

LAS VEGAS and the SANTA FE TRAIL



Isen Mansion, upper town (built ca. 1851)

A GREAT SAGA OF THE WEST

On a cold January day in 1822 Captain William Becknell (called the Father of the Santa Fe Trail) split open his saddle bags filled with silver Mexican pesos in Franklin, Missouri, and watched as the jingle of the coins on the store gutters changed the course of history. Becknell's dazzling profit and tales of adventure in the New Mexican capital of Santa Fe, late in 1821, stirred the imagination of many profit-seeking and adventurous Missourians who set out west in 1822... over 800 miles and nearly three months beyond the dreaded, mysterious Indian lands, to the earthen mecca of Santa Fe.

During the early years of the Trail, San Miguel del Vado was the "first settlement of any note" for caravans making their way to Santa Fe. But soon after its founding in 1835, Las Vegas quickly superseded San Miguel as the main stopping point for the west bound traders.

Romero Brothers



Jose Albino Baca

In the early years of trading the

Plaza resembled more of a farmer's market, but soon stores began to go up where houses once stood. Early entrepreneurs included Don Miguel Romero y Baca who, with his wife and five sons, moved to Las Vegas in 1851. The Romero sons, all destined to become political leaders and wealthy men, learned their business skills on the Santa Fe Trail. Other Hispanics who settled in Las Vegas and became merchants on the trail were Jose Albino Baca, Francisco Lopez and Miguel A. Otero.

The 1860's brought an influx of other merchants including Anglos, German Jews and French Canadians which gave the Plaza a cosmopolitan and polyglot flavor. Prominent among these were Emanuel Rosenwald and Charles Hild. In just a short period, Las Vegas emerged as the leading center for commerce in New Mexico.

"...antiquated wood church, which looked as though it had stood the wear and tear of more years than was likely to be meted out to it in the future. It stands upon the Plaza, and over the entrance stands an old cracked bell...The form is that of a cross, with a damp earthen floor, and void of seats...In the nave is the altar, with a few rude and primitive decorations, and in the rear of it are three double paintings."

W.W.H. Davis, 1853

TRADERS, PIONEERS AND IMMIGRANTS

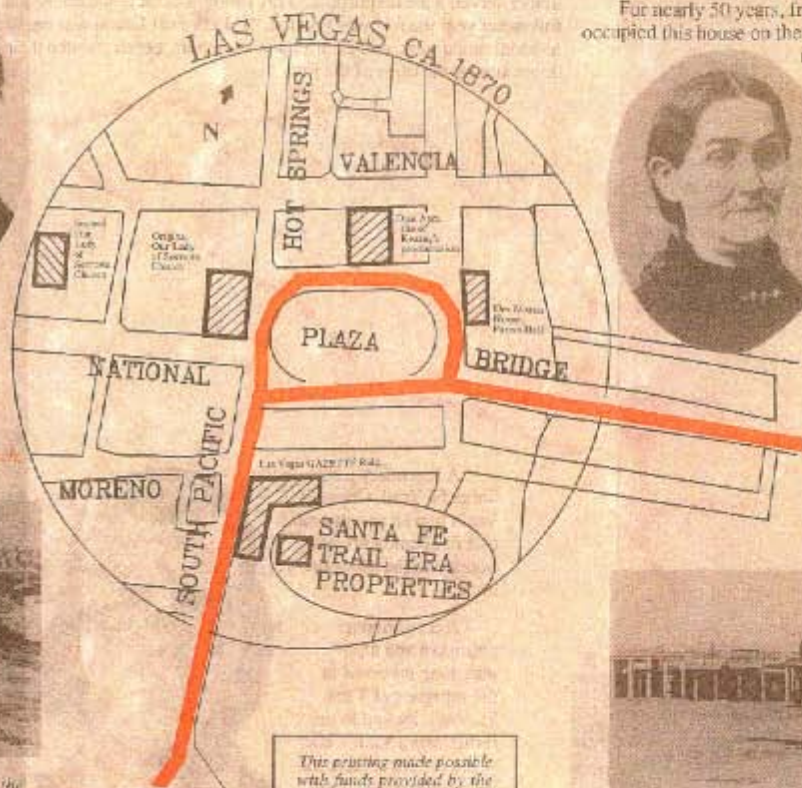
Soon government officials and local *ricos* (wealthy individuals) formed alliances and economic partnerships with the *Americanos* and local merchants began sending wagon loads of local goods to the *estados*.

"Los Americanos!"... "Los Carros!"... "La Entrada de la caravana!" The arrival of the caravans was a time for celebration in Las Vegas. Church bells ring, scouts went out to meet the wagons and townspeople gathered at the Plaza with carts full of cheese, chile, piñon, bread, wood and other goods. At night the traders mixed with the town folk at the lively *jardanges*.

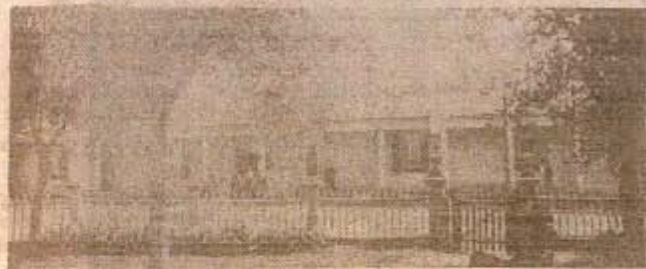


Charles Hild

Original Our Lady of Sorrows Church, west side of Plaza, 1850



This exciting guide possible with funds provided by the Las Vegas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, November 1997.



For nearly 50 years, from 1849 to 1894, the Des Marais family occupied this house on the east side of the Plaza. Though greatly remodeled over the years, parts of this house have been incorporated into the present Our Lady of Sorrows Parish Hall. Gone now are the expansive portal facing the street and the picket fence which enclosed the Plaza.

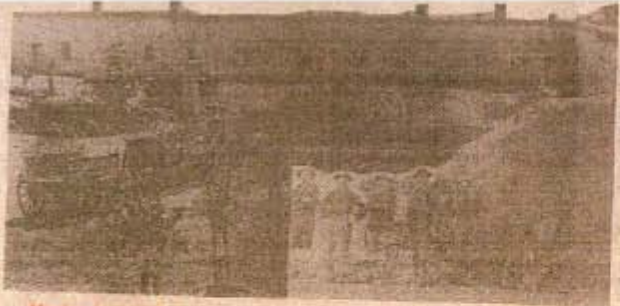


Doña Dolores Des Marais

Notorious "Hanging" Windmill in the Plaza, 1870



Project of the City of Las Vegas, N.M. Citizens' Commission for Historic Preservation with funds provided by the N.M. State Historic Preservation Division (United States Government Program).



Mechanics' Corral



Gen. S.W. Kearny

*Top: Ft. Union, ca. 1870;
Bottom: Soldiers at the fort, 1850's*

"We come amongst you as friends, not as enemies; as protectors, not as conquerors... for your benefit, not for your injury... I shall not expect you to take up arms and follow me, to fight your own people... But he who is found in arms against me, I will hit!"
S.W. Kearny, August 14, 1846

In 1846 the U.S. declared war on Mexico and sent its conquering forces westward to take over the new lands. As the only living community on the Santa Fé Trail, Las Vegas was the first New Mexico town to feel the impact. On August 14 of that year, the Army of the West, led by Gen. Stephen W. Kearny, marched into town. From the top of one of the flat-roofed adobe houses on the north Plaza, Kearny proclaimed that he was taking possession of New Mexico.

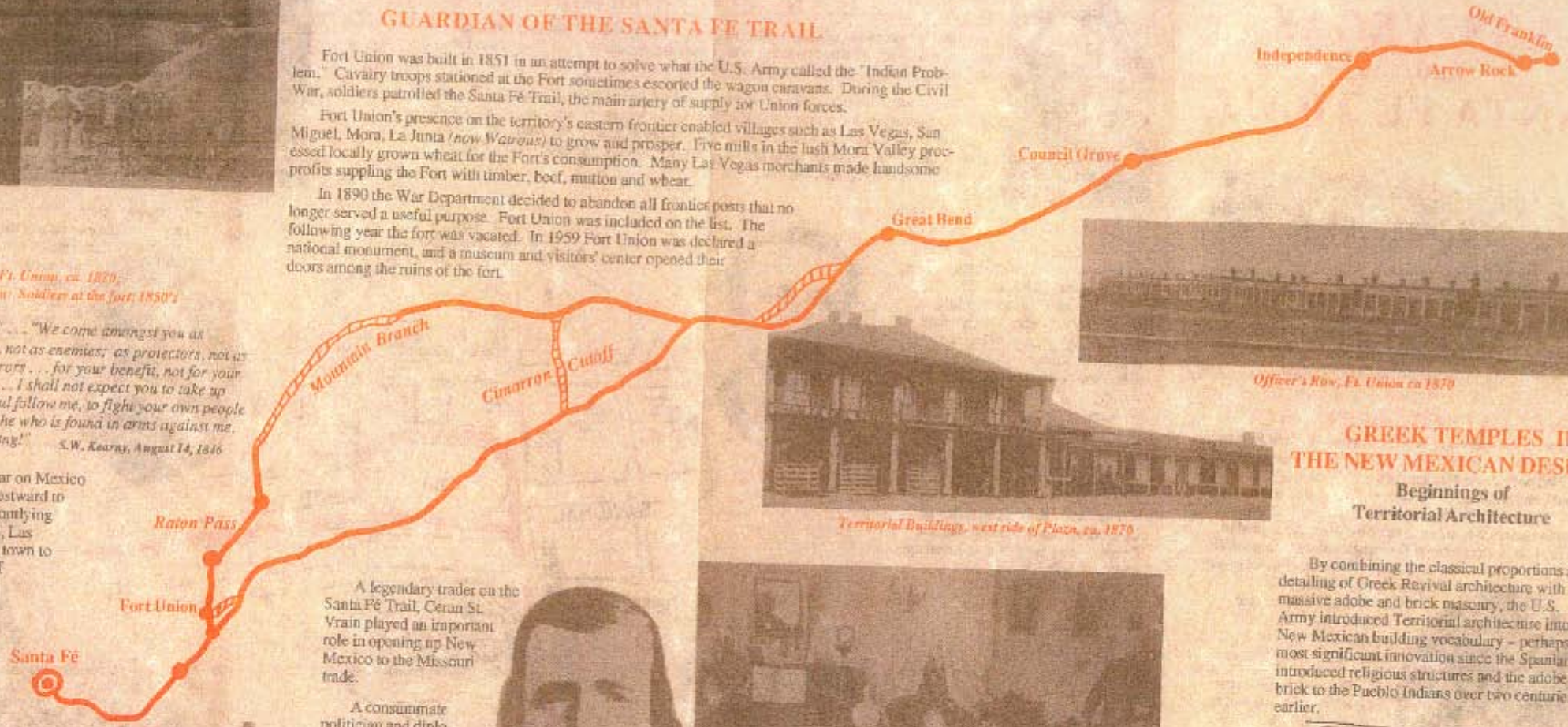


GUARDIAN OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

Fort Union was built in 1851 in an attempt to solve what the U.S. Army called the "Indian Problem." Cavalry troops stationed at the Fort sometimes escorted the wagon caravans. During the Civil War, soldiers patrolled the Santa Fé Trail, the main artery of supply for Union forces.

Fort Union's presence on the territory's eastern frontier enabled villages such as Las Vegas, San Miguel, Mora, La Junta (*now Watrous*) to grow and prosper. Five mills in the lush Mora Valley processed locally grown wheat for the Fort's consumption. Many Las Vegas merchants made handsome profits supplying the Fort with timber, beef, mutton and wheat.

In 1890 the War Department decided to abandon all frontier posts that no longer served a useful purpose. Fort Union was included on the list. The following year the fort was vacated. In 1959 Fort Union was declared a national monument, and a museum and visitors' center opened their doors among the ruins of the fort.



A legendary trader on the Santa Fé Trail, Ceran St. Vrain played an important role in opening up New Mexico to the Missouri trade.

A consummate politician and diplomat, long involved in the intrigues of Taos, St. Vrain looked to the fertile Mora Valley later in his life for retirement. He pioneered the grain industry in the valley. His house and massive stone mill still stand in Mora.



Col. Ceran St. Vrain



Officer's Row, Ft. Union ca. 1870



Territorial Buildings, west side of Plaza, ca. 1870



Interior, Officers' Quarters, Ft. Union, ca. 1875

GREEK TEMPLES IN THE NEW MEXICAN DESERT

Beginnings of Territorial Architecture

By combining the classical proportions and detailing of Greek Revival architecture with massive adobe and brick masonry, the U.S. Army introduced Territorial architecture into the New Mexican building vocabulary - perhaps the most significant innovation since the Spaniards introduced religious structures and the adobe brick to the Pueblo Indians over two centuries earlier.



1305 S. Pacific St.