“William Clark, the Southern Plains Fur Trade, and the Santa Fe Trail.”

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Proceedings of the
2015 FUR TRADE SYMPOSIUM
BENT'S FORT AND THE SOUTHERN FUR TRADE
September 23–26th, 2015
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site / Otero Junior College
La Junta, Colorado.

Cover Image:
Bent's Fort at the end of the rainbow: opening night of the symposium. Courtesy of National Park Service Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.

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Produced with assistance from the National Park Service Denver Service Center Publications Team.

This project was paid for in part by a History Colorado State Historical Fund grant

HISTORY Colorado
STATE HISTORICAL FUND
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William Clark's amazing adventure with Meriwether Lewis and the Corps of Discovery represents one of the foundational narratives of America's past. Their odyssey to the Pacific Ocean and back from 1803 to 1806 marks an epic adventure from sea to shining sea. This voyage helped legitimize American sovereignty over the newly acquired Louisiana Territory and strengthened American claims to the Pacific Northwest. While this story is well known, Clark's lifelong dealings with the Spanish and later the Mexicans, as well as his role in helping advance the overland trade with Mexico along the Santa Fe Trail, is more obscure.

Clark's dealings with Spaniards and Mexicans coalesce around three major episodes of his life: (1) his military service, private fur trading venture, and continental exploration from 1791 to 1806; (2) his career as Indian agent and Missouri Territorial Governor from 1807 to 1820; and (3) his tenure as superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis from 1821 to 1838. During each of these episodes, Clark made decisions that brought him and his colleagues into dealings with Spaniards and Mexicans, during which interactions he exhibited his influence upon the Santa Fe Trail and the southern Plains fur trade.

Clark's military service, private ventures, and continental exploration from 1791 to 1806

When Clark moved west from Virginia in the mid-1780s, his family relocated to the Falls of the Ohio River in Louisville. Because the Ohio River was the major eastern tributary of the Mississippi, this relocation brought him into regular contact with French and Spanish traders and citizens who resided in Indian Country along the mighty Mississippi and its tributaries. This Indian homeland had changed hands several times. Native sovereignty had been challenged by France's "Right of Discovery" in the 1680s when explorers such as LaSalle named the region Louisiana. Soon, the Spanish acquired the land west of the Mississippi in the 1762 Treaty of Fontainebleau. Great Britain claimed all lands east of the Mississippi River following the 1763 Treaty of Paris and Americans reasserted the same claim following the 1783 Treaty of Paris.1

1 William Clark's older brother George Rogers helped win the West for the American colonies, but his capture of French communities led to numerous lawsuits, which tied up his resources the remainder of his life. William spent much time and money to help relieve his brother from these suits, particularly a vexing lawsuit brought by Spanish merchant Laurent Bazadone, who demanded retribution for goods George seized at Vincennes during his 1786 campaign. Most of the papers pertaining to the case were lost in an 1837 fire. For a discussion of Clark v. Bazadone, see John Bakeless, Background to Glory Following the American Revolution, America extended her western and southern borders over competing French, Spanish, and Native claims, which culminated in the Indian Wars of the Old Northwest. During these conflicts, Clark enlisted as a Kentucky militia volunteer. Then, as a lieutenant in the regular army, Clark commanded sixty infantry troops, twenty dragoons, and a remuda of seven hundred packhorses, which he adroitly saved from a Delaware and Shawnee ambush while on his way to Fort Greenville in May of 1794. General Wayne granted Clark's request to command a company of riflemen as his reward. Wayne also recognized Clark's diplomatic abilities and sent him on several missions to negotiate with the Chickasaw Nation and with the Spanish forces stationed at Chickasaw Bluffs (modern Memphis, Tennessee). The Spanish commander invited Clark to stay for supper. Clark wrote in his journal "I was treated with the respect due to an American officer." This may have been the first instance where Clark dealt directly with a Spanish official.2

(Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1997), 323, 331–35; William Preston Clark to George Rogers Clark, 3 August 1834, William Clark Papers, Missouri Historical Society; Clark Family Papers, Forsyth Historical Society.

After the 1794 victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, General Wayne entrusted Lt. Clark to undertake another diplomatic mission to the Spanish. In the summer of 1795, Clark traveled to New Madrid to protest the Spanish fortification on the Chickasaw Bluffs, to ascertain Spanish strength on the middle Mississippi, and to ensure free navigation of the river for American citizens. On 15 September 1795, Clark and seventeen men descended the Ohio River to its confluence with the Mississippi and thence to New Madrid. Clark delivered his message to the Spanish Governor Don Manuel Gayoso de Lemos before returning to file his report at Fort Greenville on 4 November.3

The Northwest Indian War ended with the signing of the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. Clark commanded the Chosen Rifle Company—comprised of elite riflemen—sharpshooters in the Second Sub-Legion—during the winter and spring of 1795–96 and met Meriwether Lewis, who was his subordinate. Clark resigned from the army and returned to Louisville to care for his aging parents and to aid with the pressing financial and legal concerns of his brother George.4

During the fall of 1797, Clark made his first entrepreneurial fur-trading venture. He visited Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and St. Louis on business, making acquaintances and ascertaining fur prices. Then, he loaded two flatboats in Louisville with 1,479 pounds of deer skins, 50 pounds of beaver fur, 10 pounds of otter fur, 66 bear skins, and 500 pounds of bacon from neighbors and friends from Kentucky and prepared to embark for New Orleans. Beginning in March of 1798, his flotilla floated down the Ohio, drifted down the Mississippi, and arrived in December at New Orleans, the center for the Spanish government’s commercial aspirations in North America. During his descent Clark drew numerous representations of the Mississippi River in a leather-covered journal in which he recorded his travels. Unfortunately, Clark recorded little about his business dealings with the Spanish, but he did record selling his cargo for $2,310.50 Spanish silver reales (dollars), the prided currency of the day, and paid the 6% duty ($288.77). Clark recorded the prices the Spanish paid for animal hides and pelts. Later, Clark returned via Baltimore after ten months, four-thousand-mile business trip to the Spanish port that initiated his lifelong interest and involvement in the fur trade.5

5 William Clark, Memorandum Notebook dated 1798–1801, Brekenridge Collection, C 1075, SHSM; William Clark Papers, MHS. Jo Ann Trogdon recently investigated evidence linking Clark to a series of native ties with the British, the Spanish, and the French with allegiance to America. The American entry into the International race to control the fur wealth of the western half of North America intensified efforts to establish legitimate claims to the region. The Spanish had already acquired great wealth along the Pacific Coast by harvesting sea otters. Sea otter pelts and Spanish silver were about the only valuable items westerners could trade in China for the luxuries of Asia. The Spanish crown viewed the Manila galleon trade so favorably (because of the wealth it generated) that it allowed only one expedition to sail to the Orient annually. Meanwhile, English and French traders bartered for furs and hides with tribes from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi to supply Europe’s growing leather industry with hides and pelts from deer, elk, buffalo, antelope, and beaver—the five mammals most frequently mentioned in Lewis and Clark’s expedition journals.

On 3 October 1803, Lewis over-promised his president, suggesting that instead of spending the winter in St. Louis preparing for the expedition, he might “make a tour plots by Benjamin Sebastian, Samuel Montgomery Brown, and others involved in the so-called Spanish Conspiracy. Congress officials lined their pockets with Spanish silver dollars in return for promises to help separate Kentucky from the United States, although Clark’s involvement in the ring is still not crystal clear. Jo Ann Trogdon, The Unknown Travels and Dazzling Pursuit of William Clark (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015), 131; Trogdon, “Five Mysterious from William Clark’s 1798–1801 Notebooks,” We Proceeded On 41, no. 4 (November 2015): 24–30.
Jefferson instructed Lewis and Clark to "explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by its course & communication with the waters of the Pacific ... may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce." Gathering practical information on geography and fur resources was paramount, as was fostering peace and friendships with tribal nations. Moreover, they must inform the nations of our "dispositions to a commercial intercourse with them; confer[ing] with them on the points most convenient as mutual emporiums, and the articles of most desireable interchange for them & us." Moreover, Jefferson’s counsel to be cautious and not provoke the Spanish proved prophetic. Spanish officials sought to thwart the Lewis and Clark expedition by sending several expeditions to arrest the Corps of Discovery.

Although unsuccessful in arresting Lewis and Clark, the Spanish did capture, detain, or thwart other American explorers, adventurers, and fur hunters. Some of these include Zebulon Pike, Philip Nolan, Thomas Freeman and Peter Custis, Manuel Lisa, Auguste P. Chouteau, Jules Delhun, Jacques Clamorgan, Joseph McLanahan, Reuben Smith, James Patterson, Manuel Blanco, Robert McKnight, James Baird, Joseph Philibert, and others. Spanish officials detained these Yankee Interlopers, confiscated their goods, and typically sent them back to the U.S. or detained them in Spanish prisons. The intrigues related to the Santa Fe trade permeated St. Louis. James Wilkinson wrote Pike saying, "It is reduced to a certainty that Manuel Lisa and a society of which he is the ostensible leader have determined on a project to open some commercial intercourse with Santa Fe." Wilkinson counseled Pike to try to block Lisa’s efforts, saying, "You must do what you can consistently to defeat the plan."

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5. Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, in Jackson, ed., Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1:135–37. Six months later, after the acquisition of Louisiana, Jefferson amended his instructions, telling Lewis that since America was now "sovereigns of the country, without however any diminution of the Indian rights of occupancy we are authorised to propose to them in direct terms the Institution of commerce with them. It will now be proper you should inform those through whose country you pass, or whom you may meet, that their late fathers the Spanish have agreed to withdraw ... that they have surrendered to us all their subjects ... that henceforward we become their fathers and friends." Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, January 22, 1804, in Jackson, Letters, 165. For a chronicle of those Jeffersonian expeditions, see Doug Erickson, Jeremy Skinner, Paul Merchant, eds., Jefferson’s Western Explorations: Discoveries Made in Exploring the Missour, Red River; and Waishita (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark, 2004); and Jay H. Buckley, "Jeffersonian Explorers in the Trans-Mississippi West: Zebulon Pike in Perspective," in Zebulon Pike, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West, eds. Matthew L. Harris and Jay H. Buckley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 101–38.

The possibility that overland trade between Santa Fe and St. Louis was possible prompted Clark to gather as much information about it as he could. On 3 August 1804, a trader on the lower Missouri told Clark that a traveler could reach Santa Fe in twenty-five days from St. Louis via the Arkansas and Kansas Rivers. On 15 August 1805, a Shoshone informant told Lewis his people “could pass to the Spanish by the way of the Yellowstone River in 10 days.” Both claims represented miscalculations, because both distances were between 950 and 1,023 miles from Santa Fe. On 17 September 1806, Capt. John McCallen told the captains he was bound for Santa Fe via the Platte River to open trade negotiations with the Spanish. Clark remarked, “Capt McCallen’s plan I think a very good one if strictly pursued &c.”

Clark’s career as Indian agent and Missouri territorial governor from 1807 to 1820

When Lewis and Clark returned from their epic journey, Thomas Jefferson appointed Lewis as territorial governor of Upper Louisiana and Clark as brigadier general of the territorial militia and principal federal Indian agent for all western tribes except for the Osages, whose agent was Pierre Chouteau. Clark became quite close to the powerful Chouteau clan, especially Auguste and Pierre. Clark’s first objective was to make peace with the powerful Osage Nation, and in 1808, he oversaw the erection of a military outpost and government trading factory on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River near modern-day Sibley, Missouri. Clark drew detailed sketches of the shape of the fort and its buildings. Originally named Fort Clark but renamed Fort Osage, the fort housed soldiers under the command of Capt. Eli B. Clemson to provide protection, and the United States Factory (trading post) under the direction of George Sibley encouraged the Osages to settle nearby for economic benefits. When built, the fort was simultaneously the westernmost fur-trading factory of the U.S. factory system (and the most profitable one) as well as the westernmost U.S. military post.

In the controversial Treaty of Fort Clark, negotiated first by Clark and then by Pierre Chouteau, these U.S. diplomats and Osage emissaries agreed upon the construction of a fort to be built for the protection and economic benefit of the Osage. The Osages agreed to exchange most of their lands east of a line directly south of the fort (most of Missouri!) in exchange for annual annuities, access to the government trading factory, and protection by the military garrison from the Sac and Fox Nations and other enemy raiders. The Great Osage were to receive $1,000, and the Little Osage were to receive $500. Fort Osage became the major stopping point for Indian and white traders, military escorts, and those traveling the Missouri and became an important landmark on the Santa Fe Trail.

Constructing government factories and forts provided a starting point for stabilizing the region by establishing economic and military alliances with tribes, specifically the Osages. It was also a way to decrease illegal trading among the tribes by unlicensed traders. A number of upper Missouri tribes, however, lay outside of the government trading system, so agents sought to pull them into an American alliance through private traders operating under government regulations administered by Clark. Manuel Lisa had immediately made plans to ascend the Missouri River upon Lewis and Clark’s return in 1806. His party, which included a number of Lewis and Clark Expedition veterans, headed upriver in 1807 and established a fort on the Yellowstone River, which achieved moderate success trading with the Crow. The following year brought additional returns and

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the possibility and desirability of him forming a fur company to capitalize on those profits and to extend American influence into the upper Missouri country. On 7 March 1809, Lisa assembled a group of prominent and influential citizens in St. Louis to organize the Missouri Fur Company. As the territorial seat of government, St. Louis served as a western gateway and an outfitting place for nearly all expeditions destined for Santa Fe or upper Missouri. Lisa's company had the powerful backing of Pierre Menard and William Morrison of Kaskaskia, as well as the St. Louis elite: Pierre and Auguste Chouteau, Benjamin Wilkinson, Sylvestre Labbade Jr., Andrew Henry, Governor Meriwether Lewis's brother Reuben, and General William Clark. Meriwether Lewis may have been a silent partner as well. With the energetic leadership of Lisa, and with Henry and Menard as field captains, St. Louis newspaper editor Joseph Charless concluded that the company had "every prospect of becoming a force of incalculable advantage, not only to the individuals engaged in the enterprise, but the community at large." The company's grand plans included erecting trading posts and forts among upper Missouri tribes and monopolizing the trade of the entire region, taking it from the British. The company had several points in its favor: Governor Lewis supported it; William Clark, the principal Indian agent served on the board of directors; and there was sufficient capital to carry the fur trade on an extensive scale. Article 10 of the Articles of Association and Co-partnership listed an important item of business: Governor Lewis contracted with the Missouri Fur Company to transport Sheheke-shote, the Mandan chief who had accompanied Lewis to Washington, back to the Mandan villages. The company would receive the generous sum of $7,000 for its services. Pierre Chouteau and a party of 125 men (including 40 men from Clark's Missouri Militia) eventually forced their way through the Arikaras' blockade. Despite the success of this expedition in delivering the chief safely home, its exorbitant cost was one of several expenses authorized by Governor Lewis that the new Secretary of War, William Eustis, refused to pay.

Clark's involvement in the Missouri Fur Company was extensive. As the government's representative, he ensured that the trading houses operated smoothly. He may have overstepped his bounds by using his position to engage in private trade, albeit

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19 Missouri Gazette, March 6, 1809.
In regions beyond the reach of the factories. To further complicate matters, Clark operated a general store in St. Louis, selling goods to Indians and company traders. He conducted this business on the side to supplement his government salary; it gave him an extra source of income to support his immediate family and the proliferating clan of stepchildren, nephews, nieces, in-laws, and cousins he helped provide for as the years passed. Nevertheless, Clark’s commingling of government, the fur company, and private business looked like collusion to some St. Louisians.29

Clark viewed his actions as furthering personal, state, and national interests among tribes in the continent’s interior. The company’s primary trading area near Missouri’s headwaters lay hundreds of miles beyond the reach of the government trading houses. Clark desired to secure the fur trade then flowing into Britain’s hands and to win the loyalty of the upper Missouri tribes. He envisioned the fur company as the means to accomplish both ends. Additionally, Clark was responsible for issuing licenses to trade with the Indians; therefore, having some influence in the firm would make his own task easier to complete. It also solidified his connection with his French Creole friends. Even the cautious Chouteau trusted Clark to keep the company books.21

The company appointed Clark as its resident agent in St. Louis to “receive all Peltries, furs, monies, or other property sent or delivered to him by the Company or any member thereof.” In other words, Clark received all of the merchandise coming downstream, stored it at the government’s expense in a government building, used his associations to complete the sale of the furs, and made contracts with Indian merchants suppliers for trade goods. Finally, the company gave Clark full power “to sign and execute all notes, bills, obligations, receipts discharges & acquittances for and in behalf of the Company.” Clark was involved as a plaintiff or defendant in more than a dozen court cases representing the firm. To the company, it made sound business sense. To some Missourians, it reeked of a conflict of interest.22

Manuel Lisa’s attempts to open the Santa Fe trade faced setbacks with the outbreak of the War of 1812, but he still proposed to send his trusted lieutenant Charles Sanguinet to the Arapahos. Lisa penned a letter to Introduce himself and the Missouri Fur Company to the Spaniards, proposing trade between Missouri and Santa Fe. Lisa stated it was his “desire to engage in business and open up a new commerce, which might easily be done. With this in view, and as director of the Missouri Fur Company, I propose to you gentlemen that if you wish to trade and deal with me, for whatever quantity of goods it may be, I will obligate myself to fill each year any bill of goods which shall be given me. And all shall be delivered (as stipulated) both as to quality and as to quantity, at the place nearest and most convenient for both parties, to your satisfaction, after we shall have agreed on the chosen place.” Moreover, Lisa dispatched more than one thousand dollars of merchandise to indicate his seriousness and willingness to open the trade route, but the death of Jean Baptiste Champlain and Indian hostilities on the Plains and in the Rockies forced Lisa to pull back his vision for a time.23

As the War of 1812 broke out, President James Madison appointed William Clark as governor of the newly created Missouri Territory. Territorial governors served as ex officio superintendents of Indian affairs. Clark tried to keep the peace during the War of 1812. He used his connections with fur traders, like Manuel Lisa, to keep the Lakotas and other nations neutral during the war. Clark authorized the construction of two dozen blockhouses between Fort Osage on the Missouri and Fort Madison on the Mississippi with rangers to patrol between them. Following the war, he had the Osage treaty lines surveyed in 1815. Land with a clear title was incorporated into several towns and counties, especially Franklin in Howard County and Boonville in Cooper County. Boonville and the Boone’s Lick region in general derive their names from the famous frontiersman Daniel Boone. Clark knew the Boone family well, especially the sons Daniel Morgan and Nathan Boone. The latter traveled with him to help construct Fort Osage in 1808 and served as a militia officer during the war.24 Militiamen and fur traders used the Boone’s Lick Road in territorial Missouri to travel between St. Charles and Old Franklin, the western terminus of the Boone’s Lick Road and the eastern terminus of the Santa Fe Trail, as well as a gathering place for politics, economics, and outfitters’ supplies.25

Clark took action to protect his Indian charges from being overrun by squatters. On 9 December 1815, he issued a proclamation that “white persons emigrating from the settlements of this territory, as well as from the neighboring territories, States, and elsewhere, have, at various times intruded upon the Indian lands and made


23. *Articles 14–15, 22, St. Louis Missouri Fur Co., Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, MHS, St. Louis Circuit Court Records, Case Files, Office of the Circuit Clerk—St. Louis, Missouri State Archives—St. Louis (http://mscourtypegists.wustl.edu/); 2–9, 9–11, 13, 19, 21, 29–30, 40.


establishments there." He said that they had disregarded his previous warnings and were in violation of the law. "These practices can be no longer permitted," he stressed, and "should they neglect to this last and peaceful warning the military power will be called upon to compel their removal." He reorganized the militia, knowing that if he was called upon to carry out the government's wish to expel squatters, he would need sufficient strength to back up the warning he had issued. When federal approval to evict squatters came in the spring, Clark acknowledged that the task had proved "more difficult to perform than could well be imagined." With no federal troops to enforce his eviction notice, Clark turned to the militia, who resisted removing the squatters and insisted that Clark was supporting Indian claims over the concerns of American citizens. In the end, Clark's promise to protect Indian rights amounted to little more than lip service. Instead of removing the squatters, he laid the groundwork to remove the Indians. Moreover, Clark had defended the Spanish and French land claims of the old settlers. The new immigrants streaming into the territory began to complain that Clark was pro-Indian, pro-French, and out of sync with the new direction in which the territory's political winds blew. The influx of new people began to alter the balance of political power in Missouri. Although the established French Creole families on the Mississippi controlled fur-trading interests, wheat and corn production, and landholdings, and made profits from these new emigrants, they soon became a distinct minority of the population.

Clark's friends proved to be a liability in his political campaign. As territorial governor, Clark had allied himself with influential French Creole fur merchants and with land claimants holding unconfirmed Spanish titles. Land speculators and the majority of the population who had arrived within the past five years disapproved of the governor's support of these claims, especially his proclamations about expelling squatters from Indian lands. Clark's loyalty to longtime friends and members of the territorial establishment fit what he felt would best serve the national interest. This affiliation with Missouri's old-guard "caucus," made up of prominent politicians, leaders, and a lawyer juncto, proved disastrous for Clark's political aspirations. This group had taken control of the convention, written in higher salaries for the office of governor and judge, and seemed to be dictating to the people what the new government would be like. Editor Joseph Charless of the Missouri Gazette waged political warfare against the group and was especially vicious in his attack on the caucus's ringleader, Thomas Hart Benton.

Clark, whom many had viewed as overly sympathetic to Indians during his years as agent and territorial governor, recognized the shift in popular opinion and reluctantly compromised his views. Although Sibley developed strong trading ties with the Osages, private traders were not happy that they had to compete with the government for trade. By 1822, Clark joined Thomas Hart Benton and the Chouteau faction to lobby Congress to end the factory system in favor of private entrepreneurs regulated by trade and intercourse laws. Missouri's lobbying efforts succeeded. Private entrepreneurs like William Ashley advertised for adventurers to ascend the Missouri while William Becknell advertised for fur hunters to ascend the Arkansas.

This change occurred on the heels of a scientific exploration of the central plains led by Stephen Long, sparked by the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty, which established a transcontinental boundary between the United States and Spain. Long and a group of scientists and officers set out from Fort Osage, marching westward along the Kansas and Platte rivers, mapping, surveying, and selecting future fortification sites. Unfortunately, they did not examine the sources of the Platte, Arkansas, or Red rivers. Although Long's expedition failed to explore the new American boundary with Spain, he brought back invaluable information about the central plains from the Platte to the Canadian rivers. The expedition was relevant to Clark because it helped to define the region within his superintendency. More importantly, Long deemed the land unsuitable for European settlement, and many Americans began to advocate that this unwanted land would be ideal to exchange for Eastern tribal lands.

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20. Missouri Gazette, December 9, 1815.
22. See notice, Missouri Intelligencer, September 2, 1820; John O'Fallon, "Brief Notices of the Principal Events in the Public Life of Governor Clark" St. Louis Enquirer, August 9, 1820.
When Secretary of War James Barbour recommended Indian removal to ameliorate the expanding settlements in eastern regions in 1826, Clark suggested that lands in the Great Plains be exchanged for Indian lands in the East. His proposal stated that the "country west of Missouri and Arkansas, and west of the Mississippi river, north of Missouri, is the one destined to receive them. From all accounts, this country will be well adapted to their residence." He continued, "[I]t is well watered with numerous small streams and some large rivers; abounds with grass, which will make it easy to raise stock; has many salt springs, from which a supply of the necessary article of salt can be obtained; contains much prairie land, which will make the opening of farms easy; and affords a temporary supply of game." 34

Clark had gathered information about the geography of the Great Plains, the geography of the Rocky Mountains, and the inhabitants of each of his observations during his expedition. He also possessed Indian Information, gleaned from treaty councils and Indian delegations. At his Indian office and museum in St. Louis, he kept a master map of the West, created between 1810 and 1812, and added Information from Zebulon Pike, John Colter, Manuel Lisa, and other explorers, fur traders, and trappers who stopped by his office to receive permission to venture into Indian country. Some information proved difficult to reconcile. Pike's misinformation about the pyramidal height of land from whence all major western rivers flowed—the Snake, Yellowstone, Missouri, Platte, Colorado, and Arkansas—caused Clark to squish Wyoming and Colorado together to reconcile the geography. Aside from this egregious error, Clark's master map offered the best American cartographic representation of the trans-Mississippi West available until John C. Fremont's explorations in the 1840s. 35

In 1820, the government authorized Reverend Jedediah Morse of the First Congregational Church in Massachusetts to tour the western country and ascertain the conditions of the Indians. In Morse's official report, he related the object of his trip had been to find the Indians' place in an expanding America and to define the government's relationship to them—areas directly under Clark's stewardship. Morse reported on how the American intrusion had transformed Indians, who had gone from being "happy proprietors of this extensive domain" to drinking "the bitter cup

34 American State Papers: Indian Affairs, 2:653.
of humiliation." Poor treatment, land loss, armed conflict, and removal had left them "fugitives, vagrants, and strangers in their own country."36

One of the most important sections of Morse's somewhat romanticized report focused upon the Indian trade. Morse concluded that the United States' system wherein the government and licensed traders supplied Indians with merchandise in exchange for furs had several shortcomings. First, he wrote that the Indian agents were not vested with sufficient authority to stop dishonest and unprincipled traders or alcohol from reaching the Indians. Second, he proposed that the government either increase its investment and run the whole Indian trade itself or withdraw altogether and allow duly licensed and regulated traders to operate in Indian country. Ironically, Clark had pointed out both of these shortcomings and possibilities for correction five years earlier, as territorial governor.

Morse thought that expanding the factory system with sufficient government capital might work to control the liquor trade as well as destroy the influence of the British credit system by selling goods at fixed prices in the villages. The government, however, could not supply high-quality goods as cheaply as private traders or the British could. Since the U.S. government factors at the fur factories were not allowed to extend credit to Indians, Morse suggested that they consider abandoning the trade altogether. He also cautioned that turning the trade over to private citizens would carry some risks. Regulating liquor and monitoring the custom of extending credit to the Indians, as well as the fact that traders, engaged, and interpreters were often British subjects and could sometimes be of dubious character, presented some potential problems in protecting the Indians from fraud, debauchery, and injustice. Morse concluded, "the Factory system for supplying the Indians with such articles as they may need, does not appear to me to be productive of any great advantage, either to the Indians themselves, or to the Government... In my opinion the best plan of supplying the natives, is by private American traders of good character, if they could be placed under proper restrictions."37

For the government's interest, private traders needed to appease Indians; extend credit; intermingle and instill elements of civilized ideas, manners, and customs; and promote intertribal peace. Indian agents also should reside in or near villages of the nations they served, build council houses, and employ blacksmiths and carpenters, providing the agents with the necessary tools to assist the Indians. Furthermore, the government should make certain to replace all British flags and medals with their American equivalents. They could also form or support a society to promote the general welfare of the Indian tribes and begin a civilizing mission to refine them where they were or exchange land with them beyond the frontier settlements. By removing the Indians from some white men with evil intent, the government could allow time for Indian superintendents and agents of high moral character to assist the Indians in establishing agriculture and schools and to vaccinate them against European diseases. Schools, such as those operated by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, combined with the training by agriculturalists and the agents, would make it possible for the Indians to eventually be "raised gradually and ultimately, to the rank, and to the enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of freemen, and citizens of the United States."38

 Pawnee chief Petaleshoro's speech to President Monroe during the Indian leader's 1822 visit to Washington provides an Indian's perspective into the situation facing his tribe. He remarked about the time before whites when Indians' wants were fewer and there was nothing they could not get; all of their needs were met. But now, times were changing. "My Great Father: Some of your good chiefs, as they are called [missionaries], have proposed to send some of their good people among us to change our habits, to make us work and live like the white people. I will not tell a lie—I am going to tell the truth. You love your country—you love your people—you love the manner in which they live, and you think your people brave. I am like you.... I love my country—I love my people—I love the manner in which they live, and think myself and my warriors brave. Spare me then, Father; let me enjoy my country, and pursue the buffalo, and the beaver, and the other wild animals of our country, and I will trade their skins with your people. I have grown up, and lived thus long without work—I am in hopes you will suffer me to die without it. We have plenty of buffalo, beaver, deer, and other wild animals—we have also an abundance of horses—we have everything we want—we have plenty of land, if you will keep your people off of it."39

Clark's tenure as superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis from 1821 to 1838

General Agustin de Iturbide proclaimed Mexican Independence from Spain in 1821, which opened economic doors to Mexico's northern provinces.40 Two hundred thirteen years after Governor Pedro de Peralta arrived and founded Santa Fe as the capital of New Spain In 1609, American Thomas James witnessed the celebration on Epiphany Sunday, 6 January 1822, near the Governor's Palace in Santa Fe's central square. James reminisced that he helped erect a seventy-foot liberty pole with a new flag but later

36. Morse, A Report to the Secretary of War, 80.
37. Jedidiah Morse, A Report to the Secretary of War of the United States, on Indian Affairs (New Haven: Printed by S. Converse, 1822), 29m–30n.
38. Morse, A Report to the Secretary of War, 39–64.
remembered the revelry was too much for him. "No Italian carnival ever exceeded this celebration in thoughtlessness, vice and licentiousness of every description."

The euphoria did not just affect New Mexicans. Missourians also took notice, recognizing that the Spanish policy of mercantilism, which had previously affected Spanish citizens from trading with non-Spanish territories, was lifted. A trading route connecting the Boone's Lick Road from St. Louis to Franklin and from Franklin to Santa Fe was now possible. Thomas James was soon joined in Santa Fe by Jacob Fowler and Hugh Glenn, who had left from Fort Smith, Arkansas. In June, William Becknell, a manager of the Boone's Lick Salt Works and one of the founders of the Santa Fe Trail, advertised in the Missouri Intelligencer for "a company of men destined to the westward for the purpose of trading horses and mules, and catching wild animals of every description." Intending to trap furs in the Rockies and trade with southern tribes like the Comanches, he and a half dozen men loaded mules with cotton goods and other merchandise at Franklin and stopped at Fort Osage, the last American outpost, in September. They journeyed overland along the Arkansas River and south through Raton Pass before arriving at San Miguel, the port of entry. At Taos, they exchanged their goods for silver dollars, burros, and Spanish blankets. At Santa Fe, they received a cordial reception by Governor Molgarés and were granted permission to trap beaver.

Taos and Santa Fe evolved into trapping and Indian trading operation bases for men like William Wolfskill, Ewing Young, Augustus Storrs, Antone Robidoux, James O. Pattie, Etienne Provost, Ceran St. Vrain, Bill Williams, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and others, many of them personally acquainted with Clark. Over the next five years, more than $100,000 in beaver skins were harvested from mountain streams. Others, like Thomas James, found trading with Comanches for buffalo robes and horseflesh in Comancheria "more enticing than the mules and furs of New Mexico." Becknell's loaded pack mules returned to Missouri in 1822 loaded down with Spanish silver dollars. News quickly spread that Mexican trade on the Santa Fe Trail was both feasible and lucrative. Soon, merchandise worth tens of thousands of dollars flowed east and west over the 780-mile journey. Teams of six or eight oxen pulled heavy wagons filled with three to six thousand pounds of glass beads, rifles, silk stockings, calico ribbon, domestic cotton, and other manufactured goods, which were exchanged for silver dollars, furs, and mules. Moreover, the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (or Royal Road of the Interior Lands) ran 1,200 miles and connected Mexico City to Santa Fe. With Santa Fe connected to the Missouri settlements via the Santa Fe Trail and, a decade later, to the California missions via the Old Spanish Trail, Santa Fe emerged as the crossroads of the Southwest.

The increased traffic along the Santa Fe Trail brought a host of problems to the native inhabitants, and Missouri's achieving statehood created even more. Demolishing the factory system and opening up the fur trade to private entrepreneurs created more conflict. With almost four hundred thousand settlers in the new state, population pressures pushed out against the native inhabitants. In 1822, Congress passed a special act that created the post of superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis, and the president appointed Clark to fill the post for an annual salary of $1,500. Until the Indian department reorganized in 1834, Clark oversaw all Indians west of the Mississippi River as well as numerous eastern tribes relocated onto the Great Plains over the next two decades. Clark felt that reserving a permanent homeland for tribes where they could engage in agricultural pursuits was one of the ways they would be assimilated and acculturated into the American mainstream. He proposed and supported the creation of a permanent Indian territory, Indian "civilizing" missions, Indian schools, and Christian proselytizing. Like many of his day, Clark thought that

Individual land ownership, public education, and Christianity provided the course for Indians to gain American citizenship. Superintendant Clark and his nephew Benjamin O’Fallon (who was a subagent for the Upper Missouri) corresponded with Mexican officials on a number of topics including the overland trade, Indian depredations, and individual traders. Santa Fe Governor Joseph Vizcarra corresponded with Alexander McNair and Superintendant Clark but they had to be circumspect in their letters because only the Secretary of State in Washington was supposed to deal with foreign diplomats. Nevertheless, Clark informed Vizcarra that he was doing all in his power to stop the Pania ( Pawnee) war against the Upper Spanish provinces of New Mexico. “I have spoken to the Pania Chiefs ... and instruct the agents in that quarter to use their influence to prevent a continuation of this war ... although I am apprehensive that it will be with much difficulty that those Indians will be restrained from pursuing a war for which have been lucrative without much loss on their part.” O’Fallon, the agent using his influence, kept Clark apprised of the situation, although O’Fallon often wrote those letters from St. Louis instead of from his post on the Upper Missouri where he should have been residing. This correspondence between O’Fallon, Clark, and Mexican officials continued when Bartolomé Baca became Governor of Santa Fe. 

In addition to helping the Mexicans avert war with the Pawnees, Clark also supported efforts to assist, survey, and protect the people and goods traveling along the Santa Fe Trail. After all, the furs, silver, and other products were a boon to the Missouri economy and helped Clark’s friends, just like the New Mexicans enjoyed the cutlery, silks, and cotton cloths supplied by Missouri merchants. Unlike the fur trade companies that required bonds and capital investment, practically anyone could buy a wagon or some mules, load them with goods, and make a profit if they reached Taos or Santa Fe, while others could invest in mercantile endeavors from St. Louis. Missourians received raw materials, like furs, robes, and silver bullion, in exchange for cheap manufactured goods.

Clark’s efforts to survey and protect the Santa Fe Trail aided them in their quests. Clark had worked with surveyor Joseph Brown before. A fellow Virginian, Brown had conducted the 1815 survey of the Louisiana Purchase in Arkansas and Missouri; provided the first plat of St. Louis, which fittingly started at the home of Auguste Chouteau; and, finally, conducted the 1823 survey of the line between the Missouri and Indian territories beginning at the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. Brown was accompanied by former factor George Sibley, Missouri legislator Benjamin Reeves, and Thomas Mather, who replaced entrepreneur Pierre Menard who was too ill to make the trip. Clark may have aided the commissioners in garnering congressional approval and support for the appropriation of funds and the ability to make treaties. Clark was also aware of the need to purchase a right-of-way from tribes along the route, as well as ensure safety for the caravans and protection for the tribes. They successfully concluded additional treaties with the Osage and Kansa nations. Ironically, the survey was a little short on both ends, starting at Fort Osage instead of Franklin and ending in Taos instead of Santa Fe.

In June 1825, Clark met with Osage and Kansa representatives at Castor Hill on the Marlas Castor (Beaver Pond) ranch on the outskirts of St. Louis and enacted a treaty that divested those nations of much of the territory encompassing Kansas and parts of Oklahoma. After the 1825 Osage Treaty, the twenty-five-mile-wide strip that includes Jackson County was made available for American settlement. After Lexington had been platted in 1822 and, later, Independence in 1827 (the same year Fort Leavenworth was constructed farther upstream on the Kansas side of the Missouri River), Fort Osage lost its luster. Lexington became the county seat and was the new eastern terminus of the trail, where mules, silver, and furs traveled its main street. Clark was acquainted with the Auli brothers, James and Robert, and other entrepreneurs who lived and traded in Lexington and Independence.

During 1829, the sunset of the John Quincy Adams administration, William Clark and Thomas McKenny formulated a new code of regulations for the administration of Indian affairs. Lewis Cass used his influence as Secretary of War to convince Congress of the wisdom of adopting the code. On 9 February 1829, Cass and Clark submitted a lengthy treatise of fifty-six sections to Congress to organize the Indian department. The Cass-Clark bill recommended increased government regulation of frontier trading.

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clearly marked boundary lines, and substantial oversight by Indian superintendents and their agents to ban alcohol and control all trading licenses for persons entering Indian country.53

Unauthorized and unlicensed traders could not legally enter Indian country without Clark’s permission (or permission from one of his agents or subagents). Thus, Clark developed friendships and corresponded with the top rung of the fur trade community: William Ashley, Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, David Jackson, Robert Campbell, Jim Bridger, and others all worked closely with Clark to ensure they curried his favor to keep their licenses to trade and the bonds they offered current and up to date. Jedediah Smith, for instance, cultivated a close relationship with Clark, writing letters, sharing geographical information, and sending artifacts for Clark’s Indian museum.54 Smith also relied on Clark to write letters of recommendation to the government. Smith wrote Secretary John Eaton that he should contact Clark to verify Smith’s qualifications for a proposed government expedition to the West with Lt. Reuben Holmes, for instance. In addition to acquiring licenses from Clark to enter Indian Country to trade with the Indians, traders like Smith who planned to travel to Santa Fe also had to apply for a passport from the State Department to enter Mexican Territory. Smith had Ashley write a note to Thomas Hart Benton to help Smith acquire a passport for a “trading Expedition to the Mexican Provinces,” which Smith received on 3 March 1831.55

Fur brigade leaders like Jedediah Smith also provided useful field information for Clark. Smith wrote Clark a letter in December 1829 recounting his difficulties with Indians and Mexicans during his 1827 and 1828 Journeys to California. Smith acknowledged the hospitality of John McLoughlin and the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Vancouver but then stated, “Until British interlopers are dismissed from off our territory ... Americans will never be respected or acknowledged as patrons by Indians on the west side of the Rocky Mountains.”56

Clark echoed Smith’s sentiments in an 1831 governmental report on the condition of the fur trade, wherein he offered a glimpse into how to improve the fur trade and eliminate its negative effects on Indians: “In elucidating the present conditions of the Fur Trade on the frontiers of the States, it will be seen to lie under many disadvantages.” Principally among these disadvantages, he offered, was “the preference which the Indians themselves have always shown and still continued to show the English.” Clark advocated for more government control and more humanitarian aid, as well as a crackdown on liquor taken into Indian country. One agent informed Clark that only one out of one hundred gallons of liquor taken into Indian country was actually permitted by the Indian office. Since liquor for the “boatmen” had been abused, “I shall conceive of my bound duty to recommend the total & entire prohibition of this article in the Indian Country under any pretense of for any purpose whatever.”57

Smith’s 1831 journey to Santa Fe occurred a decade after the trail opened and hundreds of traders and fur hunters had made the 1,700-mile round trip from St. Louis to Santa Fe. Plains nations, like the Comanches, Pawnees, Cheyennes, and Arapahos, loathed the traders, killing their game and trespassing through their territory.58 Josiah Gregg estimated that three hundred traders and helpers freighted a quarter million dollars in merchandise across the trail that year. The Smith, Jackson, and Sublette expedition that departed St. Louis on 10 April 1831 consisted of seventy-four men and twenty-two mule-drawn wagons, half of them belonging to Smith and half to the other partners. Unfortunately, Smith lost his life on the journey. The Jackson and Sublette caravan arrived at Santa Fe on the Fourth of July. Sublette traded well, garnering fifty-five packs of beaver and eight hundred buffalo robes as his share.59

Jedediah Smith’s Party Crossing the Burning Mojave Desert during the 1826 trek to California by Frederic Remington. Courtesy of Jay H. Buckley, Ph.D.

56. Clark must have respected the tribes, even with the trouble some of them occasionally caused. Clark named Paducah, Kentucky—the only town he ever planted—after the Comanches, whom the Lakotas called Paduxa.
57. William Sublette led trading parties into the Rockies in 1823–26 and purchased Ashley’s interests with Smith and Jackson in 1826. After leading the supply caravan to the 1827 Bear Lake rendezvous, he sold his interests to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1830 and joined Smith and Jackson on their trading expedition to Santa Fe in 1831. Upon his return, he joined Robert Campbell in supplying the 1832 rendezvous for the RMFC and built Fort William and Fort Laramie to compete with the American Fur Company in 1833. William Sublette’s new two-year license to trade is dated 25 April 1832. William Sublette Papers, Missouri Historical Society. See also, Don Berry, A Majority of Scoundrels: An Informal History of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (1961, repr., Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2006), 252; John E. Sundt, Bill Sublette, Mountain Man (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959).
Congress and the American public failed to realize that ratification of Indian treaties did not end Indian-white conflicts; in fact, these treaties often created new problems and misunderstandings that resulted in atrocities committed by both sides. Mexican officials grew suspicious of people evading custom duties. Even worse, Americans traded ammunition, guns, and liquor to Indians, creating a potential powder keg of trouble. The Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas frontiers, in particular, became zones where hostilities frequently occurred. Comanches, Kiowas, Osages, Pawnees, and Wichita warriors regularly pillaged trade caravans or collected tolls between Missouri and Santa Fe as well as waged war against emigrant tribes like the Cherokees and Delawares, who had been driven out by the Indian Removal Act. When the Reverend Isaac McCoy embarked on an exploring tour of Kansas to establish an Indian Canaan, Clark warned him not to venture past the lands recently allotted to the Shawnees due to Pawnee war parties. 

Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors raided horses from Kiowas and Comanches, who raided them back. The vast herds of horses, mules, oxen, and other livestock on the overland trail, in addition to the merchandise available, proved alluring to raiders on all sides, including the Comancheiros. Clark encouraged the deployment of the First Regiment of U.S. Dragoons from Leavenworth to garrison forts in Indian country, beginning in 1829; to conduct regular patrols of the extensive area; to escort overland expeditions; and to minimize depredations between settlers and emigrant Indians and the indigenous tribes.

Nevertheless, it was an uphill battle. Major Bennet Riley from Jefferson Barracks provided Clark with the number and names of men killed in the 1829 Santa Fe expedition. Others, like William Gordon, informed Clark that the Arapahos and Gros Venitres “have 1,200 warriors. They inhabit the country from the Santa Fe Trail to the head of the Platte. ... They harass the Santa Fe traders, and those engaged in the fur trade.” Five years later, in 1836, the threat of Indian attack had not abated, and Kentuckian Herman Bowman informed Vice President Martin Van Buren that the Indian Territory represented “a more exposed frontier, than at present in a part of any civilized nation.”

The liquor traffic, in particular, contributed to the hostilities. Clark wrote that after one drink, “not an Indian could be found among a thousand who would not sell his horse, his gun, or his last blankets for another drink.” Traders bought pure alcohol in St. Louis for a dollar a gallon and sold it in the mountains for four dollars or a buffalo robe a pint, making it the most lucrative (and illegal) trading item. Clark’s record on stopping the liquor trade equivocated, consistently condemning it in correspondence to Washington but often granting liquor licenses to overland caravans for their boatmen to use! Nevertheless, the whiskey trade in Indian Territory and along the Santa Fe Trail is a story full of heartbreak and debauchery.

Private traders operating beyond the permanent Indian Territory often viewed the government’s trade and intercourse laws unenforceable. Most company leaders, such as the Bents, still tried to maintain respectability. Clark knew the Bent family. He likely met Silas Bent in the spring of 1804 before the Lewis and Clark Expedition departed because Bent served as a prominent lawyer and judge of the St. Louis Superior Court. Of Bent’s seven sons, at least four of them—Charles, William, Robert, and George—became fur traders on the upper Arkansas. Ceran St. Vrain was another St. Louis native son, William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain formed a Bent—St. Vrain Company and constructed a stockade near Pueblo on the north side of the Arkansas River, which served as an outpost to trade for beaver pelts and buffalo robes with the Indians. Southern Cheyenne warrior Yellow Wolf

72 For instance, Clark authorized Sublette and Campbell to take 450 gallons of alcohol to the 1832 rendezvous, even though his letter to Sublette says, “It is not to be used in trade, or barter, or to be given to the Indians.” Berry, Majority of Southerners, 300–301; William E. Unruh, Indians, Alcohol, and the Road to Teso and Santa Fe (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 47, 65, 98; William E. Unruh, White Man’s Wicked Water: The Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802–1892 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 18–19, 34–36; William E. Unruh, The Rise and Fall of Indian Country, 1825–1855 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 68–69.
informed William Bent that if the company constructed a fort further downstream, they would be in a better location to trade with the southern Cheyennes and Arapahos for buffalo robes. About a dozen miles above the mouth of the Purgatoire River, the partners constructed the adobe Bent's Fort on the north side of the Arkansas River. The adobe fort quickly became the center of the Bent—St. Vrain Company’s expanding trade empire, which included Fort St. Vrain to the north and Fort Adobe to the south, along with company stores in New Mexico at Taos and Santa Fe. From 1833 to 1849, the fort became a stopping point along the mountain route of the Santa Fe Trail. Just like Clark’s Fort Osage had been the trading center for the Osages, Kansas, Otos, and Missourias, Bent’s Fort served as the nexus for southern plains tribes as well as a convenient rendezvous for trappers, mountain men, and explorers. On 13 December 1834, William Clark issued Charles Bent a license to trade with Indians at Bent’s Fort.44

That same year, Clark’s efforts to reinvent the Indian trade and streamline the Indian department culminated in two substantial changes: the passing of the 1834 Indian Trade and Intercourse Act and the Indian Reorganization Act. The Indian department field service “consisted of four superintendents, eighteen agents, twenty-seven subagents, thirty-four interpreters, and a miscellaneous group of officers” with an annual collective income of nearly sixty thousand dollars. Clark’s efforts also contributed to the establishment of an Office of Indian Affairs in 1834.45 Clark’s efforts to ameliorate Indian suffering, tighten trade relations, curb the liquor traffic, and improve department efficiency in Indian Country proved too little too late.46

For three decades following the expedition for which he is best known, William Clark forged a meritorious public career that contributed even more to the opening of the West: from 1807 to 1838, he served as the U.S. government’s most important representative of western Indians. Although he never made the trek to Santa Fe himself, his role in establishing Fort Osage; his efforts to survey and protect the trail; and his close associations with the principal participants in the trade through issuing licenses to trade, paying depredation claims, issuing reports, and supporting patriots along the Santa Fe Trail, convey the significant role William Clark played in advancing the Santa Fe trade.


45. Ronald N. Satz, American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 155.

46. Otto Frowin Frederiksen, “The Liquidor Question among the Indian Tribes in Kansas, 1804–1881,” Bulletin of University of Kansas 33, no. 8 (April 1952), 49–50. Indian Country in 1834 was defined as west of the Mississipi and not part of the states of Missouri or Louisiana or the territory of Arkansas.

Over the next few decades, the beaver fur trade continued to decline while the buffalo hide trade increased dramatically on the southern, central, and northern plains. By the time of William Clark’s death in 1838, an estimated quarter of a million dollars in goods annually traversed the Santa Fe Trail. Although Clark never personally traveled the trail, his eldest son, Major Meriwether Lewis Clark, led an artillery battalion in General Kearny’s Army of the West from Fort Leavenworth, to Bent’s Fort, and on to Santa Fe before invading Mexico. In 1846, at the start of the Mexican War, the United States Army used the Santa Fe Trail to invade and later supply New Mexico.48 Another son, George Rogers Hancock Clark, married Eleanor Ann Glasgow, whose brothers, Edward and William, were significant merchants on the Santa Fe and Chihuahua Trails.49 And it was Eleanor and her daughter Julia Clark Voorhis who preserved and later donated many of the eighteen boxes of the Clark Family Collection papers to the Missouri Historical Society, which made this Inquiry Into Clark’s role in the Santa Fe Trail possible.


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