

# THE SANTA FE TRAIL IN THE FORT UNION-WATROUS AREA

by Harry C. Myers

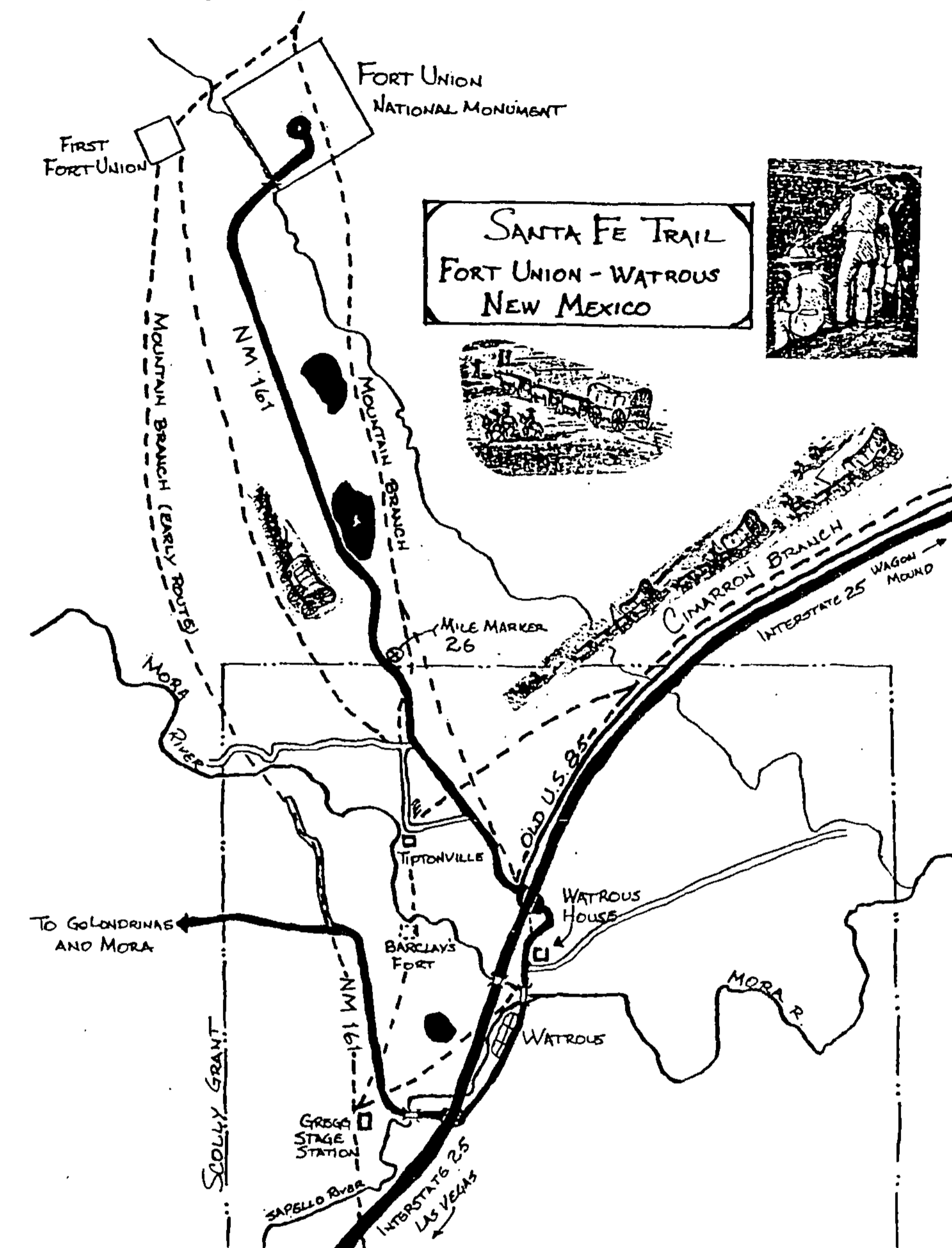
[Harry C. Myers is superintendent at Fort Union National Monument and a member of SFTA.]

The most significant number of Santa Fe Trail remains anywhere are found in the Fort Union-Watrous area of New Mexico. The area was originally called La Junta de los Rios Mora y Sapello (the junction of the Mora and Sapello rivers) and simply known as La Junta. In this tree-shaded valley, the intersection of the Cimarron and Mountain branches of the Trail occurred. Mexican traders sometimes halted here and waited until enough wagons had gathered to make a safe journey across the plains to Missouri.

The soil of the Mora and Sapello river valleys was fertile and surrounding grasslands were perfect for stock grazing. In 1843 John Scully and nine others petitioned Mexican Governor Manuel Armijo for a grant of land at La Junta. The grant received, Scully and the others colonized the triangular valley at the junction by November 1843. But the Scully grantees were not the first to settle in the valley.

In 1841 an Englishman by the name of James Boney, with his Mexican wife, settled and began to cultivate the land and build an irrigation ditch. Lt. W. H. Emory, with Brig. Gen. Stephen W. Kearny's Army of the West in 1846, reported: "Six miles brought us to the first settlement we had yet seen in 775 miles. The first object I saw was a pretty Mexican woman, with clean white stocking, who very cordially shook hands with us and asked for tobacco. In the next house lived Mr. Boney, an American, who has been some time in this country, and is the owner of a large number of horses and cattle, which he manages to keep in defiance of wolves, Indians, and Mexicans. He is a perfect specimen of a generous open-hearted adventurer, and in appearance what, I have pictured to myself, Daniel Boone, of Kentucky, must have been like in his day. He drove his herd of cattle into camp and picked out the largest and fattest, which he presented to the army." Boney was killed shortly thereafter by Indians and his family moved out of the valley.

In 1849 Alexander Barclay, an Englishman, and J. B. Doyle, an American, came to La Junta. Formerly Indian traders on the plains



associated with Bent's Fort, the two built a trading post on the Mora about a mile above the junction of the rivers. During the 1850's Barclay's Fort, resembling Bent's Old Fort, became a well-known stopping place on the Trail. Only scattered foundation stones are now left to mark this once important trading establishment and stage station.

Samuel B. Watrous, who came to New Mexico from Vermont in 1837, settled with his family at La Junta in 1849. He bought one-seventh interest in the Scully Grant and built a great adobe ranch house and store at the junction of the Mora and Sapello rivers. He amassed large herds of cattle, engaged in trade on the Trail, and sold merchandise to the

garrison at Fort Union and travelers on the Trail. When the railroad came in 1879, Watrous donated land for a townsite. Because the railroad already had another La Junta in Colorado, Watrous's name was given to the new railroad town. The Watrous house still sits in the valley immediately north of the town of Watrous. A portion of the original house was torn down in the late 1950s. However it was faithfully reconstructed from Historic American Building Survey drawings done in 1940. The house today is the headquarters of the Doolittle Ranch.

Watrous had several daughters who married and settled in the valley. George Gregg married one and became the manager of the

Barlow-Sanderson Stage Station at an intersection of the trails just above the crossing of the Sapello River. This station, known as the Gregg Stage Station or the Sapello Station was a "home station" where stages made half-hour meal stops. On New Mexico SR 161 south of Watrous and west of I-25, the stage station still exists looking much as it did during the 1860s and 1870s when stagecoaches stopped there. It is now a private residence.

Another Watrous daughter married William Tipton in 1849, who with his brother came through La Junta in 1846 with the Army of the West. Tipton went into partnership with his father-in-law and settled about a mile above Barclay's Fort in the valley. By 1870 he had laid out a townsite around his ranch. Tiptonville contained stores, saloons, a church, and a school. On the Mountain Branch it became a stopping place for caravans on the Trail and a gathering place for the soldiers from Fort Union. Although Tipton's impressive ranch house burned, foundations of it remain along with what is reputed to be his store and a stage stop. The adobe remains of ten largely unaltered buildings exist, reflecting the adobe-brick construction characteristic of the Territorial period. Tiptonville lies off NM SR 161 on the way to Fort Union. It can be reached by a county road which goes through the old town following the Santa Fe Trail and returns to SR 161. Trail ruts are evident both north and south of the town. To the east of Tiptonville and SR 161, a cutoff from the Cimarron Branch leads into Tiptonville and is evident coming down the hill. Both the town and these ruts are private property, but visitors are welcome to drive the county road through the town and view the ruts from SR 161.

Fort Union was established in 1851 for the protection of northern New Mexico and the Santa Fe Trail. It soon became the major quartermaster depot for the Southwest. Immense wagon trains carrying supplies for the military in the Southwest snaked over the plains to the depot at Fort Union. Trail ruts abound around the fort and weave through and around the remaining adobe structures. Here, one is able to stand in the ruts and follow their course through the fort property. From here one can look south to the La Junta valley and see at least three courses of ruts as they

cross pasture land and head into Tiptonville and Watrous. Fort Union was declared a National Monument in 1956. It is now administered by the National Park Service and is open each day of the year except Christmas and New Year's Day.

South of Fort Union on SR 161 one passes two ponds. These are Los Pozos where Kearny and the Army of the West camped in 1846. Continuing on, the Army occupied Santa Fe for the United States without firing a shot.

At mile marker 26 on SR 161 are probably the most evident set of ruts. They come over the hill and head straight into Tiptonville. Erosion has deepened these ruts to a depth of six feet or more. Just before the junction of SR 161 and I-25 ruts may be seen coming over the hill and heading into the Watrous Store. Black Willow Trees, reportedly planted by Watrous, line the old Trail, funneling travelers almost to the front door of the store. As a stretch of the Mountain Branch ran straight from Fort Union to Watrous, bypassing Tiptonville, this is considered an intersection of the two branches. If you follow the road into Watrous, you will be on the Trail when you are at the point where Black Willows line the road. A drive around the town of Watrous, little changed since most of the structures were built just before the turn of the century, gives one a good feeling for the New Mexico town of that era although many buildings are in a state of disrepair.

Traveling on old US 85 between Watrous and Wagon Mound, one can, at a leisurely pace, inspect ruts of the Cimarron Branch. Although ruts are visible from I-25, the old highway gives one a chance to move slowly without much traffic. South of Watrous and .3 mile south of mile marker 364 on the west side of the road is the Trail leading from the Sapello crossing to Las Vegas. Another routing parallels I-25 on the east to the crest of the hill but is difficult to see.

The present day La Junta valley is little changed from the time when mules and oxen pulled wagons along the Santa Fe Trail. The most obvious intrusion, Interstate 25, is quickly lost once one gets into the countryside. In this land of wide-open prairies and endless sky, visitors can return to a slower time of a hundred years ago and get a feel for the commerce of the prairies. ◁