

# Old Spanish Trail / Mormon Road Historic District: A National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Nevada

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## Introduction

Urban expansion in southern Nevada is rapidly encroaching upon land that was only recently considered isolated desert. Within this once isolated desert, now caught in the web of urban development, is the route of the Old Spanish Trail, which extends from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Southern California and crosses portions of six states. Through southern Nevada, the route covered approximately 152 miles from the Arizona to the California border. After 1850, the Trail was used mainly for transport between Salt Lake City and San Bernardino and became known as the Mormon Road. As an important cultural resource in southern Nevada, the Trail was documented by archaeologists and nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as the historic route mapped by Frémont.

I will discuss how the nomination process worked and how a listing on the National Historic Register differs from a National Historic Trail designation. I will also touch upon future management of the Trail if it is given National Historic Trail status.

## Evaluating the Trail

The first step in managing the Trail as a cultural resource is evaluating

its eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The Nevada State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has federal obligations to update and add to the statewide inventory of cultural resources. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) also has obligations to inventory lands under its administration and protect and preserve important historic and cultural aspects of our national heritage.

Nevada SHPO initiated the National Register nomination process and chose the Old Spanish Trail/Mormon Road (OST/MR) because of imminent threats from explosive development in southern Nevada. Because so much of the land in Nevada is managed by the BLM, Nevada SHPO works very closely with the BLM to preserve worthy cultural resources; thus, Terri McBride, archaeologist at the Nevada SHPO, and Stanton Rolf, District archaeologist at the BLM Las Vegas Field Office, collaborated on the nomination process.

During the 1980s, BLM archaeologists Keith Myhrer and Stanton Rolf intensively surveyed the trail from Las Vegas to the Nevada/California border. Prior to walking the route, library research was conducted to determine chronology and historical accuracy

of Trail accounts. The research design that was subsequently developed utilized historical data and archaeological methodology to conduct the laboratory and fieldwork in a scientific manner.

The route was then identified and plotted on USGS topographic maps, and artifacts were collected along the way. William White, then a BLM graduate intern archaeologist and presently senior archaeologist at the Harry Reid Center in Las Vegas, analyzed a total of 77 artifacts. These artifacts, which included cans and bottles, mule and horseshoes, and wagon parts, indicated the heaviest use of the Trail occurred from the 1860s to the 1900s. The data on the Trail was documented and published in a 1990 BLM Technical Report 17, "Archaeology of the Old Spanish Trail/Mormon Road from Las Vegas, Nevada to the California Border."

As a result of this initial field inventory, three classes of trail preservation were identified. The first class is **Totally Disturbed**; for example, a segment that is now paved over and incorporated into the modern highway system. The second class of preservation is **Partially Disturbed**, such as those portions extensively driven by contemporary off-road vehicles and portions that have been bladed. The third class of

preservation is **Relatively Undisturbed**. Two sections of the Trail showed little evidence of recent vehicular use and retain some degree of integrity. A total of 48.3 miles of the Trail were examined during this survey and segments were evaluated for integrity.

To be eligible to the National Register of Historic Places, a site or property **must** retain integrity of location, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Also, a property or site must have **tangible, physical remains** to be included in the National Register. Small roadside camps and trash dumps are artifactual manifestations of the travelers on Frémont’s OST/MR, as is the “pitch zone”—a 20 foot corridor on either side of the wagon tracks where unnecessary wagon contents and trash were thrown to the side of the road. These features would not exist without the historic travel corridor and are contributing factors in determining site eligibility.

Myhrer and Rolf determined that two segments of the Trail from Las Vegas to California (4.1 and 5.7 miles in length) were considered somewhat pristine. It was determined that 19.0 miles are only partially disturbed. These portions of the Trail still maintain historic integrity in terms of association, feeling, location, and setting. A total of 19.5 miles are considered totally disturbed. These portions are **not** considered eligible for nomination to the National Register but **still** have potential for interpretive and historic/recreational uses.

In-depth research is vitally important to recognize the significance of properties such as the OST/MR and place them in their specific historical context. Using the 1990 BLM report as a springboard, Terri McBride of Nevada SHPO completed additional historic research, which included a site file search at the Harry Reid Center For Environmental Studies at the University of Nevada Las Vegas Campus, archival research at the Nevada Historical Society and the Nevada State Archives and Library, and the BLM Nevada State Office in Reno. In December 2000, Terri spent one week surveying with Old Spanish Trail Association (OSTA) volunteers, who were crucial to the field investigations. She reexamined those segments west of Las Vegas that were determined eligible in the 1990 report—10 years of development in southern Nevada can make a big difference to historic resources—and she also documented a major segment of the trail (4.0 mi. long) on Mormon Mesa, east of Las Vegas near the Arizona border.

This recent survey data, along with Terri’s archival research, pinpointed the route as the one Frémont mapped and popularized known as the “Northern Branch.” This route passed through much of southern Nevada, unlike other widely recognized routes that circumvented most of Nevada such as the “Southern Branch,” which followed the Gila River route.

### **National Register of Historic Places: Criteria Used for Evaluating Segments of the Trail**

There are four criteria used to evaluate properties for National Register status:

Criterion A: The property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. This is determined by background research.

Criterion B: The property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

Criterion C: The property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity.

Criterion D: The property has yielded, or has the potential to yield information important in prehistory or history.

As mentioned previously, sites nominated **must** retain integrity, so those portions relatively undisturbed were evaluated as significant under two of the four National Register criteria—criterion (A) being associated with events that have made a major contribution to the broad patterns of our history **and** criterion (D) having the potential to yield information important in history. The Trail was nominated as an Historic District and is regionally significant under two research themes proposed in the Nevada Comprehensive Preservation Plan (White et al. 1991)—the Transportation Research Theme, and the Exploration and >>>

Settlement Sub-theme. In August 2001, the OST/MR was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Although several other states also have segments that have been determined eligible for a National Register listing, Nevada was the first to actually go through the nomination process.

The locations of those segments that were nominated **are not disclosed** to the general public to ensure continued preservation of the resource. Which leads to a discussion of the goals of National Register status and National Historic Trail designation and how they differ.

### **National Register of Historic Places and the National Historic Trails Designation**

Extensive historical research is required to identify and document significant trails—whether NRHP or NHT; however, National Register listing is an honorary one **and** is preservation-oriented.

OSTA is currently working with the National Park Service (NPS) on obtaining National Historic Trail status for the OST. There are three criteria that must be met. First, the Trail must be established by historic use and be historically significant as a result of that use. Second, the Trail must be of national significance with respect to any of several broad categories of American history, such as trade and commerce, exploration, migration and settlement. Finally, the Trail must have significant potential for public recreational use or interest based on historic

interpretation and appreciation.

In contrast to National Historic Register properties, Historic Trails **do not necessarily** show physical manifestations of trail routes. These are *corridors* that generally follow historic routes as determined through maps and journals and may even AVOID pristine segments of a trail. National Historic Trails are used to develop long-distance recreation corridors, a different end result than the National Register listing.

Some of the potential uses allowed on National Historic Trails are bicycling, hiking, horseback riding, and snowmobiling. Certain trails even permit motorcycling and offroading. In contrast, NRHP listings are preserved and protected.

### **Future Management Issues**

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), also known as a “handshake” agreement between the NPS and other agencies “encourages long-term interagency coordination and cooperation to further the spirit and intent of the National Trails System Act by preserving and strengthening the visitor satisfaction, administration, management, cooperation, partnerships, and funding of those lands and resources associated with the National Trails.”

If the OST becomes designated as a NHT, the National Park Service would then step in and share jurisdiction of the Trail with the agencies that manage the lands through which the Trail passes. Since BLM manages most of these

lands in southern Nevada, this agency may be designated as lead administrator in the future.

Partnerships with volunteer groups are critical to support efforts to increase public awareness of the OST and to ensure public support for its protection and preservation. An MOU is currently being formalized between the Las Vegas Field Office and members of OSTA. The purpose of this MOU is to promote working relationships between the BLM and OSTA in the identification, development, and maintenance of historically significant segments of the Old Spanish Trail. This MOU establishes a national framework to guide the development of agreements between BLM field offices and OSTA at regional, state, and local levels.

The Las Vegas Field Office and the Nevada SHPO are also in the planning process for interpretive and recreational uses along the Trail. Trailside signs and kiosks are currently being designed that will educate and enhance the public’s appreciation of the Trail. Volunteer groups are encouraged to enter into partnership with the BLM to further preservation efforts; for example, the Boy Scouts of America supports service projects on Historic Trails that earn participants the “Historic Trails Award.” This program encourages young people to learn about the historical roots of their community and the importance of preservation efforts.

To conclude, in this new millennium, as we travel across southern Nevada in a matter of hours, not days, we

## *What's next for the Old Spanish Trail?*

# Comprehensive Management Plans and Trail Support Groups

by Steve Elkinton

Program Leader, National Trails System, NPS

Good afternoon, it is a great privilege to address you today.

For this talk, I am going to assume that the Old Spanish Trail will become an NHT in the near future. Making that assumption, I want to get you thinking about what comes next. >>>

might pause to reflect on our historic foundations. The past is ever present with its traces all around us. We must strive to preserve the historic treasures of this past as a legacy for future generations.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the volunteers who willingly gave of their time over the years to help archaeologists survey the Old Spanish Trail/Mormon Road through Nevada. A big thanks goes to Terri McBride, Archaeologist, Nevada SHPO. This paper would have been difficult to write without her suggestions and assistance. Lastly, thanks go to Stanton Rolf, BLM District Archaeologist, who made it possible for me to attend the 2002 Old Spanish Trail Association Conference. ■

First, I want you to consider the central axiom of our office, built on observing hundreds of trails and trail organizations over the past 15 years: **A National Trail without a self-sustaining, independent citizens' organization will not endure.**

Therefore, I stand before you today, challenging this organization to become as strong and large and financially successful as it can be. Without a strong partner, Federal agencies cannot succeed in making a National Trail a success. There will be times when you need to play politics and build budgets. There will be times when you need to invite Congressmen and Senators and the Secretaries of the Interior to come to Trail events. There will be times when you are frustrated with us—and we with you—but we must persevere together. That is the only road to success for a National Trail.

Next, I want to get you thinking at several time perspectives:  
— The next 3–5 years, during which the comprehensive management plan (CMP) is being crafted;  
— The next 10–20 years, the life of the Trail's advisory council and development phase (getting marked and made available to the public); and  
— The long-term, beyond 20–25 years.

Let's look at the next 3–5 years after Congressional designation. This period should see the appointment of a trail advisory council, the establishment of a trail administration office, and the development of the Trail's comprehensive management plan, or "CMP."

What is the CMP process and what should you expect? The agency assigned to administer the Trail prepares the plan, and by law it is to be completed within two complete fiscal years after establishment (but seldom is). Its contents must include, as a minimum:

- A listing of all significant natural, historical, and cultural resources to be preserved (especially "high potential sites and segments")
- Management objectives and practices
- A protection plan for the identified high potential sites and segments
- Signing and marking process
- Carrying capacity and a plan to implement it
- General and site-specific development plans
- Anticipated (estimated) costs
- Sample cooperative agreements

It has become our practice over the past 30 years to structure these plans as a set of alternatives and to conduct them as Environmental Impact Statements, with all of the required compliance review and public involvement that goes with such documents. Be prepared for it to take longer than expected.

Sound complex? Maybe even a little frustrating? Let me suggest >>>