**William Becknell & the Santa Fe Trail**

In 1821 William Becknell faced substantial debt.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Dictionary-1) He had bought out the Boone family interest in the aforementioned salt works around 1818. In 1820 Becknell ran unsuccessfully for the Missouri Legislature and borrowed money to finance the campaign. The [Panic of 1819](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panic_of_1819) took its toll on his business activities by limiting the amount of credit and hard currency available. Owing creditors more than $1,200 dollars ($20,000 in today's money), Becknell was briefly jailed until a friend posted bail. The judge in the case gave Becknell until early 1822 to pay his creditors or face more jail time.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Life-2)

Under pressure, Becknell left Franklin in September 1821 on an extended trading trip, including hunting for furs, as the [fur trade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fur_trade) was still lucrative. He bought $300 worth of trade goods for his trip. According to an advertisement Becknell placed in the *Missouri Intelligencer* newspaper, his intent was "for the purpose of trading for horses and mules and catching wild animals of every description."[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Oklahoma-3) Becknell and his group were not the only ones searching for a convenient trade route to [Santa Fe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Fe,_New_Mexico), but that fall they were the first to arrive, in mid-November 1821.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Dictionary-1) Becknell's timing was near perfect.

Mexico had recently become independent of Spain. It lifted the ban against trade with outsiders. French colonists from St. Louis had traded with Santa Fe when both were still under Spanish rule before the [Louisiana Purchase](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisiana_Purchase). The Chouteau brothers of [St. Louis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Louis) had been given a monopoly with the Spanish for trade in Santa Fe, and this trade contributed to the wealth of the river city.

The people of Santa Fe were eager for the variety of goods Becknell offered from his string of pack horses. They were willing to pay high prices, with some cotton cloth and calico bringing the then-unheard of sum of three dollars a yard. After a month of trading, Becknell and his party left Santa Fe on December 13 with their saddlebags overflowing with silver.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Kansas-4) His investment of $300 in trading goods had returned approximately $6000 in coin.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Life-2)

Reaching Missouri in January 1822, Becknell almost immediately began planning his next trading trip to Santa Fe. For his second journey, he chose to haul trade goods by wagon instead of pack horse. He had to slightly alter his original route to accommodate the width of wagons and draft teams. The wagon train left Franklin on May 22, 1822 and suffered considerable hardship, with both animals and people nearly dying of thirst in the parched [Cimarron Desert](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cimarron_Desert&action=edit&redlink=1). The 'train' arrived in Santa Fe forty-eight days later. The second trip proved to be even more profitable than the first. Taking an estimated $3,000 in goods to Santa Fe, Becknell's party returned with a profit of around $91,000 dollars. They paid some of that total as dividends to shareholders who had helped fund the trip, and even the smallest investor reaped great returns.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Becknell#cite_note-Life-2)

Becknell made a third profitable trip to Santa Fe in 1824. The following year in 1825, he helped map the trail for surveyors hired by the U.S. Congress. For his efforts in opening up an improved route for regular traffic and military movement, William Becknell became known as the *Father of the* [*Santa Fe Trail*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Fe_Trail)