

National Historic Trail Feasibility Study and Environmental Assessment

July 2001



OLD SPANISH TRAIL

New Mexico • Colorado • Utah • Arizona • Nevada • California

United States Department of the Interior • National Park Service

Color Scans

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the feasibility and desirability of designating the Old Spanish Trail as a National Historic Trail under the study provisions of the National Trails System Act (Public Law 90-543, 16 USC 1241, et seq.).

Pioneered by Mexican trader Antonio Armijo in 1829, the Old Spanish Trail was a horse and burro pack route that connected Santa Fe and Los Angeles. In its early years, trappers, slavers, traders, and immigrants used parts or all of the Old Spanish Trail. Other variants of the trail developed as travelers sought adequate water, grazing, shorter distances, smoother terrain, and safer passage. Over time, multiple, parallel, and intertwined routes developed. Many of these routes followed older trails developed by American Indians, and later followed by Spanish, Mexican, and other Euro-American explorers.

After 1848, use of the eastern end of the trail diminished as the California Trail to the north and southern trails across Arizona became the primary routes to California. In 1847, the Mormons initiated wagon travel from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. Their wagon road paralleled or overlapped much of the western end of the Old Spanish Trail. This wagon road became known as the Mormon Road, and served as a supply route for Mormon settlements. Many immigrants, Gold Rush prospectors, and others used this route as an alternative to the more northerly routes of the California Trail to California. The study recommends that the Mormon Road be considered either a separate historic route or a component of another trail, such as the California Trail.

The history, background, and significance of the Old Spanish Trail have been researched and analyzed using criteria set forth in the National Trails System Act, with application of National Historic Landmark criteria for national significance. This analysis is found in the "Analysis of National Trails System Act Criterion B" and the "Other Themes Considered with Respect to National Significance" sections of the document. The analysis determined that the Old Spanish Trail is nationally significant, with respect to the theme of the Changing Role of the United States in the World Community and the topic of commerce as identified in the National Park Service's Revised Thematic Framework (1996). Trade characterized the most substantive use of the entire trail. It included legal and illegal commercial activities between and among various ethnic groups, and trade in enslaved American Indians. Although the analysis determines a finding of national significance, it also recognizes that a dearth of data exists concerning many aspects of the alignments and use of the Old Spanish Trail. Factors such as the highly arid and forbidding nature of the landscape over which caravans on the trail passed, illegal trade activity, and the opportunities and dangers posed by shifting alliances between trail travelers and the diverse American Indian bands, had a significant impact on trail alignments and use. The analysis concludes by recommending that if the Old Spanish Trail becomes a national historic trail, then a multidisciplinary cultural resource management program that includes historical, archeological, and ethnographic investigations should be a vital component of trail administration. With respect to a number of other historic themes and uses that were evaluated, the Old Spanish Trail is found to be of state or local significance.

This trail study presents three alternatives. Under the first of these alternatives, Alternative A, the "no-action" alternative, there would be no further federal involvement, and the routes would not become components of the National Trails System as a national historic trail.

Alternative B recognizes the interest in and support for the trail from groups, organizations, and public agencies. In lieu of designation of the Old Spanish Trail as a National Historic Trail,

Alternative B proposes ways to give the public and Congress additional options for preservation, interpretation, and public use of the trail. Private organizations and the states could implement this alternative. Federal land management agencies could participate using existing authorities, or Congress could prescribe additional federal involvement.

Alternative C proposes the designation of Old Spanish Trail routes in New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California as a National Historic Trail under the study provisions of the National Trails System Act. If designated by Congress as a National Historic Trail, the Old Spanish Trail would be managed through cooperative partnerships with public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and landowners. The federal role would be to set and ensure consistent preservation, education, and public use programs. There would be little, if any, federal acquisition of private land. It is recommended that authorities be enacted so that land would be acquired only from willing sellers.

Alternative C proposes three principal routes for designation as part of the National Historic Trail: Armijo's Route, The Northern Route, and the North Branch. Other identified variants of these routes were studied in the preparation of this feasibility study, including the western fork of the North Branch, the Fishlake Cutoff, and the Kingston Cutoff. These three variants are included as part of the overall study area and met most criteria for National Historic Trail designation, but are not recommended for designation at this time, because data is lacking to show that they were used in conducting trade and commerce between New Mexico and California, between 1829-1848. Future investigations may uncover additional information on these variants that shows they were used for trade and commerce during the period of significance. Because these routes have met all other study requirements of the National Trails System Act, this feasibility study suggests that any legislation developed to designate the Old Spanish Trail should also authorize the Secretary to administratively add these trail variants to the National Historic Trail if sufficient documentation is presented to verify their association and use.