

The SFTA and the NPS – a 30-Year Partnership
By Frank Norris, NPS Historian

On May 8, 2017, both the Santa Fe Trail Association (SFTA) and the National Park Service (NPS) commemorated the 30th anniversary of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail. But relations between our two organizations go back even further than the day that President Reagan signed the trail bill into law [On May 8, 1987]. Eight months earlier, at the September 1986 meeting that formed the Santa Fe Trail Council (SFTA's predecessor), NPS folks were in attendance, encouraging the group's efforts. And throughout the early months of 1987, as the Santa Fe Trail bill wended its way through the U.S. House and Senate, Santa Fe Trail Council members were urging their congressional representatives to enact the trail bill into law. Our two organizations have been working together ever since.

When President Reagan signed the Santa Fe Trail bill, no one knew which federal agency would administer the trail. Just a few weeks later, however, that hurdle was overcome when Interior Secretary Donald Hodel decided that the NPS would fulfill that role. By August 1987, staff in the NPS's Southwest Regional Office (in Santa Fe) were working with SFTC leaders and other citizens to choose 35 prominent citizens to serve on the Santa Fe NHT's Advisory Council, which was chaired by William deBuys, from Santa Fe, and Dr. David Sandoval, from Pueblo, Colorado.

That fall, work began on the trail's comprehensive management plan, which involved many public meetings and consultation with SFTA members. David Gaines, a landscape architect in the agency's Santa Fe office, was asked to lead the NPS's effort. Key to the planning process was knowing the trail's exact location, so during the spring of 1988 several prominent SFTA members – Greg Franzwa plus Leo and Bonita Oliva, along with Jere Krakow and Mike Spratt from the NPS – spent several weeks along the trail, chatting with local experts and mapping the trail. Publicity was also an important part of the planning effort, so the NPS sponsored the production of a 12-minute film, *All's Set on the Santa Fe Trail*. The film, which featured many SFTA members, was completed in the spring of 1989.

The draft comprehensive plan was completed later that year, and the final plan was published in 1990. The plan featured a designated auto tour route and the official NPS trail logo, and by 1992, the NPS was working with various state transportation departments to install signage along the auto tour routes. This sign placement would continue for the next several years.

In April 1990, regional officials established the Branch of Long Distance Trails, and by this time Gaines was being assisted by John Conoboy, an outdoor recreation planner, along with various secretaries, all of whom served for fairly brief periods. In 1990, the Santa Fe NHT received its first budget: \$74,000. This was the first year that any national historic trail received more than token funding; even so, it was a bare-bones budget.

Beginning in 1990, Gaines and his colleagues devoted a good deal of attention to forging a working agreement between the NPS and SFTA, and in April 1991 the two entities finalized their first memorandum of understanding. Just four months later, the MOU was terminated in

favor of a cooperative agreement, which allowed the NPS “to provide limited financial assistance for specific projects and programs.” Ever since that time, the two organizations have worked together under a succession of cooperative agreements.

In order to guide how the trail would be interpreted, Gaines and other NPS staff began working with SFTA members and other trail supporters on a trailwide interpretive plan. That plan, begun in 1990, was completed in September 1991. That same year, the NPS produced an interim trail brochure. Soon afterward, the NPS sponsored a historical study that featured the role of Hispanics along the trail, and also a historic context study, which identified significant trail-related properties and nominated national register forms for them. The first study, undertaken by Susan Calafate Boyle, eventually resulted in the book *Las Capitalistas; Hispano Merchants and the Santa Fe Trade*, while the second study, by the Urbana Group, was completed in 1993. The NPS, during this period, also worked to certify various historic sites, original trail segments, and interpretive facilities. Staff in Santa Fe devised a new certification form, and on January 24, 1991 the Santa Fe NHT gained its first certified partner when landowners Dan and Carol Sharp, who owned the Autograph Rock property in Oklahoma, signed the appropriate paperwork. In order to clarify and explain the certification concept, the agency, in October 1991, completed and published a trailside certification guide.

The early 1990s also brought the first trail retracement project. Among trail advocates, some strongly felt that the public should be encouraged to travel in the trace of the historic ruts, but others – just as vehemently – thought that a retracement trail should be constructed adjacent to the historic ruts. This question was partly resolved in early 1993, when officials at the Cimarron National Grassland (in southwestern Kansas) announced the construction of the 19-mile “Santa Fe Companion Trail,” which would parallel the trail right-of-way. Trail construction began that year, and officials opened it to the public on September 10, 1994.

During the first ten years after the Santa Fe National Historic Trail was established, relations waxed and waned between the SFTA and NPS. The SFTA, at this time, was an entirely voluntary organization, and some SFTA board members wanted a standalone, independent organization, free of any government constraints. NPS officials, for their part, could also be independent, occasionally acting on their own without consulting trail partners. By the late 1990s, however, this arm’s-length relationship (on the part of both parties) appears to have toned down, and since that time both NPS and SFTA leaders have worked to ensure a mutually productive partnership.

The nature of coordination between the NPS and SFTA has changed over the years. Beginning in 1989, NPS and SFTA leaders conversed when the trail’s advisory council had its periodic meetings. The last such meeting took place in the fall of 1996, however, and the organization disbanded a year later. But each year since that time, SFTA has held either symposiums (held at odd-numbered years in various locations) or assisted with the Rendezvous (held in Larned in even-numbered years.). NPS staff have attended most, if not all of those gatherings, supplemented by attendance at either biannual board meetings or at other venues.

Over the past thirty years, the two organizations have worked together on scores if not hundreds of projects pertaining to site identification, preservation, interpretation, and development. As

one example of that cooperation, the NPS during the early 1990s worked with the Autograph Rock landowners on site design and planning. Beginning in 1993, the SFTA spent considerable time preparing for the trail's 175th anniversary, which took place in September 1996. Those events were coordinated by Harry Myers, who served both as an SFTA board member and a Fort Union-based NPS employee. Soon afterward, the two organizations worked together on the agency's first large-scale interpretive project, a series of ten interpretive waysides placed at various sites in Council Grove, Kansas.

NPS staff have worked with SFTA members at sites and segments all along the trail, from Old Franklin to Santa Fe. At Trail Junction Park near Gardner, Kansas, for example, a major seven-panel interpretive display, opened in 2008, marks the approximate dividing point between traffic headed to Santa Fe versus Oregon or California. West of Dodge City, Kansas, a cooperative effort resulted in the 2011 construction of a major interpretive kiosk at the so-called Boot Hill Trail Tracks. Between Springer and Clayton, New Mexico, a large interpretive display focuses on trail-related resources at the Gaines Ranch. And in the Kansas City metropolitan area, a multi-year, continuing collaboration between NPS staff, SFTA officials, and political leaders has resulted in the partial implementation of an interpreted, 46-mile pedestrian corridor that roughly parallels the Santa Fe Trail.

In other ways as well, trail interpretation has increased significantly in recent years. The interim trail brochure noted above was replaced, in 1996, with a slick-paper trail brochure. That brochure was updated several times, and more recently a new design was formatted and printed. Rack cards have also been produced for several areas on the trail, an extensive webpage has been developed, and various trail-related videos and interactive maps are now available. All were developed with input from SFTA members, who either contributed materials or reviewed the draft products.

In 2006 and 2007, the two organizations collaborated on the trail's most comprehensive resource effort to date. The Great Santa Fe Trail Rediscovery Expedition was an extensive field-based effort to identify and evaluate major trail resources. Six people spearheaded this project, three each from the NPS and SFTA.

The success of the certification effort suggests additional cooperation between landowners, many of whom are SFTA members, and the NPS. The first certification, in early 1991, was quickly followed by others, and by the fall of 1995, 30 sites or segments were certified trail partners. This number increased to 47 in 2000, to 59 in 2005, and to 74 in 2015. These partnerships have helped protect many historical sites and trail segments. Also important in protecting the trail has been the placing of sites and segments on the National Register of Historic Places or as National Historic Landmarks. During the mid-1960s, fewer than 10 nominations recognized the trail's importance. Today, however, well over 60 trail-related nominations have been completed, and currently, on-going efforts with various state historic preservation offices will result in additional National Register entries.

Today, as in years past, NPS members are avid participants or observers at SFTA's annual meetings and Rendezvous, they contribute occasional articles to *Wagon Tracks*, and they enjoy working with SFTA members while compiling videos, interactive maps, websites, interpretive

waysides, and museum exhibits. Our agency feels that it's a successful partnership – one that we look forward to continuing in new and exciting ways as we cooperatively protect, develop, and promote the Santa Fe National Historic Trail.

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