

# Trail BLAZERS

A new book reveals the forgotten and little-told stories of historic women on the Santa Fe Trail. Their modern-day counterparts are continuing spirited legacies of honoring the land and their roots.

BY FRANCES LEVINE AND KATE NELSON

Photographs by  
Tira Howard



Ratón civic leader Brenda Ferri takes a walk on today's Santa Fe Trail near the Ratón Pass.



# BY THE TIME SUSAN WALLACE’S WAGON TRAIN CRESTED RATÓN PASS IN 1878,

the Santa Fe Trail had accomplished its goal of knitting the Wild West into the American story. The trail’s 1821–1880 heyday as a trade route filled with mules, oxen, and covered wagons was steaming into a new era. But one thing would remain the same: The stories of women travelers like Wallace were relegated to hard-to-find letters and diaries, largely lost to history.

Best known today as the wife of Territorial Governor and *Ben-Hur* author Lew Wallace, Susan wrote detailed accounts of her time in Santa Fe, a place she described as “invested with indescribable

romance.” In Frances Levine’s new book, *Crossings: Women on the Santa Fe Trail* (University Press of Kansas), Wallace’s voice joins those of women like María Rosa Villalpando Salé dit Lajoie, Marian Sloan Russell, suffragist Julia Archibald Holmes, and Jane, the enslaved servant of Susan Shelby Magoffin.

Precise routes varied, but along the approximately 1,000 miles between St. Louis and Santa Fe, the trail dramatically changed cultures and economies, for better and for worse. Historians have long focused on the impact of travelers like William Becknell and Kit Carson, but women left lasting marks as well. Their number includes mothers, teachers, nuns, writers, nurses, and artists.

They passed through outposts like Ratón, Springer, Taos, Fort Union, and Las Vegas, dropping seeds of history that grew into businesses as notable as La Fonda on the Plaza and as cozy as the remote Watrous Coffee House—both overseen by women.

“Watrous isn’t your end goal,” coffee-house manager Rachel Pulliam says of her business off I-25, near Fort Union. “It’s a place of respite and refreshment to take you wherever your life is going.”

Women living today along the historic Santa Fe Trail continue to add to the story of the Southwest, an unfolding narrative that takes us from who we were to what we became. We set out to meet a few more of these women of the trail, time-traveling between past and present.

## RATÓN

As she descended the steps of a sleeper car on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in Trinidad, Colorado, Susan Wallace might have thought the discomforts of travel from her home in Indiana were over. In spring 1878, as railroad construction inched westward, this leg of a journey that had once consumed several months could now be completed in less than a week.

But Wallace found the train a miserable experience, marred by wailing children, weary mothers, and an assortment of con men, characters, and bedbugs. Then she had two days and one night of Santa Fe

Trail travel in a jouncing buckboard before she reached her new home in the territorial capital.

She likened the ride to a medieval form of torture. The wagon jarred every fiber of her body, not even stopping for the night. She was sure the crosses and markers, or descansos, along the trail marked places where travelers succumbed to the injuries delivered by the wagon’s thrashing.

To her relief, the sound of convent bells and her driver’s cry of “La fonda!” (“The inn!”) soon indicated she had reached the trail’s end in Santa Fe.

That fall, train tracks would reach Ratón, in northeastern New Mexico, and transform it into a coal-mining powerhouse. “At one time, 37 different languages were spoken here,” Brenda Ferri says. “Our history is very important because that’s our identity.”

Ferri grew up in Ratón but left for college and career, logging time in Albuquerque, Denver, and Phoenix. She returned in 2005 when her father fell ill and because “it was just time to come home.”

She took on leadership of the Raton Arts & Humanities Council, a post she still holds. But her sense of civic responsibility only grew as she added a collage of duties that include executive director of Raton MainStreet, a seat on the school board, and leadership of the New Mexico Elks Association.

As she works to enrich the arts in a 6,000-person town where the economy is still reeling from mine closures, Ferri imbues a pioneer drive not unlike Wallace’s. “We’re trying to reinvent ourselves,” she says. “We have to do it by small mom-and-pop shops and independent entrepreneurs. If we don’t, I feel like we would just go away and be forgotten.”

Historic markers throughout town highlight the Santa Fe Trail’s route. Depression-era murals by native son Manville Chapman inside the ornate Shuler Theater also deliver a visual reminder. For Ferri, the best encapsulation of her hometown’s significance comes every time she, like Wallace, crests Ratón Pass and beholds the vast volcanic region beyond.

“The beauty of that landscape is my favorite view in the whole world,” she says. “You have an open view of all the mountains. When I get to that point, it’s like, *Ohhh, I’m home.*”

**Below, clockwise from top:** Susan Wallace published six books. An 1844 lithograph shows the arrival of the caravan in Santa Fe. Richard and Marian Sloan Russell, 1865. **Facing page:** Brenda Ferri, near I-25’s part of the trail, is the executive director of Raton MainStreet.



PUBLIC DOMAIN; PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES, NEW MEXICO HISTORY MUSEUM, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, #045011; PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES, NEW MEXICO HISTORY MUSEUM, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, #PAMU.60



## TAOS

María Rosa Villalpando’s journey east from Taos to St. Louis began even before the Santa Fe Trail was formally recognized. Abducted in a raid by Comanches on Ranchos de Taos in August 1760, she was among dozens of women and children taken to Comanche settlements in southwestern Colorado.

Her mother and husband were killed in the battle, and she was separated from her infant son. Despite Spanish attempts to rescue the captives, few were recovered. While Villalpando was held among the Comanches, she had a son. They traded her to the Pawnee, and in their



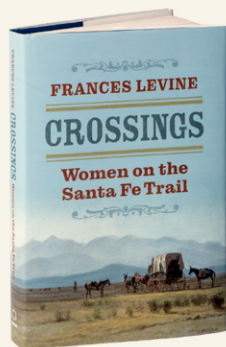




## READ ALL ABOUT IT

In ***Crossings: Women on the Santa Fe Trail*** (University Press of Kansas), historian Frances Levine delves into stories such as Comanche captive María Rosa Villalpando; Kit Carson’s half-Arapaho daughter, Adaline; Jewish pioneers Betty and Flora Spiegelberg; and Kate Messervy Kingsbury, who hoped to recover from tuberculosis in New Mexico’s arid environment.

Other good reads: In ***Land of Enchantment: Memoirs of Marian Russell Along the Santa Fe Trail*** (University of New Mexico Press), Russell recounts numerous journeys on the trail, from her childhood impressions to her days as a military wife at Fort Union. ***Down the Santa Fe Trail and into New Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin*** (University of Nebraska Press) speaks to life as a trader’s wife during the Mexican-American War, the outcome of which claimed New Mexico as a territory of the United States.



camp on the Upper Missouri River, she was purchased by a settler of French colonial St. Louis.

Jean Baptiste Salé dit Lajoie brought her to St. Louis in 1768, along with an infant son they had together. They married in 1770. When Salé dit Lajoie left her and returned to France in 1792, she prospered as a trader of provisions, hides, and furs—expertise she might have developed while held in captivity or seeing the Taos trade fairs of her youth.

In St. Louis, where she lived to be more than 100 years old, her dramatic, if somewhat romanticized, history was well-known to trail traders. But her ties to her past were lost. She never again saw her childhood home of Taos, which eventually featured a branch of the famous trail—one that attempted to assimilate generations of Indigenous and Hispanic people living there.

In recent years, one of the notable impacts of that assimilation was the decline of traditional weaving knowledge at Taos Pueblo. Ceremonial traditions held firm, but dancers relied on other Pueblo people to make the belts for their regalia. “Whoever showed up to Taos Pueblo, we would just buy it,” Marlee Espinosa says.

Last year, Chimayó-based weaver Emily Trujillo and Taos-based weaver Layne Jackson Hubbard started Futuros Ancestral/Ancestral Futures. Their intent: revive Río Grande-style weaving in northern New Mexico. Interest among pueblo members, including Espinosa, inspired an offshoot just for them. Espinosa signed up last November. At a demonstration of fiber artists at La Hacienda de los Martinez in Taos this January, she sat before the fifth child-size belt she would soon complete.

“It’s really hard,” she says. “But once you finally get it, it clicks. Now I’m trying to get it to click for other people.”

Every Sunday, the nascent weavers gather to share tips and encouragement. “I signed up just because I wanted to learn something new,” Espinosa says. “But now my female relatives are asking me to teach them as well.”

Members of the group shoehorn the craft around full-time jobs (Espinosa works in education), filling evenings and weekends learning beginner-level

patterns. One hopes to plant cotton this spring to grow her own fibers. Another forages native plants to dye sheep wool. All look forward to color-coordinating their regalia, rather than relying on whatever’s sold to them.

“It’s powerful that we’re able to restore this tradition,” Espinosa says.

## FORT UNION

From 1851 to 1891, Fort Union, 100 miles east of Santa Fe, strived to tame the New Mexico Territory, including its key role against Confederate forces during the Civil War. Its placement along the trail as a supply post made the fort an essential stop for travelers, including wives of traders and officers.

One of them, Catherine (Katie) Bowen, traveled from Buffalo, New York, to New Mexico with her husband, U.S. Army Captain Isaac Bowen, in March 1851. They remained at the fort until 1853. Her letters to her parents document their travels from St. Louis to the fort and her life there. She enjoyed the company of other officers’ wives, who socialized over sewing, cooking, and gossiping, she wrote.

No doubt one subject of gossip among women who later lived at the busy fort was Julia Anna Archibald Holmes, who came to a civilian settlement at Watrous, 10 miles south of the fort, with her husband, James, in 1859 as a governess and teacher. Holmes was also a suffragist and ardent abolitionist whose sympathies did not often align with other people on the trail or New Mexico’s political and military elites.

While on the trail in 1858, Holmes wore the American Reform outfit, a jacket and bloomers that symbolized both her political leanings and her desire for equality with men in the work of tending camp. “However much it lacked in taste,” she wrote, “I found it to be beyond value in comfort and convenience, as it gave me freedom to roam at pleasure in search of flowers and other curiosities, while the cattle continued their slow and measured pace.”

Her first child was born at Fort Union. The couple found themselves out of favor during the rise of Civil War tensions in New Mexico and returned east in 1862.

Today, the fort is a national monument

of eroded structures surrounded by rolling ranchland covered in knee-high waves of grama grasses. The town of Watrous, named for farmer and rancher Samuel Watrous, who provisioned the fort as well as travelers, survives off an easy-to-miss exit on I-25.

Since 2019, a small coffeehouse with fluffy scones and robust breakfast burritos has lured travelers who hail from every U.S. state and places as far-flung as Brazil, Germany, and Japan. Colorado native Rachel Pulliam manages the Watrous Coffee House, an airy space that once served as living quarters beside a long-gone general store. Her husband, Jason, trains horses for the Watrous Valley Ranch, which owns the shop. She keeps the books for the ranchers—while also raising two children and helping start a one-acre farm that aims to feed 100 families.

Only 90 people live in Watrous. On a busy day, you might meet all of them inside the coffeehouse or on its spacious lawn, which hosts community garage sales and special events. A sense of the Santa Fe Trail’s cultural crossings takes form in the parking lot’s mix of license plates and, inside, the snippets of conversation about moving cattle. (Reading materials include the latest editions of *Beef Bulletin* and *American Quarter Horse Journal*.)

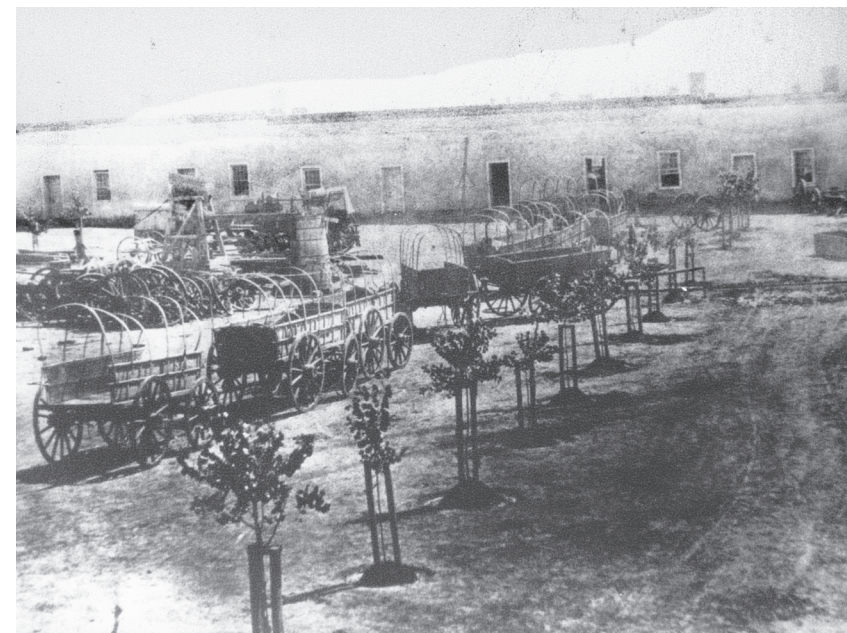
“I’ve always worked hospitality-related jobs,” Pulliam says. “The thread is that you are the free counselor, and you walk through life with people. You see them bringing in their child for the first time, you see the couple going through



From top: Suffragist Julia Archibald Holmes, circa 1870. Supply wagons at Fort Union, circa 1890. Facing page: At Taos Pueblo, Marlee Espinosa carries on weaving traditions.

## WEB EXTRA

Hear more about ***Crossings: Women on the Santa Fe Trail*** in author Frances Levine’s own words at [nmmag.us/franceslevine](https://nmmag.us/franceslevine).







## HIT THE TRAIL

In Ratón, visit the **Raton Museum** for a grounding in trail history. [facebook.com/RatonMuseum](https://facebook.com/RatonMuseum). While taking in an event at the **Shuler Theater**, enjoy the murals in its lobby. (The theater is also home to the Santa Fe Trail School for the Performing Arts.) [shulrtheater.com](https://shulrtheater.com)

In Taos, pop into **La Hacienda de los Martinez**, which served as a locus of 19th-century trading. [taohistoricmuseums.org](https://taohistoricmuseums.org)

Learn more about **Futuros Ancestral's** efforts to revive weaving traditions. [futuros-ancestral.org](https://futuros-ancestral.org)

Take in **Fort Union National Monument's** museum and walking tours that show the remnants of military life and the ruts of Santa Fe Trail wagons. [nps.gov/foun](https://nps.gov/foun)

Stop for some java at the **Watrous Coffee House**. [watrouscoffeeshouse.com](https://watrouscoffeeshouse.com)

Make a reservation for a free art and history tour of **La Fonda on the Plaza** at 10:30 a.m., Wednesday through Saturday. [nmmag.us/laфона-tour](https://nmmag.us/laфона-tour)

Pay respects at historical markers. **Women of the Santa Fe Trail**, between Ratón and Maxwell on I-25, recognizes early Hispanic women on the trail, along with Mary Donoho, Susan Shelby Magoffin, and Marian Sloan Russell. The marker for **María Rosa Villalpando**, in Ranchos de Taos, honors the legacy of a woman who was taken captive by Comanches and rose to prominence in St. Louis society. In Santa Fe, the marker for **Mother Magdalena and the Sisters of Loretto** tells of the nuns who came by trail. They became the first teachers in New Mexico Territory and established its first hospital. [nmhistoricwomen.org](https://nmhistoricwomen.org)

The **Santa Fe Trail Museum**, in Springer, displays artifacts from the trail inside the old Colfax County Courthouse. [nmmag.us/sftrail-museum](https://nmmag.us/sftrail-museum)

Wander portions of the trail's Cimarrón Route north of **Clayton**, including McNees Crossing and a portion of the Kiowa National Grassland. [nmmag.us/cimarronroute](https://nmmag.us/cimarronroute) While in Clayton, check out the Santa Fe Trail sections at the **Herzstein Memorial Museum**. [herzsteinmuseum.com](https://herzsteinmuseum.com)

Besides its bounty of photos and artifacts, the **Santa Fe Trail Interpretive Center**, in Las Vegas, New Mexico, carries engaging books and brochures to deepen your knowledge and guide your feet. [nmmag.us/sftrail-center](https://nmmag.us/sftrail-center)

the wife's chemotherapy, and then you see the man coming in alone. So you sit with them and share that moment.

"That's what's cool about being here. Everyone lives so far away that you don't knock on the door. You come here."

## SANTA FE

At the territorial capital, traders tended to turn south and follow the old Camino Real to Mexico City. But "the end of the Santa Fe Trail" served as a welcome stopping-point for many—particularly the lodgings on the Plaza's southeast corner, which has long served as a lucky spot for innkeepers, including women.

Mary Dodson Donoho operated the United States Hotel there from 1833 to 1837. Elizabeth Ann Williams Davis took over its successor, the Exchange Hotel, in 1881. That year, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* noted that "she had made money where others had failed" and had kept the Exchange "in the lead consistently

**Above:** Rachel Pulliam presides over the Watrous Coffee House. **Facing page:** The Exchange Hotel at the end of the trail, now long gone. La Fonda on the Plaza board chairman emerita Jenny Kimball.

## "IT WAS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART."

— JENNY KIMBALL, ON THE EXCHANGE HOTEL, WHERE LA FONDA ON THE PLAZA WAS BUILT IN 1923


despite the disadvantages of an inconvenient, illy-arranged, straggling one-story adobe building."

Davis went on to operate the Plaza Hotel in Las Vegas and, after a brief stint as a homesteader in Santa Rosa, lived the rest of her life in Las Vegas.

The Exchange continued a decline into "pretty rough lodging," says Jenny Kimball, board chairman emerita of its successor, La Fonda on the Plaza. "It was not for the faint of heart. It would have been dusty. It would have been dirty. If the Exchange Hotel was anything to write home about, they wouldn't have torn it down in 1919."

Mary Colter, an architect for the Fred Harvey Company, oversaw construction of La Fonda and committed herself to expressing an arts-and-crafts sense of New Mexico in every headboard, light fixture, and fireplace. That dedication inspired Kimball and architect Barbara Felix in recent improvements that saw La Fonda rise as an industry leader with luxury suites, fine dining, and the sometimes-raucous bar's dance floor.

"We have everything, from families that are driving the country to our repeat guests who won't stay anywhere else," Kimball says. "It's a smorgasbord, from sophisticated travelers to first-time guests."

Docents conduct tours that focus on how the hotel's details reflect aspects of New Mexico history. "We want everyone to understand this isn't just another hotel in another city," Kimball says. "When you walk the hall on your own, you see things. But until the docent explains to you, 'These are Gerald Cassidy paintings,' you're just walking by a landscape. It's an hour tour that says, 'Here's 20 things about the area that are interesting. Now go dig into them.'" 

**Frances Levine and Kate Nelson** are featured in *Storytellers*, page 8.

