

Great American Lives

of Nineteenth Century Missouri

Susan Magoffin

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Born to wealth and privilege, Susan Shelby Magoffin seemed an unlikely person to travel the coarse and hazardous Santa Fe Trail. Yet, both circumstance and her spirit of adventure combined to make her, in all likelihood, the first American white woman to travel the path connecting Missouri to Mexico. Today, we owe much of what we know about life on the trail to the details Susan supplied in her journal.

JOURNAL BEGINS

The granddaughter of Kentucky's first governor, Susan Shelby was born on July 30, 1827, into one of the wealthiest families in the state. She grew up with servants and a proper education. When she was 18, she married Samuel Magoffin, a successful Santa Fe Trail **merchant**, 27 years older than she.

Susan and Samuel spent their honeymoon in New York, but instead of settling into a home near family, the Magoffins prepared for a trading **expedition** down the Santa Fe Trail.

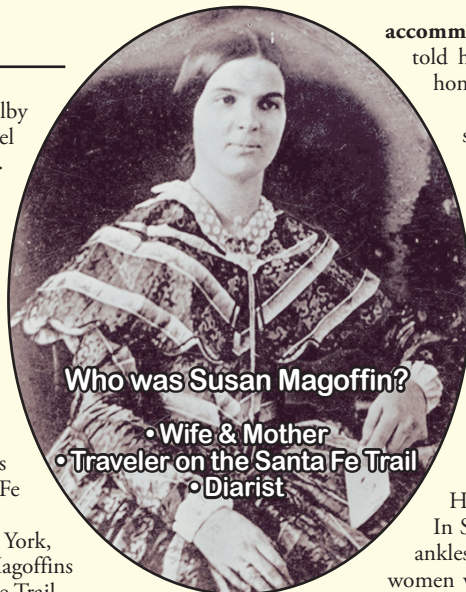
With war just beginning between America and Mexico, it was a particularly dangerous time to travel the trail. But according to Susan's journal, she was very excited about the trip.

She began her very **thorough** journal in June 1846 as she and Magoffin departed from Independence, Mo. Throughout the expedition, she wrote in it almost every day.

ON THE TRAIL

Life on the Santa Fe Trail was harsh. There were dust, flies, and bad weather, not to mention the dangers posed by Indians, disease, fires and flooded rivers. But as the wife of the expedition leader, Susan could afford to bring many comforts on her journey.

She traveled with her servant, Jane, and dog, Ring. She lived in a tent with a bed and mattress, a table, chairs, and even carpeting. Despite Susan's familiar



Who was Susan Magoffin?

- Wife & Mother
- Traveler on the Santa Fe Trail
- Diarist

Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

accommodations, the landscape told her that she was far from home.

As the Magoffins traveled south, the green prairies and forests gave way to rocky deserts and mountains. When they reached the first stop at **Bent's Fort** in Colorado, Susan discovered buildings constructed with **adobe** rather than brick or wood. Floors were dirt and the ceilings were made using logs, with adobe to fill the cracks.

Farther down the trail, Susan noticed a difference in the food. In Las Vegas, N.M., she sampled what is now known as green chili stew. She strongly disliked it, noting in her journal: "I could not eat a dish so strong and unaccustomed to my **palate**."

In August 1846, the Magoffins reached Santa Fe. Here Susan noted big differences in the style of dress.

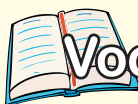
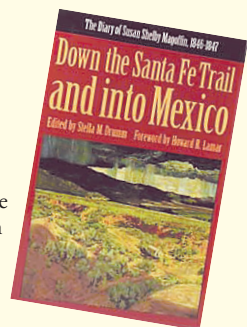
In Susan's world, proper ladies wore skirts covering their ankles and blouses buttoned to the neck. But the Mexican women wore skirts showing their calves and low cut blouses that Susan found **offensive**. Communication problems also persisted because the Mexican women did not speak English.

Although life was different in Mexico, Susan became **accustomed** to it. She liked her adobe home in Santa Fe, learned a little Spanish and made some friends.

On September 8, 1847, Susan made what would be the last entry in her journal. She later suffered an attack of yellow fever, during which she gave birth to a son who died soon after.

Susan left Mexico on a **vessel** to New Orleans, then went north to live in Lexington, Ky. In 1852, she and Magoffin settled in Missouri. She never fully regained her health, however, and died in 1855.

Today, her journal remains a valuable commentary on the development of the West.



Vocabulary

Match the vocabulary word with the correct definition, then write a sentence using each word.

- ___ Accommodations
- ___ Accustomed
- ___ Adobe
- ___ Bent's Fort
- ___ Expedition
- ___ Merchant
- ___ Offensive
- ___ Palate
- ___ Thorough
- ___ Vessel

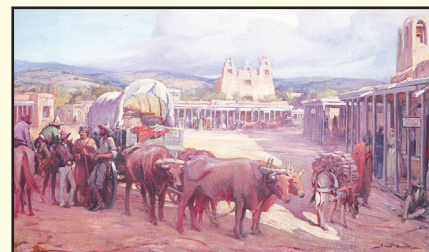
- A – A journey made for a specific purpose
- B – To be used to something
- C – Furnishings bringing comfort to the surroundings
- D – Causing displeasure or a disagreeable sensation or feeling
- E – Very detailed
- F – A fort in southeastern Colorado that served as the center of the Plains Indian trade and an important link in the Santa Fe trade
- G – Sun-dried brick made from clay for construction purposes
- H – A sense of taste
- I – Someone who buys and sells goods for profit
- J – A large ship or boat

What was the Santa Fe Trail?

The Santa Fe Trail opened in 1821 when Mexico gained independence from Spain, presenting an opportunity for trade between Mexico and the United States.

The trail extended from Independence, Mo., to Santa Fe, the northernmost settlement of Mexico. It took approximately 11 weeks to travel by wagon.

Merchants were lured to the Santa Fe Trail by the promise of large profits from selling furs, silver, pelts, blankets, guns, tools and other decorative and useful items.



Gerald Cassidy, View of Santa Fe Plaza in the 1850s (End of the Trail), circa 1930, oil on canvas. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, New Mexico. Gift of the New Mexico Historical Society, 1977.