The Fur Trade in Colorado:
A Selected Bibliography and Chronology

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Brief Chronology

1806 Returning from their journey to the Pacific, Lewis and Clark meet trappers heading west
1815 A.P. Chouteau and Jules De Mun party first large fur brigade to upper Arkansas and southern Rockies
1822 William Ashley’s famous call for “enterprising young men”
1823 Arikara Battle temporarily closes Missouri River to trade, inspires “Rocky Mountain trapping system” whereby trappers travel overland to interior West and rely on rendezvous for re-supply
1825 Rocky Mountain Fur Company’s first rendezvous
1826 Ashley sells Rocky Mountain Fur Company to William Sublette, David Jackson, Jedediah Smith
1830 Smith, Jackson, Sublette sell Rocky Mountain Fur Co. to Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, Milton Sublette, Henry Fraeb, Jean Baptiste Gervais
1830 William Sublette takes first supply wagons to mountains, does not cross Divide
1831 Jedediah Smith killed by Comanches on Cimarron Cutoff, Santa Fe Trail
1833 Bent’s Fort constructed
1834 Astor’s American Fur Co. buys out Rocky Mountain Fur Co.
1835 Fort Vasquez established on the South Platte by Andrew Sublette and Louis Vasquez
1836 Fort Lupton established on the South Platte by Lancaster P. Lupton (possibly 1837)
1837 Fort Jackson established on the South Platte by Peter Sarpy and Henry Fraeb
1837 Fort St. Vrain established on the South Platte by Bent and St. Vrain
1838 Bent and St. Vrain purchase Fort Jackson from Sarpy and Fraeb
1842 El Pueblo established on Arkansas River
1843 Fort Bridger established, marks traditional end of the fur trade era, though limited trapping and fur/hide trading continues
Bibliography

Selected sources on the fur trade in Colorado, with general works on the fur trade in the Rocky Mountain West.

Primary sources

Thomas Fitzpatrick collection, MSS #240, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

Lancaster P. Lupton collection, MSS #398, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.


Articles


   Over-generalized and dated at times, but worth reading as an introduction to the subject.


   Reprint of Covington’s reminiscences of the everyday life of a trapper from 1827 to 1829 that originally appeared in the Greeley Sun in 1879. Contains previously unknown information on Sublette’s winter re-supply expedition of 1827.


   Anecdotal biographies of Colorado mountain men, including Bill Williams, Pegleg Smith, Andrew Sublette, etc…


   History of the fort through its 1930s reconstruction with brief biographies of Louis Vasquez and Andrew Sublette.

Well-documented account of Fraeb’s violent demise.


A short piece demonstrating how trappers working the southern Rockies from New Mexican towns benefitted from the trail at the end of the fur trade era.


With an excellent introduction and footnotes by LeRoy Hafen, this is one of the best sources on the twilight of the fur trade in Colorado.


Books


Though it focuses on western Canada and the northwestern U.S., it provides insights into women’s roles in the fur trade, some of which are applicable to Colorado and the southern Rocky Mountain region.

Adding depth to his fur trade picture, Butler includes material on the catching and skinning of animals, the preparation of skins, and the making of felt hats. This book provides a vivid look into the life of the trapper and trader, the dangers they faced, and the fortunes that a few lucky ones were able to amass. Butler also uses his role as an archeologist to present the generally never before seen floor plans of many of the posts and unknown drawings that are just now coming to light. Attention has also been given to the five of twenty-four trading posts that have been reconstructed. Rendezvous The trading of animal skins has been a prominent activity throughout the known human occupation of Colorado. These skins—hides, furs, or robes—provided protection from the elements as well as a valuable commodity traded for economic gain; their trade strengthened and maintained political relationships. Initially, the abundance of fur-bearing animals in northern North America attracted Europeans who traded metal and glass for the skins of beavers, otters, bears, and other animals. This exchange certainly drove some of the earliest encounters in Colorado. The Spaniards witnessed indigenous trade fairs and exchange between Puebloan groups and neighboring hunter-gatherers that primarily involved agricultural goods being traded for animal products including skins. The fur trade also attracted a cosmopolitan mix of ethnic and cultural groups—French-Canadian, American Indian, African American, Hispanic, British, Irish, German, and Russian trappers and traders all worked side by side with Missourians, Ohioans, Pennsylvanians, and Virginians. The peak of the Rocky Mountain fur trade ran for a very short period of time, from 1820 to 1840. A variation of the Upper Missouri River system took place in Colorado on the Arkansas and South Platte rivers. Rival trading firms such as Bent, St. Vrain, and Company; Vasquez and Sublette; and the American Fur Trading Company built competing forts to lure away the commerce of the Cheyennes and Arapahos. This comprehensive history of the native and maritime fur trade in Alaska during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is without precedent. The Bering Strait formed the nexus of the circumpolar fur trade in which Russians, British, Americans, and members of fifty native nations competed and cooperated. The desire to dominate the fur trade fed the European expansion into the most remote regions of Asia and America and was an agent of massive change in these regions. Award-winning author John R. Bockstoce fills a major gap in the historiography of the area in covering the scientific, commerci