

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Fall 2001

**Review of *Wagons for the Santa Fe Trade: Wheeled Vehicles and Their Makers, 1822-1880* By Mark L. Gardner**

Mike Capps

*Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Capps, Mike, "Review of *Wagons for the Santa Fe Trade: Wheeled Vehicles and Their Makers, 1822-1880* By Mark L. Gardner" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2189.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2189>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Wagons for the Santa Fe Trade: Wheeled Vehicles and Their Makers, 1822-1880.* By Mark L. Gardner. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. xx + 204 pp. \$40.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

In 1821, William Becknell and his companions from Missouri arrived in Santa Fe with a few pack animals loaded with an assortment of trade goods. The response they received from goods-starved New Mexicans was so enthusiastic they quickly returned to Missouri for another load to sell in this new market. Operating on the theory that the more supplies they carried the greater their profits would be, Becknell's 1822 company loaded three wagons this time and again reaped a tremendous reward for their efforts. When news of his success spread he was quickly joined by

others, and a trading enterprise to continue for the next sixty years began.

The wide variety of wagons employed in this Santa Fe trade is the subject of Mark Gardner's carefully researched and richly illustrated book. Prompted by a general interest in wagons and the Santa Fe Trail, Gardner initially encountered an apparent scarcity of primary documentation. What he learned, though, and what becomes quickly evident to his reader, is that the documentation did exist; it had just never been thoroughly researched and summarized in a single source. Gardner's book does an excellent job of rectifying this situation in an engrossing and highly readable fashion.

Beginning with a discussion of the various types of wagons used in the trade, Gardner moves on to document how most of the early ones were built by manufacturers in Pennsylvania before the rise of a significant wagon-making industry in Missouri. Of particular interest is his information on the success of several free black wagon makers in St. Louis in the 1850s. He also strips away many of the myths surrounding the fabled Murphy wagons, long regarded as the "monster" wagons of the Santa Fe trade. In looking objectively at the extant documentation, though, he succeeds in placing Joseph Murphy's contributions within the proper historic context and fully acknowledges that "he was one of the important manufacturers of wagons used on the Santa Fe Trail."

Subsequent chapters examine a host of details about trade wagons, including their origins in the Trans-Appalachian regions, various features and specifications taken largely from primary sources, how their design evolved to meet the conditions of the country and changing requirements of the trade, and how an ever-growing demand for wagons brought about the displacement of the individual wagonmaker by mechanized factories, complete with specialized labor and an ancillary parts supply industry. In a final chapter, the fascinating story of William Thompson and his invention of the patented Windwagon should be espe-

cially interesting to students of Great Plains history.

The depth of detail and the many valuable illustrations Gardner provides make *Wagons for the Santa Fe Trail* an indispensable addition to any library documenting the history of transportation in the West.

MIKE CAPPS  
National Park Service  
Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial