

The history of Cooper's Fort and the founding of Cooper County is a classic American frontier story of resilience, tragedy, and the literal expansion of the West.

□ The History of Cooper's Fort (1812–1815)

While many imagine a "fort" as a military base, Cooper's Fort was a civilian stockade—a communal refuge built by settlers during the War of 1812.

Construction: Built in 1812 in the "Boonslick" region (modern-day Howard County), it was the largest of several local forts (including Fort Hempstead and Fort Kincaid).

Design: It consisted of a large log stockade that enclosed about 20 family cabins. It was designed so that the back walls of the cabins formed part of the exterior defense.

The "Boonslick" Economy: The fort was located near the Boone's Lick salt works. Salt was a precious commodity for preserving meat, and the settlers worked the salt springs and a 250-acre field nearby while keeping a constant lookout for attacks.

A "Homegrown" Defense: Since the federal government had few troops in the Missouri Territory, the settlers formed their own militia. Sarshell Cooper was elected Captain of the Missouri Rangers, leading 112 men to patrol the area.

The Heroine of the Fort: In one famous incident, the fort was nearly overrun. Mildred "Millie" Cooper, the 16-year-old daughter of Braxton Cooper, reportedly galloped through a line of attackers to reach Fort Hempstead six miles away to call for reinforcements.

□ The Founding of Cooper County (1818)

The creation of Cooper County was a direct result of the rapid population boom following the War of 1812.

The "Mother of Counties": Originally, the entire region was part of Howard County (organized in 1816), which was so massive it was nicknamed the "Mother of Counties" because so many others were eventually carved out of it.

Official Organization: On December 17, 1818, the Missouri Territorial Legislature officially split Howard County. Everything south of the Missouri River became Cooper County.

The Namesake: The county was named to honor Sarshell Cooper. While his brother Benjamin was also a prominent leader, Sarshell's martyrdom in 1814 made him a legendary figure among the pioneers.

Massive Original Size: At its founding, Cooper County was enormous—it included land that today makes up all or part of 11 other counties, including Cole, Henry, Cass, and Bates.

The First Settlers: While the Coopers lived on the north side of the river, the first permanent white settlers within the actual borders of Cooper County were Hannah and Stephen Cole, who established Hannah Cole's Fort (near modern-day Boonville).

Comparison of the "Big Two" Forts

Feature Cooper's Fort Hannah Cole's Fort

Location North side of the River (Howard Co.) South side of the River (Boonville)

Primary Leader Sarshell & Benjamin Cooper Hannah Cole (widow of William Cole)
Significance Largest defensive hub in the region. First permanent settlement in Cooper Co.
Fate Washed away in the great flood of 1844. Site later became the city of Boonville.

The Santa Fe Trail is one of the most storied routes in American history, and its roots are deeply intertwined with the Cooper family and the Boonslick region. While many people associate the trail with Independence, Missouri, it actually began further east in Franklin (directly across the river from Boonville).

The Birth of the Trail (1821)

The trail was blazed by William Becknell, an adventurous merchant from Franklin. When Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, they opened up trade with the United States. Becknell saw an opportunity and left from the Boonslick area with a small pack train, arriving in Santa Fe to find a market hungry for manufactured goods.

Why it Started in Cooper/Howard County

The Jumping-Off Point: In the early 1820s, Franklin was the westernmost town of any significance. It had a land office, shops, and a ferry—making it the logical place to outfit a wagon train.

The "Becknell" Factor: William Becknell lived in the area and recruited his first team of men from the local settlers who had survived the War of 1812 in the forts (like Cooper's Fort).

Boonville's Rise: Because "Old Franklin" was built on the low-lying riverbank, it was eventually destroyed by floods. Trade shifted across the river to Boonville in Cooper County, which sat on higher bluffs. For several years, Boonville served as a major outfitting post before the trail's "starting point" gradually moved west to Independence and later Westport (Kansas City).

Key Trail Landmarks in the Area

If you are writing for a web page, these specific locations are great "hooks" for readers:

The Boonville Ferry: For years, travelers and wagons had to cross the Missouri River via ferry to connect the northern and southern routes of the trail.

The "Buck Snort" Hill: A famously steep climb for wagons leaving the river bottom heading west through Cooper County.

Lamine River Crossing: A difficult water crossing in western Cooper County that tested the durability of the early freight wagons.

Comparison: Then vs. Later

Era Primary Starting Point Method of Transport

1821–1827 Old Franklin / Boonville Pack animals and small wagons.

1827–1845 Independence, MO Large "Conestoga" style freight wagons.

1845–1880 Westport / Kansas City Massive commercial caravans and eventually the Railroad.

Formatted: 5 February 2026

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