



title: Along Ancient Trails : The Mallet Expedition of 1739
author: Blakeslee, Donald J.
publisher: University Press of Colorado
isbn10 | asin: 0870814109
print isbn13: 9780870814105
ebook isbn13: 9780585023595
language: English
subject Mallet Expedition (!739-1740) , Mallet, Paul, Mallet, Pierre.
publication date: 1995
lcc: F799.B63 1995eb
ddc: 978/.01
subject: Mallet Expedition (!739-1740) , Mallet, Paul, Mallet, Pierre.

ALONG ANCIENT TRAILS

The Mallet Expedition of 1739

Donald J. Blakeslee

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO

© 1995 by the University Press of Colorado Published by the University Press of Colorado P. O. Box 849 Niwot, Colorado 80544

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The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State College, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Mesa State College, Metropolitan State College of Denver, University of Colorado, University of Northern Colorado, University of Southern Colorado, and Western State College of Colorado.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blakeslee, Donald J., 1943-

Along ancient trails: the Mallet expedition of 1739 / Donald J. Blakeslee.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-87081-410-9 (alk. paper)

1. Mallet Expedition (1739-1740) 2. Mallet, Paul. 3. Mallet, Pierre. I. Title.

F799.B63 1995

978'.01dc20

95-38262

CIP

This book was set in Adobe Caslon and Adobe AG Oldface.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48-1948

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Joy

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PREFACE

In June 1740, four French Canadians arrived in New Orleans, the capital of the colony of Louisiana. Another three showed up at Fort des Chartres, the center of French Illinois. They brought word of the first successful expedition from the east to Santa Fe. Led by the brothers Pierre and Paul Mallet, eight or nine men had left Illinois the previous spring, found their way to Santa Fe, spent the winter there, and returned by separate routes to French territory.

Jean-Baptiste LeMoyne de Bienville, governor of French Louisiana, was delighted by the news. The French had attempted to reach Santa Fe previously, but all officially sanctioned expeditions had fallen short of the mark. There had been rumors that voyageurs had reached the vicinity of New Mexico, but the truth is that no one in the French colonies knew how to get to Santa Fe. The governor recognized the importance of the Mallet trip and wrote to the king of the opportunity for profitable trade that New Mexico seemed to offer.

His optimism was based on the friendly reception the Spanish government had offered the Mallets. The brothers had dined at the table of the alcalde mayor and had been sent back to New Orleans with the request that, next time, they should bring a passport and an official decree permitting them to trade with the Spanish. The Mallets also carried a letter from a Spanish vicar to a French priest in New Orleans. The vicar begged the priest to send some goods on account, promising to pay in silver currency. Although he received his salary in cash, the Spaniard noted, there was little that he could purchase with it in New Mexico. The desire of New Mexicans for trade with Louisiana was obvious.

The optimism gradually faded. A return expedition in 1741-1742 under the direction of André Fabry de la Bruyère foundered on the lower reaches of the Canadian River. The French authorities attempted no other government-sponsored expeditions. This was just as well, because Spanish policy had changed. After reviewing the Mallet entrada, the Spanish government decided to pursue a hard line to protect its northern marches in North America from French intrusion and possible invasion. The few independent entrepreneurs who reached Santa Fe in the ensuing decades faced arrest and confiscation of all their goods. It was not until 1821, in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution, that William Becknell arrived in Santa Fe to initiate regular trade.

As a result, the Mallet expedition has always appeared to be an isolated event, separated from Becknell's creation of the Santa Fe Trail by eighty-two years of frustration. Scanty documentation also has discouraged historical interest in the expedition. The Mallets kept a journal, but it has been lost. Only a brief abstract of the journal that Bienville provided to the French court has survived, and it provides minimal evidence regarding the route taken. The journey from Illinois up the Missouri River to South Dakota and thence overland through Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico is recorded in a scant five handwritten pages, and the return route is covered in three.

French historian Pierre Margry published the abstract and some related documents in his monumental *Découvertes et Etablissements des Français dans L'Amérique Septentrionale* at the end of the nineteenth century. Henri

Folmer (1939a, 1939b) translated the Margry version and attempted to trace the route of the expedition. Despite the fact that his version of the route depends on a series of unverified assumptions, no other historian has challenged it seriously. This lack of interest may derive in part from the apparently isolated nature of the Mallet achievement, but surely it results primarily from the lack of related documents. Without the context provided by other sources, the details in Bienville's abstract of the original journal are too few and too vague to allow a forceful critique of Folmer's analysis.

This book is the result of a discovery that revealed connections between the Mallet route and those of many other expeditions across the Plains. Seen from this new perspective, their trip was not an isolated event but was tied to both earlier and later expeditions. Some of these other expeditions generated documents that help to illuminate the Bienville abstract of the Mallet journal.

The connecting links are Indian trails. Most early explorers of the Plains, beginning with Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1541, had Indian guides who led them along Indian trails. Traders followed the explorers, and trading posts sprang up along the trails. In later years, armies erected military posts along them, and many battles in the Indian wars took place on the trails. Emigrants followed the traders, and the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, and the California Trail all followed aboriginal routes.

The journals, maps, and letters created by the explorers, traders, military men, and emigrants all help to document the precise location of the Indian trails. Few of them provide complete information for the full extent of a trail, but many describe a particular landmark or otherwise allow a segment of a trail to be pinpointed. When all of the accounts of travel along an individual trail are collated, the result is often a precise delineation of its route.

Such is the case with the trails the Mallet brothers used. The Bienville abstract omits much of the detail that must have been in the original journal. It does, however, provide direct evidence of the use of Indian trails. Additional clues to specific locations are present, and when read in the light of documents from other expeditions along the same trails, such as that of Zebulon Pike or Nathaniel Boone, I found that it was possible to trace the Mallet route. Still, it

took over 7,000 miles of travel back and forth across the Plains and the help of many scholars and local informants to unravel all of the puzzles involved.

This book is the story of the Mallet expedition, and it is a drama filled with adventure, tragedy, and mystery. In the presentation here, two stories are intertwined. One is the tale of the Mallet expedition and its aftermath. The other is the story of the investigation that uncovered their adventure. All too often, history is presented as a just-so story. It is not "just so." Accurate history is created through scholarship, and the investigative process can be an adventure in itself.

Trying to follow the route of any early expedition is a wonderful puzzle. The delights it offers are twofold. One comes in solving part or all of the question of where people went. This can be as rewarding as solving any other historical or scientific question, but the product is only a line on a map. The other and deeper reward comes from what one learns along the way. The investigator cannot merely study the records of a single trip, determine its starting point, and try to match comments in a diary with features of the landscape. Often he or she must detour into other topics and the events of other times.

There is no way this kind of research can be completed within a limited time or by searching for the sorts of documents that deal with the subject directly. All I could do was to define the goal and learn what might apply. The rest was indirect vision, reading around the subject rather than in it. Few have written about Indian trails, fewer still about the Mallet expedition. The lode of primary documents is meager indeed. Nevertheless, the landmarks are there, hidden in reports of other expeditions, in family traditions about grandfather's farm, in archaeological site files. It is the adventure of piecing together this sprawling puzzle, the hard work and hot days, the hidden clues, the kindhearted help of strangers, and the blind luck that I want to share with you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An enormous number of people contributed to the research that went into this book. I am especially indebted to my colleagues Mildred Wedel, Waldo Wedel, David Weber, David Lyon, Bill Unrau, John Ludwickson, Tom Witty, Douglas Parks, John Koontz, and Bob Blasing. Many people provided help with the translations, including Lorna Batterson, Joyce Scott, Janie Riles, Françoise Brodier, Cathy Culot, and Hector Garcia. Kent Wilkinson drafted the maps.

More valuable assistance came from the librarians and research staff at the University of New Mexico, the History Library and Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe, the Kansas State Historical Society, the State Library and Historical Society in Oklahoma City, the National Archives and the Library of Congress, the Division of Archives, Record Management and History of the Louisiana Secretary of State, Historic New Orleans, the Chancery Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and the Louisiana State Museum Library. Special thanks are due to Cathy Moore-Jansen and Mike Kelley of the Ablah Library at Wichita State University.

The Faculty Support Committee at Wichita State University helped underwrite some of the research with a summer faculty fellowship, for which I am very grateful. The speakers' bureau of the Kansas Humanities Council provided the means by which I was able to visit many places across Kansas and to meet the multitude of local historians who gave me valuable leads.

Finally, to my sons, Sam and John, who accompanied me on those long, hot field trips, thanks for your help.

ALONG ANCIENT TRAILS

1. THE SETTING

The Great Plains

The Great Plains of North America nearly bisect the continent from south to north, stretching from southern Texas to the boreal forest of Canada. To anyone entering them from east or west, the change in environment is obvious. In 1739, the West was Spanish territory, a land of forested mountains and desert valleys. Perennial streams flowing from the mountains made life possible for the Spanish colonists and their Pueblo subjects. To their east lay the High Plainstreeless, arid, and in some areas totally lacking in landmarks by which inexperienced travelers might steer their course.

East of the Plains were the French colonies of Canada and Louisiana. In these lands of great rivers, people normally traveled by canoe or boat. Rainfall was sufficient to support enormous forests even on level ground, and the French and their subject tribes were able to cultivate their fields without irrigation.