

## Mountain Men Museum Education Kit

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### Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- analyze a primary historical source
- create and justify a response to the primary source
- examine maps to trace the journey of the document

### Connection to Colorado Social Studies Standards:

- 4th grade: 1.1.a, 1.1.b, 1.1.c, 2.2.c, 3.1.b, 3.1.d, 4.2.d

**Materials:** pencil/pen, copies of Lupton's Letter, map of Colorado, map of U.S.

**Time:** 1-2 class periods

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## Background

By the time forts started to spring up in the West, it was clear that the white man had more on his mind than just passing through the area. Now he was showing that he meant to stay. He was willing to work hard and defend himself and his rights to trade behind the walls of his fort.

In the early 1830's, beavers were just starting to become harder to find, and the trade of buffalo and buckskin robes was beginning to pick up. At the same time, the forts were replacing the rendezvous as the most important places to trade. For one thing, the fort was open all year round, and it was always in the same place, so it was easy to find by all. In addition, the heavy, bulky buffalo robes were easier to manage at the forts than at the rendezvous. The Indians' importance in the fur trade was growing, too, because it was the Indians who traded most of the buffalo and deer skins, not the trappers. They didn't bring in as many as they could kill, but only as many as the Indian women could tan. Thirty hides per year was a lot for one woman to prepare.

Fort after fort began to appear in the mountain and plains area, among them some names you may recognize: Fort Lupton, Fort Union, Fort Vasquez, Fort Hall, Fort St. Vrain, and Bent's Fort. Many tribes would arrive at the posts eager to trade their buffalo robes for beads, awls, looking glasses, tobacco, knives, guns, ammunition, combs, battleaxes, and other things. The traders at the forts made a huge profit, as you might expect, because they traded items of little worth for the robes which they could sell for much more money. Of course, Indians profited too—trading plentiful buffalo robes for hard-to-acquire manufactured goods.

In 1833, Charles and William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, with the consultation of Chief Yellow Wolf, a Southern Cheyenne Indian, chose the site for their trading post, 150 miles north of Taos, on the Santa Fe Trail, just north of the Arkansas River. The Arkansas River was the border between the US and Mexico. Bent's Fort is near what is known today as La Junta, Colorado. It was also near a Cheyenne winter camp site, which was good from Yellow Wolf's point of view since his people were eager for trade goods.

When it was finished, Bent's Fort was the largest of all the forts in the mountain-plains region. There were

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twenty-six apartments at the post, all built around a central plaza, or “placita,” where dances were held, and where the fur presses were located. There was a large dining room for guests, complete with china, silver, and white tablecloths. The fort even boasted a billiards room. Outside the fort were an ice house, a trash dump, a burial ground, and a racetrack.

The partners split up responsibilities for keeping the post operational. Charles Bent managed the company's business in St. Louis and supervised caravans as they traveled down the Santa Fe Trail. Ceran St. Vrain ran the company's stores in New Mexico, while William Bent proved to have the most skill at dealing with their Plains Indian customers. Bent married Owl Woman, the daughter of a Southern Cheyenne spiritual leader. For sixteen years, William ran the fort and oversaw all the employees and the business transactions.

From the watchtower over the main gate, it was easy to see who was approaching the fort. Some of the tribes that came to trade were the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Pawnee, Apache, and Ute. Scholars, explorers, writers, artists, engineers, drovers, and of course, mountain men also visited the fort. Kit Carson once worked as a hunter for the fort, and other visitors included John C. Frémont, Francis Parkman, diarist Susan Shelby Macgoffin, Jim Beckwourth, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Baker, Jim Bridger, and “Uncle Dick” Wooten.

The fort was not only a place for trade, but was also a place to dance, refit, and socialize after a long journey on the Santa Fe Trail.

### Suggested Procedure:

Lancaster P. Lupton wrote a letter asking the President of the United States for an appointment as an Indian Agent on the West Coast. Lupton was a former soldier and western fur trader who established a trading post named after himself (Ft. Lupton) near the South Platte River in Colorado. Despite his military experience, Lupton did not receive the appointment. In 1847, he moved to Hardscrabble, Colorado, near Pueblo, where he started a farm. He had previously married a Cheyenne woman, and together they had eight children. During the Gold Rush of 1849, Lupton moved to California to test his luck at mining. He settled in California and died there in 1885.

1. Read the letter written by Lupton. If you are unable to read his handwriting, look at the typed transcript of the letter. In the letter he is asking the President of the United States for a military appointment on the West Coast.
2. Have the students do some quick research and find out who the President of the United States was at the time that the letter was written.
3. While the students are pretending to be the President, have them write a return letter to Lupton explaining why not or why they are appointing him as an Indian Agent.
4. Have the students research which American Indian tribes Lupton could have been assigned to work with in California in 1846 had he received the assignment?

5. On a map of Colorado, have students locate Ft. Lupton. Explain that communication was very slow and tedious process in the United States, and the rest of the world, in 1846. Because the mail was sent via wagon train which covered 10-15 miles per day, how long would Lupton's letter have taken to get to Washington D.C.?
  - a. The distance from Ft. Lupton to Washington D.C. is approximately 1,670 miles. (Use Ft. Lupton even though the letter was sent from Bent's Fort)
  
6. On a map of the U.S. have students decide what trail the letter probably took on its journey to the capital city. (i.e.; The Oregon Trail, the Santa Fe Trail, etc.)

Dent's Fort Arkansas No 8<sup>th</sup> 1846  
To the President of the U. S.

Sir I respectfully request that I may be appointed Indian Agent at some of the agencies that will probably be formed in Oregon or California.

In making this request it is proper to state the grounds upon which I hope my application may meet with success - While in the U. S. Army I had many opportunities of becoming acquainted with Indian character at Forts. Johnson, Gibson and Linnworth. Since I left the Army in 1836, I have spent the greater part of my time in the vicinity of the Rocky Mountains, almost constantly in communication with the different tribes of Indians in that region -

Educated as I was for the Army, and having served many years on the extreme Western frontier, I of course have no profession - The energies of my youth and early manhood - the time usually spent by others in learning how to live - have been devoted to the service of my Country.

I do not ask for the office for the sake of the office - I ask it as a means of subsistence

The accompanying testimonials were procured with a view of being restored to the Army, but I deem them equally applicable in the present instance, as they fully show, who I am, what my qualifications are, and what my former services have been.

I have the honor to be Sir

Very Respectfully

Your Obedt. Servt.

S. P. R. P. P. P.

**Transcript of letter dated 1846**  
**From Lancaster Lupton to**  
**The President of the United States**

Bent's Fort Arkansas [River] November 8th, 1846

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Very Respectfully

Your Able Servant

L. P. Lupton