

FRONTIERSMAN & INDIAN FIGHTER



KIT CARSON
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Christopher Houston “Kit” Carson was an American frontiersman and Indian fighter. He left home in rural present-day Missouri at age 16 and became a mountain man and trapper in the West. Carson explored the west to California and the north through the Rocky Mountains. He lived among, and married into, the Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes. He was hired by General John C. Fremont as a guide. Known as “the Pathfinder,” he led Fremont through much of California, Oregon, and the Great Basin area. He achieved national fame through Fremont’s accounts of his expeditions. (Fremont was later the Republican candidate for U.S. president in 1856. He was a celebrated explorer of the U.S. frontier.) Carson became the hero of many dime novels.

Carson was a courier and scout during the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 1848, celebrated for his rescue mission after the Battle of San Pasqual and his coast-to-coast journey from California to deliver news of the war to the U.S. government in Washington, D.C. In the 1850s, he was the agent to the Ute and Jicarilla Apaches. In the Civil War, he led a regiment of mostly Hispanic volunteers at the Battle of Valverde in 1862. He led armies to pacify the Navajo, Mescalero Apache, and the Kiowa and Comanche Indians. He is vilified for his conquest of the Navajo and their forced transfer to Bosque Redondo where many of them died.

Kit Carson’s alliterative name, adventurous life, and participation in a large number of historical events have made him a favorite subject of novelists, historians, and biographers.

He was born in Madison County, Kentucky, near the city of Richmond, December 24, 1809. At the age of one year, he moved with his parents and siblings to a rural area near Franklin, Missouri. His father, Lindsey Carson, a farmer of Scots-Irish descent, had fought in the Revolutionary War under General Wade Hampton. Lindsey Carson had a total of 15 Carson children — five by Lucy Bradley, his first wife, and ten by Kit Carson’s mother, Rebecca Robinson. Kit Carson was the eleventh child in the family. He was known from an early age

as “Kit.” The Carson family settled on a tract of land owned by the sons of Daniel Boone, who had purchased the land from the Spanish before the Louisiana Purchase. The Boone and Carson families became good friends, working and socializing together, and intermarrying.

Carson was eight years old when his father was killed by a falling tree while clearing land. Lindsey Carson’s death reduced the Carson family to desperate poverty, forcing young Kit Carson to drop out of school to work on the family farm, as well as to engage in hunting. At age 14, Carson was apprenticed to a saddle maker in the settlement of Franklin, Missouri. Franklin was situated at the eastern end of the Santa Fe Trail, which had opened two years earlier. Many of the clientele at the saddle shop were trappers and traders, from whom Carson heard stirring tales of the Far West. Carson is reported to have found work in the saddle shop suffocating. He once said, “The business did not suit me, and I concluded to leave.” His master may have agreed with his leaving since he offered the odd amount of 1 cent for his return and waited a month to post the notice in the local newspaper.

At sixteen, Carson secretly signed on with a large merchant caravan heading to Santa Fe. His job was tending the horses, mules, and oxen. During the winter of 1826–27, he stayed with Matthew Kinkead, a trapper and explorer, in Taos, New Mexico, then known as the capital of the fur trade in the Southwest. Kinkead had served with Carson’s older brothers during the War of 1812, and Kinkead taught Carson the skills of a trapper. Carson also began learning the necessary languages. Eventually, he became fluent in Spanish, Navajo, Apache, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Paiute, Shoshone, and Ute.

He founded Ft. Nichols on the Santa Fe Trail which is in Cimarron County near Boise City, Oklahoma.