

West Texas Archeological Society

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WEST TEXAS
ARCHEOLOGICAL SOCIETY



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<https://westtexasarcheologicalsociety.website>

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Interpretive Displays At Meyers Spring Ranch

We have been assisting in the tours at Meyers Spring Ranch for the last few years. They usually have one in the spring and fall for the two organizations, Shumla Archeological Research Center and Witte Museum/Rock Art Foundation. Since I am often the one guiding the Camp Meyers Spring side of the tour, I found that our original plan of a walk-through of the sites did not work. By that point, they are at the end of their day and, although interested, they do not have the time or energy for a walking tour. They are also usually short on time for their return trips. So, I decided these interpretive photo signs would be more helpful in helping everyone envision what they were seeing around them. We are gifting them to Thad Steele, the landowner. They are made using fiberglass-on-metal technology for outdoor signs. They will be on posts at the parking area, but I have made them removable so they can be taken down and stored until the tour groups come through. I created them by overlaying graphics on top of actual drone photos of the site.



Fort Concho Display

We are making progress again on the Fort Concho Headquarters display, incorporating our work on the Concho Mail Station for visitors to the fort. Cory Robinson, Fort Concho Curator, is creating wall displays using images from our report, along with text-placard descriptions. I passed him a 150-word description of the techniques used to interpret the site, our work to date, and future plans. He has now broken it down into five different topic placards to be printed on the same material as I described above for our interpretive signs. For those who have not read the report, here is a good summary of the primary topics to be included in the display.

History

The Concho Mail Station served as headquarters of the San Antonio–El Paso Stage Line’s Concho Division. The line was commonly known as the Ben Ficklin Stage Line, named for its founder, Benjamin Ficklin. The station was located three miles south of Fort Concho in San Angelo, Texas.

Although stage service through Fort Concho to El Paso began in March 1868, the station itself was not established until about January 1869, when Ficklin purchased 640 acres along the Concho River. The main facilities were likely completed by mid to late 1869. Ficklin died on March 10, 1871, in Washington, D.C. Afterward, F.C. Taylor managed operations, and the mail contract was awarded to Ficklin’s partner, F.P. Sawyer, who operated the line until June 1875. In 1882, a massive flood destroyed the station and the nearby town of Ben Ficklin, killing at least 65 people and effectively ending the community.

The Site

The Concho Mail Station site, including a nearby military camp, covered about three acres south of the Concho River. Stagecoaches operated three times per week between San Antonio and the Concho Mail Station/Fort Concho. Service between the station and El Paso ran twice weekly, later increasing to three times per week. A second line connected the station to Fort Smith along the old Butterfield Route.

As division headquarters, the station required extensive staff and facilities. The 1870 census lists 31 workers. The complex included two corrals, a blacksmith shop, wheelwright and paint shops, a harness building, coach sheds, a commissary, a mess hall, and several picket houses. Manager Francis C. Taylor’s stone residence was built from locally quarried rock, while the station was constructed of adobe. An 1876 inventory recorded eight four-horse teams, eight four-mule teams, three two-horse teams, four two-mule teams, and eleven coaches of varying sizes, plus two horse hacks.

Military Detachment

Military records show the 24th Infantry Regiment, headquartered at Fort McKavett, was responsible for mail stations across West Texas. Infantry from Fort McKavett protected the station and stagecoaches, even while assigned elsewhere. Fort Concho oversaw the route west to Fort Stockton and north along the Butterfield road. In the early 1870s, Fort McKavett appears responsible for the road south to the Concho Mail Station. Infantry and cavalry were camped along the river just outside the station and escorted travel between the two posts. Though records are unclear whether cavalry came from Fort Concho or Fort McKavett, they were likely from the 9th Cavalry. Guarding of mail stations is documented as early as February 1870, shortly after the site purchase was finalized on January 18, 1869. Artifacts and ground scarring confirm a detachment camp near the station. Records show both forts shared guard and escort duties, though coordination details remain unclear.

Artifacts

In 2015, a metal detecting club received permission from the land lessee to search the fields and brush around the station site. They worked weekends for about six months. Most artifacts were recovered from the plowed field east of the station. A massive flood in 1882 came from the west, struck the station, and carried materials downriver to the east. As a result, many artifacts were buried in the eastern field, with some remaining in the brush near the station. The club recovered numerous items, many of which were identified and displayed in framed collections. Due to the careful documentation and the nature of the finds, the artifacts can be directly connected to the station and the nearby military detachment. However, because the flood displaced and mixed materials, most find locations do not help identify specific site features. In a few cases, clusters of similar items suggest areas such as the military camp and probable workshops. Overall, the artifacts provide valuable insight into the site’s long occupation as a small civilian and military community.

Archaeology

After conducting document research and identifying the basic location of the station complex, we began a detailed Google Earth search for abandoned trails in and around the complex. Satellite images can reveal subtle differences in vegetation resulting from years of continuous use. After trails are abandoned, the vegetation will grow back slightly differently than in the surrounding area because the trail has become a depression, attracting more soil and water runoff from rain. Bushes and grass tend to grow slightly healthier in the depressions. Vegetation also grows back in the shape of abandoned buildings. We then conducted an on-the-ground survey to identify artifacts that might support the imagery analysis. In historical archaeology, metal detecting with GPS pattern analysis is a key tool, along with searching for dishware, pottery, glass, and cut stone. The final phase is to choose specific areas for planned digs to uncover features such as building foundations.

Conclusion

The Concho Mail Station was a significant part of the history of West Texas. It was not only the Division Headquarters, but it was the access point of all passengers and mail coming and going from both the northeastern and southeastern areas of Texas out into the unsettled lands and beyond. They overcame significant challenges and hardships to help expand into the area. Without this hub of transportation it is reasonable to say that San Angelo would have been much slower to grow into the county seat. The compound itself was a community. In 1870 there were 34 civilians and 7 - 15 more soldiers living and working in this small 3-acre piece of land. From all accounts the business was well organized and for the most part, received praise from their passengers. It is also a sacred ground where at least six persons lost their lives during the 1882 flood. With such a significant contribution to not only the local area but all of West Texas, this site should be designated an historically significant site.

An interesting stoneware piece came to light during the lab. Using AI to identify it, it turns out to be an ink bottle used to fill the ink wells at the time. I've inserted an image of one I found online.



Second Book To Tom Green County Library

We donated our second compilation of reports to the Tom Green County Library. Our first was the Butterfield Trail Across The Concho Valley and West Texas. This book covers a different time. It is the San Antonio to El Paso Overland Mail Across West Texas, 1868 - 1886: A Journey In Historical Archeology. You can find a copy on our website for download.



A Little Bit of Validation On An Old Report

On my first project in 2009 on the Butterfield Overland Mail's Johnson's Station site, I determined that there were multiple periods of occupation after the abandoning of the station. One of those periods came from some unusual cartridges, indicating buffalo hunters in the 1875 time period. Buffalo hunters were known for using heavier 50-caliber ammunition, but these cartridges could not be attributed to any other use, and research indicated there was a buffalo-hunting outfit on the Middle Concho River. Here is an excerpt from that report.

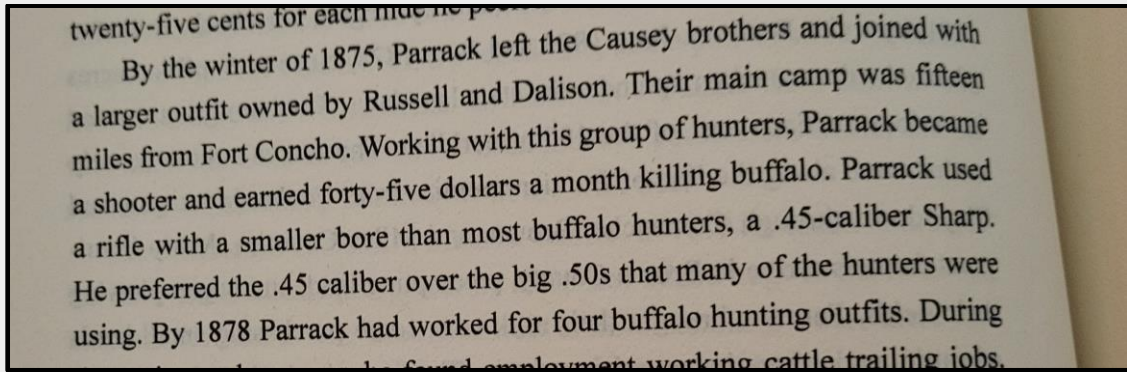
Possible Buffalo Hunter Camp

One .45-100 (also known as 45-2.4"), one either .45-100 or .45-110 (also known as 45-2 7/8"), and five .45-110 and cartridges were found at this site (Figure 52). All these cartridges were unstamped. The .45-100 is fired. One .45-110 is fired and one is unfired. Four look to be unfired reloads with replaced primers (Figure 53). These replaced primers had marks on them that were probably made by the priming punch used to seat them into place. Possibly related to this, a modified piece of heavy gauge wire that may have been a decapping tool was unearthed nearby (Figure 54). This could have been used to remove the old primers after being drilled.



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I was reading Harold Jobs' recently published book, 'Barbs, Bullets, and Blood', and was surprised to find some validation of my analysis. I was also able to determine that the hunting region for this outfit was, in fact, west of Fort Concho, which is where Johnson's Station was located. Excerpt below.



To see the full Butterfield Trail (updated) report, go to this link:

<https://assets.zyrosite.com/AzGE74rQ66UMXrKb/the-butterfield-trail-through-the-concho-valley-2026-update-upWHZrYsiV7sYGI3.pdf>

Meyers Spring: A migration camp for millennia

Although we focus much of our work on historical archeology, that does not mean we are not fully aware of the ancient periods of the areas we are working. That is especially true for Meyers Spring. In several of our papers, we refer to this spot as one of several clean spring migration camps leading from the Rio Grande River up to the buffalo-hunting plains of the upper Pecos River. In fact, it is probably the only way to make it through the deadly maze of canyons of that area for those who made the annual trek. The stone points found on the ranch area are a testament to this. The most prominent atlatl points we find are Livermore, Val Verde, Shumla, and Martindale, with Martindale dating back as far as 4000 B.C. However, on our most recent trip, our resident stone point expert and super sleuth, Kinley Coyan, found a Baker point right in the ranch road.



This Baker point dates from 6000 - 4000 B.C. I just completed a new display for the ranch display area, and reprinted an identification image for our previous display. These are small displays compared to many we see,

but the fact that we can tie them directly to this spring and pictograph/spring area makes them so much more important than a display case with unknown origins.



New Report Coming Soon

- The Lady in Blue Petroglyphs at Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River
- 2026 edition of Camp Meyers Spring (now 134 pages)

Upcoming Events (field projects will be emailed separately)

April 10/11: West Texas Historical Association Annual Meeting, MCM Elegante Hotel, Lubbock, TX

Heritage Room 8:30 AM – 9:45 AM Friday – Chair: Tom Ashmore, West Texas Archaeological Society

The Jumano Picture Story of ‘The Lady in Blue’

Heritage Room 0:15 AM – 11:30 AM Saturday - Joint Session with the Edwards Plateau Historical Association-- Building West Texas; Trails, Places, and People: 1

Lisa Dennis Mahler, Director of the Borden County Museum— The Ruffini Brothers: Ernst Frederick and Oscar

Golda Foster, Edwards Plateau Historical Association, The Mother County: Tom Green County, and those who came from it

Tom Ashmore, West Texas Archeological Society, The Goodnight-Loving Trail across West Texas - The Real Lonesome Dove

Apr 25: Southwest Federation of Archeological Societies' Symposium, Amarillo, TX

The next SWFAS symposium will be held on April 25th at the Springhill Suites in Amarillo. Last year, the symposium was skipped, so we are giving three presentations this year. More information coming soon.

May 9: WTAS Day at Meyers Spring Ranch – A full family day of tours! (details to be emailed)

May 12 - 14: Library presentation for school students and the community of Sonora, Eldorado, and Ozona, TX, *The Jumano Picture Story of 'The Lady in Blue'*

TUES 12 MAY-2026	<i>Students – 10am @ Sutton County Civic Center</i> <i>Community – 6pm @ Sutton County Civic Center</i>
WED 13 MAY-2026	<i>Students – 10am @ Schleicher County Public Library</i> <i>Community – 6pm @ Schleicher County Public Library</i>
THURS 14 MAY-2026	<i>Students – 10am @ Crockett County Civic Center</i> <i>Community – 6pm @ Crockett County Civic Center</i>

May 16: National Stagecoach and Freight Wagon Annual conference, Ft Davis, TX, 'Horsehead Crossing.'

Oct 9/10: Horsehead Crossing Weekend, 1) Horsehead Crossing, 2) Camp Van Camp: The Pecos Expedition