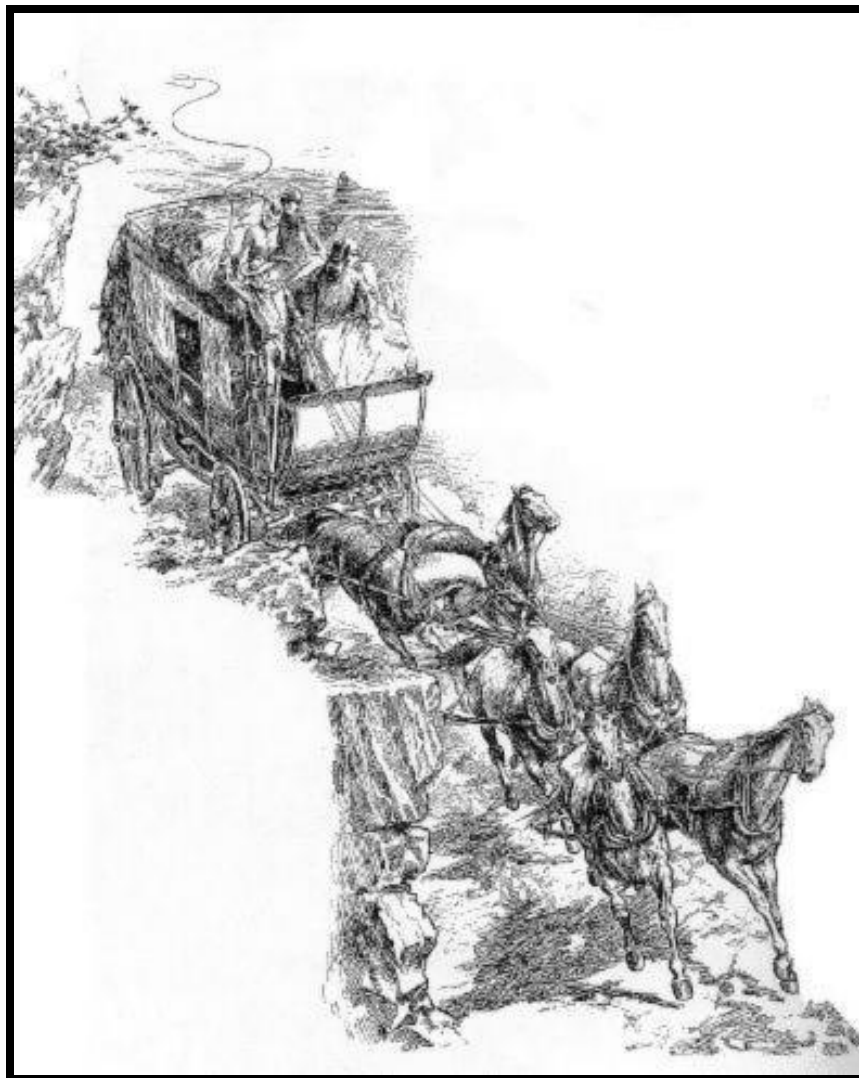


# **Archeological Investigations Butterfield Overland Mail's Grape Creek Station (41CK305) Coke County, Texas**

**Tom Ashmore, West Texas Archeological Society**



**2017  
Updated 2025**

## **ABSTRACT**

One of the most significant periods in West Texas's Concho Valley was the pre- and post-Civil War period. This period saw an explosive expansion in our country as emigrants made their way through this area to points further west, primarily New Mexico and California. This brought about the Butterfield Stage line from 1857 to 1861, as well as settlers, cattle drives, and trade caravans on this same trail. It also brought with it the Indian wars as the tribes, such as the Apache and Comanche, viewed this expansion as an encroachment on their land, which was necessary to the survival of their tribes. As the attacks on settlers and emigrants increased, it brought more military camps and forts to the region. As such, studying the various locations related to these times is significant in clarifying the people and events of those times.

The old Grape Creek Station site remained known until the early 1900s. After that, the memory of its location was lost as those with the knowledge passed on. The general location was known, but first-hand knowledge was lost. Roscoe and Margaret Conkling attempted to find it in the late 1940s as they wrote their now-famous 3-book set on the Butterfield Trail, but they could never locate the station site and had to rely on the landowner's description of its location. Over the years, several avocational archeologists and historians attempted to verify the described location while searching the local area, but to no avail. This study used new satellite technology to determine the site's exact location and clarify its history.

With the landowners' permission, the on-ground efforts began with metal-detecting surveys of a narrowed-down location. The prime targets were three potential locations within hundreds of yards of each other. The third location turned out to be correct, and a more thorough survey project began to tie the archeological artifacts recovered from the ground to the research and confirm the identification as the Grape Creek Station.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Without the permission of the landowners, Mark and Bryce Thieman, I could never have attempted this project. Their generosity and trust were key to this study from the beginning. A special thanks to C.A. Maedgen, my metal detecting and collaborator partner, who encouraged me at every step. Our thanks also go to Evelyn Lemons, Librarian/Archivist at Fort Concho, for providing maps and historical information from the Fort Concho archives. Her assistance was invaluable in our research. It was Evelyn who referred a caller to Fort Concho asking about Grape Creek Station that began this journey and my successful introduction to the landowners of the property that I had been trying for so many years to access.



**Tom Ashmore standing in the Butterfield Trail outside Grape Creek Station**



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**East Fork Grape Creek looking south**

## **Butterfield Overland Mail**

The official government contract for the Butterfield Overland Mail began in September 1858, running semiweekly from Tipton, Missouri, and Memphis, Tennessee, to San Francisco, California, and the same in the opposite direction. However, the contract was acquired one year prior with a stipulation the mail would begin to run for the government within one year. That year was spent building roads, stations, bridges and everything else needed to complete the project (Butterfield Overland Mail –TSHA). Stages probably began running during that year, but it is unlikely they were carrying paying passengers. They may well have been running as part of the preparation and supplies for the formal opening in September 1858.

The Butterfield Overland Mail schedule called for stagecoaches to pass in each direction twice per week. The coach was fitted with three seats, and these were occupied by nine passengers. As the occupants of the front and middle seats faced each other, these six people needed to interlock their knees. About all the rest of the coach was full of mailbags (Butterfield Overland Mail - Smithsonian).

For the West Texas portion of the trip, the wagons were more rugged than the eastern Concord coaches. They were built especially for Butterfield and were called CelerityWagons or Mud Wagons due to their rugged construction.



**Celerity Wagon used by Butterfield Overland Mail Company**  
(Photo Courtesy of the Booth Western Art Museum)

Another unique aspect of the West Texas portion of the route was the mules used to pull the wagons. They used semi-wild Spanish Mules. Spanish Mules were originally brought from Spain to Mexico. They were



smaller than their larger cousins and the mules we are familiar with today. They were hardier in this rough and dry country.



Spanish Mules in Spain

For Grape Creek Station the coaches would arrive Tuesdays and Fridays heading west and Wednesdays and Saturdays heading east. The entire trip took 24 days in one direction.

No. 1

Sep. 16th, 1858.

OVERLAND MAIL COMPANY.

THROUGH TIME SCHEDULE BETWEEN

ST. LOUIS, MO.,  
MEMPHIS, TENN. } & SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

GOING WEST.

GOING EAST.

LEAVE.	DAYS.	Hour.	Distance to place.	Time allowed.	Miles per hour.	LEAVE.	DAYS.	Hour.	Distance to place.	Time allowed.	Miles per hour.
St. Louis, Mo., & Memphis, Tenn. }	Every Monday & Thursday.	8.00 A.M.	Miles.	No. Hours		San Francisco, Cal.	Every Monday & Thursday.	8.00 A.M.	Miles.	No. Hours	
P. R. R. Terminus, "	" Monday & Thursday.	8.00 P.M.	180	10 16		Firebaugh's Ferry, "	" Tuesday & Friday.	11.00 A.M.	168	27	6
Springfield, "	" Wednesday & Saturday	7.45 A.M.	143	37 3/4		Vernalis, "	" Wednesday & Saturday.	5.00 A.M.	82	19	4 1/2
Fayetteville, "	" Thursday & Sunday.	10.15 A.M.	100	26 1/2		El Tejon, (via Los Angeles)	" Thursday & Sunday.	9.00 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2
Fort Smith, Ark.	" Friday & Monday.	5.30 A.M.	65	17 1/2		San Bernardino, "	" Friday & Monday.	5.30 P.M.	150	32 1/2	4 1/2
Sherman, Texas	" Sunday & Wednesday.	12.30 A.M.	205	48 1/2		Fort Yuma, "	" Sunday & Wednesday.	1.30 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2
Fort Belknap, "	" Monday & Thursday.	9.00 A.M.	146 1/2	32 1/2		Gila River, Arizona	" Monday & Thursday.	7.30 P.M.	186	50	4 1/2
Fort Chadbourne, "	" Tuesday & Friday.	5.15 P.M.	136	30 1/2		Tucson, "	" Wednesday & Saturday	3.00 A.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2
Pecos River, (on Gravel)	" Thursday & Sunday.	3.45 A.M.	165	36 1/2		Soldier's Farewell, "	" Thursday & Sunday.	8.00 P.M.	184 1/2	41	4 1/2
El Paso, "	" Saturday & Tuesday.	11.00 A.M.	248 1/2	55 1/2		El Paso, Tex.	" Saturday & Tuesday.	5.30 A.M.	150	33 1/2	4 1/2
Soldier's Farewell	" Sunday & Wednesday.	8.30 P.M.	150	33 1/2		Pecos River, (on Gravel)	" Monday & Thursday	12.45 P.M.	248 1/2	55 1/2	4 1/2
Tucson, Arizona	" Tuesday & Friday.	1.30 P.M.	184 1/2	41		Fort Chadbourne, "	" Wednesday & Saturday	1.15 A.M.	165	36 1/2	4 1/2
Gila River, "	" Wednesday & Saturday	9.00 P.M.	141	31 1/2		Fort Belknap, "	" Thursday & Sunday.	7.30 A.M.	130	30 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Yuma, Cal.	" Friday & Monday.	3.00 A.M.	135	30		Sherman, "	" Friday & Monday.	4.00 P.M.	146 1/2	32 1/2	4 1/2
San Bernardino, "	" Saturday & Tuesday.	11.00 P.M.	200	44		Fort Smith, Ark.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	1.00 P.M.	205	45	4 1/2
El Tejon, (via Los Angeles)	" Monday & Thursday.	7.30 A.M.	150	32 1/2		Montana, & Thursday.	" Monday, & Thursday.	6.15 A.M.	65	17 1/2	3 1/2
Vernalis, "	" Tuesday & Friday.	11.30 A.M.	127	28		Springfield, "	" Tuesday & Friday.	8.45 A.M.	100	26 1/2	3 1/2
Firebaugh's Ferry, "	" Wednesday & Saturday	5.30 A.M.	82	18		P. R. R. Terminus, "	" Wednesday & Saturday	10.30 P.M.	143	37 1/2	3 1/2
(Arrive) San Francisco,	" Thursday & Sunday.	8.30 A.M.	103	27	6	(Arrive) St. Louis, Mo., & Memphis, Tenn. }	" Thursday & Sunday.		160	10	16

This Schedule may not be exact—Superintendents, Agents, Station-men, Conductors, Drivers and all employees are particularly directed to use every possible exertion to get the stages through in quick time, even though they may be ahead of this time.

If they are behind this time, it will be necessary to urge the animals on to the highest speed that they can to driven without injury.

Remember that no allowance is made for the time for ferries, changing teams, &c. It is therefore necessary that each driver increase his speed over the average per hour enough to gain the necessary time for meals, changing teams, crossing ferries, &c.

Every person in the Company's employ will always bear in mind that each minute of time is of importance. If each driver on the route loses fifteen (15) minutes, it would make a total loss of time, on the entire route, of twenty-five (25) hours, or more than one day. If each one loses ten (10) minutes it would make a total loss of sixteen and one half (16 1/2) hours, or, the best part of a day.

On the contrary, if each driver gains that amount of time, it leaves a margin of time against accidents and extra delays.

All hands will see the great necessity of promptness and dispatch: every minute of time is valuable as the Company are under heavy forfeit if the mail is behind time.

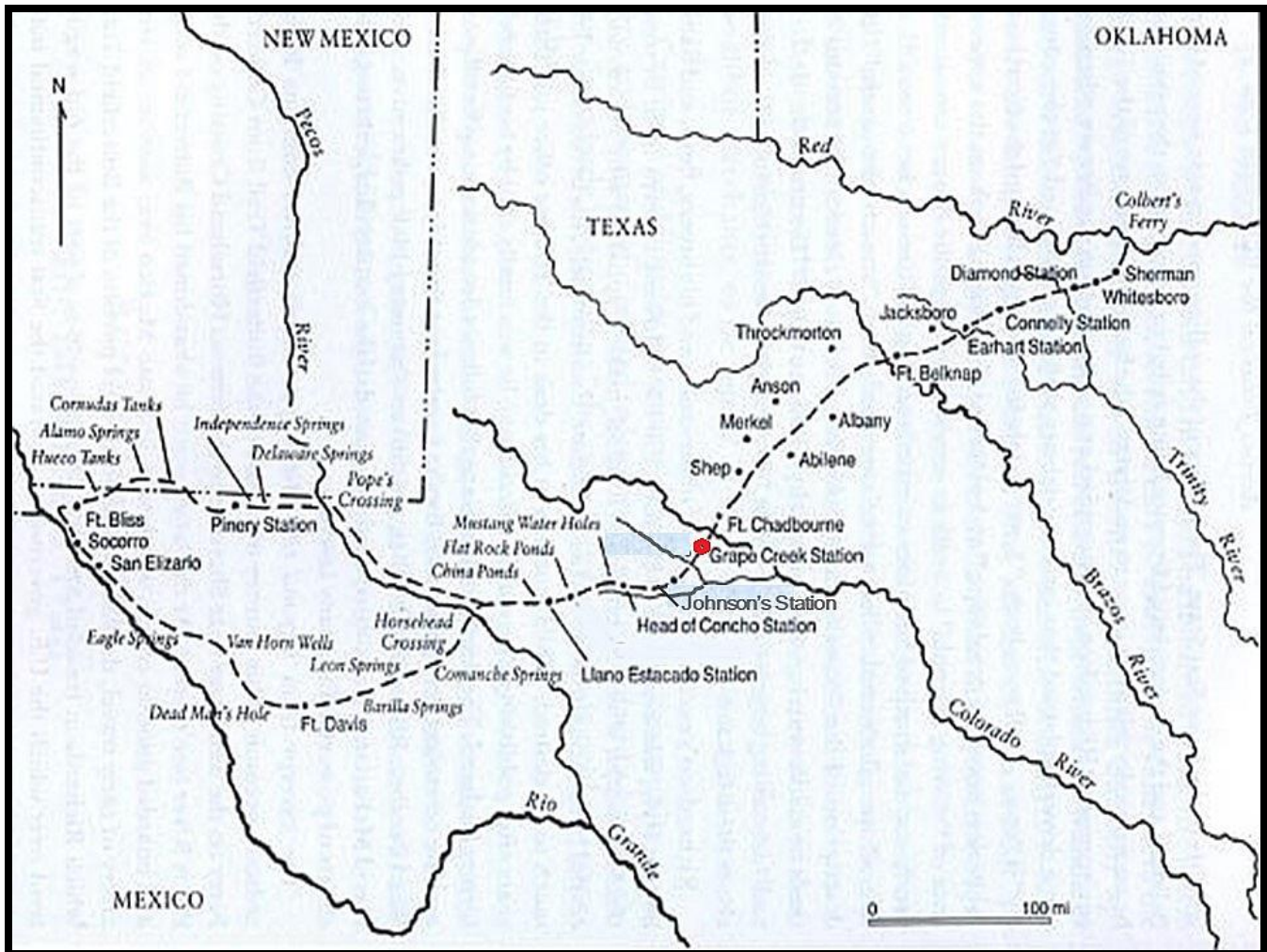
Conductors must note the hour and date of departure from stations, the causes of delay, if any, and all particulars. They must also report the same fully to their respective Superintendents.

\* The Station referred to on Gila River, is 40 miles west of Maricopa Wells.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD.

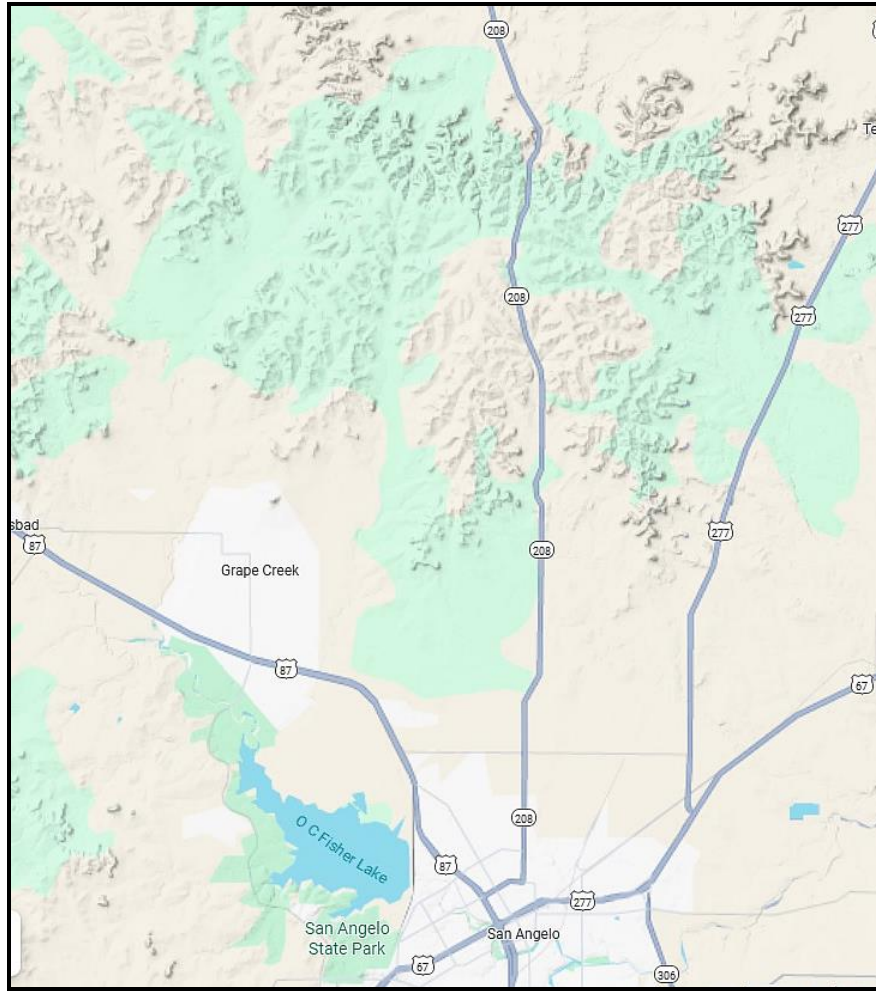
Pres't.

## Grape Creek Station



Grape Creek Station was the first relay station for the Butterfield Stage line heading west after leaving Fort Chadbourne, Texas. It was one in a series of stations for the stages crossing West Texas on the way to or from the Pecos River and New Mexico between 1857 and 1861. It was located on the east side of the east branch of Grape Creek, a spring-fed creek running north to south. Travelers came to the station after a southerly crossing of 30 miles through the dry West Texas land and over a small set of hills given the name Stone Mountain at the time. Coming from the west it was the next station after the Johnson's Station on the Middle Concho River, a distance of 32 miles. Although neither Fort Concho nor San Angelo existed at the time, the location sits just over 18 miles north of these current locations and 10 miles northeast of the current town of Grape Creek.

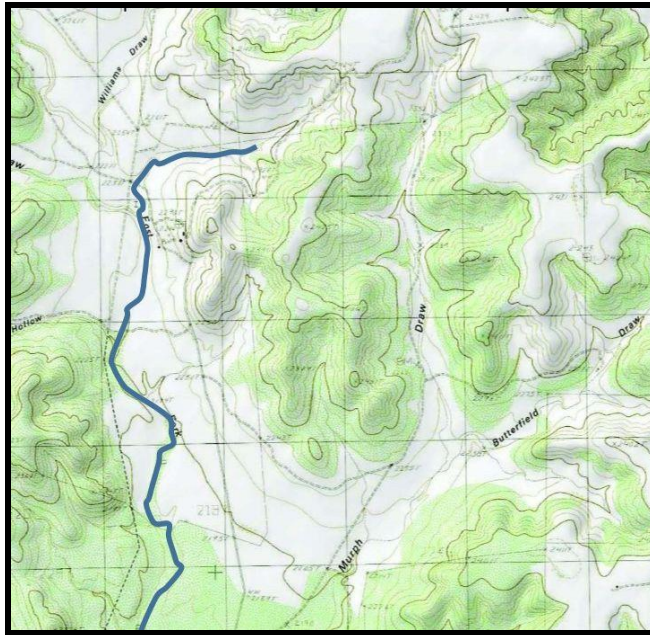




**San Angelo and the town of Grape Creek (Google maps)**

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**East Fork Grape Creek**

We know a few things about the Grape Creek Station construction from first and second-hand accounts of the period. The first account came from Mr. Waterman Ormsby, the first and only passenger of the inaugural run of the Butterfield Overland Mail (Wright). Ormsby was a special correspondent for the Tucson Arizona Herald and rode the entire route in September 1858. His account of the station follows:



**Waterman Ormsby**

***“We soon reached it and found it to be a corral or yard, for the mules, and tents erected inside for the men, under the charge of Mr. Henry Roylan. They had seen us coming and were herding the mules as we drove up. Their corral was built of upright rough timber, planted in the ground. They had pitched their tents inside, for fear of the Indians, and took turns standing guard, two hours on and two hours off. The station was near Grape Creek, a fine stream, and also near some fine timber -- two desirable things not to be found everywhere in Texas.”***

Later, a cabin was built outside the corral and the two were enclosed by a wooden picket stockade wall. We know this from an account by Mrs. Emma Elkins she gave in a 1911 article in Hunters Magazine (Elkins). Mrs. Elkins lived on Fort Chadbourne at the time of an Indian attack and her account came from the Grape

Creek station occupants themselves while Mr. Pennington, the station manager, was recovering in the Fort Chadbourne hospital.

*“One fusillade after another was fired at the house without serious results, the house being built of split logs and therefore bullet-proof, and the premises enclosed by a picket fence five feet high.”*

Unrelated to the Indian attack the next day was to be the closing and abandoning of the station. The company had given orders to close everything down due to the onset of the Civil War and at the time of the attack, they were already packed to leave. The military escorted them back to Fort Chadbourne after the attack for Mr. Pennington’s recovery and afterward, they moved back to their home in Mason, Texas.

### **Post-Butterfield Stage Period**

After the stage station was abandoned in 1861, this remained the main road for travelers from east to west through north Texas to New Mexico. Up to the late 1800s, this road was used by immigrants heading west, cattle drives, military, ranchers, and freighters, crossing into Texas from what is now Oklahoma at Collier’s Ferry in the area of Whitesboro. Similar to Johnson’s Station - the abandoned stage station on the Middle Concho River - the “old” Grape Creek Station became a popular camping spot for travelers headed in either direction. The reason for this was fairly obvious once you saw the location. If you are heading west, you would have just come over a rough set of hills and about an 8-hour day’s travel from Fort Chadbourne. If you were heading north from either the old Johnson’s Station or, in later times, Fort Concho, you would again have just completed an 8-hour day and would be facing the hills as your next obstacle. The archeological artifacts recovered from the site support the postulation that this site remains a preferred campsite.

### **Grape Creek Station #2: Two Periods, Two Stations**

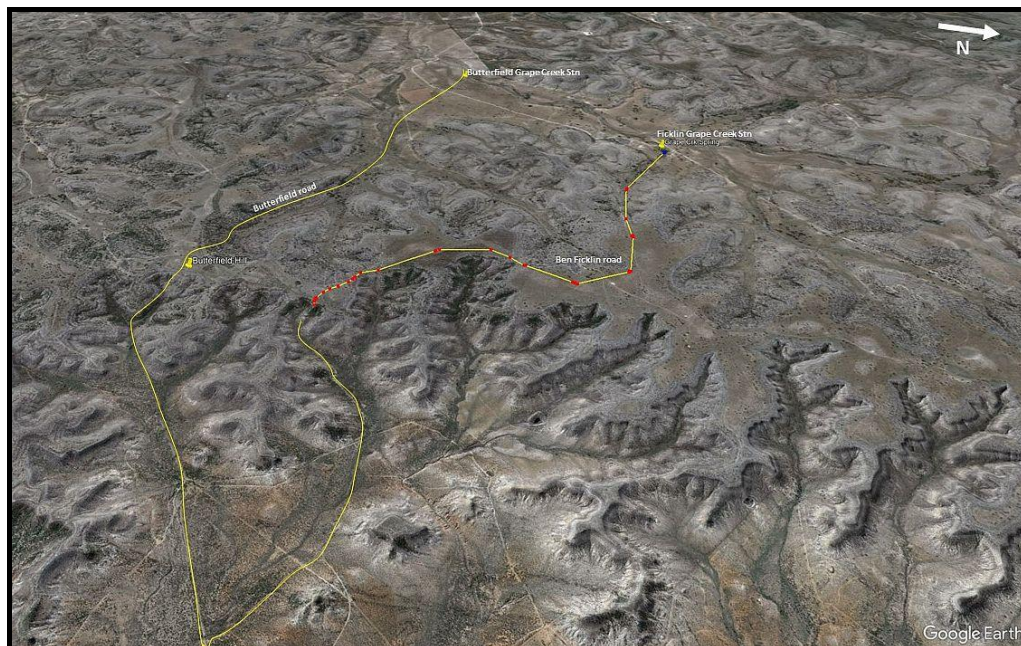
There has been confusion over the years regarding the station site being reported here and another site two miles upstream. What we will refer to as the second site, or Grape Creek Station #2, was reported by Glen Sample Ely in his book, ‘The Texas Frontier and the Butterfield Overland Mail, 1858–1861’. (Ely) It was a Grape Creek Station site that he viewed, but it was a separate station from 1870 to 1882, not 1858 to 1861.

The San Antonio to El Paso Overland Mail, also known as the Ben Ficklin Mail Line, reconstituted the former overland mail lines in West Texas after the Civil War. Their headquarters was the Concho Mail Station, located just south of Fort Concho, San Angelo, Texas. They initially built the mail line from San Antonio through to El Paso in 1868, but in 1870, they added a northern route from their Concho Mail Station

and Fort Concho. That route used the old Butterfield road and stations to reach the ultimate destination of Fort Smith, Arkansas. That route ran until 1882. The main stations along the route are documented in the U.S. Postal and U.S. Army archives, but minor swing stations were not.

The primary station after leaving Fort Concho to the north was Fort Chadbourne Station, as it was in the Butterfield Overland Mail Line. Ficklin reconstituted and used as many of the old Butterfield stations as he could. However, since Fort Concho was not part of the original Butterfield route, the distances between the fort and the initial stations on both the western and northern routes were shorter than the standard spacing of swing stations. Optimum spacing was 25 miles. This shorter spacing was for both Johnson Station to the west and Grape Creek Station to the north. The distance from Fort Concho to the old Johnson's Station was 20 miles, and the distance from Fort Concho to the old Grape Creek Station is 20.5 miles. Both stations had to be moved upstream. Johnson's Station was moved five miles upstream, but it retained the name Johnson's Station. (Ashmore, 2010) The same route extension was accomplished for Grape Creek Station. In that case, they moved as far upstream as possible, which was to the spring source, two miles further. This station must have also retained the name, since it was still on Grape Creek.

Upon reviewing Glen Ely's reporting and the imagery associated with Site #2, the route extension from the old Butterfield Station became apparent. By following the old road from Site #2 up the mesas, I found it descending off the mesa on the north side very similar to Butterfield Hill. It turns out the two roads descending off the mesas (Butterfield and Ficklin) are only separated by a mile. The cuts for the descent are also almost identical. This is important, because the modern ranch roads coming off the mesas look totally different. Finally, the two roads intersect and continue along the path of the old Butterfield Road.



**Both Roads from each station**





**Zoomed in view of both roads as they reach hill descent**



**Comparison of both descent hill roads**



This solves the puzzle of two locations for Grape Creek Station. They were constructed for two different periods and for two different stagecoach lines. The periods were close enough to result in similar trash-type artifacts, as shown in this report and in Glen Ely's photographs.

## **Ranch Period**

The ranching period for this area began in 1899 when John Abe March and his brother, Napoleon Murph March, purchased 30,000 acres from B.M. Collyns. Collyns purchased the land from the state of Texas in 1880, according to Coke County records.

There is no indication in either the evidence or the family history that the March brothers or B.M. Collyns ever occupied this site. The March brothers knew of the site and tried to describe it to Roscoe Conkling during his visit in the late 1940s, but they never actually took Conkling to the site. There was some confusion about either the conveyance of the site location or Conkling's notes because the site location, as described, was misidentified in Conkling's subsequent book. It was a minor error of compass direction from the March home, but critical in the station's actual location. This was confirmed by the fact that an archeology group from Odessa, TX, searched for the site as described in the Conkling book around the year 2,000, but after extensive searching, their efforts turned up nothing.

## **Finding The Station**

### **Satellite Imagery Interpretation**

The advent of publicly accessible satellite imagery via Google Earth played a crucial role in finding and interpreting this particular site. First, it helped find it by being able to follow the Butterfield Trail, something previously unavailable through other means. Even after 156 years, the trail trace is visible to the trained eye.

The reason a historic trail can be traced through satellite imagery is that satellite images can show subtle differences in vegetation caused by years of constant trail use and the vegetation's subsequent regrowth after the trail's abandonment. The vegetation will generally grow back slightly different from the surrounding area because the trail has become a depression, which later attracts more soil and water runoff from rain. Bushes and grass tend to grow slightly healthier in the depressions. In most areas, it can be so slight that casual observation on the ground or even from an aircraft cannot detect it. However, using satellite imagery, especially with multiple images of the same location using Google Earth's 'Historical Imagery' tool, a trained eye can find the trace of these vegetation changes in long wagon trail lines across the terrain.

The original study began in 2006 to identify the second-stage station heading west out of Fort Chadbourne, Johnson's Station (Ashmore 2010). The concept is to find the remnants of the trail leading out of a known location, in this case, Fort Chadbourne, and learn to follow the traces to the next stopping point. This turned into a 13-year study of the trail from Fort Chadbourne to the Pecos River. (Ashmore 2019)

Determining the exact trail was incorporated into the research to properly correlate imagery data with accounts from stage passengers or other persons with firsthand knowledge. The final piece is to obtain access to the property to confirm both the trail and the site, and work on it as an archeological project to lay the final piece of the puzzle in place.

### **Comparing First-Hand Accounts with Imagery To Find The Location**

The first account that needed to be correlated to imagery interpretation of the trail leading to the station was that of Ormsby and his portion of the trip from Fort Chadbourne to Grape Creek. In his account, he asked the driver how far it was to the next stage stop.

***"How far is the next station?"***

***"I believe it's 30 miles."***

***"Do you know the road?"***

***"No."***

***"How do you expect to get there?"***

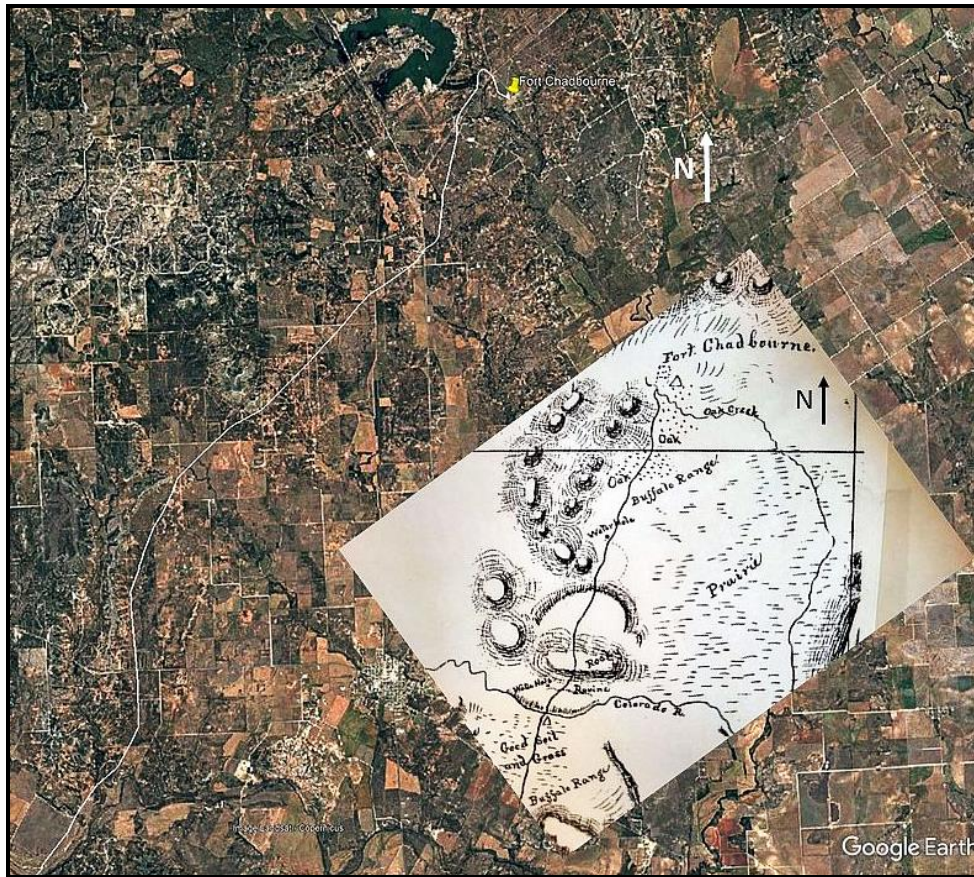
***"There's only one road. We can't miss it."***

After dealing with the unruly and semi-wild Spanish Mules, they departing to the west from Fort Chadbourne and headed south across Oak Creek. From there, the Butterfield Trail took a direct route from Fort Chadbourne south to the Colorado River. This route to Grape Creek Station measures exactly 30.2 miles. Again, going back to Ormsby's account:

***"Fortunately, our course was a clear straight one, leading across a boundless prairie."***

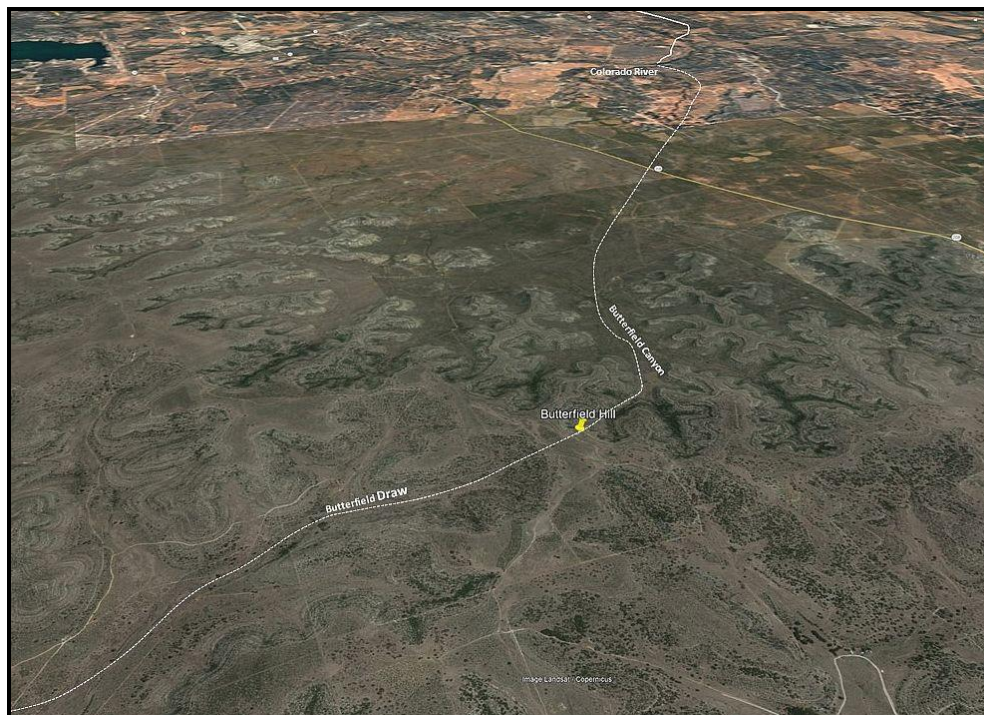
The road mentioned follows an 1867 military-mapped road between Fort Chadbourne and the Colorado River.





**Road between Fort Chadbourne and Colorado River**

After the Colorado River, the trail must cross a rugged northwest to southeast running set of hills to get over to the valley Grape Creek runs through. The route leading up to this set of hills and the road climbing up the east side is well known. The east side is named Butterfield Canyon and the road is cut through the tough limestone.



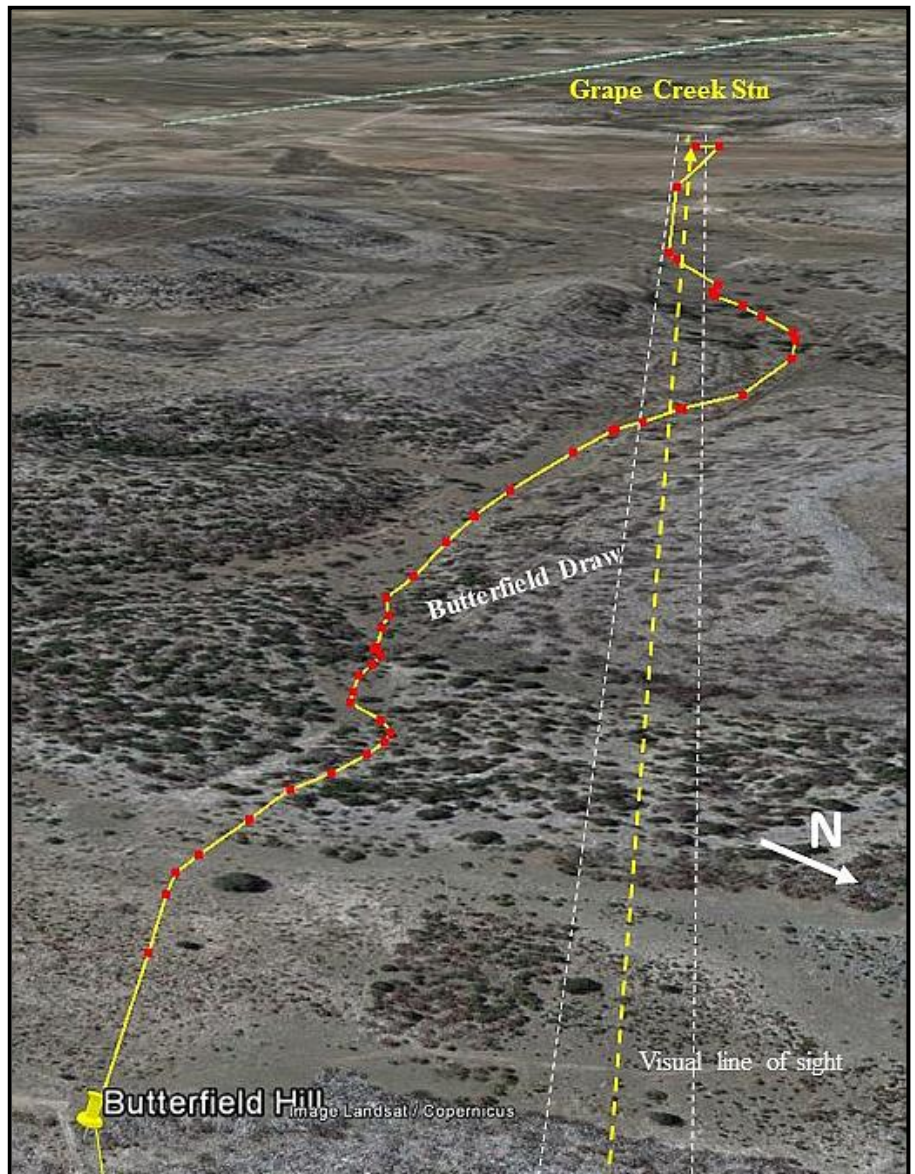


It is fairly steep getting up. According to Ormsby, because they had to do with just two mules instead of four the mules stopped halfway up and refused to go any further. So, they spent the night to let the mules rest and made it to the top in the very early morning hours while it was still dark. When they reached the top he continues:

***“We ascended the hill and discovered the station fire, miles distant – a mere speck among the trees.”***

Again, going back to Google Earth and taking the view he was describing, you find the only possible location he might have been able to see the station fire would have been down a draw looking west with a very narrow view between the lower hills. That draw is named Butterfield Draw on topographic maps.

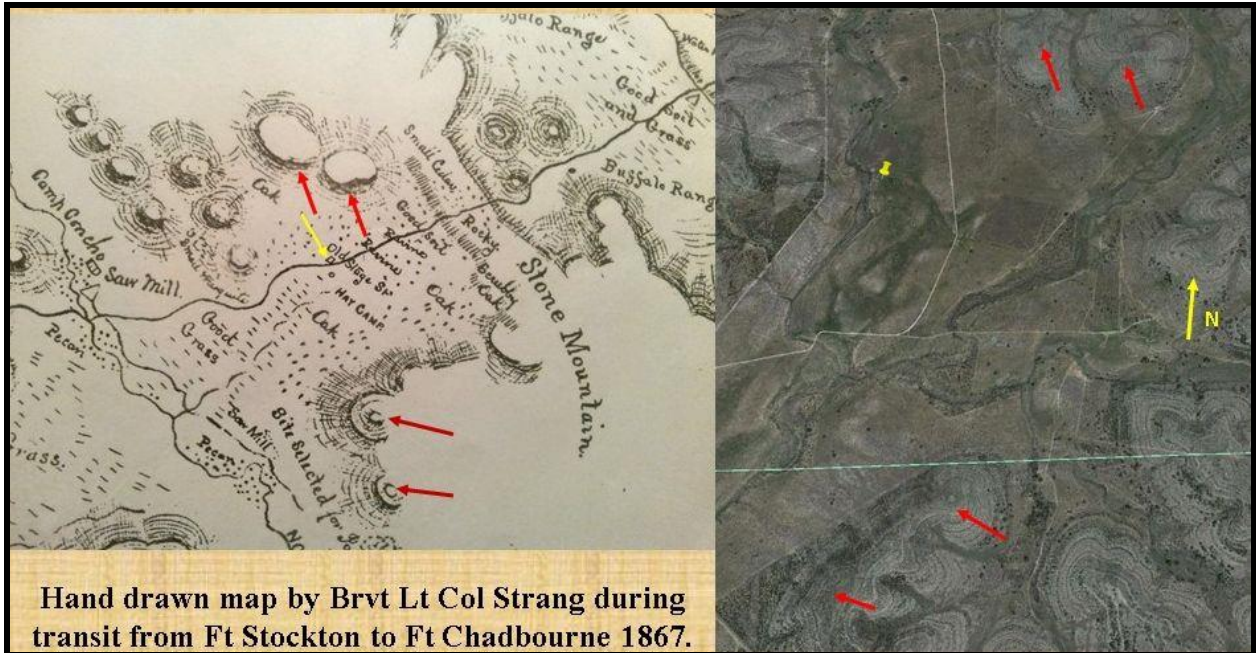
It is important to note that a fire from either the Butterfield’s Grape Creek Station or the later Ben Ficklin’s Grape Creek Station could not be seen from any part of the mesa after reaching the top of the Ficklin Road hill. This helps confirm the correct hill and road for the Butterfield line is the one farther south, shown here.



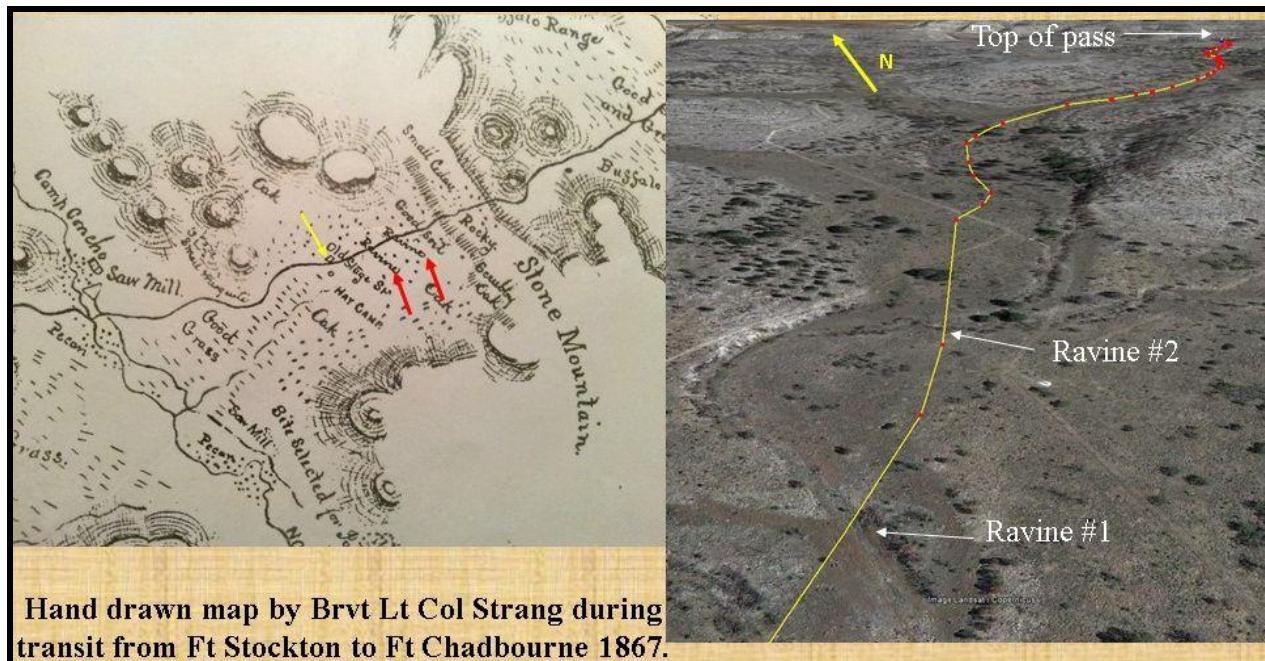
**Looking down on Grape Creek Station from top of hills (Google Earth)**



The next account comes in the form of the 1867 map by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Strang, who made a journey from Fort Stockton to Fort Chadbourne to assist in preparations for the transfer of the military from Fort Chadbourne to the new Fort Concho. He made an extremely precise map of his journey, which included the “old Stage St” on it. By comparing the map against Google Earth imagery there are several items that match up to the current location. The first is the station in relation to a set of hills to both the north and south. Setting the two side by side makes a perfect match. The second is his description of two ravines they crossed after leaving the station location and heading up the hills as they continued east and north to Fort Chadbourne. Again, it is a perfect match.



(Google Earth on right)



(Google Earth on right)



An aerial photograph of a landscape. A winding creek, labeled 'East branch Grape Creek', flows from the top right towards the bottom right. A dirt road or wagon trail runs horizontally across the upper middle of the image. A yellow arrow points to this trail, with text 'Old wagon trail heading to station from south' next to it. Another yellow arrow points to a small, light-colored area on the trail. In the bottom left corner, a yellow arrow points towards the bottom right, with the letter 'N' above it, indicating North is towards the bottom right. The terrain is a mix of green grass and brown, bare earth.

At one point the trail takes a 90-degree turn to head east up Butterfield Draw and up the hills described earlier. There is only one reason it would take such a sharp turn from the creek and that would be that the station has to be somewhere near the turn. This revealed the proper search location which ultimately led to the finding of the site on the ground.



17

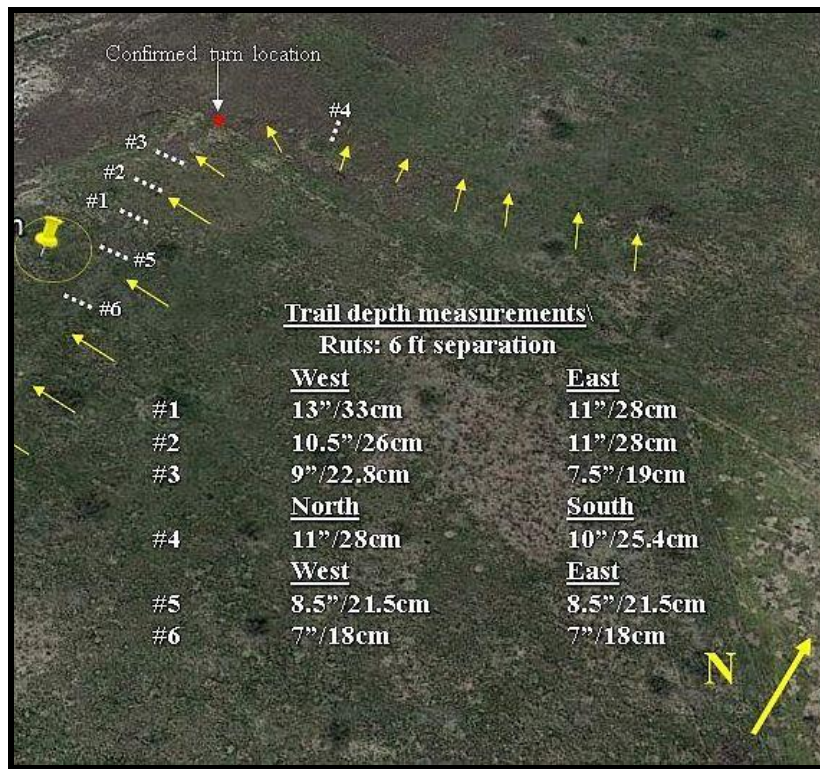


The trail throughout the Grape Creek area left a fairly deep depression in the soft soil. We would have to drive across the trail each day to get to the site and the vehicle sensors in the front bumper would be set off each time as we dipped down into the depression, which averaged seven feet wide and 9.5 inches below the rest of the terrain. At the point we drove through it was 11 – 13 inches deep.



**Depth of the trail depression is quite prominent  
(Front wheels in middle of trail)**

In order to confirm the imagery interpretation we walked the trail and made extensive measurements. The depression left in the ground is quite obvious in this area, to the point that we could determine the ruts within the depression. We measured these rut area depths compared to the surrounding terrain. We additionally confirmed the locations of where the trail crossed the ranch roads heading both north and south.



**Trail depth measurements (Google Earth)**

# Archeological Investigation

## Butterfield Overland Mail Period

Next to the trail and about 100 yards before the 90-degree turn a very faint outline can be seen in the one particular satellite image of a circular corral. The circle is approximately 70 feet in diameter. Within that circle we got our first metal detecting hits. Both from the imagery and the layout of the artifacts this appears to have been a 20 X 15 foot shed within the corral, probably a supply and tack shed. The items found were square nails for construction of the shed, various pieces of metal band, metal tops of containers, small crushed cans, heavy gauge wire, and a piece of heavier gauge metal with a hand-punched hole in it



**Tack/supply shed location and artifacts**

Just outside the area, we found a hand-forged mule shoe. The mule shoe appears to have been removed due to wear rather than arbitrarily lost. There were no nails in the shoe and it had distinct wear and a crack in the middle of the worn area.



**17: Hand-forged mule shoe with crack and heavy wear**



Spread around the corral area on the surface we found various pieces of bottle glass. Normally, finding glass bottle fragments in a corral would be unusual. However, Ormsby's account tells us that the station residents were living inside the corral in tents on the inaugural journey. They probably lived in there for quite a bit longer as they built the new cabin.

***Their corral was built of upright rough timber, planted in the ground. They had pitched their tents inside, for fear of the Indians, and took turns standing guard, two hours on and two hours off.***

Later, a log cabin was built outside the corral, and the entire area enclosed with a five-foot-high picket stockade wall. We know this from an account of Mrs. Emma Johnson Elkins in a 1911 Hunter's Magazine, published out of Ozona, TX. Mrs. Elkins lived on Fort Chadbourne at the time and this was an account of an Indian attack on the station that took place the day before they were to abandon the station from orders of the company. The route was being shut down due to the start of the Civil War. Although the Indian attack received attention in several publications afterward, the pertinent portion of her account follows.

***One fusillade after another was fired at the house without serious results, the house being built of split logs and therefore bullet-proof, and the premises enclosed by a picket fence five feet high.***

The first indication of where the cabin resided is based on the great number of cut footing stones strewn about a fairly small area, with many smaller cut stones of the same type.



**Sampling of footing stones throughout the cabin area**

Similar to the vegetation being changed for the trail, the vegetation that grows back after a building has blocked out the sunlight for many years is also different than the surrounding vegetation. This cannot be seen by satellite imagery, but it can be seen by drone imagery, and in this case, it very clearly showed the right angles making up a three-room L-shaped dog trot cabin next to the corral. Together 42 large size stones were found on the surface in the area of the cabin. Some of these were exposed during metal detecting digs. Smaller size stones, also flat on both sides, were too numerous to count. Note the breezeway of the dog trot is facing the optimum direction for the predominate wind from the southwest. This is the same layout for the dog trot cabin found at Johnson's Station, the next station down the line to the west.



**Drone imagery showing cabin area with footing stones**

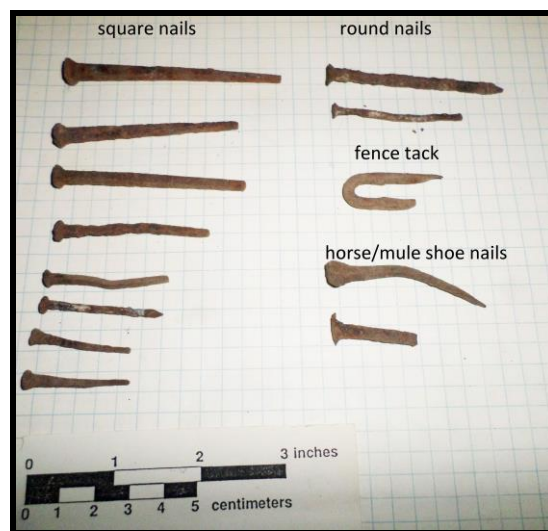
In and around the cabin area we found hundreds of metal detection hits. Most turned out to be square nails of all sizes and flagging these locations confirmed the outline of the building as seen in the vegetation from above. The smaller nails were probably used mostly for nailing down hand-cut shakes for the roof, which would explain the larger number found throughout. It can be speculated that the larger nails were for the main roof beams and probably the door and window frames since a split log cabin would not require much in the way of nails for the walls.

A few of the smaller nails turned out to be round. This was at first a puzzle, given the probable period of the construction. Our research, though, indicates round nails were being manufactured much earlier than



previously thought. Several companies began producing round nails (called wire nails at the time) in New York in the early 1850s (Nelson).

The topmost shoe nail in 21 is a horseshoe nail which was never used. The shoe nail below is one of the two we found outside the corral area and near the estimated cabin perimeter. These fit the mule shoe we found perfectly. Additionally, these two nails were cut, one at 28mm and the other at 27mm. There is a slight bend on the end of each nail was cut with nail cutters. It is important to note that the nails are in the same condition as when the shoe was put on. This indicates they were removed by a farrier with the removal of the shoe. Although it is possible this was done by someone traveling at a later time, it is much more likely this was part of the standard activity by the station mule tenders while the stage was running.



**Sample of the many nails found at this site**

Three shovel tests were conducted in the area that would have been considered the common/dining area, which would be the left room to the dog trot when looking from the east side of the cabin.

### **Shovel Test #1**

50cm x 50cm - middle of cabin room

0 - 20cm: porcelain bottle top, probable deer leg bone, crushed piece of small can, bone handle wrapping a metal insert (utensil).

20 - 30cm: 1x small square nail, small pieces of porcelain glass, mortar, a small piece of whiteware plate, 44-40 cartridge (possible turbation)

30 - 40cm: piece of bottle glass, mortar, small square nails, small medallion with three clamps (advertising medallion?)

### **Shovel Test #2**

50cm x 50cm – South corner of cabin room

0 - 20cm: mortar, small piece bottle glass.

20 - 40cm: mortar, small piece bottle glass, large square nail



## **Shovel Test #2**

50cm x 50cm - West side of cabin room

0 - 20cm: mortar, 3x small square nails, 1x small round nail, 1x large square nail,

20 - 40cm: mortar, small piece bottle glass

Notably, no window glass was ever found at this site. That fits with not only the period but also the fact this cabin was not intended as a homestead site.

The 44-40 was one of three cartridges of this type found at various locations of the site. This cartridge was likely buried deeply during the grubbing operation that went on while clearing the field on two separate occasions according to the landowners. This would be an artifact from the post-abandonment/camping period.

The large amount of mortar/plaster found in the shovel tests and throughout all the digging in the cabin area is also significant. There is a great deal of it coming out of almost every dug hole in the area of the cabin. The term mortar/plaster is due to the fact this is not mortar in the traditional sense or of the kind normally found, for example at Fort Chadbourne. Some unearthed stones were covered in the mortar/plaster substance, along with a slice of pure mortar coming out of the one hole.

These stones were likely used to build the fireplaces; one on each end was typical. The smaller stones, which are all also flat on both sides, were mortared/plastered as they were placed. Most were not exposed to high heat, but we did find fire-cracked limestone spread about farther out from the cabin area. At first, we thought this might be remnants of Middle Archaic Indian encampments since there was abundant evidence of stone tools and a few diagnostic points throughout the area. However, we did find one very large cut limestone block that was fired and had mortar/plaster on it. This was probably one of the main fireplace blocks and this gave a strong indication that the smaller fire-cracked rocks were also part of the inner fireplace construct and had been spread from the ranch clearing operations. The smaller stones were probably the outer portion of the fireplace that was not exposed to the high heat.



**Mortar/plaster on stone, a slice of mortar/plaster, and various chunks**

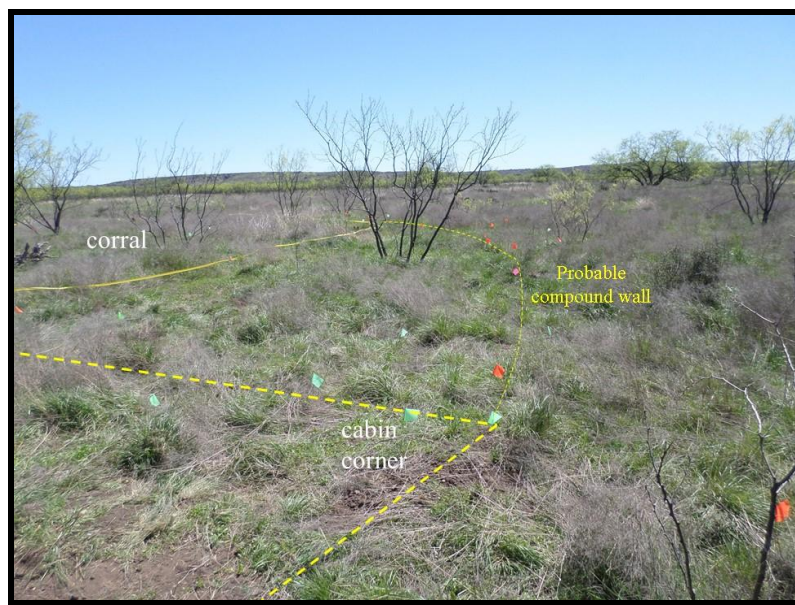


**Large cut, fire heated limestone block**



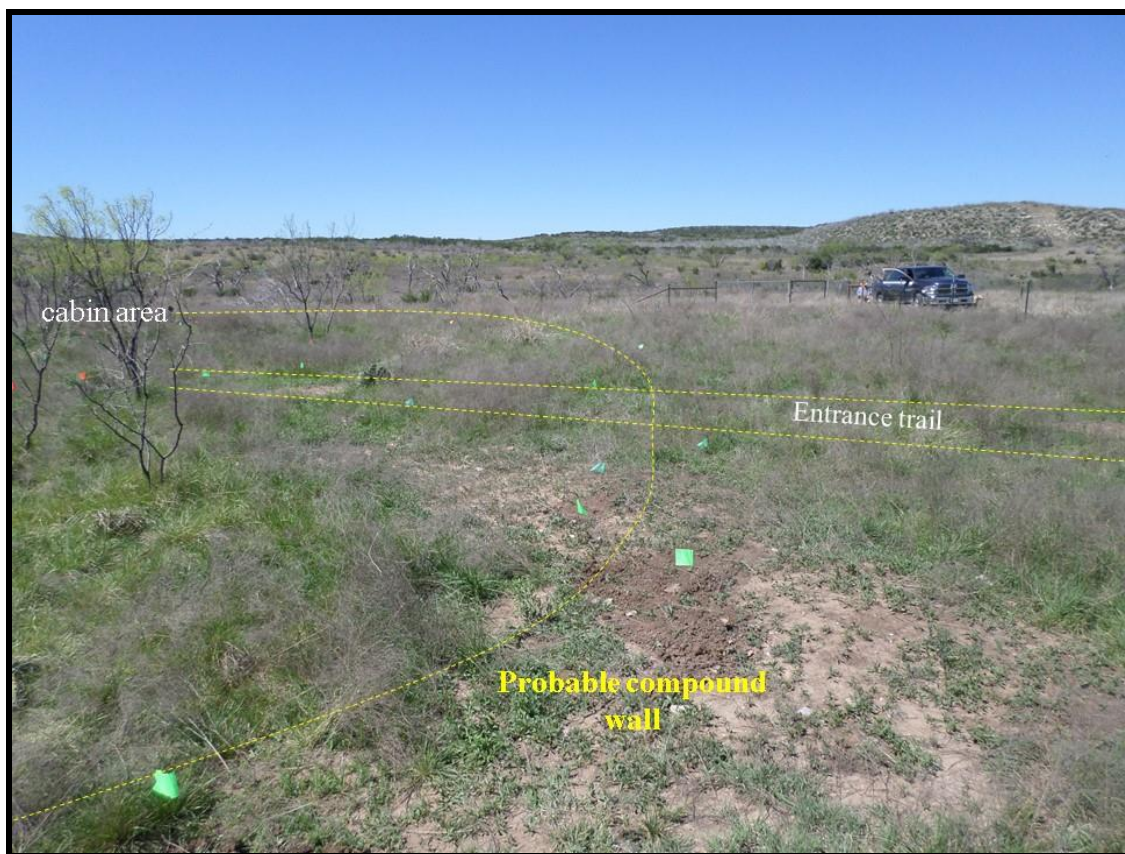
**Mortar on the side and top of a large limestone block**

As reported by Mrs. Elkin in her account, after the cabin was built a stockade type wall was added using a picket wall construct. A faint outline of this wall and the entrance trail from the main trail can be seen in one particular satellite image. The entrance trail leads up to the cabin. It appears they extended from the corral to the cabin on each side for the stockade in a circular fashion. Flagged of the nails metal detected tend to support this outline seen in the imagery.



**Probable south compound wall is shown by flagged nail areas**





**Probable north compound wall is shown by flagged nail areas**



**Outline of entire stage stop with stockade wall (Google Earth)**

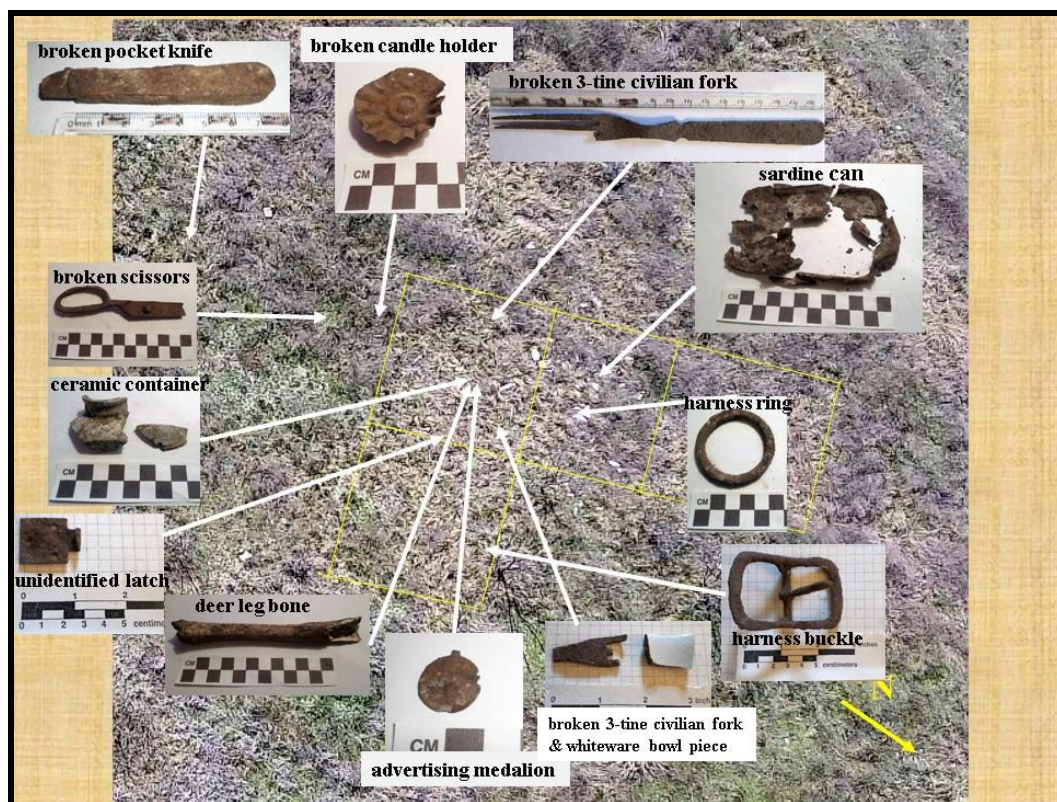


# Artifacts

Similar to Johnson's Station, the next station down the line, there are multiple periods represented in the artifacts found at this location. There are the artifacts that would fit the period the stagecoach was active and there is the post stage station period, which represents camping for those using the old stage road.

The artifacts that fit the stagecoach period are limited. This is because the owners were ordered to pack up and leave the station in the spring of 1861. Within their account of the Indian attack conveyed by Mrs. Elkins, they commented that their wagon was packed and they were to depart the next morning. After the attack, a contingent from Fort Chadbourne was brought back to the station to render medical aid and assist in transporting them back to the fort. So, we know they departed and took all their possessions with them. The only artifacts left to find are those they purposely discarded as trash.

The numerous square nails used in the construction of the cabin were obviously of proper period. Beyond that, most of the items of the proper period were found in or very close to the estimated cabin perimeter. The following shows the artifacts and where they were found.



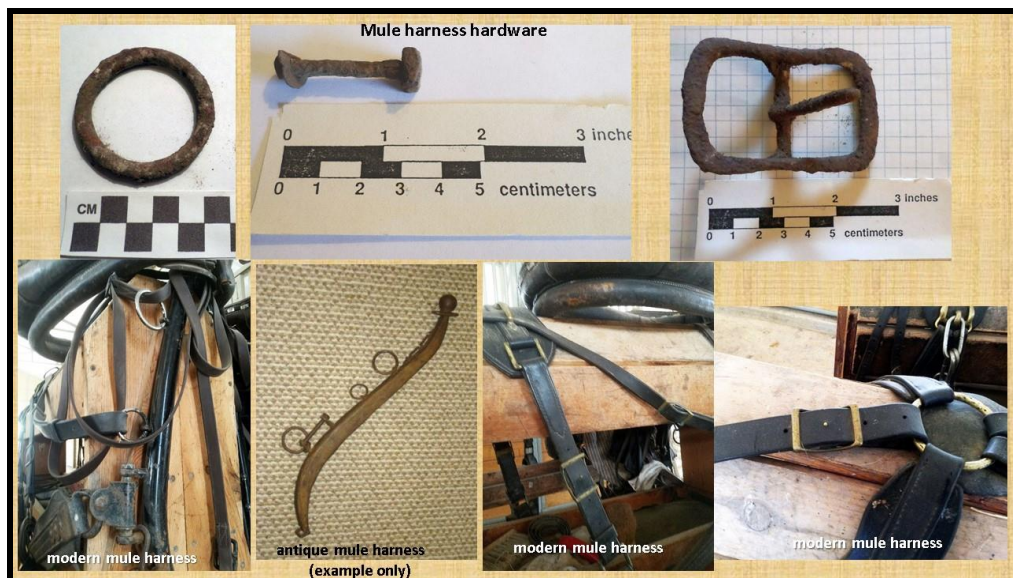
**Artifacts in and around cabin area of probable Butterfield stage period**

Also found in an area just in front of the building perimeter were some large pieces of whiteware. One was an identifiable piece of dish and the other had a partial stoneware stamp on it. The maker's mark is from L.F. Field, Utica, N.Y., produced 1860 – 1870 (Pottery Magic).



**Whiteware dish pieces and partial stoneware stamp**

In addition to the hand-forged mule shoe found near the corral, three items, in particular, appear to be mule harness hardware. Those are the harness buckle, harness ring, and a hand-forged square head hinge pin for the mule yoke. The buckle and ring were both found within the cabin perimeter. The hinge pin was found out by the area that would have been the stockade gate for the wagon to enter. The hinge pin is smaller than most mule yoke hinge pins. This can be explained by the smaller size of the Spanish mules being used for this portion of the stage route.



**Mule harness hardware (artifacts top, examples bottom)**



## **Post Stage Station Period Artifacts**

After the stagecoach site was abandoned it continued to be used by travelers. Some of the items found were obviously from this later period. It was also likely reoccupied by the Ben Ficklin mail line as a swing station on the same route from 1870 to 1882.

Two military periods of camping were found – Fort Chadbourne and Fort Concho periods. A 50-70 cartridge was found that matched a similar cartridge found at Johnson's Station on the Middle Concho River in 2006. This was a Berdan-primed, raised-ring centerfire cartridge. This is also identified as UMC Ringed Folded Head. This was the earliest of the .50-70 Government cartridges. It was a black powder round adopted in 1866 for the US Springfield Model 1866 Trapdoor Rifle.



**50-70 Military cartridge**

There are two possibilities for this type of cartridge being at these two locations. One is a unit from Fort Chadbourne and one is a unit from Fort Stockton.

In June 1867 Lieutenant Boehm left Fort Chadbourne with a detachment of 40 men and followed the Butterfield Trail down to the Middle Concho. They set up what they called 'Permanent Camp' at the location of Johnson's Station. Basing out of this location they escorted cattle herds to the Pecos for a period of one month, at which time they were relieved by G Company of the 4th U.S. Cavalry. This rotation of company-size detachments continued for six months into November 1867, when Fort Chadbourne finally closed and moved to start up Fort Concho the following month. (Haley, Taylor)

The other possibility is the unit from Fort Stockton led by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Strang on his march to Fort Chadbourne in October 1867. Both these units probably camped at the Grape Creek site, as it is approximately eight 8 hours by wagon between this site and the next stage site, Johnson's Station. It should be noted that a similar cartridge was found at the Johnson's Station site. (Ashmore, 2010)

The other military artifacts found at this site come from the Fort Concho period. A broken knife and fork from an M1874 military mess kit was found at two separate locations within the estimated compound walls but not within the estimated building perimeter.



Utensils from the M1874 mess kit

This site did not show up in any Fort Concho patrol reports. However, this site was known to be a temporary camp for soldiers from Fort Concho passing this way (Danier, Schmidt). It is unknown how long this building was standing and useable. It could have eventually been washed away by some of the massive floods reported in the early 1900s or the logs could have been taken away and repurposed.

Other camping items found appear to be civilian in nature. We know this road was used extensively after the Civil War by immigrant wagon trains and cattle drives. For the trail drives the name changed to become the Goodnight-Loving Trail.

The 44-40 was the most popular cartridge of the 1870s. Three were found at this location and six were previously found at Johnson's Station. These particular ones were stamped Winchester (WRC). In one cartridge the primer is missing, but from the other two, it appears they were not fired from the same gun based on the hammer pin indentation comparison.

Except for one 44-40 cartridge the camping items appeared to be outside the building perimeter and spread around. In addition to the 44-40 cartridge a UMC 12 gauge 'Club' shotgun shell was dug up in the area of the cabin perimeter. The UMC Club double ring was the first in the Club family of shells. It was a black



powder shell and was the first generation of Club shells. It was produced between 1885 and 1891 (Turtlefoot).



**44-40 cartridges**

One of the three medicine bottle tops found matches one of the most common Sarsaparilla bottles manufactured and most likely dates between the late 1890s to early 1900s. (Lindsey) A second does not appear to be hand-blown, making it probably the same general era as the Sarsaparilla bottle. A third could not be unidentified.



**Medicine bottle tops (left bottle is Sarsaparilla)**

A Dutch oven lid was found in an area that would be considered completely outside the compound. Dutch ovens were the main cooking mode for wagon trains and cattle drives.

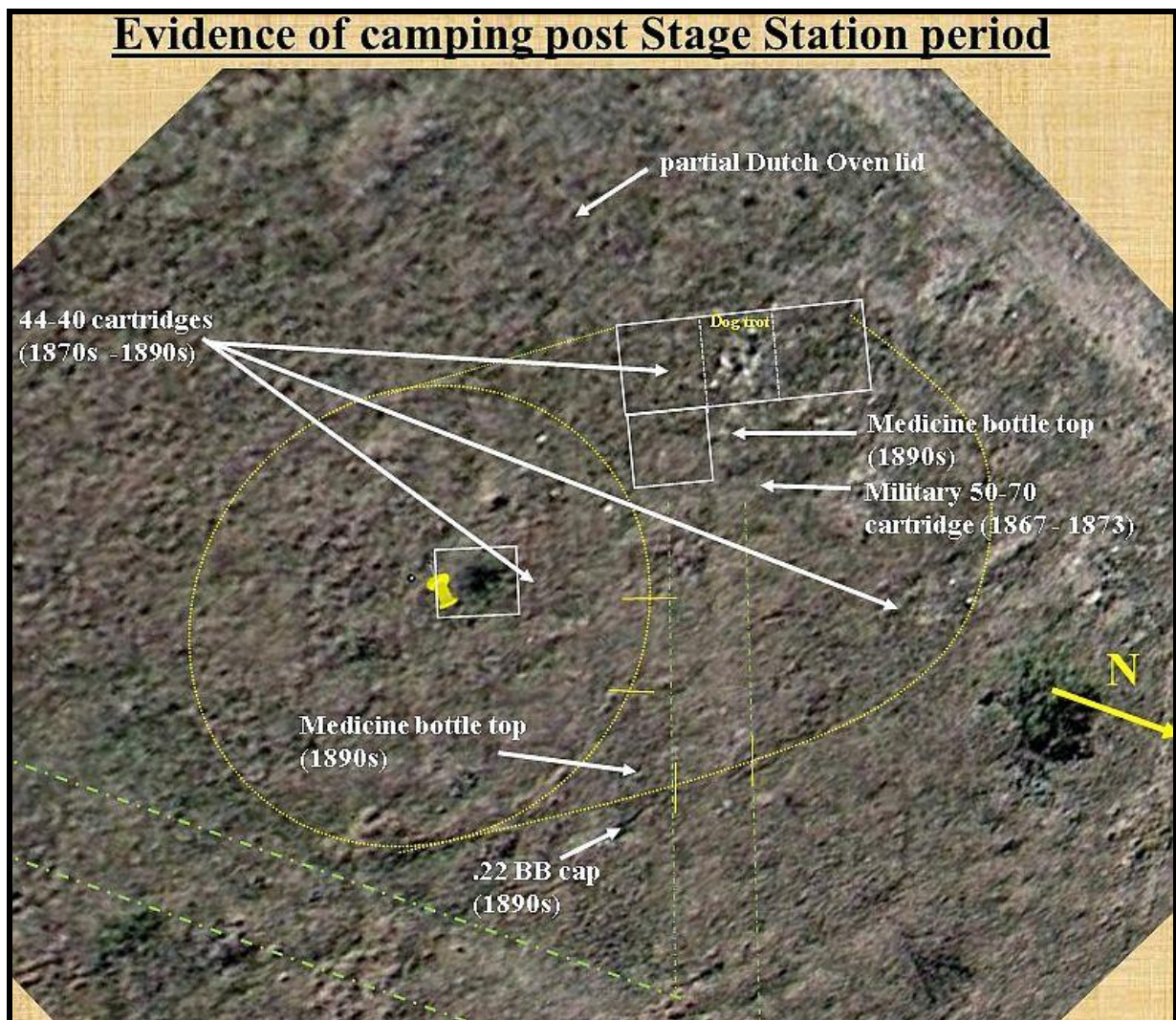


**11-inch Dutch oven lid**

Closer to the creek we found a solder top can lid. These were common in the 1870s to 1890s, often with military units. However, it could also have been any camping person of that period. The lid was cut off below the seal.



Solder top can lid



Locations of probable camping artifacts (Google Earth)



# Summary



The Butterfield Overland Mail's Grape Creek Station was located precisely where those with first-hand knowledge described it. And it was also constructed exactly as described. Time, floods, fires, and modern ranching had almost removed all traces of it. Only a close inspection using new technology and following clues from our long-ago travelers could help find this elusive ghost of the past. To the casual eye, there is nothing left, and there hasn't been for a long time. The owner stated she had ridden up and down this creek as a young girl and had never known of or seen this site.

Although this primitive station stood for only a short time, it had a profound effect on the opening of the West and tying our country together across vast distances of a harsh, unforgiving land. Only the hardest could build something out of nothing while withstanding everything nature and a hostile Indian nation could throw at them.

For the weary travelers, it was a small spot where they could find peace and respite, sitting on the banks of a clear, spring-fed creek under the shade of lingering pecan trees. I'm sure many who came to this spot in covered wagons after the station was abandoned stayed more than just one day, knowing the next part of their journey would be unforgiving.

The location has been lost for the better part of 75 years, and it was essential to find it and pull from the ground what small bits of the past we could. We can now let the past go back to sleep and let the land continue on its path of reclaiming what it owns and what we only borrow and then return.

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