

Butterfield Overland Mail's Antelope Spring Station

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7-Mile Mesa (northwestern end)

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Abstract

In August 1859, the Butterfield Overland Mail company decided to forego the northern route along the east side of the Pecos River to New Mexico and on through the Guadalupe Mountains to El Paso and begin operations from Horsehead Crossing across the Pecos River west to Fort Stockton. The change was made for several reasons: 1) to add Forts Stockton, Davis, and Quitman to the mail route; 2) better water sources; 3) more passengers/mail; and 4) better protection by the military.

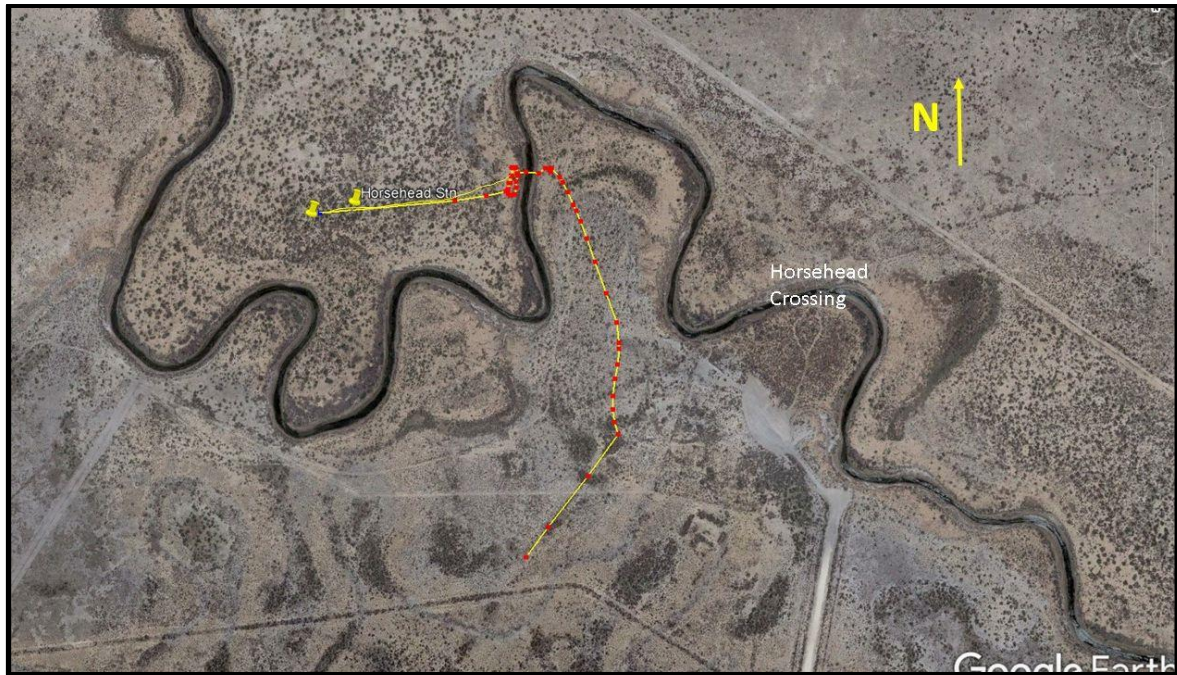
To accomplish this, a new stagecoach station needed to be built. This station was never listed on the existing company schedules since it was put in so late in the route's existence. It was given the name of the nearby spring – Antelope Spring Station, also known as Camp Pleasant. An archeological recording of this station was never conducted until this last year. We will give a thorough description of the station, the layout, and all the work involved with this unknown historical site, as well as the road that followed the Comanche Trail.

History

Coaches could not cross the muddy and deep Pecos River. So, they arrive on each side of the ferry points. Passengers and mail would be ferried across using a small skiff-type boat (Ely, Dearen). The skiff probably was connected to a rope line to keep it from being swept downstream by the strong current. The station continued to operate along this route and used this methodology from this point on.

To verify the wagon road from the stage station was for the ferry crossing, a review of any wagon trail on the other side of the river was required. The result was that a wagon trail can be seen in historical satellite imagery departing the established Fort Stockton Road before it reaches Horsehead Crossing proper and heads straight to the west river bank, directly opposite from the wagon trail turnaround on the east side.

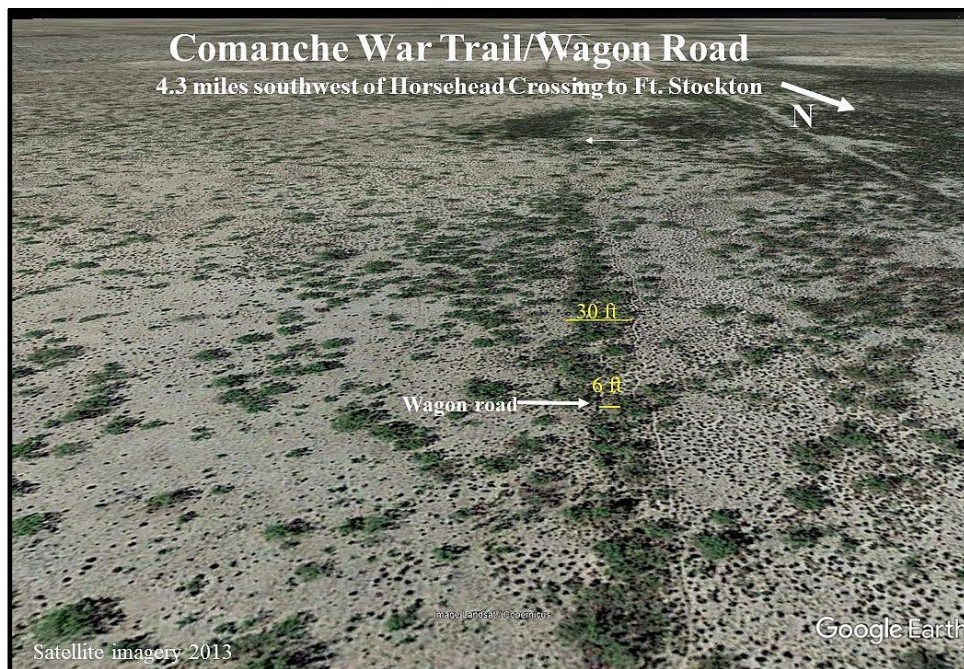
On the east side of the river, the road came from the stage station to a turnaround area. The coach drove along the river bank in a kind of loop around and then back to the station.



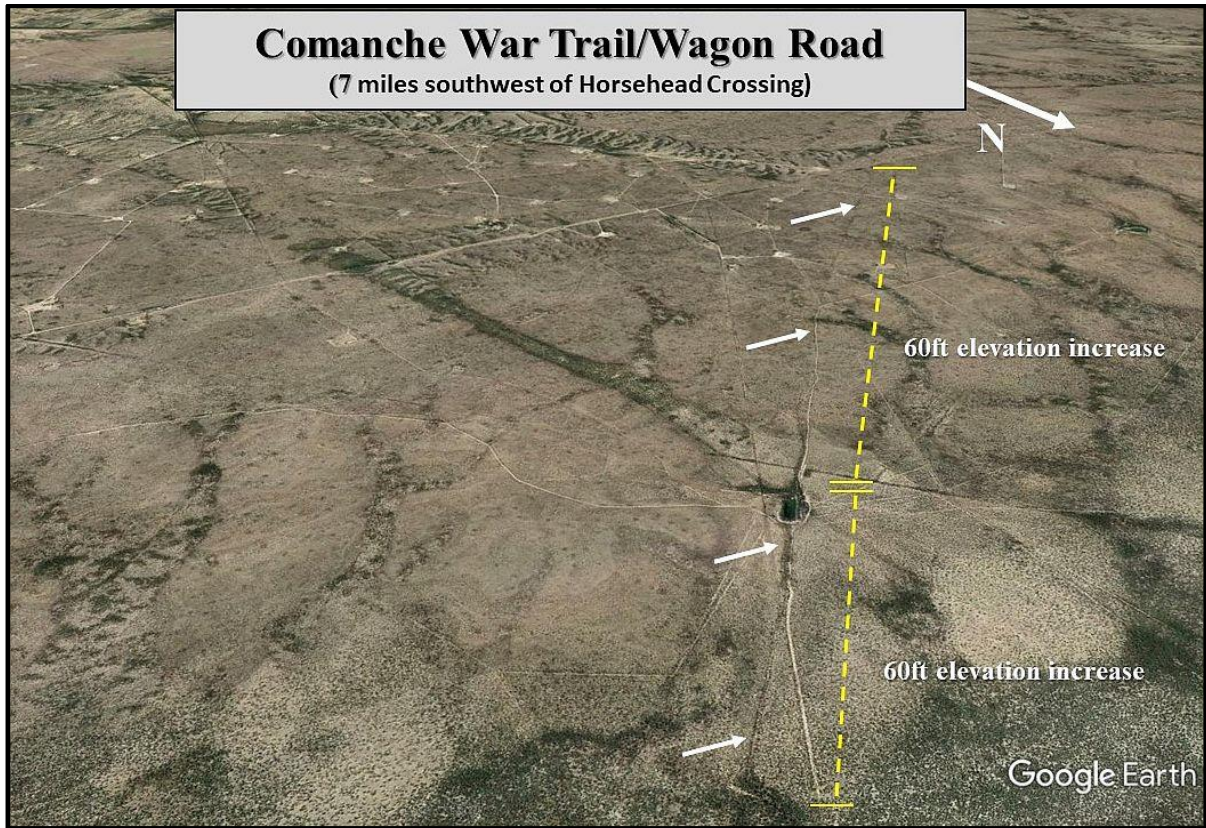
Roads from Ft Stockton road and stage station leading to opposite sides of river

Fort Stockton Road

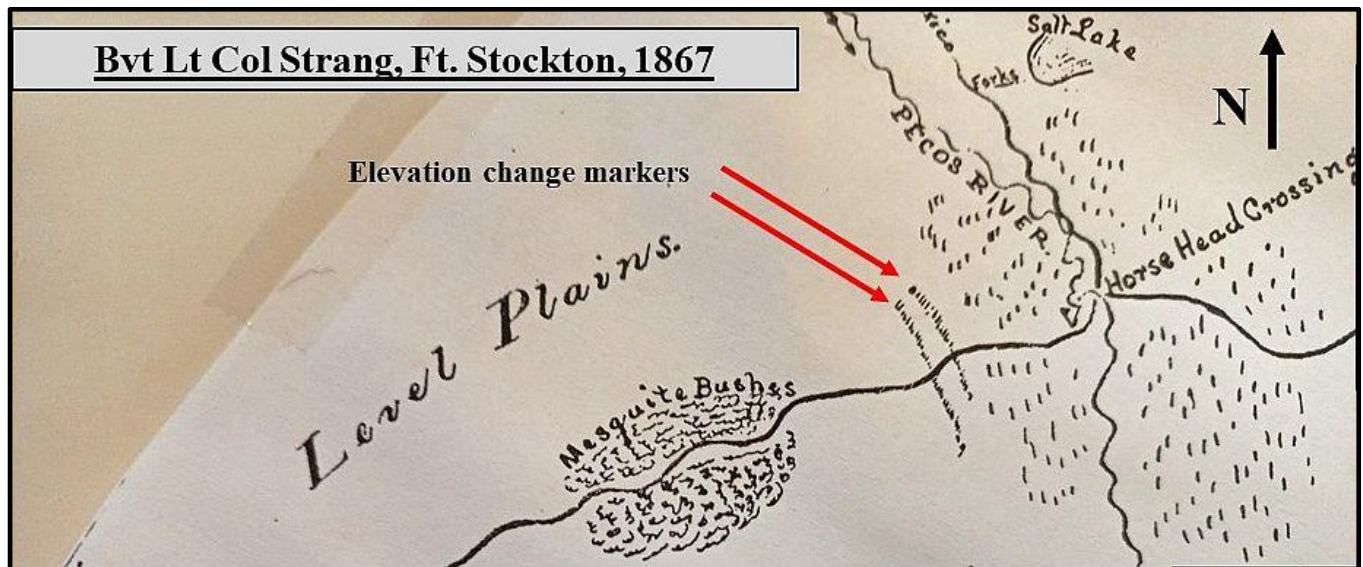
After the stagecoach left the river it quickly merged into the Comanche Trail that had been used for the previous 70-plus years to run their stolen horse herds in the winter or spring up to northern Texas. It then runs seven miles in a straight line west to a minor plateau. The Comanche Trail made a ready-made road all the way to Comanche Spring, which is what Fort Stockton was built around. The trail leading to the plateau is approximately 30 feet wide and the six-foot wagon wheel ruts running down the middle can still be seen from above in some sections.



As the trail comes to the plateau, it climbs a wide draw leading 120 feet up to the flat before heading on to Fort Stockton. This draw makes an easy climb in two 60-foot sections.

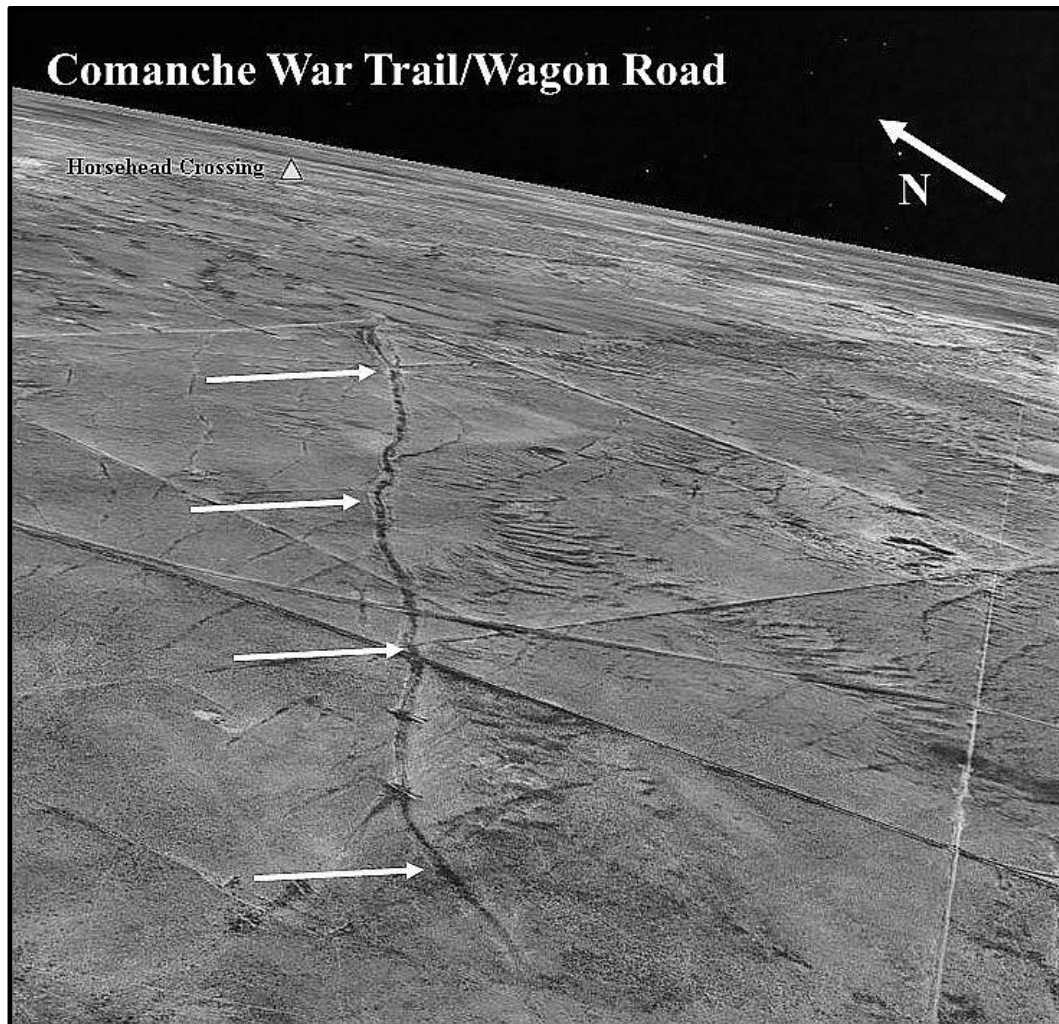


We can verify this is the correct road through an 1867 military map that annotates the two elevation changes at this point. The map was created by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel E.J. Strang during his expedition from Fort Stockton to Fort Chadbourne.



Original map from National Archives

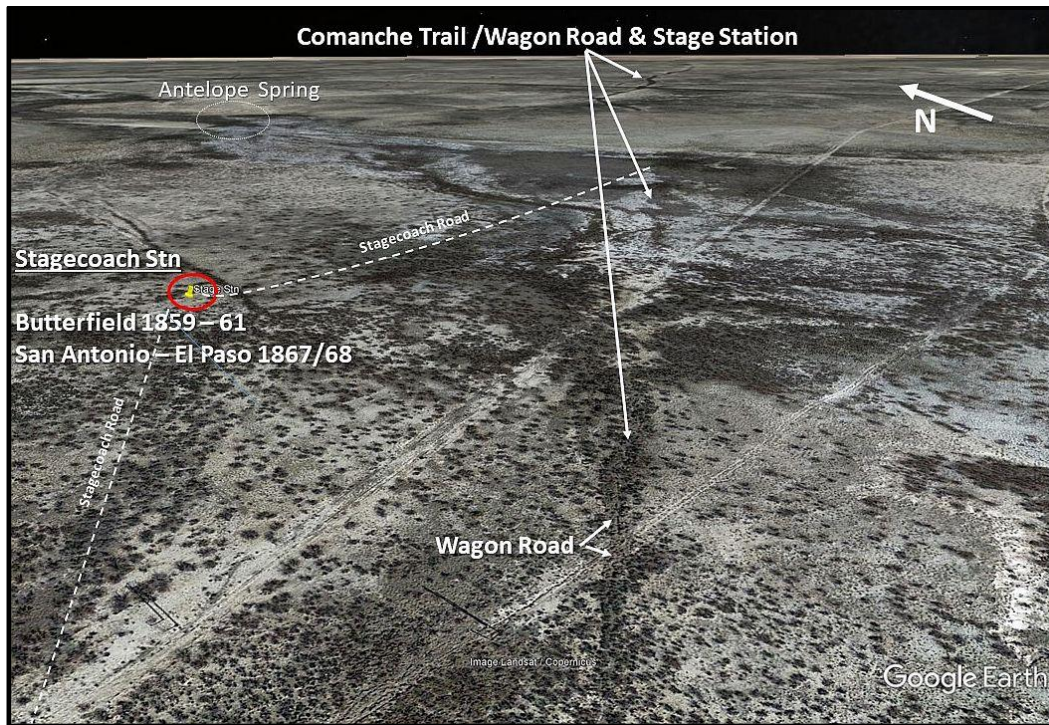
After the Comanche Trail moves onto the plateau proper, it becomes very apparent from above. The trail becomes wider and the after-growth brush is thicker. The width ranges from 80 to 130 feet in this area and the scar is very distinct. In a close-up view, you can also see the wagon road continuing down the middle of it.



Butterfield Trail From Horsehead Crossing (top left) Coming West

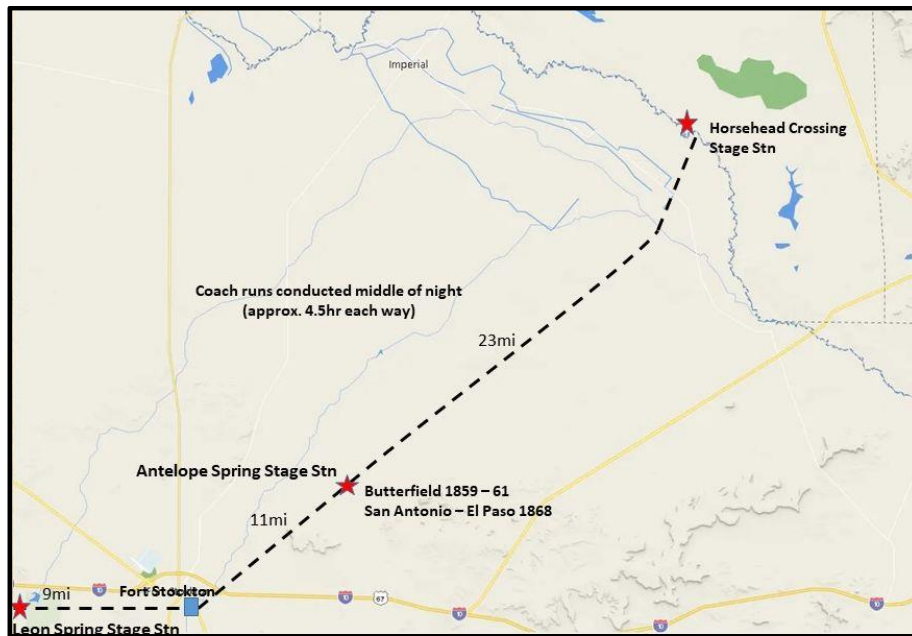
When it reached the plateau, they were 16 miles from the stagecoach station, making it a 23-mile one-way journey. This was always done in the middle of the night, arriving at the Pecos River around 3:00 a.m. and departing around 4:00 a.m. The stagecoach station was never listed on the existing company schedules since it was put in so late in the route's existence. It was given the name of the nearby spring – Antelope Spring Station.

Although the station is only 260 yards from the main wagon road, it was accessed from the main road by service roads to the north and south, making a large triangle to the station. The northern service road is one-third of a mile and the southern is a half mile to the main wagon road.



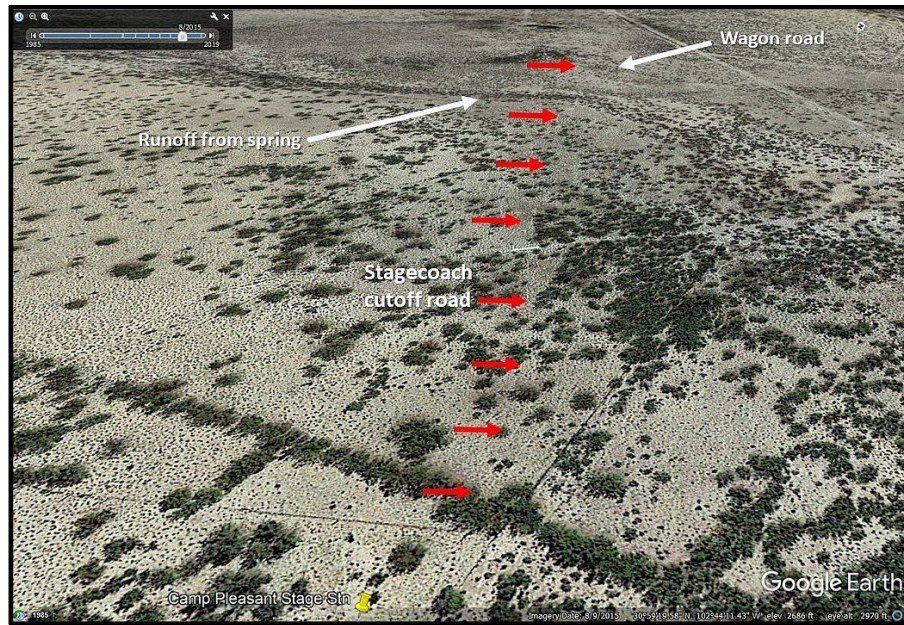
Main Wagon Road and Stagecoach Station

The location of this station is unusual, being just 11 miles from Fort Stockton and 23 miles from the Pecos River. It was undoubtedly chosen due to the location of the spring. There was no other known water source on this road at the time and the animals, stressed with such a long journey, were at their limit of endurance for the round trip, even at a walking pace in the middle of the night. Another reason for this location is the distance between stations for changing mule teams. Fort Stockton was not an actual swing station. It was a drop-off and pick-up depot only. Leon Springs was the next actual swing stage station for the Butterfield route, being only nine miles from Fort Stockton. That makes the distance a proper 20 miles for a team changing station.



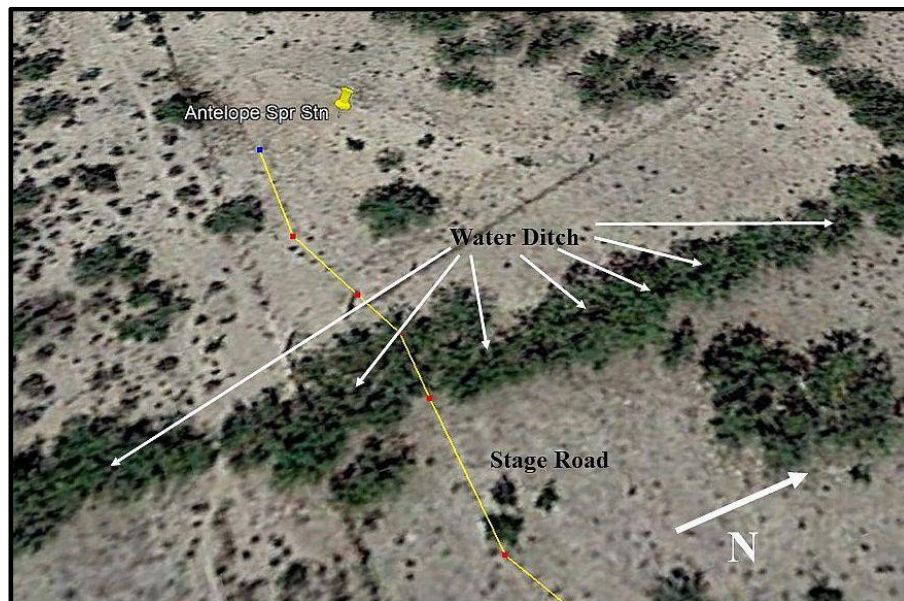
Main Stage Stations And Distances

As the stagecoach came in or departed to or from the north, the road crossed a water ditch built from the spring runoff. This was an item of interest to find out what exactly they did to ensure an easy crossing and maintain the water flow through the ditch. The purpose of this ditch was water for the station and will be explained in detail in the next segment of the report.

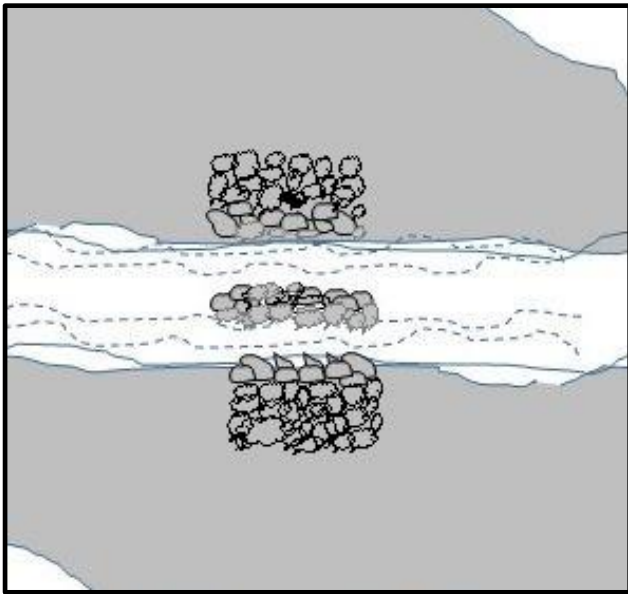


Stagecoach Service Road To/From North

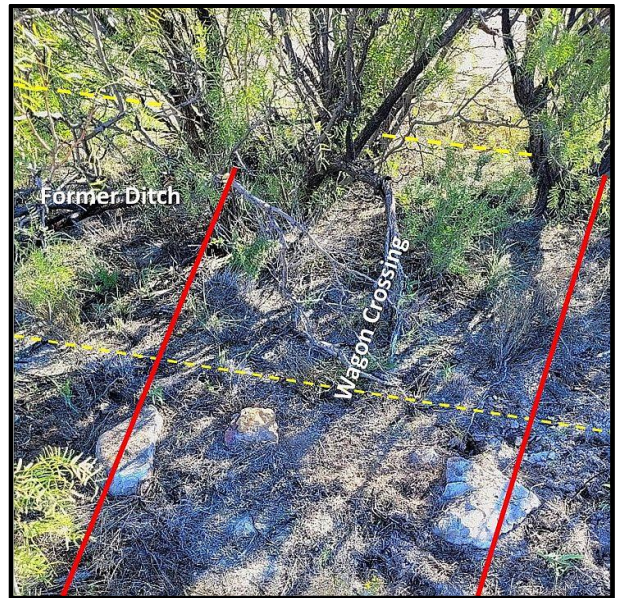
Although many of the wall stones had been bulldozed and pushed through this area to an eventual stone pile, we found several in-ground stones in a parallel line to the former water ditch were found on the south side of the ditch exactly where the crossing was. Although the ditch is filled in now from all the vegetation growth and bulldozing, an overhead analysis of the core area (as can be seen in the image below as a dark line in the middle of the bushes) indicates it was three feet wide. Thus, wagon wheels would have been able to cross with a line of stones on each side and a line of stones in the middle of the ditch, protecting the ditch structure and allowing water to flow through.



Stagecoach Road Coming From North Across Ditch

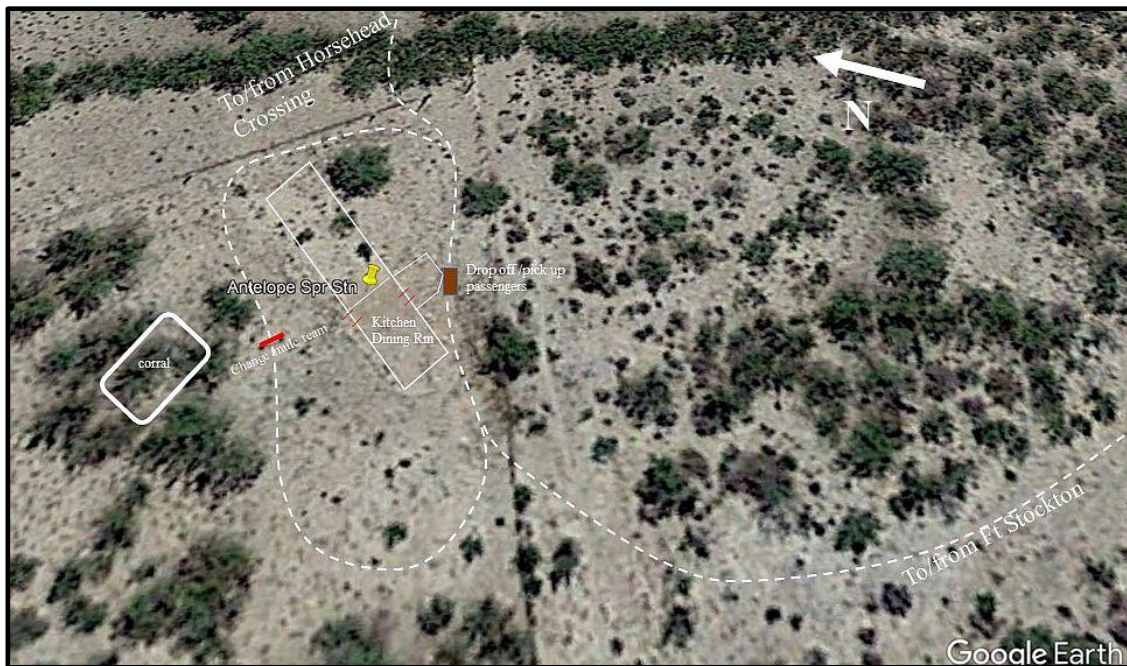


Probable Ditch Crossing Design



Wagon Crossing Point

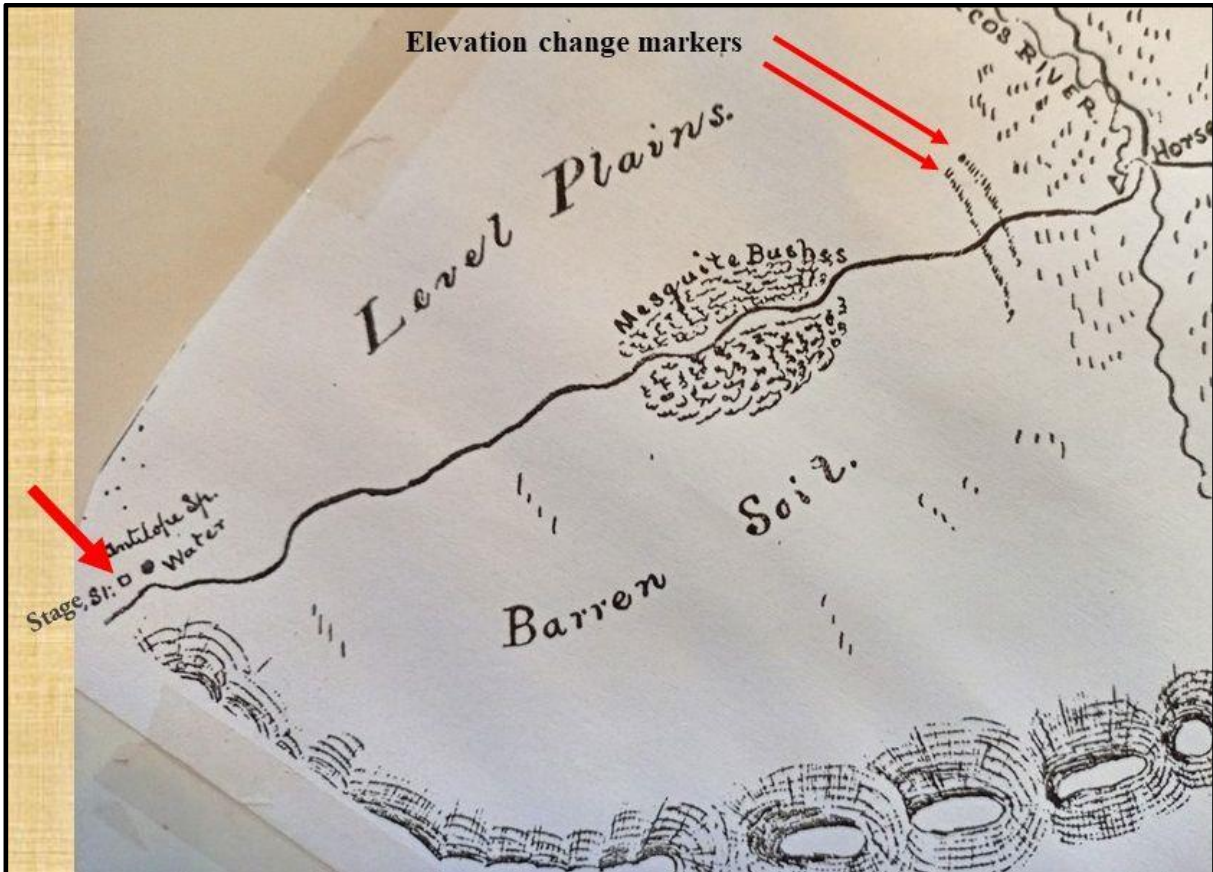
The arrival or departure to the southern portion of the wagon trail did not cross over the ditch. Instead, they entered and exited south, skirting and avoiding the ditches. Both roads came to a stop on the south side of the building. On the south side of the building is the foundation for a large porch. It measures 4 x 3 yards, with a corner cut as an entrance step. This is where passengers were dropped off and picked up on departure. A trace of wagon tracks can be seen leading from the north across the ditch and from the south leading right up to the porch entrance. After dropping off passengers, the coach would be driven around to the other side of the building, near the corral, where the teams would be switched out.



Entrance/Exit Roads To And Around Stage Stop

The Way To Get Water

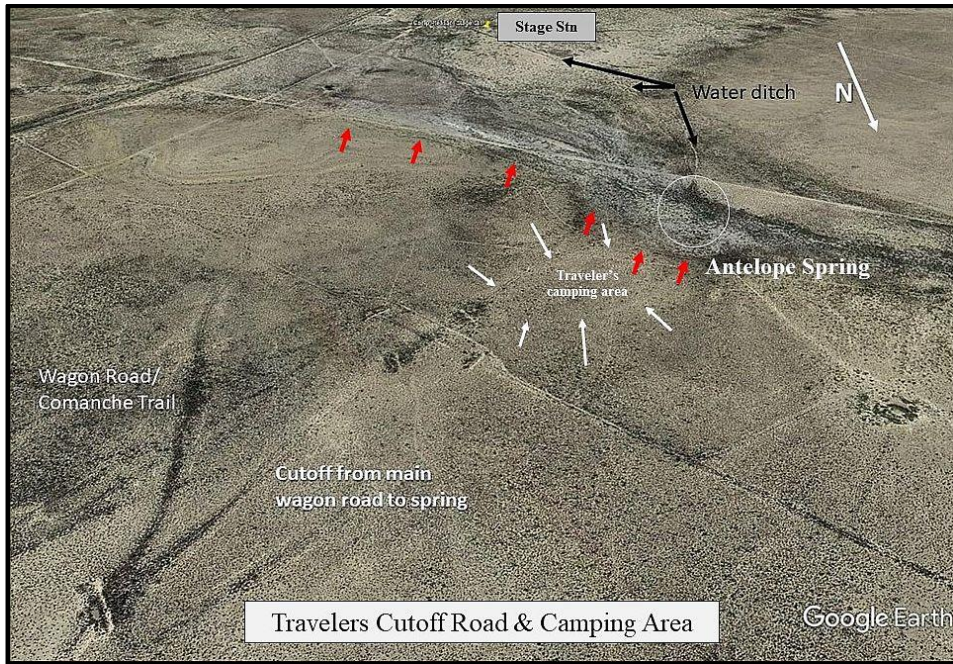
One of the most important things about this station is how they developed drinkable water. The station was a short distance from Antelope Spring. This spring was documented by both a wagon train journal in 1868 and a Fort Stockton military report by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hunt in 1869 (Ely). Brevet Lieutenant Colonel E.J. Strang annotated both the station and the spring on a topographic sketch map in 1867. His extremely accurate map shows the spring approximately 0.8 of a mile from the stagecoach station, which matches up with our Google Earth measurements. Although later survey maps depict a nearby Bonita Springs, that spring did not exist at the time, and when the survey maps were created, Antelope Spring was dried up and not depicted. Bonita Springs is now also dried up. All water in this area is now brought up by wells and pumps.



Brevet LTC E.J. Strang Map 1867

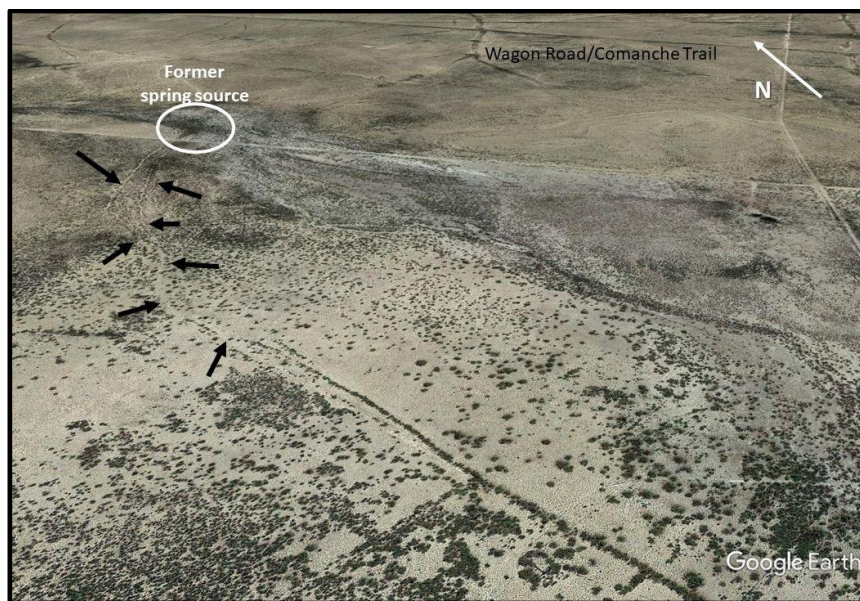
Antelope Spring was known to be a very heavy alkaline water spring. According to the 1868 wagon train account, the water was “so salty” they “could hardly cook with it.” And the military report from that period indicated the spring was “very strong alkaline, grass the same.” (Ely) Thus, this was a critical problem for the station personnel to overcome since it was the only known source of water at the time.

It appears the station location was chosen due to both the spring runoff direction and far enough away from the wide swath of area the spring runoff covered. In a heavy rain period the location needed to be far enough away from the maximum runoff width so as not to be flooded.



Looking From North: Wagon Traveler's Cutoff Road to former Antelope Spring
 Note: camping circular loop can still be seen)

From a long line of bushes coming from the end of the spring gully runoffs, we determined they dug the water ditch to tap into the spring's runoff water. The ditch runs 530 yards, past the station, and makes a 70-degree turn to flow another 15 yards into a holding/settling pond. The settling pond was 30 yards long and opened into a trapezoidal shape, expanding from 5 to 10 yards in width, making it around 50 square yards. From the opposite end and a corner of the pond, another ditch ran 20 more yards to a final extraction pool. To this day that extraction pool is still 18 inches below the surrounding surface. Although some of it is filled in and it is now filled with bushes, we estimate the extraction pond covered about 8 square yards and was probably 36 inches deep. The holding/settling pool has filled in but to this day no vegetation will grow on that soil. A wagon trail runs up to the extraction pool, makes a loop, and runs back to the back door of the station.



Looking From South To North, Antelope Spring Gully Runoff And Beginning Of Ditch



Water ditch, settling pond, and extraction pond

The ditch not only delivered the water but provided the process of aeration, a well-known technique with ranchers in this area for cleaning highly alkaline spring and well water. In water treatment, the aeration process brings water and air into close contact by exposing drops or thin sheets of water to the air or by introducing small bubbles of air and letting them rise through the water. Sweeping or scrubbing action is caused by the turbulence of water and air mixing together. This removes undesirable gases such as hydrogen sulfide and methane. The scrubbing process caused by the turbulence of aeration physically removes these gases from the solution and allows them to escape into the surrounding air. The settling pond is then used to remove heavier minerals such as iron and manganese. (Aeration) If needed, further desalination filtration might have been used for human consumption. Two ancient methods could have been used. One was boiling water to steam and collecting the steam runoff, and another was filtering the water with wool as a dipping wick, which was used as far back as ancient Greece for trapping salt. (Desalination)

Before reaching the large settling pool beyond the station, there is one small offshoot ditch that is 20 yards long, running at a 90-degree angle off the main ditch. At the end of this offshoot ditch is a small pond. This pond was very likely the pond used for watering the stagecoach station mules. It measures 5 x 7 feet and is only 35 feet from the station corral. A slight ground scaring can be discerned between the two areas. More recent working pens are also nearby. Since the offshoot ditch does not go directly to the pens, it is reasonable to assume the rancher that constructed those pens did not create the ditch but also used it in the later period of ranching. This later set of working pens was for the large 7D ranch, which went through a series of owners around the turn of the century. Although these are now abandoned metal pipe working pens, they were referenced as used to cut the drift cattle out during the period of Mussey and Presnall

ownership (1887–1890), and the location was said to be next to the old stage station. (Smith, Williams) A clear track can be seen leading from the pond 110 feet to a metal watering trough at the corral.



Offshoot Ditch To Animal Watering Pond

Two Stagecoach Lines, One Station

The area in and around the former building is littered with dishware and glass, much of it probably from a later period than the Butterfield Overland Mail due to the fancy designs and colored dishware. This analysis comes from our previous excavations of three Butterfield Stagecoach stations in West Texas that were abandoned and never reconstituted as a station (Ashmore). All Butterfield period dishware was very common with little design. Station managers were honing out very crude living conditions in a barren and hostile country at the time.

This more elaborate dishware can be explained by the fact this station was reused after the Civil War by the San Antonio to El Paso Upper Road Stage Line, also referred to as the Ben Ficklin Stage Line. The contract began in July 1867, but the first stage ran the Lower Road in October because the Upper Road was not yet ready. The Upper Road Stage Line used the same route to Fort Stockton as the old Butterfield Mail route. This means Antelope Spring Station was probably in the restoration stage beginning shortly after July 1867. The Upper Road line began in March 1868. On June 3, 1868, T. G. Williams, the agent in San Antonio, announced express mail service through to El Paso in 6½ days. The stage left San Antonio on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 8 a.m. (Mullins).

However, the Indian problems became so acute at Horsehead Crossing (and probably at this location as well) in the 1867-68 period that the commander at Fort Stockton ordered a new river crossing be created 35 miles further downstream. The alternate location became known as Camp Melvin/Pecos Station. Camp Melvin was the military detachment stationed there. The new stagecoach crossing point was originally just upriver

at a site nicknamed Ficklin's Ferry in the fall of 1868. Later, the entire operation moved to Pecos Station/Pontoon Crossing/Camp Melvin, one mile downriver. (Smith) So the Antelope Spring station was probably only in use for about six months or less, but likely occupied as it was being restored. It was not unprecedented to reuse a former Butterfield Station. Head of the Concho Station, 75 miles east of the Pecos River, was also reused by this same stagecoach line.

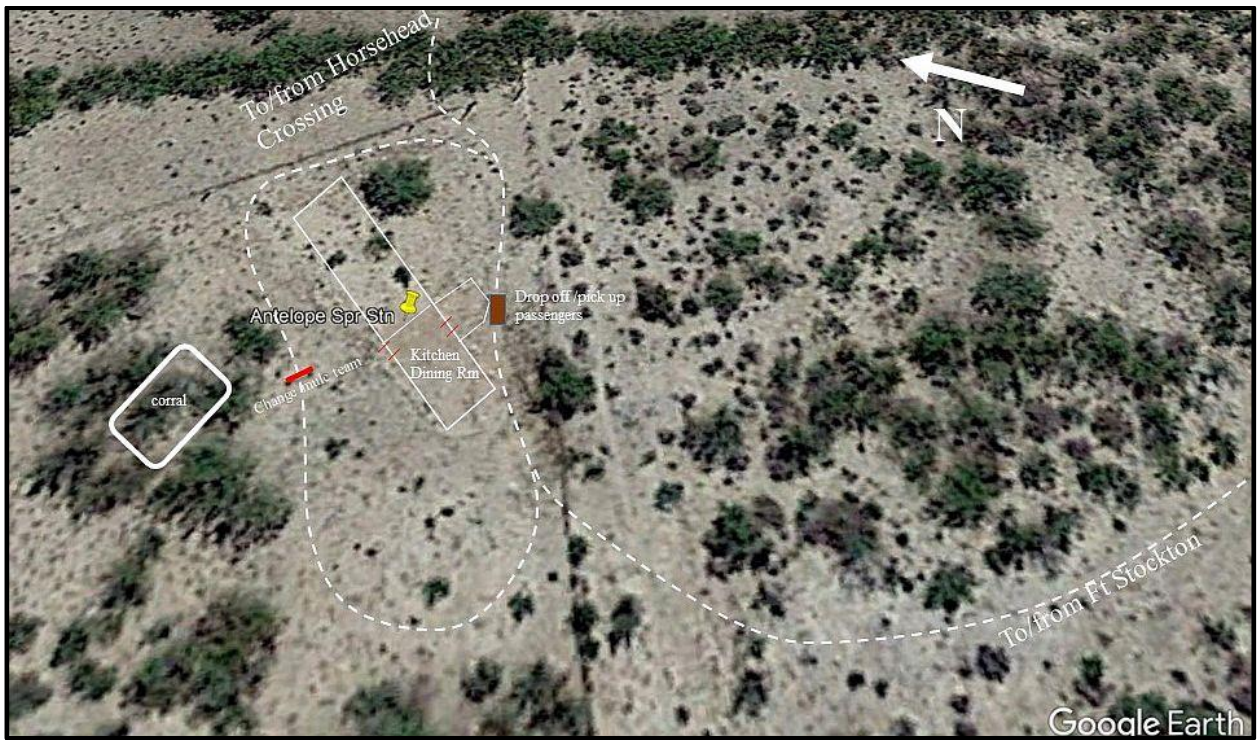
We found one critical piece of evidence on our reconnaissance that supports this theory. A small piece of stoneware was found in the middle of the station in the room that was probably used to entertain passengers with meals. This room is the same size and location within the building as the one at Fort Chadbourne, which was found to be a similar passenger meal and kitchen area. The artifact is a small piece of stoneware with a maker's mark from the Clementson Brothers of Hanley, England. This maker's mark was only in existence from 1865 to 1910 (Birks). This fits perfectly for the period of the San Antonio to El Paso (Ben Ficklin) Stage Line's initial period of 1867/1868. This would have been a prize possession of the station manager and an extremely unfortunate accident, but very fortunate for our research.



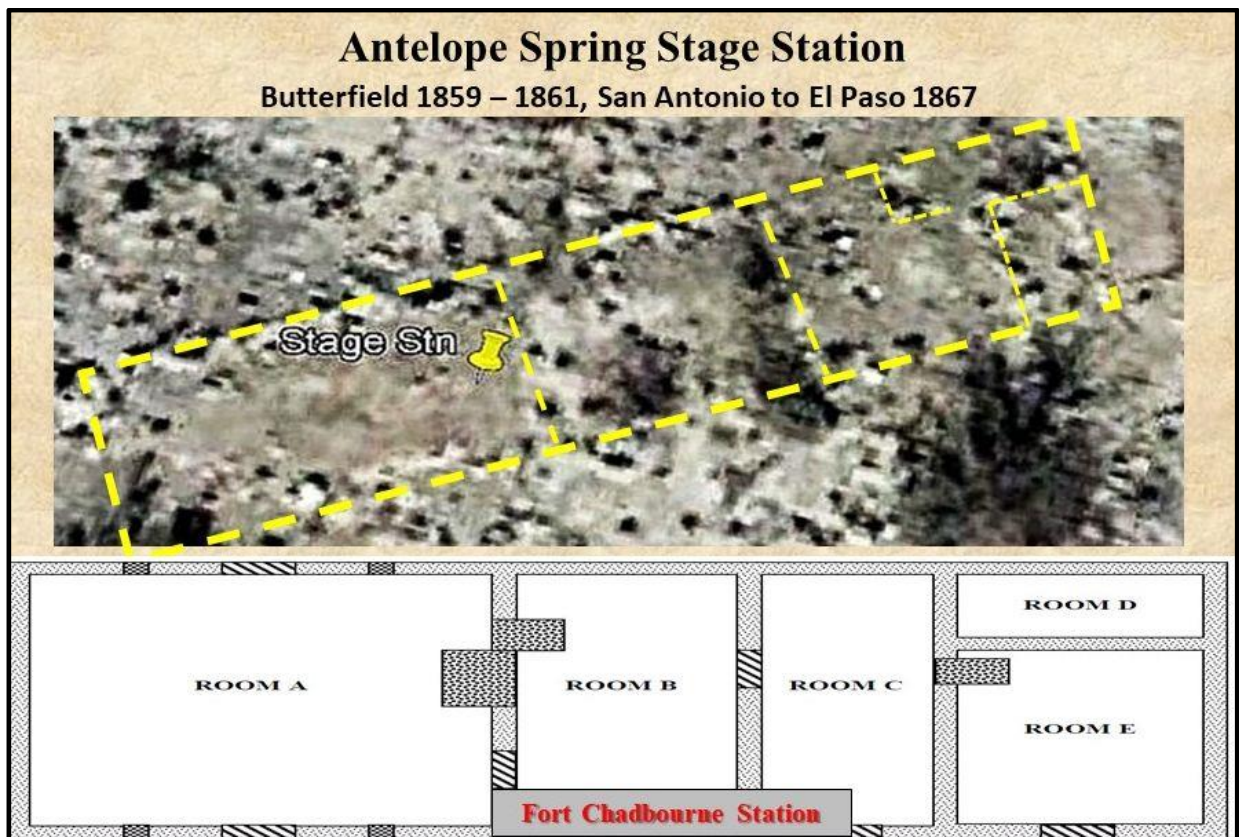
Stoneware Found Within Station Walls

Station Construction

This station was constructed much like the station at Fort Chadbourne, which we excavated in 2008 (Riemenschneider). The Fort Chadbourne station was a major station on the Butterfield route. Antelope Spring construction appears to have used the same design. It was the same length, but five feet narrower. The internal rooms are also very similar in layout. Using conversions we were able to determine the station was designed in yard measurement, a common building measurement at the time. The folding yardstick was the most common tool for this type of work. For this reason, we are using their measurement method of yards throughout this report. The station measures 27 x 6 yards.



Wagon route into and around the station



Comparison of Fort Chadbourne and Antelope Spring Stations

Passengers would have been dropped off at a south-side porch leading into the room listed in the Fort Chadbourne excavation layout as Room A. This is the same room where the critical piece of stoneware was

found. Although only the base of the walls remain, a large pile of wall stones was piled 30 yards away and then abandoned at some time in the past. We found the stone pile mixed with many pieces of glass and dishware from the building, indicating it was bulldozed. Bulldozing was likely done post-WWII when bulldozers became commonly available through army surplus. In the later period of the 50s, even though the nearby road may have been abandoned, the railroad was in operation and ran right by the site a quarter mile away. This abandoned site was probably well-known to most people in the area at the time. The West Texas section of this railroad runs from San Angelo to Fort Stockton and eventually on to El Paso. It runs through all the major towns along the way and is still in use today. The family memory of the current owner is that the rail line was used by travelers walking the tracks to Fort Stockton.



Station wall stones bulldozed into pile

Artifacts

There are still numerous artifacts in and around the building's foundation. Much of it, however, was moved along with all the other stones into the stone pile nearby. The artifacts consist of dishware and glass from bottles. No metal detection was conducted at this site, but no surface metal objects were found. The site has been visited by many visitors over the years, and there was probably much more in previous times.





Antelope Spring Station Artifacts

Conclusion

We originally thought this station was a minor swing station, providing little for the passengers as they made a quick mule team change. However, Antelope Spring Station was built with a major effort. They used the design of the Fort Chadbourne station, which was a major station on the mail line. It was the same length and only slightly narrower. And it was made of large stones that had to be quarried and brought to the site. Secondly, they undertook a monumental water project to bring water to the site from just under a mile away. The water ditch was approximately a yard wide and ran for 565 yards. They also constructed a large settling pond that measured out to 50 square yards and an extraction pond that measured about eight square yards.

All this was to ensure the alkaline spring water was sufficiently aerated for animals and humans. Once at the final destination the water had to be bucketed into a wagon water barrel and moved to the station. We also found that this location of the station fit in correctly with the distance between fully outfitted stations when you consider Fort Stockton was only pick up and drop off depot at the fort. Thus, this was not a minor swing station, but a fully outfitted line station where passengers could rest and receive a meal.

The station ran as a Butterfield Overland Mail station for around 20 months, being closed, along with all the other stations, in April 1861, due to the onset of the Civil War. It was then revitalized to be a station for the San Antonio to El Paso Stage Line. This was another major undertaking, to be sure. Its first mail run for that stage line was in March 1868, only to be once again closed in the fall of that year as the U.S. Army ordered the river crossing to be moved from Horsehead Crossing to what became Pecos Station/Pontoon Crossing/Camp Melvin.

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