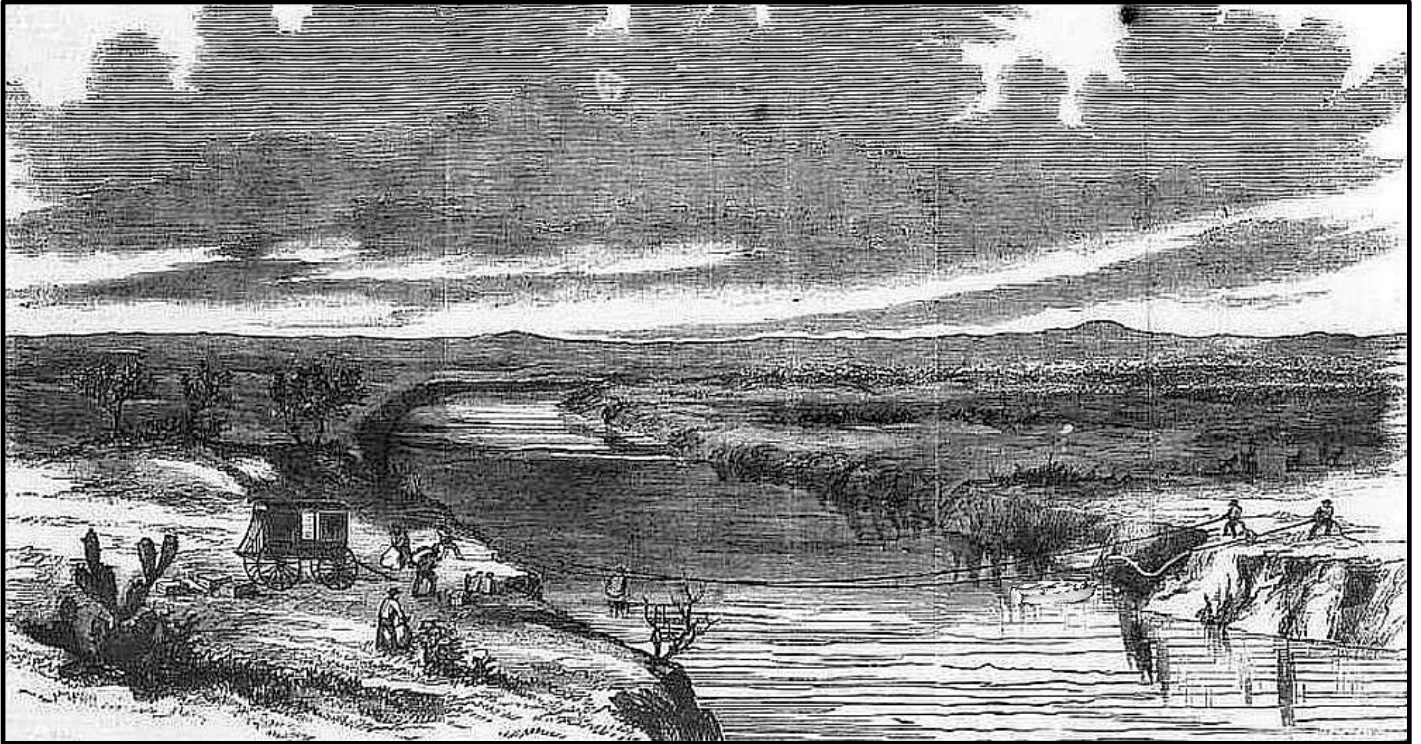


Ficklin Ferry Crossing and Old Camp Melvin (Melbourne)

West Texas Archeological Society
(westtexasarcheologicalsociety.website)

May 2024 (updated Nov 2025)



Abstract

As Indian attacks at Horsehead Crossing Station continued to increase in 1868, the new Upper Road San Antonio to El Paso Overland Mail owner and the commander at Fort Stockton decided to move from this hotspot downriver to a location farther away from the Apache and Comanche raiding parties. The military and the stagecoach line chose this new location, easily reachable by stagecoaches heading south to the river from Centralia Draw. This was an interim solution while they laid out a plan for a more permanent crossing and mail station downriver that would eventually incorporate a bridge across the river. This interim crossing was named Ficklin Ferry Crossing after the company's founder, Benjamin Ficklin. This report follows up on research by historians Patrick Dearen, Wayne Austerman, Bill Yeates, and Grover Ramsey, whose works touched on this site but did not address it in its entirety.

History

The documentation of the Ficklin Ferry Crossing and the supporting military camp comes primarily from U.S. Army records, specifically reports from Fort Stockton. In April 1868, Fort Stockton's Commander, Colonel Edward Hatch, ordered the 9th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers to scout a new site for a mail and passenger

river crossing downriver from Horsehead Crossing. Sometime in June 1868, Benjamin Ficklin's men and 9th Cavalry scouts secured the area for a new crossing and named it Ficklin Ferry Crossing. (Austerman) They used the same methodology for crossing the river at this location as at Horsehead Crossing. A small skiff boat was used to ferry passengers and mail across while stagecoaches waited on each side of the river. The site was chosen for two main reasons. First, the gap between the hills allowed access to the river, and second, they found a clean running spring on the hillside above the area. Clean springs were a critical factor in these occupation sites, whether it was Indian, settlers, military, or mail lines.

Colonel Hatch issued Special Order 56 on July 1st, 1868, ordering that the mail crossing point be moved from Horsehead Crossing to a new location downriver. The Horsehead Crossing Station, previously built and used by the Butterfield Overland Mail Line before the Civil War, was being reused at the time by the San Antonio to El Paso Mail Line beginning in March 1868, and Colonel Hatch had detached a small unit to protect it. However, they could not stop the Indian depredations at the station or adequately protect the passengers.

Although the orders came from Colonel Hatch, Ben Ficklin had ongoing direct communication with Brigadier General J. J. Reynolds, 5th District Commander, Texas, regarding his problems at the many swing stations across West Texas. General Reynolds promised to assist in protecting the stations, which led to subsequent orders and to military detachments being sent to each swing station throughout West Texas. (Barton) Thus, the orders to find and relocate to a safer location on the Pecos River likely originated with the 5th District Headquarters in San Antonio and were passed down to Fort Stockton.

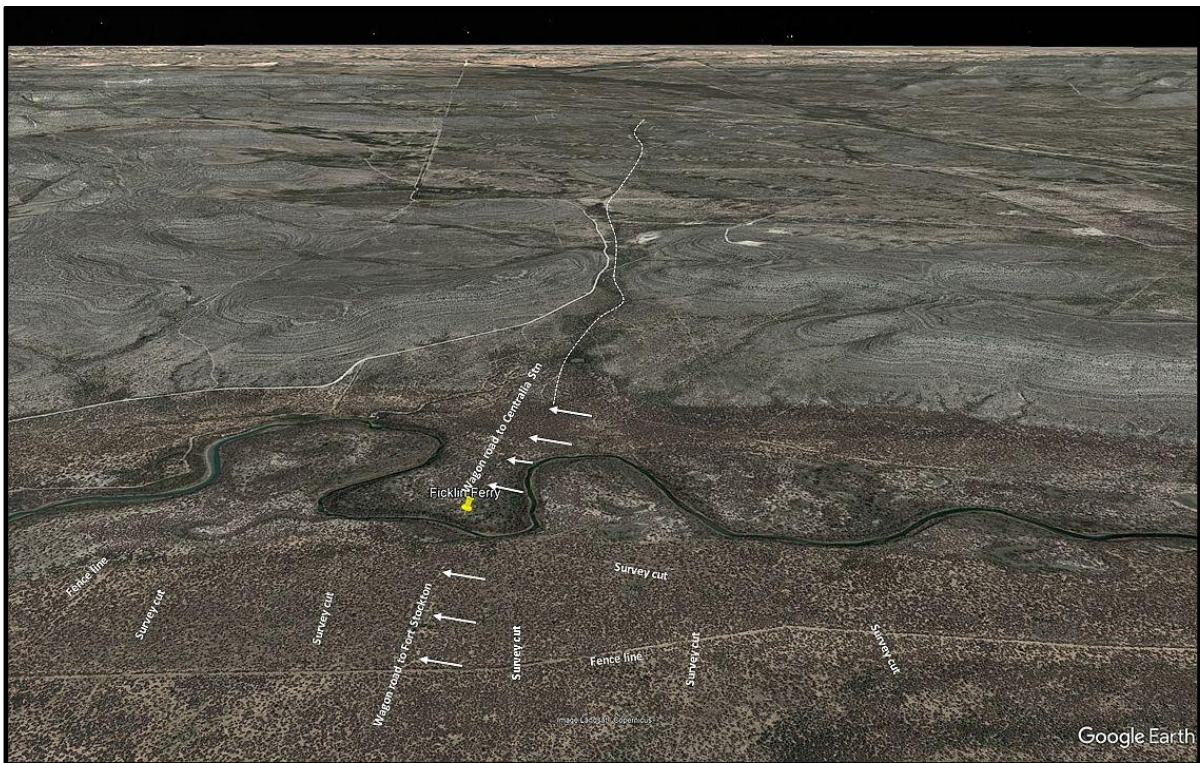
In July 1868, a detachment of Company A, 41st Infantry Regiment Buffalo Soldiers, led by 1st Lieutenant Robert Neely, departed Fort Stockton and made its way to the new Ficklin Ferry Crossing point to set up camp and picket post guard operations. On July 17th, the detachment from Company G, 41st Infantry Regiment, departed Horsehead Crossing Station and returned to post, indicating that the station was abandoned at that time. Thus, the new Pecos River Ficklin Ferry Crossing was operational around the end of July 1868. Military orders indicate that the infantry detachment was also working on the crossing river embankments into August.

As stated in our Pecos Mail Station report, this site remained active until the end of October or early November 1869, when the entire operation moved one mile downstream to the new Pecos Mail Station, new Camp Melvin, and Pecos River Pontoon Bridge. Thus, Ficklin Ferry Crossing was active for about 14 months. This was due to the massive undertaking of building a large stone corral, a stone station, and a pontoon bridge across the river at the new station. (Ashmore, 2023)

The Ficklin Ferry Crossing Location

The older pre-Civil War Lower Road went from Fort Clark through Fort Lancaster, then up the west side of the Pecos River and on to Fort Stockton. It was never reused for mail runs after the Giddings Pecos Station (the next station after Fort Lancaster) was attacked and burned down by Indians during the Civil War in 1862. The road continued to see activity from wagon trains, freighters, and the military, but never for mail. That road ran almost a mile from the river, bypassing the old burned-out station on its way to a camping area near a spring called 'Leaving The Pecos.'

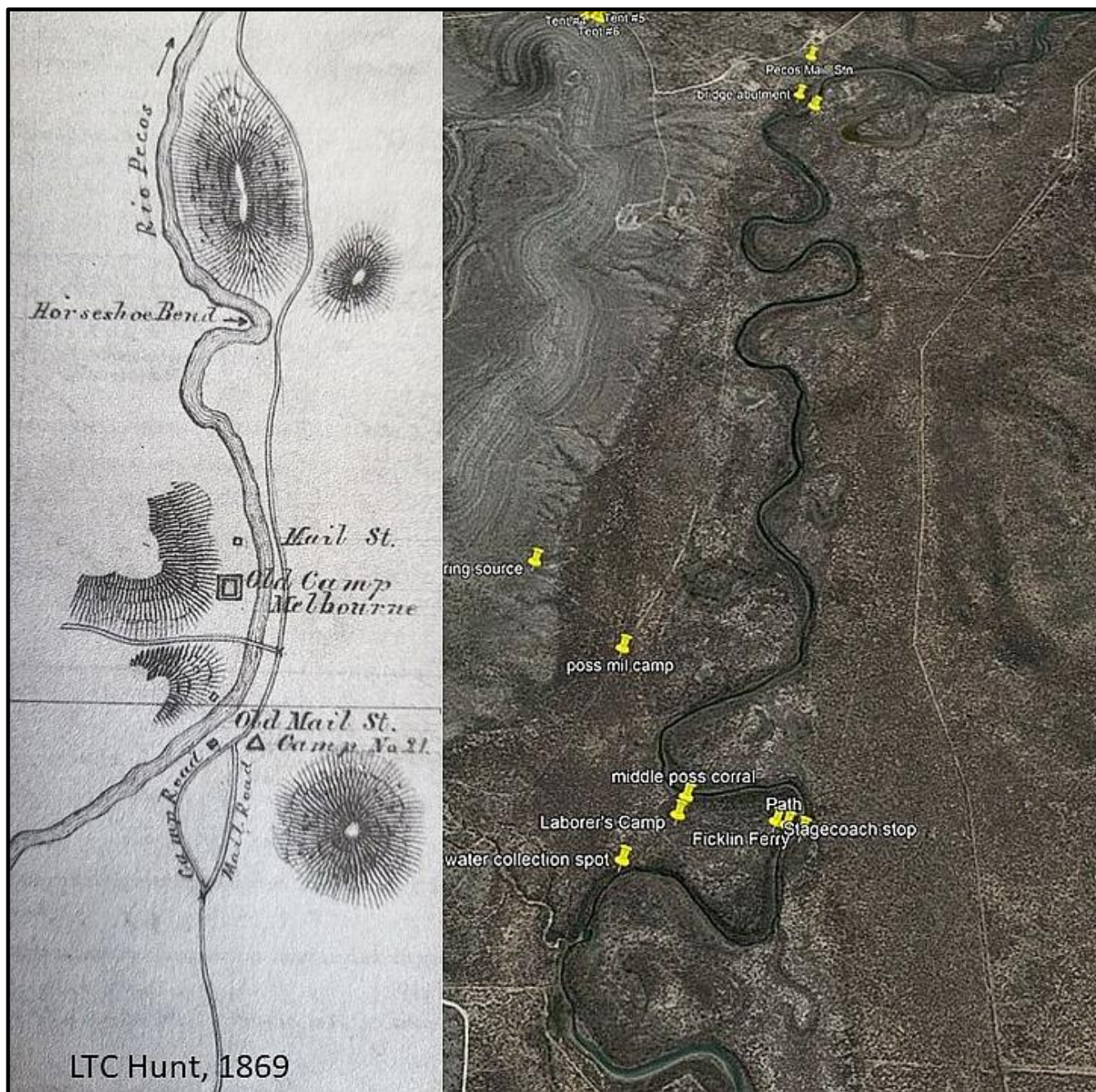
The new mail road, called the Upper Road, can still be followed from the Ficklin Ferry river crossing north through the gap in the hills to eventually reach Centralia (Central) Station. On the west side, the mail road can be seen departing from the exact opposite bank of the east-side road, connecting to the old Lower Road, then heading to Escondido Springs Station, now known as Tunas Station, 19 miles from Fort Stockton. Multiple survey cuts are visible in satellite imagery from a much later period, when the area was being laid out into sections.



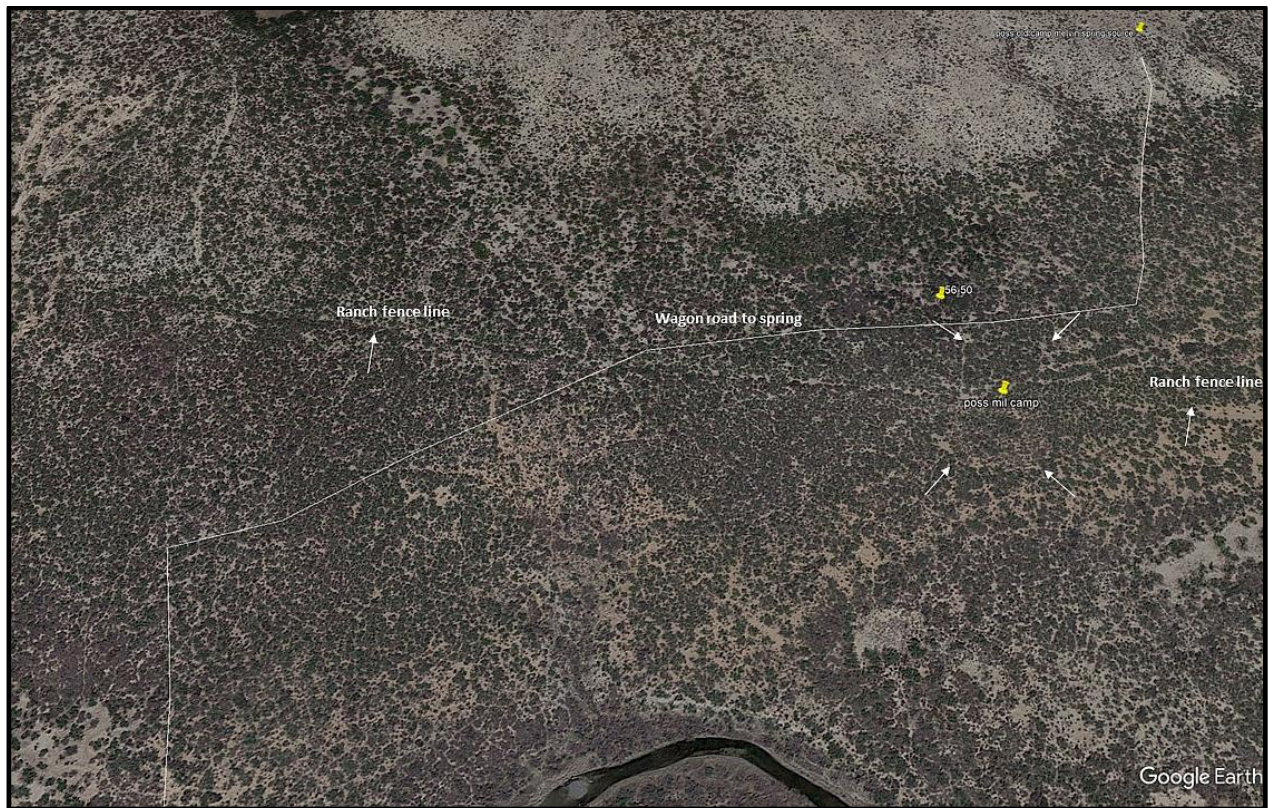
Ficklin Ferry Crossing location and wagon trace

The location of the crossing, the former military camp, and the stagecoach road match a map produced by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hunt, who passed through the area in November 1869, while serving at

Fort Stockton. His map indicates it was abandoned, and he gave the name as Melbourne rather than Melvin. Neither of these names can be found in military records.



Comparison of crossing and military camp



Probable former military camp boundary identified in LTC Hunt's map, and wagon road to spring

During an archaeological reconnaissance of the area in April 2024, we found that, due to excessive flooding over the last 156 years, most artifacts commonly found at these camps had been either swept downstream by the massive floods or buried so deeply they could not be detected. This is a common issue at historical sites near the Pecos River. We could only find a single but important substantiating artifact in the area of the military map on LTC Hunt's map. It was a spent 56-50 cartridge found eight inches deep in the excessive sandy flood overburden.

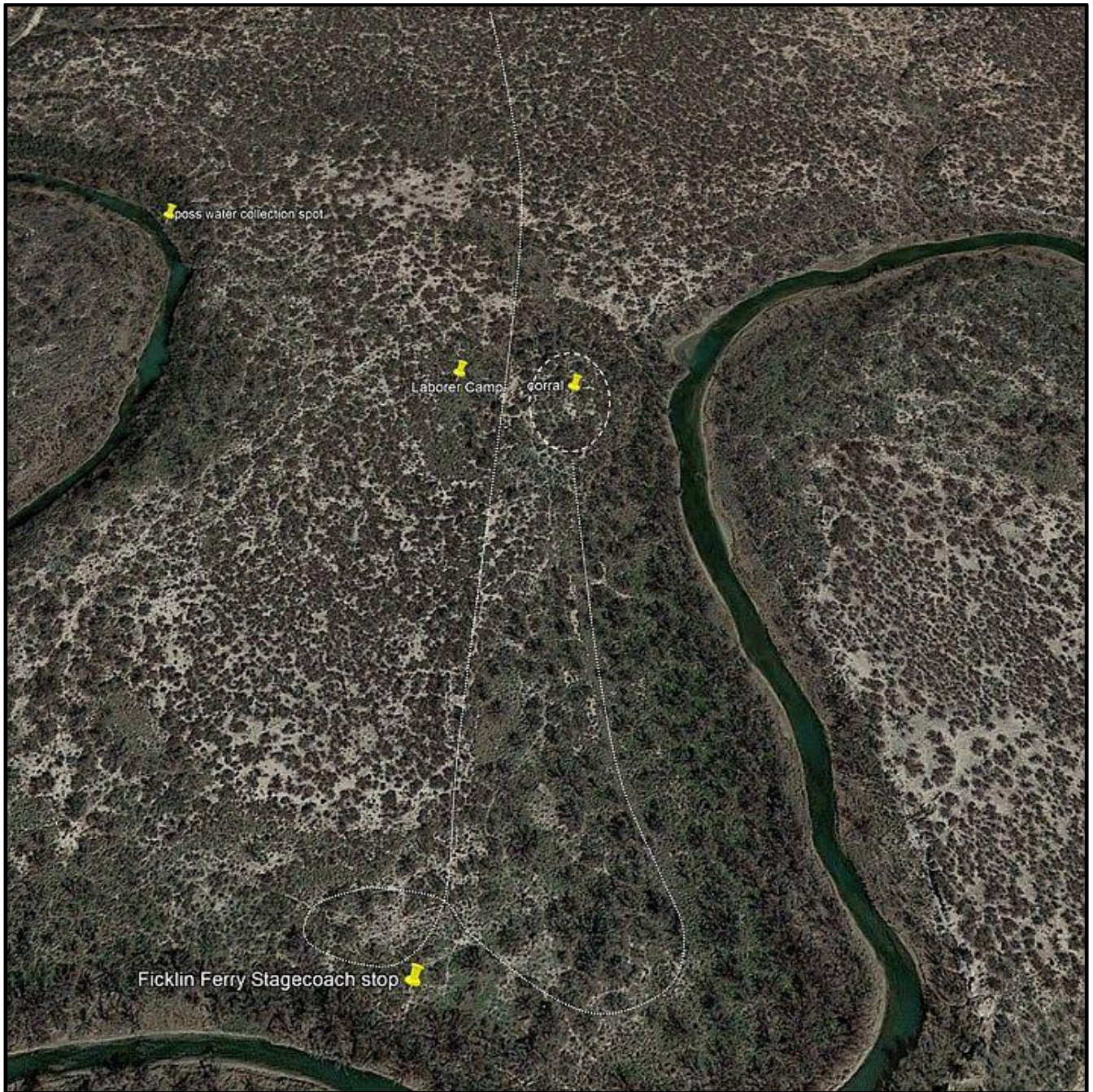
The 56-50 was a cartridge for the Spencer carbine, in use by the Overland Mail Company in 1868. It was issued to all employees. (Barton) One cartridge was found close to what was a wagon road leading up to a local spring on the side of the hill.



56-50 cartridge found near road to spring

The laborer camp and corral can be seen in overhead imagery and in the unnatural vegetative aftergrowth alongside the former stagecoach road. They sit 200 yards back from the river crossing point, side by side,

with the road running between them. There is also a separate road leading back to the corral for the changing of the mule team. A sweep of this area, unfortunately, again produced negative results for artifacts. Again, we believe the floods were too severe and left everything either too deeply covered or completely swept away. Mesquite overgrowth is also now a significant problem in this area.



Stagecoach road, turn-around area, laborer camp, and corral



Deep, sandy flood overburden in the area near the river

Google Earth imagery reveals the old turnaround traces for the coaches on each side of the river. This also gives us insight into the actual crossing point, where the river is around 50 feet across. This location, between river bends, is very similar to the ferry crossing location at Horsehead Crossing Station. (Ashmore, 2019)



Turn-arounds and crossing point for Ficklin Ferry Crossing

Conclusion

The Ficklin Ferry Crossing is another piece of history in the westward expansion after the Civil War. Although it was a temporary site, it lasted for 14 months. This lengthy period was probably unexpected due to the massive construction required a mile downstream for the stone Pecos Mail Station, its extensive stone corral, and the delays encountered while bridging the river. During this time, even wagon trains used the Ferry Crossing location, as journaled by Harriet Bunyan in May 1869, writing that they gained permission to ferry belongings across in the mail skiff. (Dearen)

Reconnaissance team



Kinley Coyan, Henry Dusek, Johnny Gurley, Tom Ashmore

In Memoriam To Bill Yeates

Bill Yeates first located the Ficklin Ferry Crossing site and reported on it in his 2005 report for the Southwest Federation of Archeological Societies. An avid private pilot, Bill was the first to find traces of the stagecoach roads before Google Earth imagery and drone photography became popular.

Bill was a pilot most of his life and had many interests, including astronomy, archaeology, and photography. He attained the rank of Lt. Col. in the Civil Air Patrol. He was a long-time member of the Concho Valley Archaeology Society, the Experimental Aircraft Association, and the Concho Valley Photo Club. Bill was also the author of several books on Archaeoastronomy, Archaeology, History, and Aviation.

We would like to honor Bill Yeates for his initial work on this site in 2002 and 2003, which laid the ground work for this report.



1938- 2022



Figure 2a. Site of Ficklin's ferry

(Yeates, 2003)

Aerial photo by Bill Yeates identifying the crossing and road

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