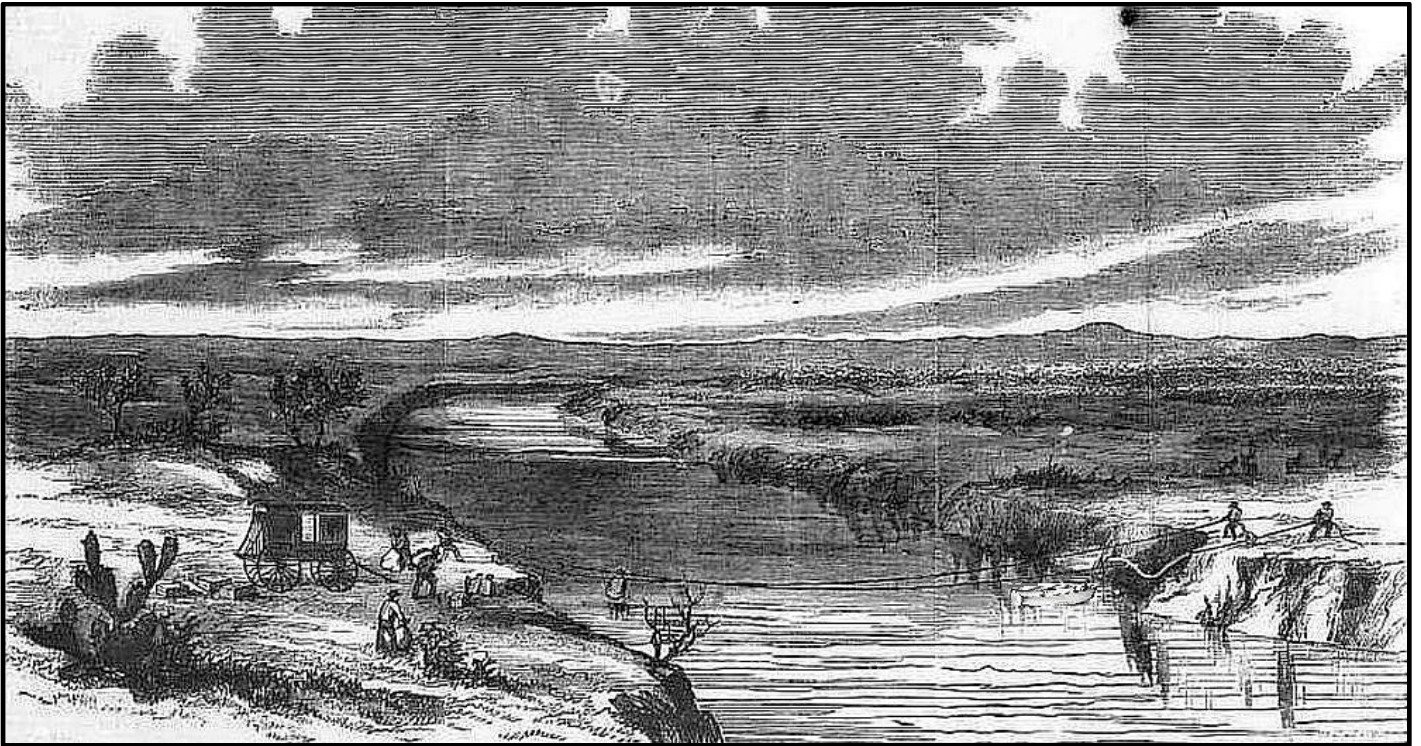


# **Ficklin Ferry Crossing and Old Camp Melvin (Melbourne)**

West Texas Archeological Society  
(westtexasarcheologicalsociety.website)



## **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 that was easily reachable as the stagecoaches headed south to the river from Centralia Draw Station. 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 research done by historians Patrick Dearen, Wayne Austerman, Bill Yeates, and Grover Ramsey, whose works touched on this site but did not address it in whole.

## **History**

The documentation of the Ficklin Ferry Crossing and supporting military camp comes mostly from U.S. Army records, specifically the reports from Fort Stockton. In April 1868, Fort Stockton's Commander, Colonel Edward Hatch, ordered the 9<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry scouts secured the area for a new crossing and named it Ficklin Ferry Crossing. (Austerman) They set up the same methodology for crossing the river at this location as 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 sent out Special Order 56 on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1868, ordering the mail crossing point be moved from Horsehead Crossing to the 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 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, 5<sup>th</sup> 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 the subsequent orders and military detachments sent to each swing station throughout West Texas. (Barton) Thus, the orders to find and move to a safer location on the Pecos River likely originated from the 5<sup>th</sup> District Headquarters, San Antonio, and were passed down to Fort Stockton.

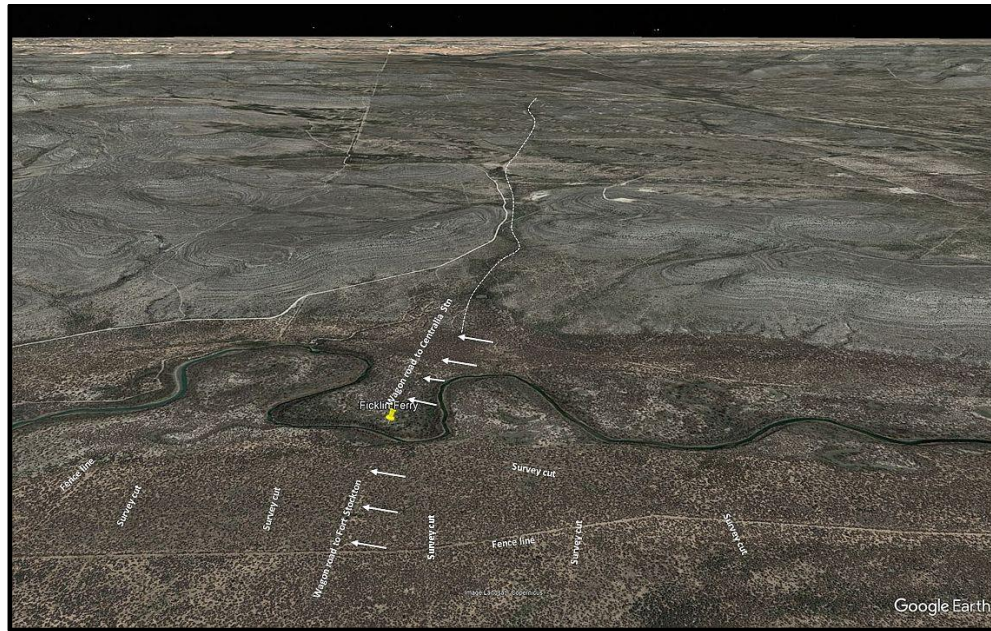
In July 1868, a detachment of Company A, 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment Buffalo Soldiers, led by 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Robert Neely, departed Fort Stockton and made its way to the new Ficklin Ferry Crossing point to set up camp and picket post guard operations. On July 17<sup>th</sup>, the detachment from Company G, 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, departed Horsehead Crossing Station and returned to post, indicating the station was at that time abandoned. 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, stone station, and pontoon bridge across the river at the new station. (Ashmore, 2023)

### **The Ficklin Ferry Crossing Location**

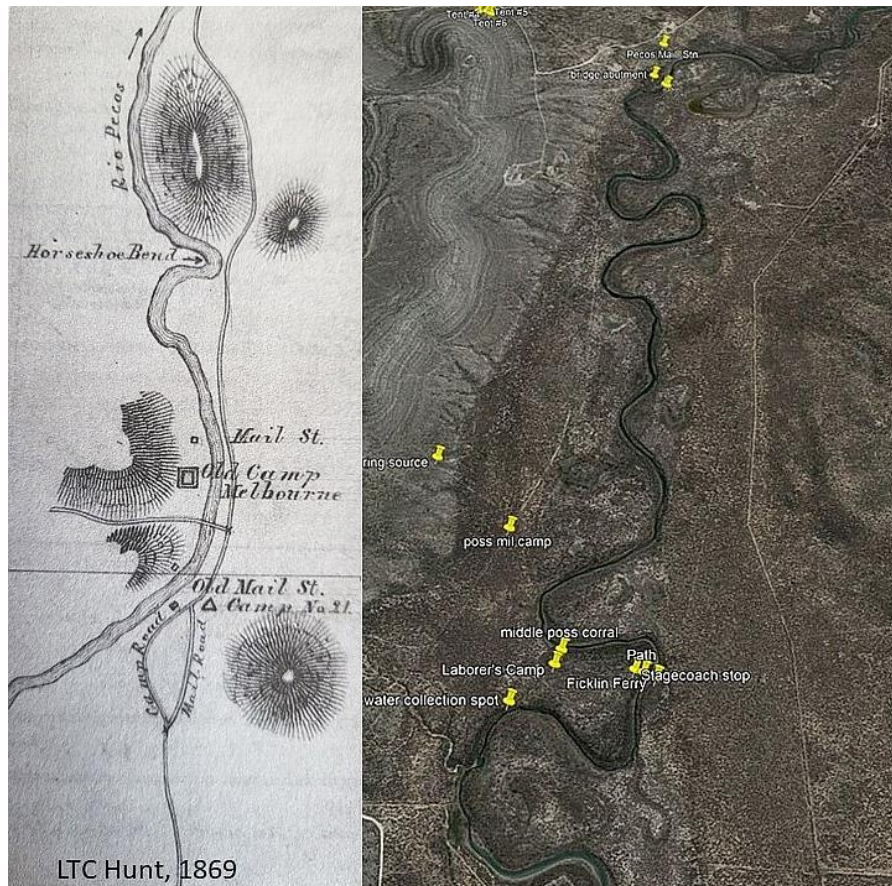
The older pre-Civil War Lower Road went from Fort Clark through Fort Lancaster, then up the west side of the Pecos River and on to Fort Stockton. It was never reused for mail runs after the Giddings Pecos Station (the next station after Fort Lancaster) was attacked and burned down by Indians during the Civil War in 1862. The road did continue to see activity by wagon trains, freighters, and 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 into the old Lower Road, and then heading to Escondido Springs Station, now known as Tunas Station, 19 miles from Fort Stockton. Multiple survey cuts can be seen in the satellite imagery from a much later period when the area was being laid out for sections.

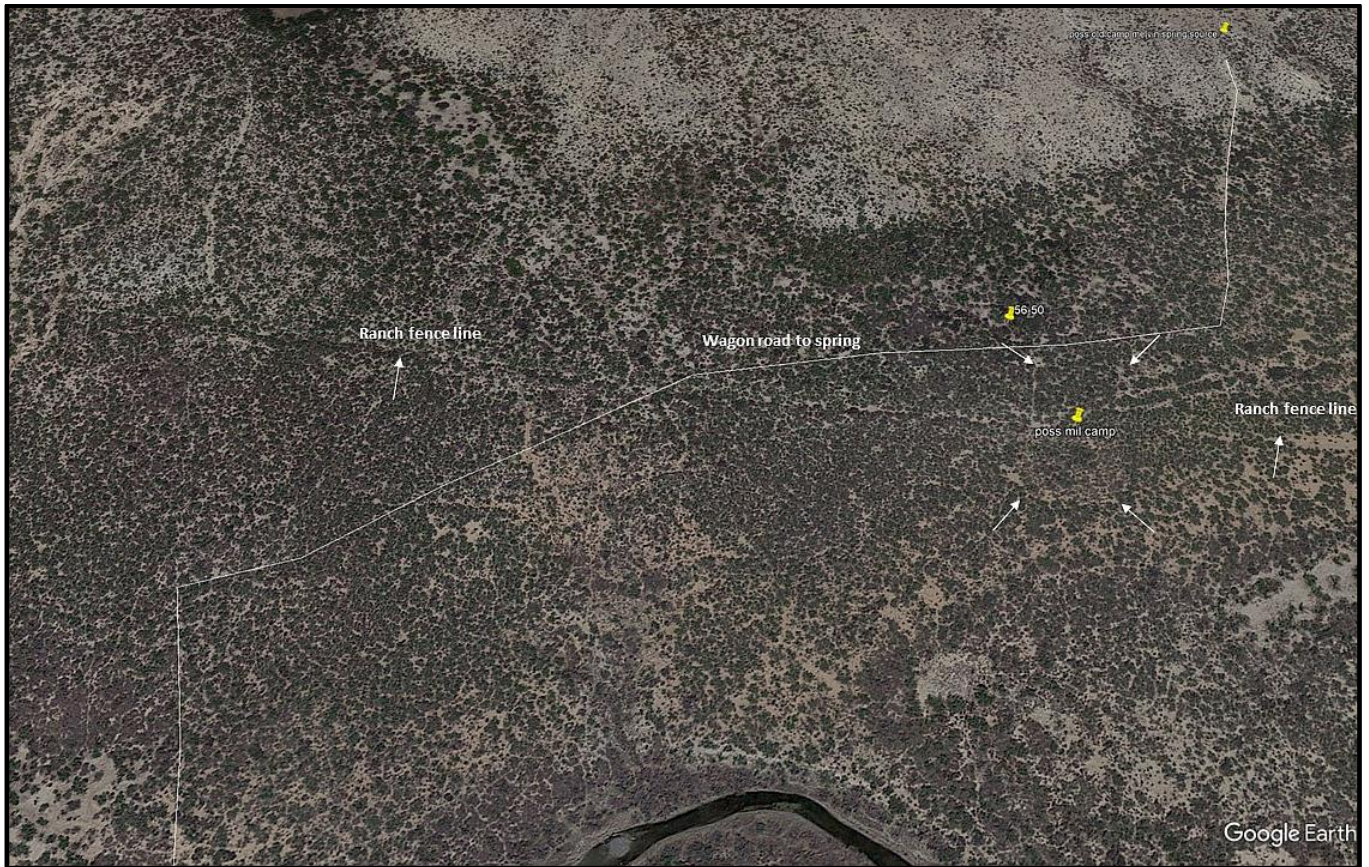


### Ficklin Ferry Crossing location and wagon trace

The location of the crossing, the former military camp, and the stagecoach road match a map produced by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hunt out of Fort Stockton as he passed through the area in November 1869. 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**

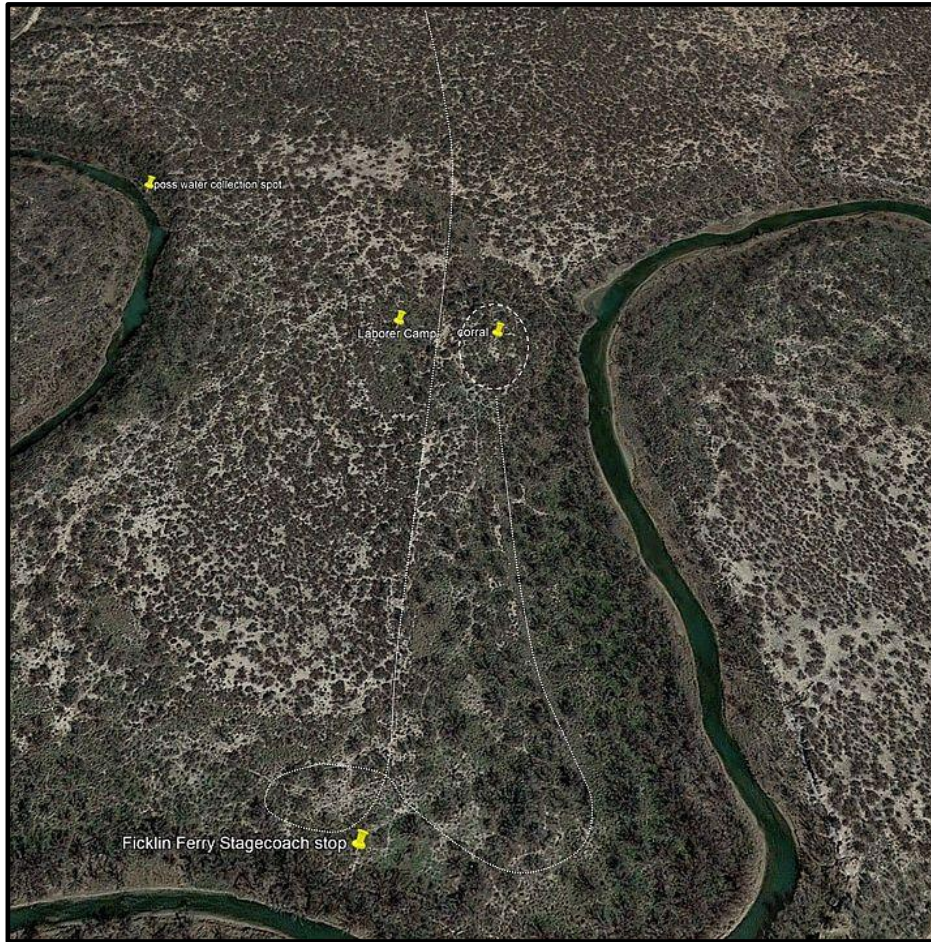
During an archeological reconnaissance of the area in April 2024, we found that due to excessive flooding over the last 156 years, most artifacts normally found at these camps had been either swept downstream from the massive floods or were buried so deep they could not be detected. This is a common issue with historical sites close to 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 in use in 1868 by the cavalry for the converted 1865 Spencer carbine (Barnes). These would have been the common carbines used by the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers out of Fort Stockton in 1868. The 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry was the first to establish the camp before the infantry arrived to work on further construction support and overall protection of the stagecoach site. (Austerman) However, the Spencer was also issued to stagecoach employees by the mail company (Barton), and the cartridge was found close to what was a wagon road leading up to a local spring on the side of the hill. So, we cannot be sure which group this may have been connected to for this particular artifact. However, the proper period and location were needed for the overall stagecoach operations. **56-50 cartridge found near the former military camp**



The laborer camp and corral can be visualized through overhead imagery and the unnatural vegetative after-growth alongside the former stagecoach road. They sit 200 yards back from the river crossing point and are side by side, with the road running between the two. 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 turn-around traces for the coaches on each side of the river. This also gives us insight into the actual crossing point, the river being around 50 feet across at that point. 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**

**Reconnaissance team**



**Kinley Coyan, Henry Dusek, Johnny Gurley, Tom Ashmore**

## 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 unexpectedly long due to the massive construction required a mile downstream for the stone Pecos Mail Station, its extensive stone corral, and the delays encountered 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)

## 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.



**Aerial photo by Bill Yeates identifying the crossing and road**

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