

## Butterfield Overland Mail's Horsehead Crossing Station

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(updated 2024)

***“Horsehead was the setting for so many Indian fights and other dramatic events that some historians believe the crossing exemplifies the challenges of pioneering the West.” Patrick Dearen***

### Abstract

Although it's long been known that the Butterfield Overland Mail built a stage station up river from original Horsehead Crossing site, the station's location has never been specifically identified in any archeological publications. This research brings together historical information with satellite and drone imagery, and on-ground reconnaissance to establish the exact location of the site. Found in the National Archives and published by both Patrick Dearen and Glenn Ely was a hand drawn 1869 map of the location of the “Old Station,” giving the starting point for the search that revealed not only the location of the station, but the Pecos River ferry crossing site used by the Butterfield Company.

### History

When the Butterfield Overland Stage came to the Pecos River on its inaugural run on September 26, 1858, the Horsehead Crossing Station did not yet exist. The future location was no more than a camp of one Butterfield employee and 15 Mexican hired hands. The lone rider on the stage, Waterman L. Ormsby, a newspaper reporter for the New York Herald, described the event.

***“As I lay dozing on the seat, about three o'clock on Sunday morning, I heard a cry from Jones that we had reached the Pecos River, and there we were, sure enough, right into it. After hallooing and blowing our horn, we obtained an answer, as we supposed, from the other side of the river, telling us to drive up stream which advice we followed, when to our astonishment we found ourselves in camp on the same side of the river. The fact is, the Pecos makes such a turn here that you can hardly tell which side you are on...”***

***We found that Mr. Glover had arrived with his train but a few hours before us and had brought the stock for stocking the road. He had employed here fifteen Mexicans, or “greaser” as they are more commonly called – and a more miserable looking set of fellows I have never saw.”*** (Ormsby)

Several items in this description are telling, as to the location. The camp was up river from Horsehead Crossing, proper, and it was inside a large bend of the river, with the river practically encircling the bend, leading to the comment, “you can hardly tell which side you are on.”

Another telling item is the number of Mexicans Mr. Glover had with him. It does not take 15 Mexicans to lead a mule train of 22 mules tied together. Thus, these Mexicans must have been brought in to stay and build the station as well as run the temporary camp that would meet the stagecoaches twice a week, one from each direction.

It appears the same thing was already ongoing at the next station up the river, Emigrant Crossing Station. Again, Ormsby described it as they arrived after a grueling trip from Horsehead Crossing.

***“The three Americans in charge of the station had, with the assistance of half a dozen “greasers,” built a very find “adobe” corral, and had started a house of the same material, and calculated that they could defend the stock against a whole tribe of Indians.”*** (Ormsby)

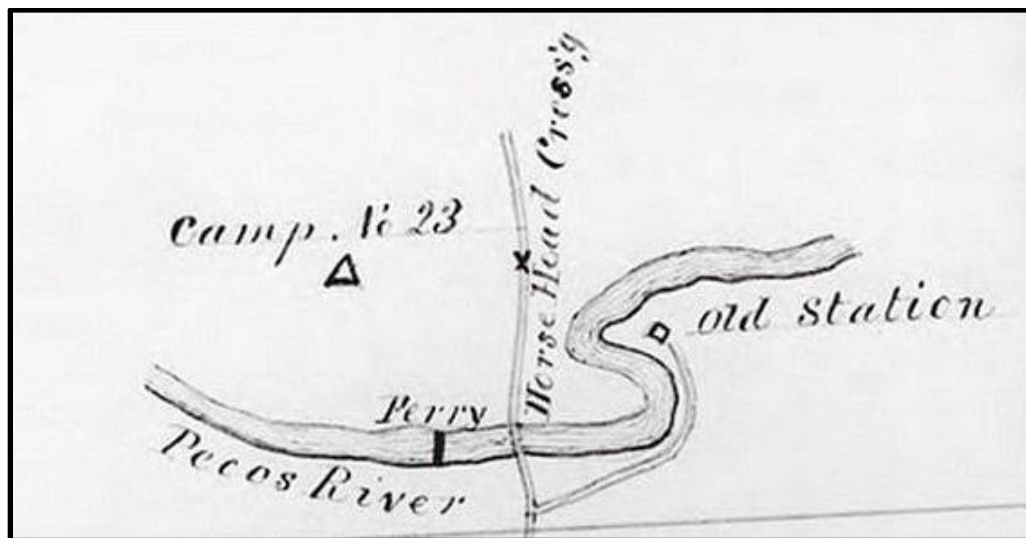
So, the design of the Emigrant Crossing station was a corral and building compound of adobe. This is very much like other Butterfield compounds, whether they were constructed of stone or adobe. The corral and living structure were one enclosed compound for protection of both the stock and occupants from Indian raids. The stagecoaches would drive right into the compound before unloading their passengers and changing out the mules for the next portion of the journey.

Horsehead Crossing Station was probably completed in the spring of 1858. But it wasn't long after that the route was dramatically changed, abandoning the northern route and moving to a southern route from the Pecos River through Fort Stockton, Fort Davis and Fort Quitman before heading on to El Paso. They accomplished this by building a roped-skiff ferry system rather than attempting to get a coach across the muddy and swift river. They continued with this method until the station was closed.

Forage for the animals was brought from Head of Concho Station, 79 miles east. Indians attacked the station at least twice, running off with the mule stock and stealing whatever they could. (Ely) The station was finally ordered to be shut down, along with all other stations, in March 1861 due to the onset of the Civil War.

### Finding The Station

The main item of historical significance related to the specific location of Horsehead Crossing Station is a hand-drawn map from Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Thomas B. Hunt from his expedition of 1869 through the Horsehead Crossing area on his way to Fort Craig, New Mexico. This map shows Horsehead Crossing proper, which his unit proceeded through, but he also identified the "old station" in relation to the regular crossing point. This specific river bend can be easily identified now through Google Earth satellite imagery.



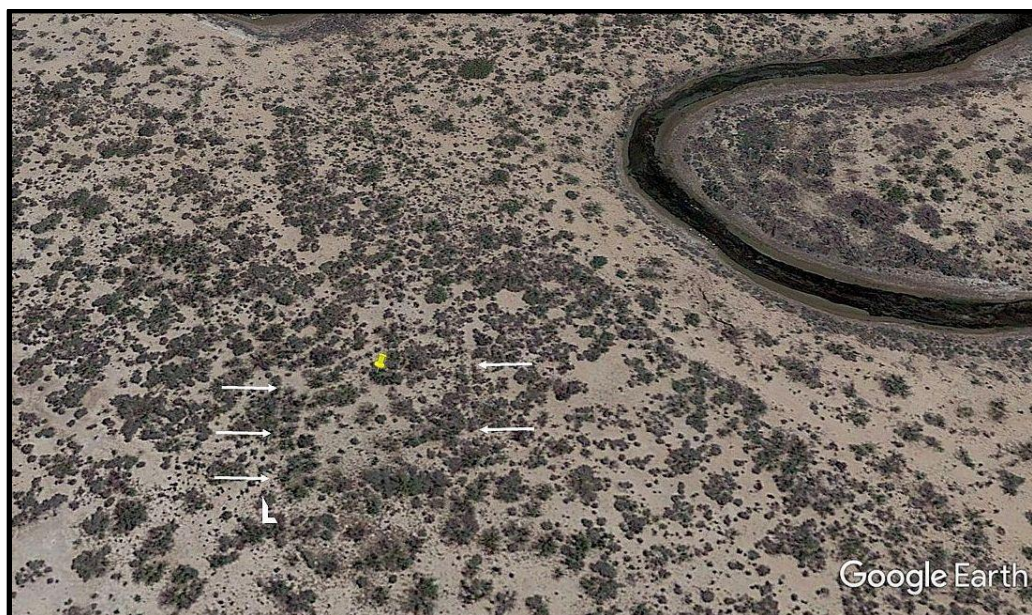
Brevet LTC Thomas B. Hunt, 1869 map (National Archives)



**Comparison of Hunt 1869 map and identified location of station through imagery interpretation**

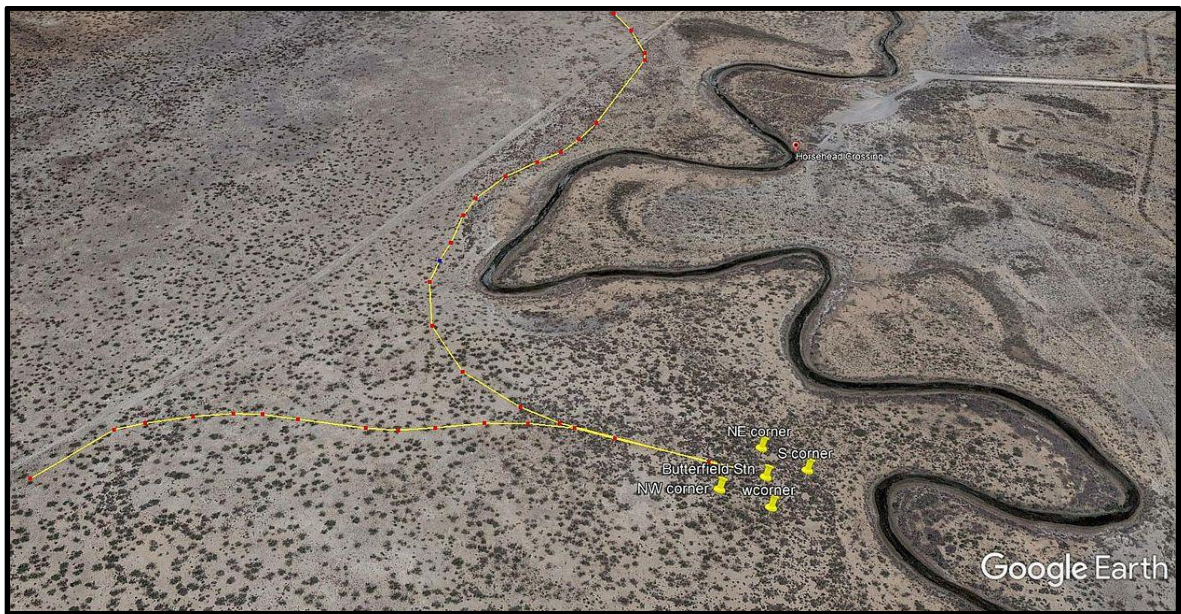
When searching in an area that has had little human activity but has seen great effects by the natural forces, the thing to look for within the vegetation is unusual straight lines, 90 degree angles, and unusual greening of an area that has no perceptible reason for such greening. The area of this bend is completely restricted to cattle due to the dangers of the muddy banks and is totally fenced off by the ranchers.

In order to search properly using Google Earth the historical capabilities of the application is invaluable since images will be taken in different seasons throughout the years. Years of drought may reveal things covered during years of wetter weather. In this case the year 2014 was a drought year and is the year that revealed the anomalies in the vegetation. Two straight line remnants of wall structures and one 90 degree angle can be seen in this image.



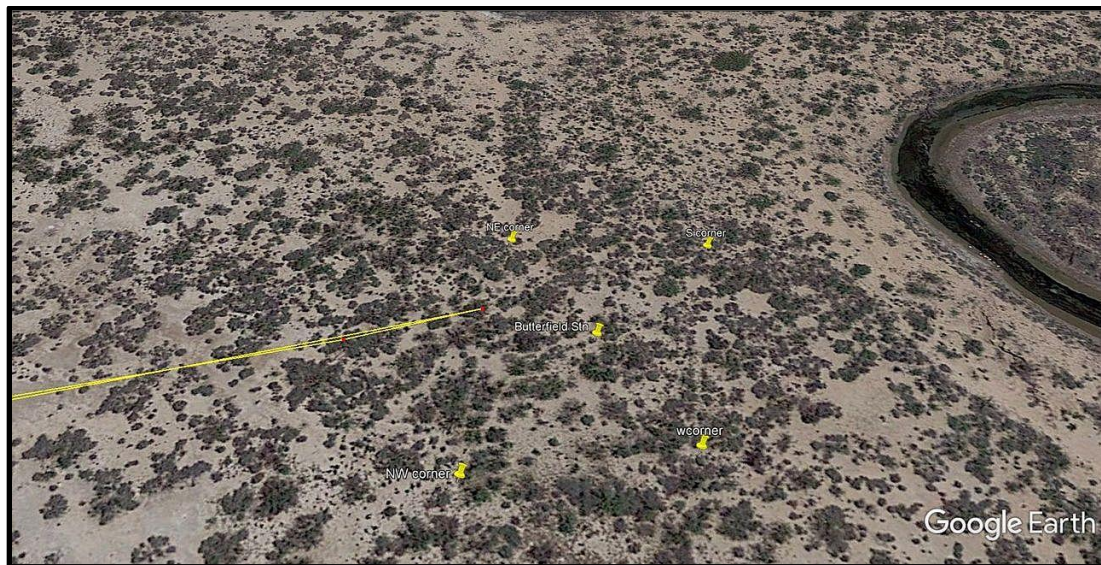
**Anomalous straight lines and 90 angles in vegetation**

After finding what appears to be the remnants of a structure, the task is to look for roads leading to it and from where they come. In this case there is a well-known wagon road from the Horsehead Crossing cutoff heading up river to the next crossing point, Emigrant Crossing, and it passes by this bend in the river. From that wagon road another, a less well travelled wagon road can be seen in satellite imagery leading in and out of the bend and directly to the location of this former structure.



**Wagon road leading in and out to the former structure. Note: Long straight line in upper left corner is modern fence line**

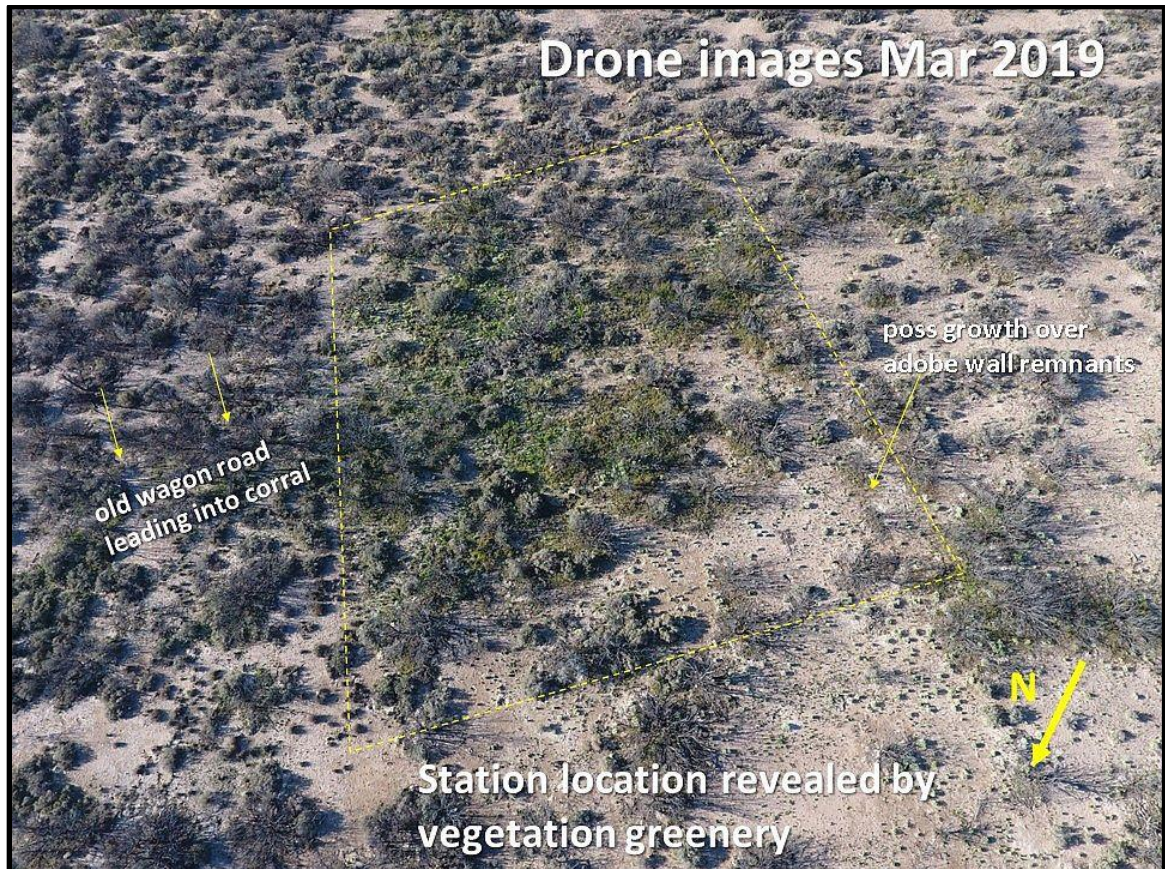
Additionally, this road leads directly to what would be the rear portion of the compound. This would be the corral area. In a description given by Butterfield employee, J.M. Browne, the adobe compound layout had the corral area to the rear (nearest the river) and building to the front. (Ely) It was common for Butterfield stations to have the stagecoach drive directly into the compound for the safety of the passengers and station keepers alike while changing out the mules.



**Wagon road leading directly into the rear of the compound**

One aspect that reveals the station location, in addition to the 2014 satellite image, are the drone images taken in March, 2019. The drone reveals the site is the only location in the bend with greening

vegetation and it is all within the rectangular shape of the old compound. It is very common for former building sites to take on a completely different vegetative cycle after the site is long gone. This is due to process of bioturbation during the period of occupation. Bioturbation is the alteration and disturbance of a site by living organisms; the turning and mixing of sediments. In this case it is both human and animal waste products changing the soil which makes it a better soil for plant growth - similar to mulching of a garden - but is a completely unintentional and natural process. The most greening of the site is to the rear, where the mules were kept.



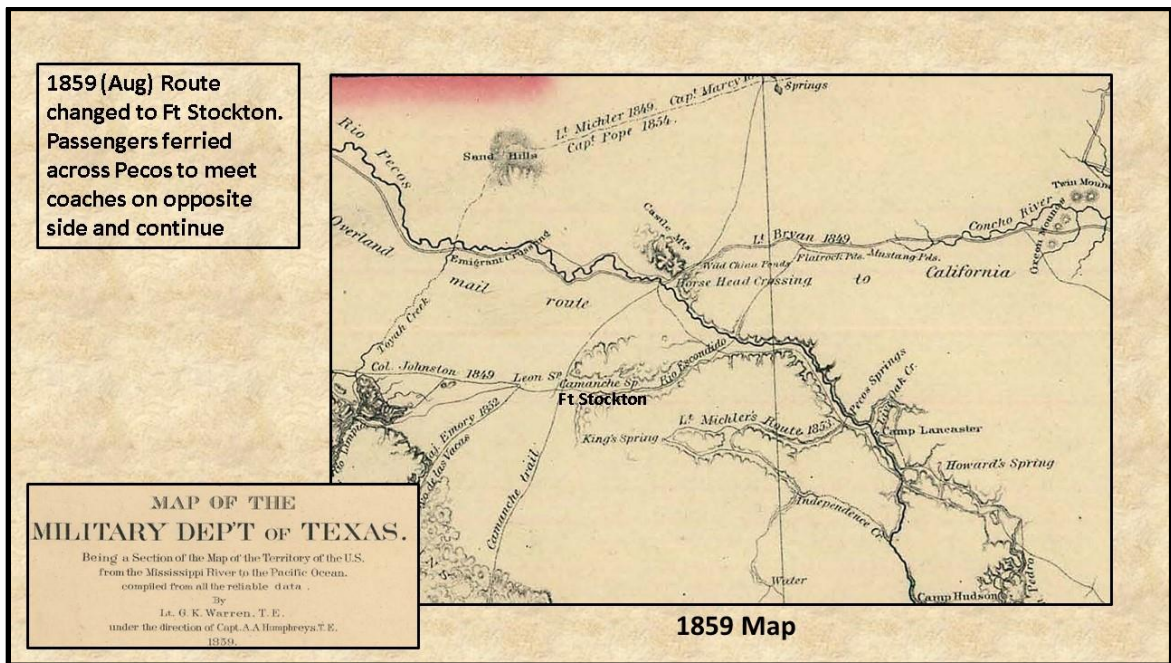
**Inside the former compound the vegetation shows to be healthier due to bioturbation**  
(Note the wagon trail running right into the rear of the compound.)

One wagon trail within the bend that was not the main road leading in and out was at first puzzling. It ran from the station directly to the river in a southerly direction. This road can be seen as a series of bushes in a straight line. The only reason for natural growth in a straight line would be some kind of draw or change in the earth that would cause the land to be lower for a distance and in a straight line. That was not the case here. With the line of bushes beginning at the station and on level land it has to have been created from a former wagon road.

The documented Butterfield ferry system answers the question to this road's purpose. In August of 1859 it was decided to forego the route further north of Horsehead Crossing and begin operations from Horsehead Crossing south to Fort Stockton. The change was made for several reasons: 1) to add the forts Stockton, Davis and Quitman to the mail route 2) better water sources 3) more passengers were available on the lower route. (Green)

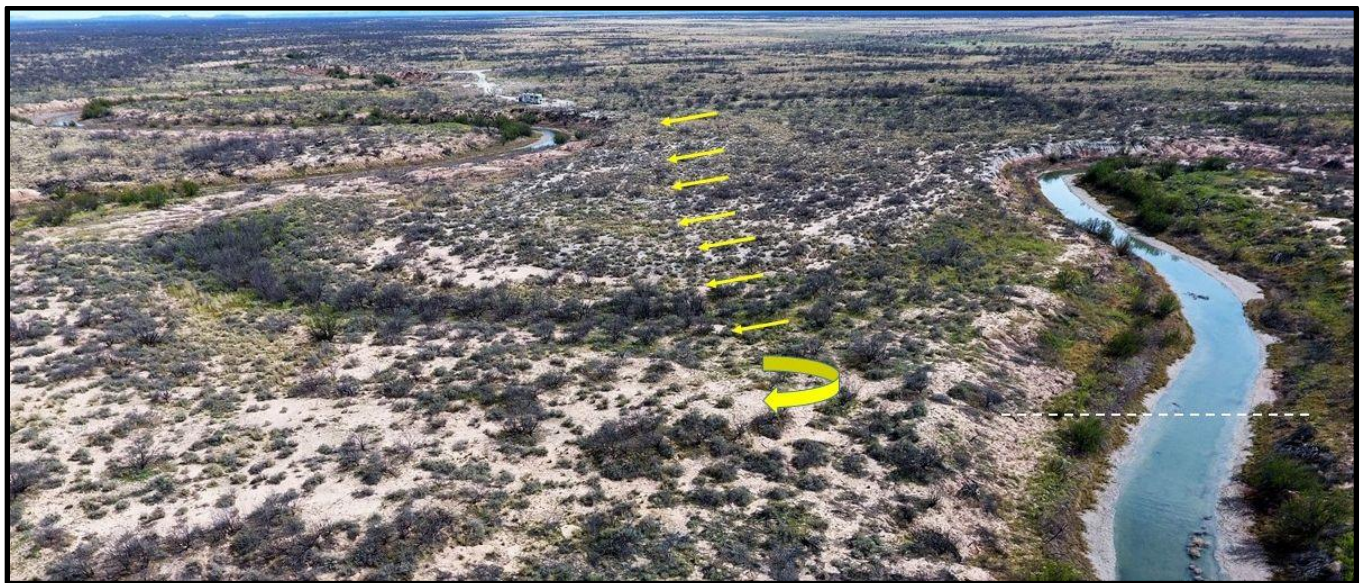
In order to accomplish this change the company built a ferry system near the station. Coaches could not cross the muddy and deep Pecos River and they had no better crossing anywhere to the south. The

coaches would arrive on each side of the ferry points. Passengers and mail would be ferried across using a small skiff-type boat. (Green/Ely/Dearen) The skiff probably was connected to a rope line to keep it from being swept downstream with the strong current. The station continued to operate under this route and methodology from this point on.



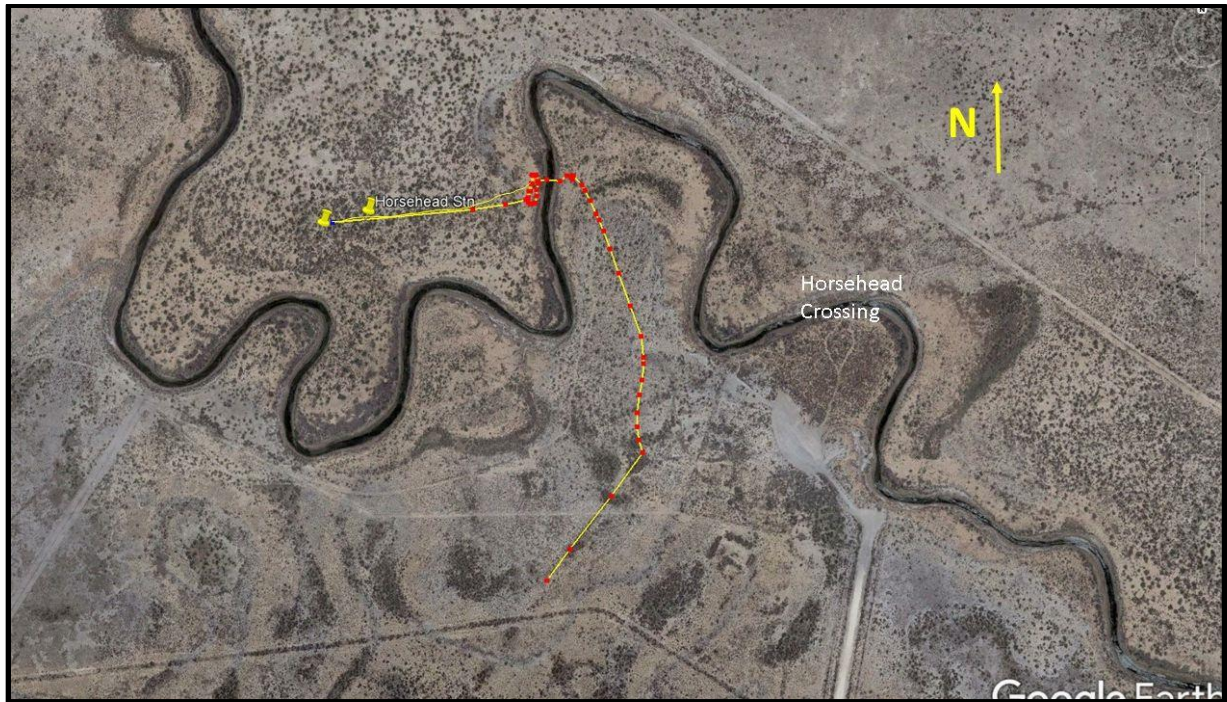
**1859 map of road from Horsehead to Fort Stockton ('Ft Stockton' added for location)**

In order to verify the wagon road from the 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 departing the established Fort Stockton road before it reaches Horsehead Crossing proper and heads straight to the river bank directly opposite from the wagon trail turn around on the other side.



**Dark line of bushes is old wagon road from Fort Stockton road to ferry crossing point on west side of Pecos**

On the west side of the river the road came to what looks like a turnaround area. On the east side it appears the coach may have driven along the bank in a kind of loop around and back to the station.



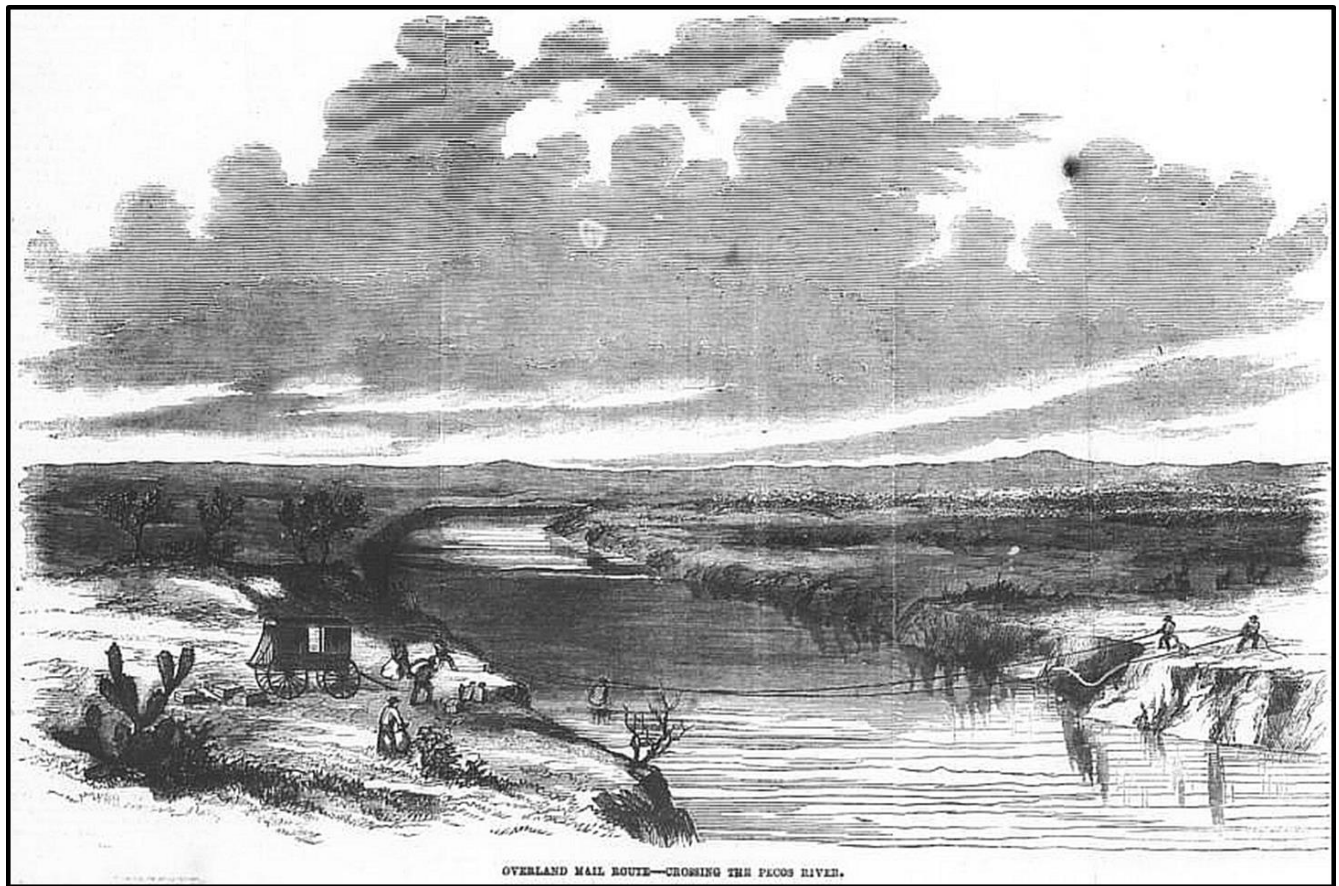
Roads from Ft Stockton road and stage station leading to opposite sides of river

**A Case for the Butterfield Overland Mail Using the Lower Road Much Earlier Than Previously Known**

The Butterfield Overland Mail is documented to have used the northern route, also known as the Upper Road, from Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River up the east side of the Pecos, and on through the Guadalupe Mountains to El Paso. This is the uncontested and postmaster-directed route for all the coaches until the route change in June 1859. However, a report and illustration of Butterfield coaches using the Horsehead Crossing to transfer packages and mail by the Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, dated November 27 1858, sheds a new light on the fact that the company was using at least a portion of the southern route in addition to the northern route for the purpose of hauling additional freight.



Newspaper Head for November 27, 1858 illustration

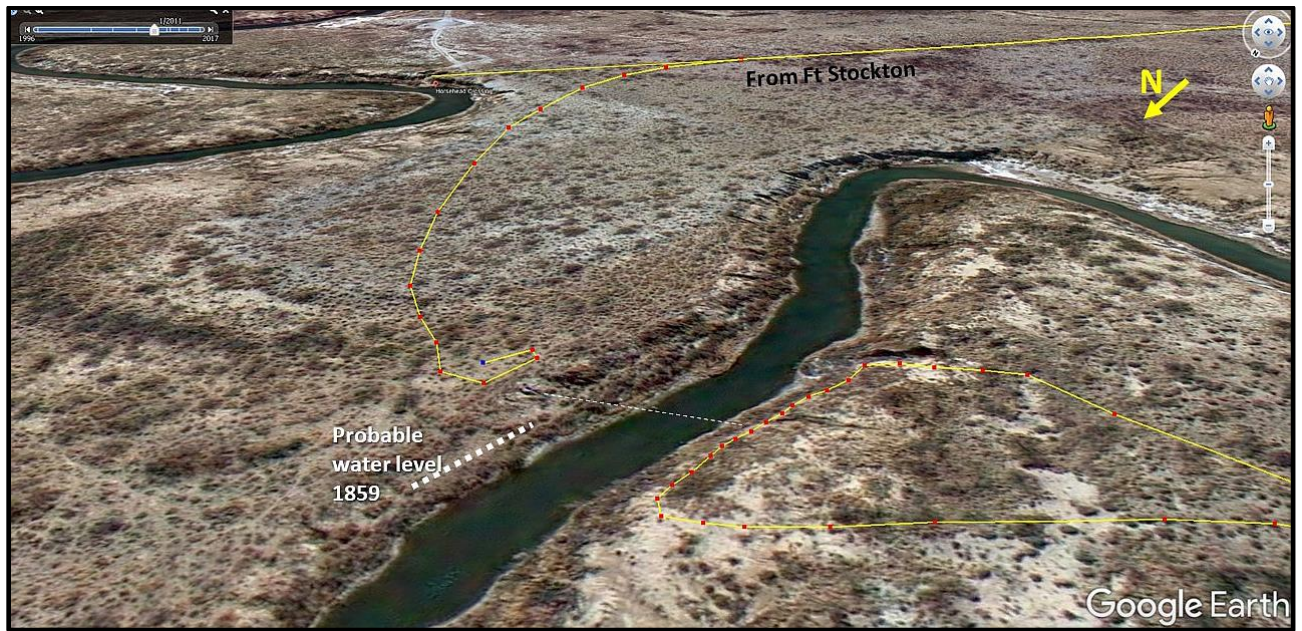


#### **Illustration of Horsehead Crossing transfer of packages and mail via rope line**

In this illustration, we can see six men working to transfer bags and boxes across the river by rope, carried in a hide bag (described in the accompanying article). Four men are working the west side and two are working the east side. On the west side, three men are working with bags for transfer and one is maintaining the rope that has a pulley wheel. Boxes are on the ground behind the stagecoach and some packages are gathered at the edge of the embankment. The mules have been removed from the coach, probably being grazed because there was no station on the west side. A leather hide bag is hanging on the rope. On the east side the rope is passing through a ring implanted in the ground to ensure stability of the pull. One man is letting the rope out while the other is pulling. In the background are four loose mules. There are no passengers in the illustration.

As stated earlier, the stagecoach transfer point at Horsehead Crossing was actually up river from the well-known wagon crossing point. It was created in a separate bend of the river, 300 yards east of Horsehead Crossing Station. The newspaper illustration is the exact same spot as used later when the route was officially changed.





### Horsehead Crossing Point

During this period a separate contract for mail from San Antonio to El Paso was held by George Giddings. Giddings received a contract for Route number 8076 for semi-monthly service on January 1 1858. The contract ran for three and a half years. The route was increased to weekly from Indianola to San Antonio and then on to El Paso in February 1859. (Mullins)

So, the question is, why was the Butterfield Overland Mail running a separate and undocumented coach freighting service on much of the same route and during the same time frame as Giddings' mail route? At this time Camp Stockton did not exist. I believe the answer lies in several issues of the time. First, two populated locations were being bypassed by the Butterfield's northern route. Both these were military installations as potential shipping customers, with a direct and quick route back to Saint Louis. Second, the company must have known what was in the political wind for the upcoming route change and were getting ahead of the turn of events.

Both locations with any population were military. The first was Fort Davis. In early 1858 Fort Davis housed around five companies, but these were down to three in August. On September 28 1858 a company of 86 men from Fort Davis opened up Fort Quitman on the Lower Road, 120 miles west of Fort Davis. (Dings) On April 12 1859 Camp Stockton started up with one company from Fort Lancaster. (Francell) So, in November there were approximately 250 military personnel assigned along the Lower Road, along with any civilian support personnel for farm products and construction. By January there was another 80 or so at Camp Stockton, along with their civilians that came into the area to support the military. By June 1859 the entire route was changed, abandoning the northern route, replaced by the river crossing (to include passengers) and southern route, which Butterfield obviously knew about in advance and had made preparations for the change.

Before the route was changed, anyone that wanted shipping of moderately small items to or from Saint Louis would want to use the Butterfield Overland Mail rather than the San Antonio route. The Butterfield Overland Mail was running each direction twice per week, compared to twice per month for the San Antonio route. Additionally, it would have been a one-day run to Horsehead Crossing from Fort Davis (two days from Fort Quitman) and then 11 days to reach Saint Louis. Conversely, the other route would have been around 10 days to San Antonio after waiting for the bi-weekly coach, then ground freighting to Indianola, steamship to New Orleans, and finally riverboat up the Mississippi to Saint

Louis. By my calculation this would have been somewhere around six weeks. Obviously, ordering from Saint Louis would be a similar length of time. As long as it was small enough freight, the obvious choice would have been the Butterfield Overland coaches, and this would have been worth a separate freight run for the Butterfield Company while continuing their main coach route through the Guadalupe Mountains.

### **Conclusion**

The satellite and drone imaging can locate the sites of old stage stations, even when they have been completely removed from the landscape and can be used to follow the wagon road directly to the site, supporting the site's location. The only green vegetation in the entire horseshoe bend at the site in the early spring of 2019 was at the site and in a rectangular layout. This is caused by bioturbation and is a telltale sign of previous human habitation when looking for old sites of this type. The measurement of the remnants of the wall structure from the imaging supports that this station was probably an adobe structure with walls approximately 3.5 feet thick. The location matches the hand-drawn 1869 map by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hunt, adding to the supporting evidence of this being the correct location. Floods either swept away or buried deep any remnants. The documented stagecoach ferry system is also revealed by old wagon roads, one coming from Fort Stockton to the edge of the river and the other leading from the station and back in a loop. Both end up directly across from each other on each side of the river. Finally, the river crossing was being used at least seven months prior to the official change of route as an additional freighting route to Saint Louis and beyond.

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