Pecos Mail Station (41CX1825/1826) **& Camp Melvin** (41CX20)**:**

The Rest Of The Story

West Texas Archeological Society (westtexasarcheologicalsociety.website)

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Abstract

The Pecos Mail Station and Camp Melvin were constructed for the San Antonio-To-El Paso Mail Line (also known as the Ben Ficklin Mail Line). These three sites that encompass the entire operation have been known by the Iraan, Texas area locals since the town was founded in the late 1920s. Generations of families have been climbing the rock-walled station, the nearby corral, and military camp to look for interesting trash that might have been left behind for as long as they can remember. The nearby and long-gone pontoon bridge is a legend in the archives of Trans-Pecos history. Historians have written stories from the few military records and the personal narratives of the ranching families and their cattle and wagon crossings, heading across the muddy, winding, and dangerous Pecos River.

So, why would we begin another archeological study of what everyone has known about and mostly forgotten and written off as an old memory? The answer is that the complete and complex story was never actually told. Everyone just assumed it was just there one day, lasted a little over for 12 years, and was gone.

But the story goes much deeper. With new archeological and research techniques, we can now tell the whole story – the human story- from beginning to end.

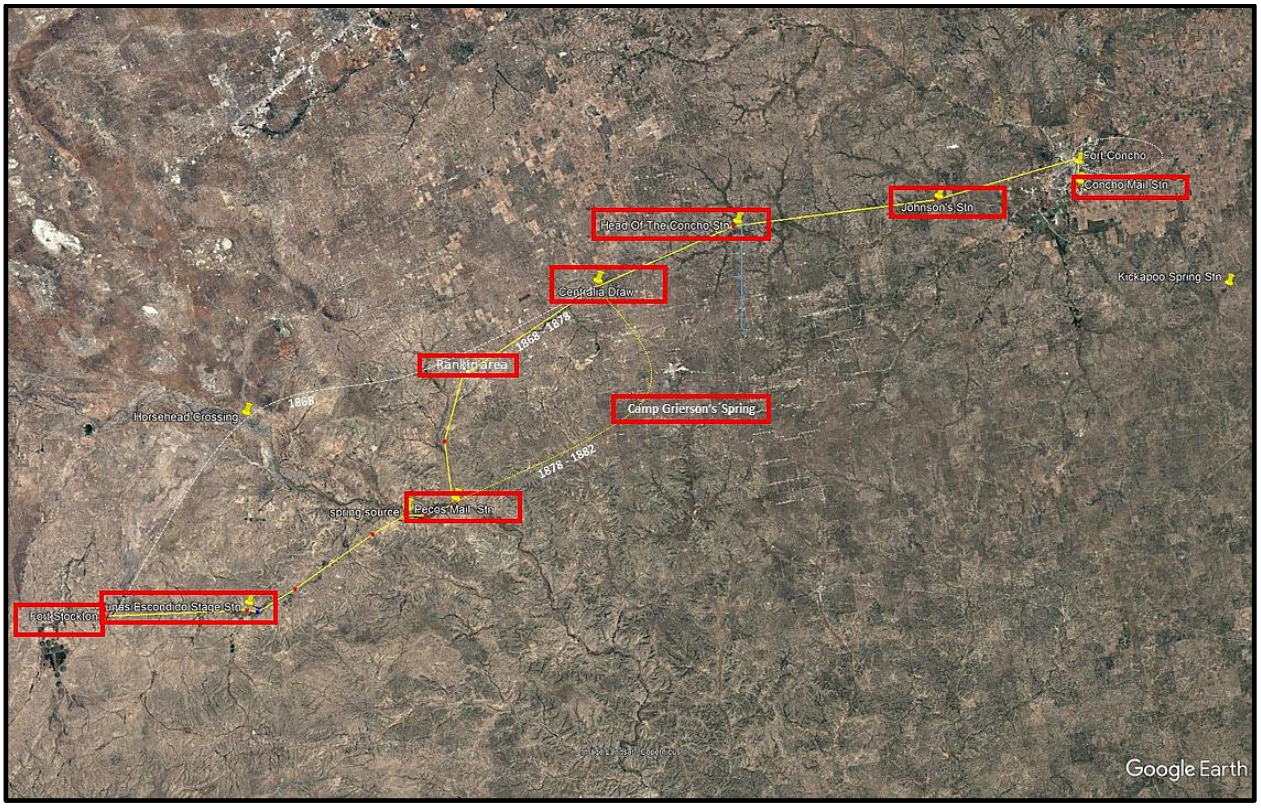
There are two chapters to the Pecos Mail Station and Camp Melvin. A significant amount of time and effort went into the construction, and then there was the operational period of over 12 years. This report will cover the two chapters in history, with the archeology to understand them.

History

Most of the Pecos Mail Station period documentation comes from the U.S. Army records, specifically the reports from Fort Stockton. In April of 1868, Fort Stockton's Commander, Colonel Edward Hatch, ordered the 9th Cavalry to scout out a new site for a mail coach river crossing downriver from Horsehead Crossing due to the Indian problems that were not abating for that crossing. Benjamin Ficklin's men had been using the old Butterfield Overland Mail's station to cross the river and head to Fort Stockton for the San Antonio to El Paso Mail Line. The Horsehead Crossing Station, previously built and used by the Butterfield Overland Mail Line before the Civil War, was being reused beginning in March 1868. (Ashmore) Colonel Hatch had detached a small unit to protect it. However, they were unable to stop the Indian depredations at the station or properly protect the passengers. By June they had found a location for a new crossing and named it Ficklin Ferry Crossing. (Austerman) Benjamin Ficklin set up the same technique for crossing the river at this new location as they had at Horsehead Crossing. A small skiff boat was used to ferry passengers and mail across the river while stagecoaches waited on each side of the river.

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 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 station throughout West Texas. These were all guarded by the now famous Buffalo Soldiers. (Barton) Thus, the orders to find and move to a safer location on the Pecos River likely originated from the 5th District Headquarters, San Antonio, to Fort Stockton.

Colonel Hatch sent out Special Order 56 on July 1st, 1868, ordering the mail crossing point be moved from Horsehead Crossing to a new location downriver. On July 12th, 1868, a detachment of Company A, 41st Infantry Regiment, led by 1st Lieutenant Robert Wesly, departed Fort Stockton and made its way to the new Ficklin Ferry Crossing point to assist in constructing the new crossing and their own camp and picket post guard operations. On July 17th, the detachment from Company G, 41st Infantry Regiment, departed Horsehead Crossing Station and returned to Fort Stockton, indicating the station was at that time abandoned. Thus, the new Pecos River Ficklin Ferry Crossing was operational in mid-late July, 1868.



Route(s) From Fort Concho to Fort Stockton

Colonel Hatch was given a large budget by 5th District Headquarters, Texas, to get Fort Stockton rebuilt, beginning with the re-occupation in July, 1867. Construction began in September of 1867, with four stone masons, 12 teamsters, and four quarrymen. These numbers jumped dramatically in October to 58 masons, 12 teamsters and 6 quarrymen. This continued throughout the rest of 1867 and well into 1868. The year 1868 began with 33 masons and dropped down to 18 masons and 12 teamsters by May. It appeared by the numbers that the work of rebuilding the fort was beginning to recede. However, in August the numbers jumped back up to 24 stone masons and 20 teamsters. There is nothing in records to say exactly what these contractors were working on each month, but the jump in numbers was consistent from August 1868 through February of 1869, when they again began to drop off. In March they were down to 10 masons and 20 teamsters, and from April 1869 on it dropped to four, and sometimes two masons per month.

At the same time, in the report to Congress, dated August 15th, 1868, the Quartermaster, District of Texas, reported, ***"At Stockton nothing could be procured toward building but stone, lime, sand, and mud – the post being in the middle of the plains, prairies, and barren mountains, extending hundreds of miles in every direction. It was determined to build at Stockton of adobe with stone foundations."***

So, the question is, 'If they were building with adobe on stone foundations, why did they continue to need such a large number of stone masons and teamsters well into 1869? We believe the answer is the incredible

task they took on to build the Pecos Mail Station as a stone compound and its stone corral. The station walls measured approximately 10 feet in height, 2 feet wide, and 220 feet in total length. The stone corral wall measured approximately 6 feet in height, 2.5 feet wide, and 700 feet in total length, taking up over a half acre in space.

The drop-off in numbers indicates the construction of the two sites was probably completed by April 1869. However, we know the ferry crossing continued to be used through at least June 1869 when Harriet Bunyard in a wagon train wrote in her journal about crossing the river by floating the wagons while their possessions being taken across in the ferry skiff. We also know the ferry crossing was still being used four months later, in October, when Major C.M. Tunnel reported still looking for a bridging location near the "ferry site." (Dearen) But the next month, in November, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hunt, while on his way to Fort Davis, reported the "old Camp Melbourne" was abandoned. Given this, we can determine that the military moved their camp to begin defense of the new operational site at the end of October or early November of 1869. Two months later, in December, the Fort Davis surgeon's reported of his travels through the area that the pontoon bridge was in place. (Dearen) Given these reports we can assume the delay between the completion of stonework and startup of operations at the new site was due to getting the pontoon bridge to be put in place.

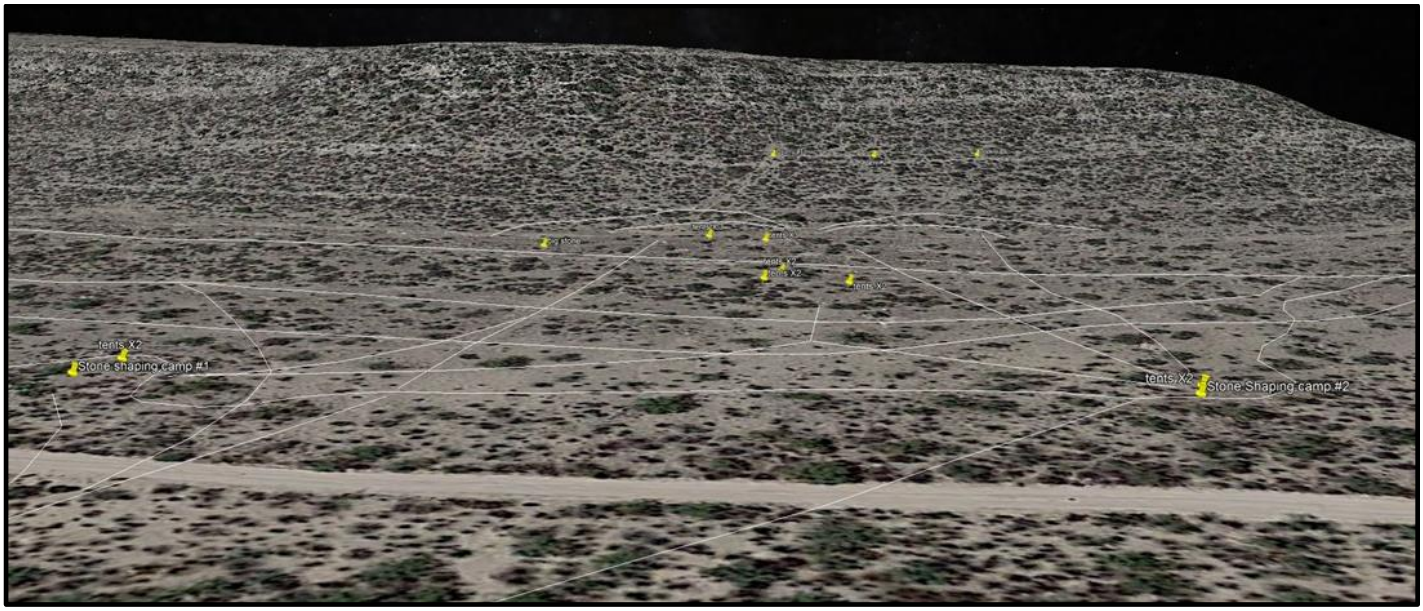
Chapter One: Construction

The construction of the two sites – the stone station and stone corral - was a massive operation, conducted by skilled quarrymen, stone masons, and teamsters to transport all the stone. We estimate the station took around 522 tons and the corral took another 770 tons of stone. The amount of stonework and shaping could only have been done by skilled quarrymen and stone masons of the time. The amount of stone required to dry construct these two sites indicates a massive operation with many wagons for heavy transport to the sites.

There were three quarry sites halfway up the hill at the first large rock shelf. Below them were two sets of loading wagon roads, one high and one low. Below the wagon loading roads we found five tent platforms. The platforms were leveled so we could measure them and determine approximately how many tents were in each platform. Two platforms measured 12 X 3 yds, one 7 X 3 yds, and two 5 X 3 yds. Each was strewn with period can trash and supply box strapping. We estimated these accommodated 12 tents total, probably all large single-man tents.

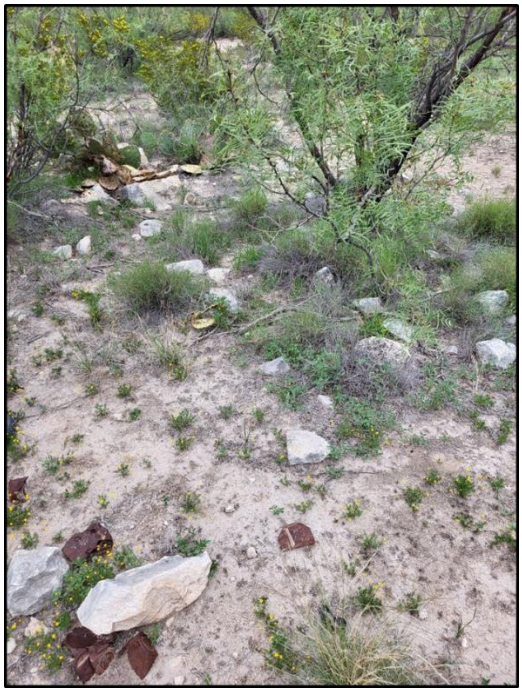
From the loading areas, the wagon traces went either to one of two stone-shaping camps or straight out to one of the construction sites. Each stone-shaping camp had tent platforms that would have accommodated two tents. Broken rubble was strewn below the shaping site tent areas and the same period cans and trash could be found. In stone shaping camp #2 (east side) several unfinished or unused stone blocks were also left behind.

Trash Found Around Tent Site Pads



Quarry Sites (above), Wagon Roads, Tent Sites Below, Stone Shaping Sites #1 & #2 at bottom

Quarry Site #1: Untouched Area on Left, Quarried Area on Right



Stone Shaping Camp #2 (mound partially covered)

Left behind shaped stones

Tent Platform below Quarry Sites

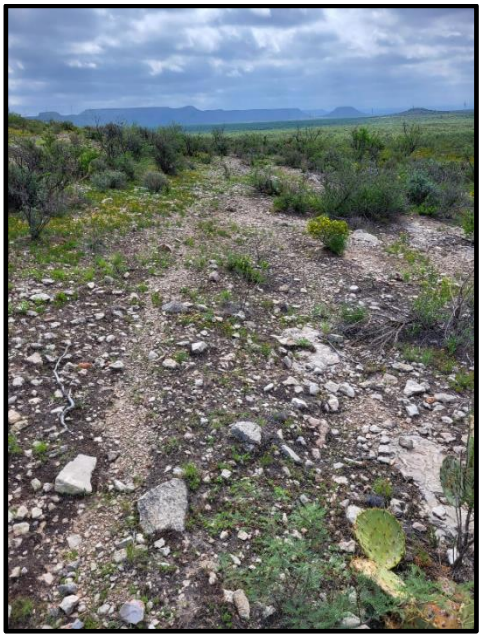
At one of the stone-shaping sites, we found a mule shoe and nail that is the size of the small Spanish mules. These are the mules that were used by the stage line from the Concho Mail Station, near Fort Concho, on their westward route. This is a good indication that the mules being used by the construction workers were from the stage line, and supports that the stage line and the U.S. Army (with their contracted workers) were collaborating for the construction of this station and corral.

Spanish-Sized Mule Shoe and Nail Found At Stone Shaping Site

To the far east of the operational area there is one particular site with large quarried stones lining it, which we designated Tent Site #1. It is in line but separated from the other tent sites by 125 feet. The other tent sites are laid out 35 feet apart and dug out to be level, but not rock-lined. This was probably the operations

supervisor's tent site. Any operation of this magnitude would have required an overall supervisor and he would have been given a site created to suit his position. Additionally, we can trace a perimeter wagon road going to this site specifically. This wagon road can be traced to the far western side of the operations area.

Although this and the other tent sites are strewn with the normal metal trash found at all camps, one significant artifact was discovered next to this particular site. It is the internal back-plate cover over the gears of a pocket watch. This, along with the location and the quarried stone lining, helps to identify this particular tent site as a probable supervisor's site. After the construction phase was completed, this site was likely taken over by the NCO in charge of the military detachment.



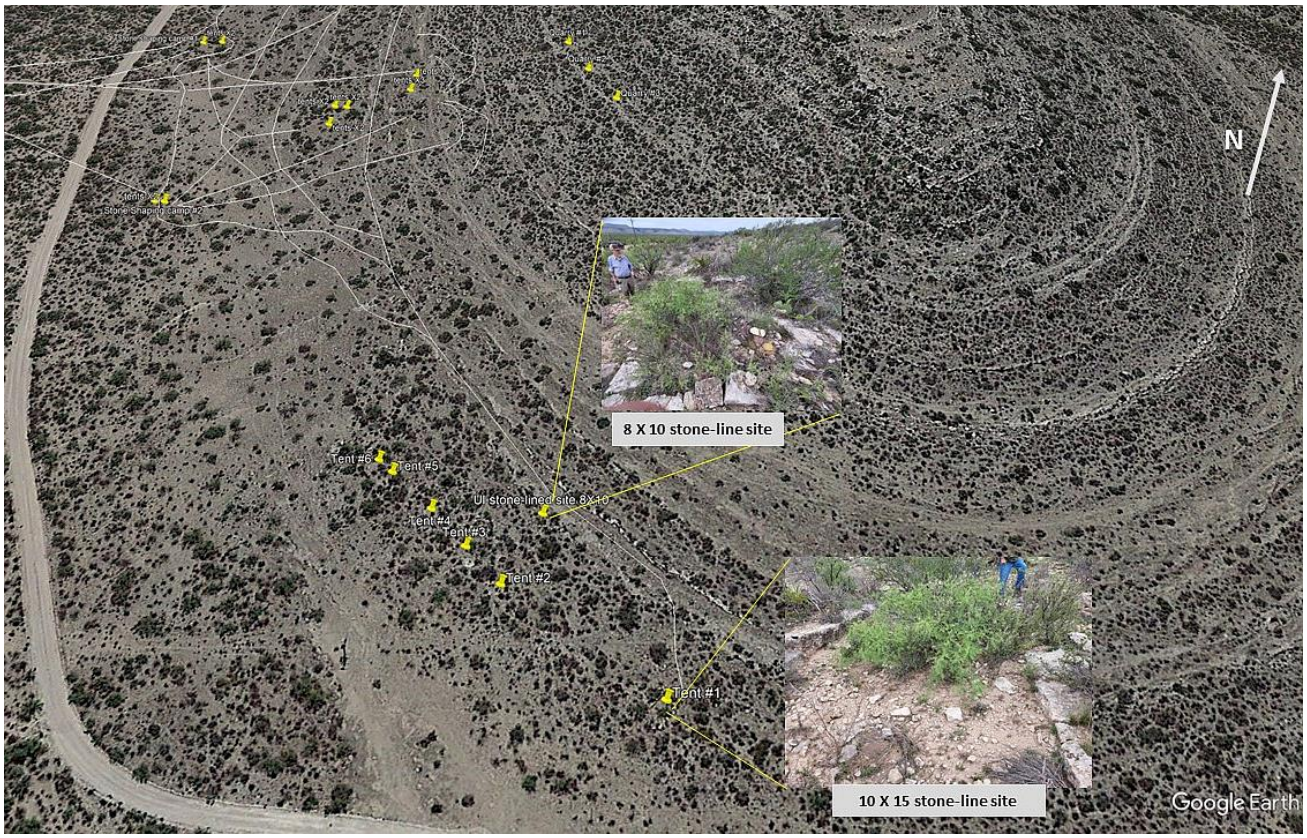
Perimeter wagon road trace

Probable Operation Supervisor's Tent Site

Pocket Watch Back Plate Cover

Examples of Back Plate Covers On Pocket Watches

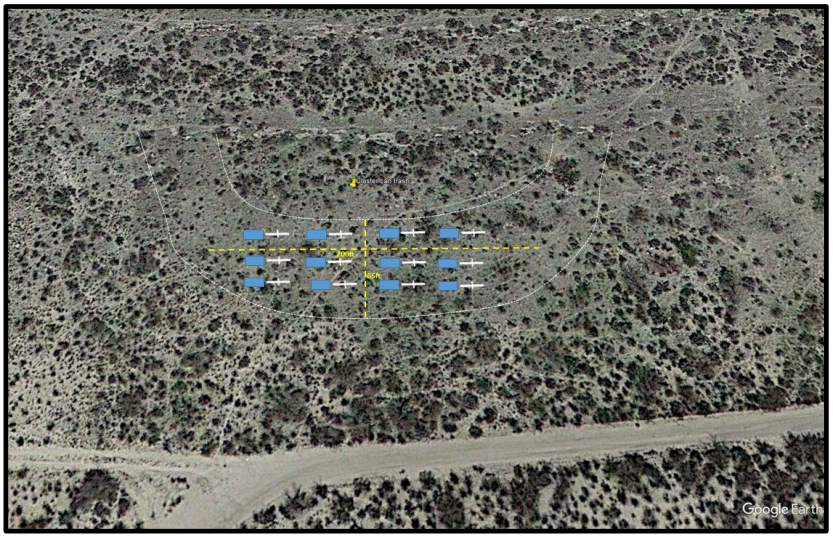
There are five more tent sites in this area. All are the same size as site #1 (10 X 15), but not stone-lined. They are all dug to be leveled out as a tent site. An out-of-place 8X 10 stone-lined site sits above the other tent sites. It is speculation, but this may well have been a central latrine site, possibly tent-covered and stone-lined to reinforce the walls against cave-in. The site is north of the tent sites with a predominant south wind in this area. Based on proximity to a supervisor's site, we assess the five adjacent sites were probably the primary stone mason's tent sites, as they would have been the most important and highest-paid workers in this operation.



Probable Supervisor, Five More Tent Sites and Possible Latrine Site Above

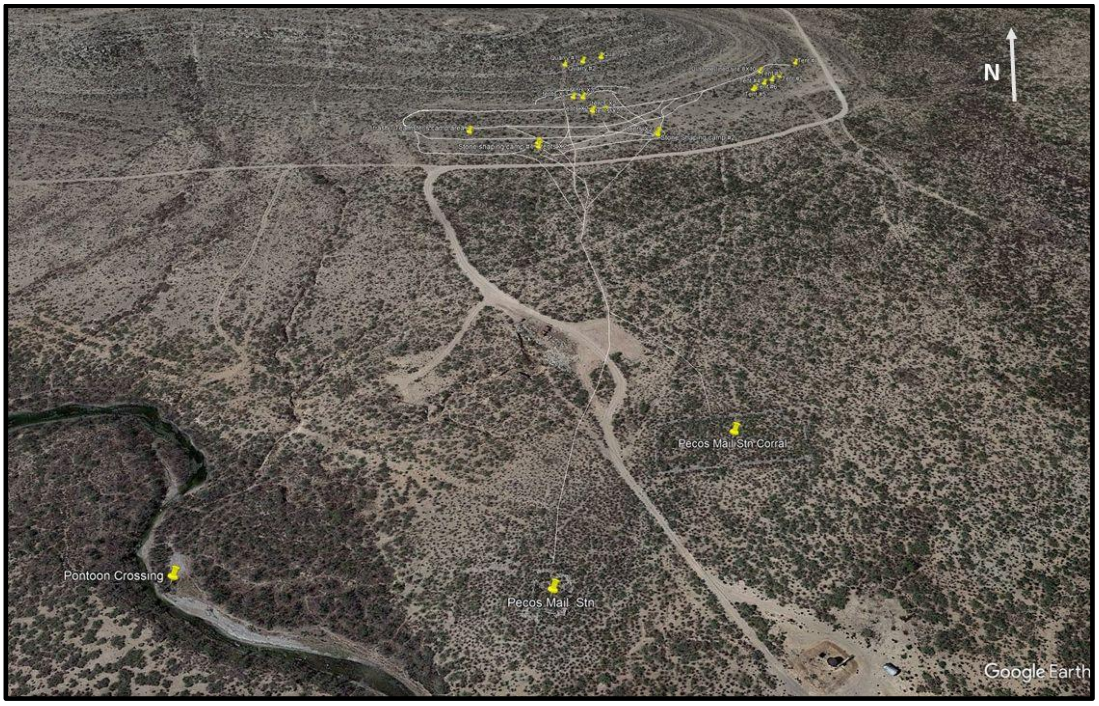
If you count up the tent sites we believe are related to stonework (quarry, shaping, construction) we come up with 21 personnel. That is very close to the military reports that ranged from 20 to 24 from August 1869 to January 1870, before beginning to drop off for the next two months of 1869 (18 & 10 respectively) and then dropping completely down to four in April.

The second part of the operation was the teamsters, needed to transport all the quarried rock to the construction sites. There were 16 – 20 teamsters, depending on the month, contracted by Fort Stockton from August 1868 to March 1869. It appears the teamsters set up their camp and wagon parking area on the lower west side of the operations area of the quarry hill. The parking area is well-worn compared to other areas and connects to all the road structures throughout the operational area. Just above the parking area, we found typical period trash, similar to the other camp areas. The parking area appears to be 200 X 65 feet and could easily contain 12 wagons pulled by 4-mule teams.



Assessed Wagon Parking Area and Teamster Camp Site (actual dimensions of heavy wagons)

After the wagons departed the quarry area the roads headed south to the Pecos Mail Station construction site, with a turn-off over to the corral construction site.



Roads from Quarry Area to Two Construction Sites

The corral itself covered over a half acre and the walls were originally around six feet high. We know this from an early 1900s photograph taken before the walls had completely collapsed. Greasewood stands approximately four feet high at full growth. With this, we can make a good estimate in the photograph of the wall being six feet high. This corral was huge, enclosing .60 of an acre, or 26,136 square feet. We can only speculate why such a large corral was built, with the best guess being that due to the Indian threat, they never wanted the animals to be outside of the corral other than relieving stagecoach teams at the station.

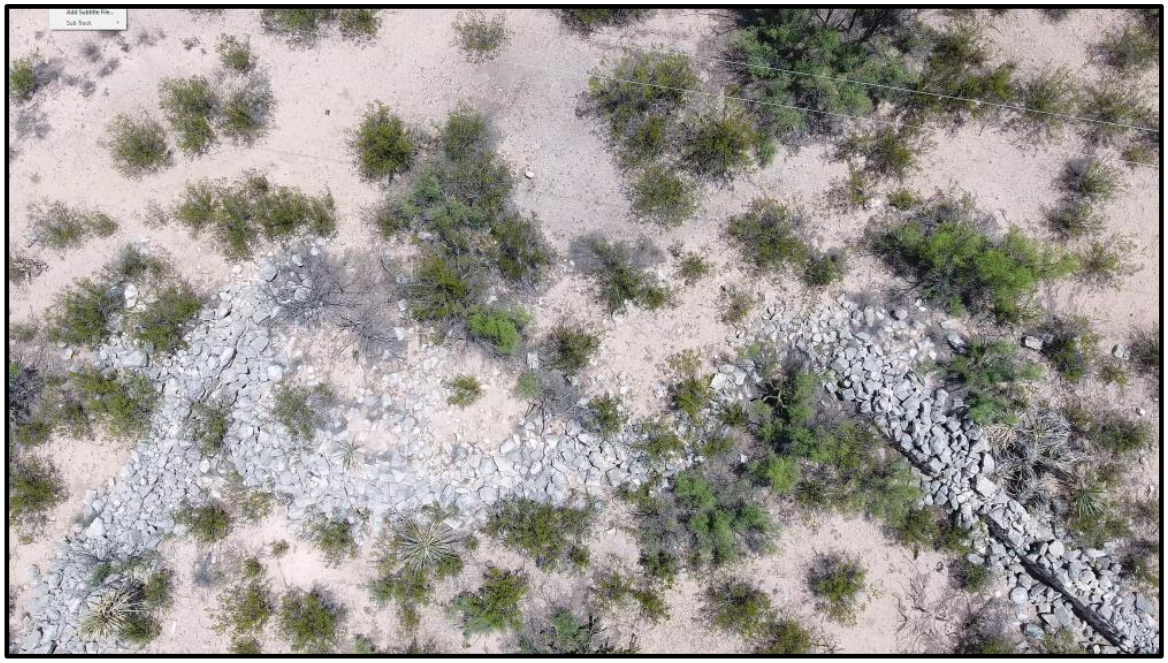
Photograph of Corral from the Early 1900s

The walls were built 2.5 feet wide. Two lines of faced rock were laid, with a gap in the middle to be filled in with rubble. In this way, the shaping masons only had to make a flat face on one side of the large stones. This saved quite a bit of work and made a stronger wall for such a long, straight line.

Corral Stone Wall

Unfortunately, in the 1990s an electrical power line right of way was created that ran past the northeast corner of the corral. The corral had not been designated an historic site and the electrical company bulldozed the corner underneath the right of way. This shows the importance of designating historic sites with the Texas Historical Commission to properly document and preserve these sites against encroaching modernization where alternatives can be considered. This site is now separately designated in the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory database, University of Texas and Texas Historical Commission, as 41CX1826.

Stone Corral .60 Acre



Northeast Corner of Corral's Bulldozed Area and Power Lines Above

The Pecos Mail Station was the entire reason for all of this construction. Although it was given the name of 'mail station,' it was essentially a stagecoach swing station for coaches going to or coming from El Paso and having to cross the river. More immediately, it was on the way or coming from Fort Stockton.

All the stone was considered a requirement due to the Indian problems of the time. Attacking stations, mostly to steal the animals, was a constant problem and a real danger in this open country. Having to stop to

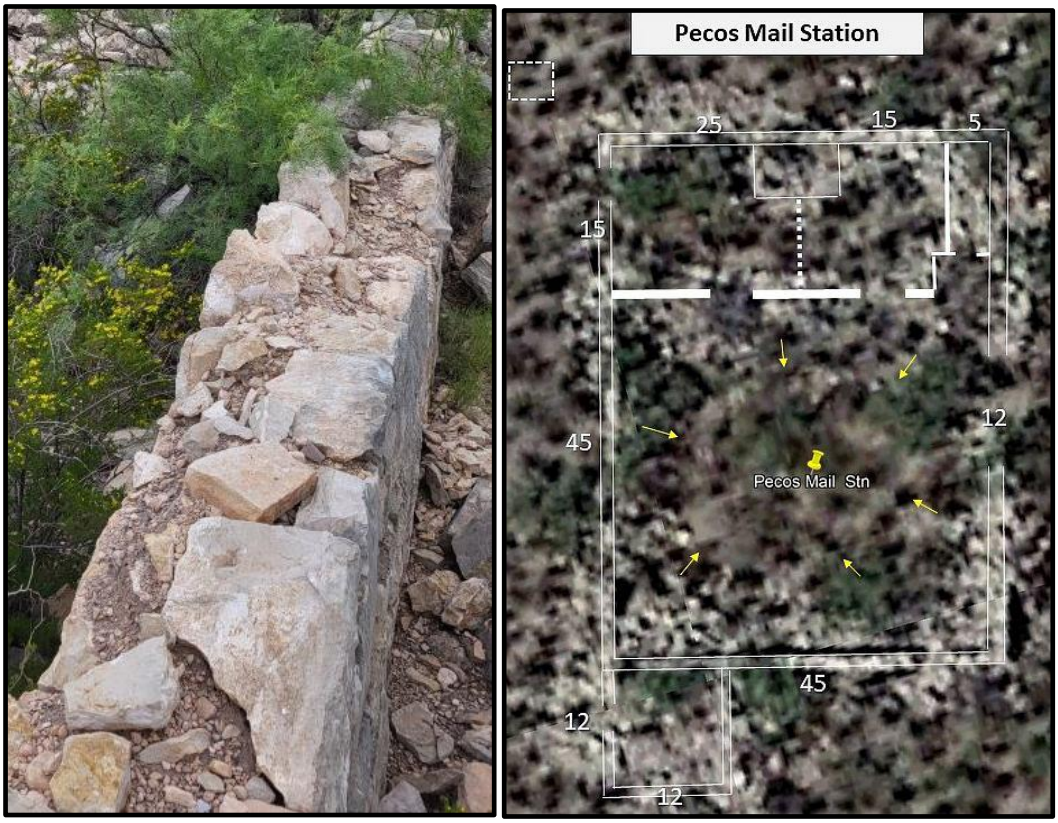
change mule teams, or the corralling of those teams for rest needed serious protection. Indians were experts at overcoming just about any method that had been devised. Very high rock walls with very heavy gates and military guards were the only way they had come up with that seemed to deter them - and even that oftentimes did not work.

Pecos Mail Station Ruins. (Note C.A. Maedgen standing near the collapsed wall on the left side)

The station consisted of 10-foot high walls (see photo at beginning of the report) with a 45 X 45-foot courtyard that the stagecoaches could drive into for their mule team changeover. The entrance appears to have been a gated 10-foot wide opening. The north side of the station is taken up by two rooms and a storeroom/tack shed. The two rooms probably shared a central fireplace, open to each room. The common area appears to be 15 X 25 feet and has a rear door leading out to a small, stone-lined platform that was their outhouse. The second room was probably sleeping quarters and measured 15 X 15 feet. The storeroom was set back from an alcove and measured approximately 5 X 10 feet.

On the south side of the compound was built a small stone structure that had no entrance into the main compound. The door into it was on the west side. It measures 12 X 12 feet. Based on a wagon road leading to this small structure from the military area, we can assess this was a guard post, and probably a documented guard house used for detaining any military soldiers that were put up on charges. Since they would need to see to the northeast, we can determine it was probably at least as high as the main walls, but the location also gave them a good view of the pontoon bridge crossing, located 170 yards upriver, to the west.

The Pecos Station walls followed a similar construction technique as the corral, but the walls were 2 feet wide versus 2.5 feet. They were laid out in a double line of stone. In some cases, fully squared blocks were used, especially at the base of the wall, and in other cases, it appears only one face of the stone was shaped. Small pieces were placed to level each row of stone and fill in gaps.



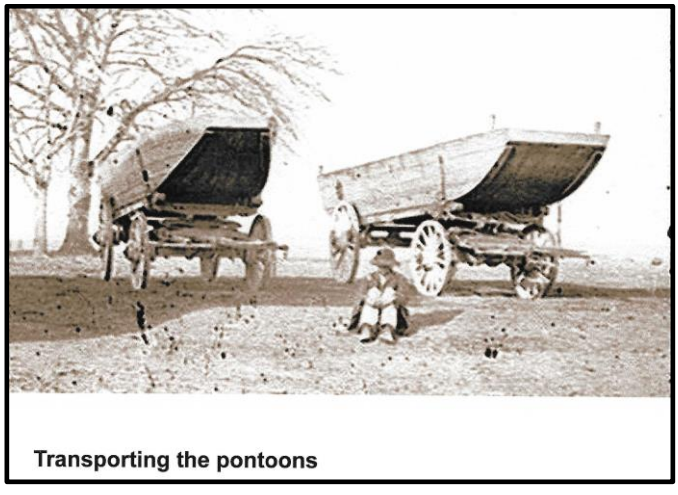
Double-Line Stone Wall

Fully Cut Blocks on Base of Wall

Chapter Two: Pecos Mail Station Operations and the Pontoon Crossing Bridge

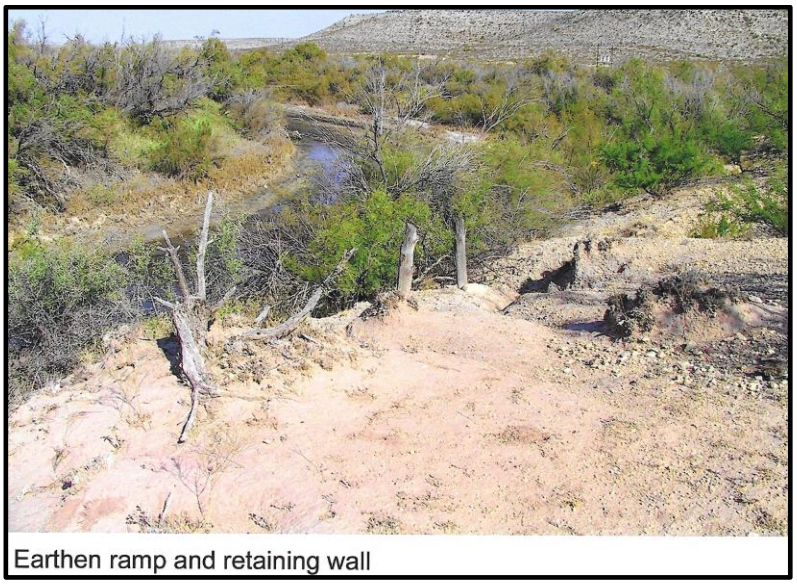
It appears from the records that there was a gap of seven months (April – end of October 1869) between the end of stone construction and the move from the Ficklin Ferry Crossing to the new site. This was likely due to the delay by the Army on just how they were to build a bridge across the river. This was a critical element of the new site. It would allow for stagecoaches and other standard-sized wagons to cross the river. It is likely that once the stone construction ended, the efforts began to prepare for bridging construction. This bridging would have required a military engineering company, probably out of San Antonio. It was these military engineering companies that had the means and skills to build these bridges. Their expertise came from their bridging operations during the Civil War. According to a military communication in 1882 between Fort Concho and the commanding officer at the Grierson Springs detachment, the bridge was jointly owned by the government and the Ben Ficklin Mail Line. (Dearen) The gathering of equipment and transportation for such a large bridging operation, and then the building itself, would account for the extended period of time for completion.

A Civil War pontoon bridge



Transporting the pontoons

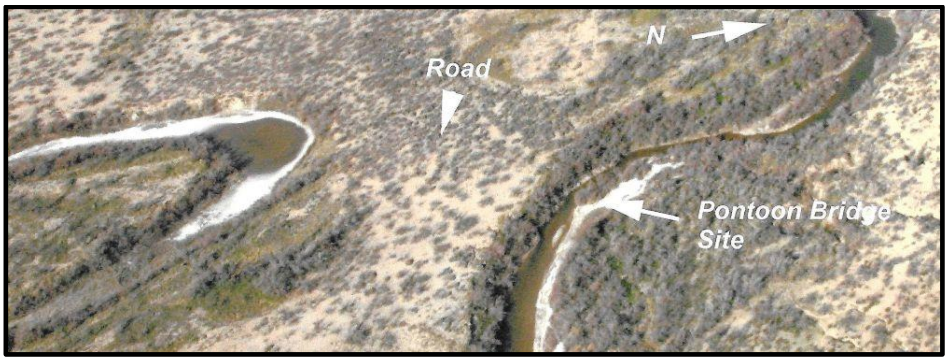
Another factor for the delay was likely caused by the Army first attempting to move a single-span wooden bridge from Lancaster Crossing to this location, beginning in December 1868. (Dearen) The records don't show just how long this took, but it could not have been an easy task, taking an entire wooden bridge apart and transporting it by wagon, 32 miles upriver, only to find the bridge was too short and another way must be found. The remains of the abutment for the failed wooden bridge attempt remain below the stone mail station.



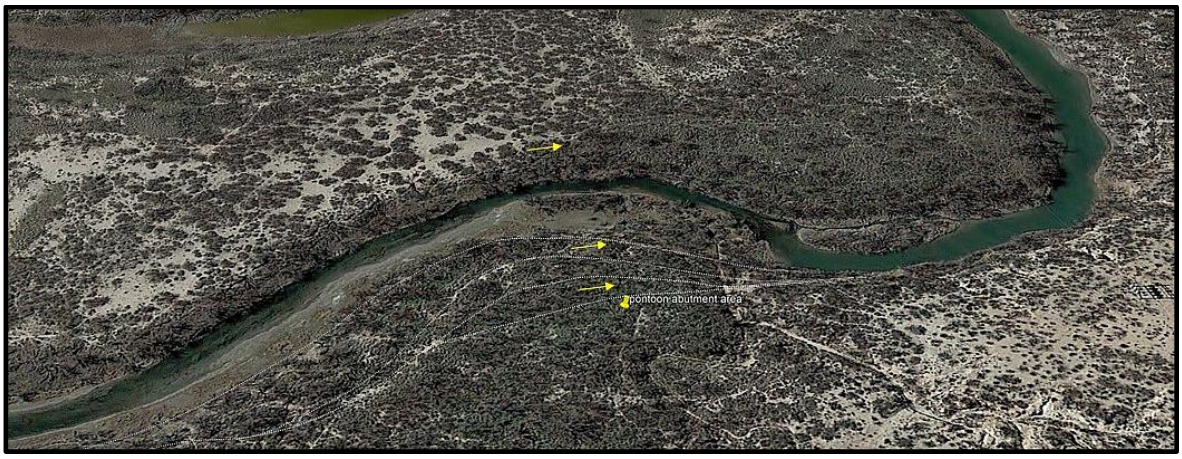
This is the abutment for the bridge (prior to pontoon bridge) that was never built (photo 2002, courtesy Bill Yeates)

The pontoon floating bridge was the second choice that could handle wagons in that period. It is a much larger operation than most today can conceive. And given that the west side embankment is at least 15 feet higher than the north side at water level, the bridge would have been quite long. By following the old wagon trace that runs past the station and down to the bridge area, we could find what would have been the bridge abutment, or east-side entrance. Through Google Earth we can also find the elevation, and these two points on each side of the river are the same. However, a dip in the bridge to the expected water line would still require a fairly mild cut-bank climb out on the west side to keep the bridge angle from becoming too steep. This would make the bridge approximately 170 feet long. A photograph of a very similar pontoon bridge of the period gives a good perspective of the size of this bridge. It also gives a good perspective of the requirements needed to build a structure of this size, far away from the major supplies needed.

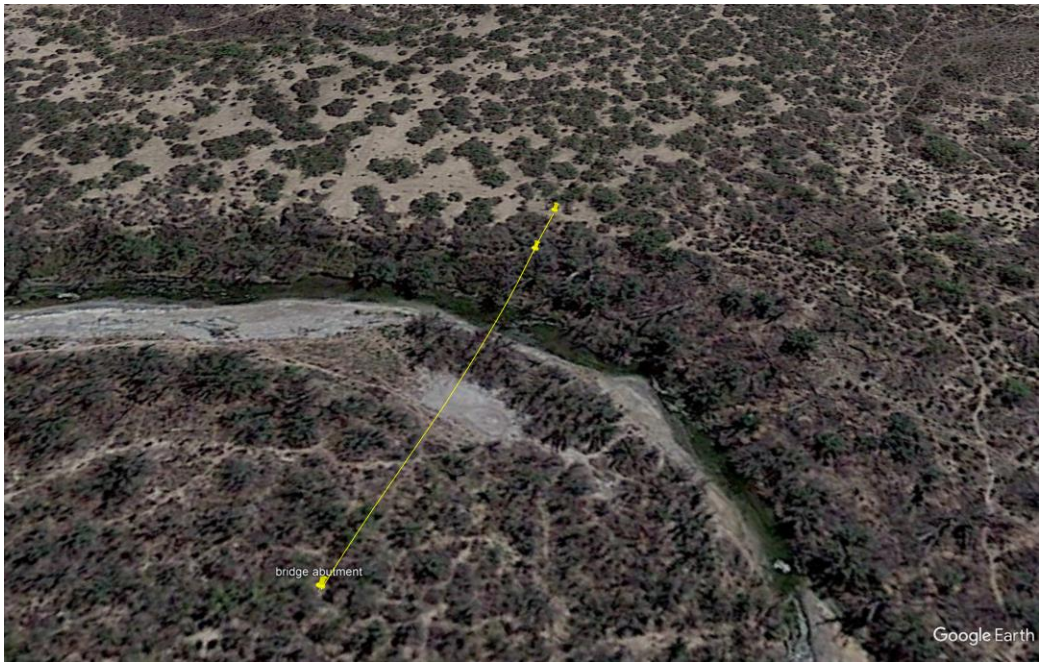
Wagon Trace and Probable Pontoon Bridge Site



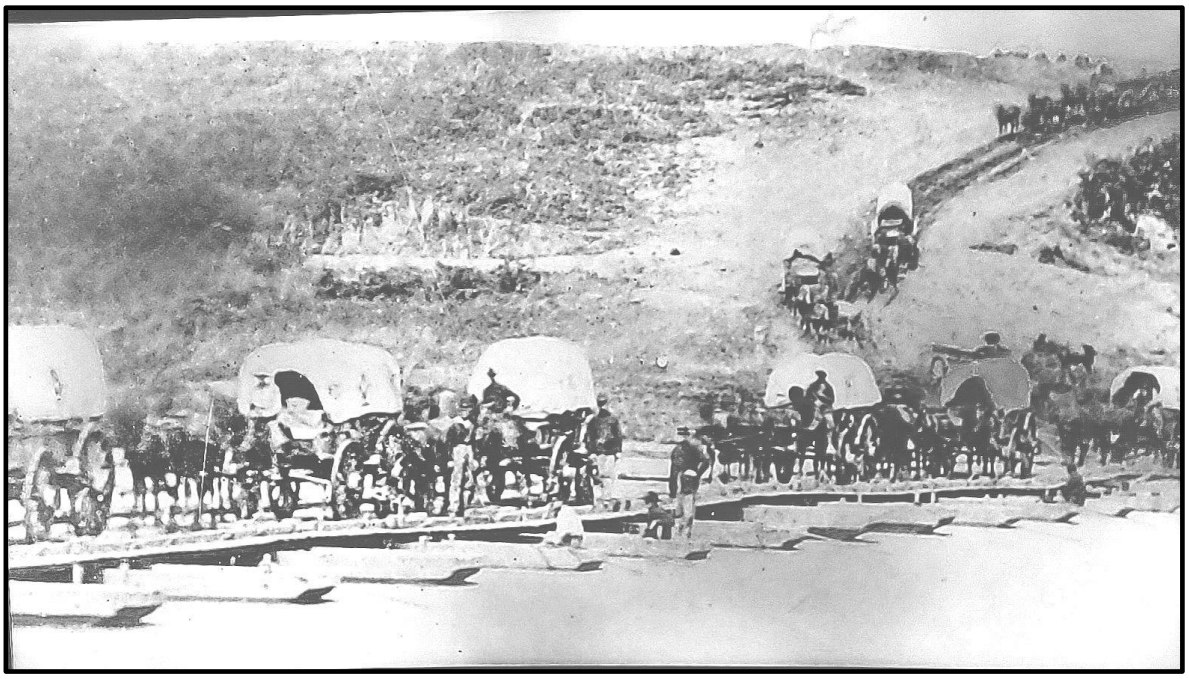
Aerial View from 2003 Where the West Side Road Is Clearly Visible (photo 2003, courtesy Bill Yeates)



East Side Abutment Area, High Water Lines, and Line Of Bridge



Pontoon Bridge Crossing Area with Cut Bank on West Side



Not the Pecos River pontoon bridge, but very similar

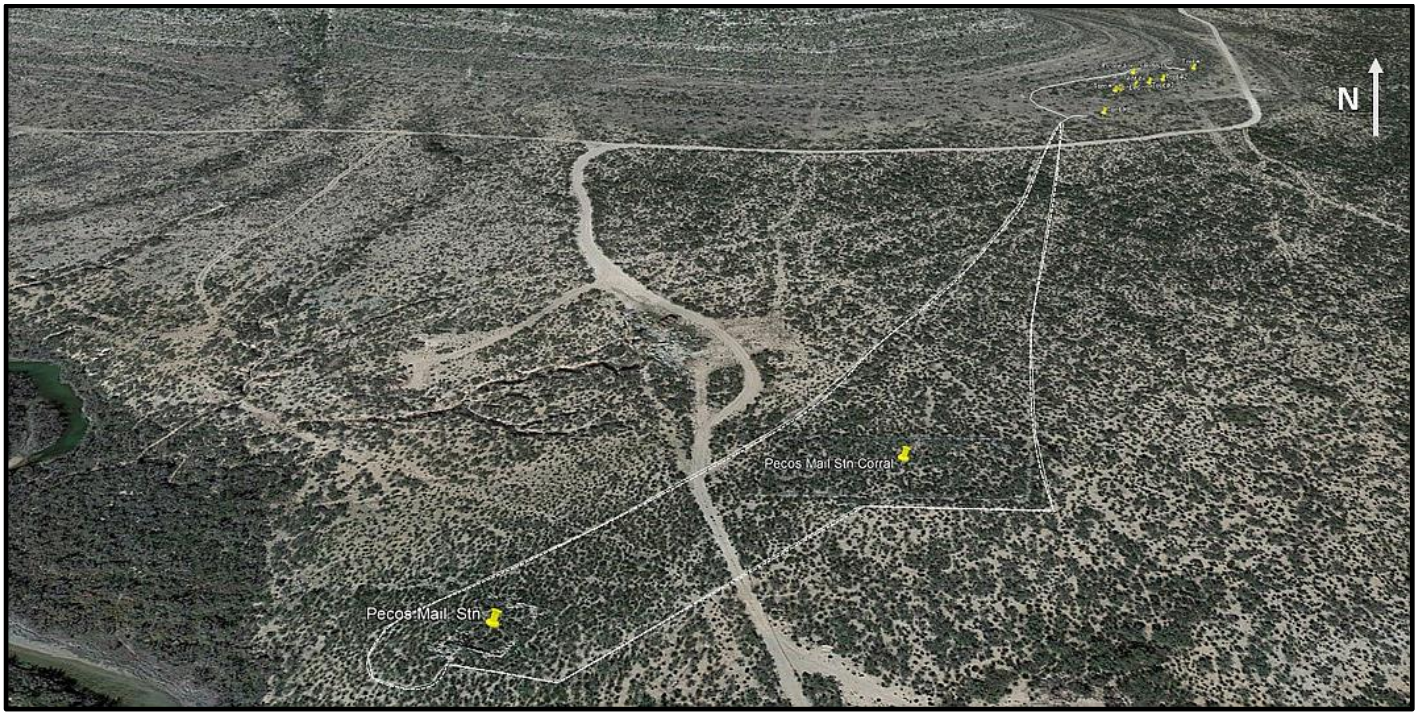
We can also assess the purpose of this particular location for the pontoon bridge. This type of bridge needs many pontoons in the water to stabilize the bridge and decrease the angle on each side. This was one of the widest sections of the river at the time, as can be seen by the wide sandbars exposed now. This location would have provided the most water for floating the pontoons.

Camp Melvin (Melbourne)

Military records show the name was probably Camp Melbourne, but got changed over the years through mispronunciations. As stated earlier, the military guard detachment probably moved to the new site in late October 1869, making this the probable beginning of operations for the mail station and the pontoon bridge. Before the change of location from a former crossing point, called Ficklin Ferry Crossing, the military detachment was noted as being eight soldiers. This likely remained the size of the detachment after the move. However, the numbers changed over the years, depending on the perceived threat.

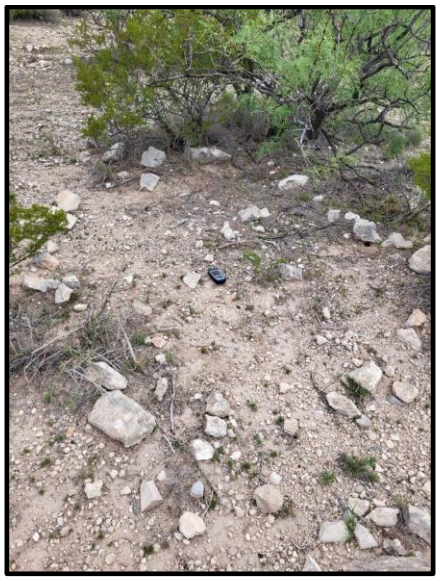
In May of 1871, the detachment was one NCO and four privates. The following January, the guard detachment was noted as only being a total of four. However, given new attacks throughout the area, from 1876 to 1879 the guards ranged from one to three NCOs and four to nine privates. During the height of the threat, they acted as both station guards and stagecoach escorts (Dearen).

The soldier's routine each day would be to wagon out to the mail station and corral guard posts. This probably happened multiple times per day. This made a solid wagon trace that can be followed through Google Earth imagery. The trace runs from the former tent sites of the stone workers to the mail station guard post, around the mail station, over to the corral gate, around the corral, and back to the starting point.

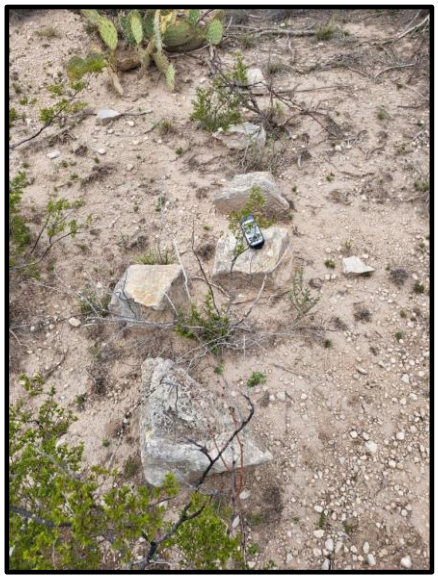


Camp Melvin Military Wagon Trace

In addition to the seven original tent sites, we found one site that was likely for the wagon driver. This small line of rocks marked a 5 x 7-foot tent spot next to what appears to be a wagon parking spot. Nearby, we found a 21-foot line of placed stones that may have marked one end of a small corral for the wagon mules. A pair of mules is probably all they needed for their daily duties. A ground impression visible on Google Earth indicates a 20 x 25 space was created for the mules.



Tent outline

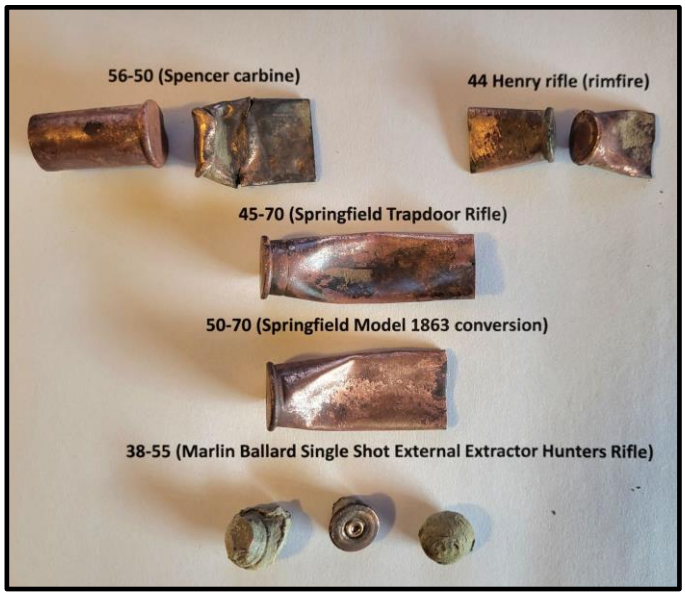


Lined Rocks

Wagon Trace, Wagon Park Impression, Tent Site, Mule Corral Impression

The Pecos River West Side

There was no mail station on the west side of the Pecos River where the pontoon bridge crossed. However, the Torres family contracted a vegetable farm out of Fort Stockton. They sold vegetables to anyone crossing the river. We conducted an artifact reconnaissance with the following results.



The 56-50 Spencer cartridges were issued to stage drivers and stagehands of the Ficklin Mail Company. The one on the right is headstamped FVV & Co. These were manufactured between 1864 and 1868. It appears to be run over by a wagon. The 45-70 and 50-70 were military cartridges from two different periods, probably from the stagecoaches' escort guards. The 50-70 was the 1869 – 1872 period and the 45-70 was from 1872 – 1882. These were foot stomped, which was an order to all military discarding cartridges. This were to keep Indians from trying to reload and reuse the spent cartridges. The 44 Henry cartridges, although not a standard military cartridge, were also foot stomped. The 38-55 was a civilian cartridge.

Three other items uncovered in the area were a brass rivet from a military belt or knapsack, an end cut from a horseshoe from blacksmithing work, and a bridle rosette.

Conclusion

The construction of the Pecos Mail Station and pontoon bridge took 14 months and was ready around December 1869. It was a massive undertaking. It was then operational for 16 years, probably ending when Fort Stockton was abandoned in 1886. The pontoon bridge lasted much longer than that, as wagons from all aspects of commerce continued to use the bridge as long as it held together. Nobody knows exactly when that was, but stories of using the bridge continued into the late 1800s. The stone station was never reused and its 10-foot walls continued to crumble over the decades, until now they are just a few feet high.

The station and bridge were significant to the opening up of West Texas and beyond until the railroad took over the task. Indian attacks were constantly a threat until around 1879, with reports of deaths by stagecoach drivers, station employees and those working near the station. That is the reason the structures were constructed with such significant stone walls. The military, mostly Buffalo Soldiers, was their only defense and they were stretched extremely thin, just holding their own and surviving in this harsh environment.

Although the records only hint at the funds used by the military in this endeavor, the only way this could have been accomplished was through mostly government funds and professionally skilled contract workers. The mail line undoubtedly assisted where it could, but this was a military construction project to ensure the federal mail continued from San Antonio through all the military forts through the Upper Road to El Paso.

1885 photo taken by Capt Weidemeyer, 16th Infantry, Co. F, Fort Concho on a trip from Fort Concho to Fort Stockton by stagecoach. (courtesy Fort Concho archives)

Our Team

Tom Ashmore, C.A. Maedgen, James Michael Collett, Henry Dusek, Johnny Gurley

Dedication

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

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Appendix A

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May 21 1871 Camp Melvin Station, Texas. Detachment of Tr. K, 25th U. S. Inf

Sgt. J. Walker in command. Soldiers wounded, 2.

In July 1873 Juan Chabavilla (mule handler) was killed by a raiding party of thirteen Indians
that stole the horses and mules of the stage company.

Oct 1877 stage driver killed 16mi north of mail station
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Picket nr of soldiers:

June 1869: 8 (source Harriet Bunyard wagon train) Mail skiff = Ficklin Ferry Crossing

May 1871: 5 (1 sgt, 4 pvt)

Jan 1872: 4

Jan 1876 – Oct 1879: 1 – 3 NCO, 4 – 9 pvt

Jan 1880 1 NCO, 2 pvt

Jul 1 1868 Ordered move from Horsehhead Crossing

Aug 68 Moved to Ficklin Crossing

Jun 15, 1869 Ferry Crossing still being used. Documented by Harriet Bunyard in Wagon Train.

Oct 1869 Military studying bridge crossing

Old Camp Melvin abandoned (report in Nov 1869, source: Bvt LTC Thomas Hunt)

Pontoon spanned river adjacent to mail station “first few months of 1870”

Mar 1880 military abandon Camp Melvin

By end 1881 all closed

Appendix B Ft Stockton

May 1868 18 stone masons 12 teamsters

Jun 1868 20 stone masons 17 teamsters, Ficklin building Ferry Crossing infrastructure

Jul 1868 16 stone masons 17 teamsters Jul 1 Special order 56 to move

Aug 1868 24 stone masons 20 teamsters (41st Inf moved from HHC)

Sep 1868 23 stone masons 16 teamsters

Oct 1868 21 stone masons 16 teamsters, Lt 41st Inf in charge Pecos Stn

Nov 1868 22 stone masons 20 teamsters

Dec 1868 22 stone masons 21 teamsters, 11 laborers

Jan 1869 22 stone masons 21 teamsters, 11 laborers

Feb 1869 18 stone masons

Mar 1869 10 stone masons

Apr 1869 41st Co A, G 33 detached, **4 stone masons**

May 1869 41st Co A, G 42 detached, 4 stone masons

Jun 1869 41st Co A, G 31 detached, 2 stone masons (still using ferry crossing)

Jul 1869 41st Co A, G 47 detached, 2 stone masons

Aug 1869 41st Co A, G 38 detached, 2 stone masons

Sep 1869: 41st Co A, G 40 detached, 4 stone masons

Oct 1869 41st Co A, G 23 detached, 4 stone masons,

Nov 1869 24th Co G 32 detached, 4 stone masons (Hunt found old Melvin abandoned) Capt Clement 41st Inf in charge of Co. A at Pecos Stn

Dec 1869 24th Co G 31 detached, 4 stone masons, Capt Clement in charge of Co. A at Pecos Stn

Jan 1870 24th Co G 20 detached, 2 stone masons (pontoon bridge), Capt Clement in charge of Co. A at Pecos Stn

Feb 1870 24th Co G 25 detached, 4 stone masons (pontoon bridge), Capt Clement in charge of Co. A at Pecos St