

San Antonio To El Paso Overland Mail's Middle Station

Staked Plains Swing Station and Army Picket Post, 1868 – 1878

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History

When Benjamin Ficklin obtained the mail contract in 1867 for the San Antonio to El Paso overland mail route, he was immediately ordered to build a new route through the recently established Fort Concho, on the Concho River. He created a route through Fredericksburg and Fort McKavett, then to the Concho Mail Station, three miles from Fort Concho, which he made the headquarters for the route. (Ashmore, 2023)

For the stations heading west from Fort Concho, he decided to reestablish as many of the pre-Civil War Butterfield Overland Mail stations as possible. To reach Fort Stockton, he would have to cross the Pecos River at Horsehead Crossing, using the same method as Butterfield before the war. Near Horsehead Crossing station, westbound and eastbound coaches would meet on either side of the river, transferring mail and passengers in a small skiff. He dispatched crews to rebuild the old stations and commenced operations in March 1868. However, it was only four months into the new route when the Commander at Fort Stockton ordered the Pecos River crossing moved to a location farther downriver for better security. That initial new crossing became Ficklin's Ferry Crossing, 35 miles downriver. At this location, they used the same method of crossing the river as had been done at Horsehead Crossing. They used a skiff boat for transferring mail and passengers. (Ashmore, 2024)

Due to the new crossing point on the river, they needed a road from the old Butterfield Trail down to Ficklin's Ferry Crossing. With the help of the 9th Cavalry, Ficklin chose a location to come off the old Butterfield Trail west of the Centralia Station, formerly the Butterfield's Llano Estacado swing station, deep

in the desolate ‘Staked Plains.’ At that point, the road passed through a north-south-running draw that would take them all the way down to their new Pecos River crossing. But they also needed another station within the standard plus-or-minus 25-mile stretch for changing mule teams. They were lucky to find a good water hole that appeared to be fed by a spring just after the road turned south. This was the only water anywhere in the area, and at 18 miles, it was just right for their needs. Because this location sat between the Centralia and Pecos Mail Stations, it was named Middle Station. In some Army records, it was also referred to as Central Station. This similarity to the name Centralia Station, which is the station just before Middle Station, has confused many historians over the years.

The general location of Middle Station was reported in October 1868 by H.G. Logan, a San Antonio Herald journalist. Logan rode a small, two-mule company mail hack from Fort Concho to Fort Stockton. In his description of the ride, he wrote of following the ruts of the old Butterfield Road along the Middle Concho River. After departing the Head Of The Concho Station, they passed Mustang Holes and then Flat Rock Ponds. Flat Rock Ponds was the site of the old Butterfield (Llano Estacado) Station, as reported in 1867 by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Strang, on an expedition out of Fort Stockton. Ben Ficklin’s mail company also reused it for one of their swing stations, and as stated previously, this station was renamed Centralia Station, probably due to its location in the middle of Centralia Draw.

Camps and Stations	
Fort Stockton	
Antelope Spring	11.11
Horse Head Crossing - Pecos River	22.57
Salt Lake	6.00
Horse Head Crossing - Pecos River	6.00
Gap Water Pass - Castle Mountains	12.30
Wild China Ponds	11.46
Old Stock Station - Flat Rock Ponds	15.02
Mustang Water Holes	22.52
Head of Concho	9.82



Typical light mail hack

In less than an hour past Flat Rock Ponds, Logan's coach arrived at Middle Station. At that time, the mail company had not yet built a structure and had only a brush corral, but it did keep the troops supplied with water. (Austerman) It was stated that at Middle Station, the road turned southwest and ran (for 21 miles) to the Pecos River and Ficklin Ferry Crossing. We previously reported on the location of Ficklin Ferry Crossing (Ashmore, 2024).

On a rough, dirt road, a small two-mule hack will travel an average of three to four miles per hour. That puts L.G. Hogan and his hack at just under an hour to reach Middle Station just after the road splits heading southwest down the wide draw to the Pecos River.

The reference to water is the key to locating this lost station. There is only one water hole just after the road splits and heads down the draw toward the Pecos River.

Another firsthand account, published in an 1872 Austin newspaper, described an attempt by Comanche raiders to attack the station and referenced the water hole adjacent to the camp, which still holds water today.

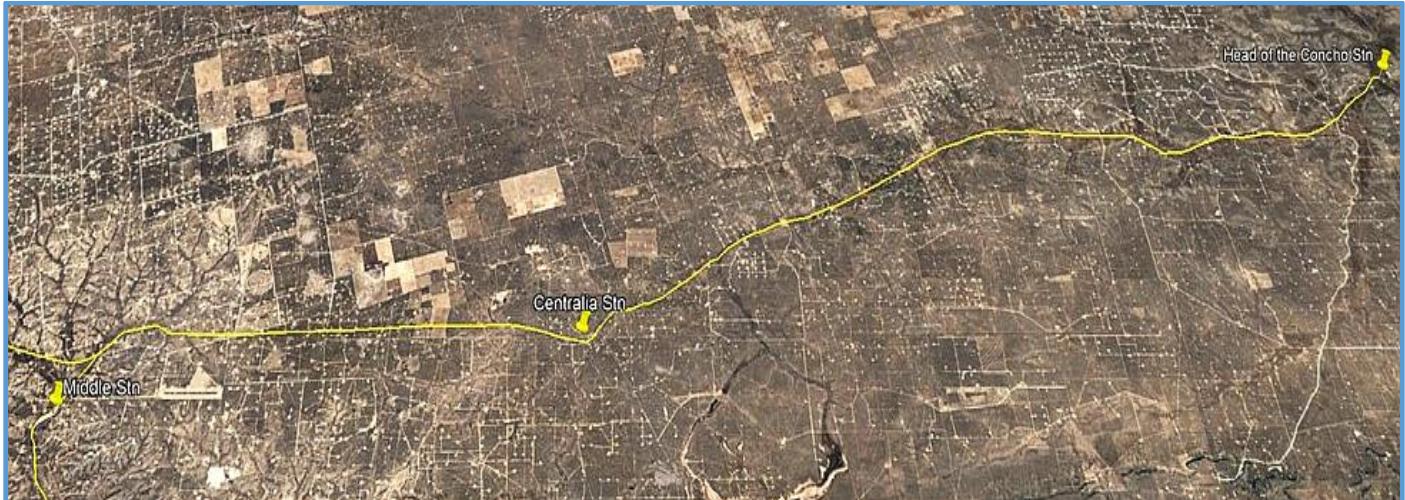
During the attack, the hostler's



dog broke free and went after one of the Indians who was creeping up on the camp. The dog chased the Indian through the "water hole" with the men whooping and cheering. (Austerman)

That water source became a key component of a ranching operation many years later, marked by numerous metal cattle pens, concrete water troughs, and tanks. The natural 250 x 50-foot pond still holds water, wrapping around what was the old swing station and Army picket post.



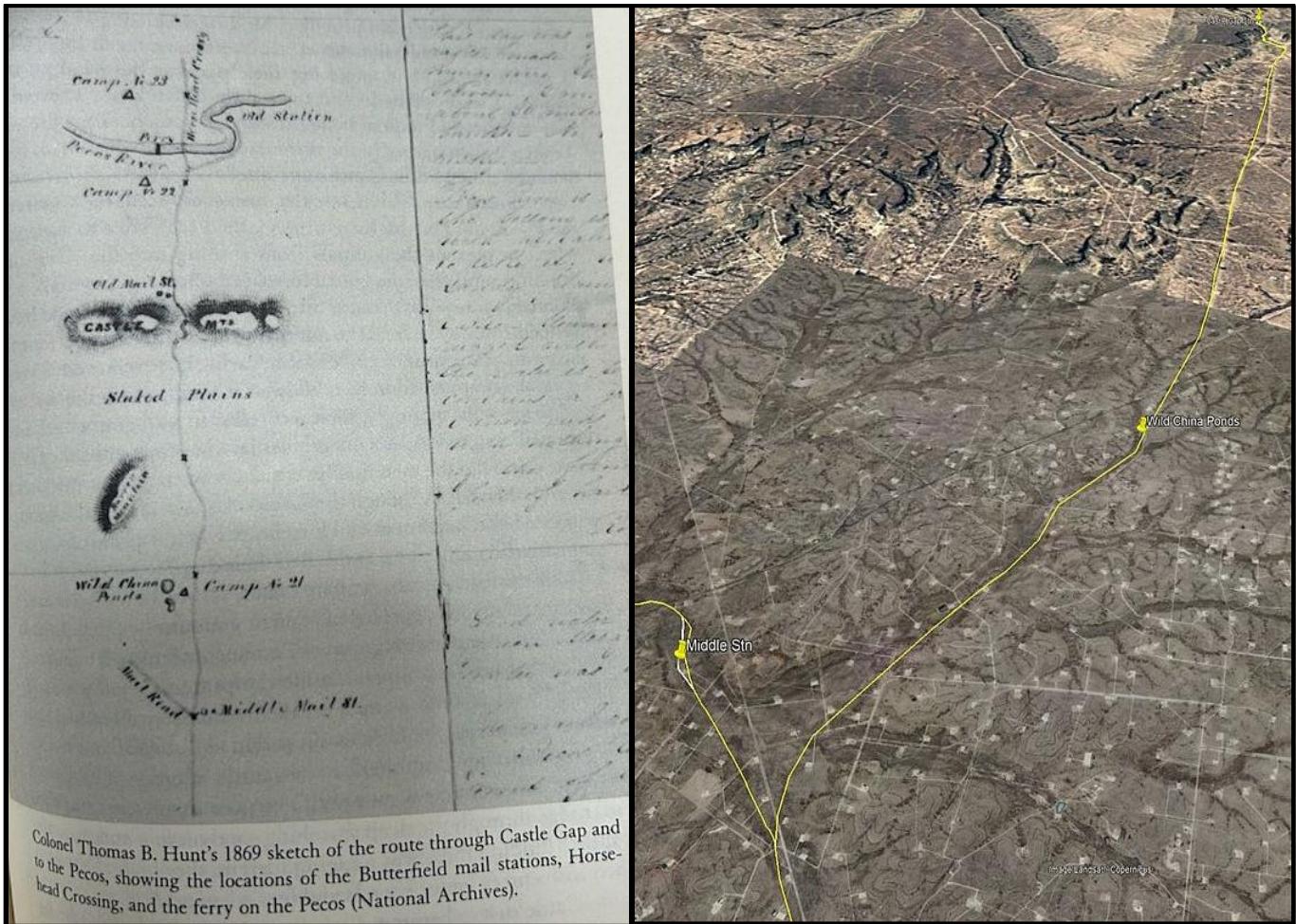


Route Overview



Zoomed In View with Stagecoach Access Road (in white)

An 1869 map by Colonel Thomas B. Hunt, from Fort Stockton, shows the site of Middle Station, which matches the location described in this report. It shows the turn to the south off of the old Butterfield Road and the Middle Station in the vicinity of that turnoff. A distance relationship can be determined by the following location to the west, annotated as Wild China Ponds, which also matches the Google Earth rendering of both places.



Comparison of Colonel Hunt's map (National Archives) and Google Earth

In July 1868, the Fort Concho post report indicates that two non-commissioned officers and 15 privates were sent to guard both Camp Charlotte and Middle Station. The guard details were from the 17th and 35th Infantry Companies stationed at Fort Concho. (Ft Concho Archives) Each NCO would have been assigned to one of the stations, and the 15 men would have been divided between the two. They did not specify exactly how many went to each location, but Camp Charlotte, being larger, would have had a few more men for the picket duty.

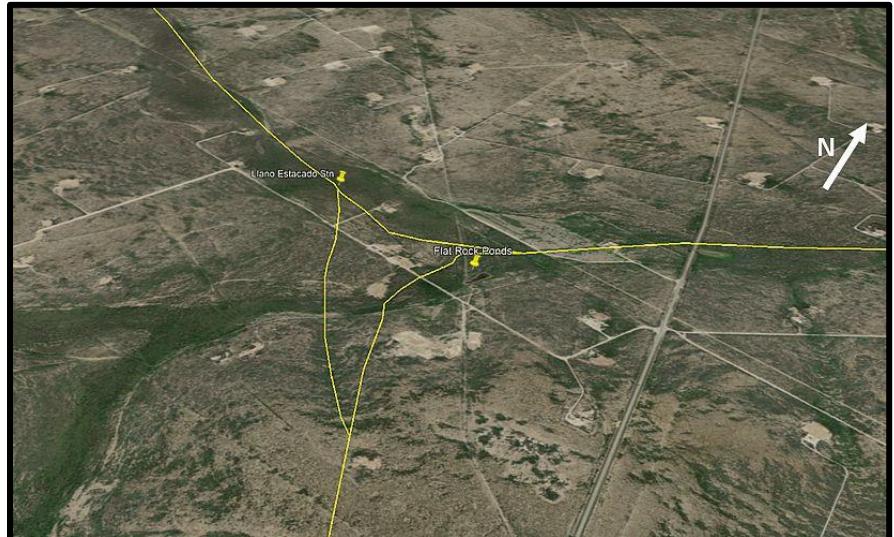
Camp Charlotte was a cavalry camp on the old Butterfield Road before reaching the Head Of The Concho Station. Their mission was to escort travelers on the road, whether it was cattle drives heading to Horsehead Crossing or stagecoaches and wagon trains heading to the Ficklin Ferry Crossing. Both Camp Charlotte and Middle Station were enclosed in circular berms.

The Ending For Middle Station

In 1878, Colonel Benjamin Grierson, Commander of Fort Concho, ordered his men to scout for a water source that might be used by “depredating Indians” in the dry country west of the Head of the Concho, Middle Concho River. Two cowboys who had been chasing cattle thieves led a scouting detachment to the

spring. With the report sent back to Fort Concho, Colonel Grierson took to the field to see for himself and quickly decided that this would be an excellent location for a small military camp, not only to keep Indians from using this water source, but also to serve as a shortcut to the Pecos Mail Station. (Ashmore, 2023) Construction of the camp began in November 1878. (Riemenschneider)

This change required Ben Ficklin's mail line to also change its route to provide mail and official communications to the camp. Thus, in November 1878, Middle Station was abandoned, and Camp Grierson's Spring became the intermediate stop on the way to Pecos Mail Station. The military created a new road to both the camp and the Pecos Mail Station. The new road was also used by wagon trains from that point on. For the stagecoaches, from that point on, the route would turn south at Centralia Station. We know the mail company used the Centralia Station both before and after the period of the Middle Station route to the Pecos, because there is a visible cutoff road from that station back to the road heading to Camp Grierson's Spring for the period after 1878, which is easily visible in Google Earth imagery. Additionally, the 1880 census attached to Grierson's Spring lists two "stage drivers." (Riemenschneider)



Cutoff road from Centralia Station down to Camp Grierson's Spring

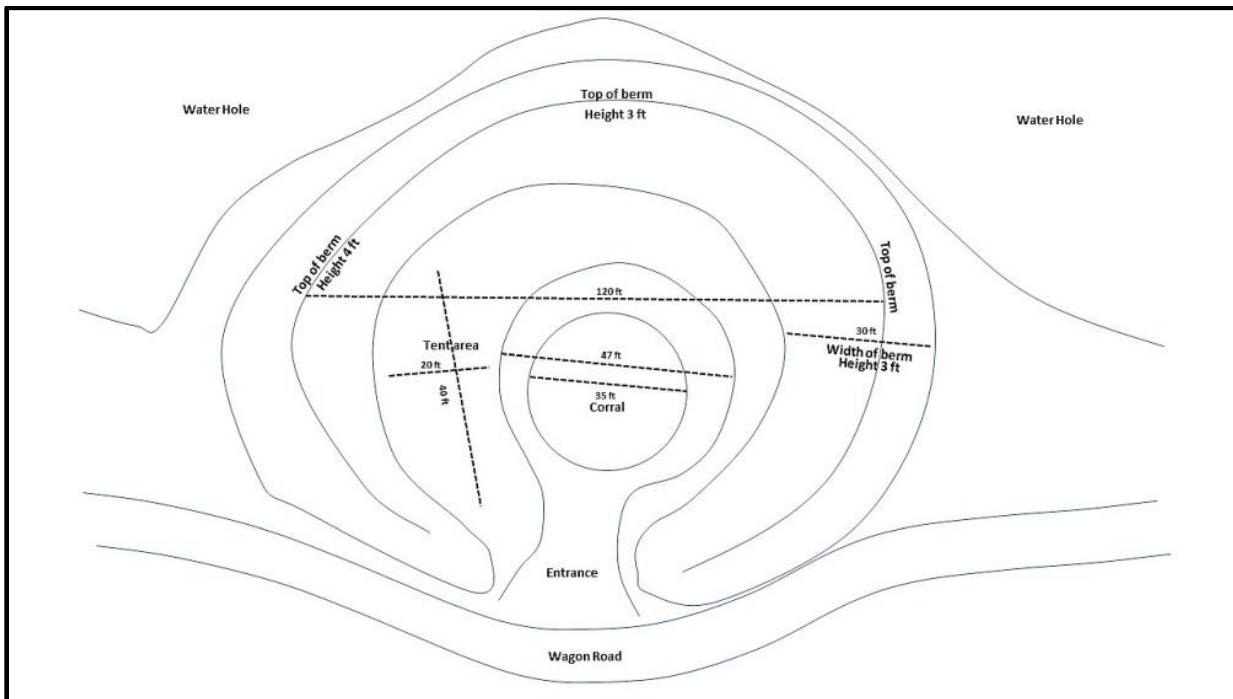
Middle Station Layout

The similarities between Camp Charlotte and Middle Station are striking. Both camps were reconstructed with circular berms surrounding them. This was likely due to the lack of other resources in the area and the need to protect a large compound. Camp Charlotte's berm is 150 feet in diameter, and Middle Station is 120 feet in diameter at its widest point. The Middle Station berm averages three to four feet high, and the Camp Charlotte berm averages three to five feet high. Both have the portion of the berm facing the road open and level ground.



Comparison of The Two Camps

The difference between the two is that Camp Charlotte was a cavalry company and required a large corral, which they created with a rock wall behind the berm. Middle Station appears to have kept its small corral in the middle of the berm area. The tents were probably set in a widened space to the north side of the corral, or on the left side if viewed from the open entrance.



Middle Station

With this understanding, we can now create a probable layout, using AI graphics.



AI depiction of Middle Station

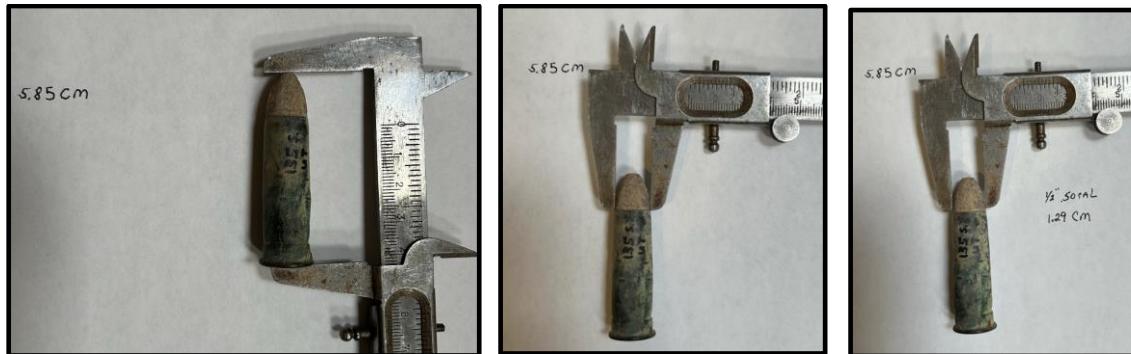
Archeological Findings

Unfortunately, due to the landowner's restrictions, we have only one artifact to help with site validation, but it is a very important one.

In 2013, a member, then working in oil field operations in that area, passed through the abandoned ranch and the pond area. He noticed an unspent cartridge on the ground to the north side of the berm. The cartridge is a 50-70 Government cartridge, the same type used by cavalry and infantry from 1868 to 1875. The converted breech-loading "Trapdoor Springfield Model 1868 rifle and later 1870 rifle, which fired the .50-70, was an infantry rifle during that period. The U.S. Army also had a large supply of percussion-fired Sharps carbines at the close of the Civil War and had the Sharps Rifle Company convert about 31,000 carbines to .50-70 for cavalry use. There was no way to tell the difference between .50-70 for rifle or carbine cartridges because they were not stamped. Although a passing cavalry unit could have dropped this cartridge, it is more likely that a picket post guard on duty dropped this cartridge. The infantry continued to issue 50-caliber rifles until 1875, whereas the cavalry in Texas began transitioning to 45-caliber carbines in 1874. As seen in the Fort Concho post reports, the Middle Station began assigning infantrymen to picket duty there as early as July 1868.

The .50-70 cartridges were carried in an ammo box on the belt and could easily be dropped when handling the ammunition. These same cartridges were also found at the infantry camp guarding the Concho Mail Station for the

San Antonio To El Paso Line. Although the mail route began in March 1868, the Concho Mail Station and its picket camp were established in early 1869. (Ashmore)



,50-70 cartridge found outside berm of Middle Station



Unfired and unstamped,.50-70 found near the picket station berm

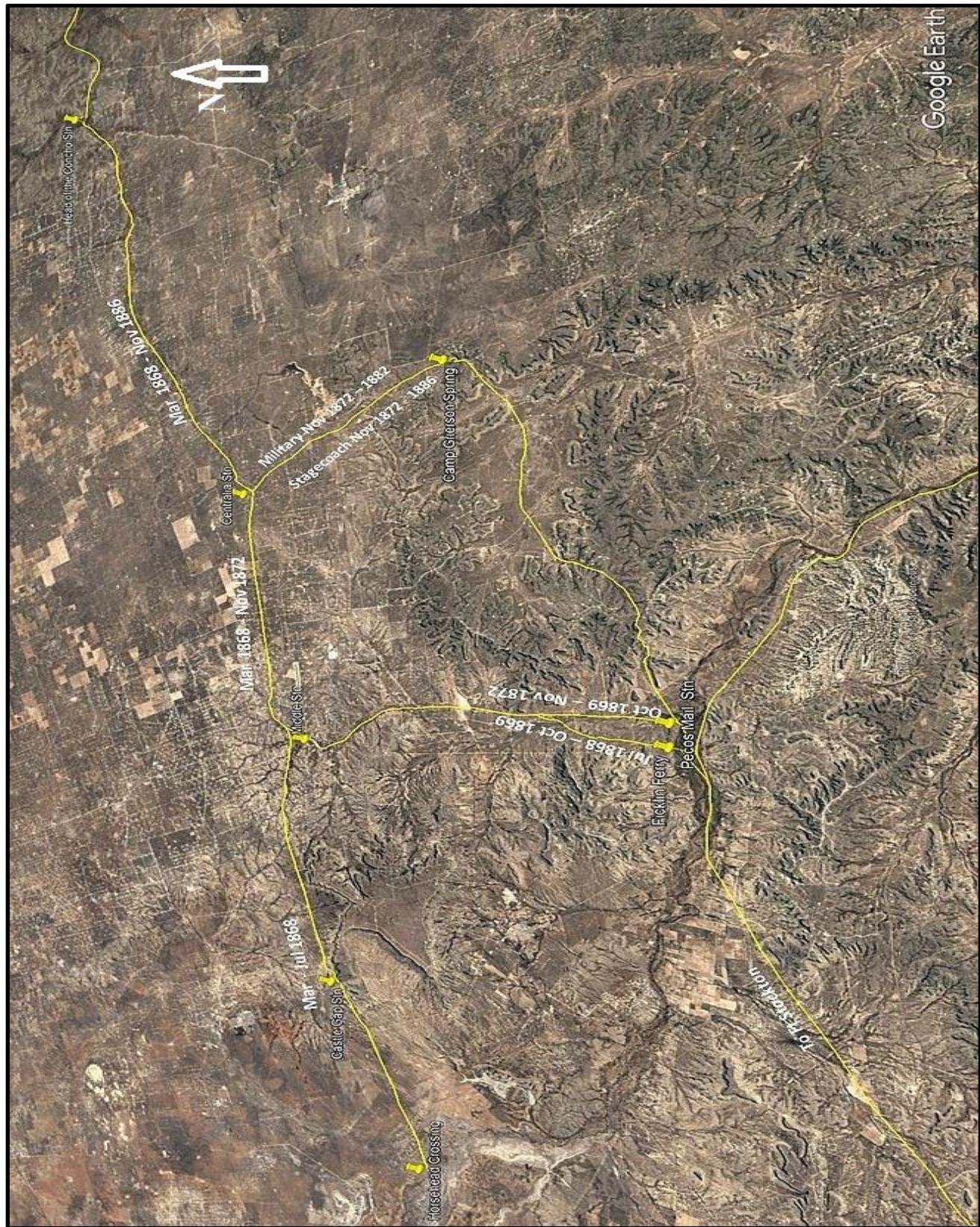


Example: Hagner-type ammo box for .50-70

Conclusion

This study resolves several issues that have long confused historians. First, it clarifies the lost station required due to the distance between Centralia Station at Flat Rock Ponds and the Pecos River, whether at the Ficklin Ferry Crossing point or the later Pecos Mail Station. It resolves the confusion of the renaming of the Butterfield period's Llano Estacado Station and the post-Civil War Centralia Station. It resolves the confusion over the naming of Centralia Station and Middle Station found in various civilian and military documents of the time. And finally, it completes the routing of the San Antonio to El Paso stage line between Head of the Concho Station, on the Concho River, and the Pecos Mail Station on the Pecos River.

**Final 1868 – 1886 San Antonio To El Paso Routes and periods from Concho Mail
Station to the Pecos River & Fort Stockton (turn sideways to view)**



Resources

Ashmore

2023 *The Concho Mail Station (41TG427)*

<https://assets.zyrosite.com/AzGE74rQ66UMXrKb/the-concho-mail-station-Qalmv0Kpfqxnfsi.pdf>

2023 (updated 2025) *Pecos Mail Station (41CX1825/1826) & Camp Melvin (41CX20): The Rest Of The Story*

<https://assets.zyrosite.com/AzGE74rQ66UMXrKb/pecos-mail-station-and-camp-melvin-AR0LjyEBOnCZJMvq.pdf>

2024 *Ficklin Ferry Crossing and Old Camp Melvin (Melbourne)*

<https://assets.zyrosite.com/AzGE74rQ66UMXrKb/ficklin-ferry-crossing-c9UVqKs1MGv79CHS.pdf>

Austerman, Wayne

1948 *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules, The San Antonio – El Paso Mail, 1851 – 1881*, Texas A&M University Press, 1985

Riemenschneider, Larry

1998 *Grierson's Spring – Military Outpost, 1878 – 1882*, Journal for Big Bend Studies, Volume 10

https://www.academia.edu/36004916/Griersons_Spring_Military_Outpost_1872_1878