

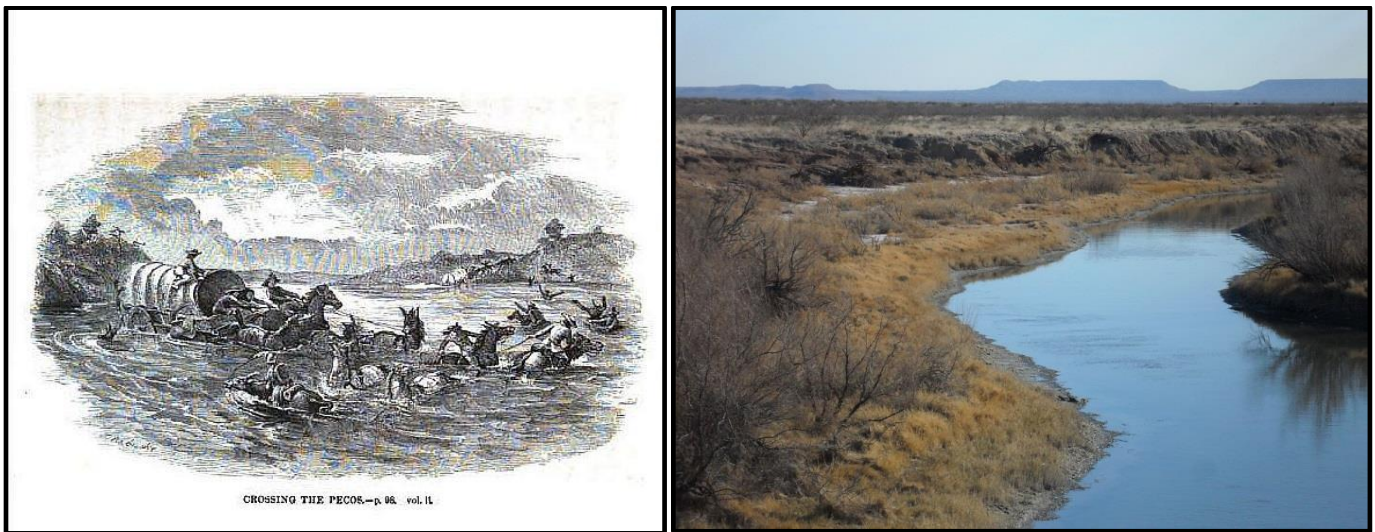
The Pecos River's Horsehead Crossing

Updated 2024, Tom Ashmore, West Texas Archeological Society

Oct 30th, 1850: *"After breakfast, I examined the river with a view of crossing, intending to devote the day to it, and recruit our tired animals. Found the water at Horse-head Crossing, which was a quarter of a mile from our encampment, to afford the greatest facilities. Here there was a bank about half the height of the main bank, to which there was an easy descent, and one equally to the water. It is the place where other parties seem to have crossed, and hence rendered easy of access. I noticed long line of horse or mule skulls placed along the bank, which probably gave it the name it bears."*

John Russel Bartlett

Bartlett goes on to describe a harrowing experience trying to cross the swift waters and keeping their wagons and mules from being swept away. In order to cross, they had to enter the waters and let the stream pull them with the current while making it to the opposite bank, some distance down from the entry point.



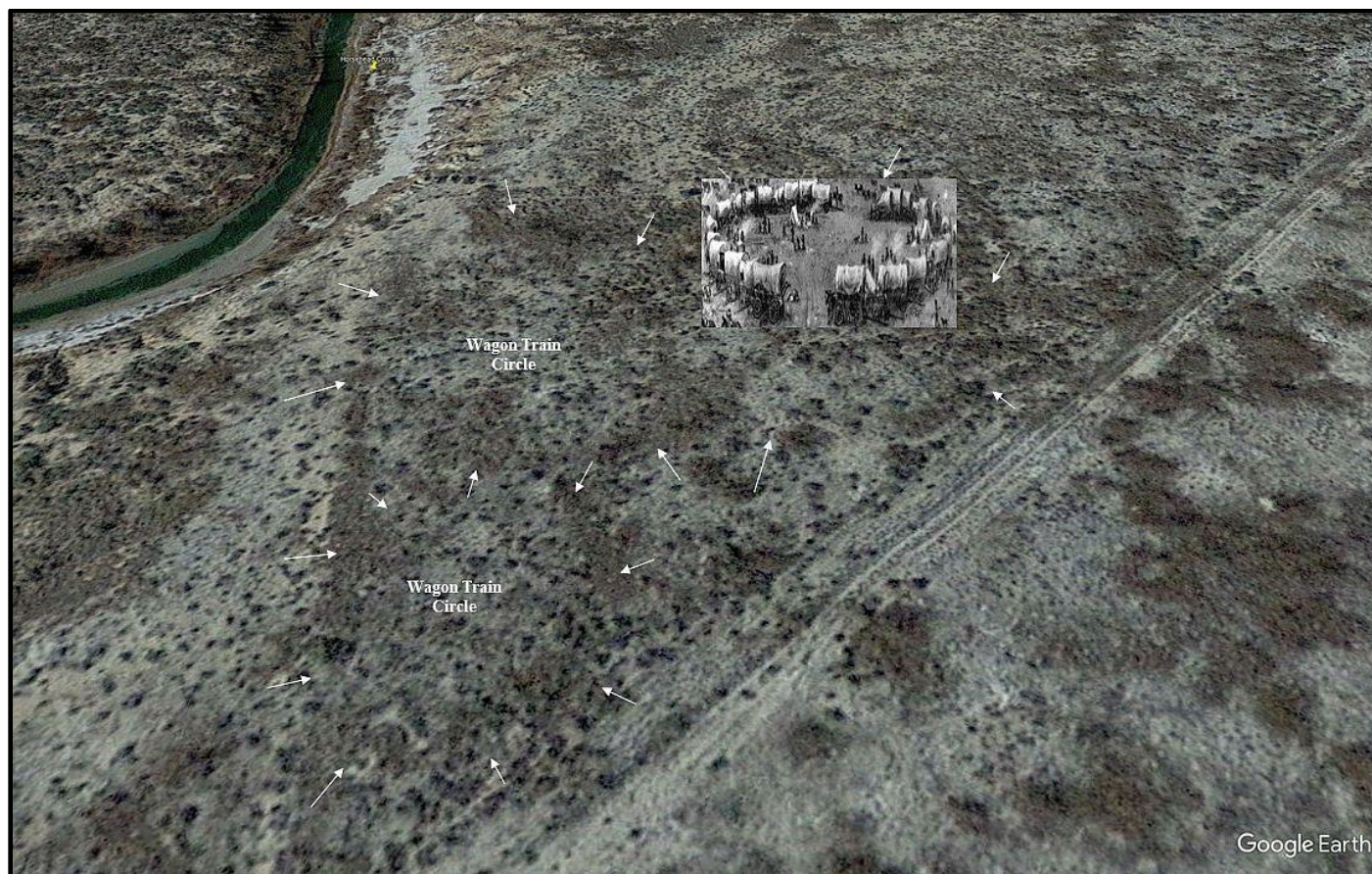
Drawing from Bartlett's account of 1850 crossing the Pecos River at Horsehead Crossing

Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River is not well known today, but in the days of the opening of the West, it was very well known. It was the main crossing for the early Jumano Indians on their trading excursions, the Comanche on their raids into Mexico, the early emigrants on their way to California, the Butterfield Overland Mail, and numerous freighters and cattle drives on their way to and from New Mexico, and even up into Colorado and Wyoming. Horsehead Crossing was one of the few fordable points on the Pecos River in the early days of this wild and open territory. The Pecos River's steep, muddy banks, unpredictable currents, and quicksand were a danger in most other locations for many miles in each direction. After long treks across the surrounding desert, thirsty animals would either drink themselves to death or become hopelessly mired in the mud at the crossing. This was especially true for the Comanche raids coming back up from Mexico, where horses were the main commodity of the raids, and this is what gave it the name.

The Wagon Trains

Horsehead Crossing was the closest and only known crossing of the Pecos at the time the wagon trains were moving west to join the California Gold Rush. This was the only crossing known of and reported on at the time. Thus, they were not going to risk searching for another crossing and getting stuck on the east side of the river. They crossed and headed up the west side until they could continue on to El Paso. Later, the wagon trains were looking to make it to the new safety of Fort Stockton, and Horsehead Crossing was the closest point to that respite. The wagon trains would hold up on the east side, rest, and make plans for the crossing. Often, this meant a complicated plan of floating possessions across the river before attempting to take the wagons into the water, which was up to the beds of the wagons at the best of times. Sometimes, it meant floating the wagons with empty water barrels strapped to the sides.

When wagon trains held up for the night, they circled the wagons in the same manner as seen in Hollywood movies. Through satellite imagery, you can still see the images on the ground of those wagon circles on the east side.

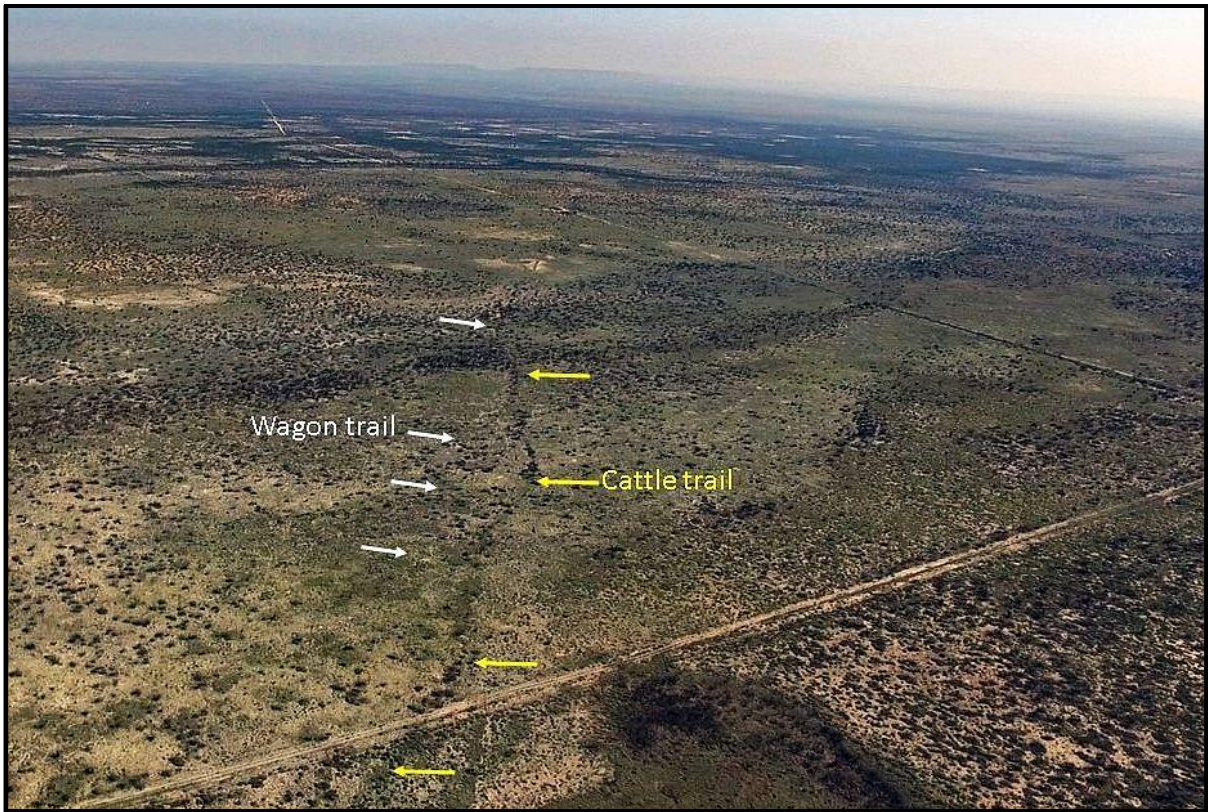


Wagon train circles still visible in vegetation growth

Horsehead Crossing Cattle Drives

During my early research in my satellite imagery study of the Pecos River along the Butterfield Trail, I was struck by the visibility of another trail, which was not as clearly defined but paralleling the wagon trail. I realized this parallel trail was the remains of the many cattle drives that paralleled the old wagon trail. Once you see this, the logic is obvious. The cowboys knew that if they let the cattle follow the wagon trail, they would destroy it as a road. So they kept their herds near it but not on it.

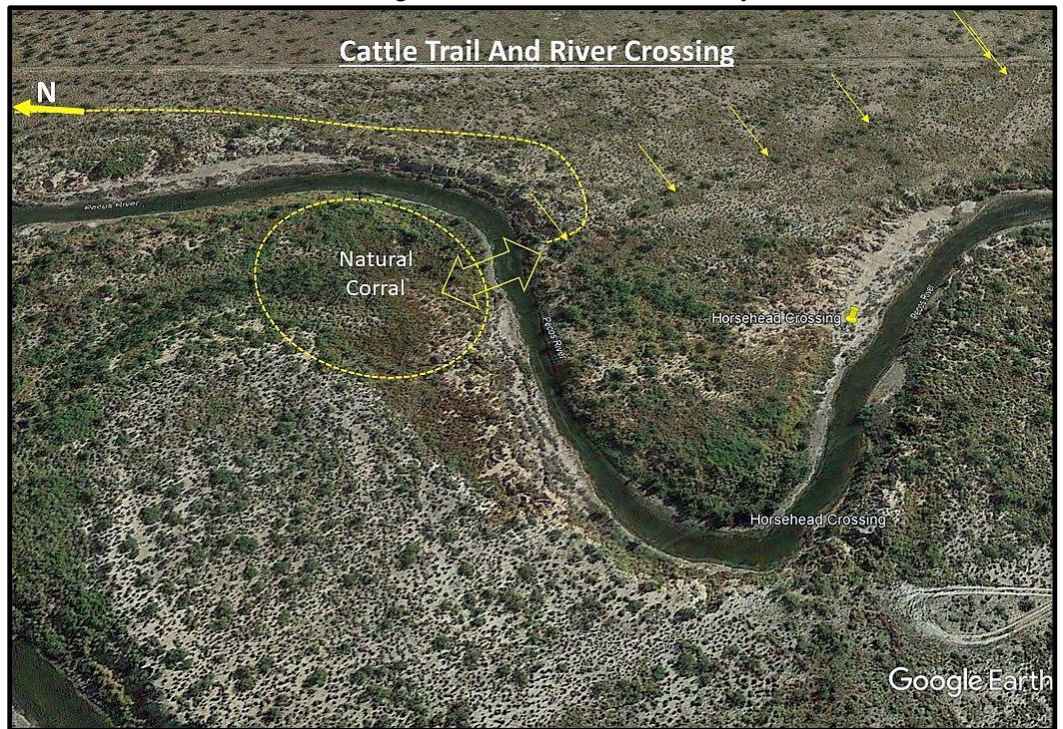
When Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving made their first cattle drive to New Mexico in 1866, they weren't quite sure what they were getting themselves into. After 72 hours non-stop with no water, they passed through Castle Gap, just 12 miles from the Pecos River. The cattle became crazed for water, and when they passed through the gap, they could smell the water and burst into a run. They ran so hard that the ones behind the leaders pushed them right across the river, so they could not even stop to drink.



Cattle and wagon trails running side-by-side coming into Horsehead Crossing

After the herd crossed the river, Goodnight turned them back to the water to get their fill. After a few days of rest, they started what remained of the herd up the east side of the Pecos, heading to the southeastern boundary of New Mexico. Their herd of 2,000 was now down to about 1,500. Hundreds were lost on the three-day waterless trek, and hundreds more died in quicksand along the river. Despite the losses, they made an excellent profit when they sold at Fort Sumner. Thus began the many cattle drives across West Texas and on to New Mexico and Colorado.

It turns out that there was not just a single crossing point at Horsehead Crossing, but four distinct trails that can still be seen in the Google Earth imagery, covering two bends of the river. It takes a lot to develop a trail that



can still be seen in satellite imagery 160 years later, so this was not by happenstance. Other than the main and well-known wagon crossing, a second trail breaks off from the general wagon road coming from the east and heads to a different section of the river to cross, around the northern bend of the river and to the northwest. This trail is not as distinct as the wagon trail and looks much like the cattle trail that parallels the main wagon trail heading into Castle Gap.

It appears the cowboys learned to control the cattle coming out of the Gap, and they were directed to this section, probably to keep them from destroying the wagon crossing location. It also leads right into a perfect bend in the river on the western side that could be used as a kind of natural corral for resting and watering the cattle.

I made it a point to visit each location to determine if the terrain (embankments leading to the water) made sense for a crossing of these types. The terrain does fit for good crossing locations in each case. The eastern embankments for the cattle crossing are broken down at the exact spots the imagery showed the trails leading up to, and they are not broken down in the other locations. The western embankment is a shallow and easy rise up from the water.



Looking at eastern side of later cattle crossing broken down embankment

Horsehead Crossing and The Comanche War Trail

Another crossing that appears to have no relationship to the wagon or cattle trails heads north to south, crossing close to the area of the probable cattle crossing but headed in a completely different direction. Following it in both directions determined that this was the Comanche War Trail, headed to Big Spring to the north and Comanche Springs, now Fort Stockton, to the south. On their raids into Mexico, these were two well-known watering stops for the Comanche.



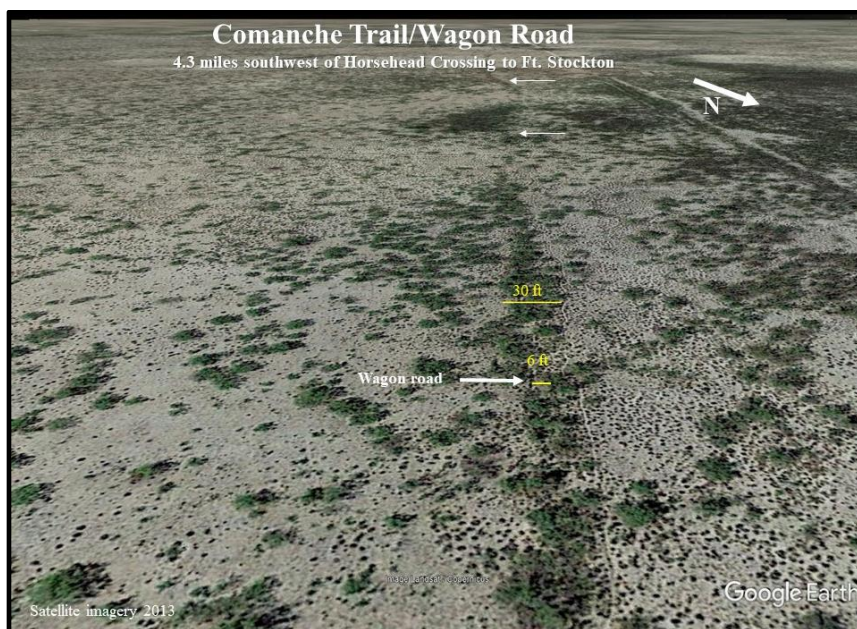
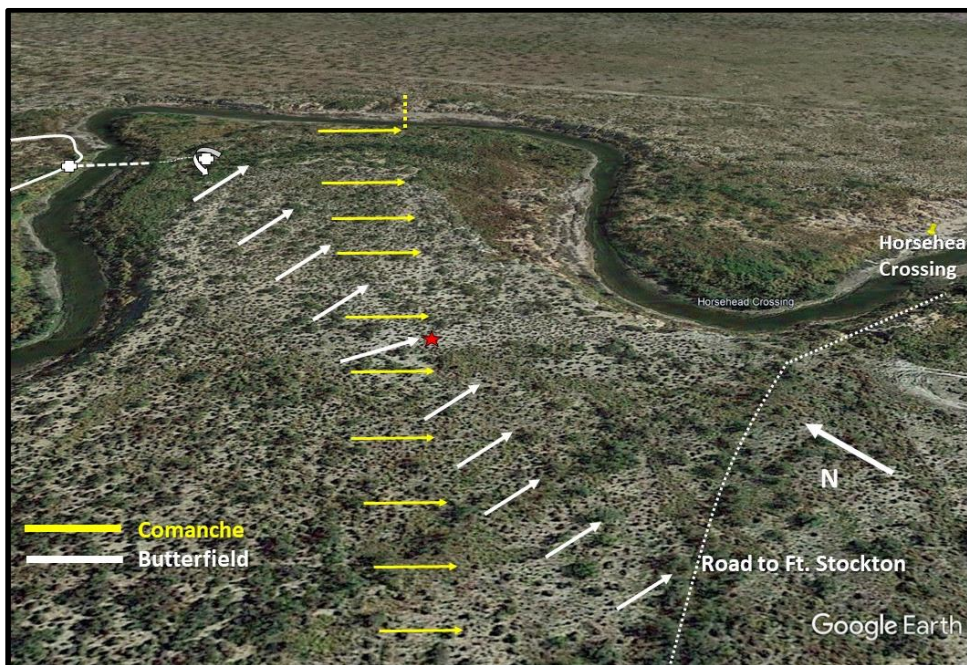
Comanche Trail crossing location

The year was 1859, and the Butterfield Overland Mail route had been changed from continuing up the Pecos River and crossing the Guadalupe Mountains to a new route down to Camp Stockton and on to Fort Davis and El Paso through a southern route. A westbound passenger noted after leaving from the west side of the river on the way to Camp Stockton, the coach crossed “eight beaten paths, side by side [which] indicated the frequency of their bloody raids into northern Mexico for cattle, horses, and children.”

Through Google Earth analysis, both trails and the crossing point mentioned by the passenger can be found.

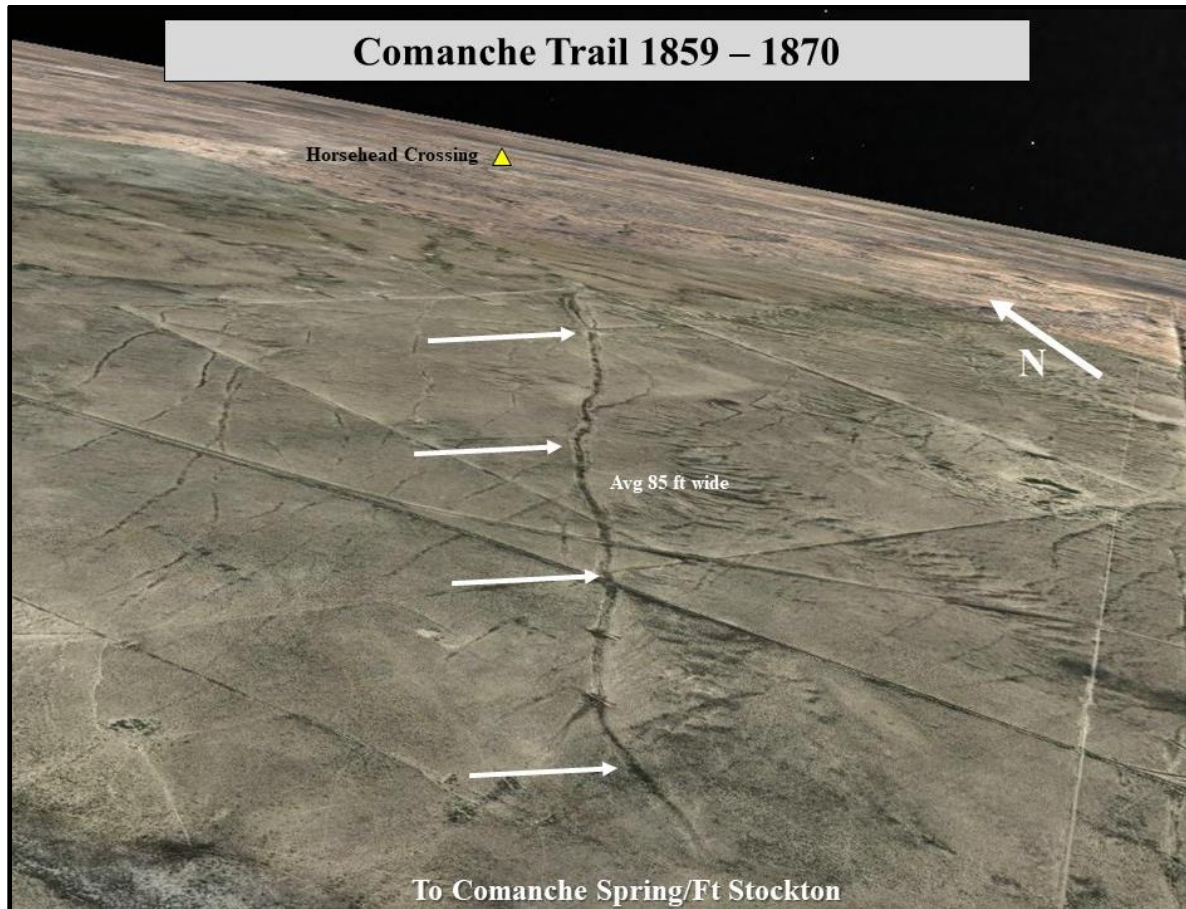
Although the stagecoach/wagon road becomes one with the Comanche Trail just a little further west, the two trails diverged to their separate crossing points, making an X just before each reached the water line.

As you can see in the image below, the wagon road and the Comanche Trail merge into one soon after leaving Horsehead Crossing. The wagon road runs right down the middle of the Indian trail and all the way to Fort Stockton. At the time, I’m sure there was no brush growing up as it is today, and it was the easiest ready-made road for the stagecoach and wagons. The road makes a straight line to a low plateau seven miles from the river. Although the wagon road is only about eight feet wide, the brush scar averages 40 feet wide to the plateau.



Over a million horses - possibly even double that number - were herded over this same trail year after year, and running the horses off to the side of each previous trail created a wider and wider swath. As the need came for a good wagon road from Horsehead Crossing to the newly created Camp Stockton, and later Fort Stockton, with its growing town and the already made trail, this was the easiest and straightest route. This wagon road became

a major roadway and connection from all points east, which probably helped to keep this trail from being modified by ranchers until early in the 1900s.



Horsehead Crossing Stagecoach Station

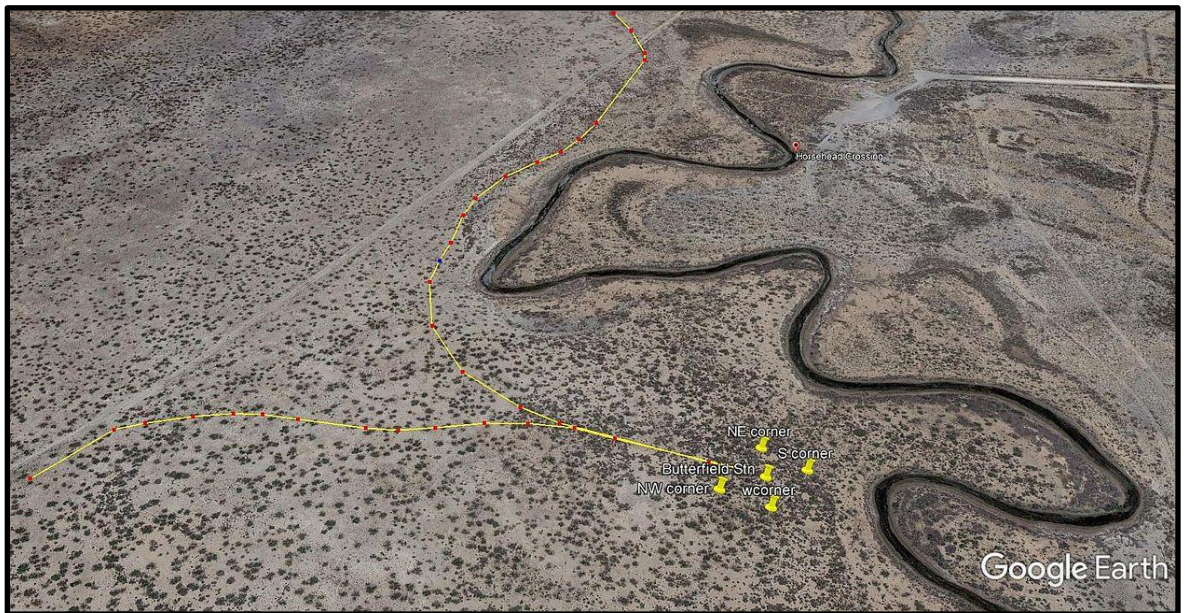
Horsehead Crossing Station was probably completed in the spring of 1858. But it wasn't long after that the route was dramatically changed, abandoning the northern route and moving to a southern route from the Pecos River through Fort Stockton, Fort Davis, and Fort Quitman before heading on to El Paso. They accomplished this by building a 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.

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 now be easily identified through Google Earth satellite imagery.



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

In this case, a well-known wagon road heads upriver from the Horsehead Crossing cutoff to the next crossing point, Emigrant Crossing, and passes by this bend in the river. From that wagon road, another, less well-traveled wagon road can be seen in satellite imagery leading in and out of the bend and directly to the location of this former structure.



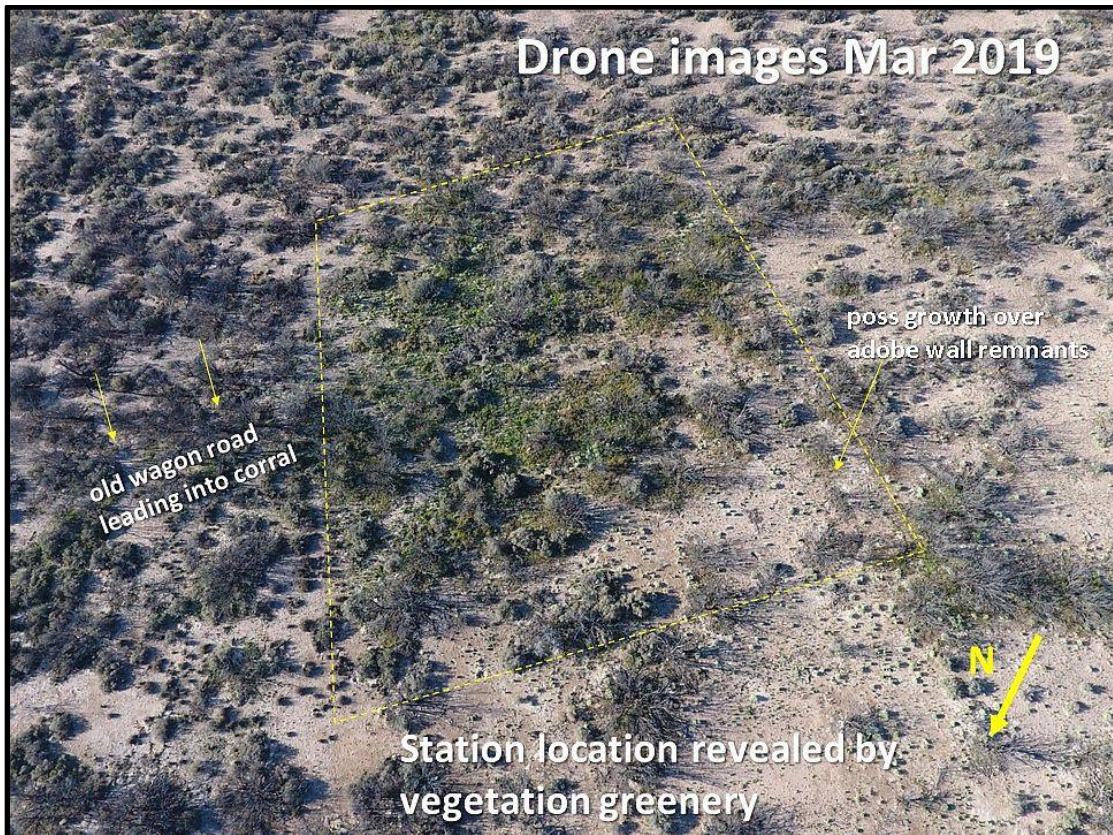
Wagon road leading in and out to the former structure. (Long straight line in upper left corner is modern fence line.)

Additionally, this road leads directly to 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 the 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 while changing out the mules.



Wagon road leading directly into the rear of the compound.

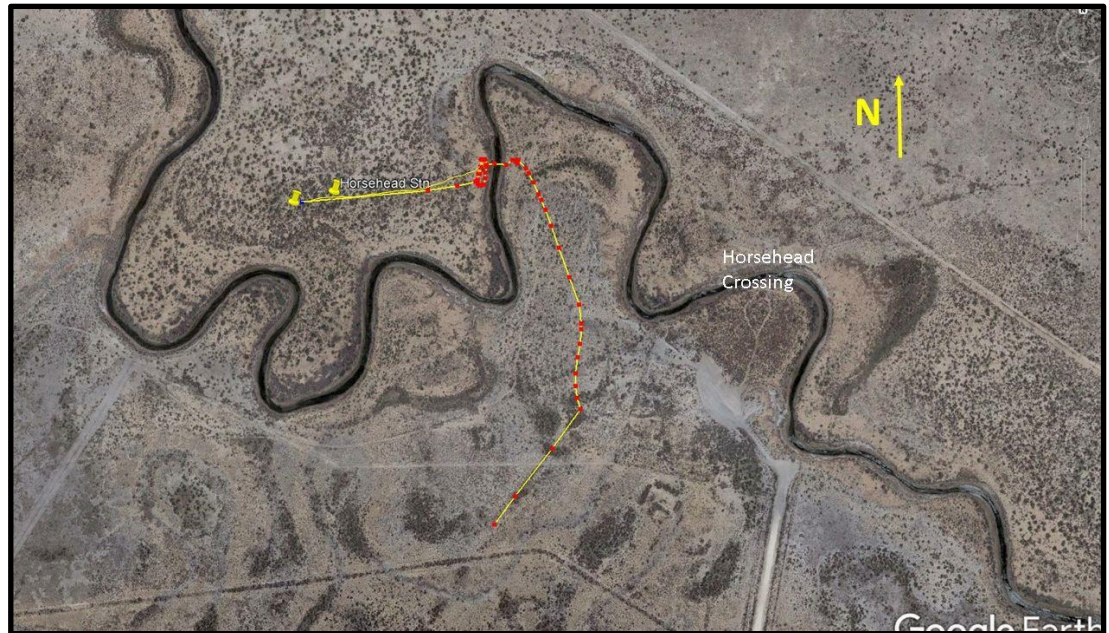
Drone images reveal that the site is the only location in the bend with greening vegetation and is all within the rectangular shape of the old compound. It is common for former building sites to take on a completely different vegetative cycle after the site is long gone. This is due to the process of 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 the mulching of a garden - but is an entirely unintentional and natural process. The most greening of the site is to the rear, where the mules were kept.



Drone image of old stagecoach 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. The line of bushes beginning at the station and on level land has to have been created from a former wagon road.

The documented Butterfield ferry system answers the question of 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)



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

The company built a ferry system near the station to accomplish this change. 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)

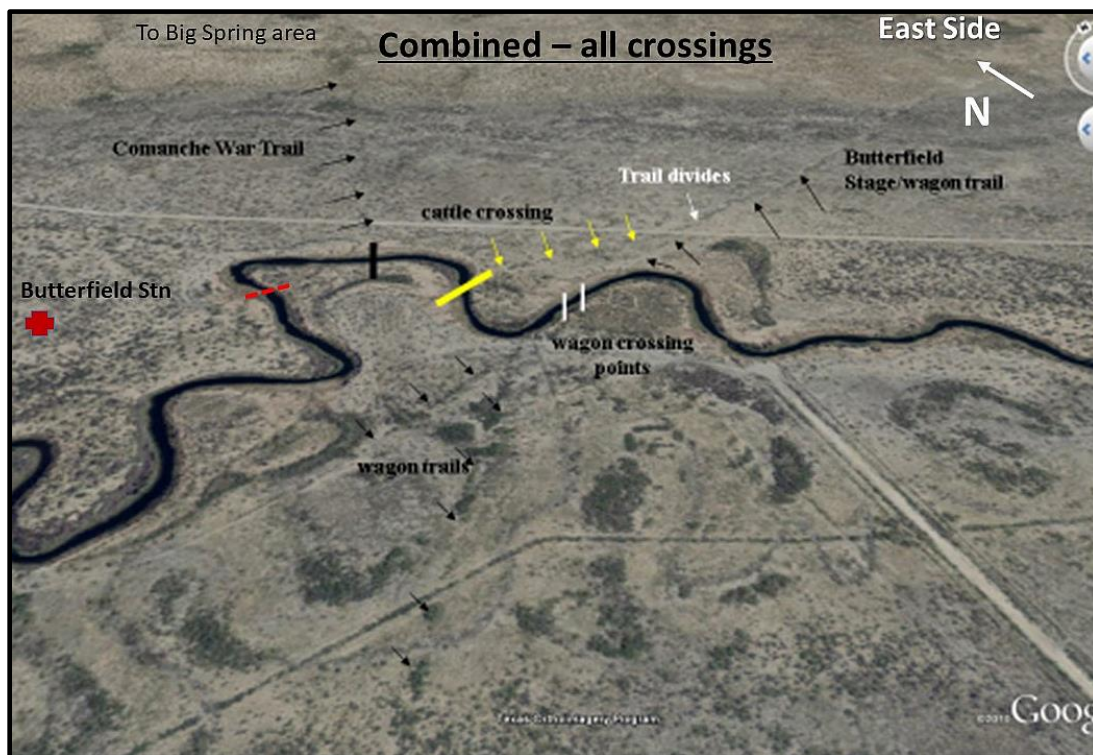
The skiff probably was connected to a rope line to keep it from being swept downstream with the current. From this point on, the station continued to operate under this route and methodology.

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



Illustration of the stagecoach crossing point

So, these are the four crossing points of Horsehead Crossing: wagons, cattle, Indian, and stagecoach skiff. This study has taken us a full seven years to understand completely. The new technology, on-ground reconnaissance, and research has brought back the understanding of this famous and dangerous point on the Pecos River.



All trails leading in and out of Horsehead Crossing, looking from the west.

For full reports on: Horsehead Crossing Butterfield Stage Station, Comanche War Trail, or the road from Horsehead Crossing to Fort Stockton, (including Antelope Spring Station), see our website: <https://westtexasarcheologicalsociety.website/reports>

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