

***The Butterfield Trail Through
The Concho Valley
And
West Texas***



***Tom Ashmore
2019***

Forward

Over a ten plus year period it was my pleasure to work with Tom Ashmore on numerous Concho Valley Archeology Society projects. One of the major projects was a CVAS project at Fort Chadbourne, which lasted for 5 or 6 years. Other projects included rock shelters on the Nature Conservancy property along Independence Creek over a 4 or 5 years. Others include Horsehead Crossing and the immigrant Trail at the Green Mounds. Last but not least are the two lost Butterfield stage stations, Johnson station and Grape Creek station.

Johnson station and Grape Creek station as we know them were no longer visible to a person casually passing close by. Even the ranch owners were unaware of the location of either Butterfield site. Now that these sites are uncovered after years of being lost to posterity we can confidently pass along to those that follow us our knowledge of where these long lost sites are located. It was my pleasure to work with Tom on this project over about a 10 year time period. After gaining permission from the property owners we were allowed to access the general area and begin our search for the exact site. If it were not for Tom's skill in reading satellite maps and his skill in following the scar left on the land by the mules and the stage coaches we would have never found the sites. I can honestly say that I was a skeptic at first in reading the satellite facts but after Tom educated me on how to use the tools I came to be a believer in the latest modern day technology, which helped us solve a mystery. I really became a believer in the use of the new technology when Tom and I went to the ranches to match up the satellite picture with the ranch land. With satellite map in hand we found where the stage line crossed the main ranch road near the Grape Creek Station. We walked the stage trail in multiple places near the Grape Creek Stage Station and our satellite guidance maps opened these doors for us. Again I'll say that without Tom's skill in reading satellite maps and his application of this modern technology we would have never found the Johnson Station or the Grape Creek Station. I am a firm believer in the use of this technology and I attach my name to Tom's report concurring with his findings.

On the Grape Creek site Tom and I worked the site on the weekends and used our metal detectors to pin point the metal objects remaining. During the week it was my job to search the archives at Fort Concho reading the Scouting reports looking for any mention of the Grape Creek Station by the cavalry. We also looked into historical articles for mention of the Grape Creek Station. We came upon an article in Marvin Hunter's magazine from 1911 by Emma Elkins, which shed light on what happened when the Indians attacked. Of course we referred to the Conkling books repeatedly to be certain that we stayed accurate with our work in the field.

Surely those that follow us will find our efforts to be beneficial and will expand their knowledge of an important time in the Concho Valley. I am proud to have been a part of this team effort and greatly appreciate Tom sharing with me his skills acquired in satellite map reading acquired during his 20 years in military intelligence.

C.A. Maedgen, III

Region 10 Director for TAS

1/9/2019

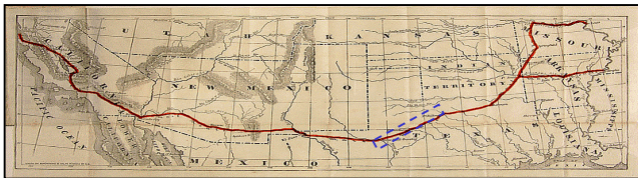
SMU BS Geology 1966,

SMU MFA Communications 1968

Introduction

One of the most significant periods in West Texas' Concho Valley was the period of pre and post-Civil War. This period saw exploding expansion in our country as emigrants made their way through this area to points further west, mostly New Mexico and California. This brought about the Butterfield Stage line from 1857 to 1861, as well as settlers, cattle drives and trade caravans on this same trail. It also brought with it the Indian wars as the Apache and Comanche viewed this expansion as encroachment on their land so necessary to the survival of their tribes. As the attacks on settlers and emigrants increased it brought more military camps and forts to the region. As such, studying the various locations related to these times is significant to clarifying the people and events of those times.

The West Texas section of the Butterfield Trail was one of the most difficult for stagecoach travelers. When they left Fort Chadbourne heading west they knew they were in for a rough ride. Because the trail ran through a dry and unpopulated country - and the fact that it continued to be used long after the Butterfield Overland Mail was discontinued in 1861 - the impression can still be seen by a trained eye through satellite imagery in places that no trail can be found on the ground.



Section of Butterfield Trail studied

Many efforts were made over the years to detail the Butterfield Overland Mail route through West Texas. The team of Roscoe and Margaret Conkling conducted the most famous, documented in their 1947 two-volume book, 'Butterfield Overland Mail' (Conkling). This route study is still considered today to be the most accurate and a sort of bible of the trail's route. However, during their research of West Texas they were unable to actually travel many sections of the trail and had to rely on local residents' memory of just where the trail ran. Often the memory of residents turned out to be close, but not absolutely accurate. This series of reports researched over a 12 year period attempts to clear up some of these gaps while taking a journey from Fort Chadbourne to the Pecos River on the Butterfield Trail.

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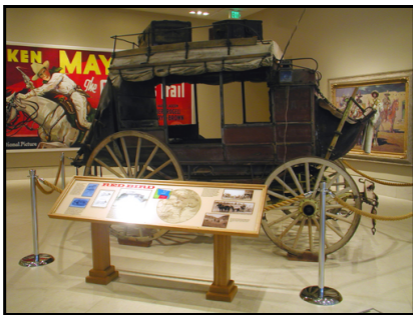
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1. Butterfield Overland Mail Overview

The official government contract for the Butterfield Overland Mail began in September, 1858, running semiweekly from Tipton, Missouri, and Memphis, Tennessee, to San Francisco, California and the same in the opposite direction. However, the contract was acquired one year prior with a stipulation the mail would begin to run for the government within one year. That year was spent building roads, stations, bridges and everything else needed to complete the project (Butterfield Overland Mail –TSHA). Stages probably began running during that year, but it is unlikely they were carrying paying passengers. They may well have been running as part of the preparation and supplies for the formal opening in September 1858.

The Butterfield Overland Mail schedule called for stagecoaches to pass in each direction twice per week. The coach was fitted with three seats, and these were occupied by nine passengers. As the occupants of the front and middle seats faced each other, it was necessary for these six people to interlock their knees. About all the rest of the coach was full of mail bags (Butterfield Overland Mail - Smithsonian).

For the West Texas portion of the trip the wagons were more rugged than the eastern Concord coaches. They were built especially for Butterfield and were called Celerity Wagons or Mud Wagons due to their rugged construction.



Celerity Wagon used by Butterfield Overland Mail Company
(Photo Courtesy of the Booth Western Art Museum)

Another unique aspect of the West Texas portion of the route were the mules used to pull the wagons. They used semi-wild Spanish Mules. Spanish Mules were originally brought from Spain to Mexico. They were smaller than their larger cousins and the mules we are familiar with today. They were hardier in this rough and dry country.



Print of a 19th Century Spanish Cowboy riding his mule
(Courtesy www.mulesspan.com)

The coaches would arrive Tuesdays and Fridays heading west and Wednesdays and Saturdays heading east. The entire trip took 24 days in one direction.

No. 1.]

[Sep. 16th, 1858.

OVERLAND MAIL COMPANY.

THROUGH TIME SCHEDULE BETWEEN

ST. LOUIS, MO., MEMPHIS, TENN. } & SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

GOING WEST.

GOING EAST.

LEAVE	DAYS	Hour.	Distance from St. Louis.	Time allowed.	Arrive at St. Louis.	LEAVE	DAY.	Hour.	Distance from St. Louis.	Time allowed.	Arrive at St. Louis.
St. Louis, Mo., & Memphis, Tenn.	Every Monday & Thursday.	8.00 A.M.	360	10	16	San Francisco, Cal.	Every Monday & Thursday.	8.00 A.M.	360	10	16
P. R. R. Terminus, Springfield.	" Monday & Thursday	6.00 P.M.	180	19	16	Pirebain's Ferry, Visalia.	" Tuesday & Friday,	11.00 A.M.	162	27	6
Fayetteville, Ark.	" Wednesday & Saturday	7.45 A.M.	143	37 3/4	3 1/2	" Wednesday & Saturday	5.00 A.M.	82	18	2	2 1/2
Fort Smith, Tex.	" Thursday & Sunday.	10.15 A.M.	100	36 1/2	3 1/2	" Thursday & Sunday.	9.00 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2	4 1/2
Sherman, Tex.	" Friday & Monday.	3.30 A.M.	65	17 1/2	3 1/2	" Friday & Monday.	3.30 P.M.	150	30 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Chadbourn, Tex.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	12.00 A.M.	205	45	4 1/2	" Sunday & Wednesday.	1.30 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2	4 1/2
Pecos River, (on crossing)	" Monday & Thursday.	9.00 A.M.	146 1/2	35 1/2	4 1/2	" Monday & Thursday.	7.30 P.M.	135	30	4 1/2	4 1/2
El Paso.	" Tuesday & Friday.	3.15 P.M.	136	30 1/2	4 1/2	" Wednesday & Saturday	3.00 A.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
Soldier's Farewell, Tucson, Arizona.	" Thursday & Sunday.	3.45 A.M.	165	30 1/2	4 1/2	" Thursday & Sunday.	8.00 P.M.	184 1/2	41	4 1/2	4 1/2
Tucson, Arizona.	" Saturday & Tuesday.	11.00 A.M.	248 1/2	55 1/2	4 1/2	" Saturday & Tuesday.	5.30 A.M.	150	30 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
Gila River, Cal.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	3.30 P.M.	150	35 1/2	4 1/2	" Monday & Thursday.	12.45 P.M.	248 1/2	55 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Yuma, Cal.	" Tuesday & Friday.	1.30 P.M.	124 1/2	41	4 1/2	" Wednesday & Saturday	1.15 A.M.	165	35 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
San Bernardino, Cal.	" Wednesday & Saturday	9.00 P.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2	" Thursday & Sunday.	7.30 A.M.	138	30 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
Ft. Tejon, (on crossing)	" Friday & Monday.	3.00 A.M.	135	30	4 1/2	" Friday & Monday.	4.00 P.M.	145 1/2	32 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
Visalia.	" Saturday & Tuesday.	11.00 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2	" Sunday & Wednesday.	1.00 P.M.	205	45	4 1/2	4 1/2
Pirebain's Ferry, (on crossing)	" Monday & Thursday.	7.30 A.M.	150	35 1/2	4 1/2	" Monday & Thursday.	6.15 A.M.	65	17 1/2	3 1/2	3 1/2
San Francisco.	" Tuesday & Friday.	11.30 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2	" Tuesday & Friday.	8.45 A.M.	100	26 1/2	3 1/2	3 1/2
	" Wednesday & Saturday	5.30 A.M.	82	18	4 1/2	" Wednesday & Saturday	10.30 P.M.	143	37 1/2	4 1/2	4 1/2
	" Thursday & Sunday.	5.30 A.M.	103	27	6	" Thursday & Sunday.	10.30 P.M.	160	40	4 1/2	4 1/2

This Schedule may not be exact—Superintendents, Agents, Stationers, Conductors, Drivers and all employees are particularly directed to use every possible expedient to get the stages through in quick time, even though they may be short of this time.

Remember that no allowance is made in the time for ferries, changing teams, &c. It is therefore necessary that each driver increase his speed over the average per hour enough to gain the necessary time for each, changing teams, crossing ferries, &c.

Every person in the Company's employ will always bear in mind that each minute of time is of importance. If each driver on the route loses fifteen (15) minutes, it would make a total loss of time on the entire route, of twenty-five (25) hours, or more than one day. If each one loses ten (10) minutes it would make a total loss of sixteen and one half (16 1/2) hours, or the best part of a day.

On the contrary, if each driver gains that amount of time, it saves a corresponding time against accidents and other delays.

All hands will see the great necessity of promptness and dispatch; every minute of time is valuable as the Company has order heavy freight if the mail is behind time.

Care should be taken that the hour and date of departure from Station, the cause of delay, if any, and all particulars. They must also report the same fully to their respective Superintendents.

* The Station referred to on this Route is at the west end of Mariposa Wells.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD.

Pres't.

2. Satellite Imagery Interpretation of Historic Trails

Satellite imagery is the new tool in the archeology tool set. This is now well known in the professional archeological community, but it is also available to amateur historians and archeologists. We need to keep pace with the technology as it continues to emerge and use it to its fullest in helping us reveal the past. I think that we will continue to find that with this new tool we will find some of the accepted theories will either be modified or more fully fleshed out, filling in what the military refers to as intelligence gaps. In this case we can call them historical gaps.

The advent of publicly accessible satellite imagery via Google Earth played a crucial role in finding and interpreting this particular site. First, it helped find it by being able to follow the Butterfield Trail, something previously unavailable through other means. Even after 156 years the trail trace is visible to the trained eye.

The reason an historic trail can be traced through satellite imagery is that satellite images can show slight differences in the vegetation caused by the years of constant use of the trail and then allowing the vegetation to grow back after the abandoning of the trail. The vegetation will generally grow back slightly different than the surround area due to the trail having become a depression which later attracts more soil and water runoff from rains. Bushes and grass tend to grow slightly healthier in the depressions. In most areas it can be so slight that casual observation on the ground or even from an aircraft cannot detect it. However, using satellite imagery, especially with multiple images of the same location using Google Earth's 'Historical Imagery' tool, a trained eye can find the trace of these vegetation changes in long wagon trail lines across the terrain. A good example of this is a spot just off Arden Road, outside of San Angelo. Standing on the spot where the trail is and looking directly down the trail, if you did not know it was an old trail you would take the difference in the terrain and vegetation as natural. However, you can see just a slightly better growth in the grass from the long ago depression.

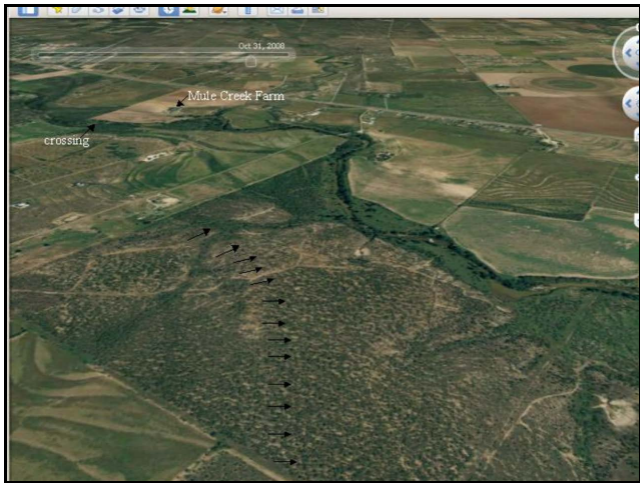


Standing on Butterfield Trail looking north. Note the slight depression and tall grass.

Using satellite imagery from an extreme oblique angle, which is what Google Earth allows, can reveal the slight difference in a much more striking contrast and you can see the trail as it snakes across the countryside. However, another extremely important feature in Google Earth that is needed to follow the more difficult stretches of trail is the historical imagery capability. When looking at a location with the historical imagery capability set to on, you can move through the many years of images, looking at the exact same piece of earth from the exact same angle and find the one that will show the trace best for that piece of earth. I try to angle it out and go pretty far out so I get a long distance look. That is usually where I can see the faint trails best. The old trails tend to not follow existing boundaries or roads. When you see a faint trail crossing multiple properties, but in no logical relationship to modern boundaries it is a good bet it is an old trail. They always followed the easiest terrain possible - no steep cuts or hills. If they had to go down a cut they would always find the easiest way possible. You have to look at the trails from all different angles to pick them out piece by piece. Sometimes I go backward as if I'm looking out the back of an airplane and sometime I go forward as if I'm looking out the front. I've even followed the trail sideways. It all depends and it's a lot of trial and error. I connect the pieces together using the Google Earth line drawing tool to put a line down on top of it and then I begin with the next piece from the end of the line. Most of the time the trail is darker rather than lighter. Sometimes it looks like a bunch of bushes in a row and sometimes it is just some dark

plotching that ends up looking like a faint line. The final trick is to be able to move the image forward and backward or side-to-side. For some reason, this allows your eyes to pick up the hard-to-find trace line where they could not in a still picture. I've found that the best elevation to be at is around 3,000 feet.

The following picture shows the trail as it heads to the North Concho River crossing point. Notice the slightly darker vegetation in a line highlighted by arrows.



Satellite image of Butterfield Trail as it heads north to Middle Concho River crossing
(Google Earth)

3. The Butterfield Trail From Fort Chadbourne

In order to be sure you are on the Butterfield Trail you need to begin from a known point. In this case we know that Fort Chadbourne was a main stage stop for the Butterfield Overland Mail and we know exactly where the stage building is. With this we can start our journey, heading west.

According to Conkling, the stage headed from the stage stop “west for about a quarter mile to the crossing on Oak Creek where the stream may still be forded at normal flow.” Conkling continued, “It then followed a winding course through the hills bordering the river.” Finally, they state the trail crossed the Colorado River at the location of Buffalo Creek. The problem quickly encountered was that the most prominent trail out of the fort heads not west, but south to a very deep cut in the stream, crossed a small bridge, in which only the abutments remain, and continued due south in a generally straight line and crossed the river at a location other than Buffalo Creek. This road was confirmed by multiple map sources later produced by the military. After crossing the Colorado River it also heads to the Grape Creek Mail Station, also documented in military maps.

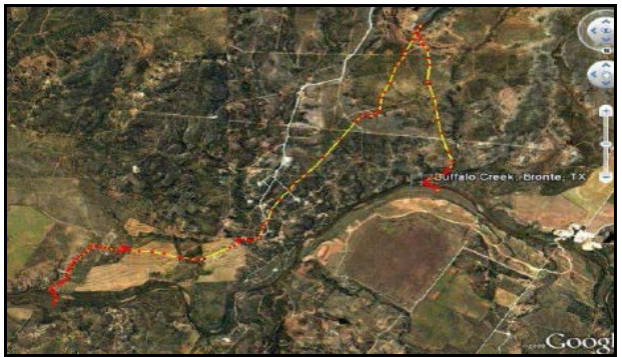


Satellite image of Fort Chadbourne and trail trace leaving station and heading south
(Google Earth)

The road described by Conkling was much harder to trace, but I finally was able to find it and follow it exactly as described. Although undocumented, this means there were actually two different roads to the Colorado River used during different periods of time. The one described by Conkling was the road laid out by the military to move from their earlier location of Camp Johnston on the North Concho River. It follows a path through the existing cemetery and across the highway, turning to cross the creek, as he states. From that point it begins to fade as the trace heads south. Returning to Conkling's account about the Colorado River crossing, he states, "From this point it followed along the west side of Buffalo Creek for a distance of about four miles where it diverged from the old Military road which followed on southwest by way of Pecan Spring, while the Butterfield road from this junction to the Middle Concho River, was a newly opened company-built section of road."

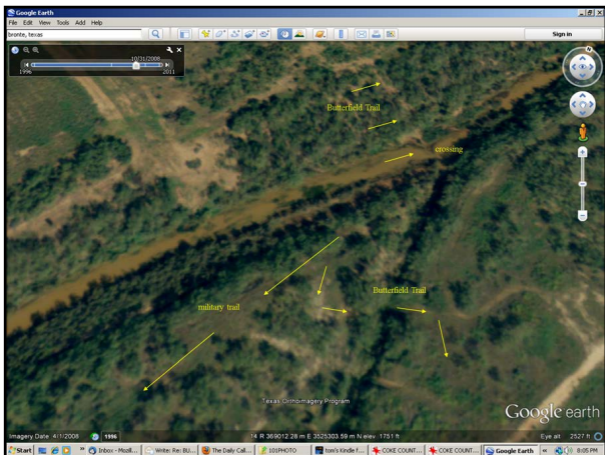
Note that he states that it was following a military road before diverging. This is significant. In old military maps this road was listed as the Joseph Johnston road. Later, a better and more direct road was built by the Butterfield Company down to the Colorado River. This one required a direct south exit from the fort and to do this they needed to build a bridge across Oak Creek, which is very deep at that point. Those bridge abutments are still there and you can trace the trail going up to them and leaving on the south side to head toward the west side of what is now the town of Bronte. After taking the more direct and easier route down to and across the Colorado River the newer road headed west to merge with the older road and continue on to the Grape Creek Station.

Below you can see where I have traced both trails heading south, where they cross the Colorado River and where they merge to continue heading south. The trail on the right is the older trail and on the left is the newer trail. There is one discrepancy in the Conkling account and that is that the trail only follows along the west side of Buffalo Creek for a short distance and then crosses to the east side. It had to cross at this point to continue south to the Grape Creek Station.

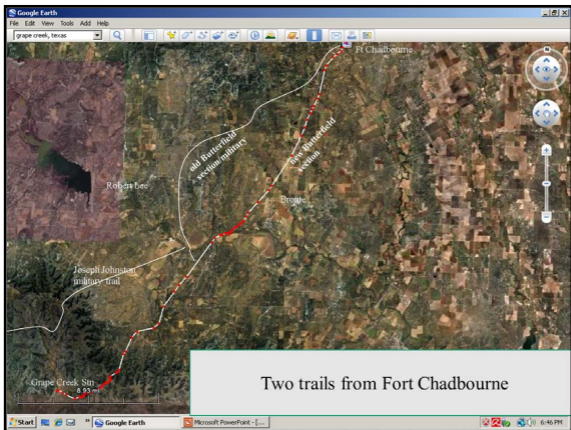


Two Colorado River points (looking south) and merge point (Google Earth)

The Butterfield Company needed to take a different route in order to set up a stage stop at the proper distance with accessible water they had determined for changes of mule teams and apparently there were no good locations on the original military route. That stage stop was to be the Grape Creek Station. So the Butterfield route diverged from the military route just after crossing the river. The military route headed SSW and the Butterfield route headed SSE.



Military Road Colorado River crossing point and deviation of original Butterfield road
(Google Earth)



After abandoning the military trail the new trail passed to the west side of what is today the town of Bronte and crossed approximately 3.5 miles east of the original crossing.



Butterfield Trail as it passed by current town of Bronte (Google Earth)



Butterfield Trail at Colorado River crossing south of Bronte (Google Earth)

This trail merged with the originally constructed offshoot from the downstream military crossing about 6 miles south to continue on to Grape Creek Station.

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