

Confusion of Texas sections of Butterfield Trail

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In Texas the Butterfield Trail has at least three separate sections that contain separate, parallel trails that were either used at different times by the Butterfield Overland Mail or were built at a later period to be used as a shortcut, with the second trail being confused with the original trail route. One section is the two trails leaving Fort Chadbourne, heading south to the first swing station, named Grape Creek Station. The second is a section along the Middle Concho River built as a shortcut by the military after the Civil War. A third section splits at Centralia Draw in far West Texas, with the original Butterfield Trail taking the northerly route and a later post-Civil War stagecoach trail taking the southerly route and both merging again before entering Castle Gap on its way to the Pecos River.

According to Conkling, the stage leaving Fort Chadbourne 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 when I attempted to follow the most prominent trail out of the fort was that it headed south to a very deep cut in the stream, crossed a small bridge, of which only the abutments remain, and continued due south in a generally straight line and crossed the Colorado River at a location other than where previously reported. This road was confirmed by multiple map sources later produced by the military. After crossing the Colorado River it merged with the former trail on its way to the Grape Creek Station.

The road described by Conkling was much harder to trace, but I finally was able to find it and follow it exactly as described through an extensive search via Google Earth. 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 to Fort Chadbourne. After crossing the Colorado River the military road headed more westerly over the hills, whereas the mail road diverged and headed south-southwest on its own course. The Butterfield Company must have used the military road at first since it was the only road in a forbidden land, but later chose a more direct and level path to the Colorado River.

When the trail reached Middle Concho River south of Grape Creek it made its way to the next swing stop, Johnson’s Station, by following the river west. Many locals and Texas state topographical maps show the Butterfield Trail not running alongside the river, but running in a straight line, essentially a half mile from the river. This trail was a later shortcut ordered built by Col Grierson while commander at Fort Concho. It was referred to at that time as the El Paso Mail Road or the Fort Stockton Road. It merged back into the old Butterfield Trail about five miles west of Johnson’s Station.



Farther west the trail came to Centralia Draw. The Butterfield Trail heads almost due west from this location, but a later post-Civil War stagecoach company, named after its owner, Ben Ficklin, chose a new route to the south and then west. Both trails again merged before making its way through the only pass to the Pecos River, Castle Gap.

The two later parallel trails were believed by most people in the area to be the original Butterfield Trail. These trails are more prominent because they were used for a longer period of time and by many more wagons than the original sections. Quite a bit of research and Google Earth imagery interpretation finally resolved the confusion of these unique sections of the trail.



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