

Marking the Butterfield: Retracing the Indian Territory Segment of the 1858–61 Butterfield Overland Mail Stagecoach Road



*By Susan Penn Dragoo**

In May 2018 the United States National Park Service recommended that the Butterfield Overland Mail Stagecoach Road be designated a National Historic Trail, becoming a part of a system of modern trails that follow as closely as possible to the original routes of travel. The Butterfield Overland Mail Company operated on the southern route from 1858 to 1861 and ran approximately 2,800 miles from Saint Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco, California. It was the first successful overland enterprise to efficiently and consistently connect the eastern United States with the west coast for mail delivery and passenger service, a need prompted by the huge migration to the Pacific coast after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. It was also the longest stage line of its time, created significant infrastructure, and was a major influence in the opening of the West.¹

One hundred ninety-two miles of the Butterfield line traversed Indian Territory, entering the Choctaw Nation from Fort Smith, Ar-

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kansas, and crossing the Red River into Texas at Colbert's Ferry, south of present-day Durant. Oklahoma historian Muriel H. Wright wrote in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* in 1933 that if a straight-edge were placed on a map of southeastern Oklahoma between Fort Smith and Old Boggy Depot (representing a significant portion of the Butterfield trail through Oklahoma), the route of the trail would deviate little from that line. Wright wrote:

It should be specially noted that the good roadbeds in the valleys, shallow crossings on the larger streams and easy passes through the outlying ridges of the San[s] Bois and the Winding Stair Mountains lay along this same line, which made it the best and the most direct route for travel from Fort Smith across the Choctaw and the Chickasaw country to Red River and points southwest. So it was a natural trailway undoubtedly followed by the native Indian tribes and by visitors to the country lying between the Arkansas and Canadian and the Red rivers long before the first permanent settlements were established in that region.²

Sixty years before the National Park Service issued its historic trail recommendation, a committee of seven representing the Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS) met in Fort Smith, Arkansas, to retrace the Indian Territory segment of the Butterfield, locate its twelve stage stations, and place permanent historical markers at each site.³ The seven—Wright, Vernon H. Brown, John D. Frizzell, Mildred Frizzell, James D. Morrison, George H. Shirk, and Lucyl A. Shirk—were charged by the OHS with this responsibility in connection with the centennial of the Overland Mail Company's service, an event widely celebrated in 1957 and 1958 along the road's original path.⁴ John D. Frizzell's restored Concord stagecoach was used in the reenactment of the stagecoach journey across the country in 1958.⁵

Planning for the Oklahoma portion of the centennial celebration had begun in November 1953 with the first meeting of an Oklahoma subcommittee, appointed by Dr. H. Bailey Carroll, Texas historian and editor, who chaired the centennial's national committee.⁶ At that initial gathering, the group agreed that plans should include the marking of the Butterfield Overland Mail Route within Oklahoma's borders. Vernon H. Brown, an American Airlines pilot, chaired the Oklahoma subcommittee, thus the reconnaissance of the Indian Territory route began with flights along the old stage road to identify and photograph visible evidence of the road and related remains.⁷ Other members of the original committee were W. E. Hollon and E. E. Dale, both of the

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Muriel Wright, 1940 (12682, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).



University of Oklahoma; Berlin B. Chapman, Oklahoma A&M College (now Oklahoma State University); and Charles Evans and Muriel H. Wright, both of the Oklahoma Historical Society.⁸

Brown and Wright both had associations with Roscoe and Margaret Conkling, authors of *The Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857–1869*, the definitive work on retracing the trail. Brown wrote that he “leaned heavily on his friends” (the Conklings) in authoring an article for *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, “American Airlines Along the Butterfield Mail Route,” and “had many talks with [them] and [found] their story of the Butterfield Overland Mail . . . most fascinating.” He added, “Their three-volume work on the subject [was] among the most treasured in the writer’s library.”⁹ Wright had served as a guide to the Conklings in 1932 “to some of the historic sites when they were mapping out their study of the Butterfield route through Oklahoma, by auto cross country, preparatory to the publication of their history,” and the Conklings mention Wright in the book’s acknowledgments.¹⁰

The 1932 excursion with the Conklings was certainly not Wright’s first exploration of the stagecoach road, known before the Overland

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Mail as the Fort Smith–Boggy Depot Road. She notes two extended field trips that took place in 1930 in a 1933 *Chronicles* article. In one, she accompanied John Y. and Margaret Bryce to historic points along portions of the road, which was an early route for immigrating Chickasaws.¹¹ In the other, she accompanied her uncle, J. B. Wright, along the road from Skullyville to Stringtown. She compiled the results of these field trips in a “book of views” with historical notes that she placed in the library of the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1931.¹² That book is now, apparently, lost to history.¹³

In September 1955 Wright, along with Brown and his wife, accompanied movie producer William H. Moore on a tour of the Oklahoma traces of the Butterfield. Moore was scouting the area for a television program on the history of the Overland Mail, to be shown in 1957. Whether it was ever produced is unknown. Wright navigated, noting “the traces of the Overland Mail Route were continuously in view all along the way.” They visited the sites of the twelve stage stations, all of which could still be seen at the time.¹⁴

It was natural that Wright would guide such expeditions. She was born in 1889 in Lehigh, Choctaw Nation, a short distance from the convergence of the Texas Road and the Butterfield. Her grandfather was Allen Wright, principal chief of the Choctaw Nation from 1866 to 1870. In 1866 it was Chief Wright who famously suggested the name “Oklahoma” for the land that would eventually become the forty-sixth state.¹⁵ Wright wrote for *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* from 1923 to 1971 and served as its editor unofficially beginning in 1943 until she was officially named the editor in 1955. She authored several Oklahoma history textbooks and played a pivotal role in launching Oklahoma’s historical marker program in the 1950s. And, as she wrote in 1957, Wright believed “the road to Fort Smith, the whole route through the Indian Territory over which the Butterfield stages ran, was the most important in the development and settle-[sic] in Oklahoma.”¹⁶

Thus, with Wright as a dedicated guide who believed in the importance of the mission, the 1958 committee was well equipped for way-finding on their expedition. The committee’s 1958 account of the status of the Oklahoma segment of the Butterfield being the most recent published on the subject in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, this writer set out in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 to retrace the trail and the committee’s route and to assess the state of the historical markers placed under the auspices of the committee. The findings of these journeys six decades apart follow.¹⁷

Before reaching Fort Smith, Arkansas, a Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach of 1858 traveled through southern Missouri and northwest-

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Butterfield Overland Mail Route map created to celebrate its centennial, 1957 (20751.36, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).

ern Arkansas, carrying mail from Saint Louis that was transported by rail to Tipton, Missouri, then the western terminus of the railroad, and placed on a stagecoach. The stagecoach acquired many passengers along the way, and a mailbag also came from Memphis to be placed on the stagecoach, or wagon, at Fort Smith for delivery to San Francisco. From Fort Smith westward, the Overland Mail at first used “celerity wagons” rather than the Concord coach.¹⁸ These wagons were lighter in weight and more suited for rapid travel over rough roads. After roads were improved and bridges built, Concord coaches were used along the line.¹⁹ As it left Fort Smith, the stage at first forded and later ferried across the Poteau River just south of the Fort Smith military installation and traveled south on the finger of land between the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers.²⁰ Today, using Highway 9A through Arkoma, Oklahoma, to cross the Poteau is the closest route to that of the actual stagecoach road.

Indian Territory’s twelve stage stations were established through contracts with Choctaw and Chickasaw citizens and located about sixteen miles apart.²¹ There, station keepers maintained a supply of livestock at the ready so that a fresh team of horses or mules could be quickly exchanged during the coach’s brief stop. The easternmost station in Indian Territory was Walker’s Station, located at Skullyville, northeast of present-day Spiro. The Choctaw Agency was established there in 1832 when the removal of the Choctaws was in progress under

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Ephemera celebrating the centennial of the Butterfield Overland Mail Route, 1958 (21646.23, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS)

the direction of Major Francis W. Armstrong, the first Choctaw agent in the West.²² The agency grew up around the town of Skullyville, so named because annuity payments were issued there to the Choctaws who called it *Iskuliville* or “Moneytown,” *iskuli* meaning “money” in Choctaw.

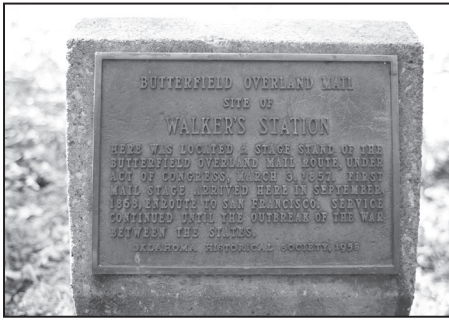
Choctaw Governor Tandy Walker later occupied the agency building and served as station keeper during the Overland Mail days. The building burned in 1947; at the time it was one of the oldest structures standing in Oklahoma.²³ The 1958 caravan, having assembled the morning of May 17, 1958, at Fort Smith’s Goldman Hotel to begin their journey, parked their cars near the Walker’s Station spring and drank “at the same spot so much enjoyed by the countless passengers riding across the Choctaw Nation via Overland Mail stages a century ago.” In 1958 local citizens still carried water from the spring, delivered through a pipe from the spring house to the side of the road. When the committee stopped there, all that remained of the station building were scattered foundation and chimney stones.²⁴ Today, the site is likewise scattered with the refuse of a house recently burned, but apparently a more modern one. The spring still flows, protected by a spring house, probably of newer vintage than the one noted in 1958. It no longer appears to be a spot offering spring water to the community.

About 150 feet east of the station site is the “deep cut trace of the old road” running northeast to southwest, traversing the present county

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Right: Tandy Walker's gravestone in Skullyville Cemetery, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

Below: Walker's Station marker, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

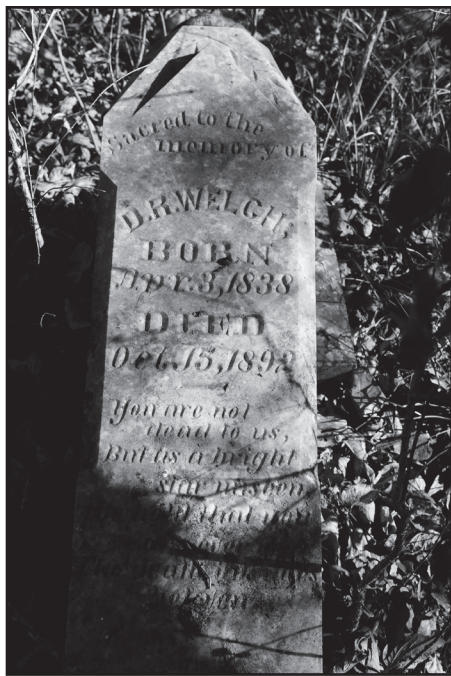


road running along the east side. The committee's report describes Walker's Station as "one of the most beautiful of all the Butterfield sites in Oklahoma. The ground is covered with a lush growth of blue grass. The tall and stately hickory, walnut, oak, and elm trees give it an aura of dignity and importance."²⁵ The dead trunk of a huge tree still stands, probably one of those described in 1958, but the lawn is now dominated by a massive, living bois d'arc, impressive in its own right.

A spot was selected east of the station site for the historical marker, on the west side of the county road and in the center of the depression created by the old stage road. In 2018 the original marker, a bronze tablet attached to a concrete pedestal, still sat along the county road just inside a fence. The trail is easily recognizable—a deep swale leading southwest from the marker.

The committee also visited the grave of Governor Walker in the original Skullyville cemetery, southwest of the station. The cemetery, "except for a few small areas . . . cleared for recent graves" was then "almost completely grown rank with dense blackberry bushes, wild honeysuckle and weeds."²⁶ Happily, now in the hands of the Choctaw Nation, the cemetery is well groomed. Walker's white marble gravestone, fractured but still intact, is easily located near a wrought-iron fence, beneath a stately oak.

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D. R. Welch gravestone near Brazil Station, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

From the cemetery the committee traveled through Spiro and turned south on US Highway 59, turning west at Shady Point. The trail itself pursued a diagonal, southwesterly course, passing a few hundred feet south of the remains of the 1888 Skullyville County Jail, which still stands on the north side of Rock Jail Road about two and one-half miles west of Highway 59.²⁷ It is the only extant building connected with the Skullyville County government of the Choctaw Nation.

About six and one-half miles west of Shady Point, the committee turned north and proceeded as far as Brazil Creek bridge, located seven-tenths of a mile southwest of the old trail crossing on Brazil Creek, then returned south four-tenths of a mile from the bridge to a lane leading east. That route took them to the abandoned Brazil school and the site of the D. R. Welch place. Welch was the toll-keeper for a post-Civil War tollgate established at Brazil Station. He built a house and store there in 1868.²⁸ North of those landmarks is the site of the once bustling settlement of Brazil and, nearby, the grave of D. R. Welch.²⁹ While not an official Butterfield station, Brazil was “important from the early beginnings” as a stop for travelers, according to the committee, noting the site of the old stables and corral was near the present well, still in use.³⁰

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Council House Spring at Trahern's Station, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

Retracing the committee's route in 2018, the abandoned Brazil school foundation remains, north of Brazil Cemetery. The lane mentioned by the committee is blocked by a locked gate where it turns north but, granted access by the property owner, this writer observed the well and the cemetery.³¹ The gravestones, some tumbled and moss-covered, include that of D. R. Welch. A trace of the trail from the Brazil settlement northeast about a mile to the Brazil Creek crossing is still evident and navigable.

From Brazil, the committee proceeded southwest to Latham, the location of the second Butterfield station, Trahern's, also known as "Council House" because of the presence of a Choctaw Nation Council House there.³² On the north side of the county road in 1958 was the home of Everett Bledsoe, which was still standing in 2018 but in a dilapidated condition. On the south was the home of Leon Watson, which was no longer standing as of 2018. Most of the surrounding countryside had been cleared for cultivation, and the committee determined the station to have been in the field a few hundred feet east of the Watson home. As of 2018, a grandson of Leon Watson, Jonathan Watson, lived in a modern home east of the site.

In 1958 the grave of station keeper James N. Trahern was located in a grove of trees in the east portion of the field. According to Bledsoe,

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Butterfield Stage sign located between Trahern's Station and Holloway's Station, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

“A former owner had removed the grave stones of the cemetery and placed them in a large pile near the Trahern grave, in order to cultivate the field; and that the entire area between the Watson home and the Trahern grave had once been a cemetery.”³³ Today a few gravestones remain beneath a young pin oak farther east. Trahern’s gravestone is not among them, but has been placed in storage for safekeeping.³⁴ Near the copse of trees where Trahern’s grave was originally observed is a burial mound claimed to be the grave of Choctaw Chief Musholatubbee, still marked in 1958 by a row of stones. The large size of the grave has been attributed to the belief that the chief’s horse was interred with him. Today the mound is still visible, but the remains of the row of stones have been scattered.

About five hundred feet north of the Musholatubbee grave is Council House Spring. In 1958 it was “flowing copiously,” its stone walls covered with ferns.³⁵ About one hundred feet away, the site of the old Council House was then marked by a few scattered foundation and chimney stones, no longer discernible in 2018. But the spring still flows and is easily identified by its walls of cut stone.

The committee selected a site for the historical marker due north of the Trahern gravesite, on the south side of the county road. The bronze

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Edwards's Store, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

marker on a concrete base, with the upper concrete corners damaged but otherwise intact, is still in place today.

The route from Trahern's to the third Butterfield station, Holloway's, is almost directly southwest. The road climbs from four hundred feet elevation at Latham to six hundred feet at Edwards's Store, an unofficial stop between Trahern's Station and Holloway's Station and the only original building along the Butterfield route in Oklahoma that is standing today.³⁶ The store, the committee wrote, "is located in a beautiful spot. As Edwards' place is approached, one is conscious for the first time of climbing, as the road swings southwest and south around the northwest limb of the Savanna sandstone hills."³⁷

In 1958 Edwards's Store was clearly visible on the rise to the north of the county road, though today it is easy to miss, except for a historical marker at the bottom of the drive. Thomas Edwards established the store in 1850, and later set up a meal service and unofficial stop for Butterfield passengers. A great-nephew of Edwards, Edgar Hardaway, occupied the building at the time of the committee's visit.³⁸ The committee wrote of Edwards's Store, "Upon seeing the great, hand hewn logs of the original home on the Butterfield Mail, at once one knows this is the real thing. Perhaps the most convincing features of all are the great stone chimneys at either end of the home. The stones are so perfectly fitted on the earliest chimney that they laid without mor-

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tar.”³⁹ Today the essential structure of the building—stone chimneys and hewn logs—is intact. The committee expressed hope that the log building would be preserved, but that hope has not been fully realized. As of 2018 it was intact but abandoned, refuse and broken furniture littering the interior and the breezeway. The flooring on the front porch was dangerously rotted. But west of the house is a well-kept cemetery where one can still appreciate the vista to the north of the Brazil Creek valley and the hills beyond, extolled by the 1958 writer as “one of majesty.”⁴⁰ And the fact that any passerby is at liberty to stop and explore this historic structure is something to appreciate. Efforts spearheaded by descendants of the Edwards family resulted in the structure’s listing on Preservation Oklahoma, Inc.’s 2013, 2018, and 2019 lists of Oklahoma’s Most Endangered Places. This recognition of historic sites at risk for demolition or deterioration raises awareness of the need for protection and may benefit Edwards’s Store.⁴¹

From Edwards’s Store, the committee traveled west and south on the county road for five miles until reaching the Narrows, a small pass between two mountain crests, where Holloway’s Station and a tollgate were located. From Edwards’s Store to Holloway’s Station the Latimer County road follows the Butterfield route almost exactly; in 1958, the committee could see the trace of the old trail lacing back and forth across the roadway.

The site of Holloway’s Station was indicated by the remains of an early cemetery, of which only a few markers remained in 1958. The principal remaining stone was that of “Dolphus C., Son of H. S. & J. S. Jackson.” The committee designated a site for the historical marker on the north side of the road, across from the cemetery plot. Today the Holloway’s Station marker sits in good condition inside a fence, and a short climb up an embankment on the south side of the county road reveals the Jackson gravestone.

From Holloway’s the committee followed the county road southwest to Red Oak. There the trail swung sharply west, following the direction of US Highway 270, “south of the present main lines of traffic,” according to the Conklings.⁴² The committee drove US 270 to the fourth station, Riddle’s. But less than a mile south of the highway a county road named Butterfield on some maps (also E1430) proceeds through the foothills, providing an appealing view toward the north from a slight elevation. This may follow the trace of the original trail, but it dead-ends and requires a brief detour on US 270 about a mile east of Panola. At Panola, the old road can be rejoined (Northeast 104th Road) and traveled across the Fourche Maline Bridge to Lutie, where Riddle’s Station was located, east of the Lutie Cemetery.

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Jackson gravestone near Holloway's Station, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).



In 1958 the committee noted scattered chimney stones and other debris of the Riddle place about five hundred feet north of the county road.⁴³ Today those remains are not evident. Just west, on the hillside, is the Riddle family cemetery plot, remaining much the same as described by the committee.

From Lutie west to Wilburton, the committee noted the tracks of the Rock Island Railroad “superimposed on the Trace of the trail,” and the road lacing back and forth across, often only a few feet away from the tracks.⁴⁴ Traveling parallel to the railroad today, the old trail is not obvious, but is easy to imagine as the city streets wind back and forth across it, perhaps tracing the trail’s path.

West of Wilburton the trail turns south, rises sharply, and crests at the site of Mountain Station, not an official Butterfield station but a settlement that probably owed its existence to the stagecoach road, according to the Conklings.⁴⁵ A well-maintained cemetery remains at the site. For several miles on either side of Mountain Station, the county road was closely contiguous to the trail, and in many places the trace of the old road could be seen by the committee within a few feet of the roadway.⁴⁶ This is one of the few places in Oklahoma where the But-

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The Riddle family plot in the Lutie Cemetery, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

terfield traces are still so evident, and are probably navigable with a four-wheel drive, high clearance vehicle (if one had permission from the property owner). Along that trace is Mountain Station Spring, not mentioned by the 1958 committee but now made public by a prominent, contemporary sign along the road just south of the cemetery. The spring is enshrouded in protective concrete and flowing on the edge of a rocky trace of the trail.

The route from Mountain Station to the next Butterfield stage station, Pusley's, took the committee on a dim, almost impassable section line road, fording Buffalo Creek before it terminated at the entrance to the Pusley place.⁴⁷ There, they spent a significant amount of time inspecting the home of Eastman Pusley, a relative of station keeper Silas Pusley. The structure was built after the Butterfield was out of service but was "an excellent example of the station type home."⁴⁸ They urged its preservation as a historic home but obviously that did not occur, as no structures stood at the location when this writer visited. It was, in fact, a bit difficult to find, even following the GPS coordinates now available.

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Mountain Station Spring, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

For the historical marker, the committee chose a spot on the south side of the section line road, in the center of the depression made by the stage road. It was this information and a photograph of the remnants of the marker on the now-defunct www.civilwaralbum.com that made it possible to locate the site in 2018. Buffalo Creek is now crossed on a low water bridge and just beyond the crossing is a gate. The entry of the Butterfield trace into the Pusley property is west of the gate, identified by the presence of the stump of the marker. The bronze plaque has been removed and the base mostly destroyed, but enough is present to allow identification.

In 1958 the committee noted a well, built “waist high out of carefully cut and fitted slabs of sandstone” adjoining the Eastman Pusley house, and the Pusley burial plot about two hundred feet southwest of the location of the old Silas Pusley home.⁴⁹ Both the well and the burial plot are still present along the trace of the trail.

Beyond Pusley’s, the committee traveled southwest on a private road through the Mose Watts ranch, following the Butterfield trail very closely toward the next stage station, Blackburn’s. Of this stretch of road, they wrote:

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Well at Pusley's Station, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

The next seventeen miles to Blackburn's is through some of the most interesting and difficult geology in the state of Oklahoma. This northeast-southwest valley through the Ouachita Mountains was made possible by the great Ti Valley fault. . . . Isolated as this valley is, by nature of its geologic structure and lack of subsequent culture, gives the feeling of riding over the actual old stage road. In fact, at a number of places it is possible to drive over portions of the original mail road. Since this area is for the most part one large ranch, there is only a private ranch road or trail throughout most of the distance. There are no cars, no houses, no telephone lines, no electric lines nor signboards for the longest distance of any place along the Overland Route in Oklahoma. The trail winds up along Buffalo Creek (draining to the northeast) slowly rising to a divide near the middle of the valley of Elm Creek (draining southwest). Beautiful wild flowers and a lush growth of grass carpet the floor of this valley.⁵⁰

During one of the writer's modern-day sojourns, the ranch was accessible, and most of the road was driven. It was still much as described during the 1958 expedition, winding through a broad valley inhabited only by cattle and deer. The ranch road passes the site of Buffalo Sta-

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tion, a stage stand established after the Civil War.⁵¹ Nothing remained of it in 1958, although the committee recommended a historical marker be placed there. Whether that occurred is unclear, but no evidence of a marker was visible during the writer's 2016 visit.

The 1958 expedition left the Watts Ranch on the Hartshorne-Ti county road three miles west of Buffalo Station and turned south toward the community of Ti, then west five miles to a section line road leading south to Pine Top School. West of Ti, the county road closely followed the trace of the old trail.⁵² Pine Top School is now gone, its possible location evident in an old foundation seen immediately before crossing a bridge over the Indian Nation Turnpike. The turnpike is probably the single biggest change on this segment of the road over the sixty-year period, and the rushing highway traffic below jars the senses after leisurely hours of traveling country roads.

South of Pine Top School, the county road crossed a well-defined trace of the trail and there the committee placed the historical marker for Blackburn's Station.⁵³ Today the base of the marker is still present, though very difficult to see, in the brush along the roadside. Its bronze plaque is missing.

From the Blackburn's marker, it is thirteen miles to the community of Wesley, and about three miles beyond is the site of the next Butterfield station, Waddell's. Along the way, "the present road, up the valley of Brushy Creek, with the imposing crest of Pine Mountain (El. 1,253 feet) is picturesque and full of delight," wrote the committee.⁵⁴ Today the drive is a pleasant one on well-graded, often tree-canopied dirt and gravel roads.

The site of Waddell's Station was known as the "old Beale place" in 1958, and there the group could see the original well and another well-defined trace of the trail. They selected a marker site on the north side of road, under a large bois d'arc tree.⁵⁵ Today, an explorer searching along the roadside for the marker will encounter frustration; the marker has been moved some distance away from the roadside near a modern barn.

Traveling west from Waddell's Station, the county road closely follows the trail and soon enters the Atoka Wildlife Management Area (AWMA). Here the modern traveler will encounter a small, yellow, metal sign stating "Butterfield" at a southbound turn. According to AWMA staff, the stagecoach road indeed turned south at this point. In fact, the remains of a post-Butterfield stage stand exist along Breadtown Creek (also known as Chickasaw), a short distance from the main road.⁵⁶ A separate trip by the writer to the Breadtown Stage Station

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Well at Breadtown, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

was fruitful, yielding remains of a well and an impressive stone wall along a trace of the trail through the forest. Following the trace to the AWMA's southern boundary one encounters a private ranch road, where the stage would have traveled toward the next station, Geary's Station.

While the trail continued its more southwesterly course, the modern road goes directly west to join US Highway 69. The committee traveled south on US 69 in 1958, noting a new road a short distance south of Stringtown leading west to the site of the Atoka Reservoir, then under construction by the City of Oklahoma City as a water supply. The area had been cleared for construction and the site of Geary's Station was set to be inundated, thus the committee did not attempt to visit the site but recommended placing a marker on a high point overlooking the future lake.⁵⁷ Sixty years later the Atoka Reservoir is a long-standing presence, not something anticipated. Geary's Stand was indeed inundated and its historical marker placed on the reservoir's dam. A short

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S. L. Whatley, an engineer at the Atoka Reservoir, looking over gravestones in a cemetery that was relocated before the area was inundated to create the reservoir (2012.201. B1353.0120, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

stretch of the original trail, accessible only on foot, extends toward the Geary's Station site from Lake Road, which runs along the reservoir's eastern shore.

The route of the trail south of Geary's Station is not entirely clear. The committee wrote that "the route of the Trail from [Geary's] to the next station, Boggy Depot, is all but obliterated and is now obscure in every detail."⁵⁸ A stretch of trail is memorialized as the Butterfield at the Atoka Museum and Civil War Cemetery, just north of Atoka on US 69. On the western shore of the Atoka Reservoir, this writer observed traces of what was likely the old trail. Much is left to speculation.

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At the time of the 1958 expedition, Boggy Depot had just been established as a memorial state park in conjunction with Oklahoma's 1957 Semicentennial, thanks to the efforts of J. B. Wright. On the Indian Territory route of the Butterfield, Boggy Depot was the largest and most important settlement, and was at the time the capital of the Choctaw Nation.⁵⁹ The committee expressed regret that the "fine home of Rev. Allen Wright (destroyed by fire March 28, 1952) is not yet extant, thus adding much to the quiet dignity of this memorial State Park." For the historical marker, the committee designated a spot in the center of a trace of the trail entering Boggy Depot from the east.⁶⁰

Today Boggy Depot is no longer a state park, but a recreation area owned by the Chickasaw Nation. The Reverend Allen Wright is buried in the Boggy Depot Cemetery, which also houses a large granite memorial to Muriel Wright, who died in 1975 and was buried at Rose Hill Burial Park in Oklahoma City. The historical marker sits intact at the east entrance to the park. The site of Allen Wright's home and other landmarks are indicated by interpretive signs.

From Boggy Depot to the next station, Nail's, the route of the trail can be closely followed along county roads between Boggy Depot and Kenefic. Nail's Station was at Nail's Crossing on the Blue River. The 1958 expedition found large piles of brick and stone marking the location in a field on the high ground east of the river.⁶¹ Traces of the ford across the river were still clearly visible and the Nail family burial plot was located, though found in poor condition, having been allowed to "return to a jungle of trees, wild vines, climbing roses and iris, all in bloom." The gravestone of station keeper J. H. Nail was identified within the plot and a site selected for the marker amid the ruins of the Nail home.⁶²

In 2019 the site appeared unchanged from the committee's 1958 description. The tall, ornate gravestone of J. H. Nail still stood erect in the fenced burial plot, though with a list that suggests some support would soon be needed to prevent its collapse. The marker at the home and station site was found in a small clearing northwest of the cemetery. Unlike the other historical markers, this one is not on a public road and permission of the property owner and considerable effort were required to locate the site. The piles of brick and stone referenced by the committee flanked the marker, and a foundation and large well also were evident. This writer also visited the nearby Civil War site of Fort McCulloch on the west bank of the Blue River. Fort McCulloch was a Confederate fortification with extensive earthworks built to defend Texas from a Union attack.⁶³ Remnants of the earthworks remain and traces of the old road are discernible on the west side of the river.



Nail's Station marker at Nail's Crossing on the Blue River, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

Traveling south from Nail's Station, Fisher's Station was located west of present-day Durant. There the committee identified the station site, known since the Civil War as Carriage Point. They selected a marker location in front of a modern home along the county road; the marker sits there in good condition today.⁶⁴

From Fisher's Station the trail continued south to the crossing on Red River at Colbert's Ferry. The station at Colbert's was the only one located in the Chickasaw Nation. About one mile south of the community of Colbert, the committee turned east on the county road toward the old Red River toll bridge, finding that substantial ruins of the Colbert home remained along with the gravestone of station keeper Benjamin F. Colbert. The historical marker was placed on the south side of the county road, where it remains.⁶⁵

Returning north from the marker site, another county road led back south to the abandoned toll bridge across the Red River, a structure that was one of the lead characters in the "Red River Bridge War."⁶⁶ A free bridge was opened in 1931 in competition with the toll bridge, which led to the conflict between Oklahoma and Texas. Since then

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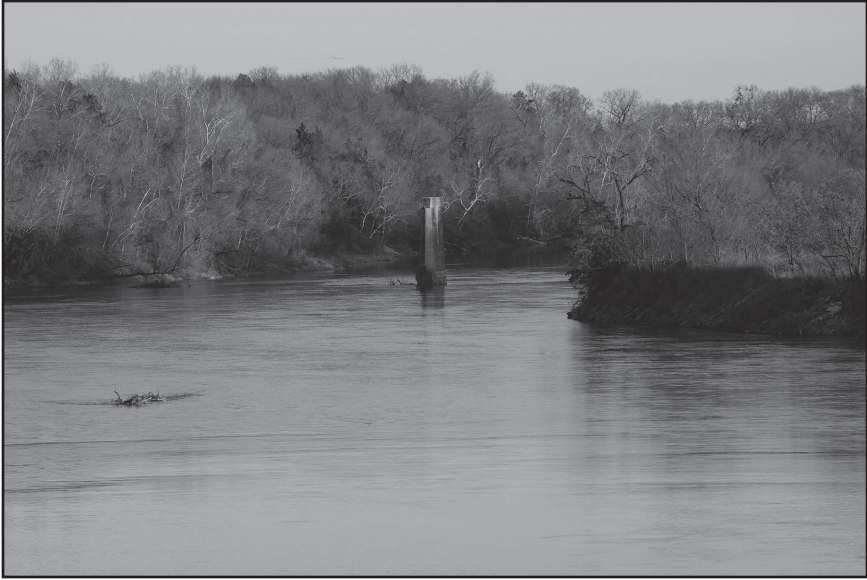
Replica of Fisher's Station built during Durant's celebration of the Butterfield Overland Route (19687.TO.D103.07.3.3, Chester R. Cowen Collection, OHS).

the bridge had been gradually deteriorating, but in 1958 was sound enough for pedestrian use. The committee walked onto the bridge and looked down the river to the site of Colbert's Ferry, impressed with its tranquility in contrast to the melee likely to have been a common sight when the "whip for the Overland Mail brought his celerity wagon, pulled by a four-in-hand, down that steep bank to the waiting ferry to be pulled across the Red River, by Negro slaves, into Texas and towards the unknown West."⁶⁷

Today the bridge is gone but the pilings still are visible from the modern highway bridge over the Red River. Access to the bridge pilings, about one-third mile upstream from the Colbert's Ferry site, is through private property, inaccessible at the time of the writer's visit in 2018.

Even an incomplete tour of the Butterfield route through present-day Oklahoma is revealing of the significant physical remains of the road. Edwards's Store, the springs and cemeteries, and the scars of the road itself still visible upon the land impress today's explorer with a sense of time travel. The historical markers, ten of which are fully intact, provide a valuable point-to-point track leading from border to border. The work of the committee and of Muriel Wright in particular, in both her leadership and her documentation of multiple explorations on the Butterfield trail, have left a robust written record for the student of history.

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Bridge pilings near Colbert's Ferry, 2018 (photograph courtesy of the author).

And what of Wright's assertion that the road was "the most important in the development and settle-[sic] in Oklahoma"?⁶⁸ Oklahoma historian Grant Foreman might take issue; he described the Texas Road as "probably the most important and celebrated of our early thoroughfares."⁶⁹ Beginning as a trail used by Osage Indians and French traders at least as far back as 1802, the north-south thoroughfare became a well-traveled road from Saint Louis to the Three Forks, near present-day Muskogee, or into Texas.⁷⁰

"Beginning as early as 1822," Foreman wrote,

this great highway helped to populate Texas and served important pioneering traffic north and south through eastern Oklahoma. For half a century, until the coming of the railroad in 1872 and for many years after, thousands of restless homeseekers were seen in motion along this road; . . . Civil War regiments of the North and South, exploring expeditions, trains of freighters.⁷¹

Ultimately, the first railroad built in Indian Territory, the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas (MK&T or Katy), followed the route of the Texas Road, and today one of Oklahoma's busiest automobile highways, US Highway 69, follows the same path. "The importance of the Texas Road,"

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Oklahoma's Butterfield Overland Mail Route (HISMAP.0034, Oklahoma Historical Society Map Collection, OHS).

writes Foreman, “is exemplified by its influence on contemporary and subsequent history of the country.”⁷²

Foreman did acknowledge that the Butterfield had its place in the history of Oklahoma and left its imprint on the country, “notwithstanding the comparatively small amount of passenger traffic and the inconsiderable number of immigrants who followed the line.”⁷³

In contrast to the rushing traffic on Highway 69, the route of the Butterfield through Indian Territory today is remote and rural. Much of its path is restricted by fences or crisscrossed by the grids of county roads. Perhaps that is what has helped preserve it. As Wright wrote in 1933, “For one who will follow the traces of the old stage line road from Fort Smith to Red River, bearing in mind the part it had in the history of Oklahoma and other sections of the Southwest, there still lingers something of the spirit of Indian Territory days.”⁷⁴

Important as the Texas Road was, there are few, if any, physical remains of its early history because of the significant development of roads and population centers along its path. But along the Butterfield, a trip is worthwhile “not only for the historical interest but also for the glimpses of forests and prairies, mountains and streams still as fair in their unspoiled beauty as when the first pioneers saw them,” wrote Wright.⁷⁵ At least it was in 1958 and much the same could be said today.

In Indian Territory the Butterfield ran primarily through the Choctaw Nation, bringing increased traffic and new infrastructure, along with economic resources for citizens who obtained contracts as station keepers or benefited economically in other ways, such as operating tollgates. The road began as an old Indian trail southwest out of Fort Smith when it was established in 1817, then was well known for its use by the Chickasaws during their 1837–39 removal to their new home in Indian Territory.⁷⁶ The first stop on the trail west of Fort Smith, the Choctaw Agency at Skullyville, became prominent in 1832 at the beginning of the Choctaws’ forced immigration. In 1837 Boggy Depot was established—the trail’s western terminus when it was known as the Fort Smith–Boggy Depot Road. Later, it was where commissary

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supplies were issued to the Chickasaws. When Fort Washita was established as a permanent military post in 1842 and the road extended to that point, it sometimes was called the Fort Smith–Fort Washita Road. The trail converged with the Texas Road about a mile north of present-day Stringtown, and from there the two roads merged to the Red River.⁷⁷

After the Civil War, when the Butterfield Overland Mail was no more, the Choctaw Council directed the building of bridges and turnpikes, the operation of tollgates, and the establishment of stage stands, continuing to use some of the old Butterfield stations.⁷⁸ The 1872 construction of the MK&T Railroad through the Indian Territory meant the demise of the stage line companies, but for many years after, travelers were familiar with the old stage stations along the historic trail.⁷⁹

Wright might be accused of bias in her assertion of the Butterfield's importance. After all, she was of Choctaw descent, born and raised in the region the stagecoach road traversed; closely involved with the civic affairs of the Choctaw people; and well versed in their history. But one has the sense she would have been much more astute than to let such bias, if it existed, influence her to make such a broad statement. Perhaps the answer is more mundane. Was a typographical error responsible for this potential misinterpretation?

In print, Wright's statement reads, "Near Geary's place on North Boggy, the road converged with the Texas Road, over which many emigrants from Missouri and farther north traveled on their way to settlement in Texas. But the road to Fort Smith, the whole route through the Indian Territory over which the Butterfield stages ran, was the most important in the development and settle- in Oklahoma."⁸⁰ Something is missing after the word, "settle." Was it simply the suffix "-ment"? Or could an entire line be missing? Perhaps she was stating it was the most important in the development and settlement of the Choctaw or Chickasaw Nations in Oklahoma, or both. Without her original manuscript, today's reader cannot know for certain.

But another of Wright's statements is convincing enough and clearly evident from her work: "It was the Butterfield Overland Mail stages that made the old road from Fort Smith to Colbert's Ferry famous in the history of the country."⁸¹

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Endnotes

* A native of Okmulgee and a resident of Norman, Susan Penn Drago is a freelance writer and photographer with a focus on historical travel in the American Southwest and Oklahoma in particular. Her work, often published in *Oklahoma Today*, includes retracing the travels of Thomas Nuttall in Oklahoma, following the path of Captain Randolph B. Marcy's 1849 California Road, and, most recently, identifying what remains of the Indian Territory segment of the Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach route. She and her husband, Bill, also travel extensively via four-wheel drive vehicle and motorcycle, as well as hiking, and they document their adventures for popular magazines such as *Overland Journal*, *OutdoorX4*, *ADVMoto*, *TrailGroove*, and *RoadRunner*. Drago also does scenic photography for the Oklahoma State Parks and her images hang in a growing number of state park lodges and cabins, including Sequoyah State Park and Lake Murray. Drago holds a bachelor's degree in telecommunications from the University of Tulsa, a master's degree in management from Southern Nazarene University, and a master's in biostatistics from the University of Oklahoma.

¹ "Final Butterfield Overland Trail SRS & Transmittal Letters to Congress," National Park Service, parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?documentID=88283; Sandra L. Johnson, "History of the National Trails System," American Trails, www.americantrails.org/national-trails-system/history.

² Muriel H. Wright, "Historic Places on the Old Stage Line from Fort Smith to Red River," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 11, no. 2 (June 1933): 798.

³ Vernon H. Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1958): 446.

⁴ An Oklahoma City attorney and historian who was nicknamed "Mr. Oklahoma History," George Shirk worked on the committee that selected sites to be designated with historical markers and wrote the text for many of the markers. He served on the Oklahoma Historical Society board of directors for many years and as its president from 1958 to 1975. Sheri Hoeksema Harris, "Shirk, George Henry," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=SH025; Muriel H. Wright, "Notes and Documents," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1957): 228.

⁵ "Notes and Documents," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1958–59): 478.

⁶ Vernon H. Brown, "American Airlines Along the Butterfield Mail Route," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1955): 12.

⁷ Muriel H. Wright, "The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1957): 55; Brown, "American Airlines Along the Butterfield Mail Route," 12–13.

⁸ Brown, "American Airlines Along the Butterfield Mail Route," 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

¹⁰ Wright, "The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago," 56; Roscoe P. Conkling and Margaret B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857–1869: Its Organization and Operation over the Southern Route to 1861; Subsequently over the Central Route to 1866; and Under Wells, Fargo and Company in 1869* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1947), 23.

¹¹ J. Y. Bryce, "Temporary Markers of Historic Points," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 8, no. 3 (September 1930): 282–90; Patricia Loughlin, "Wright, Muriel Hazel," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=WR005.

¹² Wright, "Historic Places on the Old Stage Line from Fort Smith to Red River," 800.

¹³ Mallory Covington, email message to author, August 4, 2016; Mallory Covington, email message to author, February 14, 2018; Mallory Covington, email message to au-

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thor, July 13, 2018. At the time of this publication, Mallory Covington was the archival collections manager for the Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, OK.

¹⁴ Muriel H. Wright, "Notes and Documents," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 1955): 395–96.

¹⁵ Loughlin, "Wright, Muriel Hazel."

¹⁶ Wright, "The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago," 68.

¹⁷ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 446–71.

¹⁸ Wright, "The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago," 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 447.

²¹ Wright, "Historic Places on the Old Stage Line from Fort Smith to Red River," 804, 810

²² Jon D. May, "Skullyville," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=SK005.

²³ Muriel H. Wright, "Notes and Documents," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 26, no. 1 (1948): 90–91.

²⁴ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 447.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 448.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 448–49.

²⁷ Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office, "Skullyville County Jail," Oklahoma's National Register of Historic Places, nr2.shpo.okstate.edu/QueryResult.aspx?id=80004286; Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 449.

²⁸ Conkling and Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 239.

²⁹ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 449–50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 450.

³¹ Karen Molthan-Looper, interview by the author, Shady Point, OK, April 2018.

³² I. C. Gunning, *The Butterfield Overland Mail Through Eastern Oklahoma* (Poteau: Eastern Oklahoma Historical Society, 1970), 23.

³³ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 451.

³⁴ Jonathan Watson, interview by the author, 2018.

³⁵ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 451.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 452.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ "Preservation Oklahoma Announces 2019 Most Endangered Places," Preservation Oklahoma, Inc., www.preservationok.org/news/2019/mostendangeredplaces; Michael McNutt, "Oklahoma's State Capitol Joins List of Most Endangered Historic Places," *Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK), April 11, 2013, newsok.com/article/3781885; "Oklahoma's 2018 Most Endangered Historic Places Announced," Preservation Oklahoma, Inc., nebula.wsimg.com/0bd8b34eeadc17d2c4ce1d83135eed7a?AccessKeyId=DC37FC00BC0C403C3A9E&disposition=0&alloworigin=1.

⁴² Conkling and Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 251–52.

⁴³ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 456.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Conkling and Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 254.

⁴⁶ Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 457.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 458.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 458–59.

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- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 459.
- ⁵¹ Conkling and Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 256.
- ⁵² Brown, et al., “Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail,” 460.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 461.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 463.
- ⁵⁶ Ira Wood, personal conversations with author, February 2018. Ira Wood was the Atoka Wildlife Management Area technician.
- ⁵⁷ Brown, et al., “Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail,” 464.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 465–66.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 467.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Jon D. May, “Fort McCulloch,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=FO036.
- ⁶⁴ Brown, et al., “Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail,” 468–69.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 469–71.
- ⁶⁶ Dianna Everett, “Turnpikes and Toll Bridges,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TU022.
- ⁶⁷ Brown, et al., “Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail,” 471.
- ⁶⁸ Wright, “The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago,” 68.
- ⁶⁹ Grant Foreman, “The California Overland Mail Route Through Oklahoma,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 9, no. 3 (September 1931): 300.
- ⁷⁰ Grant Foreman, *Down the Texas Road: Historic Places Along Highway 69 Through Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936), 5–10.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 8.
- ⁷² Ibid., 9.
- ⁷³ Foreman, “The California Overland Mail Route Through Oklahoma,” 317.
- ⁷⁴ Wright, “Historic Places on the Old Stage Line From Fort Smith to Red River,” 798.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 800.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 800–01.
- ⁷⁸ Wright, “The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago,” 68.
- ⁷⁹ Wright, “Historic Places on the Old Stage Line From Fort Smith to Red River,” 821.
- ⁸⁰ Wright, “The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago,” 68.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.