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OKLAHOMA

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TELLING OKLAHOMA'S STORY THROUGH ITS PEOPLE SINCE 1927



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SAYING "I DO" AT THE GAYLORD-PICKENS MUSEUM | OKLAHOMA HALL OF FAME
THE BUTTERFIELD TRAIL IN INDIAN TERRITORY: ROCKS, RUTS AND SPRINGS
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OKLAHOMA'S STORY THROUGH ITS PEOPLE



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The old road is still there, if you look for it. Faint traces skip across the countryside on a southwesterly diagonal, spanning a corner of Oklahoma from Fort Smith to the Red River. Wells and cisterns and rock-lined springs, rubble, and broken grave markers remain deep in the woods. Stones stood on edge along wagon ruts serve as signposts. They tell the story of four-horse teams drawing stagecoaches at top speed across the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations, rushing to bring the United States mail to the Pacific Coast, a destination nearly 2,800 miles from the journey's beginning in St. Louis, Missouri.

By Susan Dragoo

FIELD TRAIL TERRITORY: D SPRINGS

OKLAHOMA CITY

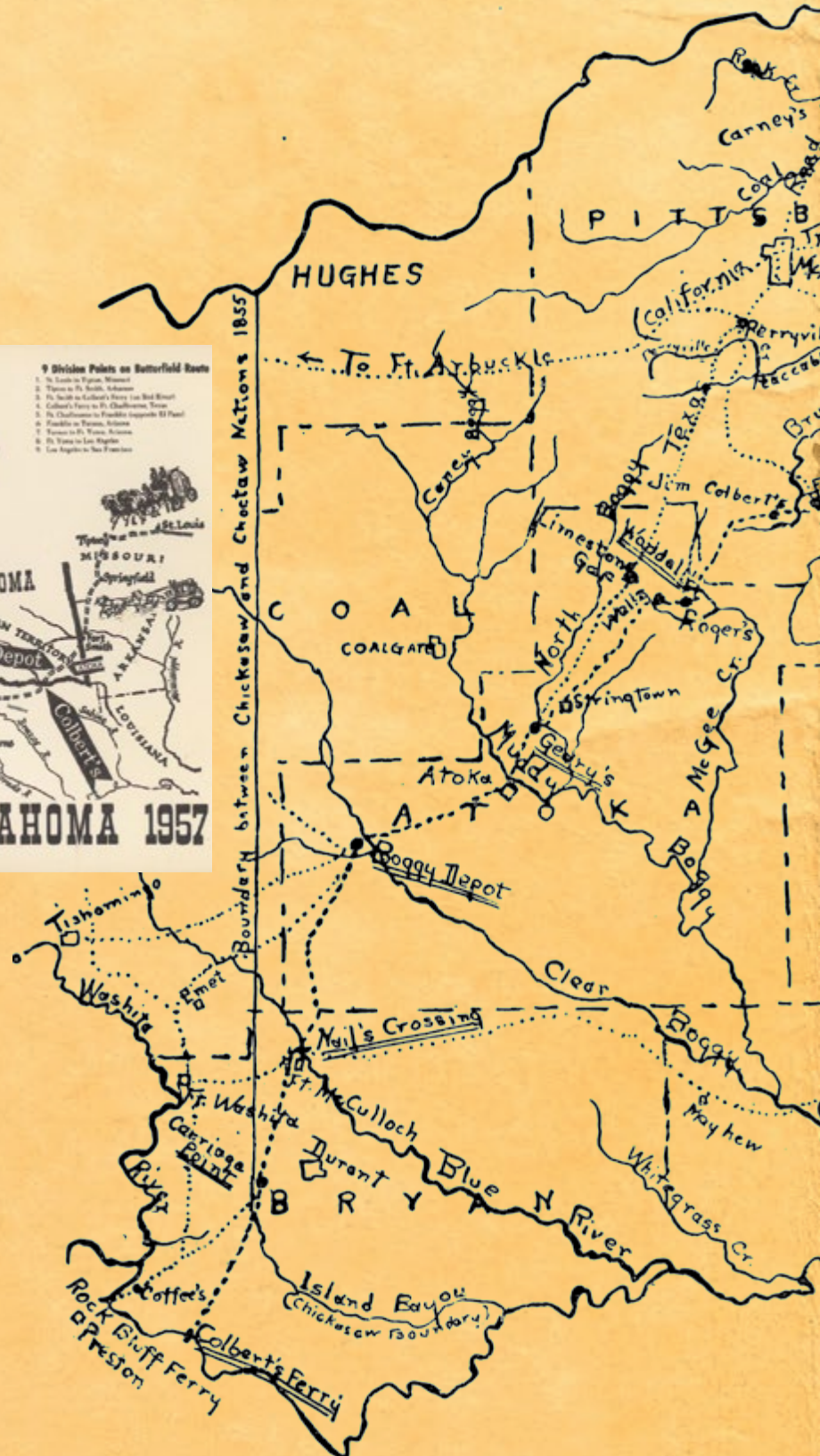


The Road from Ft. Smith to via Boggy Depot, Trails..... (1842-1885) Stageline - Ft. Smith to Red River Stage Stands ● Butterfield Stands (underscored)

The stagecoaches belonged to the Overland Mail Company, organized by New York transportation giant John Butterfield in 1857. Awarded the government contract to provide the first transcontinental overland mail service, Butterfield set up the line in a year's time, a remarkable feat given the infrastructure required along the frontier. The stage



line operated for two and a half years on the "Southern Route," passing through Missouri, Arkansas, Indian Territory, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California, bound for San Francisco to serve a recently transplanted population hungry for news from the east and letters from home. The service operated successfully, transporting mail and passengers in both directions efficiently and safely, for the most part, during its brief life. The first westbound



Red River 1837-1890



Muriel Wright, a member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, was Oklahoma's most prominent historian of the Butterfield trail. She created the map of the trail, left. Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society.

stagecoach, which left Missouri on September 16, 1858, arrived in San Francisco one hour shy of twenty-four days' time, a breathtaking performance for long-distance overland travel in the day, and shorter times were often recorded. In the spring of 1861, with the onset of the Civil War, the Overland Mail service was moved to a more northern route.

In spite of its short life, the name "Butterfield" acquired cultural significance over the years as an icon of the Old West. In 2023, it was named a National Historic Trail, a federal designation which identifies and protects pathways of historic importance for public use and enjoyment. The Butterfield Trail joins the Santa Fe Trail and the Trail of Tears as the third National Historic Trail within Oklahoma's borders.



The Centennial Committee of the Oklahoma Historical Society placed historic markers at all of the Oklahoma Butterfield stations in 1958.

About two hundred miles of the old mail road cross southeast Oklahoma and, thanks to the efforts of twentieth-century historians, the route is well understood. At first it followed the Fort Smith-Boggy Depot Road, using wagon trails which had existed since the late 1830s as a result of the Choctaw and Chickasaw removals and U.S. Army movements. Oklahoma historian Muriel Wright extolled the route, writing:

The good roadbeds in the valleys, shallow crossings on the larger streams and easy passes through the outlying ridges of the San 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 railway 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.

Near Atoka, the Fort Smith-Boggy Depot Road converged with the Texas Road, which began as a trail leading from St. Louis to trading posts among the Osage people in southwest Missouri and northeast Oklahoma. It became a well traveled road by the 1820s, continuing southwesterly into Texas and serving as the avenue by which thousands of home seekers traveled to Texas before the coming of the railroad in 1872.

For twenty-first-century travelers, the Butterfield in Oklahoma offers a pleasant couple of days exploring back roads and off-the-beaten-path historic sites. One of the challenges of finding the trail today is that most of it, except what has been incorporated into modern byways, is behind barbed wire fences and locked gates. Luckily, in 1958 the Oklahoma Historical Society placed roadside markers at the sites of Butterfield relay stations to commemorate the trail's centennial, and most of the monuments are still intact and accessible.

Relay stations provided fresh teams of horses or mules so the stages could keep going, night and day. Passengers could also embark or disembark at these spots. In the Indian Territory, the stands were operated primarily by Choctaw and Chickasaw citizens living on or near the mail road, some of whom obtained concessions from their governments to charge tolls to non-citizens for use of road improvements such as bridges and turnpikes. A dozen stations dotted the stage line across Oklahoma, an average of sixteen miles apart. Walker's Station at Skullyville was the easternmost. The trail then ran southwest through Red Oak, Wilburton, Atoka, and Boggy Depot before reaching the Red River at Colbert's Ferry.

The site of Walker's Station occupies a spot on a quiet country lane just outside Spiro. It originated as the Choctaw Agency, established about 1832 to manage the Choctaw removal from the western end, and to distribute annuities to Choctaw citizens. By 1858, the agency house served as the home



Tandy Walker was governor of the Choctaw Nation when the first westbound Butterfield stage passed through. He ran a Butterfield relay station at Skullyville, near present-day Spiro. *Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society.*

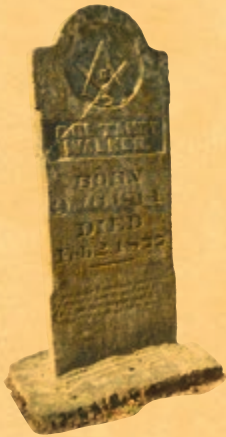
Walker's Station originated as the Choctaw Agency circa 1832. It was destroyed by fire in 1947, at which time it was the oldest structure in Oklahoma.



The vehicles used by the Overland Mail company in Indian Territory and points west were celerity wagons, tailor made for rugged roads. Illustration courtesy Gerald T. Ahnert.

of Choctaw Governor Tandy Walker, who was also the Butterfield station keeper. This historic structure survived until 1947 when it burned, at that time the oldest structure in Oklahoma. Today the spot is on private property and would be easy to miss, but on Spring Road a green sign for Roselawn Cemetery marks a turn-off, and a walk north along the street reveals a granite marker and bronze plaque in a trace of the stagecoach road. Looking southwest from the marker, the depression in the earth is obvious.

Other historic sites in the area invite investigation. The Skullyville cemetery abides just west of the station, a place of quiet antiquity where the graves of Tandy Walker and other Choctaw leaders are shaded by massive oaks. And, just a few miles north, the Spiro Mounds Archeological Center is open to the public, one of the nation's most important American Indian sites and the only such prehistoric archaeological site in Oklahoma.

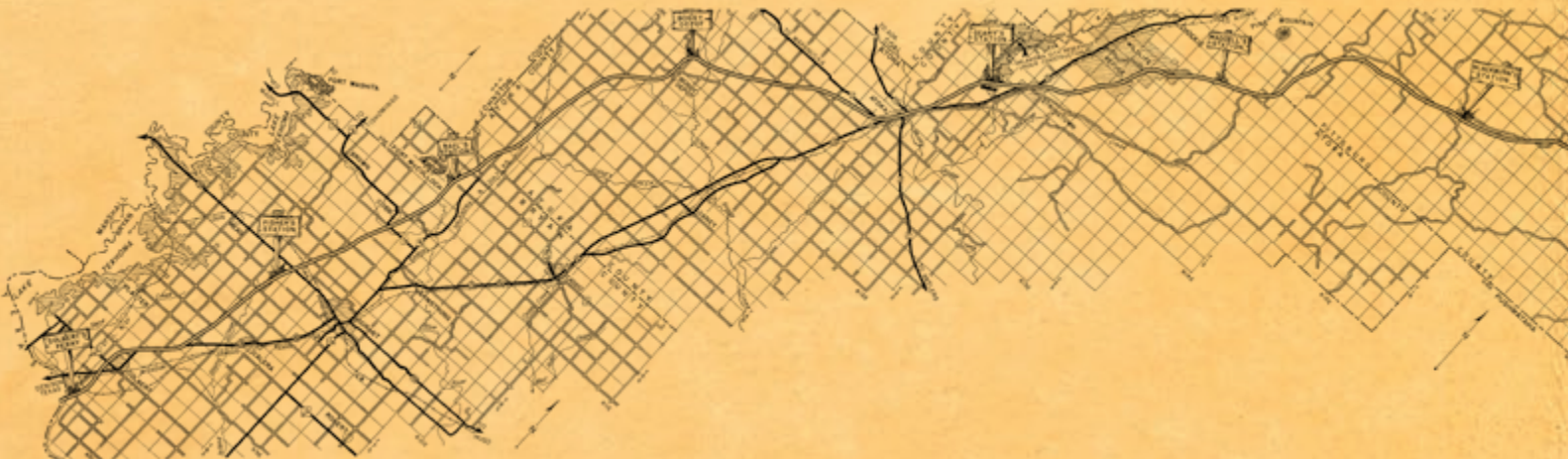


Tandy Walker and other Choctaw leaders are buried in the picturesque Skullyville cemetery near Spiro.



By the time the Overland Mail reached the Indian Territory, it was riding on something other than a stage “coach.” In Arkansas, westbound mail and passengers transferred from the familiar Concord coaches to “Celerity wagons,” designed specifically for the rough roads of the west. The wagon’s weight was about half that of a stagecoach and its lower center of gravity made it less apt to tip over. The Celerity wagon was used on about seventy percent of the Butterfield Overland Mail route and for the entirety of the segment through Indian Territory.

From Walker’s, the road continues southwest to Trahern’s Station then, about sixteen miles southwest, a real treasure



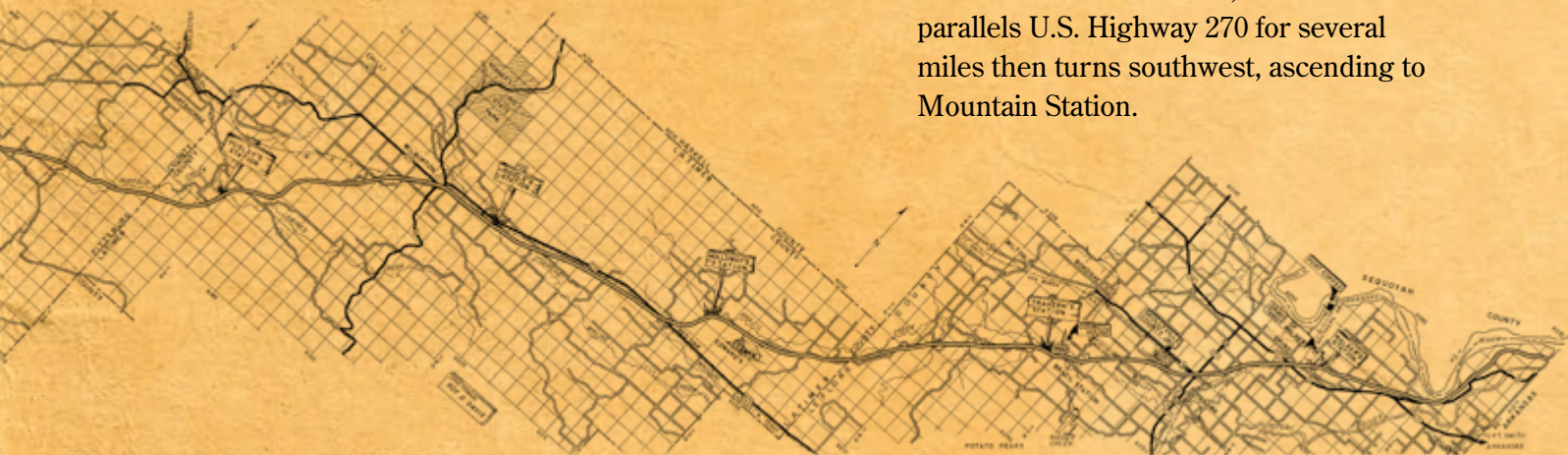


comes into view. It is the Edwards Store, the only standing structure remaining along the Choctaw Nation segment of the road contemporaneous with the operation of the Overland Mail. The log cabin was the home of storekeeper Thomas Edwards, an Englishman who married into a Choctaw family. Meals were provided for travelers at the establishment, which began in 1850 as a single log structure built from hand-hewn pines and sandstone

The Edwards Store is the only structure dating from Butterfield days still standing along the Choctaw Nation segment of the trail.

obtained nearby. Efforts to preserve the structure are currently in progress and it is accessible to the public when active restoration efforts are not underway.

Beyond Edwards Store, the road passes through a gap in the mountains known as the Narrows and the site of Holloway's Station, then enters present-day Red Oak. Turning due west, the trail crosses the Fourche Maline and arrives at Riddle's Station, just east of present-day Lutie Cemetery, on the eastern outskirts of Wilburton. From Lutie, the old road parallels U.S. Highway 270 for several miles then turns southwest, ascending to Mountain Station.



Mountain Station, atop Blue Mountain southwest of Wilburton, was the site of the only accident fatal to a passenger on the entire Butterfield Overland Mail route.



Although not an official Butterfield stop, Mountain Station occupies a significant place in history. It was here, where stages would stop for water after climbing the mountain, that the only Butterfield accident fatal to a passenger occurred. On July 20, 1860 an eastbound stage carrying eight passengers wrecked when the horses ran away on the descent of

the hill. The wagon left the road, collided with a tree, and was broken to pieces. A passenger named Andrew Mackey was killed and everyone on the stage was injured. A grave marker for Mackey is located in the Mountain Station cemetery.

Also riding on the wrecked stage was Eadweard J. Muybridge, traveling as a through passenger from San Francisco. Best known for his use of photography to capture animals in motion for the first time in 1878, Muybridge laid the groundwork for modern motion pictures, developing a shutter system to stop motion and one of the earliest motion picture projectors, the zoopraxiscope. Headed to the east coast to board a ship for his native England, Muybridge sustained a serious head injury in the accident. He eventually recovered and returned to California, but the long-term effects of the head injury led to significant changes in Muybridge's personality. Rather than inhibiting his achievements, however, some speculate the head injury enhanced his creative abilities. He became more willing to take risks and pursued his art obsessively, perhaps contributing to his innovations in the field of photography.

Eadweard Muybridge, a pioneer in early motion picture photography, was also a passenger on the ill-fated Mountain Station Butterfield stage. Despite a serious injury to his head with lasting effects, Muybridge went on to a creative and successful career.



Beyond Mountain Station, the trail becomes more obscure. An unpaved county road over a low water bridge at Buffalo Creek leads to Pusley's Station, where only the base of the historical marker remains. From here, the original trail passes through what is now private ranchland, so a detour through Hartshorne is required. Reconnecting with the trail in Ti Valley via Savage Highway, the route continues west between limestone hills through a broad prairie. Soon, near Pine Top Cemetery, the sudden presence of the Indian Nation Turnpike interrupts the nineteenth-century reverie induced by miles of lollygagging along dirt roads. Immediately after the bridge over the turnpike, a left on the county road leads to the marker for Blackburn's Station, hidden in brambles along the roadside, its bronze plaque missing.

Turning back west, the road traverses Brushy Creek at a low water crossing and continues along tree-shaded dirt and gravel to Waddell's Station. Soon the path enters the Atoka Wildlife Management Area. There, a yellow metal sign saying "Butterfield" appears at a southbound turn-off, leading to the ruins of a stage stand at Bread Town Creek, not an official Butterfield station but a near-contemporary.



A yellow metal sign saying "Butterfield" marks a turn-off leading to the ruins of a later stage stand at Bread Town Creek.

An old well survives at Pusley's Station, in the southwestern reaches of Latimer County.



Leaving the Wildlife Management Area, the road pops out onto pavement amid high-speed traffic at U.S. Highway 69 near Stringtown. The back roads between Spiro and Stringtown have wound through some of Oklahoma's most beautiful mountains and prairies, where settlements are few and other vehicles are rare. It would have seemed fitting to meet a stagecoach along the way.

The next station is Geary's Stand, which sat on the east side of North Boggy Creek and was inundated in 1959 by the creation of the Atoka Reservoir. A marker for Geary's is located at the dam and a stretch of the original trail is walkable on the eastern shore of the lake. Continuing south, the Atoka County Museum and Civil War Cemetery, about a mile north of Atoka on U.S. Highway 69, offers another opportunity to walk the trail.

Allen Wright's antebellum home in Boggy Depot survived until 1952.



Chief Allen Wright, a member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, was the most prominent resident of Boggy Depot. He famously suggested the name "Oklahoma" for the territory in 1866.

Southwest of Atoka, the next Butterfield station was located at Boggy Depot which, in 1858, was the largest and most important settlement between Fort Smith, Arkansas, and Sherman, Texas. The station was located at Guy's Hotel. Boggy Depot's most famous resident was Chief Allen Wright,

perhaps best remembered for suggesting the name, "Oklahoma," meaning "Red People" in Choctaw. Wright's family home in Boggy Depot survived until 1952, when it was destroyed by fire. Today Boggy Depot is a quiet and attractive recreation area managed by the Chickasaw Nation. Allen Wright is buried in the adjacent Boggy Depot Cemetery, now the only visible remnant of the once-thriving community other than the historical marker at the park's eastern entrance.

From Boggy Depot, the road continues toward Red River, passing through Nail's Crossing, a station on the east bank of the Blue River. On the western bank is the site of Fort McCulloch, an 1863 Confederate encampment. Both are on private property, but the Fort Washita Historic Site, just a few miles off the trail, offers a worthy side trip. Established in 1842, Fort Washita was, by the 1850s, a busy stop for military expeditions and travelers headed for California's gold fields.

Fisher's Station is the next Butterfield stand south of Nail's and from there the trail skirts the western edge of Durant, then ends its Oklahoma leg at Colbert's Ferry on the Red River. The historical marker for Colbert's is located on River

Road and there, from the county highway, the Colbert family cemetery is visible. The pilings of a toll bridge established later at the ferry site can be viewed from the U.S. Highway 69 bridge across the Red River.

With the coming of the railroad to Indian Territory in 1872, many of the villages along the Butterfield road fell on hard times and dwindled away, bypassed as new communities sprang up nearer the railroad. As a consequence, many road swales, old wells, springs, and other physical remnants of the trail's existence have been preserved away from major roads. Along the old mail route, the preponderance of unpaved byways passing through sparsely populated farm and ranchland lends an air of remoteness which prompts the imagination to wander back through time, contemplating the experience of earlier travelers. As Muriel 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



A stretch of the Butterfield road is memorialized at the Atoka County Museum.

in the history of Oklahoma and other sections of the Southwest, there still lingers something of the spirit of Indian Territory days."

Although no longer a continuous, discrete pathway, the road abides nonetheless, and something of that same spirit of Indian Territory days does indeed still linger. Faded scars on the land remain: a swale through a pasture, a cutdown creek bank, a path worn bare through the forest. In forgotten places, stone-lined wells still stand near the rubble of rock buildings and graveyards of broken tombstones. But with each passing year, these few tangible remains of the Butterfield crumble and disappear. Even the 1958 concrete and bronze markers are deteriorating. This portal to a different time is closing in a physical sense, disintegrating as earthly things do. But the story of Oklahoma's Butterfield Trail offers a journey through time back to Indian Territory's antebellum days, as concrete and steel dissolve into wagon ruts, hewn logs, and flowing springs.

Fort Washita, established 1842, was an important stop adjacent to the Butterfield trail.

