

Monday, June 25, 2018



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# Manchaca Springs, Historical Overview

## Native American Utilization

Manchaca Springs are several springs on a small tributary of Onion Creek off today's Old San Antonio Road in southern Travis County. The springs were named for Jose Menchaca of the Army of the Texas Republic. In 1709 the Spanish expedition under Espinosa, Olivares, and Aguirre is believed to have stopped here. That the Spanish were camping at Manchaca Springs is because it was on a branch of the Camino Real leading into Austin before turning east to Nacogdoches. And of course, the Spanish were usually following pre-established Indian trails. There is evidence of use in prehistoric times.

The springs have a long history of utilization in historic times by American Indian tribes, notably the Comanche. In 1840, seeking retribution for the Council House Fight of 1840 in San Antonio, a large group of Penateka Comanche mounted the "Great Raid of 1840", said to be the largest raid ever mounted by Indians against cities in the United States, namely Victoria and Linnville, Texas. James Wilson Nichols account of the raid states that Comanches, enroute to Victoria and Linnville "emerged from the mountains into the prairie near the Manchac (sic) Springs in Hays County. "

Indians, presumably Comanche, emerging from and/or vanishing back into the "mountains" west of the springs is a common theme in other tales about Manchaca Springs. Wilbarger tells of an encounter at the springs between Texans and Indians in 1844 when a "party of Indians .. came down from the Colorado mountains .. where they succeeded in stealing a large number of valuable horses." On their return to the mountains the Indians "camped for the night at or near a noted watering place known as the Manchaca Springs". Texans under the command of Captain Wiley Hill attacked their camp the next morning. The Indians were eventually able to make good an escape back to the mountains and the Texans returned to Manchaca Springs where they retrieved their horses, plus the Indian "camp equipage". John Holland Jenkins recounts another encounter between Texans trying to retrieve stolen horses, led by Captain Gillespie, attacking Indians camped at "Manshak Springs", "Manshak" being the common pronunciation of Manchaca. Texans didn't always fare well when encountering Indians at the springs. In 1845 two pioneer

German-Texan authors, Friedrich Wilhelm von Wrede Sr. and Oscar von Claren, were killed and scalped by Indians at Manchaca Springs. Both were buried there by United States soldiers, who gave them military honors.

## Stage Stop on Austin to San Antonio Road (Old San Antonio Road)

The springs were a watering hole on the Chisholm Cattle Trail from 1867 to 1895, but they are best known as a watering hole not for cattle, but for horses, mules and people on the stage. Marilyn Dunnahoo McLeod's is a charter member of the Manchaca Onion Creek Historical Association (MOCHA). Quoting her write-up on the Bullock Museum website:

Located on the Old San Antonio Road, Manchaca Springs was a way station for at least two different stagecoach lines, and probably more. Advertisements in Austin's *Texas State Gazette* in 1850 record a tri-weekly mail route run by J. S. Harrison of Harrison & McCulloch that traveled through "Manchac Spring," San Marcos, and New Braunfels, connecting Austin with San Antonio. An ad in the Austin City Directory for 1877 mentions Scott's Stage Line, which ran from Austin to San Antonio via "Manchac Springs."

Stagecoach lines set up way stations or stops along their routes for their passengers to get a bite to eat and rest, and also to change out their horses or mules with fresh stock. Some stations also provided overnight accommodations as well. The fare at most stage stops was sparse and minimal. Reports of hard biscuits, greasy pork gravy, and bitter black coffee abound. The Manchaca Springs stage stop, owned by Adolphus Weir in the 1850s, was rather well equipped compared with others. *A Journey Through Texas*, written by Frederick Law Olmsted and published in 1857, records a wonderful window in time at Manchaca Springs. Mr. Olmsted, who hailed from New York and was the landscape architect for Central Park, gives us his firsthand account of the accommodations there:

*"We found a plantation that would have done no discredit to Virginia. The house was large and well constructed, standing in a thick grove, separated from the prairie by a strong worm fence. Adjacent, within, was the spring which deserved its prominence of mention upon the maps. It had been tastefully grottoed with heavy limestone rocks, now water-stained and mossy ... Everything about the house was orderly and neat. We were ushered into a snug supper-room and found a table set with wheat-bread, ham, tea and preserved fruits waited on by tidy and ready girls."*

## Manchaca Springs as a Post Office

The natural location of post offices in the 1800s was along stage stops and railroads, so not surprisingly Manchaca Springs' history includes that of being a post office. From "Onion Creek Post Office and Stage House (McElroy-Severn House)", *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, 1990:

The San Antonio Road linking Austin with San Antonio, was one of the state's most frequented highways and a primary stage route through Hays County. One of the earliest stage stops in the Buda area was established about by the 1840s at Manchaca Springs, on the road between Austin and the county seat of San Marcos. According to Dobie, no other settlements lay between Manchaca Springs and

Thomas McGehee's homestead at the confluence of the Blanco and San Marcos rivers, eighteen miles to the south near present San Marcos, in 1846 (Dobie 1932: 16). The Manchaca Springs siting, a few miles south of Onion Creek reflects the fact that a third of the county's population of 387 lived in the vicinity of present Buda and along the creek in 1850 (Dobie 1932: 39-40; Schwartz 1986: 360). It is not known what type of resources such as corrals or shelters existed at Manchaca Springs initially, but its function as a change and watering station for stage horses is well-documented and it must be assumed that there were at least rudimentary facilities at the way station. In 1851, Mississippi native Adolphus Weir purchased 452 acres of land surrounding the springs and built a home for his family on a hill above the site (Schwartz 361-362). The Weirs operated a stage stand and stables that continued to serve the passing stagecoach (Dobie 1932: 39-40). Weir's sons changed the horses and took in the mail in the years before a postmaster was appointed. Occasionally, passengers spent the night at the stop (Schwartz 361-362).

After the Civil War, refugees from the old south flocked to Texas and Hays County began to expand from a handful of isolated frontier enclaves into a more populous agricultural region. In 1867, the increased population around Manchaca Springs warranted the appointment of a postmaster, John S. Spence, and the stage stop and post office site was officially named the Onion Creek, Texas, post office. By 1870, the county's population had nearly doubled from the previous census to 4,008 (Dobie 1948: 66). The increase no doubt led to the location of a new post office in the Onion Creek area, near present Buda. On April 3, 1875, the new post office and stage stop were established on Onion Creek, a few miles north of Manchaca Springs on the San Antonio Road. George W. Waters was appointed postmaster.

Appropriately, the new site took the name Onion Creek post office and the Manchaca Springs post office regained its original name. (Schwartz 1986: 365). According to the application made to the U.S. Post Office Department, the station anticipated serving 500 people (Newlan 1992: 4), a substantial, if scattered, population in Hays County at that time.

From *Texas Post Offices by County*, combined with the history above, plus additional deed research, the following picture of post-offices, postmasters, and dates at the springs emerge.

First, Manchac House PO

MANCHAC HOUSE  
Pelham, Wm., 10 Apr 1851  
Weir, Adolph G., 20 Jan 1852  
Discontinued 7 Oct 1852

The location of "Manchac House" (no "a") at Manchaca Springs is an issue of debate. *Texas Post Offices by County's* map shows it west of the I&GN railroad, not by the springs. But deed research, and descriptions by Frank Brown suggest it was located at one of the set of springs known as Manchaca Springs, or very near. Personal correspondence with John Germann (*Texas Post Offices by County*) indicates it is *possible* the location on the map is incorrect (work in progress; and as I say, deed information for both Pelham and Weir, along with Brown's description, makes the springs a more probable location).

Later, Onion Creek PO:

## ONION CREEK

Spence, John S., 24 Dec 1867

McCuiston, John J., 27 Dec 1871

Summerrow, Mortimer P., 27 Aug 1872

[*Waters, Geo. W.*, 24 Jun 1873

*Chandler, Jas. A.*, 8 Oct 1878

*Changed to Dupree [later Buda] in Hays County 21 Mar 1881]*

As pointed out in the history from the *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, the post office name Onion Creek was used both for a PO at the springs, but then again at a different location north of the springs, Manchaca Springs reverting to its prior name. The postmasters italicized in brackets would then appear to be those related the relocated Onion Creek PO.

## Post Weir through Severn Dairy Farm

The springs as a stage stop are most famously associated with Adolphus Weir, and the property remained in the ownership of his descendants into the 20th century, the last descendant to own the property being Nannie Botts, who married Elmer Severn, the property being run as a dairy farm.

Weir died in 1860 and was buried on his property at Manchaca Springs, then reinterred in 1875 to Oakwood Cemetery in Austin by his widow who had moved to Austin. While Weir was reinterred this does however beg the question as to whether others may have also been buried on the property. Correspondence with contacts through the Manchaca Onion Creek Historical Association suggests this is a possibility, but not confirmed.

*The Austin American*, Dec 24, 1911, announced the marriage of Nannie Botts to Elmer Severn. 1898-1902 Travis county road maps show the Botts were land owners in the area.

*The Statesman*, Mar 15, 1920, ran an article "HISTORIC STAGE COACH ROAD HOUSE BURNS ... Few structures in Travis county were older than this familiar old building .. [here the stage stopped] while the horses drank water and the passengers alighted from the coach strolled into the bar and lapped up a few schooners of beer, (Yes, my child that was before prohibition went into effect)".

*The Austin American*, Feb 8, 1925, ran an article, "TENNESSEE MAN SETTLED IN '49", retelling the story of how Weir came to own the property, but also providing additional clues about the property: "[the Weirs lived here for 75 years]. The house and stables that he built stood until a year or so ago, when the house was torn down (being replaced by a modern bungalow), and the stables were burned down accidentally". The article then later says "Mrs. Elmer Severns (sic), the great granddaughter of Adolphus, is now living on the site of the old Weir home. Her modern little bungalow is furnished with running water brought up by hydraulic pressure from the same springs that have played so significant a part in the lives of four generations of her family."

This article brings into question which structure described in the 1920 article burned (house vs. stables), this article suggesting it was the stables that burned, and the house was torn down.

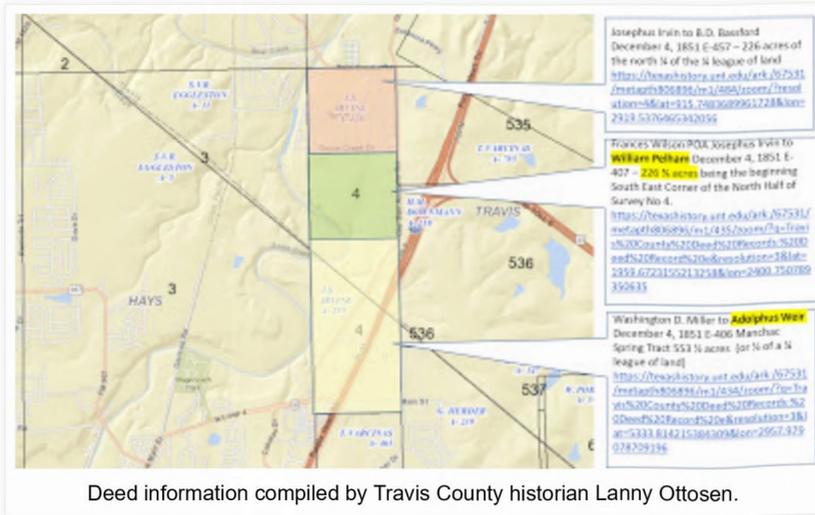
But the article is most significant in that it suggests the house shown in an aerial photo of the property taken in 1937 (Tobin Imagery), while the property was still owned by Elmer and Nannie Botts Severn, marks the location of the original Weir home. A fence in the photo may well correspond to the (or at least the location of the original) "worm fence" mentioned by Olmsted. That 1937 aerial photo is a snapshot of the property while still owned by a descendant of Weir

and provides clues -- building placement, fences, visible ruts, swales, creek ford, large oak trees -- as to the actual route the stage may have taken into the stage stop.

*The Austin Statesman*, May 18, 1933, ran an article, "First Stage Stop Scene of Picnic", about a picnic held at the Severn dairy farm: "The elm and pecan grove over-looking Manchaca Springs on the E.E. Severn model dairy farm was the setting for a dairyman's picnic ... Mrs. Alma Heep recalled that on the site of the picnic ground once was located the Manchaca Springs stage coach inn on the old Post Road [Old San Antonio Road]". The article confirms the property was being run as a dairy farm.

Just four years after this picnic, Elmer Severn would pass. Per his death certificate he died on April 19, 1937; place of residence Manchaca Springs, Texas. The property was soon after sold to the Heep family marking an end of the property under Adolphus Weir and his descendants.

## Photos



Deed information compiled by Travis County historian Lanny Ottosen.

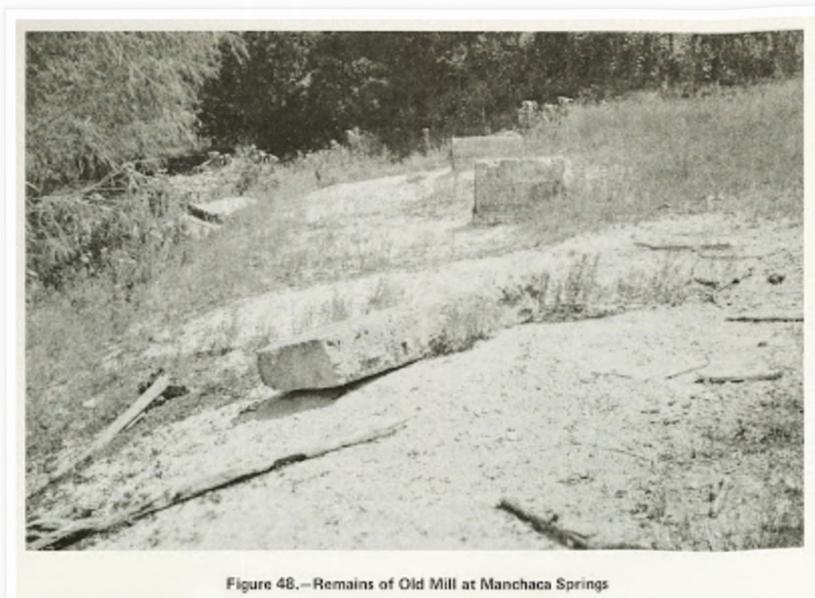


Figure 48.—Remains of Old Mill at Manchaca Springs

"Remains of Old Mill at Manchaca Springs" from [Brune, 1975]

see Stage Coach at Manchaca Springs, [The Portal to Texas History](#)

see Hotel at Manchaca Springs, MOCHA Facebook citing Austin History Center PICA 19585

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