

1867-1872 SPRING BRANCH POST OFFICE

CONTEXT:

The 1867 to 1872 Spring Branch Post Office is located at 170 Rittmann Road, Spring Branch, Comal County, Texas. (PHOTOS #1,#2,#3) In the mid-1840s, German emigrants made their way to Texas to begin a new life. The sponsor of this immigration project was the Adelsverein, an organization for the protection of German immigration. New Braunfels became the first large settlement in Comal County. Many emigrants moved on to the hill country in the county and developed small, functioning settlements. Spring Branch was one of those areas settled during this time. Postal communication was vital and the only way for settlers to keep in touch with the world outside of their small community. Between 1867 and 1872, Gottlieb Elbel was the Postmaster of Spring Branch. This was the first post office in Spring Branch established after the Civil War. The post office was located in the Gottlieb Elbel home, built ca. 1852, which still stands today. In 1871, the family moved into an adjacent, larger home that also exists on the property.

OVERVIEW:

History of Spring Branch, Comal County, Texas:

Over one hundred and fifty years ago most of this territory of Central Texas showed no sign of human co-habitation with nature. Only an occasional Indian campsite or trail existed that passed through the prairie toward the mountain region to the west. Some trails followed a path along the Guadalupe River and the various other flowing natural springs and creeks. This enabled travel where animals, particularly horses, oxen, cattle and mule could be watered.

After the war of 1836, when Texas became a Republic, the area became attractive to German settlers that immigrated under the auspice of the Adelsverein (Society for the Protection of German Immigration). Many made the trek from Indianola up to New Braunfels which was founded in 1845 and then into the hill country. Texas soon became a state of the United States in 1846.¹

The original route from New Braunfels to the west was an Adelsverein road to the northwest along the Cibolo Creek following an old Indian path called the Pinto Trail.

Other routes were developed into the hill country along the waterways and creeks and small settlements sprang up from New Braunfels towards western Comal County. These

settlements were separated by four or five miles as land was claimed. Many original settlers purchased their land in the Texas Hill Country from holders of Spanish or Mexican land grants or from land speculators. Most of these emigrants were from Europe, especially, from Germany. They brought their customs, craft, traditions, culture and language with them. Rock fences were built, as were rustic homes fashioned from local timbers and rock. Fachwerk (half-timber) and half stone or mortar was used to construct homes, barns and other buildings.²

Most of the small settlements provided the necessities to the farmers and ranchers in the area. They sometimes included a saw mill, grist mill, flour mill, cotton gin, blacksmith shop, school, store, church, cemetery, lime kiln, charcoal burners, molasses vats and cane presses, depending on the needs of the surrounding settlers. These tiny settlements were usually self-sufficient and provided a means of sharing goods and wares. These settlements also developed as post offices along postal routes connecting San Antonio, New Braunfels, Blanco, Boerne and the rest of the hill country.³

One such area emerged along the Guadalupe River at a nearby spring in Western Comal County. It was named Spring Branch Creek and the settlement named Spring Branch.⁴

The original hub of settlement, the Post Office of Spring Branch, 23 miles Northwest of New Braunfels, was located on the Spring Branch Creek at the Porter Store. It was then moved to the Elbel homestead, then to Monken's Store, then to Specht's Crossing on the Guadalupe at the Specht's homestead, then to William Specht's Store, then to the Knibbe Store on Spring Branch Road and then finally moved to Hwy 66 (now 281) near the intersection of Spring Branch Road. The area of Spring Branch began with a radius of four to five miles and is currently 15 to 20 miles. The community center changed with the changes of the postal stations.

Spring Branch was founded in 1852, and by 1856, families by the names of Knibbe, Elbel, Porter, Horne, Fuhrmann and Imhoff were living along the creek. The Spring Branch Creek was known to have large pools of icy, cold, crystal clear water year round, thus the settlement was named for this beautiful spring and nicknamed "the Branch." Other families to soon settle the area were Beierle, Acker, Kriegner, Willke, Monken, Becker, Bergmann, Moos, Neugebauer, Kuebel, Bartels, Esser, Specht, Bender, Busch, Kretzer, Stahl, Gass, Jonas, Rust, Schaeferkoeter, Wunderlich.⁵

The closest route from New Braunfels in the early years would have been to travel the Blanco Road (Hwy 46), cutting north (was originally 46 and then became 311), where the

Boerne to New Braunfels Road (the continuation of 46) continued west. One would cross the Guadalupe River at Esser's Crossing and continue on to Spring Branch.

Spring Branch Post Office:

The first post office was established in 1858, with Louis Willke as postmaster. It was located at the Porter Store. At the onset of the Civil War, Comal County voted 239 to 86 in favor of the Confederacy.⁶ During the Civil War, all United States government post offices were closed. The Comal Ranch, a Confederate Post about a mile from Spring Branch, was designated as the post office. William DeForest Holly was appointed as the first Comal Ranch Postmaster in 1861 and Col. Charles Power was appointed in 1862.⁷ The Comal Ranch remained the post office for the area until after the Civil War in 1865. A post office was re-opened at that time in New Braunfels, and Spring Branch residents had to rely on a notice in the *New Braunfels Zeitung* newspaper that mail in their name had arrived at the New Braunfels Post Office.

Shortly after this time in 1867, Gottlieb Elbel began serving as Postmaster out of his homestead in Spring Branch. It was noted on the 1868 Spring Branch Post Office contract of Gottlieb Elbel (PHOTO #4) that the location was 11 miles from the Twin Sisters Post Office and 11 miles from the Smithson's Valley Post Office. The first mail arrived on August 27, 1867, between New Braunfels and Fredericksburg through Spring Branch by pony express rider (also properly known as a mail rider according to the US Mail Service), Adolph Jonas on horseback. Adolph Jonas was 22 years of age and delivered the mail from New Braunfels to Fredericksburg. He would deliver mail by horseback for 11 more years along this route. After that, a coach line was established from Austin to Blanco to Fredericksburg and San Saba. Jonas then continued to ride horseback to deliver the mail for another six years from New Braunfels to Blanco.⁸

Gottlieb Elbel was postmaster until 1872.⁹ (PHOTO #5) He was most remembered for his postal journal from 1867 to 1872, that has survived to this day. (PHOTO #6) In the journal it was noted that Col. Power (Comal Ranch Postmaster) subscribed to the following periodical publications: *Weekly Picayune*, New Orleans; *Texas State Gazette*, Austin; *New York Tribune*, New York; *Albion*, New York; *San Antonio Weekly Herald*; *The World*, New York; and *The Two Republics*, Mexico City. It was recorded that on October 16, 1867, that Alfred Power sent a letter to Dublin, Great Britain, paying 50 cents currency; on April 26, 1868, Heinrich von Rittberg paid 15 cents postage on a letter received from West Prussia; and on June 5, 1868, a letter sent to Bruchsal Baden via Hamburg, Germany, required 10 cents postage.¹⁰ According to

a notation in the journal by Oscar Haas in 1947, the journal not only showed when the postal station was re-established, it showed who lived in the Spring Branch area and what newspapers they subscribed to. The following information concerning the journal is reprinted with notations. Permission was obtained from Brenda Anderson-Lindemann, author of *Spring Branch & Western Comal County, Texas* as it will appear in the updated version of her book soon to be published:

The journal was found in January 1999 by Harry Knibbe's granddaughter, Sharyn Uecker-Wilson, while she was reviewing boxes that came from a safe in the Harry A. Knibbe Store on Hwy 66, presently the Spring Branch Store on Hwy. 281. This journal was given to the author (Brenda Anderson-Lindemann) shortly after the 140th anniversary edition was published (of her book *Spring Branch & Western Comal County, Texas*). The journal was believed to have been given to Harry Knibbe to place in the Store's safe by Otto Elbel (1899-1955), who never married, grandson of Gottlieb Elbel. The journal must have been placed in the store safe after 1936, since it survived the original store fire in 1934 and before 1947 when it was shown to Oscar Haas while he was researching and visiting each Comal County settlement. He referred to this journal in his book, *History of New Braunfels and Comal County, Texas: 1844-1946*, page 133. The Sophienburg Archives in New Braunfels did not have knowledge of the journal, and no one contacted in Spring Branch had ever seen it. What a huge surprise to find this journal!

Brenda Anderson-Lindemann

Christian Gottlieb Elbel of Spring Branch:

Gottlieb Elbel arrived in Texas at Galveston Bay on May 21, 1849, from Saxony, aboard the ship Galliant Flora. Gottlieb met Miss Christiane Zeh (1826-1862) of Strassberg, Plauen, Saxony, while waiting in Germany to board the ship for Texas. She was born to Johann and Johanna Sophie Mueller Zeh on October 25, 1826. Christiane had been hired as a servant or waitress on the Galliant Flora. Gottlieb and Christiane were married on March 31, 1850, by Louis Cachand Ervendberg, Pastor of the German Protestant Church of New Braunfels. Gottlieb (1827-1904) was born in Grobau, Plauen in Vogtland, Konigreich, Sachsen (Saxony) on May 2, 1827.

The couple remained in New Braunfels for a time, cutting shingles from cypress and then Gottlieb became a freighter. The couple was blessed with a daughter, Wilhelmine, born August

20, 1851, near New Braunfels.¹¹ They then moved to the Spring Branch area where a two room log cabin structure was built. (PHOTO #7) Eight children were raised in this small structure that also served as the Spring Branch Post Office from 1867 to 1872, with Gottlieb Elbel as Postmaster. Gottlieb Elbel applied for his naturalization papers on Nov 17, 1851, and was granted citizenship in 1855, completing his five years after arrival in Comal County. Seven children would be born after arriving in Spring Branch: Auguste, January 11, 1853; Hermann, October 10, 1854; Emma, December 27, 1855; Bertha, February 20, 1857; Ernst, October 16, 1858; Marie, December 27, 1861 and Erdmann, March 24, 1862. Christiane died on March 25, 1862 after giving birth to her eighth child. The child, Erdmann died a year later.

In the 1860 Comal County Agricultural Census, the Gottlieb Elbel farm consisted of 33 improved acres and 145 unimproved, cash valued at \$1000 and farm implements valued at \$150. Also, Gottlieb Elbel had six horses, 36 milk cows, eight working oxen, 89 head of other cattle, and 22 swine with an estimated value placed at \$1500. The past year the farm had produced wheat, rye, Indian corn, cotton, sweet potatoes, butter and hay.

The trials and tribulations of the first years and the ever present dangers from the Indians demanded all the strength a man had. Mr. Elbel understood the hardships of the times but also saw the happier times. He made light of the losses of cattle and horses which the Indians stole in broad daylight. In one of the far west rooms of the 1871 homestead, there were slits in the eighteen inch walls where one could lean probably while seated with rifle in hand, to shoot outward at the Indians. These slits were constructed at an angle preventing being shot at from the outside. This room was possibly where the family hid during the Indian raids since it had no other windows. After the 1949 remodel by the McCallums, a double window replaced the slit section.¹²

On August 31, 1867, Gottlieb Elbel married the widow of Carl Wehe, Mrs. Auguste Seekatz Wehe (1834-1901). From this union was born Albert F., April 21, 1868; Franklin born Nov 11, 1869; Walter born Mar 8, 1871 (died 1871) and Alma born Nov 23, 1874. Auguste Wehe-Elbel was born on March 18, 1834 in Westerburg amt Rennert, Nassau and came to Texas in 1852 at the age of 18 aboard the ship "Hochenstaufen". She married Carl Wehe in 1859 and they had 4 children. They were Sophia Friedericke Wehe, Francisca Ida Wehe, Jacobine "Louise" Wehe and Caroline Wehe.¹³

Gottlieb and Auguste build the larger home in 1871 near the 1852 original home.

(PHOTO #8)

Gottlieb Elbel Property:

Gottlieb was a farmer and rancher obtaining about 1900 acres of good farming and grazing land in his lifetime. The small portion of the property where the 1852 home/post office, cemetery and the 1871 home are located is 2.932 acres out of the Edward Howard Survey No. 19, Comal County, Texas (being the same land deeded from Arno Knibbe and wife Clara Knibbe to Robert McCallum and wife Betty McCallum by warranty Deed dated March 3, 1949).

(PHOTOS #9, #10, #11) The original property was part of land granted to L.C. Cunningham in 1841¹⁴, then sold to A. Degener on Jan 11, 1850,¹⁵ and then eventually part of 200 acres sold to Gottlieb Elbel on May 26, 1852.¹⁶ The McCallums purchased the property and then sold it to Harlan Henryson on August 19, 1998.¹⁷ Originally there was a barn that burned down in 1933.

When the property was purchased in 1998, it had been vacant for years after being occupied by several tenants. This property included almost three acres, with the original homestead cabin built in 1852, constructed of native cedar logs, adobe, and cypress timber, and also a house built in 1871, constructed of native cedar logs, adobe brick, stone and cypress timber. (PHOTO #12) The original family cemetery, where Gottlieb Elbel and other members are buried was also included in the deed. (PHOTO #13)

The 1871 house had been modernized with electricity, windows and plumbing in 1949 but in 1998, was not in livable condition, so with the help of contractor Terry Miller, the house underwent a restoration, maintaining the original appearance. (PHOTO #14 collage) In 2001, additional living space was added, maintaining the period appearance. (PHOTO #15 collage) The 1852 cabin was in a state of deterioration and was restored, and enlarged by contractor, Terry Miller in 2009.¹⁸ (PHOTOS #16 collage, #17 collage)

SIGNIFICANCE:

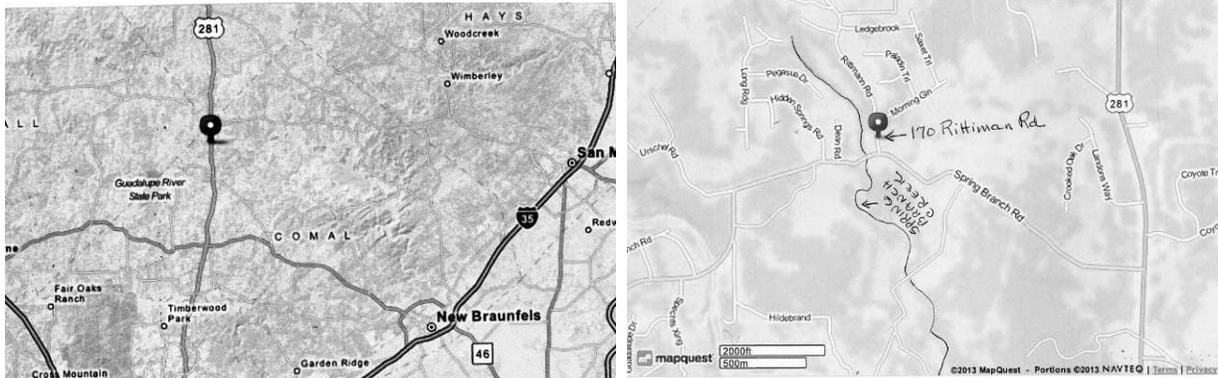
Small, functioning settlements such as Spring Branch were vital to the survival and economy of Comal County pioneers in the early years. The post office was essential and provided communication with the outside world. It was the hub of the settlement and communities developed around these areas. The German emigrants faced many hardships taming the unsettled area of Western Comal County and Gottlieb Elbel and his family, represent examples of the hardy settlers that persevered and survived. The structures still in existence and

the Elbel postal journal help to tell the story of this survival and the importance of the post office and people to a community.

Information compiled by Brenda Anderson Lindemann, Harlan Henryson, Carmen Rittimann, Sami Devillier and Karen Boyd

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- ¹ Anderson-Lindemann, Brenda *Spring Branch & Western Comal County, Texas*, Omni Publishers, Inc. SA,Tx 1998 p. 1.
 - ² Lindemann p. 21.
 - ³ Lindemann p. 2.
 - ⁴ Lindemann p. 4.
 - ⁵ Lindemann p. 39-40.
 - ⁶ Haas, Oscar *History of New Braunfels and Comal County, Texas 1844-1946* p. 154.
 - ⁷ Haas p. 309.
 - ⁸ 1867 Spring Branch Post Office Journal.
 - ⁹ Lindemann p. 39.
 - ¹⁰ Haas p. 309.
 - ¹¹ Texas Death Certificate #12107 from Familysearch.com, accessed 8/2013.
 - ¹² Gottlieb Elbel obituary in possession of Brenda Lindemann, historian and interview of descendant Carmen Rittimann by Brenda Lindemann in August 2013.
 - ¹³ Lindemann p. 64-65.
 - ¹⁴ Comal County Deed Records Book E p 427-428 no 2822 patent 225 assignee of Edward Howard #19 abstract 210.
 - ¹⁵ Comal County Deed Records Book A p 638-639.
 - ¹⁶ Comal County Deed Records Book C p 412-413 no 1433.
 - ¹⁷ Deed for Harlan Henryson filed in Comal County.
 - ¹⁸ Notes by Harlan Henryson.

PHOTO #1,#2



Location map of Spring Branch, Comal County, Texas and 170 Rittimann Road

PHOTO #3 1933 American Legion Map of Comal County

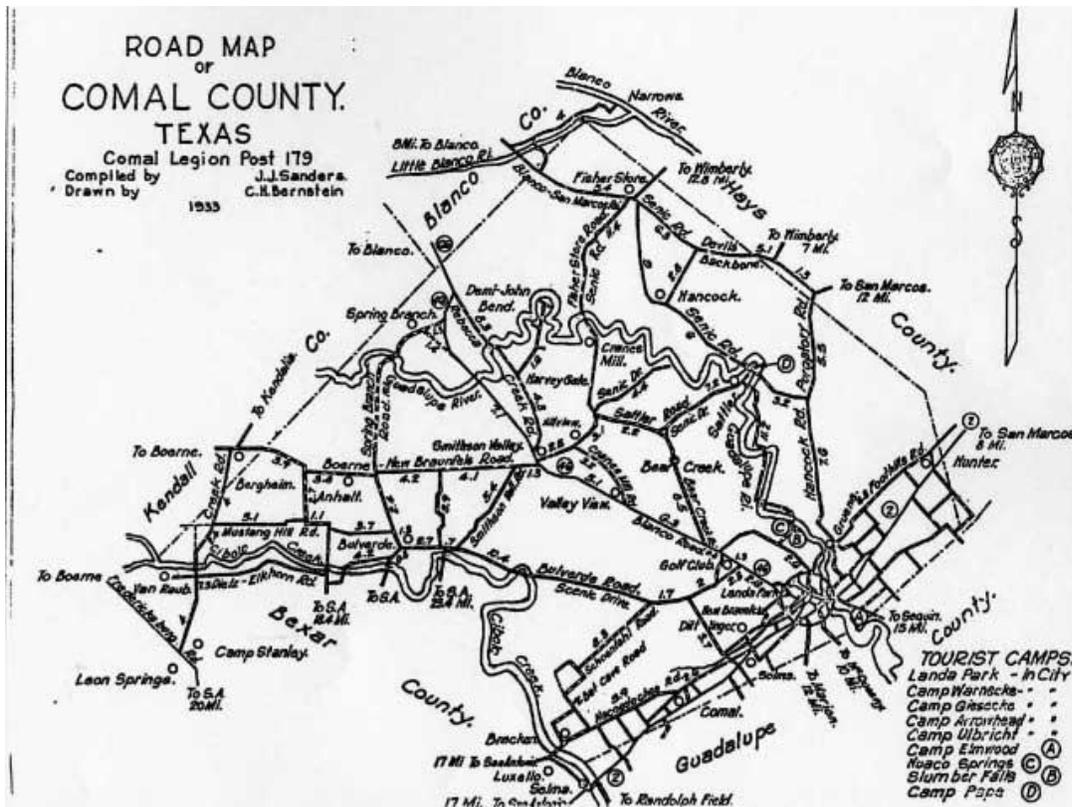


PHOTO #4 Gottlieb Elbel Post Master Contract

(No. 40.) POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT.
 TOPOGRAPHER CONTRACT OFFICE,
 WASHINGTON, July 14, 1867.

TO POSTMASTER AT *Spring Branch*
Colonial Co. Tex.

The (P. O. Dept.) name of my office is _____
 Its local name is *Spring Branch* Township.
 It is situated in _____ County of *Colonial* State of _____
 The name of the most prominent river near it is _____
 The name of the nearest creek is _____
 This office is _____ miles from said river on the _____ side of it, and is _____ miles from said nearest creek, on the _____ side of it.
 The name of the nearest office on route No. *3049* is _____, and its distance is _____ miles, by the traveled road, in a _____ direction from this my office.
 The name of the nearest office on the same route on the other side is *Smithson's Valley* and its distance is _____ miles in a *south east* direction from this my office.
 The name of the nearest office of the route is _____, and its distance by the most direct road is _____ miles in a _____ direction from this my office.

State, under this, the names of all other offices near your office in different directions from it, and their distances from it by the most direct roads.

If the town, village, or site of the Post Office, be known locally by another name than that of the Post Office, write that other name here, that it may be identified on any published maps of the State (or Territory), if appearing thereon.
 A concise description of the township (or where the land is not so divided, a sketch map showing the precise location of your office, together with the adjoining Post Offices, towns or villages, the roads, railroads, and larger streams or creeks, in addition to the above verbal descriptions, will be useful, and is desired.
 A correct map of the locality and adjacent country might be furnished by your County Surveyor but this must be without expense to the Post Office Department; it being, however, for the general interest and advantage of the community to have the Post Office correctly located on the maps. It may be expected that this will be cheerfully furnished on proper application.
 State (on margin of this sheet) whether there is an B. O. at your county seat (count-house), or in the town of your County Surveyor, a step of the county.
 State also the present Surveyor's name and Post Office address.

(Signature of Postmaster) *Gottlieb Elbel*
 (Date) *July 14 1867*

PHOTO #5 Gottlieb Elbel

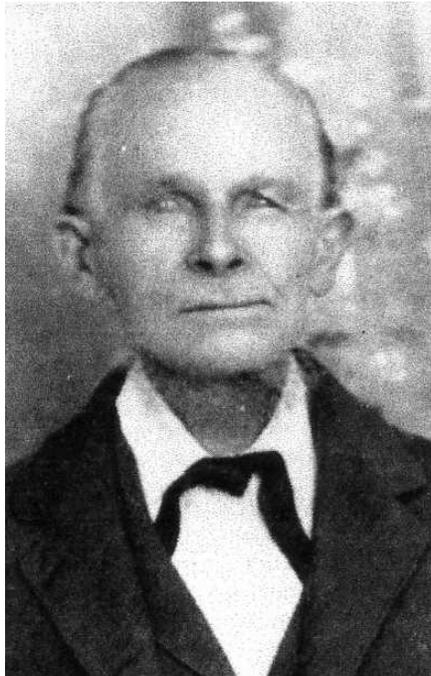


PHOTO #6 Page from Postal Journal

Zeitung
Abendzeitungen wo für sich geben
Wochentlich
New Orleans
New York Tribune New York
San Antonio Weekly Herald Texas
Texas State Gazette Austin
Albion New York
The World New York
The Free Republic Mexico City
Hoone New Orleans Deutsche Zeitung
Wochenblatt in N. Orleans
Sonntag-Blatt Zeitung
New York Democrat

PHOTO #7 Photo from Brenda Anderson-Lindemann *Spring Branch and Western Comal County, Texas*, 1852 structure photo unknown date.



Figure 31 Old Gottlieb Elbel Homestead & 4th Post Office, circa 1852; C/o John & Cheryl Ferguson of Austin, Texas Historical Architecture Specialist working on her doctorate.

PHOTO #8 1940s photo with 1852 structure on the left and 1871 structure on the right



PHOTO #9, #10, #11 photos of 1871 structure taken in the 1940s with Robert McCallum and daughter

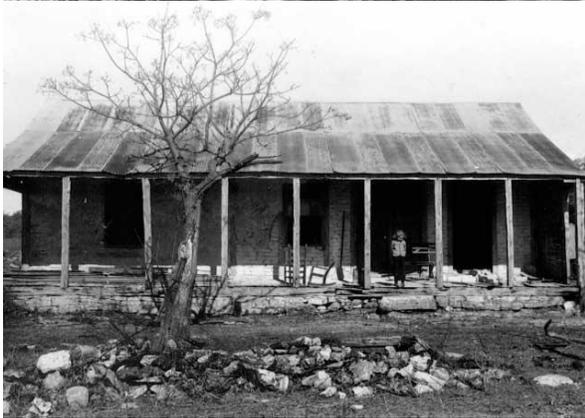


PHOTO #12 Property from deed records

PHOTO #13 2013 photo of the Elbel Cemetery

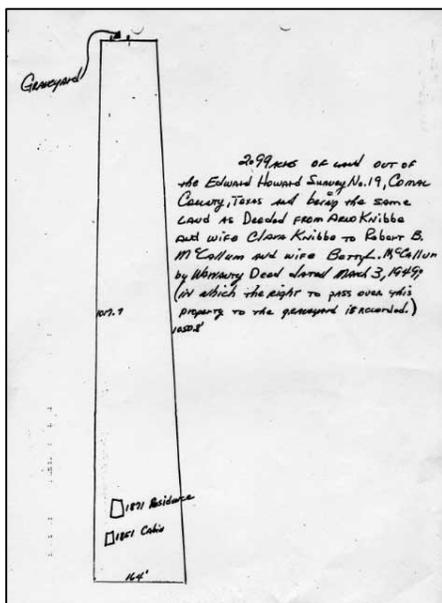


PHOTO #14 series of photos taken in 1998 before and during the renovation of the 1871 home





PHOTO #15 Collage of 1871 home after renovation (Harlan Henryson in photo)





PHOTO #16 Collage of 1852 home/post office in 2003 prior to renovation (Harlan Henryson in photo)







PHOTO #17 Collage of 1852 home/post office after renovation (Harlan Henryson in photo)



