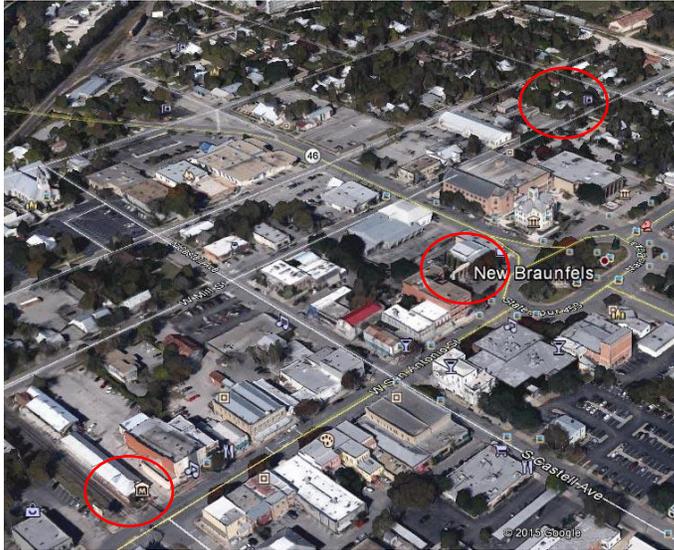


## MILL STREET TELEGRAPH STATION

### CONTEXT

The first telegraph office in New Braunfels was at the Guadalupe Hotel on the main plaza beginning in the mid-to-late 1860s. August Schmitz began as a telegrapher at the hotel in 1869 and in 1871, the telegraph office moved to Schmitz's home on Mill Street. The office remained there for eight years before moving back to the hotel and eventually to the railroad depot. The home at 265 E. Mill Street was built in the mid-



1800s from local materials and is still standing to this day. It is one of the few German fachwerk or half-timbered structures left in New Braunfels and is an example of the vernacular building technique used in the founding years of the city. This story of the little house revolves around its use as a telegraph station in the early years of telegraph communication.

The current map shows from left to right the railroad depot, Guadalupe (now the Schmitz) Hotel and the Mill Street house in relation to the center of New Braunfels.

### OVERVIEW

#### **Long Distance Communication and the History of the Telegraph**

Long distance communication has always been a necessity in an evolving country. Long ago smoke signals were developed for communicating from hill to hill. The English developed the semaphore, a signaling device using flags or lights. On top of a hill was built a light box with shutters which allowed signals to be flashed from one tower to another. A message could be relayed as far as 85 miles. This system was obsolete by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of the telegraph. Several systems were utilized before the invention of the telegraph, one being the Pony Express but by 1869 the Pony Express was replaced by the telegraph.

Samuel F.B. Morse is given most of the credit for inventing the telegraph. This may not be entirely true but Morse did prove that signals could be transmitted by wire. Morse received funds from Congress to install a line between Washington D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland. His idea was to bury wires. This idea failed so he had to take another course of action to hang wires from trees, however, this also failed. Finally, he had the idea to hang the wires from poles. In 1844, Morse stationed himself in the Supreme Court Chamber in the Capitol in Washington D.C. He sent the famous message “What hath God wrought” to his assistant, Alfred Vail, in Baltimore. Vail got the message.

By 1846 a new business, the Associated Press, took full advantage of the telegraph to send messages to newspaper offices. What a boom for rapid communication! The national election results of 1848 were sent via wire to newspapers for the first time. Abraham Lincoln’s State of the Union address was transmitted over telegraph wires to all “loyal states”. Obviously the Confederacy didn’t get the speech. Lincoln was supposedly fascinated by the technology of the telegraph and would spend hours, even overnight, in the War Department building to keep track of what was going on during the Civil War. Western Union built its first transcontinental line in 1861 following the railroad tracks. Messages were easily sent to newspapers across the United States but it seemed impossible to send a message by wire to Europe.

An American businessman named Cyrus Field organized a new company called the New York Newfoundland and London Telegraph Co. Field began laying 2,500 miles of cable from Ireland’s Dingle Peninsula to New Foundland. After several failed attempts of the use of the wire, Queen Victoria in England successfully sent a letter of congratulations to newly elected president, James Buchanan, on the advent of his election. The telegraph system had a lengthy history and was used well into the 1960s when the military began exploring what would become the Internet and e-mail systems.

The telegraph also played an important role in time keeping. Before the Civil War the use of “local time” was adequate and everyone in a community synchronized their clocks and watches with a local steam whistle or bell. The railroad changed everything regarding the view of correct time. It was essential that time and schedules were coordinated. There were no established time zones and the situation was becoming chaotic. In 1865, the US Naval Observatory began transmitting time signals to Washington D.C. by telegraph. Western Union telegraph then transmitted the time to

railroads across the nation. Large clocks were used to standardize the time. These clocks were weight-driven pendulum types and were synchronized daily. At the railroad office, on the Morse wires, a signal began a couple of minutes before the hour, then a pause and a final click at the hour. Railroad operations people were required to carry approved watches that they synchronized with the telegraph signal. There is a Western Union clock donated to the New Braunfels Conservation Society that is housed at Forke Store at Conservation Plaza. This clock was used for timekeeping at the telegraph office in early (unknown date) New Braunfels.

Up until 1877, long-distance communication was by telegraph and in that year the telephone became a rival technology. In 1879, patent litigation between Western Union and the telephone was ended and largely separated the two systems of communication.

### **The History of the Telegraph in Texas**

The use of the telegraph in Texas preceded the railroads and began as the Texas and Red River Telegraph Company in 1854 with the first telegraph office opening in Marshall, Texas. Ironically, Samuel F.B. Morse had offered his new invention in 1838 to the Republic of Texas but received no reply.

On January 15, 1856, the Texas and New Orleans Telegraph Company was chartered and began construction of the lines from Galveston to San Antonio and Austin. The important port town of had to wait Galveston until 1859 before a line was finally completed to the island. It was in 1865 that the capital city of Austin had a telegraph. By 1866, most of the telegraph companies operating in Texas consolidated as the Western Union Telegraph Company and by 1870 there was an estimated 1,500 miles of telegraph wire in Texas. In the 1870s, telegrams cost a quarter for distances under 25 miles. Originally, lines were strung treetop to treetop and telegraph operators would close their offices and ride along the lines to make repairs. Expansion was extensive with the completion of railroad lines and lines were strung from pole to pole. In 1876, a military telegraph was completed linking San Antonio with other army posts. Western Union continued over the years to expand their services and continued well into the late 1900s.

### **The History of the Telegraph in New Braunfels**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the world was connected by the telegraph.

What was happening in New Braunfels as far as communication? When the immigrants first came to the Republic of Texas, the fastest form of communication was by mail. It took about three months for letters to arrive from Germany on a ship and then had to be transported overland.

Letters and penny postcards were delivered to stations by stagecoach. The stagecoach stopped at the Schmitz Hotel located on Main Plaza. Throughout the Civil War (ending in 1865), news about the war reached New Braunfels by stagecoach. In 1880 the International and Great Northern Railroad came to New Braunfels and mail was sent by rail.

At a special meeting of the New Braunfels City Council on May 12, 1865, the mayor gave permission to the Western Union to fix the places for posts with the agent in



such a manner that the free passage and use of the streets of the city would not be obstructed. The operator that worked the telegraph had to learn Morse Code. When the message arrived over the wire, it was written down and then hand-delivered to the person it was meant for. The first telegraph office was in the Guadalupe (or Schmitz) Hotel

which was located on the plaza in downtown New Braunfels. (the Guadalupe hotel is on the left in the photo) It was the natural place for the office to be. It was the hub of the community, open 24 hours a day and could house the telegraphers. It could also provide a Pony Express stop for telegrams to be delivered elsewhere in the county. August Schmitz was named as the telegraph operator at the Guadalupe Hotel in 1869 according to the *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung* newspaper and in July of 1871 it was noted in the *Zeitung* that Schmitz had to repair vandalized telegraph lines near Stringtown which was between New Braunfels and San Marcos. The telegraph operator frequently had to repair stolen or vandalized lines. In 1871 the telegraph office moved from the Guadalupe Hotel to August Schmitz's home on Mill St. The next photo is the current view of the Mill Street home that was the telegraph station. The property is approximately one block from the Guadalupe Hotel. It is confusing, but unknown, the relationship of August Schmitz to Guadalupe Hotel owner Jacob Schmitz.

An interesting article in the New Braunfels Herald on April 2, 1970 reads: “When the New Braunfels people in 1870 celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the town, they sent him (Prince Karl in Germany, founder of New Braunfels) a telegram of good wishes to his castle on the Rhine and received a reply immediately. Presumably in 1845 he did not expect that someday he would be able to send telegrams from Germany to the colony founded by him.”

On February 24, 1871 a telegraph brought word of peace in the French and German war. Cannons were fired in New Braunfels. This was important news for those with family back home in Germany.

The *Neu-Braunfeler Zeitung* office was moved to Mill Street next to the telegraph office in 1877. Two houses down from the telegraph office and next to the *Zeitung* office, was the home of Anselm Eiband. He was the editor of the newspaper. No doubt it was advantageous for the newspaper to be adjacent to the telegraph office to receive news that could be published in the newspaper.

Another important telegram was received indicating that the Supreme Court ruled in favor of New Braunfels regarding the Veramendi Land in 1879. The Adelsverein or German Immigration Company filed bankruptcy and a clear title was not obtained for the land settled as New Braunfels. In 1852, the heirs of Juan Veramendi filed suit against the citizens of New Braunfels to reclaim the land which they claimed had not been paid for. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Veramendi Family in 1854 but that was overturned in 1879.

In 1879, the telegraph office was moved back to the Guadalupe Hotel (it became the Schmitz Hotel in photo below after 1873 remodel and expansion) and then moved to the railroad passenger depot in 1881. The first trains had entered New Braunfels in the fall of 1880 and the IGN Railroad depot was located on San Antonio Street near downtown. In most cases, the telegraph followed the railroad. This provided for oversight of the telegraph lines on railroad right of way. It also allowed the coordination of correct



time between the US Naval Observatory and the railroad via the telegraph.

Eventually in 1899 the telegraph and telephone offices merged. City Council passed an ordinance Dec. 10, 1895, granting Southwestern Telephone and Telegraph permission to erect and maintain on the streets, alleys and public ways, poles, fixtures and wires necessary to supply New Braunfels citizens with communication by telephone.

### **August Schmitz, Telegraph Operator**

The duplex/house at 267 E. Mill St. is on NB lot #140 and still stands today where August Schmitz once operated the early telegraph office. The land on which this house sits was originally conveyed to Francis Guilbeau, a San Antonio merchant, by the German Emigration Company in 1847 for \$60 in company papers. Guilbeau sold the property to Friedrich Hartwig in 1866. Hartwig came to New York from Germany in 1853 at the age of 18. In the 1860 Comal County Census, he was listed as age 25 and a carpenter. It is unknown who built the house on Mill Street, however, the construction represents 1840s-50s early vernacular building characteristics. The third owner was August Schmitz, the telegraph operator. Schmitz bought the property from Hartwig in 1872. It is thought that the home was probably rented by Schmitz from Hartwig as early as 1871 as there was an article posted in the *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung* by Friedrich Hartwig for sale or rent of the property. The telegraph office was then moved two months later to the Mill Street residence.

The telegraph operator had to be educated, speak and write English and German, and be a trusted official. August Schmitz possessed these qualities. He came from Germany and was a school teacher.

August Schmitz was born Jan 3, 1830 in Germany. In 1860 he is listed as a 30-year-old school teacher in Guadalupe County. His wife is listed as Margaret and children listed are August, Charles, Herbert and Rudolph. In 1870 he is listed in the Comal County census as a 40-year-old telegraph operator and living with him is his wife, Margarethe and children Karl (Charles), Johanne, Tony and Amalie. Herbert and Rudolph are not listed.

In January 1876 Charles Schmitz replaced his father, August, as telegraph operator. There must have been some failure to pay by customers because in December 1876, there was a notice in the *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung* that Charles Schmitz announced

no credit, only cash. In March 1877, there was a notice that Schmitz stated all telegrams need to be paid at the time sent.

August Schmitz left New Braunfels and returned to Cibola Valley in Guadalupe County. He received a U.S. Appointment of Postmaster for Cibola Valley on December 16, 1879, and in the 1880 Guadalupe County census is once again listed as a 50-year-old teacher with wife Margaretha and children Johanne, Antonia (Tony), Mary (Amalia), Bertha and Stella. August Schmitz died on November 2, 1894, and is buried in the Stapper Cemetery in Bexar County.

After Schmitz, the property was transferred to J. August Dietz on January 26, 1878, as a trustee sale for non-payment of interest, principal and taxes. In 1886 Dietz sold the property to Valentine Fuhrmann for \$1000. The property remained in the Fuhrmann Family, namely the Ludwig descendants, until 2014 when it was sold to Danny and Anna Lisa Tamez.

### **The Fachwerk Structure**

The building now has two complete rental units each with living area, kitchen, bath and bedroom. It was converted into a duplex by the Ludwig family for additional income sometime after 1886. The original walls are still standing in the front two rooms, as are the original floors. The story is that the bricks that line the walls were made with mud and water from the Comal River, a block away.



The construction is fachwerk or half-timber. This method utilizes heavy squared-off and carefully fitted and jointed timbers with joints secured by large wooden



pegs without the use of modern tools. Hand-powered tools were utilized along with laborious woodworking allowing a gradual assembly of the building that could bear heavy weight without using excessive interior space for vertical support posts. The timber walls were then filled in with brick or other infill. The wall surface on the interior was often covered with

wainscoting or plastered for warmth or appearance. The outer wall surface was frequently plastered for durability.

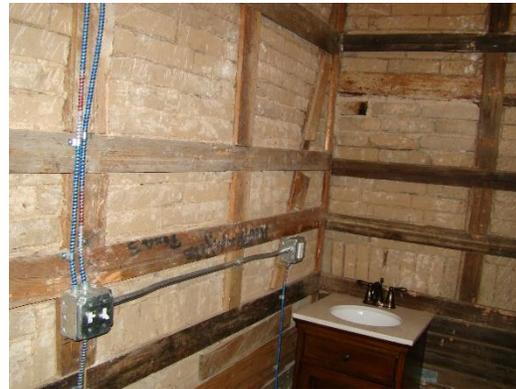
Fachwerk is the German name for this construction prevalent in Europe. In America, most half-timbered houses existing in Missouri, Pennsylvania and Texas were built by Germans.



Prior to the arrival of the railroad which brought more modern building materials, this building technique was used in New Braunfels and Comal County utilizing basic building materials

such as lumber and hand-made brick. Prince Solms in the *Colonization in General and German Colonization in Particular*, describes how the German colonists should build their houses.

According to *the New Braunfels Historic Resources Survey: City of New Braunfels, New Braunfels, Texas, Comal County* in January 2009 by Hardy-Heck-Moore, “The use



of fachwerk harkened back to a time in German history that seemed to Solms and the German settlers as more pure than the present time. Solms and the German immigrants thought that Texas afforded opportunities to restart and re-connect with these simpler times.”

The early home housing the telegraph office on Mill Street has been restored for vacationers to be able to enjoy a little bit of the past in the present by owners Danny and Anna Lisa Tamez. They have exposed the fachwerk inner wall construction and restored the floors and ceilings. To avoid deterioration of the outer wall surfaces that had been covered in asbestos shingles, they had to apply rock and stucco to the fachwerk surfaces for protection. The photos in this section are current images of elements in the home.



## **SIGNIFICANCE**

The telegraph had a dramatic impact on New Braunfels in the mid-to-late 1800s. It was the start of a communication revolution. New Braunfels was fortunate to be along a telegraph line between Austin and San Antonio as well as a railroad line. The railroad and telegraph evolved together and made a change concerning how people viewed time. Due to the telegraph, communication became instantaneous and news could be received from all over the world in a matter of moments instead of waiting weeks or months. No doubt the telegraph had an impact on the *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung* newspaper with the receipt of the Associated Press news and news from overseas. Instantaneous communication became necessary in an evolving economy as stock market information could be sent by telegram. The telegraph began in a downtown hotel that was the hub of the community and then moved for eight years to this fachwerk home on Mill Street before moving back to the hotel and then to the railroad depot. The significance of this house is the story of the early telegraph in New Braunfels as well as the structure itself. As telegraph operator, August Schmitz performed a significant service for the citizens of New Braunfels. It is fortunate that the Ludwig family preserved the structure for over 100 years and that the Tamez Family has continued that tradition for the future.

Narrative compiled by Myra Lee Goff and Karen Boyd. Historic photos from the Sophienburg photo collection.