

**March 12, 2008**

**Early Transportation - Danville and Montgomery, Texas 1845 – 1860:  
Based on the research of the Danville History Committee**

*Contributions by David Frame, Karen McCann Hett, Karen Lawless, Carolyn Terrell, and Elsa Vorwerk. All Committee members had previously conducted extensive research on family histories that were tied to Danville. While researching for the exact location of Old Danville, identifying the existing road structure was a natural consequence of the effort. The evidence for the road structure is only available in the early Montgomery County Court record. (1836 – 1860)*

From a Texas History perspective, the tendency is to think of the Austin's Colonies as the first settlements in Texas. In fact, the Spanish, French, and Germans were in Texas long before Austin utilizing the Indian Traces from Louisiana to South Texas for trade and expansion of territory. This system of trading routes eventually became the early State highway system. The northern land route to Austin's colony was via the established, and centuries old Indian traces through East Texas. Natural springs and shallow water river crossings were common characteristics of the early traces.

The genesis of the road system serving Danville and Montgomery were the principal Indian traces that had been established by the Couthatta and Bidai Indians. Two of these early traces traversed the northwestern and western sections of Montgomery County. By 1845, the Spanish, various US Military forces, Mapping Expeditions, and the early settlers had developed these early traces into a system of roads and supporting trails.

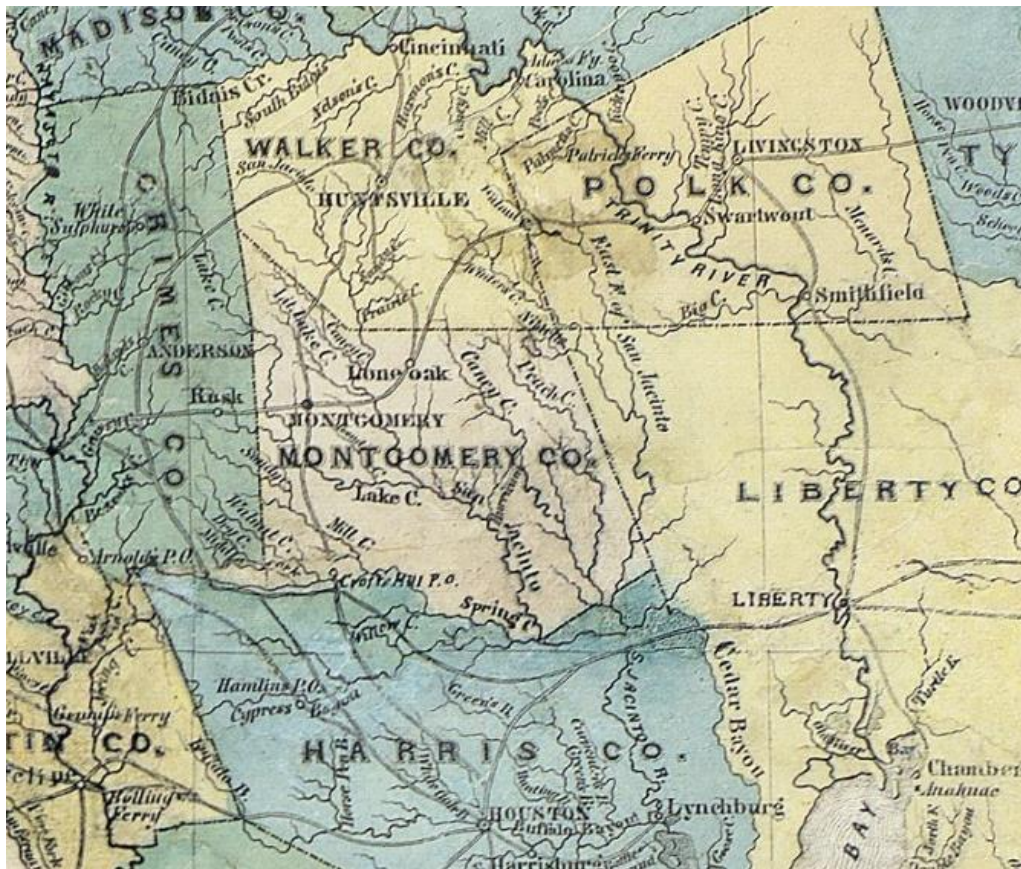


1839 Map of Texas by Hunt and Randel

The mapping capabilities of the Republic, the State and Counties of Texas from 1836 to 1880 were extremely limited. The 1839 State of Texas Map by Hunt and Randell, considered one of the best, illustrates the early deficiencies of the route depictions. Any indication of a trail or trace was only an approximation of a route that was known to exist. In many cases, illustrated by a straight line. There were no surveyor descriptions that could be relied on for accurate maps.

Early County Court records (1840's) were slightly better, with an indication that a particular road passed through an owner's property, or a recorded survey. In many cases, the survey owner was the original grantee from the State. Thus, a general indication of road structures was available based on property ownership. There was no real degree of accuracy achievable based on these records.

In 1845, two official roads, published as *stage and post roads*, served the Danville and Montgomery areas. (see map below) The "Houston Road" ran from Huntsville via Stubbsfield, Montgomery, present day (*pd*)Tomball, aka Croft's Mill, and to Houston. The "Swartout Road" ran from Swartout, via Lone Oak, Montgomery, and Rusk to Washington.



Cordova – Texas 1854

National Archives, College Park Md, Map Room – Photo of Montgomery Co and adjacent area, from 1854 Map of Texas by Cordova -- Note: Locations that are shown have postal service.

Existing in concert with the two official roads of the period was a much larger network of pathways that had been established through the previous centuries. These pathways were linked through out Montgomery, Walker, San Jacinto, Grimes, and Harris counties. During the dry season, these pathways and short cuts allowed fording of streams with coaches, wagons, and heavy loads offering a much quicker route to a final destination. The additional trails/roads that served various locations between 1845 and 1858 are detailed in the Montgomery County Commissioners Court Minutes and are listed below. The building and maintenance of the roads and associated short cuts would eventually transfer to the Counties, and then into the State and Farm to Market roads of the Texas Highway System in 1917

*Note: The Court records provide the only evidence for the existence of this extensive network of trails and roads. There are no map records of this area in the National Archives, the Texas General Land Office and other State Archives.*

- Swartout – Waverly – Danville –  
This trail was a more direct dry season pathway between Swartout and Danville. It became the primary road in 1845.
- Huntsville – Pine Valley – Swartout  
Major pathway to/from Huntsville and the lower crossing on the Trinity River
- Carolina – Pine Valley – Danville  
This trail was a dry season pathway to/from Danville and the upper crossing on the Trinity River. There were four routes leaving Danville westbound. As a crossroad, Pine Valley hosted a major Stage Depot for many years.
- Huntsville – *pd*Willis – McNeeses – and Dunmans Crossing aka Porter ...to Houston  
aka the “Houston Road”. This trail was a short cut to Houston passing east of Danville and was principally for those on horseback. The southbound road out of Danville to San Jac Town split just northeast of Lone Oak and intersected with this road. The terrain beyond McNeese’s was suitable for travel only during the driest conditions.
- Danville – Grand Lake - Egypt – *pd*Tomball – Houston  
This trail was a dry season short cut that went just west of *pd*Conroe and crossed the San Jacinto River south of Lake Creek. The road avoided the Lake Creek bottoms south of Montgomery and was the most direct route from Danville to Tomball.
- Swartout – *pd*New Waverly - Longstreet (Bays Prairie) – Anderson  
This trail was a direct dry season pathway between the lower crossing on the Trinity and Anderson. Same as the Danville – Swartout trail, except this one split around *pd*New Waverly and went west.
- Danville – Lone Oak – San Jac Town aka Corner’s Bluff – Montgomery

The principal road from Danville to Montgomery. Through a ten year period, it crossed the San Jacinto at various places. The original crossing point was below Atkins Creek. Later the crossing was moved to a point above Atkins, very close to the river bridge on the Old Wills-Montgomery Road Now under Lake Conroe. Was recognized for the view it offered from both sides of the river. Principal crossing spot for many years.

- **Danville –Dunlap’s Bridge – Washington/Anderson**

The research group has not been able to pinpoint the location of Dunlap’s bridge. The records indicate that it was due west of Danville enabling a more direct path to Washington.

- **Dunlap’s Bridge – Huntsville**

Court minutes indicate that the trail left Dunlap’s Bridge on a direct course to Huntsville. Research team could not establish specifics for this route. Early county road maps show numerous possibilities for this trail into South Walker County.

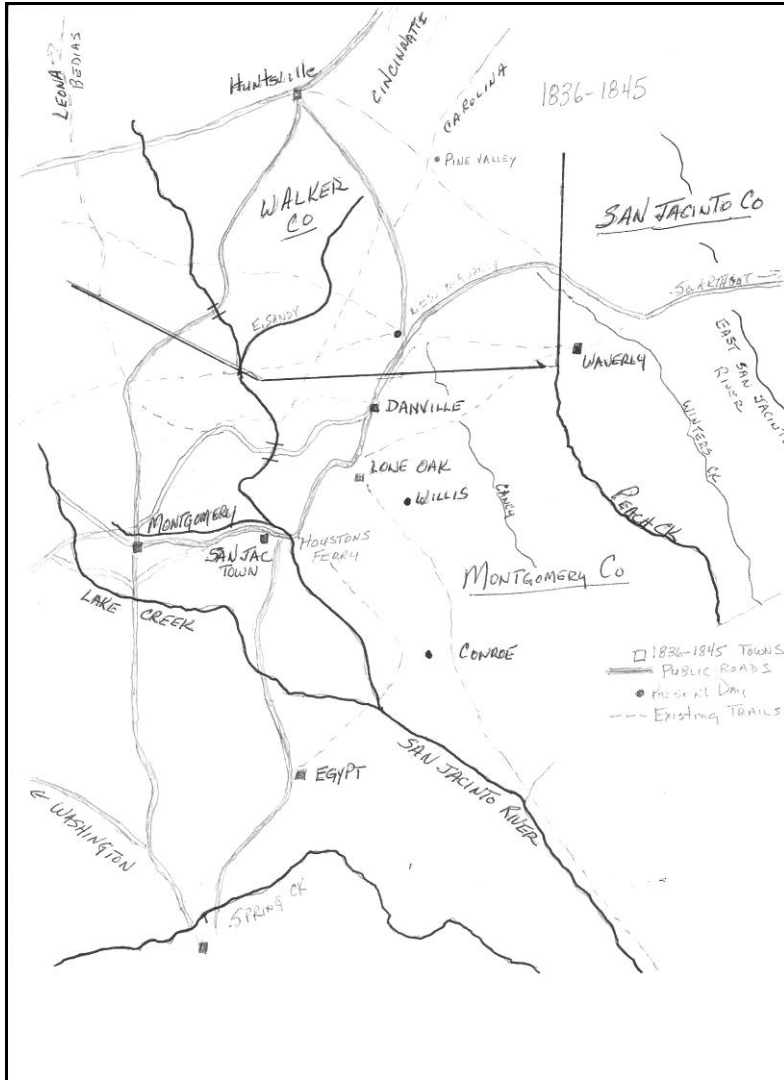
- **Danville – Johnson’s Bluff - Fowlers Bridge – Montgomery**

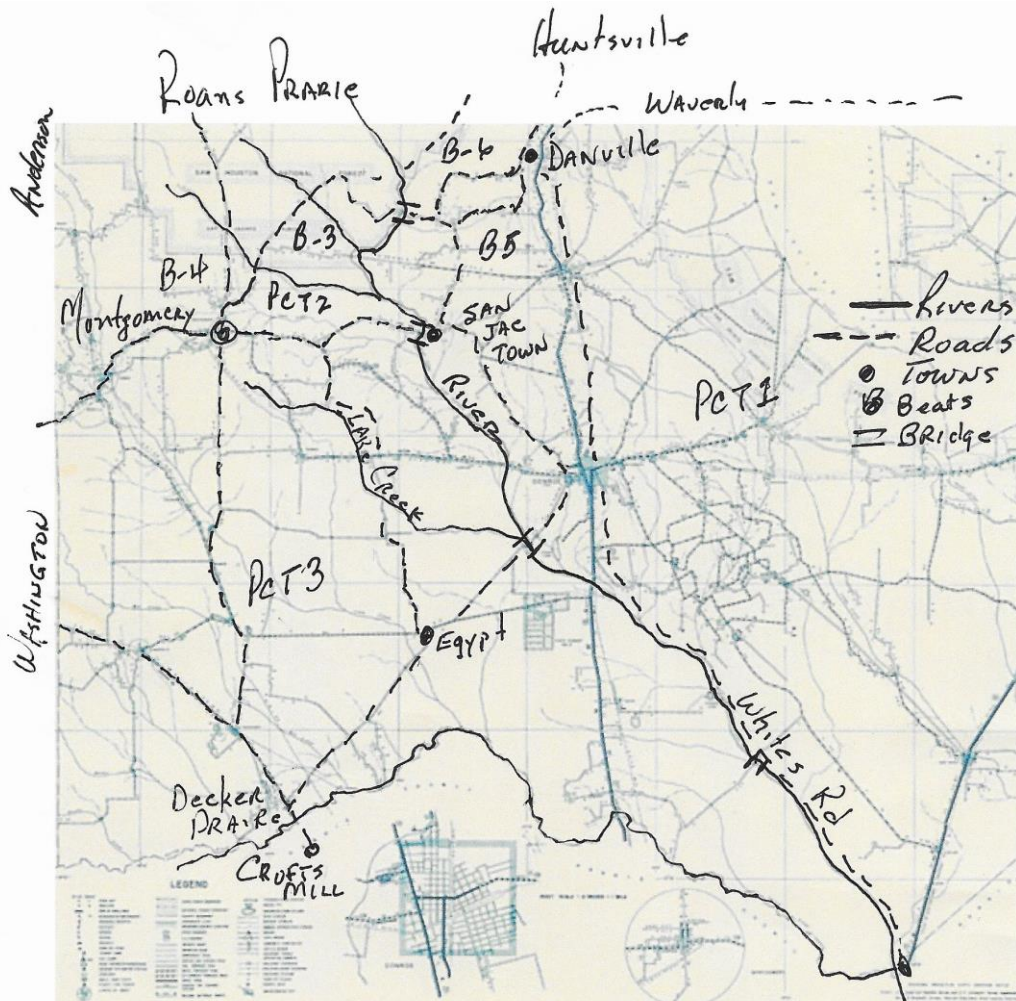
Fowler’s Bridge was southwest of Danville and crossed the San Jacinto River at a point adjacent to Weirs Creek. From the bridge, the road went west then turned south toward Montgomery. Because of the greater distance to travel, this was an alternate but well used route between Montgomery and Danville. Also known for its’ the view from Johnson’s Bluff.

- **Huntsville - Anderson – Croft’s Mill**

This route is shown on Pressler’s 1858 Map of Texas. It is the only route from Huntsville to Houston that completely avoided the San Jacinto River basin.

The map below, of the existing roads in 1845, is based entirely on property ownership and work orders found in the court records. The county boundaries, rivers and location of Huntsville, Willis, and Conroe are to scale.





Montgomery Co Roads 1936 with 1845 Overlay

Above is a 1936 Montgomery Co highway map, the first record of the county road system, developed by the St. of Texas with an overlay of the 1845 road system (dotted lines), Precincts, and Beats in Montgomery County. A beat was an established militia group organized to defend an area. It's obvious that the present day, western portion of the county road system evolved from the network of Indian traces and trails that existed in the 1830's. The bridges on three main roads that crossed the San Jacinto River at Weirs Creek, Lake Creek, and White Oak Creek are missing today.

Around the Danville area, these roads and trails supported a wide range of business activities. These included numerous agricultural operations, lumber mills, brick yards, blacksmith shops, storage facilities, cotton warehouses, and numerous Churches. Within the town of Danville, there was a general store, post office, stage depot, lawyer's offices, Doctors offices, carpenters, schools, two Churches, a freight business, as well as number of local residences.

An examination of the Maps of Texas, the court records, and pathways listed above indicates the absence of any development in the South Eastern part of Montgomery

County during this period, especially the area between the convergence of the San Jacinto River and Spring Creek. Many of the older records show this area as a “thicket” and it was referred to as a “boggy area” and “bear country”. It remained undeveloped until the 1880’s.

When traversing Montgomery County, the San Jacinto watershed, rainfall, mode of travel, and the traveler’s willingness to accept increasing degrees of difficulty (excessive distance and weather conditions) were all part of the decision process when determining the best route to a destination. If the traveler was on foot, horseback, or using pack animals, the options for moving through the upper parts of Montgomery County were virtually limitless. Forging a creek or small river like the San Jacinto was a matter of local practice. If travel was by coach or wagon, the East and West forks of the San Jacinto River and Spring Creek, with their major tributaries, Caney, Peach, Big Sandy, Crystal, Lake Creek, Little Lake Creek, Adkins, and Cypress creeks dictated the routes taken by these vehicles. Collectively, these rivers and streams are known today as the Upper San Jacinto River Basin. There were alternate routes around the headwaters of every major stream, some of them requiring many miles of additional travel, e.g., the westerly route from Huntsville to Anderson to Croft’s Mill and Houston. In some cases, the only option was to wait for the waters to recede. There are numerous documented instances of travelers being stranded for days and even weeks waiting for conditions to improve.

From 1845 through 1860, the trace, trail, and road environment in Montgomery County was under rapid development and very fluid. The road system was managed by the Montgomery County Commissioners Court; but was built, paid for, and maintained by the land owners. For each of the trails previously listed, the Court assigned a work crew headed by a land owner. Assignments to road duty were routine, included all able-bodied persons, and were not limited to sections of road that traversed the specific property of an owner. Throughout this period the Court required the land owners to maintain “finger signs.” These signs were a key component of the “road system” providing travelers not only directions, but could also indicate which way to go based on the conditions of the rivers and streams.

In many cases, the Court targeted the considerable resources of the larger land holders. For instance, one of the principal planters and a resident of Danville, Green Wood, was tasked to build and maintain Whites Road; 32 miles of trail that ran from Danville to the convergence of the San Jacinto River and Spring Creek. Wood assigned 18 hands to this task, then maintained this road for several years. In 1846, the Court assigned Thomas Caruthers and 50 additional owners and hands plus all able-bodied people to work the road between Caney Creek and the Liberty Co Line. The concepts of equity and fairness in terms of owner expenses and number of assignments were not evident in the Court’s orders.

From 1843 to 1858, the Court records indicate that flooding damaged many of the bridges and crop lands adjacent to the San Jacinto River. Then, as today, Montgomery County residents would have been aware of the occasional extreme and sometimes

violent nature of the local weather, especially the prospect of enormous amounts of widespread rainfall. Today, residents are well aware of the rainfall that can occur with a tropical storm. An example of extreme rainfall occurred in October 1994. After four days of rain, the San Jacinto River rose to 32ft above normal at the I45 Bridge, and 41 ft above normal at the I59 Bridge. Two thirds of the San Jacinto Basin's headwaters were well above flood stage. If we translate the conditions of the 1994 event to the 1840's and 50's, we can understand that settlers and travelers would have been distressed, possibly isolated, and likely inconvenienced for months and maybe years. Destruction of the bridges and road beds was total on at least 3 occasions, 1843, 1844 and 1858. Businesses, homes, crops and livestock located in the flood plain were destroyed, or suffered severe damage. Evidence of a such an event can be found in a quote from a Houston newspaper dated Jun 10, 1858. "The roads in this county bear evidence of a great deal of rain.....the roads are washed and very many bridges have been washed away."

In Jan 1847 J W Ridgeway petitioned the Court to build a substantial bridge across the San Jacinto River. The court approved the request giving Ridgeway one year to complete the task and eight years of toll authority to recover his expenses. Jan 31, 1854, the State of Texas authorized the San Jacinto Bridge Company, a corporation headed by Zill McCaleb, to build a bridge across the San Jacinto River at a point known as McCaleb's boatyard. (San Jac Town) On May 19, 1858 the court authorized funds for new bridges across the San Jacinto, and Lake Creek in two separate areas. In 1860, the CCt was still seeking a permanent way across the river.

The records show that dealing with the River was an ongoing, time consuming, and expensive effort. Conversely, there were many occasions through recorded history of drought and the river being reported as "dry". Clearly, the weather and resulting condition of the rivers and creeks was the single most influential factor in the daily lives of the settlers and those traveling through the area.

If Pressler's 1858 Map of Texas is compared to Wilson's 1846 Map, the relocation of the Post Offices to Danville and Waverly, plus the development of additional roads in the western portions of the county is evident. At this point in time the Railroads were starting to influence the movement of cotton in the western part of Montgomery County. A telegraph was built from Houston to Palestine along the Houston – Huntsville Road, which was later named Telegraph Road.





National Archives, College Park Md, Map Room – Photo of Montgomery Co and adjacent area, from 1858 Map - State of Texas by Charles M. Pressler Note: Map shows the expansion of the road system through out western Montgomery County.

In addition to the roads and trails, ferry boats, steam boats, and other water transports operated on the Trinity, San Jacinto, and Brazos rivers as well as Galveston and Buffalo Bayou from the late 1830s to 1880. These boats supported the transportation of people and goods to the strategic crossing points of the expanding road system. Of major importance were two ferries, Houston's/Burch's ferries which operated at San Jac Town, and Dunman's ferry which operated at the convergence of Spring Creek and the San Jacinto River. Both offered a way across the river during normal water conditions.

Although the rainy season was an impediment to the normal traveler, elevated water levels in the rivers offered an opportunity for various types of boats to be utilized on the San Jacinto River. A specialized application of water craft was the use of flat boats. The concept most likely came from a similar craft, the Bateau boat, used on the Rivers of Virginia and the Carolinas' to transport tobacco. These long narrow boats were capable of transporting large loads, in this case, cotton. In 1853, there were 2 boatyards, one operated by Zill McCaleb and the other by Robert Marsh, serving this industry with warehouses and boat building facilities. Both were located on the river in the area of the *pd* Lake Conroe Dam.

Green Wood, a Danville plantation owner, kept very accurate records of the material he used for flat boat construction, river conditions, and the loads that he shipped down the river. On several occasions, his hands moved 1000-1200 planks from the mill to the boat

construction/staging area. In 1853, he built four “flats” to transport his entire cotton crop, 280 Bales, to Houston. Per his ledger, he transported 70 bales per boat. Although the exact design of the boat is unknown, the displacement required to float 70 bales (35,000 pounds) and the shallow water terminology of ‘flats’ translates to a craft that was 10 feet by 50 feet in size, weighing at least 40,000 pounds, would have a draft of about 15 inches. The design terminology used in the ledger also shows some degree of sophistication in the construction of the boats.

This size craft would have required a crew of 6-10 men to maneuver down the river. During high water, or flood stage event, this was a risky venture. Allowing this craft to get sideways in the current, or the cotton to get wet, would have been a very dangerous and potentially costly proposition. It’s easy to calculate why Woods and others were willing to take this risk. It took 3 days on the river and 30-40 men to move 100,000 pounds of cotton to Houston. The boats were then dismantled and the planks were sold.

Conversely, transporting the same load via wagon required the following: a 6 mule/oxen team with 2 spare animals, 1 large wagon, a driver and handler, carrying 10 bales of cotton (4000 pounds) and 5-10 days to make the trip to Houston. 26 wagon loads of cotton would be required to move 100,000 lbs. Transport via the river was far more efficient, and less expensive than the cost of transport by wagon.

In February 1850, Wood, who was moving to Danville, waited a month in Houston because the roads were impassable. He recorded the arrival of his freight at a landing. “Freight put on the San Jacinto Pole Boat owned by Capt. Davis got up to the Landing on the 24<sup>th</sup> one month from Houston. Freight very badly injured. Hauled with 3 wagons three days & hired five loads at \$5 each.” The “Landing” referred to is most likely McNeese’s. McNeese’s was on the San Jac River at the convergence of Crystal Creek, fifteen miles from Wood’s location.

In a letter dated June 1850, from Dr Geo Spiller to his family in Virginia, he specifically says that “small steam boats” were being used on the River. Very likely a packet boat designed to move people and goods. There is confirmed use of steam boats and paddlewheels on Galveston Bay, Buffalo Bayou, and multiple paddlewheels on the Trinity River as early as 1830. No doubt, some of these tried the San Jacinto on multiple occasions, especially during high water events. There was one report of a wheel boat collecting wood and pine cones in the vicinity of SanJac town.



Picture of a small steamer used on Rio Grande. This boat was moved from Galveston to the Rio Grande.

Green Wood's journal dated May 11, 1850 states ". River very high, crossed in the Keel boat of Captain Davis. Mules & Horses swam over." Event occurred at San Jac Town. The keel boat, by definition and construction, was similar to a pole boat, or a flat. Also, the title of Captain implies some military experience or navigational capability as well as responsibility, i.e. command of an operational vessel, transporting cargo, for profit, etc. There are two references to Capt. Davis transporting goods and passengers on the river with a keel boat.

By 1853, Woods' was sending wagons to McNeese's to get supplies and groceries. In his journal, Wood's used the term "sent down to the boat" to record these trips. In one case, he says the "San Jacinto boat". Wood's grocery list included barrels of lard, barrels of molasses, barrels of port, loads of iron, pork, and salt. During this period, barrels were the most common method of transporting goods via larger boats. The only way for these heavy supplies to get to McNeese's was either pole boat or steam boat. The extent and duration of steam boat service on the San Jacinto River is unknown, however, it's not unrealistic, given the need and the right conditions, to expect that these craft traveled up to McNeese's and to the boat yards. Wood also had an invoice in his ledger for boat repairs completed by Sheppard for Marsh's boatyard. Contained in the invoice were itemized expenses which included a steam boat fare, and stage fare. After 1856, there are no references in Wood's journal to the flats, or trips to McNeese's, evidence that the movement of cotton was now via rail.

Construction started on the Houston Texas and Central Railroad in 1853. As Pressler's 1858 Map of Texas illustrates, the Railroad was abeam Millican at that time. The distance from Montgomery to Millican is approximately twenty miles. This is 1/3 of the distance required to transport goods to Houston and the route from Montgomery to this location avoids most of the San Jacinto watershed. Planters working the western side of the San Jacinto River would have found shipping via rail from this location very

attractive and much more efficient. In 1861-1864, Millican served as a staging location for CSA troops. Initially, many CSA troops went by rail to northern Virginia to serve in Lee's Army.

A complex network of transportation systems was developed in the northern and western parts of Montgomery County throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Even so, citizens had a need for the more efficient transportation services. Railroad development was delayed until after the Civil War, but when it arrived, the primary system of transportation changed. The rail roads caused the collapse of river-based services and landing locations. One location in particular, Danville, refused to allow the railroad access through the town because of the corruption associated with the construction crews and unwanted travelers. That decision lead to the downfall and abandonment of the town of Danville by the 1880's.