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Gordon's Ferry

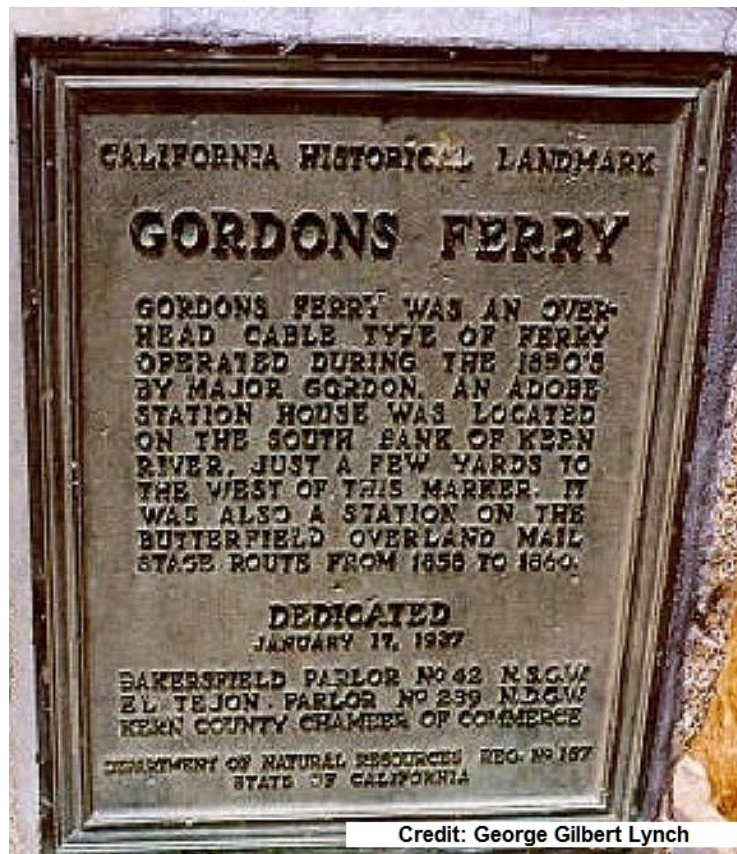
And Other Crossings Of The Kern River, 1852-1937

By Gilbert Gia
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On January 31, 1915 Kern County dignitaries and civic groups met at Gordon's Ferry bridge to dedicate a bronze plaque. Present that day was Kern County Union High School Principal Herman A. Spindt whose efforts as a local historian brought about this recognition of the historic crossing.¹ Local newspapers did not write about the event, but it was reported in the February issue of the *Grizzly Bear*, the Journal of the Native Daughters of the Golden West.

¹ The State Department of Natural Resources approved, registered, and numbered California historic sites. At the 1915 dedication were the Native Daughters of the Golden West (El Tejon Parlor 239) and the Native Sons of the Golden West (Bakersfield Parlor 42).

That original plaque stated that in the 1850s and early 1860s Gordon's Ferry "was the point on the lower Kern river where all trails and roads from both north and south converged," and the plaque also identified seven major trails into the San Joaquin Valley.² Today's bronze marker more modestly describes the crossing's historical importance.



Gordon's Ferry Marker

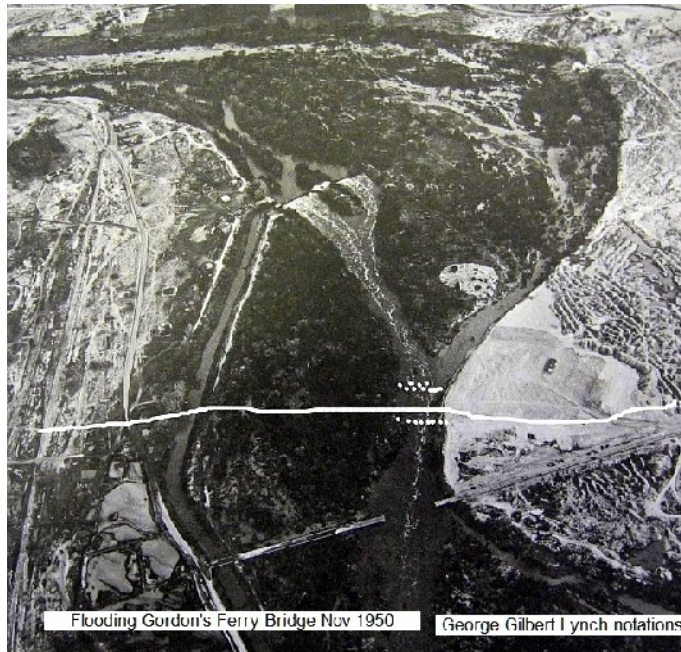
² Feb 1915.

As a term, Gordon's Ferry first appeared on April 20, 1852 as an entry in the Tulare County *Franchise Book*. Ex-Officio Tulare Recorder Aneas B. Gordon, 36, had been granted a tax-free, eight-month license to operate a ferry and sell goods and liquor on the Kern River. ³

Precisely where Gordon established his operation is not known for sure, but in 1936 Herman Spindt said an early map showed a wagon road that approached Kern River from the south and crossed the river about 100 to 200-yards from today's Gordon's Ferry bridge.⁴ He also said old-timers recalled a ferry about one-half-mile up-river from the bridge. In either case, it is probably safe to say that the first Gordon's Ferry crossing was within a half-mile of either side of today's bridge, with the somewhat greater likelihood it was on the up-river side.

³ Annie Rosalind Mitchell, *The Way it Was: The Colorful History of Tulare County*. Fresno, CA: 1976. Gordon was born in Scotland and immigrated to Texas before he came to California. Gordon was "Ex-Officio" because California had not yet recognized Tulare as a county. His name has been spelled variously: In Ann Zwinger, *John Xantus, the Fort Tejon Letters 1857-1859*, Gordon is "Major William H. Gordon." In Roscoe P. and Margaret B. Conkling, *Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857-1869, vol. II*, (Arthur H. Clark, 1947), Gordon is "John F. Gordon". The names are so different they seem to be different people, but both are associated with Gordon's Ferry.

⁴ Herman Adolph Spindt, *The Butterfield Stage Route in Kern County, 1858-1861. Presented to the Kern County Historical Society*. Bakersfield: Monograph, May 29, 1934. Spindt identified Gordon as Major Aneas B. Gordon.



Line and white dots showing the ferry crossing; 1950 bridge below

In the early 1850s placer gold was discovered a few miles north of Gordon's Ferry in the foothills between Poso Creek and White River, and Gordon's became an important river crossing for gold-seekers from the Southland. Shortly after that, Richard M. Keyes found gold on the northeastern slope of Greenhorn Mountains, more specifically about three-miles west of present-day Lake Isabella. Gordon's Ferry had little to do with this strike because prospectors from the Southland came in from the Mojave Desert, Walker's Pass, and Kern River Valley.

In 1852, about eight months after Gordon established his ferry, rain fell for three weeks across California. An observer wrote, "The rivers have been swelled to such an extent as to inundate all the low lands, causing immense damage, destroying stock and agricultural products." ⁸ According to José Jesús López, early pioneers said the river swept Gordon's "perfectly bare of all signs of improvements." ⁵

The Greenhorn gold rush played out by 1855, but new strikes nearby attracted another wave of miners. Those from Southern California would have used Gordon's Ferry to access the upper Kern River gold fields via Linn's Valley. In fact in 1856, traffic became so great along that route that A.T. Lightner built a toll road between Linn's Valley and Keysville.⁶

In 1858 Washington in cooperation with the Butterfield Overland Mail & Express Company started a bi-weekly stage between the Mississippi River and San Francisco. It passed through Texas, New Mexico Territory, the California desert, and into the Republic of Mexico before returning to California. When

⁵ Frank Forrest Latta, *Saga of Rancho El Tejón*, Bear State Books, 1976, ISBN 1892622300

⁶ In 1859, business in nearby Glennville was so thriving that David Lavers built a hotel and barn for stagecoach traffic.

the stage was at Los Angeles, San Francisco was 462 miles, 80 hours, and 33 station-stops ahead. One food stop and wagon change on that segment was Gordon's Station at Gordon's ferry on the Kern River.



View of Panorama Bluffs from Gordon's Ferry Bridge

Marshy conditions on the planes of the southern San Joaquin Valley meant Gordon's Ferry was important for travel between Los Angeles and Visalia. Until the late 1850s the population on the valley floor was slight, and therefore the stage ascended the foothills to serve mining populations.⁷

⁷ That leg was near today's Bakersfield-Glenville Road. About four miles below Woody, the stage road descended into Fountain Springs and then to Visalia. (Lynn Hay Rudy. *Old Bakersfield: Sites & Landmarks, 1875-1915*. 2000. Jenner, CA (22750 Hwy. I, Jenner, CA., 95450): p 116). Today it is county maintained and called the Old Stage Road.

The Butterfield stage entered the San Joaquin Valley via Grapevine Canyon⁸ and then turned northeast to avoid Kern Lake and the swamplands of the Kern River delta. According to Spindt, eight miles north of today's Fairfax school the stage "followed up the gradual acclivity to the summit of the bluffs bordering the Kern River, [and the stage] descended the bluff near the present rifle range of the Bakersfield rifle club."⁹

Today, about 200 yards east of the intersection of Fairfax Road and Alfred Harrell Highway, a shallow draw angles down to the river (see X's on map below). This probably traces Butterfield's route.

⁸ Fort Tejon was established in Grapevine Canyon in 1854, but a year later there were two Tejon Pass routes between San Fernando and the lower San Joaquin Valley. Both originated in the Santa Clara Valley, passed through San Francisquito Canyon, and continued on to Lake Elizabeth in the Antelope Valley. There, the road divided. One went to Fort Tejon and Tejon Canyon on Interstate 5. The other route entered a mountain pass south of Tehachapi Peak called Tejon Canyon/Crocker Canyon. That trail paralleled Tejon Creek before descending to Edward Beale's holdings at the Sinks of the Kern in the San Joaquin Valley [W. Harland Boyd, *California a Middle Border, Kern River Country, 1772-1880* (1972) pp 13, 17]. In 1850, Los Angeles sought trade with miners in the Owens Valley and constructed that precipitous trail [Clarence Cullimore, *Old Adobes of Forgotten Fort Tejon*. Kern County Historical Society, Bakersfield, California. (1941), p. 36]. Spindt, op cit, implies that the Butterfield Stage of 1858 did not use the Crocker Canyon route.

⁹ Ibid. In a 2003 interview with the author, historian George Gilbert Lynch said he gathered lead shot in the 1940s on a hillside by today's Fairfax Road.



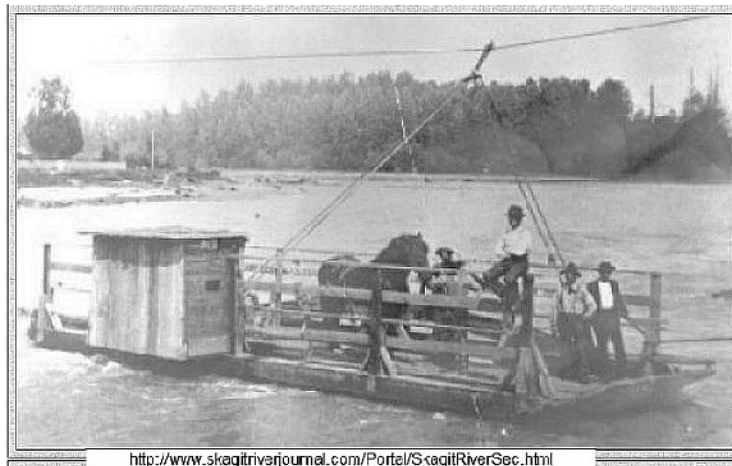
Likely path of the Butterfield Stage. Ferry crossing is at upper left.



Another likely path. View facing south to No. 11 on map

History provides us few eyewitness accounts of Gordon's Ferry. *New York Herald* reporter Waterman L. Ormsby was a

passenger on the first Butterfield stage between St. Louis and San Francisco, and on the morning of October 8, 1858 his stage was at the ferry. Ormsby reported that the flatboat was not working, and passengers crossed the river in a small boat.¹⁰ In 1859 another traveler wrote, "We crossed the river, obtained a pretty good dinner at the station, changed horses, and emerged upon the Desert, a stretch of 27 miles without water."¹¹ Gordon's station was then a set of adobe buildings on either side of the river, each with a stagecoach and horses. During times of low water, stages forded river to change teams.



<http://www.skagitriverjournal.com/Portel/SkagitRiverSec.html>

Reaction ferry

Some accounts mention an overhead cable between banks but do not explain the function of the cable. Certainly a cable

¹⁰ Waterman L. Ormsby, *The Overland Mail*. Huntington Library, 1942

¹¹ *Mariposa Gazette*, Jul 1, 1859. That desert was the plains of the Southern San Joaquin Valley.

would have prevented drifting, but its presence suggests that Gordon's was a reaction ferry.¹² If so, the craft was fitted bow and stern with bridle cables that could be shortened and lengthened to adjust the boat's angle to the current. When the orientation was correct, the force of the current would propel the craft between the river's banks.

By August 1859 Joseph Gale owned the franchise.¹³ His business probably improved in February 1860 when the new wagon road over Greenhorn Mountain was opened over Posey Flat Station to the diggings at Keysville. A few months later Andy McFarlane & Company began work on a toll road to improve passage between Tulare and Keysville. The *Visalia Weekly Delta* wrote,

When complete it will open a good wagon road the entire way from Tulare to Mono Lake. There is a good bridge across the Kern River at Keysville, and there is a good natural road from there up the south fork of the River to the new mines.¹⁴

¹² Also called a gravity ferry

¹³ *Visalia Record and Fresno Examiner*, Aug 6, 1859.

¹⁴ *Visalia Weekly Delta*. Feb 25, 1860. In 1861 lead and silver deposit were discovered 30-miles southeast of Lone Pine in the Owens Valley.

Traffic was brisk below the bluffs at Gale's ferry, but politics and an unprecedented natural disaster changed the value of the crossing. Sometime after February 1861, Texas and five other states seceded, and Butterfield had to abandon the southern route to California and instead enter the state via Virginia City, Nevada.

Just months earlier, in June 1860, Congress authorized construction of a telegraph line between Missouri and California, and in October, Gordon's station relayed the first Morris Code text between Los Angeles and Benicia.¹⁵ With the start of the Civil War, Gale's station, and crossing, became important to the war effort.

The natural disaster came in the form of an historic rain that started falling across California on December 24, 1861. Four weeks later eyewitnesses described a 20 by 30-mile lake that appeared to fill the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Los Angeles Star*, as cited by Bonnie Ketterl Kane, *View from the Ridge Route, Vol. II, The Fort Tejon Era*. p 154-5. For about 13 months, between 1853 and 1855, Benicia was the capital of California.

¹⁶ Goodridge, op cit.

**According to José Jesús López, flooding on the Kern River
erased Gale's ferry crossing.¹⁷**

**But months later, Philo D. Jewett noted in his diary that
Messrs. Cameron and Gilbert had installed a new ferryboat
eight miles downriver from Jewett's camp at the mouth of Kern
Canyon.¹⁸ That distance suggests two likely locations for the
ferry: Today's Gordon's Ferry bridge site, or at Randolph's old
ferry, which in 1865-6 was about one-half mile east of the
intersection of today's Manor Street and Roberts Lane.¹⁹**

¹⁷ Latta, op cit.

¹⁸ "Father has gone to the Ferry." Aug 13, 1862: "Went to the Ferry 8 mi. below to day [sic] for the first time. Saw Mr. Cameron and Gilbert. Cameron expects to launch a new ferry boat tomorrow." [*Jewett Diary*, Aug 11, 1862. (Kern County Library microfilm)]; Louis V. Olcese constructed the first bridge at Rancheria Road in 1893 (see *Bakersfield Californian*, Aug 19, 1943 and *The Rio Bravo Ranch*, (2007) by George Gilbert Lynch).

¹⁹ Randolph's Ferry was in NE 1/2, S.18, T29S-R28E, or about two miles downriver from today's Gordon's Ferry Bridge. (John Redstone, "Kern Pioneer Life Was Interesting." *Historic Kern*, vol. 13, #4, Jun, 1963).



View from Panorama Bluffs, Gordon's Ferry is upper right

Col. Thomas Baker's son, Tom Baker,²⁰ know about the flood of 1861-1862. When the five-year-old arrived at the Kern River with his family in 1863, there was a ferry there because soldiers from Visalia and Fort Tejon had rebuilt it.²¹

The gold strike of 1864 at Clear Creek east of Greenhorn probably increased traffic at the Government ferry, but then a second strike followed at Havilah. Asbury Harpending wrote, "Miners, capitalists, speculators, swarmed in from all over the

²⁰ Born July 1857 in CA

²¹ Nicholas Patrick Scanlan (ed.), *Kern County Pioneer Recollections*. Fresno: Pioneer Pub Co, 1985. No one was at the river to help Col. Baker. He crossed in a canoe and brought the ferry over to his waiting family (Tom Baker, "History of Early-Day Bakersfield." p 16).

Pacific slope."²² By 1866 Havilah saw stages from Walker's Pass and Kernville, but in this mining period, and in those two described below, Gordon's station played an insignificant role.

After silver was discovered at Cerro Gordo²³ in the southern mountains of Inyo County, Kernville's river crossing saw increased traffic.²⁴ Those Southern California miners who came into the San Joaquin Valley via Fort Tejon followed the eastern foothills, made their way up Caliente Creek to Walker's Basin, and from there achieved Havilah. Others entered the mining area via Antelope Valley and Willow Springs, and travelers from the north came in by way of the Greenhorn Mountains route.²⁵ None crossed the Kern River at old Gordon's station.

²² Asbury Harpending, *The Great Diamond Hoax*. 1913. Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2002, p 106

²³ Willow Springs was a way station between Los Angeles and Cerro Gordo. The mining area was known as the Comstock of the Southern Sierra. Mining was in decline there by 1877.

²⁴ In 1866 James Cross operated a ferryboat at Kernville. He tested a new, 414-foot ferry cable, but it parted (*Havilah Courier*, Feb 8, 1866, as cited in the *Daily Californian*, Aug 18, 1892); In 1867 H.C. Harding nearly drowned while crossing the Kern River on a ferryboat (*Visalia Delta*, Jun 5, 1867); The river flow at Gordon's Crossing was usually low in June. That means Harding's mishap occurred at Cross Ferry near Kernville; "Rain fell for about 30 hours almost incessantly. The bridge over the Kern River, we are informed, was washed away..." (*Havilah Weekly Courier*, Dec 29, 1866).

²⁵ On Feb 25, 1860 the *Visalia Weekly Delta* reported a good bridge at Keysville. Ferries and bridges on upper crossings of the Kern River were often washed away.

Miners at Havilah and Kernville traded at Kern Island (Bakersfield), but mountain roads were difficult and sometimes impassable. On November 6, 1867 Kern County Supervisors at Havilah authorized Col. Baker to build and operate a toll road from Caliente Wash, 12-miles east of Baker's Field, to the intersection of the Los Angeles/Havilah Road at Walker's Basin. This supply route, too, had nothing to do with Gordon's Ferry.

By May 1868, semi-weekly stage service was running between Havilah and Los Angeles,²⁶ and traffic was brisk at the Sumner Mines near Kernville. In March 1870 mining was such an important activity that county supervisors appropriated \$500 to buy the Sumner Bridge at Kern River.²⁷

Then on January 1, 1868 a freak flood of the Kern River demolished old Gordon's Station. It also washed out the

²⁶ The two-day trip was \$20 (*Havilah Weekly Courier*, Aug 8, 1868 and May 16, 1868); Judy Barras in *Long Road to Tehachapi* (Bakersfield, CA: Sierra Printers, 1976) describes the route as Willow Springs/Oak Creek Pass/White Rock Creek/Tweedy Creek (near today's Monolith). The road followed creeks and canyons for about 50 miles before reaching Walker's Basin.

²⁷ Kern County Courier, Mar 15, 1870; 1870 Kern County tax rolls show that the G&S Sumner Mining Co. of Kernville paid taxes on horses, wagons, tools, a 16-stamp quartz mill, and several buildings, including a "Board and Sleeping House." G&S Sumner Mining operated seven quartz loads, or mines, one of which was the famous Big Blue. In Mar 1875 the *Southern Californian* reported that Dr. L. S. Rogers of Bakersfield visited Kernville and enjoyed the "excellent fare and clean beds" at Peterson's Hotel. It then had 100 regular boarders. The *Californian* added that G&S Sumner Mining processed 100-tons of ore a day with an 80-stamp mill powered by water supplied by a 4x6-ft, 2,600-ft-long flume.

fledgling settlement of Bakersfield, and relocated the Kern River to its present position north of town. The community soon rebuilt itself, and three months later John E. Stone applied to the county "to maintain a ferry at a point on Kern River known as the Telegraph Ferry where the road from Visalia to Tejon crosses said river."²⁸

What happened to Gordon? The Tulare County Franchise Book notes that he paid business taxes through 1857. Spindt wrote that ²⁹ around 1858 Gordon relocated and established a trading post in San Francisquito Canyon on the Los Angeles-Fort Tejon road.³⁰ Gordon probably had abandoned the Kern River ferry in favor of the Owens Valley road because by then it was seeing a great amount of traffic between Los Angeles and the Cerro Coso mines.³¹ In 1870, a traveler reported meeting a "hale and hearty" Major Gordon near Elizabeth Lake.³² According to Spindt, Gordon moved to Santa Paula and died there in 1875.³³

²⁸ *Havilah Weekly Courier*, Mar 21, 1868.

²⁹ Spindt, op. cit.

³⁰ Ibid. Gordon probably located there somewhat earlier.

³¹ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Jan 21, 1870. p 2

³² Harris Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California*, 1853-1913. Los Angeles, CA: Zeitlin & Ver Brugge, 1970. p 194

³³ Spindt, op. cit.

In the decade of the 1870s, the San Joaquin Valley marshlands were disappearing owing to dry years and canal building, but both contributed to more direct wagon routes, principally those linking Bakersfield and Fort Tejon and Bakersfield and Visalia. Because travelers no longer had to skirt the marshy basin, old Gordon's Ferry became even less important. José Jesús López, who came to Tejon Ranch in 1873, said he never saw a ferry at Gordon's Station, but he did recall a ferry operator named "Luck" Smith and his wife who operated one there for a short time. According to Lopez, after Smith died the crossing was called the Widow Smith's, and after her death a family named Delano had it and restored the name to Gordon Station. Lopez said that after the station became a post on the State telegraph line (1860), Tom Delano was its telegraph operator for many years.³⁴

³⁴ Frank Forrest Latta and José Jesús López. *Saga of Rancho El Tejón*. Bear State Books, Santa Cruz, CA 1976



George Gilbert Lynch at the probably site of Gordon's Ferry.
(bridge upriver is an oil company pipeline)

By the early 1870s, Gordon's Ferry had become a footnote to history. The marshes near Bakersfield were mostly gone, and stages abandoned the 96-mile mountain road to Visalia in favor of a shorter, more level path between the two towns. In April 1870 the *Kern County Weekly Courier* wrote,

We may have one of the best roads in the state at almost a nominal expense. Those who have traveled this route inform us that water can easily be secured at convenient distances, that the crossing of the various river beds can be made without difficulty and that there is not a single elevation to be called a hill on the entire route. ³⁵

³⁵ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Apr 12, 1870.

The *Courier* later reported that the Bakersfield Stage Company was using the new path, and that came at no surprise. According to a Kern County survey of March 1871, the new Visalia road was just 72 miles long, and travel time between the towns had been reduced to ten hours.³⁶

The Kern River was an obstacle to use of the new route, and in 1872 a ferry was established downriver from old Gordon's Crossing. The *Kern County Weekly Courier* wrote,

The Kern river ferry is near the northern boundary of the town and connects directly with the main street, which is the old highway between Visalia on the north and Los Angeles on the south. ³⁷

The ferry was immediately useful because back in March 1871 George B. Chester initiated three stages a week between Bakersfield and Visalia, and it was "in a direct line to

³⁶ Mar 18, 1871

³⁷ May 31, 1870. The new ferry was located at an existing ford on soft sand. At times of high river it was a wider, shallower crossing than the one at old Gordon's Station (Kern Co Weekly Courier, May 4, 1872). The main street was Chester Ave. ["Kern river" with lower case "r" was common newspaper usage.]

Bakersfield."³⁸ The towns had becoming trading partners ³⁹ and the coming railroad would increase that commerce. In April 1871 the Southern Pacific was at Gilroy, and in September the company was making plans to build a railroad bridge at Bakersfield located "a little below [downriver of] the present ferry..." ⁴⁰

George B. Chester diversified his business. In January 1872, Supervisors authorized him to maintain the new ferry and collect public tolls,⁴¹ but the ferry was of marginal use to the growing population west of Bakersfield. In response to urgent petitions, the county considered a second ferry. In summer 1872 a Bakersfield paper wrote,

Accordingly, a careful examination of the stream farther down reveals an excellent crossing, hitherto concealed by a thick growth of willows. This spot is very near the western prolongation of Third Street North. The road is here confined to a channel [of the Kern River] not more than two hundred feet in breadth between high and solid

³⁸ *Visalia Delta*, Mar 23, 1871 and Apr 6, 1871

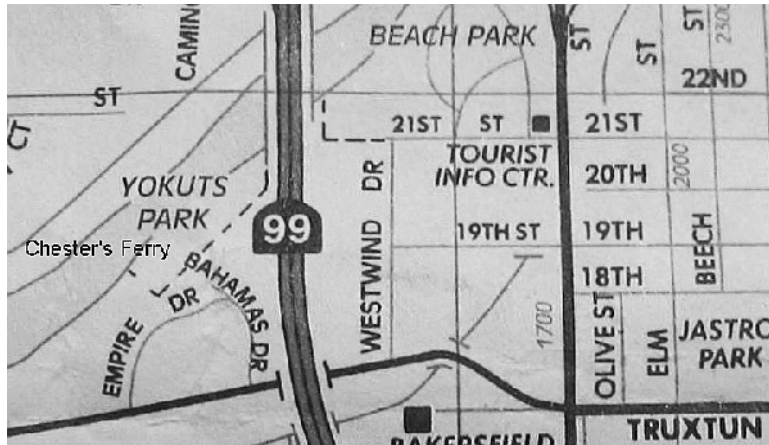
³⁹ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Apr 1, 1871

⁴⁰ *Visalia Delta*, Sep 21, 1871. Completed in October 1874, the railroad bridge was three-quarters of a mile southwest of the bridge that today links Bakersfield and Oildale.

⁴¹ *Havilah Miner*, Jan 11, 1872

banks of clay. A force of men are [sic] now engaged in opening a road to it, and piers will be constructed on either side for the convenient landing of the ferry boat, which will be removed to it with as little delay as possible.⁴²

Today, the western prolongation of Third Street North is 19th Street. That locates Chester's Ferry at today's Yokuts Park and about 1/4-mile south of the 24th Street bridge.



Approximate location of Chester's Ferry near Yokuts Park

After the old ferryboat was floated down to the new landing, the *Weekly Courier* noted,

The new ferry, to which we alluded in our last issue, was put in operation on Tuesday. This is a great improvement on the old one. The stream is here narrow and deep, and

⁴² *Kern County Weekly Courier*, May 4, 1872.

there will be no difficulties in ferrying during the summer from the shoaling of the water. ⁴³

Chester's Ferry became important to the silver ingot trade. In fall 1869, mining and smelting magnates Mortimer M. Belshaw and Victor Beaudry contracted with freighter Remi Nadeau to transport silver-lead ingots from Cerro Gordo to the Los Angeles Harbor via Owens Valley and San Francisquito Canyon. In 1870 Cerro Gordo's furnace output increased to nine tons a day, and Nadeau fell behind in his deliveries. Smelting output then jumped 75 percent. On December 1, Belshaw & Beaudry canceled their contract with Nadeau and hired James Brady. Brady's solution to the transport problem was a river steamer on Owens Lake.⁴⁴ Although it shortened

⁴³ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, May 11, 1872. Shoaling means wave action in shallow water. A bridge replaced the ferry in 1877 (Bailey, Richard. *Heart of the Golden Empire*. Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Pub, 1984. p 120); The *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Aug 10, 1872 said the river was easily to ford.

⁴⁴ Jun 22, 1872

the 200-mile trip to Los Angeles by three days, thousands of ingots continued to pile up at the smelters. ⁴⁵

Meanwhile at San Francisco, the firm of Livermore & Redington thought the SP rail-building south would allow San Francisco to capture the silver ingot trade from Los Angeles. ⁴⁶

In 1872 Livermore & Redington bought Chester's stage company, appointed him manager of the Kern and Inyo Forwarding Company, and established a freighting contract with Belshaw & Beaudry. ⁴⁷

Chester collected the ingots at Cerro Gordo, delivered them to the Bakersfield ferry, and then freighted them to the SP's southern rail terminus at Tipton, just 50 miles north of Bakersfield.⁴⁸ Three days a week, trains at Tipton were loaded

⁴⁵ Remi A. Nadeau, *City-Makers, 1868-76*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1948. pp 38-43, 89-94. Nadeau wrote that by early 1872 increased trade with Owens valley caused Kern County to improve the wagon road over Tehachapi Pass.

⁴⁶ Livermore & Redington invested here between 1865 and fall 1874.

⁴⁷ Margaret Aseman Cooper [Zonlight], *Land, Water, and Settlement in Kern County, California 1850-1890*. Thesis. U of California, 1949. New York: Arno Press, 1979. p 38. John H. Redington & Co (a California wholesale drug distributor) capitalized the firm; "A.O. Thoms had bought out Livermore & Chester's Visalia-Bakersfield line and turned it into his Los Angeles Line, Jul 4, 1872, 3,1" (Handwritten note of W. Harland Boyd, McGuire Local History Room, Beale Library, Bakersfield).

⁴⁸ Julius Chester's Telegraph Stage Company ran between Visalia and Bakersfield and was the Southern Pacific's freighting agency south of Tipton (Nadeau, op cit).

with ingots and sent to San Francisco. Los Angeles suffered an immediate business decline.

The system was so profitable that Livermore & Redington decided to improve the ferry. Wrote the *Delta*,

We learn that a new and commodious ferry boat is to be constructed for the navigation of Kern river this winter when the rains shall come. The gunwales passed through a few days since, and if one may judge from their size, the boat will be ample capacity. It is now in course of construction and will be, when completed, 50 feet long by sixteen feet wide, strongly built, and capable of transferring the heavy bullion-laden teams from Owens River with greatest ease and celerity. ⁴⁹

The Southern Pacific rails continued toward Bakersfield, and Kern County Supervisors renewed Chester's ferry franchise.⁵⁰ Then Nature and Economics stepped in: Heavy rains, inflated feed costs, and an outbreak of equine epizootic

⁴⁹ *Visalia Delta*, Nov 28, 1872. "Passed through" referred to the SP line at Goshen, eight miles west of Visalia. Gunwale, pronounced "gunnel" to rhyme with "tunnel", is a nautical term describing the top, side edge of a boat.

⁵⁰ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Jan 4, 1873

eroded profits, and when the fatal horse contagion appeared in Inyo County,⁵¹ even freighters in Los Angeles refused to enter the Owens Valley.

The plague played out by April, but by then Belshaw & Beaudry had canceled their contract with Chester and reestablished it with Nadeau. Wagons heavy with ingots again appeared in Los Angeles streets, business tills swelled to a \$1,000 a day,⁵² and the Inyo mines refueled the growth of Los Angeles.⁵³

If rains, disease, and feed costs had not ended Chester's contract, the looming national economic crisis would have, and that turn-down even affected the Southern Pacific. Rails reached Delano on July 14, 1873, but money was so tight by then that the SP halted construction for a year.

⁵¹ W. Harland Boyd. *Lower Kern River Country, 1850-1950*, p. 25

⁵² Edith Dane, "Out of the Past - Kernland Tales." *Daily Midway Driller*, Nov 30, 1957.

⁵³ Nadeau, op cit.



Chester's Ferry Accident Of 1874 (acrylic pastels)
Mia Suverkrop Alexander, 2009 (by permission)

A local newspaper described a January 9, 1874 accident at the new ferry:

When the ferryboat reached the middle of the stream the leaders [horses] of the stage team took fright, turned round, and forced the whole team into a sudden retrograde movement that resulted in precipitating both stage and horses into a deep and rapid river. The stage rolled over and was carried some distance down the stream. The passengers extricated themselves with difficulty, one being nearly drowned. The accident was the result of neglect in not closing the gates at the ends of the boat. The craft itself is one of the largest, strongest and

**safest of its kind, if the means of security it affords are
availed of. ⁵⁴**

**What happened was an anomaly because the usual
complaint was the ferry was slow in serving wagons waiting in
line to cross the river, and the numbers increased as new
settlements appeared on the west side of Bakersfield. An
example of growth in 1873 was the area around Rhymes
schoolhouse at Tracy's crossing.**

**[A] year ago the county around the schoolhouse was
almost without an inhabitant. Now it is dotted with the
homes of settlers, and many who have procured locations
by means of agents, or those who have gone before them,
are expected to arrive this fall. The children of the families
already there are numerous enough for a first-class
school.⁵⁵**

**In September 1874, County Supervisors invited bids for
construction of a bridge across Buena Vista Slough near Tracy's**

⁵⁴ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Jan 10, 1874

⁵⁵ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Sep 27, 1873

crossing. Westsiders welcomed it, but residents north-of-the-river felt ignored.

We hear dissatisfaction expressed in regard to the point selected..." wrote the *Visalia Delta*. Kern County had funds for only one bridge, and the *Delta* urged against building a bridge at Tracy's Crossing because it would be useless for traffic from Visalia. Those travelers would still have to ford the Kern River, which "for a greater part of the year [is] quite as impassable as the slough itself..."⁵⁶

The Southern Pacific bridge at North Chester, completed in October 1874, was of little use to westside wagon traffic between Bakersfield and Famoso. Pleas for a bridge continued in late January 1875; residents were inconvenienced and trade between Bakersfield and Visalia was too often disrupted. The *Courier* wrote,

There has been no way of crossing Kern river the past week. The ferryboat was torn loose from its moorings and carried a considerable distance down stream before it was recovered. It is at such times as this that the want of a

⁵⁶ *Visalia Delta*, Sep 3 and 10, 1874

bridge is seriously felt. Kern river will probably not be fordable again until next July. ⁵⁷

The *Visalia Delta* pointed out that Dr. Thornton's private bridge at Old River had stood up well to high water, and the paper used that as reason for demanding a westside bridge at Chester's crossing.⁵⁸

As dissatisfaction continued, George Chester's manager W.C. Pratt improved the ferry west of Third Street North, and Chester continued to profit from the tolls. ⁵⁹ The *Sumner Gazette* concluded,

The people of that part of the county cannot afford to cross the river except on urgent business unless the river is at a low stage, and it is practical to ford it. The small produce, fish or butter, eggs, chicken, vegetables, etc, is

⁵⁷ *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Jan 23, 1875. The citation suggests that the ferry at the North Chester crossing was not replaced.

⁵⁸ *Visalia Delta*, Jan 21, 1875. Dr. George F. Thornton was a Confederate surgeon who came to Kern County in the early 1870s. He was general manager of James B. Haggin's 5,000-acre Bellevue ranch located about four miles southwest of Bakersfield.

⁵⁹ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Mar 9, 13, 1876 and Apr 6, 1876. The improvements included a mule that towed the ferry from bank to bank. Chester, who had then returned to the ferry business, had collected \$5,000 in tolls. The *Courier* wrote, "The tax on the people who use it is enormous." (*Sumner Gazette*, Jun 3, 1876).

rendered practically valueless because the ferry tolls consume the profit. ⁶⁰

The *Californian* agreed. Any money spent on a Tracy's Crossing bridge ignored the needs of north-of-the-river residents. At times of high water, Chester's ferry was too out-of-the-way for them, but it remained their only access to Bakersfield shopping and its post office. Residents complained of ferry tolls, but equally annoying were the dry months when the sandy banks of the river at the Chester Ferry ford bogged-down wagons. Why couldn't Supervisors buy a ferryboat and charge reasonable tolls? A number of complainants north of Bakersfield threatened to transfer their business to merchants at Lerdo. ⁶¹

The County searched for a bridge site,⁶² but Chester's Ferry was not on the list because
... it is situated in the midst of country, which extends several miles in every direction of heavy, deep sand along the approaches from either side-- Two miles of sand on

⁶⁰ *Sumner Gazette*, Jun 17, 1876

⁶¹ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Sep 28, 1876

⁶² *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Aug 24, 1876

the west of the river and a mile of the same on the east side. ⁶³

A few days later a paper noted, Every available point on the river was critically examined for a distance of ten miles, commencing at Randolph's old ferry above Capt. Stephens' place, ⁶⁴ and about 400 yards above Anderson's crossing ⁶⁵ and extending down the river as far as the head of the Pioneer ditch. ⁶⁶

The committee favored construction of two bridges, an northern one near Randolph's old ferry, ⁶⁷ which was just up-river from the Southern Pacific bridge, and a second bridge several miles down-river at the head of Pioneer Canal. ⁶⁸

⁶³ *Sumner Gazette*, Sep 9, 1876

⁶⁴ Elisha Stephens. For his biography see Kern Gen, Vol 47, No 1, March 2010 [Kern Co (CA) Genealogical Society].

⁶⁵ *Sumner Gazette*, Sep 16, 1876. Anderson's Crossing was on the Anderson Ranch and in 1880 was in T29S-R27E, Sec. 26,32-33-34-35. Today, Truxtun Ave extension, Interstate-5, and Stockdale highway bound that area.

⁶⁶ The head of Pioneer Ditch was near today's Calloway and Stockdale Highways, just northwest of CA State University, Bakersfield [Lynn Hay Rudy, *Old Bakersfield: Sites and Landmarks, 1875-1915*. (2000. Jenner, CA)]

⁶⁷ Randolph's was either at the intersection of Jewett Ave and the river or at today's Manor St bridge.

⁶⁸ The lower bridge site was just west of today's CA State University and about one-fourth mile upstream of today's bridge at Stockdale Hwy and Buena Vista Rd. Across the river from it was the Bellevue Ranch, J.B. Haggin's headquarters.

Supervisors were handed two petitions: 91 signatures in favor of a bridge at Chester's ferry, and 327 requesting a bridge at old Randolph's ferry. ⁶⁹ The *Kern County Gazette* favored the Randolph's ferry site and condemned Julius Chester, owner of the *Southern Californian-Kern County Weekly Courier*, for thwarting progress on a bridge.

Chester dismissed that accusation. He cited earlier stories in his newspaper proving he favored a bridge long before the *Gazette* existed, and Chester further maintained that a bridge at Randolph's old ferry unfairly advantaged the new town of Sumner.⁷⁰ He also accused the *Gazette*, and three members of the Board of Supervisors, for having their hands "in the people's pocket."⁷¹

Chester reminded his readers of what happened at Randolph's ferry during the flood of 1868 when a nearby slough became as full as the river. Chester advised that if the slough were covered over to provide road-access to a bridge,

⁶⁹ *Kern County Weekly Gazette*, Oct 7, 1876, col. 3,2. The number of petitioners from Bakersfield was 418 out of a population of 700 (Population data: *Kern County Weekly Courier*, Oct 24, 1874, a reprint from *Southwest Christian Advocate of San Francisco*).

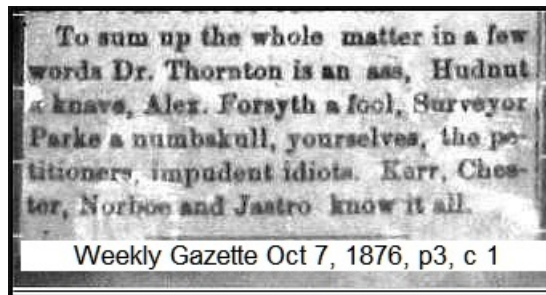
⁷⁰ Just east of Bakersfield

⁷¹ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Sep 28, 1876

then at the next flood every man-made structure would be under water, including the nearby McCord canal. Wrote Chester,

If Reed and Murphy want a bridge for their special benefit, let them build it, or wait till the increasing demands of the upper river and the financial condition of the County would justify the erection of one at County expense.⁷²

The *Gazette* replied that the Chester Ferry crossing, which Chester himself favored, had a nearby slough with similar problems.⁷³



Asses, Knaves, and Fools

Supervisors Kerr, Norboe, and their committee re-inspected the Randolph site but rejected it in favor of a bridge one-half-mile down river and closer to the Southern Pacific

⁷² Ibid. Reed and Murphy were not identified.

⁷³ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Oct 7, 1876

bridge.⁷⁴ The *Gazette*, in an open letter to readers, vilified

Chester and the Board of Supervisors:

To the people of Kernville, Linn's Valley, Long Tom, Pose Creek, Sumner, etc. Your petitions for a bridge across the Kern River at Randolph's old ferry, the point unanimously recommended by the Committee appointed by the Board of Supervisors, were duly presented, and it becomes our unpleasant duty to inform you that your prayer was denied." The *Gazette* went on to imply that the Board of Supervisors had accused the Randolph site petitioners of being fools.⁷⁵

Months passed. Surprisingly, peace descended in October 1876 when the *Courier-Californian* wrote that all was a misunderstanding. The people of Lynn's Valley were not incensed after all. They "simply understood that one bridge was asked for, and that was to be as near as possible to the present ferry."⁷⁶ Captain Ashe speaking for residents of New River near the proposed lower bridge informed the *Californian*

⁷⁴ Ibid. The final site selected was about one-quarter mile upstream of today's Chester Ave Bridge.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Oct 12, 1876

that they, too, had been misled, and they "had no idea that in that petition they were imposing a change upon the route of the people North of them so much to their disadvantage."⁷⁷ Supervisors by then had approved the construction of two bridges.

The *Californian* opined that a bridge between Bakersfield and New River would someday service one of the most ... prominent and interesting thoroughfares in the county. The land owners have agreed to set out live posts the whole distance -- twenty miles -- with fences on each side, so forming an avenue sixty-feet in width the entire distance from Bakersfield. For twelve miles the road will be straight and must make one of the finest drives in this southern part of the State.⁷⁸

Bridge materials arrived in November 1876, and construction on the lower bridge started with pile driver work.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid. That road is today's Stockdale Hwy. On Dec 14, 1876 the *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier* described the ranching practice of setting out rows of green willow and cottonwood cuttings in winter. When sprouted, they become living fence posts.

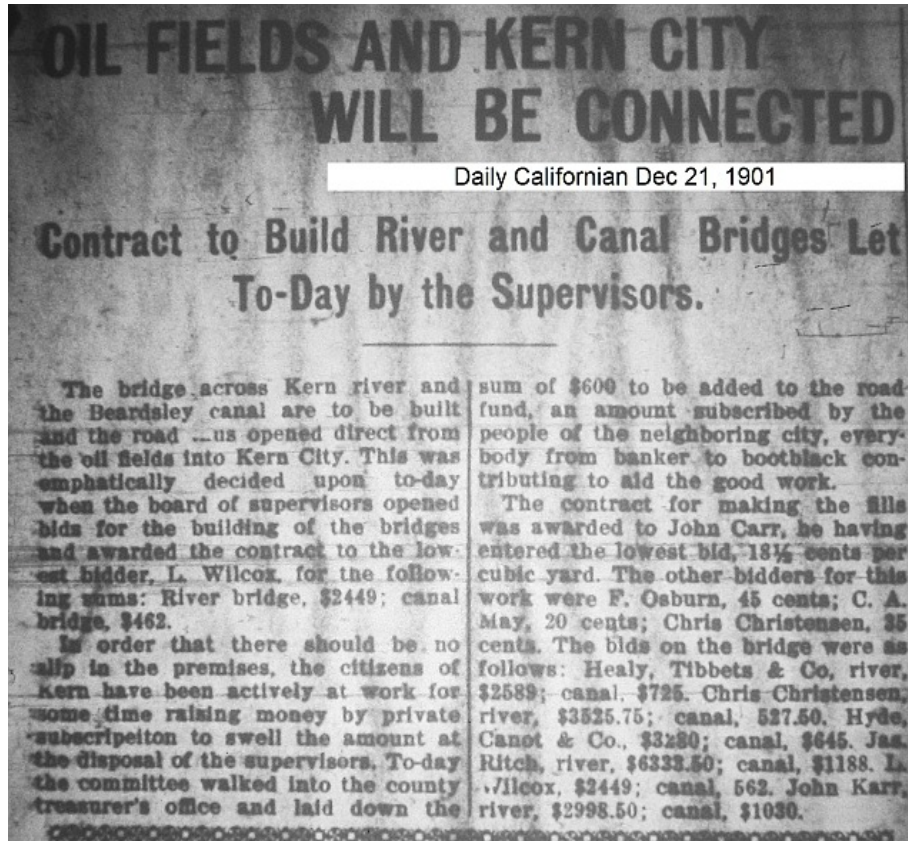
⁷⁹ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Nov 2, 1876. pgs 3, 1. Haggin & Carr was awarded the county contract to build the bridge (*Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Oct 26, 1876).



Jewett Lane Bridge (view south, 1911)

Construction on the upper bridge, three-quarters-mile upriver from the Southern Pacific bridge at north Chester Avenue, stalled owing to bonding problems. In early January 1877, a road was extended north to the partially-finished bridge,⁸⁰ it opened within months, and for the 36-years it was know as the Jewett Lane Bridge. In January 1913, traffic at Jewett Lane Bridge was rerouted to a newly-completed concrete bridge at North Chester. Today, Jewett Lane dead-ends at a mobile home park just north of West Columbus Avenue, but it still points to where the Jewett Lane Bridge once crossed the river.

⁸⁰ *Southern California and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Jan 6, 1877



Plans for Bridge at Gordon's Ferry, December 1901

After oil was discovered on the Kern River, plans were made for a wagon road up Panorama bluffs with a grade of about five degrees to the river. The route from the end of Baker Street to the China Grade will not be laid out, as it is not considered necessary to grade a road between these points, the land being of a level surface and easy to travel over.⁸¹

⁸¹ *Daily Californian*, July 17, 1901

In December 1901 a Kern City [East Bakersfield] committee collected donations for a bridge at Gordon's crossing, and two days later members "walked into the County Treasurer's office and laid down the sum of \$600 to be added to the road fund."⁸² L. Wilcox won the building contract: \$2,449 for the bridge and \$462 for a second bridge over the nearby Beardsley Canal.⁸³ Road-filling and grading was completed by February 4, 1902, and by then both bridges were almost ready for traffic.



Gordon's Ferry Bridge Today

In 1915 Bakersfield High School Principal Herman A. Spindt, and others, dedicated the first historic marker at Gordon's Ferry bridge. In 1937 a flood destroyed it. Somewhat later when the new bridge was completed, the same organizations dedicated another plaque, but this time more

⁸² *Daily Californian*, Dec 19, 1901

⁸³ *Daily Californian*, Dec 21, 1901

**modestly citing the importance of Gordon's Ferry in Kern
County's history.**

**Thank you, Ramona Gia. Thank you proof readers and critics Jerry Ludeke and
Jenny Gia. Errors, omissions, and shortcomings are my own. – Gilbert Gia, 2010**

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