

FOLLOWING THE WARPATH: The Good Sight Mountains, Fort Cummings and Cooke's Canyon

County road A30 is a well-marked turnoff from NM 26 about 16 miles west of Hatch and a mile or two short of Nutt. The road runs down the Uvas (Grapes) Valley through large tracts of flat, irrigated farmland. The turn onto A21 is unmarked, but the acute angle it joins A30 is exactly as shown on the map. A21 runs back north through a low pass in the Good Sight Mountains, following roughly the same path as the old stage route back to the highway. Both roads are accessible (with care) to a 2WD sedan.

The road from Mesilla to Fort Cummings and on to Silver City was part of the 2,800 mile route pioneered by an energetic, flamboyant and very determined entrepreneur named John Butterfield. In 1857 Butterfield landed a government contract to deliver the mail from St. Louis to San Francisco – provided he could make the trip in 25 days along the “ox bow” route demanded by Southern politicians. He immediately set out to establish and staff stations, hire drivers and position teams of horses and mules every 20-30 miles across Texas and New Mexico Territory and on across the Mojave to the Pacific. In September 1858, Butterfield swung aboard a four-horse Concord coach and took the reins for the first leg of the first trip, carrying two bags of mail and Waterman L. Ormsby, special correspondent for the *New York Herald*. Butterfield got off at the next stop, but the mail – and Ormsby – arrived safely in San Francisco a full day ahead of the contract deadline.

"Now I know what hell is like," he groaned as he staggered off the coach. "I've just had 24 days of it."



The open terrain and gradual slopes of the Good Sight Mountains seem to offer few opportunities for surprise attack. The old stage route is marked on topo maps of the area but to the untrained eye there's no trace visible on the ground.

Apaches made the trail from Mesilla to Tucson the most dangerous stretch of the trail, and the narrow canyon just west of Cooke's Spring, under the ominous shadow of Massacre Peak, was a favorite ambush site. The Army established Fort Cummings at the spring in 1863 to protect travelers along that section of the road.

An English traveler who passed through Cooke's Canyon in 1867 "listened with some anxiety to the stories told me by the frontier men about the many massacres perpetrated by the Indians in that dread gorge. It was clear that even the soldiers dared not stir a mile from the post, and that it was 'just a toss up' whether any traveler got through alive."

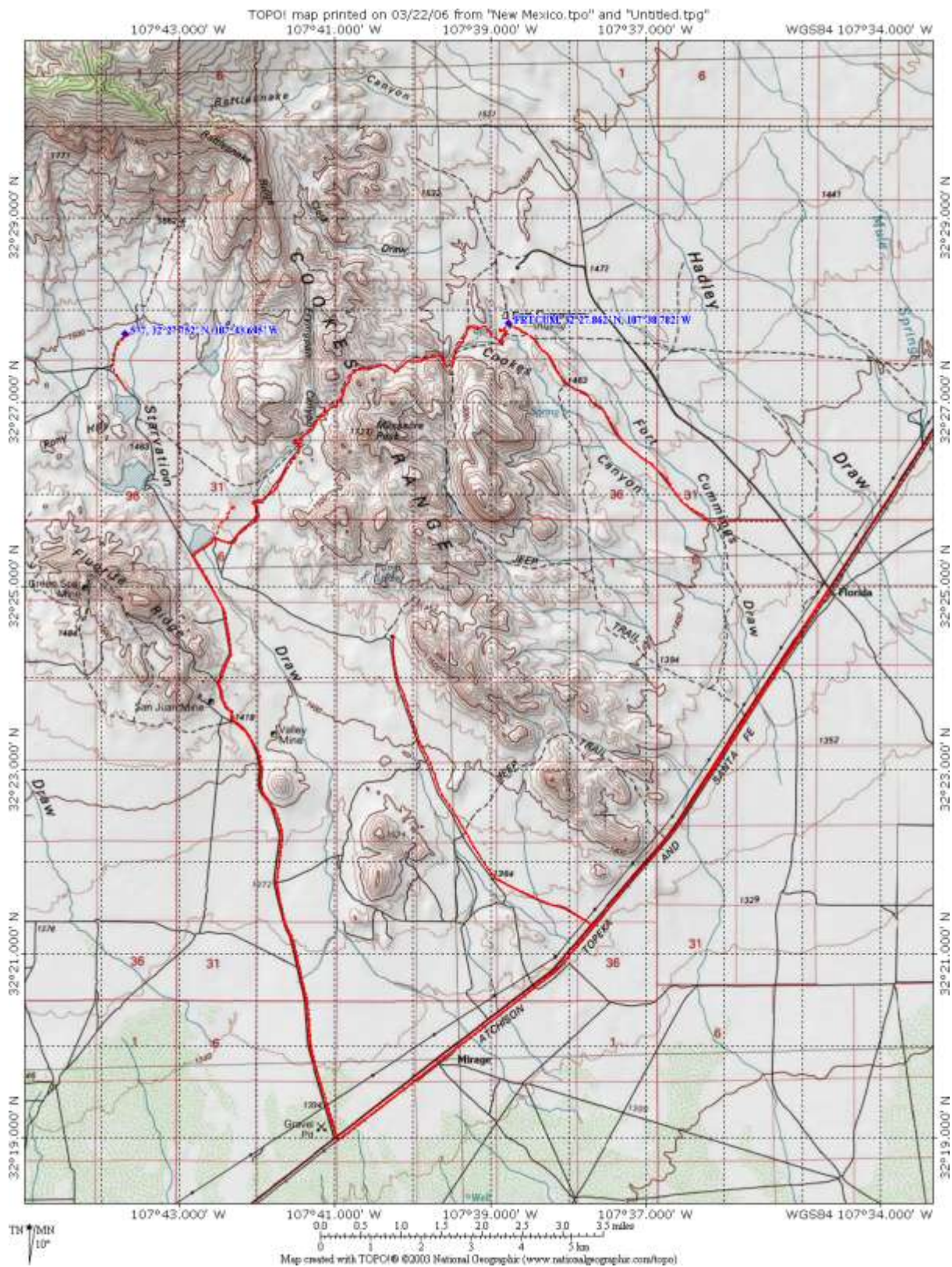


Surrounded by a ten-foot high wall of whitewashed adobe brick, Cummings was visible from miles away and was a welcome sight for nervous travelers.

To visit the site of Fort Cummings, take NM26 to mile marker 24 and look for a large railroad water tank at the turn onto Cooke's Canyon Road. The unpaved road crosses a cattle guard after about a mile, and the jeep trail to the fort turns left. After several more miles, the road crosses another cattle guard and soon a plaque can be seen on the left. The ruins of fort Cummings are about 500 yards to the north. There's little left today of either the fort or the nearby stage station but a few crumbling fragments of stone walls; the well-house covering the nearby spring was built after the fort was abandoned in the 1880s.



The Fort Cummings cemetery once contained a large number of both military and civilian graves – soldiers re-interred the bones gathered up from the shallow graves in Cooke's Canyon after travelers complained of the depressing effect of these chilling reminders of the dangers along the trail. Although the cemetery was reported cleared some years after the fort was abandoned in 1884, no national cemetery ever recorded receiving any remains from here.



I drove from Fort Cummings west through the canyon and back down to NM 26 some years ago in a little 4WD pickup, but the road scarcely existed then and is worse now. I'm told it's still accessible to ATVs, but watch the weather. In a sudden rainstorm, the narrow canyon is a deathtrap.



Best campsite near old Fort Cummings is City of Rocks State Park, a rocky outcrop standing in splendid isolation on the plain northwest of Deming. The jumble of gigantic boulders reminds most folks of the ruins of some antediluvian abode of the giants. Campsites are pleasantly isolated among the rocks, and it's a great place for watching the sunset and counting stars in the night sky. Jack rabbits in the evening and coyotes at night add to the ambience.