



- A. (Green Star): The 1842 cabin of Mabel and Charity Gilbert is believed to have been located between Neal and Montclair, north of Fort Worth Avenue, south of Castle Street. (32°45'01"N, 96°50'43" W)

(Blue dashed lines – shown as a rough approximation.) An ancient network of trails followed the ridge-line between the Trinity River and Mountain Creek, dividing into two versions, running on the north or south side of Coombes Creek. As the Republic of Texas "Military Road" it ran from Austin to the Red River.

- E,C: From their cabin at "A", the Gilberts could see friends, or foes, approaching from the south along various versions of the ridge-route highway.
- D.: Their view up the valley of Coombes Creek – today's Sevens Park Golf course -- must have been especially beautiful, with clear sight all the way to the hilltop where Sunset High School now stands (D).
- B. Most importantly, the Gilberts had a clear sight-line from their cabin grounds, through the notch where Fort Worth Avenue descends to Sylvan, across the Trinity floodplain to John Neely Bryan's cabin (B).

MABEL AND CHARITY GILBERT'S CABIN

Jim Barnes, 16th September 2025

History has always said that Mabel Gilbert (1797-1870) and his wife Charity (Morris) Gilbert (1800-1854) were the first White Settlers to join John Neely Bryan as permanent residents in his proposed new city on the banks of the Trinity River. A great deal has been written about the Gilberts – how they floated downstream to Bryan's site from Bird's Fort in the spring 1842; how their son Louis Morris Gilbert became the first child born in the new city; how they were the first to cross the Trinity River to claim land on the west side. But there are still questions about the Gilbert's short time in Dallas. Did they build a cabin on the west side of the River? Exactly where did they claim land? Exactly when did they leave?

In 1928, W.S. Adair quoted Judge William Nelson Coombes (1857-1939) describing how his grandfather came from Kentucky to Texas in 1843, found John Neely Bryan's cabin, crossed the Trinity River and went to: *"the cabin of Dr. Gilbert on Gilbert Creek, near the present site of West Dallas. Dr. Gilbert owned, in addition to his land claim, a gun, a dog and a pony; and his wife on her part, owned a skillet, a frying pan and a parrot. Grandfather bought Dr. Gilbert's claim and the doctor and his wife with their movables came to the east side of the river. By way of making good his claim, and of identifying himself more intimately with the locality, grandfather changed the name of Gilbert Creek to Coombes Creek, and Coombes Creek it has remained to this day."*^A *"Mr. Gilbert was leaving and grandfather bought his cabin"*, Judge Coombes was quoted in 1925.^B

In a third article with Judge Coombes' recollections, W.S. Adair never mentions Mabel Gilbert at all.^C In this 1931 version William Coombes builds his own cabin, the first in West Dallas. I prefer the 1925 and 1928 versions – that Coombes "bought" the Gilberts' claim and moved into a cabin the Gilberts had already erected.

One might first tend to imagine that, with any place on the west side of the Trinity River available, the Gilberts would have built their new home directly across the river, close to Bryan's; but instead they located their cabin more than two miles to the west. Their site selection on the west side seems to have involved: avoiding floods, being close to the new Republic of Texas "Military Road", and having long clear views.

The Trinity River's enormous flood spreads have always been a problem for Dallas. Judge Coombes recalled the Indians describing an 1833 flood -- its scale is staggering. The street elevation of its eastern high-water point, the intersection of modern Commerce and Ervay Streets, is at 437 feet above sea level. That would put the top of that 1833 flood five feet above Bryan's courthouse square (site of today's "Old Red") – seven feet above the top of today's earthen levee at West Commerce Street – a flood that would have reached westward almost to the intersection of modern Sylvan Avenue at Fort Worth Avenue (just below the cliff where the Belmont Hotel was built in the 1940s). The wide dense forest along the Trinity River, tangled with centuries of fallen dead trees, impeded drainage of flood waters. Even if the Indians' story had never been true, the early White Settlers who heard it would have been cautious. So, the Gilberts climbed up the escarpment on the west side of the Trinity floodplain to build their cabin on a site safely above inundation.

Secondly, Gilbert's cabin site was close to key travel paths. In 1840 the Republic of Texas commissioned Colonel William Cooke to establish a new highway from Austin to the Red River – the "Military Road". This first official highway of the region approached the Trinity River along the ridgeline between the Trinity River and Mountain Creek -- through today's southwest Oak Cliff. The Military Road turns eastward, goes down into the floodplain and then turns north. It crosses the Trinity River (along roughly the path of modern Sylvan) to a proposed fort near Cedar Springs, then proceeds northward along another ridgeline between the Elm Fork and Turtle Creek. This wide prairie trail -- only general in its specific route --- must have quickly taken on two different versions as it approached the Trinity River. One version curved along the north side of what-today-we-call Coombes Creek – along the route of today's Fort Worth Avenue through the natural notch where Fort Worth Avenue descends to Sylvan; and a second version ran along the south side of Coombes

Creek, similarly along the wide prairie ridgeline to where the "Rock Lodge" was later built --just northeast of modern Cedar Hill Avenue and Evergreen Avenue. That southern version could either cross the floodplain north to Cedar Springs or aim a pathway eastward toward the better Trinity River ford at John Neely Bryan's new town site. This southern variation of the Military Road route passed an important natural water flow we now call Kidd Springs. The cabin that William Coombes acquired from Mabel Gilbert was located on a highpoint just north of the first purer ridge route of the Military Highway, on the north side of the creek – on today's map, a location between Neal and Montclair streets, north of Fort Worth Avenue and just south of Castle street (32°45'01"N, 96°50'43" W). The Gilbert cabin was sited close to the Military Road coming up from Austin to Bryan's new town called Dallas. These important "Military Road" pathways disappeared long ago, and today can only be imagined.

And thirdly, Mabel Gilbert's cabin was located so that it had long clear views. To the east, from his cabin Gilbert had a carefully aligned view through the notch where Fort Worth Avenue has always descended to the Trinity River bottoms, then out across the floodplain to the bluff where John Neely Bryan's cabin was located. Bryan could stand at, or near, his cabin's door and see smoke curling up from Gilbert's cabin's fireplace a couple of miles across the river -- evidence that all was well on the western frontier. Gilbert's cabin also had an open view to the west, across broad treeless prairie stretching upward for about a mile -- almost to modern Westmoreland. Looking south from his cabin, Gilbert had a view across treetops along the creek, across today's Kessler Park addition (then grassy hills) to the ridgeline along which today stand the Rock Lodge, Kessler Park Methodist Church, and Rosemont Elementary School. The Gilberts could see anyone moving along either ridgeline version of the new Military Highway – on either side of the creek. And finally they must have had a most beautiful view up the valley of Coombes Creek, a long vista across what is today's beautiful Stevens Park golf course to the heights where St. Cecilia church and Sunset High School now stand. . Blocked now by trees and buildings, these views today can only be imagined using topological maps.

When Mabel Gilbert's family established their first settlement west of the Trinity River, they named the local creek "Gilbert Creek" and a big local spring they called "Gilbert Springs". Judge Coombes explained how his grandfather changed the name of the creek to "Coombes Creek". The Gilbert name, however, occasionally lingered. Years later it's seen on maps and in a real estate deed as late as 1875, being called "Gilbert's Branch". The name also changed from "Gilbert Springs" to "Kidd Springs" when "Captain Kidd" bought the site for an amusement park during the 1870s.

A detail in Judge Coombes' stories is a parrot, owned first by the Gilberts, then apparently the same bird by the Coombes. This is a parrot Charity Gilbert brought with her to Bryan's new settlement. Greene thinks that John Neely Bryan let the Gilberts' name his new town; and they named it in honor of their friend U.S. Naval Commodore Alexander J. Dallas. "Jocko" (or "Jackoo"), the parrot, had been a gift from Commodore Dallas. ^D.

Historian M.C. Toyer has speculated that Mabel and Charity Gilbert had hoped to be granted more land which the Republic of Texas was offering to White Settlers building new homes along its new Military Highway. But the Gilberts had already built a new home in Bonham—had already been granted land in Texas, and when the Gilberts learned that the Republic wasn't going to grant them more land they then left Dallas, and sold their cabin. William Coombes' occupation of this cabin started in October, or November, of year 1843.

- A. 1928-07-01; *Dallas Morning News*, p.8; W.S. Adair, "*Horse Stealing Best Sport of Texas Indians*";
- B. 1925-07-12; *Dallas Morning News*, Sec. 3, p.2; W.S. Adair, "*Indians on Rampage in Dallas Area*";
- C. 1931-10-25; *Dallas Morning News*, p.1. W.S. Adair, "*Winter of 1878 Declared Coldest in North Texas*"
- D. 1984-07-06; *Dallas Morning News*, p. 19A; A.C. Greene; "*Capt. Mabel Gilbert's Trip*"; and also:
1991-11-03: *Dallas Morning News*, p.48A; A.C. Greene, "*Birthplace of Dallas was really Bird's Fort*".