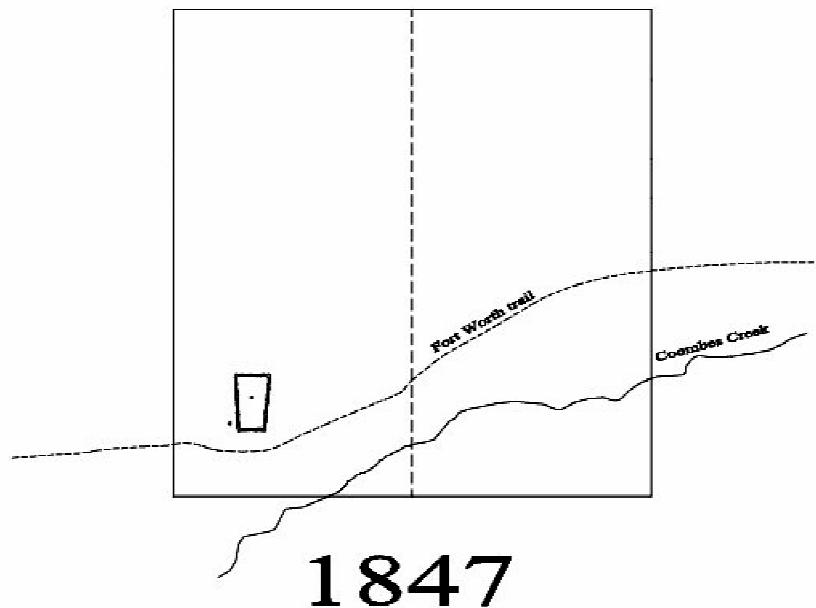


Why *Dallas* stopped growing west into *West Dallas*

A history essay by Jim Barnes; 3rd August 2026 (last revised 8th August 2026)



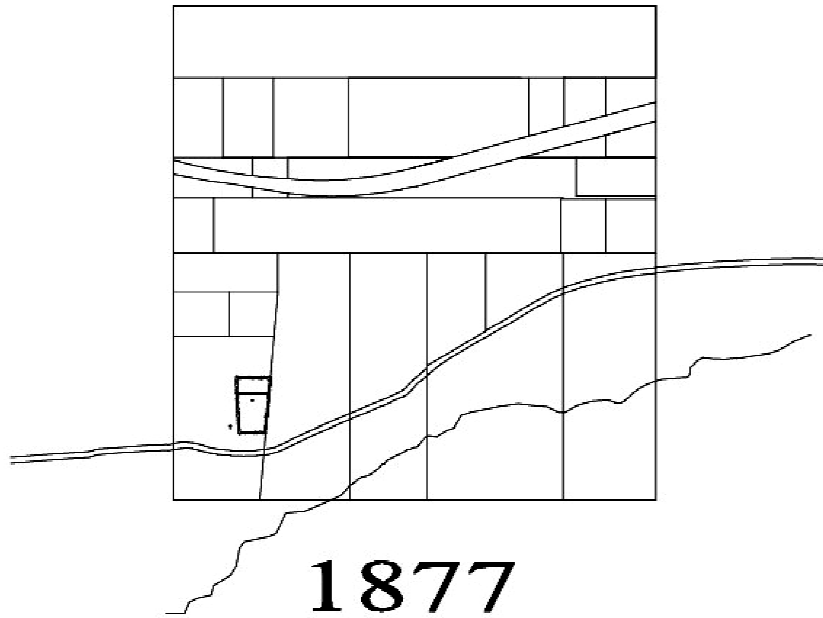
William and Ivy Coombes' square mile land claim in West Dallas

Dallas pioneer settlement on the west side of the Trinity River started in *West Dallas*. The entire county soon filled with new settlement but the William Coombes Survey subdivided faster than most – partly due to its unique family situation ¹, but mainly due to its elevated position close to town and its roads headed west. It was the obvious western suburb of fast growing Dallas. Nevertheless, forty years later the new *Oak Cliff* addition bypassed and eventually surpassed *West Dallas*. This essay will try to explain when and why *West Dallas* stopped being the center of urban growth on the west side of the Trinity.

Arriving at John Neely Bryan's new town on the Trinity River bluff in 1842, Mabel and Charity Gilbert looked across a mile-wide dense tangle of forested floodplain and listened to Indian reports of a flood a decade before when Bryan's town site had been more than five feet underwater. ² The floodplain forest, filled with centuries of fallen trees, formed a sort of gigantic beaver dam, impeding swift drainage of flood water. The family of Mabel and Charity Gilbert crossed the floodplain forest, climbed the escarpment where today's Belmont hotel stands, and a couple of miles west of Bryan they built the first White Settler cabin on the west side -- up on the plateau prairie. ³

A year later the Gilberts sold that cabin and land claim to new arrivals from Kentucky, the family of William and Ivy Coombes. ⁴ Comanche raiders were stealing William Coombes' horses, so he planted a corral of thorny bois-d'arc trees around his cabin as protection. ⁵ Infant deaths started a new family cemetery just outside this corral—today's *Western Heights Cemetery*. ⁶

At some time now unknown, some survey party now unknown laid out the checkerboard grid of section lines by which the Peters Colony granted square mile parcels to immigrants. William and Ivy Coombes waited until 1847 before filing an irregular claim for two adjacent half sections. ⁷ This gave them the site of their cabin plus the east edge of the escarpment facing the Trinity floodplain, with the fledgling town of Dallas beyond.

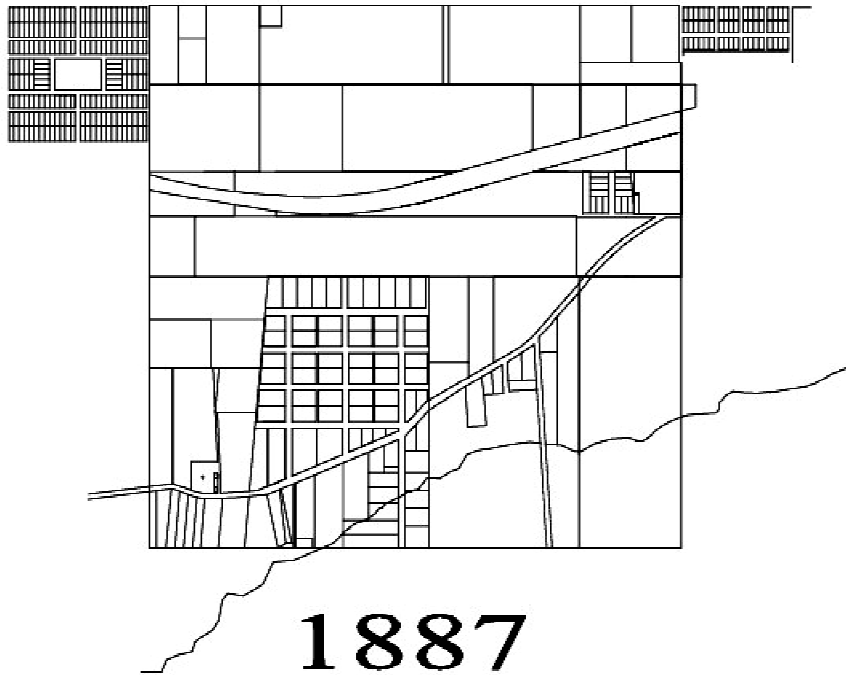


The William Coombes Survey had been subdivided among 25 separate owners by 1877.

The square mile had been divided among nine Coombes family members by the end of 1867. The *Texas & Pacific Railroad* built its transcontinental railroad across the William Coombes Survey in 1873. Separate family members started selling smaller pieces of their land to others – lots too small for farming or raising livestock, but intended as house and garden sites for suburban commuters whose professions and businesses operated in Dallas.

If Thomas L. Marsalis and John Armstrong had started thinking of developing real estate on the west side of the Trinity River as early as 1877, they would have seen that the William Coombes Survey was already cut into more than two dozen pieces. So, when Marsalis and Armstrong purchased the huge site for their *Oak Cliff* addition, instead of trying to buy-out the already subdivided *West Dallas* parcels two miles west of Dallas along the earlier obvious pattern of western expansion, they swerved two and half miles south.

Dallas grew quite rapidly in the 1870s. It was apparent that somehow the growing city was going to cross the Trinity River soon. Land in the William Coombes Survey continued to be subdivided for development.



On the day that the Oak Cliff Addition opened, there were already four platted subdivisions in West Dallas

The first Dallas County subdivisions west of the Trinity River were in *West Dallas*. Best known is the large *Flanders Heights Addition*, platted in 1884 by Dallas' first professional architect James Flanders and his father-in-law Daniel Stafford.⁸ *Cedar Glade Addition*, just off the northeast corner of the William Coombes Survey had also been platted that year.⁹ *Wright's Addition* and the *College Park Addition* were platted prior to the opening of *Oak Cliff*.¹⁰ Samuel Armstrong and his daughter, Mary (Armstrong) Stevens, widow of Dr. John H. Stevens, were subdividing land at the intersection of Sylvan and Fort Worth Avenue. B.M. Bradford (foster parent to William Coombes' last children) was selling one and two acre strips in the southwest corner of the William Coombes Survey.

1. West Dallas never had a streetcar line.

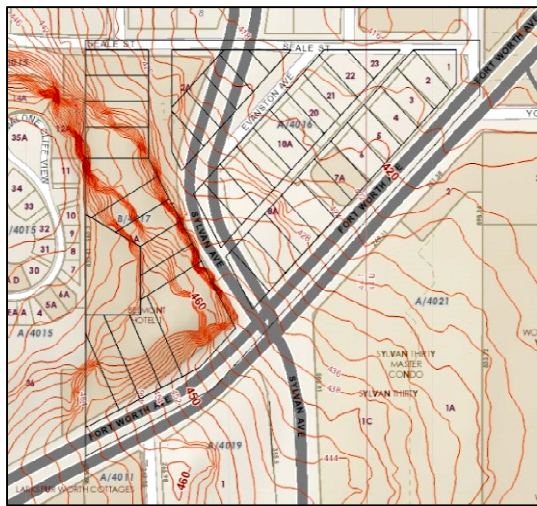
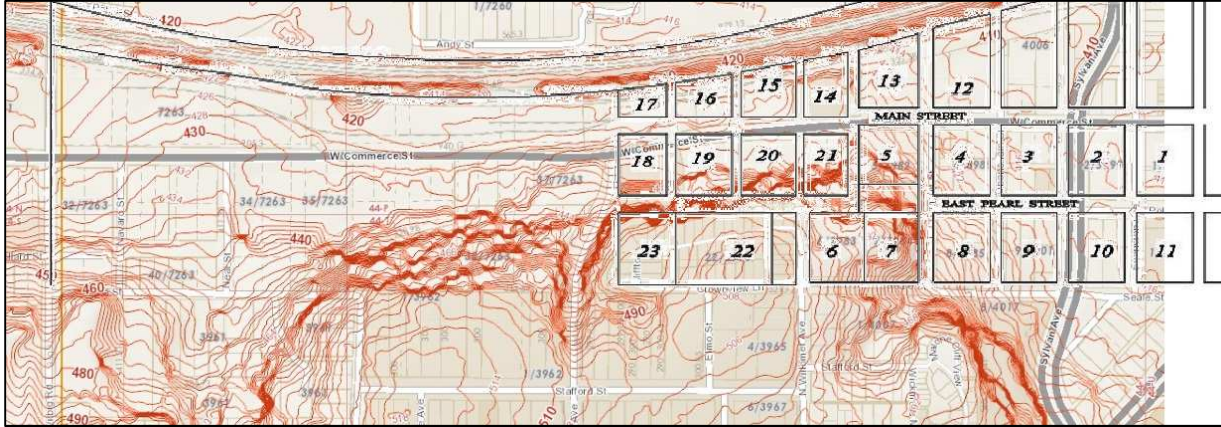
Oak Cliff was an immediate success. *Oak Cliff* provided hourly commuter rail transportation and also utilities like water, electricity, gas, sewers – services *West Dallas* lacked.

In 1886 the *Texas & Pacific Railroad* promised to build a depot in *West Dallas*, and provide regular commuter service to nearby Dallas¹¹; but it was freight that provided profit to the railroad -- there's no evidence of that depot or commuter schedule ever being established for *West Dallas*. Plagued by far-away problems, the *Texas & Pacific Railroad* went into bankruptcy in 1888.¹²

West Dallas had been included on a planned loop of *Oak Cliff's* commuter rail line. The tracks were to turn north off Jefferson at Tyler, always intended to circle north and include *West Dallas*.¹³ Furthermore a second branch of this *West Dallas Railroad* was shown on an 1889 plat climbing the north face of the escarpment into *West Dallas*.¹⁴ A steel bridge was set across the Trinity on Main Street downtown¹⁵ – the line's construction was nearly finished; but it never went into service. Had it been completed, the history of *West Dallas* and *Oak Cliff* would have been very different. Instead, it evaporated into financial insolvency.¹⁶ *West Dallas* never had a commuter railway.

2. *West Dallas failed to plan streets to climb the escarpment.*

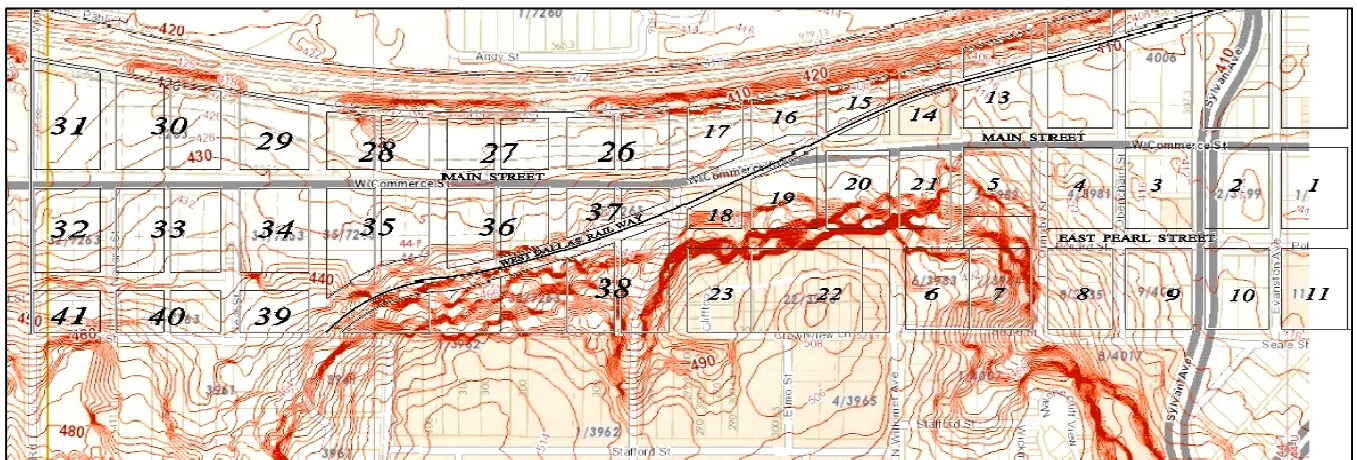
As *West Dallas* rapidly grew, its new plans utterly failed to provide workable streets climbing up the escarpment. In 1888, William Fisher subdivided his wife's inherited land as the *W.R. Fisher Addition*.¹⁷ The north-south streets look like they were drawn on a flat table without the slightest regard for the steep slopes— perhaps the worst subdivision plan I've ever seen.

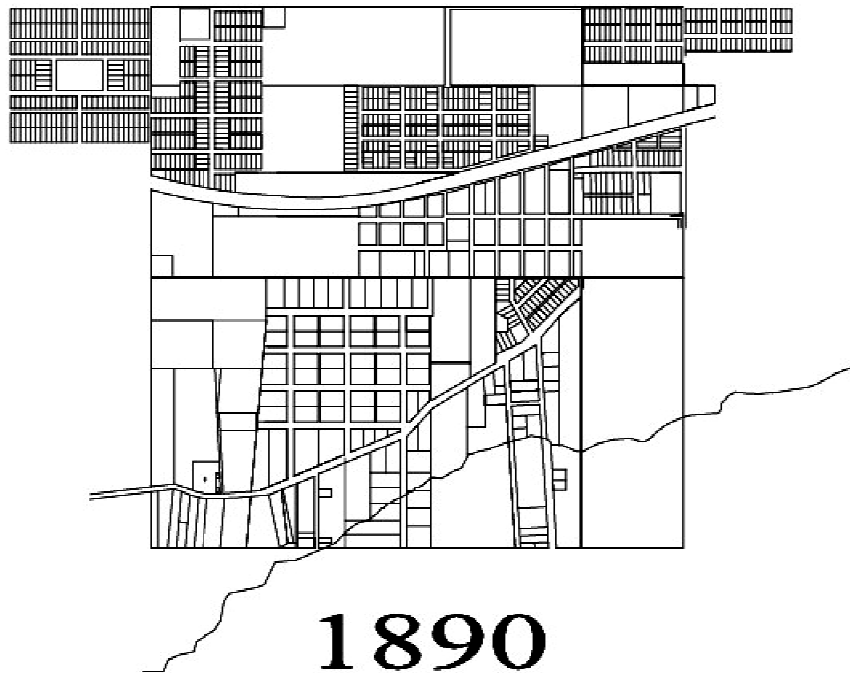


Also during that year after *Oak Cliff* opened *Terrace Grove* addition created this plat layout¹⁸ including the escarpment west of *Sylvan* -- individual lots requiring impossibly steep driveway climbs.

Thirty-five years later the *Kessler Park Addition* was deftly designed to fit similarly difficult terrain nearby – a masterpiece of urban development which fit to the natural landscape.¹⁹ No such skill planned *West Dallas*.

An 1893 re-plat of the *W.R. Fisher Addition*²⁰ continued with more street routes disregarding topography. Most of the failure remained permanent—streets never built.





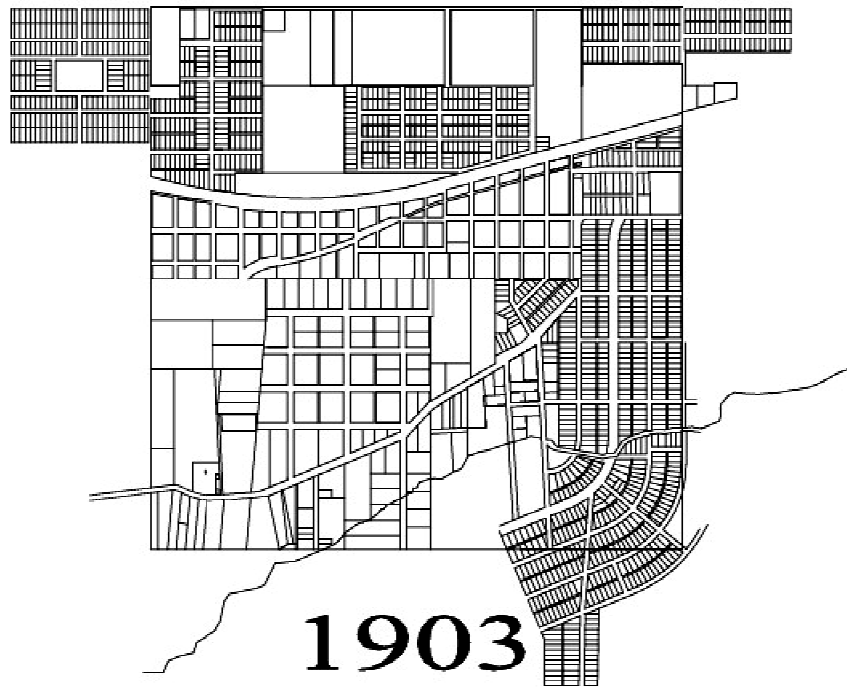
Subdivision of the William Coombes Survey area of West Dallas on the day Oak Cliff first incorporated as a city.

3. West Dallas refused to merge into the new City of Oak Cliff.

On the 6th day of October 1890 an election was held and a lopsided vote incorporated a new *City of Oak Cliff*, a broad area whose northern boundary line was the *Texas & Pacific Railroad*.²¹ It included much of *West Dallas*. A 1990 history, *The Hidden City: Oak Cliff, Texas* (page 82) makes it sound as if a single disgruntled resident, farm owner Mrs. S.E. Pollard had sued and caused that municipal incorporation to be annulled by the District Court on 21st of February 1891. In fact the population of *West Dallas* rose up as a mass and howled their disapproval of being merged into *Oak Cliff*. At a big community meeting chaired by Judge William Hord with W.R. Fisher, "unanimous" resolutions condemned the incorporation.²² They didn't want the tax burden that municipal services would impose. If *West Dallas* was going to merge, it wanted to merge with the *City of Dallas* – not *Oak Cliff*. The Court annulled that first incorporation. The municipal incorporation annulled, *West Dallas* was never part of the *City of Oak Cliff*. Though there were repeated attempts, *West Dallas* never incorporated as a separate city. The area was not annexed into the *City of Dallas* for another fifty years.

In 1893 *West Dallas* took its first and only step toward urban organization when it formed a West Dallas Independent School District, and constructed a large brick schoolhouse (designed by James Flanders in the Flanders Heights addition).²³

Decades of surging growth ended in local economic meltdown in 1893, only briefly preceding a larger nation-wide financial panic. Foreclosure and bankruptcy was widespread. Thomas L. Marsalis left for New York City. Growth temporarily slowed on the west side of the Trinity River.

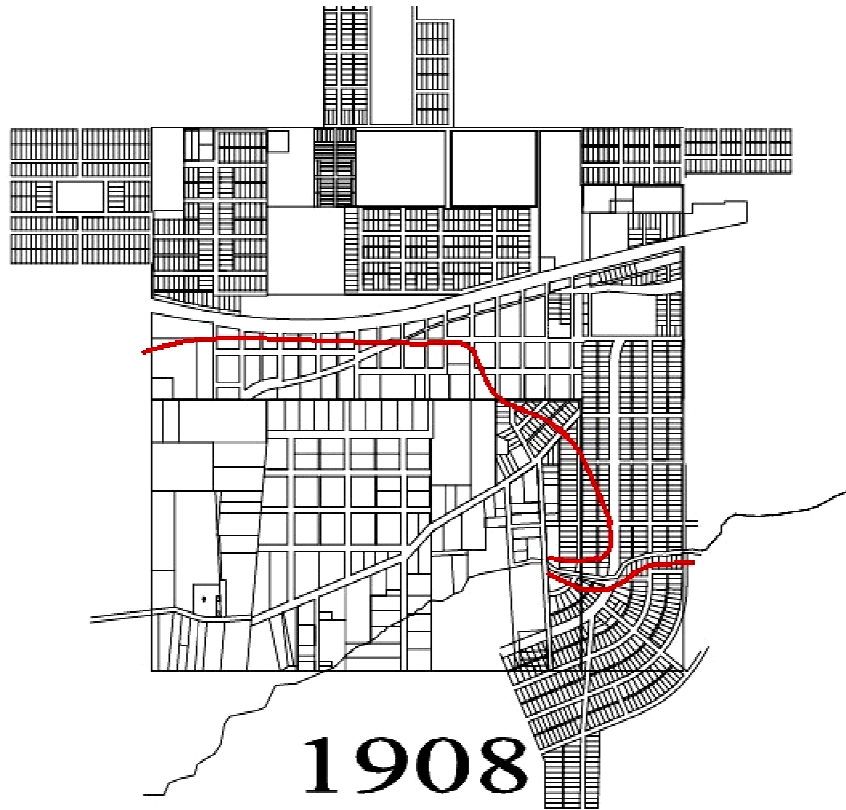


Subdivision of the William Coombes Survey area on the day Oak Cliff was annexed into the City of Dallas.

4. West Dallas never organized municipal governance or services.

West Dallas refused to incorporate itself as a municipality. It had its independent school district, but no public city services – no public water supply, no garbage collection or sewer systems, no police or fire protection, no publicly maintained streets, street lighting, etc. The populace complained that it didn't want taxes – they never got services.

Despite this lack of organized governance and basic municipal services, nevertheless on the 17th of March 1903, when the rival *City of Oak Cliff* was annexed into the *City of Dallas*, *West Dallas* was still a growing Dallas County suburban district, as shown by real estate subdivision on this map above.



Subdivision of West Dallas at the crest of the 1908 Trinity River flood – with the edge of the flood outlined in red, except that the Dallas city engineer described the railroad track as being above flood water west of Beckley.

5. **West Dallas was susceptible to flooding.**

A series of spring floods at Dallas peaked on the 26th of May, at a depth of 52.6 feet. The *Texas & Pacific Railroad* bridge over the Trinity River washed away. The West Commerce Street road to *West Dallas* was submerged. Native John Love recalled that his grandfather ran an emergency raft service ferrying people across the wide flood to downtown Dallas – using the Sylvan bridge over Coombes Creek as his dock. It's difficult to reconstruct the exact boundary of the flood.²⁴ What is today the intersection of Sylvan and Seale streets would have been underwater. Most of the area north of Coombes Creek and east of Sylvan flooded; everything north of the railroad was inundated. For *Dallas* and *Oak Cliff* it was a scary nuisance. For *West Dallas* it was a catastrophe.

The 1908 flood is the high-water mark for *West Dallas*. Since the 1842 arrival of White Settlers, no flood had measured higher. And it marked the end to *West Dallas* preeminent growth. People who believed that the Trinity River floodplain forest had been cleared, that the giant floods of the past would never return, had been mistaken. Whole *West Dallas* subdivisions were abandoned – platted streets never paved. Investors who had bought *West Dallas* land, sold out, and never returned -- like St. Louis beer baron Adolphus Busch²⁵ who invested instead in a big new hotel downtown. The citizens of Dallas organized to build a long new high concrete viaduct across every possible future flood – what we now call the Houston Street viaduct – which started construction within a few years. It went to *Oak Cliff*, not to *West Dallas*. The population up on the escarpment changed their neighborhood's name to *Western Heights*.²⁶ *West Dallas* had flooded and failed.

FOOTNOTES

1. www.7/Ladders.com/Coombes/... ; "**William Nelson Coombes: A History**"; Jim Barnes; last revision 25th October 2025; and "**Land Ownership: 1842-1908**"; describe the family's subdivision of the square mile.
2. Dallas Morning News: "**Horse Stealing Best Sport of Texas Indians**"; 1928-07-01-- page 8: W.S. Adair.
3. www.7/Ladders.com/Coombes/... ; "**Mabel and Charity Gilbert's Cabin**"; Jim Barnes; 28th October 2025.
4. Same as 1 above.
5. www.7/Ladders.com/Coombes/... ; "**The Bois D'Arc Corral**"; Jim Barnes; 31st October 2025.
6. www.7/Ladders.com/Coombes/... ; "**Missing Burials**"; Jim Barnes; 26th August 2025.
7. **Special Certificate, No 109**; 10th May 1847; The Texan Emigration and Land Co.; Denton Co.; from the online records of the General Land Office of the State of Texas (Austin); (downloaded in March 2025).
8. **Flanders Heights**: Dallas County real estate deed records; Vol. 67, Page 283; 6th August 1884.
9. *Reeves and Fitzgerald's Cedar Glade Addition*: Vol. 91; Page 108; 12th of April 1884.
10. **College Park Addition**; Vol. 84; Page 604; 15th June 1887
Wright's Addition to West Dallas; Vol. 86; Page 275; 12th September 1887.
11. Dallas Morning News: 1886-October-8th; page 8, "**West Dallas Items**".
12. "Texas History Notebook--a blog about Texas"; <https://texoso66.com/2019/08/08/texas-and-pacific-railway/> (accessed: 1st August 2026); *Texas and Pacific Railway* (written 2019).
13. The full circuit plan for the Dallas & Oak Cliff Railway can be seen on an 1891 map by Murphy & Bolanz: "**Official Map of City of Dallas and Suburbs**", *UNT Portal To Texas History* (Aug. 2026).
14. **West Dallas**: Dallas County real estate deed records; Vol. 106, Pages 170-171; 2nd June 1889.
15. The *West Dallas Railroad* bridge on Main Street is on the Sanborn Insurance Maps of Dallas, 1892, Sheet 3. This steel bridge was later moved south and used for the Zang Causeway.
16. Dallas Morning News: 1894-March 7th; page 5, "**Oak Cliff Railroad**".
17. **W.R. Fisher Homestead Addition**; Dallas Co. Deed Records. Vol. 90, Page 100; 5th March 1888.
18. **Terrace Grove Addition**: Vol. 99/ Page 114; 30th November 1888.
19. **Kessler Park (1st Section)**; Plat Map Vol. 3, Pages 147-148; 19th April 1924; and **Kessler Park (2nd Section)**; Plat Map Vol. 3, Pages 197-199; 23rd April 1924.
20. **W.R. Fisher Addition Revised**; I found only on: "**West Dallas**"; Vol. 106, Page 170; 2nd June 1889.
21. **Minutes of the 14th District Court**; Case 8638; Minute Book; Vol. Z, pages 193-195.
22. Dallas Daily Times Herald; 4th September 1890; page 8, col. 4-5; "**Over the River: The question of incorporation discussed in West Dallas**".
23. www.7/Ladders.com/Coombes/WDSD.pdf ; "**District Map**"; Jim Barnes; undated (25th January 2026).
24. Reconstruction of the area of the 1908 is difficult because of later alterations to sea-level calibrations in the region; complicated by relocation of the Trinity River channel, as well as widespread alterations of surface elevations downtown and later along the Interstate 30 construction channel.
A map of the flood, drain by City engineer John F. Witt was printed in The Dallas Morning News: "**Map Prepared Under the Sanction of Engineers**", 7th June 1908; page.6.
Today the flood gauge of the Trinity River at Dallas is calibrated at a level of 367.84 feet above sea level. Adding to that the traditionally stated depth of 52.6 feet gives the 1908 flood crest at 420.44 ft.
In sketching this map I tried to follow contours shown on the map of the Dallas Central Appraisal District, outlining an edge at 421 feet above sea level.
I suspect that the 1908 flood was actually somewhat higher, but currently I lack documentary proof. Several eyewitness accounts maintain that a flood in 1866 had been higher, or as high, though downtown features had changed so drastically in the intervening 42 years that they could not be certain.
25. Munden to A Busch -7 acres; Dallas Co. Deed Records; Vol. 369, Page 60; 10th May 1905 (Busch purchase). A Busch to A Wagner -7 acres; Vol 462, Page 202; 29th Feb.1910 (Busch sale) location now:~1400 Singleton.
26. Dallas Morning News: 1908-Sept. 21st: page 11; "**To Change West Dallas' Name**."

(End of Footnotes)