

Did the Stage Stop Here?

Some places transcend time, while others help define it. The Thornton family home in Westlake does both. "We believe this house was probably the first structure of any significance in the area," Steve Thornton said of his family's house on Roanoke Road. Thornton's mother, LaVana Thornton, still lives in the hilltop house that local legend says is an old stagecoach stop known as Placido.

The Thornton family bought the gabled, stone house and surrounding property in 1916 from the family of the once-prominent landowner Henry Keller. While the Thorntons are fairly certain that Keller's family built the house sometime around 1866, they would like to construct a written account of their home's history. If the house was a stagecoach stop in the 1800s, the building would be eligible for listing in the National Register. But the Thorntons' motivation for researching the house is more than the quest for a historical designation. "I'm more interested in knowing the history than getting a marker," LaVana Thornton said.

She said she has heard stories about the house being a stagecoach stop since moving to the farm in 1947. Based on these oral histories and the physical evidence they have accumulated, the Thorntons believe their property was a stagecoach stop on an east-west road that ran between Double Springs and Roanoke.

Double Springs, or Twin Springs as it is sometimes called, was a town located about a half-mile southeast of the Thornton's land, near Mount Gilead. The town moved to Athol, now Keller, when the railroad came through the region.

The Thorntons have hit a few roadblocks in their attempt to reconstruct a record of their home's past. The Tarrant County courthouse burned in 1876, destroying most of the county's early records. County officials reconstructed many property records using information found in tax rolls, but most documents that pre-dated the 1876 fire were lost forever. The lack of documents concerning the house seems to confirm that it was indeed built before 1876.

Driving along Roanoke Road as it winds past the Thornton property, it is easy to imagine a time when other forms of transportation might have traveled the tree-shaded path. "We don't have any actual proof that the stagecoach stopped here but that is what we've always heard," LaVana Thornton said. According to one legend, bandits held up the stagecoach one night while it was stopped at Placido and then buried the gold by the pigpen near the house. LaVana Thornton remembers hearing stories in the 1940s from men who told her they had "dug holes all over the Thornton farm" in their childhood as they searched for the buried gold.

But more than legend seems to support the claim that the Thornton house was a stagecoach stop in the 1800s.

"I've actually dug up pieces of what looks like flagstone from under the ground in front of the house,"

Steve Thornton said. "It looks like there may have been a horseshoe-shaped drive in front of the house at one time."

Thornton also said the spring-fed pond in back of the house would have provided a reliable source of water for horses and that would have been essential for any stagecoach stop.

The Thorntons also have an 1895 map of Tarrant County detailing several stagecoach routes. One east-west route designates a stop in a community called Placido about one-half mile from a settlement called Double Springs, which seems to match the location of the Thornton's property. The Thorntons need more information to document that their house once served as a stagecoach stop. Anyone with information concerning the stagecoach lines or routes that passed through the Alliance area is encouraged to contact the Westlake Historical Preservation Board at (817) 430-0941.

But even without a historical designation or proof of their house's role in the region's history, the Thorntons say they will preserve the structure they have always called home. "My father was born upstairs in 1917," Steve said. "And he died about 600 feet from this house."

"No matter where we have lived, this has always been our home," LaVana Thornton added.