

Cooper Creek School, Fishtrap and Cooper Creek Roads, Denton County Narrative

Revised May 2014

*Historical Narrative written and researched by Kate Singleton for Texas Historical Commission
Recorded Texas Historic Landmark Application,
2012, Denton County*

I. Context

The Cooper Creek School is located at the junction of Cooper Creek and Fishtrap Roads in northeast Denton County. The school is situated between the Cooper Creek Cemetery and a small wood frame church, one of the first structures for the Cooper Creek Baptist Church. The current school building was constructed in 1919 and is the third school structure to stand at this location. It was paid for through a bond program voted on by the school board in July of 1919¹. The building would have been available for the following school year. The building housed a school for the children and the community of Cooper Creek from 1919 to 1951. It has continued to serve the community as a place for clubs, churches and organizations to meet.

Cooper Creek is now located within the city limits of Denton (*Note – Cooper Creek Community is still outside the city limits of Denton – May 5, 2014 correction to narrative – Beth Stribling, Marker Chairman*) but was described as being three and a half to four miles northeast of Denton. The Cooper Creek community was established around 1872, although families had been living in the area before the Civil War². It is important to note that the Denton County Courthouse burned in December 1875; therefore there are few records from before that time. The land for the cemetery, school, and church had been set aside in deeds that date back to the 1870s. The land is located in the Thomas H. Living Survey in northeast Denton County. In a deed dated October 14, 1878, the cemetery, school and church are noted as having been established and a portion of the land was for a “free school”³.

II. Overview

¹,”Rural School Bonds Voted”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, July 7, 1919, p.4.

² "Reunion Sunday at Cooper Creek", *Denton Record Chronicle*, March 24, 1923 p.5.

³ Denton County Records, Vol. K, p.189, October 14, 1878.

Early History

Cooper Creek is situated in what was part of the Peters Colony land grant. William S. Peters received a land grant from the state of Texas in 1841⁴. The company was called the Texian Land and Immigration Company but known as Peters Colony. Most of the settlers were from the Upper South. Peters sent his agents to Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri.⁵ Alexander Cooper moved to the area in 1848 as part of the Peters Colony. Families that settled in the area before the Civil War included Reverend James Farris, who was a founder of the Cooper Creek Methodist Church, Thomas Skaggs and his family, and the Price family⁶.

Geography and Agriculture of Denton County

Denton County has three general soil belts running north to south: the eastern belt lies in the Blackland Prairie; one fourth of the county is in the western belt that lies along the Grand Prairie and half of the county in the mid-section is in the Eastern Cross Timbers⁷. The area was settled due to the abundance of water, timber and sandy soil, and the crops planted were cotton, corn and other similar crops⁸.

Denton County became know for its wheat cultivation, beginning in the early 1880's and well into the turn of the century⁹. Large scale cultivation of crops like wheat became economically feasible with the advent of the railroad and the ability to move these crops to market. Between 1880 and 1900, the acreage cultivated with wheat increased more than 80,000 acres. Denton County ranked either first or second in statewide wheat

⁴ Handbook of Texas Online, s.v."http://tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/DD/hcd6.html (accessed November 27, 2006).

⁵ Mary Jo Cowling, *Geography of Denton* (Dallas: Banks Upshaw and Company, 1936), p.1.

⁶ Emily Fowler and Alma Lain Chambers, *Towns and Communities of Denton County*, (Denton, Texas, 1960, pp.1-3)

⁷ University of Texas Bureau of Business Research, *An Economic Survey of Denton County Prepared for Texas and Pacific Railroad* (Austin: University of Texas, June 1949), Section 2.0201-02.

⁸ "Cotton Stripped of Foliage and Corn Ruined in Some Places", *Dallas Morning News*, July 1, 1904, p.10.

⁹ Captain B.B. Paddock, *History of Texas: Fort Worth and Texas Northwest Edition*. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1922), Vol. 2, p.738.

production behind Collin County¹⁰. The wheat crop increased steadily in the early 1900's. In 1903, the wheat crop increased 10% from the previous year¹¹.

Cotton was also grown in the area around Cooper Creek¹². In 1880, there were 29,785 acres of cotton being cultivated in the county. Cotton cultivation peaked at 115,078 acres in 1920¹³. In 1930, cotton cultivation made up 26% of the crops grown in the county, wheat was 16%, oats 15%, corn 13%, peanuts, sorghum and barley 3%¹⁴. During the Depression years, cotton was still being grown in the area¹⁵. By 1945, cotton was the leading crop in Denton County, followed by cattle. The surge in cotton production may have been in response to the demands of World War II.

Dairy farming was also important to the local economy with Denton ranking 9th in the state¹⁶. Altogether, in 1920 there were 4,200 farms in Denton County and in 1925, there 4,255 farms or ranches averaging 120 acres. By the beginning of the Depression in 1930, there were 3,963. This number steadily declined through the Depression years from 3,796 in 1935 to 3,340 in 1940¹⁷. Like many rural areas, as the number of farms grew, the community established a school for the local children. The community consisted of the cemetery, school and two churches, Cooper Creek Baptist Church and Cooper Creek Methodist Church. Cooper Creek is similar to the other agriculturally based communities in Denton County including Green Valley, Bolivar, Drop and Chinn's Chapel. Cooper Creek was an active community with participation centered at the school, churches and cemetery.

III. Historical and Cultural Significance

Education in Texas

¹⁰ Handbook of Texas Online, s.v.,"<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/DD/hcd6.html> (accessed March 5, 2007).

¹¹ "North Texas". *Dallas Morning News*, April 21, 1903, p.10.

¹² "Cotton Report", *Dallas Morning News*, July 10, 1907, p. 10.

¹³ Handbook of Texas. Denton County.

¹⁴ Cowling, p.45.

¹⁵ "Eight Cent Raise in Ginning Prices Called Necessary". *Dallas Morning News*, July 28, 1932, Section II, p.8.

¹⁶ University of Texas Bureau of Business Research, 4.0107.

¹⁷ University of Texas Bureau of Business Research, 4.0101-03.

The importance of public education to the state of Texas was noted in the constitutional convention of 1836, “Unless people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuation of civil liberty or the capacity for self government”. The state constitution stated that “It shall be the duty of the congress, as soon as circumstances will permit, to provide by law, a general system of education¹⁸. However, it was not until Texas entered the Union in 1845, that permanent school financing was provided¹⁹. The legislature loaned the school funds to railroads so they could finance construction of the tracks. After the Civil War, laws were passed to establish schools, provide funding, and make attendance mandatory²⁰. The state constitution of 1876 made wide ranging changes to the school laws. It established a county school system that allowed any group of parents or citizens to organize a school community and apply for state funds based on the number of qualifying students between the ages of eight and fourteen²¹.

Cooper Creek School

Under this change in the Constitution, the Cooper Creek School applied in 1876 to Denton County for recognition as a community school. W.G. Evans, W. G. Etter and Thomas Skaggs were the trustees of the new school. These men were early settlers in the county, and Evans and Etter were charter members of the Cooper Creek Baptist Church. The history of the school, churches, and cemetery are all closely linked together. The families lived and worked on their farms; attended the school and the churches in the area, and were buried in the cemetery. There are several examples of the pastor or members of the churches who were trustees, principals and/or teachers at the school. As an example, in the late 1940s, Denver Amos served as pastor of the Cooper Creek Baptist Church and as principal and teacher at the school²². The property where the school house, cemetery and church are located served as the center of activity for the Cooper Creek community.

¹⁸ Section 5, Constitution of the Republic of Texas, 1836.

¹⁹ Section 2, Article X, Constitution of the State of Texas, 1845

²⁰ Myrtle Watson, “*Education: A Debt the Present Owes to the Past*”, Paper Published May 6, 1976 as part of Denton County Bicentennial Celebration, p.3.

²¹ Myrtle Watson, p.6.

²² Joy Smith, *Cooper Creek Baptist Church Standing Firm: The First 140 Years*, (Denton, Texas: Smith, 2010), p. 18.

The county records indicate that there 39 students enrolled in 1876, when it was listed as Cooper Creek School #21²³. In 1877, the Denton County Commissioners voted to allow an ad valorem tax to be levied on all real and personal property by each district to provide additional funds to pay teachers²⁴. The school was in a one room building on the current site. In 1884, a state law abolished the community system and established a county school system, with numbers designating each school. That year the Denton County Commissioners Court numbered, renumbered and named all the schools in the county. Additionally, all of these school districts were surveyed and boundaries were established. Cooper Creek was renumbered from 21 to 26. At this time there were 73 common school districts in the county, with Denton as an independent district. By 1900, there were 92. Each district elected their own school board that hired and fired teachers, set the curriculum and calendar, decided the tax rate, and generally ran the schools without guidance from the county or state²⁵.

The number of students at the Cooper Creek School grew steadily. During the 1885-1886 school year there were 59 students and one “colored” or African American student. This is the only year this one student is noted²⁶. Eventually, a new (second) school building was constructed²⁷.

The land that the school, cemetery, and church were located on was bought and sold several times as part of a larger tract. Interestingly, when the property sold, there was always an exception that kept the acreage of this parcel (school, cemetery and church) separate. Denton County purchased the 1 ¼ acres where the school was situated in 1907 from J.R. Templeton. The deed noted that it was “for the benefit of the free schools for Denton County”. The deed went on to state that this land was sold by J.A. Fain and wife to W.G. Evans and James Farris for a “free school”²⁸. In 1909, Denton County

²³ Director’s School Record for Denton County, O.N. Hollingsworth, Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1876, p.102.

²⁴ Myrtle Watson, p.6.

²⁵ E. Dale Odom, *An Illustrated History of Denton County, Texas: From Peters Colony to the Metroplex* (Denton, Texas: Odom, 1996), p. 50.

²⁶ Director’s School Record for Denton County, 1885-1886, p.4, p.6.

²⁷ Joy Smith, p. 149. Photographs from the early 1900s show the second school building.

²⁸ Denton County Records, Warranty Deed, Volume 106, p. 210, July 30, 1907.

consolidated Cooper Creek into Denton Public Schools. By 1911, the County Superintendent administered the schools and a County School Board governed them. In 1912, the superintendent post became an elected position²⁹.

By 1918, Denton had 81 common districts and 7 independent districts. The Cooper Creek district was Number 26 and was approximately 14 square miles and 333 ½ acres³⁰. In 1917, Cooper Creek decided to implement the idea of a “teacherage”. Much like a church parsonage, this would be a home for the teacher that was convenient to the school. The Denton Record Chronicle noted the “progressiveness” of the idea³¹. The “teacherage”, no longer extant, stood to the southeast of the school and was constructed around 1918. It was described as a six room building. In later years the “teacherage” housed the school caretaker³².

In 1919, Denton County received \$18, 635 from the State for rural schools. It was indicated that the schools “had to meet the prescribed requirements”³³. The third school building began construction in 1919 with bond funds voted on by the board. Apparently, a vote for school bonds by the community had failed so the board went ahead and voted to sell bonds in the amount of \$4,000 to build a new school and buy equipment for it. The new school had four large rooms. There were wood burning stoves in the rooms. The outhouses were located behind the school building. Also on the site of the school was a well, a barn, sheds and a 3-acre garden³⁴.

The school was the center of community activity. Both churches used the school at varying times for services or programs. When a small pox epidemic struck in 1918, the local doctor treated all the children at the school house to help stem the outbreak³⁵. Cooper Creek School was very active in the County Interscholastic program and competitions. They won several of these competitions, at one point setting a county

²⁹ Dale E. Odom, p. 53

³⁰ Field Notes of Cooper Creek District No. 26, Denton County Common School Districts, 1930.

³¹ “Loafer Tells of Things He Saw at the County Fair”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, January 1, 1917, p.2.

³² Joy Smith, p.60.

³³ “Denton County to Receive \$18,635 for Rural Schools”, *Dallas Morning News*, October 8, 1919, p.11.

³⁴ “Rural School and Teacherage in Denton County”, *Dallas Morning News*, January 9, 1921, p. 10.

³⁵ Joy Smith, p.37.

record. By 1925, they had won the Rural School Cup three consecutive times. As a result, they were given the cup permanently³⁶. In 1931 Cooper Creek led in the “Class C Literary Division” of the County Interscholastic League and won at athletic competitions³⁷. Following their victory, they presented a play to the community called “A Poor Married Man”³⁸. At this time there were 77 pupils enrolled in nine grades; tenth grade had been discontinued by the county board³⁹. The pupils at the school often produced plays for the local community⁴⁰.

The school was also used for community events and lectures. These lectures ranged in subject from prohibition to travelogues. The area churches often used the school to hold services while their buildings were being constructed or remodeled. They also used the school for revivals. The Church of Christ used the building for their mission meetings and services in the mid-1940s⁴¹.

In 1949, the Gilmer-Aikin movement prompted changes in the Denton County schools. Gilmer-Aikin refers to a committee that was established by the Texas legislature to study education reform in the state. The committee’s work culminated in recommendations to the 1949 legislature to make schools and school districts more efficient and better funded. The resulting bills that were passed by the legislature consolidated 4,500 school districts into 2,900 more efficient administrative units. State funding supplemented local taxes. Additionally, higher salaries attracted teachers to the classroom and encouraged the study of education as a career path. State funding for schools was dependent on attendance, thus providing an incentive for local districts to increase attendance. The length of the school year was established as well as the twelve years of schooling for children.⁴²

³⁶ “Pilot Point Leading in Denton County Meet”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, March 28, 1924, Section 2, p.1

³⁷ “County Interscholastic League”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, March 27, 1931, p.1.

³⁸ “Cooper Creek Wins Athletic Events, Presents Play”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, February 28, 1931, p.6.

³⁹ “77 Pupils Enroll at Cooper Creek”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, September 30, 1930, p.5.

⁴⁰ “Cooper Creek Wins Athletic Events, Presents Play”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, February 28, 1931, p.6.

⁴¹ “Cooper Creek Service”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, July 7, 1946, p.13

⁴² Oscar Mauzy, "GILMER-AIKIN LAWS," *Handbook of Texas Online* <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mlg01>), accessed September 25, 2011.

In July of that year, five operating schools, Green Valley, Cooper Creek, Sand Hill, Center Point and Corinth, were annexed into the Denton County school district⁴³. The final year for Cooper Creek as an independent school was the 1950-1951 academic year. However, even after classes were discontinued it was used by various clubs and organizations for meeting space⁴⁴.

⁴³ C.A. Bridges, *History of Denton County, Texas from Its Beginnings to 1960*, (Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1978), p.411.

⁴⁴ C.A. Bridges, p.411.

Cooper Creek Home Demonstration Club and the School Building

The Cooper Creek Home Demonstration Club often used the school for meetings, programs and as a place to hold fundraisers (ice cream suppers, pie suppers) that benefitted the school, cemetery and the community⁴⁵.

The Home Demonstration Clubs were begun in Texas in 1912 and were patterned after the federal government's agricultural and home demonstration programs. In 1914, these efforts were formalized with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. The legislation mandated that programs be established through the states' land grant universities and gave these programs funding. Texas established the Texas Agricultural Extension Agency through Texas A & M University. The established programs benefitted from the federal funds and the legislative requirement for matching funds from state and local governments. In the 1920s and 1930s, the program grew to 2,268 clubs and 48,712 members. During World War II, these clubs actively participated in "victory gardens" and "victory canning". The agents taught efficiency, cleanliness, comfort and beauty. The clubs gave scholarships to 4-H girls, raised funds for community projects and helped rural women develop leadership and parliamentary skills⁴⁶.

The Cooper Creek Home Demonstration Club used the building from 1962 to 1977 as their club house, leasing it for one dollar a year. In 1968, the Denton Independent School District decided to sell the school as surplus property. The Cooper Creek Cemetery Association feared that the parcel would be sold to a private landowner. They were concerned that their access to the cemetery would be compromised and that the school building, an important part of their community, would be demolished. The school district sold the association the parcel of land with the school building⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Denton County Records, Resolution #3880, Volume 566, p. 3, May 6, 1968.

⁴⁶ Debbie Mauldin Cottrell, "Home Demonstration," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/articles/aah01>), assessed September 11, 2011.

⁴⁷ Denton County Records, Resolution #3880, Volume 566, p. 3, May 6, 1968.

The building continues to be used to this day. It is owned by the Cooper Creek Cemetery Association. The Cooper Creek Baptist Church uses it for youth group meetings and activities and a Cowboy Church has services in the building.

IV. Architectural Description

The Cooper Creek school building is located at the corner of Fishtrap and Cooper Creek Roads in northeast Denton County. The building is situated on a tract of land that includes the Cooper Creek Cemetery and the former Cooper Creek Baptist Church. As noted before, the site was part of a parcel set aside in a deed in 1878. The community school district sold the parcel where the school is situated in 1907. In 1968 the Cooper Creek Cemetery Association purchased the property back from the Denton Independent School District. By doing this, the Cemetery Association made the original school, church and cemetery parcel whole again. The school building sits back from the road and has a parking area in front of the building (south façade). To the west is the cemetery and to the east is the church building. The property is bounded on the north by a farm.

The Cooper Creek School is typical of rural school buildings that were constructed in Texas in the years following World War I. Many of these schools are no longer extant or have been inappropriately modified. Neither the architect nor builder of the school is known. Construction of the third school building began in 1919 with bond funds voted on by the board. Apparently, a vote for school bonds by the community had failed so the board went ahead and voted to sell bonds in the amount of \$4,000 to build a new school and buy equipment for it. The new school had four large rooms. There were wood burning stoves in the rooms. The outhouses were located behind the school building. Also on the site of the school was a well, a barn, sheds and a 3-acre garden⁴⁸.

The school is a one story wood frame rectangular building. It has a hipped roof with exposed rafter tails. The exterior is original 117 wood siding. There were two chimneys; one on the east side of the building and one on the west side of the building; these have been removed. The building has a center entrance porch with double doors and brick columns. The doors are metal panel replacement. The brick columns have a plain cast concrete cap. On either side of the entrance are five multi-pane windows. These are metal replacement windows. The Cooper Creek Cemetery Association that owns the

⁴⁸ "Rural School and Teacherage in Denton County", *Dallas Morning News*, January 9, 1921, p. 10.

school stated that they consulted with THC staff several years ago when they changed the windows. They have indicated that THC staff said that these replacement windows were acceptable. They replicated the original windows. The sides of the building have two sets of paired windows with modest wood surrounds. The rear of the building has two 6-panel wood doors that flank the two sets of 5 windows that are the same as the front. The foundation of the building is brick piers and it has a concrete stem wall around the periphery. The building has a central hallway with two large rooms on either side. The room on the southeast side has a small stage. The interior of the building is relatively intact, although it has paneling that was placed on the walls in the 1960s. The building is in good condition and maintains its integrity.

V. Documentation

- Ed Bates, *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* (Denton, Texas: McNitzky Printing, 1918).
- C.A. Bridge, *History of Denton County from Its Beginning to 1960* (Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1978).
- Mary Jo Cowling, *Geography of Denton* (Dallas: Banks Upshaw and Company, 1936).
- Emily Fowler and Alma Lain Chambers, *Towns and Communities of Denton County*, (Denton, Texas, 1960)
- E. Dale Odom, *An Illustrated History of Denton County, Texas* (Denton, Texas: Self Published, 1996).
- Captain B.B. Paddock, *History of Texas: Fort Worth and Texas Northwest Edition* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1922).
- Joy Smith, *Cooper Creek Baptist Church Standing Firm: The First 140 Years*, (Denton, Texas: Smith, 2010)
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- Myrtle Watson, "Education: A Debt the Present Owes to the Past", Paper Published May 6, 1976 as part of Denton County Bicentennial Celebration

Handbook of Texas Online

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County Records

- Director's School Record for Denton County, O.N. Hollingsworth, Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1876
- Director's School Record for Denton County, 1885-1886
- Denton County Records, Vol. K, p.189, October 14, 1878
- Denton County Records, Warranty Deed, Volume 106, p. 210, July 30, 1907
- Field Notes of Cooper Creek District No. 26, Denton County Common School Districts, 1930
- Denton County Records, Resolution #3880, Volume 566, p. 3, May 6, 1968

Texas Constitution

- Section 5, Constitution of the Republic of Texas, 1836
- Section 2, Article X, Constitution of the State of Texas, 1845

Newspaper Articles

“North Texas”. *Dallas Morning News*, April 21, 1903, p.10

“Cotton Stripped of Foliage and Corn Ruined in Some Places”, *Dallas Morning News*, July 1, 1904, p.10

“Cotton Report”, *Dallas Morning News*, July 10, 1907, p. 10

“Loafer Tells of Things He Saw at the County Fair”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, January 1, 1917, p.2.

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“Denton County to Receive \$18,635 for Rural Schools”, *Dallas Morning News*, October 8, 1919, p.11.

“Rural School and Teacherage in Denton County”, *Dallas Morning News*, January 9, 1921, p. 10.

“Reunion Sunday at Cooper Creek”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, March 24, 1923 p.5

“Pilot Point Leading in Denton County Meet”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, March 28, 1924, Section 2, p.1

“Eight Cent Raise in Ginning Prices Called Necessary”. *Dallas Morning News*, July 28, 1932, Section II, p.8.

“77 Pupils Enroll at Cooper Creek”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, September 30, 1930, p.5.

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“Cooper Creek Wins Athletic Events, Presents Play”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, February 28, 1931, p.6.

“Cooper Creek Service”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, July 7, 1946, p.13

VI. Photo Log

Photo 1: Looking North at front façade of school

Photo 2: Looking Northeast at west façade and south (front) façade

Photo 3: Looking Northwest at east façade and front (south) façade

Photo 4: Looking Southwest at the north (rear) façade

Photo 5: Interior of the School, looking northeast in front room on east side

Photo 6: Interior, Looking south at stage in east side of building

Photo 7: Interior, looking northwest in front room on west side of building

Photo 8: Interior, looking northeast in back room on east side of building

Photo 9: Looking northeast on Fishtrap Road at Cooper Creek Cemetery and School

Photo 10: Looking northwest from Fishtrap Road at Cooper Creek School and former Cooper Creek Baptist Church

Photo 11: Looking northwest from Fishtrap Road at parking area and Cooper Creek School

Photo 12: Looking north from Fishtrap Road at Cooper Creek School and former Cooper Creek Baptist Church

Historic Photograph of Cooper Creek School and “Teacherage”, Dallas Morning News, January 9, 1921, page 10

VII. Legal Description

Denton County Deed Records, Volume 566, p. 29, May 6, 1968

being more particularly described as follows:

BEGINNING at the southwest corner of said tract conveyed by J. R. Templeton et ux to the Trustees of Cooper Creek School District No. 26; said beginning point being the southeast corner of the Cooper Creek Cemetery tract;

THENCE EAST along the South boundary line of said Cooper Creek School District No. 26 tract to a point which is 60 feet from the beginning point, a steel pin;

THENCE NORTH parallel with the west boundary line of said Cooper Creek School District No. 26 tract and the east boundary line of the Cooper Creek Cemetery tract, 324 feet, more or less, to a point in the north boundary line of said Cooper Creek School District No. 26 tract;

THENCE WEST parallel with the south boundary line of the tract herein conveyed along the north boundary line of said Cooper Creek School District No. 26 tract, 60 feet to the northwest corner of said Cooper Creek School District No. 26 tract;

THENCE SOUTH along the common boundary line of the Cooper Creek School District No. 26 tract, 324 feet, more or less, to the PLACE OF BEGINNING.

Current Description

Legal Description

A0729a T. H. Living, Tr 52, 53(pt), 4.76 Acres, Old Dcad Tr 21,22