

# THE ROUND TOP HOUSE

## A FRONTIER LANDMARK

FAYETTE COUNTY, TEXAS

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Round Top Area Historical Society

**“ROUND TOP!”** shouts the stagecoach driver as the pinnacled Round Top House comes into view. It’s 1849. Passing to the right are cultivated fields planted high with corn and ahead to the left is the first glimpse of the white-painted way station with its roof-top tower beckoning the driver and his weary passengers. In the coach below, one younger man cannot wait and pulls his hat, and he pokes his brow through one of the left side, canvass-covered widows to get a clearer view of the approaching Round Top House. He sees it and a few other buildings nestled beside a grove of mature live oaks, which will offer welcoming shade. A woman seated on the opposite side is startled by an exuberant group of slave children, who have appeared suddenly from a row of corn. A few of them are able to keep pace with their arms out-stretched. She recovers with a laugh and digs into her cloth bag for a stick of rock candy tied in paper wrap. She tosses it out her side window in the direction of the lead runner, who catches the treasure and darts back into the corn field with the others following in hot pursuit.

The dust covered passengers are about to reach one of the landmark facilities on the route between Houston and Austin, where they will be able to take a needed stretch, receive a thirst quenching drink and undoubtedly make a hurried visit to the euphemism. Stagecoach and way

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station personnel, however, will not remain idle but will be performing routine wagon maintenance and a change of horse teams. Within a short time, the stagecoach driver announces his call to load up, and he and his passengers are once again on the trail descending Soergel Hill for their next anticipated stop at Earthman’s farm near Nechanitz. However, less than two miles down the road, the stagecoach passes through an emerging settlement on Cummins Creek where

there is a recently completed, small building on the left. There is signage labeling it as the “Round Top Post Office”. Any stops here will be brief for the pickup and delivery of mail pouches and packages. Discerning passengers, however, are rightly confused since the Round Top name appears both here and two miles back at the way station on Soergel Hill.

The Round Top House (RT House) was an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century structure located in the northeastern reaches of Fayette County, Texas. This modest, frontier facility, which had a distinctive roof top appendage or cupola, was both a dwelling and a place of business; however, for a brief moment in time, it was the focal point for the region and became the namesake for two communities. The RT House was built by the pioneer Captain John York during the late 1830's or the early 1840's. York, as an Indian fighter, designed the building with a faceted cupola with

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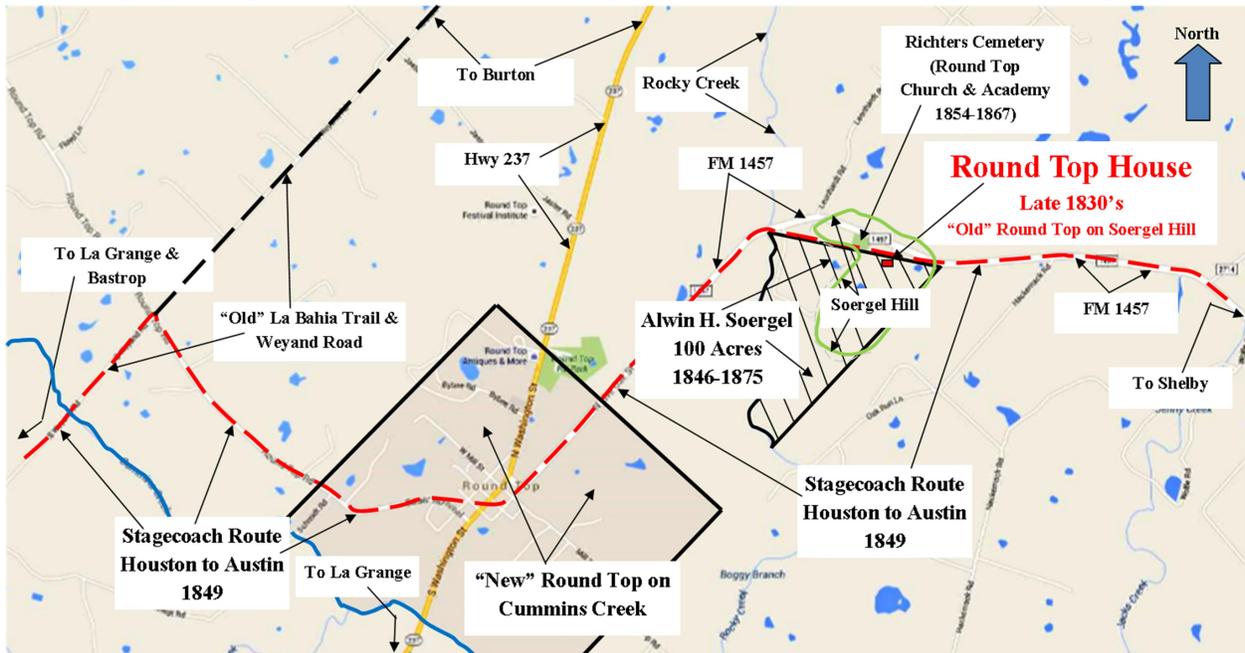
ports for viewing or shooting at unwarranted visitors such as the periodic Comanche raiding parties that plagued the area prior to 1848. It is believed the RT House was designed to serve the traveling public as a way station and was particularly important for freight haulers driving wagons laden with goods from the coast into the central Texas region. Undoubtedly, there were peripheral buildings associated with the RT House including a blacksmith shop that served not only the passing element but members of the local community as well.

In anticipation of his planned move to DeWitt County, John York sold 100 acres of his Winn League holdings, which included the RT House, to Isom McMillin. McMillin kept the property for only a short time and then sold it in February 1846 to Alwin H. Soergel. Alwin and one or more of his Prussian traveling companions lived in the RT House for a few months; however, by the late summer or early fall of 1846, Alwin decided to give up his short-lived agrarian lifestyle and took employment with the Adelsverein (the German Emigration Company) where he was able to continue with his writings and his sojourn across the State of Texas. Alwin appointed his cousin Ernst Soergel, who was also an employee of the Adelsverein and working as an assistant overseer at the nearby Nassau Plantation, as manager of the RT House and its 100 acres of land.

Ernst Soergel was probably involved in the negotiations with officials over the relocation of the region's postal services to the RT House in December 1846. The appointed new Postmaster was Henry A. Robertson, who lived a short distance to the north on what is now Leonhardt Road. The RT House became an immediate focal point of the community because it was not only the region's postal center, but it was also a gathering place to read and discuss state and area news as well as local postings. If the way station services had been curtailed during the recent sales to McMillin and/or Alwin H. Soergel, then Ernst would have certainly reinstated those services following the 1847 announcement of a new Houston to Austin stagecoach route that was to run literally by the Round Top House.

The *Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register*, Houston Texas, May 10, 1847 issue wrote: “New Road to Austin..... We learn that Col. Crump of Austin county, has recently caused a route to be surveyed from Houston, in a direct line to Austin, and finds that the distance between the two places is only 142 ½ miles. By either of the old routes the distance is over 160 miles. This (new) route crosses the Brazos, nears Jones’ Ferry, passes through the town of Travis, and by the **Round top house** on the dividing ridge between the Yagua [Yegua] and Colorado, by Earthmans and runs on to the high lands east of Bastrop, to its termination at the capital”. Less than two years later, the *Texas Democrat*, Austin, Texas, March 3, 1849 issue reported the following: “We learn from the Telegraph that the new road from Houston to Austin, leading by Bellville in Austin County, and by the **Round Top House** in Fayette County will soon be opened. This road, it is said, will be about thirty miles nearer than the old route by San Felipe and La Grange or that by Washington and La Grange”.

It would appear that this stagecoach route would have overlaid with much of today’s highway FM 1457 between the communities of Shelby in Austin County and “new” Round Top on Cummins Creek. In those early days, the route towards Austin would have passed through the emerging village on Cummins Creek and proceeded west via today’s Round Top Road for



approximately 1½ miles to its intersection with the “old” La Bahia Trail (today’s Weyand Road). The route on the La Bahia Trail would have turned south and crossed Cummins Creek until it intersected the “old” Gotier Trace. At this junction, stagecoaches, riders and other conveyances would have proceeded in a westerly direction over a revamped Gotier Trace to Bastrop and the Capital beyond.

In September 1847, Alwin H. Soergel sailed from Galveston, Texas for Prussia after receiving notice of his brother's illness. He would never return to Texas. During the following month in Fayette County, Ernst Soergel was a party to the "Shootout" at Nassau Plantation. He and a few other men as Adelsverein supporters staged an attack on the plantation to retake it from illegal occupiers. These men met in the early morning hours at the RT House and formulated their plan of attack. Unfortunately, two men were killed during the "Shootout", and Ernst was indicted for one of those killings. Eventually, he was acquitted; however, his reputation was greatly diminished. The "Shootout" also affected the RT House with Ernst as manager. Within nine months, the RT House lost its status as the region's postal center.

Ernst Soergel took residence in the RT House sometime during the late 1840's after losing his position as assistant overseer at Nassau Plantation. The Adelsverein was in decline and was about to lose the plantation for default on a lien due to non-payment for food supplies and other services rendered for the survival of Fredericksburg. Arthur Meerscheidt, who had recently arrived from Prussia in early 1850, lived with Ernst in the RT House for several months while his own property in the adjacent Jack League was made ready with new improvements. Arthur married that same year into the von Rosenberg family and decided in 1853 that it was his duty as an in-law to advise his Aunt Auguste about Ernst Soergel's unsavory reputation. The spinster Auguste, who was the sister to Arthur's mother-in-law, was about to marry Ernst after a brief two week engagement. The marriage had been prearranged by the von Rosenberg family, and Auguste advised her nephew-in-law, Arthur Meerscheidt, to mind his own business.

Conversely, Ernst and Auguste Soergel and the Arthur Meerscheidt family were very close friends and relations for the rest of their lives. It seems apparent that Ernst and Auguste along with their adopted daughter Elisabeth Spangler/Spengler made the RT House their home from the 1850's through the American Civil War. The adopted daughter Elisabeth married in 1868 to Auguste's blood-related nephew, Carl August Walter von Rosenberg (vR), who was Arthur Meerscheidt's brother-in-law. Walter vR purchased the RT House and its 100 acres in 1875 from his father-in-law, Ernst Soergel. Ernst undoubtedly attained the property through an assignment or will from his cousin Alwin H. Soergel, who died shortly before the sale.

It is assumed that Ernst Soergel continued with the way station services at the RT House during the era of stagecoach travel. Ernst had purchased other properties in the region following the American Civil War and probably lived in a larger abode elsewhere. In 1875 his health began to decline, so he and his wife Auguste moved into the new, two-level home of their son-in-law, Walter von Rosenberg. The house was located near Boggy Creek inside the town limits of "new" Round Top off Cummins Creek. Ernst died in that house in 1880 after suffering a relapse from a previous illness associated with respiratory problems. His burial location remains an unknown, but it is believed by the von Rosenberg Family of Texas that he was interred near his sister-in-law, Amanda Fallier von Rosenberg, in the Soergel Hill Cemetery (now Richters Cemetery), which is but a stone's throw of the Round Top House.

It is unclear as to how long the Round Top House may have survived. Hopefully, it remains partially intact and is now within the structure of a larger farmhouse or outbuilding. The Wagner family occupied much of the Alwin H. Soergal tract during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Their old home place location is believed to be among a new complex of buildings known as *A Light Unto My Path*, which lies adjacent and immediately to the east of the Richters Cemetery off FM 1457. The aforementioned complex of buildings was undoubtedly the same site for the early 19th Century Round Top House and its peripheral outbuildings.

The Round Top House was more than dwelling or a simple place of business. It was the focal point of the community for a brief moment in time and for many years a comforting way station for teamsters, settlers, mail carriers, stagecoach personnel and passengers and the general local public. It had become a topic of statewide conversation during the late 1840's. It served the community, albeit, for a short time, as the region's postal center and as a place to gather and share the news and gossip. It was also the namesake for two separate communities. One of these thrives today and is now the cultural heart of Fayette County. It was, unfortunately, the staging ground for the "Shootout" at nearby Nassau Plantation in October 1847, where two deaths occurred. During the early 1850's the RT House received a new lease on life when it became a part of a greater community with the advent of the Round Top Church and Academy. This building was designed as an educational facility for the region's Anglo plantation society with the weekends devoted to worship for its faculty and registered students and perhaps those supporters living in the surrounding community.

The Round Top House was for a number of years an important landmark for the local community and the passing traveler; however, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was nothing more than a fading memory. Fortunately, Leonie Rummel Weyand and Houston Wade gave it a brief mention in their 1936 book, *An Early History of Fayette County*. In that publication they quote from the May 12, 1852 issue of the *Texas Monument* newspaper printed in La Grange, Texas: "*Round Top got its name from Soergel's white house, which had a tower not round but octagon shaped. The house was attractively situated on the summit of a hill.*"