

OLD G.H. CUNNINGHAM FARMSTEAD
230' southeast of intersection of
Curry and Vincent Roads
Waxahachie Vicinity
Ellis County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3378

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
Southwest System Support Office
National Park Service
P.O. Box 728
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OLD G. H. CUNNINGHAM FARMSTEAD

HABS NO. TX-3378

Location: 230' southeast of intersection of Curry and
Vincent Roads
Waxahachie vicinity, Ellis County, Texas

USGS Boz, Texas Quadrangle, Universal
Transverse Mercator Coordinates
14.697630.3576690

Present Owner: Texas National Research Laboratory Commission
(TNRLC)
1801 N. Hampton Road, Suite 400
DeSoto, Texas 75115

Present Occupant: None
Occupant: None

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Old G.H. Cunningham Farmstead includes a grouping of buildings on a 106-acre tract of land in the J.J. Mallard Survey. The complex is associated with George H. Cunningham (1825-1915) who owned vast amounts of land in Ellis and nearby counties during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like so many pioneers who settled in western Ellis County, Texas, prior to and immediately after the Civil War, Cunningham originally hailed from Tennessee. He came to Ellis County in 1849 and worked as a land surveyor. He purchased this 106-acre parcel in 1855 from James Jefferson Mallard and established this farm on a prominent and highly visible location that overlooked the surrounding countryside. The one-story frame house nearest to

Curry Road reportedly is his original residence. Although he farmed the land with hired help, Cunningham appeared to be more interested in land acquisition and at one time owned more than 3,000 acres in Ellis County. Local informants report that he later built a large house on another tract of land near the J.M. Dunaway House and leased his old homestead to tenant farmers. After Cunningham's death in 1915, a guardian for the estate of B.C. Cunningham (presumed to be Brazillin C., the youngest son of George H. and Tennessee Sims), oversaw the property, but in 1933 Leta Mae Cunningham assumed control. She later married G. Howell Hight, and they continued to lease the property to tenant farmers. After the decline of the local cotton market in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the farmers on this and other farms began to harvest a greater variety of crops as well as raise cattle. The property's significance stems from its association with one of the most extensive landowners in Ellis County during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and from the age of one of the houses, which is among the oldest extant buildings in the region. Furthermore, the property also reflects the evolution of a mid-nineteenth century family-run farm into an early twentieth century tenant farm.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: ca. 1856

2. Architect: None

3. Original and Subsequent Owners:

George H. Cunningham (1855-1915)

Estate of B.C. Cunningham (1915-1933)

Leta Mae Cunningham (1933-1966)

Roger and Roxana Hight (1966-1986)

Buena Vista Joint Venture (1986-1992)

Texas National Research Laboratory Commission (TNRLC)

4. **Builders, Contractors and Suppliers: Unknown**
5. **Original Plans and Construction: No original architectural plans or drawings were located during research investigations. Such drawings probably never existed for the vernacular buildings on the property.**
6. **Alterations and Additions: The main house was built about 1856 and enlarged through three phases of construction, beginning with a gable end addition ca. 1870. Then an ell and shed porch addition were built ca. 1890, and the roof was rebuilt and the bathroom installed (ca. 1940). The other buildings were constructed from the third quarter of the nineteenth through the second quarter of the twentieth centuries.**

B. Historical Context:

This farmstead is associated with George H. Cunningham, an early settler in western Ellis County and one of its wealthiest citizens during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the property was a tenant farm for well over 100 years, one of the houses dates to the mid nineteenth century and is believed to have been Cunningham's original residence.

George H. Cunningham was one of a large number of early settlers who came to Ellis County from Tennessee in the 1840s and 1850s. He was born on January 8, 1828 in Middle Tennessee, and relocated to Texas in 1849. He originally was a farmer, but also studied land surveying. According to an 1892 biography, Cunningham was appointed Deputy Surveyor of Ellis, Johnson, Navarro and Hill Counties, probably in the early 1850s, and later was elected District Surveyor for the Robertson Land District which embraced the previous counties and other territories in north-central Texas. While in office, he lived in Springfield, Limestone County, southeast of present-day Ellis County [1].

The experience he gained while in office proved indispensable in later years. He not only became well acquainted with the land, but also understood that land was Texas' most valuable resource and in its undeveloped state was undervalued. He assisted many people in their efforts to locate and claim property and sometimes received land in lieu of money for his services. As a consequence, he acquired much property in the region and profited greatly when land values soared during the cotton boom of the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One of his first land acquisitions in Ellis County was a 106.66-acre parcel in the James J. Mallard Survey, which he obtained on July 3, 1855. The deed notes that Mallard, a resident of Collin County, Texas, conveyed the land to Cunningham of Limestone County, Texas, "for and in consideration of locating, surveying and having patented to me three hundred and twenty acres . . ." [2]. Ad valorem tax rolls of 1855 do not list Cunningham as a landowner in Ellis County, but in the following year he paid taxes on nine parcels in the county. These documents also note that he owned no horses, cattle, mules or hogs [3]. This information suggests that he was more interested in land acquisition than farming, a decision that had profound consequences later in his life.

When Cunningham began accumulating land in Ellis County, most residents were farmers who cultivated crops that were grown for self sufficiency [4]. The area's rich agricultural potential was recognized, but the poor transportation network and dispersed settlement patterns hindered large-scale expansion of the agriculture-based economy. Cunningham and his wife, the former Tennessee Sims, a daughter of Ellis County pioneer John B. Sims, were married in September 16, 1859, and are listed in the 1860 census [5]. The Agricultural Productions Schedule of that year notes that Cunningham claimed only 70 acres of "improved" soil, despite owning 16 tracts of land. He owned livestock, but his totals were far less than those of his neighbors, such as J.M. Dunaway, Walter M. Turner and Ezekiel M. Brack. The Agricultural Schedule also reports that he harvested no crops, which contrasts to other area farmers who typically grew wheat, corn, rye and other crops. Cotton, which later played such an important role in the county's history, was not grown by Cunningham or any of his neighbors [6].

The exact location of his home has not been positively confirmed, but one of the houses in the 106.66-acre parcel in the Mallard Survey dates to his tenure as owner. Its form, detailing and physical features are indicative of mid-nineteenth century domestic architecture. Furthermore, the strategic placement of the house on a prominent hill overlooking the surrounding countryside suggests that the person responsible for the construction of the house understood the topography and selected a highly desirable site. This property, therefore, is believed to be the site of Cunningham's first residence in Ellis County.

When the Civil War erupted, Cunningham enlisted in the Confederate Army and rose to the rank of Lieutenant in Company C, Nineteenth Texas Calvary [7]. He returned to Ellis County after the war. Despite the many hardships its residents endured both during and immediately after the war, Ellis County soon rebounded and experienced renewed expansion. Much of this growth centered upon the growing of cotton. Area farmers found the soil to be conducive to its cultivation even though the poor transportation network and the lack of sufficient labor to pick the crop kept profits low. By 1870 Ellis County ranked 45th in the state in cotton production [8].

he construction of the Houston and Texas Central and other railroads spurred much growth in both urban and rural areas of the county during the 1870s. The railroads enabled area farmers to ship their cotton to markets more efficiently, thereby increasing their profits. The mass migration of new settlers into Ellis County also boosted the local economy, as well as the expanding cotton trade. Between 1870 and 1880, the population of Ellis County more than doubled, and most of these residents became farmers [9]. Precious little unclaimed land was available at the time because early pioneers, such as Cunningham, controlled most of the real estate in the county. Eager for means of employment, these new residents often leased farmlands from land owners in exchange for a percentage of harvested crops, usually one-third of the grains and one-quarter of the cotton [10]. The widespread practice of the tenant-farm system came to dominate the local cotton market. By 1880 Ellis County was the 7th largest cotton producer in Texas; a decade later, it led the state [11].

Because of his vast landholdings, George H. Cunningham benefitted from the rise of cotton and the tenant-farm system. By 1892 Cunningham owned approximately 3,000 acres and had tenants working on his 1,300-acre farm [12]. He reportedly built a large two-story house on a field near the J.M. Dunaway Farmstead and leased his old residence to tenant farmers [13]. However, by 1910 he lived in the 500 block of W. Main Street in Waxahachie [14]. The census listed his occupation as "own income" which implies that he lived off the profits he garnered from his investments. With Ellis County's still expanding cotton market and with his active participation in the tenant-farm system, Cunningham accumulated a substantial fortune.

When he died in 1915, Cunningham's net worth was estimated at \$259,220 [15]. He bequeathed his other tracts of land to his other surviving heirs, but the Estate of B.C. Cunningham acquired the rights to the land in the Mallard and adjoining surveys [16]. B.C. Cunningham is presumed to be Brazilian, the youngest son of

George and Tennessee Cunningham.

For the next 18 years, the Estate of B.C. Cunningham remained owner of the property, according to Ellis County tax records [17]. During this span, Ellis County continued to produce large quantities of cotton, most of it from tenant farms such as the one that operated at the old George H. Cunningham Farmstead. Cunningham's granddaughter, Leta Mae, assumed control of the property in 1933, as the local cotton market began to wane [18]. Poor agricultural practices, over reliance on a single crop and the nationwide economic depression of the 1930s took their toll on Ellis County cotton growers. Many of the tenants who worked the land for decades began to abandon farming and relocate to urban areas; as a consequence, farm sizes increased due to the consolidation of small tenant farms [19]. Those who continued to farm returned to the type of diversity that the early pioneers practiced. Cotton remained a popular agricultural commodity, but its importance and profitability never again reached the heights it attained during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A series of tenants occupied the Old G.H. Cunningham Farmstead while Leta Mae Hight and her husband G. Howell Hight were owners. None stayed more than a few years [20]. In 1967 the Hights, who lived in Bexar County, Texas at the time, conveyed the property to their children, Roger and Roxanna Hight. The last owners, Buena Vista Joint Venture, acquired the farmstead in 1986 and leased it until 1992 [21].

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL STATEMENT:

A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural Character:** The farmstead is in the vicinity of Waxahachie, in the historic but no longer extant community of Boz is one of the most intact farmsteads in the area. It features buildings which were occupied from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. The site includes a one-story, double-pile, double-pen or Cumberland house, with one-story, gable end, ell and porch additions. (See photographic documentation HABS No. TX-3378-1 through HABS No. TX-3378-G-1 and HABS drawings, Sheets 1 through 3. Rooms numbers on drawings are indicated by numbers in parentheses). The house survives with a one-story pyramidal tenant house, a two-story barn, a one-story garage, a pole

barn, a storm cellar, a cistern and a well house.

2. **Condition of the Fabric:** The exterior chimney of the main house has been partially dismantled and the roof and walls are in fair to poor condition. The outbuildings are in fair to poor condition.

B. Site:

1. **General Setting:** The house faces southeast and is located on a promontory, overlooking sloping pastures, and is 230.0' southeast of the intersection of Curry and Vincent Roads. The house is approached from the road by an earthen drive.
2. **Buildings:** The site includes a one-story garage, HABS No. TX-3378-B; a pole barn, HABS No. TX-3378-C; a two-story barn, HABS No. TX-3378-D; a one-story pyramidal tenant house, HABS No. TX-3378-E; a cistern and a well house, HABS No. TX-3378-F; and a storm cellar, HABS No. TX-3378-G.
3. **Landscaping, Enclosures:** The site is sparsely landscaped with remnants of plant materials which were introduced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A 48" caliper pecan dominates the center of the site with China Berry, English Privet and Mulberry planted as ornamentals. Mesquite and Hackberry comprise the native tree specimens that are present. Bois d'arc has been used as a hedgerow specimen at the far southwest edge of the site. Perennials such as Louisiana Iris and Day Lilies have been planted in small beds about the main house. Most of the vegetation has been removed.

PART III: ENDNOTES

1. **A Memorial and Biographical History of Ellis County, Texas** (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1892) 335-336; reprint ed., Ellis County Historical Museum and Art Gallery, Inc., Fort Worth: Historical Publishers, 1972.
2. Ellis County, Texas, Deed Record B:358.
3. Texas, State Comptrollers Office, Ad Valorem Tax Rolls for Ellis County.
4. Killis P. Almond, Jr., and Randall W. Moir, "Historic

2. Ellis County, Texas, Deed Record B:358.
3. Texas, State Comptrollers Office, Ad Valorem Tax Rolls for Ellis County.
4. Killis P. Almond, Jr., and Randall W. Moir, "Historic Structures Management Plan, submitted to TNRLC on behalf of the U.S. Department of Energy in Support of the Superconducting Super Collider," 1992.
5. Ellis County Genealogical Society, Searchers and Researchers, Volume XV, (Waxahachie, Texas: Ellis County General Society, 1992 37; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules, County Texas," 1860.
6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Products of Agriculture," 1860.
7. A Memorial and Biographical History, 335-336.
8. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census- Volume III: The Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States, by Francis A. Walker, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872).
9. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas," 1880; Almond and Moir, "Historic Structures Management Plan."
10. Stanley Murdock, and Yula Glenn Murdock, interview by Terri Myers, Written notes, Waxahachie, Texas, 12 June 1992.
11. U.S. Department of the Interior, Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883).
12. A Memorial and Biographical History, 335-336.
13. Stanley Murdock and Yula Glenn Murdock.
14. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas," 1910.
15. Texas, State Comptrollers Office, Ad Valorem Tax Rolls for Ellis County.
16. Ellis County, Texas, Tax Abstracts of Lands.

17. Ibid.
18. Almond and Moir, "Historic Structures Management Plan."
19. Ibid.
20. Stanley Murdock and Yula Glenn Murdock.
21. Ellis County, Texas, Deed Record 515:165; Ibid, 753:223.

PART IV: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings: No original plans or drawings are known to exist.

B. Early Views: No early photographs have been located.

C. Interviews:

McGregor, Frances Dunaway. Interviews by Terri Myers. Written notes. Waxahachie, Texas. 20 May 1992 and 12 June 1992.

Murdock, Stanley, and Murdock, Yula Glenn. Interview by Terri Myers. Written notes. Waxahachie, Texas. 12 June 1992.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources

Ellis County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk. Deed Records.

Ellis County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk. Probate Records.

Ellis County, Texas. Office of the County Tax Assessor/Collector. Tax Abstracts of Lands.

Texas. State Comptrollers Office. Ad Valorem Tax Rolls for Ellis County. On file at the Genealogical Collection at the Texas State Library.

U.S. Department of the Interior. Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Eighth Census, by Joseph C. Kennedy. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864.

U.S. Department of the Interior. Report on the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895.

U.S. Department of the Interior. Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. Ninth Census- Volume III: The Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States, by Francis A. Walker. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas." 1860.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas." 1870.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas." 1880.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas." 1900.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Population Schedule: Ellis County, Texas." 1910.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Products of Agriculture." 1860.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Products of Agriculture." 1880.

2. Secondary and published sources

Almond, Killis P., Jr., and Moir Randall W. "Historic Structures Management Plan, submitted to TNRLC on behalf of the U.S. Department of Energy in Support of the Superconducting Super Collider." 1992.

Ellis County Genealogical Society Record, Volume III.
Waxahachie, Texas: Ellis County Genealogical Society.

Hardy, Daniel, and Moore, David. "Historic Resources Survey of Ellis County: An Inventory for the U.S. Department of Energy." 1990.

Hawkins, Edna Davis, Ruth Stone, Ida M. Brookshire and Lillie Tolleson. History of Ellis County Texas. Waco: Texian Press, 1972.

A Memorial and Biographical History of Ellis County, Texas. Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1892; reprint ed., Ellis County Historical Museum and Art Gallery, Inc., Fort Worth: Historical Publishers, 1972.

PART V. PROJECT INFORMATION

This Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) recording project was undertaken by the Texas National Research Laboratory Commission (TNRLC) in conjunction with the Superconducting Super Collider Project in Ellis County. The project was conducted in accordance with TNRLC's Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Department of Energy, The Texas Historical Commission and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The MOA stipulates that a record be created of buildings to be demolished in the project area. The field work and measured drawings were prepared by ArchiTexas of Dallas. The recording team consisted of Bruce Fowler, Gary Garmon, Gilbert Hickox, Larry Irsik, Craig King, Richard Martratt, Craig Melde, Jeanie O'Brien, Ernesto Robles, Edward Sergeant, Gary Skotnicki, Stan Solamillo, and Diane Van Buren. Historical Research was conducted under the supervision of David Moore of Hardy, Heck, Moore of Austin. Architectural analysis and descriptions were prepared by Stan Solamillo of Dallas. Archival photography was by Brendan Dunnigan and Doug Hankins of Arlington.