

Defaults, Delays and Vibrations on the Overland Mail Route

July 1, 1861 to May 10, 1869

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The Precursor Transcontinental Mail Routes

In the period before July 1, 1861 when the daily mail route commenced, there were several postal routes utilized to handle mail between points east of the Mississippi River, and the vast areas of the West. The clamor for ever-faster postal communication loudened dramatically with the mineral discoveries in California in 1848 that precipitated massive migration.

The first government contract mail service between New York to San Francisco was inaugurated in 1848. This service utilized the route from New York City by steamer to Chagres (Aspinwall), by land across the Isthmus of Panama to Panama City, and thence by steamer to San Francisco.

This route remained the gold-standard service against which all overland routes were judged. The schedule for this service varied over the next twenty years but for much of the time it was a tri-monthly mail from New York and a bi-monthly mail from San Francisco. An additional twice monthly postal route, via Tehuantepec Peninsula, connecting New Orleans with San Francisco operated briefly between October 1858 and October 1859.

Although multiple routes for mail carriage became available in the period after 1850, the “Via Panama” service remained the default until December 15, 1859, when the Southern, or “Butterfield,” overland route became the default for letter mail from San Francisco to New York. Prior to that date a sender was required to endorse the cover to be sent overland for it to be sent on the overland route. An example, with the stage coach illustration and slogan serving as an endorsement, is shown in Figure 2.

Daily mail service on the Overland Mail Route, connecting St. Joseph, Missouri or Atchison, Kansas and points east with Placerville, California and points west commenced operations on July 1, 1861 pursuant to a March 12, 1861 Post Office Order. This contract between the Post Office Department and the Overland Mail Company consolidated the two previous contracts for mail service on the Central Route, route numbers 12.578 and 12.801, into the single route number 10.773 and specified that mail was to depart each of the terminal points six days a week with a through schedule of 20 days for eight months of the year and 23 days in the four winter months. Contract was to expire on July 1, 1864. In addition to the daily mail, the contractors were to provide expedited service by Pony Express until the completion of the overland telegraph.

In 1864 the route was again divided into two contracts: one for a Western Division to operate between Salt Lake City and Folsom, California and one for an Eastern Division to operate between Atchison and Salt Lake City. The contract specifications changed frequently between that date and the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869. As sections of the rails were completed from east and west directions, those section were utilized for mail carriage.

A map of the Overland Mail Route as configured in 1861 is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Overland Mail Route in July 1861.

The Distributing Post Office System

The Distributing Post System in 1861 was a relic from earlier periods when there were fewer post roads. Under this system, mail posted at an office that was not a distributing post office (DPO) was first assorted into two categories: “direct mail” and mail to go first to a DPO. The direct mail category included: mail addressed within state or territory of origin, mail to offices in another state which should not pass through a DPO on the best route to destination, and letters with “mail direct” endorsement. Mail in this category was sent directly to the destination office with a waybill. Letters in the mail to a DPO category was postbilled and directed to the DPO through which the letter would first pass on the proper route to place of destination. If, however, a letter was mailed at a DPO, it was sent direct, or postbilled to the last DPO through which the letter should pass on route to office of delivery. This system resulted in delayed transit, and frequent mistakes, at the large DPOs which was not rectified until the system was gradually abandoned after 1864.

Defaults

Each distributing post office received instructions as to how mail to various destinations was to be routed. These instructions included a “default” route that should be used unless the sender specifically endorsed the cover to be sent direct, or to be sent by a specified route other than the default. Changes in the default route were frequently mandated by the Post Office Department for various reasons such as temporary route closures, faster service available on an alternate route, and similar circumstances. Unfortunately, the evidence of such default route changes is not well documented in most instances.

An examination of these default route changes on mail sent between the San Francisco and New York City distributing post offices is better documented because of the frequent newspaper announcements which were published locally.

Although this article will focus primarily on changes in the default routes between these two cities in the period after July 1, 1861, a brief summary of prior route default changes is in order.

The first government contract mail service between New York to San Francisco was inaugurated in 1848. This mail service utilized the route via the Isthmus of Panama with steamers operating on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Although multiple routes for mail carriage became available in the period after 1850, the “Via Panama” service remained the default until December 17, 1859, when the Southern, or “Butterfield,” overland route became the default for letter mail from San Francisco to New York (The notice was received in California on January 20 and implemented on January 23, 1860). Prior to that date a sender was required to endorse the cover

to be sent overland for it to be sent on the overland route. An example, with the stage coach illustration and slogan serving as an endorsement, is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. An “endorsed” cover authorizing overland rather than the “Via Panama” default in August 1859.

After the December 17, 1859 date, a sender was required to endorse a cover to New York with “Via Panama” if that is the way he wished the letter sent. If not endorsed, it was sent by the overland route.

Although the Southern route was transferred in March 1861 to the Central Overland Route, it remained the default for letter mail into the period of the Overland Mail Company contract for daily mail.

The Central Overland Route between San Francisco and New York City served as the default route until August 27, 1862 when the following dispatch (*New York Times*, August 28, 1862) from the Post Office Department was sent:

Washington, Wednesday, Aug. 27

A dispatch received at the Post-office Department, dated Salt Lake yesterday, says: “A general war with all the Indian tribes east of the Missouri River is close at hand.

An interruption of the overland mail is daily expected. Nothing but prompt and decisive action on the part of the Government will prevent it.

*The lines should be protected by soldiers at intervals of a hundred miles.
Gen. Paige’s force is too small, and Col. Conner’s force is 400 miles West, traveling slowly.”*

Owing to the information contained in the above dispatch, the Post-office Department has instructed Postmasters to send the California mails by way of New-York until further directed.

This information was summarized in the September 1862 issue of *United States Mail And Post-Office Assistant* in an article entitled “The New Overland Route” which mentioned that the portion of the overland route between Julesburgh and Fort Bridger had been changed to via the Cherokee trail and Bridger’s pass from the previous route via Fort Laramie. A late addition the article mentions:

LATER- Since the above was in type, instructions have been received from the Department ordering all California mails to be sent by steamers via the Isthmus, until otherwise ordered. This is owing to the increasing Indian troubles upon a portion of the regular overland route. The steamers leave New York on the 1st, 11th, and 21st of each month.

This change of default was not long-lived. A letter of Benjamin Halliday, proprietor of the overland Stage Company, dated Atchison, Kansas on September 3, 1862, was printed in a *New York Times* article of September 4 and announced that an eastbound mail from Carson Valley, Nevada Territory had arrived that day and the time included a 13 hour detention east of Salt Lake.

An article in the September 17, 1862 issue of *The New York Times* reported:

THE CALIFORNIA MAIL SERVICE – Correspondents writing to the Pacific Coast should not overlook the announcement that letter mail service via the overland route is resumed. The fear of interruption to this service by Indian depredations, appears to have been a false alarm, for the overland coaches are arriving daily at the Missouri River, bringing passengers and local mails in only seventeen days from Placerville, California, or about twenty-one or twenty-two days between San Francisco and New York. Of late the overland mail regularly beats the steamers of corresponding dates. Thus, on Monday last, we received San Francisco dates to the 23rd ult. overland, while the Champion, which arrived yesterday, brought us only to the 21st. Of course the daily mail, with this quick time, greatly increases the facilities for correspondence.

It appears likely from this article the difficulties on the overland route were resolved before the San Francisco post office implemented the order to change the default to the via Panama route.

This temporary change of the mail-handling default at New York City occurred the month following an alteration in the Central Overland Route. In July 1862, Ben Halladay the proprietor of the Overland Mail Company moved the route south from Ft. Laramie and the South Pass to the Cheyenne Pass. Fort Halleck was also established that same month specifically to protect the new overland trail from Indian depredations. Still, the real object in this route re-alignment was to be able to include Denver City on the path. That was accomplished in short order and on September 16, 1862 through mail, via Denver City, began operating. A map of this new route is shown in Figure 3.

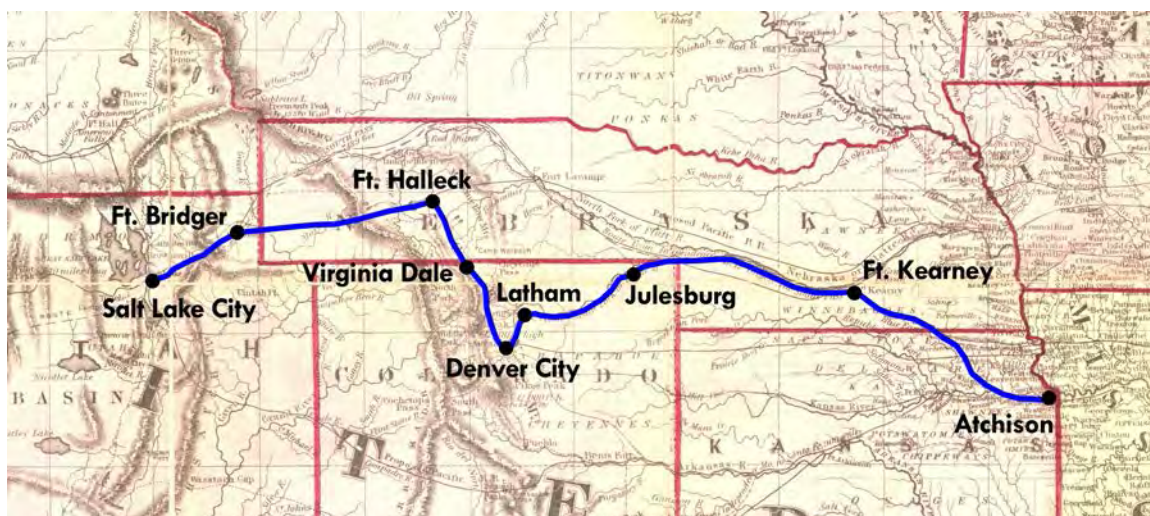


Figure 3. Map of Central Overland Route after September 1862 change.

On September 28, 1862 the first direct mail route connecting Santa Fe and Denver was put into operation. This important feeder route extended the connections to the Southwest. Although an old military route had been

used, mail had been carried on the old Santa Fe Trail to Kansas previously. A map of these routes is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Map of military route (green) and mail route (blue) between Santa Fe and Denver City.

Vibrating Mails

The following summer delays on the main overland route were insignificant. There was a minor delay in July 1863 because of Indian attacks west of Salt Lake City. In such cases, mail was held at the stations affected and transmitted when a military escort could be gathered. However, mail disruptions on the overland route were much more severe in 1864. Following Indian raids that began in mid-July, on August 11, 1864 the Overland Stage Line agent, William Gillespie, filed a post office report of a mail failure on the overland route (Figure 5). In this he advises that the westbound mail stage that left Atchison on August 10th was turned back west of Fort Kearney because:

“Indians killing families on Little Blue (a river). Burning Stations and running off stock. That the coach made every effort to get through. Was attacked – two passengers seriously wounded and coach compelled to return to Fort Kearney.”

Route No. 10775 From St. Joseph To Haverhill

I Hereby Certify, That the delay of the Mail and failure to arrive in schedule time at Haverhill Cal. Leaving Atchison on the 10th Aug. 1864 was caused by Indians killing families on Little Blue Burning Stations and running off stock. That the coach made every effort to get through. Was attacked - two passengers seriously wounded and coach compelled to return to Fort Kearney

That there was no want of stock, and that every effort was made to perform the trip in due time.

Mr. Gillespie of the Overland Stage and Express Company, has received the following dispatch about yesterday:

Fort Kearney, Aug. 3. The Indians killed two men and a boy and a horse on the morning.

Mr. Geo. W. Howe has also advised us a dispatch just received from Fort Laramie, dated last Saturday, as follows:

Fort Laramie, August 3. The Indians attacked a train which was about there, killed seven men, women and a boy. News received.

DAN McKEITH.

From these dispatches it will be seen that the Indians, confederated by agencies, are committing their cruelties in the immediate neighborhood of the principal military posts in the route. Howe's train was attacked within seven miles of Fort Laramie. From which, where the train was burnt yesterday.

STONED.

W. A. Gillespie, Agt. O. S. Line.

Today, at 101 thirty-five miles above Fort Kearney. Black's Station, where the men were killed, is but ten miles this side of Fort Kearney.

Geo. Curtis received the following telegram yesterday:

St. Joseph, Aug. 3rd, 1864.

Major S. S. Curtis:

The Indians are committing very heavy loss of stock and men. I have just received a report that a train was burned at some point on the morning of the 2nd inst. I have also at least the report of a train being killed on the morning of the 2nd inst. I am unable to give you more definite information at this time, but I will keep you posted as soon as I can.

S. S. CURTIS.

Major General.

St. Joseph, August 3rd, 1864.

Major S. S. Curtis:

I have just received a report that a train was burned at some point on the morning of the 2nd inst. I have also at least the report of a train being killed on the morning of the 2nd inst. I am unable to give you more definite information at this time, but I will keep you posted as soon as I can.

S. S. CURTIS.

Major General.

St. Joseph, August 3rd, 1864.

Major S. S. Curtis:

I have just received a report that a train was burned at some point on the morning of the 2nd inst. I have also at least the report of a train being killed on the morning of the 2nd inst. I am unable to give you more definite information at this time, but I will keep you posted as soon as I can.

S. S. CURTIS.

Major General.

Figure 5. Notice of August 1, 1864 mail failure on Overland Mail Route.

Attached to the report are several newspaper notices, with dates from August 6 to August 9, which support his claim. The situation continued as evidenced by a second report of mail failure filed at Atchison on August 25, 1865 (Figure 6). This report by Gillespie is less expansive and states: "Indian troubles on road. Road deserted. Impossible to stock road. No trains moving." I would speculate that the agent was tiring of writing similar reports for each daily mail that was scheduled and failed. In addition, this notice is evidence that westbound mail was still being received at Atchison as late as August 25th instead of being re-routed at New York by a change of the default such as had been rapidly implemented in August 1862.

Route No. 10773 From St. Joseph To Placerville
I Hereby Certify, THAT the delay of the MAILS and failure to arrive in schedule time at
Placerville Cal. Coach leaving Atchison on the
Aug. 25th /64 was caused by
Indian troubles on road.
Road deserted. Impossible to stock
road. No trains moving.
That there was no want of stock, and that every effort was made to perform the trip in due time.
SIGNED, W. A. Gillespie Agt.
O. S. Line

Figure 6. Notice of August 25, 1864 mail failure on Overland Mail Route.

A letter from a correspondent that appeared in the *New York Times* of September 30, 1864 indicates that the mail between Salt Lake City and Fort Kearney was to have resumed on September 20 or the day following:

Fort Kearney, N.T. Tuesday, Sept. 20, 1864

Everything commences to wear a quite look again out here. The Indian scare on the Overland route is about over. The stages commence running again today or to-morrow on the Overland road. Gen. R. B. Mitchell arrived at Buttonwood, 95 miles west of this, on Friday last, and will probably start again on a scout in two or three days. He went to Salmon Fork of the Republican, but was unable to find any Indians.

I notice that your correspondence out West here, exaggerate matters with reference to this route. The Indians, in small parties, (about seventy-five,) started out on the Overland mail route, and did succeed in massacring several trains who were wholly unarmed. They never did attack any fort, nor are they likely to do so on the Overland route east of Laramie.

Unlike the situation in 1862 when an order to change the default mail handling was issued by the Post Office Department, the disruptions of 1864 resulted in mail “vibrating” between the available routes. An amusing account of the phenomena appeared in a *New York Times* article on October 2, 1864 and a long but rewarding quote is below:

*California Gossip
From Our Own Correspondent
San Francisco, Monday, Aug 22*

*If people don't receive their letter from this side latterly, let them lay it to the proper cause, and the irregularities of the newly self-appointed Postmasters on the overland route. At last accounts the natives of the not to the "manor born" had assumed the reins of the overland coaches and had intimated that they would run the route themselves. They scalped about forty drivers and station-men by way of showing that they were not joking, and those employees who got away had hair-breadth escapes from losing their hair the same way. It is rumored that there has been a sudden rise in Indian stock, and a corresponding loss of stock of the Stage Company. If all of these stories are true, the "bloods" of the tribes thereabouts are driving four-in-hand turnouts at Ben Holladay's expense. Then again, there are people who are so wicked as to say that all this fuss is got up by the Stage Company themselves to induce Congress to "come down" with the greenbacks. I don't think Ben Holladay would be induced to scalp a couple of dozen employees before breakfast just to show the Postmaster-General the beauties of the overland stage business. Ben talks scalps sometimes, but I really don't believe he did it. If the employees all wore wigs he might make a show of being a "bloody Ingen," and put them through a course of horrors for effect. Still, I don't think Benjamin would do a little trick of that kind. We learn here that all the overland mails for the first ten or fifteen days in August were stopped somewhere the other side (east) of Salt lake, by reason of "Indian hostilities." Subsequently ordered back here to go by steamer, and after starting this way, were stopped again, and turned around, and are supposed at this present moment to be **vibrating** (emphasis added) along the road, between two "postal orders" – one to go this way and the other to go that way – and between the two, your chances of getting your letters are first-rate, only it is not advisable to be impatient. You must wait until the pendulum movement is arrested.*

Some specifics regarding this vibrating mail phenomenon of 1864: On September 2, 1864 orders were received at Denver City that all eastbound mails were to be sent via San Francisco and Panama to New York. Frank Root, who was the mail agent at Latham, Colorado, reported that one hundred and nine sacks of eastbound mail, weighing between two and three tons had accumulated at his office. Westbound mails accumulating at the Atchison distributing post office were finally returned to New York for carriage, via Panama, to California. On October 1, 1864 some 70,000 eastbound letters and 180 sacks of newspapers were received back at San Francisco to be sent onward by steamer. Some mail undoubtedly was received back at New York and San Francisco after the route was re-opened in late September and was transmitted back on the overland route. An example of such mail has not been identified by the author but undoubtedly exists.