

STEAMBOAT MAIL ON THE COLORADO RIVER

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An article in the previous *Chronicle*¹ discussed the Jackass Mail Route and mentioned several covers addressed to Lieut. Beekman DuBarry while he was stationed at Fort Yuma, California. Those covers were all carried by government mail, via San Francisco and San Diego, and onward by mule across the Colorado Desert to Fort Yuma, California. One additional cover from the correspondence, shown in Figure 1, was not included because it was carried by a military supply steamboat on the Colorado River rather than on the Jackass Mail Route.



Figure 1. Pair of imperforate 3¢ 1851 stamps on an 1854 cover from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to San Francisco, forwarded to Fort Yuma, California.

This cover, posted from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is addressed to Lieutenant Beekman DuBarry, in care of “Major O. Cross Jr., Qr Master, U.S.A.” at San Francisco, California. It was franked with a pair of three-cent 1851 issue stamps to prepay the 6¢ over-3,000-mile postal rate that was in effect prior to April 1, 1855. It is known from other DuBarry correspondence that he was a member of the 3rd Regiment of U.S. Artillery. According to an online military history of that unit,² parts of his unit began arriving in California in April and May of 1854. Although the regimental headquarters was established at Benecia, various elements were dispersed throughout California. Another source³ includes a transcript of the “Post Return of Fort Yuma, California for July 1854” that specifically lists “Beekam

¹ Richard Frajola and Floyd Risvold, “Deconstructing the Jackass Mail Route,” *Chronicle* 220, pp. 275-282.

² http://www.usregulars.com:80/usartillery/3us_art.html (last viewed 17 November 2008).

³ http://home.att.net/~dmercado/fort_yuma.htm (last viewed 17 November 2008).

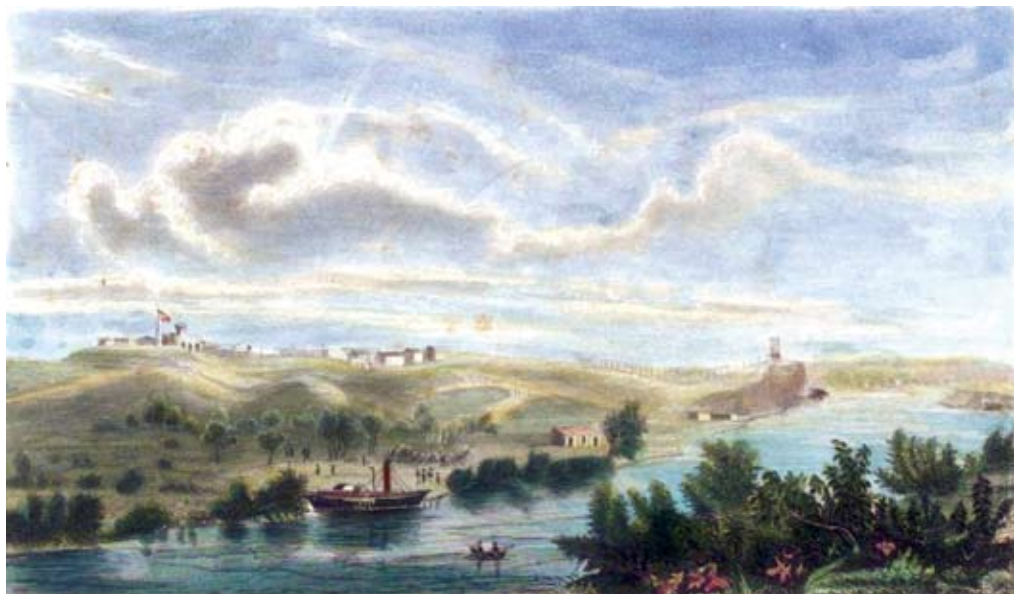


Figure 2. Panoramic view, circa 1860, showing Fort Yuma situated on the mesa on the west side of the Colorado River. A steamboat is shown at the landing below the fort.

[sic] DuBarry, 1st Lieut., 3rd Arty., Company ‘I’” as being present at that date. Therefore, it can be firmly established that this cover was posted on August 2, 1854.

From Bethlehem the cover was transmitted to New York City and onward using the main steamship route, via the Isthmus of Panama, to San Francisco, California. The pencil “771” on the cover indicates that it was placed in Quartermaster Cross’ box for delivery in San Francisco. Cross lined-out a portion of the address and re-directed the cover to “Fort Yuma, Cal.” in manuscript using the red ink typical of the military at this time. It should be noted that the cover was not re-mailed through the post office. It does not bear a San Francisco postmark. Instead, it was transmitted using the military supply route between San Francisco and Fort Yuma.

Military Supply Routes to Fort Yuma

Fort Yuma was located in California on the west bank of the Colorado River just below its confluence with the Gila River. Figure 2 shows a panoramic view, circa 1860, showing Fort Yuma situated on the mesa on the west side of the River. A steamboat is moored at the landing below the fort.

Fort Yuma had been established as a camp in 1850 and was abandoned in December 1851 largely because of supply difficulties. It was reoccupied on February 29, 1852 and designated as Fort Yuma in that year. Supply lines were soon improved.

The military supply route from San Francisco to Fort Yuma is clearly outlined in a *New York Times* article written by Edward E. Dunbar, a correspondent in the West, which was published on February 10, 1859. In reference to the original overland supply route it mentions: “Originally, Government supplies were dispatched to Fort Yuma, via San Diego, at a cost of \$700 per ton.” However, the overland supply route had been abandoned in favor of a water route. The same article continues:

“In view of this fact, several enterprising parties in San Francisco—Captain Wilcox, Johnson and others—conceived the project, in 1854 (sic), of affording Government the opportunity of forwarding supplies from San Francisco to Fort Yuma, via the Gulf of Califor-

nia and river Colorado, thus avoiding all land transportation. To this end they built a small steamer adapted to the peculiar and difficult navigation of the Colorado. Success attended the enterprise. Government dispatched supplies from San Francisco, by transports, to the mouth of the Colorado, at a cost of about \$25 per ton, from thence by the aforesaid steamer up the Colorado to Fort Yuma, a distance of 160 miles, at \$75 per ton.”

The Colorado Steam Navigation Company actually began operations in 1852 when Captain Alfred H. Wilcox and others began to supply Fort Yuma utilizing a steamboat to ascend the Colorado River from the mouth of the Gulf of California to the fort.

Steamboats on the Colorado River

Even though the newspaper report is inaccurate regarding the date the supply route commenced operations, the overall scheme outlined is correct. One historical source⁴ includes great detail on the early steamboat operations on the Colorado River. Pertinent points are summarized in following paragraph.

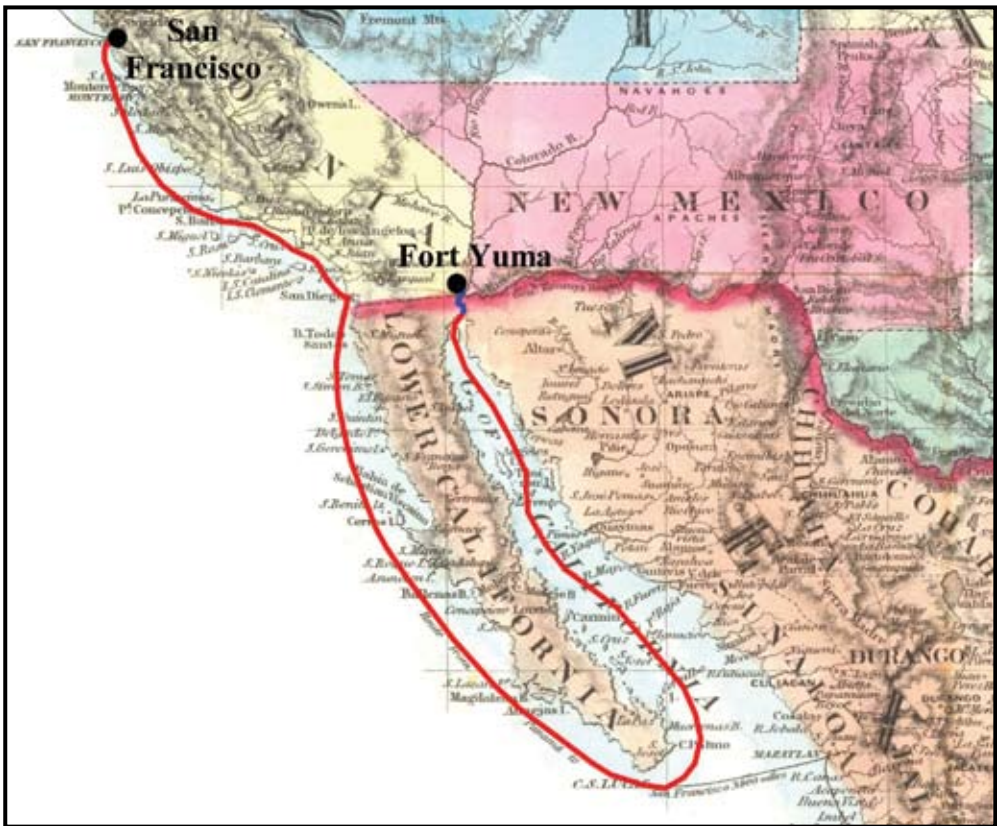


Figure 3. Map of the 1854 military supply route from San Francisco, around Lower California and by the Colorado River (shown in blue) to Fort Yuma.

In 1852 a small steamboat was constructed at San Francisco which was disassembled and shipped aboard the U.S. schooner *Capacity* to the mouth of the Colorado River where it was reassembled in June. The *Uncle Sam* then made the first trip by steamboat up the Colorado River to Fort Yuma. That steamboat was soon replaced by the larger *General Jessup*, a

⁴Lingenfelter, R.E., *Steamboats on the Colorado River, 1852-1916*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1978.

104-foot-long side-wheeler, which made her maiden supply voyage to Fort Yuma in February 1854, carrying 37 tons of cargo. During the remainder of 1854 the *General Jessup* was the only steamboat that operated on the Colorado River. Later, additional steamboats were added for the route which continued to be utilized by the military for several more years.

The cover illustrated in Figure 1 was carried from San Francisco to Fort Yuma using the military supply route operated by the Colorado Steam Navigation Company in late 1854. The route was south from San Francisco, by steamer around the Lower California peninsula, to the mouth of the Colorado River. This is shown on the map in Figure 3. From the mouth of the Colorado, the cover was carried 150 miles up the river on the steamboat *General Jessup* for delivery to Fort Yuma. This leg of the route is shown on their map in blue.

As a final note, it should be mentioned that mail carried on military supply routes, rather than in government mails, can rarely be as well documented as this example. Recognition of such alternate modes of mail carriage can result in exciting discoveries. ■