

DECONSTRUCTING THE JACKASS MAIL ROUTE

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Officially known as route number 8,076, or the San Antonio to San Diego route, but more widely known to collectors as the “Jackass Mail” route, the first single-contract overland mail route to California has received little notice in the pages of the *Chronicle*. This oversight can be partially attributed to the paucity of surviving covers. Also, the pioneering accomplishment of James E. Birch, in establishing the mail route in 1857, was overshadowed by the Butterfield line. Butterfield usurped a portion of Birch’s line and rapidly became the dominant overland mail carrier to California before the Civil War. This article will rectify at least some of the neglect that the “Jackass Mail” route has suffered.

From 1850 the Post Office Department issued a series of contracts for carrying mail over portions of the California Trail, but no through service was provided. Two major overland postal routes were in operation: one connected Missouri and Salt Lake City and another connected Salt Lake City and California. Most trans-continental mail used steamers via the Isthmus of Panama.

In response to clamoring by residents of California for improved mail service, Congress enacted a postal bill to establish a through-mail route between San Antonio, Texas, and San Diego, California, on August 18, 1856. Further, the Act of December 19, 1856 authorized construction of a military road from El Paso to Fort Yuma and the military posts needed to protect the route. With connections onward from both termini to the major points in both California and the East, it was hoped this route would be faster and less costly.



Figure 1. Map showing the entire San Diego and San Antonio (Jackass Mail) route, with various segments coded in color (see text).

The military road was soon completed and the Post Office awarded a mail contract to Birch on June 22, 1857, effective for four years, from July 1, 1857. The contract for route 8,076 called for two trips per month between San Antonio and San Diego at \$149,800 per annum. The 1,476 mile route, shown in Figure 1, was to be traversed in 30 days.

State 1: The Original Route (7/1/1857—10/27/1858)

The route seems conceptually sound. Both termini had relatively frequent communication with points beyond. From the eastern terminus at San Antonio, there was a daily stagecoach mail to Indianola which connected with five-times-a-week steamers to New Orleans. From the western terminus at San Diego, the California Steam Navigation Company steamers operated to San Francisco, albeit only semi-monthly. There was a pre-existing postal route in operation that connected San Antonio and El Paso. This was incorporated into the new through route and needed only minor upgrades.

The new portion of the route that connected El Paso and San Diego required more substantial upgrades. The military road bill noted above pertained only to the portion between Fort Yuma and El Paso. Mail transportation across the Colorado Desert lying between Fort Yuma and San Diego was certainly the biggest challenge facing the new contractor. This was the section where mules were used to carry the mail, resulting in the “Jackass Mail” moniker.

For operational purposes, the route between El Paso and San Diego was divided into sections. The first, between El Paso and San Antonio, was operated as a round-trip unit. The remaining section utilized mail carriers from each end, El Paso and San Diego, who met in the middle at Maricopa Wells and returned. The mail schedule called for simultaneous departures from San Diego and El Paso on the 9th and 24th of each month. Eastbound and westbound carriers were to meet at Maricopa Wells on the 16th, where the mails were exchanged.

The first westbound mail under the Birch contract departed San Antonio on July 9, 1857. George H. Giddings, the agent for Birch and prior mail contractor for the route connecting San Antonio and El Paso, placed James E. Mason in charge. A second westbound mail departed on July 24 under Captain Skillman’s supervision. Mason was delayed in Texas by Indian attacks and was able to proceed only after being joined by Skillman near El Paso. As a result, the first and second mails arrived at San Diego together on August 31, 1857. The first eastbound trip departed San Diego on August 9, 1857.

James Birch left San Francisco for the East on August 20, 1857 before the completion of the inaugural trips. He was lost at sea on September 12 when the steamship *Central America* (the famous gold treasure ship salvaged in 1987) sank in the Gulf of Mexico. Isaiah Wood, previously his agent in California, and George Giddings continued the business. Effective January 1, 1858, the post office transferred the contract for route 8,076 to George Giddings at the same compensation. Birch’s estate sold the line to the firm of G.H. Giddings and R.E. Doyle in May 1858.

Giddings and Doyle improved the line and expanded their business to include passengers, thereby becoming the first transcontinental, overland passenger service. A newspaper advertisement, under a banner illustrating a four-horse stage coach, proclaims: “Overland to the Pacific, the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line” and further mentions (emphasis added):

This Line which has been in successful operation since July 1857 is ticketing passengers through to San Diego, and also all intermediate stations. Passenger and Express matter forwarded in NEW COACHES drawn by six mules over the entire length of our Line, excepting the Colorado Desert of one hundred miles, which we cross on mule back. Passengers guaranteed in their tickets to ride in coaches, excepting the 100 miles, above stated.

A following paragraph includes this ominous sentence: “An armed escort travels

through the Indian country with each mail train, for the protection of the mails and passengers.” The line was soon referred to by passengers and newspapers as the “Jackass Line” and our guess is that the appellation was not intended to be flattering.

Approximately forty trips were made over the entire route under the original contract. The Postmaster General reported postal receipts on the route of \$601 with a loss of \$195,399.

State 2 (10/27/1858—2/1/1860): The Loss of the El Paso–Fort Yuma Section

The first deconstruction of the line occurred on October 27, 1858 when the post office ordered Giddings to discontinue the section between El Paso and Fort Yuma (shown in blue on the map in Figure 1). The firm was also ordered to increase service on the remaining portions of the route to weekly trips. Further, the post office ordered a \$59,131 deduction from the annual compensation, reducing it to \$196,448 from January 1, 1859.

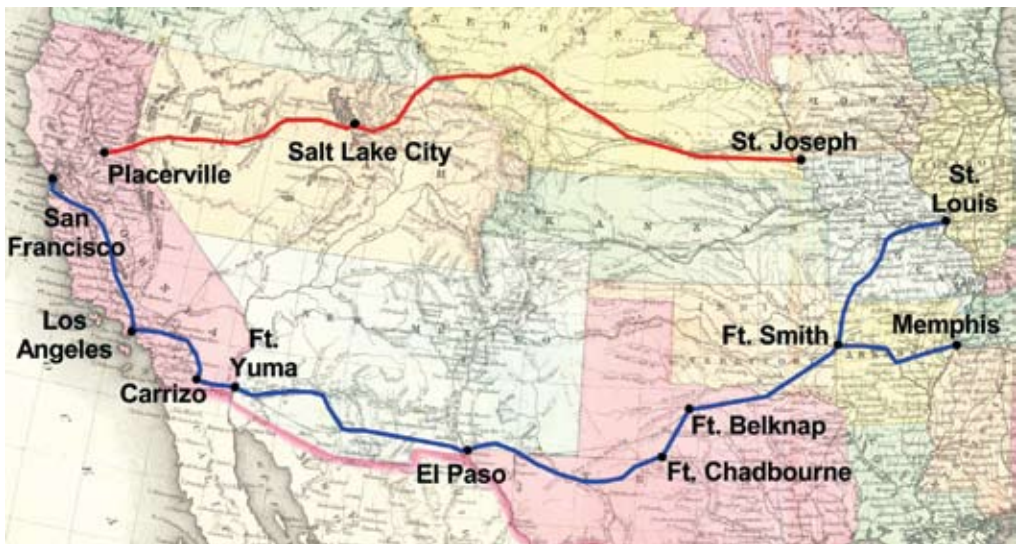


Figure 2. Map showing the Butterfield southern overland route (blue) and the central overland route (red).

This major alteration was the result of the letting of a contract for route 12,578 to handle transcontinental mail from St. Louis, Missouri, and Memphis, Tennessee converging at Fort Smith, Arkansas, and traveling onward to San Francisco twice weekly. The contract for this route, as shown in Figure 2, was effective from September 16, 1858 and became famous as the Butterfield, or Southern Overland route. Service was directed to be performed in four-horse stages or a “celerity wagon.”

The new Butterfield route, which actually joined the old San Diego to Fort Yuma section at Carrizo, California, was heavily promoted by congressmen from the South. It rapidly became the major overland mail-hauler before the start of the Civil War.

State 2a: Reduction of Service

The utility of the Jackass route to the postal service diminished significantly, if not almost entirely, after the heart of the route was lost to Butterfield. On April 14, 1859 the post office ordered a reduction in service on the route to semi-monthly trips, taking off 28 of the weekly trips per annum, at a deduction of \$76,448 per annum from June 7, 1859.

State 3 (2/1/1860—3/12/1860): Loss of the Fort Yuma–San Diego Section

On February 1, 1860 the route was further reduced when service between San Diego and Fort Yuma (shown in red on the map in Figure 1) was ordered to be discontinued by the post office, effective from April 1, 1860. The post office reduced the compensation due Gidding and Doyle by a further \$28,695 per annum. This left the line operating only the coach-route between El Paso and San Antonio, and eliminated the service by mule. By all meaningful definitions, the “Jackass Mail” route was terminated at this point.

State 4 (after 3-12-1860): Loss of the Comanche Springs–El Paso Section

Not yet through performing surgery on the route, on March 12, 1860 the post office ordered the line to discontinue service between Comanche Springs and El Paso, Texas (shown in black on the map in Figure 1) effective May 1, 1860, at a deduction of \$37,599 per annum. This order left the route a semi-monthly service from Comanche Springs to San Antonio (shown in green on the map in Figure 1) with payment of \$53,276 per annum from May 1, 1860 to expire on June 30, 1861. There is a memo on the March 22, 1860 Post Office Department Route Summary document presented in the Frajola-Kramer-Walske Pony Express book (page 147) that states that the Postmaster General reserves the right to curtail service if “if any other route should be put under Contract that shall cover this in whole or in part.”

With the Civil War looming, Butterfield service on the Southern route was suspended on March 12, 1861 and moved to the Central route (shown in blue on map in Figure 2). The San Diego and San Antonio mail line then merged their interests into the Overland Mail Company which began their daily mail service over the central route on July 1, 1861. All mail service provided by the United States in the state of Texas was suspended from May 27, 1861.

The Postal Artifacts

Covers carried on the Jackass mail route were to be endorsed “via San Diego and San Antonio” or similar. The authors record ten covers endorsed to be carried on the route. Additional covers carried within Texas, or between Texas and the East on the portion of the



Figure 3. Imprint envelope of the Alta California newspaper, endorsed “via San Diego and San Antonio,” posted November 21, 1859, and sent from San Francisco to New Orleans over the entire length of the “Jackass Mail” route. The 10¢ 1857 stamp is Type V.

route that utilized stage coaches, are known but are not considered to be “Jackass Mail” route uses. The few survivors that are properly endorsed emanate from just three correspondences.

Figure 3 shows what is certainly the most spectacular of the Jackass Mail covers, addressed to Edward C. Wharton at the office of the *Picayune* newspaper at New Orleans. It bears a full endorsement “Via San Diego & San Antonio.” This cover is an imprint envelope of the *Alta California* newspaper office, franked by a single ten-cent 1857 stamp, type V.

The franking represents an overpayment of the three-cent rate for carriage less than 3,000 miles (the total route was roughly 2,500 miles). The cover, sent during State 2 of the route, includes a most interesting original letter on matching imprint stationery. The letter, dated November 18, 1859, states:

Dear Sir, We wish you would upon receipt of this ascertain the time of departure of mail from your city via San Antonio and send us a short weekly letter, with the latest telegraphic news etc. by that route. The agents of the Company think they will be able to make time at least 3 days ahead of the St. Louis line. We will notify you of the success of the experiment.

Respt, Yours, F. MacCrellich & Co.

The cover is docketed as having been received on December 15th, a trip of fewer than 30 days even if counted from the date the letter was written on November 18th. It was evidently held at San Francisco and postmarked to correspond with the date of the steamer departure for San Diego on November 21.

This cover is the only example known to the authors that we are sure was carried over the entire route between San Diego and San Antonio.

There are two additional covers reported that were endorsed to be carried on the San Antonio and El Paso portion of the route. Both of these originated in Jackson, California and are addressed to Nueces Town, Texas, in the spring of 1860. This is a wonderful pair of covers as they were actually handled differently.

The earlier of the two, shown in Figure 4, is endorsed “Via San Antonio and El Paso” at the top and franked at double the three-cent rate for under 3,000 miles. It has a red Jack-



Figure 4. Cover endorsed “via San Antonio and El Paso,” sent February 5, 1860 from Jackson, California to Nueces Town, Texas. The two perforated 3¢ 1857 stamps pay double the three-cent rate for a distance under 3,000 miles.

son, California postmark dated February 5, 1860 and was carried late in the State 3 period of the route. Instead of going via San Diego, the cover was carried on the portion of the Butterfield overland route, via San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Fort Yuma to El Paso. There it was transferred to the still-surviving segment of the Giddings and Doyle route from El Paso to San Antonio and then onward to Nueces Town, Texas.



Figure 5. Cover endorsed “via El Paso and San Antonio,” sent April 4, 1860 from Jackson, California to Nueces Town, Texas, franked at the single rate to 3,000 miles with a strip of 1¢ perforated 1857 stamps. Instead of being put into the Butterfield overland mail like Figure 4, it was routed via the Panama steamer departing on April 5.



Figure 6. Cover to Fort Yuma endorsed “via San Diego,” franked with imperforate 1851 stamps and sent September (1857) from West Point, New York.

The second cover of the pair, shown in Figure 5, is endorsed “Via El Paso and San Antonio,” a different town order. It was franked at the single rate to 3,000 miles with a strip of the one-cent perforated 1857 issue and postmarked at Jackson on April 4, 1860 after the

beginning of State 4 of the route. This cover was apparently routed contrary to the endorsement when it arrived at San Francisco. Instead of being put into the Butterfield overland mail like the previous example, it was routed via Panama by steamer departing on April 5. Because the mileage by that route was in excess of 3,000 miles, it was struck with their "Due 7" handstamp to make the correct total rate of ten cents.

The majority of surviving covers endorsed to be sent by the Jackass mail route are addressed to Lieutenant Beekman DuBarry of the 3rd Artillery, U.S. Army, while he was stationed at Fort Yuma, California. At least six covers endorsed "Via San Diego" to DuBarry while stationed at Fort Yuma are known. Dating these covers is aided by knowing that the DuBarry's unit was re-posted away from Fort Yuma in June 1858.

One of two reported DuBarry correspondence covers endorsed "Via San Diego" and bearing adhesives, is shown in Figure 6. This cover was sent from West Point, New York, in September 1857 with the 10¢ steamship rate paid by a strip of three 3¢ 1851 stamps a single 1¢ imperforate stamp. This cover was carried via New York City, Chagres, and Panama to San Francisco on the regular steamship route. From San Francisco it was carried by the California Steam Navigation Company to San Diego and then over the mule-mail route to Fort Yuma during State 1 of the route.

The other endorsed, stamped cover to DuBarry was sent to him at Benecia, California and forwarded to Fort Yuma. It originated in Philadelphia, franked with 1857 adhesives.

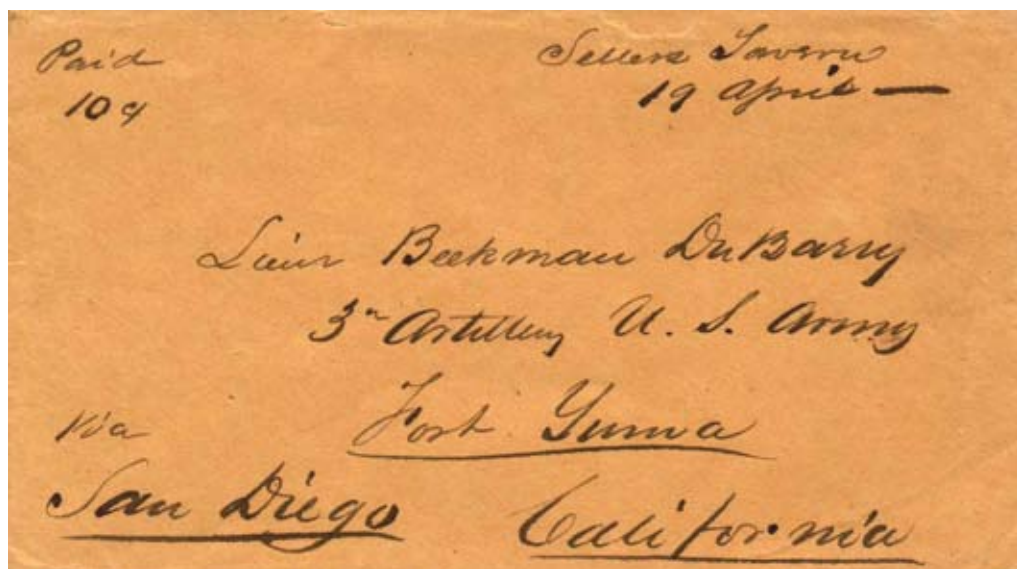


Figure 7. Prepaid stampless cover endorsed "via San Diego," sent April 19 (1858) from Sellers Tavern, Pennsylvania to Fort Yuma, California.

One of the four stampless DuBarry covers is shown in Figure 7. This cover, endorsed "Via San Diego," was sent from Sellers Tavern, Pennsylvania on April 19 and was prepaid for the correct ten-cent rate. Like the previous 1857 cover, this 1858 use was carried via New York City, Chagres, and Panama to San Francisco on the regular steamship route. From San Francisco it was carried by the California Steam Navigation Company to San Diego and then over the mule-mail route to Fort Yuma during State 1 of the route. The authors record two similar stampless covers from Sellers Tavern, Pennsylvania, from this correspondence, both mailed in the first half of 1858. The final stampless DuBarry use is a forwarded cover addressed to DuBarry while still at Benecia and forwarded.

A tenth cover has been recently identified. It is cover from Painesville, Ohio, used in the fall of 1857 with a 10¢ imperforate 1855 stamp, type I. The cover is addressed to "Delos E. Goldsmith, Fort Yuma California, Junction of the Gila & Colorado Rivers" and in parenthesis "San Diego P. Office" indicating that it was to be carried via the San Diego post office. This is an 1857 use during State 1, carried only on the mule portion of the route between San Diego and Fort Yuma. It arrived in California via the Panama route to San Francisco.

There are covers known carried from forts in Texas, addressed to the East, that would have been carried on the portion of the route between El Paso and San Antonio. These cannot accurately be termed "Jackass Mail Route" covers even though they were carried by Giddings and Doyle as contractors.

The authors would appreciate learning of any further covers endorsed to be carried via San Diego, or via San Diego and San Antonio. ■

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