

KEARNY'S CALIFORNIA MAIL ROUTE
RICHARD FRAJOLA AND FLOYD RISVOLD

The earliest United States regular mail route to be established within California pre-dates the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which formally ceded Alta California to the United States in 1848 after the Mexican-American War. This “regular mail” route was actually a military express mail service inaugurated by military governor Stephen W. Kearny in April 1847. While the service was operated by the military, letters from civilians were authorized to be carried and all mail was carried free of charge. This mail service is properly categorized as an American mail route operating in Mexican California.

It was announced in the *California Star* (later the *Daily Alta Californian*) edition of Saturday, April 17, 1847, as follows:

REGULAR MAIL. Our readers will be pleased to learn that Gov. Kearny has established a semi-monthly mail, to run regularly between San Francisco and San Diego. This mail is to be carried on horseback, by a party consisting of two soldiers; and is to commence on the 19th inst. Starting every other Monday from San Diego, and San Francisco, the parties to meet at Captain Dana's Ranch, the next Saturday to exchange Mails; and start back on their respective routes the next morning, and arrive at San Diego and San Francisco, on the Sunday following, and so continuing.

The 1847 Mail Route Between San Francisco and San Diego

The actual route, shown in Figure 1, followed closely the Spanish Royal Road (“Camino Real”) which connected the California missions with Mexico City. Parts of the trail had been used to carry mail since at least 1776, when Father Junipero Serra suggested a monthly mail be established to connect the Presidio of San Diego and Monterey, near San Francisco.¹

A letter carried over this route is shown in Figure 2. It is a folded letter from Henry Mellus, dated at San Francisco, addressed to his partner William D.M. Howard at Los Angeles. It is endorsed “San Francisco Dec 27” at top in red ink, typical of military endorsements of the time. This endorsement was possibly written



Figure 1. Mail route of 1847 connecting San Francisco and San Diego, California.

¹ Letter of Father Junipero Serra dated July 27, 1776, in the Risvold collection.



Figure 2. An 1847 letter from San Francisco to (Los) Angeles, California.

by Captain Joseph L. Folsom, who was acting military postmaster. December 27 was a Monday in 1847, which corresponds to the scheduled departures.

The writer of this letter, Henry Mellus, came to California in 1835 as a sailor before the mast in the ship *Pilgrim*. A shipmate on this voyage was Richard Henry Dana, whose diary of the trip, *Two Years Before the Mast*, established his fame. Mellus served as agent for Appleton & Co. in the hide and tallow trade before partnering with William D.M. Howard in purchasing the Hudson Bay Company property in San Francisco in 1846. Mellus died in 1860.

Additional information about this short-lived mail route is revealed in two letters found in government papers.²

In a letter headed Monterey, California, June 3, 1847 and addressed to L.W. Boggs, *alcalde* at Sonoma, the Governor of California, Col. R.B. Mason, writes:

I regret that it is not in my power to afford the people in California any greater mail facilities at this time than the military express that has been established, once in two weeks, between San Francisco and San Diego, which carries letters and papers for all persons free of charge.... This is a military government, and the supreme power is vested in the senior military officer of the Territory.

A letter from Monterey, California, dated 9 January 1849, addressed to “Col. J.L. Folsom, Assistant Quartermaster Genl.” and written by Lt. W. T. Sherman (who was destined for greater things), mentions the California service as follows:

The military express mail to and from San Francisco and Monterey is under your control; that from Monterey to Dana’s is under the control of the quartermaster at Los Angeles.

It is not known how long the route remained in operation beyond the January 9, 1849 date in the Sherman letter just quoted. So far, the Figure 1 cover is the only example known to the authors of a letter endorsed for carriage on Kearny’s California mail route. ■

² 31st Congress, House of Representatives., Executive Document No. 17, Feb 6, 1850.