

Army of the West

Chapter Two

Santa Fe Trail Mail, 1821-1850

This chapter describes the mails that travelled on the Santa Fe Trail between New Mexico and Missouri from 1821 to 1850. The period began with Mexico's August 24, 1821 independence from Spain, and ended with the July 1, 1850 start of the first U.S. contract mail service between Santa Fe and Independence, Missouri. Unfortunately, prior to Stephen W. Kearny's military expedition to Santa Fe at the start of the Mexican War in 1846, there is a dearth of letter mail known in private or institutional collections.

The Santa Fe Trail

Captain William Becknell, a War of 1812 veteran from Arrow Rock, Missouri (just east of Independence) is considered to be the Father of the Santa Fe Trail. Following the announcement of Mexican independence, he departed from Missouri on a trading expedition, and arrived in Santa Fe in November 1821, after following the route which became known as the Santa Fe Trail. This route, originally touching at Bent's Fort (in today's Colorado) remained the primary mail, commercial and military route to the Southwest for decades. A shortcut over less mountainous terrain known as the Cimarron Cutoff (shown in green in Figure 2-1), was also used. At Santa Fe, the trail connected with a southbound trail to Chihuahua, Mexico known as the El Camino Real de la Tierra Adentro (Royal Road to the Interior Lands). This trail provided a conduit for trade with Chihuahua and central Mexico.

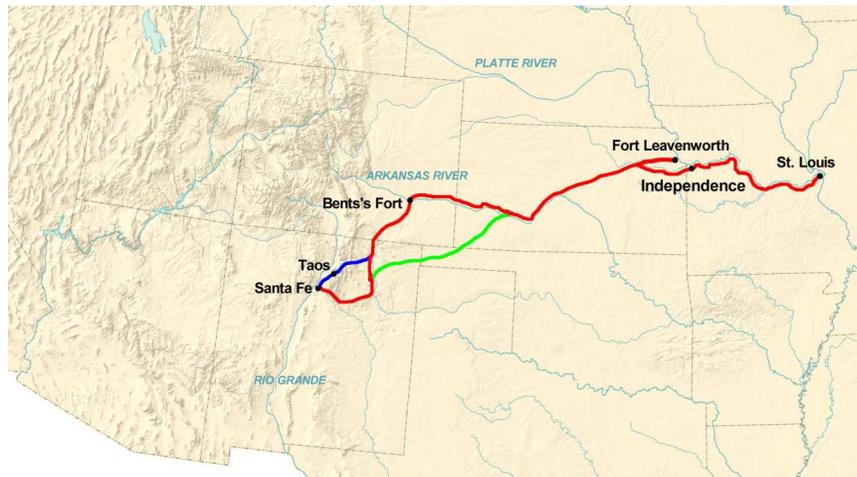


Figure 2-1. Santa Fe Trail (in red), Cimarron Cutoff (in green) and the alternate Taos route via Palo Flechado Pass (in blue).

Early mail from American residents in New Mexico was carried privately to Missouri by returning merchants or trappers, usually in the company of a trade caravan. One of the earliest reported examples of mail carried over the Santa Fe Trail is part of Turley Family Papers owned by the Missouri Historical Society, and is illustrated in Figure 2-2.

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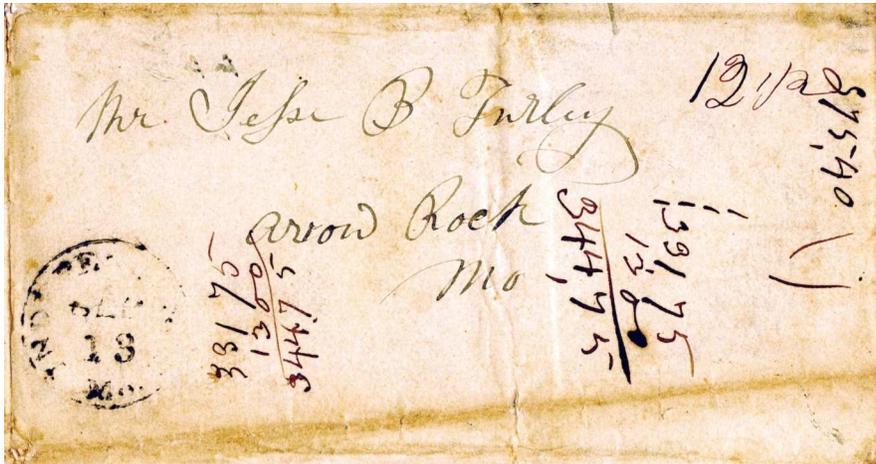


Figure 2-2. August 3, 1841 letter from Taos to Arrow Rock, Missouri that entered the mails at Independence on September 13.

This letter from Simeon Turley was dated at Taos on August 3, 1841 and addressed to his brother Jesse in Arrow Rock, Missouri. The letter mentions that he is sending it by Nick Gentry (a wagon-master who had first gone to Santa Fe with Charles Bent in 1829) and includes a reference to trade goods being sold, including buffalo robes and beaver pelts. The letter was carried over the Palo Flechado Pass

and on the main Santa Fe Trail via Bent's Fort to Independence, Missouri. It was postmarked there on September 13, 1841 and rated for 12½ cents postage due.

Simeon Turley came west from Boone's Lick, Kentucky to Taos in 1830. Like many Americans who wished to settle in the area, he became a Mexican citizen. He was soon engaged in the retail trade in Taos and Santa Fe, dealing in goods imported from the United States by his brother Jesse and others including the Bent brothers. Simeon's primary residence was a few miles north of Taos and his compound included a flour mill and a distillery where large quantities of whiskey ("Taos Lightning") were made. The Turley correspondence includes additional letters that were similarly carried and entered the mails at Independence or delivered directly to the addressee. One of these letters, also dated 1841, accompanied a shipment that included approximately fifty ounces of gold that he had taken from the stream that supplied water to run his flour mill. Simeon was later killed during the Taos Revolt in January 1847.

The Texan Santa Fe Expedition of 1841

In 1840, Texas President Mirabeau Lamar¹ attempted to gain control over the Santa Fe Trail trade and to exert territorial control over much of New Mexico by peaceful persuasion. Failing in that, he resorted to a military expedition in 1841. Lamar raised an invasion force of slightly over 300 men, including merchants carrying trade goods. This group, designated the "Santa Fe Pioneers," departed on June 19, 1841 from a point twenty miles north of Austin, Texas.

By early September the Texans, now split into two groups and worn out from difficult travel, began entering New Mexico near present-day Tucumcari. News of the incursion had previously reached New Mexico's Governor Manuel Armijo, and the Mexican militia was prepared. First, Colonel Cook's party of ninety men surrendered and then the larger body of 200 men under Colonel McCloud also surrendered on October 5 without any shots fired. The prisoners had their property, arms and shoes taken from them, and were marched some 2,000 miles to Mexico City. They were not released until April 1842.

News of the failed Texan Santa Fe expedition was carried to the United States by Manuel Alvarez, the U.S. Consul at Santa Fe. His departure from Santa Fe was delayed for twenty-four days by Governor Armijo, in what Alvarez considered to be an attempt to cause further risk from weather and the Comanches on the trail to Missouri. Alvarez finally left Santa Fe with his party of sixteen men on October 26, 1841. After five of

the party split off to return to Texas, the remaining group continued east on the Santa Fe Trail. During a severe snow storm near Council Bluffs, two men froze to death and 48 of their 67 animals perished. The remaining members of the party arrived at Independence on December 13, 1841.

A letter carried on this ill-fated journey, also owned by the Missouri Historical Society, is shown in Figure 2-3. This October 22, 1841 letter was written by James Magoffin, a well-known Santa Fe Trail trader recently arrived at Santa Fe with goods from Saint Louis. It is addressed to an attorney in Colombia, Missouri and endorsed to be carried by Mr. Manuel Alvarez at the lower left. It entered the mails with an Independence postmark of December 20 and postage due of 18¾ cents.

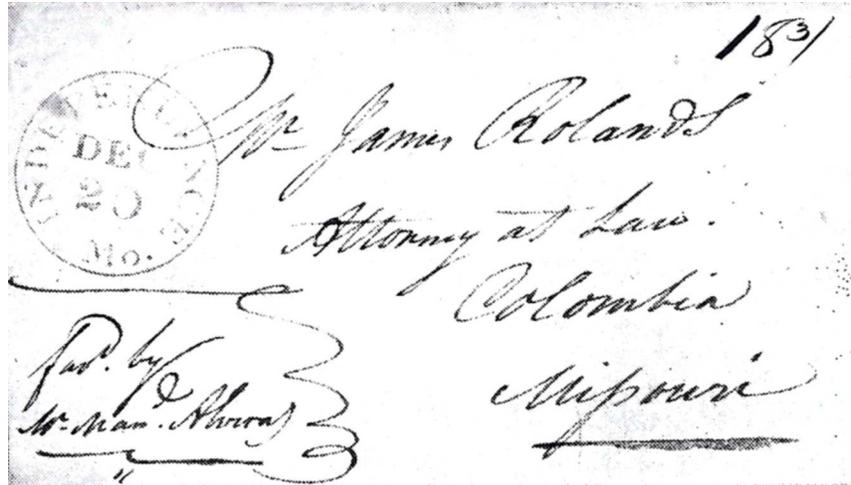


Figure 2-3. October 22, 1841 letter from Santa Fe to Colombia, Missouri that entered the mails at Independence on December 20.

Kearny’s Army of The West, 1846 to 1847

Shortly after the outbreak of the Mexican-American War, General Stephen W. Kearny was assigned the task of capturing New Mexico with his newly-formed “Army of the West.” His initial force consisted of approximately 1,800 men, including 600 men from Kearny’s U.S. 1st Dragoons, and 800 men from the 1st Regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers under Colonel Alexander Doniphan. They began departing from Fort Leavenworth on June 26, 1846 and followed the Santa Fe Trail into Mexico.

The main portion of Kearny’s forces arrived at Bent’s Fort between July 18 and July 31, 1846. This post on the Arkansas River was considered to be the furthest point of the trail still in the United States. Newspapers reported that a military mail from forward positions passed through Bent’s Fort on July 18, 1846 and arrived at Fort Leavenworth on August 18.

A small number of letters written by Kearny’s soldiers, or by traders accompanying the army, have survived. These artifacts, coupled with newspaper reports, allow a reconstruction of the mail services employed. Three letters carried at the same time from the area around Bent’s Fort show an interesting contrast between how private mail was handled and how mail from the army was handled.



Bent's Fort, 1833-1849

- Built as trading post by Bent Brothers and St Vrain
- Kit Carson employed as hunter in 1841
- Staging point for Army of the West in 1846
- Abandoned due to cholera epidemic in 1849

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The earliest (Figure 2-4) was written by Ebenezer N. Pomeroy, a trader employed by Robert Aull who was traveling with the Army of the West.



Figure 2-4. July 31, 1846 letter from Bent's Fort to Lexington, Missouri that entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth on September 2.

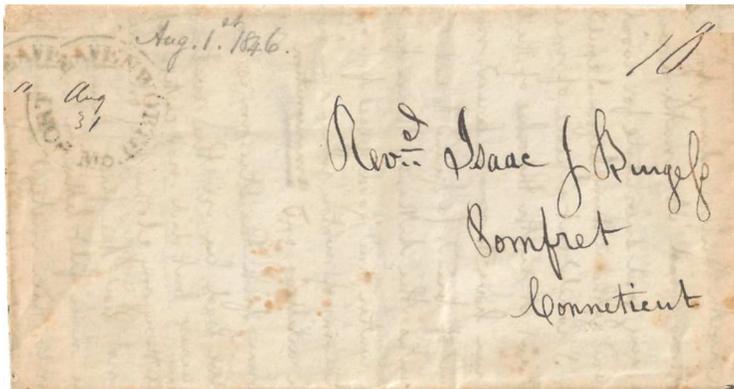


Figure 2-5. August 1, 1846 letter from Bent's Fort to Connecticut that entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth on August 31.

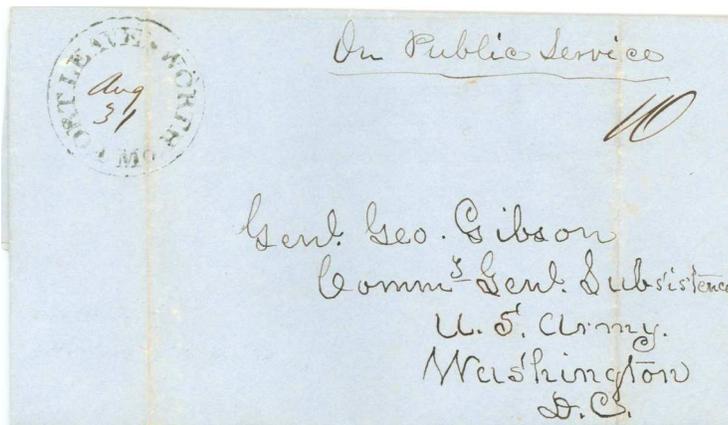


Figure 2-6. July 31, 1846 letter from Bent's Fort to Washington, D.C. that entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth on August 31.

This letter is datelined "Near Bent's Fort" on July 31, 1846 and is addressed to Pomeroy's wife, care of Robert Aull, at Lexington, Missouri. It was probably carried by a member of Aull's company who accompanied the military mail courier to Fort Leavenworth. It was postmarked there on September 2 and rated for five cents postage due. The second letter (Figure 2-5) was written by a member of Doniphan's Missouri volunteer cavalry. It was datelined August 1, 1846 "In camp on the banks of the Arkansas River five miles below Bents Fort in the Indian Country," and addressed to Pomfret, Connecticut.

This letter, rated for 10 cents postage due, was postmarked at Fort Leavenworth in manuscript on August 31, two days earlier than the civilian letter in Figure 2-4.

The third letter (Figure 2-6) was written by Lieutenant William N. Grier, a member of Kearny's 1st Dragoons. It was datelined, "Encampment of 'Army of the West' near 'Bent's Fort' Arkansas River" on July 31, 1846. This letter is addressed to General Gibson, Commissary General of Sustenance, US. Army, Washington, D.C. and endorsed "On Public Service" at the top. This public service endorsement did not relieve the letter of postage due, but did allow the recipient to claim the amount due as a reimbursable expense. Like Figure 2-5, this letter was postmarked on August 31 at Fort Leavenworth, and rated for postage due of 10 cents. It was docketed as received on September 14.

These three letters show that the military letters from Kearny's U.S. troops and Doniphan's volunteers were handled expeditiously together, but that civilian mail was either handled in separate bags or delivered privately to the post office.

The Army of the West Captures Santa Fe, 1846

On August 1, Kearny departed from Bent's Fort into Mexico and arrived with little opposition in Santa Fe on August 18, 1846. Surviving letters suggest that the military began a regular mail service between Fort Leavenworth and Santa Fe shortly after occupying Santa Fe. Table 2-1 shows the known eastbound trips undertaken in 1846.

Table 2-1 – Trips between Santa Fe and Missouri in 1846

Departed from / Date	Arrived to / Date	Notes
Bent's Fort Jul 18, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Aug 18, 1846	Army of the West advance party
Bent's Fort Aug 1, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Aug 31, 1846	See Figures 2-4 to 2-6
Bent's Fort Aug 3, 1846	Independence Aug 28, 1846	Colburn
East of Bent's Fort ?	Fort Leavenworth Sep 9, 1846	
Santa Fe Aug 22, 1846	? Sep 19 or 20, 1846	October 1 news reports
Santa Fe Sep 9, 1846	Independence Oct 4, 1846	See Figure 2-7
Santa Fe Sep 17, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Oct 17, 1846	See Figure 2-8
Santa Fe Sep 27, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Oct 30, 1846	Lt.-Col. Ruff of MO Volunteers
Santa Fe Oct 9, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Nov 4, 1846	See Figure 2-10
Santa Fe Oct 14, 1846	St Louis Nov 15, 1846	Capt. Fitzpatrick from California
Santa Fe Oct 18, 1846	St Louis Nov 27, 1846	Major Sumner
Santa Fe Oct 20, 1846	Fort Leavenworth ?	Reported in St Louis on Dec. 5
Santa Fe Oct 21, 1846	Independence Nov 26, 1846	Reported in St Louis on Dec. 23
Santa Fe Oct 26, 1846	Independence Dec 1, 1846	Dr Vaughn
Santa Fe Nov 16, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Dec 25, 1846 ?	Reported in St Louis on Dec. 31
Santa Fe Dec 4, 1846	Fort Leavenworth Feb 12, 1847	Goff letter to Weston, MO
Santa Fe Dec 28, 1846	Independence Mar 2, 1847	Lt. Hinton letter to Virginia

The regular military mail service was apparently discontinued after General Kearny left Santa Fe in September 1846. Irregular mails continued to be carried after that by returning traders or military couriers.

Two letters from the trader Ebenezer Pomeroy are the earliest known from occupied Santa Fe to Independence. The earlier letter, dated August 30, 1846 from Santa Fe, reported that letters dated in July had been received by the hand of Captain Charles Bent in less than thirty days from the East. The second letter, datelined September 4 is shown in Figure 2-7. This letter was postmarked on October 5 in Independence and rated for five cents postage due. It was part of a mail carried by a group of traders who departed from Santa Fe on September 9, 1846. The October 9, 1846 *St Louis Republican* reported that the leader of the party of traders had arrived in Independence on October 3 and that the wagon with the mails was to arrive on the following day.

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Figure 2-7. August 30, 1846 letter from Santa Fe to Missouri that entered the mails at Independence on October 5.

Mail from the Army of the West was carried by military couriers who typically travelled to Fort Leavenworth. However, as seen in Figure 2-7, the bulk of the letters from traders seems to have been carried by returning traders to Independence.

An example of military mail carried from occupied Santa Fe is shown in Figure 2-8. This letter was endorsed "Santa - Fé New Mexico, Sept 17th 1846" and addressed to the Adjutant General of the U.S. Army at Washington, D.C.. It was carried with the military mails to Fort Leavenworth where it was postmarked on October 17 and rated for 10 cents postage due.

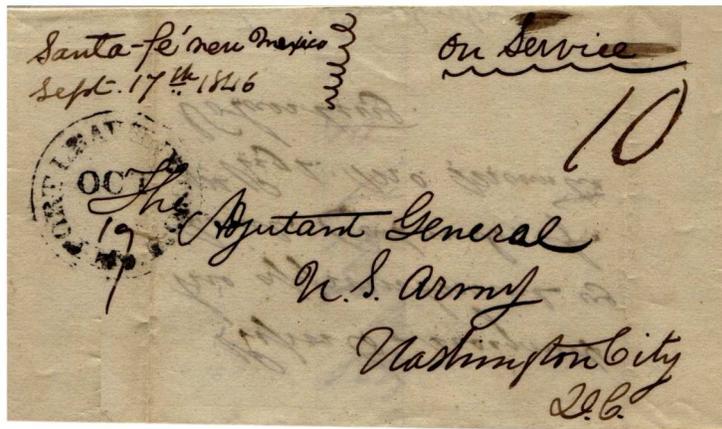


Figure 2-8. September 17, 1846 letter from Santa Fe to Washington, D.C. that entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth on October 17.

Kearny Divides the Army of the West, 1846

After installing Charles Bent as acting civil governor of New Mexico and appointing Colonel Sterling Price as military governor, Kearny divided his Army of the West into three separate forces. The main force under Price was to occupy New Mexico from Santa Fe. Price was on his way from Fort Leavenworth with the 2nd Regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers, so Doniphan's 1st Regiment was to wait at Santa Fe until their arrival. Price would then take over occupation duties and Doniphan would mount an expedition southward toward Chihuahua, Mexico.

Price arrived in October, and was soon faced with the Taos Revolt of January 1847. It was quickly suppressed by Price's forces, but not before the murder of several Americans, including Governor Bent at Taos.

Doniphan and his 1,200-man force were ordered to capture El Paso del Norte. After that, he was to join forces with General John Wool at Chihuahua, for further campaigning in northern Mexico. Doniphan

captured El Paso on December 25, 1846, but learned that Wool was not going to be at Chihuahua. Nonetheless, he set off in that direction in the midst of greatly superior enemy forces. He confronted an army four times his size at the Battle of the Sacramento River on February 28, 1847 and swept the field, capturing nearby Chihuahua in the process.

Figure 2-9 shows a letter written on captured stationery, datelined March 6, 1847 at Chihuahua. Lieutenant Hinton wrote that:

The army under Col Doniphans command made a triumphial entrie into this city on the evening of the 2nd of March after a hard and well fought battle on the 28th (Sunday) of Febry. We met the enemy in force at "Sacramento" a "rancho" about 25 miles north of this city. They had fortified themselves and mounted 12 pieces of cannon upon their works. Their full strength according to their adjutant's account (which we found upon the field) was four thousand one hundred. Ours was 1300 but we had but about 900 men engaged in the fight.



Figure 2-9. March 6, 1847 letter from Chihuahua, Mexico to Ohio that entered the mails at Independence on May 25.

This letter left with the March 7 military mail to Santa Fe, and it was carried from there to Independence on May 25. Doniphan's army left Chihuahua on April 23 for Saltillo and Buena Vista, where they finally joined up with General Wool's army.

Meanwhile, the third force, under the command of Kearny, was ordered to travel overland to California to assist in the capture of that strategic territory. Kearny and the 300 men of the 1st Dragoons departed from Santa Fe on September 25, 1846. The newly-raised Mormon Battalion was to follow him to California upon their arrival at Santa Fe.

The 550-man Mormon Battalion had departed from Fort Leavenworth in September 1846, and reached Santa Fe a month later. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, the Battalion immediately followed Kearny on foot, and was tasked with building a wagon road to San Diego. They reached San Diego on January 29, 1847 after a march of about 1,900 miles from the United States.

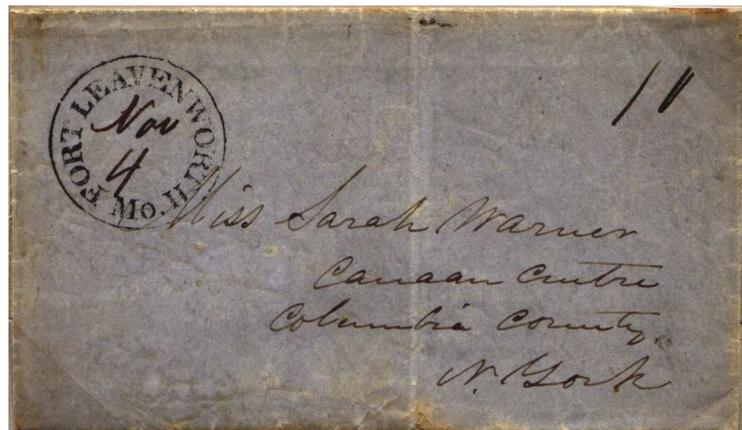


Figure 2-10. October 2, 1846 letter written "120 miles west of Santa Fe" to New York that entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth on November 4.

At least one mail is known from Kearny's column while it was travelling to California. A letter (Figure 2-10) carried in

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that mail from a soldier in the 1st Dragoons was datelined October 2, 1846 “En Route to California, 120 miles from Santa Fe.”

Kearny encountered Kit Carson near Valverde, New Mexico on October 6. Carson was travelling east with dispatches announcing the capture of Los Angeles and the subjugation of California. Upon hearing

this news, Kearny decided to send 200 of his dragoons back to Santa Fe and ordered Carson to lead his remaining force to California. Carson’s dispatches and the mail from Kearny’s force (which included Figure 2-10) continued east with Lieutenant William S. Murphy, who passed through Santa Fe on October 9, and reached Fort Leavenworth on November 3. The letter in Figure 2-10 entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth where it was postmarked on November 4 and rated for 10 cents postage due to Canaan Center, New York.



Figure 2-11. November 20, 1848 letter from Santa Fe that entered the mails at Fort Leavenworth on February 1, 1849.

The Occupation of Santa Fe

After crushing the January 1847 Taos Rebellion, Price settled down to occupation duties in Santa Fe. Contracts for carrying mail were let by the Quartermaster General’s office at Fort Leavenworth, and were very irregular. The military in Santa Fe also maintained a sporadic courier service. The letter in Figure 2-11 was carried in one of the military mails.

This letter was datelined “Santafée Sunday Nov. 19th 1848” by military surgeon E.B. Bateman. He gave it to the military quartermaster, who endorsed it “Santa Fee Nov. 20” in military red ink. It was carried by a military courier who left that day but had to return because of adverse weather. He left again on December 20 and reached Fort Leavenworth on February 1,² where the letter was postmarked and rated for 10 cents due to Illinois.

With the start of contract mail service by the Post Office Department on July 1, 1850, there was no further need for this military mail service.

Endnotes

1. Texas had seceded from Mexico in 1836. Lamar was elected as the second President of the Republic of Texas in December 1838.
2. Report from a St Louis newspaper on February 13, 1849.