

# The San Francisco Post Office is Born

**PURPOSE & SCOPE** – This exhibit displays postal history leading up to the establishment of the San Francisco Post Office (SFPO) and through its subsequent year of existence as it solidified into the primary mail distribution point in the American West. This timeframe, the years 1843 to 1850, is from the period when California was still a part of Mexico (prior to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ceded Alta California and much of the West to the U.S.), and into the second year of postal operations at San Francisco. This was also during the height of the California Gold Rush.

**HISTORY/BACKGROUND** – In February 1848 gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill, near Sacramento, north of San Francisco (SF). At the time of gold discovery, SF was a very small town with a population of only several hundred people. Monterey, approximately 100 miles to the south, was actually the center of commerce for the area having been established as the capital of Baja and Alta California by Spain, eventually becoming California’s port of entry during Mexican rule. The U.S. established a consulate in Monterey in 1842. Initially the gold discovery news was disbelieved but by 1849 people from all over the globe converged upon the small town by the thousands, consumed with “gold fever.” Contract mail service from SF commenced right in the middle of this chaos when the SFPO began operations in March 1849 after special mail-agent William Van Voorhies arrived aboard the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSC) steamer *California* on February 28, 1849, sent to organize the new PO system along the West Coast. The gold rush disrupted the original plans to establish Astoria, Oregon as a principal location on the Pacific Coast. SF emerged as the focal point for postal operations in the West, and was the first PO established in California.

**ORGANIZATION** – The exhibit is organized chronologically from the Mexican period of California into the second year of SFPO operations, cover examples are shown over this 1843-1850 period. Exhibit items of significant importance are framed in red instead of dark blue. Items certified by expert committee are indicated with “c” near the frame edge.

Common acronyms/abbreviations used:	
CDS – Circular Date Stamp	P● – Post Office
PMSC – Pacific Mail Steamship Company	SF – San Francisco
PMSS – Pacific Mail Steamship	SFP● – San Francisco Post Office

Illustration showing the early days of the SFPO and the long lines of people waiting to collect letters.

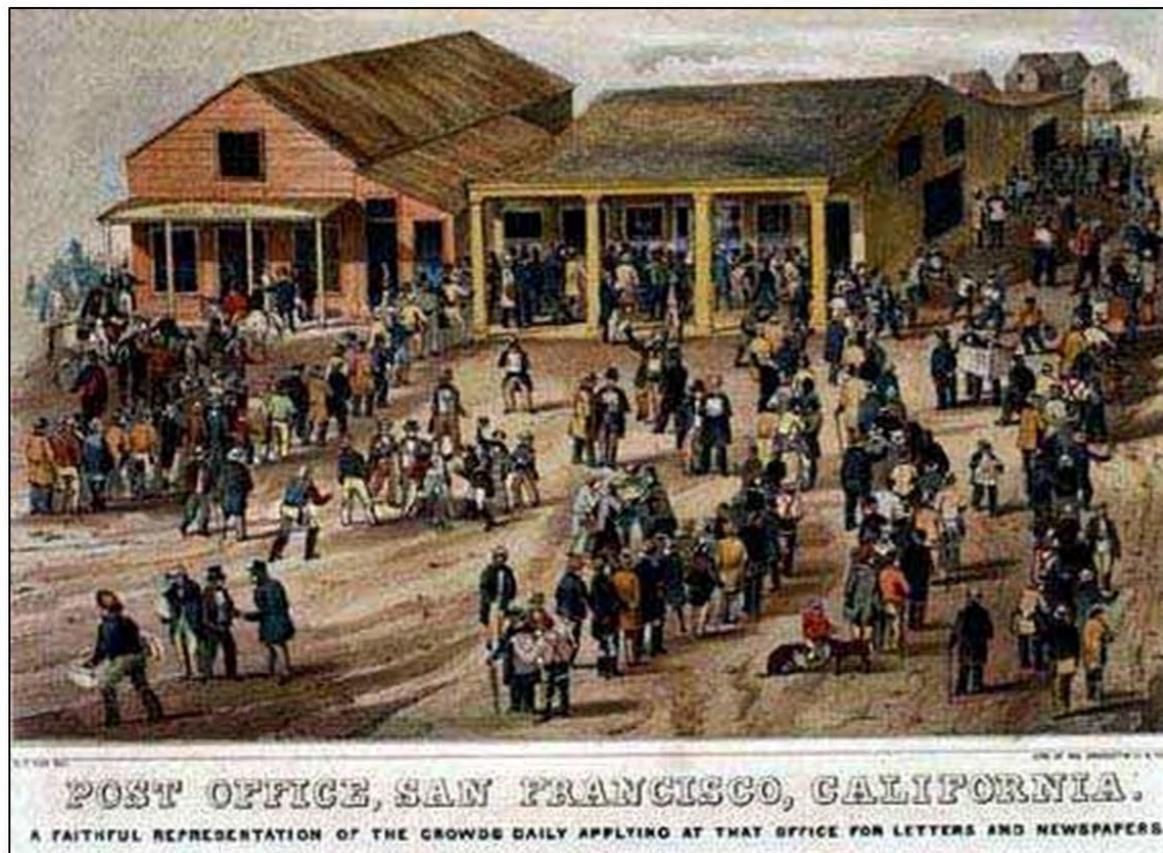


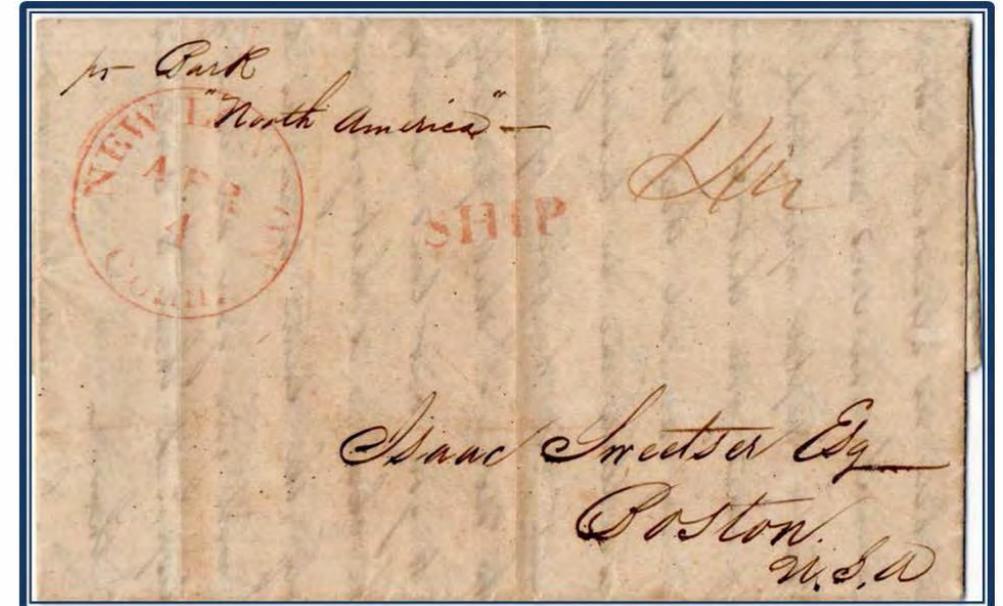
Image courtesy of The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco ([www.sfmuseum.org/](http://www.sfmuseum.org/))

# Prologue – Early California (1843) Mail Conveyance

## Mail carriage prior to the establishment of the SFPO

In 1840’s California (while it was still part of Mexico), whaling and trading ships in the Pacific would carry letters home to the U.S. East Coast. At this time Monterey was the center of commerce and “Yerba Buena” was the name of the small village which would be renamed to “San Francisco” in 1847. The ships would travel around Cape Horn to return home, a 6 month journey.

Dated “Monterey California Oct 6th 1843” on folded letter endorsed “pr Bark North America” to Boston, MA. Entered mails at New London, CT April 4 (1844) with SHIP handstamp and manuscript 14½¢ due rating for 12½¢ inland postage (single sheet, distance of 80-150 miles) plus 2¢ ship fee. 6 months in transit via Cape Horn.



Letter Dateline



Map showing the Cape Horn route used by the whaling and trading ships

Image Courtesy of Richard Frajola & Steven Walske- *Mails of the Westward Expansion, 1803 to 1861*

# Establishment of the First U.S. Mail Route in California

Military express mail service inaugurated by military governor Stephen W. Kearny

Assistant Qtr. Mrs. Office  
San Francisco California  
April 19<sup>th</sup> 1847

To whom it may concern:- The bearer of this letter, Sergeant Murry, of the United States Service, is the Courier conducting the mails from this place to Monterey, in compliance with the proclamation of General J. W. Kearny, the Governor of the Country, and he is directed to take all letters and despatches to the latter place free of cost. Any assistance, therefore, which the bearer or his party may require on the road, all public agents are requested to render without delay in the furtherance of the public service.

Yours, Sir, Respectfully  
Comd. Mo. G. H. Servt.  
J. L. Folsom  
Capt. Asst. Qtr. Ms. U.S.A.

A "bearer letter" carried on the Kearny **FIRST MILITARY MAIL** on the leg between SF and Monterey. The semi-monthly route (between SF and San Diego) was initiated April 19, 1847 (the date of this letter) and all mail was carried free of charge. This is the first official carriage of U.S. mail within California at the time when it had been annexed by the U.S. military (and had a military governor), but was not yet ceded to the U.S. via the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (which occurred in February 1848).

Dated "Assistant Qtr. Mrs. Office, San Francisco, California, April 19th 1847", Letter reads "To whom it may concern: The bearer of this letter, Sergeant Murry of the United States Service, is the Courier conducting the mails from this place to Monterey, in compliance with the proclamation of General J.W. Kearny, the Governor of the Country, and he is directed to take all letters and despatches to the latter place free of cost- Any assistance therefore, which the bearer or his party may require on the road, all public agents are requested to render without delay in the furtherance of the public service"  
Signed "J.L. Folsom, Capt. Asst. Qtr. Ms. U.S.A"

Map showing the military mail route of 1847 connecting San Francisco and San Diego, California.

Announcement of the service in the *California Star* newspaper, Saturday, April 17, 1847



Image Courtesy of Richard Frajola

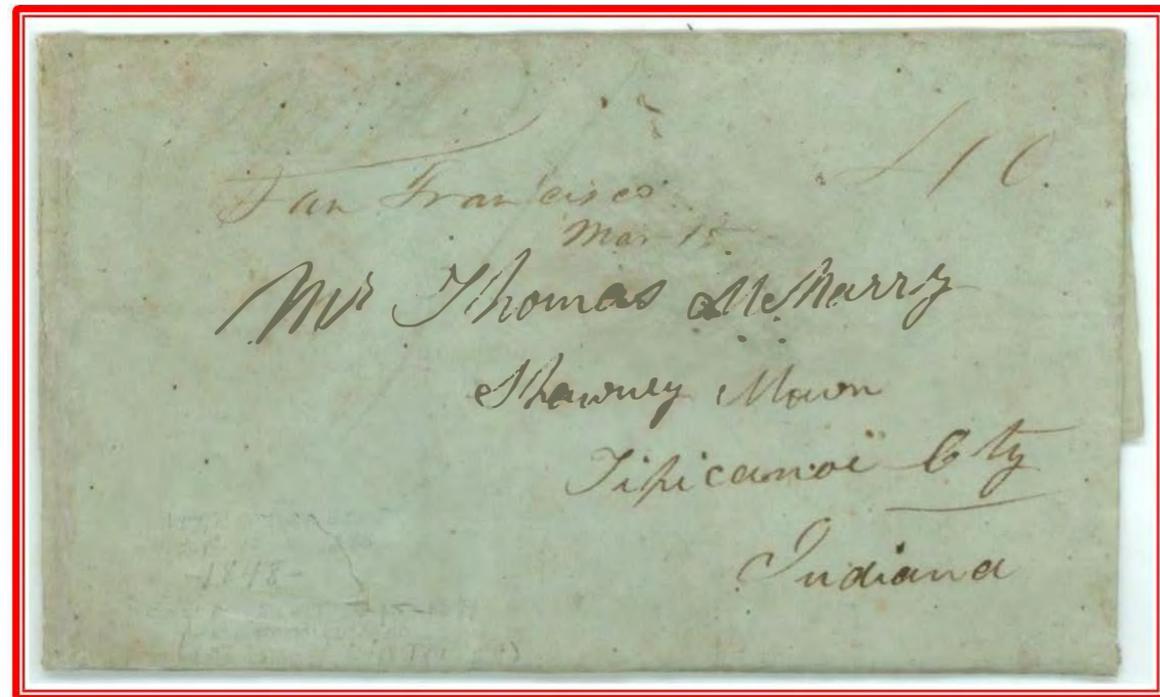
**Regular Mail.**  
Our readers will be pleased to learn, that Gov. KEARNY has established a semi-monthly mail, to run regularly between San Francisco and San Diego. This mail is to be carried on horseback, by a party consisting of two soldiers; and is to commence on the 19th inst. Starting every other Monday from San Diego, and San Francisco, the parties to meet at Captain Dana's Ranch, the next Sunday to exchange Mails; 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 mail will thus be carried once a fortnight from San Diego to San Francisco, and from San Francisco to San Diego.

## Establishment of the San Francisco Post Office

First Mail Conveyed from the SFPO

The San Francisco Post Office (SFPO) began postal operations in March 1849 after special mail-agent William Van Voorhies arrived aboard the PMSS *California* on February 28 and began setting up the new West Coast PO system. The Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSC) held the US contract mail route between Panama and SF.

The 1848 US Postal Act created a 40¢ per ½ ounce rate for mail to the Atlantic Coast from the West Coast.



Letter datelined "St. Frisco, California, December 11, 1848." Unpaid 40¢ rate cover to Indiana. SF town and March 15 (1849) manuscript postmark, the expected departure of Peruvian bark *Callao*, (actually departed March 19).

Contract steamer PMSS *California* was intended to carry the first mail from the SFPO, however nearly all her crew deserted to the gold fields upon her arrival and it was badly in need of repairs from the long journey from NY so it sat idle in the bay for weeks (the PMSS *Oregon* and PMSS *Panama* had yet to arrive). Ironically, the very first contract mail out of SF, via Panama, actually left on a non-PMSC vessel.

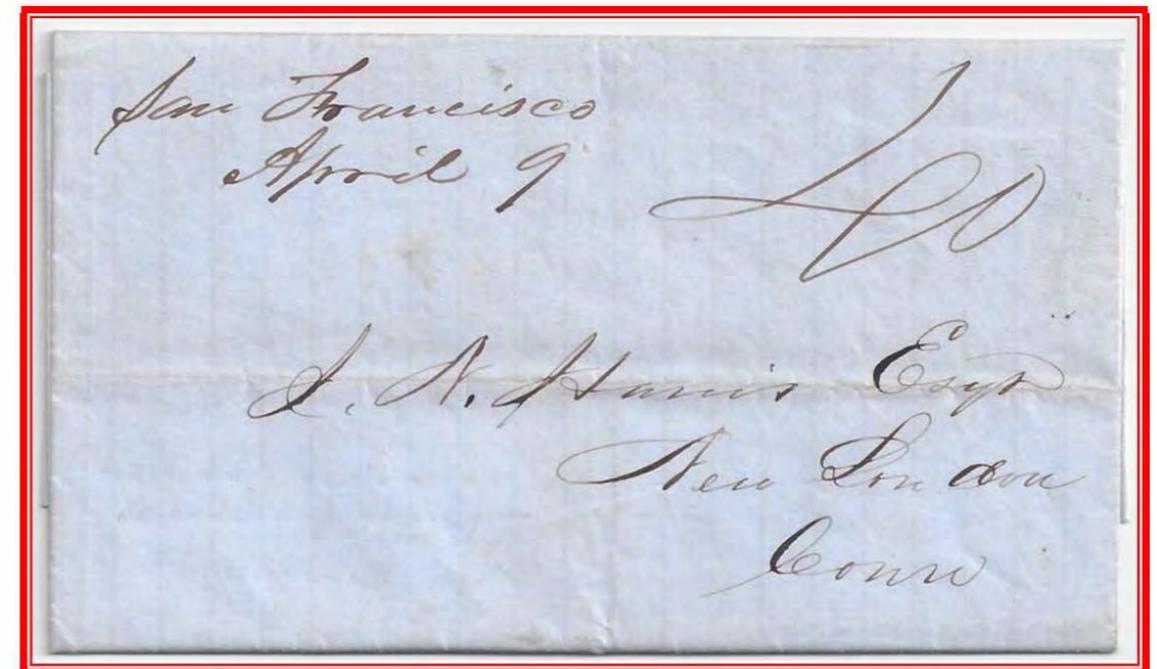
**Only known privately held example of the first eastbound U.S. contract mail from SF**

**This is the earliest SFPO postmark and one of 12 discovered SF manuscript covers**

## Establishment of Pacific Mail Steamship Co. Conveyance

First Contract Mail Conveyed by PMSC from the SFPO

From March to June 1849 the SFPO used manuscript markings, these were the first SF postmarks.



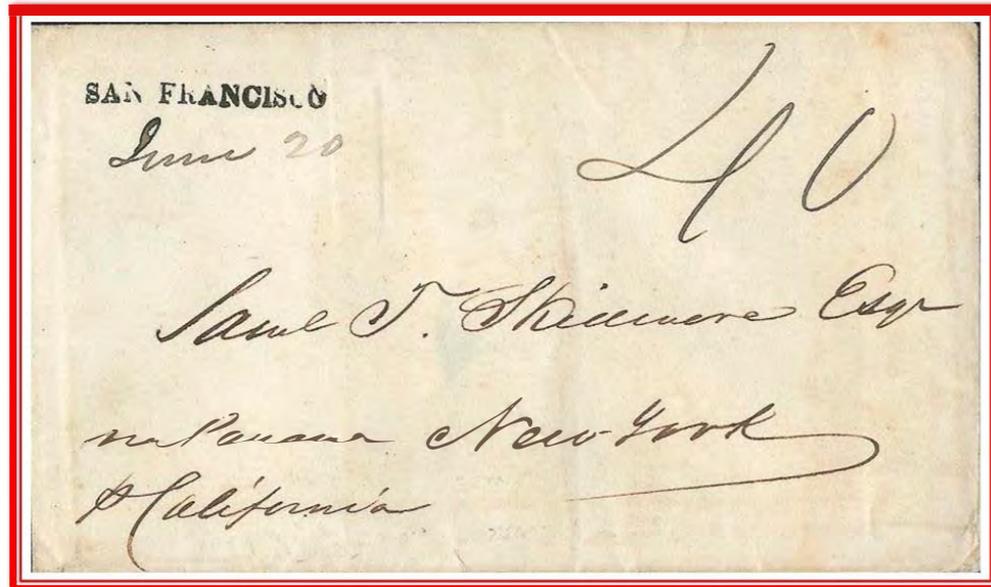
Unpaid 40¢ rate to Connecticut. The maiden voyage of the PMSS *Oregon* from SF, departing on April 12, 1849 (postmarked April 9, the original expected departure date).

**First eastbound contract sailing by the PMSC, one of four discovered**

## The First SFPO Postmark Device

### First Day Use of the SF Straightline Postmark

From June to August 1849 the SFPO used straightline markings for three sailing dates, these were the first SF postmark devices.



June 20 (1849) unpaid 40¢ rate cover to New York. Endorsed “via Panama p California.” Letter datelined April 30, 1849. PMSS *California* actually departed May 1, the PMSS *Panama* left on June 20. Sender intended to catch departure of the *California* but was apparently too late. The next opportunity for contract mailing was 7 weeks later on June 20.

Illustration of Pacific Mail Steamship (PMSS) *California*, the first vessel to arrive in San Francisco authorized to carry the contract mails.



Image courtesy of The California State Library, Sacramento

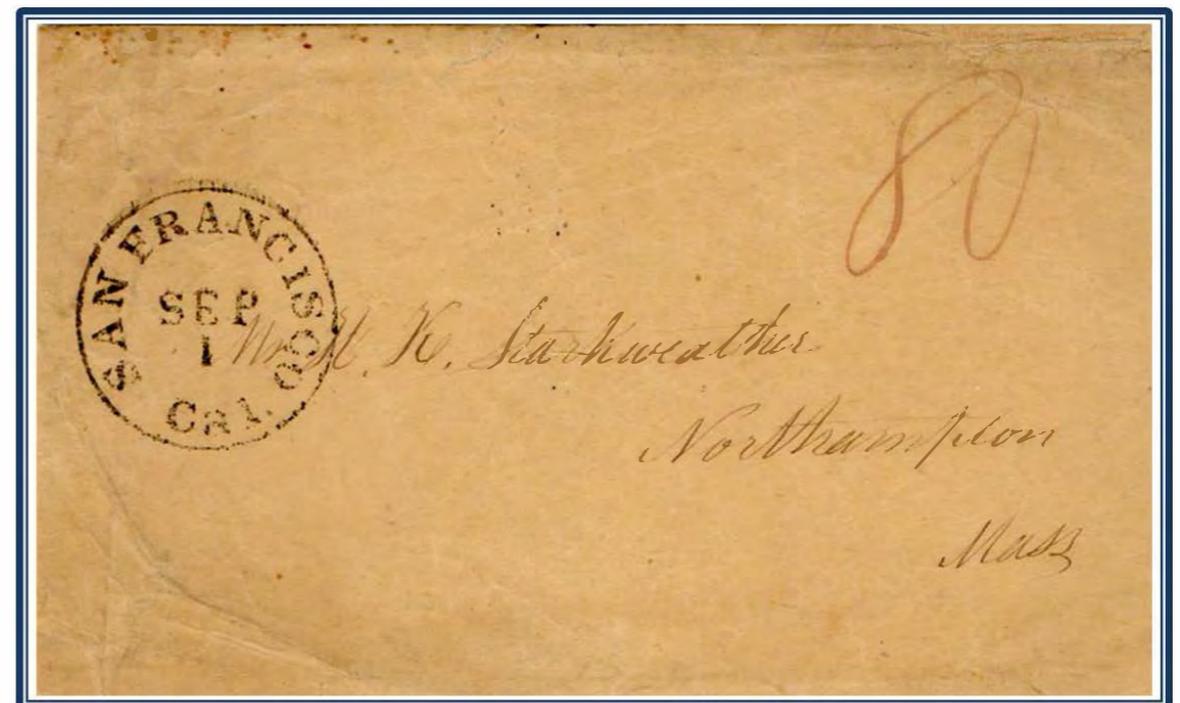
## The First SFPO Circular Date Stamp

The SFPO began using its first CDS August 1, 1849 (also the last usage date of the straightline device).



August 1 (1849) paid 40¢ rate to Massachusetts. Earliest use of the first CDS and also the straightline PAID marking by the SFPO.

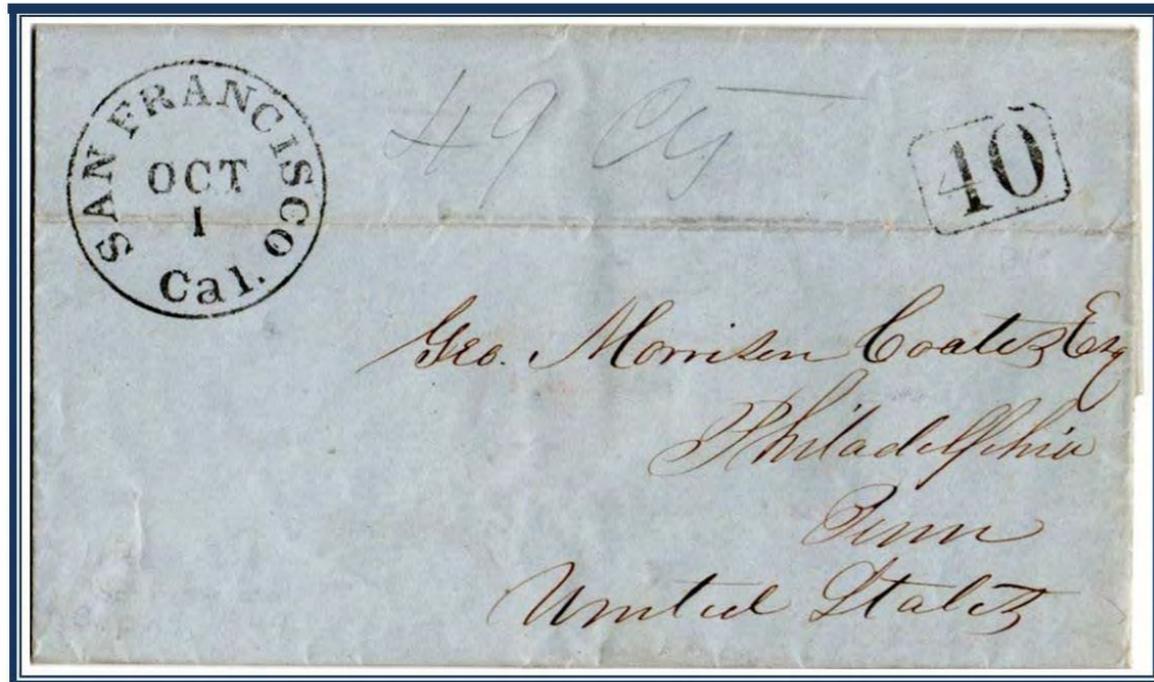
### First Day Use of the First SFPO CDS



September 1 (1849) unpaid 80¢ double rate cover to Massachusetts. Second sailing date usage of first SFPO CDS, carried by PMSS *Panama*.

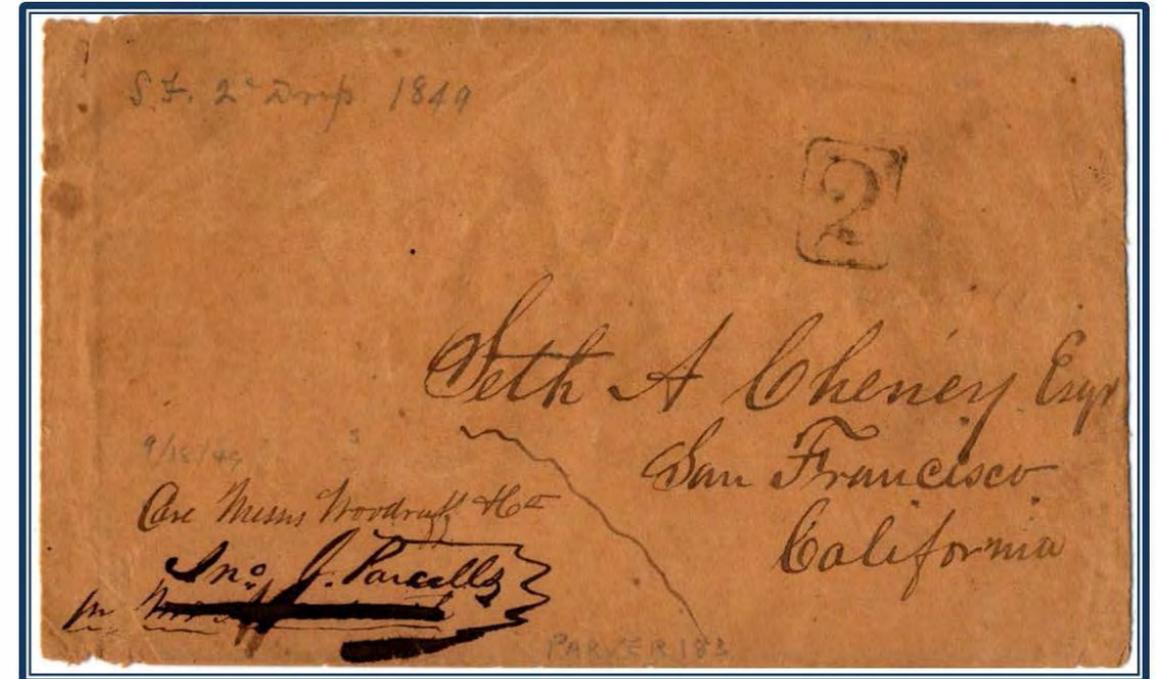
# The First SFPO Separate Rate Handstamps Emerge

Box-40, Box-80 and Box-2 Rate Markings



October 1 (1849) unpaid 40¢ rate cover with Box-40 marking to Pennsylvania. Boxed rate markings were in use for the remainder of the year (to February 1850, when the integral rate CDS replaced these).

## Inaugural use of Box-40 rate marking by the SFPO



September 18 (1849) local 2¢ SFPO drop use. Box-2 rate device was also used along with the Box-40 and Box-80 devices which arrived at the SFPO in September 1849.

## Earliest discovered use of the SFPO Box-2 rate marking



February 5 (1850) CDS with Box-80 marking to New York. Unpaid double rate, 80¢ due.



January 31 (1850) SF CDS, with straightline PAID to NY, late use of the Box-40 marking just prior to integral rate CDS emergence.



July 3 (1850) SF CDS, local SFPO drop use, unpaid 2¢ rate, red Box-2 device.

# The First SFPO Integral Rate Circular Date Stamps Emerge

Various Rates Incorporated Into New CDS Device Styles

PER STMR ISTHMUS



February 28 (1850) integral rate CDS, unpaid 40¢ single rate to Maine. Carried by PMSS *Oregon* on March 1. In February 1850 the first integral rate CDS devices were put in service at the SFPO.

## Inaugural use of integral rate CDS by the SFPO

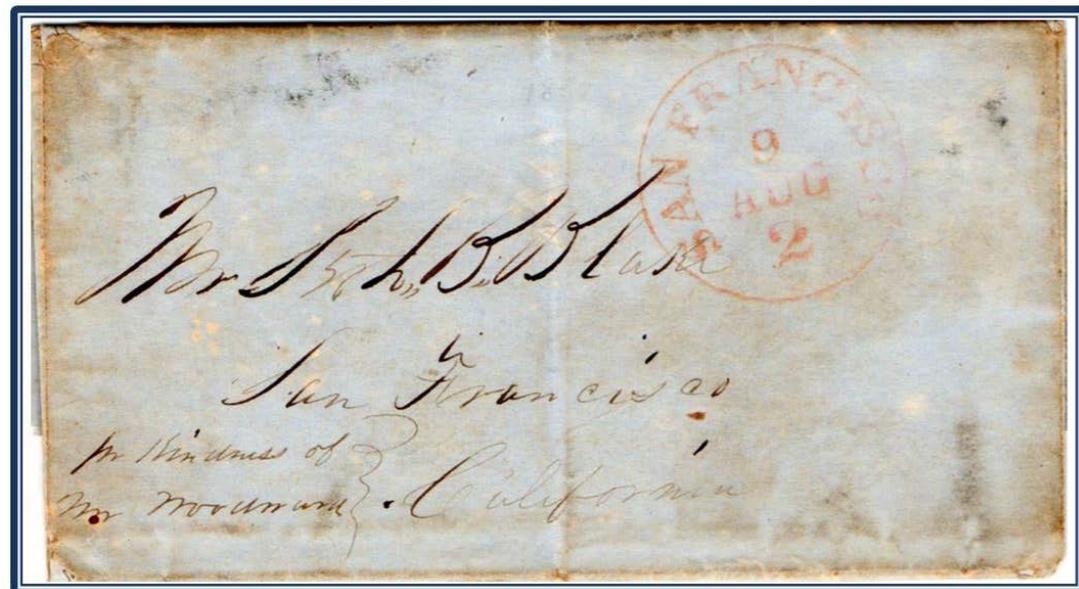
Integral rate large diameter CDS (sans serif font) to MA, unpaid 40¢ rate. This is the largest diameter (35 mm) SFPO CDS, the device began service in April 1850. Red straightline marking "PER STMR ISTHMUS" with additional manuscript endorsement. The *Isthmus* departed SF on September 17, 1850, its last trip carrying the SFPO mails as a non-contract steamer via George Law's Pacific Line. POD directive of October 10, 1850 banned all future non-contract sailings with the mails as this was a breach on the government contract.



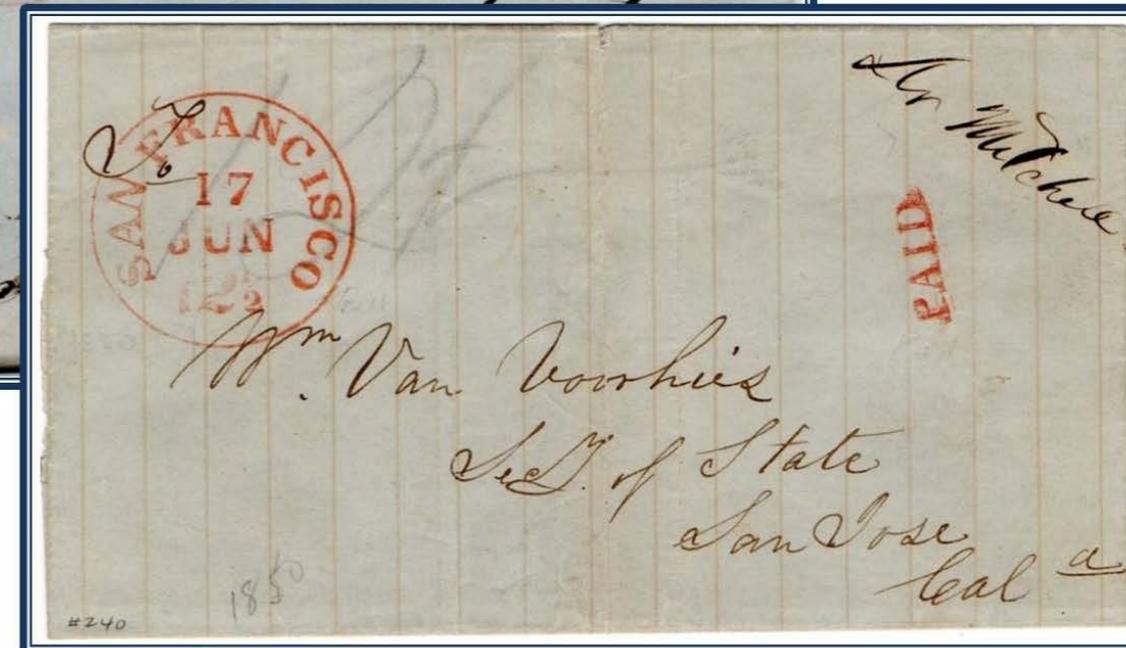
Two 1850 unpaid 80¢ rate covers to MA, serif font April 27 and large diameter sans serif font May 1.



June 17 (1850) with SF integral 12.5¢ rate CDS, paid to San Jose. Addressed to Van Voorhies, now Secretary of State and no longer POD special mail agent. The 1848 US Postal Act created a 12½¢ per ½ ounce rate for mail between points on the West Coast.



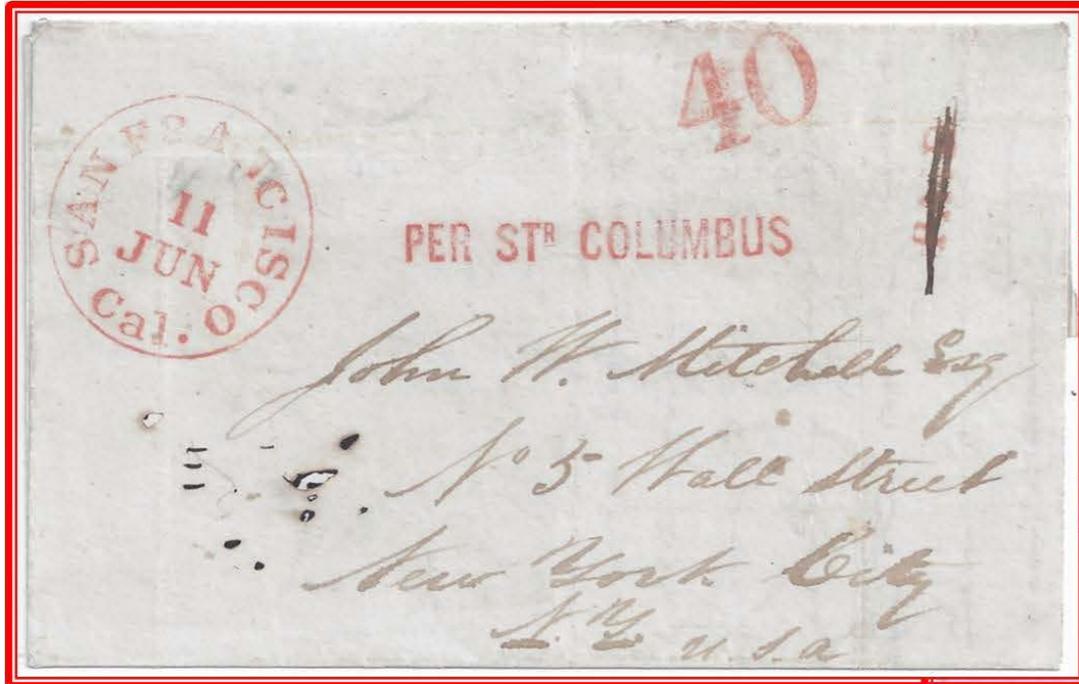
August 9 (1850) SF CDS on letter datelined Mexico City and privately carried to SF. Integral rate CDS with "2" for unpaid 2¢ drop rate. This CDS rate usage is not common.



**New SFPO Separate Rate Handstamps Emerge**  
 1849 Box Style Devices Replaced By Unboxed Rate Devices

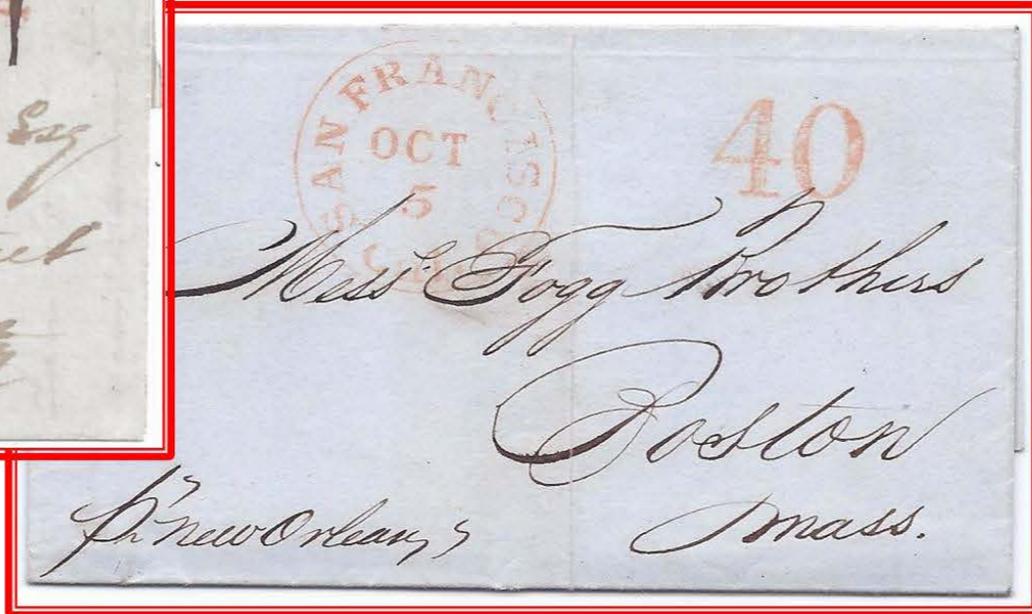
PER ST<sup>R</sup> COLUMBUS

PER ST<sup>R</sup> ISTHMUS



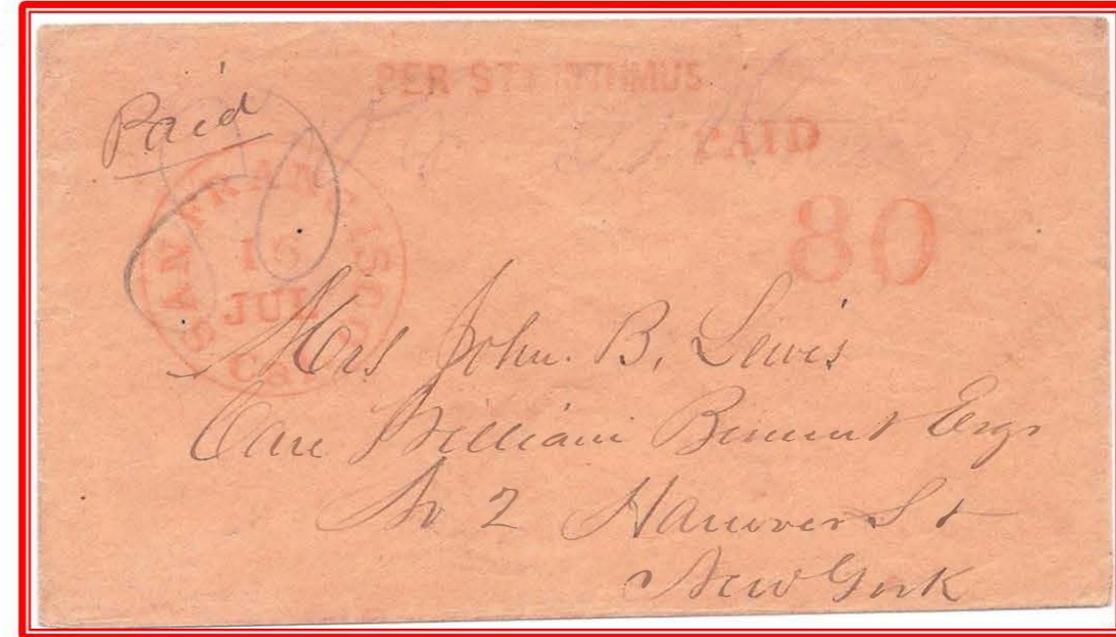
Red straightline marking device "PER ST<sup>R</sup> COLUMBUS" used on non-contract steamer of George Law's Pacific Line. PAID crossed out, unpaid 40¢ single rate cover to NY. Postmarked June 11 (1850) probably in error as no advertised departure aligns to this date, actual departure was June 18.

**Inaugural use of this vessel device marking**



Manuscript endorsement "per New Orleans" on unpaid 40¢ rate to MA. Non-contract steamer Empire City Line *New Orleans* departed October 5 on its maiden voyage to Panama, and only departure carrying the SFPO mails

**One of two discovered outbound covers with this endorsement**



Red straightline "PER ST<sup>R</sup> ISTHMUS" device marking. Paid 80¢ double rate cover to NY. George Law's Pacific Line *Isthmus*, departed SF on July 17, 1850, postmarked July 16.

**Only discovered double rate cover with this device marking**

Bill of lading contents datelined "Papiete August 29th, 1850" for shipment of box of oranges. Privately carried from Tahiti and locally deposited at the SFPO where red CDS and separate "2" drop rate handstamp were applied.



November 4 (1850) SF CDS, unpaid single 12.5¢ rate with separate rate handstamp, to San Jose.



