

How They Carried the Mail in America

1850—1870

The study of Postal History has traditionally concentrated on routes, rates, and services. Much less attention has been paid to studying the wide variety of ways in which the mail has been transported. This exhibit is a “sampler” of a larger and more comprehensive study of how the mail was carried in America during a particularly eventful twenty year period in the 19th century. The period began with a dramatic reduction in postal rates as well as a massive westward migration due to the discovery of gold in California; it continued with a cataclysmic Civil War; and it ended with a further westward shift in the population center of the country. All of these factors greatly increased the demand for postal services and/or severely compromised their delivery. These two facts were reflected in how the mail was carried.



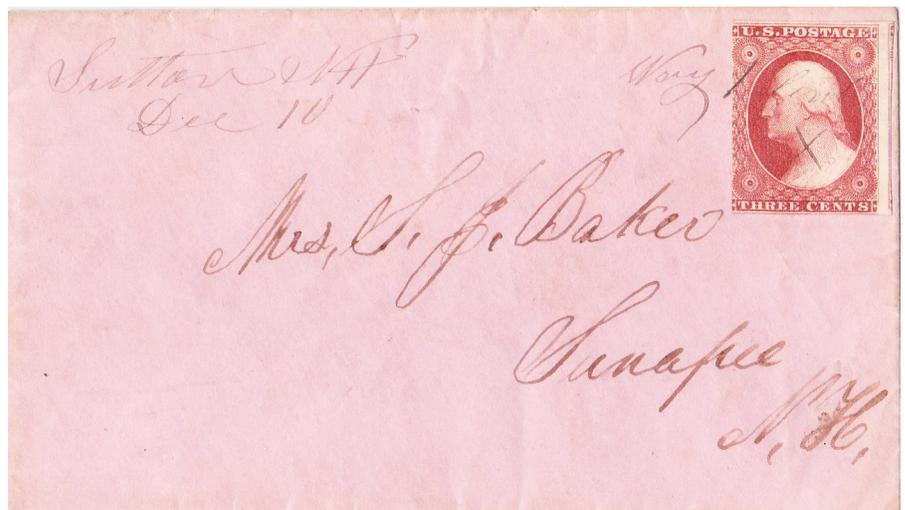
MISSISSIPPI RIVER STEAMBOAT (circa 1855)

The Mississippi River and its navigable tributaries afforded a relatively rapid and inexpensive transportation system that served a large portion of the nation. The *Rapides* was a wooden-hull, side-wheel, steam-powered “packet boat” (i.e. it carried passengers and freight including mail). Built in 1855, it plied the waters between New Orleans and Donaldsonville on Route 7702 until 1856 and was then used between New Orleans and Shreveport.

Although certain broad trends are discernible during this time period (such as an expansion of rail transport), there was considerable local and regional variation in how the mail was carried. This was due to differences in topography, climate and weather, the impact of war or Indian hostilities, and the availability of capital. Therefore, this “sampler” is organized according to these factors. It has a bias toward Civil War and Western uses simply because they tend to illustrate more interesting forms of mail transport on account of the peculiar challenges that were involved.

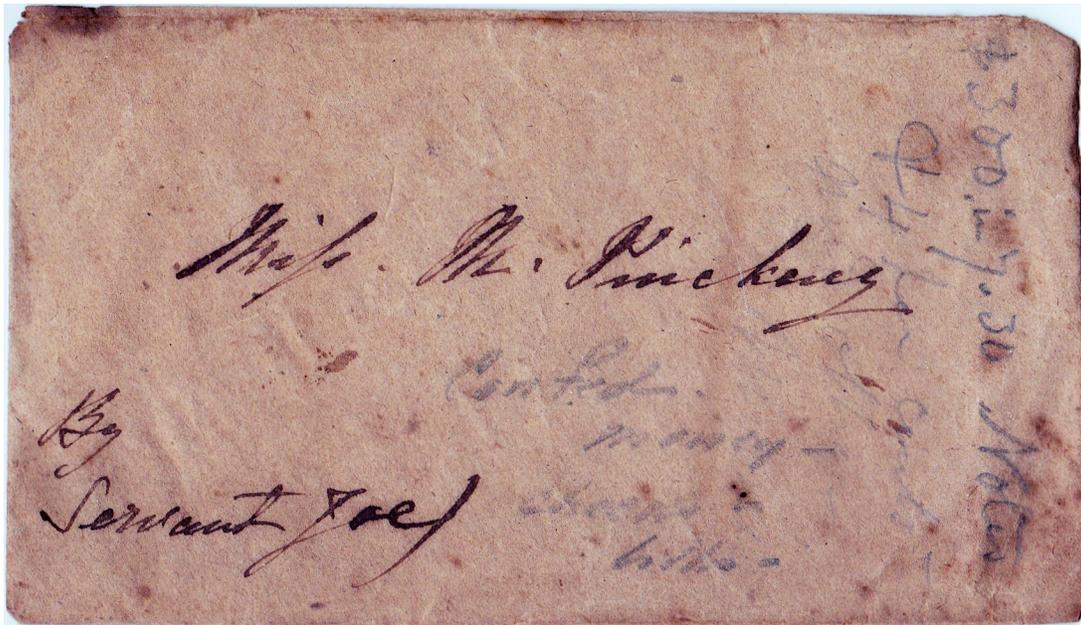
STAGECOACH “WAY” (circa 1855)

In 1785, the Postmaster General let the first stagecoach contract for carrying the mail. However, in 1813 Congress declared that all navigable waterways were postal roads and in 1838 railroad lines were given the same status. Thus by 1850, stage lines between major cities were disappearing in the East, although they remained the major form of mail and passenger transport between smaller towns, as this cover illustrates.



Via A Household Slave (circa 1862)

This cover, which contained three hundred dollars in legal tender, was entrusted to a slave rather than to the Confederate Postal Service. Perhaps the sender considered the former to be more trustworthy, or perhaps the postal route had been interrupted by the war. Or maybe the distance to the addressee was too short to justify a trip to the Post Office and the cost of a postage stamp.



Note that the use of the term “Servant” confirms that this was a slave-carried cover. Most such covers have a more ambiguous sender’s endorsement (e.g. “by Joe”).

Making this cover even scarcer is the proof that it was used during the Civil War since most slave-carried covers cannot be dated to that period or are clearly ante-bellum. In the case of this cover, the proof is the docketing that indicates that the envelope contained Confederate Treasury Department “Train & Hoer” notes which were issued pursuant to an Act of April 17, 1862. These \$100 notes accrued interest of 2 cents a day or \$7.30 per year. Because of the latter, they were popularly known as “7.30” notes – the term that is used on the docketing along this cover’s right edge. In addition, the middle of this cover is docketed “Confederate money” which reflects the fact that these notes were also legal tender.

By A Paroled Prisoner of War (1864)



The sender of this cover, Lt. John Parris Sheahan (Company E, Maine 31st Infantry Regiment) was captured at the Crater outside Petersburg on July 30, 1864 and subsequently imprisoned at the Richland Jail in Columbia S.C. He entrusted this letter to a fellow prisoner, Capt. Sumner U. Shearman (Company A, Rhode Island 4th Volunteer Regiment—his name was misspelled “Sherman” on the envelope), who had also been captured at the Crater and who was subsequently paroled. The following information was taken from a narrative that Capt. Shearman published after the war:

On December 8, 1864, Capt. Shearman and six other prisoners were abruptly paroled. To quote Captain Shearman, “many of the prisoners took advantage of the opportunity to send letters home by us using paper and envelopes of the poorest quality imaginable”—as this “adversity” cover demonstrates. The paper and envelopes had been sold to the prisoners by the guards “at an exorbitant price” which—as this cover also demonstrates—sometimes included pre-paid Confederate postage.

The paroled prisoners were loaded onto a freight train that picked up additional prisoners from Andersonville and Florence along the way. It was snowing and unusually cold when they arrived in Charleston which appeared to have been abandoned. They were then marched across the city from the train depot to the wharves where they boarded a Confederate steam vessel that had previously been used as a blockade runner. They were then carried out to “a fleet of vessels under the walls of Fort Sumter, which our government had provided for the transport of prisoners.” He was placed aboard the steamer *United States* where he and the other officers were assigned by the ship’s captain to staterooms. They lay at anchor for one night in Charleston harbor and then set sail the next day for Annapolis, Md. Upon arrival there (presumably at Camp Parole), each prisoner was granted 30 days’ leave. On December 17 Capt. Shearman traveled to Washington, D. C. by train (where he mailed Lt. Sheahan’s letter—note the postmark). His purpose was to claim the pay that had been accumulating while he had been imprisoned. However, while he was in Washington he discovered that his unit had been demobilized in his absence and he was thus discharged from the army on December 18.

Few other covers of this period that were carried out of the mails can be so well documented in terms of the carrier, the circumstances, the route, and the means of transport. This cover is also unusual in that it represents a late and perhaps unique “provisional” usage that represented an accommodation to prisoners of war—and presumably a source of profit for their guards.

By Canoe (circa 1864)



This Confederate cover was smuggled across the Mississippi River by the Confederate Postal Service while the river was blockaded by Union gunboats. The typical means of transport was described by James H. Kimball of Livingston, Texas who was a Third Sergeant in Company C of the Louisiana State Cavalry and who was later put on detached duty in the “secret service” that ran the Union blockade:

I had to cross the river every week, taking the risk of being killed or captured. I remained in this branch of the service till the Confederacy went down. My life was at times hard as well as hazardous. The Federals were vigilant and anxious to capture me. They were aware that I was crossing the river every week but where and when they never found out. They offered \$10,000 in gold for my capture, but never got me.

William Ewell was my commander, and about fifty men (were) subject to his orders, about twenty-five men on each side of the river. . . Sometimes we had a good deal of mail matter and Confederate money to handle, at times amounting to several thousand pounds. When the river was low we could ride to it, and when it was high we would use canoes which would safely carry two men with baggage. The spring before the surrender of Gen. Lee we had to go forty miles in our canoes.

The other significant aspect of this cover involves how it was rated:

During the period of the 40 cent Trans-Mississippi Express Mail rate (October 1863 to April 1865), the regular 10¢ per half ounce letter rate was still valid. However, the lower rate received lower priority in handling. In this unusual case, a CSA postal clerk somewhere between Richmond and Brandon “upgraded” this regular rate letter to the higher priority “express” rate by adding a “Due 30” notation, despite the fact that all Trans-Mississippi Express Mail letters were required to be fully prepaid. It is likely that this exception was made because the letter was addressed to a soldier at the headquarters of the Trans-Mississippi Department in Shreveport and because it was “in care of” General John B. Magruder. At that time, General Magruder was the commander of the District of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona and was widely esteemed in the region for his victory in the Battle of Galveston the year before.

By Union Gun Boat (1864)

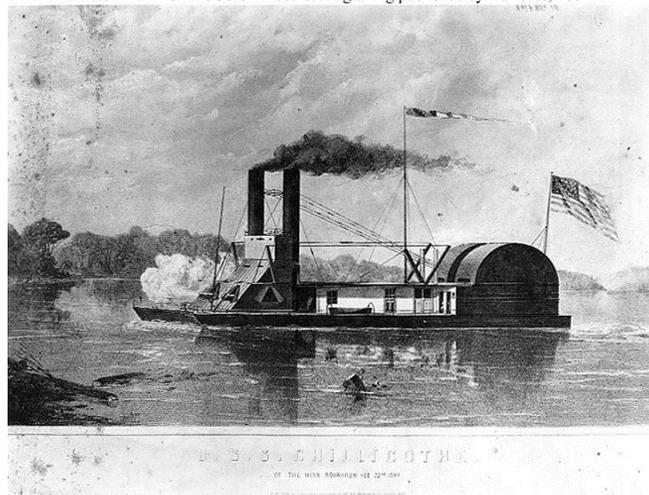


This cover to Confederate prisoner-of-war Willie D. Postlethwaite at Fort Delaware was accepted as a favor by two Union surgeons who were sent under a flag-of-truce from Natchez to Fayette, Mississippi on November 30, 1864 in order to attend a wounded Union Army scout who was in Confederate custody. The letter was subsequently brought aboard the gunboat U.S.S. *Chillicothe* which was on blockade duty on the Mississippi River. While on the gunboat, the letter was examined and put in an envelope which was then addressed and transferred to the ship tender U.S.S. *Pierce* which carried it upriver to Cairo, Ill. (the home port of by the Mississippi River Squadron) where it was put in the U.S. mails.

At the time that it handled this cover, the U.S.S. *Chillicothe* (or the “Chilly Coffee” as it was known among the sailors) was stationed off Fort Adams about 40 miles below Natchez and was commanded by Lieut. George P. Lord, U.S. Navy. It was a side-wheel steamer that was the smallest (162 feet long, 395 tons) and least expensive (\$92,960) of the boats in the Mississippi River Squadron. It had an average speed of seven knots and was fitted with three guns.

There is only one other reported cover that shows processing of a “flag-of-truce” cover on a Mississippi River gunboat. Both are from Fayette and are addressed to Willie Postlethwaite at Fort Delaware.

Photo # NH 264 USS Chillicothe. Engraving published by Buffords, 1864



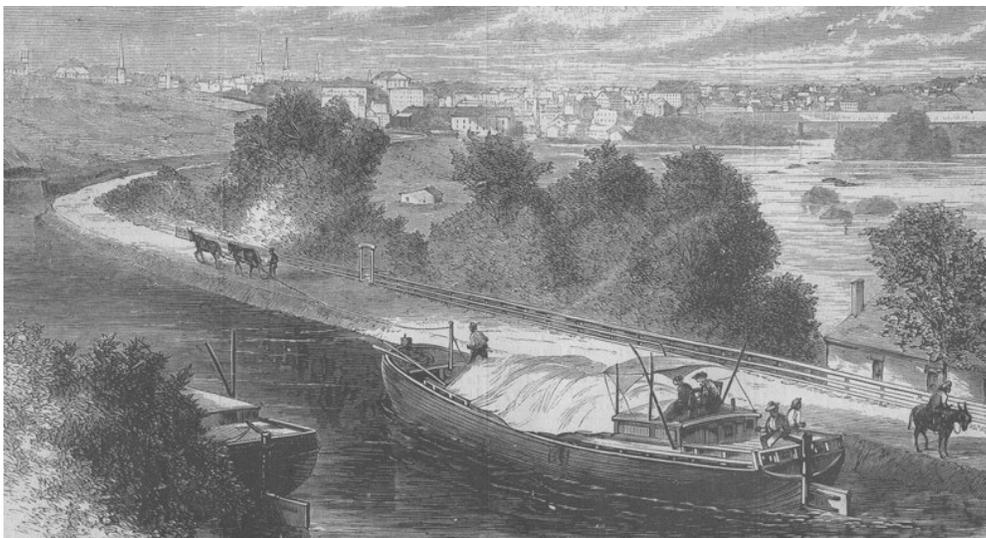
By Canal Boat and Pole Boat (1852)



This cover was mailed at the Richmond, Va. Post Office which then placed it on a Kanawha canal boat that had a contract to carry the mail.

These canal boats had a shallow draft and were long (up to 90 feet) and narrow in order to accommodate the dimensions of the canal. They were pulled by teams of horses or mules that trod tow paths along the banks. In 1851, the contract for mail carriage on this route (2434) was held by Boyd Edmund who was paid \$4,650 a year for thrice-weekly service.

This cover has one other unusual feature which relates to its transport beyond the Kanawha canal. At the Cartersville lock, (note the "via Cartersville" endorsement) it was transferred to the Willis River system which connected the James River and Kanawha canal with the town of Ca Ira near Cumberland Courthouse. Transport on the Willis system was by so-called "pole boats" - i.e. they were propelled by men who used long poles that they pushed along the river bottom. The boats themselves had a shallow draft and a flat bottom, the latter allowing them to carry heavy loads (such as tobacco hogsheads) and still remain stable.



By Dog Sled (1860)



This cover was carried by dogsled by Whiting's Express from Mt. Pleasant to Meadow Valley where it was placed into the U.S. Mail. Mt. Pleasant is approximately 5 miles northeast of Meadow Valley in Plumas County and even today is in a remote area.

Beginning in the winter of 1857, Whiting operated a dog sled express between Buckeye Ranch in Yuba County and Quincy, the county seat of Plumas, a distance of 30 miles. He used a sled that had been built for \$75 and a team of four dogs – Newfoundlands and St. Bernards – that were driven in tandem. He usually drove the express himself and would dismount and use snowshoes on steep grades or through deep snow in order to lighten the burden on his dogs which otherwise could pull as much as 600 lbs.

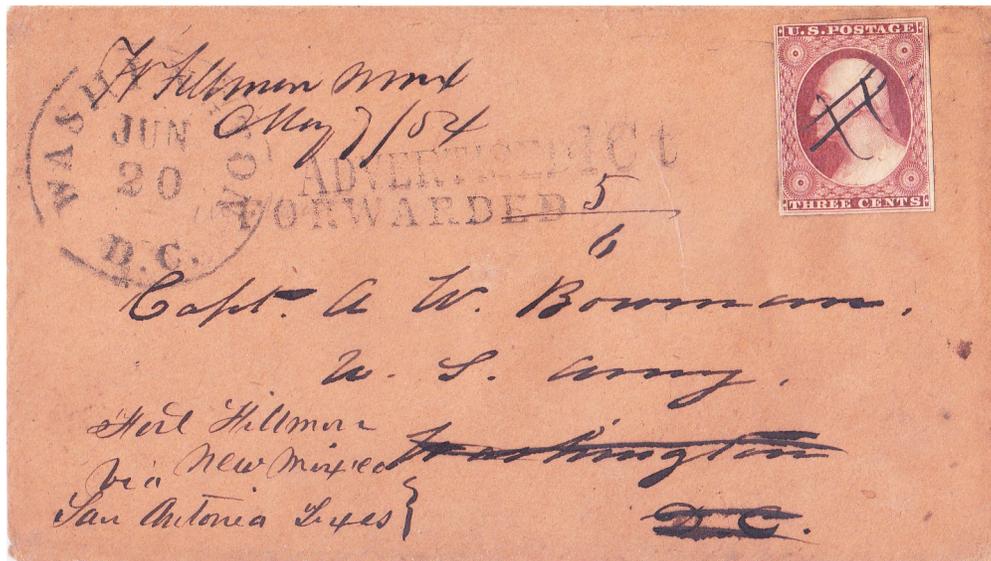
According to the *Visalia Weekly Delta* of April 14, 1860, a late storm – “the heaviest of the season” – had just dumped an “immense” quantity snow at the time that this letter was handed to the expressman. Indeed, the writer of the enclosed letter notes that it would have been sent sooner “*but the snow came on so deep that I was uncertain whether a letter would go out of the mountains or not but will now try . . .*”



Although dog sleds were commonly used in the mountains during the winter, few other western covers during this time period can be as convincingly documented as carried by that means.

In addition, this manuscript Whiting & Co. express company marking with the notation of the 25¢ express charge is very rare and possibly unique.

By Farm Wagon (1854)



On September 20, 1851, the U.S. Post Office awarded Henry Skillman, a former Army scout, the first contract for carrying mail between San Antonio and Santa Fe (via El Paso) – a 910 mile journey – on Route 6404. Ft. Fillmore was a stop on that route. Skillman initially provided a bimonthly service, but in March 1852 it became a monthly one.

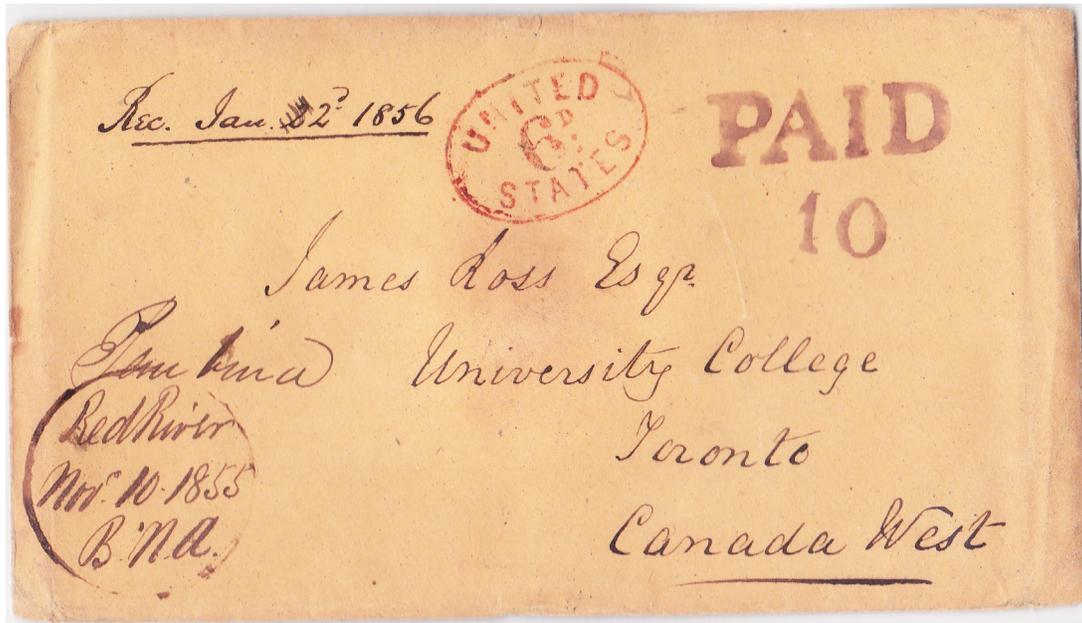
The first run was made using a Concord coach that was pulled by six mules and that was guarded by 18 armed men on horseback. However, the route lacked the infrastructure to continue to support the coaches, so Skillman switched to freight wagons which were often accompanied by horsemen who led pack mules. Eventually, the Postmaster General began to pressure Skillman to again carry passengers. Although he could not afford to build and provision the necessary stage stations, in 1852 he managed to provide passenger and mail service in makeshift, canvas-topped farm wagons, one of which presumably carried this cover. The Postmaster General was understandably dissatisfied with Skillman's performance and his contract was revoked in April 1854.

But that wasn't the end of Skillman's association with the U.S. Mail: he worked for subsequent contractors on the San Antonio—Santa Fe route and was the driver of the first west-bound Butterfield Overland Mail stage when it arrived in El Paso on September 30, 1858. (He had been at the reins without any relief for ninety-six hours.)

It's also interesting to note that during the Civil War, Skillman operated a secret courier service between El Paso del Norte and San Antonio for the Confederate agents who remained in the area during its Union occupation. However, on April 15, 1864 he was tracked down and killed by a detachment of the First California Cavalry near Presidio del Norte.

Fort Fillmore was dedicated on September 23, 1851 and was strategically located to protect settlers and traders from hostile Apaches where several commercial and emigration routes converged. This May 1854 cover is one of the earliest of the 6 reported usages from Fort Fillmore that have a manuscript fort marking,

By Ox Cart (1856)



Until the early 1880s, there were no governmental trans-Canada mail routes so letters between western and eastern Canada were either routed through the U.S. postal system or carried through Canada by the private express of the Hudson's Bay Company. The route via the U.S. used the Red River Trail from the Red River Settlement (also called the Selkirk Settlement and now Winnipeg) to Saint Paul, Minnesota via Pembina, which is now in North Dakota but was then in Minnesota Territory.

For most of the year, the mail was carried on two-wheeled carts which were also laden with pelts from the fur trade. Despite the fact that these carts were made only of wood and animal hides and lacked iron fastenings, they could carry up to half a ton. Each of them was pulled by a single ox that was bracketed by a pair of 12 foot parallel oak shafts (or "trams") that also formed the frame of the cart in the rear. The all-wood, spoked wheels were up to 6 feet in diameter and the oak axle was lashed to the cart by strips of cured bison hide. Because the wheel hubs weren't lubricated, the carts made a hideous squealing sound that could be heard for several miles and that earned the carts the wry nickname of "North West fiddles."

The men who ran the dog sleds and oxcarts were hardy and colorful characters from the Métis people who were the mixed-race descendants of Native American women and European (usually French Canadian) fur trappers.



To Fort Yuma

The following four covers illustrate the evolution of mail transport to Fort Yuma, an important military post in the “Snake” Indian Wars. It’s geographic isolation in southeastern California as well as the challenging topography and climate made mail delivery particularly difficult.

By An All-Water Route (1854)



This cover left Bethlehem, Pa. on August 2, 1854 and was transported by train to New York City where it was put aboard the USMSC steamer *George Law* which departed the city on August 5 and arrived in Aspinwall, Panama on August 15. After crossing the Isthmus by train, it was carried by the PMSC steamer *Sonora* to San Francisco where it arrived on August 31.

From San Francisco, the cover was carried by steamship on the military supply route that was operated by the Colorado Steam Navigation Company. That route went south from San Francisco to San Diego and then around the Baja California peninsula and up the Sea of Cortez to Port Isabel near the mouth of the Colorado River. From there it was put on the *General Jessup*, a 104 foot, side-wheeler steamboat with a thick, flat bottom and shallow draft that was designed specifically for carrying heavy cargo up the Colorado River to Fort Yuma, a distance of approximately 150 miles. (Later boats were more maneuverable stern-wheelers that were better suited to the swift currents and shifting sand bars of the river.) At the time that this cover was sent, the *General Jessup* was the only military supply steamer that operated on that river.

The letter is addressed to Lieut. Beekman DuBarry, care of Major Osborne Cross, the Army Quartermaster in San Francisco. However, DuBarry - who was in charge of a battery in the 3rd Artillery Regiment - had been assigned to Ft. Yuma in June of 1854. Therefore, Major Cross lined out the address in the distinctive red ink that the military typically used and added the Fort Yuma forwarding address.

Only two covers have been reported that were carried on this unique and early “all-water” route from San Francisco to Fort Yuma which utilized a purpose-built boat. This cover is the finer.

Via Mule-Back (1854)



This cover followed much the same route to the West Coast as the previous one:

It left West Point, N.Y. on November 3, 1854 and was transported by train to New York City. It was then put on board the USMSC steamer *George Law* which left New York on November 6 and arrived in Aspinwall, Panama on November 15. After crossing the Isthmus by train, it was transferred to the PMSC steamer *John L. Stevens* which left Panama on November 16 and arrived in San Francisco on November 24 with 317 bags of mail. It was then transported by coastal steamship from San Francisco to San Diego by the California Steam Navigation Company.

At that point in its journey, the cover left the U.S. mail system.

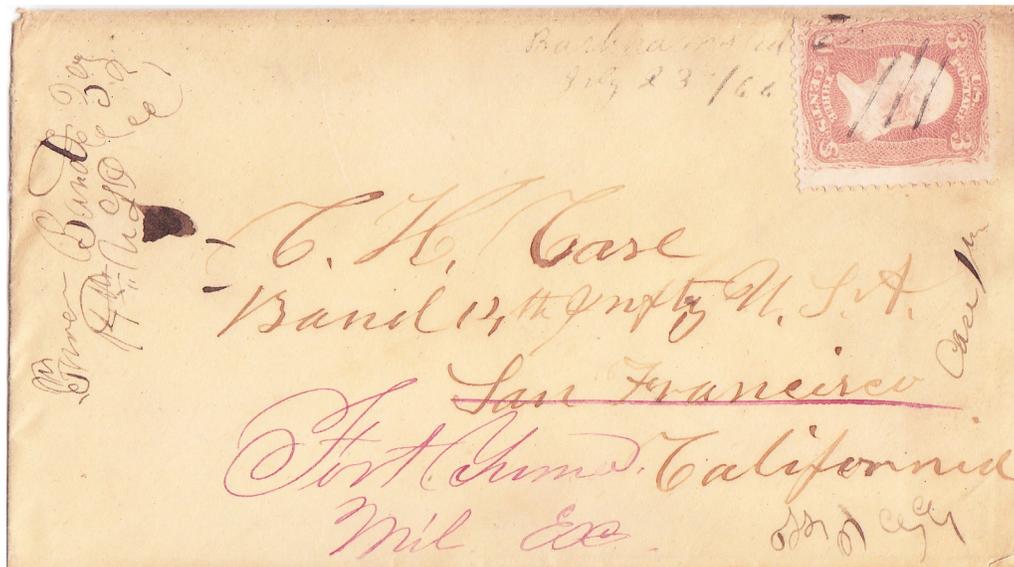
It was transferred to the "Desert Dispatch" which had been established earlier in 1854 by two former enlisted men, Samuel Warnock and Joseph Swycaffer, who contracted with the U.S. Army to operate a military express between San Diego and Fort Yuma. Twice each month, one started eastward from Old Town in San Diego and the other started westward from Fort Yuma. They each rode on mule-back since that was the only reliable means of crossing the Colorado Desert with its mountains and sand dunes, searing heat, and scarce grass and water.

The 1854 usage is supported by the fact that Lieut. DuBarry was stationed at Fort Yuma from June 1854 to July 31, 1856 and also by the fact that the transcontinental rate increased from 6 cents to 10 cents on April 1, 1855. Note that this letter was prepaid 6 cents in stamps but it was charged a second, unpaid rate of 10 cents.

There are no more than 10 reported covers that were carried by the "Desert Express" and this is certainly one of the earliest.

Finally, it's interesting to note that mail is still delivered on mule-back in the United States. That's the mode of transport to Supai, Arizona (ZIP 86435), an Indian Village which is more than 2000 feet below the rim of the Grand Canyon.

By A Soldier On Horse-back (1866)



This cover, which originated in Barkhamsted CT on July 23, 1866, was addressed to a member of the 14th Infantry Army Band in San Francisco, which was the headquarters of the Department of the Pacific. It was then redirected by the office of the Quartermaster with the notation "Fort Yuma, Mil Ex" in the same red ink and handwriting that was used on the first cover in this "Fort Yuma" series.

The cover was subsequently sent to Los Angeles by military steamer and then to San Diego by stagecoach. From there it was carried by a soldier on horseback to Fort Yuma via the Jacumba Pass, a route that avoided the harshest portions of the Colorado Desert. According to docketing on the reverse of this cover, it arrived in Fort Yuma on August 29, 1866.

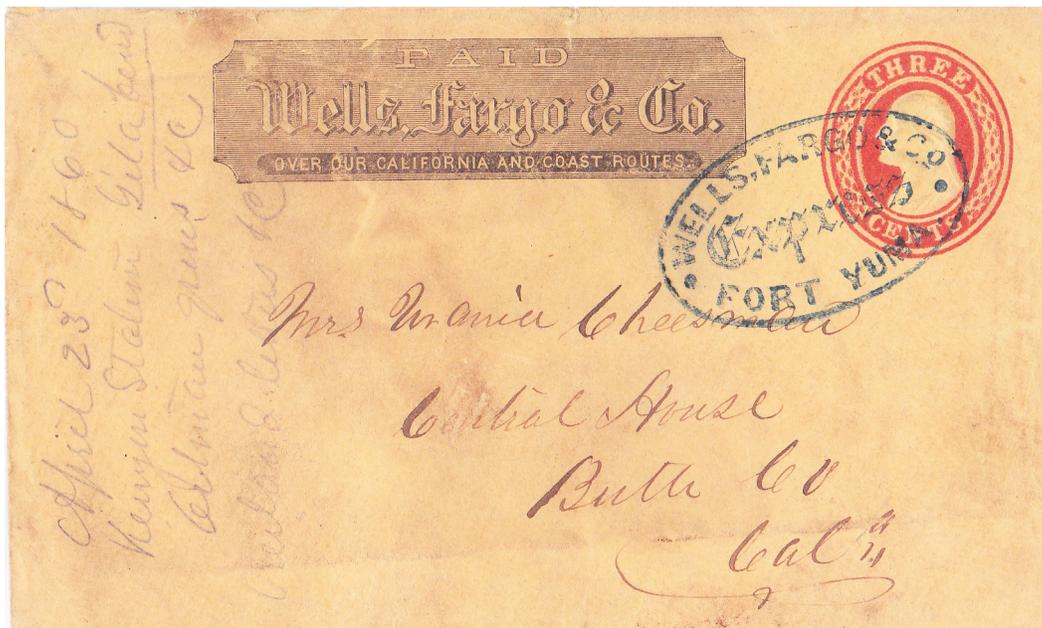
The first regularly scheduled military express to Fort Yuma left San Diego on July 16, 1866. However, shortly after that (on July 26, 1866), Major General McDowell, the Adjutant General, solicited sealed proposals for the privatization of the express. The specifications included "a weekly military express mail bag to Fort Yuma from any U.S. Post Office in Southern California" until such time as the Post Office took over the route. The contract was awarded to Banning & Co. which began weekly stagecoach service from Wilmington, California to Fort Yuma via Los Angeles and San Bernardino on September 10, 1866.

Thus, this cover was carried by a military rider in the two month period between the establishment of an express to Fort Yuma by the U.S. Army and the contracting of that service to a private stage company.

It's interesting to note that prior to 1856, some of the military express riders were highly-paid civilian employees of the Army but after that date (and in an effort to cost costs) they were all extra-duty soldiers. Although some were chased and even killed by Indians, the express riders seldom got the best horses because those were usually reserved for the cavalry.

Finally, it's worth noting that many military expresses also carried civilian mail when space permitted. This was particularly true in the Southwest after the demise of the Post Office's Butterfield route in 1861. Although many letters were undoubtedly carried by this means, it is rare to be able to prove that by a military endorsement.

By Stagecoach (1860)



This cover is docketed along the left side as originating on April 23, 1860 from Kenyon Station, Arizona (previously Murderer's Grave Station) which was a stop on the Southern Overland (Butterfield) route. It was carried by the Overland Mail Company (OMC) or by private means to Fort Yuma. It then crossed the Colorado River on a rope ferry a mile downstream from the fort at Jaeger's Ferry where the Wells Fargo office and the OMC stage station were located. From that point, the cover was carried by the OMC to Los Angeles on a rugged celerity wagon that was probably pulled by wild mules. This type of coach was reportedly designed by John Butterfield himself and featured canvas sides, a wide track (to discourage tipping over), and broad steel "tires" (to avoid sinking into the sand). From Los Angeles to San Francisco, the OMC used a larger and more comfortable (relatively speaking) Concord coach that was pulled by a team of four to six horses. This is the type of coach that most of us recognize from movie Westerns.



CELERITY WAGON



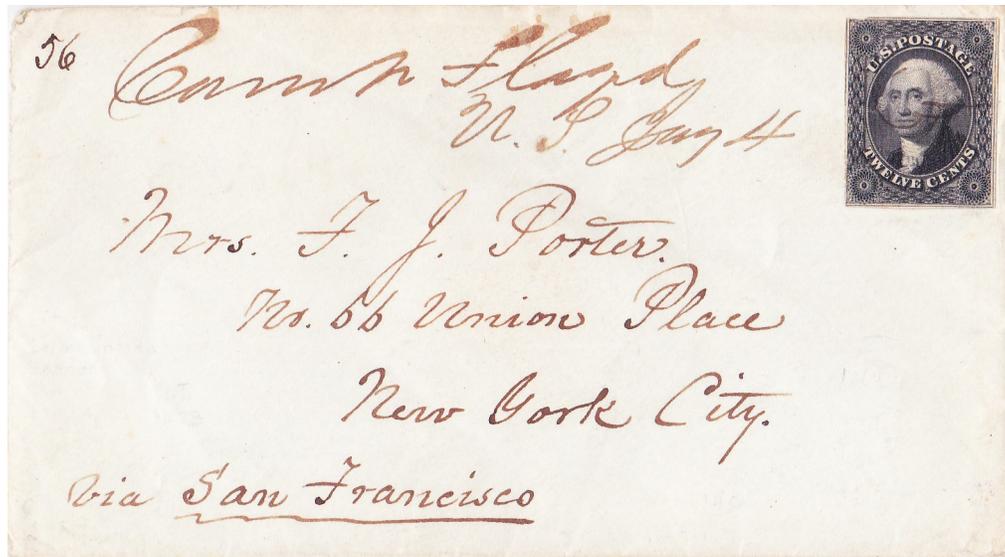
CONCORD COACH

There are two other interesting aspects of this cover: First, it was mailed shortly after Wells Fargo – which was a major creditor of the OMC – deposed John Butterfield as the president of the company in March of 1860 and effectively took over its control. Second, this is most likely the earliest recorded Wells Fargo cover from its express office in Fort Yuma which was established some time in 1859. (The month is unrecorded.)

Over the Mountains

The Sierra Nevada mountains lay astride the most direct route between San Francisco—the commercial “hub” of the West—and the eastern United States. Therefore, there was considerable incentive to develop a swift and reliable “four seasons” route over this formidable barrier. The following three covers illustrate how rapidly these efforts progressed over the course of only a decade.

By Mule-Drawn Sleigh (1859)



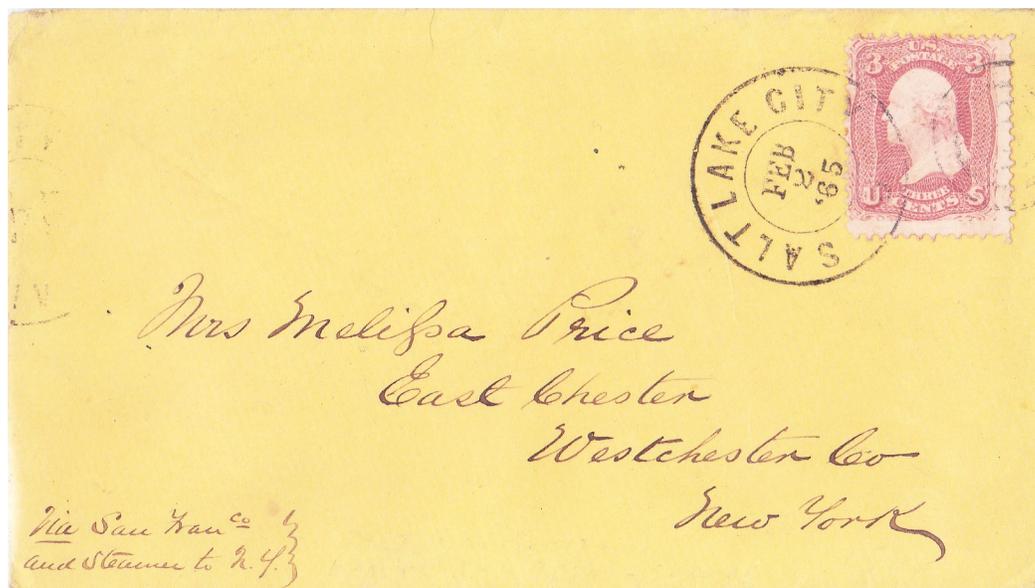
During the winter of 1858-59, John “Snowshoe” Thompson, in association with John Chiles, started a stage line between Placerville, California and Genoa (Carson Valley), Nevada. George Chorpenning held the contract for carrying the U.S. Mail between Salt Lake City and Placerville and they thus became subcontractors to him for carrying the winter mails over the Sierra Nevada Mountains for \$2000 per year. The mode of transport of this letter between Genoa in the eastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Strawberry Station in the western foothills was described in the *Sacramento Daily Union*, on January 12, 1859:

The new road over the mountains, so far from being obstructed by snow is really much better than in the summer. The snow has covered the rocks and rough ground, and the sleigh runs above them on the packed snow. Thompson has two sleighs and two teams of mules, with which he travels the road daily . . . the distance traveled on snow (is) twenty-five miles.

Other sources indicate that, prior to the construction of the sleighs, the wheels were removed from the stage coaches when they reached the snow line and runners were attached. There are also references to Thompson sometimes utilizing horses wearing custom snowshoes to pull the loaded sleighs. When the snow was too deep for sleighs, he would put 50-70 lbs. of mail in a backpack and then either hike on foot or traverse the mountains on seven foot Norwegian skis.

The “new” road that the newspaper referred to was completed in December 1858 and had the virtue of avoiding the Goose Creek Mountains and thus the worst of the winter snows. Because of that, the Post Office was able to restore a direct mail route between Salt Lake City and San Francisco. The importance of that route cannot be overestimated because it became a critical component of the daily, all-season transcontinental mail service that began on July 1, 1861.

Via Turnpike and Ocean Steamer (1865)



By the time that this cover was mailed in 1865, the road across the mountains between Placerville and Carson Valley had been widened and re-graded so that it could carry as much as ten tons of freight on wagons that were pulled by as many as a dozen horses or mules. The line of freight wagons could sometimes reach half a mile in length. In addition, three or four large passenger stages crossed the mountains in each direction daily. Many of the key improvements were made by private companies in the form of “turnpikes” for which they charged tolls. These “turnpikes” usually paralleled and bypassed the slower or more hazardous portions of the main road which had been built with public funds. Despite its dramatic improvements, by 1865 the Placerville Road which ran just south of Lake Tahoe to Salt Lake City faced considerable competition from the Dutch Flat Road which ran north of the lake to Virginia City. Indeed, the Pioneer Stage Company and the California Stage Company – the dominant lines on the Placerville and the Dutch Flat roads respectively – were bitter rivals.

Another significant aspect of this cover is that it was routed westward to San Francisco and then carried by steamer to New York even though the overland route had been the normal or “default” one for transcontinental mail since December 17, 1859. However, on January 7, 1865, a party of sixty Indians attacked and robbed the overland mail express coach three miles east of Julesburg between Fort Laramie and Fort Kearney. The 70 or so soldiers who responded were driven back to their post by 500 Indian reinforcements who then entered the express station and burned it, thus destroying a critical grain depot for the Central Overland Mail. Because of this and the destruction of all of the other stations over a 380 mile stretch of the route, the overland mail was suspended between Atchison and Denver and still hadn’t been restored as of February 15.

These kinds of interruptions had been occurring intermittently since 1862 and the Post Office’s response had been inconsistent: in some cases, it had automatically sent the transcontinental mail via the ocean route, but in other cases it had permitted the mail to pile up at either end of the interruption in the usually vain expectation that the route would quickly be re-opened by the Army. As this cover demonstrates, some writers weren’t willing to take their chances with the Post Office’s judgement, so they specifically endorsed their letters to be carried via the ocean route.

By An “Over the Mountains” Express Train (1870)



This cover was carried from Salt Lake City to Ogden Utah on the Utah Central Railroad which had only recently been completed in January of 1870. That line – the first intrastate railroad in Utah – had been built by the Mormons to connect their capital, Salt Lake City, with the new transcontinental railroad.

In Ogden, the cover was transferred to the Central Pacific Railroad. The eastern terminus of that railroad had been advanced 60 miles from Promontory to Ogden sometime in the first half of 1870 though a \$2.8 M purchase from the Union Pacific Railroad. At that point, Ogden became a major terminus on the transcontinental railroad because passengers and freight changed rail lines there.

From Ogden, this cover crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the Central Pacific Railroad’s “Pacific Express.” A passenger train had first crossed the mountains on June 18, 1868 following the completion of Tunnel No. 5 on August 28 of the previous year. That 1,659 ft. “Summit Tunnel” at the Donner Pass (elevation 7,056 ft.) had taken almost 5 years to build.

It is important to note that since December 1, 1869, Wells Fargo had been the exclusive provider of express service on the Central Pacific Railroad, having purchased the franchise from the Pacific Union Express Company. Wells Fargo – whose stagecoach business was already faltering due to the expansion of the railroads – had paid such an inflated price (\$5 M) that the value of its stock sank even further, a development that eventually facilitated a hostile takeover of its stage business.

Despite the fact that the Central Pacific advertised that it provided “through train service” from San Francisco, the tracks terminated on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. The San Francisco and Oakland Railroad and the San Francisco and Alameda Railroad had operated cross-bay ferries from Oakland Point and Alameda Terminal respectively until 1870 when the Central Pacific Railroad took over both of these railroads and their ferries. For the most part, the ferries carried passengers rather than trains although there was some ferrying of freight cars. The largest of these cross-bay ferries was the *El Capitan*, a single stack paddle steamer that had been put into service in 1868 in anticipation of increased traffic when the transcontinental railroad was extended from Sacramento (its original western terminus) to Oakland. The transit time across San Francisco Bay by ferry was 30 minutes. It wasn’t until September 23, 1938 that trains crossed the water to San Francisco on tracks via the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.