



Chapter Twelve

Colorado Mail Routes, 1858-1861

The discovery of gold in the Pike's Peak region of Colorado led to yet another large westward migration. In July 1858, a prospecting party discovered gold along Cherry Creek near today's Denver. By the spring of 1859, gold seekers by the thousands were making their way from the United States to the Pike's Peak region. Sensing a business opportunity, William Russell and John Jones formed a private express company to carry passengers, gold and express mail between the gold fields and the Missouri River towns that formed the western border of the United States. Figure 12-1 shows a map of the region.

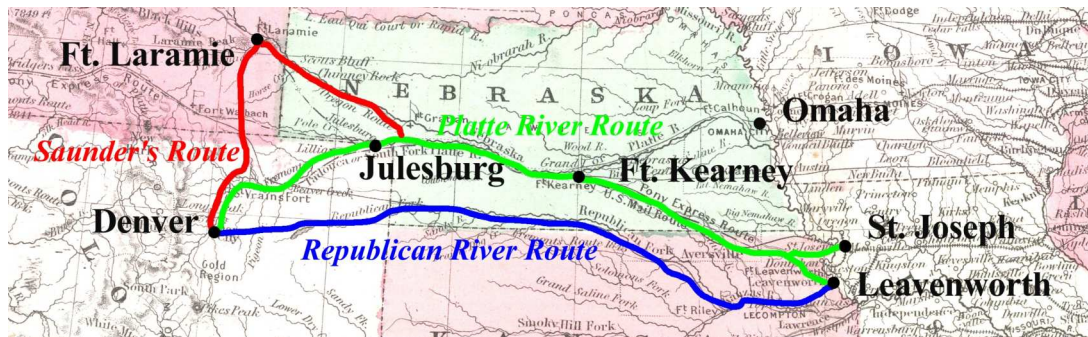


Figure 12-1. Map showing the routes used to access the Colorado Pike's Peak gold region near Denver from the Missouri River frontier towns.

The history of the private express mails and the U.S. contract mails are intertwined in this period, so this chapter considers them jointly in chronological order. The period begins with the informal arrangements for the transport of mail in 1858 and ends with the July 1, 1861 start of the daily overland contract mail.

Opening the Pike's Peak Region

The Green Russell party from Georgia discovered gold in July 1858 and established the town of Auraria near their diggings. Two months later, the Lawrence (Kansas) party arrived in the area and laid out the towns of Montana and St. Charles. By November, the cold weather had driven most of the Lawrence party back to the United States, so William Larimer took over the St. Charles site, re-naming it Denver City.

Figure 12-2 shows how the settlements appeared in 1859. This is a view toward the west of the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek, with the Rocky Mountains in the background. The tents to the left are the early settlement at Auraria and the area to the lower right is the settlement of St. Charles.



Figure 12-2. An 1859 view of the settlements at the Denver town site.

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Initially, mail from the new settlements was carried back to the United States by returning gold miners, but the settlers soon determined to have a more regular service. They contracted with mountain man Jim Saunders to carry mail between the Cherry Creek settlements and Fort Laramie for 50 cents a letter. His one documented trip left Denver on November 23, 1858 and arrived at Fort Laramie on January 9, 1859.¹ No letters are known to have survived from any of his mail-carrying trips, but they would show entry into the U.S. mails at Fort Laramie during the January-April 1859 period. Saunders reportedly made several other trips, but no information is known about them.

Figure 12-3 shows an example of one of the very few surviving 1858 letters. This example from October 1858 is the earliest known cover from the Denver gold mining region.



Figure 12-3. Cover datelined October 28, 1858 near Cherry Creek. Carried by a returning traveler to Pacific City, Iowa and mailed on December 4.

This letter was written by E.P. “Pinkie” Stout, who arrived in Denver on October 24, 1858 with the Dudley party. He datelined it “South Platte Near the Rocky Mountains Oct 28th 1858” and explained that, “an officer of the army at Ft. Kearny who came out with us returns tomorrow and will take our letters there & mail them from which place the mail runs once a week to the states.” The letter was taken to Pacific City, Iowa (just south of Omaha, Nebraska) and postmarked there on December 4, prepaid three cents postage to Ohio. Stout settled in Denver City, and served as President of the Denver City Town Company from its inception on November 22, 1858 to September 24, 1859. For return mail, he instructed his wife to direct letters to Fort Kearney or Fort Laramie.

A November 1858 cover carried via Fort Kearney is shown in Figure 12-4. This letter from George Salsy, a member of the Lawrence party, is datelined “Montana K.T. Dec 2nd 1858” and describes the growing gold rush to Pike’s Peak. He endorsed the envelope “Montana K(ansas) T(erritory) Cherry Creek Gold Mines” and gave it to a member of his party who was leaving the next day to return home. The letter was prepaid three cents U.S. postage to Michigan and postmarked on December 30 at Fort Kearney, Nebraska. For return mail, he gave the address of “Montana near Cherry Creek via Fort Laramie.”



Figure 12-4. Cover datelined December 2, 1858 from Montana K. T. and carried by a returning prospector to Fort Kearney on December 30.

The May 7, 1859 *Rocky Mountain News* reported the arrival at Cherry Creek of what was likely the last mail via Fort Laramie (Saunders route shown in red on Figure 12-1 map) before the express mails began. It reported that:

Three days ago the Laramie mail came in, bringing we learn 1500 letters and a great number of papers which are delivered to their proper owners upon payment of fifty cents for each letter and ten cents for each paper. This is a heavy tax, yet we are glad to get them at any price and only mention it to show the necessity for some kind of regular postal favors – We learn there is a movement on foot to petition the P.O. at this place and presume before our next issue movement will be made, when we shall take occasion to allude to these matters again.

In response to multiple petitions, great changes in communication were already underway. On January 18, 1859 the U.S. Post Office Department had established post offices at Auraria and Montana,² and on March 18, a post office was also established at Coraville,³ in Denver City. However, no contract routes were authorized to serve these new post offices until July 1860, so their function was very limited. To fill that void, the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company began running express mails in April 1859, and their first mail arrived in Denver on May 7, 1859.

The Formation of the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company

The partnership of Jones & Russell formed the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company (L&PP) in February 1859. Its purpose was to serve the growing tide of emigrants to the Pike's Peak region, so they purchased 52 new stagecoaches using 90-day loans. Russell announced the new service in the March 12, 1859 *Leavenworth Herald*, claiming a daily line of coaches between Leavenworth and Denver, with trip times under twelve days, starting April 10. Unfortunately, the coaches did not arrive until Sunday, April 17 so service began on April 18. In the meantime, the L&PP mapped out a new route to Denver along the Solomon and Republican Rivers (the blue route in Figure 12-1), establishing re-stocking way stations along the route.

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Table 12-1 shows a reconstructed L&PP trip table for the April to June 1859 period.

Table 12-1 Schedule of L&PP Trips in 1859

Westbound		
Depart Leavenworth	Arrive Denver	Notes
Mon April 18, 1859	Sat May 7, 1859	Reported as first trip by 5/21 <i>Missouri Republican</i>
Sat April 23	Thu May 12	Reported as second trip by 5/14 <i>Rocky Mountain News</i>
Sat April 30	Wed May 18*	Census: 4/30 L&PP, May 19 return to Leavenworth
Mon May 2*	Fri May 20*	May 21 return to Leavenworth
Wed May 4*	Sun May 22*	May 23 return to Leavenworth
Fri May 6*	Tues May 24*	May 25 return to Leavenworth
Wed May 11	Sat May 28*	Census: 5/11 L&PP, June 1 return to Leavenworth
Sat May 21	Mon June 2*	Census: 5/21 L&PP, June 3 return to Leavenworth
Mon May 23	Wed June 4*	Census: 5/23 L&PP
Wed May 25	Mon June 6	Greeley/Richardson trip, June 7 return to Leavenworth
Fri May 27	Wed June 8*	June 9 return to Leavenworth
Mon May 30*	Fri June 10*	June 11 return to Leavenworth
Fri June 3*	Wed June 15*	June 17 return to Leavenworth
Eastbound		
Depart Denver	Arrive Leavenworth	Notes
Tues May 10, 1859	Fri May 20, 1859	Census: 5/9 L&PP; first return trip
Fri May 13	Wed May 25	Reported 2 nd return trip by 5/28 <i>Leavenworth Weekly Herald</i>
Thu May 19	Sat May 28	Reported 3 rd return trip by 5/30 <i>Leavenworth Daily Times</i>
Sat May 21	Thu June 2	Census: 5/21 L&PP via Leavenworth 6/3
Mon May 23	Sun May 29	Census: 5/23 L&PP via Leavenworth 5/29
Wed May 25	Wed June 8	Census: 5/25 L&PP via Leav. 6/9; <i>NY Herald-Tribune</i> 6/9
Wed June 1	Fri June 10	Census: 6/1 L&PP via Leav. 6/12; <i>NY Evening Post</i> 6/11
Fri June 3*	Sat June 11*	(No report on this trip)
Tues June 7	Mon June 13	June 14 <i>NY Evening Post</i> ; 1,000 letters
Thu June 9	Thu June 16	June 23 <i>NY Times</i> ; June 11 <i>Rocky Mountain News</i>
Sat June 11	Mon June 19	Brought Greeley report; June 22 <i>NY Herald Tribune</i>
Thu June 17	Thu June 30	July 5 <i>NY Evening Post</i> ; July 1 <i>Springfield Republican</i>

* Dates are inferred from connecting trip data and typical trip times.

The trip tables show that, after a slow start, trips left from Leavenworth on a fairly regular Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule. Once the stagecoaches arrived at Denver, they were turned around in a day

or two for the return trip to Leavenworth. Westbound trips initially took about 18 to 19 days, but were reduced to around twelve days by mid-May. At ten to twelve days, initial eastbound trips were faster than the westbound trips. These trips times were also reduced as the route became more developed, to as low as six days in late May. On May 28, 1859, L&PP announced regular Monday-Wednesday-Friday departures from Denver. The same announcement set charges for letters at 25 cents for the express fee plus three cents for a U.S. stamped envelope.

The spring of 1859 brought great discouragement to the Pike's Peak gold mining region, as no significant new gold discoveries were made. Many miners began to return home, believing that the gold mines had played out. In June 1859, eastern journalists Horace Greeley and Albert Richardson visited the mines and wrote a favorable report of their very promising potential. That report reached Leavenworth on June 19, and the frantic gold rush resumed. The L&PP kept a low profile following the early reports of no gold, but kicked into full operation with the Greeley Report. On June 21, they began running ads in the Leavenworth *Times* stating that:

Jones, Russell & Co.'s express to the gold mines will leave every day when coaches are full of passengers. No coach will leave, except on Tuesdays, unless there are six passengers. One, two or three coaches will start every day, if there are passengers enough to justify. Fare \$125, including 20 lbs. baggage. Extra baggage will be charged express rates. John S. Jones, Supt.

Mail Carried by the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company

The "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co." express marking without year-date was prepared for the Leavenworth express office, and a variety with 1859 year-date was used at Denver.

The Republican River route mapping party returned to Leavenworth, and probably collected the eastbound cover in Figure 12-5 at one of the newly-established way stations on April 26. It bears the earliest known use of the Leavenworth "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co." express marking. It was prepaid three cents postage to Virginia, and was postmarked at Leavenworth City, Kansas Territory on April 27, 1859.



Figure 12-5. Eastbound cover marked "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co." on April 26, 1859 and posted in Leavenworth City, K. T. on April 27.

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Figure 12-6 shows the earliest westbound use of the Leavenworth express marking. This letter was prepaid three cents postage and posted in Stouts, Ohio on April 15, 1859. Unaware that the L&PP had commenced operations, the sender endorsed the cover "By way of Fort Larimia" expecting that it would be carried by private messenger from Fort Laramie to Denver. The Post Office Department, however, had instructions to deliver the Denver mails to the L&PP in Leavenworth City, from whence the L&PP would

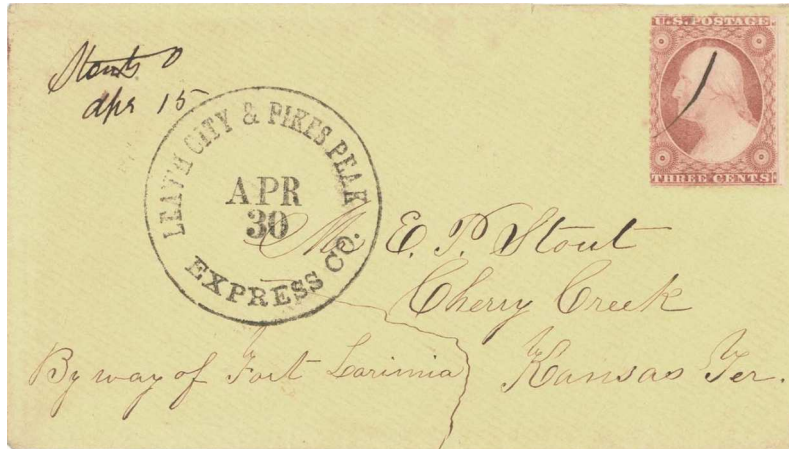


Figure 12-6. Westbound cover posted in Stouts, Ohio on April 15, 1859. Marked "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co. Apr 30" at Leavenworth City.

transport them to Denver at no additional cost to the post office. Accordingly, this letter was probably diverted from St Joseph (the terminus for the mail route to Fort Laramie) to Leavenworth City, where it was delivered to the L&PP, who marked it with their April 30 "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co." express marking without year-date. It was then dispatched to Denver on their third westbound trip, which departed Leavenworth on Saturday, April 30 and arrived in Denver around May 18. This letter was sent to "Pinkie" Stout (see Figure 12-3) from his wife. The 25 cents express fee was collected on delivery.

An unpublished census of L&PP covers by Richard Frajola and Ken Stach includes eight westbound and eight eastbound covers. Figure 12-7 shows the Denver "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co." express marking on an eastbound cover.

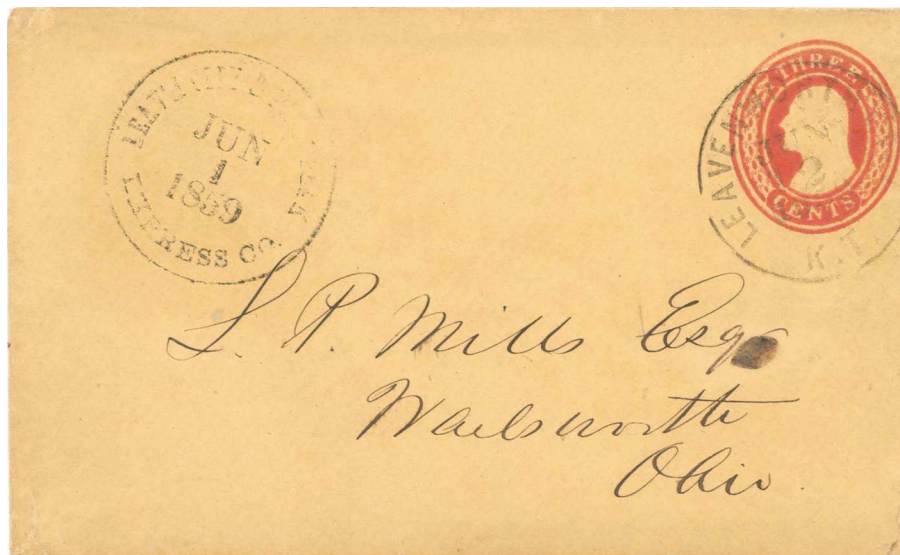


Figure 12-7. Eastbound cover marked "Leav'h City & Pike's Peak Express Co." on June 1, 1859 at Denver and forwarded via Leavenworth City on June 12.

This Nesbitt stamped three cents envelope originated in Denver, where it was given to the L&PP for transmittal east. L&PP collected its 25 cents express fee and marked it with their express marking on June 1, 1859. It was carried on the seventh eastbound trip, which arrived in Leavenworth on June 10. It entered the U.S. mails to Ohio on June 12 at Leavenworth City.

The Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company Expands

Not content to carry only passengers, mail and gold between Denver and Leavenworth City, the L&PP purchased the weekly U.S. mail contract between St Joseph, Missouri and Salt Lake City from John Hockaday on May 11, 1859 (described in Chapter Seven). This acquisition, financed with debt, further stressed the already fragile L&PP finances. It also necessitated a change in route from the Republican River route (shown in blue in Figure 12-1) to the Platte River route (shown in green in Figure 12-1). The June 11, 1859 *Denver Rocky Mountain News* reported that:

On Monday morning last (note: June 6) Mr. Williams of the Express arrived here with one of the company's coaches, in six days and twenty-three hours⁴ from Leavenworth City. This we consider making pretty good time, bringing us mail from the eastern cities in twelve days, and telegraphic dispatches in Leavenworth papers in seven days.

Mr. Williams informs us that he has made an entire change in the location of the mail route. The company having purchased the stock and route of the Salt Lake and California mail, will now move their whole force to the Platte route by way of Fort Kearney to the South Platte crossing, from whence one line will continue up the North Platte to Laramie and the South Pass, the other diverging, following the South Platte to this place – Mr. W. gave the necessary orders for the removal of all stations to the Platte as he came up... This is only another proof of the superiority of the Great Platte route over others bending across the plains.

In a letter to the June 18, 1859 *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, Williams further explained that:

Denver City, June 11th, 1859.

Messrs Editors,

Dear Sirs, – In your last paper you give the reason, as you suppose, why Jones & Russell moved their stock from the new road recently laid out by myself and others from this place to Leavenworth City, to the Platte River Route. You are mistaken in your supposition.

We purchased, after the trains started from Leavenworth, the Salt Lake Mail contract, and designed carrying it over the new road, but could not get the sanction of the Department, and to run the Mail on the Platte and the Express over the new road would be too expensive, we determined to move to the Platte route for the present, but in due time the new road will be the main road to this place... We will leave here with our coaches once each week, carrying the U.S. Mail, also all passengers. Hoping this will find a place in your columns, I remain yours very respectfully,

B.D. Williams, Agent, Jones & Russell's P.P. Exp. Co.

His comment about the U.S. mail reflects an unfortunate misconception by Williams, who thought that the U.S. mail contract purchased by the L&PP included service to Denver, rather than just the mails between St Joseph and Salt Lake City. The implication of this was that L&PP would no longer charge a 25 cents express fee, and would carry the mail between Denver and Leavenworth for just the regular U.S. postage of three cents. This, however, would only have worked financially for the L&PP if it had a U.S. mail contract with an annual subsidy from the Post Office Department.



**Beverly D. Williams, L&PP
Manager, 1822-1907**

- Born in Memphis, Tennessee
- Deputy sheriff in Kentucky, 1842-50
- Pork packing business in Louisville, 1853-56
- General manager of L&PP, 1859
- Territorial representative to Congress, 1860-61
- Captain in Union army, 1862-65

The “Phantom” U.S. Mail Contract

Upon his June 6 arrival in Denver, Williams undoubtedly passed the erroneous information about the U.S. mail contract to John Fox, agent for the L&PP in Denver who, in turn, informed the postmaster of the Coraville post office (located in the same building as the L&PP in Denver), Richard Edes. With the news

of a contract postal route servicing Denver, the formerly moribund Coraville and Auraria post offices jumped into action as dispatching offices.



Figure 12-8. Cover postmarked at Coraville, Kansas Territory on June 8, 1859. Carried to Leavenworth City on July 2 by the L&PP.

Figure 12-8 shows the earliest known Coraville postmark. This cover with a prepaid 25 cents L&PP frank (the dateless handstamp) on a three cents Nesbitt stamped envelope was postmarked in manuscript at Coraville on June 8, 1859. It was not treated as U.S. contract mail at

Coraville since the express fee had been paid so it entered the U.S. mails at Leavenworth City on July 2, per the postmark cancelling the indicia.

By June 17, Coraville was using a straight-line postmark, and the mails were being carried by the L&PP for only three cents

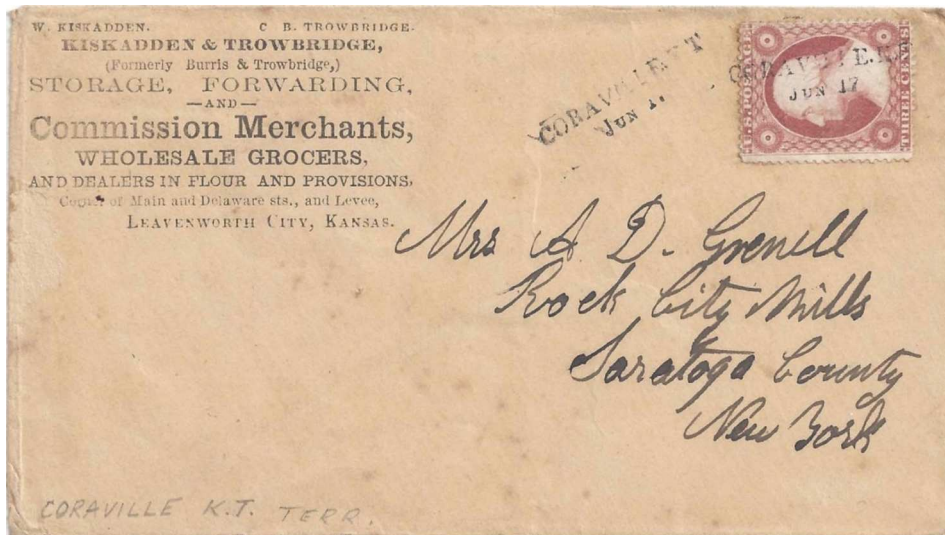


Figure 12-9. Cover postmarked at Coraville, Kansas Territory on June 17, 1859. Carried to Leavenworth City by the L&PP without express charges.

postage. Figure 12-9 shows one of the three known letters carried as U.S. contract mail from Coraville in June 1859. This cover was franked with three cents U.S. postage and postmarked at Coraville on June 17. It was carried by the L&PP free of additional express charges on the coach that left Denver on June 17 and arrived in Leavenworth City on June 30. Since it had already entered the U.S. mails at Coraville, there

was no need for Leavenworth to postmark the cover, and it was sent onward to its destination in New York.

The Auraria post office (across Cherry Creek from Denver and Coraville) also began active operations at this time. The earliest known cover from Auraria is shown in Figure 12-10. This three cents stamped Nesbitt envelope was postmarked at Auraria on June 15, 1859 and carried, free of express charges, to Leavenworth on the June 17 L&PP coach from Denver.

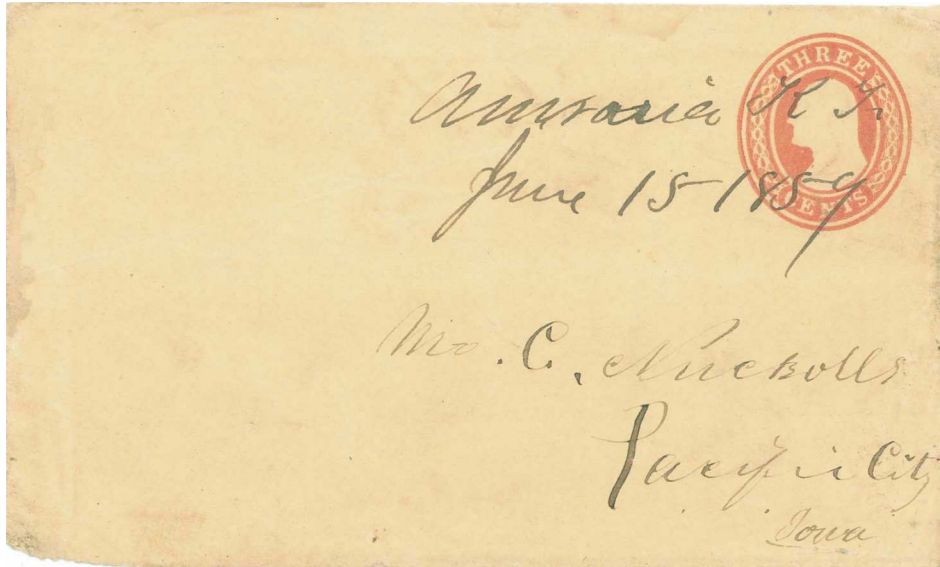


Figure 12-10. Cover postmarked at Auraria, Kansas Territory on June 15, 1859. Carried to Leavenworth City by the L&PP without express charges.

The L&PP made three “phantom” eastbound contract mail trips before Williams’ error was corrected by personnel in Leavenworth in late June. These three mails were sent on June 11 (arrived in Leavenworth on June 20), June 17 (arrived June 30) and June 22 (arrived July 2). After June 22, the L&PP began charging 25 cents express fees on all of the mail carried by it. John Fox explained why in the July 9, 1859 Denver *Rocky Mountain News*:

Dear Sirs: - I am aware that some prejudice is entertained by the citizens of the cities of Auraria and Denver and also the Mountains, against the Express Company of which I am agent at this place...When the Company first commenced running their stages the Postmaster at Leavenworth City was notified to deliver all mail matter for Pike’s Peak, Cherry Creek, and the gold mines of Kansas and Nebraska, to Jones and Russell’s Express Company, as long as they would carry it free of expense to the Government. The Postmaster at Leavenworth City obeyed the order of his superior. The Express Co. receiving no pay from the Government for carrying letters and papers as express matter, who will say that twenty five cents for a letter is unreasonable. It was afterwards in contemplation to transport the mail as a regular U.S. Mail and one of the Company’s agents acting under the impression and belief that arrangements to that effect had been made, announced to the citizens here, and in the mountains, that all mails which would thereafter arrive, would come as U.S. Mail. Under the same impression myself three mails were sent East by me, the letters bearing the three cent stamp only.

The arrangement to carry the mail was not perfected, and the Company, in justice to themselves, were compelled to charge the twenty five cents per letter still...I will close this communication by saying that no U.S. Mail has ever arrived at this office.

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Shortly after the discontinuance of the “phantom” contract mails, the Coraville post office was discontinued on June 25.

Further Changes with the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company

With the greater business scope represented by the St. Joseph-Salt Lake City mail contract, the L&PP name became less descriptive. The latest known L&PP express marking is dated July 2, 1859 and new dated express markings reading “Jones & Russell's Pike's Peak Express Co.” were prepared for Denver City and Leavenworth City. Only one example of the “Leavn'th City” variety is known, used on July 25, 1859. The “Denver City” handstamp arrived in Denver on July 20, and was quickly put into use on eastbound mail starting around July 22. Figure 12-11 shows an early example.



Figure 12-11. Cover marked “Jones & Russell's Pike's Peak Express Co. Denver City July 29, 1859.” Forwarded via Leavenworth City on August 8.

This letter was datelined from “Near Gregory diggings on a branch of Clear Creek, Nebraska Territory July 17th 59” and was carried by the Jones & Russell's Pike's Peak Express Company (Jones & Russell) on the stagecoach that left Denver on July 29. It ran over the new Platte River route to Leavenworth City, where it entered the U.S. mails on August 8. In this letter, W.H. Mann describes his westbound trip across the plains via “the express route which follows up between the

Republican and Smokey Hill Forks after leaving Junction City (at the head of the Kansas River)” to Denver, where he arrived on July 4, 1859. His was the last westbound trip over the old Republican River route.

The new Platte River route became fully operational with the westbound stagecoach that left Denver on July 2, 1859. A letter to the July 22, 1859 *Leavenworth Daily Times* described this first trip:

Denver City, July 9, 1859.

Editor of the Times: Through your columns we wish to make favorable mention of the Express Company of Messrs. Jones & Russell. We left Leavenworth on Saturday morning (note: July 2) at 10, A.M., 2d inst., and were landed here this morning at 7, A.M., making the entire trip in six days and twenty-one hours. The appointments of the route far exceeded our expectations, and when every arrangement that they have now under way is completed, there will be thrown open to the public one of the best, if not the best, stage routes in the world. The stations will be from twenty to thirty miles apart...The coach on which we came was the first one on the Platte Route, and consequently was subject to more than ordinary delay. By a computation of our own, we are able to say that twenty-eight hours were lost at the different stations in getting up the mules and arranging for the travel which is ready to go on to the line.

The movement to the Platte River route was not without glitches. The coaches from Denver were intended to connect with the Salt Lake City mail coaches at Julesburg for the trip between there and St. Joseph. However, the Leavenworth *Times* of June 24 and July 4, 1859 reported that the Salt Lake City stagecoaches refused to receive either passengers or letters. This was soon rectified, and the new route ran smoothly.

Further Efforts for a U.S. Contract Mail

Frustrated by the lack of contract mail routes, the postmaster at Auraria, Henry Allen, decided to contract directly for a weekly U.S. mail. In the July 9, 1859 Denver *Rocky Mountain News*, he announced that:

Mail Notice – Please inform your readers that I have made arrangements with Mr. Willis, one of the employees of the United States Express Company, to carry the mail from Auraria to the Missouri River, the contract to commence on Monday next (note: July 11), and continue to depart every Monday morning until further notice. Therefore 3 cent postage will convey the letters to the States, and the same back as soon as the agent gets through.

Willis received the total postage of each mail carried as compensation, and followed the Platte River route to Fort Kearney, where letters continued on in the U.S. mails.

Figure 12-12 shows a cover carried in the first Willis contract mail. This cover was prepaid three cents U.S. postage and postmarked at the Auraria Kansas Territory post office on July 12 (corrected from July 11), 1859. It was carried to Fort Kearney by Willis on his first trip under contract to the Auraria postmaster. The corrected Auraria postmark indicates that Willis left a day late, on Tuesday, July 12.

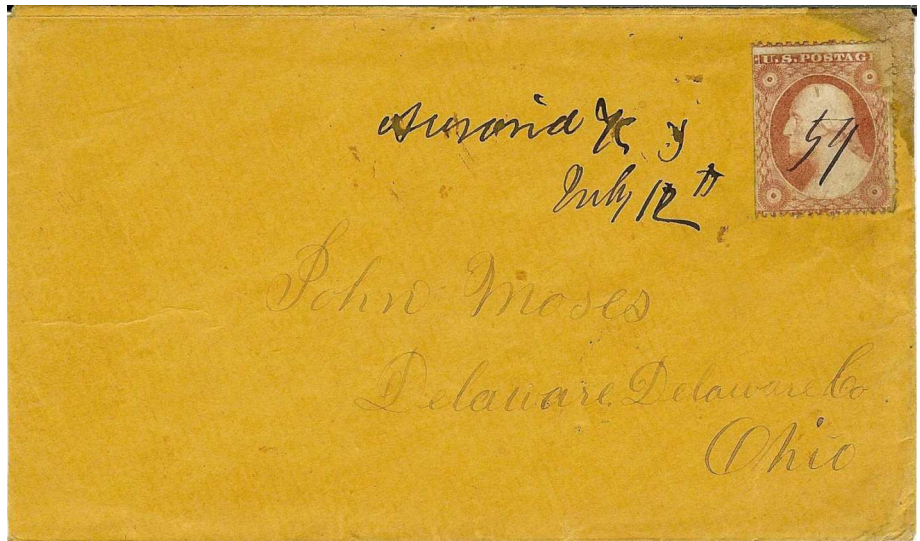


Figure 12-12. Cover postmarked with Auraria, Kansas Territory on July 12, 1859. Carried to Fort Kearney by Willis, under contract to the Auraria postmaster.

Willis' service was evidently unsatisfactory, since the following notice appeared in the August 27, 1859 Denver *Rocky Mountain News*:

The Mails – We learn from Mr. Allen, the postmaster, that Mr. Willis has failed to carry out the contract taken by him to carry the U.S. mail from this office to Fort Kearney...Mr. Allen has now entered into a contract with the Express Company by which mails will be transported three times a week each way between Auraria and Fort Kearney in U.S. mail bags, which will be opened only by the postmasters at either end of the line. The charge will be twenty five cents for each letter and ten cents for each paper in addition to the U.S. postage – that being the compensation allowed the Express Co.

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We can now rely upon having mails carried with promptness and dispatch, and the compensation is as little as any responsible company or individual will undertake to transport it for.

Since government has failed to extend to us privileges and advantages of postal facilities, we are certainly fortunate in being able to secure tri-weekly service even at the cost of twenty-five cents per letter, in the hands of so prompt a company as Jones Russell & Co. The mail will leave hereafter, until further notice, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday of each week at 6 ½ o'clock a.m.

The Express Company also carry letters and papers to and from their office in Denver, at the same rates as formerly, they paying the U.S. postage.

Figure 13-13 shows a cover carried on Willis' last contract run to Fort Kearney. This cover was prepaid three cents U.S. postage and postmarked at the Auraria Kansas Territory post office on August 23, 1859. Auraria by then was using a straight-line postmark, which is known used in the period from July 26 to August 26, 1859. Willis left Denver on August 26 and carried the letter to Fort Kearney, where it continued on in the U.S. mails to Illinois.

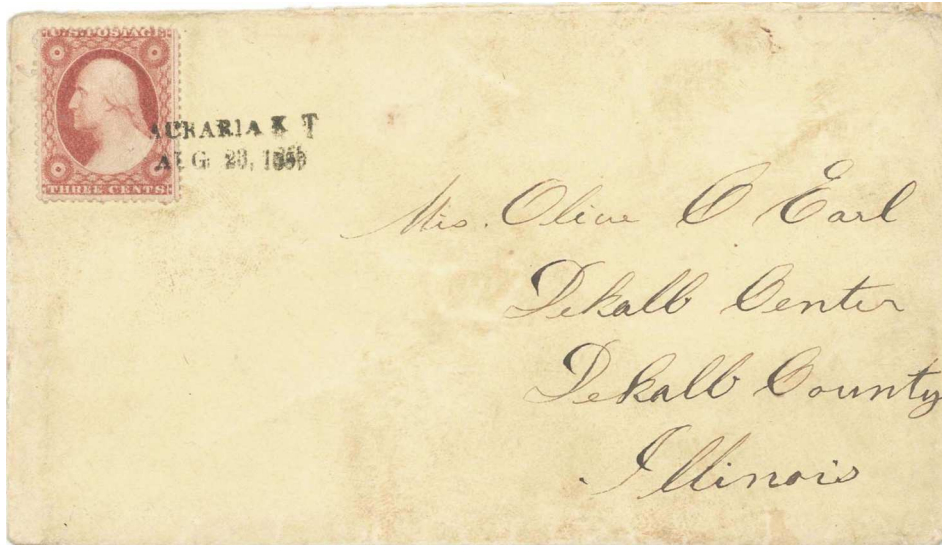


Figure 12-13. Cover postmarked at Auraria, Kansas Territory on August 23, 1859. Carried to Fort Kearney by Willis, under contract to the Auraria postmaster.

The Only Game in Town

With the failure of Allen's efforts to establish a U.S. contract mail, Jones & Russell was the only option for getting a letter between the United States and Denver. Although Allen's August 27 announcement offered to process mail "in U.S. mail bags" there was no reason for a letter-writer to give his mail to the post office, since the fees were the same whether processed through the post office or directly by Jones & Russell. Accordingly, no letters postmarked at Auraria are known from August 27, 1859 to its discontinuance on February 11, 1860. On that date, the Auraria post office was moved across Cherry Creek and became the Denver City post office. Even so, no letters are known postmarked from Denver City until August 16, 1860.

At the same time that Allen optimistically described their tri-weekly service, Jones & Russell announced a reduced schedule, effective August 22, 1859:

From and after Monday, August 22nd, Jones Russell & Co.'s Express Stage Coaches will leave Denver City for Leavenworth City, on Thursdays...6 ½ o'clock A M
 Arrive at Leavenworth Thursdays...6 ½ o'clock A M
 Returning, leave Leavenworth Tuesdays...6 ½ o'clock A M
 Each stage coach is capable of carrying eight passengers with comfort and ease. Passage through to Leavenworth \$100, board included.
 All articles expressed through to the States are forwarded immediately to their place of destination without delay.

Despite their virtual monopoly in the passenger and express business, the L&PP was never able to turn a profit. In July 1859, the loans that Jones and Russell had used to finance the start-up of the L&PP were overdue, and the company did not have sufficient funds to pay them down. Accordingly, the powerful freighting partnership of Russell, Majors & Waddell (RMW) stepped in with financing to keep the stagecoach line and their partner, William Russell, solvent. The L&PP finances did not improve, so RMW had to absorb the L&PP on October 28, 1859. The line continued to operate as Jones & Russell's Pike's Peak Express Company,⁵ so no change in the markings or handling of the express mail took place after the takeover by RMW. On February 13, 1860 RMW received a charter for a subsidiary, The Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company (COC&PP), which would handle all of its mail-related activities, and this new entity absorbed the L&PP on February 20. This change initiated a gradual change in express mail markings from Jones & Russell to COC&PP on May 24, 1860, although Jones & Russell express markings continued to be used at Denver until June 7, 1860.⁶

Of more significance, the COC&PP began the renowned transcontinental pony express in April 1860 (described in Chapter Thirteen), and this moved the eastern terminus for all of their mail handling activities to St Joseph, Missouri from Leavenworth City at the end of April 1860. For the month and a half between May 3 and June 14, Jones & Russell eastbound express mail from Denver entered the U.S. mails at St Joseph.

Figure 12-14 shows an example. This letter from "Pinkie" Stout was datelined "Denver April 30th 1860" and prepaid three cents U.S. postage. It was datestamped "Jones & Russell's Pike's Peak Express Co. Denver City" on May 3 to reflect the departure date of the Jones & Russell stagecoach, and to indicate that the 25 cents express fee had been paid. It entered the U.S. mails at St Joseph on May 10.



Figure 12-14. Eastbound cover marked "Jones & Russell's Pike's Peak Express Co. Denver City" on May 3, 1860. Entered the U.S. mails St Joseph.

COC&PP Takes Over

Following the February 20, 1860 COC&PP acquisition, both the L&PP and Jones & Russell ceased to exist. The trip that left Denver on February 23 marked the end of L&PP or Jones & Russell operations, although mail handling continued as before. The first COC&PP express marking was a crude undated straight-line woodcut that read “Denver Central Over’d Cal & Pike’s Peak Express” which is known used from March to May 1860.

Figure 12-15 shows an example used in conjunction with a Jones & Russell express marking. This envelope originated in Denver, where it was given to the COC&PP for transmittal to New York City. The COC&PP collected its 25 cents express fee and marked it with a Jones & Russell express marking on April 26, 1860. The April 26 marking was obliterated by the placement of a three cents stamp over it, and a May 3 Jones & Russell express marking along with a woodblock COC&PP marking were applied in Denver. It entered the U.S. mails at St Joseph on May 10.



Figure 12-15. Cover marked “Jones & Russell’s Pike’s Peak Express Co. Denver City” on April 26 (stamp applied over datestamp) and May 3, 1860. It received the Denver COC&PP woodblock marking, and was forwarded via St Joseph on May 10.

Oval COC&PP express markings were prepared for Denver, Leavenworth City and St Joseph. Magenta and yellow labels were also prepared as advertising for the service. The Denver marking was used mainly on eastbound mail, and its earliest confirmed use is May 24, 1860. The St. Joseph marking was used principally as a transit marking on westbound mail from August 1860 until November 1861. The St Joseph marking was also used in conjunction with the Denver COC&PP marking on eastbound mail in the September 1860 to March 1861 period. Finally, the rarest of the COC&PP markings, from Leavenworth City, is known on both eastbound and westbound mail.

The eastbound cover in Figure 12-16 shows the Denver COC&PP marking, a St Joseph transit COC&PP marking, and a magenta COC&PP advertising label. This cover originated in Denver, where it was given to the COC&PP for transmittal to New York City. The COC&PP collected its 25 cents express fee and marked it with an oval November 24, 1860 Denver City COC&PP express marking. Six days later, it arrived in St Joseph, where a November 30 St Joseph COC&PP transit marking was applied. It entered the U.S. mails at St Joseph on December 1, and the three cents stamp paid the postage to New York. The



Figure 12-16. Cover marked “Central Overland and California Pike's Peak Express Company Denver City K.T.” on November 24, 1860. At St Joseph, it was marked with a November 30 COC&PP transit marking.

magenta COC&PP advertising label reading “The Only Through Express, Direct Your Letters Care C.O.C. & P.P. Express St Joseph, MO., or Leavenworth, K.T.” is tied by the manuscript routing endorsement, indicating that it was applied in Denver City.

Figure 12-17 shows a westbound cover with a St Joseph COC&PP marking. This cover was mailed on December 17, 1860 at Fredonia, Maryland with three cents U.S. postage prepaid, and endorsed “via the C.O.C. & Pike's Peak Express from St. Joseph Missouri.” It was sent in the U.S. mails to St. Joseph, where it was transferred to the COC&PP for transmittal to Denver City. The COC&PP added their green December 25 St Joseph marking and sent it by coach that day to Denver.



Figure 12-17. Westbound cover postmarked in Fredonia, Maryland on December 17, 1860. Forwarded at St Joseph, Missouri on December 25.

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Not all of the mail was handled through St. Joseph. A few eastbound trips terminated at Leavenworth City, and at least one westbound cover originated in Leavenworth.

Figure 12-18 shows an eastbound example with a magenta advertising label. This cover originated in Denver, where it was given to the COC&PP for transmittal to Pennsylvania. The COC&PP collected its 25 cents express fee and marked it with an oval October 30, 1860 Denver City COC&PP express marking. It entered the U.S. mails at Leavenworth City on November 6, and the three cents Nesbitt stamped envelope paid the postage to Lockport. The magenta COC&PP advertising label is tied by the Denver City COC&PP marking.



Figure 12-18. Cover marked “Central Overland and California Pike's Peak Express Company Denver City K.T.” on October 30, 1860. A magenta advertising label was added at Denver, and it entered the U.S. mails at Leavenworth City on November 6.

Figure 12-19 shows the backstamp found on a westbound cover that entered the U.S. mails at Leavenworth City on June 25, 1860. This cover was prepaid three cents U.S. postage and postmarked in Leavenworth City, Kansas Territory on June 25, 1860. The Leavenworth postmaster gave it to the COC&PP for transmittal to Denver, and the COC&PP marked it with its rare Leavenworth City oval marking. The front of the envelope is marked “Collect 10cts” and “Paid G” in manuscript, indicating that the express fee was collected on delivery. Only three examples of the COC&PP Leavenworth City marking are known, used in the June-October 1860 period.



Figure 12-19. Leavenworth COC&PP datestamp on reverse of westbound cover postmarked in Leavenworth, Kansas Territory on June 25, 1860 and marked with the Leavenworth COC&PP marking of the same date. It was addressed to Hamilton, Colorado Territory.

Competition Enters the Market

The May 23, 1860 *Denver Rocky Mountain News* reported that, “C.S.S. Hinckley, Superintendent of the Hinckley & Co.’s Rocky Mountain Express Co., arrived on Saturday morning last (note; May 19) to set in motion their express arrangements throughout the mountain mines.” Hinckley & Co. quickly set up an express service between Denver City and the Pike’s Peak gold mines, and connected with the COC&PP for extended express service between Denver City and the Missouri River. This led to a cooperative period for the two express companies from May 31 to mid-August 1860. Letters carried conjunctively by the two express companies show the express markings of both. Figure 12-20 shows an eastbound example.



Figure 12-20. Cover carried from the mountains and marked “Hinckley & Co.’s Express Denver City” on June 2, 1860 and transferred that day to the COC&PP in Denver for forwarding via St Joseph.

This letter originated somewhere in the Pike’s Peak gold mining region and was carried by Hinckley to Denver, where they marked it “Hinckley & Co.’s Express Denver City” on June 2, 1860. Hinckley transferred the letter to the COC&PP, who also marked it with their June 2 Denver City marking. It was then carried by COC&PP stagecoach to St. Joseph, where it entered the U.S. mails on June 8. Hinckley charged 10 cents for their express service and the COC&PP charged 20¢ for their service. A three cents stamp applied by the sender paid the U.S. postage from Denver to Wisconsin.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Post Office Department finally moved to establish contract mail routes to the Pike’s Peak region. Congress passed the March 27, 1860 “Act to Establish Mail Routes in the Territory of Kansas” and the Post Office Department awarded the weekly Denver City-Julesburg contract for route 15151 to E.F. Bruce on June 16. About the same time, the Post Office Department established a new post office at Julesburg on May 23, which was intended to serve as a transfer point for mail to and from the Pike’s Peak region. Accordingly, on July 4, 1860, the Post Office Department ordered the COC&PP to increase its service between Julesburg and St Joseph to weekly and had to compensate the COC&PP for carrying the Denver City mail between Julesburg and St Joseph or Salt Lake City.

It is somewhat surprising that the COC&PP did not bid for contract route 15151, since they already had the infrastructure in place for a weekly mail. A July 3, 1860 dispatch of Albert Richardson to the July 26 *Lawrence Republican* may explain why:

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The express brings in and takes out about five thousand letters per week, for which the writers and recipients are compelled to pay twenty-five cents each, in addition to the Government postage. The recent "letting" of the mail contract to this place is believed to be merely a nominal affair, it is expected that the Pike's Peak Express Company will control it, and compel us to submit to this heavy tax through the season.

If Richardson's account is accurate, then the COC&PP was collecting about \$65,000 per year from its express mail service, and the contract for route 15151 paid only a fraction of that. Thus, the COC&PP stood to lose significant money from a functioning U.S. mail service to the region, and apparently chose to compete against it.

Bruce defaulted on his contract by late July. Upon his failure, the post office changed the eastern terminus from Julesburg to Fort Kearney, to avoid the COC&PP compensation for the Julesburg-St Joseph/Salt Lake City segments, since two other existing contract routes linked Fort Kearney with Omaha and St. Joseph. The modified route was re-named 15151a. On August 29, the post office accepted the winning bid for the modified contract from E.S. Alvord, superintendent of the Western Stage Company (Western).

Western, which had an established stagecoach business between Omaha and Fort Kearney, was not equipped to run stagecoaches over route 15151a, and needed some time to stock the route. To fill the gap, the post office offered compensation to the COC&PP for carrying the contract mails until Western could become operational. The August 15, 1860 Denver *Rocky Mountain News* reported the first arrival of U.S. mail on the evening of August 10:

First United States Mail. The Express coach which arrived here on Friday evening last, brought in two mail bags sealed with government locks, which were promptly passed over to Postmaster McClure at his new office on Larimer street. Whether the bags came through accidentally, or in accordance with an agreement made with the Express Company, we are unable to learn; the agents here having received no explanation from the east on the subject...How the numerous miners and business men in the mountains are to get their mail matter now, we are not advised. Messrs. Hinckley & Co., who have a list of some twenty thousand names to whom they are authorized to forward letters in the Mountain region, were unable to get such letters from the Postmaster.

The August 22, 1860 Denver City *Rocky Mountain News* confirmed that, "Mr. Williams informs us that arrangements have been made with the C.O.C. & P. P. Express Company for the temporary carrying the mail for this region once a week from Julesburg to this city." That same issue also reported the arrival of second U.S. mail on August 20, explaining that:

The Monday evening coach brought sixteen bags of U.S. Mail, which was duly deposited at the Post Office...We hope there is now a prospect of a regular weekly mail and that it will soon be increased to a more frequent service. The contractors for all the branch lines from this city, are on the ground and have commenced service in accordance with the letting.

The Denver office becomes the distributing office for all this region, and ere long will be the scene of immense business.

This report explains why the post office would not deliver mountain region letters to Hinckley, and foretells the end of Hinckley's mountain express business. A third mail of seven mailbags arrived in Denver on August 29, and marked the start of a reasonably consistent weekly mail. The first U.S. mail from Denver left on Tuesday, August 14 with a reported four thousand letters.⁷ The COC&PP was later recognized by the Post Office Department for carrying the U.S. mail from July 1 to September 13, 1860.

With a contract mail route finally in operation, the Denver City post office also became fully operational. Figure 12-21 shows an August 23, 1860 cover from Denver.

This cover originated in Nevada City on August 16, 1860 and was carried from there to Denver by Hinckley's Express, which datestamped the letter upon its August 23 arrival. Hinckley transferred the letter to the Denver City post office, which applied its earliest known "tombstone" postmark,⁸ also of August 23. It was carried by COC&PP coach to St Joseph under a temporary U.S. mail contract.



Figure 12-21. August 16, 1860 letter from the Nevada City mines marked "Hinckley & Co.'s Express Denver City August 23." Postmarked at Denver City on August 23 and carried by the COC&PP to St. Joseph under a temporary U.S. mail contract.

Figure 12-22 shows a letter carried on the third westbound contract mail trip to Denver. This letter was prepaid three cents U.S. postage and posted in Stillwater, Minnesota on August 9, 1860. It was carried in the third contract mail to Denver, which was carried by the COC&PP and arrived on August 29. The Denver post office postmarked it on that day with its "tombstone" postmark.



Figure 12-22. August 9, 1860 letter from Stillwater, Minnesota carried by the COC&PP to Denver under a temporary U.S. mail contract.

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Throughout September 1860, the Western Stage Company was preparing the route for its mail contract. The September 15 New Orleans *Times-Picayune* reported that:

Mails to the Rocky Mountains – A dispatch from Omaha, Nebraska Territory, of the 10th says: The Western Stage Company having contracted for the U.S. mail to and from Denver, via Omaha, Mr. Hooker, the general agent, started this morning to stock the road and make the necessary arrangements for three mails per week, which will probably be perfected by the 1st of November, until which time they will continue running a weekly mail.

The Post Office Department accommodated Western's start-up by allowing them to carry weekly mails between Denver and Julesburg until November 1, and thereafter weekly between Denver and Fort Kearney in five days. The September 26, 1860 Denver City *Rocky Mountain News* reported that:

We had the pleasure of a call this morning from Mr. Hooker, of the Western Stage Company, who arrived a day or two ago. He has just passed over the route from Omaha to this city; making preparations to stock the road for a weekly line of coaches. He informs us that his company has secured the mail contract from Ft. Kearney to this city, and not from Julesburg alone, as has been reported. The stock for the route is being placed on the road as rapidly as possible; the coaches are ready, and the first mail up is on the way and should arrive this evening or tomorrow morning... The first mail down will leave this city tomorrow morning. The time through to Omaha this winter, will be about five and a half days, to be reduced to five or less, the coming summer.

The first Western stagecoach departure from Denver was on September 27, but the Denver postmaster reported that Western started its U.S. mail service on September 13. In addition, the September 18 New York *Herald Tribune* reported that the first through U.S. mail was received at Omaha on September 15 with Denver dates to September 7. Undoubtedly, Western contracted with the COC&PP to carry the mail on the September 7 trip as well as trips on September 13 and September 20. Figure 12-23 shows a letter carried on the September 20 Western contract mail trip.

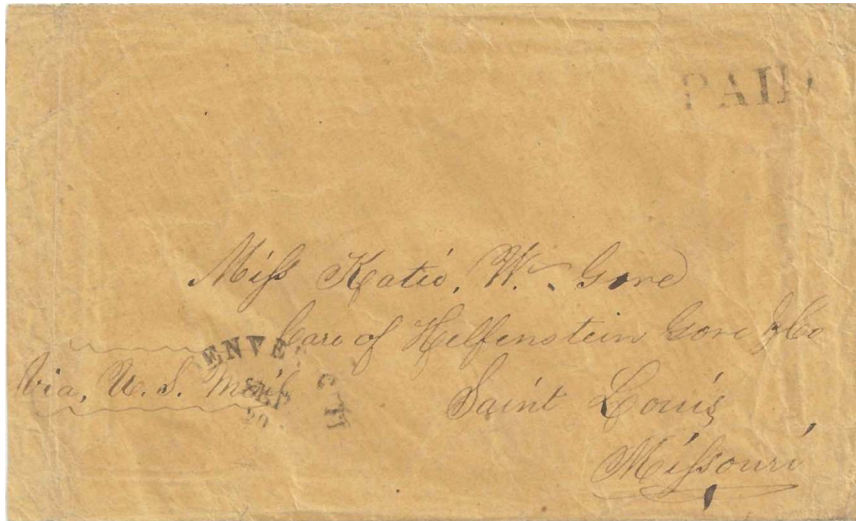


Figure 12-23. September 20, 1860 letter from Denver City carried by the COC&PP under subcontract to the Western Stage Company.

This letter was endorsed "Via U.S. Mail" in Denver City, where it was prepaid three cents postage in cash and received a September 20, 1860 "tombstone" postmark. The Western Stage Company had commenced operations under their weekly U.S. mail contract, but had no stagecoaches available to carry the mail. Accordingly, they contracted with the COC&PP to carry this mail to St. Joseph.

The postmaster at Fort Kearney reported that Western began its mail service on September 12, while the Julesburg postmaster reported commencement on September 17. This represented Western's slow westbound stocking trip which left Omaha on September 10 and arrived in Denver around September 28. Apparently, they carried

the first westbound U.S. mail on that trip. By October, Western's weekly stages were running smoothly, and continued on a weekly schedule until the contract for route 15151a was annulled by the Post Office Department effective July 1, 1861.

Figure 12-24 shows a February 1861 eastbound letter carried by Western. This letter was prepaid three cents U.S. postage and postmarked on February 11, 1861 in Denver City, which used the second type⁹ of "tombstone" cancel. It was carried by Western on its weekly U.S. mail run to Fort Kearney, and was sent during the brief period from the January 31, 1861 Kansas Statehood to the formation of the Colorado Territory on February 28, 1861.

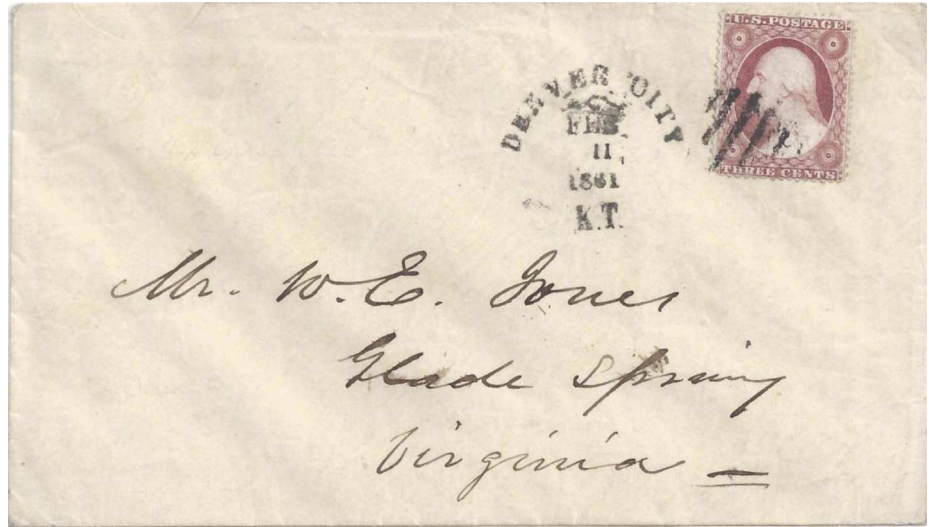


Figure 12-24. February 11, 1861 letter from Denver City carried by the Western Stage Company to Fort Kearney.

Western's weekly stages over the Denver-Fort Kearney route also represented the first real competition for the COC&PP. On September 7, 1860 Hinckley & Co. opened a competing express business to the East, using Western's facilities to carry letters, packages and gold dust. The COC&PP reacted quickly, and reduced its express letter fees to seven cents on September 17, 1860.

The race was on, but both Hinckley and COC&PP would suffer for it. Hinckley printed at least seven different types of franked U.S. three cents stamped envelopes that it sold for 10 cents. Figure 12-25 shows an early example. This Hinckley franked envelope was datestamped in Denver on November 13, 1860. It was carried by a Hinckley messenger on a Western stagecoach to Fort Kearney and then on to St Joseph, where it entered the U.S. mails on November 22.



Figure 12-25. Eastbound cover marked "Hinckley & Co.'s Express Denver City" on November 13, 1860. Mailed November 22 in St Joseph, Missouri.

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Most of the known eastbound Hinckley express letters entered the mail at St Joseph, but some stayed on Western stagecoaches all of the way to Omaha. Figure 12-26 shows an example on a different type of Hinckley franked envelope.



Figure 12-26. Eastbound cover marked “Hinckley & Co.’s Express Denver City” on December 24, 1860 and posted in Omaha, Nebraska on January 1.

This Hinckley franked envelope was datestamped in Denver on December 24, 1860. It was carried by a Hinckley messenger on a Western stagecoach to Fort Kearney and then on to Omaha, where it entered the U.S. mails on January 1, 1861.

Ultimately, competition from a competent U.S. mail service drove both Hinckley and COC&PP out of the letter express business. Hinckley was purchased by the COC&PP on May 11, 1861 and the latest known COC&PP express cover is from November 1861.

The Post Office Department notified Western Stage Company on May 21, 1861 that its Denver-Fort Kearney mail contract would be annulled, effective July 1. This was part of the great consolidation of the Central Route overland mail contracts into the daily overland mail managed by the Overland Mail Company. Perhaps sensing the end, E.S. Alvord sold the Western Stage Company to the Overland Mail Co. on May 1, 1861. Tri-weekly U.S. mail service to Denver by the COC&PP under subcontract to the Overland Mail Co. began on July 1, 1861.

Endnotes

1. Larimer, *Reminiscences*, page 136.
2. No mail is known from the Montana K.T. post office, and it is not clear that it was ever operational.
3. There was no town named Coraville; it was simply the name of a post office. When the office began to function in June 1859, it was located in the same building as the L&PP on Blake Street in Denver City.
4. The stagecoach, with Albert Richardson and Horace Greeley on board, left Leavenworth on Wednesday, May 25. B.D. Williams caught up to the coach on horseback at Station 23, and proceeded with them to Denver. The trip time of the coach was eleven days, but Williams made better time from Leavenworth because he travelled part of the way on horseback.
5. There was no discernible difference between Jones & Russell and the L&PP. Contemporary news accounts and advertisements use the two names interchangeably and sometimes in the same advertisement.
6. The census compiled by Richard Frajola and Ken Stach shows Jones & Russell markings used continuously up to May 22, 1860, and then replaced by oval COC&PP markings on May 24. One additional mail from Denver on June 7 was marked with Jones & Russell express markings.
7. Hafen, *Overland Mail*, page 160.
8. The earliest known Denver City postmark is an August 16, 1860 manuscript marking.
9. The "K.T." at the bottom of the postmark is elongated.