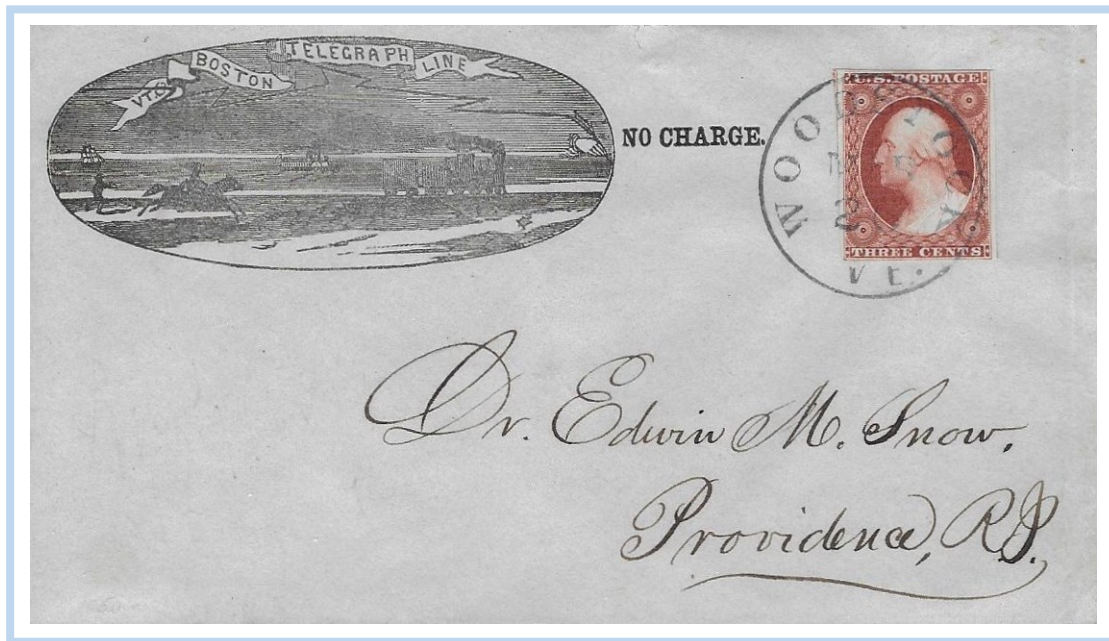


HOW THEY CARRIED THE MAIL IN AMERICA

1850 to 1870



An 1850s telegraph company cover that portrays more ways of carrying the written word than any other illustrated envelope of that era. It depicts a messenger on foot, a rider on horseback, a sailing ship, a steamship, a train and—leading them all—a hand that's holding a quill pen that's attached to a telegraph line. Rather inexplicably, it omits a stagecoach but includes a turtle that seems to be ahead of everything except the telegraph.

The study of Postal History has traditionally focused on routes, rates, and postal services. Less attention has been paid to *how* the mail was carried—i.e. the mode of transport. However, that's the primary focus of this exhibit.

A secondary focus is routes. That's because routes—or, more specifically, their topography, climate and weather, and human hazards—strongly influenced the means by which the mail was carried. So did government policies, financial considerations, entrepreneurial ambitions and rivalries, and the available technologies. Therefore, to a lesser extent, those factors are also a part of this exhibit.

Admittedly, the choice of the time period of 1850 to 1870 is arbitrary and reflects my long-standing collecting interests. However, those two decades were undeniably a period of unprecedented challenges and changes with regard to carrying the mail, particularly over great distances:

- ◆ The period began with the California Gold Rush and a massive westward migration into distant parts of the continent that were largely unsettled and often geographically isolated. That created an urgent need for mail systems where there was at best a primitive transportation infrastructure.
- ◆ At about the same time (on July 1, 1851) the cost of postage dropped considerably, thus making it more affordable to send a letter through the mail. The resulting increase in mail volume and the decrease in unit revenue soon forced the Post Office Department to seek more efficient means of carrying the mail.
- ◆ Of course, the most significant event during this time period was the Civil War which produced governmental policies that disrupted the normal flow of mail between the North and the South and severely degraded the transportation systems in the latter.
- ◆ And finally, the twenty year period that this exhibit covers saw technological advances that strongly influenced how the written word was carried. The most important of these were the completion of a transcontinental telegraph in 1861 and the spread of steam-powered transport over both water and land.

References. Although this exhibit reflects a considerable amount of research (both my own and that of others), I have cited references only when they underpin the story of a cover or substantiate a particularly important point. That's because this exhibit has no scholarly pretensions and instead was done for enjoyment—my own and hopefully that of the viewer.

Organization. This exhibit consists of three major sections:

- ◆ HOW the Written Word was Carried

- Animals & vehicles

- Boats & ships

- Trains

- Telegraph

- People

- ◆ CASE STUDIES: How Mail Transport Evolved or Adapted in a Particular Setting

- Central Overland route

- Southern Overland route

- Santa Fe Trail

- Fort Yuma mail

- Across New York

♦ HAZARDS: How They Affected the Transport of Mail

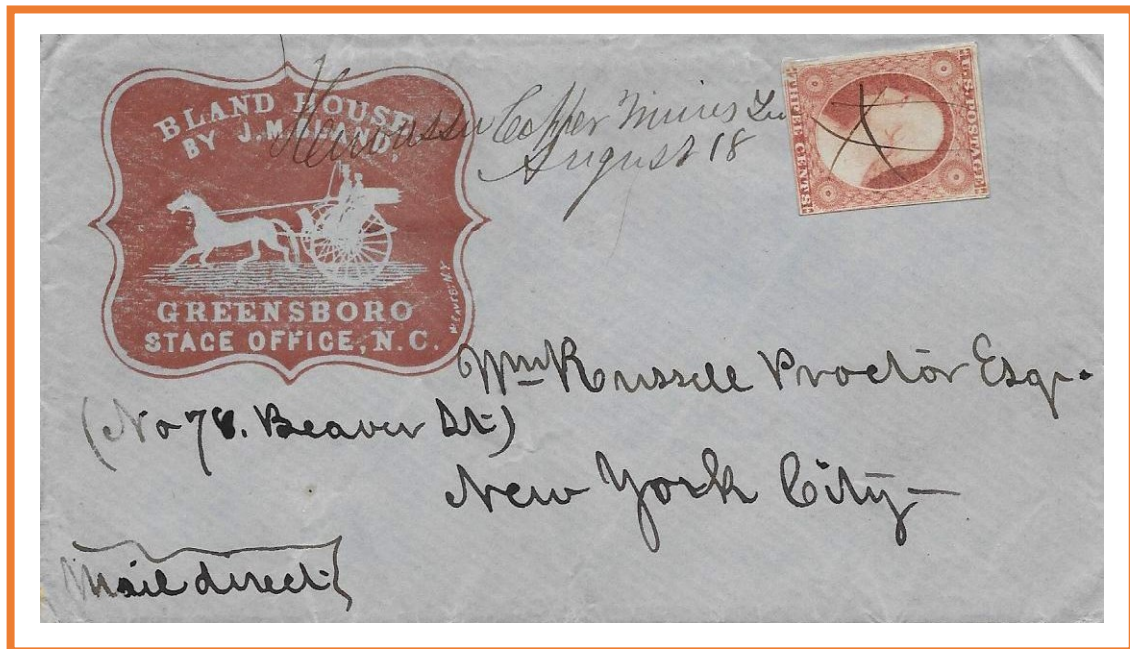
Weather and Season

Indian hostilities

Robbery

War

♦ SPEEDS: A Chart



A cover from Hiwassee Copper Mines, TN with a corner card for a hotel that was located at a stagecoach office. Most towns had at least one such office and, as we shall see, during the 19th century much of the country depended on stagecoaches to carry the mail.

HOW

The Written Word was Carried

ANIMALS & VEHICLES

In the 17th and 18th centuries, most of the mail carriers in America rode on horseback. However, during the first half of the 19th century, mail contracts increasingly went to operators of animal-pulled vehicles that could carry both passengers and mail. Nevertheless, some mail carriers and mail bags continued to ride on the backs of horses or mules, particularly over terrain that was unsuitable for wheels or sleigh runners.

* * *

The main difference between coaches and wagons was that the former were designed primarily to carry passengers while the latter were designed to carry freight. However, there was an overlap between the two in their design and their use. The kind of wagon or coach that a mail carrier used in the 1850-1870 period depended upon the distance and topography of his route, the character and condition of the roads, the cost of the conveyance, and whether he wished to also carry passengers and/or freight.

* * *

The coaches that were built by Abbot, Downing & Company in Concord, NH were the best of the wheeled vehicles. Designed to carry both passengers and freight, their “Concord” coaches were unsurpassed in their quality, durability, engineering, and luxury. Even their shape was unique: it was oval rather than box-like because Abbot and Downing had noted that the peculiar shape of an egg makes it resistant to breakage despite its thin shell.

Other innovations included an advanced braking system for use on steep grades—boxes released sand onto the brake pads in order to increase their “grab”—and a revolutionary suspension system that eschewed iron springs in favor of “slinging” the coach on stacks of leather straps. That “thorough brace” suspension gave the coach a back-and-forth swinging motion rather than a more jarring, up-and-down one. (Mark Twain, who traveled to the West in a Concord coach in 1861, said it was like traveling in “a cradle on wheels” although most other travelers were less rapturous in their descriptions.)

Additional high-end features included the use of Austrian steel (which was harder than the American variety), wooden sides with glass windows, gilded interior scrollwork, and leather seats

(although some grouched that the padding was harder than the wood beneath it). As you might expect, all of that came at a price: a Concord coach could run north of \$1,500 which was about what a typical worker made in three years.

* * *

At the “bottom of the line” were primitive freight or farm wagons that could be retrofitted with plank seats in the cargo area in order to carry passengers. One step up from them were dual-purpose wagons with built-in rows of plank seats, open or canvas sides, and an optional canvas roof and iron spring suspension. Like the coaches of the day, those wagons were often named for the town or state in which they were manufactured (e.g. Troy, Dearborn, or Jersey wagons). They were also commonly referred to as “ambulances” which was the Army’s term for wagons of that type.

* * *

There were also hybrid vehicles that had features of both coaches and wagons. Although at first glance they resembled Concord coaches, those “stage” wagons (a.k.a. “celerity” or “mud” wagons) were smaller and had a boxier shape. In addition, the passenger compartment was spartan, the windows had canvas shades rather than glass, and the suspension usually consisted of iron springs.

But despite those differences, stage wagons weren’t simply dumbed-down versions of the more expensive Concord coaches. Instead, they were built specifically for the rough and/or mountainous roads that Concord coaches couldn’t handle. For one thing, stage wagons were lower and had smaller wheels—features that lowered their center of gravity and thus made them less likely to tip over. In addition, their wooden wheels and iron tires were much wider than those on a Concord coach which made them less likely to get stuck in sand or mud (and thus the name “mud” wagon). Furthermore, they weighed half as much as a Concord coach which made them faster (“celerity” wagon) and easier for animals to pull up the side of a mountain. For all of those reasons, there were far more stage wagons than Concord coaches on the primitive roads of the West, although the stage lines almost invariably pictured a more comfortable and upscale Concord coach in their ads.

* * *

With both Concord coaches and stage wagons, the mail bags were usually carried in a space beneath the driver’s seat or in an outside rear compartment or “boot.” However, priority was often given to passengers’ luggage so that when there was no other room for the mail bags, they were strapped to the undercarriage where their contents sometimes became soaked or even lost when the vehicle forded a stream. Alternatively, some drivers made room for the luggage of a new passenger by leaving a mail bag or two by the side of the road in the hope that it would be picked up by a subsequent coach or wagon.

* * *

In the 19th century, the term “stage” referred to any public conveyance that had an established route and a regular schedule. As such, it could refer to a coach, a wagon, or even a sleigh.

On long-distance routes, the term carried an additional connotation: the division of the route into segments or “stages” by the presence of “stations” where the drivers and/or the draft animals (horses or mules) could be changed. Larger stations also sold food which was usually unappetizing and overpriced and some also provided primitive accommodations. (Passengers usually slept on a dirt floor). The largest stage stations had somewhat better amenities and served as repair and resupply facilities for the stage lines.



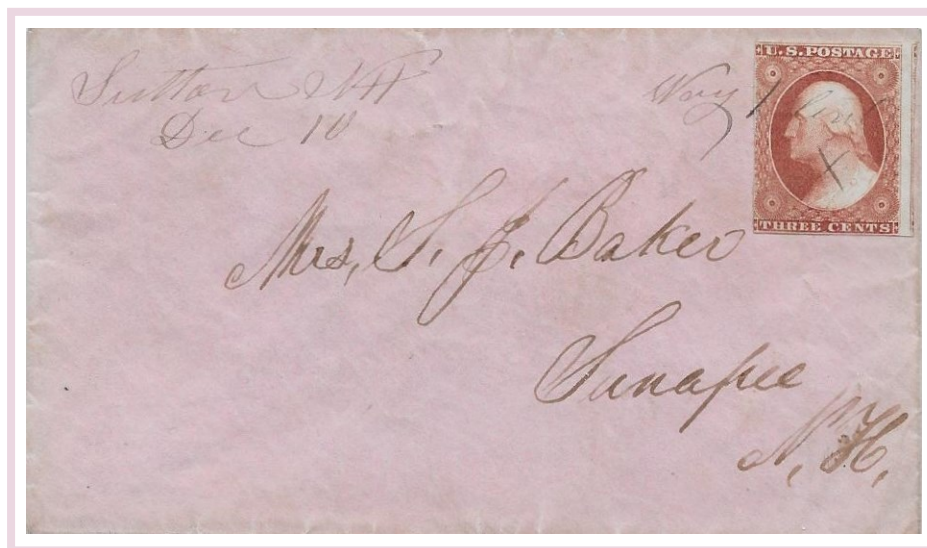
Above: A stage or celerity wagon of the Overland Mail Company (OMC). One hundred of the company's stage wagons were designed by John Butterfield himself—the founder of the OMC—and were constructed by the James Gould Company of Albany, NY. The OMC used stage wagons rather than Concord coaches on 70% of the Southern Overland Route. Note that the number of passengers in the photo wasn't unusual, even for long trips.

Below: One of the OMC's Concord stagecoaches. Note that the rear "boot" appears to be bursting with luggage and perhaps also mail. A single OMC Concord coach carried as many as 12,000 letters.

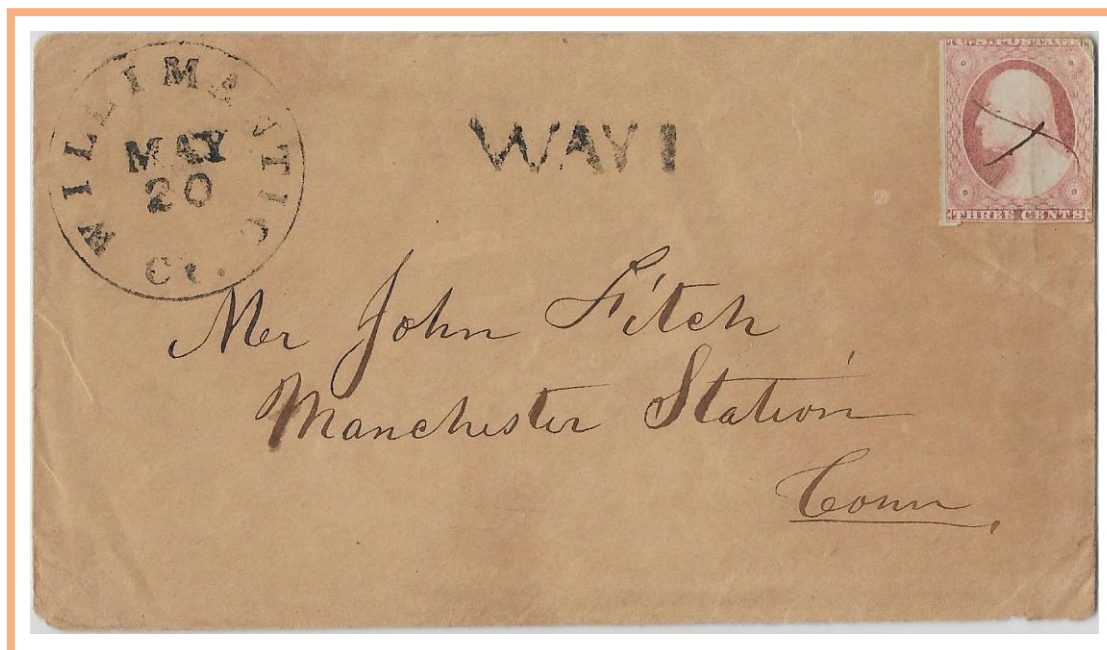


STAGECOACH

ALONG THE "WAY"

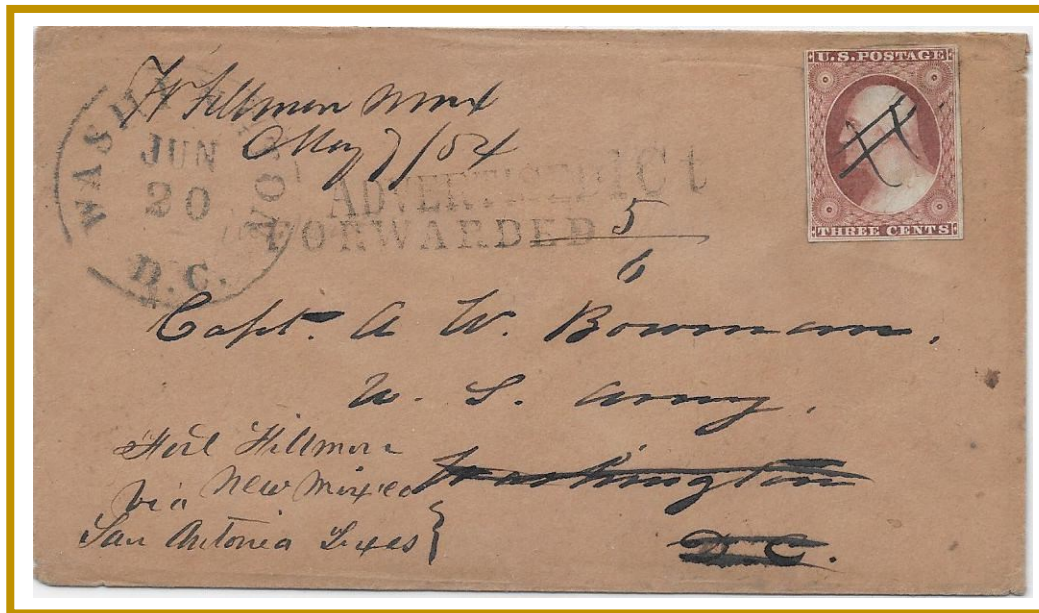


A circa 1855 ladies cover that was handed to a stagecoach driver somewhere "along the way" to Sutton, NH where a "Way 1 Cent" marking was applied. The postmaster paid the driver a penny for bringing the letter to the post office. The addressee had to reimburse the postmaster in order to collect the letter.



Another stagecoach "way" cover, but this one entered the U.S. Mail in Willimantic, CT where it received that town's rare "WAY 1" wood block handstamp. It was then put on an eastbound train of the Hartford, Providence & Fishkill Railroad which transported it to Manchester Station. Ex Judge Fay and Wilson Hulme.

FARM WAGON DOWN-GRADED



A May 1854 cover from Fort Fillmore, New Mexico Territory (NMT) that was addressed to an Army Captain in Washington, D.C. but was then sent back to Fort Fillmore "via San Antonio" (as per the postal clerk's endorsement) after being advertised but not claimed in Washington.

The renowned coachman Henry Skillman carried this cover between Fort Fillmore and San Antonio in a farm wagon. A stagecoach carried it between San Antonio and Indianola, TX and a Gulf steamer carried it between Indianola and New Orleans.

This is a very early use from Fort Fillmore and possibly the earliest use with an adhesive stamp.

Signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Ex Persson, Shipley, and Craveri.

This cover was carried from Fort Fillmore by Henry Skillman who, on September 20, 1851, was awarded a mail contract for Route 12,900 which ran for 910 miles between San Antonio, TX and Santa Fe, NMT (via El Paso, Frontera, Fort Fillmore, Dona Ana, Socorro, and Albuquerque). The service was twice-monthly for most of the period in which Skillman held the contract.

Skillman's initial trips were made in Concord coaches that were pulled by six mules and guarded by more than a dozen armed men on horseback. However, neither the revenue nor the route's infrastructure proved sufficient to support the coaches, so Skillman was soon forced to switch to freight wagons that weren't equipped to carry passengers.

At some point in 1852, Skillman bowed to demands that he carry passengers again even though he still couldn't afford to build and provision the necessary stage stations. Therefore, his passengers had to endure the 19 day journey between San Antonio and Santa Fe in a farm wagon that had been fitted with bench seats. That was presumably the mode of conveyance of this cover.

Skillman lost his contract on April 22, 1854, which was *before* he carried this cover from Fort Fillmore to San Antonio. However, the new contractor—David Wasson—was not scheduled to take over until July 1. Furthermore, when an agent of Mr. Wasson failed to appear in San Antonio on that date, the postmaster gave the mail to Skillman.

Skillman eventually regained his contract and then held it until June 22, 1857 when he lost it permanently. At that time, his contract was superseded by James Birch's contract for the 1,476 mile route between San Antonio and San Diego.

However, Henry Skillman didn't disappear from the history of the mail: he helped to operate the western division of Birch's route, was a renowned stagecoach driver for John Butterfield, and during the Civil War operated a mail line between Mesilla, AZ and San Antonio for which he (along with his brother William and George Giddings) eventually received a Confederate Post Office Department contract.


* * *

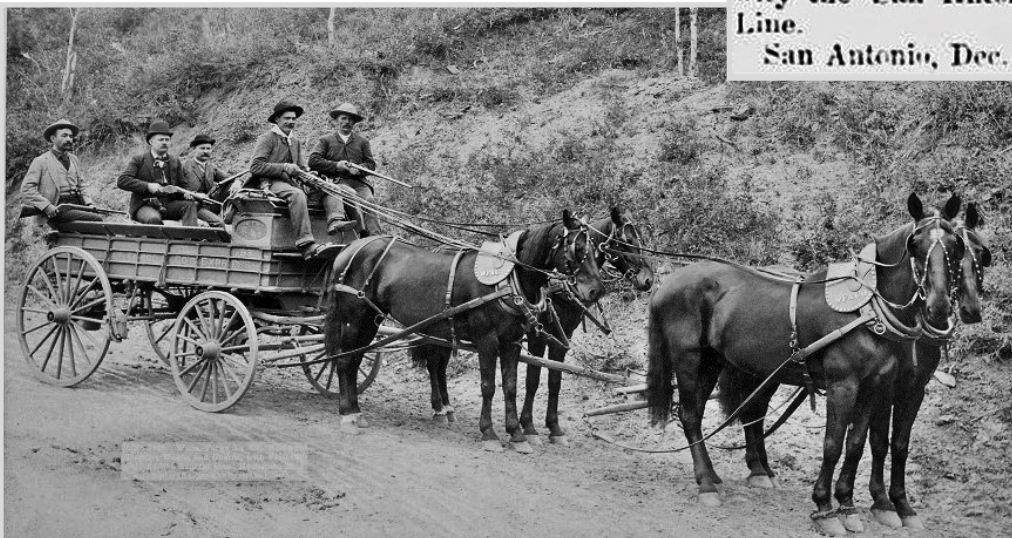
This cover was carried 140 miles between San Antonio and Indianola, TX on a daily four-horse coach. It was then carried 540 miles between Indianola and New Orleans (via Galveston) on a Gulf steamer (Route 6,201) under the Harris and Morgan contract. At the time that this letter was sent, the steamer ran only weekly but beginning on July 1, 1854 the trips were increased to thrice-weekly.

* * *

Fort Fillmore, which was dedicated on September 23, 1851, was located on the Rio Grande River about six miles south of Mesilla, NMT. It was strategically located where several emigration and trade routes converged in order to use the Apache Pass. The fort attempted (rather unsuccessfully) to provide settlers and traders with protection against hostile Indians. It was a stop not only on Skillman's route, but also on the San Antonio to San Diego route of his successor, James Birch, and ultimately on John Butterfield's Southern Overland Route.

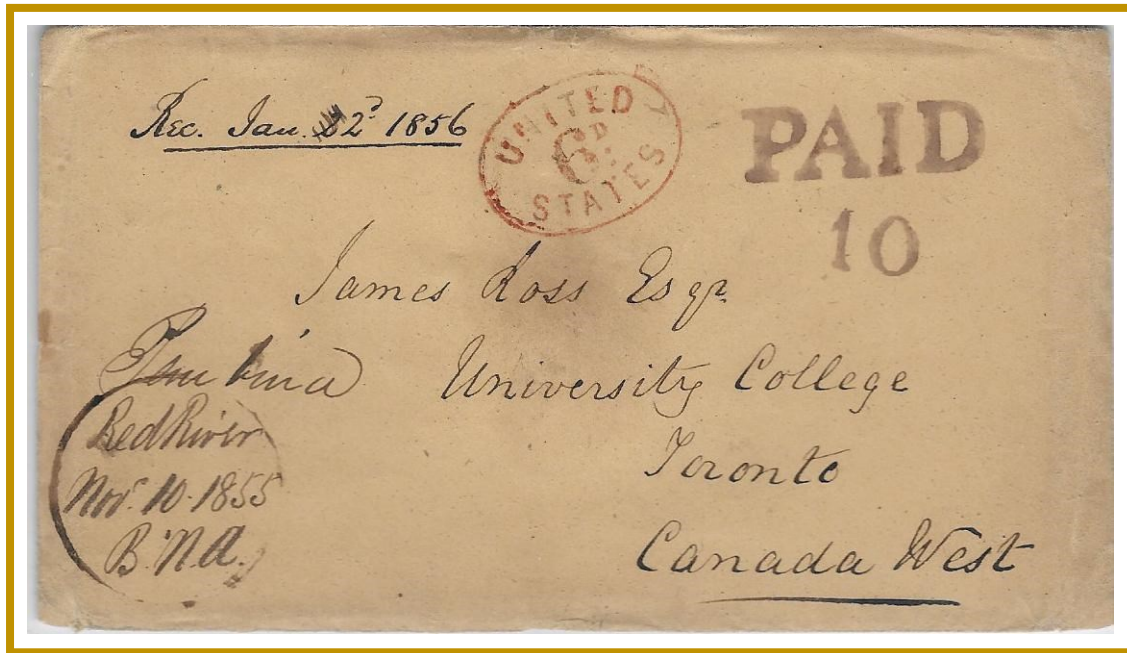
Right: A notice from the San Antonio Ledger and Texan. Despite the drawing of a Concord stage-coach, by the date of the notice the mode of transport had become considerably more modest (see the photo below).

**SAN ANTONIO, EL PASO
AND SANTA FE MAIL**
A Route. Notice is hereby given, 
that from and after this date, my
her, **W. D. SKILLMAN**, will be my authorized Agent
in this city the transaction of all business connected
with the San Antonio, El Paso and Santa Fé Mail
Line.
HENRY SKILLMAN.
San Antonio, Dec. 14, 1853. 30-1y



OXCART

“NORTHWEST FIDDLES”



A November 10, 1855 cover from the Red River Settlement in British North America (B.N.A.) to Toronto that was sent via the United States. A courier carried the cover from the Red River Settlement to the U.S. post office at Pembina in the Minnesota Territory (MNT) and from there fur trappers in oxcarts transported it to St. Paul.

The census on the Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries website lists 11 covers with this hand-drawn Red River Settlement handstamp, of which two are unconfirmed and only six (including this cover) are sound.

Ex Risvold and Bilden.

At the time that this cover was mailed (and up until the early 1880s) there were no governmental mail routes between the western and eastern portions of B.N.A. Therefore, letters were either carried by the private expresses of the Hudson Bay Company or routed through the U.S. postal system.

The route through the United States utilized the Red River Trail which ran from the Red River Settlement (which is now Winnipeg) to Saint Paul, MNT. That route went through Pembina which was 68 miles south of the Red River Settlement. Pembina was a major fur-trading center as well as a U.S. post office. At that time it was in the Minnesota Territory but today it's in North Dakota.

This arrangement for mail between the western and eastern portions of B.N.A. required that the mail be treated as if it had originated in the United States. That effectively made the Red River Settlement postmaster—William Ross—an agent of the U.S. Post Office Department. Therefore, he

collected the U.S. postage of 10¢ (the treaty rate for U.S. mail to B.N.A.) and then handstamped the envelope “PAID 10.” He also collected a Canadian fee of 3d for the transport of the letter to Pembina, although that was never marked on the envelope.

* * *

The Red River Trail was a major fur trading route between the western portion of B.N.A. and the U.S. Therefore, it isn’t surprising that most of the mail was carried by fur traders—particularly Henry Sibley and Norman Kittson—in carts that were loaded with animal pelts and other goods.

Each of the two-wheeled carts was pulled by a single ox that was bracketed by a pair of 12 foot oak shafts that were an extension of the cart’s frame. Despite the fact that the carts were constructed only of wood and animal hides—there were no iron fastenings—each of them could carry up to a half ton of cargo. And because the wheel hubs weren’t lubricated, the carts made a hideous squealing sound that could be heard for miles and that earned them the wry nickname of “Northwest fiddles.”

The carts usually traveled in a “brigade” of six, although a train of carts could number several hundred and extend over two miles. They could cover up to 20 miles a day.

The men who drove the ox carts 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.

* * *

The rarity of this handstamp is due to the fact that it was used only between November 10, 1855 and March 10, 1856. The brevity of this interval was due to the death of the Postmaster, William Ross, in the spring of 1856.



Métis drivers resting beside their ox carts



The Red River Trail—and Beyond

This cover traveled from the Red River Settlement (RRS) to Pembina where it most likely picked up the East Plains branch of the Red River Trail which was the preferred route to St. Paul after 1854. That route followed the Red River (blue arrows) past present day Breckenridge and then continued southeast to St. Cloud on the Mississippi River. From there it followed the west bank of the river to Fort Snelling and St. Paul.

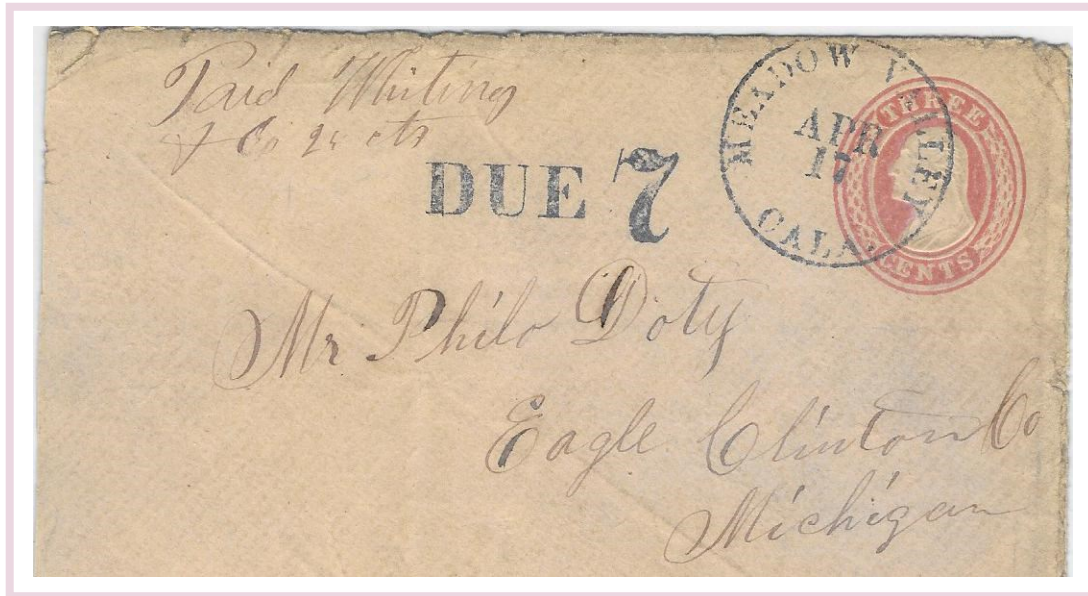
From St. Paul, this cover was carried by a steamboat down the Mississippi River (shown in blue) to a town that had a connection with trains to Chicago.

In 1855 when this cover was mailed, the only railhead on that portion of the Mississippi River was at Rock Island, IL but several towns north of Rock Island had stagecoach connections to eastbound trains. Therefore, it remains unclear where this cover was transferred, although La Crosse, WI is one possibility (see: Chronicle 262, May 2019, p. 128).

From Chicago, this cover was carried to Detroit on the Michigan Central Railroad (Route 13,003). It crossed the Detroit River on a steamboat (there was no railroad car ferry service until January 1, 1867) and was then given to the Canadian post office at Windsor, Ontario. It finally reached Toronto on the Great Western Railway via a branch line from Niagara Falls that had opened earlier in 1855.

DOGSLED

“THE SNOW CAME ON SO DEEP”



An April 17, 1860 cover to Eagle, MI that originated at Mt. Pleasant, CA and that was carried on a dogsled by Fenton Whiting, an expressman, to Meadow Valley, CA where he deposited it into the U.S. Mail. The original letter accompanies the cover and, along with contemporary newspaper articles, documents that Mt. Pleasant and its environs were all but snowed in at the time that this cover was carried by Whiting.

Although many 19th century Western covers were carried by dogsled during the winter, it is rare to find one in which that mode of transport is so convincingly documented.

Making this cover even rarer is the fact that it bears a manuscript Whiting's Express franking rather than the usual printed one and it also notes the express fee of 25¢.

Signed by Frajola. Ex Walske.

Beginning in 1857, Fenton B. Whiting operated his Feather River Express in northern Plumas County, CA and in the Magalia Ridge region of Butte County.

During the winter snows, he used a \$75 sled and a team of four dogs—Newfoundlands and St. Bernards—that were driven in tandem. He would dismount from the sled and use snowshoes on steep grades or in deep snow in order to lighten the burden on his dogs which could otherwise pull as much as 600 lbs. When the snow was too deep for the U.S. Mail coaches on the route, Whiting carried the Quincy post office's mail along with his own express letters.

* * *

According to the *Visalia Weekly Delta* of April 14, 1860, “a late storm—the heaviest of the season”

had just dumped an “immense” quantity of snow on the region. Indeed, the writer of the enclosed letter (which is datelined Mt. Pleasant—April 11, 1860) 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.”*

He also requests that a return letter be directed to Quincy, CA because *“it is the nearest to (where) we get letters any place in the mountains by the expressman.”* Quincy was the headquarters of Whiting’s Express.

* * *

This cover was taken from Meadow Valley to San Francisco where it received a “Due 7” handstamp and was transferred to the Overland Mail Company (OMC) which had been the “default” carrier of transcontinental mail from California since January 23, 1860 (pursuant to a U.S. Post Office Department order of December 17, 1859). The OMC carried the letter over the entire length of the Southern Overland Route to St. Louis and from there it was taken to Michigan by a combination of steamboat, train, and stagecoach.

* * *

Since the OMC’s route was itself close to 3,000 miles, an additional 7¢ was due from the recipient in order to make up the remainder of the 10¢ rate for over 3,000 miles.

* * *

Lastly, it’s worth noting some of the other content of the enclosed letter:

“This country is rather hard. Wages are rather low and gambling is all the rage. In the little town where I stop, the cards lay about the streets like shavings about the shop of some industrious mechanic.”

The writer also notes that an earthquake the previous month had shaken the goods from store shelves. In addition, he advises anyone who remains for long in Salt Lake City to convert to Mormonism *“and then renounce the doctrine once you leave.”*



HORSEBACK

YANKEE MAIL IN REBEL TEXAS



A May 24, 1861 cover from Camp Hudson, TX that was mailed after the secession of Texas and the occupation of Camp Hudson by Confederate troops. It was carried on horseback by William and Henry Skillman on Route 8,076 which ran between San Antonio, TX and Mesilla, AZ. Camp Hudson was a station on that route and had postal receipts of only \$28.13 in 1861.

This is the only recorded cover from Camp Hudson during its Confederate occupation.

It is also a rare example of mail that was carried by the legendary Skillman brothers through Confederate Texas under a U.S. Post Office contract.

With PF certificate 265978 (1992). Ex Beals and Guggenheim.

With the pending transfer of the Overland Mail Company (OMC) from the Southern Route to the Central one, the U.S. Post Office Department contracted with George H. Giddings to provide service between San Antonio and San Diego (with through connections to Los Angeles and New Orleans). At the same time, Giddings obtained the permission of the new Confederate government to use the route through Texas.

Giddings' contact called for semi-monthly service on horseback beginning on April 1, 1861 (which was also the date that the final OMC stagecoach left San Francisco for St. Louis on the Southern Route). Although Giddings was already operating a mail line out of San Antonio, he had lacked stage stations west of Fort Stockton (in Comanche Springs, TX) since March 12, 1860 when the OMC had taken over that portion of his route. Therefore, he had to delay the start of his contract until he'd obtained some of the stage stations that the OMC was now abandoning. The first trip under that contract finally left San Antonio on April 18, 1861 (see: *New York Times* of July 12, 1861 which summarizes an article from *Mesilla Times* of May 17).

The segment of the route between San Antonio and Mesilla was operated by William and Henry Skillman with whom Giddings had partnered.

* * *

On July 1, 1861 the U.S. Post Office Department cancelled the San Antonio to El Paso portion of Giddings' contract. The remainder of his contract was annulled on August 2 following the invasion of New Mexico Territory by Confederate troops from Texas.

However, on August 28, the Confederate Post Office Department awarded George Giddings and the Skillman brothers a contract for the route between San Antonio and Mesilla. Their contact commenced on November 1.

Between July 1 and November 1, it's likely that the Skillmans continued to carry mail between San Antonio and Mesilla under local contracts.

* * *

Because the Skillman brothers advertised that the 600 mile trip from Mesilla to San Antonio took them almost exactly a week, it's likely that this cover's 200 mile trip from Camp Hudson to San Antonio took between two and three days.

The Mails.

The S. A. & S. D. Mail Co. are now making regular semi-weekly trips between this place & san Antonio, leaving here Monday and Thursday mornings, and arriving on the evenings of the same days.

From the Mesilla Times of May 25, 1861

The San Antonio and San Diego Mail Company (S.A. & S.D. Mail Co.) was the result of an 1861 reorganization of Giddings' San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line that had carried the mail between those two cities until John Butterfield's Overland Mail Company had all but replaced it. At the time of the reorganization, the only U.S. Mail contract that Giddings still held was for the 367 mile route between San Antonio and Camp Stockton, TX.

BOATS & SHIPS



A circa 1850 cover that was carried by an Ohio River steamboat to Maysville, KY where it entered the mail with a “STEAM.” handstamp to indicate a “way” use.

This is the unique example of the Maysville “STEAM.” marking on a cover with an 1847 issue stamp. This marking is unlisted in Simpson-Alexander.

This is also the finest of the two or three recorded examples of this attractive and non-standard eight-bar Maysville grid.

Ex Boker and Gross.

Prior to the advent of steam engines, boats on inland waterways were powered mostly by animals or men. Horses or mules were used to pull boats on canals while human power—which consisted of rowing, paddling, or punting (a.k.a. “poling”)—was used mainly on rivers and lakes. However, the Post Office Department (POD) never made widespread use of boats on inland waterways during the era of animal and human propulsion.

* * *

In 1807, Robert Fulton launched his first steamboat, the *Clermont*, on the Hudson River. Within three years, steamboats were replacing man-powered boats on the Hudson, Mississippi, and other major rivers. Those early steamboats also carried mail—but not for the POD. It wasn’t until 1815 that the POD finally awarded a contract to a steamboat line and, even then, the POD continued to lose revenue to private steamboat carriers. Therefore, in 1823 Congress declared all navigable waterways to be post roads and made it illegal for private companies to carry mail on them. However, that provision proved difficult to enforce so on August 31, 1852 Congress made the transport of mail by private, for-profit carriers legal as long as the U.S. postage was paid.

Steamboats were initially made of wood and propelled by paddlewheels—either a broad, single wheel in the rear (a “stern-wheeler”) or a narrower wheel on both sides (a “side-wheeler”). Stern-wheelers were generally more powerful but less maneuverable.

The steam pressure that turned the paddlewheels was generated in gigantic, water-filled copper boilers that were connected to a firebox. In the early days, steamboats (and also trains) burned wood—so much wood that within a couple of decades, many of the forests in the Northeast were gone and the banks of the Mississippi had become so denuded that soil erosion and silt deposition threatened the navigability of the river.

A further problem was that the steam pressure in the boilers was so immense that explosions were relatively common and occasionally catastrophic. Indeed, because of explosions (as well as poor construction and maintenance and submerged obstructions or “snags”) the average life of an antebellum steamboat was only four or five years on the Mississippi River and about half of that on the Missouri.

* * *

Particularly on the Mississippi River and its tributaries, steamboat mail was mostly commercial. If a boat lacked a POD contract, it often delivered mail directly to a business (or its wharf agent) at its destination or at an intermediate stop. However, a “non-contract” boat could also deliver its mail to a post office. A “contract” boat had only the latter option although some of those boats carried a route agent who was a POD employee and who performed many of the duties of a post office clerk. The route agent handled mail that was given to the boat “along the way.”

Thus, the potential markings on a steamboat cover include:

- ♦ A “name-of-boat” marking—usually a handstamp—that was applied by a crew member, most likely to advertise the boat or the boat company.
- ♦ A route agent’s marking that signified that the cover had entered the U.S. Mail on the boat.
- ♦ A post office’s markings that signified that the cover had entered the U.S. Mail at that facility.
- ♦ Instructions or “endorsements” by the sender to transmit the cover via a particular boat.

* * *

The term “packet” (or “packet boat”) refers to a river or coastal vessel that carried mail, passengers,

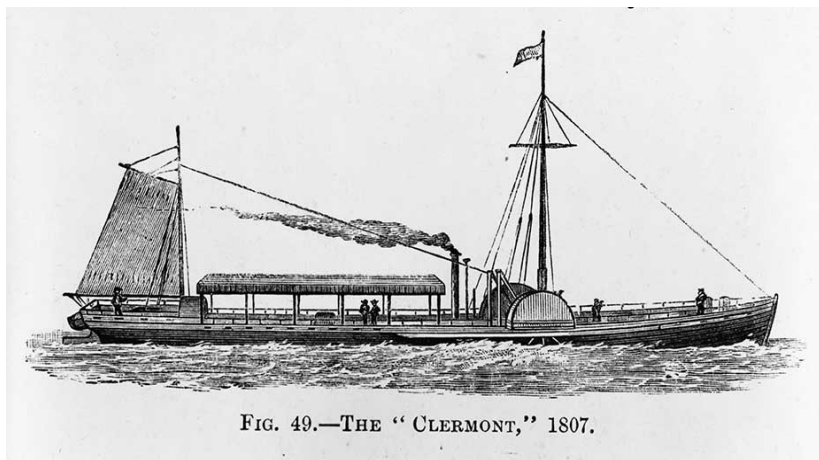
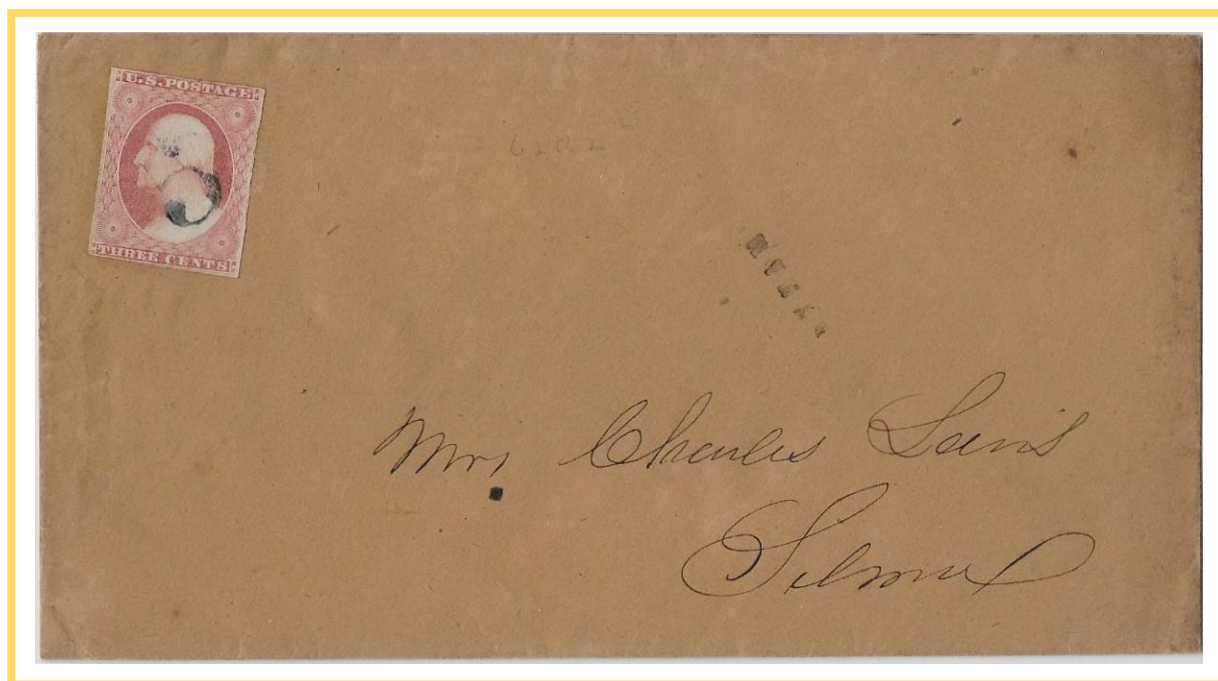


FIG. 49.—THE “CLERMONT,” 1807.

STEAMBOAT ALONG THE "WAY"

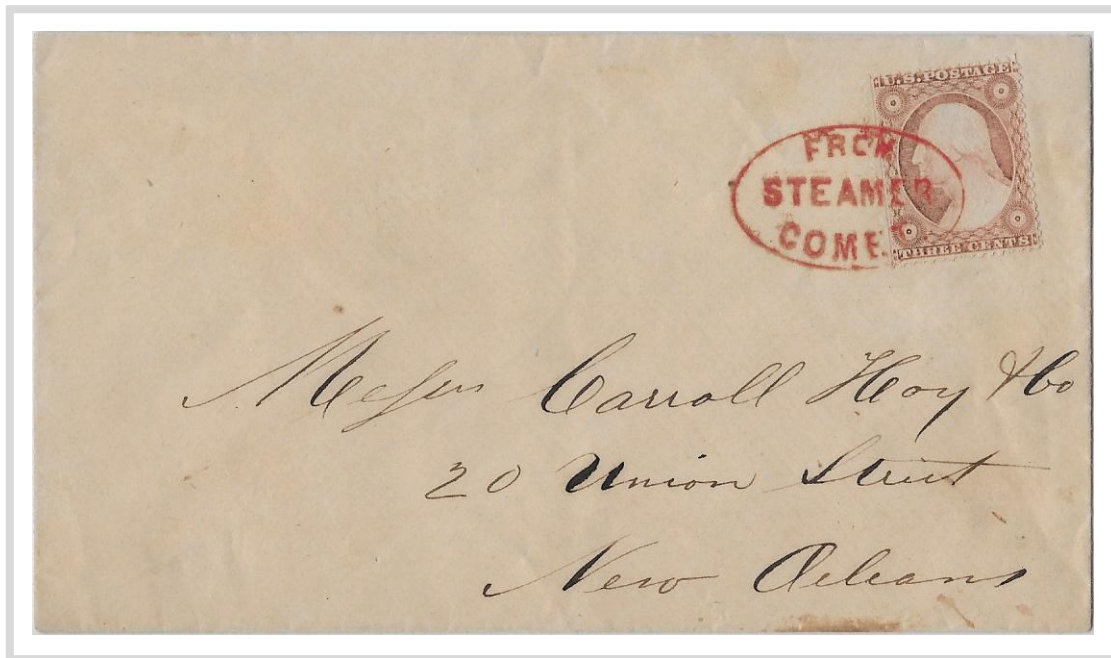


An 1850s cover that was given to a steamboat on the Mississippi or the Yazoo River which took it to Vicksburg, MS where it was put into the mail. This is the finer of the two recorded examples of the Vicksburg "WAY 6 cents" handstamp on a cover with an adhesive. Ex Eggen.



An early 1850s cover that was picked up by a steamboat at one of its stops. It was then taken to the Selma, AL post office where a "STEAM" handstamp was applied. Ex Chase and Hulme. The former wrote on the reverse: "the rare tiny 'steam' used only on the Alabama River – I once had a small lot of three from the same correspondence. This was the best copy."

STEAMBOATS



The Comet was an Ouachita River side-wheeler. This is the finest recorded example of its handstamp. Klein 91 / Milgram 274. Ex Eggen and Clippert.



The Catahoula was another Ouachita River side-wheeler. The boat was built for Captain J.D. Walker who at the beginning of the Civil War was imprisoned by the Confederates as a Union spy. This is the finest recorded example of this marking. Klein 61 / Milgram 182. Pictured in Milgram. With PF certificate 92531 (1980). Ex West and Moody.



The Polar Star plied the Ohio River for the "Lightning Line" which was owned largely by the Madison & Indianapolis Railroad and which ran boats between Cincinnati and Louisville. This is the only recorded example of this marking. Klein 444 / Milgram 1133. Pictured in Milgram. With PF certificate 149965 (1985). Ex Sotheby's October 1977 waterway cover sale.



Both the Charmer and the Dew Drop ran between New Orleans and Vicksburg although other boats in the line ran farther upriver to Greenwood, MS. This use probably dates from between November 1860 and April 1861 because that's when Masters Parisot and Dent owned both the Dew Drop and the Roebuck. This is the only recorded example during this time period of a name-of-boat handstamp (Klein 74 / Milgram 204) that was used on a name-of-boat envelope (Klein 121 / Milgram 342). Pictured in Klein and in Milgram and listed in Chase's Three Cent book. Ex Chase, Warm, and Sotheby's October 1977 waterway cover sale.



The Rapides was a wooden-hulled, side-wheeler that sailed the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Donaldsonville, LA until 1856 and then sailed between New Orleans and Shreveport on the Red River. After 1861, it was used by the Confederacy. It was sunk in an accident in New Orleans on February 27, 1876. It had been insured for \$4,000.

There are nine recorded examples of this handstamp on a full cover, of which only six are nice strikes. Only one other example is recorded with an adhesive stamp and it, too, isn't canceled. This is the unique example on a ladies cover. Klein 460 / Milgram 1158. Signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Also with Dr. Chase's notation on the reverse: "the finest Miss. River steamboat cancellation." Ex Rust.



The Tiger began sailing between the Red River and New Orleans in 1858 and was snagged and lost at Alexandria, LA in 1860. Its brief period of operation probably accounts for the scarcity of covers with its handstamp. Indeed, this is possibly the only known example with an adhesive stamp. Name-of-boat handstamps on mourning or ladies covers are rare because the packet boats that traveled the Mississippi and its tributaries carried mostly commercial mail. Klein 557 / Milgram 1371. Ex J. David Baker and Haas.

STEAMBOAT

FAST



An 1850s cover that was carried by the A. L. Shotwell, a side-wheeler steamboat that was renowned for its speed.

This is the only recorded example of the "Louisville & St. Louis Mail Route" route agent handstamp.

Pictured in Chronicle 226, May 2010, (p.116). Ex Craveri.

The A. L. Shotwell carried the mail on Route 5,103 which covered a 650 mile stretch of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. However, the boat is best remembered for its race against the *Eclipse*. Both boats took more than three days to cover the 560 miles from New Orleans to Cairo, IL with the A. L. Shotwell winning by a mere 24 minutes.



Steamboat races were important events that were scheduled weeks in advance and heavily advertised. They attracted large and highly partisan crowds that sometimes lined the river banks for hundreds of miles. Wagering was common. Prior to a race, the boats were often stripped of their adornments and unnecessary equipment in order to lessen their weight.

Left: A Currier & Ives print of a steamboat race

STEAMSHIP

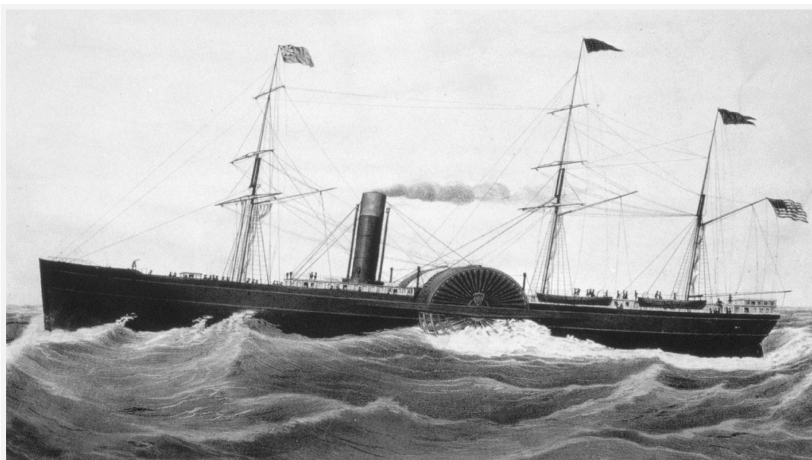
COAL AND WIND



A cover that was carried to San Juan del Sur on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua by the steamer *Sierra Nevada* which left San Francisco on December 9, 1854. It was transported across the isthmus of Nicaragua to San Juan del Norte on the Atlantic coast by stagecoach and by lake and river steamers. On December 23, it departed Nicaragua on the steamer *Star of the West* which arrived in New York on January 1, 1855. Klein 512 / Milgram 1275.

Pictured in Milgram (p. 643), in Coburn's *Letters of Gold* (p. 94), and in Ashbrook's *One Cent Stamp of 1851-57* (Vol. 2, p. 268). Ex Haas.

In 1854, the *Sierra Nevada* was owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Company. She was an 1,800 ton, 235 foot long steamship that had a paddle wheel on either side, three masts, and a single smokestack. As with most ocean-going steamers of that era, she had an iron hull that was narrow, deep, and solidly braced in order to withstand the stresses that were imposed by the paddle wheels in rough seas. And like most ships of her type, the *Sierra Nevada* was expensive to run because of her high coal consumption.



Her operating cost could be reduced by the use of sails which also backed up the steam engines. Nevertheless, ocean-going steamers like the *Sierra Nevada* had to carry so much coal that their cargo space was limited. As a result, they were used mainly for the transport of passengers, mail, and high value cargoes like bullion.

Left: A print of the *Sierra Nevada*

CANAL BOAT and POLE BOAT

PULLED BY ANIMALS, PUSHED BY MEN



An 1854 folded letter that was mailed at the post office in Richmond, VA and carried to Cartersville, VA by a Kanawha Canal packet boat (as per the sender's endorsement) that was pulled by horses or mules. It was transferred in Cartersville to a bateau or "pole boat" that was bound for Ca Ira, VA on the Willis River system.

This is probably the finest of the fewer than 10 recorded examples of this use.

The Kanawha Canal ran westward from Richmond to present day Buchanan, VA in very close proximity to the James River. Most of the recorded covers that were carried on that canal were "way" uses that were handed directly to a boat operator at the wharf in Richmond or at some point farther along the canal. Most of the "way" uses that reached Lynchburg received that town's "Way 6" handstamp—a survival from the pre-stamp era— even when the postage had been prepaid.



"Non-way" covers that were mailed at the Richmond post office and then put on a "contract" canal boat must have been much more common. However, in most cases that mode of transport can't be assumed because Richmond was also served by stagecoaches and trains. In this case, the Ca Ira destination makes a canal boat use likely and the "per Packet Boat" endorsement proves it.

The Kanawha Canal boats had a shallow draft and were narrow and long (up to 90 feet) in order to accommodate the width of the canal. They were pulled by teams of mules or horses that trod tow paths along the banks. The average speed of a canal boat that was pulled by three strong horses was about four miles per hour.

* * *

In 1854, the contract for mail transport on the Kanawha Canal (Route 2,426) was held by Boyd, Edmonds & Co. who were paid \$4,650 a year for thrice-weekly service.

* * *

In 1863 the Kanawha Canal boat *Marshall* carried the body of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson from Lynchburg to his home in Lexington, VA for burial.

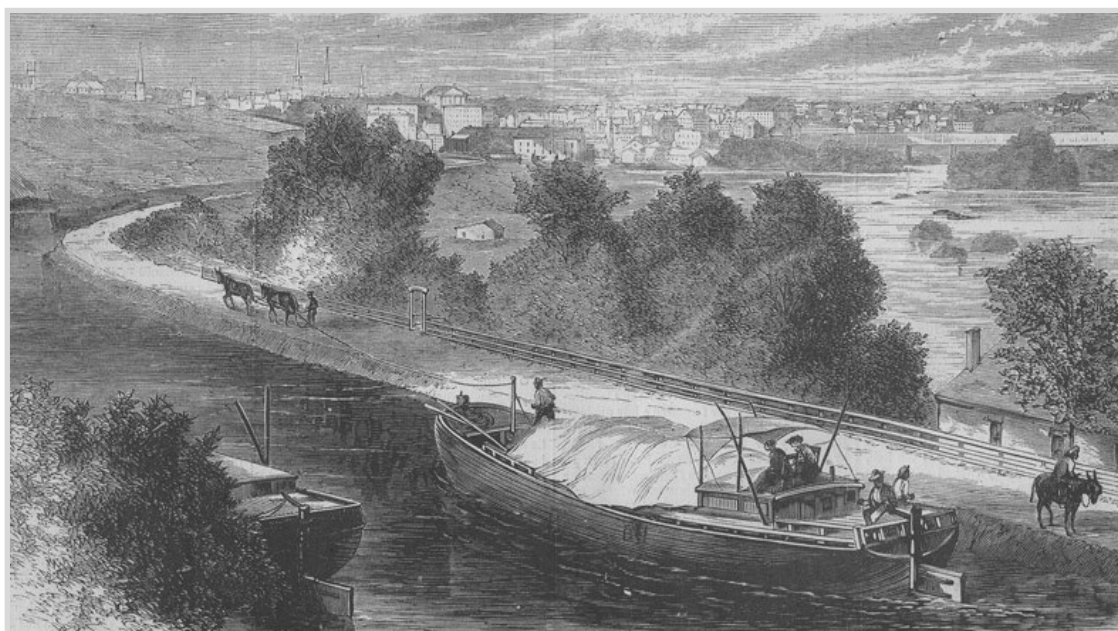
* * *

This cover has another unusual feature that relates to its transport beyond the Kanawha Canal: at the Cartersville lock, 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 River was by *bateaus* which were shallow draft, flat-bottomed boats that usually tapered to a point at one or both ends. Their flat-bottomed design allowed the boats to remain stable when carrying a heavy load. The *bateaus* were so-called “pole boats”—i.e. they were propelled by men who used long poles to push or “punt” the boats along the river bottom. In addition to the mail, the boats carried tobacco hogsheads and other agricultural products.

* * *

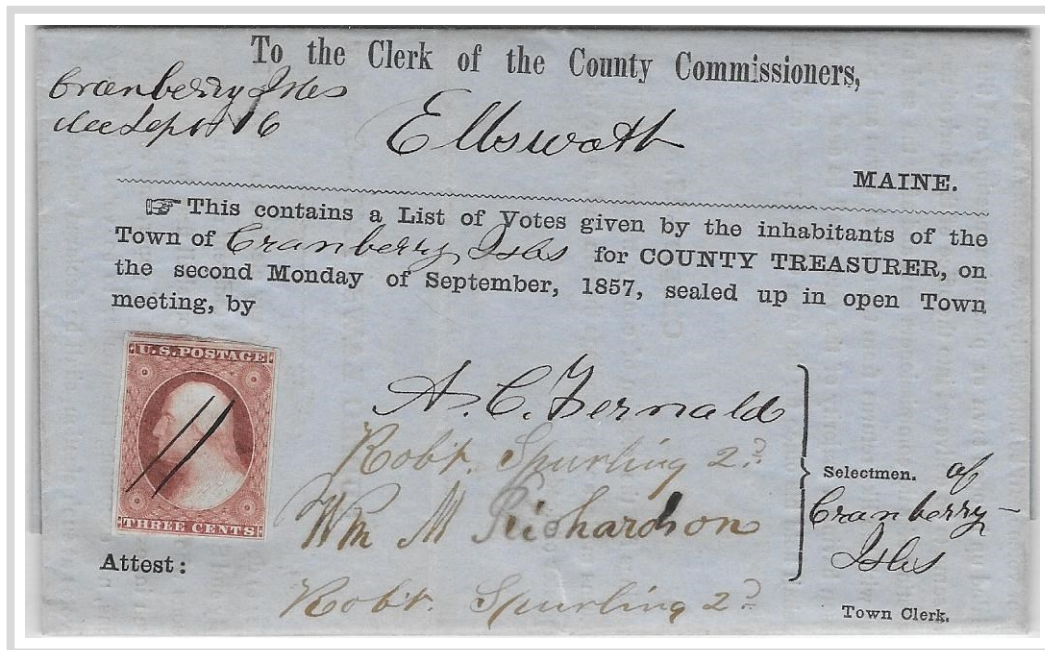
Because of its rapids, the Willis River was navigable only because of its “flash locks” that consisted of low dams with a gate in the middle that was hinged at the bottom. When the pond that was formed by the dam was full, the gate was dropped and the boats went down or up on the resulting flood.



A Kanawha Canal boat being pulled by horses on a tow path

ROWBOAT

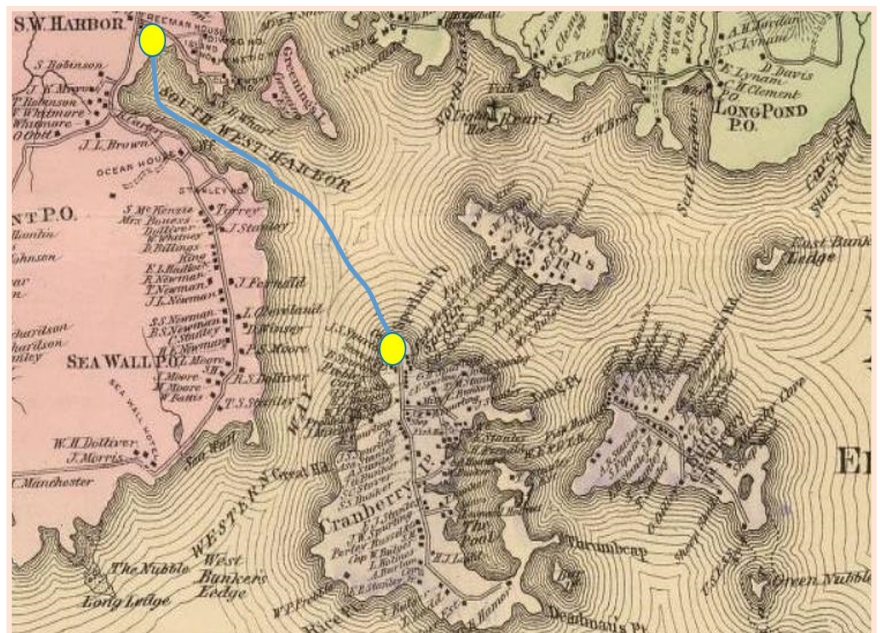
ACROSS AN OCEAN CHANNEL



An 1857 cover that was carried by a rowboat in the weekly mail from Great Cranberry Island, ME ("Cranberry Isles") to Southwest Harbor on the mainland on Route 74. The boat crossed the Western Way which is an ocean channel.

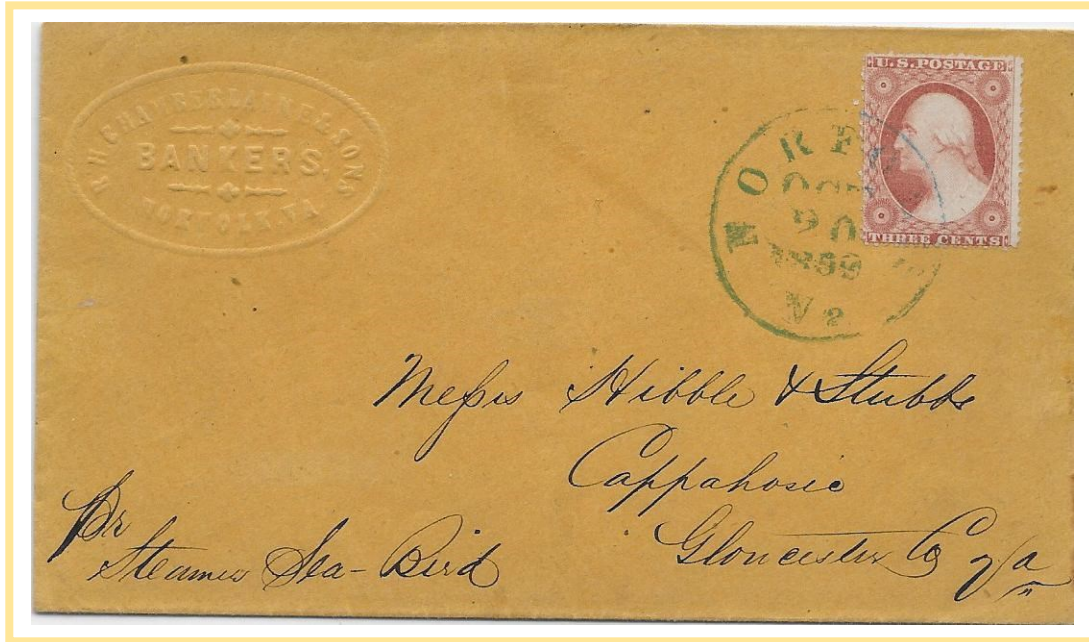
In the mid-19th century, the mail boat's recorded transit time across the four mile channel was 90 minutes. That speed of just under 3 mph would be extremely slow for a steamboat but is consistent with sustained rowing by a fit person in a moderately-laden boat. Indeed, rowboats were commonly used to cross the channel until the last quarter of the 19th century when they were rapidly replaced by steam-powered boats.

Right: A map of the Cranberry Isles. The blue line shows the approximate route of the rowboat between the two post offices (yellow circles).



STEAMBOAT

A PACKET BOAT GOES TO WAR



An 1859 cover that was carried by the Sea Bird on the York River between Norfolk and Cappahosick, VA. Although the boat—a side-wheeler steamer without sails—spent most of her life as a packet boat, she is better known as the ill-fated flagship of the Confederate “mosquito fleet” that attempted to defend Roanoke Island and Elizabeth City against Union gunboats in February 1862.

In 1861, the *Sea Bird* was purchased by the State of North Carolina and fitted with two cannons—a 32-pound smoothbore and a 30-pound rifled bore—for service in the Confederate Navy. During the hard-fought battles in defense of Roanoke Island (February 7-8, 1862) and Elizabeth City (February 10) the boat and many of her crew members perished.

“A federal gunboat, the Commodore Perry, ran down the rebel flagship Sea Bird, having on board Commodore Lynch, cutting her apart. Our men boarded her pell mell, and during the encounter a portion of her officers and crew jumped overboard; others had their brains knocked out with handspikes, which were freely used.”

The Republican (Springfield, MA) February 15, 1862



IRON CLAD MONITOR

BATTLE-SCARRED



A cover that originated on the “U.S. Iron Clad Steamer Nantucket” (as per the sender’s endorsement) and that was carried by a Navy tender to New York where it was post-marked on August 27, 1863. The enclosed letter is datelined August 17, Wassau Sound, Georgia and contains important historical references.

The *Nantucket* was a *Passaic*-class monitor (an iron-clad gunboat) that was assigned to the South Atlantic Coastal Blockading Squadron during the Civil War.

It displaced 1,875 tons, was 200 feet long, and had a maximum speed of seven knots. Its iron armor was 1” thick on the deck, 3” to 5” thick on the sides, and 11” thick on its single turret which housed two smooth-bore cannons. It carried a crew of 75 officers and enlisted men.

The boat was launched on December 6, 1862 from the Atlantic Iron Works in Boston and was commissioned on February 26, 1863 under Commander Donald MacNeil Fairfax who is best known for boarding the British mail steamer *R.M.S. Trent* on November 8, 1861 in order to remove James M. Mason and John Slidell, two Confederate diplomats who’d been on their way to England and France to lobby for the interests of the Confederacy.

* * *

On April 7, 1863 the *Nantucket* took part in the first attack on the Confederate forts in Charleston Harbor. The bombardment was carried out by nine U.S. Navy ironclad warships, of which seven—including the *Nantucket*—were monitors. The attack was a dismal failure and the small fleet limped away with one ship close to sinking and most of the others damaged. The *Nantucket*, which had been struck 51 times, required extensive repairs.

In July 1863, the *Nantucket* supported the Union Army in the second battle for Fort Wagner which controlled the southern approaches to Charleston Harbor and protected Morris Island. It was in that battle that the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry—a regiment of African-Americans—gained its “glory.”

In May 1864, the *Nantucket* participated in a second attack on Charleston Harbor that was no more successful than the first. It then continued on blockade duty until the end of the war and assisted in the capture of at least one blockade runner.

On November 14, 1900 it was sold at auction in the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. The rather aggressive winning bid of more than \$13,000 reflected the illustrious history of the ship.

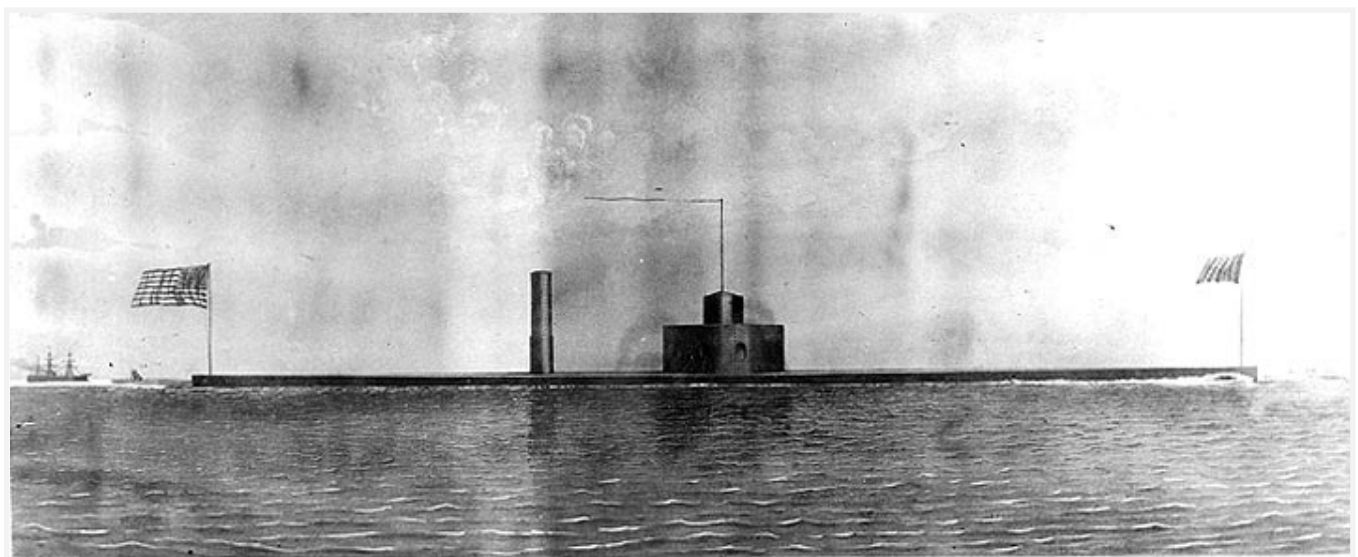
* * *

The original letter that accompanies this cover is from a crew member to his mother and is dated “U.S. Iron Clad Steamer *Nantucket*, Wassau Sound, Georgia, Monday, August 17th, 1863.” It was written less than a month after the boat’s participation in the second battle for Fort Wagner. The letter reads in part:

“The rest of the Iron Clads are hammering away at the doors of Charleston . . . By this time somebody over in (Fort) Sumpter (sic) has been hurt, for the bricks will fly there to some purpose . . .

“There is very little chance of any rebel ram coming down here—the loss of the ‘Atlanta’ showed them what we could do and I suspect they (now) overrate the Iron Clads as much as they underrated them after the first attack on Charleston.”

The *Atlanta* was a particular kind of Confederate ironclad steamer that was called a “ram.” Like the name implies, it could sink enemy ships by ramming and penetrating their hulls with its own reinforced bow. Many of the rams also carried heavy guns. In June 1863 the *Atlanta* set its sights on the Union ships that were blockading Wassau Sound which is just outside of Savannah. However, she was engaged by two Union monitors which overwhelmed her with superior firepower and forced her to surrender.



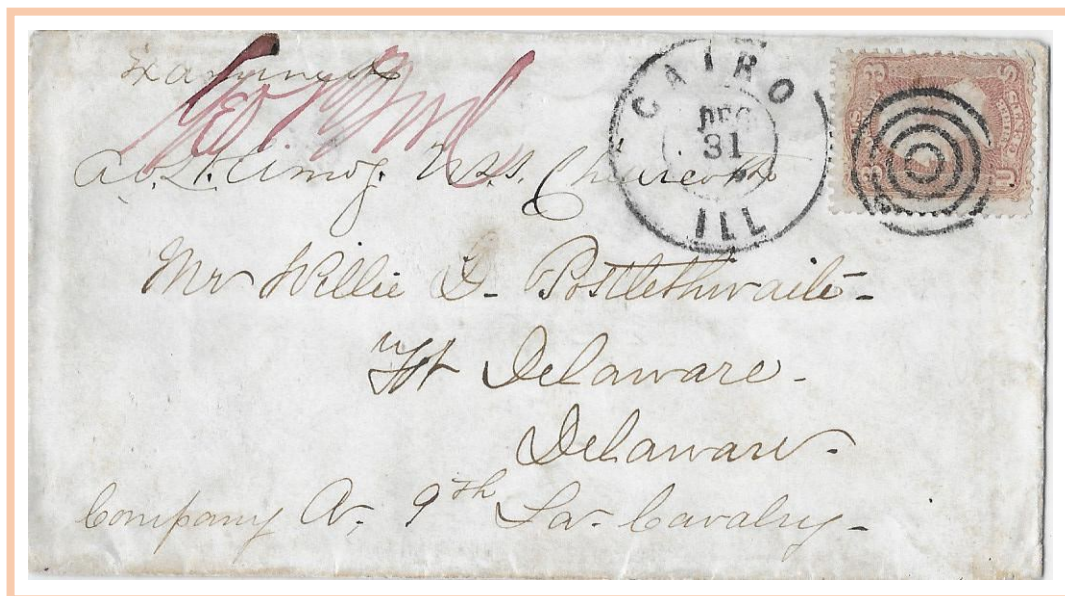
The U.S.S. Nantucket

(From the Online Library of the Naval Historical Center)

GUNBOAT

RETURNING A FAVOR

A Rare Flag-of-Truce Use



An 1864 cover that carried a letter to a Confederate POW at Fort Delaware, DE. The letter was exchanged on or about December 2 between Fayette and Natchez, MS under a local flag-of-truce. It was then censored aboard a Union gunboat—the U.S.S. Chillicothe—that was part of the fleet that was blockading the Mississippi River. The cover was then transferred to a Navy tender which carried it to Cairo, IL where it was put into the U.S. Mail on December 31.

Accompanied by photocopies of government records of the capture and imprisonment of the addressee.

This is one of only two recorded examples of a flag of truce cover that was handled by a Union gunboat on the Mississippi River. (Both are from this same episode.)

Pictured in Walske and Trepel's *Special Mail Routes of the American Civil War* (p. 81). Ex Birkinbine and Walske.

According to *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, on November 30, 1864 two U.S. Army surgeons were sent via a flag-of-truce from Natchez, MS (which was under Union control) to nearby Fayette (which was under Confederate control). Their goal was to care for a captured and wounded U.S. Army scout. Before returning to Natchez on December 2, the surgeons were given two letters to a Confederate soldier who was imprisoned at Fort Delaware.

Apparently this letter originally lacked a cover since the address on the envelope is in the same handwriting as the "Examined" notation that was written on board the U.S.S. Chillicothe, a Union

gunboat in the Mississippi River Squadron. In addition, someone on the gunboat provided the U.S. postage stamp.

Local flag-of-truce exchanges were occasionally made with the Union gunboats that controlled the Mississippi River. Such mail was censored on the gunboat and forwarded to either New Orleans or Cairo, IL. In this case, the cover was carried upriver to Cairo—the home port of the Mississippi River Squadron—by the tender *U.S.S. Pierce*.

* * *

The following details with regard to this cover were obtained from *The Official Records*:

On November 30, 1864, Brigadier General Mason Brayman, the Commander of U.S. forces in Natchez, MS wrote the Commanding Officer of the Confederate forces near Fayette:

“SIR: I learn this morning that Lieutenant Earl, commanding independent scouts, under special instructions of Major-General Canby, Commanding Military Division of West Mississippi, was seriously wounded last night in passing through Fayette; that he was left at the residence of a surgeon, who had not, however, the means of treating him as the nature of his wounds required, and that he now remains in a precarious condition, and doubtless a prisoner. I hereby dispatch Surg. A.E. Carothers, in charge of a U.S. general hospital, and Surg. P.A. Willis, post surgeon of this command, attended by six men, under flag of truce, with such instruments and supplies as the condition of Lieutenant Earl may require. I have to request that these gentlemen be received in the usual manner and permitted to afford such surgical aid as may be needed. If able to be brought in, I request that Lieutenant Earl may be paroled; if not, and he remains a prisoner, that he may be treated with humanity and courtesy. The gentlemen whom I send have discretionary power. The wife of Lieutenant Earl will also accompany them, and I bespeak for her like courtesy.”

On November 30, the flag-of-truce party left Natchez in a carriage and arrived the following morning in Fayette where they were met by Lt. B. B. Paddock, a commander of Confederate scouts, to whom they presented General Brayman’s letter. Lt. Paddock informed them that Lt. Earl had been moved the day before to a district hospital (probably in Jackson) that was 30 miles behind the Confederate lines. Because it was “contrary to usual custom” for the enemy to enter the lines, the surgeons and Lt. Earl’s wife could not visit him. However, Lt. Paddock assured them that Lt. Earl would receive “every attention in my power to bestow” and he also promised to forward to Lt. Earl “some medicines and delicacies” that the surgeons had left for him.

Despite these assurances, the surgeons were suspicious of their enemy’s intentions because Lt. Earl had been a considerable nemesis to them and a Confederate soldier had been seen wearing his three rings (which were returned to Mrs. Earl upon the pleas of the surgeons). However, there was nothing that the surgeons could do other than remain cordial and grant a favor in return by transmitting some letters to a Confederate soldier who was imprisoned in Fort Delaware.

Unfortunately, Lt. Earl died in Confederate custody and was buried by them in Union Church (about 35 miles from Natchez) on December 7, 1864.

* * *

See: Robert Nicholson Scott, et al., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, United States War Department, Washington, the Government Printing Office, Series I, Volume XLI, Part IV—Correspondence, Etc., Chapter LIII, 1893, pp. 755-756.

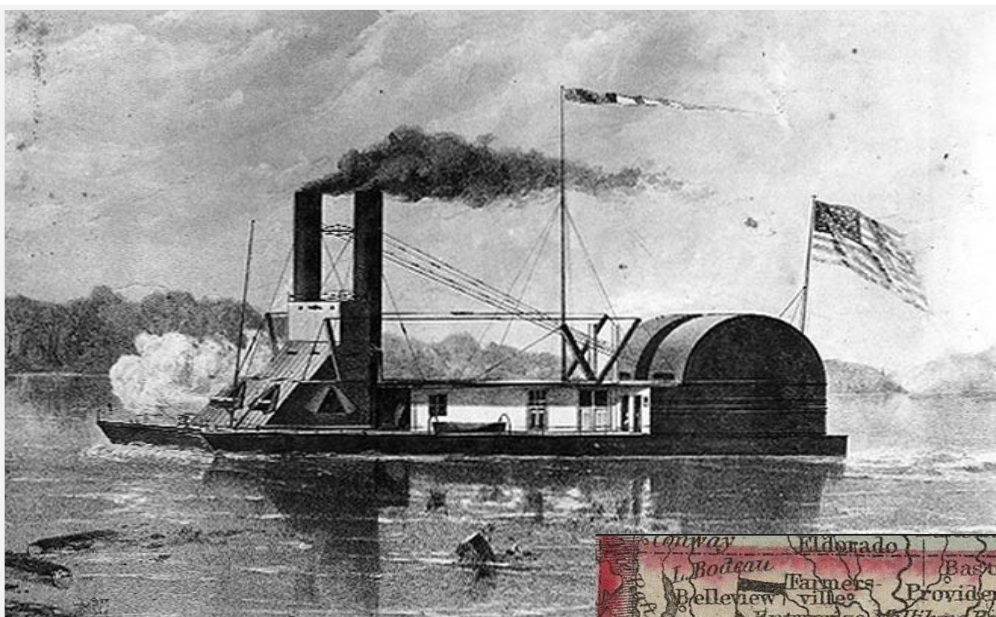
The Confederate prisoner, Willie D. Postlethwaite (b.1844), was a private in Company "A" ("New River Rangers") of the 9th Louisiana Cavalry. He was captured near Corinth, MS on October 5, 1863, and was sent to Alton, IL on October 6. He was transferred to Fort Delaware on February 29, 1864 and exchanged on March 7, 1865 at Boulware's and Coxe's wharf in Virginia. He was later listed in the 1880 New Orleans census.

Pvt. Postlethwaite was a scion of an old and wealthy Natchez family. His wife and her family were also from the Natchez area. On the other hand, his father (who was also named William Dunbar Postlethwaite) had settled in Westmoreland, LA. These facts explain why young "Willie" had enlisted in a Louisiana regiment and why the surgeons were given letters to him in Fayette which was only a few miles from Natchez.

* * *

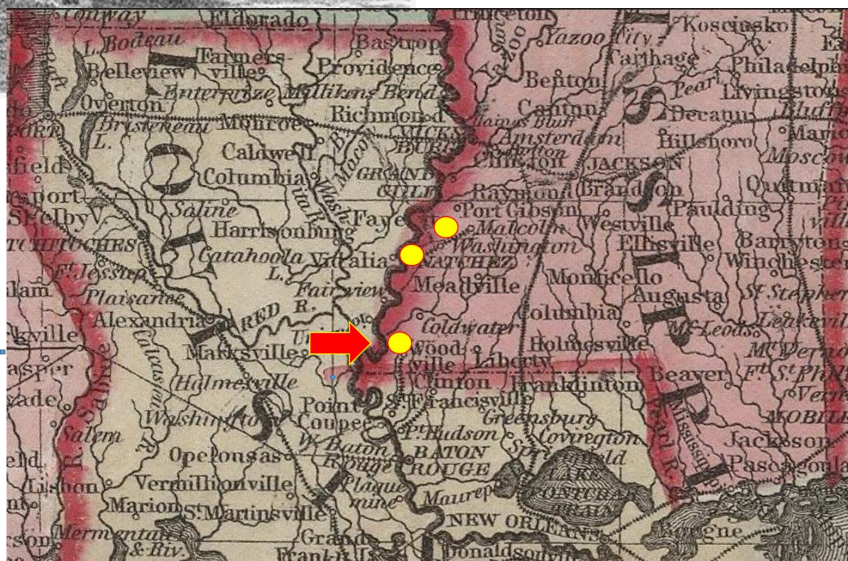
On December 2, 1864, the *U.S.S. Chillicothe* (or the "Chilly Coffee" as she was called by her crew) was stationed off Fort Adams about 40 miles below Natchez. She was commanded by Lt. George P. Lord, U.S.N. who signed this cover (as the censor) in the red ink that was typically used by the military at that time.

The *U.S.S. Chillicothe* was the smallest (162 feet and 395 tons) and the least expensive (\$92,960) of the gunboats in the Mississippi River Squadron. A side-wheeler steamer, she had an average speed of seven knots and was fitted with three guns. After the war, she was sold at auction for \$3,000.



Above: A print of the *U.S.S. Chillicothe*.

Right: A map of the lower Mississippi region. The lowest circle is Fort Adams. The arrow shows the location of the *U.S.S. Chillicothe* on December 2, 1864. The middle circle is Natchez and the upper one is Fayette.



CANOE

A "SECRET SERVICE"



An 1864 Confederate cover from Richmond, VA to Shreveport, LA "via Brandon Miss" that was covertly carried by a canoe or a rowboat through the Union blockade of the Mississippi River.

There are perhaps five recorded trans-Mississippi express covers that were sent with some of the postage "due" and this is the only example that was uprated from the regular mail rate of 10¢ to the Express Mail rate of 40¢.

Pictured in Walske and Trepel's *Special Mail Routes of the American Civil War* (p. 107). Signed by Brian Green. Ex Green, Hall, Murphy, and Walske.

This cover was carried across the Mississippi River under circumstances similar to those that were described below by James H. Kimball of Livingston, Texas who was a Third Sergeant in Company "C" of the Louisiana State Cavalry and who was later placed on detached duty in the "secret service" (as he termed it) that crossed the Union blockade of the Mississippi River:

"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.”

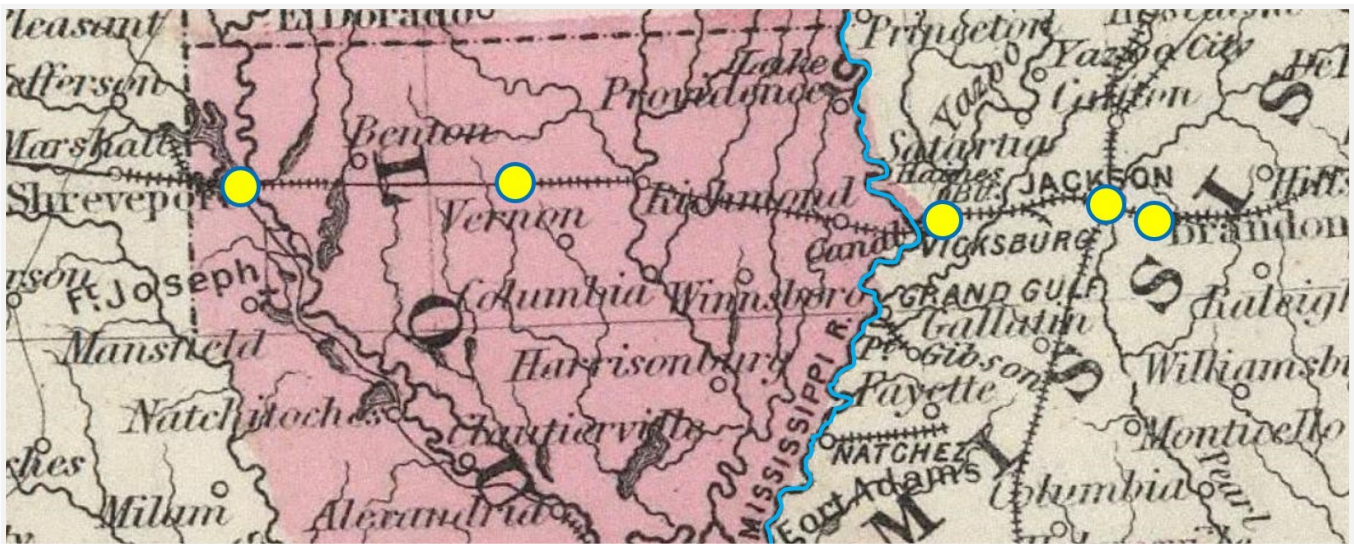
* * *

See: Mamie Yearly (compiler), *Reminiscences of the Boys in Gray, 1861-1865*, Vol. 2, Dallas, Smith & Lamar, 1912, pp. 402-403.

* * *

During the period of the 40¢ trans-Mississippi express mail rate (October 1863 to April 1865), the standard, “non-express” rate of 10¢ per half ounce was still valid for mail that crossed the river. However, standard rate letters received lower priority. In this unusual case, a CSA postal clerk somewhere between Richmond, VA and Brandon, MS “upgraded” this standard rate letter to the express rate by adding “Due 30” and “Via Brandon Miss” notations, despite the requirement that all express letters be fully prepaid.

This exception may have been made because the letter was addressed to a soldier who was at the headquarters of the Trans-Mississippi Department in Shreveport. Perhaps more importantly, 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 as the hero of the Battle of Galveston which had been fought the year before.

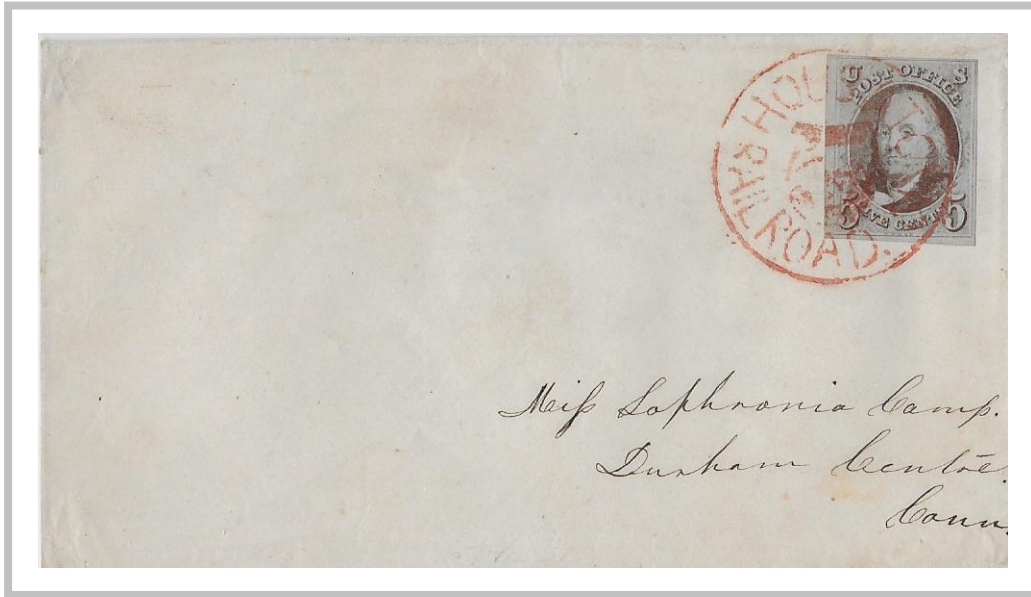


Trans-Mississippi Mail via Brandon

A circa 1865 map showing the relationship of (from right to left) Brandon, Jackson, and Vicksburg in Mississippi and Monroe and Shreveport in Louisiana. Westbound trans-Mississippi mail was routed through Brandon and Meridian (which isn’t shown on the map) primarily because they were located on the only major east-west railroad line in that part of the Confederacy. .

The regular postal route between Brandon and Shreveport remained open (despite the Federal gunboats on the Mississippi) until Jackson fell on May 14, 1863. After that, the mail—including this cover—was carried across the river on ever-changing routes.

TRAINS



A circa 1850 cover that entered the U.S. Mail on the Housatonic Railroad where it received the route agent's handstamp. The railroad ran between Bridgeport CT and either West Stockbridge, MA (Route 702, 96 miles, July 1847 to June 1849) or Pittsfield, MA (Route 705, 98 miles, July 1849 to June 1853).

With PFC 511828 (2013) and 564867 (2019). Ex Dick, Rust, Boker, and Gross.

The Mohawk & Hudson Railroad, which was incorporated in New York State in 1826, was the first American railroad that was designed to be powered by a locomotive engine rather than by horses or gravity. It opened on August 9, 1831 using a steam locomotive, the *DeWitt Clinton*.

Just 30 years later, there were more than 30,000 miles of tracks in the country. Indeed, by 1860 railroads linked almost every city in the North and Midwest. In fact, in the heavily-settled Corn Belt, over 80% of farms were within five miles of a railroad which facilitated the shipment of grain and livestock to national markets in cities like Chicago.

The antebellum South was another matter: railroads tended to be short lines that linked cotton and tobacco-growing regions to river or ocean ports. The absence of an extensive intercity rail network proved to be a major handicap for the South during the Civil War.

In the West, vast distances, difficult terrain, and harsh weather were major challenges to the construction of rail lines but the railroads still managed to follow the wagon trains westward, albeit with a considerable time lag. Indeed, it wasn't until 1869 that there was a coast-to-coast rail network, although an ever-increasing portion of the continent could be crossed by train before then.

* * *

Interestingly, the first Post Office Department (POD) contract to transport the mail by train wasn't

with a railroad company. In 1832 the POD agreed to pay a stagecoach company an extra \$400 per year so that it could use a train on a portion of its route between Philadelphia and Lancaster, PA. For several years after that, most of the contracts for rail transport continued to be with stagecoach operators, but once Congress declared on July 7, 1838 that all rail lines were also post roads, contracts with railroad companies rapidly increased.

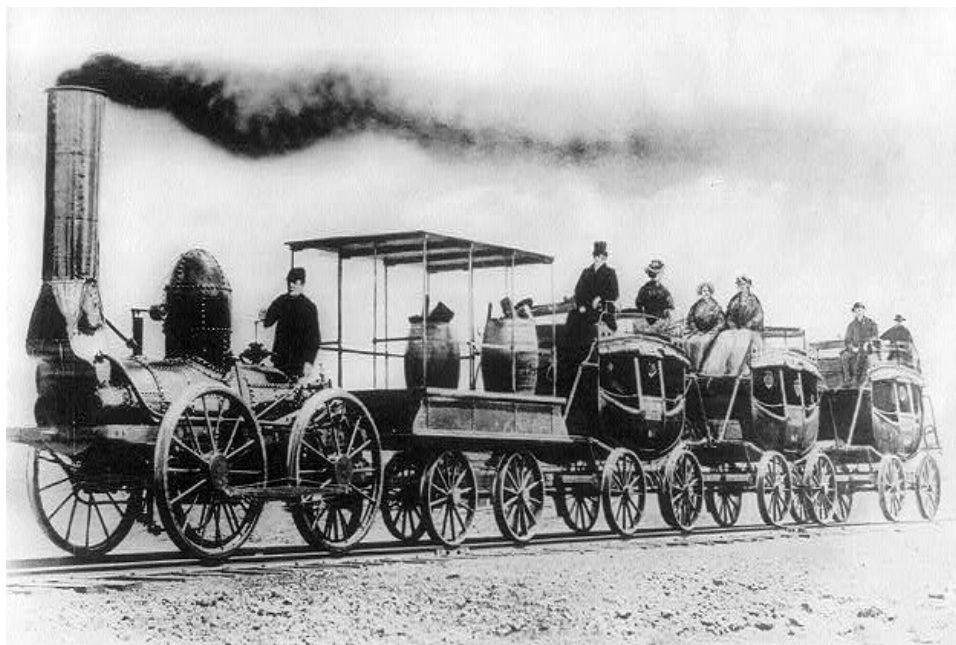
The contracts called for the railroads to carry locked bags of mail from one post office to another. At first the bags were left unattended and shipped with the rest of the freight. However, beginning in June 1840, many trains carried a POD employee—a route agent—who watched over the bags and performed some of the functions of a post office clerk. Those functions included processing the “loose” or non-bagged letters that the train received along its route. Indeed, most of the railroad markings on mid-19th century covers were applied by route agents. Those covers seldom bear any post office markings because there was usually no need for them—the route agent’s marking was sufficient to indicate that the cover had entered the U.S. Mail. On the other hand, covers that were carried in a locked bag usually received only post office markings and seldom bear any indication that they were carried by a train.

* * *

Until around 1870, steam-powered locomotives burned wood rather than coal. An early example of a coal-burning locomotive was the Union Pacific Railroad’s engine No. 119 which on May 10, 1869 was at the ceremony at Promontory Point that marked the completion of the transcontinental railroad.

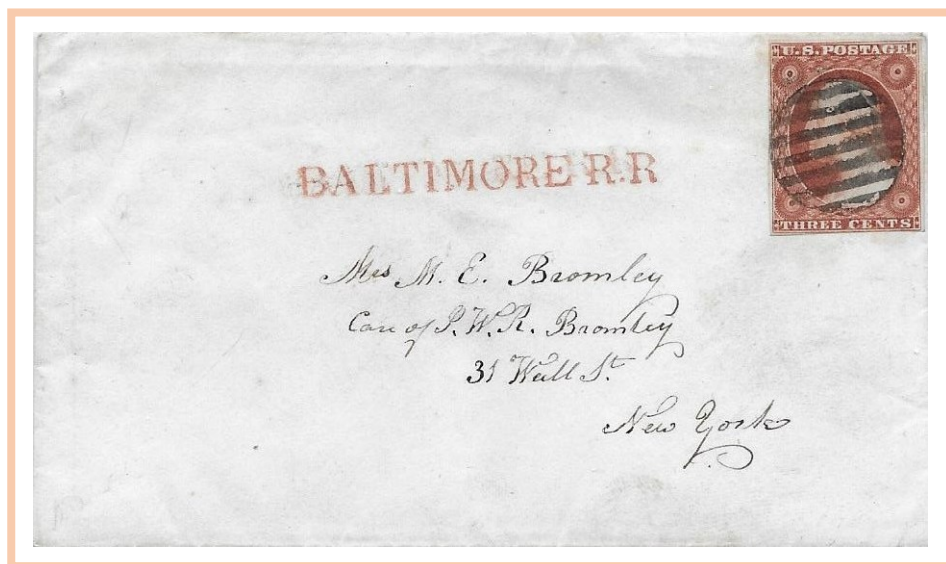
* * *

During most of the 19th century, the speed of steam-powered trains was limited less by locomotive technology than by the quality and maintenance of the tracks. The express trains between the big cities in the East—such as between New York and Philadelphia—ran on the best tracks and had a maximum speed of as much as 60 mph. At the other extreme, most trains in the South couldn’t run faster than 10-20 mph on account of the primitive and less expensive “strap rails” that were constructed mostly from wood rather than steel.



The DeWitt Clinton

TRAINS

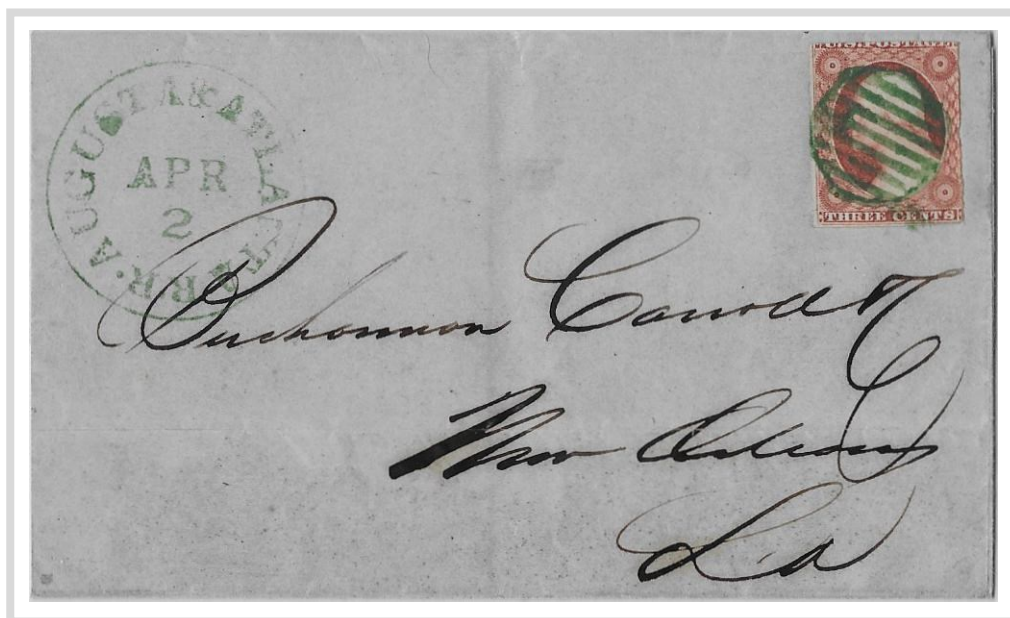


A mid-1850s cover that was carried by the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore Railroad. The "BALTIMORE RR" handstamp was applied to mail that was bagged for New York at the Baltimore post office. Ex Beals and Alexander.

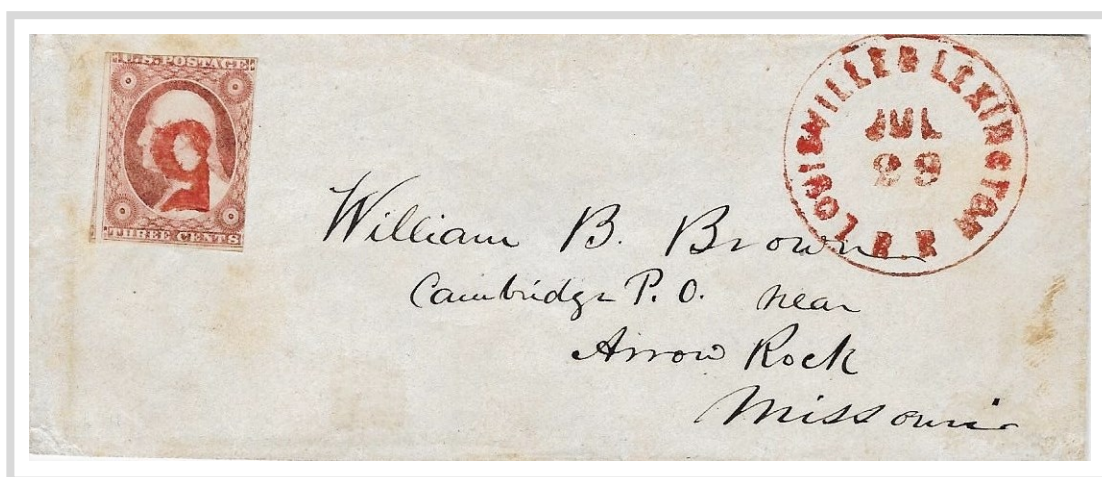


An 1851 cover that was carried from Philadelphia to New York by the Camden & Amboy Railroad on Route 1,352. The "PHILADA RAILROAD" handstamp was applied by the New York post office to mail that had been bagged in Philadelphia. PF certificate 211498 (1989). Ex Simpson and Hopkins.

TRAINS



An 1853 cover with a green “AUGUSTA & ATLANTA R.R.” route agent marking. Railroad route agent markings in true green are rare during this time period, particularly on covers that are franked with an adhesive stamp. Ex Toasperm, Downing, and Hopkins.



An 1853 or 1854 cover with a blood red “LOUISVILLE & LEXINGTON R.R.” route agent handstamp. The matching “5” had nothing to do with the postal rate (which was fully paid by the 3¢ stamp)—it was simply used to cancel the stamp.

This cover is pictured and discussed in Skinner and Peterson’s *The 1851 Issue of United States Stamps: A Sesquicentennial Retrospective* (pp. 239 and 253) where Frank Mandel notes that this railroad had only 94 miles of track. Ex Hicks, Mandel, and Sharrer.

TRAIN

FASTER

Replacing a Regional Stagecoach Line



An April 1, 1859 cover from Camp Floyd, U.T. to New York City that was carried by John Hockaday from Salt Lake City to St. Joseph, MO in a mule-drawn stagecoach. In St. Joseph, the cover was transferred to the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad which had been completed as recently as February 13, 1859 and which substantially reduced the travel time to the major cities in the East.

Signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Ex Polland.

The Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad was the first railroad to cross the state of Missouri and, at the time, it extended farther west than any other railroad with connections to the East. In anticipation of the railroad's completion, the eastern terminus of the Central Overland Route was moved from Independence to St. Joseph on May 1, 1858 which was when Hockaday's contract began.

According to *Appleton's Railway and Steam Navigation Guide*, the train took about 12 hours (with stops) to travel the 206 miles between St. Joseph and Hannibal, although in a demonstration in support of making St. Joseph the eastern terminus of the Central Overland Route, an "ace" engineer had completed the trip in 4 hours and 50 minutes. In contrast, a stagecoach on the "Hound Dog Trail"—which the railroad paralleled and largely replaced—required 40-70 hours, depending on traffic and the condition of the road. Therefore, the new railroad cut the travel time to New York by two or three days.

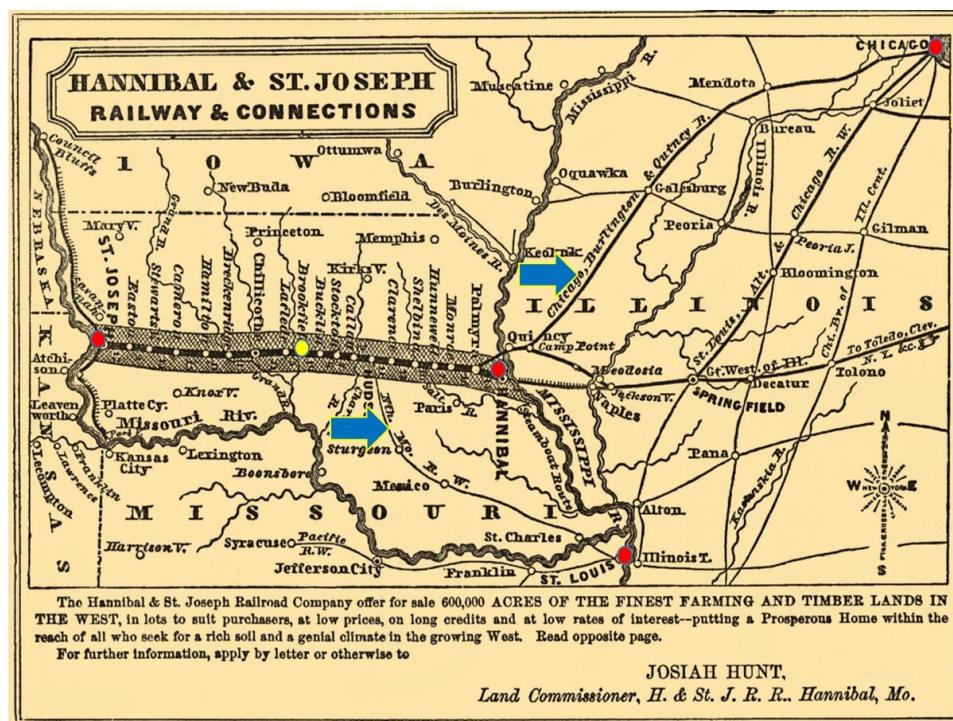
Beginning on or shortly after February 13, 1859, the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad carried the mail to and from the Central Overland Route and beginning on April 3, 1860, it also carried the mail to and from the Pony Express. Thus, this railroad was arguably the most important rail link in coast-to-coast mail transport until 1870 when the transcontinental railroad was completed.



An eastbound cover with a “Hannibal & St. Joseph / Brookfield / Apr 1860” station agent’s handstamp. The Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad was the key eastern connection for the Pony Express and this cover was carried by that railroad during the first month of the Pony Express’ operation.

This Brookfield station handstamp is the only known marking from the earliest days of the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad and this is the finer of the two recorded examples.

Ex Wyer, Hicks, Risvold, and Kramer.



The Brookfield station (yellow circle) was about half way between St. Joseph (left red circle) and Hannibal (middle red circle). The railroad’s main rail connections were with the North Missouri Railroad (lower blue arrow) which went to St. Louis (lowermost red circle) and with the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad (upper blue arrow) which went to Chicago (uppermost red circle). Both of those railroads had U.S. Mail contracts. Later on there was also a direct connection with a rail line to Toledo and Cleveland. The map is circa 1860.

TRAIN

UNDER ENEMY CONTROL



A May 1861 cover that was carried by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&ORR) from its Duffields, VA station at a time when that portion of the railroad was effectively under the control of Col. Thomas (later General “Stonewall”) Jackson of the Virginia Militia. It was one of the last letters to be carried by that railroad before Jackson’s troops interrupted it less than 48 hours later in “The Great Train Raid of 1861.”

This is the latest and the finest of the three recorded examples of the Duffields station handstamp and the only example from after Virginia seceded. It is accompanied by the original letter from Elkton, VA.

This folded letter to Rochester, NY originated in Elkton in the western portion of Virginia two weeks after Virginia was admitted to the Confederacy on May 7. It entered the U.S. Mail at the B&ORR station in Duffields, VA on May 21, 1861.

* * *

Although the B&ORR remained allied with the Union—it was owned by the State of Maryland—it had effectively been under Confederate control since April 18, 1861 when the Virginia Militia had first occupied Harpers Ferry. (Virginia had seceded from the Union the day before.)

On April 27 Colonel Thomas J. Jackson assumed command of the Harpers Ferry area. In early May he learned that many of the B&ORR freight cars that were passing through the town were carrying coal from the Ohio Valley to the U.S. Navy base in Baltimore. The latter supplied the warships that were blockading Southern ports. Therefore, Jackson devised a scheme to at least temporarily cripple the transport of coal and reap a windfall of rolling stock for the Confederacy.

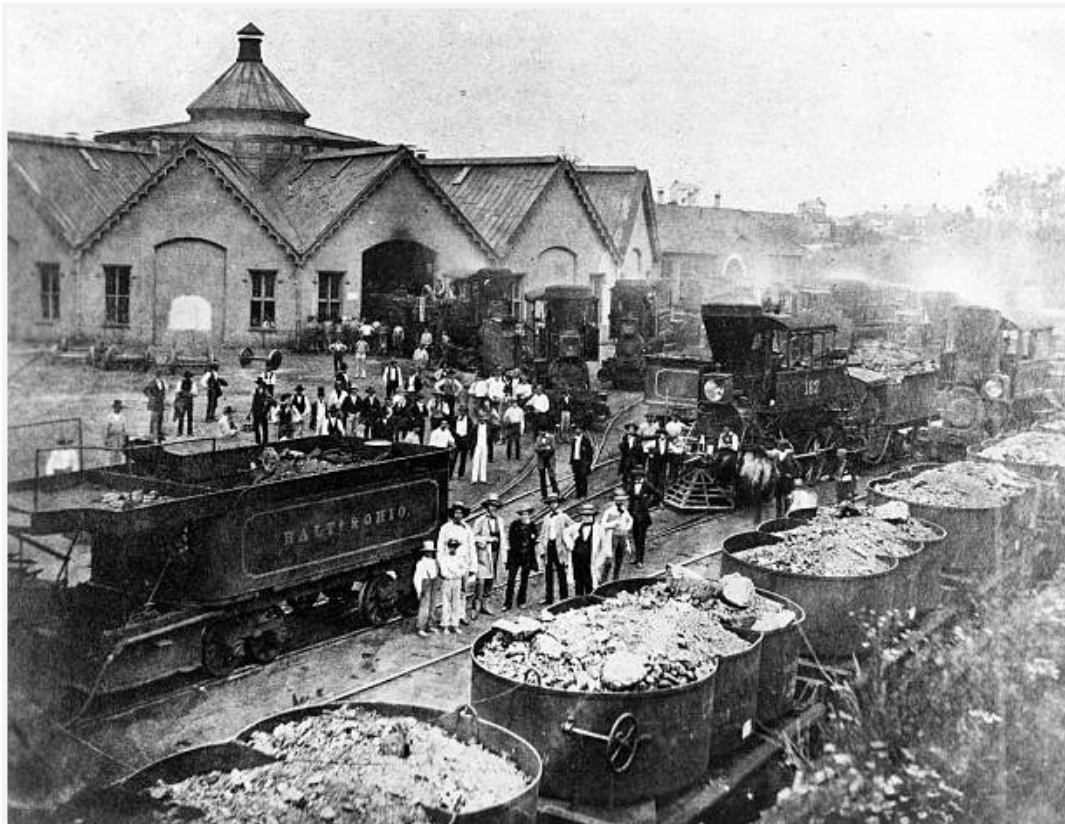
Although there is some controversy among historians with regard to the following events, one

popular version states that in mid-May, Jackson complained to the railroad president, John Garrett, that the noise of the freight cars was disturbing the sleep of his troops and that henceforth all freight traffic through Harpers Ferry had to be restricted to the daylight hours. Then within days, Jackson tightened the restriction so that movement of the trains was limited to a two hour period around mid-day. Garrett was in no position to defy Jackson, so he ordered that the trains be staged one behind the other in the yards on either side of Harpers Ferry in order to maximize their throughput during the permissible time period.

Then shortly after noon on May 23, Jackson sprang his trap: his troops cut the railroad lines east of Martinsburg and west of Point of Rocks (with Duffields station in between), thus trapping the rolling stock. This "Great Train Raid of 1861" resulted in the capture of 56 locomotives and more than 300 freight cars for the Confederacy.

* * *

The enclosed letter from Elkton, VA was written in dated installments between May 7 and May 20, 1861 and its contents are also noteworthy: they describe Confederate preparations for the defense of Harpers Ferry, the fact that Col. Jackson was about to be relieved of his command, the fear that John Brown Jr. was organizing a slave invasion of Virginia, and the rumor that President Lincoln *"is drunk most of the time and entertains his visitors with coarse Irish anecdotes."*



The B&ORR shops in Martinsburg, VA, circa 1861, with workmen and bystanders among Camelback locomotives and with a train of iron-pot cars carrying coal that might well have been destined for the ships of the Union blockade.

TELEGRAPH

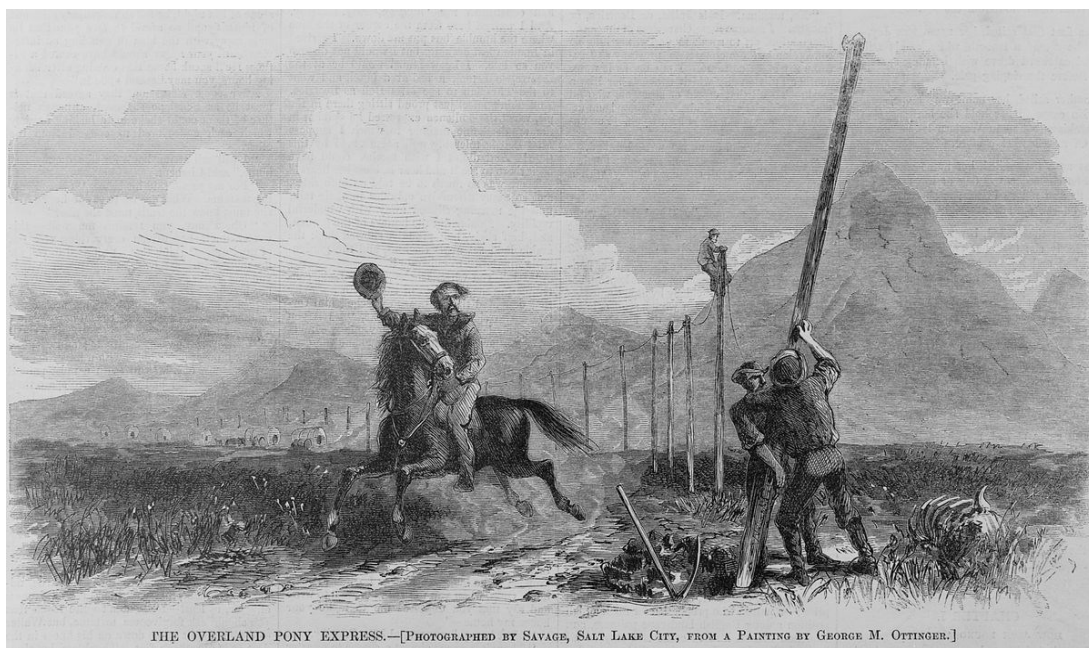
On May 24, 1844, Samuel Morse sent a telegraph message (“What hath God wrought”) from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore—a distance of 44 miles—and thus revolutionized long-distance communication by making it almost instantaneous. By 1850, telegraph lines linked the major cities in the East and by the end of that decade there was even a modest network of lines in California. However, the major advance came on October 24, 1861 when the transcontinental telegraph was completed.

* * *

The transcontinental telegraph was built by Western Union and its subcontractors for the U.S. Post Office Department. The construction began on July 4, 1861, took 112 days, and cost half a million dollars. The project involved planting 27,500 poles and stringing approximately 2,000 miles of iron wire over terrain that was often treacherous and sometimes occupied by hostile Indians.

As with the transcontinental railroad, the construction was divided between a western and an eastern team that worked toward each other. On October 24, the cables of the two teams were joined at Salt Lake City. Almost immediately, a telegram was sent to President Lincoln from the Chief Justice of California. The Chief Justice took that opportunity to assure the President of his state’s loyalty to the Union. Ironically, Lincoln had initially balked at funding the transcontinental telegraph, believing it to be “a wild scheme.”

Of course, the telegraph never replaced the mail. On the contrary—and as the following cover illustrates—the two modes of communication were often used in tandem: although the telegraph was much faster, the mail was far less expensive and had greater geographic “reach.”

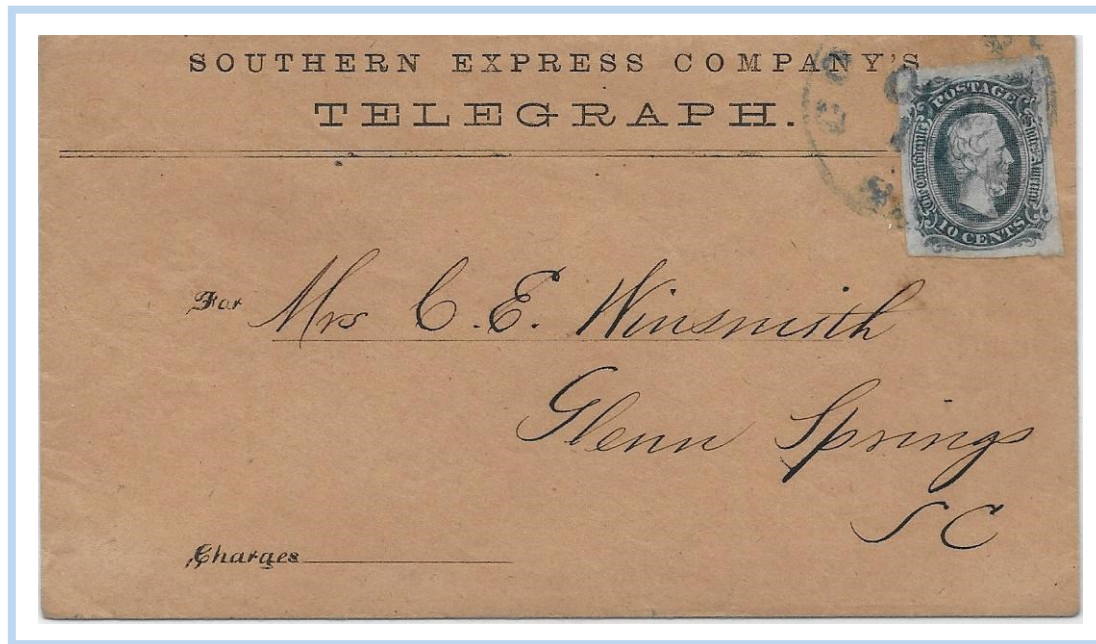


THE OVERLAND PONY EXPRESS.—[PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAVAGE, SALT LAKE CITY, FROM A PAINTING BY GEORGE M. OTTINGER.]

This is the well-known image of a Pony Express rider doffing his hat to men working on the transcontinental telegraph. Although some say that the rider’s gesture was a friendly greeting, others believe it was more of a salute to the inevitable: the Pony Express ceased to exist only two days after the transcontinental telegraph was completed, thus rendering the “pony” obsolete.

TELEGRAPH and MAIL

FROM A WOUNDED HUSBAND



An October 10, 1864 Confederate cover with a "Southern Express Company's Telegraph" corner card. It was put into the CSA mail to Glenn Springs, SC by that company's office in Columbia, SC. The telegram was almost certainly sent from Richmond on behalf of a Confederate officer who was informing his wife of his recent wounding.

There are approximately two dozen postally-used Confederate telegraph covers in private hands.

Ex Judd and Monroe.

This cover is addressed to the wife of Capt. John C. Winsmith who commanded Company "H" of the 1st Regiment ("Hagood's") of the South Carolina Volunteer Infantry. Capt. Winsmith—who was mustered into the Confederate Army at Charleston on May 3, 1862—was wounded at Sharpsburg on September 17, 1862 and wounded again (in the right shoulder) in the charge on Fort Harrison in Virginia on September 30, 1864. He was recorded among the sick and wounded officers who were "absent with leave" on the muster rolls of October 31 and December 31, 1864 and February 28, 1865. He survived his wounds and after the war practiced law in the Spartanburg area.

Several other Confederate covers are known that are addressed in exactly the same manner as this one—i.e. to "Mrs. C.E. Winsmith" using Catherine Elizabeth Winsmith's first and middle initials. All were from Capt. Winsmith as indicated by his endorsement on those covers. Therefore, it's very likely that the message inside this envelope was also from Capt. Winsmith, although it was urgent enough to be sent by telegraph rather than entirely through the Confederate mails.

Given the early October date of the cover, the message was almost certainly related to Capt.

Winsmith's recent wounding and his current convalescence in General Hospital #4 in Richmond. That news would have been wired from the Southern Express Company's office in Richmond to their office in Columbia, SC which was the one closest to Glenn Springs. The telegraph operator in Columbia would have immediately transcribed the message and put it into the Confederate mail.

* * *

Prior to the Civil War, the Adams Express Company all but monopolized the express business in the South. However, after the formation of the Confederacy on February 4, 1861, the company—which was based in the North—feared that the new government would confiscate its Southern assets. Therefore, on April 8, 1861 it sold its southern division (i.e. south of the Potomac and Ohio rivers) to Henry Plant, who was its prosperous and talented manager. Plant gave the company a promissory note for the \$500,000 sale price. He then re-branded the division as the Southern Express Company which he incorporated in Georgia with himself as the president. Although the company claimed to have Southern shareholders, some people believe that it secretly continued to be an Adams subsidiary. (Indeed, there's no evidence that Plant ever paid off his note.) In any case, the company was soon advertising that it would *“forward packages by passenger trains and steamers—and dispatches by telegraph—to all parts of the Confederate States.”* Indeed, it quickly proved to be more efficient and reliable than the Confederate postal system and was therefore entrusted with military payrolls and sensitive government documents.

* * *

After the outbreak of hostilities on April 12, 1861, the Southern assets of many other telegraph companies—which were invariably based in the North—were confiscated by one means or another, just as the directors of the Adams Express Company had feared. Many of the pre-war companies were amalgamated into a new “Southern (or Confederate) Telegraph Company” although some maintained their own identity either as an “affiliate” of that company or as an entirely separate business that was reincorporated with Southern shareholders. (The Southern Express Company was an example of the latter.) But in all cases, telegraph services in the South were controlled by the Confederate Post Office Department. That was in contrast to the situation in the North where the telegraph companies remained more or less independent of the government during the war.

* * *

The rate for sending a telegram in the Confederacy was initially 5-10¢ per word but as inflation began to surge, it rose to 15-25¢. The charge was often noted on the enclosure (which was written by the telegraph operator) rather than on the envelope.

* * *



Some of the preceding information is from George Kramer's exhibit of Confederate telegrams.

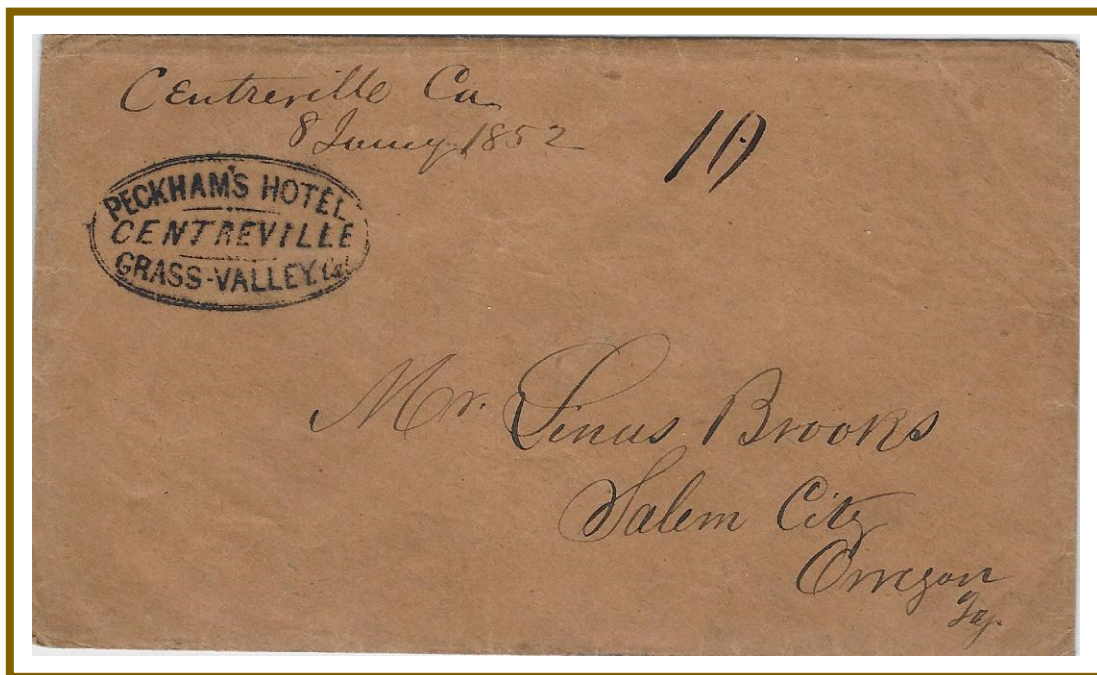
PEOPLE

We shouldn't forget that moving the mail from one place to another was always done by people, regardless of the means of transport.

However, as you might expect, the people varied considerably in their circumstances and roles:

- ♦ Some carried the mail for the Post Office Department. Others carried it for an enterprise that competed with the Post Office Department or that filled a gap in its service.
- ♦ Some carried the mail for money. Others carried it for free. The latter were usually travelers who carried a letter as a favor for a friend, family member, colleague, or customer.
- ♦ Some carried the mail across much of the country. Others carried it only within a town.
- ♦ Some carried the mail under trying and memorable circumstances. Others carried it under circumstances that were entirely mundane.

The following covers—along with others in this exhibit—illustrate each of these circumstances and roles.

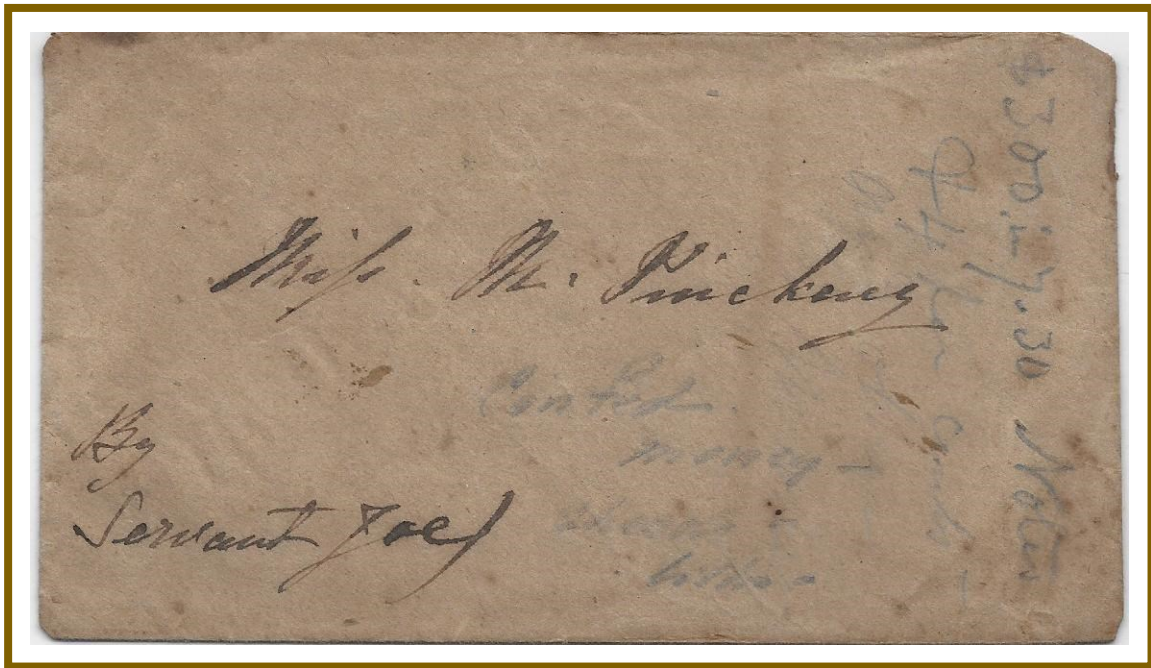


A January 8, 1852 cover from Centreville, CA to the Oregon Territory that bears the handstamp of Peckham's Hotel. Hotel clerks sometimes carried letters to the local post office as a favor to their guests. Some of the hotels that offered that service applied their handstamp to the covers, probably as a form of advertising.

This Peckham's Hotel handstamp is the only hotel forwarder marking from California during this time period. This example is the finest of the four that have been recorded.

SLAVE

“BY SERVANT JOE”



A cover that was carried to “Mrs Pickney” by “Servant Joe” and that, according to the pencil docketing, contained Confederate money.

The use of the term “Servant” in the endorsement confirms that this was a slave-carried cover. Although many such covers are endorsed with the name of the carrier (and usually just their first name), there’s rarely any reference to the fact that they were a slave.

Making this cover even scarcer is the fact that its docketing proves that it is a Confederate use. Most slave-carried covers are either antebellum or their period of use can’t be proven.

The docketing indicates that this primitive brown envelope contained Confederate Treasury Department “Train & Hoer” notes. Those notes were issued in \$100 denominations and accrued interest at the rate of 2¢ per day or \$7.30 per year. Because of the latter, they were popularly known as “7.30” notes—the term that is used on this cover’s docketing.

The Act of April 17, 1862 that established Train & Hoer notes as investment securities also required that they be accepted as legal tender. This cover reflects that fact, too, because it’s also docketed “Confederate money.”

PRISONER OF WAR

DIDN'T TRUST THE ENEMY'S MAIL

A Rare Provisional Use



An 1864 adversary cover—a printed math table—that carried a letter from a Union POW in the Richland Jail in Columbia, SC. After being censored by the Captain of the Post Guard, it was carried across the lines by another prisoner who had unexpectedly been exchanged and who eventually deposited it into the U.S. Mail in Washington, D.C. on December 17, 1864 (as indicated by the date stamp).

The Confederate “PAID” and “10” markings on this cover are “provisional” in that they were applied to the envelope prior to mailing so that it could be sold to a Union POW who obviously couldn’t go to the post office. As it turned out, the cover never entered the Confederate mail which is why it lacks the Columbia, SC date stamp that would ordinarily have accompanied the rate marking.

This is undoubtedly a unique use.

Ex Walske.

This envelope contained a letter from Lt. John P. Sheahan who was a prisoner of war in Richland Jail, a Confederate prison for Union officers in Columbia, SC. However, the key player in this cover’s story was Capt. Sumner U. Shearman. (His name is misspelled “Sherman” in the lower left corner of the envelope). Capt. Shearman not only carried this cover out of the Richland Jail but also published a memoir after the war that describes this cover’s background and journey in unusual detail.

Following his capture at the Battle of the Crater, Capt. Shearman, along with other prisoners, was crammed into a railroad freight car and transported to the Richland Jail in Columbia, SC. The 20' x 20' room that he shared with 16 other officers had no furniture and "was lined with rows of bed-bugs all along the angles of the walls and ceiling."

The prisoners were permitted to write letters home that were limited to one side of a half-sheet of paper. They were given the opportunity to purchase paper and envelopes "*of the poorest quality imaginable, and (at) an exorbitant price, reckoned in Confederate money.*" As this cover illustrates, the envelopes that they purchased sometimes included the Confederate postage.

After seven months of captivity—during which time he taught a Latin class for the prisoners—Capt. Shearman was summoned before a Confederate major who told him that he was to be freed the next morning as part of an exchange of 10,000 sick or wounded inmates from various Union and Confederate prisons. Although time was very short, "*many of the prisoners took advantage of this last-minute opportunity to send letters home by us.*" Understandably, the prisoners trusted a fellow Union officer more than they trusted their enemy's postal system. However, their letters still had to pass the prison's censor.

The following day (December 8, 1864), Capt. Shearman and six other exchanged prisoners were loaded onto a freight train that picked up prisoners from other facilities along the way. It was snowing and unusually cold when they arrived in Charleston which appeared "terribly scarred by shot and shell and was so completely abandoned that there was grass growing in the streets." The prisoners were marched across the city from the train depot to the wharves where they boarded a Confederate steamer 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."

Capt. Shearman was put aboard the *U.S.S. United States* where he and the other officers were assigned to staterooms. He noted that there were 900 prisoners on board from Andersonville and Florence, "some of them in the last stages of emaciation," and that two or three of them died during the voyage and were buried at sea. He also noted that there was a Sanitary Commission agent on board who provided him with a change of underclothing. (His old underclothing—which he had worn throughout his captivity—was tossed overboard.)

The ship took the prisoners to Annapolis, MD (presumably to Camp Parole) where they were immediately granted 30 days of leave. Therefore, on December 17 Capt. Shearman took a train to Washington, D.C. in order to claim the pay that he'd accumulated during his imprisonment. While there, he mailed Lt. Sheahan's letter and also learned that his unit had been demobilized. As a result, he was honorably discharged from the Army on December 18.

After he got home he discovered why he'd been exchanged even though he'd been neither sick nor wounded: his inclusion had been arranged by one of his father's friends—Gen. Ambrose Burnside.

* * *

See: Sumner U. Shearman, "Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life." In *Personal Narratives of Events in the War of the Rebellion*, 5th Series, No. 8, Providence, R.I., Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society, 1898, 38 pp.



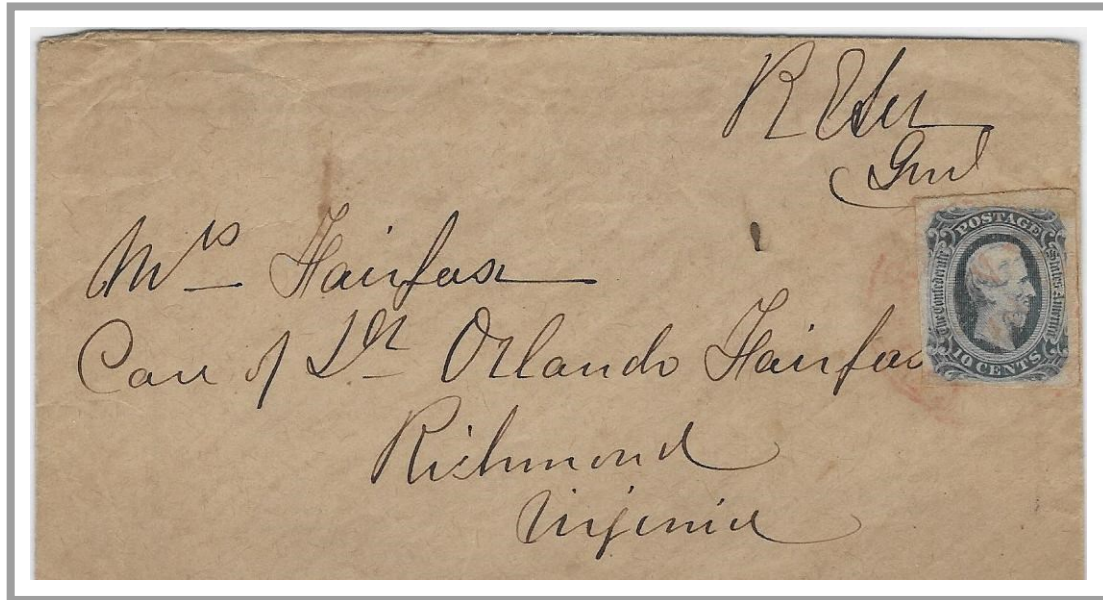
John Parris Sheahan (1842-1894)—the author of the letter—was mustered into Company “K” of the Maine 1st Cavalry Regiment on August 23, 1862 and was commissioned as a Lieutenant in Company “E” of the Maine 31st Volunteer Infantry Regiment on March 11, 1864. He saw action at The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, and Cold Harbor before being captured at the Crater on July 30, 1864. He was listed as a prisoner at the Richland Jail in the December 23, 1864 edition of the *New York Times* and served several months in various Confederate prisons before escaping in early 1865. He was mustered out of the army on July 15, 1865 and then enrolled in the Maine Medical College at Bowdoin and eventually became both a physician and a dentist. The photograph shows him as a 1st Lieutenant.

Sumner U. Shearman (1839-1914)—who carried this cover—saw action at South Mountain, Antietam, and the first battle of Fredericksburg before he was commissioned as a Captain in Company “A” of the Rhode Island 4th Volunteer Regiment on March 2, 1863. He was captured at the Battle of the Crater outside of Petersburg, VA on July 30, 1864. After his discharge from the Army, he studied and practiced law according to the wishes of his father who was an associate justice of the Rhode Island supreme court. After the death of his father, he entered divinity school and eventually became the rector of St. John’s Church in Jamaica Plain, MA. The photograph shows him in his later years as a minister.



THE GENERAL'S BODYGUARD
FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

With an Autograph Letter Signed by Robert E. Lee



A General Robert E. Lee field cover to a soldier's mother in Richmond, VA that's endorsed by Lee and that's accompanied by the original signed letter that he wrote on November 8, 1864 from the Petersburg battlefield. This cover would have been carried to Petersburg by a member of the 39th Virginia Cavalry Battalion which provided Lee's personal couriers and bodyguards. After entering the Confederate mail in Petersburg, this cover was transported to Richmond either by train on the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad or by mail wagon on the Richmond Turnpike.

This envelope and letter are reputed to be the finest example of a Lee field cover that remains in private hands.

Ex Ralph Poriss and written up by him in the Confederate Philatelist 267 (May-June 1992).

The accompanying letter reads:

Petersburg 8 Nov '64

My dear Mrs. Fairfax -

I rec'd your note of the 23 ulto & am sorry for the unpleasant situation of my young friend Ethelbert. I hope something may be done to relieve him. I have written to ascertain what action was taken on his recommendation for promotion in the Signal Corps. That seems to offer the speediest plan of amelioration & at the present I see no other. Please present my kind regards to the Dr. & to your daughters & believe me very truly yours / R E Lee

The “note” to which Lee was referring was from a mother—Mary Fairfax—who wished to have her son removed from harm’s way. Her son—Ethelbert—was a private in Company “E” of the “Alexandria” Light Artillery of the 18th Battalion of Virginia Heavy Artillery. On June 1, 1863 he’d been temporarily placed on detached duty with the Confederate Signal Corps which included 1,500 other privates who had a similar status. On September 1, 1864 he’d been ordered to return to his original unit even though he’d been recommended for a promotion that would have allowed him to remain in the Signal Corps. His mother’s concern was almost certainly related to the fact that his original unit had been assigned to the Inner Line Richmond Defenses which would presumably make a heroic “last stand” against the expected Union assault on the Confederate capital.

Lee received many such requests from mothers who had sons in the Confederate Army and, as a matter of principle, he usually declined to use his influence to accommodate them. However, in this case Lee’s response was ambiguous: on the one hand he was willing to inquire about the status of the son’s promotion, but on the other he was apparently unwilling to pull any strings if the promotion didn’t go through—“*I see no other (plan).*”

His ambiguity was undoubtedly due to the fact that the mother in question was the wife of one of his closest friends, Dr. Orlando Fairfax, who was a Virginia aristocrat and a Confederate surgeon. Furthermore, Lee had previously written Dr. and Mrs. Fairfax a letter of condolence upon the death of their oldest son, Pvt. Randolph Cary Fairfax of the “Rockbridge” 1st Light Artillery Regiment who had been killed in action at Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862. In contrast to that effusive and heartfelt letter, this one—despite its friendly sentiments—is strikingly brief and to the point and, indeed, almost businesslike. Clearly, Lee was uncomfortable with the request and perhaps with his own response.

* * *

As it turned out, Ethelbert Fairfax *wasn’t* removed from harm’s way: although he did receive the promotion that allowed him to remain in the Signal Corps, he was shot in the chest at the Battle of Bentonville (NC) in March 1865. Fortunately, he survived that wound and died in 1907 at the age of 77.

* * *

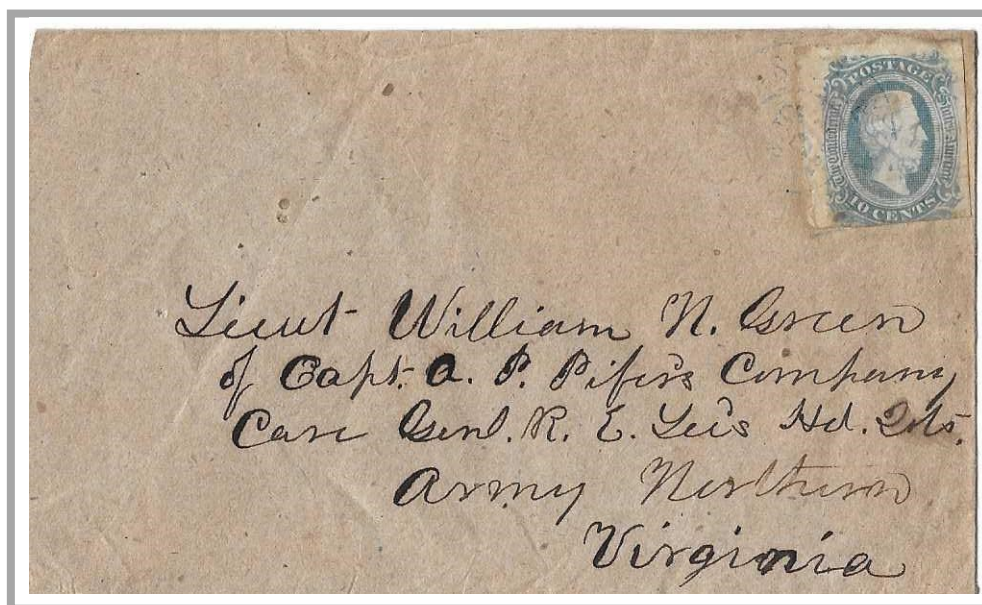
The Fairfax Family Papers, 1777-1864 are listed in *WorldCat* (OCLC #122609334) which calls out this November 8, 1864 letter from Gen. Robert E. Lee as “*of special note.*”

Photocopies of the collection (including this letter) are in the Library of Virginia in Richmond and in the University of Virginia Library in Charlottesville. The late Ralph Poriss, a highly-regarded manuscript dealer and collector, purchased the original autograph letter and the accompanying Lee-endorsed cover from the descendants of Dr. and Mrs. Fairfax. Mr. Poriss eventually consigned them to a Richard Frajola auction which is where I purchased them.

* * *

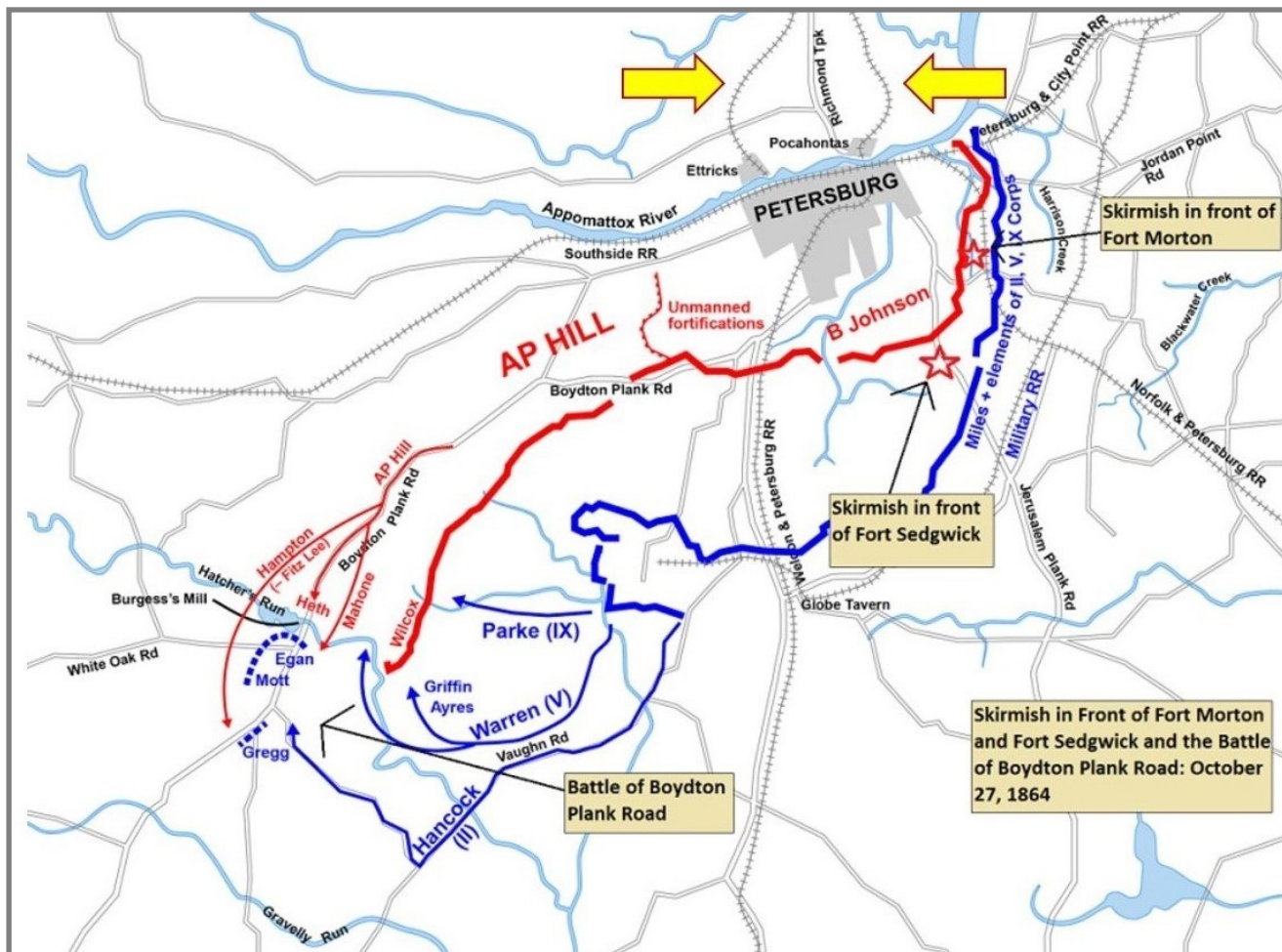
Lee-endorsed field covers that went through the Confederate postal system are considerably rarer than his field covers that were conveyed entirely by military courier. Indeed, Capt. James L.D. Monroe recorded only 17 examples of the former that are outside of institutional collections. Among those 17, he listed only five (including this one) as still having their original contents. However, since the date of his census, at least two of those covers have been sold without their contents.

This letter would have been carried from Lee's headquarters by a member of the 39th Virginia Cavalry Battalion which served as Lee's personal bodyguard, escort, and couriers. That unit also accompanied Army engineers on reconnaissance missions, performed provost duty, guarded wagon trains, and held the horses of officers when they dismounted at Lee's headquarters. In any case, members of the battalion stayed at Lee's side from Fredericksburg to Appomattox.



Above: An envelope that is addressed to a member of the 39th Virginia Cavalry Battalion "Care (of) Genl. R. E. Lee's Hd. Qts." That battalion, which was organized late in 1862, was led by Major John H. Richardson and was thus known as "Richardson's Battalion of Scouts, Guides, and Couriers." The addressee was a member of Company A which was commanded by Capt. Augustus P. Pifer who organized the first company that became part of the battalion. Like Pifer himself, most of his recruits came from Frederick County in the northwestern part of the state. The envelope bears a very light Petersburg, VA hand-stamp from August 10, 1864 which was during the siege of Petersburg. That date was three months before a courier from the 39th Virginia Cavalry Battalion carried Lee's November 8 letter to Mrs. Fairfax from the battlefield to Petersburg. Below: A Currier & Ives lithograph of the final day of the siege.





Siege of Petersburg—Action on October 27, 1864

The map portrays the final battles around Petersburg before both armies suspended hostilities and hunkered down for the winter. Lee penned the letter that accompanies this cover shortly after that “lull in the storm” began. Hostilities resumed with a vengeance in early February and soon resulted in a series of Confederate defeats that ultimately led to Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865.

Blue: Union troops. Red: Confederate troops. Note that the position of the Union Army was mostly south of Petersburg which left open the Richmond Turnpike and the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad (both are between the yellow arrows). This cover was carried to Richmond by one of those routes.

Petersburg 8 Nov '64

My dear Mr^{rs} Fairfax

I rec^d your note of the 23rd Ult^o & am
very sorry for the unpleasant situation of my young
friend Ethelbert. I hope something may be
done to relieve him. I have written to ascertain
what action was taken on his recommendation for
promotion in the Signal Corps. That seems to offer
the speediest plan of amelioration, & at present I see
no other. Please present my kind regards to the
L^{ds} & your daughters & believe me very truly
yours R E Lee

Mr^{rs} Mary R. Fairfax

CASE STUDIES

HOW MAIL TRANSPORT EVOLVED OR ADAPTED IN A PARTICULAR SETTING

CENTRAL OVERLAND ROUTE

The Central Overland Route followed the main emigrant trails westward from the Missouri River to Salt Lake City and then onward to California. Its importance reached its zenith on July 1, 1861 when it replaced the discontinued Southern Overland Route as the default transcontinental mail route. However, the seeds of the Central Route's own demise were soon to be sewn: on January 8, 1863 the Central Pacific Railroad began building eastward from Sacramento. By the end of the decade, the transcontinental mail was being carried on tracks rather than trails.

Nevertheless, one could plausibly argue that the route itself remained dominant for the remainder of the 19th century. That's because the railroad more or less followed the Central Route rather than a more southern one that some had advocated. In essence, the mail carriers and emigrants of the 1850s had proven the viability of a route that went over the Sierras and the Rockies and that crossed the Great Plains.

* * *

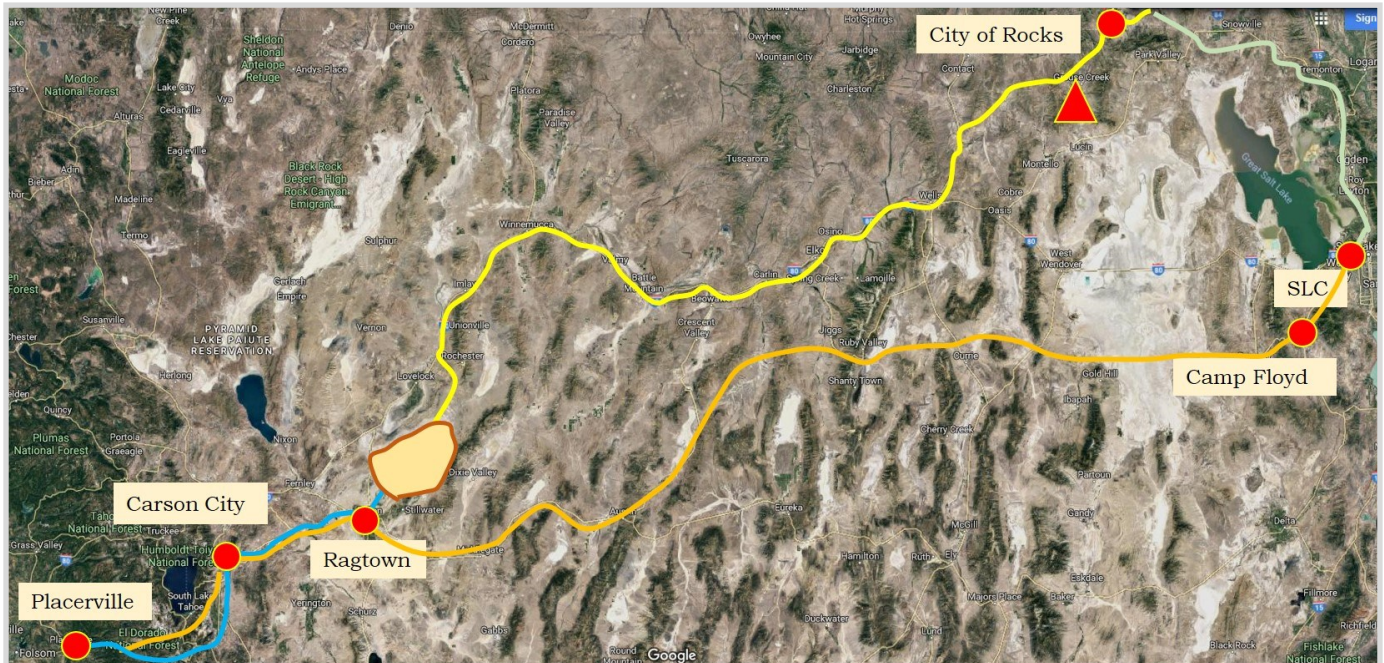
The improvements that were made in the Central Route during the 1850s and the early 1860s were the key to its long-term dominance. The main impetus for those improvements was the discovery of gold in California in 1848 and the discovery a decade later of gold and silver in the Wasatch region of Utah Territory (it's now in Nevada). Those discoveries created a demand for a reliable, all-season route across the Sierra Nevada Mountains that connected San Francisco and Virginia City—the commercial centers of the West and its two largest cities at that time. That route had to handle a prodigious volume of people, mining equipment and supplies, bullion, consumer goods—and mail.

The eastern segment of the Central Route—the portion between Salt Lake City and the Missouri River—was also improved but to a lesser extent. That segment crossed and re-crossed rivers for much of its length, so the most important improvements were new bridges and ferries that obviated the need for travelers to go miles out of their way in order to find a place where a river could be forded.

CENTRAL OVERLAND ROUTE

WESTERN SEGMENT

PLACERVILLE TO SALT LAKE CITY

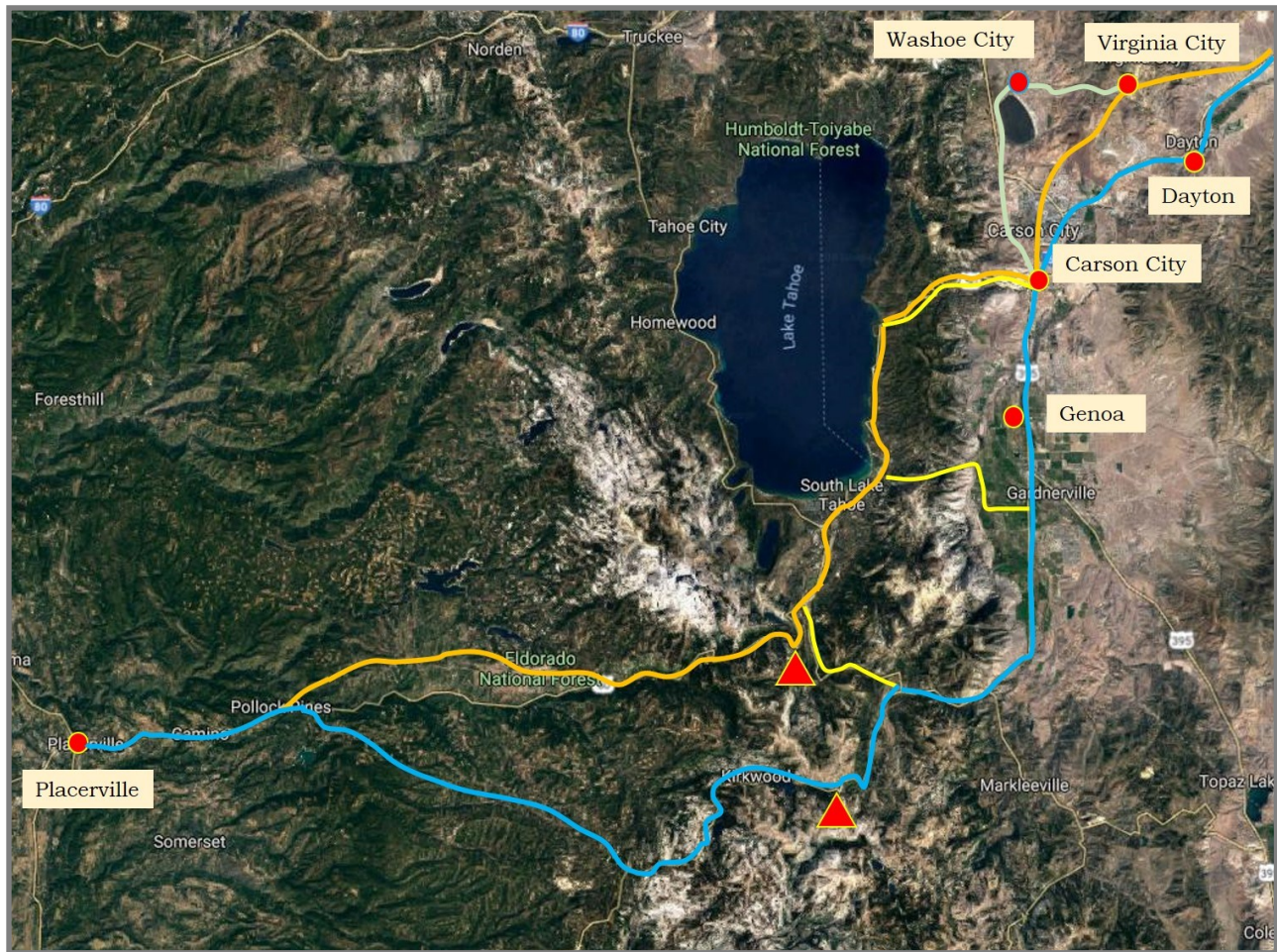


- ♦ The Carson Trail (in blue) extended from Placerville in California to Ragtown in Utah Territory (Nevada Territory after March 2, 1861). It then turned northward to meet the California Trail in the area of the Humboldt River Sink and the Forty Mile Desert (the pale orange shape).
- ♦ The California Trail (in yellow) continued across the Forty Mile Desert and then followed the Humboldt River northward before turning eastward and eventually crossing the Goose Creek Mountains at Granite Pass (the red triangle).
- ♦ The Salt Lake Cut-Off (in light green) left the California Trail just east of City of Rocks, ID and then headed south across the salt flats of the Great Salt Lake to Salt Lake City (SLC).
- ♦ The Egan Trail (in orange) ran between Carson City and Salt Lake City. It threaded its way through a series of mountain ranges that give a corrugated appearance to central Nevada and Utah in this Google Earth satellite view.
- ♦ Prior to December 1858, the western segment of the Central Overland Route was comprised of the Carson Trail, the westernmost portion of the California Trail, and the Salt Lake Cut-Off.
- ♦ After December 1858, the “new and improved” western segment was comprised of Johnson’s Cut-Off (the orange line between Placerville and Carson City) and the Egan Trail (the orange line between Carson City and Salt Lake City.) Note that the Egan Trail ran past Camp Floyd which was about a day’s journey from Salt Lake City.

CENTRAL OVERLAND ROUTE

WESTERN SEGMENT

DETAIL OF THE TRANS-SIERRA PORTION

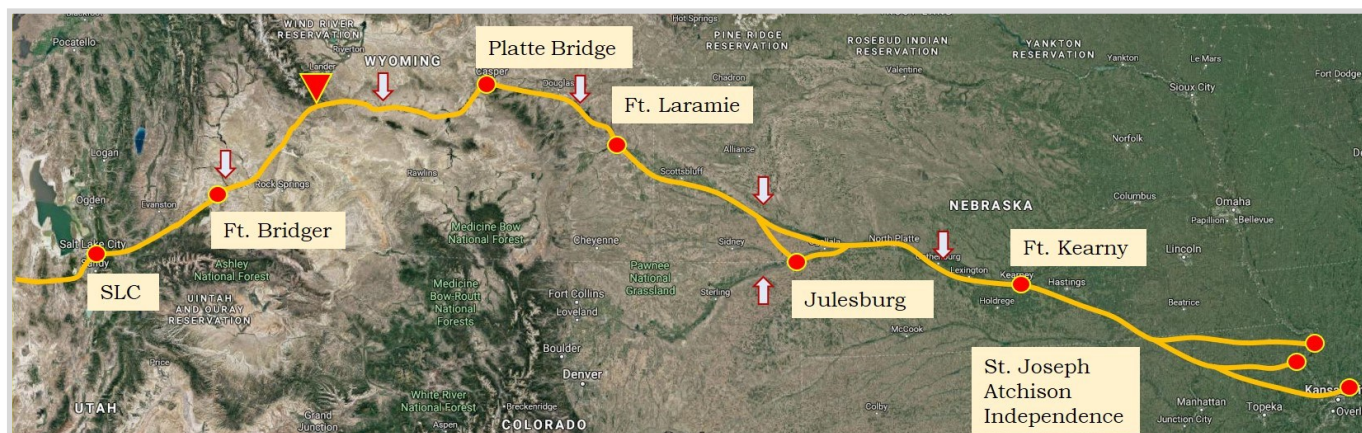


- ♦ The Carson Trail (in blue) began in the west at Placerville, crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains at Carson's Pass (the lower triangle), and then followed the Carson River Canyon through the Carson Mountains and into Carson Valley. It then turned directly northward and passed through Genoa, Carson City, Dayton, and Ragtown (which is shown on the previous map). Beyond Ragtown, the Carson Trail crossed the Forty Mile Desert to join the California Trail.
- ♦ Johnson's Cut-Off (in orange) branched off the Carson Trail at Pollock Pines, CA, crossed the Sierras at Johnson's Pass (the upper triangle), hugged the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe (which was then called Lake Bigler), and ended at Carson City.
- ♦ The three, roughly parallel yellow lines mark (from top to bottom) the Kings Canyon road, the Kingsbury Grade road, and the Luther Pass road. All of them crossed the Carson Mountains from Lake Valley in the west to Carson Valley in the east. Together they comprised the "Bonanza" system of toll roads.
- ♦ The route of the Virginia City Pony Express between Carson City and Virginia City is shown in pale green. Between Carson City and Placerville, the route followed Johnson's Cut-Off and the Kings Canyon road.

CENTRAL OVERLAND ROUTE

EASTERN SEGMENT

SALT LAKE CITY TO THE MISSOURI RIVER



- ◆ The eastern segment of the Central Overland Route began in Salt Lake City and ran northwest to Fort Bridger which was located at a fork in the Green River (the far left “down” arrow). Fort Bridger was the site of a major trading post.
- ◆ Throughout the 1850s and early 1860s, the route then crossed the Rocky Mountains at South Pass (the red triangle).
- ◆ East of South Pass, the route followed the Sweetwater River (the next “down” arrow) to Platte Bridge which was an important trading post, supply station, and river crossing.
- ◆ Beyond Platte Bridge, the route continued along the North Fork of the Platte River (the next two “down” arrows). It ran past Fort Laramie to a point just east of Julesburg where it picked up the main body of the Platte River (the far right “down” arrow) and then followed it to Fort Kearny. Forts Laramie and Kearny were the largest emigrant re-supply stations on the route and were also key mail depots.
- ◆ Julesburg, which was located on the South Fork of the Platte River (the “up” arrow), eventually became another key supply depot until it was burned by hostile Indians in 1865.
- ◆ The eastern terminus of the Central Overland Route was initially Independence, MO. However, on May 1, 1858 it was moved to St. Joseph, MO in order to connect with the newly-completed Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad which linked the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.
- ◆ On September 23, 1861 the terminus was moved again, this time to Atchison, KS. That move followed the completion of the Atchison & St. Joseph Railroad which edged the railhead a few miles closer to California.
- ◆ The portion of the Central Overland Route east of South Pass was called the Great Platte River Road because it was shared by the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails, all of which were key emigrant routes to the West..

PACK MULE

TOO RUGGED FOR WHEELS

The Earliest U.S. Mail Transcontinental Cover



A June 1, 1851 cover from San Francisco to Parsippany, NJ that was carried by George Chorpenning and Absalom Woodward on their second trip from Sacramento to Salt Lake City and then by Samuel Woodson on his 5th successful trip from Salt Lake City to Independence, MO. Pack mules were used over the entire distance.

Chorpenning and Woodward held the contract for the first U.S. Mail route between California and Utah Territory (U.T.).

This is the earliest recorded cover that they carried. (No covers are known from their first trip which was on May 3 and which was also eastbound.)

In addition, this is the earliest recorded cover that was carried in the U.S. Mail over the entire Central Overland Route.

Furthermore, this is the earliest recorded cover that was carried overland in the U.S. Mail across the entire country.

Accompanied by photocopies of two other covers from the same correspondence that reached the East Coast via Panama. All of the covers originated in Hawaii and were carried out of the mails to San Francisco.

Pictured and written up in Walske and Frajola's Mails of the Westward Expansion (p. 136). Signed by Frajola. Ex Walske.

In 1851, the Post Office Department advertised for bids to carry mail from Sacramento, CA across the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Salt Lake City, U.T. The contract for that route (Route 5,066) was

awarded to George Chorpenning and Absalom Woodward who, for \$14,000, agreed to carry the mail monthly from each terminus in no more than 30 days.

* * *

From Sacramento, Chorpenning's and Woodward's route went through Folsom to Placerville where it picked up the Carson Trail which by 1850 was used by 95% of the emigrants to California. Their route then continued westward to the Sierra Nevada Mountains which it crossed at Carson's Pass. It then followed the Carson River Canyon through the Carson Mountains and into Carson Valley.

At that point, the route turned sharply northward and passed through the Nevada towns of Genoa, Carson City, Dayton, and Ragtown. (Note that at that time Nevada was part of Utah Territory.) It then crossed the Forty Mile Desert and picked up the California Trail which followed the Humboldt River northward toward its source before turning eastward and eventually crossing the Goose Creek Mountains at Granite Pass. Shortly after that—near City of Rocks, ID—the route left the California Trail and headed south on the Salt Lake Cut-Off which skirted the eastern shore of the Great Salt Lake and terminated in Salt Lake City.

* * *

The natural hazards on that route were formidable and included:

Carson's Pass—One section of the trail up to the pass was called "The Devil's Ladder" because it was so steep that wagons had to be hauled up it using rope or chain pulleys that were passed around trees. Furthermore, the crest of the pass was so high (8,574 feet) and so exposed that during the winter travelers could encounter gale force winds and snow that was 20 feet deep. Indeed, in the winter of 1851, one eastbound mail trip through the Sierras took two months. The carriers finally reached Salt Lake City on foot and only after they'd eaten their mules which had frozen to death.

Carson River Canyon—This deep and narrow cleft in the Carson Mountains could be blocked by huge boulders that had fallen a thousand feet or more. In some cases, wagons had to be levered over the boulders using long pry bars or hauled over them using ropes. In other cases, the boulders were heated in a bonfire, doused with cold river water, and then shattered with iron picks. Another hazard was flooding, particularly in the spring when the melting mountain snows caused the Carson River to overflow its banks and drown everything on the canyon floor.

Forty Mile Desert—This scorching hot stretch of the California Trail was considerably longer than 40 miles (its dimensions were more like 70 by 150 miles). What little water it held was poisonous and its vegetation was sparse and inedible. And trudging through its deep, salt-encrusted sand quickly exhausted the hardiest of draught animals. Indeed, in 1850, one emigrant counted the remains of more than 1,000 mules, about 5,000 horses, almost 4,000 cattle and oxen, and more than 3,000 wagons. He also counted 953 human graves. Mark Twain—who crossed that desert himself in a stagecoach—wrote that "it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that we could have walked the 40 miles and set our feet on a bone at every step." It was estimated that only half of the emigrant wagons that started across the Forty Mile Desert made it to the other side.

Humboldt River Valley—Although the eastern portion of the Humboldt River had good water and grass, the western portion was an entirely different matter. One man who traveled that portion in 1849 wrote: "(The) Humboldt is not good for man or beast . . . there is not timber enough in three hundred miles of its desolate valley to make a snuff box (let alone a cooking fire) . . . or sufficient vegetation along its banks to shade a rabbit . . . while its waters contain (enough) alkali to make soap for a nation."

Goose Creek Mountains—In the winter, these mountains that straddle Utah, Nevada, and Idaho rivaled the Sierras in the number of men and animals that they claimed from the mail teams. The eastern slope of Granite Pass (elevation 7,100 feet) was a particularly notorious graveyard.

* * *

Chorpenning and Woodward considered the Carson and California trails too hazardous for wagons or coaches so they used pack animals instead—usually mules. A single set of animals had to make the entire 910 mile journey because the contractors couldn't afford to build and stock stations where the mules could be changed out.

* * *

In 1850, Samuel Woodson obtained the first contract for the transport of the U.S. Mail from Utah Territory to the Missouri River. For \$19,500 per year, he made monthly trips in each direction on Route 4,965 which ran between Salt Lake City and Independence, MO. He left each city on or about the first of the month and was supposed to arrive by the end of the month. His first trip left Independence on August 1, 1850.

Woodson's route from Salt Lake City followed the Mormon Trail to Fort Bridger (which was 110 miles northeast of Salt Lake City) and then crossed the Rocky Mountains at South Pass. On the eastern side of the mountains, his route first followed the Sweetwater River, then the North Fork of the Platte River, and finally the main body of the Platte River. It then left that network of river valley trails (the so-called "Great Platte River Road") and headed southeast toward Independence.

That route had its own considerable hazards: hostile Indians, swollen rivers, long stretches that lacked water and vegetation, terrain that exhausted and hobbled the animals, blistering heat or sub-zero cold, and year-round fits of violent weather.

To make matters worse, settlements were sparse along the route. Therefore, like Chorpenning and Woodward, Woodson had to use one set of pack mules for the entire trip because he couldn't afford to build and supply stage stations. However, Woodson's 1,300 mile route was almost half again as long as that of Chorpenning and Woodward. Therefore, it's not surprising that within a year (on August 1, 1851) he subcontracted about half of the route—the portion between Salt Lake City and Fort Laramie—to two Mormon scouts, Feramor Little and Ephraim Hanks, whom he paid \$8,000 per annum. Woodson retained the portion between Fort Laramie and Independence and the two mail teams met at Fort Laramie around the 15th of each month in order to exchange their mail.

Nevertheless, there were still delays and canceled trips, particularly during the winter, and thus the Salt Lake City postmaster decided to send much of the eastbound transcontinental mail with Chorpenning to California via the Old Spanish Trail during the winters of 1852-53 and 1853-54. That arrangement increased the amount of mail that Chorpenning had to carry from an average of 100 lbs. per trip to at least 500 lbs. However, his compensation was increased accordingly.

* * *

This cover is part of the "Ford" correspondence that was written by E.K. Whittlesey, a Hawaiian missionary. It was carried outside of the mails on the brig *Cheerful* which arrived in San Francisco on June 1, 1851, having left Honolulu 29 days earlier. Ordinarily, the San Francisco postmaster would have sent this cover via Panama because at that time the ocean route was the default one for transcontinental mail from the West Coast. However, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSS) boat had left San Francisco the day before. Rather than hold the letter for the next sailing in two weeks, the postmaster endorsed it to go "overland" and immediately put it on a Sacramento River steamer. The steamer's late afternoon departure permitted passengers and mail to make an early morning connection in Sacramento on the following day.

Therefore, this cover left Sacramento with Woodward (who led that particular mail trip) on June 2 and arrived in Salt Lake City on July 2. It then left that city with Samuel Woodson (who had waited for the Sacramento mail) on that same day and arrived in Independence, MO on July 24. It finally reached New Jersey in early August.

In *Mails of the Westward Expansion*, Walske and Frajola make the interesting observation (p. 136) that this letter would have arrived at its destination about two weeks earlier if the San Francisco postmaster had held it for the next PMSS sailing on June 14.

* * *

The 1851 use of this double-weight/double-rate cover was determined from the known dates of the “Ford” correspondence. In addition, it couldn’t have been mailed *after* 1851 because the cost of postage was reduced on July 1, 1851. Indeed, if this cover had entered the mail in San Francisco just one month later, the rate to New Jersey would have been 20¢ (the unpaid rate for a double-weight letter traveling more than 3,000 miles) rather than 80¢ (the double rate for a letter from California to the East Coast as per the Act of August 14, 1848). Furthermore, this letter couldn’t have been mailed *before* 1851 because there was no “overland” U.S. Mail route from California until the Post Office Department contracted with Chorpennig and Woodward. Before that, all transcontinental mail to and from the California had been sent via the ocean route.

* * *

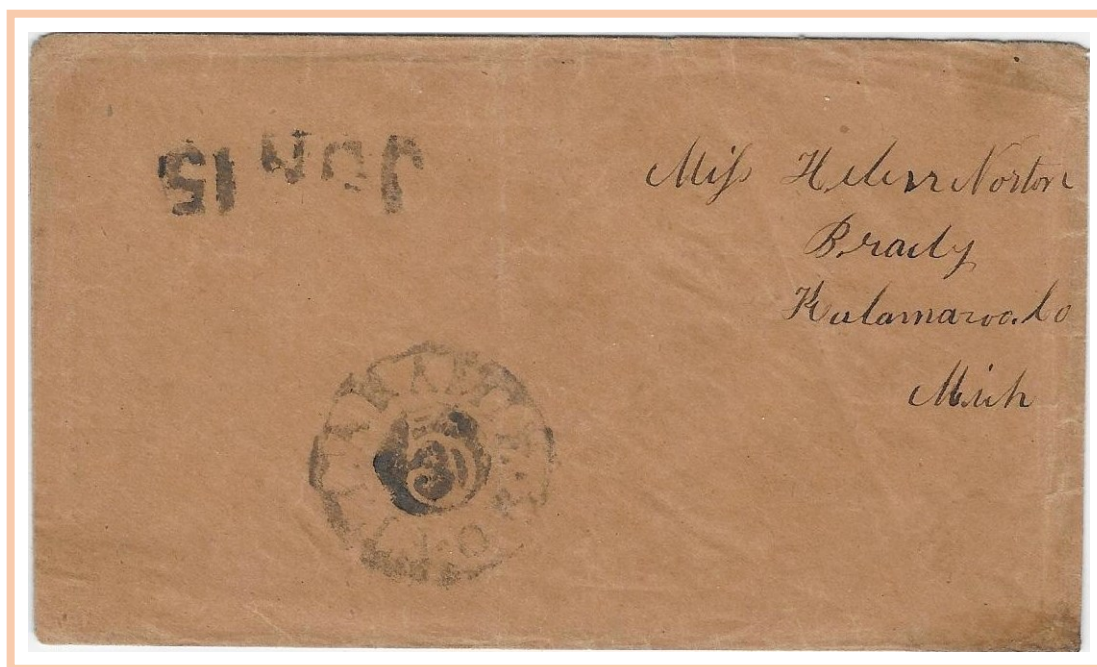
Mail is still delivered by pack mules in the United States—specifically, to the Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The mail team uses the same mules and route (the Bright Angel Trail) that the tourists use.



No, it's not Chorpennig and Woodward, but at least it's a 19th century photo of two men with pack mules.

PACK MULE

LATE



An 1852 cover that was postmarked June 15 at Fort Laramie and carried by Samuel Woodson on a pack mule train to Independence, MO.

The crude "Ft Laramie O.R." (Oregon Route) marking, the "Jun 15" date, and the negative "5" (5¢) due marking were all carved from wood blocks. The due marking was applied separately but it fits so perfectly within the Fort Laramie marking that they appear to have been applied with a single handstamp. (This is the only recorded example of this unusual placement.)

The "O.R." designation was used by forts and post offices on the Platte River Road which was formed by the convergence of the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, and the Mormon Trail. That region—which was part of the Louisiana Purchase—was still an "unorganized territory" and was under the postal administration of the Oregon Territory.

Fewer than 10 covers are recorded with any of these markings and this is widely regarded as the most striking example. The completeness of the three handstamps is also exceptional.

Pictured in the 1979 edition of Simpson-Alexander (p. 333) and in Walske and Frajola's Mails of the Westward Expansion (p. 124). Signed by Frajola. Ex Risvold and Walske.

This cover—which originated at Fort Laramie on the Central Overland Route—was postmarked June 15 (1852) because that was the date that Samuel Woodson was expected to pick it up on his route between Independence and the fort. However, the June mail left Salt Lake City 12 days late and, according to Walske and Frajola, the two Mormon carriers—Feramorz Little and Ephraim

Hanks— didn't reach Fort Laramie to exchange their mail with Woodson until around June 23. Woodson finally arrived in Independence with this cover around July 8.

* * *

In the 1850s, Fort Laramie was an important headquarters for military campaigns against the Plains Indians. The conflicts with Indians increased in frequency and violence in 1854 following the Grattan Massacre in which 29 soldiers from the fort were killed. The incident was incited by the murder of a Lakota Sioux chief by a soldier.

Aside from being an important military garrison, Fort Laramie was the only major trading post and re-supply station in the 800 mile stretch between Fort Kearny and Fort Bridger and by 1852 an estimated 50,000 emigrants had already passed through its gates.

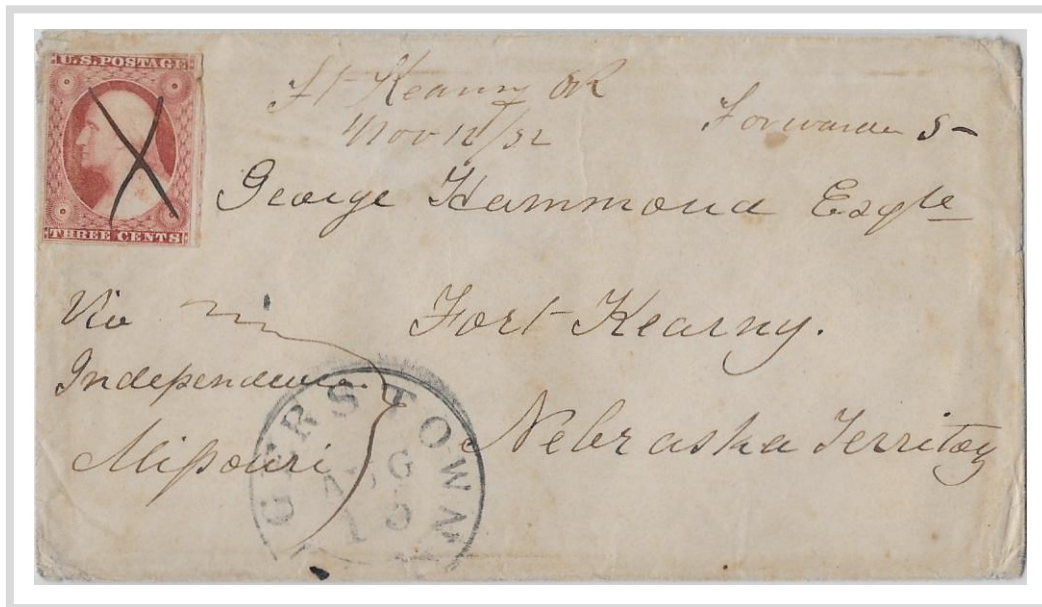


Fort Laramie in the 1850s from a painting by William Henry Jackson.

PACK MULE

EVEN LATER

A Unique “Oregon Route” Marking



An August 1852 cover from Hagerstown, MD to Fort Kearny “Nebraska Territory” that was subsequently forwarded to Washington, D.C. from Fort Kearny with a “Forward 5” marking.

This cover was carried on pack mules by Samuel Woodson in both directions on the Platte River Road.

This manuscript Fort Kearny postal marking with the “OR” (Oregon Route) designation is unique during this time period.

Furthermore, it is unlisted in Simpson-Alexander and in the American Stampless Cover Catalog.

Signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Ex Winter and Craveri.

The “November 12/52” manuscript postmark that was applied by the Fort Kearny postmaster reflected the expected departure date for the eastbound mail. However, because of heavy snow, Feramorz Little and Ephraim Hanks were delayed in reaching Fort Laramie with the Salt Lake City mail. As a result, Samuel Woodson didn’t leave Fort Laramie (which was west of Fort Kearny) with the eastbound mail until January 12, 1853. He finally arrived at Fort Kearny to pick up this letter on January 19.

As it turned out, this cover was carried on the only eastbound mail trip on the Central Overland Route during the winter of 1852-53 (between November 1, 1852 and April 1, 1853 to be precise). In the interim, the eastbound mail from Salt Lake City was routed westward to San Pedro, CA (the port of Los Angeles) and then onward by coastal steamer to San Francisco where it was sent via the ocean route to New York.

* * *

Although this cover was addressed to “Nebraska Territory,” that territory wasn’t organized under the Kansas-Nebraska Act until May 30, 1854. Therefore, this 1852 “forwarded” use from Fort Kearny was from the “unorganized territory” that was under the postal administration of the Oregon Territory.

* * *

The addressee, Dr. George Hammond, was transferred from Fort Kearny to Washington, D.C. in September 1852 while this cover was in transit. It was undoubtedly forwarded to him in the latter city. It was common during that time period for covers to be forwarded in batches. In such cases, the forwarding address was often written on only the top cover but all of the covers usually had a forwarding rate designation that indicated whether that postage had been paid or was due.

* * *

Fort Kearny was established in May 1848 on the south bank of the Platte River as the eastern anchor of the Great Platte River Road. As such, it was an important rest area, re-supply station, and message center for emigrants who were on their way to the West. Unlike Fort Laramie, it lacked fortified walls, presumably because it was less involved in the Plains Indian Wars.

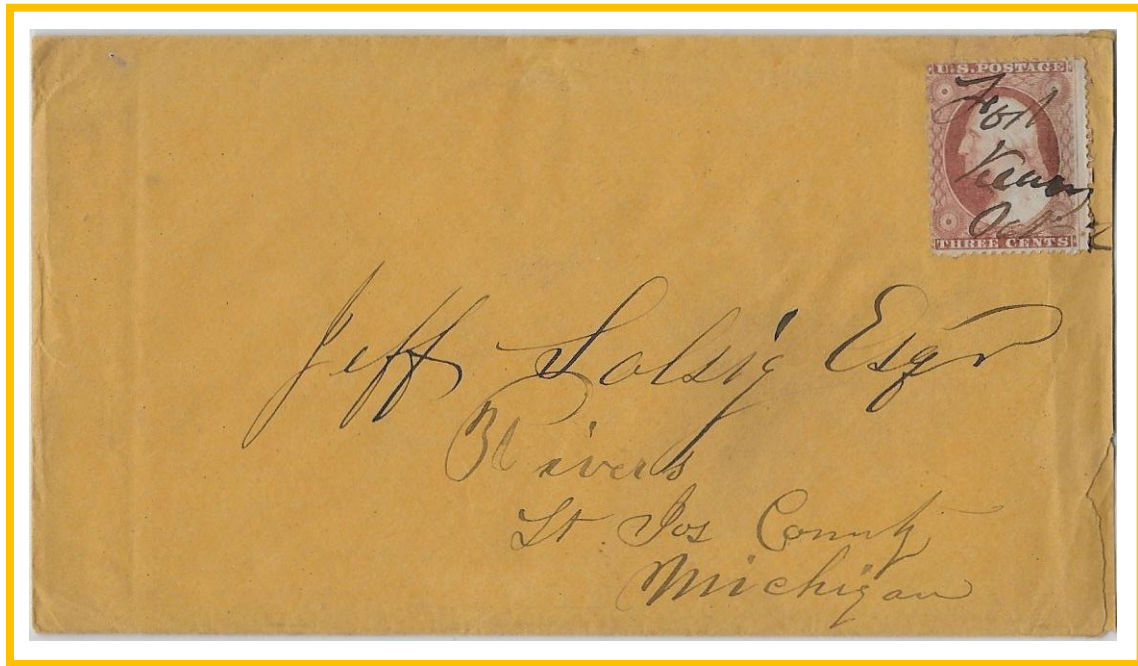
The fort was situated approximately half-way between Independence, MO and Fort Laramie. The travel time to both was about a week.



Fort Kearny around 1850 from a painting by William Henry Jackson

COVERED and STAGE WAGONS

“ON MY WAY TO THE GOLD MINES”



An October 2, 1858 cover from Fort Kearny, Nebraska Territory to Rivers, MI that was carried to the fort by an emigrant who was on his way west, almost certainly in an oxen-pulled “covered” wagon. It was then transported eastward by John Hockaday in a stage (or “celerity”) wagon.

The cover is accompanied by the original trail letter from George Salsey who was one of the earliest settlers of Denver, CO.

Ex Beals.

The original letter which is datelined “*This side of Ft. Kearny four miles, October 1, 1858*” is from George Salsey to his brother:

It begins “*I am on my way to the Rocky Mountains Gold Mines . . . tomorrow we pass through the Fort.*” He then goes on to describe that there are four men to a wagon, that they kill plenty of fresh meat including elk, antelope, raccoon, prairie hen, and rabbits, and that he does the cooking for eight (“*I do as good as a woman in that respect*”). He concludes by declaring that “*We have lots of spirit, live high, and sleep on the ground.*”

George Salsey and his group (which had originated in Lawrence, Kansas Territory) arrived in what is now Denver, CO on October 24, 1858 after consolidating with other wagon trains at Fort Kearny. The total number in Salsey’s group was 56 men and one woman. They were part of the first big wagon train to reach Denver.



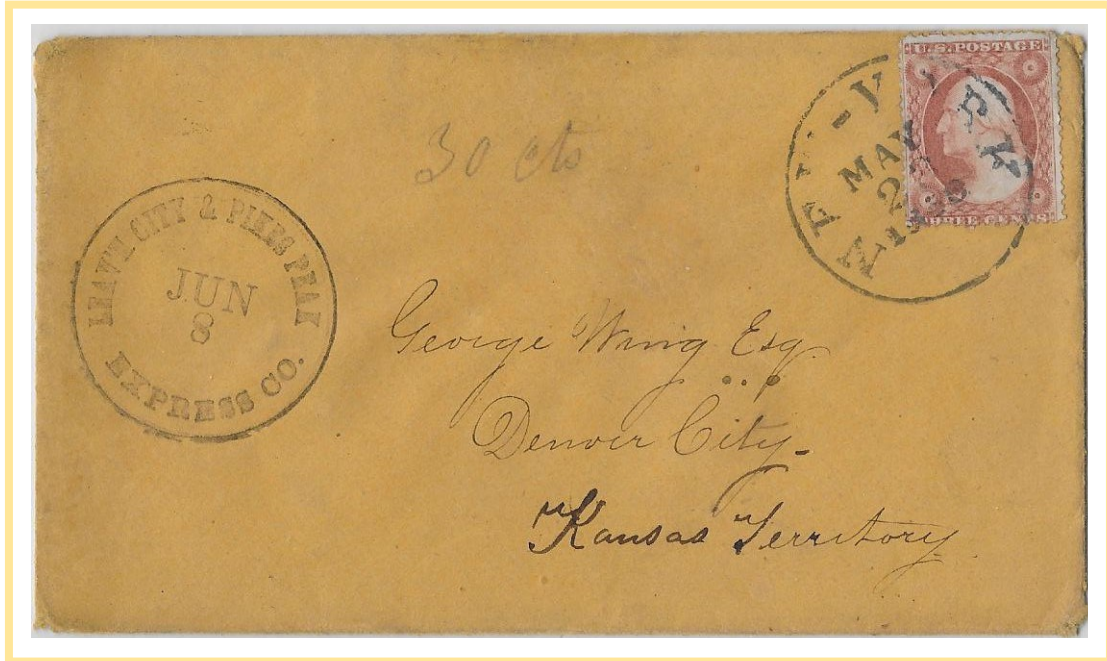
Above: Why they were called wagon "trains."

Below: A typical emigrant wagon was about 4 feet wide and 10 feet long (not counting the tongue which is what the people in the photo are sitting on). It could carry up to one ton of cargo. A tough white canvas top was stretched over a series of steam-bent wooden supports to create a "covered" wagon. Contrary to popular belief, most emigrants did not use Conestoga wagons which were twice the size of most emigrant wagons. Conestoga wagons were useful for hauling freight over short distances but they were too cumbersome for cross-country travel and too heavy to be pulled by just two or four draft animals, which were all that most emigrants could afford.



MULE-DRAWN COACH

“TO THE WILDERNESS”



An 1859 letter that left New York City on May 23, 1859 and that was carried mostly by rail to St. Joseph, MO (which it reached via the newly-completed Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad). From St. Joseph it was taken to Leavenworth City, K.T. where it was transferred to the Leavenworth City & Pike's Peak Express Company, thus leaving the U.S. Mail. It departed Leavenworth City on June 8 in a mule-drawn Concord stagecoach and arrived in Denver on June 15 or 16.

The "30 cts" pencil express fee—an unusual and perhaps unique feature of this cover—indicates that the letter was delivered outside of Denver for an additional charge.

Eight westbound and eight eastbound covers have been recorded with the handstamp of this seminal express company. This is one of the finest examples and is unrecorded.

With the original 12 page letter that confirms the usage.

The discovery of gold by W. Green Russell and Sam Bates near Cherry Creek (or Little Dry Creek) at the present site of Denver in Kansas Territory (K.T.) in the summer of 1858 set off a stampede to the Pike's Peak region of the Rocky Mountains. In that same year, William H. Russell—who was a founder of the largest freighting company in the West—partnered with John S. Jones and Luther Smoot to carry "passengers, mail, freight, and gold" between Leavenworth City on the Missouri River and Denver City. Their Leavenworth City and Pike's Peak Express Company (LC&PPE) was incorporated in 1859 and its first stagecoach left Leavenworth City on April 18 of that year and arrived in Denver City 19 days later.

The 687 mile route from Leavenworth City followed the military road to Fort Riley and Junction City, K.T. where, according to one contemporary account, "travelers for the West bade good-bye to most of the remaining amenities of civilization." From there the route ran northwest through the barren landscape between the Republican and the Solomon branches of the Kansas River. It then

bent southwest to follow the South Branch of the Republican River toward Denver City.

* * *

The route was punctuated by 27 stage stations that were an average of 25 miles apart. Some of the stations were little more than tents and Horace Greeley—a passenger on one of the trips—said of one such station, “I would match (it) and its surroundings against any other scene on our continent for desolation.”

In contrast to the desolation of the route, the LC&PPE used upscale Concord coaches (the first in Kansas Territory) and a thousand of the finest Kentucky mules, four of which pulled each coach. The coaches usually traveled in pairs for greater protection against Indian attacks.

* * *

A passenger ticket cost \$125 and freight cost \$1 per pound. Carriage of a letter from Leavenworth City to Denver City cost 25¢ and—as this cover demonstrates—a delivery to a location outside of the city proper cost an additional 5¢. The LC&PPE charged those fees because it didn’t have a U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) contract and subsidy. That might seem curious because the USPOD relied on the LC&PPE to carry the U.S. Mail between the Missouri River and the goldfields in the Pike’s Peak area.

* * *

The coaches left from the Planter’s House hotel in Leavenworth City on a fairly consistent Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule. Although the westbound travel time was initially around 19 days, it fell to around 12 days by mid-May and then to as few as six days by the end of that month.

* * *

The LC&PPE quickly ran into financial difficulty. The high operating costs, the losses from Indian attacks, the paucity of travelers who could afford the fare (which was over \$4,000 in today’s dollars), and the exodus of prospectors once the gold strikes proved to be disappointing all conspired against the company. The company tried to restore its fortunes by purchasing John Hockaday’s USPOD contract for weekly mail service between St. Joseph, MO and Salt Lake City, U.T. At that point the LC&PPE abandoned the Republican River route and made the service to Denver City a branch line (via Julesburg and the South Fork of the Platte River) of its new trans-continental route.

The original route to Denver City lasted less than three months. So did the “Leavenworth City and Pike’s Peak Express Company” name which morphed into “Jones & Russell’s Pike’s Peak Express Company” in early July.

* * *

The original 12 page installment letter that accompanies this cover is dated from April 29 to May 28, 1859 (the latter is the date of the New York CDS). It’s from the wife, fiancé, or girlfriend of the addressee, George Wing. The woman writes that a child whom they both knew amusingly noted that “*George Wing has gone to Pike’s Beaks.*” She also laments that Mr. Wing had “*gone out into the wilderness*” and that he’d probably never received seven or eight letters that she’d sent to Kansas City because he’d already left that town. The letter also contains interesting tidbits about life in New York City during the mid-19th century.

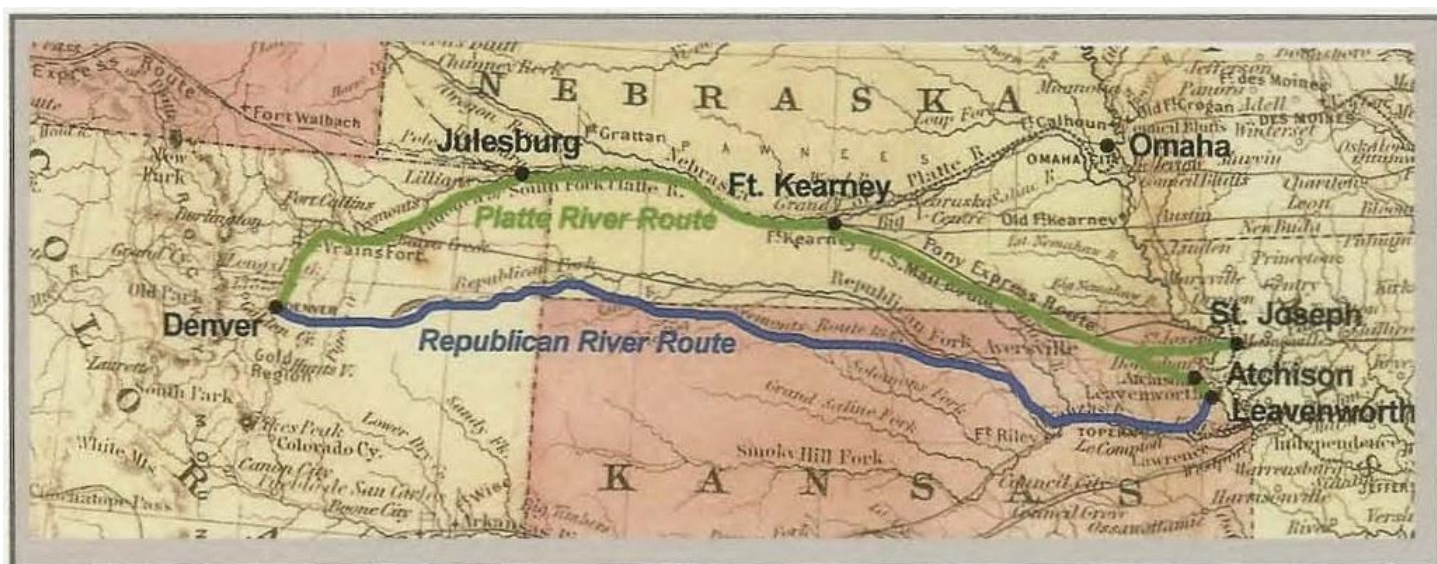


Station #1

A drawing of the Planter's House hotel in Leavenworth City, K.T. around the time of the LC&PPE's operation. Station #1 was in the basement and the Concord coaches left from the hotel's main entrance. (From the Kansas Historical Society)

Station #27

A drawing of the LC&PPE's office in Denver City, K.T. The original office was just a windowless shack. The contrast with Station #1 shows you the difference that going 687 miles further west made at that time.



A map showing the Republican River Route (in blue) that this cover took as well as the route from Julesburg to Denver that succeeded it once Russell and Jones had purchased Hockaday's U.S. Mail contract and moved their operations to the Platte River Route (in green).

HORSE-DRAWN COACH and SLEIGH

A “THROUGH” CROSS-COUNTRY STAGE

The First Complete Trip Over the New Central Route



A December 11, 1858 cover from Placerville, CA to Brockport, NY that was carried by George Chorpennig from Placerville to Salt Lake City, Utah Territory by stagecoach and then by John Hockaday from Salt Lake City to St. Joseph, MO by stagecoach and sleigh.

This cover was on the first eastbound trip over the “through” stage line between California and the Missouri River following the completion of the new western segment of the Central Overland Route.

That new segment made the Sierra Nevada Mountains consistently passable during the winter and permitted the U.S. Post Office Department to restore the shorter, direct “over the mountains” route between Placerville and Salt Lake City that had been abandoned entirely on July 1, 1854.

Accompanying the cover is the original letter which describes the new trans-Sierra wagon road that became the westernmost portion of the Central Overland Route. The letter also provides a detailed description of California and its economy during the mid-19th century.

Ex Vogel.

The creation in 1858 of an all-season mail route between California and Utah Territory required that the Carson and California trails be abandoned because they were too long, too hazardous, and too often impassable during the winter. The alternatives that were chosen were Johnson’s Cut-Off and the Egan Trail which—after extensive improvements—became the new mail route between Placerville and Salt Lake City.

In 1857, Sacramento, El Dorado, and Yolo counties together invested \$50,000 toward the construction of a new trans-Sierra wagon road along Johnson's Cut-Off. The route ran north of the Carson Trail but connected with it in the west at Pollock Pines, CA and in the east at Carson City, U.T. It was not only shorter than the Carson Trail but had the advantage of avoiding Carson's Pass. Instead, Johnson's Cut-Off crossed the Sierras at Johnson's Pass (elevation 7,377 feet) which was more than 1,000 feet lower than Carson's Pass and considerably less exposed. (Nevertheless, Johnson's Pass was no "walk in the park." One emigrant described the slog up to the top—Echo Summit—as "like climbing a tree, only harder.")

Going east from the pass, Johnson's Cut-Off went through Lake Valley, hugged the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe, and then crossed the Carson Mountains close to Carson City where it finally re-joined the Carson Trail.

Although that was the route that the Virginia City Pony Express followed in 1862, Chorpenning's route in 1858 left Johnson's Cut-Off near the southern end of Lake Tahoe. At that point his route continued eastward to cross the Carson Mountains into Carson Valley via the Luther Pass. It then followed the Carson Trail northward to Genoa and Carson City.

* * *

The other part of the new route between California and Utah Territory was Egan's Trail which ran between Carson City and Salt Lake City.

Howard Egan had discovered that route in 1855 but had used it only for cattle drives because it wasn't fit for wheeled vehicles. Then in 1857-58 the Army built a wagon road along the trail in order to facilitate the supply of Camp Floyd from the headquarters of the Department of the Pacific in San Francisco.

Chorpenning first scouted the new military road in October 1858 and immediately saw its advantages: it not only avoided the considerable hazards of the California Trail but it also provided a more direct path to Salt Lake City and could thus cut 280 miles from his mail route. And, as a bonus, the Egan Trail had plenty of good grass and water.

The genius of the Egan Trail was that it utilized a series of well-aligned passes through the otherwise daunting series of mountain ranges in the heart of Utah Territory. Indeed, emigrants to California had previously avoided those mountains by using the westernmost portion of the California Trail which, although arduous, was more or less negotiable by wagons.

* * *

When Chorpenning's third contract began on July 1, 1858, the completion of the improvements in Johnson's Cut-Off were within sight. Therefore, the Post Office Department restored the direct, "over the mountains" route between California and Utah Territory in the belief that it could now be kept open throughout the winter.

The new contract on Route 12,801 called for weekly stagecoach service in each direction between Placerville and Salt Lake City in no more than 16 days. Chorpenning's first westbound coach left Salt Lake City on July 4 and his first eastbound coach left Placerville on the following day.

* * *

At that point Chorpenning had established a series of stage stations between Placerville and Carson City. However, he had no stations along the new military road from Carson City to Salt Lake City because, as I've already noted, he didn't even scout that road until October. According to

contemporary newspapers, he finally began to build, supply, and staff a series of stations along the Egan Trail in November 1858. Until then, he had to use his 1851 route that followed the California Trail through the northern part of Utah Territory.

According to the *San Francisco Bulletin* of December 22, 1858, the first mail coach to use the new Egan Trail road left Salt Lake City on December 6. That proved to be particularly timely because the previous coach—which had used the old California Trail route—had been delayed by snow in the Goose Creek Mountains.

Since Chorpenning's coaches departed from Salt Lake City on Mondays and from Placerville on Saturdays, the first *eastbound* coach to use the new Egan Trail route would have left Placerville on December 11 which is the date of the Placerville postmark on this cover.

Indeed, the *Sacramento Daily Union* of December 15, 1858 ran a "Letter from Placerville" that was dated December 13 and that referred to "*the new road, just completed.*" The same issue also carried a December 10 dispatch from Genoa in Carson Valley that noted that "*the next mail coach will come over the new route.*"

Thus, this cover was carried on Chorpenning's first eastbound trip over the new Egan Trail road which, along with the new Johnson's Cut-Off road, created a direct, all-season route between California and Utah Territory that was both safer and faster for stagecoaches.

* * *

The December 10, 1858 letter that accompanies this cover was written by a traveler who had recently arrived in California on a westbound stage. He describes the new road over the Sierras but doesn't describe the new Egan Trail road. Of course, that's because the writer must have taken the old California Trail route from Salt Lake City if he was already in Placerville on December 10.

His description of the new Johnson's Cut-Off road includes the following:

"We have a good Wagon Road over the dreaded Sierra Mountains to Carson Valley—constructed this season and is 85 miles long over which the mail from the States passes in a 4-horse coach or wagon weekly. The grade or rise of the Road is only 1¼ ft. per rod in the steepest places so that four horses take 2 tons of freight at a load. The Stage comes through in a day so that the Nevada Mountains are no longer a barrier to Emigration. Although the snow for 10 or 12 miles of this Road will be deep this Winter, yet I believe it will be kept passible for teams all Winter. I may send this by the Salt Lake mail so that it may pass over the same Road that I did in coming out here."

Note that the writer had to endorse the cover "by Salt Lake" in order for it "pass over the same road" that he had just traveled. That was because in 1858 transcontinental letters from California were sent via the ocean route unless they were specifically endorsed to be sent overland.

* * *

This cover is also noteworthy for the fact that it was carried from Salt Lake City to St. Joseph, MO by John Hockaday on Route 8,911. Except for the change in the eastern terminus, his route was similar to the one that Samuel Woodson had used in 1850.

Hockaday's contract (May 1, 1858 to June 30, 1859) called for weekly service from each terminus with trips to be completed in no more than 22 days which was considerably less than the 30 days that had been specified in Woodson's contract. However, there were now stage stations at which draft animals and drivers could be changed. That meant that Hockaday could use coaches and sleighs rather than slower pack animals and could travel both day and night. Nevertheless, he ran

a frugal operation: there were only seven stage stations along his 1,300 mile route.

* * *

Hockaday used light coaches—probably some variant of stage or celerity wagons—rather than the larger and more expensive Concord coaches. He generally used teams of four or six mules since they could tolerate the long hauls between stage stations and could cope with the difficult sandy, rocky, and muddy footing that was encountered along the route. However, at least 400 miles of his route was subject to heavy snowfall during the winter, so he used mule-drawn sleighs between stage stations when necessary.

This cover undoubtedly went part of the way by that means because, according to the *Daily Alta California* of January 6, 1859, it had snowed almost continuously from November 15 to December 10 in the area of South Pass City, with the storms of early December being “*the severest known in those parts for 10 years.*” The paper went on to state that the snow was currently up to 20 feet deep in places “all the way to Laramie.” It also reported repeated delays along the mail route, the loss of nine mail team mules due to the weather, and the fact that two “mail boys” had frozen to death.

* * *

Although the coordination of the schedules of Chorpenning and Hockaday was far from perfect, contemporary newspapers still hailed their composite route as a “38 day transcontinental through line” and as “the first Central Overland mail stage.”

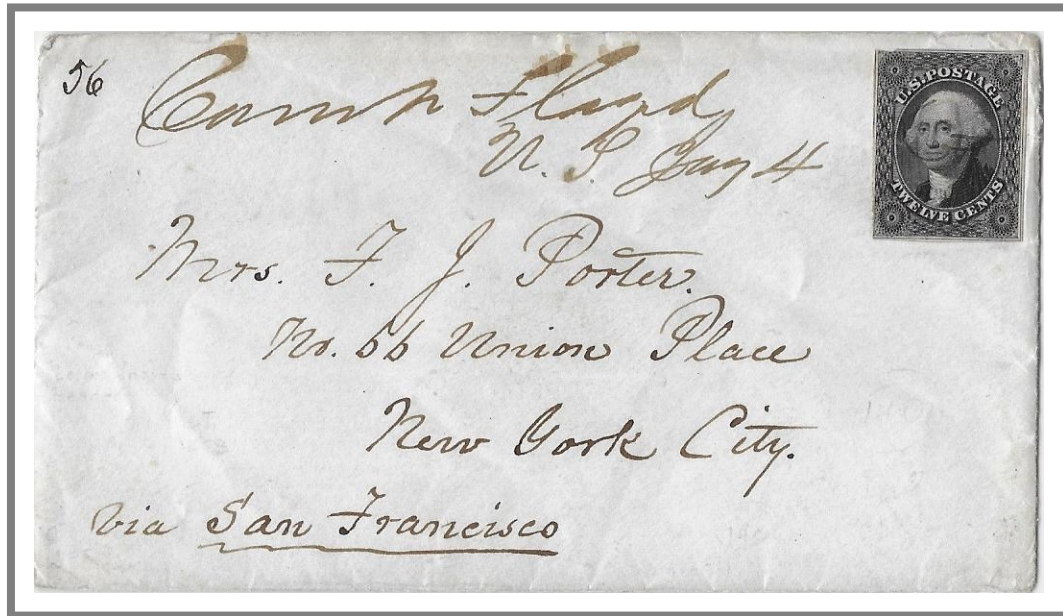
Indeed, the new “through line” was reliable enough to become a credible competitor to both the Southern Overland Route and the ocean mail route, although it carried less mail than either of them. But more importantly, it proved the viability of a direct, all-season route that went “over the mountains” from California to the Missouri River and beyond. That, in turn, led to the establishment on July 1, 1861 of the first daily, all-season, transcontinental mail service—a service that further united the two coasts of the nation.



Sierra Nevada Mountains

MULE-DRAWN SLEIGH

CONQUERING THE SIERRA SNOWS



A January 4, 1859 folded letter from Captain Fitz John Porter at Camp Floyd, U.T. to his wife in New York that was sent "via San Francisco" (rather than eastward via Salt Lake City and St. Joseph) as per his endorsement. With the original signed autograph letter.

This cover was carried over the Sierra Nevada Mountains in a mule-drawn sleigh by John "Snowshoe" Thompson who was a subcontractor to George Chorpenning.

It is also one of six or seven recorded uses of the 1851 12¢ stamp on a cover from a Western territory.

Signed by Ashbrook (as "unique") and also by Frajola.

In 1858 John "Snowshoe" Thompson, in association with John Chiles, started an "over the mountains" stage line between Placerville, CA and Genoa in Carson Valley, NV (which was then in Utah Territory). During the winter of 1858-59, Thompson carried the U.S. Mail between those two towns as a subcontractor to George Chorpenning who held the contract for mail service between Placerville and Salt Lake City.

The *Sacramento Daily Union* of January 12, 1859 described Thompson's mode of winter transport between Genoa in the eastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Strawberry Station in the western foothills as follows:

"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.”

The article was referring to the new Johnson’s Cut-Off road which was the first “all-season” road over the Sierras.

Thompson was perhaps best known for crossing the mountains on 10 foot Norwegian skis with a mail sack strapped to his back. He had first carried the local Carson Valley mail by that means during the winter of 1856. However, once he became Chorpennings’ subcontractor, he was responsible for transporting more mail than he could carry himself and therefore used custom-built sleighs.

* * *

Thompson also had a contract for clearing the snow from the wagon road for which he was paid \$1,500 per winter. (That was in addition to the \$2,000 that he earned for carrying the mail.) He usually dealt with the snow by beating it down with wooden mauls or by trampling it with teams of horses, although there are also contemporary references to his compressing and hardening the snow using oxen-pulled rollers.

* * *

At the time that this cover was mailed, the sender—Army Captain Fitz John Porter—was serving under future Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnson in the Utah expedition against the Mormons. However, Porter is best known as the Brigadier General in the Union Army who was convicted by a court martial for his conduct at the Second Battle of Bull Run. During the heat of that battle, he initially declined an injudicious order to make a flank attack on “Stonewall” Jackson’s forces and when he finally did comply, the result was every bit as disastrous as he had feared. After more than 25 years of effort, he succeeded in having his conviction overturned.

* * *

Almost all of Captain Porter’s letters from Camp Floyd were sent overland to St. Joseph, MO. That’s because the Central Overland Route was the “default” one for transcontinental mail from Utah Territory. However, Capt. Porter probably endorsed this particular letter to be sent “via San Francisco”—and thus the ocean mail route—on account of the unusually heavy snow on the Great Plains and the resulting delays in the overland mail. As the write-up of the December 11, 1858 cover from Placerville indicates, those delays were well-publicized in contemporary newspapers.



HORSEBACK

A LEGEND - BUT A LOSER

The Pony Express



An eastbound Pony Express “way” use from the trip that originated in San Francisco on November 10, 1860 and arrived in St. Joseph 13 days later on November 24.

The U.S. postage was either unpaid or more likely paid in cash by the sender at a Pony Express station. The Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (COC&PPE)—which founded the Pony Express—handstamped the cover at the Pony Express terminal in St. Joseph, MO and then applied a 3¢ stamp. The COC&PPE then transferred this cover to the St. Joseph Post Office for eastward transport on the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad.

The stamp slightly overlaps the COC&PPE handstamp and covers the Pony Express’ penciled “1/4” notation that indicates that the sender had paid the \$2.50 fee for a letter that weighed up to one quarter ounce.

Frajola-Walske-Kramer census number E39A. Signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Ex Kramer.

The Pony Express—or the Central Overland Pony Express Company as it was formally known—began operating on April 3, 1860. It was a private venture of the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (COC&PPE) which was owned by William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, and William B. Waddell. At that time, the Pony Express was not part of the COC&PPE’s contract to carry the U.S. Mail (by stagecoach) on the Central Overland Route.

The Pony Express promised to convey letters from San Francisco to New York in nine days and in

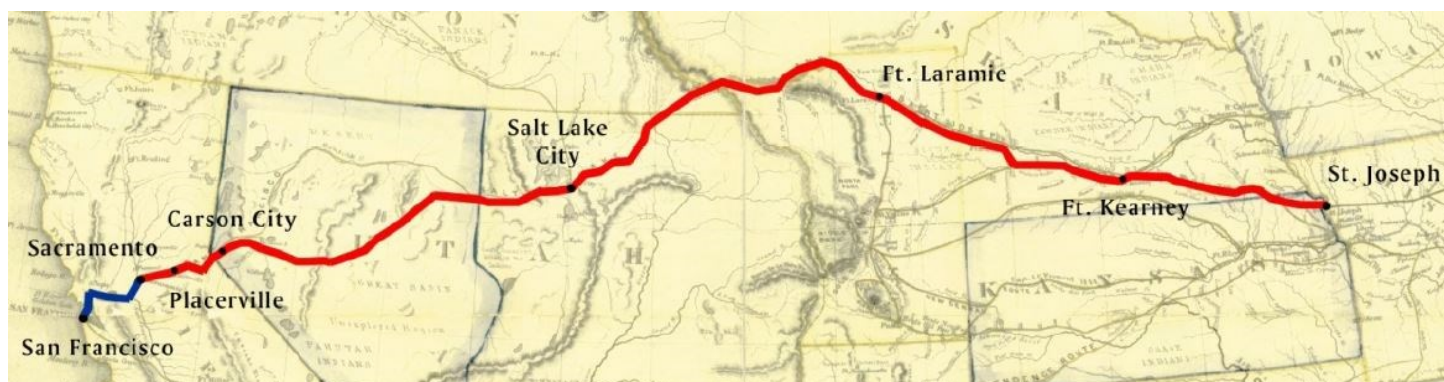
the opposite direction in 10 days, provided that the letters were sent part of the way by telegraph. At that time, the key telegraph offices were in Carson City, NV and at Fort Kearny, NE where there were also Pony Express stations. Those offices were (respectively) the easternmost extent of the Western telegraph network—which was almost entirely within California—and the westernmost extent of the much larger Eastern network.

Pony Express letters that did not use the telegraph typically took 12 to 14 days to cross the entire country. However, that still compared favorably with the stagecoaches on the Central or Southern routes which took at least three or four weeks just to move the U.S. Mail between California and the Missouri River.

* * *

The horseback portion of the Pony Express initially ran 1,840 miles between Sacramento, CA and St. Joseph. However, at the time that this cover was carried, the western terminus had been moved eastward (on July 1, 1860) to Folsom, CA in order to connect with the recent extension of the Sacramento Valley Railroad which ran between Sacramento and Folsom. The 130 or so miles between Sacramento and San Francisco were covered by steamboats on the Sacramento River and San Francisco Bay.

With only minor deviations, the Pony Express followed the Central Overland Route:



The Pony Express maintained 150 to 200 “relay” stations that were spaced 10 to 15 miles apart. Horses were swapped out at every station which allowed them to be ridden as hard as the terrain permitted. The riders were changed and rested at “home” stations that were spaced at 75 to 100 mile intervals. The operation required 400 to 500 horses and approximately 80 riders. According to contemporary ads, the riders had to be “young, skinny, wiry fellows (who were) willing to risk death daily—orphans preferred.” Indeed, riders were told that they had to be willing to sacrifice themselves (and their horse) rather than give up the mail. For that risk, the riders were paid \$100 a month at a time when an unskilled laborer made \$15 to \$30.

* * *

Ironically, it was far more hazardous to staff a Pony Express station than to be a rider: six riders died on the job—four were killed by Paiutes and two froze to death—while dozens of station staffers died, mostly during Indian attacks.

Letters were carried in a specially designed saddle bag called a “mochila.” The mochila—which could quickly be transferred between horses—contained four compartments, one of which was for “way” mail. Each home station manager had a key to that compartment that allowed him to add “way” letters and also remove letters that were to be delivered to a station down the line. The “way” letter compartment was usually the only one that could be opened between the two terminals.

* * *

The transcontinental Pony Express was an expensive enterprise that lost more than \$200,000 (more than \$6,000,000 in today’s dollars) in its 18 months of operation. However, the COC&PPE operated it as a “loss leader”: it hoped to win a lucrative Post Office Department contract for daily stagecoach mail service on the Central Overland Route if it could demonstrate the route’s viability. The Pony Express did exactly that, so on July 1, 1861 “daily” stagecoaches began to carry the U.S. Mail between Placerville, CA and St. Joseph, MO. But alas, the initial contractor wasn’t the COC&PPE. Instead, it was the Overland Mail Company which had previously held the contract on the now discontinued Southern Overland Route.

* * *

The end of the transcontinental Pony Express came on October 26, 1861 — two days after the transcontinental telegraph was completed at Salt Lake City. The telegraph connected Sacramento, CA and Omaha, NE and had rapidly expanding connections throughout the East and the West. Suddenly, nine or ten days to carry a message between the two coasts seemed painfully slow.

* * *

During its 18 months of operation, the Pony Express carried approximately 35,000 letters of which 251 are recorded in the Frajola-Walske-Kramer census. Among those survivors, fewer than 20% are “way” letters like the present cover.

* * *

When the Pony Express was launched from St. Joseph on April 3, 1860, its charge for a letter was \$5 per half ounce. However, the rate changed to \$2.50 per quarter ounce on July 31, 1860 for westbound letters and on August 15, 1860 for eastbound ones. The purpose of the change was to reduce the cost of sending lighter letters and thus encourage more business.

* * *

The law required that U.S. postage also be paid. The postage on a Pony Express letter was calculated as if it had been carried in the U.S. Mail from its origin to its destination. In November 1860 when this cover was mailed, the postage was 3¢ for any distance up to 3,000 miles and 10¢ for any greater distance. The present cover—which was destined for New York state—paid the 3¢ rate. That means that it could have originated as far west as Division IV of the Pony Express. That division extended from Salt Lake City to Roberts Creek, NV. (See the map on the next page.)

Right: A newspaper notice from the Daily Alta California (San Francisco) from August 15, 1860. It announced the rate reduction that applied to this cover.

Below: A map of Division IV of the Pony Express. Given the fact that the postage was 3¢—the rate for under 3,000 miles—this “way” cover could have originated as far west as Robert’s Creek in Nevada which is at the far left of the map. Salt Lake City is at the far right.

PONY EXPRESS.

Office.....153 Montgomery street.

CHANGE OF TARIFF.

FROM THIS DATE
WE WILL FORWARD

Quarter Ounce Letters

AT \$2 50.

Charging the same for each additional quarter-ounce, or fraction thereof.

The Courier will leave each
WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAY,
the Express closing at 3¼ P. M.

sub-tf J. LAMBERT, Agent.



STAGECOACH

"DAILY" COAST-TO-COAST MAIL

The First Eastbound Trip



A June 29, 1861 unpaid double rate (30¢) cover from San Francisco to Cognac, France that was endorsed "p(er) Overland Mail."

This cover was carried on the first eastbound trip of the "daily" transcontinental mail service between California and the Missouri River that began on July 1, 1861.

That was also the first eastbound trip of the Overland Mail Company after it moved from the Southern to the Central Route.

Signed by Frajola. Ex Walske.

When the Southern Overland Route was terminated on March 2, 1861 on account of Civil War disruptions in Texas and Arkansas, the contract of the Overland Mail Company (OMC) was moved to the Central Overland Route which ran between Placerville, CA and St. Joseph, MO. At that time, routes 12,801 and 8,911 were merged into a single contract—Route 10,773.

The new contract called for service from each terminus six days a week. (The public called that "daily.") The trips were to be completed in 20 days or less from April to December and in 23 days or less during the four winter months. However, the OMC frequently beat that schedule.

It took three months for the OMC to move its operations northward, during which time the twice-monthly ocean mail route via Panama once again became the “default” transcontinental route. (The semi-weekly Pony Express was a more expensive alternative.)

Finally, on July 1, 1851, the first “daily” overland mail and passenger coaches left from Placerville and from St. Joseph. The reaction of the public was summarized in the *Sacramento Daily Union* of July 2 in a “Note from Placerville” that was dated July 1:

“The first Daily Overland Mail left this city at 1:30 P.M. to-day, escorted out of town by an immense concourse of citizens, with bands of music, and cannon. The procession was headed by Mayor Wale and the Common Council of the city. He made an appropriate address. The coach and horses were decorated with American flags. There were six bags of letter mail and twenty-eight bags of paper mail, weighing 1,776 pounds.”

This cover was carried in one of those “six bags of letter mail.”

* * *

The route that this cover took to that historic trip was as follows:

It left San Francisco on June 29 and was carried to Sacramento by a steamboat of the California Steam Navigation Company, a trip that took 6½ hours. On the morning of June 30, it left Sacramento on the Placerville stagecoach. That trip via Folsom City and Diamond Springs was approximately 45 miles and would have taken 11 to 15 hours, depending on the traffic and the condition of the roads. In any case, it would have reached Placerville in more than enough time to make the 1:30 PM OMC stagecoach departure on the following day.

The cover would have arrived in St. Joseph on July 20 or 21 and then reached New York City by train two or three days later. On July 23, it was sent onward by train to Boston for the departure of the Cunard line steamer *Canada* on July 24. It arrived in Calais on August 6 with 16 décimes (for double weight) postage due.

* * *

The route of the “daily” overland mail from Placerville to St. Joseph initially blazed no new trails: it followed George Chorpenning’s 1858 route from Placerville to Salt Lake City and then followed the old emigrant route past Fort Bridger, through South Pass, and then along the Sweetwater River and the Platte River to Fort Laramie and Fort Kearny. From there, it headed directly southeast to St. Joseph which was the largest distribution post office on the Missouri River.

* * *

In September 1861, the eastern terminus of the route was moved to Atchison, KS following the completion of the Atchison & St. Joseph Railroad the previous March. That made Atchison the westernmost city on the Missouri River that had a rail connection to the East. However, the move might have been motivated more by the belief that Atchison would be less affected by the Civil War fever that was raging in Missouri and by the rumor that the stagecoach office in St. Joseph was teeming with secessionists.

* * *

The OMC used the latest models of four and six horse (and mule) Concord stagecoaches. Indeed, no other long-distance stage line at that time could boast of having better equipment.

Nevertheless, one journalist described the cross-country trip as “a preview of hell.” The miseries included choking dust, back-breaking seating, grotesque overcrowding, unpalatable and overpriced food, and extreme heat and cold. Furthermore, the coaches had to average more than 110 miles a day in order to meet the advertised through time of 17 days. That meant that they had to be driven hard both day and night.

Fortunately for the animals and the drivers, there were stations along the way where they could be changed out and rested. However, that didn't help most of the passengers who had to sleep upright (and usually leaning against each other) in a jolting, careening coach. The passengers who rode on the top fared better in that respect: they could sleep lying down after strapping themselves to the side rails so that they wouldn't roll off the coach.

* * *

Although the OMC held the contract for the entire Central Overland Route, it immediately subcontracted the segment between the Missouri River and Salt Lake City to the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (*COC&PP*) which was owned by Russell, Majors, and Waddell.

Although the OMC initially operated the remainder of the route (using the existing *COC&PP* infrastructure), it soon subcontracted the segment between Virginia City and Placerville to the Pioneer Express Company which by that time was owned by Louis McLane who was closely linked to Wells, Fargo & Co. (WFC). That meant that the only segment that the OMC continued to operate on its own was the one between Salt Lake City and Virginia City.

In subsequent years, there were purchases and reorganizations that culminated in 1866 in a “grand consolidation” that left WFC in control of the entire Central Overland Route.

* * *

Although “daily” transcontinental mail service is taken for granted today, it was a very big deal when it first started in 1861. The mail was the only affordable means of communication between friends, loved ones, and businesses that were separated by an entire continent. It was also the only means that the government in Washington, D.C. had of keeping the people “out West” tied to the rest of the country through newspapers and government documents.



A 19th century photograph of the historic Cary House in Placerville, CA. The hotel was built in 1857 and it's still in operation today. At the lower left is a stagecoach—probably from the Pioneer Stage Company that had a headquarters at the hotel. In many western towns, the stagecoach stop was located at a prominent hotel.

HORSEBACK
IN HALF THE TIME
The Virginia City Pony Express



A June 1864 cover with a red 25¢ Wells, Fargo & Co. Pony Express stamp (143L9) and a printed Wells, Fargo & Co. franking that was carried over the Sierra Nevada Mountains from Virginia City, Nevada Territory to Placerville, CA by a rider on horseback.

Ex Dale-Lichtenstein and Kramer.

The Virginia City Pony Express was established by Wells, Fargo & Co. (WFC) on August 11, 1862 in order to provide faster express service between Virginia City and San Francisco. The former was a key commercial and mining center in the Washoe region of what became Nevada Territory (N.T.) on March 2, 1861. Some of the world's richest lodes of silver and gold were discovered in that region between 1859 and 1863.

It took 44 hours for WFC's "standard" express service to travel between Virginia City and San Francisco. However, the "premium" Virginia City Pony Express was initially advertised as taking only 24 hours. (Later on, the ads claimed 26 hours.) The reduction in the transit time was due to the fact that a rider on horseback—rather than a stagecoach—was used between Virginia City and Placerville.

Between Placerville and Folsom, the "premium" express mail was carried by the Pioneer Stage

Company which also carried WFC's "standard" express mail between Virginia City and Placerville (via Genoa, N.T.) The Sacramento Valley Railroad carried the "premium" express mail between Folsom, CA (the railroad's western terminus at that time) and Sacramento. Steamers then carried the mail over the Sacramento River and across San Francisco Bay.

* * *

Like its predecessor—the transcontinental Pony Express—the Virginia City Pony Express crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the Placerville Road (a.k.a. Johnson's Cut-Off). However, there were some important differences in their routes east of Lake Tahoe. The most obvious one was that the transcontinental Pony Express had bypassed Virginia City—mail to and from that town had been exchanged at Dayton, N.T. Furthermore, although its predecessor had crossed the Carson Mountains on the Kingsbury Grade toll road, the Virginia City Pony Express crossed them closer to Carson City. (As of 1863, it probably used the Kings Canyon toll road.)

* * *

As the roads between Placerville and Virginia City were improved during the early 1860s, the travel time for stagecoaches became progressively shorter. The ensuing competition from the fastest of the coaches caused the more expensive Virginia City Pony Express to be discontinued on July 29, 1864. However, the premium "pony" service was briefly resurrected between December 28, 1864 and March 2, 1865 after winter storms had damaged the roads enough to slow down the coaches.

* * *

The original premium for this pony express service was 10¢ per half ounce which was paid by a brown WFC adhesive stamp. In February 1863, the premium was raised to 25¢ which was paid by a blue stamp which is the most common variety that can be found on a cover. That stamp was replaced in March 1864 by a red one which is comparatively scarce on cover.

The WFC adhesive stamps paid only for the upgrade to the "premium" express service which meant that the sender also had to pay the fee for the "standard" express service. That fee was covered by the 10¢ that WFC charged for their envelope (which included 3¢ U.S. postage). The printed "PAID / Wells, Fargo & Co." franking at the top of the envelope signified the payment of the fee for their "standard" service.

Right: Tandem ads—and services—of the Virginia City Pony Express and the Pioneer Stage Company. From the Weekly Mountain Democrat (Placerville), October 10, 1862.

WELLS, FARGO & CO'S PONY EXPRESS.

(ON AND AFTER MONDAY, the 11th
Instant, we will run)

PONY EXPRESS, DAILY.

SACRAMENTO AND VIRGINIA
CITIES!

Carrying letters and exchange papers through
From San Francisco in 24 Hours!
From Sacramento in 15 Hours!
From Placerville in 10 Hours!

RATES—All letters to be enclosed in our frank, and ten cents prepaid on a letter for each letter weighing 1/2 ounce or less, and ten cents for each additional half ounce.

WELLS, FARGO & CO.

Placerville, August 20th, 1862.

PIONEER STAGE COMPANY,



FROM
PLACERVILLE TO SACRAMENTO!
— VIA —

Diamond Springs, El Dorado, Clarksville and
Folsom!

CARRYING THE U. S. MAILS
And Wells, Fargo & Co's Express.

COACHES leave Placerville daily in time to connect with the cars of the Sacramento Valley Railroad to Sacramento. Returning,

Leave Folsom on the arrival of the morning train from Sacramento.

Also, leave Placerville daily for Virginia City, via Strawberry, Van Hook's, Genoa, Carson City, Silver City and Gold Hill.

None but gentlemanly and experienced drivers are employed.

Passengers registering their names will be called for in any part of the city.

OFFICES—At the Cary House, and at the Nevada House, Upper Placerville.

LOUIS McLANE & CO.,
Proprietors.

THEO. F. TRACY, Agent.
Placerville, October 4th, 1862.

STAGECOACH and TRAIN

“THE OLD ORDER OF THINGS PASSED AWAY”

The Final Stagecoach with the Transcontinental Mail



A May 6, 1869 cover from San Francisco to Cognac, France that was carried from Sacramento, CA to Omaha, NE on the transcontinental railroad except for a 20.4 mile segment between Promontory Point and Corinne in Utah Territory over which it was carried by a Wells, Fargo & Co. stagecoach on May 9, 1869.

That May 9 trip was the final one for the stagecoaches that carried the transcontinental mail because on the following day the tracks of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads were united at Promontory Point.

This is the only recorded cover that was carried on that historic final stagecoach trip.

Signed by Frajola and with his note. Ex Walske.

Although the initiation of “daily” service between California and the Missouri River on July 1, 1861 represented a high water mark for the transcontinental mail stages, the seeds of their demise were sewn not long afterward: on January 8, 1863 the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) began laying track eastward from Sacramento, CA and on July 10, 1865 the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) began laying track westward from Omaha, NE. And as the train routes progressively lengthened, the route of the mail stages progressively shortened. That’s because the stages’ new role was to carry the mail between the slowly converging railheads.

The route and timetable of this cover were as follows:

- ♦ On Thursday, *May 6, 1869*, it left San Francisco for Sacramento.

Its initial route was described in the May 1869 edition of *Appleton's Railway and Steam Navigation Guide*:

"Passengers can leave San Francisco by splendid river steamers at 4 p.m., and connect with the Central Pacific Railway at Sacramento (the) next morning . . ."

* * *

- ♦ On *May 7 at 6:30 AM*, the cover left Sacramento on a CPRR train (Route 14,834).

This and all subsequent times are from the June 1869 edition of the *Traveler's Official Railway Guide* which contains the schedules for the CPRR and the UPRR trains for May 1869. Note that some of the times vary among different railway guidebooks and company advertisements by 30-60 minutes. Those discrepancies were due mostly to changes in the schedules over the course of the month and are too small to materially affect the discussion of this cover.

* * *

- ♦ On *May 8 at 11:30 PM*, the cover and the CPRR train arrived at Promontory Point after a trip of 690.4 miles and 41 hours.

Note that the CPRR tracks had reached Promontory Point on April 30.

* * *

- ♦ On *May 9 at approximately 2:00 AM*, the UPRR train from Omaha, NE (Route 14,451) arrived at Corinne, U.T.

The UPRR tracks had reached Corinne on March 27 but didn't reach Promontory Point until May 7. And even then, additional track work had to be done because the UPRR was responsible for closing the 2,500 feet that remained between the two railheads at Promontory Point as of May 7. That work was completed on May 9 except for a residual gap of no more than 100 feet that was finally closed at the "Golden Spike" ceremony on May 10.

Therefore—with the exception of a special "excursion" train for dignitaries on May 8—the UPRR ran only a construction train beyond Corinne prior to May 10.

- ♦ On *May 9*, the final stagecoach to carry the transcontinental mail made a round-trip between Promontory Point and Corinne (which were 20.4 miles apart) in order to exchange the mail between the CPRR and UPRR trains. This cover was included in that exchange.

The conclusion of that final stagecoach journey was described in the *Sacramento Daily Union* of May 11, 1869 which quoted a dispatch that was headed "*at the end of the Central Pacific Railroad track, May 9*":

“At noon to-day Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Overland Stage No. 2, Eastern Division, driven by Samuel V. Geltz, who has been eight years in the Company's service, arrived at Promontory Point from Corinne loaded with public documents and other mail matter. The four old nags were worn and jaded, and the coach showed evidence of long service. The mail matter was delivered to the Central Pacific Company, and with that dusty, dilapidated coach and team, the old order of things passed away forever.”

* * *

The contract of Wells, Fargo & Co. (WFC) to carry the transcontinental mail expired on May 9 because the following day—when the tracks of the two lines were joined—a stagecoach was no longer needed to shuttle between the two railroads.

Sadly, the era of the transcontinental mail stage ended not with a bang but a whimper: when the first of John Butterfield's coaches left San Francisco on September 15, 1858, the stage route had been 2,730 miles, but by the time that the WFC coach made its final trip on May 9, 1869, the route had shrunk to a little more than 20 miles.

* * *

The approximate timeline of that final stagecoach trip was as follows:

- ♦ Shortly after the CPRR train arrived at Promontory Point on *May 8 at 11:30 PM*, the waiting WFC stagecoach would have picked up its mail.
- ♦ Assuming an average speed of 4-5 mph (which was typical on that route), the coach would have arrived in Corinne on *May 9 around 4:00 or 5:00 AM* in order to deliver the eastbound mail from the CPRR train and pick up the westbound mail from the UPRR train.
- ♦ Even allowing for time to rest the horses and the driver, the coach would have arrived back at Promontory Point with the UPRR mail *by noon on May 9*, as was documented in the newspaper account.

The CPRR train then left for Sacramento with the UPRR mail at 6:30 PM and the UPRR train left for Omaha with the CPRR mail at around 9:00 PM.

* * *

With regard to the remainder of this cover's journey:

- ♦ From Corinne, the UPRR carried this cover to Omaha, NE. The 1,064 mile trip would have taken approximately 59 hours.
- ♦ Because there was no railroad bridge across the Missouri River until March 27, 1872, mail and passengers were then ferried to Council Bluffs, IA by the Union Pacific Transfer Company. (When the river was frozen during the winter, sleighs were used.)
- ♦ From Council Bluffs, this cover was carried to Chicago on the Chicago & North Western Railroad which had the only eastward rail connection with the UPRR terminal as of May 1869. However, not long after that, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy and the Chicago, Rock Island &

Pacific railroads also established connections, and the three railroads then competed vigorously for the passenger business to and from Omaha.

- ♦ From Chicago, this cover was carried by the Pennsylvania Railroad and its connecting lines to Jersey City, NJ (via Fort Wayne, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg). Jersey City was the location of the “New York” rail terminal because at that time there was no way for a train to cross the Hudson River. Therefore, this cover crossed that river on a ferry.
- ♦ On *May 15*, this cover—which was charged the 15¢ French packet rate—left New York on the ocean steamer *Lafayette* that was operated by the French Line (Ligne H). It arrived in Cognac on May 26 or 27 (there are two date stamps on the reverse) with 8 décimes postage due.

* * *

This cover’s transit time from San Francisco to New York was nine days (May 6 to May 15) which was also the transit time of the earliest recorded cover from San Francisco to New York that was carried *after* the transcontinental railroad was completed on May 10 (see: *Chronicle* 243, August 2014, p. 235). The latter cover was postmarked in San Francisco on May 13 and in New York on May 22. It’s not surprising that the transit time of the two covers was the same because the use of a stagecoach on May 9 to transfer the mail between the trains didn’t delay the departure of the eastbound UPRR train from Corinne.

Nevertheless, once deficiencies in the tracks and infrastructure were fixed, the schedule refined, and the railroad extended from Sacramento to Alameda—and a few months later to Oakland Pier—the transit time between San Francisco and New York was reduced to an average of 7 days and 2 hours. (The fastest time that was recorded in 1869 was 6 days and 15 hours.) However, that figure applied only to the “express” trains that carried first and second class passengers. The transit time for freight trains (which also carried “emigrant” class passengers) was upwards of 10 days. Therefore, it seems likely that the Post Office Department—which demanded “celerity” from its contractors—used only the “express” trains.

* * *

According to the *New York Herald* of May 12, 1869, the annual cost of transporting the cross-country mail by stagecoach had been \$1,100 per mile but the railroads carried it at an annual cost of only \$200 per mile. And as a bonus, the railroads had cut the transit time between San Francisco and New York by more than half.



The transcontinental mail stage and its successor.

TRAIN

A NEW ERA

A Very Early Transcontinental Railroad Use

A Unique Station Agent Marking



A May 13, 1869 cover to Butternuts, NY that was left at the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) station in Wash-a-kie in Wyoming Territory by a passenger who was bound for California on a westbound train. On that same date, the station agent handed the cover to a UPRR route agent on an eastbound train.

This is the earliest recorded cover that was provably carried on a transcontinental train that departed after the tracks of the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific railroads were united on May 10, 1869.

Indeed, it was almost certainly carried on the first westbound “through” train of the transcontinental railroad.

This is also the only recorded example of a Wash-a-kie station agent marking and it’s also unusual in having both station agent and route agent handstamps.

Pictured in Western Express 227, March 2008, p. 5. With PF certificate 484746 (2010) and also signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Ex Haas, Persson, Jarrett, and Risvold.

In 1869, Wash-a-kie was a small Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) station and telegraph office in Wyoming Territory. It was 751 miles west of Omaha, NE—the eastern terminus of the UPRR—and

43 miles west of Rawlins, Wyoming Territory (which is on the dateline of the letter that once accompanied this cover). Because Wash-a-kie never had a post office, this station agent marking is the only philatelic trace of that obscure location.

* * *

A cover has been recorded with a May 10 Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) route agent handstamp and “May 6, ’69” docketing (see: Schuyler Rumsey sale 90, lot 137). Although it was described as being carried eastward on the special May 10 train, that cannot be proven. That’s because on May 10 the UPRR trains that had left Corinne, U.T. on May 9 and 8 and possibly also on May 7 were still in transit to Omaha, NE. Therefore, on May 10 the cover—which bears no indication of where it originated—could have been handed to a route agent on any one of those trains somewhere between Corinne and Omaha.

Another cover has been recorded that was definitely carried on a train that departed *after* the transcontinental railroad had been completed. It was postmarked at San Francisco on May 13 and would have been put on a CPRR train in Sacramento on May 14 (see: *Chronicle* 243, August 2014, p. 235). It is the earliest recorded cover that was carried over the entire transcontinental rail route.

This Wash-a-kie cover was also carried on a train that departed after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. However, it was put on a train one day earlier than the San Francisco cover. The letter that it enclosed was written on board a *westbound* UPRR train on May 13 (see below) and the Wash-a-kie handstamp proves that it was put on an *eastbound* UPRR train on that same date.

Therefore, this Wash-a-kie cover is the earliest recorded cover that was provably carried on a train that departed after the transcontinental railroad had been completed. Indeed, it was probably carried on the first westbound train that departed after the May 10 “golden spike” ceremony (again see below).

* * *

This cover was part of a correspondence that was written by Mr. Niles Searls to his wife during a round-trip that Mr. Searls took between New York and California during May and June of 1869. As his descendant—Ms. Frances G. Long—has noted, Mr. Searls was one of the very first people to complete a trip over the entire length of the transcontinental railroad. Ms. Long has published Mr. Searls’ correspondence from that trip which includes the letter that this Wash-a-kie cover once enclosed (see: *New York History* 50, July 1969, pp. 302-315, Fenimore Art Museum and JSTOR, publishers). The following are excerpts from those letters:

- ♦ *New York / Saturday May 8th* . . . start tonight by the Erie R.R. Have my tickets through to Sacramento at a cost of \$238.
- ♦ *Erie R.R. / Sunday May 9th* . . . expect to reach Cleveland by Atlantic & Great Western Road this evening & be in Chicago tomorrow .
- ♦ *Michigan C RR / May 10th 1869* . . . We are 40 miles East of Chicago . . . already Californians are converging on the line until we have quite a company.
- ♦ *Sherman House Chicago / Monday May 10th* . . . (will) be ready for Omaha by the 3 P.M. train over the Chicago & North West R.R. The last spike is to be driven today & a grand celebration is on the Tapis (i.e. “on tap”) here in honor of the event.

- ♦ *N. West R.R. Iowa / Tuesday Morning May 11th* . . . We left Chicago at 3 PM yesterday in an elegant Pullman Sleeping Car . . . I can't breathe enough of this invigorating Prairie air . . . We left Chicago in the midst of a celebration over the completion of the Pacific Road. They fired guns over us, rang bells, & played music—The streets were so densely packed that we had to walk to the Depot & came near (to) being left.
- ♦ *Platte River 250 miles West of Omaha / Wednesday Morning May 12th 1869* . . . We are on the illimitable plains. Are running up the broad Platte Valley in an elegant Pullman Car & driving herds of antelope from the track every few miles. As we roll out of one station we can look 10 miles ahead over a track as straight as a Gun Barrel & see the next . . . The eating houses can't accommodate half the passengers & the best racers get the food . . . We are now in the worst of the indian country, but shall pass it before dark . . . I look down on the Muddy Platte as I write.
- ♦ *Rawlings Thursday Morning / May 13th 1869* . . . We are across the Summit . . . The country is wild & barren. The Road becomes rougher . . . it is said we will lay by tonight on account of the newness of the Road.

This is the letter that was enclosed by the present cover. The "Summit" refers to Sherman Summit which is discussed below.

- ♦ *Bryan near Green River (Wyoming)* . . . I have struck a cheerful place. A man hangs to a telegraph pole & a Vigilance Committee are tearing down a pretty good looking house & have three more prisoners to hang in the Cool of the Evening. We are waiting fifteen minutes & from the car window I can see what I have stated.
- ♦ *Wasatch (Utah) Friday Morning / May 14th 1869* . . . We are now on the new portion of the Road & last night ran about 4 miles per hour until 12 P.M. & then laid up for the night . . . We expect to reach the Central Pacific Road this evening.
- ♦ *Promontory Point / Saturday Morning / May 15th 1869* . . . I write you sitting on the *last rail*. The spike of gold is not here . . . (We came only) about 150 miles yesterday. Came at times only 2 or 3 miles an hour—were pushed over trestle works and bridges 50 to 60 feet high where engines dare not pass . . . This place is on the large promontory which juts into Salt Lake from the north. A city is growing up here which dates from the day before yesterday. It is on an open barren desert. Our fare is rough but I like it. It is pioneer like. The Sacramento train is coming & we will be off as soon as baggage can be transferred.

The reference to "trestle works and bridges" probably refers, at least in part, to the Devil's Gate bridge that was just southwest of Ogden, U.T. The swollen Weber River had washed away some of its supports a few days before, making it dangerous for heavy engines to use. Also, Mr. Searls didn't see the golden spike because it had been removed immediately after the ceremony on May 10. It is now at Stanford University.

* * *

The following are excerpts from Mr. Searls' letters on his return trip:

- ♦ *Union Pacific R.R. / Thursday June 3d 1869*: I left Sac city this morning . . . we enter the snow sheds in a few minutes and then I cannot write. Sheds, Sheds, Sheds, Sheds, Sheds. Dark, Dark &c.

The sheds were long, open-ended, barn-like structures that were built over forty miles of the CPRR tracks in the Sierras in order to shield them from heavy snow.

- ♦ *Sunday Morning June 6th* . . . We have crossed the Summit, traversed the Humbolt—the Alkali Desert— left Salt Lake in the distance & (are) now in a Palace Car drawn by two engines—we are pushing up the Summit of the Black Hills . . . Sherman is reached, the highest point ever traversed by a R. Road—8,300 feet & now with brakes set & steam turned off we run 100 miles down to Cheyenne. Oh how we go! A switch misplaced, a broken wheel or rail would crush out our lives in a second.

Sherman Summit in Wyoming is between Laramie and Cheyenne and is about 125 miles east of Rawlins. Like the letter says, it was the highest point on the trans-continental railroad—indeed on any railroad in the world.

* * *

Mr. Niles Searls (1825-1907), a native of New York, was a young attorney when he traveled with his wife by wagon train to California in 1849 after hearing of the discovery of gold. He tried his hand at mining but wasn't successful so he opened a law office in Nevada City in 1850 that had a pork barrel for a desk and a nail keg for a chair. Despite this humble beginning, he eventually became the chief justice of the supreme court of California. Before that, he was successively the district attorney of Nevada County, a district judge (he'd been elected on the Know-Nothing or "American" ticket), and a state senator. According to his obituary in the *Sacramento Union* of April 30, 1907, "he was one of the most popular men who had ever resided in Nevada City."

* * *

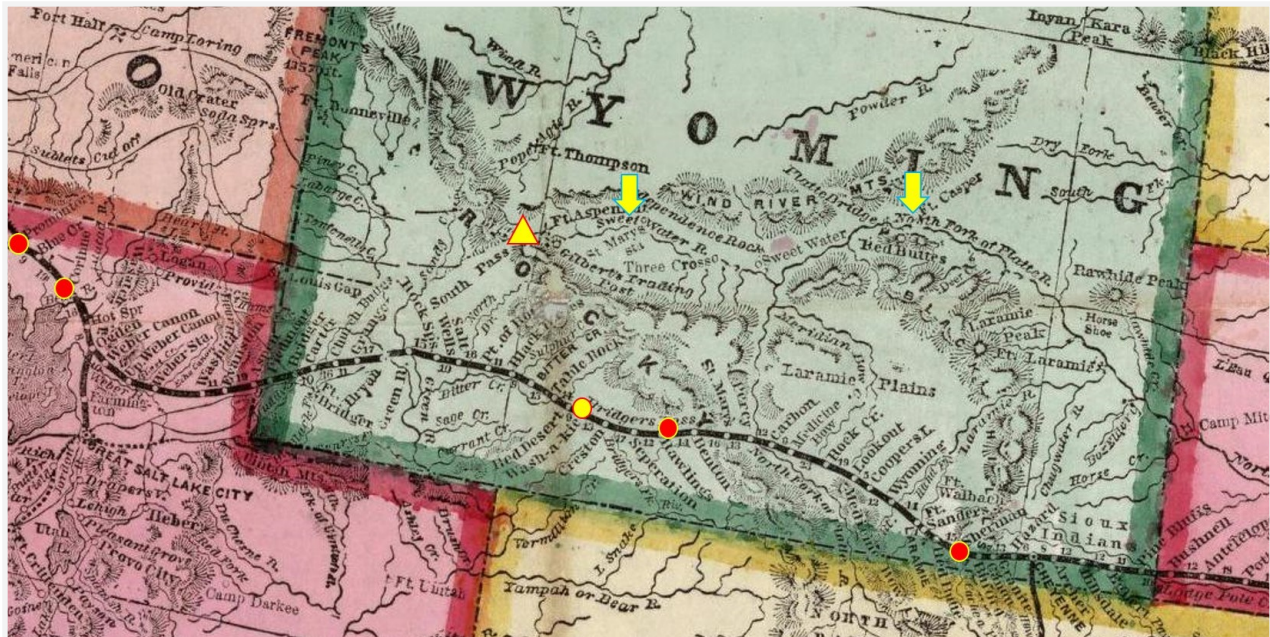
Lastly, it's worth noting that Searls' letters reveal two important facts:

First, although the UPRR and CPRR tracks had been joined on May 10, 1869 there was still considerable work to be done. For example, Mr. Searls noted that over some segments his train didn't run at night and over others it barely crept along during the day. Furthermore, there were some trestles and bridges that were already in need of repairs.

Second, his letters indicate that his UPRR passenger train left Omaha the day after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. His eye witness confirmation of a May 11 departure date belies references that state that regular commercial service didn't begin until May 13 or even May 15 (for example, see Feldman, *U.S. Contract Mail Routes by Railroad*, p. 84 or Brown, "The Transcontinental Railroad", *American Heritage Magazine* 28, February 1977).



"Promontory Trestle Work and Engine No. 2"—1869 photograph by Andrew J. Russell. From the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.



The Union Pacific Railroad in Wyoming Territory

- ◆ On this 1869 map, the heavy black line shows the route of the railroad.
- ◆ The circles represent (from left to right) Promontory Point and Corinne in Utah Territory and Wash-a-kie (in yellow), Rawlins, and Sherman in Wyoming Territory. According to its dateline, the letter that this cover once enclosed was written as the UPRR train passed through Rawlins. It was then left with the station agent in Wash-a-kie.
- ◆ Note that the railroad roughly paralleled the Central Overland Route in Wyoming Territory. The triangle marks South Pass, the left arrow indicates the Sweetwater River, and the right arrow indicates the North Fork of the Platte River. Together, they outline the Great Platte River Road which formed the easternmost segment of the Central Overland Route.
- ◆ Promontory Point and Corinne are highlighted because they refer to another cover in this exhibit—the one that was on the final stagecoach that carried the transcontinental mail.

The famous photograph of the “golden spike” ceremony on May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, U.T. No exhibit about the transcontinental railroad would be complete without it.



TRAIN and FERRY

ALL THE WAY BY STEAM



A March 1870 cover from Salt Lake City, U.T. to San Francisco that was carried over the Sierra Nevada Mountains by the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) on behalf of Wells, Fargo & Co. (which applied Leutzing types 12-3 and 17-4 handstamps to the cover).

The final 30 minutes of the two day journey was on a steam-powered, paddle wheel ferry that crossed San Francisco Bay.

This cover was first carried from Salt Lake City to Ogden, U.T. on the Utah Central Railroad which had only recently been completed in January 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 trans-continental railroad. In Ogden, the cover was handed to the Union Pacific Railroad which carried it 60 miles west to Promontory Point, U.T. where it was transferred to the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR). (The junction between the two railroads had yet to be moved from Promontory Point to Ogden). The cover was then carried over the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the CPRR's *Pacific Express*.

* * *

A passenger train had first crossed the Sierras on June 18, 1868 following the completion of Tunnel No. 5 on August 28 of the previous year. That 1,659 foot “Summit Tunnel” at the Donner Pass (elevation 7,056 ft.) had taken almost five years to build.

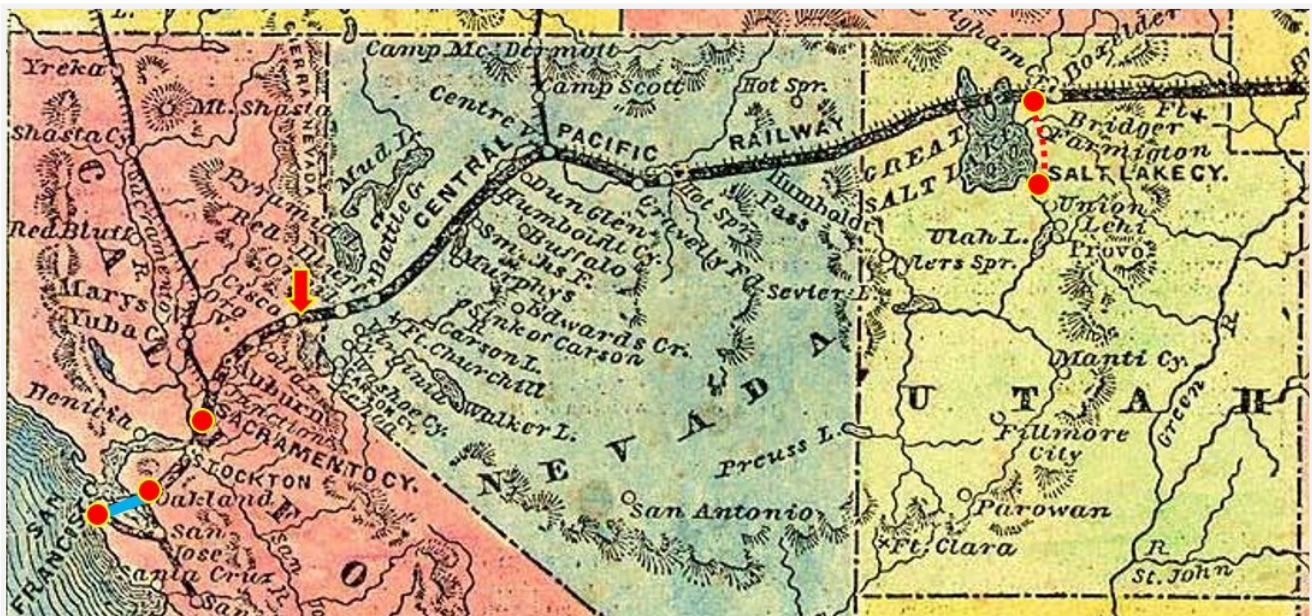
Wells, Fargo & Co. (WFC) had been the exclusive provider of express mail service on the CPRR trains since December 1, 1869. At that time, WFC had purchased the franchise from the Pacific Union Express Company. (The latter had been formed by promoters of the CPRR in order to compete with WFC.) Wells, Fargo—whose stagecoach business was being whittled away by the ever-expanding 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 stagecoach line.

* * *

Despite the fact that the CPRR advertised that it provided “through” train service to San Francisco, at the time that this cover was mailed the tracks from Sacramento ended at Oakland Pier on the eastern side of San Francisco Bay. From there, passengers, freight, and mail were transferred to a paddle wheel steamer for a 30 minute trip across the water to San Francisco. It wasn’t until September 23, 1938 that the train tracks finally reached San Francisco via the new San Francisco -Oakland Bay Bridge. However, in the late 19th century, the freight cars of some trains were ferried across the bay on big, purpose-built steamers.

* * *

In 1870 when this cover was mailed, the trip by train and steamer from Ogden to San Francisco took 47 hours. Today the fastest train between Salt Lake City and San Francisco (which is a somewhat greater distance) takes 17½ hours.



The rail route between Salt Lake City and Oakland in 1869

- ◆ At the far right, the red circles are Ogden, U.T. (upper circle) and Salt Lake City (lower circle). The Utah Central Railroad (dotted red line) runs between them.
- ◆ At the far left, the circles are (from left to right) San Francisco, Oakland, and Sacramento. The latter was the original western terminus of the Central Pacific Railroad which was soon extended first to Alameda and then to Oakland Pier.
- ◆ The passage across San Francisco Bay was by ferry (blue line).
- ◆ The red arrow points to the Donner Pass. Both the pass and the railroad are just north of Lake Tahoe which is seen as a vague blue shape.

SOUTHERN OVERLAND ROUTE

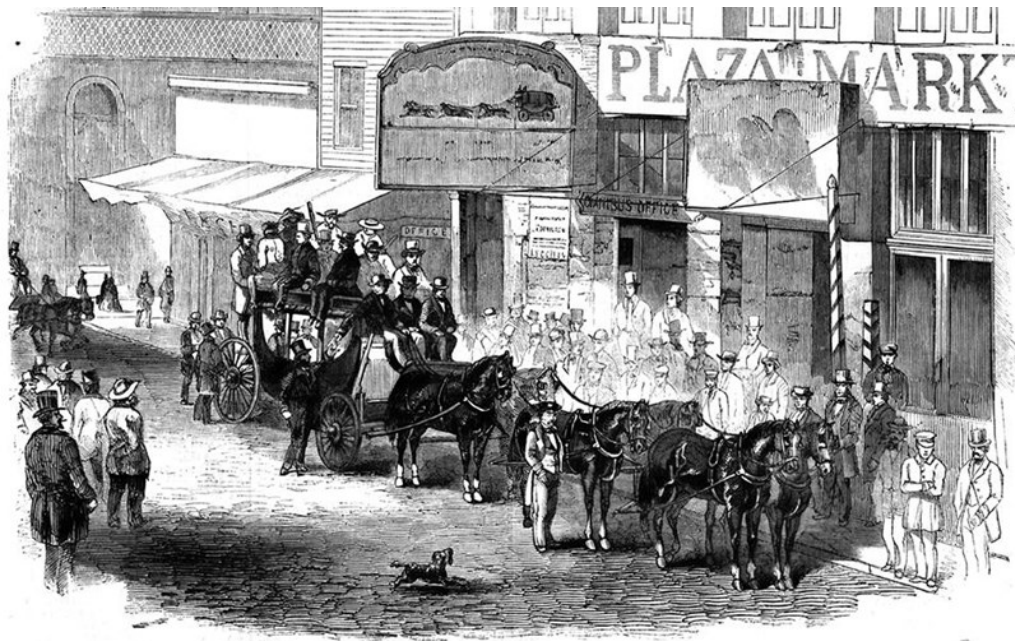
The Southern Overland Route (Route 12,578) is popularly known as the “Butterfield” route because John Butterfield—a Utica, NY businessman with interests in railroads, telegraphs, and banks as well as in stagecoach and freight lines—held the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) contract. His Overland Mail Company (OMC) carried passengers, freight, and mail between San Francisco and both St. Louis and Memphis with the branch point being at Fort Smith, AK. (However, the Pacific Railroad rather than OMC coaches provided the transport over the 160 miles between Tipton, MO and St. Louis.)

Current references (e.g. Frajola and Walske’s *Mails of the Westward Expansion*) list the distance of the stagecoach route as 2,730 miles although on October 18, 1858 a special agent of the USPOD stated the distance was 2,784½ (!) miles. In either case, it was the longest continuous mail route in history—indeed, it was about 600 miles longer than the Central Overland Route. However, the Southern Route had the advantage of being snow-free in winter and thus usable the year round.

Butterfield was paid \$600,000 per year for twice-weekly service (on Mondays and Thursdays) from each terminus. The trips were to be completed in 25 days or less. At that time, it was the biggest overland mail contract that had ever been awarded by the USPOD. However, expenses were also high: the OMC employed more than 800 people, maintained 139 stage stations, kept 1,800 horses and mules, and had at least 100 Concord stagecoaches and 150 stage wagons (a.k.a. “celerity” or “mud” wagons). In addition, the OMC built bridges and undertook other capital projects to improve the route.

* * *

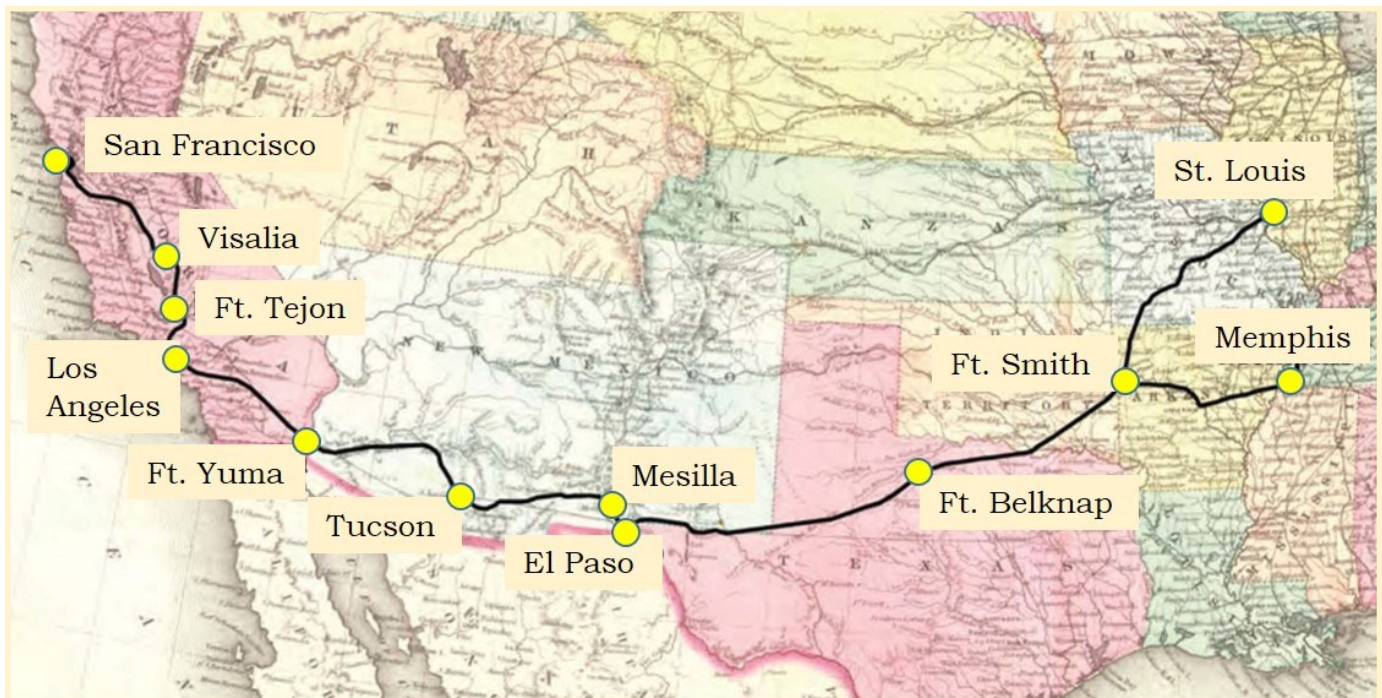
Passengers could get an idea of what to expect by perusing the list of travel supplies that were recommended by the *San Francisco Bulletin*. Those supplies included “one Sharp's rifle and a hundred cartridges, one Colt's Navy revolver and two pounds of balls, and a knife with a sheath.”



THE OVERLAND MAIL STARTING FROM SAN FRANCISCO FOR THE EAST.—[FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.]

Significant dates for the Southern Overland Route included:

- ♦ *September 15, 1858*—the first OMC stagecoach left San Francisco.
- ♦ *September 16, 1858*—the first stagecoach left St. Louis.
- ♦ *December 17, 1859*—the route became the “default” one for transcontinental mail, replacing the ocean route. (Notice was received in California on January 20, 1860 and implemented on January 23.)
- ♦ *February 18, 1861*—Union forts in Texas were surrendered, ending the protection of OMC assets from Confederates and Indians.
- ♦ *March 2, 1861*—the Post Office Department appropriation bill discontinued the Southern Overland Route and moved the OMC’s contract to the Central Overland Route.
- ♦ *March 21, 1861*—the final westbound stagecoach left St. Louis.
- ♦ *April 1, 1861*—the final eastbound stagecoach left San Francisco.
- ♦ *April 13, 1861*—the final westbound stagecoach arrived in San Francisco.
- ♦ *May 1, 1861*—the final eastbound stagecoach arrived in St. Louis.
- ♦ *July 1, 1861*—the OMC began “daily” transcontinental service on the Central Overland Route which became the new “default” route for transcontinental mail.



The Southern Overland Route



A circa 1857-60 stagecoach "corner card" envelope with a patriotic motif (flags on the horses' heads). These envelopes also bore a printed directive to the Post Office Department to use a particular route—in this case the Southern Overland one. Most of these "stagecoach" envelopes were used from large towns. This use from Woodside, CA—a small town at the time (and much later the home of Steve Jobs)—is rare. Pictured in Coburn's *Letters of Gold* (p. 246). PF certificate 277104 (1993). Ex Polland and Vincent.

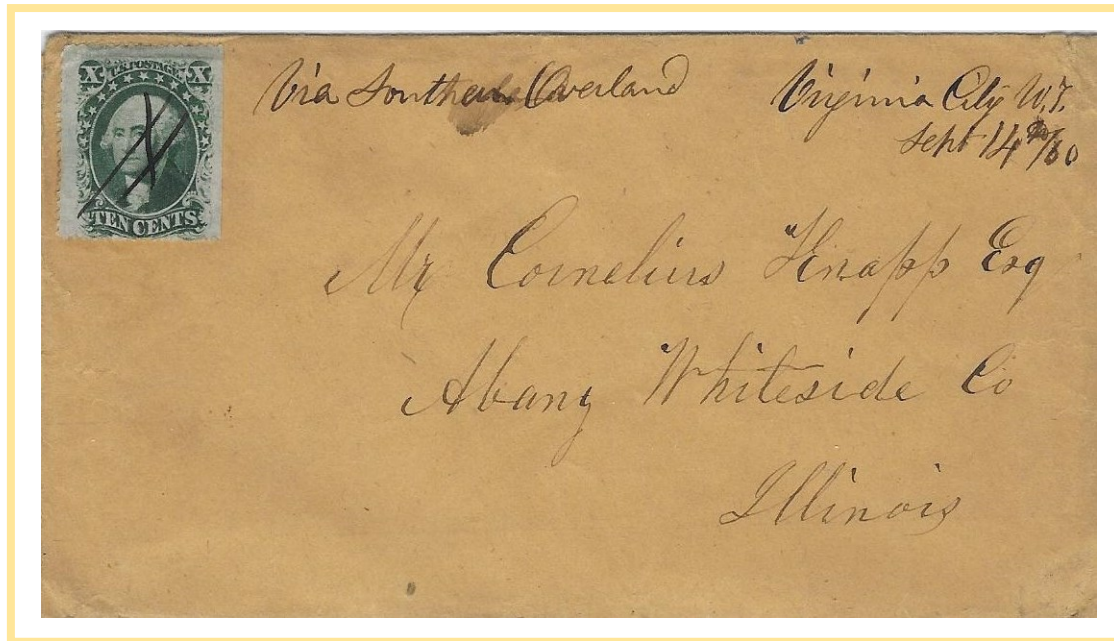


A circa 1857-60 train propaganda "corner card" envelope. The corner card not only specified the Southern Overland Route but also lobbied for the completion of the transcontinental railroad which, somewhat ironically, roughly followed the Central Overland Route, not the Southern one. D'Alessandris recorded only three examples of this design (Type A-1). This example from Petaluma is unique. Ex Salzer and Oakley.

STAGECOACH

WEST THEN EAST

A Rare Use on Both the Central and Southern Routes



A September 14, 1860 cover to Albany, IL that was carried westward from Virginia City, Utah Territory to Placerville, CA on the Central Overland Route. From Placerville, it was taken to San Francisco where it was transferred to the Overland Mail Company (OMC) which carried it eastward to St. Louis on the Southern Overland Route.

No more than six covers have been recorded that were carried on both the Southern and the Central routes.

Signed by Frajola. Ex Gamett.

Ordinarily, this cover from Utah Territory to Illinois would have been sent eastward to St. Joseph, MO on the Central Overland Route. That's because that route was the shortest one to Illinois. And perhaps more to the point, it was also the "default" route for transcontinental mail from Utah Territory. So why was this cover endorsed by the Virginia City postmaster to be sent by the "Southern Overland (Route)" which required that it first be sent *westward* to San Francisco? The answer most likely involved the following factors:

- ♦ In 1860 Virginia City was on its way to becoming the second largest city in the West. But despite that fact, the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD)—in an effort to reduce the cost of the contract—had reduced the service on the Central Overland Route from weekly to semi-monthly. That meant that an eastbound letter from Virginia City (such as the present one) might have waited as long as a fortnight to be picked up by an eastbound stagecoach of the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (COC&PPE) which in 1860 held the contract for the entire Central Overland Route.

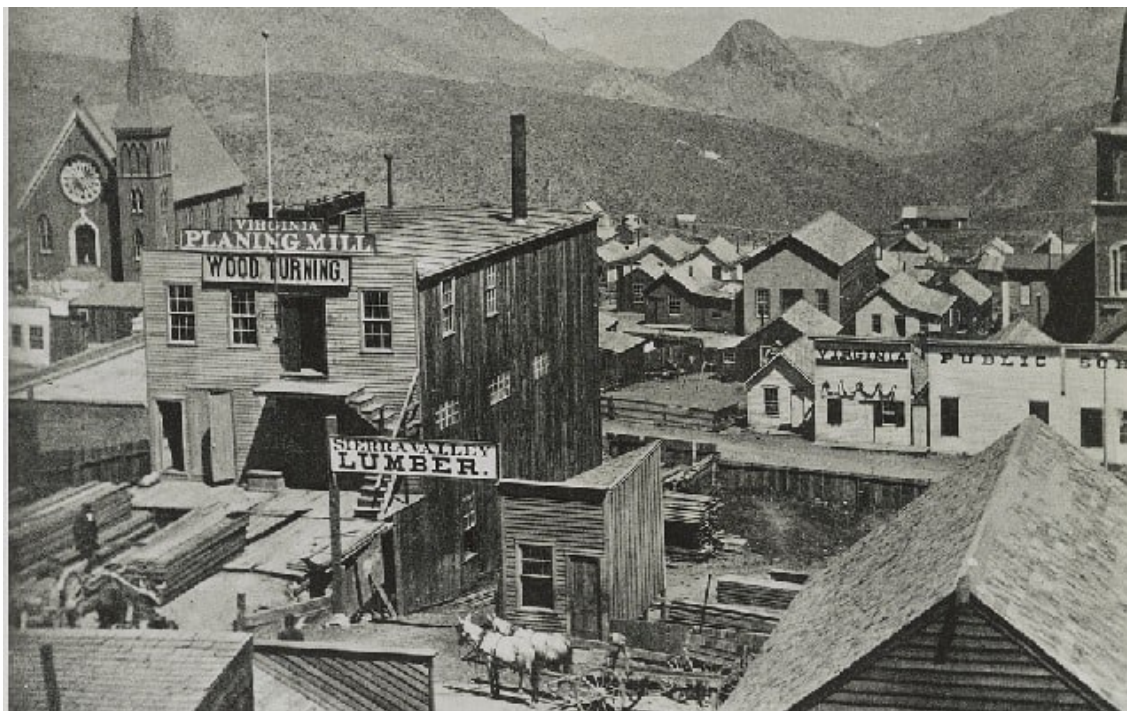
- ♦ In 1860 John Butterfield's Overland Mail Company (OMC) was carrying the mail *twice a week* from San Francisco to St. Louis on the Southern Overland Route. That meant that, despite the added distance, this cover might have reached its destination sooner by taking that route.
- ♦ On September 6, 1860—eight days before this cover was posted—the Pioneer Stage Company (PSC) initiated *daily* stagecoach service between Virginia City and Sacramento with a “through” connection to San Francisco (see: *Sacramento Daily Union*, September 14, 1860). That was clearly a strong incentive for the Virginia City postmaster to give the PSC a temporary contract. Although contemporary newspapers don't document such a contract, they do document ample precedent for it: according to the October 18, 1859 edition of the *Sacramento Daily Union*, the Placerville postmaster had paid the PSC to carry the mail between Placerville and Salt Lake City when the agents of the regular contractor—George Chorpenning—had failed to call for the mail on October 15.

Everything considered, it seems likely that the Virginia City postmaster gave this letter to either a semi-monthly westbound COC&PPE stagecoach that was fortuitously passing through at that time or else he gave it to a daily westbound PSC coach. In either case, the letter was taken to San Francisco via Carson City, Placerville, and Folsom and then put on one of the twice-weekly OMC stages to St. Louis.

* * *

Celerity was one of the three “star” virtues that the USPOD demanded of its contractors. Therefore, the Virginia City postmaster could justify this unusual routing if it was faster than waiting up to two weeks for a COC&PPE stagecoach that was eastbound on the Central Overland Route.

However, both the opportunity and the need for this unusual routing came and went in only a year: in 1861, the Southern Overland Route was abandoned and service on the Central Overland Route was increased to six days a week.



Virginia City in 1866

(Library of Congress collection)

STAGECOACH

ACROSS THE COUNTRY AT A BARGAIN RATE



An 1857-60 cover from Sonoma, CA to St. Louis that is endorsed "Via Southern Overland Mail" and franked with a 3¢ stamp that paid the under 3,000 mile rate. However, a postal clerk marked the cover "Due 7" in order to make up the rest of the 10¢ rate for over 3,000 miles. That marking was crossed out by a subsequent clerk who recognized that although the cover had crossed the Rocky Mountains—and, indeed, more than half of the country—it still had traveled less than 3,000 miles.

This is perhaps a unique example of the scarce 3¢ "over the mountains" rate that shows the uncertainty involved in "close calls" with regard to the distance traveled.

Ex Arnold and Risvold.

As of April 1, 1855, a "single weight" letter (i.e. one-half ounce or less) was charged 3¢ if it was carried no more than 3,000 miles and 10¢ if it was carried beyond that distance. Therefore, when Butterfield's Overland Mail Company made its first trip on the Southern Overland Route (Route 12,578) on September 15, 1858, it cost only 3¢ to send a letter between its two main terminals—St. Louis and San Francisco—because the distance between them was a couple of hundred miles shy of 3,000 miles. However, the problem of "close calls" could arise when a letter that was carried the length of the route was posted or delivered just beyond one of the terminals. Complicating the problem was the fact that the Post Office Department calculated the rate on the basis of the actual distance that the letter traveled rather than the straight-line distance between two points on a map.

Although Sonoma is north of San Francisco, the length of the postal road between them was short enough for this cover to still qualify for the under 3,000 mile rate.

The bargain rate of 3¢ for many transcontinental letters ended on February 27, 1861 when a new rate of 10¢ was instituted for any letter that crossed the Rocky Mountains.

* * *

This letter is addressed to the National Telegraph Company which was the leading telegraph company in St. Louis. Some of the letters that were carried by the OMC and destined for the East Coast were addressed to the National Telegraph Company so that they could be sent onward from St. Louis by telegraph, thus saving several days of transit. In this case, an agent of the Associated Press was stationed at that telegraph office in order to relay news to New York that arrived from the West Coast via OMC stagecoaches.

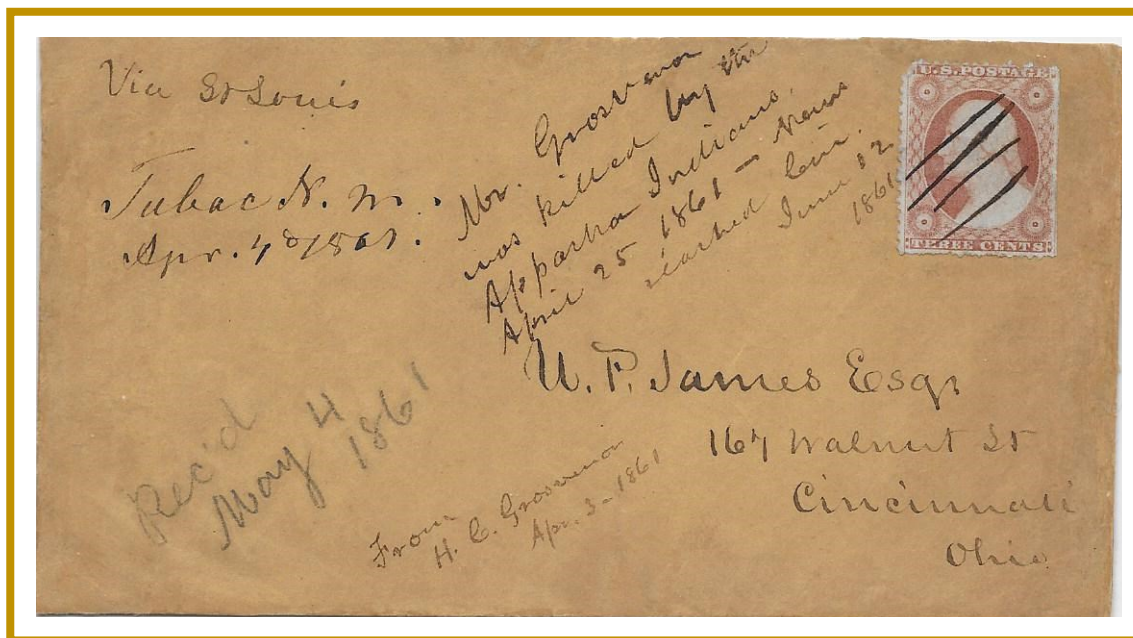


An 1860 photograph of one of Butterfield's Overland Mail Company coaches as it passed through Temecula, CA.

BUCKBOARD and STAGECOACH

“KILLED BY THE APPACHA INDIANS”

The Final Trip on the “Butterfield” Route



An April 4, 1861 letter from Tubac, Arizona Territory to Cincinnati, OH that was carried by buckboard from Tubac to Tucson where it was put on the Overland Mail Company (OMC) stagecoach to St. Louis, as per the endorsement. Contemporary docketing recorded the fact that the sender, a mining company official, had been killed by Apache Indians while this letter was in transit.

This is a rare post-secession use from Arizona Territory and the only one from Tubac. (Most are from Mesilla.)

This is also the only recorded cover that was carried on the OMC's final trip on the Southern Overland ("Butterfield") Route.

With a note from Frajola. Ex Birkinbine.

Because Tubac was not on a Post Office Department mail route, in 1859 the Tubac postmaster contracted with S. H. Lathrop of the Sonora Exploration and Mining Co. to carry mail on weekly buckboard trips between Tubac and Tucson, a distance of approximately 45 miles. This cover would have left Tubac with Lathrop on April 5 and arrived in Tucson on the same day.

In Tucson, this letter was picked up on or after April 9 by the Overland Mail Company (OMC) stagecoach that had left San Francisco on April 1. That final trip of the OMC on the Southern Overland Route arrived in St. Louis on May 1 (see: Walske and Frajola, *Mails of the Westward Expansion*, pp. 171 and 302).

From St. Louis, this cover would have been carried by ferry across the Mississippi River to the East St. Louis (Illinoistown) terminal of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad. (There was no railroad bridge between those two towns until 1874 when the Eads Bridge opened.) The route to Cincinnati was 341 book miles and there were two trains a day. Therefore, it would have taken only a day or two for this cover to reach the Cincinnati post office once it left St. Louis. According to docketing on the front of the cover, the addressee picked it up in Cincinnati on May 4.

* * *

The evidence for this cover being carried on the final OMC trip from San Francisco is as follows:

- ♦ The April 5, 1861 edition of the *San Francisco Bulletin* noted that “the Overland Mail by the Butterfield route did not leave this city today for St. Louis, as usual and will be discontinued hereafter.” Furthermore, the *Sacramento Daily Union* from that same date noted that the final Butterfield coach had left “on Monday”—which was April 1.
- ♦ The mail that left San Francisco on April 1 arrived in St. Louis on May 1 (see above). That arrival date in St. Louis is entirely consistent with the docketing that indicates that the cover was picked up at the Cincinnati post office on May 4.
- ♦ The immediately prior mail trip left San Francisco on March 26 (see: Walske and Frajola, p. 302, and also the “Letter from St. Louis” dated May 1 and published in the *Daily Alta California* on May 16). That OMC trip would have arrived in St. Louis on or very shortly after April 25. Given that arrival date, this cover should have been retrieved from the Cincinnati post office well before May 4 if it had been carried on that penultimate trip.
- ♦ Although the author of the May 1 “Letter from St. Louis” speculated that after the March 26 trip from San Francisco, the transcontinental mail had been carried via Los Angeles, San Diego, San Antonio, Galveston, and New Orleans (Route 8,076), that seems all but impossible. That’s because the first trip under George Giddings’ new contract for that route passed through Mesilla on April 18, 1861—and that was a *westbound* trip from San Antonio (see: *New York Times* of July 12, 1861 which quotes the *Mesilla Times* of May 17). Therefore, no cover that was carried by Giddings could have reached Cincinnati by May 4. Furthermore, the OMC coach that left San Francisco on April 1 would have passed through Tucson to pick up this cover long before one of Giddings’ eastbound riders did.
- ♦ Lastly, R. McP. Cabeen opined that letters taken as far as Tucson on the Butterfield route during the last few weeks before its official discontinuation were unable to get through and were returned to the West Coast. From there, he believed that they were sent to St. Louis via the Central Overland Route or via Panama. (See: *Chronicle* 38, 1961, p. 3.) However, the total transit time of this cover of less than a month makes Cabeen’s theory impossible and, indeed (and as I have already noted), Walske and Frajola found documentation that the final mail trip on the Southern Overland Route reached St. Louis on May 1.

* * *

Additional docketing on the front of the cover reads:

From H.C. Grosvenor Apr. 3 -1861 / Mr. Grosvenor was killed by the Appacha (sic) Indians April 25, 1861—Never reached Cin(cinnati) / June 12, 1862

June 12, 1862 was undoubtedly when the note about Mr. Grosvenor’s death was written and is probably when the news reached the addressee. All of the docketing is in the same handwriting.

The *San Francisco Bulletin* of June 25, 1861 provided the details:

"Intelligence afterwards reached us of a massacre that occurred on the same day near the Santa Rita Silver Mines, some eight miles from Tubac. The mining company had sent a team to Tubac for supplies, which started out from town with its load on the morning of the 25th, under the charge of two Mexicans. The company's book-keeper, who had superintended the purchase, after seeing the wagon off returned home by a bridle trail, some five miles shorter than the wagon road. As the hour for the arrival of the wagon passed without its appearance, the director became uneasy, and some time having been suffered to elapse, he started down the road afoot to see if anything had happened. He did not return, and as his absence was protracted, the company's engineer followed, taking some of the men with him. They found the body of their lamented agent lying in the road, some two miles from the hacienda, bearing too strong proofs of having been massacred by Indians lying in ambush. The gathering shades of night prevented their further investigation at that time, and observing that the wagon was only a few hundred yards off, with the mules detached and gone, they deemed it imprudent to advance to it, lest the savages were still lurking there in ambush for further victims. They therefore silently bore the inanimate body of the fallen agent, Horace C. Grosvenor, to the house, and sent a messenger to Tubac with the sad tidings and a request for assistance. The bodies of the two Mexicans were discovered by the messenger lying beside the wagon. They had evidently been killed before the appearance of Mr. Grosvenor, and the Indians must have perceived him at a distance, and placed their ambuscade while he was ascending a hill. The bodies were buried on the following day.

Mr. Grosvenor had been in the interest of the Santa Rita Silver Mining Company for nearly three years, and was untiring in his efforts to promote the objects of the Company. His family reside in Cincinnati, where he is widely and extensively known as an excellent engraver on wood, and an upright man. His loss will be deeply deplored by those who knew him and appreciated him for his sterling worth."

OFFICE SONORA E. & MINING CO. }
Tubac, February 25th, 1859. }
UNTIL THE POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
commence regular mail service on the route, a
mail will be sent from this office Friday of each
week to Tucson, to connect with the mail of the
Overland Mail Co., both East and West. A mail
will be received at the office on Sunday of each
week.
S. H. LATHROP,
Treasurer.

Above: A notice from the Weekly Arizonian from March 3, 1859. Below: A buckboard wagon of the type that Lathrop might have used. The term "buckboard" refers to the front board that protects the driver from the rear hooves of the horse if it bucks. (Image from the Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop.)



SANTA FE TRAIL

The Santa Fe Trail ran approximately 900 miles between Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory and Independence, MO (or later Kansas City, KS). The route had two branches: the Mountain Branch and the Cimarron Cut-Off. The latter was not only agreeably flat for wagon travel, it was also 100 miles shorter and up to 10 days quicker. The downside was that it was a magnet for attacks by Plains Indians. Furthermore, there was a 90 mile stretch—the Cimarron Desert—that was so lacking in water and in anything edible for people or mules that the Mexicans had dubbed it the “*Jornada del Muerte*” or the “Journey of Death.” Nevertheless, the Cimarron Cut-Off was used to carry the U.S. Mail for more than a decade because the Mountain Route was too rugged for a mail wagon.

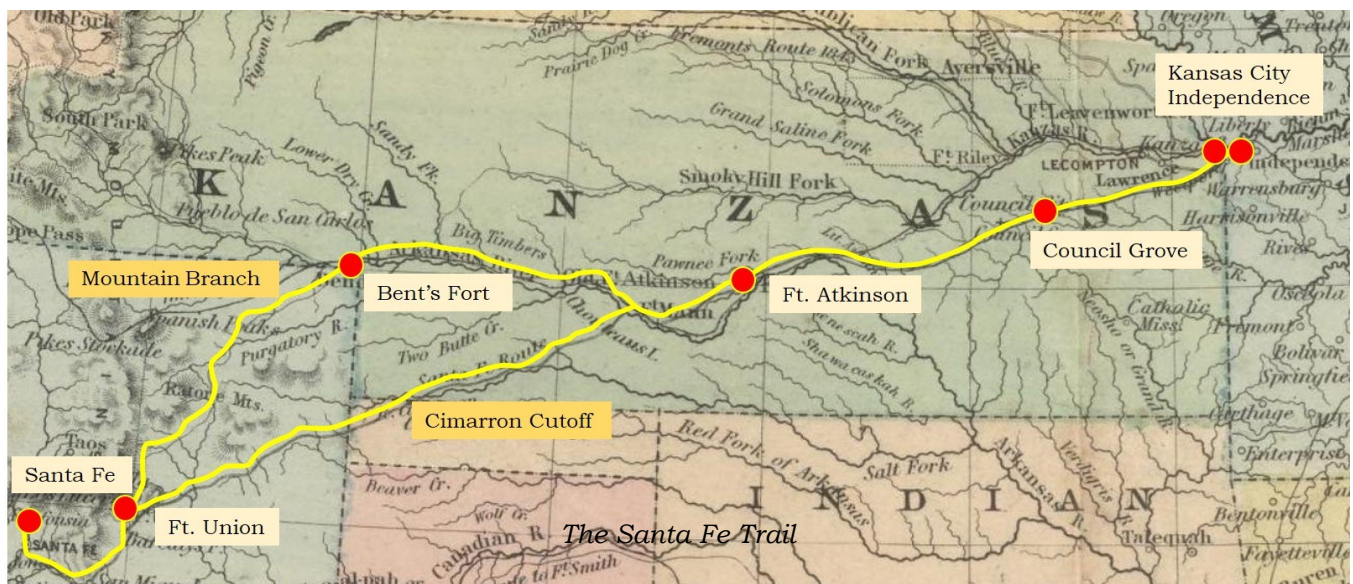
* * *

The first U.S. Post Office Department contract to carry the mail on the Santa Fe Trail (Route 4,888) was awarded to Waldo, Hall & Co. who held that contract from July 1, 1850 to June 30, 1854. They were paid \$18,000 a year for monthly mail service from each of the terminals in 29 days or less. It was the first government contract for the use of stagecoaches to carry mail into the West. (Samuel Woodson’s contract for mail service between Independence and Salt Lake City began on the same date, but Woodson used pack animals.)

* * *

Significant years for the Santa Fe Trail mail route included:

- ♦ 1861—the mail route was changed to the much-improved Mountain Branch. An important stop was Bent’s Fort which also had connections to Denver.
- ♦ 1863—the eastern terminus of the route was moved slightly westward to Kansas City, KS.
- ♦ 1882—the mail contract was transferred to the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad which had linked up with the Southern Pacific Railroad the year before, thus creating a second trans-continental railroad. That was the end of stagecoaches carrying the mail between the Missouri River and the West.



JERSEY or DEARBORN WAGON

AN EARLY “SUV”



A June 1852 cover from Annapolis, MD to Fort Union, New Mexico Territory that was sent “Via Independence Missouri” and then forwarded back to Annapolis on September 3, 1852 with a Fort Union postal marking (Type I) and a “frd. 5” notation. It was carried by Waldo, Hall & Co. in mule-drawn Jersey or Dearborn wagons in both directions on the Cimarron Cut-Off of the Santa Fe Trail.

This cover bears a particularly early postal marking from Fort Union. (The earliest is also from 1852 although it is possible that that marking was actually applied by the addressee.)

Signed by Frajola and with his certificate. Ex Simpson, Dike, Shipley, and Craveri.

Waldo and Hall’s contract called for them to carry the mail in wagons that had elliptical springs and iron axles. That meant that they didn’t have to buy expensive Concord coaches that had leather thorough braces rather than springs. Instead, they used the utilitarian Jersey or Dearborn wagons that were favored by Santa Fe traders, merchants, and peddlers.

Jersey and Dearborn wagons were very similar: they were both light-weight, carry-all vehicles that had an upright post in each corner that supported roll-up side curtains and a flat canvas roof. (The roof canvas could also be stretched over bent wood supports in order to create a “mini” covered wagon.) A typical wagon had two to four moveable plank seats. Although a Jersey or Dearborn wagon could be pulled by a single animal, Waldo and Hall used teams of four or six mules for greater speed in “Indian country.”

The stations on the Cimarron Cut-Off were among the most widely-spaced on any stage route in the West: in the 11 years that the mail stages used that route, the interval between stations was never less than 375 miles. That meant that the mail teams had to stop at night so that people and

mules could rest. It also meant that they had to carry food, fuel for campfires, and fodder for the animals. For that reason, the mail team usually included a wagon that carried only provisions. Furthermore, on many trips, there were separate wagons for passengers and their baggage.

* * *

Fort Union was opened in July 1851 in order to keep the Indians at bay along the Santa Fe Trail and to protect emigrant wagon trains. However, prior to 1857 the Army didn't routinely escort the mail teams, so Waldo and Hall had to supply their own guards. Although they initially employed as many as eight, they could eventually afford only three or four. Nevertheless, all of their guards were all well-armed and together could fire 50 rounds before they had to reload.



A Jersey wagon that was used by Wells, Fargo & Co. A Dearborn wagon had a similar appearance. Both kinds of wagons were widely used because they were practical, respectable, and relatively cheap—much like a basic SUV today.

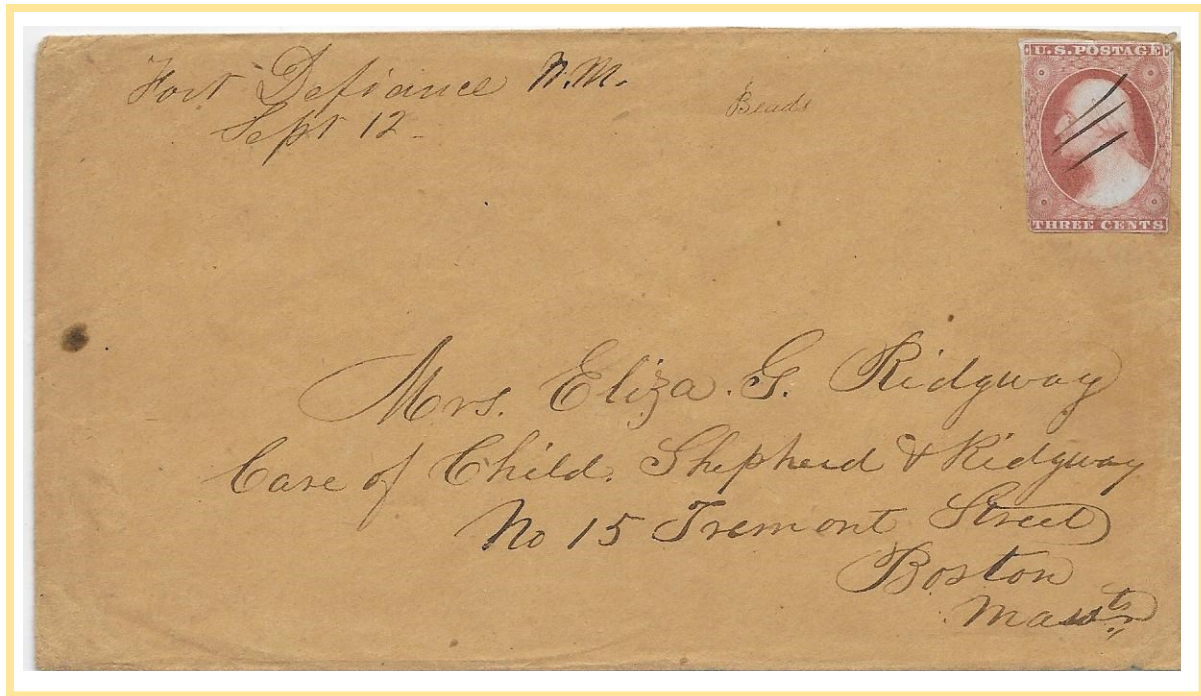
“Covered” Jersey or Dearborn wagons were very popular with the emigrants who settled the West.



STAGECOACH

WITH AN ARMY GUARD

The Earliest Postal Marking from Fort Defiance



A September 12, 1857 cover that was carried approximately 175 miles from Fort Defiance in New Mexico Territory to Albuquerque by a military courier. From there a local stage line took it 65 miles to Santa Fe where it was put on the stagecoach to Independence, MO. That stagecoach, which was operated under the Hall-Hockaday contract, was among the very first to be escorted by soldiers from Fort Union under a new policy of using the Army to protect the mail teams from Indians on the Cimarron Cut-Off.

This is the earliest recorded postal marking from Fort Defiance. It's also the finest of the few recorded manuscript postmarks from that fort.

Pictured in Western Express 62, September 2012, (p. 32). Ex Dike, Everett, and Birkinbine.

Fort Defiance, which was established on September 18, 1851, was the first military post in what is now Arizona but was then part of New Mexico Territory. The fort was built on valuable grazing land that had been used by the Navajo Indians until they were banished from it by the Army. As a result, the fort was subjected to frequent attacks by the Navajo, including massive ones in 1856 and 1860. In 1861 at the start of the Civil War, Fort Defiance was abandoned, but in 1863 it was reestablished as Fort Canby.

The fort had a post office from April 9, 1856 to October 21, 1863. However, it was never served by a U.S. Post Office Department route. Therefore, a military courier took this cover to Albuquerque

where it was put on a mail stage to Santa Fe. It was then carried to Independence, MO on the Santa Fe Trail.

* * *

From July 1, 1854 to June 30, 1858, the contract for mail service between Santa Fe and Independence was held by Jacob Hall and John Hockaday. (At that time the route number was changed from 4,888 to 8,912.) Their contract called for the trips to be completed in six-mule stagecoaches in no more than 25 days. That was four days shorter than the previous contract that had been held by Waldo and Hall. Hall and Hockaday's trips were initially monthly but on July 1, 1857 they were increased to twice-monthly with the coaches leaving each terminus on the 1st and the 15th of each month. At the same time, the annual compensation was increased from \$10,990 to \$33,000.

* * *

Indian attacks on the mail parties on the Cimarron Cut-Off finally became so frequent that in September 1857 Fort Union began to provide armed escorts for all of the mail trips. Prior to that, the mail contractors had usually supplied their own protection. The military escorts used mule-drawn wagons because mounted soldiers were considered to be too exposed (think "Custer's Last Stand") and the wagons themselves could provide cover. Furthermore, the Cimarron Cut-Off had very little grass for cavalry horses.

This cover was carried on the first or second east-bound trip that had an Army escort.

* * *

The 1857 attribution of this cover is based on the dates of other letters from this correspondence which range from September 1857 to June or July 1858 (see: Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, sale 1189, p. 48).



Fort Defiance around 1873 from a painting by Seth Eastman

FORT YUMA MAIL

Fort Yuma was established in 1852 at the only location (Yuma Crossing) within 200 miles where the Colorado River could be crossed. As such, the fort guarded the most important emigrant trail into southern California and from 1858-61 it was also a major stagecoach stop on the Southern Overland Route. During the Civil War, the fort was the staging area for the Union Army's invasion of Confederate Arizona. During the subsequent Indian War period, it was the main military supply depot for the southwestern United States. However, when the Southern Pacific Railroad finally reached it in 1877, the fort's days became numbered: with the development of a regional railroad network, there was no longer a need for a depot that stored six months' worth of supplies for military installations throughout the far West.

Despite the fort's importance, supplying and communicating with it were initially quite difficult on account of its isolated location in the extreme southeastern corner of California. Steep mountains, arid deserts, and hostile Indians stood between the fort and the more settled portions of the state, including the important port cities of San Diego and Los Angeles.

* * *

Joseph Swycaffer, who carried mail to and from Fort Yuma from 1855 to 1857, described it in the following manner:

It was a death trap to many a soldier. It was one of the most forbidding and desolate places at that time on the continent of America: there was no rest for the wicked and no peace for the righteous. The red men were always on the alert to surprise the camp and murder the occupants. The soldiers were always on duty and slept on their arms, if sleep they could, with the thermometer ranging anywhere from 112 to 132 degrees."

See: J.M. Guinn, *A History of California and an Extended History of Its Southern Coast Counties*, Vol 2., Los Angeles, Historic Record Company, 1907, pp. 1719-1720.)

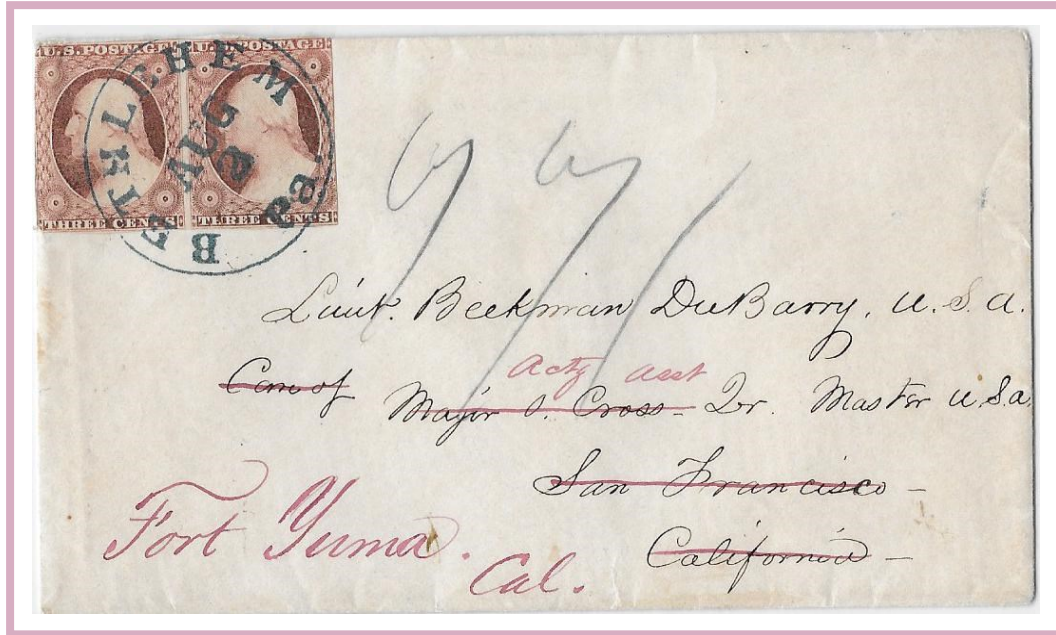


Fort Yuma in 1875

The fort is in the distance on a mesa. In front of it is the Colorado River with a steamboat. The tall masts on either side of the river are the "gin cranes" of the cable ferry. The ferry itself is just visible beyond the canvas top of a wagon next to the river. Just beyond the horses in the left foreground is a low building. We know that it's a saloon because in another version of this drawing, two men are emerging from it and holding bottles aloft.

STEAM, SAIL, and STEAM AGAIN

AN ALL-WATER ROUTE TO THE DESERT



An 1854 cover to a soldier at Fort Yuma, CA that originated in Bethlehem, PA and that was carried from San Francisco to the Colorado River via a military "all water" route to the desert.

This is the finer of the two recorded examples of this unusual and important use.

*Pictured and discussed in Walske and Frajola's Mails of the Westward Expansion (p. 158).
Signed by Frajola. Ex Walske.*

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 on August 5 and arrived in Aspinwall, Panama on August 15. After crossing the Isthmus by stage coach and steamboat, it was put on the PMSC steamer *Sonora* to San Francisco, the headquarters of the Army of the Pacific which administered military operations in the far West. Shortly after this cover's arrival in San Francisco on August 31, a post office clerk placed it in the box of the Army Quartermaster as indicated by the penciled box number on the envelope.

Because the addressee, Lieutenant Beekman DuBarry, had been assigned to Fort Yuma in June of that year, the Quartermaster readdressed the cover in the red ink that was typically used by the military at that time.

A steamship of the California Steam Navigation Company then carried this cover to San Diego where the main supply depot for Fort Yuma was located. However, contemporary newspapers indicate that, prior to 1857, schooners rather than steamships carried military supplies from San Diego to the Colorado River. That was because steamships carried and consumed prodigious

amounts of coal which took up much of the cargo space and made the ships more expensive to run. Furthermore, the winds around the California Baja peninsula were usually favorable for sail ships.

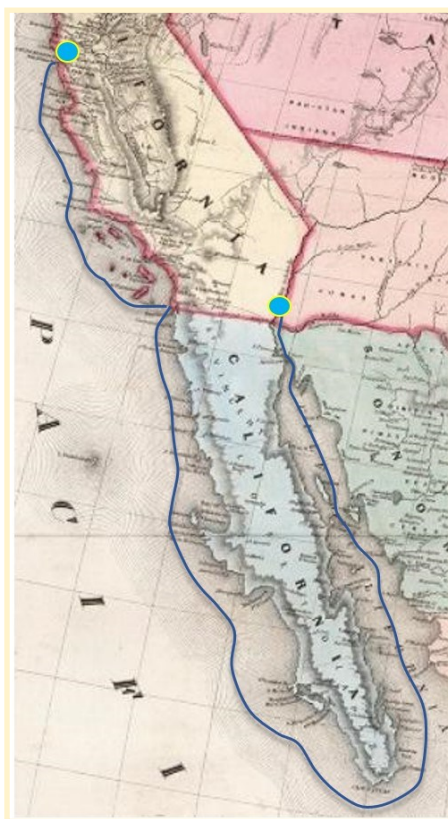
It's likely that this cover was carried up the Colorado River to Fort Yuma by the *General Jesup*, the most advanced cargo vessel on the river at that time. That 60 ton, side-wheeler steamboat had an unusually thick bottom and shallow draft and had been built specifically for the tricky currents and the shifting sandbars of the river. Although the boat's boiler had exploded on August 26, this cover wouldn't have reached the mouth of the Colorado River before the second half of November which is when the *General Jesup* returned to service. Keep in mind that the Army Quartermaster didn't receive this cover until early September and that he put it on a steamer that departed from San Francisco only once or twice a month. Furthermore, the more than 1,900 mile journey from that city to the mouth of the Colorado River usually took more than two months.

The alternative to the *General Jesup* was a barge that was loaded with military supplies and that was towed upriver by small steamboats that were owned by George A. Johnson who also owned the *General Jesup*. (Johnson had a near-monopoly on Colorado River transport at that time.)

Although an overland route from San Diego to Fort Yuma existed, it was rarely used at that time by the military. That's because, in the absence of a road, the mountains and desert were a severe challenge for the heavily-laden wheeled vehicles that moved military supplies. And perhaps more to the point, the land route cost the Army \$700 per ton as opposed to only \$100 per ton for the all-water one.

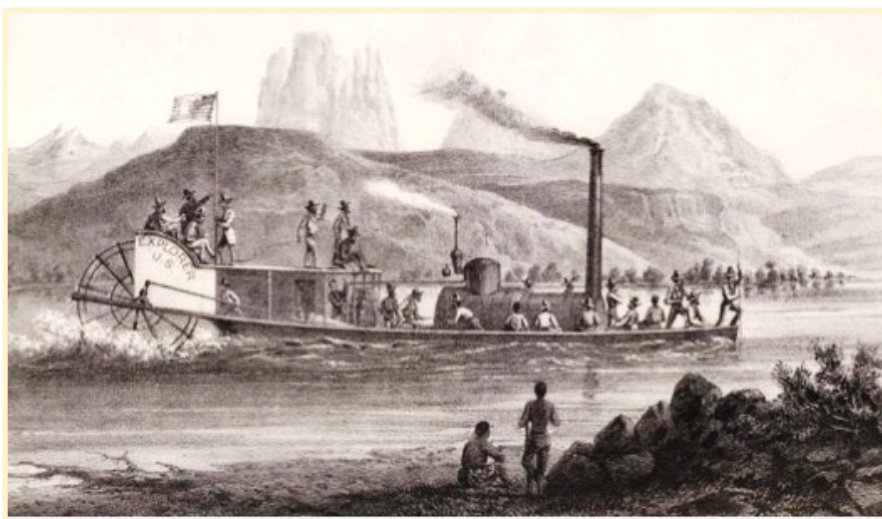
* * *

The 1854 date of this August cover was deduced from the fact that Lt. DuBarry was assigned to Fort Yuma from June 1854 to July 1856 and the fact that the "over 3,000 miles" rate was increased from 6¢ to 10¢ on April 1, 1855.



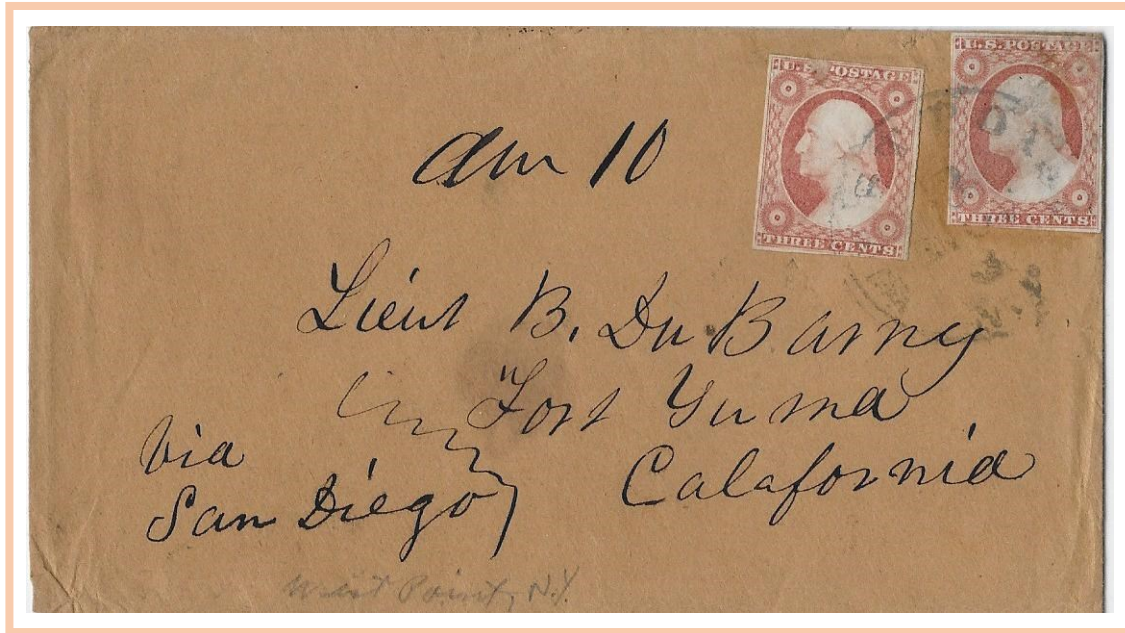
Left: The military all-water route from San Francisco (upper circle) to the Colorado River (lower circle) via San Diego.

Below: A print of the steamboat *Explorer* that, like the *General Jesup*, plied the Colorado River during the mid-1850s but, unlike the *General Jesup*, was a stern-wheeler rather than a side-wheeler. It illustrates the primitive nature of Colorado River steamboats during that time period, particularly in comparison to their Mississippi River cousins.



MULEBACK

THE “DESERT DISPATCH”



A November 3, 1855 cover from West Point, NY that was carried by the Desert Dispatch on mule back from San Diego to Fort Yuma on the first regular mail route to Fort Yuma.

There are nine recorded examples of this Desert Dispatch use which is often confused with the later “Jackass Mail” service of James Birch.

Signed by Frajola. Ex Vogel.

Like the previous cover, this one was transported from New York City to San Francisco via Panama. And once again, the California Steam Navigation Company carried it to San Diego, only this time it was under a U.S. Post Office Department contract rather than a military one. However, in San Diego the cover left the U.S. Mail when it was transferred to the Desert Dispatch service.

The Desert Dispatch was established by two former Army teamsters, Samuel Warnock and Joseph Swycaffer. They contracted with the Army to operate an express mail service between San Diego and Fort Yuma, a distance of approximately 170 miles. Beyond that, reliable information about the Desert Dispatch is hard to come by. For example, the *Western Express* published only one article about it between 1954 and 2019. That article by Oscar Thomas—which incorporated the research of James Blaine who examined some important primary sources—indicated that the service operated from 1855 to 1857 (see: *Western Express* 261, September 2016, p. 49).

Further details are largely unverified. The most popular version is that twice each month, one of the partners started eastward from Old Town in San Diego while the other started westward from Fort Yuma. They met somewhere “in the middle” where they exchanged their mail bags and then

turned around. Each rode on a mule because—in the absence of a road—that was the best way of crossing the rugged mountains east of San Diego and the arid and nearly grassless Colorado Desert.

Their route probably followed the Tijuana River southward from San Diego into Mexico and then continued eastward for about 40 miles before re-entering California near the town of Campo. It then crossed the high mountain ridges at the Jacumba Pass which is near Mountain Springs. That pass provided the only route through the mountains south of Warner's Pass which was well off the line between San Diego and Fort Yuma. Even then, the road through the Jacumba Pass wasn't fit for wheeled vehicles until the late 1860s which is one reason why the stagecoaches on the Southern Overland Route (1858-61) used the more northern Warner's Pass and thus bypassed the important port city of San Diego.

Beyond the Jacumba Pass, the route descended precipitously to the desert floor and then roughly paralleled old Route 8 until it made a slight dip back into Mexico in order to avoid some high and treacherous sand hills near Fort Yuma.

* * *

The 1855 date of this November 3 cover was inferred from the dates of operation of the Desert Dispatch and from the fact that Lt. DuBarry was stationed at Fort Yuma until July 1856. Also, other covers from this West Point, NY correspondence—including one dated September 14—are clearly from 1855 and show pre-payment of the correct 10¢ rate for over 3,000 miles. In this case, the 6¢ in postage represented an underpayment of 4¢. However, instead of crediting the 6¢, a postal clerk disallowed all of the payment and charged the recipient 10¢. Although that policy applied to letters to some destinations (e.g. Canada), it didn't apply to domestic transcontinental letters so the partial payment should have been credited. Examples of that error are rare.



The route of the Desert Dispatch

The left and right circles indicate San Diego and Fort Yuma respectively. The distance between them is approximately 180 miles.

The American-Mexican border is indicated by a faint white, roughly horizontal line.

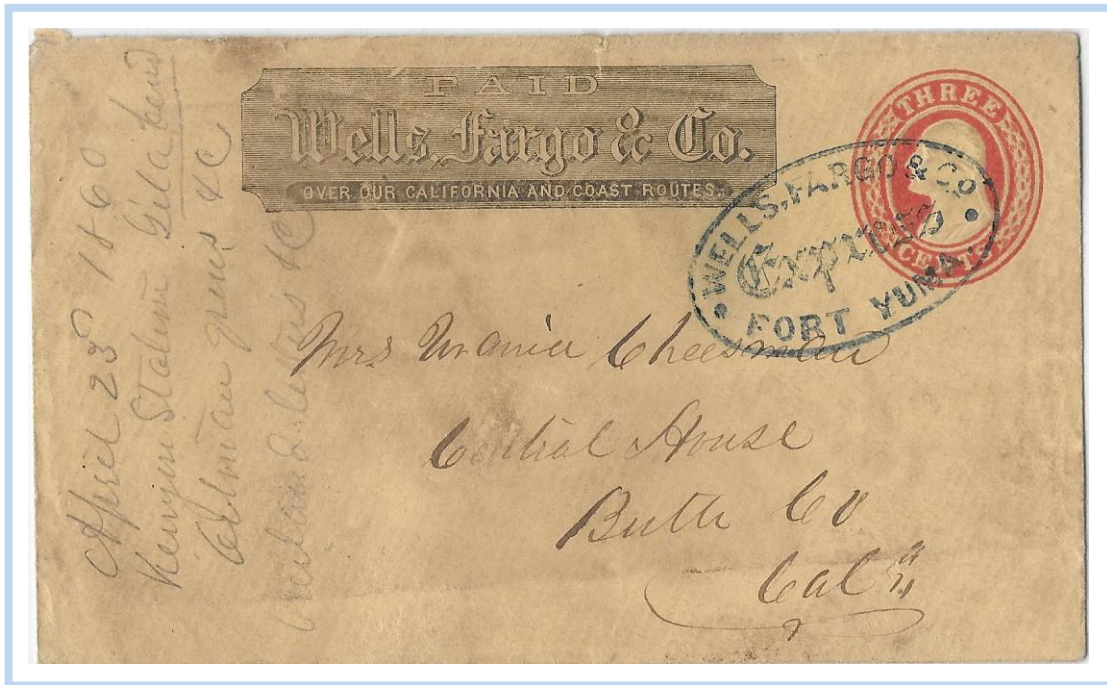
The Jacumba Pass is marked by a triangle and the four to six story high sand hills—the Algodones dunes—in the Colorado Desert near Fort Yuma are marked by a double arrow.

(The map is based on a Google Earth satellite view. The green areas on the right side are the result of irrigation and didn't exist in 1855.)

FERRY, WAGON and COACH

FROM MURDERER'S GRAVE

The Only Wells, Fargo Cover From Arizona Territory



A cover with a Wells, Fargo & Co. (WFC) franking that originated at Kenyon's (or Kinyon's) Station in the New Mexico Territory on April 23, 1860 according to the recipient's pencil docketing on the front. Kenyon's Station was a stop on the Southern Overland Route of John Butterfield's Overland Mail Company (OMC).

A westbound OMC stage carried this cover to the Fort Yuma office of WFC where it was hand-stamped and returned to the OMC for onward transport to San Francisco and then to Central House.

This is (by far) the earliest recorded cover that bears a WFC handstamp from its Fort Yuma office which was established in 1859—the year before this cover was mailed.

It is also the earliest known cover with any kind of postal marking that is associated with that fort.

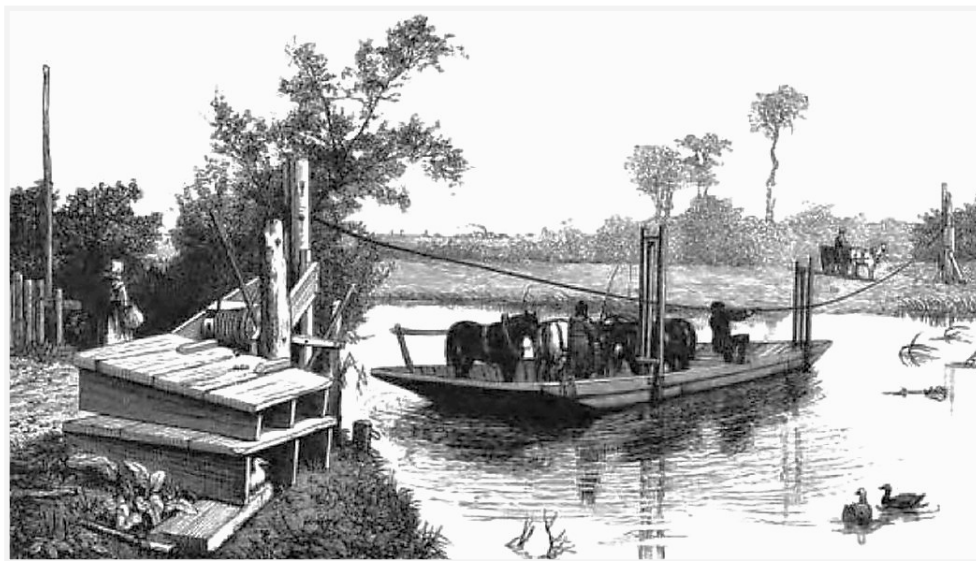
In addition, this is one of two recorded WFC covers that originated in the Arizona portion of New Mexico Territory and is the only recorded WFC "way" cover from that region.

Furthermore, it is one of two recorded OMC "way" covers that originated in the Arizona portion of New Mexico Territory.

Kenyon's Station—where this cover originated—was previously known as Murderer's Grave. It was a small, horse-changing station on the Southern Overland Route (Route 12,578) of Butterfield's Overland Mail Company (OMC). It was located on the Gila River approximately 130 miles east of Fort Yuma and, at the time that this cover was mailed, it was in the portion of the New Mexico Territory that eventually became the State of Arizona.

Because of the franking on the envelope, a westbound OMC celerity wagon carried this cover to the nearest Wells, Fargo & Co. (WFC) office rather than to the nearest post office. At that time the nearest WFC office was at Fort Yuma, either at Fort Hill in Jaeger City, CA or just across the river in Arizona City. (The exact date in 1860 that the office moved to the latter location is unrecorded.) In both locations, the WFC and OMC offices were in close proximity.

In either case, this cover had to cross the Colorado River on a "cable" ferry which was a raft that was attached to a rope that was strung between two tall, wooden "gin cranes" that were located on either side of the river. The rope guided the ferry and kept it from drifting in the strong current. It could also be used for hand-over-hand propulsion of the ferry, although pole-propulsion or "punting" was usually easier. At the time that this cover was mailed, the ferry fee at the Yuma Crossing was \$1.50 for a horse and rider which is equivalent to about \$43 today.



A mid-19th century "cable" or rope ferry on a Western river

After handstamping and recording this cover, WFC returned it to the OMC which carried it to Los Angeles in another celerity wagon. However, between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the OMC used a six-horse Concord coach because the road was much better.

At San Francisco the cover was transferred to a Sacramento River steamer for the 6½ hour trip to Sacramento. From there it was carried to Central House (near Oroville) by a Feather River steamer or, alternatively, by horse, cart, or wagon. The cover remained the responsibility of WFC from Fort Yuma onward and thus never entered the U.S. Mail.

* * *

During this time period, WFC didn't operate its own fleet of wagons and coaches but instead contracted with various stage lines (and other carriers) to transport its express freight and mail. In the Southwest, one of its main contractors was the OMC which shared board members as well as investors with WFC. (See: John and Lillian Theobald, *Wells Fargo in Arizona Territory*, Tempe, Arizona Historical Foundation, 1978, p. 4.)

HORSEBACK

VIA "MIL EX"



A July 23, 1866 cover from Barkhamsted, CT to San Francisco that was endorsed by the U.S. Army to be forwarded to Fort Yuma by a military express ("Mil Ex").

Although many Western covers from this time period were carried by a military express, covers that bear an Army endorsement that specifically refers to that service are scarce.

Making this cover even scarcer is the fact that it was carried to Fort Yuma by the Army during the brief period between the re-establishment of a regular military express after the Civil War and the outsourcing of that service to a civilian contractor.

(The nearly illegible markings on the cover aren't doodles—they reiterate the addressee's name and unit and were probably applied by military personnel.)

Like the first cover in this series, this one was addressed to a soldier in San Francisco and was then forwarded to Fort Yuma by the Army. (Indeed, it was probably forwarded by the same person in the Quartermaster's office, given the similar handwriting—again in red ink—of the forwarding endorsement).

From San Francisco, this cover was carried by a military steamer to San Pedro-Los Angeles and then put on a stagecoach to San Diego. The final leg of the journey was completed by a soldier on horseback who followed a route through the Jacumba Pass and across the Colorado Desert that was similar to the one that the "Desert Dispatch" had used a decade before.

* * *

During the Civil War, the U.S. Army had run military expresses throughout the Southwest, some

of which went through Fort Yuma which was the major staging area for the troops (the California Volunteers) that invaded Confederate-held Arizona. The most important of those expresses was formed in 1862 and consisted of highly skilled cavalymen called “vedettes” who formed relays of riders along the old Southern Overland Route. After the war, the vedette expresses were dissolved as troops were withdrawn from the Southwest. At that point, military express service to and from Fort Yuma became irregular at best.

Regular express service resumed on July 16, 1866 when a soldier on horseback left San Diego for Fort Yuma on the primitive road across the mountains and desert that the Army had built during the war. However, only 10 days later Major General Irvin McDowell, the Adjutant General of the Department of the Pacific, solicited sealed proposals for the outsourcing of that service. The specifications included “a weekly military express mail bag to Fort Yuma from any U.S. Post Office in Southern California.”

The present cover was carried by an Army courier prior to September 10, 1866 when Banning & Company—the winner of the contract—began weekly stagecoach service from Wilmington, CA to Fort Yuma via Los Angeles and San Bernardino. At that time, Banning already held a number of contracts with the U.S. Post Office Department, including one for the transport of mail between Los Angeles and Wilmington.

It’s also worth noting that since March 1, 1865, there had been weekly mail service between San Bernardino and Arizona Territory (Prescott and Albuquerque). However, that route went through Fort Mojave on the upper Colorado River and bypassed Fort Yuma by at least 200 miles.

STAGE LINE TO FT. YUMA.



On and after Monday, September 10th, the stages of the undersigned, carrying the United States and Quartermaster's mail, will leave the Exchange, at Wilmington, California, for Fort Yuma, at 4 o'clock every Monday passing through Los Angeles and San Bernardino, Arriving at Fort Yuma the following Friday. Returning, leaves Fort Yuma the following Sunday at 6 o'clock a. m.

LETTERS, PACKAGES, ETC., Forwarded on Reasonable Terms.

The Overland Stage from San Francisco, leaves Los Angeles every day; the Steamer Pacific leaves Wilmington three times each month.

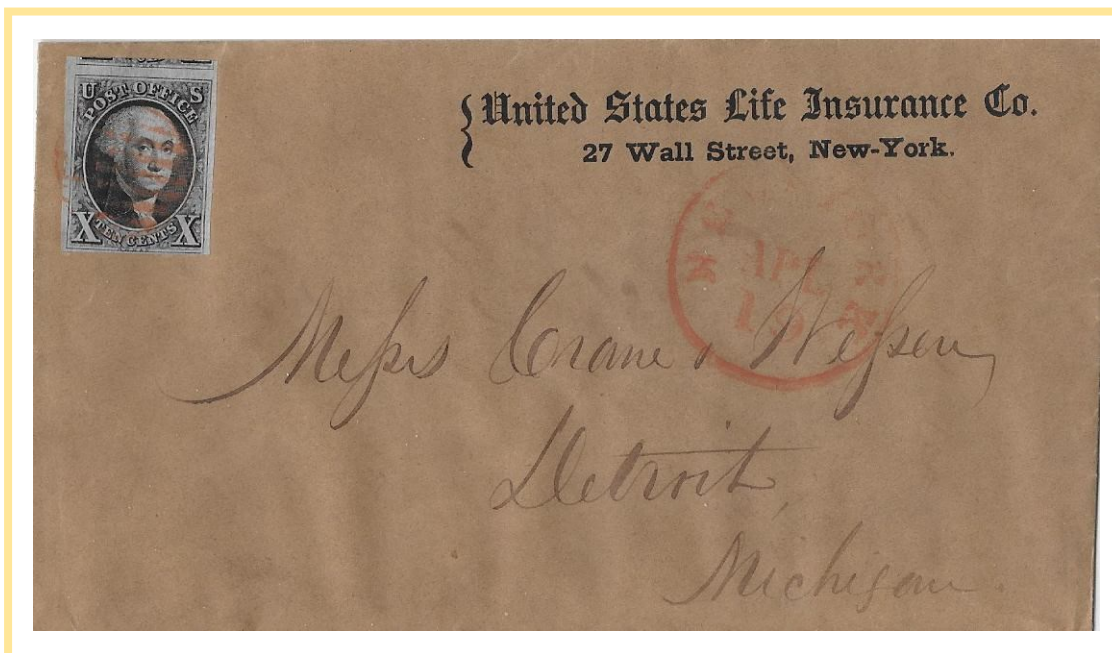
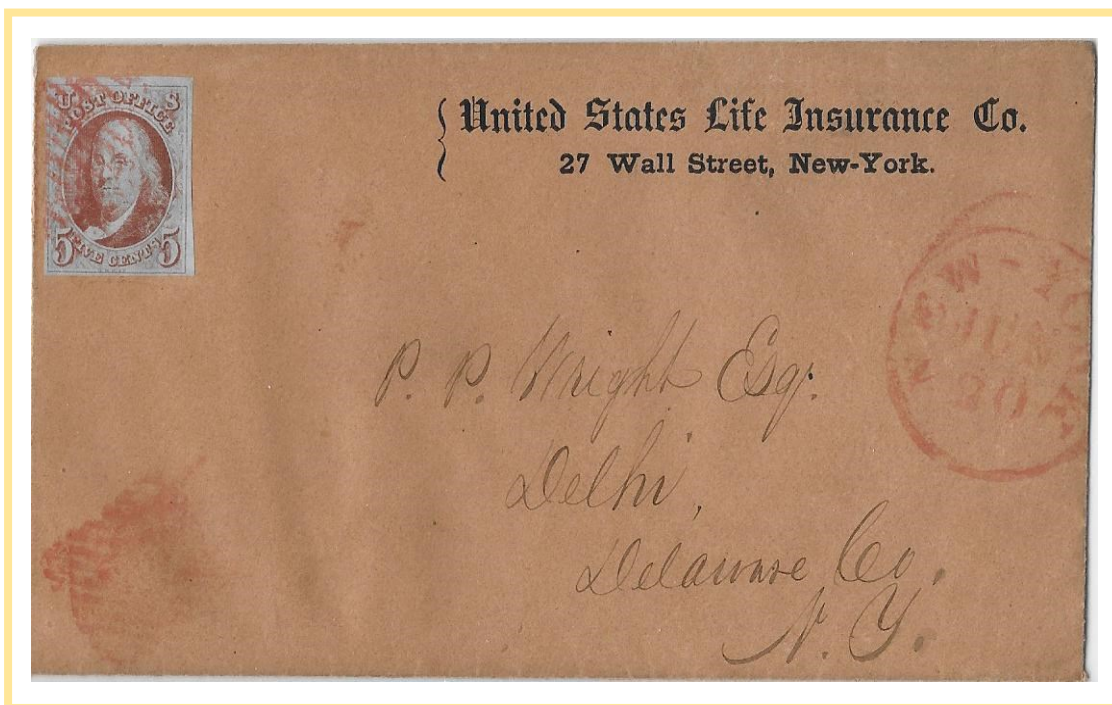
The stage from San Diego to Los Angeles leaves only once a week, and the steamer once a month.

BANNING & CO.
Wilmington, Cal., Sept. 6, 1866. 191f

From the Weekly Journal Miner (Prescott, AZ)

ACROSS NEW YORK

SHORT and LONG



Two 1847 issue covers from New York City that were carried up the Hudson River by steamboats and then taken westward by the New York & Erie Railroad before their routes diverged. One ultimately reached its destination by stagecoach and the other by Great Lakes steamer. They are a very rare “matching” pair of covers that have the same corner card and that were addressed by the same hand. And as a matching pair, they are probably unique in showing the two basic rates that the 1847 stamps were issued to pay: 5¢ per half oz. for a distance of less than 300 miles and 10¢ per half oz. for any greater distance. The 5¢ stamp is the brown orange shade and is on an 1851 cover. The 10¢ stamp is on an 1850 cover that is ex Garrett, Boker, and Gross. With PF certificate 451754 (2007) for the 5¢ cover and 564868 (2019) for the 10¢ one.

Office of the United States Life Insurance Company,
No. 27 Wall Street, New-York, June 20th 1851

The letterhead of the 5¢ cover's original enclosure.



A portion of a circa 1850 map of New York that shows the routes that the two covers took.

- ◆ From the Duane Street pier in New York City (lowermost yellow circle), both covers were carried up the Hudson River (waterways are in blue) by a steamboat that was operated by the New York & Erie Railroad.
- ◆ At Piermont, NY (1) the covers were transferred to a New York & Erie Railroad train (Route 813).
- ◆ At Deposit, NY (2) the 5¢ cover was transferred to a stagecoach for transport to Delhi, NY (red circle).
- ◆ The 10¢ cover continued westward on the New York & Erie Railroad to Elmira (3) where it was transferred to the Chemung Railroad for transport to Jefferson (4) at the head of Seneca Lake. The New York & Erie Railroad had leased the Chemung Railroad since December 1849 and held the mail contract for that portion of the route.
- ◆ At Jefferson, the 10¢ cover was put on a lake steamer (Route 1,121) to Geneva (5).
- ◆ At Geneva, the cover was transferred to a mail car of the Albany & Schenectady Railroad which, since February 17, 1848, had owned all of the freight, mail, and emigrant passenger cars that ran between Albany and Buffalo. However, from Hugh Feldman's book, it appears that the mail contracts were still held by the Attica & Buffalo Railroad (for the portion between Geneva and Rochester on Route 1,180) and the Tonawanda Railroad (for the portion between Rochester and Buffalo on Route 1,164).
- ◆ Finally, at Buffalo (6) the 10¢ cover was put on a Lake Erie steamboat to Detroit (Route 2,054). At that time, the mail contract was held by the Detroit & Cleveland Steamboat Company which was paid a penny for every letter that it carried.

It wasn't until 1854 that a continuous rail link was established between New York City and Detroit.

HAZARDS

How They Affected the Transport of Mail

Mail systems in the third quarter of the 19th century were vulnerable to many hazards that caused changes in the routes and/or the means of transport.

We have already seen several examples of this including how wheeled vehicles were modified in order to cope with bad roads and treacherous terrain. We have also seen how treacherous terrain resulted in the construction of entirely new routes that were safer and faster.

In this final section, I present a handful of interesting covers that illustrate some additional hazards and the ways in which governments and mail carriers coped with them.

- ♦ *A seasonal waterway freeze*—The first cover illustrates how a freeze-over of Lake Champlain forced the mail to Montreal to be diverted to a longer overland route—and at double the cost.
- ♦ *Blizzards*—The second cover is the only known survivor of a celebrated and unusually well-documented mail trip in which two veteran Mormon scouts pressed onward with the mail despite fierce winter storms on the Great Plains that probably would have killed lesser men.

The third cover illustrates a very different response to heavy snowfall on the Great Plains. After an eastbound mail carrier from Salt Lake City was turned back by the awful weather, the postmaster in that city sent the transcontinental mail westward to California for transport by ocean steamers to the East Coast via Panama—and at triple the ordinary cost.

- ♦ *Indian hostilities*—The fourth cover is also a transcontinental cover from Salt Lake City that was sent to the East Coast via California and Panama. However, in this case the reason for the long detour wasn't the weather but rather Indian attacks on the Great Plains.

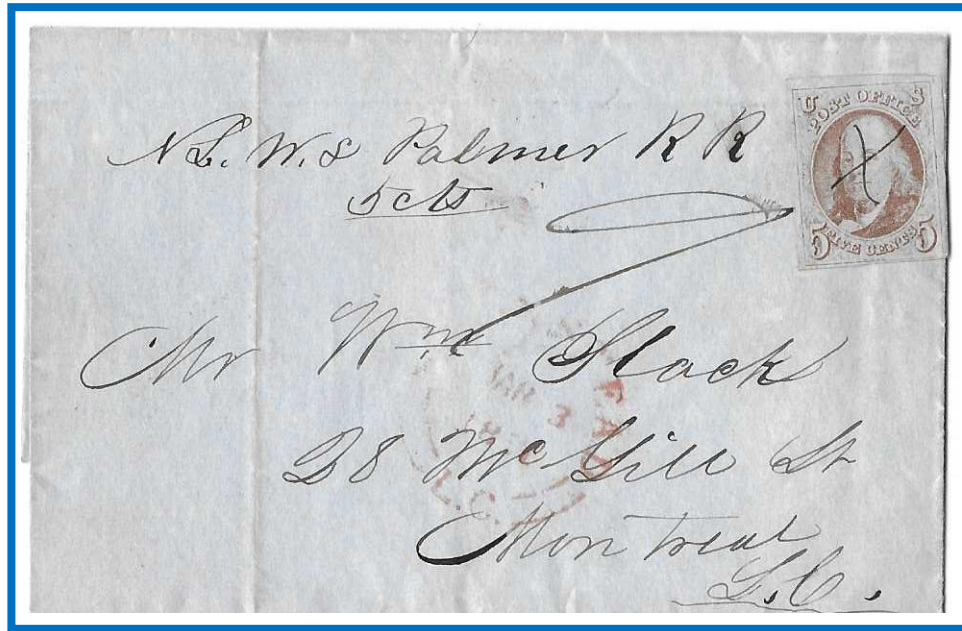
The cover also illustrates how the construction of routes with less hazardous topography quickly became so expensive that the projects were left to private companies that then charged tolls for the use of their roads.

- ♦ *A mail robbery*—The fifth cover is a rare example of mail that was recovered from a stagecoach mail robbery.
- ♦ *War*—The final two covers illustrate two very different responses by the Confederate mail system to the Federal blockade of Mobile Bay.

The first cover was carried on a purpose-built steamship that ran through the blockade.

The second was endorsed to be sent from Florida to Mississippi “via Mobile.” But instead of being carried by a Gulf of Mexico steamboat to blockaded Mobile, the cover reached its destination via a series of trains—and at double the cost.

AROUND A SEASONAL FREEZE OVER LAND, NOT WATER



A March 1851 cover to Montreal that originated on the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad with a 5¢ 1847 issue stamp. However, instead of taking the usual route to Canada via Lake Champlain and the Richelieu River, this cover went overland by stagecoach to Derby, VT where it was exchanged with the Canadian office in Stanstead, L.C. That much longer (and more expensive) route was necessitated by the fact that the waterways were still frozen and thus impassable to steamboats.

This is a rare example of an 1847 issue cover that demonstrates the effect of seasonal conditions on a postal route.

It is also the only recorded 1847 issue cover that bears a route agent marking from this railroad.

Furthermore, it is a rare example of an 1847 issue cross-border usage that entered the U.S. Mail on a train.

With PF certificates 0363766 (2000) and 573626 (2021). Ex Craveri and Eubanks.

Ordinarily, a letter to Montreal that originated on the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad (NLW&P RR) would have been carried by a series of trains (the exact series isn't documented) to southeastern Vermont. It then would have crossed that state in a northwesterly direction on either the Rutland RR or the Central Vermont RR. As of 1851, both terminated at Burlington, VT on Lake Champlain. From Burlington (or perhaps Vergennes in the case of the Rutland RR) a steamboat of the Champlain Transportation Company would have carried the letter up Lake Champlain and then the Richelieu River to St. John, Quebec on Route 943. From that exchange office, a train would have carried it approximately 25 miles to Montreal.

However, on February 9, 1851 Lake Champlain froze for the winter and became unnavigable (See: B.F. Hough, *Results of a Series of Meteorological Observations*, Weed Parsons & Co., 1872, p. 358). Therefore, around March 1, this cover was transferred from a train to a stagecoach at either Burlington or Montpelier for transport to Derby, VT. The major coach roads to Derby originated from those two towns.

At Derby, this letter was exchanged with the Canadian post office in Stanstead, Quebec which applied a “Stanstead, L.C. March 3, 1851” handstamp on the front. It was then carried by stagecoaches and trains to St. John, probably via Sherbrooke (although there is no transit marking from that town). From St. John, where it received a March 5 transit backstamp, it was taken by train to Montreal where a March 6 arrival backstamp was applied. At that time, there was no direct railroad or stagecoach connection between Burlington and St. John.

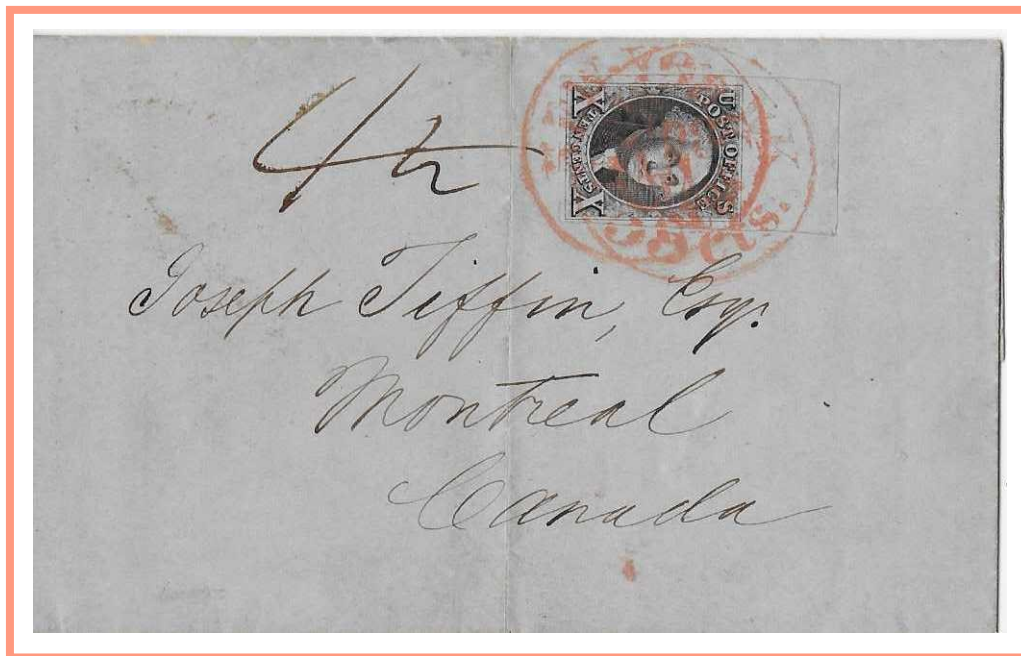
* * *

Because the distance traveled from Stanstead to Montreal was between 100 and 200 miles, the addressee was charged 9d (as was marked on the front) which was double the 4½d rate for under 61 miles that he would have been charged if the letter had been sent via Lake Champlain.

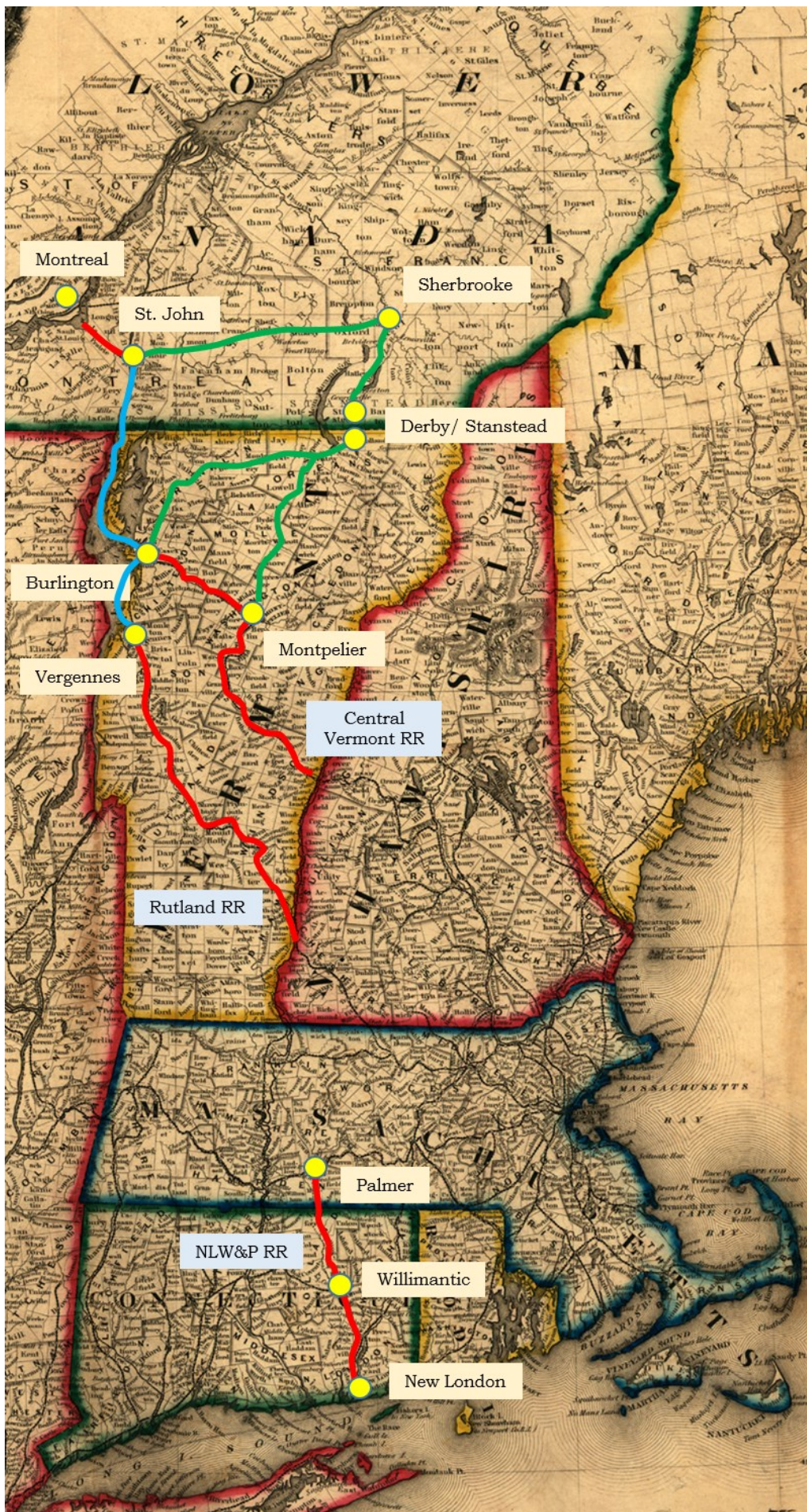
The NLW&P RR route agent charged the sender 5¢ postage for a distance of less than 300 miles to the Canadian border. The less than 300 mile rate was correct if the route agent received the letter closer to Palmer, MA than to New London, CT.

* * *

The NLW&P RR began construction on July 30, 1848, reached Willimantic CT on November 15, 1849, and reached Palmer MA on September 20, 1850. The *Official Register* for 1851 lists that railroad as the contractor for Route 712 which ran between New London, CT and Palmer, MA and states that its total compensation from the U.S. Post Office Department that year was \$2,456.



A January 28, 1850 cover from New York to Montreal that was carried via Lake Champlain on Route 943. According to the National Weather Service, 1850 was one of only three years between 1816 and 1916 in which Lake Champlain didn't freeze over during the winter. Note that the New York "5 cts" CDS—although used accidentally—was struck twice, probably to signify the 10¢ rate. With PF certificate 177786 (1987). Ex Brown, Matthies, Rust, and Eubanks.



An 1850 railroad map that shows the likely routes to Montreal from the NLW&P RR.

The three seasons route via Lake Champlain and the Richelieu River is in blue.

The overland winter route via Derby and Stanstead is in green.

Both of those routes first crossed Vermont on either the Rutland or the Central Vermont railroad. (All railroads are in red.)

The connection between the NLW&P RR and the railroads in Vermont isn't shown because there were several alternatives and the actual route remains speculative.

THROUGH A BLIZZARD LIFE-THREATENING



A cover with a November 1 (1856) Salt Lake City, Utah Territory (U.T.) CDS that was carried eastward across the Rockies and Great Plains by two famous Mormon scouts, Feramorz Little and Ephraim Hanks under a single-trip contract. That well-documented trip—which normally took 30 days or less—took 78 days due to terrible blizzards on the Great Plains. After an heroic effort by the scouts, the cover finally reached St. Petersburg, Russia—a scarce destination during this time period—on April 25, 1857.

This is the only recorded cover from that legendary mail trip.

It is also one of only six or seven known uses of the 1851 12¢ stamp from a Western territory.

Pictured and discussed in Walske and Frajola's Mails of the Westward Expansion (p. 129) and signed by Frajola. Ex Risvold and Walske.

Between December 1, 1856 and January 31, 1857 there was no regular contract to carry the mail between Salt Lake City and Independence, MO. That was because the Magraw contract had been annulled and Magraw's successor, Hiram Kimball of Salt Lake City, had failed to accept his contract on time. (The fault lay with the Post Office Department which had inexplicably sent the contract to him via the overland mail despite the fact that it was severely disrupted by winter weather.) In addition, Salt Lake City had been all but paralyzed by snow, so the eastbound mail from as far back as November 1 had never left that city. (The November 1 CDS was the date that the letter was originally scheduled to leave.) Therefore, the Salt Lake City postmaster, Judge Elias Smith, hired Feramorz Little and his brother-in-law Ephraim Hanks to carry the November and December mail from Salt Lake City to Independence on a single-trip contract for \$1,500.

Both of the men were seasoned Mormon scouts who had previously carried the mail between Salt Lake City and Fort Laramie as subcontractors to Samuel Woodson. However, it's somewhat surprising that they accepted the new contract because they'd just returned from an exhausting and dangerous rescue mission east of the Rocky Mountains. (Mormon emigrants—the Martin and Willie companies—had been pushing handcarts across the Great Plains on foot when they became stranded in heavy snow.)

* * *

On December 11, 1856, Little and Hanks rode out of Salt Lake City on horseback ahead of a couple of pack mules that were loaded with mail. The snow had finally stopped, so they quickly passed Fort Bridger and then crossed the Rocky Mountains at South Pass. On Christmas Day, they enjoyed a merry feast with traders and mountaineers at the Platte Bridge trading post which was 130 miles west of Fort Laramie. However, when they set out again on the following day, they were almost immediately overtaken by a severe snowstorm. Fortunately, they quickly found an Indian camp where they were sheltered and fed by “Old Smoke,” a Sioux chief who had long been their amiable acquaintance.

They finally reached Fort Laramie—their first re-supply station—on December 31 which was about three weeks after they'd left Salt Lake City. The post commander, Colonel Hoffman, warned them of deep snow further east, so they left their horses at the fort and purchased a small, light wagon that their mules could pull. And to lessen the strain on the animals, they carried only minimal supplies: a small amount of bacon and just enough coffee, sugar, and flour to last to Fort Kearny. They also carried basic bedding and a revolver for each of them and a butcher's knife, shovel, axe, and a rifle between them.

They left Fort Laramie on January 2, 1857 and initially did well, covering the 50 miles to Scott's Bluffs in two days. However, at that point the snow became so deep that the mules got bogged down. Therefore, the men abandoned the riverside trail and traveled on the frozen Platte River itself. Although the river had less snow, its ice was a challenge: the mules scrambled and stumbled over large blocks and broke through thin sections, cutting their legs on the ice's razor-like edges. They also slipped, slid, and fell and if they couldn't get up, the men dug through the snow to find dirt that they could spread around the animals to give them a better footing. And if that didn't work, the men detached the mules from the wagon, lassoed them with a rope, and then laboriously dragged them along the ice until they got to a spot where the mules could stand up.

The scarcity of firewood was also a problem. Hanks lagged behind Little in order to scavenge the twigs that receding water had stranded on the river bank. Each time that he filled his pockets, he would catch up with the wagon, empty his pockets, and then return to his work. In the course of the day, he could collect about a bushel of wood which was enough to provide them with cooked food and a campfire.

Still another worry was the lack of edible vegetation for the mules. Hanks climbed cottonwood trees in order to cut off tender shoots, but the animals wouldn't have survived if the men hadn't coaxed them into eating lightly cooked buffalo meat that had been dusted with flour. Fortunately, there were plenty of buffalo and they were easy to shoot when they became mired in the snow. The only problem was the wolves that circled the men as they butchered a carcass. However, a few shots from a revolver managed to keep them at bay.

On January 31, Little and Hanks arrived at Fort Kearny after a 29 day trip from Fort Laramie that normally took about seven days. They obtained new supplies from the post commander, Captain Wharton, and also picked up the fort's eastbound mail, just as they'd done at Fort Laramie. Soon after setting out again on February 2, they left the Platte River and headed southeast.

Unfortunately, on the second night they were struck by a severe blizzard that cut their visibility to

near zero—they could barely see their hand in front of their face. Although their wagon was almost intolerably cramped and its canvas covering couldn't keep out the gale-driven snow, they didn't dare budge for a day and two nights. Of course, the men feared for their animals, but it was impossible to tend to them while the storm was still raging. However, when the weather finally cleared on the second morning, they were relieved to find that the mules had survived beneath the tarp that Hanks had slipped beneath their harnesses as the snow began to fall.

After resting and feeding their mules, they set out again and finally reached Independence on February 27, 1857. It had been 26 days since they'd left Fort Kearny—a segment of the trip that normally took only a week. It had also been 78 days since they'd left Salt Lake City. They had previously completed that same trip in under a month.

Not surprisingly, people marveled at the fact that the men had survived. They also shook their heads in wonder that the men had pressed onward when others would have turned back. But Little and Hanks were the best of the best and, indeed, are now counted among the legends of the Old West. And even today, they're held out to Mormon children as exemplars of courage, resilience, persistence, and Faith.

* * *

See: James A. Little, *Biographical Sketch of Feramorz Little*, Salt Lake City, Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890, pp. 38-54.

* * *

With regard to the rest of this letter's journey, it took approximately two weeks for it to travel from Independence to New York. In New York, it missed the March 14 sailing of the American Collins Line steamer *Ericsson* and finally departed on the American Havre Line steamer *Arago* on April 4. It arrived in Southampton, England on April 17 and was then forwarded via Belgium and Prussia to St. Petersburg where it arrived on April 25 (or April 13 on the Julian calendar that Russia used at that time). All told, it took more than five months for this letter to arrive at its destination after it had been put in the mail at Salt Lake City on or about November 1, 1855.

I might add that the two 12¢ stamps paid the postage only to England, so the additional postage (in Russian kopeks) for transport from England to Russia was marked on the reverse of the cover and was due from the addressee.



A drawing of Little and Hanks in a snowstorm east of Platte Bridge

A HUGE DETOUR DUE TO SNOW

A PHANTOM RATE



A January 1855 cover from Salt Lake City (SLC) to New Jersey that was endorsed to go "Via California."

It is a rare example of transcontinental mail from SLC that was first carried westward because the Central Overland Route to Independence, MO was closed on account of Indian hostilities or in this case deep snow.

It is also a rare example of mail that Chorpenning carried to California using the Old Spanish Trail rather than the more direct trans-Sierra route which until 1858 was impassable due to snow during the winter months.

Lastly, it is one of only three recorded covers that show payment of a non-existent (or "phantom") rate of 9¢ that was comprised of 3¢ for westward transport from SLC to California plus 6¢ for eastward transport from California to the East Coast.

This cover is discussed and pictured in Chronicle 215 (p. 203) and in Walske and Frajola's Mails of the Westward Expansion (p. 127). Ex Risvold, Walske, and Eubanks.

Not surprisingly, Chorpenning encountered significant challenges in carrying the mail over the mountains between Salt Lake City (SLC) and California. Indeed, treacherous mountain passes, an alkaline desert, deep winter snows, primitive roads, and Indian attacks all conspired to give him a dismal record. So beginning in 1852, Chorpenning made use of the portion of the Old Spanish (or Mormon) Trail that ran between SLC and southern California.

Chorpenning's use of that route changed considerably over time:

- ♦ *March 1852*—Chorpenning carried the eastbound mail by steamer to San Pedro (the port for Los Angeles) and then overland on the Old Spanish Trail to SLC. The San Francisco postmaster allowed this after snow prevented Chorpenning from carrying the mail over the Sierra Nevada Mountains in December 1851 and January 1852.

The Old Spanish Trail had the advantages of completely bypassing the Sierra Nevada and Goose Creek Mountains and the Forty Mile Desert. In addition, it was relatively free from Indian attacks, had a good wagon road, and was consistently passable during the winter. However, the route also had the disadvantages of being 500 miles longer than the direct trans-Sierra route and being dependent on coastal steamers to take the regular California mail from SLC to San Francisco. If Chorpenning missed the connection with a steamer in San Pedro, the normal 32 to 35 day trip could stretch to 52 to 55 days.

- ♦ *Summer 1852*—The route returned to the trans-Sierra one.
- ♦ *Winter 1853 and 1854*—Chorpenning once again used the Old Spanish Trail and again reverted to the original route when the mountain snows receded.
- ♦ *July 1, 1854*—Chorpenning secured a second four-year contract for monthly mail service between San Francisco and SLC. However, now the Old Spanish Trail was used year-round with the blessing of the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) which named it Route 12,801. In addition, the southern California terminus was moved to San Diego. The regular California mail continued to be carried by coastal steamer to San Francisco but now San Diego was also the terminus for some transcontinental mail. That's because the USPOD began to pay Chorpenning to carry that mail when the Central Overland Route from SLC to Independence was closed on account of snow or Indian attacks. In San Diego, the transcontinental mail was put on Panama-bound ocean steamers of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSS).
- ♦ *November 1, 1854*—The southern California terminus for all of Chorpenning's mail was moved back to San Pedro. Chorpenning's trips from each terminus continued to be monthly.
- ♦ *July 1, 1858*—Under Chorpenning's third contract, Route 12,801 was moved back to the more direct trans-Sierra route. The restored service between SLC and Placerville, CA was now weekly and was to be completed in 16 days or less. The first westbound trip left SLC on July 4 and the first eastbound one left Placerville on July 5.

The resumption of the trans-Sierra route in the summer of 1858 assumed that the extensive revisions and improvements in the route would be completed by the winter. In fact, the first westbound trip on the newly completed, four season route left SLC on December 6, 1858 and the first eastbound trip left Placerville on December 11. Another cover in this exhibit was carried on the latter trip.

* * *

The present 1855 cover is an example of a transcontinental use that was first carried to California by Chorpenning on the Old Spanish Trail (a.k.a. Mormon Trail) because the Central Overland Route as well as his usual trans-Sierra pack mule route were impassable on account of snow. The cover left the SLC post office in a wagon or stagecoach on January 5 and arrived in San Pedro, CA about one month later. It was then carried by a coastal steamer to San Francisco where it was put on the PMSS ocean steamship *Golden Age* which left for Panama on February 16 and arrived there on March 2. After crossing the Isthmus of Panama by train, it was put on the United States Mail Steamship Company steamer *Illinois* to New York on March 12.

The Mormon postmaster in SLC charged the sender 3¢ for transport to California (under 3,000 mile rate) plus 6¢ for transport from California to New Jersey (over 3,000 mile rate). However, that 9¢ rate was incorrect—only the 6¢ rate for a total of more than 3,000 miles was applicable.

However, even a charge of 6¢ would have been unfair. That's because if the letter had been carried eastward from SLC on the Central Overland Route, the postage to New Jersey would have been only 3¢ (for under 3,000 miles). In this case, the reason for the longer routing via California was the inability of the U.S. Post Office Department to provide service on the usual route, a situation which—arguably—shouldn't have imposed a financial penalty on the sender. As it turned out, the sender was charged *triple* the normal rate.



Chorpenning's three routes

- ♦ The 1851-1854 route (in blue) consisted of the Carson Trail, the western portion of the California Trail, and the Salt Lake Cut-Off.
- ♦ The 1852-1854 winter and the 1854-1858 all-season route (in black) consisted of the Old Spanish Trail as well as the ocean route between San Francisco and either San Pedro or San Diego.
- ♦ The 1858 -1860 route (in red) consisted of Johnson's Cut-Off and the Egan Trail.

GOING THE OTHER WAY FROM INDIANS

“VIRBRATING MAIL”



A February 2, 1865 cover from Salt Lake City, U.T. that was sent “Via San Fran^{CO} and Steamer to N.Y.” (as per the sender’s endorsement) on account of Indian attacks on the Central Overland Route east of the Rocky Mountains. It was thus carried westward over the Sierra Nevada Mountains by a horse-drawn stagecoach on one of several competing toll roads or “turnpikes” that were the “super highways” of their day.

Despite improvements in Johnson’s Cut-Off and other trans-Sierra wagon roads during the late 1850s, they remained limited in the amount of traffic that they could handle. Therefore, the discovery of gold and silver in 1859 in the Washoe Mountains of Utah Territory (later Nevada Territory) created an urgent need for roads that could transport thousands of miners and other workers and millions of tons of equipment, materials, provisions, and bullion. Private investors and a few municipalities quickly responded by building new roads across the mountains or by improving the existing ones.

In the early 1860s, the two major trans-Sierra routes between California and Utah Territory were Johnson’s Cut-Off (known at that time as the Placerville Road) and the Henness Pass Road. The former ran south of Lake Tahoe while the latter ran north of it. Both of those roads underwent major improvements and were extended to Virginia City which, as the center of the Washoe mining boom, quickly became the second largest city in the West.

Although the Henness Pass Road crossed the Sierras at a lower elevation, the Placerville Road was 100 miles shorter, could be kept open all winter, and connected with the Sacramento Valley Railroad which had been built in 1856 and which ran between Sacramento and Folsom. As a

result, the Placerville Road carried most of the trans-Sierra traffic and mail. Therefore, it continued to be the westernmost component of the Central Overland Route which, by the early 1860s, passed through Virginia City.

* * *

The cost of building, improving, and maintaining the cross-mountain roads was defrayed by charging tolls. Typical charges were \$2.00 for a farm wagon, \$1.50 for a rider on horseback, and 12¢ for a dog. However, the real money came from the tolls on the massive, 10-mule freight wagons which were charged as much as \$160 per ton of freight in addition to up to \$30 for the wagon itself. The revenue from those freight wagons must have been immense: in a single month in 1862, more than 2,000 of them traveled eastward on the Placerville Road alone.

The new roads also carried hundreds of passenger and mail coaches that had to cope with traffic jams that were created by the ponderously slow freight wagons. Although an unimpeded coach could travel between Placerville and Virginia City in 18 hours, a fully-loaded freight wagon took more than two days. Therefore, it's not surprising that the coaches—including those that carried the mail—often chose to cross the mountains at night when there were fewer freight wagons on the roads.

* * *

By 1865, virtually all of the roads that crossed the Sierra and Carson ranges were toll roads or “turnpikes.” (The name refers to the barrier or “pike” at the toll house that was “turned” upward once the toll had been paid.) Aside from the Placerville and the Henness Pass roads, the most heavily traveled turnpikes were the three roads over the Carson Mountains—the “Bonanza” system—that were the key connections with the Washoe mining region in western Utah Territory.

* * *

In addition to toll roads, new toll bridges and toll ferries were built in the 1860s. They made crossing the many rivers on the Central Route more expensive but they also made it faster and safer. Furthermore, new stage stations were added that were more closely spaced (i.e. every 10-20 miles), thus allowing for fresher draft animals and drivers. Taken together, all of the capital improvements on the Central Route cut the mail transit time between California and the Missouri River from about 38 days (under the Chorpenning and Hockaday contracts) to about 28 days. The benefit extended even to wagon trains: the travel time for emigrants bound for California declined from about 160 days in 1849 to about 120 days in 1860.

* * *

Under normal circumstances, this cover would have been carried eastward from Salt Lake City to St. Joseph because the Central Overland Route had been the “default” route for transcontinental mail since July 1, 1861. Nevertheless, transcontinental mail could still be sent by ocean steamer from San Francisco if a letter was specifically endorsed to be carried by that means. However, that was usually pointless because mail service on the Central Overland Route had been expanded to six days a week (also on July 1, 1861), while steamers left San Francisco for New York only twice a month.

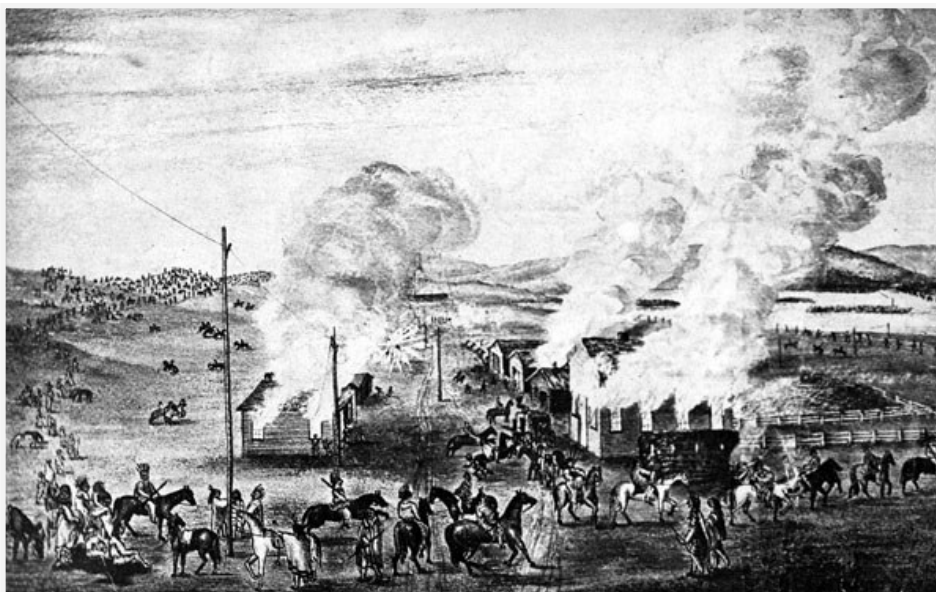
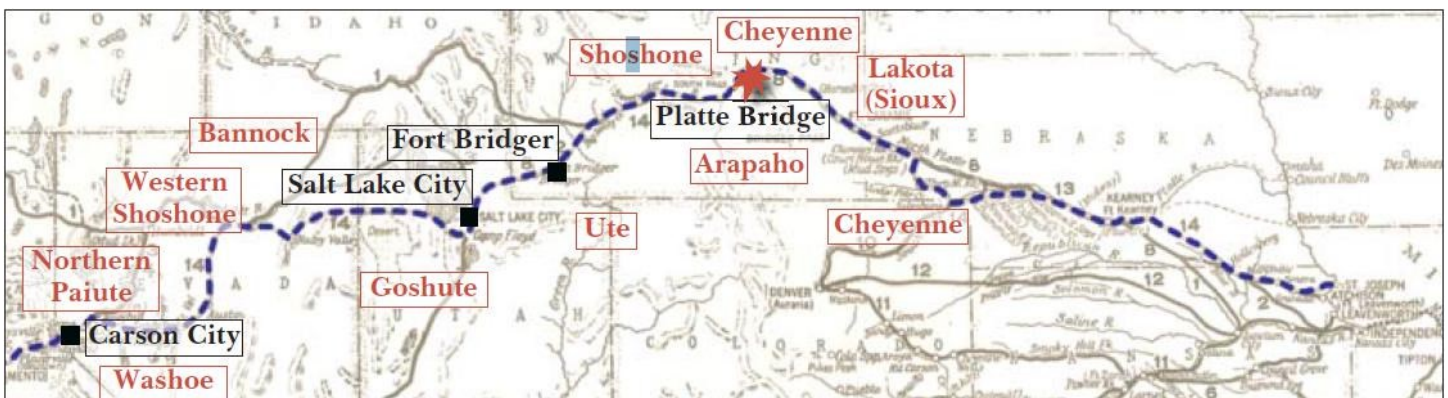
But beginning on August 27, 1862, intermittent Indian uprisings along the Central Overland Route east of the Rocky Mountains caused the route to be suspended on a number of occasions. When that happened, the ocean mail route to New York via San Francisco and Panama once again became the “default” one—if only temporarily—for transcontinental mail.

In 1864, the course of the uprisings became so unpredictable that the Post Office Department sometimes started to move the mail by the overland route but then reversed course and took steps to transport it by steamer before changing its mind yet again, thus creating a back-and-forth pattern that was dubbed “vibrating” mail. That indecision sometimes led to a complete paralysis of mail movement on either side of the interruption in the overland route. Indeed, at one point almost 40 tons of mail piled up in Julesburg, CO alone. Therefore—as this cover illustrates—some correspondents tried to take the routing decision out of the hands of the Post Office Department by endorsing their letters to be carried via California and the ocean mail route.

* * *

The circumstances behind the routing directive on this cover were as follows:

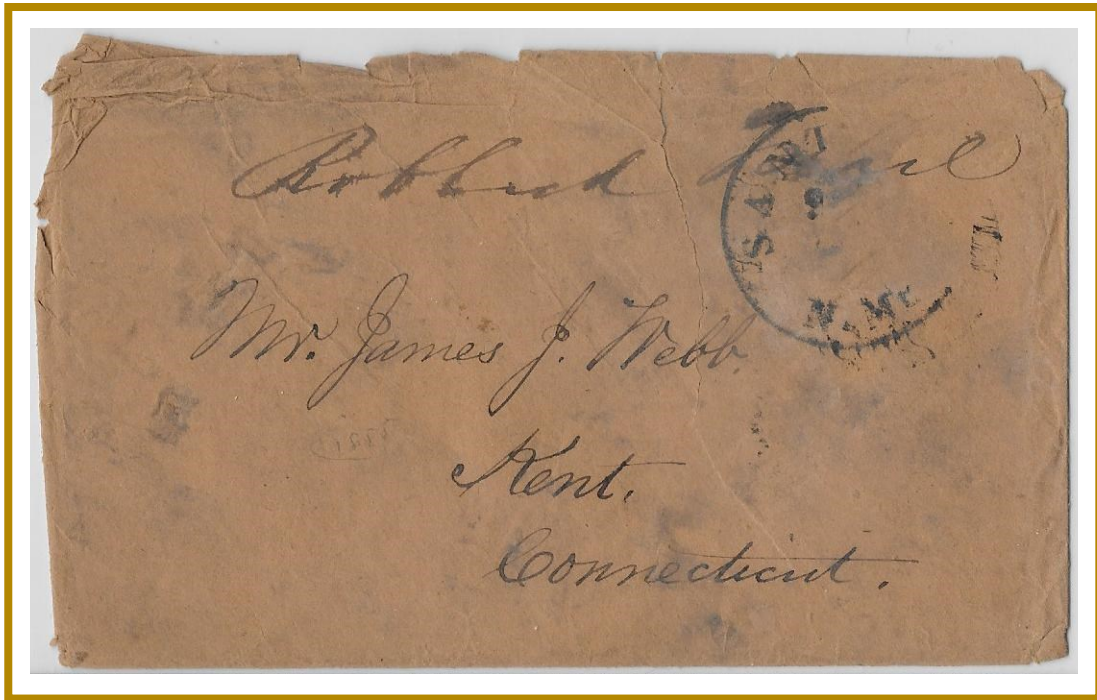
On January 7, 1865, Indians attacked and robbed the mail coach three miles east of Julesburg on the South Fork of the Platte River. Among the 70 or so soldiers from Fort Rankin who responded, 14 were killed and the rest were driven back to their post by 500 Indian reinforcements who then plundered and burned the supply station at Julesburg. Because of that outrage and the ensuing destruction of all of the other stations along a 380 mile stretch of the Platte River Road, the Central Overland Route was shut down and, according to contemporary newspapers, it still hadn't reopened as of February 15.



Above: A map of the Central Overland Route that shows how it ran through the lands of many Indian tribes.

Left: A drawing of the burning of Julesburg by Indians in 1865.

“ROBBED MAIL”



A cover to Connecticut from Santa Fe, NM (with that town's partial September CDS) that was involved in a stagecoach mail robbery between Independence, MO and St. Louis. The mail bag was retrieved from a river and taken to Jefferson City, MO where the postmaster wrote "Robbed Mail" on this envelope to explain why no postage was due despite the absence of any indication that the postage had been paid. (The original 10¢ green adhesive had been soaked off in the river.)

Although stagecoach robberies were fairly frequent in the Old West, covers that document that event are decidedly rare. In this case, the "Robbed Mail" notation as well as contemporary newspaper accounts provide that documentation.

Ex New.

This cover was carried from Santa Fe, NM to Independence, MO via the Cimarron Cut-Off of the Santa Fe Trail under the Hall contract. It's fate beyond Independence was chronicled in several contemporary newspapers.

- ♦ *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), November 2, 1855—"On Wednesday night, the 24th (of October), the Western mail was robbed at Lisletown, on the Osage river, ten miles from Jefferson City. The bag containing the New Mexico mail was cut and numbers of letter packages broken open. The next day the mail was found in the Marie River, close by. One Charles S. Gilbert, formerly a stage-driver, was arrested on suspicion."
- ♦ *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), November 2, 1855—"A letter from the Postmaster of Jefferson City, MO published in the *St. Louis Republic* of October 30 contains further information in reference to the robbery of the Santa Fe mail on the 24th of October between Jefferson City and St. Louis.

“The deed was perpetrated by one of the passengers, who styles himself as Charles Leaman Gilbert and says he is from New York. The mail bag and a part of its contents were discovered by some Germans on the edge of a creek near Lisletown where the stage had stopped over night. A knife was also discovered among the letters, which turned out to be the same which Gilbert had borrowed at Lisletown the previous evening. That circumstance led to his detection. He was overtaken and brought back to Jefferson City where after an examination he was committed for trial in default of \$1,000 bail.

“The robber made a complete sweep of the most valuable packages. The directions upon the letters were found to be mostly illegible. Among them there are many official letters from the Army and other departments in New Mexico, the loss of which will be a serious inconvenience to the officers forwarding them.”

- ♦ *Advocate* (Racine, WI)—“A letter from Linn, Osage County, dated the 27th says it is supposed about \$20,000 was taken from the Santa Fe and Independence mails, recently robbed at Marie’s River. Gilbert to whom the robbery has been traced was a stage driver but not on the route where the robbery was committed.

“There was some \$6,000 in drafts which he did not take. After the robbery, he proceeded to Mr. Orme’s and on the 27th a package or a portion of a package of letters was found in the woods.”

It’s interesting that the facts as recorded in these three newspapers varied somewhat.

* * *

The original letter is no longer with this cover, but it was from a Mr. Ashurst Hovey Redmen and was datelined “Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 27, 1855.”

* * *

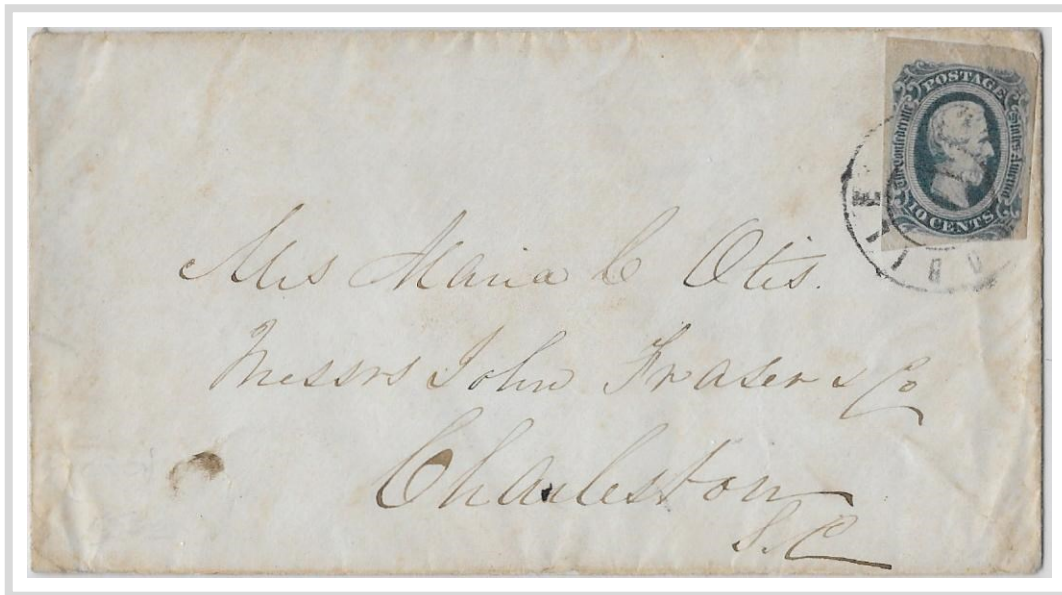
Lisletown—where the robbery occurred—was just a few miles southeast of Jefferson City. Lisletown ceased to exist in 1860.



A stagecoach robbery that wasn't in Missouri but could have been because that state has as many as 549 peaks. (Illustration from True West magazine)

THROUGH THE MOBILE BAY BLOCKADE

THE MIGHTY "LITTLE DENBIGH"

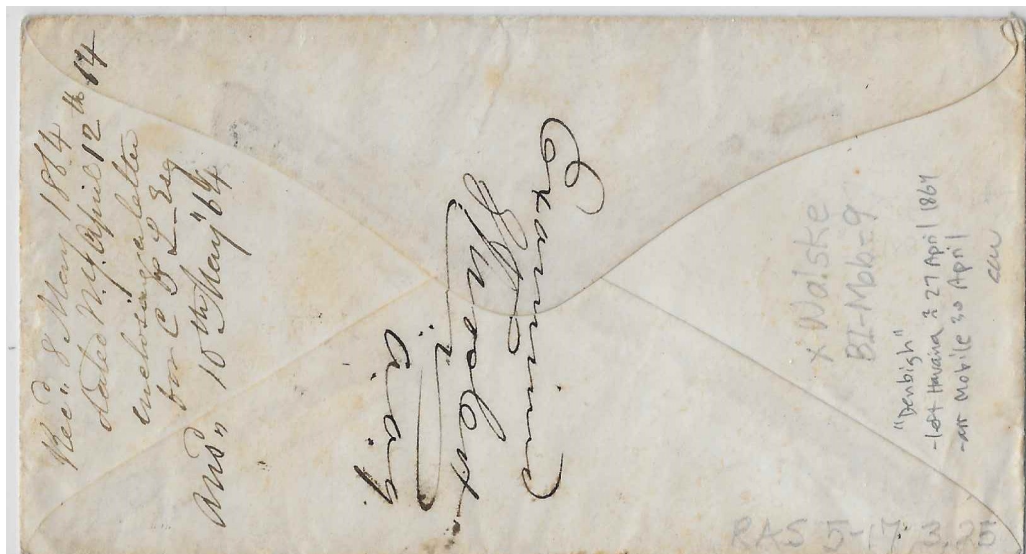


A cover that originated in New York City on April 12, 1864 (as per the receipt docketing on the reverse) and that entered the Confederacy by running the Union naval blockade of Mobile Bay on the renowned blockade runner Denbigh.

This cover is the latest of the nine recorded covers that ran the blockade into Mobile.

It is also one of fewer than 20 blockade-run covers that bear a Confederate censor's marking. In addition, the censor's marking on this cover is unique.

Walske-Trepel census BI-Mob-9. Ex Walske.



On April 19, 1861—shortly after the fall of Fort Sumter—President Lincoln announced a blockade of Southern ports. His goal was to choke off the trade of the Southern states with Great Britain and Europe. That trade involved the South’s exportation of cotton—its chief source of income—and its importation of munitions with which to fight the war.

In order to maintain trade through the blockaded Southern ports, investors funded and operated steamships that were designed and built to penetrate the Union blockade, either by stealth or by outrunning the Union ships. The investors included Southern, British, European, and even Northern commercial firms, several of which were truly multinational companies. The ships were almost exclusively built in Great Britain and manned by British crews. For the most part, they sailed out of Bermuda, the Bahamas, and Cuba—i.e. ports that were immune from Union attack or blockade because they were controlled by countries that had remained neutral during the war.

* * *

It’s estimated that at least 1,500 “blockade runners” were captured or destroyed between 1861 and 1865. However, that figure belies the fact that more than 80% of the runs through the blockade were successful. Indeed, the only reason that so many ships were lost was that they continued to run the blockade until they were either captured or destroyed (although some survived the war).

* * *

This cover left New York City on a Havana-bound steamer on or shortly after April 12, 1864. In Havana, it was transferred (probably by a forwarding agent) to the blockade runner *Denbigh* which left Cuba on April 27. After steaming 590 miles across the Gulf, the *Denbigh* penetrated the blockade of Mobile Bay on April 30.

As was the case with six of the nine recorded covers that ran that blockade, this cover didn’t receive a handstamp or rating mark that indicated that it had entered Mobile on a ship. That’s because it was carried “under cover”— i.e. inside another envelope that presumably received the markings in question. The outer envelope was addressed to a Mobile forwarding agent who removed this cover, applied the 10¢ Confederate stamp, and then put the cover into the mail where it was censored by Thomas Cox, a Confederate Assistant Adjutant General (“a.a.g.”). According to the docketing, it arrived in Charleston on May 8.

* * *

After June 1863, all incoming or outgoing covers that ran the Union naval blockade were supposed to be examined and approved by Confederate military authorities. However, fewer than 20 actually bear a censor’s marking. Three of those are on covers that came into Mobile although the censor’s marking on this cover is unique.

* * *

The *Denbigh* was built by John Laird, Sons & Co. in Birkenhead, England (near Liverpool) which also built turreted ironclads for the Confederate Navy. She was commissioned by Robert Gardner of Manchester (who paid £10,150 for her) and was launched in August 1860. She was then sold to the European Trading Company which was a partnership between merchants in Mobile, Paris, and Manchester. It was that firm that ran the *Denbigh* between Mobile and the neutral Spanish port of Havana.

The *Denbigh* was 162 tons, about 182 feet long, and about 22 feet wide in the beam. She had an iron hull, a single mast and smoke stack, and a paddle wheel on either side. There were several features that made her ideal for running the blockade, including a maximum speed of almost 14

knots which was relatively fast for a ship of that type, and a “light” draft of only seven feet which allowed her to run through shallow channels in Mobile Bay where the blockading ships dared not venture on account of their “heavier” draft. Her attributes were summarized by William Watson, a famous blockade-running master as follows:

“She was small in size, not high above the water, and painted in such a way as not to be readily seen at a distance. She was light on coal, made but little smoke, and depended more on strategy than speed. She carried large cargoes of cotton, and it was generally allowed that the little Denbigh was a more profitable boat than any of the larger and swifter crafts.”

* * *

The *Denbigh*’s first run into Mobile was on January 10, 1864. She subsequently made seven roundtrips between Havana and Mobile and became such a regular sight at the Mobile dock that she was nicknamed the “Mobile Packet.”

* * *

On August 5, 1864—approximately three months after this cover reached Mobile—Union naval forces under Admiral David Farragut captured the barrier island forts and occupied Mobile Bay, thus ending blockade-running through that port.

This cover is the latest recorded cover that ran the blockade of Mobile Bay. It was carried by the *Denbigh* on its fourth blockade-running trip.

* * *

After the Union occupation of Mobile Bay, the *Denbigh* began running the blockade of Galveston harbor. And that’s where the boat’s career ended on the night of May 23-24, 1865 when she ran aground on Bird Key. Sailors from the blockading squadron boarded and burned her the next day. Today, her underwater remains are a protected archeological site under the stewardship of the Texas Historical Commission.

* * *

The *Denbigh* ultimately made 13 roundtrips through the Union blockade, including those between Havana and Galveston, and was considered one of the most successful blockade runners of the war.

Only one other cover is recorded that was carried by the *Denbigh*—an outgoing use from Mobile.

* * *

John Fraser & Co.—the Charleston firm to which this cover is addressed—was part of a powerful commercial trading house that also had offices in Liverpool (Fraser, Trenholm & Co.), New York City (Trenholm Brothers), and the Caribbean. It’s likely that this cover originated from the New York City office because the receipt docketing states the origin only as “N.Y.” without mentioning a company or a person.

During the Civil War, Fraser, Trenholm & Co. served as the overseas bankers for the Confederate States and the firm’s senior partner, George A. Trenholm, became the Confederacy’s Secretary of the Treasury in 1864. Trenholm’s company profited as much as any from the Union blockade of Southern ports: by 1863, its own fleet of blockade runners had brought in \$9 M—the equivalent of almost \$330 M in today’s dollars.



The Denbigh by day and night.

Note how her paint and low profile tended to hide her at night. (Top painting by Thomas Cantwell Healy)



AROUND THE MOBILE BAY BLOCKADE

A DOZEN CONFEDERATE RAILROADS



A September 15, 1861 Confederate cover from Atseena Otie, FL to Paulding, MS for which the sender paid the 5¢ rate for under 500 miles on the assumption that the cover would be put on a Gulf of Mexico steamboat and routed "via Mobile" (as per the sender's endorsement). However, because of the Union blockade of the Gulf ports, the cover was sent overland by train. Since the distance involved was considerably more than 500 miles, the distributing post office in Memphis charged an additional 5¢ that was due from the recipient.

This is the unique Confederate usage from Atseena Otie.

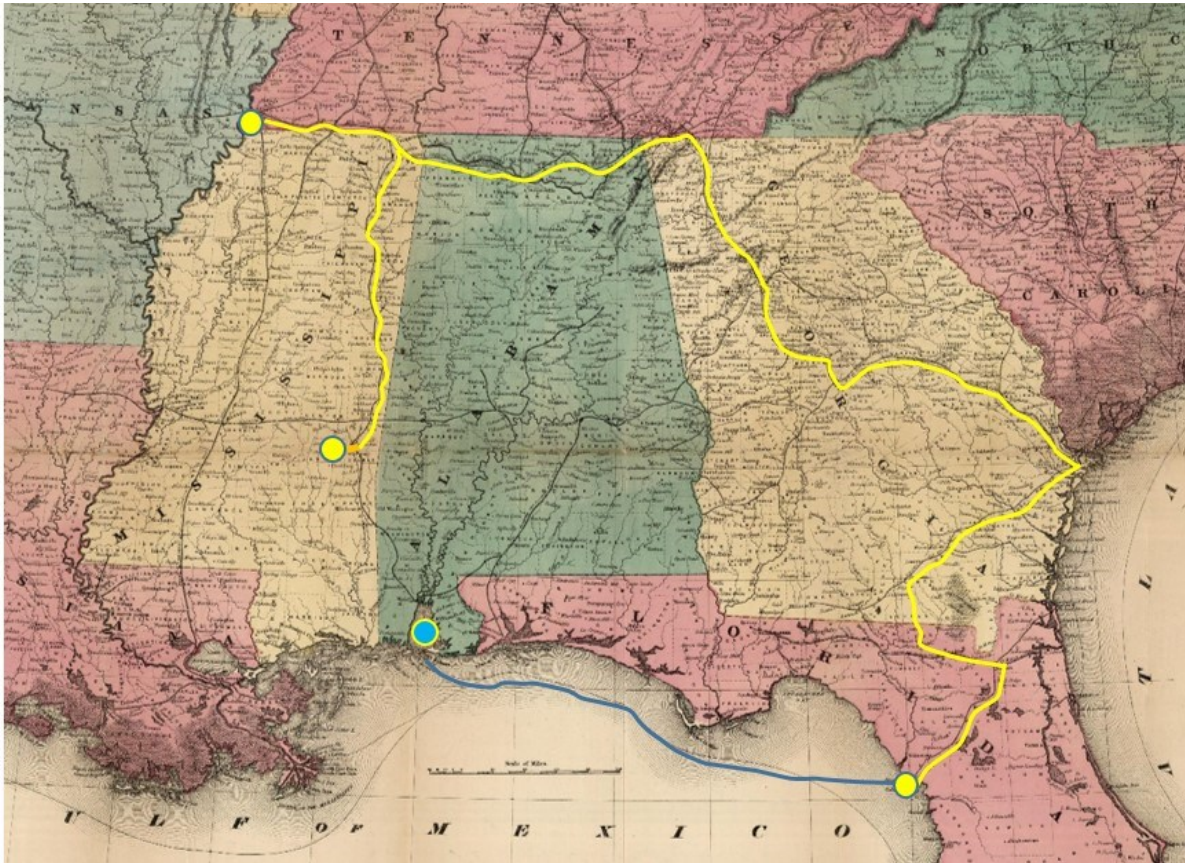
Furthermore, it is the finer of only two recorded Confederate covers that were "up-rated" because they were sent overland by train rather than by the shorter (but blockaded) Gulf route that the sender had intended.

Ex Bogg and Briggs.

On May 26, 1861 the U.S.S. *Powhatan* initiated the blockade of Mobile Bay. At approximately the same time, the Florida Gulf ports were blockaded. That included the port at Atseena Otie Key which is located near the mouth of the Suwannee River and is part of the Cedar Keys group.

Because of the Gulf blockade, the "Via Mobile" routing instruction on this cover was ignored and the cover was sent overland by train. That was possible only because the Florida Railroad had been extended to Way Key in March 1861 which was only a few months before this cover was mailed. (Way Key is just across the harbor from Atseena Otie Key.)

The window of opportunity for mailing this cover closed rather quickly. In January 1862—less than four months after this cover was mailed—Union troops destroyed the railhead at Way Key and effectively isolated Atseena Otie and the other Cedar Keys.



An 1866 map showing the rail route (in yellow) from the Cedar Keys to Memphis by way of Baldwin FL, Savannah, and Atlanta.

- ◆ *From Memphis, the route “backtracked” on the Memphis & Charleston Railroad and then went south toward Paulding, MS on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad. Paulding wasn’t a station on the latter so this cover traveled the final few miles via horseback, coach, or wagon.*
- ◆ *The journey involved 12 different rail lines.*
- ◆ *The yellow circles are (going counter-clockwise from the bottom right) Cedar Keys, Memphis, and Paulding. The blue circle marks Mobile.*
- ◆ *The blue line shows the intended Gulf steamer route from Cedar Keys that was precluded by the Union naval blockade.*

SPEEDS

METHOD	MAXIMUM MPH	COMMENTS
Oxen-pulled wagon	2	Preferred mode of transport by emigrants because they could use the wagon for cargo and walk beside it at a comfortable pace. Wagon trains typically covered 10-20 miles in a day.
Man walking	4	
Oxcart	4	
Pack mule / pack horse	4	
Man-powered boat (rowing, paddling, punting)	4	Speed was slower against a current which, if too strong, made going upstream impossible.
Canal boat	4	Typically pulled by 2 or 3 horses or mules.
Horse-pulled wagon	6	
Sleigh	8	Typically pulled by horses or mules.
Stagecoach	8	Shorter routes often used four horses. Longer routes used six for greater speed. However, speed was limited by the road surface—which was often bad—and by the traffic in cities and on some major inter-city routes.
Dog sled	15	Applies only to level ground and short distances. Half this speed was more typical.
Muleback	15	Mules are half-horse and half-donkey. It's the latter half that slows them down.
Ocean-going steamship	15	Figure was the record in 1850 for a steamship with a screw propeller. Maximum speed of a paddle wheel steamship was closer to 10 mph when burning coal and less than that when using sails. (In contrast, the fastest ships with sails—so-called “clipper” ships—could reach 20 mph.)
River steamboat	25	In practice, speed could be half this figure or less because of river traffic, obstructions, and/or travel against the current.
Blockade-running steamship	25	These ocean-going, paddle wheel steamships were specially designed for speed as well as stealth.
Horseback	40	Applies to a full gallop over a relatively short distance.
Train	60	Speed depended mostly on the condition of the tracks. The maximum speed in the South could be 20 mph or less.
Telegraph	Fraction of a second	However, it typically took the operators a minute or more to transmit and record a message in Morse code.

NOTE: Speeds are approximate