

California Express Mails, 1849 to 1856

by Richard Frajola (May 2012)

The California Expresses, as defined here, were a group of privately owned firms that carried letter mail and newspapers to, from, or within California. They constitute a subset of the larger group of California private mail handlers. Not included are forwarding agents and San Francisco letter bag operators who arranged transmission of mail by others. Also excluded are the few private individuals who delivered and picked up mail within a city. Still, it is a large and diverse group of companies.

This study deals with the mail systems and companies in operation prior to December 31, 1855. That date serves as a defined endpoint for the pioneer period as patterns of express activity changed significantly following the collapse of Adams Express, the dominant single express, in February 1855. The Pacific Express and other express companies arose from the collapse of Adams, and the age of Wells, Fargo & Co. domination began. Also, by 1856, the government postal system was able to provide reliable and inexpensive postal services to most areas of California.

This article will examine the different types of California express companies that operated in the period before the government post office was able to effectively serve California postal patrons. Although mail carrying was of minor importance to the vast majority of the express companies who could make larger profits carrying gold and supplies, it was necessary as the communication component of the system. These express companies carried mail on ocean to ocean routes by steamship, on inland waterways by steamboats, and on mountain and landlocked division routes by stagecoach or on horseback. Working in conjunction when necessary, these diverse elements together formed a complex transportation system. It is this scheme, viewed as an integrated transportation and distribution system, that will be examined.

Background

Following the discovery of gold in California in 1848, massive immigration began when news of the discoveries reached the East. When William Van Voorhies, Special Post Office Agent for California and Oregon, arrived in the burgeoning city of San Francisco on February 28, 1849, he faced the impossible task of setting up postal facilities in a timely fashion. He had been instructed to set up coastal post offices in California which could be visited by the contract mail steamers.

Van Voorhies, as well as his successor R.T.P. Allen, faced a major problem; the cost of goods and services in California was vastly higher than in the East. Even though the agents were able to appoint postmasters in several towns, they were not able to secure contractors to carry the mail for the meager pay allowed. Congress, a distant 3500 miles away, had to approve mail transportation contracts for all routes that produced insufficient revenue. As a result, mails could not be transported within California until Congress could pass new legislation. Before any approved route contracts could be implemented, the contracts had to be advertised for bid, the contracts awarded and the news relayed back to California.

The mails that arrived by contract steamer at the San Francisco post office had to be distributed to patrons directly from their small office. Similarly, all mail destined for the East had to pass through the same post office in order to be placed on the next mail steamer out. It was not possible to serve that many postal patrons effectively from such a small office with the bulk of the demand concentrated on steamers' arrival or departure dates.

The residents of California located in San Francisco as well as over a vast interior area sought other solutions and were willing to pay for them. As a result, the postal needs of the population were met by private firms and individuals from an early date and the popular and efficient express services continued well beyond the establishment of the post offices.

The situation was well summarized in an article that appeared in the July 27, 1850 issue of the San Francisco newspaper *Daily Alta California*:

EXPRESS COMPANIES - We scarcely know what we should do if it were not for the various Express lines established, enabling us to hold communication with the Mines. With the present defective mail communication we should scarcely ever be able to hear from the towns throughout California, or the remote portions of the Placers, north and south. Our enterprising Express agents however supply the deficiency, and my promptitude with which they attend the transmission of letters and packages, and the fidelity with which they conduct all business entrusted to them, are justly entitled to the confidence and support of the community. Their expenses are necessarily very heavy and it requires a liberal patronage to remunerate them. Hawley & Co., Todd & Bryan and Berford & Co., are the three lines holding communication with different sections of the country. We commend them all to the liberal patronage of the public, and beg to acknowledge to all of them our indebtedness for numerous acts of kindness and courtesy.

The Transportation Schema

In this pioneer period, the transportation system expanded geographically and evolved slowly but the primary routes and basic transportation methods remained constant. For westbound mail from the East addressed to a miner at one of the mining camps near Sacramento City, the first leg was the ocean to ocean service. This included transit from an eastern port, via steamship (defined here to include all ocean-going, steam powered vessels) operating on the Atlantic Ocean. Then came land transit across Panama or Nicaragua if needed, and finally by steamship operating on the Pacific Ocean to San Francisco. A distinct group of expresses, classified here as the *ocean to ocean expresses*, provided this service.

The second leg on the journey, after arrival of the mail at San Francisco, was the onward transmission by steamboat up the Sacramento River to one of the major distribution points along the waterway, in this example Sacramento City. A second group of expresses provided the requisite steamboat service and are classified as *trunk line expresses*. There were four early ports that served as divisional distribution points (see Figure 1): San Francisco, Stockton, Sacramento, and Marysville. Shasta developed into an additional

division point and was reached by a combination of steamboat and stage routes.

The steamboat service from San Francisco to the Stockton division point traversed San Francisco Bay and Delta to the Sacramento River. Other division points were reached via the Sacramento River to Sacramento City and north past its confluence with the American River to Marysville and later by steamboat to Colusa and then by stage.

The third leg on the journey was from the division point to the addressee if he were located outside the distribution center. Mail was distributed by various means including on foot, by horse, by stage, or by a combination of these transportation modes. This group of expresses is classified here as *divisional expresses*. Each division point served a unique geographical area or division.

As the transportation network matured, some of the companies began operating on more than one of the three segments. The successful ocean to ocean expresses made substantially larger profits than the trunk line expresses which, in turn, made more money than the divisional expresses. This was usually in proportion to the amount of gold each bloc of expresses was handling, as well as the amount of financial services that they offered. In an effort to assure their continued supply line of gold from the mines, the ocean to ocean expresses made alliances, usually exclusive, with the trunk line expresses and even the divisional expresses. As the disparity in profits increased, the larger firms often purchased the feeder trunk line and divisional expresses. Usually, what was formerly the express firm became an agent for the larger company and continued as an integral part of the transportation scheme. As a result, the three-tier model still works well conceptually. Each of the three major components of the transportation system can now be described in more detail.

The Ocean to Ocean Expresses

This group of express companies group includes those firms that operated between San Francisco and the East. This link in the transportation system was utilized primarily to transport gold from the California mines to New York but mail was also carried. It should be noted that from an early date the post office carried the majority of mail that required ocean to ocean transport. The private firms operated on all available steamships and used both the contract mail route via Panama as well as the non-contract via Nicaragua route.



Figure 1. Map of rivers and division points

The most important of the ocean to ocean expresses during this period were: Adams & Co's Express, Berford & Co's Express, Gregory's Atlantic & Pacific Express, Pacific Express (after February 1855), and Wells, Fargo & Co's Express. In addition, some steamship lines received private mails directly for transmission. The two primary routes these expresses used will be briefly described. The via Nicaragua route was never used for contract mails, while the via Panama route was used both by the post office as a contract route and as a route for private express mail.

The Via Nicaragua Route - Cornelius Vanderbilt founded his Independent Line with the intent to operate a passenger and mail route across Nicaragua in opposition to the contract mail steamers operating via Panama to California. He chose the route (shown in Figure 2) because it was substantially faster than the longer contract route. In 1853, his Accessory Transit Company received a concession from Nicaragua to cross the country. The route was by steamer from New York to San Juan del Norte on the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua, by river to Lake Nicaragua, across the lake to Rivas, by stage to San Juan del Sur, and by steamer to San Francisco.



Figure 2. Map of the via Nicaragua route

Use of the route decreased after William Walker's military incursion into Nicaragua in 1855, and the route was abandoned in early 1857. Later, Vanderbilt extorted a monthly stipend from the companies that held the via Panama mail contracts, and his Accessory Transit Company ceased to operate.

All mail carried over this route was carried privately and did not enter the government mails until an entry port was reached after the ocean to ocean transport was complete. Many such uses bore propaganda handstamps such as "Via Nicaragua Ahead of the Mails" and soon other competing lines began carrying mails without a contract. Some of these handstamps were applied by letter bag operators in San Francisco while others were applied by the steamship offices or the express companies themselves.

The Via Panama Route - The most important government mail contract route connecting California and the East was via the Isthmus of Panama (Figure 3). This route, which utilized steamships on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, carried the majority of government mail during the period between 1849 and the July 1, 1861 commencement of a daily overland mail on the central route. In addition to the contract mails carried on the via Panama route, some ocean to ocean express



Figure 3. Map of the via Panama route

companies used the same contract mail steamers to transport express agents and their private express mail bags.

There were three segments to the route. The United States Mail Steamship Company (USMSC) held the contract for mail on the Atlantic side with service from New York to Chagres commencing on October 1, 1848. With the opening of nearby Aspinwall the port was changed in March 1852. The Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSS) held the contract for mail on the Pacific Ocean. Their service on the Pacific commenced with January 17, 1849 departure of PMSS steamer *California* from Panama City with mail for San Francisco. The third section was the seventy mile trail across the Isthmus of Panama that connected the two ocean mail routes. Original service was provided by the PMSS, but on January 1, 1852 the transit contract was given to the Panama Railroad Company. The railway was completed in January 1855.

The California Trunk Route Expresses

The primary commercial route between San Francisco and the mining supply camps of the interior was by inland waterway. This main line included the San Francisco Bay and Delta, the San Joaquin River south to Stockton and the Sacramento River, north past Sacramento City, and up the Feather River to Marysville.

Commercial steamboat navigation on the trunk line can be dated to October 1849 when the first commercially successful steamer arrived on the Sacramento River. It was the 226-foot side-wheeler *Senator* that had arrived safely after a seven-month trip from New York. She was soon joined by others, including the *New World*, also operated by the People's Line. The People's Line dominated until the independently owned screw-propeller steamer *McKim* arrived on the river. In 1851, the Union Line inaugurated service with two steamboats, the *Confidence* and the *Wilson G. Hunt* and by year end there were at least thirty steamboats operating on the Sacramento River.

Many of the early expresses operated only between division points by steamboat and only as far as another of the four primary division points, namely San Francisco, Stockton, Sacramento City, and Marysville. From the division points, express matter and mail was usually distributed by other modes of conveyance to a final destination by one of the divisional expresses. The Shasta division point was first served from Marysville and later by steamboat to Colusa and then stagecoach.

Among the primary trunk route expresses operating during this period were: Adams & Co's Express, C.A. Berford & Co's Express, Todd's Express, Freeman & Co's Express, Gregory's Express, Hawley's Express, Mumby & Co's Express, Newell & Co. Express, Pacific Express, Reynolds & Co's Express, Todd's Express, and Wells, Fargo & Co's Express.

The Divisional Expresses

This group of expresses is the most diverse in terms of modes of transportation utilized. Although most of these distribution points were within reasonable distance to their service areas (see Figure 4 map), some

expresses operating from San Francisco served additional points along the entire California coastline. Because of these differences, the divisions will be examined separately.

The San Francisco Division express companies did not have to operate over rough mountain terrain to mining camps. Instead, their service area included business and commercial centers around the Bay and Delta as well as coastal California ports (not shown on map).

Many of the areas, such as San Jose, could be easily reached by steamboat or over well developed stage coach roads. To reach additional coastal California ports the use of sailing vessels, or steamers over longer routes, was required.

As a result, the companies servicing this division were a much more diverse group than their counterparts elsewhere. The companies serving the coastal towns or inland towns situated on stage roads generally carried mail completely outside of the government mails. Express matter and letters could be dropped off and collected directly at the express offices with no government mail service involved.

The Stockton Division expresses primarily served the Southern Mines and the smaller supply towns in the area as shown on map. Mail was received from steamboats operating from San Francisco or points up the Sacramento River. Like the other mountain express companies, the portion of service beyond Stockton was handled by stage and horse.

During the pioneer period, Todd & Company and Newell & Co. expresses operated between Stockton and San Francisco by steamer. Although they also operated by coach to Sonora as well, the leading divisional express serving the mountain mining camps was Brown's Express.

The Sacramento Division express companies operated from the primary hub of gold mining activities in California. Sacramento City was located at the point where the American River joined the Sacramento River. The American River watershed area was home to the first gold discovery at Sutter's Fort in 1848, and also many of the earliest producing placer mines.

The influx of a large number of gold miners to the area in 1849 brought with it an enormous load on the

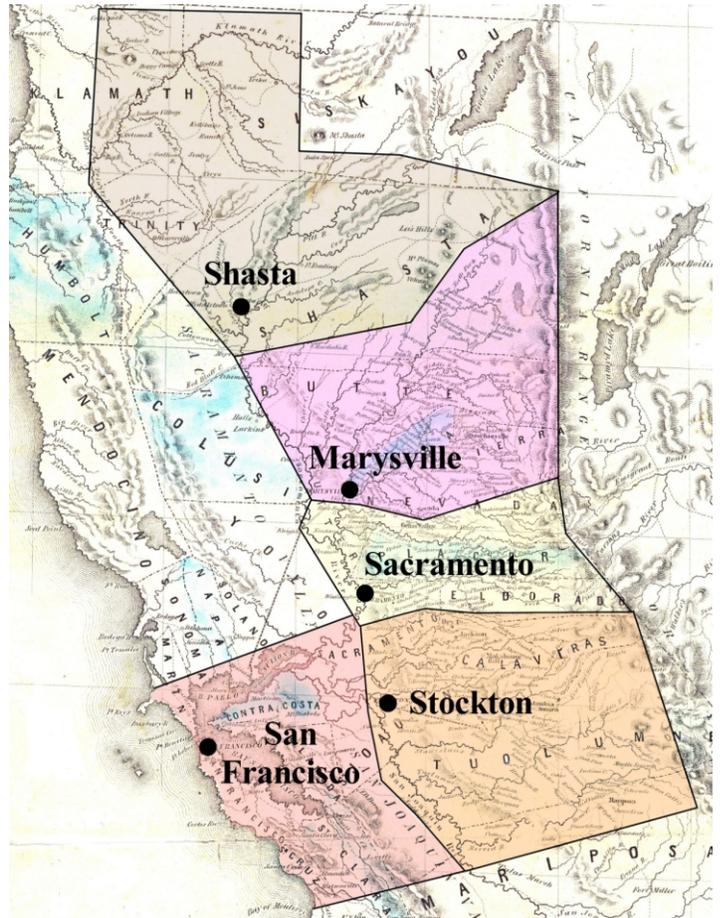


Figure 4. Map showing Divisional express service areas

transportation and banking systems. The miners working in the isolated mining camps up the Feather River and its branches required food, mining equipment, a way to transport their gold to buyers and communication with the outside world.

Typically, the Sacramento Division express companies carried supplies, newspapers and mail from Sacramento City to the miners and returned with gold to be shipped, via brokers and banking centers, to the East. In the Sacramento City Division, the express companies initially transported their cargo on foot, horseback or in small carts. The Sacramento Valley Railroad was not completed until 1856.

The Marysville Division express companies gained prominence after gold mining activities on the upper Feather and Yuba Rivers reached significant levels. It developed into a primary transportation hub and river port as steamboat routes were extended from Sacramento northward on the Sacramento River to Marysville.

In general, the mining camps in northern California that were served from Marysville were less concentrated than those in the Sacramento City Division. They also generally required longer transportation lines, particularly following the 1853 mining boom near Shasta. These long overland trips mostly traversed flatter terrain which allowed the use of stage coaches as well as carts at an early date. Marysville also served as an express center for the early mines in southern Oregon Territory.

The Shasta Division express companies did not become significant until late in the period. The mines in the area were initially served from Marysville and most of the pre-1853 expresses are more properly classified as operating from the Marysville division point. After the wealth of the area became apparent during the 1853 boom, its importance increased and became a true division point with direct service from San Francisco. Steamboats ascended the Sacramento River as far as Colusa during the period before 1856; between Colusa and Shasta, stage coaches were employed. The mining region served from Shasta extended north beyond the Oregon border when the Klamath River mines opened.

The Interface Between Post Office and Private Express Mails

During the period under discussion, 1849-1856, the postal system in California expanded rapidly. In 1849 and 1850, most post office mail from the East was directed to either the San Francisco or Sacramento post offices as more precise locations were unknown to eastern correspondents. The express companies handled almost all of the mail from those offices to the miners working in the gold fields. From November 1849, regular bi-monthly mail service between San Francisco and the East was the norm. As new California post offices became operational, defined as having a post office and had at least some form of regular contract mail service, government mail could be sent over routes previously the sole domain of the express companies. The Stockton office became operational in October 1849 and the Marysville office in August 1850.

The method employed by Alexander Todd, one of the earliest California expressmen, is typical. Todd, who in 1849 was at the gold diggings 150 miles from San Francisco, started a signature list of fellow miners who

authorized him to pick up mail for them at the San Francisco post office. Initially, Todd charged \$1.00 for checking for mail and took gold in payment for each letter he returned with. He also agreed to carry letters from the mines to the post office for \$2.50 each. On his first trip to San Francisco his pack mule was laden with letters going to the post office. Traveling through Stockton, the local merchants engaged him to carry their gold to San Francisco. This formula of carrying treasure as well as letter mail made the journey very profitable for Todd.

With the improvement of government postal arrangements the number of ocean to ocean expresses decreased. Those that survived turned to alternate routes, such as the via Nicaragua route after 1853, or relied on profits generated by banking or the carriage of gold. Similarly, the express companies that operated only via steamboat on the trunk line were forced to increase their operations beyond carriage of letter mail, or lower fees, or both.

With time, this pattern repeated itself frequently as the postal service reached more interior towns with regular service. The large companies thrived, particularly in their banking and gold shipping operations, while the smaller outfits were forced to add routes and lower letter mail rates. The divisional express companies expanded their coverage area and followed the miners to the newest booming locations. This expansion required the extension of transportation lines. The success of these smaller operators increasingly depended on their ability to team with reliable partners such as Wells, Fargo & Co. Express or Adams & Co's Express.

Adams & Company had been established in Boston in 1839 as a banking and parcel express company. Late in 1849, a separate partnership was set up for operations in California. Adams formula was to appoint agents in the numerous small mining camps who could conduct banking operations on their behalf. In addition to the banking of gold dust, Adams transported gold to San Francisco, and thence to the East. They also transported merchandise, parcels and letter mail between the mining camps. Letter mail carrying was an adjunct to their primary operations but it was not expensive for their messengers to carry a pouch of mail on their routes. Agents who accompanied the gold shipments to the East also took letter mail. Adams purchased several of the smaller letter expresses and subcontracted the staging out to others. By 1854, Adams & Company had become the largest shipper of gold dust and had developed a vast network of agents and staging lines throughout California. However, in February 1855, as a result of the failure of a major Eastern banking partner, Adams was forced to close their doors in California.

Wells, Fargo & Company adopted the Adams formula of combining banking, express haulage of parcels and gold, and carriage of letter mail by both overland and ocean routes. Reuben Washburn established the first California branch of Wells, Fargo & Company upon his arrival on July 13, 1852. They soon perfected the formula and became the dominate force in the California express business after 1855. Wells, Fargo & Company purchased competing businesses to expand their routes, formed partnerships with those they could not purchase, loaned money to express and haulage companies, and formed alliances with others.

On January 13, 1854, U. S. special postal agent Fry gave notice to the express companies that they must have

U.S. postage prepaid on letter mail in an amount equivalent to the postage if carried in the government mails. After postal stationery entires became widely available, the express companies introduced printed franks. Early advertisements for Wells Fargo & Co. printed franks began running on August 16, 1855 and state:

We will furnish Government Three Cent Envelopes with our "Frank" upon them, at a rate of \$12.50 per hundred, which will convey single Letters enclosed therein over our California or Coast Routes free of charge.

The Ten Cent Government Envelopes, with our "Frank," will be furnished at \$20 per hundred, which will carry single letters enclosed therein, free of further charge, through our Atlantic Express.

The use of printed express franks on government entires proliforated in the period after 1855 as many new companies began operating in smaller and more remote areas of California. The end of this pioneer period saw the lessened importance of the express companies in the transcontinental transmission of mail. This role changed again in 1860 with the arrival of the Pony Express on the overland route.

Summary

The private express companies provided a range of services that were vital to the growth of California in the period between 1849 and 1856. In addition to banking and the carriage of gold and express matter, this group of companies provided reliable letter mail communication to the residents in the period before efficient government postal service was available.

Previous philatelic literature has focused primarily on the individual companies rather than on the overall transportation schema that was employed in the transporation of mail. This schema combined different types companies with correspondingly different modes of service over extended routes. Three main categories of company type can be identified: companies that provided ocean to ocean service by steamship, companies that operated over the trunk line by steamboat to the division points, and a third group of companies that operated from one of the five division points to a regional service area.

This overview of the interaction between the various types of California express companies, as well as their interaction with the government postal service, helps to understand the disparate elements that combined to result in an effective commuication system in the pioneer period.