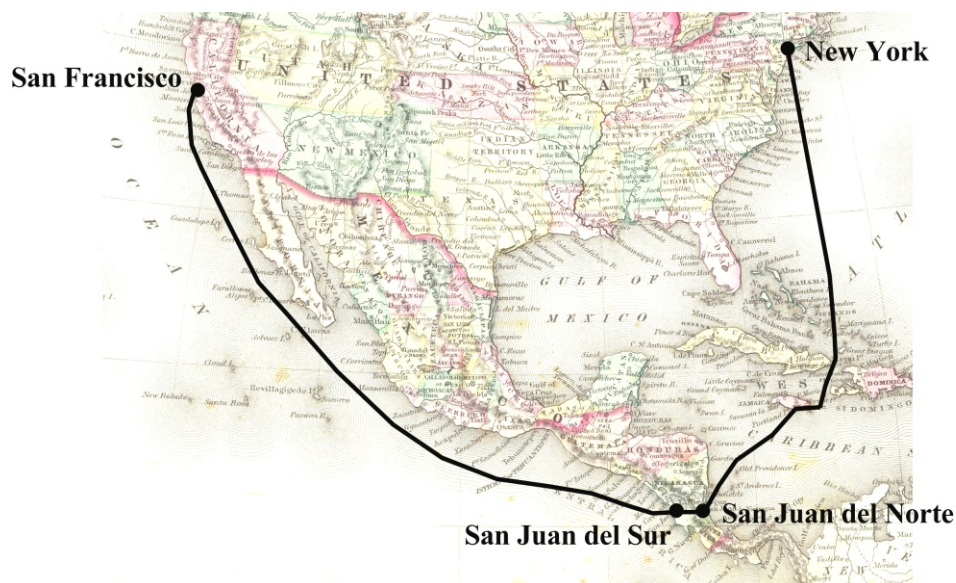


Via Nicaragua Private Mail Route



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 because it was substantially faster than the longer contract route. In 1853 he received a concession for his Accessory Transit Company 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.

The first through trip from San Francisco that carried mail was likely the September 14, 1852 departure of the S.S. Lewis. After transit across Nicaragua, mails connected with the Daniel Webster departing San Juan del Norte on October 6 and arriving in New Orleans on October 11, 1852. Use of the route decreased after filibuster William Walker's incursion into Nicaragua in 1855. By August 29, 1855 Walker controlled San Juan del Sur and continued in control until 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. The route was resurrected from late 1862 until the first months of 1868 but seldom used.

Mail carried without contract over this route frequently bore propaganda handstamps such as "Via Nicaragua Ahead of the Mails" and soon other competing lines began carrying mails without contract. Some of these handstamps were applied by letter bag operators, or news agencies, in San Francisco while others were likely applied by the steamship offices or express companies using the route.

Eastbound covers carried privately via Nicaragua usually entered the mails at New York City and bear their ship or steamship markings. There are few westbound covers reported and only one eastbound cover from the 1860s period.