

Post Office Overland Mail Directive Handstamps

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This article will examine the “OVERLAND” straight line directive handstamps that were used at the San Francisco (two types), Sacramento, and Nevada City, California post offices between October 1859 and November 1860. An additional type with “OVERLAND MAIL” designation that was used at Weaverville will also be discussed. After the examination of numerous covers, several of which bear postmarks of the named office in identical ink, there is no question that the markings were applied at the post offices as listed. Excluded from this survey are directive handstamps which were privately applied.

These auxiliary directive markings have been inadequately recorded and interpreted in the past¹. This article will incorporate a census of currently known examples and a theory to explain why and how these devices were used. The authors will attempt to show that the markings applied prior to January 23, 1860 should be broadly interpreted as meaning: “This letter was received too late to catch the mail steamer departure from San Francisco and is being sent by overland mail instead.” After that date, when the default for mail carriage was changed to the overland mail route, the markings may be interpreted as meaning: “This letter was received too late to catch the stage coach departure from San Francisco and is being sent by next overland mail instead.” All reported examples were carried over the Butterfield Southern route. This mail route was from San Francisco, via Los Angeles, Tucson, El Paso and Fort Smith to either St. Louis or Memphis.

Although “Too Late” handstamp markings were used later at San Francisco, after 1867, and elsewhere in the United States they are in all instances associated with steamship departures and were used to indicate that a letter was to be held for a later steamer departure. San Francisco presents a nearly unique case where mail that was received too late for a steamer departure could instead be conveyed overland. This is a rather difficult concept to convey in a concise handstamp.

It should be noted here that San Francisco postmarks, like all datestamps used in the United States in this period, reflect the date that the mail was to be transmitted onward and not the date of receipt of the letter by the San Francisco office.

The Default Mail Handling System

During the period under discussion, distributing post offices such as San Francisco received instructions as to how mail to various destinations was to be routed. These instructions included a “default” route that was to be used unless the sender specifically endorsed the cover to be sent by a specified route other than the default.

For trans-continental mail passing through San Francisco prior to January 23, 1860, the default route was to go by steamer via Panama. Therefore, all mail not endorsed with a specific overriding directive, was sent via Panama. After that date until the switch to the

Central Overland Route in the Spring of 1861, the default for trans-continental mail routing was the Butterfield Southern Overland route.

It is interesting to note that the San Francisco postmaster Charles L. Weller was a strong advocate for Butterfield's twice weekly overland mail while newspaper reports of the era frequently complained that the New York postmaster preferred to send the California mails by way of the steamers. It should also be noted that by the Fall of 1859 the semi-monthly mails by the Central overland route were very little used except for mails to Salt Lake City because of frequent contractor failure to carry mails as contracted.

The San Francisco Type 1 Overland Handstamp

The census (see Table 1) records 52 covers from all of the known offices of use. The largest group of these is the 33 covers that bear the San Francisco type 1 handstamp (SFC1) and they will be examined first. The marking, which shows a small "R" in the word "OVERLAND," is illustrated in Figure 1. It was used almost exclusively in the seven month period between October 1859 and April 1860. The one 1862 example (SFC1-33) probably represents a fluke late use of a retired device.

OVERLAND

Figure 1. San Francisco type 1 "OVERLAND" handstamp with small "R," SFC-1)

A typical example of the use of the San Francisco type 1 marking on cover is shown in Figure 2. This cover (SFC1-5) was sent from Honolulu, Hawaii on October 3, 1859 and was carried by the ship *Yankee* which arrived in San Francisco on October 21, 1859. The arrival was a day late for the semi-monthly mail steamer departure which at this period sailed on the 5th and 20th of each month. The San Francisco postmaster determined that the best service to the East was via the Butterfield Southern route which departed from San Francisco each Monday and Friday. The cover was stamped with the "Overland" handstamp as a directive and to indicate the choice of this route was by the postmaster rather than the sender. It was also postmarked with the San Francisco October 24, 1859 datestamp indicating that it was being sent onward on that Monday departure date of the Butterfield Overland mails via Los Angeles which arrived at St. Louis on November 18, 1859. The *New York Times* newspaper of November 19 reports news, via telegraph, from Saint Louis that mentions arrival of the overland mail with most recent news from Hawaii. For a time in transit comparison, the mail that was sent via Panama by Pacific Mail Steamship Company steamer *John L. Stephens* that departed San Francisco on October 20, 1859 arrived in New York with the US Mail Steamship Company steamer *North Star* from Aspinwall on November 21, 1859.



Figure 2. A cover that originated in Honolulu with Oct 3, 1859 postmark and transmitted onward from San Francisco by the Butterfield overland mail departing October 24, 1859. San Francisco type I “OVERLAND” handstamp (census #SFC1-5)

All five recorded letters (SFC1-2 to #SFC1-6) carried on this trip of the *Yankee* from Hawaii are addressed to the East and were similarly marked with the Overland handstamp.

A further six covers originating in Hawaii with postmarks of November 16, 1859 (SFC1-13 to SFC1-18) were similarly handled at San Francisco after receipt of mails carried from Hawaii by the ship *Architect* which arrived in San Francisco on December 11, 1859. Having missed the steamer departure on December 5th, the covers were marked Overland in San Francisco and postmarked for the Monday, December 12, 1859 departure of the Butterfield stage via Los Angeles to St. Louis. The overland mail arrived at St. Louis on January 2, 1860.

Additional covers that originated in Hawaii on December 6, 1859 (carried by the *Yankee*, SFC1-23) and January 24, 1860 (carried by the *Comet*, SFC1-30) also show the Overland handstamp applied after having arrived too late at San Francisco to catch the steamer departure. All of the San Francisco postmarks are dated to correspond with Butterfield stage departures.

To summarize, 14 covers that originated in Hawaii bear the San Francisco type 1 Overland handstamp. The common feature of all is that their mails were received in San Francisco too late to catch semi-monthly steamship departure. All of the reported covers carried by these four vessels on these trips bear the overland handstamp although it would be expected that covers addressed to port of entry, if found, would not.

A second group of four covers that bear the type 1 Overland handstamp originated in Victoria, British Columbia (SFC1-25 to SFC1-28). An example is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. A cover that originated in Victoria and was transmitted onward from San Francisco by the Butterfield overland mail departing December 30, 1859. San Francisco type I “OVERLAND” handstamp (census #SFC1-25)

This cover was sent from Victoria via Portland, Oregon and thence by PMSS steamship *Notherner* which departed Portland on December 24, 1859 and arrived at San Francisco on December 29, 1859. Rather than await the steamship departure of January 5, 1860, it was directed to be sent overland with a type 1 handstamp and departed on the Butterfield stage of Monday, December 30, 1859. This trip arrived in St. Louis on January 23, 1860. A second cover from Victoria with the same use is also recorded (SFC1-26). The other two reported covers that originated in Victoria that have the type 1 handstamp (SFC1-27, SFC1-28) were handled similarly and were dated in San Francisco on January 23, 1860 to indicate carriage on the Monday departure of the Butterfield stage which arrived at St. Louis on February 15, 1860.

The January 23, 1860 date is significant. The *New York Times* reported that San Francisco Postmaster Weller had on that date implemented the change of the default route for letter mail to the East from carriage by steamer via Panama to carriage by Butterfield overland mails via Los Angeles and St. Louis. This had been first announced by Weller in California papers on January 17th but letter mails are known to have been carried on the steamer *Atlantic* that departed on January 20, 1860. So, apparently the change of default was indeed first implemented on January 23, 1860.

The remaining 14 covers which bear San Francisco type 1 Overland handstamps fall into two groups. The first group comprises nine covers that were marked in transit at San Francisco having originated elsewhere in California (SFC1-1, SFC1-7, SFC1-8, SFC1-9, SFC1-11, SFC1-20, SFC1-29, SFC1-31, SFC1-32). The earliest of these, a use from Don Pedro’s Bar, California (SFC1-1), is also the earliest reported example of the handstamp and is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. A cover that originated at Don Pedro's Bar on October 4, 1859 and was transmitted onward from San Francisco by the Butterfield overland mail departing October 7, 1859. San Francisco type I "OVERLAND" handstamp (census #SFC1-1)

The cover was sent from Don Pedro's Bar, California (located in Tuolumne County) on October 4, 1859 to San Francisco for onward transmission to Massachusetts. The default at this date was for mail to be shipped from San Francisco via steamer to Panama. However, this cover must have arrived in San Francisco too late to catch the departure of the New York and San Francisco Steamship Company mail steamer *Cortes* which departed the following day at 9:00 AM. As a result the San Francisco post office stamped the cover with their new overland device and placed it in the Butterfield mail that departed on Friday, October 7, 1859.

It is presumed after examination of the dates of mailings that none of these covers arrived at San Francisco in a timely fashion to catch the mail steamer departure and were routed overland on the Butterfield route instead. This does not include a final cover that originated in Missouri and is addressed to Oregon (SFC1-7). It bears a partial strike of the overland marking that is stuck 75% off the top of the letter and was probably hit with the marking accidentally.

The final group bearing San Francisco type 1 overland handstamps are five atypical covers that have San Francisco origin postmarks, or are assumed to have originated in San Francisco (SFC1-10, SFC1-19, SFC1-21, SFC1-22, SFC1-24). The example shown in Figure 5 has a red manuscript "Paid 15" endorsement that is believed to have been applied at San Francisco (SFC1-19).

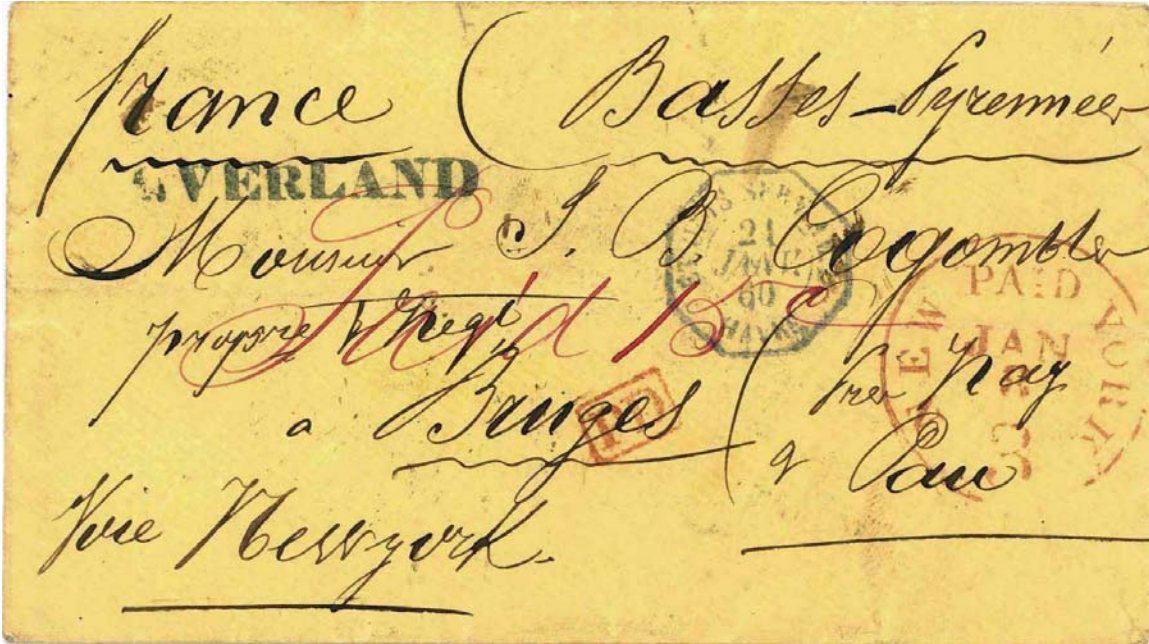


Figure 5. A cover that apparently originated in San Francisco that was transmitted onward by the Butterfield overland mail departing December 9, 1859. San Francisco type 1 “OVERLAND” handstamp (census #SFC1-19)

This cover was likely posted too late for December 5, 1859 sailing of the Atlantic and Pacific Steamship Company (Opposition Line) steamer *Uncle Sam* and was instead carried overland on Butterfield stage of December 9th. The stage arrived at Saint Louis on January 2, 1860 and the mails reached New York City in time to catch the steamer sailing for France that departed on January 8th.

Another of the presumed San Francisco origin covers is a use to Nova Scotia (SFC1-24). It has a blue oval “Paid” handstamp that was applied by Wells Fargo. This cover was evidently intended to be carried by the Wells Fargo agent on one of the steamship departures of December 20, 1859. However, it was instead placed in the mails and was postmarked for the Friday, December 30th departure of the Butterfield stage.

An article in the *Daily Alta California* of December 31, 1860 mentions that: “By the Overland Mail which left this city yesterday, 7910 letters were sent. This unusual number is due to the arrival of the mails from the North by the steamers *Northerner* and *Columbia*, which did not reach here in time for the mail steamer.” It is possible that this cover was included in the Wells Fargo pouch of one of the steamers from the North.

The Sacramento Overland Handstamp

In addition to the San Francisco Overland handstamp used between October 1859 and April 1860, the Sacramento post office used the handstamp shown below in Figure 6. The six reported uses (SAC1-6) date between August 24, 1859 (SAC-1) and January 3, 1860

(SAC-6). It should be noted that both of these covers have very weak strikes of the day portion of the postmarks. The dates listed in the census for these two covers were both taken from catalog descriptions which cannot be confirmed from available images.

OVERLAND.

Figure 6. Sacramento, California “OVERLAND” handstamp (SAC)

A typical example of the use of the SAC marking is shown in Figure 7 below. The Sacramento marking is believed to have been used to indicate that it was received too late at Sacramento to catch the overland mail departure from San Francisco.



Figure 7. Cover used from Sacramento on November 11, 1859 with SAC “OVERLAND” handstamp (SAC-4)

This cover was postmarked at Sacramento on Friday, November 11, 1859. It bears their Overland handstamp in matching ink. The date corresponds to the Butterfield departure day from San Francisco. Interestingly, the departure schedule of the Butterfield mails from San Francisco had just been changed from 8:00 AM to Noon, effective from the November 7, 1859 trip. The postmaster at Sacramento may have used the Overland handstamp to indicate that although he would miss the departure of that date, he still wished the cover to go overland on the next trip departing November 14th rather than by the steamer that was departing scheduled to depart on November 20th. The November 14, 1859 departure from San Francisco arrived in St. Louis on December 6, 1859. All four Sacramento covers that can be firmly dated are postmarked with the date of a Butterfield departure from San Francisco (SAC-2 to SAC-5).

The Weaverville Overland Handstamp

The “OVERLAND MAIL” handstamp used by the Weaverville post office is shown in Figure 8. The only reported cover (WEA-1) is postmarked Weaverville, California on Saturday, January 7, 1860 in ink that matches the “Overland Mail” handstamp. The cover is shown in Figure 9.

OVERLAND MAIL.

Figure 8. The OVERLAND MAIL handstamp of Weaverville, California



Figure 9. Cover originating in Weaverville and postmarked January 7, 1860 (WEA-1)

As Weaverville is at least a two day stage trip distance north of San Francisco it is possible that the postmaster knew that the mail was going to arrive too late for the Monday Butterfield departure and wanted to indicate that it was not to be held for the next steamer departure. This is the same reason for use of the marking as seen at Sacramento.

Overland Handstamps Uses after April 1860

Additional uses of a new style “OVERLAND” marking at San Francisco as well as a marking introduced at Nevada City will be examined next. The San Francisco marking (SFC2), showing dropped “LAN” in “OVERLAND,” is shown in Figure 10.

OVERLAND

Figure 10. The San Francisco type 2 marking with dropped “LAN.”

Ten examples of the San Francisco type 2 handstamp are reported with uses dated between September 6 and October 26, 1860, five months after the latest reported use of the first style marking. San Francisco postmaster Weller had changed the default on January 23, 1860 from steamer service via Panama to the Butterfield overland route. So, all letter mail was to be sent overland unless specifically endorsed otherwise. One of the three reported examples that originated in San Francisco (SFC2-3, SFC2-7, SFC2-10) is shown in Figure 11.



Figure 11. Cover originating in San Francisco on September 24, 1859 (SFC2-3)

This cover addressed to Switzerland was endorsed in manuscript to be sent overland. It was undoubtedly received at the post office well prior to the date it was transmitted onward. On Monday, September 21, 1859 the mail steamer *Uncle Sam* was scheduled to depart at 9:00 AM and the Butterfield overland mail was scheduled to depart at Noon.

It is probable that the cover was received after the closing of the Monday Butterfield mail bag and was used in manner typical of other Overland handstamps to indicate that the letter was received too late to make Monday's overland mail and was held for the Friday, September 24th departure.

A use of San Francisco type 2 handstamp on a cover that originated in Vancouver, Washington Territory is shown in Figure 12. It was postmarked at origin on September 25, 1860. Overland mails from Washington Territory were scheduled to arrive in six days at this time. However, the *Daily Alta California* reported news from nearby Portland, Oregon dated to September 25 in their newspaper of October 3, 1860 so it is clear that this cover reached San Francisco too late for the Monday, October 1 overland mail departure and was instead carried on the Friday, October 5 departure.



Figure 12. Cover originating at Vancouver, Washington Territory with postmark of October 3, 1860 bearing a San Francisco type 2 handstamp (SFC2-5)

An interesting use of the type 2 Overland handstamp at San Francisco is a cover that originated in La Porte, California on October 15, 1860 (SFC2-10) which is shown in Figure 13. It is a double rate use to France with three additional stamps on reverse overpaying 30c rate. This cover was evidently received in San Francisco with the adhesives uncanceled and here the SFC2 device was employed as a cancel. It would have been received at San Francisco office too late for carriage on the Butterfield departure of that date and was carried on the trip that left Friday, October 19, 1860. The mails from that trip arrived in New York on November 13th and this cover arrived in time to catch the departure of the regular Saturday American mail steamer on November 17th.



Figure 13. Overland handstamp used as a cancel on October 15, 1860 cover from La Porte to France (SFC2-8)

The Nevada City Overland Handstamp

An overland marking was used also at Nevada City, California after the default had been changed to the overland Butterfield route. Only two examples have been reported and the marking is shown in Figure 14.

OVERLAND

Figure 14. The “OVERLAND” marking used at Nevada City (NVC)

The earlier of the two uses was postmarked on Friday, June 15, 1860 at Nevada City (NVC-1) and is shown in Figure 15. The second example is postmarked Nevada City on a Monday, November 26, 1860.



Figure 15. Cover originating at Nevada City with June 15, 1860 postmark (NVC-1)

Both of these dates correspond with Butterfield Overland mail departures from San Francisco. Nevada City is too distant from San Francisco to arrive in a timely fashion for the departures of the same date. In keeping with previously discussed examples, it seems likely that the marking was used to indicate that the mail was to be sent onward by Overland mail on the next departure date.

The authors would appreciate learning of any additional examples of these markings that may exist and are not included in the census. The census, including images of reported covers where available, will be kept current on the website here:

www.rfrajola.com/overland/overland.htm

If anybody can provide better images, or provide images that are lacking, please advise the authors.

1. Alexander, Thomas J. *Simpson's U.S. Postal Markings, 1851 – 1861*. US Philatelic Classics Society, Columbus, Ohio, 1979, page 324. The listing incorrectly identifies the town of origin of the San Francisco type 2 marking and does not include the markings used at Sacramento or Weaverville. Further, the discussion portion does not associate the use of the markings with mail carried on the Butterfield overland route.

Table 1. Census of Post Office Overland Mail Handstamps

San Francisco Type 1 "OVERLAND" (small "R") handstamps (SFC1)					
Ref. #	Origin	Origin Pmk	SF Postmark	Franking	Addressee - Destination
SFC1-1	Don Pedro's Bar, CA	Oct 4, 1859	none	#24, #26 (3)	Nye - Falmouth, MA
SFC1-2	Honolulu, HI	Oct 3, 1859	Oct 24, 1859	ms 22, US #33 (4)	Dana - Boston, MA
SFC1-3	Honolulu, HI	Oct 3, 1859	Oct 24, 1859	HI #8, US #36	Bartow - Brooklyn, NY
SFC1-4	Honolulu, HI	Oct 3, 1859	Oct 24, 1859	HI #8, US #36	Murdock - Brooklyn, NY
SFC1-5	Honolulu, HI	Oct 3, 1859	Oct 24, 1859	12 Paid in SFC cds	Cameron - New York, NY
SFC1-6	Honolulu, HI	Oct 3, 1859	Oct 24, 1859	HI #8, US #36	Chamberlain - Parkesburgh, PA
SFC1-7	Montevallo, MO	Oct 21, 1859	none	#U15	Haynes - Jacksonville, OR
SFC1-8	Marietta, CA	Oct 30, 1859	none	ms Paid 10 cts	Orvuly - Newbridge, GA
SFC1-9	Placerville, CA	Nov 11, 1859	none	#35	Gilliland - North Henderson, IL
SFC1-10	San Francisco, CA	Dec 2, 1859	Dec 2, 1859	#14	Faunce - Duxbury, MA
SFC1-11	Todds Valley, CA	Dec 3, 1859	none	PAID, 20	Hallock - Canton, CT
SFC1-12	Honolulu, HI	Nov 9, 1859	Dec 9, 1859	HI #8, 12 (due) in SF	Maxfield - N. Dartmouth, MA
SFC1-13	Honolulu, HI	Nov 15, 1859	Dec 12, 1859	HI #8, US #36	Wilcox - Harwinton, CT
SFC1-14	Honolulu, HI	Nov 15, 1859	Dec 12, 1859	12 Paid in SF cds	Box 502 - Newark, NJ
SFC1-15	Honolulu, HI	Nov 16, 1859	Dec 12, 1859	HI #8, US #36	Bartow - Brooklyn, NY
SFC1-16	Honolulu, HI	Nov 16, 1859	Dec 12, 1859	12 (due) in SF cds	Briggs - N. Dartmouth, MA
SFC1-17	Honolulu, HI	Nov 16, 1859	Dec 12, 1859	12 Paid in SF cds	Morrison - Perry, ME
SFC1-18	Honolulu, HI	Nov 16, 1859	Dec 12, 1859	12 Paid in SF cds	Bond - Boston, MA
SFC1-19	(San Francisco, CA)	(Dec 6, 1859)	none	ms Paid 15c	Cogomble -Pau, France
SFC1-20	Red Dog, CA	Dec 12, 1859	none	#U18	Heydlauff- North Plains, MI
SFC1-21	San Francisco, CA	Dec 21, 1859	Dec 21, 1859	#35 (2) + #26 (2) frwd.	Dana - Boston, MA & Staton Is., NY
SFC1-22	San Francisco, CA	Dec 21, 1859	Dec 21, 1859	#U18	Wheeler - Philadelphia, PA
SFC1-23	Honolulu, HI	Dec 6, 1859	Dec 26, 1859	HI #8, US #36	Cochrane - New Bedford, MA
SFC1-24	San Francisco, CA	Dec 30, 1859	Dec 30, 1859	#26 (4)	Hamilton - Halifax, Nova Scotia
SFC1-25	Victoria, BC	none	Dec 30, 1859	Victoria P. O. frank, black boxed 15 due	Simpson - Ingersoll, Canada
SFC1-26	Victoria, BC	none	Dec 30, 1859	Victoria P. O. frank, red ms 15	Rumsey - Toronto, Canada
SFC1-27	Victoria, BC	none	Jan 23, 1860	Victoria P. O. frank, 15 Paid in SF cds	Simpson - Eldora, Canada
SFC1-28	Victoria, BC	none	Jan 23, 1860	Victoria P. O. frank, red ms 38	? - London, GB
SFC1-29	Longbar, CA	Jan 25, 1860	none	#35 (2 + 1 stamp missing)	Sigoud - Matour, France
SFC1-30	Honolulu, HI	Jan 24, 1860	Feb 13, 1860	HI #8, 12 (due) in SF cds	Hadlock - Jamesport, NY
SFC1-31	Columbia, CA	Mar 28, 1860	none	PAID, circled 15	Devarenne - Montrouge, France
SFC1-32	Nevada City, CA	Apr 4, 1860	none	Paid 15 ms	Hoitt - Raglan, Canada
SFC1-33	Camptonville, CA	May 8, 1862	none	#U41	Smith - Pittsford, VT

Sacramento "OVERLAND" handstamps (SAC)					
Ref. #	Origin	Origin Pmk	SF Postmark	Franking	Addressee - Destination
SAC-1	Sacramento City, CA	Aug (24?), 1859	none	#33	Leaming - Laporte, IN
SAC-2	Sacramento City, CA		none	#33	Herrington - Meadville, PA
SAC-3	Sacramento City, CA		none	#U18	Clay - Sandbornton Bridge, NH
SAC-4	Sacramento City, CA		none	#33	Green (?) - Chester, PA
SAC-5	Sacramento City, CA		none	#35	Castle - Essex, VT
SAC-6	Sacramento City, CA		none	#35	? - Oswego, IL
Weaverville "OVERLAND MAIL" handstamp (WEA)					
WEA-1	Weaverville, CA	Jan 7, 1860	none	#24, #26 (3)	Perkins - Cornville, ME
Nevada City "OVERLAND" handstamp (NVC)					
NVC-1	Nevada City, CA	Jun 15, 1860	none	#35	Simpson - Norristown, PA
NVC-2	Nevada City, CA	Nov 26, 1860	none	#U16	Song - Manchester, MA
San Francisco Type 2 "OVERLAND" (dropped "LAN") handstamps (SFC2)					
SFC2-1	Mokelumne Hill, CA	Sep 6, 1860	none	#35, (clean PFC, but two 12c replaced)	Beretta - Santa Margherita, Italy
SFC2-2	Don Pedro's Bar, CA	Sep 14, 1860	none	#35, Due 3 frwd	Jaye - Wareham, MA
SFC2-3	San Francisco, CA	Sep 24, 1860	Sep 24, 1860	#27, #35 (3)	Giacomo - Locarno, Switzerland
SFC2-4	Victoria, BC	none	Sep 27, 1860	Victoria PO frank, #27, #35	Millan - Bowmanville, Canada
SFC2-5	Vancouver, W.T.	Sep 25, 1860	none	#35	Harris - Philadelphia, PA
SFC2-6	Oroville, CA	Sep 21, 1860	none	#35 (2)	Smith -Long Green, MD
SFC2-7	San Francisco, CA	Oct 5, 1860	Oct 5, 1860	#27, #35 (3)	Giacomo - Locarno, Switzerland
SFC2-8	La Porte, CA	Oct 15, 1860	none	#30A (6)	Bouhier - Chantonnay, France
SFC2-9	Victoria, BC	none	Oct 19, 1860	Victoria PO frank, ms 1/- due	? - Edinburgh, GB
SFC2-10	San Francisco, CA	Oct 26, 1860	Oct 26, 1860	#30A (2)	Bartlett - Boston, MA