

A “private mail system” is a planned and organized system for handling letter mail, owned and operated by private firms or individuals, without government subsidy or control. This paper will give an overview of some of the various types of systems that operated in North America, west of the Mississippi River, prior to 1865. Some of these systems are frequently found and easily recognized while others are largely misunderstood and seldom recognized.

The Anglo population of the United States in 1830 was concentrated east of the Mississippi River. Saint Louis, Missouri was the primary departure point for the venturesome few who explored and traded in the vast area to the west. In the Northwest, mountain men were employed in the fur trade, trapping beaver for their pelts, and in the Spanish areas of the Southwest, traders were active on the Santa Fe Trail (Map 2). In California the few Anglos present were involved in the hide and tallow trade.

In 1830 government mail service was virtually non existent west of the Mississippi River. What little mail there was to and from the area was handled “by favor” of individuals who traveled along the various trails. The first organized private mail system was that instituted by the Hudson Bay Company.

Hudson Bay Company Canoe Brigade

In addition to their supply ship routes to England, the Hudson Bay Company operated a once yearly overland express connecting their western “factories” at Red River, York, and Fort Vancouver with their headquarters at Montreal, Canada. This “canoe brigade” left Fort Vancouver every spring during the early 1830’s. A Hudson Bay Company officer accompanied a crew of Indians over a route which followed the major waterway arteries as shown in Map 1.

Letters were carried without charge. Figure 1 shows an 1833 letter from Nathaniel Wyeth, an American fur trader, dated at Fort Vancouver which was carried by “favor of the Hudson Bay Co.” to Montreal where it entered the government mails with “Paid 6 (d)” for transmission to Massachusetts. It was carried across Lake Champlain and entered the United States mails as a steamboat letter at Whitehall, N.Y. (the manuscript “B”) where it was rated “18 ¾” cents due.



Figure 1 - 1833 Ft. Vancouver by Canoe Brigade to Montreal (*Dale Forster collection*)

During the 1830's and early 1840's there was little population growth in the West. However, some settlers and missionaries began to move west along the Oregon Trail (see Map 2). Letters continued to be handled "by favor" along the trails until the advent of the Mormon Church expresses.

The Mormon Church Expresses

In 1847 Brigham Young, along with a group of Mormon followers, settled Salt Lake City. By January, 1848 nearly two thousand people were located in the Valley. Communication was vital and on January 15, 1848 a mail express from Salt Lake City to Independence, Missouri was announced. The charge was fifty cents per letter and twelve cents for each newspaper. Throughout the remainder of 1848 there were several additional Church sponsored mail expresses to and from Salt Lake City. None could boast a regular schedule.

On January 18, 1849 a government post office was established for Salt Lake City. However, there was no government established postal route or contract awarded for the carriage of mail. In March, 1849 a postal route was established between Salt Lake City and Kanesville, Iowa although funds were still not approved. A church funded trip to Kanesville with mail was performed by Almon Babbitt. Leaving Salt Lake City on July 27, 1849, the mail included a memorial to congress requesting territorial status for Utah. An example of a private letter carried by Babbitt on this trip is shown in Figure 2. The letter, which mentions "I expect Mr. Babbitt along with the Mormon mail", is dated from Pacific Springs (see Map 2, located between Salt Lake City and South Pass) and was picked up by Babbitt on his way to Kanesville and postmarked three days after his arrival there more than a month later. Additional private and Church sponsored expresses operated between Salt Lake City and Iowa prior November, 1850 when the first contract mail arrived.

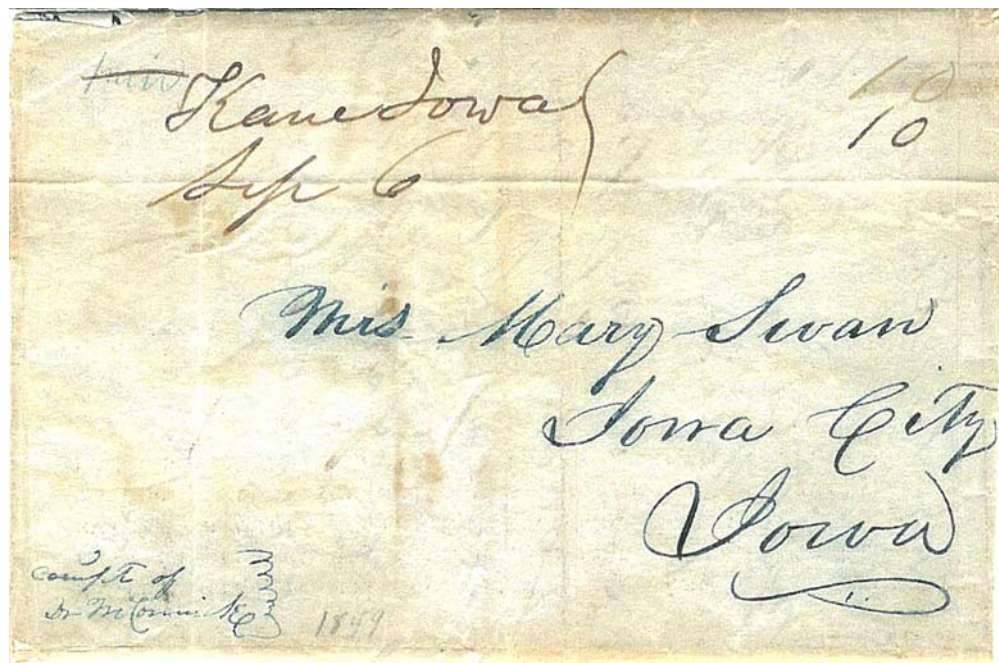


Figure 2 – July, 1849 from Salt Lake City by Express to Kane (Kanesville), Iowa
(Floyd Risvold collection)

The First Trans-Continental Contract Route

The need for the overland Mormon Church Expresses ended when the first contracts for a trans-continental carriage of mail were awarded by the post office in 1850. Samuel Woodson was granted a contract for a monthly mail service to begin July 1, 1850 between Independence, Missouri and Salt Lake City. George Chorpenning was awarded a contract for mail carriage between Salt Lake City and Sacramento, California to commence on the same date. See Map 4.

This monthly service primarily benefited those offices between California and Missouri who would otherwise have to rely on private mail services. The route was rarely used for mail between California and the East. New mail systems were needed in California.

Private Mail Services in California

Concurrent with the Mormon migration to Salt Lake City was the discovery of gold in California in 1848. A massive immigration began as news of the discoveries reached the East. It is estimated that the population of California was 100,000 by the end of 1849. When William Van Voorhies, Special Postal Agent for California and Oregon, arrived in the burgeoning city 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 post offices along the coast of California which could be visited by the contract mail steamers.

The major problem that Van Voorhies, as well as his successor R.T.P. Allen, faced was that the cost of goods and services in California was vastly higher than corresponding costs in the East. It was very hard to find individuals willing to perform the duties of a Postmaster for the meager pay allowed. Further, Congress had to approve postal routes in cases where the net proceeds of a post office did not support the expense of mail supply. This was completely out of the question in California because the costs of transporting mail were large multiples of similar costs in the East. So, even if post masters could be found, there was no way for mail to be transported between the post offices until Congress, 2,500 miles away, passed new legislation.

The mails delivered by contract steamer to the San Francisco post office had to be delivered directly from their small office. There were no contract mail routes for mail to be delivered to areas beyond. Similarly, all mail destined for the East had to pass through the same post office in order to catch the next mail steamer out. It was not possible to serve that many postal patrons from such a small office with the bulk of the demand concentrated on the days the steamers arrived or departed.

The merchants in San Francisco as well as the miners spread out at the gold diggings along the rivers to the east of San Francisco sought other solutions and were willing to pay for them. As a result, the postal needs of the population, including both the collection and delivery of mail, were met by private firms and individuals from an early date.

California Regional Letter Expresses

The normal mail distribution system in the East was for the postal patrons to go to the post office to pick up their mail directly, or for mail to be placed into a box rented from the postmaster. In the largest cities, a patron could authorize the post office to turn over letters for delivery by either

a government letter carrier or to a designated private local post for an additional fee. With mails coming into these offices several times a week, there was little problem in distribution. Also, most patrons were within a convenient distance of a post office.

In San Francisco, with large volumes of mail coming in once or twice a month, the number of people seeking their mail at the same time was immense. Also, many of the inhabitants were employed in the gold fields which were many miles away from any post office.

Alexander Todd is frequently credited as being the first of the California Expressmen. The system used by Todd was certainly one that was to be repeated by over a hundred other Expresses in the years that followed 1849. Todd, who in 1849 was at the gold diggings 150 miles from San Francisco, started a signature list of those 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 one ounce of gold 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.

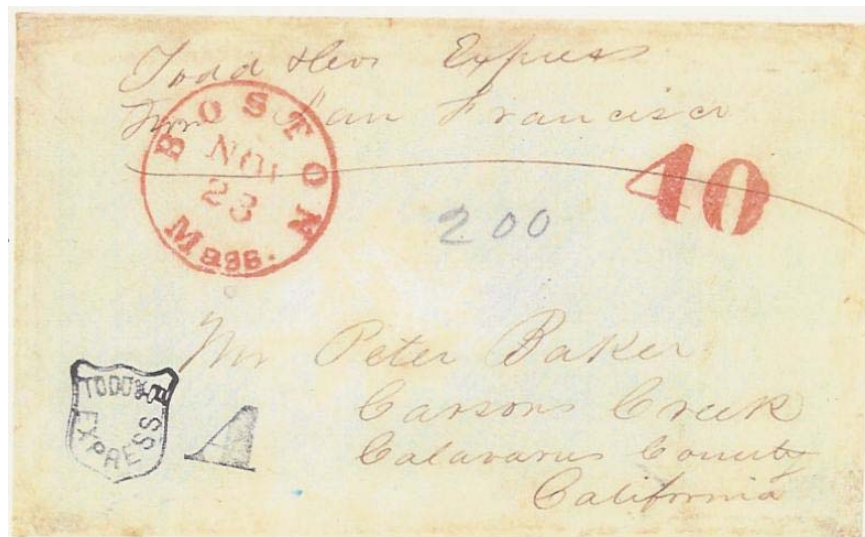


Figure 3 – November, 1850 from Boston, delivered by Todd & Co. to the mines in 1851
pencil “200” is the express charge of \$2.00 (*George Kramer collection*)

In order for Todd to have access to the mails at San Francisco as soon as it arrived, he was sworn in as a postal clerk. For the privilege, he paid the San Francisco postmaster twenty five cents for each letter addressed to a signatory on his list of miners (estimated by Todd to be 2,000 names). Todd's business was extremely profitable in the period before he retired in 1853. He had relied heavily on the letter mail for his profits and by 1853 the presence of competitors, and the improved government mail service, convinced him that it was no longer worth continuing.

An example of a letter delivered to the mines by one of Todd's competitors is shown in Figure 4. It was picked up at the Sacramento post office by Hunter & Co's. Express and delivered to “Big Bar Hill” for a total fee of \$1.35 (10c postage plus \$1.25 express charge). The express fee on this example is lower than Todd's charges. Fees decreased even more before Hunter sold out to

Wells Fargo & Company in 1854. In typical fashion, Hunter then became their agent at Placerville.



Figure 4 – 1851 from Sacramento post office by Hunter & Co. Express
(Henry Conland collection)

A quote from the *Daily Alta Californian* issue of March 18, 1850 sums up the prevailing opinion on mail service, and private expresses, at the time:

“One year ago ... the existence of Sacramento City was hardly thought of in the Atlantic States. Hence those leaving home during that period ... instructed their friends to direct their communications to San Francisco, thinking that place to be the only one in Upper California. It follows as a necessary consequence that most letters sent to this state came through the post office of San Francisco, although most of those to whom these epistles were addressed were to be found in the mining districts. While the miner would gladly give an ounce (of gold) to get intelligence from his friends at home, who probably had not heard from him for three or four months, it was too much of a sacrifice to pay \$50 and lose ten or twelve days of valuable time to enable him to visit the post office in San Francisco. These expresses have in a measure obviated this difficulty and they together with the post office here under the present able management will soon affect (sic) an entire revolution in the manner of facilitating correspondence, and enable us to get letters regularly on the arrival of every mail. The conductors of these expresses are accommodating and courteous, they conduct business entrusted to them with care, promptness and punctuality, and at a reasonable charge. There is at present so much competition among them that each has to exert itself to its full power to be anything like a successful business.”

The formula for handling letter mail, and a small amount of express cargo, to and from the mines, was to be emulated by over one hundred other letter express companies in the next twenty years. However, the formula did not have the long term profitability of the system developed by Adams & Company.

The Regional and Trans-Continental Expresses

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 and Oregon with William Dinsmore and D.H. Haskell in charge. Their business was international in scope and they maintained offices in London, Panama and later in Australia. 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 agents and messengers to add a pouch of mail on their routes. Agents who accompanied gold shipments to the East also took letter mail. Adams purchased several of the smaller letter expresses and sub-contracted the staging out to others.

A primary feature of Adams mail system was that the mail was carried entirely outside of the government mail system. Delivery of mail from the post offices was largely left to others.

One of the innovations adopted early by Adams & Company was the use of printed “franks” on envelopes. Envelopes were printed with “Paid, Adams & Co., Over our California and Coast Routes” on them. These envelopes were sold to miners for 25 cents and could be used to deposit their letters into Agent offices after the close of business hours as prepaid. In 1854 adhesive stamps were issued by Adams although genuine examples used on cover may not exist. The example below is exceptional in that it bears a frank that is not on a government entire. It is the earliest example reported.



Figure 5 – Adams Express printed frank used from the mines to the mails in Sacramento in 1854
6c government postal rate prepaid with adhesives (*William Weiss collection*)

By 1854 Adams & Company had become the largest shipper of gold dust and had developed a vast network of agents and staging lines reaching from Oregon to southern California. In

February 1855, as a result of the failure of a major Eastern banking partner, Adams was forced to close their doors in California. The Adams & Company formula of combining banking with parcel and letter express was to be perfected by Wells, Fargo & Company.

Wells, Fargo & Company was very successful in combining banking, express haulage of parcels and gold, and letter mail by both overland and ocean routes. Reuben Washburn established the first California branch of the Company on July 13, 1852 when he arrived from New York. A cover on this first trip is shown below.



Figure 6 – 1852 New York to Sacramento
Wells, Fargo & Co. first day of service in California (*George Kramer collection*)

The formula perfected by Wells, Fargo & Co. allowed them to totally dominate the express business in the West after 1855. They 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. By the time they gained control of the Pony Express and the Overland Mail Company in 1861, their network of influence and overlapping corporate directorships made them the dominant force in the field. I will later examine their activities during the period from 1861 to 1864.

California Local Posts

The delivery of local mail from the post offices was one service that Well's Fargo did not provide. The first evidence of a local post being established in San Francisco is to be found in an advertisement for Reed & Co. City Despatch Post in December, 1853. Their service was patterned after similar privately owned local posts in Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Typically these local posts picked up mail from the post office for delivery to subscribers within the city of San Francisco, delivered mail directly from their office to local addresses, and took mail from their office, or drop boxes, to the post office. Adhesive postage stamps were needed for all mail deposited in their drop boxes. Reed's also served as a delivery agent for Adams & Company.

In June, 1855 H.L. Goodwin established the California Penny Post Company. In addition to collecting and delivering mail to and from the San Francisco post office, Goodwin set up similar services in nine other California cities adding inter-city service via allied expresses, to his local post scheme. He issued adhesive postage stamps as well as several styles of preprinted, franked envelopes in the brief period before closing his doors in 1856. It has been said that the active hostility of the San Francisco Postmaster toward Goodwin was responsible for his failure.

A descriptive price list of Goodwin's mail services is shown on their circular below. Unlike many of his competitors, Goodwin did not handle express cargo.

RATES OF PENNY POSTAGE IF PRE-PAID BY STAMPS.	
For Conveying a Letter to the Post Office, - - -	2 cts.
" Delivering a Letter from the Post Office, - - -	5 cts.
" Conveying a Letter to the P. O. in one city and delivering the same in another, - - -	7 cts.
" Transmitting by Express letters received after the Mails are closed, - - -	7 cts.
" City Delivery east of Taylor and Fourth streets, - - -	5 cts.
" " " west of " " " " " " " " " " " "	10 cts.

San Francisco City Delivery commences from the Office, 135 California street,
at 7 A. M., 1 P. M., and half-past 4, P. M.

Figure 7 – California Penny Post Company circular of rates and services
(Henry Conland collection)

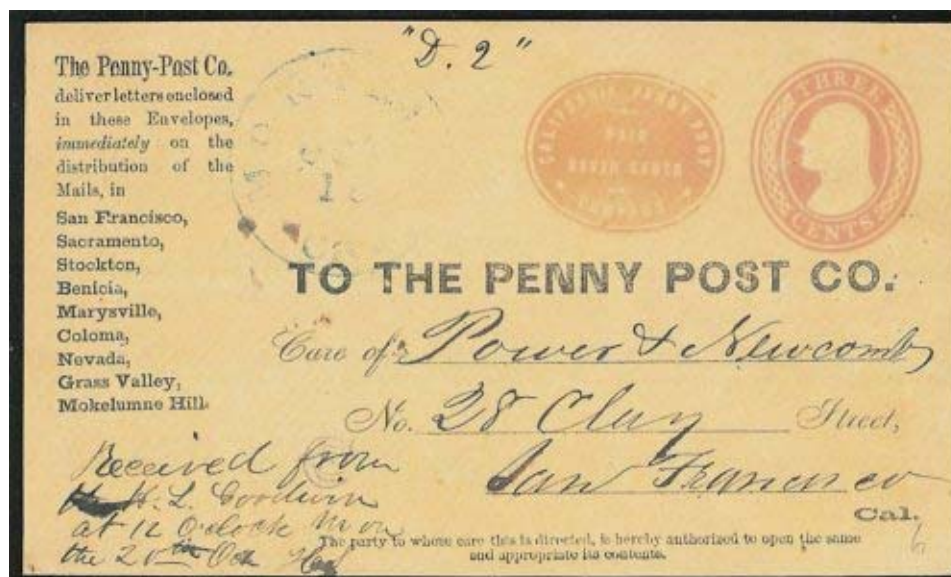


Figure 8 – Penny Post 7c printed envelope used from Monterey
by government mails to San Francisco, prepaid delivery in San Francisco
note recipient's endorsement "Received from H.L. Goodwin" (ex Marc Haas collection)



Figure 9 – Penny Post Company from San Francisco to Sacramento in 1855
(Henry Conland collection)

The San Francisco Letter Bag Operators

Another type of private mail service was provided by the letter bag operators. These letter bag operators delivered mail to the next outbound steamer for a small fee. They announced sailing dates for the various steamers that would carry mail, and then received mail from customers at their offices. The need for this service arose because many of the steamers carrying mail were without government contracts and usually did not receive mail for carriage directly from the post office. The service was performed for a nominal fee and some, such as Sullivan's News Room, may have received only advertising as remuneration. Although Merchants Exchange was the first of these letter bag operators, having started in 1849, the most widely known is the "Noisy Carrier News Room" which was operated by Charles Kimball from Long Wharf in San Francisco. He used a wide variety of handstamps as well as a label on the mail that he handled.

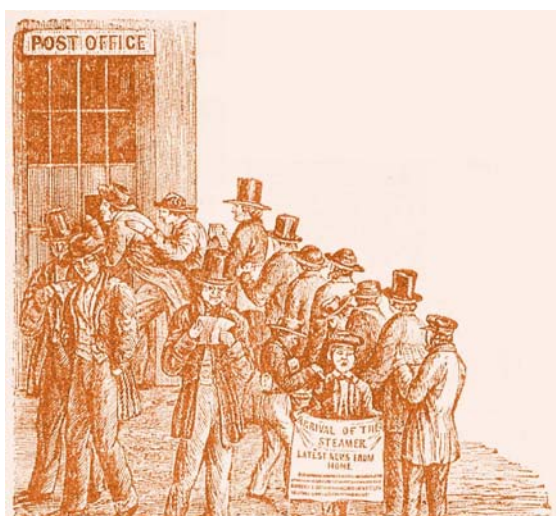




Figure 10 – 1855 from San Francisco, delivered by Noisy Carriers to the post office carried by contract mail steamer via Panama, 10c rate for over 3,000 miles
(ex Marc Haas collection)

The example shown in Figure 10 was delivered to the San Francisco post office for carriage by contract mail steamer, via the Panama route. The example below, handled by Leland's, was turned over for carriage privately "Via Nicaragua" by a vessel that did not have a contract (see Map 9). Note that the example in Figure 10 has a San Francisco postmark while the example in Figure 11 was postmarked on arrival in New York City. Some covers that entered the mails in New York bear a "ship" postmark.

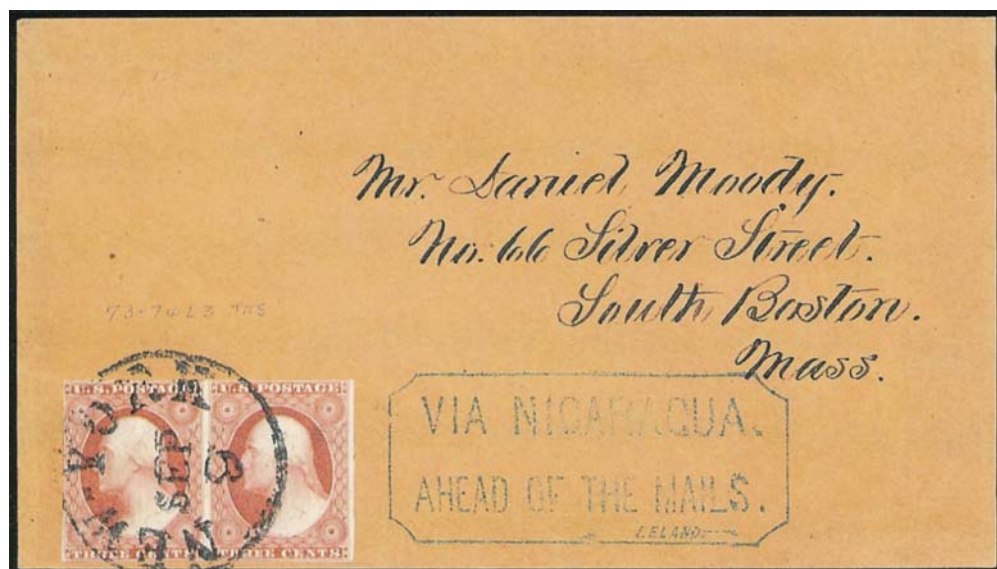


Figure 11 – 1854 from San Francisco, delivered by Leland to a non-contract steamer via Nicaragua, entered mails at New York City, 6c rate for over 3,000 miles prior to April, 1855
(ex Marc Haas collection)

Other California Private Mails

In addition to the regional and trans-continental expresses, local posts, and letter bag operators, other forms of private mail handling in California are known. These include forwarding agents who expedited ocean mail and certain hotels who evidently forwarded mail for their guests. Some, such as the “forwarded” example below, are often difficult to categorize. If Peterson’s owned the shipping line between La Paz and San Francisco, I would call them an express company. If, however, they made arrangements with another ship on the route, I would call them a forwarder. In either case, private carriage of mail was involved.



Figure 12 – 1862 La Paz, Mexico, Forwarded by Peterson’s to the mails at San Francisco 10c rate for over 3,000 miles plus 2c ship fee at San Francisco (*George Kramer collection*)

The Colorado Expresses

The private mail systems first perfected in California in the years after the discovery of gold were to be employed repeatedly in the West as other gold rushes ensued. The difficulties in mail service caused by rapid population growth and lack of contract routes to the areas resulted in a repetition of the California pattern of response by private firms. However, as most of the new gold rushes were well inland, those private services related to ocean mail carriage are not seen. Also, since most of the gold camps were in towns substantially smaller than San Francisco, we do not see local posts being utilized. I will briefly discuss the private mail services employed during the Colorado gold rush as being typical. Similar type systems were employed during later rushes in British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Dakota, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

In 1858 gold was discovered along Cherry Creek in what is now Denver, Colorado. The first mails were carried out of the region by a man who was employed, in a subscription post arrangement, by those wishing to have their mail carried. Mails were taken to either Fort Laramie or Fort Kearney (see Map 5). The earliest reported example is shown in Figure 13. It was endorsed by the express carrier “Montana, K.T., Cherry Creek Gold Mines” designating the name of the gold camp of about 80 miners (Montana) as well as “K.T.” (the area was part of Kansas Territory at the time).

The private express significance of a cover such as this can be easily missed. The “Montana K.T.” express endorsement is neither a manuscript postmark, nor a docket. In this case, the cover bears a “Fort Kearney, Nebr.” origin postmark indicating the office that the cover entered the government mails.



Figure 13 – November 30, 1858 Cherry Creek Gold Mines (Denver) by express to Fort Kearney, Nebraska (*Frederick Mayer collection*)

The Leavenworth City & Pike's Peak Express Company was formed in February, 1859 by William Russell and John Jones to operate between Denver City and Leavenworth City, Kansas Territory. This express, which handled both freight and letter mail, and its successor expresses operated until a government mail route was finally authorized in 1861. Mail destined for Denver was turned over to the Express agent at Leavenworth City for private carriage by express to Denver as shown by Figure 14. See Map 5 for the various routes used by express companies to transport mail to and from Denver.



Figure 14 – May, 1859 Fincastle, Ohio by Government mails to Leavenworth City by express to Denver City (*Frederick Mayer collection*)

Additional expresses operated from Denver to the gold mines situated further away in the mountains. These expresses flourished until either post offices and government mail routes were established or the gold gave out and the camp disappeared.

On March 22, 1859 a government post office was established for Coraville. This was not the name of a locale, but rather of an office which was located at the same place as the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company office in Denver. However, as happened frequently in the West, there was no government contract awarded for carriage of mail to and from the office. The contract for mails between Salt Lake City and Leavenworth City did not include Coraville. In error, three mails were dispatched from Coraville as contract mails before the express agent realized that they were not being paid for the service. As the express company did not receive payment from the Government as contract mail carriers, this usage may be properly considered "private" mail carriage between two post offices. Such usages represent a peculiar combination of government and private mails which show absolutely no physical evidence of the private involvement.

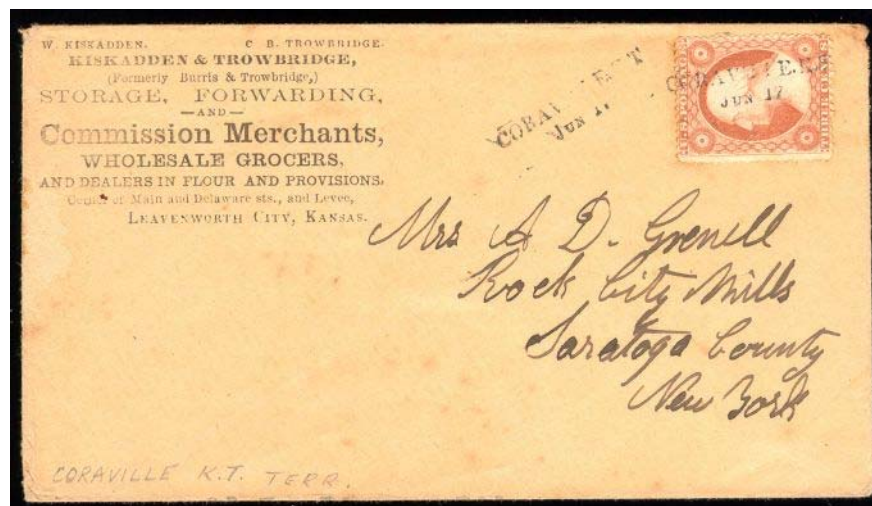


Figure 15 – June 17, 1859 Coraville post office, by private express, to Leavenworth City carried by Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company without payment
(Frederick Mayer collection)

The Pony Express

The most famous of the private mail services in the West is certainly the Pony Express. It captured the imagination of the populace at the time and has continued to do so ever since. From a postal history perspective, the Pony Express was an unusual combination of governmental and private mail systems that is unique in American history.

The Pony Express was conceived and put into operation by William H. Russell. On December 17, 1859 the Post Office Department was directed to send letter mail by overland routes rather than by ocean routes. At the time, Butterfield held the contract for a twice weekly overland mail carried on the Southern Route while the firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell held the contracts for the less frequent, twice monthly mail to be carried over the Central Route. The respective routes are shown in Map 6.

William Russell persuaded his two partners, Majors and Waddell, to institute a ten day “pony express” private mail service between St. Joseph, Missouri and Placerville, California in an attempt to gain a lucrative contract for a daily mail along the Central Route. To wrestle that contract away from Butterfield and the Southern Route, it was necessary to show that the Central Route could be used during the winter months and that the service could be performed more rapidly. The Pony Express service, scheduled to begin on April 3, 1860, was announced by Russell on January 27, 1860. It began as a private mail service of the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company which was the company the three partners had previously set up to handle express business to the Colorado gold fields. A weekly service was initiated on April 3, 1860 whereby letter mail could be transported from Placerville, California to St. Joseph, Missouri by Pony Express. There it would enter the government mails for fast carriage, via connecting railway lines, to points in the East. Since St. Joseph was also the western terminus of the telegraph line, telegraphic dispatches could be carried by Pony Express from California to St. Joseph and then relayed by telegraph to New York. The route in the opposite direction was similarly utilized. See Map 7.

The rate for service over the entire route between Placerville and St. Joseph was announced as being \$5.00 per half ounce. It was to be a weekly service accomplished in ten days. Letters were to be enclosed in government stamped envelopes to comply with the private mail provisions of the Post Office Act of 1852. However, the usage of adhesive stamps rather than stamped entires is known.

Figure 16 shows an example carried on the first eastbound trip of the Pony Express. It is a paste-back with another envelope “pasted” to verso which had the address. It shows the printed frank indicating the Pony Express charge had been prepaid. The majority of the few known examples were used from towns in Nevada. It bears a running pony handstamp of St. Joseph on reverse.



Figure 16 – April 3, 1860 San Francisco to Washington, D.C., the first trip
(*ex Hall collection*)

Figure 17 shows an example of early Pony Express service going the other direction (westbound) into San Francisco. The letter was evidently prepaid \$5.00 in cash at origin and was carried entirely outside of the government mails, or within a sealed bag to St. Joseph, and from there to San Francisco privately. In conformance with postal law, the letter was enclosed in a government stamped entire even though the government performed no service for the ten cents. Some westbound Pony Express covers prior to 1861 bear only three cents postage which reflects the rate between St. Joseph and California only. If carried privately between New York City and California, the rate should have been ten cents (over 3,000 miles).

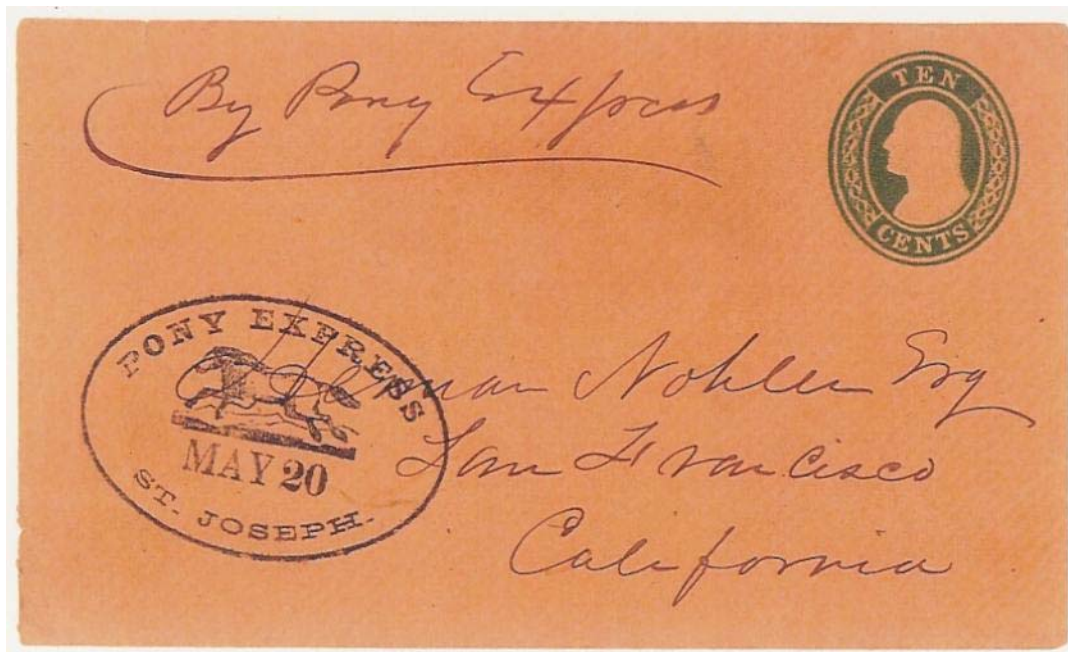


Figure 17 – May 20, 1860 St. Joseph to San Francisco by Pony Express prepaid \$5.00 in cash, enclosed in 10c Government entire (*George Kramer collection*)

In late May and early June, 1860 the Pony Express service was disrupted due to Indian depredations in Nevada which resulted in several of the weekly trips being cancelled. When the express was re-started, the service was increased to twice weekly. The cover shown below (Figure 18) is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting Pony Express covers extant. One usually reads about how no mails were lost and of situations where the fearless Pony riders evaded their Indian predators. However, such was not always the case as this cover evidences. It was carried on the Pony Express trip which left San Francisco on July 21, 1860. The mail pouch did not arrive in St. Joseph until almost two years later! The notation reads “recovered from a mail stolen by the Indians in 1860” and bears a New York backstamp of May 3, 1862, the date when it was finally delivered in New York.

The only mention in print that I have been able to find about a Pony Express mail being stolen is in [The Overland Stage to California](#) by Root and Connelley which mentions:

"At times there would be a lively chase by Indians, but only once has there been mention made that he was overtaken. On this occasion the rider was scalped, but the pony escaped with the letter pouch, which was subsequently recovered out on the plains and the letters promptly forwarded to their destination."



Figure 18 – July 21, 1860 San Francisco by Pony Express “mail stolen by the Indians”
pouch found and delivered in New York in 1862
(Dale-Lichtenstein collection, courtesy H.R. Harmer, Inc.)

The above cover is almost certainly a postal artifact of this incident. An interesting report of Howard Ransom Egan, a Pony Express rider serving the area in July, 1861, mentions in reference to his escape from Indians the week before the above cover was mailed, “*Later I got it from some friendly Indians that there had been a trap set to catch an Express rider for the purpose of seeing what he carried to make him travel so fast.*” This may explain why the letters were not destroyed.

Another example of West to East service by Pony Express is shown in Figure 19. It is a September 5, 1860 folded letter from Havana, Cuba to San Francisco. It was carried privately to New York where it was forwarded by Duncan Sherman & Co. to the Pony Express Office. The New York Pony Express office apparently bundled mail for the Pony Express in packages and sent them by Government mails to the care of their express agent in St. Joseph. As a result, letters would need only three cents postage for the rate between St. Joseph and San Francisco (under 3,000 miles). The use of the three cent adhesive stamp corresponds to the postage rate between the terminal points of the Pony Express and thereby conforms to the spirit of the postal law.



Figure 19 – 1860 Havana, Cuba to San Francisco (George Kramer collection)

In the period before April, 1861 there was very little mail carried by the Pony Express. One estimate, related by Hafen, is that only forty one letters were carried on an average trip from San Francisco to St. Joseph during this period. Russell announced one-quarter ounce letters would be handled at \$2.50 in August, 1860 in an attempt to bolster financial returns. With the semi-monthly mail contract about to expire in November, 1860, the Pony Express was in dire financial straits. On the other hand, Butterfield's Overland Mail contract was not due to expire for another four years.

Contract Pony Express Service

In April, 1861 a new era in the Pony Express began. In March, 1861 Congress learned that secessionists had halted mails on Butterfield's Southern Route. They passed a post office Appropriations bill with an amendment providing that the Butterfield's line be moved to the Central Route and awarded a new extension on their contract if they chose to accept. William Russell and the C.O.C. & P.P. realized that they were better off joining forces with the Overland Mail Company. On March 12, 1861 the Overland Mail Company accepted the new contract which stipulated mail carriage six times per week over the Central Route. The contract was to be effective on or before July 1, 1861 and evidence indicates that the change began shortly after April 1, 1861.

An interesting clause of the contract stipulated that they *"be required also during the continuance of their Contract, or until the completion of the Overland Telegraph, to run a Pony Express Semi-weekly at a Schedule of times of ten days eight months of the year and twelve days four months of the year, and to convey for the Government free of charge five pounds of Mail Matter; with liberty of charging the public for transportation of letters by said Express not exceeding One dollar per half ounce."* (emphasis added)

Additional contracts were signed by and between the Overland Mail Company, the Western Stage Company and William Russell on behalf of the C.O.C. & P.P. which effectively allowed each company to operate a portion of the route, and to be compensated from the proceeds of the mail contract.

Another clause of the post office mail contract allowed the Overland Mail Company to enter into an exclusive agreement with Wells, Fargo & Company for through carriage of mail from the East to any point West of Salt Lake City, and from West of Salt Lake City to any point in the East. This clause was implemented and by April 15, 1861 notice appeared in the San Francisco newspaper announcing that letters for the Pony Express were to be delivered to the Wells, Fargo & Company office.

This situation is certainly unique in the history of postal service in the United States. Here we have a private company (Wells, Fargo & Co.) offering a premium service over a contract mail route, enjoying a partial subsidy from the mail contract, and with the approval of the Post Office Department. In fact, the Post Office required *“the proper authorized mark of the contractors, showing prepayment of such sum as they require under said section of the law”* thereby necessitating the issuance of adhesive stamps and special stationery by Wells, Fargo & Company.

The earliest reported usage of the Pony Express stamps is April 28, 1861. An example of each of the originally issued stamps on the same cover is shown below.



Figure 20 – June 26, 1861 San Francisco to New York \$2.00 and \$4.00 Pony stamps, triple rate the only reported example of a \$4.00 green used on cover (*George Kramer collection*)

On July 1, 1861, the date the new Overland Mail Contract became effective, the rate for Pony Express service was lowered to match the contract rates (rates cut in half). A new series of adhesive stamps, as well as a special printed frank were issued. For mail to be carried west to east, new \$1, \$2, and \$4 stamps were issued (See Figures 21 to 23).



Figure 21 – July 27, 1861 San Francisco by Pony Express, \$1.00 red adhesive franked entire, from New York unpaid 15c rate to France (ex Marc Haas collection)



Figure 22 – October 23, 1861 San Francisco, \$2.00 green adhesive and 10c 1861 issue on 10c franked entire, double rate, entered the mails at Atchison, Kansas (ex Grombacher collection)



Figure 23 – from Hawaii, August 10, 1861 from San Francisco, \$4.00 black adhesive quadruple rate, entered the mails at St. Joseph, free mail to Treasury Department
(Dale-Lichtenstein collection, courtesy H.R. Harmer, Inc.)

For mail carried east to west, a special frank (Figure 24) as well as an adhesive for letters over one-half ounce were issued (Figure 25).



Figure 24 – September 20, 1861 New York to San Francisco (George Kramer collection)

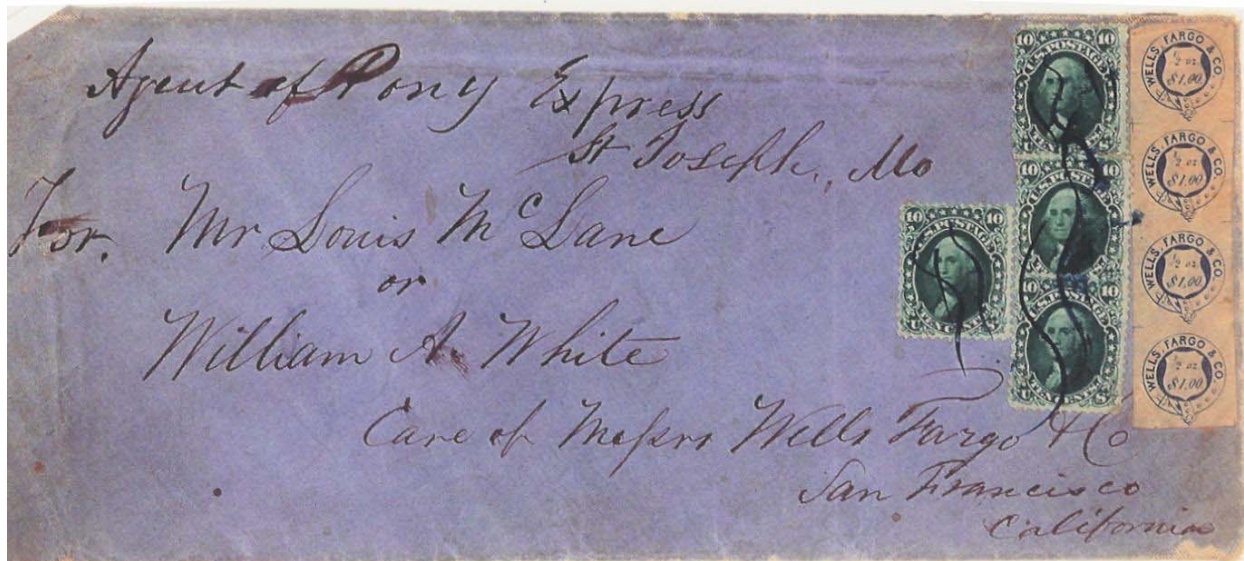


Figure 25 – October 11, 1861 from Boston, quadruple rate, four copies of \$1.00 garter adhesive 10c rate for distance over 3,000 miles (times 4) plus \$1.00 garter stamp for each ½ ounce one of the most spectacular covers in United States philately (George Kramer collection)

It is not accurate to categorize the period of Wells, Fargo & Co. control of the Pony Express between April 15, 1861 and July 1, 1861 as involving private mail service. On July 1, 1861, however, something interesting occurred to complicate the picture even further (and to explain why I have included covers used after July 1, 1861 in this paper).

The Pony Express had operated over a route that terminated at Sacramento with connections, via steamer, to San Francisco. The contract that became effective on July 1, 1861 authorized Pony Express service only to Placerville, which was further east than Sacramento. So, on the same day the contract became effective, Wells Fargo announced a new private mail service for carriage by steamer and Pony Express between San Francisco and Placerville. This service required a Wells Fargo franked entire which was available for twenty cents (ten cents for the government entire, plus ten cents fee for service). So, once again we have private mail carriage involved. It was private mail carriage between San Francisco and Placerville, government subsidized service between Placerville and St. Joseph, and regular government mails eastward from St. Joseph. For Pony Express letters going to San Francisco, a “delivery” charge of twenty five cents was levied automatically and was collected from addressee. Therefore, all of the covers shown in Figures 20 to 25 involved private mail carriage.

The eastern terminus of the trans-continental pony express was changed from St. Joseph to Atchison, Kansas in September, 1861. Need for the Pony Express service decreased as telegraph line sections were completed. Service was discontinued after October 24, 1861 when the overland telegraph line was finally completed.

Summary of Trans-Continental Pony Express Services and Rates

Phase I. April 3, 1860 to April 14, 1861

Central Overland, California & Pikes Peak Express Company control

Private Mail Service (no adhesive stamps, a printed frank is known)

Rate was \$5.00 per ½ ounce (after August, 1860 special rate of \$2.50 for ¼ ounce letter)

Phase II. April 15, 1861 to June 30, 1861

Wells, Fargo & Co. control

Pony Express partially subsidized by government, technically not a private mail service

Rate was \$2.00 per ½ ounce

Adhesive stamps issued (\$2.00 red and \$4.00 green)

Frank issued for East to West service (for ½ ounce)

Phase III. July 1, 1861 to October 24, 1861

Wells, Fargo & Co. control

Pony Express portion to Placerville a government mail service, Placerville to San Francisco portion private mail service

Rate was \$1.00 per ½ ounce for Pony, plus 20c for Wells, Fargo express service from San Francisco to Placerville (10c Pony plus 10c for stamped entire) and 25c for same service from Placerville to San Francisco collected on delivery

Adhesive stamps issued for West to East service (\$1.00 red, \$2.00 green, \$4.00 black)

Adhesive stamps and franks issued for East to West service (\$1.00 frank, \$1.00 garter)

The Virginia City Pony Express

Wells, Fargo & Co. later instituted a “pony express” service to the mining regions of Nevada that was entirely private in nature. In August, 1862 they announced a twenty four hour mail service between San Francisco and Virginia City, Nevada to supplement their normal express service of forty four hours. The initial rate of ten cents per one-half ounce was later increased to twenty five cents and adhesive stamps were utilized.



Figure 26 – 1862, 10c Pony Express adhesive used from Virginia City to San Francisco
(ex Frajola)

To conclude, numerous forms of private mail service were utilized in the West. There were literally thousands of individuals or firms involved in handling letter mails and the field of private mails in the West is both complex and fascinating. To a casual observer many of the extant postal artifacts handled privately appear to be normal government carried mail. Others, such as the Wells Fargo carried trans-continental Pony Express usages appear to be private mails and some were actually carried under government subsidy. There have been many books and articles written on various aspects of western mails (see bibliography for those I consider to be the most useful) and there will be many more. Postal historians should be aware of the potential areas for private carriage of mail when researching all United States covers.

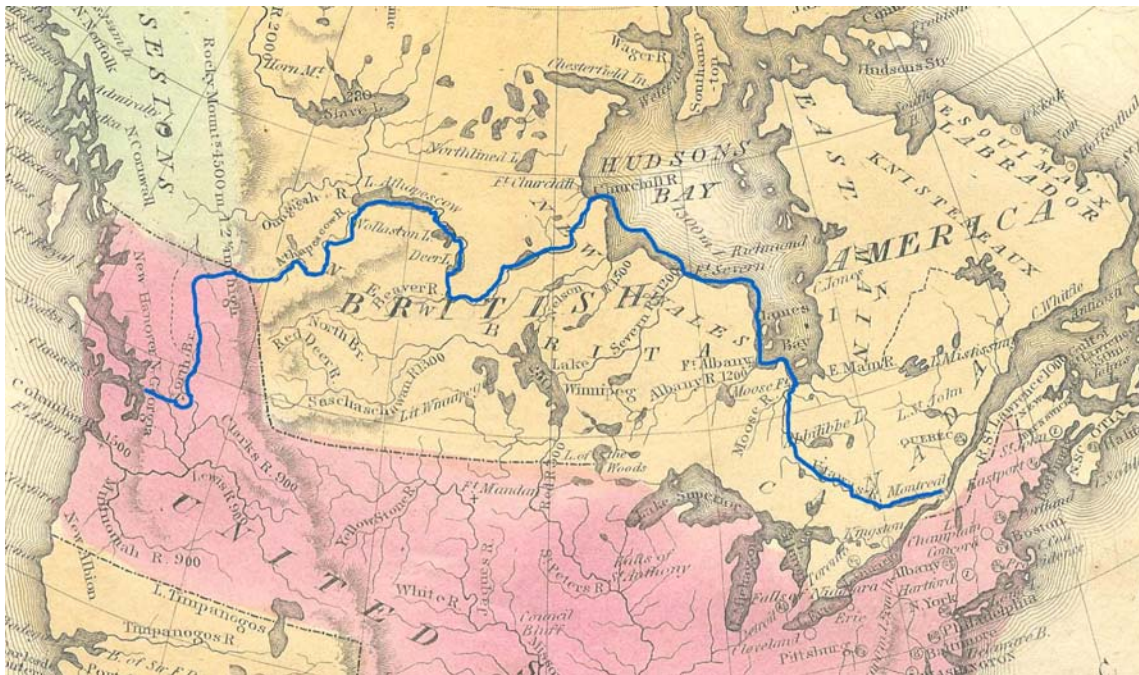
Selected Reference Books

- Jesse L. Coburn, *Letters of Gold* (U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, 1984)
Dale Forster, *Oregon Express Companies* (by the author, 1985)
Richard C. Frajola, *Haas California Postal History* (Richard C. Frajola, Inc, December 14, 1985)
 The Crittenden Correspondence (Richard C. Frajola, Inc. catalog, October 23, 1981)
 Private Postal Systems In The United States (Philatelic Foundation Seminar, No. 3, 1992)
LeRoy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail* (Arthur Clark Company, 1926)
W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West* (University of California Press, 1952)
 A New Look at Wells Fargo (California. Historical Society Quarterly, December, 1966)
 Wells Fargo's Pony Expresses, (Journal of the West, July, 1972)
John Leutzinger, *The Handstamps of Wells, Fargo & Co.* (Western Cover Society, 1993)
M.C. Nathan and W.S. Boggs, *The Pony Express* (The Collectors Club, Inc., New York, 1962)
Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley, *The Overland Stage To California* (by authors, 1901)
Jerome C. Smiley, *History of Denver* (Denver Times, 1901)
John K. Stimson, *Stimson's Express History* (by the Author, 1881)
Ernest Wiltsee, *The Pioneer Miner and The Pack Mule Express* (California Hist. Society, 1931)
 Gold Rush Steamers of the Pacific (California Historical Society, 1938)

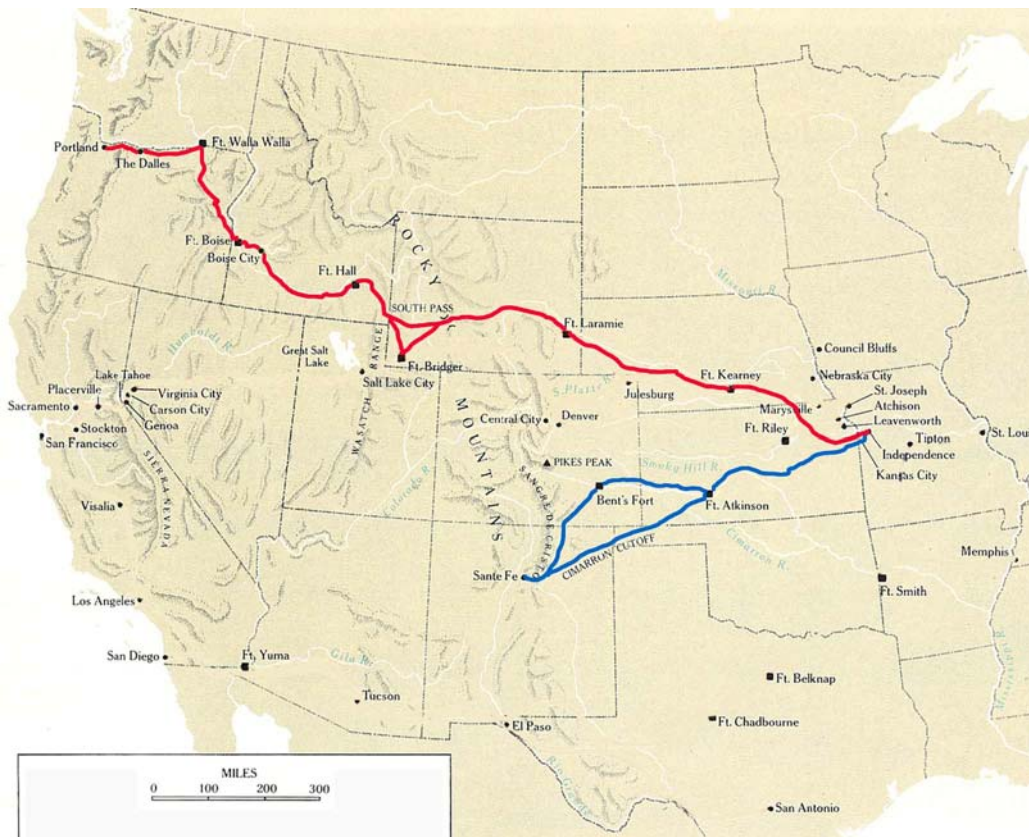
Selected Web Site References

- <http://www.amazon.com> – Forty two books listed on the Pony Express!
<http://www.roguetrader.com/~dave/> - Stories of the Pony Express
<http://www.coloradoterritory.org/Default.asp> - Frederick Mayer Collection of Colorado Territory
<http://www.rfrajola.com> – Author's web site with articles on private mails and other subjects
<http://www.xphomestation.com/xproute.html> - Detailed maps of Pony Express Route
<http://www.wellsfargohistory.com/1852/index.html> - Wells, Fargo & Co. history site
<http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/about/the-bay.html> - history of Hudson Bay Company

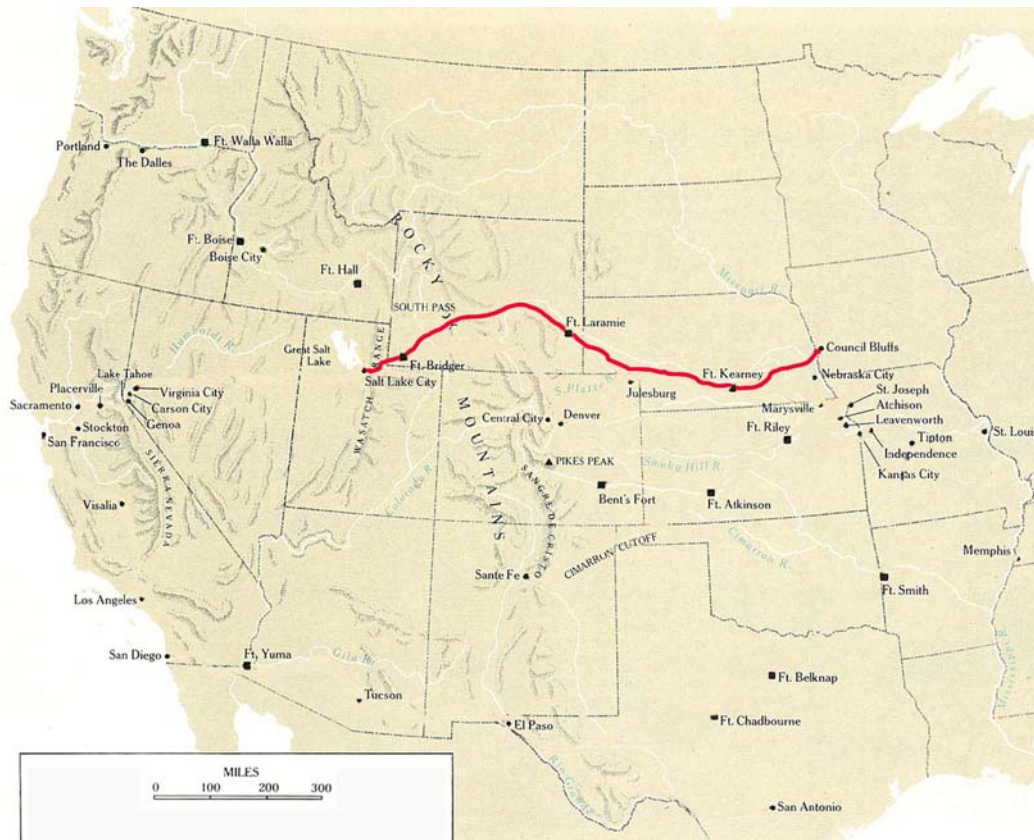
Appendix A – Route Maps



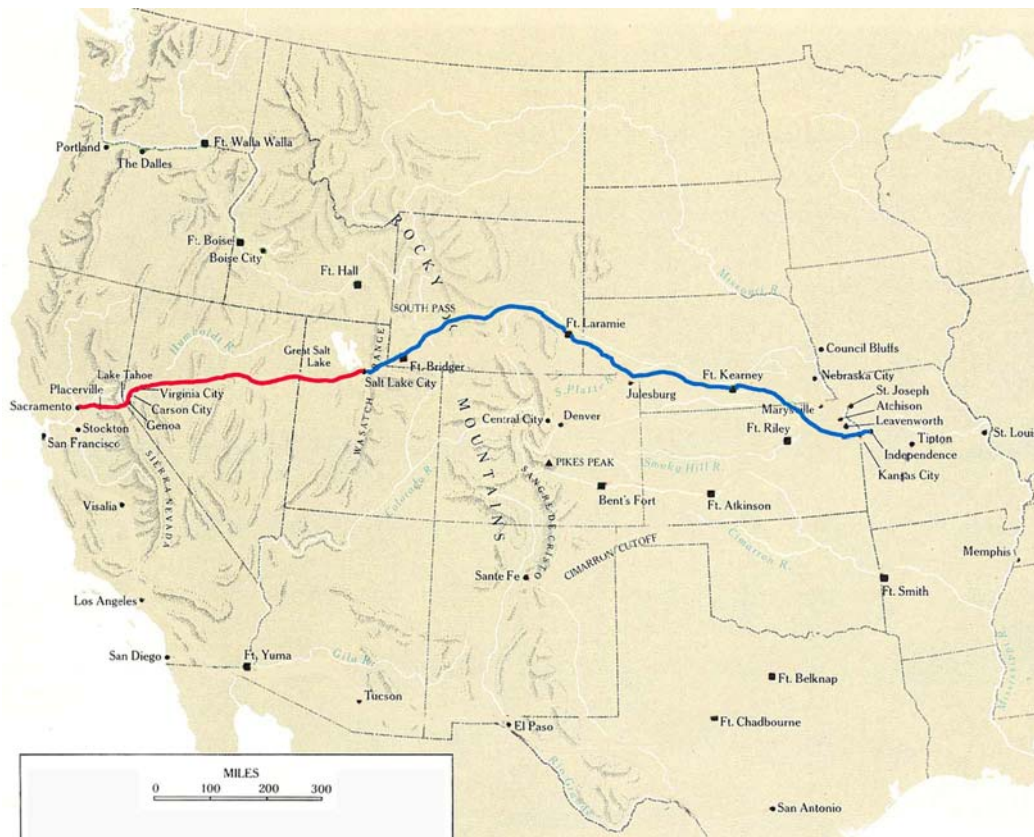
Map 1 – Route of the Hudson Bay Company Canoe Brigade to Montreal



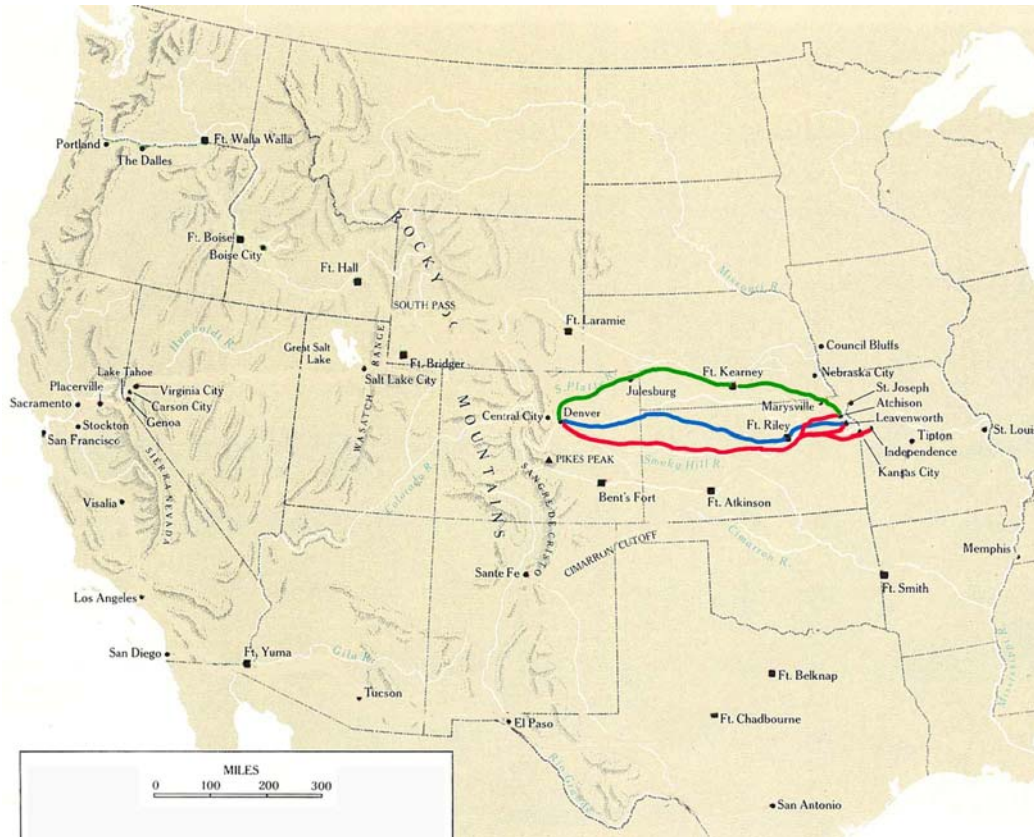
Map 2 – Santa Fe Trail and Oregon Trail



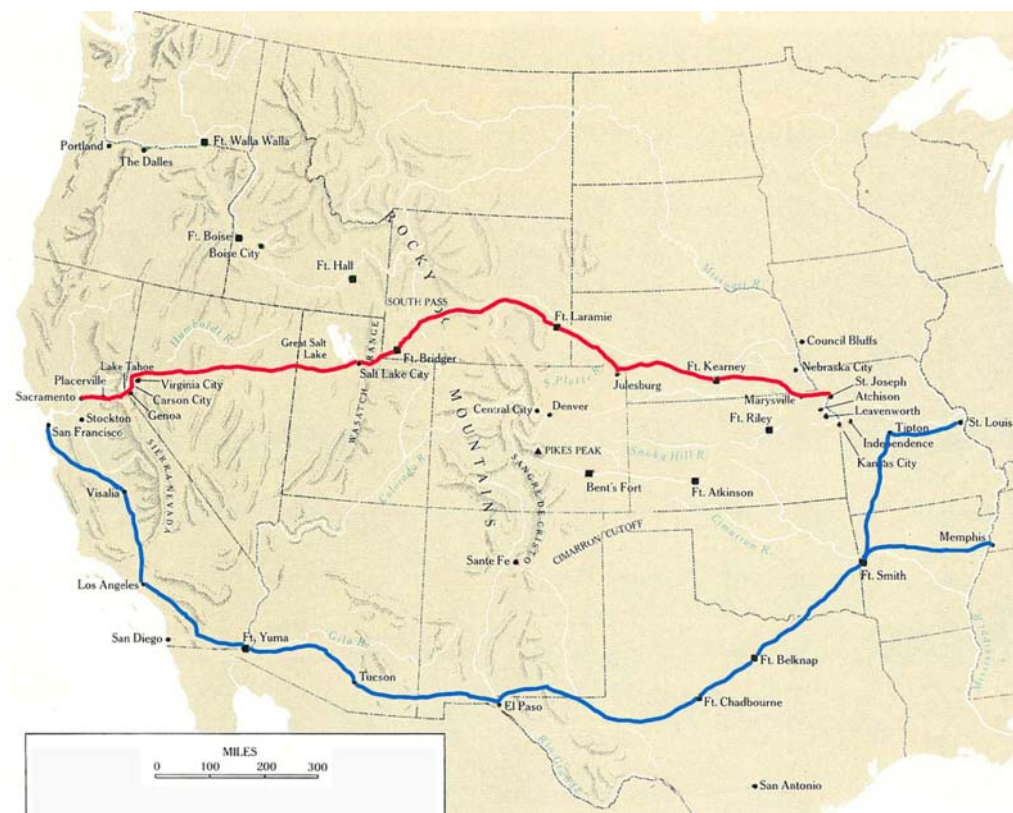
Map 3 – Mormon Church Express Route



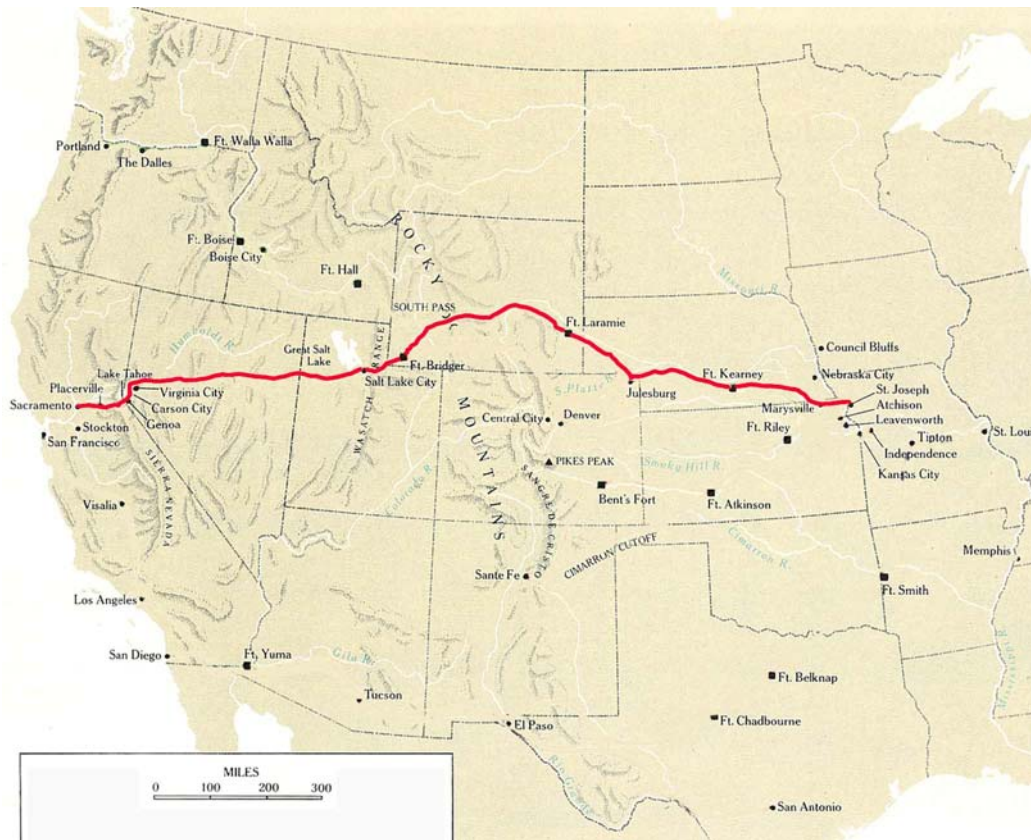
Map 4 – Chorpenning Contract Route and Woodson Contract Route



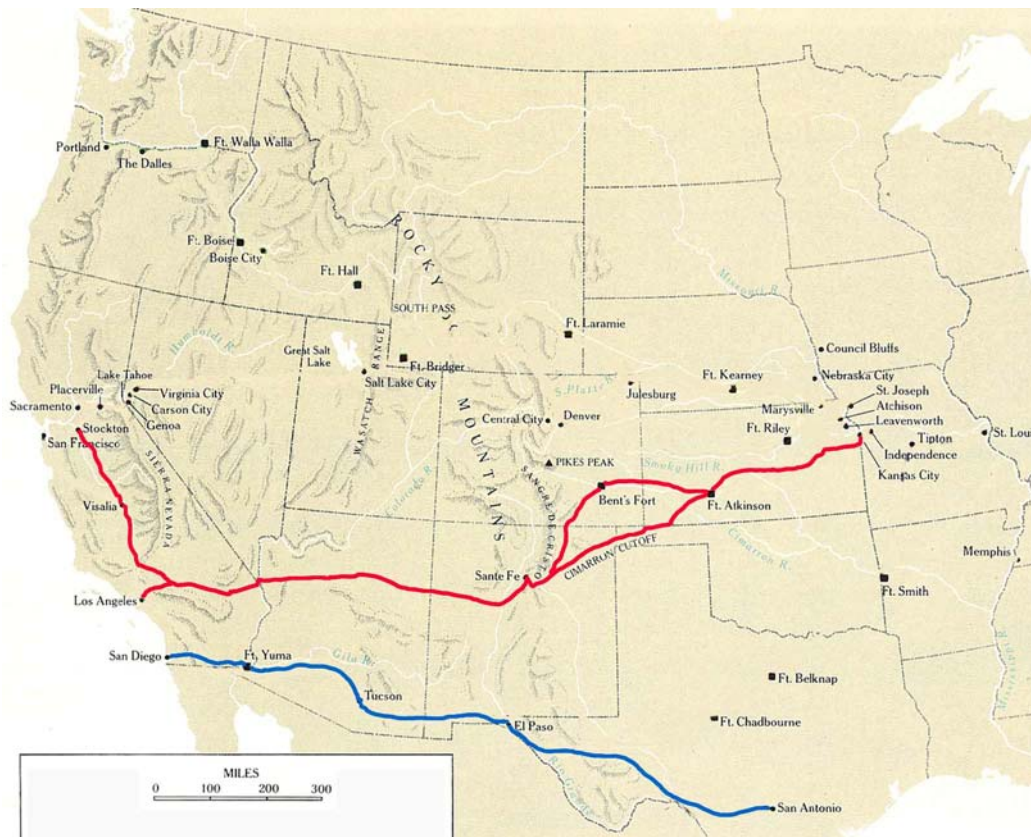
Map 5 – Express Routes Servicing Denver



Map 6 – Central Contract Route and Southern (Butterfield) Contract Route



Map 7 – Pony Express Route



Map 8 – “Jackass” Contract Route and Kansas City to Stockton Contract Route



**Map 9 – Via Tehuantepec Contract Route and Via Panama Contract Route
Via Nicaragua Private Mail Route**

Notes On The Contract Mail Routes

The “Butterfield” Overland Mail Route

A contract for mail service overland between California and the Mississippi River along a southern route was awarded to John Butterfield and others on September 16, 1857. It was a six year contract with service to begin on September 15, 1858. Twenty five days was the scheduled time between the two terminal points of San Francisco and St. Louis, a distance of 2,795 miles. The choice caused considerable division with many claiming that the route was chosen because of the Southern leanings of Postmaster General Aaron Brown who was from Tennessee. However, good reasons did exist for choosing a Southern route including more moderate winter weather and possible usefulness in dealing with Mexico.

According to the April 27, 1860 San Francisco *Bulletin* by that date more letters were being carried by the overland route than by steamers. On June 30, 1860 the same paper noted, quoting a St. Louis correspondent of June 6th, that in England special mail bags were being made up to go overland in the times intervening between the dates of departure of the Panama steamers. Since December 17, 1859 the Post Office Department had been directed to send letter mail by overland routes. Contract for Ocean Mail expired on September 30, 1859 whereupon the PMG contracted with Vanderbilt for 9 months.

March 12, 1861 Butterfield moved to Central Route.

Trans-Continental Routes From San Francisco

1849 (mail by contract steamers, via Panama)

April 12, 1849 *Oregon* via Panama

May 1, 1849 *California*

June 21, 1849 *Panama*

July 2, 1849 *Oregon*

August 1, 1849 *California*

September 2, 1849 *Panama*

October 1, 1849 *Oregon*

November 1, 1849 *California*

November 15, 1849 *Panama*

December 1, 1849 *Unicorn*

1850 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

Starting July 1, 1850 monthly contract route overland – mail had to be marked be carried

Laws Line steamers carried mail on June 18, 1850 and July 17, 1850 from PO without contract

1852 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

1853 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

1854 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

1855 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

1856 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

1857 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

1858 (mails via contract steamers on, or about, the 1st and 15th of each month)

Butterfield Overland Route	September 15, 1858	March 12, 1861	2795miles	Twice weekly
Via Tehuantepec	October 27, 1858	September 27, 1859		Twice monthly
Via Panama		Exp. September 30, 1859 +9mos special.		Twice monthly
Jackass Route	July 1, 1857	Into 1859 and part route until 1861		Weekly to Twice monthly from July 1, 1859
Kansas City, via Santa Fe to Stockton	October 1, 1858	July 1, 1859		Monthly (only 4 mails reached KC from this route, 2 mails reached Stockton))
St. Joe, via SLC to Placerville				Weekly reduced to twice monthly July 1, 1859
California Trail Route Chorpensing (Sacramento to SLC) & Woodson SLC to Ft. Leavenworth)	July 1, 1850	June 30, 1854		monthly
Pony Express Route	April 3, 1860	October 24, 1861		