

# Faster, Faster!

## Reducing Time for Transcontinental Mail Delivery, 1843-1869

**PURPOSE** - This exhibit assesses the progression of faster mail delivery using covers departing California (primarily San Francisco) bound for, or transiting through, cities on the East Coast (primarily New York), showing “coast to coast” (transcontinental) routing. The period of study was 1843 to 1869. This timeframe was prior to the establishment of any post office in California or contract mail route on the Pacific, and up to the completion of the US transcontinental railroad. Examples include attempts to enhance mail delivery service and frequency by using non-contract carriers and routes. Transit duration with color code is shown at top left of each page to assess delivery speed.

**HISTORY** – In February 1848 gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill, near Sacramento, north of San Francisco. At the time of discovery, San Francisco (SF) was a very small town and no formal postal system was yet established there. In these early days eastbound mail was taken by private ship (when one could be found) by favor of the captain and deposited into the post office upon arrival. Contract mail from SF commenced in the middle of the gold fever chaos when the SFPO began service in March 1849. At that time the mail contract route was via Panama and the mail contract was held by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSC). But gold fever was great and many other companies began competing for the lucrative trade of transporting passengers and gold dust, and even carrying the mails. Occasionally during this period mails were carried via non-contract steamers in an attempt to appease the masses who were steadily complaining of the poor, slow and infrequent mail service. Competition continued to increase in the 1850’s, with independent lines carrying mail outside of the SFPO, ultimately for deposit into the post office in New York. These lines often advertised “ahead of the mails” as they were an alternate and faster service to the contract mail route. Eventually overland mail routes were established and became the default mode for mail carriage in 1859, paving the way for the famous Pony Express and ultimately the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 which significantly sped up transcontinental mail delivery.

**DURATION ASSESSMENT** – Precise delivery dates/durations are not able to be calculated for most examples, but very close approximations can be estimated to show delivery trends. Newspapers documenting departure and arrival dates (steamers, stage, etc.) are primary (and accurate) sources to assess duration. After that, estimates are made to final destination as follows; covers direct to New York assumed vessel arrival date, covers routed to nearby states from New York added 1 or 2 days depending upon distance, overland covers connecting to Midwest railheads added 4 days to reach destination, and covers routed to Europe via New York were assumed to arrive 1 day prior to postmark (typically steamer departure date).



Map showing primary mail routes during this period: via Panama (black), Southern Overland (green) and Central Overland (blue). The San Diego-San Antonio route (red) is not part of this study.

*Image Courtesy of Richard Frajola & Steven Walske- Mails of the Westward Expansion, 1803 to 1861*



## Mail carriage prior to the establishment of the SFPO

In 1840's California (while it was still part of Mexico), whaling and trading ships in the Pacific would carry letters home to the US East Coast. At this time Monterey was the center of commerce and "Yerba Buena" was the name of the small village which would be renamed to "San Francisco" in 1847. The ships would travel around Cape Horn to return home, a slow 6 month journey.

Datelined "Monterey California Oct 6th 1843" on folded letter endorsed "pr Bark North America" to Boston, MA. Entered mails at New London, CT April 4 (1844) with SHIP handstamp and manuscript 14½¢ due rating for 12½¢ inland postage (single sheet, distance of 80-150 miles) plus 2¢ ship fee. 6 months in transit via Cape Horn.



*Monterey California Oct 6<sup>th</sup> 1843*

*Letter Dateline*



Map showing the Cape Horn route used by the whaling and trading ships

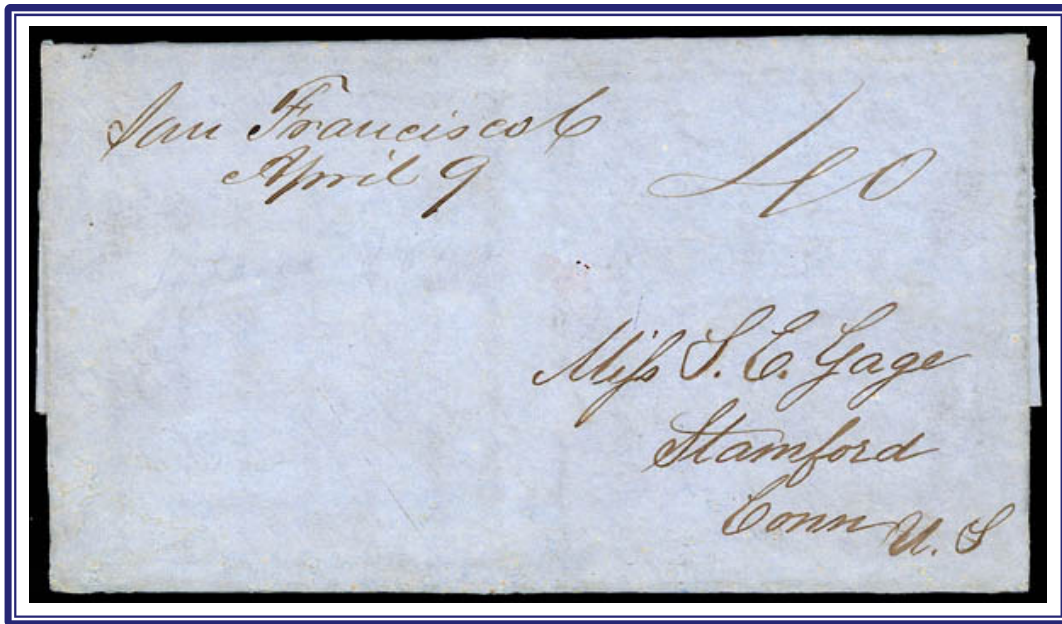
*Image Courtesy of Richard Frajola & Steven Walske-  
Mails of the Westward Expansion, 1803 to 1861*



## Initial Contract Mail Conveyed by PMSC

### Mail carriage at the establishment of the SFPO

On November 16, 1847, the Navy Department awarded a ten-year contract to provide monthly steamship service between Panama City and Astoria, OR (later changed to SF as the main terminus in June 1848). Service was to commence on October 1, 1848 (departure of steamships for SF) and to run ten years. The Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSC) was formed on April 12, 1848. Atlantic side US Mail Steamship Company (USMSC) sailings were not synchronized with PMSC and mail could wait up to a month on the Isthmus to make a connection. Service was monthly, departing SF on the first of each month, beginning April 1849. This resulted in very slow delivery during the startup period of the contract mail service.



Unpaid 40¢ rate to Connecticut. The maiden voyage of the PMSS *Oregon* from SF, departing on April 12, 1849 (postmarked April 9, the original expected departure date) and the **first eastbound contract sailing by the PMSC**. Arrived in Panama City on May 5, USMSC *Falcon* left Chagres on May 6, so the connection was missed. Routed instead via non-contract Empire City Line steamship *Crescent City* to New Orleans on June 10 connecting with the USMSC *Falcon* on June 12 for the trip to New York, arriving June 19, then to Connecticut. Long 73 day transit duration of the early PMSC contract mails reflects the unreliable Isthmus connection.

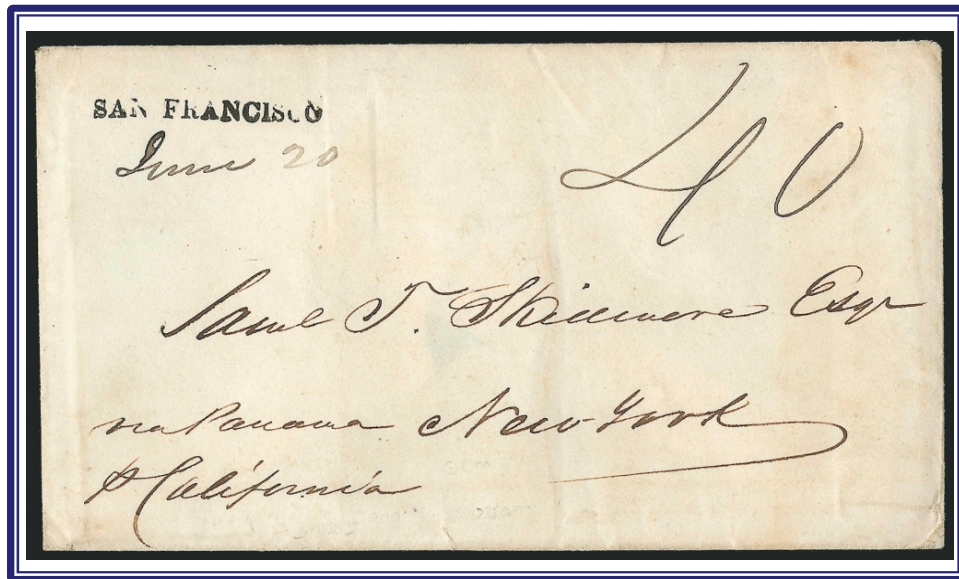
45-109  
Days



## Early Contract Mail Conveyed by PMSC

1849

Mail carriage within 5 months of establishment of the SFPO



June 20 (1849) unpaid 40¢ rate cover to New York, **first day use of SF Straightline postmark**. Endorsed “via Panama p California.” Letter datelined April 30, 1849. PMSS *California* actually departed May 1, the PMSS *Panama* left on June 20 on its maiden voyage to Panama. Sender intended to catch departure of the *California* but was apparently too late. **Waited seven weeks to catch the next contract steamer departure**. Arrived in Panama City on July 12, connecting with USMSC *Falcon* at Chagres, and into New York arriving August 17. 58 days delivery time from sailing date, but 109 days from date written due to missing the original departure.



August 1 (1849) paid 40¢ rate to Massachusetts, **first day use of the first SFPO CDS** (and also the straightline PAID marking). PMSS *California* departed August 1, on its second voyage to Panama. The USMSC *Falcon* left Chagres on July 25 and was not due back for weeks, so to avoid a long delay the US mail agent arranged the Empire City Line *Empire City* to carry mail, arriving in New York on September 13, then to Massachusetts. 45 days is vastly improved over the above cover but still slower than expected.

39-46  
Days

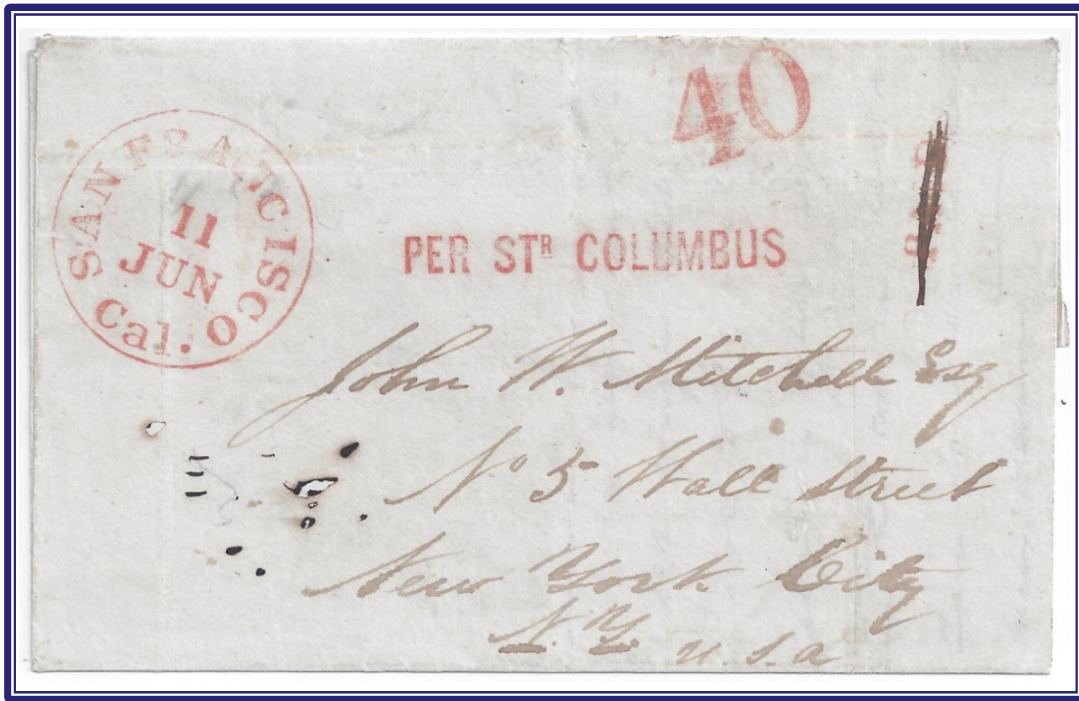
## Non-PMSC Special Contract Mail

1850

Mail carriage via non-contract Law's and Empire City Lines



During May-October 1850 the SF postmaster dispatched mails mid-month via non-contract steamers (George Law's Line and the Empire City Line), but only if letters were specifically endorsed to such vessels, in an attempt to appease the public who complained of poor and infrequent mail service. This practice was disallowed late in 1850 by the PMG as it was a breach of the mail contract. However it doubled the sailings per month for this short period and led to a change in the PMSC contract to double its sailings per month in January 1851.



Straightline marking "PER STR<sup>R</sup> COLUMBUS" on unpaid 40¢ rate cover to New York. Dated June 8 and postmarked June 11 (1850), actual departure of this special contract mail was June 18 aboard *Columbus*, arriving Panama City July 6, connecting with USMSC *Falcon* to Havana and USMSC *Ohio* to New York on July 24. 46 days transit from date written, but still faster by two weeks versus waiting for the July 1 contract departure of PMSS *California*.



Straightline marking "PER STR<sup>R</sup> ISTHMUS" on paid 80¢ double rate cover to New York. Second voyage of the *Isthmus*, departed SF on July 17, 1850, postmarked July 16. Arrived Panama City August 8, connecting with USMSC *Falcon* and *Ohio* to New York on August 24. 39 days transit, however the July 15 contract mails also caught the *Falcon* in Chagres so both arrived at the same time.

35-39  
Days

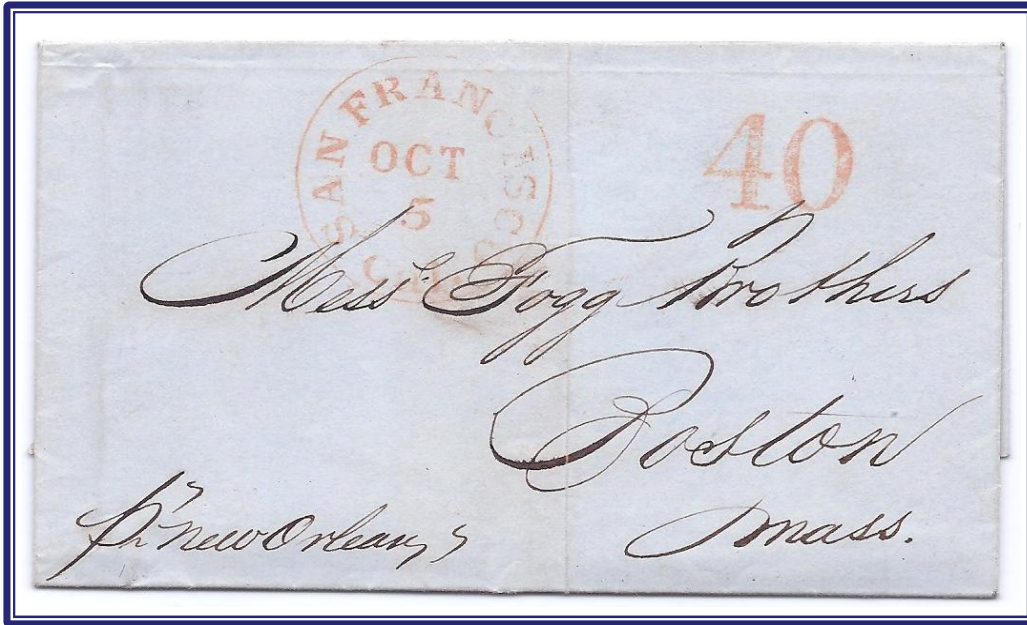
## Non-PMSC Special Contract Mail

1850

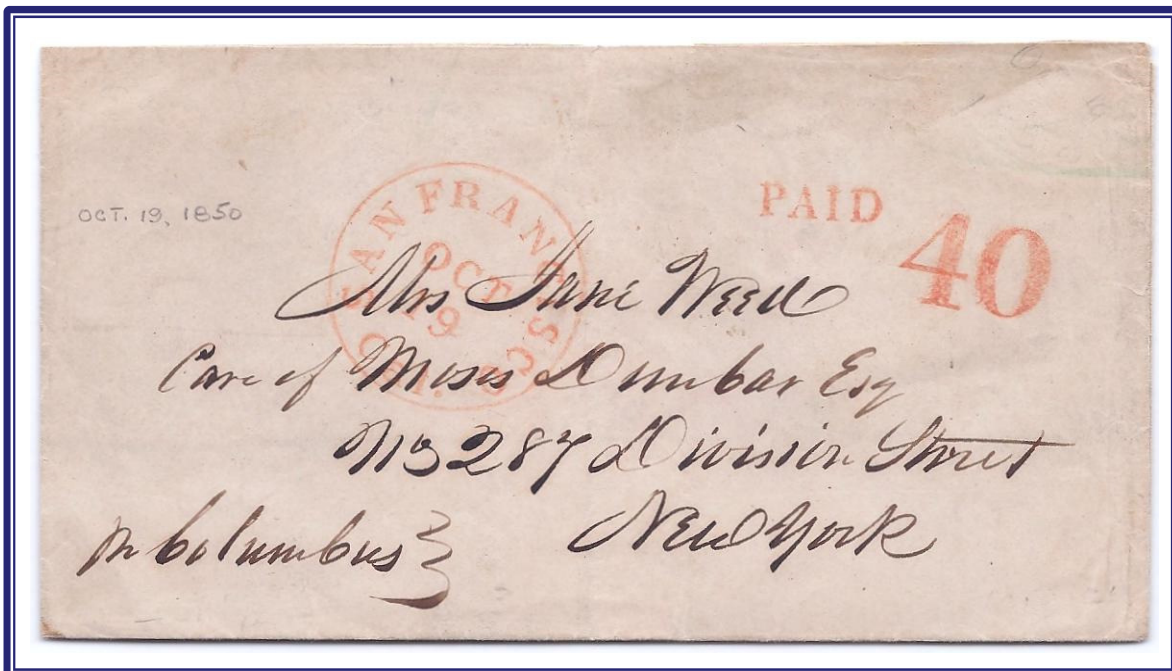
Mail carriage via non-contract Law's and Empire City Lines



POD directive of October 10, 1850 banned all future non-contract sailings with the mails as this was a breach on the government contract. October 19, 1850 was the final non-contract sailing date carrying the mails from the SFPO. The directive was received in SF just after this departure and from this date forward all sailings carrying the SFPO mails were via PMSC contract steamers.



Manuscript “per New Orleans” on letter datelined September 30, 1850. Unpaid 40¢ rate to Massachusetts. ECL *New Orleans* departed October 5 on its maiden voyage to Panama. Arrived Panama City October 22 (the same day as PMSS *California*), connecting with USMSC *Georgia* to New York on November 7, then to Boston. 39 days transit, however the October 1 contract mails also caught the *Georgia* in Chagres so both arrived at the same time.



Manuscript “per Columbus” on paid 40¢ rate to New York. *Columbus* departed SF on October 19, 1850. **Final non-contract sailing date carrying the mails from the SFPO.** Arrived Panama City November 7, connecting with USMSC *Pacific* and *Ohio* to New York on November 23. 35 days transit.

36-39  
Days

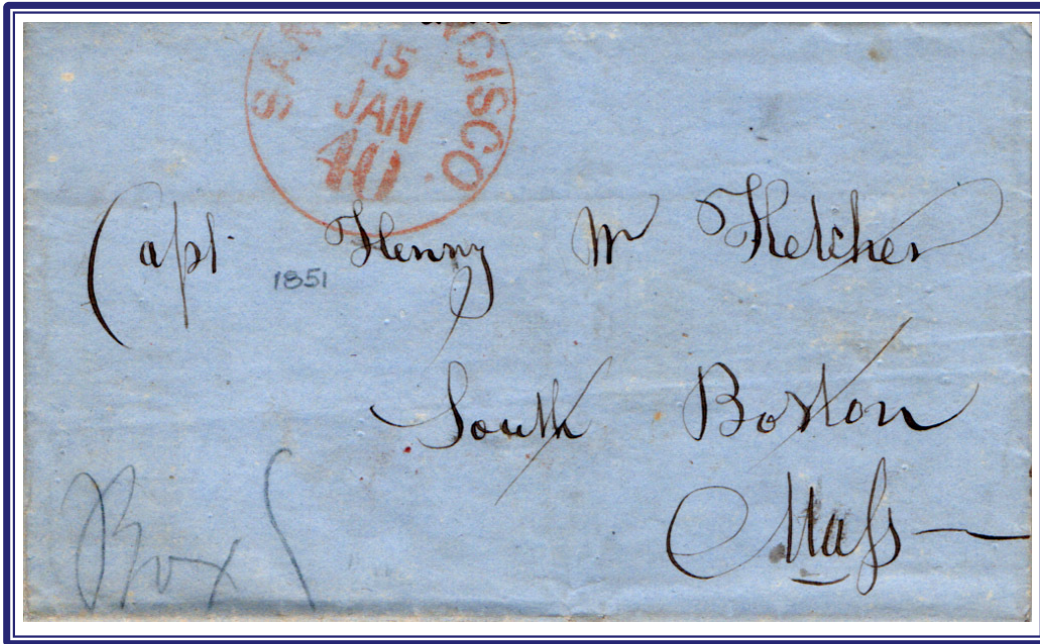


## PMSC Twice-Monthly Contract Mail

1851

Contract change doubles monthly sailings

Route efficiency slowly increases



January 15 (1851) unpaid 40¢ rate to Massachusetts, **first contractual sailing of the new twice-monthly PMSC schedule** (prior to this date the PMSC had increased sailings voluntarily, primarily for passenger traffic, but also carried the mails). PMSS *Unicorn* departed January 15 connecting with USMSC *Ohio* departing Chagres February 10, arriving in New York February 22, then to Boston. 39 days transit, still slow, but now twice the sailing rate as the original monthly service.



July 15 (1851) SF CDS to Le Havre, France with “PAID” and “22” handstamps. The SFPO incorrectly calculated the July 1851 rate change as 6¢ prepaid cross-country plus 16¢ transatlantic. 22¢ handstamp created for unauthorized rate and used July/August 1851 before correcting to 26¢ rate. **Only five recorded examples of this 22¢ rate error.** PMSS *Northerner* left July 16 from SF, connecting with USMSC *Falcon* and *Cherokee*, arriving New York on August 21 (then connecting to Atlantic steamer to France). 36 days transit to East Coast.

24-27  
Days



## PMSC Settles Into Twice Monthly Rhythm

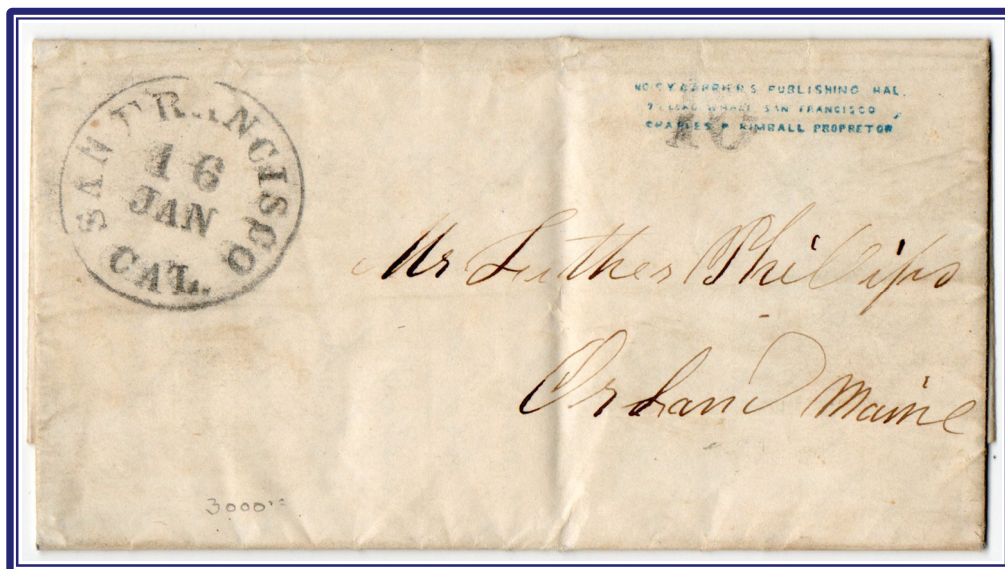
Service and route reliability stabilize

1853 -  
1854

The SFPO ran out of 3¢ 1851 Issue stamps and used bisected 12¢ stamps to pay the 6¢ rate during May-September 1853. Initially they were accepted but by September 1853 bisects as pre-payment were prohibited and rejected in the East but the PMG notice did not reach the SFPO until October 1853.



September 16 (1853) SF CDS, 6¢ prepaid rate to New York using bisected 12¢ 1851 Issue. While the SFPO allowed usage of the bisect, it was rejected in New York where the 10¢ due marking was applied for the unpaid transcontinental rate. PMSS *John L Stephens* left September 16 from SF, connecting with USMSC *Illinois* October 1, arriving New York on October 10. 24 days transit to East Coast was fast for this service.



January 16 (1854) SF CDS, 10¢ unpaid rate to Maine, blue small font “Noisy Carriers Publishing Hall” handstamp, proprietor Charles Kimball was letter bag operator who arranged for carriage to SFPO. PMSS *John L Stephens* left January 16 from SF, connecting with USMSC *George Law*, arriving New York on February 10, then onwards to Maine. 27 days transit to final destination.



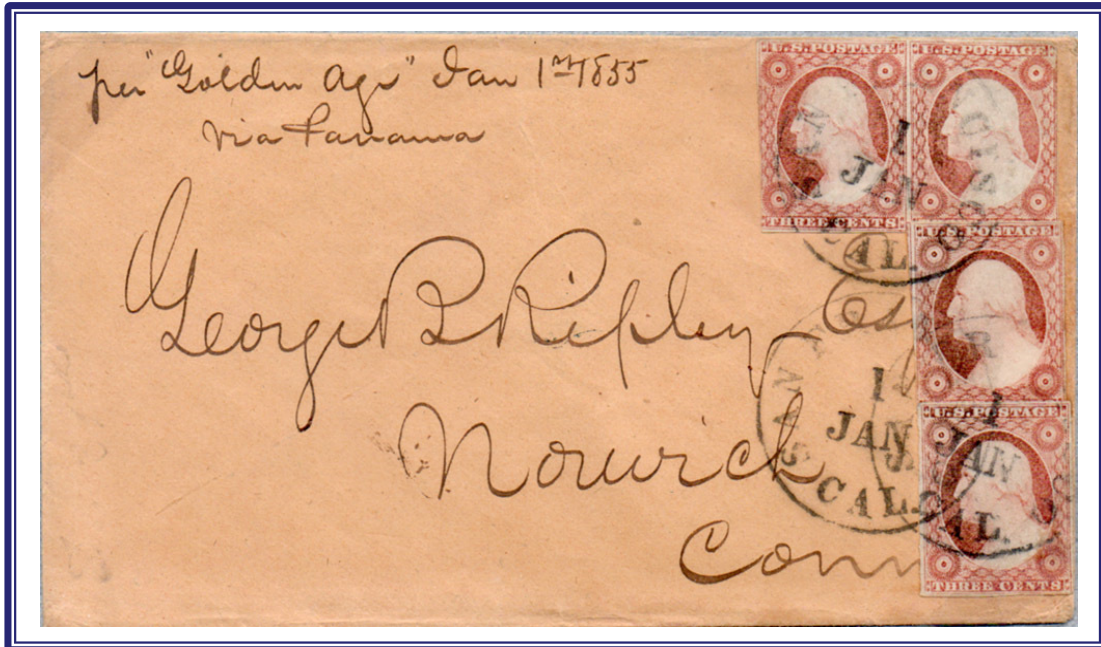
22-25  
Days



## Panama Railroad Completion Speeds Delivery

Isthmus transit reduced to hours  
Connection efficiency increased

1855 -  
1859



January 1, 1855 cover carried by PMSS *Golden Age* on its second run to Panama. 12¢ double rate to Connecticut prepaid via four 3¢ 1851 Issue stamps. Cover arrived in Panama on January 14, just **two weeks prior to the full completion of the Isthmus railroad**, but able to take advantage of the nearly complete infrastructure. Connecting with USMSC *George Law* the next day and into New York on January 25, then to Connecticut. 25 total days to destination.



July 20, 1859 integral “30 Paid” SF CDS double rate 30¢ prepaid letter to La Rochelle, France. Carried by PMSS *Golden Age*, connecting with USMSC *Star of the West* into New York August 11. Transferred to Atlantic steamer *Ocean Queen* of the Vanderbilt Line departing New York August 13 for France. **22 days to New York, fast service for the Panama route via PMSC/USMSC.**

23-25  
Days



## Non-Contract Mail via Nicaragua

Independent companies compete with PMSC contract mail

1853 -  
1854

By late-1852, letters were offered to be carried for free, if prepaid with US postage, by independent companies and delivered “in advance of the mails” or “ahead of the mails” using the faster and shorter Nicaragua route. This mail was not processed through the SFPO but privately carried to the steamer directly (outside of the mails). Letters did not enter the US mails until reaching the East.



Blue framed “Via Nicaragua, Noisy Carriers Publishing Hall, San Francisco” handstamp on half-paid (Due 6) double rate letter with New York two line STEAM SHIP marking. Carried on Nicaragua Steamship Company *Cortez* departing SF December 16, 1853, connecting with *Star of the West* departing San Juan del Norte December 31 and arriving in New York January 9, 1854, then to Massachusetts. 25 days transit slightly faster than Panama route at this time and gave senders additional opportunities for eastbound mail.



Endorsed “pr Cortez” prepaid 6¢ rate to New York. “Via Nicaragua Ahead of the Mails” blue boxed marking applied at SF. NSC *Cortez* departed SF on February 1, 1854, connecting with the *Northern Light* departing San Juan del Norte February 15 and arriving in New York February 23. Letter entered the mails with “New York SHIP FEB 24” CDS. For 1854, a fast 23 days transit time.

28 Days



## Non-Contract Mail via Panama

1854

Independent companies compete with PMSC contract mail

In early 1853 Cornelius Vanderbilt lost his Nicaragua shipping business when he lost stock control of the company while vacationing in Europe. It became the Nicaragua Steamship Company (NSC). As a result of this Vanderbilt began the new competing Independent Opposition Line to Panama (not Nicaragua) in September 1853.



Carried directly to the steamer at the SF wharf, bypassing the SFPO, where oval handstamp “Independent Line, Ahead of the Mailes, Uncle Sam and North Star, Via Panama” was applied. 6¢ prepaid rate to Maine. Carried by the *Uncle Sam* departing SF September 1, 1854 for connection to the *North Star* at Panama. However, the *North Star* was sold to USMSC September 5 (four days after this departed SF) so the mails were taken to Nicaragua and carried via Vanderbilt Independent Line steamer *Prometheus* from Nicaragua to New York entering the mails September 27 for Maine. 28 days transit, given inefficient connection at the Isthmus.



Map showing the shorter distance of the mail route via Nicaragua (red) versus via Panama (blue).

23 Days

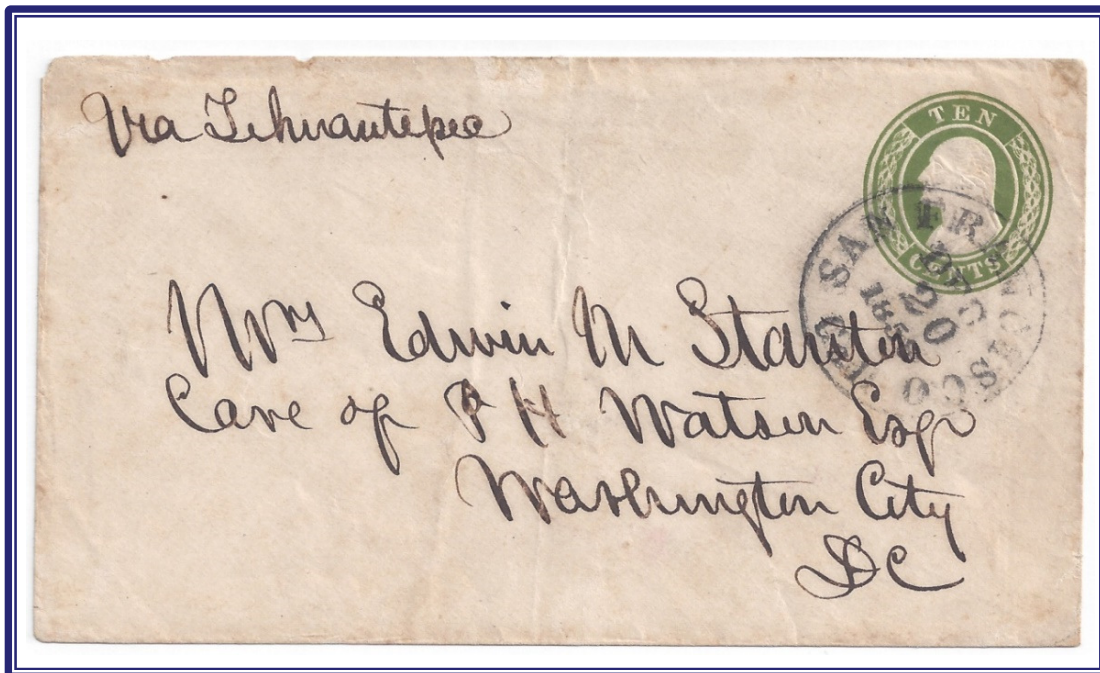


## Contract Mail via Tehuantepec Mexico

New route tested as Panama contract nears expiration

1858 -  
1859

A twice-monthly mail contract via the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was awarded to the Louisiana Tehuantepec Company and commenced service from SF on November 5, 1858. This was a shorter and faster route (to reach New Orleans) than via Panama (which was facing contract expiration September 30, 1859), but lasted only one year as the contract was not renewed given low revenues. PMSC steamers carried mail from SF to Acapulco for connection across the Mexican Isthmus. Letters had to be endorsed “Via Tehuantepec” for carriage over route.



Manuscript “Via Tehuantepec” endorsement on cover with December 20, 1858 SF CDS. Transcontinental postage to Washington, D.C. prepaid by 10¢ postal stationary. PMSS *John L Stephens* departed SF on December 20, 1858 on the fourth eastbound trip for this route, arriving at Acapulco December 28 connecting to New Orleans January 8, 1859. The journey to Washington D.C. was completed by railroad which averaged approximately 4 days. A transit time of 23 days. **Only 22 eastbound covers are known carried over the Tehuantepec route.**



Map showing the Tehuantepec Route through Mexico

26 Days



## Contract Mail via Southern Overland Route

Twice weekly overland route becomes default over Panama

1858 -

1861

Beginning in September 1858 a twice-weekly overland mail commenced between San Francisco (via Los Angeles) and St. Louis/Memphis (25 day delivery requirement), known as the Southern, or Butterfield Route (named after the contractor). Illustrated envelopes were occasionally used to direct the letter overland. After the September 30, 1859 expiration of the via Panama steamer mail contract, the PMG changed the default route for transcontinental mail to this overland route in December 1859.



October 28, 1859 SF CDS, to Maine, prepaid 10¢ transcontinental rate on “Overland Mail, Via Los Angeles” illustrated railroad propoganda cover. The overland mail departed SF on October 28 and reached Saint Louis on November 19. The journey to Maine was completed by railroad which averaged approximately 4 days. A transit time of 26 days.



March 5, 1860 SF CDS, 10¢ prepaid transcontinental rate to Maine. Blue illustrated four-horse stagecoach design with “Overland via Los Angeles U.S. Mail” on coach. The overland mail departed SF on March 5 and reached Saint Louis on March 27, with the journey to Maine completed by railroad in approximately 4 days. A transit time of 26 days.

17 Days



## The Pony Express Commences

Fast service via Central Route but at very high cost

1860 -

1861

One of the most famous icons of the early American West was the Pony Express which ran from April 1860 to October 1861 encompassing four different rate periods. Initial service commenced on April 3, 1860 managed by the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (COCPPE). In an attempt to obtain the daily overland mail contract they needed to demonstrate the superiority of the Central Route versus the Southern Route, and created the Pony Express to show it. With the Civil War looming, a move to the Central Route was inevitable, however the COCPPE did not obtain the mail contract they had strived for. The daily overland mail began July 1, 1861 using the Central Route (run by the Overland Mail Company). When the overland telegraph was completed the Pony Express was discontinued on October 26, 1861. Fees were high (initially \$5 per ½ ounce) but transit times were fast, taking only 10 to 15 days from San Francisco to Saint Joseph, Missouri.



Manuscript *By Pony* and pencil “1/4” (quarter ounce) markings (\$2.50 express fee) with October 13 SF blue Running Pony oval and October 25 COCPPE St. Joseph, MO and USPO Saint Joseph, MO October 26, 1860 CDS. Cover addressed to New York with required 10 cent US postage paid via 1857 Issue. Transit time of 13 days across the plains and 17 days to New York.

Beginning August 15, 1860 (eastbound) the COCPPE reduced the rate from \$5 per ½ ounce to \$2.50 per ¼ ounce, creating this route’s second rate period, which applied to this cover. Detailed census indicates 191 eastbound Pony Express covers are known with 59 from this second rate period.

23-28  
Days

## Daily Overland Mail via Central Overland Route

Civil War terminates southern overland route

1861 -  
1869



The daily overland mail commenced service on July 1, 1861 and was operated by the Overland Mail Company (OMC) utilizing the Central Route after the Southern Route was terminated due to the Civil War. The route connected to St. Joseph, Missouri or Atchison, Kansas, with a 20 day delivery requirement (23 days during winter).



September 16, 1863 SF CDS (with year date error), to France, unpaid 15¢ rate with original double rate in error and obliterated by cogwheel cancel. Endorsed “via Overland” carried by OMC. New York CDS of October 10 for connection to North German Lloyd line *America*. Calais arrival CDS of October 23, 8 décimes due. A transit time of 23 days to New York.



March 4 (1868) SF integral PAID CDS, “p overland mail” to England. Prepaid double 12¢ rate (changed from 24¢ rate two months earlier), April 13 London receiving CDS. Carried from New York on April 2 via North German Lloyd line *Union*. A transit time of 28 days to New York reflecting the slower winter months carriage.

7-10  
Days

# The Transcontinental Railroad Completes

1869

Fastest service at standard postal rates



On May 10, 1869, the railheads of the transcontinental railroad met at Promontory Summit, Utah six years after work began. Mails dispatched overland by the SFPO, after this route was established, traversed the continent in a very fast 7-8 days compared to an average 24 days prior to railway completion.



May 4 (1869) SF CDS with manuscript “Per Overland” endorsement, postmarked just 6 days before completion of the transcontinental railroad when the railhead gap was approximately 9 miles (traversed by the OMC stagecoach). 30¢ unpaid double rate indicated by blue manuscript 2. New York May 15 exchange CDS. French packet direct via the *Lafayette* per red octagonal “Paq Fr H No 2” Ligne H postmark. 16 décimes (double) postage due. Fast 10 day transit time to New York.



October 9 (1869) SF CDS, postmarked 5 months after completion of the railroad when service was firmly established. Similar double rate cover to above. New York October 16 exchange CDS. Very fast 7 day transit. **Cross-country transit time reduced on average from 24 days to 7-8 days via railroad, which would forever change mail delivery speed in the US.**