

San Francisco Letter Bag Operators



The phrase "letter bag operators" has a specific meaning that is uniquely applied to a group of private individuals and news rooms that operated in San Francisco. In the long tradition of coffee houses and news rooms on the East coast, these firms maintained bags for the deposit of outbound mail. The need for this service arose because many of the steamers available for carrying mail were without government contracts and usually did not receive mail for carriage directly from the post office. The bags of mail were delivered to the San Francisco post office, a steamship agent, or directly to a non contract steamship departing San Francisco. Often the letters were handstamped by the letter bag operator or the steamship agent to publicize their service.

Edward E. Dunbar first announced his Merchants' Exchange and News Room in San Francisco in an advertisement, dated November 15, 1849, that appeared in the *Placer Times* and elsewhere. The Merchant's Exchange also received mention in a *Weekly Pacific News* article that commented:

(it) is about the most comfortable place to spend an evening that there is in town. The room is well lighted and warmed, and has papers of the latest dates from the United States and Europe. Some place, other than the drinking houses, where strangers and citizens could spend an evening, has long been needed.

The advertisement specifically mentions that "letter Bags for the various mails are kept at the Office" and that "half-yearly subscriptions are being received from merchants" and others" while "Parties from the mines can for a small sum avail themselves ... by the day, week, or month."

The most widely known of the San Francisco letter bag operators was Charles Kimball, San Francisco's "Noisy Carrier." After his attempts in 1849 to operate an express between Sacramento and San Francisco, and his failed attempt to establish a city delivery post in February 1850, Kimball started his newspaper "crier" career in April. By the end of 1850 Kimball was publishing a directory from his publishing hall at 77 Long Wharf. By 1853, Kimball was also serving as a letter bag operator. His "Noisy Carrier" handstamps exist on eastbound mail in a wide variety of styles. Although his handstamps are known on mail delivered to contract steamers, most were used on mail that was sent by non contract steamers via Nicaragua and these often include the language "Via Nicaragua, Ahead of the Mails."

In July 1850 Still & Conner's Bookstore and newspaper depot advertised prices current prepared for the steamers. Later, while operated as John N. Still's bookstore, a handstamp was briefly used.

By January 1852, Leland & Sullivan were advertising their news room located at the "Post Office Arcade." Their May 31, 1852 advertisement in the *Daily Alta California* mentions that a letter mail bag "will be kept open all night" for mail to be sent on the contract steamer departing the next day. The advertisement also mentions that postage stamps and letter paper are available for sale. By June 30, 1853, J. W. Sullivan and George H. Leland had separated ways and were operating in competition. Both of their advertisements appear on that date above a third notice of a mail bag being kept at Lecount & Strong opposite the General Delivery entrance to the post office. No markings associated with Lecount & Strong have been identified.

As the importance of mail by steamship lines running in opposition to the post office contract steamers diminished after the close of the via Nicaragua route in 1856, the need for letter bag operators also ended.