

The Butterfield Overland Mail Company

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On September 15, 1857, businessman and financier John Butterfield of Utica, New York won a coveted six-year, \$600,000-a-year federal contract to transport mail twice a week between St. Louis, Missouri and San Francisco in 25 days. At the time, it was the largest land-mail contract ever awarded in the United States, requiring mail deliveries year-round. Before then, the fastest service across the continent had been provided by the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line across approximately 1,475 miles of desert and mountains between the two points in about 52 days. (That service had been organized by James Birch and begun months earlier in July and August, 1857.)

In modern terms, what the two stage lines offered in mail delivery could be the contrast between today's fiber optic network and a dial-up computer connection. In the mid-19th century, bringing the continent together by stageline from St. Louis to San Francisco with such unheard of speed elicited wonder and excitement and tremendous pride.

John Butterfield's line followed the so-called "oxbow route," skirting the Rocky Mountains and heavy winter snows by traveling south through Texas, the New Mexico Territory, Fort Yuma, near present-day Yuma, Arizona, and Southern California, before rolling on to San Francisco. It bypassed San Diego.

The undertaking was enormous. Butterfield, in association with the principals for Wells, Fargo & Co. (for the American Express Co.), invested more than a million dollars getting the stage line organized. The company had to build or repair roads and bridges, set up and staff about 150 stations, purchase stagecoaches and wagons, and buy horses, mules, and feed. Water wells had to be dug and mountain passes cleared. And, there were 800 employees to be hired!

Operation of the 2,800-mile route began on September 15, 1858. The mail went through almost without exception in the 25 days required. However, the lack of water and conflicts with native Indian peoples continually plagued the Overland Mail throughout its existence. Butterfield famously exhorted his employees,

“Remember boys, nothing on God’s earth must stop the United States Mail!”¹



The Overland Mail stage departing for San Francisco, October 23, 1858 from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*

Though the stages had the mail as its first priority, hardy, adventurous passengers were also accepted. Passage over the entire route cost \$200. Twenty-five pounds of baggage were allowed, along with two blankets and a canteen. Stages traveled at breakneck speeds, twenty-four hours a day. There

were no overnight hotel stops—only hurried intervals at stations where the teams were changed.

Waterman L. Ormsby, a reporter for the *New York Herald* and the only “through” passenger on the first westbound Butterfield Overland Mail



Loading Overland Mail passengers in San Francisco from *Harper's Weekly*, December 11, 1858

Stage, expressed his opinion of his experiences over the 2,812-mile journey upon his arrival in San Francisco in 1858,

“Had I not just come out over the route, I would be perfectly willing to go back, but I know what Hell is like. I’ve just had 24 days of it.”²

Operation of a section of Butterfield’s route between Fort Yuma and

Vallecitos duplicated part of the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line’s run. When the San Diego run did not continue to produce the expected revenue, it was halted.

Short line stage companies began coordinating service with the Butterfield Stage. For example, passengers traveling on the Butterfield line who wanted to go to San Diego used a shuttle stage service. Thornton Boulter described it in an article published in the *San Diego Union* on April 8, 1934:

Overland travelers who booked passage to San Diego on the Butterfield line left the Stage Coach at Warner's Ranch and traveled a shuttle line that wound down into Santa Isabel, then to Rincon, through San Pasqual Valley, into Poway, over the mesa to San Dieguito Valley, and then back of what is now Del Mar, through Sorrento Valley and up Rose Canyon and on into Old Town.³

Central Overland California Route

Competition to Butterfield's line was mounted by William Russell, William Waddell, and Alexander Majors in 1860 in the form of the Pony Express. It began relay operations along a central/northern route. While it succeeded in delivering the mail within 10 days time between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, the company failed to get the U.S. mail contract and became enmeshed in debt.⁴ However, the Pony Express did succeed in proving to the postal service the advantages of using a central route over the longer "oxbow route."

In March 1860, with debts mounting for the stage line's upkeep and repairs, Wells, Fargo and Co. (which held several unsettled loans) took control of the Butterfield Overland Stage Company from John



An Overland Mail stage crossing the Rockies from *Harper's Weekly*, February 8, 1868

Butterfield, forcing him out as president. Congress ordered the southern route discontinued and the service transferred to the central course at the beginning of the Civil War on March 12, 1861.⁵ The contract directed mail stages to travel through Nebraska, South Pass and Salt Lake City and designated the line the "Central Overland California Route."⁶

The last Butterfield stage on the Oxbow run occurred March 21, 1861 with service ceasing June 30, 1861. The stock and coaches along the southern

route were moved north for the new line. It took about three months to transfer them and to build new stations, and to secure hay and grain for the operation of the six-times-a-week mail line.⁷

While the western end of the Central Overland California Route was controlled by Wells, Fargo and Co., the eastern end of the route was taken over by Ben Holladay, who called his line the Holladay Overland and Express Company.⁸ Packages and mail on Holliday's stage line were delivered to his terminus at Salt Lake City then further carried westward in Wells, Fargo's charge.⁹ Hard feelings mounted between the two operators. Holladay disliked collaboration and Wells, Fargo became infuriated by his high rates and the poor care of his equipment and animals.¹⁰ Holladay's abrupt sale of his line to Wells, Fargo in 1866, enabled the company to have a long-distance stagecoach and mail service monopoly, until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

¹ David Nevin, Time-Life Books Eds., *The Expressmen, The Old West*, Time-Life Books, New York, 1974. P. 32.

² Waterman L. Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail: Only Through Passenger on the First Westbound Stage*. Edited by Lyle H. Wright and Josephine M. Bynum, University of California Press, 1991.

³ Kenhelm W. Stott, "Stage Coach Operations in San Diego and Imperial Counties, 1857-1874." Ms. San Diego State College, 1950. On file in the Research Archives, San Diego Historical Society. P. 30.

⁴ Nevin, *The Expressmen*. Pp. 100-108.

⁵ W. Eugene Hollon, "Great Days of the Overland Stage," *American Heritage Magazine*, June 1957, Vol. 8, No. 4.

⁶ Frank Root and William Elsey Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California*. Crane & Co., Topeka, Kansas, 1901. P. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Nevin, *The Expressmen*. P. 209.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*