

**Butterfield Overland Trail  
(proposed National Historic Trail)  
Significance Statement (draft)**

**presented by the NPS's  
National Trails Intermountain Region (NTIR)  
to the Landmarks Committee of the  
National Park Service Advisory Board**

**for consideration at its semi-annual meeting  
(via webinar), to be held on April 9, 2013  
in Washington, D.C.**

Proposed Butterfield Overland Trail –  
Statement of Significance (draft)

Frank Norris, Historian,  
National Trails Intermountain Region

**INTRODUCTION (LEGISLATIVE HISTORY):**

The 1968 National Trails System Act (P.L. 90-543) established the framework for a system of national trails, and it created three trails categories: scenic trails, recreation trails, and connecting or side trails. In addition, the act created two national scenic trails – the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail – and, in Section 5 (c), called for the study of 14 additional trails, of which three were primarily scenic, the other 11 primarily historic. During the next decade, either the Interior Secretary or the Agriculture Secretary oversaw the completion of most of these studies. These studies quickly recognized that inasmuch as all of these trails were being judged according to scenic trail criteria, many otherwise-eligible historic trails did not satisfy Congress’s criteria. As a result, Congress inserted an amendment in the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-625). Section 551 of that act called for the establishment of a separate category for national historic trails (NHTs), and under the revised criteria set forth in that section, most of the historic trails that were subject to study in the 1968 act have since become legislatively-designated national historic trails.

Congress first began to consider the Butterfield Overland Trail as a national historic trail in July 2006, when Rep. John Boozman (R-Ark.) introduced the Butterfield Overland Trail Study Act (H.R. 5980), which called for a “resource study” of the trail. No action was taken on this bill during the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, but in March 2007 – toward the beginning of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress – Boozman resubmitted the bill, by then known as H.R. 1266. The National Parks Subcommittee held a hearing on the bill that July. In October, this and eight similar bills were incorporated into a new bill, sponsored by subcommittee chair Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.), which was called America’s Historical and Natural Legacy Study Act (H.R. 3998). This bill, which called for a “special resource study” of the trail, was reported by the full Natural Resources Committee on December 4, and it passed the House on the same day. In the Senate, hearings in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee were held in April 2008, but a month later, the committee chairman reported the bill “with an amendment in the nature of a substitute.” This amendment reduced the number of park-related proposals from nine to three. The Senate committee favorably reported on the modified bill in June, but no further action took place on H.R. 3998 in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress.

On January 7, 2009, at the beginning of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, the head of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee resubmitted a bill (S. 22), called the Omnibus Public Land Management Act; it had similar if not identical Butterfield provisions to that which had been discussed in the previous Congress, but the overall bill was far longer, more comprehensive than what had existed previously. That bill passed the Senate just eight days later and was sent on to the House. On March 11, the full House voted on the bill, but under the rules that day a two-

thirds vote was required, and – by just a few votes – the bill’s supporters were unable to muster a sufficient number of votes to send the bill to the president. By this time, however, the House had already passed a similar bill – H.R. 146 – that also contained a Butterfield provision. On March 19, the Senate (with a few added amendments) passed the House bill, and on March 25 the House agreed to the Senate amendments.

When President Obama signed the bill on March 30, it became Public Law 111-11. The Butterfield-related provisions were included in Section 7209 of that bill. The bill called for the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study of the trail. In response, that responsibility was delegated to the National Park Service, which in turn assigned the project to the National Trails Intermountain Region office (NTIR). The National Trails Intermountain Region office is therefore undertaking this study.

## **CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE AND THE THEMATIC FRAMEWORK**

Section 5(b)(11) of the 1968 National Trails Study Act (P.L. 90-543) states that “To qualify for designation as a national historic trail, a trail must meet all three of the following criteria that were established in 1978, as noted above:

- A) *It must be a trail or route established by historic use and must be historically significant as a result of that use. The route need not currently exist as a discernible trail to qualify, but its location must be sufficiently known to permit evaluation of public recreation and historical interest potential.*
- B) *It must be nationally significant. To qualify as nationally significant historic use of the trail must have had a far reaching effect on broad patterns of American culture. Trails significant in the history of Native Americans may be included.*
- C) *It must have significant potential for public recreational use or historical interest based on historic interpretation and appreciation.”*

In order to attain national significance (item B, above), proposed national historic trails – in the same way as proposed, historically-themed national park units – must qualify under at least one of six criteria that pertain to National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) in accordance to regulations issued subsequent to the National Historic Sites Act of 1935. A National Park Service (NPS) bulletin that pertains to the National Register of Historic Places, entitled “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,” states that “The quality of national significance [when considering potential National Historic Landmarks] is ascribed to districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States in history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture and that possess a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

1. *That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United*

*States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained; or*

2. *That are associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States; or*
3. *That represent some great idea or ideal of the American people; or*
4. *That embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or*
5. *That are composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively compose an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorate or illustrate a way of life or culture; or*
6. *That have yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have yielded, or which may reasonably be expected to yield, data affecting theories, concepts and ideas to a major degree.*

Another key topic in the selection and appropriateness of historic trails as being part of the National Trails System is whether they are part of broad, recognized themes in American history. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the NPS has operated under one of a series of thematic frameworks, the most recent of which is the NPS Revised Thematic Framework, issued in 1994. This framework envisions American history as being a complex interrelationship of people, time, and place that are manifested in eight broad themes: I) Peopling Places, II) Creating Social Institutions and Movements, III) Expressing Cultural Values, IV) Shaping the Political Landscape, V) Developing the American Economy, VI) Expanding Science and Technology, VII) Transforming the Environment, and VIII) The Changing Role of the United States in the World Community. The framework also provides a list of subsidiary topics that further define and describe that theme.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

As noted below, the National Trails Intermountain Region office has concluded that the proposed Butterfield Overland National Historic Trail (as signified in Sec. 7209 in the 2009 omnibus parks bill) is nationally significant under two separate themes and subsidiary topics, as elaborated upon below, along with the NHL criterion associated with each theme:

- 1) **Theme V = Developing the American Economy, Topic 3 = transportation and communication; NHL Criterion #1 = an association with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United States history.**

The primary basis for recognizing the Butterfield's Overland Mail Company as being nationally significant is that it fulfilled a critical need – expressed by a broad range of Americans – to tie

California, and various western territories, more closely to the long-established portions of the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. Prior to September 1858, transportation and communication between the Mississippi River valley (or the east coast) and the Pacific Coast – for passengers, mail, express, and other forms of freight – took place on a twice-monthly basis via a sea route that connected to the Pacific Coast via the Isthmus of Panama. The implementation of the Butterfield route brought the disparate parts of the country together by providing twice-weekly stages to and from California; just as important, it satisfied the long-expressed need to have an overland route that ran entirely within the country’s borders.

**2) Theme III = Expressing Cultural Values, Topics 3 (literature), 4 (mass media), and 6 (popular and traditional culture); NHL Criterion #3 = a theme that represents some great idea or ideal of the American people.**

Although the Overland Mail Company operated along the so-called “southern route” for only 2½ years, the fact that it was the first “transcontinental” stage route resonated with Americans. Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Americans, particularly in the western states and territories, appreciated and depended upon the service, and – perhaps because the Butterfield was a well-known, long-distance stage route – later generations of Americans (thanks to western novels, motion pictures, and television) recognized that the stagecoach was an iconic western symbol, and the Butterfield’s stature grew as a result. Today, “the Butterfield” is a name that is well-known to many Americans who may be ignorant of where the line went and when it operated; for this reason, many commercial establishments, both along the trail corridor and elsewhere, bear the names “Butterfield Trail,” “Butterfield Stage,” and similar appellations.

These two themes are discussed in greater detail below (see the “Significance Themes” section).

## **PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The period of significance for this study is proposed to be from 1858 and 1861. While the Overland Mail Company operated over the southern or “ox-bow” route beginning in 1858, two preparatory events during 1857 are inextricably a part of nationally-significant transportation developments in the United States during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. These events include 1) the congressional authorization, in March 1857, of a subsidized postal route between the Mississippi River and San Francisco, and 2) the June 1857 award, and the subsequent beginning of operation of, what was formally known as the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Route. As noted in the Historical Narrative (see below), preparatory events had happened even earlier, inasmuch as Congress had authorized a postal route between San Antonio and San Diego in August 1856, but Postmaster General Aaron V. Brown did not fund that authorization until mid-June 1857. John Butterfield and his associates were informed in early July 1857 that they would win the contract over the southern or “ox-bow” route (although they did not sign that contract until mid-September 1857). John Butterfield, his associates and employees spent one year – between September 1857 and September 1858 – preparing the route. The line ran continuously, twice each week in each direction, for two and one-half years until March 1861, when Congress voted to move the Overland Mail route from the “ox-bow” route to the central route.

## **STUDY LEGISLATION, PURPOSE, AND TASKS**

### **○ Legislation**

This determination of significance is necessitated by the passage of P.L. 111-11, signed by President Obama on March 30, 2009. Section 7209 of that bill called for the Secretary of the Interior to “conduct a special resource study along the route known as the ‘Ox-Bow Route’ of the Butterfield Overland Trail ... in the States of Missouri, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.” (See Map 1, on following page.) This study shall evaluate

- 1) “a range of alternatives for protecting and interpreting the resources of the route, including alternatives for potential addition of the Trail to the National Trails System; and
- 2) the methods and means for the protection and interpretation of the route by the National Park Service, other Federal, State, or local government entities, or private or non-profit organizations.”

Section 5(b) of NTSA directs that “the feasibility of designating a trail shall be determined on the basis of evaluation of whether or not it is physically possible to develop a trail along a route being studied, and whether the development of a trail would be financially feasible.” Inasmuch as this special resource study is being treated, for administrative purposes, as a feasibility study, studies of this type should include a number of evaluation methods, one of the most critical of which pertains to its significance. Section 5(b)(11) provide that “To qualify for designation a national historic trail, a trail must meet all three of the following criteria.” These three criteria are described above (see the section entitled “Criteria for National Significance and the Thematic Framework”).

### **○ Purpose of Feasibility Study**

The purpose of the feasibility study is to determine whether the designation of the Butterfield Overland Trail as a national historic trail is feasible, according to criteria specified above.

### **○ Tasks**

The tasks which will help determine whether the Butterfield Overland Trail should be considered feasible as a national historic trail include 1) a historical narrative and a bibliographic essay, and 2) a more explanatory discussion of significance themes briefly noted above, each of which will help justify the trail’s national significance, and 3) a bibliographical essay.

## **HISTORICAL NARRATIVE**

### *Foreword*



The first several decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic expansion of the United States' geographical boundaries, and within those boundaries strong demographic growth took place as well. The Louisiana Purchase (1803), which added an area that constituted more than one-quarter of the area in the present coterminous United States, was soon followed by smaller territorial acquisitions in the northern Midwest (1818) and Florida (1819). During the next 20 years, the U.S. added no new territory, but its population almost doubled, from 9.6 million in 1820 to 17.1 million in 1840.<sup>1</sup> Relatively few American citizens during the 1820s and 1830s lived beyond the country's western borders – in the Mexican provinces of New Mexico and California or in the British-held Oregon Country. In the early 1840s, however, that tenet began to change as Americans – first in a trickle (starting with the Bidwell-Bartleson party of 1841), and later in more substantial numbers – headed west to Oregon (and also California) to establish settlements and open up new farmlands. Most of the new settlers headed west over all or portions of the Oregon Trail, a 2,000-mile overland route that wound from Independence, Missouri to the Continental Divide at South Pass before reaching the Snake and Columbia river valleys. Perhaps based on the success of this multi-year migration and the new reality of Americans living in close proximity to the Pacific Coast, the term “manifest destiny” – which

<sup>1</sup> “U.S. Population by Official Census, 1790-2000” (chart), *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2009 edition, 592-93.

had been coined by a U.S. journalist in 1845 – was soon adopted by hawkish American politicians who envisioned a country whose borders would encompass both the Oregon Country and the Mexican provinces of New Mexico and California.<sup>2</sup>

In December 1845, the Republic of Texas joined the United States as its 28<sup>th</sup> state, and just five months later, growing tensions between the United States and Mexico regarding the border between southern Texas and northern Tamaulipas brought war. President Polk declared war on May 13 and Mexican leaders responded in kind ten days later. U.S. Army forces, under the command of General Stephen W. Kearny, headed west from Fort Leavenworth toward New Mexico, and by mid-January 1847, American military units had overtaken Mexican forces in both New Mexico and California. That March, U.S. troops landed at and occupied Veracruz before continuing on to victories over General Antonio López de Santa Anna at Puebla, Mexico City and elsewhere. Major military action wound down in October 1847. The resulting Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, finalized in February 1848, forced Mexico to cede to the U.S. not only present-day New Mexico, Arizona, and California but also Nevada and Utah, and portions of Colorado and Wyoming. Meanwhile, in June 1846, the U.S. and British governments had reached a compromise over the Oregon Country, the result being that present-day Oregon, Washington, and Idaho along with western Montana and Wyoming was now part of the United States.<sup>3</sup> By early 1848, therefore, the present-day map of the coterminous United States was nearly complete.

The discovery of gold in California, by James W. Marshall in January 1848, brought a new impetus to western settlement. During the months that followed, Marshall's find was replicated up and down the Sierra Nevada foothills, and California was almost instantly transformed to a gold-based economy. But California's transportation and communication network was so rudimentary that it was not until mid-August that a New York newspaper first announced the find. The following year, more than 20,000 "forty-niners" invaded California,<sup>4</sup> and by September of 1850 Congress – as part of the Compromise of 1850 – admitted California as the 31<sup>st</sup> state. Tens of thousands of additional emigrants, most driven by "gold fever," arrived in the decade that followed.

### *Postal Routes to California*

Even before California attained statehood, its residents recognized that the lack of an adequate transportation network, and poor communication, were two of its foremost problems. Those hoping to travel from the U.S. east coast to California had three basic options. One choice – noted as "the best established California connection" but taking five months or more – was a 17,000- to 18,000-mile sailing voyage from one of the east coast ports, south around Cape Horn,

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<sup>2</sup> "United States History, Chronology of Events," *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2009 edition, 477.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> George R. Stewart, *The California Trail, an Epic with Many Heroes*, American Trails Series, A.B. Guthrie, Jr., ed. (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1962), 232. David H. DeJong, in "Arizona, Advantageous to the Indians? The Overland Mail Routes and the Establishment of the Pima Indian Reservation, 1852-1860," *Journal of the West* 45 (Summer 2006), p. 17, states that there were "40,000 or so emigrants that passed through their villages between 1846 and 1852."

and north to California.<sup>5</sup> A second, less popular option – a variant of the Cape Horn route – took passengers by boat from an east coast port to Panama, across the isthmus by mule or on foot via a muddy, dangerous trail to the Pacific Coast, then aboard a northbound vessel to California. This 6,000-mile trip took three months and was thus somewhat less time consuming than the Cape Horn voyage, but it was also more risky (due to rampant cholera and “Chagres fever” in Panama) and unpredictable (due to the relative scarcity of ships sailing up and down the Pacific Coast).<sup>6</sup> A third alternative was travel over one of several overland routes. The most popular was the so-called California Trail (or “the Platte-Humboldt trail”), a variant of the Oregon Trail that split into a multiplicity of routes that surmounted the Sierra Nevada, while other overland routes headed west along the Cherokee Trail, the Gila River Route, and other less well-traveled paths. All of the overland routes, however, were an ordeal which consumed between four and six months of travel, and death in the form of disease, Indian attacks, and accidents occurred all too often.<sup>7</sup> Of the three options, all were widely decried as being unsatisfactory. The January 1855 completion of the Panama Railroad, which bridged the 48-mile-wide isthmus, was a substantial improvement because it reduced the Panama portion of the trip from several days to a few hours; as a result, travelers and mail could now go between New York and San Francisco trip in 26-30 days, and in as few as 22 days under ideal conditions.<sup>8</sup> Despite this improvement, a broad stripe of Americans – and particularly those in California – clamored for transportation and communication that would connect California with the other 30 states safely, reliably, and without needing to pass through foreign territory. As author Vernon Brown has noted, “The demand for an overland mail route within our own borders became imperative.”<sup>9</sup>

Having an efficient way to transport mail and express<sup>10</sup> was a key element of the Californians’ demands. As far back as 1845, pressure from Americans living in Oregon had resulted in action by the U.S. Post Office Department for an improved mail service.<sup>11</sup> The huge influx of migrants to California in the late 1840s and early 1850s, not surprisingly, raised the volume of those complaints; and the Post Office Department itself demanded changes to its existing service because the shipping interests that served the route via Panama constituted a monopoly and thus demanded prices widely decried as usurious.<sup>12</sup> The California press was first responsible for raising the issue, but inasmuch as the new state had two U.S. representatives as well as two

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<sup>5</sup> Roscoe P. Conkling and Margaret B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857-1869: Its Organization and Operation Over the Southern Route to 1861; Subsequently Over the Central Route to 1866; and under Wells, Fargo and Company in 1869* (Glendale, Calif., Arthur Clark Co., 1957), 59-60. (Noted in later references as “Conklings, *Butterfield*.” This is a three-volume work; unless otherwise indicated, all references are to pages in Volume 1.) John Walton Caughey, in *The California Gold Rush* (Berkeley, Univ. of Calif. Press, 1948), notes on p. 57 that the voyage took “5, 6, or 8 months,” while on p. 77, it was noted as being “4 to 8 months.” See also p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 55-56, 61-62. On pp. 64-65, the Conklings note that the prevalent ships of the early 1850s were side paddle-wheel steamers, equipped with auxiliary sails. Caughey, *California Gold Rush*, pp. 59-67.

<sup>7</sup> Caughey, *California Gold Rush*, 123; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 82, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 62, 64; LeRoy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869* (Norman, Univ. of Oklahoma, 2004), 46-47; “Panama Rail Road Company,” *Official Guide of the Railways*, December 1939, 1259.

<sup>9</sup> Vernon H. Brown, “American Airlines Along the Butterfield Route,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 33 (March 1955), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Express companies during the nineteenth century were similar to companies such as FedEd or United Parcel Service today; that is, these companies sent freight, parcels, money, etc., in ways that were faster and safer, but more expensive, than either the U.S. mail or ordinary freight service.

<sup>11</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77, 85.

senators, its delegation loudly, and continuously, made demands in Congress for post roads, improved mail service, and a transcontinental railroad.<sup>13</sup> Congress, however, was paralyzed with inaction due to the increasing divisiveness surrounding sectionalism, and jealousy between northern and southern senators prevented any significant actions that might assist one section at the expense of the other. As a result, mail and express going to and from California was routinely shipped either around Cape Horn (during the 1840s) or via the Isthmus of Panama (during the 1850s).<sup>14</sup> As early as 1850, the Post Office Department contracted for a monthly mail service connecting Independence, Missouri with Salt Lake City, and an extension of that line the following year continued the service on to California. That line, however, was subsidized only marginally, and it did little to slake California's demand for mail service, so most California mail and express continued to travel by steamer via Panama.<sup>15</sup>

Within California, stagecoaches were the primary land transportation method, and a complex stage network soon developed. By early 1854, after a period of hectic competition, most stage lines in the state had been merged into the California Stage Company; this firm was headed by James Birch, who had had been hauling prospectors to the "diggings" since 1849.<sup>16</sup> For hauling express parcels in California, the two most prominent firms were Adams and Company, founded in 1849, and Wells, Fargo and Company, founded in 1852 – both of which had grown wealthy carrying gold, currency, and other high-valued goods. In 1855, however, Adams and Company failed, leaving Wells Fargo with a virtual monopoly on express services in California.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Pacific Railroad Survey*

Prodded by Senator William Gwin of California, Congress in March 1853 made an initial move toward more fully incorporating California into the union when it allotted \$150,000 for railroad survey work, with the specific goal of which was "to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean."<sup>18</sup> This act authorized the U.S. Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers to undertake four scientific and topographic expeditions between the western settlement fringe and the West Coast. Three of these expeditions would head west along the approximate corridors of the 48<sup>th</sup> parallel (between St. Paul, Minnesota and Puget Sound), the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel (between St. Louis and San Francisco), and the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel of latitude (between Little Rock, Arkansas and Los Angeles). In deference to the Gadsden Purchase, which President Pierce's secretary of state negotiated later that year

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78; Ralph Moody, *Stagecoach West* (New York, Crowell, 1967), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 55-59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-88. The department eventually instituted weekly service on this route, and offered a far higher subsidy; these events, however, did not take place until early 1858, which was several months after improvement work had begun on the more heavily-subsidized Butterfield "ox-bow route."

<sup>16</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 41-43, 47-48, 51-52; Edward Hungerford, *Wells Fargo; Advancing the American Frontier* (New York, Random House, 1949), 48-50.

<sup>17</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 48-49; Oscar Osburn Winther, *Via Western Express and Stagecoach* (Stanford, Calif., Stanford Univ. Press, 1947), 103-04.

<sup>18</sup> 32<sup>nd</sup> Congress, Session II, Chapter 98 (March 3, 1853), Section 10, in *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 10 (1851-1855), p. 219. That same day, Congress – in another bill – allotted \$5,000 "for survey from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean." 32<sup>nd</sup> Congress, Session II, Chapter 96 (March 3, 1853), p. 184.

with Mexican authorities,<sup>19</sup> a fourth survey was eventually undertaken along the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel (between northern Texas and San Diego). In accordance with the act, surveys over all four of these routes commenced in 1853 and were completed by late 1854; the following year, reports describing each route and its viability as a railroad right-of-way were completed and submitted to Congress.<sup>20</sup> These reports provided both Congress and the American public a wealth of information about its vast, newly-acquired domain. Due to the increasing strains of sectionalism, however, Congress was unable, for the time being, to move forward and authorize any transcontinental railroad projects.

A primary rationale behind the Pierce administration's purchase of the southern portions of present-day Arizona and New Mexico was the widespread recognition – based on the experiences of both westbound migrants along the so-called Gila River route and the Bartlett-García Conde boundary survey of 1850-51 – that this area provided the possibilities for a year-round route between Texas and California for wagons and, eventually, a railroad. The first moves toward providing a long-distance mail service in this area had taken place in 1849-50, with a monthly horseback route between San Antonio and Santa Fe, via present-day El Paso.<sup>21</sup> By 1854, a stagecoach driven by a six-mule team was carrying the mail over this route.<sup>22</sup>

### *Congress Authorizes Long-Distance Postal Routes*

In 1856, Californians instituted a renewed effort for improved ties with the remainder of the United States. That April, they sent 75,000 petitions to Congress calling for action, and four Congressmen – two California senators and two Missouri representatives – submitted bills that year calling for an overland mail service.<sup>23</sup> That pressure resulted in three major pieces of legislation. On August 18 of that year, Congress enacted a post-roads bill which, among other California provisions, established a postal route “from San Diego, via El Paso, to San Antonia [sic], Texas.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps as a way to ease operations along this proposed line, Congress passed a

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<sup>19</sup> In order to clarify the confusing and contradictory border language contained in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, James Gadsden, the U.S. minister to Mexico, negotiated a clearly-defined boundary adjustment with Mexican President Antonio López de Santa Anna on December 30, 1853. This \$10 million agreement was ratified by the U.S. Senate on April 25, 1854 and by Santa Anna on June 8, but it proved so unpopular in Mexico that it played a key role in Santa Anna's removal from power that year. See Conklings, *Butterfield*, 70-72, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Originally printed as Congressional documents in 1854 and 1855 (see 33<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, House Executive Documents 736-37 and 758-68), these were later expanded and published, by the Government Printing Office, in 13 volumes between 1855 and 1861.

<sup>21</sup> El Paso, more formally known as El Paso del Norte, had been a settlement on the right (south) bank of the Rio Grande since the 1680s. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo fixed the international boundary along this river. On the left (north) bank, U.S. settlement began in 1849, and by 1851 the nucleus of the town of Franklin began at Coons' Rancho. In 1859, settler Anson Mills platted the town of El Paso (on the U.S. side of the river), a move which, in the words of the *Handbook of Texas*, “resulted in endless confusion until the name of the town across the river, El Paso del Norte, was changed to Ciudad Juárez in 1888.”

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hde01> For the sake of simplicity, the settlement on the U.S. side of the river will be referred to as El Paso in this study, even though it was technically known as Franklin during the first year of the Butterfield's operation.

<sup>22</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 90-91.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-05.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Frajola and Floyd Risvold, “Deconstructing the Jackass Mail Route,” *Great Britain Collectors Club Chronicle* 220 (November 2008),” 273; 34<sup>th</sup> Congress, Session I, Chapter 168. “California,” in *United States*

second act on February 17, 1857 that authorized Interior Department contractors to carve out a wagon road over perhaps half of the San Antonio-San Diego route: specifically from El Paso west to Fort Yuma, on the California side of the Colorado River. Congress allotted \$200,000 for this project.<sup>25</sup>

The third, and perhaps most critical piece of legislation that Congress passed in response to the growing need for improved transportation was passed on March 3, 1857, the 34<sup>th</sup> Congress's last day before adjournment. On that day, the national legislature finally overcame the more tentative steps it had taken during the past seven months regarding the implementation of improved transportation and communication between the western settlement fringe (in the various Midwestern states) and California. It did so not with an authorization for railroad construction – an action that would have to await the raging sectional debate – but with a move to subsidize a far less costly trans-Mississippi stagecoach line. In a move spearheaded by Democratic senators William Gwin of California and Thomas Rusk of Texas, along with Rep. John Phelps of Missouri, Congress attached an amendment to the annual post office appropriations bill which authorized a stagecoach line that would connect California with the Mississippi River valley. The bill authorized a six-year contract for up to \$300,000 per year for a semi-monthly stage service, \$450,000 for a weekly stage, and \$600,000 for a semi-weekly stage. Congress recognized that any of three cities – St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans – might logically serve as the stage line's eastern terminus, and that there were four potentially viable routes over which the proposed stage line might run. Each of the three Mississippi River communities, moreover, had vocal partisans intent on securing the stage line's headquarters. Congress, however, sidestepped this issue (and the sectionalism inherent to it), and instead asked the Post Office Department to tackle the issue by tendering a contract for a route "from such point on the Mississippi River, as the contractors may select, to San Francisco, in the State of California." The bill stated that the victorious bidder needed to guarantee a 25-day trip over this route, and that the system would be up and running within 12 months after the signing of the contract.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Post Office Department Issues Postal Route Contracts*

At this time, the Postmaster General – an appointee of the recently elected Democratic president James Buchanan – was Aaron V. Brown, a former governor of Tennessee. Brown, who was

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*Statutes*, Vol. 11 (1855-1859), p. 124; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 80. After the passage of the authorization bill, the Executive Branch made no immediate move to appropriate the funds in order to issue a contract for carrying mail over this route.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne R. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules; the San Antonio-El Paso Mail, 1851-1881* (College Station, Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1985), 89; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 71; W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West; a Study of Federal Road Surveys and Construction in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1846-1869* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1952), 218-221; 34<sup>th</sup> Congress, Session III, Chapter 50, Section 2, in *United States Statutes*, Vol. 11 (1855-1859), p. 162; Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869*, 81. Frajola and Risvold, in "Deconstructing," 273, mistakenly note that Congress passed the wagon-road authorization bill on December 19, 1856. In order to preserve a balance between sectional interests, Congress – in the same bill that authorized the El Paso-Fort Yuma road – also authorized a \$300,000 road between Fort Kearny, Nebraska Territory, and the eastern boundary of California.

<sup>26</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 105-12; G.C. Tompkins, *A Compendium of the Overland Mail Company on the South Route, 1858-1861, and the Period Surrounding It* (Millefleurs, 1990), 86; 34<sup>th</sup> Congress, Session III, Chapter 96, Sections 10-13, in *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 11 (1855-1859), p. 190.

keenly aware of the sectional aspects of the proposed stage line terminus, oversaw the issuance of a contract prospectus that was issued in April 20, 1857. Key elements of the contract proposals would be the frequency of service, the subsidy requested, the route chosen, and – of particular importance – the route and the city chosen for the eastern terminus. Brown called for all proposals to be submitted by the afternoon of June 1, 1857, and in response, nine proposals were submitted. The bid awards were to be announced a month later, on July 1.<sup>27</sup>

Of these nine proposals, several were highly unrealistic; one called for a \$1 million-per-year contract heading west from Vicksburg, Mississippi, while another proposed a route via South Pass, Wyoming.<sup>28</sup> Two bidders, however, submitted highly realistic proposals. James W. Birch, the first president of the highly successful and recently-consolidated California Stage Company and a confidante of many congressmen, submitted a bid for a \$600,000 per year, semi-weekly stagecoach service. Birch, according to one historian, “had plenty of capital to finance such a venture, and no man in the country could match his accomplishments in organizing and operating successful stage and mail lines.” By mid-May 1857, moreover, Birch had told a friend that he was “so sure of getting [the contract] that he has ordered the necessary coaches to be built.”<sup>29</sup> The other serious bidder was a consortium headed by John W. Butterfield, of Utica, New York, a personal friend of President James Buchanan. Butterfield and his associates<sup>30</sup> submitted three bids, all of which proposed semi-weekly service over the 35<sup>th</sup> Parallel route (via Albuquerque). One of Butterfield’s bids proposed St. Louis as the eastern terminus, a second proposed an eastern terminus at Memphis, and the third proposal called for a “bifurcated” route that headed west from both St. Louis and Memphis and met “at the most suitable point” before heading west to Albuquerque and on to California. Butterfield’s bid packages also stipulated that the consortium would be willing to run over any variation of its route (along the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel) which, in Brown’s judgment, would be most likely to make the mail safe and expeditious.<sup>31</sup>

Brown, having scrutinized and evaluated each of the nine proposals, knew that both Birch and Butterfield – perhaps because both men were experienced operators of large stage lines – had submitted the highest-quality technical proposals. (One historian noted that “most of the other bidders were hastily organized firms.”<sup>32</sup>) Keenly aware of the need to balance the interests of both northern and southern partisans, but also cognizant of his Tennessee roots, Brown (and

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<sup>27</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 112; Muriel H. Wright, “Historic Places on the Old Stage Line from Fort Smith to Red River,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 11 (June 1933), 821. Frank A. Root and William Elsey Connelley, *Overland Stage to California* (Crane and Co., 1901), p. 7, mistakenly note that the bid deadline was June 30, 1857.

<sup>28</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 88; LeRoy Hafen, “Butterfield’s Overland Mail,” *California Historical Quarterly* 2 (Oct. 1923), 215-16.

<sup>29</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 88-90; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 73, 79.

<sup>30</sup> The six associates affiliated with Butterfield on the Overland Mail contract were William B. Dinsmore, William G. Fargo, James V. P. Gardner, Marcus L. Kinyon, Alexander Holland, and Hamilton Spencer. Four others, at a later date, also became associated with the enterprise. All hailed from New York State save Spencer, who lived in Bloomington, Illinois. Fargo, five years earlier, had teamed with Henry Wells and had established Wells, Fargo and Company, a highly successful stagecoach company serving the various California gold rush communities. Conklings, *Butterfield*, 114; Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 87-88; Winther, *Via Western Express*, 100-02.

<sup>31</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 113; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 74; Walter B. Lang, ed., *The First Overland Mail: Butterfield Trail, St. Louis to San Francisco, 1858-1861* (unknown binding, 1940), 16.

<sup>32</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 74.

other members of the Buchanan cabinet) went beyond the bounds of the proffered contract and made two significant – perhaps extralegal – decisions.

First, Brown approached Birch in late May or early June and told him that he had won an overland mail contract. It was not the prized overland mail contract for which he had submitted a bid, however; instead, as historian Wayne Austerman has noted, “Brown awarded Birch a contract that was essentially a consolation prize.” This was a four-year contract for semi-monthly mail service between San Antonio, Texas and San Diego, California via El Paso which included an annual subsidy of \$149,800. (This was the route that Congress had authorized on August 18, 1856, as noted above, but had not previously acted upon.) Brown was thus able to implement a route to the Pacific Coast that went entirely through the Deep South and its western extensions. Birch signed the contract on June 12, the contract became effective ten days later, and on July 9 – less than a month after Birch signed on – service was expected to begin between the two far-flung points.<sup>33</sup> With remarkable speed, Birch was able to dispatch agents to Texas, and on the scheduled date of July 9, a large crowd gathered at the plaza in San Antonio and cheered as the line’s first stagecoach rolled west. On August 30, after considerable tribulation, the westbound mail (not on a stagecoach, but on horseback) arrived in San Diego. Birch’s first eastbound mail, meanwhile, had left San Diego on August 9; that mail was apparently brought into San Antonio in mid-September.<sup>34</sup> This contract called for the mail to depart twice per month from each end of the trail. The operators of this mail route tried valiantly to uphold this schedule, but an unexpected catastrophe – Birch’s death, in a September 12 steamship sinking off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina – threatened to jeopardize the entire operation.<sup>35</sup>

Brown’s other daring decision involved the location of the overland mail route. Brown – perhaps due to the technical factors cited above, or perhaps because of the friendship between Butterfield and President Buchanan – was leaning toward accepting one of the three bids that Butterfield and his associates had submitted, all of which followed the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel route.<sup>36</sup> Congressmen from Texas and elsewhere in the south, however, let it be known that they were

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<sup>33</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 90; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 92, 99, 104; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 92-93; Basil C. Pearce, “The Jackass Mail – San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line,” *San Diego Historical Society Quarterly* 15 (Spring, 1969), <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/69spring/jackass.htm>. Kathryn Smith McMillen, in “A Descriptive Bibliography on the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 54:2 (October 1955), 211 notes that the September 18, 1857 *Daily Herald and San Antonio Public Advertiser* had an article headlined “Arrival of San Diego Mail, Discussion of Service.” DeJong, “Advantageous to the Indians?” 19 states that the first westbound stage arrived in San Diego on August 31, not August 30.

<sup>35</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 84. Of the 578 passengers and crew on the *Central America*, 372 perished when it sank in a Category 2 hurricane; it was the deadliest peacetime shipwreck in American history. Perhaps because some 30,000 pounds of California gold (worth approximately \$2 million at the time) had been on board, treasure hunters sought out – and found – the ship in 1987 and excavated its remains a year later. The gold – which by the 1990s was worth an estimated \$100-\$150 million – was awarded, after a lengthy legal battle, to the discovery team in 1996. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS\\_Central\\_America](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Central_America) and [http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/2\\_5.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/2_5.html).

<sup>36</sup> Dorman H. Winfrey, in “The Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” *Along the Early Trails of the Southwest*, ed. by Wayne Gard, *et al.*, p. 29, states – in an unattributed quote – that even before the contract was officially let (in mid-April 1857), Brown “suggested to John Butterfield that his firm might be given the contract if Memphis were made the eastern terminus of the line, and the route were southwest through Arkansas to the Red River, across the entire state of Texas to El Paso, and on to California by the road along the Gila Trail.”

unhappy that Butterfield's route stayed north of the Lone Star State, and they demanded that the Tennessean who served as postmaster general adopt a route that ran farther south.<sup>37</sup> As a result, therefore, Brown on July 2, 1857 issued the following order – which was in direct violation of the “as the contractor may select” route clause in the March 3 authorization bill – which stated that any winning bid would need to include a route

from St. Louis, Mo., and from Memphis, Tenn., converging at Little Rock, Ark.; thence, *via* Preston, Tex. or as nearly so as may be found advisable, to the best point of crossing the Rio Grande above El Paso, and not far from Fort Fillmore; thence, along the new road being opened and constructed under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, to Fort Yuma, California; thence, through the best passes and along the best valleys for safe and expeditious staging, to San Francisco.<sup>38</sup>

Northern interests, not surprisingly, howled in protest at the decision. (The *New York Times* complained, “What possible object there can be in selecting this extreme Southern route we are utterly unable to conceive, unless it is that of forcing the future railroad to take an unnatural course, such as neither buffalo, emigrants nor capital would ever select.”<sup>39</sup>) But Brown, trying to appear objective in his decision, stated in his 1857 report to President Buchanan that the southern route (dubbed the “horseshoe” or “ox-bow” route by New York newspapers) was chosen to avoid the deep winter snows, and the consequent postal delays, along the Central Route; even the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel route was slighted because, in his opinion, weather records gathered from Albuquerque had proven that the climatic conditions along this route were unsatisfactory. Only the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel route, according to Brown, could offer a route that was “safe, comfortable, and certain during every season of the year.”<sup>40</sup> Butterfield and his associates, by this time, had been

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<sup>37</sup> Tompkins, *Compendium*, 54. Winfrey (p. 29) states that the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel route “was found objectionable by many southerners” because it did not run through Texas. In addition, he quotes (from an unattributed source) that Brown “suggested to John Butterfield that his firm might be given the contract if Memphis were made the eastern terminus of the line, and the route were southwest through Arkansas to the Red River, across the entire state of Texas to El Paso, and on to California by the road along the Gila Trail.”

<sup>38</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 75-76; Conkling, 114; Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 10. Jackson, in *Wagon Roads West*, 222-232, noted that work on the Interior Department's wagon road – the goal of which was to ease the westward movement of 1858 emigrants – did not actually begin until late 1857. Brown thus stretched the limits of credulity when he stated in early July 1857 that the new road was “being opened up and constructed,” because at that time, the expedition's 40-wagon caravan was just a few day's travel west of Memphis, on a trip that would require almost four months to reach the east end of the proposed wagon road. Brown's “bifurcated” route – that is, with eastern termini at both St. Louis and Memphis – appears to have been adopted from one of Butterfield's three bids.

<sup>39</sup> *New York Times*, June 25, 1857, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 76-78; Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 9; Rupert N. Richardson, “Some Details of the Southern Overland Mail,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 29 (July, 1925), 3-4; Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869*, 92; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 119-20. Brown's favoritism toward the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel route – on and beyond his political preference – was apparently based on the results of 1) the Randolph B. Marcy Expedition of 1849 between Fort Smith, Arkansas and Doña Ana, New Mexico Territory, 2) the Bartlett-García Conde boundary survey of 1850-51, and 3) two Pacific Railroad Surveys that commenced in early 1854, one by Lt. John G. Parke (from San Diego to El Paso), the other by Capt. John Pope (from Albuquerque to El Paso, then east to Fort Belknap and Preston, the latter on the Red River). Also see the following website:

[http://cpr.org/Museum/Explorations\\_Albright.html#VII](http://cpr.org/Museum/Explorations_Albright.html#VII).

told (informally) that they would win the contract; but they were also aware that Brown, with his overt pandering to southern interests, was playing havoc with the budget that the consortium had submitted in its “bifurcated” 35<sup>th</sup> parallel route proposal.<sup>41</sup> Northern interests, strident in their objections, were well aware that the establishment of such a long-distance, well-subsidized wagon road might well be the precursor to a transcontinental railroad along the same route corridor, and the attendant economic benefits that such a railroad would bring forth.<sup>42</sup>

By July 7, the press announced that Butterfield and his associates apparently had won the contract, which called for semi-weekly service and a \$600,000 annual subsidy.<sup>43</sup> This tentative contract, the route of which was in line with Brown’s July 2 order (see above), called for two eastern stage lines that would meet in Little Rock, Arkansas. (Brown had evidently suggested this meeting point because Little Rock, in addition to being a state capital, was the largest town between either St. Louis or Memphis and El Paso.<sup>44</sup>) Once he had tentatively secured the contract, however, Butterfield wisely decided to reconnoiter the St. Louis-Little Rock route and quickly learned that it was impracticable. He also knew that the Pacific Railroad, which had started building west from St. Louis in July 1851, had already laid tracks 125 miles west to Jefferson City and planned to open additional mileage the following year. Butterfield, therefore, worked with Brown on a revised route that would utilize the Pacific Railroad west to its end of track, after which the line would use the Bolivar road, or old Boonville mail road (which linked Boonville, on the Missouri River, with Springfield, Fayetteville, and Fort Smith), so that the two stagecoach routes would instead meet at Fort Smith – which was less than half the size of Little Rock.<sup>45</sup> Brown, on September 11, formally agreed to Butterfield’s recommendation regarding the Arkansas and Missouri portions of the route.<sup>46</sup> On September 16, 1857, Butterfield and his associates signed a six-year, \$600,000-per-year<sup>47</sup> contract with the Post Office Department, which called for the stage line – to be called the Overland Mail Company – to be in operation within one year from the contract date.

### *Butterfield’s Company Gets Prepared*

John Butterfield, the head of the winning consortium, was perhaps ideally suited to cobble together, within just a year’s time, a stage line that would connect the Mississippi River with the Pacific Ocean. Experienced and well-capitalized, he was one of the acknowledged transportation

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<sup>41</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 114.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-18.

<sup>43</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 80-81.

<sup>44</sup> <http://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=970>. Little Rock had an 1850 population of 2,167, a figure that would grow to 3,727 ten years later.

<sup>45</sup> According to the website for the *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture* (see above), Fort Smith’s 1850 population was 964; by 1860, it had grown to 1,532.

<sup>46</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 114-15, 124; Fern Angus, *Down the Wire Road in the Missouri Ozarks and Beyond* (Cassville, Litho Printers and Bindery, 2004), 3-5, 9, 50, 52; F.P. Rose, “Butterfield Overland Mail Company,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1956), 63, 65. In 1859 and 1860, telegraph wires were strung along the road from Syracuse south to Springfield and Fort Smith; thereafter, this route was known as the Wire Road; or, in later years, the Old Wire Road.

<sup>47</sup> According to one historical currency conversion website, \$600,000 in 1858 is equivalent to \$16,682,000 in 2012. See <http://futureboy.us/fsp/dollar.fsp?quantity=6&currency=dollars&fromYear=1858>. Sources have erroneously suggested that the contract was signed on Sept. 15, Sept. 18, or other days.

titans of his day. Born in 1801 in New York state, he had been working in and around stagecoaches since the age of 10; by age 19, he was a stagecoach driver working out of Albany. He moved to Utica in 1830. Soon afterward, he purchased the necessary equipment and started his own stage company. By the mid-1840s, through a series of adroit investments, he controlled most of the important mail and passenger stage lines in northern and western New York State. He also became a force in companies that operated packet boats, steamships, and a railroad.<sup>48</sup> In 1850, the firm that he led merged with two others – one led by Henry Wells, the other involving William G. Fargo – to form the American Express Company, which was the pre-eminent express company of its time. Given the embryonic nature of railroads during these pre-Civil War days, both congressmen and officials in the Post Office Department recognized that Butterfield was one of the foremost transportation leaders of his day, a man with both the political wherewithal and technical expertise to construct and manage a far-flung stagecoach line.

John Butterfield, and those that worked for him, recognized that an enormous job awaited them. In order to get the stage line operational, they first needed to study and visit the proposed route. Because of Brown's last-minute meddling with the contract, he and his associates needed to gather maps and reports to discern the best routes for wagon travel; once that decision had been made, he sent representatives west from St. Louis to learn the physical condition of the route and what arrangements might be made regarding the establishment of stations along the way; and to oversee the survey and construction of the western end of the route, he dispatched Marcus L. Kinyon to San Francisco, who along with John Butterfield, Jr. laid out the route east to Tucson.<sup>49</sup> The goal was to make an initial survey of the chosen routes, and to provide improvements to those roads where appropriate. A more time-intensive task also involved a search for station sites along the route. The March 1857 authorization bill, which provided for a 320-acre pre-emption for station sites on public land, had called for stations "not to be nearer than ten miles from each other."<sup>50</sup> At these relay stations, passengers could embark or disembark, horse or mule teams could be changed on short notice, and animals could be stabled in readiness for the next stage.

This reconnaissance, which probably began in July 1857 if not before, revealed stark contrasts between the eastern, western, and central portions of the proposed route. White settlers, by this time, had established an incipient agricultural economy, and a basic wagon road network, throughout Missouri, Arkansas, and portions of north-central Texas.<sup>51</sup> In southeastern Indian Territory (within present-day Oklahoma), wagon roads had existed since the 1830s due to the forced Choctaw and Chickasaw migrations as well as U.S. Army movements to area forts, and

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<sup>48</sup> Tompkins, *Compendium*, 73-74.

<sup>49</sup> Moody, (*Stagecoach West*, 98, 100-01) and the Conklings (*Butterfield*, 124) offer considerable detail regarding the specific ways that Butterfield's men spread out into the field and prepared for the line's implementation.

<sup>50</sup> 34<sup>th</sup> Congress, Session III, Chapter 96, Section 12, in *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 11 (1855-1859), p. 190.

<sup>51</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 98, 101; Tompkins, 116-17. Regarding the Red River, Butterfield's men recognized that Brown's July 2 order called for the line to go "via Preston, Tex. or as nearly so as may be found advisable." Because they thus had some geographical flexibility, they were approached by residents in Sherman, Texas, who noted that Ben F. Colbert, who operated adjacent Colbert's ferry (8 miles downstream from Preston), had recently expended a large sum of funds to improve the road on both sides of the river; in addition, he offered a free crossing to all Butterfield stages. As a result, Colbert's Ferry was selected rather than the ferry at Preston.

most of the newly-established relay stations were homesteads of either Choctaw or Chickasaw residents.<sup>52</sup> And in the inland valleys and coastal areas of California, the similar rudiments of an economic and transportation system had likewise been established. In the settled areas, therefore, Butterfield personnel contacted selected tavern owners, livery-stable owners, storekeepers, and farmers along the route and were able to cobble together a network of relay stations, most of which were spaced 10 to 25 miles from one another.<sup>53</sup>

The biggest challenge, however, lay in the central portion of the route, beyond the settlement fringe. In 1858, white settlement ended west of Fort Belknap, Texas<sup>54</sup>, and the entire, 1,350-mile expanse from there to Warner's Ranch, California, boasted only a handful of forts and villages.<sup>55</sup> In order to traverse Texas, Butterfield's advance crew adopted three different historical routes. Between Sherman and Fort Belknap, they used the route that Captain Randolph Marcy had used while traveling eastbound in 1849, and two years later by Col. Joseph E. Johnston. From Fort Belknap to Fort Chadbourne, they followed Johnston's cavalry trail of 1851, while west of Fort Chadbourne, they adopted much the same route that Lt. Francis T. Bryan and Lt. Nathaniel A. Michler had traversed while headed west to the El Paso area in 1849.<sup>56</sup> Of the overall condition of the route, historians Roscoe and Margaret Conkling noted that "Marcy and others referred to the Southern route as though the general topography of its course had been designed by Nature's processes to provide a wagon road to the Pacific." As a result, according to Ralph Moody,

Butterfield made no attempt to build an actual road between Fort Smith and El Paso. Roadways were cut into the steep banks of gulches, ravines, creeks, and fordable rivers; the narrower unfordable streams and deep ravines were bridged with logs; and ferries were installed at rivers that were too wide for bridging at reasonable cost. Other obstacles were circumvented, and only enough grading was done to prevent upsets.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Wright, "Historic Places on the Old Stage Line," 799-801, 804-12; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 98-99.

<sup>53</sup> See Kirby Sanders, "Table 1, Butterfield Station and Mileage Chart," in *The Butterfield Overland Mail Ox-Bow Route, 1858-1861*, Overview Chapter. The politics and controversy that underlay the selection of the California route are detailed in Ralph Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 101-05.

<sup>54</sup> A.C. Greene, *900 Miles on the Butterfield Trail* (Denton, Univ. of North Texas Press, 1994), 46 stated that "in 1858, the Brazos River was considered the eastern boundary of civilization," and J.W. Williams, in "The Butterfield Overland Mail Road Across Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 61 (July 1957), p. 7, noted that "Westward from Belknap, Texas [in Young County and adjacent to both Fort Belknap and the Brazos River] was almost devoid of population." Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 14, stated that Sherman (140 miles east of Fort Belknap) was the western end of white settlement during the Butterfield years, while Hafen's *Overland Mail*, p. 93, averred that the route was "almost uninhabited between Colbert's Ferry [just north of Sherman] and Fort Chadbourne."

<sup>55</sup> Sanders, Table 1, in *The Butterfield Overland Mail*. The only settlements along the central portion of the Butterfield route were Fort Chadbourne and Franklin [El Paso], Texas; Fort Fillmore and Mesilla, in present-day New Mexico; Tucson, Sacaton, and Gila Ranch in present-day Arizona; and Fort Yuma, California.

<sup>56</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 99; Sanders, [various Texas segment reports], in *The Butterfield Overland Mail*; Tompkins, *Compendium*, 117.

<sup>57</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 101. Those improvements, however, went only so far; according to one historian, "To build a good road was out of the question. One passenger reported that his stage overturned three times on a stretch of the trip east of Fort Belknap." Richardson, "Some Details," 12-13.

Stagecoach riders, who endured the condition of the road firsthand, were forthright with their assessment of the route's condition; one noted that it was "the worst road God ever built."<sup>58</sup>

For the route that reached beyond El Paso, Butterfield's men were doubtless aware that the first forty-five miles – north to the village of La Mesilla – lay along a route corridor (called El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro) that Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans had been traveling since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century; it was part of a larger route that reached all the way from Mexico City north to Santa Fe and other New Mexico settlements. Between Mesilla and the Colorado River, the 1846-47 expeditions of Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West and the Lt. Col. Philip St. George Cooke's Mormon Battalion had moved west between these two points, followed soon afterward by some 60,000 California gold rush migrants who had followed the Gila River route. The Mormon Battalion had brought wagons over the route (which touched the later Butterfield route in only a few places), and in so doing proved that wagons could be taken over the southern route; it was followed, in 1849, by a gold-rush wagon train led by Col. Jack Hays, which took a more direct route between Fort Fillmore and Tucson.<sup>59</sup>

Of more immediate concern, however, Butterfield and his associates recognized that its entire El Paso-Colorado River route – plus an additional 100 miles west almost all the way to Warner Springs – would be over much the same route that Congress, in June 1857, had allotted to James Birch for his San Antonio-San Diego postal route.<sup>60</sup> Birch's semi-monthly operation, as noted above, had commenced operations in July 1857. But Birch's September 1857 drowning death in an Atlantic hurricane had forced route management onto men who had neither Birch's experience nor his reputation;<sup>61</sup> and to make the waters even more murky, those that had inherited Birch's contract knew full well that Butterfield's better-capitalized, more heavily-subsidized stage route would soon be rolling over much of the same right-of-way that had been Birch's sole domain a few months earlier.<sup>62</sup> Despite these setbacks, however, the line soldiered on. Officials for the line stated that 87 relay stations had been established along the route, spaced 25 to 30 miles apart. The stations located in San Diego, El Paso, and San Antonio were fairly substantial, but as to the other stations, one (perhaps optimistic) historian noted that they "were generally adobe huts with brush corrals."<sup>63</sup> Before long, service between the two

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<sup>58</sup> David Nevin, *The Expressmen* (New York, Time-Life Books, 1976), 32.

<sup>59</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 78; Gerald Ahnert, *The Butterfield Trail and Overland Mail Company in Arizona, 1858-1861* (Canastota, NY, Canastota Pub. Co. 2011), 6; Donald M. Powell, "Materials Relating to New Mexico and Arizona in the Serial Set, 1846-1861," *New Mexico Historical Review* 44 (October 1969), 322.

<sup>60</sup> Maps in Frajola and Risvold, "Deconstructing the Jackass Mail Route," 273 and Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 100-01 noted that the San Antonio-San Diego route was distinct from the proposed Butterfield route east of El Paso, Texas and west of San Felipe, California, but the 600-mile distance between these two points was over the same general geographical corridor.

<sup>61</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, pp. 92-94, 109, 116, 120-21, notes that Isaiah Woods, Birch's chief lieutenant, operated the line until December, when Julia Birch (James Birch's widow) requested that George Giddings take over.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, 109-10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-01; Emmie Giddings Mahon and Chester V. Kielman, "George H. Giddings and the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 61 (October 1957), 230-31. Noel M. Loomis, *Wells Fargo* (New York, Potter, 1968), 127-28, followed by Pearce, "The Jackass Mail," was more skeptical than Mahon and Kielman about the level of improvements along the route. Loomis stated that except for the three major stations, "others were nothing more than a brush corral and a mud-walled hut, while the larger number were merely camping places at springs or stream crossings." The Conklings, *Butterfield*, vol. 2, describe the station in El Paso as being a

endpoints was reduced from 53 days down to less than 27 days (30 days being the congressional maximum).<sup>64</sup> Politicians in northern California derided the San Antonio-San Diego line as going “from no place through nothing to nowhere,” and because the line relied on mules rather than horses, one San Francisco editor mockingly dubbed the line as the “Jackass Mail.”<sup>65</sup>

A further consideration along the route between El Paso and the Colorado River was that Congress, in February 1857, had allotted \$200,000 for a wagon road connecting these two points. The logistics of providing on-site materials for the isolated wagon road meant that work crews were not able to commence field operations until November of that year, when they headed both east and west from the Pima villages, in Arizona. Due to ineptitude and cronyism, the field superintendents for this project proved to be incompetent if not criminal. Despite those drawbacks, however, the crews – led by Jesse B. Leach – completed a rough wagon road by the September 1858. The project engineers claimed that the new route, dubbed the Leach Wagon Road, would save between two and five days’ travel compared to any previously-available routes.<sup>66</sup> Given the time frame in which this work was done, Birch’s immediate successors were in no position to take advantage of the wagon road improvements, at least for the line’s first six to nine months of operation. Butterfield stages, which did not commence operations in the Southwest until the fall of 1858, followed Postmaster General Brown’s July 2 directive and traveled over some of these recently-improved roads. In other areas, however, the routes diverged; the wagon road crews, for example, improved a route along the Gila and San Pedro rivers, while Butterfield crews east of Sacaton (in central Arizona) opted to go farther south, through Tucson.<sup>67</sup>

Between Fort Yuma and the inland valleys of southern California, the proposed Butterfield stage planned to follow a route that Euroamerican migrants had followed ever since Juan Bautista de Anza’s expedition in 1774. For the remainder of the Spanish period, and throughout the Mexican period as well, this route – which circumvented the Algodones Sand Dunes (west of Fort Yuma) by going through Baja California, Mexico for 59 miles – was considered the overland supply line from Sonora to California. This route, similar to the Gila River route east of Fort Yuma, had been traversed by the Army of the West in late 1846, the Mormon Battalion in

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“low, rambling adobe building with a corral adjoining” (p. 62), and on pp. 169-70, they categorically state that at Maricopa Wells, “a small mud-wattled shelter and a brush corral constituted the station here, the only station building constructed by this mail company between El Paso and San Diego.” Gerald Ahnert, *Butterfield Trail*, 6), however, disagrees with the Conklings, noting that “the mail company had only three stations in Arizona at Tucson, Maricopa Wells, and Colorado City.” Ralph Moody, in *Stagecoach West*, 86, stated that “since the stations were more than a hundred miles apart, it was customary to herd along an extra relay of mules.”

<sup>64</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 104-06; Frajola and Risvold, “Deconstructing the Jackass Mail Route,” 274.

<sup>65</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 107; Stuart N. Lake, “Birch’s Overland Mail in San Diego County,” *Journal of San Diego History* 3 (April 1957), 15-18; DeJong, “Advantageous to the Indians?” 19. The term “Jackass Mail” is a misnomer; mules (not jackasses) pulled the stages between San Antonio and Fort Yuma and also between the Colorado Desert and San Diego, while for the 100-mile crossing of the sandy Colorado Desert, stagecoaches were dispensed with and both passengers and mail rode on mule back. Frajola and Risvold, “Deconstructing the Jackass Mail Route,” 274.

<sup>66</sup> Jackson, *Wagon Roads West*, 222-232; Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 111, 127-29; Tompkins, *Compendium*, 105-06; DeJong, “Advantageous to the Indians?” p. 19. Sources variously state that the wagon road project was completed anywhere from May 1858 to October 1858.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, *Wagon Roads West*, 225-26; Conklings, *Butterfield*, Vol. 2, 89.

early 1847, and thousands of California-bound gold rush migrants in 1849 and later years. The Mormon Battalion had brought the first wagons over the route.

Given the paucity of established settlements between Fort Belknap and Warner's Ranch, Butterfield's men recognized that they were largely if not solely responsible for constructing and maintaining the massive infrastructure that would be necessary to sustain their operation. As noted above, James Birch and his successors in July 1857 had established a route that included supposed "stations" located every 25 to 30 miles. Available evidence, however, suggests that these stations – if improved at all – were tents, perhaps augmented by a brush corral. (No sources have suggested that Butterfield used Birch's improvements or that Birch's successors cooperated with Butterfield to share station sites.) What Butterfield's men needed to do, therefore, was to construct a long necklace of stations, numbering 45 or more, each of which would need to include sleeping and feeding accommodations, storerooms, corrals, stables, and most critical of all a dependable water supply. The Butterfield crews, therefore, set to work constructing the necessary four-room buildings, most of them built out of local materials (either log, stone, sod, or adobe). Given the enormous task, and Congress's dictum to have the line ready within 12 months of the contract signing, some of these stations were incomplete by September 1858 – tents were substituted for the time being – but by late 1859, work on all of these relay stations had been completed. For the first time ever, modern nineteenth-century technology – in the form of relay stations, corrals, draft animals, wells, equipment, and supplies – now linked the Mississippi River valley and the Pacific Coast.<sup>68</sup>

Constructing and equipping the necessary stations (which apparently numbered approximately 140 when service began and later grew to "nearly 200"<sup>69</sup>) was an enormous undertaking. This included the hiring of more than 750 men, of whom about 150 were drivers, most of which came from the Mohawk Valley and other New York venues. A major item for purchase was some 1,800 horses and mules; horses were utilized on the well-trodden paths east of Fort Belknap, Texas and west of Fort Yuma, California, while mules were used along the more rough-hewn central portion of the route.<sup>70</sup> The company also purchased perhaps 500 vehicles, which included 1) 100 wooden-roofed Concord or "Southern style" coaches, which were used between

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<sup>68</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 100-01; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 135; W. Eugene Hollon, "Great Days of the Overland Stage," *American Heritage* 8 (June, 1957), 30.

<sup>69</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 134, state that there were "141 stations reported" in September 1858. Moody (*Stagecoach West*, 107-08), however, noted that "139 were completed and stocked during the summer of 1858. California had the greatest number, with fifty between San Francisco and Fort Yuma. ... The eastern end of the line was equally well prepared, with well-stocked and supplied way stations.... But on the 580-mile stretch between Fort Belknap and El Paso only ten relay posts had been completed, and although feed, provisions, harness, and mules were on the way they had not yet reached some of the posts." Butterfield himself made an inspection trip over the line in midsummer 1858.

<sup>70</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 124, 130-31, 141-42; Greene, *900 Miles*, 21, 45; Loomis, *Wells Fargo*, 129. Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 11, state that John Butterfield purchased 1000 horses and 500 mules (which was an odd proportion, given the mileage in which horses versus mules would be used). Before long, Butterfield's men learned that mules were not only more dependable than horses in areas where the roads were marginal in quality, but that nearby Indians – who still roamed freely throughout much of New Mexico Territory and western Texas at this time, were much less likely to steal mules than horses. Greene states that mules were often used as far east as Sherman, Texas. Loomis, *Wells Fargo*, 129, states that Butterfield hired 2,000 employees, not 750.

Tipton and Springfield (later extended to Fort Smith) as well as between Los Angeles and San Francisco, 2) canvas-topped celerity wagons (also known as a “mud wagons”), which were used to cover the remaining distance, and 3) an array of freight, utility, and water wagons.<sup>71</sup> Added to those costs were the expenses in provisioning the various stations and supplying tack, the construction of wells, water tanks and water diversion devices in many parts of the arid southwest, plus the continuing costs of providing hay or other fodder. All in all, it was estimated that these preliminary expenditures represented an investment of approximately \$1 million – which was far more than the \$600,000 annual subsidy called for in the Post Office Department contract.<sup>72</sup>

The overall purpose of Butterfield’s massive acquisitions was to have an array of stations each 20 miles, on the average, although some would be separated by just nine miles, and others would be 60 miles apart.<sup>73</sup> The various “home-owned” (contracted) stations would have two to four employees on staff. At the company-owned stations, five to seven employees was the norm, while the larger stations or those located in “Indian country” had eight to ten Butterfield men on hand; these included cooks, stock tenders, herders, water haulers, blacksmiths, and guards, all supervised by the station agent. Overseeing the station agents were nine division superintendents, who also supervised the all-important drivers and conductors on each stage.<sup>74</sup>

For that portion of the route between Memphis, Tennessee and Fort Smith, Arkansas, Butterfield decided not to run a point-to-point stageline. Instead, he worked with existing carriers – and the existing transportation infrastructure – to cobble together a workable route. Although historical details of this route are sketchy, the route as originally planned utilized a Mississippi River ferry between the Memphis waterfront and Hopefield (near present-day West Memphis), Arkansas. Butterfield initially contracted this service with the Chidester and Reeside Stage Company, followed by a mail haul over a recently-completed, 40-mile-long railroad segment between Hopefield and Madison. According to one source, the stage line had 18 stations between Memphis and Fort Smith; of that number, however, perhaps only 10 or 12 were used by Butterfield passengers and mail.<sup>75</sup>

### *The Overland Mail Company Begins Service*

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<sup>71</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 131-33; Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 11; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 107. The Conklings correctly call these firms J.S. (Stephens) Abbot & Sons (of Concord, NH, who had previous partners with Lewis Downing), James Gould (Albany, NY), and Eaton, Gilbert and Co. (Troy, NY). The company names noted in Winfrey, “The Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 33, are incorrect. Several sources (Conklings, *Butterfield*, 124; Greene, *900 Miles*, 16; Loomis, *Wells Fargo*, 128, etc.) stated that Butterfield purchased a total of 250 coaches, “most of them celerity wagons, not Concord.”

<sup>72</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 125, 136; Richardson, “Some Details,” 11.

<sup>73</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 131, 135. The Conklings note that “In the Pecos Valley in Texas, there were very long stages, some over sixty miles between the stations. To provide a relay on these long drives, a herd of mules driven by three or four herders, accompanied each Mail, and a “flying change” was made every twelve or fifteen miles.”

<sup>74</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 126-27, 135; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 101; Richardson, “Some Details,” 12. The line’s division headquarters (where the division superintendents worked) were located at Tipton, Fort Smith, Colbert’s Ferry, Fort Chadbourne, Franklin [El Paso], Tucson, Fort Yuma, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

<sup>75</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 134. The operators of this line were John T. Chidester and J.E. Reeside, each of whom operated other stage lines in Arkansas during the mid-to-late 1850s.

On Thursday, September 16, 1858 – one year to the day after the contract had been signed – all was in readiness, and the stage line – officially called the Overland Mail Company – commenced operations. In St. Louis, where no local newspapers announced the event – and thus no crowds were in attendance – Butterfield escorted two small leather pouches from the post office to the nearby train station and then boarded the waiting train, which left promptly at 8 a.m. The train, at a 16 mile-per-hour pace, chuffed westward. At Tipton, a few villagers gathered for the train's arrival, and at 6:01 p.m., Butterfield clambered off the baggage car and transferred the mail pouches to the waiting Concord stagecoach, which was pulled by a six-horse team. Nine minutes later, Butterfield and his son (also named John Butterfield) left town and headed south along the Boonville mail road toward Springfield.<sup>76</sup> On board was a full complement of passengers, one of whom was Waterman Ormsby, a 23-year-old reporter for the *New York Herald*, who had agreed to write a series of news articles about the ride and the countryside he encountered. While Butterfield, father and son, would ride the stage as far as Fort Smith, Ormsby would be the only westbound passenger to ride all the way to San Francisco. His lively account, published in newspaper installments later that year, was first published in book form in 1942. It is still in print.<sup>77</sup>

The initial stage made good time – four to five miles per hour on the average – as it made its way south toward Fort Smith, where – if all went according to schedule – it would meet the mail stage that was heading west across Arkansas. As it turned out, the stage was more than three hours ahead of time when it arrived in Fort Smith on Sunday, September 19 at 2:05 a.m. The westbound stage, as it turned out, had pulled into town just fifteen minutes earlier. Amidst blaring horns and a growing crowd, passengers and mail were consolidated for the trip west, and in less than an hour after its 3:30 a.m. departure, the coach had crossed into Indian Territory.<sup>78</sup> The stage then continued ever westward, moving night and day toward California. Station personnel along the way – warned by a horn blast a mile or so before the coach arrived – were consistently ready for the incoming stage, and the horses or mules were changed quickly and efficiently. No untoward problems were encountered anywhere along the entire 2,700-mile route, and at 7:30 a.m. on October 10, 1858, the first stage – with a weary Waterman Ormsby still aboard<sup>79</sup> – rambled into Portsmouth Square in downtown San Francisco. The stage had arrived in just 23 days and 23½ hours – which was three hours ahead of the published schedule<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Rose, "Butterfield Overland Mail Company," 65-66; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 111.

<sup>77</sup> The details of that first westbound trip were published in eight newspaper installments between September 26 and November 19, 1858. Waterman L. Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, ed. by Lyle H. Wright and Josephine M. Bynum (San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library, 1998), 1, 89, 131; [http://www.worldcat.org/title/butterfield-overland-mail/oclc/1616965/editions?start\\_edition=11&sd=desc&referer=br&se=yr&editionsView=true&fq=](http://www.worldcat.org/title/butterfield-overland-mail/oclc/1616965/editions?start_edition=11&sd=desc&referer=br&se=yr&editionsView=true&fq=)

<sup>78</sup> Rose, "Butterfield Overland Mail Company," 73.

<sup>79</sup> Upon disembarking in San Francisco, chronicler Waterman Ormsby (*Butterfield Overland Mail*, 58) adopted a positive attitude toward his obvious weariness when he wrote that "the journey has been by no means as fatiguing to me as might be expected by a continuous ride of such duration, for I feel almost fresh enough to undertake it again." Perhaps more realistically, he has been widely quoted as saying that "Had I not just come out over the route, I would be perfectly willing to go back, but I now know what Hell is like. I've just had 24 days of it." The veracity of that quote, however, has not been established. As A.F. Harlow (*Old Waybills*; New York, 1934, p. 206) noted, Ormsby returned to New York by steamer.

<sup>80</sup> The first published schedule stated that westbound stages leaving St. Louis at 8:00 a.m. on Mondays would arrive in San Francisco at 8:30 a.m. on Thursdays – which, given the slightly greater than two hours' difference in a time change, provided for an elapsed time of approximately 24 days, 2½ hours between the two cities. (Standard time

and more than a day faster than Congress had stipulated in Section 13 of the Post Office Department's March 1857 authorization bill.<sup>81</sup> Two days later, in San Francisco, the stage's arrival "was celebrated in a style never before dreamed of on the Pacific Coast."<sup>82</sup> One day before the first westbound mail left St. Louis and Tipton, history was also being made on the Pacific Coast as the first eastbound stagecoach left San Francisco. That stage, with postal inspector Goddard Bailey and five other through passengers on board, also made good time; despite occasional celebrations (that hampered progress) from grateful residents along the way, the Butterfield mail coach arrived in St. Louis on October 9, less than 25 days after it had left San Francisco.<sup>83</sup>

### *Operating the Overland Mail Company*

The initial runs were followed by others which operated on a regular, twice-per week schedule. Operating according to a published, 24-day, 2½-hour timetable, stages clattered day and night, seven days per week, regardless of weather and road conditions. As noted in special instructions that Butterfield distributed to his employees, saving time was paramount; as he often declared, "Remember boys, nothing on God's earth must stop the United States mail!"<sup>84</sup> Stages, and passengers, thus rolled along 24 hours a day, seven days per week. The primary interruptions in their journey were at relay stations, where either horse or mule teams were changed. According to historian Gerald Ahnert, "pulling up to a Butterfield stage station was like making a NASCAR pit stop," and passengers were expected to take care of any personal needs in 10 minutes – or up to 40 minutes if a meal was to be served.<sup>85</sup> Passengers stopped to bolt down meals twice per day, and while one traveler stated that the food "is better than could be expected so far from civilized districts," another cautioned that "the fare could hardly be compared to that of the Astor House in New York."<sup>86</sup> Being a Butterfield passenger was not an inexpensive proposition; initial rates were \$200 from St. Louis or Memphis to San Francisco, but just half that for eastbound passengers. Within a few months, however, company officials discovered that the demand for traffic was equally great in both directions, so starting in May 1859, tickets were pegged at \$150

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would not be established in the United States until 1883.) See Walter B. Lang, ed., *The First Overland Mail: Butterfield Trail, St. Louis to San Francisco, 1858-1861* (unknown binding, 1940), 10.

<sup>81</sup> After disembarking, Ormsby stated that he was "the only one who had ever made the trip across the plains in less than fifty days." (Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 130) Ralph Moody (*Stagecoach West*, 123), however, stated that Ormsby was incorrect, "for by that time the passage was being regularly made over the central route in 38 days or less." As Noel Loomis (*Wells Fargo*, 136) has noted, a 38-day, twice-monthly stage over the central route (between Independence and Placerville) began in July 1858, and starting that October, weekly service was offered over the route.

<sup>82</sup> Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 13-14.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-14. The Conklings (*Butterfield*, 137), based on Bailey's report (noted in Lang, p. 105) noted that the first eastbound mail left San Francisco on September 15 at 12:10 a.m. and arrived in St. Louis on October 9 at 8:45 p.m., for an elapsed time of approximately 24 days and 18½ hours.

<sup>84</sup> Tompkins, *Compendium*, 114-15; Rose, "Butterfield Overland Mail Company," 64, 67; John Butterfield, President, "Special Instructions to Conductors, Agents, Drivers & Employes," in Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, frontispiece.

<sup>85</sup> Ahnert, *The Butterfield Trail*, 11-12; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 108-09; Greene, *900 Miles*, 22; William Tallack, "The California Overland Express; the Longest Stage-Ride in the World," in Lang, *The First Overland Mail*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 135-36; Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 141.

for both eastbound and westbound passengers. Passengers going shorter distances paid 10 cents per mile; thus a 200-mile ticket cost an even \$20.<sup>87</sup>

As any passenger could attest, comfort was not particularly valued on Butterfield coaches. Because there was often a waiting list for the available seats, the company – hoping to maximize income – thought nothing of packing its Concord coaches with up to nine passengers in the main coach, and it was also known – at least for short periods – to place up to six additional passengers on the roof as well.<sup>88</sup> (The Celerity coaches were packed just as tightly, although – for obvious structural reasons – no one rode on the roof.) Given the rough, unimproved nature of much of the road network, a long-distance ride in a Butterfield coach often devolved into an endurance test. In order to keep conditions as civil as possible, passengers were given a fairly extensive list of “do’s and don’ts” and were implored to pay heed to them.<sup>89</sup> Despite those admonitions, however, both privacy and civility often suffered, as Waterman Ormsby reported:

When the stage is full, the passengers must take turns at sleeping. Perhaps the jolting will be found disagreeable at first, but a few nights without sleeping will obviate that difficulty, and soon the jolting will be as little of a disturbance as the rocking of a cradle to a suckling babe. For my part, I found no difficulty in sleeping over the roughest roads, and I have no doubt that anyone else will learn quite as quickly.<sup>90</sup>

A sure topic of conversation for Butterfield passengers was the potential danger of Indian attack. Along a major portion of the line (as in Missouri, Arkansas, and California), there was no danger; Indians had either been moved to reservations elsewhere, or (as in the case of the Choctaw, in Indian Territory), they were peaceful and living on their own lands. But between the western settlement limit in Texas and the agricultural valleys of present-day central Arizona, American Indians still roamed freely. Company officials had every reason to be concerned about the safety of both employees and passengers, because Indian attacks (particularly from Comanche and Apache raiding parties) had been all-too-common occurrences along the San Antonio-San Diego postal route since operations had begun in July 1857.<sup>91</sup> To provide a modicum of safety to both passengers and employees, Butterfield’s employees had located the stage line so as to take optimum advantage of the existing military facilities. It thus passed through Fort Belknap, Fort Chadbourne, and the recently-abandoned Fort Phantom Hill, all in

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<sup>87</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 138-39; Hafen, “Butterfield’s Overland Mail,” 221. Between January and May 1859, through tickets cost \$200 each way. A ticket purchased for \$150 in 1859 is worth an estimated \$3,750 to \$4,250 today.

<sup>88</sup> William Tallack, an 1860 Butterfield passenger from Australia, noted (p. 14) that “Outside were the driver, the conductor, and an indefinite number of passengers, as, by popular permission, an American vehicle is never ‘full,’ there being always room for ‘one more.’” From “The California Overland Express,” in Lang, *First Overland Mail*, 131.

<sup>89</sup> Hafen, “Butterfield’s Overland Mail,” 221; Greene, *900 Miles*, 18, 24; Raymond A. Mulligan, “Down the Butterfield Trail,” *Arizona and the West* 1 (Winter 1959), 364-66.

<sup>90</sup> Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 94. Traveler George S. Dana (see Lang, *First Overland Mail*, 128) stated that “Sleep is shy for the first week, but after that the passengers get used to the thing and could sleep if the coach were tumbling a precipice.”

<sup>91</sup> Mahon and Kielman, “George H. Giddings,” 231-33, 236-37; Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 95-96, 102, 115-20

Texas; Fort Fillmore, in present-day New Mexico; Fort Bowie, in present-day Arizona; and Fort Yuma, California.<sup>92</sup>

In order to avoid potential conflict for the hundreds of employees living in stations located miles away from those forts, Butterfield issued a strict edict as it pertained to Indians:

A good look-out should be kept for Indians. No intercourse should be had with them, but let them alone; by no means annoy or wrong them. At all times an efficient guard should be kept, and such guard should always be *ready* for any emergency.<sup>93</sup>

Butterfield was hopeful that his policy would work, and while it may have had short-term success, it did not last. As one source noted, “It was found necessary for the protection of the lives of the men and the Company property, to provide arms and ammunition for all the stations in the dangerous Indian country.” The major annoyance caused by American Indians was the stealing of stock. In addition, “stations were occasionally threatened by predatory bands and demands made for supplies from the Company stores. Some of the stations were actually attacked, but these assaults were successfully repulsed.”<sup>94</sup> Given the danger of simply living in, or traveling along, the trail corridor at that time, one historian noted that “the Butterfield suffered less from Indian depredations than did other western stage lines – only ten of its drivers were killed.” One particularly bloody episode took place along the trail at Apache Pass, in February 1861, that resulted in several company employees being killed or wounded; an eastbound stage was attacked, but no Butterfield passengers were killed by Indians, either in this incident or, so far as is known, at any other time during the line’s 2½-year history.<sup>95</sup>

Well before the Butterfield line became operational, the presence of the San Antonio-San Diego postal route made it clear to both the private and public sectors that the government would soon be subsidizing two routes over a 600-mile-long, thinly-populated southwestern corridor. Given the relatively large subsidy that Butterfield and his associates had received, George Giddings (who had held the San Antonio-San Diego postal contract since March 1858) concluded that his company had been tricked. Aaron V. Brown, perhaps recognizing the situation, had inserted language in the June 1857 contract stating that “the Postmaster reserves the right to curtail or discontinue the route at his own discretion.” On October 23, 1858, Brown invoked that clause to truncate service over Giddings’ mail route between El Paso and Fort Yuma. In return for an

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<sup>92</sup> Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 50, noted that Butterfield’s men, at Fort Phantom Hill, appropriated the stable (described “a fine stone building”) as “the cheapest and best new station on the route.” Winfrey, p. 30, notes that Fort Griffin was also along the route; while the Clear Fork station was nearby. Fort Griffin – and the adjacent town of the same name – did not come into being until 1867, if not later.

<sup>93</sup> Butterfield, “Special Instructions” in Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, frontispiece.

<sup>94</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 141-42; Mulligan, “Down the Old Butterfield Trail,” 363-64, 366; Richardson, “Some Details,” 14-15; Greene, *900 Miles*, p. 10. Bailey’s report (in Lang, *First Overland Mail*, 108) stated that the “stations in Arizona are at the mercy of the Apache, and the Comanche may, at his pleasure, bar their passage through Texas.” Butterfield passengers were generally unarmed, although those who rode on the San Antonio-San Diego route were urged to carry “a Sharp’s carbine and one hundred cartridges, along with a Navy revolver and two pounds of balls and caps.”

<sup>95</sup> George Hackler, *The Butterfield Trail in New Mexico* (n.p., Yucca Enterprises, June 2005), 19. The Apache Pass incident took place in early February 1861. For details, see Ahnert, *The Butterfield Trail*, 28-31. The only known Butterfield passenger died when a stage overturned near Fort Smith, Arkansas. Winfrey, 37

enlarged government subsidy – from \$149,800 to \$196,000 per annum – Giddings agreed to provide weekly service between San Antonio and El Paso and between Fort Yuma and San Diego. After that date, the Giddings and Butterfield lines would continue to share some route mileage until mid-March 1860, but after that date Giddings’ operations would no longer be interwoven with those of the Butterfield line.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, a decreased amount of competition along the southern route was counterbalanced by greater competition along the central route. As noted above, the government had subsidized mail service between Independence and Sacramento beginning in 1851. Operating as two separate lines – Salt Lake City being the connecting point – the service operated monthly for most of the 1850s, and for several years the route west of Salt Lake City bent southward into southern California. But beginning in May 1858, the Post Office Department offered – and subsidized – weekly service for the route east of Salt Lake City, and that October it began offering similar service over a direct (trans-Sierra) route west to Sacramento. The net effect of these two actions was that beginning in October 1858, both passengers and mail could ride a weekly stage between Independence and Placerville. The ride took 38 days – substantially longer than the Butterfield could offer – and was not as frequent, but central route partisans now had a viable alternative to Butterfield’s “ox-bow” route.<sup>97</sup>

### *Route Changes*

No sooner had service begun than shortcomings in service demanded changes. The stages under Butterfield’s direct control, by all accounts, ran satisfactorily, all things considered. But for the segment that Butterfield contracted out, between Memphis and Fort Smith, difficulties ensued shortly after the first westbound run, in mid-September 1858. Postal inspector Goddard Bailey, who rode on the first eastbound stage, had hoped to head east from Fort Smith over the route, but according to his report to the postmaster general, he “abandoned the idea on learning ... that I should probably be subjected to some delay. It is to be regretted that the contractors on this route have exhibited so little energy in meeting the comparatively trifling difficulties they have had to encounter.... They have been behind time on all their trips from Memphis to Fort Smith.”<sup>98</sup> Although details are sketchy, Butterfield apparently responded to the service difficulties by minimizing the stagecoach portion of the route. Specifically, he purchased a riverboat – the *Jennie Whipple* – in order to take passengers and mail along the Arkansas River between Little Rock and Fort Smith. The steamboat was placed in service in mid-December 1858, but was

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<sup>96</sup> Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, 131; Mahon and Kielman, “George H. Giddings,” 234-37; Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 27. As Frajola and Risvold note (“Deconstructing the Jackass Mail Route,” 275-76), a new Postmaster General, Joseph Holt, in April 1859, ordered the SA&SD mail line to scale back – on both segments – from weekly to semi-monthly trips, and its annual subsidy was cut from \$196,000 to \$119,552. On August 1, 1859, due to a change in the Butterfield’s route in west Texas (see above), Giddings’ route began to share mileage with the Butterfield route in both southeastern California and between El Paso and Comanche Springs (present-day Fort Stockton), Texas. But on February 1, 1860, the Department lopped off Giddings’ California route and further reduced its subsidy to the company to \$90,857; and just six weeks later, on March 12, the segment between El Paso and Comanche Springs was discontinued. The remainder of the route – just 313 miles between Comanche Springs and San Antonio – limped on until early 1861, when the combination of a massive Apache attack at Steins Peak and – perhaps more critically – the outbreak of the Civil War brought the mail line to a close.

<sup>97</sup> Loomis, *Wells Fargo*, 117-18, 136-37.

<sup>98</sup> Goddard Bailey, “Report of the Postmaster General,” in Lang, *First Overland Mail*, 107.

unable to operate due to low water levels.<sup>99</sup> Soon afterward, Butterfield personally inspected the route and, according to one report, “assured the people that they would soon have no further grounds for complaint.” As part of his work on this route, he collaborated with the Little Rock and Memphis Railroad, a line that had been chartered in 1853; by November 1858, its tracks extended from Hopefield (West Memphis) to Madison. He also provided additional stock and equipment to the Chidester and Reeside company, which was now providing stage service over a rough and flood-prone route between the Madison area and Fort Smith. Available research – most notably that of Ted Worley, supplemented by newspaper accounts of the day – suggests that passengers used the Memphis-Fort Smith route less than the route via St. Louis and Tipton. And owing to changing river conditions, passengers and mail going between Fort Smith and Memphis took one of three routes: 1) the rail-and-stage route noted above, 2) an all-water route utilizing the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers, and 3) a stage route between Fort Smith and Des Arc, supplemented by steamship travel on the White and Mississippi rivers.<sup>100</sup>

Less than a year after Butterfield service commenced, the first route changes took place. Both occurred during the summer of 1859. One, technologically driven, was the result of the Pacific Railroad extending its tracks west 5.7 miles west from Tipton. At the railroad’s intersection with the old Boonville-to-Springfield mail route, it opened up a new station – Syracuse – which thereafter served as the transfer point between rail and stage.<sup>101</sup> And on August 1, 1859, the most significant change during the line’s history took place, in west Texas. Between Horsehead Crossing and El Paso, company officials had learned the hard way during the previous 10½ months that this 292-mile northern, or Guadalupe Mountain route (that skirted into New Mexico for a short while) was less than desirable, so they abandoned the route and instead adopted a more southerly 314-mile Davis Mountain variant that headed west and southwest from Horsehead Crossing to Fort Davis, Fort Stockton, and the valley of the Rio Grande below El Paso. Various reasons have been posited for the change; more dependable water sources was certainly a factor, but less rugged terrain and the need to service three newly-established forts (Stockton, Davis, and Quitman) doubtless played a role as well.<sup>102</sup> This route change resulted in the abandonment of perhaps seven Butterfield relay stations and the establishment of approximately six others.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 126; Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 168.

<sup>100</sup> Sanders, [various Arkansas segment reports] in *Butterfield Overland Mail*. Another source states that Butterfield contracted with John T. Chidester and J.E. Reeside to carry the mail only from Madison to Norristown (near modern-day Russellville), after which Butterfield stages headed west to Fort Smith. Ted R. Worley, “The Butterfield Overland Mail – Memphis to Fort Smith Branch,” in W.J. Lemke and Ted Worley, *The Butterfield Overland Mail in Arkansas*, 11-12; *Executive Documents of the House of Representatives During the 2<sup>nd</sup> Session of the 35<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1858-’59* (House Executive Document 109), p. 342. Waterman Ormsby’s account (pp. 165-72) notes that in December 1858, a Reeside Co. stage took passengers from Fort Smith to Des Arc, the latter a “small town” on the White River; from there to Memphis, the mail was taken by horseback, while passengers took a riverboat to its confluence with the Mississippi River and thence upstream to Memphis. Due to continuing poor service, Butterfield took over this portion of the route in 1859. Also see Ted R. Worley, “Butterfield Overland Mail in Arkansas, Memphis to Fort Smith Branch,” *Pope County Historical Society Quarterly* 32 (Dec. 1998), 24-28.

<sup>101</sup> Sanders, “Segment Report 001-002,” in *Butterfield Overland Mail*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, “Segment Report 068;”; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 134; Tompkins, *Compendium*, 118; Greene, *900 Miles*, 66, 100.

<sup>103</sup> Sanders, “Table 1,” in *Butterfield Overland Mail*.

An additional route alteration took place in the spring of 1860, in north-central Texas. One of the difficulties of travel in this area was the crossing of the Trinity River's West Fork, located between Earhart's Station and Jacksboro. Because the crossing spot was at grade, stages during the spring flood season often had to wait hours or days or cross, or else risk a high-water crossing. In response, an ad hoc committee of Wise County residents, in late 1859, recommended to Butterfield that the 55-mile route between Davidson's (located just west of Gainesville) and Jacksboro be rerouted south to include Decatur, the Wise County seat; as an inducement, the group pledged to build a "traversable road" across the county (which included most of the mileage between Davidson's and Jacksboro), and also to build secure bridges across both Denton Creek (northeast of Decatur) and the West Fork of the Trinity River (near the site of present-day Bridgeport). Both Butterfield officials and the Post Office Department accepted the new routing, the bridges were built, and the rerouting took place during the spring of 1860. This change, which added 10 miles to the route, resulted in the loss of two relay stations but the establishment of four new ones.<sup>104</sup>

By 1860, Butterfield's Overland Mail Company was a proven technological and logistical success. Given Butterfield's insistence on a high-quality, well-funded operation – which was undergirded with the secure knowledge that he would have until 1864 to amortize his expenses – Butterfield's line effectively served as the only regularly-scheduled passenger and mail service between the Mississippi River valley and the Pacific Coast. And, by doing so, California (and the new state of Oregon as well) was now far less isolated than it had been previously. By all accounts, the Butterfield was well-liked by both politicians (the 1858 Postmaster General's report called it a "conclusive and triumphant success")<sup>105</sup> and western residents; the lone dissenters were those whom, due to sectional jealousies, continued to advocate for an equivalent service along the Central Route. As one participant noted, "the Overland is the most popular institution of the Far West. ... So regular is its arrival that the inhabitants know almost the hour and the minute when the welcome sound of the post horn will reach them."<sup>106</sup>

### *Financial Challenges Intervene*

During this period, the line became increasingly popular for mail service.<sup>107</sup> When service was inaugurated in September 1858, the Post Office Department decided that the only letters that would accompany the stage would be those marked "per overland mail." Therefore, only "two diminutive bags of mail" headed west from St. Louis.<sup>108</sup> The regularity and punctuality<sup>109</sup> of the

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<sup>104</sup> Greene, *900 Miles*, 95; Sanders, "Table 1;" Ken Specher and the Bridgeport Historical Society, *Images of America, Bridgeport* (Charleston, SC, Arcadia, 2010), 9.

<sup>105</sup> Richardson, "Some Details," 6.

<sup>106</sup> *New York Post*, June 13, 1859, as noted in Hafen, *Overland Mail*, 99.

<sup>107</sup> The September 1857 contract (see Conklings, *Butterfield*, 114-15) called for Butterfield and his associated to "transport ... the entire letter mail ... from the Mississippi river to San Francisco," and Butterfield's "Special Instructions" to his employees (see Ormsby, frontispiece) stated that the company "will not at present transport any through extra baggage, freights, or parcels of any description."

<sup>108</sup> Ormsby, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 2-3 noted that that in addition to letters, there were "some papers and packages for stations along the route."

<sup>109</sup> Richardson, "Some Details," 10, averred that "The officials and employees did everything within their power to keep the mails moving; and when passengers and stages were obliged to stop, the mails went on, carried on the backs of mules or even on the shoulders of the employees." Given those orders – which were part of Butterfield's

service, however, brought increased volumes of mail on seemingly every stage. Fragmentary evidence suggests that the number of letters more than quintupled between December 1858 and July 1859. The postal volume – most of which went all the way from one terminus to the other – continued to increase to the point that the total postal receipts for the route quadrupled between 1859 and 1860.<sup>110</sup>

The Butterfield was also a key route for passengers. “At first,” noted one historian, “there was a sharp demand for seats at the San Francisco terminus, and one passenger reported that over one hundred persons were on the waiting list when he left in November, 1858.”<sup>111</sup> As time went on, the waiting list ebbed and flowed, and both “through passengers” and “way passengers” used the service. Scattered news articles from the St. Louis newspapers suggest that each eastbound stage averaged two passengers who had boarded the stage in either San Francisco or Los Angeles and ridden all the way to Memphis or St. Louis. In addition, the stage was the lifeblood of the communities along the route, so the stages typically had a smattering of Army officers, politicians, lobbyists, international travelers, and others.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the apparent appeal that the Butterfield line held to passengers, and the ever-increasing volume of mail that went over the route, the long-term success of the venture was anything but assured. On March 14, 1859 – just six months after operations began over the line – Aaron Brown died, and six days later Joseph Holt, from Kentucky, was appointed as the new postmaster general. As one source noted, Holt “apparently entertained no friendly feeling toward the Californians,” so to cut costs, he “set about inaugurating a policy of rigid curtailment of expenditures in every branch of the Pacific mail service.” Inasmuch as the western states and territories, at that time, were being served by six postal routes (Butterfield’s route, the San Antonio-San Diego line, two maritime routes, and two overland lines over the central route), Holt calculated that the department was spending \$4.14 in support of postal services for each western resident. The Butterfield, successful as it was during 1859, brought in postal receipts of just \$27,229, a figure that was just 4.5% of the government’s subsidy. He therefore tried to reduce the Butterfield to a weekly service, but President Buchanan’s attorney general, Jeremiah Black, rebuffed Holt, citing specific contract language.<sup>113</sup>

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“Special Instructions,” the company was usually able to improve upon its 24-day, 2½-hour schedule. Westbound trips between October 1859 and April 1860 averaged 21 days and 15 hours; one source noted that “the time on some later trips was even reduced to twenty-one days.” One memorable trip from St. Louis to San Francisco, in December 1858, took only 19 days and 15 hours. Historian A.C. Greene states that “The Butterfield Mail arrived late at San Francisco or St. Louis only three times in the nearly three years it ran;” these may have been caused by “high water in the rivers [or] sand storms on the Colorado desert.” See Conklings, *Butterfield*, 137-38, and Greene, *900 Miles*, 22, 27.

<sup>110</sup> Richardson, “Some Details,” p. 9; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 142.

<sup>111</sup> Richardson, “Some Details,” p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> Richardson, “Some Details,” pp. 6-9; Tallack, “The California Overland Express,” in Lang, *First Overland Mail*, 13. Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 39, stated that “Passenger traffic ... never lived up to the expectations of the line.”

<sup>113</sup> Conklings, *Butterfield*, 142, 146-48; Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 139-40. As Richardson, “Some Details,” 9, notes, this 4.5% income figure was not out of line when compared with other western mail routes. Most of this small income was generated at the eastern and western ends of the postal route.

Although the government was unable to make changes to Overland Mail Company service, officers within the company – recognizing that Butterfield was continuing to spend more on the line’s operations than the government was providing in subsidy – became increasingly restive at the company’s financial situation. This situation became acute because Congress, in 1859, failed to pass its annual Post Office Department appropriation bill; this action, at least temporarily, held up the company’s \$50,000 monthly subsidy payments.<sup>114</sup> This economic drain accentuated the need for outside loans, which the well-heeled Wells Fargo and Company was able to provide; and at some point – probably in 1859 – Wells Fargo interests assumed de facto control of the Overland Mail Company.<sup>115</sup> The financial gloom was exacerbated in early 1860, when veteran freighters William Russell, Alexander Majors, and William Waddell announced plans for the Pony Express, a service over the central route that would be operated by the Central Overland California and Pike’s Peak Express Company. Butterfield, perhaps overreacting, perceived that the trio’s move was part of a bid to Congress for a daily mail contract over the route. In response, Butterfield – despite the company’s ongoing losses – wanted to begin a similar, daily operation over the “ox-bow” route. The Overland Mail Company’s directors refused to go along with Butterfield’s proposal, and in response, Butterfield in mid-March 1860 was removed from the presidency. This left the company under the financial control of Wells Fargo and Company, which had underwritten much of the company’s ongoing losses; William B. Dinsmore, one of the Wells Fargo representatives, was voted in as the new company president.<sup>116</sup> The Pony Express, in early April 1860, began operating between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California, and the time needed to send letters between the Mississippi River valley and California was drastically reduced from a scheduled 24 days to just 10 days. Ironically, however, the Pony Express’s service turned out to be weekly, not daily, the Pony Express did not win a government mail contract, and the inauguration of this service had little or no impact on Overland Mail Company operations.

The spring of 1860 brought more bad news to the Overland Mail Company’s directors. Sectionalism, which had been hanging over virtually all Congressional decision-making ever since the Compromise of 1850, was more powerful than ever, and in late April 1860 it came to a head when Democratic Party leaders met, in Charleston, South Carolina for their presidential convention. Perhaps because of the convention’s southern location, the party was unable to select any candidate who could win the votes of two-thirds of the convention’s membership. Northern and southern candidates, along with a third group of border-state moderates, split up into separate factions, and each nominated their own presidential candidates at separate venues during May and June. Meanwhile, in mid-May, the Republicans met in Chicago in mid-May, and on the third ballot they decided upon a “dark horse” – Abraham Lincoln, an ardent anti-slavery advocate – as their presidential candidate. Due to the Democrats’ lack of unity, it was widely recognized that Lincoln would be elected president, and many leaders – particularly those in the South – spoke openly about the inevitability of disunion if Lincoln won the White House.

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<sup>114</sup> Greene, *900 Miles*, 263.

<sup>115</sup> Loomis, *Wells Fargo*, 136.

<sup>116</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 199-201; Conklings, *Butterfield*, 148; Greene, *900 Miles*, 263-64. There is no evidence to support Winfrey’s contention (“Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 39) that Butterfield resigned “because of a physical breakdown.”

Even more bad news – this more technological in nature – came on June 16, when Congress passed a bill instructing the Secretary of the Treasury to subsidize the building of a transcontinental telegraph line to connect the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast. Although no moves were made that year to begin constructing the line, the various Overland Mail Company directors new that the completion of the line would have an immediate, and negative, impact on mail volumes.<sup>117</sup>

On November 6, 1860, Abraham Lincoln, as expected, defeated three other candidates for the United States presidency, even though he won only 40 percent of the popular vote. Just six weeks later, representatives from South Carolina met and voted to secede from the union, and during a ten-day period in mid-January 1861, four more southern states did the same. On February 1, Texas made a similar move, and just three days later, representatives from the seven seceded states met in Montgomery, Alabama and formed the Confederate States of America. Texas, in a February 23 statewide referendum, sanctioned the results of its February 1 convention vote.

Before long, the slow dissolution of the United States began to have impacts on the Overland Mail route – first in Texas, then on a more general scale. Although Cooke County (where Gainesville was located) and Grayson County (where Diamond’s Station was located) were two of only 18 Texas counties to vote against secession, these two relay stations were deemed to be potential trouble spots. As a result, the company rerouted approximately 85 miles of its route, in north-central Texas, from Sherman to Decatur.<sup>118</sup> But unsafe conditions along the route, most likely in north central Texas, forced the company’s directors to limit the line’s operations, at least temporarily, to those areas east of Fort Smith and west of Tucson.<sup>119</sup>

### *The Southern Route is Abandoned*

By the closing days of the 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, many senators and representatives from the southern states had already left Washington in favor of their home states. Perhaps because its voting strength was now top-heavy with northerners, Congress on March 2, 1861 voted to order the Overland Mail Company to move the location of its route from the southern or “ox-bow” route to

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<sup>117</sup> During this same period, major advances were taking place elsewhere in the communications field, although they were halting and had no immediate impact on how messages were sent in the central or western United States. In 1858, the first transatlantic cable had been laid between Trinity Bay (in east-central Newfoundland) and Valentia Island (in southwestern Ireland), but the line soon failed, and a long-term, successful cable was not completed until July 1866. Regarding a transpacific cable, an attempt to build a line through eastern Russian, Russian American (Alaska), and across the Bering Sea took place between 1866 and 1868, but the completion of the Atlantic cable doomed the project. A successful transpacific cable, from San Francisco to China via Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines, was not completed until 1903. See <http://www.nps.gov/poex/historyculture/index.htm>.

<sup>118</sup> Greene, *900 Miles*, 96; <http://www.texasalmanac.com/sites/default/files/images/Secession3.pdf>. Winfrey (“Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 40), quoting from an unknown source, noted that the stations in Texas became victims of citizens who “seized the supplies of the company at certain stations, and seem to have taken some of the stock and coaches.” Similarly, Moody (*Stagecoach West*, 197-98) suggests (without attribution) that in February 1861, “the Butterfield line through Texas had been devastated: stations and relay posts burned, vehicles destroyed, and provisions, horses, and mules stolen.”

<sup>119</sup> Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 40.

the central route.<sup>120</sup> Although this action legislatively brought the “ox-bow” route to a close, the line soldiered on, at least in the short term. On March 6, the last eastbound stage left Tucson with a large amount of accumulated mail, while the last westbound stage left for San Francisco in early April.<sup>121</sup> Both stages made it through Texas safely.

Because Congress had ordered the company to commence service on the central route beginning on July 1, most of April, May, and June witnessed the passage of no overland mail. The company, however, was able to follow its congressional dictum, and on July 1, the first Overland Mail Company stage over the central route left St. Joseph, Missouri, and on July 18 it reached San Francisco.<sup>122</sup> This line competed with the Pony Express – which operated along the same route – until the fall of 1861. Throughout that year, however, technology – in the form of a transcontinental telegraph line – was quickly closing the gap between the Great Plains and California. The Overland Telegraph Company of California, along with the Pacific Telegraph Company of Nebraska, built its lines toward each other. During this period, the Pony Express operated as usual, with letters and newspapers being carried all the way from St. Joseph to Sacramento. Telegrams, however, were carried only between the rapidly advancing wire ends.

On October 24, 1861, the eastern and western lines met in Salt Lake City, and a telegram that day was successfully sent from San Francisco to New York City. On that day the Pony Express was officially terminated, but it was not until November that the last letters completed their journey over the route.<sup>123</sup> Not long afterward, in June 1862, Congress passed the first Pacific Railroad Act, after which construction began on the long-awaited transcontinental railroad; the Central Pacific began building east from Sacramento in 1863, while the Union Pacific built west from Omaha beginning in 1865. For the remainder of the decade, stagecoaches over the central route continued to provide a primary mail link between the Missouri River valley and California. It continued to serve that role until May 10, 1869, when crews for the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific met at Promontory, Utah. For many years thereafter, stages continued to serve communities throughout the west. Never again, however, would stagecoaches play the central role in serving the nation’s transportation and communications needs that they did during the late 1850s and early 1860s, when the Overland Mail Company’s coaches rumbled over the “ox-bow” route between either St. Louis or Memphis and San Francisco.

In the wake of the closure of the stations along the “ox-bow route,” the route was effectively abandoned for long distance travel, although specific sections continued to be used for regional or local purposes. Many of the stations at the eastern and western ends of the line continued to operate as taverns, stores, and farm houses, much as they had prior to September 1858. But in the less settled portions of the country, most of these stations faded away. In the treeless portions of the route, for example, local residents and travelers were quick to take advantage of the available wood that had been used on roofs, doors, and corrals; and once the wood had been

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<sup>120</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, Session II, Chapter 73, Sections 9-13, in *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 12 (1859-1863), pp. 205-07; Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 198.

<sup>121</sup> Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 40-41.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>123</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/poex/historyculture/index.htm>; <http://www.telegraph-history.org/transcontinental-telegraph/index.html>

removed, the stone, adobe, and other native materials quickly fell away or disintegrated. Even in the more settled areas, short-term needs rather than permanence were the norm; rangelands were converted into plowed fields in some areas, while elsewhere farmers abandoned their lands and moved on. Stores that had once served Butterfield travelers were knocked down or replaced by more modern structures, and taverns were often incorporated into larger structures that served a different purpose. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly by the 1920s or 1930s, the landscape that had once constituted many parts of the Butterfield route had been altered to an extreme, and in all too many areas there were relatively few physical vestiges – either routes or stations – that hearkened back to the Butterfield era.

### *Butterfield Overland Trail – Route Description*

As noted above, Postmaster General Aaron V. Brown had issued an order on July 2, 1857 mandating that any winning bidder operate over a line

from St. Louis, Mo., and from Memphis, Tenn., converging at Little Rock, Ark.; thence, *via* Preston, Tex. or as nearly so as may be found advisable, to the best point of crossing the Rio Grande above El Paso, and not far from Fort Fillmore; thence, along the new road being opened and constructed under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, to Fort Yuma, California; thence, through the best passes and along the best valleys for safe and expeditious staging, to San Francisco.

John Butterfield, who knew by this time that he would win the postal contract, immediately sent out survey parties to test the viability of Brown’s recommended route. Based on what the parties found, Butterfield recognized that some portions of Brown’s route were more geographically appropriate than other parts. He quickly found, for example, that Little Rock would be a poor “converging” point (see the Historical Narrative), and he therefore convinced Brown that the St. Louis and Memphis routes should meet at Fort Smith instead. His advance parties also decided that Colbert’s Ferry would be a better Red River crossing than at Preston (eight miles upstream), and they likewise decided that the route would not follow many portions of the Interior Department’s “new road” between El Paso and Fort Yuma. The remainder of Butterfield’s on-the-ground route closely followed Brown’s suggestions.

Main Route: Butterfield’s main route, therefore, headed west from St. Louis. The first 160 miles consisted of the right-of-way of the Pacific Railroad. From Tipton, Missouri, the route went south-southwest along the Boonville mail route to Springfield, Missouri; Fayetteville, Arkansas; and on to Fort Smith. (Between Memphis and Fort Smith, Butterfield’s subcontractor, and later Butterfield himself, experimented with a number of routes and transportation modes, none of which were particularly successful.) Southwest from Fort Smith, the route went along routes used primarily by the Choctaw and Chickasaw to Colbert’s Ferry. Once in Texas, the route headed almost due west, linking together a series of military facilities, both active and abandoned: Fort Belknap, Fort Phantom Hill, Fort Chadbourne, Camp Johnston, and Camp Charlotte. Continuing west to Horsehead Crossing, one of the few places to safely cross the Pecos River, the route paralleled the river almost to the New Mexico border, then skirted the

Guadalupe Mountains, moved into New Mexico for more than 50 miles, and then headed southwest into El Paso.

As it left Texas, the route paralleled the Rio Grande as it headed upstream to Mesilla before striking west across the desert to Tucson; it then angled northwest to the Gila River villages and Maricopa Wells before heading west to Gila Ranch, after which the route paralleled the Gila River all the way to Fort Yuma, located on the western bank of the Colorado River. The route then swept south into Baja California, Mexico in order to circumvent the Algodones Sand Dunes, after which it headed west-northwest to a point near the present-day border crossing between Mexicali, B.C. and Calexico, California. Continuing in the same direction, the route followed a series of springs and waterholes until it left the desert at Warner Ranch (present-day Warner Springs). The route then wound northwest to Temecula, Chino, El Monte, and on to Los Angeles. After going through Cahuenga Pass and stopping at the old San Fernando Mission, it surmounted the San Gabriel Mountains via San Francisquito Canyon to the San Andreas rift zone, which it followed northwest to Fort Tejon. The route then descended Grapevine Canyon, continued north to the Kern River (at Gordon's Ferry), then wound through the lower Sierra Nevada foothills before re-emerging in the southern San Joaquin valley and continuing northwest to Visalia and the Kings River (Whitmore's Ferry). Just west of present-day Los Banos, it climbed Pacheco Pass before descending into a coastal valley near Gilroy. The route – here called El Camino Real, as it had been since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, continued northwest to San Jose, Mountain View, San Mateo, and on to Portsmouth Square in San Francisco.

Route Changes: The above route remained static for almost a year, but during the summer of 1859, two changes took place. The Pacific Railroad, in Missouri, extended its tracks westward, after which all Butterfield traffic bypassed Tipton, and the transfer point between train and stage was moved to Syracuse. A larger change took place in west Texas where, because of a lack of consistent water availability, combined with other factors, officials moved the line between Horsehead Crossing and El Paso to a more southerly right-of-way. The new “lower route” went through Camp Stockton (later called Fort Stockton), Fort Davis, and Fort Quitman; it then followed the Rio Grande upstream to El Paso.

Small changes were made in 1860 and early 1861. During the spring of 1860, officials – who were frustrated at the all-too-common delays that ensued at the crossing of the Trinity River's West Fork – moved the trail in a southerly direction between Davidson's Station (west of Gainesville) and Jacksboro. (Wise County officials promised a bridge over the new route, and the community of Bridgeport grew nearby as a result.) A further route change took place in early 1861 in the same general area, but for an entirely different reason: citizens in Texas, which had voted to secede from the Union in early February, were appropriating equipment at Gainesville and otherwise endangering the route. In response, Butterfield officials moved the route between Sherman and Decatur to the south, on a route via Denton and Pilot Point. According to some historians, this new route segment may have operated as long as a month before the line closed down, but known primary sources show only a single, eastbound trip over this route, which casts doubt on its overall role as a Butterfield route segment.

## TIMELINE

| <b>Date</b>       | <b>Event</b>  |
|-------------------|---|
| 1841              | The first westbound wagon train, by the Bidwell-Bartleson party, successfully goes from St. Joseph, Missouri to Oregon and California.  |
| 1846              | The U.S. Post Office Department commences the first subsidized mail route (by sea) to the Pacific Coast.  |
| 1846 (May)        | Sparked by a conflict over land rights between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, the U.S. and Mexico go to war. U.S. forces capture most of the present-day U.S. Southwest in 1846, and overall hostilities end in the fall of 1847.   |
| 1848 (January)    | James Marshall discovers gold at Sutter's Mill, east of Sacramento, touching off the California gold rush, after which tens of thousands of would-be prospectors head west.   |
| 1848 (February)   | The U.S. and Mexican governments sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which results in the transfer of most of the present-day Southwest to the U.S. government.   |
| 1850 (September)  | As part of the Compromise of 1850, California becomes the 31 <sup>st</sup> U.S. state.  |
| 1851              | Congress subsidizes the first postal route (via the central route) between Missouri and California.   |
| 1852              | Henry Wells and William F. Fargo, both of whom are on the American Express Company board of directors, found a new company in California, called Wells, Fargo and Company.  |
| 1853              | Congress passes the Pacific Railroad Act. The following year, several expeditions head west seeking viable railroad rights-of-way. By 1855, reports of these expeditions have been completed.   |
| 1856 (August)     | Congress authorizes a postal route between San Antonio and San Diego, but makes no move to subsidize it (and thus implement it).  |
| 1857 (February)   | Congress authorizes \$200,000 for the construction of a wagon road between El Paso, Texas and Fort Yuma, California.  |
| 1857 (March)      | Congress authorizes up to \$600,000 annually for a postal route between the Mississippi Valley and San Francisco.   |
| 1857 (April)      | The Post Office Department issues a contract for the March 1857 postal route; the deadline for bids is June 1.  |
| 1857 (June)       | The Post Office Department, in a surprise move, awards to James Birch a post route between San Antonio and San Diego; the subsidy is \$149,800 per year.  |
| 1857 (early July) | Word gets out that a consortium headed by John Butterfield has won a \$600,000 annual contract to haul passengers and mail between two eastern termini – St. Louis and Memphis – and San Francisco. The contract is signed in mid-September; Butterfield has one year to commence operations. |
| 1857 (mid-July)   | The San Antonio to San Diego Mail Route begins operations at both ends of its line. For the next 14 months, the line has no southern route competition.   |
| 1857 (September)  | Butterfield and his associates sign the postal contract, and work quickly commences to survey a proposed route, construct stations and ancillary facilities as needed, and purchase stock, tack, and other supplies.  |
| 1857 (November)   | Interior Department personnel commence work on the El Paso-Fort Yuma  |

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|                  | wagon road. Work continues for the next six to nine months.   |
| 1858 (September) | One year after the contract is signed, the Overland Mail Company commences operations from St. Louis, Memphis, and San Francisco. Through passengers going in both directions write accounts of their trips, which arrive ahead of time on October 9 and October 10.          |
| 1858 (October)   | Officials with the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Route agree to divest the section of their route between El Paso and Fort Yuma due to competition with the Overland Mail Company.   |
| 1859 (August)    | Due to a lack of dependable water, plus other factors, the Overland Mail route in west Texas is shifted south between Horsehead Crossing and El Paso.   |
| 1860 (March)     | John Butterfield resigns the presidency of the Overland Mail Company.   |
| 1860 (April)     | The Democratic National Convention results in a lack of consensus for a presidential candidate; when the Republicans nominate Abraham Lincoln in mid-May, the lack of Democratic consensus presages a Republican victory.   |
| 1860 (November)  | Abraham Lincoln, with less than 40 percent of the popular vote, is elected the U.S. president.  |
| 1860 (December)  | South Carolina delegates meet and vote to secede from the union. During the next two months, several additional states (including Texas) follow suit.   |
| 1861 (February)  | Confederate insurgents in north-central Texas endanger portions of the line, forcing more than 100 miles to be rerouted.  |
| 1861 (March)     | With war clouds looming, Congress – now bereft of many southern representatives – votes to move the Overland Mail Company route from the existing “ox-bow” route to the central route. The last stage runs along the southern route take place in late March and early April. |
| 1861 (July)      | Overland Mail Company begins service along the central route.   |

## SIGNIFICANCE THEMES

In reviewing the story of the pre-Civil War Butterfield stagecoach line (which operated as the Overland Mail Company) and the context in which they occurred, several historical themes have emerged. The first, most obvious theme for which this trail is nationally significant is related to transportation and communication, because the beginning of stagecoach service was a major step forward in bringing California and the various western territories closer together to the other U.S. states. But another theme – and one that makes the Butterfield name known today to many Americans – is the nationally significant importance of the stagecoach in American history and the iconic role of the Butterfield as a representation of the stagecoach era. These two themes were briefly summarized earlier in this document (see “Summary of Findings” section), but are discussed in greater detail below.

- 1) Theme V = Developing the American Economy, topic 3 = transportation and communication; NHL Criterion #1 = an association with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United States history.**

As elaborated upon in the historical narrative, a primary reason for recognizing the Butterfield's Overland Mail Company as being nationally significant is that it played a major role in tying California, and various western territories, more closely to the long-established portions of the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. The need for better transportation and communication had been expressed ever since the first parties, in the early 1840s, had headed overland to Oregon and California, but the problem became far more acute after James Marshall, in January 1848, discovered gold east of Sacramento, California. Tens of thousands of gold-seekers flocked to California in 1849 and later years, and in September 1850 – as part of the Compromise of 1850 – California became the 31<sup>st</sup> U.S. state. The large number of Americans living in California resulted in pressure – both editorial and political – to improve transportation and communication networks. Mail routes between the east and west coasts (by water) had been provided since the mid-1840s, but as late as 1850, the fastest connecting route for both passengers and mail services was a risky, multi-month trip via the Isthmus of Panama. The construction of a railroad route across the isthmus, completed in January 1855, considerably shortened the route (to an average of 26-30 days) and provided a greater level of comfort. Throughout the early- to mid-1850s, passengers and mail (via a subsidized route) had also been able to travel overland, to and from California, along the central route. The time incurred in this route, however, offered few advantages over the route via Panama, particularly after January 1855.

Both Californians and a broad range of other Americans, however, were still not satisfied. They demanded a quicker, more dependable route to and from California, and in particular a route that stayed within the country's newly-expanded borders. So in March 1853, Congress passed an act authorizing funds for a series of four railroad surveys between the Midwest and the Pacific Coast. The surveys were a necessary first step toward the eventual construction of a transcontinental railroad line, but due to the strife surrounding sectionalism, Congress made no moves toward authorizing railroads at this time.

The next move toward increasing the linkage between the Midwest and the Pacific Coast came in August 1856, when Congress authorized an overland stage route between San Antonio and San Diego. But it made no move to subsidize the line for the time being. It was not until March 1857 that Congress made a serious move to more effectively bridge the gap between the Mississippi River valley and California. It authorized a hefty annual subsidy to establish a regularly scheduled stage line that would carry both passengers and mail to and from San Francisco. By early July, Buchanan's postmaster general had announced awards for both of those routes: to James Birch for the route west from San Antonio (to be traversed in 30 days or less) and to John Butterfield and his associates for a route from both St. Louis and Memphis to San Francisco (to be traversed in 25 days or less). Given the fact that Butterfield's subsidy was more than four times that of Birch's subsidy, and that San Francisco was a far larger city than San Diego at the time, the Butterfield contract was clearly the more high-profile contract. The contract was signed in September 1857, and precisely a year later the line went into operation. Given Butterfield's high standards (and vast economic infusion he brought to the line), his stage route operated with few flaws. Most stages were able to go from beginning to end in 22 or 23 days, which was faster – and with far greater frequency – than the maritime route could offer. Passengers, communities, and mail recipients all agreed that the line had fulfilled its goals, and in

so doing California was indeed far more closely linked to the rest of the United States than it had been previously.

The Overland Mail Route, however, did not remain the fastest way between the Midwest and California for long. In early 1860, the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company announced plans to run a Pony Express (carrying letters only) between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California. When this operation began in April of that year, riders and their ponies were able to cover the mileage between these two distant points in less than ten days, which was less than half of what the Butterfield's stages could provide. Less than a year later, one westbound ride was able to cover the distance in less than eight days.

New communications technologies intervened in 1860, when Congress passed a bill directing the Treasury Secretary to issue a contract for the construction of a transcontinental telegraph line. Work on the line began the following spring, and beginning in late October 1861, telegraph messages could be sent in just a few minutes between San Francisco and New York. Not surprisingly, the completion of this line doomed the Pony Express, which ceased operations the following month.

Passengers going between California and the eastern and Midwestern states continued to go by stagecoach (or, in some cases, by ship via the Isthmus of Panama). The southern route was used until March 1861, when Congress – with war clouds looming – moved the Overland Route line north to the central route. Service resumed in July 1861, taking just 17 days to go between St. Joseph and San Francisco. Not long afterward, in June 1862, Congress passed the first Pacific Railroad Act, after which construction began on the long-awaited transcontinental railroad; the Central Pacific began building east from Sacramento in 1863, while the Union Pacific built west from Omaha beginning in 1865. For the remainder of the decade, stagecoaches over the central route continued to provide a primary mail link between the Missouri River valley and California. It continued to serve that role until May 10, 1869, when crews for the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific met at Promontory, Utah. After that date, passengers could go from Mississippi River points to San Francisco in less than a week, and the era of long-distance stage coaching began to fade away.

Based on the above chronology, it can be seen, therefore, that the twenty-year period following the California gold rush witnessed manifold improvements in both transportation and communication. These improvements, collectively, made the mountain west territories and the Pacific Coast states far less isolated. They included the first subsidized overland postal route (1851), the completion of the Panama Railroad (1855), the implementation of the San Antonio-San Diego postal route (1857), the implementation of Butterfield's Overland Mail Company (1858), the inauguration of Pony Express service (1860), the completion of the overland telegraph (1861), and the driving of the "golden spike" at Promontory, Utah (1869). Given the fact that the Pony Express has been recognized as a national historic trail since 1992 and that the Promontory area, since 1857, has been administered by the National Park Service as Golden Spike National Historic Site, it needs to be recognized that the Butterfield Overland Trail – which, in this context, also incorporates portions of the San Antonio-San Diego postal route – likewise needs to be recognized as being nationally significant.

Because the route was created as a political necessity, because the Civil War intervened just a short time after the line got underway, and because northern interests during the war directed future developments away from the southern corridor, the Butterfield “ox-bow” route did not prove to be a long-lasting transportation corridor. The line is nonetheless important in the development of the west. The Butterfield Stage made an indelible impression for a number of reasons: 1) its length, 2) the massive infrastructure it built, 3) the frequent (and scheduled) service that it provided, and 4) its important (if short-term) role in forging greater ties between the Mississippi River valley and far-off California. As one historian noted,

though the accomplishments of its brief career were perhaps more spectacular than substantial, its influence would endure long after it had passed from the scene. It was the foremost institution in the development and expansion of the area in which it operated. During the period of its existence the population of the chief towns along its routes nearly doubled, and numerous smaller settlements, each with its post office, sprung up [sic] along its path.<sup>124</sup>

**2) Theme III = Expressing Cultural Values, Topics 3 (literature), 4 (mass media), and 6 (popular and traditional culture); NHL Criterion #3 = a theme that represents some great idea or ideal of the American people**

Although many of the physical vestiges of the short-lived Butterfield disappeared not long after the line was abandoned, twentieth-century Americans retained a fondness for the line and its connection to the old west. The Butterfield, to be sure, was only one of hundreds of stagecoach lines that had once provided the necessary link between cities and towns in the western and central states. And, as noted in the above narrative, the Post Office Department had awarded subsidized contracts over at least three other Pacific Coast mail routes before Butterfield and his associates won their contract.

Despite the Butterfield’s apparent lack of uniqueness, however, this line – both in its proposal stage and in its operational phase – was a major public development; it was a thread of civilization in an otherwise desolate, isolated world. When it first went into operation, President James Buchanan declared that the service was “a glorious triumph for civilization and the Union,” and he predicted that “the East and West will be bound together by a chain of living Americans which can never be broken.”<sup>125</sup> By 1859 or 1860, a broad swath of westerners who lived near the trail corridor had become wholeheartedly convinced of the importance of the linkage that the line provided with the outside world; as one participant wrote, “the Overland is the most popular institution of the Far West. ... So regular is its arrival that the inhabitants know almost the hour and the minute when the welcome sound of the post horn will reach them.”<sup>126</sup>

The iconic nature of the trail has remained. One historian noted that “to generations who came after it, the Butterfield overland mail would symbolize the spirit that made the west, in character

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<sup>124</sup> Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 43.

<sup>125</sup> Mulligan, “Down the Butterfield Trail,” 358; Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage to California*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> *New York Post*, June 13, 1859, as noted in Hafen, *Overland Mail*, 99.

as in fact, a part of the United States,” while another wrote that “the saga of the Butterfield Trail remains a romantic high point in the westward movement, forming familiar elements in historical plots, functioning as a vibrant backdrop against which mythic adventures, western thrillers, movie serials, and television spectacles have raced.”<sup>127</sup> Yet another historian stressed its importance as the foundation for a new economic order:

though the accomplishments of its brief career were perhaps more spectacular than substantial, its influence would endure long after it had passed from the scene. It was the foremost institution in the development and expansion of the area in which it operated. During the period of its existence the population of the chief towns along its routes nearly doubled, and numerous smaller settlements, each with its post office, sprung up [sic] along its path.<sup>128</sup>

To later generations, a key characteristic of the Butterfield stage line was the fact that it was a long-distance route through isolated, dangerous territory. Thus the Butterfield embodied the romance – either real or imagined – of stagecoach travel; consequently, any references to the line bespoke the risk that passengers and crew experienced along the route (which to later generations would be seen as “adventure”), particularly in present-day west Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. These qualities prompted one historian to write in 1925, “the romance and adventure associated with the two years and a half of its history have not been overlooked by the writers of more popular works.”<sup>129</sup>

Given the iconic nature of the Butterfield line, a number of dime novelists and western fiction writers wrote stories that focused not on the Butterfield as a specific entity; instead, they dramatized the western stagecoach and the risks inherent in a stagecoach ride, particularly as it pertained to conflicts with Apaches and other western Indian tribes. This theme continued to be a common theme in motion pictures, movie serials, and television shows. As historian Ralph Moody noted in a 1967 volume,

Several factors have combined to create in the public mind a glorious but entirely false conception of stagecoach driving in the West. First there were European tourists and newspaper editors from the East who crossed the continent by stagecoach in the late 1850’s and early ‘60’s and then hurried home to write glamorized articles and memoirs. Few of them failed to include a stagecoach careening down a snakelike, precipitous mountain road hacked from sheer granite walls with six horses galloping wildly. ... Then there were the magnificent and highly imaginative paintings by Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell of Indian attacks on stagecoaches, the horses running frantically and the driver pouring on the leather. The third factor was the western novel, stories of a romantic, glamorous, imaginary West that never was. ... In these sagas of the fantasy West no cowboy ever rode and no stagecoach ever rolled at less than an all-out gallop.

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<sup>127</sup> Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 44; Greene, *900 Miles*, 9.

<sup>128</sup> Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 43.

<sup>129</sup> Richardson, “Some Details,” 2.

To complete the misconception, the movies, and now television, have firmly fixed the image ... where every stagecoach is driven up hill and down at a breakneck gallop.<sup>130</sup>

An exemplary movie spotlighting this theme was *Stagecoach*, released in 1939. Key to the movie's success was a long-running gunfight between the Ringo Kid (played by John Wayne, in his first starring role) and others on a speeding stage, all of whom fought scores of Apache Indians, led by Geronimo. This gunfight, which really had no historical basis on any event that took place along the Butterfield route,<sup>131</sup> allegedly took place on an isolated road between the fictional Tonto, New Mexico and Lordsburg (a present-day town that sits astride the Butterfield route). Directed by John Ford, the movie's action, characters, stunt work and photography so impressed audiences that one prominent reviewer was moved to write, "Although there were Westerns before it, *Stagecoach* quickly became a template for all movie Westerns to come. ... Thousands of films have followed *Stagecoach's* path, but no [one] has ever improved on its formula."<sup>132</sup> Another reviewer, recognizing the relationship between the Butterfield route and the motion picture, stated that the Butterfield

was the longest overland mail route and stagecoach run in America at the time. Immortalized by the John Ford movie classic *Stagecoach* of 1939, it was a dangerous stage route through hostile and untamed regions of the western frontier. The images left behind from Ford's movie are Hollywood's tainted vision of a part of American history that was quite a bit more raw than what was depicted on the big screen film.<sup>133</sup>

As an additional response to the lure of the old west that has often been associated with this stage line, commercial establishments along the route have long attached the Butterfield name to their facilities.<sup>134</sup> The attraction of the Butterfield is such that this name has been manifested even in places located far afield from the stage line corridor.<sup>135</sup>

## ANALYSIS OF SEGMENT-BY-SEGMENT SIGNIFICANCE

As noted above, in the "Where the Butterfield Overland Trail was Located" section, the contract for a long-distance Post Office Department route was awarded to John Butterfield and his associates on September 16, 1857, and the route that was implemented – over what became known as the southern, or "ox-bow" route – was largely in accordance with an order that

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<sup>130</sup> Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 49-50.

<sup>131</sup> As noted in the historical narrative, one Butterfield stage was attacked, near Apache Pass, in February 1861. The stage in question was not moving, however, and no passengers were killed or injured.

<sup>132</sup> Mark Deming, on the Rotten Tomatoes website (<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1019774-stagecoach/>). Based on the success of this movie, a new version of *Stagecoach* was released in 1966 (directed by Gordon Douglas and with Alex Cord as the Ringo Kid), and again in 1986 as a made-for-TV production (directed by Ted Post and starring Kris Kristofferson).

<sup>133</sup> Pam Uher movie review: <http://www.helium.com/items/1164198-butterfield-stagecoach-line-150th-anniversary>

<sup>134</sup> The names "Butterfield Trail" and "Butterfield Stage" have been applied to motels, apartments, elementary schools, streets and hiking trails, parks, and even such unlikely businesses as shooting ranges, animals hospitals, parking lots and golf courses. Venues on or near the trail include Springfield, MO; Fayetteville, AR; Gainesville, Jacksboro, and El Paso, TX; Picacho and Deming, NM; Tucson, AZ; and Temecula, CA.

<sup>135</sup> Butterfield Trail-related establishments have been identified in such disparate places as North Aurora, IL; Durango, CO; Page and Winslow, AZ; and Julian and Poway, both in San Diego County, CA.

Postmaster General Aaron Brown had issued on July 2 of that year. Butterfield's original route (which began service in mid-September 1858) remained unchanged for more than ten months. Beginning in the summer of 1859, a number of route changes – mostly small – took place:

- the point in central Missouri at which mail was transferred, from the Pacific Railroad to one of Butterfield's stages, was moved west 5.7 miles, from Tipton to Syracuse (summer of 1859)
- over an approximate 300-mile route between Horsehead Crossing and El Paso, Texas, the route was moved south in order to ensure water availability, and other factors (August 1, 1859)
- in north-central Texas, a 55-mile route between Davidson's Station (near Gainesville) and Jacksboro was moved south to ease the crossing over the West Fork of the Trinity River (spring of 1860)
- also in north-central Texas, an approximate 85-mile route between Sherman and Decatur was moved south because of political instability at Gainesville and perhaps elsewhere (late February or early March 1861)

Given the geographical changes that took place along the line during its 2½-year history, it can be seen that by far the largest change (which was in west Texas) was implemented approximately at the halfway point of the line's operation along the southern route. It therefore appears that both routes are equally significant. A small route change took place in central Missouri at about the same time. In north-central Texas, additional routes were made over relatively short routes in 1860 and 1861. The 1860 route change resulted in at least one year of service for both the old and new route alternative. The 1861 route change, by contrast, resulted in a more southerly route segment being used for only one month. Taken together, however, the number of route changes was so small that there is little purpose to be gained in singling out one route as being of greater significance than any other. All routes under which the Butterfield stage or its Arkansas contractor traveled, therefore, should be considered as being nationally significant.

As has been seen, however, the totality of the Butterfield system included more than the stage routes themselves. Specifically, passengers and mail going over the 160-mile route between St. Louis and Tipton, Missouri traveled on the Pacific Railroad. And toward the eastern end of the route between Memphis, Tennessee and Madison, Arkansas, passengers and mail traveled over either the Little Rock and Memphis Railroad or via a Mississippi River ferry. Never, in the 2½-year history of the Butterfield line, did stages travel between St. Louis and Tipton or between Memphis and Madison. Given the problematic nature of preserving, commemorating, or interpreting Butterfield-related activities along these two transportation corridors, the agency has concluded that these two corridors should not be included as part of the proposed Butterfield Overland National Historical Trail. Certain areas within those corridors, however, may be of interpretive interest.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY**

While a broad range of western writers have written in generalities about the Butterfield, relatively few people have undertaken the more exacting task of tracking down specifically where the Butterfield route and its stations were located. In 1930, the husband-and-wife team of Roscoe and Margaret Conkling – who were living in El Paso at the time – were the first to undertake this enormous task. They assembled an impressive array of documents, diaries, and maps. Meanwhile, the couple spent more than a decade driving the highways and back roads along the Butterfield corridor, where they spoke to local informants and visited, to the greatest extent possible, the purported locations of the various stations and described both their history and the extent of any remaining on-the-ground evidence. They published the results of their research, in a three volume set, in 1947.<sup>136</sup> For many years thereafter, their volumes were the standard by which later writers, heading down a similar thematic path, would follow.

Other writers have complemented the Conklings' work on a state-by-state basis. In most cases, these writings have combined a relatively brief overall trail history with specific information about various station sites. The first known statewide treatments were Grant Foreman's and Muriel Wright's articles – both in the early 1930s – as they pertained to Oklahoma, followed by Herman A. Spindt's 1936 entry that covered the route in southern California.<sup>137</sup> In the years since the Conklings published their work, additional scholarly articles have been published pertaining to Arizona,<sup>138</sup> Arkansas,<sup>139</sup> California,<sup>140</sup> New Mexico,<sup>141</sup> Oklahoma,<sup>142</sup> and Texas.<sup>143</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, full-length works on the various states have begun to appear. The first such publication was Gerald Ahnert's guide to Arizona's Butterfield stations. Two decades later, A.C. Greene wrote a book-length narrative that encompassed the various Texas stations as well as several of those in New Mexico.<sup>144</sup> The twentieth century has witnessed the publication of three statewide guides: George Hackler's book on New Mexico; Kirby Sanders' volume on

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<sup>136</sup> Janet Y. Brockmoller, "A Music of Two Spheres," *Password* (El Paso County Historical Society) 30 (Fall 1985), 143-47.

<sup>137</sup> Grant Foreman, "The California Overland Mail Route Through Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 9 (Sept. 1931), 300-317; Wright, "Historic Places on the Old Stage Line," 798; H.A. Spindt, "The Butterfield Stage Route," Historical Society of Southern California, *The Quarterly* 18 (June 1936), p. 41.

<sup>138</sup> Arizona Pioneers' Historical Society, *Butterfield Overland Mail Across Arizona, 1858-1861* (Tucson, Arizona Silhouettes), 1958; Gerald Ahnert, *Arizona Treasure Hunters' Guide to Butterfield Stage Stations, 1857-1879* (Syracuse, the author), Dec. 1990.

<sup>139</sup> Rose, "Butterfield Overland Mail Company," 62; Mary Frances Izell, "The Problem of Selecting the Northwest Arkansas Route for the Butterfield Overland Mail," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 17 (Autumn, 1958), p. 232.

<sup>140</sup> Vernetta Snyder Ripley, "The San Fernando (Newhall) Pass, Part 10: 1858, Butterfield Overland Mail," in Historical Society of Southern California, *The Quarterly* 30 (March 1948); Phil Brigandi, "The Southern Emigrant Trail," unpub. mss. in NTIR Collection.

<sup>141</sup> Henry P. Walker and Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, "Colonel Bonneville's Report: The Department of New Mexico in 1859," *Arizona and the West* 22 (Winter, 1980), p. 343.

<sup>142</sup> Muriel H. Wright, "The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 35 (June 1957); I.C. Gunning, *The Butterfield Overland Mail Through Eastern Oklahoma* (Eastern Oklahoma Historical Society, 1971); Ruth Ann Overbeck, "Colbert's Ferry," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 57 (Summer 1979), 212.

<sup>143</sup> Williams, "The Butterfield Overland Mail Across Texas," 1.

<sup>144</sup> Gerald T. Ahnert, *Retracing the Butterfield Overland Trail through Arizona; a Guide to the Route of 1857-1861* (Tucson, Westernlore Press), 1973; Greene, *900 Miles*.

Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma; and a new volume by Gerald Ahnert that is considerably more extensive than his previous publication.<sup>145</sup>

In 2011, author Kirby Sanders worked with the National Park Service and compiled a prodigious volume of data that, to a large extent, compiled and evaluated the findings of these and many others who have written about stations and other historical sites along the trail corridor. Others, in recent years, have shown an interest in the corridor as well. Fred Yeck has visited the site of each known Butterfield station and has produced an illustrated compendium of his research, while others – particularly those residing in California – have undertaken sophisticated historical research combined with field work related to both routes and sites.<sup>146</sup>

Recent years have also witnessed a proliferation of studies about specific portions of the route. A few studies have focused on broad events surrounding one or more Butterfield stations.<sup>147</sup> Some studies have investigated the history of stage stations along the route, and the dominant personalities associated with them.<sup>148</sup> Others are architectural or similar site studies of stations for which structural evidence still remains.<sup>149</sup> Finally, a number of Butterfield-related studies have focused on archeological projects at station sites.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Hackler, *The Butterfield Trail in New Mexico*; Kirby Sanders, *Driver's Guide to the Butterfield Overland Route, Vol. 1: Missouri, Arkansas & Oklahoma* (Springdale, AR, Heritage Trail Partners), 2008; Ahnert, *Butterfield Trail and Overland Mail Company*, April 2011.

<sup>146</sup> Kirby Sanders, *The Butterfield Overland Mail Ox-Box Route, 1858-1861* (unpub. mss., NPS), May 26, 2011; Fred Yeck, "Butterfield Overland Mail, St. Louis to San Francisco," unpub. mss., 2012; Gordon Smith, "Notes from a Wagon Seat," *San Diego Reader*, ca. 1984, in San Diego State Univ. vertical file, "Overland Stage Routes," Folder 2, in [http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt7r29r890/entire\\_text/](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt7r29r890/entire_text/); Leland Bibb Map Collection, unpub. mss.

<sup>147</sup> Raymond A. Mulligan, "Sixteen Days in Apache Pass," *Kiva* 24 (Dec., 1958), 1-13; Richard W. Barsness, "Los Angeles' Quest for Improved Transportation, 1846-1861," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 46 (Dec., 1967), pp. 291-306; DeJong, "Arizona, Advantageous to the Indians?", 17.

<sup>148</sup> Janet L. Hargett, "Pioneering at Yuma Crossing; the Business Career of L. J. F. Jaeger, 1850-1887," *Arizona and the West* 25 (Winter 1983), pp. 329-354; Gilbert Gia, Gordon's Ferry and Other Crossings of the Kern River, 1852-1937," [www.gilbertgia.com](http://www.gilbertgia.com); Mary Emma Gibson and Iola Potts, "Butterfield Overland Mail," [www.tiptonmo.com](http://www.tiptonmo.com).

<sup>149</sup> Dava McGahee Davy, *Pinery Station, Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas* (Carlsbad, NM, Carlsbad Caverns Natural History Association), 1979.

<sup>150</sup> Dale L. Berge, "The Gila Bend Stage Station," *Kiva* 33 (Apr., 1968), pp. 169-243; Stephen R. Van Wormer, et al., *An Isolated Frontier Outpost: Historical and Archaeological Investigations of the Carrizo Creek Stage Station* (California State Parks), June 30, 2007.