

Pre-Contract Overland Routes into the American West: 1832 to 1851

This exhibit describes the early overland postal routes that connected the expanding American West with the rest of the world. The 1803 Louisiana Purchase and the 1845-48 territorial acquisitions tripled the size of the United States, and moved its western frontier from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Letter communications played a crucial role in enabling the consolidation of these new territories, but the Post Office Department waited until 1847 to establish the first western post office; until 1848 to establish the first contract transcontinental route via Panama; and until 1850 to establish the first contract overland route into the new territories. Prior to the establishment of contract mail routes, private parties carried small amounts of mail on overland routes. This exhibit examines that pre-contract mail, starting with the earliest known letter from the Rocky Mountains in 1832.

Major Overland Postal Routes



Oregon mail routes were the first opened into the Rockies. Americans mainly used the Oregon Trail northwest of Salt Lake City, while the Hudson's Bay Company used a route through southern Canada to Montreal.



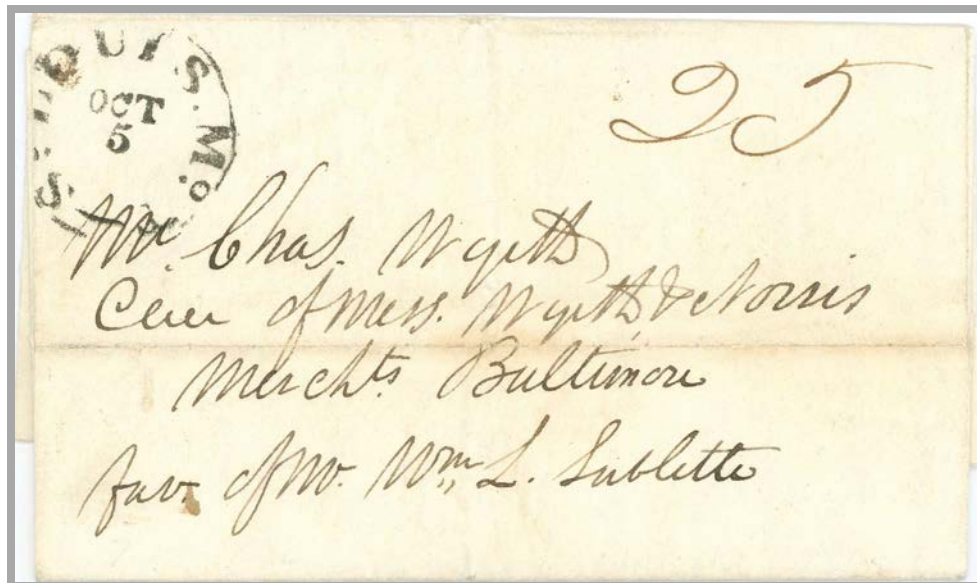
Utah mail routes connected Salt Lake City, Utah with Missouri and California, and followed the Central Emigration Trail via South Pass.



Santa Fe mail routes used the Santa Fe Trail to transport mail between New Mexico and Missouri, and connected with the southern route to California.



California mail routes used the Central Emigration Trail and the Spanish Trail via Los Angeles and Santa Fe.



Dated July 14, 1832 at the Pierre's Hole (Idaho) fur trade rendezvous - "Fav. of Mr. Wm L. Sublette"

Sublette's fur trade caravan left July 30 and arrived in St Louis on October 3 - rated 25¢ due

Earliest known letter from the Rocky Mountains

Oregon Pre-Contract Mail

Introduction: 1832 - 1851



The fur trade developed the early overland trails to Oregon. American trappers opened the Central Route via South Pass, and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) developed the Canoe Brigade route through southern Canada.

Pre-contract overland routes were superseded by the December 1848 steamship contract mail route between Astoria, Oregon and New York via Panama, and by the July 1851 overland contract mail route between Oregon and Salt Lake City.



“Fur Trade Rendezvous” by Alfred Jacob Miller



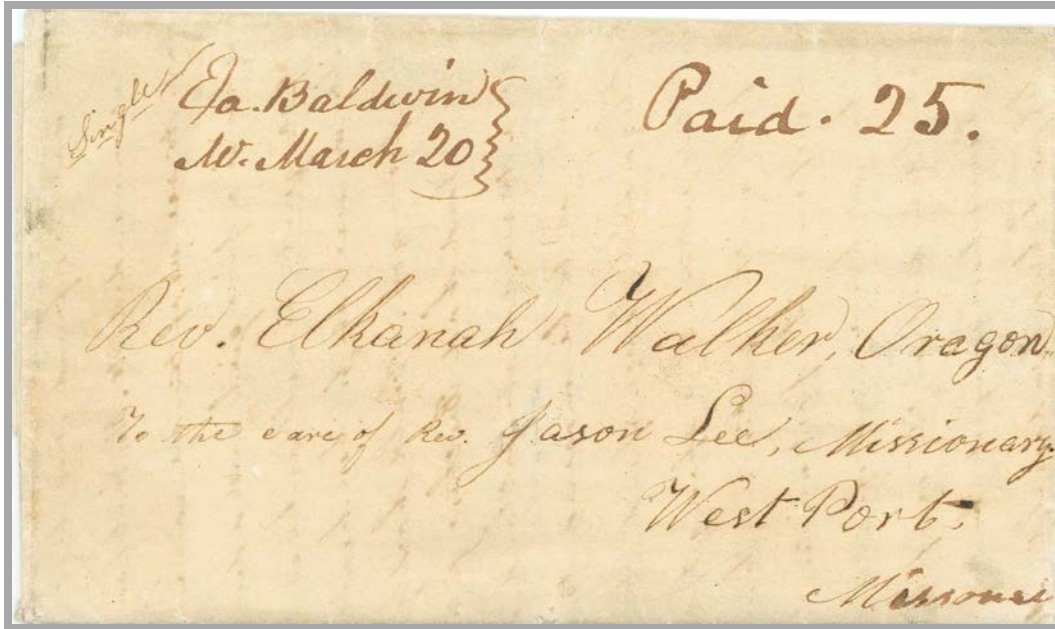
Dated June 21, 1834 at the Ham's Fork (Wyoming) Rendezvous - from Nathaniel Wyeth
Carried by Bonneville's fur trade caravan - left July 10 and arrived in St Louis in late August
Posted on September 1 - rated 25¢ due for over 400 miles to Massachusetts - forwarded twice

Oregon Pre-Contract Mail

Fur Trade: 1832 - 1840



When no post roads were available to a given destination, postmasters were authorized to use private parties to carry mail to that destination, and to compensate them with the amount of postage carried.



Addressed to Oregon on March 20, 1839 from Baldwin, Maine - prepaid 25¢ to Westport, Missouri

Entrusted by the Westport postmaster to the Munger/Griffin missionary party - left May 4

Arrived on July 5 at the 1839 Green River rendezvous with an American Fur Company caravan

Left rendezvous on July 10 with a westbound HBC fur brigade - received in Oregon on September 16

Only known westbound fur trade caravan letter



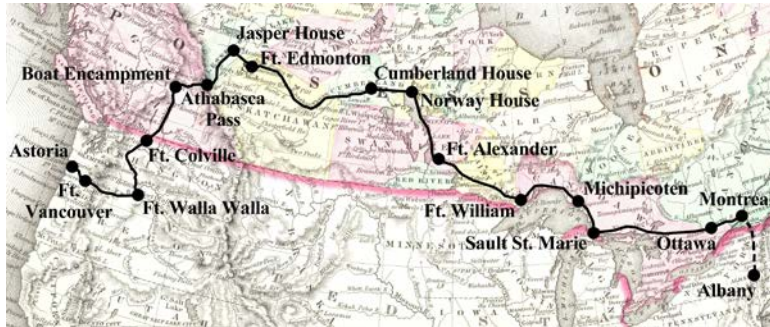
"Caravan en Route" by Alfred Jacob Miller

Oregon Pre-Contract Mail

HBC Canoe Brigade: 1833 - 1846



The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) developed their overland Canoe Brigade route to carry furs back to market and bring supplies to Oregon. They also carried some mail from or to Americans in Oregon. The June 15, 1846 Oregon Partition marked the end of this route for Oregon Territory mail.



Dated January 16, 1833 in Fort Vancouver, Oregon - endorsed "Fav. Of the Hon. Hudsons Bay Co."
Carried by HBC Canoe Brigade to Montreal, Canada - posted August 13 - prepaid 6p to the U.S. border
Marked "B" for steamboat to upstate New York - rated 18¾¢ due for 150-400 miles to Massachusetts

Earliest known letter from Oregon by HBC Canoe Brigade

Oregon Pre-Contract Mail

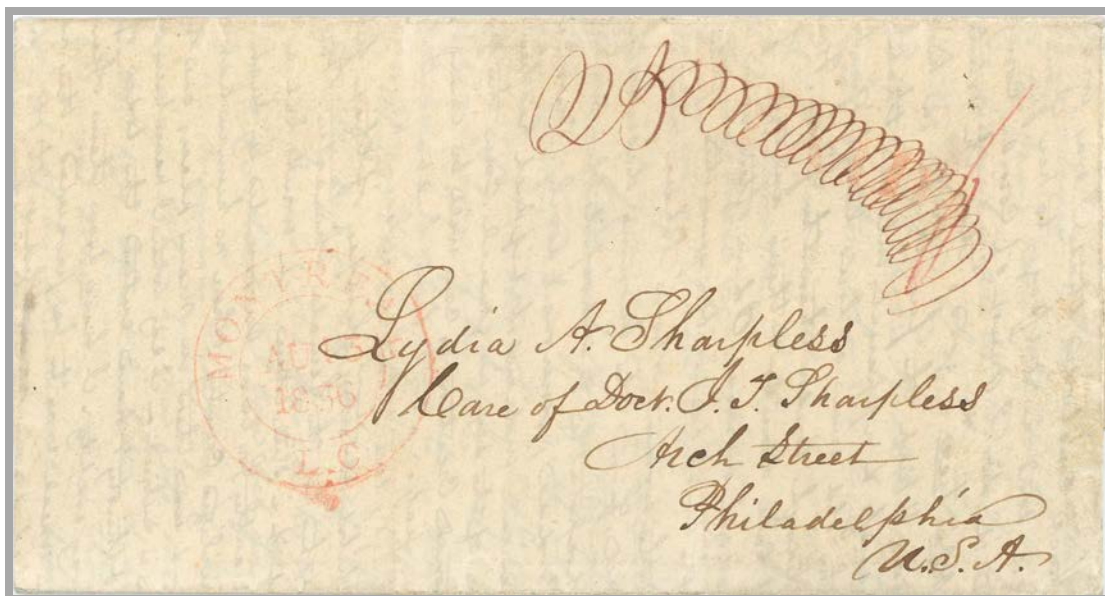
HBC Canoe Brigade: 1833 - 1846



Eastbound HBC Canoe Brigade trips left once per year from Fort Vancouver after the ice had cleared on the Columbia River, typically in February. They took about six months to reach the HBC headquarters at Lachine (Montreal), Canada.



“Shooting the Rapids” by Frances Anne Hopkins



Dated December 18, 1835 in Fort Vancouver, Oregon - from naturalist John Townsend

Carried by 1836 Canoe Brigade to Montreal - posted August 13, prepaid 6p to the U.S. border

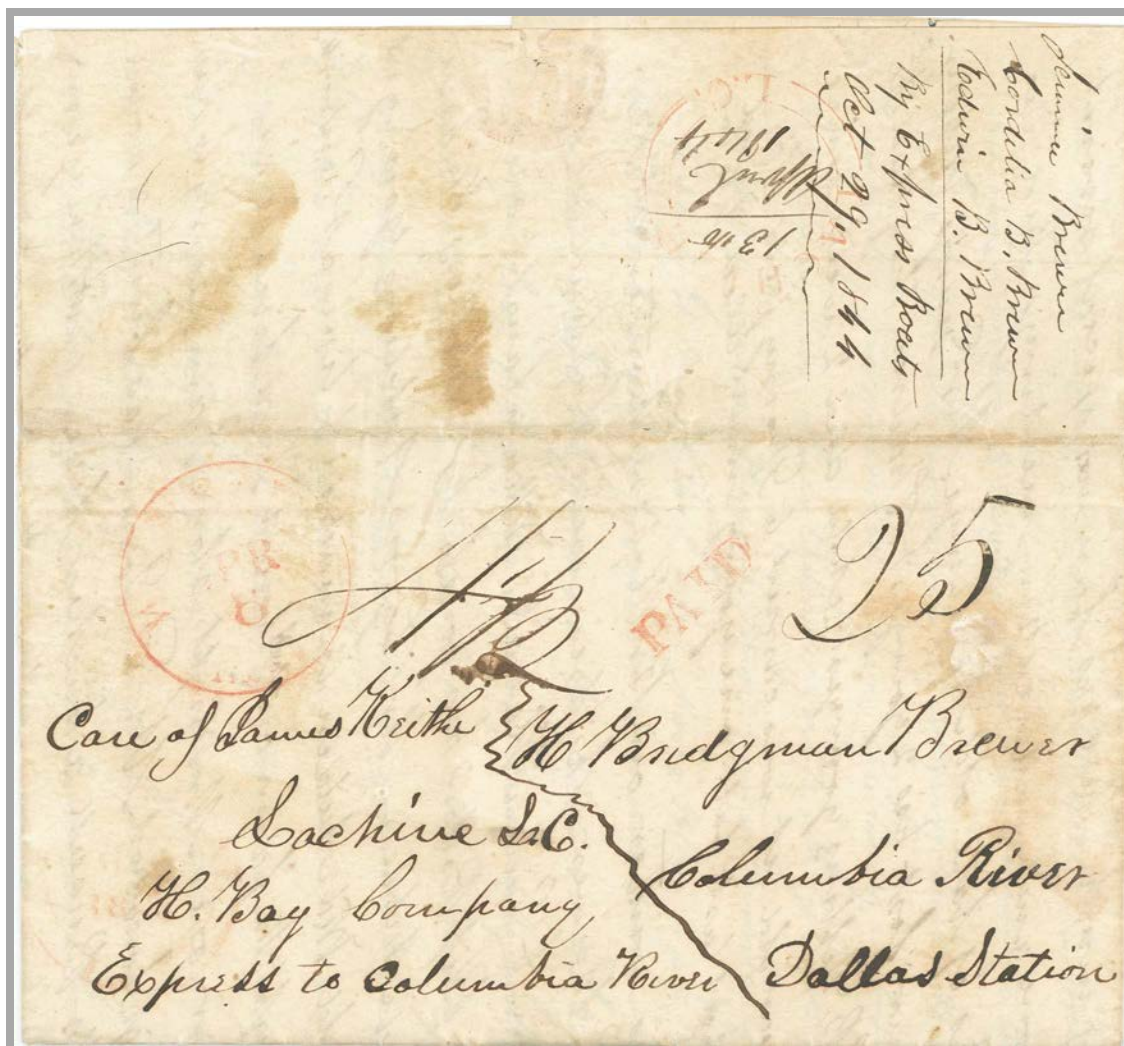
Entered U.S. mails in Vermont - rated 25¢ due for over 400 miles to Philadelphia

Oregon Pre-Contract Mail

HBC Canoe Brigade: 1833 - 1846



The yearly westbound HBC Canoe Brigade was scheduled to leave Lachine (Montreal) each spring and to arrive in Oregon six months later. Only parts of the journey were actually made in birch bark canoes.



Posted April 8, 1844 in Wilbraham, Massachusetts - prepaid 25¢ to the Canadian border

Endorsed to the care of the "H. Bay Company Express to Columbia River" at Montreal

Postmarked April 13 in Montreal with 4½p due - **carried by HBC Canoe Brigade to Oregon**

Arrived October 29, 1844 at Wascopam Mission "By Express Boat" per docket on back

Only known HBC Canoe Brigade letter to Oregon

Oregon Pre-Contract Mail

Overland Courier: 1840 - 1848



Settlers returning from Oregon became more numerous after 1840. They carried a few letters that were posted at one of the Missouri River border towns – Westport, Independence, Savannah or St. Joseph.



Dated February 23, 1842 at Waskopam Mission, Oregon - **carried overland to Missouri**

Initially endorsed to the HBC Canoe Brigade - entrusted instead to William Fowler

Posted December 7 in Westport, Missouri - rated 25¢ due for over 400 miles to Connecticut



"The Oregon Trail" by Albert Bierstadt

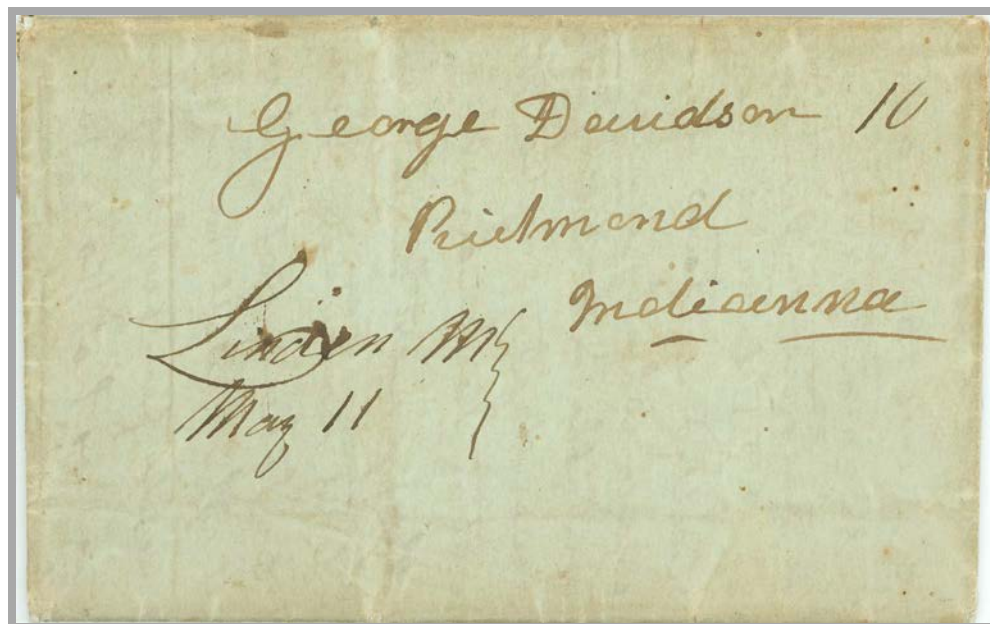
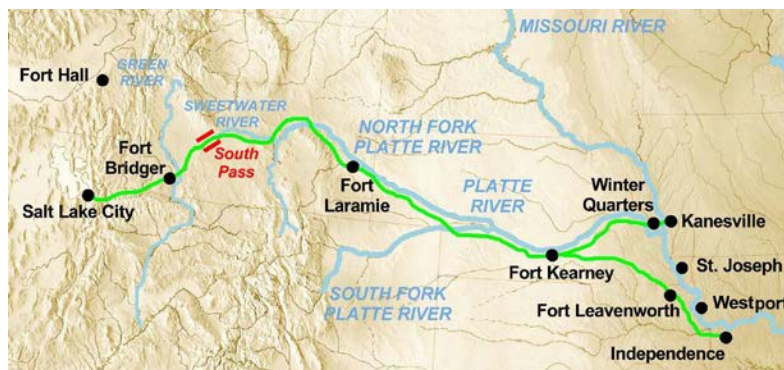
Utah-Missouri Pre-Contract Mail

Introduction: August 1847 - August 1850



Mormons established Salt Lake City in July 1847. They used the old fur trade and Central Emigration Trail to carry the mail.

Initially, they relied on irregular private couriers between Salt Lake City, Utah and Kanesville, Iowa. Starting in March 1849, an organized system of Mormon couriers serviced a special mail contract with the recently-established Salt Lake City post office.



Dated "Great Salt Lake City: January 9th 1848" - posted on May 11 in Linden, Missouri
"This mail is carried by some soldiers of the Mormon Battalion recently (arrived) from California"

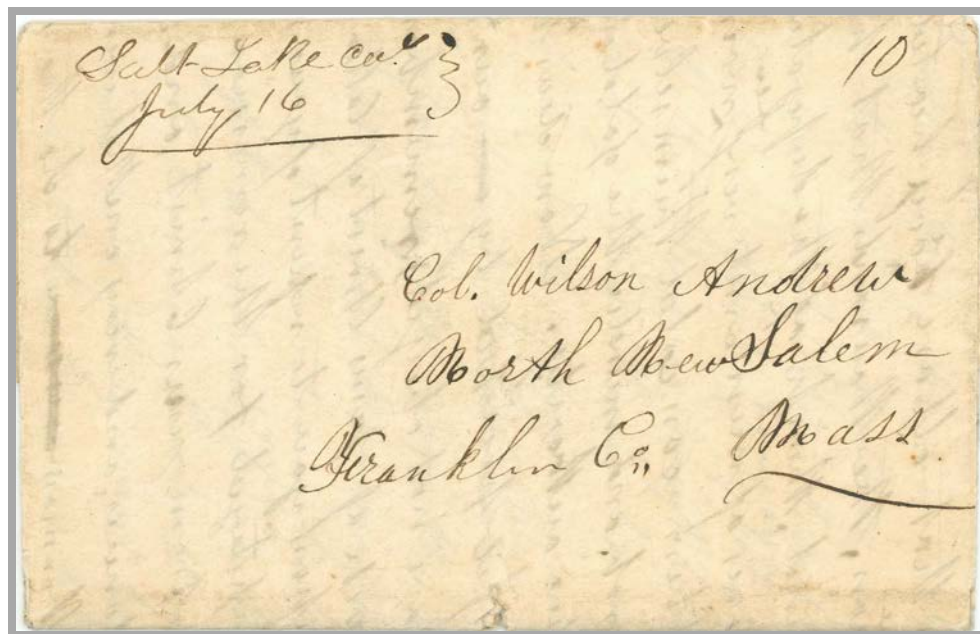
Earliest known letter from Salt Lake City in private hands

Utah-Missouri Pre-Contract Mail

Mormon Courier: March 1849 - August 1850



Mormon couriers carried both post office and private mail for 50¢ per letter. They also received the amount of postage on post office mail.



Postmarked July 16, 1849 in Salt Lake City - carried by Mormon courier Almon Babbitt to Kane, Iowa
Left July 27 and arrived September 3 - **earliest known letter from the Salt Lake post office**



Dated near South Pass (Wyoming) on July 27, 1849 - **collected enroute by Almon Babbitt**
This privately-carried letter was postmarked on September 6 at Kane, Iowa - rated 10¢ due

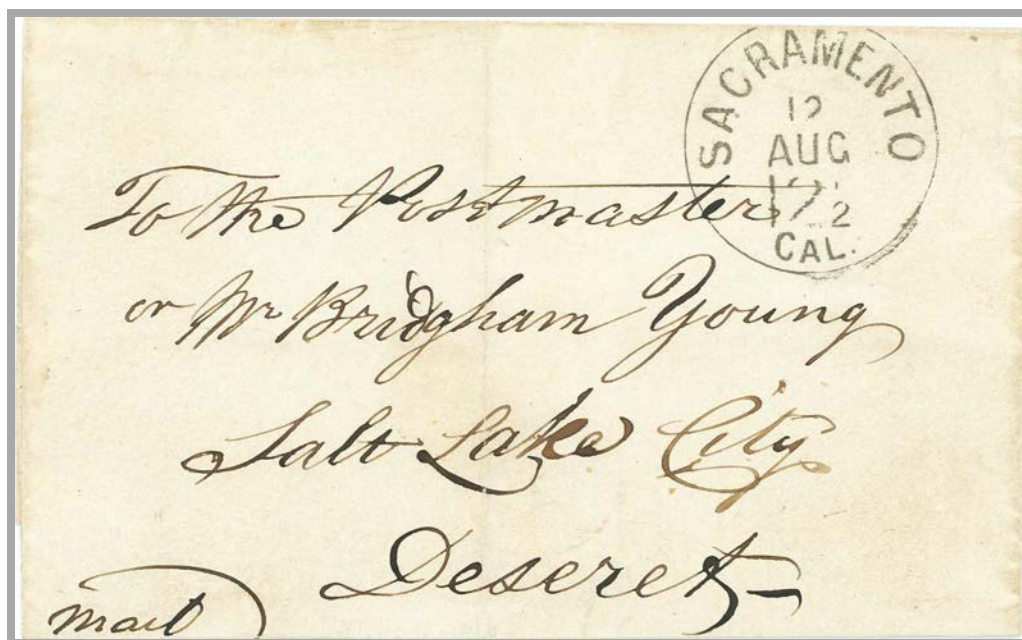
Utah-California Pre-Contract Mail

Mormon Courier: August 1847 - May 1851



Mormon couriers also carried mail on a few trips between Salt Lake City and California. After post offices were established in California in 1849, postmasters there could grant special trip contracts to these couriers for the amount of postage carried.

The May 1851 start of the Chorpenning contract service between Sacramento and Salt Lake City superseded these trip contracts.



Postmarked August 12, 1850 in Sacramento, California - addressed to Salt Lake City, Deseret

Sacramento integral post mark indicates 12½¢ due for August 1848 local West Coast rate

Entrusted by postmaster to Amasa Lyman party - left August 16 and arrived September 29

Only known letter carried by a Mormon courier to or from California

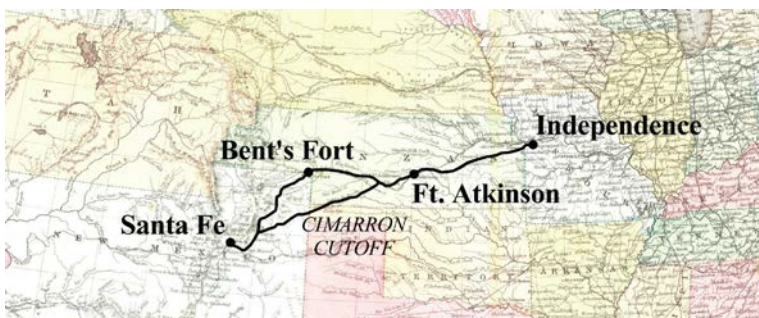
Santa Fe Pre-Contract Mail

Introduction: July 1846 - June 1850



In a major action during the Mexican-American War, Kearny's Army of the West left Missouri on June 26, 1846 and captured Santa Fe, New Mexico on August 18. His forces occupied Santa Fe and also moved south to Mexico and west to California.

Military and private couriers carried mail from these dispersed forces to Fort Leavenworth, near Independence, Missouri. They were superseded by the July 1850 contract mail route between Santa Fe and Independence.



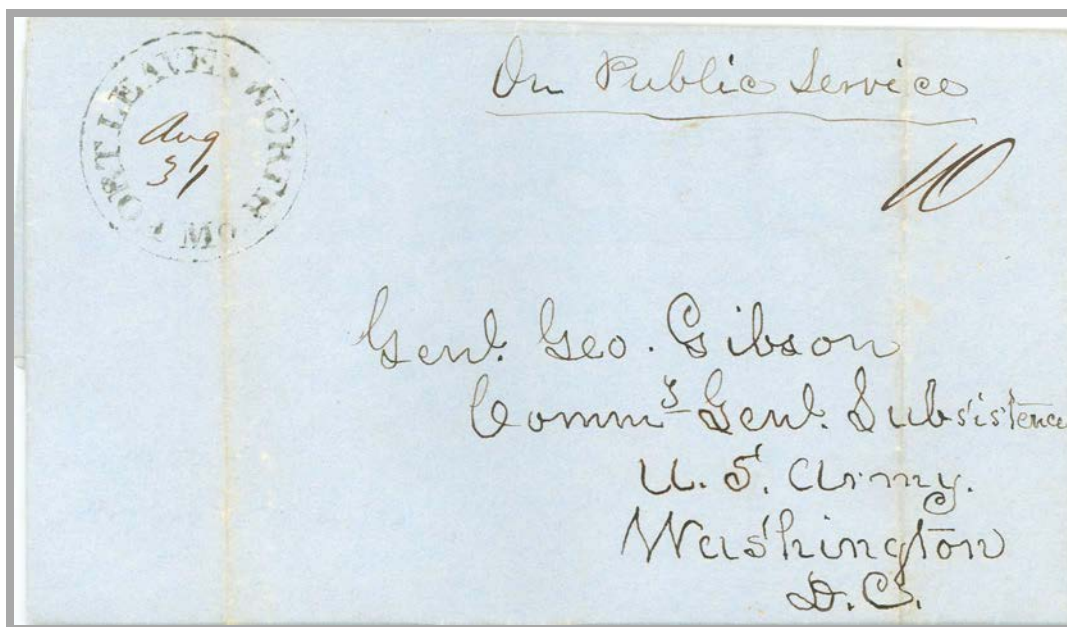
Postmarked "Santa Fee" on November 20, 1848 in red by military quartermaster **Military courier Mr. Newman** left on November 20 - bad weather forced him to return Left again on December 20 and arrived in Fort Leavenworth on February 1 - 10¢ due

Santa Fe Pre-Contract Mail

Military Courier: July 1846 - June 1850



The Army of the West passed through Bent's Fort in late July 1846 and reached Santa Fe three weeks later. Shortly after that, a third of the force left for Chihuahua, Mexico and another third (under Kearny) left for California.



Dated near Bent's Fort on July 31, 1846 - from Lt. Grier of Kearny's 1st Dragoons
Carried by military courier to Fort Leavenworth - postmarked there on August 31 - 10¢ due



"Western Troopers" by Melvin Warren

Santa Fe Pre-Contract Mail

Military Courier: July 1846 - June 1850



The Army of the West's 1st Missouri Mounted Volunteers defeated a much larger Mexican army at Chihuahua on February 28, 1847. They captured most of the enemy's supplies.



Datelined in Chihuahua, Mexico on March 6, 1847 - from Lt. Hinton of the Missouri Horse Guards

Carried by military courier to Santa Fe - then by private courier to Independence, Missouri

Postmarked in Independence on May 25 - 10¢ postage due to Ohio



Letter written on captured letterhead of the Governor of Chihuahua (67% size)

California Pre-Contract Mail

Introduction: July 1846 - March 1849



Emigration to California began to build in 1846 and exploded with the gold rush in 1849. Overland mails began after the U.S. gained control of California in July 1846, and virtually ended with the March 1849 start of the contract mail by steamships via Panama.

Two routes were used. The first followed the Central Route via South Pass and the second connected Los Angeles with Santa Fe via the Old Spanish Trail.



Dated May 18, 1848 in Monterey, CA - **carried by Chouteau via Los Angeles and Santa Fe**
Postmarked October 11 in St Louis, Missouri - 10¢ postage due to Massachusetts

California Pre-Contract Mail

Kearny Overland Mail: June-August 1847



General Kearny returned overland from California with a mail. He left Monterey on May 31, 1847 and arrived at Fort Leavenworth on August 22.



Dated April 30, 1847 in San Francisco - carried to Monterey in May 3 bi-weekly regional mail
Mailed August 23 on steamer *Amelia* to St Louis - postmarked there on August 26 with 10¢ due



Dated May 2, 1847 in San Francisco - postmarked at Fort Leavenworth on August 31 with 10¢ due
From sergeant in NY 1st Volunteer Regiment - carried in military dispatches to Fort Leavenworth

California Pre-Contract Mail

Stockton Overland Mail: June-October 1847



Commodore Stockton stepped down from his California command in January 1847 and returned overland via South Pass. His party left Monterey on June 20 and reached St Joseph, Missouri on October 26.



Dated March 24, 1847 on the USS *Congress* (Stockton's former flagship) in San Diego harbor
Missed March 26 sailing of USS *Savannah* from San Diego - sent to Stockton at Monterey, California
Postmarked October 30 in St. Joseph, Missouri with 10¢ due - **only letter known from this mail**



"USS *Congress*" by Tom Freeman