

US Western Mail Routes – 1848 to 1865

-The purpose of this exhibit is to provide an overview of some of the most commonly used and better-known Western mail routes from 1848 to 1865. There are numerous routes and methods used during this period, several very minor with many variations. Many of those were either short lived and/or carried very little mail and are not the subject of this exhibit.

-The focus of this exhibit is the major routes which carried the great bulk of mail to the West, with particular emphasis on California mails, both incoming and outgoing. Some of these routes went by ocean mail via Panama or other overland routes in Mexico and Central America. Others were overland from terminuses in the middle part of the country, such as St. Joseph and the Kansas City area. Some of these pathways became major arteries for Western expansion such as the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. They crossed the vast open tracts of country across the American West which were followed by literally tens of thousands of immigrants. The covers/letters shown represent those sent on these various routes.

Exhibit Outline

- I. Early Ocean & Overland Routes 1848-1851
- II.. Ocean Mail Routes 1851-1865
- III. Overland Routes 1851-1865

**Featured items are edged in red.*



Letter carried on the Steamer Sierra Nevada "Via Nicaragua Ahead of the Mails". Sent in August 1854 from San Francisco and arrived at New York on October 5 via "Ship".

Synopsis

US Western Mail Routes – 1848-1865

Purpose: The purpose of this single frame exhibit is to provide an overview of some of the most commonly used and better-known Western mail routes in the mid-19th century. It is not meant to be a review of the numerous minor and lesser-known routes employed across the West, but focuses on the major ocean and overland paths used to transport mail from 1848-1865.

Background: Since the early times when Americans and other Europeans began settling in California and Oregon mail routes developed. In 1821 there were only about twenty foreigners living in what is now California. After Mexican independence (1821) trade prohibitions were lifted for foreign trade and the area began to draw individuals to both trade and settle. In 1848 the United States had claimed California at the end of the Mexican War. There were soon several thousand emigrants from both Europe and the US residing in the newly acquired region, and the discovery of gold in 1848 set off the famous California gold rush. This resulted in 300,000+ individuals flooding into what became the State of California in 1850. This quickly created a huge demand for reliable mail service which often was carried by private express companies. Several mail contract routes developed over the next fifteen years..

Treatment & Importance: Exhibit contains postal history items representing several of the best-known mail routes. It includes transcontinental and ocean route covers carried by various companies. The Federal Government out of necessity contracted with various companies to complete this enormous task. This was a critical period of US and postal history, resulting in the vast migration to the West Coast. Many Western related postal items are greatly desired by collectors, and along with the enclosed letters that record the trials and hopes of individuals that headed West. The usages in this exhibit show include stampless covers, territorial mail, express companies, free franks, circular rates, etc. sent via transcontinental and overland routes.

Philatelic/Subject Knowledge: I have collected Western related mail for over 40 years and have studied 19th century US history for all my adult life. I have utilized many sources including the Kansas Historical Society, University of Kansas collections, California Historical Society and the Huntington Library. I have an extensive personal collection of historical documents, including postal history, that contain valuable information not noted in any other source. I have developed an extensive library of books and other printed materials related to postal history, including rates, routes, etc...

Rarity & Condition: In light of the condition of 19th correspondence that traveled over extreme distance and rugged conditions I have attempted to obtain the best examples available. Western postal items are very desirable and can be very elusive to obtain, often demanding significant monetary outlay. I have been fortunate to obtain many scarce items that relate to the fascinating history of the Western US.

Highlights: Several covers in my exhibit are worth noting due to their unusual nature or use. I have outlined these in red and include a unique via Nicaragua Congressional Free Frank, Via Tehuantepec covers, a San Francisco Newsletter, Colorado Express cover, Camp Shaemahmoo W.T. (only 3 known) and Via Las Angelas stagecoach cover and other Butterfield Route items.