



The Pony Express: Its story, stamps and covers

By Arden Simoni

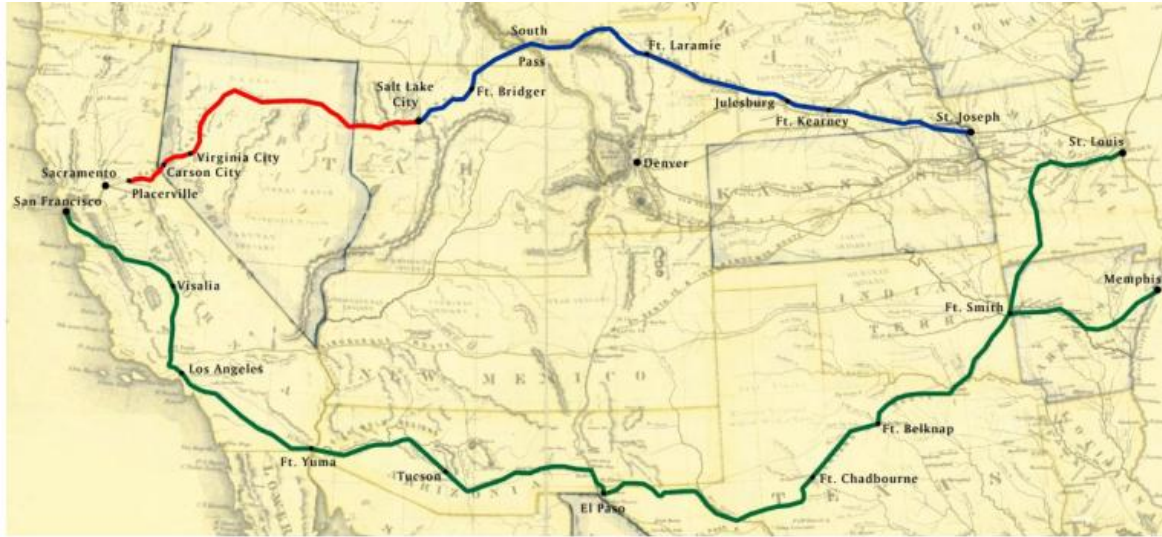
This is a detailed historical map of the Santa Fe Trail, showing the route from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Fort Union, New Mexico, and then to Santa Fe, New Mexico. The map includes numerous place names, distances, and illustrations of various scenes along the trail, such as stagecoach travel, military movements, and local settlements. A red line marks the primary route, with branches to other destinations like El Paso and San Antonio. The map is framed by a decorative border with small illustrations of the trail's history.



Virginia City Pony Express: August 11, 1862 - March 2, 1865



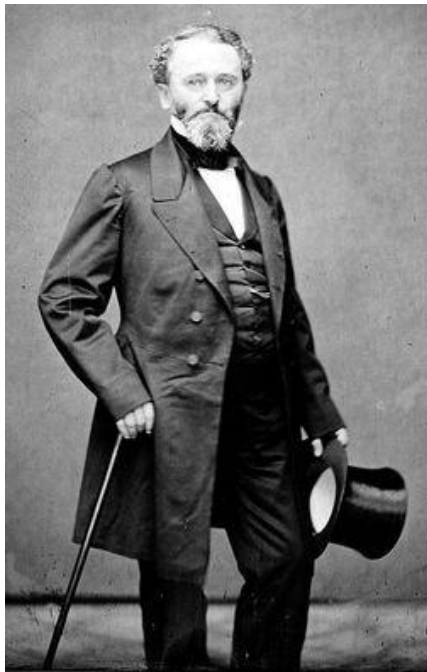
Western transportation routes existing before the Pony Express



Map showing the Southern Route (in green) and the combined Central Route (Eastern Division in blue and Western Division in red)

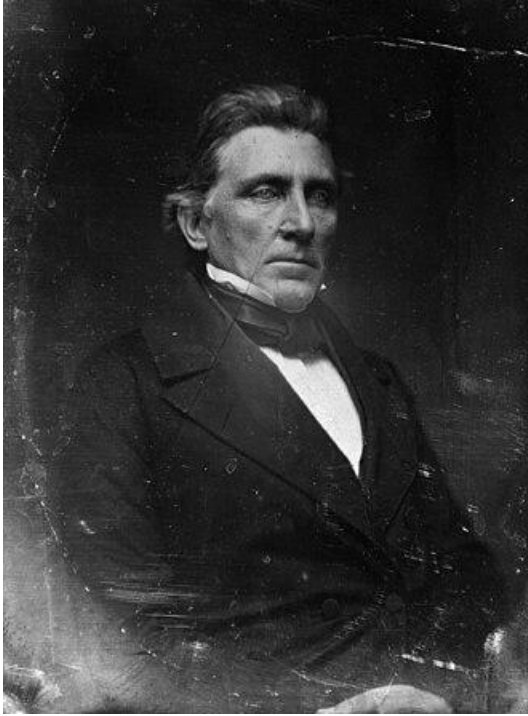
- December 17, 1859, Postmaster General ordered that transcontinental mails were to be carried by overland mail coaches, rather than by steamship via Panama.
- Southern Route, four-horse carriages twice-weekly \$600K contract to John Butterfield
- Central Route, St Joseph to Salt Lake City, covered wagons monthly \$23K contract to Hiram Kimball, then to S.B. Mills, then to J.M. Hockaday (weekly service)
- Central Route, Salt Lake City to Placerville, semi-monthly service, \$65K, to George Chorpensing

Pony Express Founder: William Hepburn Russell, Sr



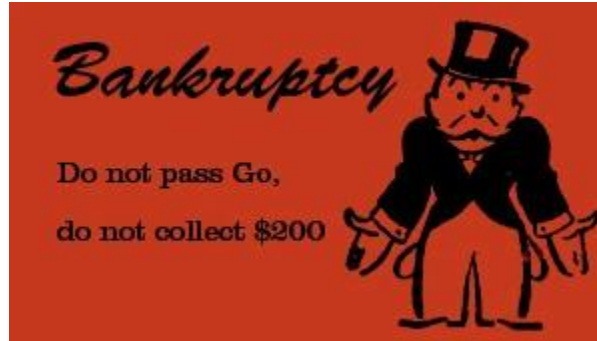
- Russel was envious of Butterfield's operation of the Southern Route (Overland Mail Company), since if the government subsidy could cover costs of the postal contract, receipts for carrying passengers, gold, packages over the same line were pure profit (Butterfield's operation ultimately failed and was taken over by Wells Fargo)
- Russell's firm, partnership between himself, Alexander Majors and William Waddell, successfully ran a freight company from Leavenworth, Kansas, to military outposts from New Mexico to Oregon
- Russell's luck ran out in providing supplies to subdue the 1857 Mormon Uprising, but lost stock and equipment to the Mormons resulting in debt
- Russell, Majors and Waddell's firm evolved into the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (COC&PPEC) that won the mail contract for delivery between Salt Lake City and Placerville on May 11, 1860.
- The COC&PPEC aspired to win a higher postal subsidy by taking over the entire Central Route, from St Joseph to California

Senator William Gwin, California, advocated for the Pony Express



- Along with John Fremont, among California's first US senators, in office January 13, 1857 – March 3, 1861
- Senator was very anxious to establish a line of communication between California and the States east of the Rocky Mountains, which would be more direct than that known as the Butterfield route.
- Senator Gwin convinced Russell to gamble on starting the Pony Express, who hoped to win the overland postal contract in summer, 1860.
- It was imperative to start the Pony Express service ASAP to convince skeptical congressmen of its feasibility (many dubious of winter delivery over mountains)
- With only two months of preparation, the Pony Express commenced April 3, 1860

Pony Express Bankruptcy and change of ownership



- Russell, Major and Waddells gamble on the Pony Express failed: Skeptics in Congress not convinced of reliable winter transport. A temporary ocean transport contract for the post office was instead awarded to Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1860..
- Initial Pony Express rate was \$5/½ oz, equivalent to \$190 in 2025 dollars!
- Russell shadily expropriated money from a trust for Indian reservations to rescue the Pony Express, but was later indicted (never pursued due to Civil War)
- “Stagecoach King” Ben Holladay, as the major creditor, took control of the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express in January, 1861, after its bankruptcy

Wells Fargo enters picture



WELLS FARGO

- Central Overland Company awarded postal contract for Central Route, and jointly with the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express managed the Pony Express on March 16, 1861. Wells Fargo acts as agent.
- June 16, 1860 Pacific Telegraph Act enacted, calling for a government subsidy of \$40,000 per year, over ten years, for the building and operation of a telegraph line across the center of the continent
- July 1, 1861 the Pony Express became a partially subsidized government mandated postal service, stipulated to end after the completion of the overland telegraph
- October 24, 1861, the overland telegraph completed, and two days later the continental Pony Express terminated.
- Wells Fargo operates the San Francisco to Virginia City Pony Express, August 11, 1862 - March 2, 1865

PONY EXPRESS FACTS



- Pony Express used over 190 stations, distanced 5-20 miles apart
- Regular time to transverse St Joseph to Sacramento: 10 days
- Quickest Run: Carrying President Lincoln's Inaugural Address, the riders traveled the route in 7 days and 17 hours.
- Route maintained, even winter, over the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada
- Route deviated at times, Athilon instead St Joseph due to Confederate Missouri incursion, Folsom or Placerville instead of Sacramento at times for western pony terminus
- The Paiute War, or Pyramid Lake War, disrupted Pony Express service.
July 21, 1860, Pony Express mail stolen by Indians



PONY EXPRESS

St. JOSEPH, MISSOURI to CALIFORNIA
in 10 days or less.

➡ **WANTED** ⬅

YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS
not over eighteen. Must be expert
riders, willing to risk death daily.

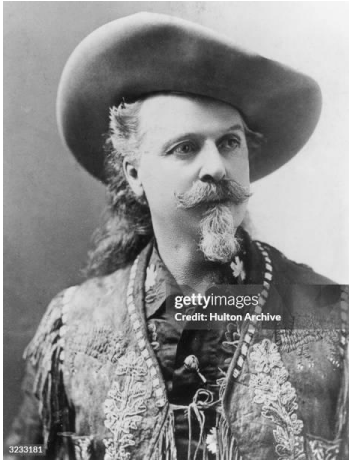
Orphans preferred.
Wages \$25 per week.

APPLY, **PONY EXPRESS STABLES**
St. JOSEPH, MISSOURI

Pony Express Riders

- About 200 riders were hired
- The salary, at \$25/week, compared favorably to the average salary of \$1/day
- Thanks to religious background of co-founder Alexander Majors, riders had to swear on a Bible not to curse, fight or abuse their animals.
- Horse and rider should perish before the “mochila” with letters did
- 6 pony express riders died on the job, compared to 16 stock hands at relief stations who were more prone to Indian attacks.

Famous Pony Express Riders



- Buffalo Bill Cody claimed he was a pony express rider at age 15 in the Wyoming area
- Claimed to have rode 322 miles non-stop in 21 hours 40 min due to relief rider being killed



- “Little Joe” Cartwright rode as a Pony Express rider during the Paiute War during two-part Bonanza episodes
- “Riding the Wind” can be accessed on YouTube (Season 7 episodes 17-18)

Summary of the Transcontinental Pony Express Operational Phases and Rate Periods

Phase	Operation	Rate Periods
I.	Operated by the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company under private control	<p>Rate Period 1. \$5 per half ounce</p> <p>Eastbound - April 3 through August 14, 1860 Westbound - April 3 through July 30, 1860</p> <p>Rate Period 2. \$2.50 per quarter ounce</p> <p>Eastbound - in effect August 15, 1860 through April 14, 1861 Westbound – in effect July 31, 1860 through March 31, 1861</p>
II.	Interim Phase: a joint private operation of the Overland Mail Company and the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company with Wells Fargo acting as agent	<p>Rate Period 3. \$2 per half ounce</p> <p>Eastbound - in effect April 15 through June 30, 1861 Westbound – in effect April 1 through June 30, 1861</p>
III.	A government mandated postal service operated in conjunction with Wells Fargo private service between San Francisco and Placerville	<p>Rate Period 4. \$1 per half ounce*</p> <p>Eastbound – in effect July 1 through October 26, 1861 Westbound – in effect July 1 through October 31, 1861</p> <p><i>* not including Wells Fargo fee for service between San Francisco and Placerville.</i></p>

Stamps used on Pony Express letters



Scott 143L1-143L2, Phase 3, Wells Fargo as agent, 3rd rate period, \$2/ ½ oz. West to East service only. Publisher Britton and Company, San Francisco



Scott 143L3-143L5, Phase 3, 4th rate period, \$1/ ½ oz. West to East service only. Wells Fargo now under contract with the US Post Office, and so stamps are technically officially issued authorized by Congress



Scott 143L6, “Garter” Phase 3, 4th rate period, \$1/ ½ oz. East to West service only. Publisher George Nesbitt, New York. Also, technically issue officially authorized by Congress.



Scott 143L7-143L8, Private express serviced by Wells Fargo, San Francisco to Virginia City, August 11, 1862 - March 2, 1865. 10c and then 25c for ½ oz

Scott U34, U32, 26, 35. The Post Office enjoyed a legal monopoly on mail service, but private carriers, though breaking the law, were tolerated. Wells Fargo, however, to keep from running afoul of the post office, bought government stamped envelopes (i.e. U33, U34), to which it also affixed its own stamps. Post office rate was 3c for less than 3000 miles distance, and 10c for over that. Before Wells Fargo was the Pony Express agent, private datestamps were affixed on letters, with postage stamps enabling transfer to the post office system



Pony Express Covers



Only surviving cover carried on the first westbound trip that departed from St. Joseph, Missouri on April 3, 1860 and arrived in San Francisco on April 14

- About 35,000 letters were delivered on the transcontinental Pony Express
- About 250 of these survive
- In the first phase of the Pony Express, run by founders Russell, Majors and Waddell, about 20 covers survive
- An estimated 15,000 letters were delivered on the San Francisco to Virginia City Pony Express

“Stolen Pony” Express Mail Cover, 1860



- Paiute Indians overtook Pony Express rider and scalped him, but the pony escaped with the mail mochila. Letter later recovered in the plains, and delivered 1862 after Pony Express dissolved.
- The most expensive US cover, costing \$1 million
- On loan from William Gross to the National Postal Museum

Westbound, December 1860



- Departed St Joseph December 6, 1860, arrived San Francisco December 21, 1860 (winter delay). First phase (before Wells Fargo became agent), second rate period (\$5 for two quarter onces)
- Free frank, signed by sender, Congressman Isaac Stevens, first Governor of Washington Territory and future Union general
- Hammer price \$20,000 + 18% commission April 30, 2024 H. R. Harmer



International, Westbound Cover 1861



- One of 6 Pony Express letters to a foreign destination. Scott 143L3
- Hammer price \$750,000 + 18% commission, April 30, 2024 H. R. Harmer

Westbound Cover, 1861



- One of 4 covers with “Garter” stamp (143L3)
- Just missed last pony horse from St Joseph before service terminated, and was delivered by stagecoach
- Hammer price \$47,500 + 18% commission, June 21, 2023, H. R. Harmer