

The Construction of the Butterfield Overland Mail Company Line in California

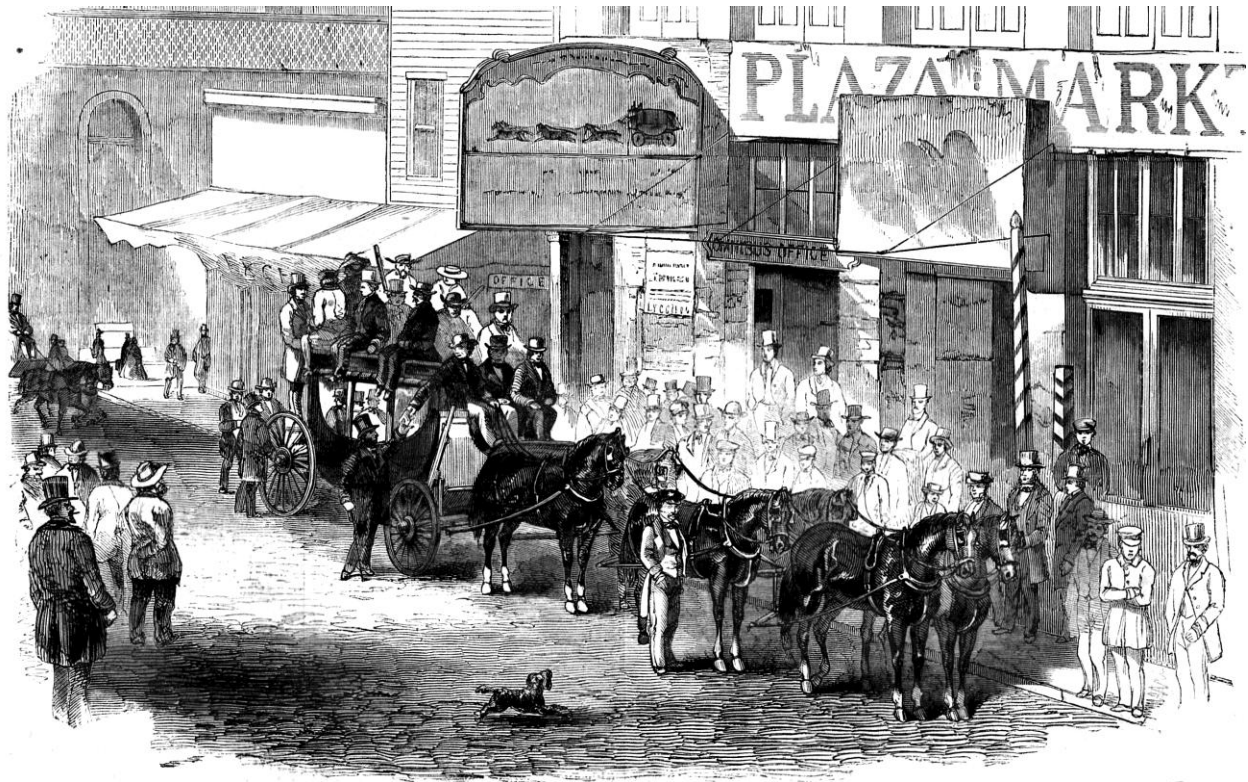
by

©2013 Gerald T. Ahnert
1027 Westmoreland Ave.
Syracuse, NY 13210

Email: nobottomgulch@yahoo.com

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THE OVERLAND MAIL STARTING FROM SAN FRANCISCO FOR THE EAST.—[FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.]

At San Francisco, California, the western terminus of the trail, a Butterfield stagecoach begins its journey. From Harper's Weekly, December 11, 1858

John Butterfield's successful bid for the Overland Mail Company Contract

Contract No. 12,578 for \$600,000 per annum for six years for a semi-weekly service was signed on September 16, 1857, by John Butterfield, his partners, and Postmaster General Aaron V. Brown. Butterfield met the terms for building the trail and started service from San Francisco one year later on September 14, 1858, exactly ten minutes past midnight.¹ John Butterfield was the president of this company officially designated as the "Overland Mail Company." The Postmaster General stated his reason for choosing John Butterfield's bid:²

...—a route which no contractor had bid for, but one which, in the judgment of A. V. Brown, of Memphis, "*had more advantages than disadvantages than any other.*" And, as John Butterfield & Co. had, in the opinion of Brown, "greater ability, qualification and experience than anybody else to carry out a mail service," John Butterfield & Co. was selected and preferred...

¹Bailey, G., *The Senate of the United States, Second Session, Thirty-fifth Congress, 1858-1859*, Report of the Postmaster General, Appendix, Great Overland Mail, Washington, October 18, 1858, published in Washington (D. C.) by William A. Harris Printer, 1859,. This report contains Bailey's inspection of the line and tables of times arrived at significant points along the trail, p739

² *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 2, 1858, IMMIGRANT ROADS AND MAIL ROUTES ACROSS THE CONTINENT

San Antonio to San Diego Mail Line

Before the Overland Mail Company (OMC) started its service on the Southern Trail, there was another pioneering stage line of note. The San Antonio to San Diego Mail Line (SA&SD) was the first attempt to connect the East to the West with a mail carrying stage line. Most of the travel was accomplished by stage, but part was on mule back—thus the nickname of “Jackass Mail.” The trail for the line didn’t exactly connect the East to the West, as it started in central-south Texas. Mail was brought to San Antonio from the South and only delivered the mail to San Diego in Southern California. This left out key cities such as San Francisco. They also only ran twice a month. The line used the old Emigrant Trail and established very few stations. As an example, they only built one crude brush station in Arizona at Maricopa Wells. The only two other places in Arizona they used as possible stations were at Tucson and what was known as “Peterman’s” about forty miles east of the Colorado River.³ Although Butterfield’s Overland Mail Company did travel on some of the tracks made by the SA&SD line, the OMC made significant improvements by building new sections to shorten the trail.⁴ In Arizona alone, the OMC built twenty-three new stations.

The SA&SD started its service from July 24, 1857 to December 1858. As the OMC started its service in mid-September 1858, their services overlapped by about three months. Correspondent Farwell noted in late October 1858⁵ he was at Butterfield’s San Simon Stage Station in Arizona: “Opening from this is San Simon’s Valley. Here is a new station, just established, where we changed horses, and here we met the San Diego mail.” The SA&SD benefited for three months by this new section constructed by Butterfield.

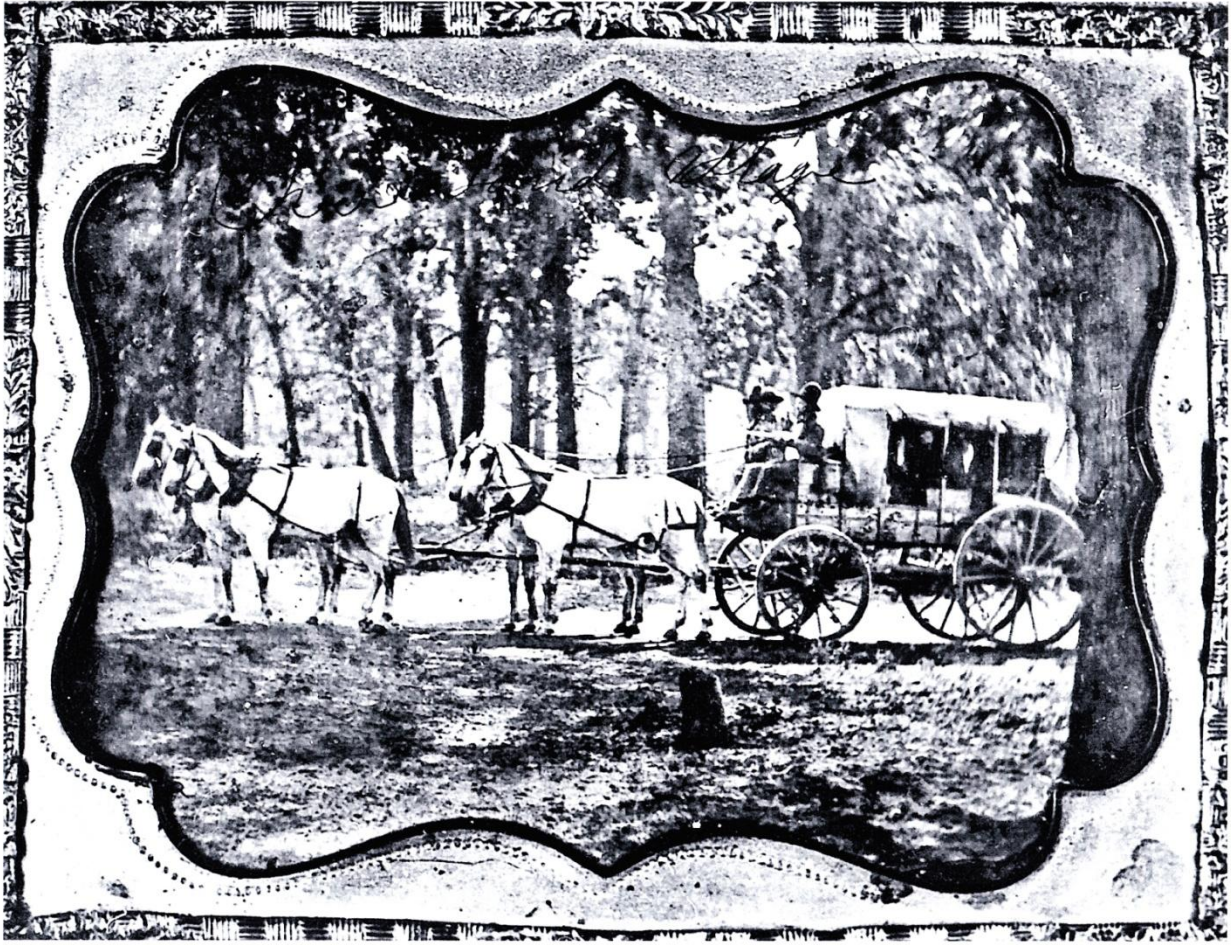
The OMC’s route was better positioned to receive the mail from the northeastern and southeastern United States to be transported to San Francisco, as the route had two starting points. One was at St. Louis, Missouri, and the other at Memphis, Tennessee. These trails met at Fort Smith, Arkansas. The OMC route served more states, territories, cities, and towns than the SA&SD, since their route was 2,860 miles. The SA&SD route was 1,475 miles. Because the OMC route started at St. Louis, it truly connected the East to the West, as in 1858 St. Louis was considered to be the jump-off point for the western frontier.

Historians often debate about who gets the honors for the first stage line to connect the East to the West. From many primary source references it does appear that it can be said that the Overland Mail Company was the first *successful* company to accomplish this important task.

³*The Senate of the United States, Second Session, Thirty-fifth Congress, 1858-1859*, Report of the Postmaster General, SAN ANTONIO AND SAN DIEGO MAIL ROUTE, Washington, October 18, 1858, published in Washington (D. C detailing his trip during November 1857, p744.) by William A. Harris Printer, 1859,. The report of Superintendent for the *San Antonio and San Diego Route* detailing his trip during November 1857, p744

⁴Ahnert, Gerald T., The Construction of the Butterfield Trail in Eastern Arizona, *Desert Tracks, Publication of the Southern Trails Chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association*, June 2013, , p18

⁵*Daily Alta California*, November 16, 1858, J. M. Farwell



Butterfield stage wagon near the Texas-New Mexico border, and Cottonwood Stage Station, early 1861. The driver was David McLaughlin. It is from a copy of a daguerreotype and reproduced with permission from ©Nita Stewart Haley Memorial Library, Midland, Texas.⁶

The Overland Mail Company and its involvement with Wells, Fargo & Co. and American Express Co.

Seven of the eleven owners of the OMC that signed the contract were also on the board of directors of two famous *express* companies. John Butterfield was one of the founding members of the American Express Co. in 1850.⁷ Three of the OMC contract signers were on the board of directors of both Wells, Fargo & Co. and American Express Co. William G. Fargo was a director of the OMC—Henry Wells was not. To understand the intertwined relationship of these companies, and their influence on each other, an understanding of the word “express” in this context is needed. According to *The World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary* the following is given for its definition: “A quick or direct means of sending things. Packages and money can be sent by express in trains or airplanes [stagecoaches].”

⁶ The Nita Stewart Haley Memorial Library, Midland, Texas, owns the copyright to this historic photo and it cannot be copied and used without their permission.

⁷ *Syracuse Daily Standard*, April 5, 1850

Both Wells, Fargo & Co. and the American Express Company furnished financial support to the OMC. Their investment increased over time. Wells, Fargo & Co. was the dominant financier,⁸ as its wealth increased rapidly. In the beginning their influence on the OMC, as well as on other transportation lines, amounted to the stage lines carrying their parcels. Ken Wheeling, one of the leading experts on wagons, carriages, and stagecoaches stated the following:⁹

Although Wells, Fargo & Company shared board members with several stagecoach companies, it was not primarily in the stagecoach business. It was, first and foremost, an express company, concerned with expedition the shipment of almost anything between a paying sender and an intended addressee. At times, it found it necessary to subsidize this or that stage company in order that its own shipping business might not suffer from want of a carrier.

An article in the *Daily Alta California*, October 16, 1858, thanked Wells, Fargo & Co. for shipping Atlantic newspapers *express* to them via the Overland Mail Company.

After the formation of Wells, Fargo & Co. in 1852 they became involved in banking and the transporting of valuable shipments, such as gold from the California mines to banks in San Francisco. They would often use their own wagons and guards. It was forbidden to ship any valuables on the Overland Mail Company's stages, as shown in John Butterfield's order no. 8 in the company's "Special Instructions" issued to all employees: "No money, jewelry, bank notes, or valuables of any nature, will be allowed to be carried under any circumstances whatever." For this reason, no Overland Mail Company stage on the Southern Trail was ever held up by outlaws.

Many of the pioneering stage companies on the central trail, as well as the Overland Mail Company on the Southern Trail, suffered some financial hardships. Wells, Fargo & Co. increased its investments in these troubled companies. Even before the OMC was moved to the central trail, after March 1861 because of the impending Civil War, John Butterfield was voted out of office (April 1860) for spending what was perceived as too much on the efficient running of the line. Wells, Fargo & Co. was threatening to foreclose because their loans and investments were not showing a profit. (Although no longer president, Butterfield remained a member of the board

William Dinsmore, as president, took over the reins of the company. By 1866 Wells, Fargo & Co. achieved the "Grand Consolidation" of all the independent companies on the central route—including the OMC.

Wells, Fargo & Co. did not operate on the Southern Trail during the OMC's service during September 1858 to its abandonment there in March 1861.

⁸ *Letter from the Secretary of State*, 46th Congress, 3d Session, Ex. Doc. No. 24, Route 12578, California—St. Louis, Mo., to San Francisco, Cal. Overland Mail Company contractor in account with the United States. This record shows Wells, Fargo & Company's financial involvement (other than personal loans) starting June 29, 1860.

⁹ Kenneth Wheeling is Associate Editor of *The Carriage Journal* and director of the "Carriage Association of America." Quote is from his article in the *Overland Journal* "The Abbot, Downing & Company's Famous "30," Vol. 23, No. 4 (2005-2006), p142. The *Overland Journal* is a publication of the Oregon-California Trails Association

Wells, Fargo & Co. operates for the first time in California as a Stage Line

In Ken Wheeling's well documented article "The Abbot-Downing and Company's Famous "30"" for the *Overland Journal*, he writes that Wells, Fargo & Co. still had not achieved the total running of a stage line with their logo on the side of a stagecoach until 1867:

In the spring of 1867, the stagecoaches of the old Pioneer Stage Company were re-decorated and re-lettered. For the first time, stagecoaches in California bore the name of Wells, Fargo & Company on their transom rails.

On April 20, 1867, Wells, Fargo & Co. placed its first order with Abbot-Downing & Company for thirty Concord stagecoaches. They did not arrive at Salt Lake City, Utah, to be put into use on the central line, until June 20, 1868. For the first time the name of "Wells, Fargo & Company" appeared on the transom rails of new stagecoaches acquired by the company. The "Grand Consolidation" of the stage lines on the central route by Wells, Fargo & Co. would be short lived with the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869. Only two stagecoaches, and the gear of a third, survive from the original thirty ordered by Wells, Fargo & Co. The State of California owns the renovated No. 251 which is on loan to the Wells Fargo History Museum, Old Town, San Diego, CA.¹⁰

Marquis L. Kenyon—Butterfield's Chief Architect for building the Overland Mail Company Line in California

There are many primary source references to support Marquis L. Kenyon's¹¹ involvement building the infrastructure of the line. He was also one of the eleven owners of the OMC. He was not on the board of directors for Wells, Fargo & Co. or American Express and was directly under the supervision of John Butterfield.

Many of the employees of the OMC had Upstate New York connections. John Butterfield's home was in Utica, NY, but the head offices for the company were in New York City. Along with Butterfield, Kenyon had many years of experience in the staging business. Before his employment with the OMC, he was the proprietor of an extensive line of stages at Rome, NY, where he had resided since 1839.¹²

Kenyon left New York by steamer and traveled to San Francisco in November 1857. With him were John Butterfield Jr.,¹³ F. De Ruyter and S. K. Nellis.¹⁴ De Ruyter was on the construction crew that built Dragoon Springs Stage Station in Arizona. They had just left to go to

¹⁰ Ken Wheeling, *Overland Journal*, The Abbot-Downing and Company's Famous "30," Vol. 23, No. 4 (2005-2006), p142

¹¹ *Marquis L. Kenyon* is the correct spelling for his name. There were various ways that newspapers misspelled his name. The most popular was "M. L. Kinyon." The 1860 Federal Census incorrectly spelled his name as "Marcus L. Kinyon." The Congressional record copies of the contract also misspell his name as "M. L. Kinyon."

¹² *Biographical Sketches of the State Officers and Members of the Legislature of the State of New York, in 1861*, New York, 1861, p213-214

¹³ *The Binghamton Press*, March 23, 1909.

¹⁴ *Evening Star*, Washington, D. C., November 23, 1857

a site on the bank of the San Pedro River to build a station, when three of the Butterfield employees were massacred at the Dragoon Spring Stage Station on September 8, 1858.¹⁵

In the winter of 1857-1858 Kenyon's task was laying out the line. He traveled about 35 to 45 miles a day, by mule, finding efficient routes, through the designated corridor, for the trail and selecting station sites.¹⁶ John Butterfield Jr. was with Kenyon on this initial trip to supervise the layout of the trail. It was John Butterfield Jr. that was the driver of the first stage when the line opened for service between Tipton, Missouri, and San Francisco. In June Kenyon was engaged in setting up the line in California and hiring crews to construct stations and stock the road from San Francisco to San Bernardino. Mr. E. G. Stevens and Mr. Hall were hired by Butterfield to stock the road and build stations on the selected sites from San Bernardino to Fort Yuma. To access San Bernardino, they had a difficult job clearing a trail over San Bernardino Hill and San Francisco Pass.¹⁷

In late June Kenyon announced that the stations were completed enough and stocked from San Francisco to Fort Yuma and stages can be running twice a month on this section starting in August. He also stated that the line will be ready to meet the contract's requirement for service twice a week on the entire length of the trail on September 15, 1858. In late August 1858 it is announced that there are fifty-two stations ready for service in California.¹⁸ There were three stations established in Mexico from about where New River crossed the southern California border into Mexico to the border of Arizona at the western bank of the Colorado River. This was done to avoid the sand dunes of southeastern California. It is not known if they were counted in the total of fifty-two stations.

Many settlements and ranches between San Francisco and Los Angeles were contracted by the OMC to provide stage stations. For this reason, many of these stations were not named by Kenyon, but retained their existing names. One of the most notable was Warner's Ranch which was established many years before Butterfield's service. Kenyon named some of the remote stations on the trail to Tipton, Missouri. As an example, he gave five of the twenty-six stage stations in Arizona names from around his home in Rome, NY. And one he named after himself—Kenyon's Stage Station in western Arizona. The next station to the west of Kenyon's he named Stanwix. Kenyon owned Stanwix Hall hotel in Rome, NY. Three other names of stations in Arizona bore familiar names from near his home; they were Oneida, Mohawk, and Seneca.

A minimal number of stations were established to put the line into service by September 15, 1858, but after service started, many more were added and some sections of the trail were straightened. This was particularly evident in eastern Arizona.¹⁹ Although the trail was through an established corridor, the route of the trail, as it was on September 15, 1858, had had many local changes by March 1861 when the OMC ceased its service on the Southern Trail.

¹⁵ Ahnert, Gerald T., *The Butterfield Trail and Overland Mail Company in Arizona, 1858-1861*, 2011, Canastota Publishing, Canastota, NY, p37

¹⁶ *Evening Star*, Washington, D. C., April 29, 1858

¹⁷ *Los Angeles Star*, June 12, 1858

¹⁸ *Los Angeles Star*, June 26, 1858

¹⁹ Ahnert, Gerald T., *Desert Tracks*, The Construction of the Butterfield Trail in Eastern Arizona, June 2013, p18



*A Butterfield Overland Mail Company Celerity Wagon from an 1858 drawing by William Hayes Hilton. Wild mules were often used and were a constant problem. Courtesy Huntington Library (From “A Ride on a Butterfield Stagecoach” in *The Butterfield Trail and Overland Mail Company in Arizona, 1858-1861*, 2011, ©Gerald T. Ahnert) This style of stage, known as a stage wagon, was used from Los Angeles to Fort Smith, Arkansas.*

Kenyon stocked a line of the classic Concord stagecoaches from San Francisco to Los Angeles, but stage (celerity) wagons were used from Los Angeles to Fort Smith, Arkansas. One hundred of these stage wagons were designed to meet John Butterfield’s specifications. They were built in either Albany or Troy, NY. Many were stocked at the stations, as the stages were changed about every sixty miles.²⁰

He resigned as a Superintendent and director for the OMC in 1860 when the morale and discipline started to decline with the ousting of John Butterfield as president. He returned to his home in Rome, NY, where he again participated in many transportation businesses. He died March 27, 1862, and is buried in the Rome Cemetery.

John Butterfield, his son John J., and his main architect for the building of the trail, Marquis L. Kenyon, are recognized for their monumental achievement of establishing what was known as the world’s longest stage line. There is a bill in Congress to give it its proper recognition and make the Butterfield Trail a National Historic Trail.

²⁰ Ahnert, Gerald T., Butterfield Overland Mail Company Stages on the Southern Trail, article to be published in the *Overland Journal* in 2014