

The Panama Route 1848-1851

From the mouth of the Chagres River to the City of Panama on the Pacific, was a journey of about sixty miles using mules and canoes to cross the isthmus.

Di Alessandro Arseni



On March 3, 1847, Congress passed a law directing the establishment of a postal route from Atlantic ports, across the Isthmus of Panama to California and Oregon with stops at Monterey and San Francisco, the through service to be subsidized in the amount of \$100,000, under the control of the Navy for the construction of new steamers readily convertible to Navy warships in an emergency. The Atlantic route was assigned to a syndicate group, incorporated by the New York Legislature on March 23, 1848 as the **United States Mail Steamships Company**, with a mail subsidy increased to \$ 290,000 per year. The first west mail service began with two ships, the *Falcon* and *Isthmus*, both 600 tons., on December of the same year. On board of each steamer, an Agent of the P.O.D. was responsible of the mail bags.

During her way to Chagres, steamships touched Charleston, Savannah, Havana and New Orleans. The postage for single letters, not exceeding half and ounce in weight, were 12 1/2 ¢ to Havana, 20¢ to Chagres, 30¢ to Panama, 40¢ to San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Francisco and Astoria. After the firsts two ships, U.S.M.S.S.C. placed in service the *Ohio* (on Sep. 20, 1849), the *Cherokee* (Dec. 13, 1849), *Georgia* (Jan 28, 1850), *Philadelphia* (March 1851) and *El Dorado* (March 20, 1851).

Another Company, the **Howard and Son's Empire City Line**, operating on the New York to Chagres route from December 1848, first with the *Crescent City* (1,300 tons-Dec. 23), and later the *Empire City* (1,700 tons.-Sept. 15, 1849). In 1851, also the *Brother Jonathan* (March 19) of **Edward Mill's Independent SS Co.**, and *North America* (Feb. 11) of **Bedford & Co. California Independent Line**, runs between New York and Chagres with stops at Havana and Kingston, subsequently both acquired by Cornelius Vanderbilt for his **Pacific Line**, starting July 1851.

On November 19, 1847, the contract to carry the mail to the far away conquered province of California and the new territory of Oregon, on the Pacific side, was assigned to William H. Aspinwall. Aspinwall, with Gardiner Howland and Henry Chauncey, formed on April 12, 1848, the **Pacific Mail Steamship Company** which was to play such an important part in the development and transportation facilities on the west coast for so many years to come. They were granted a ten-year mail subsidy of \$ 199,000 per year, beginning 1 October 1848.

The P.M.S.S.Co. provide three steamers for operation on the west coast. The first was the *California* of 1,050 tons (Oct 6, 1848), the second the *Oregon* of 1,099 tons (Dec 7, 1848) and the third the *Panama* of 1,087 tons. (Feb.15, 1849) All three steamers rounded Cape Horn and docked in Panama, where found hundreds of argonauts waiting for a passage to the gold hills of Sacramento Valley.

The Pacific Company also operated a branch line between San Francisco and Astoria, using small steamers. In 1849 the Line chartered (later purchased) the 650 tons. *Unicorn* from the British **Cunard Line**, arrived at San Francisco on October 31.

Between April 1850 and the end of 1851 improve his service adding the new *Tennessee* (1,300 tons-April 14 at S.F.), the *Carolina* (600 tons.-May 7) on San Francisco and Oregon route, and bought from **George Law's Pacific Line** the *Antelope*, *Columbus* (800 tons-May 23 1851), *Isthmus* and *Republic*, in Pacific run on 1851. The **Empire City Line**, in 1850 dispatched three steamers to the Pacific with the Empire City Pacific Line branch: the *Sarah Sand* (1,500 tons.-June), the *Northerner* (1,200 tons-August) and the *New Orleans* (800 tons-September). The firsts two sold to the Pacific Mail Co. in 1850, the third to an Australian line in 1852.

As traffic and competition grew between steamships companies, fares for passengers were cut in half and subsidies for carrying the mail quickly came to agreement. Starting July 1851 another serious competitor arose on the scene, Cornelius Vanderbilt, with his **Independent Line** in few years conquered the monopoly of transportation and communications between East and West.

Directed to Culloma, California, this cover was headed 14 Oct. 1850, probably paying from a place over 300 miles to New York, where it arrived on Oct. 25, 1850. From here departed on 26 by the U.S. Mail S.S. *Ohio*. The stamps are cancelled by the New York square grids and "40" integral rate cds. both in red. On arriving at San Francisco was delivered to Culloma (over 170 miles from S.F.) where on December 17 was forwarded back. The address paid 40¢ transcontinental rate plus 12 1/2¢ for local rate, by the Act of August 14, 1848.



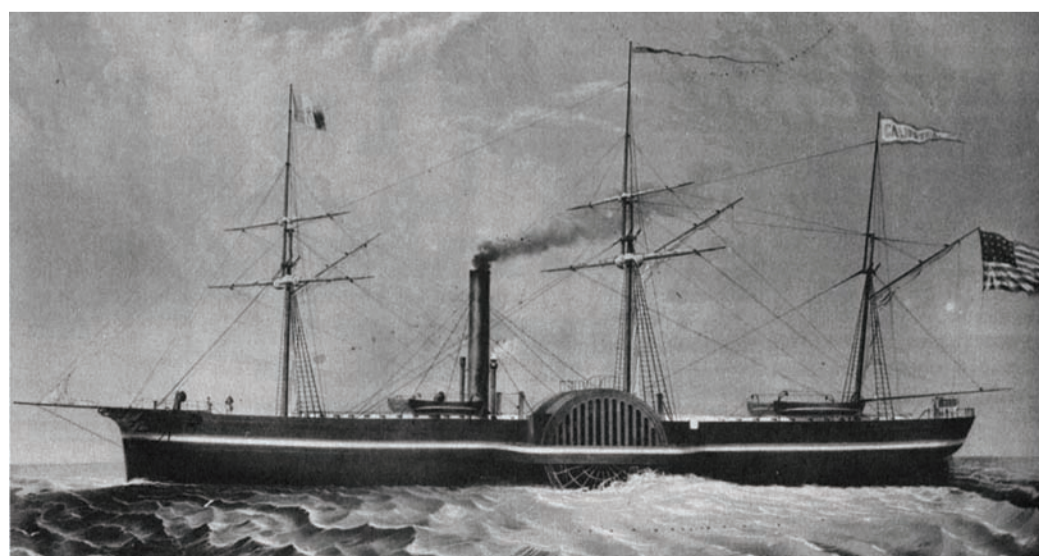
Dated October 1, 1849, this letter originated in Philadelphia. From there it was carried to New York City and placed aboard the mail steamer headed for the Isthmus of Panama. After carriage across the Isthmus to Panama City, it was placed on the ocean mail steamer for San Francisco. The single letter postal rate for this service was 40¢, paid here by four 10¢ stamps. The rate and its payment were restated in manuscript "Paid and 40". The address was probably a participant in the Gold Rush, a true '49er. Sold by Matthew Bennett on 2002 for \$25,700



Transportation across the Isthmus of Panama was a major problem for the traveler by that route. From the mouth of the Chagres River on the Caribbean, where the steamers anchored in the early years, to the City of Panama on the Pacific, was a journey of about sixty miles. Sometimes, when the seas were heavy, it was impossible to land, and the steamers rolling off the mouth of the Chagres for days before the passengers could be put ashore. For the journey on the river, native canoes were poled up by three or four natives, carried two to four passengers. During the dry season, from December until April, the head of navigation of the Chagres was at Gorgona, a village situated thirty-nine and half miles up the river from its mouth. The boat trip out the river to Gorgona required three to three and half days. Here travelers went overland to Panama for a twenty miles ride by mules or horses. (the railway will be open in January 1855). The lack of vessel on the Pacific side of the Isthmus compelled the restless Argonauts to wait weeks in some cases for accommodations to reach California.

Top right: this transcontinental usage at the 40¢ rate is the only recorded 10¢ 1847 cover sent from California to New York. Franked with a strip of four cancelled by pen and red straight-line "paid", travelled on board of the steamship Carolina of the Pacific Mail Co., departing San Francisco on January 1, 1851, arriving at Panama on 19. After carriage across the Isthmus, it was probably placed on the atlantic steamship Georgia, departing Chagres on January 24 and arriving at New York on February 8.

Right: this double 40¢ rate cover from New York to San Francisco, is the second greatest number of 10¢ 1847 stamps on a single cover, formed with a strip of three and one of five. Datelined "New York, February 7, (1850), was carried by the steamer Philadelphia of the Howland and Aspinwall's Atlantic Line, departing on 7th Feb. from Pier #4, via Charleston, Savannah, Havana and Kingston to Chagres, where it arrived on 19th. From Panama, on the other side of the Isthmus, the mail bag was picked up by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company SS. California, departing Panama on March 2, arriving at San Francisco on March 26. Ex Ishikawa, sold by Siegel Auctions, 1992 for \$363,000



Postal Routes

PACIFIC MAIL STEAMSHIP COMPANY

THE ONLY THROUGH LINE FOR

CALIFORNIA,

And Oregon, via Chagres or Navy Bay.

The public are informed that under the new arrangements of the Company Steamers inspected and approved by the Navy Department, and carrying the U. S. Mails, will hereafter

Leave PANAMA immediately on arrival of the Atlantic Mails, And SAN FRANCISCO on the 1st and 15th of each Month.



The following Steam Packets belonging to the Company are now in the Pacific one of which will be always in port at each end of the route.

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Golden Gate, 2500 tons, | Antelope, 750 tons, |
| Oregon, 1100 | Republic, 1200 " |
| Panama, 1100 | Carolina, 600 " |
| California, 1050 | Columbus, 600 " |
| Tennessee, 1300 | Isthmus, 600 " |
| Northerner, 1200 | Unicorn, 600 " |
| Columbia, 800 | Fremont, 600 " |

The New Steamer COLUMBIA will ply regularly between San Francisco and Oregon.

The connection in the Atlantic will be maintained by the

UNITED STATES MAIL STEAMSHIPS

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| GEORGIA, 3000 tons, | EMPIRE CITY, 2000 tons, |
| OHIO, 3000 " | CRESCENT CITY, 1500 " |
| ILLINOIS, 2500 " | CHEROKEE, 1300 " |
| PHILADELPHIA, 1100 tons. | |

Leaving New-York for Chagres or Navy Bay, On the 1st, & 15th of each month. [OVER.]

Brother Jonathan 1360 tons (1851), 1181 tons (1865), was launched for Edward Mills on 2nd Nov. 1850. Sailed between New York and Chagres in 1851-1852 and then sold to Cornelius Vanderbilt who increased her capacity to 750 passengers. Sailed from New York for San Francisco on 14th May 1852 and then sailed between San Francisco and San Juan del Sur until 1856. After 1856 she was sold to the California Steam Nav. Co. and used on coastal services until 30th Jul. 1865 when she struck a rock off St. Georges Point, north of Crescent City and sank.

California Was the first steamer built by the PMSSCo. and she was launched May 19, 1848. She sailed from New York for Panama, via Cape Horn, on October 6, 1848. The California arrived at Panama January 17, 1849 and steamed into San Francisco February 28, 1849. She was deluged with additional argonauts at Panama and upon arrival at San Francisco her entire crew, save the Captain and one of the engine room boys, deserted for the gold fields.