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

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 dispersed 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 passage 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.

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 thronia 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 F.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 Mills’ 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 Gardner 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, beginin 1 October 1849. The P.M.SS.C. provide three steamers for operation on the west coast. The first was the California of 1,050 tons (Dec. 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 ofSacramento 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 transportations and communications between East and West.
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 steamer 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.

**Postal Routes**

**Pacific Mail Steamship Company**

The only through line for California, And Oregon, via Chagres or Navy Bay.

- **Golden Gate.** 2500 tons, Antelope, 750 tons, Oregon, 1500 tons, Republic, 1200 tons.
- **Panama.** 1100 tons, Carolina, 500 tons.
- **California.** 1600 tons, Columbus, 600 tons.
- **Tennessee.** 1300 tons, Isthmus, 400 tons.
- **New Jersey.** 1200 tons, Savannah, 600 tons.
- **Columbia.** 800 tons, Firemount, 600 tons.

The following Steam Mail Steamer Companies are now on the Pacific coast of which will always in jest at each end of the route.

**United States Mail Steamships**

- **Georgia.** 3000 tons, Empire City, 2000 tons, Crescent City, 1500 tons, Illinois, 2000 tons, Cherokee, 1300 tons, Philadelphia, 1100 tons.

Leaving New York for Chagres or Navy Bay, On the 1st of each month.

**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. George Point, north of Crescent City and sank.

**California**

Was the first steamer built by the PMSSCo. and she was launched May 15, 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 desiguated with additional argonauts at Panama and open arrival at San Francisco her entire crew, save the Captain and one of the engine room boys, deserted for the gold fields.