The Butterfield Overland Route

The first U.S. overland mail contract to singly connect San Francisco to the Mississippi River Cities was made with the Overland Mail Company as contractor. The “Southern” route name quickly became synonymous with the Company president, John Butterfield. This was a biweekly service (later more frequently between Los Angeles and San Francisco) in operation from September 16, 1858 thru late March, 1861 when, because of the Civil War, congress determined to move the overland mail route north to the Central Overland Route.

Overland “STEAM BOAT” to California

Originated on board an inland steamboat - Savannah - Memphis - Butterfield Stage

From Washington Territory

This is one of two recorded covers from Washington Territory.
At 2730 miles, it was approximately 900 miles longer than the Central Overland Trail, but the Butterfield route avoided the difficult winter task of crossing the Rocky Mountains.

As depicted throughout these pages, the route was to and from St. Louis and Memphis through Ft. Smith, Ft. Chadbourne, El Paso, Tucson, Ft. Yuma, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

"Butterfield" letters had to be inscribed "Overland", "Southern" or the equivalent.

Because Auburn, California and Carson City, Utah Territory are east of Sacramento, this letter would normally have gone on the Central Overland Route; however, due to large snowfalls, it was directed south.

Freeman & Co. Atlantic States Express

"Way Cover"

A "way" cover taken by Freeman & Co. and placed into the mails at Marysville.

"Alonzo talks of coming home. Spent one day with Col. John C. Freemont."
The "OVERLAND" marking was occasionally utilized. It directed that a letter be sent via the "Butterfield Route" vs. "Via Panama".

The five cents stamp of 1859 is rarely seen on "Butterfield " mail.

The private three line straightline marking of E.S. Howell.

One of two recorded of this style.

The original published schedule.
Quintuple Rate

To an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court

Doubleweight and Forwarded

San Francisco November - 1859 - Factoryville, NY
Forwarded January 2, 1860 - New Orleans, La

This exhibitor has not seen another of this style straightline marking.

“The line is equipped with Concord Spring Wagons, capable of carrying four passengers with 40 pounds of baggage plus 500 - 600 pounds of mail” . . . . “The team usually consists of four horses or mules, but upon the more difficult stretches, more animals are used” . . . . Recommended equipment for the passenger included: “One Sharp’s rifle and a hundred cartridges, one Colt’s Navy revolver and two pounds of balls, a knife and a sheath”.

San Francisco Bulletin, various issues of 1858.
The most fashionable envelopes illustrated horses and coaches racing to deliver passengers and the mail.

This is perhaps the only "Butterfield" cover graced by the "Downiesville Star" cancellation on its stamp.
During the time period of the Butterfield contract, the postal rate was ten cents for delivery “over 3000 miles”. One would think that letters such this to Indiana would be rated three cents as the distance from California was substantially less. Not so; the 3000 miles was determined not “as the crow flies”, but rather by the actual length of the postal route, - in this case approximately 2970 miles. Therefore, only mail to or from St. Louis or shorter and their environs would be rated three cents.

The Marysville Six Horse Stage

Marysville - San Francisco - Butterfield coach - St. Louis - Knightstown, Indiana

To Indiana (beyond 3000 miles)

Marysville - San Francisco - Butterfield coach - St. Louis - Knightstown, Indiana

“Due 7“

St. Joseph, Missouri - Sacramento, California

St Joseph, Missouri is approximately 250 miles northwest of St. Louis. Therefore, this letter had to travel east to St. Louis, thence, on the Butterfield and back through the southwest the 2970 miles to San Francisco; additionally about 100 miles east to Sacramento. Therefore, the total milage would be about 3300.
Foreign Mails

Butterfield Overland “Closed Mail”

Great Britain to Vancouver

May 5, 1859

London May 5 - Liverpool May 6 - Lv Liverpool May 7 per Cunard “Canada”
Arr Boston May 20 - Railroad to St. Louis - Butterfield Route
Arr San Francisco June 18 - by ship to Victoria, Vancouver’s Island

Rate: 29 cents = 1 / 2½ = Great Britain did not have half penny stamps at this time; thus all mail of this rate to the North American West Coast was one half penny overpaid.

Shortly after the Butterfield Contract began in September, 1858, Great Britain was granted permission to utilize this route by Closed Mail via New York (no New York marking). The Contract ended in April, 1861.

The Unique “Per Prussian Closed Mail” Cover

December 30, 1859

Lv San Francisco December 30 - via Los Angeles per Butterfield Overland Route
Lv New York January 28, 1860 per Inman “Edinburgh” - Arr Liverpool February 10
Aachen February 12 - per Prussian Railroad - Buhl

Rate 30 cents: 5 cents to U.S.
18 cents transatlantic and G.B.
7 cents to Prussia which rebated 2 cents to Belgium.
The newly built Pacific Railroad serviced the St. Louis terminus.

A reporter's account of his east to west journey aboard a Butterfield coach. A few excerpts presented.

"The route starting from St. Louis is 160 miles on the Pacific Railroad to Tipton, thence through western Missouri, a pretty thickly settled part of the state, to Springfield; thence over the line into Arkansas, touching at Fayetteville and over the Ozark Mountains."
There were three possible routes for mail to be carried to Los Angeles in order to connect with the overland mail eastward from Los Angeles.

The main route was from San Francisco via Gilroy, Visalia and Ft Tejon. The second was along the coast thru Salinas and Santa Barbera, and the third was by water from San Francisco.

Legitimate Usage of the "Via Visalia & Los Angeles" Slogan

October 23, 1859  “rec’d Nov 16th”

The slogan “Via Visalia and Los Angeles” was probably intended as much for publicity for Visalia as anything else, but could be construed to differentiate this route from other ways of getting mail to Los Angeles.

Only one other other “Via Visalia” cover was used during the proper period.
The Three Cents Rate via the Butterfield Route was generally applied to mail carried over a portion of the route; in this case the full route was traversed; not valid without the "Overland" or equivalent endorsement.

Yager’s Ferry to cross the Colorado River.

Present day Arizona was part of New Mexico Territory until February, 1863.

“Via St. Louis O.L.M.” (Overland Mail) to Tucson, thence by mining wagon to Tubec, thence by military currier to Ft. Buchanan, Arizona, New Mexico Territory.
The best telegraphic facilities in the midwest were operated by The National Telegraph Company in St. Louis. There was a working arrangement whereby a letter sender could have their message telegraphed from St. Louis by using this type of envelope; this authorized National to open the letter upon arrival, and then telegraph the contents, a three days savings to the east coast.
From the spring of 1860 onwards, Butterfield operated a branch line north to Santa Fe. As Socorro was about midway, a normal routing would have been north via the Santa Fe Trail. However, a few covers are known to have been routed south “Via Texas”.

**Through The Chocktaw Indian Nation**

“Meeting the Memphis mails at Ft. Smith we take a short cut through the Chocktaw Nation Reserve in the Indian Territory through the prairies of Texas to Ft Chadbourne, 487 miles from Ft Smith, At Chadbourne the wild part of the route may be said to have commenced... from Chadbourne to Franklin, 414 miles, not a house or a settlement - and little else but prairies and jagged mountains, indians and game.”

Armstrong Academy, to Israel Folsom, in Washington on Chocktaw business.

Eagle Town (also Eagletown) to Peter P. Pitchlynn, a chief of the Chocktaw Nation, then in Washington, D.C.
An overland passenger wrote: "The blast of the stage horn as it rolls through the valleys and over the prairies of the west, cheers and gladdens the heart of the pioneer. As it sounds through the valleys of Santa Clara and San Jose', it sends a thrill of delight to the Californian. He knows that it brings tidings from the hearts and homes he left behind him; it binds him stronger and firmer to his beloved country. So regular is its arrival that the inhabitants know almost the hour and the minute when the welcome sound of the post horn will reach them. The Overland is the most popular institution in the Far West."  

San Francisco Bulletin June 13, 1859.

Clamor for the Building of a Transcontinental Railroad.

All the while of the Overland Stage, Californians as well as those who foresaw the onset of the Civil War demanded the construction of a Transcontinental Railroad. Despite numerous attempts, congress did not approve a bill until after the Civil War.
Texas

To El Paso on the Butterfield Route, thence southeast to San Antonio on the old Jackass Route.

To San Antonio
Overpaid 7 cents.

“Via San Antonio and El Paso”
From Jackson, California to Nueces.
Double rate

955 miles on the Butterfield Route

This letter was posted at the Breckinridge post office August 25, 1859. It was taken to Ft. Chadbourne where it met the Wednesday coach on the 27th through St. Louis. Noted “received September 10.”
From Small Towns

The Comptonville Red Oval

One of two recorded letters with this strike.

Postmasters' Free Frank from Forsters Bar

The last known usage of this CDS, February 16, 1859, which was first noted in March, 1856.

Shakopee, Minnesota Territory

"via St. Louis & El Paso"
With the anticipation of the Civil War, the army began to redeploy its troops from the southwest; therefore, in the spring of 1861, Butterfield horses and equipment were transferred north for use on the Central Overland Route.

Hand Painted

February 28, 1861

The End of an Era

The Act of Congress of March 2, 1861 provided for the removal of the (Southern) Overland Mail Route. On April 5, San Francisco Postmaster Charles Weller stated that by the dispatch "received this morning from Washington", he was only sending southern overland mails as far south as Los Angeles. The Alta of Saturday, April 6 reported: "Overland mail did not leave Friday as scheduled; discontinued, per correspondence between Postmaster Weller, April 5 and the USPO March 12." This dispatch had to arrive in San Francisco by Southern Overland Mail as no steamer arrived during the first five days of April. Therefore, the last eastbound mail left on Monday, April 1.

The Penultimate Westbound Delivery

March 6, 1861

This letter is pencilled "rec Apr 3d / 61" on the back.