



The Butterfield Overland Mail



Introduction

Two weeks prior to the signing of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the war with Mexico, gold was discovered on the banks of the American River in central California. The resulting influx of miners and settlers eventually demanded a regular communication link to 'the states'. By 1857 Congress finally passed legislation in an attempt to alleviate California's isolation.

The Debate

As early as 1852, Congress clearly recognized that it would be many years before the dreams of a transcontinental railroad could be completed and put into operation. In the meantime, the nation needed some form of overland mail and passenger service to the Pacific. In session after session representatives from the North and South debated, yet failed to agree on the specific route.

On March 3, 1857, Congress passed the Post Office Appropriations Bill authorizing the establishment of overland mail service between "some point on the Mississippi" and San Francisco. The issue of the exact route would be decided by the Postmaster General. The Postmaster General was

Aaron Brown, a Virginian by birth and former governor of Tennessee. Brown decided that a southern route to California was the best choice, since Congress stipulated that the mail must reach its destination within 25 days of departure, and a southern route would be less likely to be hampered by inclement weather.

Nine firms submitted bids to operate the route, with Brown eventually awarding the contract to John Butterfield in September 1857. In addition, Memphis and St. Louis were chosen as the two "points" on the Mississippi". Butterfield now had one year to get his operation underway.

The Southern Route and Apache Pass

The line chosen by Brown was called the "oxbow" route for when it left its eastern terminus, it ran southwest in an arc through Texas before turning northwest up California's central valley, a distance of 2,812 miles.

Butterfield constructed 141 stations to service company vehicles and patrons. Nineteen stations were built in Arizona, with one constructed in June 1858 in Apache Pass. It was made of stone with living and dining quarters, and a corral in the rear of the building for the mules.

The mail road entered Apache Pass on the east at nearly the same location as the modern road. It promptly turned south up modern Siphon Canyon, and emerged from the mile-long canyon into the basin 600 yards west of the springs, and passed just south of the stage station. From here, the mail road hugged the mountains to the south and eventually crossed the modern road about 1/2 mile below the summit. At 5000 feet, this point in Apache Pass is the highest elevation on the entire Butterfield route.

The Civil War

Like many of the emigrants, John Butterfield regarded Apache Pass as the most dangerous point on the entire line to the Pacific and urged the government to build a military post there. It was still a stronghold of the Chiricahua Apaches led by Cochise, one of the most dynamic leaders in their history. Cochise, however, maintained relatively cordial relations with the station employees for three years. By early 1861 national events would effect the happenings in Apache Pass.

In January 1861 the Texas legislature voted to secede and by March became the seventh state of the Confederacy. Congress, fearful

that the Overland Mail route would soon fall into Confederate hands, promptly pulled the Butterfield line from the southern route to the northerly central route, which ran through Salt Lake City.

While these political events were occurring, the tumultuous "Bascom Affair" underscored the end of the Butterfield Mail through Apache Pass. For on February 19, 1861, the very day that military forces marched out of Apache Pass, General David Twiggs, from his San Antonio headquarters, surrendered all Federal property in the Department of Texas to state authorities.