

Steamboats

In 1811, cutting-edge technology met up with the nation's mail system, and there was no looking back. Fast-moving steamboats began traveling the rivers, replacing packet boats, rowboats, and rafts as a means to carry mail.

Beginning in 1815, operators of steamboats and other craft had to deliver the letters and packets they carried to local postmasters within three hours of docking in daylight or two hours after sunrise the following day. By the 1820s, more than 200 steamboats regularly served river communities, and the Post Office Department issued contracts for these vessels to carry mail. In 1823, Congress declared waterways to be post roads. Use of steamboats to carry mail peaked in 1853 prior to the expansion of railroads.

Even before gold was discovered in California in 1848, the Post Office Department had awarded contracts to two steamship companies to carry mail between New York and California. The aim was to get a letter from the East Coast to California in three to four weeks, but this goal often was missed. Mail traveled by ship from New York to Panama, moved across Panama by canoes and mules, then went on to San Francisco by ship. When the Panama Railroad was completed in 1855, it eased transit across the isthmus, but a speedier method was needed to move mail.

As early as 1848, some overland mail reached California, if erratically, via the military. Scheduled, semiweekly overland service began September 15, 1858, with a contract to John Butterfield's Overland Mail Company, using the 2,800-mile southern stage route between Tipton, Missouri, and San Francisco. The specified running time was 24 days, but it often took months.

Californians felt their isolation. For example, Los Angeles learned California was admitted to the Union six weeks after the fact. Three years later, an article attributed to the *Los Angeles Star* (October 1, 1853) asked its readers:

Can somebody tell us what has become of the U.S. mail for this section of the world? Some four weeks since it has arrived here. The mail rider comes and goes regularly enough, but the mailbags do not. One time he says the mail is not landed in San Diego; another time there was so much of it the donkey could not bring it, and he sent it to San Pedro on the steamer — which carried it up to San Francisco. Thus it goes wandering up and down the ocean . . .

Faster transportation to the Pacific coast was needed.