

70 Years Ago in Stamps:

California Ocean Mails, 1851-55

by A. R. Rowell (*From Stamps Magazine, Jan. 15-Feb. 12, 1938, with images added*)

The main purpose of this article is to furnish a check list, compiled from contemporary sources, of the departures of the "Great Through Mail" from San Francisco to the Atlantic States, during an important period of its history.

Effective July 1, 1851, the former rate of forty cents for the carriage of letters between the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts (Figure 1) was sharply reduced to six cents for prepaid letters (Figure 2) and ten cents for unpaid letters (Figure 3).

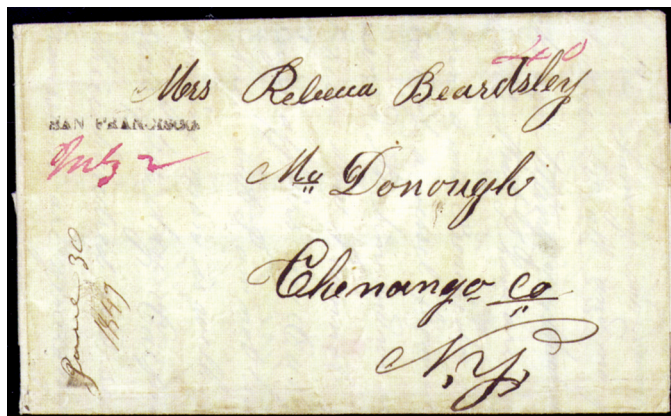


Figure 1. An example of the 40¢ transcontinental rate that prevailed prior to July 1, 1851. This 1849 folded letter to New York bears a clear strike of the "San Francisco" straightline handstamp. Just below that is a manuscript "July 2" and in the upper right is an ms "40" rate. Ex Kramer

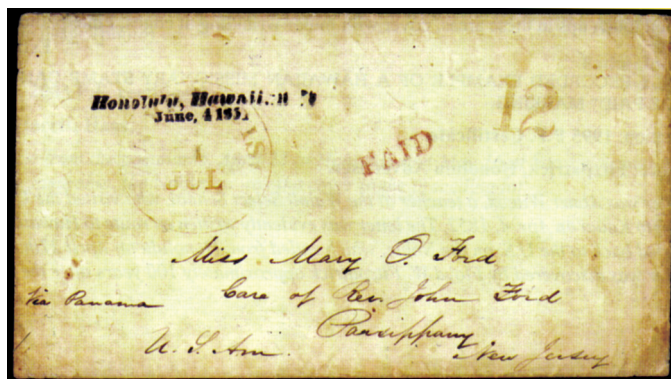


Figure 2. This cover to Parsippany, N.J., bears a clear strike of the rare "Honolulu, Hawaiian Is./June 4, 1851" handstamp, but more relevant to our subject, it also shows a light "San Francisco Cal. 1 Jul" c.d.s. just below that, making this a usage on the first day of the 6¢ transcontinental rate. Note as well the "Via Panama" manuscript in the lower left. Ex Kramer

Effective April 1, 1855, the rate was changed to ten cents, either prepaid or unpaid. It is the period between these two dates, July 1, 1851, to April 1, 1855, which is covered by this list.

Although ocean mail service on the Pacific had been in operation for more than two years before this period, the earlier



Figure 3. An 1852 cover to California with a Philadelphia Nov. 19 c.d.s., showing the transcontinental 10¢ rate for unpaid letters. It bears a 1¢ Eagle Carrier, Sc. LO2, and a 3¢ 1851, Sc. 11. As the 3¢ postage left 3¢ unpaid, it was erroneously marked "Due 5 cts", the rate handstamp used on unpaid domestic mail under 3,000 miles. It was later changed to "10¢", the rate for unpaid over 3,000 miles mail, with the part-payment being ignored. Ex Kramer.

sailings are excluded from the list, principally for the reason that no stamps of the 1847 issue were furnished to California post offices (Figure 4), and only on very rare occasions are these stamps found on California mail.

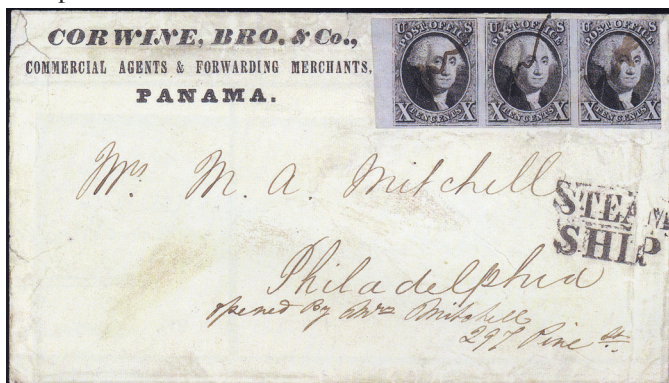


Figure 4. While no 1847 issue stamps were furnished to California P.O.s, Amos Corwine, U.S. consul and despatch agent at Panama, received a supply in July, 1850. This is the only usage that bears his advertising corner card and is the last known use of the 10¢ 1847 from Panama (November 11, 1850). The 30¢ pays the single letter rate to the U.S. by contract steamer. Ex "Como".

The period of the prepaid ten cent rate, beginning April 1, 1855, is also excluded for the present, principally from lack of leisure to complete it.

Collectors to whom a postage stamp is only a postage stamp, and who are not particularly curious concerning the postal history behind it, will perhaps attach little importance to such a list. To others, however, to whom philately has a wider meaning, and

who find absorbing interest in the story of the transportation of the mail in bygone days, it will appeal.

If you have, for example, a cover in your collection mailed from San Francisco on October 15, 1851, it adds color and interest to it to know that it was carried to Panama on the pioneer mail steamer CALIFORNIA, the first American steamship to pass through the Straits of Magellan, whose history is so intimately connected with the colorful story of the California Gold Rush.

Also, on occasion, one can by the use of such a list find an "invisible year date" on a cover which otherwise gives no indication of the year of its use. For example, the writer's collection contains a cover postmarked "San Francisco July 31" bearing a strip of four imperforate three cent stamps, but nothing whatever in the way of a year date. Reference to the list, however, discloses that the only year in which there was a steamer sailing on July 31 was the year 1852, which occurred then because the regular steamer day, August 1, fell on Sunday. Other similar examples of such "invisible year dates" are not infrequently noted. (Figure 5)



Another use of the checklist is to identify the ship on which a cover was carried. This 1854 cover to New York from Tasmania, Australia, with two 4d, Sc. 2, cut-to-shape singles bears "Ship" and "12" handstamps, to cover the 10¢ trans-continental postage plus 2¢ to the ship's captain. The cover also bears a "San Francisco Cal. 16 Dec." c.d.s. When we come to it in a subsequent instalment, it will be seen that this is the date of a sailing of the John L. Stevens.

With the possible exception of the Pony Express of 1860-1861, no chapter of our postal history is more interesting, more illustrative of that enterprise, courage and indomitable spirit in the face of heavy odds which we like to think of as typical American qualities, than the story of the California Ocean Mail. While the Atlantic approach to Panama had been familiar since the days of Pizarro, the Pacific Coast between Panama and San Francisco Bay was, until the establishment of the Pacific Mail, almost an unknown sea to navigators. In the Spanish period an occasional small sailing vessel would beat her way up from Acapulco or Valparaiso to Monterey, and an occasional Boston trader would come to barter with the Californians for hides and tallow (secretly three-fourths of his cargo, probably, in some lonely cove before reporting to the Customs House at Monterey!) but that was all.

The lack of charts, the impenetrable and ever-present fogs, the lack of coal for the ravenous old-type engines, made steam

navigation of the Pacific a dangerous adventure at its best. It is not strange, therefore, that in the years 1852-1854 no less than six first-class steamers, the NORTH AMERICA, INDEPENDENCE, WINFIELD SCOTT, S. S. LEWIS, TENNESSEE and YANKEE BLADE, were wrecked and lost on the west coast of Mexico and California.

Added to these dangers were those of the Isthmus, the Panama fever; cholera and dysentery, which made no more than an even-money wager the traveller's chances of arrival in California with a whole skin and a sound constitution.

The story of the establishment of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company has been well told elsewhere.... For the purposes of this article it is necessary only to refer to the incorporation of the Company in 1848, under the leadership of the already famous



Figures 6-8, Above, P.M.S.S. office in San Francisco; right, William H. Aspinwall (both from www.apl.com); below advertising and rate card listing the ships of the line and rates to Chagres and to San Francisco. Ex Jarrett



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 "	Colmbus, 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 and 15th of each month.

merchant prince of the clipper ships, William H. Aspinwall, to the taking over by this company of the contract awarded by the Secretary of the Navy to Arnold Harris of Arkansas for the Pacific mail service, and to the construction for the Company of the three original vessels of the Pacific line, the CALIFORNIA OREGON and PANAMA. (Figures 6-8.)

It is interesting to note that the Pacific mail service was inaugurated, not through the agency of the Postmaster-General, but through that of the Secretary of the Navy, the primary object being not only the establishment of a needed postal service, but also the building up of a steam marine capable of being transformed into warships in the event of need. Nor was the principal object of the Company that of postal service, nor was it the freight and passenger traffic of the Gold Rush (which had not yet started), but rather the establishment of a link in an ambitious and far-sighted project of steam transportation to the Orient, an object later successfully accomplished.

These three original vessels were small, wooden affairs, side-wheelers about the size of a respectable ferry boat. The CALIFORNIA was but 200 feet long, 34 feet in the beam, with 20 feet depth of hold. The others were similar. They were all, however, built along the lines of the clipper ships (the CALIFORNIA and the PANAMA having been built in the famous yards of William H. Webb, in New York, designer of some of the most famous of the clippers) and were, for those days, comparatively swift.

Not having been built for the Gold Rush, they were entirely inadequate for the demands for transportation immediately made upon them. The CALIFORNIA sailed from New York on October 6, 1848, when the rumors of gold had attracted no more than passing attention, and she carried no passengers. However, by the time she reached the city of Panama, after her perilous voy-



The California departs New York, October 6, 1848.

The route of the California on its maiden voyage. From <www.maritimeheritage.org>

age around South America, she found the place swarming

with gold-seekers clamoring for passage. Built for about a hundred passengers, she carried about three hundred and fifty on her first trip up from Panama. Tickets sold for as high as \$1,000.00, and passengers were willing to sleep in any corner or on any coil of rope to get to El Dorado.

The CALIFORNIA arrived in San Francisco Bay on Feb. 28, 1849. Her crew promptly deserted and decamped for the mines, and it was some months before she could muster men and fuel enough to make the return trip to Panama.



A November 7, 1849 folded letter from Tepic to Lima, then forwarded in Mazatlan, after which it was sent by the steamer California to Panama, November 22nd. It shows a 1 shilling "Paid in Panama" crown circle in red. The manuscript "2" is the 2 reales charge in Peru (1r for ship letter and another 1r for internal postage).

The OREGON, next to arrive, anchored under the guns of a naval vessel, and by intimidation and raises in pay her commander succeeded in keeping his crew, so that by April 11th or



1850 cover showing the earliest recorded use of the Honolulu straight-line postmark, type 201. It was carried on the schooner Penelope to San Francisco and then aboard the steamer Oregon, departing San Francisco on December 1 for Panama City. At San Francisco the cover was rated "42" to cover the 40¢ steamship rate to New York plus the 2¢ ship fee.

12th, 1849 (the records are in conflict) she was enabled to start back to Panama, taking with her the first mail carried East under the mail contract.

Due to the unexpected demand for transportation, we soon find additional vessels added to the line. The first was the small British steamer UNICORN, chartered in 1849, purchased in 1850, and soon disposed of as more suitable vessels were acquired.

The TENNESSEE, which like the CALIFORNIA and the PANAMA was built in the Webb yards, was originally designed for Atlantic service, but was purchased by the Pacific Mail Steamship Co., and on April 13, 1850, arrived in San Francisco. She was a little larger than the others, or 1,295 tons register as compared with 1,050 for the CALIFORNIA.

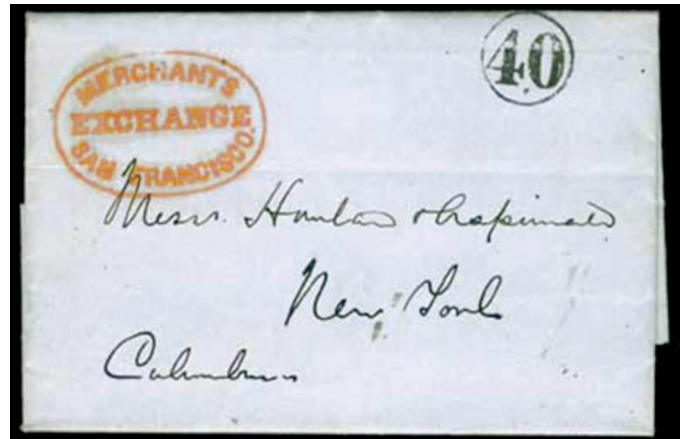


The steamer Tennessee



A July 7, 1850 folded letter carried with manuscript marking "per Steamer Tennessee"; however it missed the sailing of the Tennessee and was instead carried on the steamer Isthmus to Philadelphia. Cover also bears a "San Francisco 40" c.d.s. Ex Jarrett.

The TENNESSEE was soon followed by the CAROLINA and the COLUMBIA, the latter intended for the California-Oregon run but employed for some time in the Panama service. Later she and the FREMONT set up an enviable record for reliable and efficient service on the Oregon run. In the Spring of 1851 the Pacific Mail took over a half dozen vessels from smaller competitors, including George Law's Pacific line. These were the NORTHERNER, the ISTHMUS (later renamed the SOUTHERNER), the COLUMBUS, the SARAH SANDS, the REPUBLIC and the FREMONT. The CAROLINA and the SARAH SANDS were of the propeller type, then considered slower and less efficient than the side-wheeler.



"Merchants Exchange, San Francisco" forwarder marking on an Oct. 19, 1850 folded letter to New York City with the sender's ship designation Columbus, which departed Oct. 19. The black "40" in circle due handstamp was applied at New York.

This brings us to our list of mailings, commencing July 1, 1851, which follows. The addition of new vessels to the line will be noted as they appear in the list. Repeated references to the "Alta" are to the famous old newspaper the San Francisco "Daily Alta California," which from 1849 for more than forty years chronicled the day by day doings of the turbulent city by the Golden Gate.

1851

July 2—Wednesday—PANAMA

Originally scheduled to sail on the regular day, July 1, she was delayed until the following morning. Letters, however, are known to have been postmarked July 1, the intended date of sailing. In this connection it should be borne in mind that postal regulations provided that mail should be postmarked as of the date of departure, rather than the date of deposit or of making up the mail. (P. L. R. 1852, Sec. 65.)

"The amount of treasure shipped to the Atlantic States by the steamer Panama yesterday was \$1,500,000." Alta, July 2.

"THE NEW POSTAGE STAMPS. The Philadelphia Sun. Referring to the new stamps to made use of under the New Postage law, says they are being made in that city. The new twelve cent stamp is similar to the present ten cent stamp, with the full face of Washington. The three cent stamp presents a profile of Washington after the style of a medallion, and the one cent stamp a finely executed head of Franklin. The one cent stamps will be found convenient for prepaying postage on newspapers and making odd change. It is presumed that forty or fifty millions of these stamps will be required during the year to meet the public demand." Alta, July 6.

July 15—Tuesday—NORTHERNER

"The postmaster and his clerks yesterday had quite as much as they could conveniently attend to, in making up and dispatching the mail for the steamer Northerner. We saw four large wagons, with two mules attached to each, standing in Clay Street to receive the bags. There were about a hundred of them, and they made four very formidable loads. They left the Post Office at about six o'clock in the afternoon." Alta, July 16.

August 1—Friday—OREGON
 August 15—Friday—CALIFORNIA
 September 1—Monday—TENNESSEE

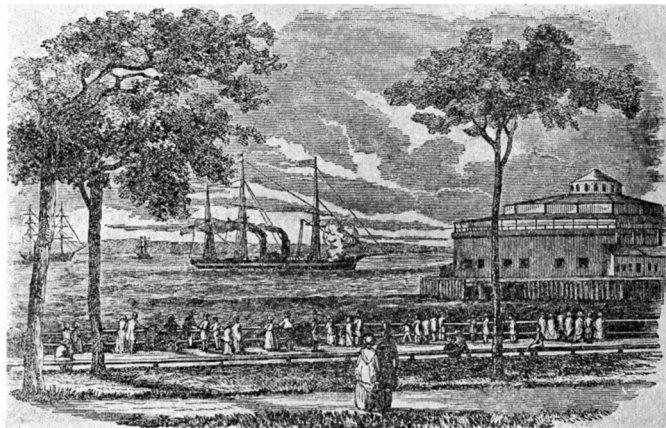
“We see it stated in the New York Herald that the Postmaster General has determined to prosecute individuals for the transmission of letters out of the regular mails to California. So the passengers and our Expresses will be obliged to keep a sharp look-out for the P.M.G.’s bailiffs.” *Alta*, Sept. 2.

September 15—Monday—PANAMA
 October 1—Wednesday—OREGON

“The hour for the sailing of the Pacific Mail Steamers has been altered from four in the afternoon to six in the morning. The *California*, which sails next Wednesday, is the first that the change affects. Treasure for shipment will be received up to 12 o’clock on Monday night next.” *Alta*, Oct. 11.

This change resulted in considerable protest at the earliness of the hour, and some time later it was fixed at later in the morning.

October 15—Wednesday—CALIFORNIA
 November 1—Saturday—TENNESSEE
 November 15—Saturday—NORTHERNER



The steamer Golden Gate leaves New York

The Pacific Mail’s fine new steamer the GOLDEN GATE arrived in San Francisco on November 19th. The acquisition of this vessel marks the beginning of a new era in the affairs of the Company. All of its previous vessels had been built before the Gold Rush, and were small and inadequate. The GOLDEN GATE was built especially for passenger service to California, was 269 feet long, 40 feet in the beam, of 2,067 tons register, and had capacity for about 800 passengers.

December 5—Friday—GOLDEN GATE

Note the irregular sailing date, occasioned probably by the necessity of additional time to get the new vessel ready for sea again after the long voyage from New York. The Company had been promising in its advertisements for several months that the GOLDEN GATE would make this particular trip.

December 16—Tuesday—PANAMA

This sailing was scheduled for the 15th, but the steamer did not get away until the next morning. Mail, however, was doubtless postmarked the 15th.

1852

January 1—Thursday—OREGON
 January 16—Friday—CALIFORNIA
 February 1—Sunday—TENNESSEE

Occasional Sunday sailings occur in 1852 and 1853. Thereafter when the regular sailing date fell on Sunday, the ship customarily sailed the Saturday before, until the change of sailing dates in September, 1855, after which in such cases the sailing occurred on the following Monday.

February 18—Wednesday—PANAMA

An irregular date. Originally advertised to sail on Saturday the 14th.

“We are authorized to state that the Mail Steamer Panama will not sail until the 18th inst., at the usual hour.” *Alta*, Feb. 14.

February 28—Saturday—OREGON
 March 2—Tuesday—NORTHERNER

“We understand that the Postmaster General has approved an arrangement by which the transit of the great mail between San Francisco and New York will be much accelerated. The through mails for Panama and the Atlantic States are to be dispatched in the first class steamers of the Pacific Mail Company, touching at Acapulco only and lessening the time between this city and Panama to about fourteen days. The way mails for Monterey, San Diego, etc., are to be dispatched by other steamers of the Company, leaving two or three days earlier so as to make the necessary connections at Panama. This arrangement will no doubt prove highly acceptable to the public. It goes into effect immediately.” *Alta*, Feb. 14.

This accounts for the two sailings above, and for those that follow in the next two months on days other than the first and the middle of the month. The OREGON carried way mail on the trip of February 28, and the NORTHERNER, on March 2, carried the through mail.

March 16—Monday—CALIFORNIA
 March 20—Saturday—TENNESSEE

The TENNESSEE carried the through mail. The CALIFORNIA, on the 15th, probably carried only the way mail.

April 5—Monday—GOLDEN GATE
 April 8—Thursday—PANAMA

The PANAMA was originally advertised to sail on April 1, “carrying the U.S. and way mails.” She was subsequently advertised to sail on April 8, with no reference to mail, and it is uncertain whether she carried mail or not. In this connection it should be noted that vessels belonging to the Company were frequently making trips to Panama, carrying passengers and freight,

but no mail. For example, the REPUBLIC was advertised to sail on March 11, and the CONSTITUTION on March 13.

April 15—Thursday—COLUMBUS

April 18—Sunday—NORTHERNER

The COLUMBUS carried way mail on the 15th. The NORTHERNER was originally advertised to carry “the U.S. and way mails” on the 15th. Her sailing was postponed to the 18th, and on that date she doubtless carried the through mail only, because of the sailing of the COLUMBUS three days earlier. Note the Sunday sailing on the 18th.

May 3—Monday—COLUMBIA

The double sailings above referred to have now been abandoned, except for the June 28th sailing of the GOLDEN GATE hereinafter noted.

May 16—Sunday—PANAMA

June 1—Tuesday—TENNESSEE

June 18—Friday—CALIFORNIA

The NORTHERNER was advertised to sail on the 16th, but she was delayed in arriving from Panama and did not reach San Francisco until that date. The CALIFORNIA was therefore substituted in her place, and the sailing postponed to the 18th to facilitate returns to correspondence received via the NORTHERNER.

July 15—Thursday—NORTHERNER

July 31—Saturday—OREGON

In this instance the sailing was advanced one day because August 1st fell on Sunday.

August 15—Sunday—PANAMA

Advertised to sail on Saturday, the 14th, but did not get away until the next morning at 5 A.M. Mail was doubtless postmarked the 14th.

September 1—Wednesday—CALIFORNIA

“The postmaster of this city wishes the public cautioned against the use of sealing wax in transmitting their correspondence. In the warmer latitudes the wax melts, causing the whole bundles to stick together, and when opened it is almost impossible to separate them without defacing the superscription. Gum arabic or common wafers are an excellent substitute, and will not be affected by any climate.” *Alta*, Aug. 30.

September 16—Thursday—GOLDEN GATE

October 16—Saturday—OREGON

November 1—Monday—CALIFORNIA

November 16—Tuesday—GOLDEN GATE

December 1—Wednesday—PANAMA

December 16—Thursday—TENNESSEE

The Panama Railroad was under construction from May, 1850, to January 28, 1855, on which day it was first traversed from ocean to ocean. However as construction advanced from the Atlantic toward the Pacific, the completed portion was utilized for the transportation of travellers to and from California, the remainder of the distance being covered on mule back or on foot. The following form of advertisement



1852 folded letter datelined “Papeete Tahiti June 8” addressed to London, directed via California (lower left), entering the mails at San Francisco, with Sep 16 c.d.s. This cover was carried on board the Golden Gate to Panama, then to New York on the Georgia, and on to London on the Washington.

frequently appears during the latter part of 1852: “...As the Railroad is now in operation the passengers can cross the Isthmus in one day at a very moderate expense, say:

25 miles from Panama to Gorgona

(being hire of mule) \$12.00

20 miles from the latter to Soldado..... 5.00

17 miles from the latter to Aspinwall 2.00

Without a mule, \$7, or with expense of mule 19.00

Passengers leaving Panama at 4 A.M. can arrive at Aspinwall and be aboard the boat the same evening.”

The feelings of the ordinary traveller, after such a day’s journey, can be better imagined than described.

1853

January 1—Saturday—NORTHERNER

January 15—Saturday—GOLDEN GATE

February 1—Tuesday—TENNESSEE

This was the TENNESSEE’S last trip. On the return from Panama she went ashore in the fog on Sunday morning, March 6th, four miles north of the Gate, at a point then called Indian Cove or Tagus Beach (after another vessel, the TAGUS, wrecked there in 1851) but since known as Tennessee Cove. I have been told, but cannot vouch for the statement, that at the lowest tides of the year her engines are still visible.

“The mail made up at the Post Office for the Tennessee which sailed on the 1st was the largest that has ever left San Francisco. As nearly as can be computed there were one hundred thousand letters and twenty thousand newspapers, the whole composing a mail of ninety-two large canvas bags.” *Alta*, Feb. 3.

G.						
United States mail service abroad as in operation on the first of October, 1853.						
No. of route.	Points.	Distance.	Number of trips.	Contractors.	Annual pay.	Remarks.
7	Aspinwall to Panama, New Gren- ada.	60	Twice a month....	Panama Railroad Company, (David Hooley, presi- dent.)	95,335	Under a temporary arrangement, au- thorized by act of Congress of March 3, 1851, to carry at twenty-two cents a pound.

U.S. mail service via Panama Railroad... Aspinwall to Panama, New Grenada, a distance of 60 miles, trips twice a month, “Under a temporary arrangement, authorized by act of Congress of March 3, 1851, to carry at twenty-two cents a pound.”

February 16—Tuesday—PANAMA

This was an extra trip, carrying the way mails.

February 16—Wednesday—CALIFORNIA

“The mail brought up by the Golden Gate yesterday was the largest ever sent to this country. There were 105 large bags, some of which weighed upwards of 200 pounds.” *Alta*, Feb. 20.

March 1—Tuesday—OREGON

March 16—Wednesday—GOLDEN GATE

April 1—Friday—CALIFORNIA

April 9—Saturday—COLUMBUS

Beginning as of this date weekly mail service was put into effect, but it was entirely unsatisfactory and was terminated with the sailing of June 16th. The “in-between” trips carried way mails, and stopped at Monterey, San Diego and Acapulco. The “regular” trips, on the first and middle of the month carried through mail and stopped at Acapulco only.

April 17—Sunday—NORTHERNER

Advertised to sail on the 16th, but held until early morning on Sunday the 17th. This was because of the arrival in San Francisco on the 16th of the GOLDEN GATE, the delay being to facilitate returns to correspondence received by that vessel. Mail was probably postmarked the 16th.

April 23—Saturday—ISTHMUS

April 30—Saturday—GOLDEN GATE

The first of May falling on Sunday, the sailing was advanced one day.

May 16—Monday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

This was the first run of the JOHN L. STEPHENS. She left New York on or about January 12, and arrived in Panama, via the Straits of Magellan, on March 4, fifty-three days out of New York. She arrived in San Francisco on April 3, and was the center of much interest among the citizens. She was named after the first president of the Panama Railroad, who died in 1852.

May 24—Tuesday—REPUBLIC

June 1—Wednesday—CALIFORNIA

June 8—Wednesday—COLUMBUS

June 16—Thursday—GOLDEN GATE

“Without surprise or regret we learned yesterday that the weekly mail communication, or rather we should say the weekly mail steamers, between California and the Atlantic States had been suspended—stopped. The event is not unexpected; the arrangement has been of no earthly advantage to any one except the dealers in coal and ships’ stores, who have had the contracts to supply the steamers employed in the transportation of the mails. There has been no weekly communication since the arrangement began; nothing but confusion, dissatisfaction and disappointment to all parties has come of it. The steamers on this side and on the other, used in the transit of the intervening or weekly mails, have been wholly incapable of carrying out the

plan. In each instance they have failed to land the mails from this port at Panama before the arrival of the succeeding steamer of the 1st or 15th. The P. M. S. Co. undertook the arrangement without sufficient ships, and have kept the plan in operation at a positive loss to themselves from the commencement. They are under no obligations to continue the arrangement, it appears, not having contracted with the U.S. Government, nor entered into any form of agreement with the Post Office Department to carry the mails weekly. Mr. George Law has notified the P. M. S. Co. that his weekly steamers are withdrawn and the arrangement broken up on the Atlantic side, and this has decided the agents of the P. M. S. Co. in this city to stop short in their operations and keep back the Northerner, which was announced to sail on Friday next. Henceforth the mails will be carried semi-monthly as before.” 2 *Alta*, June 22.

July 1—Friday—OREGON

July 16—Saturday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

The GOLDEN GATE returned from Panama on July 18th, and was laid up for repairs until October. This gave occasion for the following interesting data:

“We are informed that the Golden Gate will be detained at the depot at Benicia for the next two months undergoing repairs. This vessel has been running sans intermission for two years, and since her arrival in the Pacific has been carrying the mails and passengers between San Francisco and Panama. During the time she has cleared \$800,000 for the Company. She has been under the command of Capt. Patterson from the moment she was run off the stocks until the present time, and he has made her the most popular, as she is the finest vessel on the Pacific.” *Alta*, July 19.

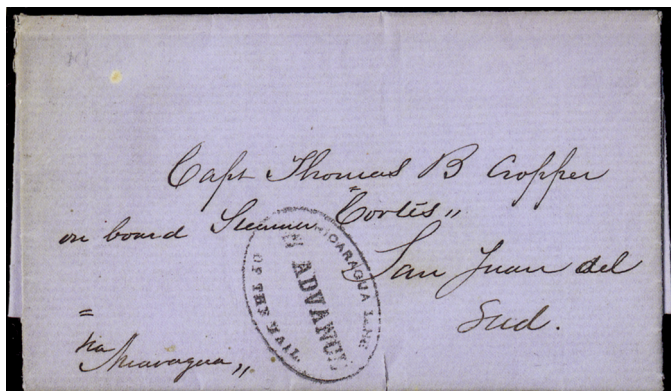
“THE GOLDEN GATE. This fine steamer, we have said, is to lay up for two months or so, for the purpose of having a new saloon fitted up. The following are the principal statistics of her history:

“Launched February, 1851. Left New York for Annapolis on a trial trip July 10, 1851, returned on the 16th. Left New York for Panama c Aug. 5, 1851, arrived at Panama on her first trip Nov. 4, 1851. She has made 11 trips from Panama to San Francisco, 10 trips from San Francisco to Panama. She has carried 12,178 passengers and \$18,208,930 in treasure. She has carried the mails 17 times in 2,111 bags altogether.” *Alta*, July 20.

August 16—Tuesday—WINFIELD SCOTT

This was the first trip of this vessel for the Pacific Mail. She had been operated between San Francisco and Panama for about a year by an independent line, first seemingly called the “Telegraph Line” (*Alta*, Apr. 30, 1852), and later called the “New York and San Francisco Line” (*Alta*, June 16, 1852, and later). It was sometimes referred to as “Babcock’s Independent Line” (*Alta*, Mar. 6, 1853). The line also operated the COR-

TES on the Pacific and the UNITED STATES on the Atlantic. The company ceased business in the summer of 1853, the



A cover datelined New York 19th December 1853 addressed to a ship captain "on board Steamer 'Cortes', San Juan del Sud", also with "via Nicaragua" manuscript and "Nicaragua Line in Advance of the Mails" oval handstamp.

WINFIELD SCOTT passing into the Pacific Mail fleet and the CORTES being acquired by the Nicaragua Line.

September 1—Thursday— OREGON

"A great deal of complaint is made upon the arrival of each Eastern mail that portions of it for this city are not delivered for several days afterwards....The fault lies with the offices where the missing mails are made up, and not in San Francisco. Under an order from the head of the Department, the New York, Boston and New Orleans offices make up separate bags for Sacramento and Stockton (and perhaps other points in the interior of the State) which bags do not pass through the San Francisco office at all, although it is the distribution office properly for this Coast. From the inherent defect in this arrangement, partially, but more especially through the carelessness of clerks in the Eastern offices, large quantities of matter belonging to San Francisco are placed in the bags direct to Sacramento, Stockton, &c. These bags go directly forward, are opened at the points of distribution and the matter for this city returned or not as the case may be." *Alta*, Aug. 9.

September 16—Friday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

October 1—Saturday—PANAMA

"Captain Ebenezer Knight, one of our oldest and most well known citizens, died yesterday morning at about 7 o'clock....He has been well known here since 1849 as the agent of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, which position he filled with great credit to himself and satisfaction to the community." *Alta*, Oct. 12.

October 16—Sunday—GOLDEN GATE

November 1—Tuesday—CALIFORNIA

November 16—Wednesday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

December 1—Thursday—WINFIELD SCOTT

This was the second and last trip of this vessel for the Pacific Mail. The day after sailing, December 2, 1853, she was wrecked in a fog on Anacapa Island, off Santa Barbara, and was a total loss. Her mails were salvaged and returned to San Francisco by the CALIFORNIA on the latter's return trip from Panama.



A 6¢ green on white entire (Sc. U13) to New York with a "Columbia Cal." handstamp and "Nov 29" manuscript date, also with "Steamer Winfield Scott" handstamp. The Winfield Scott was the only contract steamship of the Pacific Mail Steamship Co. to have its own handstamps. Because this Nesbitt entire envelope did not exist in 1852, this cover was among the letters salvaged from the wreck of the Winfield Scott. *Ex Kramer*.

December 7—Wednesday—CALIFORNIA

On account of the failure of the mail dispatched by the WINFIELD SCOTT, the CALIFORNIA made an emergency sailing on this date.

"The P. M. Steamship Company's steamer California will leave port at 8 o'clock this morning for Panama, stopping to take off the passengers of the steamer Winfield Scott. This old pioneer in the Pacific steam navigation only remained in the port of Panama on her last trip one day, and now circumstances require that she shall leave here about twenty hours after her arrival, which is certainly very quick work for so old a vessel. The California will carry no passengers from here, but will take mail and express packages. The mail for the California was kept open last night till twelve o'clock, thereby giving an opportunity to answer letters received by the California." *Alta*, Dec. 7.

December 16—Friday—GOLDEN GATE

December 31—Saturday—OREGON

The end of this year marked another major steamship disaster for the Pacific Mail. Its new steamer, the SAN FRANCISCO, was completed at a cost of \$350,000, and left New York on Dec. 21, 1853, bound via the Straits of Magellan for the city for whom she was christened. She had on board eight companies of the Third Regiment, U.S. Artillery. Shortly after sailing, she encountered a storm of unprecedented fury, and after a nine-day battle was completely demolished. She was abandoned on January 5, 1854, with a loss of approximately 200 lives. By a coincidence the clipper ship SAN FRANCISCO was wrecked in the Golden Gate at about the same time, February 8, 1854. She should not be confused with the steamship of the same name.

1854

January 16—Monday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

"We are requested by the postmaster to state that the Atlantic mails will close at the post office at 10 o'clock on Wednesday morning. Bags for the principal cities will be kept

open to within half an hour of the sailing of the mail steamer. This arrangement is very favorable, as it extends by 12 hours the usual time for depositing mail matter." *Alta*, Jan. 31.

February 1—Wednesday—COLUMBIA

This mail was scheduled to be carried by the GOLDEN GATE. That vessel, however, broke a shaft on the return from Panama, and in attempting to enter the harbor of San Diego ran aground on a reef and was disabled for some time. Her mails were brought to San Francisco by the GOLIAH, a minor vessel of the Pacific Mail. The COLUMBIA, with the FREMONT, was customarily employed on the Oregon run.

February 16—Thursday—CALIFORNIA.

March 1—Wednesday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

March 16—Thursday—GOLDEN GATE

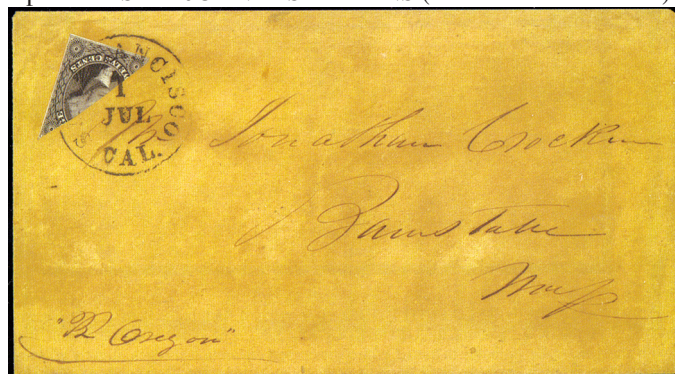
April 1—Saturday—OREGON

By the California the Post Office of our city received 460,000 postage stamps from Washington, whereby one of our grievances will be greatly relieved. Of these, 360,000 are three cent stamps and the remainder one cent. They are about sufficient for a three month's supply, with those already on hand of larger denominations. Twenty thousand have already been sold and the Postmaster is ready to supply purchasers... "*Alta*". Mar. 23.

April 15—Sat.—JOHN L. STEPHENS (see cover next column)



A stampless folded letter to Paris, postmarked "San Francisco Cal 15 Apr" [1854] with matching handstamped "Paid 26" single line handstamp. Other markings include a partial "New York Packet May 13" cds, French 26 May entry cds. This cover was carried per Pacific Mail Steamship Line steamer "John L. Stephens" on April 15, arriving Panama City April 28, then probably per the U.S. Mail Steamship Line steamer George Law (named after the President of the U.S.M.S. Ship Co. mentioned above) to New York and the Collins Line steamer Pacific to Liverpool.



12¢ 1851 used as 6¢, Sc. 17a, during a period of a shortage of stamps. The circa 1854 cover to Barnstable, Mass., bears a San Francisco, Cal. 1 Jul." c.d.s. and a manuscript "Per Oregon" in the lower left. Ex Kramer

"A letter has been laid upon our table addressed to Don Trinidad Dias 'en los puntos de la Alta California en donde se halle,' in the places of Upper California in which he may be found. Remarkably clear direction that!" *Alta*, Apr. 17.

May 1—Monday—PANAMA

"An item of interest to you Californians will be found in the fact of George Law's retirement from the presidency of the U.S.M.S. Ship Co. (see cover, next column). He has sold out 'stock and fluke' to M. O. Roberts, Esq., backed by Moses Taylor and Chas. Hecksher, Esqrs. The transfer took place today (Apr. 4) to the modest little amount of 800,000 dollars. Whether Mr. Law is going altogether into the musket trade, or intends to take the Turkey war on contract, has not yet transpired." *Alta*, May 6 (extract from a letter from New York.)

"We stated on the arrival of the last mail steamer that George Law had sold out his entire interest in the line of steamers plying between New York and Aspinwall. Among the grati-

fying changes caused by this sale, we learn that the company have condemned the two steamers Georgia and Ohio, and that they will soon put on the line in their places two new, handsome and comfortable boats. In addition to this the company intend having a steamer always lying at Aspinwall, so there will be no danger to passengers of detention. John Aspinwall, a brother of Wm. H. Aspinwall, President of the P. M. S. Company, has been elected president, and the two companies, instead of being to a certain degree antagonistic, as they have heretofore been, will now harmoniously operate together for the safety, quick transportation and comfort of their passengers." *Alta*, May 14.

May 16—Tuesday—GOLDEN GATE

June 1—Thursday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

"The new and elegant steamer Sonora, R. L. Whiting, Esq., Commander, arrived yesterday from New York, which port she left on the 11th March, accomplishing the whole distance, touching in at Rio, Valparaiso and Panama, in the wonderful short period of fifty-eight days' running time. This is considered the quickest running time on record, and at once places the Sonora in the first rank of our Pacific steamers. She brings up the full mail of the 5th May and about 650 passengers." *Alta*, June 1.

The SONORA was built in the Westervelt yard in New York, and cost about \$260,000. She was about the same size as the GOLDEN GATE, being 269 feet in length.

"A singular abuse of the franking privilege and fraud upon the Post Office has come to light. A packer for two members of Congress, and authorized to use their names for franking documents, has been detected selling franked envelopes at fifty cents per hundred. A claim agent purchased a lot and enclosed eleven hundred circulars, to pass through the city post office, when an investigation led to the detection of the fraud. The matter has been compromised." *Alta*, June 3.

June 16—Friday—SONORA

This was the first trip of this vessel from San Francisco.

July 1—Saturday—GOLDEN GATE

“THE U.S.M.S.S. LINE. We are informed, as we have already stated, that Mr. Law has sold out his entire interest in this line, Messrs. Moses Taylor, C. J. Hecksher and M. O. Roberts being the purchasers. We have heretofore expressed our opinion in regard to the mismanagement of Mr. Law’s ships. The comparison between them and the well appointed and cleanly steamers of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company was eminently unfavorable to the former, and we congratulate the travelling public that they have fallen into the hands of the enterprising and liberal men now controlling them. The old ships, the OHIO and the GEORGIA, are withdrawn permanently from the service, and a new and swift steamer is nearly ready to run in connection with the Illinois and the George Law.” Alta, July 8.

The Pacific Mail’s next new steamer, the GOLDEN AGE, was built in the yards of Wm. H. Brown, in New York. She was originally intended for the Collins Line, and was to be named the ADRIATIC. She was, however, sent across the Atlantic on speculation, and finally reached San Francisco, not by way of Cape Horn, but by way of the Cape of Good Hope, spending several months in Australia. Thence she made the pioneer steam voyage across the Pacific via Tahiti to Panama, where she was purchased by the Pacific Mail.

The following was reprinted from a Panama paper: “The steamship Golden Age, D. D. Porter, U.S.N., Commander, arrived at Panama from Sydney, via Tahiti. She left Sydney May 11th and reached Tahiti on the 24th, remaining in that port six days, taking on board 1200 tons of coal, and sailed thence on the 31st, making the voyage from Sydney to Panama, including stoppages, in 38 days...

“The Golden Age brings 110 cabin passengers and 60 in the steerage, and would have been full of passengers but for various misrepresentations of difficulties in crossing the Isthmus.

“The following is a memorandum of the run of the Golden Age since leaving New York, using but twelve of her sixteen furnaces:

	Miles	Days	Hours
New York to Liverpool	3,100	11	7
Liverpool to Cape of Good Hope.....	6,360	26	12
Cape of Good Hope to King George’s Sound (Australia)	4,930	17	12
King George’s Sound to Melbourne	1,270	4	20
Melbourne to Sydney	550		42
Sydney to Tahiti	3,421	13	12
Tahiti to Panama	<u>4,532</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>12</u>
	24,173	94	00

making for the entire distance an average of 257 nautical or 297-1/2 English miles per day.

“The Golden Age has never stopped her engines at sea since

leaving New York, and has neither in hull nor machinery met with an accident during this voyage around the world. She has never been idle since arriving on the Coast of Australia, having been constantly employed running on that coast while her coals were being shipped to Tahiti.” Alta, July 16.

August 1—Tuesday—SONORA

“The Golden Gate, which arrived yesterday, made the trip from Panama in twelve days and six hours, the quickest time, we imagine, that has been made between the two ports.” Alta, July 31.

August 16—Wednesday—OREGON

September 1—Friday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

September 16—Saturday—PANAMA

“The mail brought up yesterday by the California is said to be the largest that has ever been sent to this State. There were upwards of 300 bags of mail matter.” Alta, Sept. 20.

September 30—Saturday—SONORA

“\$5000 WAGER. Wanted to bet \$5000 that the passengers by the Yankee Blade will arrive at Panama in advance of those per the Sonora. Also \$2500 that they will reach New York in advance of those by Sonora, on their next downward trip. Money deposited with Page, Bacon & Co.” Alta, Sept. 29.

“THE \$5000 WAGER TAKEN. Both the bets offered for the last days in the Alta will be accepted provided the Yankee Blade goes into Acapulco, and stops there as long as the Sonora, which ship it is known must stop there for fuel. Money deposited with Page, Bacon & Co. Alta, Sept. 30.

Considerable anxiety has been manifested by various parties going to the Atlantic States by the steamers today, on account of the report that heavy bets have been made on the time which might be made by the Pacific Mail steamship Sonora and by the Yankee Blade. The public announcement that heavy bets were made and the money deposited has increased this feeling of anxiety for safety on this voyage, and tended to make the passengers feel uncomfortable.

“This practice of ocean steamboat racing is exceedingly reprehensible and should not only be discountenanced by those having the steamers under their control but the travelling community. Acting under this conviction, the Mail Steamship Co. have issued positive orders to Capt. Whiting, commander of the Sonora, not to engage in racing on any account whatever, and also instructed the Engineer not to carry at any time more than the usual average amount of steam. To further prevent pushing the steamer, she has only been coaled for nine days run, and will go into Acapulco for the balance of her coal. Such being the arrangements made by the agents of the mail steamer, the passengers may rest easy; they will not be hurried into eternity instead of into Panama.” Alta, Sept. 30.

Despite the reassuring words of the “Alta” the worst fears of the passengers were realized, and some thirty of those who chose the YANKEE BLADE lost their lives the first day of the

voyage. On October 1, about 3 P.M., in a dense fog, while her commander believed himself ten miles off shore, she piled up on the rocks of projecting Point Arguello, not far from Santa Barbara, and was a total loss.

carrying the great Atlantic mails and passengers. Her saloons and steerage are elegant and commodious, and as she has just come down from being thoroughly overhauled at the Benicia docks she is in first rate trim for a comfortable and speedy voyage home. Her late astonishing trip around the world has excited a great deal of curiosity, and a delightful voyage in her may be expected." *Alta*, Nov. 14.



3¢ pair, Sc. 11, tied by "New-York Jun. 24" c.d.s. and "Independent Line, Via Panama, Ahead of the Mails, Yankee Blade and North Star" double-line oval handstamp. Ex Kramer

October 16—Monday—GOLDEN AGE
The GOLDEN AGE arrived in San Francisco for the first time on October 16th.

Commencing as of this date the steamers of the Pacific Mail and the Nicaragua Line, instead of sailing together on the 1st and 16th of the month, sailed on alternate weeks, giving weekly communication with the East. The following refers to a Vanderbilt sailing, and illustrates one of the practices of the express companies which brought down upon them the wrath of the Post Office Department:

"In the absence of the regular mail, Messrs. Adams & Co. will dispatch a special messenger with their letter bags, who will go with them to New York and see to their delivery there. He will also mail and post-pay in New York the letters for other points in the United States, free of extra charge to parties here. The bags will remain open at the office till within a few moments of the departure of the steamer. *Alta*, Oct. 23.

November 16—Thursday—GOLDEN AGE
December 1—Friday—SONORA
December 16—Saturday—JOHN L. STEPHENS
1855



Adams & Co.'s Express, Cal. 25¢ black "Over our California lines only", Sc. 114, with double circle "Adams & Co. Sacramento Apr. 10" 1853 c.d.s. Ex Kramer

November 1—Wednesday—JOHN L. STEPHENS
"THE GOLDEN AGE. This magnificent steamship, originally intended for the Collins Line, is advertised to leave by the P.M.S.S. Co. on Thursday next at 9 A.M. from Vallejo St. wharf,

January 1—Monday—GOLDEN AGE
January 16—Tuesday—SONORA
"DETENTION OF EXPRESS LETTERS. Imperative orders have been received by Mr. Postmaster Weller to seize and detain all mail matter brought by the Expresses In accordance with these orders from the Postmaster General, the letters brought by Adams & Co. and Wells, Fargo & Co. per Golden Age yesterday, were taken into the charge of the postmaster, and thereby the mercantile community was put to considerable inconvenience in obtaining their correspondence. Mr. Weller, perhaps, could not do less than obey the instructions of the Postmaster General, but the order was itself oppressive and not to be endured. *Alta*, Jan. 30.

February 1—Thursday—JOHN L. STEPHENS
"The P.M.S.S. Co. will dispatch the splendid steamship Golden Age, Capt J. T. Watkins, with the mails and passengers on Friday next at 9 A.M. from Vallejo St. wharf. We take great pleasure in informing our readers that the [Panama] Railroad is now finished, and therefore it is confidently expected that the trip home will be made in 21 days. The trip from ocean to ocean is performed in about six hours, in easy and luxurious cars; and where, once upon a time, the braying of donkeys was heard, the whistle of the steam engine greets the ear of those who are about visiting the old folks at home. There are no difficulties or annoyances now on the Isthmus—and particularly for children and ladies is this a great desideratum. Now no one is detained on the Isthmus, and sickness cannot be contracted, for directly upon arrival at Panama you proceed to the cars, and do not leave them until in sight of the Atlantic." *Alta*, Feb. 14.

"PASSENGERS PER GOLDEN AGE who are disposed to celebrate the completion of the PANAMA RAILROAD in a manner corresponding to its importance are earnestly advised to get the NECESSARY PAPERS at once from ROBERTS & CO.'S FAMILY GROCERY, 117 Montgomery St. (*Alta*, Feb. 14.)

February 16—Friday—GOLDEN AGE
March 1—Thursday—GOLDEN GATE
March 16—Friday—SONORA
March 31—Saturday—JOHN L. STEPHENS

This was the last sailing under the rates of 1851-1855. Commencing April 1, the rate to and from the Atlantic States, either prepaid or collect, was ten cents. Since this sailing occurred on the last day of March (due to April 1 being a Sunday), and the next did not occur until April 17th, it follows that anything like a first day cover of the new rate, from California, is a practical impossibility.

What became of the steamers that carried the mail? Ocean vessels come to their end either suddenly and dramatically in tragedy, or, like an old fire horse, slowly descend from the days of their glory into desuetude. The staunch old CALIFORNIA sailed the Pacific for forty-seven years. She last sailed as a steamer in 1875, then was rigged as a bark and engaged in the coal and lumber trade, finally going down off the coast of Peru in 1894.

BARK CALIFORNIA GOES TO THE BOTTOM
She Was the First Steamer to Carry Gold Seekers to San Francisco.

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 17.—A dispatch to the Merchants' Exchange to-day reported the wreck of the bark California, lumber laden, from Puget Sound for Pacasnyo, Peru, at the latter port. The vessel was formerly known as the steamer California, built at Greenpoint, N. Y., in 1849. It arrived here Feb. 1, 1849, being the first steamer to enter this port from New-York with gold seekers.

The New York Times
 Published: January 18, 1895
 Copyright © The New York Times

The PANAMA was sold to Ben Holladay's new "California, Oregon & Mexico Steamship Company" in 1861; her engines were removed about 1865, and her hulk is said to have been used for coffee storage in Mexico. The OREGON sailed as a steamer until about 1869, when she too, was rigged as a sailing vessel and was employed for some years in the Puget Sound lumber trade, her final end being unknown to this writer.

Of the others, the end of the GOLDEN GATE was the most sudden and terrible. On Sunday afternoon, February 27, 1862, she was proceeding on her regular trip to Panama, carrying 338 persons and nearly a million and a half in treasure. While the passengers were at dinner, fire broke out amidships and spread with great rapidity, cutting off most of the lifeboats. She was headed for the beach, near Manzanillo, Mexico, but most of those on board were forced into the sea by the flames, or lost in the surf, there being only about eighty survivors. Ben Holladay, the great stagecoach magnate, saved himself by clinging to a floating ladder.

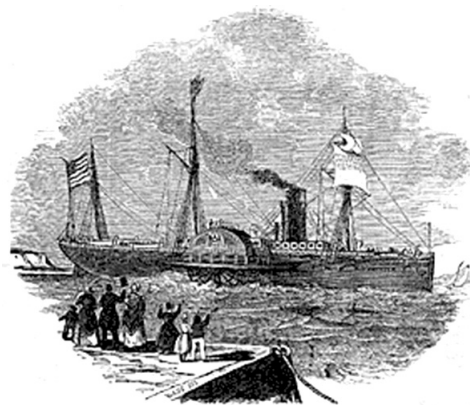
The GOLDEN AGE was burned on the Japanese coast about 1869. Both the NORTHERNER and the SOUTHERNER (originally the ISTHMUS) were wrecked, the latter in 1856 off Cape Flattery, the former some years later off the Northern California coast. The COLUMBUS too was wrecked about 1866.

The days of iron men in wooden ships are gone, never to return, but we of the present day owe much to both, which we will do well to remember.

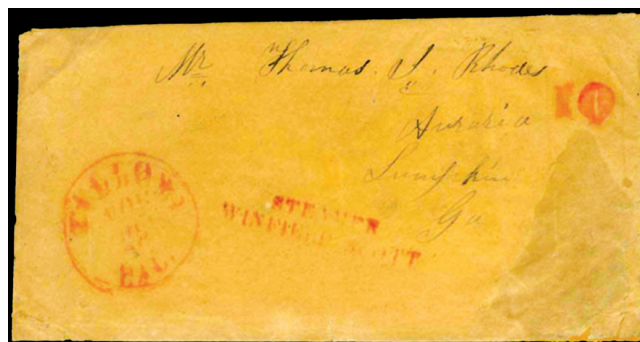


A June 5, 1857 edition of the San Francisco News Letter with "P.M.S.S. John L. Stephens" corner card.

The Life and Times of the Winfield Scott



The Winfield Scott departs New York.
 From <channelislands.noaa.gov>



A cover with "Steamer Winfield Scott" two-line handstamp in red struck on 1853 brown cover to Auraria Ga., with "10" rate handstamp and "Culloma Cal. Nov. 29" circular datestamp, making this one of only seven known covers recovered from the wreck of the steamer.



Salvaged piston and crosshead. From <channelislands.noaa.gov>



Diver at the Winfield Scott site examines a portion of the wreckage