

BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND STAGE COMPANY

Background – The California Gold Rush resulted in more than a quarter of a million men heading west to California in search of their fortunes during the bonanza years of 1849 through 1853. Most of them left their families behind and keeping in touch was a major effort. Private companies, some of which were under federal contract, conveyed the mail. These companies used various routes, including ocean steamer around South America or overland across the Isthmus of Panama. Mail service was extremely sporadic, at best once or twice a month. There was a definite need for a regular mail service. On 3 March 1857, Congress passed a bill authorizing the Post Master General to issue a cross-country mail-carrying contract. The route selection was to be determined by agreement between the contractor and the Post Master General but was to run between some point on the Mississippi River and San Francisco, a distance of over 2800 miles. However, the bill stipulated that the coaches had to be capable of carrying passengers, that each trip had to be completed within 25 days and that service must start within one year of the letting of the contract.

John Butterfield – John Butterfield was born in 1801 in Berne, New York. He became a professional stage driver by the age of 19 and soon became the owner and operator of a livery service. In 1850, he convinced Henry Wells and William Fargo to consolidate their express companies with his own Butterfield & Wasson Company to form the American Express Company, which Butterfield then directed. In 1857, Butterfield won the \$600,000 contract to deliver the mail from St. Louis to San Francisco. The Butterfield Overland Stage Company, a subsidiary of the American Express Company had outbid nine other groups to win the contract.

Butterfield Overland Stage Company – After signing the contract, Butterfield had to develop the route and resources to fulfill the contract. His first task was to hire about 800 men that he would need to operate the company. He primarily hired experienced frontiersman, men friendly with the various Indian tribes that would be encountered along the right-of-way. Using the most capable men, he began laying out the route and erecting almost two hundred stage stations. The stage stations were located approximately twenty miles apart. Next came the purchase of the animals and rolling stock. He acquired more than a thousand horses, about seven hundred mules, eight hundred sets of harnesses and about two hundred and fifty Concord stagecoaches and spring wagons. In addition, hay, grain and other supplies, including food, had to be stockpiled at the way stations and arrangements made for regular deliveries to them after the coaches began rolling.

There were six stage stations between what is currently the Arizona border and Tucson. These were the San Simon, Apache Pass, Ewel Springs, Dragoon Springs, San Pedro (Benson) and Cienega (Vail). The Green Valley Hiking Club visits the ruins of two of these stations during the course of two of their hikes. The Apache Pass station is visited as part of the Butterfield Stage Road/Fort Bowie hike and the Dragoon Springs station is part of the Dragoon Springs Wash hike. One of the criteria for determining the route of the Butterfield Stage Line was the availability of water and both the Apache Pass and Dragoon Springs stations had a nearby spring that provided an assured supply of water.

The Apache Pass Stage Station was located 19 miles west of the San Simon Station and 15 miles east of the Ewel Springs Station in a pass across the Chiricahua Mountains south of the Dos Cabezas area. The station was built of stone in July, 1858. It had 6 to 8 foot high walls and consisted of a kitchen/dining room, sleeping rooms, a storage room for feed and weapons and a corral for the mules. I



Apache Pass Stage Station Ruins



Butterfield Stage Route Tracks

The Dragoon Springs Station was located near Dragoon Springs in the mouth of Jordan Canyon just north of the Dragoon Mountains. In the 1850s Dragoon Springs was an assured water source. The exact location of the springs is difficult to determine today because they stopped flowing after the earthquake of 3 May 1887. The station was a 45-foot by 55-foot structure with a corral at one end and two 9-foot by 10-foot rooms at the other. The Dragoon Station was a “swing” station used for changing horses or mules. The animals were kept inside the station in a stock corral. The walls were 10 feet high and constructed of stone. The ruins of the station’s walls exist today. The Dragoon Springs Station was 25 miles to the west of the Ewel Springs and 21 miles to the east of the San Pedro (Benson) Station.



Dragoon Springs Station Ruins

The first run of the Butterfield Overland Mail Company left St. Louis at 0800, 18 September 1858, passed through Tucson on 2 October and arrived in San Francisco on 10 October. The total elapsed time was 23 days, 23 ½ hours which beat the contract requirement of 25 days. The average speed was 5 miles per hour for the 2866-mile trip. The time was reduced on future runs with most stages arriving at their final destination 22 days later. The fare between St. Louis and San Francisco was \$200 for westbound passengers and \$100 for east bound. The Overland Mail Company continued to make two trips a week from each direction for the next 2 ½ years. In March of 1860, Butterfield was forced out of his position as head of the company due to the large debts he owed to Wells and Fargo. The Overland Stage Company was taken over by Wells

Fargo and Company. The stage line continued to run for another year and the last run was made in March 1861.

Race with the *Great Eastern* - In 1859, Butterfield made a \$100,000 bet with Captain Harrison, the captain of the *Great Eastern* which was the largest and fastest steam ship in the world. The bet was that the Overland Stage could make the trip from St. Louis to San Francisco in less time than the *Great Eastern* could sail from New York to San Francisco. They both departed their respective departure points at the same time. The Overland Stage pulled into San Francisco twenty days later. The *Great Eastern* docked in San Francisco 36 hours after the stage had arrived.

Apache Relationships – The route of the stage line through what was to become Southeastern Arizona ran through the territory controlled by the Chiricahua Apaches. During the early runs of the stage line, the Apaches were not openly hostile to the Anglo-Americans. It is thought that he actually entered into an “agreement” with the staff of the stage line that he limit his raids to south of the border and would leave the stage line alone In fact, Cochise even had a contract with the stage line during the winter of 1860 to provide wood to the stations. This all changed during February 1861 following a major blunder by 2nd Lt. George Nicholas Bascom. Lt Bascom had been sent from Fort Buchanan to question Cochise about the abduction of a child from a ranch near Sonoita. Cochise and several of his relatives met with Lt. Bascom in Apache Pass. Bascom accused Cochise of the abduction and tried to arrest him but Cochise escaped. The rest of his party were held as hostages by the Army. During the next few days, Cochise also took hostages hoping to negotiate the release of his people. Both sides ended up killing some of their hostages. Three of the Apaches that were hanged were Cochise’s relatives. This incident resulted in 11 years of bloody retaliation by the Apaches. Within 60 days, 150 Anglo-Americans were killed and it has been charged that the series of blunders, which loosed Cochise upon the Americans, cost 5,000 American lives and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property. This was one of the main reasons the stage route was shut down a month later.

For more information on the following subjects, click on the following links or post the associated urls onto your browser.

1. John Butterfield - <http://www.desertusa.com/mag98/dec/papr/butter.html>
2. Butterfield Overland Express – <http://www.over-land.com/mail.html>

Summary prepared December 2004 and updated in 2015 by T. Johnson from material found in several web sites. Photos by T. Johnson