

A Case for the Butterfield Overland Mail Using the Lower Road Much Earlier Than Previously Known

Tom Ashmore, West Texas Archeological Society

The Butterfield Overland Mail is documented to have used the northern route, also known as the Upper Road to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River, up the east side of the Pecos, and through the Guadalupe Mountains to El Paso. It made its first run in September 1858 and ran the Upper Road until June of 1859, when it abandoned the northern route and began using the southern route, also known as the Lower Road. This southern route required them to use a roped skiff boat to cross the river at Horsehead Crossing to meet a waiting coach on the west side and then make their way through Forts Davis, Quitman, and continuing to El Paso. (Ely)

On September 27th, 1858, Waterman L. Ormsby, Special Correspondence of the New York Times, reported arriving at Horsehead Crossing as part of the inaugural ride and the opening of the Butterfield Overland Mail route. His newspaper journal, now a published book, continued to record the ride up to Pope's Crossing Station, just south of the New Mexico state line, and on to the west through the Guadalupe Mountains. (Ormsby) This was the uncontested and postmaster-directed route for all the coaches until the route changed in June 1859.

However, a report and illustration by Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, dated November 27, 1858, of Butterfield coaches using the Horsehead Crossing to transfer packages and mail sheds new light on the fact that the company was using at least a portion of the southern route in addition to the northern route to haul additional freight long before the 1859 route change.

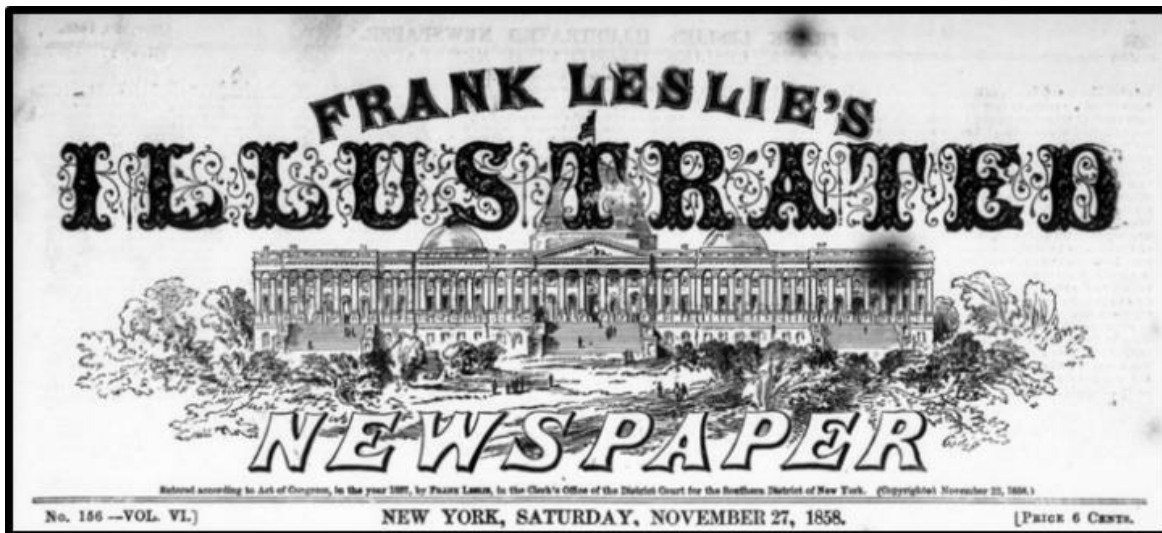


Figure 1. Newspaper Head for November 27, 1858 illustration

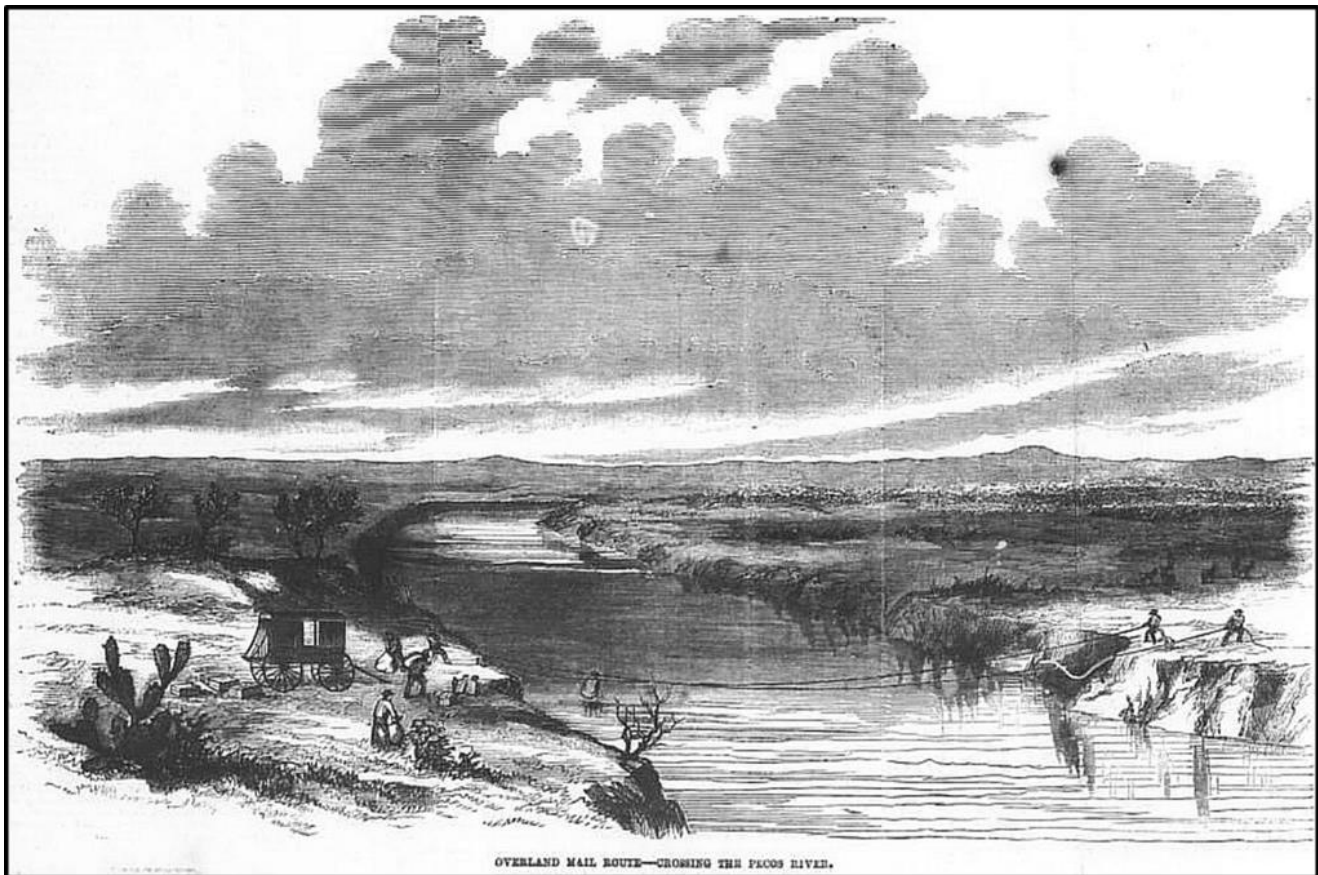


Figure 2. Illustration of Horsehead Crossing transfer of packages and mail via rope line

In this illustration, we can see six men working to transfer bags and boxes across the river by rope, carried in a hide bag (described in the accompanying article). Four men are working the west side and two are working the east side. On the west side, three men are working with bags for transfer and one is maintaining the rope that has a pulley wheel. Boxes are on the ground behind the stagecoach and some packages are gathered at the edge of the embankment. The mules have been removed from the coach, probably being grazed because there was no station on the west side. A leather-hide bag is hanging on the rope. On the east side, the rope passes through a ring implanted in the ground to ensure the stability of the pull. One man is letting the rope out while the other is pulling. In the background on the east side are four loose mules. There are no passengers in the illustration.

The stagecoach transfer point at Horsehead Crossing was a quarter mile upriver from the well-known wagon crossing point. It was created in a separate bend of the river, 300 yards east of Horsehead Crossing Station. In my previous research, I found this crossing point by following the wagon traces on each side of the river. Due to this area's sandy soil, these traces are only seen today by viewing the linear vegetation growth from above. Coming from the west, the trace cuts off from the main road to head across the bend to a circle-turn area. On the east side, the road comes from the station in the middle of the next bend and makes a large loop along the river bank before returning to the station. My research is documented in an in-depth paper devoted to this site and the old station. (Ashmore) The newspaper illustration is the same spot as used later when the route was officially changed.

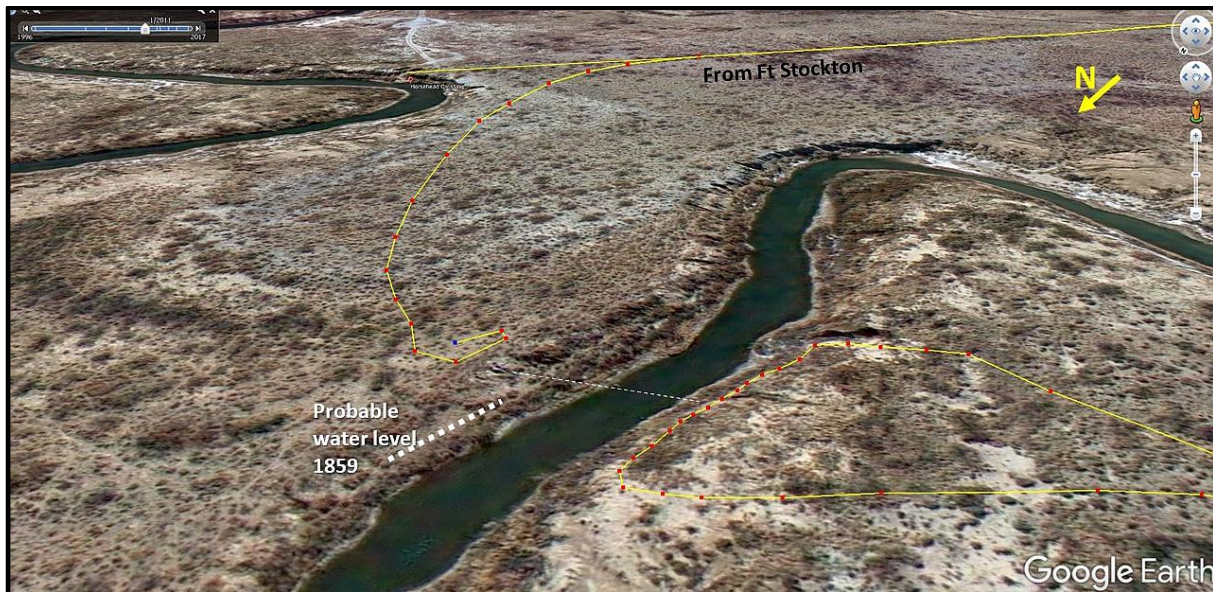


Figure 3. Horsehead Crossing Point determined through imagery interpretation and ground reconnaissance

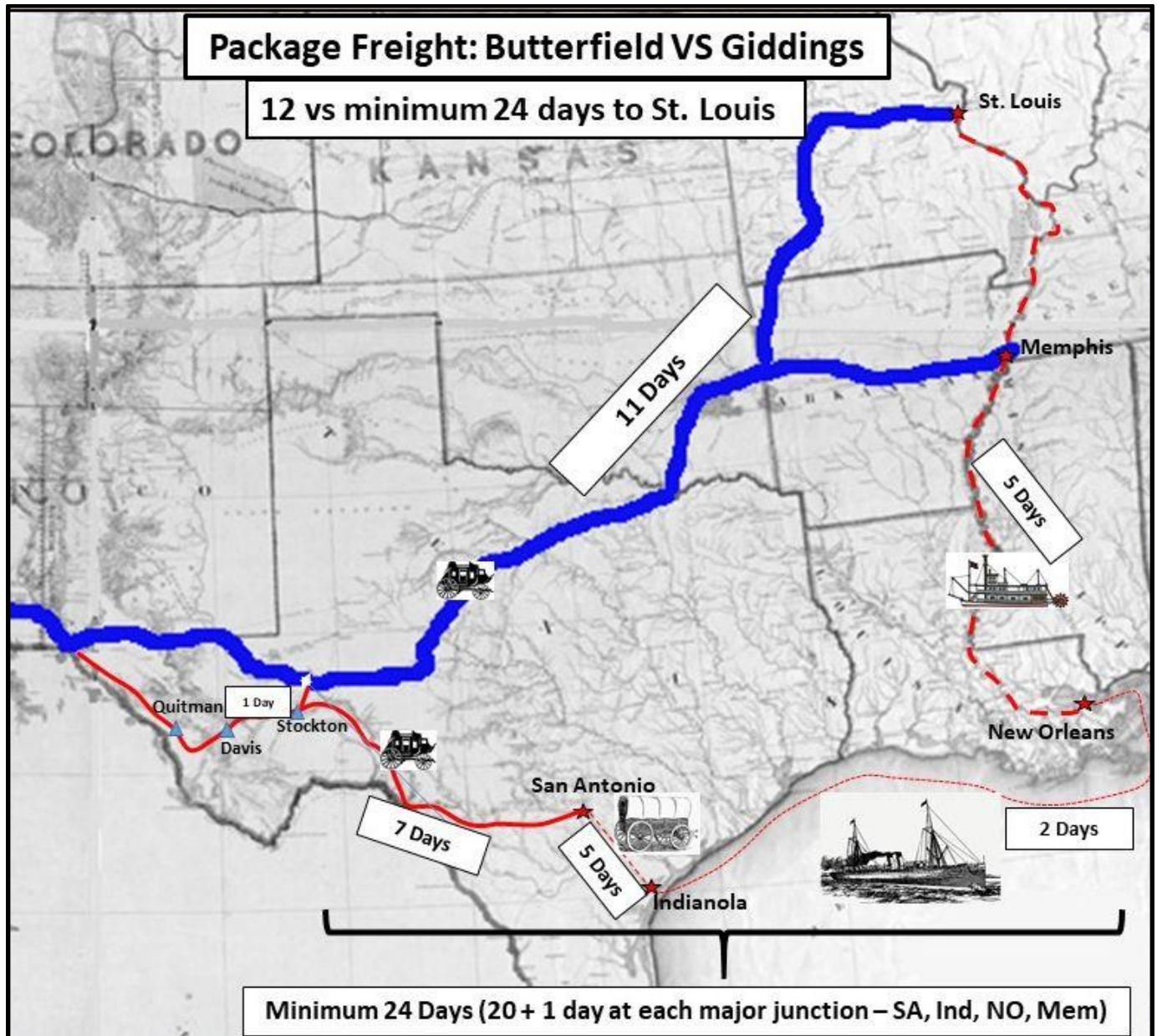
During this period a separate contract for mail from San Antonio to El Paso using the Lower Road was held by George Giddings. Giddings received a contract for Route number 8076 for semi-monthly service on January 1 1858. The contract ran for three and a half years. The route was increased to weekly from Indianola to San Antonio and then on to El Paso in February 1859. (Mullins)

So, the question is, why was the Butterfield Overland Mail running a separate and undocumented coach freighting service on much of the same route and during the same time frame as the Giddings' mail route? At this time Camp Stockton did not exist and could not have been part of the explanation. I believe the answer lies in several issues of the time. First, two populated locations were being bypassed by Butterfield's northern route. Both these were military installations as potential shipping customers, with a direct and quick route back to Saint Louis. Second, the company must have known what was in the political wind for the upcoming route change and were getting ahead of the turn of events.

Both locations with any population were military. The first was Fort Davis. In early 1858 Fort Davis housed around five companies, but these were down to three in August. On September 28 1858 a company of 86 men from Fort Davis opened up Fort Quitman on the Lower Road, 120 miles west of Fort Davis. (Dings) On April 12 1859 Camp Stockton started up with one company from Fort Lancaster. (Francell) So, in November there were approximately 250 military personnel assigned along the Lower Road protection, along with any civilian support personnel for farm products and construction. By January another 80 or so soldiers were at Camp Stockton, along with civilians that came into the area to support the military. By June 1859 the entire route was changed, abandoning the northern route and using the river crossing for mail and passengers. Butterfield knew about this coming change in advance and had already made their preparations.

Before the route was changed, anyone who wanted to ship moderately small items to or from Saint Louis would have preferred to use the Butterfield Overland Mail rather than the San Antonio route. The Butterfield Overland Mail was running each direction twice per week, compared to twice per month for the San Antonio route. Additionally, it would have been a one-day run to Horsehead Crossing from Fort Davis (two days from Fort Quitman) and then 11 days to reach Saint Louis. Conversely, the other route would have been around 8 days to San Antonio after waiting for the bi-weekly coach, then ground freighting to Indianola, steamship to New Orleans, and finally riverboat up the Mississippi to Saint Louis, with a stop at Memphis. By my calculation, this would have been a minimum of around 24 days to Saint Louis if everything went perfectly versus 12 days by Butterfield coach. Ordering from Saint Louis would

be a similar length of time. As long as it was small enough freight, the obvious choice would have been the Butterfield Overland coaches, and this would have been worth a separate freight run for the Butterfield Company while continuing their main coach route through the Guadalupe Mountains.



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