POST OFFICE REFORM ON THE MOVE: THE SAN ANTONIO–SAN DIEGO MAIL ROUTE, 1857–1861

Presented by Robert G. Cullen,
The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
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The San Antonio–San Diego Mail Route

- An early part of the federal government’s more vigorous mail delivery efforts linking California with the rest of the nation during the 1850s.
- While rarely remembered today, the route was a pivotal pioneer in bridging as well as shrinking the transcontinental gap between the Pacific coast and points east.
- The route was also an important milestone for the postal reforms of that era.
Postal Reforms

- During the 1840s, Congress passed legislation authorizing reduced postage rates and the adoption of adhesive stamps to promote prepayment of mail throughout the U.S.

- Without widespread geographic usage of stamps, however, the promise of these postal reforms would remain largely unfulfilled.

- Would prepaid mail under these new reforms become truly national in scope?
California’s Rapid Growth

- The discovery of gold in California at Sutter’s Mill in 1848 triggered the largest east–west migration of Americans up to that time.
- By the time California joined the union as the 31st state in 1850, its population had increased significantly to 100,000.
- The U.S. Post Office Department struggled to find the best means and modes available to keep that population in steady communication with family, friends, and business associates back home in the east.
In Search of a Solution

- As an answer to California’s mail-delivery challenges, steamships proved to be problematic. The reasons for this ranged from their steep fees to slow travel times.

- Overland mail lines set up during the early 1850s likewise proved to be a poor alternative. Their drawbacks included a lack of sufficient infrastructure and government funding.

- A timelier, more dependable means of mail transportation was sorely needed.

“Can somebody tell us what has become of the U.S. mail for this part of the world?”

Los Angeles Star
October 1, 1853
In 1856, approximately 75,000 California citizens sent a petition to Washington, D.C., demanding improved east–west mail service.

In response, Congress passed legislation authorizing the creation of a government-subsidized route between San Antonio and San Diego to expedite mail delivery to and from California.

That 1476-mile-long line, officially designated Route 8076, would basically become the first federally funded transcontinental route in U.S. history.

On June 22, 1857, the contract for that route was awarded to James E. Birch.
The San Antonio–San Diego Mail Route

- The first westbound mail left for San Diego on July 9, 1857, and the second run headed in that direction on July 24. Both of those mails arrived in San Diego on August 31.
- The first eastbound mail departed San Diego on August 9, 1857, and reached San Antonio on September 6, “having met no obstacles.”
After Birch was lost at sea in September 1857, George H. Giddings and Robert E. Doyle took over operation of the route.

Under their leadership, the enterprise also became the first long-distance overland passenger transportation service to California.
"This Line which has been in successful operation since July 1857 is ticketing passengers through to San Diego, and also all intermediate stations. Passenger and Express matter forward in NEW COACHES drawn by six mules over the entire length of our Line, excepting the Colorado Desert of one hundred miles, which we cross on mule back. Passengers guaranteed in their tickets to ride in coaches, excepting the 100 miles, above stated."
The San Antonio–San Diego Mail Route

- The route did much to help advance post office reforms that had first taken shape over a decade earlier, strengthening as well as lengthening the coast-to-coast reach of stamps.
In late 1858, the route began experiencing reductions in the amount of territory it covered. The line was ultimately phased out altogether by 1861 once the Civil War began and the U.S. Post Office Department suspended mail service to the now-Confederate state of Texas.
The San Antonio–San Diego Mail Route

- The route deserves more careful and comprehensive study than it has traditionally received.
- According to the 1930 book *Six Horses*, James E. Birch was “the man who put an empire on wheels.”
- It can also be argued that he and the others who made the San Antonio–San Diego Route possible and functional did much to put that era’s post office reforms on wheels.
Questions? Comments?
bobc@aashto.org

AASHTO
444 North Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite 249
Washington, D.C. 20001
202-624-8918
www.transportation.org