

*H. B. Company  
Express to Columbia River*

## Chapter Three

### Oregon Mails, 1830-1848

This chapter will trace the mail communications with the Oregon Country and the Pacific Northwest up to the implementation of contract mail routes and service by the United States post office. The history of British and American interests in the area is interwoven but the two principal threads are treated separately in dealing with the historical background of the area. However, mail communication systems were largely shared and will be examined together based on the mail routes utilized.

#### The Disputed Oregon Country

Although Spanish and Russian explorers visited the Pacific Northwest prior to 1778, the primary sovereign claimants to the area were Great Britain and the United States. The British explorer James Cook explored the coast of Oregon in 1778 and the American sea captain Robert Gray arrived in the area in 1791 aboard his ship *Columbia Rediviva*. After spending the winter on what is now Vancouver Island, Gray met the British naval Captain George Vancouver in command of the HMS *Discovery* on April 29, 1792. Following the meeting, Gray returned to the previously scouted Columbia River and sailed past the sand bars into the estuary and up to the point where Grays River joins the Columbia River. The river was navigated to a similar length by George Vancouver later that same year.

American claims were furthered as a result of the Lewis and Clark overland expedition of 1803 - 1806 which wintered near the mouth of the Columbia River. British claims were likewise advanced by David Thompson, who explored the river between 1807 and 1811 and reported widely on the numerous fur-bearing animals in the area. Following the War of 1812, an Anglo-American Treaty of October 1818 established the unusual arrangement of "joint occupancy" by the two countries for the area. This meant that either American or British subjects could freely settle there. By the 1840s, the preponderance of American settlers in the southern area of the region convinced the United States and Great Britain to resolve the Oregon Country question by dividing the region along the 49th parallel on June 15, 1846, as shown in Figure 3-1.



Figure 3-1. An 1840 map of the Oregon Country overlaid to show the disputed area and the final 1846 Treaty boundaries.

The territory south of the 49th parallel (excepting Vancouver Island) was ceded to the United States, and that north of the parallel to Great Britain.

## History of American Interests in the Pacific Northwest

The first permanent establishment in the area was Fort Astoria, located near the mouth of the Columbia River. The trading fort was raised in April-September 1811 as part of John Jacob Astor's scheme to purchase furs in Oregon Country and export them directly to China. His Pacific Fur Company (PFC) had dispatched two parties of men to the area. The first to arrive was on the ship *Tonquin*, whose officers and crew founded the fort. The second group of men (the Astorians) traveled by an overland route departing from St Louis in March 1811. Instead of following the trail of Lewis and Clark, the expedition took a more southerly route through present day Wyoming to Jackson Hole, across the Teton Mountain Range at Teton Pass and then down the Snake River. Finally they followed the Columbia River to Fort Astoria where they arrived in February 1812.

After the loss of the ship *Tonquin* during a trading trip to Puget Sound, a group of PFC men led by Robert Stuart departed from Fort Astoria in June 1812 for a return overland journey. The route taken was further south than that taken on the outbound trip and they thereby discovered the South Pass over the Continental Divide. The party then followed the Sweetwater, North Platte, and Platte Rivers to the Missouri River. They arrived in St. Louis in May 1813. A large portion of this route, well documented by Stuart at the time, was later to become the Oregon Trail, as illustrated in Figure 3-2.



Figure 3-2. Map of the Platte River Road and the Oregon Trail.

Due to the risk of loss during the War of 1812, Astor sold Fort Astoria and his Oregon Country operations to the Montreal-based North West Company in October 1813. Following the Anglo-American Treaty of 1818 some Americans began to advocate the settlement of Oregon as a means to gain full control of the territory. Notable among these was Boston's Hall J. Kelley, who took this cause to the U.S. Congress repeatedly until 1832. Kelley lacked the finances to mount his own expedition to the Northwest, so one of his disciples, Nathaniel Wyeth, finally led an expedition in 1832 (described in Chapter One) to survey the commercial potential of the area. His trip to Oregon proved the feasibility of getting there, and his congenial reception there made the journey less forbidding.

Since the United States had no presence in the Oregon Country from 1813 to 1832, the North West Company (merged into the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821) was able to establish full commercial control of the area during that time. A few American fur trappers (notably Jedediah Smith in 1827-29) penetrated into the Northwest, but were driven away by competition from the Hudson's Bay Company.

Then, in June 1831, a delegation from two Northwest Native American tribes traveled with an American Fur Company supply caravan to St Louis. They arrived in October, and asked for help in learning the religion of the "black robes." When news of this reached the eastern United States, the Protestant missionary societies were galvanized into action. They precipitated a wave of missionaries to the Northwest that became the foundation for the re-settlement of Americans in that region. The Methodist Missionary Society and American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) were the first to respond, followed soon by the Catholic Church.

The earliest missionaries traveled overland to Oregon. They accompanied fur trade caravans from Missouri to the various summer rendezvous meetings (see Chapter One). Once there, they needed fur trapper guides to lead them from the rendezvous to Oregon. After 1834, the returning HBC fur brigades escorted travelers to the Northwest. The route taken was to Fort Hall (near today's Pocatello, Idaho) and then along the banks of the Snake River to Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia River. Once on the Columbia River, boats could be used to reach different points in Oregon.

The first missionary to Oregon was the Methodist minister Jason Lee, and he traveled overland with the second Wyeth expedition to the Ham's Fork fur trade rendezvous in June 1834. Wyeth then led him to Oregon, and he arrived at Fort Vancouver on September 16. Lee was followed in 1835 by ABCFM ministers Samuel Parker and Marcus Whitman, who traveled with the American Fur Company supply caravan led by Lucien Fontenelle. They left Missouri on June 22 and arrived at the Green River rendezvous on August 12. On August 21, Parker continued on to Oregon, escorted by fur trader Jim Bridger, and Whitman returned to Missouri to recruit more missionaries. Whitman took to the trail again the following year, bringing his wife overland to Oregon. Mrs. Whitman and Mrs. Spalding were the first non-native women to cross the Rocky Mountains.

In 1833, Hall J. Kelley finally set out for the West via New Orleans and Mexico, arriving penniless in southern California in early 1834. While there, he convinced Ewing Young and



Jason Lee, Pioneer Missionary to Oregon, 1833 - 1806

- With Wyeth Party to Oregon, April to September 1834
- Overland to Westport, Missouri, March-Sept. 1838
- Promoted Oregon Territory in the U.S., 1838-1839
- To Oregon on ship *Lausanne*, Oct. 1839 - June 1840
- To Hawaii on ship *Columbia*, January-February 1844
- Recalled to New York via Mexico, May 1844
- Died March 12, 1845, aged 41 years

sixteen men to drive a herd of horses to Oregon. They arrived at Fort Vancouver on October 15, 1834, but HBC officials, thinking that they were horse thieves, gave them a chilly reception. Much offended, Kelley left in March 1835 and returned to the United States bringing stories of abuse by the British in the Northwest. This further inflamed the general desire to re-claim Oregon for the United States, so Lt. William Slacum was sent on the *Loriot* to investigate Kelley's claims and to survey the northwest coast, arriving in Oregon on December 22, 1836. This was the first in a series of U.S. military explorations into the region, and underscored the growing interest in Oregon by the U.S. government.

Meanwhile, the Methodist Missionary Society decided to reinforce Jason Lee in Oregon with additional missionaries. In 1836 and early 1837, they sent 25 people on two ships from Boston around Cape Horn and via Hawaii to Oregon, where they arrived in May and September 1837. From this point on, the Methodists sent reinforcements on ships around Cape Horn and via Hawaii, while the ABCFM continued to send their missionary reinforcements overland.

In March 1838, Jason Lee returned overland to petition the U. S. government to place Oregon under territorial protection, passing through Westport, Missouri on September 1. Continuing his trip to the East, he preached the virtues of Oregon settlement along the way, which generated much interest. After his lecture in Peoria, Illinois, a group of nineteen men formed the "Peoria Party" under the leadership of T.J. Farnham and Robert Shortess, with the intention to settle permanently in Oregon, and thus counter the influence of the English in that region. They left Independence, Missouri on May 30, 1839 and reached Fort Walla Walla on September 23. This was the first non-missionary party of Oregon settlers to arrive from the East.

In October 1839, Jason Lee returned to Oregon with the Methodist "Great Reinforcement" on a ship via Cape Horn and Hawaii. The *Lausanne* left New York City on October 9 with 52 people, and arrived in Hawaii on April 10, 1840. It subsequently reached Fort Vancouver, Oregon on June 1, 1840. Table 3-1 summarizes the early trips by missionaries and settlers to Oregon.

Table 3-1. Immigrant Trips to Oregon from 1834 to 1840

Travelers	Affiliation	Departed	Arrived in Oregon
Jason Lee	Methodists	April 28, 1834 overland with Wyeth party	Ft Vancouver Sep. 16, 1834
Hall Kelley-Young	Settlers	Summer 1834 overland from California	Ft Vancouver Oct. 15, 1834
Samuel Parker	ABCFM	June 22, 1835 overland with fur traders	Ft Walla Walla Oct. 6, 1835
Whitman-Spalding	ABCFM	May 14, 1836 overland with fur traders	Ft Walla Walla Sep. 1836
Elijah White et al	Methodists	<i>Hamilton</i> from Boston July 27, 1836	Ft Vancouver May 28, 1837
Leslie-Perkins	Methodists	<i>Peru</i> from Boston January 27, 1837	Ft Vancouver Sep. 7, 1837
Blanchet-Demers	Catholics	HBC canoe brigade from Montreal	Ft Walla Walla Nov. 18, 1838
Walker-Gray-Eells	ABCFM	April 23, 1838 overland with fur traders	Whitman Mission Aug. 29, 1838
Munger-Griffin	ABCFM	May 4, 1839 overland with fur traders	Ft Walla Walla Sep. 4, 1839
Farnham-Shortess	Settlers	May 30, 1839 overland via Bent's Fort	Ft Walla Walla Sep. 23, 1839
Jason Lee	Methodists	<i>Lausanne</i> from NY October 9, 1839	Ft Vancouver June 1, 1840
Walker-Clark	Independent	April 30, 1840 overland with fur traders	Willamette Sep. 13, 1840

A Hudson's Bay Company census in late 1839 counted only 51 non-native adult males in the Oregon Country. By the following year, there were 200 non-native settlers and missionaries, of whom 137 were Americans.<sup>1</sup> This clearly showed that the U.S. settlement of Oregon was proceeding at a fast pace, and the HBC became alarmed that they might lose control of the region. In response, they formed a subsidiary called the Puget Sound Agricultural Company and transported 121 Canadians by canoe brigade from the Red River Settlement to a spot near today's Tacoma, Washington in October 1841.

In 1841, half of the Bidwell - Bartelson Party to California (described in Chapter Four) separated from the group at Soda Springs (in present day southeast Idaho) and proceeded to Oregon under the guidance of Thomas Fitzgerald. The next major non-missionary emigrant train of about 120 people was led by Dr. Elijah White and Lansford Hastings in 1842. They left the Independence, Missouri area on May 16 and arrived in Oregon's Willamette River valley on October 5.

More American emigrants to Oregon traveled on the overland trail in 1843 than in all previous years combined. This was the beginning of a flood of American immigrants to Oregon which continued well into the 1850's.

## History of British Interests in the Pacific Northwest

Great Britain's Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was the major force in the early development of Canada as well as the Pacific Northwest. The HBC received its royal charter in 1670 as "The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay," and its operations were initially focused on central Canada. When the HBC attempted to expand westward they ran into competition from the North West Company (NWC) which had a strong foothold in the Pacific Northwest. To resolve the bitter feud that developed, the NWC was merged into the much larger HBC in 1821.

After the merger, the HBC held a virtual monopoly over the lucrative fur trade business in British North America. Their territory now extended west to the Pacific Ocean and north to the Arctic Ocean. Managed by Sir George Simpson from 1826 to 1860, the HBC employed 25 chief factors, a further 28 chief traders who shared in profits, as well as some 1,500 additional employees. The primary HBC headquarters in Canada were at Lachine (now part of western Montreal) and at York Factory on Hudson's Bay. These two facilities operated a series of smaller posts ("factories") to the west to collect furs and pelts. After collection at these smaller factories, the most valuable peltry goods were transported to York Factory, or to Moose Factory on James Bay at the southern end of Hudson's Bay, while the less important goods were sent to the HBC offices in Lachine. From those points, goods were shipped to England. In the reverse direction, supplies and goods for trade were shipped from England to the factories on Hudson's Bay or to Lachine for distribution to the smaller factories.



John McLoughlin, HBC Chief Factor, 1823 - 1846

- Appointed Chief Factor of HBC's Columbia Department, 1824
- Built HBC Fort Vancouver, 1825
- Returned to London to promote trade with Japan, 1834-35
- Returned east by Canoe Brigade to NY, March-Sept. 1838
- In London 1838-39; returned by Canoe Brigade, April-Oct. 1839
- Supported an independent nation of Oregon, 1842
- Resigned from HBC and settled in Oregon City, 1846

After the 1821 merger, the HBC established the Caledonia and Columbia fur districts, which became part of their larger Columbia Department (shown on map in Figure 3-1 as the area shaded pink west of the Continental Divide). In 1825, the newly appointed Chief Factor, John McLoughlin, opened Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River (across the river from present day Portland, Oregon) to serve as the headquarters for the Columbia Department. The 1845 view of the fort shown in Figure 3-3 portrays McLoughlin's headquarters, designated by the flag, from which point he directed 34 outposts and 600 employees engaged in the fur trade throughout the Pacific Northwest. In addition, he inaugurated salmon and timber trade with California and Hawaii and introduced farming. The food-stuff production was enough to supply both local needs and provide a surplus for export to Alaska.



Figure 3-3. Lithograph of Fort Vancouver in 1845 from a watercolor by James Warre.

The dominance of the HBC in the Oregon County began to diminish when the market demand for fur dropped significantly in the early 1840s. At the same time, the great number of American immigrants to the southern portion of the department shifted even more power away from Great Britain and the HBC. Following the 1846 Treaty, HBC abandoned all operations in Oregon, including Fort Vancouver.

### The Hudson's Bay Company Communication System

From the HBC base of operations for the Columbia Department at Fort Vancouver, Chief Factor John McLoughlin utilized two primary schemes in his system to communicate with other HBC factories and offices in Canada as well as with the HBC home office in London, England.

The two major routes used by the HBC to communicate between the Columbia River and London are shown in Figure 3-4.



Figure 3-4. Map showing primary HBC routes to England. The York Factory Express route in blue and the Cape Horn route in red.

The overland route, shown in blue, ran from the Columbia River over the Rocky Mountains to Norway House and then onward to York Factory. From York Factory, ships traveled across Hudson's Bay into the North Atlantic and eastward to England. The major water route, shown in red, operated via the Pacific Ocean, around Cape Horn, and across the Atlantic to London.

These two primary communication routes, as well as their subsidiary and variant routes, were coordinated in relation to arrival and departure dates. This resulted in a very efficient system that got supplies to the factories, and peltry goods to market, in a timely and economical manner. These routes also formed the basis for communication between the Pacific Northwest and intermediate points east.

The HBC supply ships sent westward from England departed London each May or June and arrived at York Factory in late August or early September (see Appendix B). Eastbound overland expresses departed from the Columbia River each spring and arrived at York Factory to coincide with the ship departures each September. These ships departed before ice became a problem on Hudson's Bay and arrived back in London in October or November. Westbound mail from the United States left each April on the overland route from Lachine via Norway House, and arrived in the Columbia Department in October.

The "via Cape Horn" supply ships sent westward from England departed London mostly in the late fall and arrived at the Columbia River the following spring (Appendix B). The return trips usually departed the Columbia River between October and December and arrived home in London in May or June of the following year. These supply ships often stopped in Honolulu in both directions.

No charge was made by HBC for mail carriage on their routes and the company actually paid postal charges on mail that required prepayment for onward transmission. Although free mail service was provided to persons not employed by HBC, there was a stipulation that such letters could not communicate matters pertaining to their own business or to HBC business. The vast majority of the surviving mail carried by the various HBC expresses originated in, or was addressed to, the interior of Canada and is therefore outside the scope of this book.

## Overview of Oregon Mail Routes before 1849

While the HBC employees stationed in Oregon used their own communication systems to correspond with Great Britain, the American residents of Oregon Country had limited channels available for mail communication with the eastern United States. The transcontinental routes outlined below were in use concurrently, and correspondents often chose the route based on the next available departure. All of these routes were slow, with mail usually taking five to six months or more. The brief summaries are ordered by the routes that entailed ocean conveyance followed by the land routes.

**Via Cape Horn:** This route, comprised of three variations, includes all mails that traveled by ship around the Horn to the United States and England.

**Direct:** The HBC annual supply ships carried mail in addition to trade goods between England and the Columbia River.

**Via California:** A few ships, mostly American, carried mail to and from Oregon with intermediate stops along the California coast.

**Via Hawaii:** In addition to their annual supply ships which occasionally stopped in Hawaii, the HBC ran trading ships between Oregon and Hawaii. The less numerous American trading vessels also traveled on this route. Mail from the eastern United States could be transferred at Honolulu to connect with one of these trading vessels bound to Oregon or in the opposite direction to a ship departing for an American port on the east coast.

**Via Mexico and Hawaii:** This route, eastbound from Oregon, was by ship to a forwarder in Hawaii, by ship to a forwarder in Mazatlan, Mexico, overland to a forwarder in Vera Cruz, and then by ship to the destination. Westbound mail could be carried on the route in reverse order. The route did not develop until a reliable network of forwarders was established in 1835 and was interrupted by the May 1846 start of the Mexican-American War.

**Hudson's Bay Company Overland Brigade:** The HBC ran annual "canoe brigades" between their eastern factories and the Oregon Country. American correspondents could utilize this system for their mail with minor restrictions.

**Overland between Missouri and Oregon:** Travelers on the Oregon Trail also provided opportunities to send mail in both directions.

## Mail via Cape Horn, Direct

The first HBC vessel to reach the Columbia River was the *William and Ann* which departed London on July 27, 1824 and arrived, after a stop at the Galapagos Islands, on April 8, 1825. It departed from the Columbia River on October 25, 1825 and arrived back in London on April 13, 1826. Over the next twenty years prior to the Oregon Treaty, the authors record 28 additional trips that departed from London and landed at the Columbia River. A chart of sailing dates and information derived from HBC archives and period newspaper notices is included in Appendix B. Although the 1846 London departures are included in the table, those HBC ships landed at Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island rather than at the Columbia River due to the abandonment of Fort Vancouver after the partition of Oregon. In the summer interval between arrival at the Columbia River and departure back to England, many of these vessels made coastal trading voyages to California, Hawaii or Alaska.

The earliest reported letter carried by one of the HBC annual supply ships is shown in Figure 3-5. It was written by an HBC sailor who had recently arrived on the HBC ship *Dryad*. Addressed to London,



Figure 3-5. October 9, 1830 letter from Fort Vancouver to England carried around Cape Horn by the HBC annual supply ship *Eagle*.

the letter was datelined October 9, 1830 at Fort Vancouver and describes the sailor's trip from the Falkland Islands, via Magellan Strait, Easter Island and Hawaii to Fort Vancouver. The letter was carried on the return voyage of the HBC ship *Eagle* that departed the Columbia River on October 29, 1830 and arrived in London on April 17, 1831. It entered the mails at Deal, England where it received a "Deal Ship Letter" handstamp and manuscript "1N4" (1 shilling 4 pence) postal rate due. It was postmarked upon arrival at London with their April 18, 1831 backstamp.

A letter carried by an annual HBC supply ship on an outbound voyage to the Columbia River is shown in Figure 3-6. It was datelined at London on December 9, 1834 and addressed to W. Fraser Tolmie at Fort Vancouver, Columbia River. Fresh out of Glasgow University, Tolmie had arrived in Vancouver the previous spring as surgeon and clerk for the post. After delivery of the letter to the HBC office in London, it was endorsed "Col" for "Columbia District" at top left to signify the location of the employee. Other HBC abbreviations are reported for mail directed to York Factory (YF) and Red River Settlement (RRS) but these are outside the scope of this work. Additional 1836 and 1837 examples from the Tolmie correspondence do not show the HBC endorsement. This letter was transmitted on the HBC ship *Ganymede* which departed London on December 10, 1834 and arrived at the Columbia River on July 27, 1835.

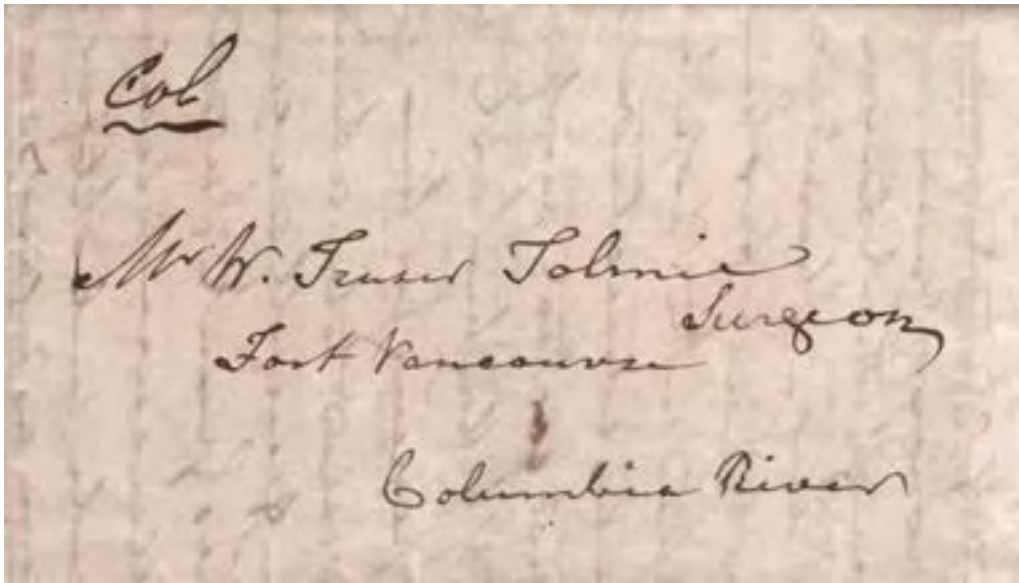


Figure 3-6. December 9, 1834 letter from England to Fort Vancouver, Oregon carried by the HBC annual supply ship *Ganymede*.

A final example of mail carried by an annual HBC supply ship is the letter shown in Figure 3-7, which originated in Western Australia and traveled around the Horn twice before being delivered to Fort Vancouver.

This exceptional letter was sent from Swan River, Western Australia on November 10, 1845 and was addressed to Henry Sewell, an early immigrant to Oregon from Great Britain. It was endorsed "to the care of the Gentlemen of the Hudsons Bay Company." It was also prepaid 6 pence in cash for the outgoing ship letter charge and bears Guildford and Perth Ship Letter transits. It was then carried on the coastal ship *Union* to Sydney, New South Wales and onward around Cape Horn to London on a private ship. A further 8 pence postage due was paid upon arrival in London by the HBC, and the letter was then placed on a supply ship bound for the Columbia Department. It cannot be determined which of the two supply ships that departed in the fall of 1846 carried this letter. The HBC ship *Cowlitz* departed London on October 8, 1846 and arrived at Victoria, Vancouver Island on March 21, 1847 while the HBC ship *Mary Dove* departed November 3 and arrived at Victoria on April 14, 1847. Both of these vessels landed at Fort Victoria, Vancouver Island rather than at Fort Vancouver, Oregon as the Oregon Treaty had been signed prior to their departures, and the HBC had evacuated Fort Vancouver.



Figure 3-7. November 10, 1845 letter from Western Australia to Fort Vancouver. After arriving in England via Cape Horn it was carried by HBC annual supply ship via Cape Horn to Fort Victoria.

### Mail via Cape Horn and California

This route was rarely used, and then only towards the end of the 1840s. An example of a letter that traveled south along the coast to San Francisco and then around the Horn to the eastern United States is shown in Figure 3-8.



Figure 3-8. July 11, 1847 letter written in Salem, Oregon and sent to Connecticut via San Francisco and Cape Horn.

This letter was written at Salem, Oregon on July 11, 1847 and hand-carried to Astoria, where it was entrusted to the newly-installed U.S. postmaster at that place, John Shively. Shively added his manuscript "Astoria Oregon" postmark but had no contract carriers to actually forward the mail. Accordingly, he arranged to have it transported on the bark *Whiton*, leaving Oregon around November 2. The *Whiton* arrived at San Francisco on November 10 and, after a stay of about a month, proceeded to Baja California. While there, it participated in two raids on Mexican ports on behalf of the U.S. Navy in its prosecution of the Mexican-American War. The *Whiton* finally left Mazatlan, Mexico on March 27, 1848 and arrived in New York City on August 4, after a four-month trip around Cape Horn. The letter was postmarked as a ship letter in New York on August 6 with seven cents postage due for the two cents ship fee plus five cents postage.

This letter, consisting of personal news, was written by missionary Orpha Lankton Carter to her parents back east. She had arrived in Oregon aboard the *Lausanne* in June 1840.

#### Mail via Cape Horn and Hawaii

Trading voyages by HBC ships and American ships between the Columbia River and Hawaii carried the bulk of the mail between the eastern United States and Oregon prior to the inauguration of contract mail service by steamers. A chart of sailing dates that includes a majority of these trips appears in Appendix B. Forwarders in Honolulu, often the British or U.S. consul, would arrange to trans-ship eastbound mail to a ship returning to the United States, or westbound mail to one of these trading vessels plying between Hawaii and the Columbia River.

The Figure 3-9 map illustrates the routes around Cape Horn between Oregon and the United States. Prevailing trade winds made it faster to send ships via Hawaii than directly up the coast of California to Oregon. Eastbound ships almost invariably stopped at Valparaiso before heading around the Cape, or through the Strait of Magellan, and westbound ships similarly stopped at Rio de Janeiro.



Figure 3-9. Map of the three routes between Oregon and the East which converged at Valparaiso. The direct route is shown in green, the via Honolulu route in blue and the via California route in red.



Figure 3-10. September 26, 1838 letter from Carlisle, Pennsylvania to Oregon sent via Cape Horn and Hawaii.

An exceptional 1838 westbound letter sent via Cape Horn and Hawaii to Oregon is shown in Figure 3-10. This letter is addressed to Mary Walker who, along with her husband Elkanah and Reverends Gray and Eells, came overland to Oregon in 1838 (see Table 3-1). It was posted in Carlisle, Pennsylvania on September 26, 1838 and prepaid  $18\frac{3}{4}$  cents for the postal rate to Boston. It was initially addressed to the Missionary Rooms (of the ABCFM) in Boston, and was also directed to the care of Peter A. Brinsmade, U.S. consul in Honolulu. The Missionary Society in Boston crossed out the Boston portion of the address, and placed the letter on the *Fama* which left on October 19, carrying Brinsmade back to Hawaii. It arrived in Honolulu on April 6, 1839, where Brinsmade transferred the letter to the brig *Thomas Perkins* which departed on June 23, 1839 and arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River on August 19. The letter was then carried by canoe to the Tshimakain Mission near today's Spokane, Washington. It probably arrived at the mission on September 16, along with the overland letter illustrated in Figure 3-21.

Another westbound letter to Mary Walker is shown in Figure 3-11. This example was datelined on August 27, 1839 in Portland, Maine and endorsed to the care of Reverend Jason Lee for the recipient at the Oregon Mission.

It was apparently sent under cover to Mr. G. Brown at the Boston missionary rooms, who transmitted the letter to Lee at New York. As previously mentioned, Lee led the Methodist "Great Reinforcement" to Oregon aboard the *Lausanne*, and he hand-carried this letter to Mary Walker in Oregon. The *Lausanne* left New York on October 9, 1839 and, after a stop at Honolulu from April 11 to April 28, arrived at Fort Vancouver, Oregon on June 1, 1840.

An eastbound letter written by Reverend Henry Spalding from the Lapwai Mission (in present day Idaho) on August 17, 1842 is shown in Figure 3-12. Spalding had come to Oregon in 1836 with Marcus Whitman as previously described. His eleven-page letter was carried by canoe on the Clearwater, Snake and Columbia Rivers to Fort Vancouver, where it caught the American ship *Nerius*, which arrived in Hawaii on

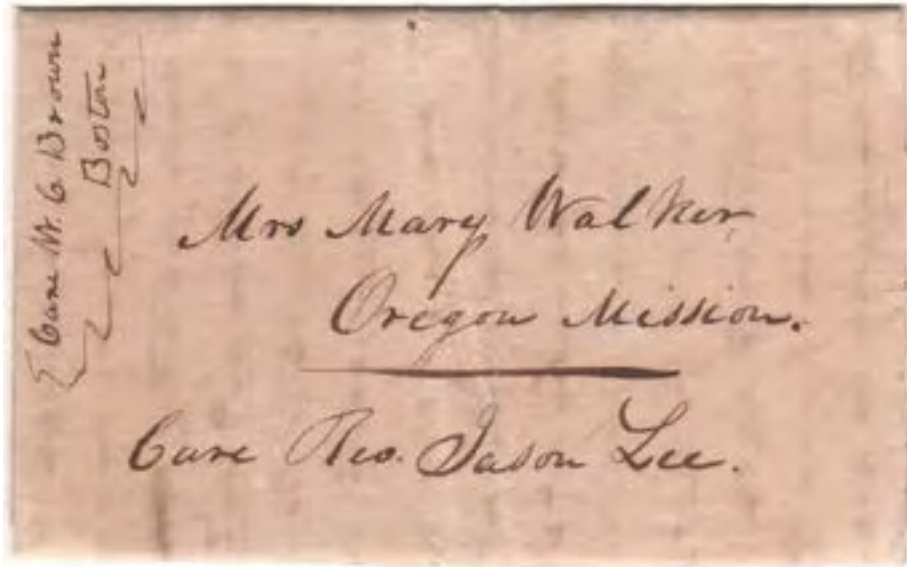


Figure 3-11. August 27, 1839 letter from Portland, Maine hand-carried to Oregon via Cape Horn and Hawaii.

October 28. The letter was transferred to the whaling ship *George* that departed Oahu on December 8 and arrived in New Bedford on May 2, 1843. The letter entered the mails with the New Bedford postmark of May 4, 1843 and was rated for 52 cents due, consisting of the two cents ship fee plus quadruple 12½ cents postage to Connecticut.



Figure 3-12. Letter written August 17, 1842 in the Northwest and sent to Connecticut via Hawaii and Cape Horn.

Another eastbound letter is shown in Figure 3-13. This letter to New York reported on the distribution of bibles in Oregon Territory and was written at Oregon City on July 8, 1848.

It left Astoria on August 1 aboard the brig *Eveline*, which arrived in Hawaii on August 14. A forwarder in Honolulu transferred it to the whaling ship *California*, which left Hawaii on September 4 and arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts on January 13, 1849. The letter was postmarked at New Bedford on January 15 with seven cents postage due, consisting of two cents ship fee plus 5 cents postage.



Figure 3-13. A July 8, 1848 letter from Oregon City, Oregon sent via Hawaii and Cape Horn to New York.

### Mail via Mexico

This route is described more fully in Chapter Four as it relates to California mail. Unlike correspondents in California, however, Oregon correspondents did not use this route very much, perhaps because the transit through both Hawaii and Mexico was overly cumbersome and slow. Figure 3-14 illustrates an unusual eastbound example from 1841.



Figure 3-14. Letter datelined June 9, 1841 in Fort Vancouver, Oregon and sent via Honolulu, Mazatlan and Vera Cruz to Massachusetts.

This letter, from American trader and ship captain Samuel Varney, was written at Fort Vancouver on June 9, 1841. He placed it on the HBC chartered ship *Wave*, which arrived in Honolulu on July 20, 1841. A Honolulu forwarder arranged for payment of Mexican postage and sent it on August 5 by the *Joseph Peabody* to Mazatlan, Mexico. A Mazatlan forwarder arranged to transport it to Vera Cruz, where it received a "Franqueado Vera Cruz" paid backstamp on October 30, reflecting the payment of two reales Mexican postage. It was then carried by the bark *Eugenia* to New York, where it received a January 13, 1842 "New York Ship" postmark, six months after it was written. It was rated for 20¾ cents postage due for two cents ship fee plus 18¾ cents postage to Massachusetts.

A second example, but carried westbound, is shown in Figure 3-15. This letter is addressed to Mary Walker (see Figures 3-10 and 3-11 for earlier examples of mail to her) and was datelined at Carlisle, Pennsylvania on December 16, 1844. It was sent under cover to 200 Mulberry Street in New York City, where the American Board of Missionary Societies had offices. The missionary society then took this letter in a bundle to the New York post office to prepay postage to Vera Cruz. It was postmarked there on December 21, the date of departure for the ship *Genius* to Jamaica. The Royal Mail Steamship Co. ship *Tay* then left Kingston, Jamaica with this letter on January 3 and arrived in Vera Cruz on January 16. At Vera Cruz a forwarder arranged to have it sent under cover to Mazatlan, where it was placed on a ship for Oregon. This letter, along with others, was probably delivered to Tshimakain Mission on October 4, 1845 by Reverend Eels, who had collected them at the Wailatpu Mission.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3-15. Letter datelined December 16, 1844 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and sent via New York and Mexico to Tshimakain Mission in Oregon.

### The HBC Overland Brigade Route

The HBC named their various overland expresses in British America by the primary destination served. Thus, the eastbound express from Oregon to York Factory was termed the "York Factory Express" while the express that traveled in opposite direction on the same route from York Factory to the Columbia River was termed the "Columbia Express." The use of canoes on several legs of these trips has given rise to the description of the expresses as "HBC canoe brigades." These expresses connected with ships on Hudson's Bay, so London was the ultimate terminus of these annual HBC overland expresses. However, most

Oregon Country mail sent via these expresses was not carried on the full extent of the route to or from London. Instead, the Oregon mails were usually handled through Lachine.

Commencing in 1825, the eastbound York Factory overland express was scheduled to depart each spring from Fort Vancouver to York Factory with intermediate stops. At Norway House a connecting express continued to Lachine. The express carried fur and peltry goods as well as mail, and arrived in the late summer. The yearly westbound Columbia Express was scheduled to depart from Lachine and York Factory in the spring and arrive in Oregon six months later. The routes connecting York Factory, Moose Factory and Lachine with Fort Vancouver are shown in Figure 3-16.



Figure 3-16. Map showing the HBC route from Fort Vancouver, via York Factory, to England in red and principal routes connecting Norway House with Lachine and Moose Factory in blue.

An article<sup>3</sup> entitled "Autobiography of Roderick Finlayson" gives an account of the spring 1839 westbound Columbia Express by an HBC apprentice clerk:

Having received our equipment for the western journey at this place, we parted with our friends at the [York] Factory, and left under the command of Dr. John McLoughlin, then the chief factor in charge of the Columbia district, with many hearty cheers from our friends at the Factory, and proceeded up the Nelson River to Norway House again. Here we exchanged our birch bark canoes for batteaux, for navigating Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan River. From Norway House we coasted along the northwest end of the lake to the mouth of the Saskatchewan River, up which we proceeded, calling at the stations of Fort Carleton, Fort Pitt and Edmonton, on the river. At the last place, the chief station of the Saskatchewan district, we left our bateaux and took horses across the plains to the Athabasca river, to Fort Assiniboine, where we again took birch bark canoes and paddled up the Athabasca River to Jasper's House, in the Rocky Mountains, from this place again took horses and crossed the Rocky Mountains to the head waters of the Columbia river, where we found bateaux again waiting for us, and paddled down the Columbia river, calling at Fort Colville, Okanogan, Walla Walla, stations belonging to the company, and reached Fort Vancouver on the Columbia, the head station of the Columbia district, which we reached almost the middle of November, being six months since I left Fort William on the Ottawa.

The batteaux mentioned were pine or cedar vessels, "made from quarter-inch pine board, and are thirty-two feet long, and six and a half feet wide in midships, with both ends sharp, and without a keel - worked, according to the circumstances of the navigation, with paddles, or with oars."

Typically one of these brigades consisted of 50 to 75 men and was supplemented by Native Americans recruited enroute. From Fort Vancouver, the brigade traveled up the Columbia River via Forts Walla Walla and Colville to the Boat Encampment. From that point, the brigade traveled by land across Athabasca Pass to the Assiniboine River and Fort Assiniboine. The rest of the trip was overland to Fort Edmonton, via the Saskatchewan River to Cumberland House, then via Lake Winnipeg, Norway House, and Nelson River to York Factory.

Once the eastbound York Factory Express reached Norway House, mail matter directed to eastern Canada and the United States was diverted southward, via Fort Alexander and Michipicoten to Lachine (Montreal). Mail directed beyond Montreal was placed in the Canadian mail system for distribution to Canada or the United States.

The earliest reported example in private hands of a letter carried by the York Factory Express from the Oregon Country is shown in Figure 3-17. It is one of three surviving letters written at Fort Vancouver, Oregon on January 16, 1833 by Nathaniel Wyeth (see Chapter One) that were carried by the same express. All were addressed to Cambridge, Massachusetts. The example illustrated was sent to his wife, a second was sent to his brother Jacob, and the third to James Brown.

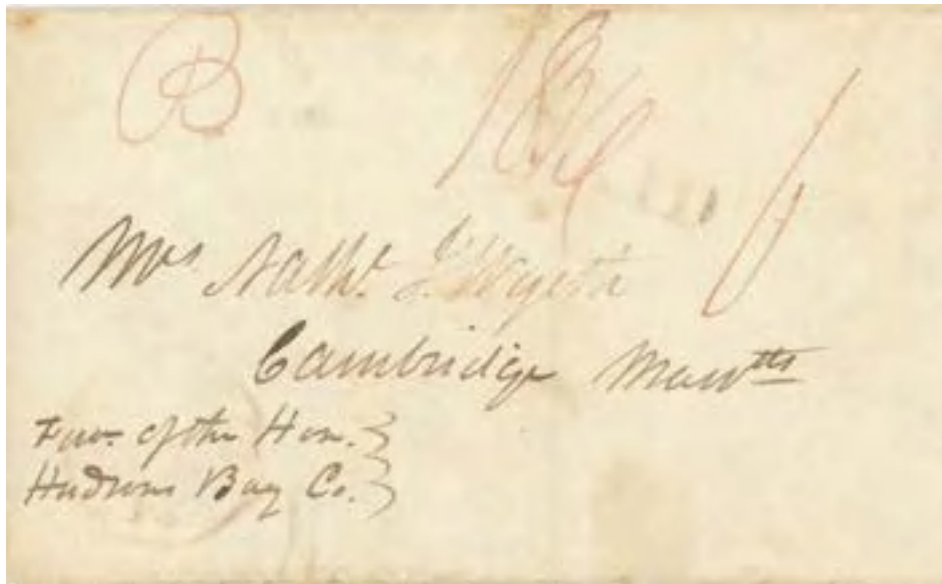


Figure 3-17. January 16, 1833 letter from Nathaniel Wyeth at Fort Vancouver carried by York Factory Express to Montreal and mailed to the United States.

The letter was endorsed by "Fav. of the Hon. Hudsons Bay Co." and departed with the York Factory overland express shortly after being written. As the letter was addressed to the United States, it would have been included in the bag for the HBC headquarters at Lachine on Montreal Island rather than to York Factory. Upon arrival at Norway House, it was diverted south and carried onward to Lachine. The letter was then placed in the mails at Montreal on August 13 and the Canadian postage of six pence was prepaid

by HBC, since mail from Canada to the United States required prepayment of postage to the border. The letter then entered the U.S. mails from a steamboat that crossed from St. Johns, Canada to Whitehall, New York via Lake Champlain. The distinctive red manuscript "B" applied at Whitehall signifies that it was received from a steamboat. The 18¾ cents U.S. postage due was applied at Whitehall for postage to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The June 1846 Oregon Partition Treaty meant the end of the HBC overland mail service to and from Fort Vancouver. An 1846 letter carried on the last eastbound HBC overland trip is shown in Figure 3-18.



Figure 3-18. February 9, 1846 letter from Fort Colville, Oregon to Massachusetts carried eastward on the last HBC York Factory Express before the Oregon Treaty.

The letter was datelined "Tshimakain, Near Fort Colville, Oregon Mission 9th Feby 1846" (northwest of present day Spokane, Washington) and was addressed to Blandford, Massachusetts. It was given to the HBC York Factory Express at Fort Colville, and entered the mails at Lachine, Canada on October 27, 1846. It was apparently not prepaid with the required postage, since it was endorsed "Postage to the lines not paid" and struck with Montreal's "Returned for Postage" handstamp. After payment of the required 4½ pence postage to the U.S. border by the HBC (as a favor to the sender), the letter was transmitted onward from Montreal on November 18, 1846. This letter entered the U. S. mails at Rouses Point, Vermont at the north end of Lake Champlain rather than at Whitehall as with the 1833 letter in Figure 3-17. Rouse's Point marked it 10 cents postage due for the rate to Blandford. Interestingly, the HBC express leg of this journey took well over a month longer than the 1833 journey, no doubt attributable to the better weather conditions of that earlier year.

This letter was written by Reverend Cushing Eells to one of his benefactors back east. Eells had come to Oregon with his wife and the Elkanah Walkers in 1838. They had been escorted from Westport, Missouri on April 23 by an American Fur Company supply train to the Wind River fur trade rendezvous of that year. They then accompanied an HBC fur trade brigade from the rendezvous to Oregon on August 29. Soon after, the Eells and Walkers established a mission among the Spokane Indians at Tshimakain.

An 1839 letter atypically carried from Oregon by the York Factory Express to England is shown in Figure 3-19.



Figure 3-19. February 1, 1839 letter from Fort Colville to London carried by York Factory Express and then via HBC supply ship from the Hudson's Bay to England.

This letter, written by an HBC employee at their Fort Colville post, was dated February 1, 1839 and was addressed to John Stuart at the Hudson's Bay House in London. It was later re-directed, probably at an HBC sorting office, to Forres, Scotland. The letter was given to the York Factory Express enroute at Fort Colville, and was carried over the "canoe brigade" route as previously described. Unlike the 1833 Wyeth letter in Figure 3-17, it was not diverted to Lachine at Norway House but instead carried to York Factory. It was then placed on the HBC ship *Prince Rupert* which departed on September 11, 1839 from Hudson's Bay. Her first port in England was Brighton, where the mails were off-loaded. This letter entered the English mails for Scotland with a "Ship Letter Brighton" stepped handstamp and manuscript two shilling eight pence due postal rating. The letter was postmarked in transit at London on October 15. Interestingly, the mails arrived in London in advance of the HBC ship which did not arrive at London until the following day (Appendix B).

An extraordinary example of an 1844 westbound letter carried by the Columbia Express is shown in Figure 3-20. It is addressed to the well-known Methodist missionary, Henry Bridgman Brewer, who had immigrated to Oregon on the ship *Lausanne* in June 1840. The letter bears a detailed address and handling directive, "care of James Keith, Lachine L.C., H. Bay Company Express to Columbia River, Columbia River, Dallas Station." It was prepaid 25 cents at Wilbraham, Massachusetts on April 6 for the United States postage to the Canadian border. It bears an April 13 Lachine, Lower Canada arrival backstamp, as well as the correct "4½" pence due notation for postage from the border point of Rouse's Point, Vermont to Lachine.



Figure 3-20. April 6, 1844 letter carried westbound on the HBC Columbia Express to Dalles Station, Columbia River.

The HBC paid the 4½ pence Canadian postage, included the letter in the mail bag carried on their 1844 Columbia Express overland trip and dropped it off at The Dalles, just up the river from Fort Vancouver. Reverend Brewer docketed the letter on reverse with his notation of senders' names as well as "(received) By Express Boat, Oct 29, 1844."

### Overland Mails between Missouri and Oregon

There were few opportunities to send mail overland along the Oregon Trail from 1835 to 1840. A single annual westbound overland party could only leave in the spring of each year. There were even fewer opportunities to send eastbound mail, since very few travelers returned east overland until the mid-1840's. After 1843, there were numerous travelers going in each direction, and overland mail volumes picked up significantly. An exceptional 1839 westbound letter carried overland to Oregon is shown in Figure 3-21. This letter was mailed in East Baldwin, Maine on March 20, 1839 and was prepaid 25 cents for the rate to Missouri.



Figure 3-21. Letter posted March 20, 1839 in East Baldwin, Maine, and sent to Oregon via Westport, Missouri.

It is addressed to Reverend Elkanah Walker (see Figure 3-10 for an example of a letter to his wife Mary) to the care of Jason Lee at Westport, Missouri. Lee had passed through Westport on September 1, 1838 during his overland journey from Oregon to the East, and the writer of this letter expected him to return that way. As described previously, though, Lee returned by ship to Oregon, so this letter was held at Westport. Since there were no post roads to Oregon, the postmaster was authorized to forward the mail by any means available. In this case, he entrusted the letter to the Griffin - Munger missionary party leaving Westport on May 4, 1839 with an American Fur Company supply caravan led by Moses Harris. They arrived at the Green River rendezvous on July 5. On July 10, the Griffin - Munger party was escorted from the rendezvous to Oregon by an HBC fur trade brigade led by Francis Ermatinger. This letter from Mary's family was finally delivered to the Walkers at the Tshimakain Mission in Oregon on September 16.

An 1842 missionary letter carried overland in the opposite direction to Connecticut via Missouri is shown in Figure 3-22.

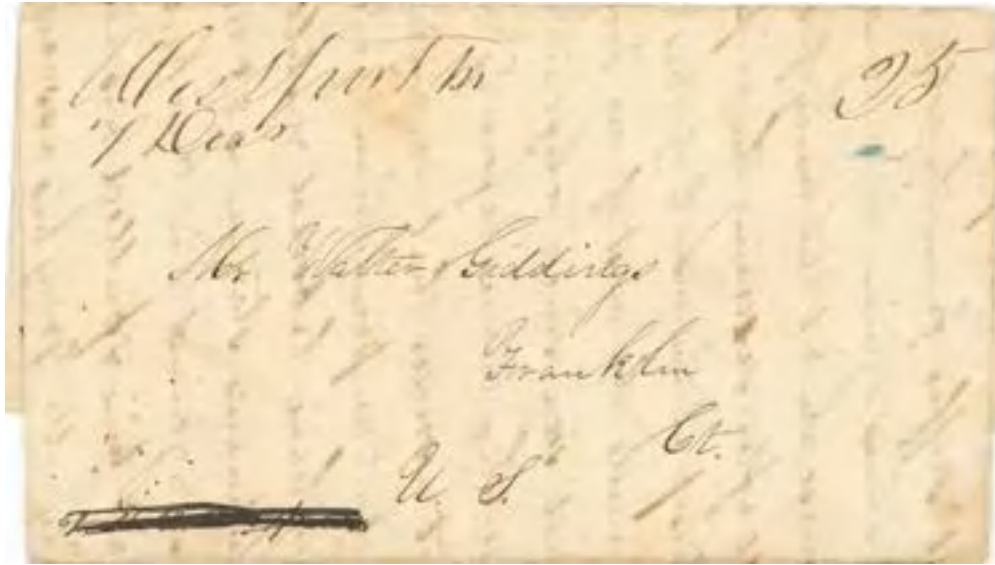


Figure 3-22. Letter dated February 23, 1842 from Waskopam Mission in Oregon, and sent to Connecticut via Westport, Missouri on December 7.

This letter was datelined "Oregon Territory Waskopam Mission Jan. 21 1842" by Henry Bridgman Brewer (see Figure 3-20 for a letter addressed to Brewer). It was initially endorsed to be carried by the Hudson Bay express per the manuscript "Per H.B. Co. Express" at the lower left. This endorsement was crossed out, and Brewer's journal explains that the letter was carried overland by William Fowler, who was returning east to get his family. He mailed Brewer's letter at Westport, Missouri on December 7, 1842, where it was postmarked and rated 25 cents due for the postage to Connecticut.

Fowler had originally come to Oregon with part of the Bidwell - Bartleson party in 1841. Under the leadership of former fur trader Thomas Fitzpatrick, the so-called Western Emigration Society from Illinois set out from Independence, Missouri on May 12, 1841. Fowler was part of the group that continued on to The Dalles, Oregon with Fitzpatrick, while the rest of the party went to California with Bidwell and Bartleson.

Brewer's letter to his father-in-law consisted mainly of a family update, and a description of the various Methodist Missions in Oregon. He closed with an appeal for return letters:

Please write every year by the way of Canada. Send letters to Lachine U.C. by the first of March (post paid) to the care of the agent of the H.(udson's) B.(ay) Co. and in October following we shall receive them. The express passes hereabout the 20th of Oct. You can send letters or packages to the S.(andwich) Islands almost every month in the year I think. Vessels come from the Islands here very frequently... This will leave in March by the express boats.

A postscript dated February 23, 1842 explained that, "I have an unexpected opportunity of sending this direct to the States" indicating Brewer's intention to send the letter overland with William Fowler, rather than by the HBC overland express via Canada.

As the immigrant population of Oregon grew, the number of people returning overland to the eastern United States grew as well. These were men returning to collect their families, as Fowler did when he returned east in 1842, people returning to buy essential supplies, or people who had simply become disillusioned with their prospects in the Pacific Northwest. As a consequence, there were more opportunities to send mail back east, since these travelers were willing to carry mail to a post office in Missouri. Depending on the route taken by the traveler, the mail could enter a number of different Missouri post offices.

A letter written by Henry Bridgman Brewer to his mother in Massachusetts on May 1, 1845 is shown in Figure 3-23. This letter was endorsed "Pr Mr Shively" at the lower left. John M. Shively had immigrated to Oregon in 1843 with the Burnett-Gantt Oregon Emigration Company. This large party left Independence, Missouri on May 3, 1843 and arrived at Fort Vancouver, Oregon on October 24. Shively stayed in Oregon until May 1845, when he left to lobby in Washington, D.C. for a U.S. mail service to Oregon. During his return, he passed through Independence where he mailed this letter unpaid. It was postmarked August 16 and rated for 10 cents postage due.



Figure 3-23. Letter dated May 1, 1845 from Wascopam, Oregon and sent to Massachusetts via Independence, Missouri on August 16. (Courtesy of Washington State Historical Society).

The letter was datelined "Wascopam O.T. April 24, 1845," and was a reply to the letter illustrated in Figure 3-20. Brewer wrote:

One year ago you was writing the letter that now lies before me. I rec'd it by the express boats last Oct. I should have answered it before but I am waiting to send it by land as letters by land I think usually reach you sooner than by ship.

An 1848 overland letter with important content is shown in Figure 3-24. This letter was datelined "Tualatin Plains Oregon Ter. April 8 48" by Reverend Harvey Clark. The letter was carried privately to



Figure 3-24. Letter dated April 8, 1848 from Tualatin Plains, Oregon, and sent to New York via Savannah, Missouri on July 27.

Missouri, even though U.S. post offices had been established at Astoria, Oregon and Oregon City a year earlier. The U.S. mail facilities would handle the vast majority of Oregon's mail from 1849 onwards.

Clark had come to Oregon in 1840 with the last supply caravan to a fur trade rendezvous. He had departed from Westport, Missouri on April 30, 1840 under the guidance of Andrew Drips, and was then was guided by Joe Meek from the 1840 Green River rendezvous to Oregon, where he arrived on December 15. He taught at various missions in the succeeding eighteen years.

In his letter Clark referred to the 1847 Whitman Massacre:

For a few weeks past our otherwise bright prospects have been darkened by savage cruelty and superstition. On the 29th Nov. Dr. Whitman and his wife and 12 white men americans including two lads nearly grown were murdered at the Whitman station. It is utterly impossible to ascertain the whole truth on this melancholy subject... The Indians were sick and many dying perhaps 30 in a few weeks including young and old. The Doctor was all attention night and day. The Indians were told (as all accounts prove) that the Doctor was giving poison or bad medicine consequently they decided to kill Dr and Mrs Whitman.

He then described the growing competition between the Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Oregon. The letter was carried overland and posted unpaid in Savannah, Missouri on July 27, 1848, where it was rated 10 cents due for the postage to New York.

## Postal Service of the Provisional Government of Oregon

From May 2, 1843 until the March 3, 1849 establishment of the Oregon Territory, the Provisional Government of Oregon served the Oregon Country as an independent government with elected representatives. Among other actions, they addressed mail services, underscoring the importance of reliable communication to the Oregon settlers.

A June 28, 1845 letter from the provisional government's Executive Committee to the Legislative Committee recommended: "That a public mail be established, to arrive and depart monthly from Oregon City and Independence [Missouri], and such other local mail routes be established as are essential to the Willamette country and other settlements."

Then, in December 1845, the provisional government enacted a law establishing a general post office at the capital city of Oregon City with William G. T'Vault as postmaster-general. The law also set postal rates for a single sheet conveyed for a distance not exceeding 30 miles at 15 cents; over and not exceeding 80 miles, 25 cents; over and not exceeding 200 miles, 30 cents; over 200 miles 50 cents. Newspapers were to be charged four cents each.

The earliest record of a mail was reported by postmaster and editor T'Vault in the *Oregon Spectator's* first issue of February 5, 1846 which included the following notice:

The Postmaster General has contracted with Mr. H(ugh) Burns to carry the mail from Oregon City to Weston, in Missouri [present day Kansas City], for one trip only. Letters mailed at any of the offices, post paid, will be forwarded to any part of the United States. As the mail sent East by Mr. Burns will reach Weston early in the season, it would be advisable for those wishing to correspond with their friends in the East, to avail themselves of the opportunity. Postage only fifty cents on single sheets.

It appears from newspaper accounts that Hugh Burns did not physically carry this mail for the 25 percent commission that he was allowed. Rather, it was almost certainly carried east by J. Bond, W. Parkinson, W. Delany and two others. A report of their arrival in Independence, Missouri was published in the July 4, 1846 *Independence Expositor*. It mentioned that the party left Oregon City direct for the States on March 1 and arrived in Independence on June 30, 1846. The article also explained that their trip had been delayed by snow storms in the Rockies and that they were at Fort Laramie on June 10. Although no specific mention was made of mail having been carried, reports in the *St. Louis Reveille* of slightly later date mentioned receipt of the first issue of the *Oregon Spectator* in St. Louis. Interestingly, copies of the first three issues of the *Oregon Spectator* also arrived in Montreal via the HBC "canoe brigade" express and were reported in August 1846 newspaper accounts.

Unfortunately there are no provisional post office letters that can be positively identified as having been carried by this express, although there is one letter that has been described that way. There are, however, surviving letters that were carried privately by members of the larger party of men that joined the five "Burns" men at Whitman's station before crossing the mountains. This larger "Spring Party" of 18 men departed on March 18, 1846 and traveled together beyond Fort Laramie which they reached on June 8. The party split up in mid June near the forks of the Platte River (in present-day western Nebraska) and traveled by divergent paths to Missouri. One such letter is shown in Figure 3-25.



Figure 3-25. Letter dated January 1, 1846 from Oregon City, Oregon and sent to Connecticut via St Joseph, Missouri on July 8.

This letter was datelined from Oregon City (Figure 3-26) on January 1, 1846 and was written by Benjamin Stark to his father. It was also endorsed at the lower left, “Ford By Yo(ur) Mo(st) Ob(edient) S(ervant) I.B. Wall.” In the letter, Stark explained that:

I send this letter by the party crossing the mountains in the Spring. It may or may not anticipate letters which I shall forward immediately on my arrival at the Sandwich Islands. As I have a communication to make to you, of considerable importance should it be the last you have, I have availed myself of this way and by Hudson’s Bay Co’s express to Montreal, to ensure its safe delivery.

Starks’s communication of considerable importance was in reference to a large plot of land that he had just purchased north of Oregon City in the center of today’s Portland, Oregon. He entrusted it to his friend Isaac B. Wall, who arranged to have it carried by the Spring Party to St. Joseph Missouri, where it was postmarked on July 8, 1846 and rated for 10 cents postage due.



Figure 3-26. View of Oregon City, Oregon in 1846.

Another Spring Party overland letter is shown in Figure 3-27. This letter was datelined “Yam Hill, Oregon Territory 7th February 1846,” addressed to East Chester, New York, and endorsed “Via Platte City Mo.” The writer of the letter, William Dawson, had traveled overland to Oregon in May 1845 with Joel Palmer in a party led by Joe Meek.

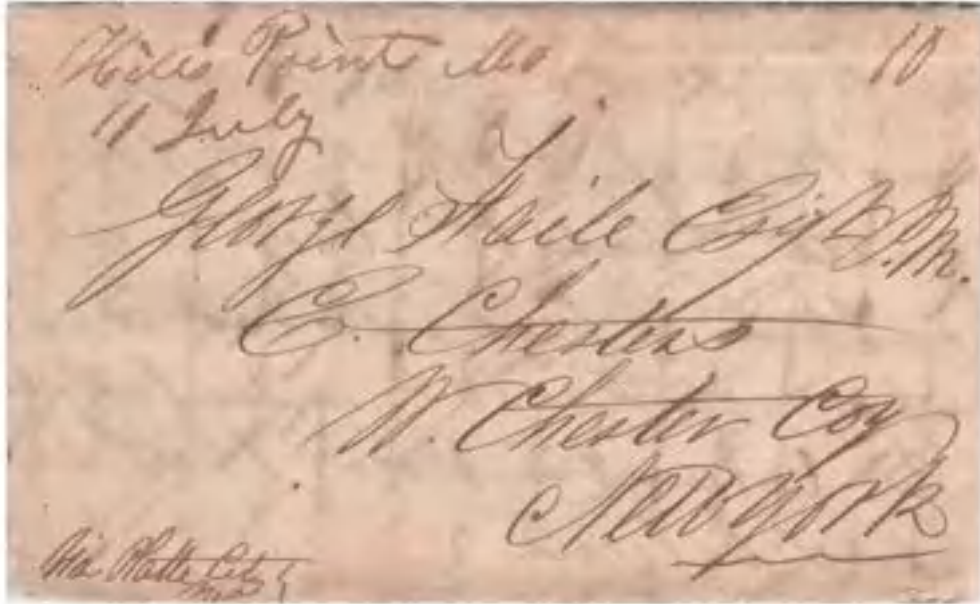



Figure 3-27. Letter dated February 7, 1846 from Yam Hill, Oregon and sent to Connecticut via Hills Point, Missouri on July 11.

While there is no specific reference to the letter carrier, it can be deduced that Joel Palmer carried it on his return trip to the East to collect his family. Palmer left Oregon City four days after the Burns party, but caught up with them at the Whitman station and accompanied the Spring Party east.



Joel Palmer, Oregon  
Pioneer (1810-1881)

- Traveled to Oregon, May 1845
- First man to climb Mt Hood, October 1845
- Arrived in Oregon City, November 1845
- Left Oregon City for the U.S., March 5, 1846
- Arrived at St Joseph, Missouri, July 7, 1846

• Returned to Oregon with family, 1847

According to his published journal, Palmer arrived in St Joseph, Missouri on July 7. He continued south on the Platte River and mailed the letter at Hills Point, Missouri (southeast of St. Joseph on the Platte River) where it was postmarked on July 11 with 10 cents postage collect.

In December 1846, the Oregon Provisional Government Postmaster General William T’Vault reported:

The law establishing the post office department needs altering materially. It was found after being in operation but a short time, that the rates of postage were altogether too high, amounting indeed to a prohibition; the revenue arose almost entirely from postage on newspapers, but fell so far short of the expenses, that the Postmaster General, at the close of the third quarter [September 30, 1846] stopped sending the mail. I would recommend that the rates of postage be reduced to five cents on each letter; double letters and packages in proportion, and one cent on

each newspaper. A mail route should be kept up between the principal sections of our territory, and I have no doubt, if the postage is reduced, the revenue arising from receipts of the office, would very nearly or quite pay expenses.

Although the post office of the Oregon Provisional Government remained technically lawful, postal operations in Oregon effectively ceased until the United States established postal facilities in 1847.

## The Start of the U.S. Postal Service in Oregon

After the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain was resolved on June 15, 1846 the U.S. Congress authorized postal facilities, routes and special postal rates for the newly-acquired region on March 3, 1847. A post office was established at Astoria, and rates between Oregon and the United States were set at 40 cents per half ounce.

The Postmaster General acted quickly on this legislation, and appointed John M. Shively postmaster of Astoria on March 9, 1847. Shively had to travel from Washington, D.C. to assume his new post, so the Postmaster General also contracted with him to carry the first post office mail from Independence, Missouri to Astoria, Oregon. Shively's compensation for this was the postage on the letters carried by him to Oregon.

Shively was already very familiar with Oregon. For his first trip to Oregon, he had joined the 700-person Burnett - Gantt overland party (also called the Oregon Emigration Company), which left Independence on May 3, 1843 and traveled via South Pass and Fort Hall to Fort Vancouver, Oregon on October 24, 1843. Shively made a land claim at Astoria in 1844, but the HBC disputed the claim and he was forced to leave Oregon in May 1845. Accordingly, he returned overland (see Figure 3-23) to Washington, D.C. where he began lobbying for a mail service to Oregon.

With his postmaster appointment and contract mail in hand, Shively left Independence once again on April 28, 1847 and traveled overland to Astoria, Oregon on September 7. One letter carried by him in this first contract mail across the Rocky Mountains is known, and is illustrated in Figure 3-28.

This letter was posted in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania on August 17, 1846, prepaid 10 cents postage to Independence, Missouri. The letter was endorsed at lower left, "To the care of the Post Master at Independence Jackson County Mo to be forwarded the first opportunity." It arrived at Independence too late for the annual emigrant wagon trains, so it was held there. In the meantime, the Independence postmaster received the following March 25, 1847 instructions from the 1st Assistant Postmaster General:



John Shively, Oregon Postmaster  
(1803 - 1893)

- Travelled overland to Oregon, May-October 1843
- Tried to claim land in Astoria, 1844
- Returned overland to U.S., May-August 1845
- Lobbied in Washington, DC, October 1845-March 1847
- Named first postmaster west of the Rockies, March 1847
- Returned overland to Astoria, April-September 1847
- Postmaster at Astoria, September 1847-1849
- 1849 joined the California gold rush



Figure 3-28. Letter posted August 17, 1846 in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania and sent via Missouri and Oregon to Sonoma, California.

Sir:

You are hereby instructed...to deliver all mail matter which may reach your Office on or before the 15th of April 1847 to J.M. Shively, who will present this communication. You will be pleased to report to this Office the amount of postages upon all prepaid letters delivered to Mr. Shively under the foregoing instructions.

In April, the Independence postmaster complied with these instructions and delivered the letter to Shively, who carried it overland to Astoria on September 7, 1847. Once in Astoria, Shively assumed his postmaster duties, and postmarked the letter with a manuscript "Astoria Ore" postmark. This is one of two known manuscript Astoria postmarks, and the other is illustrated in Figure 3-8. Unsure of the correct rates, Shively rated this letter as 50 cents due, possibly thinking of 40 cents for the overland trip to Oregon plus 10 cents from Oregon to Sonoma, California. Just as with Figure 3-8, Shively contracted with the ship *Whiton* to carry this letter. It left Astoria around November 2, 1847 and arrived in San Francisco on November 10. It was probably hand-carried to nearby Sonoma from San Francisco.

The addressee, Ralph Lee Kilburn, had been a member of the Peoria Party which had been so influenced by Jason Lee's lecture about Oregon in 1838. He set out from Missouri in May 1839 and reached Fort Walla Walla, Oregon in May 1840. He was not satisfied with the conditions in Oregon, so he helped construct the *Oregon Star*, which was the first ship built in Oregon. Along with a group of men, he set sail on August 29, 1842 and reached San Francisco on September 17. He later settled in Napa Valley, and planted orchards and grapes.

## Endnotes

1. Holman, *Dr. John McLoughlin, the Father of Oregon*, page 61
2. *On to Oregon: The Diaries of Mary Walker and Myra Eells*, page 286
3. "Autobiography of Roderick Finlayson" in *The Washington Historian*, page 30