9 - SOUTHERN OVERLAND MAIL, 1857 - 1861

The San Diego and San Antonio termini had relatively frequent connections with points beyond. From the eastern terminus at San Antonio, there was a daily stagecoach mail to Indianola which connected with five-times a week steamers to New Orleans. From the western terminus at San Diego, the California Steam Navigation Company steamers operated to San Francisco, albeit only twice-monthly. A pre-existing postal route that connected San Antonio and El Paso was incorporated into the new through route and needed only minor upgrades. The El Paso-San Diego segment of the route required more substantial upgrades, and the military road authorized in 1856 only pertained to the portion between Fort Yuma and El Paso. Mail transportation across the Colorado Desert between Fort Yuma and San Diego was the biggest challenge facing the new contractor. Drawing from the experience of the 1854-57 "Desert Dispatch" service, mules were used to carry the mail and passengers, resulting in the "Jackass Mail" moniker.

For operational purposes, route was divided into two sections. The first, between El Paso and San Antonio, was operated as a round-trip unit. The second section, between El Paso and San Diego, utilized mail carriers from each end who met in the middle at Maricopa Wells to exchange the mail. The mail schedule called for simultaneous departures from San Diego and San Antonio on the 9th and 24th of each month. The first westbound mail departed from San Antonio on July 9, 1857 with James Mason in charge. A second westbound mail departed on July 24 under Captain Skillman's direction. Mason was delayed in Texas by Indian attacks and was able to proceed only after being joined by Skillman near El Paso. As a result, the first and second westbound mails arrived at San Diego together on August 31, 1857. The first eastbound trip departed from San Diego on August 9, 1857.

A significant reduction of the mail route occurred on October 27, 1858 when the Post Office Department ordered the contractor to discontinue the section between El Paso and Fort Yuma. This alteration arose from the September 16 commencement of service along Butterfield's route 12578 between St. Louis/Memphis and San Francisco, which overlapped with route 8076 in that section. The utility of the Jackass route to the postal service diminished significantly after the heart of the route was lost to Butterfield. Then, on February 1, 1860 the route was further reduced when service between San Diego and Fort Yuma was discontinued, effective April 1, since it could be replaced by the Los Angeles-Fort Yuma segment of the Butterfield route. This left the line operating only the intra-Texas route between El Paso and San Antonio, and eliminated the service by mule. The Jackass route ended at this point.

Approximately forty trips were made over the entire route prior to the 1858 reduction, but no surviving covers are known from that period. The Postmaster General reported postal receipts on the route of $601 from July 1858 to June 1859, so not much mail was carried. Covers on this route were to be endorsed "via San Diego and San Antonio" or similar. Other covers carried on segments of the route within Texas or between Texas and the East are known but are not considered to be "Jackass Mail."

A "Jackass Mail" cover sent after the October 1858 route reduction bears the full endorsement "Via San Diego & San Antonio." Shown in Figure 9-5, this November 1859 cover is on the imprint stationery of the Alta California Newspaper Office and is franked by a 10 cents type V stamp of the 1857 issue.[3] The letter was postmarked at San Francisco for the November 21 steamship departure for San Diego. It then left San Diego on November 24 and was carried on the Jackass route to Fort Yuma. Because of the route reduction, it was transferred at Fort Yuma to the Butterfield route for the trip to El Paso, and then transferred back to route 8076 for the segment between El Paso and San Antonio. The cover is docketed as having been received on December 15 in New Orleans - a remarkable 24 days from San Francisco.