

California Gold Rush Letters to Canada via Nicaragua by Luc Frève

Historical background

In order to connect Oregon with the rest of the United States, in 1847, the Navy Department awarded ten year contracts to the United States Mail Steamship Co. (East coast) and to the Pacific Mail Steamship Co. (West coast). The contracts stipulated that the service was to begin in October 1848 in order to allow enough time for the construction of the steamers. As the United States had been at war with Mexico since 1846, a route via Mexico was impossible. So Panama was chosen because the United States had a postal treaty in effect with New Granada postal authorities since 1844. Panama was responsible for the transit of mail on its territory.

In February 1848, the war ended and Mexico ceded California to the United States. Gold was discovered near Sacramento in January 1848 but the word only spread out in May 1848. Within five years, 300,000 people moved to California. The first steamer carrying contract letters arrived in San Francisco on February 28, 1849 (previously, the writer had to arrange for his letter to be carried privately by ships stopping by San Francisco). On board was the first postal agent who had to organize the distribution of mail in California. Wages offered were insufficient to retain postmasters as most people were leaving for the gold fields. With arrival of more than 10,000 letters per month, San Francisco's post office was overwhelmed. Miners had to go into town to claim their mail as there was no distribution system in place. Due to limitations imposed by Congress, the development of mail distribution had been very slow. There was an expectation that post offices should be self-sustaining but the reality of California's high cost of living and the difficulty recruiting staff was not understood by the authority. By the end of 1850, less than 20 post offices were in operation but, two years later, 123 post offices were established. Also, it is to be noted that California only received its first order of stamps in September 1851.



Figure 1 – Wells Fargo Postal Stationary carried by their agent on Accessory Transit Co.'s steamer Sierra Nevada that left San Francisco on September 4, 1855 for San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua

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People were complaining about long delays. It could take six weeks for a letter to go from San Francisco to New York due to irregular transit time in Panama and the absence of synchronicity between steamships operating on East and West coasts. A non-contractual alternative via Nicaragua was offered by the Accessory Transit Co. The company was owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt who envisioned the construction of a canal in Nicaragua. In order to increase traffic in Nicaragua, he began servicing the route in 1851 with bi-monthly steamers. As the Nicaragua route was shorter, shipment could be delivered within a month. Vanderbilt allowed the transport of mail free of charge on his line and made several attempts to obtain a mail contract without success. The U.S. post office initial reaction was to refuse the mail carried Via Nicaragua but changed its mind and accepted the mail if the letter was prepaid so the department was not incurring any loss of revenue. This route had been in operation until the end of 1856.

The difficulties in organizing mail distribution in California offered many business opportunities for express companies and these have been tolerated by postal authorities. Already involved in the transport of gold treasure, western express companies such as Gregory's Express or Wells Fargo also carried transcontinental mail for their clients. Express companies were not bound to the Panama route; they would select the first available steamer or the faster route in order to expedite their shipment.

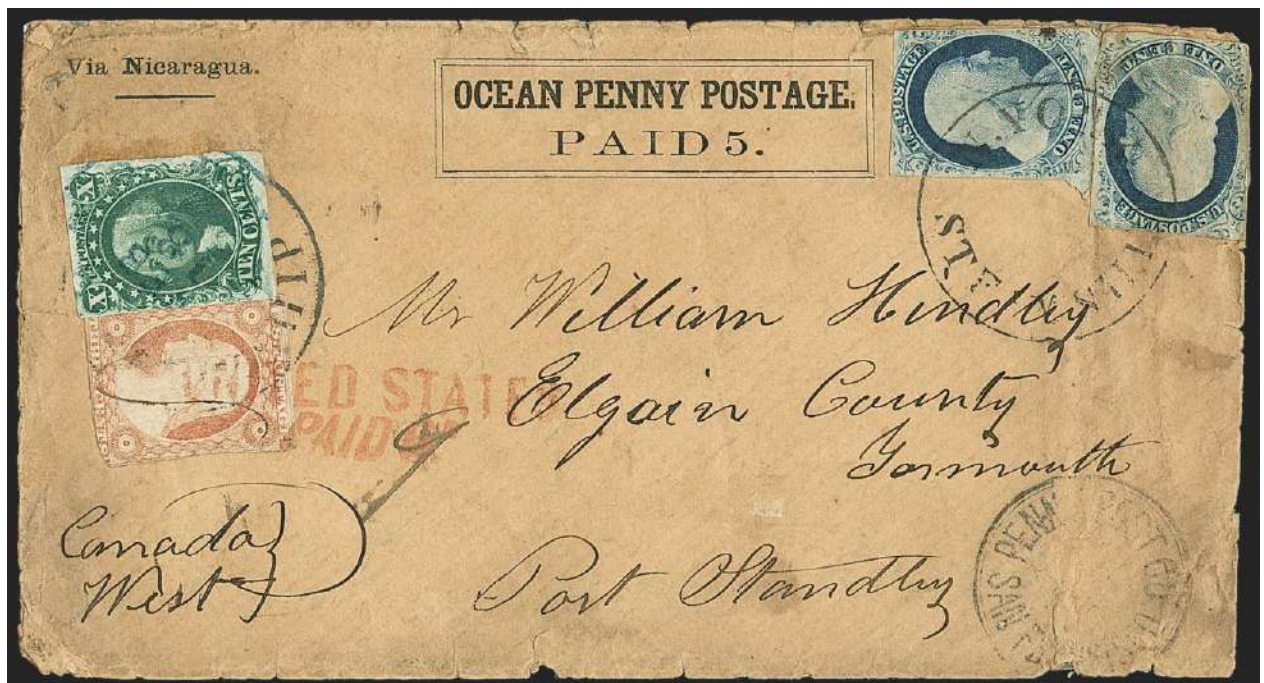


Figure 2 – Ocean Penny Postage imprint cover

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Via Nicaragua covers

Only two covers are known to Canada via the Nicaragua route. The earliest is illustrated in Figure 1. It is a Wells Fargo postal stationary carried by their agent on Accessory Transit Co.'s steamer Sierra Nevada that left San Francisco on September 4, 1855 for San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua. The shipment was carried by coach and river boat to San Juan del Norte (Greytown) on the East shore of Nicaragua. The mail bag along with the gold was then transferred to the steamer Star of the West. It was delivered to the New York's Wells Fargo office on Sunday September 30. As the post office was closed on Sunday, the Wells Fargo agent waited until the following day to deliver the mail which explained the «Oct 1» postmark. The 10 cents stationary was accepted for prepayment to Canada. The letter was sent by train to Montreal (Oct. 2, 1855 b/s) and delivered the same day to Huntingdon.

The second cover is an Ocean Penny Postage imprint cover (figure 2). Penny Post Co. operated a messenger service in San Francisco from June 1855 to July 1856. The rate to Canada was prepaid by stamps (note: the 10 cents does not belong to the cover). The cover was put in an Accessory Transit's wharf bag which was carried by steamer Uncle Sam to San Juan del Sur. After crossing the isthmus, the mail bag was turned over to steamer Northern Light and delivered to New York on December 11, 1855 for onward transmission to Port Stanley CW (December 13th b/s).

Conclusion

Since I have been keeping a census of correspondence from California to Canada and Maritimes, less than 20 covers are listed for the period of use of the Nicaragua route. As all mail from California to Canada sent through post offices followed the Panama route, the only way a letter to Canada could transit by Nicaragua is via an agent of an Express company or via an Accessory Transit Co. mail bag. In order to determine the route, we have to work from the New York entry postmark and check it against Panama or Nicaragua steamers' arrival date. Previously, this exercise was done using newspapers archives but it is easier since Richard Frajola published the sailing information in the appendixes of his book. The two covers described in this article are the only via Nicaragua to Canada I know of. If you know of others, please contact me at l_freve@videotron.ca.

Selected biography

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