



Figure 1: A cover addressed to a Rock Island, Ill., Confederate prisoner of war. It is franked with an 1861 three-cent rose tied by a duplex cancel of Nevada City, Calif., on April 15, 1865, with the manuscript directive “Via Overland.”

California Overland Mail to a Confederate Prisoner of War

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

You do not usually see the terms “California Overland Mail” and “Confederate” in the same sentence. The cover illustrated in Figure 1 is an exception.

It is Confederate only in the sense that the mail was delivered to a Confederate soldier imprisoned at Rock Island, Illinois. It did not pass through the Confederate mail system. But since the beginning of Confederate collecting, Northern prisoner of war mail has nonetheless been collected by Confederate students and such uses are listed in the CSA catalog.¹

The subject cover is franked with an 1861 three-cent rose (Scott 65) tied by a duplex cancel of Nevada City, California, on April 15, 1865, with a manuscript directive at upper left, “Via Overland.” The cover is addressed to “Mr. Willim P. Armor, Rock Island Prison, Illinois, Barracks 25.” Inventive spelling, to be sure.

On an historical note, the cover is dated the day that President Abraham Lincoln died after being shot the evening before at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C. A Rock Island Barracks blue examined oval “cancels” the Nevada City double circle postmark to indicate that the letter contents were censored.

The Federal prison at Rock Island, Illinois, a small strip of land in the Mississippi River, held between 5,000 and 8,000 Confederate prisoners.

The sketch of the prison shown in Figure 2 was found in a letter written by Confederate soldier James W. Duke to his cousin in Georgetown, Kentucky.

The drawing, by a soldier identified only as H. Junius, is apparently the item described in Duke’s letter as “the picture of our row of Barracks.” This idyllic scene of men strolling peacefully on the grounds or performing routine chores among the neatly maintained barracks, probably reveals more about the restrictions placed on outgoing mail than on actual conditions within the prison.

Overland Mail

In September 1858, the Overland Mail Company started regular semiweekly stagecoach service along the so-called “Butterfield Route” between San Francisco and St. Louis via Los Angeles. John Warren Butterfield was the president of the company.

A variety of markings, printed and handstamped, were used on mail to designate this route. This is an

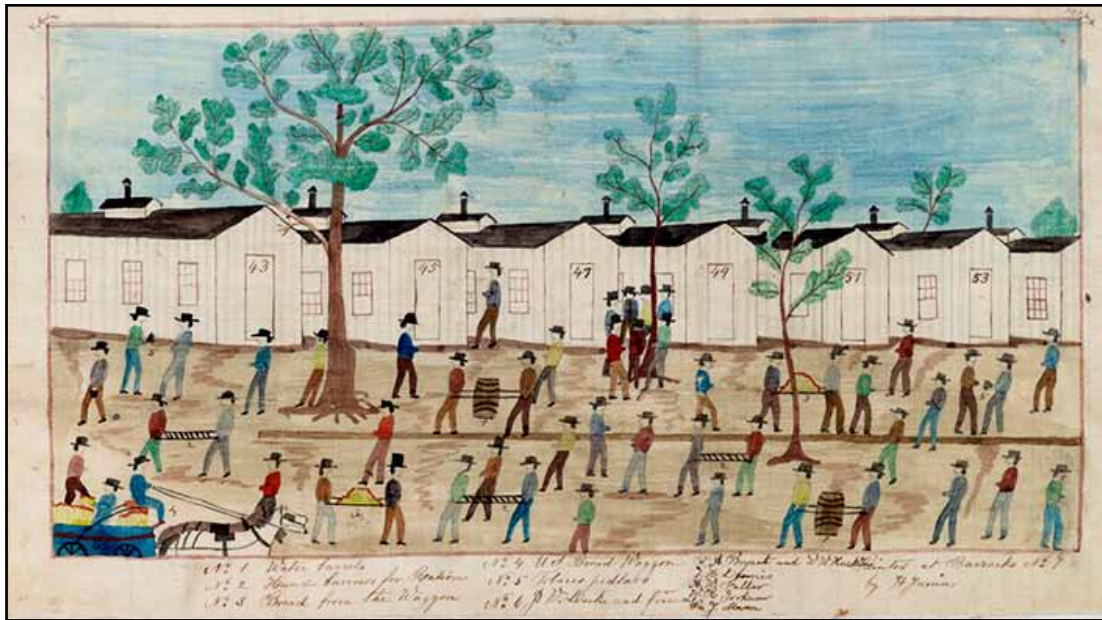


Figure 2: A sketch of the Rock Island Prison barracks found in a letter written by a Confederate soldier to his cousin. (*Library of Congress*)

extremely popular collecting area and much has been written about it over the years. Most collectors are very familiar with this fascinating topic.

Figure 3 shows one of the designs of a printed Overland Mail Company corner card, offered as a full, unused entire as lot 4047 in the Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Sale 908.

Armed conductors rode alongside drivers on the stagecoaches and were in charge of the mail and passengers. Each conductor carried a record book, which included information on the company, a map of the mail route, a time schedule, special instructions to all employees, and pages for keeping notes² (Figure 4).

The U.S. postal rates in force between April 1855 and February 1861 were 10 cents per half ounce for distances over 3,000 miles and three-cents for distances less than that.

The entire length of the Butterfield route was slightly over 2,800 miles, so a letter sent between San Francisco and St. Louis (or intermediate points) would only be charged three-cents postage. Compared to Confederate postage rates, that was a veritable bargain!³

The election of President Lincoln in November 1860 set in motion the secession of the southern states and the Civil War. Wells Fargo Pony Express riders carried word of Abraham Lincoln's election as president from Fort Kearney, Nebraska, to Placerville, California, in a record five days. This was considered one of the most significant accomplishments by the Pony Express.

Almost half the overland route lay in Confederate states. The Texas convention passed an ordinance of secession on February 1, 1861, (not effective until March 2, 1861⁴) and Gen. David Twiggs surrendered the U.S. army forts and personnel in Texas on February 18. This gave Confederate sympathizers



Figure 3: A printed Overland Mail Company corner card. (*Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries*)

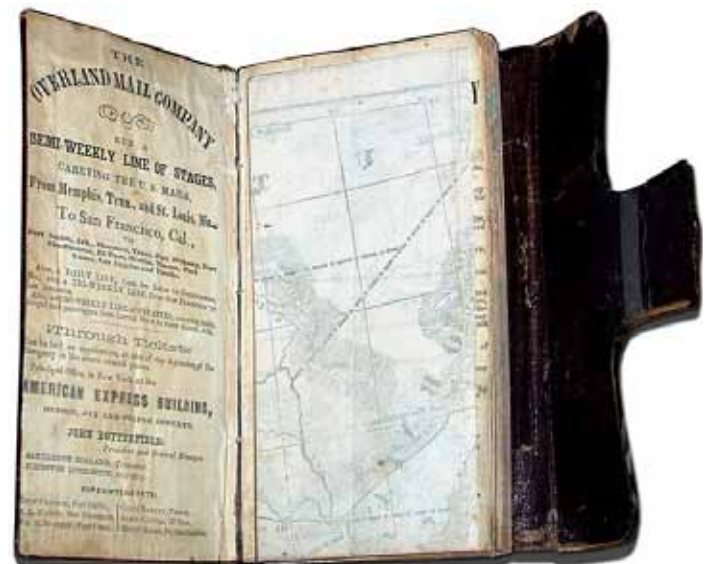


Figure 4: Butterfield Overland Mail Record Book. (*Smithsonian National Postal Museum*)

opportunities to confiscate equipment and stock from the Butterfield stations in Texas, and also opened the threat of Indian attacks on the stations. After reports of this were received in Washington, D.C., Congress

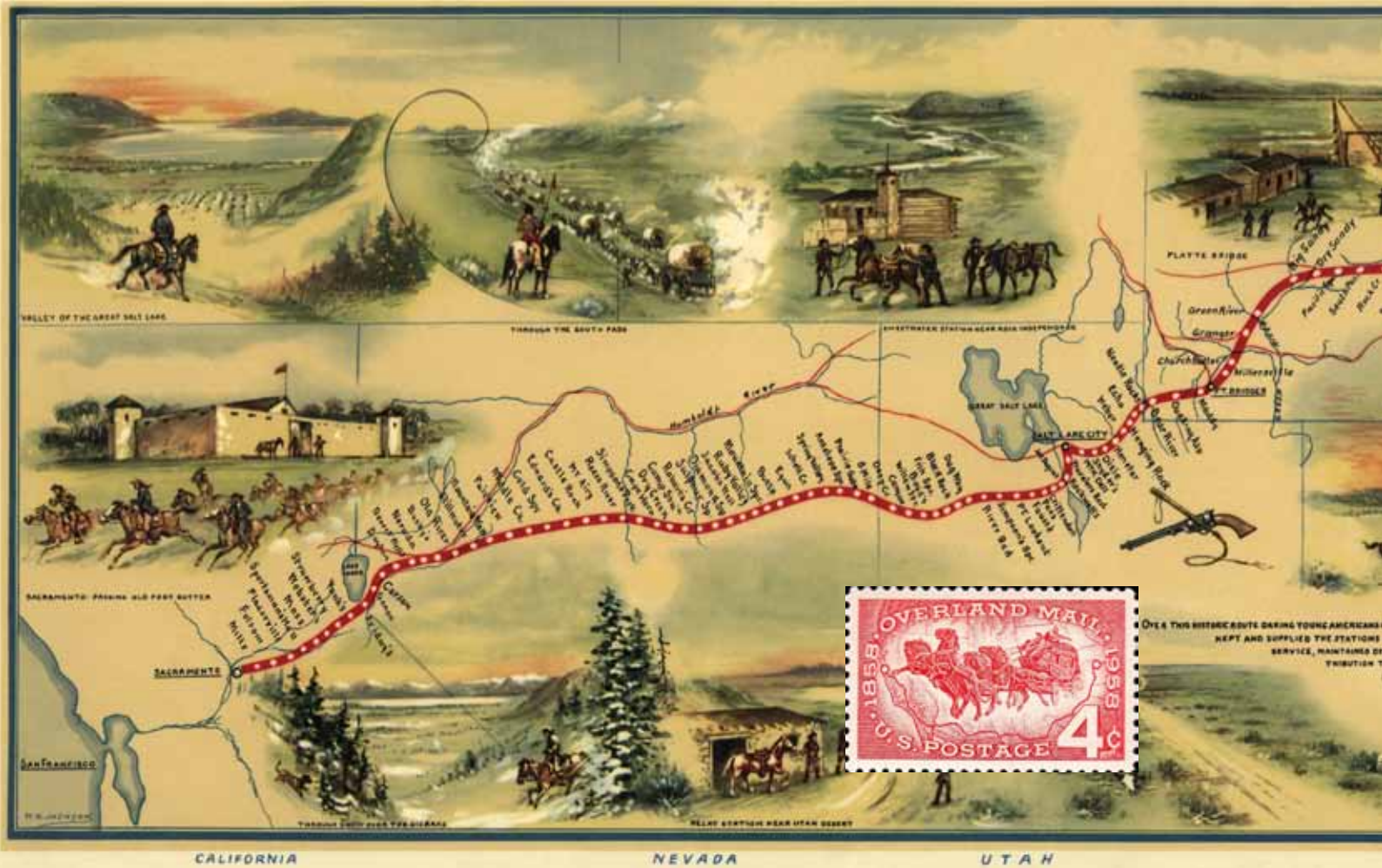


Figure 8: This map of the 1860 Pony Express route, illustrated by William Henry Jackson, shows Nevada (City) as the third stop after L...

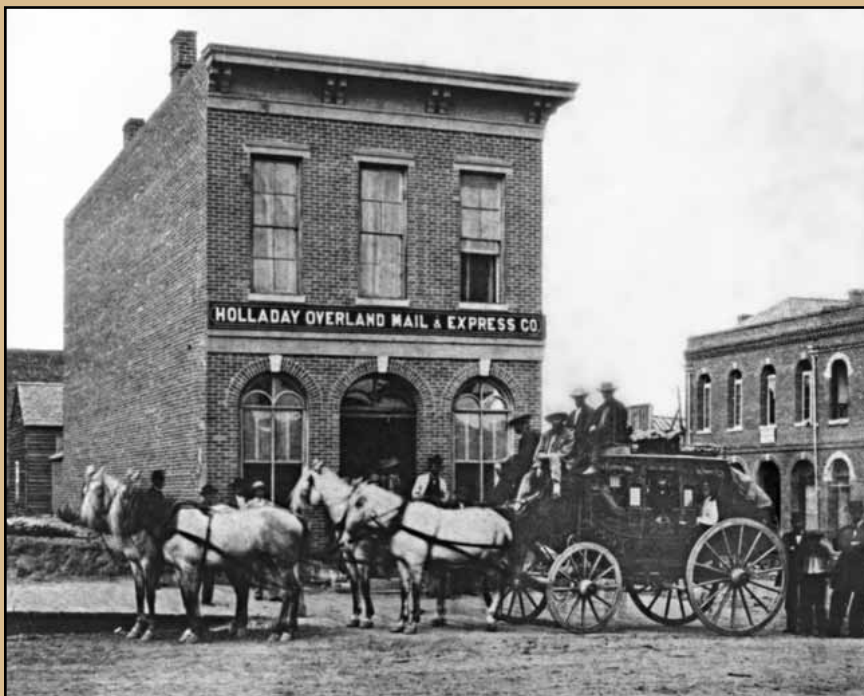


Figure 5: Holladay Overland Mail & Express Company stagecoach office on the southwest corner of 15th and Market Streets in Denver, circa 1860s.



Figure 6: The only recorded use of a Wells Fargo Pony Express stamp. (Courtesy Steven C. Walske)

passed the March 2, 1861, Post Office Appropriation Bill that moved the daily overland mail contract to the central route, effective July 1, 1861. The Overland Mail Company struggled to maintain service during the spring of 1861. The final eastbound mail left San Francisco on April 1, arriving in St. Louis on May 1.⁵

Understandably, the Union would not pay any company for a mail contract that would take the route through a state that had seceded, specifically Arkansas and Texas. The government still had two years left on the Overland Mail Company contract and had to structure a deal that would serve both Overland and Wells Fargo.⁶

The central route was a six-times-a-week service along the Platte River and through the Rocky and Sierra Nevada mountains between Saint Joseph, Missouri, and Placerville, California. Butterfield ceased operations in April 1861 and Wells Fargo & Company began service along the new route in July.⁷

The overland mail of the 1850s was an alternative to the “Via Panama” route that was the default route until the Southern “Butterfield” overland route took hold. Prior to that, a sender was required to endorse the cover to be sent overland in order for it to be sent on the overland route.

After July 1, 1861, all mail between San Francisco and the East was carried by default on the daily overland mail route pursuant to a March 12, 1861, Post Office Order, albeit with minor disruptive periods.

The contract was to expire on July 1, 1864, at which time it was renegotiated. In addition to the daily mail, contractors were to provide expedited service by Pony Express until the completion of the overland telegraph. By 1865, overland mail did not really need any endorsement since it was the default route but, likely from force of habit, the correspondent of the subject cover so marked it.⁸

The initial July 1861 contract was granted to the Overland Mail Company (aka Butterfield). At that time, Wells Fargo was a controlling stockholder in the Overland Mail Company and a subcontractor to them for the Wells Fargo Pony Express. The Overland Mail Company subcontracted the administration of the Pony Express to Wells Fargo, and the operation of the eastern half of the line to the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company.

The latter company went bankrupt in early 1862, and Benjamin Holladay (1819-1887) bought the assets of that company for \$700,000, not the Overland Mail Company, as erroneously stated in some sources.

Control through stock ownership in the Overland Mail Company had passed to Wells Fargo in 1860, when Butterfield was removed as president of the Overland Mail Company. Thus, Wells Fargo, through Overland Mail Company, operated the daily overland

contract. Holladay was only peripherally involved, despite the similarity in the name of his company, as the successor operator of the eastern half of the line (Salt Lake to Kansas).⁹

The Holladay stagecoach office in Denver was on the southwest corner of Fifteenth and Market Streets, as shown in Figure 5. In November 1866, Ben Holladay sold the stagecoach company to Wells, Fargo & Company for \$1,500,000 plus \$300,000 in company stock.¹⁰ The daily overland mail, which had the Pony Express as part of its service for a short time, continued to run until May 1869 with the opening of the transcontinental railroad.¹¹

During the Civil War, the Confederate forces that invaded New Mexico used the old southern Butterfield route both coming and going. Also, Albert Sidney Johnston used the route when he fled from California to join the Confederacy.¹²

The only recorded use of a Pony Express stamp arriving in the Confederacy is shown, courtesy of Steven C. Walske, in Figure 6. This remarkable use bears a \$2 pony stamp canceled May 1, 1861, arriving St. Louis on May 14, as evidenced by the St. Louis cancel tying the three-cent Nesbitt entire.

When the pony stamp was canceled, Virginia was still an independent state, having seceded on April 17, 1861. Virginia was accepted into the Confederacy on May 7, 1861. It was four days by train from St. Louis to New York City where it arrived on May 18, so it was able to sneak through to Richmond before the Washington-Richmond mail route closed down on May 23, 1861.¹³

Nevada City, California

Nevada City, the originating post office on the subject cover, is the county seat of Nevada County in California and located 60 miles northeast of Sacramento. It was first settled during the California Gold Rush. Nevada (Spanish for “snow-covered”) is a reference to the snow-topped mountains in the area.

Figure 7 shows a photo of Nevada City, California, circa 1856 taken by Julia Ann Rudolph (c. 1820-c. 1900) who was a 19th century American studio photographer active in both New York and California.

Figure 8 is a map of 1860 Pony Express Route, which was illustrated by William Henry Jackson, and shows Nevada (City) as the third stop after Lake Tahoe.

William P. Armor

Cover addressee William P. Armor (also seen in military records as Armour and Armer) served in Company K, 43rd Georgia Infantry (Hall County, Brown’s Boys). He enlisted as a private for the duration of the war from Gainesville, Georgia. Armor was listed as captured by the Army of the Tennessee at Champion Hill on May 14, 1863, and sent to Memphis on May 25, 1863. He is listed on a roll of prisoners at

Fort Delaware on June 9, 1863, and again as a paroled prisoner June 30, 1863. He was exchanged July 3 or 4, 1863 (conflicting dates are noted in military records).

Armor was promoted to third sergeant on an unspecified date and was again captured at Cassville, Georgia, on May 19, 1864. He appears on a roll of prisoners at Nashville, Tennessee, captured by forces under Maj. Gen. Thomas, commanding the Department of the Cumberland. From there, he was forwarded to Capt. S.E. Jones, provost marshal general, Louisville, Kentucky, on May 24, 1864. He was transferred to Camp Morton, Indiana, listed as prisoner at the Military Prison in Louisville on May 24, 1864, and sent to Rock Island, Illinois. He was listed as released on June 21, 1865, when he took the oath of allegiance per General Order No. 109 (Figure 9). The oath and other military records are in the National Archives and Records Administration files on microfiche.

Armor's place of residence was listed in military records as Cokesville Hall, Georgia. He was described as having a fresh complexion with dark hair, gray eyes, a height of 5'8" and age 26.

William P. Armor was born in 1839 in Hall County, Georgia, and died April 6, 1918, also in Hall County. He married Amanda C. Wiley (1842-1914) on March 10, 1866. They had five children. Per military records, William's brother, Harrison, is shown in the same unit during the war.

Curiously, on most records, such as U.S. Census records over the years, William's name is spelled "Armour," as well as that of his entire family. The name also appears as Armour in online genealogy records. But he spelled it Armor and I have thus chosen to make that the primary spelling in this article.

In census records, he is listed as a farmer. It appears that the origin of the family name was in England and that is the preferred spelling there. Perhaps dropping the "u" was an effort to Americanize the name, e.g., the British word "colour" vs. American "color," or perhaps it was simply the evident lack of formal education. His birth year and day also appear to be in question. Some *Ancestry.com* records show him as born on an unspecified date in June 1838 instead of 1839, although most records agree on the date of death and other details.

It is clear from a comparison of the Armor signature on the oath of allegiance that it is executed in the same handwriting as the address on the cover. This leads to speculation that perhaps he addressed one or a number of envelopes and mailed them to correspondents to use in reply. Both the signature on the oath and on the address panel of the cover have the same labored start-and-stop script of a minimally educated man.

The underhand curlicue on the top left of the "W" of "Willim" (sic) is the same as on the oath of allegiance.

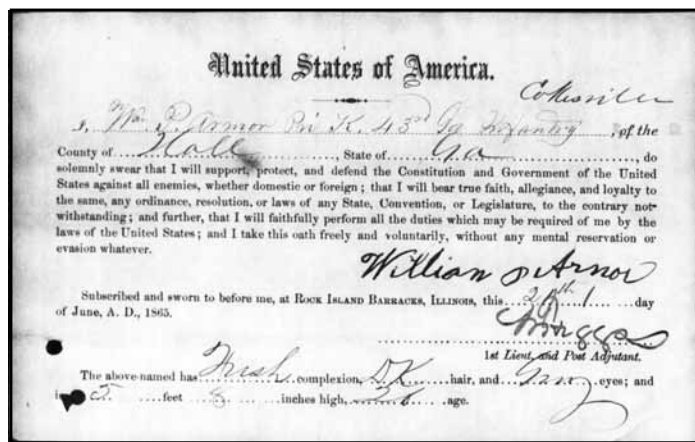


Figure 9: Oath of Allegiance signed by William P. Armor (sic) in the labored hand of a soldier ill-versed in penmanship. (National Archives and Records Administration)

There is a similarly executed "P" of the middle initial on both documents. Also, on the oath, he only made two humps on the "m" of "William" instead of three, as well as only two humps for the "m" of "Armor" instead of three—effectively producing an "n" in both cases. Studying the address panel on the cover, he left out the "a" in "William" – in his own name. "Barracks" is also misspelled with one "r," as well as "Illinois," to which he added an "e."

Final Thought

One simple prisoner of war cover conjures up marvelous images in the minds of postal historians in that rare intertwining of Civil War postal history with the Western mails.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Steven C. Walske and Richard C. Frajola for their review of the original article draft to help sort out the facts about Overland Mail Company and other express services.

Endnotes

- 1 Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012.
- 2 Butterfield Overland Mail Record Book, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, <http://postalmuseum.si.edu/collections/object-spotlight/butterfield.html> Accessed July 1, 2016.
- 3 Steven C. Walske, Richard C. Frajola, *Mails of the Westward Expansion 1803 to 1861*, Western Cover Society, 2015.
- 4 Kaufmann, Crown, Palazolo, p. 5.
- 5 Walske and Frajola, p. 167.
- 6 Pony Express National Museum St. Joseph, MO, 1860-61. <http://ponyexpress.org/pony-express-historical-timeline/> Accessed July 1, 2016.
- 7 Stephen R. Van Wormer, Sue Wade, Susan D. Walter, Susan Arter, *An Isolated Frontier Outpost: Historical and Archaeological Investigations of the Carrizo Creek Stage Station*, 2006.
- 8 Richard C. Frajola to Trish Kaufmann, July 1, 2016, e-mails.
- 9 Stephen C. Walske to Trish Kaufmann, July 1, 2016, e-mails.
- 10 The Denver Post, Ben Holladay and the Overland Mail & Express Company. <http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/2012/07/10/ben-holladay-overland-mail-express-company/2256/> Accessed July 1, 2016.
- 11 Stephen C. Walske to Trish Kaufmann, July 1, 2016, e-mails.
- 12 Frajola to Kaufmann, July 2, 2016, e-mail.
- 13 Walske to Kaufmann July 1, 2016, e-mail.