

## THE BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND MAIL ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

*By Muriel H. Wright*

*The famous "Butterfield Trail" ran through the southeastern part of our state of Oklahoma, and many times we have heard folks say, "Oh yes! that was a 'wagon road' to the West," or words to this effect, little realizing its important link with the history of our country.*

*This "Butterfield Trail" has the roots of its beginning deep in this Nation's past. An offspring of the Overland Mail Company is here with us today, very much alive and doing a tremendous service, not only in Oklahoma but the world in general.*

*Prior to the 1840's there was little demand for mail and passenger facilities from our eastern cities to the fringe of civilization along our western shores. Much of this transport was conducted around Cape Horn (15,000 miles) or across the Isthmus of Panama (6,000 miles) with only a few brave and hardy souls traveling overland. At the termination of the Mexican War, a provision in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848, granted the United States the right of perpetual passage across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Because of the unsatisfactory arrangement of these two previous routes, this new route across Mexico never came into being for gold was discovered in California soon after, and a great hue and cry was heard for an overland mail route entirely within our own boundaries.*

*Much of the sectional disputes that predated the War between the States influenced its routing, and the occurrence of this great War was responsible for its termination along the southern route.*

*When the Overland was re-routed through the central part of the United States, this same company became known as the Wells-Fargo Express Company that is known to almost every school boy and girl.*

*As stage coaches began to disappear from the scene and the job of hauling express was taken over by the railroads, the Wells-Fargo then became known as The American Railway Express Company; it later split into the American Express which became famous for its Travelers Checks, and the Railway Express which still serves the American public today.*

*—Vernon H. Brown, Chairman\*  
Butterfield Overland Mail  
Centennial in Oklahoma*

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\*Vernon H. Brown, Captain American Airlines whose home is in Tulsa, is one of ten Regional Chairmen appointed under the National Committee Overland Mail Centennials, 1957-1958, of which H. Bailey Carroll, Director of the Texas State Historical Association, is Chairman. The National Committee Overland Mail Centennials was organized four years ago under the American Association of State and Local History. The Overland Mail Centennial is being celebrated this year (1957) in Oklahoma, with a special program of events to be held at Durant, September 14-15, and special exhibit relating to the history of the Butterfield Overland Mail shown in a log cabin replica of an old Butterfield Station at the Exposition commemorating Oklahoma's Semi-centennial Celebration, in Oklahoma City, June 14-July 7, this year.

The introductory statements to this article in *The Chronicles* are from a letter by Captain Brown addressed to the postmasters at Spiro, Wilburton, Atoka and Durant, the post offices of which (first class), along the old Butterfield Mail route in Oklahoma, are permitted to use the slogan cancels on all first class mail originating locally between June 1 and December 1, 1957, as authorized through the work of the Oklahoma Committee by the U. S. Post Office Department.—Ed.

The story of the Butterfield Overland Mail from the Mississippi River across Southeastern Oklahoma<sup>1</sup> through Texas and on through the Southwest to California before the War between the States forms one of the fascinating scenes in the pageant of America's past, for the organization of the Overland Mails was spectacular in its undertaking and operation as well as a strong link in the chain of events that brought about the marvelous development of our country. The establishment of mail delivery in 1857 was a necessity of the time, in holding communication for the moving forces on the advancing Western Frontier, and a signal event that marked the beginning of the great mail service overland in the history of the United States Post Office Department.<sup>2</sup>

It was just one hundred years ago that Postmaster-general Brown advertised for bids—April 20, 1857—to operate the first mail overland from the Mississippi through what are now seven western states to San Francisco, the service having been authorized by Congress in the appropriation bill for the Post Office Department on March 3, 1857. Amendments to this Act set forth the following stipulations upon which a contract for carrying the mails was to be made:<sup>3</sup>

Sec. 10. *And be it further enacted*, That the Postmaster-general be, and he is hereby, authorized to contract for the conveyance of the entire letter mail from such point on the Mississippi River as the contractors may select, to San Francisco, in the State of California, for six years, at a cost not exceeding \$300,000 per annum for semi-monthly, \$450,000 for weekly, or \$600,000 for semi-weekly, at the option of the Postmaster-general.

Sec. 11. *And be it further enacted*, That the contract shall require the service to be performed with good four-horse coaches or spring wagons, suitable for the conveyance of passengers, as well as the safety and security of the mails.

Sec. 12. *And be it further enacted*, That the contractors shall have the right of preemption to three hundred and twenty acres of any land not then

<sup>1</sup> An article by the late Dr. Grant Foreman, "The California Mail Route through Oklahoma" (*Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. IX, No. 3, September, 1931) presents some of the history of the Butterfield Overland Mail service with descriptions of the first west-bound mail over this famous line in Oklahoma, written by W. L. Ormsby, only through passenger to San Francisco on the first stage west in September, 1858, later published in the *New York Herald*.

Another article, "Historic Places on the Old Stage Line from Fort Smith to Red River" (*ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, June, 1933), by Muriel H. Wright, gives more details on the local history relating to this famous old stage line, based on the Indian records and her field research in marking the noted Butterfield Mail route in Oklahoma.

<sup>2</sup> Outstanding publications cited in this article (Spring, 1957) are: LeRoy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869* (Cleveland, 1926); Roscoe P. Conkling and Margaret B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland, 1857-1869* (Glendale, 1947); Waterman L. Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, edited by Lyle H. Wright and Josephine M. Bynum (The Huntington Library, San Marino, 1955). The Editor (M.H.W.) of *The Chronicles* served as a guide to Mr. and Mrs. Conkling in 1932, to some of the historic sites when they were mapping out their study of the Butterfield route through Oklahoma, by auto cross country, preparatory to the publication of their history found now in three volumes.

<sup>3</sup> U. S. *Statutes at Large*, Vol. XI, p. 190, quoted in Hafen, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-8.

disposed of or reserved, at each point necessary for a station, not to be nearer than ten miles from each other; and provided that no mineral land shall thus be preempted.

Sec. 13. *And be it further enacted*, That the said service shall be performed within twenty-five days for each trip; and that before entering into such a contract. The Postmaster-general shall be satisfied of the ability and disposition of the parties bonafide and in good faith to perform such contract, and shall require good and sufficient security for the performance of the same; the service to commence within twelve months after signing the contract.

This Act "authorized" but did not *require* the Postmaster-general" to contract for the conveyance of the entire letter mail from such a point on the Mississippi *as the contractors may select*, to San Francisco." Congress had thus left the responsibility and the actual selection of the route to the final decision of President Buchanan's administration. Postmaster-general Brown himself was a foremost leader in the Democratic Party, having served as Governor of Tennessee from 1845 to 1847. The matter of drawing up and awarding a contract for carrying the mails overland called for many discussions and meetings of officials at Washington, even cabinet meetings with President Buchanan taking part.<sup>4</sup> When reports began leaking out that a southern route was likely to win, immediately a cry arose in newspapers over the country, with many columns devoted to acclaiming the superiority of a northern route or a southern route, such as the interests of each newspaper indicated. One writer reported: "The northern papers poured hot shot into their ears to compel the location at St. Louis, or at least further north; while the southern papers fired bombshells on behalf of the termini at New Orleans or Memphis and the extreme southern route . . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Nine bids were opened amidst great excitement in June, 1857. Three of these bids, the line of each in common along the 35th Parallel—i.e., by way of Albuquerque, New Mexico—were submitted by John Butterfield and his associates, William B. Dinsmore, William G. Fargo, James V. P. Gardner, Marcus L. Kinyon, Hamilton Spencer and Alexander Hollond. These three separate bids were for a semi-weekly mail: (1) between St. Louis and San Francisco, \$585,000 per annum; (2) between Memphis and San Francisco, \$595,000 per annum; (3) a route to start out from both St. Louis and Memphis and to converge at the best point (to be determined later), thence over a common line to San Francisco, \$600,000 per annum.<sup>6</sup> Further, the Butterfield proposals stated that the bidders would be willing to alter any portion of the route indicated, which the Postmaster-general might decide best for the safe and expeditious carrying of the mails. The third one of the three bids mentioned, referred to as

<sup>4</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Hafen, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-9; Ormsby, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-6.

the "bifurcated route" (a name said to have been applied by John Butterfield as President of his company), met the seemingly unsurmountable difficulties facing officials at Washington since it gave a terminus to both the North and to the South without advantage to either; and provided the opportunity of establishing the far southern route along the 32nd Parallel by way of El Paso, Texas, and Tucson, Arizona, where there was already considerable white settlement. This line was championed by Postmaster-general Brown since it would follow along the route already proven a success by Jim Burch in carrying a monthly mail between El Paso and San Francisco.

John Butterfield and his associates were astonished when they found they had no voice in determining the route which the Congressional Act stated was to be such "as the contractors may select." They entered protests before the Post Office Department, and contended for a stage line along the 35th Parallel through Oklahoma west by way of Albuquerque, New Mexico, a route heartily recommended in reports by Captain A. E. Whipple,<sup>7</sup> Captain Edward O. C. Ord and others. However, when partisans in Congress began criticising the administration's plan for the overland mail and would alter the route entirely, the Butterfield men would not countenance such attacks on officials at Washington for they were contracting with the Postmaster General as their employer.

Equally important with the designation of the best route over which the mails were to be conveyed was the Postmaster-general's responsibility in selecting those who had the highest qualifications to carry out the terms of a contract. The greatest stager of the time, if not for all time, was John Butterfield, a resident of Utica, New York, who had had wide experience in the organization and successful operation of stage and express lines in his home state.<sup>8</sup> His ability and character and that of his associates were unquestioned at Washington. They signed the great contract with Postmaster-general Brown on September 16, 1857, the terms requiring the mail to be carried to and from San Francisco twice a week, in good four-horse stage coaches or spring wagons, suitable for carry-

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<sup>7</sup> Captain A. W. Whipple had commanded the Pacific Railroad Survey through Oklahoma, along the 35th Parallel, in 1853. His original *Journal* (28 notebooks in his own handwriting) along with many others of his personal records and original paintings by Mollhausen in his collection are now in the Oklahoma Historical Society. The *Journal*, annotated by Muriel H. Wright and George H. Shirk, was published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (Autumn, 1950), besides a brief biography, "Amiel Weeks Whipple," by Francis R. Stoddard. The original notebooks of this *Journal*, records and paintings forming the Whipple Collection were presented as a gift by the Whipple heirs and descendants in 1950, and now constitute one of the most valuable collections in the Historical Society. See reference, also, Ormsby, *op. cit.*, pp. 148, 149, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon H. Brown, "American Airlines Along the Butterfield Overland Mail Route," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1 (Spring, 1955).

ing passengers and for the safety and security of the mails, at \$600,000 a year for a term of six years, the contract to go into effect on September 16, 1858.<sup>9</sup>

The Postmaster-general outlined the route designated by the terms of the contract, in his *Report* for 1857:<sup>10</sup>

.... from St. Louis, Missouri, and from Memphis, Tennessee, converging at Little Rock, Arkansas; thence, via Preston, Texas, or as nearly so as may be found advisable, to the best point of crossing the Rio Grande, above El Paso, and not far from Fort Fillmore; thence, along the new road being opened and constructed under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, to Fort Yuma, California; thence, through the best passes and along the best valleys for safe and expeditious staging, to San Francisco.

There was rejoicing among proponents of this southern route. But the press in the North looked upon the contract as a "foul wrong," the *Chicago Tribune* condemning it as "one of the greatest swindles ever perpetrated upon the country by the slave-holders."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, one who considered himself unbiased stated that it was a credit to the Administration at Washington that "a steady, straightforward course has been pursued, in spite of threats of the disappointed spoils seekers on the one hand, or the jeers and croakings of old foggy conservatives on the other."<sup>12</sup> Opponents of Mr. Butterfield howled that he could never establish a line of stations across the vast stretch of country, most of which was wilderness, and equip them properly with sufficient stock and coaches. Even if he did all this, the mail route—"the longest in the world"—would be too difficult and unwieldy and would be certain to fail.

The year ahead saw Mr. Butterfield and his associates in the Overland Mail Company making their preparations with almost superhuman energy. Many of their expeditions explored and marked out almost yard for yard in some places, along the route of the 2,900-mile route, nearly all through wild country; other expeditions set up stage stations on an average of eight to twenty-five miles apart, and wells had to be dug and houses erected at many of these. Horses and mules were purchased, "enough to have one for every two miles," to convey the mails, besides extra teams to haul supplies—hay and grain and even water—to some of the stations, every one of the some 1,500 animals branded 'O M' (Overland Mail) and kept shod all around. One hundred spring wagons (or "celerity wagons") and coaches were ordered to be made by the Concord Coach Company in New Hampshire. More than 800 operators had to be located and hired, with special emphasis on the selection of dependable and experienced drivers.<sup>13</sup> The Company's protest to

<sup>9</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8; and Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 822.

<sup>10</sup> Hafen, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Foreman, *op. cit.*, p. 302; and Hafen, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

the Postmaster-general against the converging of the mail from St. Louis and Memphis at Little Rock necessitated a test run that brought a change, the two mails on the bifurcated route to meet at Fort Smith, Arkansas, right at the line of the Indian Territory.<sup>14</sup>

The Overland Mail route covered 192 miles from Fort Smith to Colbert's Ferry on Red River, through the Choctaw and the Chickasaw nations. There were twelve stage stations on this Indian Territory part of the route after leaving Fort Smith: fifteen miles to *Walker's* (Skullyville or Old Choctaw Agency); sixteen miles southwest to *Trahern's*; nineteen miles southwest to *Holloway's* at the head of the Narrows, a pass between north side of San Bois Mountain and Brazil Creek; eighteen miles southwest to *Riddle's*; sixteen miles southwest to *Pusley's*; seventeen miles southwest to *Blackburn's*; sixteen miles southwest to *Waddell's*; fifteen miles southwest to *Geary's*; sixteen miles southwest to *Boggy Depot*; seventeen miles south to *Nail's* on Blue River; fourteen miles south to *Fisher's* (later Carriage Point); thirteen miles south to *Colbert's Ferry*.<sup>15</sup>

The first mails were mostly carried through in Concord spring wagons which could conveniently carry four passengers besides 500 to 600 pounds of mail. This celerity wagon was covered with a canvas top and side curtains, and had three seats with backs that could be let down to form a bed for night travel. The roads soon improved with bridges over some of the streams and short sections of turnpike where needed, and the regular Concord coaches were used all along the line. Both of these Concord-made vehicles were drawn by four-horse teams, with additional horses put on in a few bad places on the road. Passenger fare was two hundred dollars one way, not including meals which cost from seventy-five cents to one dollar each, according to the distance from settled regions. Each passenger was allowed forty pounds of baggage without extra cost. Travel was continuous day and night over the total distance of 2,795 miles. A California newspaper recommended the following equipment for the overland passenger:<sup>16</sup>

One Sharp's rifle and a hundred cartridges; a Colts navy revolver and two pounds of balls; a knife and sheath; a pair of thick boots and woolen pants; a half dozen pairs of thick woolen socks; six undershirts; three woolen overshirts; a wide-awake hat; a cheap sack coat; a soldier's overcoat; one pair of blankets in summer and two in winter; a piece of India rubber cloth for blankets; a pair of gauntlets; a small bag of needles, pins; a sponge, hair brush, comb, soap, etc., in an oil silk bag; two pairs of thick drawers, and three or four towels.

<sup>14</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 822. The route of the Butterfield Overland Mail stages in Southeastern Oklahoma along the old road from Fort Smith to Red River is shown on the map that accompanies this article (1957). Approximate routes of other trails in this region are shown to aid as illustrations, many of them important in Oklahoma history.

<sup>16</sup> Hafen, *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 98.

The Overland Mail Company had made all its arrangements and was ready to begin carrying the mail on the contracted date, September 16, 1858. The Pacific Railroad that had been under construction west from St. Louis for seven years completed its track 160 miles to Tipton, Missouri, in the summer of 1858, which gave the westbound mail an advantage of several hours by railroad. Tipton remained the head for all the Overland stages in Missouri during the three years of the service that saw the departure and the arrival of the mails regularly twice weekly.<sup>17</sup>

Early on the morning of Thursday September 16, the first westbound mail was made up by the St. Louis postmaster, in two small mailbags marked "Per Overland Mail," and sent by the mail wagon to the railroad depot where Mr. John Butterfield personally took charge of them and boarded the train leaving for Tipton at 8:00 a. m. The only one other person and eyewitness to this historic event was Waterman L. Ormsby, correspondent for the *New York Herald*, who saw these first mail bags made ready, boarded the train at St. Louis with Mr. Butterfield and continued on the first westbound stage through to San Francisco. The two men arrived with the mail at Tipton one minute past six o'clock p. m. the same day.

A heavy, new coach emblazoned with the words over the side, "Overland Mail Company" was standing at the Tipton depot, with six horses all harnessed and hitched and John Butterfield, Jr. ready to mount the box and be off. Ormsby describes the scene in one of his first reports of his journey published in the *Herald*:<sup>18</sup>

The time occupied in shifting the baggage and passengers was just nine minutes, at which time the cry of "all aboard," and the merry crack of young John Butterfield's whip, denoted that we were off. I took a note of the "following distinguished persons present," as worthy of a place in history: Mr. John Butterfield, president of the Overland Mail Company; John Butterfield, Jr., on the box; Judge Wheeler,<sup>19</sup> lady, and two children, of Fort Smith; Mr. T. R. Corbin, of Washington; and the correspondent of the *Herald*. It had been decided to take no passenger but the last named gentleman, on the first trip, but Mr. Butterfield made an exception in favor of Judge Wheeler, agreeing to take him to Fort Smith, where he himself intended to go. You will perceive, therefore, that your correspondent was the only through passenger who started in the first overland coach to San Francisco, as all the rest of the party dropped off by the time we reached Fort Smith. Not a cheer was raised as the coach drove off, the only adieu being, "Good bye, John," addressed to John, Jr., by one of the crowd.

Travel continued day and night, the blast of the horn announcing the approach to the stage stations. The stagecoach stopped only

<sup>17</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> The "Judge Wheeler" mentioned here was John F. Wheeler, and the "lady," Mrs. Wheeler was a sister of the noted General Stand Watie of the Cherokee Nation. For a brief biography of John F. Wheeler, printer of the first Indian newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, see *Appendix A*.

long enough to change teams quickly or, if it was mealtime, to allow the passengers to snatch a hasty bite. Ormsby writes again:<sup>20</sup>

Then, the music of the forest, the moonlight struggling through the trees, the easy motion of the vehicle moving as it rocked to and fro on the rough road, like a vessel moving on the sea, all tended to make one thoughtful of the impressiveness of the occasion. Young John enlivened the road with his eagerness to get on and to make good time, and evinced the greatest anxiety that no accident should happen to interfere with the safe carriage of the mail. There seemed to be a sort of catching enthusiasm about the whole trip, which excited more interest—I know for myself—than I ever supposed could be mustered out of the bare fact of a common coach travelling over a common road, with a common mail bag and a few common people inside. But the occasion made them all uncommon, and I soon got so that I would willingly go without my dinner for the privilege of helping along that mail a quarter of an hour.

Arrival at Springfield, Missouri, was at 3:15 p. m., Friday, September 17. The blowing of the horn as the stagecoach approached had caused excitement in the town. A crowd gathered to see the first overland mail, and to congratulate Mr. Butterfield and John, Jr. A salute of guns was fired. The 143-mile trip from Tipton to Springfield had never before been made in such quick time. There was a forty-five minute stop at Springfield while the mail and baggage and passengers were changed from the stagecoach to a Concord "celerity" wagon.

Travel night and day again past four stations before reaching the Arkansas line, the rugged Ozark hills, Fayetteville, and then Fort Smith after crossing the Arkansas River on a raft at Van Buren. The mail and passengers from Tipton reached Fort Smith at five minutes past two o'clock in the morning. There was much excitement as the coach drove up to the City Hotel where the mail from Memphis had arrived only fifteen minutes earlier. Ormsby reports "Horns were blown, houses were lit up, and many flocked to the hotel to have a look at the wagons and talk over the exciting topic, and have a peep at the first mail bags. The general interest was contagious . . . ." even this early in the morning. One hour and twenty-five minutes were used in joining the two mails from Memphis and St. Louis, examining and arranging the way mails and the way bill and changing stages. Then exactly at half past three o'clock in the morning on Sunday, September 19, 1858, the first westbound stage left Fort Smith, exactly twenty-four hours ahead of the time table schedule, gained in the first 468 miles of the journey. There were only three persons on the stage leaving Fort Smith, Mr. Ormsby of the *New York Herald*, Mr. Fox the mail agent and the driver (Mr. McDonnell?).<sup>21</sup> The Choctaw line was crossed, the Poteau was forded and they were in the Indian Territory on the way to Colbert's Ferry.

<sup>20</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.



Ormsby wrapped up in blankets and stretched out on the seats took his first opportunity in three days to get some sleep though he says that it took him "some time to get accustomed to the jolting over the rough road, the rocks and the log bridges." The stage arrived at Skullyville about daylight, and stopped at Governor Tandy Walker's house, the station for changing horses. This was the old Choctaw Agency (built 1832) where Tandy Walker, who recently had taken over the office of Governor of the Choctaw Nation, made his home. Ormsby notes that the Governor was of Indian blood but looked like "a full-blooded white man. He had a very comfortable house, owned a farm of several hundred acres and, also, several hundred head of cattle."<sup>22</sup> In personal appearance he looks like a well-to-do farmer. On this occasion he came out in his shirt sleeves and helped hitch up the horses. He has considerable influence over the Nation, and is favorably disposed toward the Overland Mail Company."

Trahern's, Holloway's and Riddle's stations were passed during the day on Sunday with breakfast and dinner on this first west-bound stage, taken from a basket—cold ham, cakes, crackers, cheese and the "needful to wash it down"—placed in the wagon through the kindness of Mr. Butterfield at Fort Smith. Ormsby has left descriptions of the country and the scenes after leaving Skullyville: rich, black land with grass and verdure grown or burned over; many Choctaws driving large herds of cattle; Texas emigrants in their covered wagons "containing their families and all their worldly possessions"; and smoother roads on open, rolling prairies where the Indian ball grounds and their tall posts were sometimes seen.

At Pusley's late in the evening while the horses were being changed, Ormsby traded an Indian boy a paper of tobacco for enough water to wash his face; he put on a blue flannel shirt and considered himself "pretty well on his way" out west. A splendid team of four horses was taken at Pusley's, and the stage was soon spinning away again over the rolling prairie. Then came a patch of woods and rough, winding road where the "driver's ambition to make good

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<sup>22</sup> Mr. Ormsby in error refers to Governor Walker as "William Walker." Governor Tandy Walker of the Choctaw Nation was serving in his official position under a new constitution of the Nation adopted in 1856 at Skullyville that made some drastic changes in the Choctaw constitution, one of which provided that the executive of the Nation should be titled "Governor" instead of "Chief." The proponents of the new constitution favored the admission of the Choctaw Nation as a state, which was bitterly opposed by a majority of the Choctaws. The Skullyville Constitution was in effect until 1860 when a new constitution was adopted at Doaksville. This provided the title of "Principal Chief" for the chief executive, and remained in effect until the close of the Choctaw government in 1907 when Oklahoma was admitted as the 46th State. Tandy Walker was a man of liberal and progressive views and distinguished himself as a military leader in the Choctaw Nation during the War between the States, serving as Colonel of the First Choctaw and Chickasaw Regiment in the Confederate States Army. He died at his home in Skullyville on February 2, 1877.

time overcame his caution, and away they went" bounding over the stones at a fearful rate".<sup>23</sup>

The moon shone brightly, but its light was obstructed by the trees, and the driver had to rely much on his knowledge for a guide. To see the heavy mail wagon whizzing and whirling over the jagged rock, through such a labyrinth, in comparative darkness, and feel oneself bouncing—now on the hard seat, now against the roof, and now against the side of the wagon—was no joke, I assure you, though I can truthfully say that I rather liked the excitement of the thing. But it was too dangerous to be continued without accident, and soon two heavy thumps and a bound of the wagon that unseated us all, and a crashing sound, denoted that something had broken.

One of the seats was found broken, and at the next station—Blackburn's—it was discovered that the wagon tongue was split, the wonder being that the station was ever reached without a bad wreck. It took more time under a light in the dark to mend the damaged tongue than the "ambitious driver" had saved.

A drive of two hours brought the mail wagon through the "beautifully clear and bright" night to Waddell's where Ormsby was awakened from sleep in his blankets, "by a familiar voice saying 'Git up there, old hoss,' and found it was the driver hitching up a new team." Bad roads meant a slow drive to Geary's on North Boggy Creek.

It was still dark before day when the stage crossed Clear Boggy and reached Boggy Depot, the well known village where there were several painted houses and stores along the street that led to the stage station at the Guy Hotel. The next stop was Nail's, or "Blue River Station," where a heavy bridge was building near the crossing on Blue, for the Overland Mail Company. Here nearly seventeen hundred miles from New York overland, the traveling correspondent saw a recent copy of his *Weekly Herald*.<sup>24</sup>

Another three-hour drive past Fisher's Stand brought the first westbound mail to Colbert's Ferry on Monday, September 20, 1858, at ten minutes to ten o'clock in the morning, thirty-four hours ahead of time. This advance of over a day and a half in the schedule meant that there was no new team ready to carry on the mail. While giving the horses a brief rest, a good dinner including rare dishes of "sugar, butter and pastry" was served the travelers at the home of Mr. Colbert. He was of the well known Chickasaw family of Colberts, and had owned and operated the ferry at this place on Red River for five years. He is described as a young man of about thirty," very jovial and friendly," and further:<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33. See, also, Muriel H. Wright, "Old Boggy Depot," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. V, No. 1 (March, 1927).

<sup>25</sup> Ormsby, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

Mr. Colbert evinces some enterprise in carrying the stages of the company across his ferry free of charge in consideration of the increased travel which it will bring his way. He also stipulates to keep the neighboring roads in excellent order, and has already done much towards it. He has a large gang of slaves at work on the banks of the river, cutting away the sand, so as to make the ascent easy. His boat is simply a sort of raft, pushed across the shallow stream by the aid of poles in the hands of sturdy slaves. The fare for a four-horse team is a dollar and a quarter, and the net revenue of the ferry about \$1,000 per annum.

The Red River was ferried in one of Mr. Colbert's boats to the Texas side where he also kept up part of the road on the way to Sherman described by the *Herald* correspondent as "a pleasant little village of about six hundred inhabitants . . . noted for its enterprising citizens":<sup>26</sup>

We found Mr. Bates, the superintendent of this part of the line, ready with a team of mules to carry the mail on without a moment's delay. As soon as we drove up, our teams were unhitched and new ones put in their places at short notice. But Mr. Bates objected to a heavy load of ammunition which was in our wagon, as too much of an incumbrance for the mail, and in a twinkling another wagon was rolled out and we were started on our way."

The stage left Sherman twenty minutes to five p. m., on Monday, September 20, 1858, a distance of 673 miles from St. Louis, and thirty-one hours and fifty minutes ahead of time. The 2,122 miles from Sherman to San Francisco were by way of old Fort Belknap, Fort Chadbourne, Guadalupe Pass and El Paso, Texas; Fort Fillmore, New Mexico; Tucson and Maricopa Wells, Arizona; Fort Yuma and Los Angeles, California.

A Concord coach at the Overland Mail station in Los Angeles took up the mail bags and with fine teams making as much as twelve miles an hour on some stretches reached San Francisco on Sunday morning, October 10, 1858, which Mr. Ormsby reported triumphantly to the *New York Herald* as the correspondent who "had kept his promise and gone through with the first mail—the sole passenger and the only one who had ever made the trip across the plains in less than fifty days":<sup>27</sup>

As we neared the city [San Francisco] we met milkmen and pleasure seekers taking their morning rides, looking on with wonderment as we rattled along at a tearing pace.

Soon we struck the pavements, and, with whip, crack, and bound, shot through the streets to our destination, to the great consideration of everything in the way and no little surprise of everybody. Swiftly we whirled up one street and down another, and round the corners, until finally we drew up at the stage office in front of the Plaza, our driver giving a shrill blast of his horn and a flourish of triumph for the arrival of the first overland mail in San Francisco from St. Louis. But our work was not yet done. The mails must be delivered, and in a jiffy we were at the post office door, blowing the horn, howling and shouting for somebody to come and take the overland mail.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

I thought nobody was ever going to come—the minutes seemed days—but the delay made it even time, and as the man took the mail bags from the coach, at half-past seven A. M. on Sunday, October 10, it was just twenty-three days, twenty-three hours and a half from the time that John Butterfield, the president of the company, took the bags as the cars moved from St. Louis at 8 A. M. on Thursday, 16th of September, 1858.

In the meantime, Mr. John Butterfield who had left the west-bound mail at Fort Smith saw the arrival of the eastbound mail at St. Louis, on October 10, an occasion of great public rejoicing. He was elated with the success, and telegraphed the President of the United States: "The overland mail arrived today at St. Louis from San Francisco in twenty-three days and four hours. The stage brought through six passengers."<sup>28</sup>

President Buchanan made reply: "I cordially congratulate you upon the result. It is a glorious triumph for civilization and the Union. Settlements will soon follow the course of the road, and the East and West will be bound together by a chain of living Americans which can never be broken."

In the Indian Territory, the month of October, 1858, saw the meeting of the Chickasaw Legislature at Tishomingo, the capital of the Chickasaw Nation, with Cyrus Harris as Governor, during which a legislative act on October 19 authorized B. F. Colbert to keep up a ferry across Red River at his residence for the "accommodation of travelers, emigrants and drovers," and to fence in the landing at the ferry on the Chickasaw side of the river with a good rail fence, and put up a ferry gate. He was required to keep good boats and trusty and efficient boatmen for the accommodation of travelers at all times, and to give a \$500 bond for the faithful performance of these requirements. Mr. Colbert maintained the ferry for many years.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Hafen, *op. cit.*, p. 95. One of the six passengers, Mr. G. Bailey, special agent of the Post Office Department was the only through passenger from San Francisco, the others being part "way." On October 13, Mr. Butterfield was in Fort Smith when the second stage from San Francisco arrived—the first one east-bound carrying mail for both Fort Smith and Memphis. This was the occasion of a great celebration at Fort Smith, with Mr. Butterfield riding in one of his coaches drawn by four fine horses in a big parade, followed by a banquet and ball that evening. The details of this grand celebration are given by Conkling, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 221-4.)

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Franklin Colbert, born in 1828 near Horn Lake, Mississippi, was the son of Chickasaw parents, Martin Colbert and his wife, Sallie (Gunn) Colbert. He came at the age of sixteen to the Indian Territory and made his home near the present Colbert, Oklahoma. At this time his mother had married Isaac Alberson, a very prominent Chickasaw leader who was strongly in favor of education and progress in the Nation. The Alberson home built in 1844 is still standing about a mile from present Colbert, now known as the Collins place, having been the home of Mrs. Sallie (Potts) Collins who was a niece of Mrs. Sallie Alberson. A note on B. F. Colbert giving a brief history of his life is found in Notes and Documents of this number of *The Chronicles*. Mr. Colbert died on March 11, 1893, and was buried near his residence in the family cemetery where a handsome granite monument marks his grave.

The regular session of the Choctaw General Council also held its regular session in October at Boggy Depot, the capital of the Choctaw Nation, with Tandy Walker as Governor, when special legislative acts were passed and approved, providing for improvements on the public road from Fort Smith through the Nation and granting tollgate privileges for building and maintaining such improvements. Some of this work had already been done during the summer undoubtedly through arrangements by the Butterfield agents. There were six of these acts granting to certain citizens the privilege of making improvements on the road and of operating tollgates:<sup>30</sup> Washington McDaniel and Charles M. James, a bridge and tollgate near their residence on Brazil Creek, about twelve miles southwest of Skullyville; William Holloway, a turnpike and tollgate at "The Narrows" just west of his place of residence near upper Brazil Creek, (Holloway's Station); Captain John Riddle, a bridge and tollgate on Fourche Maline Stream, near his residence (Riddle's Station); A. W. Geary, a bridge and tollgate on North (Little) Boggy, (Geary's Station); James D. Davis, a bridge and tollgate on Muddy (Middle) Boggy, about five miles south of Geary's; the heirs of the late William Guy, a bridge and tollgate at their mill on Clear Boggy River, about a mile east of Boggy Depot where they maintained the Overland Stage station. A year later the Choctaw Council also passed an act granting Silas Pusley the privilege of erecting a bridge and operating a tollgate on Gaines Creek, near his place of residence (Pusley's Station).<sup>31</sup> The rates of toll were the same in each of these acts, as granted by the Choctaw Council:

For each four-wheeled wagon, or other vehicle, drawn by four or more horses, mules, or oxen with driver, the sum of *Fifty cents*; For each four-wheeled wagon, or other vehicle, drawn by one or two horses, mules or oxen with driver, the sum of *Twenty-five cents*; For each man and horse, the sum of *Ten cents*; and for each animal in every drove of cattle, horses, mules, hogs, or sheep. *One cent*.

This road from Fort Smith to Colbert's Ferry was noted in the Indian Territory, and in use until shortly before Oklahoma became a state in 1907. It had its beginning along an old Indian trail southwest out of Fort Smith when that post was established near the mouth of Poteau River on the Arkansas, in 1817. The part from Fort Smith to Boggy Depot was marked out and worked in places in 1837, for the immigrating Chickasaws during their removal to the Indian Territory when on their way to their new agency and a

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<sup>30</sup> *Acts and Resolutions of the General Council of the Choctaw Nation, 1858*, published by authority of the General Council, by Josephus Dotson, printer for the Nation (Fort Smith, Ark., 1859).

<sup>31</sup> *Acts and Resolutions of the General Council of the Choctaw Nation, 1859*, published by authority of the General Council, and printed by *The Times* office, Fort Smith, Ark. *The Times* printing office was owned by John F. Wheeler (See *Appendix A*).

The Butterfield Mail stations from Fort Smith to Colbert's Ferry are listed with their locations in *Appendix B*.

trader's store at the "Depot on the Boggy." Near Geary's place on North Boggy, the road converged with the Texas Road, over which many emigrants from Missouri and farther north traveled on their way to settlement in Texas. But the road to Fort Smith, the whole route through the Indian Territory over which the Butterfield stages ran, was the most important in the development and settlement in Oklahoma. After the War between the States, other laws of the Choctaw Council provided for the building of bridges and turnpikes, the operation of tollgates and the establishment of stage stands, some of the old Butterfield stations continuing in operation.

It was the Butterfield Overland Mail stages that made the old road from Fort Smith to Colbert's Ferry famous in the history of this country. The Overland Mail Company continued delivery of the mails from St. Louis to San Francisco, back and forth twice weekly until June 30, 1861, when the outbreak of the War between the States removed the line from the route over which it had operated so regularly and so well.

## APPENDIX A

### JOHN F. WHEELER, FIRST PRINTER TO USE THE SEQUOYAH TYPE

John Foster Wheeler arrived from Kentucky at New Echota, capital of the Cherokee Nation, in Georgia, on December 27, 1827. As the head printer for the Cherokee printing press established by the Reverend Samuel A. Worcester, he learned the use of the Sequoyah alphabet and set the columns in this type in the Cherokee for the first number of the *Cherokee Phoenix* published on February 21, 1828. He married Nannie, eldest daughter of Christian David Watie (or Oowatie) and Susannah Reese Watie, and sister of Stand Watie and Elias Boudinot (Buck Watie). He moved west in 1834, stating to the Indian Agent that he was "minded to establishing a printing press in Arkansas." He was with the first printing press in Oklahoma set up at old Union Mission where he was the printer of the first book printed in Oklahoma, a Creek primer, *The Child's Book* by the Reverend John Flemming, published in 1835. He moved with the press to Park Hill where it became noted as the Park Hill Press. Mr. Wheeler was the printer of thousands of pages of Bible translations, tracts and laws in the Indian languages, and of many books in the Cherokee and the Choctaw, including: *The Choctaw Reader* (by Alfred Wright and Cyrus Byington, missionaries, 1836); *Cherokee Almanac*, 1836; *Choctaw Almanac*, 1837 and 1838; *Choctaw Arithmetic*, 1845.

John F. Wheeler signed the Cherokee Treaty of 1846, at Washington, as a witness for the Cherokees aligned with the Treaty Party of old Ridge Party, of which his brother-in-law, Stand Watie, was the acknowledged leader. It was probably for his work with the Cherokee delegation at Washington, or some similar position in the Cherokee Nation that he was often referred to as "Judge Wheeler."

He moved to Fort Smith in February, 1847, where he was well known as the founder and publisher of the *Herald*, first issued in June, 1847. He brought the first Hoe cylinder press to Fort Smith for the publication of his new paper the *Times*, the first issue appearing in January, 1858. The following news item appeared in the Fort Smith *Times* for June 30, 1858, reporting preparations made by John Butterfield's men for the great contract of carrying the U. S. mails to San Francisco:

"Messrs. Glover and Bates, superintendents for the Overland Mail Company, started two wagons and teams and eighteen men for their respective divisions on Monday evening. As soon as the "Lady Walton" [steamboat up the Arkansas] which is expected every moment, arrives, they will follow on, taking with them four coaches, twenty men and twenty mules. With the movements of Butterfield & Company before us, who will doubt the determination of that company to perform their contract, and that, true to time. Success to Messrs. Butterfield & Company."

John Foster Wheeler died at the age of eighty years on March 10, 1880. An obituary written by his friend, J. W. Weaver, well known pioneer and newspaper man with the *Fort Smith Elevator*, stated that "Col. John F. Wheeler" was editor of the *Independent* at Fort Smith at the time of his death, adding, "We have toiled early and late, we have worked hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with him for years in the labor and duties of printer, which has resulted in establishing one of the best newspapers in this section of the state."

A great-grandson of John F. Wheeler is Mr. Wheeler Mayo, the well known editor and publisher of the *Sequoyah County Times* at Sallisaw. The grandparents of Mr. Mayo were Will Watie Wheeler and Emma Carnall Wheeler who was a daughter of John C. Carnall, the publisher of the *Elevator* at Fort Smith. Mr. Mayo says that when his grandparents were married, the two old newspaper families "stopped their feuding" and joined in the publication of the *Elevator*.

The *American Newspaper Directory*, 1880 (Geo. P. Rowell & Co.) shows *Wheeler's Independent* published at Fort Smith on Wednesdays, established 1871, John F. Wheeler & Son, editors and publishers; and *Elevator* published at Fort Smith on Fridays, established 1878, John Carnall and C. H. Wheeler, editors and publishers.

—M. H. W.

## APPENDIX B

The following list gives the locations of the Butterfield Overland Mail stations along the old road from Fort Smith to Colbert's Ferry, in Oklahoma. The names of the official stage stations are given in *italic*. The locations of the Brazil Creek bridge (McDaniel and James) and the Muddy Boggy bridge (Jim Davis) are also listed since the improvements here were built and maintained under tollgate privileges at important places, by the authorization of the Choctaw General Council, and were known for many years on the old stage line road though they were not official Butterfield stands.

1. *Walker's Station* (Sec. 18, T. 9 N., R. 26 E.), LeFlore County, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles northeast of present Spiro where a pile of chimney stones marking the location of the house (burned a few years ago) and the old Choctaw Agency Spring nearby may be seen.  
McDaniel and James (Sec. 27, T. 8 N., R. 24 E.) bridge and tollgate on Brazil Creek, LeFlore County, near present Brazil.
2. *Trahern's Station* (Sec. 2, T. 8 N., R. 24 E.) at Latham, LeFlore County, where Judge James N. Trahern's grave may be seen south side of the road and old "Council House" spring about 200 yards north.
3. *Holloway's Station* (Sec. 24, T. 6 N., R. 21 E.), turnpike and tollgate at east end of The Narrows about 3 miles northeast (by present road) of Red Oak, Latimer County, where part of the old turnpike is clearly seen. Five miles east of Holloway's was Edward's Store (Sec. 23, T. 6 N., R. 21 E.) where meals were served to Overland Mail passengers soon after the establishment of the stage line. The house, log cabin type, is the only one of the original Butterfield Overland Mail stops still standing in Oklahoma.
4. *Riddles Station* (Sec. 12, T. 5 N., R. 19 W.),  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles east of Wilburton on the section line road at Lutie, off U. S. # 270. Riddle Cemetery is just east of the creek crossing near the site of the station and south of Lutie, Latimer County.
5. *Pusley's Station* (Secs. 24-55, T. 4 N., R. 17 W.) about 3 miles southwest of Higgins, Latimer County, south side of Gaines Creek with Pusley Creek to the west. Site indicated by pile of chimney stones west of an old log house, about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile southwest of Gaines Creek crossing.
6. *Blackburn's Station* (Secs. 4-5, T. 2 N., R. 15 W.) near present rock schoolhouse, Pittsburg County, and north of old road with Elm Creek short distance north.
7. *Waddell's Station* (Secs. 9-10, T. 1 N., R. 13 W.) about 3 miles southwest of Wesley, Atoka County, location locally known as old Beale place, the old log house here said to have been part of the station.
8. *Geary's Station* (Sec. 19, T. 1 N., R. 12 E.) about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles southwest of Stringtown, Atoka County, on east side of North Boggy Creek.  
Jim Davis bridge on Muddy (or Middle) Boggy Creek (S. 11, T. 2S., R. 11 E.) approximated the present bridge on U. S. # 69-75 at the north side of Atoka, Atoka County.
9. *Boggy Depot* (Sec. 1, T. 3 S., R. 9 E.) about 4 miles south of present bridge on Clear Boggy 10 miles west of Atoka, Atoka County, State # 7 to Wapanucka. The Old Boggy Depot cemetery is about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile west of the site of the old town. Pile of chimney stones marks site of the



old Wright residence (recently burned) on the west side of town, and about 300 yards west of the Guy Hotel site. Traces of the Overland Mail route clearly seen here along what was main street of Boggy Depot, east to west, turning south at the hotel site marked by two piles of chimney stones, with large oak trees to north in what was once the hotel yard.

10. *Nail's or "Blue River Station"* (Secs. 7-8, T. 5 S., R. 9 E. ) on east side of Blue River, about 2 miles southwest of Kenefick in Bryan County. The crossing here on Blue is shallow water, about 300 yards west of the Nail residence (burned) marked by pile of chimney stones. Near this site is the burial ground where a handsome monument marks the grave of J. H. Nail (died 1867), a prominent Choctaw citizen who operated the Overland Mail station or "Blue River Station," best known in local history as "Nail's Crossing."
11. *Fisher's Station* (Sec. 3, T. 8 N., R. 8 E.) about 4 miles west of Durant, Bryan County, on U. S. # 70, and 2 miles south, at the head of Island Bayou which marked the Choctaw-Chickasaw boundary line between the two nations. This station was better known locally as "Carriage Point." Fisher was a member of a well known Choctaw family.
12. *Colbert's Ferry* (Secs. 30-31, T. 8 S., R. 7 E.) about three miles south of the town of Colbert, Bryan County, just below the old highway bridge across Red River.