

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the House Resources  
Committee  
Hearing on H. R. 1266  
Thursday, July 19, 2007

H. R. 1266, the “Ox Bow Route” of the Butterfield Overland Trail in Missouri, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, would evaluate a range of alternatives for protecting and interpreting the resources of the trail area, including possible alternatives for potential addition of the trail to the National Trails System.

## HOW THIS MEETS CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL DESIGNATION

Congress in 1857 passed the Overland California Mail Act offering government aid in the form of mail contracts to any company that could provide stagecoach service from the eastern United States to California.

John Butterfield was paid \$600,000 to get the mail between St. Louis and San Francisco in 25 days. The Butterfield Overland Trail, a 2,800 mile long trail was mandated by the Postmaster General and began running in September, 1858. At that time, it was the largest land-mail contract ever awarded in the United States.

The first stage left St. Louis September 15, 1858 followed by a second the next day; the latter being necessary to handle the accumulation of mail. Both arrived in San Francisco on October 10<sup>th</sup>, thus inaugurating the first transcontinental mail and passenger line on which continuous travel was kept up.

John Butterfield operated the longest stagecoach run in the history of the world.

## HOW THIS MEETS CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL DESIGNATION

*A. Trail established by historic use and must be historically significant as a result of that use.*

California was admitted as a state in 1850 and immediately started to demand that Congress get a transcontinental railroad build to their state. Congress battled over the proposal for six years because they could not agree on the best route to follow to get to California.

California requested that mail service be improved while they waited for the railroad to be constructed. Mail had to leave the east coast by boat and sail all the way around the southern tip of South America and back up to California and that took weeks. The time could be shortened by 10 days by taking the mail to Panama and carrying it overland to a waiting ship on the Pacific side of Panama. In early 1857, the Post Office Department put up for bids a contract a time of 25 days and would run two times a week. John Butterfield was awarded the \$600,000 contract. The contract stated that the mail route would have to go into operation in September 1858. It took a year of frantic and grueling work to get the route planned, built, and equipped. Butterfield chose St. Louis as his eastern terminal but when the mail route was ready to go into operation, the line had already reached Tipton. By using the railroad line he was able to draw more passengers and reduce his operating costs. To satisfy some political factions, he also had to make Memphis an eastern terminal and the Tipton route and the Memphis route met at Ft. Smith, Arkansas.

As soon as the contract was signed, 56 year old John Butterfield set out on a rapid survey of the route, taking a staff of helpers from four other express companies. He sent out representatives to hunt out and employ guides, scouts, and frontiersmen who were friendly with the various Indian tribes, and who knew every spring, water

hole, stream ford and-mountain pass on the entire route. John Butterfield had to devise his own route from Tipton to San Francisco. He divided the 2,975 mile route into 200 way stations and relay posts. The relay posts were close enough together that the distance could be traveled at a rapid pace under any weather conditions and without danger of exhausting mules or horses. At the end of each relay, living quarters, stables and corrals were constructed. At the end of each day's travels, they had to provide sleeping and feeding accommodations for passengers and drivers. These stations also had to be equipped with blacksmith and harness shops and emergency horses and mules. Preparing the trail was also tedious. Bridges had to be built across streams, or ferryboats provided for the larger streams, creek banks cut down to make fording places, large rocks removed from roads, wells dug, passes through mountains cleared and the road graded enough so that the trail would be passable for travel.

Collecting the supplies was a huge job. Traders went out to buy the toughest and fastest horses and mules available. They bought, or had made, hundreds of sets of harness. They ordered Concord stage coaches and Celerity wagons for use on the route and heavy freight wagons for hauling the thousand tons of hay, grain, and provisions that would be required each month at the way stations and heavy tank wagons for hauling water to the arid posts.

During the year of preparation Butterfield drove his men relentlessly, and spent more than a million dollars to get the mail route ready to go into operation. In September of 1858 they had these things ready:

250 Concord coaches

500 other vehicles ready to roll

3000 tons of hay and grain provisions stored in warehouses

A well dug or water stored at all relay posts in arid regions

1200 skilled superintendents, road bosses, drivers, guards, conductors, keepers, blacksmiths, harness makers, hostlers and clerks

Most of the men Butterfield chose were rough, tough frontiersmen, for no other men could have withstood the hardships and performed the tasks he demanded of them. On his last inspection trip, he gathered his men at the relay stations for final instructions, **"Above all else, passengers and mail must be protected and schedules maintained but this can only be done by keeping on friendly terms with the Indians'."**

The first stage left St. Louis September 15, 1858 followed by a second the next day; the latter being necessary to handle the accumulation of mail. Both arrived in San Francisco on October 10<sup>th</sup>, thus inaugurating the first transcontinental mail and passenger line on which continuous travel was kept up.

*B. Trail must be of national significance with respect to broad facet of American history, such as trade and commerce, and have a far reaching effect on broad patterns of American culture*

Congress in 1857 passed the Overland California Mail Act offering government aid in the form of mail contracts to any company that could provide stagecoach service from the eastern United States to California.

The Butterfield Overland Trail, a 2,800 mile long trail was mandated by the Postmaster General and began running on September 15, 1858. John Butterfield was paid \$600,000 to get the mail between St. Louis and San Francisco in 25 days. At that

time, it was the largest land-mail contract ever awarded in the United States. It was required by contract to go through El Paso, Texas, and through Ft. Yuma, Arizona. This route was an extra 600 miles further than the central and northern routes through Denver, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah. However the southern route was free of snow.

John Butterfield operated the longest stagecoach run in the history of the world. Butterfield's mail coaches ran from Tipton, Missouri to San Francisco. Coaches were to run each way twice a week. Having 25 days to make each run, the coaches traveled day and night to meet this deadline. There were 200 stage stops, one every 20 miles or so to change teams.

*C. Significant potential for public recreational use or historical interest based on historic interpretation and appreciation.*

The following are some local examples of how local recreational and historic efforts will be enhanced by historic trail designation of the Butterfield Overland Route.

- Incorporate Butterfield Overland Trail route into regional tourism marketing and promotion
- Improve existing facilities to make them more accessible, usable, and enjoyable
- Develop new facilities to provide
  - Link to existing local trails
  - Provide connections between communities, parks and other key destinations.
  - Establish desired design guidelines for access, safety, and enjoyment
- Promote shared use of resources by using public lands in the best manner possible
- Provide access to scenic vistas, historic sites, points of interest, and support facilities.

- Provide for viewing stations, rest areas, turnouts, and interpretative signs
- Build public awareness and support through road signs, brochures, maps and bulletin boards, route guides and promotional events.