

# The History

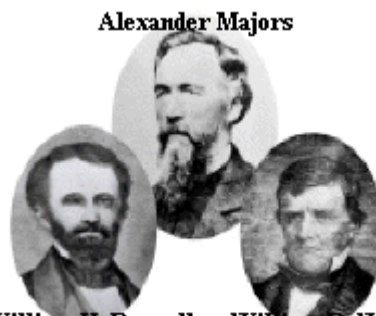
The Pony Express actually began as an advertisement. Its purpose was to draw public attention to the Central Route in hopes of gaining the million dollar government mail contract for the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company (COC&PP). By 1860, over a half-million people lived west of the Rocky Mountains. It was difficult for these people to communicate with friends and family in the east and they were demanding better and faster mail service.



Advertisement that appeared in St. Joseph newspapers

Before 1860, there were three mail routes in use. Two were overland routes and one was by sea. The route by sea was the most popular one. Mail was carried to Panama by ship, then taken across the isthmus of Panama by wagons, mules, or stagecoaches. The mail was then loaded onto a second ship for transport to California. On the most popular overland route, the Southern or Butterfield Route, the mail was carried by stagecoach. Although the Central Route was 2,000 miles long, it was the shortest of the three mail routes. It was also the least used route because people did not believe it could be traveled year-round.

The COC&PP was a freighting company operated by William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, and William B. Waddell. This company held the monopoly on the Central Route. The company wanted the \$1,000,000 government mail contract held by the Overland Mail Company on the Southern Route. Russell, Majors, and Waddell set out to prove that winter was not a factor in traveling the Central Route.



Alexander Majors  
William H. Russell William B. Waddell  
Founders of the Pony Express

The COC&PP had suffered heavy losses of supplies and equipment during the Mormon War in 1857. Congress refused to pay for the supplies and other freighting the company had done for the government. The result was that Russell, Majors, and Waddell were heavily in debt. They hoped to save the company from bankruptcy by using the Pony Express as a way of advertising to the country and Congress the benefits of the Central Route.



Supply Trains enroute to Utah

The COC&PP chose St. Joseph, Missouri, as the eastern terminus of the Pony Express because both the telegraph and railroad had reached this far west.



**St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1861**

St. Joseph was well known as a jumping off point for the Oregon-California Trails. The citizens of St. Joseph also offered incentives of land, office space, and free railroad passage for company personnel and freight.

At 7:15 p.m., on April 3, 1860, Johnny Fry left the Pike's Peak Stables in St. Joseph and headed west. In the early morning hours of April 4, Billy Hamilton left Sacramento in a driving rain headed east. They had 10 days to get the mail through. On April 13, Johnny Fry returned to St. Joseph with the eastbound mail. The Pony Express had done it! Ten days to get the mail over the Central Route. This beat the fastest times on the Southern Route and the Panama Route.



**The First Ride by Charles Hargens  
{Courtesy of the Pony Express Museum}**



**The Pony Express Route**

At any given time, there were two riders on the trail, one headed east and one headed west, day and night. The mail was carried in relays with each rider covering 75 to 100 miles. In that distance, he would change horses at relay stations spaced 10 to 12 miles apart. The horses could average 10 miles per hour and each rider changed horses 8 to 10 times.

From April 3, 1860, to October 24, 1861, almost 35,000 letters were carried by Pony Express riders. Letters were written on lightweight paper and wrapped in oiled silk to protect the paper from the elements. When the Pony Express began, it cost \$5.00 per ½ ounce to send one letter. By the time the Pony Express ended, the price had dropped to \$1.00 per ½ ounce. The mail was carried in specially designed saddlebags called a *mochila*. The *mochila* was thrown over the saddle and held in place by the weight of the rider. Each corner of the *mochila* had a *cantina*, or pocket. Bundles of mail were placed in each *cantina*. The *mochila* could hold 20 pounds of mail.



**Saddle & Mochila**

This replica saddle & mochila was made by the Wyeth Company of St. Joseph in the 1940s.



**Pony Express cover or envelope. Currently on loan to Pony Express Museum**

Although it was Russell, Majors, and



*Pony Express Rider in a Snowstorm*  
by Harrison Hartley

Waddell that proved the Central Route could be used year-round, Congress asked the Overland Mail Company to move their operation from the Southern Route to the Central Route and gave the Overland Mail Company the mail contract in March 1861. The COC&PP received a sub-contract for \$475,000 to continue the Pony Express between the Missouri River and Salt Lake City. The Overland Mail Company operated the Pony Express from Salt Lake City to California.

On October 24, 1861, the transcontinental telegraph line was completed. Now that messages could be sent in minutes by telegraph, the Pony Express was no longer the fastest method of communication and was ended.



**The Pony Express meets the  
Transcontinental Telegraph**

Financially, the Pony Express was huge failure. However, its successes are numerous. It proved that the Central Route could traveled through all seasons, blazed the trail for the transcontinental railroad across the mountains, provided the fastest communication between the east and west coasts until the transcontinental telegraph line was completed, and kept communication open to California at the beginning of the Civil War.

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