Butterfield Overland Mail Company Stagecoaches and Stage (Celerity) Wagons used on the Southern Trail

1858-1861

by

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Overview

Celebrations in the southwest, often called "Butterfield Stage Days," commemorating this important chapter in American history, incorrectly use replica stagecoaches, instead of stage (celerity) wagons. Also, many southwest museums often display stagecoaches which are erroneously contributed to Butterfield

As the "Butterfield Stage Days" celebrations and museum displays are the most visible to the public, they have contributed significantly to the erroneous history of John Butterfield's Overland Mail Company. There are some historians that I have been working with in Arizona, who are trying to correct these inaccuracies.

Although the use of stagecoaches and stage (celerity) wagons used by the Overland Mail Company has been basically covered in my 2011 book *The Butterfield Trail and Overland Mail Company in Arizona, 1858-1861,* this comprehensive report is prepared as an aid to historians.

Thirteen images made at the time of Butterfield's service are used for this report. They are six prints from copies of original newspapers that are in my collection, six images are copies of original drawings, and one copy of a daguerreotype. Included are many descriptions by correspondents which describe the types of stagecoaches or stage wagons that were used by Butterfield.

. Historical societies were contacted in Albany and Utica, NY, and the Huntington Library, San Moreno, California. A bibliography is given at the end of this report.

Description and Definitions

One of the problems in accurately identifying a genuine stage used by Butterfield is the confusion concerning their definition. Passenger and mail carrying wagons of that time generally come under two classifications—the stagecoach and stage (celerity) wagon. The Overland Mail Company used both, but John Butterfield designed a variation of the stage (celerity) wagon to be used by the Overland Mail Company.

Stagecoach: This draft animal drawn vehicle had a strong sub-frame covered by colorful decorated wooden paneling with ornate doors and comfortably padded seats. The roof was very strong which often had a metal railing around its outer edges where luggage was sometimes carried. Some photos show passengers sitting on the roof. A platform at the back was provided for luggage and mail bags. This class of stage was used on 30% of the southern Butterfield Trail.

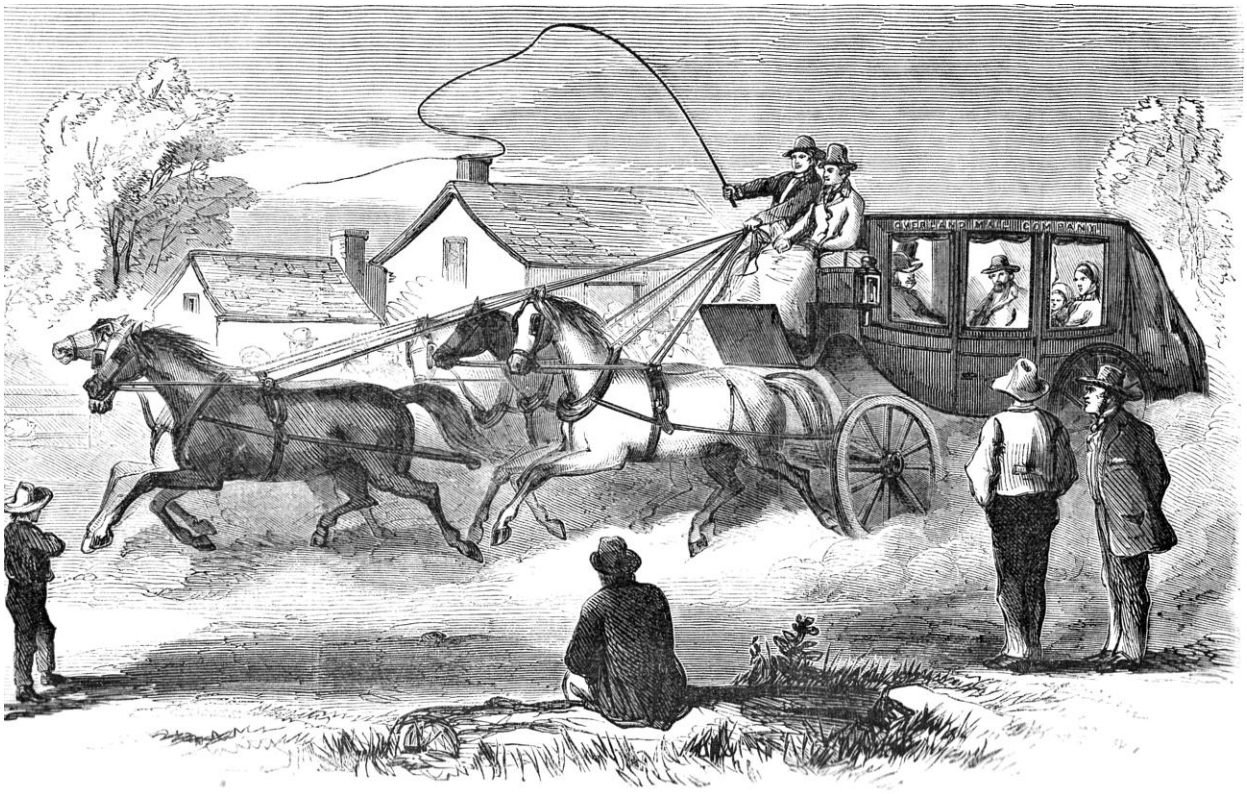
Stage (Celerity) Wagon: This style was designed for rough conditions where the trail was not as well developed, in sand, and for traversing steep inclines. It was basically an open buckboard. There were no sides except a very low panel across the bottom edge. A wooden bench seat was at the front for the driver and conductor. Behind them were three more wooden bench seats for passengers. Wooden staves held up a thin canvas top. Attached to the sides of the top were canvas curtains that could be let down. Some newspaper reports stated it was similar to a "Jersey Wagon." They had smaller diameter wheels for a lower center of gravity and had wider individual wheels as an aid on soft ground. They weighed about one half as much as the stagecoaches. This class was used on 70% of the Butterfield Trail.

The Stagecoaches and Stage (Celerity) Wagons used by Butterfield

The Concord stagecoaches were made by Abbot, Downing & Company of Concord, New Hampshire. The stage wagon that John Butterfield designed was made by James Goold Company of Albany, New York. About 100 of these were made. The Troy stagecoaches were made by The Gilbert Company, Troy, NY. All the stages only displayed the name "Overland Mail Company" on their sides. Butterfield did not use his name on any of the stages.

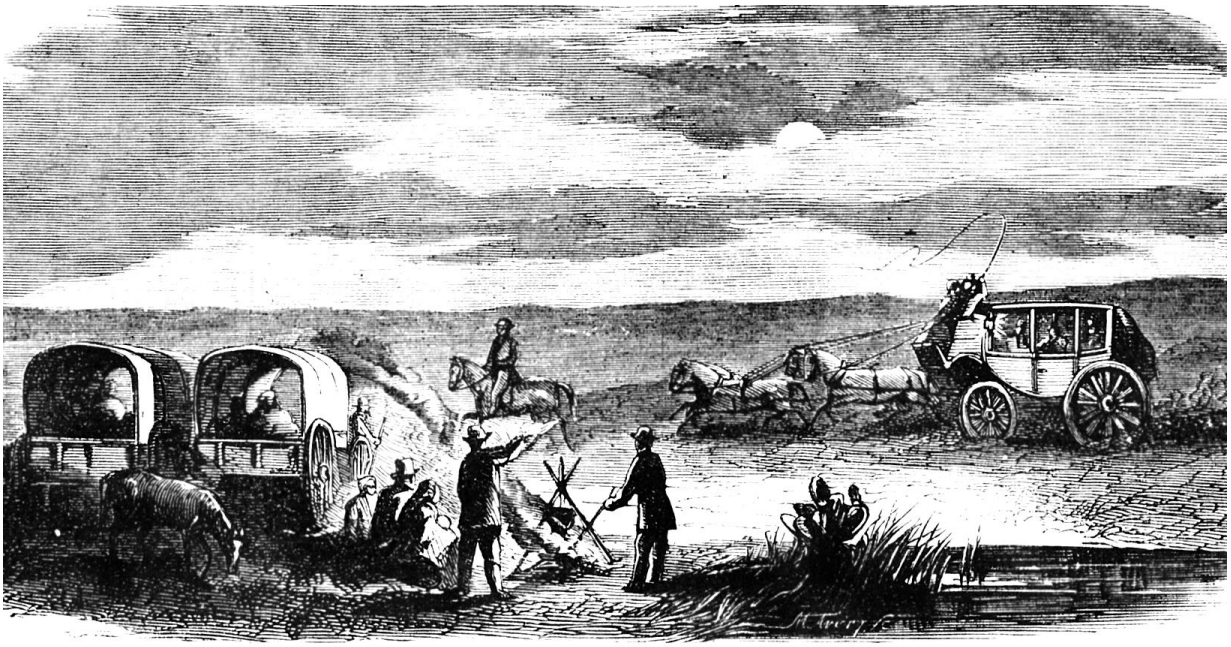
Where Stagecoaches and Stage Wagons were used on the Butterfield Trail

The Butterfield trail was bifurcated and stagecoaches were used both from Tipton, Missouri, and Memphis, Tennessee, and met at Fort Smith, Arkansas. At Fort Smith the mail was consolidated. The mail and passengers were transferred to the stage (celerity) wagon that was designed by John Butterfield. From Fort Smith to Los Angeles, California, the stage wagon was used. From Los Angeles to San Francisco the larger stagecoaches were employed. Some correspondents indicate a slight variation of this pattern.



THE OVERLAND MAIL—THE START FROM THE EASTERN SIDE.—FIRST COACH DRIVEN BY JOHN BUTTERFIELD JR.

A Butterfield Concord stagecoach starting from the eastern end of the trail—presumably at Tipton, Missouri. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 23, 1858



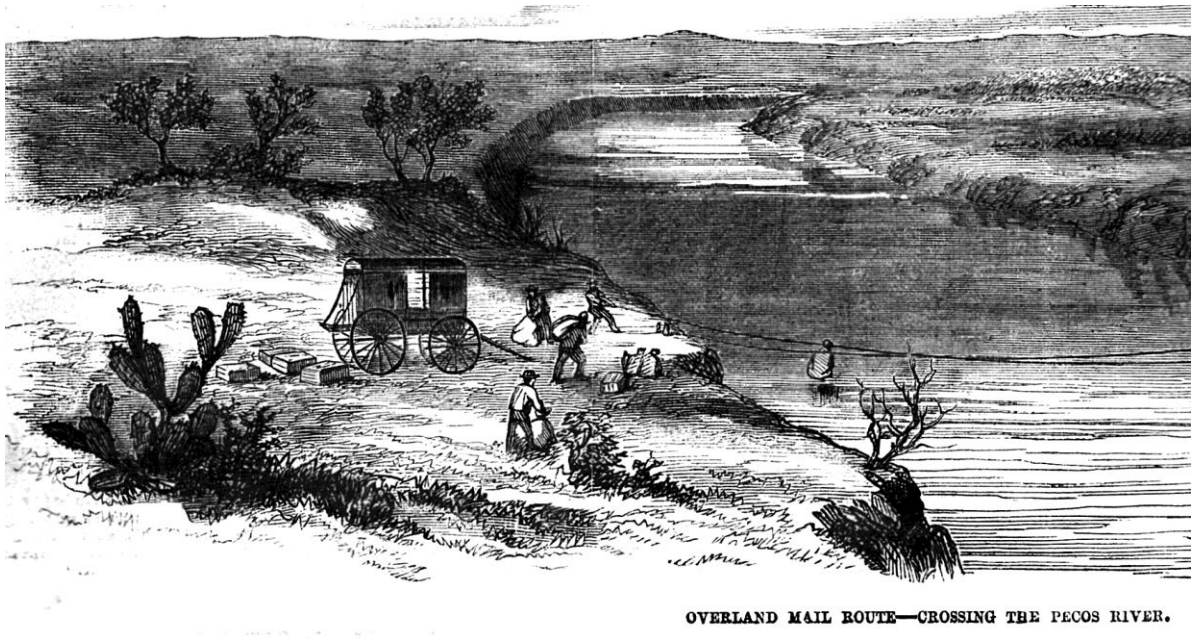
THE OVERLAND MAIL—PASSING A BIVOUAC OF EMIGRANTS IN WESTERN ARKANSAS.

A Butterfield stagecoach, in western Arkansas, passing a wagon train. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 23, 1858

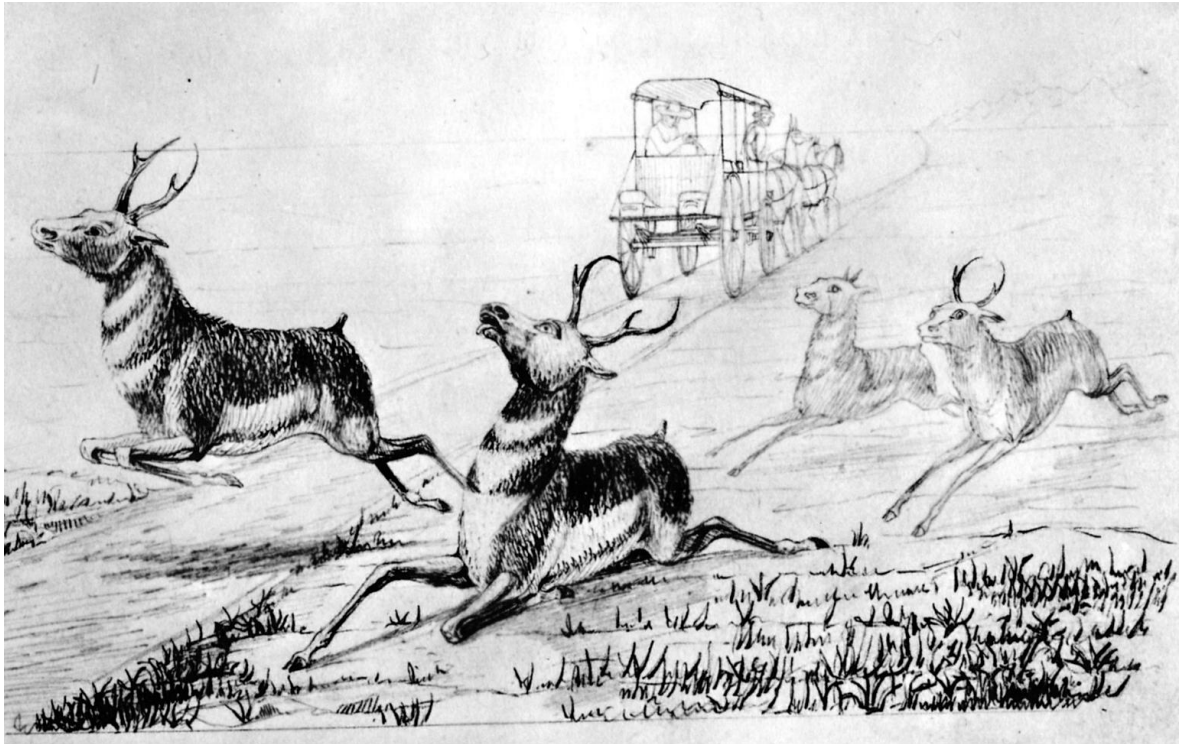
THE OVERLAND MAIL—CHANGING STAGE-COACH FOR CELERITY WAGON.

The caption reads "THE OVERLAND MAIL—CHANGING STAGE-COACH FOR CELERITY WAGON." This is at Fort Smith, Arkansas. The artist took some liberties with this drawing as the celerity wagon was considerably smaller than the stagecoach. It was designed with much smaller wheels and the body was supported on heavy leather straps and not on metal springs as shown. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 23, 1858

A Butterfield stage wagon crosses Boggy River, Oklahoma. From an October 1858 drawing by William Hayes Hilton. The mail bags have been moved to the front to protect them from the water. The original drawing is clearer than this copy and on one of the bags can be seen "W. F. & Co." In an article in the Daily Alta California*, October 16, 1858, it stated: "We are under special obligation to Wells, Fargo & Co., for supplying us with Atlantic papers received by the Overland Mail stage."* Courtesy Huntington Library



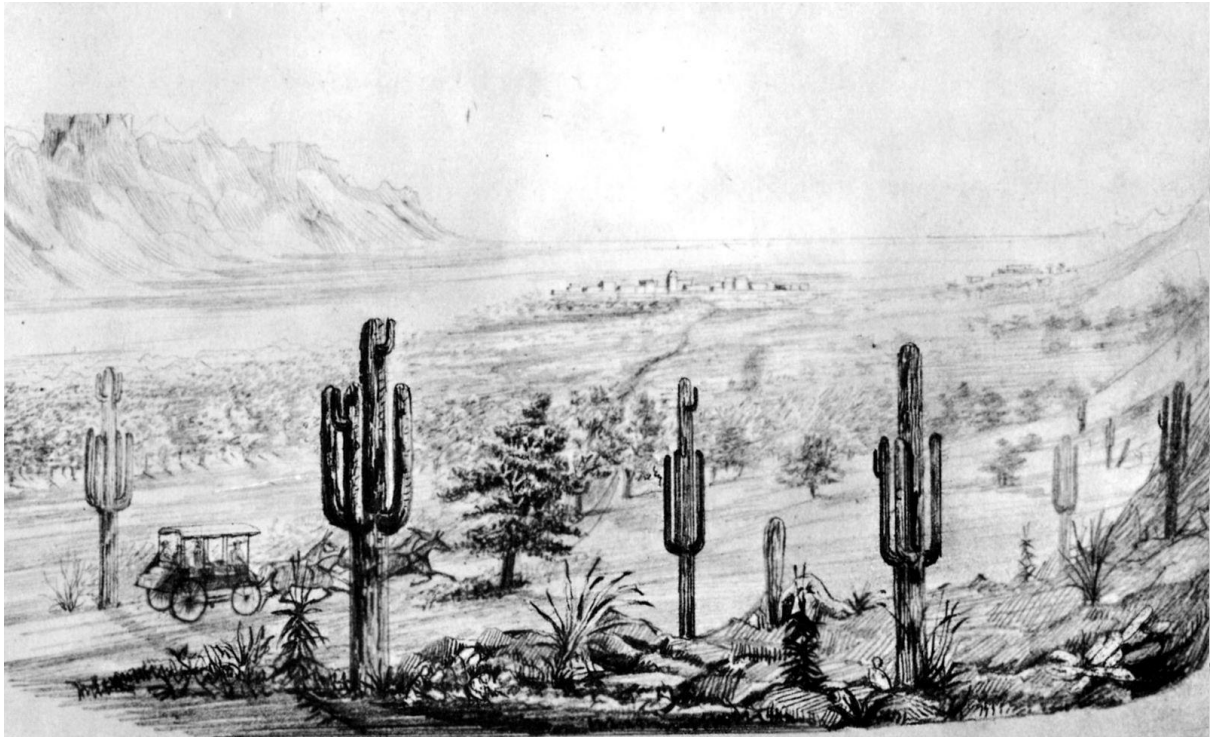
Butterfield's stage wagon about to ford the Pecos River in Texas. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, November 27, 1858



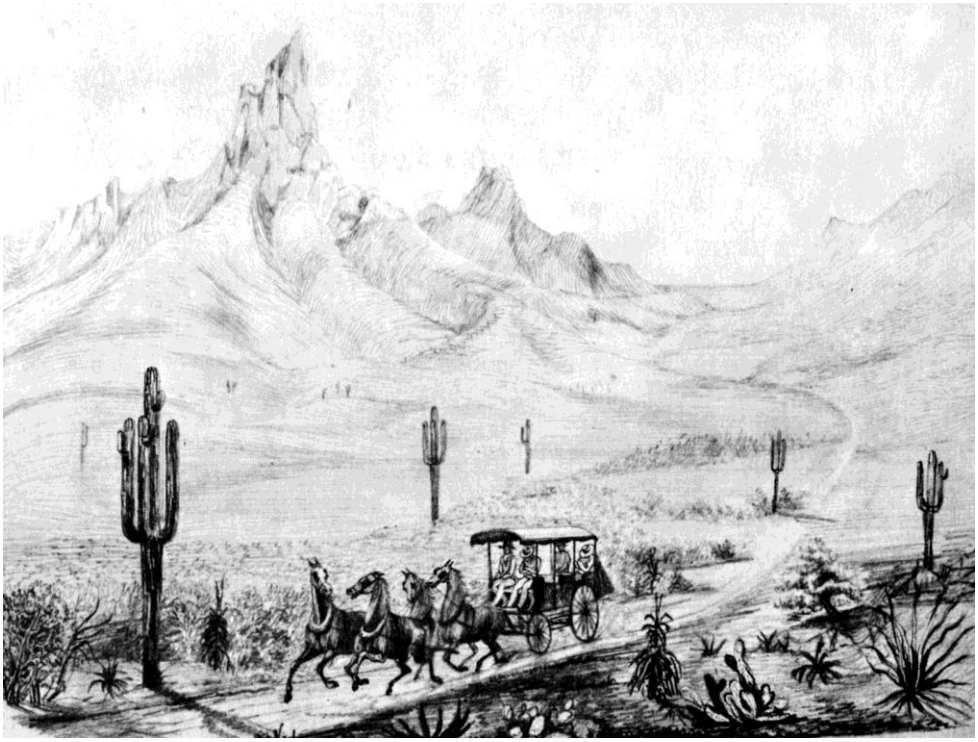
Butterfield's stage wagon in the Llando Estacado (Staked Plain) in western Texas, October 1858, by William Hayes Hilton. Courtesy Huntington Library

OVERLAND MAIL—FIRST MEETING OF THE COACHES IN GUADALUPE PASS.

In Guadalupe Pass, New Mexico, Butterfield's eastbound stage wagon meets the westbound stage wagon. On the eastbound was G. Bailey the inspector for the Postmaster-General. On the westbound was Waterman L. Ormsby, the correspondent for the New York Herald. *From* Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, November 27, 1858

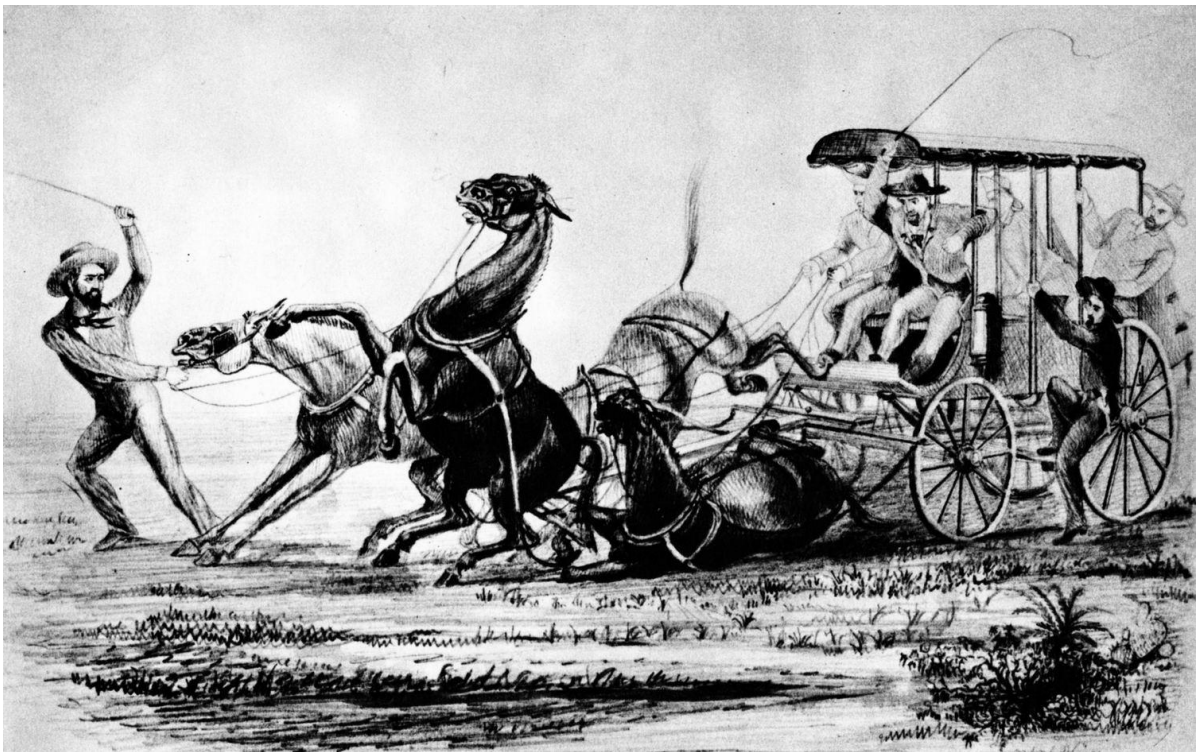


Butterfield's stage wagon approaching Tucson, Arizona, October 1858, by William Hayes Hilton. Courtesy Huntington Library

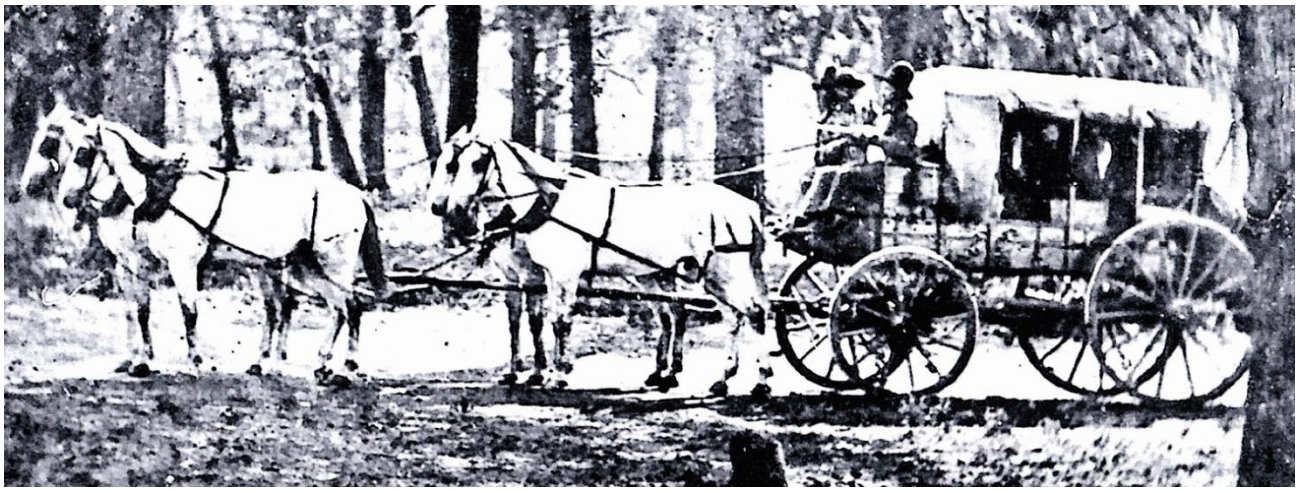


Butterfield's stage wagon in Picacho Pass, Arizona, late 1858, by William Hayes Hilton. Courtesy Huntington Library

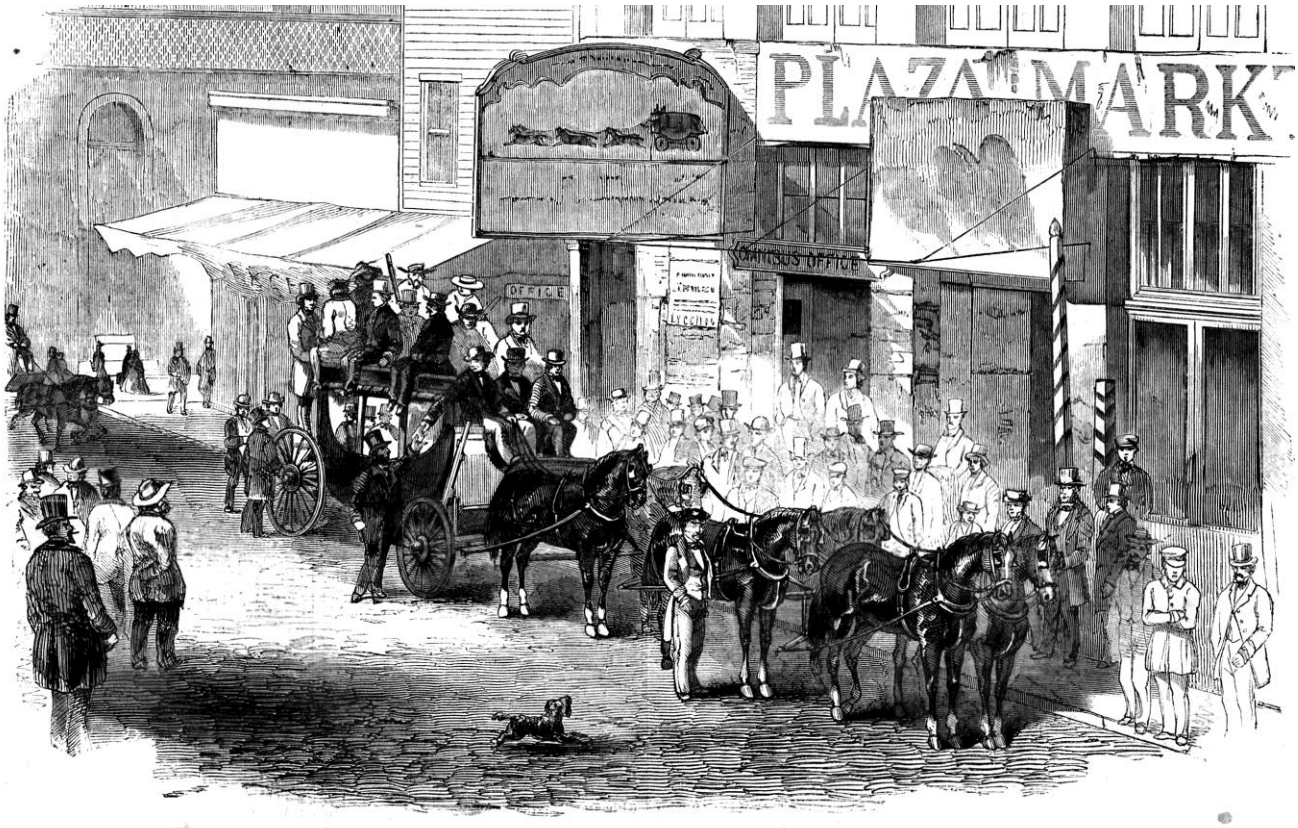
Butterfield's stage wagon in Arizona, early October 1858, drawn by William Hayes Hilton. Courtesy Huntington Library



Butterfield's stage wagon in Arizona, October 1858, drawn by William Hayes Hilton. This drawing is a good representation showing the wild mules used to pull the stage wagons on the rougher sections of the trail. Some wild horses were also used. Courtesy Huntington Library



A Butterfield stage wagon near El Paso, Texas, and Cottonwood Stage Station early 1861. The driver was David McLaughlin. This image was brought to my attention by Tracy DeVault and is from a copy of a daguerreotype and reproduced with the permission of the Nita Stewart Haley Memorial Library, Midland, Texas.



THE OVERLAND MAIL STARTING FROM SAN FRANCISCO FOR THE EAST.—[FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.]

At San Francisco, California, the most western end of the trail, a Butterfield stagecoach begins its journey. From Harper's Weekly, December 11, 1858

Correspondents' Descriptions of Butterfield's Stagecoaches and Stage Wagons

Many correspondents' also describe the types used. Waterman L. Ormsby was a passenger for the full length of the 2,800 mile line from St. Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco, California. His first 160 miles was by train from St. Louis to Tipton where he transferred to a Concord stagecoach. In his article dated September 20, 1858, and published in the *New York Herald*, October 2, 1858, he stated that at Springfield, Missouri: "Our stay was just long enough to change from the coach to one of the wagons, such as are used from this point to San Francisco." All other accounts state that the mail and passengers change from a stagecoach to a stage (celerity) wagon at Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Los Angeles where they again transfer to a stagecoach. In this article he describes the stage wagon:

"They are made much like the express wagons in your city which carry goods for transshipment, only they are heavier built, have tops made of canvas, and are set on leather straps instead of springs. Each one has three seats, which are arranged so that the backs let down and form one bed, capable of accommodating from four to ten persons, according to their size and how they lie."

An article in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 23, 1858, stated:

"From Memphis and from St. Louis to Fort Smith regular stage coaches are used, similar in every respect to those employed in the Atlantic States; but from Fort Smith onwards the vehicles used are not unlike a Jersey wagon, they are of the description known as Celerity wagons, being similar in build to the common Troy coach, and the body hung upon the same kind of springs and in a similar manner. Instead, however, of the heavy wooden top, with iron railing around it, in common use, they have a light canvas covering supported by light uprights, after the manner of a Jersey wagon. The covering affords ample protection against the weather, while it greatly diminishes the weight of the vehicle as well as its liability to upset. Each one had three seats, which are arranged so that the backs let down and form one bed, capable of accommodating from four to ten persons, according to their size, and how they lie. The company has over one hundred of these coaches on the ground, and has been running them regularly and with profitable results, for some time past, upon portions of the route."

Although most state that the stage wagons had three passenger seats, the following by a correspondent for the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, November 6, 1858, in an article titled "General Remarks on the Overland Route, from Fort Smith, Arkansas, November 25, 1858, it appears that this stage wagon only had two seats:

"There were twelve hats lost by us during the trip, which caused any amount of naughty words issued against the Company for placing six men in a stage only intended for four. With four persons in a coach, the trip would be pleasant, provided horses were substituted for the miserable little worn-out mules that are made to drag the coaches through nearly the whole route, almost from El Paso to within 200 miles of this place [Fort Smith]."

The following is from the *Daily Alta California*, June 10, 1860. The article is titled "LETTER FROM MR. WALLACE, The trip Overland, Colorado River, at Yaeger's, May 30, 1860":

"The Coaches and Passengers"

"The carriages used at present by the company are too small for the business—too narrow; there is not room upon a seat for three men, wrapped in blankets, to be comfortable, and it makes a wearing night and day for those who start out thus. But it is the intention of the Company to replace the present six passenger wagons with larger ones, and then there will be room for more comfort, or for more passengers. A great many people are waiting everywhere to get from one point to another on this road, and they don't mind a crowd, so they can get along."

Wallace's June 11, 1860, report in the *Daily Alta California* stated on his trip through Arizona: "Our stage is full; six inside and two outside [conductor and driver], and no room to spare."

Raphael Pumpelly gave a very colorful account of what it was like being a passenger on a Butterfield stage. In his *MY REMINISCENCES*, Vol. 1, 1918, on page 183 is this account on his trip to Tucson:

"I Go to Arizona"

"I secured the right to a back seat in the overland coach as far as Tucson, and looked forward, with comparatively little dread, to sixteen days and nights of continuous travel. But the arrival of a woman and her brother dashed my hopes of an easy journey at the very outset, and obliged me to take the front seat, where, with my back to the horses, I began to foresee coming discomfort. The coach was fitted with three seats, and these were occupied by nine passengers. As the occupants of the front and middle seats faced each other, it was necessary for these six people to interlock their knees; and there being room for only ten of the twelve legs, each side of the coach was graced by a foot, now dangling near the wheel, not trying in vain to find a place of support. An unusually heavy mail in the boot, by weighing down the rear, kept those of us who were on the front seat constantly bent forward, thus, by taking away all support from our backs, rendering rest at all times out of the question."

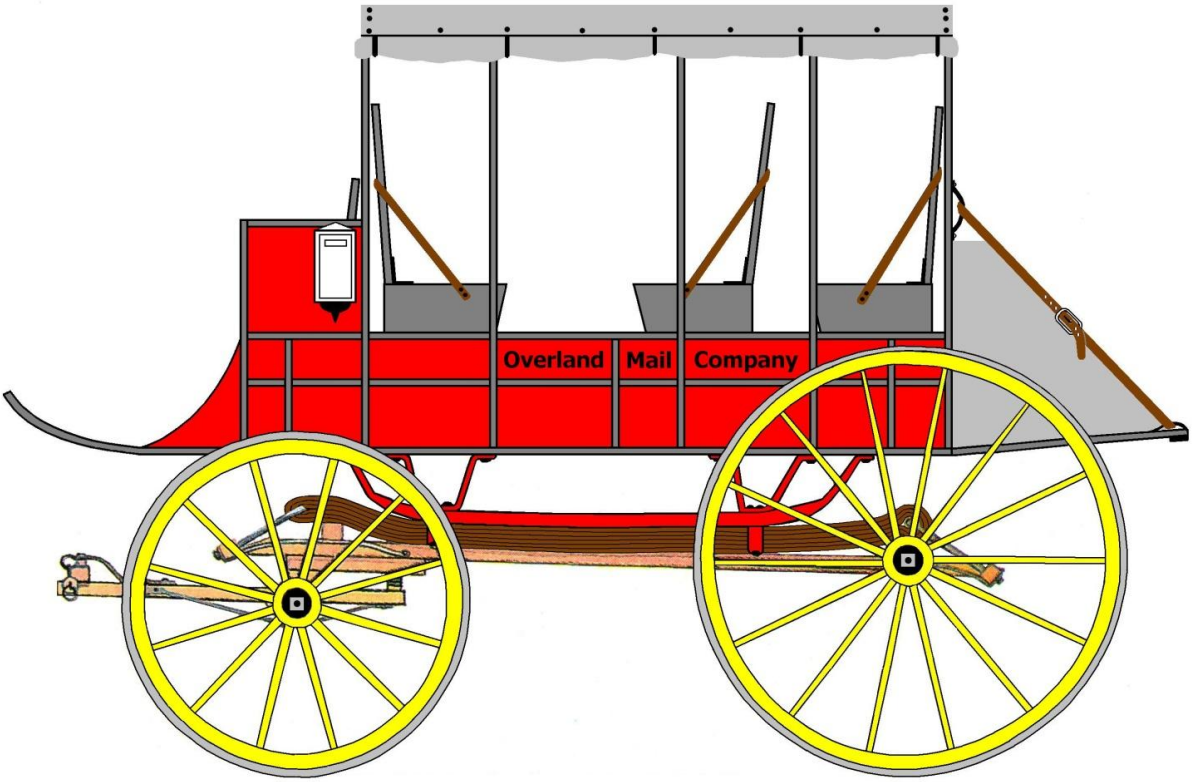
The *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California*, Los Angeles, 1896, published a speech read at a Pasadena meeting, February 4, 1896, titled "A Two Thousand Mile Stage Ride" by H. D. Burrows. In it he stated:

"We reached Fort Smith [Arkansas} on the 2nd of January [1861], fifteen and a half days from Los Angeles….On our Journey thus far we had ridden in what were called through-brace mud-wagons. But next morning before light, on a Concord stage coach we arrived at Springfield, a larger and handsomer city."

John Butterfield's Stage (Celerity) Wagon

Starting from the eastern terminus and arriving at the western terminus, these thirteen images clearly show the sequence of where Butterfield's stagecoaches and stage wagons were used on the trail. The first two are of a Concord stagecoach starting out from the eastern terminus and traveling through western Arkansas. Upon reaching Fort Smith on the western border of Arkansas, the third shows a Concord stagecoach transferring the mail, luggage, and passengers to a stage (celerity) wagon. The next nine are stage wagons traveling through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The last one is a Concord stagecoach starting out from the western terminus at San Francisco, California.

A composite has been made of Butterfield's stage (celerity) wagon from these images and verbal accounts and is presented below. **This copyrighted image may not be used without permission from the author of this report.**



The most important image used is the photo from early 1861. The wheel diameters and distance from each other, the bottom of the floor in relationship to the wheels, as well as other features match the scale of the photo. Although the other twelve images were taken into consideration, it is obvious that the artists took a few liberties with the drawn images.

The many images show in all cases "Overland Mail Company" used on the stagecoaches and stage wagons. **The name of Butterfield was never used.** In Ormsby's report to the *New York Herald*, October 2, 1858, he stated the following: "In large letters of the side was the following: **OVERLAND MAIL COMPANY"**

Some stagecoaches and stage wagons incorporated odometers to track the mileages. From a number of references we know that Butterfield's stagecoaches and stage wagons did not use odometers and relied on the stage drivers for the estimated mileages.

In the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, November 6, 1858, was a report by their "Special Correspondent" giving mileages between Butterfield stage stations. In the report was the following:

"ON THE ROAD—LIST OF DISTANCES TO FORT SMITH"

"These, and all my other estimates of distance, are not from the printed schedule, but are stated as given to me by the drivers, corrected by my own calculations. Many of the drivers vary from one another as to the length of the distances, and I found it a difficult task to arrive at any given result."

There are also many tables of distances between the stage stations which do not agree with each other. In all cases, that I have observed the distances between stations, they are given in whole numbers strongly indicating that they are estimates. When odometers were used for the measurements between stations, such as the California Column did in 1862, the mileages were given to 1/100th mile.

G. Bailey was assigned the task of inspecting the line by Post Master General Brown. He was on the first Butterfield stage that left San Francisco in September 1858. His report was published in *The Report of the Postmaster General, Second Session, Thirty-Fifth Congress,* 1858. In a study of Bailey's distances between stations in Arizona, they were found to be 20% to 50% incorrect. Although there is much to consider for Bailey's distances, because they were made by him on the first stagecoach going east before Butterfield shortened some sections, one of his most erroneous is between Oatman Flat Stage Station and Murderer's Grave (Kinyon's Stage Station). He gives this distance as twenty miles. There can be only one corridor to follow between these stations because of the restrictive geographic features of this section which both the Mormon Battalion of 1846 and Bartlett's survey team of 1852 took. This route, that Butterfield also took, I have measured as 13.5 miles. The California Column measured this distance with a wagon odometer and gave a distance of 13.49 miles. There was no way to later improve the route of the trial through this section in any significant way. Bailey's distance of twenty miles is 50% too long. In his report is the following "This was compiled with great care, chiefly from data obtained on the road, and, although it doubtless contains <u>some errors</u>, may be regarded, <u>as approximately correct</u>."

From this information we can see that Butterfield's stagecoaches and stage wagons did not make the use of odometers for their distances. All the stages would have had to have odometers, as Bailey changed stages approximately every thirty to sixty miles, as can be seen in the reports by correspondents. Also, the correspondents' many reports never mention the use of an odometer.

What Draft Animals Pulled the Stage Wagons?

Many of the cited correspondents' reports describe the problems for the Overland Mail Company using unbroken wild mules and horses between Fort Smith, Arkansas, and Los Angeles, California. By most accounts, wild mules were used more than wild horses. Their use may have diminished near the end (March 1861) of Butterfield's service on the southern route and were replaced by broken draft animals, as the 1861 daguerreotype appears to show trained horses in harness as they are posed in a disciplined fashion. It is surprising that the use of wild draft animals did not delay the Overland Mail Company stages so it couldn't accomplish its contractual agreed to time schedule.

On the section between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the stagecoaches used horses that were well disciplined and in a correspondent's report to the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, November 6, 1858, it stated that: "The mustangs are all shod and branded "O. M."

Information for Additional Research

The following is a list of information to be considered for additional research. Ideally catalogs with drawings of models from companies that made stagecoaches and stage wagons for the Overland Mail Company should be located, but presently none have been found.

Most suggest that the James Goold Co., Albany, NY, made the stage (celerity) wagons for the Overland Mail Company, but do not give a primary reference.

Identifying Butterfield's Overland Mail Company Stage (celerity) Wagon

From these references, we can determine what to look for in our search for an existing example.

The name "OVERLAND MAIL COMPANY" must be painted on the side panels and **not** any other title that might use the word "Butterfield" such as "Butterfield Stage Line."

The driver's and conductor's seat is at the same level, or very close to the same level, as the passenger's seats. Stage (celerity) wagons that have the driver's seat significantly elevated were **not** used by the Overland Mail Company.

The top was only light canvas and **not** capable of carrying any luggage or passengers. It did **not** have an iron rail on it as seen on stage wagons with stronger tops.

The sides were open, but canvas curtains could be rolled down.

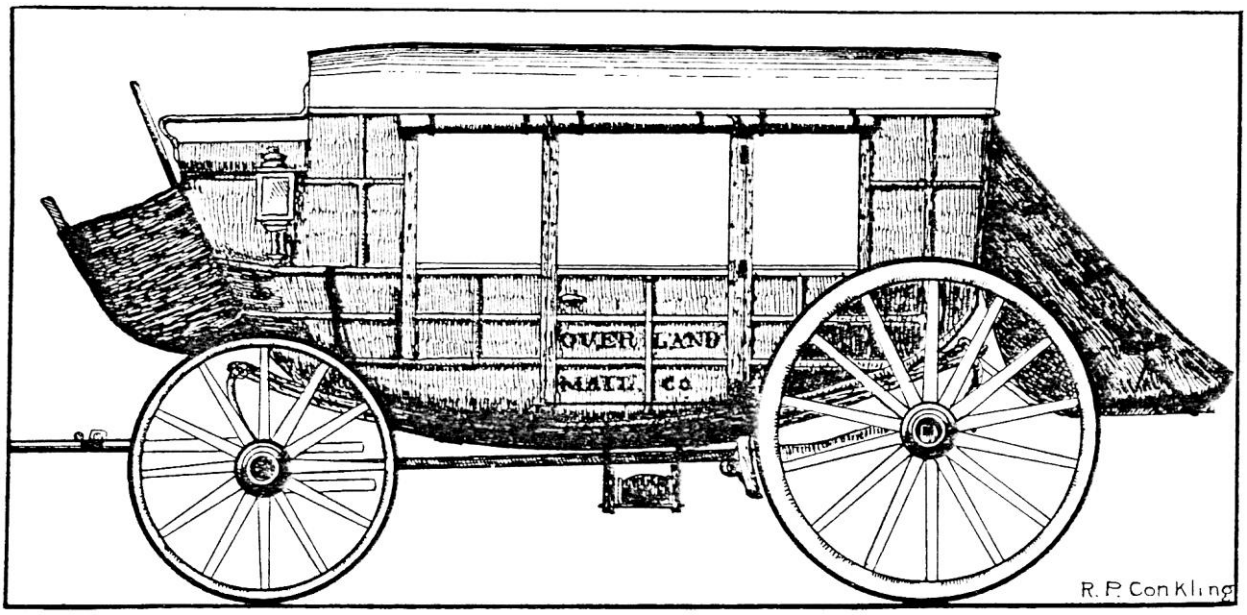
They only had low paneling on the sides with **no doors**.

Their wheels were a smaller diameter than stagecoach wheels.

The backs of the three passenger seats folded down to form a bed.

The body was suspended on the frame by heavy leather strapping.

The passenger's seats were 42" long.



This erroneous drawing was made by Roscoe P. Conkling and appeared in THE BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND MAIL, 1857-1869, by Roscoe P. and Margaret B. Conkling, Volume III, 1947. *It is represented by them as a: Butterfield "Celerity" Stage-Wagon. It has little resemblance to the actual stage (celerity) wagon that was designed by John Butterfield and made by the James Goold Co., Albany, NY, in 1857. The Conkling drawing resembles a stagecoach rather than a stage wagon.*

The use of this erroneous rendition has been used by many historians and is on an interpretive marker at the Painted Rocks Camp Site, just west of Gila Bend, Arizona.

Overland Mail Company Stagecoach and Stage (Celerity) Wagon Manufacturers:

James Goold Co. (Albany Coach), corner of Division and Union Street, Albany, NY. Ref: *History of Albany, NY, From 1609 to 1886*, Howell and Tenny, New York, 1886.

The Gilbert Car Manufacturing Company, (the Troy Stagecoach), located: "The large workshops and lumber-yards of the company, occupying a half score of squares in the central part of Green Island village (Troy), are between Clinton street on the south and Swan Street on the north, and range from George Street on the east to the company's extensive wharf on the Mohawk River on the west. Ref: *The City of Troy and its Vicinity,* Arthur James Weise, 1886.

Abbot-Downing Company, Concord, New Hampshire, (Concord Stagecoaches). Ref: *The leading Business Men of Concord and Vicinity*, Geo. F. Bacon, 1890.

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Conkling, Roscoe P. and Margaret B., *THE BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND MAIL*, 1857-1869, The Arthur H. Clark Co.,Volume III, 1947

Ormsby Waterman L., *New York Herald*, October 2, 1858

Pumpelly, Raphael, *MY REMINISCENCES*, Vol. 1, Henry Holt and Company, NY, 1918 (183)

Huntington Library, San Moreno, California, drawings by Hilton, William Hayes

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 23 & November 27, 1858

San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, November 6, 1858

Daily Alta California, June 10, 1860, "LETTER FROM MR. WALLACE, The trip Overland, Colorado River, at Yaeger's, May 30, 1860"

Nita Stewart Haley Memorial Library, Midland Texas (1861 daguerreotype photo)

Harper's Weekly, December 11, 1858

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cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin (California newspaper collection)

fultonhistory.com (New York State historical newspapers)

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