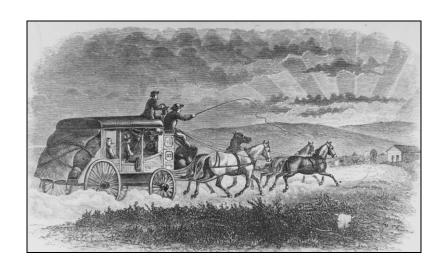
The History of Stagecoaches in Tucson, Arizona

Bob Ring



AUTHOR'S NOTES

This article is based on a two-part newspaper series that ran in the *Arizona Daily Star* Regional Sections on June 28 and July 12, 2012. This story combines the newspaper columns: "Overland Stagecoach Service through Tucson" and "A Half Century of Tucson-Area Stagecoach Service."

In this integrated article, I took the opportunity to include significant new material not covered in the newspaper.

For comments or questions, please contact me via e-mail at ringbob1@aol.com.

Overland Stagecoach Service through Tucson 1857-1880

If it weren't for stagecoaches, Tucson wouldn't have developed to be the town we see today!

Let's set the stage (sorry). Stagecoaches are defined as public conveyances that carry mail, express, and/or passengers. The term "stage" originally referred to the distance between stages or stations on a route.

Now, let's get to the problem. In 1850, two years after its gold rush began in 1848, California became the 31st state of the Union, separated from the rest of the country by the vast expanse of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Mail delivery to California from the East took at least a month and a half by steamship and pack animal across Panama. From the beginning, California pressured the U. S. Government to provide faster mail service.

It took five more years for military expeditions and surveyors to establish a trail across the southwestern U.S. that stagecoaches could use year round for overland mail delivery. Starting in 1846, the military (Cooke, Kearny) had blazed trails across Arizona to bring American troops to California to help in the Mexican War (1846-1848). Thousands of gold seekers crossed Arizona in the late 1840s and early 1850s on their way to the California gold fields. Finally in 1854-55 Lieutenant John G. Parke surveyed a potential transcontinental railroad route across southern Arizona that would become the route for the first overland mail.

In terms of today's place names, the route entered Arizona from Lordsburg, New Mexico, extended west to Tucson, northwest to the Sacaton area before turning west to the Gila River and on to Yuma and exiting Arizona – generally following the path of today's Interstate 10 and Interstate 8.

Tucson had only been an American town since becoming part of the New Mexico Territory with the Gadsden Purchase from Mexico, approved by Congress on June 29, 1854. As described by historian C. L. Sonnichsen, Tucson in the late 1850s "was still a Mexican village," with a population of a few hundred people, and few Americans.

In July 1857 the San Antonio & San Diego Mail Line began twice-a-month stagecoach runs over the new overland route, carrying both mail and passengers. However, the operation lasted less than a year - because of the death of the company's founder and increasing competition.

Butterfield Overland Mail

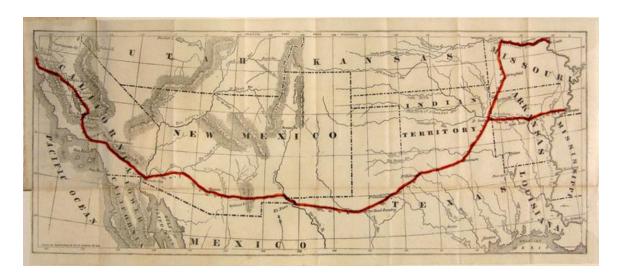
In late 1857 John Butterfield of Utica, New York won a government contract for the unheard of sum of \$600,000 (over \$17 million today) per year for six years to carry mail from St. Louis, Missouri to San Francisco, California. The agreement was to provide

overland stagecoach service twice a week in each direction; each trip of 2,800 miles was to be completed in 25 days or less. Mail was first priority but passengers were accepted for a total-route cost of \$200 (\$5,640 today), not including meals.

The Wells Fargo Company, already consolidating small express lines in California, participated with John Butterfield to invest in the Overland Mail. (Wells Fargo would go on to establish an empire in the West – including Arizona, transporting treasure and express by stagecoaches. The company operated stage lines under its own name in other Western states, but never in Arizona.)

Butterfield spent most of 1858 on the monumental task of constructing and supplying 139 (later 200) relay stations along the route through what is now Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. There was a secondary spur route to Memphis Tennessee on the eastern end of the overland trail, departing from the principal route at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

The stage stops at intervals of 10-40 miles were places where the coaches could change drivers and draft animals, and the passengers could find water and food. The stations were simple adobe structures with corrals for the animals pulling the coaches. The coaches traveled at breakneck speeds night and day, except for brief stops at the way stations.



The Butterfield Overland Mail route extended from Saint Louis and Memphis in the East to San Francisco in the West. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

At its peak, Butterfield's Overland Mail employed about 800 people, ran up to 250 coaches with 1000 horses and 500 mules. The large, high quality coaches were built in Concord, New Hampshire, weighed about 2,500 pounds and were suspended on thick,

six-or-eight-ply leather belts called thoroughbraces to insulate them from the constant pounding of the wheels over makeshift roads. The Concord coaches could accommodate up to nine passengers inside the coach, with additional room on top for the hearty.

The coaches were pulled by a team of 4-6 horses or mules. Horses were used most of the time, but mules provided extra "toughness" for long, hot stretches, particularly in the Arizona dessert.

Comfort was not a priority. The Concord stagecoach's had hard, narrow interior seats and had only leather curtains to keep out the dust, wind, and rain. More than three weeks of constant pounding on the rough route, to say nothing of lack of water and hostile Indians, made for a physically and mentally exhausting trip.

A mining engineer heading to silver mines in southern Arizona in 1860 described his overland trip:

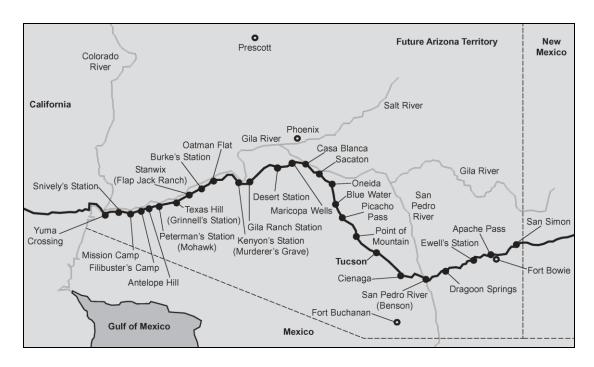
"The coach was fitted with three seats, and these were occupied by nine passengers. As occupants of the front and middle seats faced each other, it was necessary for these six people to interlock their knees; and there being room inside for only ten of the twelve legs, each side of the coach was graced by a foot, now dangling near the wheel, now trying in vain to find a place of support. ... The fatigue of uninterrupted traveling by day and night in a crowded coach, and the most uncomfortable positions, was beginning to tell seriously upon all the passengers, and was producing a condition bordering on insanity."

Across Arizona

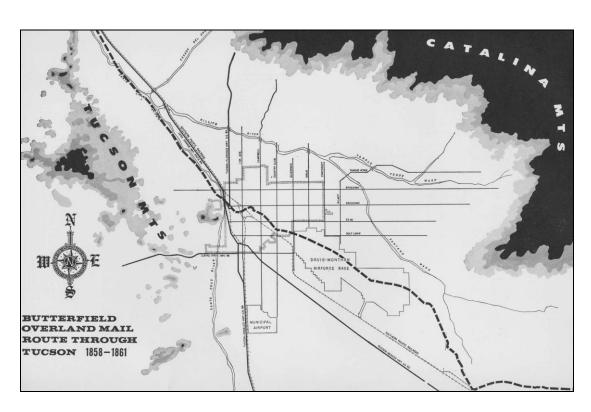
The overland route across Arizona's dry and sparsely populated desert landscape was 437 miles long with 27 stagecoach stations. It took about four days to get through Arizona at an average speed of about four and a half miles an hour.

The first Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach reached Tucson from St. Louis on October 2, 1858. Thereafter westbound mail was due at 1:30 pm on Tuesdays and Fridays; the eastbound at 3:00 am on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The Buckley House (formerly the Santa Cruz residence) was turned into Tucson's stage station with Sam Hughes (later prominent in the incorporation of the City of Tucson and establishment of public education) hired as the first station agent. The station's location in modern day Tucson was approximately one block north of the State of Arizona complex at Congress Street and Main Avenue.

Wells Fargo established an office in Tucson in 1860, as a convenient mid point for both east-west and north-south (to Mexico) traffic. William S. Oury, later to be Tucson's first mayor, was selected as agent.



The Butterfield Overland Mail route across Arizona had 27 stagecoach stops. (Courtesy of The Smoke Signal, November, 2007)



This is the Butterfield Overland Stage route through Tucson. (Courtesy Arizona Historical Society, The Butterfield Overland Mail Across Arizona)

Stagecoaches traveling to California from Tucson headed directly north up Main Street, then northwest along the Santa Cruz River to a stop at Point of Mountain (sometimes called Pointer Mountain) about 18 miles from Tucson. The Point of Mountain station, named for the prominent peak at the northern end of the Tucson Mountains, was located in today's greater Marana, near the West Avra Valley Road exit (242) from Interstate 10. Westbound stages continued northwest to stations near Picacho Peak and Eloy.

Eastbound stages from Tucson headed southeast out of town, crossed present day Davis Monthan Air Force Base, and continued southeast on a path a little north of today's Interstate 10 to a stage station at Cienega, about 35 miles from Tucson. Cienega means "marshy place" and the station provided plenty of trees and water. The station's location was on Cienega Creek, in today's Vail area, off the Marsh Station exit (281) from Interstate 10, about four miles northeast, at the railroad tracks. Coaches continuing to the east headed to the next stations near today's Benson and then Dragoon Springs.

Butterfield Overland Mail operations continued through Tucson until the spring of 1861, when the threat of Civil War and Texas's seceding from the Union forced the southern transcontinental stage line to move north, following a central overland route through the future states of Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada.



This scene depicts an overland mail coach approaching a stage station. (Courtesy of Arizona Historical Society, Photo 47311)

Other Providers

During the Civil War (1861-1865) Arizona had to rely on military couriers for mail service. But, by 1866 mail and people were again arriving in Tucson – this time from Prescott on Arizona Stagecoach Company coaches. There were connections in Prescott - both west and east - along more northern east-west routes through Arizona.

Meanwhile far to the north, starting in April 1860, the Pony Express crossed the western U.S. to Sacramento, California - ending operations when the overland telegraph was completed in October 1861. Eight years later in 1869 the first transcontinental railroad (to San Francisco) was completed at Promontory Summit Utah, ending stagecoach service on the central overland trail.

Part of Butterfield's southern overland stagecoach route was reactivated in 1870 when the Tucson, Arizona City [Yuma] & San Diego Stage Company started tri-weekly service. Connections to the east were offered in 1872 by the J. F. Bennett & Company. In the mid-to-late 1870s overland stagecoach services between California and the east through Tucson were offered by three companies: Southern Pacific Mail Line, Texas and California Stage Line, and the National Mail & Transportation Company.

Tucson was already becoming in Sonnichsen's words, "an increasingly important commercial center" when the eastern-proceeding southern route of the transcontinental railroad reached Tucson in 1880. Tucson's population had grown to about 7,000. Prospectors and ranchers had begun exploring north and south and established new settlements.

Overland stagecoach operations through Tucson ended with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in Texas in 1881, but stagecoach services connecting Arizona settlements, and from Tucson to mining, business, and commerce centers were just beginning and would continue for the next 40 years.

A Half Century of Tucson-Area Stagecoach Service 1870-1920s

The first non-native miners in southern Arizona were Spaniards who began drifting north from long-established mining areas in today's Sonora, Mexico in the 1730s. Mexicans continued prospecting in the borderland country following their independence from Spain in 1821. Immediately after the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, when the borderlands became the property of the U.S., Americans began exploring these same mining areas, rediscovering some of the old Spanish and Mexican diggings.

When the first Butterfield overland stagecoach reached Tucson in 1858, Americans had already established silver mines near Arivaca and in the Santa Rita and Patagonia Mountains.



Tucson stagecoach lines provided passenger, mail, and express service to southern Arizona mining towns.

Stagecoaches South

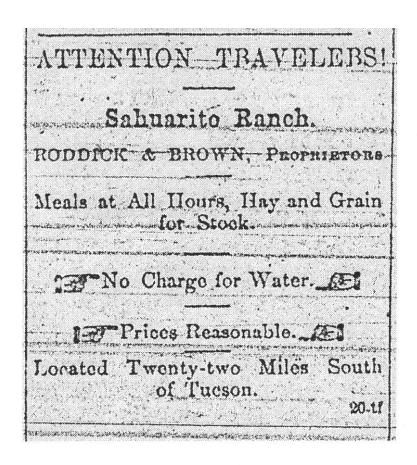
While American mining was developing, in 1870 experienced freighter Pedro Aguirre started the Arizona & Sonora Stage Line in Tucson to carry mail and passengers between Tucson and Altar, Sonora Mexico, with connections southward to the Sonoran capital Hermosillo and the important Gulf of California port at Guaymas.

In 1873 gold was discovered south of Arivaca, near the border with Mexico, setting off an American mining boom and the development of the Oro Blanco mining camp. This strike, along with successful silver mining around Arivaca, led Pedro Aguirre in 1877 to start regular stagecoach service to Arivaca, south to Oro Blanco, with continuing service to Altar, Sonora.

Aguirre continued to provide stagecoach service to this intermittently successful borderland mining region until 1886 when he sold his company and retired to his Buenos Ayres ranch west of Arivaca.

From 1892-1908 stagecoach service to Arivaca and Oro Blanco was provided by Mariano Samaniego, a Sonoran-born freighter, cattle rancher, merchant, and the acknowledged most successful Hispanic Tucson public official in the territorial period.

Stagecoaches heading south from Tucson stopped at James Brown's Sahuarita Ranch and the "halfway" station in Amado to change horses or mules and obtain food for passengers. The stop in Amado was also known as the "junction" because the route to Arivaca branched west from there.



This ad for a stage stop ran in the Arizona Daily Star, January 1878.

Stagecoaches Southeast

Two of Arizona's biggest mining strikes occurred in southeastern Arizona in 1877. Discovery of huge deposits of silver and copper led to the development of Tombstone in 1879 and Bisbee, respectively, in 1880.

Within a month of arriving in Tucson from Kansas in October 1878, J. D. Kinnear started Kinnear's Express stagecoach service (every four days) to the new silver area. By 1879 Kinnear had formed the Tucson & Tombstone Stage Line to provide daily service to Tombstone and soon thereafter on to Bisbee. In the spirited competition to provide the best service, another new Tombstone arrival from Kansas, named Wyatt Earp, sold out his own stagecoach line interests to Kinnear.

Stages from Tucson to Tombstone and Bisbee started out using the old Butterfield overland stage relay stations at Cienega and San Pedro near Benson. When the southern transcontinental railroad tracks were laid right over the station at Cienega in 1880, a new station was built a mile and half to the east at Pantano. The San Pedro station was "reopened," advertising "excellent meals for the traveler," in the *Tucson Daily Citizen*.

At about the same time as service to Tombstone and Bisbee was developing, stagecoaches from Tucson via Pantano began routes to mines around Patagonia.

Stagecoaches North

Fifty miles northeast of Tucson, near Mammoth, gold was discovered in 1879. William "Curly" Neal, of African American and Cherokee descent, came to Tucson in 1878, opened a livery and by 1879 was running a stage line to the mining towns around Mammoth, with a stage stop in Oracle. In 1895 Neal financed the building of the luxurious Mountain View Hotel on his ranch in Oracle.

Stagecoaches West

Also in 1879 silver was discovered in Quijotoa, 65 miles west of Tucson, but it wasn't until 1883 that rich croppings generated real excitement. Richard Starr (of Starr Pass fame) pioneered a stagecoach trail through the Tucson Mountains as a quick route to Quijotoa. The stage stop out of Tucson was the ranch house of the Robles Ranch in Three Points. Unfortunately the mining boom in Quijotoa only lasted until 1885, with a consequent drop-off in stage business.

In addition to the mining regions discussed above and identified on the accompanying map, Tucson stagecoaches provided service for many years to smaller copper mining areas such as Helvetia, north of Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains; Mineral Hill, just west of Sahaurita; and Silver Bell, northwest of Tucson.

Stagecoach Network

While stagecoach service to southern Arizona mining regions was developing, Tucson remained a "hub" on an increasing stagecoach transportation network among other settlements in Territorial Arizona, including Nogales, Casa Grande, Florence, Phoenix, Prescott, and Globe.

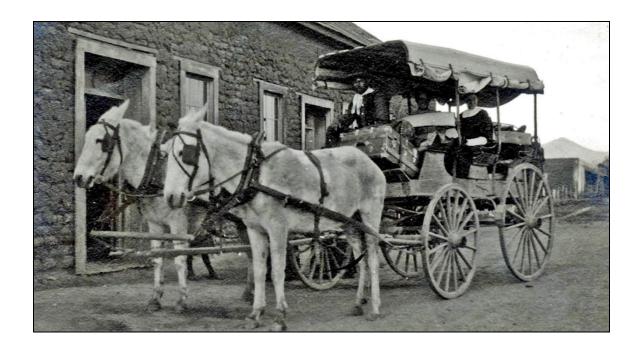
The stagecoach business was dynamic. Stage companies went out of business or changed names frequently. As improved roads replaced rough wagon trails, the coaches themselves changed. The huge, heavy Concord coaches used on overland routes were supplemented with smaller, lighter stages, wagons, or buckboards. The vehicles were pulled by teams of two, four, or six horses or mules.

A survey by my brother Al of stage line records and advertisements in Tucson newspapers between 1880 and 1910 shows that stagecoach service to destinations within 75 miles of Tucson was provided several times a week, sometimes daily, and completed in one day. Fares for passengers remained relatively constant over the period at approximately ten cents per mile, decreasing slightly over the longer routes. During that entire period I could have traveled 65 miles from Tucson to Arivaca (as my grandparents did in 1905) for six dollars.

Not all stagecoach trips were "rides in the park." Here is what Ines Fraser, on the way to the mines south of Arivaca to join her husband in 1904, said about her stagecoach trip in a letter to her granddaughter:

"We were underway! The mountains were beautiful; the road for several miles was good, though unworked, for it was on firm, slightly sandy ground. ... When we reached the 'Junction,' a stage rest stop at the turnoff for Arivaca and the borderland mining country, it had just stopped raining and everything looked cool and clean. ... The stench of carcasses was pretty bad for part of the journey.

"The miles from the Junction to Arivaca were over rolling country, with good 'natural' roads — but not good at the arroyo crossings. Our stagecoach had to wait on the brink of a steep-sided, narrow-bottom arroyo till the rush of water from a flash flood quieted down and decreased until the stage team could safely descend and scramble like fury up the opposite bank, slippery after the rain. The driver had to know his business and Arizona 'flash floods' and how to urge his horses up the steep other side. No one but an experienced teamster ... and strong, obedient horses, used to the roads, could possibly have taken heavy loads up and down those arroyo crossings during the rainy season."



My grandmother Grace Ring is visible seated in this two-mule, two-seat stagecoach parked in front of the stagecoach station in Arivaca in 1905. (Courtesy of Ring family)

Transporting Valuables

In 1877, in response to increased mining activity in southern Arizona, Wells-Fargo Express Company, transporter of valuables, reestablished its Tucson office that had been briefly operational in 1860 for the Butterfield Overland Mail. Wells Fargo began leasing space on stagecoaches to carry "treasure boxes," a good source of income for stage lines but somewhat risky.

According to the fascinating book, *Encyclopedia of Stage Robbery in Ariz*ona, there were 129 stagecoach robberies in Arizona between 1875 and 1903. Eleven of these occurred in Pima County, including two robberies near present day Marana, single robberies near Patagonia and present day Green Valley, and a robbery of the Tucson-Quijotoa stage. The Marana robberies in 1878 were committed by highwayman Bill Brazelton, who supposedly turned his horse's shoes around to confuse trackers, but was later shot dead by a pursuing posse.

End of an Era

With increased links to population centers, and agriculture, livestock, and mining enterprises, Tucson's population grew to about 14,000 people by 1910. Stagecoach lines were prosperous right up the time of Arizona statehood in 1912. But by that time local railroads, e.g. Tucson to Nogales, had proliferated and automobiles and trucks began to take the place of horse or mule driven stagecoaches.

A few local Tucson mail contract stagecoach services continued into the 1920s. One of these was mail delivery from 1914-1921 between Tucson and Wrightstown Ranch at the corner of Harrison and Wrightstown Roads.

Today, 100 years after statehood, if you "Google" "Tucson Stagecoach" you get a long list of van shuttle services that you can use to get to the airport or to Phoenix. Sadly, the romantic age the stagecoach is over, but it's nice to know that "stagecoaches" so important to Tucson's development, are still operating today!

Note: Although there is nothing left of the Pointer Mountain, Tucson, or Cienega overland stage stations, you can see an authentic Concord Stagecoach at the Arizona Historical Society museum at 949 East Second Street. Also, the library of the Postal History Foundation at 920 North First Avenue is an excellent resource for stagecoach history.

Sources: Across America and Asia: Notes of a Five Years Journey Around the World (Raphael Pumpelly, 1870); Arizona Daily Star; Arizona Place Names (Byrd H. Granger, 1985); Arizona Territory Post Offices & Postmasters (John and Lillian Theobald, 1961); The Butterfield Overland Mail Through Arizona (1958); Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857-1869 (Roscoe Conkling, 1947); Encyclopedia of Stagecoach Robbery in Arizona (R. Michael Wilson, 2003); Frontier Lady of Letters: The Heroic Love Story of Ines Fraser (Bob Ring, et. al., 2007); Historical Atlas of Arizona (Henry P. Walker and Don Bufkin, 1979); The Smoke Signal, The Butterfield Trail Revisited (Stan Brown, 2007); Tucson, The Life and Times of an American City (C. L. Sonnichsen, 1982; Tucson Daily Citizen; Wells Fargo in Arizona Territory (John and Lillian Theobald, 1978)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Ring has lived in Tucson, Arizona's Catalina Foothills since 1993.

He retired from Raytheon in 2000, where he worked for 35 years as both a technical contributor and a manager.

Sparked by family genealogy research, Bob and his brother Al are long time investigators of the history of mining in Arizona's south-central borderland. Since 2000 Bob and Al, along with partner Tallia Cahoon, have shared their research at eight Arizona History Conventions.



From October 2003 to February 2007, Bob co-wrote a bi-monthly newspaper column, "Along the Ruby Road," for the *Green Valley News & Sun*. The column highlighted the colorful history of south-central Arizona mining.

Bob has co-written and self-published three books:

Ruby, **Arizona** – **Mining**, **Mayhem**, **and Murder** (2005) The complete history of an Arizona mining camp and it noteworthy characters.

Frontier Lady of Letters – The Heroic Love Story of Ines Fraser (2007) A personal memoir based on intimate family letters.

Detour to the California Gold Rush: Eugene Ring's Travels in South America, California, and Mexico, 1848-1850 (2008) Bob's great grandfather's incredible memoir of his trek to, and almost fatal return from, the California Gold Rush.

From November 2006 to May 2011 Bob wrote a humorous, family-interest column, "Gym Rat Rantings" for his Fit Center Gym's monthly newsletter.

Since October 2008 Bob has written a monthly human-interest newspaper column, "Ring's Reflections," for the *Arizona Daily Star*, regional sections.

Bob is a Professional member of the Society of Southwest Authors.

See Bob and his brother Al's website at http://ringbrothershistory.com.

