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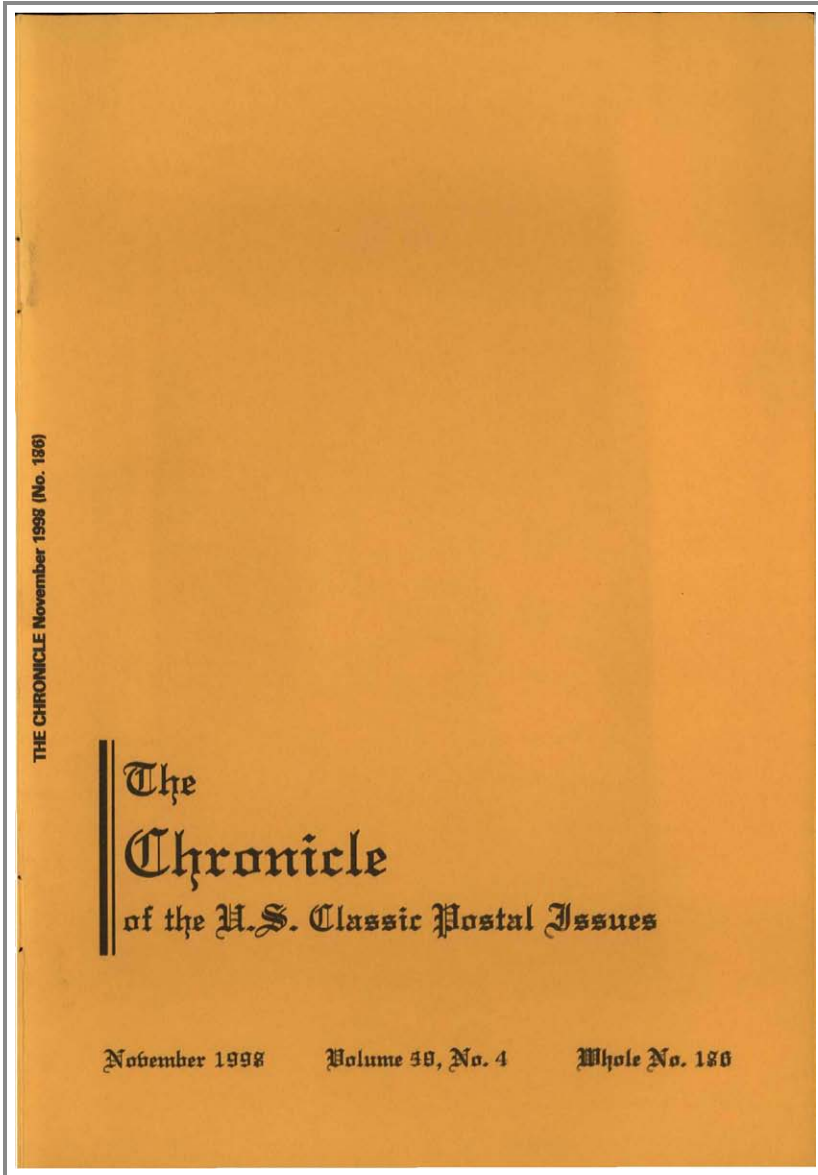


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THE EXPRESS MAIL OF 1803-1804
VAN KOPPERSMITH

Literature Review

The best known express mail service in the United States is the famous Pony Express which carried letters from western Missouri to the gold fields of California in the early 1860s. Another, but earlier, express service from New Orleans and other southern cities to Washington, Philadelphia, and New York was established in 1836. The congressional act authorizing this express was signed by President Andrew Jackson on July 2, 1836¹; it began on November 15, was discontinued in 1839, and was revived for only six weeks in early 1845. Starnes² states that the earliest U.S. express mail service was from Mobile (then in the Mississippi Territory) to Rhea Court House in Tennessee in 1814-1816. This express was established as a result of the War of 1812. Petri³ reports another express service, also a result of this War, beginning a few years earlier, in 1812. Several northern routes were covered, including Buffalo-Cleveland, Buffalo-Washington, D.C., Utica-Buffalo, Detroit-Chillicothe, and Pittsburgh-Cleveland.

In another reference, Stets⁴ reports the existence of express mail routes as early as 1807. Most of this information comes from the *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836*.⁵ These early routes include Washington, D.C.-New Orleans and Cleveland-Detroit. Letters were carried by express on the first route from April 1, 1807, until about 1810, but the second lasted only through the winter of 1807-1808.

An even earlier express mail service is the subject of this article. There are two brief references to this express mail route. The first is,

In September, 1803, [William Charles Cole] Claiborne [Governor of Mississippi Territory] was directed to establish an express line from Natchez to New Orleans; this was to be the last link in the Natchez-Nashville-Knoxville-Washington route which was then already in operation.⁶

This first reference was not fully appreciated by this writer until he learned about the 1803-1804 express while reading the Letters of the Postmaster General [PMG] for another project. The letter books are journals containing copies of all letters written by the Postmaster General [available as fifty rolls of microfilm, see footnote 5]. There may be an even earlier express service remaining to be discovered in these letters as this writer was

¹James W. Milgram, M.D., *The Express Mail of 1836-1839* (Chicago, Illinois: Collectors Club of Chicago, 1977), p. 26.

²D. Edward Starnes, Jr., "The Express Mail of 1814-1816," *The American Philatelist*, September 1976, pp. 684-686.

³Pitt Petri, "Express Mails of the War of 1812; First 'Pony Expresses' in the U.S.A.," *Postal History Journal*, March 1959, pp. 63-67.

⁴Robert J. Stets, *Postmasters & Postoffices of the United States 1782-1811* (Lake Oswego, Oregon: LaPosta Publications, 1994), pp. 11-13.

⁵The letter books are journals containing copies of all of the letters written by the Postmaster General. These letter books are available for purchase on microfilm from the National Archives as Microcopy No. 601, Record Group 28. There are 50 rolls covering 1789-1836. The USPCS owns a set of the microfilm and will loan rolls to interested members. There may be an earlier express to be discovered in these letters as this writer was searching only for information on the Mississippi Territory.

⁶Leonard V. Huber and Clarence A. Wagner, *The Great Mail* (State College, Pennsylvania: The American Philatelic Society, Inc., 1949), p. 7.

searching only for information on the Mississippi Territory. Some of these letters have been published by the U.S. government⁷ as well as by various archives. The other reference to this express is by Oakley in Volume 2 of *A Postal History of Mississippi*.⁸ In this volume, many letters from the PMG are transcribed, generally without comment. The only letter referring to the express of 1803-1804 is one to Samuel H. Smith on October 24, 1803, which is quoted below.

Historical Background

In 1762, late in the French and Indian War (which ended disastrously for the French), the "Isle of Orleans" and the French colony of Louisiana lying west of the Mississippi River were ceded to Spain by the secret Treaty of Fontainebleau (made public by Treaty of Paris, 1763). Much later, in 1795, the Spanish granted to the U.S. the right of deposit⁹ at New Orleans by the Treaty of San Lorenzo, and New Orleans became an important outlet for U.S. products. This right was revoked for a short time in 1799-1800 and again in 1802-1803. These acts "of arbitrary power again roused the indignation of the western people . . . and losses of those engaged in the river trade were extensive, and spread consternation through the Western States."¹⁰ By the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso, Spain retroceded the colony of Louisiana back to France on October 1, 1800.¹¹ Three years of delay in the formal transfer, the French refusing even to acknowledge the retrocession, the fear of losing New Orleans as a port, and uncertainty in the U.S. whether the cession included Spanish West Florida (extending from Pensacola to the Mississippi River) caused great alarm in the US.

The American minister to France, Robert R. Livingston, was instructed to negotiate in Paris to try to secure possession of either New Orleans or an area in West Florida. On October 16, 1802, the Spanish, still in control, again suspended the right of deposit at New Orleans. President Thomas Jefferson sent James Monroe as additional plenipotentiary to help insure progress in the negotiations and Congress authorized an expenditure of up to \$10,000,000 for the purchase. At about this same time, Governor Claiborne was seeking permission to make a *coup de main* on New Orleans. He had about 2,000 men in his militia and felt he could easily capture New Orleans from the Spanish before the city was reinforced by French troops. Meanwhile, Livingston also was urging President Jefferson in this direction and "even insinuated, in his correspondence with the French authorities, that such a policy would be adopted."¹²

At this time, Napoleon had to contend with other problems of his own and, consequently, even before Monroe arrived in Paris, he offered to sell all of Louisiana. The U.S. diplomats exceeded their instructions both in dollar amount and in total area, paying

⁷Clarence Edwin Carter [compiler and editor of 26 vols.]; and John Porter Bloom [compiler and editor of 2 vols.], *The Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934-1962, 1969, 1975). These 28 volumes are a great source of information [and postmarks] for the postal historian. Unfortunately, the postmarks are not illustrated or described, but only noted.

⁸Bruce C. Oakley, Jr., *A Postal History of Mississippi*, Vol. II (Bruce, Mississippi: The Author, 1980), p. 86.

⁹The right of deposit allowed U.S. products to be landed and stored at New Orleans for transfer to other ships free from all duty or charge. Without the right of deposit, all goods had to be transferred from boat to ship while still on the Mississippi River.

¹⁰John W. Monette, M.D., *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi* (New York, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846), two volumes, Vol. I, pp. 543-546.

¹¹Major Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Matthew Carey, 1812), pp. 70-71 and 132-133. These boundaries were unclear for many years as a result of the language in both treaties.

¹²J.F.H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State, with Biographical Notices of Eminent Citizens* (Jackson, Mississippi: Power & Barksdale, 1880), p. 240.

\$15,000,000 for the vast territory. On October 7, 1803, the Senate readily confirmed the purchase; on November 30, Spain formally transferred the province back to France; and, France transferred the enormous area to the U.S. on December 20, 1803.

History of the Post Road

Before the close of the eighteenth century, PMG Joseph Habersham had agreed to pay Abijah Hunt \$2,400 per annum for carrying the mail from Nashville to Natchez and back once a month. This contract was to begin in January 1800.¹³ As an actual fact, Matthew Lyon received the contract from Nashville to McIntoshes, Mississippi Territory and Hunt had the contract only from McIntoshes to Natchez.¹⁴ Soon after the first post road was established, another “post road . . . [was] established from Natchez to Loftus Heights [Fort Adams] principally with a view of facilitating the correspondence between New Orleans & the United States.”¹⁵ In order to accomplish this, Habersham wrote to the Chevalier D’Irugo, Minister Plenipotentiary for Spain, on April 6, 1801:

Your Excellency has probably observed that a considerable commercial intercourse subsists between Kentucky, Tennessee & New Orleans & that it would be considerably facilitated were there an interchange of letters through the public posts so as to insure regularity to the correspondence. As a step toward this object, a post road was established at the last session of Congress from Natchez to the boundary line on Loftus Heights & it is contemplated to convey the mail there every two weeks after the first of July next. Not being acquainted with the name of the proper officer in New Orleans to be addressed on the above occasion, I have taken the liberty to request your advice in that respect & also to be informed whether a public post is established from New Orleans to any place near Loftus Heights where an exchange of mails could take place.¹⁶

There is evidence that Loftus Heights was used to exchange mail between Spanish New Orleans and the United States as early as July 1, 1801.¹⁷

Mail service from Nashville to Natchez continued to run every two weeks until shortly after Spain revoked the right of deposit in New Orleans. As the result of that crisis, on January 1, 1803, PMG Gideon Granger “ordered a weekly mail to run between Nashville & Natchez at the rate of fifty miles a day . . .” At the same time, he “greatly accelerated the progress of the mail between Nashville and this place [Washington, D.C.] after the first day of April next so that we shall be able to hear from each other in a little more than half the time that was heretofore required.”¹⁸ On at least two occasions, the PMG sent an express from Washington, D.C., to overtake the regular mail carrier to Natchez. Both of these expresses carried dispatches which were “of first importance to the Union and particularly to the Western Country.”¹⁹ The second dispatch contained “among other things . . . the order of the King of Spain for opening the port of New Orleans.”²⁰

From Ordinary Post Road to Express Route

On September 27, 1803, PMG Granger wrote to Governor Claiborne, as follows:

¹³Roll 9, Volume E, May 8, 1799-March 4, 1800, pp. 327, 347, 356-357 and 429.

¹⁴Roll 10, Volume EE, March 3, 1800-August 6, 1801, pp. 298-299, 311-312 and 468.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 312-313. PMG Habersham to John Steele, Esqr, Secretary of the Mississippi Territory, March 26, 1801. [As with all letters transcribed and quoted here, punctuation may have been added, as well as spelling errors/anachronisms corrected.]

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹⁷Roll 11, Volume F, August 7, 1801-January 25, 1803, p. 231.

¹⁸Roll 12, Volume FF, January 24, 1803-March 16, 1804, p. 37. PMG Granger to W.C.C. Claiborne, Governor of the Mississippi Territory.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 77. PMG Granger to PM Nashville, March 11, 1803, and the exact same wording on p. 137, PMG Granger to Robert Stothart [PM], Nashville, April 19, 1803.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 137.

The important arrangements which must soon be adopted by Congress in relation to New Orleans and Louisiana render essential to the public service a rapid and regular line of intelligence from this place to New Orleans. I have accordingly made arrangements for running an express mail to the Natchez for three months commencing on the 31st of Oct. next upon the plan herein enclosed. The President relies on you, sir, to make provision for a line of expresses for the same period to run between Natchez and New Orleans.²¹

That same day, he also wrote to the postmasters at Nashville, Wythe CH (VA), Charlottesville and Knoxville. Possibly anticipating complaints, the PMG told the postmasters how to achieve his goal:

The negotiations which we are now carrying on respecting New Orleans and Louisiana renders it necessary that the mail should be conveyed with all possible expedition between that and this city. Enclosed you have a copy of an arrangement which I have made for that purpose to commence on the 1st of November, by which you will observe that it is to be carried on this side Nashville at the rate of 100 miles in every 24 hours. This can doubtless be accomplished with regularity provided the mail does not stop at night and the contractor has a horse stationed at every thirty miles distance so that one horse need never travel farther than 30 miles at one time. I hope you will do what is necessary to facilitate the expedition and should any accident happen to the contractor or rider, provide expresses or otherwise as there may be occasion to prevent a failure.²²

Finally, he also wrote the postmaster at Natchez the same day:

The public service requires the most prompt circulation of intelligence from hence to New Orleans. I enclosed copy of a new establishment to which you will attend and also to such instructions as you may receive from Governor Claiborne. I rely confidently on your most strenuous exertions to aid in effecting the proposed expedition and can only say a trip must not be lost.²³

The schedule referenced in the above three letters shows mileage as follows:

Leave Washington		every Monday	7pm
Arrive at Charlottesville	121	every Tuesday	7pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Wythe CH	203	Thursday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Knoxville	193	Saturday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Nashville	195	Monday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Natchez	550	Tuesday	6pm
Returning			
Leave Natchez		every Saturday	6pm
Arrive at Nashville	550	Sunday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Knoxville	195	Tuesday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Wythe CH	193	Thursday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Charlottesville	203	Saturday	6pm
Leave same		same	8pm
Arrive at Washington	121	Sunday	6pm ²⁴

The PMG wrote Benjamin Joslin, the new contractor between Nashville and McIntoshes, the following day (September 28, 1803). Again, his letter includes instructions to accomplish his goal.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 233-234.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 231.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 234-235.

The important negotiations which are now carrying on respecting New Orleans render it indispensable that the mail should be carried between this city and that place with all possible expedition. If you have a horse and rider stationed half way between Nashville and Tennessee, another at Tennessee, another at McIntoshes, another at the frontier house near Grindstone Ford and a horse at Natchez, you can carry the mail regularly from Nashville to Natchez in eight days as follows

Leave Nashville every Monday at 8 o'clock afternoon
Deliver the mail at Natchez the next Tuesday week by
6 o'clock afternoon in 8 days.

Returning

Leave Natchez every Saturday at 8 o'clock afternoon &
Arrive at Nashville the next Sunday week by 6 o'clock
afternoon.

I hope you will not fail to provide the necessary horses and riders to carry the mail as above and to commence at Nashville on Monday the 7th of November and Natchez on Saturday the 29th of October & continue until the first of February next. As you may have occasion for money to procure horses, etc., I have enclosed my draft on Abijah Hunt, late postmaster at Natchez, for 400 ds. Be so good as to answer this by the next post.²⁵

In a circular sent to all postmasters along the way from Washington, D.C., to Nashville, the PMG instructed "it will be essential . . . that your mails should be made up, ready to put in the portmanteau, as soon as the mail arrives, and that you should dispatch it as soon as possible, never detaining it longer than ten minutes."²⁶ Wythe CH in Virginia was a distributing post office and the postmaster had as many as 90 mails to make up in one evening. So that the express might not be delayed, the PMG wrote a lengthy letter to George Ouvy, postmaster, explaining in great detail the easiest and quickest way to distribute his mails.

. . . To save you trouble and the intermediate offices, we will have all the mails addressed to Natchez, Nashville and the Mississippi Territory enclosed in a separate bag. In respect to time, I do not see that we can extend it much . . . [You should have] three hours to make up the mail in, and it may be done by three persons, even if you should have 90 mails to make up the same evening . . . The postmaster at Stanford who distributes for Connecticut has but one hour to open and distribute the mails, and he has about 35 mails to make up at one time . . . this he does without any assistance & within the time. But he has everything prepared before the arrival of the mail in this manner. He first enters the names of all the offices to which he regularly sends mails in his account of letters sent. He then directs and dates a bill for every office placing them on a long table in the same order that they are entered in his book. His paper for wrappers is ready cut to the different sizes wanted and his twine wound on a roller. By this means the business is half done before the arrival of the mail . . . When your accounts arrive, I will examine them and, perhaps, we may see some way of shortening the labor at your office . . .²⁷

The PMG considered the successful arrival of the express on time so important that he instructed the postmaster at Knoxville to

endeavor to deliver the mail at those offices [Gallatin, Cragfont & Blackburn Springs] unless an instance should occur in which it would make a break in the regular conveyance of the southern mail at Nashville. In which case you may pass those offices without calling.²⁸

Just before the express began, PMG Granger must have received a letter of complaint from George H. Hynds of Knoxville. (Hynds had the contract for carrying the mail from Wythe CH to Knoxville.) On October 24, 1803, the PMG sent two short letters to Hynds:

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 264.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 267-268.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 290.

Yours of the 14th is received and you have now enclosed my check on the Bank of the United States for one hundred and fifty dollars as a further advance on account of the increased expedition of the mail.²⁹

Yours of the 14th is received. I have this day sent you one hundred and fifty dollars more. You will not only make the attempt to carry through the express arrangement, but *that attempt must be crowned with success.*³⁰ [The emphasis is in the original letter.]

There appears to have been only one restriction and no additional charge for the express mail service. On October 24, 1803, PMG Granger wrote to Samuel H. Smith at Washington, D.C., to inform him of the service and of the restriction on newspapers. Note the postscript.

A line of express is established from this office to the Natchez, to commence on this day week [Monday] and to continue three months from that time, during which period that mail will close at 5 o'clock pm and newspapers cannot be admitted into it unless they are fully dried and closely packed.

NB It may be useful to give this a place in your paper.³¹

As Smith was the founder and editor of the *National Intelligencer* in Washington, D.C.,³² Gideon Granger was making an attempt to get national publicity for this early express service, The Natchez Express Mail.

There is only one failure of the express mentioned in the letter books. It was the first arrival due in Washington, D.C., on November 6, 1803. The PMG dealt with it quickly and sternly. First, he wrote to several mail carriers on November 7:

The Natchez Express mail due yesterday at 7pm has not from some unaccountable cause arrived here this day at 1pm and I now dispatch the Natchez mail by an express from this city with a view of meeting the proper rider to save the trip. The business can and must be performed agreeable to your instructions - no common excuse can justify a delinquency. You must invariably leave the post office at the fixed hour of your instructions, whether the depending mail has arrived or not. The several postmasters on the route are expressly directed not to detain you more than five minutes.³³

Then, on the same day, he sent a circular to the postmasters along the route in Tennessee and Virginia:

It is with much regret that I have to inform you that the Natchez express mail due yesterday at 7pm has not arrived this day at 1pm. This will be forwarded with the Natchez mail by an express from this city to meet the proper carrier. To prevent an evil of this magnitude again recurring, I must request that you will invariably dispatch the carrier from your office at the stipulated hour without waiting for the arrival of the depending mail; and at all times be prepared to forward by express such mail as fails in arriving at your office at the proper period to meet the proper carrier. The expense will be paid at this office as soon as the account is presented. The mail must in no instance be detained over five minutes at any post office except Wythe CH.³⁴

The End of the Natchez Express and the Beginning of the Federal Road

The express route between Washington, D.C., and New Orleans was discontinued, as planned, on February 1, 1804. The federal New Orleans post office had been established by Governor Claiborne by that date. The first mail from the pre-territorial New Orleans post office was dispatched on February 14, 1804. Although expenses must have been high for the Natchez Express during its three months of existence, the only actual charges mentioned in the letters of the PMG are those of Ferdinand L. Claiborne (brother of Governor

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 277.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 279.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 278.

³²James Grant Wilson and John Fiske [editors], *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1888), 6 volumes, Vol. 5, p. 574.

³³Roll 12, Volume FF, January 24, 1803-March 16, 1804, pp. 287-288.

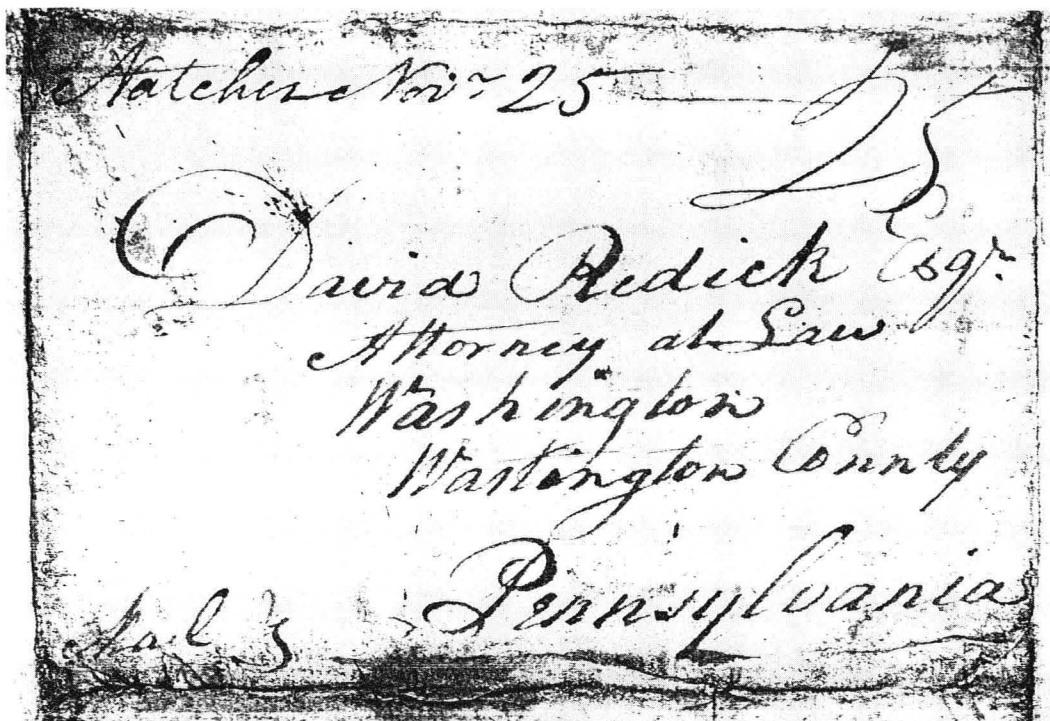


Figure 1. Earliest cover from the Natchez Express Mail of 1803-1804. The next earlier Bradford letter was carried outside the mails starting in late October 1803. The next following Bradford letter was written Jan 24, 1804, and was postmarked in Ft. Adams on Feb 1st. (Cover courtesy of James S. Leonardo.)

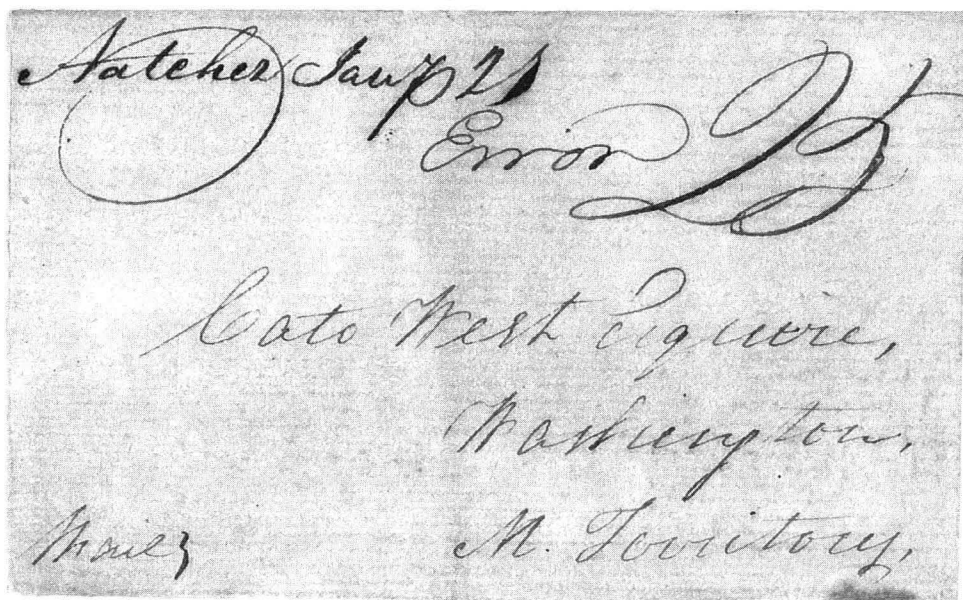


Figure 2. The second Natchez Express Mail cover. Cato West was the secretary of the Mississippi Territory.

Claiborne) for \$666.66.³⁵ Ferdinand Claiborne carried the mail on the last segment of the express from Natchez to New Orleans.

The post road between Natchez and Nashville was known as the Natchez Trace, but the greater part of the route, from Washington, D.C., to Nashville, was known as the Great Valley Road.³⁶ That these roads were neither the most direct route to New Orleans nor the easiest to traverse was known before the 1803 express began. Perhaps the following letter from PMG Granger to the Chairman of the Committee upon post roads, David Thomas, on November 30, 1803, was partly responsible for President Jefferson granting permission to study the establishment of a new post road from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans. This new route would become known as "The Federal Road."

. . . I must through you communicate my ideas on the subject of establishing a direct post road from this place to New Orleans. As New Orleans will unquestionably be the place of deposit for the products of the western world, its connection with the Atlantic capitals must be incalculably great and important. The road to and from thence will become the great thoroughfare of the United States. It is certainly an object of prime importance to procure the nearest and most convenient route to that city. This can only be done by avoiding the present road through Tennessee which passes the Allegheny Mountains and establishing a route through Virginia, the back parts of North and South Carolina into Georgia at or about the place called Jackson court house, and from thence by a road to be in part purchased of the Indians, in a line as nearly direct as the nature of the ground will admit to New Orleans. In order to accommodate the Natchez, as well as the people living on the Tombigbee [River in present day Alabama] and in the interior, it will be necessary to establish a cross road some where near the latitude of the Natchez from the proposed road to that place. By making provision for these roads, when they are once prepared for the undersigned, the distance between this place and New Orleans will be lessened near five hundred miles, the delay and embarrassments that attend passing the mountains avoided, and the states of South Carolina and Georgia, whose means of correspondence to and from New Orleans are so embarrassed by the present establishment as to render them of little or no benefit, will be furnished with a regular line of intelligence . . .³⁷

Express Mail Covers from the Route

At this time, there are only two covers known from the express mail period (October 31, 1803 - January 31, 1804). The first example, shown in Figure 1, entered the mail at Natchez and is from the David Bradford correspondence. Postmarked in manuscript at Natchez on Nov 25, it is datelined "Bayou Sarah [Spanish West Florida, present day St. Francisville, LA] Nov 12, 1803."

The second example is also postmarked in manuscript at Natchez on Jan^y 21 [1804]. Although it is rated "25," it traveled only seven miles to Washington, Mississippi Territory. The word "Error" is in manuscript to the left of the "25" cent rate marking, as the proper rate was eight cents. Strangely, this correct rate is not indicated on the cover and the "25" marking is not crossed out. See Figure 2.

Perhaps some day, covers from Natchez, or even New Orleans, to points north such as Philadelphia or Washington, D.C., will be discovered.³⁸ □

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 288.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 430.

³⁶Henry deLeon Southerland, Jr., and Jerry Elijah Brown, *The Federal Road* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), p. 11.

³⁷Roll 12, Volume FF, January 24, 1803-March 16, 1804, pp. 332-333.

³⁸This writer acknowledges the contributions of several philatelists, including James S. Leonardo, Frank Mandel, Dr. James W. Milgram, B.C. Oakley, Jr. and particularly Hubert C. Skinner.