Pony Express Rides Again

Guide to Historical Sites Along the Pony Express Trail

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Pony Express statue in Old Sacramento
On Monday, June 7, Anniversary riders depart
Old Sacramento
THE NATIONAL PONY EXPRESS ASSOCIATION (NPEA), which annually organizes a re-ride for the entire 1,966-mile route, has big plans for the 150th anniversary this summer. The re-ride usually crosses the country as the original riders did, finishing the route in 10 days of hard riding day and night. This year the re-ride will only run during daylight hours and take three weeks, from June 6 to 26, so that communities along the trail can join in the celebration.

Riders, who are all volunteers, will carry special commemorative letters in their mochila, or mail bag, with cachets to show they were carried by the Pony Express with a special U.S. Postal Service cancellation. The mail will first be carried by rivercraft from San Francisco to Sacramento for the start. Then riders will trace the old route from Sacramento up and over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and then through Nevada and Utah, some of the driest and most desolate lands in North America. Before reaching the terminus at St. Joseph, Missouri, the mail will cross Wyoming, Nebraska, a corner of Colorado, Kansas, and Missouri.

Because much of the trail crosses remote country, amateur radio operators have volunteered to help riders and their captains communicate. A GPS device, carried by the riders in one of the cantinas on the mochila, will transmit the mail’s location at all times and enable anyone to follow the mail in real time on the NPEA website (www.xphomestation.com).

If you’re unable to enjoy the festivities in June, you can make stops along the National Park Service’s federally-designated Historic Trail any time, visiting any one of the hundreds of museums, monuments, and markers, many of which are indicated on the map on the proceeding pages. **Happy Trails.**
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For a time, Placerville served as the western terminus of the Pony Express. Once called "Hangtown" because of its reputation for swift frontier justice, Placerville sits eight miles from Sutter's Mill, where John Marshall discovered gold in 1848. The 8,000-square-foot county museum contains an exhibit on the Pony Express as well as baskets and tools made by Maidu, Miwok, and Washoe peoples, a shepherd's covered wagon, a restored Victorian-era parlor from a fine home and an old general store. Outdoor exhibits include a five-stamp mill used to crush rock, a large flywheel powered by a steam engine, ore cars, and antique chain saws. El Dorado (530) 621-8865 or www.edcgov.us/museum.

A spring that once watered Pony Express horses still flows behind this old stable in Folsom. The historic building was converted into a 2,500-square-foot museum of the area’s past that offers permanent exhibits on Native Americans, explorers, Gold Rush, Pony Express, Chinese settlements and first industries to the area. Folsom (916) 985-2707. www.folsomhistorymuseum.org

Samuel B. Buckland built a way station and general store for pioneers on the Overland Trail as well as local ranchers and soldiers. Both the Pony Express and stage lines kept horses at his station. Nevada State Parks acquired the property in 1994 and recently restored and opened the building to the public. Buckland Station is located on the Carson River at Weeks Bridge, one-half mile south of the Fort Churchill entrance road. Silver Springs (775) 577-2345

The 1853 B.F. Hastings Building, one of the most historic structures in the state, once held the westernmost terminus of the nearly 2,000-mile-long Pony Express route, as well as the first permanent offices of California’s Supreme Court and its first two telegraph companies. The exhibits in this 700-square-foot museum in the Old Sacramento Historic District include a replica mochila, the lightweight leather mailbag tossed over a Pony Express rider’s saddle, and original letters and envelopes. Sacramento (916) 440-4263 or www.wellsfargo.com/about/history

Previous page: Gregg Hearty carries a mochila full of mail along the Pony Express Trail in Utah. PHOTO: MICHALEY & TAM IN THIES.
Nearly a dozen Pony Express stations stretched across what is now Tooele County west of Salt Lake City, including Faust, Lookout Pass, Blackrock, Fish Springs, River Bed Station, and Deep Creek. The remains of several have rock walls with gun ports preserved. Also in Tooele County are the Benson Grist Mill (left), Donner-Reed Museum (including artifacts from the famous Donner Party disaster), Bonneville Salt Flats, Grantsville Fort, and Wendover Airfield, where training for dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki took place. http://www.co.tooele.ut.us/h100_index.html

Location: Simpson Springs, Tooele County, Utah

Simpson Springs

Located miles south of Tooele, the old mail station, established in 1888 and later incorporated into the Pony Express route, features two reconstructed stone buildings. On the site are rock remains of what might have been a tent foundation or animal pen. Faust (801) 877-4300 or www.blm.gov/ut/st/enprog/more/cultural/archaeology/places_to_visit/simpson_springs.html

Stagecoach Inn/Camp Floyd

Established by mountain men Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez in 1843, Fort Bridger was one of the most important stops along the Oregon Trail. Mormons purchased the settlement in 1855 and fortified it during their dispute with the U.S. government, which retook the fort in 1858. Visitors can see a stables used by the Pony Express and numerous buildings dating from the period, including commissary, ice house, the first school in Wyoming, and a rock wall built by the Mormons. A museum in the stone barracks features hundreds of artifacts and exhibits on the Shoshone Indians, the Utah War, and the construction of the Lincoln Highway. Fort Bridger (307) 782-3842 or wymparks.state.wy.us/Site/SiteInfo.asp?siteID=14

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Go to TravelNevada.com/heritage to order your FREE Highway 50 Survival Guide.
Established in 1857 as a trading post and North Platte River crossing, this site became a Pony Express station and served as an Army fort from 1862 to 1867. Today the park contains a 3,000-square-foot museum, a section of the 1,000-yard wood bridge that once spanned the river, and reconstructed barracks for enlisted men, officers’ quarters, a commissary, and a blacksmith shop. Historic artifacts include period rifles and sidearms. Casper (307) 235-8468 or www.casperwy.gov/ParksRecreationandEntertainment/Museums/FortCasparMuseum/tabid/188/Default.aspx

Pony Express riders and settlers heading West couldn’t miss the 800-foot-tall bluff overlooking the North Platte River, known as the “Nebraska Gibraltar.” The Oregon Trail Museum and Visitor Center in the 3,000-acre park contains exhibits on western expansion, geology, and the world’s largest collection of works by William H. Jackson, the renowned photographer of Yellowstone. Visitors can drive or hike the 1.6 miles to the summit of Saddle Rock for views of the badlands and North Platte River Valley. Gering (308) 438-9700 or www.nps.gov/scbl

This 80-acre park contains 470-foot Chimney Rock, the landmark that once marked the end of the Great Plains and the start of the rugged Rocky Mountains for westbound travelers. A 5,000-square-foot visitors center, located one mile south of the junction of Highways 28 and 92, offers interpretive displays and a 15-minute film on the emigrants who passed by the rock on their way to California. Bayard (308) 588-2881 or www.nebraskahistory.org/sites/rock

Both Pony Express riders and Oregon Trail emigrants crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass, perhaps the most important gateway through the Rocky Mountains at the time. Gold was discovered nearby in 1867, and a boomtown sprouted up. Today South Pass City is a state historic site featuring 48 reconstructed historic structures and more than 30,000 artifacts dating from 1868 to 1910. Visitors can tour merchant shops, restaurants, a hotel, the historic Carissa gold mine, and a restored 1898 saloon with period furnishings and decorations. The pass itself, just a short trip away, is a National Historic Landmark with interpretive markers and views of the expansive plateau. South Pass City (307) 332-3844 or www.southpasscity.com; South Pass wyoshpo.state.wy.us/trailsdemo/southpass.htm
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Relive the Pony Express Trail
In historic Tooele County, Utah

Perhaps the most complete and longest remaining vestige of the famous Pony Express Trail is found 30 minutes west of Salt Lake City in Tooele County, Utah. Over 100 miles of the famous trail runs the entire length of the county. It is easily accessible by vehicle or on foot—which makes it the ideal spot to experience the trail’s sesquicentennial celebration in June 2010. On June 6 in Sacramento, CA, reenactment riders on horseback are scheduled to begin the 1,800-mile journey toward St. Joseph, MO. On June 13 they’ll pass through the heart of Tooele County on the actual Pony Express Trail. Become part of this historic and significant national event that celebrates the trail’s brief existence from 1860 to 1861. Although the Pony Express lasted only 14 months, it connected a continent’s two coasts by mail—and left an indelible legacy of gritty daring-do and progress that still captures the imagination today.

See www.ExploreTooele.com or call 800-378-0690
Located in the northeast corner of Colorado near the Fort Sedgwick and Depot museums (the latter being a 1930s Union Pacific Railroad depot), a stone monument memorializes the lone Pony Express station in the state. From Julesburg, mail to Colorado would be separated and sent to Denver. The museums display local artifacts such as early buggies, barbed wire, rifles, cannon, swords, and saddles. **Julesburg** (870) 474-2061 or www.kci.net/~history

Begun in 1857, this ranch served as a supply stop along the Oregon-California Trail. Three years later it became a relay station for the Pony Express. Legend claims that Wild Bill Hickok shot members of the McCandles Gang here while he was a stable hand. Visible to the northwest of the station are the 1,600-foot-long trail ruts of 19th-century wagon pioneers. **Fairbury** (402) 729-5777 or www.ngpc.state.ne.us/guides/parksearch/showpark.asp?Area_No=183

Gothenburg, the “Pony Express capital of Nebraska.” Relocated in 1931 from its original position 12 miles west of town, the Sam Macchette Station houses a museum featuring photographs, a reproduction Bible given to the Pony Express riders, and original pioneer tools and cooking utensils. On-site interpreters are available during the season to explain the history and significance of the Pony Express. Four miles south of town stands the Midway Station on its original foundations. Part of a private ranch, it is open to visitors by appointment. **Gothenburg** (308) 887-3505 or www.ci.gothenburg.ne.us/attractions/ lodges.htm#Pony%20Express%20Station

Built in 1847 to protect travelers on the Overland Trail, the fort served as a stagecoach station, Pony Express depot, and military outpost during the Indian Wars. Visitors can tour reconstructed buildings, including the stockade, parade grounds, and a blacksmith shop. An on-site interpretive center contains panels describing the fort’s history. **Kearny** (308) 865-5305 or www.ngpc.state.ne.us/parks/guides/parksearch/showpark.asp?Area_No=97

This 20-acre complex comprises 28 restored and operational historic buildings, including the Pumpkinseed Station and barn as well as the county’s first log cabin and a Gilded Age railroad depot. The 22,400-square-foot main building contains a large collection of antique American cars, farm equipment, saddles, and artwork, including 23 William H. Jackson paintings and the world’s largest collection of John Rogers statues. **Minden** (308) 832-1181 or www.pioneervillage.org
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9. Tooele County, Utah:
   Tooele County has been a site for rich Western history and is a treasure of heritage tourism. 800-378-0690, www.ExploreTooele.com

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National Pony Express Association
P.O. Box 236
Pollock Pines,
CALIFORNIA 95726

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KANSAS 66411
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150th Anniversary Celebration of the Pony Express Committee
Ken Martin, Chairman
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23 Hollenberg Station

In 1857 German immigrant Gerat H. Hollenberg built a six-room log cabin on Cottonwood Creek as a way station for westward travelers, reserving the loft for exhausted Pony Express riders during its operation. A quarter mile from the cabin, which is one of the few remaining unaltered Pony Express stations, sits a new visitors center featuring interpretive and hands-on exhibits on period clothing and the life of a Pony Express rider. Hanover (785) 337-2636 or www.kahs.org/places/hollenberg

25 Pony Express National Museum

This 10,000-square-foot museum, originally built in 1888 as a stable for 200 horses, now features displays including a 60-foot diorama that illustrates nearly 2,000-mile route. In Spring 2010 the museum will reopen its original forge and bellows, in which blacksmiths created horseshoes, stirrups, and other riding equipment. Hands-on exhibits include a working water pump that dates back to the stables’ initial construction and is connected to a 21-foot-deep well. St. Joseph (816) 279-5059 or www.ponyexpress.org

26 Patee House

This 1858, four-story, luxury hotel, became the headquarters for Pony Express founders Russell, Majors, and Waddell. In 1882 the brick, 140-room structure again gained notoriety when it became the headquarters for the official investigation into the murder of outlaw Jesse James. Today the house contains a museum of communications and transportation. Visitors can stroll down the “Streets of Old St. Joe,” view the dentist office of Dr. Walter Cronkite, father of the television news commentator, and see the Buchanan County jail gallows, an 1860 Hannibal & St. Joseph locomotive and railway mail car invented to speed the mail on the Pony Express. St. Joseph (816) 232-8206 or www.ponyexpressjessejames.com

24 Marysville Pony Express Barn

This 1859 stone barn was leased to the Pony Express in 1860 and remains one of the few home stations on its original site. The barn contains antique wagons, a blacksmith shop, and the original vent holes for the horses. A modern limestone annex, added in 1991, contains replicas of an original stagecoach, Marysville’s first post office, and interpretive panels describing the 18 months of the Pony Express’s operation. Marysville (785) 562-3825 or skyways.lib ks.us/towns/Marysville/mccosbusine sses/ponyexpbarn/ponyexpbarn.html

27 Lexington Historical Museum

Partners in the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell, who founded the Pony Express, had their office in Lexington, one of the most populous and prosperous cities west of St. Louis before the Civil War. At the peak of operations, they had the government contract to supply all military posts in the West and shipped freight using some 500 wagons and 7,500 oxen. William H. Russell lived here across from his partner, William Bradford Waddell, whose home still stands on South Street. The Lexington Historical Museum, located in an 1847 Cumberland Presbyterian church, features Pony Express art and memorabilia as well as artifacts from the Civil War “Battle of the Hemp Bales” and other local history. Contact museum at (660) 259-2800 or see www.lexingtonmuseum.org
Experience life on the trails at the National Frontier Trails Museum in historic Independence. The hometown of President Harry Truman offers 20 heritage sites including the Truman Library and Home, Victorian mansions, and nationally known religious sites. There’s also great golf, walking trails, shopping and dining on the historic square, a family water park and the new Midwest Genealogy Center.

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Journey back to the days of the Wild West in historic St. Joseph, Missouri. Stand in the very spot where America’s most notorious outlaw met his demise at the Jesse James Home Museum. Then, explore the history of the frontier at the Pony Express and Patee House Museums and share in the celebration of the sesquicentennial of the Pony Express. With great B&Bs, historic homes and a terrific art museum, this is one trip your gang is sure to enjoy.

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