

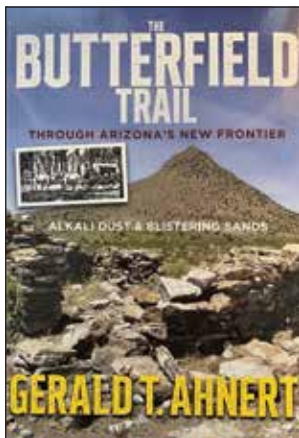
QUARTERLY OF THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

OVERLAND JOURNAL

VOLUME 43 • NUMBER 2 • SUMMER 2025



REVIEWS FROM THE TRAIL



THE BUTTERFIELD TRAIL:
THROUGH ARIZONA'S NEW
FRONTIER. ALKALI DUST AND
BLISTERING SANDS

By Gerald T. Ahnert

Rodeo, N.M.: Eco Publishing, 2025

viii, 222 pages, maps, illus., notes,
biblio., index

ISBN 978-1-938850-71-4

Paper, 6.5 × 9 in., \$19.95

Reviewed by Dan Judkins

Gerald T. Ahnert has written the definitive text on the Butterfield Overland Mail Company's operations in Arizona from 1858 to 1861, just published in early 2025. Ahnert has made this subject the study of a lifetime, from 1970 to 2025. In recent years he has spent three months each year camping on and exploring the route used by the Overland Mail, from one side of southern Arizona to the other. In the process he has emerged as the leading expert on the Butterfield Trail through Arizona.

The techniques he has developed as a historian are as important as his extensive field experience. He reads all previous histories on this topic with a healthy sense of skepticism, looking for the rare tidbits of truth and sifting through and discarding a great deal of legend and superficial writing of history. This had led to Ahnert's reliance on primary sources. Believing that "primary sources"—that is, contemporaneous, first-person accounts—are the closest one can get to the truth, from a distance of 165 years, he sets aside previous authors' accounts of Butterfield history and goes with only first-person descriptions of what happened. He is "religious" about this solid approach, the results of which show on every page of this book, which clearly demonstrates what doing good history looks like.

Another nearly-as-important approach to writing this authoritative history of the Butterfield is Ahnert's keen eye for details on the trail. In a sense, the artifacts still remaining on the trail today are even more-solidly *real* than primary-source records, and they do tell the story of what happened. With an eagle's eye he is quick to spot even the tiniest rivet, button, nail, bullet, piece of wire, or the faint tracings of an inscription left on a rock. He knows the indicators of the trail's presence

like the back of his hand, from over-turned rocks and wagon-rut marks in the bedrock to the "lay-of-the-land" and ephemeral water sources that predict the travel route. His discriminating eye and mind easily differentiate signs of the Butterfield wagon road itself from associated Native American pathways, the rare clues still left on the land from the Spanish period, forty-niner and other emigrant routes, and traces left by later military groups traveling the same pathways.

And the sweet cream topping all of this expertise in trail finding and historical research is Ahnert's smooth, easy-to-read writing style, clearly influenced by his earlier years writing for the *New York Times*. Also making this work a valuable handbook is his ability to organize a wealth of useful information into an easy-to-use format.

The background context of the Overland Mail's route through Arizona is first presented in chapter one, covering earlier Native American use of the same trail system from one mountain range to another in eastern Arizona, and then down the Gila River to Arizona's western edge. This is combined with details of travelers along the same routes during the Spanish and Mexican periods.

In chapters two and three Ahnert moves to an account of how John Butterfield formed the Overland Mail Company, hired his employees, and laid out the route in 1858—the only accurate and definitive account available anywhere. This is followed by a description of the wagons themselves. Here, Ahnert gets it right while almost all previous authors got it wrong. He presents the few primary-source illustrations of the type of wagons used, details about their design and manufacture, and who the stage drivers were.

The real meat of the book (for those interested in exploring the trail itself) follows in chapters four through thirty-two, in which he presents a chapter for each of the twenty-six Butterfield stage stations in Arizona, plus Stein's Peak Stage Station on the east side only one mile into New Mexico, and Jaeger's Stage Station just over the Colorado River from Arizona into California. Every one of these twenty-six chapters gets right to the point in a few pages, describing the stage station and what remains today, along with photographs and useful maps.

In the middle of the book is one additional and very important chapter on the Pima-Maricopa Nation, where Ahnert describes the Native Peoples living in the area of what became the Sacaton, Casa Blanca, and Maricopa Wells stage stations. He very effectively describes the people living there and their largely cordial relationships with stage travelers.

The maps, drawings, photos, and other illustrations throughout the book are outstanding, another key element making this the great book that it is. Three illustrations alone are in themselves worth the price of the book: the map of the twenty-six Arizona stage stations along the trail on page 34, the only known photograph of a Butterfield Celerity wagon on page 42, and Ahnert's own drawing on page 44 of the Celerity wagon used in Arizona that Butterfield had custom-built for the Overland Mail by J. S. & E. A. Abbot Company of Concord, New Hampshire.

Finally, the 578 endnotes in the Literature Cited section document the sources on which this comprehensive history of the Overland Mail in Arizona is based, providing an exceptionally useful tool to learn more about this subject. It is backed up by a bibliography of archival records, newspapers, and published works, and a detailed index.

A final personal comment—a good book review should be a balanced analysis of both the positive and negative. Reviewing the positive about this book was the easy part. A bit harder is identifying the negative. I have come up with only two negative comments: 1) I wish that this book had been published years earlier than 2025 (but that would have been



FINDING THE BUTTERFIELD:
A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME IN
INDIAN TERRITORY
By Susan Dragoo

Norman, Okla.: Dragoo Adventures
Media, 2024


255 pp., maps, illus., notes, index

ISBN 979-8-9909097-0-0

Paper, 6 × 9 in., \$24.95, \$16.99 Kindle

Reviewed by Gerald Ahnert

counter-productive since it is based on and finds its strength in all the research and the trail exploration that Ahnert did over the last fifty-five years), and 2) Ahnert actually knows a lot more about this subject than it was possible for him to present in this volume.

This book is a must-have volume for anyone interested in the Southern Trails, westward emigration in the mid-nineteenth century, and Butterfield's Overland Mail Company. This wagon route and the activities that occurred along it represent an important phase of the history of the western United States, a fact that is underscored by the recent (2023) addition of the 1858–61 Butterfield Trail to the National Historic Trail system, known as the "Butterfield Overland National Historic Trail." 

In January 2023 the entire length of the Butterfield Trail across seven states was designated a National Historic Trail by federal legislation. John Butterfield's Overland Mail Company's 3,000-mile-long trail was the first successful government sanctioned trail to connect the states east of the Mississippi River with the new state of California (1850). The trail passed through Mississippi, Arkansas, Indian Territory (Oklahoma), Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Mexico, and California. Each had its own unique cultural landscape.

Susan Dragoo is a writer and photographer based in Oklahoma. Her work on western history and historical travel has been published in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, *Overland Journal*, *Oklahoma Today*, and other national and regional publications. *Finding the Butterfield: A Journey Through Time in Indian Territory* is the outcome of her researching and exploring the two-hundred-mile-long trail through the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations in present-day southeastern Oklahoma. Ms. Dragoo's book fills in this little-known history and gives the reader an armchair trip along the trail and insight into this pivotal time in the lives of the Choctaw and Chickasaw between removal and the Civil War. Her research builds on and updates the pioneering effort of Roscoe B. and Margaret P. Conkling, who documented the trail in the early 1930s.


The author gives an excellent account of the early history of Fort Smith, Arkansas, as an "essential gateway to the frontier." It was established in 1817 "To quell ongoing violence between the Osage and the Cherokee as pressure grew from Cherokee migration into Osage country." She leads the reader through the intricate path of the settlement in the area that the Butterfield Trail would traverse through Indian Territory. In 1830 President Andrew Jackson gained congressional approval for the Indian Removal Act. This started the removal westward of the Choctaw and Chickasaw farther west into Indian Territory. The roads they built for their new settlements would later be incorporated into the Butterfield Trail.

In Butterfield's "Special Instructions" to his employees, number 18 stated "A good

look-out should be kept for Indians. No intercourse should be had with them, but leave them alone; by no means annoy or wrong them." Despite this instruction, the Choctaw and Chickasaw had to be engaged to get the job done. The Butterfield Trail through the states and territories where owning African slaves was allowed was a tightrope, as the drivers had to wear the political blinders of

neutrality. Dragoo gives a detailed account for the Choctaw and Chickasaw owning African slaves in her section titled "Dog Creek Settlement." Butterfield leased buildings from the Choctaw and Chickasaw to serve as his twelve stage stations in Indian Territory. Fifteen African slaves owned by a Chickasaw served an important function by operating the Red River Ferry, on the border of Indian

Territory and Texas, which Butterfield used for transporting his stages across the river.

Finding the Butterfield: A Journey Through Time in Indian Territory is a welcome addition to the shelf of Butterfield Trail books. It weaves a complete tapestry of positive and productive interaction between the Chickasaw and Choctaw and Butterfield's Overland Mail Company. 



NATIONAL FRONTIER TRAILS MUSEUM

The only museum in the nation certified to interpret the Lewis & Clark, Santa Fe, Oregon, California, and Mormon Pioneer trails.

RESEARCH LIBRARY TRAVEL DIARIES ORIGINAL ARTIFACTS

416 W. Maple Avenue • Independence, MO • (816) 325-7575

INDEPENDENCE
PARKS • RECREATION • TOURISM