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## A Brief Survey of the "OVERLAND" MAIL ROUTE

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(with acknowledgement for valuable assistance to Mr. Chas. Fox).

→ An overland trade route had existed between India and Europe from before the Roman Empire, though it was at this latter period that it was fully developed. From 476 A.D. until the 13th century the trade over this route alternately waxed and waned according to who held power in the intervening territories around Bagdad, Damascus and Cairo. It was as a result of the Crusades that the great revival took place. At that time Damascus and Bagdad were the junctions of the route but the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1483, drove the traffic to Alexandria which continued to be the centre of the Indian trade until the discovery of the route round the Cape of Good Hope.

The first historical attempt to reach England from India by the overland route was in 1777, when the then Governor of Madras, having been imprisoned by his own council, the conflicting parties, wishing to put their cases before the Board in London without loss of time, sent their messengers up the Red Sea, and the Council's messenger, who alone succeeded in the attempt, landed at Tor, in the Gulf of Suez, and crossed Egypt.

After the fall of Pondicherry in 1778, Warren Hastings sent his dispatches by a fast packet to Suez but this led to the Ottoman Porte putting a veto on the use of the Red Sea as a highway for trade between India and Egypt and refusing to allow any ship to come further than Jeddah, though an offer was made to allow messengers to travel by Turkish boat from Jeddah to Suez. This was in 1779. Such a proposition meant so much inevitable delay, the desert route too from Suez to Cairo being so uncertain, that all further thoughts of establishing this as an overland Mail route, were abandoned until 1797, when an agreement was made with the Turkish authorities and the first mail boat was sent to Suez.

From about 1770, however, boats of the Indian Navy had commenced carrying mail between Bombay and Basra, on the alternative overland route, whence it was taken by dromedary to Aleppo and thence by horse to Constantinople. And this was established by government in 1798.

Two mails were sent by each dispatch, one by Bagdad and one by Aleppo, but the rates of postage were extraordinarily high. The maximum size of a letter was 4in. × 2in. and only unsealed letters which had obtained the permission of the Secretary to the Government were permitted. Postage had to be prepaid at the rate of 10 rupees for a single letter weighing  $\frac{1}{4}$  rupee and 15 rupees for letters weighing up to  $\frac{1}{2}$  rupee with a maximum of 20 rupees for a letter weighing one rupee.

This route was finally closed early in the 19th century (1833) when the increase of piracy in the Persian Gulf and the Shat-el-Arab made it no longer safe and the mails were then landed at Basra and passed on through Bagdad and via Damascus and Beyrouth to Egypt. Even the mails from India by Bushire had to be diverted through Teheran and Alexandria, or, alternatively, by naval cruisers, via Cosseir on the Red Sea and Cairo.

The first attempt to establish a mail route between Bombay and Egypt was when the 'Enterprise' was put on the run to the Red Sea for a mail to be conveyed via the Isthmus of Suez and the Mediterranean in 1826. But this service languished till 1830. The credit of establishing the Suez route belongs, of course, to Lieut. Waghorn of the East India Cos. Navy.

Before this service was charted out, Lieut. Waghorn made a trial trip. Leaving London on Oct. 28th, 1829, he went via Dover, Boulogne, Paris, Milan, Trieste, Alexandria, Rosetta, Cairo, Suez, Cosseir and Jeddah and reached Bombay on Mar. 21st, 1830. He carried a courier's passport and made a quick journey across Europe but at Trieste missed the boat and had to charter a Spanish vessel for the trip to Alexandria. On his arrival at Suez, after waiting several days for the Indian steamer which had not arrived, he took a small boat down the coast. On these accounts the trip took 42 days more than had been planned.

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Errata

page 10, Line 6. Read "1453" for "1483".

Waghorn deserves considerable credit. He was appointed a Naval Lieutenant at the age of 17 and had only seen 10 years service by 1830.

Waghorn now announced his plans for transporting the mails across Egypt, and the first trial was made in 1835 when he sent out the following circular letter—

"I write to inform you, and other business men having relations with India, that I am leaving England the fifth, and Falmouth the eighth of February, by the postal steamer for Malta. On arriving there, I shall leave for Alexandria, thence by land to Suez, thence down the Red Sea and hope to arrive at Bombay 70 days after leaving England. On this occasion I shall take charge of any letters given me, at 5/0 each. I shall be happy to accept all letters which your company or your friends wish to send by this rapid route. I shall return to England in November and in all probability I shall travel this route each year in February so that once a year you can count on rapid communication with India, on condition however, that a steamer postal service is not established with India." January 8, 1835.

The first contract relating to postal transportation is one dated August 22, 1837, and is between the P. & O. Company and the British government. In this contract the P. & O. agrees to carry British mails "through Egypt via the Nile, and across the land to Suez, while vessels of the East India Co.'s navy conveyed the mail from Suez to Bombay.

Steamers were used on the Nile, following the plans of Waghorn, and the first regular service between Southampton and Calcutta took place September 24, 1842.

On this route, passengers and mail, leaving Alexandria, were placed on barges, drawn by small steamers, and taken along the Mahmoudieh Canal to Atfeh. Here they were transferred to larger steamers which ascended the Nile to Cairo, stopping at Boulac. Here passengers remained overnight and then started across the desert to Suez. Several stations or stops were established along the overland route, where passengers might pass the night if necessary. On arrival at Suez a ship was waiting to convey them through the Red Sea to India.

The following description is given by a traveller who made the trip from Suez to Alexandria in 1841. "The passengers, arriving from India, left Suez about noon on Dec. 19, a party of less than 200, with almost as many camels, horses and donkeys. The passengers had a wide choice of transportation: horses, camels, donkeys, a sort of sedan chair, or the so-called carriages with two wheels, drawn by two horses and a camel. An escort of 20 of the Pasha's cavalry accompanied the caravan and all the men of the party carried weapons. Gentlemen were requested to dress in the costume of brigands in order to disguise the peaceful character of the caravan and deceive possible robbers. At eight in the evening the party reached station No. 6 and the next morning started on, reaching the centre station at 2:00 P.M. After some discussion concerning the advisability of going on, due to fear of the Bedouins, the party went on, arriving at station No. 2 at midnight. After passing the night there they went on in the morning and reached Cairo shortly before noon of the 21st., having been almost 48 hrs. on the road."

"At 7:00 A.M. on the morning of the 22nd, the party left the port of Boulac, two miles from Cairo, on the steamer 'Jack-o-Lantern', bound from Alexandria. The nine passengers carried on this steamer made almost a full load, for it was said to be of only six horsepower and drew only a few inches of water. The trip continued during the night but the boat ran aground the next morning and five hours were required to extricate it. Because of this the trip from Cairo to Atfeh took 30 hours, when 24 was the usual time. At Atfeh the passengers transferred to canal boats on the Mahmoudieh Canal. These boats were pulled by horses and a great deal of time was lost on the trip because of the necessity of raising the tow rope over every boat passed. The trip on the canal took 12 hours and on leaving the boats, the passengers found camels and donkeys ready to take them to Alexandria, two miles away. Unfortunately, they arrived after midnight and the city gates were closed and could not be opened due to the very strict regulations in force. The passengers had therefore to go to a 'low place of entertainment' in the suburbs where they passed the night, being admitted to the city when the gates were opened at sunrise."

A statement given out by the P. & O. Company (about 1841) gives further details of the route. According to this, mails were forwarded from Alexandria to Cairo by donkey, the time being from 40 to 48 hours. An hour or two were required at Cairo for transfer and the mail was then sent on by dromedaries to Suez, the time being 16 to 20 hours. The average time of transport was put at 64 hours. The steamer for India was required to remain at Suez for 24 hours after the arrival of the mail for passengers, who took more time, so that the actual time of transit was about 88 hours.

*To be continued*

The following details refer to passenger traffic :—The first stage of 48 miles, through the Mahmoudieh Canal, was made on board canal boats, about 60 feet long and 7 feet wide, equipped with deck cabins. Relays of horses were provided at seven points along the Canal and the trip usually took 8 to 12 hours. The second stage, from Atfeh to Cairo, was 120 miles long. At Atfeh passengers were transferred to either the '*Cairo*' or the '*Lotus*', the two steamers of the Company, for the trip up the Nile. The '*Lotus*' was 89 feet long and 12 feet wide and being the less powerful of the two was usually stationed at Boulac to make the trip down the Nile with the current. The '*Cairo*' was 100 feet long and 14 feet wide and had a speed of 12 miles per hour on *smooth* water; this boat was usually stationed at Atfeh for the trip up the Nile. The '*Jack-o-Lantern*' was the property of Messrs. Raven & Hill; they owned a hotel in Suez and evidently transported some of the passengers, probably those who had not paid the P. & O. Company in advance for this portion of the route.

On arrival at Boulac, passengers were transferred to Cairo, whence they usually stayed at the Great Eastern Hotel until the caravan was ready. The luggage was sent on ahead and the passengers followed later on. Along the desert route there were seven stations: No. 1, 9 miles from Cairo; No. 2, 20 miles from Cairo; No. 3, 30 miles from Cairo; No. 4, the centre station, 41 miles from Cairo; No. 5, 30 miles from Suez; No. 6, 20 miles from Suez; No. 7, 9 miles from Suez. Each of these stations contained one or more rest rooms, some had private rooms and stables, and the centre station had several bed rooms. At Suez there were two hotels, one of which was owned by Waghorn.

Here it may be of interest to add a few notes on the Postal Routes to India at this period, 1841-42, from Parbury's "Handbook for India and Egypt" (London 1842).

#### POSTAL ROUTES, ENGLAND TO INDIA, 1841-1842.

The P. & O. steamers, '*Great Liverpool*' and '*Oriental*' were in service between Southampton and Alexandria. One or the other of these ships left Southampton on the first of the month, picking up the Indian mails at Falmouth about 24 hours later. According to the Government mail contract, the following schedule had to be maintained:

<b>Falmouth to Gibraltar,</b>	<b>120 hours;</b>	<b>stop at</b>	<b>Gibraltar</b>	<b>6 hours.</b>
<b>Gibraltar to Malta</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>" "</b>	<b>Malta</b>	<b>26 hours.</b>
<b>Malta to Alexandria</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>" "</b>		

Return voyage:

<b>Alexandria to Malta</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>" "</b>	<b>Malta</b>	<b>24 hours.</b>
<b>Malta to Gibraltar</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>" "</b>	<b>Gibraltar</b>	<b>12 hours.</b>
<b>Gibraltar to Falmouth</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>" "</b>		

Passengers desiring to go across France might take either of two routes: 1. From Paris to Marseilles via Châlons and Lyons, requiring 84 hours; 2. By the '*Malle-Poste*' from Paris via Moulins, St. Etienne, etc., to Marseilles in 66 hours. At Marseilles they could take a British steamer which waited there for the London mails of the 4th. of the month and which met the P. & O. steamer at Malta.

French packets left Marseilles for Malta on the 1st., 11th. and 21st. of the month, going via Livorno, Civita Vecchia, and Naples. Passengers could take these packets to Malta, changing there to a steamer for Syra, and at Syra taking the steamer from Athens to Alexandria the total time from Marseilles to Alexandria being 341 hours.

According to a contemporary statement of the P. & O. Company, the mails across Egypt followed this schedule:

From Alexandria to Cairo, by donkey,	40-48 hours.
Transfer at Cairo	1-2 "
Cairo to Suez, by dromedary	16-20 "
Average time of transit	64 "

The steamer for India was required to remain at Suez for 24 hours after receipt of the mails, to give ample time for the arrival of passengers, so that the actual time of mail transit was, on the average, 88 hours.

## 1842 ONWARDS.

Until 1842 the Suez-India route was almost entirely controlled by the Bombay Steam Navigation Co., the route being Suez, Kosseir, Jedda, Mocha, Aden, Bombay. In that year the Company had a fleet of nine ships: '*Victoria*' (built in Bombay 1840), '*Atalanta*', '*Cleopatra*', '*Berenice*', '*Zenobia*', those most generally used for the route, and the older '*Hugh Lindsay*', '*Sesostris*', '*Auckland*', and '*Semiramis*'. The steamers usually arrived at Suez on the 19th of the month and the trip to India averaged 18 days. A small steamship, the '*Seaforth*', left Bombay after the arrival of the Suez steamer, with mails for Ceylon and Mangalore (Malabar coast) whence passengers could go overland to Calcutta or Madras.

The S.S. *India*, of the Calcutta India Steam Co. made her first voyage from Calcutta to Suez in 1842, the route being Calcutta, Madras, Ceylon, Aden, Suez. She was, at that time, the best and fastest ship on the route.

The S.S. *Hindustan*, of the P. & O. line, was launched at Liverpool April 26, 1842, and was advertised to sail in September, so as to make her first voyage from Calcutta to Suez in December. The S.S. *Bentinck* was to be launched in September of that year and was also for the Suez-India route. The S.S. *Precursor* was, about June 1842, in the East India Docks and was also destined for the Suez-India route.

The S.S. *Colombo*, with mails for Suez, generally left Calcutta about the first of the year, touching at Madras and many other points before proceeding to Suez, so that the voyage seldom took less than two and a half months.

## POSTAL RATES.

Postal rates from Egypt to England were (1842): via Marseilles, 1/8; via Falmouth, 2/5. From India to Falmouth the rate was 1/-.

According to the statement of the P. & O. Company important changes were to be made in the administration of the route, especially in the part from Cairo to Suez, which was to be placed under the control of a subsidiary company, to be called the Egyptian Oriental Transit Co. The stations along this part of the route were built with funds furnished by the Bombay Steam Committee and were to come under the control of the P. & O. Co. in 1843. It was reported that Mohammed Ali was jealous of this new arrangement and opposed the building of additional stations for relays of horses.

This opposition seems to have been successful for in 1846 the land route from Cairo to Suez came under the control of the Egyptian government and a special administration (Merour) was created to carry on this work.

In 1844 a contract for five years was given to the P. & O. to establish a regular mail service in the Indian Seas, which service was subsidised. This contract was subsequently extended and in Jan. 1853 a fresh contract was concluded with the same Company for a fortnightly service between England, India and China. In the middle of 1854 a supplementary contract was made for the conveyance of mails between Southampton and Bombay through Alexandria, by which way the time of transit was reduced to 28 days.

## COMPLETION OF THE RAILROAD.

In 1855 the railroad from Alexandria had reached Kafr Zayat and mails were carried to this point by rail and thence despatched as before. In 1856 the railroad reached Cairo and in 1858 the line from Cairo to Suez was completed. This line was abandoned in 1868 on the completion of the railroad from Alexandria to Suez via Zagazig.

The Suez Canal was opened in 1869, but owing to difficulties with the British Government it was not used for the passage of mail steamers for many years.

In 1862 mails ran every 6 weeks from Bombay to Basra by the British India Steam Navigation Co. and the Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Co. ran them through from Basra to Bagdad.

During 1867-69 the port for reception and despatch of mails was Marseilles, but in 1869 arrangements were made for the substitution of Brindisi for Marseilles on the completion of the Mont Cenis Tunnel and railway and Brindisi remained the port until the Great War.

In 1880 the Southampton route was finally abolished and the contract for a weekly service stipulated for a transit time of 17½ days between London and Bombay via Alexandria and Suez. It was not until 1888 that the mails were sent by the Suez Canal instead of by rail across Egypt.

That is a brief outline of the sequence of events without any mention of Postal Markings of Waghorn, the various French Mail boats that have carried Mail and have connected up with our service or any of the other little problems of Postal History which are still to be solved and illustrated and if, we have to some extent dwelt as much on the more northerly overland routes and the Posts of India as of the concerns of Egypt in the matter, it must be remembered that, had it not been for the necessities of the East India Co., there would have been no overland mail and Egypt would not so early have entered into the picture or have attained so great an importance in Postal History and, after all, each branch of the subject sketched is only a part of the greater whole.