

Tom's Tombstone Travels: Silas St. John

St. John was born in the state of New York on April 21, 1835, to James and Hannah (Brown) St. John. According to Ancestry.com he married Julia A. Cook on April 19, 1861, and Marian (Mary) Cecilia Magee in 1874. Each of his wives gave birth to three boys and two girls.

In 1853, he and some companions were headed for Council Bluffs, Iowa, where they intended to fit themselves for a trip to the Pacific coast. Their first steamboat out of St. Louis was wrecked. They transferred to another boat which was also soon disabled. The third boat, just before it reached Lexington, Missouri, lost its ability to steer, drifted against the shore and nearly broke in two. They abandoned Council Bluffs as a destination and in Wellington, Missouri, outfitted for a cross country land trip to California. The usual hardships in such a journey were experienced, but they arrived safely in California.

In 1857, St. John helped lay out and manage the first government mail stage route in the United States. The route was from San Diego, California, to San Antonio, Texas, the entire distance being through an unsettled country and the greater portion of it an arid desert. The route followed very closely to the route taken by Colonel Philip St. George Cooke when he led the Mormon Battalion across Arizona during the Mexican War.

This, the first mail route contract made by the United States government, was controlled by James E. Birch, president of the California Stage Company. The contract called for the carrying of the mails twice a month, the consideration being \$149,000 a year. On the first run St. John also carried the mail on horseback for the second stage of the run. This was a distance of 110 miles that terminated at Fort Yuma. He was in the saddle for 32 straight hours without water.

In 1858, the government contracted with Wells, Butterfield & Company for a semi-weekly mail route from Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco and San Diego. The two were to converge in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The contract for carrying the mail over this route was to be for \$600,000 per annum. The firm then merged with the previous route owned by Birch and became the Overland Mail Company. The service increased to a daily mail run for a per annum contract of \$1,200,000. Young St. John, now about 23 years old, was again engaged to lay out the route for the new company.

In August, 1858, St. John and a crew were building the stage stations along the route between the Rio Grande River and Tucson, Arizona. One of the stations was to be at Dragoon Springs, located right in the heart of the Chiricahua Apache homeland and just a few miles away from Cochise's Stronghold in the Dragoon Mountains. Because of the proximity to the Apaches, a very strong station was to be built. First, they built a stone corral of 45 feet by 55 feet and 10 feet high. After the wall and gate were completed, St. John, with six assistants remained behind to complete the stage station within the confines of the corral. His crew consisted of the company blacksmith, James Hughes of Watertown, New York, James Laing of Kentucky, and William Cunningham of Iowa. There were three Mexican laborers, Guadalupe and Pablo Ramirez of Sonora, Mexico and Bonifacio Miranda of Chihuahua, Mexico.

Wednesday, September 8, 1858, was a clear starlit night with no moon. Laing was on watch for the first part of the night and around midnight St. John was up and posting Guadalupe as the guard for the rest of the night. The other two Mexicans slept outside the walls, as did Hughes who preferred to be away from all the animals inside the walls. Around one o'clock in the morning, St. John was aroused by a disturbance among the animals. He then heard a low whistle which he interpreted to be a signal and simultaneously there was a sound of blows and feeble outcries for the men on either side of him. He sprang to his feet and was confronted by the three Mexicans, Guadalupe with a broad axe, Bonifacio with a chopping axe and Pablo with a stone sledge and all three were striking at him.

St. John managed to dispose of Pablo with a well-placed kick. He managed to parry the blow from Bonifacio's axe directed at his head, but it caused the axe to strike him in the thigh, cutting to the bone. Guadalupe managed a blow to St. John's left arm that severed the bone and left his arm connected only by a piece of skin. St. John managed to reach his pistol and fired one shot, apparently to no affect other than to cause the three to flee. They were never heard from again.

St. John bound up his wounds as best he could, climbed upon a pile of barley sacks where he could get a view over the wall and waited for daylight. He could hear two of his companions moaning through the remainder of the night. When it was light enough to see he discovered Cunningham alive with three cuts to his head from an axe. Laing had one wound to the top of his head which severed the skull and allowed the brain to protrude. He was still alive and partially conscious. Hughes' head had been completely crushed by the stone sledge and apparently died instantaneously.

St. John managed to get a tourniquet around his arm using a handkerchief, stone and stick. The bleeding of the hip was more difficult to manage, but he learned that by keeping still the blood coagulated and stopped hemorrhaging. All day Thursday, he had to endure the moaning of his friend while he was helpless to help. There was no water in the corral and he was feverish and suffering with thirst. Thursday night the coyotes were attracted by the smell and their howling created pandemonium among the hungry mules inside the corral. Around midnight he heard Cunningham's death rattle. During the days he had to contend with buzzards, crows and magpies. At night it was the coyotes and by Saturday night the wolves were bold enough to attack Hughes' body. An occasional pistol shot was usually enough to keep most of the predators at bay and out of the corral.

Relief finally showed up Sunday morning when some travelers approached the station. Seeing no signs of life they were fearful of an ambush. After slowly approaching the station, they discovered bloody aftermath of the attack. There were some Army officer and some veterans in the party and they were able to render aid to St. John. They buried Hughes and Cunningham in a single grave. Laing clung to life, but nothing could be done for him and he died on Monday.

A crew was dispatched for Fort Buchanan which they reached on Wednesday. Assistant Surgeon B. J. D. Irwin started at once for the Dragoons and he reached St. John on Friday morning—the ninth day after the wounding of St. John. The arm was amputated at the socket. Six days later, St. John got into a wagon and rode to the fort. Five days later was able to walk about, and twenty-one days after the operation he mounted a horse and rode to Tucson.



He was later connected to the building of the first railroad in California, from Sacramento to Folsom. He was active in the oil fields of West Virginia. He was in several railroad accidents and escaped serious injury while people around him were killed. He was in the mining business in Colorado. For several years he owned and edited the Expressman of New York, a monthly devoted to the interest of express companies.

In 1888 tumors formed at the nerve endings in the stump of his arm causing the left side of his body to be paralyzed. An operation in New York was successful and the paralysis disappeared. He died in San Diego, California on September 15, 1919 and is buried there in the Mount Hope Cemetery.



The plaque at the right was stolen from St. John's headstone and later recovered and presented to the Wells Fargo Museum in San Diego who will return it to its proper place. A special thanks to William "Casey" Gill of the museum for the plaque photo.

The plaque reads: **SILAS ST. JOHN CARRIED THE FIRST EASTBOUND OVERLAND MAIL OUT OF SAN DIEGO, FROM CARRIZO CREEK TO FORT YUMA NOV, 16, 1857. ON SEPT. 9, 1858, IN A LONE-HANDED DEFENSE OF THE BUTTERFIELD-WELLS FARGO OVERLAND STAGE STATION AT DRAGOON, ARIZ., ST. JOHN WAS HORRIBLY WOUNDED AND LOST HIS LEFT ARM. HE RECOVERED TO CONTINUE IN WELLS FARGO SERVICE.**

OF HIS STUFF THE WEST WAS MADE.