

The Federal Road

~ Traffic ~

“Over this route passed post riders for remote New Orleans, militiamen to reinforce forts, stagecoaches bearing European travelers and touring theatrical companies, Aaron Burr under arrest, freight wagons, the maverick evangelist Lorenzo Dow and Peggy (his sensible wife), the horses of highwaymen, the Marquis de Lafayette in a grand entourage, Creeks taking a last look at what had been their lands, and, of course, thousands of pioneers seeking a fresh start. The chances are good that all who trace their ancestry to anywhere in Alabama south of the Tennessee Valley have a forebear who came over the Federal Road.”

-- Henry deLeon Southerland, Jr., and Jerry Elijah Brown, *The Federal Road through Georgia, the Creek Nation, and Alabama, 1806-1836*.

The *Federal Road* began in 1806 as a postal road. The Creeks by that time had given permission for the development of a horse path through their nation, its purpose being a more efficient mail delivery between Washington City and New Orleans. Congress appropriated \$6,400 on April 21, 1806, authorizing the President Jefferson to open a road from the Indian frontier near Athens to New Orleans.

Under the 1805 Treaty of Washington, the Creeks were allowed to provide “houses of entertainment” to accommodate travelers. After the erection of forts during the Creek War, more “stands” were created, usually near the forts. These became stagecoach stops, relay points for postal riders, inns and taverns, situated about 16 miles apart which was considered an average day’s travel for foot traffic.

In 1811, fearing war with the British, the government widened and rerouted the mail path in order to create a military road for the movement of troops, supply wagons, and ordnance. Ironically, although its construction looked toward a war with the British, it was a major cause of the Creek Indian War of 1813-14, and then to the removal of the Indians to the West.

Next, it became a major pioneer highway. Although the Mississippi Territory was created in 1798, only a handful of pioneers settled there before 1810. Migration into the territory was slow in part due to the presence of the powerful Creek and Cherokee tribes in western Georgia and the Choctaw and Chickasaw in Alabama and Mississippi. Pioneers came in hordes by 1820. They walked; they hauled their worldly goods in hogsheads fitted with trunnions and axles so that the whole barrel could be pulled by horses or oxen or by hand. They used a variety of vehicles, from light carriages to crude wagons. And they shared the road with stagecoaches.

~ Features ~

The *Federal Road* as a Postal Path

The Congressional appropriation in 1806 specified that brush was to be cleared to a width of 4 feet. Trees which had fallen across the paths were to be cut away. Causeways across the swampy bogs were to be made of logs 5 feet long, and logs were to be laid across the creeks. Projections on mileage were that the distance from Washington City to New Orleans would be 1,152 miles--320 miles shorter than the route over the Natchez Trace and a gain of ten days with the new route. As it turned out, the Post Office Department eventually returned to using the Natchez Trace as its main route, having found the *Federal Road* shorter route impractical because of the many streams without bridges or ferries.

The *Federal Road* as a Military Road

“The road built by the military was intended to be sufficient for moving supply wagons, cannons, and men on horse and foot. The type of construction was similar to other military roads connecting Nashville, Natchez, and other critical locations in the West.” It was not to exceed 16 feet in width. And not more than 8 feet of the 16 was to be cut close to the ground and smoothed for passengers. Swamps and streams were to be causewayed and bridged.

-- Henry deLeon Southerland, Jr., and Jerry Elijah Brown, *The Federal Road through Georgia, the Creek Nation, and Alabama, 1806-1836*.

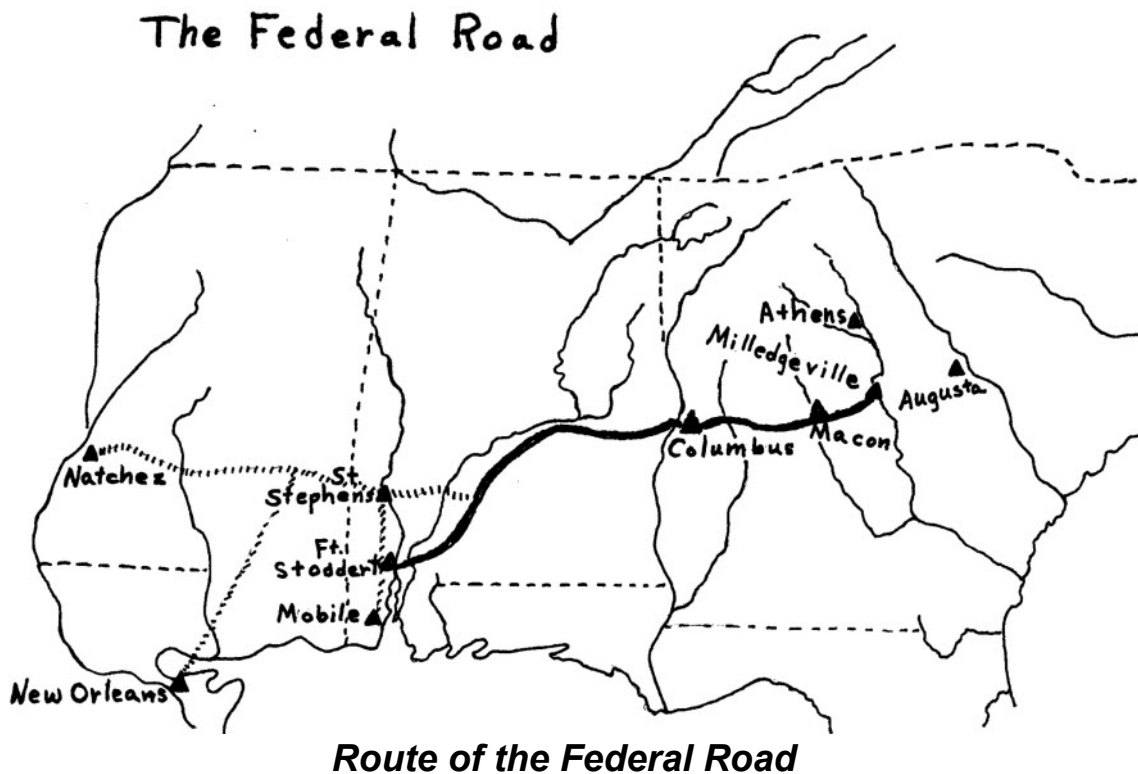
The *Federal Road* as a Pioneer Road

The road often climbed sandy ridges and rambled. Once vegetation was removed from the surface of these sandy loam, the land eroded rapid, especially on the slopes. On up or down grades, the pressure of the horses’ hooves and the iron bands on the wagon wheels disturbed the soil even more. Gullies were visible everywhere. Repair costs were extremely high. Laws put the burden of maintaining highways, bridges, and ferries on to private citizens. Roads were to be 20 feet wide, bridges and causeways 12 feet, and stumps were “not to exceed six inches above the ground, and pared round the edges.” By Mississippi Territory statute, free males and all male slaves between ages 16 and 50 could be required to work on at least one road for up to 6 days a year, using privately owned tools. When Alabama became a separate territory in 1817, the requirements were expanded.

By 1820, two hundred and thirty thousand immigrants, both black and white, were living in Alabama and Mississippi, raising cotton or erecting stores, warehouses, and homes. Some of these settlers had come by boat, but most had made the tedious trip over the *Federal Road*.

~ Timeline: The Federal Road ~

- 1806 With permission from the Creeks Indians, the *Federal Road* began as a postal road.
- 1811 The *Federal Road* was widened and improved when conflicts with the French had reached a point where it seemed necessary to be able to move troops and supplies quickly across the Mississippi Territory.
- 1813 The Creek Indian War of 1813-14 was followed by the removal of the Indians to the West.
- 1820 By this date, two hundred and thirty thousand immigrants, both black and white, were living in Alabama and Mississippi, raising cotton or erecting stores, warehouses, and homes.
- 1836 When the power of the Creek Nation was broken, alternate transportation routes were inevitable.
- 1840s With the advent of railroads, a traveler could cross the lower South entirely by steam power--from Charleston to Brunswick, Georgia, by steamboat, by rail to St. Marks, Florida, by steamboat to Mobile through the inner passage.
- 1850s The advent of the telegraph in the area relieved much of the pressure for fast military and governmental communications and also reduced the role of the Federal Road as a postal route.



The major arteries of the East and North had connections that led to the *Federal Road*. Traders and light travelers from the North came down the *Upper Road* through the Piedmont into Georgia, then traveled over the postal horse path which had opened in 1806, through Athens, Watkinsville, and High Shoals, to meet the *Federal Road* at Columbus, Georgia.

Many others used the somewhat easier *Fall Line Road* and then met the *Federal Road*, traveling through Georgia, from Augusta and through Warrenton, Sparta, Milledgeville, and Macon before reaching Columbus.

A portion of the Federal Horse Path to New Orleans ran through the West Florida panhandle, an area for which ownership was disputed by the Spanish and U.S. Governments. The alternate route to New Orleans was to travel past St. Stephens on the road to Natchez, then southwest to New Orleans. During the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson's troops constructed a new road from New Orleans north to the Tombigbee River. This provided a more direct route to Nashville. After the war, that road became an important migration route into the Mississippi Valley from Tennessee and Kentucky.