THE WAR ROAD

The likelihood of a war with the British and the certainty that an attack would occur somewhere on the central Gulf coast had by 1809 redirected attention to the need for a land route across the Mississippi Territory. In the waning months of Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, two thousand men were sent by sea to Gen. James Wilkinson at New Orleans. Before James Madison had been in office a year, half of that number were dead, killed by sickness, and Wilkinson was relieved of his command for refusing to obey a direct order from the secretary of war to move most of his fever-plagued troops to higher ground. Wilkinson, who had survived his association with Aaron Burr, was later court-martialed for insubordination and acquitted, a verdict President Madison signed “with regret.” Under the new commander, Brig. Gen. Wade Hampton, steps were taken to bolster defense and prepare for the coming confrontation. If the men and supplies were to be moved overland to reinforce the Gulf coast between the Apalachicola and the Sabine rivers, of immediate necessity was a military road.

On June 23, 1810, Secretary of War William Eustis directed Col. Richard Sparks, the commanding officer at Fort Stoddert, to order Capt. Edmund P. Gaines, the same officer who had sent a subordinate to inspect Wheaton’s horse path, to take noncommissioned officers and privates on an exploration of the country along the ridge between the Tuscaloosa, later called the Black Warrior River, and the Coosa River, to the “Highwassee,” then up, across, and down the Connsauga, Coosa, and Alabama rivers. (Earlier maps had shown that the Highwassee, also spelled Hiwassee and Hawassee, was much farther west and south of its actual location, in southeast Tennessee near Chattanooga. The Connsauga is a small stream, a tributary of the Coosa near its headwaters in northwest Georgia.)
Sparks was also ordered to send out a second party, east by Indian trails eventually to join Gaines's party at the Highwassee. Both parties were to return to Fort Stoddert by way of the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers, completing a circuit generally across and down present-day Alabama. Each party was to keep a journal of daily progress, distances, soil, timber, water, and other remarks on the character of the country.

The action of the second party was to prove of great significance. Its commander, 1st Lt. John Roger Nelson Luckett of the Second U.S. Infantry, undertook what is probably the first simple, one-line or center-line survey for road construction in Alabama. Beginning on September 12, 1810, at a red oak on the east bank of the Tensaw River, about fifteen miles from the fort, Luckett made a careful survey, marking each mile by carving Roman numerals on a tree. (Since his use of these numbers did not include the usual contractions, even the V for five, the ninety-ninth mile-post tree was inscribed "LXXXXIII".) In particular, Luckett was charged with laying out the road from the Tensaw, northeast to the junction of the Coosa and the Tallapoosa. In addition to charting a line northeast from Fort Stoddert, Luckett prepared a "brief delineation," an account which offers more insight into how the Creek country appeared to a Maryland native who had already seen the territorial lands as far as Natchitoches, where he had gone in 1806 with other U.S. troops to confront the Spaniards at the Sabine River.

Although Luckett acknowledged that he was traveling during a dry season—a providential blessing, considering other accounts—he noted the presence of many springs of pure, good, and transparent water. The hardwoods he mentioned—Spanish oak, white oak, black oak, post oak, beech, sycamore, and chestnut—were standing in their virgin state. At the 114th mile-post tree, he took note of an "extensive cane brake," which would serve as important forage for horses. But his overall view was of a land of "Sterile Sandy Soil" in "Pine Woods Land," where the only fertile or better quality soil lay along the small watercourses, precisely where the white people would want to settle. He found grass in abundance, "a circumstance favorable to the raising of large Herds of Cattle."
Gaines's party never met Luckett's; after proceeding 125 miles from St. Stephens over country that would "admit of a good road," Gaines was surrounded by a large body of Creeks and was forced to return to Fort Stoddert. At Pintlala Creek (also called in various accounts Palawla, Palaula, Pintlas, and Manack's Creek), at "7 Chains 126 Miles," Luckett also stopped. His account does not mention an encounter with the Indians, but that is probably why he returned. In a letter to the secretary of war dated July 2, 1811, Luckett said, "You are apprized of the circumstance which opposed the fulfilling of the objects comprehended on this Order," which probably means that the officials knew the operation was covert and did not want mention made of contact with the Indians. The party of soldier-surveyors was, in fact, on the edge of the territory of the Upper Creeks, near the Hickory Ground, at a time when hostilities were increasing. Whatever the reason, Luckett returned to Fort Stoddert. He had two assignments to Baton Rouge and spent the remaining thirty months of his life attached to the fort on the Mobile River. According to military records, Capt. J. R. N. Luckett died there on May 5, 1813, less than three months before the first formal battle with the Creeks.

Although Luckett's effort might be the single most important contribution by one man to the Federal Road, he and the soldiers under his command did not build it, as some earlier histories claim. On July 11, 1811, General Hampton was directed by his superiors in Washington to begin without delay the construction of three wagon roads. The first of these roads Captain Gaines had been ordered to survey earlier, from the Tennessee River to Fort Stoddert; the second, which became the Federal Road, was described as running "from Fort Stoddert to Colonel Hawkins' place on the Flint River"; and the third, from Fort Stoddert to Baton Rouge. Preliminary work on this third road, from the Mobile River to New Orleans, had already been done under the authority of Judge Harry Toulmin. He had been requested by the postmaster general on April 25, 1806, to take charge of cutting a horse path west from Fort Stoddert to intersect with a road from Pinckneyville on the Mississippi to the Pearl River. Five years later, a more direct route to New Orleans still was not possible because of the Spanish presence in West Florida, who regarded the thirty-first parallel, running about six miles below Fort
Stoddert—a projection into lower Mississippi of the line that became the straight, southern boundary of the state of Alabama and of the state of Mississippi—as inviolable by the Americans.

The orders issued from Fort Stoddert in July 1811 included one historically significant proviso: “Give to the Creeks the necessary information and explanations—the United States must have roads for the purpose of transporting their Ordnance and military stores from one military post to another, as occasion may require.” This notice was to be given to the Indians, and the soldiers were to treat them kindly. There is little evidence that this attitude of the Americans—if it was expressed—was a palliative to the more hostile Creeks; in fact, the presence of Luckett and other soldiers, as opposed to post riders, traders, or Indian agents, must have had the opposite effect. Hawkins himself was blunt after attempting diplomacy. At a special meeting in September 1811, the Creek council, including deputations from the Choctaws, Cherokees, and Shawnees, gathered at Tuckabatchee to discuss the road. At the end of the three days of debate, permission was denied. According to a Savannah newspaper report, “Hawkins, at length, told them he did not come there to ask their permission to open a road but merely to inform them it was now cutting.”

Regardless of the clouds gathering over the Creek Nation, the military road from Georgia to Fort Stoddert was opened in November of 1811. The effort by the U.S. Army provided an occasion for Josiah Blakeley to remark on the spectacle of soldiers at work. A native of Connecticut, Blakeley came to Mobile in 1806, bought what is now called (and spelled) Blakely Island in 1807, and in 1813 founded the now-defunct town of Blakely on the Tensaw River, south of Fort Mims. Writing from the Mobile District on February 12, 1812, he said, “During this last winter the United States army, which had long been wholly idle in this country, has made roads and bridges ... from Fort Stoddert to the State of Georgia.” Meager military records list some of the personnel involved in the various road-building efforts. The applicable “Register of Officers” shows, among other entries:

**Capt. Matthew Arbuckle**, September 25, 1811, cutting a road to Georgia;

**1st Lt. William F. Ware**, September 25, 1811, cutting a road to Georgia;
STATE OF GEORGIA.

By his Excellency David B. Mitchell
Governor and Commander in Chief of the Army
and Navy of this State and of the Militia thereof.

To all to whom these presents shall come, or whom the same may concern. Greetings.

KNOW YE, that the bearer hereof

is granted permission to travel through the

Creek Nation. They shall take special care to conduct themselves peaceably towards the Indians, and agreeably to the laws of the United States.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Executive Seal of the State to be affixed thereto.

Done at the State-House in Milledgeville, the __ day of ___, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ___ of the Independence of the United States of America the thirty__th.

By the Governor.

James Mathews

PASSPORT THROUGH THE CREEK NATION

This Georgia passport was signed by David B. Mitchell, the governor of the state, whose name was given to the Federal Road fort on the west bank of the Chattahoochee. The document gave Messrs. Isaac Jackson and Lawrence Moore, from Anson County, North Carolina, permission to pass through the Creek Nation. Such passports were often issued to traders seeking state approval for dealing with the Indians. (Reprinted, by permission, from Dorothy Williams Potter, Passports of Southeastern Pioneers. [Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1982].)
2d Lt. Evert Bogardus, September 25, 1811, cutting a road to Georgia;
Capt. Edmund P. Gaines, September 15, 1811, designating a road to Baton Rouge;
Capt. William Lawrence, October 18, 1811, opening a road to Tennessee (along with 1st Lt. Robert Peyton, 2d Lt. Robert Cherry, and 2d Lt. Hezekiah Bradley, November 10, 1811).

Col. Leonard Covington was detached for duty with Captain Arbuckle's and Wilkinson's companies on September 29, 1811, and with Captain Campbell's and Lawrence's companies on October 28, 1811, evidently inspecting and supervising the road construction to Georgia and to Tennessee. From this list it appears that Captain Arbuckle was in command of the troops and responsible for "cutting the road to Georgia," in part along the route previously surveyed by Luckett, and was under the general supervision of Colonel Covington.

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. A recommendation from Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to Wilkinson in New Orleans in 1803 outlined general specifications, with a special order relating to the watercourses. According to Dearborn a military road should be opened "not exceeding sixteen feet in width and not more than eight feet of the sixteen to be cut close to the ground, and smoothed for passengers.... The great object is to have a comfortable road for horses and foot passengers, and instead of the expense of cutting a wide road, it is more important that the swamps and streams should be causewayed and bridged." The water hazard was also recognized in a law passed by the Mississippi territorial legislature on March 1, 1805. It stipulated that public roads should be at least twenty feet wide, causeways at least twelve feet wide with a drain on each side, bridges twelve feet wide, and all tree stumps cut within six inches of the ground.

The overriding irony of the military road building is that, although it looked toward one war, it was the major cause of another. To be sure, the problems with the Creeks had a long foreground, as several histories have detailed. Although the Federal Road sparked the Creek
War of 1813–14, the root of the conflict involved a clash between two incompatible cultures. Even Hawkins's efforts to civilize the Indians, to encourage them to grow cotton and to teach them crafts, increased the hostility by creating a division between nativist Creeks, who wanted to practice the old way of life, and those attracted to the new. A century of trading, intermarriages, and treaties produced factions and provided fertile ground for the agitations of Tecumseh. Influenced by the British at Detroit, the famous Shawnee chief, whose parents had lived among the Creeks, came in October 1811 and addressed five thousand warriors at Tuckabatchee. In an hour-long speech he appealed to the Muscogees to restore their tribe's reputation for bravery. He admonished the Creeks to send the intruders "back where they came, upon a trail of blood." He raised the image of the white man who plows over the tombs of the Muscogee dead and "fertilizes his fields with their sacred ashes."20

Tecumseh's shrill rhetoric struck a chord among Creeks able to read the times. The conversion of the horse path into a road for wheeled vehicles was already increasing the traffic through their territory. Hawkins reported that, between October 1811 and March of the next year, 233 vehicles and 3,726 people had passed his Indian agency on the Flint River, heading west.21 In response, the hostile Creeks, called the Red Sticks, were cultivating the established alliances.

Operating in the background of the conflict were the Spaniards at Pensacola, who were also providing a base for the British trading company of John Forbes & Company, successor to Panton, Leslie & Company and John Leslie & Company.22 Mail taken by the Indians on the federal post road had been delivered to the Spaniards at Pensacola; in addition, post riders had been attacked and shot, horses killed, and horses and provisions stolen.23 U.S. sympathizers had sent word that a party of Indians under Peter McQueen and High-Head Jim (also known as Jim Boy) had been furnished powder and shot by the Spaniards and were making their way back to the territory of the Upper Creeks. To stop the distribution of military supplies, Col. James Caller of Washington County, Mississippi Territory, the senior officer of the frontier, summoned local militia, about 180 men, and on July 27, 1813, encountered the party at Burnt Corn, just south of the federal military road.24
Caller's men, among them Sam Dale, later to become an Alabama hero, drove off the Indians but were distracted in their efforts to divide the military spoils. Indians in the swamps along Burnt Corn Creek launched a counterattack, made loud with war whoops, and succeeded in scattering the whites. When his men could not be reassembled, the commander himself, according to one report, wandered in the woods for a week. Two accounts disagree on the number of Americans killed and wounded; but whether it was two or five killed, or ten to fifteen wounded, the victory was significant for the Creeks. It showed that a smaller force of Indians, even if taken by surprise and armed for the most part only with clubs, bows and arrows, and the ancient battle cries, could defeat the whites. The victory gave new authority to the fanatical prophets and encouraged Creeks still angry over the surprise attack to look to another target west on the Federal Road.

Fort Mims, established before the Creek War of 1813–14 on the east bank of the Alabama River at Mims' Ferry, near where Luckett had begun his survey, was one of a line of stockades that would become critical points for soldiers, and later travelers, on the Federal Road. It was a plantation house palisaded to protect settlers, especially those south along the Tensaw River. Although an attack by a large body of Red Sticks was anticipated, the commander of the fort, Daniel Beasley, was poorly prepared; on the morning of August 30, 1813, the day of the assault, in which he would be killed, Beasley prepared a dispatch for his superiors, discounting the plausibility of reports that a local plantation was already "full of Indians committing every kind of Havoc." The Creeks attacked at noon, firing into the fort through portholes that had been cut too low. Sand interfered with closing the main gate, and the Indians entered before it could be shut. Led by William Weatherford and Paddy Welsh, a prophet whose magical protection against bullets proved ineffectual, the Creeks by midafternoon had succeeded in massacring the defenders. A burial party sent to Fort Mims three weeks later found 247 white men, women, and children dead. It is estimated that from 20 to 40 whites escaped. The bodies of about 100 warriors were also found.

In October 1813, Brig. Gen. Ferdinand L. Claiborne, brother of territorial governor W. C. C. Claiborne, set out from St. Stephens with an expedition of Mississippians to seek out the Upper Creeks. The
campaign got an early boost and Alabama history its most celebrated tableau in the Canoe Fight. A party under Claiborne consisting of Sam Dale, Jeremiah Austill, James Smith, and a black slave named Caesar fought a band of Creeks hand-to-hand between boats in the Alabama River and killed nine, before spectators from each side, and none in the Claiborne party suffered serious injury.

After creating a base at Fort Claiborne, in Monroe County, about forty miles north of Fort Mims, on the road that led from St. Stephens across Clarke County to the Federal Road, the general left a supply point at Fort Deposit farther up the road and advanced to the Holy
Ground, near the mouth of the Pintlala on the south side of the Alabama River. Indian medicine men considered the site holy because it was defined by a river, two creeks, and a swamp and presumably could not be taken in battle; it was also the headquarters of Weatherford. On December 23, 1813, Claiborne’s Mississippians defeated the Indians, killing about twenty-one Creeks and twelve Negroes with the loss of only one American. In the Battle of the Holy Ground, a village of about eighty wigwams and a town of about two hundred houses were destroyed, but Weatherford was not taken. Mounted on his horse Arrow, he leapt down a bluff into the Alabama River and emerged safe and defiant on the opposite bank. On Christmas Day the army left the Holy Ground and returned via the Federal Road to Fort Deposit, Fort Claiborne, and dismissal. They had succeeded in driving Weatherford out of central Alabama; the next concentration of hostile Creeks would be at Horseshoe Bend.

News of the Indian uprising, and in particular of the massacre at Fort Mims, quickened the pulses of Georgians with a long-standing interest in winning more territory. Civilian travel over the new road was arrested, however; in August 1813, the Georgia militia was called out and placed under the command of Gen. John Floyd. Three months later Floyd at his base at Fort Hawkins received a plea from friendly chiefs whose homes were being burned and cattle driven off by hostile Creeks. Their desperation was spelled out in a letter written November 18, 1813, at Coweta and sent by runner:

General Floyd,

four days we have been surrounded and we have sent you two runners. And we have not heard from you. The main body of Indians is about half a mile from us and there are scouts of them up and down the river about the same distance. They are killing everything and burning all of the houses, we can’t turn out to fight them on account of our women and children. They are more than double our number, and we cannot leave our entrenchments for fear of them getting possession. Now my friend come and relieve us, come night and day. If you don’t come soon we will be in a starving situation. If we hear you are coming it will give us a great relief. You have had full time to come. The hostile party are in the open pine woods. If you was here, it is a good place to fight them. If you mean to come fight them, come. If they make off you will have trouble to find them. We only want 1000
of your men we would turn out and fight them. We have sent Tobler
to pilot you to the river. We are your

Friends
Big B W Warrior
William McIntosh
Little Prince
Alexr A C Cornells

Ensuing events would prove the immediate logistic significance of
the Federal Road. Responding to the call, Floyd crossed the Chattahoochee on November 24, 1813, and his troops built a stockade a
mile west of the river, twelve miles below the site of Columbus.
Named in honor of the governor of Georgia, David B. Mitchell, it was
to be the first fort west of the Chattahoochee in a series of stockades
about a day's travel apart, erected in an attempt to extend the supply
line beyond the 135-mile distance from Fort Hawkins to the Chattahoochee so that the Americans could remain "within Striking dis-
tance of the enemy." Floyd selected Federal Road sites near the
homes of the friendly Indians who had called on him for protection;
these chiefs also had some influence with the Creek Nation. Fort
Mitchell was near the home of Little Prince. Of the others built later,
Fort Bainbridge, in present-day Macon County, was near the home
of Big Warrior; and Fort Hull, also in Macon County, was adjacent
to the lands of Alexander Cornells and his brother Joseph.

By the time of Floyd's campaign the road had been widened; in
several places new routes had been made, so that a network of roads
existed. Although considerable manpower was needed for repairs,
the road was good enough for cannons mounted navy-style on four-
wheeled wagons to pass—an accommodation that would have con-
sequences in the battles to come.

At daybreak on November 29, Floyd's 950 militia with three or four
hundred friendly Indians attacked the village of Autossee, an impor-
tant center of the Red Stick faction, located north of Tuckabatchee.
Although eleven Americans died and the friendly Indians suffered
heavy losses, about two hundred hostile Creeks were killed, among
them two principal chiefs, and the Red Sticks were routed. The battle
was more closely fought, however, than the lopsided casualty count
indicates. The artillery that was moved over the Federal Road—per-
haps the first to be fired in battle in Alabama—turned the tide for the Americans. Heavy cannon fire into the village was followed by a bayonet charge that put the hostile Indians to flight. Because Floyd had not been able to establish his supply lines, he was unable to pursue the Red Sticks. Injured himself, he had to return to his Federal Road base at Fort Mitchell before making another march into the heart of the Upper Creek country.

The image several histories leave of the Creek Nation during the winter of 1813 is of a country devastated by war. Crops had been destroyed; many Indians had been driven into the swamps; and munitions were in short supply. Although the Americans too were having trouble with supplies (the crops of friendly Indians were also ruined) and there were military squabbles over authority in the territory, the hostile Creeks faced opposition from three sides. Claiborne’s troops were active in the south as protection for the lower settlements; the Georgians were regrouping at Fort Mitchell and were soon to be joined by more disciplined, regular army troops from South Carolina; and advancing from the north were the Tennesseans under Gen. Andrew Jackson. It appeared that the stage was set for a last stand.

In January 1814, Floyd, believing that he could move sufficient supplies over the Federal Road, launched another campaign. He was prompted to act quickly because the South Carolinians had not arrived and the six-month enlistment of his state militiamen was to expire February 22. Forty miles west of Fort Mitchell, he established Fort Hull, which was to be his westernmost Federal Road outpost, and encamped there with 1,100 militia and volunteers and 600 friendly Indians. Attempting to penetrate further, Floyd advanced with his infantry and artillery to the west side of Calabee Creek, where his actions were observed by hostile Creek scouts.

A surprise attack before dawn on January 27 at Calabee Creek by about 1,300 warriors under Weatherford, Welsh, William McGillivray, and High-Head Jim resulted in 169 casualties for Floyd’s force before the Indians retired from the field of battle. The commander was injured again, and his aide, Joel Crawford, had a horse shot out from under him in the fighting after daybreak.30 The Creeks had learned at Autossee what death the cannons could deal, and they attacked the artillery, fighting low and close; only after the barrels were lowered
Gen. John Floyd

John Floyd (1769-1839), a native of South Carolina, was a brigadier general in the Georgia militia when he commanded the Georgia expedition against the Creek Indians. His troops established a series of forts along the Federal Road to serve as their main supply line. Although wounded at the Battle of Autossee, Floyd remained in command until the militia returned to Georgia. Later he served in the Georgia legislature and in the United States Congress. (Reprinted, by permission, from Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta)
Maj. Joel Crawford

As a young man, Joel Crawford (1783–1858) was an aide to Gen. John Floyd in the Creek War of 1813–14 and had two horses shot from under him in the battles of Autossee and Calabee Creek. Later in life he served in the Georgia legislature and in the United States Congress and was a member of the commission that established the Alabama-Georgia boundary north of the Chattahoochee River. Fort Crawford in Escambia County was named in his honor, he was a first cousin of the nationally prominent Georgia politician William Harris Crawford. (Reprinted from the Rebecca Crawford Hamilton photo album in the private collection of H. D. Southerland, Jr.)
could any damage be done to the attackers. Floyd’s short-term mili-
tiamen were not destroyed, but their spirit was broken. One soldier
recorded a scene indicating how alien the behavior of the Indian al-
lies could seem to a white American.

The friendly Indians, who were with us, exercised great barbarity
upon the bodies of our enemies slain, on the morning after the battle.
They ripped them open, cut their heads to pieces, took out the heart
of one, which was borne along in savage triumph by the perpetrators,
and strange to tell, cut off the private parts of others. What bestial
conduct. One dead Indian was hoisted upon a horse and as he
would tumble off, the savage spectators would cry out, “Whiskey too
much.”

Deep in the Creek country and mindful of his weak supply line,
Floyd fell back to Fort Hull with nearly a fourth of his troops sick and
wounded. He transferred the command of the fort to Col. Homer V.
Milton and marched back to Georgia over the road that had brought
him two engagements with the enemy—the first clearly a victory, and
the second at best a Pyrrhic victory.

Under Milton, the luck changed. He held the fort until the regular
army reinforcements arrived from South Carolina. Sixteen miles east
of Fort Hull, during a heavy snowstorm, the South Carolinians built
Fort Bainbridge, completing Floyd’s plan of Federal Road supply
posts within one day’s march. In March additional reinforcements ar-
ived from North Carolina, and Milton was able to turn west again,
for a deeper penetration into Creek country. In April, his troops built
Fort Decatur on the Tallapoosa, opposite Tuckabatchee. The
strengthened forces and the more reliable supply line were prepara-
tion for an army to come down from the north to deliver the final
blow.

Jackson, meanwhile, had been making progress with Tennessee
militiamen aware of the threat the Creeks posed to their settlements.
A raiding party in the spring of 1812 had attacked a small community
on the Duck River, killing a man, a woman, and five children, and
holding one woman as a captive for several weeks, until she escaped
and was rescued by a white trader. Jackson meant to destroy the
Creeks, a motive he carried from military life into his political career.

Just west of Tallusahatchee, after that village had been destroyed
by the cavalry of Gen. John Coffee, Jackson built Fort Strother as a holding place for supplies and a point for reinforcement, but before the fresh troops arrived, Jackson decided to attack the fortified village of Talladega. On November 8, he attempted to envelope the town using two columns, but the Red Sticks, fighting more fiercely than Jackson had experienced, found an opening and many escaped. Although about three hundred were killed, many fled, and Jackson was not able to deliver the coup de grace. By March, he had a newer and bigger army and was ready to approach the major encampment of Indians behind fortified breastworks at Horseshoe Bend on the Tallapoosa.

Although badly outnumbered and poorly armed, the thousand warriors from the Upper Creek villages led by Chief Menawa were gathered at the bend to make their stand, with the river behind them as an escape route. On the morning of March 27, 1814, Jackson's artillery opened from the front, shelling continuously for two hours, during which time friendly Indians under Coffee swam the river and cut loose the canoes of the hostile Creeks. A charge by Jackson's troops broke up the Indians' front line, forcing about 300 into the water, where they were killed by Coffee's men firing from the opposite bank. The bodies of 557 warriors were found on the battlefield. Andrew Jackson had scored his major victory.

The significance of the Battle of Horseshoe Bend transcends an isolated conflict with the Indians of the Creek Nation or a history of the Federal Road. It was fought in the context of the War of 1812 and is regarded by at least one historian as a major battle of that war.32 The British already were landing troops in the South with arms and supplies for the Indians. Jackson had to turn his attention to threats from remnants of the Creeks at Pensacola, but when he returned to the fort named for him and built on the site of the old French stockade Fort Toulouse, near the confluence of the Coosa and the Tallapoosa, he believed that he had rung down the curtain on the Creek Nation.

The shaky treaty intended to formalize the end of the conflict was forced into reality by Jackson's iron will. The terms reflected his antipathy for all of the Indians, even the allies who had fought bravely with the Americans and believed they would be favored. The annexation of 22 million acres of land, however, included the holdings of
the friendly Creeks. Hawkins viewed the taking of over half of the Creek Nation as harsh, and the friendly Creeks were embittered, but Jackson shamed and threatened them into signing the Treaty of Fort Jackson on August 14, 1814. The names on the treaty included those of thirty-five friendly chiefs and only one who, perhaps, had been a Red Stick. Jackson’s affront to Indian pride drove much of the hostile Creek remnant into unity with their Muscogean relatives, the Seminoles of Florida, who maintained ties with the British. 33 More important, the contemptuous attitude of the United States embodied in the treaty virtually assured that, if this group of Indians could get revenge, it would. Jackson, meanwhile, was free to march down the Federal Road to meet the British wherever they might strike on the Gulf coast, Mobile or New Orleans.

Although the Treaty of Fort Jackson may not have been regarded as binding by Creeks, who felt betrayed, the confederation had surrendered one-fifth of its land in Georgia and three-fifths of its Alabama territory, including all of the land on the Federal Road west of Line, or Okfuskee, Creek. The surveying of the new boundary, visible in part today as the line between Montgomery and Macon counties, was an indication that the United States regarded the entire Alabama River valley as off-limits to the Creeks and open for settlement. The treaty left as a final Creek possession a narrow tract in east Alabama and west Georgia running north and south from the lower Piedmont to the Wiregrass, bisected by the Federal Road.

Except for military travel, movement on the road had come to a standstill during the hostilities of 1813–14; however, the availability of new lands on the fertile watercourses identified in Lieutenant Luckett’s “brief delineation” increased the traffic. Although journals wax eloquent in their descriptions of the hazards of travel over roads that were washed out and streams that were flooded, the Federal Road had been widened and improved, and in several places alternate routes over the network were available. Moreover, the development of the forts along the Federal Road created an illusion of security.

The character of the countryside was about to change drastically. Those who passed over the Federal Road would become part of a region in transition, exploding with energy and urgency, with the Creek Indians still in their Nation, not yet vanquished.
The Federal Road
through Georgia, the Creek Nation, and Alabama, 1806–1836

Henry deLeon Southerland Jr.
and Jerry Elijah Brown
The Federal Road project began in 1805 when the Creek Indians gave permission for the development of a "horse path" through their nation for more efficient mail delivery between Washington City (D.C.) and New Orleans. Deriving its story from the diaries and journals of travelers, both famous and infamous, The Federal Road covers the first days of mail delivery, the widening of the Federal Road into a "war road" during 1811, and the use of the road during the removal of Creek Indians to the West.

"This book is not only a biography of the principal southern thoroughfare but also the setting for the human drama of westward migration. Until now, the story of migration into newly opened cotton lands was thought of more as a phenomenon than as a saga. Southerland and Brown have enlivened southern history by giving faces and form to the multitudes that trekked westward in search of opportunity, and, in doing so, they have made an important contribution to southern history."

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"A well-researched and interesting book, a colorful portrayal highlighted by the personal accounts of brave travelers, including Aaron Burr under arrest, the evangelist Lorenzo Dow, and Lafayette, all of whom contended with a poorly built wagon road made frequently dangerous by flooding streams and hostile Indians."

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"This unique study reveals that the Federal Road actually helped create history."

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"Southerland and Brown have an excellent command of details but never lose sight of the broad picture. They use the Federal Road to tell the story of a young country, a receding frontier, and a state being born. Their perspective is unique and welcome. Good research, documentation, and excellent maps make the book valuable to scholars and laymen. It should be on the bookshelf of all students of Alabama history."

—Gulf Coast Historical Quarterly

"Southerland and Brown do a fine job of painting a scene of the deconstruction of the Creek Nation, accomplished through the construction of the Federal Road."

—American Indian Quarterly

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HENRY DELEON SOUTHERLAND JR.,
AND JERRY ELIJAH BROWN

MAPS BY CHARLES JEFFERSON HIERS

Sponsored by the Historic Chattahoochee Commission

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To Louise Harris Southerland
and to the Memory
of John M. Fletcher of Hallewookee Farm
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THE FEDERAL ROAD
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INTRODUCTION

“But for the Federal Road…”

IN 1806, A PATH FOR THE HORSES OF POST RIDERS was opened from middle Georgia to lower Alabama, through Indian country in the section of the United States once called the Old Southwest. Five years later the mail path was widened and rerouted over much of its length to create a military lane for the movement of troops, supply wagons, and ordnance. Instantly, use transcended intention: the road built for soldiers, who would confront the Creeks before engaging the British, became a major pioneer highway, an artery for all travel. Now, after more than 175 years, during which time the road has virtually vanished into the landscape, we can understand how it has meandered into history; we can recognize it as a source and a solution of conflicts, a factor in the location and growth of cities, a consideration in decisions civil and military, and a contributor to local, state, and national identities. Now we can see that one road as more important than it ever appeared in its own time, when it was merely a track, muddy or sandy, through forests and swamps; when, as the official highway, it afforded pioneers the strength of numbers and the refuge of forts and inns.

Although the insight now possible into that Federal Road approaches epiphany, it is not unique with respect to rivers and roads. When T. S. Eliot saw the full influence of the Mississippi on Huckleberry Finn—on the book, the boy, and the writer, as well as on the country—he called the river “a strong brown god”; similarly, twentieth-century Americans who made their escape to the West knew that, when U.S. Route 66 was replaced by the interstate highway system, more had disappeared than cracked pavement, Burma Shave signs, and lonely diners.

Though the sense that a road may be more than a route for travel or a conduit for commerce comes readily, it is difficult to specify par-
ticular contributions. Because a road is not a human character and because it may appear simply as part of the scenery, wandering through the events that occur on or around it, we hold back from arguing that even a prominent road is the sine qua non of a major historical change; none but the naive are likely to be convinced. One may suggest, however, without forcing the thesis, that such a thoroughfare was the Federal Road, sometimes called the Old Federal Road. It was built in 1811 from west-to-east, from Fort Stoddert, near Mount Vernon, on the Mobile River, to Fort Wilkinson, near Millidgeville, on the Oconee, then the capital of Georgia. From Fort Stoddert to the Chattahoochee, across present-day Alabama, the Federal Road coincided with the post riders' horse path that had come down from Athens, Georgia, to make the New Orleans connection in 1806. Where the horse path had turned north, at the falls where Columbus would be located, the Federal Road continued east, to areas where soldiers could be recruited and supplies procured. There, too, in Georgia and the Carolinas were waiting the Americans eager to settle in the fertile new lands to the west.

Started as a post route during the first administration of Thomas Jefferson and fulfilling its usefulness as a military road near the end of the presidency of Andrew Jackson (who made and maintained his reputation by suppressing Indians in its proximity), the Federal Road has been so central that no complete history of the southeastern United States can be written without a mention of it. In 1927, Peter A. Brannon, a historian to whose spadework this study owes a considerable debt, agreed with a nineteenth-century counterpart who compared it to the Appian Way.1 "But for the Federal Road with its forts,” Peter Joseph Hamilton had declaimed in 1898, "there had been no Alabama as we know it.”2 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. During its period of maxi-
mum use, when “Alabama fever” was epidemic in the Carolinas and Georgia, the population of the territory (later, the state) increased by over half a million.

If the road has been so important, why is this book, published about 150 years after its demise, the first full study of it? One simple reason is that the story of the road has not been assembled; details of the conception and construction, which might seem interesting mainly to historians of civil engineering, have been strewn piece-meal in hundreds of government documents, articles and books, and private letters. Even now, we know too little of the day-to-day work involved in cutting the road, building the causeways, or establishing the ferries. The single most important reason for the absence of a book devoted solely to the road is the overwhelming presence of other subjects of such magnitude that they have obscured the story of why this road came to be, where it was located, and how it has figured in sectional development. To be sure, other stories have been more spectacular: the movements of the white traders, the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson’s career, the Creek and Seminole wars, and the social and political issues pointing to the Civil War. Although a history of the Federal Road cannot be written without retelling some familiar stories (occasionally with new information), this work assumes that they are but bright beads concealing the string that joins them.

Naturally a study that proposes to isolate one element from the complex of national, regional, and state histories must steer between Scylla and Charybdis—avoiding, on the one side, the tendency to focus too narrowly and, on the other, the temptation to veer into digressions. Once upon a time historians could navigate past these perils simply by adding the phrase incidentally of after their main titles. (The best-known example is probably Albert James Pickett’s History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi from the Earliest Period.) This history of the Federal Road is “incidentally of” the territory and the states it influenced, with more attention paid to Alabama and to the courageous but doomed natives whose last days in the southern United States were synchronous with the appearance and disappearance of the Federal Road.

To write about these people, the places they inhabited, and the streams they lived by is to discover how little we know and are likely
to know. If it was not easy for the white pioneers to understand how the world looked to the Indians, it is only slightly less difficult now that the races are no longer at war. In the latter part of the twentieth century, we can at least empathize with the Indians’ concept of stewardship of the land; the savaging of wildlife, streams, and forests, only recently an issue with us, was recognized immediately by the Indians as alien and destructive. Not directly threatened by death at the hands of the Indians, we, the de facto heirs of their land, are in a position to give a fairer assessment than our ancestors could have, a privilege that is forfeited only when sympathy for the underdog lapses into sentimentality.

What we can see now, maybe more clearly than ever, is how protracted and invasive the process of transition was. Intermarriages of whites and Indians, acceptance of the whites’ mode of dress and conduct, and efforts to make Indians into farmers and craftsmen all point to the changing of ways. Though it may seem less significant, the switching over of names was a more critical signal, an indication that conceptions of man and the role of nature were changing. Unfortunately, this important point is easily lost on students struggling with the welter of alternative spellings and pronunciations that have resulted from Americans’ efforts to record Creek speech. (This book uses modern spellings for names and places and standardizes punctuation and capitalization, except in those instances when the original provides a glimmer of the writer’s individuality or some sharp insight into the times.) Dual Indian and English names reveal how close and how distant the red and white worlds were. As every schoolchild used to know, William Weatherford, the Creek leader who put his horse off a bluff into the Alabama River to escape death and who was so honorable that Andrew Jackson granted him a pardon, was also called Red Eagle. Few have occasion to know that Creek names, in and out of translation, were also used. In some official correspondence, Big Warrior signed his Creek name Tustenugge Thlucco, followed by the initials of the English name in parentheses. Alexander Cornells, a member of an extended family of mixed bloods, was also Chief Oche Haujo; but William McIntosh, both a Creek chief and an American general, usually went by the name of his Scots ancestors. Many whites also had Indian names; the raconteur-historian Thomas S. Woodward said he was called Chulatarke Emathla. Streams everywhere bear eupho-
nious Indian names (Chattahoochee, Cubahatchee) or names given to honor settlers or describe uses (Milly's, Line). In these small particulars is revealed the true course of transition.

Looking larger to understand how the Federal Road became a character in national development, one may discover an array of motives for its existence. Although the horse path from Georgia to Alabama was opened as one link in the mail route between Washington City and New Orleans, it penetrated the territory of the Muscogees—actually a confederation of tribes and clans called Creeks by the white men, who saw their villages along the watercourses—and stimulated hostilities. As a military road, the passage encouraged exploitation and made expulsion inevitable. Although the stated intent of the horse path or the road was not to remove the Creeks, the passage forced a social, military, and diplomatic confrontation with these fierce, proud people. Their final thirty years in the South were, to say the least, anguish. As their land was being crossed by the Federal Road, they were crossed and double-crossed by the government and by unscrupulous white men and betrayed, some felt, by their own kind.

It is tempting to speculate on the motives of United States officials. Did they realize that a war with the Creeks would be a likely consequence of the road building? Obviously the more far-sighted were aware of what the intrusion would bring to the wilderness that was wedged between white-dominated sections of the lower South. In his third annual message to Congress, delivered in 1803, Jefferson defined, perhaps unintentionally, the irreconcilable forces. He referred to the "ulterior measures which may be necessary for the immediate occupation and temporary government" of the newly purchased Louisiana Territory, and the strategy he outlined was the same his administration was following in the Mississippi Territory, created in 1798. The "ulterior measures" were necessary "for confirming to the Indian inhabitants their occupancy and self-government, establishing friendly and commercial relations with them, and for ascertaining the geography of the country acquired." Even as Jefferson was speaking, Georgia and South Carolina were making claims to western lands. With such a manifestly contradictory mission—believing that Indian autonomy could be confirmed while their lands were being examined for later use—the country was set
on a course that would subdue one people to make room for another.

It is also tempting to see parallels between that earlier time and our own. In extending the authority of the presidency beyond the limits set in the Constitution, Jefferson not only purchased a vast tract of land, he also left a precedent for later chief executives. Andrew Jackson effectively dealt with guerrillas and terrorists, even if his Draconian tactics now offend some sensibilities. Since the construction and implementation of the Federal Road were exercises in the use of raw power, our sense of justice is engaged as we review the consequences. Only students wearing star-spangled blindfolds can ignore the brutality that made the section safe for white travel and settlement—or pretend that the ultimate price was not paid by the Creeks. The heightened consciousness of the nation, to no one's surprise, was late in rising. In fact, the status of the black race has occupied the nation far more than have the injustices committed against the Indians.

Along with the negative moral judgments, circumspection requires that the positive results also be considered. The action started by Jefferson in response to the commonweal and completed by Jackson yielded a unified section of the country, a South that by the late 1830s was emerging from an Old Southwest and becoming an important part of the country's economy and politics. To study the changes wrought by the Federal Road is to understand the formation and the transformation of a section of the United States.

And yet the Federal Road is more than a symbol for the metamorphosis of a single geographic region. Begun in an age when travel and overland communication were synonymous, when no messages, no news, and no military dispatches moved except by horse or foot, the road lasted until rails were being laid across the swamps and ridges, steamboats were plying the Chattahoochee and the Alabama, and telegraph poles were being set in the rights-of-way. A modern world of communications options, one of them electronic even then, was in the cradle. What was happening along and to the Federal Road provides a dramatic illustration of the country's direction.

As alternate routes and alternative communications became available, the Federal Road became less central. No longer needed as the single passage through the Creek Nation, it did not become the spine
of a twentieth-century infrastructure—a network of roads, communications, and governmental functions—and gradually it faded. Today only a few remnants remain, familiar for the most part only to local historians. Over most of its length the road is obliterated, and the ruts cut by the wagon wheels of the pioneers are returned to a landscape no longer virginal and haunting, with streams decidedly less clear. To get some inkling of the world implied in the few ruins still visible involves a delving into the facts of how the road was built and maintained and how it affected and was affected by the people who passed over it. Also needed, as always in a pleasurable study of history, is the exercising of an informed imagination. If this study succeeds, the Federal Road will be regarded as a living part of our past, and an illumination of its brief life will help present-day inhabitants appreciate how we came to where we are.