

# The Natchez Trace

## ~ Traffic ~

The *Natchez Trace* has had a long history. It had been an animal path and an Indian trail as early as when the Romans built the Appian Way. The *Trace* in its Indian days was more a combination of short trails linking to other similar paths from the Gulf to the Great Lakes and from the Atlantic seaboard southwest. Don Hernando de Soto and his Spaniards used it to search for gold; de Soto left tortured Indians in his path until he met his own death.

The *Natchez Trace* was the most notorious of all the routes of its time, a path of robbers, murderers and of slave stealers. It has been a source for folklore and fiction, for tall tales and adventurous and romantic stories. Bandits were drawn there in great numbers because of the great booty to be gained, attacking people who had sold everything in New Orleans and were returning home with their profits.

The first Americans pushing west of the Appalachians brought products by barge, keelboat, and raft. They brought flour and millstones, tobacco, pelts and iron, and whiskey. At the end of their Mississippi adventure, they would sell their boats for lumber, and return overland on the *Natchez Trace*. They would meet other men headed south—raiders, medicine peddlers, and missionaries. All sorts of men trod the path; its reputation as a robbers' road was well earned. Then came the pioneers, seeking to grab up the Indians' land.

The Indians allowed postriders passage through their land since the mid-1790s. Abijah Hunt established the first mail route on the *Trace*. After the Louisiana Purchase, postal officials used a road through the South Atlantic states rather than the roundabout way by Knoxville, Nashville, the wilderness, and Natchez. Although that road cut a third of the distance from Washington to New Orleans, it wasn't considered the safest and best by Post Office authorities, who as late as 1823 still considered the *Trace* to be the better choice.

There were at least seven inns ("stands") on the *Natchez road* in 1809. A few years later, "The Louisiana and Mississippi Almanac" listed nearly 40 stands along the road, many operated quite efficiently by the Indians.

Stagecoaches never traveled the *Trace*. The water route became the preferred and easiest passage to use with the advent of the steamboat which permitted traffic both north and south. The coming of steamboat traffic spelled the end of the dominance of the *Natchez Trace*.

## ~ Features ~

The *Natchez Trace* had many names. As an Indian trail, the part north of the Tennessee River was called the *Chickasaw Trace*. At its southern end, it was called the *Path to the Choctaw Nation*. Strangely—when one considers its notorious traffic—it even bore the name *Path of Peace*. When officials in Washington decided to improve the route for the mails and the military, they christened it the *Columbian Highway*. Most people simply called it the *Natchez Road* or the *Nashville Road*, depending upon which direction they were traveling.

The coming of cotton and the arrival of the American flag hastened the turning of the *Trace* from a pathway into a road. Planters in Natchez reproduced and improved the cotton gin which Eli Whitney had devised in 1793. The acquisition of new lands (the Old Southwest from Spain in 1795 and the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803) made it necessary for the government to improve transportation routes.

In about 1801, a few American soldiers at Chickasaw Bluffs guarded the heights across the Mississippi from Spaniards. The site later came to be known as Memphis.

The events of the Aaron Burr conspiracy are tied to the *Natchez Trace* story. Meriwether Lewis died on the trail under mysterious circumstances—was it suicide or murder? Another traveler was Philip Nolan, whose short life was the basis for Edward Everett Hale's book, *The Man Without a Country*. General James Wilkinson who provided military supervision of the *Trace* was suspected of being a traitor.

Andrew Jackson made numerous trips up and down the *Natchez Trace*. Walking with his army on the *Trace* in 1813, he acquired the name "Old Hickory," because his volunteers considered him as tough as the hickory trees around them.

According to a letter from Harman Blennerhassett to his wife, a journey over the *Trace* was accompanied by "mosquitoes, or their more formidable companions the horseflies."

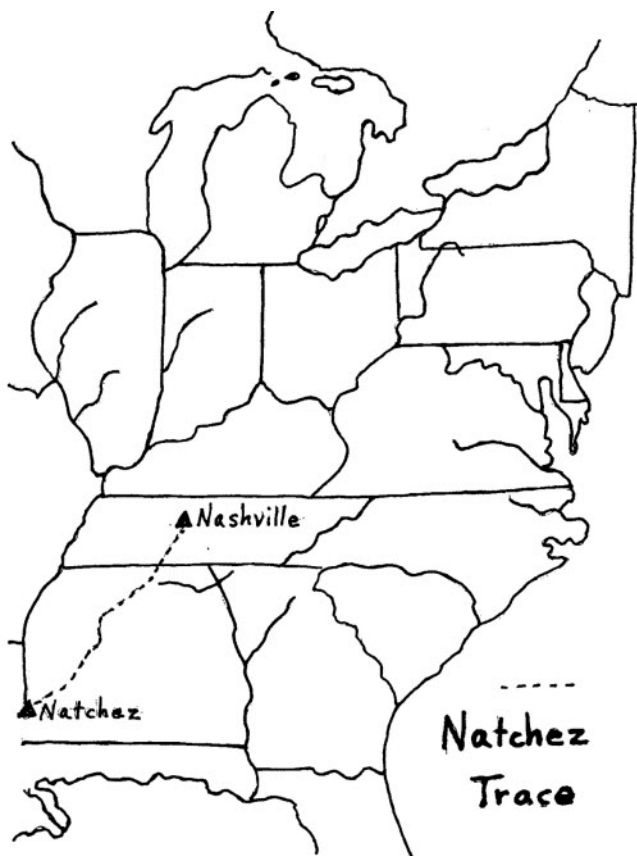
Other than to pay military surveyors and laborers, the Federal government spent little more than \$20,000 on the *Natchez road*. During the same period the government spent \$1,875,659 on the old *National Road*.

-- Jonathan Daniels, *The Devil's Backbone*.

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the use of \$1,286,686 to construct a national road along the route to be known as *Natchez Trace Parkway*.

## ~ Timeline ~ The Natchez Trace

- 1716      The French come to Natchez as the first white settlers and build Fort Rosalie.
- 1729      The Natchez Indians carry out a carefully planned massacre at Fort Rosalie, killing most of the men and many women and children.
- 1763      Rule of the Mississippi Valley passes from France's Louis XV to England's George III.
- 1776+     When the Revolution erupts, many Tories flee to Natchez from the Atlantic colonies.
- 1801-03   President Thomas Jefferson makes a treaty with the Chicasaw and Choctaw tribes so that a road can be opened along the *Trace*. Eight companies of infantry work south from the Mero District (Nashville), and six companies work northward from Natchez. Although it will serve a peaceful purpose to thousands of returning flatboatmen, the road is initially conceived with strategic military purpose, in the event that the United States might become embroiled with Spain over the port of New Orleans. This military road is completed in 1803.
- 1803      The Americans makes the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon for 15 million dollars.
- 1806      Congress authorizes construction of a road along the *Trace*, from Nashville to Natchez, a distance of 500 miles. The construction is supervised by Gen. James Wilkinson, U.S. Army. Col. James Robertson under subcontract does the work of opening a 12-foot road from the Indian boundary in Tennessee to the Chickasaw Agency in Mississippi. His specifications are that no stumps are to be left on the trail which are more than 16 inches high. So it still isn't a carriage road.
- 1817-1820 Congress authorizes a more direct military road from Nashville to New Orleans which is completed in 1820. The Army clears a right-of-way 40 feet wide through dense forest, builds 20,000 feet of corduroy causeways and over 35 substantial bridges. This is the *Jackson Military Road*. But by 1824, most of this road south of Columbus, Mississippi, is grown over and abandoned.



### **Route of the Natchez Trace**

The *Natchez Trace* went between Nashville, Tennessee and Natchez, Mississippi.

When white people first came into central Tennessee, they found an Indian path which ran from the former Indian settlements around Nashville to the Chicasaw towns around Pon-to-toc in northern Mississippi where it connected with trails leading to all sections of the southern United States.

The United States never owned the public lands of Tennessee through which approximately 100 miles of the *Natchez Trace* ran.

In Alabama, the *Trace* went only 40 miles and touched only two counties.

300 miles of the *Trace* lay in Mississippi.