

Transportation in Early Middle Tennessee

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The article appeared in *Middle Tennessee Genealogy*

Vol. VII. No. 4. Spring 1994, pp. 148-152

Now called *The Middle Tennessee Journal of Genealogy & History*

The first inhabitants of the Middle Tennessee areas use two major forms of transportation. The first form was overland travel. Indians utilized animal paths and made their own trails between hunting grounds and home. Many of these trails become modern day roads and highways. The Natchez Trace, the Cumberland Trace, the Black Fox Trail, and the Great South Trail were a few of the trails used by emigrants who settled in the Middle Tennessee area (1). The second form of transportation was water travel on rivers and streams. Canoes, dugouts, flatboats and keelboats were the primary vehicles of water travel.

In 1779 and 1780, the first groups of settlers in Middle Tennessee used these forms of travel. James Robertson made an overland journey on foot into the area from the eastern settlement by the way of the Cumberland Gap, through central Kentucky, south to Tennessee in one of the coldest winters in decades. John Donelson made a circuitous journey with a flotilla of flatboats beginning on the Holston River and followed the Tennessee River, the Ohio River, and the Cumberland River before landing in the Nashville area. At one point they landed on a shoal and had to make 30 people leave the boat to lighten it. One boat was driven onto the point of an island and sunk by strong currents. One family developed smallpox. Indian war a major hazard. One man was killed and 27 taken prisoner. By the end of the journey the flotilla was out of bread and the travelers suffered from hunger and fatigue. Both of these journeys illustrated the hazards of transportation in those times. The travelers were at the mercy of geographic obstacles, Indian attacks and weather conditions.

Two of the earliest roads in use in Middle Tennessee were the Walton Road, also known as Avery's Trace, and the Natchez Trace. The Walton Road led from the Washington District to the Metro District. The improvement of this led to Tennessee's first appropriation for internal improvements. In 1799 the General Assembly appointed commissioners, delegated funds and authorized tolls to be collected (2). The state's first turnpike company, the Cumberland Turnpike Company, was established to collect tolls and to pay for building the road and to provide for its upkeep (3). The Natchez Trace began as an Indian trail and later became an important overland route for the Middle Tennessee area. It was used as a major thoroughfare between Nashville and Natchez and on to New Orleans.

The War of 1812 forced political leaders to recognize that transportation was a big problem in the western settlements. As a result, the federal government began construction of a military road from Nashville, through Columbia to Madisonville, Louisiana in 1817 (4). This road was one of the last constructed in Middle Tennessee

with federal funds until the next century. The majority of turnpikes and roads in Middle Tennessee during this period were funded by private enterprise with some government subsidies.

Governor William Carroll is credited with leading Tennessee toward a cohesive policy of internal improvements. He expressed doubt that the federal government could finance many state internal improvement projects and called upon the legislature for state action (5). IN 1821 The General Assembly enacted a law that grouped roads into three classes. First class roads were stage roads which were twelve feet wide with bridges and mile markers. Second class roads were wagon roads which were ten feet wide and third class roads were just wide enough for a single horse and rider (6).

Throughout the next several years, funds were appropriated and a board of internal improvement with commissioners was authorized. An amendment to the state constitution called for a well regulated system of internal improvements to develop resources for the state of Tennessee (7). In 1838 the General Assembly passed a law to establish a state bank to raise funds for internal improvement projects and the state became a subscriber for capital stock in railroads, macadamized turnpikes, graded turnpikes, and sanded turnpikes (8). The legislature of 1840 brought all of this growth to a halt by repealing all previous laws authorizing the state government to subscribe stock for internal improvements (9). This development set overland transportation back in Middle Tennessee for many years. Appreciable attention was not paid to road building until the end of the century.

During the few decades of the nineteenth century, overland routes were often used for local traffic with water travel being used for long distance travels. The Middle Tennessee area relied on imported goods from Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. Cast and wrought iron, wire, nails, tools, glass, leather goods, white lead and paints, chemicals and flour were commonly shipped by barges, keelboats and flatboats on the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers (10). The Mississippi River provided the region with a commercial route to New Orleans. A round trip voyage from Nashville to New Orleans took around five months (11). Barges, flatboats and keelboats relied on river current for movement. The boats could be poled and rowed but were at the mercy of Indian attacks, weather, river conditions and upstream travel.

Steamboats were a big improvement over the flatboats. A steamboat moved under its own power and could haul people and goods in both directions on the river. The Middle Tennessee area was fortunate to have access to the Cumberland River and the Tennessee River. The Cumberland River was the most important tributary of the Ohio and was one of the most navigable rivers in the country. The Tennessee River was a minor stream for steamboat operations because of sparse population centers and the treacherous obstacle of Muscle Shoals. Harbors and navigable rivers were usually considered to be in a different class of appropriations than roads and some federal funds were available. However, the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers were the only tributaries of the Ohio improved at the government's expense (12).

The first steamboat to ply the Cumberland was the General Jackson in 1818 (13). By the 1830's steamboat traffic on the Cumberland was the principal means of hauling goods and people in Middle Tennessee. Areas not easily accessible by roads and turnpikes were able to transport goods by steamboat due to their proximity to the Cumberland and its tributaries. By 1845, passengers could make a round trip to New Orleans in fifteen days (14). This relatively speedy turnover of goods allowed the Middle Tennessee area to become an important agricultural market.

By 1800 the Southwest territories were growing rapidly. This area had yet to see its first stagecoach line. The unsettled wilderness was a barrier. Stage lines were expensive to build and maintain in areas with barely passable roads. But even then the mail had to go through. The first mail service in Tennessee was extended from Staunton, Virginia to Knoxville in 1794. The service went on to Nashville in 1797 and to Natchez in 1800. A decade later stages entered the region. In 1807 Postmaster General Gideon Granger contracted with Benjamin White for a stagecoach route from Knoxville to Nashville.

An extension line to Huntsville, Alabama from the Nashville to Knoxville line and branching from McMinnville was opened in 1820. In 1819 a traveler could ride by connected stagecoach from Anson, Maine via Washington D.C. to Nashville, a distance of 1,448 miles.

Up until the beginning of the Civil War, there were sixteen major stagecoach lines departing from Nashville. These coaches carried fifteen passengers and used four horse teams. The average speed of the coaches was six miles per hour with team changes approximately every ten miles. Many of these stagecoach lines also carried the U.S. mail and were a source of news and information in small towns. The major stagecoach lines departing from Nashville ran to Louisville, Chattanooga, Memphis, Huntsville, Tusculumbia, Florence, Clarksville, Hopkinsville, Springfield, and Russellville. Smaller accommodation coaches, usually consisting of horse teams, ran to Truine, Nolensville, Gallatin, Lebanon, and Columbia (15).

The railroad became Middle Tennessee's third mode of transportation and played a major role in the economic development of the region. In the first years of their introduction, railroads were a supplement to steamboat transportation. However, within a few years, railroads would overtake steamboats as the main means of moving people and goods.

During the 1830's and 1840's many railroads were chartered by the state. Most of these never saw completion. Middle Tennessee's first railroad, the Nashville and Chattanooga, made its first run in 1851 and was completed in 1854. The Nashville and Decatur was chartered in 1854 and completed in 1859 (16). The Louisville and Nashville railroad was constructed as a result of both cities' attempts to neutralize the other as a source of economic competition (17). The L&N railroad company played a significant role in the history of transportation in Middle Tennessee for the rest of the century.

By 1860 other modes of transportation in Middle Tennessee suffered as the railroads grew and expanded. State funds went into railroad development rather than steamboat and road development. As a result, Tennessee had 1253 miles of railroad track in 1860, while steamboat and stagecoach development was beginning to wane (18).

With the onset of the Civil War, the improvement of civilian transportation systems in Tennessee came to a halt. Many of the transportation facilities became geared to military operations. Steamboats and railroads were refitted to carry troops, cargo and supplies. When Nashville surrendered to Union troops in February of 1862, the city became a major army supply depot. Railroads and steamboats were seized and Union forces were able to utilize overland and water transportation systems to great advantage.

Federal troops were hampered to some extent by transportation problems. Disparities in the width and gauge of railroad lines made movements of soldiers and supplies from one line to another difficult. Troops were also harassed in their attempts to keep supply lines open by marauding bands of Confederate cavalry under the leadership of Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Morgan. Railroads and steamboats were the main targets. Bridges were burned, track was destroyed, tunnels blown up and boats were captured and sunk (19).

The Civil War was one of the first military conflicts in which the railroad played a role. Railroads transported troops and supplies faster than other methods of transport. Operations and construction were able to follow the troop movements of both armies. By the war's end, the railroad had become the nation's primary form of transportation (20).

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