Historical Narrative:

"Historically, there were two, possibly three, Natchez Traces, each one having a different origin and purpose..."

– Dawson Phelps, author of the *Natchez Trace: Indian Trail to Parkway.*

Trail: A trail is a marked or beaten path, as through woods or wildness; an overland route.

The **Natchez Trace** has had many names throughout its history: Chickasaw Trace, Choctaw-Chickasaw Trail, Path to the Choctaw Nation, Natchez Road, Nashville Road, and the most well known, the Natchez Trace. No matter what its name, it was developed out of the deep forests of Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee, from animal paths and well-worn American Indian footpaths.

With American ownership of the **Mississippi Territory,** an overland route linking the area to the growing country was desperately needed for communication, trade, prosperity and defense from the Spanish and English, who were neighbors on the southwestern frontier. While river travel was desirable, a direct land route to civilization was needed from Natchez in order to bring in military troops to guard the frontier, to take things downriver that were too precious to place on a boat, to return soldiers or boatmen back to the interior of the U.S., and for mail delivery and communication.

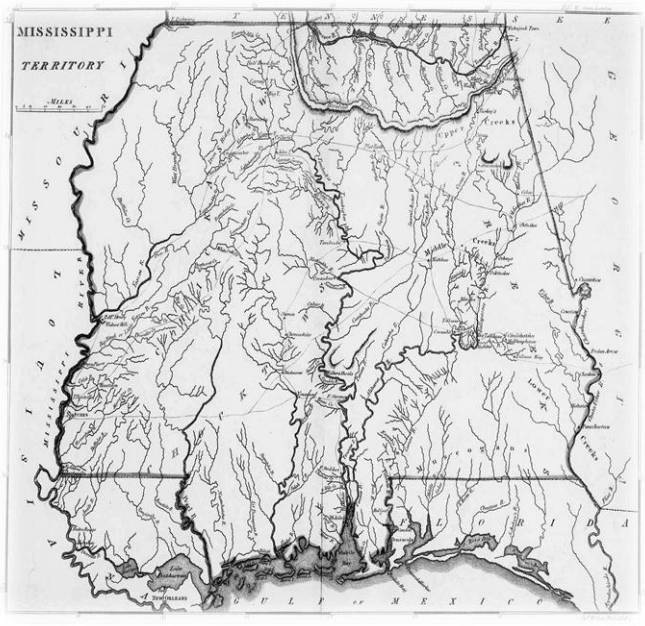

Figure 1: Mississippi Territory
Mississippi Digital Map Library

The improvement of the Natchez Trace began over the issue of mail delivery. In 1798, **Governor Winthrop Sargent** of the Mississippi Territory asked that "blockhouses" be created along American Indian trails to serve was stops for mail carriers and travelers since it took so long to deliver the mail or travel to Natchez. In fact, a letter from Washington D.C. to Natchez took three months! Sargent's request yielded a number of "inns" (hotels are the modern-day equivalents) that were created at intervals where food, sleep, and fresh horses were available. In 1800, a regular mail service was established when Abijah Hunt was contracted to carry mail between Nashville and Natchez for $2,400 and the U.S. Congress designated an overland **post road** route between the two towns.

The first mail that went on this route included mostly newspapers, government dispatches, and personal letters. It took two weeks for the mail to be carried between Nashville and Natchez, depending upon road and rider conditions. The U.S. Postmaster knew that the Natchez Trace was terrible and to repair or create a road out of a footpath would be expensive. However, he suggested that U.S. Army troops in western Tennessee be used to cut wagon roads, bridge creeks, and clear obstacles. **General James Wilkinson** (below right) of the U.S. Army, who was stationed in the area, agreed to plan and put his men to work on it in 1800/1801.

However, before his men could work, they had to obtain land treaties with the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes since the road would cross through their land. Tribal leaders met with government officials and agreed to the proposed route, established the right-of-way, but said that white settlers could not own inns on their property. The tribes also wanted exclusive rights to manage ferries on the Tennessee River and larger streams. With an agreement in place, the **Second U.S. Infantry** went to work near the **Tennessee River** and with the help of an American Indian guide to show them the way, marked the route that would become the Natchez Trace.

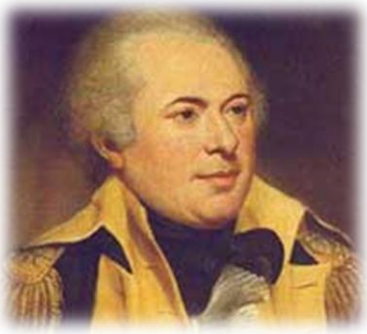

Figure 2: General James Wilkinson
Library of Congress Image

In the spring of 1802, the first section of the old Trace between the Tennessee and Duck Rivers was cleared. A year later, the same army unit went south to Natchez to start the road north. Thirty men would work for 30 days and then be relieved of duty. Their instructions included removing trees and stumps and then widen the road to eight feet. They also were to grade and smooth the road, as well as clear brush and growth up to four feet on each side of the road.

By 1805, the road extended from Natchez to Grindstone Ford. However, the U.S. Congress was concerned at the slow construction and decided to work on the road in three sections with a civilian bidder to finish the job in 1806. Their instructions were to make the road 12 feet wide and clear it. Streams less than 40 feet were to be bridged, and the entire job was to be finished by October 1807. Unfortunately, it was not quite completed but in 1809 locals in Nashville were already calling it “The Road Opened up by Federal Troops.” That same year, a spur road attaching to the Natchez Trace in the south was opened and called the “Three Chopped Way.” It was heavily traveled, as well.

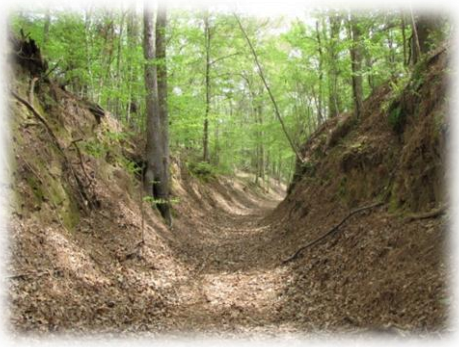

Figure 3: Old Trace
NPS Photo

During the War of 1812, Americans again became concerned about the amount of time it took to travel over the Natchez Trace. **Andrew Jackson** used the trace for moving troops during the Battle of New Orleans in 1813/1814 and recommended afterwards that a new military road be constructed between Nashville and New Orleans to cut down

travel time. Therefore, in 1816, the U.S. Congress approved $10,000 to begin work immediately on a new military road. Between 1817 and 1820, a new road was completed by 300 men that cut over 200 miles travel from the older section of the Natchez Trace. This new road allowed settlers to spread into the southwest at a faster rate than if they used the Natchez Trace.

While improvements to the Natchez Trace were made in the 1810s, there were still concerns. Thousands of travelers were still using the old Trace and many noticed that the northern section was much more usable than the southern portion. The road itself was widened, smoothed, and made into a much easier passage. In fact, wagons, carriages, horses, and foot travelers could be seen each day on the road in fairly large numbers. However, rains wore down the road and packed the soil. As a result, the old Trace began to sink in places and the trees made canopies over the road. One traveler noted that the trees "shut out the whole light of day for miles." Heavy rains also made the roads swampy messes that were impassable. The simple solution for travelers was to circumnavigate the bad portion of the road. This created new roads that branched off the original Natchez Trace.

By 1825, post roads had shifted and the Natchez Trace became much less traveled. New transportation methods including the **steamboat** and the **railroad** made overland travel less desirable. However, the old Trace saw quite a bit of use during the **Civil War** when both Union and Confederate troops traveled and fought on it during the **Vicksburg Campaign** of 1863. Afterwards, the Natchez Trace began to be claimed once again by the wilderness. It would not be until the 20th century that attention would be given to this important early highway in the form of preservation.

Creation of Post Roads:

The Post Office Act was created in 1792 when the U.S**.** Congress established not only post offices but post roads. The U.S. Congress created the post offices with three fundamental principles in mind:

1) The U.S. Post Office would be self-supporting. It would not rely on government subsidies, but would have to generate sufficient income to cover its expenses.
2) Second, if the U.S. Post Office generated a surplus, it would invest it in improved service, like roads. In other words, it would not keep its profits.
3) Finally, the U.S. Congress and not the postmaster general would decide where to put post roads. However, in England the postmaster general decided where to put post roads and this would not work in America. Therefore, the U.S. Congress decided not to delegate its power, but to keep control of locating post roads.

The debate over post roads had profound political importance. If the U.S. Post Office's task was to facilitate communications for the government, it made sense to have post roads linking coastal cities. However, U.S. Congress representatives from the interior areas of the country objected to this route. So, in keeping control over the post roads, the U.S. Congress ensured that the U.S. Post Office would respond to the American people rather than serving the government or the business community alone. By 1800, the U.S. Congress had designated 20,000 miles of post roads. The U.S. Post Office

was delivering mail as far west as Natchez. By the time of the War of 1812, the United States had 39, 378 miles of post roads and more than 2,600 post offices. By 1820, the U.S. Congress had designated 72,492 miles of postal routes linking 45,000 post offices.

Building a 19th Century Road

In general, building a road by the early 19th century involved simple technology and heavy labor. The first task - to clear the road - was usually the most difficult. Stumps, boulders, brush, and trees had to be cleared. Usually, this was done entirely by hand or with the help of horses. It was not until the construction of the Erie Canal that a worker invented a stump-puller. By using this device, seven men and a team of horses could pull 40 stumps in a day! Considering the density of the forests through which many roads ran, even this was slow progress.

Once debris was cleared, leveling began. This was the distinguishing mark of an improved road, separating it from paths for foot travel or animal migration. Using hand-held rakes, hoes, or sometimes horse-drawn scrapers, farmers and rural laborers, or in the case of the Natchez Trace - the U.S. Army - created a surface amenable to wagon, carriage, horse, and stage travel.

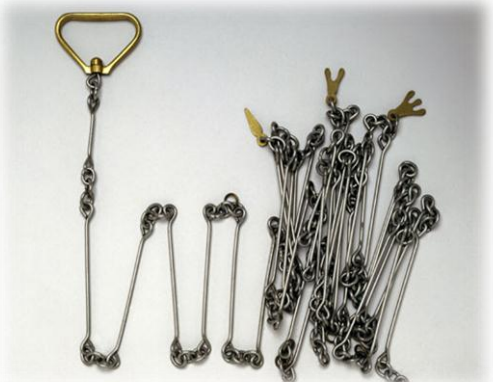

Figure 4: Gunter's Chain
Science Muesum/Science & Society Picture Library

The land also had to be surveyed by a professional to determine the most efficient route between two points. Distance, direction, and elevation all had to be measured. Distance, up through the early 1800s was measured with an iron chain 66 feet long known as **Gunter's Chain** (at right). Eighty chains equaled one mile while 10 square chains equaled an acre. To calculate distance, the Gunter's Chain was simply stretched between two points as many times as necessary. Direction was measured with a magnetic compass. Most elevation measurement was done with a simple level, a flat device containing a glass cylinder of water with a small air bubble that is even used today! Changes in elevation were extremely important in building a road. Cleared, flattened, and graded, a road could be finished at this point. However, builders found that these sorts of roads eroded quickly. Drainage ditches were added to stop the erosion process and avoid wheel ruts. Sometimes pounded stone or paving stones were placed on the road, as well, to make travel easier.

A Civil Engineer:
A **civil engineer** is a person who practices civil engineering, one of the many professions of engineering. Originally, a civil engineer worked on public works projects and was not to be compared with a military engineer, who worked only on armaments and defenses. Over time, various branches of engineering have become recognized as distinct from civil engineering, including chemical engineering, mechanical engineering,

and electrical engineering, while much of military engineering has been absorbed by civil engineering.