

# Rivers, Rails & Roads

## Transportation During the Cherokee Removal, 1837-1839

National Park Service  
Trail of Tears National Historic Trail  
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation



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## Introduction

In 1835, a minority of Cherokee leaders, acting outside of the authority of the Cherokee government, signed the Treaty of New Echota. This treaty set the conditions for the Cherokee removal: In exchange for \$5 million, the tribe would abandon their homes and lands in western North Carolina, northern Georgia and Alabama, and southeastern Tennessee and relocate to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). The Cherokee were given until May 1838 to remove voluntarily. Most refused to recognize the Treaty of New Echota, and few left before the deadline. In May 1838, the U.S. Army and state militias forcibly gathered the thousands of remaining Cherokee and held them at one of three emigrating depots, two in Tennessee and one in Alabama. Poor conditions at the emigrating depots led to rapid outbreaks of disease, and many Cherokee perished before they were divided into detachments and began their journey west.

In total, approximately 17,000 Cherokee removed to Indian Territory from 1837–1839, with more than 15,000 of them removed by force in 1838–1839. During their removal, the Cherokee utilized all major modes of transportation available at the time to reach their destination. They sailed the rivers on steamboats, flatboats, and keelboats. A few detachments traveled on one of the earliest railroads in the United States for a leg of their journey. The majority, however, traveled on roads over rough terrain with wagons in tow to transport goods, the elderly, and the sick.

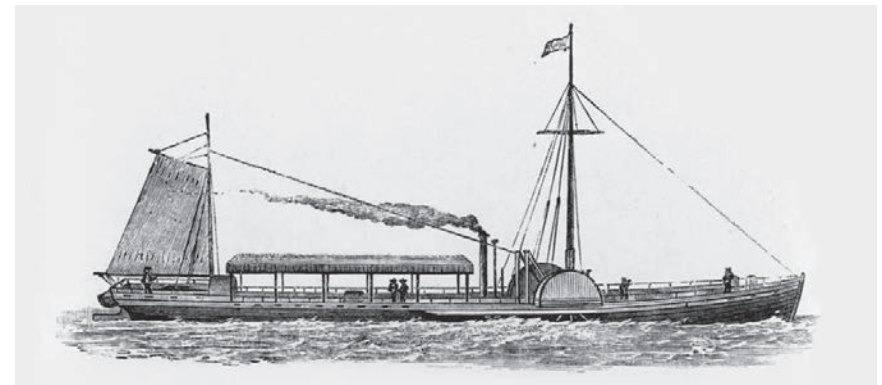
While the impact of removal was devastating, as thousands are estimated to have died, the Cherokee persevered and successfully rebuilt their communities while carrying on their cultural traditions. The removal of the Cherokee, commonly known as the Trail of Tears, largely completed the implementation of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which mandated the removal of most American Indian tribes east of the Mississippi River to lands in the West. This booklet serves as a companion to the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail Official Map and Guide, providing an overview of the many methods of transportation used in the Cherokee removal.

## Steamboats

From 1837 to 1839, nine different steamboats were employed to assist in the transportation of Cherokee detachments in reaching Indian Territory. These steamboats included the *Knoxville*, *Newark*, *Revenue*, *Smelter*, *Little Rock*, *George Guess*, *Tecumseh*, *Itasca*, and *Victoria*. Several of these steamboats were also used in the removal of the Muscogee (Creek), Chickasaw, and Seminole.

Steamboats were plying America's waterways for decades prior to the removal of the Cherokee. American engineer and inventor Robert Fulton is widely credited with developing the first commercially successful steamboat in 1807. The steamboats that traveled along the South's rivers at the time of the Trail of Tears typically shared a common design: They had a shallow, wooden hull and a wooden paddlewheel driven by steam power. Steamboats with paddlewheels on the side were called sidewheelers, and boats with the paddlewheel located on the rear were called sternwheelers. Sternwheelers could usually operate more efficiently in shallower water, but sidewheelers were easier to maneuver and were faster.

Steamboats were initially fueled by wood and coal, and like all boats, varied in size. The *Revenue*, for example, was built in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1834 and measured 127 feet from bow to stern and 18 feet, 5.5 inches wide. The *Little Rock*, built in Cincinnati, Ohio, measured slightly larger at 144 feet long, and 20 feet, 6 inches wide, while the *Tecumseh*, built in 1835 by James Howard in Jeffersonville, Indiana, measured smaller at 115 feet long and 16 feet wide. Pilot houses, multiple levels of decks, gangplanks, and smokestacks were also common features. Steamboats used in the passenger or tourist trade also had cabins with finely decorated state rooms.



Drawing of Robert Fulton's first steamboat, *North River Steamboat of Clermont* (sometimes known as *Clermont*), 1807. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

*“Imagine my astonishment, when, in that dark night, my eyes first fell upon the magnificent proportions of the steamer Knoxville, her great tall chimneys[,] her painted white house[-]looking cabin, two or three stories high, her wheel-house or paddle boxes away above her decks, another little house, the pilot house, stuck above all, long ropes running out from bow and stern, with the out end tied to some tree or rock...”*

- Description of the *Knoxville* in 1832 from the recollection of M. J. Parrot on May 16, 1876

Arguably, no other steamboat used in the Cherokee removal was better known for its fine accommodations than the steamboat *Smelter*. The *Smelter* was built in 1837 in Cincinnati and was owned and operated by two brothers from Galena, Illinois: Daniel Smith Harris and Robert Scribe Harris. Daniel served as the captain, and Robert served as the engineer. U.S. Army Lt. Edward Deas described this light-draught sidewheeler steamer as a “very good boat, over 150 Tuns Burthen, a fat vessel” and mentioned that it had a cooking stove onboard. The *Smelter* was renowned for its speed and luxurious accommodations. In an effort to capitalize on the growing tourist trade, the Harris brothers wanted to make sure that their boat offered the best facilities. As a result, it was the first boat on the Upper Mississippi to have private state rooms.

The brothers decorated the *Smelter* with evergreens and, when approaching landings or meeting with other boats, fired a cannon to announce its presence.

Steamboats fulfilled a number of specific jobs on the waterways. Towboats, for example, moved barges up and down rivers; ferries carried people across waterways; snagboats helped clear the river of large debris; packets carried people, goods, and mail down the rivers; and fuelers resupplied steamboats on the rivers with wood, coal, or oil. Most, if not all, of the steamboats used in the Cherokee removal from 1837–1839

Advertisement for the sale of the *Smelter* in *Daily Republican Banner* (Nashville), February 15, 1840.

*“[N]othing of importance occurred until the 22d July when the Steamer Smelter grounded 30 miles below Little Rock, she could proceed no further owing to the low stage of the water...on the 25th July the steamer Tecumseh[h] arrived & took the party on board... [We] reached Little Rock, Arkansas, on the 26th July—here I perceived I could proceed no further by water. I immediately made arrangements to procure wagons to proceed by land, with great difficulty I had collected near wagons sufficient but owing to the arrival of the steamer Itaska from Fort Coffee, & a slight rise in the river on the 2d of August the Indians refused to go by land, I had no means to compel them, I was compelled to discharge the wagons & charter the steamer Itaska.”*

- Captain Gustavus S. Drane, October 17, 1838

were classified as light-draught packet steamers, specifically designed to maximize the transport of people and goods up and down America’s western and southern rivers.

River travel in the early 19th century was not without danger, and as a result, steamboats did not survive long. In fact, between 1830 and 1839, 272 steamboats were destroyed, each having spent less than three years on the river. After the Cherokee removal, steamboats *Newark* and *Itasca*, for example, met an early demise, both hitting snags. The *Newark* sank within just two minutes in 15 feet of water. Sandbars, storms, fires, and boiler explosions were just some of the other dangers steamboats, their crews, and their passengers faced. On more than one occasion, steamboats carrying detachments of Cherokee along the Trail of Tears ran aground on sandbars. When this occurred, it took a tremendous effort from the crew to move the boat.

*“The forenoon was spent in trying to force the S. Boat over the Bar without effect, and the afternoon was consumed in getting her ashore on the north bank of the river. The Party remains encamped on the south bank. The river is rising very little and the weather now looks stormy.”*

- Lt. Edward Deas, April 16, 1838

## Keelboats

*"I employed the steamboat Newark to take in tow two keel boats, of 60 tons burden, and 80 feet long each, at \$13 per head, to take the detachment from Tuscumbia to Little Rock...[The keelboats] were spacious, well covered, painted, dry, kept constantly clean and well ventilated, by means of side doors, which afforded the Indians the means of sleeping without being exposed to the night air or inclement weather. On the top of each keel were three hearths, which added to the one in the deck of the steamboat, made fire-places which enabled the Indians to cook and eat at regular periods without it being necessary for the boat to stop."*

- Dr. John S. Young, June 25, 1837

Between 1837 and 1839, four Cherokee detachments utilized eight keelboats for their journeys to Indian Territory. Keelboats took their name from their construction—long, narrow boats built with a keel providing stability. They typically ranged from 40 to 80 feet long and 8 to 12 feet wide, and came to a point at the bow and stern. When fully loaded, the average keelboat drew 2 feet of water, which made it ideal for travel in shallow waters. These versatile boats transported people, food, and various commodities up and down western rivers.

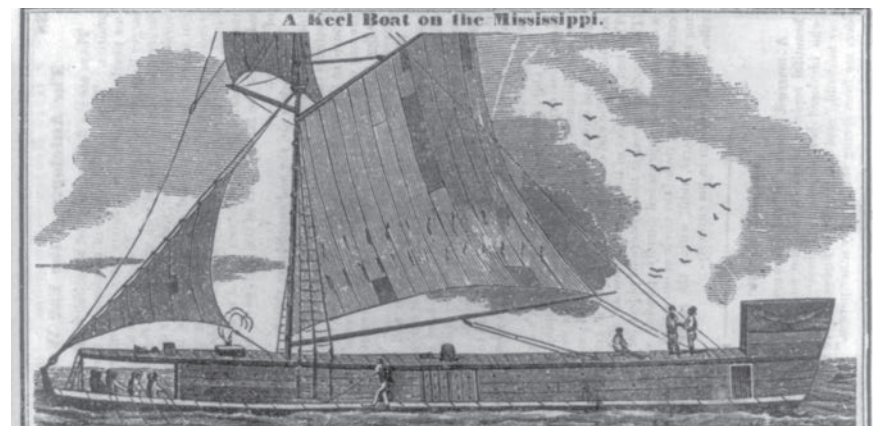


This 55-foot full-size replica of the keelboat used for the Lewis and Clark expedition has a small rear cabin, typical of early keelboats, but was likely smaller than those keelboats used on the Trail of Tears. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

While early keelboats were outfitted with a rear cabin, later versions typically had a much larger center cabin, or cargo box, for shelter and storage. Keelboats were also equipped with sails and rigging and propelled by wind, rowing, poling, or hand-winchng upstream through the rigorous efforts of their crews. Along the perimeter of the gunwales, or upper edge of the sides of the boat, ran a 12- to 18-inch cleated footway for the crew to walk when they were poling the boat. The bow of the boat was outfitted with four to twelve seats for oarsmen. During the Trail of Tears, however, keelboats were towed, meaning that the space for rowers could be used by passengers.

While no images are known to exist of the keelboats used in the Cherokee removal, period accounts offer contrasting descriptions of their appearance. U.S. Army Lt. Edward Deas, for example, described the initial keelboat used in his April 1838 detachment as "one large Keel with double cabins" that was "commodious."

Deas described the keelboats used in his June 1838 detachment as simply "double deck keels." Dr. Clark Lillybridge, a physician employed to travel with the detachment led by Dr. John S. Young in 1837, conveyed a more negative assessment, describing the keelboats as a "revolting spectacle." (*See full quote below.*)



This 1838 depiction of a keelboat on the Mississippi River shows a much larger center cabin or cargo box common to keelboats at the time. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

*"The Boats prepared for the transportation of the Emigrants, are entirely too limited in room and conveniences for the accommodation of the party. The Keel Boats are without Stoves or fires in them, water in the hold, & present to those accustomed as many of the Emigrants are, to many of the comforts of civilized life, rather a revolting spectacle."*

- Dr. Clark Lillybridge, March 13, 1837

## Flatboats



Flatboat, c.1898. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

Twenty-nine flatboats were used on the Hiwassee and Tennessee rivers to assist in the transportation of four Cherokee detachments to the West between 1837 and 1839. Flatboats were built commercially as early as the late 1780s and were one of the most common vernacular wooden boats used to transport people and cargo along the major southeastern rivers in the early 19th century. They were known by a variety of names, including *arks*, *Kentucky boats*, *flats*, *New Orleans boats*, *broadhorns*, *family boats*, and *hoopole boats*.

Flatboats were rectangular, flat-bottomed boats used for downstream travel that typically measured between 12 and 20 feet wide and from 20 to more than 100 feet in length. The stern and sides consisted of vertical walls of planks, and the bow was canted, or angled. Depending on the size of the boat, there were one or two long oars, called sweeps, on each side, a steering oar at the rear, and a “gouger” on the front of the flat. In addition, some flatboats had a mast and sail to help speed the slow-moving boats down river. In an effort to protect passengers and merchandise, cabins were often built on flats. These could be simple open-sided sheds or fully encased cabins that ran nearly the length of the boat. The cabins frequently had fireplaces built into them, as well, so that food could be prepared on board. Some, but not all, of the flatboats used in the Cherokee removal were lashed side-by-side to a steamboat and towed through some of the more dangerous rapids on the Tennessee River.

*“There was, we understand, a flat bottom boat, 100 feet long, 20 feet wide, and two stories high, fastened to an old steam boat. This was so filled that the timbers began to crack and give way, and the boat itself was on the point of sinking. Some of the poor inmates were of course taken out, while this boat was lashed to the steam boat, and some other small boats were brought to take in those who had been recalled. Twelve hundred, it is said, were hurried off in this manner at one time.”*

- Rev. Daniel S. Butrick, June 10, 1838, Ross's Landing (Chattanooga, Tennessee)

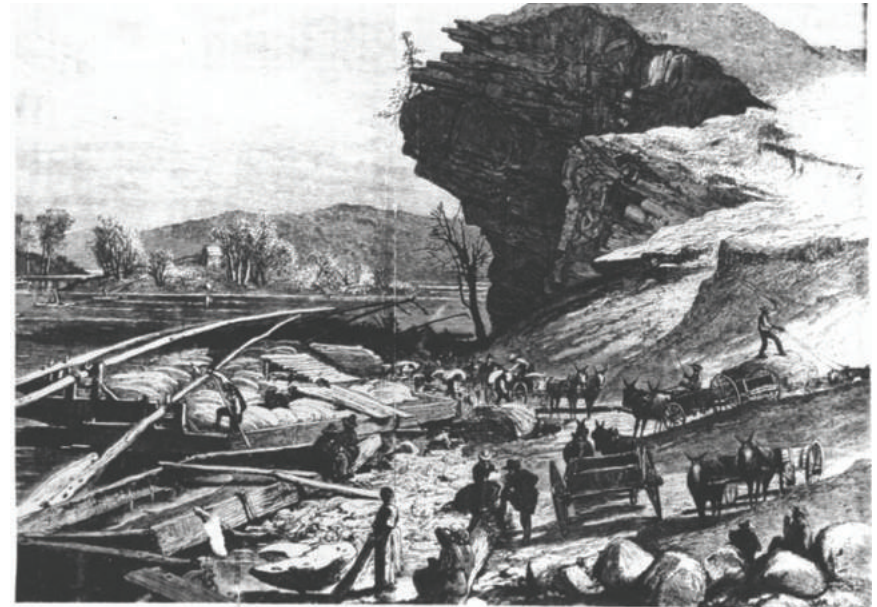


Illustration of Ross's Landing by Harry Fenn, 1871. Note small flatboats being loaded with cargo. *Courtesy of the Chattanooga Public Library.*

*“The Suck is the first and most difficult and dangerous of the rapids... The S[team] boat with one Flat on each side passed thro' with most of the people on board, but after getting thro' the most rapid water, it was found impossible to keep her in the channel, & in consequence was thrown upon the north Bank with some violence but luckily none of the people were injured although one of the Flats was a good deal smashed.”*

- Lt. Edward Deas, June 6, 1838

## Ferries

*“For the ferriage over the Tennessee River at Savannah Tenn. of a Party of Emigrating Cherokees in a number about 6[00]-700, together with the wagons & Teams, Saddle horses & also the Agents employed in the Emigration of the Party.”*

- Lt. Edward Deas, November 12, 1838

Before bridges were common, ferries played an important role in transportation as they provided conveyance over large streams and rivers. Ferry boats were most often flatboats with modifications such as sloping ramps attached to the front and back of the boat. These allowed the ferry to pull up to the bank to unload passengers and cargo directly onto the land. Although most ferries in the 1830s shared important characteristics, they were propelled across the water in a variety of ways.

In the case of a **rope** or **cable ferry**, a cord was strung across the water from bank to bank, and pulled by hand, or attached to a wheel turned by an operator, which would then pull the ferry boat across the water. This method was only practical in shallow areas where there was little to no river traffic that could get tangled in the ropes.

A **swing ferry**, also known as a **flying ferry**, was tethered to a stable point in the river by a cable or heavy rope, and used the water current and an elaborate set of pulleys to swing it from one bank to the other. Such a ferry connected Calhoun, Tennessee,



Illustration of the swing ferry at Ross's Landing in Chattanooga by Harry Fenn, 1871.

Note the buoys stretching along the river behind the ferry.

*Courtesy of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Special Collections.*

to the Indian Agency at Fort Cass. U.S. Army Lt. John Phelps wrote about the ferry in his journal: “I crossed the [Hiwassee] river on a flying bridge the first I ever saw”. Cherokee detachments used at least two other swing ferries during their journeys, one each at Ross's Landing and Savannah, Tennessee.

**Steam ferries** were essentially small and less elaborate steamboats. Steam ferries posed the same danger to passengers and crew as their larger counterparts due to boilers exploding from too much pressure. Such an incident occurred when a Cherokee detachment crossed the Ohio River on Berry's Ferry at Golconda, Illinois, scalding several people and killing two, including one Cherokee.

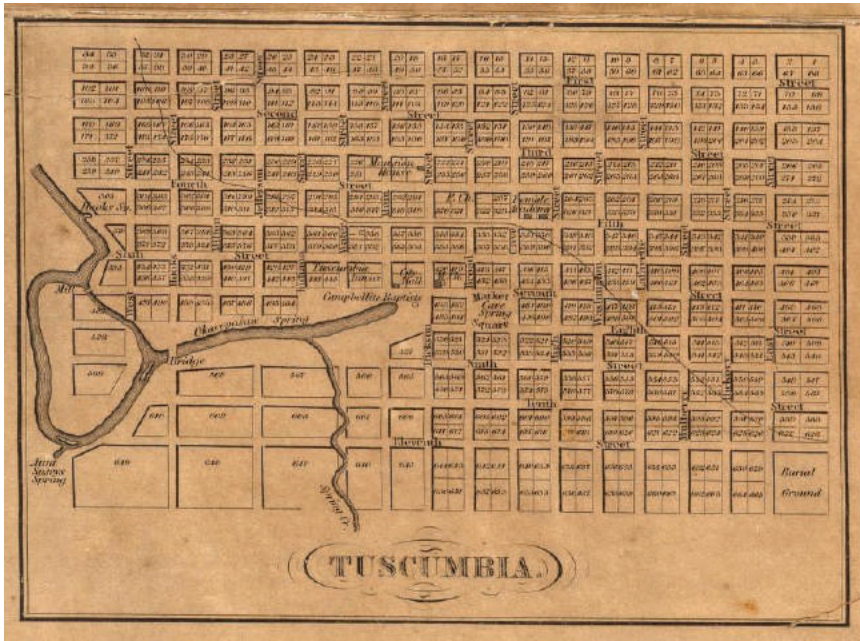
The danger and expense of steam power encouraged many ferrymen to use animals as a source of self-contained propulsion. **Horse ferries** had one of several types of wheels, such as a side-mounted paddle wheel or horizontal treadwheel, to which horses were attached, their forward movement providing the energy to propel the boat. The only horse ferry known to be used on the Trail of Tears was Green's Ferry at Bainbridge, Missouri, which ferried some of the Cherokee detachments on the Northern Route across the Mississippi River from Illinois during the winter of 1838–1839.

Though Cherokee detachments often used ferries, they also forded rivers, as the Benge detachment did at the White River in Arkansas. An observer wrote: “It was winter ... ice was frozen over along the banks of the river ... Instead of their stopping to make terms to cross the river in the ferry boat, they never pretended to halt but waded across the river, women and men, all except for the few who had horses or carriages.”



Horse-powered ferry, 1845. *Courtesy of City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 16, Series 71.*

## The Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad



Detail of the railroad route through Tuscumbia. Source: John La Tourette, "Map of the State of Alabama and West Florida," 1838, David Rumsey Map Collection, davidrumsey.com.

The Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad was among the earliest railroads in the United States and was the first railroad located west of the Allegheny Mountains. Its formation was born out of the economic need to bring goods efficiently into the local economy of northeastern Alabama and to transport cotton and other commodities year-round, by avoiding the dangerous Muscle Shoals area of the Tennessee River. Prior to the development of the railroad, the most efficient way to move goods across northeastern Alabama was by the Tennessee River, but it was only a seasonal operation, at best. Islands, low-lying shoals of jagged rocks, intense rapids, and low water levels made the Muscle Shoals area impassable and halted economic activity on the river for nine to 10 months of the year, on average.

Seeing an opportunity to benefit economically from the increasing amount of steamboat travel on the Tennessee River, Tuscumbia merchants built large warehouses and a landing at the confluence of Spring Creek and the Tennessee River, which became known as Tuscumbia Landing. This location presented a major problem,

though, as the city of Tuscumbia was located two miles from this new landing, and goods, in large quantities, needed to be transported from the city to the landing on a regular basis and in a timely manner.

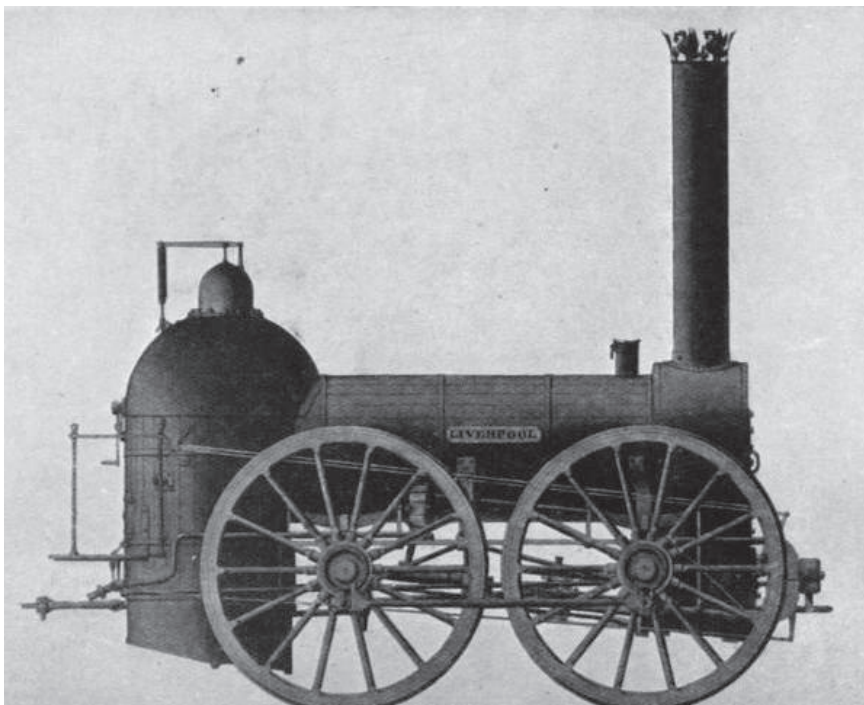
On January 16, 1830, the Tuscumbia Railway Company was incorporated to build a railroad from the town of Tuscumbia to the Tennessee River. Work on the 2-mile railroad started in June 1831 and was completed a year later, at a cost of \$4,523.85 per mile. The railroad proved a success, and even before its completion discussions were underway to expand the railroad's length to serve as a year-round alternate transportation route around the dangerous Muscle Shoals.

In January 1832, the state legislature granted a charter for the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad for a 43-mile expansion of the railroad from Tuscumbia to Decatur. Work progressed swiftly on the railroad through the hard work of enslaved African Americans. Before the end of 1834, the entire 43-mile section of railroad between Tuscumbia and Decatur was completed and ready for use with depots located in Tuscumbia, Leighton (Crossroads), Jonesborough (Town Creek), Courtland, Hillsborough, and Fennell's Turnout (Trinity).



Detail of the Tuscumbia, Courtland, & Decatur Railroad. Source: John La Tourette, "Map of the State of Alabama and West Florida," 1838, David Rumsey Map Collection.



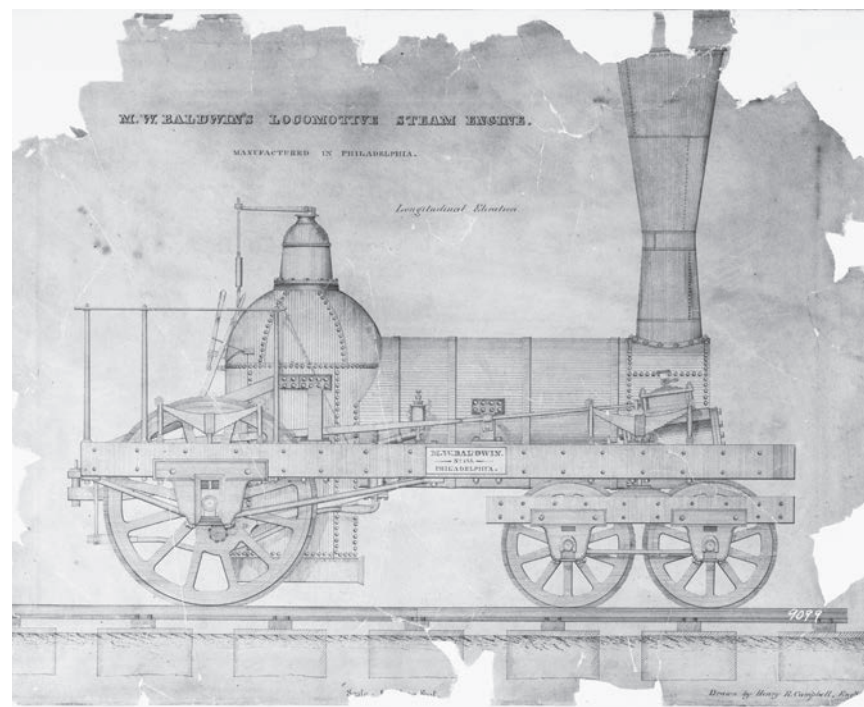


The Fulton likely had a similar design to the Liverpool (shown here), a 0-4-0 type engine built in 1830 by Edward Bury. Source: "Edward Bury and Co: Liverpool," *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History*, <https://www.gracesguide.co.uk>.

Several years after the completion of the railroad, approximately 2,000 Cherokee, and some Creek, traveled in three detachments on the newly constructed railroad for a leg of their journey to Indian Territory. During this time, the railroad utilized freight and passenger cars pulled by four steam locomotives, named *Fulton*, *Pennsylvania*, *Comet*, and *Triumph*. The first two locomotives acquired for the railroad were the *Fulton* and the *Pennsylvania*. The *Fulton* was a 0-4-0-type engine manufactured by Edward Bury of Liverpool, England, at a cost of \$4,915.04. The *Pennsylvania* was initially constructed by British manufacturer Robert Stephenson and Company of Newcastle-upon-Tyne but purchased second hand from the Philadelphia, Germantown & Norristown Railroad Company for \$5,880.37. Another 0-4-0-type engine, named the *Comet*, was ordered from the West Point Foundry in New York and cost \$7,959.82. This engine was the first recorded iron-frame, American-made locomotive. The locomotive engine *Triumph* was a 4-2-0-type engine made by W. M. Baldwin of Philadelphia and cost \$7,091.66. It was placed on the tracks on June 1, 1836.

These four steam locomotives hauled passenger or "pleasure" cars, and small, flat freight cars, known as "burden" cars. Very little information is known about the railroad's passenger cars due to the scarcity of existing records from the railroad. Mrs. J. M. Clark, a native of Moulton, Alabama, whose father worked on the railroad, described the passenger cars as "exaggerated stage coach[es]," which is consistent with trends at the time. The earliest passenger cars utilized on American railroads were, in fact, open-air carriages, similar in design to stagecoaches.

These early passenger cars were mostly built by established carriage-makers, who built what they already knew, constructing bodies identical to those used for road coaches. These stagecoach-style bodies were then mounted on wheels, appropriate for use on the railroad, that were usually manufactured by a separate entity. Tuscumbia carriage-maker Henry Williams, for example, manufactured at least one of the passenger cars for the railroad. Williams was manufacturing and selling carriages from his shop in Tuscumbia as early as the mid-1820s. He was commissioned to build a passenger car



Drawing of the Baldwin Locomotive Works 4-2-0 type engine *Martin Van Buren*, built in 1839. While no drawings are known to exist of the early steam locomotives used on the TC&D Railroad, the locomotive *Triumph* likely looked similar to this engine. Courtesy of the Baldwin Negatives Collection, Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, PHMC.

for the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad in 1833. Four years later, he partnered with Wilson Northcross. In addition to offering repair work, Williams and Northcross made harnesses and sold a variety of both new and used vehicles, including barouches, buggies, mail coaches, and passenger coaches.

On March 7, 1837, the first of three Cherokee detachments, consisting of approximately 466 individuals, arrived in Decatur. As a crowd of spectators looked on, the following morning the Cherokee began boarding the first of two trains to take them to Tuscumbia. Unfortunately, this next leg of the journey did not go as planned. About half of the detachment boarded the first train to Tuscumbia at about 8 a.m. and began their journey. The second locomotive was scheduled to arrive at about 1 p.m. By sunset, the locomotive still had not arrived, and the Cherokee were becoming increasingly cold and uncomfortable. As a result, they spent the night in a warehouse owned by the railroad, and their departure was postponed until the following morning.

The second detachment of Cherokee to use the railroad for a leg of its journey—a group of 600–800 individuals—arrived in Decatur on June 9, 1838, and boarded approximately 32 rail cars hauled by two separate trains the following morning. The train cars were reported to be “necessarily crowded” because no other train cars could be obtained for “want of power in the Locomotive Engines.”

U.S. Army Lt. Robert H. K. Whiteley led the third detachment that used the railroad for a leg of its journey. On June 21, the detachment reached Decatur and boarded two trains for Tuscumbia. The train ride was not without incident, though. One mile from Tuscumbia, Whiteley reported, a Cherokee man named Chicken, who was on the second train, “lost his hat[, and] jumped off the car to obtain it.” He was killed in the process.

*“From 3 Oclock til Sun Set the Indians continued setting upon the open Carrs [sic], waiting the arrival of the Locomotive, the weather having become very cold, their condition was quite uncomfortable[.] at length the order was given that the train would not start til morning. The Indians were immediately and anxiously engaged in selecting their bedding for the night; before they accomplished this darkness closed in upon them... The train of Carrs [sic] from the West were momentarily expected, and the Indians were afraid to lie down for fear of being run over.”*

- Dr. Clark Lillybridge, March 8, 1837



This stagecoach-style passenger car was built between 1834 and 1836 by John Lightner for the Boston & Providence Railroad and is now displayed in the National Museum of Transportation in St. Louis. It is the oldest surviving original railroad passenger car in North America and may have been similar in design to the passenger cars used on the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad during the Cherokee removal. *Courtesy of The National Museum of Transportation, St. Louis, Missouri.*

*“[The Cherokees’] appearance, in connection with the locomotive and its train, was not more attractive to the spectators, then did the engine and cars seem to be to the Indians. Many of them could be seen examining, with their peculiar inquisitive silence and gravity, this great enigma to them, while others, apparently uninterested and thoughtless, amused themselves with an old fiddle or sat motionless, gazing at those around.”*

- March 15, 1837, reprinted from the *American Sentinel* in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*

## Early 19th Century Roads and Turnpikes

*“After crossing the river, our road ran on a side hill, and was scarcely wide enough for a waggon to pass...the road, in the narrowest place, was eight feet wide, though by actual measurement, it was about 5 ½ feet, of firm ground. One loaded waggon ran off, but was caught, & propped up, till unloaded, & then got onto the road: another turned over entirely, through nothing was broken. At length, all the waggons which had crossed the river, got over this dangerous place and camped, having about a quarter of a mile to go for water.”*

- Rev. Daniel S. Butrick, traveling with the  
Richard Taylor Detachment, November 1, 1838

The majority of Cherokee traveled overland on foot during their forced removal to Indian Territory, with some traveling on horses and in wagons. The detachments used a network of well-known, established roads that linked major towns and settlements. These roads, however, varied in width, quality, and condition. Some roads at the time were only passable by horseback or on foot, while others were significantly wider, allowing enough room for wagons and stagecoaches to pass one another. Since all Cherokee detachments that traveled overland contained wagons, carriages, or carryalls to transport both people and supplies, the wider wagon roads were predominantly used to reach Indian Territory; however, detachments occasionally found themselves on hard-to-navigate, narrow roads.

Some states created a system to identify types of roads to help travelers better plan their journeys. Beginning in 1821, Tennessee, for example, created a three-tier system to classify roads. First-class roads were typically stage roads and were generally between 20 feet and 30 feet wide, contained mile markers, were bridged, and usually well-maintained. Second-class roads were 12 feet in width, mile-marked, and “cleared of obstructions so as to afford loaded wagons safe passage.” Third-class roads were only wide enough for a horse and rider. Trees along the roads were notched, so individuals knew the class of road they were traveling on. Alabama had a similar classification or “grading” system in place: First-grade roads had to be at least 30 feet wide, second-grade roads could not be less than 20 feet wide, and third-grade roads could not be less than 15 feet wide. During the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee traveled primarily on first- and second-class roads.



The Benige detachment traveled on the present-day Old Stage Road in Pulaski, Tennessee, which was incorporated into the Columbia, Pulaski, Elkton, & Alabama Turnpike Road.  
*Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*



Tollgates, such as the one shown here, were located at various points on turnpikes in order to collect tolls. *Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

By the time of the Trail of Tears, road construction in the Southeast had begun to evolve with the introduction of turnpikes. These turnpikes, or toll roads, served as the highways of the era. They helped to better facilitate movement and trade between major towns and cities and were utilized by Cherokee detachments on the Trail of Tears. The number and location of tollgates were unique to each turnpike; however, tollgates could typically not be erected within two miles of the boundary of a town or less than 4–5 miles apart. Tolls also varied from turnpike to turnpike. For example, the Memphis, Somerville, and Bolivar Turnpike, incorporated in January 1838, planned to have 10 tollgates and charge the following fares:

20 head of sheep or hogs	\$.30
20 head of horned or neat cattle	\$.50
Horse or mule not in a drove	\$.06 ¼, if in a drove \$.03
Pleasure carriage	\$.18 ¾
Loaded wagon	\$.18 ¾
Empty wagon	\$.12 ½
Cart	\$.12 ½
Foot passenger	\$.06 ¼

*“We paid Forty dollars at the Walerns [sic] Ridge gate, and the man agreed to let the other Detachments pass at half price viz 37 ½ for four wheeled Carriages & 6 ¼ for a horse. On the Cumberland Mountain they fleeced us: 75 Cents a wagon & 12 ½ Cents a horse without the least abatement of thanks. We will avoid several gates on the road to Nashville.”*

- Evan Jones, traveling with the Situwakee detachment, to Principal Chief John Ross, October 27, 1838



Extant section of the Memphis to Little Rock Road at Village Creek State Park, Arkansas. *Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*



Extant segment of the Old Jefferson Road in the East Fork Recreation Area, used by four detachments to avoid tolls on the way to Nashville. *Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*



Extant portion of the Northern Route of the Trail of Tears in Mantle Rock, Kentucky.  
*Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

During the Trail of Tears, there were reports that some tollgate operators in Tennessee charged exorbitant amounts to the detachments, thus leading four detachments to take alternate routes to Nashville to avoid tolls. Despite the inconvenience of tolls, turnpikes were among the best roads in an area. They were also built with specific construction requirements to ensure their designation as first-class roads, often requiring drainage ditches and culverts, as well as specifying surface materials.

Research indicates that most of the roads used for removal likely had dirt or gravel surfaces, while some may have been macadamized, a process named for Scottish engineer John Loudon McAdam in which single-sized crushed stone layers are compacted, with a slope from the center to the drainage ditches on the sides, to create a durable road surface. Regardless, conditions varied greatly, and there were numerous reports that detachments, at one time or another, faced poor road conditions along their journeys. Evan Jones, for example, reported to Principal Chief John Ross on October 27, 1838, at McMinnville, Tennessee, that the detachment was “somewhat fatigued with passing so rapidly over the bad roads.” On the same day, U.S. Army Lt. Edward Deas reported the following near Winchester, Tennessee: “[O]ur progress has been necessarily slow, in consequence of the obstructions in the roads over which we have passed.” A week later, on November 3, 1838, Deas continued to complain about the condition of the roads, reporting, “[W]e have pursued the direct road thro’ Fayetteville [sic] and Pulaski leading to Memphis part of which we found very rough.” Two days later, Butrick reported in his journal that while passing a particularly “narrow & dangerous part of the road” in the Walden’s Ridge area, a wagon overturned, causing fatal injuries to a member of the detachment. As the journey progressed through the winter months, rain, ice, and snow caused the roads to deteriorate further.

In the early 19th century, regular maintenance of public roads was a necessity and was typically performed through community efforts and under the direction of an appointed overseer. Just as the quality and condition of roads varied from state to state and from road to road, the process of maintaining the roads varied, as well. A number of states made it a general requirement for all able-bodied men of a certain age, both white, black, free, and enslaved, to work on the road, with few exceptions. The number of days required to work on the roads varied, and some states instituted fines for those individuals who failed to carry out their duties. Despite all the rules in place to maintain roads, early 19th century overland travel was often slow-going and hazardous during inclement weather and in rough terrain.

## Wagons, Carriages, and Carryalls

*“We have a large number of sick, and very many extremely aged, and infirm persons in our detachment, that must of necessity be conveyed in the waggons [sic].”*

– Jesse Bushyhead to John Ross, October 21, 1838

While the majority of Cherokee walked on the Trail of Tears due to an insufficient number of horses, oxen, and wagons, animal-powered wooden vehicles were still a constant presence on the trail and played an important role in the removal by carrying goods, the elderly, and the sick. Although vehicles helped in these roles, they required regular maintenance. Poor roads and difficult terrain, worsened by inclement weather, took a toll on the vehicles, which were prone to broken spokes and lost linchpins (a fastener to prevent the wheel from sliding off the axle).

Current research suggests that most of the wooden, animal-powered vehicles used on the Trail of Tears were either older vehicles acquired from sources in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina, or they came from the hands of local companies, crafters, and blacksmiths. Some Cherokee families with means traveled the Trail of Tears in carriages or carryalls of their own. A man from Maury County, Tennessee, for example, observed the Benge detachment travel in front of his family’s home and noted, “Some of the Indian half-breeds were quite wealthy, owned slaves and rode in fine carriages.”

The largest local company in the Cherokee region was probably that of John Philip Nissen of Salem, North Carolina. The Moravian settlement at Salem had deep ties both culturally and economically with the Cherokees, and trading relationships dated to the 1790s. Interestingly, Nissen established his Salem wagon-making factory in 1834, sometime after the Cherokee Agency’s January 1834 announcement about the need for wagons to carry out removal. Within a decade, the Nissen wagon dominated the region.

Other North Carolina wheelwrights and crafters were located in Charlotte, Lincolnton, and Salisbury, and Catawba County near the boundary of Cherokee

*“Tuesday about noon, the lynch pin came out of one end of the fore axletree, the wheel came off and the end of the axletree, falling on the frozen ground broke, so that we had much trouble to get on to a waggon [sic] maker 6 miles forward.”*

– Rev. Daniel S. Butrick, December 24-25, 1838

country. Eastin Morris’s *Tennessee Gazetteer* indicates several wagon-makers were active near the Cherokee settlements in Tennessee in the 1830s. At least some of the wagons used on the Trail of Tears came from Winchester, Franklin County, Tennessee. Cherokee leader John Ridge gave missionary William Chamberlain \$3,000 to travel to Winchester to purchase wagons for his family.

Though many wooden vehicles shared many characteristics, they varied in shape and intended purpose. The Pennsylvania-based Swiss and German wagon-makers who developed the **Conestoga wagon** designed it to carry freight more so than people, though it did both. Large wheels, a curved bed, and a series of bows over which a canvas could be stretched for shelter were defining characteristics of this type of wagon. The curved bed helped center the freight and passenger weight, making the wagon more stable and creating more storage capacity.

The Nissen Wagon Works produced a variation of the Conestoga wagon known as a “crooked bed” wagon. It was smaller, lighter in weight, and used more for farmwork rather than long-distance freighting. Despite the intended farm use, and given the



c.1835 Conestoga wagon on display at the Studebaker Museum in South Bend, Indiana. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*



Nissen wagon in Lewisville, North Carolina. *Courtesy of Lewisville Historical Society.*

company's establishment just a few years before the federal government removed the Cherokee west, this type of farm wagon was likely present on the Trail of Tears.

While the term **carryall** is seldom heard today, it was commonly used in the first half of the 19th century to describe a type of light, family wagon used in the central Atlantic states, and later used to describe light Rockaways. "Carryall" was used interchangeably with other names to identify slightly different types of wooden vehicles at the time, but generally referred to a light, covered four-wheeled carriage with two seats inside, drawn by a single horse. More often used to carry people than heavy loads, some carryalls had convertible tops, stuffed seat cushions, and exterior paint.

The Rev. Daniel S. Butrick, who traveled with the Richard Taylor detachment on the Trail of Tears, repeatedly referred to his vehicle as a **carryall**, as opposed to a wagon or carriage, which were terms he regularly used to identify other vehicles. On November 14, 1838, Butrick acquired a "new oil cloth" in Woodbury, Tennessee, to put on the top of his carryall as a result of the rainy weather. Butrick and his wife often slept in their carryall on the Trail of Tears but stored their bedding and tent in a larger wagon during the day.

The **stagecoach** is an evolved form of an 18th century stage wagon. The stagecoach had an oval body suspended by thorough braces. The driver's seat was located outside of the passenger body, which had at least one door on the side. This form evolved into what is known as the American Mail Coach or the Concord Coach, which ranged in size to hold from six to nine passengers.

Less expensive passenger coaches with square-shaped passenger boxes and open sides were also built. These were referred to as Passenger Wagons, Overland Wagons, Mud Wagons, and Mountain Wagons. It is possible that these could have been used on the Trail of Tears. Another popular form was the coachee, a light family carriage with curtains that placed the driver and the passenger under the same roof.

*"Soon after dark it commenced raining, and the wind drove the water into our carryall so that our bed and cloths became quite wet on one side. The weather also became very cold, and our blankets over the waggon [sic] were covered with snow when we rose."*

– Rev. Daniel S. Butrick, December, 24-25, 1838



c.1860 carryall or Rockaway. *Courtesy of The Henry Ford Museum.*

## The Zuraw Wagon

*“Mr. Hicks detachment started today, and passed us about one mile. Some of his wagons however had been unable to get up on account of the mud. Mr. Hildebrand’s detachment came up within about a mile of us, excepting some wagons mired down in the mud.”*

– Rev. Daniel S. Butrick, January 14, 1839

The Zuraw Wagon, located at the Foxfire Museum & Heritage Center in Rabun County, Georgia, is not a wagon type, but the name of a specific wagon used during the Cherokee removal. It is the last remaining documented wagon with ties to the Trail of Tears. Originally owned by Green B. Daves (or Davis) and donated to the museum by Retta Picklesimer Zuraw, the donor letter for the wagon recounts some of the oral history surrounding the artifact.

Daves served as a private in Capt. Benjamin Cleveland’s Georgia Mounted Militia from February 1838 to July 1838. He used the Zuraw Wagon during this time to round up the Cherokees from their homes and transport them to one of the fortified posts nearby. From these posts, troops transported the Cherokee once more to large emigration depots, including Ross’s Landing, Fort Cass, and Fort Payne. Most people were detained at these larger camps for months in terrible conditions until they were forced to leave for Indian Territory.

Donor materials at the museum refer to the Zuraw Wagon as a “tar-grinder” wagon, referring to the pine-sap substance used to keep everything lubricated for travel. Considering its age, the Zuraw Wagon is in good condition and remains in a storage shed at the Foxfire Museum. Changes include the removal of the tongue used to tether teams of animals for pulling, repairs of the wheel spokes, wood shims placed between the metal tire and wooden wheel, and replaced bows that provide the frame for a canvas or linen cover.

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The invention of the steamboat and railroads, along with vast improvements in the construction, design, and maintenance of roads and turnpikes, marked the beginning of a transportation revolution in the United States during the early 1800s. The Cherokee removal occurred as this revolution began to unfold. While the Cherokee utilized these transformative modes of transportation during their forced removal, it is important to remember that the majority traveled by foot on roads over rough terrain.



Zuraw Wagon as displayed at the Foxfire Museum, 2019.  
Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



