

THE JOURNAL OF MISSISSIPPI HISTORY
1999 vol. 61, pp. 213-234

Three Chopped Way and the Representations of Yesteryear

By Jack D. Elliott, Jr.

"...a past that is abolished yet preserved in its traces."

Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*

Early frontier roads have loomed large in the American historical mythos. Names such as the Cumberland Road, the Wilderness Road, the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, and the Natchez Trace evoke images of pioneers and Indians, of the conflict between cultures, of Manifest Destiny, and of the evolution of the West from wilderness to frontier to civilization. Today there are only scattered traces from the past that provide us with the means to symbolically reconstruct their bygone reality. These include the ephemeral road beds, often indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape, and a variety of archival sources—maps and documents—which are often not clear as to the exact nature and location of historic roads.

The Three Chopped Way is one such road. For a century Mississippi history textbooks have stated to generations of schoolchildren that it was an early-nineteenth-century road connecting Natchez with Georgia and providing the route for thousands of westward-bound pioneers.¹ Over years of reading in primary and secondary sources on Mississippi of that period I gradually became aware of a conspicuous absence of references to

JACK D. ELLIOTT, JR., is historical archaeologist for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. This article is the result of research conducted for the Historic Preservation Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, at the request of the Mississippi Department of Transportation. The author extends thanks to James R. Atkinson, James Allen Causey, Scott McCoy, and Jim Woodrick for their assistance.

¹ The numerous textbooks that featured the Three Chopped Way are documented separately below. The concept of the Three Chopped Way has also appeared in Frank

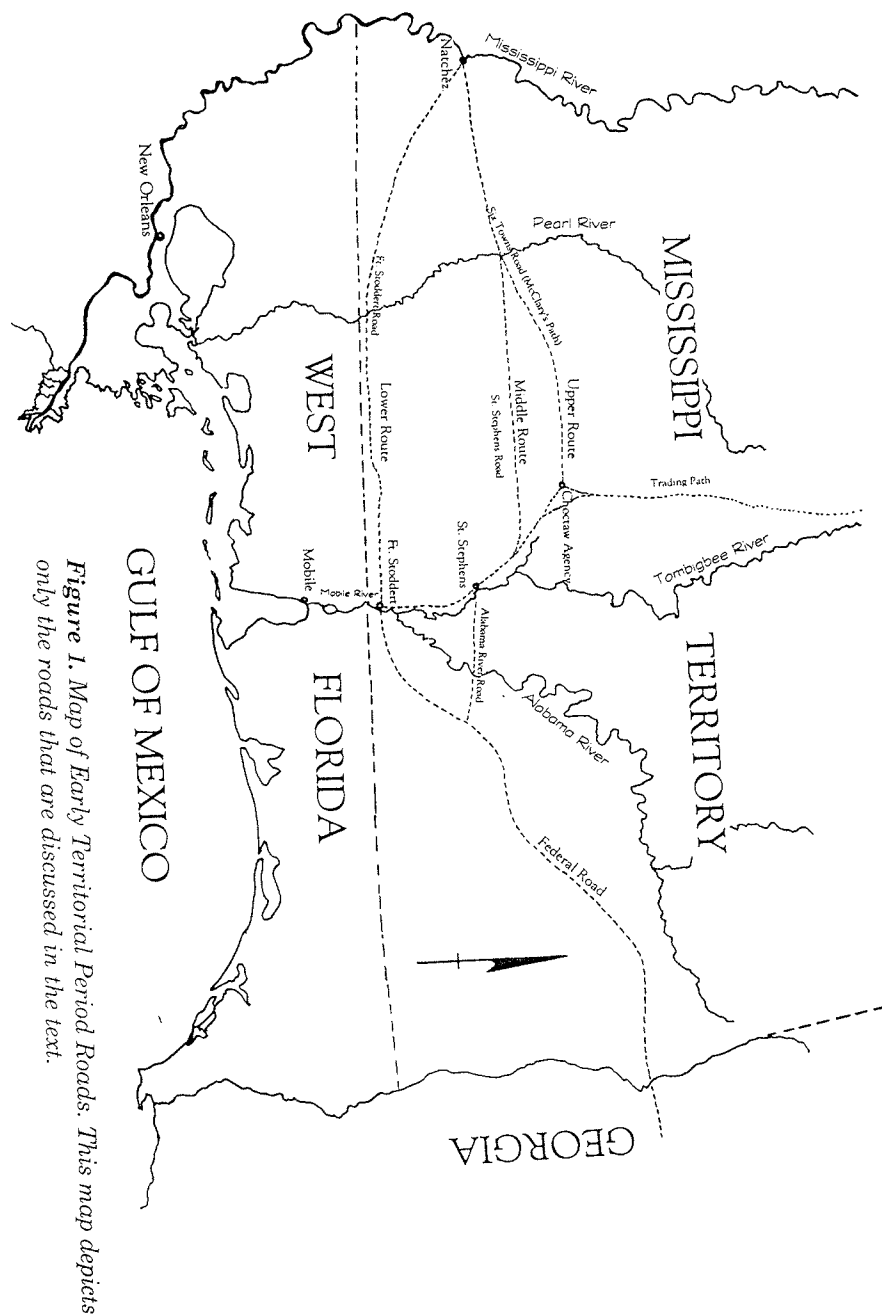


Figure 1. Map of Early Territorial Period Roads. This map depicts only the roads that are discussed in the text.

the road.² Recently I learned the source of the problem: confusion in the historiographic literature led to errors that were then passed on to other unsuspecting historians; in sum, the Three Chopped Way never existed. An examination of the process that led to this error provides insight into the problems of representing other phenomena of the past about which little is known. First, the problem of the conceptualization and interpretation of roads is explored—not a clear-cut matter as one might assume; second, a historical sketch of the relevant historic roads is provided; third, an analysis shows how the relevant secondary sources developed and how the error originated; and fourth, a few broader implications for historiography are suggested.

When traveling today we follow roads that are clearly marked by numbers and/or names that are keyed into maps of states, counties, and municipalities. Consequently, we tend to take road nomenclature and conceptualization for granted. Thus Highway X might run for some distance and then combine with one or more highways, or perhaps have a gap in it before resuming again miles down the road.

In contrast, early frontier roads were not well defined. Englishman Adam Hodgson, who traveled through the Indian territory of Mississippi during the spring of 1820, made these observations:

Our course, the whole day, was along an Indian path, about twelve or fourteen inches broad, through woods.... It was twice

Allen Cabaniss and James Allen Cabaniss, "Religion in Ante-Bellum Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* (1944), VI, 200; Jacqueline Anderson Matte, *The History of Washington County: First County in Alabama* (Chatom, Alabama, 1982), 31; Albert Burton Moore, *History of Alabama* (University, Alabama, 1934), 67; Laura D. S. Sturdivant, "Ten Commandments for a Genealogist," *Journal of Mississippi History* (1975), XXXVII, 399-400; Vernon Larry Walters, "Migration into Mississippi, 1798-1837" (thesis, Mississippi State University, 1969), 24-25.

² My work with the primary sources, while certainly not exhaustive, has included RG 2 (Mississippi Territorial Governor's papers), Mississippi Department of Archives and History and in the National Archives, RG 75 (Indian Affairs) and RG 107 (Secretary of War); Early secondary sources that fail to mention the road are J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State* (Spartanburg, South Carolina, 1978, originally published 1880); Claiborne, *Life and Times of General Sam Dale* (Spartanburg, South Carolina, 1976, originally published 1860); John W. Monette, *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi* (New York, 1846); and Albert James Pickett, *History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi, from the Earliest Period* (Charleston, South Carolina, 1851).

crossed by hunter's paths, a little narrower than itself; and we were admonished, that if we deviated into these, we should perhaps come to no habitation for 100 or 150 miles. Cow-paths which had occasionally misled us, particularly in the swamps, are found only near the settlements; or it would have been unwise to venture without a guide.³

The primary route, "an Indian path," that connected Elliot Mission with the Natchez Trace seems to have had no formal name and was scarcely distinguishable from the secondary routes of "hunter's paths" and "cow-paths." Hodgson described the problems of navigating without clearly defined paths.

Our course was through the woods, along a blazed path, about a foot broad: and, as it was necessary to procure a guide, our host rode with us till he had engaged an Indian, who, for a dollar, attended us 25 miles on his little horse....

The following day we set off early, our friends having procured us an Indian to take us the first twelve miles: he could not speak English; but, having received his quarter of a dollar, and parted from us at the appointed place, he returned to draw our track in the sand, pointing out all the forks and little cross-paths, and again left us. After proceeding about a mile, where we were a little embarrassed, we were surprised to find him again at our side, making motions to direct our route. Again we shook hands and parted: but being again puzzled by a diverging path, half a mile distant, we looked round almost instinctively, and there was our faithful fellow still watching our steps: he then came up and set us right—made signs that our road now lay in the direction of the sun—and then finally disappeared....⁴

Because the road system was not clearly defined, the travelers used other resources. Blazing a path—making ax chops on trees at strategic points—was one method of distinguishing routes. Often, however, a guide

³ Adam Hodgson, *Remarks during a Journey through North America* (New York, 1823), 282; also cf. Philip Buckner's account of travel on a forerunner of the Natchez Trace in 1801 in which he occasionally "miss't the road" and "took wrong trace." William Buckner McGroarty (ed.), "Diary of Captain Philip Buckner," *William and Mary Quarterly* (1926), VI, 192.

⁴ Hodgson, *Remarks during a Journey*, 272-73.

was essential. It must further be noted that early road systems did not always employ formal or standard names, as we do today.

Interpreting frontier road systems was difficult for travelers then; the problems are compounded for historians centuries later attempting to describe these paths. When the writer has a poor understanding of the history and geography of the area, chaos ensues (and has).⁵ With the Three Chopped Way, confused interpreters gradually created something that did not exist, or at least did not exist under that name.

A look at the relevant road systems in historical context is useful before examining the source of the error (*Figure 1*). During the periods of English and Spanish rule, areas of Anglo-American settlement began to develop, first in the Natchez vicinity and then along the lower Tombigbee River in the vicinity of Fort St. Stephens. These discrete settlement areas certainly required connecting roads across the intervening Indian territory and to settlements to the south, such as Mobile and New Orleans. After Spain turned the Natchez District and the Tombigbee settlement over to the United States in 1798 and 1799, the population in these areas increased, as did the need to communicate and travel between them.

Perhaps the best-known of these roads was the Federal Road, which connected Milledgeville, Georgia, with Fort Stoddert, the latter place established in 1799 on the Mobile River just above the thirty-first parallel and downstream from St. Stephens. Initially opened as a mail route by the federal government in 1806, the road connected the two places across several hundred miles of Creek Indian territory. This road was altered and improved in 1811 to provide for the passage of wagons and thereby expedite the movement of settlers. Like most roads, this one does not appear to have been deliberately named, although over a period of time the common name *federal road*, used to describe it and other roads built by the federal government, eventually evolved into the proper name—the Federal Road.⁶

⁵ Jack D. Elliott, Jr., "Leftwich's 'Cotton Gin Port and Gaines' Trace': Reconsidered," *Journal of Mississippi History* (1980), XLII; Elliott, "Of Roads and Reifications: The Interpretation of Historical Roads and the Soto Entrada," in Patricia K. Galloway (ed.), *The Hernando de Soto Expedition: History, Historiography and "Discovery" in the Southeast* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1997), 246-58.

⁶ Henry DeLeon Southerland, Jr., and Jerry Elijah Brown, *The Federal Road through Georgia, the Creek Nation and Alabama, 1806-1836* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1989), 21-36; Thomas D. Clark and John D. W. Guice, *Frontiers in Conflict: The Old Southwest, 1795-1830* (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1989), 176.

The history of roads in the southern Mississippi Territory west of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers was somewhat more complex. No reliable maps exist for the area before the early statehood period (post-1816), and in the extant written texts on road use and construction, reference to specific roads is not always clear.⁷ Hence, the sketch I offer is not without ambiguity.

Probably the only major route leading from Natchez to the Tombigbee during the early territorial period, termed here "McClary's Path," combined two component roads. The first component led east from Natchez to the Choctaw Six Towns. For lack of a better name, I will refer to it as the "Six Towns Road." In the Six Towns the road intersected a north-south road that led from the Chickasaw villages through the Choctaws and on southward to St. Stephens and Mobile. This road has been referred to by many names, but I will refer to it as the "Trading Path." Despite the fact that these roads constituted the main route between Natchez and St. Stephens for several years, that route was not the most direct, in that it deviated many miles to the north. The route, combining the Six Towns Road and the relevant portion of the Trading Path, was sometimes known as McClary's Path because it was used by troops under Lt. John McClary in early 1799 when he traveled from Natchez to St. Stephens.⁸

On November 16, 1805, the Treaty of Mount Dexter was signed ceding the southern portion of the Choctaw Nation to the United States. This strip would provide an area for non-aboriginal settlement that would connect the Natchez District with the Tombigbee settlements. West of the Pearl River, the northern boundary of the cession was defined by the Six

⁷ See the following maps: William Darby, "A Map of the State of Louisiana with part of the Mississippi Territory" (1816); A. Finley, "Mississippi" (1822); John Melish, "Map of Mississippi" (1819). The routes shown are based on earlier maps and consequently depict the roads from several years previous.

⁸ The Six Towns Road is identified on the Melish maps as simply "Old Indian Path." Melish, "Map of Alabama" (1818); "Map of Mississippi" (1819). See also A. Finley, "Mississippi" (c. 1822); William Darby, "A Map of the State of Louisiana with Part of the Mississippi Territory" (1816). As early as 1774 the Wilton map identifies a trail identified as "Path to Chactaw Six Towns" running east from Fort Natchez, which may have been the same road. William Wilton, "Part of the River Mississippi from Manchac up to the River Yazous" (1774).

The north-south road, a portion of which connected the Six Towns Road with St. Stephens, has been referred to variously as the "Mobile Path," the "Big Trading Path," the "Choctaw-Chickasaw Trail," the "St. Stephens road," and the "St. Stephens

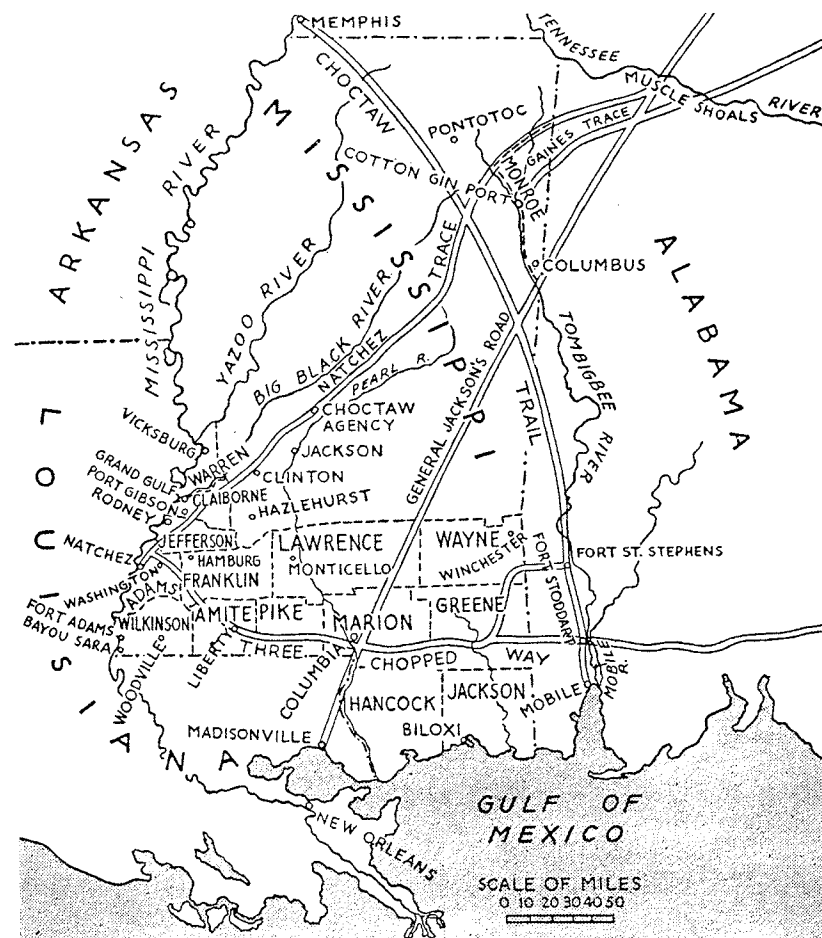
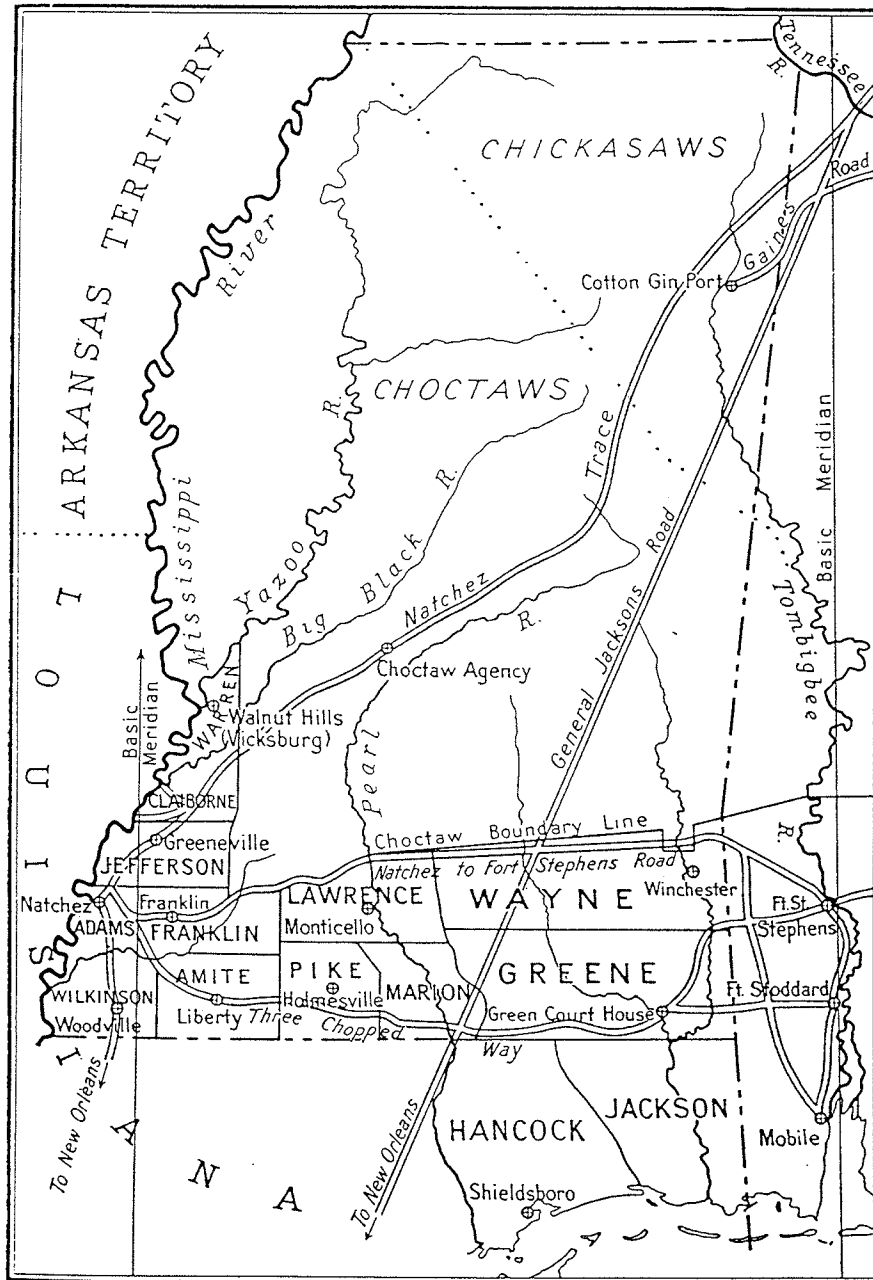


Figure 2. Guyton's "The Early Years of Statehood" map depicting "The Three Chopped Way" (Pearl Vivian Guyton, *The History of Mississippi From Indian Times to the Present Day*, 1935).

THIS IS NOT THE CORRECT MAP
FOR FIGURE 2. IT SHOULD HAVE
BEEN THE MAP FROM SYDNOR & BENNETT
see page 230 below

EARLY TRAILS AND ROADS



THIS IS THE MAP THAT WAS
SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN
USED FOR FIGURE 2
FROM SYDOR & BENNETT
MISSISSIPPI HISTORY 1930

This is the first in, and
prototype for, the series
of maps of frontier roads
that began appearing in
Mississippi history textbooks
in 1930.

Towns Road/McClary's Path, whereas east of the Pearl it was bounded by an arbitrary east-west trending line. East of the river, the Six Towns Road was far to the north of the boundary.⁹ This land cession would have an enormous impact on the settlement and road history of the area; the impact would be postponed, however, since President Thomas Jefferson did not submit the treaty to Congress for ratification for over two years.

With the populations of both the Natchez District and the Tombigbee settlements growing, an increasing need for better communication be-

trace." James R. Atkinson and Jack D. Elliott, Jr., *A Cultural Resources Survey of Selected Construction Areas in the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway: Alabama and Mississippi* (Mississippi State University, 1978), II, 10; W. A. Love, "Historic Localities on Noxubee River," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* (1906), IX, 319-20; Love, "Mingo Moshulitubbee's Prairie Village," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* (1903), VII, 374; Letter, Captain Hugh Young to Major General Andrew Jackson, September 14, 1817, typescript copy in library at Natchez Trace Parkway Headquarters, Tupelo, Mississippi; Young, "Report on the Survey of the Military Road from Madisonville to the Tennessee R.," September 30, 1817, typescript in Natchez Trace Parkway Headquarters.

Lt. John McClary headed American troops sent overland to occupy Fort St. Stephens, which was abandoned by the Spanish in February 1799. Because he apparently used the road, it became known as "McClary's path." A. Hutchinson, *Code of Mississippi* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1848), 119; Peter J. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1910, revised edition), 377; Jack D.L. Holmes, "Fort Stoddard in 1799: Seven Letters of Captain Bartholomew Schaumberg," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* (1964), XXVI, 232, 236n; Holmes, "Notes on the Spanish Fort San Esteban de Tombeche," *Alabama Review* (1965), XVIII, 289; Pickett, *History of Alabama*, 461.

In December 1804 itinerant Methodist preacher Lorenzo Dow apparently followed the same path. He departed the Natchez District crossing the "Indian line, on the main branch of Homachitti" and two days later forded the Pearl River. After meeting a group of travelers from Georgia, he then passed through the Six Towns and arrived at the Choctaw agency, which was located on the Chickasawhay River between 1804 and c. 1810. The following day he intersected "the trading-road, from the Chickasaws to Mobile" which he followed to the St. Stephens vicinity. Peggy Dow, *The Dealings of God, Man, and the Devil; as Exemplified in the Life, Experience, and Travels of Lorenzo Dow* (New York, 1854), 100-01.

In August of 1805, the Choctaw agent Silas Dinsmoor returning from Natchez to the agency probably followed the same road, which involved swimming his horses over "four large water courses." Letter, Silas Dinsmoor to James Robertson, September 2, 1805, James Robertson Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. When a mail route was established to connect Natchez and St. Stephens in late 1804-early 1805, it probably followed this route. Clarence E. Carter (ed.), *The Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1937), V, 342, 387.

⁹The treaty text defines the road and the relevant part of the cession boundary as follows: "Beginning at branch of the Humecheeto, where the same is intersected by

tween them demanded the creation of new routes that were more direct than the circuitous McClary's Path. Two new roads were eventually created, termed herewith the "St. Stephens Road" and the "Fort Stoddert Road." Unfortunately their histories are not always clear.¹⁰

On April 25, 1806, Gideon Granger, the postmaster general, wrote to Harry Toulmin, a prominent resident of the Tombigbee area, informing him of the federal government's plans for "making and improving" a post road from Georgia to Fort Stoddert, that is, the Federal Road. He requested Toulmin to take charge of opening a post road connecting Fort Stoddert with Pinckneyville in the southwestern corner of the Natchez District. The road was to be "a horse path from four to six feet wide, from Fort Stoddert, nearly due west and to be continued until it intersects a road running from Pinckneyville... eastward to Pearl river...." Granger also allowed that, if Toulmin thought it more expedient, the Fort Stoddert mail could be run to Natchez rather than Pinckneyville.¹¹

Apparently Toulmin opted for the latter route, which, running from Fort Stoddert to Natchez, suggests the route of the Fort Stoddert Road. In February 1807 the General Assembly of the Mississippi Territory passed an act that appointed Toulmin, along with James Caller and Lemuel Henry, as commissioners to "view and mark out the nearest and best road from

the present Choctaw boundary, and also by the path leading from Natchez to the county of Washington, usually called M'Clarey's path; thence easterly, along M'Clarey's path, to the east, or left bank of Pearl river; thence on such a direct line as would touch the lower end of a bluff on the left bank of Chickasawha river, the first above the Hiyoowanee towns, called Broken Bluff...." Hutchinson, *Code of Mississippi*, 119. The portion of the Six Towns Road that served as the boundary of the cession was preserved as a boundary of the original land surveys and serves today as part of the boundaries of Copiah, Lawrence, and Lincoln Counties.

¹⁰The St. Stephens Road is termed the "Post Road from Natchez to Ft. St. Stephens" on the Melish maps of Mississippi (1817) and Alabama (1819). Its route is depicted on the c. 1810 survey of the Mount Dexter cession, where it is identified as the "Natchez Road." To prevent confusion with the well-known "Natchez Trace," I do not use this name. For the route of the road, see the plats of Townships 9, Ranges 9-11, 14, 16-20 West, RG 28 (Secretary of State), SG 1, roll 60, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. For the date of the surveys, see Roffie Burt, "The Survey of Mississippi's State, Indian, and Township Boundaries," (thesis, Department of Civil Engineering, Mississippi State University, 1973), 106-07, 132-35.

The Fort Stoddert Road is termed simply "Mail Road" on the Melish maps.

¹¹Carter, *Territorial Papers*, V, 461-63; also cf. 468-70.

the City of Natchez, to Fort Stoddert...so as to strike the new road on the line of demarcation east of Pearl river."¹² It is quite likely though not certain that the 1807 legislation referred to the opening of the Fort Stoddert Road.¹³

In January 1809, the Territorial General Assembly appointed John Hanes, Benjamin S. Smoot, and James Caller as commissioners "to employ a fit person to open a road from Pearl river, where the present Choctaw boundary line crosses the same, the nearest and best way to the Chickesawhay river, so as to intersect the same at, or near the lower end of the Higawana Reserve...." The route described is almost certainly the

¹² Harry Toulmin, *The Statutes of the Mississippi Territory* (Natchez, Mississippi, 1807), 397-98. It is not clear as to what route this is, because the geographical reference point—"the line of demarcation east of Pearl river"—is uncertain. The most prominent boundary at that time was the eastern boundary of the Natchez District, which was, however, on the west side of the Pearl. The northern boundary of the Mt. Dexter cession is a possibility, in that it extended east from the Pearl, but it was not surveyed until 1809.

By March 1807, the U.S. Post Office Department had paid \$1245.23 1/2 for "making the Road from Fort Stoddert to Pearl River. Ruth T. Butler, R.B. Truett, and O.T. Hagen (eds.), "Natchez Trace Historical Survey: Material from Letter Books. Postmaster General Library, Post Office Department" (unpublished typescript in Natchez Trace Parkway Headquarters, 1935), 63.

¹³ Part of the ambiguity lies in the fact that the c. 1810 General Land Office surveys of the Mt. Dexter cession do not depict the Fort Stoddert Road, although they do depict the St. Stephens Road, suggesting that the former was not in use. See footnote 10. However, other evidence suggests the contrary.

An 1808 letter by E. P. Gaines implies that "the post road," in use at that time, was near "the National Boundary," that is, the thirty-first parallel of latitude. This would suggest that the Fort Stoddert road was indeed open in that year. Letter, E. P. Gaines, Ft. Stoddert, to Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War, April 15, 1808, National Archives, RG 107, M221, roll 22.

A new mail route was established c. December 1811 to run from "Fort Stoddert by Amite c.h. [courthouse] to Pinckneyville." The written entry for this route in the Postmaster General's records was accompanied by a notation to "Discontinue the present route from Fort Stoddert to Natchez." Butler et al., "Material from Letter Books, Postmaster General Library," 72. This seems to imply that the mail route to Natchez had heretofore followed the Fort Stoddert Road, but with the change the route was modified so that its western end terminated at Pinckneyville in the extreme southwestern corner of the territory rather than at Natchez.

Major Howell Tatum probably followed the Fort Stoddert Road in 1814 from the Tombigbee area as far as John Ford's before turning south into Louisiana. John Spencer Bassett (ed.), "Major Howell Tatum's Journal," *Smith College Studies in History* (Northampton, Mass., 1921-1922), VII, 89-95.

St. Stephens Road.¹⁴ The opening of this road would have not only reduced the effective distance between Natchez and St. Stephens, but it would have also kept travelers within the area ceded by the Treaty of Mount Dexter. Much of McClary's Path still lay within Choctaw lands until 1830.

At approximately the same time the Fort Stoddert Road and the St. Stephens Road were opening, another road was opened that would further expedite the east-west flow of traffic. In December 1807, an advertisement began to appear in the *Mississippi Messenger*, a Natchez newspaper, informing the public of the new road. The text of the ad is reproduced in its entirety:

TO TRAVELLERS

The Ferry is now complete on the Allabama River, above Little River and on Tombigbee just above Fort St. Stephens, and the way is now completely opened and marked, and causeway's across the boggy guts and branches, so as strangers can travel the road with safety by observing the three notch or three chopped way, which cuts off a great distance, in travelling from Natchez to Georgia—a plentiful supply of all kinds of provision, can be obtained reasonably in the neighbourhood of Fort St. Stephens. Franklin, M.T. Dec. 7¹⁵

This road, which I will refer to as the "Alabama River Road," was opened for the purpose of reducing the travel distance from Georgia to Natchez. It provided a diversionary route about forty miles long that left the Federal Road and crossed the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers to St. Stephens, where it connected with McClary's Path and later the St. Stephens Road, providing a more direct route to Natchez. The advertisement is of

¹⁴ Edward Turner, *Statutes of the Mississippi Territory*, (Natchez, Mississippi, 1816), 299. "[W]here the present Choctaw boundary line crosses the [Pearl River]" refers to the point where McClary's Path crossed the Pearl, now on the northern boundary of Lawrence County. The "Higawana" Reserve was in what is now the northern part of Wayne County. Peter J. Hamilton, "The Yowanne, or Hiowanni, Indians," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* (1902), VI, 408. Note that Hamilton confused the St. Stephens Road (as I use the term) with McClary's Path/Six Towns Road.

¹⁵ *Mississippi Messenger*, Natchez, Mississippi, January 21, 28, February 11, 1808. The advertisement apparently first appeared in December 1807.

critical value to this discussion because it is the source of the term *three chopped way*, which was used initially to describe *only this short road*.

The role of the various roads between Natchez and the Tombigbee settlements changed soon after the Mount Dexter Treaty was ratified in January 1808. General Land Office surveys began in 1809, followed by land sales and settlement. To provide local government, counties were established, beginning with Wayne County in December 1809, which covered most of the cession lands. In December 1811 Greene and Marion Counties were created, followed by Lawrence County in 1814.¹⁶ The processes of settlement and organization of county governments resulted in the creation of a network of new county roads, effectively bringing to an end the era of frontier trails. Usually, portions of the older frontier roads were either abandoned or preserved only in part. In such cases, roads that had been primary routes fell from prominence. For example, in 1812 Marion County laid out a road to run from the western boundary of what was then the county line "in a direct line between the Town of Natchez and Joseph Coopers ferry on Pearl River [at present-day Monticello, Lawrence County] from thence as direct a Course as possible for Fort [St. Stephens] on Bigbee River, as far as the Eastern Boundary of the county line."¹⁷ Once this road was established, it presumably absorbed much of the traffic from the older St. Stephens road.

There were, then, many problems associated with the interpretation of historical roads. But there is *no evidence* of a road referred to as "the Three Chopped Way" or any one- road unit that connected Georgia with Natchez. Rather, there were a *number* of roads connecting the two places. In particular, there were *three different routes* that developed connecting the Tombigbee settlements to Natchez. These three routes were then interpreted by various historians as making up the route of the Three Chopped Way in this part of the Mississippi Territory. The three are (1) McClary's Path, or the Upper Route; (2) a combination of the St. Stephens Road and the western end of the Six Towns Road/McClary's Path, or the Middle Route; and (3) the Fort Stoddert Road, or the Lower Route.

¹⁶ Hutchinson, *Code of Mississippi*, 72-73.

¹⁷ Unsigned article, "St. Stephens Road," in St. Stephens Road (Lawrence County) file, historical marker files, Historic Preservation Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; E. Russ Williams (ed.), *Records of Marion County, Mississippi* (1965), III, 4-5.

Which sources progressively created the conceptual confusion regarding Three Chopped Way? Of primary importance are John Wesley Monette and Peter J. Hamilton, whose accounts exhibit the problematical interpretation that led to the "creation" of the Three Chopped Way. The sequence begins with Monette's 1846 *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi*, in which the author briefly discusses the development of east-west roads across the Mississippi Territory:

In the summer following, agreeably to an act of the Legislature, approved February 4th, 1807, Harry Toulmin, James Caller, and Leonard Henry had completed the duty assigned them as "commissioners to view, mark, and open a good road on the nearest route from the city of Natchez to Fort Stoddart, so as to intersect the new Creek road [the word "Creek" is not in the original source] on the line of demarkation east of Pearl River." This was the first road from Natchez to St. Stephen's....

On the 7th of December following, public notice was given that "the ferry is now complete over the Alabama River, above Little River, and on the Tombigby, just above Fort St. Stephen. The way is now completely opened and marked with causeways across all boggy guts and branches, so that strangers can travel the road with safety, by observing the three notches, or three-chopped way, which cuts off a great distance in traveling from Natchez to Georgia." This was the first road opened from the western to the eastern part of the territory.¹⁸

The importance of the Monette text is fourfold. First, it textually juxtaposes descriptions of two roads, both of which were opened about 1807: (1) the road that the territorial legislature authorized Toulmin, Caller, and Henry to build (presumably the Fort Stoddert Road) and (2) the Alabama River Road. Second, he geographically linked the two roads at St. Stephens as a result of his inference that the road opened by Toulmin et al. began at the Tombigbee River town. Third, he describes the Alabama River Road as "the first road opened from the western to the eastern part of the territory," seeming to imply that it extended across the entire width of the Mississippi Territory. Fourth, quoting from the *Messenger* adver-

¹⁸ Monette, *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 380.

tisement, he introduces into the historiographic literature the term "three-chopped way" to refer to this road. With these problematic interpretations, Monette sets the stage for the creation of the Three Chopped Way by implying that there was a single road built across the territory, described as a "three chopped way." In addition, his questionable linkage of this road with the road opened by Toulmin et al. was to create geographical confusion for later historians.

Monette having set the hermeneutic course, it required only a small step to the creation of a single road. This step was taken by Mobile attorney and historian Peter J. Hamilton. In the 1898 first edition of his *Colonial Mobile*, Hamilton writes:

In the summer of 1807 Harry Toulmin, James Caller, and Lemuel Henry completed their duty under another act for opening the first road from Natchez to Fort Stoddert; and in December notice was given in the "Mississippi Messenger" that the ferry was ready across the Alabama and Tombigbee just above Fort St. Stephen. This road had causeways over "boggy guts and branches," and from Natchez to Georgia was marked with three notches on the trees....

The Bigbee population increased rapidly after "the three-chopped way" was finished, and the settlements by 1810 had extended on both sides the river up to Mount Sterling.¹⁹

Like Monette, he juxtaposes the Alabama River Road and the road opened by Toulmin et al.; unlike Monette, he does not have the latter road pass through St. Stephens. Nevertheless, like Monette, he does blur the two roads into one continuous thoroughfare from Georgia to Natchez. Hamilton, however, is even more explicit about the *one* road, stating that "this road...from Natchez to Georgia was marked with three notches on the trees." Additionally, in his text the term *three-chopped way*, now preceded by the definite article, is used to refer to the entire "road" from Natchez to Georgia. In his confusion Hamilton is never clear as to whether the road was supposed to pass through Fort Stoddert or St. Stephens. That confusion continues in later accounts.

Further transformations occur in Hamilton's 1898 article "Early Roads of Alabama," which probably postdates the writing of the first edition of

¹⁹ Peter J. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile* (Boston, 1898), 348-49.

Colonial Mobile. He begins by writing about "the old Federal Road, opened by the United States authorities from the Ocmulgee River in Georgia to Mims' Ferry for St. Stephens," erroneously stating that the Federal Road has its western terminus at St. Stephens rather than Fort Stoddert. He follows this with a passage that further garbles Monette's account:

[In 1807] Harry Toulmin, James Caller and Lemuel Henry as territorial commissioners extended it [the Federal Road!!] westwardly from St. Stephens to the capital at Natchez, opening also a ferry across the Alabama above Little River and across the Tombigbee above Ft. St. Stephens....

Causeways were laid over "boggy guts and branches" of the new roads and its alternate name of "Three Chopped Way" came from the triple blaze marking it from Natchez to Georgia.²⁰

In this passage Hamilton confuses the roads in Monette's garbled account with the Federal Road, then completes the transformation of the term "the three-chopped way" into a proper noun by capitalizing the first letters. The name "Three Chopped Way" is then designated as an "alternate name" for his confused concept of the Federal Road. The road, then, in this version, consists of (a) on the east—the majority, but not all, of the Federal Road, leading west from Georgia, (b) in the middle—the Alabama River road, and (c) on the west—one of the routes—unspecified—that led from St. Stephens to Natchez. West of the Tombigbee River, this route followed either the Middle or the Upper Route, as referred to above.

In a 1901 article Hamilton presented his most lengthy consideration of the road, concluding that it "played for Alabama the part which the stone Via Appia did for the country south of Rome."²¹ In the 1910 revision of *Colonial Mobile*, Hamilton included a passage that was almost identical to that in the first edition; however, following his historic roads article, he capitalized "Three-Chopped Way."²² Expanding upon Monette's problem-

²⁰ Peter J. Hamilton, "Early Roads of Alabama," *Transactions of the Alabama Historical Society* (1898), II, 49-50.

²¹ Peter J. Hamilton, "Indian Trails and Early Roads," *Report of the Alabama History Commission to the Governor of Alabama* (1901), I, 426.²² Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile* (Boston, 1910, revised edition), 391.

²² Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile* (Boston, 1910, revised edition), 391.

atical interpretations, Hamilton, in his books and articles, created the concept of the Three Chopped Way, by adopting as a proper noun a descriptive modifier originally used only for one of the component roads, the Alabama River Road.

Hamilton's work laid the groundwork for later historiography by creating the initial concept of one road and not clearly specifying the route to which he referred. Subsequently, historians were confronted with the problem of deciphering the route of the Three Chopped Way, not realizing that the problem ran far deeper. Consequently, Hamilton's error metastasized into several Three Chopped Ways, the differing accounts reflecting his ambiguity.

While Hamilton's writings were still being produced, the Three Chopped Way was incorporated into the first of a series of Mississippi history textbooks, Franklin L. Riley's 1900 *School History of Mississippi*. According to Riley, the road was opened in 1805 and widened in 1807 to a wagon road "from Milledgeville, Georgia, to Natchez by way of St. Stephens and Monticello." This description vaguely corresponded to either the Middle or Upper Route. Riley made clear his debt to Hamilton, acknowledging him in the preface and citing the "Early Roads of Alabama" article.²³ Following Riley, textbook after textbook appeared, each influencing its successor and presenting a variant on the Three Chopped Way tale. The next was the 1920 textbook by Mabel B. and John C. Fant, who specified that the road ran through Fort Stoddert on its way from Georgia to Natchez, implying that it followed the Lower Route. The Fants also added another element to the story in which the moderately famous pioneer Sam Dale served as "a scout for the commissioners who opened the *Three-Chopped Way*" and later helped move westward-bound settlers on it.²⁴

²³ Franklin L. Riley, *School History of Mississippi* (Richmond, Virginia, 1900), preface, 128. This volume was reprinted in 1915. Previous Mississippi history textbooks did not feature the Three Chopped Way, cf. Mary V. Duval, *The Student's History of Mississippi* (Louisville, Kentucky, 1887); Duval, *History of Mississippi* (Louisville, Kentucky, 1892); Robert Lowry and William H. McCordle, *A History of Mississippi for Use in Schools* (New York, 1892).

²⁴ Mabel B. Fant and John C. Fant, *History of Mississippi: A School Reader* (Mississippi, 1920), 101, 113. The reference to Sam Dale is problematical, at best. In Dale's

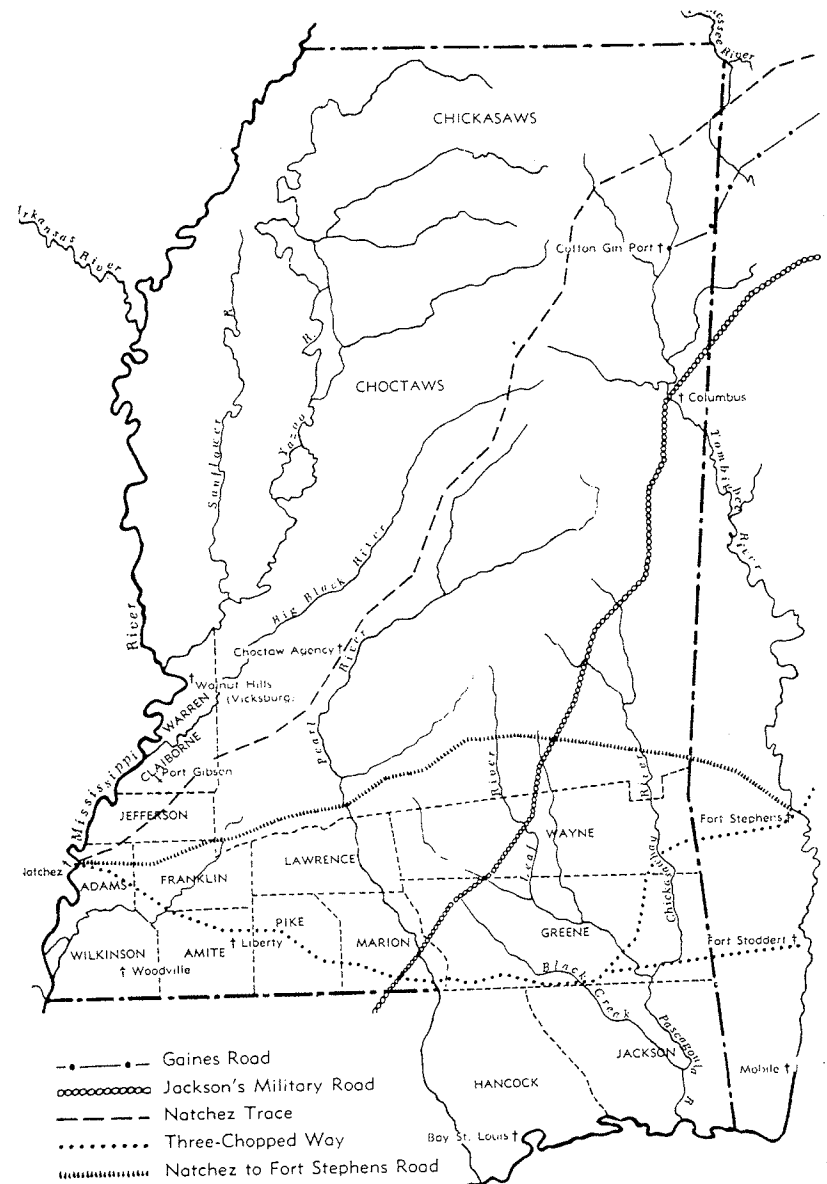
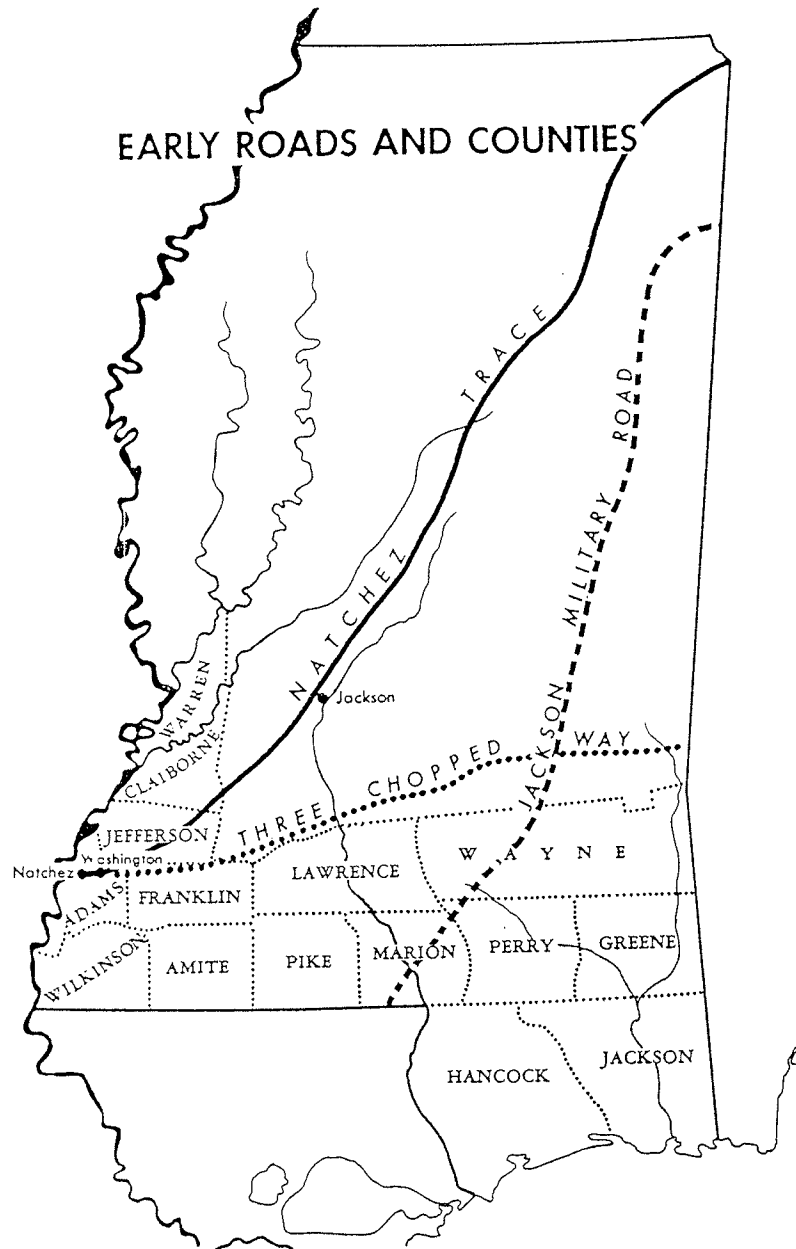


Figure 3. Bettersworth's "Territorial Roads" map (John K. Bettersworth, *Mississippi: A History*, 1959)

THIS IS NOT THE CORRECT MAP FOR FIGURE 3



THIS IS THE MAP WHICH SHOULD
 HAVE BEEN USED FOR
 FIGURE 3
 FROM MCLEMORE $\frac{1}{2}$ MCLEMORE
 SEE PAGE 230 herewith

In 1930, Sydnor and Bennett published a book that described the road as "one of the most famous" of the early trails and, like the Fant book, stated that it passed through Fort Stoddert following the Lower Route. Additionally, the book included a map of frontier roads that served as a prototype for maps in later textbooks²⁵ (Figure 2). A few years later Pearl Vivian Guyton's textbook also described the Three Chopped Way as following the Lower Route and included a similar map of early roads.²⁶

In 1945, the textbook by Richard A. and Nannie Pitts McLemore correlated the Three Chopped Way with the road opened by Toulmin, Caller, and Henry "from Natchez to Fort Stoddert." Nevertheless, despite their implication that the road followed the Lower Route, they included a map (Figure 3) that depicted the western extent following the Upper Route!²⁷ This discrepancy may have been the fault of sloppy cartography. In the late 1950s a new series of Mississippi history textbooks under the authorship of John K. Bettersworth began to appear and remained in use through the 1980s. Unlike the McLemores, Bettersworth depicted the Three Chopped Way as unequivocally following the Fort Stoddert road, or the Lower Route. He also revived the Fants's Sam Dale association and introduced a prong of the Three Chopped Way that led from the Fort Stoddert road northeast to St. Stephens.²⁸

"autobiography," there is, of course, no mention of the Three Chopped Way. The account does allude to his contracting to transport settlers from Georgia and the Carolinas to the Mississippi Territory, but it does not specify the route used. Claiborne, *Life and Times of General Sam Dale*, 45.

²⁵ Charles S. Sydnor and Claude Bennett, *Mississippi History* (New York, 1930), 119, 124, map on 123; this book was reprinted in 1939. The map was "copied" from an unnamed 1819 map in Dunbar Rowland, *The Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi 1908* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1908), obviously referring to Melish's 1819 "Map of Mississippi" which Rowland included along with several other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maps. Apparently Sydnor and Bennett used the Melish map as the base map from which their own was drafted. Needless to say, the Melish map did not use the term "Three Chopped Way."

²⁶ Pearl Vivian Guyton, *The History of Mississippi From Indian Times to the Present* (Syracuse, New York, 1935), 116, map on page 122; *Our Mississippi* (Austin, Texas, 1952), 120-21; *Ibid.* (1964), 112-13.

²⁷ Richard Aubrey McLemore and Nannie Pitts McLemore, *Mississippi through Four Centuries* (Chicago, 1945), 106, 113, 132; *ibid.* (1949), 106, 113, 132; *The Mississippi Story* (Chicago, Ill., 1959), 94-95; *ibid.* (1969), 94-95.

²⁸ John K. Bettersworth, *Mississippi: A History* (Austin, Texas, 1959), 147-49; *Mississippi: Yesterday and Today* (Austin, Texas, 1964), 110-11; *Your Mississippi* (Austin, Texas, 1975), 115-16; *Mississippi: The Land and the People* (Austin, Texas, 1981),

Appearing concurrently with the textbooks was the popular 1938 Works Project Administration publication *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State*, which served as a tour guide, directing many to the Three Chopped Way. The route as defined therein approximated yet ran somewhat south of the Middle Route.²⁹

To legitimate the nonexistent road even further, the Mississippi Historical Commission planned to erect markers to commemorate the Three Chopped Way. At the December 9, 1951, meeting of the Commission John Bettersworth was assigned the task of writing the text for two Three Chopped Way markers to be placed near Quitman and Pachuta, that is, along the Upper Route, suggesting the influence of the map in the McLemore books.³⁰ Bettersworth was having trouble documenting the road's location, and he noted in a January 9, 1952, letter that the "Three-Chopped Way was not where the Commission imagined it to be" and quipped that "the trail that ran through Pachuta and Quitman was simply an 'old Indian trail' without benefit of chops." Consequently he suggested alternate locations for markers in Greene, Perry, and Walthall Counties—along the Lower Route.³¹ A few days later he wrote regarding his decision

105, 107. Most recently, see David G. Sansing, *Mississippi: Its People and Culture* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1981), 102; and Jesse O. McKee, *Mississippi: A Portrait of an American State* (Montgomery, Alabama, 1995), 48.

The map in the Bettersworth series has been reproduced in Mary Wallace Crocker, *Historic Architecture in Mississippi* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1973), x; and Ralph D. Cross, Robert W. Wales, and Charles T. Traylor, *Atlas of Mississippi* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1974), 37.

²⁹ Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration, *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State* (New York, 1938), 85. The relevant passage reads: "Eastward from Natchez the Three-Chopped Way, so called because it was blazed with three notches cut in the trail-marking trees, ran to Fort St. Stephens on the lower Tombigbee and to Fort Stoddert in Georgia [sic]. It was the first road to bridge the eastern and western parts of the Mississippi Territory and one of the earliest roads in the Southwest, having been opened prior to 1807. Cutting across myriad streams, it broke the rule of roads 'riding the ridge' by having 'causeways across all boggy guts and branches.' From Natchez it passed through Monticello and Winchester. Later, along its side or nearby, grew Meadville, Mount Carmel, and Ellisville."

³⁰ RG 17 (State Historical Commission), Minutes, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The State Historical Commission was created by the Legislature in 1948 to identify and mark sites of historical importance.

³¹ Letter, John K. Bettersworth to Charlotte Capers, January 9, 1952, *ibid.* When Bettersworth referred to this route as being an "old Indian trail," he was obviously alluding to the John Melish maps that label the Six Towns Road as such.

to place the markers on the Lower Route: "Don't think I know where Three-Chopped Way really was.... I knew the reason why when I first made this decision [to place the markers on the Lower Route], but now I have forgotten. But what does it matter?"³² At the May 15, 1953, meeting, without recording their reason, the Commission members voted unanimously to scrap the Three Chopped Way markers.³³

But the historical marker idea did not die. At the December 8, 1956, meeting of the State Historical Commission, Bettersworth was again assigned the task of composing text for a Three Chopped Way marker, this one to be placed near Bay Springs in Jasper County—and back on the *Upper Route*. This marker was indeed erected at the specified location, with a text that echoed Bettersworth's forthcoming textbook.³⁴ Although the marker was placed on the Upper Route, it refers to a road running through Fort Stoddert, implying the Lower Route, which, of course, Bettersworth's textbooks supported. That there was a contradiction between the text and the marker's location does not appear to have been noticed. This contradiction was compounded in 1974 when the Mississippi Department of Archives and History erected a second marker with an identical text near Raleigh, Mississippi, a location that is also on or near the Upper Route.³⁵ Finally, in 1992 the Mississippi Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, erected a marker to the Three Chopped Way on the court square in Liberty, Mississippi, a site that corresponds to the Lower Route. By this time the notion of the Three Chopped Way had become so confused it was meaningless.

Some conclusions, however, can be attempted. The name "Three Chopped Way" was never used as a proper noun for a coherent entity and was used only as a common noun to describe the short Alabama River Road. Furthermore, although the concept of the Three Chopped Way as variously used does correlate with several actual historic roads, the different combinations contradict the notion of a single road. Consequently, the Three

³² Letter, Bettersworth to Capers, January 18, 1952, *ibid*.

³³ Minutes, *ibid*.

³⁴ Minutes, *ibid*. The text reads "One of routes of military & post road begun, 1807, from Natchez to Ft. Stoddert & Milledgeville, Ga. Over this trail many immigrants came into Territory & here Sam Dale operated wagon train." Three Chopped Way file, Jasper County, historical marker files, Historic Preservation Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

³⁵ Three Chopped Way file, Smith County, *ibid*.

Chopped Way could never have been a coherent historic transportation entity. The concept is the product of error in historiography and should be abandoned.

There are three further implications suggested by this phenomenon. First, there appears to be a tendency for historians to give insufficient consideration to spatial/geographical aspects of their studies, a particularly important consideration when the subject is as slippery and ambiguous as a historical road.³⁶ The "Natchez Trace" is an example of this problem; the concept was initially promoted by the Daughters of the American Revolution in the early part of this century, ultimately resulting in the creation of the Natchez Trace Parkway in 1938. The problem lies in the fact that the rubric *Natchez Trace* did not come into use until fairly late and is applied to a variety of routes of a changing transportation corridor. Reflecting back on the birth of the Parkway, National Park Service historian Dawson Phelps made these observations:

The three inexperienced men who were assigned the job of locating the Natchez Trace [in 1934]...worked under a misconception.... They were seeking a road that never was....

The survey revealed that it was impossible to identify and locate the old Natchez Trace. cursory investigation revealed the existence of at least three old trails or roads, each of which might with some validity be regarded as *the* road. Later investigation revealed several others....

If National Park Service historians...had been...perceptive, they...would have reported that there were many Natchez Traces.

Had so forthright an answer been incorporated into the 1935 Natchez Trace Report, would the National Park Service or Congress have authorized the creation of the Natchez Trace Parkway as a unit of the National Park System? ³⁷

³⁶ Other than the sources in footnote 5, see also Jack D. Elliott, Jr., "The Fort of Natchez and the Colonial Origins of Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* (1990), LII, 160-63.

³⁷ Dawson A. Phelps, "The Natchez Parkway: Fact and Surmise," (unpublished typescript, Natchez Trace Parkway Headquarters, 1965), VI/2-VI/3, VII/1, VII/3. These rather blunt but valid comments were written at the end of Phelps's lengthy employment with the Natchez Trace Parkway (1939-1965).

Given the ambiguities in reconstructing early roads—particularly when there were no formalized names—road units should be historically *and* geographically coherent; that is, they should be related both to specific historic events/periods and major nodes in the transportation network.

Second, there is a tendency in revisionist history to write as though there is a dichotomy of truth and fiction, where the writer uncovers the “myth” and presents, in its place, the “truth.” There is, of course, no simple unequivocal truth that can be humanly rendered, only interpretations. The study of history is the study of these interpretations, including memory, writings, and artifacts. The interpretation of the Three Chopped Way was flawed, but it was not devoid of all truth; the interpretation presented here is, I hope, an improvement, but it is limited in many aspects.

Third, in avoiding the dichotomy of truth and fiction, one must also avoid the postmodern perception of all interpretations as “equal,” a position that would undercut the foundation of criticism. Instead, we must see the “Truth” as an invisible standard, a symbol for something that cannot be rendered as a perfect theory, narrative, or dogma, but can only be known existentially as the intuition of a direction that ranges from poor understanding to better understanding. In following this intuition, the pursuit of Truth involves sorting through the fragmentary traces from the past and attempting to represent that complex, unseen reality as adequately as possible.

Given the ambiguities in reconstructing early roads—particularly when there were no formalized names—road units should be historically *and* geographically coherent; that is, they should be related both to specific historic events/periods and major nodes in the transportation network.

Second, there is a tendency in revisionist history to write as though there is a dichotomy of truth and fiction, where the writer uncovers the “myth” and presents, in its place, the “truth.” There is, of course, no simple unequivocal truth that can be humanly rendered, only interpretations. The study of history is the study of these interpretations, including memory, writings, and artifacts. The interpretation of the Three Chopped Way was flawed, but it was not devoid of all truth; the interpretation presented here is, I hope, an improvement, but it is limited in many aspects.

Third, in avoiding the dichotomy of truth and fiction, one must also avoid the postmodern perception of all interpretations as “equal,” a position that would undercut the foundation of criticism. Instead, we must see the “Truth” as an invisible standard, a symbol for something that cannot be rendered as a perfect theory, narrative, or dogma, but can only be known existentially as the intuition of a direction that ranges from poor understanding to better understanding. In following this intuition, the pursuit of Truth involves sorting through the fragmentary traces from the past and attempting to represent that complex, unseen reality as adequately as possible.