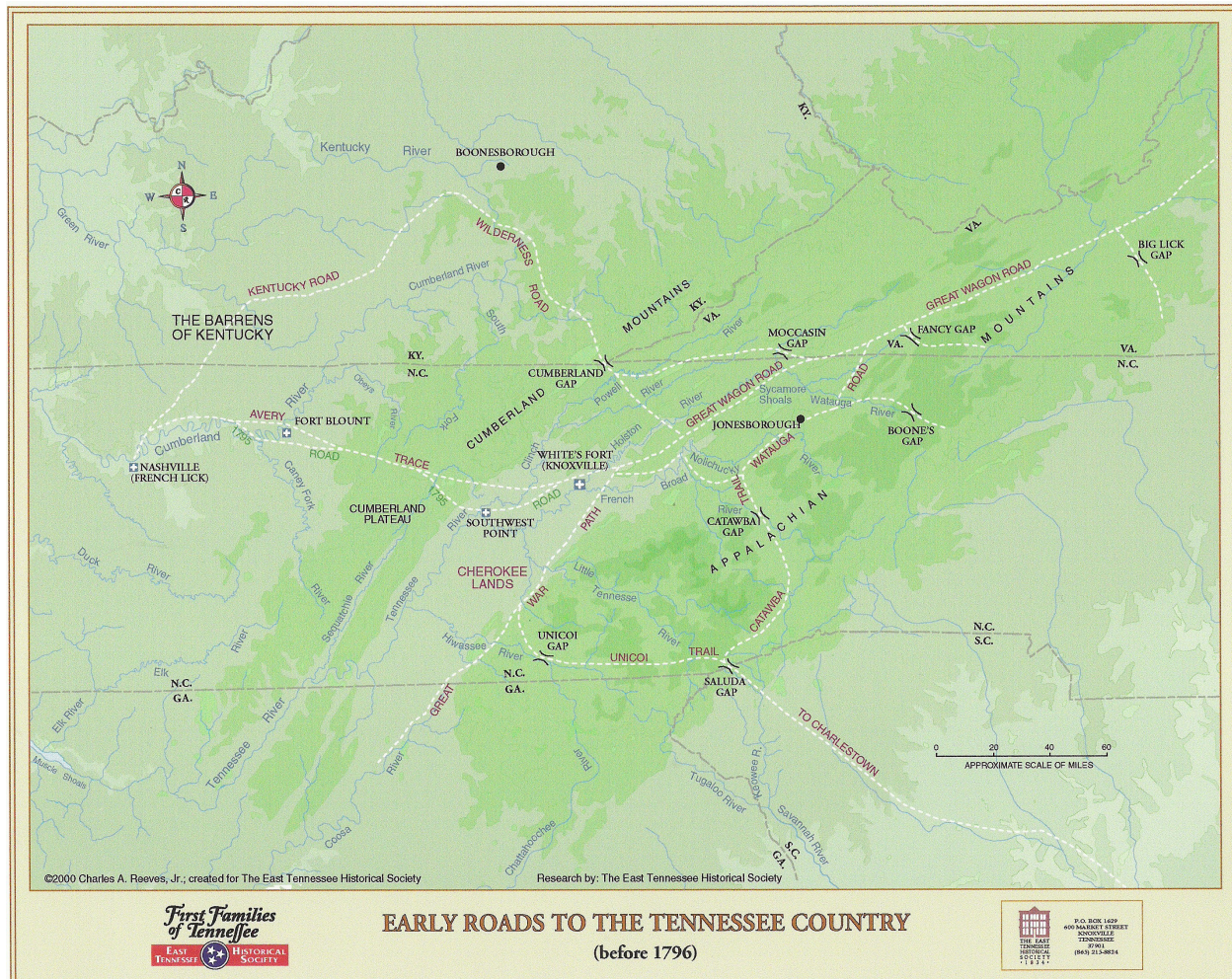


## “The Epic of Young America on the March”: The Transportation Revolution Comes to Antebellum Tennessee



**Early Roads to the Tennessee Country (Charles Reeves, Jr.)**  
*Courtesy of East Tennessee Historical Society*

Travel, transportation, and internal improvements in Tennessee, like many other aspects of the state’s history, were largely shaped by sectional interests as a consequence of its three “grand divisions”—East, Middle, and West. The distinctiveness of Tennessee’s three grand divisions hindered the development of a logical system of internal improvements that impeded travel and the transportation of agricultural goods in some regions of the state more so than other regions. Attitudes toward the issue of internal improvements were influenced not only by the political divisions created by the state’s distinctive geography, but also by each region’s opportunity for economic development. As each region sought relief for its transportation difficulties in the General Assembly, sectional jealousy and animosities already in existence further obstructed the adoption of a system of internal improvements conducive to the uniform interests of the state as a whole.

In the late 1760s, the first permanent white settlers crossed the rugged Unaka Mountains and settled into East Tennessee. These people drove their pack trains over bison and Indian

trails, while light canoes and rafts were employed to ford deep streams. Naturally, conflict ignited among the settlers and the native inhabitants of East Tennessee, land of the Cherokees. Negotiations between the settlers and the Cherokees to achieve a common middle ground forestalled initial engagements. In contrast to other frontier settlements, particularly in Middle and West Tennessee, the Cherokees made numerous concessions to those whites who settled in East Tennessee. However, later accounts of Cherokee-white relations reveal a treaty-war-treaty cycle.

Treaties engineered at both Sycamore Shoals and on the Holston River at present-day Knoxville cleared the path for the construction of roads through Indian lands. In 1775, the Transylvania Land Company, formed by North Carolina Judge Richard Henderson, contracted frontiersman Daniel Boone to design a road to the settlements in Tennessee and Kentucky to facilitate the migration of settlers westward. Boone's road, which became commonly referred to as the Wilderness Road, constituted the first road constructed by white men in the Tennessee territory. The Wilderness Road served as the principal route from the east coast colonies to the interior lands. The road traversed into upper East Tennessee from the North Carolina line, passing near Kingsport, then taking a northern route through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. From Kentucky, a branch of the road circled southward, reaching the Cumberland River at the site of the present city of Nashville. In upper East Tennessee, Bean's Station served as an important way station along the Wilderness Road where many pioneer and antebellum political leaders such as Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and James K. Polk stopped on their journeys before crossing over mountains or proceeding northward into Kentucky. After having served many settlers in their migration westward into the Tennessee and the Mississippi Valleys, the Wilderness Road was described by the *Knoxville Register and Weekly Times* in May of 1839 as "the epic of young America on the march."

On June 1, 1796, President George Washington signed a statehood bill that not only created Tennessee as the sixteenth state in the Union, but also the first state to emerge from territorial status. The members of the new government, the Tennessee General Assembly, recognized an urgent need to improve the state's avenues of transportation. Initially, legislators turned their attention towards the construction of roads. Two competing philosophies guided their initial response to the issue of internal improvements. Some legislators preferred the appointment of commissioners who would delegate state funds to the lowest bidder whose responsibility was to erect turnpikes and collect specified tolls to cover the costs and maintain its upkeep. Another practice adopted by the General Assembly provided for the chartering of companies for the establishment of toll roads. Throughout East and Middle Tennessee during the early 1800s, a majority of the roads and turnpikes were financed by private enterprise with some government subsidies. The first instance of a chartered turnpike company appears to have been the incorporation of the Cumberland Turnpike Company in 1801. This practice, however, was fraught with potential for corruption. For example, when the charter for the Cumberland Turnpike Company expired in 1811, the General Assembly refused to renew it on the grounds that the company had not honored its obligations to maintain the road. In a letter to his wife, Francis Ramsey complained that, "the roads are extremely bad. I may not be able to reach home on account of the badness of the roads." The road was in a deplorable condition at numerous points—yet the Company continued to collect tolls.

In 1801, the General Assembly enacted a law that set the requirements for a road to be designated as a turnpike. According to the state legislature, mileposts were to be erected along the road, and the sides of hills and mountains were to be leveled where the turnpike reached the width of 12 feet. While the width of bridges and causeways were set at 12 feet, the width of the turnpike on all other ground was cut at 15 feet. Twenty years later, the General Assembly classified roads into three categories: first class, second class, and third class. A first-class road constituted a turnpike that complied with the 1801 standards. Wagon roads with a width cut to 10 feet were designated as second-class roads. Roads wide enough to accommodate a single horse and rider were deemed as a third-class road. Despite a turnpike's designation as a first-class road as opposed to a second-class road, overland travel throughout Tennessee was not only time consuming, but also exceedingly pricey.



*Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives*

The significance of waterways in the state's economic development is illustrated in the lower half of the Great Seal of Tennessee, which depicts a boat and boatman representing commerce. The most common mode of river travel in the early nineteenth-century, particularly if one had to transport a number of people or a heavy load of freight, was the flatboat. The flatboat, a broad-bottomed, box-like structure made of timber that required at least three boatmen to operate, was steered by a board fastened to a pole at the rear and consisted of a roof that extended over half or two-thirds of the hull. Underneath the vessel's roof were crude bunks for sleeping and a stone hearth for cooking. Rather than spend \$160.00 to transport 2,000 tons of produce overland from Murfreesboro to Nashville in 1807, a merchant could float his crops down the Tennessee River on a flatboat for \$9.50. While transporting commerce along Tennessee's extensive waterway system saved merchants money, flatboat traffic was one-way downstream. Once the boatmen arrived at their destination, they unloaded their cargo and dismantled the boat to sell the lumber. Boatmen typically made one trip a year from Nashville to New Orleans because of low water levels in the Cumberland River. On average, a flatboat covered the distance from Nashville to New Orleans in approximately 90 days—the return trip overland took an additional 6 months.

The advent of the steamboat on the waterways of the United States signaled a great leap forward in transportation that fueled not only the nation's economy but also the development of states west of the Appalachian Mountains. Unlike the flatboat, steamboats moved under their



own power and hauled both people and agricultural goods upstream and downstream. These steam-powered vessels lowered transportation costs while vastly expanding the tonnage shipped. More importantly, the time it took to travel between New Orleans and Nashville was significantly reduced. In the 1840s, the average steamboat completed the journey downriver in approximately 7 days and steamed back upriver in about 17 days.

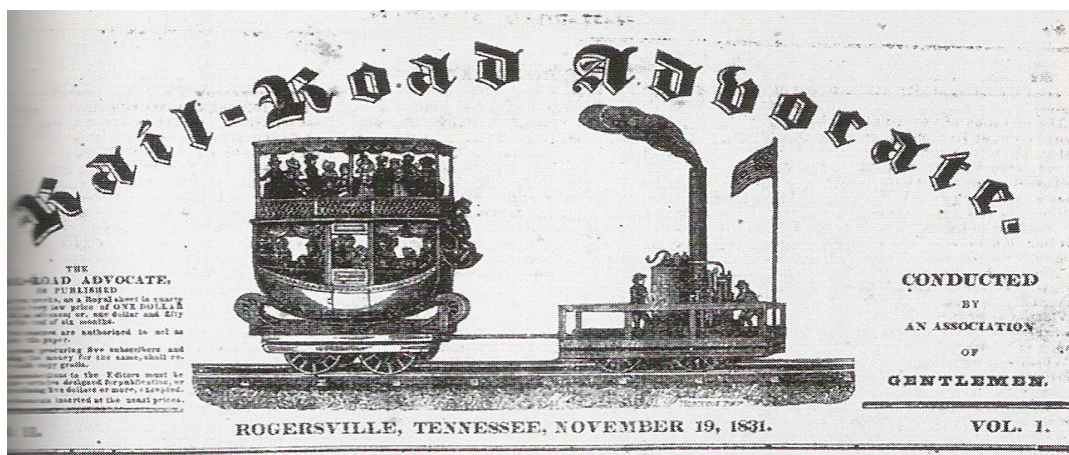
On March 11, 1819, a large enthusiastic crowd lined the banks of the Cumberland River to welcome the *General Jackson*, the first steamboat to reach Nashville. The arrival of the *General Jackson* and subsequent steamboats soon elevated Nashville from a frontier town to a burgeoning city. The sudden and unexpected presence of steamboats on the Cumberland revolutionized the means of transportation, captured the fancy of awestruck Tennesseans, and touched off an era of progress that exceeded the expectations of their most ardent supporters. The relatively speedy turnover of agricultural goods and passengers between Nashville and points northeast and south enabled Middle Tennessee to become not only an important agricultural market, but also the center of power in Tennessee politics.

In 1843, two steamboat captains, Joseph Miller and Jacob Hunter, challenged each other to see whose vessel could reach Nashville from New Orleans the fastest. Miller's boat, the *Nashville*, set the time to beat at 6 days and 13 hours in early May 1843. Later that month, Hunter's boat, the *Talleyrand*, made the journey up the Mississippi, Ohio, and Cumberland Rivers in a time of 5 days and 23 hours. On June 12, 1843, the *Nashville* recaptured the record at 5 days and 19 hours for an average speed of approximately 9 miles per hour.

In contrast to the excitement of boat races on the Cumberland River and the growing influence of Middle Tennessee in Tennessee politics, East Tennesseans did not experience the fruits of the revolution in travel, transportation, and internal improvements that were occurring in different degrees in the other parts of the state. Indeed, the issue of improved transportation as a means of overcoming geographic obstacles to economic growth was fundamental to Tennessee antebellum politics, nowhere more so than in East Tennessee. Internal improvements were not an abstract policy issue to East Tennessee but a matter of economic life-and-death for the land-locked region. Muscle Shoals, commonly referred to as the "suck" along the Tennessee River, proved to be the most significant impediment to the region's economic and political growth. The Shoals, located in northern Alabama, formed a series of obstructions nearly 40 miles in length, with rock reefs, gravel bars, rapids, log snags, and a shallow channel that caused boats along the river to ground. While steamboats were able to travel up the Tennessee River, they encountered difficulties in the stretch of river that winds through northern Alabama, hindering their access to Chattanooga, which also was dangerous to navigate, and Knoxville. On March 3, 1828, the *Atlas* became the first steamboat to successfully navigate the treacherous Tennessee River and reach Knoxville. As the steamboat's captain claimed the \$640.00 prize for reaching Knoxville, the city's mayor boasted that the *Atlas*'s arrival signaled "the commencement of a new era in the commercial affairs of East Tennessee." Despite the success of the *Atlas*, steamboat traffic on the upper Tennessee River was largely confined to the area between Knoxville and Muscle Shoals during periods of high water in the spring and autumn seasons. Among other factors such as geography, westward migration, plantation slavery, periodic economic panics, and a significant shift in political power, the difficulty in navigating the upper regions of the Tennessee River contributed to East Tennessee's declining influence in the state's political economy.

Beginning in the 1820s and continuing throughout the antebellum era, Nashville became the dominant economic and political center in the state. Therefore, Middle Tennessee legislators controlled the means to enact internal improvement legislation. Prior to this period, the state's governors had exercised caution in regard to issues of internal improvements. Controversy over the constitutionality of federal aid to state internal improvement projects led state legislators to hold off on appropriations for these projects until they secured monies from the federal government. Governor William Carroll argued that the state, rather than waiting on a response from the United States Congress, needed to take the initiative and finance improvements to Tennessee's infrastructure. Carroll informed the General Assembly that the work of internal improvements in several other states was "advancing with astonishing rapidity." The Governor inquired, "With these bright examples before us, does it become Tennessee to be idle?" Despite his interest in improving Tennessee's modes of travel and transportation, Carroll, like a growing majority of Tennessee politicians from Middle Tennessee, did not seek to improve the state's waterways or build railroads. What Middle Tennessean legislators desired most was the construction of additional and improved turnpikes, which consolidated their control of the state's commerce. Sectional considerations rather than partisanship not only shaped their support or opposition to a liberal system of state aid for internal improvements, but also influenced their preference for particular modes of transportation that prevented the state's other regions from becoming a political and economic rival.

While Middle and West Tennessee prospered economically and gradually became political allies, East Tennessee's fortunes declined. By the 1830s, East Tennessee was an impoverished and stagnant region that was constrained by its geography. Local East Tennessee leaders began to argue that railroads, rather than turnpikes, offered them the possibility of salvation. From 1831 to 1832, supporters of internal improvements in Rogersville published a bi-weekly newspaper titled the *Rail-Road Advocate*, the nation's first paper devoted exclusively to the promotion of railroads. The paper proclaimed, "railroads are the *only hope* of East Tennessee. . . . Without them, she will continue to be, what she is, and what she has been, a depressed and languishing region. . . . They are the only improvements at all suited to her condition."



*First issue of the Railroad Advocate, November 19, 1831*

The enthusiasm for railroad construction sparked by East Tennesseans managed to spread to West Tennessee. Although a few miles of track were laid outside Memphis, the project lost steam when investors failed to raise sufficient capital to receive state aid. Representatives from East and West Tennessee petitioned the General Assembly to grant them charters for the creation of railroad corporations and earmark state aid to these companies in order to attract investors. However, Middle Tennessee legislators, with the advantage of the Cumberland River and an efficient system of turnpikes, remained lukewarm to the disbursement of millions of dollars in state aid for the construction of railroads.

The Panic of 1837, which swept not only throughout the nation but also the world, had a devastating effect on the future of travel, transportation, and internal improvement projects in Tennessee. The state experienced a nearly decade long lull in the improvement and construction of roads, turnpikes, and railroads. However, as its maturing years came to a close in the 1850s, Tennessee, like most other parts of the nation, witnessed a boom in railroad construction that would revolutionize the nineteenth-century American system of transportation.

During this early statehood and antebellum period, Tennesseans, whether they traveled overland or by rivers, encountered several hazards along their journey that impeded their ability to traverse the state's distinctive geography. These hazards included weather, Indian attacks, and the Muscle Shoals. Beginning in the early 1800s, state aid was appropriated for internal improvement projects that enabled Tennesseans to travel more conveniently over greater distances in a relatively shorter period of time. The history of travel, transportation, and internal improvements in Tennessee sheds light on the sectional interests that significantly influenced not only the economic development, but also the political development of the state between 1796 and 1850.