Transportation across Georgia lands: How did it all begin? Before there were superhighways, before there were two-lane roads, before there were any paved roads or dirt roads in Georgia, even before there were foot paths where people could walk, there were trails made by animals such as bison, elk and deer. These animals created paths through the wilderness as they traveled to find sources of water, food, and salt; to find mates; and to escape from enemies.

Native Americans used many of these same paths to hunt for the animals that made them, as well as to forage for other food and water, and to visit neighboring tribes (sometimes to make war—you’ve heard of the word “warpath”). For example, the Creeks and some other groups followed a predictable cycle of travel throughout the year. Their seasonal migrations took them where they could find the plants, animals, and mineral resources needed for their survival at the times of the year that they were readily available.

Neither the wild animals nor the Native Americans chose the most direct routes to their destinations. Rather, the terrain they had to cross had a great deal of influence on their chosen pathways. Swift-moving rivers were difficult to ford even when they had a shallows or rocky shoals where crossing was far easier. Many paths followed alongside rivers and streams, but swampy areas were usually avoided.

European explorers, and then traders, were the next people to use the trails. Sites for some of the earliest British settlements, such as Savannah, Darien, Ebenezer, and Augusta, and the earliest Spanish settlement at Sapelo Sound, were chosen for their locations along the Native American trails so that trading would be possible. The more the trails were used, the more defined they became. In fact, modern roads and highways follow some of these same routes today. The early inhabitants could never have imagined the paved roads and the highway systems that have taken the place of their trails!
The rivers of Georgia were extremely important for transportation of goods, especially before the railroads were established. Though not without problems, transport by water was far easier and cheaper than overland travel by wagon train or ox cart. Goods were often shipped downstream on flat-bottomed barges called flatboats.

The flatboats were ten feet wide and from 40 to 80 feet long, and they required a water depth of only two feet. They were “steered” only by a long sturdy pole held by a man; with the strength of his arms he could usually guide the boat around obstacles. These boats traveled only downstream. They were dismantled at their destination and the lumber was sold. Cargo often had to be unloaded at the Fall Line, carried on land around the rapids, and then reloaded onto the boats for the rest of the journey.

Tobacco, clay bricks, cotton and other crops are examples of cargo carried on the flatboats downstream on Georgia’s rivers. Cotton was often shipped downstream from Scull Shoals to the port of Darien (near Brunswick) on flatboats. The alternative to this method of transporting goods was to take them overland to Augusta, where they would be shipped down the Savannah River.

Flatboats were sometimes used as ferries for carrying people and goods across rivers.
Some Great Ideas Just Don’t Succeed

You know how it is with ideas: they can seem really great when you first think of them. They still sound great when you bounce them off your friends. You do some research on your concept and get some other people interested in it. Then—when the whole team gets busy actually working on it—it just doesn’t work out like you’d planned. However, that does not mean that it wasn’t a good idea.

The Erie Canal opened in 1825 in New York. It made an enormous impact on New York’s commerce and revenue by making it possible to ship goods from Buffalo, NY, on Lake Erie, to New York City via the Hudson River, and allowed NYC to become the most important port in the United States. Foreseeing that success, people in other states, including Georgia, became interested in building canals to improve the transportation of goods to their port cities even before the Erie Canal was completed.

A group of Savannah businessmen began planning a canal that would link the Ogeechee, Altamaha, and the Savannah rivers. Since the Altamaha is formed by the confluence of the Oconee and Ocmulgee rivers, a vast area would be served by this 66-miles-long canal. More and more people were settling in the interior of the state at that time, many of them farmers. Being able to ship their products on a canal would be a great advantage for them; it would be much cheaper and much easier than transporting their goods overland. It would also take business away from Darien, which was becoming a prominent seaport, to the advantage of Savannah. It seemed to be a great idea!

Citizens of Brunswick, GA wanted their port to be more successful than that of Savannah or nearby Darien, and tried to get state funding for a canal that would connect the Turtle River to the Altamaha. They argued that the route for their canal would be shorter and more efficient than the Savannah-Altamaha route and would be easier to construct. However, that was not the case. Even though the land was nearly level and would not require lift locks, the area was too swampy and the mouth of the Turtle, an estuary, was affected too much by incoming tides. After much work had been done, the planners gave up their “almost great” idea.

Around this same time, another canal was also being planned. This one would have linked the Tennessee River (in Tennessee) with the Chattahoochee, Flint, Ocmulgee, Oconee and Savannah rivers of Georgia. This was a huge project. If it could have been accomplished, it would have given Georgia a far-reaching and superior transportation system. The Savannah planners heard about this project and wanted their canal to link with this one, which would connect the port of Savannah with all these other areas and be a great boon to their economy. However, surveyors could not find a suitable route for the canal due to the hilly terrain and

(Continued on the following page.)
bedrock that was close to the surface in the Piedmont region. Plans for this canal were abandoned in 1826.

The first segment of the Savannah project was completed and opened in 1829. It connected the Savannah River and the Ocmulgee and was 16 miles long. This canal was successful and proved to be a valuable asset to the city of Savannah. Rice, bricks, cedar shingles, and other bulky items were brought by canal barges into the city for export. However, because of the tremendous cost and lack of funding, the remaining fifty miles were never built.

Even though all of these proposed canals began with good ideas, the Savannah-Ocmulgee Canal was the only success. However, this success story was short-lived. Beginning in the 1830s, railroads became the favored mode for transporting goods; by 1870 they served communities throughout most of Georgia.
How Were the Roads Made?

On Page 1 you read about the evolution of transportation routes from animal trails to Native American paths. How did they get to be actual roads?

We can imagine explorers and traders removing weeds and undergrowth to make the trails easier to follow. We can picture early settlers making these paths wider and possibly straighter by cutting down trees and removing stumps, work that involved considerable strength, time and persistence.

These road builders had none of the heavy equipment that people now have, so the job was very difficult. They had axes and perhaps large saws to cut down trees. They had shovels and pick-axes to remove stumps. They sometimes had ropes and mules or oxen to help pull stumps from the ground.

To make the road smoother and more level, men would lay a log from a large tree across the road, tie ropes around it, and have oxen or mules drag it along behind them. Trees helped with road building in another way, too. When a marshy or swampy area could not be avoided, logs were laid side-by-side, as close together as possible, to form the road bed. These were called “corduroy roads” because of their bumpy surface.

Other than corduroy roads, the road surface depended on the type of soil in each location: clay was firm, but very slippery when wet; wagon wheels easily made deep ruts in the softer loam, and soft soil quickly turned to mud when it rained. Later, some road surfaces were covered with a mixture of sand from the southeastern part of the state and clay from the north and west. Even these roads were primitive, to say the least.

Georgia’s First Road

The Ogeechee Road is believed to be the first road to be laid out in Georgia. It was built in 1735 with the assistance of Tomochichi, the famous chief of the Yamacraw Tribe (part of the Creek Nation). It went from Savannah to the nearby town of Darien, a distance of about 20 miles. The Ogeechee Road is now known as Bull Street in downtown Savannah.
Railroads Come to Georgia

The first railroad line in GA was chartered in 1833 to link Savannah with Augusta. It actually came about because the state of South Carolina was in the process of building a railroad from Charleston to Hamburg, a city across the river from Augusta. Georgians were concerned that the South Carolina railroad would take a lot of business—and therefore money—away from our state.

This railroad became known as the Central of Georgia Railway. By 1843 it linked the cities of Savannah, Augusta, Athens, and Macon, traveling through the best cotton-producing areas of the state. Later, it went as far as Columbus and had branches that reached into the southwest part of Georgia. It came through Greensboro, but not to Scull Shoals.

The Western & Atlantic Railroad was chartered 1836. It was to be built from a point on the Tennessee River near Chattanooga to the city of Marietta, GA. Workers began grading the rail bed and started to lay the track at Marietta in 1837. However, for some reason, work on the project stopped in 1840. Some people say that the citizens of Marietta didn’t want their city to be the headquarters of the railway because of the noise and the dirty, sooty smoke caused by the coal-fired engines. When work on the railroad began again, the main site had been changed to a place they called “Terminus” which means “the end of the line” and was finally completed in 1851. No city had been established at Terminus at that time. As the city grew around the railroad, both the railroad and the city prospered. This city was later named Atlanta, now the capital and largest city of Georgia.

As the saying goes, the rest is history. By 1854 many cities and towns were connected by the railway systems of Georgia. Railroads quickly became the preferred mode of shipping freight throughout the state and throughout the country and were invaluable to the state and national economy. Passenger cars were added to some of the routes, although the ride was dirty, noisy, and uncomfortable. Train travel shortened a trip that used to take days into a matter of hours.

Southern railroads were a big help to the Confederate cause during the Civil War, carrying freight and sometimes soldiers from place to place. Most railways in Georgia were destroyed by Union soldiers during the war, but repairs were made and the companies were thriving again by 1870.
Sam Howard’s Enterprise

Samuel Howard was a successful Savannah businessman who had the idea to bring steamboat service to the Savannah River. He and his brother Charles were granted rights to do just that. The Enterprise, Georgia’s first steamboat, was delivered early in 1816. It was built primarily to tow barges laden with bales of cotton and in fact was Georgia’s very first towboat. Its maiden voyage on April 26, 1816 took it from Savannah to Augusta, where it picked up cotton to carry downstream. After that, it departed almost daily for Augusta and carried as many as 1,000 bales on each trip. This was the beginning of The Georgia Steamboat Company. Something the Howard brothers hadn’t counted on was additional revenue from passengers who were eager to travel on their boats. It was a very successful business venture. Other vessels of that era and later were also named Enterprise. One became very well known for opening the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to the benefit of carrying cargo upstream in 1814—something not feasible before. In recent years, the US Navy has had an aircraft carrier and a nuclear submarine also named Enterprise. (And we all know about the fictional Starship Enterprise!)

USS Savannah Crosses the Atlantic!

The first steamship to cross the Atlantic was the USS Savannah. It sailed from Savannah to Liverpool, England, in 1819. It also had sails, and used the steam engine only parts of 18 days of the 25-day journey. They burned pine knots to create steam; coal was not available. When it entered the harbor, the British thought the ship was on fire because of the heavy smoke belching from its smokestack and tried to put out the fire!

Steamboat on the Oconee

In 1887, the same year as the great flood that sent the Scull Shoals bridge downstream, money was raised to clear the river and to buy a steamboat. Ferry service on the Oconee began the following year with the launching of the Mary Maddox. However, there was not as much cargo to haul as there would have been earlier, largely because railroads were near many. The boat ran only intermittently as needed for cargo such as lumber, cotton, flour, and corn meal. It never had a regular schedule but continued to make occasional runs until 1912, when it caught fire and burned to the water line.