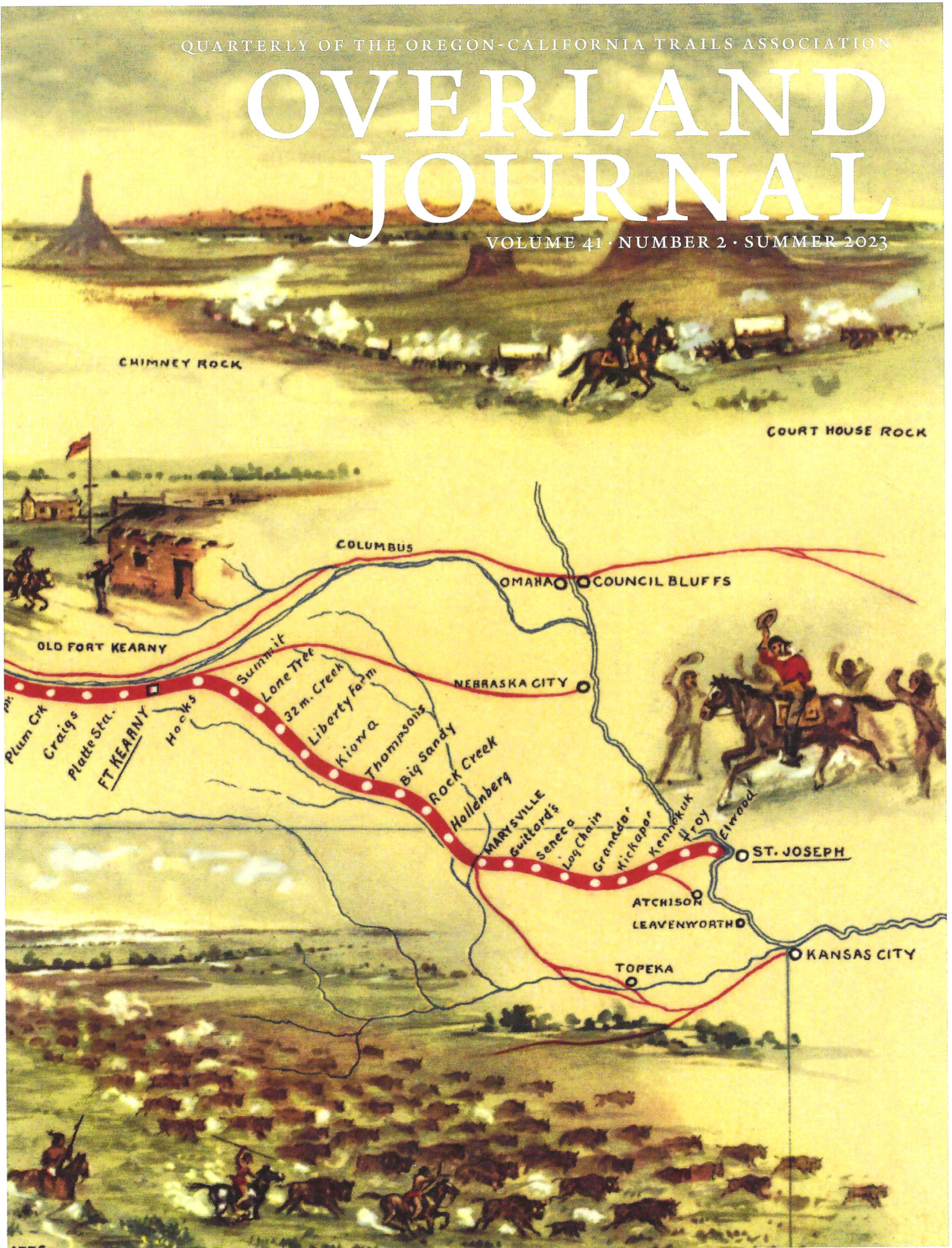


QUARTERLY OF THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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ON THE COVERS Pony Express trail map, by William  
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from 1951. COURTESY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, LIBRARY OF  
CONGRESS.

ON THIS PAGE An old well still survives along the  
Overland Mail route at the site of Pusley's Station.  
PHOTO BY SUSAN DRAGOO.


SCOTT ALUMBAUGH is the author of *On the Pony Express Trail: One Man's Journey to Discover History From a Different Kind of Saddle*. His works also include a novella, *Will Kill for Food*, and short fiction published in *StoryQuarterly*, *Kestrel*, *Hunger Mountain Review*, *Black Fork Review*, and *Meat for Tea*. His stories have been read onstage by professional actors at *Stories on Stage Davis* and *Stories on Stage Sacramento*. Alumbaugh is an avid cyclist who has ridden numerous ultra-distance events. He was so taken with the Pony Express that at age 62, he bikepacked 1,400 miles of the trail from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Salt Lake City, Utah. His journey took five weeks on a route that was mostly off-road. Scott formerly practiced business litigation in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California.

LEE KREUTZER recently retired from the National Park Service, where she spent 10 years as a park archeologist and 20 years as a cultural resources specialist working on behalf of national historic trails. In childhood she lived near the Pony Express, Oregon, and California trails in northeastern Kansas, and today she resides along the Mormon Pioneer, Pony Express, and California trails in Salt Lake City, Utah.

FRANK NORRIS is a historian, retired from the National Park Service's trails office in Santa Fe. He first worked for the NPS at Custer Battlefield National Monument in Montana, after which he served in Skagway and Anchorage, Alaska, before transferring to New Mexico in 2008. He has written upwards of ten books—primarily NPS publications—and has had more than a dozen articles published in peer-reviewed historical journals. One recent *Overland Journal* article, co-written by Lee Kreutzer, was "Trails and Rails: The Impact of Railroad Construction on the Overland Trails, 1863–1869."

SUSAN DRAGOO is an Oklahoma-based writer and photographer. Her work on western history and historical travel has been published in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, *Overland Journal* (the travel magazine, not to be confused with OCTA's journal), and *Oklahoma Today*. She is currently working on a book on the Butterfield Overland Mail in Indian Territory, a focus of her research and travel since 2016. Susan is a regular contributor to numerous travel and adventure periodicals, and her scenic photography graces the walls of multiple lodges in the Oklahoma State Parks system. An avid runner and hiker, she recently completed a rim-to-rim, one-day hike of the Grand Canyon. She and her husband, Bill, travel extensively and run Dragoo Adventure Rider Training. See her web site at [susandragoo.com](http://susandragoo.com).

DIXON FORD is an oxen drover and horseman. A retired inventor and manufacturing engineer, he has been active in displaying oxen in an accurate 1840s historical manner. In 2006 Dixon and his grandson Blake took his team of oxen on OCTA's Ezra Meeker reenactment. In 2008 he produced the documentary film *The Hard Road West* about the Donner Party. His previous article in *Overland Journal* (vol. 33, no. 1, 2015), coauthored with Lee Kreutzer, "Oxen: Engines of the Overland Emigration," won the Merrill Mattes Award as the best article published in that year.

FRANK TORTORICH is the author of the three books: *Gold Rush Trail: A Guide to the Carson River Route of The Emigrant Trail*, *Hiking the Gold Rush Trail*, and *John A. "Snowshoe" Thompson: Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra*. He is a charter and life member of OCTA and has received three major awards from the organization: Outstanding Educator for the Post Secondary Level (1997); the Merrill J. Mattes Award (2005) for his article co-authored with James Carman on Big Tree Road; and The Lifetime Achievement Award (2013). 

# Butterfield's Overland Mail in the Indian Territory

BY SUSAN DRAGOO

I HAD BEEN DREAMING OF THE COMANCHE INDIANS, and in the confusion of drowsiness first thought that the driver and the mail agent had been murdered, and that I being covered up in the blankets had been missed; then I recollected that I had a pistol, and thought of feeling for it; but finally I thought I would not stir for fear the Indians would see me, when I was brought to my senses by a familiar voice saying "Git up there, old hoss," and found it was the driver, hitching up a new team.

WATERMAN ORMSBY<sup>1</sup>

*Smack dab* in the middle of the Indian Territory in 1858, Waterman Ormsby's fear of a Comanche attack was understandable. Even on the edges of the "civilized" regions of the Territory, in the Chickasaw Nation, bands of Plains Indians were raiding settlements. Only a week after Ormsby passed through, fears of "Indian attacks" prompted a military expedition into Indian Territory led by U.S. Army major Earl Van Dorn. Unaware that the Comanches encamped in a Wichita village near present Rush Springs, Oklahoma, were there on a peaceful mission, Van Dorn's troops attacked the village just before daylight, killing nearly sixty Comanches and several Wichitas, triggering even greater hostility and concerns about "Indian Wars." This took place only a few days' ride from the road carrying Butterfield Overland Mail stage wagons back and forth between Tipton, Missouri, and San Francisco, California. Even so, the Choctaw Nation, where the twenty-three-year-old *New York Herald* correspondent found himself that night, was among the

more settled areas Ormsby would traverse on the first west-bound stage of the Butterfield Overland Mail.<sup>2</sup>

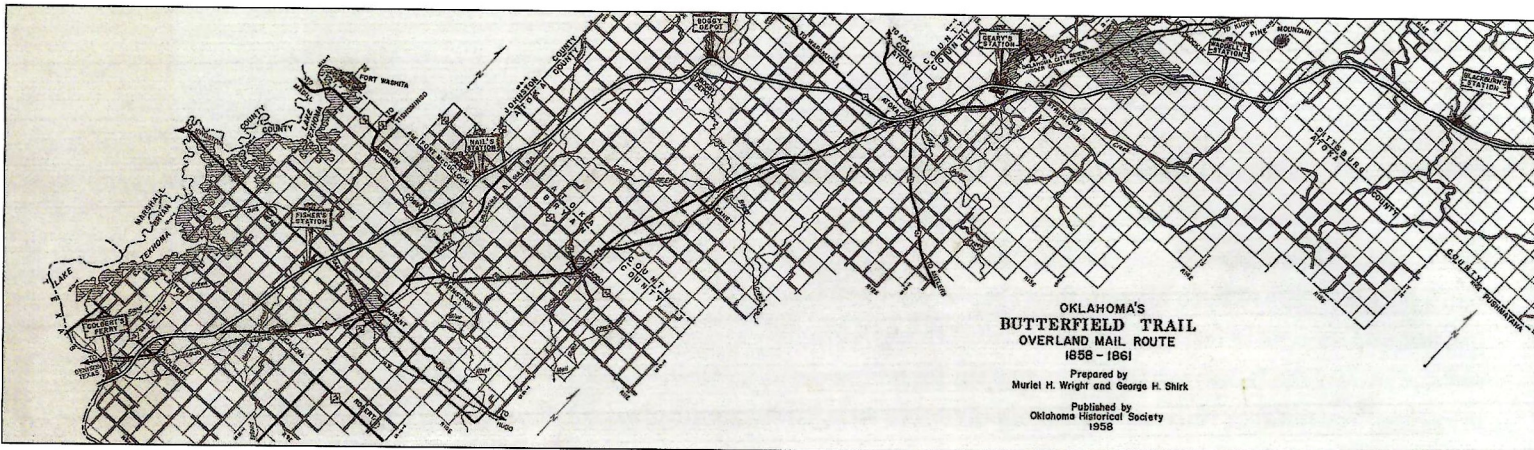
At the time, the Indian Territory was a semi-autonomous enclave set aside for the "Five Civilized Tribes": Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokees, Creeks, and Seminoles. Its boundaries—now approximately those of the state of Oklahoma—contained communal lands ceded to them in exchange for their ancestral homes in the eastern United States. In the process of "Removal" or forced migration, which occurred mostly in the 1830s, the tribes were resettled there by the U.S. government. They had since been successful in rebuilding their societies. Organized as sovereign nations, they had their own governments, churches, and schools. The land was held communally within each nation, but individuals owned the improvements they made. Such ownership by non-citizens was prohibited, although some white traders were allowed into the nations,

<sup>1</sup> Waterman L. Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, ed. by Lyle H. Wright and Josephine M. Bynum (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1942), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Elias Rector, Superintendent, Indian Affairs, Southern Superintendency, to Charles E. Mix, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 26, 1858, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1858*, 132. Grant Foreman, "Historical Background of Kiowa-Comanche Reservation," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 19, no. 2 (June 1941): 129-40. James C. Milligan and David L. Norris, "Keeping the Peace: William H. Emory and the Command at Fort Arbuckle," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 60, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 256-81.

and whites were permitted to marry into the tribes under certain circumstances. Passage through the Indian Territory by non-citizens was common, however, with several major thoroughfares crossing the region.

before fording the Poteau River at Fort Smith to enter the Choctaw Nation early the morning of September 19. From Fort Smith, the stagecoach road ran 192 miles through Indian Territory to Colbert's Ferry on the Red River.<sup>5</sup> At first the



### THE ROADS

On the inaugural westbound journey of the Butterfield stage, Ormsby left St. Louis, Missouri, on September 16, 1858, along with the mail and John Butterfield Sr., John Butterfield Jr., and five other passengers.<sup>3</sup> The party first rode a train to Tipton, Missouri, then the terminus of the Pacific Railroad. From there they boarded a stagecoach and traveled south through Missouri, transferring to a stage, or “Celerity,” wagon in Springfield.<sup>4</sup> They crossed the northwest corner of Arkansas

route followed the old Fort Smith–Boggy Depot Road, using wagon roads which had existed since the late 1830s as a result of the Choctaw and Chickasaw removals and U.S. Army movements. Oklahoma historian Muriel H. Wright extolled the route, writing,

The good roadbeds in the valleys, shallow crossings on the larger streams and easy passes through the outlying ridges of the Sans Bois and the Winding Stair Mountains lay along this same line, which made it the best and the most direct route for travel from Fort Smith across the Choctaw and the Chickasaw country to Red River and points southwest. So it was a natural trailway undoubtedly followed by the native Indian tribes and by visitors to the country lying between the Arkansas and Canadian and the Red rivers long before the first permanent settlements were established in that region.<sup>6</sup>

3 John Jr. was the driver and John Sr. was the conductor on the box. They both departed at Fort Smith and took the next stage heading back east. The other passengers also disembarked either at Fort Smith or before, and Ormsby was the only passenger on the stage wagon when it crossed into Indian Territory. See Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 11, 25.

4 “Celerity” was the name Butterfield gave the stage wagons that he ordered from J. S. and E. A. Abbot and had modified to meet his specifications. This wagon was “about half the weight of a stagecoach and was designed to handle rough conditions where the trail was not as well developed, to get through sandy areas, and to traverse steep inclines. Its wheels were often a smaller diameter than those of stagecoaches, which gave it a lower center of gravity and made it more difficult to tip over. The wheels were also often thicker, to better support the wagon in soft earth. The stage wagon was used exclusively by Butterfield’s Overland Mail Company on 70 percent of the Southern Overland Trail.” Gerald T. Ahnert, “Identifying Butterfield’s Overland Mail Company Stages on the Southern Trail, 1858–1861,” *Overland Journal* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2014–15): 143. For additional information, see Gerald T. Ahnert, “The Maker of Butterfield’s Overland Mail Company Stage Wagons,” *The Carriage Journal* 58, no. 1 (January 2020): 31–35. Note: *The*

*Carriage Journal* associate editor, Ken Wheeling, is the world’s authority for all types of carriages, including stagecoaches and stage wagons.

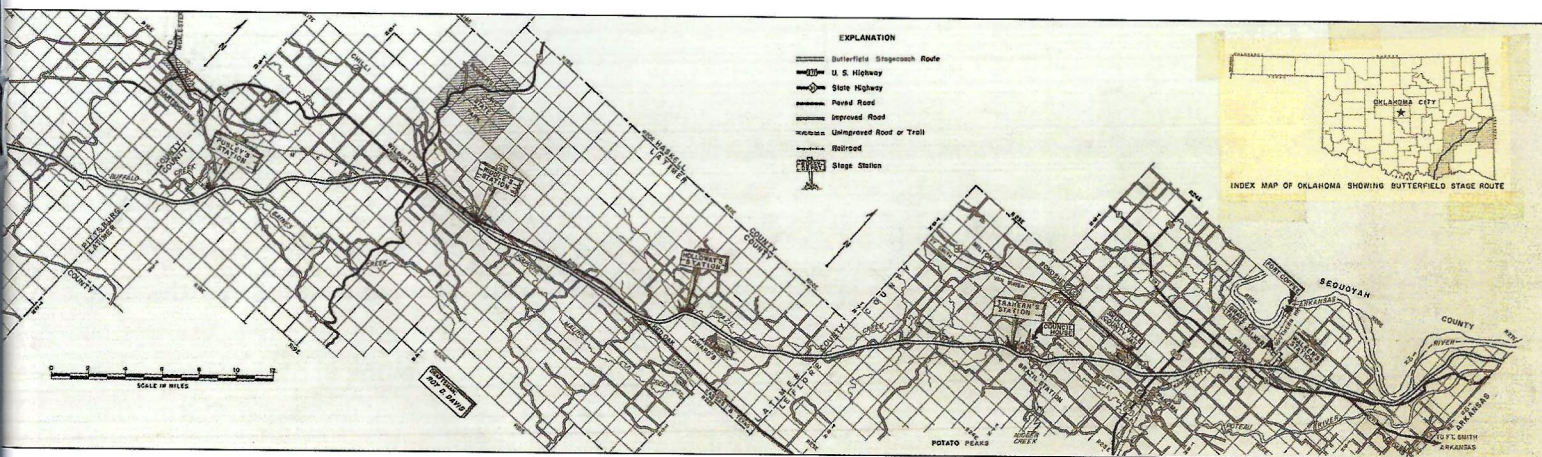
5 “Report of the Postmaster General, Great Overland Mail, Washington, D.C., October 18, 1858” in Walter B. Lang, *The First Overland Mail: Butterfield Trail, St. Louis to San Francisco, 1858–1861* (Washington, D.C.: privately printed, 1940), 110.

6 Muriel H. Wright, “Historic Places on the Old Stage Line from Fort Smith to Red River,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 11, no. 2 (June 1933): 798.

Near present-day Atoka, the Fort Smith–Boggy Depot Road converged with the Texas Road, which began as a trail leading from St. Louis to trading posts among the Osage people in southwest Missouri and northeastern Oklahoma. Known as

used by the Overland Mail stages. All six iron bridges were destroyed during the Civil War.<sup>9</sup>

Indian Territory's twelve Butterfield stage stands, located about sixteen miles apart, were established through agree-



Oklahoma's Butterfield Trail, Overland Mail Route, 1858–1861.  
COURTESY OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY MAP COLLECTION.

the “Osage Trace,” it became a well traveled road by the 1820s, continuing southwesterly into Texas and serving as the avenue by which thousands of home seekers traveled to Texas before the coming of the railroad in 1872.<sup>7</sup>

Capt. Randolph B. Marcy's 1849 wagon road to Santa Fe, New Mexico, along the 35th parallel, was another important thoroughfare across Indian Territory. Beginning with Marcy's escort of a company of goldseekers to Santa Fe in the spring of 1849, this route, with minor variations, was used by Lt. A. W. Whipple in his 1853 Pacific railroad survey and Lt. Edward F. Beale in his 1857–59 effort to carry out the government's direction to create a national wagon road.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Beale's survey team left Fort Smith on October 28, 1858, a little more than a month after the first Butterfield stage passed through. Under Beale's direction, six iron bridges were installed in late 1859 in eastern Indian Territory, including one locally known as “Bridge Edwards” that crossed the Poteau River south of Fort Smith near present-day Pocola, Oklahoma, and which was

ments with Choctaw and Chickasaw citizens who would maintain relay stations at their homes where horse or mule teams could be quickly changed and livestock stabled in readiness for the next stage, and where passengers could embark or disembark. Choctaw citizens also obtained concessions to build and maintain bridges across large streams and turnpikes over difficult sections of the road, for which they charged a fee to non-citizens.<sup>10</sup> In October 1858 the Choctaw General Council approved multiple six-year permits for this purpose along the Overland Mail route. Tolls were fifty cents for a four-wheeled wagon with a four-horse, mule, or oxen team; twenty-five cents for a four-wheeled wagon pulled by one or two livestock; ten

7 Grant Foreman, *Down the Texas Road: Historic Places along Highway 69 through Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936).

8 Grant Foreman, *Marcy and the Gold Seekers: The Journal of Captain R. B. Marcy with an Account of the Gold Rush over the Southern Route* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939).

9 Carroll J. Messer, “Beale Wagon Road to the Pacific Coast. Western Camel Road and Eastern Iron Bridge Road” (College Station: Texas A&M University, October 26, 2021), 23–25, 31, 45. <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/194898>

10 Roscoe P. Conkling and Margaret B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857–1869: Its Organization and Operation over the Southern Route to 1861; Subsequently over the Central Route to 1866; and Under Wells, Fargo and Company in 1869*, 3 vols. (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1947), 235.

cents per man and horse; and one cent each for livestock being driven through. Among the concessionaires then approved were A. W. Geary on the Little Boggy; the heirs of W. R. Guy on the Clear Boggy; J. D. Davis on the Middle Boggy; John Riddle on the Fourche Maline; and W. McDaniel and C. M. James on Brazil Creek. William Holloway was granted permission to construct a toll gate at the Narrows, “grading the earth and leveling with stone” and charging similar fees.<sup>11</sup> Of these, Holloway’s, Riddle’s, Pusley’s, and Geary’s were operated as Butterfield stations. The other eight official stations were Walker’s, Trahern’s, Blackburn’s, Waddell’s, Boggy Depot, Nail’s Crossing, Fisher’s, and Colbert’s Ferry.

The Choctaw government did not directly fund the building or maintenance of roads, but it did require citizens to contribute their labor to the effort. Under an 1854 law, all free males between the ages of 18 and 50 and all U.S. citizens—licensed mechanics and merchants—living in the nation were required to work six days a year on the public roads or pay a fine of fifty cents a day. Ormsby observed, however, that the Choctaws were “generally quite averse to work, and it is with the greatest difficulty that they can be compelled to do their portion toward mending the road.”<sup>12</sup> The state of the roads in Indian Territory seemed adequate for meeting the velocity requirements of the Overland Mail company, nevertheless. Ormsby’s transport was, for instance, thirty-four hours ahead of schedule when it

arrived at Colbert’s Ferry on the Red River, having averaged better than six miles per hour in its thirty-hour-and-twenty-minute crossing of the Territory. Ormsby even managed to nap twice on the hard wooden seats of the stage wagon during the passage. He did, however, report one dramatic incident on difficult roads between Pusley’s and Blackburn’s Stations, in present-day Latimer and Pittsburg Counties.

After taking a “splendid team” of horses at Pusley’s, the wagon had been keeping a brisk pace over the hills when they entered a patch of woods through which the trail was rocky and twisting, “bounding over the stones at a fearful rate.” Although the moon was shining brightly, the dense foliage obscured its light, leaving the driver to find his way in darkness. “To see the heavy mail wagon whizzing and whirling over the jagged rocks, through such a labyrinth, in comparative darkness, and to feel oneself bouncing now on the hard seat, now against the roof and now against the side of the wagon, was no joke, I assure you, though I can truthfully say that I rather liked the excitement of the thing,” wrote Ormsby.<sup>13</sup>

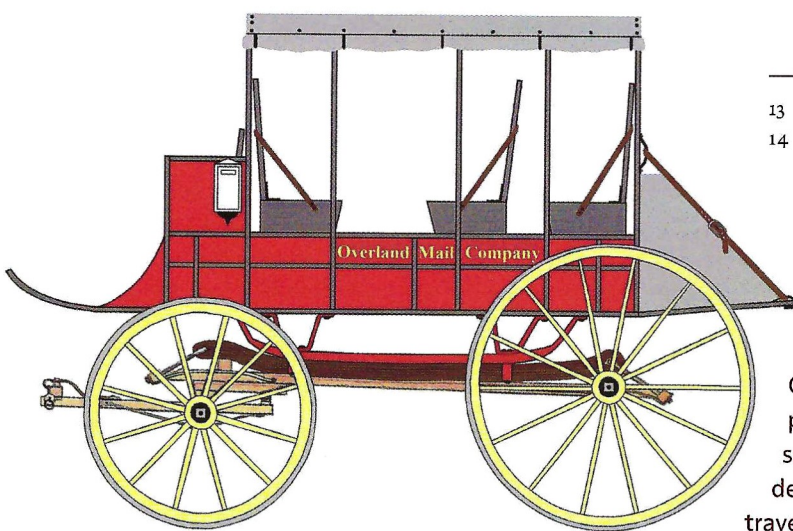
But soon, with two heavy thumps and a jolt, everyone was thrown from their seats. Stopping to examine the damage from the crash, they saw only a broken seat in the darkness, but upon reaching Blackburn’s, they discovered the wagon’s tongue split badly, requiring a repair that took more time than the driver had saved in his hurry, in Ormsby’s opinion. They traveled the next eighteen miles in a brisk two-and-one-quarter hours, but soon the bad condition of the roads slowed them down and it took three hours to travel just thirteen miles from Waddell’s to Geary’s Stations, the route having to cross limestone hills or go miles out of the way.<sup>14</sup>

11 *Acts and Resolutions of the General Council of the Choctaw Nation, At the Called Sessions Thereof, Held in April and June 1858, and the Regular Session held in October, 1858* (Fort Smith, Ark.: Josephus Dotson, Printer for the Nation, 1859), 46, 49, 60, 61, 62, 63.

12 Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 28.

13 Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 31–32.

14 Vernon H. Brown, John D. Frizzell, Mildred Frizzell, James D. Morrison, Lucyl A. Shirk, George H. Shirk, and Muriel H. Wright, “Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1958): 464.



John Butterfield’s Stage (Celerity) Wagon on the Southern Oregon Trail, 1858–1861. The Celerity wagon was used on 70 percent of the Butterfield Overland Mail route, being more suitable for rough conditions where the trail was not well developed. Waterman Ormsby was riding in one of these when he traversed Indian Territory. COPYRIGHT GERALD AHNERT.

Nineteenth-century travelers through Indian Territory often commented on the colorful ball games they witnessed. Artist George Catlin captured this scene in the Choctaw Nation between 1846 and 1850. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



Other travelers also noted difficult roads in the territory. Englishman William Tallack, traveling on an eastbound coach in the summer of 1860, commented, “The southern continuation of the Ozark mountains extends into the Indian Territory, adding to the picturesqueness of the scenery more than to the facility of travel. We took twelve hours in accomplishing forty-seven miles through this district, which became far more difficult northward.”<sup>15</sup>

J. M. Farwell, “Special Overland Correspondent” for San Francisco’s *Daily Alta California*, traveling east in the fall of 1858, found the Indian Territory roads good for the thirteen miles from Red River to Fisher’s Stand, but from there on often experienced them as rough, stony, and “uncomfortable riding.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Walter B. Lang, *The First Overland Mail: Butterfield Trail, St. Louis to San Francisco, 1858–1861* (Washington, D.C.: privately printed, 1940), 158.

<sup>16</sup> Lang, *The First Overland Mail*, 126.

#### THE CHOCTAWS AT PLAY

As Ormsby passed through the territory, he observed in the plains near Pusley’s Station, “the tall posts which the Indians use in playing ball. The players divide themselves into two parties, one standing at each post. The throwers aim to hit the posts, and the catchers must capture the ball in little bowls, with which each is provided, a penalty being inflicted for catching the ball with the hands.”<sup>17</sup>

References to the Choctaws’ traditional ball play were some of the most common and colorful in the accounts of those who traveled through Indian Territory. Stickball, or “ishtaboli,” was played by the Choctaws as well as the Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, long before their removal to Indian Territory.<sup>18</sup> Ishtaboli is roughly translated “little brother of war,” and was often played between tribal communities to settle disputes. Games took place on a field with a goal

<sup>17</sup> Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 30–31.

<sup>18</sup> “Choctaw Stickball,” <https://www.choctaw.org/culture/stickball.html>



post at each end, the players wielding two sticks made of wood. The ends were thinned and bent into flared cups with leather lacing inside to hold a ball made of woven strips of leather. The spectacle of the game impressed outsiders with its “savage beauty.” Players were elaborately painted, naked except for a belt and breechclout. In the course of play they ran and “lit-

does not reach it, for it has been arrested in its progress by a watchful eye and a sure hand; the struggle begins again, and at last it is really pushed through one of the gates.<sup>20</sup>

The game was so rough that casualties were frequent, and betting on the sport was common, sometimes relieving the

RIGHT TO LEFT An old well still survives along the Overland Mail route at the site of Pusley’s Station. PHOTO BY SUSAN DRAGOO.

The log cabin housing Walker’s Station originated in 1832 as the Choctaw Agency, in Skullyville. This photo was taken in 1930 or 1932, probably by Margaret Conkling, after the structure had been weather boarded. The building burned in 1947. COURTESY ROSCOE CONKLING PAPERS, SEAVER CENTER FOR WESTERN HISTORY RESEARCH, LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY.

“Old Thompson” lived in a primitive log cabin in the Choctaw freedmen community of Dog Creek along the Butterfield route and was photographed in 1958 by an Oklahoma Historical Society committee retracing the mail road and placing historical markers. COURTESY THE GATEWAY TO OKLAHOMA HISTORY, OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



erally leaped over each other’s heads, and tripped and dodged and foiled their opponents in every possible combination of agility and grace.”<sup>19</sup>

Artist Heinrich Balduin Möllhausen, traveling through the Indian Territory with the Whipple expedition, offered a vivid description:

The players instantly rush madly forward and become mingled together in one wild struggling mass of human bodies and limbs in which no individual or group can any longer be distinguished. The turf is trampled into dust,—the crowd sways this way and that,—now one has the ball, but it is immediately torn from his grasp,—the next moment another has snatched it, and it is seen flying through the air towards the goal; but it

loser of all his earthly possessions. Into the 1880s, stickball remained the game into which the Choctaws “entered with the zest of primitive days,”<sup>21</sup> but its popularity waned in later years. Revitalization efforts by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma began in the mid-1970s, and the game continues to be played, albeit with a few modern trappings, such as clothing.<sup>22</sup>

#### CULTURE IN THE INDIAN TERRITORY

While the descriptions of Choctaw ball play might lead one to believe otherwise, the trappings of civilization were well embedded in the cultures of the nations of Indian Territory.

19 Angie Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934), 8–9.

20 Balduin Möllhausen, *Diary of a Journey from the Mississippi to the Coasts of the Pacific with a United States Government Expedition* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1858), 46–49.

21 Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, 9, 228.

22 “Stickball,” Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. <https://www.choctawnation.com/about/culture/traditions/stickball>.

The Choctaws had been adapting to European and American society since their first contacts with French colonists and English traders in the last decades of the seventeenth century, developing an active trade economy, beginning to use livestock for subsistence and economic activity, and accepting the introduction of Christian teachings. In 1826 the Choctaws

\$170—equivalent to about \$6,000 today—was made, reported the *Arkansas Intelligencer*. “All subscribed, agents, missionaries, traders, and Indians, a considerable portion of which fund was made up by the latter. The ‘poor Indian’ sending his mite to the Poor Irish!”<sup>24</sup>



adopted a constitutional form of government. They brought these institutions and practices with them from Mississippi to Indian Territory, re-establishing schools, churches, and government. Post-Removal, in the 1840s and 1850s, the Choctaws’ society looked much like that of their non-Indian neighbors. Like others in the rural southeast, many Choctaws lived in log cabins on small farms. They raised corn and potatoes as staples, and often melons, peas, pumpkins, and yams. Cattle were important for sale as well as for food, and wild game abounded for those who wished to hunt. Along the Red River, cotton was cultivated on a large scale.<sup>23</sup> A revealing illustration comes from 1847, when the Choctaws contributed money for the relief of the Irish suffering the Potato Famine: On March 23, 1847, a meeting took place at the Choctaw Agency in Skullyville for “the relief of the starving poor of Ireland.” A collection of

#### SLAVERY IN THE TERRITORY

At the first stage station the westbound coach encountered in Indian Territory, Ormsby met mixed-blood station keeper Tandy Walker, who looked to Ormsby like a “full-blooded white man.” Walker had a large farm in Skullyville, a comfortable house and several hundred head of cattle, and he came out in his shirt sleeves to help hitch the horses. This was unusual because slaves typically took care of the horses at Walker’s and hitched them to the stage.<sup>25</sup> Like other Choctaws, Walker owned slaves and used their labor in administering the station.

Choctaws had been slaveholders in Mississippi since before the Removal, but after relocation to Indian Territory, the number of slaves grew. Some Choctaws, often mixed-bloods,

23 Clara Sue Kidwell, *The Choctaws in Oklahoma, From Tribe to Nation, 1855–1970* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 4–7.

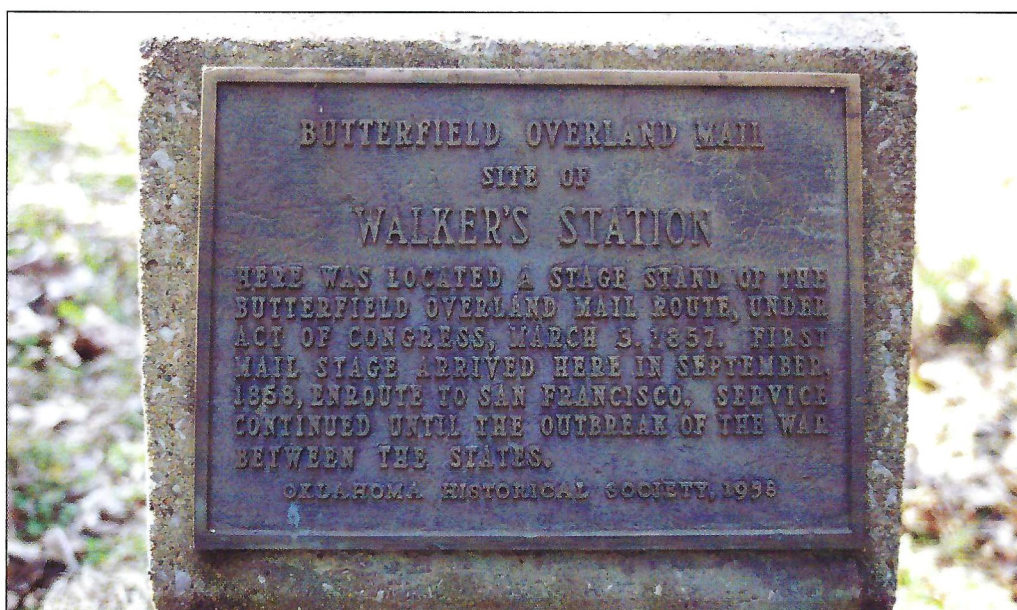
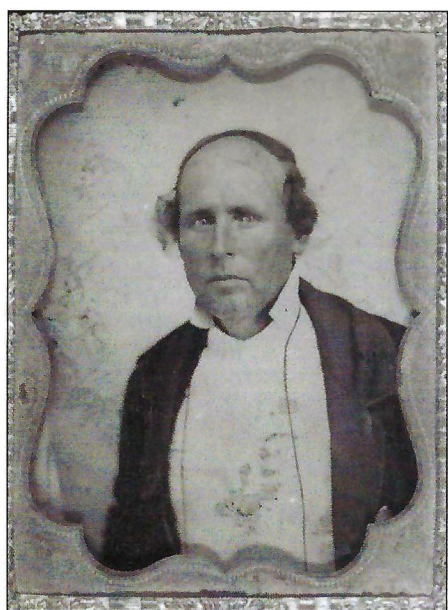
24 “The Choctaws to their White Brethren in Ireland,” *Arkansas Intelligencer*, April 3, 1847, 2.

25 I. C. Gunning, *The Butterfield Overland Mail Through Eastern Oklahoma* (Eastern Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.), 22.

owned hundreds of slaves. By 1860 slaves made up 14 per cent of the Choctaw Nation population. More than half of them lived on farms and plantations along the Red River.<sup>26</sup>

Ormsby wrote of the Choctaws, “In their treatment of [slaves] they are generally more lenient than the white slaveholders, and appear to let them do pretty much as they please.”<sup>27</sup>

enslaved by Holmes Colbert, a mixed-blood Choctaw, was interviewed at the age of eighty-three for the WPA Slave Narratives. She thought “Indian masters was just naturally kinder any way, leastways mine was.” Polly was a small child when her parents died, and Colbert and his wife provided well for her and her siblings. She remarked that other slaveowners who lived on nearby plantations were also “good” to their slaves.<sup>30</sup>



Tallack’s impression was similar to Ormsby’s. He stated there was evidently a large amount of “comfort and moderation in . . . the condition and treatment” of the slaves he observed.<sup>28</sup> In some instances slavery in the Choctaw country did seem lenient. Anecdotal accounts indicate some slaves were allowed to farm and raise their own livestock, live with a spouse owned by another slaveholder, or serve as translators between Choctaws and whites.<sup>29</sup> Polly Colbert, who was

Kiziah Love, aged 93 at the time of her interview, was enslaved by Chickasaw B.F. “Frank” Colbert. She and other slaves on the Colbert plantation “loved Master Frank” and were “about as well off as the best of ’em.” On the other side of the coin, Colbert’s half-brother, Buck, was “the meanest man the sun ever shined on” and had a habit of whipping the slaves and generally behaving badly—until one day he killed one of his own brothers and was then killed by a surviving brother. “Everybody was glad that Buck was dead,” said Love.<sup>31</sup>

26 Fay A. Yarbrough, *Choctaw Confederates: The American Civil War in Indian Country* (Chapel Hill: The North Carolina Press, 2021), 47–49.

27 Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 26.

28 Lang, *The First Overland Mail*, 161.

29 Kidwell, *The Choctaws in Oklahoma*, 32–33.

30 Interview with Polly Colbert, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 13, Oklahoma, Adams-Young, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material, 33. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn130/>.

31 Interview with Kiziah Love, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 13, Oklahoma, Adams-Young, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material, 192. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn130/>.

Although these individuals were quite elderly at the time of the interviews in 1937 and 1938, their detailed reports provide valuable insights about their individual experiences. Caution should, however, be exercised in generalizing their experiences to that of Indian Territory's enslaved population as a whole.

In 1861, with the approach of the Civil War, great pressure was placed upon the nations in Indian Territory to align with

#### A CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

Ormsby was passing through at the height of a political crisis in the Choctaw Nation. Station keeper Tandy Walker, who hitched up that first team of horses in Indian Territory, was serving as governor of the Choctaw Nation under a new constitution adopted at Skullyville in 1857. But neither Walker's jurisdiction nor the Skullyville Constitution was universally



LEFT TO RIGHT Tandy Walker was serving as Governor of the Choctaw Nation when the first Butterfield stage stopped at his station in Skullyville. COURTESY THE GATEWAY TO OKLAHOMA HISTORY, OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

All but two historical markers placed by a 1958 committee of the Oklahoma Historical Society at each of Oklahoma's twelve Butterfield stations still survive. This one sits along the county road in front of Walker's Station. PHOTO BY SUSAN DRAGOO.

Near the site of Colbert's Ferry on the Red River, flamboyant Oklahoma governor William H. ("Alfalfa Bill") Murray fanned the flames of a boundary conflict with Texas over the opening of a new free bridge in 1931. Photograph from July 27, 1931, Associated Press. COURTESY THE GATEWAY TO OKLAHOMA HISTORY, OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

the Confederacy. Neighboring states Arkansas and Texas went with the Confederacy, the U.S. government had abandoned the territory, and those who held slaves were concerned about their economic loss with the potential of abolition. Wealthy plantation owner Robert Jones was adamantly and vocally secessionist. In the end, all the nations of Indian Territory sided with the South, but the Choctaws were among the most ardent of the Confederacy's supporters. After the Civil War in 1866, the federal government made new treaties with the tribes that resulted in loss of territory for the Indian nations and required them to free their slaves and grant them full citizenship. Although those enslaved by the Choctaws were emancipated in 1866, it was 1883 before the Choctaws granted full citizenship to their "freedmen."<sup>32</sup>

recognized, and the nation was greatly divided over the structure of its government.<sup>33</sup>

Although Ormsby did not observe it firsthand, the conflict had turned violent, and an altercation he described illustrates the intensity of the strife. Down the road in Boggy Depot, "a few days since an Indian got shot while in a quarrel about politics, . . . The nation is divided on the question of forming a State government. The two parties wax strong on their respective sides, and frequent collisions are the consequence. I do not wish to be unfair on the subject, but I am given to understand that the half-breeds and whites and more intelligent full-bloods are in favor of the State government."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Yarbrough, *Choctaw Confederates*, 89–90, 112–13, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Kidwell, *The Choctaws in Oklahoma*, 51–54.

<sup>34</sup> Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 33.

The crisis emerged from the ongoing tension between progressives—often mixed-bloods—and traditionalists—often full-bloods. Intermarriage with whites having begun many years before the Removal, mixed-bloods were prominent in commerce and government in both the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations and among the other “civilized tribes,” for that matter, both before and after Removal.

Settling in Indian Territory, the Choctaws had re-established their traditional government with three autonomous political districts, each with its own chief. The 1857 Skullyville Constitution was a product of the progressive faction, abolishing the long-standing office of district chief and consolidating the executive role into the office of governor. For traditionalists, this put too much power in the hands of a single individual. The constitution’s advocates also favored the admission of the Choctaw Nation to the Union as a state and structured the governing document to align with that goal. This was another issue for traditionalists, who opposed statehood. Those who disagreed with the Skullyville Constitution and believed it was illegally adopted wrote a new constitution, adopted it at Doaksville, and elected their own set of officers in May 1858.

Ultimately the federal government intervened in the dispute, as the Choctaw Nation seemed on the verge of civil war. Under the threat of military force by the United States if no resolution could be reached, the Choctaw General Council restored the offices of the district chiefs, although the bulk of the power remained with an elected governor. In January 1860 a compromise was reached through a new constitution that retained the traditional district organization with its district chiefs and courts, and also provided for a national government with a principal chief, a bicameral general council, and a supreme court. This constitution remained in effect with few changes until 1907, when the Choctaw government ceased to exist as a separate political entity at the time of Oklahoma statehood.<sup>35</sup>

Ormsby’s thirty-hour ride across Indian Territory ended in the Chickasaw Nation at Colbert’s Ferry on the Red River. Because the stage was so far ahead of schedule, they had a long wait for the next team, providing ample opportunity for conversation with Chickasaw station keeper B. F. “Frank” Colbert, whom Ormsby described as a “half-breed Indian of great sagacity and business tact.” Born in Mississippi in 1826, Colbert had become wealthy and influential as a young man, establishing his ferry in 1853. In October 1858, with traffic increasing over the route, Colbert obtained a charter from the Council of the Chickasaw Nation to operate the ferry, protecting his valuable enterprise from infringement.<sup>36</sup>

In September 1858 the ferry was a flat boat propelled by slaves using poles. For a four-horse team the fare was \$1.25, although Colbert transported the mail across the river free of charge. At the time of Ormsby’s visit, Colbert was considering installing a cable-and-horsepower mechanism so that one man could manage the boat. No change in the ferry appeared to have been affected by July 1860, for when Tallack traveled through, he stated they were “ferried across by slaves.” By 1872, however, the ferry was being run by cable.<sup>37</sup>

Colbert’s legacy would live on in an unusual way. In 1874, after the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway (M.K. & T.) built a bridge across the Red River, absorbing some of the ferry’s business, Colbert built his own toll bridge for wagons. Less than a year later a flood destroyed both bridges, and Colbert put his ferry boats back into service. Later, Colbert formed the Red River Bridge Company, rebuilding the toll bridge in 1892. Another flood destroyed it in 1908, and it was quickly replaced. This toll bridge was in place in 1931 when a free bridge across the Red River was built northwest of the existing bridge. The attempt to open the free bridge set off a boundary conflict called “The Red River Bridge War,” which involved a stand-off between Texas governor Ross Sterling and Oklahoma governor “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, whose theatrics during the incident included declaring martial law and bringing in the Oklahoma

36 Wright, “Historic Places on the Old Stage Line,” 812–13.

37 W. B. Morrison, “Colbert’s Ferry on Red River, Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory. Recollections of John Malcolm, pioneer ferryman,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 16 no. 3 (September 1938): 302–14.

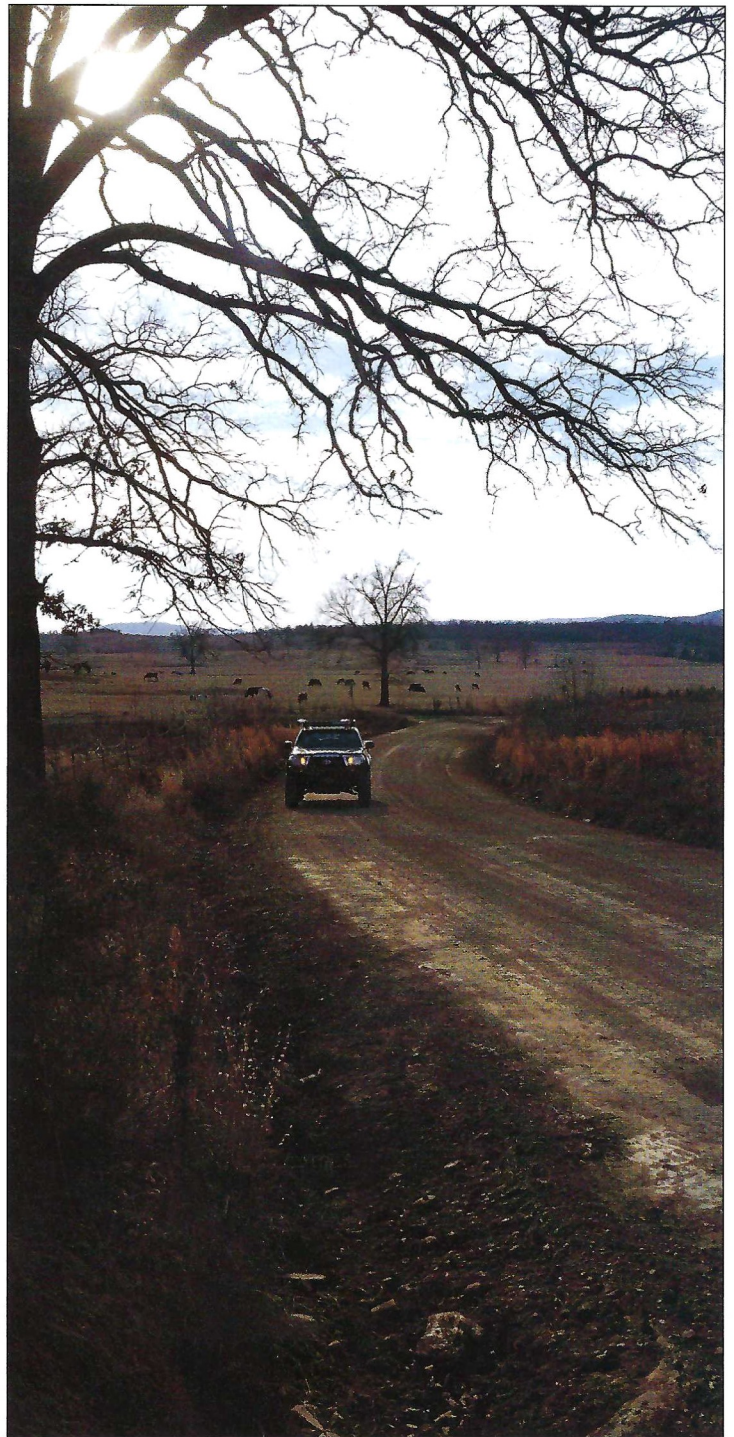
35 Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, 74–75, 269–90.

National Guard. The conflict ended peacefully, and the free bridge was opened on September 7, 1931.<sup>38</sup>

Leaving the Indian Territory for the “lonely plains and barren hills and dangerous frontier” of Texas seemed like leaving home to Ormsby. He wrote, “The very log huts of the friendly Choctaws were like home in comparison to the almost uninhabited wilds which we were to traverse, where all the evidence of the presence of man was the faint trail of the teamsters.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Ormsby’s apprehensions about the Indian Territory had been allayed.

### BACK ROADS

With the coming of the railroad to Indian Territory in 1872, many of the villages along the Fort Smith–Boggy Depot Road fell on hard times and dwindled away, bypassed as new communities sprang up nearer the railroad. In contrast, the route of the Texas Road actually served as the pathway for the M.K. & T. railroad and ultimately U.S. Highway 69, now a highly traveled interstate thoroughfare. The route of the Overland Mail through present-day southeastern Oklahoma remains very rural, much of it now fenced away on private land. As a consequence, many road swales, old wells, springs, and other physical remnants of the Butterfield trail’s existence have been preserved rather than being paved over in the name of progress. In 1958, for the centennial of the Butterfield Overland Mail, a committee of the Oklahoma Historical Society retraced the route and placed historical markers at each station except for Geary’s Stand, which was about to be inundated with the building of a reservoir.<sup>40</sup> With two exceptions, the markers are still in place and intact.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, the Butterfield route through Oklahoma is fairly easy to follow, and the preponderance of unpaved back roads passing through sparsely populated farm and ranchland lends an air



Most of the stagecoach route through present-day Oklahoma is rural, isolated, and unpaved. PHOTO BY SUSAN DRAGOO.

38 Larry O’Dell, “Colbert’s Ferry,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=CO018>. See also Rusty Williams, *The Red River Bridge War: A Texas-Oklahoma Border Battle* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016).

39 Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, 41.

40 Brown, et al., “Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail,” 446–72.

41 The two exceptions are Blackburn’s and Pusley’s. At each site, a stump of the original marker is still in place, but the bronze plaque and upper part of the concrete base are gone.

of remoteness which prompts the imagination to wander back through time, contemplating the experience of earlier travelers along these byways.

That sensation is enhanced by the presence of the Edwards Store, the only standing structure remaining along the stagecoach road in Indian Territory contemporaneous with the

in progress, and it is accessible to the public when active restoration efforts are not underway.<sup>46</sup>

Boggy Depot, where Ormsby heard about the political quarrel turning violent, is another site open to the public. "Several painted houses and a few stores" comprised the whole of Ormsby's minimal description, but Boggy Depot was the



operation of the Overland Mail.<sup>42</sup> The log cabin, sixteen miles southwest of Trahern's Station, was the home of storekeeper Thomas Edwards, an Englishman who married into a Choctaw family.<sup>43</sup> The cabin began in 1850 as a single log structure built from hand-hewn pines and sandstone obtained nearby.<sup>44</sup> A second log room and stone chimney were built in 1870 to the west of the original structure, the two rooms being connected by a covered breezeway to create the dog-trot-style cabin common to the era.<sup>45</sup> Efforts to preserve the structure are currently

largest settlement on the Indian Territory segment of the Butterfield route, a flourishing center of trade with a number of substantial homes, a church and school, several stores and warehouses, a hotel and livery, a blacksmith, a brick kiln, and a grist mill. Meals were served to travelers at Guy's Hotel. Originating in 1837 as a depot for supplies for the Chickasaw

42 Brown, et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 452.

43 I. C. Gunning, *The Edwards Store or Old Red Oak* (Eastern Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.), 8–9.

44 "The Cabin," <https://edwardsstore.com>.


45 Gunning, *The Edwards Store*, 15.

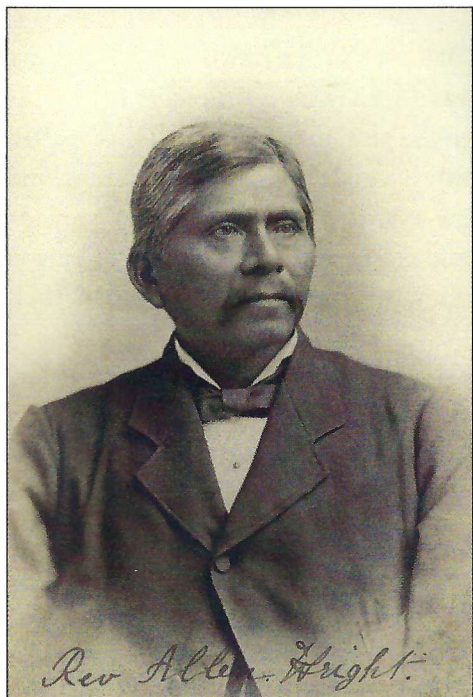
46 The Edwards Store is not to be confused with Edwards' Trading Post, established about 1835 southeast of present Holdenville, on the right bank of Little River about three miles above its confluence (*continued, next page*) with the Canadian River. Situated about 130 miles west of Fort Smith along the California Road, Edwards's Post was a stop for California-bound travelers after 1849. See Jon D. May, "Edwards's Post," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=ED008>.

migration, the settlement was situated about a mile west of Clear Boggy Creek.<sup>47</sup>

Boggy Depot's most famous resident was Allen Wright. Born in Mississippi in 1826, he moved with his family in 1833 to Indian Territory. In 1866 he was elected principal chief of the Choctaws and was one of the signers of the Reconstruc-

state park.<sup>49</sup> Today Boggy Depot is a quiet and attractive recreation area managed by the Chickasaw Nation. Allen Wright is buried in the adjacent Boggy Depot Cemetery.

An excellent and thorough online resource for following the Butterfield route across present-day Oklahoma is available at <http://civilwaralbum.com/indian/butterfield1.htm>. 



tion Treaty of 1866. When U.S. commissioners proposed the consolidation of Indian Territory's tribes under an intertribal council, Wright suggested the region be designated the Territory of Oklahoma, "Oklahoma" meaning "Red People" in Choctaw. The name was given officially to Oklahoma Territory in 1890 and then to the state in 1907.<sup>48</sup> Wright's family home in Boggy Depot survived until 1952, when it was destroyed by fire. A few years later the Boggy Depot site was made a memorial

LEFT TO RIGHT The Edwards Store, built in 1850, is the only intact structure on Oklahoma's stretch of the Butterfield mail road contemporaneous with the life of the Overland Mail on the southern route. PHOTO BY SUSAN DRAGOO.

Chief Allen Wright of Boggy Depot is famous for suggesting the name "Oklahoma" for the proposed territory in 1866. COURTESY THE GATEWAY TO OKLAHOMA HISTORY, OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

One of the last remaining structures in old Boggy Depot was Chief Allen Wright's home. It burned in 1952. This photo was taken circa 1890-95. COURTESY THE GATEWAY TO OKLAHOMA HISTORY, OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

47 Muriel H. Wright, "Old Boggy Depot," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 5, no. 1 (March 1927): 4.

48 Jon D. May, "Wright, Allen," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=WR004>. See also John Bartlett Meserve, "Chief Allen Wright," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 19 no. 4 (December 1941): 314-21.

49 Brown et al., "Committee Report Butterfield Overland Mail," 465-66.