

Paving the Trace

By Jack D. Elliott, Jr.

The Natchez Trace Parkway, a unit of the National Park Service (NPS) since 1938, extends from the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee, south to Natchez, Mississippi. A scenic highway buffered from the outside world by wide rights of way and a drapery of lush woodland, the Parkway, according to promotional literature, “commemorates” or “memorializes” the historic Natchez Trace, a road that connected Natchez and Nashville during the early nineteenth century.

Commemoration, more than a mere historical record, involves a deeper, symbolic experience of the past. However, neither the purpose of the Parkway, commemorative or otherwise, or its relation to the old Natchez Trace are altogether clear. For example, much of the Parkway’s route is at a considerable distance, often miles, from the historical road and frequently runs through bottomlands that would have been avoided by early travelers. A Parkway traveler only occasionally, indeed infrequently, encounters remnants of the old Trace roadbeds, and they are by their very nature inconspicuous, with no immediate historical ambience. Additionally, stops at many of the “historical sites” along the Parkway are little more than vicarious events, as interpretive signage indicates that actual sites are in most instances at a considerable distance, effectively inaccessible to the visitor.

The Parkway, in fact, seems to violate the fundamental principle of historical parks having a close association with the site of a historical event. Natchez Trace Parkway historian Dawson Phelps rhetorically asked, “Was it desirable to set up a unit of the National Park System, in effect a historical park, no matter what name it bore, in which less than ten percent of the estimated requirement of 45,000 acres was

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historic ground?"¹ However, there was another purpose at work in the creation of the Parkway, as Phelps noted: "Those who originated the Natchez Trace idea, and their spokesmen in the House or Senate, cared little about the form and shape their parkway assumed. They wanted a road—a road which the Federal Government would, in large part, pay for."² In this light all questions of history and heritage were peripheral, if not moot.

These observations suggest that the motivations behind the creation of the Parkway were contradictory and in part duplicitous. Individuals and organizations developed and then manipulated the image of the Natchez Trace, all within the context of heritage organizations, road promotion schemes, and the pursuit of federal dollars. Within this context the dimension of the Trace's meaning was changed from a historical geographical phenomenon to a heritage symbol within the national mythos. This idealistic image was in turn transformed into a propaganda symbol to promote road-building efforts, and from such "smoke and mirrors" a confused mandate for a parkway emerged that the NPS was obligated to make sense of. In the course of this process, something was lost.

The Road to Natchez

Any consideration of the origin of the Natchez Trace Parkway must begin with the Natchez Trace, to which the former was symbolically linked. Despite the tendency to reify the term, the "Trace" is in actuality "a rather elastic term," as the Parkway survey document noted,³ that refers to a complex historical-geographical process involving human activity, meanings, the landscape, and time; hence follows a definition of the road regarding its historical and geographical context and the changing terms—and meanings—that have been used to interpret it.⁴

¹ Dawson A. Phelps, "The Administrative History [of the Natchez Trace Parkway]," (unpublished manuscript, Natchez Trace Parkway headquarters, Tupelo, Mississippi, n.d.), chapter VII, 3. The Administrative History is on the internet at www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/natr/adhi.pdf.

² *Ibid.*, chapter VI, 6.

³ *Natchez Trace Parkway Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 110n.

⁴ These considerations apply to any road nomenclature, whether developed by happenstance or as part of a planned system of numbered highways. Jack D. Elliott, Jr., "Of Roads and Reifications: The Interpretation of Historical Roads and the Soto Entrada," in

In its most basic sense the term “Natchez Trace” refers to the road that during the early nineteenth century connected Natchez and Nashville, two frontier settlements separated by hundreds of miles of Indian Territory. However, the Trace was never created as a single unit nor officially designated as such; it evolved from a network of roads and trails that lay between the two settlements. The Natchez Trace was a concept that made comprehensible what might otherwise be perceived as a number of road segments within a network of roads that spanned the Americas. As the Natchez and Nashville settlements grew, travel and communication increased on what were initially Indian trails. The 1801 treaties with the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indian tribes authorized the federal government to survey and improve a route through the Indian Territory, thereby expediting travel between the two settlements. This improvement, as critical as it was, did not clearly define the Trace, because the federally improved road was only the intermediate part of the route that lay in the sparsely-settled Indian Territory. At either end were tens of miles of road under the jurisdiction of local governments that passed through farms and towns. The concept of the Natchez Trace served to synthesize what otherwise might have been perceived as a series of separate and distinct roads, making a complex phenomenon coherent in part through simplification and abstraction. Furthermore, the name did not suddenly appear overnight; it gradually emerged during the early nineteenth century. Initially known by names given to its component parts (e.g., “the road to the Chickasaws”), it became known by a variety of names (e.g., “the Nashville road,” “the road to Natchez,” “the Columbian Highway”) until, almost in retrospect, “Natchez Trace” came into dominant usage as the road passed its heyday. As the Indian Territory was gradually ceded to the U.S. and the lands were surveyed, sold, and populated by Americans, dense networks of new roads were developed cession by cession, gradually absorbing the Trace. Some sections of the old road continued in use as county roads, while others were abandoned entirely.

For the decades following, the Trace was mentioned only occasionally by historians,⁵ while comparable historic roads began to acquire notoriety

Patricia Galloway (ed.), *The Hernando de Soto Expedition: History, Historiography, and “Discovery” in the Southeast* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 246-58.

⁵ E.g. J. F. H. Claiborne’s landmark history, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State* (Reprint Company, Spartanburg, S.C., 1978, reprint of the first edition, 1880), 6n, 7n, 8, 226, 226n-27n, 228, 342n; Lowry and McCardle’s 1891 history hardly mentions

in the contemporary literature. For example, Josiah Gregg's 1844 *Commerce of the Prairies* told the story of the Santa Fe Trail, while Francis Parkman in 1849 did the same for the Oregon Trail in the book of the same name.⁶ By the early twentieth century only a few minor items on the Natchez Trace had appeared in print,⁷ though there was much potential in the topic. As a dynamic, shifting route connecting Natchez and Nashville, the "Natchez Trace" provided a broad conceptual framework around which disparate events and people could be woven into an amorphous and expanding tapestry of historical associations, a virtual microcosm of the birth of the nation. This symbolic potential would be recognized by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) during the early twentieth century. However, the ambiguities that lay hidden in the term would go unrecognized.

The Legacy of Memory

Symbols of the past are, of course, more than objective representations of historical personages, places, and events; they embody ideals and images that transcend the empirical. The focus on national heritage was a modern manifestation of a search for meaning, a search that left a trail of symbols through history: myths, sacred places, rituals, scriptures, and commentaries. Humans have long believed in a transcendent that exists outside the empirical world, with finite images pointed to that encompassing infinity. The Christian tradition saw society as ephemeral and secondary to that transcendental order. However, during the modern era, with the rise of nationalism, America again embraced a "transcendental aura." In his 1882 lecture "What is a Nation?" Ernest Renan declared that

the nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory . . . this is the

the Trace, as suggested by an examination of the index. Robert Lowry and William H. McCardle, *A History of Mississippi* (Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Company, 1978, reprint of the first edition, 1891).

⁶ Dawson A. Phelps, "Genesis of the Natchez Trace Parkway," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* (1965), XIX, 59.

⁷ In 1900 the first edition of Franklin L. Riley's *School History of Mississippi* devoted a few lines to the Natchez Trace, and in 1907 Dunbar Rowland's encyclopedia, *Mississippi*, appeared with three pages on the history of the old road. Additionally, a popular article

social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present, to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more these are the essential conditions for being a people A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.⁸

Throughout Europe nationalism was manifested in part by an interest in ruins and historic places associated with an often mythologized national history. It provided the incentive for recording and preserving Greek and Roman ruins and medieval castles. Heritage organizations in the United States were concerned with similar sites constituting what Renan termed the “rich legacy of memories” that would encourage “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage.”⁹

During the nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of heritage organizations devoted to recovering, preserving, and commemorating history and historic places in order to promote national ideals and identity. Many of these organizations were composed of veterans and the descendants of veterans, such as the Grand Army of the Republic (1866), the United Confederate Veterans (1889), and the Sons of the American Revolution (1889), and were concerned with recalling and memorializing the Civil War and the American Revolution. Others, such as the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (1853) or the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (1889), focused on preserving historic properties. All were concerned with commemorating and mythologizing the national past. The most successful was the DAR, founded in Washington, D.C., in October 1890. Comprised of descendants of Revolutionary War veterans, the organization was established for the stated purpose of developing

entitled simply “The Natchez Trace,” appearing in 1905, recorded a visit in June of that year to sites along the Trace.

Franklin L. Riley, *School History of Mississippi* (Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Company, 1976, this is a reprint of the 1915 edition that was in turn a reprint of the 1900 edition), 127; Dunbar Rowland (ed.), *Mississippi* (Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Company, 1976, reprint of the 1907 edition), II, 566-68; John Swain, “The Natchez Trace,” *Everybody’s Magazine* (September, 1905), 329-36.

⁸ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41-55. Renan’s original essay in French, “Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation?” was delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882, and was published in 1887.

⁹ *Ibid.*

“an enlightened public opinion” and a “capacity for performing the duties of American Citizens” through “perpetuat[ing] the memory and spirit of the men and women who achieved American Independence; by the acquisition and protection of historical spots and the erection of monuments” The society grew rapidly as local chapters were organized and each became involved in its own projects that included restorations, markings, and dedications.¹⁰

Although the first commemorations were concerned primarily with buildings, graves, and other sites associated with colonial and revolutionary war history, by the early twentieth century the DAR began to mark historical roads, an idea that was probably influenced by the growing interest in improving roads. Because the old road beds were long and often inaccessible, monuments were usually placed at strategic positions to maximize their visibility. The first road commemorated was probably the Santa Fe Trail, which the Kansas Society DAR decided to mark in 1902, with the first monument erected in 1907.¹¹ Other trails marked by the DAR and other heritage organizations included the Federal Road, the National Road, the Oregon Trail, the Camino Real, and the Natchez Trace.

The marking of the Trace was proposed by Elizabeth Jones (1868-1949) of the Mississippi State Society Daughters of the American Revolution (MSSDAR) in the early years of the twentieth century. Born Elizabeth Howard Blanton in Farmville, Virginia, she married Egbert Jones, a planter from Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1889 and lived with him there in his antebellum home, “Box Hill,” on Chulahoma Avenue. In 1892, when the DAR was less than two years old and Elizabeth only twenty-four, she became the first member from Mississippi, an act that no doubt attested to her initiative and interest in matters of heritage.¹²

¹⁰ Ann Arnold Hunter, *A Century of Service: The Story of the DAR* (Washington, D.C.: National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, 1991), 7-9, 15-17, 128.

¹¹ Mrs. T. A. Cordry, *The Story of the Marking of the Santa Fe Trail, by the Daughters of the American Revolution in Kansas and the State of Kansas* (Topeka, Kan.: Crane & Company, Printers, 1915), 15, 85-87.

¹² “Mrs. Egbert Jones Dies Following an Extended Illness,” Holly Springs, Miss., *South Reporter*, December 22, 1949; “Egbert Rufus Jones” (obituary), Holly Springs, *The South Reporter*, March 9, 1917; Anne Hughes Porter, *The History of the Mississippi State Society Daughters of the American Revolution 1896-1996*, (Kosciusko, Miss.: Professional Publishing, 1996).

In 1899 she attended the second annual convention of the Mississippi Historical Society, held in Natchez, a veritable microcosm of the state's history.¹³ Mississippi's first DAR chapter had been founded there in 1895. While at the meeting she saw relics and sites that linked history to place, in part in the auditorium of Institute Hall, which on the occasion of the Historical Society's meeting, was arrayed with artifacts from different periods of the city's history, including Indian artifacts, a sword from Fort Rosalie, a Spanish cannon ball, Civil War artifacts, and portraits of famous Natchezians. On the afternoon of April 21, the visitors were taken to see the site of Fort Rosalie, Spanish governor Gayoso's home, the Catholic cathedral, and other old homes and graves.¹⁴ It is likely that Elizabeth Jones also had the opportunity to visit remains of the old Trace, which are exceptionally distinctive in the Natchez area because of the erosional properties of the loess soils. The aura of Natchez left an indelible impression on her, and she noted a few years later, "For every American versed even slightly in the history of his country, there is a glamour of romance and mystery clinging to the name, 'Natchez.'"¹⁵

Jones's activities with the DAR expanded dramatically during the following years. In January 1903 she organized a chapter in Holly Springs, and the following year, she represented the state regent, who was ill, at the DAR's Continental Congress in Washington, D.C., where she learned the importance of holding state conventions as a means of initiating and coordinating programs. Subsequently, she organized Mississippi's first state convention, which was held in her home town, Holly Springs, on April 12–13, 1905.¹⁶

¹³ Brief item: "Mrs. Egbert Jones left last week for Natchez to make a short visit and to be present at the State Historical Association that convened there." *The South*, April 27, 1899.

¹⁴ Natchez, Miss., *Daily Democrat*, April 20, 21, 22, 23, 1899.

¹⁵ Unsigned article, "The Natchez Trace," undoubtedly by Elizabeth Jones, who was responsible for the entire page, in the *Memphis, Tenn., Memphis News Scimitar*, October 6, 1907.

¹⁶ It has been claimed that Elizabeth Jones first suggested marking the Trace at the Holly Springs meeting. However, as will be seen, she seems to have placed no special emphasis on the project until mid- to late 1907. Having discovered no contemporary documentation for her making a 1905 proposal, the author assumes that it was read back into the accounts of the convention at a later date. Porter, *The History of the Mississippi State Society Daughters of the American Revolution 1896-1996* (hereinafter *DAR History*) 12, 118; Phelps, "Genesis of the Natchez Trace Parkway," 60.

In the spring of 1906, the DAR's Continental Congress elected Jones regent for Mississippi, putting her in a position to initiate and implement her own plans. On November 4, the *Memphis News Scimitar* published a page of articles on the MSSDAR that she had written or edited. She emphasized the importance of often-neglected historical sites in the state:

We say that we like London because of its historic haunts and associations, and thinking of them, we come to regard our own country as lacking the things which awaken reverent emotion. A mere tomb in an English churchyard, or a lettered slab in one of the Inns of Court, sends us back a century or two as we ponder some poet's work and how he lived and what were his surroundings, and yet one may find plenty of this kind of delight in Mississippi.¹⁷

She noted that several DAR chapters had begun marking historic sites in the state, although she said nothing about the Natchez Trace specifically. Nevertheless, in the lower right-hand corner of the newspaper page there was a photograph of the site of Fort Rosalie, labeled "Fort Rosalie and the old Natchez Trace." Although the Trace was not actually depicted, the photo was a hint of things to come.

By October 1907 the Natchez Trace suddenly emerged as a priority in Jones's work. In that month she informed the Mississippi Daughters that she had written to the DAR societies in Alabama and Tennessee requesting their cooperation in a joint effort to mark "this great thoroughfare" as a "most worthy memorial work."¹⁸ On February 5, 1908, at the third annual convention of the MSSDAR in Jackson, she addressed the gathered Daughters about her plans. After summarizing the Trace's role in integrating the frontier Natchez District into the nation, she then articulated in rousing terms the importance of such national symbols for people today and in the future:

¹⁷ *Memphis News Scimitar*, November 4, 1906.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, October 6, 1907. Elizabeth Jones's interest in the Natchez Trace was probably inspired in part by her recollections of Natchez and the Trace. Additionally, as noted, three brief accounts of the Natchez Trace had just been published, and she was clearly familiar with the article in Dunbar Rowland's 1907 encyclopedia, *Mississippi*, because her contribution that same year to the *Memphis News Scimitar* included articles that copied verbatim from that source (Rowland, *Mississippi*, II, 567-68). Furthermore, she was aware that the Kansas State Society DAR had just begun marking the Santa Fe Trail. "Mississippi State Conference, Daughters of the American Revolution Held in Jackson, February 4th and 5th, 1908" (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), copy in possession of Dot Ward, Madison, Miss.

[H]istoric sites and relics are “the moorings that connect the present with the glorious past,” and should be cherished, since they are simply held by us in trust for future ages. We must not lose all trace of this priceless relic of our heroic past, or let it fade from us while we pursue the even tenor of our way careless of neglect. We must not only trace with accuracy the very route but raise a fund to place monuments and markers along the way revealing by this appreciation of such a historic site, the well-spring of patriotism alive in all our hearts; and also inspiring at every step the young minds of the great Mississippians of the future.¹⁹

Such language might be considered naïve by today’s cynical standards; however, it exemplifies the historical imagery overlain with transcendental evocations typical of commemorative activities in that era.

Jones’s imagination, enthusiasm, and coordination continued, and at the fourth annual convention in December 1908 she urged each chapter to purchase and erect a Trace marker. The Corinth chapter responded quickly and acquired the first monument, which they erected in the town of Tishomingo. Soon after in 1909 her own Holly Springs chapter placed a stone in the most prestigious location of all: the bluffs at Natchez, the symbolic beginning of the Trace. The next marker was erected in Port Gibson in 1910, with others following intermittently, until the last was erected at Thomastown in August 1933.²⁰ Such activities brought the old road a far greater notoriety than it had previously possessed; in 1910 DAR member Mrs. A. F. Fox of West Point noted that “[until recently] the Natchez Trace was practically unknown to the people of Mississippi.... But with pardonable pride we claim for the Mississippi Society of the DAR the credit for awakening general public interest.”²¹

¹⁹ “Mississippi State Conference, Daughters of the American Revolution Held in Jackson, February 4th and 5th, 1908,” 17-18.

²⁰ Porter, *DAR History*; Elizabeth Jones, in “Minutes of the Mississippi State Conference of the Daughters of the American Revolution Held in Meridian, December 3rd and 4th, 1908” (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), copy in possession of Dot Ward.

²¹ Mrs. A. F. Fox, quoted in “Administrative History,” chapter II, 1-2. In late 1915 she also wrote: “Even in Natchez, only last spring, I was told by persons who had been reared there that they were unfamiliar with its history, until the placing of the boulders aroused their curiosity.... In other sections, except to a very few, the Natchez Trace was to the people a name only.” *Natchez News Democrat*, January 2, 1916.

History and Hokum

Within only a few years the campaign for better roads that was sweeping America would take full advantage of the Natchez Trace's newly acquired notoriety. Prior to 1900 the country's road network was neither paved nor organized; most roads were maintained by local governments without centralized planning or coordination hindering the development of an efficient highway system. Consequently, long distance transportation was difficult by road and economically viable only by rail and water. By the turn of the century and the advent of the bicycle and automobile—which could not traverse the roads as well as horses and wagons—demands grew for an improved road system.

With the twentieth century came the first widespread efforts to coordinate road development beyond the local level. At that time road associations were organized to establish interstate highways to link major cities that were hundreds of miles apart. Highways consisted of a combination of pre-existing roads maintained by an amalgamation of local governments under the coordination of the association.²² The routes between the designated cities were not always the most direct, as they were determined by the level and location of local support. As local organizations were developed and routes selected, the associations collected dues, marked the highways with identifying logos, and promoted them by publishing trail guides and newsletters.²³ Each highway, however amorphous it might be, was promoted under a rubric often based on historical and patriotic themes, linking the project to the national mythos. These “named trails,” as they were called, originated as early as 1902 with the creation of the Jefferson Memorial Road Association in Charlottesville, Virginia, while others followed: the Lincoln Highway (New York–San Francisco), the Jefferson Highway (Winnipeg–New

As further evidence of its growing notoriety, articles on the Trace began to be published. Eron O. Rowland, “Marking the Natchez Trace: An Historic Highway of the Lower South,” *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, XI (1910), 345-61. George J. Leftwich, “Some Main Traveled Roads, Including Cross-sections of Natchez Trace,” *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society: Centenary Series*, I (1916), 463-76.

²² John B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 31.

²³ Charles L. Sullivan, *Building the “Old Spanish Trail”: The Story of a Modern American Highway* (Jackson Miss.: Mississippi Department of Transportation, 2003), 17-18. Richard F. Weingroff, *From Names to Numbers: The Origins of the U.S. Numbered Highway System* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, n.d., a version published in the AASHTO Quarterly, 1997), on the Internet at: www.fhwa.

Orleans), the Bankhead Highway (Washington, D.C.–San Diego), the Magnolia Highway (Chicago–Gulfport), and the Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine–San Diego). As named trails proliferated, a precedent was set: historical images could be used as promotional gimmicks to play upon patriotic sympathies. As a result history and heritage would be transformed into a veiled discourse intended to sell rather than educate, a distinction that was lost on the public.

Some of the named trails took their themes from old roads that figured large in American legend and history. This practice began as early as 1910, when Judge J. M. Lowe of Kansas City promoted the idea of building highways along “Famous Old Trails” at the National Good Roads Convention in Oklahoma City.²⁴ In Lowe’s home state, Missouri, plans were proposed for establishing highways that approximated several old trails, including Boone’s Lick Road and the Santa Fe Trail. Besides involving the usual constituencies, the historical aspects attracted the support of heritage and history organizations who demonstrated their willingness to rally around a modern highway project if it purported to have “historical” concerns:

[T]he lovers of history and admirers of romance joined the fight. This was on account of the historic route, over which Daniel Boone and pioneers of the West blazed their way and around which linger many pleasing tales of pioneer times, being one of the practical routes for a state highway. This brought the Santa Fe Trail and Boone’s Lick Road Association, the Kansas City Historical Society, the Missouri Historical Society, and the Daughters of the American Revolution into the fight. The work of the latter was directed, however, more towards the placing of markers along the historical trail.²⁵

These projects converged in the formation of the Old Trails Association of Missouri in December 1911, which soon transformed itself into

dot.gov/infrastructure/numbers.htm. For a list of named trails, see the National Auto Trails website: www.marion.ohio-state.edu/fac/schul/trails/national/natlist.html

²⁴ Glenn A. Harper, “Preserving the National Road Landscape,” in Karl Raitz (ed.), *The National Road* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 386, citing Charles H. Davis, *National Old Trails Road, Ocean to Ocean Highway* (Boston: Everett Press, 1914), 33–35.

²⁵ *Missouri State Board Bulletin*, September 1911, quoted in Richard F. Weingroff, *The National Old Trails Road*, part 1: The Quest for a National Road (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, n.d.), on the Internet at: www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/trails.htm

the more ambitiously named National Old Trails Association, with the goal of creating a transcontinental highway from Washington, D.C., to California “following” the conjoined route of a hodge-podge of old trails including the National Road, Boone’s Lick Road, the Santa Fe Trail, and the Oregon Trail.²⁶

The idea of developing a highway promoted on the basis of the Natchez Trace arose almost by happenstance within the context of the Old Trails movement as an offshoot of the promotion of the Jackson Highway. In 1911 Alma Rittenberry, a member of the U.S. Daughters of the War of 1812, suggested that a highway be created that would approximate the route of Andrew Jackson’s Military Road²⁷, which had been established during the late 1810s under the authorization of General Andrew Jackson to run from Nashville, Tennessee, to Madisonville, Louisiana, on the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain.²⁸ By 1915 Rittenberry’s idea had inspired the Commercial Club of Florence, Alabama, to initiate a movement to establish “the Jackson Highway,” which would run from Chicago to New Orleans via Nashville.²⁹ Like most of the old trail roads, adherence to historical routes was hardly a priority; the primary concern was selling the project to a congeries of local governments. Nor was there any objection from the heritage organizations, who seemed content with having their favorite old roads promoted.³⁰ The lack of interest in adhering to historic routes was emphatically evidenced by the intent to extend the Jackson Highway beyond its historical northern terminus at Nashville to a new terminus on the Great Lakes. The tendency to deviate significantly from the historical route would soon be played out in a rivalry between local factions, one of which used the Natchez Trace as its rallying cry.

After initiating the Jackson Highway project, routes had to be selected and local governments enlisted to improve the sections that passed

²⁶ Harper, “Preserving the National Road Landscape,” 386.

²⁷ Meridian, Miss., *Meridian Star*, September 22, 1915; Weingroff, *From Names to Numbers*.

²⁸ Yancey M. Quinn, Jr., “Jackson’s Military Road,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, XVI (1979), 334-50.

²⁹ Columbus, Miss., *Columbus Commercial*, August 19, 1915; *Meridian Star*, September 22, 1915.

³⁰ For example, the “Old Spanish Trail” Highway that was to connect St. Augustine, Florida, with San Diego, California, was based on a historic trail that never existed. The name was concocted as a promotional scheme. Sullivan, *Building the “Old Spanish Trail,”* 5.

through their jurisdictions. Competing factions immediately emerged, lobbying for the highway to pass through their own respective areas. For example, the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce sought to have the highway diverted far to the east of the direct route to run through Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile, and then along the Gulf Coast to New Orleans.³¹

By 1915 the Natchez Trace had received so much notoriety through the DAR's efforts that it seemed a suitable image for promoting a highway. Subsequently, a faction emerged urging that the Jackson Highway be constructed far to the west of the original route to approximate the route of the Natchez Trace through Jackson and Natchez before running to New Orleans via Baton Rouge. Convoluting history and semantics, they gave this route the oxymoronic title, "the Natchez Trace route of the Jackson Highway." With this appropriation of the Trace, the linkage between history and road building was established that would eventually lead to the Natchez Trace Parkway.

Although one can sympathize with the intent to form a named trail, the historical rationale was transparently self-serving, having little to do with determining the optimal route or following the actual Natchez Trace. Furthermore, it involved attempts to obscure the difference between historical roads, even implying that the Natchez Trace actually was the Jackson Military Road. For example, on September 19, 1915, a group of Attala County citizens met at the Kosciusko City Hall and drafted a resolution calling for the Jackson Highway to follow the Natchez Trace route because it was the best of the three. The resolution claimed that the route was "the shortest and most direct route from Nashville to New Orleans," a notion demonstrably untrue. It also claimed that although the Natchez Trace was not the Jackson Military Road, it was more historical, because Andrew Jackson had traveled it, while he had not traveled the Jackson Military Road. Furthermore, the DAR had recognized its "sentimental value" through marking it with monuments, and therefore "people will prefer to travel over a road that has so many historical reminiscences and associations." One envisions with difficulty the flow of traffic diverted hundreds of miles off course, because of the drivers' desire to follow the "more historic route."³²

³¹ *Meridian Star*, August 21, 1915, and reprinted August 26, 1915.

³² Natchez, Miss., *Natchez News Democrat*, September 20, 1915.

The partisans of the competing routes between Nashville and New Orleans began campaigning in preparation for a November meeting of the Jackson Highway Association. Realizing, despite claims to the contrary, that it did not have the shortest route, the Natchez Trace faction emphasized that the Trace was far more historical than the alternatives. To support their claims, they trotted out historical facts and fictions. For example, Dr. James F. McCaleb of Claiborne County made the incredible claim that the Natchez Trace was “sometimes named ‘The Jackson Military Road,’” a ruse designed to obscure the difference between the two roads,³³ while the Natchez newspaper sanctimoniously warned that having the Jackson Highway avoid Natchez would “do grave injustice and violence to both well authenticated tradition and the truth of history.”³⁴

As the primary coordinator of the Trace faction, the Natchez Chamber of Commerce organized a convention in Natchez on October 19, 1915, to muster support for bringing the Jackson Highway through the city.³⁵ Attended by delegates from Adams, Claiborne, Hinds, and Jefferson Counties and representatives of the DAR and the United Daughters of the Confederacy [UDC], the meeting was planned to forge a link between the Trace and the Jackson name. Judge W. C. McMartin spoke on the history of the Trace and its association with Andrew Jackson, while a subsequent speaker, Judge Jeff Truly of Fayette, claimed that because so many men from the area had fought under Jackson it would be “a disgrace” for “the Jackson highway to go over any other route except the Natchez Trace.” The following speaker, Lewis R. Martin, “urged that the spirit of ‘Old Hickory’ [should] be shown in waging the fight for the Trace.” The highlight of the meeting was the singing of the campaign theme song, “The Natchez Trace: The Old Jackson Highway to the Sea” sung to the tune of the “Star Spangled Banner”:

Natchez Trace can you see, by the dawn’s early light,
That so proudly we hailed at the sunset’s last beaming,
Whose smooth road and bright light, speedsthe tourist’s glad flight.
How the Jackson Highway isso brilliantly gleaming.
And the auto’s red glare and honks screaming in air.

³³ Ibid., October 7, 1915.

³⁴ Ibid., October 12, 1915.

³⁵ Ibid., October 8, 1915.

The song concluded discordantly with a chorus sung to the tune of “Dixie”: “Honk away, Honk away, Honk away down South in Natchez!”³⁶

Afterwards, delegates were selected to attend a meeting of the directors of the Jackson Highway Association in Nashville on November 17–18, where one of three proposed routes between Nashville and New Orleans was to be selected.³⁷ Chosen delegates Lewis Martin and W. B. Potts attended and immediately perceived that the directors were not interested in the Natchez Trace route. Consequently, the two were given no official standing and were only allowed—simply out of courtesy—ten minutes to present their case, and the Trace route was summarily discarded.³⁸

Upon returning to Natchez, Martin reported on the meeting and the failure of their cause. Undeterred, the Chamber, along with the Natchez Federation of Women, determined to form a new association to promote the Natchez Trace as a separate highway. The road in the new scheme would begin in Baton Rouge at the Jefferson Highway and run north to Natchez and then northeastwards to its terminus on the Jackson Highway near Florence, Alabama—not exactly the historical Trace route.³⁹

On January 19–20, 1916, about 300 people from twelve counties and parishes along the route of the proposed highway met in Kosciusko under the auspices of the DAR and formed the Natchez Trace Highway Association. The convention composed a charter, selected officers, and chose Natchez as the headquarters of the organization. The president, Lewis Martin, reported that the first goal was to organize local associations to promote the construction of the highway in each of the counties and parishes; directors were appointed for each of these associations. Finally, a design for highway markers was proposed that depicted the head of an Indian with arrows pointing north and south, indicating the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, October 18, 1915; October 19, 1915.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, October 20, 1915; October 21, 1915.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, November 18, 19, 25, 1915; *Columbus Commercial*, November 21, 1915. Lewis Martin used the few minutes available to him to paint a positive portrait of the Natchez Trace route, stating that “the greater portion of the Natchez Trace is now in use for highways and that the greater portion of the roads are graveled with no toll gates or bridges to build.” *Natchez News Democrat*, November 21, 1915.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, November 25, 1915.

distances to Natchez and Nashville. Below the head was a circle with “Daughters of the American Revolution” inscribed within. To publicize the project, the Association printed and distributed windshield stickers that urged the public to “Pave the Natchez Trace.”⁴⁰

On January 25, a Highway Ball was held in Natchez at Institute Hall, where the attendees witnessed a spectacle of historical images designed to generate fervor and funds:

The stage of the hall had been transformed into an Indian camp, backed by a forest of cedar trees. About the wigwams of the Indians were grouped some twenty of Natchez[’s] fairest young ladies and her bravest men, garbed as Indian squaws and warriors. The event was opened with a war dance, followed by a variety of artistic Indian dances, under the leadership of Miss Treeby Poole, and ending up with the singing of the Natchez Trace song.⁴¹

Within a year of the Natchez meeting, a dedication ceremony for a Natchez Trace monument was held in Houston, where the DAR commemorative activities would be melded with the road-building effort. Located on the courthouse square facing Jackson Street, which corresponded to the Trace, the stone was dedicated on February 23, 1917, in a ceremony filled with the usual patriotic motifs. Leading the dedication were representatives of the DAR, while the president of the Natchez Trace Association, Lewis Martin, delivered an address on “rebuilding” the Trace. The newspaper editor predicted that “when the Trace becomes a great national highway the people of the county and even the state will look with pride upon this monument to former days and happenings.”⁴² Almost certainly watching the ceremony was the young county attorney, Jeff Busby, whose office was only yards away in the courthouse. Years later, while serving in Congress, Busby would introduce the Natchez Trace Parkway legislation.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., January 20, 1916; January 21, 1916.

⁴¹ Ibid., January 25, 1916; January 26, 1916.

⁴² Houston, Miss., *Times-Post*, February 2, 1917; Porter, *DAR History*, 21-22.

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson Busby (1884–1964) was born in Tishomingo County, Mississippi. After graduating from law school in 1909, he began his law practice in Houston, where he served as county attorney 1912–1920 and later represented his district in Congress 1923-1935.

The monument dedication in Houston ceremonially linked the DAR's commemorative purpose to the road-building effort, blurring the Natchez Trace as evocative historical symbol and the Natchez Trace as road-building scheme into one confused image. With the merging of images, how commemorative did the project remain? Did it serve to educate new generations in the national heritage and instill in them patriotic values? Many thought that using a road movement to publicize the Natchez Trace was in accord with these goals; indeed, it did broadcast the name to a large audience. However, the price paid in this convenient arrangement was not cheap. When a symbolic heritage pertaining to matters of the spirit was transformed into a tool for selling and promoting in the cause of economic development, something was lost, even though hardly anyone noticed.

Despite its initial fervor, the Natchez Trace Highway Association gradually faded away, as would also the named trails movement. By the mid-1920s there was a labyrinthine web of over 250 trails, organized with minimal concern for efficiency of transportation; many were difficult to follow and often used overlapping routes, while others offered a confusing variety of alternative routes. A contemporary account relates that travelers confronted a "confusing mass of contradictory and misleading, unmeaning highway markers which clutter[ed] up America's interstate roads." However, change was in the wind. Congress's passage of the Federal State Aid Road Act of 1916 provided federal dollars to the states for road construction and spawned state highway departments. Confronting the chaotic system of road names, the American Association of State Highway Officials in 1926 adopted a system for organizing and numbering roads throughout the country, which, when implemented, spelled the doom of the named trails. One critic complained that the new numbered system replaced "history" with "hokum." He obviously did not recognize that the history was already substantially hokum.⁴⁴

As named trails vanished—including the Natchez Trace project—a half-remembered legacy of history used as propaganda to promote road building remained subliminal but potent. Meanwhile, the DAR contin-

⁴⁴ Weingroff, *From Names to Numbers*; Thomas D. Clark, "Changes in Transportation," in R. A. McLemore (ed.), *A History of Mississippi*, II (Jackson: University & College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 288; *Auto Trails Map of Mississippi* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1923) Among the plethora of named trails depicted on this map, the Natchez Trace is conspicuously absent.

ued to erect their monuments to the memory of the old road, completing the effort by placing markers in Webster and Leake Counties in 1933, the year that the Natchez Trace highway movement was reborn. The new movement would succeed—not as others had through rallying the support of local governments, but through using heritage as the key to the federal coffer.

The Prince of Humbug

Resurrecting the Natchez Trace idea was the product of the protean imagination of the mercurial Colonel Jim Walton, a then-resident in Eupora whose flamboyant rhetoric and disregard for the truth would take the public in thrall. In the early 1930s Walton was probably in his early eighties, although the date of his birth, like the man himself, remains an enigma.⁴⁵ Characterized by a restless wanderlust and a tendency to blur fact and fantasy, he claimed to have fled the United States during Reconstruction and spent years at sea, an experience that provided the source for many tales spun before the credulous and incredulous alike, including being shipwrecked off the coast of Mozambique and entertained by the czar in St. Petersburg. After returning to the United States

⁴⁵ “Col. Jim Walton Had Hectic Youth,” Eupora, Miss., *Webster Progress*, January 11, 1934. This article was reprinted from the *Jackson Daily News*. Sources pertaining to his birth date are contradictory. On August 31, 1933, Ned Lee, editor of the *Webster Progress*, wrote, “Today is Jim Walton’s birthday. What birthday, we know not. The International Hobo and intrepid columnist of The Webster Progress has passed his eightieth milestone, and for several years has been reluctant to name the years.” Not long after, the *Webster Progress* carried an article that stated that he was “in his 82nd year” in January 1934, indicating an 1852 birth date. “Col. Jim Walton Had Hectic Youth.” In 1940 two newspaper articles corroborated this information in providing a birthday and year, i.e., August 31, 1852. “Colorful Colonel Jim, 87, Tells of Adventures,” Jackson, Miss., *Mississippi Press*, February 1940, vol. 5, no. 5; “1861 Inaugural Witness in City,” Jackson, Miss., *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 14, 1940. However, soon afterward matters became more complicated. Upon being admitted to the state home for Confederate veterans at Beauvoir on November 2, 1943, his age was given as ninety-three, indicating that he was born in 1850. “Beauvoir Register of Inmates,” 114-15. When he died on August 30, 1947, one obituary reported that he had been born on August 7, 1847! “Great Commander Calls Gen. Walton,” *Meridian Star*, August 30, 1947. If he had been born in 1852, he would have almost certainly been too young to have served in the military during the Civil War. However, another obituary claimed that he had been born on August 31, 1849. “Confederate Army Loses One More Soldier; Col. Jim Dies,” *Clarion Ledger*, August 31, 1947.

There are other ambiguities. Whereas Walton always claimed that he was born in and grew up in Westmoreland County, Virginia, the author has not been able to find a single Walton as the head of a household in the 1850 and 1860 census indexes for the county.

in 1886, he became a journalist, writing for newspapers in Charleston, Atlanta, and New York.⁴⁶ Whimsically dubbing himself “the International Hobo,” he claimed to be “as much at home in the banquet halls of the great and intellectual as . . . in a hobo camp eating mulligan [stew] on the shady side of a cross-tie pile and sipping coffee from a cast off tomato can.”⁴⁷ One of his acquaintances recalled that

having grown a bit old for adventuring, he had wound up in North Mississippi, where it became his custom to grace some fortunate editor with his genius for digging up local history. As long as he was provided a place to stay, food and drink and the use of a typewriter, he would unearth local legends long forgotten and weave them into beautifully told stories of the area’s past. When the area was mined out he moved on to another location.

Indian lore fascinated him, as did the stories of the Trace. He seemed to select for his services those papers in towns along the route of the Trace.⁴⁸

Walton often visited the historic places that he wrote about. One such visit to the inconspicuous remains of the Trace near Cumberland, Mississippi, was recalled by William Adams:

After a short walk into the woods one of the men [who accompanied Walton] stood where the ground was a few inches

⁴⁶ Walton often wore a bright red shirt as a memento of his involvement in the Red Shirt Brigade in Reconstruction South Carolina, and he claimed to have been variously a “wealthy plantation owner, share cropper, cross tie hacker, log sawyer, bull puncher, editorial writer, columnist, hobo, world wanderer, sailor, soldier of fortune, [and] officer of more than one ship that staggered across the seven seas hunting cargo.” He also claimed to have witnessed Lincoln’s first inaugural address and watched John Wilkes Booth play the role of Hamlet. “Col. Jim Walton Had Hectic Youth,”; “Colorful Colonel Jim, 87, Tells of Adventures”; “Confederate Army Loses One More Soldier; Col. Jim Dies.” In Walton’s application for a Confederate pension, he claimed that he had been a resident of Mississippi since December 13, 1886. (Pension application in Mississippi Department of Archives and History. However, the author could not find him listed in the state censuses for 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930.

⁴⁷ “Colorful Colonel Jim, 87, Tells of Adventures.”

⁴⁸ T. T. Martin, “Jim Walton – Catalyst,” typescript n.d. in James Walton file, MDAH; Dunbar Rowland described him as “a very interesting old tramp reporter who goes through the country and gathers up all the tales, stories and traditions that he hears. . . . I can not say, however, that it is wise to use his statements.” Letter, Dunbar Rowland, Director, MDAH, to Dr. W. A. Evans, Chicago, Illinois, October 18, 1933, Rowland Letter book, MDAH, July 1–December 31, 1933.

lower than the surrounding area. He pointed southwest and northeast and said, "This is it. If you go southwest you run into fields and pasture. If you go northeast you will find some cuts in the hills where the trail was. . . ."

Mr. Walton walked northeast and found the cuts in the hills [He] eased back against [a] large tree . . . and sat on the ground. . . . "Yes, yes, it was so long ago. Farmers, settlers, armies, early preachers and outlaws—lots of outlaws traveled this old trail. Now it is gone, forgotten, hard to locate" ⁴⁹

Such intuitions certainly came from his fascination with historic places and fired his fertile imagination, which gave birth to sundry projects, movements, and campaigns that linked historical themes to modern endeavors, all characterized by enthusiasm un-tempered by critical discernment. Similarly, two focal points of his interest—the Natchez Trace and the moribund named trails—would eventually converge in a campaign that led to the creation of the Natchez Trace Parkway.

On March 10, 1933, the DAR's Natchez Trace monument for Webster County was dedicated at Mathiston, only eight miles from Colonel Walton's Eupora home. This event served as a catalyst for his imagination.⁵⁰ Although the monument had been part of the long-term goal of the DAR, Walton with typical aplomb claimed credit for it, perhaps explaining why he was not invited to the dedication. This, however, did not prevent his attending. The elaborate ceremony included the participation of two college presidents, the Speaker of the State House of Representatives (and later governor) Thomas L. Bailey, a platoon of cadets from Mississippi State College, a college orchestra, and "several hundred patriotic Webster citizens." The DAR was represented by state regent Mrs. A. L. Bondurant and Lucille (Mrs. James S.) Mayfield, chair of the Historic

⁴⁹ Letter, William J. Adams, Kosciusko, Miss., to John Mohlhenrich, Chief Interpreter, Natchez Trace Parkway, Tupelo, Miss., no date; however, the original is stamped received on July 28, 1982. NTP files.

⁵⁰ Despite the fact that the monument had been in the DAR's long-term plans for marking the Trace, it was claimed that Mrs. Ned Lee, wife of the editor of the Eupora newspaper *The Webster Progress* and Walton had begun a campaign several years before to place a marker in Webster County. *Choctaw Plaindealer*, March 24, 1933. He complained that despite his years of promoting the monument, he did not receive an invitation to the dedication ceremony at Mathiston. *Webster Progress*, July 20, 1933.

Spots and Natchez Trace Committee, who presided over the affair.⁵¹ It is quite likely that the occasion was used to recall the dream of paving the Trace, a practice that probably continued from Houston in 1917 to Thomastown in 1933.⁵² An unsigned news article about the event, probably written by Walton, provided historical background, of sorts, including references to Andrew Jackson, Lorenzo Dow, and various and sundry robbers, including Frank and Jesse James, who had actually never set foot on the Trace. The article also claimed that “[t]he old Natchez Trace is probably the oldest highway in the world. Envoys of the Mayan civilization traveled the Trace long before Caesar began the Appian Way Ambassadors of the Inca and Montezuma traveled the Trace before Columbus discovered America.”⁵³ Such outlandish claims would play a prominent role in the rebirth of the “Pave the Trace” effort and in justifying its international aspirations.

Soon afterward, in an action with long-term implications, Walton attempted to revive the name of the transcontinental Bankhead Highway named after his “life long friend”⁵⁴ Senator John H. Bankhead, Sr., of

⁵¹ *Choctaw Plaindealer*, March 24, 1933; *Webster Progress*, March 16, 1933.

⁵² This did occur when the last monument in the state was dedicated at Thomastown in Leake County on August 16. The usual cast of dignitaries and DAR representatives was in attendance for the commemoration and picnic sponsored by the “Attala-Leake-Madison Natchez Trace Association,” presumably a chapter of the largely moribund association created in 1916. Carthage, Miss., *The Carthaginian*, August 24, 1933. The principal speaker, Lieutenant Governor (and later governor) Dennis Murphree delivered a long address on the history of the Trace, concluding with a brief allusion to the campaign to pave the Trace: “We are here today to celebrate the marking of this route, but my friends, we ought to do more than talk about the glory of the past This old route should be restored to that place which she formerly held” Murphree’s speech was published in two consecutive installment’s of Walton’s column, “Bits and Tidbits,” *Webster Progress*, November 2 and 9, 1933. The quoted passage comes from the second installment. Such a plea was far too brief, coming at the end of a very long speech to be anything more than a reminder of something which was not likely to happen any time soon. This prospect would quickly change.

⁵³ *Choctaw Plaindealer*, March 24, 1933. The allusion to robbers on the Trace was likely influenced by Robert M. Coates’s recently published *The Outlaw Years: The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace* (New York: Literary Guild of America, 1930). Coates’s romanticized stories related events that took place all over the old Southwest, but for the sake of convenience they were all lumped under the umbrella rubric of the “Natchez Trace,” thereby exaggerating the image of robbers and violence. For an account that largely debunks Coates’s account, see John D. W. Guice, “A Trace of Violence?,” *Southern Quarterly* (1991), XXIX (4), 123-143.

⁵⁴ Jim Walton, “History of the Origin of the Modern Natchez Trace,” Aberdeen, Miss., *Aberdeen Examiner*, August 28, 1941.

Alabama (1842-1920), a leader in the movement for better highways. Railing against the abandonment of names for highways, he wrote that

Since Senator Bankhead's death, the highway that came into existence through his efforts and which bore his name for a time has been changed to a conglomerate of nondescript numbers that mean nothing whatsoever. In the name of simple justice to the father of our modern highway system I protest against the deleting of Senator Bankhead's name from the markers, and endorse the effort to restore his name⁵⁵

In recognition of his effort to restore the Bankhead name, the Good Roads Association invited him to speak on the subject at its meeting in Beaumont, Texas, on October 11–13, 1933. Inspired by the prospect of meeting with highway promoters and recalling the recent marker dedications at Mathiston and Thomastown, Walton issued a call for historical information on the Trace, noting that there was “a movement [underway] to reopen the old Natchez Trace as a military highway from Nashville by way of Muscle Shoals, to Natchez.” (For Walton, “a movement” was often a euphemistic reference to himself.) He added that the “Natchez Trace question will probably come up [at the meeting . . . , and I may need the data to champion the rebuilding of the old Trace. In the meantime I would like to get in touch with members of the D.A.R.'s and U.D.C.'s.”⁵⁶

His decision that the road would be a “military highway” was political savvy based on historical error. The underlying assumption was that the federal government owned a 100-foot right-of-way that had been designated as “a post or military road” by certain unnamed acts of Congress in 1818 and 1819, stipulating that it could be nothing but “a post or military road.” This was of course nonsense—there was no such legislation nor was there a federally owned right-of-way. Yet there was shrewdness to his plan. By the 1930s highways were being constructed as joint federal-state projects using Federal Aid money matched by state funds. He reasoned that a federal military highway would not come under joint federal-state custody; instead the federal government would have to pay in toto for construction and maintenance, while all

⁵⁵ *Times-Post*, June 8, 1933.

⁵⁶ Jim Walton, “Natchez Trace to be Rebuilt as Military Highway,” *Webster Progress*, September 14, 1933; also cf. Walton's letter to the editor, *Times-Post*, September 14, 1933.

traffic—military and civilian—could use the road, a compelling reason for local constituencies to support the project.⁵⁷

As with the earlier efforts to pave the Trace, historical facts and fictions could and would be drafted for promotional purposes; in this case, Walton assured his audience that the Trace was in fact “the oldest highway” in the world. To justify this questionable claim, he made the equally questionable assertion that “[s]cientists from the Smithsonian Institute [sic] have found Indian picture writing records carved on stone that tend to reveal the history of the Trace as an intercontinental and intertribal highway in use 4,000 years ago.”⁵⁸ Walton’s flamboyant statements inspired the imaginations of “progress-minded” newspaper editors, who began to promote the project as a link in a highway that would connect a northern terminus, variously represented as Canada or New York City, with a southern terminus in Latin America—variously listed as Mexico City, Panama, and Argentina.⁵⁹

Walton’s intention to ally himself with the DAR was soon realized in the form of a letter from Mrs. A.L. Bondurant, state regent of the MSS-DAR, offering the full support of her organization, which she noted was “anxious that the old road be restored as a highway” She enclosed a newspaper clipping of the article by James McCaleb that had originally appeared in 1915 during the first campaign to pave the Trace.⁶⁰

In October 1933 Walton attended the Association meeting in Beaumont, Texas, where, according to the *Beaumont Enterprise*, he invoked the spirit of the early “pathfinder” David Crockett in urging that highways not be “relegated to mere numerical classification, but that they bear along with their numbers the names of pioneer builders.”⁶¹ Little came of his effort; however, with the support of Congressman Wilburn Cartwright of Oklahoma, chair of the Roads Committee in the House

⁵⁷ The explanation for the military highway designation was offered by Walton upon being queried about his usage of the term. “Natchez Trace is Practical Road,” *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 8, 1934.

⁵⁸ *Times-Post*, September 14, 1933; cf. *Webster Progress*, September 14, 1933, and *Choctaw Plaindealer*, September 15, 1933, for similar articles by Walton. Walton published a two-part article on the Trace in the *Webster Progress*, September 28 and October 5, 1933.

⁵⁹ *Choctaw Plaindealer*, December 8, 1933; *Times-Post*, December 7, 1933; *Tupelo Journal*, December 1, 1933.

⁶⁰ *Webster Progress*, October 19, 1933.

⁶¹ *Beaumont Enterprise*, quoted in the *Webster Progress*, October 19, 1933. The text of Walton’s speech was published in the *Webster Progress*, October 12, 1933.

of Representatives, the subject of the Natchez Trace aroused interest. Plans were undoubtedly discussed for creating a lobbying organization and enlisting the support of politicians. Such efforts were standard procedure for the Good Roads Association, which would adopt a resolution supporting the rebuilding of the Natchez Trace from Natchez to Muscle Shoals, using federal money.⁶² So with a plan and the backing of the Association, Colonel Jim returned home to contact politicians and create an organization.

He visited Congressman Jeff Busby in Houston, Mississippi, and Senator Hubert Stephens in New Albany to discuss his plans. The visit to Busby in particular had notable consequences. Walton asked him to sponsor legislation for building "a highway along the Natchez Trace"; Busby claimed that he had already given considerable thought to the matter and immediately agreed to introduce legislation in Congress for the construction of a highway to run "from Nashville to the Louisiana-Mississippi line south of Natchez."⁶³

Upon returning to Washington, Busby began an investigation of the history of the Trace and consulted with the Department of the Interior and other government agencies. His consequent decisions changed the project into something that his constituents neither anticipated nor really wanted, namely a parkway. Like Walton, Busby wanted a project that would bring as many federal dollars into the state as possible. However, he apparently discovered that Colonel Jim's basis for

⁶² *Choctaw Plaindealer*, October 27, 1933; Jim Walton, "History of the Origin of the Modern Natchez Trace."

⁶³ From "Natchez Trace Parkway Long Cherished Ambition with Congressman Jeff Busby," in *Natchez Democrat*, July 15, 1934. The time frame set by Busby for the visit differed from Walton's; Busby recalled that Walton had visited him in the summer of 1933, while Walton placed the visit after the Beaumont convention in October. Walton's recollection of events was wrong in terms of precise dates; he erroneously placed the Good Roads convention in November 1932 and the Natchez Trace convention in January 1933. However, he seems to have been correct in the sequence of events. It would certainly make more sense that he visited Busby following his discussions in Beaumont. For Walton's account see "History of the Origin of the Modern Natchez Trace."

Furthermore, contemporary newspaper accounts do not mention Busby in regard to the Trace project prior to early December 1933. This is particularly telling in that these accounts were largely derived from Walton, who was a notorious name-dropper. It is difficult to believe that he could have enlisted the support of a U.S. congressman during the summer and not mention it until December. The earliest reference to Busby's playing a role in the project was in a letter by Walton that appeared in the December 7, 1933, issue of the *Houston Times-Post*, where he notes that "Hon. Jeff Busby . . . has been selected

promoting the Trace as a military highway was bogus. Having served for years in Congress, he was aware of other parkways being developed by the NPS, such as the Blue Ridge Parkway, Skyline Drive, and the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Consequently, he determined to have the NPS build the road as a parkway, a term which had specific connotations, some of which even he did not fully grasp.

The parkway—developed during the late nineteenth century in urban areas such as New York and Boston— was a combination of park and highway designed to enhance the aesthetic experience and recreational pleasure of walking and driving. After the NPS became involved in the creation of parkways in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it discovered that parkways were often confused with highways. Therefore it issued a document defining the key characteristics of parkways, such as their inclusion of wide right-of-ways and scenic easements to provide a park-like ambience. To protect this ambience, NPS prohibited commercial vehicles.⁶⁴

By changing the Natchez Trace project from a highway to a parkway, Busby placed it on a trajectory that would not please all. First, a parkway was not what the supporters wanted; few even knew what a parkway was. They believed that they were promoting a modern highway with international ambitions, one that would expedite transportation and stimulate commerce. (On a parkway, both agricultural and commercial traffic would be prohibited.) Even Busby himself did not seem to grasp these implications when he drafted his legislation; as late as July 1934 he was still talking about the Parkway's role in economic development and connecting to the international highway network. Second, in reinforcing an emphasis on history, the parkway would be committed to

to introduce the bill in the next Congress to reopen the Natchez trace." Cf. article "Busby Selected to Boost Trace" in *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, December 9, 1933. When this letter is compared with a note in the *Tupelo Journal*, December 1, 1933, to the effect that Walton had just come to Tupelo to confer with Congressman John Rankin—who happened to not be at home—the implication is that Walton was looking for congressional support in late November at which time he presumably sought out Busby. Additional corroboration is found in Walton's "Bits and Tidbits" column in the November 9, 1933, issue of the *Webster Progress*, where he mentioned, only shortly after returning from Beaumont, supporters of the Natchez Trace project including Congressman Cartwright of Oklahoma, whom he had met at the Good Roads meeting. Busby, however, was not mentioned.

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Parkways: A Manual of Requirements, Instructions, and Information for Use in the National Park Service* (1936), 2-3.

an unattainable goal—reviving a road that it could not actually follow. A highway project with minimal historical concerns could have simply paved sections of the old Trace. However, the parkway plan could not follow the old Trace, as landscape concerns prohibited its passing through the developed areas lining the old route. If the parkway could not follow the original Trace, it was committed to approximating the route—a plan that precluded various extensions and connections that many envisioned. These problems would not come to the fore immediately. In fact, the public was apparently unaware of the parkway plan prior to mid-January, when Busby announced his proposed legislation. In the meantime, the name of the game was military highway.⁶⁵

In early December 1933 the *Webster Progress* announced that “Col. Jim Walton, International Hobo, is busy these days organizing The Natchez Trace Military Highway Association.”⁶⁶ However, organizing required travel, and travel required money, and Walton seldom had any. But he did have friends. T. T. Martin, publicity director for the Gulf, Mobile & Northern Railroad, generously assisted by providing him with free trips on the railroad. On one such trip, Martin recalled,

Jim brought out a sheaf of foolscap paper captioned “Natchez Trace [Military Highway] Association.” Membership was for the stated purpose of preserving the memory of the Natchez Trace, and the equally worthy, if unstated, purpose of providing Jim with as many dollars as he could enlist members. I think I had the distinction of being the first member, but by night Jim had signed up quite a few people. We made three more trips, and the membership roster continued to grow as Jim went from one group to another telling of the Trace and its need for preservation in some enduring form.⁶⁷

Walton continued to crisscross Mississippi, enlisting members from the ranks of politicians, government agencies, civic clubs, and patriotic organizations and extolling the Trace’s potential for becoming an international highway. The first convention of the Association, he an-

⁶⁵ From “Natchez Trace Parkway Long Cherished Ambition with Congressman Jeff Busby,” in *Natchez Democrat*, July 15, 1934; Letter, Jeff Busby to Charlotte Capers, October 6, 1950, copy in Natchez Trace Parkway Library Vertical File Collection, acc. 289, box 7, folder 81, “NATR-History 1934–1963.”

⁶⁶ *Webster Progress*, December 7, 1933.

⁶⁷ Martin, “Jim Walton—Catalyst.”

nounced, would be held on January 10-11, 1934, at the Edwards Hotel in Jackson

for the purpose of forming a permanent organization, applying for a charter under the laws of Mississippi and taking steps to get Congress to reopen and rebuild the Natchez Trace as a military highway from Nashville to Natchez . . . The various chapters of the D.A.R., U.D.C., county boards of supervisors, Exchange Clubs, municipal bodies, Chambers of Commerce and all other organizations interested in the Natchez Trace and its history are to send delegates to this convention. The purpose of rebuilding the Natchez Trace is to preserve our history and furnish work for some fifteen thousand unemployed.⁶⁸

As a publicity stunt designed to give the impression that the road was fast becoming a reality, a “hundred men” were reported to be “busily cutting right-of-way” from Mathiston to French Camp in preparation for the survey, which was optimistically expected to begin shortly after Congress convened.⁶⁹ Press releases from Walton heralded the growing political support and the number of dignitaries supposedly attending the convention: Mississippi governor Mike Connor, Senator Pat Harrison, Mississippi’s congressional delegation, representatives of the NPS, and the heads of the Alabama and Mississippi Departments of Archives and History—Marie Bankhead Owen and Dunbar Rowland, respectively. Of particular note, Mrs. Owen, the daughter of the late Senator Bankhead, would be accompanied by her niece, the sultry young actress, Tallulah Bankhead. The Bankhead name represented a potent mixture of highways, history, and celebrity—just the right combination to catch the fancy of the public. The prospect of hob-nobbing with a movie star—a sex symbol at that—must have inspired many.⁷⁰

But not everyone was inspired. Although advertised as attending the convention, the director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Dunbar Rowland, did not deign to attend. As he made clear, he had “very serious doubts . . . as to the feasibility or wisdom of attempting to induce the federal government to reopen and pave the old Trace....” He pointed out that much of the road was still in use, while the commemorative aspect had been ably conducted by the DAR,

⁶⁸ *Times-Post*, December 7, 1933.

⁶⁹ *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, December 18, 1933.

⁷⁰ *Webster Progress*, December 7, 1933.

leaving little reason for a new highway, commemorative or otherwise.⁷¹ Frederick Sullens, editor of the *Jackson Daily News*, took strong exception to Rowland, noting that the promoters were not trying to “rewrite history” but in fact trying to “preserve history,” whatever that meant. Couching his support in terms of Walton’s military highway ploy, he obviously did not recognize that it was fallacious as well as employing history as propaganda.⁷²

Regardless of the project’s merits, on January 10, 1934, over 150 delegates converged at the Edwards Hotel to organize the Natchez Trace Military Highway Association. Many were no doubt disappointed when Tallulah Bankhead and other dignitaries did not appear as promised, but the meeting proceeded without them, opening with an unnamed motion picture on “the romantic history of the old Trace.” Afterward, journalist E. T. Winston of Pontotoc, known for his imaginative local history writings, read a paper about the migration of the Toltec Indians (ca. 1000 AD) from central Mexico to present-day Mississippi. One group, he related, settled at Natchez, lost its identity, and became the Natchez tribe. Other groups migrated up the Trace and became the Choctaws and Chickasaws. Although nonsense, the paper did have exciting implications for the international aspirations of the proposed highway. More sober notes, however, were subsequently sounded by NPS historians Olaf Hagen and Stuart Cuthbertson, who by their presence heralded the beginning of their agency’s involvement. Among the main accomplishments of the meeting was the organization of the Natchez Trace Military Highway Association (later renamed the Natchez Trace Association) with the DAR’s Lucille Mayfield as president, E. T. Winston as vice-president, and Colonel Walton as field director. Furthermore, during the course of the convention the state Legislature passed resolutions urging Congress to support the Natchez Trace legislation, in whatever form it might appear.⁷³

Despite Dunbar Rowland’s lack of enthusiasm, the fervor for building roads trumped any qualms over history. Most of the project’s supporters

⁷¹ Letter, Dunbar Rowland to W. Calvin Wells, Lamar Life Building, Jackson, Miss., Rowland Letter Book, MDAH, December 28, 1933.

⁷² *Jackson Daily News*, January 8, 1934.

⁷³ *Choctaw Plaindealer*, December 22, 1933, January 19, 1934; *Daily Clarion Ledger*, January 11, 1934; *Natchez Democrat*, January 12 and 26, 1934; *Webster Progress*, January 18, 1934; E. T. Winston’s paper, “History Dawns for the Natchez Trace,” was published in the Pontotoc, Miss., *Pontotoc Progress*, March 1, 1933.

were in fact not overly concerned with the ideals that heritage organizations promoted and probably regarded manipulation of the truth as a necessary means to an end. Indeed, one of the attendees, Roanne (Mrs. Ferriday) Byrnes of Natchez, who would later serve for decades as Association president, recalled, "At the beginning we needed a road and the way to get it seemed to be through what . . . became the Natchez Trace Association . . ." ⁷⁴

The Price of Everything, the Value of Nothing ⁷⁵

In Washington, Busby was no doubt keeping abreast of events in Jackson and the accompanying wave of favorable publicity. On January 24 he announced the introduction of an appropriation bill in Congress for \$50,000 for a survey of a road "to be known as the Natchez Trace Parkway."⁷⁶ The survey bill would be followed by a separate act that would appropriate \$25,000,000 for constructing the parkway.⁷⁷ Although the parkway concept was almost certainly broached at the convention by the NPS representatives, Busby's announcement was probably the first time that most had even heard the term *parkway*, accustomed as they were to the military highway. Few, no doubt, paid much attention to the change in terminology. Oblivious to the implications of this change, the *Natchez Democrat* immediately launched into euphoric and nebulous speculation about the national attention the road was likely to command "for the reason that the continuation of the Old Natchez Trace from Natchez carries it across the Mississippi river to Vidalia, La., and thence to Laredo, Texas, and on to Mexico City and already a well-defined movement has been launched for an international highway which would run from Laredo south through Mexico to South America."

⁷⁴ Jeanerette Harlow, "Main Trace Force Recalls Beginning," *Jackson Daily News*, May 24, 1970.

⁷⁵ Paraphrased from two quotes by Oscar Wilde: "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and "[A cynic is] a man who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing," *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893).

⁷⁶ H.R. 7312, 73rd Congress, 2nd session. "A Bill to provide for an appropriation of \$50,000 with which to make a survey of the Old Indian Trail known as the 'Natchez Trace,' with a view of constructing a national road on this route to be known as the "Natchez Trace Parkway."

⁷⁷ H.R. 7345, 73rd Congress, 2nd session. "A Bill to authorize an appropriation of \$25,000,000 with which to construct the Natchez Trace Parkway, leading from Nashville, Tennessee, to Natchez Mississippi."

For these reasons, the newspaper crowed, the Trace would bring “undreamed of possibilities for Natchez.”⁷⁸ By early February, Walton and other officers of the Natchez Trace Military Highway Association were on a whirlwind tour promoting the Natchez Trace’s role as a key link in the proposed intercontinental highway.⁷⁹

However, Walton’s unconventional and flamboyant character must have irritated many. When a delegation of Natchez Trace supporters traveled to Washington to testify in congressional hearings, he was not among them. One suspects that he was politely dissuaded from going to Capitol Hill because he would likely be considered an embarrassment.

Hearings were held before the House Committee on Roads on March 5–6, presided over by Congressman Wilburn Cartwright, whom Colonel Walton had met in Beaumont. The congressional delegation from the districts along the Trace was present, as were numerous members of the Association and Mississippi senator Pat Harrison, who sponsored identical bills in the Senate. Busby explained the purpose of his project, setting it within the story of the old road that would be rejuvenated with federal funds. While he couched his argument in terms of history and aesthetics, his real objective was clear: the project would be of great economic benefit because “there is no system of roads that is adequate to this particular territory and there is not likely to be any for many years to come.”⁸⁰

Testimonies were heard. Most focused on the historical significance of the Trace and the need for good roads. Little was said about the actual route, a problem that would be left to others. The hearings resulted in only a partial success. The survey bill, with its rather modest appropriation of \$50,000, was eventually signed into law on May 21, 1934. However, the bill authorizing \$25 million for constructing the Parkway was defeated.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *Natchez Democrat*, January 25 and 26, 1934.

⁷⁹ Meeting in Houston on February 7: *Times-Post*, February 15, 1934; meeting in Ackerman on February 9; *Choctaw Plaindealer*, February 9, 1934; *Webster Progress*, February 8, 1934.

⁸⁰ *Hearings before the Committee on Roads, House of Representatives, Seventy-third Congress, Second Session on H.R. 7312 and H.R. 7345, March 5 and 6, 1934* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934), 6.

⁸¹ Historic American Engineering Record, “The Natchez Trace Parkway: Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee” (draft typescript, Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, n.d.), 29, citing letter, May 26, 1934, from Lucille Mayfield to ____, NTP files,

When the survey bill was passed, it established once and for all that the road would be a parkway, with all that that would entail; it would not be, as most envisioned, a highway formed from numerous county roads (including sections of the old Trace) spliced together and paved. Furthermore, the legislation stipulated that the forthcoming survey would locate the alignment of “the Natchez Trace [Parkway] as near as practicable to its original route,”⁸² a requirement that would effectively preclude attempts to move or extend it to towns far distant from the historic route. The consequences would play out over the following months, as the National Park Service translated the legislation into a parkway plan, thereby bringing the fantasies and bluster that had come to dominate the Natchez Trace movement into conflict with the realities of legislation and the landscape.

National Park Service research on the history of the Trace had begun early, actually prior to the passage of the legislation, under the direction of Stuart Cuthbertson of the Vicksburg National Military Park and aided by Edith Wyatt Moore, a local historian from Natchez.⁸³ The research was soon expanded when NPS employees Ruth Butler, Olaf Hagen, and Randle Truett took over the effort, with three primary tasks in mind: to locate the Trace, identify historic sites on or near it, and write a narrative history. In Tennessee, at the northern end of the Trace, and in the Natchez District at the southern end, locating the route was problematical, where identification depended upon locating old roads and road beds—often using only local lore. However, in the approximately 280 miles that intervened, the township plats from the original General Land Office surveys fairly consistently depicted the road, at least where it was located during the 1820s and 1830s, during its declining years.⁸⁴

Mayfield 1934. Immediately after passage of the survey bill, Association president Lucille Mayfield successfully advocated changing the name of the Association by dropping “Military Highway.”

⁸² H.R. 7312, 73rd Congress, 2nd session. “A Bill to provide for an appropriation of \$50,000 with which to make a survey of the Old Indian Trail known as the ‘Natchez Trace.’ ”

⁸³ *Times-Post*, May 31, 1934, citing an article dated May 26, 1934.

⁸⁴ Phelps, “Administrative History,” chapter V, 1-3; *Natchez Trace Parkway Survey*, 110-21, 143. The research would produce a lengthy typescript: Ruth E. Butler, Olaf T. Hagen, and Randle Bond Truett, “The Natchez Trace: Its Location, History, and Development,” unpublished manuscript, NPS, 1936, which would provide the historical narrative section for the 1941 Natchez Trace Parkway Survey document.

By early February 1935 the research was sufficiently advanced for the Bureau of Public Roads to begin locating the route of the Trace—and the route for the parkway. Working in consultation with the NPS historians, the Bureau identified the historical route as carefully as possible and flagged it with red paint on trees, posts, and stones, the results compiled on maps.⁸⁵ The survey determined that approximately sixty-one percent of the route was still in use as county roads, state highways, and city streets; those strips were prohibited from use by the parkway.⁸⁶ Furthermore, they observed that the Trace was not simply one distinct route; it had, in fact, varied through time, as Malcolm Gardner, the first parkway superintendent observed: “[The] Old Trace sometimes exhibits alternate routes and variation in location because of such factors as weather conditions, new settlements, and [the] construction of fords and bridges.”⁸⁷ These factors made talk of an exact route or “site” of the Trace problematical. Although sections still in use—rural and urban—precluded parkway development, abandoned sections could in some cases be followed fairly closely, even though there was relatively little to see. Few sections of the old Trace were as impressive as the ones in the loess soils of the Natchez District. Ultimately, the differences between the historical and the projected routes posed a fundamental problem for a parkway that purported to be concerned with history. Dawson Phelps insightfully summarized the implications of the Park Service research, which

made it clear that there was a meager, and in many respects tenuous, physical base for historic site development. Elsewhere in America, those who designed historical parks had had an abundance of land from which to cho[o]se; land on which historic events had happened. Indeed, in most instances, historic land was so plentiful that planners, with rare exceptions, had a wide choice from which to make their selections

⁸⁵ Phelps, “Administrative History,” chapter v, 1-3; Natchez Trace Parkway Survey, 112, 143; *Times-Post*, February 14, 1935; April 17, 1935; *Choctaw Plaindealer*, May 24, 1935.

⁸⁶ Butler et al., “The Natchez Trace: Its Location, History, and Development,” 275.

⁸⁷ Memo, Sept. 18, 1939, Malcolm Gardner to NPS Dir. NTP Construction Status Files: D3015 1-H Location, Design, Survey, Natchez Trace Parkway Headquarters, Tupelo, Miss.

Quite a different situation faced those whose responsibility it was to acquire Natchez Trace Parkway land. The survey revealed that it was impossible to identify and locate the old 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.

The 1935 reports—historical and more particularly engineering—revealed the nature of the fundamental question to which an answer must be found before the decision to create the Natchez Trace Parkway could be made. Was it desirable to set up a unit of the National Park System, in effect a historical park, no matter what name it bore, in which less than ten percent of the estimated requirement of 45,000 acres was historic ground?⁸⁸

When faced with the dilemma of “rebuilding” the Trace without being able to follow it, the survey team finally brought to clarity that which had been ignored and obscured by years of fatuous rhetoric: the discrepancy between the fantasy image of the Trace and its physical reality. The wisest solution perhaps would have been to abandon the idea; after all, no legal commitments had been made, since the bill to fund the Parkway had failed. However, the results of the 1935 survey were of little concern to the Natchez Trace movement, which, once in motion, had no intention of slowing down. Before the report was released and its conclusions considered, efforts were already underway in Congress to acquire, unsuccessfully as it turned out, \$35 million from the Works Relief Administration for constructing the Parkway.⁸⁹ Such efforts would continue over the years and decades that followed and with more success.

Because the plan to only approximate the route of the Trace violated the assumption that a historic park is actually on historic land, the discrepancy was justified by defining the Parkway as “memorializing” the Trace, which at first glance was little more than an acknowledgment of the DAR’s commemorative goals.⁹⁰ In actuality, the term *memorial* was

⁸⁸ Phelps, “Administrative History,” chapter VI, 2-3.

⁸⁹ *Times Post*, June 27, 1935.

⁹⁰ Natchez Trace Parkway Survey, 144, cf. 113, 150. Although the survey report states that the project was authorized as a “memorial parkway,” implying that such terminology was in the enabling legislation, in actuality it was not.

evidently used by the designers as a semantic ploy to gain the leeway to design something that was at least workable, given the inherent problems in the project. Consequently, the parkway's route would only approximate the historic route while incorporating sufficient historical associations to suggest the Trace theme, if not present it. Bits of the original Trace, historic sites, and natural sites would be incorporated as roadside pull-offs, where feasible, to provide attractions for travelers. Because many of the associated historical sites were too distant to be incorporated, "vicarious" sites were created using interpretive signage on the history of the respective sites, their directions, and distance from the pull-off. Perhaps the most interesting features were the Indian mounds located on the Parkway, which, although located miles from the old Trace, were nevertheless linked by association with the historic road. Predating the Trace by centuries, their presence provided tacit support for Colonel Walton's claim that it was the "oldest road in the world."⁹¹

Once the development plan was sketched out, the promoters faced a major hurdle: there was no money for construction, and in the decades to follow, funding would remain a problem. Yet what the promoters back home lacked in discernment and wisdom they made up for with enthusiasm and political savvy. Because Lucille Mayfield had taken a job in Washington, D.C., with the DAR, Roanne Byrnes of Natchez assumed the presidency of the Natchez Trace Association and retained the position for over thirty years. Through her office she kept local support alive while maintaining liaisons with politicians. Consequently, in late 1935 \$1,286,686 in emergency funds were allotted for construction, and on June 30, 1937, the first contracts were awarded. Construction began in September of the following year.⁹²

Despite prohibitions on commercial use, the parkway could have become a major thoroughfare for passenger traffic in the 1930s, as would any paved road that connected two state capitals. However, that use was precluded by the manner and time-frame of construction; the

⁹¹ This notion crept into the archaeological literature after NPS archaeologist John Cotter reported on his work at Bynum mounds on the Parkway that "the old Natchez Trace" passed by the site. In fact, at its nearest approach to the mounds the Trace was about three miles distant and post-dated the site by two millennia. Regardless, the Trace was subsequently used in interpreting trade during the Middle Woodland period (ca. 100 BC-AD 600). Elliott, "Of Roads and Reifications," 249, fn 22, pp. 256-57.

⁹² Natchez Trace Parkway Survey, v.

Parkway was constructed in unconnected segments in a process that dragged out over decades. Meanwhile, comparable paved roads proliferated, and they offered the advantage of higher speed limits. Following the passage of the Federal-aid Highway Act of 1956, the federal–state partnerships launched a new generation of highway construction focused on divided-lane, limited-access roads, making transportation faster and safer than ever. By the time the Parkway was completed in 2005 with total construction costs estimated between \$400 million and \$2 billion (and these estimates should be multiplied by a factor of at least ten to place them in current dollar values), it had long since been superseded as an expeditious means of transportation.⁹³

Today the aesthetically pleasing landscape of the Natchez Trace Parkway belies the confusion in motives that led to its creation. As the NPS discovered, the Natchez Trace is a nuanced term referring in part to a historical geographical process that was brought to public attention as a heritage symbol, the term *heritage* implying an ongoing dialogue with the collective experience of human history—a recovery of “the best that has been thought and said,” to use the words of Matthew Arnold—and thereby finds its true value in raising levels of understanding and moral concern: the quest for the true, the good, and the beautiful. Yet what happened when heritage, or what passed for heritage, was used in a transparently manipulative fashion as mere propaganda in the pursuit of economic development? It had become little more than superficial images employed in public promotion. In the process the very *raison d’être* of heritage was destroyed, and the product of its misuse, institutionalized in a government bureaucracy, proceeded to take on an immortality of its own.

⁹³ Upon the Parkway’s completion, Bill Minor of the *Clarion-Ledger*, who had covered the meeting of the Natchez Trace Association for decades, wrote, “An official for the National Park Service estimated the total cost of construction . . . at \$400 million to \$500 million. As a devotee of the project for many years, I would put the dollar figure in the range of \$1 billion to \$2 billion in federal and state funds.” “Mrs. Ferriday Byrnes unsung hero of Natchez Trace dream,” *Clarion-Ledger*, June 12, 2005.