



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

Construction of the Military Road Between Little Rock, Arkansas and Fort Gibson, Oklahoma

By Cheryl Nichols

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Construction of the Military Road between Little Rock, Arkansas and Fort Gibson, Oklahoma

Compared to its counterpart in eastern Arkansas, the military road between Little Rock and Fort Gibson (via Fort Smith) was a straightforward construction project. Whereas builders of the Memphis-Little Rock road faced severe obstacles—swamps, heat, disease—that caused completion of the road to take more than a decade, the men who worked on the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road encountered relatively few difficulties. Authorized by Congress in March of 1825, the 208-mile road from Little Rock to Fort Gibson was substantially completed three years later.

Construction of a road through western Arkansas was championed by Henry W. Conway, delegate to Congress from Arkansas Territory. Addressing the U. S. House of Representatives on January 26, 1825, Conway made the case for the road:

The frontier of this country is much exposed to the Indians and it is necessary to have a good road. The appropriation asked for is sufficient to make a wagon road. The land lies high and dry; and the advantages will be direct communication with the States east of the Mississippi and an increase of the value of the public lands. It will be a continuation of the Memphis road, which was authorized at the last session, and would form part of the communication with Santa Fe. It is, therefore, of great importance.¹

The next day, the road bill passed the House of Representatives and was sent to the Senate, where it won final approval on March 3, 1825.

The “Act to authorise the Surveying and marking of a road from Little Rock to Cantonment Gibson”² appropriated \$10,000 for construction of the road³ and called for appointment of three “Commissioners” to carry out the Act’s provisions. To serve as Commissioners, Henry Conway recommended three well-known residents of Arkansas Territory: Benjamin Moore of Crawford County, Morgan Magness of Independence County, and Edward McDonald of Lawrence County.⁴

All three Commissioners were among Arkansas’s earliest settlers. McDonald had served in the first General Assembly of Arkansas Territory.⁵ Magness was a prosperous farmer

¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 March 1825.

² At the time the road was authorized, the military post that was its western terminus was known as “Cantonment Gibson.” The name of the post was changed to “Fort Gibson” in the spring of 1827, before the road’s completion. To avoid confusion, “Fort Gibson” is used throughout this paper, except in direct quotations.

³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 March 1825.

⁴ Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, vol. 20 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1954) 11 and *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 April 1825.

⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 29 January 1820.

who later represented Independence County in the state legislature for several years.⁶ Moore, at his death in 1844, was described as “a worthy citizen, and one of the first settlers of Crawford county.”⁷

In a letter dated March 18, 1825, Secretary of War James Barbour notified Moore, Magness and McDonald of their appointment as Commissioners for the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road and instructed them to “assemble at Little Rock without delay. . . .” When they finished surveying and marking the route of the road, the Commissioners were to send duplicate plats of the survey, along with field notes, to the Department of War “to be laid before the President of the United States.” For their efforts, the Commissioners would be paid \$3.00 per day. They were authorized “to employ such number of assistants as may be necessary. . . .” at a daily pay of \$1.50.⁸

A month passed before word of the Commissioners’ appointment reached Little Rock and appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette*,⁹ and it was not until October that Moore, Magness, and McDonald assembled in Little Rock. On October 11, 1825, the *Gazette* reported the Commissioners had “completed their fitting out for the expedition” and had “set out from this place, yesterday morning, with their company of assistants, pack horses, etc. to commence their labors.” It was expected that the work of surveying and marking the route of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road would take two or three months. The Commissioners would “examine the country on both sides of the Arkansas . . . and report in favor of that side which affords the most facilities for making a good road.”¹⁰

The Commissioners returned to Little Rock on December 17, 1825, having “completed their labors.”¹¹ Their report to the Secretary of War was dated December 26, 1825.¹² The following day the *Arkansas Gazette* briefly summarized the Commissioners’ findings: “[T]he Commissioners are unanimously of [the] opinion that a good road can be obtained, and at a trifling expense, considering its length and its great usefulness not only to the military but to our citizens on our western frontier, on the route which they have selected.”¹³

On January 3, 1826, the *Gazette* published a lengthy outline of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson route recommended by the Commissioners. Paraphrasing and sometimes clarifying the Commissioners’ report (as well as correcting their spelling), the paper listed and briefly described the landmarks used by the Commissioners and their assistants in surveying and marking the route, beginning at Fort Gibson:

⁶ *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northeast Arkansas* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1889) 693.

⁷ *The Arkansas Intelligencer* (Van Buren), 16 March 1844.

⁸ *Territorial Papers* 13.

⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 April 1825.

¹⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 October 1825.

¹¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 20 December 1825.

¹² *Territorial Papers* 172-175.

¹³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 December 1825.

From Cantonment Gibson to *bayou Banard*, 3 miles, the country is high, dry and gently rolling prairie, and land first quality. This is a considerable stream, running south, and a good ford can be had, on a gravelly bottom.

11 miles, *Green Leaf bayou*—country mostly prairie, timber post oak and black jack. This is a small stream, and fordable. The bottoms are extensive, and land first quality.

18 miles, *Bean's salt-works*.

19 miles, *Illinois bayou*—country hilly and stony, and land second rate; timber mostly post oak and black jack. This is a large stream, water clear, and bottom gravelly; a ferry will be required at this point, for nine months in the year.

26 miles, *Vian creek*—part wood-land and part prairie, rather hilly and stony; timber, post oak. This is a gentle stream, running south-west, over which a good ford can be made on a gravelly bottom.

33 miles, *Salisaw creek*—mostly prairie, interspersed with a few post oaks and elms. This is a gentle stream, bottom gravelly, and fordable; bottoms extensive and timber, oak, gum, elm and hickory.

45 miles, *Skin bayou*—gently rolling, some small prairies, wood-land mostly post oak and hickory; bayou, fordable.

60 miles, *Arkansas river, at Fort Smith*—The country is gently rolling and somewhat stony; to a lake in the bottom near the river, which appears to have once been the bed of the Arkansas. This lake or pond is surrounded by first-rate bottom land; timber, oak, gum, elm, ash and walnut; undergrowth, cane. From thence to the Arkansas, the bottom is rich and never subject to inundation. The road crosses to the south side of the Arkansas, and a ferry will be required at all seasons.

74 miles, *Big Vash Grass creek*—with the exception of two small prairies, the country is gently rolling wood-land; timber, oak, hickory, etc. This is a considerable stream, running north-east, over which a bridge will be necessary, the probable cost of which will be about \$300. The route lies through some low and wet lands, where a causeway of half a mile will be required.

78 miles, *Big creek*—part prairie, low and rather wet; the remainder gently rolling wood-land. A bridge will be necessary across this creek. Timber for that purpose is abundant; and the bank is good; probable expense of erecting it, about \$150.

94 miles, *Six Mile creek*—country mostly prairie, some wood-land, gently rolling, timber post oak, etc. A good crossing can be made across this creek, but a bridge would be preferable.

98 miles, *Three Mile creek*—gently rolling wood-land; a small stream, and crossing good.

100 miles, *Short Mountain creek*—country a little rolling, timber oak, etc. This is a considerable stream, and a bridge will be required, which will cost about \$300.

116 miles, *Rocky bayou or Shoal creek*—part prairie, but mostly wood-land; timber, oak, black jack, etc.; crossing good.

119 miles, *little Shoal creek*

134 miles, *Arkansas river, at Dardanelle*—country gently rolling, part hilly and some prairie; timber, oak, pine, etc. The road crosses at this point to the north side of the Arkansas, and passes through the Cherokee nation the distance of about 25 miles.

[The newspaper explains the Commissioners' decision to have the road cross to the north side of the Arkansas River at Dardanelle, noting "the difficulties which they would have encountered, or rather the impossibility of finding a suitable point to cross the Petit Jean bayou and mountain of the same name." In addition, "they would have had to encounter other nearly equal obstructions at the Fourche Lefevre and the Big and Little Maumelle bayous, and other small streams . . . and the face of the country being very broken and stony, made it impossible to find a route where a good road could be constructed without immense labor and expense."]

141 miles, *Gally creek*—a bridge required across a small miery [sic] stream on this route; country gently rolling; timber, oak, hickory, etc.; good ford across the creek.

156 miles, *Point Remove creek*—country gently rolling, part level, some low grounds; a causeway of a few yards will be required in one place, across a cypress swamp; timber, oak, gum, ash, hickory, etc. A bridge will be required across this creek, which will cost about \$300, or a ferry may be established by bestowing considerable labor in improving the landing.

160 miles, Cherokee boundary line.

166 miles, *Gay creek*.

174 miles, *Cadron creek*—country part gently rolling, and part low and wet; some causeways will be required, but only for short distances; timber, oak, gum, etc. This is a considerable stream, which will require a bridge at an expense of about \$400; it may be forded when at low stages.

191 miles, *Palarm bayou*—country, broken; timber, oak, hickory, pine, etc. A bridge, which will cost about \$250, will be required on this bayou.

198 miles, *White Oak bayou*.

207 miles and 70 chains, *Arkansas river, opposite Little Rock*—country part hilly, and part low land; timber, oak, pine, etc.

Across the Arkansas to Little Rock is 17 chains and 72 links, making the total distance from Cantonment Gibson to Little Rock 208 miles, 7 chains, and 72 links.

The *Arkansas Gazette* went on to report that the Commissioners believed they had selected a route that was "on as direct a line as possible, taking into consideration the favorableness of the ground, and the facilities which were presented for constructing a *good road*, with the least labor and expense."¹⁴

What the newspaper did not say was that the Commissioners ended their report to the Secretary of War with a plea for additional compensation to pay a surveyor they had hired:

[A]s we were all unacquainted with surveying ourselves and it being out of our power to procure an accurate surveyor without additional pay to that allowed for

¹⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 January 1826.

assistants we were under the needcessity [sic] of employing Mr. Richardson and we fondly hope his account will be paid as it now stands in fact the compensation allowd [sic] us would not be an inducement to leave our homes were it not our firm belief that the road when Opend [sic] will be of very great advantage to this remote country. . . .¹⁵

As they had been instructed, the Commissioners prepared duplicate plats of the route that was surveyed. One plat was mailed to the War Department in Washington. The other plat was sent, along with the Commissioners' report and field notes, with a man traveling from Little Rock to Washington. It was the Commissioners' belief that the traveler would arrive in Washington ahead of the mail, but just the opposite occurred. Early in March of 1826, the plat that had been mailed arrived at the War Department, causing some consternation because it was not accompanied by the report and field notes. In a letter to the editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* dated March 7, 1826, Henry Conway tersely directed the Commissioners to "forward immediately" copies of their report and field notes "that measures may be taken to open the road next summer." However, by the time Conway's letter arrived in Little Rock and was printed in the *Gazette* on April 18, 1826, the confusion over the two plats and their different methods of delivery already had been resolved.¹⁶

The same issue of the *Gazette* contained a second letter from Delegate Conway, dated March 15, 1826, stating that "Col. Arbuckle has been ordered, by the Secretary of War, to employ a part of the troops under his command, in opening the road from Little Rock to Cantonment Gibson. The work is to be commenced immediately, and I hope, will be completed in the course of next summer."¹⁷

"Col. Arbuckle" was Matthew Arbuckle, commander of the recently-established Army post that initially was known as Cantonment Gibson. Located near the point where the Verdigris and Neosho (or Grand) Rivers join the Arkansas River (in present-day eastern Oklahoma), the post still was under construction in March of 1826, when Colonel Arbuckle received his orders "to detail troops to make a road from Little Rock Arkansas Territory to Cantonment Gibson in the same Territory. . . ." The troops would report to an officer charged by the Quartermaster General "with Superintendence of the works on said road. . . ."¹⁸

Despite Delegate Conway's hope that the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road would be completed during the summer of 1826, and despite the orders issued to Colonel Arbuckle, it was April of 1827 before the *Arkansas Gazette* again had anything to report about construction of the road. No progress was made for approximately a year because Colonel Arbuckle's troops were too busy with other duties to start working on the road. In addition, with the exception of the stretch between Fort Gibson and Fort Smith,

¹⁵ *Territorial Papers* 174-175.

¹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 April 1826.

¹⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 April 1826.

¹⁸ *Territorial Papers* 205-206.

Colonel Arbuckle questioned the road's utility to the Army. He also did not agree with the route surveyed between Fort Gibson and Fort Smith by the Commissioners.

After receiving the orders concerning the road, Colonel Arbuckle responded, in a letter dated May 7, 1826, to Adjutant General R. Jones:

In relation to the service required—I have much to regret that my situation deprives me of the opportunity of fulfilling the expectations of the Government.

. . . [T]he contemplated road between this post and the Little Rock cannot be commenced, at this time, by my Command.

First, as being of the most importance, I would remark there is much reason to believe that a very General War between the Indian Tribes on this frontier will commence immediately. . . .

With respect to this post, I can say it is enclosed, and the Block up, or nearly so; yet much more labour is required to complete the defence, and a greater time required to finish the Quarters to render them comfortable and durable. . . . [I]t would be Totally impossible to prosecute this project and that of making the road at the same time, with effect with my present Command.

I would further remark, that so much of the proposed road as can be regarded very material with respect to military operations, lies between this post and Fort Smith; and, that it would be but little better than a total loss of labour, to open it on the route established by the Commissioners.

Colonel Arbuckle went on to explain that his post was understaffed and he could not spare the physician he thought should accompany a detachment working on the road; neither could he spare an officer to command the road work or the soldiers to do the work. He also requested that his men “not be required to open the Contemplated road, except between this Post & Fort Smith.”¹⁹

In a separate letter to the Quartermaster General (Brigadier General T. S. Jesup), dated May 5, 1826, Colonel Arbuckle summed up the reasons he was unable to begin work on the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road: “Want of Money, Tents & Tools.”²⁰

Before the end of the year, however, conditions changed sufficiently for Colonel Arbuckle to decide he could assign troops to work on the road. On November 16, 1826, Lieutenant James L. Dawson, Assistant Quartermaster General, wrote to the Quartermaster General to report that he had arrived at Fort Gibson on November 6. Lieutenant Dawson stated “the Commandant of the Post has notified me that he will be enabled by the advanced State of the Works, to detail the Number of Men, requisite for opening the road from this to Little Rock, in the Course of a few weeks, which will accordingly be Commenced.”

¹⁹ *Territorial Papers* 240-242.

²⁰ *Territorial Papers* 243.

Lieutenant Dawson also urged the Quartermaster General to limit the Army's involvement in building the road to the section between Fort Gibson and Fort Smith, and, like Colonel Arbuckle, he criticized the route established by the Commissioners: "The route which has been designated by the Commissioners . . . is an injudicious one. It is not only 10 Miles longer than is Necessary, but passes over exceedingly rough Country, and Crosses all the Water Courses So Near their outlets, as Not to admit of their being forded in Wet Seasons." He recommended "a departure from the route Selected by the Commissioners and the adoption of that which will avoid the difficulties I have enumerated, and afford the advantages of directness, Smoothness & Safety."²¹

One month later, on December 16, 1826, Colonel Arbuckle sent much the same message to the Quartermaster General, saying work on the road could be commenced shortly but that the route from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith should be changed. Colonel Arbuckle advised the Quartermaster General that Lieutenant Dawson had "been employed to survey the direct Route" and had reported that "with very little difficulty & slight deviations from a right line, a road in all respects greatly preferable to the route laid off by the Commissioners may be had, which will shorten the distance twelve miles. . . ." He also reiterated the view that "below Fort Smith the Military can have but little interest in the contemplated road." He suggested, however, another approach to building the road to Little Rock: "I am apprized [sic] it would be most acceptable to the Citizens to have the remainder of the way opened by contract. . . ."²²

In a letter dated January 25, 1827, the Quartermaster General directed Lieutenant Dawson to proceed with work on the road from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith. The Quartermaster General also told Lieutenant Dawson that it would be determined later whether the remainder of the road "shall be opened by contract, or by the Troops."²³

On February 26, 1827, probably before the Quartermaster General's letter was received by Lieutenant Dawson, Colonel Arbuckle wrote to the Quartermaster General, stating "the road from this post to the Little Rock might now be commenced by a detachment of my Command; Yet not without considerable inconvenience, as this post still requires much labour to complete it. I have therefore determined to suspend work on the road. . . ." Colonel Arbuckle again repeated his view "that the Military can have but little, if any, interest in a road lower down the Arkansas River than Fort Smith."²⁴

Work on the road finally commenced in the spring of 1827, after Colonel Arbuckle received a March 5 letter from Adjutant General Jones that he could not ignore: "Sir, The General in Chief directs that you will employ a detachment of the Troops under your command, in opening the road from Cantonment Gibson to Little Rock."²⁵

²¹ *Territorial Papers* 303-304.

²² *Territorial Papers* 329-330.

²³ *Territorial Papers* 376.

²⁴ *Territorial Papers* 403.

²⁵ *Territorial Papers* 414.

In a letter written on March 8, 1827, the Quartermaster General told Lieutenant Dawson that the Secretary of War had authorized adoption of the more direct route Dawson had surveyed from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith and that the road should “be opened on it.” The Quartermaster General also instructed Lieutenant Dawson to invite proposals for constructing the road by contract between Fort Smith and Little Rock. However, the road could be built under contract only if doing so would be possible for the amount of money remaining from the original Congressional appropriation: “a little upwards of seven thousand dollars.”²⁶

On April 10, 1827, the *Arkansas Gazette* again had something to report about the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road: “We understand that Colonel Arbuckle has recently received instructions from the War Department, to commence without delay, the opening of the road . . . and that he has detailed 50 men for that service. . . .”

Actually, Colonel Arbuckle still was just *preparing* to detail an attachment to begin work on the road. He wrote to the Adjutant General on April 23, 1827, that he was waiting for wagons needed “to transport the necessary supplies of the Detachment” to be ready for use, something he expected to occur “within the next eight or ten days.” He repeated “the request that [soldiers under my command] not be required to open the road leading to the Little Rock, further than Fort Smith.” He also emphasized that using Fort Gibson’s wagons for the road project would be inconvenient but said he preferred “having them so employed that the Sum appropriated may be but little diminished after the road in question is completed as far as Fort Smith; and may be sufficient to pay Citizens for completing the Work.”²⁷ In other words, although it was inconvenient, Colonel Arbuckle was economizing in order to ensure that his men would not have to work on the road between Fort Smith and Little Rock.

In May, the *Arkansas Gazette* announced that Lieutenant Dawson would be coming to Little Rock to receive proposals for building the Fort Smith-Little Rock section of the road by contract. Rather than being unhappy that the Army would not build the entire road, the *Gazette* noted that contracts would “enable our citizens generally to participate in the work” and stated approvingly that “Lieut. Dawson will divide the work into sections of about *five miles* each, which will place it in the power of almost every man to make a contract for one or more sections.”²⁸ (The idea of receiving bids for small sections of the road was not Lieutenant Dawson’s; he had been advised to do by the Quartermaster General.²⁹)

By June 19, 1827, the *Arkansas Gazette* had learned that eight miles of the road between Fort Gibson and Fort Smith were complete. The paper was told that fifty-five soldiers

²⁶ *Territorial Papers* 416.

²⁷ *Territorial Papers* 451-452.

²⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 22 May 1827. It was in this issue of the *Gazette* that the name “Fort Gibson” first was used, rather than “Cantonment Gibson.”

²⁹ *Territorial Papers* 416.

were working on that section of the road, which was expected to be finished in six weeks.³⁰

Later in June, Lieutenant Dawson arrived in Little Rock to advertise “for Proposals for opening the Road from this place to Fort Smith, by Contract, in Conformity to Your instructions on that Subject,” as he said in a letter to the Quartermaster General dated June 30, 1827.³¹ The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that Lieutenant Dawson would receive proposals until the 6th of August and reiterated its approval of his receiving bids on small sections of the road:

By dividing the Road into sections of five miles each, he has given to almost every person in the country [an opportunity] to participate in the disbursements being made in constructing it, which will have a very happy influence in relieving our citizens from their pecuniary embarrassments occasioned by the low price of cotton and the consequent scarcity of money.³²

The advertisement for “SEALED PROPOSALS” that was placed in the *Gazette* by Lieutenant Dawson listed a total of twenty-nine “divisions of about 5 miles each . . . to which the bids will respectively have reference.” Beginning in Little Rock, “Section 1st” ran “from the Arkansas river to the 202d mile tree.” The last section, “Section 29th,” began at the 67th mile tree and ended at the Arkansas River at Fort Smith.

The advertisement gave these instructions to prospective bidders:

The Road will be opened on the route designated by the Commissioners, which is blazed and marked throughout the whole distance, and is to be cut in ranges as long and direct as a reference of the line of the Commissioners, and the general direction of the survey, will admit of. It will be cut full sixteen feet wide. The timber, brush, drift, rocks, and every species of obstruction, are to be cleared from the surface, and all holes to be filled up, so as to render the passage smooth and easy. Large sized trees must be cut off within one foot of the ground, and the stumps hollowed outwards the centre; and saplings, at no more than 3 inches. In marshes, swamps, and bogs, a causeway is to be constructed, and the whole width of the road, to be made of rails or poles, 4 inches in diameter at the small end. They must be laid compactly together, perpendicular to the line of direction, and covered with a layer of about 12 inches of solid earth in the middle, and 6 inches on the sides, of the causeway. Substantial riders of durable timber, must be pinned on each side of the causeway, in such parts of the road, as is liable to be subjected to the effects of overflow. A ditch must be dug on the sides of the causeway, 18 inches wide and 12 inches deep.

In prairie land, which is liable to be boggy in wet seasons, a ditch of a similar kind must be dug on each side of the road, and the earth removed and thrown on the road, in such a manner as to raise it in the centre.

³⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 June 1827.

³¹ *Territorial Papers* 498.

³² *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 July 1827.

All hills and small elevations, on the line of the road, are to be sloped off each way, so as to permit wagons, etc. to pass with convenience.

The banks of all creeks, branches, streams, and ravines, on the route, are to be dug down so as to render the ascent and descent safe and easy at all seasons of the year.

The advertisement went on to say that the “lowest possible bid” would be accepted, but any and all bids could be rejected if the “terms of the proposals be deemed unreasonable.” Further, work was to be completed by “31st December next,” when it would be inspected by Lieutenant Dawson or some other agent of the Quartermaster’s Department. In the event that the Quartermaster’s agent found work to be deficient, and the contractor refused to fix it, the contract would be “annulled.”

Persons submitting proposals were instructed to “state the price per mile,” provide “a bond, with two sufficient securities, for double the amount of the contract,” and include the “names of the securities” in the proposal. Proposals were to be sent by mail to Lieutenant Dawson at Little Rock. Completed sections of the road would “be paid for when inspected and received.”³³

While Lieutenant Dawson was in Little Rock, Colonel Arbuckle reported to the Adjutant General, in a letter dated July 1, 1827, that “a Detachment of my Regiment, under the command of Capt. Butler, is now employed in opening the road leading from this Post to the Little Rock; and will, it is believed, finish the road as far as Fort Smith, in all the present Month; or early in the next.” The Colonel also said he believed that the unexpended portion of the road appropriation would “be sufficient to complete this road below Fort Smith. . . .”³⁴

Lieutenant Dawson began his journey back to Fort Gibson from Little Rock on August 14, 1827, have contracted, according to the *Arkansas Gazette*, “with sundry persons, principally citizens of this country, for opening upwards of 100 miles of the U. S. Road leading from this place to Fort Gibson.” The sections of the road that were not contracted would be built by troops.³⁵

In reporting on the progress of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road, the *Gazette* took the opportunity to discuss the overall value of military roads to Arkansas Territory:

[Military roads] traverse more than 700 miles of our Territory, and through millions of acres of the most valuable cotton lands, which it contains. When completed, they will be found eminently useful to emigrants, who have heretofore experienced great difficulty in getting from the Mississippi to such sections of the Territory as they wished to settle in; and we have no doubt that the increased sales of public lands which will be effected, by their means, will richly repay the government for the expense of their construction. In a military point of view, they will be found

³³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 July 1827.

³⁴ *Territorial Papers* 499.

³⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 August 1827.

of great service in the event of a war with the western Indians, as they will afford the means of speedily transporting troops from beyond the Mississippi, to the aid of those stationed at our frontier posts. And to persons travelling to Texas and other sections of the Mexican territory, they will afford the most direct route, and will no doubt soon become the great thoroughfare for the trading expeditions to that country, from most of the southern and western states.³⁶

After arriving back at Fort Gibson, Lieutenant Dawson wrote to the Quartermaster General on August 28, 1827, reporting on his trip to Little Rock. He stated that contracts had been effected for 110 miles of the³⁷ road between Little Rock and Fort Smith, leaving “but a few miles to be opened by the Troops (who have already Completed their portion of the labor as far down as Fort Smith).” He also noted that a “Considerable part of this distance has been opened by the County of Crawford, and the remainder being principally prairie land, will render the Completion of the intermediate portion, a work of little difficulty. . . . The whole route will be opened by the end of the Current year. . . .”³⁸

Although the Commissioners’ 1825 report on the route for the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road had described bridges that would be needed, including estimates of their cost, Dawson told the Quartermaster General:

In the Contracts which have been made no attention has been had to the bridging of the Several Creeks on the route—The instructions furnished me made no Specific Reference to the manner of Constructing the Road, and I have therefore made such a disposition of the funds as I deemed best calculated to promote the interest of the Government. . . . From the great disparity in the expense of the Two modes of Construction, and the obvious inadequacy of the appropriation to bridge the whole route, I was led to believe that it was not your intention to have Bridges Constructed over the larger Streams, more especially as they are furnished with Ferries, and the Smaller ones are always dry or generally fordable at all Seasons.

As part of his report to the Quartermaster General, however, Dawson gave his estimate of the number and cost of bridges that ideally would be built on the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road. He saw the need for more bridges and expected them to cost significantly more than the Commissioners’ report had anticipated. The Commissioners recommended seven bridges, though they only gave estimates on the cost of building six, totaling \$1,700. Dawson indicated that eight bridges were needed and that they would cost \$4,900, nearly three times the Commissioners’ estimate.³⁹ Dawson acknowledged that

³⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 August 1827. The military roads to which this article referred were enumerated as follows: from Memphis to Little Rock, 136 miles; from Little Rock to Fort Smith, 152 miles; from Fort Smith to Fort Gibson, 56 miles; from Fort Smith to Fort Towson, 190 miles; and from Fort Towson to Natchitoches, 320 miles; for a total of 854 miles of military roads.

³⁷ The precise number of miles under contract was 111.

³⁸ *Territorial Papers* 519.

³⁹ The bridges recommended by both the Commissioners and Dawson would have spanned Big Vash (or Vache) Creek, Big Creek, Six Mile Creek, Short Mountain Creek, Point Remove Creek, Cadron Creek, and

his estimated costs "exceed in amount those of the Commissioners, who Surveyed the Road," but said he had based his estimates "on the most accurate information I could obtain in my intercourse with the inhabitants of the Country, who are acquainted with the nature of the Work and the price of labor & materials."

Lieutenant Dawson's report also provided a breakdown of the manner in which various segments of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson would be, or already had been, built:

Put under Contract	111
Opened by Troops to Fort Smith	60
Opened by Crawford County	15
Prairie Land	12
Remaining to be opened by Troops	<u>10</u>
	208 Miles

Finally, the report revealed exactly which of the twenty-nine five-mile divisions of the road had been put under contract and for how much per mile:

Sections 1-3	16 miles	\$49.75 per mile	\$ 796
Sections 4-10	35 miles	\$50.00 " "	1,750
Sections 11-15	25 miles	\$90.00 " "	2,250
Section 16	5 miles	\$40.00 " "	200
Sections 17-20	20 miles	\$35.00 " "	700
Section 21	5 miles	\$30.00 " "	150
Section 22	<u>5 miles</u>	\$50.00 " "	<u>250</u>
	111 miles		\$6,096

In addition to the total—\$6,096—for the sections under contract, Lieutenant Dawson estimated \$1,250 would be needed for "Extra duty Men employed on the Road," bringing the overall total to \$7,346, an amount that would exhaust the Congressional appropriation for building the road.⁴⁰

Two months later, on October 31, 1827, the Quartermaster General reported to Congress on the status of construction of the military roads from Memphis to Little Rock, from Little Rock to Fort Gibson, and from Fort Smith to Fort Towson (and on to Natchitoches, Louisiana). He indicated that the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road was nearing completion, sans bridges:

Of the road authorized from Cantonment Gibson to Little Rock, Arkansas Territory, comprehending a distance of more than two hundred miles, seventy two miles have been constructed during the present season by the Troops, fifteen by the Citizens of Crawford County, and one hundred and seven miles put under contract,

Palarm Bayou. To this list, Dawson added a bridge over Gally Creek, which the Commissioners had indicated could be forded.

⁴⁰ *Territorial Papers* 519-522.

leaving on the 26th of August, the date of the last advices, only ten miles to be made by the troops, to complete the portion assigned to them. That has doubtless been accomplished before this time, and there is every assurance that the portion put under contract will be completed by the termination of the present year. This road crosses several considerable streams, some of which should be bridged, but the existing appropriation is insufficient for that purpose.⁴¹

On November 30, 1827, Colonel Arbuckle wrote to the Adjutant General, saying that "Capt. Wilkinson with a Detachment, is now employed in completing so much of the military Road between this post & Little Rock, as has not been undertaken by Citizens. It is expected he will accomplish this duty, and return to this post by the 20th of the next month."⁴²

Just a few days later, on December 3, 1827, Lieutenant Dawson broke the news to the Quartermaster General that one of the "Citizens" who had submitted a proposal to build portions of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road had not followed through and entered into a final contract: "The Bid of Mr. J. G. Russel was not Complied with, and his Bond & Contract are defecient [sic]." Dawson had expected Mr. Russel to build thirty-five miles of the road, Sections 4 though 10, at \$50 per mile. He told the Quartermaster General that these Sections would be re-advertised, saying he did not believe Mr. Russel's "default will produce Serious delay in the Completion of the whole route, which had otherwise been effected by the end of the Current Year."⁴³

Also on December 3, 1827, Lieutenant Dawson sent to the Quartermaster General another comprehensive report on construction of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road. Although he had not yet personally inspected the road, Dawson told his superior "that from the best information I am possessed of, the work has been diligently and faithfully prosecuted by the Several Contractors Engaged in it, and will without doubt be Completed agreeably to Contract, and within the Stipulated period." He also reported that Colonel Arbuckle had told him "that the Small remaining portion assigned to the Troops of his Command, is now progressing very favorably, and will Certainly be finished during the Current Month."

A statement enclosed with Lieutenant Dawson's report recapitulated the sections of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road built under contract, this time giving the names of the contractors:

Sections 1-3	Henry Bradford
Sections 11-15	Joseph Henderson
Sections 16	Henry Stinnett
Section 17-20	Thomas Hixson

⁴¹ *Territorial Papers* 547. It is unclear why the Quartermaster General's report indicated that 107, rather than 111, miles had been put under contract.

⁴² *Territorial Papers* 554.

⁴³ *Territorial Papers* 556.

Section 21 A. C. Sadler
 Section 22 Lorenzo Clarke

The report also recapitulated the manner of construction of the various segments of the road:

Distance from Fort Smith to Cantonment Gibson opened by the Troops	60 Miles
Put under Contract, and now under operation	76
Bid for by J. G. Russel, but not contracted for	35
Opened by Crawford County & Troops from Fort Smith in the direction of Crawford Court House in 1823 & 1824	15
Under operation by the Troops	<u>22</u>
	208 Miles

Lieutenant Dawson explained that the "fifteen Miles opened in '23 & '24, originally Constituted a portion of the old Route and was embraced in the line of the present road by the Survey of the Commissioners." He also reiterated that the twenty-two miles being opened by troops would be "Completed in the Course of the Current month."⁴⁴

A copy of the newspaper advertisement for proposals to build the road accompanied Lieutenant Dawson's report, as did a "Statement of Military Road Expenditure":

For the portion put under Contract and now under operation	4,346
For Extra Pay to the Troops of the Seventh Inf employed in Constructing the Said road	1,060
For the Construction of 35 miles uncontracted for, being the portion embraced in the Bid of Mr. J. G. Russel	1,750
Contingencies	<u>120</u>
Total	\$7,276 ⁴⁵

(The total shown on this statement, \$7,276, was \$70 less than the total given in Lieutenant Dawson's August report to the Quartermaster General. The difference was due to extra duty pay being slightly lower than Dawson had estimated it would be.)

On New Year's Day, 1828, Colonel Matthew Arbuckle wrote to the Adjutant General that Captain Wilkinson, commander of the troops who opened the twenty-two miles of road that were not contracted, was returning to Fort Gibson, "having completed the service required."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Territorial Papers* 557-558.

⁴⁵ *Territorial Papers* 559-561.

⁴⁶ *Territorial Papers* 583.

The *Arkansas Gazette* of January 8, 1828, reported that the "whole of the road from this place to Cantonment Gibson is completed, with the exception of 35 miles, which will be immediately put under contract, and also of a few places (of only a few rods in length) on which the contractors will be required to do a little more work. . . ." ⁴⁷

In a similar vein, on January 10, 1828, Lieutenant Dawson wrote to the Quartermaster General to report that he had inspected the sections of the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road that had been built under contract. These sections "were as nearly Completed as the extreme wetness of the Season would permit," and the contractors were "engaged in performing the little additional labor, necessary to ensure the reception of their Sections, according to agreement." Overall, the "whole route from Cant[onment] Gibson to Little Rock, is now opened & travelled except the 35 miles [that were supposed to have been built by J. G. Russel]." Dawson wrote that this last portion was under contract and would "be under operation in a few days, to be Completed on the 30 April." ⁴⁸

Although it had no bridges and a thirty-five mile stretch was yet to be finished, the Little Rock-Fort Gibson road evidently was considered complete enough by January of 1828 that the *Arkansas Gazette* gave it little or no further attention. Coverage of its construction appears to have ended with the January 8, 1828, issue of the *Gazette*, except for occasional general references in articles dealing with the overall condition of roads in Arkansas. Similarly, after Lieutenant Dawson's January 10, 1828, letter to the Quartermaster General, the road is not mentioned again in the papers of Arkansas Territory (through 1829).

Without swamps or other natural obstacles that would have made its construction more difficult, completion of the road between Little Rock and Fort Gibson went forward with as much efficiency as could be expected on the frontier. Work on the road was hampered mainly by difficulties related to finding and assigning the right men to the job, as well as by the general rigors of frontier life. Even with one major delay--from March of 1826 to April of 1827, when Fort Gibson's commander balked at assigning troops to work on the road before construction of the fort was finished--the road was completed in just over three years, first covering the approximately sixty miles between Fort Gibson and Fort Smith and then carving a path of some 150 miles from Fort Smith to Little Rock.

⁴⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 January 1828.

⁴⁸ *Territorial Papers* 597.

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**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

Construction of the Military Road Between Little Rock, Arkansas and Fort Gibson, Oklahoma

By Cheryl Nichols

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