

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Oklahoma has two main drainage systems: the Arkansas River and the Red River. These rivers along with their tributaries flow into Oklahoma by the six surrounding states. The waters flow out of the state by way of the Red, Arkansas, and Little Rivers, and Lee Creek. These rivers and creeks proved a challenge as Oklahoma travel evolved from horseback and foot travel to motorized transportation, necessitating the construction of ferries, and later bridges over many of these creeks and rivers.^{1,2,3}

When people and goods first came across Oklahoma, trails were developed based on the easiest route to travel or from animal tracks. Osage Indian trails were later used for resettlement of additional tribes and by Anglos, and by their arrival an established network of roads and fords had formed. From these routes, later highways developed, including the Texas Road (later U.S. Highway 69). Individuals established better crossings at rivers and streams beginning in the 1820s using wooden rafts, flatboats, and later ferries powered by steam engines.

Military roads were begun in the early 1800s when the U.S. Army arrived to the territory. The first surveyed road in the state was conducted by the army under Lieutenant James L. Dawson in 1826; this route extended 55 miles from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith. Military roads became the chief routes for travel, supplies, livestock, and communication not only for the military but for other settlers and tradespeople, and continued to be developed into the 1870s. The army also built and operated ferries, most of which were timber plank bridges intended only for temporary use.

After Indians were relocated to Oklahoma Territory in the 1830s and 1840s the tribes gained control of travel routes and ferries and the governments of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek tribes began a series of legislative actions that further established public roads, primarily along section lines. In 1849 the Cherokee Nation approved annual taxes for the ferries they regulated on the Arkansas, Canadian, Neosho, Illinois, and Verdigris rivers. Each tribal government established ferry regulations that applied to its landholdings, and individual landholders operated ferries and toll bridges on the creeks and rivers on their land. Traders often operated ferries associated with their stores. By the 1850s, the army built more permanent wooden and wrought iron bridges.

Oklahoma Territory roads became popular routes during this time, and travelers to the frontiers of Texas and California passed through the area. Along the Texas Road turnpikes, toll bridges, and ferries were built by the 1870s. As railroads extended their lines through the territory, they also brought iron and steel truss bridges that were often the first permanent bridges erected in some areas. Railroad bridges were often adapted to allow crossing by horse and wagon; other times railroad bridge designs, or actual retired railroad bridges were used for road use. By the 1880s, cattle trails became important, and the Chisholm (later U.S. Highway 81) and Great Western trails were extended through Oklahoma Territory. Ferries began being regulated by Oklahoma Territory in 1890, which allowed counties to fix tolls, license ferries, and regulate their locations; after statehood, these regulations became state law.^{4,5,6}