

## Byler Road

One of the most influential projects in the settlement of Fayette County was the construction of Byler Road, the first state road. The road was taken into consideration by the General Assembly of the Legislature of the Territory of Alabama in November of 1819. The act commissioning the first state road was approved by the legislature and signed by Governor William Wyatt Bibb on December 16, 1819, just two days after the state of Alabama was officially admitted to the Union as the twenty-second state.

The act specified the public road was to run from the Tennessee River in the Florence/Muscle Shoals area to the “falls of the Tuskaloosa River” (Warrior River in Northport, Alabama). Byler Road followed what is now State Highway 13 through Fayette County.

John Byler petitioned for and was given the contract to build the road. The contract specified that the road must be 12 feet wide with the roadbed cleared of all stumps and roots and all soft spots in the road covered with logs. The legislative act stated that John Byler and his associates must be responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the road for a period of twelve years.

In order to pay for the repairs, the act stated, ..“the said John Byler and his associates are hereby authorized, so soon as they have opened the said road, to erect a turnpike gate at some convenient place thereon and persons traveling the road, shall pay to said John Byler and his associates the following rates of toll, to-wit: on a four wheel carriage and team, seventy-five cents, on a two wheel carriage, fifty cents, on a man and horse, twelve and a half cents, on each pack horse or a loose horse, six and a fourth cents, for each head of cattle, one cent and for each head of hogs and sheep, half a cent. And if any person shall break through or round the said turnpike gate, with an intention to avoid payment as required by this act, they shall forfeit and pay for every such offense, triple the amount due.” This payment was to be recovered by any judge or justice of the peace in the state of Alabama.

A later act of the legislature approved in December of 1822 allowed Byler an extension of time, until November of 1823, to complete the public road and also allowed him to erect toll gates in other locations along the road provided written receipts were given at each gate so that persons traveling the length of the road would only pay the toll one time.

Once the road was completed in 1823, the legislature forbid Byler from collecting any toll from any citizen of Tuskaloosa who might have to pass through the toll gate going to and from court or conducting other ordinary business.

Byler Turnpike Road quickly became the main route for families traveling from the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee to settle in the new state of Alabama. Stage coaches traveling from Baltimore, Maryland to New Orleans, Louisiana used the Byler road. When the Alabama State Capitol was moved to Tuscaloosa in 1826, the Byler Road was

so heavily traveled it was dubbed the “Main Street of Northwest Alabama”. The road was the favored route for both Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War. A Union officer was quoted as saying in 1863 that, “Byler Road furnished better forage and was built on higher ground than other roads” they traveled.

Taverns and rest areas sprang up along the road and around the toll gates. In Fayette County a camping ground and tavern were located “near a spring under a hill” near where Berry Junction is today. A son-in-law of John Byler, Eldridge T. Mallard was a toll gate manager and ran a tavern at Eldridge in Walker County, named after Mallard. Eldridge was married to John Byler’s oldest daughter Elizabeth Katherine. They later moved to Texas and Mallard became a federal judge in Rusk Co., Texas.

Captain John Byler was born in 1781 in North Carolina. He married Elizabeth Walker and they had 9 children. He and his brother, Jacob moved their families to Lauderdale County in North Alabama in 1816. Jacob, sixteen years older than John, was very involved in the politics of that area and was elected to the first Alabama Legislature in 1819. He was defeated in 1821 and reelected in 1824.

John Byler had contracted a fever while building Byler Road and died as a result of this fever in 1824. He was 43 years old. Shortly before he died, John sold his brother Jacob his interest in the Byler Road. John Byler is buried next to his home which sat beside Byler Road in Lawrence County.

*Information for this article was acquired from the Archives of the State of Alabama, 150 Yesteryears, publication of the Fayette County Historical Society and from various websites.*