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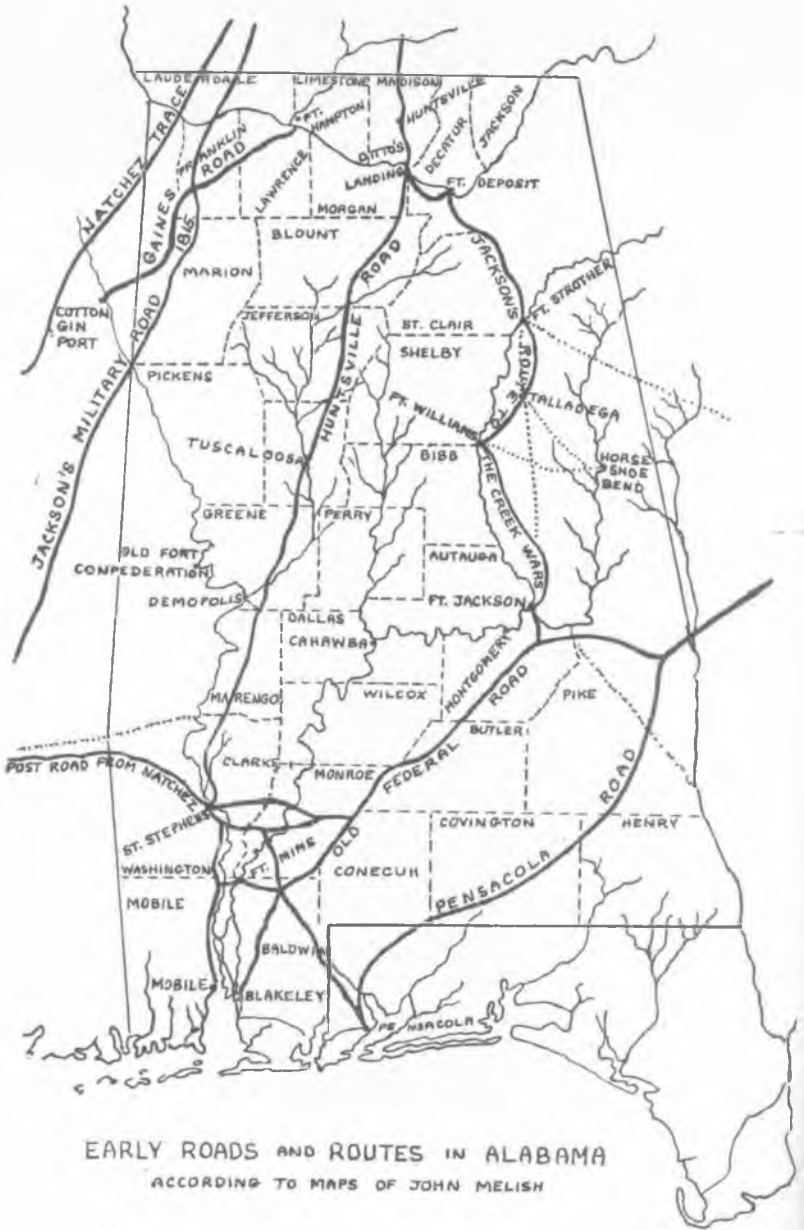
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Fisk: Huntsville's Indian Creek Canal



Drawing by Sarah Huff Fisk
Alabama History for Schools
Charles Grayson Summersell
Colonial Press: Birmingham, AL
1957, p 176.

Huntsville's Indian Creek Canal

SARAH HUFF FISK

Before roads were opened through the unsettled areas of Alabama, farmers in Madison County were fortunate indeed to have at their doorstep a ready waterway to market. The Tennessee River, with its connection to the Ohio and thence to the Mississippi, offered cheap and reasonably safe transportation, once the hazards of the Muscle Shoals were passed.

By 1820, only fifteen years after the first settlers came into the county, one-fifth of the area had been opened to cultivation. Although grains, vegetables, and fruits were grown in considerable variety, cotton was the money-making crop, the only one that could be counted on to pay its own way to market. While most agricultural products were perishable in varying degrees, cotton could be stored without deterioration until early spring, when the high rise of water on the Tennessee permitted boats to pass over the treacherous Shoals. Once over, a flatboat loaded with four or five hundred bales could generally float downstream without mishap until it was cabled to the levee in New Orleans, export center for shipment to the mills of England.

In 1819, Madison County produced nearly 18,000 bales of cotton, averaging 250 pounds each. Moving this heavy, bulky crop to market was the common problem faced by farmer, merchant and speculator alike.

Even with the river at their doorstep, shippers were plagued with an internal transportation problem. In 1820, the roads within the county were so bad that one traveler was moved to comment, "I am always apprehensive of breaking my horse's leg, or losing my own life as I approach the principal town of Alabama, where the roads are infinitely worse than in any other part of the state." In his estimation, the Great Meridian Road, over which most of the valuable products of the county were transported, was the worst in it.

The bad state of the roads doubtless contributed to high rates charged for hauling cotton. Wagonage from Huntsville to Ditto's Landing, a distance of only ten miles on the Meridian Road, was around 87¢ per bale, or nearly one-third of the cost of river shipment from Ditto's Landing all the way to New Orleans.

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Between bad roads and high wagon rates, many farmers were prompted to turn to the creek nearest their home as a cheap route to the river. Madison County has several such natural arteries. The eastern fork of Indian Creek, which takes a southerly course through Huntsville, seemed to offer a convenient waterway with great development possibilities. The flow of water on this creek was described in 1827 by a landowner near its source as "sufficient to turn machinery of any description during three-fourths of the year and during the dryest season, there is plenty of excellent water for family purposes." As the creek passes through the western edge of Huntsville it is considerably swelled by the flow of water from the Big Spring. It then flows south for six miles and west for four miles to its junction with Hurricane, or Price's Fork. Thus enlarged, the stream takes a circuitous course through swampy land until it empties into the Tennessee River below the bluff on which Triana is located.

In the early days, Indian Creek was wide and deep enough, at least when augmented by rising waters from the Tennessee, to admit the passage of river boats from Triana all the way up to the junction of its forks, a distance of about four miles. At the forks, a dam and mill was erected in pioneer days. When the land in the area was sold by the government in 1818, John W. Looney purchased the site. By 1827, he had constructed warehouses for the storage of cotton, and Looney's Landing was a regular calling point for shippers plying the Tennessee.

The development of Indian Creek as a waterway was considered as early as March 24, 1818, when the citizens of Huntsville gathered at a small town meeting and subscribed \$7,200 to clear the creek and make it navigable from Huntsville to the river. A committee was appointed to study the practicability of the project, but nearly three years passed before any real action was taken.

Meanwhile, the town of Triana, located at the mouth of Indian Creek, was incorporated on November 13, 1819. Plans for its development into a great river port on the Tennessee excited the hopes of some of the most wealthy and able men in the county. These enterprising promoters could foresee that upon the establishment of successful navigation from Huntsville by Indian Creek, Triana would become the point of transfer of a large amount of the cotton and goods for the greater portion of the county.

On December 21, 1820, the General Assembly of Alabama passed an Act to incorporate the Indian Creek Navigation Company. LeRoy Pope, Thomas Fearn, Stephen S. Ewing, Henry Cook and Samuel Hazard were appointed commissioners with power to receive subscription of stock in shares of \$50 each. When \$10,000 could be raised, the

subscribers were empowered to elect five directors, who would select one of their number as president.

The corporation was given authority to open and improve the navigation of Indian Creek from the Spring at Huntsville to Triana, by removing obstructions, opening canals, or in any other way, provided no improvements were made on the property of others without written consent of the owner. However, the corporation could institute condemnation proceedings before the County Court.

The Act provided that whenever the creek should be rendered navigable for boats drawing ten inches of water, and so long as it should be kept thus navigable, the corporation could collect toll of \$2.00 per ton of freight.

Books for subscription of stock were opened on April 23, 1821. It was estimated by the commissioners that \$25,000 or \$30,000 would cover the expense of the undertaking.

According to a plat produced by two competent surveyors, Ferdinand Sannoner and James Weakly, it appeared that in a distance of between four or five miles no deep digging or high embankment would be necessary and that a canal of three feet of water would not require an average of three feet digging. From the termination of this contemplated canal, it was thought practical only to deepen, straighten, and remove logs from the bed of the creek in order to render it navigable at all seasons.

An estimate of the annual amount of produce, such as cotton, salt, flour, lumber, whiskey, cider, apples, etc., transported between Huntsville and Ditto's Landing ranged from two to three thousand tons. It was calculated that the expense of wagonage for this amount of produce would not fall short of \$10,000 to \$12,000, so that the opening of Indian Creek would bring a clear saving of at least half this amount, after paying the toll of \$2.00 per ton. The canal's promoters also cited the convenience of supplying the town with fuel and other articles from along the course of the creek and the use of surplus water for mills. The subscription announcement closed with the dire prediction that so many towns were rising upon the Tennessee River with such vastly superior natural advantages that Huntsville might soon find her pre-eminence seriously threatened.

Three days after subscription opened, the commissioners announced that a meeting of stockholders would be held on May 16 for the election of five trustees. Payment of \$25 per share was required by June 20.

On July 18, Dr. David Moore, secretary, advertised for fifty to one hundred laborers accustomed to ditching or working on canals. He

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invited contractors to look at the plans and bid on all or any part of the work.

The Huntsville newspaper *Alabama Republican* took this occasion to editorialize the venture at great length as a novel and unprecedented improvement in so new a country. The editorial cited the accomplishments of the State of New York in constructing 400 miles of canals in a space of ten years and inferred that canals were constructed with ease and cheapness, compared with their public utility. In referring to Indian Creek Canal, the *Republican* speculated that it would be in use for the transportation of cotton the following season. How mistaken this prediction was, time alone would reveal.

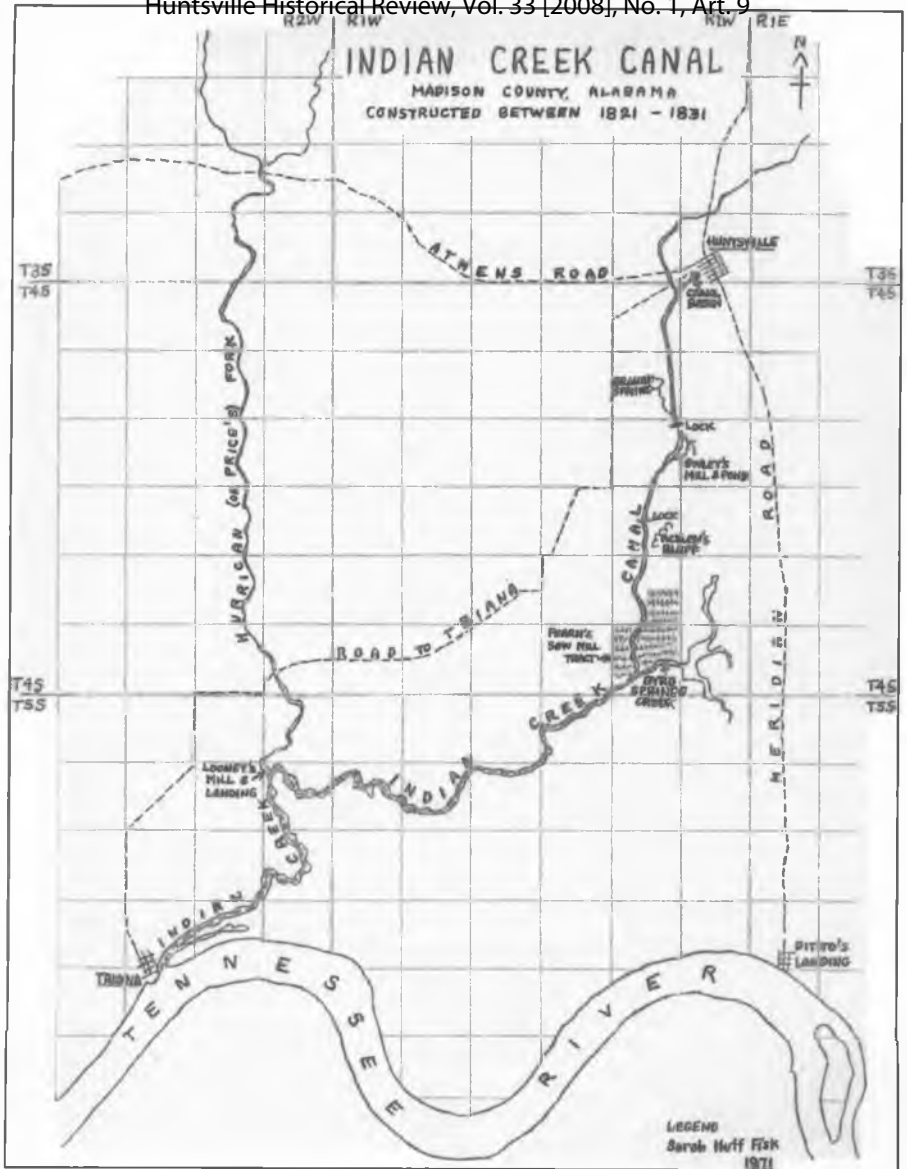
The initial phase of the work probably was centered in the winding section of creek from above the forks at Looney's Mill to the mouth of Byrd Springs Creek, a distance of five or six miles. Here it was thought necessary only to deepen and straighten the channel and remove logs. Only in this part of the creek could progress have been so rapid as to give rise to the prediction of an early completion date.

With the four-mile section of creek from the mouth of Byrd's Springs Creek north to Sively's Mill, the problems of development assumed their true proportion. Here it was necessary to compensate for a lack of downgrade by the construction of locks, five in number.

While the old locks are gone now, information recorded in deeds to land along the watercourse gives some indication of their location. The first lock was at a point about three miles south of Huntsville and just above Sively's Mill. Here, the canal company erected a dam with a flood gate lower down and Sively granted permission for the canal boats to pass through his large mill pond, which covered around ten acres.

Another lock was located northwest of Acklen's Bluff at a point where the canal company purchased two acres of land from John Turner. This purchase also included a half-mile stretch of creek to the north of the lock site, with 23 feet of land along the east bank and 16 along the west. The canal company agreed to construct a ford across the channel for Turner's use and to allow him as much water as could be discharged through a two-inch circular hole for the operation of a distillery.

On April 23, 1822, proposals were invited for completing all the portion of the canal below Sively's Mill. But progress on the work was so slow as to discourage even the press from reporting on it. After nearly two years had passed, it became abundantly clear that the enterprise had bogged down for lack of money. A popular, but often unsuccessful, fundraising method of the times was finally resorted to.



Indian Creek Canal Lottery for Internal Navigation was announced on February 6, 1825. The scheme offered for sale 4,060 tickets at \$5 each, of which 1,160 would draw prizes, ranging from a first prize of \$4,000 downward to 1,500 prizes of \$6 each. All prizes were to be discounted at the rate of 15%, the portion allotted by State law to the holder of the lottery. Thus, success of the lottery would benefit the canal

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company by \$3,000. But ticket sales lagged, with less than one-half sold by July 9. Finally, on December 31, failure was admitted and participants were requested to return their tickets for a refund.

It must have been at this point that the strength and determination of Dr. Thomas Fearn, president and leading spirit of the canal enterprise, became most apparent. Dr. Fearn was a truly remarkable person, talented, public-spirited, and energetic. He was one of the eminent physicians of the South and pioneered in the use of Quinine for the treatment of fever. He served three terms in the Alabama House of Representatives, was a member of the Board of Directors of the Planters & Merchants Bank of Huntsville and the Huntsville Branch of the State Bank of Alabama. In 1836, he and his brother, George, an attorney, merchant, and commission broker, took over operation of the Huntsville Water Works. Dr. Fearn's interest in internal improvements and commerce continued over a long period of years and was by no means limited to Madison County. He was an incorporator of the Muscle Shoals Canal in 1827. Between the years 1845 and 1855, he actively participated in four of the great Commercial Conventions held in various cities of the South.

Thomas and George Fearn did not allow the Indian Creek Canal project to languish for lack of funds, but invested their own money to the extent that the enterprise soon became popularly known as "Fearn's Canal." Although a rise in the price of cotton in 1825 must have greatly encouraged the investors in their undertaking, still another year passed before even a measure of success could be claimed.

Finally, on January 10, 1827, over five years from the start of construction, the following modest announcement appeared in the *Southern Advocate*:

The Canal and other improvements on Indian Creek, having been so far completed as to admit of the passage of boats from Sively's Mill (three miles below Huntsville) the subscribers have constructed a good shed at that place, where they will receive cotton, and deliver the same, without delay at Looney's Mill, thence into his warehouse, or to such freighter, as may have boats there, according to instructions. The charge for receiving freight, etc. will be twenty-five cents per bale.

The editor of the *Advocate* praised the Fearn's, "who have at their own expense persevered in the undertaking through so many discouraging circumstances." The canal was proclaimed to be "the first in the State and first to be rendered navigable in the western country."

Citizens who had never been upon a canal were invited to witness the novel spectacle of boats heavily laden with cotton on their passage through a lock, as they descend several feet in as many minutes, without the least risk or damage.

By the time the canal opened, a sharp decline in the price of cotton had set in. On December 14, 1827, the staple was quoted as low as six to seven cents per pound. At this rate, a bale would only bring around \$15, which would hardly defray the expense of growing and shipping it. Nevertheless, according to an early chronicler of Madison County history, the Fearn did a good business and during the winter of 1826-27 about 4,000 bales of cotton were shipped down the canal.

This statement is borne out by the fact that the Fearn continued their efforts to complete the project. In the final phase of construction, the three miles between Huntsville and Sively's Mill, it was necessary to depart from the creek bed and dig a canal for part, if not all, of the way. This took nearly three more years. Finally, on April 9, 1831, ten years after the canal was started, the *Advocate* hailed the project as completed:

FEARN'S CANAL OPEN -- The citizens of our town were greeted on Tuesday afternoon last, with a sight as novel as it is gratifying, viz, the arrival through the canal of two Keel Boats, one of which was from the Tennessee River, loaded with lumber, potatoes, etc. These boats are about 20 tons burthen, and will carry from 80 to 100 bales of cotton with ease. They went off on Thursday afternoon in fine style, under three volleys of musketry from a detachment of the Huntsville Guards, and carrying full cargoes of cotton, together with about 50 passengers who proceeded with the boats to the first lock at Sively's Mill. The lock was passed in safety, and the passengers returned highly delighted with the excursion. The present price of freight for cotton is 37½ cents per bale, which is less than one half of the ordinary prices of the wagoners.

The editor of *The Advocate* predicted that the opening of the canal would bring a reduction in the prices of hauling both to and from Ditto's Landing and declared that produce from along the Tennessee, such as cedar posts, flour, corn, potatoes, whiskey, etc., combined with the inexhaustible supply of wood on or near the banks of the canal, would at all times present a valuable upstream freight. It was calculated that the

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cotton production of the county would supply a steady downstream freight on the canal for six months out of the year.

On December 20, 1831, the Fearn announced a reduction in the canal rate to 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ ¢ per bale, including tolls, and stated that a warehouse was provided free of charge in Huntsville for the storage of cotton intended to be sent by the canal. At Looney's Landing storage to await arrival of river boats could be had for 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ per bale. The size of the locks was specified as 10 feet wide and 70 feet long, so that all boats under these dimensions could ply the canal.

About this time, the Fearn began the acquisition of around 650 acres of timber land along the canal in the area northwest of the mouth of Byrd's Spring Creek. They established a Grist Mill and Saw Mill on their tract and shipped timber and firewood to Huntsville.

An excessive amount of snow in the mountains of East Tennessee during the winter of 1831-32 caused the Tennessee River to flood. While this brought the much desired "long tide" over the Muscle Shoals, it also backed water up Indian Creek and over hundreds of acres of low lands through which the canal passed. After such a flood, silt and debris had to be cleared from the channel and levees repaired.

In spite of these and other difficulties, the Fearn continued their efforts to improve the Canal. On October 28, 1833, they advertised for good hands at 75¢ per day to throw up embankments and excavate "the basin," located at the head of the canal and directly west of the Big Spring in Huntsville. A warehouse and landing were erected on the north side of the Basin.

On November 11, 1833, George Fearn entered into partnership with Michael Erskine in a cotton freighting business. They offered shipment from Huntsville all the way to New Orleans at the customary rates charged from landings right on the river--the owners paying the canal toll of 20 cents per bale.

Late in 1834, the Fearn, in partnership with Alfred Howell and Thomas Patteson, purchased Looney's property at the Forks of Indian Creek, including the mill, machinery, warehouses and all improvements. Within a few months, they offered the property for sale or lease, with the privilege of diverting a portion of the water of the creek, should it be required for a canal to the Tennessee.

On February 16, 1835, the public was reminded that the canal was open for all who wished to use it at the established rate or toll, as far as Looney's Mill, but a rise of the Tennessee was required to pass that point. It was suggested that several more boats would meet with profitable employment in the trade.

The canal received national attention with the publication in 1835 of *Mitchell's Compendium of the Internal Improvements of the United States*. It was the only canal listed in Alabama, although mention was made of the proposed 37-mile passage around the Muscle Shoals.

On June 29, 1835, at a time when the mounting price of cotton indicated prosperity ahead, the Fearn's suddenly revealed elaborate plans for the organization of a new enterprise, to be called the Huntsville Canal Company. Under a new liberal and perpetual charter granted by the Legislature, they hoped to raise \$150,000 for the purpose of constructing from Huntsville directly to the river a canal large enough to admit barges and river boats, and hopefully, even large steam boats all the way up to the town. If only \$75,000 could be raised, an alternate plan was proposed. Terms were to be worked out whereby holders of stock in the Indian Creek Navigation Company could associate themselves with the new company. The Fearn's asserted that should the new undertaking fail from lack of support, they would use their own limited funds to enlarge and improve the present canal and extend it through to the river.

Despite the hopes entertained by the promoters of the proposed new Huntsville Canal, it was too late to attract the public to their venture. Shippers were turning to more modern improvements for the transport of cotton and other products. A McAdamized Turnpike under construction along the Meridian Road from Green Bottom Inn through Huntsville to Ditto's Landing promised fine hauling conditions. The new steam railway in operation between Decatur and Tusculumbia had fired the public interest.

While the bright prospects of the Railroad Age served to stun the hopes of the canal's promoters, the financial panic of 1837 surely rendered the death blow to the enterprise. George Fearn was among many who suffered severe financial losses. He was forced to mortgage his property, including his interest in the canal company and the Huntsville Water Works.

It is doubtful if the canal operated to much extent after 1837. In a deed executed in 1839 for the sale of excess land along the watercourse, Thomas Fearn and the trustees of George Fearn, reserved full rights to the canal, embankments, and roadway along the bank, but made it plain that the purchaser would be free to make all repairs neglected by the canal company. Other deeds of this period mention "crumbling dams and levees" along the watercourse. So swift was the decline of the canal that by 1859, the author of the *Huntsville Directory, City Guide and Business Mirror* stated it had been abandoned within a few years and "is now antiquated and useless."

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In 1969, an Alabama Historical Association marker was erected at the site of the canal's basin on Gallatin Street in the Heart of Huntsville to serve as a permanent reminder that Indian Creek Canal once contributed to the continuing effort for the improvement of commerce in Madison County.

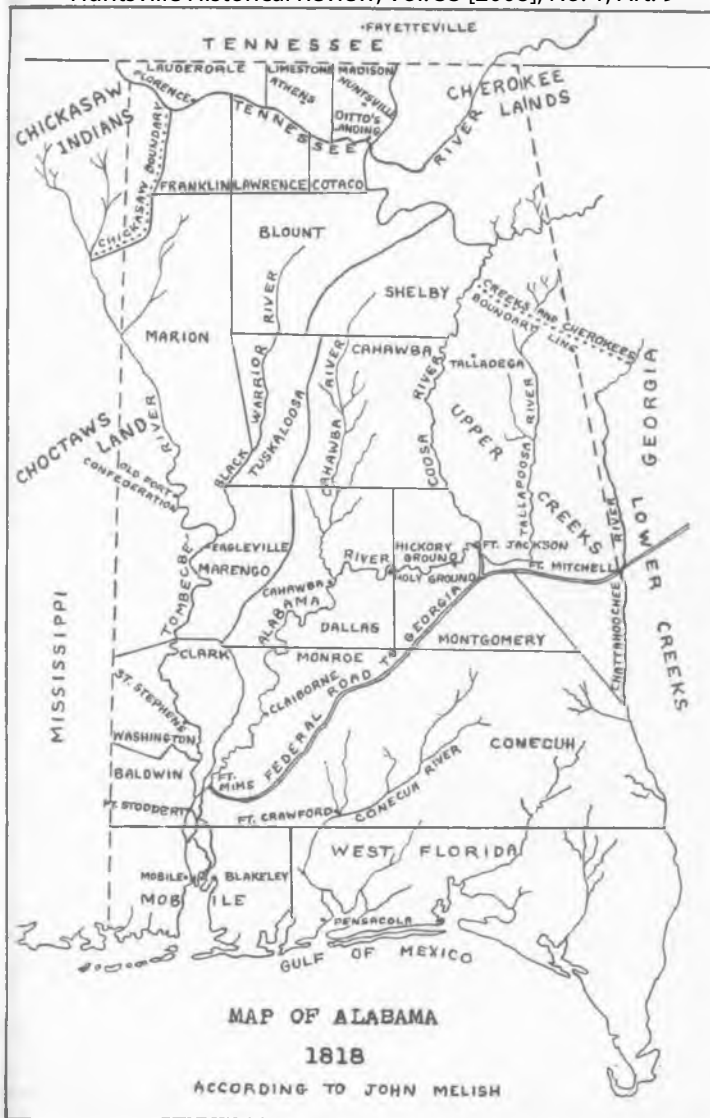
Sarah Huff Fisk presented this paper to the Alabama Historical Association on April 23, 1971.



Northern Terminus
INDIAN CREEK CANAL
First Canal In Alabama
Incorporated 1820
Completed 1831

This canal was constructed to the Tennessee River to facilitate the transportation of cotton to market. Developers were: Thomas Fearn, LeRoy Pope, Stephen S. Ewing, Henry Cook, and Samuel Hazard.

Alabama Historical Association marker in Big Spring Park, Huntsville



Drawing by Sarah Huff Fisk
Alabama History for Schools
Charles Grayson Summersell
Colonial Press: Birmingham, AL
1957, p 161.

Further Reading

Research notes for this paper may be found in the Sarah Huff Fisk Collection located in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.