

STAGECOACHES AND PUBLIC ACCOMODATIONS
IN ANTEBELLUM GEORGIA*

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During the first half of the nineteenth century, before railroads had become the favored mode of transportation, travelers to Georgia's interior often rode stagecoaches to areas inaccessible by steamboat. While early stages (so called because a change of horses was required at intervals along the route) were little more than covered wagons, by the 1830s they had assumed their familiar oval shape.

Fares in Georgia were higher than the national average due to the effects of Georgia's "shakegut" roads upon coaches and horses and to a lack of steady patronage. The majority of Georgians could not afford to ride the stage, while the wealthy usually relied upon private carriages. Only contracts to carry the U.S. mail allowed stage lines to make any profit at all. Stage travel cost approximately ninety cents per mile in today's dollars.

By stage it took three days and nights of almost constant riding to cross Georgia from east to west, and four days and nights north to south. The journey was jolting and fatiguing, especially in the fall line area where roads were the worst. European travelers were often dismayed at the egalitarianism of the coaches and the imperious and surly nature of the drivers. While passengers were generally uncomfortable, they were in little actual danger; accidents, though common, were rarely fatal and robberies were virtually unknown.

Accommodations along Georgia's roads produced almost as many complaints as the stagecoach ride itself. Small town inns and taverns, especially in western and central Georgia, had the worst reputations, though decent accommodations could be found in Savannah, Macon, and Augusta. As in most American inns of the day, private rooms, or even private beds, existed rarely. Available rooms were often filthy and verminous. Food was usually adequate in quantity, though prepared under quite unsanitary conditions. Salted pork was often the only meat, accompanied by cornbread or vegetables in season. While a few private homes provided accommodations for travelers, the price was often exorbitant and strangers, contrary to myths about southern hospitality, were regarded with suspicion.

As Georgia became less of a frontier state and as rail transportation became more common, conditions for travelers improved to some degree. In more remote areas, however, abominable accommodations were often encountered well into the 1870s.

*Editors' synopsis