Dipping Cattle Along the Old Federal Road

A Forgotten Chapter of Macon County History

By Steve Williams

Original concept and research by Shari L. Williams, Ph.D.

Hidden beneath leaves and vines in eastern Macon County near Warrior Stand is a narrow concrete trench. It, and others like it across Alabama and the South, once stood at the center of a controversial campaign to transform cattle raising in Alabama. Only a short distance away lies a surviving segment of the Old Federal Road. Together, the road and the abandoned vat preserve two hugely different chapters in the Macon County and Alabama history.

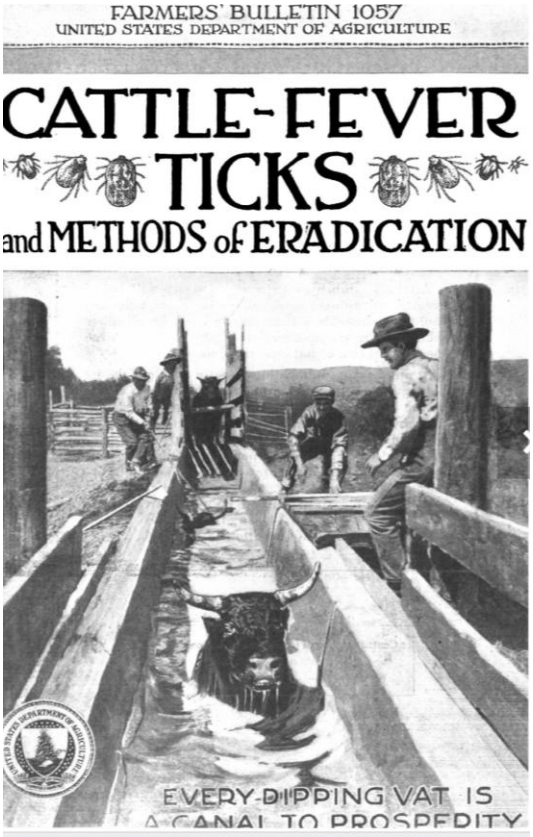
The vat represents a later chapter in the history of the Federal Road corridor. The road originated in the early nineteenth century as a postal and military route through the Creek Nation. Opened as a military road in 1811, it connected Georgia with Fort Stoddert near Mobile and ultimately with New Orleans. It became one of the principal routes by which travelers and settlers entered Alabama. Although newer roads gradually replaced it, portions of the old route continued serving local communities into the twentieth century. The Encyclopedia of Alabama and Auburn University's surviving maps of the Old Federal Road in Macon County document the road's path through the county.

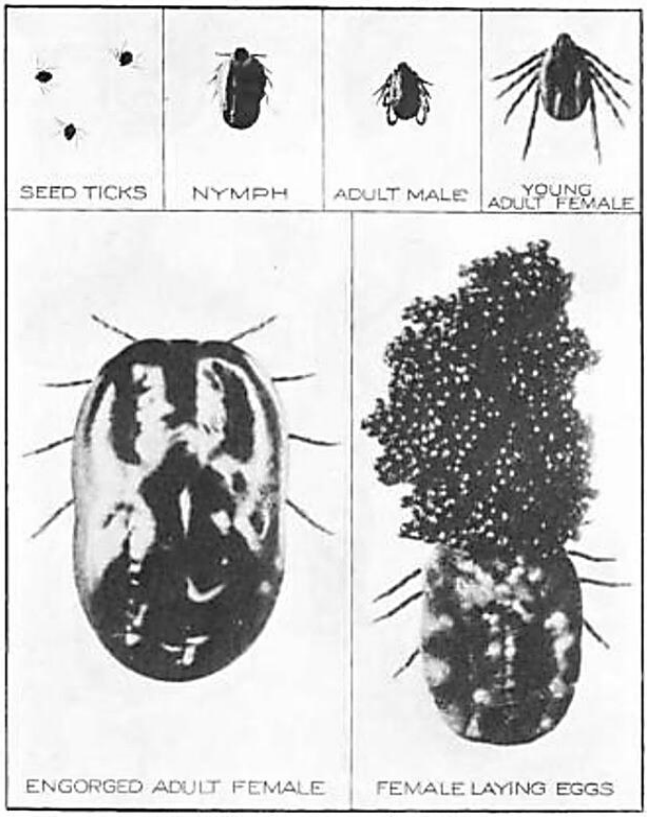
More than a century after the road first opened, the surrounding countryside became part of a major campaign against one of the South's most destructive livestock pests—the cattle fever tick. The tick transmitted the organisms responsible for Texas cattle fever, a disease that caused anemia, fever, weight loss, reduced milk production, and frequently death among susceptible cattle. The disease also discouraged farmers from improving their herds with cattle brought into the South from areas where the tick was not common.

In 1906, the federal government began cooperating with states to eradicate the cattle fever tick. Alabama's first state veterinarian, Dr. Charles Allen Cary of Auburn, became one of the leading figures in the state's campaign. Cary and other agricultural authorities promoted the construction of concrete vats in which cattle could be completely immersed in an arsenical chemical solution that killed the ticks. Auburn's Agricultural Experiment Station published detailed information about the tick, dipping solutions, and vat construction in its 1913 bulletin, "Biology or Life History of the Cattle Tick as Determined at Auburn, Ala.: Dipping Vats and Dips."

A typical dipping facility consisted of more than the vat itself. Cattle handlers drove the animals through a narrow chute that forced them to plunge into the arsenic-infused solution. The animals then climbed a sloping ramp at the opposite end. A concrete draining floor or holding pen allowed excess solution to run from the cattle and return toward the vat. At the Macon County site, the long concrete trench is the most recognizable feature, but nearby concrete remnants may represent part of its draining area or associated working pens.

© 2026 – All Rights Reserved





Left Figure 1. *A USDA cover page illustration showing cattle passing through a dipping vat during the federal tick-eradication campaign. Source:* ***W. P. Ellenberger and Robert M. Chapin, Cattle-Fever Ticks and Methods of Eradication, Farmers' Bulletin 1057 (revised) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1920), cover page. Internet Archive, https://archive.org. Public domain.***

Right Figure 2. *Cattle Fever tick enlarged 4x. Source:* ***Cattle-Fever Ticks and Methods of Eradication,***

Finding the Warrior Stand Vat: Shari's Account

My investigation into cattle dipping began during a visit to private property near Warrior Stand. I accompanied Dr. Lawrence Krumenaker, who was investigating surviving portions of the Old Federal Road and believed that a segment of the historic road crossed the property.

We had begun examining the area when a pickup truck pulled in behind our vehicle. I was concerned, thinking that the driver was the property owner stopping to ask what we were doing. In hopes of keeping things amicable, I promptly introduced Larry and myself. The driver told us he owned the property. I explained our historical research. Fortunately, he was interested in the Federal Road. I gave him an extra copy of Larry's book, and as we talked, he told us that his father had once operated a cattle-dipping facility along that stretch of the old road. He then gave us permission to continue looking around the property.

Beneath the leaves, fallen limbs, and vegetation, the most recognizable surviving feature of the facility was a long, narrow concrete dipping vat. I photographed the vat and nearby concrete remains that may have formed part of the draining area where cattle stood after passing through the dipping solution. Those remains led us to ask a larger question: what could this forgotten site tell us about cattle-tick eradication and the continuing use of the Old Federal Road corridor in Macon County?

© 2026 – All Rights Reserved

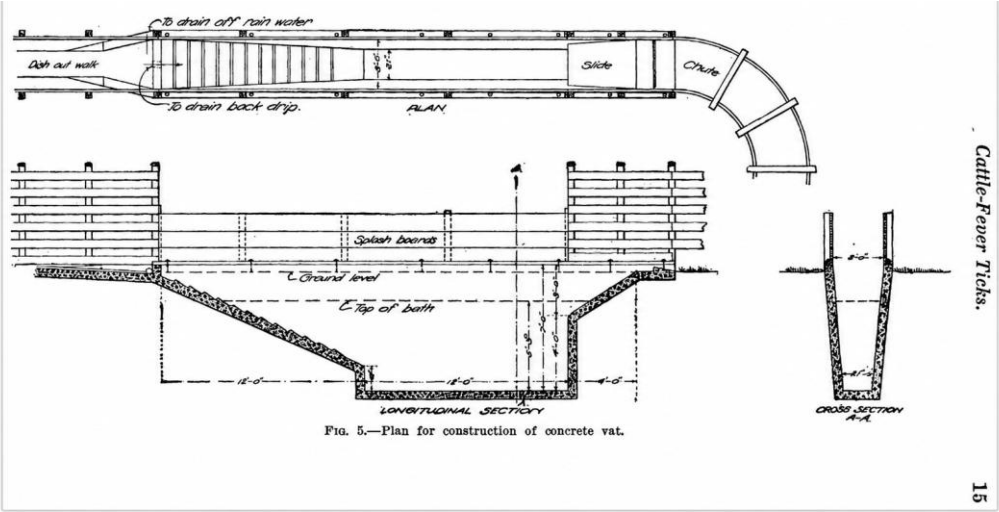


Fig. 5.—Plan for construction of concrete vat.

Figure 3. *Plan, longitudinal section, and cross-section for construction of a concrete cattle-dipping vat. Source: Cattle-Fever Ticks and Methods of Eradication, page 15.*

Shari took the photos shown below to document the Warrior Stand vat and possible remnants of its associated draining area. Although the features appear consistent with a typical dipping facility, additional investigation and documentation is needed before every concrete remnant can be identified conclusively.



Figure 4. *One view of the surviving concrete cattle-dipping vat near the Old Federal Road corridor in Macon County. Shari Williams and Dr. Lawrence Krumenaker examined the site.*

© 2026 – All Rights Reserved



Figure 5. *A second view of the overgrown concrete vat, showing the narrow channel partly concealed by leaves and vegetation.*



Figure 6. *Concrete remains near the vat that may have formed part of a draining pad or associated working area. Further examination is needed to confirm the feature's original purpose.*

The campaign reached Macon County no later than 1914. On May 21 of that year, *The Tuskegee News* printed an article titled "Destroy Cattle Tick," explaining the use and construction of dipping vats. The newspaper evidence becomes even more specific in March 1916. In an article titled "Quarantine Notice," *The Tuskegee News* reported that Macon County held an election on May 3, 1915, in which a majority of participating voters supported tick eradication. Acting under the authority of the State Live Stock Sanitary Board, State Veterinarian C. A. Cary subsequently quarantined the county, with the order taking effect on March 15, 1916.

© 2026 – All Rights Reserved

The notice restricted the movement of cattle into and out of the county except under state and federal regulations. More importantly, it ordered that cattle in Macon County undergo "systematic dipping" every two weeks until the county could be declared free of ticks and released from quarantine. This establishes that cattle dipping in Macon County was not merely an occasional practice by individual farmers. By 1916, it was part of an organized and compulsory countywide program supervised by state authorities. Inspector C.H. Berry monitored program compliance in the Hannon and Warrior Stand districts in Macon County.

On February 7, 1919, the State of Alabama passed "an act to establish and provide for state-wide eradication of the cattle fever tick." The 1919 legislation, introduced by House Representative James E. Dunaway, a Dallas County merchant, required county commissions or revenue boards to install or build the "necessary number" of vats and provide the standard arsenical dip to fill the vats. Vats were to be located four miles apart and overseen by county-paid inspectors who were commissioned as State inspectors. Further, the statute required any person, firm, company, or corporation who owned one or more cattle in a quarantined county to dip their cattle once every two weeks.



Figure 7. *Created using Canva Magic.*

Participation did not always come willingly. Farmers had to gather their cattle and drive them—sometimes for considerable distances—to an approved vat at regular intervals. Poor farmers and landless cattle owners were especially likely to resent the expense, lost working time, and intrusion of government inspectors. Native or "scrub" cattle sometimes survived in tick-infested areas better than imported breeds, leading some owners to question why they were being forced to participate in a program that they thought benefitted wealthier livestock breeders.

Resistance occurred among cattle owners who opposed mandatory dipping. Throughout Alabama and other southern states, they refused to comply. In what came to be called the "tick wars," obstructionist farmers threatened inspectors and "vat wreckers" damaged or destroyed dipping vats with dynamite. Nevertheless, eradication gradually improved the health and value of Alabama cattle and helped make possible the development of a more productive livestock industry. Cattle dipping as an eradication method phased out entirely after 1946 with the introduction of DDT chemical sprays.

The location of the Warrior Stand vat beside a surviving Federal Road corridor adds another dimension to the site. By the twentieth century, the road was no longer the great postal, military, and migration route it had once been, but portions apparently remained useful as local farm roads. Its continued accessibility may have made the area a practical location for bringing together cattle from surrounding farms. That possibility is reasonable, but it remains to be demonstrated through maps, land records, county records, or contemporary newspaper accounts.

Though hugely different, the period of the Federal Road and the period of the Warrior Stand vat nevertheless share common themes of transformation. The nearby road recalls the transformational period of Creek ancestral homelands in East Alabama and the opening of Alabama to American settlement. The vat represents the transformational period of rural agriculture a century later, when

© 2026 – All Rights Reserved

science, government regulation, and changing ideas about livestock management reached deeply into the lives of local farmers.

Both transformational periods evoked controversy and war, albeit in vastly different forms. What survives in the woods today of the vat and the road are therefore more than an obsolete concrete trench and a once major thoroughfare fallen by the wayside. They are evidence of how an old transportation corridor continued to serve a changing countryside—and of a controversial campaign that altered cattle raising in Macon County and throughout Alabama. These remnants quietly reveal a Macon County past that directly connects to state and U.S. history.

Note: Steve Williams, author, also conducted research for this article.

Sources

- Alabama Legislature. *General Laws (and Joint Resolutions) of the Legislature of Alabama Passed at the Session of 1919*. Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing Company, 1919.
- Auburn University Libraries. "Old Federal Road in Macon County, Alabama 2." Auburn University Digital Library. Auburn University Digital Library Collection**.**
- Brook Blevin. "Beef Cattle Industry." *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. March 14, 2007. https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/beef-cattle-industry.
- Kevin Harrell. "Federal Road in Alabama." *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. December 22, 2010. https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/federal-road-in-alabama.
- Graybill, H. W., W. M. Lewallen, and C. A. Cary. *Biology or Life History of the Cattle Tick as Determined at Auburn, Ala.: Dipping Vats and Dips*. Alabama Polytechnic Institute Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 171. Auburn, Ala.: Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1913. AURORA Digital Repository.
- *The Tuskegee News*, May 21, 1914, "Destroy Cattle Tick," https://newspapers.com.
- *The Tuskegee News*, March 16, 1916, quarantine notice signed by C. A. Cary, State Veterinarian, https://newpapers.com.

© 2026 – All Rights Reserved