

## **“Ridgeland Relayed...Inside + Out”**

By Tom Watts

### **Passports Required on the Natchez Trace?**

In 1812, General Andrew Jackson became involved in a dispute with Silas Dinsmoor, the United States Agent to the Choctaw in the Mississippi Territory. The Choctaw Agency was located on the old Natchez Trace (In present-day Ridgeland, just off Interstate I-55 and the Natchez Trace Parkway). The United States government provided a large brick agency house for Dinsmoor to conduct business and to provide assistance to travelers on the Natchez Trace. Dinsmoor established a personal plantation near the agency, and he built a personal inn for travelers. His troubles arose from of a dispute over the Trace Road, which ran through the Choctaw Nation from Natchez to Nashville.

United States’ Treaty with the Choctaw stated that travelers were required to obtain passports to travel through the Choctaw Nation. Dinsmoor began to enforce the law, supposedly to help stop the trade of stolen slaves on the road. Jackson claimed that Dinsmoor enforced that provision for personal gain. Poor travelers who did not have a passport were forced to stay in Dinsmoor’s inn until they could obtain a passport. Because they did not have money to pay Dinsmoor’s charges for food and lodging, he forced them to work on his plantation to pay for their stay.

In 1812, when Jackson traveled to Natchez to trade slaves, Dinsmoor stopped him and asked if he had the required passports. Jackson told him that the United States Constitution was his passport and that no citizen should be required to obtain a passport to travel on a government road. Dinsmoor threatened that if Jackson traveled through the area again without a passport, he would stop him by force. Jackson threatened to burn Dinsmoor’s inn. Dinsmoor recruited Choctaw to serve as his army to stop Jackson. Jackson learned of Dinsmoor’s move and armed his party of slaves as a counter-force. At that time, the Choctaw considered Jackson their friend. Jackson sent word ahead to the agency that he was approaching. Rather than attacking Jackson, the Choctaw Indians rushed out to greet him. Dinsmoor was away from the Agency at the time. Jackson rescued the travelers that Dinsmoor had detained for lack of a passport.

Dinsmoor was summoned to Washington to confer with the Secretary of War. In his absence, Jackson arranged for another man to move into the agency and act as agent. Even though he had not been officially removed as the Choctaw Agent, Dinsmoor was unable to overcome Jackson's influence. It was the last time a passport was required to travel the Natchez Trace.