

**Chilton and Coosa County Ferries Across the Coosa River
By Derric Scott**

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By Derric Scott

Travelers have crossed the Coosa River between Chilton and Coosa counties using ferries for a very long time. After the era of dams and large bridges, they disappeared from practically every historical location. In Chilton and Coosa Counties today the Coosa River is punctuated by the two hydroelectric dams located within their county lines.

Several ferry locations are found between the counties on the earliest maps of the river. These are, from north to south:

- Adams' / Mims' Ferry
- Zimmerman's / Higgins' Ferry
- Smith's Ferry
- Knight's / Wyatt's / Log Cabin Beach Ferry.

Johnson's Ferry / Adams' Ferry / Mims' Ferry

Adam's Ferry was established on August 3, 1874 when the Baker County Commissioner's Court gave a license to Samuel Adams to put a ferry at the Johnson's old ferry location on the Coosa River. He is allowed to charge "for a 4 horse team \$1.00, 2 horse team 50 cents, 1 horse team or man & horse 25 cents, man or woman 10 cents and that he be allowed to charge double rates during high water."

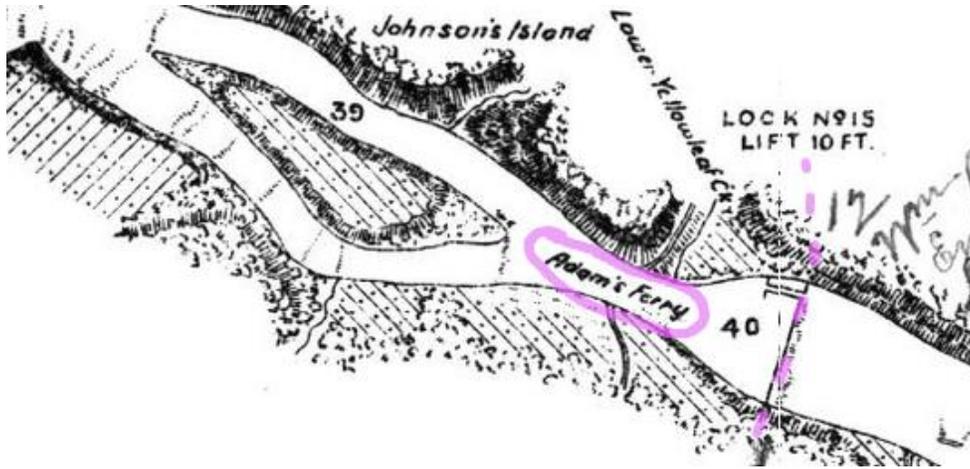
It is therefore ordered by the court that the said David Adams, ^{authorized and licensed to} ~~may~~ establish a ferry across the said Coosa River at Johnson's old ferry upon entering into bond with good security to be approved by the Judge of Probate of this County and payable to the County of Baker in the sum of five hundred Dollars and conditioned according to Law. It is further ordered that said David Adams be allowed to charge the following rates of ferrriage to-wit:

For a 4 horse team \$1.00 2 horse team 50 c
" 1 horse team or man horse 25 c. Man or woman 10 c

Baker County Commissioner's Court Minutes, August 3, 1874.

Adam's Ferry (formerly Johnson's Ferry) was just north of what is now Ware Island. That island was called Johnson's Island in the 19th Century. Adams' Ferry is referenced in the old newspapers, including as early as May 1877 in the Chilton County Courier. In June of 1908 a notice is given that "The old Adams Ferry across the Coosa River, which has been closed up for some time, is again opened up to the public, who can cross at all times by applying to G. D. Mims, Ferryman." By 1924 it is being called Mims' Ferry and Harvey Mims has filed an application in Chilton County to run it.

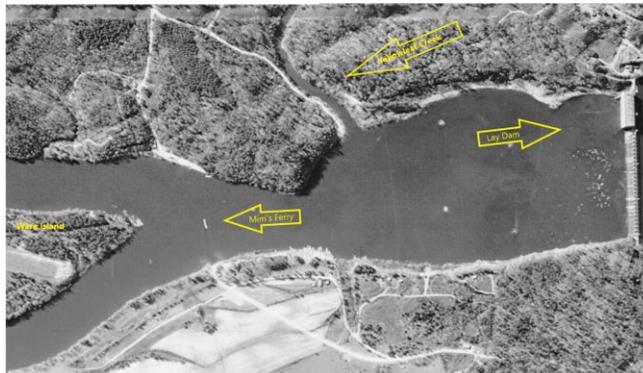
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1889 Coosa River Map Showing Adams' Ferry just below Lay Dam Site (Lay Dam was built at "Lock 12," but here it was Lock 15 before renumbering). Johnson's Island is now Ware Island.

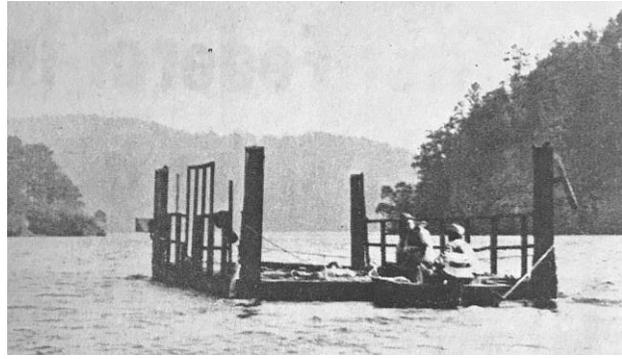


Adams' Ferry, September 5, 1912. Carriage Driver is Master Mechanic Haslam.



1958 Aerial Photo showing Mims' Ferry, Ware Island, Yellow Leaf Creek, and Lay Dam.

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The Mims' Ferry's older ferry is being replaced in 1971. Bill Attaway standing on old ferry watching the new arrive. Second photo, the old ferry "flat" was towed to Higgins' Ferry Park for diving platform.

The Mims' ferry was replaced by a bridge on County Road 55 that was built in 1978-1979.

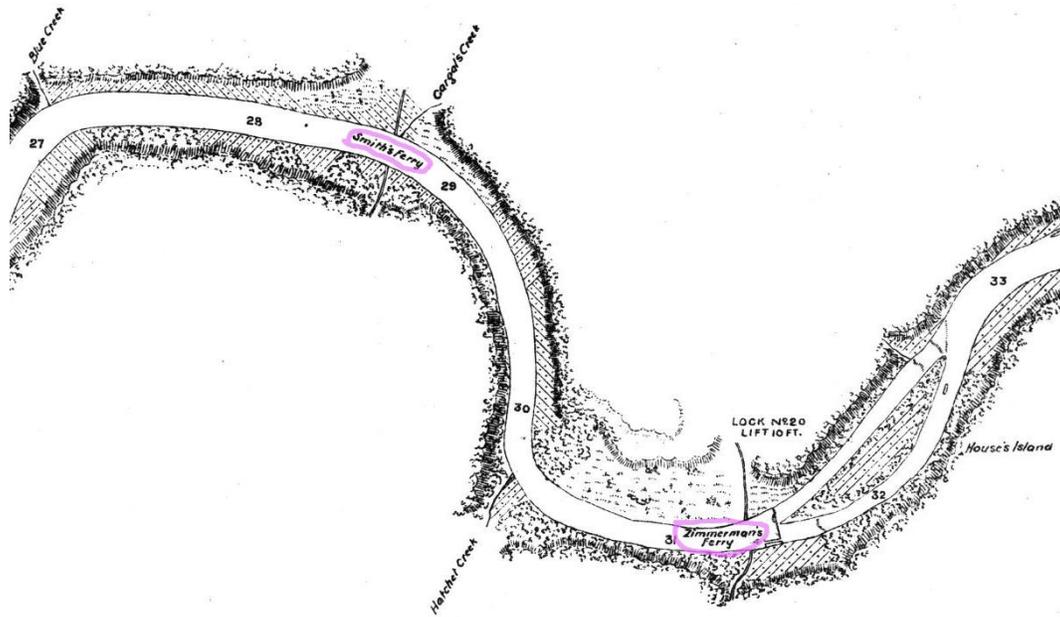


1979 Opening of the County Road 55 Bridge just below Lay Dam, replacing Mims' ferry. Possibly the ferry in the distance.

Zimmerman's Ferry / Higgins' Ferry

From the old river maps in 1889, it appears that Zimmerman's Ferry is in the same place as the modern Higgins' Ferry boat launch. An interesting aside is that there was an island near this location before the dam flooded the area. A traveler from Prattville to Talladega in June 1878 described his trip and crossing on Zimmerman's Ferry in a letter in *The Southern Signal*. In the *Banner*, on August 1st, 1895 a letter talks about seining fish up the "creek" to Zimmerman's Ferry and Sylacauga road. In that 1889 Coosa River survey, it mentions that the banks are "well timbered, but with very little cultivation within about two miles of the banks on either side, excepting a stretch of about three miles, beginning at Zimmerman's Ferry, and even there, on one bank only."

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1889 Coosa River map showing Smith's Ferry near Cargile Creek and Zimmerman's across from, and north of, Hatchet Creek



Ress Driver (later a long-time Clanton fireman and city employee) operating Higgins' Ferry October 11, 1921.

Smith's Ferry

Smith's Ferry was an early ferry just south of Cargile Creek, between Higgins' Ferry and Mitchell Dam (reference the 1889 map image above). Mentions of Smith's Ferry **Road** are the only references to it in the old Union-Banner newspapers, except perhaps the article quoted in the Zimmerman Ferry section above. The Times-Argus of Selma, in 1873, prints a geological article that mentions the mica outcrops between Clanton and Smith's Ferry. The road that ends at that point today comes mostly from the direction of Verbena.

Smith's Ferry must have become unused because in February of 1875 Mr. B. F. Higgins petitioned to establish a ferry at the "Smith old Ferry" on the Coosa River.

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And now comes B. J. Higgins and presents his petition in writing saying that a License ~~Ferry~~ for a Ferry be granted to him at Smith old Ferry on Coosa River and making proof to the Court that he is a citizen of ^{Upper} said County and over the age of 21 years and that he has controll of the Banks on both sides of the River and that there is no other Ferry within two miles of said Smith Ferry on said River it is therefore ordered by the Court that said B. J. Higgins be authorized and Licensed to establish a Ferry across the said Coosa River at Smith old Ferry upon his entering into Bond with good and sufficient security to be approved by the Probate Judge of said ^{County} and payable to the County of Chilton in the sum of seven hundred and fifty dollars and conditioned according law. It is further ordered that said B. J. Higgins be allowed to charge the following rates of Ferryage to wit

for a four horse ^{or} mule team	\$1.00
for a two horse ^{or} team	50
for a one horse ^{or} team or man and horse	25 cts
for a man or woman	10 cts
for a single head	10

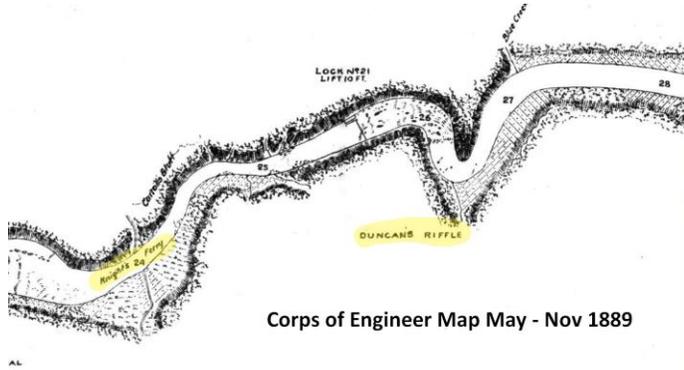
Baker County Commissioner's Court Minutes, February 8, 1875.

There is an article in June 1903 about a group from Concord that held a picnic at a ferry. They went down Smith Ferry Road and Mr. Higgins was running it. Smith's Ferry and Zimmerman's Ferry were not far apart; see the diagram and the section on Smith's Ferry. The article said, in part: "Quite early last Saturday morning the sound of wagons and buggies was heard going, going down the Smith Ferry road on and on. A large number of us went until we reached the ferry. Now for a picnic; the children were laughing and running to and from ..." and it goes on into great detail and one interesting note, the ferry is run by "Mr. Higgins" who allows them to play on the "flat" (ferry boat). In later writings there are also mentions of two ferries – an "upper" and a "lower" Higgins' Ferry. It seems likely that Higgins eventually ran both the old Smith Ferry and the old Zimmerman Ferry at the same time.

There are newspaper mentions of the Smith Ferry Road through at least 1912. The current County Road 59 seems to be the Smith Ferry Road of old – it goes directly from Verbena to the area where the ferry was located.

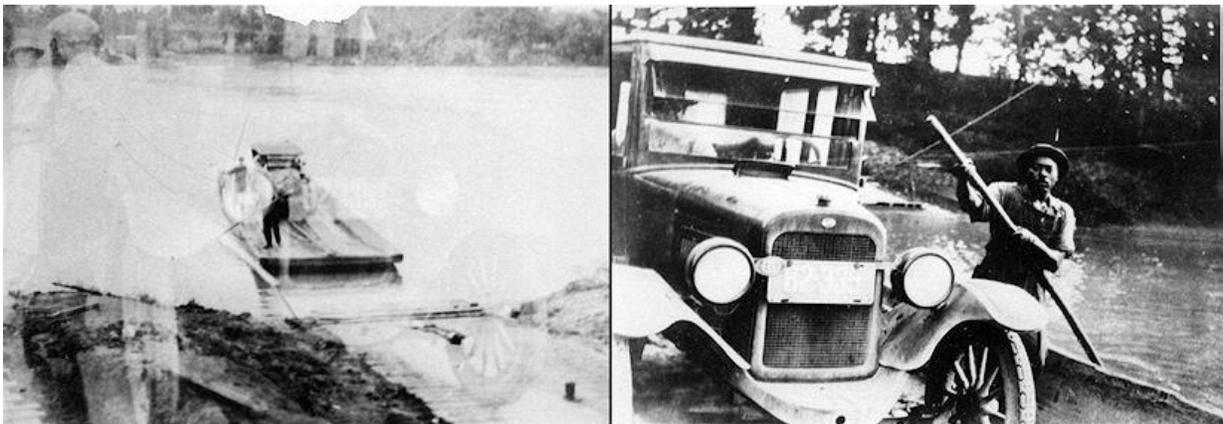
Knight's Ferry / Wyatt's Ferry / Log Cabin Beach Ferry

This ferry was established by Jimmy Knight in 1872. It crossed the Coosa River about a mile or two below Duncan's Riffle (which would later become the site of Mitchell Dam). The ferry boat was powered across the river by rowing and poling.



1889 Coosa River map showing Knight's Ferry location; modern map showing Dam and Bridge location.

In 1892 John Wyatt began running the ferry. In 1910 a cable was erected and the ferry was pulled across by hand.



Knight's Ferry ca 1923-1924 (almost certainly a 1923-24 Willys Overland Model 64 4-door sedan)

After automobiles became popular, John's son Charlie modified a Ford Model T engine to power the ferry. Later Charlie ran the ferry until it closed.

The old road known as Knight's Ferry Road between Verbena and the river was rebuilt while Mitchell Dam was being constructed, the hills and curves were graded out, and it opened for use on August 5, 1921. When Alabama Highway 22 was completed in 1930 the Wyatts moved the ferry to that point, just below the Dam, and it became operational in April 1930. They called it Wyatt's Ferry.

On August 19, 1942 the ferry's operation was taken over by the state, the toll was removed, and the counties acquired the property. In later years it was powered by a V-8 engine driving a paddle wheel. The later ferry itself was built by the Highway Department and was buoyed up by old Navy tanks.

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Knight's/Wyatt's Ferry ca 1947 (left), ca 1950 (right)



Aerial view ca. 1930s-1940s showing Mitchell Dam, Knight's/Wyatt's Ferry and pipeline

After much delay and persuasion, construction of the Highway 22 Bridge over the Coosa River was finally begun. It was later named the Folsom Bridge after Alabama Governor Folsom largely because he was instrumental in securing the funding to have the bridge built.



Chilton County View of the ferry, ca 1950s. Bridge construction is visible in the distant left.

When the bridge opened in December of 1958, the ferry boat was to be moved and placed into operation in Elmore County at the old ferry site near the junction of the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers. At that time there were very few other ferries in operation in Alabama (some were the Mims' Ferry below Lay Dam, one at Wedowee, Randolph County and one at Stephenson, Jackson County).

On the Coosa County side a resort of log cabins and a sandy beach was created and called "Log Cabin Beach." In later years, the ferry was often referred to as the Log Cabin Beach Ferry.

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Coosa County view of the ferry, December 1958 when the new Highway 22 Bridge opened, Mitchell Dam in distance.



1958 Aerial Photo showing the Knight/Wyatt Ferry in relation to the pipeline and Highway 22 Bridge

References

Alabama Journal, May 25, 1956, *New Bridge Over Coosa River to Replace 64-Year-Old Ferry*, by Kate Harris.

Union Banner, many small items in many issues. Too many to list.

Facebook groups “*U know u lived in CLANTON as a kid,*” “*WE GREW UP IN CLANTON, ALABAMA*” and others.

Thomas Blalock’s tireless research in old newspapers and Internet archives.

Baker County Commissioner’s Court Minutes – 1874.