Notes on Road Building in Washington's Time*

By A. N. Johnson, M. W. S. E.

ROAD building, as we know it to-day, did not begin in the United States until after the Revolutionary War. Prior to that time the work that had been done was chiefly in opening and marking trails, at first for pack animals only, later widening these to accommodate wagons. In 1750 routes were authorized to be laid in Central New York and Pennsylvania merely to accommodate pack horses.

In many sections the location of the trails and the roads following them were notable in that they kept to the highlands or the ridges. When it was necessary to cross a stream the road would follow the ridge as far as possible, then make a sudden dip. As a consequence, at the stream crossings the grades were excessive, far more than the general contour of the country would demand. This feature of road location is particularly noticeable in Maryland and Virginia.

The administration of the roads in colonial times was at first in the hands of the individual settlers and later was placed under the auspices of the various towns, plantations or parishes, in general being patterned after the English system, which it might be said, in passing, was at this time about as wretched as it could well be.

The year 1775 saw the beginning of corduroy roads and it is remarked that this was a work "that was done by everybody in particular and by nobody in general." A traveler would become stuck in the mud and would build a short bit of corduroy road to help himself out, which was left there for the benefit of other travelers.

Harriet Martineau remarks that "corduroy roads appear to have made a deep impression upon the imagination of the English, who seem to suppose that all American roads are of corduroy. I can assure you that there is a large variety of American roads * * *

"Lastly, there is the corduroy road, happily of rare occurrence, where if the driver is merciful to the passengers he drives them so as to give them the association of being on the way to a funeral. There are involuntary sobs on each jolt helping the resemblance. Or, if he be in a hurry he shakes them like pills in a box."

Until 1790 there were not to exceed 1,800 miles of post roads in the United States. It was about this period that broken stone or macadamized roads were first built. Successful roads of this construction were in use a number of years before they were introduced into England by Macadam in 1816. Macadam came to England from America in 1783 and was no doubt acquainted with the progress made in the United States in this form of construction.

One of the earliest macadamized roads was in Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia-Lancaster turnpike, which was completed in 1794 at a cost of \$465,000.

The president of this turnpike company issued in 1796 the following notice to the public: "Be it further enacted by the authority of the aforesaid that no wagon or other carriage with wheels, the breadth of whose wheels shall not be four inches, shall not be driven along said road between the first day of December and the first day of May following in any year or years, with a greater weight thereon than 2½ tons."

There is a record of an earlier turnpike in Virginia built in 1785-86. This road connected Alexandria with the lower Shenandoah.¹

The importance of road communication between the Ohio country and the East was early appreciated and was constantly in the mind of Washington, to whom is attributed, more than to anyone else, the attainment of the great highway across the Alleghenys. A connecting link in this route was from Fort Frederick to Fort Cumberland. Fort Frederick was erected in 1756 and the necessity for a short route from Fort Frederick to Fort Cumberland soon became apparent. After the capture of Fort Du Quesne a committee of the Maryland Assembly was ordered to make a report of the cost to connect Fort Frederick and Fort Cumberland by a wagon road. The following extract is taken from this report:

"Your committee have made an Enquiry into the situation of the present wagon road from Fort Frederick

to Fort Cumberland, and are of the opinion that the distance by that road from one fort to the other is at least eighty miles, and find that the wagons which go from one fort to the other are obliged to pass the Potomac River twice, and that for one-third of the year they cannot pass without boats to set them over the river.

"Your committee have also made an Enquiry into the conditions of the ground where a road may most conveniently be made to go altogether upon the North Side of the Potomac, which will not exceed the distance of sixty-two miles at the expense of £250, current money, as may appear from the following estimate, viz.:

"An estimate of the expense of clearing road from Fort Frederick to Fort Cumberland, and the several different stages:

For clearing from—	£	s.	d.
Fort Frederick to Licking Creek, 3½ miles	0	0	0
Licking Creek to Praker's Creek, 8½ miles	12	0	0
Praker's to Sideling Hill Creek, 12 miles	16	0	0
For a bridge over Sideling Hill Creek	60	0	0
Sideling Hill Creek to Fifteen Mile Creek, 4 miles	22	0	0
Fifteen Mile Creek to Town Creek, 15 miles	140	0	0
Town Creek to Col. Cresap's, a good road, 4 miles	0	0	0
Col. Cresap's to Fort Cumberland, wants clearing, 15 miles	0	0	0
	250	0	0

"Your committee are of the opinion that a road through Maryland will contribute much to lessen the expense of carrying provisions and warlike stores from Fort Frederick to Fort Cumberland, and will induce many people to travel and carry on a trade in and through the Province, to and from the back country."

The first road to be built across the mountains was constructed by Washington as far as the Great Meadows. Washington had been placed second in command to Colonel Fry on an expedition sent out by the Governor of Virginia, November 15, 1753, with a letter to the French Commandant of the Fort erected by the French on the Ohio River. Colonel Fry was killed by a fall from his horse, which left the full responsibility of the expedition on Washington, who was barely twenty-one years old. He proceeded to Wills Creek, Maryland, and in his journal he describes this section of the road "the worse road that was ever traveled by man or beast."

From Winchester to Wills Creek, Washington was obliged to build the roads as he went to make them passable for his horse and wagons. Beyond Wills Creek he built a road, the route for which had been worked out by Col. Cresap three years before. This section of the road was known as Braddock's Road.

The writer walked over the portion of this road over Wills Mountain during the summer of 1899 and its course could readily be followed although much overgrown with brush and many trees of considerable size. This was the only road to the West until 1818, being in use for sixty-five years. The National Road opened in 1818 was relocated around the end of Wills Mountain, following the course of Wills Creek and eliminating entirely the steep grades of the route followed by Washington. It is probable that at that time he considered the obstacles to be met in following along the creek greater than going directly over the mountain, which route was through a saddle-back and was the most available of any direct crossing.

The following description, by a writer of the times, of the early work on the National Road begun shortly after Washington's death is of interest:

"That great contractor, Mordecai Cochran, with his immortal Irish brigade—a thousand strong, with their carts, wheelbarrows, picks, shovels and blasting tools, graded the commons and climbed the mountain side, leaving behind them a roadway good enough for an emperor." This road, called the "Chain of the Federal Union," was perhaps nearer to the heart of Washington than any other public enterprise of the time."

At the time of Washington's death the era of turnpike building was well under way, and for nearly forty years thereafter the method by which most of the important road work of the time was financed and administered was by private turnpike companies.

The amount of travel that many of the earlier roads carried was remarkable. On the Mohawk Turnpike from Albany west to Utica, began in 1787 and finished in 1800, a steady stream of settlers flowed westward from New England. Great wagons filled the road. Within 50 miles of Albany there were 52 taverns, but

these could not provide sufficient accommodations.

The construction of the great westerly route from Baltimore through Frederick, Hagerstown and thence to Cumberland, was begun in 1787 by the counties but was turned over to private control in 1804 when the road was completed at the expense of certain Maryland banks. The travel was so great that it proved to be a wonderfully profitable investment, yielding 20 per cent. for several years.

After 100 years we see to-day another era of building long stretches of road, but financed and administered by the States. These roads will add to and strengthen the "Chain of Federal Union" so well begun by Washington.

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¹"Stage Coach and Tavern Days," Earle, p. 282.