

Trade Trailblazer

The National Road Linked Communities and Helped Expand America's Western Frontier

BY CHARLES GERENA

A green truck sits on the sloping dirt shoulder of State Route 144 in western Maryland. It's filled with fresh produce for sale, advertised by a wooden sign sitting in the truck bed. This agricultural entrepreneur hopes to take advantage of the automobiles whizzing by.

Nearly two centuries ago, a different type of traffic occupied this route and several others that led to the National Road, the nation's first multi-state thoroughfare. Farmers loaded their wagons with flour, tobacco, and other commodities, then journeyed for days in the blazing sun to reach merchants in Baltimore. They shared the road with freight wagons loaded with finished goods heading west, stagecoaches, and herds of livestock prodded along by drovers.

side of the Appalachian Mountains. It also stimulated economic growth along the way, from small towns like New Market, Md., to bigger cities like Wheeling, W.Va., providing a glimpse at how interstates would alter 20th century America.

"If you're looking for the heart of American history, it's transportation," says Joseph Weaver, a history professor at Allegany College of Maryland. "You aren't going to get any economic development unless you can get from here to there."

The Atlantic Ocean facilitated most trade during colonial times — goods flowed between Europe and port towns like Baltimore. Some colonies also traded with each other, using dirt roads and navigable rivers.

A few adventurous souls settled the fertile lands west of the Appalachians, but the remoteness of the region and fear of attacks from Native Americans kept most settlers away. Others decided to venture westward when England ceded control over the Northwest Territory at the end of the Revolution in 1783. Millions of acres that encompassed the future states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and the upper portion of Minnesota eventually came under control of the newly formed American government. With few sources of revenue, officials eagerly sold this land to boost federal coffers, according to geographer Karl Raitz at the University of Kentucky.

By the early 1800s, says Raitz, farmers lived in the Scioto River Valley in central Ohio. Little towns also formed along the Ohio River north of Wheeling.

Western settlers felt safer from



NATIONAL ARCHIVES, U.S. BUREAU OF PUBLIC ROADS

The National Road helped travelers negotiate mountainous terrain before the advent of railroads.

When its last stones were laid in 1839, the National Road stretched from Cumberland, Md., to Vandalia, Ill. The 600-mile roadway was complicated and expensive to build, but its economic benefits were undeniable. It helped goods and people flow between established eastern cities like Baltimore and expanding communities on the western

Indian attacks, but trade with the eastern seaboard was still difficult. Only a few narrow dirt trails were available for land-based travel, and they turned treacherous in bad weather.

Instead, it was easier for goods to head south from the Northwest Territory. Schooners traveled downstream on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to the port of New Orleans in Louisiana, which France sold to the United States in 1803. This North-South trade raised concerns that “French merchants in New Orleans were going to make all the money, not the people in East Coast cities,” notes Raitz.

Political pressure from eastern merchants intensified to facilitate commerce across the Appalachians. Settlers in the future state of Ohio also clamored for better transportation access. With the support of President Thomas Jefferson, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin devised a plan for a nationwide system of canals and roads, including a key roadway between America’s eastern seaboard and western frontier.

But some Congressmen opposed spending money on transportation improvements. They worried that federal involvement in road building — which had typically been done by private turnpike companies under state charter — would set a precedent for Washington to intervene in other local matters. At the time, “how much power the government had and how much the states had was still very much up in the air,” notes Joseph Weaver.

Opponents also argued that the government wasn’t authorized to finance roads and canals. They believed the U.S. Constitution allowed for federal funds to further only the “general welfare” of the nation. “Back then, people conceived of roads as going from town to town or from a river port to town,” says Raitz. Consequently, roads were seen as benefiting only individual communities.

Jefferson and other supporters of Gallatin’s plan countered that it was in the national interest to build transportation links because they would help keep the United States united.

After a tax on whiskey led to an infamous rebellion in Pennsylvania’s western counties, it was thought that an east-west roadway would enable government troops to quell future uprisings, as well as defend the frontier from domestic or foreign enemies.

Moreover, farmers contended that settlement of the Northwest Territory couldn’t continue unless there was better access to eastern markets. Jefferson and others envisioned the United States as an agrarian society, so facilitating agricultural development on new soil was important to them. Plus, land sales generated revenue for the federal government.

After much debate, Congress developed a funding mechanism for an east-west roadway. When Ohio joined the Union in 1802, language in the statehood bill set aside five percent of the proceeds from federal land sales in the state for road construction. The legislation was later modified to designate three-fifths of these funds for state roads and the remainder for federal roads to and through Ohio. Similar language in the statehood bills for Indiana and Illinois also earmarked revenue for the National Road’s construction.

The only contentious question that remained was where to put the National Road. Gallatin thought the road should connect a navigable body of water that emptied into the Atlantic Ocean with the Ohio River on the other side of the Appalachians. But there were a couple of routes that would meet this goal, and several cities wanted to be part of the solution.

“Washington, D.C., leaders expected that the proposed National Road would begin in the nation’s capital,” wrote historian Norris Schneider in his 1975 book, *The National Road: Main Street of America*. “The merchants of Richmond, Va., wanted the produce of the western settlers to fill their warehouses. Philadelphia, already a supplier of goods to the Ohio Valley through Pittsburgh, took it for granted that the new road would start in front of Independence Hall.”

Anatomy Of A Road

Congress and project superintendents outlined detailed specifications for the National Road. Most contractors followed these standards fairly closely, but others may have fudged a little due to time and budget constraints.

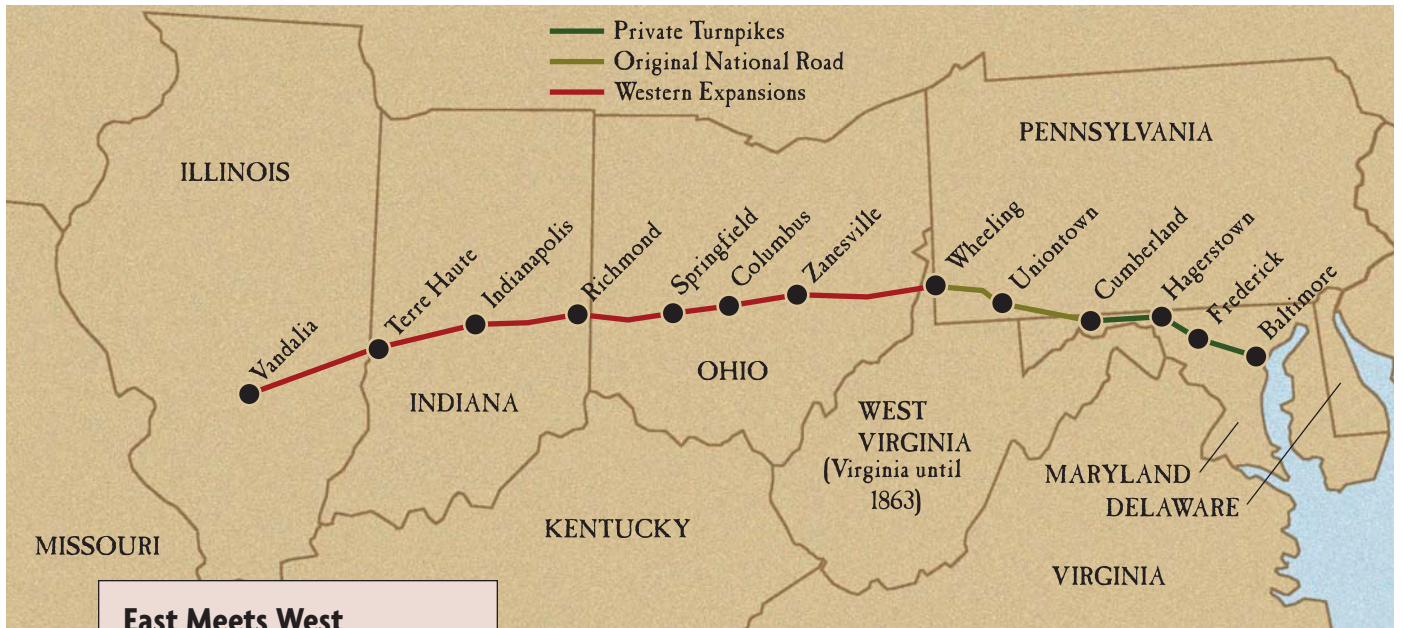
- ▶ The total width of the road was supposed to be “four rods,” or about 66 feet. This is close to the modern specification of 72 feet for a four-lane, controlled access freeway.
- ▶ The roadbed was to measure 30 feet and have a raised center. The side slopes were to be no greater than 30 degrees.
- ▶ The grade of the road couldn’t exceed five degrees above or below the horizon, even over steep hills and through narrow valleys.
- ▶ The roadbed was to consist of two layers: the base layer containing stones small enough to pass through a 7-inch ring, and the top layer consisting of soil mixed with rocks that could fit through a 3-inch ring.
- ▶ Ditches were to be added, when necessary, to carry off rainwater and melted snow.

—CHARLES GERENA

Instead, a growing city in western Maryland named Cumberland was the front-runner to become the National Road’s starting point. Roads already linked the city to Baltimore, which was closer to the Ohio River than Philadelphia or Richmond. Maryland officials agreed to upgrade these trails to support traffic to and from the National Road. Also, government officials planned to make the Potomac River navigable to Cumberland, which would create another route to the National Road.

Most importantly, Cumberland was located where the Potomac and several streams had carved a deep but narrow gap through Wills Mountain. This opening created “one of the few convenient passages through the [Appalachians] between New York and Alabama,” noted historian Billy Joe Peyton of West Virginia University in a 1996 compilation of essays on the National Road edited by Karl Raitz.

In 1805, a Senate committee recommended that the National Road



East Meets West

It would take federal and state road crews decades to piece together a continuous route between Baltimore, Md., and Vandalia, Ill. In the meantime, people and goods began traveling on segments of the National Road and private turnpikes in Maryland before they were open for traffic.

Western Expansions Of National Road – 470 Miles

- ▶ Extension to Zanesville, Ohio, completed 1828-31
- ▶ Extension to Columbus, Ohio, finished in 1833
- ▶ Extensions through Indiana built from 1829 to 1834
- ▶ Final extension to Vandalia, Ill., opened in 1839; roadway completely finished by state government by 1850

Original National Road – 130 Miles

- ▶ Started at Cumberland in 1811 and completed at Wheeling in 1818

Private Turnpikes – 140 Miles

- ▶ Baltimore and Frederick Turnpike, Hagerstown and Boonsboro Turnpike, Cumberland Turnpike, and Bank Road built between Baltimore and Cumberland from 1807 to 1823

Note: Dates and distances are approximate

begin in Cumberland and end at a tributary of the Ohio just below the city of Wheeling. The Senate approved legislation later that year to formalize the road's route and appropriate \$30,000 for an initial survey.

However, it took the House until March 1806 to approve the bill, and only by a vote of 66 to 50. Pennsylvania's representatives voted 13 to 4 against the bill, even though the National Road would go through the southwestern corner of the state, because Philadelphia wasn't the road's eastern terminus. Virginia and South Carolina representatives also were against the measure. "The South was antagonistic because it feared a western road would drain off its population and because Richmond was not included on the route," noted Philip Jordan in his 1948 book titled *The National Road*.

Despite the close vote, construction of the nation's first interstate highway was finally able to move forward.

Actually, the federal government didn't award the first contracts for the National Road until 1811. It took that long to find road builders willing to take on the project.

The scope of the National Road's construction was unprecedented. Workers had to clear a 60-foot swath through forests, dig drainage ditches on either side

of the road, break apart stone into various sizes to form the roadbed, and erect bridges to span creeks. And they had to do it all with hand tools and no earth-moving equipment.

Given these challenges and the distractions of the War of 1812, the National Road didn't reach Wheeling until 1818. By then, its construction cost soared to an average of \$13,000 a mile, more than double initial estimates.

Still, the National Road offered an easier, faster route for commerce. This helped increase the volume of trade from western farmers to eastern merchants. Ships carried agricultural goods on the Ohio River and its tributaries to Wheeling, where their cargo would be offloaded onto Conestoga wagons and sent to Baltimore and other markets to the east. While this created more competition for farmers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, manufacturers of processed food and finished goods in those states could access markets to the west.

Several stagecoach lines also traversed the National Road. They accelerated communications — mail took only 48 hours to travel from Baltimore to Wheeling compared to eight to 10 days previously — in addition to carrying Americans and some immigrants into the western frontier.

Besides improving interstate travel, the National Road increased local property values as development sprung up along its route. Taverns, blacksmith shops, stagecoach stations, and livery stables operated along the road to serve travelers, providing the seeds for small towns throughout western Maryland and West Virginia's northern panhandle. At the same time, the road boosted development in established communities like Cumberland and Wheeling.

Baltimore was a major beneficiary of the National Road, especially after turnpike companies completed four roads that linked the port town and Cumberland by 1823. Maryland officials pressured state-chartered banks to finance the work.

"They told banks that they wouldn't renew their charter unless they came up with the money to fix these roads," describes Weaver. Fortunately, the tolls charged on these turnpikes were able to cover expenses and generate a profit. "It turned out to be one of the best investments that the banks made."

Other communities along the turnpikes also profited from National Road traffic. Jim Higgs, vice president of the New Market Historical Preservation Society Inc., says additional inns and shops opened in New Market to serve westbound travelers who stopped in town before traversing the last 20 miles of the Baltimore-Frederick Turnpike.

"It was a place to bed down," says Higgs, who owns a former tavern in New Market. A wagoneer could also obtain water for his horses and get their shoes fixed at the blacksmith shop. All of these services were available within a block of either side of the turnpike.

Eventually, the National Road and its turnpikes became the "Main Street" for many towns. But even as the road supported trade and migration, it began falling apart.

Congress appropriated money for repairing the National Road, but it couldn't keep up with the continual wear and tear on the road. Wagon wheels constantly cut into the road's surface, while a succession of hooves pounded on it.

Some people even stole rocks from the road for construction projects.

As a result, the entire length of the National Road was never in good condition at one time. This was especially true after workers began extending the road west of Wheeling in 1825. By the time the National Road crossed the mid-sections of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois and ended in the city of Vandalia in 1839, its older sections were in terrible shape.

Some Congressmen proposed enacting tolls on the National Road to fund maintenance costs. But others questioned the constitutionality of such tolls since the road wasn't built on federally owned land. Besides, there was growing interest in building railroads and canals, which were deemed superior to roads.

By 1831, Washington decided to get out of the road business. As sections of the National Road were overhauled for the last time, they were turned over to individual states. Lawmakers cut off federal funding for the road after 1838 and transferred ownership of the road's last section to Illinois in 1856.

Since the states could collect tolls, they immediately converted their sections of the National Road into turnpikes by setting up tollgates. Yet they were restrained from charging tolls high enough to cover maintenance costs due to the availability of alternatives, says Karl Raitz. Locals would build "shunpikes" to bypass toll roads that were considered expensive. By the 1870s, the states had relegated ownership of the road to individual counties.

Still, people and goods continued to travel between Wheeling and Baltimore on the National Road through the 1850s. Most of the road's traffic west of Wheeling was local, especially between capital cities like Columbus, Ohio, and Indianapolis, Ind.

Then, the construction of railroads to the Ohio River made the National Road obsolete. The most famous one was the Baltimore and Ohio, which connected Baltimore to Wheeling by 1852. "The travel time between Baltimore and Wheeling was several weeks by stagecoach. With the railroad, that

time was cut down dramatically," says Albert Feldstein, a regional planner for the Maryland Department of Planning who has written about the National Road's history. As a result, many people took the train to Wheeling, then transferred to wagons and continued on the National Road.

To make matters worse, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was completed in 1850 along the Potomac River. While most canal boats carried coal, they also offered an alternative route for produce between Cumberland and communities on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia.

The National Road became popular again around the turn of the 20th century as the railroads became congested and automobile travel emerged. Congress provided federal money in the 1920s to incorporate parts of the road and the turnpikes between Baltimore and Cumberland into one of the nation's first new highways, U.S. Route 40. Once again, the road stimulated the growth of restaurants and hotels.

Today, parts of the National Road are designated as scenic byways in states like Maryland and West Virginia. In June 2002, the Federal Highway Administration named it an "All-American Road." With these designations, small communities like New Market hope to take advantage of a new type of traffic — tourists who want to take a weekend drive or to catch a glimpse of transportation history.

"We have been hosting travelers for 200 years, and we're still doing it," says Jim Higgs. **RF**

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