

Conn. Route 8 Realignment in 1966

Here is a story that I have never seen in print, and it is certainly one of considerable magnitude. It concerns the alignment of Conn. Route 8 as it passes Colebrook River Lake and proceeds northward into Massachusetts. It was never intended to follow the present alignment, and as you drive along its length, you are witnessing the result of a major snafu of highway engineers. Here is what happened:

In 1955 when the Metropolitan Water Commission completed construction of the Hogback Dam, since renamed the Goodwin Dam, it was noted that this dam was intended to hold back a pool of water, with all excess water flowing over the top of the dam. The shortcomings of this design was made crystal clear in August of that year when this area was visited by the remnants of a hurricane that caused widespread devastation, and forever after would be known as the Flood of 1955.

The Hogback Dam was constructed further downstream in Hartland, with a water elevation of 641 feet above sea level. This created a pool of water that backed up to approximately where the iron bridge is located. This was several hundred yards short of the Massachusetts state line. The realignment of Conn. Route 8 from its original location east of the river involved repositioning it on the west side. This road is the one used for recreational purposes nowadays when the water level is low enough to permit.

The Army Corps of Engineers saw an immediate need for a dam having flood control capabilities, and plans were drawn up to construct the present Colebrook River Dam. This dam dwarfs the Hogback Dam, and has a pool elevation of 761 feet, causing it to flood back as far as the site of the bridge carrying Route 8 across the West Branch of the Farmington a short distance downstream from New Boston, some two and a half miles north of the state line.

The creation of the dam and relocation of Route 8 were done separately with the highway being done under separate contracts with both states.

While this was going on, I was employed as information editor by Hammond Inc., a major map company located in New Jersey. One facet of my job was to keep current with major construction projects that would cause realignments of existing highways. The Colebrook River project was of primary interest to me, of course, especially as there were initially three proposed realignments for Route 8 in Colebrook.

One proposal had the route, as a limited access highway, coming northward from Winsted beginning at the present junction of the new Route 8 and U.S. Route 44. From this intersection Route 8 was to keep going straight northward over Wallens Hill and continue along the upland that would cross first Eno Hill, then the West Branch directly over the top of the Colebrook River Dam and continue in a more or less straight line along the upland in Colebrook just west of the Hartland line, continue along the same upland area, crossing Route 57 in Tolland, Mass. east of where it drops suddenly down the mountain to the village of New Boston, then remain on the same general course northward until it intersected with the Mass Pike in the town of Becket.

That was plan "A". Plan "B" called for the alignment as it appears today, with the road following along the river valley. Plan "C" called for the relocation considerably west of the river. It would have left Wallens Hill approximately where Route 20 branches off from Route 8 over a fairly high bridge that would carry it onto the upland seen to your left as you drive north along Route 8 in Robertsville. It was then to cross

Sandy Brook in the general vicinity of the two bridges just west of Tom Bell's lumber mill. That would place the proposed realignment in the middle of Algonquin State Forest where it was to continue generally along Chapin Road, Moses Road and Simons Pond Road and so on through Sandisfield where it would cross Route 57 in West New Boston and continue northward until it intersected the Mass Pike in Becket.

As our family home was located at the intersection of Beech Hill and Moses Roads, you can imagine the consternation with which we viewed this third proposal; consequently I kept close tabs on the developing scenario as it wound its way through first the State, then the Federal Government legislatures. Federal funds paid for seventy-five percent of the cost of the highway relocation; therefore an act of Congress was required to grant these funds. Eventually the announcement was made that the final alignment had been determined; it was to be plan "A".

I immediately notified my parents, but no sooner had I done so than my father called me up to announce that there was a great deal of blasting going on down at the River on the west side, and there had obviously been a change in plans. I remained adamant; there had been no changes made on the alignment of Route 8. It didn't make for a strong argument however when I stood at the foot of Beech Hill and watched the new highway take place. I even went so far as to bring all of the Federal charts and graphs up from New Jersey with me to show my father that I was right. No matter – seeing is believing, and somehow I was wrong.

All the while Connecticut worked on their section of highway, Massachusetts was doing nothing. As a matter of fact, when our segment was complete, including the lines down the middle, Massachusetts hadn't begun cutting trees. It was at this point that an investigation was begun. Connecticut, for some unknown reason had chosen an alignment different from the approved one. Why there was no communication between the two states is beyond me, but Massachusetts, realizing something wasn't right, sat tight until the matter should be rectified, otherwise they would not be eligible for Federal funds.

There were hearings held in Hartford as well as in Washington, which eventually proved that no one had benefited from the error and that it was simply a case of a major blunder on the part of the highway engineers that never was discovered until the job was completed.

Congress then had to negate the original bill and fund plan "B", at which point Massachusetts began their end, although they were very vocal about the fact that it made far more sense to have their section on the uplands along the east side of the river.

Years went by, and I never came across anyone who had knowledge of this story. Really there was no reason to talk about it. Then in the summer of 2002, while mentioning to my neighbor Laurel Saramak, who lives on Moses Road, that she had come very close to living at the edge of a limited access highway right up here on Beech Hill. She floored me with "I know, my father, Albert DiMeo, had been an engineer on that job, and he has been telling us that story for years! He still has a set of aerial photos of the entire Colebrook section of that road while it was under construction."

I think both of us were relieved to talk to someone else with knowledge of the fiasco, as over the years, we had begun to doubt the truth of our own recollections.