

Early Turnpike Roads

The turnpike between Hartford and Albany formed, with the Connecticut River, the shortest and easiest route from the Hudson River to the Eastern seaboard. No other road leading over the mountain barrier between New York and New England was more traveled. It also passed through a thinly settled region where, in striking contrast to its busy commercial life, primitive customs remained in force until late into the nineteenth century. Long after the railroads had brought the river communities in touch with the seaport cities, long after the Boston and Albany system had brought civilization to Berkshire and western New England, the old turnpike remained the chief line of travel for the rural folks of southwestern Massachusetts and northwestern Connecticut, and some of its offshoots are today their only outlet to the outside world, and yet the turnpike itself replaced a more ancient road that passed out of existence two hundred years ago; the Old North Road. For forty years it served as the main link between the eastern and western colonies. Over its length passed part of the military forces that took Crown Point and Ticonderoga, and in a reverse direction, remnants of Burgoyne's captured army on their way from the fields of Saratoga to imprisonment in the Boston area.

As civilization slowly crept westward out of the Connecticut Valley, the need for a better highway became immediately apparent, but the formidable challenges presented by the topography deferred the construction of the turnpike until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The ninety-seven miles of its length presented almost every challenge known to engineering. Steep hillsides were to be scaled, causeways had to be laid across wide meadows subject to periodic flooding, rivers were to be bridged, and cuttings had to be made on steep slopes along the narrow courses of turbulent streams.

No sooner had construction of this turnpike begun shortly after 1798, than its builders were confronted by the unexpected competition of a rival road. The following notice appeared in the September 16, 1799 *Connecticut Courant*:

To the Public:

"All persons desiring to encourage a Turn Pike Road from New Hartford to Massachusetts line up Farmington river are requested to meet at Mr. John Burr's tavern in Colebrook on the fourth Monday of Sept. inst., at 12 o'clock on said day to concert measures to carry said object into effect. As this route will open a passage to the County of Berkshire and the State of Vermont at least twelve miles nearer than the present established turnpike [through a level valley], and as there is no doubt that it will be immediately carried through the State of Massachusetts, it is presumed that a sufficient number will appear to promote so necessary an undertaking."

The result of this meeting was the incorporation of the Farmington River Turnpike Company within a year of the Greenwoods Company. Unlike the Old North Road, the two turnpikes that succeeded it were kept in good repair. Crooked ways were straightened, grades were reduced, new bridges built. The whole line was divided into sections, each of which was placed in the hands of a contractor, from whom a system of rigid inspection exacted the highest grade of work. A wholesome spirit of rivalry between the different section bosses kept them constantly on the alert against damage by storm or traveler. A story survives about the man who oversaw the section passing through Avon. This gentleman, by the name of Woodford, was noted for the excellent condition of his section. "One time," recounted an old-timer, "I saw Woodford hopping'

mad. There was a teamster's horses got tired goin' up the mounting and he had to stop every little while to let them rest. He kept blocking the rear wheel with little stones no bigger'n your fist, and once when he started up he forgot to throw one of them aside. Pretty soon 'long comes Woodford runnin' up the hill like mad. 'Stop you!' he yells. 'Block your wagon and go back and throw that stun out o' the way, and if you ever do it again I'll have you 'rested,' he says."

The fare between Hartford and Albany was \$5.00. In summer the start was made from either end at 2 A. M., and the advertisements promised to put the patron through "in time to dine and take outgoing stages of other lines." Frequently, however, this was impossible. During the spring mud season, and during the worst of winter storms, the trip could take three days. The schedule time was ten miles an hour and the change houses stood this distance apart. On approaching a station, a horn was sounded and a new driver and fresh horses succeeded. To maintain this average pace over some portions of the road, a breakneck speed down hill was required to compensate for slow up-hill progress. A story was told of a frightened passenger, who, after a terrible jolting down the western side of Talcott Mtn. [Avon Mtn.], stuck his head out of the window and beckoned to the driver. "My friend," he asked earnestly, "be you goin' down any further? Because if you air, I'm goin' to get out right here. I want to stay on the outside of the earth a leetle longer!"

Another traveler, who, to relieve the horses, had toiled on foot up Wallens Hill in Barkhamsted, entered the hill-top inn and asked, hat in hand, if the Lord was in. "For, he explained, "it seems to me we've come high enough to find him,"

In the prosperous days of the road, the tollgate was a favorite lounging place for the people of the immediate neighborhood. The collector's house was built so as to arch over the road and a door on one side of this shed opened to the office from which windows looking up and down the line. Within this room the gatekeeper and his guests huddled around the fireplace in winter; in pleasant weather they sat on the benches outside. On summer evenings the young fellows gathered at this center to learn the doings of the great outside world. The country folk of Massachusetts and Connecticut exacted contributions of turnpike rumors from every passing traveler while the toll keeper exacted coins from the driver. This information quite often preceded that of the local weekly newspaper.

As late as one hundred years ago a person standing at the Winsted railroad station could see a lumbering old ark bearing the inscription "Winsted, Colebrook and Sandisfield." It might have been driven by a stoop-shouldered old driver or a dashing, swearing, ranting young fellow with a wink for every pretty girl he met and a string of oaths for every wagon that blocked the highway before him; the day of the "Sunday driver" did not commence with the coming of the auto!