THE LITTLE PORTAGE

Map prepared with the assistance of Paul A. W. Wallace
THE LITTLE PORTAGE TRAIL

By Marie Kathern Nuschke*

Two portages formerly connected the waters of Sinnamahoning Creek (a tributary of the West Branch of the Susquehanna) with the waters of the upper Allegheny. The long one, known as the Big Portage, ran from Shippen (Emporium Junction) via Forest House on the Divide to Canoe Place (Port Allegany). The other, the Little Portage, which was several miles shorter than its mate, ran from Costello, which is situated at the confluence of Freeman Run and a branch of the First Fork of the Sinnamahoning, to Forest House. After the two portages met on the Divide, the road ran beside the little brook called Portage Creek for eleven miles, to Canoe Place and the Allegheny River. The folks in little Canoe Place once were busy cutting pine logs for canoes and catamarans for the emigrants coming in large numbers who were prepared to follow the river to the West.

It is the purpose of this paper to tell what the writer, who spent her early life at Austin in the Freeman Run Valley, has learned from the old-timers about the Little Portage and the manner in which it was used by both Indians and settlers who traveled it.

There is no question but what the Indians knew the value of the Little Portage long before the white man saw it. The First Fork of the Sinnamahoning was navigable for a longer distance than the river on the other side of the mountain from Sinnamahoning to Shippen. The Little Portage was not less than five miles shorter than the Big. It is logical to assume that neither white man nor Indian who used a canoe would have preferred to carry the canoe five miles farther than necessary.

William Carson was the first settler in the Freeman Run Valley. His land was one mile below the southern end of the Little Portage Trail. First he built a cabin for his family. Then he built a log gristmill that he named “Settler’s Hope.” A year later, Mrs. Nuschke contributed another chapter of Pennsylvania mountain lore, “Hicks, Fighters, and Clog Dancers,” to the October, 1952, issue of this journal.

*Spelled Corson, Carsen, Kernsain, and Cursain on old papers.
or two later, C. C. Burdette, a Vermont-born gentleman who came alone into the Valley, rolled up his first cabin near the point where the Little Portage Trail ascended the mountain. He was Carson's nearest neighbor. In later years, Burdette often told friends that when living in that cabin at one time he saw not less than fifty Indians (men, women, and children) with their canoes and belongings come up the river and go over the Trail.²

We do not know the exact date when the Little Portage Trail was turned into a road, but the connecting link of the road, known as the Ridge Road, between it and the New York State line was completed in 1823.

It was laid out and chopped by Nathan Turner. It left the Jersey Shore Pike two miles south of Lymansville (Ladona) on the hill of the Frank Howland farm, then crossed the Palmer farm near the big spring, then crossed the present Littlefield and Weiss farms to the ridge across from the Sterling Devans farm (now Lewis Duell). Then it followed the ridge between Little Moore’s Run and the South Woods Branch of the Sinnamahoning and went down the Eleven Mile Hollow for a distance of two miles to the Rees³ settlement near the Rees cemetery one half mile above the junction of the South Woods Branch and the Ayers Hill Branch. The road has not been used since about 1850.⁴

The wagon trains of the New York State people took a route to Dansville, New York, on to White’s Corners and southward, where it joined the old Ridge Road that took them straight to the Little Portage.

In 1830, “due to the increase in travelers,” Carson built Saint’s Rest Inn. However, his neighbor Eli Rees on the South Fork of the stream had the advantage of seeing the New York State travelers first. When very tired, they all stopped at the Rees place and the overflow went to the cabin of their daughter Maryanna Rees Gillispie, located on an adjoining piece of land. If both

² Information from Mae Austin Weigand, Kenyon Everett, and Hannah Wales Austin who knew him in later years.
³ Eli Rees brought his family from Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1830 and settled two or three miles farther north on the road that led to Carson’s and the Little Portage.
places became crowded, the surplus went on to Saint’s Rest Inn. The inn became famous for its hospitality and good cheer. Years later sportsmen called it “Paradise.” In time it became the regular stagecoach stop.

William Rees told the writer that long after the Ridge Road had lost its identity, his family used it as a short cut to Coudersport.

There were several reasons that caused the great trek of pioneers to cross the Alleghenies into Ohio and Kentucky. Man loves adventure, and many people had an urge to explore the West and find a place to their liking where they could build a home and start a new life. But a very important reason was the fact that following the Revolution the newly independent government, not having much money, paid many of the veterans of the war in land in the Midwest.

The people in the New England States, with few exceptions, followed the southern route used by General Rufus Putnam, through Easton, Reading, Harris Ferry (Harrisburg), over the mountains at Bedford to the Youghiogheny (always spoken of as the “Yo”) into the West. Until 1792, northern Ohio was thickly populated with hostile Indians of various tribes whose headquarters were at Sandusky. It was here that the big powwows were held, and the war paths led in all directions. When the Minsies and Shawnees were first forced out of their home near Muncy, Pennsylvania, by the whites, who came in large numbers after the northern lands on the West Branch had been bought from the Indians, they went into Ohio and joined the hostile tribes already there. The bloody war that followed was unprecedented in early Ohioan history. Anthony Wayne said that he “quieted” the Indians in 1794, but it took several years more to force them to submit to the white man’s terms.

When the first road was opened from Buffalo to Cleveland in 1795, Cleveland was a small trading post with a very few houses. There were no other roads leading from it in any direction. Although the Indians were out of Indiana in 1811, and out of Illinois in 1833, “it was the year 1841 before the last remnant of Indians migrated” from Ohio. Until 1850, nine years after the last Indian emigration from northern Ohio, New York State pioneers moving

west used the Little Portage Trail through Potter County, Pennsylvania, to set themselves on a route that would avoid the dangerous ground in northern Ohio.

According to one Port Allegany historian, "John Keating and party, accompanied by one Francis King, a surveyor, then recently emigrated from London, England, came into northern Pennsylvania by the Susquehanna River to Jersey Shore in the spring of 1798, loaded their canoes and proceeded as far as Shippen. They cut a bridle path through the forests over the hill to this place... following very nearly the present Pennsylvania Railroad route."

When Victor Beebe, the Potter County historian, tells of this same incident, he says the main purpose of this particular trip by Francis King was "to open up a road from that point [Shippen] to the present site of Port Allegany for the use of the settlers en route to what was then the West... This road was not the one used by the early settlers." Beebe did not tell which road they used.

If the Big Portage was in such bad condition when Francis King found it that he had to "cut a bridle path through the forests over the hill [Divide]" to Canoe Place, it proves that the road had little value. Shorter routes had been opened to the West by the settlers crossing Pennsylvania into Ohio. Still later, after 1834, travelers crossing through central Pennsylvania generally went over the portage at Hollidaysburg, and although it was a longer portage than the Shippen crossing, hundreds of miles were saved to the travelers. In the Sesquicentennial edition in 1954, the Potter County Journal described the Potter County alternative to Francis King's "The Big Portage" route as the "Little Portage Trail."

For hundreds of years, the Indians had traveled single file on the mountain trails, thus wearing them down to a twelve-inch to eighteen-inch width and a twelve-inch depth. The writer's father, Delphis Brisbois, who saw the top of every mountain ridge in the area before the hard roads were made, said that deep, narrow paths ran on the top of every mountain. Sometimes a narrower

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path would lead off to the right or the left, and, if followed, usually led to a spring.

It is proper that we should know something more about the road, carts, wagons, and people that went over the Trail in this area.

It was not uncommon for two people to ride one horse when traveling. If a horse accidentally stepped out of the deep trail, it could easily fall and injure itself as well as the rider. Indians and white men had used horses on the Trail, but when whole families started for the West, both carts and wagons were used and the Trail had to be widened.

The Indian trails were important since they steered the white man to the very places where he wanted to settle. They always led to fine springs and fast became the connecting links between the far-flung settlements.

At first, the oxcarts could not travel faster than one mile per hour. Four oxen had to be used on a heavy wagon. Later when the trails were widened, they were called "cartways." They were still so rough that when the first stages appeared on them, the driver had to show skill in order not to be upset. Many times when one of the wheels fell into a bad rut, the driver would call sharply, "Gentlemen to the right," or "Gentlemen to the left," as the case might be. In later years stages carrying passengers never went over the entire length of the Little Portage Trail but only a five- or six-mile stretch of it from Forest House to the top of Cowley Hill, after the road had been completed to the E. O. Austin Farm in the Freeman Run Valley.

Charles Haglund of Costello, one of the first persons to ride on that stage from Forest House down into the Valley, told the writer that the virgin forest had not been cut and the trees were so huge and the foliage so dense that you could not see the sky. It was like riding on open land in late evening.

Mrs. Ralph Austin (formerly Miss Hannah Wales) told the writer that when she arrived at Forest House, she decided to walk to Austin. It was in early summer. Not once did she think of the bobcats, bears, and panthers that were in the forest, but she was happy looking at the carpet of flowers on the ground as far as the eye could reach. She discovered that many were exquisite blooms that she had never seen before in her life.
The Little Portage Trail, in its full length, must have been a delightful road to travel. Oh, for more detailed descriptions!

The oxcarts and wagons were all constructed with ropes called “sidestays,” which were fastened to the upper side of the vehicle by iron rings or clamps so that they could be pulled by the men walking beside them if they started to tip.

There has been much discussion as to whether it was easier to ascend a mountain than to descend it. To ascend, the oxen were directly responsible for the success of the long, hard pull. Horses were rarely used to pull the wagons. Usually a man acted as scout and rode ahead to note the condition of the road or perhaps choose a camp site for the night.

To descend the mountain, the heavily loaded wagon or cart was held back either by putting a small tree trunk through the spokes of the hind wheels to act as a brake, or by fastening a good sized tree with branches to the back of the wagon to hold it back. If there were children in the party, they insisted upon the latter method, because then they were privileged to stand on the tree as they slid down the road, which was great fun. Many people living today will remember that the hill at Forest House was so steep that it took many “thank-you-mums” to get an ordinary horse and buggy to the foot of the hill, and the slanting ledges in the road were welcome places for a tired horse to rest when ascending the hill.

The Little Portage was precipitous at both ends, but the entire road on top of the mountain was on reasonably flat land. The only big bend in the Trail was at the head of Cove Hollow, later known as Horn Hollow. The Trail left the flat on land later owned by the Brownlees and ascended the mountain on the Freeman Run side of the Valley. It ran from south to north to the Divide. At a spot called Beaver Meadows on Cowley Hill, a path ran west down the mountain to Sizerville and Big Elk Lick. Only one other path left the Trail. It was a steep one down the mountain across the land known in later years as Walker’s Hollow, to a big mineral spring at the base of the mountain in the Freeman Run Valley. Evidently the Indians liked that water. In later years, Austin people usually took that path from the spring to the Trail, where they took the path to Big Elk Lick (Gardeau) to buy salt from a father and son who had a good business furnishing the com-
modity to all the settlers for miles around. It was a tiresome walk but many miles were saved.

A heavily loaded wagon was a noisy conveyance. Hubs and axles on carts and wagons squeaked all the time when not greased with lard, so a bucket of grease swung under every vehicle and was used often. Many a practical housewife, unwilling to leave all her precious utensils behind, fastened a number of pails, kettles and other articles to the covered top of the wagon, and every jolt on the road caused a noisy clamor that could not be stopped by the grease pot.

When the travelers reached an inn, cabin, or camp site, where they could spend the night, the men folks pulled out the bow pins and loosened the bows which held the heavy yokes on the necks of the oxen. They would milk the cows, rub down the horses, feed and water the oxen and any other stock with them and then hobble all of them for the night.

All the carts and wagons carried straw ticks and blankets which were used no matter where they slept—in the inn, on the floor of a cabin, or out of doors in or under the wagons. Not always was there sufficient food at a cabin or inn for a large party, so the travelers had to be ready to build a campfire and do their own cooking if necessary. Game was plentiful along the route, so there was always tasty meat or fowl stew prepared in a large iron kettle. This was served with thin corn cakes and plenty of milk.

The people on the Ridge Road at Reesville and North Wharton had little or no contact with the outside world and depended upon the travelers to keep them informed. It was an unwritten law that every traveler should stop at each cabin and tell everything he knew, especially the late national news. What excitement there must have been with the arrival of each party!

Mountain travel had some disadvantages, but it also had its advantages since there had to be very little bridge building and travelers were content to ford streams when it became necessary to come down into the valleys. The first settlers in the Austin section of Potter County did little traveling alone on the trails unless absolutely necessary since many wild beasts roamed through the dense forest.²

² All information re the travelers on the Little Portage came from descend-ants of Eli Rees and William Carson, i.e., Mabel Putnam Phelps, William Rees and Norman Young.
It is difficult to conceive why it took so long to get a good road from central New York State through northern Ohio after the Indians had left.

Although the Erie Canal was finished in 1825, the writer has seen an 1827 New York State map that showed the little town of Painted Post in the south central part of the state, a frontier town that had a vast wilderness between it and the village of Erie, which had been settled by the French who came to the site by the lake route. The map also showed a tiny unnamed settlement on the southeastern tip of Chautauqua Lake (Jamestown). Northern Pennsylvania from the Susquehanna River to the Ohio boundary was an uninhabited wilderness except for Indians.

A few years after the Erie Canal was built, someone discovered that wagon trains could follow the canal to Buffalo and then travel along the shores of Lake Erie to the site of the present city of Westfield, where they came south to Chautauqua Lake and followed it to the settlement now known as Jamestown. They then had a short route to Conewango Creek that flowed south into the Allegheny River that led them to Pittsburgh.

This was a popular route but it did not stop travel over the Little Portage. A study of tales passed on by travelers to friends and relatives years ago proves that they still thought they had a shorter route to the West when they came south through Potter County and crossed the Little Portage to the Allegheny than if they went north to the canal and followed it to Buffalo, whence they had to travel many miles in a southeasterly direction to reach the Allegheny.

It would be interesting to know how they finally discovered that the Allegheny River flowed north from Canoe Place to the present sites of Olean and Salamanca in New York State before it started south to the Pennsylvania line and continued to flow south to Pittsburgh.

The last information that the writer was able to get about the Little Portage came from a descendant of Dr. Thomas Siveter, a native of London, who moved to Cayuga, New York, and later traveled by covered wagon over the Portage in 1849 on his way to southern Ohio. Later he became one of the founders of the town of Salem, Iowa. Since the Little Portage Trail was not used after 1850, Dr. Siveter and his family may have been among the last persons to travel over it.
Fred W. Garretson, who lived in the Freeman Run Valley as early as 1884, has told the writer, "As a boy of eleven years, I climbed the mountain directly in front of our home (now the location of the Veterans of Foreign Wars property) with a Mr. Davis and walked its entire length twice to Forest House. Years later, after we moved into the West and I met Dr. Siveter, I felt very proud when he told about his trip over the Portage to think that I had walked upon that trail when living in old Austin. Although the trail had not been used for thirty or more years, we could still see the ruts left by the oxcarts and wagons."

History says that the old Ridge Road went out of existence about 1850, which coincides with the date E. O. Austin gave for the cessation of travel on the Little Portage. This colorful trail was never to be used again; it had served its purpose.