

EXHIBIT REVIEW

THE PENNSYLVANIA TURNPIKE, THE NATION'S FIRST SUPERHIGHWAY AT THE STATE MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA

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The Pennsylvania Turnpike is one of the most significant highways of the twentieth century. It proved so popular it was expanded across the state after World War II. Its design was both audacious and revolutionary: the nation's first high-speed, long distance highway completely free of any at-grade crossings for its entire 160-mile length, with long entrance and exit ramps, super-elevated curves meant to be taken at high speeds, and a low grade despite crossing through the steepest part of Pennsylvania. And yet, the Pennsylvania Turnpike receives comparatively little attention in histories of infrastructure improvements made in the United States to accommodate the automobile and enhance the age of personal high-speed transportation that the auto initiated. Much scholarly work focuses on the development of the Interstate Highway System, inaugurated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s. But the Pennsylvania Turnpike played a key role in the ultimate development of that system, demonstrating that long-distance, high-speed, limited-access automobile traffic was both possible and desirable and igniting a debate about whether such highways should be free to users or paid by tolls. Until recently, even the Hall of Transportation at the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, meant to celebrate Pennsylvania's role in transportation, gave the turnpike only perfunctory coverage.

That changed October 1, 2015, when the State Museum opened a new permanent exhibit, *The Pennsylvania Turnpike, the Nation's First Superhighway*, exactly seventy-five years to the day the turnpike opened in 1940. The bright, welcoming exhibit provides a very good overview on the turnpike, its construction, and the engineering challenges the superhighway had to

overcome, as well as its continued role as a major east-west transportation artery across Pennsylvania.

Scholars of transportation history may have been slow to grasp the historical significance of the turnpike, but the same was not the case with the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, the quasi-governmental organization that conceived of, planned, and built the superhighway. The commission seems to have been consciously aware of the groundbreaking nature of what it was building from the very beginning and, as a result, they documented and celebrated their amazing new highway in breathtaking detail. This greatly benefits the State Museum's exhibit, which apparently had a nearly inexhaustible cache of turnpike-related materials from which to choose—photographs, booklets, pamphlets, and magazines; restaurant menus, highway maps, postcards, and souvenirs of all kinds; road signs, construction paraphernalia, electronic maps and other equipment from command centers and regional offices; and videos, videos, videos, taken during construction, shortly after the road opened, on major anniversaries, and just because. The State Museum and its sister agency, the State Archives, received this material from the Turnpike Commission itself in the late 1990s.

A fraction of this material has been imaginatively and accessibly arranged by Curator Curt Miner and his staff to tell the turnpike's story in a way that will engage visitors of all ages. Children will find many buttons to push and videos to watch, while the most discriminating collector of turnpike memorabilia may discover some hidden treasure he or she didn't know existed. Along the way, a visitor will learn a great deal about the turnpike and its important role in transportation history. A visitor can easily go through the exhibit in twenty minutes or stay for a longer period of time to absorb more of the information.

The exhibit begins with a very concise opening panel that succinctly explains the reasons for the turnpike's existence: a better east-west route across the rugged central section of Pennsylvania in a bid to speed travel time between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia (although it initially went to neither of those places). Visitors can then move at their own pace through the compact exhibit. For those wanting details, there are easy-to-read interpretive labels with a good mix of text and images. For those so inclined, there's a great deal of information to be had, without ever feeling overwhelmed by dense, wordy panels. The same is true of the artifact and photograph labels—the material

is presented succinctly—with enough information for casual visitors when something has caught their eye, but with more detail for those wanting to dig a little deeper.

One fascinating aspect of the exhibit is the plethora of turnpike material culture presented. The commission produced a wide array of things emblazoned with the words “Pennsylvania Turnpike” and the commission logo: pennants, plates, matchbooks, postcards, decks of cards, flatware, cups and saucers, glasses, and all sorts of bric-a-brac. Much of it is here, artfully laid out. There’s even a song, “Pennsylvania Turnpike, I Love You,” by Dick Todd and the Appalachian Wildcats. It’s a reminder that the turnpike was not just a transportation artery; during its formative years it was also a tourist attraction that captivated the imagination of the traveling public by its very newness and innovative design. The artifacts and song present this part of the turnpike’s story in a way that words and labels can’t.

The exhibit just as artfully uses much larger artifacts to tell other portions of the turnpike’s story. There’s an electronic map used by the commission between 1973 and 1988 to locate trouble on the turnpike and alert the public. There’s an enlargement of a travel map that shows the turnpike and its proximity to major Pennsylvania tourist attractions. Also displayed is a personal favorite, a large road sign with a menacing pointed index finger and the words “YOU Slow Down.” The sign sat for years outside of Breezewood in Bedford County and was seen by everyone traveling between the western section of the turnpike and the Baltimore and Washington areas.

The crown jewel of artifacts, though, is probably the original turnpike tollbooth. The turnpike continues to serve as a major, heavily traveled East Coast highway and, as a consequence, it is constantly being updated and renewed, to increase safety and to improve operating efficiency. The tollbooths at the turnpike’s interchanges have been replaced at least twice during the turnpike’s seventy-five-year history, so it’s extremely difficult to find an original one. The State Museum did, however. And it’s not just an original tollbooth, it is specifically the one from the Irwin interchange, the original western terminus of the turnpike. The narrow, glass and steel panel booth nicely shows the simplicity of the early design and also the human element of the superhighway: the booth features a statue of a smiling, uniformed toll-taker leaning out to accept payment from a turnpike patron. Outside of the booth is a period Packard automobile facing a screen showing one of

the many videos available in the exhibit. This one is a commission-produced film taken from a car passing through a tollbooth and beginning a trip on the turnpike. It's a particularly nice touch.

When the turnpike was constructed, the commission garnered a great deal of publicity by using the never-finished South Pennsylvania Railroad and its seven uncompleted tunnels for much of the right-of-way. One of the earliest nicknames of the turnpike, in fact, was "The Tunnel Highway," and this aspect of its engineering captured the public's fancy. The exhibit acknowledges this part of the turnpike's origin story through large images and a box of faux dynamite, mute testimony to one of the major difficulties encountered. But what makes this exhibit noteworthy is that it tells the rest of the turnpike story; not just its construction but also its use.

There are only a few small things that could be done a little better. The exhibit tries to set the turnpike's construction in a larger context of national defense preparedness and addresses the turnpike's role as a catalyst for the eventual development of the Interstate Highway System. These explanations are, however, a little too brief. For example, in discussing the Interstate Highway System, a label reads, "After World War II, the success of the Pennsylvania Turnpike convinced President Dwight D. Eisenhower and other leaders of the need for coast-to-coast system of superhighways. In 1956, Eisenhower approved the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, the enabling legislation for the nation's 47,000-mile interstate highway network. The Pennsylvania Turnpike was the blueprint." The label attempts to distill a complex, decades-long policy debate into a single paragraph and while doing so it assigns the turnpike a larger role than it deserves. The exhibit correctly points out that the turnpike developed engineering standards for long-distance, high-speed, grade-separated limited-access highway that were largely replicated when building the Interstate Highway System, but other roads inside and outside of the country also served as part of the blueprint. A more nuanced discussion would have given the turnpike its due while providing a more background.

A few small things could have perhaps been done differently. Overall, the exhibit does an excellent job in presenting the importance of America's First Superhighway. The exhibit is a must for anyone interested in Pennsylvania and transportation history.

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FIGURE I Courtesy of The State Museum of Pennsylvania.



FIGURE 2 Courtesy of The State Museum of Pennsylvania.



FIGURE 3 Courtesy of The State Museum of Pennsylvania.



FIGURE 4 Courtesy of The State Museum of Pennsylvania.