Continuity and Change along the National Road in Pennsylvania

William B. Rhoads

Early twentieth century garage and gas pump on the National Road in West Alexander, Pa., bypassed with a new highway in the 1940s.
In 1929, a stream of autos and trucks hurtled over the new concrete of the old National Road that opened in 1818 between Cumberland, Maryland, and Wheeling, West Virginia, on the Ohio River. At night some drivers could sense “their headlights...dispelling strange shades of the past: the Conestoga wagons, the picturesque, hard-swearing, hard-fighting tribe of teamsters, the 6000 pound loads of freight...; the Great Eastern and Western mails....”1 To the east of Uniontown, Pennsylvania, headlights might also pick out shades of Colonel George Washington and his colonial troops who had contested bravely but unsuccessfully with the French and Indians at Fort Necessity in 1754, or a shadow of General Edward Braddock, killed in battle in 1755 and buried in the middle of the trail which was supplanted by the National Road some 60 years later.

Advocated by George Washington, Albert Gallatin, Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay as a means of unifying the eastern seaboard with the western lands of the Ohio country, the National Road, authorized by Congress in 1806, was constructed in Pennsylvania as a straighter, broader and smoother version of the tracks used by Washington and Braddock. Great stone bridges crossed streams and rivers, dozens of inns lined the road, and when the federal government turned the road over to the states in 1835, polygonal toll houses were erected about every 15 miles.2 Until the 1850s, America’s first federally financed highway functioned as the primary route to the West for countless settlers, merchants, statesmen and politicians, including John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson.

Soon the National Road — especially the 80 miles traversing southwestern Pennsylvania — began to function as more than a commercial route, becoming recognized for its historical significance as well. In the early nineteenth century, James Reeside, a leading proprietor of stages on the road, had posters that proclaimed:


One Baltimore merchant in the 1840s, upon seeing the swampy Great Meadows where Fort Necessity had stood, was moved to call the ground a “holy place.”3

Road workers in 1804 came across what presumably were Braddock’s bones, in his grave, a little more than a mile from Fort Necessity and a short walk from the National Road. The bones were reinterred under a noble looking tree. A board lettered “Braddock’s Grave” and nailed to the tree attracted patriotic pilgrims.4 After the tree was felled by a storm, Josiah King, editor of the Pittsburgh Gazette, in about 1872, paid for the planting of elms, larches and a Norwegian spruce, all imported from England, and a weeping willow from the site of Napoleon’s tomb, as appropriate memorials for the fallen British commander.5

The second half of the century saw the once-great road fall idle and decay, vanquished by the railroad. Local farmers became its main users. Still some attention was paid its most historic sites. The Fort Necessity Washington Monument Association, incorporated by 1850, laid the monument’s cornerstone four years later, but the project languished, perhaps in part because travelers were turning away from stages in favor of the faster trains of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad which entered Wheeling in 1853.

By 1879, the National Road had experienced a quarter century of decline. Recognizing it as antiquated but picturesque, a journalist, William H. Rideing, surveyed a portion of the road and declared the “old national pike” to be “a glory departed.” Nevertheless, relics of the road’s heyday survived: “the taverns, with their hospitable and picturesque fronts, the old smithies, and the toll-gates, have not been entirely swept away.” Rideing thought it “questionable whether or not our means of locomotion in palace-cars are preferable to the [stage] coach in point of luxury, but it is certain that the extinction of the old tavern of the pre-railway period deprives the world of a very great boon.” Longfellow’s Tales of a Wayside Inn (1863) helped create nostalgic sentiment for historic inns, but the revival of their popularity along the National Road would not occur for another four decades.

The period of disuse and decay continued into the 1890s, when a native of the region, Thomas B. Seabright, catalogued in great detail the picturesque buildings and personalities of the road’s halcyon years. A former tavern, the Temple of Juno, (whose bastard-ized portico was said to have been designed by a local man “not likely versed in the classic orders of architecture”) had adjoining “two immense stables...one log, the other frame, both still standing, weather beaten, empty and useless, [which] bear silent, but impressive testimony to the thrift of other days, and impart a tinge of melancholy to the memories of the old pike.”7 The steam railroad had made the stables useless.

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Searight expressed a widely felt “grief” over the replacement of the “four-horse coach” by the “steam car,” and he found only little satisfaction in observing steam itself being challenged by electricity (in the form of the trolley) so that “the time is coming when the steam car will follow in the wake of the old stage coach.”

Searight’s devotion to the National Road was so great that he asked to be buried as close to it as possible. He died in 1899 and his grave in Union-town’s Oak Grove Cemetery is within a few feet of the roadway.

By 1900, the road and its appurtenant structures still seemed to be in decline. Archer Butler Hulbert noted a “few ponderous stone bridges and a long line of sorry looking mile-posts mark the famous highway.... Scores of proud towns, which were thriving centres of a transcontinental trade, have dwindled into comparative insignificance,” and “the clanging of rusty signs on...ancient tavern posts” told a story of “inexpressible pathos.” But, the automobile age was beginning, and Hulbert predicted “the revolution in methods of locomotion” would soon reverse the road’s long downward movement. Ironically, the antiquated road would again become useful thanks to the auto revolution.

The bicycle and automobile presage an era of good roads, and of an unparalleled countryward movement of society. With this era is coming the revival of inn and tavern life, the rejuvenation of a thousand ancient highways....[T]he old National Road will become, perhaps, the foremost of the great roadways of America.

Its location and grading made it ideal as a “trunk line” for commercial traffic to the West. Yet, Hulbert also envisioned that “its historic associations will render the route of increasing interest” to thousands
of travelers. “A hundred National Road taverns will be opened, and bustling landlords welcome, as of yore, the travel-stained visitor.”

By 1909, Hulbert’s forecast was coming true. The roadway was slowly being improved for rubber-tired vehicles, and The Travel Magazine recommended the National Road for history-minded auto tourists, citing Braddock’s grave as a place where “stopped many an automobile on the adjacent roadway.” Why did they stop there? Not merely to honor a fallen general, but also to pay tribute to “one of the leading spirits in pushing westward and leaving behind him trails that became permanent highways.” The grave, still marked by a cluster of evergreens, was remarkable as “one of the first landmarks in the history of American touring,” and consequently “should be honored by every automobilist.” Motorists were further advised that for more historical excitement they should begin their tour in historically uninteresting Ohio and go east into Pennsylvania, where “you begin to feel that you are traveling on hallowed ground.” The experience, if not quite religious, was “in great contrast to the popular notion of ‘joy riding.’”

And where should these tourists eat? “At some ancient hostelry which was a rip-roaring inn in the stagecoach days.... Here you have a home-made supper and listen to home-grown yarns about the days when General Braddock chased the Indians, General Washington chopped down trees for roads....”11 The resurrected inns therefore satisfied the auto tourist’s craving for food, historical information and entertainment.

The resurrection was not accomplished at once. In 1910, much of the road was “in rather bad repair” and only a few of the old inns were operating. Still, Pennsylvania was resurfacing the road, partly from “appreciation of its historical value.” Soon the hills would echo with “the cheerful honking of motor horns — just as in former times they responded to the merry tooting of the coach guards’ trumpets.”12

In 1912, the National Highways Association and others tried to gain state and federal funds for highway improvements by appealing to legislators’ historical and patriotic instincts. The association designated the National Road as the eastern segment of the transcontinental National Old Trails Road. The association’s president argued that the benefits of improved roads were not only commercial but also “social, moral...[and] educational.”13

Allied with the association was the Daughters of the American Revolution, which created a National Old Trails Road Department. To educate generations of travelers concerning historic sites along the road, the D.A.R. in 1912 began mounting tablets such as the one at Great Crossings bridge (1818) at Somersfield, which described Washington’s and Braddock’s movements in 1753-55. The D.A.R.’s Great Crossing Chapter, responsible for this tablet, later preserved the nearby toll house at Addison. Not as lucky, the toll house near West Alexander, without the protection of the D.A.R., became a “notorious speakeasy” in the early 1920s and subsequently was destroyed.15

Some prominent men in Fayette County in 1909 formed the Braddock Memorial Park Association, purchased 24 acres around the grave, laid out a park and erected an “imposing” granite shaft to Braddock’s memory. Dedication ceremonies were attended by a deputation from his old regiment, the Coldstream Guards, who presented a bronze memorial tablet.16

This flurry of monument building was predicated upon the presence of an audience — auto tourists in particular. They were given further guidance by the National Highways Association’s publication, The National Road: Most Historic Thoroughfare in the United States, and Strategic Eastern Link in the National Old Trails Ocean to Ocean Highway (1916), by Robert Bruce. Written specifically for the “motor tourist,” this volume noted that it was now possible for the “good driver” to cover the road between Cumberland and Wheeling almost as quickly as the fast trains of the B&O. However, Bruce offered many historical enticements to delay the tourist. Detailed maps and text indicated the location and significance of old taverns, stone (and one iron) bridges, as well as Fort Necessity and Braddock’s grave. West of the grave was “the only original stone mile-stone from Cumberland to Wheeling.” In Uniontown, the motor tourist was told that none of the hotels catering to tourists were “as they were in olden days,” but the former White Swan Tavern (built of logs about 1805)
might be visited for a glimpse of its old-fashioned barroom. In West Alexander, travelers were more fortunate because the Lafayette Inn still served plain but substantial meals and showed the room in which Lafayette was said to have slept in 1824.\textsuperscript{17}

Bruce’s intention was to highlight the road’s historic and scenic wonders, while downplaying the unattractive intrusions of turn-of-the-century industry. Still, he was obliged to acknowledge the presence of a large coke plant at Brier Hill and oil derricks from Glyde to the West Virginia line. Brownsville seemed like “a small Pittsburgh — smoky and grimy, but busy and prosperous.”\textsuperscript{18}

As Bruce conceded in 1916, the business traveler, as well as freight and mail, would shun the National Road in favor of the railroad. But during and after World War I auto tourists had to accommodate themselves to the presence of “the great automobile truck, well able to move several tons on the heaviest grade, appearance in convoys of ten, twenty, thirty, or more.” Tourists who sought romance in driving the National Road could join John Faris in likening these convoys to lines of “picturesque” Conestoga wagons so that they became “motor-conestogas.”\textsuperscript{19}

By the 1920s, the sleepy days of the National Road were over. “Motors now rush and roar” over the new concrete surface of U.S. 40, the transcontinental highway of which the old National Road was a small part. Traffic and tourism were great enough to allow the reopening of still more ancient taverns,\textsuperscript{20} but these were not sufficient. Low-budget travelers could stop at Hilderbrand’s Cool Breeze Camp and Rooms, east of Brownsville, after servicing their vehicles at the more dignified Garlett’s Garage.\textsuperscript{21}

The cities of Washington and Uniontown each had a new high-rising hotel whose names, the George Washington and White Swan, paid tribute to the past. Bruce had recommended a visit to the venerable White Swan Tavern: it was removed, and a seven story, red brick, Georgian Revival hostelry was erected on the site in 1925. While the exterior of the million-dollar hotel had nothing in common with its modest wooden predecessor, the Georgian-Federal details suggested in a general way the stage coach era. The hotel’s publicity insisted it was “seemingly brought from the early romantic days of a century ago, when the old White Swan Inn...was always the favorite stopping place for travelers.” Furthermore, “relics” from the White Swan were exhibited on the lobby floor to impress upon guests the continuity of the old and new establishments.\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, the George Washington Hotel (1922-23) asserted its ties with the historic road through its Georgian-Federal exterior and lobby, but even more clearly through murals (1935) by Malcolm Stevens Parcell in the Pioneer Room depicting early travel on the road.\textsuperscript{23}

By contrast, the Summit Hotel near Uniontown spurned local and American tradition with its Mediterranean-styled facade and Germanic Munchausen Wine Vault.\textsuperscript{24} Stronger evidence of the changing population residing near the road was provided by the exotically towered St. Nicholas Greek Catholic Church (1913-17) facing the road in Brownsville.

Immigrants were subjected to the Americanization programs of the D.A.R., which sought to instill American traditions and values. In 1928, new and old Americans riding east of Beallsville were confronted with a roadside sculpture, the “Madonna of the Trail,” a monumental, 10-foot tall woman honoring “the pioneer mothers of the covered wagon days.” Where histories of the road had thus far dwelt on the masculine arts of war, road building, stage coach driving and innkeeping, the D.A.R., in erecting this sculpture, chose to pay tribute to the strength and virtue of pioneer motherhood. It was the 10th in a series of 12 similar monuments designed for the D.A.R. by the obscure St. Louis sculptor A. Leimbach and placed along historic roads joining the Atlantic and Pacific. It also was the the focus of intense conflict between Washington and Fayette counties, both of which sought the honor of its presence. Harry S. Truman of Missouri, president of the National Old Trails Association in 1928, visited both counties, met with male civic leaders and found them “at swords’ points” over this issue. In the end, Beallsville, Washington County, was chosen.\textsuperscript{25}

The 1930s were both years of economic depression and reaffirmation of faith in the founding fathers; for example, the restoration of colonial Williamsburg began in 1926. While Great Meadows had been a pilgrimage site for a century, only

remnants of the earthworks survived to give the auto pilgrim a sense of the actuality of the battle. In 1932, as a part of the national observance of the bicentennial of Washington's birth, the federal and state governments, and local organizations, joined to recreate Fort Necessity. The nearby Mount Washington Tavern (c. 1827) was acquired by the state in 1932 to serve as a museum of the battlefield with relics from the fort, colonial household utensils, military equipment and Indian relics. The recreated fort was dedicated in the presence of 20,000 Americans and military attaches representing Britain and France. Without the concrete highway and mass-produced auto, such a crowd could scarcely have assembled in an out-of-the-way field to dedicate this "altar of national patriotism."  

In 1940, the Works Progress Administration Writers' Program described both the old and a few of the modern sites along the National Road, U.S. 40: "Historic mementoes linger here amid industrial activity." Tourist cabins were found in clusters on the way to Fort Necessity. After the war, Philip Jordan noted the proliferation of "new taverns, some doing business where Jacksonian inns stood. Many attempt to recreate the old days with parlors filled with antique cherry tables and walnut rocking chairs." Jordan was not fooled: "[W]aitresses in nylons and starched uniforms have replaced the cotton-stockingled, calico-clad maids of 100 years ago. And short orders are more in demand than leisurely dinners." Moreover, few slept in the old inns, but streams of cars pulled into tourist camps and motor courts drawn by "neon signs, garish, glittering letters...." Apparently "the old road has become a hurried, neurotic highway." But not just like any other U.S. highway. Here a truck driver discoursed knowledgeably on Fort Necessity and Braddock's grave. Chamber of Commerce secretaries certified that "thousands travel it annually just because it is the country's most historic national highway."  

The National Road in Pennsylvania remains a constantly changing mixture of old and new. Much long-distance traffic has apparently abandoned it in favor of interstate highways completed in the 1970s. Still, historically minded motorists in not too great a hurry may avoid the monotony of the Turnpike and I-79, and seek out remnants of the early nineteenth century road and its attendant structures: they will find about 20 of the cast iron mileposts manufactured about 1835 in Brownsville and Connellsville, a fragment of the "S" bridge west of Washington the Searight and Addison toll houses (the latter surrounded by historical and patriotic monuments), Mount Washington Inn (now operated by the National Park Service as a museum interpreting the National Road and its inns), and Century Inn at Scenery Hill (opened 1794, still offering food and beds, and featured in the Wall Street Journal). Fort Necessity, recreated in 1954, remains a major tourist attraction, though few seem to stop at Braddock's grave. Since 1946, motorists have been alerted to historic places (including the road itself) not only by older D.A.R. plaques but also by free-standing blue and gold markers placed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. State and county tourism offices tout the annual National Pike Festival urging visitors to "Travel the Road that Made the Nation."  

Of course changes along the road have made the 1940 W.P.A. guide obsolete. U.S. 40 now bypasses West Alexander, a village near the West Virginia line, yet a D.A.R. plaque still identifies the Old Trails Road. This plaque was mounted on an abutment of the bridge carrying the B&O over the National Road at the state line. The B&O tracks and steam cars are gone; the road has triumphed. The Lafayette Inn at West Alexander was demolished about 1940, to be replaced by the R. K. Grimes & Son garage and service station. Grimes preserved the front door and the door to Lafayette's bedroom as entrances to the garage office. The Great Crossings stone bridge lies submerged beneath Youghiogheny River Lake, completed in 1943 by the Army Corps of Engineers; the village of Somerfield was obliterated by the same project. Triple X-rated videos may be viewed in Washington across the National Road from the historic and beautifully maintained LeMoyne House (1812).

Landmarks from the road's busy period in the early twentieth century have also changed. Early gas stations and motor courts have declined and new ones have arisen. Neither the George Washington nor the White Swan function as hotels, and a 1926 prediction that the George Washington would "construct an airplane landing on its roof before the passing of the next century" has yet to come to pass. Tourists are welcomed at the National Trail Motel, near Braddock's Grave, and at the colonial-style Washington Motor Inn in Washington at the junction of U.S. 40.
and I-70. Coke ovens and oil derricks are not much in evidence, but a coal yard adjoins Searight’s toll house. Change is ongoing, but the survival of Fort Necessity and the “S” bridge may reassure motorists that the upheavals of the twentieth century—including the revolution in ordinary living caused by the universality of the automobile—have not destroyed all signs and memorials of an heroic past.

3 Jordan, National Road, 106-07, 183. In 1820, the “romantic history” of Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain brought on initial steps to preserve the ruins. Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., Presence of the Past (New York: 1965), 31.
4 Jordan, National Road, 107-08, 175; John Kennedy Lacock, “Braddock Road,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 38 (1914), facing 36.
6 William H. Rideing, “The Old National Pike,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine 59 (Nov. 1879), 801-07. Rideing only traveled from Frederick to Cumberland, Md., but his comments were also applicable to the National Road in Pennsylvania. Jordan, National Road, 368.
8 Searight, The Old Pike, 353. The Unions town Street Railway was chartered in 1890. West Penn Traction (Chicago: 1968), 13.

12 In 1914, Earle Robert Forrest noted on the back of his photo of the Youghiogheny House (1818) in Somerset that “the old house enjoys as big a trade as it ever did during the best of the old pike days, as it is a famous stopping place for automobile parties.” Photo 1710, Box 7, Forrest Family Papers, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Archives, Pittsburgh (hereafter Forrest Papers). For the revival of old inns elsewhere in the country thanks to the coming of auto touring, see William B. Rhoads, “Roadside Colonial: Early American Design for the Automobile Age,” Winterthur Portfolio 21 (Summer/Autumn 1986), 135-36.
17 Bruce, National Road, 9, 62, 66, 76; Faris, Seeing Pennsylvania, 119. In fact, Lafayette stopped, but did not sleep at this inn.
18 Bruce, National Road, 68, 72, 74.
19 Bruce, National Road, 10; Faris, Seeing Pennsylvania, 77-78. Real Conestogas had almost vanished; in 1922, one of the last in Western Pennsylvania was rescued by Henry Ford from a farm near Hickory, Washington County.
21 The camp and garage are pictured on post cards published by Curt Teich about 1926 and 1920-24 respectively. I am grateful to Katherine Hamilton-Smith, curator of the Teich Postcard Collection of the Lake County (Ill.) Museum, for directing me to these and other images of roadside architecture.
22 L. Gillespie Vajk to author, 12 Sept. 1988; text printed on Curt Teich post card (mid-1920s) of the White Swan Hotel. The hotel also published a brochure by Dr. William Blake Hindman, “The History of the National Highway Route 40,” in 1931, “for the purpose of making your trip over America’s most historic highway more interesting.” Brochure in Historical Society of

In the 1920s Hilderbrand’s Cool Breeze Camp and Rooms, east of Brownsville on old U.S. 40, was a stopping place for low-budget travelers.
Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh.

24 Donald Miller, Malcolm Parcell (Pittsburgh: 1985), 62, 66. Parcell was a native of Washington County with a national reputation in the 1930s. The George Washington Tavern, 2, 30. George Washington owned a part of the Fort Necessity battlefield between 1769 and his death; in 1784, he proposed it would be a good site for an inn.

25 Writers’ Program, Pennsylvania, 594-95; Jordan, National Road, 395, 402, 407.

26 I drove U.S. 40 from Addison to West Alexander (from the Maryland to the West Virginia state lines) on 2 and 3 August 1988. For a comprehensive list of surviving “transportation related resources” from about 1818 to 1939 along the National Road in Pennsylvania, see Denise L. Grantz, “National Road: Historic Resource Inventory,” at the Bureau of Historic Preservation, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pa.


Modern day National Road in Washington, Pa., with the beautifully maintained LeMoyne House on the left. Home of physician and abolitionist Francis J. LeMoyne, this historic house, built in 1812, was a stop on the underground railroad. Today it is the headquarters of the Washington County Historical Society.

28 In 1929, a new bridge was located to permit the retention of much of the historic bridge. The National Old Trails Association had opposed the relocation of the road. Washington Observer, 10 Dec. 1929, Forrest Papers, Box 12.


32 Forrest, Washington County, 753.