Carried in Comfortable Coaches

In 1806, Thomas Jefferson signed “An Act to Regulate the Laying Out and Making a Road from Cumberland in the State of Maryland, to the State of Ohio.” This road would ease the journey of settlers moving west by improving part of the existing road cut by British General Edward Braddock in 1755, and link the nation together through the Appalachian Mountains. Construction of the Cumberland Road was completed to Wheeling, Virginia, in 1818. Thanks to the newly graded surface, the four- to six-week-trip from Baltimore to the Ohio River could now be completed in less than half the time. Drovers moved herds of cattle, sheep, and pigs from western farms to the markets of Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Wagoners could transport salt, sugar, tea, coffee, and iron to western settlements, then return with whiskey, wool, flour, and bacon much more efficiently in their Conestoga wagons. Even though this improved route made the journey easier for many, the pace of travel was still only a few miles an hour. For those who could afford it, stage coaches offered speedy travel between cities in the East and the Midwest.

The earliest stage lines spanned the 131-mile-trip from Cumberland to Wheeling in four different sections, but ran only three times each week. These original lines, bought by enterprising businessmen like Lucius W. Stockton and Richard Stokes, were made into a thriving business. In 1821, Stockton and Stokes ran a stage line between Gettysburg and Hagerstown, Maryland. An ad in Washington, Pa.’s The Reporter on April 30, 1821, states, “The arrangement of this line, will secure a passenger a safe conveyance from Wheeling to Philadelphia (a distance of 346 miles) in a little more than four days.” The pair continued to expand their operations west, establishing the National Road Stage Company in Uniontown around 1824.

The National Road Stage Co., with Stockton as president, had lines leaving daily from Washington, Pa., for points both west and east, but needed support infrastructure along the way. About every 12 miles, Stockton set up relay stations to change the team of horses in a matter of minutes. These stage coaches could carry nine passengers inside with another sitting beside the driver. In addition to passengers, mail was also carried on these stage lines because of their efficiency and speed. Before the completion of the road, mail was sent once a week from Baltimore to Wheeling, taking about eight days to arrive.
mail could be transported 28 times a week and in less than 48 hours along the same route.¹¹

Traffic on the road boomed and then began to wane by the 1850s and '60s as the railroad moved further west. Railroads moved goods, people, and mail further, faster, and in greater volume than the wagoners and stage coach drivers. Stage coaches were still used, for a time, to network areas together that were not yet connected by rail. Eventually, they ceased to be needed and many of these vehicles were sold west to do the same thing they did here: move people and goods ahead of the railroad.

A stage coach, as well as a Conestoga wagon and other vehicles, can be seen in the Trails to Trains exhibit at Meadowcroft when the museum reopens in May.

¹ U.S. Congress, An Act to regulate the laying out and making a road from Cumberland, in the state of Maryland, to the state of Ohio, 9th Cong., 1st sess., March 29, 1806.

² Register of Debates in Congress, Mr. McKennan speaking on Cumberland Road, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 1832, 8, pt. 2:2728.
³ Ibid.
⁵ Thomas B. Searight, The Old Pike: A History of the National Road, with Incidents, Accidents, and Anecdotes Thereon (Uniontown: privately printed, 1894), 148.
⁷ Forrest, 750.
⁸ Ibid., 753.
⁹ Searight, 148.
¹⁰ Register of Debates in Congress, Mr. McKennan speaking on Cumberland Road, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 1832, 8, pt. 2:2728.
¹¹ Ibid., 2729.