**The National Road**

**America's First Major Highway**

A Road From Maryland to Ohio Helped America Move Westward

By Robert McNamara

The National Road was a federal project in early America designed to address a problem which seems quaint today but was quite serious at the time. The young nation possessed enormous tracts of land to the west. And there was simply no easy way for people to get there.

The roads heading westward at the time were primitive, and in most cases were Indian trails or old military trails dating to the French and Indian War. When the state of Ohio was admitted to the Union in 1803, it was apparent that something had to be done, as the country actually had a state that was difficult to reach.

The U.S. Congress took up the issue of building what was called the National Road. The idea was to build a road which would lead from the center of the United States at the time, which was Maryland, westward, to Ohio and beyond.

One of the advocates for the National Road was Albert Gallatin, the Secretary of the Treasury, who would also issue a report calling for the construction of canals in the young nation.

In addition to providing a way for settlers to get to the west, the road was also seen as an improvement for business. Farmers and traders could move goods to markets in the East, and the road was thus seen as necessary to the country’s economy.

The Congress passed legislation allocating the sum of $30,000 for the building of the road, stipulating that the President should appoint commissioners who would supervise the surveying and planning. President Thomas Jefferson signed the bill into law on March 29, 1806.

**Surveying for the National Road**

Several years were spent planning the route of the road. In some parts the road could follow an older path, known as the Braddock Road, which was named for a British general in the French and Indian War, but some extensive surveying was required.

The first construction contracts for the National Road were awarded in the spring of 1811. Work began on the first ten miles, which headed west from the town of Cumberland, in western Maryland. As the road began in Cumberland, it was also called the Cumberland Road.

**The National Road Was Built to Last**

The biggest problem with most roads 200 years ago was that wagon wheels created ruts, and even the smoothest dirt roads could be rendered nearly impassable. As the National Road was considered vital to the nation, it was to be paved with broken stones.

In the early 1800s a Scottish engineer, John Loudon MacAdam, had pioneered a method of building roads with broken stones, and roads of this type were thus named “macadam” roads. As work proceeded on the National Road, the technique advanced by MacAdam was put to use, giving the new road a very solid foundation that could stand up to considerable wagon traffic.

The work was very difficult in the days before mechanized construction equipment. The stones had to be broken by men with sledge hammers, and were put into position with shovels and rakes.

William Cobbett, a British writer who visited a construction site on the National Road in 1817, described the construction method:

"It is covered with a very thick layer of nicely broken stones, or stone, rather, laid on with great exactness both as to depth and width, and then rolled down with an iron roller, which reduces all to one solid mass. This is a road made for ever."

A number of rivers and streams had to be crossed by the National Road, and this naturally led to a surge in bridge building. The Casselmans Bridge, a one-arch stone bridge built for the National Road in 1813 near Grantsville, in the northwest corner of Maryland, was the longest stone arch bridge in America when it opened. The bridge, which has an 80-foot arch, has been restored.

Work on the National Road continued steadily, with crews heading both eastward and westward from the origin point in Cumberland, Maryland. By the summer of 1818 the road's western advance had reached Wheeling, West Virginia.

The National Road slowly continued westward, and eventually reached Vandalia, Indiana in 1839. Plans existed for the road to keep going all the way to St. Louis, Missouri, but as it seemed that railroads would soon supersede roads, funding for the National Road was not renewed.

The National Road played a major role in the westward expansion of the United States, and its importance was comparable to that of the Erie Canal. Travel on the National Road was reliable, and many thousands of settlers going westward in heavily loaded wagons got their start by following its route.

The road itself was eighty feet wide, and distances were marked by iron mile posts. The road could easily accommodate the wagon and stagecoach traffic of the time. Inns, taverns, and other businesses sprang up along its route.

An account published in the late 1800s recalled the glory days of the National Road:

"There were sometimes twenty gaily-painted four-horse coaches each way daily. The cattle and sheep were never out of sight. The canvas-covered wagons were drawn by six or twelve horses. Within a mile of the road the country was a wilderness, but on the highway the traffic was as dense as in the main street of a large town."

By the middle of the 19th century, the National Road fell into disuse, as railroad travel was much faster. But when the automobile arrived in the early 20th century the route of the National Road enjoyed a resurgence in popularity, and over time the first federal highway became the route for a portion of US Route 40. It is still possible to travel portions of the National Road today.

**Legacy of the National Road**

The National Road was the inspiration for other federal roads, some of which were constructed during the time the nation's first highway was still being built.

The National Road was also enormously important as it was the first large federal public works project, and it was generally seen as a great success. And there was no denying that the nation's economy, and its westward expansion, were greatly helped by the macadamized road that stretched westward toward the wilderness.

**The National Road**

1. How would the National Road lead to Westward expansion?

2. What state suffered the most because of our primative roads?

3. Besides settlers moving West, what else did these roads encourage?

4. How much money was allocated for the National Road?

5. Why was it necessary to build strong roads of something besides dirt?

6. Who was John MacAdam?

7. How was macadam created?

8. What different types of occupations may have had a surge in demand because of the construction of the new roads?

9. What businesses sprang up along side of the road?

10. Why did these roads fall out of popularity?