The King's Highway

~ Traffic ~

When Peter Stuyvesant, leader of the Dutch in New York, decided to oust the Swedes in 1651, he used the Indian trail through the Delaware Valley. Axe men cleared the way for his overland marchers with their packhorses staggering under the weight of guns, ammunition, and provisions.

"As Philadelphia expanded, it drew commerce from newly emerging New Jersey farms as well as from the interior of Pennsylvania—nearly nine thousand wagons were in use along the scores of dirt roads which led to the dynamic city."
--Douglas Waitley, *Roads of Destiny*.

Conestoga freight wagons, drawn by four to six sturdy horses, were especially designed for mud with iron-rimmed wheels nearly a foot wide. Gaudy canvas tops were stretched across arching bands of wood. Cushionless, backless oak benches were installed when these vehicles hauled passengers.

Among the ferry crossings was one crossing the Potomac River at Alexandria, Virginia, a seaport nearly as busy as Philadelphia or New York in 1750.

At Charleston, wagons came in from surrounding villages, farms, and plantations. In these wagons were bales of cotton, sacks of hams, piles of tobacco, containers of candle wax, and huge bundles of bear skins. Such wagons would then return loaded with a year's supply of pots and pans, tea and coffee, gunpowder and bullet lead, coarse cloth for work clothes, and fine linen for dress-up wear. Herds of cattle moved down the highway like a bellowing river.

Charleston was the southern terminus of the *King's Highway* prior to the Revolutionary War. Charleston was linked by water with warehouses at Augusta, 140 miles up the Savannah River.

The vehicles hauling passengers were rarely comfortable. They were selected according to the stretch of road upon which they were to travel. At times, passengers would choose to leave the stagecoach in preference of covering a section on horseback or by packet boat.

From Boston to Charleston on the *King's Highway* was about 1300 miles. It was possible to travel this road by wagon. In most cases, the wagons could average about 20-25 miles per day. A traveler making the entire journey would have taken at least two months.

~ Features ~

City Tavern at Philadelphia was a favorite dining and gathering place. It was only three blocks from the Pennsylvania state house, a natural gathering place for local politicians and later delegates to the Continental Congresses.

Anyone wishing to go to Baltimore, Annapolis, or Alexandria could proceed by stagecoach, rent a chaise with a servant driver, or ride in one of the packet boats docked at the river. The road approach to Baltimore was one of deep ruts, the path often obstructed by uprooted trees. The appearance in this area of slaves also made Northerners uncomfortable.

At Annapolis the *King's Highway* was often called the *Great Coast Road*. At Bladensburg, a ferry transported vehicles across the Potomac to Alexandria. Here the popular City Tavern, Gadsby's, was highly rated along with the Wayside Inn of Sudbury, Massachusetts, and Fraunces' Tavern in New York City, as the finest public houses in the colonies.

South from Alexandria the *King's Highway* was for a distance called the Potomac Trail. This was the tidewater area of plantations and mansions, far removed from the highway, dependent instead on ships sailing up the tidal inlets to their docks. The road to Williamsburg was especially poor due to flooding rivers; seasoned travelers usually opted to go by horseback. The center of unpretentious Williamsburg was its Raleigh Tavern. A ferry crossed the choppy waters of Hampton Roads from Yorktown to Norfolk, a small town huddling around a spacious harbor. From Norfolk the *King's Highway* was locally called the *Virginia Path*. It skirted the Dismal Swamp for thirty miles, an unpleasant two-day-trip along pools of standing water.

The first town in North Carolina was Edenton, a small town on a low ridge of fertile land beside the Albemarle Sound. Next came New Bern, seat of the Colonial Assembly. North Carolina's most important town was Wilmington because of its deep-water harbor. Once across the river, the highway branched, one segment heading due south into the Green Swamp and one looping westward around it.

Just beyond lay 40 miles of South Carolina beach, then indigo country at Georgetown. Nearing Charleston, the *King's Highway* met the traders' path coming in from Augusta, a major trading post. Busy and growing Charleston exceeded Boston in total commerce.

~ Timeline ~
The King's Highway

1651   Peter Stuyvesant used the old Delaware Indian trail (across Jersey) to force out the Swedes.

1673   In response to King Charles' wish that communication be established between his colonies, the first crude riding trail is created for mail service between Boston and New York. Named the *Boston Post Road*, it eventually expands into the *King's Highway*.

1696   The Post Master General requested funds at the Pennsylvania Council to clear the Trenton ferry landing on the PA side to enable correspondence and trade and the convenience of passengers.

1750   By this date, a continuous road exists for stagecoach or wagon traffic from Boston, Massachusetts to Charleston, South Carolina. It links all thirteen colonies, but it wasn't an easy road to travel. With few bridges crossing rivers and streams, and muddy roads in the Spring, many parts of the road were impassable for weeks at a time.

1774   By the time delegates made the trip from New York to Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, the road could accommodate the largest carriage in reasonable safety.

1775-81   The *King's Highway* as a link between the colonies helps them to coordinate their war efforts. The name is looked upon with disfavor by American patriots; many prefer to use the name *Boston Post Road* again.

Route of the King's Highway

Boston, MA	Wilmington, DE
New Haven, CT	New Castle, DE
Fairfield, CT	Annapolis, MD
Greenwich, CT	Alexandria, VA
Rye, NY	Fredericksburg, VA
Kingsbridge, NY	Bowling Green, VA
New York City	King William, VA
Newark, NJ	New Kent, VA
Elizabeth, NJ	Williamsburg, VA
Rahway, NJ	Yorktown, VA
Perth Amboy, NJ	Hampton, VA
New Brunswick, NJ	Norfolk, VA
Princeton, NJ	Suffolk, VA
Trenton, NJ	Edenton, NC
Bordentown, NJ	New Bern, NC
Burlington, NJ	Wilmington, NC
Philadelphia, PA	Georgetown, SC
Chester, PA	Charleston, SC

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