

# The National Road

## ~ Traffic ~

In the early 1800s, thousands of movers and tons of merchandise moved across the National Road, despite its haphazard quality. They came from the Shenandoah Valley and down from rocky New England during the 1820s, pausing to rest briefly at Cumberland, then driving on toward Uniontown and Wheeling. Eastern goods could either be sent upriver from Wheeling to Pittsburgh or downstream to ports in Ohio, Indiana and on to Louisiana. Agricultural produce and materials from the South and West came upriver to be unloaded at Wheeling to be carried eastward over the road to cities as far away as Baltimore.

Baltimore merchant, Timothy Collins, describing his view of the road just east of Wheeling, said, "Wagons pulled by oxen or horses passed in a steady stream; freight haulers, their loads piled high and held secure by rope, jockeyed for position; and dozens of stages, most of them lacking paint but still brave in the aristocracy of the highway, swept forward with imperious blasts from tin horns. Drivers, with dust heavy in matted whiskers, trudged patiently behind cattle and sheep."

--P. D. Jordan, *The National Road*

A horde of emigrants hurried westward during the golden decades prior to the Civil War. "Their covered wagons had been forming an endless procession ever since the *Cumberland Road* was opened. After they settled Pennsylvania, they filled Ohio. When Ohio land no longer was available, they clumped on into Indiana to erect their homes and plant their fields on the banks of the Wabash. They clung to the *National Road* like a mosquito to a denizen of the swampy American Bottoms. It was the people's highway, and the people crowded it from rim to edge until their carts, wagons, stages and carriages challenged one another for the right of way."

--P. D. Jordan, *The National Road*.

The railroad's iron rail killed the old *National Road*, but the horseless carriage resurrected it in a blaze of glory. It had scarcely known any traffic for 40 years, but with the advent of the automobile, there also came pleas for hard surfaced roads. As portions of the road were improved, the traffic increased. After World War I, travel-eager Americans took to the highways, and even the 1929 depression failed to stem their enthusiasm and use of the road. Reaching from East to West, it became the great highway U.S. 40, widened to three and even four lanes. It became a work road and a hauling route as well, with truckers replacing the old six-horse team wagons and the eight-ton freight schooners.

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## ~ Features ~



The total length of the *National Road* was 600 miles. Stone mile-markers were used, and some still exist. The one shown here is displayed at the National Highway Museum at Zanesville, Ohio. Initially the road was called the *Cumberland Road* because it started in Cumberland, MD. By 1825, it was referred to as the *National Road* because of its federal funding.

Those traveling west of the Alleghenies on the *National Road* considered Ohio the Frontier and Indiana and Illinois the West.

West of the Ohio River, there were several "S" bridges. Engineers found it difficult and expensive to construct a bridge where the road crossed a stream obliquely; so they made the crossing itself perpendicular and curved the bridge around and back in the shape of an "S."

In 1834, the War Department specified that the macadam process would replace the original inferior surfacing east of the Ohio River. But even macadam weakened under the continuous cutting of heavy wheels and wagons.

As the various states accepted administration and maintenance of the *National Road*, they started to collect toll. The state of Pennsylvania built six tollhouses about fifteen miles apart. There, a horse and rider paid four cents toll; every score of light-footed sheep, six cents, a score of cattle with sharp hooves that cut holes in the road, twelve cents; a stagecoach with two horses, twelve cents; any vehicle with four horses, eighteen cents. In Ohio, tollhouses stood about ten miles apart, and rates were slightly higher. Free travel was often permitted for going to or returning from public worship, funerals, military muster, mills, voting places, and business establishments.

Artistic signboards invited travelers to wayside taverns. The driver's horn would bring the tavern host to his door. He knew that the approaching stagecoach would stop to water the horses and allow the gentlemen time for brandy and to patronize his dining room. At night, there were beds for the passengers.

Trains reached Cumberland from Baltimore in 1842. As the rails were laid farther west, passengers preferred to ride behind locomotives rather than slow horses. The *National Road* was nearly abandoned until the advent of the automobile.

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~ *Timeline* ~  
**The National Road**

- 1753 George Washington rides to order the French at Fort Le Boeuf (Waterford, PA) to withdraw from British territory.
- 1754 Washington is sent to Fort Duquesne (Pittsburgh) to expel the French. Retreats and builds Fort Necessity; surrenders to French.
- 1755 British General Braddock cuts a road for his infantry and supply wagons en route to capture Fort Duquesne. Army ambushed and Braddock is killed.
- 1802 Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury, proposes to exempt tax for lands sold by Congress and to use proceeds from sale of those public lands for construction of roads.
- 1803 The enabling act for admission of Ohio to the Union contains provisions for construction of a road linking East and West.
- 1805-06 Congress passes "An Act to Regulate the Laying Out and Making a Road from Cumberland, in the State of Maryland, to the State of Ohio."
- 1811 Contracts are signed for construction of the first ten miles west of Cumberland.
- 1818 The road reaches Wheeling.
- 1830s Congress begins to turn the road over to the states for administration and maintenance.
- 1833 The road enters Columbus.
- 1838 Congress makes its last appropriation for the road.
- 1839 Illinois opens an 89-mile clay-surfaced section from Indiana to Vandalia, then capital of Illinois.
- 1840-41 Federal work is suspended because of lack of congressional appropriations.
- 1850 Indiana completes its intrastate segment.
- 1926 The old *National Road* becomes part of U.S. 40.



**Route of the National Road**

- |                     |                         |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Cumberland, MD      | Valley Grove, WV        |
| Allegheny Grove, MD | Point Mills Station, WV |
| Frostburg, MD       | Fulton, WV              |
| Grantsville, MD     | Wheeling, WV            |
| Keyser, MD          | Bridgeport, OH          |
| Oakton, PA          | St. Clairsville, OH     |
| Addison, PA         | Zanesville, OH          |
| Somerfield, PA      | Columbus, OH            |
| Farmington, PA      | Springfield, OH         |
| Uniontown, PA       | Richmond, IN            |
| Brownsville, PA     | Indianapolis, IN        |
| Beallsville, PA     | Terre Haute, IN         |
| Scenery Hill, PA    | Effingham, IL           |
| Washington, PA      | Vandalia, IL            |
| Claysville, PA      |                         |
| West Alexander, PA  |                         |