

The Turnpike Record - 1957 series of five articles on the Great Western Turnpike, by A.B. Gregg,
Guilderland Town Historian

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The Great Western Turnpike

by A.B. Gregg

Guilderland Town Historian

If any of our citizens are newcomers, they know little of our glorious, romantic, exciting local history, second to none in the entire country. Few books are available. My own "Old Hellebergh", published in 1936, is out of print and a collector's item. To this ever growing body of new residents, as well as to many old timers, I hope these little sketches will be interesting and enlightening, giving to all a new appreciation of the land they have chosen in which to build their homes and raise their children. If our history is dry, tedious, or boring, it is not the fault of history, but of the historians.

What better subject is there to begin with than the story of that ancient artery of transportation around which most of your lives circulate today, that has given its name to this publication - the Great Western Turnpike. In this and the next few articles, we hope to tell you the story of its building, its early patrons, its stage coaches, toll gates and taverns, followed by its plank road conversion, its decay and rebirth in our modern Route 20.

I had the distinct privilege last week of witnessing the opening of an immense original fireplace in one of these famous taverns along the Great Western Turnpike, now owned and occupied by Supervisor John J. Welsh, of the Town of Guilderland. Perhaps nowhere along the route will one find more of the original structure in its ancient form than this tavern stand at Fullers. It will be mentioned further in connection with Wayside Inn stories.

Visualize the territory in which you now live, before the building of the Turnpike. Dense pine forests towered above the sand laid down in prehistoric Lake Albany. From this heavy growth of virgin trees came the firewood for the city of Albany and fuel for the glass furnaces of Hamilton (Guilderland). Through the "Pine Bush", the Schenectady Post Road, in a way roughly bisected by the angle now formed by Routes 5 and 20. At various points other paths or crude roads broke north or south to the Normanskill or the old Schoharie Road, now Willow Street in Guilderland.

"These pioneer roads", says Oliver W. Holmes, "were usually 'under brushed through', which meant that the undergrowth and small trees were cut away, and the swamps 'corduroyed'. Large trees were circumvented. There were no bridges, but the banks at the fords were cut down, making them passable in good seasons of the year and in daylight."

That flares were set out for lonely travelers is proven by an immense tallow candle, 12 inches in circumference, found in the roots of a 150 year old tree recently demolished by the roadside in the Pine Bush.

Next. The building of the Great Western Turnpike.

May 9, 1957
The Great Western Turnpike
by A.B. Gregg
Town Historian

Few people realize what a momentous period existed in our history while the Turnpike slowly crawled to the West. The entire land draped itself in mourning for its beloved George Washington. The thriving manufactory and village of Hamilton (now Guilderland) had achieved the distinct honor of being the first to name their corporation after the Secretary of the Treasury in the heyday of his popularity. The new township of Guilderland was born. The Louisiana Purchase was completed. On the continent, Napoleon Bonaparte had all but overrun Europe and was poised for the invasion of England.

Little worried over European affairs, the pioneer settlers, who had been crowding into the rich lands of central and western New York since the Revolution, were crying out for the legislature to do something to get their surplus crops and cattle to the eastern seaboard markets. These frontier communities were too poor to build costly highways, and so was the State. The solution was private capital in turnpike companies which would be chartered by the State and allowed to reimburse themselves both for their original investment and maintenance of the road by erecting every ten miles a "turn-gate" or "turnpike" which upon payment of the proper toll would be turned aside to allow the traveler to pass.

Our Great Western Turnpike was incorporated March 15, 1799, with Stephen Van Rensselaer, Lord of the Manor of Rensselaerswick, and owner of every foot of land on which we all live today, as president. There were a number of other Albany stockholders; the city itself purchased 359 shares. It was capitalized for \$180,000. The actual cost of the 52 miles from Albany to Cherry Valley was \$167,388.93. The road was completed in 1804.

Hard surfaced, it had been built by plow, scraper, cart, shovel and rake. At Guilderland, you may see today one of the deepest cuts on the whole route. A young Willow Street boy watched with breathless interest as the construction gangs worked their way with these primitive tools through the hill at Batterman's Pond. He saw the high block of sandstone from this cut taken to the glass furnaces of his father for testing and, in after years, as a world famous geologist, wrote about the event.

How thrilled he was on his first trip to Albany over the new road in his father's "One hoss shay"! At Billy McKown's his father had stopped to get a glass of bitters and to water the horse. But it was the first toll gate at Winthrop Avenue that amused him most, when out popped the keeper, and demanded twelve and a half cents to let them through. "Better take this schedule, folks", said the keeper, "You'll be needing it from now on".

May 23, 1957
The Great Western Turnpike
by A.B. Gregg
Town Historian

By no means are we dependent on imagination for an accurate picture of the Turnpike from the moment it was opened to the public. Henry R. Schoolcraft, the former Guilderland boy, writing of the incident in later years from Michigan, where he had become a world famous explorer, scientist, ethnologist and author, vividly portrayed the scenes of his youth. He told of the wagons covered with canvas, drawn by from four to eight horses, loaded with the products of the West - pork, bacon, lard, grain, flour, potash, wool and maple syrup. There were droves of cattle, hogs and even turkeys, putting up for the night at Guilderland. Then there were the emigrants, some alone on horseback, others in wagons piled high with their families and goods. And finally came the colorful stage coaches, slung from heavy leather bands and drawn by four prancing horses, these commodious coaches were crowded with travelers, both inside and on top, with the baggage and freight and mail strapped in the "boot" at the rear. Extra coaches on occasion went through like sections of the 20th Century Limited today.

In the streets might be heard, in addition to English, "nearly all the dialects of the German between the Rhine and the Danube; the Low Dutch, as spoken by the common country people of Guilderland; and the Erse and Gaelic of the Irish and Scots; and the genuine Yankee, as discoursed by wood choppers, teamsters, schoolmasters, men out at the elbows and travelling wits".

To provide for this constant stream of traffic, public houses for taverns, wagon stands and wards for overnight quartering of cattle and turkeys, began to rise as fast as capital could be secured. They were filled, all year round, day and night, from garret to cellar barroom with even the floor at a premium on which to stretch a few hours. Customers were moving at all hours, coming in until midnight, while others long before daylight were starting away.

At first no tavern existed between Billy McKown's at Fuller Road and the village of Guilderland. Exactly one lone farmhouse broke the monotony of this sandy stretch of four miles. At the northeastern corner of Willow Street, Guilderland, stood the next tavern. From an old "broadside", let me quote: "For sale. One of the most eligible situations for a Tavern in the State. That very desirable stand occupied by the subscriber as a Public House and Tavern in the village of Hamilton, eight and a half miles from Albany at the intersection of the Great Western Turnpike and the Old Schoharie Road, and is supposed to be one of the best situations on the Great Western Turnpike. Another valuable acquisition granted by the Hamilton Glass Manufacturing Co. is the privilege of selling spiritous liquors, an exclusive right granted to this house. A great benefit results from the vast companies that view the Glass Works and the number of travelers who seldom pass without making this a resting place."

- John Schoolcraft
Guilderland, Feb. 20, 1807.

Next: tavern stories

June 6, 1957
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Eventually, 50 or more taverns could be counted between Albany and Cherry Valley. One of the most conspicuous and luxurious was constructed at Guilderland. In fact, the hamlet got one of two nicknames from the builder and proprietor H. Sloan. To the "Glass House" was added the name of "Sloans". It stood on the site of the present Sunoco gas station in Guilderland until destroyed by fire in the dying years of the last century. An old photograph shows a large three story structure surmounted by four immense chimneys at each corner, with a square cupola in the center. An elaborate two story porch decorated the front. Renowned for its ballroom and its food, it became a popular place for straw rides and sledding parties from a radius of 50 miles.

Many people still remember the Case Homestead that burned a few years ago at the entrance to the Western Avenue Golf Course. Erected as a tavern soon after the construction of the Turnpike, it was the scene of a humorous incident described by Roscoe in his *History of Schoharie County*. George William Brown, son of Schoharie county's first judge and historian, at the age of 12 was able to cut a goodly share of timber which stood upon the line of the Great Western Turnpike through Carlisle. He developed into a powerful man with a notorious appetite. In drawing grain to market, several neighbors accompanied each other, and the custom was to take their own provisions along in a dinner box, but that custom was dropped in George Williams' case as he could not carry enough to appease his tireless appetite. But upon this particular occasion, he was to drive with Russell Case at what was formerly called Batterman's Mills, eight miles west of Albany. Dinner there was advertised, "All you can eat for one shilling". So George's associates planned to victimize the landlord; they even agreed to pay for his dinner.

George sat down to the table upon which was a roasted pig upon a platter in front of him. Without ceremony he took upon himself the task of carving and putting the meat down his throat without giving his fellow guests a morsel. As they watched dumbfounded, George ate the whole pig, stuffing and all. Then he called the landlord and asked, "Hash you got any more of dem leetle hocks?". Mr. Case, boiling mad at being tricked, said "Nix! You Schoharie Slaughter. More of you and I'd be out of business!"

Farther out Route 20, the present home of Supervisor Welsh is shown on the old maps as the John Fuller Tavern. The basement kitchen and barroom opened directly on the Turnpike. The huge, hand-hewn beams, the woodwork, the original 18 inch floorboards throughout all, speak of the sturdy construction that has defied the years. A home-made brick of Normanskill clay, with which the building is lined, bears the date 1809. At the rear and across the road stood large barns and stockades for droves of cattle and turkeys. Here, too, was an important toll gate.

Next: The Rabid Wolf.

June 20, 1957

The Great Western Turnpike

by A.B. Gregg

Town Historian

"The Rabid Wolf"

Savage wolves infested this section for many years after the opening of the Great Western Turnpike. From the vastness of the Pine Bush or the caves of the Helderbergs, they were a constant threat to the lone traveler or the sheepfold of the farmer. At the formation of the Town of Guilderland in 1803, one of the first laws enacted provided a twenty dollar bounty on the head of every wolf delivered to the town board.

Even the more populated centers were occasionally attacked. One night on the village of Hamilton, a foray was made by a frenzied wolf. From its wild encircling actions it was immediately seen to be rabid. Men poured out of their homes with guns that had rusted over fireplaces since the Revolution. One old patriot officer, roused from his bed, could not find his hat and clapped on a Revolutionary cocked hat which hung in his room. He halted at the brow of a hill, levelled his ancient gun at the charging wolf and fired, dropping him on the spot. The village could again sleep.

H.R. Schoolcraft told of the skill of his Latin teacher, Cleanthus Felt, who had a method all his own in baiting wolves. He knew how to make wolves follow his tracks, by smearing his shoes with asofoedita, and then ensconcing himself at night in a log pen, there to bid them defiance and shoot them down.

At the taverns, nightly discussion turned invariably to the latest depredations of the wolves. Schoolcraft relates of a trip home from Albany with a companion, a man loud in his boasting of heroic feats against these wild beasts. "We occupied my father's chaise. It was late before we got out of the city, and night overtook us away in the pine woods at Billy McKown's (Fuller and Western Turnpike), a noted public house, halfway between the city and Hamilton, where it was customary in those days to stop; for besides that he was much respected, and one of the most sensible and influential men in the town, it was not thought right, whatever the traveler might require, that a horse should be driven eight miles without drawing breath and having a pail of water. As I was young and less of a charioteer than my valiant companion, he held the whip and reins thus far; but after the wolf stories that poured in on us at McKown's, he would hold them no longer. Every man, he thought, was responsible for himself. He did not wish to be wolf's meat that night, so he hired a fleet horse from our host, and a whip and spurs, and set off with the speed of a Jehu, leaving me to make my way through the sandy plains, as best I could. In truth, we had just reached the worst sombre part of the plain, where the trees were more thick, the sand deep and heavy, and not a house but one within four miles. To render it worse, this was the chief locality where wolves had ventured to attack men. I confess, I was scared. But nothing harmed me, the horse was fine and I reached home not only uneaten but unthreatened by a wolf's jaw."

July 4, 1957

The Great Western Turnpike

by A.B. Gregg

Town Historian

(this is Mr. Gregg's final article on the history of the Turnpike. The story of this historic thoroughfare has never before been set down in its entirety and Mr. Gregg did considerable research to compile it. The Record is grateful to Guilderland's Town Historian for writing it for us.)

The Great Western Turnpike Co. was one of the few to survive the staggering blow dealt by the advent of the canals and the railroads, but in common with all other turnpikes, gave little returns to its stockholders.

When the era of the plank roads appeared it also grasped at [typesetting error - line repeated for one missing] re-incorporated as the Great Western Plank Road Co. The idea had come from Russia via Canada. The first plank road in the U.S. was built from Syracuse to Oneida Lake in 1846. The Great Western Plank Road was built in 1849. It was materially augmented by a feeder line, the Schoharie & Albany Plank Road Co. This company constructed its own road only as far as Guilderland, from which point its customers paid toll at the two remaining gates of the Great Western into Albany. A state historical marker designates the location of the first of these at the entrance to the Turnpike Drive-In Theater.

Laid on the south side of the old turnpike, the plank road was eight feet wide. Planking was laid crosswise on sills or sleepers about four inches square, embedded in packed earth. No nails were used, the weight of the heavy planking keeping them firm. The edge of the planking was purposely left uneven to help heavily loaded wagons, which had turned out, to get back again on the planked surface. While the original cost was small, about \$1,800 per mile, the depreciation was terrific. Wear and tear due to the calks of the horses's shoes and fast decay, compelled frequent repairs, with complete replacement every five years. Each time lumber was becoming scarcer and more costly. The building of the Albany and Susquehanna R.R. forced the abandonment of the Schoharie and Albany Plank Road in 1866 - a life of only 17 years. In 1877, The Great Western abandoned all but the last 10 miles into Albany. Over this stretch the traveling public was forced to pay toll for the use of a most wretched road bed until the final dissolution in 1905. Once, when a very little fellow, I rode over this section with a farmer and his load of red raspberries, bound for the Albany market. He drove on the sand, avoiding the rickety, worn planks, but at the gates he still had to pay toll.

Then after 100 years, the turnpike was free. But what a road! It was little better than the original colonial paths. To trade in nearby cities, one traveled over hard, rutty roads; in winter, often drifted full of snow, in spring through hub-deep mud, in summer through toilsome sand. One hill of sand, near the present Westmere, constantly encroached and blocked the highway, even in the early auto days. What little maintenance work was done during these years by the town and county. Not until 1916 did the State take over the Turnpike and lay a section of hard surface, but it was 1925 before it was accepted as an integral part of the now famous U.S. Route 20.

Gone are the wagons with produce of the West, the droves of cattle, the emigrants, the stage coaches and the taverns. And gone are the wolves that roamed your land. All these have been traded for massive trailer trucks, transcontinental buses, rushing tourists and motels. And we, whose lives depend so completely on the road, travel it daily, with scarcely a thought of its intriguing history.

For that reason we have given you its story - indeed it is "The Turnpike Record."