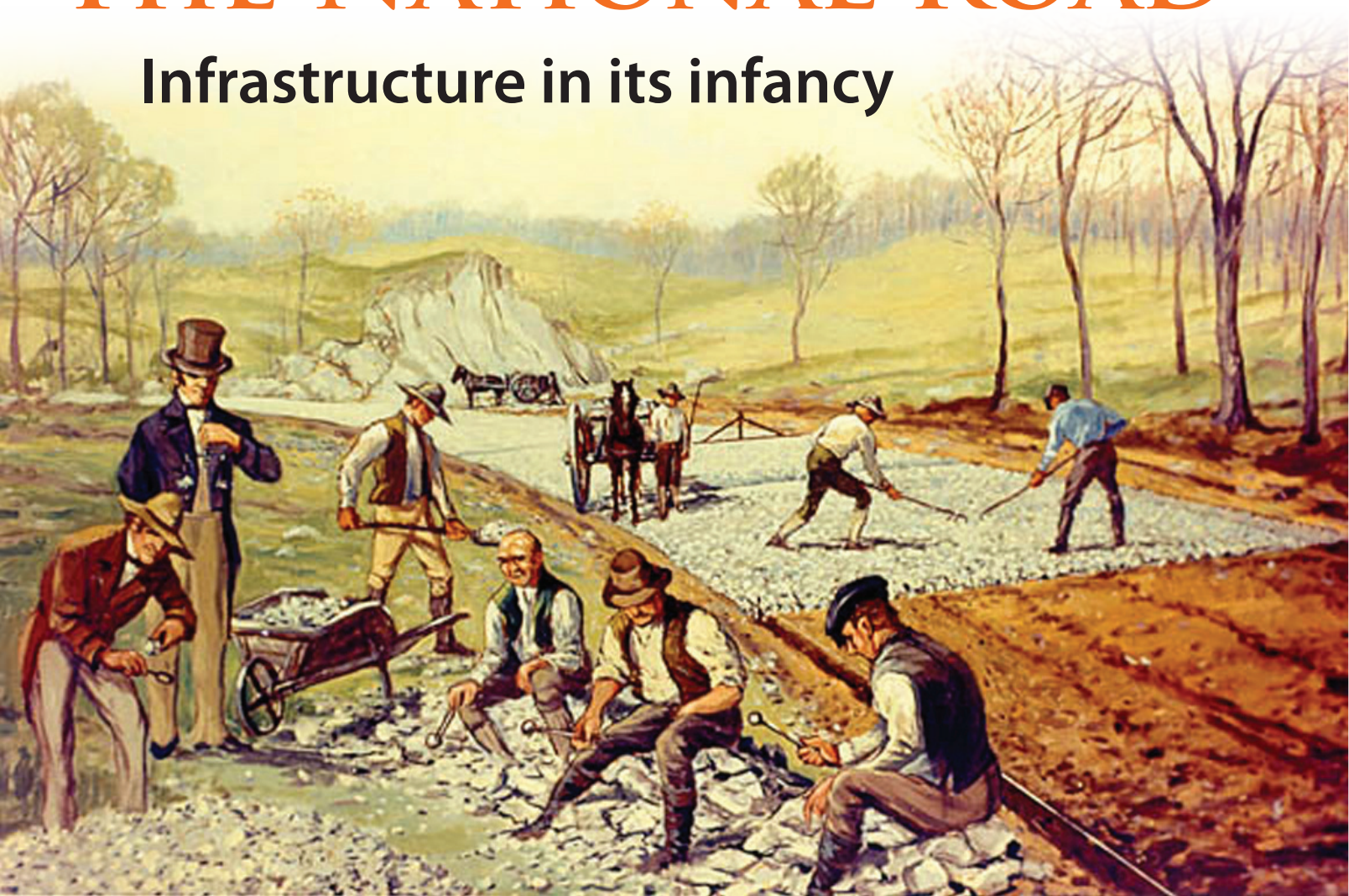


THE NATIONAL ROAD

Infrastructure in its infancy



BY LARRY STEVENS, SR/WA

In 1794, when the United States was just a fledgling country, James Madison echoed a common states rights sentiment when he said, “I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article in the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents.” Although he was not referring to the new nation’s need for roads, his sentiments reflected the thoughts of many of his peers in Congress who believed the federal government should remain limited and favored the rights of states to predominate.

George Washington held a somewhat different view, referring to progressive seating, which referred to the steady occupation of border regions and the expansion of the U.S., which necessitated federal support for roads and inland navigation. With the founding of the Potomac River Company in 1785,

Washington hoped that this private company could succeed in expanding the nation westward, doing what he felt the federal government should be doing.

Today, as we drive across America on great ribbons of iron-grey concrete with their iconic blue Interstate shields, it is hard to fathom a federal government so limited in scope and vision that many of our early leaders could not see the benefit, in fact the virtual necessity, for such infrastructure improvements. But such was the case.

Washington even “feared that the swelling population west of the Alleghenies would drift into alien orbits and would in a few short years be as unconnected to us . . . [as] we are with South America.” He warned that the western settlements “stand as it were upon a pivot the touch of a feather would

turn them any way." Despite his admonitions and the Congressional authority to "establish post roads" under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, Congress remained unconvinced throughout Washington's two terms in office, and other than the private improvements along the Potomac River, the west remained a vast and largely disconnected part of United States territory.

This changed a few years later, when President Thomas Jefferson made one of the biggest executive decisions of any president with his purchase of the Louisiana Territory, and, with the admission of Ohio to the Union in 1803, decided that he should conduct a comprehensive review the nation's need for transportation system. To that end, he commissioned Albert Gallatin, his Treasury Secretary, to write a report on roads, canals, harbors and rivers.

The 1808 landmark report was astounding in its scope. At more than 100 pages in length, it outlined a turnpike from Maine to Georgia with inland canals headed to Ohio, a canal across New York State and numerous river improvement projects along the eastern seaboard. The plan that Gallatin detailed was a utopian array of infrastructure projects with an astronomical cost of \$20 million. Even with a proposal that limited spending to \$2 million a year, Jefferson grew weak in the knees, questioned its practicality and even its constitutionality. The grand plan was shelved, never to even see the light of a Congressional debate.

The one grand project omitted from Gallatin's report was a trans-Appalachian road to Ohio. Jefferson, who shared Washington's vision for the need for projects that would unify



the young nation, had already proposed such a road. So even though he could not bring himself to support Gallatin's grand scheme, he pressed Congress hard to authorize the construction of a national road west. After a long and bruising debate in which Congress debated the role of the federal government against that of the states, ultimately the vote came down to the fact that it would be a boon to business. They finally passed the bill for a grand sum of



The National Road, 1818-1838. The first section was completed in 1818 from Baltimore to Wheeling. The road was completed across Ohio by 1828, across Indiana by 1832 and to St. Louis in 1838. In the 1840s, the road was continued to Jefferson City, Missouri. The towns along the National Road grew rapidly and became some of the most important trading centers in America.

\$30,000 in 1806, and Gallatin, as Jefferson's master builder, was given the task of carrying out Jefferson's visionary road project that would connect Cumberland, Maryland to the Ohio River, rather than his own more ambitious plan. Gallatin threw himself into coordinating surveying and planning for the project, the first 10 miles of which began construction in 1811.

Perhaps the biggest problem facing road construction 200 years ago was that weather and wagon wheel ruts would cut deep into the road surface, and even the smoothest roads could rapidly be rendered impassable. As Gallatin considered the importance of the National Road—frequently called the Cumberland Road because construction started in the tiny western Maryland town of Cumberland—he began to cast around for a more durable surface. Crushed stones had been pioneered in the early 1800's by Scottish engineer, John Loudon MacAdam and Gallatin decided that his road would be surfaced with this new material, quickly adopting its inventor's moniker, "macadam."

By 1818, the National Road had edged westward to Wheeling, Virginia, which is now West Virginia. Congress conducted another rousing debate wedged in around the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and managed to authorize an extension of the road to St. Louis, Missouri, and in 1825, its terminus was pushed on to Jefferson City, Missouri. Although Congress could agree on a destination, construction continued fitfully and without a cohesive plan for nearly 30 years until two factors brought construction to a halt. First, a financial crisis in 1837 trimmed the financial sails of Congress and the federal government, who acrimoniously found compromise with the highway's last appropriation in May 1838. Second, the building of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad paralleled the road, providing faster, more reliable and cheaper freight service. The federal death knell came when Congress, split on the state's rights issue, debated and eventually voted down completion of the road in 1840.

During the 1840's, orphaned by the federal government to state administration and completion, the National Road found travelers and drovers surging west, crowding inns and taverns along the way. Huge Conestoga wagons, along with carrying migrants westward, hauled produce from frontier farms to the east and returned with staples such as coffee and sugar. But as the railroads pushed west, the gold rush fever waned and the Civil War spurred a spiderweb of new railroad lines, the National Road degenerated into a hodge-podge of local roads that splintered and suffered from varying degrees of neglect. It continued to decay until recreational bicyclists began pushing for better surfaced paths for their daring high-wheeled ordinary bikes and the more modern "safety" bicycle (something like today's beach cruiser). In the first decade of the 20th century, horseless carriages and then automobile drivers added their voices to the growing clamor for more and better highways to connect America's growing agricultural and industrial interests.



Mile Markers: Congress required that there be distinguishing marks at regular intervals to aid travelers. The milestones were set at one-mile intervals on the north side of the road. Congress did not specify their appearance, so each state was free to select its own design. To date, over 83 of these stone markers remain along the original routes of US 40.

Motorists demanded that local governments pave main streets and looked to the states and eventually federal government to provide sound and safe surfaces to carry them and their goods to surrounding communities and beyond. Over time, the National Road was dubbed "America's Main Street" because so many small towns across middle America had grown up with it as the main street running through the town center.

While the National Road still exists in various forms today, mostly as U.S. 40, it has largely been supplanted by I-70, where fast cars and huge semis plow along at breakneck speed to get to one of its prime destinations of Baltimore, St. Louis, Denver and San Francisco. But there are still timeless little hamlets and valleys sporting small restaurants with home-cooked meals, old inns, farm houses and main streets that harken back to a time when life was a little slower and far less stressful. And if you find yourself on one of those lonely stretches of road and listen closely, you might almost hear the wheels creaking on those Conestoga wagons grinding westward with hand painted signs scrawled across the gleaming white canvas with the words, "California or Bust."

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