

## The Building of the Northwestern Turnpike in Harrison County

Legislatures of the state governments under which people of Harrison County have lived have heard continually one cry from the citizens: "Give us roads!"

Two years after the Virginia Assembly formed Harrison County, citizens of the new county petitioned the legislature for a road from the State Road<sup>1</sup> to the Little Kanawha.<sup>2</sup> Fourteen years later citizens were still petitioning the government in Richmond for a road from the State Road to the Little Kanawha River to make accessible the salt works at Bulltown.<sup>3</sup>

For a few years after 1800 the cry for roads into Harrison County shifted to the United States Congress where J. G. Jackson, a Clarksburg native who was a member of the U. S. House of Representatives, fought for the National Road to run through Harrison County and to terminate in Marietta rather than in Wheeling.<sup>4</sup>

November 21, 1826, citizens gathered at the county courthouse in Clarksburg to protest a law passed "at the last session" of the Virginia Assembly wherein a company was incorporated to build a road from Winchester through Romney and Clarksburg to the Ohio River. Edwin L. Duncan moved that a petition be carried by county delegates John Cather and George I. Williams to the legislature asking the State of Virginia to finance the road which, "when completed will furnish the most direct and advantageous rout [sic] from the Seat of the General Government, and the principal Atlantic cities to the States of Ohio, Indiana, and Missouri."<sup>5</sup> The citizens asked that further time be allowed for a compliance with the existing law and that the public engineer be directed to proceed to locate and grade the proposed road.

Hundreds of Harrison County citizens signed petitions to the Virginia Assembly in 1828 and 1830. The citizens asserted that the road via Romney through Clarksburg to the Ohio River would be "seventy miles nearer the East than the present route from Kentucky and lower Ohio" and raised the specter of Virginia sectionalism: "Without the means of interchange of thought or of political or commercial intercourse how can the people living West of the mountains ever feel towards those on the East as brethren; they never will and never can, but they must feel themselves as they pretty generally do, offcasts and aliens. As the matter now stands they are drawn to Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, where they are daily forming connections which must eventually prove highly prejudicial to the interests of Virginia, unless as a mother she extends to them that protection and patronage they have a right to expect."<sup>6</sup> Harrison County people reminded the legislature that the projected route "is the one which should have been selected for the National Road ..., has been recommended several times by the Executive of the Commonwealth ..., and has also been forcibly recommended by the able engineer of the board of public works, who surveyed the whole route, and is perfectly competent to judge of the happy effects the opening of this highway would have upon this whole region of country ... It will unquestionably pay in the way of tolls, a handsome revenue upon the amount expended. There is one thing certain, it will have a tendency to unite the East with the West, in one common feeling of interest, allay sectional jealousies, and make us as Virginians should be --- a band of brothers."<sup>7</sup>

The Virginia Assembly on March 19, 1831, passed an act to provide for the construction of a turnpike road from Winchester to some point on the Ohio, the exact course of the road to be selected by the principal engineer of the State of Virginia. The state would borrow \$125,000<sup>8</sup> and issue stock redeemable in twenty years to finance the construction. If tolls charged for passage over the road failed to meet costs of interest, redemption of the principal of money borrowed, and repairs on the road, money to meet the deficiency would be supplied by the state fund for internal improvements. The act of the legislature stipulated that the turnpike should not exceed 18 feet or be less than 12 feet in width. Through level ground the road would be raised in the middle one-twenty-fourth part of its breadth. Bridges, side ditches, gutters, and an artificial bed of stone or gravel were to be dispensed with except in instances where the chief engineer deemed them necessary. A superintendent would be hired to carry out the plans for construction of the chief engineer. "As soon as twenty miles of the said road shall be finished, it shall be lawful for the president and directors to cause a gate or gates to be erected across the said road ... and to appoint receivers of tolls at the said gates."<sup>9</sup>

The projected road was divided into an eastern division and a western division with a superintendent appointed for each of the two portions of the road. Although progress was slow on both divisions because of "the scarcity and consequent high price of labor ... and the want of proper diligence on the part of contractors", the western division suffered from the "unfitness of the superintendent of that division for his office."<sup>10</sup>

The eastern (Winchester to Romney) and the western (Romney to Parkersburg) divisions of the road were divided into sections with each section let out to contractors. Two sections lay in part in Harrison County: the 6th western, which began on the east side of the Tygart's Valley River and terminated in Clarksburg at the intersection of North Back (Pike) Street and Academy (Second) Streets; and the 7th western, which began at the terminal point of the 6th section and ran 13¼ miles west to Salem and then on into present-day Doddridge County.<sup>11</sup>

In building the 6th section the chief engineer surveyed a road through the valley and south of the pioneer road<sup>12</sup> in the town of Bridgeport and directly over the hills to Clarksburg. The board of public works described the building of the sixth western section:

At Prunty town, re-commenced the task of exploring; and between that place and Bridgeport (a distance of 11 miles), five routes were surveyed, and a careful reconnoissance taken of the intervening country, with a view to avoid two exceedingly difficult hills, Robertson's and M'Donald's. In this the success was beyond expectation, those obstacles being shunned, and a route discovered both easier and more direct than the present one. The same ridges are crossed at comparatively low points, and a great proportion of the way is through fields, by which this section, otherwise from the number of its bridges expensive, will more nearly approximate the average cost of the other sections.

The longest ascent is that of a ridge dividing Lost run and Plummer's run, upon which for nearly 3/8 of a mile the grade is as high as 4½ degrees. This grade does not recur except for very short distances, until within 3½ miles of Clarksburg.

Near Bridgeport, the turnpike will unite with the road from Morgantown and Union, Pennsylvania [Route 73]. About ¼ of a mile above Bridgeport, Simpson's creek must be crossed with a bridge of 68 3/4 feet span at 14½ above water.

Between this and Clarksburg, the location pursues, with some little variation, the route chosen by Mr. Crozet<sup>13</sup> in 1825, and proximately located by him for the neighbourhood uses of Bridgeport and Clarksburg. A road has been constructed here 12 feet wide, even now very superior to common country roads, though for economical motives, the original location was not strictly followed.

In restoring that location, the purpose of this road being different, all parts at 5 degrees were changed to 4½ degrees and 4 degrees, and a re-location was made through two sloughs, which now give much labour to teams, and will require the utmost care in the road formation.

After crossing the high ridge dividing Simpson's and Elk creeks, and within one mile of Clarksburg, a ravine is crossed by a bridge, as specified in Mr. Crozet's location. That at present built, though superior to rustic bridges, is inadequate to the purpose, not being of sufficient width, and having no abutments, with other defects not necessary to enumerate, as the necessity of substituting one of better character is sufficiently shown. The timber is however sound, and much of it might be used in the new construction.

This bridge will require two short spans of 23 feet, the central support to be a good white oak trestle; average height of abutments 15 feet, including foundation. From this point, is not quite 1 mile, entirely through fields to the crossing of Elk creek at the foot of N. Back street in Clarksburg. The creek is here crossed with a single span of 70 feet at a level of 21 feet above the water, which is in summer but a few inches deep, and the 6th western section terminates in the town at the intersection of N. Back [Pike] and Academy [Second] streets. It was inexpedient to cross at the foot of the Main street, which I regret, as the county of Harrison is under obligation to keep up a bridge at that spot, one which fell down last summer being in progress of re-construction at this time. Some intimation was made to me of a wish to make an arrangement for the mutual benefit of the North-western turnpike company, and the citizens of Clarksburg, but having no authority to make contracts, I referred the applicants to your honorable body, and proceeded with the location, making in the mean time such examinations as would assist in any future arrangement between you.

The length of this section is 18 ¾ miles through very favourable ground; and the subjoined statement exhibits a view of the location from Romney westward as far as progressed in.

Commencing at Romney:

The length of	1st western section	22 miles 0.65 chains
	2nd	20 miles 2.25 chains
Distance through	Maryland	8 miles 67.89 chains
Length of	3rd western section	9 miles 39.10 chains
	4th	9 miles 13.90 chains
	5th	22 miles 23.28 chains
	6th	18 miles 64.02 chains

Distance from Romney

to Clarksburg	By location	110 miles 51.09 chains
	By 1st survey	107 miles 0.00 chains

Distance added in location 3 miles 51.09 chains<sup>14</sup>

The first six sections of the western division of the road were opened by the end of the year 1834. The construction of the road from Clarksburg to Parkersburg met much the same fate as that of the road to the mouth of the Little Kanawha authorized by the Virginia Assembly in October 1786, a road built east from Clarksburg to the State Road but a road west from Clarksburg to Parkersburg described by a traveler in 1798 as nothing but a blazed way through the woods.<sup>15</sup> In 1834 the 9th section of the Western Division of the Northwestern Turnpike was "untouched" and on parts of the road "grubbing was so imperfectly done that I could distinguish stumps in the middle of the road from which the earth, intended to conceal them, had been washed away."<sup>16</sup> The board of public works in March 1836 dismissed William S. Naylor, superintendent of the western division of the road, and replaced him with Josiah D. Wilson.<sup>17</sup>

One cause for the delay in construction of the 7th through 10th sections of the road was contention over the direction of the route. Chief Engineer Crozet had surveyed the route via Limestone Creek to Salem, then to Middle Island Creek and on to Parkersburg; later a survey was made of a route from Clarksburg via Rock Camp gap to Middlebourne and Sistersville. The route via Limestone Creek and Salem was chosen because it was shorter, the Parkersburg terminus would be nearer Cincinnati in Ohio, and the road via Salem easier to construct than one to Sistersville: "From Clarksburg to Salem is 13¼ miles, and thence by survey to Parkersburg is 66 miles; no obstacle is found on this route until after crossing Middle Island Creek."<sup>18</sup>

Building the 7th section from the end of the 6th section at Academy Street (Second) in Clarksburg to Limestone Creek two miles west required crossing Elk Creek at its mouth, where the turnpike used the bridge built by J. G. Jackson in 1816-1817<sup>19</sup> and the West Fork River at Adamston, where a new bridge was constructed. Phineas Chapin was paid \$3,325; Thomas Prim, \$2,450; and John Wilson, Jr., \$4,000 for work on this bridge.<sup>20</sup> The board of public works remarked as to the cost of bridges: "The whole of this road [Northwestern Turnpike] is remarkable for the expensiveness of its bridges, which must be raised to great elevations on account of the rapid and high swells of all the western rivers, and must besides, be constructed with great spans to give a free passage to the enormous trees which are brought down from their wild banks in the present uncultivated state of the country; some of these bridges cost very nearly as much as a section of road of 20 miles, without bringing any revenue; and stand, besides, much exposed to depredations. Some watch should be kept over them; but there is no authority to employ agents for the purpose."<sup>21</sup>

Many letters from the clerk of the board of public works were addressed to Waldo P. Goff who, as former member of the Virginia House of Delegates and a leading Harrison County citizen, frequently wrote the board as to the construction of the road. On March 30, 1836, the clerk of the board informed Goff that Superintendent Naylor had been replaced by Superintendent Wilson and that Phineas Chapin's letter, in which Chapin asked to be named contractor of the Rock Run Bridge, had been laid before the board.<sup>22</sup>

In the spring of 1837 the board of public works received from Superintendent Wilson estimates which were so inflated that the board threatened to cancel all work on the turnpike:

Richmond 24th April 1837

J. D. Wilson, Clarksburg  
Dear Sir,

Your communication of the 15th inst. with its enclosures was this day received and submitted to the consideration of the Board.

After the most mature reflection the Board have come to the determination of suspending the work on all the sections of the Road not now under contract, until an opportunity shall occur of prosecuting it on more favorable terms than those contained in the proposals transmitted by you. They have therefore declined accepting any of the bids for the 7th section, and have furthermore instructed me to inform you, that should Mr. Farr fail to enter at once into a contract for the 8th section agreeably to his understanding with the Board, you are to suspend taking any steps to relet that section, as authorized by my letter of the 21st inst., until you receive further instructions; and should Mr. Creel not have entered into a contract for the 9th section, when you receive this, that section is also to remain unlet.

There can be no doubt, considering the number of works of internal improvement which have been abandoned at the North, from the pecuniary embarrassment which prevades the whole union, and the consequent want of funds to continue the prosecution of such works, that the present high prices of labour and provisions must very soon experience a considerable reduction. And desirous as the Board are to get this road completed during this year, the fact that they cannot acquiesce in the high rates demanded without exceeding the funds placed at their disposal is alone sufficient to justify the course they have resolved upon. Even the additional sum of \$50,000, which the last Legislature authorized them to borrow, was insufficient to cover their then existing engagements with the attendant expenses, and they would not be justified in knowingly entering into contracts requiring the expenditure of more money than the Legislature had appropriated for the road. A more favorable state of things may be confidently anticipated at an early day.

I have little doubt that the principal cause of the present proposals being so immoderately high, may be found in a belief on the part of the people along the line, that the Board are determined to have the road completed during the present year, cost what it may. If I am correct, the present decision of the Board will have a very beneficial effect and no doubt enable them to prosecute the work at fair prices.

A letter was also received today from Gilpin and Stout declaring their intention to abandon their work unless the Board increased their compensation. This the Board have refused to do, as well for the reasons stated in regard to the 7th and other sections, as from a full belief that it would be only an entering wedge for a similar application from every contractor on the line.

You will please inform Messrs Gilpin and Stout of the Board's decision & oblige

Yours,  
W. H. Brown, Ckl. 23

The threat by the board of public works to cancel construction of the turnpike immediately stopped the cost overrun. It took no longer than the time needed for J. D. Wilson to announce to the contractors the board's decision and a response to the letter from the board to reach Richmond for the clerk of the board to be again writing J. D. Wilson directions for construction of the 7th, 8th, and 9th sections of the turnpike at costs which the board of public works could approve.<sup>24</sup>

To comply with the Act of March 1831, which authorized the turnpike, a tollgate must be installed at the end of every twenty miles of the road. On August 14, 1837, the clerk of the board of public works wrote J. D. Wilson authorizing him to purchase two acres of ground "on the top of the ridge" between Bridgeport and Clarksburg for the erection of a tollgate and buildings needed to collect tolls.<sup>25</sup> Mrs. William T. Owens, who in 1981 is ninety-five years old, remembers seeing the tollgate installation atop Bridgeport Hill when she was a child.<sup>26</sup>

Although the legislation for the turnpike in 1831 required tolls only at twenty-mile intervals, a later law must have made collection of tolls at certain bridges legal for Harvey W. Harmer recalls, "[A tollgate] was at [the Adamston] bridge. The writer well remembers coming to Clarksburg as a boy [circa 1880] and paying toll to 'General Banks', the old toll keeper."<sup>27</sup>

After the turnpike opened in 1838, money from tolls poured into the state treasury. The report of the board of public works in 1840 tells the story:

Northwestern Turnpike

Revenue: The receipts of the road have increased to such an extent, that we have been enabled not only to defray the expenses of repairs, for which I had feared that we might fall \$4,000 short, but that we have also met extraordinary charges for toll-houses, repairs and improvements of bridges, and additional expenses connected with the South Branch bridge; and that, in all probability, we shall have satisfied all demands against the road by the 1st January, so that even if no increase takes place in the receipts next year, we may reasonably expect a surplus of about \$4,000, applicable either to the improvement of the road, or to any other purpose the board may please to direct ...

Cost: This being the longest, as well as the best road of the kind in the state, through a mountainous and difficult country, it may be interesting to shew here, in conclusion, a statement of its cost.

The construction of the road proper, or that part which generally is done by contract, has cost very little upwards of \$196,000, which being for 235 miles, makes it \$835 per mile, the road being mostly from 20 to 22 feet wide; only eight miles of it are at the reduced width of 17 feet.

The expenses generally included under the head of contingencies, such as cost of land, toll-houses, salaries of agents, etc., have amounted to about \$27,500, which is 14 per cent on the cost of the road proper.

To these must be added for M'Adamizing \$20,286  
And, finally, for bridging, about 82,000<sup>28</sup>

The board of public works in 1840 reported "that the improvement of the country [the Northwestern Turnpike] traverses progresses with wonderful and gratifying rapidity."<sup>29</sup> Inns and taverns were built six miles apart along the entire length of the road. Sheep, hogs, cattle, geese, and turkeys were driven to market over the road and held at night in pens built near the taverns along the road.<sup>30</sup> A daily line of stagecoaches ran from Parkersburg to Romney starting in June 1840.<sup>31</sup>

Clarksburg was the center for the road since during construction all letters to the superintendent of the western division were addressed to Clarksburg. After the road was built "Mr. J. D. Wilson, the former superintendent of the western division, was appointed, and took charge of the whole line [Winchester to Parkersburg] on 1st April [1840]"<sup>32</sup> Letters from the board of public works were addressed to Superintendent Wilson in Clarksburg continuously from 1840 to 1851.<sup>33</sup>

The residential district of Clarksburg shifted from Main Street to North Back Street, renamed "Pike Street." One year after the road opened in 1838 Waldo P. Goff built for his bride a house, later named "Waldomore", on the turnpike in Clarksburg and a few years later James Madison Jackson built for his bride a house which stood facing the turnpike one-half mile east of Waldomore.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The State Road ran from Winchester by way of Romney to Morgantown. Henry Haymond, History of Harrison County, p. 251.
2. Virginia, General Assembly, Legislative Petitions, Harrison County, December 5, 1786.
3. Ibid., December 6, 1797, December 13, 1800.
4. Dorothy Davis, John George Jackson, pp. 104-5.
5. Virginia, General Assembly, Legislative Petitions, Harrison County, December 7, 1826.
6. Ibid., December 5, 1828.
7. Ibid., December 8, 1830.
8. The Virginia Assembly appropriated additional sums of \$86,000 on February 6, 1834, and \$50,000 on March 30, 1837. Virginia, General Assembly, Acts, 1833-1834, p. 104; 1836-1837, p. 82.
9. Virginia, General Assembly, Acts, 1830-1831, pp. 153-8.
10. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report, 1834/1835 - 1835/1836, p. 19.
11. Ibid.
12. "The pioneer road ... ran in front of the old church in the Bridgeport Cemetery, through land included in what is called 'Willis Addition', a little north of Mechanic Street and down the hill to the creek below, from where the road proceeded on to Clarksburg via Grasselli [Anmoore]. Dorothy Davis History of Harrison County, p. 343.
13. Claudius Crozet, the principal engineer of the State of Virginia, was a native of France who had served as an engineer in the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte. Crozet had inspected the West Fork River dams near Clarksburg in 1824.
14. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report, 1831/1832-1833/1834, pp. 86-7, 89.
15. Henry Haymond, p. 251.
16. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report, 1831/1832-1833/1834, p. 19.
17. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Northwestern Turnpike, Letter Book A.
18. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report 1831/1832-1833/1834, pp. 88-9.
19. Dorothy Davis, John George Jackson, pp. 276-7.
20. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Northwestern Turnpike, Minute Book II. William S. Naylor, superintendent of the western division 1832-1836 estimated the cost of the Elk Creek Bridge near the terminus of the 6th section to be \$2,100; the Simpson Creek Bridge near Bridgeport, \$1,440. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Northwestern Turnpike, Letter Book A.
21. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report, 1837/1838, p. 16.
22. Chapin was awarded the contract to build the bridge on June 24, 1836. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Northwestern Turnpike, Letter Book A.
23. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Northwestern Turnpike, Letter Book A.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Mrs. W. T. Owens in a conversation with Dorothy Davis, April 1972. Mrs. Owens was born August 3, 1886. Louise Hornor in a conversation with Dorothy Davis June 20, 1981.
27. Harvey W. Harmer, Covered Bridges of Harrison County [West Virginia], p. 34.
28. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report, 1839/1840, pp. 475-8.
29. Ibid., p. 475
30. John Randolph Schaeffer, Over the Alleghenies by the Northwestern Turnpike, p. 64.
31. Henry Haymond, p. 269.
32. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Annual Report, 1839-1840, p. 475.
33. Virginia, Board of Public Works, Northwestern Turnpike, Letter Book B.

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