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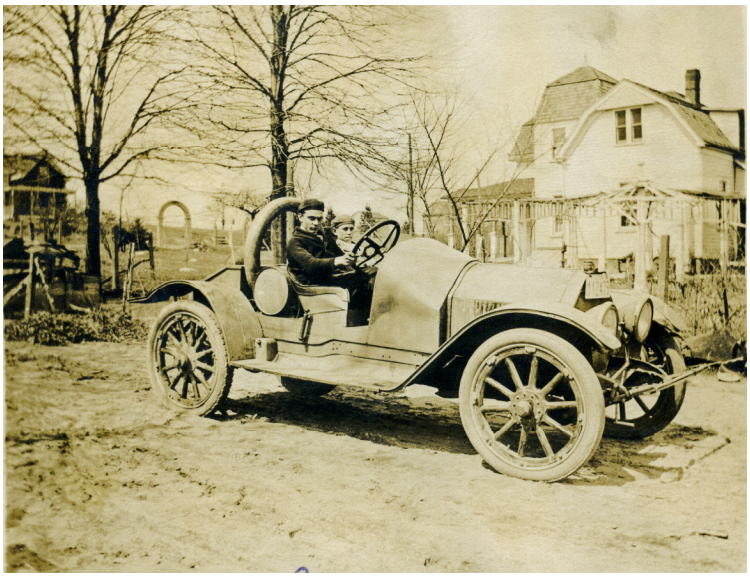
SADDLE BROOK HISTORICAL SOCIETY – MAY 2014

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

This has been a banner year for road travel problems: including potholes; painful fare increases for Hudson River crossing commuters and an unbelievable, politically motivated George Washington Bridge entrance-road scandal. Roadways have never received a great deal of attention, except for a few famous roadways such as the Chisholm Trail, the Cumberland Trail and the Santa Fe Trail. The evolution of our nation's roads has seemingly been of little historical interest. Roadways simply exist to take us from "point A to point B." As an "old timer," I've seen the growth of roadways within and around my hometown, Saddle Brook, as well as interstate highways that have emerged through the years. I've seen the beginnings of Route 80, the Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike as well as the demise of Route 66, Steinbeck's "Mother of Roads" – the once famous corridor through our southwest and now a virtually unused relic of the past.

We inherited our first roads from Native Americans who had burned out an extensive system of trails throughout the eastern coast, from Canada to Florida. Saddle River Road which colonists appropriately called Swamp Lane was one of them.

Roadways grew as our nation grew, and it was George Washington who saw the commercial importance and envisioned a functional roadway between the east and the midwest. Washington didn't live to see its initiation; it was Thomas Jefferson who championed the idea of connecting the East with the Ohio Territory. In 1806, his efforts culminated with Congress funding a turnpike which would link Cumberland, Maryland with Wheeling, West Virginia, our first national highway. It was completed in 1819. This was a vast improvement over waterway travel which was far slower than direct, horse-drawn wagon travel. Even so, the national road effort was neglected for a period of time by the introduction of railroads as a major purveyor of freight during the 1800's.



At the end of the Nineteenth Century, the need for improved roadways again came into focus with the arrival of two new inventions, the bicycle and the "horseless carriage." In 1894, the Department of Budget Office and Road Inquiry backed a program to sponsor a $10,000 project to build one-half mile "seed" roads throughout the country. These roads were an inducement for continued building which would be funded at local levels and displace muddy, debris-filled and often inundated roadways. Lobby groups such as the League of American Wheelmen for bicyclists and the League for American Motor Roadmen for automobiles joined the effort. Car manufacturers such as Olds, Durant and Ford with his famous "Tin Lizzie" also lobbied for construction.

After WWI, people were motivated to travel. In 1919, the government, interested in national defense and our ability to move troops from one end of the country to the other, had the Motor Transportation Corps conduct an expedition of seventy-four vehicles from the East Coast to the West Coast. The trip which took a disappointing sixty-four days was highlighted by breakdowns and often flooded and barely used roads. Our thirty-fourth President, Dwight Eisenhower, then an army major, took part in the trek. His experiences would evolve into a lifetime pursuit.

In 1923, the government became interested in standardizing what had become a "jumble" of highway designations. Road numbers from east to

west would be even numbered, while those from north to south would become odd. Lowest numbers would be issued from north to south and from east to west. Route 2 in Paramus which was bordered on each side by celery farms with pitch black soil would be changed to Route 17 to match up with Route 17 in New York. In the 1930's, Route 4 (formerly Garretson's Lane in the Fair Lawn segment) connected the George Washington Bridge to Broadway, Paterson. It is not known when the first Route 4 Bridge traversing the Saddle River was constructed. Old photographs of Easton's Tower show a lake used for row boating where the present Route 4 Bridge now exists. It is possible that the wooden bridge directly south of Easton's Tower was the only Saddle River crossing. The question is when?

Fritz Benke notes in his *Paramus: The Way We Were* that these new roads traversed farms and subsequently isolated portions of them. On the other hand, many farmers were happy to see increases in their property values. Catherine Onerevole remembers when her father, Candido Belli, had to move his house in the Fifth Street area because it would be in the middle of the Route 46 right-of-way. This was during the 1930's. "The house was moved one block, south of Route 46. It was amazing to see them move a house on huge logs. To be sure the logs rolled easily; the workers covered them with Octagon Soap. My Cousin Mae and I collected the Octagon wrappers for our mothers to use as coupons. In 1968, the house was purchased by the Department of Transportation for a jug-handle to exit the highway on Fifth Street." The jug-handle was never constructed, and the area is still a vacant lot.

Over time our old township roads improved to accommodate changing needs. Midland Avenue and Saddle River Road were widened during the Twenties as trucks replaced wagons. Fred Berghan of Berghan's Nursery recalled that the hill adjacent to the cemetery was too high for safe travel and had to be lowered. The change in elevation can still be seen today. Sidewalks and curbs were installed on Saddle River Road in 1929, and John Addick who lived at 267 recalled that the improvements brought peddlers selling dry goods, pots and pans, butchered meat and fish. Market Street which connected Paterson to Hackensack is an old road that reflected the growth of the two cities in the 1700's. The concrete Market

Street Bridge over Saddle River replaced a wooden bridge. The "new" concrete bridge was constructed in 1924 and was designated as Route 10 as can be noted on the pillars at each end. Fair Lawn Parkway began at Route 4 and its southward completion was halted by WWII. Outwater Lane is also of special interest. In 1776, Washington's army had to retreat from overwhelming British forces. After retreating west on Outwater Lane, they crossed the Acquackanonk Bridge which they immediately dismantled. Three future Presidents - Washington, Madison and Monroe - were among those ragged patriots as were Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Paine. Westminster Place is of parenthetical interest since it was considered as a possible passway for Route 80. Instead, we lost the historical Demarest House across from the Saddle Brook Diner.

To continue this chronology, it was Franklin Roosevelt who resumed the national highway mission. In 1933, he and Thomas MacDonald, Director of the United States Department of Roads developed preliminary plans. The Taconic State Parkway in New York is one result of their collaboration. In 1956, the Federal Highways Act followed MacDonald's planning model for a national highway system. The Act was signed by President Eisenhower. At least one historian has suggested that the President used a communism scare tactic to gain congressional support. In any event, 41,000 miles of highway were completed.

Here we are in Saddle Brook, conveniently nestled between Route 17, Route 208 and the New Jersey Turnpike with the Garden State Parkway and Route 80 transecting – what a great location! So, as you travel the Garden State Parkway, think of Dwight Eisenhower and his 1919 cross-country journey. Think of the Lenni-Lenapes as you drive along Saddle River Road, and imagine George Washington and the other ragtag patriots who fled from the British on Outwater

Lane. Without the Lane and the Acquackanonk Bridge, the war might have been over in 1776

Sources:

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Paramus: The Way We Were – Fritz Behnke

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Historic National Road: The Road That Built the Nation – Maryland Travel Bureau

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