The Susquehanna Turnpike

By Joan Odess

1750-1790s

Mountains, streams and thick forests made the interior of New York State difficult to reach. In 1753 Catskill explorer and pioneer, Gideon Hawley described the landscape as "*obstructed by fallen trees, old logs, miry places, pointed rock and entangling roots*."

> Gideon Hawley as quoted by Seymour Dunbar in *A History of Travel in America*

As European settlers pushed farther westward in search of more land, they made their way down the Susquehanna River, following trails made by Native Americans and marks on trees made by the few settlers that had gone before them.

After the Revolutionary war, there was an increase in westward migration, creating a need for new and better roads as the existing trails were not wide enough to accommodate wagons. In response, NYS attempted to improve existing roads using money raised from lotteries. In August 1790, hired by the State, Surveyor C. Gelston set out to map and evaluate the condition of a route from Wattles Ferry on the Susquehanna River to Catskill on the Hudson River by way of Windham.

The lotteries failed to raise sufficient funds and the State turned to chartering turnpikes, roads owned and maintained by private companies, instead.

1800-1806

In a study of the New York turnpike movement in 1806 by Benjamin DeWitt, 67 turnpike road companies and 21 bridge companies were listed.

"*Twenty-eight roads may be said to be finished, comprising together a distance of nine hundred miles of turnpike road complete…*"

> Early study of the turnpikes: Benjamin De Witt, *A sketch of the turnpike roads in the state of New-York*

On April 1, 1800 the New York State Legislature approved the Charter that created the Susquehanna Turnpike Road Company. The Susquehanna Turnpike would begin at Catskill and end at Unadilla/Wattles Ferry, a distance of about 90 miles. Rather than passing through Windham, the road would follow a route farther north through Conesville.

Investors purchased shares in the Susquehanna Turnpike Road Company, thus financing the construction of the road.

Construction

Building a proper road involved a costly expenditure of time and materials. The burden of labor fell literally on the backs of men who were poorly compensated for their work.

"*The last resource is to engage to work upon the turnpike roads. Here the labourer will get one*

dollar per day, and must find himself meat, drink, washing, and lodging. The day's work is tasked, and if not accomplished, his wages are docked…"

Clements Burleigh's letter of "Advice to Emi grants to America" published early 1800s in *Travels Through the United States of America* by John Melish

In 1792, the legislature gave specific directions for improving public roads and building bridges: "*Every bridge…erected and constructed pursuant to this act, shall be made of stone masonry, and shall be covered with timber or plank, of at least four inches thick with a strong rail work on each side…*"

Act of NYS Legislature

Progress was slow and setbacks were numerous. In the spring of 1804 "*four valuable bridges on the Susquehanna Turnpike were washed out*."

J. Van Vechten Vedder's *History of Greene County*

After five years of toil, the Turnpike was completed in 1806.

Tollgates

In order to maintain the road and pay the dividends owed to the Susquehanna Turnpike Road Company shareholders, tollgate houses were built every ten miles. Here the tollgate keeper lived and received a salary in return for collecting tolls from travelers.

Rates of toll varied according to type of traffic. "*…the General Turnpike Act of 1807 gave lower toll rates to wagons with six-inch weels, and free passage to those with twelve-inch wheels as these damaged the road less than more narrow ones*".

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*

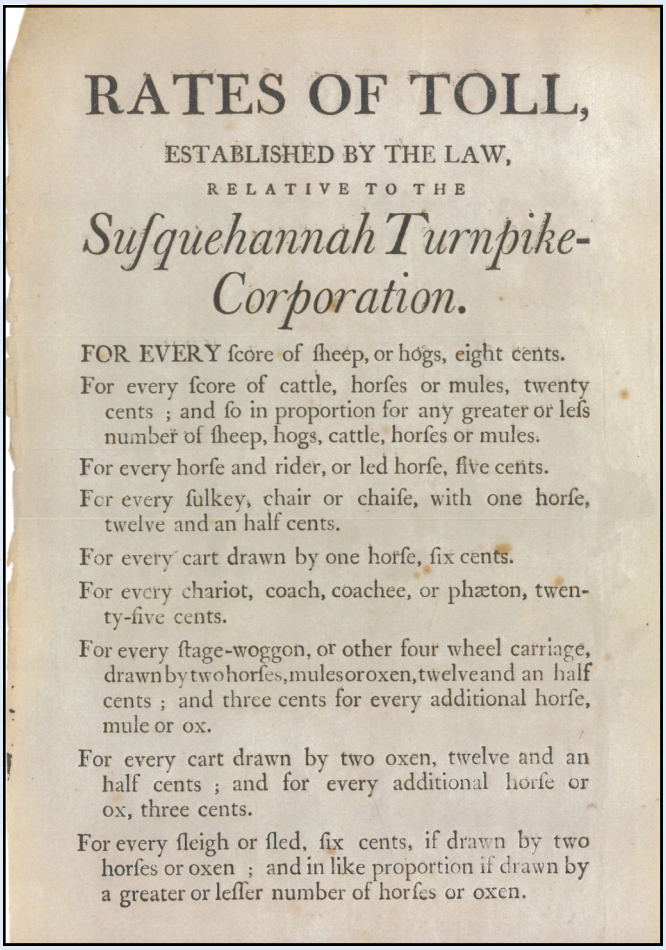
Local residents often tried to evade the toll by creating shunpikes, roads which branched off the turnpike before the tollgate and rejoined the turnpike beyond the gate. Miller Hill Road in Meredith was one such road. An act passed in 1822 allowed the Susquehanna Turnpike Road Company to move the Meredith tollgate from near Miller Hill Road to a mile or so beyond Elk Creek Road so as to catch any shunpikers, as the evaders were called. "*Shunpikers, if caught, had to pay three times the toll*."

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*"

To cope with the loss of revenue resulting from shunpikes, the company was granted permission to establish tollgates at five-mile intervals instead of ten-mile intervals and collect half the fare at each, thereby decreasing the effectiveness of these roads.

Commerce

The turnpike provided access to three major waterways and allowed merchants to ship their goods more quickly and cheaply than hauling



RATES OF TOLL,

ESTABLISHED BY THE LAW,

RELATIVE TO THE

Susquehannah Turnpike-Corporation.

FOR EVERY ſcore of ſheep, or hogs, eight cents.

For every ſcore of cattle, horſes or mules, twenty cents ; and ſo in proportion for any greater or leſs number of ſheep, hogs, cattle, horſes or mules.

For every horſe and rider, or led horſe, five cents.

For every ſulkey, chair or chaiſe, with one horſe, twelve and an half cents.

For every cart drawn by one horſe, ſix cents.

For every chariot, coach, coachee, or phæton, twenty-five cents.

For every ſtage-woggon, or other four wheel carriage, drawn by two horſes, mules or oxen, twelve and an half cents ; and three cents for every additional horſe, mule or ox.

For every cart drawn by two oxen, twelve and an half cents ; and for every additional horſe or ox, three cents.

For every ſleigh or ſled, ſix cents, if drawn by two horſes or oxen ; and in like proportion if drawn by a greater or leſſer number of horſes or oxen.

them overland the entire way. Waterways included the Hudson which connected merchants with New York City, the Delaware which led to Philadelphia and the Susquehanna which emptied into the Chesapeake Bay.

Purchase prices for goods delivered to New York City were published in local newspapers advising rural merchants of the market value of their goods.

"*In the case of the Susquehanna Turnpike, the main return that stockholders envisioned would come in the form of new settlers clearing and developing the land along the route, and the flourishing of business as a result*."

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*

Businesses of every kind could be found from one end of the turnpike to the other.

"*Droves of hundreds of head of cattle and sheep were passed daily."*

Dr. Gaius L. Halsey *Reminiscences* 1890

"*Some taverns catered to the numerous drovers who thronged the road with their animals. ... the tavern would have to be some distance from the local village in order to provide fields for the livestock. The tavern keeper would also need to have watering troughs to refresh the animals after their long tiring walk*".

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*

"Stages with three and four extra teams heavily loaded hourly passed both ways. Private carriages without number were to be seen loaded with people and their baggage, going on journeys to visit friends at a distance."

Dr. Gaius L. Halsey *Reminiscences* 1890

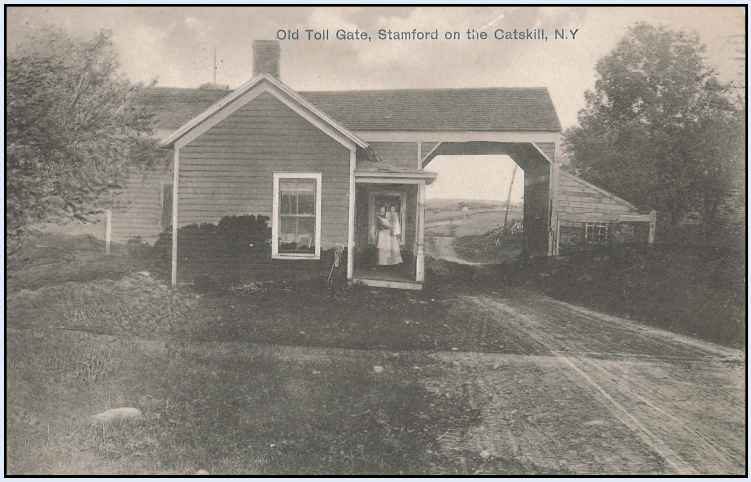
Mile markers were erected at one-mile intervals along the turnpike to avoid fare disputes between stagecoach drivers and passengers,

"The idea of capitalizing on the Westward Movement by opening a tavern caught on quickly, and these establishments proliferated along the route of the turnpike. It was said that travelers could find a tavern every mile."

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*

Taverns provided a resting-place and a meal for weary travelers who, in turn supplied tavern keepers and fellow patrons with news from distant towns.

Not all taverns were reputable as noted by Samuel J. Parker in 1838. "*It is true that there were 'taverns' and drunkards about them, a robber-like tavern keeper who expected every stage-coach passenger to pay his then three cents for his glass of homemade whiskey, and looked dangerously at every one of us that would not buy his alcoholic fluid. So that by advice of the stage driver we bought custard*



pies, villainously made, or the worse mince pies, or the 'last of earth's abominations,' ginger cake, to relieve the landlord of the taverns, at one to three cents apiece. Or the root beer, often made quite well, at times like sweetened woodashes, lye; undrinkable; the whiskey drinkers taking the whiskey, that for hours

stank up the stage coach, when the curtains were drawn in cool weather…"

David George Erdmann *The Catskills*, Winter 1972-73 "The Susquehanna Turnpike"

Decline

The decline of the Susquehanna Turnpike resulted from a number of factors. Maintenance was a constant problem resulting in loss of revenue and further deterioration of the road. When a stretch of road was not in good repair the tollgate was left open and no tolls were collected.

Uriah Edwards of New Canaan, Connecticut, traveled the turnpike in 1828 on his way to visit his brother in Cortland County. He had paid no toll until he reached the Town of Lisle in Broome County, where he was stopped by a closed gate. "*I Remonstrated with the Gate Keeper (a little Girl) and informed her that I had not paid any toll for many Miles on account of the Road being out of repair.*" When the girl still demanded the toll, Edwards criticized the tollgate-- which was "*nothing more or less that a Pine Pole across the Road. I told the little Girl it was the meanest Gate I ever saw. She replied that the Gate was no meaner that the People that travelled the Road. I was pleased with her observation and paid the fees…*"

Uriah Edwards in "Journal of my travels…"
Courtesy of the NYS Library

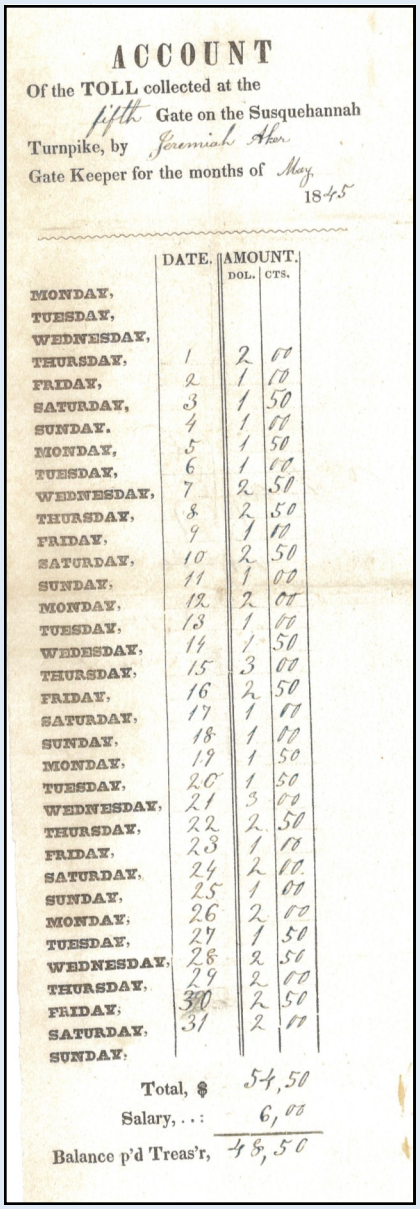
"*The chartering and construction of the Charlotte Turnpike in 1833 delivered a killing blow to the western section of the Susquehanna Turnpike. Beginning in Harpersfield, where the Susquehanna Turnpike turned off toward Kortright, the Charlotte Turnpike followed the Charlotte River to its meeting with the Susquehanna River. The new turnpike followed an easier grade and a shorter route to the Susquehanna, thus diverting traffic from the more difficult Wattles Ferry route*."

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*

"The Susquehanna Turnpike concluded its short-lived glory days with a long, lingering deterioration. The dates of its beginning and ending look impressive: 1800-1901—one hundred years. However, the turnpike was intact for less than 50 of those years."

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*

"*In the short term, the Susquehanna Turnpike was a success, but it may have become a victim of that very success. The main purpose of the turnpike had been to make a good road through the wilderness to the Susquehanna River and thus provide easier access to the West, and to give western set-*

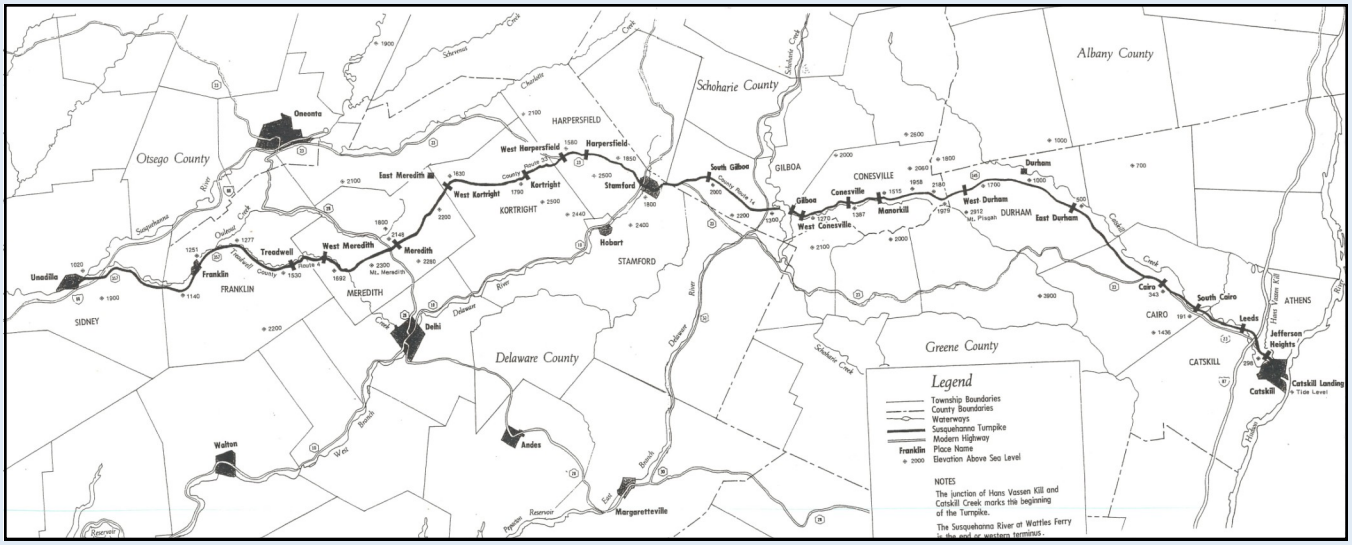


ACCOUNT

Of the TOLL collected at the fifth Gate on the Susquehannah Turnpike, by Jeremiah Akin Gate Keeper for the months of May, 1845

DATE.	AMOUNT. DOL.	CTS.
MONDAY,		
TUESDAY,		
WEDNESDAY,		
THURSDAY, 1	2	00
FRIDAY, 2	1	00
SATURDAY, 3	1	50
SUNDAY. 4	1	00
MONDAY, 5	1	50
TUESDAY, 6	1	00
WEDNESDAY, 7	2	50
THURSDAY, 8	2	50
FRIDAY, 9	1	00
SATURDAY, 10	2	50
SUNDAY, 11	1	00
MONDAY, 12	2	00
TUESDAY, 13	1	00
WEDNESDAY, 14	1	50
THURSDAY, 15	3	00
FRIDAY, 16	2	50
SATURDAY, 17	1	00
SUNDAY, 18	1	00
MONDAY, 19	1	50
TUESDAY, 20	1	50
WEDNESDAY, 21	3	00
THURSDAY, 22	2	50
FRIDAY, 23	1	00
SATURDAY, 24	2	00
SUNDAY, 25	1	00
MONDAY, 26	2	00
TUESDAY, 27	1	50
WEDNESDAY, 28	2	50
THURSDAY, 29	2	00
FRIDAY, 30	2	50
SATURDAY, 31	2	00
SUNDAY.		

Total, $ 54,50
Salary, . . : 6,00
Balance p'd Treas'r, 48,50

tlements better access to the eastern markets. This it did do for several decades."

Dorothy Kubik's, *West Through the Catskills: The Susquehanna Turnpike*