

THE TURNPIKE ERA

AFTER the close of the War for Independence, Rhode Island witnessed a vast improvement in its facilities for transportation, both by water and by land. Vessels of greater tonnage were built, and lines of ships running to several coast ports were built. Besides, the various ferry crossings in the State were thereafter maintained with a greater degree of efficiency. Lines of stages were established to Taunton, New Bedford, Worcester, Plainfield, Springfield and to other places, while the main stage line between Boston and New York, via Providence, was so much improved that the time for the trip was reduced to three days, going in either direction. Facilities for transporting freight were also provided on these same routes. However, the great obstacle to fast communication and transportation by land in those days was the unimproved condition of the roads. The citizens who happened to live along these main lines of communication showed no interest in the upkeep and improvement of the roads because, in their opinion, only strangers and stage owners from other States derived any profit from this new and rapidly-growing industry of carrying passengers and goods. Likewise, the owners of stage and transportation lines did not care to spend money to put the roads in first-class condition when the residents

along the lines would receive the chief benefit from such expenditures.

This short-sighted attitude on the part of all concerned finally led to the introduction of what might be termed the "turnpike era" in Rhode Island. Under the system of turnpikes, a corporation assumed the care of a particular stretch of road and charged everyone, neighbor or stranger, a given fee for the use of it, every time such use was made. Fees were charged according to the extent of the use made; thus, a wagon or team with four cattle was charged less than one with more; a single horse and chaise less than a coach and more horses, etc. This strange schedule of rates seems to have been derived from the early system of charging bridge tolls, long the custom at that time. The original idea of the toll-bridge was that those who originally built a bridge were entitled to the use of it free, yet strangers were required to bear their fair share of the expenses of maintaining the structure. During the days of Roger Williams, the Wapweyset Bridge, one of the earliest erected in Providence, was free to all citizens of the Town, while all strangers were required to pay tolls.

The first turnpike of which there is any record in the statutes was on the line from Boston to New York; it was in existence previous to the year 1798 and was called

the Providence and Norwich turnpike. The Providence and Boston turnpike was in active use before the turn of the century, having been built under an act of the Massachusetts legislature; also, an act to incorporate the same was passed in Rhode Island on October 29, 1800. Turnpikes to East Greenwich, Gloucester, the Island of Rhode Island, Smithfield, Pawtucket, Wickford, Coventry, Cranston, Foster, Cumberland, Worcester and other places were incorporated during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and until the introduction of railroads, the turnpike was regarded, naturally, as the highest development of land communication.

The development of industry in Rhode Island helped in no small measure to bring about action that gave the State its excellent system of turnpikes. When mills were established on the streams throughout the State, it was soon discovered by their owners that the existing roads were inadequate for industrial requirements, making it very difficult to transport raw material and the finished products. Consequently, through the influence of these early manufacturers, particularly the cotton spinners, pressure was constantly brought to bear upon the legislators and others who soon became "road conscious" and supported all efforts to better highway conditions. Perhaps Rhode Island's present preeminence as a "good roads" provider is due to the efficient propaganda of more than a century ago. Frequently, in those days, an old road or cart-path was taken, rebuilt and improved, but not until a franchise had been obtained from the State Legislature.

An illustration of the important influence the cotton industry exerted on road building is afforded by the work in this direction performed by the Wilkinson family of Pawtucket, justly recognized as the leaders in cotton manufacturing in Rhode Island for forty years after it was established. About 1804, Oziel Wilkinson built thirteen miles of a turnpike leading from Pawtucket in the direction of Boston, a highway that took the place of the old road previously used, and Oziel made all of the picks and shovels used in the construction work at his own

shop in Pawtucket. This improved road accommodated the stages that brought passengers from Boston to Providence on their way to New York by way of packet or steamboat. The Valley Falls turnpike was built by Isaac Wilkinson, the son of Oziel, about 1812. The Wilkinsons also aided in improving many other highways in the vicinity, and other pioneer manufacturers in Pawtucket were likewise interested in the matter of road building as members of the turnpike corporation, if not as actual road builders.

Referring again to turnpike toll rates, some of the established charges are interesting to review. On the Providence and Boston turnpike, that had the heaviest traffic of any road, the following rates were fixed when the charter was granted in 1800: "A wagon, cart, or ox sled not exceeding four cattle, $12\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$; a team of more than four cattle, 15¢ ; a sleigh with more than one horse, $12\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$; a one horse sleigh, $6\frac{1}{4}\text{¢}$; a coach, chariot or phaeton, 40¢ ; a chaise chair or sulky, $2\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$; a horse and horse cart, $6\frac{1}{4}\text{¢}$; a person and horse, $6\frac{1}{4}\text{¢}$; draft horse, and neat cattle in droves, per head, 2¢ ; swine in droves for every fifteen, 10¢ ; for less number than fifteen, each, 1¢ ; sheep and store shoat, each $\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$; mail stage, $6\frac{1}{4}\text{¢}$. And foot passengers shall not be liable to any toll, nor shall persons passing in said turnpike road for the purpose of attending public worship or funerals; nor any persons living within four miles of the place of the turnpike, passing on said turnpike road for the purpose of attending town meetings or other town business, or going to and from mills, or for the purpose of husbandry."

One of the most important of the old turnpikes was the New London road, built and operated by a Turnpike Company, chartered in 1816. It was intended that this road should be three rods wide, and it extended from Providence southwesterly to West Greenwich and thence through South County to Pawcatuck bridge, the old Indian fording place at Westerly on the western boundary of Rhode Island. The company that held the charter was empowered to maintain six toll gates, and by various amendments to the charter was given permission to absorb portions of existing highways.

This turnpike was not completed until 1820, when it became a popular stage route over which the coaches from Boston passed on their way to connect at New London with steamboats for New York. The company thought that this would provide a shorter route than the one which had been developed from the historic Pequot Trail, but the success of the new turnpike was not lasting because it failed to follow the easy grades and conform to the natural principles of early road evolution. Nowadays, with modern machinery and labor-savers, hills, valleys, swamps and protruding ledges are not regarded as serious obstacles; whereas, in pick and shovel times, topography directed the course of successful cross-country highways.

The Providence and Pawtucket Turnpike Company turned over its rights and property to the State of Rhode Island in 1833, and from that time until 1869 the State continued to collect tolls on the turnpike. In the latter year it was surrendered to Providence and to the Town of North Providence, and then the turnpike became a free road. Thomas Burgess was State agent for this turnpike from 1833 to 1850. The income from the successful highway between Providence and Pawtucket for twelve months beginning on October 24, 1835 was \$4044.02, and

the expense of maintenance during the same period was \$878.33; but after the railroads became well-established the revenue from this turnpike decreased sharply. The original charter of the Boston and Providence Railroad Company gave that corporation the right to acquire the turnpike, but the railroad officials finally declined to avail themselves of this privilege.

Comparable to the present rivalry among motor coach, airplane, steamship and railroad lines, turnpike and stage lines made common cause against the railroad when it first appeared, and attempted to run it out of existence by vigorous competition, but the railroad could make the trip to Boston from Providence, in the beginning, in two hours and a half, and no amount of speedy horses or frequent relays could drive a stage coach between those points as quickly as that. The stage lines then sought business by lowering prices, but here also the railroad could meet and discount them, and reluctantly the stage lines and turnpike corporations yielded to the inevitable and accepted their fate. The same destiny may overtake some of our present-day common carriers; certain people will have regrets, but sentiment and personal interests mean little in the face of progress.