

THE PLAINFIELD PIKE

In the year 1714, the Plainfield Pike came into existence. How good a piece of road this was in its earliest days there is no way of knowing for there is no official record of that. However, when it was taken over and designated as a road, it was probably a big improvement over what had served as an avenue of communication. It served its function until the last of the 18th century when it became necessary to make repairs. Since the State had no money to do this it proceeded to raise the necessary funds by lottery. Strange as this may seem, it is not an isolated case in the history of the State. Unfortunately, the Plainfield Pike seems to have been a sort of white elephant on the hands of the State for the next thing heard of it after being repaired with the money raised by the lottery is that it had become the Plainfield Pike Company. It then became a toll road and the moneys collected from the tolls were used to maintain it. Just how many toll gates there were on that road is not known definitely. According to a record of Robert Lawton's there was but two, one between Eli Lawton's and Byron Young's and the other between Andrew Angell's and Field's. It is hardly likely than many dividends were paid by the company because "shun pikes" started to spring up along the highway and in 1865 the Turnpike Company gave up and went out of business. The town of Johnston purchased its share of the road for a nominal sum. The rest of the road was maintained by farmers who lived along the way. At first it was well maintained but as time passed the road got more and more into a deplorable condition. Contracts were not renewed and only the bare minimum was spent on it to keep it passable. Since it was a boundary line the maintenance fell equally between Johnston and Cranston. Johnston kept the road repaired from Gallows Bridge to the old Simmonsville crossroad near Robert Lawton's and from a point just west of Byron Young's where it ceases to be the boundry, to the Scituate line. Cranston looked after the rest.

This brings us up to 1895. Few people knew of the extensive traffic that used this road. It was a very important road. It was the artery of trade for several large mills beyond the Scituate town line. Situated as they were, everything the mills needed, fuel, raw materials, machinery, had to be brought in this way as there was no railroad to bring in the supplies. Everything had to be brought in by team. Also the products of the mills had to be teamed out. This necessitated the employment of a large force of teamers and at almost any hour of the day there was to be seen ponderous wagons, drawn by four and sometimes six horses, dragging their slow and toilsome way up the heavy grades of the Plainfield Pike. In the Spring and Fall of the year it was through mud and water.

The mills served with this antiquated sort of transportation were the Ashland, Richmond, Ponagansett, Pottersville, Clayville and Rockland Mills and the numerous bobbin factories. But these mills were only a part of the teaming done on that glorious road. There were farms along the way and some dairy farms also that depended on the teams to get their milk products into town. The teams brought the feed and other farm supplies out from the city.

There were lumber mills that used this road to haul their lumber and timber. Many of the piles, for instance, that were used on the old Red Bridge came from the eastern boundary of Scituate. For many months Ed. Page, Clark Potter, the Whitmans and many others hauled lumber over this road and hauled many bridge piles to be used in Providence. The Pike had numerous steep grades and that added greatly to the expense of teaming. Horses had to be changed even for the ordinary loads as these grades tired the horse very quickly. It is stated that Robert Lawton kept his small part of the road in excellent shape.

There were at that time (1895) a number of houses that were over two centuries old and ruins that were associated with the Indians. There was built on this road the Samuel Joy place. This was one of the earliest settled farms in the State, settled away from the city. There was a farm house earlier but tradition tells us that the Indians killed the owner and burned the house. All that remained was the burned ruins of the farm once known as Pike's place. Next along the road was the Fenner place and was reached by a well-made private roadway that led to the house which was situated on an elevation. As one goes along up a hill one comes to Sam Scranton's place. This was famous for many years as a great resort of sporting people, for Sam in his lifetime was one of the best-known sporting characters in this part of the country . . . and let it be said, there probably never was a sporting man anywhere who had a better record for fairness than Sam Scranton had. His statements could always be relied upon as strictly true. The records tell us that he was a great dog fancier.

The Robert Lawton place is next mentioned as being nearly as old as the Joy place and the Fenner place. Originally the farm was known as the Westcott place, having been the property of Stukely and Reuben Westcott. This house was noted for the beautiful trees that surrounded it most of them planted by Robert Lawton. Directly opposite Lawton's was an "Italian Colony". Good homes surrounded by well-kept gardens.

Along the road is Antioch Chapel and the Abraham Waterman place. While Mr. Waterman grew considerable hay, he still had to purchase much more for his dairy farm and this along with the grain that he fed his cattle had to be teamed over the Plainfield Pike. Then along a little way is the Antioch school. It says in the records that pity was felt for this forlorn little school set on a little piece of land that was carved out of the forest.

Near the place where the road ceases to be a boundary between Johnston and Cranston is the farm of Byron Young. The largest most prosperous farm around those parts. Next comes the Salisbury and Hopkins places and a wayside Inn kept by William Jenkins, Jr. Every small crossroad that ran into the Plainfield Pike contributed its share of business to this main road. The main part of the business came from Scituate. Dairy farms, produce from the farms, fruit from the orchards. It was and still is an important way to the city. The road was three rods wide and when it was improved it followed the same survey. A special commission was appointed by Johnston and Cranston to upgrade the road and have it macadamized in the early future. Since the Plainfield Pike was to benefit several areas, Coventry, Scituate, the city of Providence, Johnston and Cranston were to contribute to the cost of improvement. It wasn't necessary to wait for these places to take action before the work could be done. The State Highway Commissioner was authorized to examine the road and to determine what changes were necessary and then report to the town councils of the various towns. Thus each town would know in advance just what expense it must bear. This was one of the best roads in the State and was extended to the Connecticut line. The president of the Johnston Town Council, John E. Bowen, took up the matter and it was quickly passed into a law. This was the Good Roads Act and the beginning of a road system in the State of Rhode Island. A Mr. Chase was appointed Commissioner of Highways and the town of Johnston was the first town to call upon the Commissioner for a test of this new legislation.

The original road was laid out and surveyed by Peter Green, Silas Carpenter, Nehemiah Sheldon, Joseph Angel, William Turpin, John King, Pelegue Williams, Benjamin Tillinghast, John Angel, Stephen Arnold, Jr., Josiah Westcott, Nathaniel Waterman, Resolved Waterman, Nicholas Sheldon, James Browne, William Sprague, Peleg Rhoades and Malachi Rhoades. The original record was July 15, 1714.