

THE OLD PORTAGE RAILROAD DESCRIBED

IN ITS TIME WAS CONSIDERED A MARVEL.

IT CROSSED THE ALLEGHENIES

From Hollidaysburg to Johnstown—Connected the Canals—Used Ten Planes—Daylight Road—Abandoned Years Ago.

The following paper was read at a meeting of the Fortnightly club by one of its members. It is published by request. As the colonies along the Atlantic coast expanded, they burst westward through the trans-Allegheny trails and left these paths standing as open roads. It is doubtful if anywhere else in the limited States "wagoning" and "wagoners" became so common or did such a thriving business as on the two or three trans-Allegheny routes in Pennsylvania between 1785 and 1850.

With the completion of the entire Pennsylvania canal system from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, in 1834, the occupation of the famous old Conestoga wagons disappeared and the romantic old stage coach got its first warning of relegation. The Ohio river was the only river which greatly facilitated westward migration during this early period. The most direct and shortest route to Pittsburgh was by canal to Hollidaysburg, over the Portage Road to Johnstown, thence by canal to the Ohio river, became the most popular and the most largely patronized thoroughfare to the west. This in turn was later superseded by the Pennsylvania railroad.

After a careful study of all the surveys made by the direction of the assembly of this commonwealth to find the best and most direct route from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh to connect the east with the great west, it was decided that crossing the mountain by way of Hollidaysburg and Johnstown was the most practical. On the 9th of April, 1827, Governor Shultz approved a supplement for the extension of the canal system, authorized the canal commissioners to contract for a canal, locks, and other works necessary to cross the Allegheny mountains "so as to insure the greatest public advantage."

By virtue of this authority, the plan of the canal was adopted and the common noun portage was raised to the proper noun Portage. The planes and levels were the connecting links to pass over the portage between the Juniata and the Conemaugh. It was among the first railroads constructed in this country for public purposes and was finished as a single line road in the fall of 1832. The canals were completed and in operation in 1832. The Old Portage road was not opened for general business in connection with the canal until the spring of 1834, when the "only great system of rapid transit and an economical method of transportation to connect the east and west" was inaugurated.

The length of the Old Portage road was a little less than thirty-six miles. To overcome the elevation of 1158 feet between Johnstown and Hollidaysburg it required ten planes, each of different levels. The planes were numbered eastward from Johnstown. The head of plane No. 6 was the highest point on the road, and here a large hotel was erected for the accommodation of the traveling public. This was a favorite stopping place and the hotel building—called the "Stone House"—is still standing. It is located about two and a half miles in a southeasterly direction from Crescon. On the west side of the mountain, from Johnstown to the head of plane No. 5, there were five planes and six levels. On the east side, from Hollidaysburg to the top of the mountain, there were five planes and five levels.

The only tunnel on the road was at the head of plane No. 1. It was 900 feet in length. This tunnel can be seen from the Pennsylvania railroad a short distance east of Johnstown. Opened For Business in 1834. When the road was opened for business in 1834 it was a fine track, railroad, and during that year and part of 1835 all the cars, passenger and freight, were hauled on the levels by horse power. Four horses were required for freight trains of five or six cars. The cars were about eight feet long. These cars were taken up and let down the planes by stationary engines. A driver starting with a train at Johnstown would take his train through the Hollidaysburg locks of the section boat drivers would put their mules in the front section and have them hauled over the mountain and some would take them over the Frankstown road and meet their boat at Hollidaysburg.

In 1835 a second track was laid. The rails and cast iron chairs were brought from England. The rails were something like the "T" rails now in use but inverted. The flat side of the rail was up and the bulged part was set in a cast iron chair, and the chair rested on a stone block or stone tie. These stones had faces of about two feet and were about 18 inches thick. The chairs were fastened by drilling two holes in the stone blocks, one on each side of the rail, then filling the holes with locust pins, placing the chairs over these pins and driving spikes through the chairs into the stone blocks. The rails did not have fish plates but were joined in the chairs and wedged with keys. The wedges had to be tightened every day and the key driver had a daily trip of six or eight miles to drive them in place. The gauge of the road was 4 ft. 8 1/2 in., the same as now on all standard roads.

When the road was contemplated the great obstacle to the civil engineers was to get a track around the many sharp curves required in passing over the mountain. They did not believe a long rail could be used on a curve and actually purchased rails four feet long for this purpose. It was discovered that a long rail could be laid around a curve of a practical radius. If this had been known at the time the roadbed was made, it is probable there would not have been any planes, but a gradual ascent as was finally adopted twelve years later.

Stationary engines were erected at the head of each plane to draw the cars up and to let them down. The method for doing this was by an endless rope turning around a shive at the head and the foot of each plane. When a car went down another went up. Hemp ropes were used until 1843 when one of the first wire ropes made by the inventor—Roebling—was put in use on plane No. 1.

In 1835, the first locomotive was put in service for use on the level from the head of plane No. 1 to the foot of plane No. 2. This locomotive was built in Boston and was called "Boston." The wages of the engineer were \$2.00 per day, and the fireman received \$1.12 1/2. Joseph Parks, a father of the late Joseph Parks, of Tyrone, was the first fireman of the "Boston." This locomotive was a Leitchian in those days. It had one pair of driving wheels with wooden spokes and folios, 48 inches high. The front of the boiler was supported on a four wheeled truck. The average speed was about fifteen miles an hour. In one instance the run from No. 1 to No. 2, the fourteen miles level, was made in 45 minutes. This was wonderfully fast traveling. Locomotives with a single pair of driving wheels were used until 1851 when the locomotive "Jun-lata" with two pairs of drivers was put in service. A number of other locomotives with two pairs of drivers were afterwards introduced.

The freight cars first used were eight feet in length and width and seven feet in height, and had one four-wheeled truck, but in 1851 larger cars were brought into use which had two trucks and were sixteen to twenty feet long. The passenger cars were about the size and had the general appearance of an ordinary horse street car. The platform and canopy were not so large, but the wheels were larger. In the early days of the Old Portage there were no baggage cars, and the baggage was carried on the tops of the passenger cars as in the old coaching days, but later baggage cars were introduced. Nor were there any brakemen on the passenger trains. The "captain" as the conductor was called, attended to the brakes.

One Train Each Day. There was one regular passenger train each way every day. It was a daylight railroad, never running any kind of trains at night. When night approached, freight trains would stop at the first plane and remain there until the next morning. A passenger train going east would leave Johnstown between six and seven in the morning, on the arrival of the packet from the west, and would run to plane No. 2. At this point the train would be located and here breakfast was served. The trip across the mountain took about seven hours, arriving at Hollidaysburg between one and two o'clock. The west bound train would leave Hollidaysburg at about the same time, between six and seven in the morning, and arriving at Johnstown between one and two in the afternoon. A passenger train in the latter days consisted of a baggage car and two coaches and hauled about sixty people which made a comfortable load for a packet. The fare between Johnstown and Hollidaysburg was \$1.25.

During the forties and fifties the immigrant travel was heavy, but these people were hauled on special trains for that class of passengers. They usually carried their food in the cars, and frequently the train would stop along the road at a suitable location for them to cook and eat. Some were carried in section boats where they did their cooking and sleeping while the trains were run. The section boats had but one compartment for cooking, eating, sleeping and storing food. They were about 8x12 in size. It is generally supposed that Woodruff was the inventor of sleeping cars about 1850 and that Pullman brought out the dining cars as we know them in modern railroad, but dining and sleeping cars were used on the Old Portage twenty years or more before.

The fuel for the locomotives and stationary engines was wood, which was used until about the time of the abandonment of the Old Portage. Coal was used on the New Portage road. The small locomotives could carry a quarter of a cord of wood, which would be sufficient for a run of several miles. The larger locomotives used later consumed from five to seven cords of wood in a good day's work. We find in those early days, the same manipulation to cheat the state as at present. The inspectors' duty it was to accept wood for fuel would start at Johnstown or Hollidaysburg and inspect and accept all the cordwood stacked on the right hand side of the road to the summit, then he would return and inspect and accept all the wood stacked on the left hand side of the road going down. He thus accepted and the state paid for the same wood twice. Sometimes when a new inspector would take up the wood on one side of the road, the parties interested would carry the wood to the other side of the road, and re-rank it before his return, when it would be accepted again. They would thus get a double price for the same wood.

Road Was Abandoned. After the Old Portage had been in operation for twelve years, the progressive times required a more extensive, more rapid means of transportation than the system of canals, locks and planes could supply. In the meantime it had been ascertained to be possible and practical to run a railroad over the mountain. To meet this increased need for transportation, the Pennsylvania railroad was organized April 13th, 1846. While the Pennsylvania road was building, those interested in the canals, locks and Portage, in an effort to hold the traffic to the old system induced the state to build the New Portage. The New Portage road was commenced in 1852. It was built by the state and crossed the mountain without planes to connect the canals, the distance between Johnstown and Hollidaysburg. The New Portage was 41 miles, or 5 miles farther than by the Old Portage, but a train could make the trip in four to five hours. It was completed in the fall of 1855, but it was operated only in 1856 and to August 1st, 1857.

The \$75,000,000.00 expended by the state for the construction of the Portage road was well spent. It had been for twelve years the favorite and best route to the west; but it was not able even with the New Portage to compete with the all rail, more expeditious Pennsylvania railroad which was opened for through traffic February 15, 1854. The canal system with locks and the Portage was out of date and had to be abandoned. The Portage road was sold by the state to J. Edgar Thompson for \$7,500,000.00 and the deed executed July 21st, 1857. Charles Dickens crossed the Alleghenies on the Portage railroad in 1842. The following is an extract from his American notes: "We left Harrisburg on Friday. On Sunday morning we arrived at Hollidaysburg, the foot of the mountain, which is crossed by railroad. Occasionally the rails are laid upon the extreme verge of a giddy precipice and looking from the carriage window, the traveler gazes sheer down, without a stone or scrap of fence between, into the mountain depths below. It was very pretty traveling like this at a rapid pace along the heights of the mountain, a keen wind, to look down into a valley of light and softness and we ridged to a high above like a whirlwind."

One of the most interesting objects at the World's Fair in Chicago, to transportation people, was a relief map of a portion of the Old Portage railroad showing the track, cars and locomotives in miniature. It had denominative cars to explain how section boxes were taken out of the water and carried over the mountain. The exhibit is now in the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's Historical Department in Philadelphia where about everything from the wooden spoke and fellow to its successor now in use is to be seen. It shows the progress made in transportation facilities. Many very interesting evidences of the Portage road still remain. The roadbed and planes; the retaining walls and bridges, especially the skew bridge for the public road over the foot of plane No. 6; the cut stone culverts; the foundations for the stationary engines; the Old Stone House at the Summit and the tunnel. In some parts the roadbed is used as a public road, and the tracks are used by the Pennsylvania railroad. How great the difference between crossing the Alleghenies today and that of a hundred years ago. The immense wealth of our Republic and its great power of drawing people, industry and wealth to itself will make it necessary for greater, better and more rapid facilities for travel and transportation than we have at present. Who can picture in imagination the changes that may take place in our highways during the next hundred years.

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