

## Kentucky Roads

Kentucky has many “firsts” to its credit. One of the more important of these firsts involves roads. The state may not have had the first roads in the nation, but it did have the first highway department. In 1835, the commonwealth established the State Board of Internal Improvements. For two decades, Kentucky took an interest in the creation and maintenance of state highways. Not until the 1850s did the commonwealth abolish the Board of Internal Improvements, thus giving up state supervision of highways for over half a century.

Travelers in modern-day Kentucky would have difficulty in imagining the lack of decent roads. From the earliest settlement period, the majority of roads in Kentucky were made up of buffalo trails that served as the pioneer’s first thoroughfares. Foot trails made by Indian hunting and war parties wound through dense forests and thickets of cane and brush. A person walking along these paths could traverse great distances through the wilderness. Riding a horse or getting a wagon to navigate these narrow passages was another matter.

When the first pioneers came to Kentucky they found forests that seemed to go on forever. At times the buffalo traces became impassable due to fallen trees and debris from storms and floods. The hearty souls who braved the wilderness realized very soon that if they hoped to settle Kentucky they had to have passable roads. The colonial government of Virginia could not effectively address the road problems of its western possession of Kentucky by passing the usual laws requiring monies to be spent, or a road levy of all able-bodied men to build and maintain highways. Kentucky was too far off. After all, Virginia, like the rest of the South, had very few good roads. If expenditures were to be made on roads, they would be made east of the mountains.

Notwithstanding Virginia’s seemingly cavalier attitude toward Kentucky, settlers did go west via the Wilderness Road and Boone’s Trace. Dozens of lesser known paths and trails served as travel routes into the western wilderness. Pioneer accounts of coming to Kentucky tell of some of the hardships encountered by the commonwealth’s first settlers. Swollen streams and rivers, cane patches so tall and thick that a man on horseback could get lost in them, mud deep enough to reach a man’s waist, all of these hazards awaited those who wanted a chance at getting a piece of Kentucky land.

When Kentucky entered the Union on June 1, 1792, the newly formed state government quickly found that its citizens wanted roads. By 1795, the legislature agreed to build a wagon road from Crab Orchard to Cumberland Gap. Two years later, in 1797, a tollgate was constructed at Cumberland Ford to raise money for road maintenance.

These early highways had little in the way of comforts. The roads measured about ten to twelve feet in width. Often the trunks of trees that had to be cut for road construction were left to rot where they fell. The legislature did require that the stumps be rounded-off so as to avoid injury to the traveler and their livestock.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, builders of Kentucky roadways could boast of improving the state’s thoroughfares by adding logs covered with a thin layer of earth. These log roads became the famous corduroy roads that bounced and bruised travelers during their journeys. Some travelers told of their horrifying experience on Kentucky’s early roads with the most vivid detail possible. Crushed hats and jostled passengers seemed minor in comparison with overturned coaches, broken axles, and

runaway horses. To travel Kentucky's roads in the early days of settlement was to take one's life in one's hands.

The need for a better road system forced the government of Kentucky to drastically change the way in which the state built roads. The commonwealth needed commerce and roads could provide the impetus for commercial ventures. After all, reasoned Kentucky lawmakers, it would be next to impossible to establish trade in a state that had no internal roads.

One way to pay for roads proved to be highly controversial. For centuries roads had been built and maintained by charging fees for their use. While the concept of toll roads made sense, in reality they were hated with a passion. Set up about every five miles, tollgates, or turnpikes as they were often called, became an item of hot political debate.

Private or public, the commonwealth set the rates for toll roads. By 1851, rates had been set. A horse and rider, five cents; a carriage or wagon, ten cents; two cents for each hog, and three cents for each head of cattle. Passage for a stagecoach that had six seats cost thirty-five cents. A wagon or coach pulled by six horses cost up to 75 cents. By 1861, individuals owned most of Kentucky's roads.

Toll roads dominated transportation in the commonwealth throughout the nineteenth century. The legislature did little or nothing to alleviate the situation. In fact, by that time the fourth and present constitution declared that the state could not establish a highway fund. An amendment in 1909 ended this restriction.

With most of the state's roads privately owned, travelers had no choice but to pay the required tolls. However, during the 1890s things began to change. Hard times had again come to the Kentucky economy. Poor people complained that the toll road owners charged excessive rates. With three-fourths of the major roads in the commonwealth under private ownership, a virtual monopoly controlled a major means of transportation. The public outcry against toll roads began to gain momentum when many of the toll road owners refused to keep their roads in good condition. In many instances the road had reverted to the nearly impassable conditions of years ago.

The government of the commonwealth did not want to get involved with the road situation. When little or no remedial action came from Frankfort, citizens took the law into their own hands. The infamous "Tollgate Wars" of the 1890s had begun. Tollgates were destroyed and tollhouses burned. Gatekeepers often suffered from beatings and shootings from angry citizens. Mounting violence prompted tollgate owners to sell their operations or in some cases flee the area before they could be killed.

Governor William O. Bradley (1895-1899), the state's first Republican chief executive, ordered an end to the violence and lawlessness of those who attacked the tollgates. The Democratic legislature, sympathizing with the protesters and also seeing a golden opportunity to embarrass Bradley, refused to act against the lawbreakers. In 1896, with stock in tollgates virtually worthless, the Kentucky General Assembly voted to provide a free turnpike system. Governor Bradley signed the bill into law.

In a strange turn of events, local authorities refused to honor the law regarding tollgates. Officials stated they had no right to raise taxes to buy turnpikes. Another wave of public outrage broke out against the tollgates. This time the full fury of the people turned against the hated toll roads. Over 300 tollgates and tollhouses were burned or dynamited by angry citizens. In less than a year the tollgate system of Kentucky roads

collapsed. Those tollgate companies left unscathed sold their stock to the counties, which opened the roads for free travel. Toll roads did not return to Kentucky until the 1950s when the Kentucky Turnpike Authority established a toll road between Elizabethtown and Louisville.

For many years Kentucky roads remained little more than graveled, poorly graded, and potholed affairs. Creek gravel, followed later by more finely crushed stone made up the majority of the highways. County courts again required the labor of local men to help with the upkeep of roads. With the advent of the automobile, Kentucky and the rest of the nation had to provide better roads. Little by little, the commonwealth's highways were paved with asphalt and concrete. The Interstate Highway System authorized in 1945 opened Kentucky to the rest of the nation. The Interstate system also united Kentucky. No longer would bad roads keep people from traveling through the state. No longer would the lack of good roads keep Kentuckians from taking advantage of the many wonders and places of interest their own state afforded.

Millions of people crisscross the commonwealth with ease and comfort. The highways of Kentucky have facilitated the introduction of business and industry that has pumped millions of dollars into the state's economy. As ancient Rome learned so many centuries before, a good system of roads is prerequisite for prosperity and defense. The buffalo traces of pioneer days now have been replaced with thousands of miles of easily traveled highways.