

The National Road

Call it Broad Street or call it U.S. Route 40. In the 1830s the major road through Columbus, Ohio was known as the National Road. The National Road began as the Cumberland Gap in the state of Maryland and eventually stretched across the United States to San Francisco.

In the early 1800s President Thomas Jefferson realized the need for a road to the West and to navigable rivers like the Ohio River. He knew every great nation needed roads for transportation, development and the spread of commerce. So on March 29, 1806, he signed a Congressional Act to establish a national highway that would reach across the Alleghenies to the West, Ohio being “The West” in those days. The goal was to “make the shortest and most direct road and connect with navigable rivers and benefit the most people” (Jordan, p.76).

Originally the road was to be built from the sale of public lands. As it unfolded, however, only two percent of the money came from these sales. In 1824, Ohio legislators granted permission to extend the National Road though the state. The section between Zanesville and Columbus was begun in 1829, reaching Columbus in 1833.

A controversy arose surrounding how the road would run through Columbus – east to west, or north to south. To satisfy everyone, it was decided the road would enter from the east on Main Street, run north on High Street, and exit the city on Broad Street running west. The Columbus section was built of timber and stone taken from a quarry north of the State Hospital on the Hilltop.

Farmers and tavern owners who lived on the National Road benefited greatly. In those days, several inns and taverns lined the road. Patrons could get a hearty breakfast of buckwheat cakes or dine on home cured ham. The Neil House is a perfect example of an inn which profited from its location on the route. The Neil House opened in 1820 before the road came through Columbus, but it was the headquarters of the stage coach company Neil, Moore and Co. State Line. Through the years, the Neil House grew to be one of Columbus’s largest downtown hotels. Four-Mile House, on the west side of Columbus near Chase Avenue, was another National Road inn. It got its name because it was four miles from the heart of Columbus. Being located close to Camp Chase kept the inn busy during the Civil war. Four-Mile House closed around 1913.

Numerous stage coach lines traveled through Ohio, including the Ohio State Co., Citizen’s Line, People’s Lines and the Good Intent Line, which was run by General N. P. Talmadge. Talmadge was a staunch supporter of the temperance movement and his drivers had to pledge they would not drink.

Although rarely called the National Road, mileposts can still be found along the road as a reminder of our nation’s first major highway.

Sources

A Guide to the National Road by Karl Raitz

Historic Highways of America vol. 10: The Cumberland Road by Archer Butler Hulbert

The National Road: Main Street of America by Norris F. Schneider