

The Nation's Original Toll Road

By Gary L. Graham, P.E.
Bridge Engineering Manager
Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission

The origin of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PTC) goes back to the glory days of the railroads. A new east-west passage through Pennsylvania called the South Penn Railroad was to be constructed to compete against the formidable Pennsylvania Railroad. The alignment was cleared, the railroad bed surveyed, and the boring of nine tunnels started. However, due to a settlement between the competing railroad owners, work on the South Penn Railroad was stopped. The abandoned railroad bed sat idle for many years.

Then, in 1934, an idea was proposed of building a four-lane, all-weather, toll road utilizing the old abandoned South Penn Railroad bed. On May 21, 1937, Act No. 211 was signed into law, authorizing the construction of a 160-mile toll highway between Middlesex, Cumberland County, and Irwin, Westmoreland County. It also created the Turnpike Commission to supervise the project. The law stipulated, however, that not a cent of State tax money should be spent; it was up to the Commission to handle the financing through the sale of bonds. The bonds were to be paid off by revenues generated through tolls.

Ground was broken on October 27, 1938, and in 23 months time, motor vehicles were traveling the "Dream Highway". The original section employed over 1,100 design engineers and 155 contractors from 18 states for a total work force of 20,000. More than 5,000 men worked on seven tunnels at one time.

On October 1, 1940, the road built on the South Penn Railroad



alignment was officially opened to traffic at a total cost of \$70 million. America's first long-distance superhighway was an immediate success. More than 26,000 vehicles were using it daily. That skyrocketed to over 2.4 million in twelve month's time. This was far more than the 715 cars per day estimated in a 1939 study by the Bureau of Public that also stated toll roads would be big money losers (so much for studies).

For the first time in the history of roads in Pennsylvania a superhighway existed which provided free flow of traffic 160 miles across the State. The Turnpike was termed the foundation of a nationwide system of superhighways and sixteen years later the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was legislated and funded by Congress. The PTC was the forerunner of all other toll roads in the country.

Due to the success of the original section of the Turnpike, other extensions followed. It was extended to Valley Forge in the east in 1950, and then onto the New Jersey border in 1954. To the west, the Turnpike was extended to the Ohio line in 1951. The Northeast Extension opened in 1957, and took

the Turnpike north to Scranton. In 1992, the Beaver Valley Expressway was completed, and in 1993, the Amos K. Hutchinson Bypass

was completed, both in the western part of the state, bringing the total mileage to approximately 500 miles of toll road.

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HDR Engineering, Inc.
3 Gateway Center
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
412.497.6000

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