

The Howardsville Turnpike

By Lynn Coffey



In the middle 1800s, the hearty people driving their wagon teams up the slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains and through low-lying valleys were traveling on a near-forgotten road called the Howardsville Turnpike. In the 1850's it provided this area's major transportation link with Eastern Virginia. During severe weather, only a few miles a day could be made in the heavy wagons, sometimes taking up to two weeks to complete the trip. The road was narrow and during rainy periods, filled with muddy ruts that took off many a wagon wheel. Also, people had to be on the lookout for robbers which frequented the highways. Large teams of horses or mules pulled the wagons, sometimes as many as six animals per individual wagon. The custom of the time was to have "bell teams," consisting of a set of bells hooked on the horse's harness or on the wagon itself. If a wagon got mired down in the mud or its wheel slipped off the road and needed assistance from a passing wagon, the bells were

automatically forfeited to the one helping. There was a certain amount of prestige in having a lot of bells adorning one's wagon because it showed the driver was a very capable handler on often dangerous terrain. The turnpike was also unique for its time in that it was an excellently engineered road. It was a point-to-point route of even grade, making it possible for the cumbersome wagons to maneuver the steep mountain slopes. The specifications for the road, set in June 1848 were as follows: Regular road width: 30 feet, width on hills: 20 feet, and width on cliffs: 12 feet.

Wagons burdened down with freight such as various grains and agricultural products, hogsheads of tobacco, and pig iron from the Mount Torrey Furnace near Sherando were hauled over an early road known as the Howardsville Turnpike. The Mount Torrey Furnace produced 1,000 to 1,500 tons of iron ore between the years of 1801 and 1880. Whiskey was a likely cargo since Augusta County produced 90,000 gallons of spirits in 56 distilleries, according to an 1840 census report.



Covered wagon used to haul goods

Cattle and turkeys were also driven over the steep mountain inclines of the Blue Ridge in order to reach the Howardsville destination where the goods were then shipped east by boat on the James River or the canal system.

Back in the early 1980s I talked with Ruby Hamner who told how families drove large flocks of turkeys over steep mountain inclines to reach Howardsville. She said her family made the 2-to-3-day trip in a covered wagon and camped along the way. I asked how they kept the turkeys going

in a straight line on the road for that length of time and she said children would walk along the roadside with long sticks, herding the birds forward in a tight group. In the evening, the turkeys would roost in the trees and that's where the family stopped and made camp. Before the birds flew down in the morning, they would break camp and be ready for another long day on their journey to Howardsville. In my mind's eye, I can see the turkeys walking the road and envision a covered wagon creaking up the side of the mountain before stopping for the night. The glow of a campfire and the aroma of supper cooking over the open fire makes a nostalgic picture that's not hard to imagine.

Originally, the turnpike was built as a means by which the people of Shenandoah Valley could haul their goods to Howardsville where it was put on boats bound for Richmond. A canal around the Falls of Richmond was completed in 1795, allowing travel west on the James River for a distance. As settlers increased and began traveling west, a better source of transportation was needed. And so, paralleling the James River, the Kanawha Canal system was built. The Canal reached Howardsville sometime in 1834. The James River and the Canal reached their closest point to Augusta County at the thriving little town of Howardsville on February 17, 1846. The General Assembly adopted an act incorporating a company to build a turnpike road from Howardsville to Roberts Ford, across the Rockfish River. It is not known who took the initiative for the project, but someone realized that the area which is now Nelson and Augusta Counties did not have a direct connection with the James River/Kanawha Canal system and consequently with Richmond and Eastern Virginia. The road was built and controlled by the Howardsville and Rockfish Turnpike company. Shares of stock in the company were sold for \$100 each and 30 stockholders formed the original corporation. As word of the project grew, as many as 68 shareholders would be part of the company. Over the years the road was expanded but because of lack of funds and several construction disputes, the turnpike, which stretched 53.31 miles from Howardsville to Middlebrook, Virginia, took almost ten years to finish.



There were toll booths set up along the route, whereby gatekeepers would collect a fee from people traveling the turnpike. These tolls were used for road repairs. By the time the road was completed in 1858, the railroad came across the Blue Ridge via a tunnel at Afton and connected with the Maury River canal in Buena Vista, and

An early toll booth where people paid to travel the turnpike the turnpike's usefulness began to wane. The road was thought to be abandoned after the Civil War but in 1860 boat traffic peaked when around 195 boats traversed the canal on a regular basis. In 1880, Mt. Torrey Furnace ceased operations and around 1887 the canal system ceased operations in Howardsville.

The suspected route of the turnpike from Howardsville to Middlebrook is as follows: From Howardsville the route followed Mt. Alto (Rt. 602) to Rt. 617 in Schuyler. From there by the old railroad bed (which was built on the old road) to Rockfish Station. Then picks up Rt. 617 through

“Old Stage Bridge.” At present Rt. 29, the route doglegs west to Rt. 619 through Twin Poplars to Rt. 810 (part from Poplar School to Rt. 810 which is no longer maintained). From Rt. 810 to Rt. 16 to near the junction of the south and north forks of the Rockfish River where it followed the South fork. On to Lodebar; Rts. 612 and 613 in part. The route then follows near present Rt. 151 north, passing near the front of Rockfish Presbyterian Church, through Martin’s Store (present junction of Rts. 6 & 151, near Greenfield). The route continues along Rt. 151 to Rt. 709 near Proffett’s Chapel (present Chapel Hollow Road) and up the mountain on a portion that is no longer used, to Humpback Gap (under Humpback Rocks, touching the parking area on the East corner). It then parallels the Blue Ridge Parkway for a short ways and crosses on the East side to the junction with Rt. 610 (Augusta County) and proceeds through Sherando to Rt. 608 through Stuarts Draft, and on to Rt. 340 southwest on to Greenville. Although not as carefully researched, the company reported that on September 30, 1853, the road was completed from Stuarts Draft to a point near Middlebrook, intersecting the Brownsburg and Middlebrook Turnpikes. Mileage was 34.25 miles from Howardsville to Sherando, 14.06 miles from Sherando to Greenville, and 5 miles from Greenville to Middlebrook for a total of 53.31 total miles or a round-trip total of over one hundred miles.

The Howardsville Turnpike was once a thriving passage but now all that’s left is parts of the old road along with its brief, written history to commemorate its usefulness as a trade route in the middle 1800’s.

Special thanks to Eugene Ramsey and Mrs. Ruby Hamner for detailed information about the turnpike as well as other information obtained at the Waynesboro Library that was used in the May 1982 and the April 2002 issues of the Backroads. In 2023, thanks also to Becky Howard of Nelson County Historical Society for providing more information about the Howardsville Turnpike taken from the Nelson County Library.



The “wagon bridge” in Sherando

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Author’s Note:

On March 30, 2023, my husband Billy and I took a day trip to Howardsville, Virginia, on part of the old Turnpike Road. Although it was not the complete route, we followed as best we could on the suspected route listed above. We didn’t start in the Middlebrook, Greenville, and the Stuarts Draft part of the turnpike but started on Rt. 610 eastward in Sherando, across the “wagon bridge” over Back Creek and

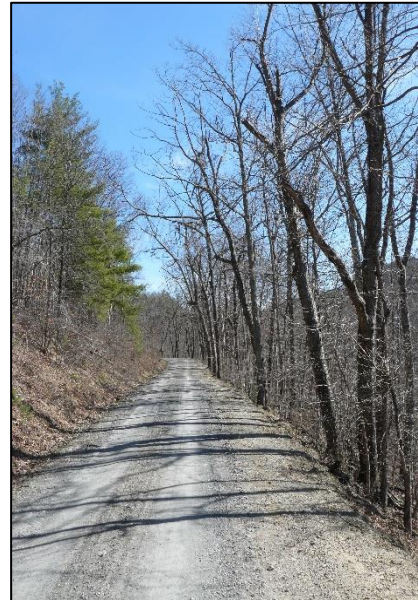
followed the narrow gravel road up to the

Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 4 where it crosses east over the Parkway at the top of current Rt. 709 (which is now private road and closed to the public). I took a photo at the bottom of Rt. 709 (Chapel Hollow Rd.) where it intersects with Rt. 151. From there we drove the few miles south on 151 where it junctions with Rt. 6 and took 6 to Rt. 29. We

turned left on Rt. 29 and drove a few miles north and turned right on Rt. 617. From there we stopped to take a picture at Stage Bridge Road and Rockfish River Road (617).

I've always loved Rt. 617 because it borders the scenic Rockfish River most of the way to Schuyler. We followed 617 to Rockfish Station (small white building next to the RR tracks) and into the village of Schuyler and turned left on Rt. 800 just past the post office. We drove on Rt. 800 until we came to Rt. 602 (on the right) which is called the Howardsville Turnpike Road. Although we drove into Schuyler via 617, the way to Howardsville may be closer if you turned left on Rt. 6 East off of Rt. 29 and then hit Rt. 800 (Schuyler Road) then turned left onto Rt. 602 (Howardsville Turnpike Road).

We stayed on Rt. 602 until we came to Howardsville and crossed the RR there and drove down to the public boat landing on Baber Lane where the Rockfish River empties



Rt. 709 on 151 near Afton

As our journey to Howardsville came to an end, we stopped at the general store where I talked to a local couple, asking if we took Rt. 626 south, would we come out in Lovington. They said yes, and also directed us to stop at the James River Wildlife Management area on the way since the remains of the old Kanawha Canal which parallel the James is still there, albeit washed out from Camille and grown over. We drove a good ways on Rt. 626 and turned left on Midway Mills Road (Rt. 743) where the Wildlife Management Area sign directs you down to the river. All that's left of the Kanawha is a slight indentation in the ground where the canal used to sit. On the way out we noticed a walled-in area with a gate and I got out and walked over to a cemetery where members of the Dunn family are buried. There was a plaque with information on it that was worth the stop and it is featured in the Nelson County Cemetery Book on page 101.

Turnpike near top of Parkway

into the mighty James. I was under the mistaken impression that Howardsville was still a small village and neither of us were aware that the original town of Howardsville, once nestled close to the James River, was completely washed away in Hurricane Camille in August of 1969. The only things remaining are a few homes, a Masonic Lodge, and a church, all located higher up on the hill from the river. The Howardsville General Store and Deli, built in 1978, is located on James River Road just up from the public boat ramp on the James River and the only place we saw to get food, drinks and snacks.



Rt. 617 at Rockfish River & Stagebridge Rd.



The old Rockfish Train Station



Train tracks over the Rockfish River



Dam over the Rockfish River at Schuyler



Routes 800 and 602 to Howardsville



Boat ramp on James River at Howardsville



We left and drove on Rt. 626 until we came to Rt. 56 (James River Road) and turned right which took us into Lovingston. We treated ourselves to a late lunch at McDonalds and drove south on Rt. 29 until we turned off on Rt. 56 west. From there we took the back way home up the familiar Campbell's Mountain Road, across the Parkway and down to Love. The whole trip took us five hours and it was a relaxing day we both really enjoyed because traffic was light and everything we saw along the way added new perspective to the Howardsville Turnpike article for NCHS Backroads blog.

Howardsville General Store



The confluence of Rockfish into the James



James River Wildlife Management Area



The Dunn family graveyard within the James River Wildlife Management Area