

The Buncombe Turnpike

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After the War of 1812, Americans turned their attention to domestic issues. From then until the Civil War, the country was characterized by a spirit of commerce and economic improvement. Americans realized that a successful economy required a good infrastructure, mainly in the form of transportation. This set off a road and “canal-building mania” across the country. State, local, and national governments funded a number of projects during this period, and internal improvements became a major issue in the politics of the time.(1)

The Buncombe Turnpike, an improved road from the Tennessee border through Asheville to the South Carolina line, was a major internal improvement project built during this era in western North Carolina. The Turnpike, the first state-approved project in the area, accomplished exactly what its promoters hoped it would- it established a thriving economy in the region. The Turnpike became an example of the benefits such a project could bring and it set a precedent for future improvements in western North Carolina.

Transportation problem

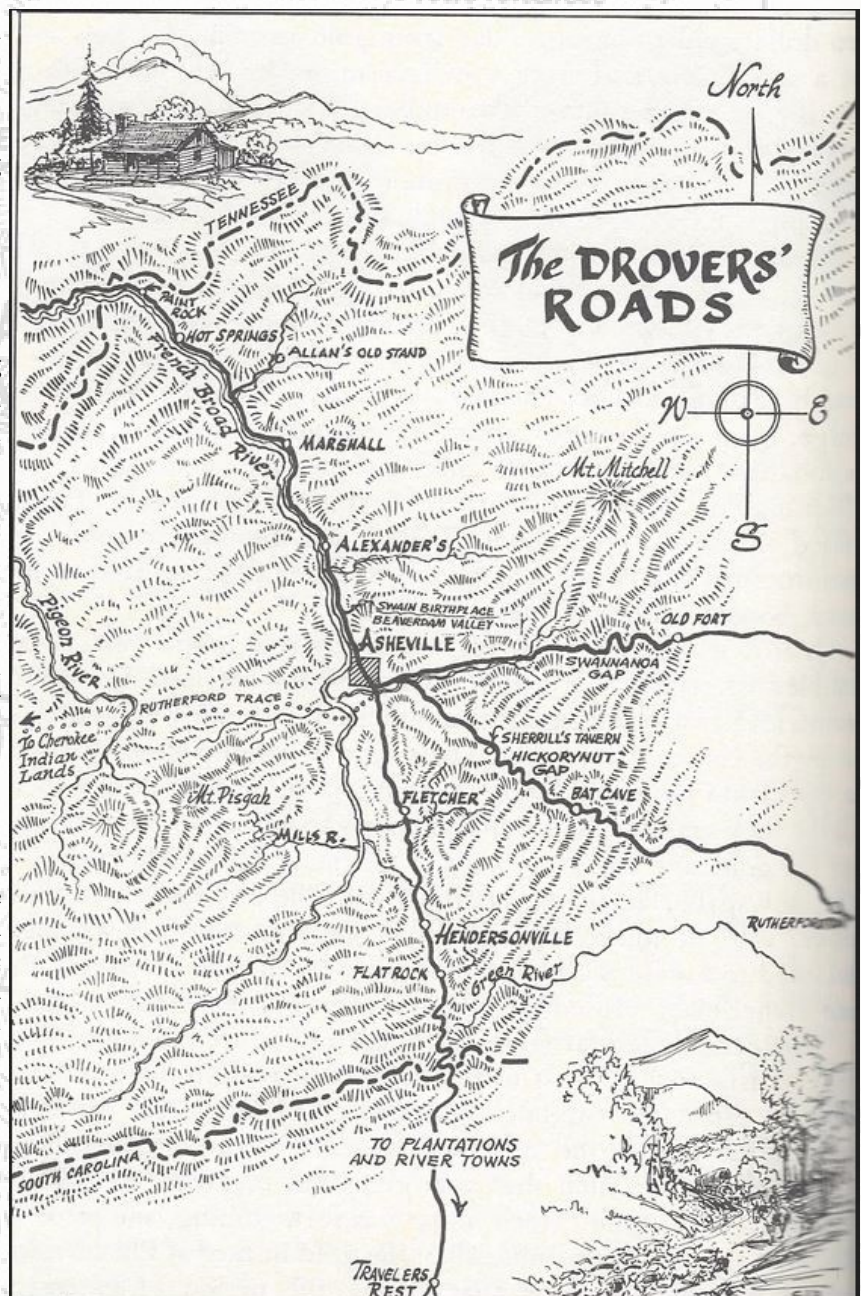
Perhaps more than any other state, North Carolina desperately needed internal improvements. Compared to other states, North Carolina was backward and isolated. The coast offered no outstanding ports, and inland water transportation was just as bad. All rivers, with the exception of the Cape Fear, flowed into the shallow coastal sounds or into another state. Roads, the only other means of transportation, hardly deserved the name, being little more than local paths. The eastern coastal plain and the West were isolated from each other. A resident of the mountains summed up the situation when he said, “as things now are [I have] less to do with people on the northern side of the Albemarle Sound than with those on some of the remotest regions of the globe.” Indeed, what little contact Westerners had outside their immediate area was usually with neighboring states of Tennessee, South Carolina, and Virginia.(2)

Proposed solution

The transportation problem in North Carolina hampered the whole economy of the state. With no way to move agricultural and manufactured goods to markets, the state had a mostly subsistence or local economy. A few state leaders recognized this situation and, following attempts in

1. David Brion Davis et al, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*, 4th ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 387-88, 511 and Hugh Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome, *North Carolina: A History of a Southern State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 312.

2. Lefler, 298-301 and John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 159.



other parts of the country at internal improvement, tried to apply improvement programs to North Carolina. The earliest attempt came in 1815 when the General Assembly formed a committee to recommend improvement in the state's infrastructure. The work of the committee was done mostly by Archibald D. Murphey, a senator from Orange County. Between 1815 and 1819, Murphey presented the legislature a series of reports that outlined the state's problems and offered solutions. Murphey's plan was aimed at unifying the state by connecting all the major rivers. Roads would be built and improved to provide access to the waterways. The Catawba and the Yadkin rivers were Murphey's main concern in the West. Both rivers flow into South Carolina, and Murphey wanted to keep commerce from flowing out of state on these rivers. He proposed canals connecting the Yadkin with the Cape Fear and the Catawba with the Yadkin. If this were accomplished, "the productions of more than one half of the territory of the state, would find their market upon the Cape Fear, and enlarge and sustain the commercial towns upon that river." (3)

Murphey not only wanted to keep North Carolina commerce within the state but he also hoped to bring in commerce from neighboring states as well. Much of his plan for the mountains was focused on this goal. Obviously, transportation improvements in the mountains would be limited to roads but Murphey wanted the roads to converge on the navigable waters of the Catawba and the Yadkin, which he said could be made boatable within fifteen miles of the Blue Ridge. Murphey saw Wilkesboro as the focal point for the northern mountains. He identified a number of roads already in place that ran across the mountains and connected Wilkesboro with Tennessee and Virginia, including one through present-day Jefferson and one through present-day Boone. Farther south, Murphey recognized three roads at the head of the Catawba River that would funnel commerce onto that waterway. One of these roads passed through Asheville, and Murphey felt that it could be extended to the southwestern corner of the state. Another road leading to the Catawba passed through Rutherford County. (4)

Murphey mentioned another road that was important in the area but he did not consider it an essential part of his plan. It was the road that ran from Asheville to South Carolina. Murphey called it a "great highway" used by people from Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee to travel to South Carolina and Georgia. He recognized that the mountain people used this road as a means of trade with Columbia and Augusta. Since this road did not connect with the Catawba and thus, with the rest of North Carolina, Murphey did not include it in his scheme. Besides, Murphey noted that the mountain people who traded with South Carolina and Georgia "will find a market much nearer to them, when the Catawba shall be made navigable." (5)

Murphey hoped to use these existing roads as a part of his system of inland transportation. They would draw trade from neighboring states into North Carolina. However, he found these roads to be "badly laid out...badly made, and the population in many parts is too weak [i.e. dispersed] to keep the Roads in even tolerable repair." But this was only a small problem. The roads could be easily upgraded by "mere ditching on each side, and throwing up the earth in the middle, will make us good Roads as the public convenience requires." (6)

The North Carolina General Assembly did not fully accept Murphey's sweeping plan. Most opposition came from eastern representatives whose region did not have as much need for internal improvements as the West. Rather than approving a unified plan such as Murphey's, the legislature chose to approve one individual project at a time. During the late 1810s and early 1820s, the General Assembly sanctioned projects on specific rivers, such as the Yadkin and Roanoke. Paying for these projects presented a problem. With such a poor economy, North Carolina hardly had a tax base sufficient to support such a large outlay of public funds. Instead of making the state fully responsible for internal improvements, the legislature sought to encourage private initiative by forming companies. The state bought shares in these companies in order to stimulate investment. Private investors in such transportation companies hoped to see returns when the projects were completed and tolls and fees could be charged for the use of an improved river or road.

3. Lefler, 298-301; R.D.W. Connor, Ante-Bellum Builders of North Carolina (Greensboro: The North Carolina College for Women, 1930. Reprinted. Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1971), 14; Charles Clinton Weaver, Internal Improvements in North Carolina Previous to 1860 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1903. Reprinted. Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1971), 9-10 and William Henry Hoyt, ed. The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey, Vol 2 (Raleigh: North Carolina Historical Commission, 1914), 42-45.

4. Hoyt, 185-187.

5. Ibid., 186-187.

6. Ibid., 186.

The state obtained its funds for investment from the sale of Indian land in the West.(7)

Company formed

One of these local projects that the state funded was, ironically, the improvement of the road that Murphey considered only marginal in his statewide plan. With representatives from Buncombe County pushing the bill along, the General Assembly formed the Buncombe Turnpike Company in 1823. The Company would improve the road from Tennessee to South Carolina and charge tolls for the use of it. Individuals could buy shares in the company for \$50 per share. When stock in the Company was offered for sale, private individuals bought \$20,000 in shares, with the state taking \$5,000 in shares. The money was soon raised and work began on the existing road from Warm Springs (today's Hot Springs) near the Tennessee border, through Asheville and on to Saluda Gap at the South Carolina line. The Turnpike was built and improved according to a set of specifications. It was 30 feet wide most of the way; 20 feet was the smallest width allowed and only in places where it was necessary to cut into a bank. It had to be as level as possible with only a slope of one foot in ten allowed. In certain places, tree trunks laid side by side formed a portion of the road.



This was known as a corduroy road. The Buncombe Turnpike generally followed the banks of the French Broad River. and presumably was employed in low-lying, muddy locations. Wooden mileposts were installed at locations along the way.(8)

The Buncombe Turnpike generally followed the banks of the French Broad River. A traveler on the Turnpike a few years after it was finished described the surrounding territory on one part of the road,

In many places the breadth of the valley through which the river flowed was not more than 300 feet, the stream itself occupying in some places less than 100 feet. On each side rose precipitous hills, to a height of 300 and 400 feet from their base, clothed with thick wood to their very summits, and showing on their sides large masses of rock overgrown with shrubbery, and studded with flowers. Sometimes our path along the river's edge was overhung with a perpendicular cliff of more than 100 feet in height, so close to the stream, that while on our left we could almost drop a stone into the water from the carriage window on that side, we could put out our hands and touch the rock of the perpendicular cliff on the other.

The road was not like this along the whole route, however. The same traveler described open places and cultivated land along the road in certain locations.(9)

The builders of the road ran into opposition soon after they began. James Allen, a resident of the area, owned and operated a turnpike that ran along the ridge above the French Broad River. Of course, the state-sponsored road would ruin his business so he offered the officials of the Buncombe Company \$5,000 to run the road along his turnpike. They refused his offer and Allen promptly took the issue to court. The state supreme court sided with the Buncombe Company and the road was completed as planned.(10)

The Buncombe Turnpike was finished in 1828, five years after the state approved the project. Toll gates were installed about every ten miles. Wagons and carts, depending on size, had to pay between 50 cents

7. Lefler, 316-317; Weaver, 14, 16, 65 and Hoyt, 44-45.

8. Manly Wade Wellman, The Kingdom of Madison (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 37-38 and J.S. Buckingham, The Slave States of America, vol. 2 (Fisher, Son & Co., 1842. Reprinted. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 201.

9. Buckingham, 194-95, 204.

10. Wellman, 41.

and \$2.50 to travel the road. The charge for a horse and rider was 20 cents. Drovers of large livestock such as horses, mules, and cattle were charged 6 ¼ cents per head and three cents per head for hogs and sheep. Many travelers agreed that the tolls were a bargain for such a good road. One local resident commented, “if any serious enquirer really wishes to know what may be done for \$30,000 under proper restrictions, let him traverse the road...it is one of the best roads in the [South] nor are there many better in the United States.”(11)

Feeding the South

The Buncombe Turnpike was enormously successful and profitable. It established a booming economy, based on livestock trade, in the region along its route. The reason for its success is that the Turnpike was an important link in the larger economy of the whole South. The Deep South, from South Carolina to Mississippi, used most of its farmland for the production of cotton. Consequently this region was forced to import much of its food from other regions of the South. East Tennessee, the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, and the Nashville Basin of Tennessee supplied the cotton-producing South with much of its food, particularly livestock. The cheapest way to transport livestock from the Upper South to the Deep South was on the hoof. The Buncombe Turnpike provided the shortest route to South Carolina and Georgia from many locations in Tennessee and Kentucky and thus became an avenue for this interregional livestock trade. Such trade along the French Broad River Valley likely was taking place as early as the turn of the century, involving mostly local Carolina farmers, but the improved road greatly increased livestock traffic especially from Tennessee and Kentucky.(12)

Almost every variety of livestock was driven along the Turnpike including cattle, sheep, hogs, turkeys, and ducks. Work animals were also an important part of the trade. Fine horses, mules,



Hog drovers on the Buncombe Turnpike.

and oxen were escorted to markets in Charleston, Columbia, and Augusta. Certain practices and customs developed in this trade. If a farmer raised a large number of livestock, he would typically drive the animals himself to market. However, professional drovers existed who would collect livestock from various farmers and drive them south for a fee. While most livestock came from Tennessee and Kentucky, many local farmers also used the route to market their livestock. Even farmers in the northern mountains sent their livestock south along the Turnpike. Boone and Wilkesboro became focal points where livestock was collected and driven to the Buncombe Turnpike.(13)

Enormous droves

While no reliable statistics on the number of livestock driven along the Turnpike are available, many estimates were made by contemporaries. For each type of livestock estimates typically are several thousand per year. Figures include 10,000 horses and mules per year and reports of single droves of turkeys, cattle, and ducks that each numbered up to 500. Hogs were the most numerous form of livestock by anyone's estimate. Figures for hogs range as high as 150,000 to 175,000 per year. While it might be argued that some of these individual estimates could be exaggerated, the original source for many of these figures were reliable records. A fee was collected for every head of livestock that used the Turnpike so exact records of animal traffic were kept by the company. In 1849, one hired driver “on his return through Asheville...took pains to inquire at the toll office about the number that had passed the toll gate that season. The answer was 90,000 head.” Thomas Clingman, a prominent North Carolina politician, noted in 1844 that

11. Wellman, 38, 43 and Buckingham, 194.

12. Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 192-196 and Edmund Cody Burnett, “Hog Raising and Hog Driving in the Region of the French Broad River,” *Agricultural History* 20 (April 1946), 86-88 and Inscoe, 45.

13. Inscoe, 46; Burnett, 86-88 and Buckingham, 203-04.

"for a number of years past the value of the live stock as ascertained from the books of the Turnpike Company) that is driven through Buncombe county is from two to three millions of dollars."(14)

How droving worked

The Buncombe Turnpike was utilized year round but it was flooded with traffic in the fall months of October and November when farmers in Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina marketed their hogs. They waited until the corn crop was harvested, fattened their hogs on the crop, and then sent them south. Professional drovers usually hired several drivers to aid them in taking hogs to market. Each driver was responsible for about 100 hogs. The drover would lead the way on horseback while the drivers followed, each keeping his group of hogs together and urging them along with a whip. The size of a single drove varied (a drove was considered to be the total group of hogs taken to market by a single professional drover; a single drove was managed by one professional drover and several hired drivers). A drove commonly consisted of about 500 hogs although one drover claimed that he once accompanied 2,785 hogs in a single drove from Kentucky through the Buncombe Turnpike. When the droves reached South Carolina, each drover usually had certain buyers waiting on him there. It was considered a poor business practice for a drover to sell to another drover's buyer because this would result in a drop in prices and all drovers would suffer. Since the consumers of this meat were planters and slaves in the Deep South, the price that drovers received for their hogs depended heavily on the price of cotton. When the drovers received payment for their herd, they returned down the Turnpike. Farmers along the Turnpike gave drovers their livestock on credit, so when the drovers returned from South Carolina, they settled with the farmers who supplied them with livestock.(15)

Stock stands

Local farmers were not the only residents to benefit from the Buncombe Turnpike. Livestock herds could be driven only about eight to ten miles per day. Many entrepreneurs saw that drovers needed a place to stay and eat at night and a source of feed for the livestock. Soon a string of stock stands opened along the Turnpike. Stock stands provided the services of a tavern, inn, and stable. Hogs were herded into pens and fed several bushels of corn for the night while the drovers received a meal. Accommodations included a large room with a fireplace where several drovers slept on the floor. About 15 stock stands were located along the route of the Turnpike and each could serve a large number of men and animals at one time. William Lenoir spent the night at a stand with "five thousand hogs and 75 people." One observer stated that, "I have known ten to twelve droves, containing from 300 to one or two thousand [hogs each] stop over night and feed at one of these stands." A stand owner estimated that in one particular month, he fed 110,000 hogs. Drovers typically paid stand owners for their services on their return from the market but occasionally the stand owner would accept lame animals for payment, which was used to feed other drovers.(16)

The stock stands came in many different forms. A black man owned one stand that consisted simply of four cabins. Others were more elaborate. One was a large, two-story structure with thirty rooms



Poinsett Bridge on the Drovers Road near Greenville, South Carolina. Built in 1820, it is, as far as I know, the only bridge or structure on the route left standing. It was named after Joel Poinsett, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, who brought the poinsettia flower to the United States. The bridge was designed by Robert Mills, architect of the Washington Monument, the U.S. Treasury building, and numerous other public buildings.

14. Inscoe, 45-46; Buckingham, 203; Burnett, 88 and Thomas L. Clingman, *Speeches and Writings* (Raleigh: John Nichols, 1877), 116.

15. Burnett, 88, 91-92, 94, 100, 103 and John Arthur, *Western North Carolina: A History 1730-1913* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1914. Reprinted. Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1973), 286.

16. Arthur, 286-87; Burnett, 99-100, 102-103 and Inscoe, 48.

and two verandas running the full length of the building. The owner of this stand also operated at the same location a “store, tanyard, shoe-shop, harness-shop, farm, blacksmith-shop, wagon-factory, grist mill, saw mill, ferry, and bridge.” The operator obviously attempted to serve every need that the traveler might have. One contemporary noted that “the hotel was famous for superior accommodations from Cincinnati to Charleston, South Carolina.” Many of the stock stands also doubled as summer resorts for Low Country residents, and the contrast in clientele was not lost on many people. One vacationer complained “that what she’d hoped would be a quiet restful week at Warm Springs was spoiled by the incessant noise of the hogs and hog drovers who daily passed through that elegant hotel’s grounds.” James Buckingham, an English-

man traveling through the region, gave the following description of one stand, *There were about 50 persons staying at this house, some for health, and some for pleasure, and these were said to include members of the first families in Carolina. Yet the place appeared to us to possess no one attraction, but that of climate. The bed-rooms were dark and dingy, the bedding coarse and dirty; no washstand, dressing-tables, mats, or carpets; broken looking-glasses, tallow candles, brass and tin candlesticks, and filthy negro servants; these were the accommodations that awaited the traveller. The dining-room was not more than eight feet high, with a whitewashed wooden ceiling, blackened with the ascending smoke of candles; it was like a badly built soldiers’ barracks; and the fare was like that of nearly all the country inns, coarse, greasy, tough, badly dressed, and cold. In short, the whole establishment was forbidding and comfortless in an unusual degree; yet here many families of opulence, and especially ladies, passed several months in the summer; were anxious to get here, and always sorry when the time came to go away.*

Farther down the road, Buckingham stopped at another stand by found it to be “much superior to most of those on the road, in its cleanliness and general order.” Some stock

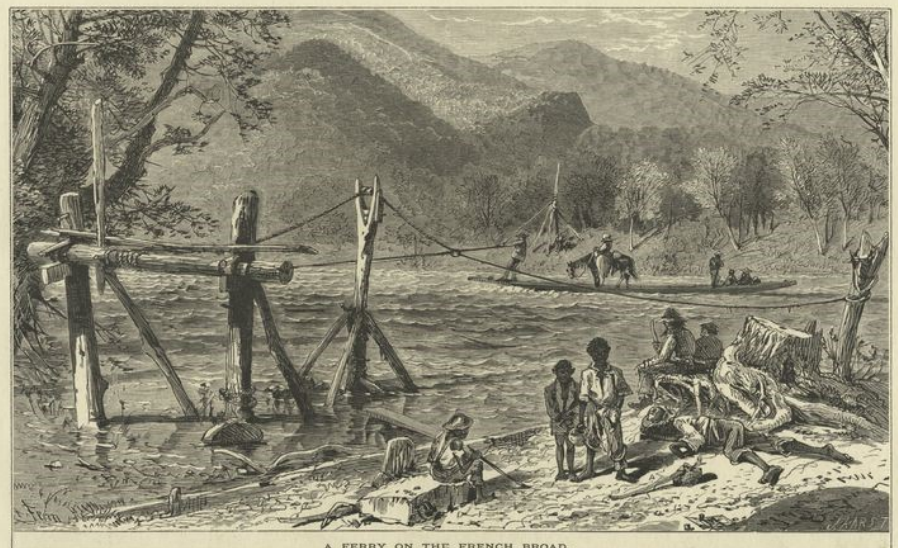


Alexander Stock Stand

stands were located on the opposite side of the French Broad from where the Turnpike ran and it was often necessary to ferry livestock across the river.(17)

There is some evidence suggesting that a considerable amount of goods was taken from the Lower South, over the Turnpike to storekeepers in the mountains and beyond. A traveler observed,

Over this road...quite a large amount of merchandise is constantly transported for the merchants of the interior,



A FERRY ON THE FRENCH BROAD.

17. Burnett, 99-100; Inscow, 48; Buckingham, 195, 207 and Arthur, 286-87.

so that mammoth wagons, with their eight and ten horses, and their half-civilized teamsters, are as plenty as blackberries and afford a romantic variety to the stranger.

The Turnpike also stimulated a demand for stagecoach service. One hotel in Asheville advertised that it was “in readiness at all times to convey passengers to any part of our beautiful Mountain Country.” It not only provided transportation within the mountains, but also to towns such as Greenville, Tennessee, Greenville and Spartanburg, South Carolina, Morganton, Salisbury, and Charlotte.(18)

Market for corn

The Buncombe Turnpike not only provided local farmers a market for their livestock, but it gave them an outlet for other farm products as well. With so many hogs and other animals daily passing through and stopping at stock stands for feed, stand operators bought a large amount of corn from local farmers. Before the autumn drives, operators announced the days they would purchase corn from producers. One local resident remembered that corn growers “would commence delivering frequently by daylight and continue until midnight. I have seen these corn wagons strung out for a mile and as thick as they could be wedged.” Stand operators would frequently pay cash but the usual arrangement was for farmers to trade their corn for merchandise brought to the stand owners from the Lower South. Apparently, the hogs were well fed by stand operators because they usually gained weight on their trip along the Turnpike.(19)



Modern-day remnant of the old Turnpike near Hot Springs, now part of the Appalachian Trail.

Archibald Murphey’s plan for internal improvements called for connecting western North Carolina to the eastern part of the state by water. The flaw in Murphey’s program was that he did not consider any economic ties that were already established and desire for an economically unified state caused him to disregard economic benefits that could be had from trade with neighboring states. The Buncombe Turnpike was an antithesis to Murphey’s plan and its enormous success shows how flawed his plan was. The Turnpike had nothing to do with waterways and its success was in no way connected with commerce on rivers. The Turnpike did nothing to connect the mountains with other parts of the state. In fact, it was a road through North Carolina, not into it. It connected one group of North Carolina’s neighbors with another group. However, North Carolinians benefited greatly from this passing commerce and even the state as a whole benefited because the state government owned stock in the company and collected sizable profits.

The success of the Buncombe Turnpike stimulated interest in other roads for western North Carolina. Not surprisingly, most of the roads planned and built did not head east but north, west, and south to neighboring states. In the 1830s, a turnpike was constructed through the Oconaluftee Valley into Tennessee and plans were made to connect Macon County with the state of Georgia. However, mountain residents had a difficult time squeezing aid from the legislature in Raleigh. The General Assembly in 1846 approved the building of a turnpike in Caldwell County but did not appropriate money for it. John Morehead, governor of the state in 1840, proposed an ambitious plan calling for a great east-west road linking all of North Carolina. Even this project had difficulty obtaining funds. The Hickory Nut Gap Turnpike was another project

18. Burnett, 87 and Inscow, 32-33.

19. Burnett, 102-03 and Inscow, 51.

that the legislature approved and then later rejected. This Turnpike, running from Asheville to Rutherfordton, was eventually built by the counties that it affected without state aid. The state government's reluctance to build more roads in the West was due to opposition from the Democratic party and efforts by eastern interests to hold back funds from the West.(20)

The Caldwell & Ashe Turnpike

Westerners became impatient with state government and took the initiative in constructing turnpikes. Caldwell County residents, apparently giving up on state funding, formed the Caldwell and Ashe Turnpike Company. (It actually ran through what is now Watauga County but the County was not formed at the time and was still part of Ashe County.) Caldwell County hoped to draw trade from Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky by building a road to join the one in North Carolina. The Turnpike was constructed from Patterson in Caldwell County, through Blowing Rock and down the Watauga River to Shull's Mills, Valle Crucis, and on into Hampton, Tennessee. In Tennessee, the road was extended to Jonesboro. William Lenoir, a prominent Caldwell County resident, was instrumental in the formation of the company. He surveyed the route in 1848 and construction began shortly afterwards. A successful stagecoach service on the Turnpike operated from 1852 until the Civil War.



The French Broad River near Hot Springs. The Buncombe Turnpike ran along the left bank.

(21)

The push for railroads

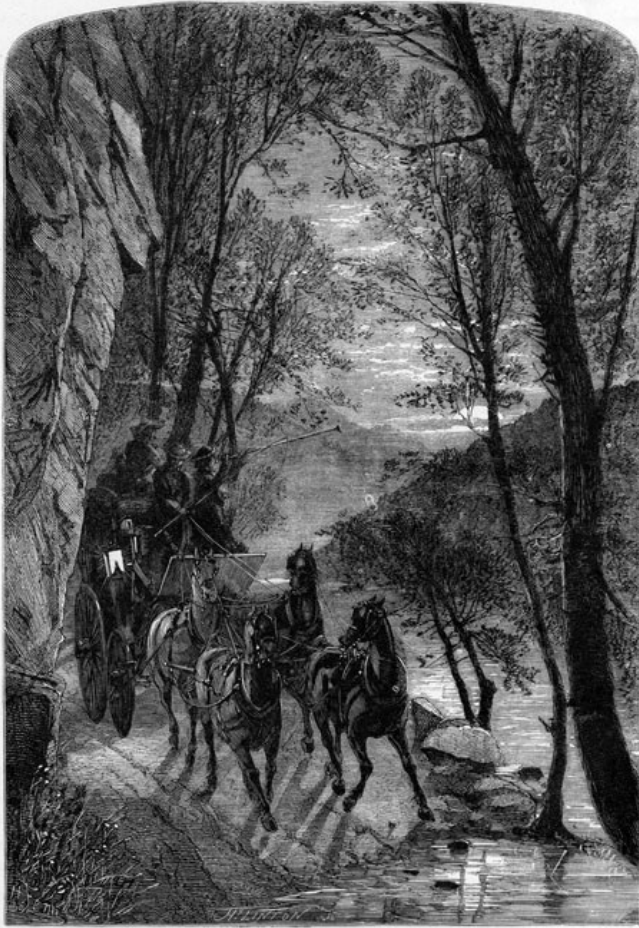
From 1815 until the 1830s, the only form of transportation available to mountain residents of North Carolina was roads. As a result, the push for internal improvements in this region of the state focused almost exclusively on turnpikes. Beginning in the 1830s, the railroad, a new form of transportation, caught the attention of Westerners and attempts were made at getting lines across the mountains. As with the roads, out-of-state railroad connections became important for this region. The first railroad proposal came from South Carolina in 1835. A group from Charleston wanted to run a line from that city to Knoxville, Tennessee. In North Carolina, the tracks would run alongside the Buncombe Turnpike much of the way. The plan eventually failed from lack of support by the states of South Carolina and Tennessee.(22)

While talk of railroads in western North Carolina began in the 1830s, the real push for railroads occurred during the 1850s. The main concern during this time was the Western North Carolina Railroad. This railroad was a state project approved by the General Assembly in 1855. The plan called for a line to run from Salisbury to Asheville and into Tennessee. The exact route was not determined at the time the bill passed. As a result, western North Carolina towns competed for the tracks to pass through their town. Westerners had seen the economic impact of turnpikes and realized that railroads would bring the same prosperity. The Western North Carolina Railroad would reach the foot of the Blue Ridge at one of three locations- Lenoir, Morganton, or Rutherfordton. Each town campaigned for the prize. Morganton eventually was chosen because it would be easier to run the line from there to Asheville. The route from Asheville to Tennessee was the object of more competition. One alternative was west through Waynesville and Franklin.

20 Inscoe, 156-57.

21 Inscoe, 156-59 and Arthur, 239, 243.

22 Inscoe, 165-66 and Weaver, 85.



"THE LOVERS' LEAP"—APPROACH BY NIGHT.

Stagecoach on the Buncombe Turnpike near a rock formation known as the Lovers' Leap near Warm Springs..

The Asheville News wrote frequent editorials on the subject of internal improvements during this period. Two editorials written during the debate over the railroad expressed western North Carolina's feelings about, not only the railroad, but the state's whole internal improvement program from the beginning.

We have no doubt the people of the West will readily embrace this tender of a dissolution of every tie that binds us together as one people, and will henceforth regard themselves as having neither part nor lot in the internal improvement system of North Carolina...and we predict the people of the French Broad Valley will never again ask for a connection with any North Carolina road. We have the means of independence. We have the elements of social prosperity and individual wealth. Let us put a proper value upon our advantages, and give all the world to understand that we can live without their [North Carolina's] assistance. To this end keep your money at home. Read home papers, patronize home schools, employ home mechanics, and as far as possible

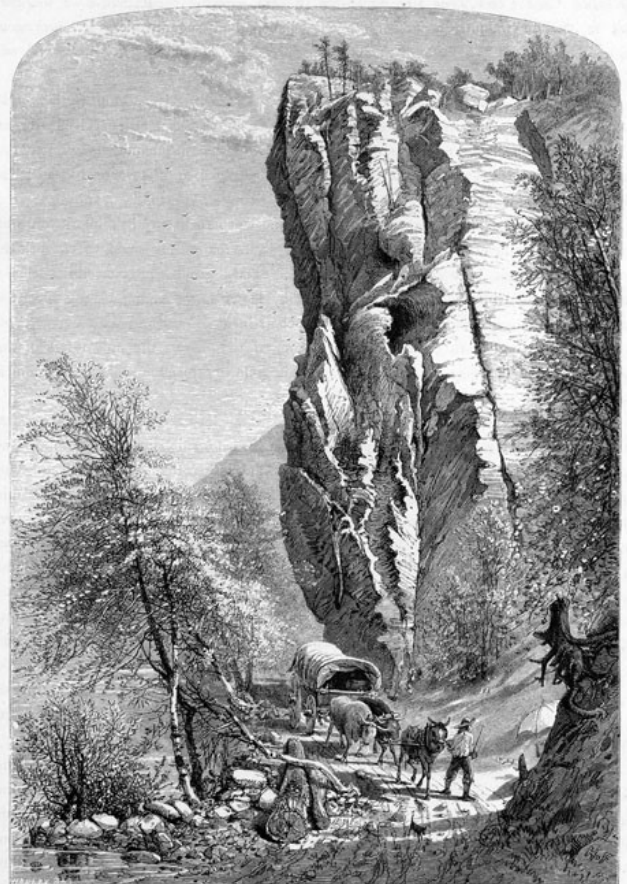
22 Inscoe, 169-70

23 Inscoe, 169-70.

24 Ibid, 171-72, 174.

The other was the route of the Buncombe Turnpike. The more western route was chosen.(22)

All the competition for the railroad was in vain because the tracks never reached Morganton before the Civil War. The bill authorizing the railroad required that it be built in sections from east to west. Construction was painfully slow and Westerners became impatient. As with many residents who wanted turnpikes a few years earlier, they felt betrayed by the state government when it did not deliver on its promises. There was even talk of secession. One Buncombe County resident advocated joining South Carolina. He said, "If we can't get in there, try Georgia next, and then Tennessee...it would be decidedly better to be attached to either of those states. If we belonged to any one of them we would have a railroad right off." He was not exaggerating. In the 1850s a group of South Carolinians again proposed a railroad down the French Broad Valley. The mountain residents of North Carolina were reluctant to encourage South Carolina since their own state was going to build a railroad along the same route. However, when they realized that they would probably never see the Western North Carolina Railroad in their lifetime, mountain residents quickly sought the help of the South Carolinians. They bought thousands of dollars' worth of stock in the company and were optimistic about seeing a railroad very soon.(24)



"THE LOVERS' LEAP"—AT EARLY SUNRISE.

eat, drink, and wear what is manufactured in the mountains of North Carolina...Our people are waking up, and having grown tired of the condition of colonial vassalage, are determined to take care of themselves. They can improve their farms without State Aid, thank God. They can adorn their homes, educate their children, fear God, hate the Devil, and loath two-faced demagogues, all without a charter from the Legislature! And we are glad of it.(25)



A Team on the French Broad.

The Buncombe Turnpike had a significant impact, not only on the local area, but on all of western North Carolina. This impact could be felt from the time of its construction in the 1820s until the Civil War. The most obvious importance of the Turnpike was its impact on the economy. It stimulated the agricultural economy in two ways—livestock and corn production.

The Turnpike created a service industry in the region in the form of stock stands. It also facilitated the movement of goods across the mountains. Resort hotels and stagecoach services were two nonagricultural portions of the economy to benefit from the Turnpike. The stockholders of the Buncombe Turnpike Company shared in the prosperity brought by the road. The Turnpike was profitable and continued to operate into the 1880s, although its peak years were before the Civil War.

Impact on the Old West

The Turnpike had implications far beyond what anyone planned or imagined. The state of North Carolina unwittingly sponsored a project that was also of great importance to the economy of the whole South. Residents of Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia benefited from the trade that flowed along the banks of the French Broad River. One author even suggests that many of the herders made their way to the western United States in the following years, and from their experience on the Buncombe Turnpike, contributed to the ranching economy that developed there after the Civil War.(26)

The fact that the Buncombe Turnpike was the first internal improvement in western North Carolina and the fact that it was highly successful had long-lasting implications for that region of the state. For Westerners, the Turnpike was the epitome of the benefits of improved transportation. The demand for other roads and railroad in the following years overwhelmed state government. Western enthusiasm for internal improvements ran ahead of the government's willingness and ability to provide it. Mountain residents turned to other means of improving transportation. They looked to local governments, private companies, and other states. Indeed, one important effect of the Buncombe Turnpike was that it confirmed the West's ties to surrounding states. These ties became stronger in the following years; even to a point of Western hostility to their own government.

The Buncombe Turnpike provides valuable insights into the factors that made internal improvements successful during this period. Internal improvements did not necessarily create a booming economy as much as they stimulated economies that were already in place. Trade along the French Broad River had been going on for at least 25 years before the Turnpike was built. The Turnpike provided a boost for this trade.

Another factor in the success of these programs was the goal of a particular improvement. The state government and western North Carolinians had different objectives concerning internal improvements. The state wanted to use improvement projects to unite the state economically which, state leaders thought, would result in a better economy. Western residents were very pragmatic about internal improvements.

25 Ibid., 174, 172

26 Terry Jordan, *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 36, 40, 53-55; "Early Northeast Texas and the Evolution of Western Ranching," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67 (March 1977), 66-87 and "The Texan Appalachia," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60 (September 1970), 409-427.

They would go along with a state-sponsored project but they felt no economic loyalty to North Carolina. The West already had ties with other states and the Buncombe Turnpike reinforced those ties. The mountain region supported whatever projects would give them greater access to markets. The first objective of a successful improvement was economic. If the economic objective was met, social, political, and other considerations could be addressed.

The Buncombe Turnpike was actually a pork barrel project. It was approved by the state at the urging of local legislators and was not included in any larger, statewide plan such as Murphey's. However, the Turnpike was a success and Murphey's plan failed. Perhaps the state did the right thing in choosing to approve projects individually rather than implementing a statewide program. Local communities had a better understanding of the most lucrative trade routes and a better knowledge of measures that were necessary to improve trade.



Some Turnpike drovers headed for the plains after the Civil War and contributed to the cattle drives and ranching that characterized the Old West.