

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY NOVEMBER 8



The West Virginia Turnpike was dedicated on November 8, 1954.

CSO: SS.8.8, ELA.8.1

Investigate the Document:

1. The construction of the West Virginia Turnpike did not go without its share of criticism; what did several 'distinguished magazines' refer to it as? What about the media?
2. Before the state took over the construction of roads, that responsibility was held by the counties. However, their efforts primarily concentrated on building roads that connected their citizens to the _____ rather than from county-to-county.
3. The early plans for the West Virginia Turnpike called for there to be a four-lane highway connecting *these* two cities, located at the northern and southern extremities of the state. The northern terminus in the present-day is located in _____.
4. The completion of the Turnpike linked what two regions of the country?
5. The later completion of *what* three interstate highways led to an increase in the volume of traffic on the West Virginia Turnpike.

Think Critically: What benefits have arisen as a result of the completion of the West Virginia Turnpike and major interstate highways? What were some challenges in completing the 88-mile West Virginia Turnpike? What factors led to the need of establishing an expansive network of interstate highways across the country?

THE WEST VIRGINIA TURNPIKE "88 MILES OF MIRACLE"¹

by Christopher R. Monday

In 1986, Edward Peeks, a business writer for the *Charleston Gazette*, wrote "the West Virginia Turnpike has all the makings of a new image builder for the state, an image that will shine."² Long time West Virginia residents could be excused if they saw the irony in praising a road which had been highly criticized throughout its 32-year history. The turnpike prompted distinguished magazines to call it the "turnpike that goes nowhere."³ A West Virginia historian minimized the Turnpike's purpose and labeled it "obsolete."⁴ The media branded the Turnpike as a "death trap" and frightened the tourist industry from the state.⁵ Yet, with all the criticisms and the complaints, the West Virginia turnpike can arguably be considered one of the state's most important achievements of the modern era.

In 1863, the year of secession from Virginia, West Virginia was largely a frontier state. Settlers were confined by the mountains that surrounded them, leading to extreme localization in some portions of the state. Travel was difficult and the building of roads was expensive. Consequently, the State gave the responsibility for road building to the counties, believing that the counties could more effectively determine the needs of their constituents. The counties, however, concentrated their efforts on building roads that connected their constituents to the county seat rather than from one county seat to another. In 1909, only two county seats were connected by paved road when over 1,200 miles of paved road existed in the state. Despite the State purchase of the county road system in 1933 and many other advances in road transportation, there were little change in the

local orientation of the state's population.⁶

Over the ensuing fourteen years, especially with the opening of the four-lane Pennsylvania Turnpike, other parts of the United States were emphasizing highway construction for travel efficiency and attraction of industry. The West Virginia State Legislature saw this "boom" as a way to encourage highway construction to serve the people of West Virginia. The state's roads were dangerous with many curves and resulted in high accident rates as well as very slow driving times. Such conditions did not encourage travel outside of one's locality.⁷

Thinking that the "superhighway" could alter West Virginia's introverted population while opening the state to new people and industry, the State legislature approved appropriation of funds in 1947 to study the feasibility of building such a road.⁸ Early plans showcased the road as having four-lanes and connecting the north and south extremities of the state, Wheeling and Princeton, respectively, with one another.⁹ This plan was discarded in 1951 when the Turnpike Commission (appointed in 1949 by Governor Okey Patterson) after doing countless studies, decided the cost to be too great.¹⁰ What was to be a four-lane road would now be two lanes and stretch to Fairplain, outside of Ripley, instead of Wheeling. Before ground broke in 1952, cost considerations had made Charleston the new northern terminus of the Turnpike. An engineering firm had determined the need for a \$5 million Tunnel (later named Memorial Tunnel) to connect the road between Paint Creek and Standard.¹¹ The final price tag on the project was \$133 million and was funded through the sale

of bonds which were to be retired from tolls.¹² Construction on the project began in 1952. The construction cost five workers their lives and mountains literally had to be moved to complete the job.¹³ Nevertheless, within two years the turnpike was complete and opened for automobile travel. It was nicknamed "the engineering marvel that beat the mountains," "a motorists' dream," "a highway through the clouds," and "88 miles of miracle."¹⁴

Soon after the completion of the Turnpike, the Federal government authorized the creation of the Interstate Highway System. New four lane highways began to create a new transportation infrastructure across the United States. Though not operating at Interstate standards, the Turnpike increased the flow of traffic though West Virginia. It was no longer necessary to go around West Virginia to avoid its bad roads. The Turnpike brought more business and industry to the state as well as linking the Southern states with the Industrial areas of the Mid-west and Lake region.

The growing Interstate system brought more traffic to West Virginia than the Turnpike could bear. With the increased traffic came increased auto and truck accidents resulting in fatalities. By 1975 the death toll for the 21 year old highway was at 278 and in 1979, 28 fatalities occurred on the Turnpike.¹⁵

Under increasing public pressure, studies were conducted to ascertain the cost of upgrading the Turnpike. A 1974 study put the cost at \$350 million. When work on the project had not been begun by the next year, a flood of articles in local newspapers castigated state officials for their lack of action and questioned their competence. Turnpike officials themselves were concerned about the inaction and feared that continued postponement of the work would allow the price tag on the project to "soar out of sight."¹⁶

In late 1976, work finally began on the Turnpike upgrade. Over \$200 million in contracts were awarded to companies who would help in the project. Engineers had to blast old portions of road and mountains to make room for the four-lane structure. They even had to move and redirect creek beds to make room for the road.¹⁷

By 1983, eighty-seven of the eighty-eight miles needed to upgrade the Turnpike were completed. The Memorial Tunnel, hailed as state-of-the-art in 1954 with lights and automatic exhaust equipment and once considered "the most majestic feature of the highway," was beginning to be a menace. In 1986, it cost \$500,000 a year for maintenance and was a hindrance to the completion of the four-lane upgrade. A decision was made to bypass the tunnel. A 1.72 mile extension would be built to bypass the tunnel and the Bender Bridge which spanned Paint Creek.¹⁸ The bypass cost \$35 million, employed 125 men and women and took three years to complete. Ten million cubic yards of earth were moved and in the process, 300,000 tons of coal were taken from the mountain.¹⁹

When finished, the Turnpike upgrade greatly exceeded the original cost estimates. More than \$683 million was spent on the project. The result, however, was a major north-south highway that was safer and more economically important than its predecessor. The later completion of Interstates 64, 77 and 79 into West Virginia and their linkage with the West Virginia Turnpike has continued to escalate the volume of traffic on the road. Heavy traffic, particularly during peak holiday seasons like Thanksgiving, can tax the road's abilities and drivers' fortitude.²⁰

When the Memorial Tunnel Bypass was completed, Don Williams of Bluefield was the first motorist to drive across it. "I think it's really good for West Virginia and maybe the people won't badmouth the West Virginia Turnpike any more," he said. He continued by stating that the Turnpike

would take West Virginia into a "new era," an era that would "carry us into the future."²¹ It was Williams and people like him who made the West Virginia Turnpike into what it was supposed to be: "88 Miles of Miracle."

Notes

1. Kay Michael, "'88 Miles of Miracle' Did What it Was Intended to Do," *Charleston Daily Mail*, Sept 2, 1987, 1D.
2. Edward Peeks, "Finished Turnpike to Help Image," *Charleston Gazette*, Aug 12, 1986, 3C.
3. Michael, "88 Miles."
4. Otis K. Rice and Stephen W. Brown, *West Virginia: A History*, 2d ed. (Lexington: the University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 203.
5. Michael, "88 Miles" and Peeks, "Finished Turnpike."
6. West Virginia, "West Virginia Department of Highways," pamphlet, 1977, p. 2. Hereafter cited as "WVDH."
7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
8. Michael, "88 Miles."
9. "WVDH," p. 14.
10. John G. Morgan, "\$5 Million Tunnel Planned as Part of State Turnpike," *Charleston Gazette*, May 23, 1951.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Michael, "88 Miles"; Rice and Brown, p. 203; Richard Grimes, "Toll Road Officials Worry About Debt," *Charleston Daily Mail*, Sept 2, 1987, 1A.
13. Bob Adams, "New Deaths Stress Turnpike's Record as Dangerous Road," *Charleston Daily Mail*, Apr 24, 1975, 1B. Steve Mullins, "Engineering Challenges Persist in Efforts to Upgrade Turnpike," *Charleston Daily Mail*, May 18, 1981.
14. Michael, "88 Miles."
15. Adams, "New Deaths"; Kay Michael, "Turnpike's Deadly Reputation Reversed," *Charleston Daily Mail*, July 18, 1989.
16. Bob Kittle, "22-Month Check Shows Turnpike Death Risk 6 Times Interstates," *Charleston Daily Mail*, Jan 19, 1976.
17. Mullins, "Engineering Challenges"; "The Turnpike: When Will It Be a 'Real' Interstate Highway," *Charleston Gazette*, June 20, 1979, 1E.
18. Peeks, "Finished Turnpike"; Morgan, "\$5 Million."
19. Topper Sherwood, "Moving Mountain to Valley Just Another Job," *Charleston Daily Mail*, May 14, 1987, 1B.
20. Richard Grimes, "Toll Lane Traffic Delayed," *Charleston Daily Mail*, Nov 30, 1988, 1A.
21. "First Traffic Bypasses Now-Closed Tunnel," *Charleston Gazette*, July 8, 1987.