



## All Roads Lead to Parkersburg...

Well, maybe not *all* roads led here, but Parkersburg was certainly a major hub of transportation throughout the 1800s. When our nation was growing rapidly thanks to westward exploration and expansion of industry, Parkersburg's strategic location on a major river and several transportation routes made it a major regional center. Parkersburg was the terminus for two early major turnpike routes, the Northwestern Turnpike and the Staunton and Parkersburg Turnpike. These two roads brought traffic from the east to the Ohio River and beyond.



## Early Road-Building

In early 19th century, many roads were built as turnpikes. After the state government granted approval and a charter, a private company would typically raise 2/5th of the capital needed to build the road and the General Assembly would pay the other 3/5th. Then the private company

had the responsibility to build and maintain the road and the right to collect tolls. Very few of the turnpikes were financially successful, especially in the mountainous region of western Virginia, where building a road proved expensive. Full ownership of all the turnpikes eventually reverted to the government, especially after the Civil War. Many of the state and county highways we travel today started out as turnpikes.

## The Northwestern Turnpike

The Northwestern Turnpike was chartered in 1827 by the Virginia General Assembly. Unlike other turnpikes, it was 100% government funded. The Northwestern Turnpike was meant to compete with the National Road (U.S. 40), which ran parallel to the north through Pennsylvania. It started construction in Winchester and reached Parkersburg in 1838.



*Sketch by Joseph H. Diss DeBar entitled "The Northwestern Turnpike, from Winchester to Parkersburg, fifty years later."*  
(Source: West Virginia State Archives)

The engineer and surveyor of the Northwestern Turnpike was Claudius Crozet, a Frenchman who had served under Napoleon and taught at West Point. Crozet was appointed the Principal Engineer for the Virginia Board of Public Works and was responsible for developing much of Virginia's early infrastructure. He and his assistant Charles B. Shaw surmounted many difficulties in laying out a road through the mountainous terrain while keeping to standards of grade and road width.

When the Northwestern Turnpike was completed, it served as a vital link between the East Coast and the Ohio River. The pike stimulated the economy of many small towns along its

length, prompting population growth and establishment of inns, taverns, stagecoach stops, livery stables and other businesses. In Parkersburg, the Northwestern Turnpike follows current-day 7th Street.

By the time the Blennerhassett Hotel opened in 1889, railroads and river navigation had somewhat supplanted turnpikes. However, the road still provided a valuable transportation link for surrounding communities and continues to do so. Today U.S. Route 50 follows the general route of the Northwestern Turnpike across West Virginia. Although it has been upgraded to four lanes between Clarksburg and Parkersburg, you can find the original road by going off the beaten path through towns like Ellenboro, Pennsboro and West Union.

Take a look at the corner of Market Street and Fourth Street and try to imagine a busy crossroads full of horses, wagons, pedestrians, river men, railroad workers, farmers, traders and a multitude of others, all converging in Parkersburg, where river, rail and road meet.