The Buncombe Turnpike

As Presented by
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Colonial Dames xvii Century

At the
Dunroy on Rutledge
Homeowners Association
Annual Meeting

6 December 2017

Thank you so much for your kind invitation to be with you today. I appreciate the opportunity to thank you for your wonderful support of our Colonial Dames 17th Century Chapter project …… the marking of one of the remaining segments of the Buncombe Turnpike which, as you know, is included on the Dunroy on Rutledge property. We hope that those of you who were able to be with us, enjoyed our October dedication celebration and the bits of history that were shared.

It may be difficult for many of us to imagine the area as it was in the 16 and 1700's …. Just wooded forest, with the primary residents being the now nearly extinct buffalo. Historians have said that, long before the first adventuring Europeans, set foot on soil of the New World, the Cherokee had claimed, and occupied, as part of its national territory, much of the upper and northwestern area of South Carolina, and all of North Carolina lying west of the Blue Ridge, which includes our area.

The highlands, west from the crest of the Blue Ridge, were an important part of the Cherokee nation's hunting grounds and their quest for game occupied all of their time during the long weeks of summer and early autumn.

Along well traveled paths which the buffalo had laid, the Cherokee crossed streams, seeking the easiest and most accessible routes to fresher feeding grounds. Much of this trail followed the French Broad River. From every part of the surrounding mountains, many of these old worn trails apparently converged at the great rocky plateau from which the white man's settlement later received its name — Flat Rock.

Trade with the Cherokee was established as early as 1673, along paths that crossed at the site of present-day Asheville. The natural riches of the region, and the flow of commerce, soon drew large numbers of settlers, causing Buncombe County to be formed in 1791. The business of government brought in scores of new settlers,

traders, speculators and adventurers. With this influx of new citizens, the well-worn Indian paths became thoroughfares for traders and drovers.

Even before the beginning of the 1800' s, farmers and merchants did their commerce by bartering but they had a definite interest in selling goods for money. This would give them the opportunity to purchase goods and equipment not available to them through barter.

European settlers began to construct roads through the mountains which was no easy task. Because roads over ridgetops often proved too steep for overtaxed oxen and horses, these pioneer road builders preferred to follow creeks and rivers. These roads, or the original trails, rough, narrow and steep as they were, constituted the only means of communication between the scattered settlers of this area.

Asheville scarcely claimed a spot on the map until after the state legislature authorized a group of men to set up a company to build the Buncombe Turnpike and charge tolls for the road. This turned Asheville from a small village into a center of community between Tennessee and South Carolina. Later the Turnpike allowed for stagecoaches to run which, of course, brought additional commerce to Asheville and the surrounding areas.

By an act of the North Carolina General Assembly, $50,000 was appropriated in 1823 to construct a highway to connect the mountain areas with eastern markets. This road extended from Saluda Gap into Flat Rock, along what is now Erkwood Avenue, crossing Mud Creek, on down Hendersonville' s Main Street, to Fletcher and on to Asheville. The route continued alongside the French Broad River to Warm Springs, and at Paint Rock, joined the Tennessee road, in effect, connecting Greenville, South Carolina with Greeneville, Tennessee.

Completed in 1827, travel was now possible from Kentucky and Tennessee, over this route to Charleston and the Low Country, and soon made it the most utilized road in western North Carolina.

Imagine if you will the Turnpike road conditions at that time; a narrow foul-smelling dirt road - particularly after a rain, just muddy ruts, from wagons and thousands of animals that were driven along. Reports exist today describing tens of thousands of horses, cattle, mules, ducks, turkeys and especially hogs driven south from farms in eastern Tennessee, through western North Carolina to Greenville and on further into South Carolina.

Horses, mules and even cattle could be driven by horseback and drovers might travel as many as twenty miles a day. But those driving ducks and turkeys might manage no more than six, since at the onset of dusk, the turkeys would fly up into nearby trees and roost for the night. The drovers would have no choice but to bed down on the spot to wait for daylight and for the turkeys to come down again, to resume their travels.

After the road was improved, farmers could use wagons to ship their crops to the plantation country where cash crops such as cotton, indigo, cane and rice were marketed. The farmers found the best way to market their corn was by feeding it to hogs, cattle and turkeys which, in the fall, were then driven over the Turnpike to Charleston or Augusta, Georgia.

Hogs were driven in herds of thousands by at least one drover, assisted by boys who used sticks with flannel streamers to control the path of the animals. Estimates are that as many as 100,000 pigs journeyed this road each fall.

Hog and cattle drives in the mountains were extremely hard on the livestock, which often arrived at their destination gaunt and sick. To help remedy the problem, large quantities of grain were fed to the animals at designated stock stands, usually about five miles apart. This had the additional benefit of providing local farmers with supplemental markets for their surplus corn. The roadside inns and stock stands were no doubt essential to the successful completion of

the drives, also providing drovers with food, drink and dry beds. During one fall peak period, one NC innkeeper reported to have fed as many as 90,000 hogs in a single month, and provided lodging for 50 men in one night. Innkeepers frequently would accept lame pigs as payment for food and lodging, to be used for bacon and hides for tanning. Support services also sprouted up along the route, such as blacksmiths and wagon makers, as well as other merchandise outlets.

Residents of South Carolina and Georgia looked for refuge from the heat, humidity and mosquito-borne diseases of the summer Low Country. South Carolinians traveled 250 miles north on the Turnpike to establish summer residences in Flat Rock, Hendersonville and Fletcher. It was not an easy trip; as one traveler wrote, "It was gaping potholes, swollen streams, broken axles and long days with few facilities."

By 1850, the heavy animal traffic necessitated repairs to the Turnpike. The following year the route from Asheville to Hendersonville, still used by drovers, was a plank road of thick oak boards. This plank road provided mud-free travel but lasted only eight years.

The Turnpike flourished until 1861 when the Civil War reduced trade and travel to a near standstill. After that period, the Turnpike fell into disrepair and neglect, from which it never recovered, due to the advent of the railroad to the mountains.

Western North Carolina's roads still follow the trails developed during the era of drovers and the "Great Drovers' Road". A major milestone for Asheville and surrounding communities was the construction of the Buncombe Turnpike. Nothing surpassed the Turnpike as a means of developing commerce and the subsequent growth of towns and cities along its route.

I hope that as you return home today you'll stop for a moment to view our bronze marker near the entrance to Dunroy, and to gaze down

the remaining segment of the Buncombe Turnpike, imagining it as it was in the early 1800's as tens of thousands of animals were driven to markets along its path. This was an essential element of our area's history and development. We of the Mary Coffin Starbuck Chapter, Colonial Dames 17th Century are proud to have been able to honor it with a permanent marker.

Thank you.