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Early Turnpikes Were Privately Funded, Part One of Three

After independence from Britain, the American colonies transformed a number of their country roads into turnpikes. A turnpike was originally the revolving turnstile at the toll gate or entrance to a road. A turnpike-road was constructed from funds provided by turnpike corporations, financed by private capital. The turnstile or tollgate consisted of four revolving crossed bars sharpened at each end. A turnpike was a medieval weapon, a defensive frame of spikes designed to repel attackers. A pike was a long wooden shaft with pointed steel or iron head. The toll gate, or turnstile bars, resembled this medieval weapon, so the name turnpike-road was adopted. This was gradually shortened to turnpike to describe a privately funded, toll road. Turnstiles or turnpikes were preceded by toll bars, a simple bar placed across the entrance to a road. The bar was lifted when the toll was paid. Many British urban areas still have roads and districts named Toll Bar.

Windham center in 1916. note Windham Tavern on the left. The tree-lined Windham Turnpike, beyond the tavern, connected Windham Center to Providence, Rhode Island.



The first recorded reference to a turnpike road was in London, England in 1346. In 1663, England's Great North Road, the ancient Roman road from London to Edinburgh, became Britain's first turnpike, wherein capital was raised by a loan to build and maintain the much-used highway. A parliamentary act enabled financiers to recoup their outlay by the collection of tolls for travel over the roads. The last turnpike in England was closed in 1896.

The first American turnpikes in the 1790s were based upon Charles II's 1663 act which raised funds from the travelers along much used, existing, worn out roads. In 1808, a federal report on internal improvements revealed that Connecticut was very active in turnpike building. It had incorporated fifty turnpike companies since 1803, and by 1808 had constructed 770 miles of turnpikes, which were basic, dirt roads, built in a straight

line, wherever possible.

Restrictive policies by the British Parliament prevented inter-colonial trade, so ancient Indian paths in New England were not developed. Slowly, country roads were developed in land from the coastal areas, so each village became virtually self sufficient, having its own water-powered saw and grist mills, and agricultural produce. Textile mills were developed next to fast flowing rivers, but roads needed developing. Turnpike corporations were chartered by the state legislature, and relieved local governments obligations to maintain highways. The old colonial highways were repaired by the turnpike franchises. The first was the new London and Norwich (1792), an old Mohegan trail.

In 1919, a civil engineer named Frederic James Woods published the results of his ten year study of early American turnpikes. It written at a time when the automobile was changing the appearance of these old turnpikes, which he described as grass-grown pathways. Willimantic's location prior, to the coming of the railroads, gave it an important position on these old roads. Woods came to Windham to research its turnpikes in 1916. He was assisted by two local historians, William A. Buck (1866-1945), a grain dealer and local politician who served as Windham's first selectman in 1928-30, and from 1932 until 1942, and Arthur W. Gates (1867-1963), for more than 50 years a master dyer with the Willimantic Linen Company, and its successor the American Thread Company. For the next two weeks we will examine some of the local turnpikes researched by Messrs. Woods, Buck and Gates.

Continued next week.