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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Country Roads
*From Rivers to Indian Trails, Railroads, and
Highways*

By David Frew
January 2023



Family cars like our 1937 Hudson had to be really big. There was enough room for several kids in the backseat but no seatbelts.

Bay Rats took road trips. Parents or relatives would pack us into the back seats of big, cranky family cars and drive us to glamorous, far-off destinations. Towns like Waterford, Meadville, Jamestown, Corry, and Warren, or special places like Cook Forest and Niagara Falls became family favorites. The common feature of most of

these places was water. A river or creek with picnic tables was a magnet for family fun. While we drove, I often gazed out back windows, wondering how the country road that we were traversing was created and why so many of them seemed to follow rivers and creeks. Was there a relationship between rivers and the roads?

Erie's founding challenge began when surveyor Andrew Ellicott was presented with the mission of connecting Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania with the brand-new Great Lakes port town of Erie. Ellicott was not the first to be presented with the challenge of connecting early towns with roads, however. Similar projects had been happening in Europe as well as the United States' Atlantic Coast regions for decades. Interestingly, most of the towns that needed transportation connections happened to be located on long-established water routes since river transport was the only way to trade during the era before roadways, railroads, and airports. Faced with the challenge of developing a very long roadway, as opposed to the short routes that had typically been surveyed and built between towns on the Atlantic Coast, Ellicott did what his predecessors, Native Americans, had done. He used ancient Indian pathways (trade routes) that had been created along the banks of rivers and creeks.



A map of Pennsylvania shows established Indian trails.

North America's first pathfinders and "surveyors" were its native people. Tribes had already been here for centuries before European arrival. Once Native North Americans had become established in the "East," their tribes began to develop trading relationships and the seemingly enormous distances that they faced were not at all daunting to them. They understood from their oral history that they (Native North Americans) had already traveled thousands of miles as they mostly migrated east from their original Pacific Ocean origins. Indian people were highly

motivated to develop trade routes since most of the Eastern tribes had settled in locations that were most advantageous with respect to one or two important commodities. Tribes that settled at the east end of Lake Erie, for example, had access to the slate that was needed to make arrowheads. Central Pennsylvania's tribes had easy access to big game, including Elk, that was made into shoes and clothing that helped protect them from the elements. What to do when a tribe has more than enough arrowheads but not enough leather for clothing and shoes? Trade.

A comprehensive map of Indian trails of Eastern North America looks almost like a modern Rand McNally Road Atlas. Dozens of interconnected trails stretched from today's Ontario to the Gulf of Mexico, covering almost all of today's Pennsylvania as well as upstate New York, and linking those regions with both the Atlantic Coast and the southern states. How did Native Americans develop all of these trails, some of which were very well-marked and wide? They took advantage of the relentless force of water, which had already found its way through Pennsylvania's rugged internal terrain, which contained mountains, thickly wooded forests, and huge swamps.

When Native people migrated from the west, they followed running water: rivers, streams, and creeks. What could have been more logical? As they moved, they remained close to the water that was so necessary for their survival. They were taking advantage of powerful forces of nature, which had used running water to create the most efficient pathways through the mountains and forests of the East. Migrating Indians had walked along the edges of the running water and when they identified a place to stop and settle it was always near a year-round source of water. After settling, the Indians already knew where rivers and streams went and eventually tribes began to trade with each other, usually using water routes. Iroquois from the Erie region built simple flat rafts that they used to tow goods all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. After they reached their final trading destinations, they abandoned the rafts rather than tow them back upstream. They returned by foot to their northern homes.

To connect Philadelphia and other eastern portions of the state with Pennsylvania's new Great Lakes shipping port at Erie, Andrew Ellicott spent 1793 and 1794 developing a map of established east-west Indian trails and selected the most direct routes and well-marked paths from among the possibilities. The Indian trails that he chose and connected into his new roadway followed major rivers and creeks. From Philadelphia he used an established trail that connected with the Susquehanna River, Pennsylvania's largest waterway. Ellicott's route used trails that followed the Susquehanna and its West Branch to the town of Danville. After Ellicott's new route was widened and marked, Danville became a major Central Pennsylvania destination. It was settled in 1792 and grew rapidly because of the new traffic. This early Ellicott trail was the 18th century version of a modern thruway, bringing trade and commerce to the new town.



A map of Pennsylvania's rivers and creeks

Ellicott's roadway continued along another Indian trail that followed Sinnemahoning Creek to Driftwood, Pennsylvania, east of Dubois. Like Danville, the new junction at Driftwood (named because of the "drifters" who were passing through the wooded area) grew exponentially and was incorporated in 1804. Interestingly, Driftwood was the birthplace of famous American cowboy star Tom Mix. From Driftwood, Ellicott's road followed another Indian trail that led to the Allegheny River near today's town of Salamanca, New York. The roadway to Erie followed the Allegheny River and, from the northeast, continued along Chautauqua Lake to the escarpment ridge overlooking Lake Erie. Here it intersected with an extension of the now celebrated Mohawk Trail.

Travelers followed the Mohawk Trail Extension along the ridge overlooking Lake Erie until they reached the site of Judah Colt's upper-station general store near today's intersection of Routes 430 and 89. From there they descended first to North East, then Erie, following the pathway that the French had established, leading to Fort Presque Isle.



This section of the Mohawk Trail has been expanded to a modern highway.



Other sections became railroad right-of-ways

The Mohawk trail that Ellicott used for his final leg to Lake Erie remains one of America's most celebrated Indian Trails. It connected Atlantic Coast Indians with the Iroquois Five Nations and was named for the eastern most of the original "Iroquois Five Nations," the Mohawks. The Mohawk people were called the "eastern gatekeepers" in much the same way that the Seneca were known as "western gatekeepers" of the Iroquois. Much of the original Mohawk Trail has been preserved and remains intact, although there are only a few miles of the original, creek-side trails left to be enjoyed by hikers. As in the case of Ellicott's roadway to Erie, the Mohawk Trail has expanded to include railroads and highways.

The first portions of the roadway that Ellicott established became the traditional route to the Ohio Valley for settlers arriving at the Ports of Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. It became a gateway road, leading to Warren, Pennsylvania, the Allegheny River and subsequently, the Ohio River. By the early 1800s, thousands of settlers were traversing this roadway to the west.



A postcard, commemorating the Mohawk Trail

Little did we know when we were taking family trips to Warren that our car was traversing a historic roadway connected to the creation of Erie and designed by America's premier surveyor, urban planner and astronomer? We did not know it then but we were fledgling historians on a field trip.

*"Life is old there, older than the trees
Younger than the mountains, growin' like a breeze
Country roads, take me home
To the place I belong."
(**"Take Me Home Country Roads," John Denver**)*

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For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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