

October marks 75 years for the Pennsylvania Turnpike

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The Pennsylvania Turnpike, the nation's first superhighway, opened 75 years ago on Oct. 1.

The turnpike was a picturesque four-lane highway with a grass median for most of the 160 miles from Middlesex to Irwin. The highway narrowed to two lanes at the seven tunnels leveling the climb through the mountains. Curves and grades were gradual.

"There was consistency of design from end to end," turnpike spokesman Carl Defebo said. "This was the first roadway that was built from the drivers' and vehicles' standpoint."

The turnpike now stretches from New Jersey to Ohio and has kept pace with engineering standards for superhighways, he said.

The original toll for a motorist taking the 160 mile trip from Middlesex in Cumberland County to Irwin in Westmoreland County was \$1.50

The toll today for the comparable 159-mile trip from Carlisle to Irwin is \$19.40 or \$13.78 with E-ZPass.

The turnpike started as a toll road because the Pennsylvania Constitution prohibited the commonwealth from incurring more than \$1 million in bonded debt without a referendum. The defense highway, modeled after the German autobahns, was estimated to cost \$60 million to \$70 million, or more than \$1 billion in today's dollars. The project was funded by New Deal agencies, state money and a bond issue.

Planners learned about the abandoned tunnels on the abandoned South Pennsylvania Railroad from Path Valley native Edward Flickinger, a planner for the state.

Officials broke ground for the project on Oct. 27, 1938, on a Shippensburg area farm where the commission had hurriedly gotten the right of way on a handshake. About 200 to 300 farmers gathered. Mrs. Eberly, the farmer's wife, asked the men for their autographs. They asked the mother of five why.

Walter A. Jones, the first turnpike commissioner chairman, later recalled her response: "I want the autographs so my children can say they saw history being made that day when the greatest highway and a new era of road building was started."

The highway construction offered jobs to local construction workers. Public Opinion reported in May 1940 that contractors needed laborers and would pay more than 50 cents an hour.

By July 1940 contractors had paid \$35 million in wages for construction. The money order business at the Roxbury Post Office more than tripled to \$7,000 a quarter, Postmaster John M. Hull told the newspaper. The one street through the sleepy mountain village was lined with the cars of workers and mechanics. Highway contractors even smoothed out the Roxbury baseball field.

"Early media coverage focused on the tunnels," Defebo said. "The cave-ins were a big concern."
Four workers died in a cave-in at Laurel Hill. Two dozen men died in building the highway.

The two local tunnels are the Blue Mountain and Kittatinny tunnels. While the South Pennsylvania railroad had done some construction about 50 years earlier, the tunnels were not completed. Workers blasted through the final wall in the middle of the Blue Mountain Tunnel in May 1940, just four months before the highway opened.

The highway cut, nicknamed "Little Panama," at Clear Ridge near Everett was the longest in the U.S. at 153 feet deep and a half-mile long.

The highway opened Oct. 1, 1940, with an unlimited speed limit. Cars' cooling systems limited how fast motorists could traverse the terrain.

"It was magically audacious to have a highway that didn't involve climbing the mountain," Defebo said. "You simply went through them."

The all-weather highway bogged down on its first Sunday as more than 10,000 vehicles went for Sunday drives in ideal weather. Cars lined up at interchanges for repeat trips. A Pittsburgh man reported that he averaged 70 mph once he got on the highway. Others were passing him.

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