

# The National Road: America's First Federal Highway

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*Every problem in the building of the Republic has been,  
in the last analysis, a problem of transportation.*

—Archer B. Hulbert

Built between 1811 and 1837, the National Road, also known as the Cumberland Road, was the first federally-funded highway in America. Extending 620 miles from Maryland to the frontier of Illinois, this migration route allowed thousands of our ancestors to settle in the Midwest in the early days of the new nation.



<sup>1</sup>Early roads into the Old Northwest Territory—today's Great Lakes states—were little more than trails. It could take 45 days to travel 500 miles, and wagon travel was difficult or even impossible in the interior of the Territory. Most travel and commerce was accomplished by way of rivers.

## Settling Ohio

The first permanent settlement of the United States in the Northwest Territory, Marietta, was founded in Ohio in 1788 at the confluence of the Ohio and Muskingum rivers. Because rivers were the highways of the time, it was feared that Ohio settlers would choose to trade with the Spanish at New Orleans because sending goods from the Ohio River to the Mississippi and down to New Orleans was easier than overland travel to the east. The young United States was concerned that settlers in these remote frontiers might ultimately choose to align themselves with some other nation, and the

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<sup>1</sup> CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1255728>

government sought ways to make it easier to trade with the U.S. than with Spain. The necessity of settling close to rivers also inhibited the settlement of the interior of Ohio, and the government wanted these new lands settled, civilized, and their resources tapped for economic gain.

## Early Roads

Braddock's Road, and later Zane's Trace, were early attempts to cut roads from eastern areas of civilization and commerce through the wilderness of the new territories, but the federal government felt a more organized effort was necessary to facilitate the transportation of settlers to the Northwest Territories and transportation of their agricultural and manufactured goods back to eastern population centers where there were markets for them.



<https://web.archive.org/web/20141013025954/http://www.cumberlandroadproject.com/index.php>

## Authorization and Building

Congress authorized the National Road plan on 24 March 1802. It was to stretch from Cumberland, Maryland, to St. Louis, Missouri. But it wasn't until 8 May 1811 that the first construction contracts were let. Irish immigrants and Ohio farmers worked on the road, which was constructed slowly in sections, but settlers began using each section as soon as it was completed, opening up the interiors of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Finally finished in 1837—only as far as Vandalia, Illinois—it became the highway to the west for settlement by our ancestors and the highway to the east for commerce.

## Our ancestors and the National Road

Our ancestors had a variety of relationships with the National Road. It was a highway for migration into the interior of the Old Northwest Territories. Settlements had grown up in the territories along the Ohio River in the south and the Great Lakes in the north, but the National Road opened the interior of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to settlement. For the first time, it was relatively easy to move families into these new lands. “The population of the three states west of the Ohio through with the National Road ran increased from 783,635 to 3,620,314 in the generation the road was in active use (before the advent of railways).”<sup>2</sup>

The road also allowed goods to be moved to the east and west. Wagoners drove freight wagons back and forth along the road, much like the long-haul truckers of today. The road permitted stagecoach travel, so our ancestors could make journeys for business or to visit family. The road was also used by people to travel locally as pedestrians, on horseback, or in farm wagons.

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<sup>2</sup> Archer Butler Hulbert, *The Old National Road: A Chapter of American Expansion* (Columbus: FJ Heer, 1901).

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