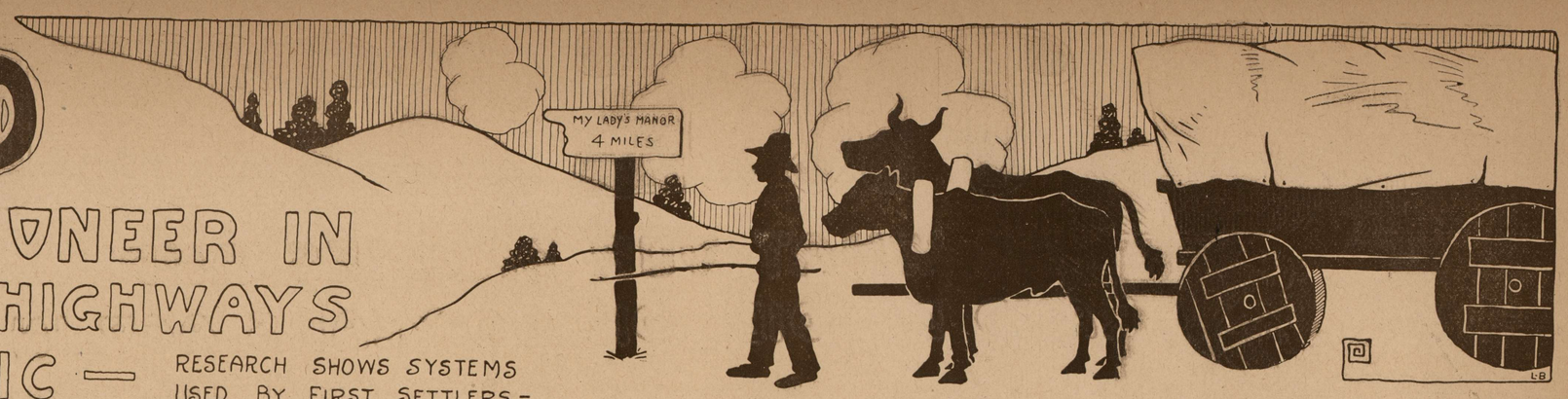
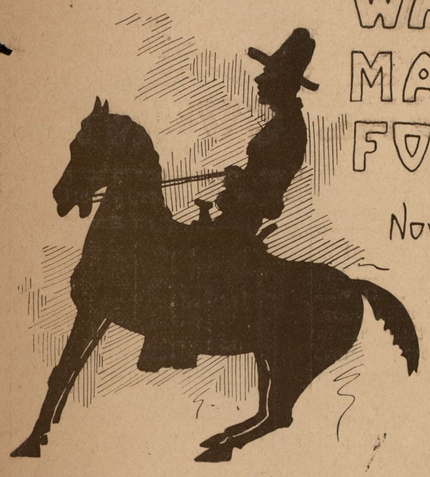
MARYLAND

WAS A PIONEER IN MARKING HIGHWAYS FOR TRAFFIC — RESEARCH SHOWS SYSTEMS USED BY FIRST SETTLERS —





NOW ELABORATE NETWORK OF SIGNS GUIDE TOURISTS FROM HERE-THERE AND EVERYWHERE —

Maryland was a pioneer in the matter of marking highways for guidance and direction of traffic. The State's claim to this distinction is well established by a glimpse into records.

It well may be considered that the elaborate highway signs of today found their beginnings in the early road system of the Maryland of Colonial days. When the motorist of 1924 follows the markers along Lincoln Highway or other transcontinental routes, he is paying unconscious tribute to the foresight of the first settlers.

To most persons this may come as something of a surprise. In noting the development of the State road system through such enterprises as the building of the Severn Bridge, one is apt to think that the advent of the motor vehicle was the first stimulus to real progress along the line of road construction and guiding signposts.

That this assumption is poorly founded is shown by pioneer achievements.

Research shows that the carts and coaches of Colonial Maryland could proceed with the same confidence now afforded motorists by the complete system of road markers.

The signpost of Maryland's distant past was no creation of the skilled painter. Elaborate artistic effects were not sought. Enameled signs were unheard of. The system was primitive. At the same time, though, it was efficient, and when measured by the population and resources of the time it compares well with the highly developed system of the present generation.

The first record of road marking in Maryland dates back to 1666—110 years before the American Revolution. Just how the pioneers succeeded in getting things done without the incentive of a Fourth of July road building pageant is not clear, but there seems good reason to believe that the results were satisfactory to those directly concerned.

The record of 1666 started with the passage of an act by the Assembly of Maryland. This legislation was entitled "An act for marking highways and making the heads of rivers, creeks and branches and swamps passable for horse and foot.' Minor changes in the provisions of the act were made during the next third of a century; and in 1704 the Assembly brought forward a new law, covering the road question in more comprehensive manner.

Building of roads did not wait for the new law, however. Soon after passage of the act of 1666, work was begun on the construction of a cart road leading from Appoquitnimink creek, in New Castle county, Delaware, to Bohemia river, in Cecil county, Maryland. This work was undertaken by Augustine Herman, of Bohemia Manor.

Historians say that the thoroughfare was the first road in Delaware. Added historical interest is given by the circumstance that it made possible the founding of the town of Odessa, in Delaware, and the old town known as Cecilton, on Bohemia river, in Maryland.

In a letter to a contemporary, Herman made this reference to the road enterprise:

"I am now engaged in encouraging settlers to unite together in a village, of which I understand a beginning will be made before next winter. From there we may arrive by land in one day at San Hoeck, New Castle. * * * The Maquas (Christmas) Kill and the Bohemia river are only one mile distance from each other, by which it is an easy correspondence by water, which should be greatly encouraging to the inhabitants of New Netherlands." (The village thus referred to was subsequently named Port Harman).

This pioneer road building apparently had the desired effect of showing the importance of channels of communication in encouraging settlements.

The growing conviction along this line of thought took form in the passage of the law of 1704—still almost three-quarters of a century before the Declaration of Independence. In that year the General Assembly went on record as showing that it was "thought convenient, and very much for the benefit of the inhabitants of the province, that roads and paths be marked, and heads of rivers, creeks and branches be made passable."

With this in mind, the Assembly passed a law that "all public and main roads be hereafter cleared and grubbed, fit for traveling," for a width of 20 feet.

Definite specifications for marking the thoroughfares were afforded by a clause which was the forerunner of the present system of signs.

This clause stipulated that "all the roads that lead to ferries, court-houses of any county, or to any church, or leading through any county to the Port of Annapolis, shall be marked on both sides of the road with two notches."

Study of the law of 1704 indicates that the two notches were merely the basis for the marking system. Distinctive marks were to be employed to show the destination of the individual road. Any thoroughfare leading to Annapolis, for example, was marked by the letters "AA", accompanying the two notches.

As described in the legislative act the system was thus elaborated:

"If the road leads to Annapolis the road that leads there, at the leaving of the other road, shall be marked on the face of the tree, in a smooth place cut for the purpose, with the letters AA set on with a pair of marking irons and colored; and so, with two notches all along the road; and where, at any place, it leaves any other road, shall be again distinguished with the mark aforesaid, on the face of the tree, with a pair of marking irons, and colored as aforesaid."

Annapolis was not the only community regarded as of sufficient importance to warrant special attention in the way of road markers. The law made similar provisions for designating roads leading to Williamstadt (Oxford).

To determine the choice of roads for given points, the act further stipulated:

"And the roads that lead to any county court house shall have two notches on the tree on both sides of the road as aforesaid, and another notch a distance above the other two.

"And any road that leads to a church shall be marked at the entrance into the same, and at the leaving any other road with a slit cut down the face of the tree near the ground.

"And any road leading to a ferry and dividing from other public roads shall be marked with three notches of equal distance at the entrance into the same."

In choosing trees as the foundation of the marking system the Maryland Assembly showed thrift and foresight in equal measure. The trees were ready at hand and their use as sign posts involved no expense for construction.

That the assumption of permanence was well grounded is shown by the circumstance that some of the pioneer signs are still to be seen along the roads of Maryland after a lapse of more than 200 years. One of these is to be found in Charles county, according to a representative of the United States Bureau of Public Roads. This tree bears three notches, indicating that the road led to a ferry.

One of the first records of expenditure for road purposes dates back to 1774. In that year a commission was appointed to direct an outlay of $11,000 to construct "three great roads leading to Baltimore." The York, Frederick and Reisterstown roads were laid out in 1781. The Falls road was authorized in 1791, with a width of 40 feet. The Frederick road was made a "public highway" in 1792. The authorization for the Washington turnpike was made December 31, 1796.

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