The Old Northern Turnpike

In the last couple of columns, I discussed Schaghticoke in 1790, as a town in the new State of New York and county of Rensselaer. The town soon became one of the cradles of the Industrial Revolution in the United States. As today, one of the keys to industrial development is good transportation. In 1790, roads were primitive or non-existent, following the path of old Indian trails. In 1799, the legislature of the State of New York established "a turnpike corporation for improving the road from the village of Lansingburgh trhough Cambridge and Salem to the house now occupied by Hezikiah Leaving in the town of Granville." A group of men, including Cornelius Lansing, as in Lansingburgh, and Colonel James Brookins, a revolutionary veteran newly come to town, acted as directors of the corporation. Brookins lived in the house that is now the base of Paradise Tree Service on Route 40. The turnpike followed route 40 to Melrose, where it continued on the Melrose-Valley Falls Road, across what is now the Tomhannock Reservoir to Tomhannock, crossing the Hoosic River on the Buskirk bridge.

The corporation financed the turnpike by selling shares of stock. Money would be earned from collecting tolls. The commissioners were empowered to develop the route as they thought best, compensating landowners as required. In spring of 1801, the clerk of the turnpike corporation advertised in the "Lansingburgh Gazette" for contractors to build the road, indicating that about twenty of the fifty miles would be completed that summer. The road was to have a firm foundation of "wood, stone, gravel, or any other hard substance", and would be surfaced with gravel or pounded stone. A sampling of the tolls which the corporation could collect every ten miles include: five cents for every 20 hogs or sheep, twelve cents for every 20 cattle, four cents for every horse and rider, and 25 cents for every four-wheeled carriage drawn by two horses. Tolls could not be collected from people going to church or from those going to or from any mill to have wheat ground into flour.

Another provision of the law stated that "said corporation shall cause mile stones to be erected one for each and every mile of the said road…on each stone…shall be legibly marked the distance…from Lansingburgh." There was a penalty stated for destruction of the markers. This is of great interest to us today, as two mile markers survive in Schaghticoke, one at the intersection of Route 40 and Fogarty Road in Speigletown, the second just a mile north, on the east side of Route 40 opposite the swimming pool supply store. They look like tombstones, but merely state the number of miles to Lansingburgh.

The mile markers offer a spur to the imagination. Just think of traversing the turnpike in the early years of the 1800's. You might be on horseback or in a small carriage, travelling amidst a flock of sheep being driven along, or a farmer walking with a few cattle or pigs. Every ten miles, you'd have to pay another toll- though chances are you wouldn't be travelling that far. If you were, there were inns at frequent intervals for rest and refreshment for man and beast, in Speigletown, at Grant's Hollow, at Melrose, Schaghticoke Hill, and on to the north. There would certainly be some noise, but probably of horses neighing and wheels squeaking, rather than brakes and horns. And there would be pollution, but from manure and dust rather than car exhaust and oil. A different atmosphere on a route still used today.

Bibliography: Broderick, Warren of Lansingburgh, via Dr. Larry Lansing of Speigletown