Getting There From Here - Remembering The Stagecoach

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Wells Fargo used Concord Coaches, a new type of coach that was introduced in the year 1829 which was manufactured by the Abbott-Downing Company in Concord, New Hampshire.

Rivers were our first highways, though they required portages around the rapids and falls if one went far enough upstream. The means of transportation in New Hampshire since its first settlements took place in the early 1600's have gradually transitioned from one type to another. We are being encouraged (pressured?) now to transition to a different, but not entirely new, means of going where we want to go by purchasing electrically powered automobiles. But let's think about the fact that progress in transportation in the Granite State as well as elsewhere has depended on the roads provided for us to travel on.

New Hampshire was once considered to be wilderness by the European settlers, though there were Indians who lived on the land. The rivers did provide a way into that wilderness but were limited in the extent of travel, though, interestingly, future roads would often be built alongside the rivers. The trails or paths made by the native Americans provided a means of travel for the immigrants, the ancestors of some of us, These paths could be used for walking and perhaps for horseback riding but were not suitable for any type of vehicle.

The ways through the wilderness of New Hampshire opened up by horseback riding came to be known as bridle paths.

The early explorers didn't find their gold and other precious minerals they were expecting to find here, and at that time probably had no interest in granite, but they did find fur-producing animals, fish, and tall trees that were perfect for converting to masts for ships and lumber for the rest of the ship. Rough roads were built for the purpose of removing the trees from the forest by the use of horses and oxen, but these were not suitable enough for carriages and the more advanced means of travel, the stagecoach.

In America the first stage coaches were built and used in New

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A stagecoach with passengers riding on top.

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England in the early 1700's, but they required better roads and were still uncomfortable to ride in. Though the first settlers of New Hampshire sometimes set about clearing land and building houses before roads were built to their location, building roads, for obvious reasons, soon became a priority.

In 1771 Governor Wentworth traveled from Portsmouth to Hanover by way of Plymouth and Haverhill to attend commencement exercises at Dartmouth College. The trip took him six days. Haverhill, New Hampshire, came to be the central destination for stagecoach travel in northern New England. Coaches regularly left from there to go to Maine, Vermont, northern New York, and Stanstead, Quebec, Canada.

According to Stearn's history of Plymouth a line of stages was established to that location in 1814. Daniel Webster is said to have commented on travel conditions in New England in 1805 by saying "Stages then ran no more into the center of New Hampshire than they ran to Baffins Bay." That would seem to have changed soon afterwards.

In 1834 there was stage service six times a week from Concord through Canterbury, Northfield, Sanbornton, New Hampton, Plymouth, Rumney, Wentworth, Warren, and Haverhill. Certainly there would have been a change of horses somewhere along the route. Another route was from Gilmanton through Laconia and over the Province Road and on through Winona and over Beech Hill in New Hampton and on to Ashland and Plymouth. A stage route from Sanbornton divided in the town of Meredith on its way to New Hampton with one route going through the village and then across the river and on to Plymouth. The other went over Pinnacle Hill to the first New Hampton Post Office run by William Kelley and on to Holderness (Ashland) and Plymouth.

Going back a little in time, it might be well to note that between the years of 1750 and 1780, the Conestoga wagon, that is commonly seen in depictions of families moving to the west, made its appearance. It was popular as a means of transportation until the middle of the 19th century.

Stagecoaches were made in various sizes with some seating up to 15 or 16 passengers, but, if the situation warranted, they added as many as a dozen more with some sitting with the driver or elsewhere on top of the wagon. The passengers did not have a smooth ride; some of the stagecoaches didn't have springs, and after metal springs were added, it was still a rough ride. The driver was often accompanied by a companion with a gun as there was the danger of meeting up with robbers on the way, giving us the phrase, "riding shotgun." The roads were not always great along the stagecoach route, making it necessary for passengers, on occasion, to get out and walk, or to help push the coach out of the mud.

A new type of coach was introduced in the year 1829 which was manufactured by the Abbott-Downing Company in Concord, New Hampshire. It was called the Concord Coach and its use extended around the country. While visiting a museum in Walla-Walla, Washington a few years ago I was

Stagecoach on display at Walla Walla, Washington Fairgrounds. This is one of two Concord coaches that were shipped from the East coast around Cape Hope and then from the Pacific Ocean up the Columbia River and used on a stage line in Washington around 1861.

drawn to an exhibit of a replica of a life-size twenty count mule team in front of a real stagecoach which I discovered was a genuine Concord Coach.

The main improvement of the Concord Coach was that its "springs" were leather strips which were attached sideways beneath the body of the coach, giving the ride a cradle-like feel. Mr. Abbott and Mr. Downing, the owners of the company were reported to have personally inspected every coach before it left the factory. Their coach seated up to nine passengers with room for three facing each other from the front and the back, and a bench in the middle for an additional three persons. This did not mean that the actual passenger list was always limited to nine.

The speed of a stagecoach was usually considered to be about five miles an hour, but with the making of better and smoother roads the speed increased by a mile or two per hour.

As it is today, so it was in 1771: many people seemed to like speed. A wagon without springs made the trip from New York to Philadelphia in one and one-half days and was named the Flying Machine. A few years earlier in 1754 it took Benjamin Franklin, then the postmaster general of Colonial America , riding most of the way on horseback, eighteen days to ride from Philadelphia, PA, to Portsmouth, NH.

Though similar in method the postal service was at first operated separately from stage routes and with post riders as delivery men, but eventually teamed up with the stagecoach.

That story, however, will have to wait for another article.

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