

# GOOD ROADS

BY MICHAEL MALONEY

New York improved its toilsome trails of sand and mud.

**A**ustin Patterson's 1897 travel diary documents his bike trip along the Erie Canal from Albany to Buffalo. In the diary, he wrote that from Little Falls to Herkimer, "The roughness of the roads along this part of the route was fully atoned for by the beauty of the hill scenery."

Country roads in New York weren't always the easiest to travel. They were muddy in the spring, dusty in the summer, and deep with snow in the winter. Unimproved roads were generally located in the more rural areas of New York, while roads in cities tended to be paved.

Patterson rode the last four and a half miles on smooth asphalt, arriving in Buffalo about eleven days after he started. The rough and rutted roads

*The Storm King Highway was one of the major civil engineering feats of early road building in New York.*

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*New York's country roads were muddy in the spring.*

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that Patterson faced on parts of his trip were a fact of life for farmers, cyclists, and others in rural areas, at least until advocates for the Good Roads Movement reached the Empire State.

#### **Bike Boom**

The Good Roads Movement started in the 1880s during America's bike boom. Bicyclists, among the first to advocate for better roads, felt bumps in the road as they traveled around New York's scenic countryside. Later, the advent of automobiles spurred legislators to action, as bad roads caused expensive damage to cars and whipped up clouds of dust. New Jersey was at the forefront of the Good Roads Movement, with an act that required the state to pay one-third of the cost of road improvements.

At the center of the Good Roads Movement was concern for farmers, both social and economic. Good Roads advocates believed that farm work

could be isolating, and that muddy roads often kept farmers and their families from easily connecting with nearby towns and villages. Good roads would help farmers transport goods to markets and rail lines, thereby improving local economies. Good Roads supporters soon discovered that not all farmers felt that way and those in rural areas would become some of the most vocal critics of New York's Good Roads Movement.

#### **Movement Becomes Law**

With the popularity of the Erie Canal in the 1820s and railroads in the 1830s, the need for good rural roads wasn't seen as economically important. Roads couldn't handle the amount of freight that the rail system or the Erie Canal could, so why bother developing rural highways?

Railroads and canals were seen as competition to improving country roads and advocates for better roads were fed up with resources

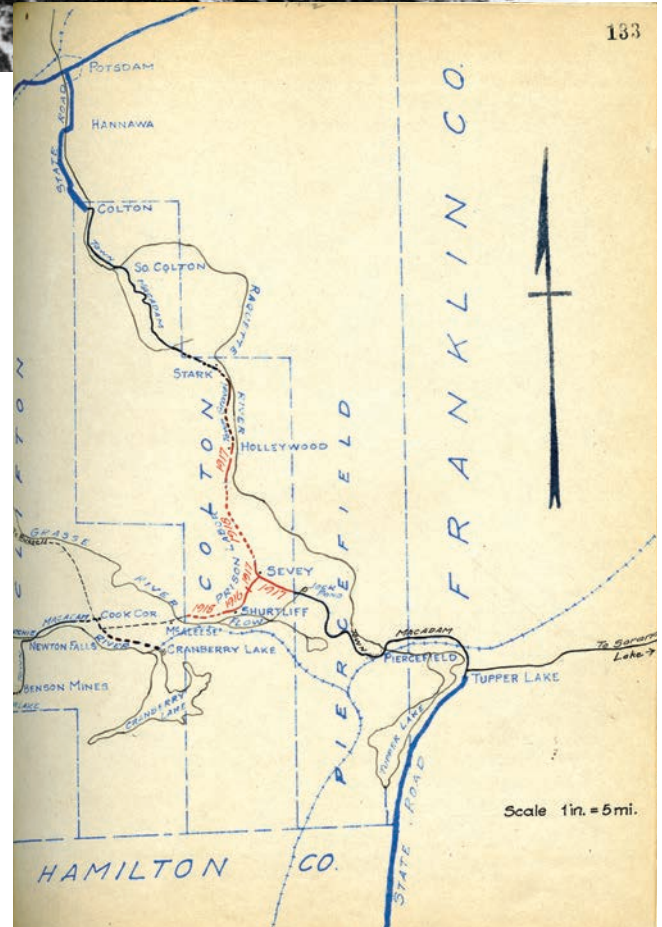
going to the canal and rail systems. New York State Senator William W. Armstrong from Rochester saw the state's rapid growth of the canal and rail systems as a disruption to the natural order of transportation development. According to Armstrong, more developed nations focused on improving roads first, then canals and railroads. Armstrong sought to address this with his co-sponsorship of the Higbie-Armstrong Good Roads Act of 1898, which allowed for cost sharing between municipalities, counties, and New York State when constructing new main roads. Prior to this legislation, road building and upkeep depended on private funds or local municipalities. The Fuller-Plank Act was enacted shortly after, in 1899, and provided funds for roads that act as "feeders" to main roads.

Some of the strongest opposition to the Higbie-Armstrong Good Roads Act came from farmers. Supporters of the act claimed that taxes would be raised only minimally and that it would create economic growth. However, there was apprehension among some farmers that these new taxes would add to their already substantial financial burden. There was also concern that the roads being improved would not be the roads that farmers needed most. New York State Senator Hobart Krum from Schoharie claimed that in New Jersey, a great amount of money had been spent on improving a

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Preparing road surfaces with tar in Albany County.  
Right: Adirondack road construction map



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road to Atlantic City, a road that nearby farmers had little use for. According to Krum, it was mainly used by “tally-ho coaches and carriages with coachmen and footmen.” However, Senator Krum’s allies in the State Assembly (the act was previously passed in the Senate) could not gather enough “no” votes and the act passed with a majority vote of 90 to 39.

**Good Crews**

New York had thousands of miles to improve, so finding state officials and hard-working, honest contractors was key to completing the work. This wasn’t always easy. The State Engineer’s office was responsible for finding and supervising contractors to improve roads as well as

inspecting completed roads. Correspondence highlights some of the problems the state had with contractors in the early days of road construction.

One contractor started work on East Avenue in Rochester in June 1898 and immediately ran into delays due to lack of equipment and materials. The importance of this project was emphasized by Brighton Town Supervisor A. Emerson Babcock, who wrote in a letter to the western division engineer that “a failure to please the people of this county in building an unsatisfactory road means permanent death to all good roads moves here for the future.” Correspondence from western division engineer A.J. Rockwood to the contractor





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Like many states, New York used prisoners to build roads. Pictured is a prisoner labor camp in the town of Thurman in Warren County, NY.

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shows growing frustration with the progress of the East Avenue Road construction. By May 1899, the firm still lacked the necessary equipment to begin work and Rockwood accused the contractor of being evasive. By late July, Rockwood wrote to State Engineer E.A. Bond that they were "making practically no progress on the East Avenue project" and said the contractors should be taken off the contract. However, they eventually were allowed to complete the road project after finding "a new lease on life."

Finding qualified supervisors was a challenge as well. Members of the board of supervisors in Watertown testified at a 1907 Joint Legislative Committee on Good Roads that they knew good, qualified candidates for highway commissioners. Indeed, one farmer had a reputation for being a

"cracker-jack" highway inspector, but running his farm was more of a priority than building roads. This seemed to be a common issue in rural areas. In addition to finding good commissioners, county officials had trouble finding engineers to plan and inspect the roads, resulting in heavy reliance on the already over-burdened state engineer.

#### Prison Labor

New York, like many states, used prisoners to build roads. Road construction was considered a better alternative to using prisoners to produce commercial goods, which caused competition with the civilian labor force. Aside from the obvious benefit to the state of reducing the tax burden of road building, officials believed that road work would benefit prisoners, exposing them to hard work and fresh air that could improve their moral character

as well as their health. Despite the grueling labor, prisoners working in remote areas such as the Adirondacks' "mountain camps," were given some leeway to fish, swim, and trap small game. Morale also seemed to be better without curious townsfolk present to disrupt the workflow, although in the town of Malone, compliments and enthusiasm from residents regarding the road work resulted in an enhanced level of pride from the workers. Some men even found work on farms in Malone after they finished their sentences.

As supervisory costs began outweighing financial benefits, officials reduced the number of guards on road crews. A successful experiment in Onondaga County in 1912, which called for using guards for supervision rather than discipline, decreased the number of guards per sixty prisoners to no more than five. In 1913, it was recommended that an honor system be introduced, decreasing the number even more and making prisoners more responsible for their own conduct.

#### Graft

State Superintendent of Highways C. Gordon Reel proclaimed that using prison labor saved the state millions. Ironically, Reel was accused of losing millions of dollars through extensive graft. During his "graft hunt," Governor William Sulzer estimated that anywhere from \$5 million to \$9 million had been plundered

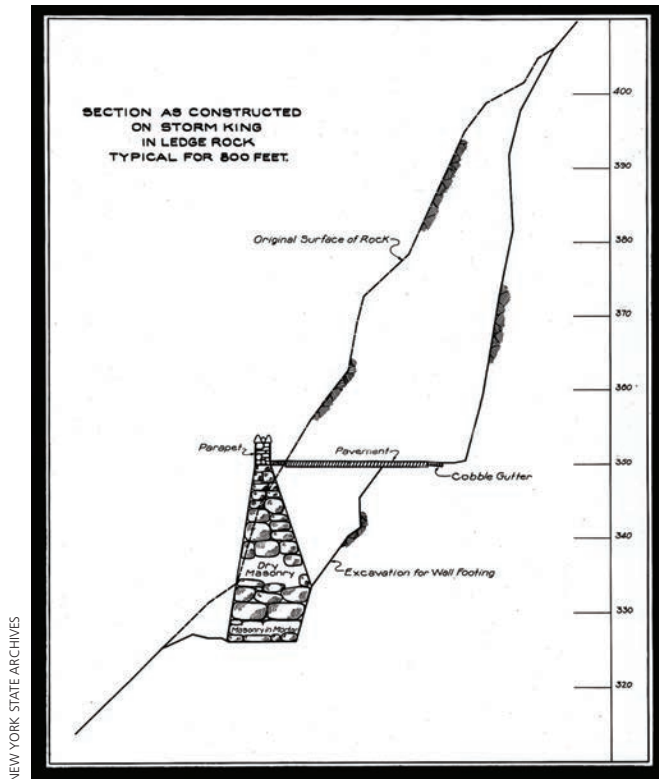
## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Inspiration for this article came from letter books of engineers of the Western Division of the Erie Canal held by the New York State Archives. In addition to dealing with the Erie Canal, the Western Division Engineers oversaw road construction. Correspondence in these letter books sheds light on both the successes and failures of the early Good Roads Movement. Other records used from the State Archives include transcripts of a 1907 hearing on road construction held by the Joint Legislative Committee on Good Roads and reports from project engineers to the Superintendent of State Prisons and the State Commissioner of Highways. The reports described prison labor camps, providing images of the prisoners and the roads they worked on.

Austin Patterson's 1897 travel diary is available via Parks & Trails New York at [issuu.com/parkstrailsnewyork/docs/amp-albany-buffalo-biketrip-1897](http://issuu.com/parkstrailsnewyork/docs/amp-albany-buffalo-biketrip-1897).

investor in transportation in the twentieth century. Transportation infrastructure expenditures reached a peak in 1913, with New York investing over 40 percent of its expenditures in transportation. Supporters of good roads in the 1890s had no way of predicting just how popular and life-changing automobiles would become. By 1920, twenty-two years after the Higbie-Armstrong Good Roads Act, 683,000 vehicles were registered in New York. This trend only continued in the next few decades with the development of New York's highway system.

Improving dirt roads is still a somewhat controversial idea in towns that have them. Residents near unpaved roads often enjoy the quaintness of dirt roads, making them feel as if they have a direct connection to history. As Terry Zeleski, president of the Old Road Society, said about the historic Old Albany Post Road in Philipstown: "From Native American trail, to Queen's Road during the reign of Queen Anne, and later, the King's Road, during the reigns of George I and II, the road served our nation's Continental Army throughout the Revolutionary War. The road connects residents and visitors to our present world, while serving as an important link to our past." Yet, the old problems of the muddy, dusty, sometimes dangerous dirt roads remain and the question of whether to pave is still alive in these communities. ■



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by Reel's highway department between 1912 and 1913. Reel was one of the first state officials to be removed by Sulzer in 1913. He was accused of lining the pockets of Tammany-friendly contractors who overcharged, underperformed, and then kicked back some of the proceeds to Tammany Hall. *The Auburn Citizen* had no sympathy for Reel, stating that his true office was not in Albany but "at the estuaries of the Hudson where the river divides and leaves that nest of political infelicity known as Manhattan Island."

Despite charges of corruption, the highway department did make progress under Reel's administration. Frustration with the slow pace of road construction in 1911 led Reel to reorganize the highway construction department. This resulted in over 1,100 miles of road being constructed in a four-month period, compared to 680 miles the year

before. Reel also initiated one of the major civil engineering feats of early road building in New York, the construction of the Storm King Highway.

Typical of the Good Roads Movement, the Storm King project encompassed many of its problems and successes. It was expensive, over-budget, took too long, and had contractor problems. The first contractor went bankrupt and the second faced labor shortages due to World War I. The terrain was also challenging, requiring surveyors to rappel down the mountain and laborers to be lowered down cliffs in baskets. But after seven years, the highway was finished, and automobilists were overjoyed with the new scenic route.

### To Pave or Not to Pave

The combination of new road construction, the Barge Canal, and the railway system made New York an early