

## The Role of Transportation in Canal Winchester's History

One of the most profound influences on the development and growth of Canal Winchester has been transportation. From its inception, Canal Winchester has had its roots in agriculture and transportation. The fertile land brought settlers to this area and gave them a means of survival and, ultimately, of profit. The timely succession of increasingly modern methods of transportation in the area has allowed for growth and prosperity.

There were few settlers in the area before 1825, mainly due to a lack of a profitable means of getting surplus goods to market. At times the streams were the only available means of transportation; the "roads" -- really just paths -- were unpaved and thus unreliable. Bareis records that one attempt was made, in 1824 or 1825, to reach New Orleans by water from Madison Township. A flat boat was built and started from Big Walnut Creek with a cargo of flour, meal and pork. The man who took the cargo to New Orleans arrived safely, but, unfortunately, "took the yellow fever and died there."

The first resolution in the Ohio Legislature regarding a canal system was introduced in 1819. Almost every section of the state wanted the canal located nearby for convenience and for the economic benefits. In 1822 the governor was authorized to appoint an engineer to survey for a canal, and authorization to secure "rights of way" was granted in 1823. In 1825 an act was passed to commence the building of a canal, and active work on the canal began in 1829. With the start of construction on the canal, economic improvement was at hand -- local workers were paid cash with which they in turn could pay their taxes and make other necessary purchases. The routing of the Ohio and Erie Canal through what is now downtown Canal Winchester led to the platting of the village. Literally, the village owes its existence to the transportation industry.

On September 25, 1831, the section of the Ohio and Erie Canal from Newark to Columbus to Circleville was finally opened for navigation. The speed on the canal was regulated to a maximum of 4 m.p.h. The first boat passed through Winchester on a Saturday night, and more arrived the next day. Crowds gathered along the banks of the canal to watch and cheer. With the coming of the canal, the area had constant, reliable transportation for goods and passengers. Many businesses opened along the canal route in the years after it opened and the boat trade was much sought after. The "laying up" of the canal boats and their crews in winter provided excitement and diversion for the natives. The last canal boat passed through town in 1902.

In the early and middle part of the 19th century, the stagecoach was an important method of transportation, especially for passengers, in the Ohio country -- although, the terrible condition of the roads, especially in winter, would have adversely affected travel by any overland means during that time period. In 1822, a tri-weekly stagecoach line from Lancaster to Columbus was in operation. Although there is no formal record, it is possible that coaches may have run at irregular intervals some years earlier. The average speed of the stagecoach was about 6 m.p.h. on fair roads. In 1849 there was a daily coach from Columbus to Pomeroy, located on the Ohio River. In the 1850's a daily hack line between Winchester and Columbus via Groveport served the area. Winchester was fortunate to have been served by both the canal and the stage line.

The stagecoach line did improve communication in the days before the telegraph. The coach often carried the mail and other special communications in addition to passengers. Bareis records that in the Ohio State Journal on December 11th, 1829, it was reported that "by the extraordinary exertions of the Ohio Stage Company, the President's message, which was delivered at Washington City, at twelve o'clock, noon, on Tuesday last, was received at our office at 15 minutes before 11 in the evening of the following Wednesday, having traveled the whole distance between the two places -- estimated at 420 miles -- over excessively bad roads, in the space of 34 hours and 45 minutes -- a performance unparalleled in the annals of traveling in this part of the country."

The Ohio Statesman of December 11th, 1846, recorded that "the President's message was received on the western bank of the Ohio River, opposite Wheeling, by the Ohio Stage Company, at 35 minutes past one o'clock, p.m., on Thursday, and was delivered at Columbus -- 135 miles -- in the unparalleled short space of 6 hours and a half."

The condition of the roads in general in the state was bad for the first 50 years or so of the 19th century. Travel by stagecoach or wagon could be brought to a halt by inclement weather. The roads were often not much more than bridle paths -- winding crookedly around swampy areas and hilly terrain. Some of the roads in the area still seem to follow those crooked paths. There were few bridges and with rainy weather, some roads would become next to impassable except on foot or horseback.

In the middle to late 1800's, turnpikes and toll roads, owned and operated by private companies with local shareholders, began to appear in the area. These toll roads were the "best" roads -- paved, with bridges over the streams -- in the area, but there was a charge to use them. By the end of the 19th century, the county began to take over the toll roads and make them public roads. These overland routes of the last century's turnpikes are still being used today and are considered to be the "main paths" in the area.

By about 1850, the Winchester, Jefferson and Carroll Road Company had a road graded and bridges erected to enable travel from Columbus to Hooker's (a little west of Lancaster) in Fairfield County. The Columbus and Winchester Pike (eventually part of U.S. Rte. 33) was built in 1865 and was a toll road until 1888 when it was turned over to the county commissioners and the toll gates removed. The route itself, between Columbus and Lancaster, dates to before 1830, but the surface was much improved by the turnpike company, making travel easier. The Columbus and Groveport Pike was incorporated in 1849 and remained a toll road until 1897 when the bridge over Big Walnut Creek burned. The county then purchased the turnpike from the shareholders and a new iron bridge was erected in 1898.

The coming of the railroad to Canal Winchester gave the community the opportunity to continue to exist past the canal era. In 1834 the first interest in getting the railroad to Ohio was expressed by Judge John Chaney, who was then a U. S. Representative. In 1837 the first locomotive was used in Ohio, and the railroad came to Columbus in 1850. From 1852 to 1867 there was interest in and plans made for procuring a railroad line through Canal Winchester. In 1869 the first train passed through the village on the Columbus and Hocking Valley Railroad line. There were then daily runs between Columbus and Lancaster through Canal Winchester and the ability to continue to transport goods, mail, and passengers was assured. Because of the canal and then the railroad, grain elevators were once plentiful in this agricultural area -- surplus grain could be sold and shipped to other parts of the country, ensuring a profitable economy for the village.

For years before 1899, the building of an electric railway system was discussed. Electric traction lines were first incorporated in the area in 1899, but failed to materialize on schedule. By 1901 it finally seemed possible that the electric railway would actually happen when the Scioto Valley Traction Company began acquiring rights of way. On July 19, 1904, the first interurban cars on the Scioto Valley Traction Company lines reached Canal Winchester on a trial run. At one place on the trip between Canal Winchester and Groveport, the car registered a speed of 62 m.p.h. Once the line was fully established, the cars ran every two hours.

From 1910 to 1920 was the boom time for the interurban. The Scioto Valley Traction Company brought additional modernization to the area c. 1916 when they began to sell the surplus electricity that was generated by the company to the public. The last interurban train ran through the village on September 30, 1930. The decline of the interurban was a national phenomenon, mostly due to the rising dominance of the automobile.

Transportation in and around Canal Winchester today is mostly by automobile. The canal was last used in 1902; the interurban stopped running in 1930; the last passenger train stopped in Canal Winchester in 1949. Trains still pass through the village, but no longer stop at the depot that is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Canal Winchester is located along U.S. Rte. 33, which provides easy, direct access to Lancaster and Columbus and, consequently, to Interstates 70 and 71. Forty years ago, Rte. 33 passed through downtown Canal Winchester on the main streets of the village. In the 1950's and 60's, due to increased traffic and safety concerns, upgrading the two-lane U.S. Rte. 33 between Columbus and Lancaster became a priority. The improvements included rerouting the highway around, rather than through, Canal Winchester. Today, "33", as it is known to the locals, is a busy four-lane highway just north of the downtown area and the main highway from Columbus to Lancaster and much of southeastern Ohio. Being part of the "33 Corridor" -- an area conducive to commercial development because of the transportation access -- keeps the village alive and growing.

Canal Winchester has been fortunate to have had its transportation needs well met over the past 175 years or so. Had there been any interruption in the long line of transportation system developments over the years, the village would probably have died as have many small towns on outdated transportation routes. No community can sustain its existence for long without good, reliable access to the rest of the world and, in that respect, Canal Winchester has, indeed, been blessed.

Note: Sources for this tidbit include: the 1902 History of Madison Township by George Bareis, the 1992 Canal Winchester: The Second Ninety Years by Carroll and Steube, and the archives of the Canal Winchester newspaper, the Times.