

Plank Roads and Roadhouses in De Kalb

by Bryan Thompson

In our fast changing world, we are used to rapid changes in technology. What was the latest technology twenty years ago may now seem hopelessly obsolete. Who among us today would rush out to buy a new VHS player?

Rapid obsolescence is nothing new. In 1878, Samuel W. Durant, in L. H. Everts "History of St. Lawrence County" (page 131) nostalgically remembered the era of plank roads only twenty years earlier:

The Old Turnpike

We hear no more the clanging hoof,
And the stage-coach rattling by,
For the steam-king rules the traveled world,
And the old pike's left to die!

The grass creep o'er the flinty path,
And the stealthy daisies steal
Where once the stage-horse, day by day,
Lifted his iron heel.

"No more the weary stager dreads
The toil of the coming morn;
No more the bustling landlord runs
At the sound of the echoing horn;
And the dust lies still upon the road,
And bright-eyed children play
Where once the clattering hoof and wheel
Rattled along the way.

"No more we hear the cracking whip,
And the strong wheel's rumbling sound;
But, ah! The water drives us on,
And an iron horse is found!
The coach stands rusting in the yard,
The horse has sought the plow;
We have spanned the world with an iron rail,
And the steam-king rules us now!

'The old turnpike is a pike no more,
Wide open stands the gate;
We have made a road for our horse to stride,
And we ride at a flying rate.
We have filled the valleys and leveled the hills
And tunneled the mountain's side,
And round the rough crag's dizzy verge
Fearless now we ride.

"Go-on-on-with a hearty front!
A puff, a shriek, and a bound,
While the tardy echoes wake too late
To echo back the sound.
And the old pike-road is left alone,
And staggers seek the plow;
We have circled the earth with an iron rail,
And the steam-king rules us now!"

The 1840's were a time of increasing economic prosperity for the pioneer farmers and manufacturers of central and northern New York. The forests were rapidly being tamed and small industries had sprung up on streams throughout the

region. The main impediment to further economic expansion was an adequate transportation system for moving heavy agricultural and manufacturing products to market.

The roads of the time were pitifully inadequate. The common roads, built by farmers and local residents working off their annual tax obligations in three or four days labor per year, were deep mud mires in spring and fall and bone cracking rutted surfaces in summer.

Winter provided the only reliable time for hauling produce to market. As early as 1815, Philo Hurlbut wrote from De Kalb to his brother Garry in Roxbury, Connecticut inquiring about the price there for apple brandy. If the price was adequate, he wrote, "As soon as the sleighing is continuous I will be down with a load." A hard frozen surface, continuous from De Kalb to Roxbury in the dead of winter, provided the smoothest, fastest means for transporting heavy freight.

Yet travel through the uncertain winter weather provided its own set of challenges. Anna Arnold, on returning to De Kalb (April 15, 1817) from her grandparent's home in Rhode Island described her journey thus, " Two days on the grants it was very cold and windy. The snow was six feet deep on the level and the roads would drift so that it was like breaking a track through the snow nine feet deep. People would have to un-tack the horses and draw the sleighs through by hand. People do try to go eight, nine, ten sleighs in company so as to help each other out of their difficulties. I have (set) in this cutter one hour at a time while they would be un-tacking their horses and trying to pass by each other and the snow blowing so that you hardly see your hand before you."

Over the years, a system of turnpikes, constructed from hand-crushed gravel, were developed between major population centers. These needed continuous maintenance to prevent the development of potholes, " And such incredible holes I never saw before. It did almost seem to jar the breath out of one's body on the Utica Turnpike. The holes [were] so bad that it was dangerous to travel. I understood that there [were] several horses killed by pitching in by such holes with such force." (Anna Arnold, April 15, 1817)

In about 1820, John Louden MacAdam developed a new road construction technique involving a crowned road surface with a large crushed stone base and a small crushed limestone topcoat. This surface was more durable though expensive. A few New York State turnpikes received this treatment in the 1820's. However the narrow iron-shod farm wagon wheels of the day soon beat the surfaces to pieces. The problem proved so severe that the MacAdam turnpikes offered reduced fares for wagons with wheels at least six inches in width.

In the early days, the St Lawrence and Oswegatchie rivers allowed bateaus to move heavy loads of potash and timber to Ogdensburg and on to Montreal. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 proved an economic boon for communities along its route. Other canals were soon planned across the state but few proved economically feasible.

In the 1830's, the first railroads began to spread across the state. The railroad could reach communities not accessible by water. However, railroads were expensive, risky propositions for the relatively poor hinterlands. St. Lawrence County began organizing for its first railroad in 1829. Only after 5 attempts, with the backing of wealthy Boston businessmen hoping to get an upper hand in the

local market, was the Northern RR incorporated in 1845. This first local railroad was not fully operational until 1850.

Meanwhile local farmers and businessmen were anxious to improve transportation and their local economies. The newly introduced plank roads gave local citizens a chance to take transportation improvement into their own hands.

Plank road construction originated in Russia and was introduced to Canada in the 1830's. The first Plank road in the United States was the, Salina and Central Square Plank Road, completed in 1846, on what is today the course of US RT 11 near Syracuse. The editor of the Skaneateles Columbian raved about the new road, "It is decidedly the most agreeable road to ride-over that we ever saw. The carriage glides smoothly as on the frozen surface of a lake or river. A horse in a light carriage will readily go along at the rate of sixty or seventy miles per day." (Columbian September 16, 1847)

This first New York State Plank road was constructed under the old turnpikes act, which was quite cumbersome. In response to the enthusiasm for the new type of toll road, the New York State Legislature passed Chapter 210 of the laws of New York for 1847, creating a new simplified process for incorporating Plank Road Companies in the state. This set off a statewide boom in the construction of plank roads.

The law stipulated a minimum capitalization of \$500 per mile, even though contemporary engineers estimated the cost to build and maintain the roads at \$1300 per mile. The new road construction technique was widely promoted. January 2, 1849 the St Lawrence Republican newspaper of Ogdensburgh, devoted nearly half of their front page to a letter from Thomas G.

Alvord, of the Salina and Central Square company, explaining the methods of construction and the details of operating a plank road company. By this time, plank roads were being planned throughout St. Lawrence County.

Plank Road Companies in De Kalb

Two such plank road companies were planned for the town of De Kalb. They were: The Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road and The Gouverneur, Richville and Canton Plank Road.

The historical record for the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road Company is more detailed, so we will start there. The company was organized February 6, 1849 with John Pickens, William H. Cleghorn, Lewis Samburn, William Thurston, Rocius W. Judson, Andrew Roulston, and Peletiah Stacy as directors. The company's offices were in the home of Dr. Lewis Samburn in Heuvelton. Lewis Samburn was the treasurer of the company throughout its existence. Over the years, the presidents of the company were: William H. Cleghorn, Orin M. Fisk and Nathan P. Giffin.

The share prices of the company were set at fifty dollars per share. The shareholders in the new company and the number of shares they purchased were: Nathan P. Giffin 63, A Bacon 33, Peletiah Stacy 24, Lewis Samburn 16, Susan Daubenny 10, Orin M. Fisk 8, Philene Thurston 5, William Thurston 5, R. W. Judson 5, Andrew Roulston 5, Mary Kendrew 4, Amos Hulett 3, Nathaniel Holt 3, H. S. Humphrey and Co. 2, Stephen Slosson 2, G. L. Townsley 2, J. G. Hopkins 2, Alden Vilas 2, Bishop Perkins 1. The share holders included prominent business men and farmers from both towns as well as all the inn keepers and several store owners along the proposed route.

The toll road began at the southern end of the bridge in Heuvelton, where the first toll gate was placed, and followed the route of NYS Route 812 to near Kendrew Corners. There, it left the current highway, going past the western side of the Kendrew Methodist church and following the current Ritchie Road until that road makes a 90 degree turn near the Stiles farm. At this point, the Plank Road diverged, continuing straight south to the bank of the Oswegatchie River near Coopers Falls. Here, the company erected a new lattice truss wooden covered bridge over the Oswegatchie River to the new village of Cooper's Falls. A second tollgate was located here. From Cooper's Falls, the Plank road reentered the course of NYS 812. In De Kalb Village (Old De Kalb), the plank highway altered the original grid street pattern of the village, creating the two sharp curves motorists contend with today. East of De Kalb Village (Old De Kalb), the Plank Road again left the course of modern 812. It eventually connected with what is today Keyes Rd. and crossed NYS 812 about ½ mile north of US RT 11. It then continued west past Peletiah Stacy's house to the current Bush Rd and then along the course of the Old Northerner Rd to the intersection with US RT 11. Here, the final Tollgate of the highway was located.

The Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank road was an 8 feet wide plank road with similar width turnouts at regular intervals. Thomas Alvord described the construction of just such a road in his letter to the St Lawrence Republican.

The first step was to plow two parallel furrows four feet apart with a walking plow. Next three by six beams (stringers) were laid end to end in the furrows with staggered joints as level as possible. Planks of three to four inch thickness were then laid across the sleepers. One pair of workers laid the planks while another pair used iron bars to ram the planks tightly into the previous ones. The planks

were not nailed or pegged to the sleepers. The ends of the planks were staggered rather than even to facilitate the reentry of a wagon wheel onto the plank surface from the shoulder. After the plank surface was laid a crew with scrapers dug parallel ditches and threw the dirt up along the ends of the planks to create a shoulder. No effort was made to even the ground under the planking. Turnouts for meeting other wagons were provided at convenient intervals.

Construction of the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank road was commenced in the summer of 1849. Most of the road was completed in 1850, but the new roadway across Thomas Kendrew's and the Lattice-Truss covered bridge across the Oswegatchie were not completed until 1853.

The toll rates for all plank roads in New York State were set by the legislature in the authorizing legislation. The rates were one and one half cents per mile for any vehicle pulled by two animals, one half cent per mile additional for each additional towing animal. For a vehicle drawn by one animal three quarters of a cent per mile. For every score (20) of sheep, swine or cattle, one cent per mile. For every horse and rider or led horse, one half cent per mile.

The Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank road had an economic advantage over many other routes in that it was the official mail route for the Ogdensburgh mail from Utica. This brought an increase in stage and other traffic. The mail stages used locally in this era looked nothing like the stages made famous by Hollywood movies. John Melish,

In his "Travels In the United States of America, (Published 1812 Philadelphia, PA T & G Palmer Printers) describes a stage that resembles one pictured leaving the Jaekman

Tavern, Canton during the plank road era. "The mail stages are long machines hung upon leather braces. with three seats across, of a sufficient length to accommodate three persons each, who all sit with their faces towards the horses. The driver sits under cover, without any division between him and the passengers, and there is room for a person to sit on either side of him. The passengers' luggage is put below the seats, or tied on behind the stage. They put nothing on the top, and they take no outside passengers. The stages are slightly built, and the roof suspended on pillars, with a curtain to be let down or folded up at pleasure. The conveyance is easy, and in summer very agreeable, but it must be exceedingly cold in winter." Melish, page 106.

The Gouverneur, Richville and Canton Plank Road was incorporated five months after the De Kalb and Heuvelton Plank Road, on July 6, 1849. The major stockholders in the company were: Cornelius Favil, John Leslie Russell, Henry Barber, T. H. Conkey, Barzillai Hodskin, Harlow Godard, Danford Johnson, John Smith, A. B. Lynde, Edward Alexander, Orin C. Spencer, William E. Sterling, Luther Colton, Edwin Dodge, E. Miner, Orville page, E. Dewey, Obadiah K. Rundell and F. Dewey. The first officers were: E. Miner president, Wm E. Sterling treasurer, C. A. Parker secretary. Later Barzillia Hodskin served as President and Harlow Godard was secretary. The first trustees were: Wm E. Sterling, S. B. Van Duzee, John Smith, J. Burnett, E. Miner, and T. Caldwell.

The road was 16 miles long and initial capitalization for the project was \$16,000. The road commenced at the eastern boundary of the village of Gouverneur

followed the approximate route of US 11 through the village of Richville, intersected the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Rd about three miles east of the village and continued through East De Kalb to the Canton Town line terminating at the Forest House at the Canton town line (De Kalb Junction would not come into existence for another 13 years). The road was completed in 1850.

The toll booths on the road were located: at the edge of the Village of Gouverneur, at the intersection with the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road, and, at Lynde's Tavern, which was located one half mile east of East De Kalb (Just east of where the Jeffers Road joins Route 11 today.) with a secondary tollbooth located at East De Kalb on the East De Kalb Road. The road was constructed in a manner similar to the previously discussed Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road.

The Boom

The new system of plank roads brought an immediate economic boom to the town of De Kalb. Increased travel led to the proliferation of roadhouses to serve the traveling public and an increase in the number of neighborhood post offices. A tollgate keeper was paid \$150 per year for manning the gate. Since they had to be present everyday anyway, many opened roadhouses and some added a postmasters income as well.



The old Northern Hotel in later days.

Perhaps the most prosperous roadhouse in the town was the Northern Hotel built at the intersection of the two plank roads in the town. William A. Thompson proudly announced the hotel's opening in the January 16, 1851 St Lawrence Republican. "Travelers home at the Northern Hotel. The subscriber has recently fitted up a new establishment at the junction of the Canton and Ogdensburgh Plank Road, in De Kalb for the expressed accommodation of traveling guests of which he solicits a liberal patronage. Parties shall be accommodated on the shortest notice. Call Gentlemen and Ladies, and try the Northern Hotel." Daniel Thompson is also associated with this hotel.

The Northern Hotel was often the site of public meetings. On October 6, 1852 the Free Democrats of the town of De Kalb held a meeting of "The Democracy of the Town of De Kalb" at the Hotel. They passed an abolitionist resolution calling for no new slave states in the union. This meeting gives some credence to the local legend that the hotel was a stop on the Underground Railroad. It is the only documented meeting place of abolitionists in the town.

Not all the guests at the Northern Hotel were treated hospitably. In August 1855, Henry Talbot escaped from the county jail in Canton. Two days later, hungry and exhausted, Talbot applied for a room at the Northern Hotel. William Thompson recognized the fugitive and turned him over to the authorities in Canton. For his sharp eye, he collected a \$100 reward.

James Caul operated a roadhouse in Richville during the plank road era. He later sold the business to his brother-in-law A.B. Lynde and went on to operate a well-known hotel in North Lawrence.

Further to the east, on the Gouverneur Richville and Canton Plank Road, John H. Bartlett constructed a roadhouse near the intersection with the East De Kalb Road (in what is now a rest area on US Rt. 11). He was tollgate keeper for the East De Kalb Rd gate. He became the first postmaster for the East De Kalb Post Office July 14, 1851.

An all night Cotillion (quadrille) Ball was held at the Hotel for New Year's in 1852. In 1852, Bartlett sold the hotel to William Nois Smith, who continued as Hotel Keeper and Postmaster. In 1853, the hotel was the sight of the Town of De Kalb's annual town meeting. The 23rd regiment of the NYS Militia held their encampments near the hotel twice in the 1850's. By 1858, the new Rome Watertown and Potsdam Railroad opened a depot at East De Kalb.



East De Kalb from Rogerson's 1858 Wall Map of St Lawrence County.

Just one half mile east of East De Kalb was the last tollgate in the town. The gate was manned by a Mr. Lynde, who also kept a roadhouse here just east of the current Jeffers Rd on lands purchased by the Plank Road Company from Obadiah K. Rundell in 1850 for three shares of Plank Road stock.

When the plank road was constructed through De Kalb Village (Old De Kalb), there was already a Hotel there run by Courtland C. Holt. This stage stop was located on top of the hill on Canton St. in the village. When the plank road was constructed through the village, it avoided the hill, creating a series of curves staying near the river. Now, for stages to reach Holt's, they had to leave the smooth plank road and climb a long rough hill.



Holt's Hotel circa 1880

Seeing a business opportunity, two brothers, Francis M. Townsley and Gideon Lauren Townsley, constructed a new roadhouse hotel on the plank road in De Kalb village about 1854. The hotel was located near where the old general store stands today. The hotel was noted for its tall signpost with a coach and four that swung in the wind and a large pine plank-watering trough by the side of the road. Although the sign and hotel closed with the end of the plank road era the watering trough remained until 1903.

G.L Townsley dropped out of the partnership in 1857, but F. M. Townsley continued operations through 1858. In 1859, with business waning, F. M. leased

the roadhouse to Perry Porter who kept it in operation for several more years. From 1855 to 1860, the Inn was the sight of the annual town meeting of De Kalb. The annual rent for these meetings was ten dollars.

The next stop on the Heuvelton and De Kalb plank road was the short-lived hotel of Henry Fisk at Coopers Falls. Fisk borrowed \$3000 from Fredrick De Peyster in September 1855 to construct the roadhouse near the tollgate. Just two years later (1857), the hotel was in foreclosure.

The final roadhouse on the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road in the town of De Kalb was that of plank road stockholder William Cleghorn Jr. This stage stop was located in his home on the easterly side of the road at the top of the hill north of Kendrew Corners. Mr. Cleghorn operated the Blink Bonnie Post office from his roadhouse, from December 2, 1850 until February 7, 1854.

The Bust

The era of the plank roads was short lived for many reasons.

The roads were being built in 1849 just one year before the first railroad reached Ogdensburg from Vermont. By 1857, a second railroad, The Rome Watertown and Potsdam was completed, paralleling the Gouverneur Richville and Canton Plank Road. These new conveyances soon took much of the traffic and the US mail from the plank roads.

However, the major problem was that costs of operations and maintenance were grossly underestimated. All projections were for an eight-year lifespan for the planking surface. However, in reality, the lifespan of a plank turned out to be more like five years. By law, plank road companies were required to keep a

maintenance crew on the job and pay part of the salary of a county appointed Plank Road Commissioner as well as the gatekeepers.

When a plank failed, it was a serious problem that had to be repaired immediately, as no fill had been added beneath the plank surface and a deep hole could prove deadly to a trotting horse. Plank Road companies often became the subject of damage suits. As the surface deteriorated, many stockholders were unwilling to invest more money in a concern that provided little if any profit. Through out the state by the late 1850's, plank road companies were closing.

The two companies in the town of De Kalb faced similar fates. Each tried to stay in business for a while by abandoning the more expensive portions of their plank roads. The Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road Company abandoned the portion of their road west of the six-mile post (located 30 feet from the Cleghorn Lime Kiln near Kendrew Corners.) August 2, 1858. The Heuvelton Company thus ridded themselves of more than half their road and bridge maintenance liability. The Gouverneur Richville and Canton Plank Road Company abandoned the portion of their highway east of Lot #414 (where The Maple Leaf Diner now stands on US Rt. 11) August 20, 1859.

In June 1860, Nathaniel Hodskin brought suit against the Gouverneur Richville and Canton Plank Road Company for nonpayment of debts. On December 7, 1863, the Gouverneur Richville and Canton Companies property in the town of De Kalb was auctioned off by the St. Lawrence County Sheriff to the De Kalb Commissioners of Highways. On January 1, 1861, the stockholders of the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Road Company abandoned the remainder of their road from the village of Heuvelton to the six-mile post near Kendrew. In 1866, the

Town of De Kalb took on the old Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank road as a town highway from the six-mile post to the Northern Hotel.

Without the plank roads and mail stages, the old roadhouses soon faded away as well. Many became private homes or workshops. The Northern Hotel was the last to go. As the private home of Mr. and Mrs. John Thomas, it was often used by Richville church groups for fundraisers and social events into the 1890's. It is easy to see how the old timers would wax nostalgic for the days of their childhood when the stage horn sounded and the dashing teams rushed into as many as eight different roadhouses in the town of De Kalb.

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