

THE GREAT CONESTOGA ROAD

Part I.—The Laying Out and Opening of the Great Conestoga Road From Philadelphia to Rock Hill (formerly Postlethwaite's), on the Conestoga River, 1683 to 1734: (Also, Auxiliary Roads Into the Susquehanna Valley From the Delaware Settlements, Enumerated).

The first great road leading from Philadelphia to the West, having the Susquehanna Valley and River as the objective, occupied the same ground as, or a strip of ground closely parallel with, that occupied by the Pennsylvania Railroad, at least to the Octoraro Creek. This early road, leaving the little town of Philadelphia, passed through Merion, Haverford and Radnor; also what is now Downingtown, Coatesville and Christiana, which was then known as John Minshall's. This is practically the course of the Philadelphia road to-day. West of Christiana, however, it continued its trend south of the Pennsylvania Railroad, after going through the turn in the "Gap hills," passing in its course Strasburg, Henry Haines' on Pequea, the Big Springs, what is now the Running Pump (a little north of West Willow), the Long Lane, Rock Hill Ferry over the Conestoga (near Postlethwaite's, now Fehl's residence), and on to Blue Rock, Wright's Ferry and other points on the Susquehanna. It seems that it made a considerable detour southward near West Chester, practically going through the neighborhood of that place which in the early days was called Goshen.

1683—The earliest authentic steps seem to have been taken about 1687, and in Vol. 1, of the Colonial Records, it is set forth at page 209, under date of August, 1687: "Upon ye reading ye Petition of ye inhabitants of Rodnor (Radnor), complayning yt part of ye road which leades thence to the ferry of Philadelphia is ffenced in & more likely to be, it was ordered yt John Bevan, Henry Lewis, David Meredith, John Evans, Barnabas Wilcox and Thomas Duckett, meet within fourteen days, to view or agree upon, as conveniently as may be, a road from ye place aforesaid to ye ferry." This is dated 1687, but it is likely that the road was in existence earlier up to Radnor. It is marked on the map, beginning at the letter "C," and it strikes out in a northwesterly direction.

1683-7—Additional light is thrown on this in "Merion in the Welsh Tract," by Thomas Allen Glenn, a valuable book published by him in 1896. He says that the townships of Haverford and Radnor were settled by Cymric Quakers in 1682, and quotes Proud, saying that the Welsh took up the said two townships and also Merion, and a little later settled three townships more, Newtown, Goshen and Uwchland (See page 38). He says that the first settlement in Merion was made by Dr. Edward Reese and a few others; that Haverford and Radnor were settled a little later, and that an ancient line stone on the edge of Haverford College grounds near the spring house and near Bryn Mawr is marked 1683, and that on the Gulf Road there is a line stone with Penn's "Coat of Arms" on it, north of Bryn Mawr (See page 50). At page 51 he says that these Welsh (or Cymric Quakers) at their own private ex-

pense built good roads, which were marked by Penn's "Coat of Arms," and he sets forth a petition in which they describe themselves as "descended from the ancient Britains." There were several roads striking westwardly and northwardly a short distance from Philadelphia very early. The old Gulf road, he says at page 364, from Philadelphia to the Gulf Mill at Upper Merion passed by the Merion meeting-house at a very early date, likely before 1687; and at page 367 he says: "The townships of Haverford and Radnor were to be reached from Philadelphia by Haverford street, perfected in 1683 and Radnor street the same year;" that "Haverford and Darby road was laid out in 1687, and the old Haverford road to John Bevan's plantation in 1704." He says also that the road leading toward Merion from Radnor was surveyed in 1694; and at page 364 that the Merion meeting house was built in 1695, but that the first Old Gulf Road was laid out in 1683. He says, at page 367, that entering Merion from Blockley this old road extended toward what is now called Liberty Mill and thence by a ford over the creek to "Harriton" and Bryn Mawr. (Bryn Mawr is on the Pennsylvania railroad, and one of the stations.) He says, also, at page 368, that what we are accustomed to call Montgomery avenue or Lancaster Road, extending from High street (now Market street) to Lancaster, was formerly known as the old Conestoga Road, but was not confirmed until 1721, and then only to Brandywine. This shows that the eastern end of the Old Conestoga Road, and may be several branches of it forming what is like a delta, was or were laid out as early as 1683 to 1690, and that

they all met in the neighborhood of Haverford or Bryn Mawr.

1693—The next authenticated step is set forth in Vol. 1 of the Colonial Records at page 396, as follows, under the date of December 19, 1693: "Upon the petition of the inhabitants of Radnor, requesting a road to be laid out from the upper part of the said township of Radnor to Merion Ford; and of Andrew Robeson and Lawrence Cock, Esquires, requesting a confirmation of the road that now is from Merion Ford to Philadelphia, and that it came into the third street of the said town. Ordered that a warrant from the Lieutenant Governor be directed to the Survey General to lay out the roads desired, and that the same may be confirmed accordingly, and that a return thereof be made into the Secretary's Office, in order to a final confirmation of the same."

This will readily be seen to be an extension of the road leading to Radnor, up towards Haverford Meeting House or Church. The completion of the road thus asked for extends the highway about fifteen miles from Philadelphia; and the course lies in a general way along the same line on which the Pennsylvania Railroad now lies.

1696—Interest in the Susquehanna River and its valley was first very early shown by the ancient Welsh of Haverford and the adjoining townships. At pages 53, 54 and 55 Mr. Glenn, the same author which I have quoted, says that a considerable number of these Merion, Haverford and Radnor residents subscribed to the Susquehanna Land Company, and he gives the names and the amounts which they subscribed, which amounts are large and show how they were developing the country westward

from Philadelphia. The account is headed, "An Account of Those Who Subscribed for the Purchase of Lands on the Susquehanna River in 1696." This account is found in the "Penn Papers" of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and it shows that they subscribed for several thousand acres.

1701—It seems that as early as 1701 there was a road to Susquehanna, because in Vol. 1 of the Penn-Logan Correspondence, page 43, Isaac Norris wrote to David Zachary under the date of June 21, 1701, saying: "I have just come from Susquehanna, where I have been to meet the Governor. We had a round about journey and pretty well traversed the wilderness." It is likely that this course is north of the Conestoga Road, and I shall refer to it later.

1703—The next stage in building a road toward Susquehanna is found in Vol. 2 of the Colonial Records, page 111, and at this page first appears the name of Susquehanna Road. On the 16th of November, 1703, "A petition by Humphrey Ellis, Daniel Lewis, and 58 other subscribers, being the principal inhabitants of ye Welch Tract (which included Goshen township, now the region of West Chester and the surrounding country), was read, showing that most of the petitioners, being purchasers and possessors of divers of land and divers of them inhabitants in and about the Township of Goshen in ye said tract, had now no lawful road laid out by due authority, leading from ye Township of Goshen to Philadelphia, their chief and present market, by reason of which being greatly incommoded; they therefore pray, that because a road laid out as aforesaid may be of general service to ye Countrey, by being ye nearest and directest way to

the upper settlements upon the Brandywine, & may conveniently be continued to the Susquehanna, this board would be pleased to order that such a road may be laid out as aforesaid, leading from ye said Township, through the Township of Haverford, by Haverford Meeting House, to ye City of Philadelphia.

“Upon ye consideration of which it was further represented, that there had been already two roads laid out or proposed, in the County of Chester, to ye said Township, but the persons concerned not being able to agree about the said roads, & neither of them being laid out by a sufficient authority for a General or a Great Road through the whole Countrey; It now lies before this Board, to order and settle ye same, upon all which:

“’Tis ordered that Samuel Richardson, David Lloyd, Rowland Ellis, William Howel, William Jenkins, and Richard Thomas, all inhabitants of ye County of Philadelphia, do view the said two roads as now laid out or intended in ye County of Chester, and viewing also the ground between the said two Roads and Philadelphia, and Between Goshen and Brandywine, that ye said persons do forthwith lay out and survey one direct road of fifty foot in breadth, as convenient in all respects, as may be both to the inhabitants and to ye settlers of ye interjacent lands and Travellers, leading from William Powel’s Ferry on the Schuylkill, and passing by Haverford Meeting-house to ye principal part of Goshen Township, and thence continued in a direct course to ye upper settlements on the Brandywine and do return the same with all its courses to this Board, in order to a confirmation.”

1704—What was done in the building of the road toward the Susquehanna River, west of Haverford Church, prior to 1705, can not be ascertained; but that there was a road known as the Susquehanna Road between these points before 1705 is shown in Volume 1, Part 2, of the Notes of Assembly, page 26, from which we gather that it must have been in more or less general use before 1704, because in that year a petition was filed in the Assembly by the inhabitants of Radnor “about a road lately laid out from John Powel’s Ferry (which is Callowhill street) to the Susquehanna Road at the northeast branch of Brandywine Creek; which petition was read and ordered to be read again and considered along with Thomas Godfrey’s petition to the last Assembly on like account.” In this it will be observed that the petitioners speak here about a road lately laid out, leading to the “Susquehanna Road at northeast branch of Brandywine,” which inferentially asserts that there was a Susquehanna Road at that time to Brandywine, at least, and it is likely that the petitioners who in 1703 asked for a road to the Brandywine had already been using such a road and now desired it to be laid out according to law.

1705—On the 23d of June, 1705, the viewers appointed to lay out a road to Brandywine made a return to Council, which may be found in Volume 2 of the Colonial Records, page 203. The survey of courses and distances is not given, but they tell in a general way that they “laid it out from Philadelphia to the principal part of Goshen, fifty feet wide, passing Haverford meeting-house, and thence in a direct course to the Upper Settlements on Brandywine with all its courses;

and the Council thereupon approved it and ordered it to be laid out and graded, so that it should be a free and lawful road or highway, and be used as such for the future by all the Queen's subjects, as they shall have occasion."

It seems that the road was not entirely satisfactory, because on the 30th of November, 1706, there was a petition by many "inhabitants of Merion and the upper part of the Welch tract, 98 in number, requesting a better accommodation, and that a road should be laid out from Merion Meeting-house to Powel's Ferry, and from thence following in to the road leading to Philadelphia."

1711—The return made in 1705 states that the road was laid out "to the upper settlements on Brandywine." It is not clear whether these upper settlements on Brandywine were on the east branch or the west branch, and whether the end of the road was in the neighborhood of Downingtown or Coatesville—these towns being respectively on the east and west branch of Brandywine. Different statements in the Colonial Records seem to indicate that the east branch was the limit, but they also state that the road extended to Thomas Moore's (3 Col. Rec., page 43). However, among the Quarter Sessions records at West Chester, in Volume 1 of the "Original Road Papers," page 45 (a method of old road records in Chester county perfected by Gilbert Cope, Esq.), there is a "return of a road from Thomas Moore's, on the west branch of Brandywine, in the great valley, to John Miller's, and to the New Castle County line," John Miller's being on the Nottingham road. And also in the same Court papers, under September sessions, 1725, there is an order about not

clearing a certain road "leading out from Conestoga to the western branch of Brandywine." This, I believe, is the same terminus mentioned in Volume 3 of the Colonial Records, page 43, as a road petitioned for, in 1718, from Conestoga "to Thomas Moore's on Brandywine," which seems to fix Thomas Moore's as being on the west branch of Brandywine.

1712—But there is additional evidence that as early as 1711 a recognized road extended even westward to the Susquehanna itself. There is no record of any such being laid out; but among the records of the Quarter Sessions Court of Chester county, found in Volume 1 of the "Original Papers," page 50, there is a record that "at a Court held the 27th and 28th of the sixth month, in 1712, a return was made of a certain road, beginning more than half a mile northwest of Peter Taylor's house, at a white oak in the western line of the Welch tract, and thence through a land of John Spruce and others to a road from Uwchlan to Philadelphia, meeting the said Uwchlan road forty perches west of Lloyd's bridge, the last mentioned (Uwchlan to Philadelphia Road) being the directest and best road that leads from Philadelphia to the Dutch settlements at Conestoga and Susquehanna, and is far more commodious for travelers, being dry, champion ground, and less injurious in ye said Valley than ye other road heretofore made use of." Here we have, in 1712, a statement that there was in use at that time a road leading back to the new Dutch settlements on Conestoga and Susquehanna; and therefore on the map I have marked the date 1712 along certain portions of the great Conestoga road. It was not a laid out road at

least west of Coatesville, but up to Coatesville by this time the great Conestoga road was surely well built.

1714—There is evidence that at this date the Conestoga road was in use from the Conestoga creek to Philadelphia from a point on that creek known as Rock Hill to-day. This evidence is furnished by the records of the Quarter Sessions Court of Lancaster county, in a petition filed there in 1734, which I shall speak of a little later.

1716—Under this date there is another evidence that a road at this time led to Conestoga from Philadelphia. In Vol. 1, of the "Original Papers," p. 73, in the Records of the Quarter Sessions Court of Chester County, under date of 1716, in a road proceeding for a certain road branching out of the King's highway, there occurs the following statement, stating that the road petitioned for joins the Great Road, viz.: "To a bridge on the road that leads from Philadelphia to Conestogoe." And, according to this statement, at this time there was a road leading from Philadelphia to Conestogoe.

1718—From what has already been said it is plain that this road was intended to be a King's highway from Philadelphia to Coatesville, as we remember that by order of Council it was to be laid out 50 feet wide to the upper settlements on Brandywine (2 Colonial Records, page 203). The Council, which corresponded in Penn's Government to the ministry in England or the Senate in our Commonwealth, laid out the King's highways or great roads, and the Quarter Sessions Court laid out the ordinary ones.

1718—Now there follows an effort to make the western end of this road

a King's highway in the year of 1718. In Vol. 3, of the Colonial Records, p. 43, under the date last mentioned, "a petition of several inhabitants of and near Conestoga, setting forth the great necessity of a road to be laid out from Conestogoe to Thomas Moore's and Brandywine, was read; and the Board having taken the said petition into consideration, appoint Isaac Taylor, John Taylor, John Cartilage, Ezekial Harland, Thomas Moore and William Marsh to lay out the said road and make a report thereof to this Board in order to a confirmation." This was filed in Council; but I cannot find that viewers were appointed or that a road was laid out in pursuance of this petition, as there is no record of a return made in the Colonial Records. Besides, if it had been laid out as a King's highway, it would have been laid out fifty feet wide or more. But the roads now on the same ground are narrower than ordinary roads, rather than wider. So it would seem that nothing was done under these proceedings. But, as additional evidence that a road was in full use at this time, it is set down in Volume 3 of Colonial Records, page 92, under the date of 1720, by James Logan, that "he had occasion to go towards the farther end of the Great Valley on the 'road to Conestoga,' and that at the Governor's desire he did not fail "to proceed to Susquehanna" on that same road. So that we now have a well-known road to the Susquehanna.

1721—Now there seems to be a step to lay out a piece of this road between the Eastern branch of the Brandywine and the Western branch of the Brandywine. A road was in general use between these two points undoubtedly at this time, but to have it formally laid out was desired, and so we find in

the February and May Quarter Sessions Court, 1721, of Chester county, a return of a road from the Western branch of Brandywine Creek to the "Great Road at the plantation of Owen Perkins, Treedefryn township."

1721—In the Quarter Sessions Records of Chester County, Volume 1, of the "Original Road Papers," page 128, under the date of 1721, there is a petition to His Majesty's Justices of the Court of Quarter Sessions then sitting at Chester, stating that the inhabitants about the Western branch of the Brandywine need a good road from there to Philadelphia, and they ask viewers to be appointed to view the ground from the mountains beyond the head of the West branch of the Brandywine, to continue along the barrens "behind Goshen," which road, they say, will be very serviceable to them, "and the new settlers on the plantations to go to Philadelphia." This original petition may easily be seen in West Chester, together with the names of the signers.

1721—In Volume 3 of the Colonial Records, page 142, there is a petition to Council, complaining that the Justices of Chester county ordered a new road to be laid out and cleared "in the highway to Conestoga, which new road departs from the old one at Perkins' house, and, cutting the same again a little above Brandywine, runs all the way through uninhabited and unsettled lands quite up to the Palatine settlements on this side of the Conestogoe;" and they complain that this should be a King's highway, laid out by Council and in a somewhat different place, because the road the Court is about to lay out would discourage several good settlements on the old road. The Council were not satisfied with what the Court had done

and yet did not want to annul the Court's steps without a hearing, and so Council ordered "that the road now and heretofore used from Philadelphia to Conestogoe, through the townships of Merion and Radnor, laid out by authority of the Government as far as Thomas Moore's mill, on Brandywine creek, be deemed the King's highway, and that all orders of the Chester county Court should be hereby superseded."

1725—Under November sessions, 1725, of the Quarter Sessions of Chester County, something of the condition of this Conestoga road at this time is shown to us, for in these records appears the following: "Ordered that the Superintendents of Sadsbury (Township) be fined 20 Shillings unless they clear ye road laid out from Conestoga to ye Western Branch of Brandywine, as far as ye same crosses ye sd Township, and that ye road be cleared by ye 25th of March next." This again leads me to think that Thomas Moore's was on the west branch of Brandywine. In this we see that a great deal of trouble was experienced in making a proper road west of the west branch of Brandywine creek, on up toward Conestoga.

1726—In Volume 3 of the Colonial Records, page 263, under date of 1726, "a petition of divers inhabitants about Pequea in the county of Chester" is set forth, complaining that the Chester County Court order a road be laid out through the Township of Pequea, over hills, rocks and swamps, and half a mile about (around) in the space of three miles, said to be the road which leads from Thomas Moore's toward Donegal, and they pray that the Council would appoint a view on the road, particularly the part through the Township of Pequea.

Viewers were appointed, among them John Wright, Samuel Blunston, John Cartilage. What report they made is not shown. The eastern end of this road was likely in the line of the Great Conestoga road; but the western part deflected off toward the Northwest—toward Donegal.

1729—This is the year in which Lancaster county was formed, and the condition of the Great Conestoga road at this, the time of the birth of our county, was about the same as it was at the date of our last notice. It was now used, but was in an unsatisfactory condition; and it was not confirmed as a King's highway under the petition and proceedings begun in 1718, recorded in Volume 3 of the Colonial Records, page 43. Only a part of it was laid out by order of any Court. Therefore, naturally, there should be proceedings early after the birth of Lancaster county for the perfecting of it, and we will now notice these.

1734—Under this date, in Docket No. 1, of the Quarter Sessions Court of Lancaster county, page 89, is set forth a petition of many of the inhabitants of Lancaster county, setting forth that there had been a public road laid out from Gap to Conestogoe and had been for nearly twenty years past found very convenient for the inhabitants; but the same, not being confirmed by authority, was liable to continual alterations, and is now almost impassable for want of repairs. The petitioners then prayed "that the same be laid out with courses and distances with such alterations as may be necessary from the County line near John Minshall's to Conestogoe, and from thence continued over the Manor to Susquehanna to Blue Rock." Upon this the Court ordered that John

Postletwaite, Martin Miller, Samuel Taylor, Jacob Cosner, Daniel Ferree and James Jones, or any four of them, "view, and if they see cause, to lay out the same according to the prayer of said petition, and report their proceedings to the next Court." This report was forthwith made on affidavit, and they laid out a road beginning at a marked chestnut tree standing on the west side of Octoraro creek. From there it took a northwesterly direction by courses and distances set out, 756 perches "to the turn of the hills at the Gap;" then it proceeded further westward somewhat southward, 222 perches to Thomas Green's; then almost due west by courses and distances mentioned, 1,526 perches, or nearly five miles, to Edward Dougherty's; then again by courses and distances nearly due west, turning to the north, 750 perches, or nearly two and one-half miles to the Pequea creek near Henry Haines'; then directly west 682 perches, something over two miles, to the Big Spring; then by several courses and distances slightly south of west 2,395 perches, or about seven and one-half miles, to Conestoga river, "at the usual ford leading into the Manor, containing in the whole, Nineteen miles and three-fourths." And this road was confirmed, as appears on page 99 of the same docket.

The balance of the road which was prayed for seems not to have been laid at this time to Blue Rock on the Susquehanna; but shortly afterwards a road did terminate at Blue Rock.

Here it will be noticed that the petition says that this road was laid out before, but not confirmed, and that it had been conveniently in use twenty years before the date of the petition, which would take it back to 1714.

We have now traced the gradual laying out and constructing of the "Great Conestoga Road"—the first one stretching from Philadelphia to the Susquehanna river, beginning in 1683 and being completed about 1734. Its location on the map is indicated by the letters and names (beginning at Philadelphia), "C. Merion, Haverford Meeting House, John Minshall's, Gap, Strasburg, Henry Haines', Big Springs, Postlethwaite's and a star." This highway bore the same relation to our forefathers of Lancaster and Chester counties that the Pennsylvania railroad bears to us to-day.

It would be an interesting thing to ascertain what taverns existed along its course, but this is properly the subject of a separate inquiry and I will not attempt it. Two of the first buildings of Lancaster county are still standing along its course; the westernmost is George Fehl's residence near Rock Hill, at one time the Court House for Lancaster county; and the eastern one of the two, the old Herr stone house, built in 1719, on the farm now occupied by David Huber, Jr., near Willow Street; farther east there may be several more, but I am not acquainted with their location. This ends all that we can say upon the Great Conestoga Road.

At a future time I hope to take up in a way similar to this the various other roads which were tributary to the Great Conestoga Road, and show by that, that this Conestoga road and its tributaries were the avenues of trade out of the Lower Conestoga Valley, on to Philadelphia; while another set of roads farther north were a similar artery of trade out of the Donegals, the Upper Conestoga Valley and the Upper Pequea Valley into Philadelphia.

I shall briefly enumerate these roads as they are set forth on the map, and with that conclude this discussion. They are:

(1) A road from Lime Stone Ridge at the headwaters of the Pequea, running southward and crossing the Great Conestoga road on to White Oak Springs, to John Churchman's, in Maryland, laid out by Chester county Courts in 1724, where the record may be found.

(2) The old Peters road, beginning at the junction of the Cocalico and Conestoga creeks, and leading by Eby's mill, Daniel Cookson's, Joseph Darlington's, joining the Great Conestoga road at John Spruce's land, in Whiteland township, Chester county, found among the records of the Chester county Courts, under the date of 1726.

(3) The road now known as the Harrisburg and Downingtown turnpike, found in Lancaster county records, under the date of 1735, joining the old Conestoga road at Downingtown.

(4) The King's highway from Lancaster, extending eastward by the Compass Church and joining the old Conestoga road in the early days about Downingtown.

(5) An early road from Chestnut Level to Lancaster.

(6) A road from Harris' Ferry to Lancaster, in 1736.

(7) A road from Donegal, joining the Harrisburg road, about 1742.

(8) The old Octoraro road, found in August sessions, 1719, of the Quarter Sessions Court of Chester county, this being the earliest road in Lancaster county laid out by order of Court.

In addition to these the following roads on the map deserve some attention, viz.:

(1) The old New Castle and Conestoga Whisky road, mentioned in Colonial Records, about 1701.

(2) The old Swedish road, between Christiana and Susquehanna, mentioned by Campanius Holm and also by Acrelius, dated about 1646.

(3) The road or highway mentioned by Penn between Philadelphia and Susquehanna, by way of French creek, mention of which is made in Volume 1 of Hazard's Register, pages 400, dated 1687.

(4) Two roads or Indian paths, not shown on the map, but mentioned in Volume 3, Part 2, page 131, of the "Memoirs of the Historical Society at Philadelphia," one running northwesterly, crossing Rock Run, fifteen miles from Philadelphia; the other intersecting Doe Run, thirty-eight miles from Philadelphia, dated about 1638. These last mentioned groups of roads will form part two of this discussion of early roads into Lancaster county.

Author: Eshleman, Henry Frank, 1869-1953.

Title: The great Conestoga road / by H. Frank Eshleman, Esq.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Conestoga Turnpike (Pa.)--History.
Roads--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.
Lancaster County (Pa.)--Maps.
Lancaster County (Pa.)--History--17th century.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1908

Description: [215]-232 p. : ill. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 12,
no. 6

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.12

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

+++++

Institution Name
Institution Address
Institution Phone Number
Institution E-mail Address