



Haverford Township Historical Society



THE LANCASTER ROAD AND TURNPIKE

By Richard D. Kerr

The origins of Lancaster Road are purported to go all the way back to a trail used by the Lenape prior to the arrival of European explorers and settlers. The route was adopted by the colonists for regular travel between the new town of Philadelphia and the Merion Meeting House. It was extended further out to connect to the Radnor Meeting House as well.

During his tenure, William Penn desired to have a road reach all the way to Lancaster. To continue to promote the colonization of Pennsylvania, Penn realized that he had to accommodate settlements that were not just along waterways. Only in this way would settlement push into the interior of the land. For this to happen, a way other than watercraft was needed to facilitate travel and commerce between towns. Thus the trail was extended even further and earned its name as the "Lancaster Road." By about 1740, milestones were placed along the road. Into each was chiseled a simple number, indicating the distance in miles from the Quaker meeting house at Second Street and High (now Market) Street in Philadelphia.

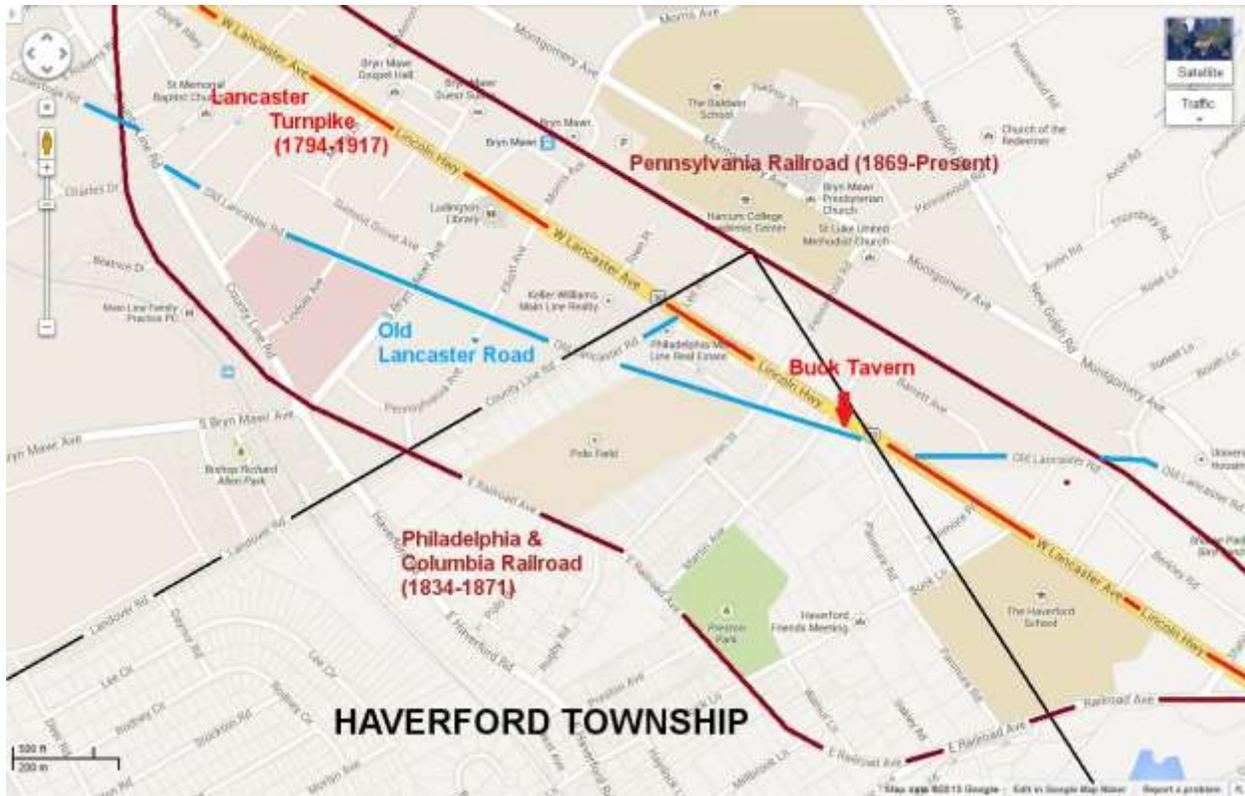
Using the term "road" is something of an optimistic euphemism in modern terms, and even back at that time. It was basically a cleared path, good enough for walking, riding a horse if you were so fortunate, or leading one or more pack horses carrying goods. Only much later was it usable by a wagon or a stagecoach, and it remained a rutted way that became muddy after every rainfall.

As the population grew and pressed westward, with commerce increasing as well, it became evident that another, better road to Lancaster would be very advantageous. When the Lancaster Turnpike (described below) was constructed, the original Lancaster Road earned the added adjective "Old."

You can readily find parts of the Old Lancaster Road's route today by looking for roads bearing that name. For example, on a street map one can start at 54th Street and City Avenue, trace Old Lancaster Road to Montgomery Avenue, then follow Montgomery past the Merion Meeting House. Continue through Ardmore to the Haverford section of Lower Merion, where an Old Lancaster Road angles off to the west and then reappears on the other side of the railroad underpass. The Lancaster Turnpike (now Lancaster Avenue and U.S. 30) and Old Lancaster crossed, and farther up U.S. 30 another Old Lancaster Road angles off to the northwest until it reaches County Line Road, where its name becomes Conestoga Road. (Even "back in the day" another name for the original Lancaster Road was the "Conestoga Road.") The brief section along U.S. 30 and the first bit of Old Lancaster Road northwest of there are within Haverford Township. In the triangular piece of land north of the original intersection of these two roads, just beyond milestone 11, the old Buck Tavern served for centuries as an overnight stopping point.

The Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike was opened in 1794, over a century later. It set new standards, with a 24-foot width, a base underlayment of coarse stone and a top layer of packed, finer stone and gravel. It is regarded as America's first turnpike, as well as its first long-distance paved road. Of course, the private developers charged a toll for its use. Toll houses were located along the length of the road, although none were located within Haverford Township.

In time, people using the Old Lancaster Road got in the habit of staying on the Turnpike a bit in this area, and cutting off to the west later to get back onto Old Lancaster, where the present intersection and traffic signal are today. The corresponding forsaken segment of the Old Lancaster Road fell into disuse and disrepair, and it eventually vanished. In present times, its “shadow” can be seen in the northeast property line of the Polo Field.



Today it is hard to imagine this road to Lancaster, which passes briefly through Haverford Township, being called “The Great Road to the West,” but that is what it was back then. Like the Old Haverford Road, it too was dotted with milestones. Placed along the north side, these measured the distance from the Market Street bridge over the Schuylkill River, now the 30th Street Station area. The Haverford Township segment fell between Milestones 8 (written “8 M TO P” for “8 Miles TO Philadelphia”) and 9.

In the era of the mighty Pennsylvania Railroad, a number of its powerful presidents and senior officers lived along the Main Line. They were well off, involved in community affairs, and protective of their railroad and its business. So, not surprisingly, ownership of the stretch of the Lancaster Turnpike between 52nd Street in Philadelphia and Paoli was bought by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1876. In this way, the management could set toll rates that did not undercut the competitiveness of the railroad. At the turn of the twentieth century, they were also in positions where they could prevent any trolley company from getting a franchise to build a cheaper, more frequent service along the road where it paralleled their railroad and its local passenger train service.

In 1913 the “Lancaster Pike” became part of the Lincoln Highway, the nation’s first transcontinental improved highway for the automotive age. Designated with special signs, the Lincoln Highway stretched from New York City to San Francisco. In 1917 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, through its Department of Highways, took control of the Lancaster Turnpike. It became the free public road now known in our area as Lancaster Avenue. It is part of U.S. Highway 30.

Explore for More... The Lancaster Road and Turnpike

Here's the Wikipedia entry for the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia_and_Lancaster_Turnpike

Read a description of the route of the Old Lancaster (Old Conestoga) Road, from the Independence Hall Association of Philadelphia:

http://www.ushistory.org/philadelphia/street_conestoga.htm

Read about the old Buck Tavern and its prime location where the roads to Lancaster crossed, from *The First 300: The Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion* (about halfway down):

<http://lowermerionhistory.org/texts/first300/part07.html>

If you can't get enough about the roads to Lancaster, read the 150-plus page *History of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike: The First Long Turnpike in the United States* by Charles I. Landis in 1917:

<http://archive.org/details/firstlongturnpi01landgoog>

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