

Adopted from the Traveling the National Road Classroom Activity Program website:
<http://www.nps.gov/archive/fone/classroom/nr1teacher.htm>

Courtesy National Park Service, Fort Necessity National Battlefield

Traveling by Roads

Roads are used by people every day. You probably traveled on a road to get to school today. Can you think of some reasons why roads are important? Can you imagine what it would be like to have no roads?

Two hundred years ago there were few roads in the new nation of the United States. People used horses and wagons to travel, but without roads they had to go very slowly. Without roads mountains were very hard to cross.

Americans wanted the country to grow. They wanted people to be able to move beyond the mountains and live in the land to the west. Merchants whose job was commerce had to travel to do business. Roads were needed for all these people. In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson signed an act allowing a road to be built from Cumberland, Maryland, into Ohio. This road was called the Cumberland Road or the National Road.

The National Road was the first, and only, highway paid for by the U.S. government. It was a road that would help many people in their travels west. It would also help connect areas of the growing United States. People often left the National Road to continue their journey via rivers.

Thought Provoking Questions:

- 1. Why would politicians want a road that connects east and west?**
- 2. Why would farmers want the same road?**

Building the National Road

In 1811, people began to build the National Road. Building a road was hard work. There were no trucks or bulldozers back then. People with hand tools, oxen, and mules did the work of these machines. People working on the National Road were paid as little as \$6.00 per month.

When the Road was first being built, workers would dig a long strip where the road would go. They would fill this strip with layers of crushed rock. The rocks that could pass through a 7-inch measuring ring were laid first. Then a layer of rocks that could pass through a 3-inch ring was put on top.

But this road was damaged easily. So the National Road in Ohio was built a different way. A man named John Louden McAdam realized that if a road was built on raised ground instead of in a dug strip, rain water could run off the road. Then the road would last longer. So the workers put down layers of crushed rock and let wagons and people travel on each layer to pack the rocks tightly together. This macadam system made a much sturdier road.

The National Road took a long time to build and did not reach Wheeling, Virginia, until 1818. The road cost the U.S. government almost 7 million dollars. Areas of the road going through the mountains cost the most to build, \$13,000 per mile.

Thought Provoking Questions:

- 1. Why would the road cost more to build in the mountainous areas than in other areas?**
- 2. Why would building a road today be easier than it was in 1811?**

Supplemental Activities:

1. Build a "road" with the students. Have students bring in bags of small rocks and pebbles from home. Build the "road" in dishpans or other shallow pans. In small groups, have students lay the larger rocks on the bottom and the smaller rocks on the top. They can use rolling pins to compact the surface. Discuss how difficult or easy it would be to travel on the "road".

Relevant Site Information:

The View from Here to There: Aesthetics of the Rural Midwest exhibit contains tools that people used to alter the natural environment. What kinds of things can you find pictured in the art or as a part of the exhibit that has shaped our environment?

Activity Answers:

Horses and oxen: pulls down trees, carry loads, pulls wagons of supplies and tools

Hammers: break rocks to build a road

Shovels: moves dirt and loads of rocks into wheelbarrows

Railroads: moves goods from one place to another

Rebar: strengthens roads

Cars and trucks: ways of moving people and goods from one place to another

Bridges: allows people to travel over a physical or natural obstacle

Roads: manmade path between two places

Wheelbarrows: moves dirt for building roads

Wood: laying down wood in a road bed

Ferry: allows people and goods to cross rivers

Dredge boat: scraps the mud of the river bottom, deepening it to allow boats to navigate it safely

Axe: clears woods, allows settlement

Slip scoop: scraps soil and moves large amounts of dirt

Soil density meter: measuring the density of soil to before building a road

Travelers on the National Road

How do people travel on roads today? They may use buses, trucks, or cars to go from place to place. But in the 1800's, people traveled in different ways.

Some people walked along the National Road. Drovers walked their herds of animals to market. These herds of sheep, pigs, cows, or turkeys could be very large. People who lived along the National Road might also walk from place to place on it.

Other people traveled the Road with Conestoga wagons. These large wagons were pulled by 6-8 horses. The wagons were painted red and blue with white canvas covers and carried large loads of supplies along the road. These wagons were similar to today's tractor trailers.

Many stagecoaches traveled the National Road. It was expensive to ride in the brightly painted coaches pulled by 4 horses. The coaches were painted with bright scenes to attract customers. Stagecoaches carried passengers, and some also carried the mail from one town to another.

All kinds of people traveled the National Road. Emigrants traveling west used the road, but few of these people wrote about what they saw and did. Politicians, performers, and military people also used the road. As many as 200,000 people traveled the National Road every year.

Thought Provoking Questions:

- 1. Pretend you are traveling the National Road in the 1800's.**
- 2. How would you travel?**
- 3. Where would you go?**
- 4. Why?**