

# National Road/Route 40

1811-1834, 1926



The National Road, in many places now known as Route 40, was built between 1811 and 1834 to reach the western settlements. It was the first federally funded road in U.S. history. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson believed that a trans-Appalachian road was necessary for unifying the young country. In 1806, Congress authorized construction of the road, and President Jefferson signed the act establishing the National Road. In 1811, the first contract was awarded, and the first 10 miles of road were built. As work on the road progressed, a settlement pattern developed that is still visible. Original towns and villages are still found along the National Road. The road, also called the Cumberland Road, National Pike, and other names, became Main Street in these early settlements, earning it the nickname “The Main Street of America.” In the 1800s, it was a key transport path to the West for thousands of settlers.

In 1912, the road became part of the National Old Trails Road, and its popularity returned in the 1920s with the automobile. Federal aid became available for improvements in the road to accommodate the automobile. In 1926, the road became part of U.S. 40 as a coast-to-coast highway running from Atlantic City to San Francisco.

*1910 photo of the National Road, 1.5 miles west of Brownsville, Pennsylvania.*



U.S. Department of Transportation  
**Federal Highway Administration**

**Contributions & Crossroads**  
Our National Road System's Impact on the U.S. Economy and Way of Life



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*A section of Route 40 (above) with its original paving bricks stretches out to the horizon.*

*The Fox Run S-Bridge (left) has been resurfaced with red bricks. It represents an original portion of the Historic National Road.*

## Quick Facts

- In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson signed the act establishing the National Road, making it the first federally funded road in U.S. history.
- This was the second U.S. road surfaced with the macadam process—a simpler and effective way of constructing and protecting roadways using crushed stone.
- The first portion of the National Road was the Cumberland Road. Construction began in 1811 in Cumberland, Maryland, and ended in 1818 in Wheeling, West Virginia.
- A series of toll roads and turnpikes were constructed by 1824 to connect Cumberland, the eastern terminus of the National Road, to Baltimore.
- In the 1820s and 30s, Congress authorized extending the National Road to St. Louis and across the Mississippi River to Jefferson City in Missouri.
- Construction of the National Road stopped in 1839 because of high maintenance costs and railroads providing long-distance transportation.
- The Wheeling Suspension Bridge that carries the National Road across the Ohio River was completed in 1849. It is the oldest vehicular suspension bridge in the United States still in use.
- In the early 1910s and 20s, use of the National Road was rejuvenated by the growth and use of affordable automobiles, particularly the Ford Model T.
- In 1926, the National Road was designated the eastern part of U.S. Route 40, a coast-to-coast highway running from Atlantic City to San Francisco.

## Reference and Additional Information

<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/back0103.cfm>  
<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/byways/byways/2278>  
<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/trails.cfm>

<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/not2.cfm>  
<https://www.nps.gov/fone/learn/historyculture/nationalroad.htm>  
<https://www.nps.gov/fone/learn/education/classrooms/upload/TNR-Timeline.pdf>