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National Road Responsibilities

By [J. Bradley Jansen](#)

This month, politicians patted themselves on the back during the unveiling of the National Road Monument in western Maryland. As was [pointed out](#), the National Road was the first entirely federally financed and built road.

As a genealogist and Ohio native, I know that some of my ancestors wrote about their travels westward to the Buckeye state. One of my relatives, the Rev. Matthew Gardner, [described](#) their 1800 journey:

There was then little communication with the wilderness west. Not only railroads and steamboats but turnpikes were unknown[.] ... The mountains were difficult to climb, the streams were dangerous to [ford](#), the undertaking was hazardous, and the journey was long. The weather was pleasant and the journey as prosperous as could be expected. They reached Pittsburg on the Ohio river by the first of October, just one month from the time they started. Pittsburg was a small village. They waited two weeks before they found a boat going down the river. They embarked on a flat-boat, the boats then used, with four other families; furniture, wagons, horses and all, crowded on one small flat-boat. The river was low, the progress was slow, sometimes they floated rapidly and sometimes they were long aground.

At that time, roads were built and maintained privately or by county governments and followed the paths laid out by the inherited wisdom of Indian trails and farming tracks -- something Nobel Prize-winning economist F.A. Hayek would trumpet as the superiority of [local knowledge](#). Local farmers

could even "[work off](#) their 'road tax' by contributing time to repairs and [construction](#)."

Certainly the National Road eased travel for later relatives during the westward migration, but it was not without controversy. While the federal financing for the construction was debatable, Congress at least turned over maintenance of the road to the states, and the National Road became a tollway.

From the beginning, our internal improvements history is one of pork-barrel spending interwoven with political motivations. As a National Road-Zane Grey Museum video [illustrates](#), the path of the road was determined by politics over efficiency.

Thomas Jefferson's treasury secretary, Albert Gallatin, convinced the president that the road needed to deviate into western Pennsylvania in order to carry the state in his re-election bid. *Plus ça change*.

Extensions of the National Road were often delayed in Congress with debates about the [constitutionality](#) of the endeavor.

Though dubious himself about the constitutionality of federally financed internal improvements, Jefferson allowed a small percentage of the sale of public lands in Ohio to be used to finance the National Road project ([pdf](#)). Presidents Monroe, Madison, and Jackson opposed "internal improvements" without a constitutional amendment allowing them ([pdf](#)).

Modern skeptics of the federal government's growth beyond the wildest imaginations of the Founding Fathers still have [reservations](#) about our federal highway funding. The Cato Institute put out an analysis to revisit the status quo in a more recent historical context and offers a [plan](#) for change.

As we mark the 200-year anniversary of progress of our "internal improvements" policy, we might be well-served remembering our constitutional limitations; the wisdom of returning maintenance to the states and the private, sector as they did with the National Road; and the inherent politicization and inefficiency of federal pork-barrel spending.

More broadly, we should take a step back and re-examine the road we're on with federal "internal improvements" for our financial infrastructure, too. With the federal government's use of the Federal Reserve, and Fannie and Freddie, to pave our financial paths, we need to see the continued political favoritism, inefficiencies and wasteful spending.

Something to ponder while stuck in rush-hour traffic, realizing that your financial situation has probably deteriorating 40%, in large part thanks to the [popped housing bubble](#).

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