

Backward Glances: Eighteenth Century GPS

Susan Thompson

When we set out to travel -- whether to Croton Falls, Danbury or on a long trip -- we don't worry about finding our way. With GPS, road maps, Mapquest and an overwhelming number of road signs, we are not likely to get lost.

But it was a very different story in the 18th and 19th centuries. Roads in our area were mostly unmarked single tracks in terrible condition that had been hacked through the wilderness (Rochambeau's army did not march two-by-two by choice!). One of the most-traveled routes was the New York to Vermont Post Road that entered North Salem from Waccabuc via Mead Street to our Post Road, then followed today's Hawley, Grant, Titicus, Old Salem, Peach Lake and Dingle Ridge Roads into Putnam County. This post road is labeled on Supervisor Daniel Delavan's 1798 map of North Salem.

Even before the Revolution, towns began the practice of setting up milestones marking the distance from the county seat or, in our case, from New York (measured from NY City Hall at the corner of Nassau and Wall Streets). Three of these markers, all Town of North Salem Historic Landmarks, survive in town on Grant Road (55 miles), Titicus



Road (56 miles, in photo) and Dingle Ridge Road (58 miles). The purpose was to tell the traveler how far he had come – or how far he had to go – and to reassure him that he was on the right road. Only a post road and later a turnpike had markers. If you were traveling on unfamiliar turf and didn't pass any markers, you were probably on the wrong road. On a stormy day at dusk, how reassuring it must have been to round a bend and spot a marker!

This marker is on Titicus Road, opposite the town Christmas tree. It originally read "56 miles from New York." The top is broken, and unfortunately, the stone is also defaced. Someone delineated the inscription with white paint.

According to Fred Warner, town historian in the 1950s and 60s, marker 55 was moved from the bridge at the intersection of Grant and Titicus Roads when preparations for the Goldens Bridge – Danbury trolley got underway in the early 1900s. The trolley project failed due to financial problems and the mile marker remains where it was moved, a few hundred feet southwest of the 55-mile mark.

The markers are red sandstone, rounded at the top and look like gravestones. Sandstone is not local and was probably imported from across the Hudson or from Connecticut by New York City gravestone carvers. Sandstone is relatively easy to carve and remained in vogue until marble became popular for headstones in the classical revival in the 19th century. If you stop at Cat Ridge Cemetery, you will find only two

sandstone markers. All of the others are marble, granite or fieldstone. New Castle historian Gray Williams has studied carving styles and was able to identify the carvers of some of the mile markers in the southern part of the county.

So why do our sandstone markers look like stone doghouses? By the middle of the 20th century, most of the markers in the county were showing more than wear and tear, having been damaged by vandalism, development, road equipment and weather. The Westchester County Historical Society decided to protect them with stone surrounds. Some markers, like the one in front of Waccabuc County Club, were even incorporated into short stone walls.

Which side of the road are they on? Our three are on the left, coming from New York. Oddly, all of the similar markers in Connecticut are on the right. Did Nutmegers start driving/riding on the right before New Yorkers? The tradition of keeping your cart or horse to the left came with the colonists from England, a holdover from the days when you might have to draw your sword with your right hand to fend off a foe. In 1804 New York State became the first state to require traffic keep to the right on all public roadways.

Charming but probably apocryphal stories attribute both the design and some of the installations of the markers to Ben Franklin. While it is true that Franklin owned a way-waiser, a French-made device that attached to a carriage to measure distance, there is no mention in his papers or other recorded evidence that he – or the post office -- installed any of the markers. Many historians, including me, were charmed at the thought of Franklin riding along marking the miles, with stone installers following behind. But even though Franklin was one of two deputy postmaster generals appointed by the British for 20 years and then then postmaster general of the colonies, he hardly had time to set mile markers. During that period he was here only six years – the rest of the time in England as agent of the Pennsylvania assembly or at sea traveling to and fro. During the Revolution, Franklin was again out of the country, this time in France. It would not have been the postmaster's purview to install markers. Postal riders knew where they were going, and the maintenance of roads, bridges, ferries and markers was a town responsibility.

Who installed our markers and when? We may never know. But the lovely little sandstone sentinels remain as reminders of traveling in simpler times.