

Early Roads in Orange County

From Historian Frank Walker in *Remembering*:

Roads of Commerce

“As soon as the colonists began to move west of the fall line, there was a need for public roads. The broad, slow moving river highways of the Tidewater did not exist in the uplands. Backwoodsmen, explorers, and maybe a few frontier families might not mind using game trails or Indian paths, such as the Carolina Road, but that wasn’t going to suit most people. A trail sufficiently cleared to permit travel on horseback was good, but a road along which wagons could be pulled and tobacco hogsheads rolled was the goal. With good roads, the colony’s interior could be settled and its commerce extended.

“As with much of the law governing property in the colony, the procedures to be followed in establishing a new road were based on those in effect in the Mother Country. Landowners who wanted a public road in their area petitioned the local court for an order directing its creation. The court conducted such hearings as it deemed necessary, and if it determined that the petition had merit, ‘viewers’ of the proposed new road were appointed to lay out its route and report back. Viewers naturally tried to use existing private roads whenever possible, both to keep construction costs down and to avoid upsetting the already-established pattern of travel in the area. If the viewers’ report was accepted, then an ‘overseer’ (sometimes called a ‘surveyor’) of the road was appointed to attend to its construction and maintenance.

“An important step in the road building and maintenance process was an identification of all the ‘laboring male tithables’ on the properties to be served by the road, since those persons constituted the construction and maintenance work force. In the colonial era, a tax, or tithe, was assessed on certain defined persons, and any person who met the definition was a ‘tithable.’ ‘Laboring male tithables’ were typically able-bodied males sixteen years of age or older, whether slave, indentured, or free....”¹

“Each tithable was required by the court to labor a certain number of days per year on the road (usually six), bringing all the tools and wagons or ox carts, with teams, needed to do the work. In this manner it was expected that county public roads could be built and maintained at no cost to the public treasury. For larger, more complicated projects, such as bridges or ferries, the court would appoint special commissioners to enter into construction contracts on behalf of the county. Later in the nineteenth century, Virginia created a Board of Public Works to coordinate the development of multi-county projects such as railroads, canal and turnpikes.”²

¹ Frank Walker, *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 220.

² *Ibid.*, 220-221.

“Now, having an understanding of how things were supposed to go, we learn that the first of Orange County’s roads turned out to be an exception to the rule. That first road was the one built from Fredericksburg to Fort Germanna in 1714. Lieutenant Governor Spotswood argued that the colony’s need for the outpost of Germanna, plus the absence of both landowners and tithables in that frontier region, dictated that the road to the fort [Fort Germanna] should be built with public funds. The Burgesses and Council probably had no trouble understanding that such a road would also benefit private commercial interests, especially those of their Lieutenant Governor, but ...the road project was funded. Such a proposal would have met stiff resistance just a year or two later when Spotswood was often at odds with his legislators.

“Typical exceptions to the usual road-creating process were the ‘mountain roads’ created by counties whose western settlements had reached the Piedmont frontier. Some of those roads ... extended to or beyond the Blue Ridge. Others simply penetrated into the backcountry for a ways before fading out or connecting with another mountain road.

“Orange County was particularly benefited by the construction of mountain roads. Remember that the lands going to make up the eastern portion of Orange County were the western extensions of Essex, King and Queen, and King William counties. All three of these counties had mountain roads. When those roads were initially being extended by stages into the backcountry, there were probably never more than a handful of tithables living out ahead of them, and some public funding was necessary. The expectation was that settlement would follow quickly, and the roads could then be maintained in the normal way. Also, during the 1730’s the Valley began to be settled from the north, which both accelerated the demand for extension of at least some mountain roads across the Blue Ridge and produced tithables to help with the work.³

“The primary mountain road through Orange County was known as the **Spotsylvania County mountain road**⁴ and is referred to in many documents simply as ‘the mountain road.’ Its origins were the old Essex County mountain road, which generally followed a trace just south of the Rappahannock River until it got to Fredericksburg. The road built to Germanna in 1714 actually served as an extension of the Essex mountain road. (The Germanna site was initially in Essex County.) Beyond Germanna it turned northwest towards the present-day town of Orange. Later extensions of that road were made by Spotsylvania County, hence the name it bore by the time Orange County was formed. Ultimately that mountain road extended to Harrisonburg via Swift Run Gap. The many versions of Routes 3, 20, and 641 have in places tended to follow the corridor of the Spotsylvania County mountain road through Orange County, though their actual roadbeds are probably rarely lying directly on its trace...”⁵

“The **King and Queen mountain road** ran generally through central Spotsylvania County, joining the Spotsylvania road in Orange County in the vicinity of today’s new Veriersville. Today’s Routes 621 and 608 probably come close to tracing that old route. The **King William**

³ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴ Names of roads were not typed in bold in the original text.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

mountain road skirted along the northeast edge of today's Lake Anna before coming cross-country to a point just east of the Town of Orange, where it joined the Spotsylvania road. Portions of Route 612 look as though they might possibly qualify, but no modern road is a clear successor to the King William mountain road.

"As anticipated, settlement and commerce followed the roads, and those roads with the most commerce were the ones that provided connections to ocean shipping. In the mid-eighteenth century there were deep-water docks all along the Rappahannock, and there wasn't a bigger port city in our part of the world than Fredericksburg. Roads fanning out from the Rappahannock docks supported the development of Orange and surrounding counties and in turn made Fredericksburg one of Virginia's most prominent commercial centers in the early colonial period.

"Intersecting the Spotsylvania mountain road at what would become the town of Orange was a north-south road which crossed the Rapidan at a ford that rivaled Germanna [ford] in width, shallowness, firmness of river bottom, and ease of approaches: today's Barnett's Ford at Madison Mills [Route 15 crossing of Rapidan River]. The intersection, therefore, attracted such commercial traffic as there was in the region, and those roads became more widely-known travelways."⁶

⁶ Ibid., 223.