



ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

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STAGECOACH TRAVEL IN ROCKBRIDGE

By Richard Halseth

“Not enough has been written about stagecoach ways, the adventures of the road — breakdowns, upsets, and robberies; not enough about the moods of the road — the early morning departures, the late arrivals at night, traveling in the heat and dust or in the mud and rain; not enough about the coaches themselves or the drivers and their horses; and, last of all, not enough about the stagecoach taverns of the day. Perhaps these can be the themes of other papers. It is not good to forget this institution and the part it so long played in the life of the people of this region. The stagecoach, for the period in which it was dominant, set the tempo of the nation’s life. In the days before the telegraph, it not only carried passengers and their belongings, but it carried the mails and the world’s news. Business could move no faster than it received the reports upon which its decisions were made. A democratic government could not

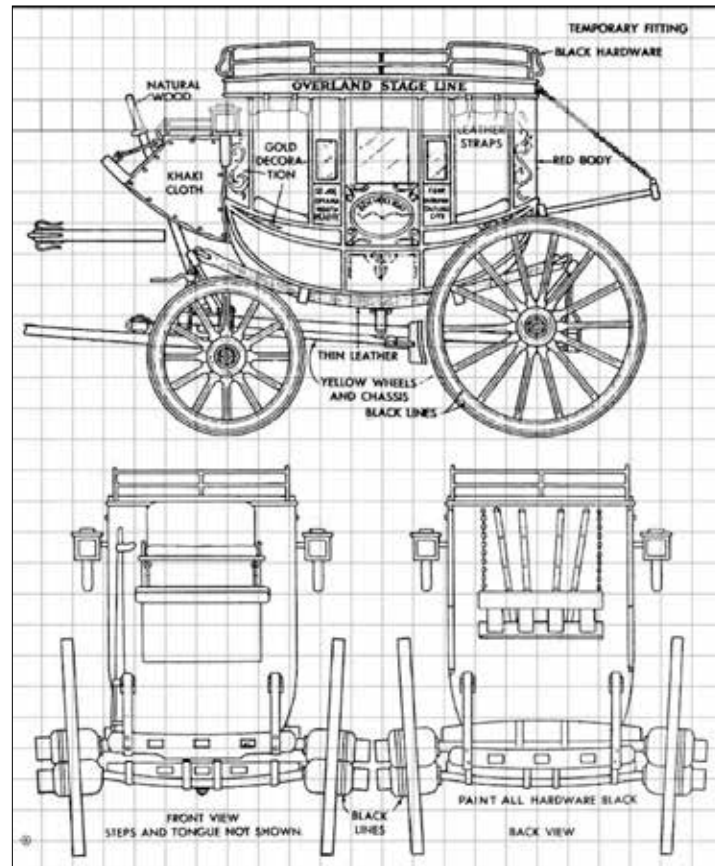
act with confidence before the response of its citizens to events and situations was registered. Situations, indeed, were shaped in slower rhythm. The speed of this shuttle, as it passed back and forth between communities, binding them together, was, for fifty years after the Revolution, a major determinant in the pattern of American civilization. In understanding this pattern, we understand better by contrast the days in which we live.”

Oliver W. Holmes¹

EARLY STAGECOACHES were little more than wagons with stakes on the sides to support rough coverings. Seats were just hard wooden benches. Springs were crude and not very effective. Eventually the coaches were improved by being enclosed and sprung

Above: The former Sheridan Livery Stable in Lexington. In its heyday it was a stopping point on the Lexington–Staunton–Hot Springs stagecoach route.

1 “Stagecoach Days in the District of Columbia,” paper presented in 1948 and published in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*



Typical coach design

on leather straps, with cushioned seats. By the time they disappeared in the early 1900s, they were the stagecoaches we had gotten to know through Western movies.

They were built from white oak, ash and basswood, braced with iron bands and fittings. Inside were three bench seats accommodating up to nine passengers; some models could seat twelve. Passengers on the center bench had no back rest — but leather straps were suspended from the roof, with which they could steady themselves. Outside another six passengers could sit (precariously) on the roof. One or two could sit next to the driver.

Coaches could be pulled by two, four or six horses, depending on the terrain and cargo weight, with four horses the typical team.

Early in Colonial times, mail was carried on horseback because of limited and narrow roads. As road conditions became better suited to larger loads, however, the postal service eventually began use of stagecoaches.

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Why “stagecoach”? The name applied because horses could be used only for limited distances before needing rest and feed. In general, teams had to be changed about every 12 to 15 miles, depending, of course, on road conditions and the weight of the load they were pulling. Along the route of travel, stops were scheduled so precisely that it took only a few minutes to unhitch the exhausted team and attach the replacement.

ROCKBRIDGE TRAVELERS’ EXPERIENCES

FROM THE DIARY of a worldly traveler, Prince Carl Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, who journeyed from Harper’s Ferry to visit the Natural Bridge in 1825–26:

I left my baggage in Staunton at half past two o’clock, in a miserable stage, in order to go to the Natural Bridge, upon a very bad road. We passed only two decent places, Fairfield and Lexington, the last is the chief town of Rockbridge county, and has a court and high school. On account of a fog, which lasted all day, we could see but little of the country, which in some parts of Rockbridge county becomes very mountainous. We forded two small streams, called Middle river and Buffalo creek, over the last there is a wooden bridge, which is made use of only at very high water.

Our travelling company was not the most agreeable, it was composed of two Americans, who did not open their mouths, and of an Irish resident, who talked the more for the silence of the others; all this was disagreeable enough. At times he became interesting, when he had cheered his heart with whiskey.

We passed by many very handsome country-houses; at one of them we saw eight large black eagles sitting on a fence, they were fed by the care of the proprietor. The inhabitants seem not very fond of shooting, for I saw snipes in Fairfield, which flew even into the yard of the tavern. Game is here very abundant, a deer costs about a dollar and a half.

In the afternoon we reached a lonely tavern, situated in the mountains called Natural Bridge, which is fifty miles distant from Staunton. I availed myself of the short time the sun remained



Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Prince Carl Bernhard

above the horizon to hasten to the Natural Bridge, which is a mile and a half distant from the tavern, and for the sake of which I had made so great a circuit and suffered so many fatigues. A young negro slave from the tavern was our conductor; the way led through mountains overgrown with wood. At last I stood upon a rock whence I could overlook the cleft and the bridge just before me. In Jefferson’s Notes, that learned man gives a description of the bridge, which is as follows: “The Natural Bridge, the most sublime of Nature’s works. If the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme. This bridge is in the county of Rockbridge, to which it has given name, and affords a public and commodious passage over a valley, which cannot be crossed elsewhere for a considerable distance. The stream passing under it is called Cedar creek. It is a water of James’s river, and sufficient in the driest seasons to turn a grist-mill, though its fountain is not more than two miles above.”

I confess that I am no poet; yet I was very glad to have taken the trouble of coming hither; this rock-bridge being certainly one of the greatest wonders of nature I have ever beheld; and I have seen Vesuvius and the Phlegræan fields, the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland, the Island of Staffa, and the Falls of Niagara! The brook under the bridge was almost dry; the most majestic view is from below.

On the 23d of November we left the wretched tavern at the Natural Bridge, and returned to Staunton in a crowded stage, in which were four gentlemen from the state of Tennessee, members of congress, going to Washington. I took my seat as usual alongside the coachman, where I had more room and fresh air. We returned as far as Lexington by the road we left it. Having stopped for a short while here, I was the object of much curiosity to the German descendants who are

settled here. The town of Lexington was first established about forty years ago, and it now contains eleven hundred inhabitants. In its vicinity upon a hill, is a large arsenal covered with zinc, belonging to the United States.

From Lexington we took another road which led us through the considerable villages of Brownsburg and Middleburgh. The road was in some places very bad, and terribly rough; but we sometimes found a side road, which in that dry season was still very good; it ran generally through a forest. We saw lonely houses and met with many travelers on horseback, several of them were well dressed white women. All our coachmen in this state were whites; I was surprised at this, knowing that black coachmen could be had at a cheaper rate, and was told that in this state, blacks were not allowed to drive the mail stage.

IN 1815 a certain Mr. William Richardson traveled overland from Boston to New Orleans. His voluminous diary noted that the entire trip took “only” 54 days. His travels took him down the Shenandoah Valley, and on March 4, 1815, he wrote:

Just as the sun rose this morning I had reached the summit of the Blue Ridge mountains [Afton] and having got some distance ahead of the stage (for we had to walk all the way up) I sat down to rest and view the vast and beautiful country which we could overlook. The grandeur of this view cannot be described. Having spent a short time in the delightful situation, the stage overtook us and we got in, and with cautious steps, tread

STAGECOACH THROUGH GOSHEN PASS

The Goshen Pass was practically a one-way road — only small vehicles could pass each other. [When] two stages met, one bound for Lexington, the other for Goshen, the Goshen stage was, of course, on the right-hand. All the passengers and the drivers attached ropes to the [Lexington-bound] stage and climbed the cliff while the two horses left attached on the left-side slowly drew [the Goshen-bound stage] past the other on the two wheels that were on the road and the other wheels hanging free over the precipice.

— Nannie Jordan, “Visiting Memorable Places,” in *Rockbridge Anecdotes*, Number 4 [link]

our winding way down this rugged mountain. . . . At seven o'clock we arr'd at Brownsborough [Brownsburg] all well, after a very tedious, tho' interesting, day ride — the stage got stuck fast in the mud several times, which compelled us to walk for a considerable distance.

Richardson left Brownsburg in the stage at three o'clock that Sunday morning and reached Lexington at eight, covering about fifteen miles in five hours. At Lexington the journey was interrupted because the roads were too bad for the whole stagecoach to proceed, but the front axle and wheels were taken off and the mail carried ahead on them. Now Richardson's real troubles began.

I now employed a man to find me a horse to proceed on with the mail but it being Sabbath day, none was to be had. I therefore, after severely reprimanding the stage proprietors for such an imposition, for it was their duty to have furnished me with a horse, gave up the pursuit. A Mr. Brekinridge, who was a passenger in the stage seeing my anxiety, very politely offered me a horse he had obtained of a friend to ride 14 miles. I lost no time in getting under way, in hopes to overtake the mail, and bribe the driver to let me ride on the mail until we had made the next stand from whence I was told the stage ran. In this I succeeded, and in the rain which was pouring down in torrents straddled the mail, . . . on which I rode through the mud and water in a most dreary country, to Fincastle, where we arrived at 12 o'clock. Having spoke to the driver of the next stage, to call me in the morning. I lost no time in getting something to eat, having had nothing all day, and lay down to get a little sleep.

THE *Lexington Gazette*, on November 16, 1877, ran an article concerning the loss of a stage and three horses:

On Thursday of last week the rain fell in torrents flooding the streams and raising the river higher than since the big freshet in 1870. The stage for Goshen left here at 2 p.m. having on board Oscar Clyce, driver, with Col Ross and Mr. Bartholomew as passengers. Bratton's Run was reached about 9 ½ p.m. and was seen to be unusually high, but as the river had not risen much,

WET MAIL.—A package of letters from the mail lately overturned with the stage-coach in North river was received here from Lexington yesterday. Nearly all the letters were water-stained, and from most of them the stamps had been washed, but the writing was quite legible.

Front page news:
Richmond Dispatch,
November 15, 1877

the careful driver concluded to attempt the crossing. It is a swift and, at high tide, a treacherous stream. The horses and coach were soon swept off of the ford. The driver got on top of the coach and was soon joined by Col R and Mr. B., who climbed through the windows. Their position was one of danger as well as of terror, for none of the party could swim. The horses broke loose from the coach, which rolled over and over, the storm-tossed "land-lubbers" crawling to the top side as it turned. As it came to the river (some 300 yards from the ford) it lodged upon a rock. The situation can be better imagined than described, and was terrible in the extreme. A negro man, living in a cabin near the river heard their cries and came to their relief. He cut down a sycamore tree so that it fell near them, and upon it they managed to reach the bank, more dead than alive—the coach washing away as it was relieved of the weight of the last one who left it. Oscar Clyce was pious—in a stage-driver's way—and vowed "Bratton's Run wouldn't fool him again;" Col Ross "thanked God," as he jumped ashore, and gave the negro a V; and Mr. B. thought unutterable things, and did likewise. They stayed at the old negro's cabin that night, and the next day managed to get to Goshen, baggage lost, and in a very dilapidated condition generally.

One horse got out alive and well. The bodies of two others have been found many miles down the river. The body of the coach was torn to fragments, but the running-gear was recovered, as was the Northern and Richmond mail bags, contents but little damaged. The Express safe, containing \$80 in money and other valuables was recovered, as well as Col Ross' satchel and most of the other baggage. Capt. Harman's loss is from \$500 to \$800.

THE PENNSYLVANIA ROAD, The Turnpike, The Wilderness Road, The Warriors Path, The Great Wagon Road and Route 11 — the route had many

names but the way was the same. Today's U.S. Route 11 follows the original trajectory not exactly but closely. A system of tolling was developed so roads could attract private funds to be used for improvements. Stagecoach transportation expanded as travel became more comfortable and affordable and travel times decreased.

From Harper's Ferry to Bristol stagecoaches were the dominant travel choice from around 1820 to perhaps 1860, about when railroads came into vogue. Even then, for decades stages were feeder lines, bringing passengers to locations the railroads couldn't economically serve and lacking navigable water resources.

Over time the Great Road, having begun as a rough, unimproved path, was widened, then transformed into sections of plank, then macadam, and then asphalt and concrete as we know U.S. 11 and Interstate 81 today.



R. A. Brock, Gen. Robert E. Lee,
Johnson Publishing, Richmond

Valley Pike in 1897

INNS AND TAVERNS

BECAUSE stagecoaches had to stop every 12 to 15 miles, an opportunity arose for entrepreneurs to invest in stables, inns, taverns — accommodations for the coach passengers and the horses that pulled them. Fortunately today many of these facilities still exist, although often in a different capacity. A few stand out.

The Rockbridge Inn, Rockbridge County

The Rockbridge Inn played a central role in the development of Rockbridge County. At one time it was owned by Colonel H. C. Parsons, the primary developer and



Rockbridge Inn

promoter of the Natural Bridge. Originally known as the Galbraith Tavern, construction was completed in 1823 along the old Valley Turnpike at Rices Hill Road, just north of the Bridge. The property consisted of a two-story brick house with 10 rooms, a brick kitchen, smoke house, ice house and a large log stable.

The Teaford Inn, Rockbridge County

The Teaford Inn was located 12 miles west of Lexington on the Midland Trail, formerly U.S. Route 60. The Teaford served travelers for nearly 100 years, serving Sunday brunch into the mid-1940s. The Teaford Inn seems not to have handled a large volume of business but rather functioned as a small stagecoach inn. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* described it thus: "Unlike many of the caravansaries that sprang up along the stage coach routes, the Kerrs Creek Inn bore a dignified atmosphere and catered to persons of refined taste. The



Teaford Inn, 1938

jugglers and strolling players, peddlers and beggars and the rough and picturesque drivers of the great Conestoga wagons, all avoided Teaford's."

The Red Brick House, Rockbridge County



Red Brick House (Treavy Inn)

Also known as Red House, the Treavy Inn and the McDowell House. This eye-catching red-brick, red-roof building is located south of Fairfield on Route 11 at the northwest corner of Decatur Road (county road 712) and is thought to have been about 1778. On the site was originally located a red log house, built by the early settler John McDowell. The present house was built by Joseph and Susannah Treavy, who acquired the site in 1783. During the Treavys' ownership it was an inn for stagecoach travelers moving up and down the Valley Pike.

Nicholas Spring's Tavern, Brownsburg, Rockbridge County



Nicholas Spring's Tavern

Located in Brownsburg and built in 1834, the house was a stagecoach stop on the route from Staunton to Lexington from the 1840s to the 1880s. Horse teams were changed at the stop and passengers could stop in the tavern for a meal and a toddy. The house is on the Virginia Landmarks Register.

Sheridan Livery, Lexington



Sheridan Livery

John Sheridan was born in Ireland in 1847 and arrived in the United States at the age of four. When he was 15 he enlisted in the Confederate Army. In 1887 he built a livery stable at the corner of Main and Henry streets in Lexington. His livery business carried the mail and served a stagecoach station connecting Lexington, Staunton and Hot Springs. Soon, however, the stagecoach-service business was in decline and the operation became a feeder operation to the railroads before yielding entirely to the automobile culture. Today the former stable is once again a destination for guests.

Steele's Tavern, Rockbridge County

John Steele operated a tavern and stagecoach stop along today's Route 11 at the intersection of Route 56, then called Midway. Cyrus McCormick first demonstrated his new machine, the first practical grain reaper, in a field of oats owned by John Steele. Steele's actual tavern, alas, has been lost.

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