



ASHE Scanner

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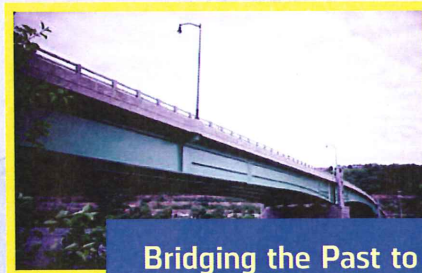


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Pike2Bike Trail: The Pennsylvania Turnpike's Abandoned Corridor

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Abandoned tunnel entrance

First a Bit of History

The Pennsylvania Turnpike opened on October 1, 1940, as America's first superhighway and is still the lifeblood of today's vehicular travel from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. This route, meandering east to west through the mountain ranges of southern Pennsylvania, is not without its share of history. In particular, in the mountains east of where I-70 breaks off the turnpike and heads southeast to Washington, D.C., there is a seemingly unknown stretch of turnpike that no longer feels the rumble of cars and trucks. This 13-mile-long stretch of abandoned turnpike has a rich history that predates vehicular travel and has a yet-to-be-determined role to play in the future of multimodal transportation in southcentral Pennsylvania.

The history of the turnpike predates the Civil War. The Pennsylvania Railroad linked Harrisburg and Pittsburgh on February 15, 1854. However, the boom in railroad building often meant that to gain a competitive advantage, railroad tycoons would build new duplicate routes parallel to existing routes to steal revenue from the established line. Such was the case when William Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie and Henry Oliver formed a syndicate to build the \$15 million

South Pennsylvania Railroad, which started construction on September 6, 1883, to challenge the already-established Pennsylvania Railroad. In July 1885, J.P. Morgan mediated a settlement between Vanderbilt and the Pennsylvania Railroad, and construction of Vanderbilt's railroad halted at 60 percent complete. Vanderbilt died three months later.

Jumping forward about half a century, the stock market crash of 1929 led to the 1932 election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency. FDR's New Deal philosophy provided an opportunity, through the Public Works Administration, that would ultimately finance the construction of the turnpike. On April 23, 1935, Pennsylvania Representative Cliff Patterson introduced House Resolution No. 138 to authorize a feasibility study to convert the abandoned Vanderbilt Railroad to a roadway for the rapidly growing popularity of the automobile. This route was far less prone to treacherous weather-related driving conditions than U.S. 30 (Lincoln Highway), which was used to cross the state. Despite the authorization to form on May 21, 1937, the Turnpike Commission received no funding. At that time, Pennsylvania's constitution prohibited the state from incurring more than \$1 million of bonded debt without a referendum, and cost estimates for

the project ranged from \$60 million to \$70 million; therefore, generation of all revenue occurred through federal grants, bonds and tolls as security for the bonds. To get the job kick-started, the state highway department did provide support services, which were later repaid with toll revenue. Financing proved challenging as investors had a difficult time imagining a 160-mile-long toll road; it was never done before, but financing was finally approved on October 10, 1938.

The Turnpike's Evolution

Since no one ever designed a 160-mile-long "racetrack" before, more than 1,100 engineers struggled to set aside conventional design methods to build a road that defied terrain and was built for speed. Design standards included:

- 200-foot-wide right-of-way
- Total roadway width of 78 feet with four 12-foot-wide lanes and a 30-foot-wide median
- Maximum grade of three percent
- Maximum curvature of six degrees
- Superelevated curves
- 1,200-foot-long entrance and exit ramps with limited access
- Minimum 600-foot sight distance
- Absolutely no at-grade crossings
- A single unified design task from end-to-end



PennDOT Secretary of Transportation Leslie Richards (center) and PennDOT staff ride the abandoned Turnpike.

The popularity of the turnpike skyrocketed quickly as a new era in transportation had begun. The speeds achievable on the road pushed the limits of engineering not only for civil engineers, but also for mechanical and material engineers who now needed to design vehicles capable of safely operating at those speeds. By 1960, 31 million vehicles per year were using the turnpike—24 times more than the original planners anticipated. The original seven tunnels on the turnpike were two lanes wide, and became bottlenecks causing miles of backup as two lanes of traffic merged into one. In the 1960s, twin tunnels were built at the Blue Mountain, Kittatinny, Tuscarora and Allegheny tunnels. However, it was determined that the best way to ease congestion between Breezewood and Fort Littleton was to create a 13.5-mile bypass around the 3,532-foot-long Rays Hill Tunnel, which was the shortest of the original tunnels, and the Sideling Hill Tunnel, which was the longest of the original tunnels at 6,782 feet. As part of the bypass project, the Cove Valley rest stop was also abandoned on the east side of the Sideling Hill Tunnel. On November 26, 1968, the bypass opened, and an eerie silence fell over the 13-mile stretch of the newly abandoned turnpike.

A Turnpike Makeover

Although deteriorating every day, the abandoned concrete roadway, along with the two tunnels began seeing foot and bike traffic by those interested in a glimpse of roadway and turnpike history. In 2001 the Turnpike Commission transferred ownership of the property to the Southern Alleghenies Conservancy with the intention of having that entity rehabilitate the roadway and tunnels to create a multi-use trail corridor, known as the Pike2Bike Trail. With a proposed trail head near today's Sideling Hill Rest Stop, the eight-and-a-half-mile Pike2Bike Trail includes passage through the Rays and Sideling Hill Tunnels. The Pike2Bike Trail would provide linkage to the hiking trails of the James Buchanan State Forest, the Great Allegheny Passage Trail, the East Coast Greenway, the 9/11 Memorial Trail and the remnants of the historic railway adjacent to the highway, and provide an improved alignment of BicyclePa Route S.

In an effort to advance the Pike2Bike Trail project, Bedford and Fulton Counties, as well as local businesses, have invested funding in a master plan (2006) and an economic impact analysis (2014) and are planning an update to the master plan over the next 12 months. 🇺🇸

In October 2016, Pennsylvania Secretary of Transportation Leslie Richards took interest in the trail and biked the corridor with representatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and PennDOT. "Our ride reflected the truly collaborative spirit of state and local partners to breathe new life into our infrastructure," she said. "We are interested in working with Bedford and Fulton Counties on moving this concept forward. Adding this route has the potential to build tourism and the region's economy." On October 27, a few weeks after the Secretary's ride, the local ASHE Altoona Section hosted a guided tour of the abandoned turnpike and tunnels. Members of the Section and guests hiked three miles along the trail (former turnpike) and accessed the tunnel buildings. The tour provided an educational experience for all to better understand the history of the original Pennsylvania Turnpike while utilizing the abandoned transportation system for a recreational hike.