

Headin' East



Plaque, opposite the entrance to Mt. Sunapee State Park, was placed in 1960. Photo by Jane White

The Province Road by Jane White

Alone, at the edge of a traffic island blanketed with frozen snow, sits a rock bearing a plaque. Situated opposite the entrance to the Mount Sunapee Ski Area, it has long witnessed the change of seasons and the growth of the trees that, until last summer, flanked its sides. It has stood for more than thirty years, unnoticed by most motorists who hastened by, preoccupied with their own destinations. If one were to find a convenient place to stop and walk close enough to the marker to read the inscription, one would discover a memorial to The Province Road placed by the Daughters of Colonial Wars in 1960. It reads: "The Province Road 1769 - Military Road 1754 - Scout Path 1743 - Penacook Trail."

When I first learned of the existence of the marker, I found it almost entirely obscured from view by the small trees that must have been planted to enhance the memorial but which, in time, have concealed it. Such overgrowth might be considered symbolic of what has happened to the road it commemorates. Of what significance was this road that someone

thought it important enough to erect a plaque in its memory with tantalizing hints of its history? Where did it go and more challenging, what is left of it now? There are a few clues to be found along small stretches of area roads bearing the name Province Road, Old Province Road, or West Province Road, the latter being adjacent to the access road to the Mt. Sunapee ski area. Following the access road, said to be a remnant of the original Province Road, one can find a double chairlift bearing the name, Province Double Chairlift, whose route roughly follows the direction of the Province Road. Beyond that however, one must rely on maps so old that many of the town names and boundaries are not as we know them today in the year 1999.

Imagine the land which was to become the state of New Hampshire as it might have been 300 years ago, before early settlers had made significant advances into the interior countryside. A vast forested land, inhabited mainly by Native Americans who lived mostly along lakeshores and the two major waterways in the area, the Connecticut and the Merrimack Rivers, it was uncharted country, devoid of roads. The Native Peoples concerned themselves with hunting, fishing, foraging and planting crops with little need to explore further unless their food supply became depleted. Initially, the only significant movement seems to have come from the occasional Iroquois raiders who would travel from Lake Champlain, southward and then east to the Merrimack River to invade the Penacooks, thereby establishing a trail which later became a scout path. The use of this path increased during the years when French and English animosity resulted in periodic skirmishes along the American frontier, and the Penacook Tribe, which had tried to remain neutral, eventually allied themselves with the French. It was a trail which later, in peaceful times, continued to be used by trappers and traders.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Portsmouth, a thriving seaport, was established as the provincial capital of the region and the growing population began moving further inland. About

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the same time, trading posts had begun to develop along the Connecticut River Valley, the northernmost of which was Number 4, located where the center of Charlestown is now situated. The need for such settlements at the western limits of the province to "communicate" with the so-called Metropolis, as

Portsmouth was then

termed, became increasingly necessary. Portsmouth was an important center of commerce which received goods useful to the outlying settlements. Creating a convenient route by which to transport cargo two hundred miles from the eastern half of the province westerly to settlements on the Connecticut River became imperative. An

east/west road, once established, would also facilitate settlement of townships in the interior of the province as well as enhance the opportunity for trade between the two areas.

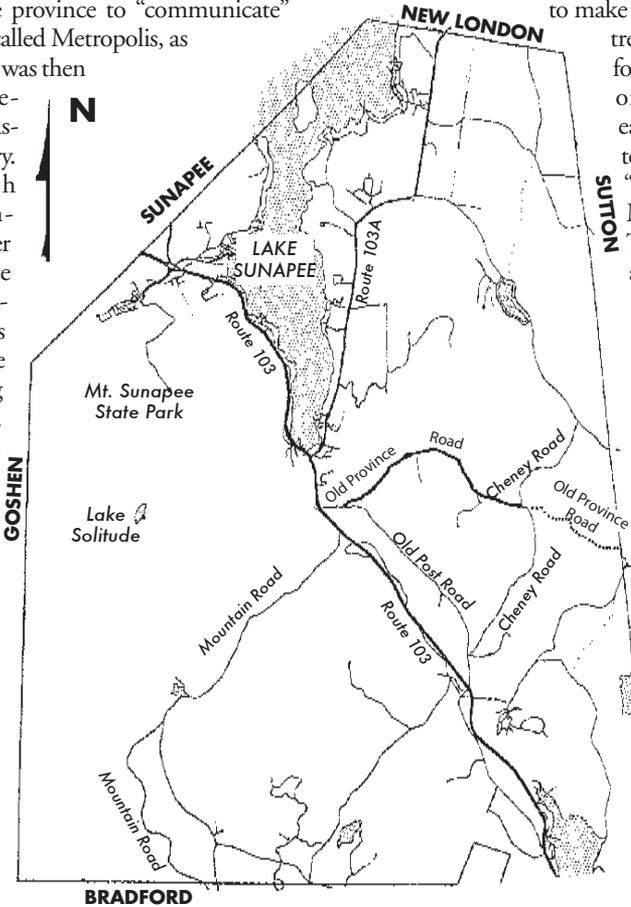
In December, 1742, Governor Benning Wentworth, recognizing this growing need for a road between the Connecticut River and the Merrimack, employed a surveying crew to

begin laying out a route. Frequently deterred by Indian attacks, little was accomplished until about 1759, when Sir Jeffrey Amherst, Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Forces in North America, commanded some of his men

to make a survey and mark

trees in preparation for the establishment of a road leading east from Charlestown/Number 4 to "Pennycook" on the Merrimack River. The military men, already familiar with the established scouting path, followed its line. Eventually, a road was established which, according to an early map and various town records, traveled from Charlestown eastward through the towns of Acworth, Lempster, Unity and Goshen, a town formed in 1791 from sections of Newport and Sunapee.

It then continued onward through Saville (Sunapee), around the southern end of Lake Sunapee through Fishersfield (Newbury), Perry (Sutton), Almsbury (Warner), fill any terminating in Boscawen. Other towns as far afield as Haverhill and Middletown, have also been named as claiming sections of Province Road, but the map places the major portion of the road further south. As to the route of the



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eastern portion, vague mention is made of the road traveling through Barnstead and Dover, the principal interest of historic records seeming to be with the section west of the Merrimack. This is perhaps due to the fact that with the larger and more established settlements to the east there may have been alternate routes of access.

By 1768, efforts were still underway to create a passable carriage road between Charlestown and Boscawen, delay being created by the fact that regional settlers were preoccupied with clearing land for themselves, establishing homes and producing food. There was little time, money or incentive to build a major road in addition to which the process of road-building at that time was arduous undertaking.

After surveying the region, marking trees and laying out a route, the trees had to be cut and brush cleared, leaving a passage which was little better than a bridle path dotted with stumps and rocks. The original road often traversed fairly steep hills because the crossing of streams higher up and closer to their source meant dealing with a narrower crossing and less bridge building. The higher elevations also allowed for surveillance of lower terrain for hostile raiding parties that were not uncommon at the time the road was being built, a factor that further slowed progress. Bit by bit, however, obstacles were overcome, boggy areas filled by placing felled trees side by side in a row to form a rough but firm causeway, the road was smoothed and widened so that what had originally been passable only on horseback or by oxcart became usable for coaches and other horse-drawn conveyances. Records show that the old scouting trail officially became Province Road around the years of 1768 - 1772 and was so-named because it was the result of the actions of Governor John Wentworth and the provincial legislature, the only carriage road in western New Hampshire

built through such a process.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, an attempt was made to physically trace the actual route of Province Road from the Merrimack to the Connecticut River resulting in frustrations similar to those confronting anyone who tries to do the same today. Maps of the local area show sections of roads called Province Road, but it is almost impossible to trace the road in one continuous line from east to west. This is because long before the turn of the century, demographics had begun to change and much of Province Road fell into disuse. As the textile industry became increasingly important, it caused

a movement away from family farms to the more prosperous cities, particularly Manchester and Nashua. Concord, because of its central location, became the capital of the state. Portsmouth gradually declined in its importance as a seaport, being superseded by Boston and as a result, most major roads and railways throughout the state traveled in a north/south direction with Boston becoming a major destination.

It is an interesting challenge to travel sections of roadway named Province Road in towns of Newbury and Goshen as well as roads bearing other names, which lie along the route of the old road. Try to imagine what one might have found had one traveled along the road during earlier decades. Today, many of the old cellar holes, barely visible during the early 1900's exploration, are no longer evident. Only an occasional graveyard bears witness to the road that once carried people across New Hampshire. In the traffic island at the base of Mt. Sunapee, the Province Road memorial marker stands as a continuing tribute to human endeavor, a reminder of life as it used to be long ago and testimony to the inevitability of change.

