

# Spanning the Gap

## Historical Narrative of River Road and Freeman Tract Road



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By park historian *Susan Kopczynski*



Extensive archeological evidence indicates that Native Americans first used the road as a trail along the river, called the **Minsi Trail** or the **Delaware River Path**, which connected the area of present-day Philadelphia to the area of present-day Pennsylvania towns of Bethlehem, Nazareth, Stroudsburg, and

Shawnee-on-Delaware. The trail followed today's trajectory of River Road and Route 209 to Minisink Island, Port Jervis and Kingston, NY. Several different spear points have been found in the area, such as the *Lehigh broadspear*, which has been radiocarbon-dated to roughly 1720 B.C. The modern Tribal component of the area is dated to around 1400-1450 A.D.

Early white settlers probably entered the area by way of the Minsi Trail. One of the first was Nicholas Depui who came in 1725 from the Hudson River valley in New York State. As white settlement increased, so did the number of farms, limited only by the amount of land one family could work. River Road connected the farms to each other and to

(Left) Trees line an old farm road that once connected to River Road, but now is part of McDade Trail.

### Along River Road



Looking north at the Kautz Farmhouse (stone) and washhouse (wood frame, at far left) on River Road (since demolished) around 1890.



An early view of Newcomb House.

nearby markets and developed accordingly. In 1744, a road was laid out from Walpack Ferry on the Delaware River to a point on the Lehigh River, some 38 miles in length. Using the Walpack Ferry, settlers could cross into New Jersey and travel north along **Old Mine Road** up to present-day Montague NJ and the Hudson River valley. At about the same time, a road was being developed on the Pennsylvania side parallel to River Road and the Delaware River on the opposite side of the ridge.

This road extended from present-day Stroudsburg to Milford PA and Port Jervis NY, and follows the course of present day Route 209. Since there were a number of residents in Bushkill in the 1750's (Peters, Hyndshaw, Schoonover and Gonzales), a lesser road or bridle path must have existed from Bushkill across the ridge known as the **Hog Back** to the Walpack ferry, as well.

During the French and Indian War (1755-1763), Native Americans attacked the isolated farms in the area and River Road found a new purpose. A string of forts was placed in the Delaware Water Gap area to protect the settlers in the area from these raids; two of the forts guarded River Road. Fort Hyndshaw was located at the northern end of River Road in Bushkill PA and Fort Depue was located at the southern end in Shawnee-on- Delaware at Depue's home. According to the journal of Captain John Van Etten, stationed at Forts Hyndshaw and Hamilton in 1757, there were many times when troops made forays in the area and presumably used the road. On June 24, 1756 Commissary General for Pennsylvania James Young wrote in his journal: "*It is a good plain road from Depue's (Shawnee-on-Delaware) and there are many plantations (farms) this way; but all deserted and the houses chiefly burnt ...*" It is not clear, however, whether he was referring to River Road or Route 209. In September 1761, the River Road was formally surveyed by Benjamin Depue.

By the time of the American Revolution, River Road began to appear on a number of maps. Among the



Newcomb House, near Shawnee-on-Delaware PA. This section of the road sees the greatest traffic, due to Smithfield Beach.



Mist rises off the river near Hialeah. Fields under agricultural lease line the road in this section.



A historically cultivated field, now maintained as farmland under the park's agricultural leasing program.

earliest is *A Map of the Improved Part of the Province of Pennsylvania* by Nicholas Scull dated 1759. It is worth noting that the legend for this map indicates it is a road and not an Indian trail. Others are a *Map of Pennsylvania* by W. Scull in 1770, *Province of New Jersey* by William Faden in 1777, and *New and Accurate Map of New Jersey* from *Universal Magazine* for June 1780. These maps show the road going from Depue's (Shawnee-on-Delaware) to Walpack Ferry and crossing into New Jersey to present day Old Mine Road. Another road shown on these maps follows the course of present day Route 209 (Milford Road) running parallel to River Road on the opposite or west side of the ridge. This indicates that River Road and Route 209 (Milford Road) were the main routes of travel in the area and developed at about the same time. From Shawnee-on-Delaware (*Depui's* on the maps), one could follow River Road north to the ferry and cross over to New Jersey or follow present-day Hollow Road to Route 209 north to Minisink Island and Port Jervis NY.

River Road was used at least once by the military when General Philip Van Cortlandt marched with the 2nd New York Regiment down the road to join General John Sullivan's famous expedition in 1779.

The road remained little changed during the 19th and into the 20th century, except for the usual accommodation for wagons, then automobiles. In 1797, the second section of the road was apparently laid out from the intersection with Jag Road to Peter Trach's mill. Historic re-alignments occurred at least four times during the historic period. The first was in 1838 when a half mile section that went from Samuel Michaels to Jacob Miller's (Zion Church north?). The second was a 1773 foot section by Smithfield Beach that was abandoned in 1912. Most of the road, except for the part near Decker's Ferry, was acquired by the state in 1932 during the governorship of Gifford Pinchot. In 1934, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation paved four and three-fourth miles of River Road, excepting Freeman Tract section. This included considerable



River Road near Zion Church.



The lime kiln at Turn Farm is visible from River Road, especially in winter.



Turn Farm Trailhead, McDade Trail, near Bushkill PA. The road begins to climb a shelf towards Route 209 at this point.



re-alignment of the upper section and some widening of the curves. Another small section was abandoned through the lands of Herbert Theune in 1954. The road retains a 20 foot corridor width without shoulders or clear zone.

The 1870 agricultural census lists 22 families along River Road. Each had between 75 to 100 acres of land planted in corn, oats, rye, wheat, potatoes and buckwheat, in addition to milk cows, horses and sheep in pasture. Each farm also had between 28 and 30 acres of unimproved land or woods. This was used as pasture or for timber. Historic photographs show the hillsides heavily cleared. The Valentine Weaver House, no longer standing, was built as an inn for loggers, or rafters on the river, in 1867. Elizabeth Menzie's book *Before the Waters* shows another building identified as an inn which is no longer standing.

By the turn of the century, the agricultural economy deteriorated and farmers turned to a new use, recreation. Most took in boarders and provided fresh farm products to the burgeoning resorts in the area. In 1962, the flood control act authorized a dam to be built across the Delaware River to provide electricity, water, and recreation, as well as flood control. The dam would have submerged all of the farms along the river, ending agricultural use and replacing it with water-based recreational use. Escalating costs and vigorous protests from valley residents and ecologists eventually stopped the dam project. Before it ended, however, many long time residents/farmers were bought out or forced to leave. The Army Corps of Engineers and the National Park Service demolished six historic farmsteads along River Road and had them recorded by the *Historic American Buildings Survey*. The road itself and other landscape features were little affected.

Agricultural use continues through a lease program with 304 acres in cultivation by a single farmer. Recreational use continues as well. A beach development from the 1950's remained with new

Two tree-lined roads (*allées*) run through agricultural fields and provide the entrance and exit roads to Hialeah Picnic Area today.

#### Along Freeman Tract Road



Cold Spring Farm, on Freeman Tract Road at River Road, in 1971; only the springhouse in the foreground remains today.



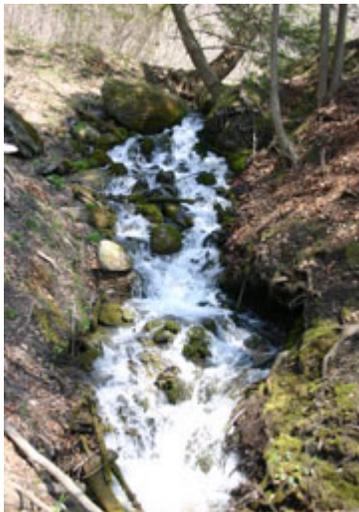
Cold Spring Farm Springhouse today



Owens Springhouse today.

facilities as **Smithfield Beach**. **Hialeah Picnic Area** was developed on the site of a summer home development. A new multi-use trail has been developed along abandoned roads and farm roads. **Hialeah Air Park**, a small air field for a model airplane club, occupies a small space alongside the road. The River Road corridor retains a high level in the feeling and association with agricultural and recreational uses. Its rural, narrow two-lane, meandering character recalls its historic origins as one of the earliest main transportation corridors in Monroe County. By contrast, Route 209 has become a heavily traveled commercialized thoroughfare and bears little resemblance to its early origins.

### ***Freeman Tract Road***



Driving north on River Road today, the motorist rounds a low flat curve at the Turn Farm Trailhead, then follows the paved road as it swings left to climb the rocky shelf toward Bushkill PA and Route 209.

However, the original trajectory of River Road was to bear sharply ***right*** just past Turn Farm, and to follow the dirt road which is now called ***Freeman Tract Road*** down to the ferry landing at Walpack Bend.

Despite remaining unpaved, this historic piece of River Road was busy, lined with homesteads, summer homes and denominational camps like Miller and Hagen (*above, right*), farm outbuildings, and even a few small old cemeteries. Two sturdy springhouses (*above, right*) still bear witness today to the traffic and uses of vanished years.

(*Left, below*) A stream which feeds the Owens Springhouse (*above*) on Freeman Tract Road, plunges down to the level of the Delaware River as a small, unnamed waterfall.



This altar in the woods between the river and Freeman Tract Road was a space used by campers for worship.



The old ferry landing at the end of Freeman Tract Road today.



Drifting past Freeman Tract PA in early spring. The bank on the far side is Depew Island NJ.