

From Trails to Rails

Information for Studying Transportation in New Hampshire

Background

Getting around New Hampshire originally occurred on foot. Today's highways follow many of the foot trails used by Native American Indians. At the museum, students will see a map of Indian trails in *New Hampshire Though Many Eyes*, a long-term exhibition on which this lesson is based. The trails usually followed higher ground to avoid swamps, rivers, and lakes. Also, a high vantage point was useful for detecting movement of animals and people.

Native Americans also used vehicles for travel: the birch bark canoe and the dugout canoe. Because Abenaki villages were located along New Hampshire's many rivers and lakes, water travel was crucial to survival. Heavier dugout canoes were hewn from pine or chestnut trees and used on open water such as lakes and the ocean. Lighter birch bark canoes were used on smaller, shallower streams and rivers. Examples of these canoes will be seen at the museum.

At first, Europeans, especially the English, settled around the port at Portsmouth. Ocean-going sailing ships became the lifeline to the Mother Country as colonists sought a place to send lumber, furs, and dried fish, and to acquire manufactured and luxury goods, including furniture, cloth, spice, and tea. Specialized ships called gundalows were built to carry masts, bricks, lumber, and livestock. Smaller boats were used to unload the gundalows and carry goods to shore.

After the French and Indian Wars were concluded, the frontier was a safer place to live. Settlers settled further inland, away from the major waterways, and needed means to transport themselves and goods. Ox carts and horse-drawn wagons provided overland travel.

By the middle of the 1800s, the horse-drawn coach replaced the horse-drawn cart as the personal travel mode of choice. Coach travel was greatly improved by the Abbot-Downing Company in Concord, NH. The company gained a worldwide reputation and market for their coach, which offered a comfortable ride made possible by the introduction of an independent suspension system.

This suspension system consisted of thoroughbraces, which were long leather straps folded over to form several thicknesses; they were installed from front to back under both sides of the coach to keep the coach from swaying from side to side and yet provide a soft ride. Also, a moveable glass panel in the doors provided passengers with light and a view of the countryside on stormy days. Although the coaches traveled only three to five miles an hour, and sometimes carried as many as fifteen passengers plus luggage and mail, they were considered the epitome of “modern” travel.

By mid-century, the railroad was making its impact on New Hampshire by connecting towns and cities with each other and the rest of the world. Markets for New Hampshire goods such as cotton textiles were expanded; people gained access to products produced in other parts of the country; and it became easier to take jobs further away from the farms and small towns. The growth of the railroad was dramatic. In 1838, fewer than forty miles of track had been laid. By 1900, over 1,200 miles of track connected every part of the state.

With the coming of the automobile and airplane in the twentieth century, distance is almost of no consequence. People and goods move about more freely. Markets and competition are global. Workers commute daily to distant jobs, particularly evidenced in New Hampshire by the number who commute daily to Boston. Flights into space are also part of the story of the development of transportation in New Hampshire.

However, the evolution of transportation has had its downside. Forests were destroyed to build sailing ships. Wildlife and forests, as well as towns and cities, were interrupted by roads and interstate highways. Pollution caused by the exhaust from cars and planes and the encroachment of airports and other transport centers on wetlands and other pristine areas raise questions about the impact of transportation on humans and the environment.

During the visit to the museum, students will see and examine objects and take part in activities related to the story of transportation’s evolution in New Hampshire, a story that has applications to other states and regions of our nation as well.

Objectives

1. To provide an overview of the development of transportation in New Hampshire from Abenaki trails to more modern methods of transport.
2. To compare and contrast the methods and conditions of travel by canoe, coach, railroad, car, and airplane.
3. To discuss the impact of each form of transportation on the landscape and the daily lives of the people of New Hampshire.