

The Columbus Dispatch

200-year-old highway still a path to progress

National Road celebration linked to condo project along E. Main St.

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BY COLLIN BINKLEY

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A horse-drawn wagon carrying history buffs and the city's mayor is scheduled to roll through Downtown today, stopping at a suite of condos recently renovated from 1890s-era buildings.

The procession marks the bicentennial of the start of work on the National Road, the nation's first federally funded highway. It passes through central Ohio as Rt.40 in its span from Maryland to Illinois.

"George Washington kind of envisioned it originally when he was a soldier back in the Revolutionary War," said Cyndie Gerken, former president of the Ohio National Road Association.

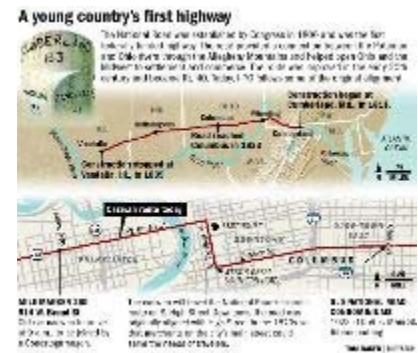
In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson authorized construction, and workers laying the road reached Ohio in 1825.

Trailblazers had opened other paths between states, but none offered an easy route through the Allegheny Mountains into the West, and none had been paid for by the federal government.

"The West was where all the opportunity was for land," Gerken said. "It was wilderness then until the road came through."

The caravan in Columbus today will include vintage cars following the reverse route of the road's construction, setting out from Vandalia, Ill., where the road ended, and finishing in Cumberland, Md., the site where work began 200 years ago Saturday.

Mayor Michael B. Coleman is expected to hop on the wagon on Broad Street in Franklinton, head south on High Street and follow Main Street to Olde Towne East. There, he will cut a ribbon in front of four historic buildings renovated from blighted structures built more than a century ago along the National Road.



"We can put eight homeowners here," said Jonathan Beard, chief executive of the Columbus Compact Corp., the nonprofit development group that led the \$1.6 million project. "We can eliminate the blight and really contribute to this string of jewels that we've put up and down Main Street."

The condos have been for sale at about \$100,000 each for a month, Beard said. None has sold, but he expects the energy-efficient homes to rejuvenate the 1000 block of E. Main Street.

The project was paid for with a 50 percent match from the federal government and includes a small park at the corner of Main and Ohio Avenue, formerly a vacant lot. It will be called the Old National Road Heritage Park.

A new restaurant will move into a nearby building that had been a beer and wine carryout, Beard said.

After the ceremony today, Gerken and other members of the Ohio National Road Association will trace the historic highway east, but they won't precisely follow the same route as the first road. Some portions, Gerken said, were buried when I-70 stretched across the state.

At the Pennsylvania border, the Ohio National Road Association will deliver a set of bells to a group from the next state, representing the bells customarily attached to early American wagons.

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