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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Original National Road pavement to be preserved from Mon-Fayette Expressway

By Timothy A. Strother
FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Sunday, October 26, 2008

Buzz up!

Construction of the Mon-Fayette Expressway has likely caused some inconvenience for drivers who typically travel Route 40 from Uniontown to Brownsville.

For members of the National Road Heritage Corridor, however, it provided an opportunity to recover a 5-ton slice of American history.

While excavating for construction of a new bridge overpass near the Brownsville Drive-In, PennDOT workers discovered what turned out to be a 200-year-old portion of the original National Road.

story continues below



Donna Holdorf, executive director of the National Road Heritage Corridor, said the slab was discovered in late August and was buried beneath several layers of asphalt, dirt, and cement. Holdorf added that an archaeologist from PennDOT contacted the Corridor upon discovery of the road bed in accordance with an agreement.

"We had in record a decision that if they were to uncover any artifacts during construction, we would have an opportunity to retrieve and preserve them," Holdorf said.

Holdorf also credited the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission for uncovering the road bed, and thanked several firms for their assistance in recovering the slab.

"We owe a great deal of thanks to the Golden Triangle Construction Co., which donated the equipment, labor, and materials needed to encase the slab," Holdorf said. Holdorf also credited Trumbull Corp., the McGuire Group, and PennDOT for their efforts in the excavation.

Preserving and promoting the historical, recreational, and scenic value of the National Road is a primary mission of her organization, Holdorf said, and this latest find is just one of many projects aimed at meeting that goal.

Holdorf and her colleagues also worked to preserve and verify its archaeological heritage. Because Holdorf does not have an archaeologist on her staff, she said she contacted the PennDOT central office section of Cultural Resources, where she was eventually put in touch with PennDOT regional archaeologist Ryan Rowles.

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DELICATE PROJECT

Rowles said what was supposed to be a few hours of taking photos and recording data evolved into a complicated and delicate project aimed at showcasing the road's turbulent journey through time.

"When the backhoe dug down through the existing asphalt, which was 16 inches thick from repaving projects, it first exposed a thin layer of tar over a thick layer of earth fill placed there by a contractor decades ago," Rowles said. "Beneath the fill was another layer of tar and then the original National cobble roadbed, beneath which was a layer of natural clay."

He added that the sequence of the slab's layers is called a stratigraphic profile, which reveals both the man-made and natural history of the road as it evolved over time.

"The slab of stratigraphy reveals, in a small way, the complete history of the National Road, from the undisturbed pre-European landscape to the surface of modern Route 40," Rowles said. "It's a window into the history of transportation in our region. And it's real, not a recreation."

Rowles also noted that keeping the block intact was perhaps the most difficult part of the project, a challenge that will be renewed while preparing the slab for display.

In addition to the National Road excavation project, Rowles said he has also worked in other parts of the country, including on Native American bison kill sites in the Midwest, where Rowles said he and his colleagues uncovered massive bison bone beds.

Despite his experience, however, Rowles said excavating a 5-ton slice of road and keeping it intact was a first in his archaeological career.

"I have never participated in a project like this. The extraction of an intact stratigraphic block like this is not common, and I can think of only one example," Rowles said. "I am aware that a significant section of Route 66 was extracted and sent to the Smithsonian, although I'm not sure if it is available for display."

Although she isn't exactly sure when the slab will be ready for display, Holdorf said she hopes to have it ready by next spring.

Holdorf also said she hopes to be able to cut the block into pieces to be displayed in several different locations. Rowles and Sky said they were grateful for the opportunity to work with Holdorf on the project.

"The National Road Heritage Corridor is a community of people, historic properties and businesses that works to preserve and interpret local, regional, and American history along Route 40," Rowles said. "Donna and her staff and partners are making a real and positive difference in the experiences of both visitors to our region and its residents."

CORRIDOR HISTORY

Created in 1994, the Corridor is one of 12 designated state heritage areas. Holdorf said the road was designated as a state scenic byway in 1995 and in 2002 was recognized nationally as a National Scenic Byway All-American Road, which is the highest designation given through the national scenic byways program. Aside from its statewide and national recognition, however, Holdorf said the road has a place in American history that greatly exceeds the notion of westward expansion.

"This road's place in history is much more than just a road west," Holdorf said. "It has to do with constitutional challenge and how it has affected important programs that still exist today."

She added that it was the first federally funded road built in the United States, which was initiated by an act of Congress that was signed by President Thomas Jefferson in 1806. She added that the decision to construct the road without amending the United States Constitution set a precedent that continues to impact several governmental decisions and programs.

"It's interesting because it was debated in Congress much like programs you shake your head about today," Holdorf said. "That very decision allowed the creation of other federally funded programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, with no constitutional amendment."

The constitutional history of the National Road has also inspired research and scholarship at the national level as well.

Holdorf said she and her colleagues work closely

with people and organizations from five other states through which the road traverses, which include Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and West Virginia.

One of the people with whom the organization has worked is Ted Sky, who works as a full-time lecturer for the Columbus School of Law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Sky said he began his research on the constitutional history of the road in 2001, some of which is highlighted in his book, "To Provide for the General Welfare: A History of the Federal Spending Power."

Sky explained that in 1822, President James Monroe delivered a memorandum to Congress regarding its constitutional authority to appropriate federal funds to maintain the National Road and other internal improvements. Sky added that the memo came after Monroe vetoed a bill that he believed gave the federal government jurisdiction over the road by imposing federal tolls.

"Monroe explained in the memorandum why he believed that Congress could appropriate funds for the building or repair of the road and other internal improvements, without a constitutional amendment, as long as it avoided the pitfalls of the bill he vetoed," Sky said.

He added that Monroe's memo concluded that what is commonly known as the General Welfare Clause was not limited by the specific powers given to Congress in the Constitution.

Sky said Monroe later signed legislation to appropriate funds to repair the National Road based on the conclusions reached in his memo.

Since then, Sky said, the Supreme Court cited the memo in a 1930s case that affirmed a broad reading of federal spending power. Later, Sky said the same interpretation was used by the Supreme Court to sustain the Social Security program.

"These precedents formed the constitutional basis for the enactment of federal programs in other areas," Sky said. "That interpretation permits Congress to appropriate funds for such programs as Social Security, Medicare, federal aid for interstate highways, and other forms of infrastructure investments."

He added that presidents John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson and James Madison also made important contributions to the constitutional history of the National Road.

Although he has not yet seen the slab, Sky said he feels it is a creative way to educate people about the significant history of the National Road and hopes it helps people to understand its place in American history.

"Preserving artifacts like the National Road slab and learning about its history help to increase our understanding of the magnificent heritage of the United States," Sky said. "It also helps us to appreciate the contributions of 19th-century statesmen, administrators and builders to the economic progress and population growth of the United States."

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