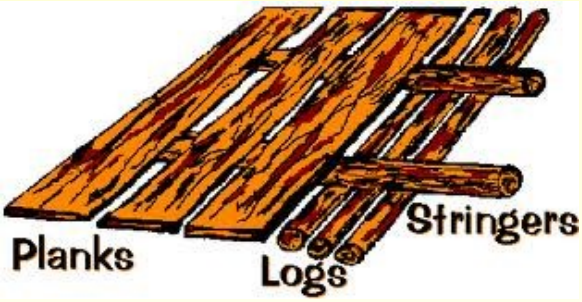
Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary
1823-2013

No. 9—Following the Beaten Path

Native American foot trails provided the first "roads" in our town. As settlers began to populate the area in the late 1700's, additional pathways allowed farmers to drive cattle to market, reach waterways, travel to another town, or simply visit a neighbor. Early town of Union minutes record the road districts that were set up along with the names of path masters residing on these dirt roads. A path master accepted the responsibility of maintaining the road, in exchange for not being taxed.

Initially River Road crossed the town from east to west and Choconut Creek Road was the primary north-south route. Early settlers established secondary roads off these primary routes. Although maps prior to 1855 show hand-drawn roads, it is unknown whether they existed at the time or were added to the map at a later date. The 1855 map was drawn to scale showing streams, roads, and buildings. Tracy Creek, Powderhouse, Bunn Hill, Jensen, Prentice, Knight, Foster, and Meeker as well as Jones, Echo and others were already established.



The more heavily traveled dirt roads were replaced by plank roads that eliminated the dust of summer and the mud and potholes of spring. Somewhat bumpy, they were an improvement over dirt until the boards began to warp. Vestal joined nearby communities who were already constructing plank roads by the mid-1800's. The Broome Republican of September 10, 1851 announced that enough stock had been sold in the Vestal Plank Road Company to allow the election of directors. At a meeting held at Lewis Wright's store on the 23rd of August, Samuel B. Foster, M.D., John LaGrange Jr. and Francis B. Smith, Esq. were elected inspectors. Don Ralyea, Esq., John Olmstead, Alfred Rounds, James B. LaGrange, and Caleb LaGrange were elected directors. The company was formed to construct a plank road from the Union-Vestal Bridge to the Pennsylvania border.

Demand increased for improved roads and more of them as automobiles replaced horses and wagons as a primary form of transportation during the second quarter of the 20th century. Macadam, a soil and stone aggregate, provided an excellent surface for narrow wheeled coaches. Concrete, used as early as 1894 in the U.S., provided a smooth surface for the new touring cars.

Roads across the country had names that caused confusion as they changed abruptly or overlapped each other. Auto clubs complained bitterly as they pushed for a better solution. A joint committee developed universal signs and a consistent numbering system that culminated in an October 1925 report to the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) outlining their recommendations. The report resulted in AASHO adopting the U.S. Numbered Highway System on November 11, 1926.

Locally, a 1926 ad for lots in the Rood Subdivision in Twin Orchards boasted they were easily accessible from Endicott and Binghamton on the new Binghamton – Vestal Concrete Highway, formerly River Road and sometimes referred to as Vestal Avenue. A 1939 County Highway map labels Vestal Road as No. 1613 from the city line to Main Street. West of Main Street the road was numbered 420 and 5215. The NYS DOT maintains a list of touring numbers which were assigned to some roads in addition to their designated number and name. For example, Choconut Creek Road was numbered 8331 and assigned touring number Route 26.

Jones Road before 1917 Passes in Front of the Jones Farmhouse.

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No. 9—Following the Beaten Path (continued)

Choconut Creek Road in Vestal Center.

The new concrete Vestal – Vestal Center Highway opened in 1930 connecting the center of Vestal to the Pennsylvania border. Pennsylvania continued the concrete road to Choconut, furnishing a new route to Montrose. In 1948 the Vestal – Vestal Center Highway was widened from 20 to 24 feet and resurfaced with asphalt.

The first two lanes of Vestal Parkway East, from the Binghamton City line to the five corners were built in 1941. In 1951 the two west bound lanes and the median were added. Vestal Parkway West was completed in 1949 to elevate traffic on Front Street. From the beginning the Parkway was a traffic nightmare. Speed, a lack of traffic lights, ubiquitous signs, and improper turn-arounds led to a growing number of accidents. During the 70's travel on the Parkway improved; more than one-third of the over 60 crossovers were eliminated, traffic lights were installed, turning lanes added, and speed modulated for the area. In spite of its problems, the 7.5 mile Parkway still contains some of Vestal's most valuable property.

If you've lived in Vestal for any length of time or perused any of the historical maps, you'll see how both road names and numbers have changed over the years. Secondary roads were often named for the largest land owner then changed as farms were sold. Road numbers also changed as new or existing roads came under the jurisdiction of the town, county, or state. Here are some examples of how Vestal's roads changed.

When the new Route 17 Expressway was planned, it meant the Vestal Parkway had to be renumbered. New York State considered calling the Parkway Route 188; so the area would have had Route 81, i 88, and Route 188... how complicated would that have been for travelers? Fortunately clearer heads prevailed and the Parkway was renumbered as Route 434. The Parkway derives its name from the style of roadway…a broad roadway divided by a planted median.

Between the Binghamton City line and Main Street, River Road was known at various times as Vestal Avenue, the Binghamton-Vestal Concrete Highway, the Binghamton-Vestal Highway, and Vestal Road. The road turned south at Main Street before continuing west to the Tioga County line. The portion west of Main Street was also River Road before becoming Front Street. As it crossed the D.L. & W. tracks it was known for a time as the Old Road. As it re-crossed the tracks it then switched to Owego Road. The 1969 Route 17 Expressway further changed the road configuration, turning the Old Road to Castle Gardens Road.

Although today's signs read Old Vestal Road, the official name is simply Vestal Road…the old was added to differentiate between the original Vestal Road and the new Binghamton-Vestal Highway, or Vestal Parkway. The adjective stuck even through most people do not realize the reason for the origin.

Here are some other name changes you may remember. Jones Road had three segments each with its own name; Jones, Fancher and Brimmer. Echo was Ensign and Steenburg. A portion of African Road was formerly Hotaling Road, Wilcox Road became Pierce Hill, portions of Jensen were Willis and Coughlin Roads, Carey Road changed to Freer and then became Brown Road.

Bunn Hill was the Vestal Center-Willow Point Road and a portion was the William Drum Road for a time. Sugar Creek became the Vestal Center-Binghamton Road before being renamed to Powderhouse Road. Clark Road was Rider and is now Prentice, and of course Pumphouse Road began as Ferry Road. Gardner Road was Pierson Hill Road. Glenwood was the Back Road to Vestal Center. Knight Road was a combination of Knight and Dean Road. Costley was Hill Road. Castleman was a combination of Castleman and Murphy Road. West Hill Road, formerly Center Hill Road, was called Church Street between Glenwood and Route 26. Over the years road names changed while other roads were eliminated due to construction or lack of use. The naming of roads in Vestal's many subdivisions is yet another story.

Additional information and sources for this article can be found at the Historian's office.

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