

A Brief History of Jacob's Ladder Trail
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On a September day in 1910, a crowd of people, reported to be 800, 2500 or 4000 by various sources, congregated on the summit of Morey Hill to celebrate a momentous advance in transportation – the completion of the first auto road over a mountain range. It was the dawn of the age of the automobile – the crossroads of the supremacy of horse-drawn and rail travel with the infancy of the trolley, motorcar, and airplane.

In an article describing the celebration in the *Valley Gleaner*, a newspaper in Lee, the writer asked himself how an “event held on a mountain top a dozen miles from anywhere, only accessible by a single highway, in a rainy day, no shelter within several miles, with no attraction of a popular nature, should prove to be a real success”, then provided the following answer:

“It is to be found in the supreme significance of the event, in the major importance of the idea to be celebrated. The breaking down the natural barrier between the east and the west, the building of a highway connecting the Connecticut and Housatonic river valleys, Springfield with Berkshire, and in the larger sense the cities of Boston and Albany, the creation of an interstate route, the unifying of the state by surmounting physical obstacles, all this is meant by the completion of this project. It is not alone in the material sense either, for bands of communication create bonds of human fellowship and the people of the state will henceforth know each other better because Jacob's Ladder has been conquered.”

Like with the railroad seventy years earlier, the Berkshire hills were the proving ground on which the efficacy of a new mode of travel was tested against gravity. Future mountain crossings would be grander and would carry travelers to loftier heights, but it was on these hills that the first victory was won – the victory against the skeptics.

In 1912, a trans-continental route was proposed by a group of small town businessmen in South Dakota. Their proposal became the Yellowstone Trail, which spanned the country from Plymouth, Massachusetts to Seattle, Washington. The Jacob's Ladder Trail was adopted as part of that road system. So, within a couple of years of its opening, the Jacob's Ladder Trail was part of another “first” - the first auto route across the Northern Tier of the US.

The 1920's were probably the heyday of Jacob's Ladder Trail tourism. Henry Ford had made the automobile accessible to the middle-class and they had embraced auto travel as an inexpensive form of recreation. Tourist inns and gift shops sprung up at the Morey Hill summit, Jacob's Well, Bonnie Rigg Corners, and elsewhere along the Trail.

The 1930's brought major changes to the road. Miles of it were moved and straightened, and bridges were replaced as projects of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA). Meanwhile, another “New Deal” program, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was creating many of the recreational assets we enjoy along the Trail today. As part of that program, both the Chester-Blandford and October Mountain State Forests were shaped. The existing forests on the state-owned lands were thinned, pruned and replanted, and fire- and pest-control measures were implemented. The tracts were also improved with roads, rustic shelters, and picnic areas.

By the post-World War II years, Jacob's Ladder Trail was a busy highway. It was the main east-west truck route between Boston and the states to the west. The mill-towns along the Trail were at the height of their productivity as paper, abrasives, quarried stone, and woolen products were churned out up and down the Westfield River and in Lee.

The Interstate Highway program initiated by the Dwight Eisenhower administration brought construction of a new road across Massachusetts. At least as early as 1948, a route had been contemplated to alleviate some the congestion along the now nearly half-century-old network of state roads, particularly in Boston. The Federal program gave the state needed financial assistance. Construction began on the Massachusetts Turnpike in 1955. The new four-lane road opened from the New York state line to Boston on May 15, 1957.

The effect on traffic along Jacob's Ladder Trail was immediate and drastic. Suddenly all through-traffic was siphoned off by the Turnpike, while the lack of an exit for the roughly 30-mile stretch from Lee to Westfield relegated the older road to local traffic. With the resulting isolation, the mills in the towns along the Trail began to falter.

The first to fail was the woolen mill in Huntington. The woolen mill had been a leading producer of blankets, but it suffered from the drop in demand from the military in the years after WWII. When the mill burned to the ground in the 1960's the owners decided not to rebuild.

The paper mills began to fail or move away. Again, the Huntington mill was the first to go. Among the Russell mills, the Westfield Paper Company disappeared first. The venerable Strathmore Paper Company was bought out by International Paper and the operation was moved to Ohio in the 1990's. Texon Paper Company continues to hold on in the Crescent Mills hamlet of Russell.

The Cortland Abrasives Company plant in Chester burned spectacularly in the 1980's, bringing an end to that business. A small vestige of the once-thriving abrasives industry continues to operate out of a building on Middlefield Street. The Chester Granite Company – actually located in Otis – continues to do a good business providing granite curbstones, among other granite products. However, any connection to Chester, other than the name, is lost - the Becket & Chester Railroad that once delivered quarried stone to the stonecutting facilities and freight trains in Chester is long gone, as are the cutting sheds and freight sidings. These and many other remnants of Chester's industrial past lie decaying in the woods with maturing trees growing up around and through them.

The towns along most of the length of the Trail are now predominantly bedroom communities for the cities of Westfield, Pittsfield, Northampton, and Springfield. Becket has also attracted a large population of second-home owners. While the decline of industry that resulted from the creation of the Turnpike has created some fiscal challenges, it has also created some benefits. The lack of development pressure has almost accidentally preserved much of the area. While the rest of the state has seen an explosion in population and development, the Jacob's Ladder Trail corridor has almost regressed - a reminder of Massachusetts in a simpler time.

In 1991, the federal government passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which provided funding for many transportation-related projects. One of the programs spawned by ISTEA was the Scenic Byways Program – a national grass-roots collaborative effort established to help recognize, preserve and enhance selected roads throughout the United States. Locally, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) and the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) joined forces to re-establish the Jacob's Ladder Trail as a scenic byway.

The name Jacob's Ladder Trail had faded into insignificance during the road's years of decline. The road was still remembered by that name by many of the "old-timers" of the area, but younger residents were unaware or disinterested in the road's history, and often confused by its quaint moniker.

Under the leadership of PVPC and BRPC, and with the partnership of MassHighway (now MassDOT) – the modern-day Massachusetts Highway Commission – the Jacob’s Ladder Scenic Byway Advisory Board (JLT) was formed in 1992. Since then, JLT has successfully applied for grants of hundreds of thousands of dollars to enhance, preserve, and interpret the qualities that make the Jacob’s Ladder Trail and the towns along its length special.

The members of the JLT advisory board include citizen representatives of the five towns and the business community, representatives of the two RPAs – PVPC and BRPC – and a liaison from MassHighway. Since the inception of the modern incarnation of Jacob’s Ladder Trail, four more scenic byways have been recognized in Western Massachusetts: the Connecticut River Byway, the Mount Greylock Scenic Byway, the Mohawk Trail Scenic Byway, and the Rt. 112 Scenic Byway.

The advisory boards of the various scenic byways, through our RPA representatives, have formed a loose collaboration in the belief that we can be more successful as allies than as competitors. The roadways we have adopted encompass the entire western third of the state and, with the exception of gaps between Lenox and Lanesborough, and Westfield and South Hadley form a continuous network of connected scenic byways.

In celebration of the centennial of Jacob’s Ladder Trail, and in tribute to its dedication 100 years ago, we are placing a stone monument at the site of the cairn. Fittingly, the stone comes from the Chester Granite Company, who generously donated it.