

What is Jacob's Ladder?

By Steve Hamlin

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Jacob's Ladder was a section of the Becket Turnpike that was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ironically, the original Jacob's Ladder was discontinued with the building of the new state highway that was named in honor of it.

It was an extremely steep road whether the traveler was approaching from the east or the west. It climbed in a nearly straight line over the summit of Becket Mountain (AKA Morey Hill) from a point very near the end of what is now Gentian Hollow Road, then descended to approximately opposite the end of the road into what is today called Sherwood Greens on the west side of the summit.

In her book, *Growing Up on Jacob's Ladder*, Shirley Phelps Brusco described the road:

“It was said that the dirt road looked like a ladder as there were rows of dirt going across the road to stop the rain from washing it out and on the sides of the road were clearings for horses and oxen to rest. Hence the name Jacobs Ladder.”

According to a *Berkshire Gleaner* article from September 21, 1910, it was Cortlandt Field Bishop who popularized the name Jacob's Ladder, having heard the name applied to the road by a local resident.

On the east side of the summit, the road climbed at a grade of 17 percent or more through soil that turned to sticky mud at the slightest provocation. On the west, the grade was 22 percent. By contrast, the worst roads around today – Becket Road in Lee, Round Hill Road in Chester, or Dickinson Hill in Russell, for example – are more on the order of 15 percent at their worst.

The ditches that paralleled the narrow road on either side added to the considerable challenge that the steepness of the west side presented. Many an early traveler became much more acquainted with those ditches than they ever intended to, courtesy of an unfortunately placed rock or an over-application of the brakes that caused a skid.

In July, 1906, the Boston Globe reported on a Col. and Mrs. Pfaff who, along with their traveling companions, were thrown from their car while descending the west side of Jacob's Ladder, “when their touring car struck a rock in the highway and turned the machine into an embankment.”

It was much more common to get stuck in the mud of the eastern approach, though.

In October, 1903, the New York Times reported that Cortlandt Field Bishop of New York and Lenox, “who has been the leader in the investigation of Jacob's Ladder, ... was caught in the quagmire last evening while returning from Amherst...” in “a soft portion of steep highway on Becket Mountain, where it was alleged that a trap was set for automobiles by clay placed on the highway...” Bishop was already at work trying to get a new road built to replace Jacob's Ladder, having raised \$600 towards the effort according to the article.

A Boston Globe article from November 1904 reported that the hill had become known as “Three-Dollar Hill” among motorists, the typical fee charged by the local farmers to have a car hauled out of the mud by a team of horses or yoke of oxen. The article goes on to state that “As many as four heavy cars have become mired in the clay deposit simultaneously.” Hauling wealthy, stranded motorists out of the mud must have been far more lucrative than farming.

Jacob’s Ladder was known far and wide as a hazard to motorists. In 1904, the national magazine *The Horseless Age* published a notice that the Automobile Club of America proposed “to post signs in Blandford and Becket, Mass., warning automobilists against taking the “Jacob’s Ladder” route (via Becket’s Hill) from Springfield to the Berkshires and to go instead by way of Becket Station and East Otis.”

At least as early as 1904, there were plans for a better road over the Berkshires to connect Springfield and the Connecticut River valley with Pittsfield and beyond, but the preferred route was far from certain. The 1904 Globe article listed the choices:

“There are four routes. One is via Northampton and Cummington, where an altitude of 2045 feet is reached. The way is circuitous and dangerous. Another is from Huntington on the Westfield river, over Peru hill, a distance of 55 miles, and a climb of 2080 feet above the sea. A third takes in the famous “Jacob’s ladder.” The fourth and approved route of the Automobile club of America is through Russell on the Westfield river to Blandford, Otis and East Lee. This run is of 54 miles between Springfield and Pittsfield over an elevation of 1840 feet.”

“The most sought and probably the most difficult ascent for an automobile over a through county road in Massachusetts today is the climb from the Westfield river to the top of “Jacob’s ladder.” The height is 1810 feet from sea level.”

In December of 1904, *The Horseless Age* reported that “The Selectmen of Becket, Mass. have agreed to permit Cortland F. Bishop to expend the money he has raised by private subscription for repairs to Jacob’s Ladder, the road over Becket Mountain, which for some time has been practically impassable to automobiles.”

By 1908, the options had been narrowed down to just two. Either one would follow the current route along Walker Brook to Bonnie Rigg Corners. There, the choices became either northwest through Washington, Hinsdale and Dalton, or due west around Jacob’s Ladder via a cutoff to Lee.

The hoteliers of Pittsfield, and particularly Dalton, favored the more northerly route, but Lenox, Lee and Stockbridge argued for an improved route over Becket Mountain, mostly along the same Becket Turnpike that Jacob’s Ladder was a part of. In January, 1910, the Boston Globe reported that opponents to the Jacob’s Ladder cutoff predicted that it would cost \$200,000 to build a road around the “tourist’s terror.”

State engineers dismissed that prediction and the road we know was built at a cost of less than half of the opponents’ prediction. The “tourist’s terror” was tamed, with the precipitous grades reduced to less than 7 percent – a grade that cars of the period could conquer, reportedly without down-shifting.

The More Hill cutoff was completed and opened to motorists around the end of 1909. The rest of the new road into Lee was finished in 1910. Today, the original Jacob’s Ladder, the stretch of road that struck fear in the hearts of early motorists, has been reclaimed by the forest. Having vanquished the beast, its conquerors memorialized the road by naming its replacement in its honor.