



300 Years of History Along Route 206



A driver crosses the new bridge over Shipetaukin Creek in 1934.

[Note: Today's US-206 through Lawrence has had many names over the years. For the sake of clarity, the author has chosen to refer to it as "US-206" throughout.]

Today's US-206 through Lawrence follows the route of the Lenape Assunpink Trail. There is no evidence that local Native Americans actually used that name, but we do know that the trail terminated at a large Lenape settlement on the Delaware River between Trenton and Bordentown.

One of the earliest written accounts of the route came from two Dutchmen, Dankers and Sluyter, who traveled from New York to Virginia and back. When they made their journey in 1679-1680, there were already ferries running across the Delaware at Trenton and the Raritan at New Brunswick.

But the road that connected the ferries at New Brunswick and Trenton, by their account, was not much more than a footpath that could accommodate travelers moving in single file. These footpaths eventually became bridle paths and the bridle paths eventually became wagon roads, mostly through use rather than through planned improvements.

A few years after Dankers and Sluyter, the operator of the New Brunswick ferry, John Inian, reported that he had built a road to the Falls of the Delaware "at a considerable expense" and had shortened the distance by about six miles.

The town of Maidenhead came into being in 1697, the same year that saw the first mention of US-206 in public records. The court in Burlington ordered the town to charge twelve men



LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

The Complete Official Road Guide to the Lincoln Highway

New Jersey

PRINCETON

N.Y. S.F. Pop. 5,136. Alt. 217 feet. Mercer County.
52 3279 Four hotels, 4 garages. Route marked through city and county, signs at city limits. Three banks, 1 railroad, 1 express company, 3 telephone companies, 3 newspapers, 3 public schools, electric lights, trolley and water works.
5 Princeton University, 1,599 students; (founded 1746). Home and burial place of the late President Grover Cleveland. For years the home of President Wilson, who was President of the University. Carnegie Lake, the largest artificial lake in the world, donated by Andrew Carnegie.

LAWRENCEVILLE

N.Y. S.F. Pop. 207. Alt. 123 feet. Mercer County.
57 3274 One hotel, 2 garages, 2 railroads, 10 general business places, 2 express companies, 1 telephone company, 1 newspaper, 3 public schools, electric lights, trolley and water works.
6 Lawrenceville Academy is one of the most famous schools for boys in the United States.

TRENTON

N.Y. S.F. Pop. 106,831. Alt. 33 feet. State Capital. County seat, Mercer County. On the Delaware River. Leading manufacturing city.
63 3268

The legendary Lincoln Highway passed through Lawrence on its way from New York to San Francisco.

with laying out a road from the Province Line to the Assunpink Creek. The road was to begin at "York's Old Road," probably a reference to the road that John Inian of New Brunswick had laid out ten years earlier.

US-206 was one of two major roads that competed for the cross-Jersey traffic during colonial times. It was sometimes called the Upper Road. Its competitor, the Lower Road, connected Perth Amboy with Burlington and roughly corresponds with today's US-130.

The great advantages of US-206 were geographic: it was shorter, generally stayed on higher ground, and the ferry crossings at each end were shorter. The great advantage of the Lower Road was political. East Jersey had its capital at Perth Amboy and West Jersey at Burlington, so the Lower Road connected the two most politically important cities in the Jerseys.

In the early years of the 18th century the Lower Road was much more active. In 1704 the Provincial legislature passed a public highways act that did not even mention the Upper Road. In 1717, however, the Upper Road was finally acknowledged in a revised highway act. By 1761 the Upper Road was sufficiently important that the legislature designated it as one of three roads in the province that were to have their routes remain unchanged.

The primary arena of competition was in providing stage service for passengers traveling between New York and Philadelphia. By the late 1720s there were stages running regularly on the Lower Road. The first known stage line on US-206 went into service in 1738. It ran between Trenton and New Brunswick twice each week during the summer.

As the roads gradually improved and passenger volume grew, the time needed to make the trip declined. New York to Philadelphia was a three-day journey in the first half of the 18th century, but in 1783, after the Revolution, a stage operator advertised that he could get you from Newark to Philly in one day.

US-206 is one of the few colonial roads to have the distinction of having been traveled by each of the major armies of the Revolution: Washington's Continentals, British regulars, Hessians, and the French.

After a series of defeats in and around New York, in November 1776 Washington led his army in retreat across New Jersey. The British regulars

under General Cornwallis were in hot pursuit, as were Hessians under Colonel von Donop.

By the time they reached Maidenhead, Cornwallis was only a day behind Washington. Washington passed down US-206 with about 4,000 men on December 7th and Cornwallis followed the next day with an army of about 16,000. When Washington reached Trenton, he famously rounded up all of the boats up and down the Delaware River and moved them to the Pennsylvania side so that Cornwallis could not follow him across.

On December 31st, 1776, Washington was in Trenton and the British were building their forces in Princeton. Washington sent an advance party of 1,000 men up US-206 and stationed them at Shipetaukin Creek, or what was then called Eight Mile Run. British scouting parties discovered them early on New Year's Day and troops were dispatched to clear the road. An intense skirmish occupied most of the morning. The Americans fought so vigorously that the British had to call up reinforcements in order to accomplish their mission. Total casualties were 140, mostly on the British side.

The following day, January 2nd, the British marched on Trenton via US-206 and Maidenhead's most famous Revolutionary War battle took place, the memorable delaying action by the Pennsylvania Riflemen under the command of Colonel Edward Hand. They skirmished at Five Mile Run, and then fell back to Shabakunk Creek where there ensued a lengthy afternoon battle. As a result, Cornwallis reached Trenton late in the day and did not have enough daylight to dislodge Washington from the opposite bank of the Assunpink Creek. Washington was then able to slip away overnight and successfully attack the garrison at Princeton the following morning.

The fourth army of the Revolution to pass through was French. In 1781, Count Rochambeau and his men were called to join Washington's forces in a march to Yorktown. The French and the Continentals joined up north of Princeton and marched down US-206 together through Trenton to Philadelphia.

With the end of the war and the return of commerce and unrestricted travel, US-206 entered one of its busiest and most prominent periods. When the Confederation Congress met in Princeton for several months in 1783 it is likely that most of the Founding Fathers passed through Maidenhead on US-206. George Washington passed through Maidenhead again in April of 1789 on his way from Virginia to his first inauguration in New York.

In the early 19th century, America was about to undergo a transportation revolution, and the role of roads would never be the same. The 50-year supremacy of US-206 as a thoroughfare between New York and Philadelphia would be undone by three new challenges.

The first of these were turnpikes, with improvements and maintenance supported directly by user tolls. The turnpike with the greatest impact on US-206 was chartered in 1804 as the Trenton-New Brunswick Straight Turnpike Company. This is today's Brunswick Pike, US-1. In 1808 the first stage lines began using the turnpike and almost immediately all of the through traffic abandoned US-206.

The second major challenge was the railroad. In 1833 the John Bull locomotive began service between Bordentown and South Amboy. Within a few decades railroads crisscrossed the state and put the long-distance stagecoaches out of business. The third challenge came in 1834 with the opening of the D&R Canal. One canal boat could carry as much freight as a four-horse wagon. From that point on, US-206 was used only for local traffic.

During that period, the roads in Lawrence were financially supported by the citizens of Lawrence. Able-bodied men were expected either to spend a few days a year working on the roads themselves or to pay a tax in lieu



Main Street in Lawrenceville was unpaved before the automobile. The trolley from Trenton to Princeton ran alongside.

of their labor. The cost of construction was borne largely by the property owners along the road.

Starting in the 1880s, a bicycle craze swept the US, and cyclists wanted better roads. In 1892 a group of cyclists founded the National League for Good Roads and began publishing Good Roads magazine. Farmers were also looking for better roads to improve their access to markets.

In 1891 New Jersey became the first state to provide state funding for road construction. The state would pay one-third of the cost of road improvements, with property owners along the road paying ten percent and the counties the balance.

In 1894 Mercer County began a program of road improvement. The macadam road from Trenton to Lawrenceville was completed that year, and in November 1895 the Freeholders awarded the contract for the Lawrenceville to Princeton segment. This was technically more challenging because of the grades and stream crossings at Shipetaukin Creek and Stony Brook.

By the turn of the 20th century US-206 was part of a statewide network of 300 miles of improved roads. New Jersey was the envy of the nation and a leader in the financing and planning of road improvements.

In 1913 Carl Fischer of Indianapolis envisioned the idea of a continuous automobile highway stretching from New York to San Francisco. This became the legendary Lincoln Highway and, as the best route from New York to Philadelphia, US-206 became the Lincoln Highway's first leg.

The Lincoln Highway convinced government officials to invest in roads. Perhaps as a result of its success, as an entity it ceased operation in 1927. From that point forward, state and federal governments took the lead role in defining what the American road network would look like.

In 1916 the New Jersey legislature passed the Egan Road Act, which introduced a new system of numbering the most important roads in the state, provided a funding mechanism of bonds, and established a state highway commission. Fifteen roads were numbered and ours was given NJ-13. That same year in Washington, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Highway Act, providing \$75 million to be given to the states over a five year period.

By 1923 the leading edge of that money had found its way to Lawrence to pave our section of the Lincoln Highway, essentially creating the road we know today. Most of the paving was straightforward, but there was a big engineering job at Shipetaukin Creek, where the road and the creek were to be realigned and a new bridge built. At 59 feet, this remains the longest bridge in Lawrence.

The new national highway system went into effect in 1925, which required the old Lincoln Highway signs to come down. Its route through New Jersey was given a new Federal highway number: US-1. For a brief period our US-206 was known as US-1.

By 1927 the state numbering system was getting unwieldy, so all state roads were renumbered. NJ-13 became NJ-27, the number it retains today from Princeton to New Brunswick. Brunswick Pike was given NJ-26, but once it became a concrete paved four-lane road, the US-1 designation moved over there. At around the same time, 206 came into service as a number, following essentially the same route that it does today.

The last piece of what we would today recognize as the modern US-206 came in 1930 with the creation of the Brunswick Circle to handle the increasing traffic at the Trenton-Lawrence border. If you had driven US-206 in the 1930s you would see a road laid out very much like the one we drive

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today, with the exception of the I-95 interchange.

In 1953 the state highway commission decided that no road would be allowed to have both US and NJ highway numbers, so the southern terminus of NJ-27 was set at the end of Nassau Street in Princeton and the road continued into Lawrence strictly as US-206. By that time, of course, US-206 had lost its status as the major north-south thoroughfare. That honor belonged to US-1, just as it does today.

So history repeated itself. In late colonial times and the early years of the republic, US-206—The Upper Road, the King's Highway—was the major north-south route. Then the Brunswick Turnpike was built and US-206 was demoted. However, in the early years of the automotive age, US-206 became the great Lincoln Highway and once again the major north-south road. But once paved, the Brunswick Pike, with its straight alignment and its wide right of way, again took over as the primary thoroughfare.



Image courtesy of Firestone Library, Princeton University.

The King's Highway from Trenton to Princeton and beyond was surveyed by John Dalley in 1762.

