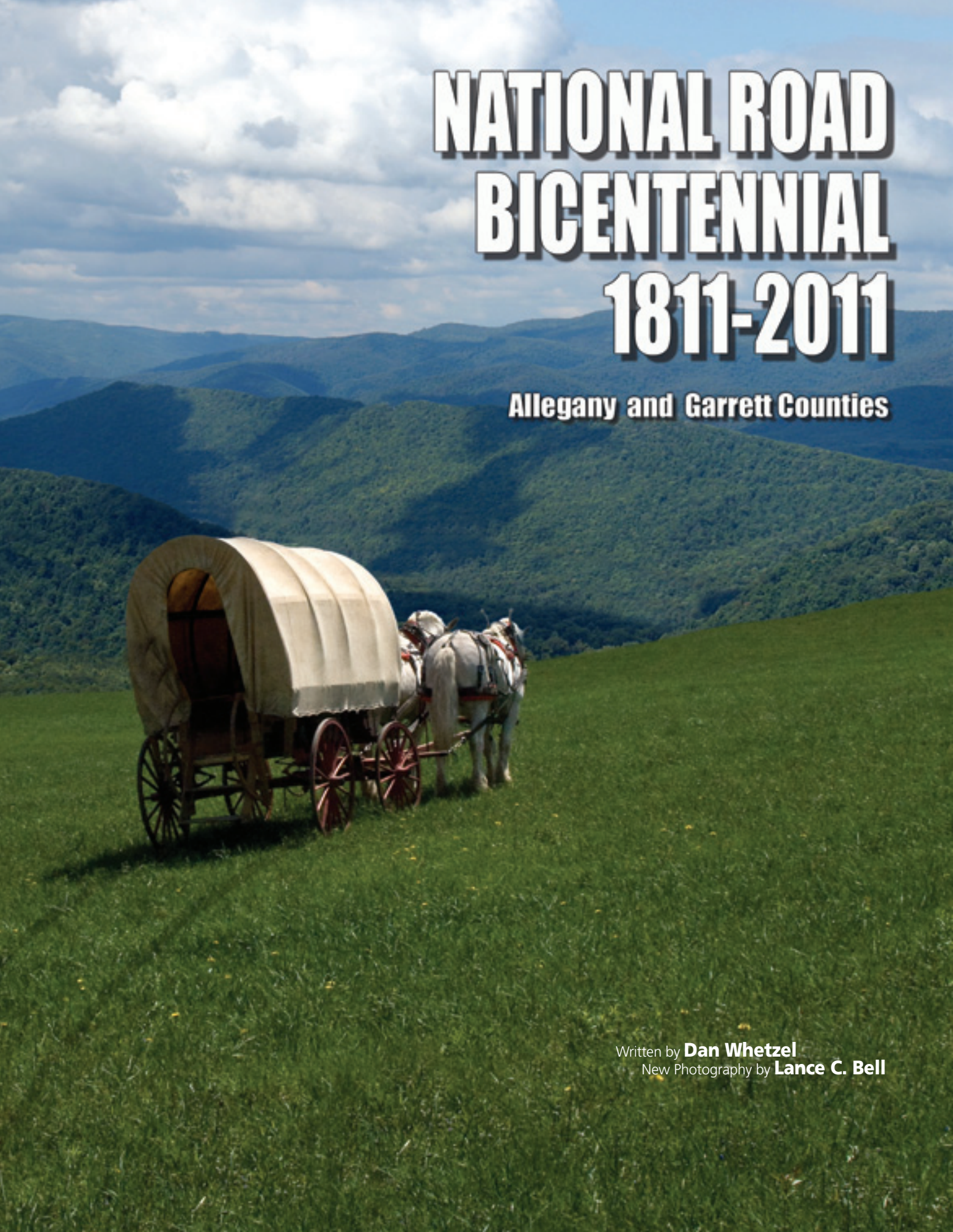


Written by **Dan Whetzel**
New Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

Christopher Gist (portrayed by Bob Bantz), was an American frontiersman, commissioned by the Ohio Company to explore their western lands. He accompanied George Washington in 1753–54 on his historic trip to order the French out of the Ohio Valley and on the journey twice saved Washington's life. On Gen. Edward Braddock's expedition (1755) against Fort Duquesne, Gist served as a guide. A light tint in this photo shows the original Colonial trail sunken pathway. At this point it parallels the National Road (Rt. 40), as well as Interstate 68 between Cumberland and LaVale, MD.

The small town of Cumberland, Maryland, became a national news story when President Thomas Jefferson signed an act of Congress to lay out the National Road, America's first federally funded highway. The National Road would eventually stretch from western Maryland to Vandalia, Illinois, and provide a major corridor for westward expansion during the nineteenth century. Cumberland became a gateway to the west and a major transportation center as thousands of travelers made their way through town to link with the corridor that would provide the most convenient way to move their goods. Coaches carrying passengers and freight, small wagons full of household goods, and hardy individuals on foot continued to use the road until railroad transportation reduced traffic. The National Road influenced the development of the United States and no other American highway equals it in political and economic importance. Once again the National Highway is newsworthy as it celebrates 200 years of service to western Maryland and the United States. Such a celebration is cause for reflection on the origins of the road and its route through the city of Cumberland and western Maryland.

The National Road was one of several transportation corridors that literally placed western Maryland on time period maps during the nineteenth century. Railroads, highways, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal all had a significant presence in western Maryland in the 1800s, but it was a series of commercial and military events decades earlier that established the area as a transportation center.

European commercial interest in western Maryland can be traced to entrepreneurs who established themselves in lands formerly occupied by the Shawnee tribe. In 1749, a group of Virginians received a land grant from the King of England to settle the Ohio country within seven years; the men called their organization the Ohio Company. Christopher Gist, renowned frontiersman and surveyor, was dispatched to present day western Maryland to choose a site for a trading post while Colonel Thomas Cresap,

pioneer and early settler, was employed "to lay out and mark a road from Cumberland to Pittsburgh," thus establishing an important link to the Ohio territories and facilitating English control of the western region. In 1750, the Ohio Company built a storehouse on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River in Ridgeley, West Virginia, at the confluence of Will's Creek; this was the first European commercial establishment in the Cumberland area.

In 1751, Cresap and Gist were aided by Nemacolin, a friendly Delaware Indian, who directed the frontiersmen along a centuries old path leading over Haystack Mountain and points westward toward Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although the path would have been no more than a few feet wide, Cresap and Gist certainly welcomed a trail through the wilderness as they cleared logs and other obstructions to make it suitable for pack horses. The enhanced Nemacolin's Path was the first rudimentary road heading west from Cumberland.

Frontiersman, D. Gordon Oester, an admired figure at the Springs Folk Festival (Springs, PA), will be sadly missed at the festival this year. He passed away in July 2010.

Nemacolin's Path became a political and military corridor as France and England escalated tensions in the Ohio Valley during 1753. Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie dispatched Colonel George Washington to warn the French commander in Pittsburgh to leave the valley, a region claimed by England. In November, 1753, Washington enlisted the services of Gist and several others as they walked Nemacolin's Path into Pennsylvania carrying Dinwiddie's message to French Commander Saint Pierre. After being rebuffed by the commander, Washington returned via Nemacolin's Path to the Ohio Company store house at Will's Creek before reporting to Dinwiddie in Virginia.

Not accepting the rejection lightly, Governor Dinwiddie enlisted volunteers under Colonel Joshua Fry's command for the purpose of persuading the French to leave the Ohio Valley. George Washington served as second in command and arrived at Will's Creek in April 1754. Colonel Fry was fatally injured after being thrown from his horse at a location near the storehouse, thus leading to Washington's first military command. Washington once again marched over Haystack Mountain into Pennsylvania where his men skirmished with French forces near Uniontown, killing the French commander. This incident, known as Jumonville (after the French commander's name), is considered to be the opening shot of the French and Indian War. No less a philosopher and historian than Voltaire stated: "A cannon shot fired in the woods of America set all Europe in a blaze."

As the French and English headed toward full scale war, General Edward Braddock was ordered to Will's Creek (and then Pittsburgh) for the purpose of projecting English military influence into the Ohio Valley. In preparation for the impending conflict, the small Will's Creek storehouse was augmented by a larger military structure on the opposite side of the Potomac River built during the winter of 1754-1755 that became known as Fort Cumberland.

When General Braddock arrived at Fort Cumberland in 1755 he was faced with daunting logistical problems. Traveling westward from Cumberland would be a difficult task because Nemacolin's Trail, although previously widened by Washington's men, was steep, rugged, and not suitable for heavy artillery and goods carried by wagons. Six hundred men wielding axes were assigned the task of enlarging the trail to a width of 12 feet. A member of Braddock's expedition recorded the following incident upon completion of the upgraded trail:

French soldiers during a reenactment of the French and Indian War.

"The detachment of six hundred men commanded by Major Chapman marched the 30th day of May at daybreak, and it was night before the whole baggage had got over a mountain about two miles from the camp. The ascent and descent were almost a perpendicular rock; three wagons were entirely destroyed…and many more extremely shattered."

"The General reconnoitered this mountain and determined to set the engineers and three hundred more men at work upon it as he thought it impassable by Howitzers."

One of General Braddock's officers is credited with recommending an alternative road be constructed through the Narrows at Will's Creek that would provide for easier movement of wagons. One hundred men completed work through the gap in two days, as a road was cut, dug, and blasted between Will's Creek and the rock ledges. Subsequently, the bulk of Braddock's Army marched from Fort Cumberland through the Narrows on its trek toward Pittsburgh. An impressive array of military hardware passed through the gap on June 8-9, 1755, including: 200 wagons, 1,500 pack horses, a train of artillery, and 2,100 men.

Despite General Braddock's confidence, his force suffered defeat on July 9, 1755, at Braddock's Field, having been forced into a guerilla style battle for which he and his troops were unsuited. Remnants of his shattered force returned to Fort Cumberland weeks later amid much disorder; the general died after the battle and was buried near Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

Even though Braddock's men blazed the Narrow's route in 1755, it was apparently abandoned thereafter. Increasing settlement around Fort Cumberland following the French and Indian War meant the original Nemacolin-Cresap-Gist-Washington-Braddock military alignment over Haystack Mountain was the preferred western route into Pennsylvania. Washington made additional trips over the road, as did Meriwether Lewis in 1803 on the first leg of his journey to the Pacific Ocean.

At some point in time after the French and Indian War, the military route over Haystack Mountain was augmented by a second road that could be termed colonial. It is likely that both Braddock's military road and the unnamed

Wrought Iron, hand forged artifacts recovered along Braddock's Trail/Colonial Road/National Road.

1. Chain, wagon wheel spikes and pins, horseshoe nails, and a broken bolt.
2. Three horse bits, horseshoes, wagon tongue support, large wagon staple and a chain lock.
3. Hammer head, large tent spikes, carriage step, musket trigger guard, broken musket barrel and belt buckles.
4. Broken kettle and kettle leg, Colonial spoon (Copper), possibly a military fork, and a hand iron.
5. Cannon balls.

colonial road served travelers concurrently. The later road was not documented like the earlier and more famous route, but did exist, and was likely constructed and maintained by residents on an as needed basis. The locations of Braddock's military alignment and colonial road over Haystack Mountain have been debated over the years and are still subject to discussion. Several written accounts of Braddock's Road through Cumberland are inaccurate but have been repeated many times so as to become historical fact. The colonial road is rarely noted at all. An examination of the historical record and artifacts found along both routes provides convincing evidence of their locations.

George Washington's manuscript sketch of Fort Cumberland and surrounding area clearly notes his western route headed in the direction of present day Fayette Street. A second map drawn by Christopher Gist marks the same path from the fort toward Haystack Mountain. Neither map displays marks along present day Greene Street.

John Kennedy Lacock conducted a survey of Braddock's Road in 1908 and noted that no trace of it existed from the fort site to Haystack. While Lacock believed that Greene Street was the likely route, he also concluded that Sulphur Spring Hollow (Fayette Street) could have been used to reach the eastern slope of the mountain.

Evidence points to a Fayette Street alignment for the Braddock military route from Fort Cumberland. The unnamed colonial road ran parallel to the military road but further south and at a lower elevation; the roads were typically separated by 500 to 1,000 feet.

Allegany County resident and historian, Bob Bantz, has become one of the foremost authorities on the French and Indian War time period in the region, and his work encompasses decades of research and field work. His collection of artifacts found along the northern route provides evidence of military operations from the French and Indian War time period. Cannon balls, musket balls, musket parts, military utensils, and an array of other more common items found along the northern course correspond to Washington and Gist's maps. Artifacts located along the southern colonial road provide evidence of domestic goods but not military hardware. Importantly, the sunken pathways of both roads are still visible in a few sections which provide additional evidence of their directions. The most interesting view of both roads is where they intersect near LaVale. The colonial road's gentle descent contrasts sharply with Nemacolin-Cresap-Gist-Washington-Braddock's alignment, thereby providing an obvious and visible reason for the newer road's existence.

Westward expansion after the French and Indian War (1756-1763) and Revolutionary War (1775-1783) placed demands on a rudimentary road system that stretched along the eastern seaboard to the Appalachian Mountains. Recognizing the need for road improvements that would facilitate commerce and bind western territories with eastern population centers, the United States Congress acted to appropriate money for a National Road. Cumberland was recognized as a logical starting point to begin the federal projects because of its connection to the port of Baltimore and infrastructure established in an east-west direction during previous decades of publicized military campaigns.

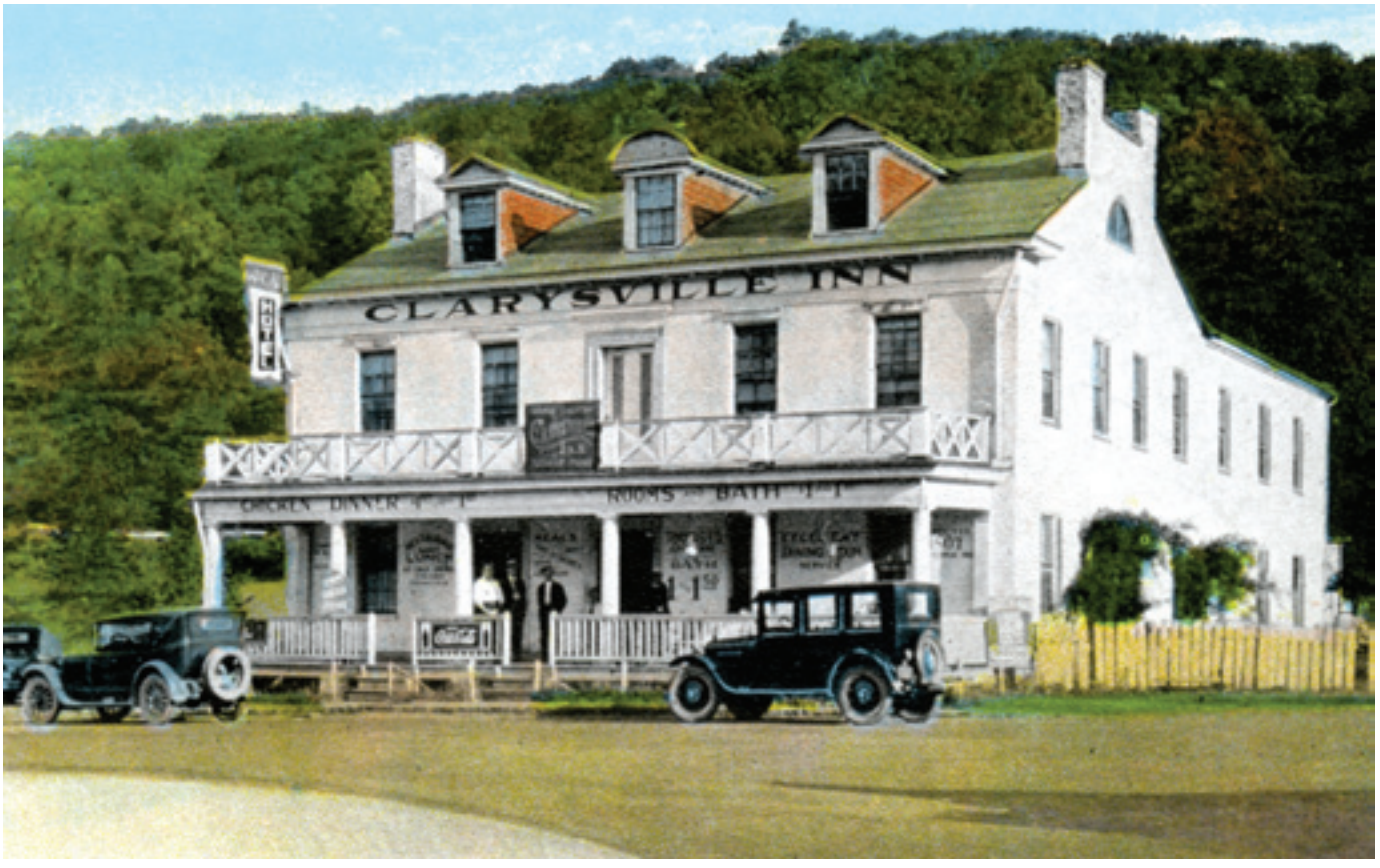
While preliminary paper work may have followed President Jefferson's authorization of the congressional act in 1806, actual road building did not begin until 1811 when a

contract was awarded for the first ten-mile section. Work began at "the corner of Lot No. 1 in Cumberland near the center of the confluence of Will's Creek and the North Branch of the Potomac River" and proceeded westward along the alignment of present day Greene Street to the eastern slope of Haystack Mountain. The stone marker commemorating the starting point was moved by engineers in 1908 and placed near Riverside Park. Today, the small monument is inconspicuously located within a traffic island on Greene Street near Washington's Headquarters.

Plans called for a 32 foot wide road surface area and a 20 foot proper road bed that was to have a maximum grade of five degrees. A stone base of 18 inches comprised the road center which tapered to 12 inches on both sides. Stones were to be uniform in size and were made to pass through a 7-inch ring for the road base while smaller ones were broken and passed through a three inch ring for surface use. Backbreaking work required road gangs to hammer stones to the required size, pull stumps, and level the road bed with picks, shovels, rakes, and mattocks. Wages were valued according to task and skill levels. On the low end of the pay scale workers received $6.00 per month while a few skilled laborers commanded $1.00 per day.

Top: A 1907 photo of a Toll House on the National Road near LaVale, MD, courtesy of Al Feldstein.

Bottom: Today the Toll House has been restored and can be seen along the National Road on Rt. 40, just west of LaVale.



Clarysville Inn along the National Road between LaVale and Frostburg, Maryland. Photo courtesy of Al Feldstein.

The original National Road over Haystack Mountain constructed in 1811-1812 paralleled both the Nemacolin-Cresap-Gist-Washington-Braddock alignment and the colonial road. The National Road section over the mountain was named to honor General Braddock, thereby causing some confusion over where his original road was located. At no point in the city of Cumberland or on Haystack Mountain did the National Road (present day Braddock Road) follow Braddock's original military path or the colonial alignment. Three parallel roads, typically separated by more than a thousand feet and decades of time, crossed the mountain and descended to LaVale. After exiting LaVale, the National Road generally followed Braddock's course through Garrett County into Pennsylvania.

The official Braddock Road marker at Dingle Circle commemorating the general's military campaign is more than 1,000 feet from where he actually ascended the eastern slope of Haystack Mountain on the way to Fort Duquesne, Pittsburgh.

When the military and the colonial roads ceased being used is unknown, but it could be speculated that the building of a hard surface National Road in 1811-1812 would have caused the former corridors to fall into disrepair.

Not until 1833, after the steeper way over Haystack Mountain had been used for two decades, was the National Road out of Cumberland re-routed through North Mechanic Street to enter the Narrows. The longer but much easier route required the building of a substantial stone bridge across Will's Creek; evidence of the abutments may still be viewed at the location. After exiting the Narrows, the road continued toward a toll house constructed in 1836, the only one still standing in the state of Maryland and a tourist attraction.

The National Highway has made history for two hundred years and is ready to pause and celebrate. Dave Umling, city of Cumberland planner, has been busy coordinating a bicentennial commemorative events schedule for May, 2011, and beyond that will feature a parade in downtown Cumberland, a time capsule ceremony, special museum exhibits, train rides, bus tours, art exhibits, a fireworks display, and musical performances. For a complete listing of the National Road Bicentennial events, contact Dave Umling at 301-759-6503.

The Casselman Bridge is located within a four acre Maryland State Park along United States Route 40 just east of Grantsville, Maryland. When completed in 1813, it was the largest single span stone arch bridge in the United States. The Casselman Bridge served travelers on the National Road from 1813 to 1933 when a second span was constructed to withstand the increased use of vehicles. The original bridge remains open to pedestrians.

The Casselman Inn (above), built in 1824, was one of numerous inns along the National Road to serve stage coaches, covered wagons, drovers and riders. It is located one-half mile west of the Casselman Bridge at 113 Main Street, Grantsville, MD. Today, it remains an inn with a restaurant open Mon – Sat.

The author would like to express appreciation to Bob Bantz for his time and expertise in preparation of this article.

The Editor and staff would like to thank Charlie Glover and his granddaughter Madison Glover (right) for their help with wagon and horse photos for this story.