

High Point and Transportation
Talk given by Barbara E. Taylor, President
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Transportation is integral to the formation of almost every town. Many of the first towns in our country were located on water: whether they were on the coast and had a port that allowed commerce to flow in and out, or on a river that facilitated the transfer of goods.

High Point is not on the coast, does not have a port, nor is it founded on a river. Yet, one of the most important re-occurring themes in the development of High Point is transportation. From buses and buggies, trolleys and trains, to working boats and pleasure boats, High Point has had it all. What better place to hold the first meeting of the NC Transportation Hall of Fame?

Before High Point was founded Native Americans walked the land by foot and on horseback. Many of these routes became trading paths for the Indians.

As Europeans migrated to this area they came by horse and wagon down the Great Wagon Road. Travel in the "backcountry", as this area was known, was often on the paths carved out by the Native Americans. Travel was slow and uncomfortable. Wagon wheels churned up dust in dry weather. During rainy periods, travelers faced muddy roads that sometimes mired wagons and carts completely making travel impossible.

Though many Individuals had begun settling in the area in the mid 18th century traveling from Virginia and Pennsylvania, they generally settled around a church, or in this area around "Quaker meetings." Their farms were spread throughout the area. The land supported them. It wasn't until mid 19th century, almost 100 years after the first European arrived that the town of High Point would be established.

As many of you know, High Point was founded at the crossroads of the two major arteries: the Plank Road and the Railroad.

In the early decades of the 1800s people began to search for ways to improve travel. A farmer was dependent on the weather to bring goods to market. If the weather was inclement, roads often became impassible. The idea of surfaced roads was something many farmers throughout the country began to call for.

The Fayetteville and Western Plank Road was one of several surfaced roads built in North Carolina between 1830 and 1860 along pre-existing unpaved routes. It ran from Fayetteville via High Point and Salem to Bethania. This was

the longest plank road ever built anywhere in the world, and certainly the most important in North Carolina. It was aptly called the "Appian Way of North Carolina."

This new type of road assisted farmers and merchants to convey their goods to market. The farms around what would become High Point now had a way to get to the inland port of Fayetteville and to outside markets.

Plank roads were made of a first layer of stringers, or large timbers. They were approximately 12" x 12" square and laid end-to-end, with a width of ten feet across. The stringers were surfaced with rough-cut timber or Planks, placed crosswise. The cracks were filled with sand. The High Point Museum has an original stringer on display.

Instead of bone-shaking travel on dirt roads, the plank road gave vehicles a smooth surface with good traction. Speed on a plank road was much greater than on a dirt road. And crops could be taken to market in bad weather, when ordinary farm work was prevented.

To get onto the road, a person drove onto the planks at a point near his home and headed for the nearest tollhouse. Anyone who was caught trying to avoid the tolls paid a fine.

Traveling was not a solitary activity on the Plank Road. At peak use, about 60 vehicles a day rolled along the road. The busy road was only wide enough for one wagon to pass at a time. When wagons met on the road, the wagon bound for market had the right of way. Stagecoaches had the right of way over slower moving vehicles.

An alternate means of transportation was also being considered. Railroads were being built as early as the 1840s. This area was affected by the construction of the North Carolina Railroad, which crossed the state from Goldsboro to Charlotte in the 1850s. The railroad could move goods at an even more rapid pace. The rails were stronger and lasted longer than the wooden planks of the Plank Road.

These two major arteries, the plank road and the railroad, crossed at the "highest point" along the surveyed rail line. This "crossing" would develop into the town of High Point.

While there was a small settlement along the plank road, it wasn't until the arrival of the train that real development was begun. On November 22, 1855, the first train pulled into the High Point station. Most of the people who had gathered for their own barbecue celebration had never seen a train before. It was quite a show. As the Greensboro *Patriot* reported, "Just before the train came within sight of the station, where the great mass of spectators had congregated, the engineer, with a stagecoach whip in his hand, climbed upon the engine and sat

astride it. As the train rounded the curve in sight of the expectant crowd, he began lashing the sides of the engine with all his might, thus ushering into High Point its first train." The "iron horse" had arrived.

By 1859 the total population of the little crossroads town was 596, including free whites, slaves and free persons of color. Town leaders decided the time had come to incorporate. The state granted a charter on May 26, 1859. The city limits were "one mile North, South, East, and West from the crossing where the Fayetteville and Western Plank Road crosses the North Carolina Rail Road in said town making a square of two miles."

Quickly the High Point station became a popular destination for farm goods from Forsyth and Surry counties. For the next 50 years High Point flourished because goods brought by wagon for distances of up to 125 miles from Virginia and the counties of North Carolina had a way to northern and southern markets via the railroad. Thomas Sechrest, an early settler noted that "This Depot being the nearest point to the mountain counties, and by Plank Road making it of easy access to them, must if capital should concentrate at it, make it one of the most important Depots on the N.C. Railroad."

Of course the railroad soon would be used to transport soldiers during the Civil War and passengers to many distant destinations. At the turn of the century, wealthy industrialists with the Eastern Field Trials Club came to High Point via train for hunting and recreation.

The train depot built in 1907 was recently restored, saving a small portion of our past. It is a landmark in High Point.

Yet this was only the **beginning** of High Point's link to transportation.

By the turn of the century buggies were one of the modes of transportation for families. High Point was soon the home of the High Point Buggy Company. The company was founded by three brothers A.M., H.C. and J.R. Briggs. They opened their business in Florence in 1881. The company was enticed here from Florence in 1901 and continued making buggies until 1922.

The High Point Museum has a standard two-person buggy with fold back top built by the High Point Buggy Company on display. The Company produced over 30,000 vehicles in the twenty years of production in High Point. With the coming of the automobile, the company began making upholstered furniture, surviving as a business for another three decades.

Less than a decade later public transportation came to High Point. In 1906 the North Carolina Public Service Company began a trolley system. Much of High Point's residential development between 1910 and 1925 happened near the trolley routes.

The Southern Car Company in High Point first made trolley cars here. Its chief engineer was Perley A. Thomas, a native of Canada, with experience building streetcars in Detroit. He came to High Point in 1910. When the Southern Car Company closed in 1916, Thomas started his own trolley car works. The famous "Streetcar Named Desire" in New Orleans, immortalized in the Tennessee Williams drama of the same name, was a Thomas car! Trolleys were used for approximately 30 years until the mid 1930s.

At the turn of the century the automobile was becoming a favorite for private transportation. Unfortunately, High Point cannot claim to be the home of any car manufacture!

As the community grew, cars and the trains began to clash ... and crash! Today we know that our train tracks run beneath Main Street. However, this was not the case for the first several decades of the 20th century. In 1928 a plan was adopted to lower the train tracks. Because of the Depression lowering of the tracks was not accomplished until 1938.

With the decline of the trolley the Perley Thomas Company adapted with the times. The first Thomas Built bus rolled off the assembly line in 1936. Today, they manufacture a full line of Buses for the commercial transit, school bus and specialty vehicle markets. It is a leading business in High Point. **The museum's "front end of the bus" is one of the most popular exhibits.**

High Point manufacturers aided the country during World War I and World War II by adapting certain businesses to the building of transportation items. The Giant Furniture Co. switched from production of furniture to the production of wooden airplane propellers during the First World War (**The High Point Museum has a wooden propeller from Giant Furniture on display**). Similarly, Thomas Built Buses supported the war efforts in the 40s by providing the military with truck bodies.

Other companies such as Mickey Bodies and Old Dominion (**museum has a display**) have been mainstays of the community and provided businesses with the means to transport their goods.

High Point's entrepreneurship soon led to the founding of yet another company dealing with another form of transportation. With no large body of water nearby, High Point became the home of Hatteras Yachts in 1959 when Willis Slane took on the challenge of designing a boat of fiberglass. It wasn't too long before Hatteras Yachts became the fourth largest boat builder in the country. **The High Point Museum has the rudder and compass from his first boat, *The Knit Wits*, on display.**

In early 1965 Hatteras Yachts also served the U.S. war effort by designing specialized boats for use on the rivers of South Vietnam. The company's Patrol Boat Riverine (PBR) was in use during much of the Vietnam War and was considered the "workhorse" of the war.

Within days the new Highway 311 will open, assisting traffic to quickly bypass High Point. How will High Point's future be affected? Both Interstate 85 and 40 bring distant visitors to our door. Soon Interstate 73 and 74 will do the same. High Point, founded at a crossroads, continues as a crossroads, and remains viable through transportation.

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