

Roads are usually not a very exciting topic, but we have one in Perrysburg that is. It is none other than U. S. Highway 20 that runs through here going east and west right past popular fast-food places like Burger King, Frisch's Big Boy and McDonald's.

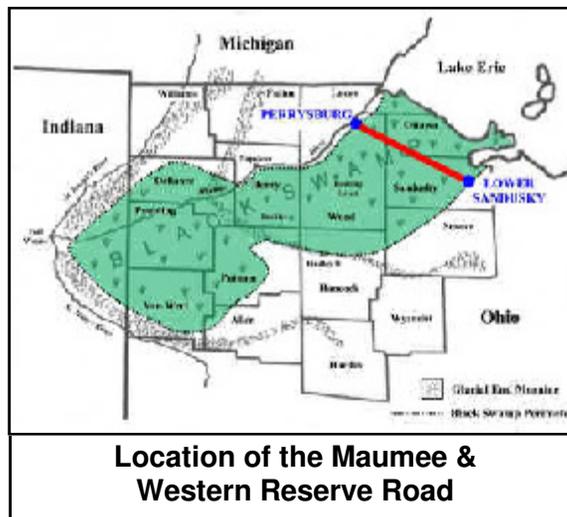
What's so unusual about it? Well, it dates back to 1794 and it was the first road (you might say "bridge") across the Great Black Swamp. It was also at one time called "the worst road in America".

After General "Mad Anthony" Wayne's victory at Fallen Timbers, a mile or so up the river from Perrysburg, in 1794, the Indians ceded to the United States a strip of land 123 feet wide for a road to extend from the "Foot of the Rapids of the Miami of the Lake" (just below present-day Fort Meigs) to the western edge of what was called the Connecticut Reserve. Three years later the strip was surveyed and marked, and eventually changes were made to make it pass through Fremont, then known as Lower Sandusky, which was about the easternmost extent of the swamp.

That established the road — on paper at least — but it was to remain as before for another nine years, nothing but a blazed trail through a forested swamp criss-crossed by streams and in many places fallen trees that made its use by a wheeled vehicle impossible. Even on horseback the standing water was often up to the saddle skirts.

Finally giving up the federal initiative, Congress in 1823 gave the entire strip of land to the State of Ohio.

Perrysburg had high hopes that this road would help the village grow with a direct overland connection to the east. Remember, the Great Black Swamp almost surrounded us, so the



Location of the Maumee & Western Reserve Road

only practical way into town from the east was by Lake Erie and the river.

In 1824 work began on building the road. Earth was scooped up from both sides to make a raised roadbed, and two-inch thick planks eight feet long were laid crosswise on stringers to make a hard "roadway" surface. All of this sounds relatively good, but by oversight or design, natural drainage here from south to north (toward the river) was ignored and no culverts under the road were constructed. In addition, brush and timber from clearing the heavy forest were piled on the south side of the roadway.

As a result, in effect, a gigantic dam from Perrysburg to Lower Sandusky had been constructed! Water stood in the ditches for much of the year, soaking the roadbed and allowing the wooden planks to sink into the mud.

During the so-called "Toledo War" when Ohio and Michigan state militia threatened one another over a dispute about the location of the state line, Governor Robert Lucas led Ohio troops here over the road. Upon having to abandon some of his equipment in the mud, he clearly saw the need to do something about the road.



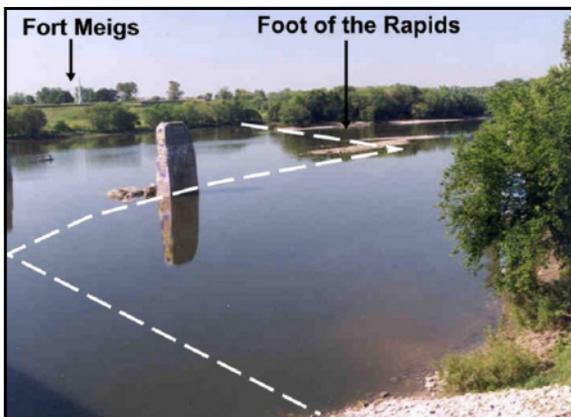
The riverbank in Lower Sandusky (Fremont) where the road begins

In 1838 the General Assembly ordered that culverts be dug and that the road be covered with broken stone (and for a long time it was called the Stone Road, even though its official name was the Maumee & Western Reserve Road).

Log inns, or taverns, began appearing along the road, about one every

mile or so for the convenience of travelers who sometimes were lucky to struggle a mile a day during the muddy season. Spafford's Exchange Hotel on West Front Street was the last inn at this end. In 1842, limestone mile markers were installed along the north side of the road. They may have been the first along a major highway in this country. One can still be seen here in town in tiny Milestone Park at Sandusky and Hickory Streets, a mile from the Foot of the Rapids river ford below Fort Meigs.

The markers are triangular shaped, with the letter P. for Perrysburg on the right face, and L. S. for Lower Sandusky on the left. The miles to either location are indicated below the city



The riverbank at Fort Meigs in Perrysburg where the M&WR road ends

designations. On the top of each milestone is the date 1842. The Ohio Department of Transportation replace several deteriorated milestones in 1961 with cast concrete replicas similar to, but not exact duplicates of the original 1842 limestone design.

Originally a national road, the Maumee & Western Reserve Road was a turnpike with toll gates about every nine miles. The tolls collected helped pay for its upkeep.

In the 1870s the Ohio state legislature turned the road over to the counties through which it runs. Maintenance continued to be a problem, but it was still the road used for years by thousands of farm wagons, stage coaches, carriages, horseback riders, and sleighs to get to and from Perrysburg.

Today, of course, it is busy U.S. Highway 20 and if you look closely, one can still see most of the milestones placed in 1842.

Further reading: Historic Perrysburg made a survey of the condition of all milestones in 2005 / 2007 and documented the findings as well as the history of the Maumee & Western Reserve Road in a book that is available in Way Library.

Things You Should Know About Perrysburg, Ohio

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