



The Three Notch'd Road Revisited

Contributed by
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An earlier article of mine (Winter, 1977) attempted to sketch briefly what was then known about the history of the Three Notch'd or Three Chopt Road, from the 1730's to the 1930's the predecessor of Routes 250 and 64. Further research and reflection upon all the newly published Louisa records make another article seem worthwhile.

Traditionally, the Three Notch'd Road was an Indian path improved by sections during the 1730's into a road suitable for wheeled vehicles to travel from Richmond to the Valley. It was originally called the Mountain Road or Mountain Ridge Road. By 1737, it had a system of numbered mile markers running from west to east. These were probably erected by Peter Jefferson to divide the road into segments for individual road surveyors and were probably painted or incised on trees. It seems likely that No.0 was at the D.S. Tree near the present Ivy, a tree on which were carved the initials of an early settler named Davis Stockton. No. 12, "the twelve mile tree", was located near Shadwell, while Nos. 18, 22, 26, 39, 36, 40, and 46 ran on down to near Richmond. William Byrd described a similar system of numbered trees in Spotsylvania County in 1732.

During the 1730's, the name Mountain Road occurred regularly in the Goochland County records, but beginning about 1742, the names "three notch", "three notch'd road", began to occur in the county records, with an occasional "three chopped" or "three chopt". Of the first ten occurrences, eight or nine were one of the forms of "three notch'd". The name Mountain Road rapidly fell from favor after 1743, although as late as 1755 an advertisement in the

Three Notch'd Road Revisited

Virginia Gazette called it the "Three Notched mountain road". The road's part in the historic events of 1781, Colonel Banastre Tarleton's Raid and Jack Jouett's Ride, is well known.

To the foregoing it now seems some additions can be made. The first occurrence of the name "Three-notched Road" seems to have been in a Louisa County ordinary license of 14 February 1742 Old Style, and the second in the renewal of that license a year later. Eleven days after this renewal the name began to appear regularly in the records of Goochland County, the county in which almost the whole length of the road was then maintained.

The question of the origin of this name has never been resolved. That it came from the notches placed at intervals on trees along the road is obvious. But why were the notches placed there? Why only in 1742, if the numbers up to 46 already existed on the trees by 1737? The close coincidence of the first occurrence of the name (14 February 1742 Old Style) and the formation of both Fredericksville Parish and Louisa County (both of 1 December 1742 Old Style, some 2½ months earlier) suggests that some relationship may exist between them.

The road running in 1742 along the top of the watershed between the James-Rivanna Rivers and the Pamunkey-South Anna Rivers, then known as the Mountain or Mountain Ridge Road, perhaps to differentiate it from the Old Mountain Road running parallel to it several miles to the north, was generally the boundary between the counties of Goochland and Hanover, from which Louisa was formed, as far westward as Mechunk Creek. From that point, a line ran northwestward to the Blue Ridge, crossing the mouth of Ivy Creek, and delineated the extent of Louisa as created in 1742, if not in fact the earlier Hanover County. While the county line at this point seems to have left the road, the boundary of the new Fredericksville Parish diverged, following the road to Wood's Gap (now Jarman's) in the Blue Ridge. It seems very likely, then, that the line along this road was either selected and marked by the Fredericksville Parish Vestry as the parish line or that it was marked as the county line by the county surveyor at the behest of the gentlemen justices of the Louisa County Court or perhaps both.

The simple system of marking property lines with three notches, which survives to this day, would of course have been well known to both the vestrymen and the justices. That none of the road west of the Rivanna River seems to have been denominated "Three notch'd" in county records prior to 1748 would seem to argue for the county line interpretation, although both parish and county lines would have been the same to the neighborhood of Mechunk Creek. None of the foregoing can as yet be substantiated, but it is known that an agreement to run the line to the mountains was effected between Goochland and Hanover in 1731. Whether anything was then done is uncertain, but the creation of Louisa from Hanover in 1742 should certainly have resulted in action. Presumably, the name would have appeared earlier had the road been marked with the notches earlier than 1742.

Louisa County Historical Magazine

When one examines the ordinary license, some other interesting facts begin to emerge:

14 February 1742 O.S. Louisa County Court Order Book, Page 11 On the Petition of Charles Allen License is granted him to keep an Ordinary on the Three-notched Road in this County he with Thomas Paulett his security having first entred into Bond therefore and acknowledged the same.

Charles Allen's ordinary or tavern would appear to be the building still standing in Gum Spring at the intersection of Routes 522 and 643 (Three Notch'd Road). Allen patented this land in 1745 and sold it in 1746, but was probably already resident on it in 1742. By 1742, also, the road would have clearly emerged as a main east-west link between the Valley and Richmond and Williamsburg, the capital.

More significant for our argument perhaps is Allen's security, Thomas Paulett, and his relationship with the parish and county government. Active in the area from 1731 until his death in 1771, he served as vestryman of Fredericksville Parish from its creation in 1742 to its division in 1761 and thence in its successor, Trinity Parish. A gentleman justice from 1748, he was sheriff in 1761 and then stood down. Significantly, he seems to have been a sitting vestryman in St. Martin's Parish when Fredericksville Parish was separated from it. Since eleven new vestrymen were elected and his is the first name in the book, he would have been the first vestryman in the new parish. Being already sworn, he would seem to have administered the oaths of office to the new men. As the only vestryman carried forward from St. Martin's, he may even have participated in marking off the boundaries of the new Fredericksville Parish.

With his probable connection to the notching of the trees as a part of the marking of the parish and/or county boundary established, why then was the term "Three-notched Road" used in the ordinary license rather than "Mountain Road"; the term used for it at the time in Goochland County where it was maintained? Probably in order to clearly differentiate it from the Old Mountain Road, so called even today, which paralleled it, running between it and the South Anna River from the lower counties up to the Southwest Mountain. This was a Louisa County road and the term "Three-notched Road" may have seemed the easiest way to show clearly the location of Allen's ordinary. Either Allen or Paulett may have suggested it, or some member of the court. The name may even have already had some usage, although the fact that it only begins to be used regularly in Goochland a year later would seem to argue against this.

Whatever may have been the circumstances of its use in the license, all the evidence would now seem to point to the name Three Notch'd Road as having a Louisa County origin in its first usage, as well as the name itself being an outgrowth of the laying out of that county and its more or less coincident parish, Fredericksville, in 1742.