

New Bedford Streets; A Piece of Americana: King's Highway

Welcome to next installment in the New Bedford Streets; A Piece of Americana series. Previously we covered William Street, Kempton Street, Middle Street, Centre Street, Ashley Boulevard, Elm Street, Coggeshall Street, Mechanics Lane, Washburn Street and many others. If you would like to read those or perhaps revisit them, they can be found by using the search bar to the right. You can also select the "Streets" category.

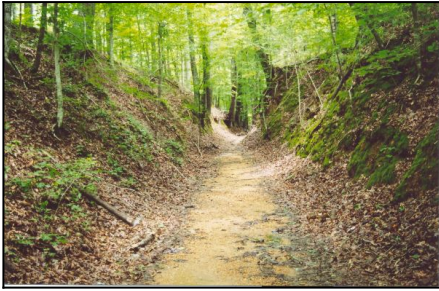
As usual, I'd like to re-iterate the importance of reader feedback, correction, and contributions. In the process of exploring these streets, I try to confirm or validate statements and dates by finding multiple sources. Unfortunately, if all those sources are making their statement based on an older, incorrect source, and there isn't any dissenting information available, there's no way to know otherwise. So by all means, please join in.

In addition, when trying to validate some statements, often there is very little to no information available. I haven't decided which is worse – finding one source, or finding multiple sources, but not knowing if they were all founded on an inaccuracy. So help from local historians, those who remember, oral histories and anecdotes handed down through the generations, people with private collections, and even know-it-alls will help!

By all means, let us make this an open discussion to keep the "wiki" accurate.

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How many times do you suspect that you've driven along King's

Highway? Somewhere along the line you must have wondered “King who?” or “How is it that we are getting **off** the highway, yet onto a supposed ‘highway’ which is really a city street?”



*An old Indian trail –
what King’s Highway
was originally.*

The term *highway* goes back to the Old English word *heahweg* which meant “a public main road from one town to another.” While we freely interchange the word with other words like freeway or motorway, there was a time in our history that it meant something very specific. The key is within the word itself: it was called so because the road or way was actually raised or “high,” as in higher than the “others.”

The highway goes all the way back to ancient Rome. To say that the ancient Romans traveled would certainly be an understatement. The expanse of the Roman Empire was a vast one and that meant there was a need to get from point “A” to point “B” in the most expedient manner possible to deliver supplies, trade goods, transport arms and weaponry, or just explore foreign lands. What was needed was something that wouldn’t slow down travel every time it rained, snowed or flooded.

In a time before macadam, tar and asphalt there was...dirt. Cobblestones or freestones were simply not a practical, viable option when it came to traversing thousands of miles for the early settlers. For an empire like Rome without the Atlantic to cross, this was much more feasible. A more efficient method was needed and the one decided upon was simply taking earth from opposite sides of the intended road, and piling it in the

center – this raised the road. To differentiate these from the common road, they were dubbed *highways*.

When the settlers arrived they needed to have a clear path between settlements. Out of practicality – though potentially dangerous- they would commute along the old extant, already cleared Indian paths. In this way – pardon the pun – they would either have to do nothing, or only slightly expand the path. Interestingly, these trails an paths were so old that moccasin shod feet had worn them down to as far as 2 feet deep.

Of course, as time went on and colonies formed, larger groups and vehicles would follow along these paths necessitating raising the the road to be a highway for the reasons mentioned above.



The 1,300 miles of King's Highway started by King Charles II in 1650.

In the case of “King’s Highway” they did exactly that. In 1652 many of the Dartmouth proprietors came from Plymouth Colony to inspect their land purchases. There is mention that they simply followed “...the old Indian trail from Plymouth to Newport. Leaving the head of the Acushnet River, it followed the line of the Tarkiln Hill road to the present Acushnet station; thence through the Hathaway Road to Smith’s Mills, by the old road to Head of Westport; then through Tiverton to Dan

Howland's Ferry (1685-1690) and thence to Newport." As of 1652, this path was known as "Old Rode Island Way," but before long would be known as King's Highway.

The land that this Old Rhode Island Way or King's Highway traversed was owned by iconic men and families of the New Bedford's past; veritable giants like the Russells, Kemptons, Allens, Jenney, Willis and Pope.

The next mention after that of the 1652 Old Dartmouth Proprietors wouldn't come until 1704. Since not much was surveyed, in lieu of maps, one would find layouts. These were sketches that resembled maps, but were nowhere near as accurate, symmetrical or proportionate since landmarks were primarily used instead of streets and distances. If there was surveying, it was of farmstead or homestead boundaries.

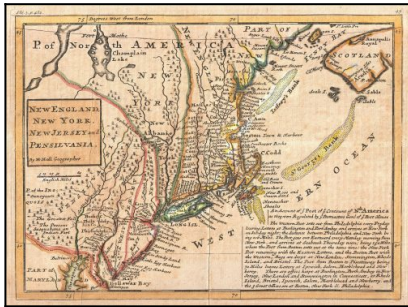
This layout would have made some good eye candy for the article, alas I couldn't find any. The only mention I came across was in an Old Dartmouth Historical Sketch where it states "Laid out a drift way to go down the lots on the West side of the Cushenit river, to turn out of the Country road a little to the westward of the first brook on the west side of the bridge over Cushenit river where is now and so in the old path till it comes to a marked red oke bush and then to turn out on the west side of the old way and so to go along in the new path above the new fenced land till it comes to the land of Stephen Peckum (Peckham) and then over the bridge in his pasture and the south-westerly till it comes into the path and thence along the path till it comes into the way that comes from Clark's Cove."

Phew. That is a carefully crafted and directionally vague sentence to avoid using the period to punctuate! This illustrates why layouts were used – there was little to measure beyond farm boundaries.

Shining light on that vague sentence is the commentary that

followed:

"We may not be able to follow the bed of the first brook west from the river, or to locate the "red oke bush," or the bridge in the pasture of Stephen Peckum;" but in the County Street and Acushnet Avenue of our day, straightened to be sure, to meet the demands of a later time, we are, in part following the old paths used by the Indians and the Pilgrims."



1729 map of the region. (Large View)

Sadly, from here the trail grows cold – sorry, I have no power to resist puns. The name King’s Highway eventually supersedes the other names like Old Rhode Island Way, Plymouth Way, Parting Ways (one of many.)

I’ve found no mention of who the king was, so we’ll have to use inference and deductive reasoning to come as close as possible. Since there was no one of great stature with the surname *King* in New Bedford’s early history, it would be safe to rule out one of the first and largest thoroughfares in the country being named after one. Highly unlikely.

I’ve heard it said that it was named after King Philip or Metacomet. Early settlers and colonists used the original Indian names for rivers, ponds and other land features, even towns. In some cases, they would name something in honor of a local Indian warrior or chief. However, there is little precedence for naming land or a street in honor of someone who killed many locals – fresh in their minds.

What is most likely the case is that the “King” in King’s Highway was an English king. Throughout history we have many King’s Highways. In fact, you can go back almost 2,000 years to the ancient Near East to find the first mention of a King’s Highway – a trade route from Egypt to the Sinai Peninsula. There are no less than 15 recorded uses of King’s Highway which can be seen here.

Throughout the colonies from 1650 to 1735, 1,300 miles of road were designated as a King’s Highway. These roads were commissioned initially by Charles II of Scotland (Scotland? England had no monarchy during this time) who reigned from 1649-1651. The reason? To provide a clear postal route between Boston and the southern colonies.

It’s certainly not a leap of faith to conclude that the King’s Highway that we currently have – an old Indian path, became an important postal route and subsequently for public use by traders, merchants, settlers, and anyone else.

The fact that it is not dedicated to a specific monarch indicates how unstable and filled with turmoil the English monarchy was in this period. 1649 was the year England became a republic and declared a Commonwealth. After a second English Civil War and trial and execution of Charles I, this was a huge statement made by the people – one that said “We’re sick of a monarchy!” Power would be “passed” to Parliament and the Council of State and here the famous Cromwells as Lords Protectors, would enter the picture.



*Doth thou
thinkest that*

*King Charles II
is the “king” of
King’s Highway?*

This period in English history is a deep and complicated one that goes beyond the scope of this article – however, it is an intriguing one for the implications it would have on the history of the Western World and certainly worth a follow-up read.

For now, suffice it to say that there was no king to name, because no king was expected to be on the throne for long, and people weren’t sure whether passing power to parliament and the Council of State was a permanent thing or whether the idea of a monarchy would take a back seat or be done away with for good. Indeed, it would eventually be restored with the House of Stewart and Charles II in 1660.

How this pertains to King’s Highway demonstrates how loyal many colonists were to the English throne. Keep in mind that this is a period before the Revolutionary War and before the terms loyalist, Tory, royalists, or patriot. At this early time in history, Americans saw themselves as English and/or European and would often refer to themselves as the King’s Men. They were all loyalists. In fact, it could be said that most were proto-Nationalists, even among many of the pilgrims who fled England to practice their own brand of religion.

So who is the king in King’s Highway since there was no king at the time the Dartmouth Proprietors visited the area? Since the road is not dubbed “Lord Protector’s Highway” we know the street wasn’t named while the Cromwells ruled from 1653-1659.

The aforementioned King Charles II of Scotland who was King from 1649-1651 took to the throne as King of Scotland, England and Wales in 1660 and reigned until his death by apoplexy in 1685. So, with liberty – pardon the pun again – it could be said that the “King” in King’s Highway *could* be King Charles

II.

However, what we have here is an extension of hope by the English settlers that the monarchy would “come 'round.” It hearkens back to a time when America wasn’t really American yet and was more European or British – when they were all loyal subjects. So, King’s Highway wasn’t made in honor of any specific king, but showed a devout and loyal attitude to the monarchy in general. This makes this article the quintessential piece of Americana.