

Carroll Yesteryears

12 March 2023

In the 19th Century, Travel Was Not for Faint of Heart

By Samuel M. Riley

Tens of thousands of motor vehicles move along major highways in Carroll County, MD, each day, carrying travelers to-and-from work, vacations, and local stores. Commercial vehicles, typically trucks or tractor trailers, carry goods or other materials to destinations near and far. While the volume and type of vehicles certainly have changed since the early nineteenth century, those engaged in journeys along local roads do so for much the same reasons and with similar needs as yesteryears: “Gas, Food, and Lodging,” as announced on blue logo signs along interstates today. In the early 19th century, inns and taverns along Maryland’s roads provided travel essentials.

Roadside hospitality has been a staple of travel for millennia. Wayside inns and taverns proliferated in the mid-Atlantic region during a “transportation revolution” in the early 1800s as roads improved in an increasingly interconnected world.

In Maryland, outlying millers and merchants pushed for better roads to move goods like flour to the port of Baltimore. An 1805 Maryland law authorizing construction of privately-financed turnpikes, including what we now know as the Reisterstown Road, connected northern Maryland communities to the outside world. The 1805 legislation ushered in Maryland’s Turnpike Era, with improvements to roadways that previously had been little more than muddy cart paths.

As turnpikes snaked their way through Westminster and outlying communities, they served the needs of residents and also created larger transportation networks, linking Baltimore to points to the west. In 1816, as many as 12,000 Conestoga (freight) wagons passed between Baltimore and Pittsburgh—most through Westminster and Union Mills.

Turnpikes also facilitated easier passenger travel. Stagecoach lines—the Greyhound buses of their day—multiplied, enabling travelers to pay for transportation from one location to another. Other travelers—on foot, horseback, personal wagons—added to the traffic.

Entrepreneurs seized the opportunities presented by the needs of hungry and tired travelers. In Westminster, Jacob Sherman, and later Isaac Shriver, operated the Main Court Inn on East Main Street. Isaac’s oldest brother, Andrew Shriver, operated an inn and tavern in nearby Petersburg (Littlestown, PA) in the 1790s before founding Union Mills with another brother, David.

At Union Mills, David soon left to manage turnpike construction, but Andrew remained, operating a burgeoning industrial enterprise anchored by a grist mill. He quickly added the hospitality trade to his business plan, too.

A set of reports issued by Elizabeth Anderson Comer Archaeology, Inc. (EAC/A) in 2021 shed light on Andrew Shriver’s inn and tavern operation at Union Mills. According to the EAC/A reports, the 1820s west-side addition to the Shriver Homestead likely accommodated these hospitality services. The 1820s were the height of the Turnpike Era, when a busy road passed Union Mills connecting to turnpikes headed west to Pittsburgh, PA.

According to an 1819 edition of the *Maryland Gazette*, one stagecoach line operated a service from “Baltimore, by Reister’s-town, Westminster, Union Mills, Petersburg and Gettysburg, to Chambersburg” three times a week, leaving Baltimore at 4 a.m. and arriving at Chambersburg by 7 p.m. The total distance: 85 miles. An inn and tavern at the bustling crossroads of Union Mills provided an important service to travelers with fresh horses, meals, and lodging, as well as another source of income for the Shriver.

A “tavern” in the early 19th century was not the same as today’s bar or pub (public house), mainly serving alcohol. Rather, it was typically a lodging house, providing travelers with room and board. Most taverns featured a large taproom or dining room where guests were received and offered food and beverages. Nicer taverns featured a parlor where visitors could relax in a more intimate setting. Union Mills offered both.

Research is still underway as to the services provided at the Shriver inn and tavern at Union Mills. We know that in 1795 Andrew Shriver’s establishment in Petersburg was licensed to sell “Wine, Rum, Brandy, Beer, Ale, Cyder, and all other spirituous liquors by the small measure” provided that he not “suffer any Drunkenness, unlawful Gaming, or any other Disorders.” Postal services were readily available, as Andrew Shriver also served as the Petersburg postmaster. The operation at Union Mills followed the same model, with food and overnight accommodations as well.

Reviews of wayside taverns from the era were often shy of even one star. Col. John May of Boston traveled from Baltimore through Little Winchester (Westminster) in the 1780s, on a trip to the Ohio River. He did not speak well of an overnight stay in the area, noting he “lodged the night thirty miles from Baltimore. The accommodations poor, the provisions worse.”

Morris Birkbeck, an English gentleman who traveled from Washington, DC, to Pittsburgh in 1817, provided a scathing review of taverns along the route. Birkbeck complained of the “horrors of the kitchen” from which meals were served. About those kitchens, he continued, “[H]ow shall I describe, though I have witnessed them? It is a dark, sooty hole, where the idea of cleanliness never entered.” But perhaps worse were the accommodations, because “all is performed in the gregarious plan; everything is public by day and by night; for even night, in an American inn, affords no privacy.” As Birkbeck observed, “[s]oon after the last meal, you assemble once more in rooms crowded with beds, something like the wards of a hospital; where, after undressing in public, you are fortunate if you escape a partner in your bed, in addition to the myriad of bugs which you need not hope to escape.”

Whether Andrew Shriver’s family provided a higher quality experience we don’t yet know, but American ornithologist John James Audubon and author Washington Irving of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” were among their notable guests. Customers likely did not include African Americans, however, who if they were involved in transportation or simply traveling probably were lucky if they could find accommodations with the establishment’s help. Many inns and taverns—including Union Mills—relied on African Americans who were enslaved or indentured to prepare meals and maintain the household.

As the Turnpike Era ended eclipsed by railroads, the inn and tavern at Union Mills ceased operations as the family focused on other ventures. The Shriver’s wayside hospitality, however,

reflected the larger story of a rapidly developing interstate transportation system that drew the Shriver businesses into an increasingly interconnected, international economy. The hey-day of the Turnpike Era, which for a time so richly rewarded Andrew Shriver's holdings, was an opening salvo into a period of change that catapulted earlier stages of the American Industrial Revolution from locally-focused, mercantile capitalism to intensified industrialization.

To this day, the Union Mills Homestead remains an important reminder of the Turnpike Era and the exciting challenge of enterprise. Visitors can still enjoy a meal and an adult beverage at Union Mills at events like the Homestead Foundation's Maryland Microbrewery Festival or the Bluegrass, Bourbon and Bocce event, sponsored by the Historical Society of Carroll County. While overnight accommodations are not included at these modern functions, the authenticity of the historic site allows guests a step back in time to an earlier era.

Samuel M. Riley, a local attorney and retired National Guard officer, serves as President of the Union Mills Homestead Foundation and researches local history. He can be reached at info@unionmills.org.



Image1: painting by Carl Rakeman, *The National Pike*, depicts busy horse-drawn traffic on the National Road, or Cumberland Road as it was originally called. The road was the first federally-funded highway project, initially connecting Cumberland, MD to Wheeling, WV. *Courtesy of Federal Highway Administration.*



Image 2: A view of the Main Court Inn (center) at the intersection of East Main Street and Court Street in Westminster. Other adjacent businesses, including blacksmiths and stables, also serviced travelers' needs. Since demolished, the site is now occupied by Buckingham Auto Repair. *Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.*



Image 3: The west end of the Union Mills Homestead, with a view of the 1820s era addition (foreground) built by Andrew Shriver to accommodate inn and tavern business during the Turnpike Era. *Courtesy Union Mills Homestead Foundation.*