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Plank Roads — Part 1

(Our next display at CoBACH Center will be about the Grand River Trail — Detroit to Lansing)

Brief History of Plank Roads:

The first plank road in North America was constructed near Toronto Canada, in 1836. Reports of its popularity and smoothness for transportation contributed to a plank road craze in the State of New York. The first plank highway in New York was completed in 1846 near Syracuse. Pennsylvania passed a general plank road act in 1849. Indiana also passed an act in 1949 authorizing the construction of plank roads. In 1850 the state of Indiana had about 400 miles of plank roads completed, at a cost of $1,200 to $1,500 per mile. An interesting comparison, 212 miles of railroad was in operation in Indiana in 1850.

The *Manual of Road Building 1873* by W.H. Gillespie (U of M Library) described the basics of Plank Roads: "In the most generally approved system two parallel rows of small sticks of timber (called sleepers, stringers, or sills) are embedded in the road, three or four feet apart. Planks, eight feet long and three or four inches thick, are laid upon these sticks, across them, at right angles to their direction. A sidetrack of earth, to turn out upon, is carefully graded. Deep ditches are dug on each side, to ensure perfect drainage, and thus is formed a Plank Road."

Plank Roads in Michigan:

In the late 1840's, Michigan underwent a "plank road craze." During that time, the state legislature chartered over 200 private corporations to build and operate wooden toll roads. These roads were seen as a salutation to Michigan's swampy, and often impassable dirt trails at a time when the state lacked funds for public infrastructure. Sort of an answer to "FIX THE DAMN ROADS."

The Plank Road Act of 1848 was Michigan's first general law designed to standardize the chaotic private toll road industry. It replaced the need for the legislature to issue individual charters for every company, instead providing a uniform legal framework for the toll road industry.

The Act established strict engineering and operational standards to ensure the roads were somewhat uniform across the state.

Road Dimensions: The roadbed had to be graded to a width of at least 20 feet.

Plank Specifications: At least 8 to 16 feet of that width had to be covered with wooden planks that were at least 3 inches thick.

Grade limits: Companies were forbidden from building roads with an incline exceeding 4 degrees to ensure heavily loaded wagons could traverse them.

Tollgate frequency: Companies were generally permitted to erect tollgates at intervals of no less than five to six miles.

Charter duration: Most charters were initially granted for a period of 60 years, though many companies went bankrupt or abandoned their routes long before that expired. *To be continued…*

(Thanks to Jerry Damon for researching this story.)



