

Unicoi Turnpike Trail: A Path through Time

The path now known as the Unicoi Turnpike Trail predates written history. It has been known by many names, depending on the time period. “Unicoi Path,” “Tellico Path,” “Overhill Trading Path,” and “Unicoi Turnpike” are examples. In 1999 the section that runs between Vonore, TN and Murphy, NC was designated one of 16 National Millennium Flagship trails and named the Unicoi Turnpike Trail.

The Unicoi Turnpike Trail is more than just a path. The places, events, and people associated with the trail are linked to the nation’s history. During the 17th century, the path connected the Overhill Cherokee towns in Tennessee to the Cherokee settlements in the Carolinas and Georgia, as well as the Atlantic coastal ports. By the early 18th century, the trail was used to transport thousands of deerskins and furs to Charleston and Savannah, where they were shipped to Europe.

The French and Indian War (1755-1761) prompted British soldiers and South Carolina militiamen to enter the Overhill Cherokee Country on this road to build Fort Loudoun. During the American Revolution, the trail became a warpath that funneled raids between colonists and Cherokees.

In the early 19th century, entrepreneurs converted the path into a toll road and named it the Unicoi Turnpike. Drovers herded thousands of hogs, turkeys, and other livestock from Tennessee over the turnpike to the Carolinas and Georgia. This spawned new markets for residents of East Tennessee and created economic opportunities along the route. “Stands,” with inns, taverns, stores, and stock pens were established every 12-13 miles where drovers could spend the night and pen their animals.

The discovery of gold at Coker Creek in the 1820’s brought hundreds of white prospectors into the area causing the U.S. government to establish Fort Armistead on the Unicoi Turnpike to discourage intruders from overrunning Cherokee lands. During the Cherokee Removal in 1838, the Unicoi Turnpike was the first leg of the journey for more than 3,000 Cherokee people who were deported from North Carolina on the Trail of Tears.

During the Civil War the mountain counties in eastern Tennessee were especially vulnerable to attacks by bushwhackers and guerrillas. This was especially true along the Unicoi Turnpike near Unicoi Gap. In fact the tollgate keeper was murdered during one of the raids. By the time of the Civil War the old road was largely abandoned in favor of other transportation routes but a tollgate operated at Unicoi Gap until the turn of the 20th century.

After the Weeks Act created the USDA Forest Service in 1911, sections of the turnpike became part of national forest lands, leaving those remnants of the old road somewhat undisturbed. In June 2005, a section of the original roadbed that lies in the Cherokee National Forest near Coker Creek was restored and opened to the public for hiking. The rest of the Unicoi Turnpike Trail (between Vonore, TN and Murphy, NC) can be explored by automobile on highways that follow the approximate route of the old path.

Free trail guides are available by contacting the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association at 877-510-5765 or info@tennesseeoverhill.com. A booklet with more detailed information about the Unicoi Turnpike is also available for \$5.00 plus S&H.