

Searching for the Old Mine Road

Twenty-first century travelers from Kingston, NY, to Pahaquarry, NJ, pass markers reading “The Old Mine Road was built about 1650.” It is generally accepted that this road linked early Dutch settlements in Esopus, NY, to the Delaware River. Its oral history, reported within the 1828 letters of Samuel Preston published in Samuel Hazard’s “Register of Pennsylvania,” recounts information told to a surveyor in 1730 by area settlers. With its southern terminus at Pahaquarry, many thought Old Mine Road was tied to copper mines worked there. Since successive attempts at those mines proved unprofitable, most dismiss any possibility of that as the reason for the road’s construction. The reference in Hazard’s “Register” has been dissected and analyzed — yielding more doubt than understanding. Whether romanticized history or fact, the origin of the road has stirred controversy and dispute.

What is most contested is whether or not the road extended as far south or existed as early as commonly believed. Writers who popularized Old Mine Road, particularly Amelia S. Decker who placed markers along its southern end, acknowledge it began as an Indian trail. The Old Mine Road traverses the Minisink, a region extending northward for about 60 miles from the Delaware Water Gap. First named in the 1600s, Minisink would also identify an Indian village, a nearby island in the Delaware River, a 1701 voting district, a 1704 patent, a 1736 precinct, and a 1788 New York town. The Minisink was at the crossroads of a number of native Lenape trails and waterways which explorers and traders traversed through the late 1600s.

Research also proves frustrating because routes were not given consistent names in the period preceding the American Revolution. Before it was the Old Mine Road, it was the Trade Path, Road to Esopus, Kings Road, and Queen’s Highway. Not unlike modern roads, it began as a trail, a primary route used by explorers and traders, and evolved into a wagon route and then a finished road. Old Mine Road’s origin starts in the period of Dutch control of *Novi Belgi* (New Netherlands) and continues through the British takeover in 1664. To understand the full historical context and evolution through these changes in governance — since each entity

called the area by a different term — one has to become a historical detective to spot illusive clues.

The Minisink was a region highly contested by proprietors and adjacent colonies. The Dutch West India Company instructed Peter Minuet to seek sources of minerals and promote trade and commerce. Documents of early New York note ore had been found along the Delaware and adjacent mountain ranges. Modern analysts of 17th- and early-18th-century maps believe locations and details were purposely left vague because Dutch sponsored entrepreneurs were competitive and secretive. Those engaged by the Dutch West India Company seldom kept records; those that were kept were often lost at sea, discarded, or destroyed. Later, as the English forcibly overtook this area, there would also have been reason to neglect disclosing mines from which the British would exact quotas of production.

Of the earliest settlers, many were Indian traders engaged by the New York colony in an attempt to establish claim to the Minisink. The lush shores along the Delaware’s eastern banks enticed weary explorers to put down roots, exchanging the pursuit of trade and ore for timbering and agriculture. With settlements came itinerant ministers, journeying south toward Shawnee, PA, and erecting permanent churches along the lower end of the Minisink around 1737. Such activity would eventually cause Native Americans to seek to reclaim their territory and to destroy early evidence of European presence.

Thus, we remain, trying to piece together a historical puzzle, looking to the records of European colonizers and to the archives of east and west Jersey as well as those of the colonies of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. A common thread is the consistent use of Old Mine Road to promote exploration and commerce — frequently a search for ore given the number of mines uncovered along its route. To weave these threads into a comprehensive understanding of the Old Mine Road continues to challenge the modern historian.

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