Chapter 11

Toll Bridges, Tunnels and Turnpikes*

Introduction

Toll facilities have made up important segments of the transportation system of the United States since pre-Revolutionary days. In Connecticut, for example, a toll ferry crossing between Rocky Hill and Glastonbury has been in continuous operation since 1655—121 years before the Declaration of Independence.

Although many ferries still survive, when we speak of toll facilities in our day we are more likely to mean turnpikes, bridges, and tunnels for the use of which a direct user fee is charged. In one sense, there is no basic difference among these three types of facilities. A turnpike is a highway over land; a bridge is usually a highway over water: and a tunnel is usually a highway under water.

But in the development of Federal and State law applicable to these facilities, some important distinctions have been made over the years and it is necessary to go back into history to understand and appreciate these.

A. Nature and Composition of Facilities

I. TOLL ROADS

1. BRIEF HISTORY

The first turnpikes in this country were direct descendants of those in England and they reached their first full flowering after the American Revolution. The principal reason was that neither the new Republic nor its individual States was able to assume the financial burden of providing the transport facilities needed to bind the young Nation together.

In 1792, Pennsylvania pioneered in the field by authorizing incorporation of a company to build and operate a road from Lancaster to the port of Philadelphia. The turnpike was completed 4 years later and its success prompted similar projects in other areas. In the next quarter century, State legislatures chartered hundreds of private turnpike companies and some 8,000 miles of roads were constructed The bubble burst in the 1830's under the competition from canals and railroads, coupled with the high cost of maintaining and operating the turnpikes. The toll roads gradually fell into disrepair except where the citizenry kept portions open for local use. Toll bridges, with relatively lower maintenance costs and fewer competing facilities, fared better financially.

Between 1843 and 1857 some of the States became fascinated with plank roads and during that period over $10 million in bonds were issued to build more than 7,000 miles of these all-weather roads.

*Prepared by the International Bridge, Tunnel, & Turnpike Association, with minor editing by committee staff.