Historical Context

In the year 1759, after several years of embarrassing losses to a significantly smaller French army, the British finally got their act together in New England. That July, General Amherst (the first competent general assigned to the region) captured two key French outposts, Fort Carillon, now known as Ticonderoga, and Fort St. Frederic, the key to trade on Lake Champlain (Hill, 1985; Starbuck, 1999).

The physical structure of Fort St. Frederic was lost in the battle, so General Amherst ordered the construction of a new, larger fort nearby that became known as the Crown Point Fort. To ensure adequate supplies for the building and future support of the fort, he ordered a road built through what is now Vermont to Fort Number Four in Charlestown, New Hampshire, which was at the time the northernmost fort in the Connecticut River Valley (Crown Point Road Association, 1999).

Building the Crown Point Road

Building a road through Vermont in 1759 was no mean feat; much of the primeval forest remained intact, and there were large rivers to ford and swamps to pass through or avoid. Captain Stark of Roger’s Rangers was sent to survey the route, and in September of 1759 he and 250 men began construction on the road (Squires, 1959). They set out from Fort Number Four in June, and over the course of the next several weeks Goffe struggled to keep his men from deserting in the face of hard labor with little to no food (Jones, 2001). They succeeded in completing the road, however, and by late July, there were men, supply wagons, and cattle passing over the road. The first of these reached the Crown Point Fort on July 31st, and the first non-aquatic highway in the region was finally complete.

Figure 1. Crown Point, New York. The original French fortification (K) was built in 1731 and destroyed in 1759 when French soldiers, facing a British army far larger than their own, set fire to their munitions and blew it up (Coolidge, 1985). Crown Point Fort (A) was built by the British to replace the French fort and secure their hold on the region.

Figure 2. Once the Crown Point Road left the Valley of Vermont, it entered the broad, flat Champlain Valley. This extensive plain has very little elevation change, and as a result rivers tend to be in a winding, alluvial phase—perfect for the formation of swamps. Swamps are found in areas that are either intermittently or permanently water-covered that support woody plant growth (UNGS). In the Champlain Valley, swamps appear to be primarily associated with rivers, and in areas where the floodplain is poorly drained (Chemisoff and Whitney, 2008). For the soldiers building the Crown Point Road, swamps meant extra work to build corduroy sections (built up with logs) and—at least for Colonel Goffe’s men building at the height of summer—plenty of mosquitoes and other biting insects to contend with.

Figure 3. One of the major challenges to blazing the Crown Point Road was crossing the Green Mountains. The range itself was originally formed when an ancient island chain known as the Taconic Island Arc collided with the North American plate approximately 350 million years ago (Klyza and Trombulak, 1999). The basement rock of the range, however, dates back to a mountain range so ancient that it had entirely ended away by the Taconic Orogeny; these Precambrian deposits visible throughout much of the central and southern portions of the range are over one billion years old (Doolan, 1996). Continued tectonic activity in the region led to faulting and igneous intrusion, as well as the melting and re-crystallization of various historically mined minerals such as copper, talc, and asbestos (Doolan, 1996; Klyza and Trombulak, 1999).

Figure 4. There were numerous other challenges that made construction on the Crown Point Road a grueling task. Building bridges in stable locations, or at least finding safe places to ford the river was a difficult task. There was also the question of felling the (by today’s standards) giant trees of the old-growth forest still present in the region; some of them could reach diameters of over 5 feet (CEES), and the felling such huge trees was dangerous (at least one man in Colonel Goffe’s regiment broke his leg when a tree fell on him) (Jones, 2001). All of this was done on very short rations; sometimes the men did not eat for two days at a time and could not work on the road. Many were so fed up with the conditions that on July 20th, 1760, 40 men deserted the regiment.

Figure 5. This 1860 map of Vermont traces the path of the Crown Point Road 100 years after it was completed by Colonel Goffe and his men. The detail with which the route is recorded suggests that even a century later, large portions of the road may have still been intact (or only recently lost to development or abandonment).

Bibliography

*GIS Data
*USGS Topo Maps, ArcGIS Online