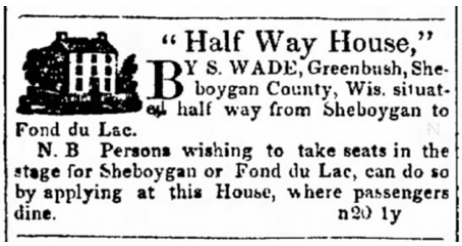
Plank Roads

Post & Lesson Plan

Plank Roads

Imagine a Wisconsin without any roads. Do you think it would be hard to get around? Before the 1850s, Wisconsin did not roads, at least not ones you would recognize. Most travel across was on footpaths made by Native Americas or along rivers like the Milwaukee or Wisconsin. As more people moved to Wisconsin, settlers cut thick prairies and forests into roads. This was a lot of work for dirt paths. Even worse, these paths would turn into mud when it rained. Travelers had to wait for wet roads to dry or risk sinking into the sticky mud.



"Half Way House,"

BY S. WADE, Greenbush, Sheboygan County, Wis. situated half way from Sheboygan to Fond du Lac.

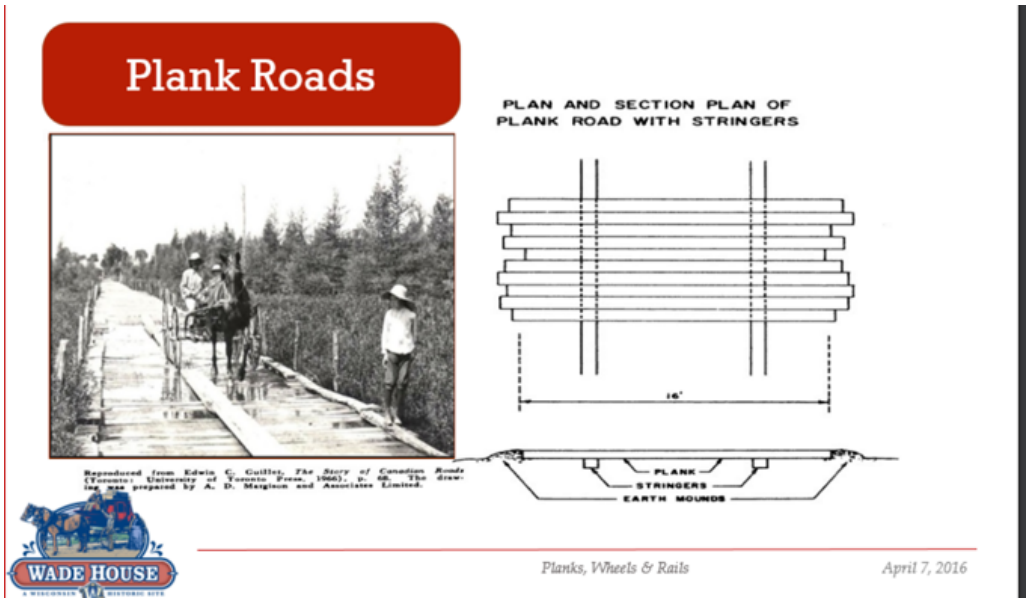
N. B Persons wishing to take seats in the stage for Sheboygan or Fond du Lac, can do so by applying at this House, where passengers dine. n20 1y

A newspaper clip advertising a stagecoach ride along the plank road.

Early settlers began to think of new ways to connect towns. However, people disagreed on the best way. Some liked railroads. They were fast and reliable but expensive. The first railroad between Milwaukee and Waukesha, for instance, started working in 1851. Others had heard about the success of plank roads in Canada. They heard these roads were better than dirt roads because travelers could carry heavier loads more quickly, they were smoother to travel on, Wisconsin was filled with trees to make them, and they were cheaper than railroads.

Additionally, plank roads were easy to make. Planks were laid down parallel with the dirt road. Then, longer and thicker planks were placed on top across the base planks. The edges of these planks were covered with dirt to keep them in place.

On the left of the image, you can see people traveling along the plank road. On the right, there is a diagram of how the plank road was made. Image courtesy of the Wade House.



Building these wooden roads also could boost the economy as Wisconsin was full of woodlands. Creating wooden roads would make more work for **lumberjacks** and sawmills. It seemed that plank roads would benefit a lot of people. That is why many were interested in funding plank roads. One problem was that the state government did not have the money to fund them. Lack of state funding was common.

Plank roads relied on private funding. Private funders were usually businessmen, looking for investments to make them money. One private funder was Sylvanus Wade. He played a big role in organizing and funding the plank road from Sheboygan to Fond du Lac. Wade acted as the plank road's promoter, **investor**, and member of the Board of Directors. He likely helped fund the plank road because it would bring more people through his town.

Sylvanus Wade lived in Greenbush and ran the Wade House. The Wade House was a hotel, restaurant, dance hall, and public house. It was a great place to stop and get a meal cooked by Mrs. Wade, hear the local gossip, or to rest one's head. Because Greenbush was half-way between Sheboygan and Fond du Lac, Sylvanus Wade thought tired travelers would stop. Building a plank road seemed like a great business venture.

The road was funded by selling $25 shares of plank road company. The more shares one bought, the greater percentage of the profits one would get. Plank roads, as noted, were private roads. The owners placed toll booths on the road, and travelers had to pay to use the road. If the road was successful, Wade would get profits from people using it and staying at the Wade House.

Eventually, the Sheboygan to Fond du Lac plank road was paid for and completed in 1852. At first, the plank road worked well. It made the lives of farmers especially easier. During the harvest season, 200 wagons carried farming goods to market every day. It was a real improvement.

Unfortunately, it seems people did not consider the difference between Canada's and Wisconsin's climates. In Canada, the plank roads lasted around ten years. In Wisconsin, they lasted less than five. Hot summers and shorter winters made the wood rot. This paired with a high volume of travel from farmers and travelers meant that the roads needed serious repairs much sooner than expected. However, the roads did not make enough money to pay for the needed repairs. These repairs made plank roads pricy for their owners.

As a result, many owners stopped paying for repairs. When this happened, the state government took ownership of the roads, making them public roads. Some attempted to fix the rotting roads by filling them with dirt, but after twenty years, most of the roads had turned back into the dirt roads they replaced. The Sheboygan-Fond du Lac plank road, for example, was nearly dirt after only ten years.

Travel along the plank road during harvesting season. Image courtesy of the Wade House.

For this reason, many Wisconsinites turned to the already established and popular railroads. Railroads in the end were preferred to plank roads because the roads needed too many repairs and the railroads were much faster. Many railroads also got more money from investors. Since, investors on the east coast thought railroads were better. Railroads benefited from more investment than the plank roads. Luckily for Wisconsin, the failure of plank roads did not have any serious effects on the state. Railroads were successful, and they made trade easier in Wisconsin and across the nation.

Word Bank:

Lumberjack (luhm-br-jack): a North American worker in the logging industry who cuts down and transports trees for processing into forest products.

Investor (uhn-veh-str): a person that spends money on someone with the expectation of a future financial return

Reading Comprehension Questions:

1) What was the plank road? What was it made out of?

2) Who traveled along the plank road?

3) Knowing what you know about the fall of the plank road, what could have been done to make it better?

4) Do you think plank roads would be useful today?

5) What would have happened if the plank road was made of crushed stone instead of wooden planks?

Plank Roads

Enduring Questions:

- How do objects help us understand Wisconsin history?

Essential Questions:

- Why do we save things?
- What makes the things we save important?
- What questions can objects help us answer?
- How do we unlock the meaning of an object?

Wisconsin Standard for Social Studies

Behavioral Sciences:

- Give examples of how peoples from different cultures develop different values and ways of interpreting experiences. **(SS.BH2)**
- Classify technologies based on intended use, access, and design, and how they might change people's lives (for better or worse). (**SS.BH4**)

Social Studies Inquiry Practices and Processes:

- Evaluate the strength of claim, evidence, and communication using criteria established by both teacher and student. **(SS.Inq4)**
- Explore opportunities for personal or collaborative civic engagement with community, school, state, tribal, national, and/or global implications **(SS.Inq5)**

Economics:

- Use economic reasoning to compare and contrast the costs and benefits of a decision. **(SS.Econ1)**
- Categorize different limited resources (e.g., money, materials, time, labor/workers, land, natural resources, renewable or nonrenewable). **(SS.Econ1)**
- Predict unintended costs and benefits (i.e., externalities) for a given current situation or event. **(SS.Econ4)**
- Differentiate between private property (e.g., factories and homes) and public property (e.g., parks, public schools, and government buildings). **(SS.Econ4)**

Geography:

- Classify various ways that people and countries depend on one another. **(SS.Geog3)**
- Summarize how transportation and communication have changed economic activities over time. **(SS.Geog4)**

History:

- Use evidence to draw conclusions about probable causes of historical events, issues, and problems. **(SS.Hist1)**
- Describe patterns of change over time in the community, state, and the United States. **(SS.Hist2)**
- Explain how historical events have possible implications on the present. **(SS.Hist3)**

Political Science:

- Classify the basic structures and functions of governments, and summarize basic powers of the government at the local, state, tribal, and federal levels. **(SS.PS3)**

Content Questions:

- What were the advantages of a plank road over a dirt road?
- Who decided to build a plank road? Were they right in their reasoning?
- How did plank roads change transportation? What do they tell us about transportation?

Educational Goal Assessment:

- Discuss the importance of different forms of transportation
- Compare and contrast different types of transportation
- Practice research and inference skills

Activity #1: Past and Present

- Pick one type of transportation and list two advantages and disadvantages: see below

Activity #2: Match

- Identify the type of transportation and match it to the correct pathway: see below

Activity #3: Town Hall

- With the information you have learned about plank roads and rail roads, have students split into groups and find the best material for a new road. Let students research different types of materials and decide on a new one.
    - **Things for students to consider:**
        - What the road is made of? This one is important. One possible trick could be to search for "The History of Roads." This search will show someone what kind of roads have been tried and maybe why they failed. This is important to consider for deciding on one's own road.
        - How much will this cost?

                What will move on this road?

Bibliography:

Special thank you to all at the Wade House for help on the research and writing process!

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Starling, Robert B. "THE PLANK ROAD MOVEMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA: PART I." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (1939): 1-22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23513946.

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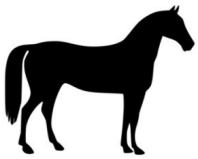
List the one advantage and disadvantage for these types of transportation

 Average speed: 60 - 65 MPH	 Average Speed: 55-65 MPH
 Average speed: 6.5 MPH	 Average speed: 5 MPH

***Note:** Speed is not always an advantage. Try and consider why going slower may be better?

Match to the correct pathway: Remember that some forms of transportation can match more than once!

1. 

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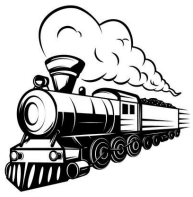
3. 

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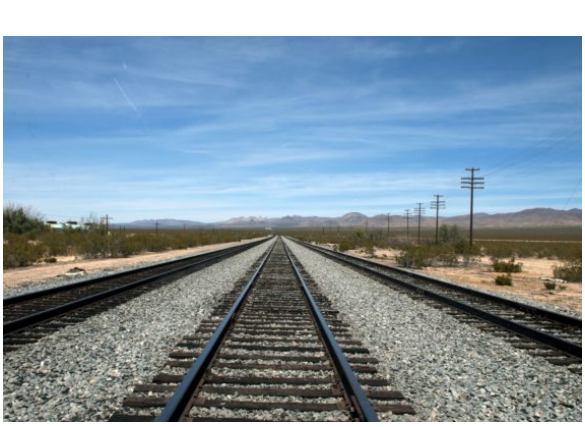
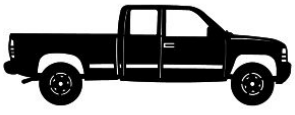
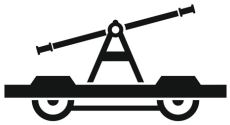
6. 

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