

Planning A Knox Trail Road Trip

How to plan a Knox Trail road trip? You need a guidebook (and maybe I'll write one).

In the early, winter months of 1776, Henry Knox did the impossible. He brought 60 tons of captured cannon from Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York to George Washington who was holding the British under siege in Boston. Overnight on March 4th, Washington moved the biggest of these cannon to the top of Dorchester Heights and two weeks later, on March 17, 1776 – celebrated since 1901 as Evacuation Day – the Brits sailed out of Boston never to return.

(Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip did visit Boston in July of 1976 as part of the Bicentennial and addressed a gathering in friendship outside of the Old State House.)



British Cannon Abandoned on March 17, 1776 (Cambridge Common)

Massachusetts and New York, in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the British evacuation from Boston, worked together in the mid-1920s to place markers along what they hoped was Knox's original route.

But Knox and the cannon had traveled mostly over old Native American paths, frozen rivers and wilderness areas crossing the mountainous Berkshires. Even determining his course through more developed areas proved difficult as he left at best sketchy diary notes from which to ascertain specifics and those largely ran out at the Massachusetts border.

In 1925-26, communities assumed to have been along the way were asked to try their best. Old maps were consulted by local historians. And many a story handed down three or more generations was brought to light.

Scholars and would-be scholars since the idea of the Trail was first proposed have speculated over Knox's exact route. In the 1970s, a Western Massachusetts postmaster actually got a section of the Trail and its markers moved in light of new research. And one gentleman was recently reported still out in the woods of Otis, Massachusetts looking for signs.

In its 1925 preliminary report to the Massachusetts legislature, the General Knox Commission made the following basic recommendations:

“For the sake of historic reminders to the present and future generations, the Commission, in consulting with the selectmen and other officials of the various cities and towns, arrived at the conclusion that the markers should be located at or near such parts of the old road as are now merged with the State highways that constitute the main thoroughfares. The Commission also recommends that the lettering on the markers be of such size that travelers may readily read them and ascertain their purpose as they drive by.”

The Commissioners must have known that this plan would overlay the course of current “main thoroughfares” to create a chain of markers not strictly following Knox's supposed original route. It seems likely that it was felt more important to have the markers placed where “travelers may readily read them.”

In 1925, Massachusetts was first to have the idea for a Henry Knox Trail and expected to complete it across the Commonwealth in the anniversary year of 1926. But after New York took it up in mid-1926, the prospect of completion was delayed until 1927.

Of course, these two (perpetually at odds) states couldn't agree to do exactly the same things. They decided to erect similar looking granite slabs, but the Massachusetts slab has a sloped top while New York's is flat. They did agree to use an identical narration and imagery of the cannon train. But the text on the Massachusetts markers is inscribed with a small *bas-relief*, bronze plaque depicting the train, while New York decided on fastening an all-inclusive *bas-relief*, bronze plaque. And a different artist had to be hired to create each.



Bolton Landing, NY



Monterey, MA

As to the number of markers, the Massachusetts legislature resolved that the Commission:

“purchase and supervise the erection of a suitable marker in each of the cities and towns on the route in this commonwealth over which General Henry Knox brought the guns and ammunition captured at Fort Ticonderoga to General Washington at the camp of the Colonial army in Cambridge ...”

Lacking specific historic detail to rely on, the Massachusetts commission identified 26 cities and towns through which it believed Knox had passed and had a budget of \$6,000.00 approved for the markers, with the localities to bear the cost of erection and future maintenance. Inscribing the text allowed the possibility of variation.

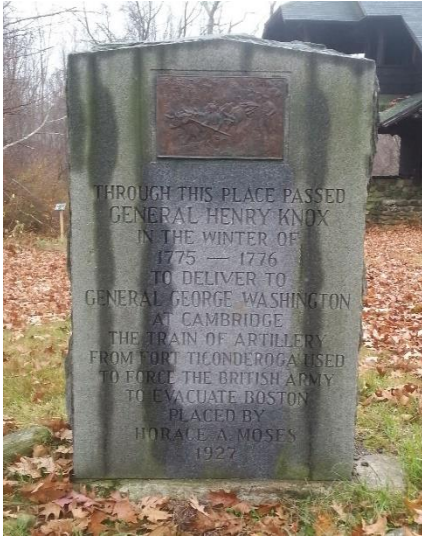
New York, which had the advantage of more specific details from Knox’s diary, was able to make many of its placement decisions based on fact and chose to erect 30 identical markers along its portion of the route.

Massachusetts initially planned on erecting a marker at the border. But New York assumed that responsibility after it got involved, and the border marker is the last of its identical 30. Straddling the borderline, the opposite side of this double-sided marker imitates the Massachusetts markers with a *bas-relief* plaque of the cannon train and an inscribed text recognizing the border crossing. (Looking closely, you can see that the Massachusetts side was done without a chiseled frame around the plaque and with a slightly different style of lettering.) This was one of the markers moved as a result of new research.



Double-sided Border Marker

Finally, New York added a unique *bas-relief* plaque for a marker placed inside Fort Ticonderoga. The Massachusetts legislature ordered a uniquely inscribed one placed on Dorchester Heights.



Horace A. Moses Marker

And a wealthy, Massachusetts individual, Horace A. Moses, who was born in Ticonderoga, New York, got permission to purchase and place one of his own.

This made a total of 59 original markers.

Now, as to our road trip. To plan any trip, you need to start with a destination. I had a practically impossible time pinning down the number and location of the markers from available sources. My wife and I completed (by car) what I could identify of the Henry Knox Trail in two phases, the first was done in mid-November and the second in January – timed to mirror the seasonal start and finish of Knox’s journey.

We found all the markers we knew of and almost all of them in total as it turned out. But afterwards, it took a trip to the Massachusetts Archives and some archivist assistance before the attached list of 61 marker sites (the marker at Ensign Lane in Stillwater, New York is missing) could be compiled.* The two additional to the original 59 were added in recent years; one in Roxbury in 2009 along the route to Dorchester Heights that the cannon took after dark on March 4, 1776, and one at Crown Point in 2017 to recognize the 29 cannon from there that were brought to Fort Ticonderoga ahead of Knox’s arrival.

While following the Trail offers greater appreciation for Knox’s accomplishment, as travelers and tourists, we found far more to do along the Henry Knox Trail than just tracking down markers.

*A different Knox Trail marker is located at Stone’s Bridge in Wayland with a story of its own. Find out what that is at the annual meeting of the Wayland Historical Society on May 11, 2022 at 7:00 P.M.

(This is the second in a series of pieces about the Henry Knox Trail. There’s more history and travel detail to come.)

Steven Glovsky of Wayland can be contacted at TravelsWithTwain.com.