

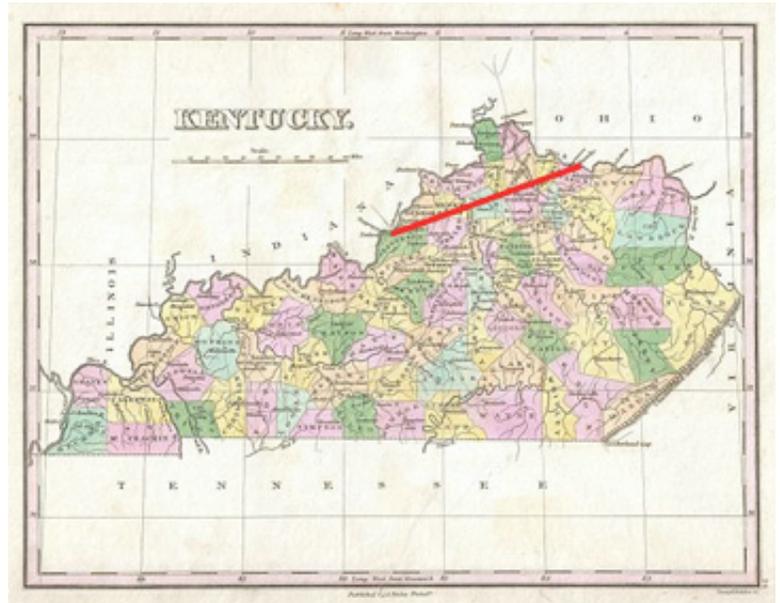
Maysville Road Bill of 1830

An act of Congress to fund internal improvements in Kentucky and a political battle over the federal financing of internal improvements.

In 1830, Congress approved a bill presented by Henry Clay, Whig Speaker of the House of Representatives, for federal payment of up to \$150,000 in the Maysville, Washington, Paris, and Lexington Turnpike Road Company, a turnpike project in central Kentucky. The turnpike would constitute the first part of a planned larger road that would connect New Orleans via the Natchez Trace and Maysville Road with the National Road in Ohio. The bill also served as an expression of Clay's larger vision of economic nationalism, known as the American System, an aspect of which—the promotion of internal improvements—had strong popular support among westerners.

President Andrew Jackson vetoed the bill in a carefully crafted message designed to appease western Democrats who favored internal improvements. Although he rejected federal funding for transportation projects, he sought to maintain the political approval of westerners. Furthermore, both Jackson and Martin Van Buren, secretary of state, who wrote much of the veto, despised Clay and used the Maysville bill as a way to derail the American System. Thus, the veto remained more politically than economically inspired, an understanding shielded by the language of the veto message, which argued for a strict interpretation of the Constitution regarding federal funding of interstate projects and for fiscal responsibility.

Following the veto, Clay attempted to resurrect the American System by redefining the funding of internal improvements. Trying to circumvent Jackson's constitutional scruples, Clay turned to the idea of linking internal improvements with the sale of federal land, making the proceeds of land sales solely available for internal improvements. In later years, congressional opposition to this policy of monetary distribution to transportation companies solidified its support in favor of land grants, particularly railroad land grants. The Maysville veto marked the end of federal funding of state transportation projects. Americans had by the 1830s come to rely on state funding for transportation projects and had also lost their enthusiasm for Clay's American System.



Maysville Road veto

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The **Maysville Road veto** occurred on May 27, 1830, when President [Andrew Jackson](#) vetoed a bill that would allow the Federal government to purchase stock in the Maysville, Washington, Paris, and Lexington Turnpike Road Company, which had been organized to construct a road linking [Lexington, KY.](#) and [Maysville, KY.](#), on the [Ohio River](#), the entirety of which would be in the state of [Kentucky](#). Its advocates regarded it as a part of the national [Cumberland Road](#) system. Congress passed a bill in 1830 providing federal funds to complete the project. Jackson vetoed the bill on the grounds that federal funding of intrastate projects of this nature was unconstitutional. He declared that such bills violated the principle that the federal government should not be involved in local economic affairs. Jackson also pointed out that funding for these kinds of projects interfered with paying off of the national debt.^[1]

Proponents of [internal improvements](#), such as the development of roads and bridges, argued that the federal government had an obligation to harmonize the nation's diverse, and often conflicting, sectional interests into an "[American System](#)." Jackson's decision was heavily influenced by his Secretary of State [Martin Van Buren](#). Some authors have described the motives behind the veto decision as personal, rather than strictly political. The veto has been attributed to a personal grudge against [Henry Clay](#), as well as to preserve the trade monopoly of New York's [Erie Canal](#), in Van Buren's case.^[2] Martin Van Buren then became known as a failure in the White House because of the economic problems at the time.

Debate in Congress

Supporters of the bill insisted on the project's national significance. This particular project was intended to be a part of a much larger interstate system extending from [Zanesville, Ohio](#) to [Florence, Alabama](#). If the highway as a whole was of national significance, they argued, surely the individual sections must be as well.^[3] They looked to the [Supreme Court](#) decision handed down six years before in [Gibbons v Ogden](#), in which the court confirmed the power to regulate commerce among the states including those portions of the journey which lay within one state or another. Additionally, the road connected the interior of Kentucky to the Ohio River, and therefore served as the main artery for the transportation of goods. Kentucky Representative [Robert Letcher](#) made this argument regarding the road's connection to the rest of the nation:

The road designed to be improved is intended to intersect at the great national road in the State of Ohio. It connects itself also on each side with the Ohio River. These two connections most certainly and justly entitle it to the appellation of a national work.^[4]

Moreover, the federal government had provided funding for other intrastate projects when they benefited the rest of the nation. As Representative Coleman stated:

But gentlemen say, every inch of the Maysville road is in the State of Kentucky. How can it be national? I answer, every inch of the Delaware Canal, sixteen miles in length, is in the State of New Jersey; and every inch of the Louisville Canal is in one county; nay, I believe in one city. How can they be national? Yet, Congress have subscribed for stock in both of them.^[5]

These arguments were all intended to illustrate the road's overwhelming national significance. Opponents responded that this line of argument would establish that every road was a national road; there would be no limit to federal power.^[6]

Jackson's veto

Jackson believed that federal money should only be spent when carrying out Congress' enumerated powers. President [Thomas Jefferson](#) employed a broad view of the spending power when he carried out the [Louisiana Purchase](#) and the construction of the Cumberland Road. In contrast, President [James Madison](#), the "Father of the Constitution," a [strict constructionist](#),^[citation needed] viewed this type of spending as unconstitutional, as evidenced by his veto of the [Bonus Bill](#). Jackson sided with Madison's view and felt that Jefferson's broad view of the spending power was not enough to justify passage of the bill before him.

One of Jackson's main arguments against the bill was the project's provincial nature. It was understood that Congress could only fund projects which benefited that nation as a whole, but the Maysville project was "purely local matter:"

"It has no connection with any established system of improvements; is exclusively within the limits of a State, starting at a point on the Ohio River and running out 60 miles to an interior town, and even as far as the State is interested conferring partial instead of general advantages."

Jackson was quick to clarify that this did not imply that he would approve of projects which were of "national" character. Even though there is not a constitutional argument to be made against this type of action, it would be unwise to do so at the time, given the public debt. Until the debt was paid off, there would be no surplus to spend on these projects. Generally, Jackson supported internal improvements. During his first term, he sanctioned federal expenditures for transportation projects at a rate nearly double that of the expenditures under President [John Quincy Adams](#).^[7] It was seen as good policy to spend federal money on national improvements, as long as two conditions were met. First, they should be done pursuant to a general system of improvement, not by ad hoc legislation. Second, the Constitution should be amended to make clear the limits on federal power.^[8]

Some scholars^[who?] argue that Jackson's veto can be seen as largely driven by personal, rather than political motives, particularly given Jackson's approval of internal improvement bills with as much a local nature as the Maysville Road. Jackson's veto may have been one of the many manifestations of the rivalry between Jackson and Henry Clay, who was one of the major proponents of the Maysville Road as part of his [American System](#).

Because the Maysville Road Project was of a local nature the veto did not find a resounding opposition in Congress. In fact, the veto would please voters in New York and Pennsylvania who were responsible for financing their own projects, and saw no reason to help fund similar projects in other states. It also appealed to Southern [states' rights](#) supporters who had no need for canals or new roads. For Jackson, this decision underscored his belief that the construction of roads and canals lay more within the realm of the states rather than the federal government. This belief in limiting the federal government's scope of action was to be one of the tenets of [Jacksonian Democracy](#).

In 1846 President [James K. Polk](#), an admirer and follower of Jackson, vetoed the [Rivers and Harbors Bill](#) on similar grounds. [Henry Clay](#) and his [Whig Party](#), by contrast supported both the 1830 and 1846 bills because they believed the national government had a responsibility to promote trade commerce and economic modernization.^[9]

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