

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 13—\$50 Million Main Street

Before 1941, Vestal's primary shopping district was located on North Main Street and at the eastern end of Front Street. Change was on the way when a new 2-lane road, the Vestal-Binghamton Highway or Route 17, was constructed between the Binghamton city line and Main Street. The first two lanes of the Vestal-Binghamton Highway opened in 1941, but the impact to stores on Front and Main Streets would not be felt for more than 10 years. Between 1941 and 1951 farmland still lined the highway and large billboards popped up in open fields.

Congestion on Front Street was relieved in July 1949 when the two mile western extension of the highway between Main Street and the Tioga County line was finally completed. Designed in the parkway style, it had four lanes divided by a median or mall. The Vestal Parkway West created what locals called the "5 Corners" ...the intersection of Front Street, the Parkway West, North Main Street, the Vestal-Binghamton Highway, and South Main Street. Newspapers published numerous photos of everyday gridlock and frequent accidents at the intersection.



Each year the volume of traffic on the Vestal-Binghamton Highway increased prompting the addition in 1951 of two westbound lanes from 5 Corners to the Binghamton city line. The parkway style was again used for what would become Vestal Parkway East.



Not only did the Parkway add to the confusion at 5 Corners but it created a new type of hazard...crossovers. There were very few crossovers on Parkway West compared to the eastern section. Traffic was forced to come to a stop or drive around trucks and long vehicles that protruded into the driving lane as they waited in the crossover for a break in traffic. It was a heart-stopping trip that grew worse as traffic increased annually after the 1954 construction of the Route 201/C. Fred Johnson Bridge to Johnson City. Congestion further increased at

Part of the traffic problem stemmed from the junction of the road (Route 26) carrying traffic between the Highway and the Vestal-Endicott Bridge. Rush hours were chaotic. Cars traveling north over the viaduct on their way to factories in Union had to navigate the intersections with no turning lanes or traffic lights.

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 13—\$50 Million Main Street (continued)

the eastern end of the Parkway when construction of the new Harpur College campus began in 1954. The October 1963 opening of the T. J. Watson Memorial Bridge between Vestal and Endicott provided easy access for those traveling to new subdivisions south, east, and west of central Vestal.

Land values along the Parkway exploded as dirt turned into gold. Acres of open fields were broken into smaller parcels for businesses. Ansco, Ozalid, IBM, Columbian Mutual Insurance, Lu & Johns, and Star Dry Cleaners, was joined by Weston's Shoppers City, Star's, and Grandway. Fast food restaurants and gas stations filled the spaces in between. The Vestal Steak House was one of the earliest restaurants on the Parkway followed by the Red Barn, Frankie & Johnnies, Pee-Tee's, Chicken Inn, and Betty's Drive Inn to name just a few. The Quonset hut Vestal Theater, Loblaw's grocery store, Hills Bakery, Colonial Motor Inn, Howard Johnson's, Vestal Hills Country Club, and the V Drive-In all boasted a Parkway address.

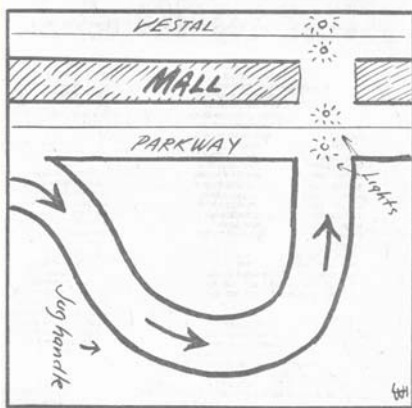
An article in June 1957 proclaimed the Parkway as the "No. 1 Traffic Accident Scene". Speed along the Parkway was debated from the local to the state level. The Town safety plan proposed dropping the speed from 50 to 40 mph. Yet Parkway accidents continued to soar prompting a representative from the State Highway Department to recommend in March 1962 the elimination of 29 of the 63 crossovers. The Vestal News reported 365 accidents on the Parkway in 1965. A decision concerning the addition of turning lanes, which began in 1963, was still undecided in 1966 when the Department of Public Works proposed constructing "jug handles" as a safe solution to replace the crossovers. Before the year was

out left turning lanes and five traffic lights, at Vestal Avenue, Bunn Hill, Rano, African, and Clayton Ave. were planned. Even Governor Rockefeller called for more safety measures on the Parkway. Traffic signals and turning lanes were completed in 1967. These improvements might have had a more significant impact if not for the utility poles and ubiquitous signs vying for a driver's attention. The profusion of signs and lights, especially on a rainy night, made driving even more hazardous.

At the eastern end of the Parkway, close to the city line, the 32 houses comprising Rivercrest were witness to the ever increasing traffic. It was there that the eastern end of Vestal Road entered the Parkway at an angle. Drivers heading east on Vestal Road had to cross the two lanes of westbound Parkway traffic to merge into the eastbound lanes of the Parkway...a hair-raising experience considering that you had to look into oncoming traffic then backward over your right shoulder to gauge the speed of eastbound traffic before cutting across to merge into the eastbound lanes. Timing was crucial. This "accident waiting to happen" was finally corrected in 1970 when eastbound traffic on Vestal Road ended at Murray Hill Road.

The new Route 17 Expressway was supposed to relieve the Parkway from being a "thruway" for transient traffic when it opened in September 1969. The Parkway was to become Vestal's main shopping thoroughfare, or as the Vestal News coined it in 1967, our "\$50 Million Main Street". But the Expressway had little effect on Parkway traffic because businesses and plazas wanted to locate along those golden miles. Despite the unending improvements, newspaper articles from 1977 reported an increase in accidents and in 1998 another study of traffic problems by the Department of Transportation (DOT) was proposed.

The Parkway needed a new route number when Route 17 was assigned to the new Expressway. Initially the State planned to renumber the Parkway to Route 188 which meant the area would have a Route 81, Route 188 and Route 88...how confusing would that have been. Fortunately clearer heads prevailed and the Parkway became Route 434. In 1967 the 5 Corners were reconfigured to four when the intersection of Front and Main Streets was moved south about 200 feet. No longer needed, the old viaduct over the D. L. & W. railroad tracks was demolished the following year.



Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary 1823-2013

No. 13—\$50 Million Main Street (continued)

Times changed, the once bustling hamlets of Tracy Creek and Vestal Center were now quiet rural landscapes compared to the congested east-west corridor along the Susquehanna where the 7.5 mile Vestal Parkway represented the busiest and most valuable real estate in town.

Additional information, sources, and photos are available at the Historian's office.