

In the beginning, ships brought settlers and provided a link to the rest of the world. Maryland's abundant waterways, including Chesapeake Bay and navigable tidal rivers and creeks, served travel and communication needs until settlement moved inland. Ferries were the first form of transport covered by law. An act of 1638/9 provided for a ferry across St. George's River to enable persons to attend provincial assemblies in St. Mary's City; toll was set at one pound of tobacco. By 1658, a more general need for ferries was expressed, and the Assembly required each county, except Kent, to maintain a ferry out of the county tax levy. The 1658 act made the county courts responsible for ferries, though ferry operations soon were assumed by private enterprise. The county courts later became responsible for roads as well, and over the next two centuries, while the legislature authorized the laying out, building, and repairing of roads and bridges, both public and private, the counties, through commissioners or elected road commissioners, actually built and paid for them.

Maryland's first road law was passed in 1666. It ordered county commissioners to make highways and paths passable for persons on horse and foot by 1668. In each county overseers were to be appointed, and either tobacco or labor was to be assessed against county taxables. Compelling county residents to work a certain number of days per year on county roads was rooted in English custom, dating from feudal times, and became a long-lasting tradition in Maryland. An act of 1704 also required roads to be made passable but was more specific: the roads were to be cleared and grubbed to a width of twenty feet; substantial bridges built where needed; trees alongside notched in such a way that the traveler could tell if the road led to a ferry, courthouse, church, or to Annapolis or Williamstadt; the public roads recorded annually in the county records; and fines set for any person failing to do his road duty. Despite the volume of road legislation between 1704 and 1804, travel on Maryland roads remained a harrowing experience according to contemporary accounts. Plenty of roads were cleared, but few had improved surfaces of any kind. The movement westward required roads able to bear heavy wagons; the French and Indian War required a military supply road to Fort Cumberland; post roads were needed for efficient communication and trade between colonies. County labor and tax levies were unequal to growing demand. In 1788, convicts and vagrants were sentenced to work on public roads (Chapter 11, Acts of 1788). In 1787, Baltimore County was called upon to fund and oversee several turnpikes leading to Baltimore Town (Chapter 23, Acts of 1787).

Turnpikes played an important role in road development in Maryland. Although more turnpike companies failed than succeeded, the best roads in the State were turnpikes. Some fell into disuse, others reverted to the counties, but Maryland was unique in the number of private turnpikes which existed into the twentieth century. The State Roads Commission purchased the last one in 1921. Turnpikes relieved the counties of the financial burden of building and maintaining roads by investing private capital in what had proved to be a monumental task and by making road users pay for upkeep. The legislature chartered any number of private turnpike companies between 1787 and 1804 with limited success, as indicated by an act of 1804 which mentions "the public expectation almost entirely frustrated" (Chapter 51, Acts of 1804). The companies incorporated under the 1804 act compensated Baltimore County for work accomplished under the 1787 act and succeeded in building most of Maryland's major routes west. However, no company sought incorporation to build the last connecting link to the National Road in Cumberland without which trade from the interior would be lost. The legislature came up with a complex scheme which tied together the renewal of bank charters, construction of the Cumberland Turnpike, and funding for free schools (Chapter 122, Acts of 1813). By 1825, the major turnpikes in Maryland were completed and, in their heyday, Baltimore was the terminus for seven pikes. In 1834, the federal government turned over to Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland those sections of the National Road within their respective borders to become turnpikes. Maryland's legislature, in anticipation of federal action, had already set tolls and provided for the appointment of one of the earliest State transportation officials, the Superintendent of the National Road (Chapter 85, Acts of 1831).

Paralleling the turnpike movement was the nationwide craze for internal improvements, i.e., canals and railroads. George Washington himself was instrumental in setting up the Potomac Company to open navigation on the Potomac River up to Cumberland by means of canals around the worst rapids. In 1784, Maryland confirmed the charter issued by Virginia, and although the Potomac Company did overcome some obstacles to navigation, it soon ran into debt (Chapter 33, Acts of 1784). A bi-state commission in 1821 recommended abandoning the charter and the riverbed, and instead, perhaps inspired by the near-completion of the Erie Canal, building a canal in the river valley from the Potomac to the Ohio River. The legislature, hoping to recoup in part its financial investment in the Potomac Company, chartered the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company in 1823 (Chapter 140, Acts of 1823). Baltimore interests expected no benefit from the proposed canal, although a feeder canal to Baltimore had been discussed, and on July 4, 1828, as ground was broken for the canal, it also was broken for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (Chapter 123, Acts of 1826), which Baltimore entrepreneurs hoped would bring western trade to Baltimore. Maryland owned huge blocks of stock in both ventures; previously the legislature had invested