Some say it was the roads that made Monroeville what it is today. In fact, the local Planning Commission once went so far as to declare Monroeville to be “a phenomena of the automobile.” The history of Monroeville is inextricably linked with the history of the roads.

By the latter part of the 1700s, Pittsburgh had become a bustling pioneer village with several business houses scattered among the log cabins. Settlements sprang up near Pittsburgh to become small villages in themselves, but the region to the east remained sparsely populated, still heavily wooded, with virgin forests largely intact.

The first families to settle in that region were from a wave of Scots-Irish immigrants encouraged by the Pennsylvania authorities to move west, settle the frontier, and farm the land. By the first half of the 1800s, the area now known as Monroeville was a small village nestled among widely-scattered farms. In what would surely be a precursor of things to come, it was a road that gave the emerging village its first taste of prominence.

By 1807, the grand-daddy of modern highways, the Northern Turnpike was completed from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, and Monroeville, at its convenient location 13 miles out of Pittsburgh, became the first stagecoach stop heading east on the new road.

In 1810 the village could boast of two blacksmiths, two stores, and an inn. The village would develop along the new road, extending east to west. And when a local farmer named Joel Monroe began selling off lots along the road, he was to lay the down the core of the modern community that bears his name.

In 1849 the village, along with present day Turtle Creek, Wilmerding, Wall and Pitcairn, became part of the newly-formed Patton Township. The new Township survived with only minimal government: a Constable to guard the peace, a Board of School Directors, and, most notably -- a Board of Road Supervisors.

In the latter part of the 1800s the coal mining industry around Pittsburgh began to extend eastward. Deep mining of coal began in 1890s, with the coal boom occurring around the time of the First World War as trenches were dug in the cow pastures to get at the thick rich coal of the Pittsburgh seam.

With the coming of the railroads in 1850s the Turtle Creek Valley experienced a dramatic growth, and soon the local mines were feeding a growing steel industry in the valley. To meet the steel industry’s voracious appetite for coal, railroads tracks were laid in the area, and spur lines built to service the coalmines.

In the late 19th century Patton Township enjoyed something of a boom in coal mining; many local residents who didn’t work on the farms were to find employment in the mines, or on the railroads.

But the coal boom ran its course and by the first part of the 1900s, life in the little farming community had lapsed back to what it had pretty much been for the past hundred years. One resident recalled that: “…after the mines had played out, Monroeville became almost a ghost town.”
By that time, those who didn’t work on the farms might take the train from Saunders Station to Pitcairn on their way to work at the giant Westinghouse plant in Wilmerding, or the sprawling railroad yards in Pitcairn.

It was during the 20th century that Monroeville grew from a farm village, with horses and buggies traveling over dirt roads, to a flourishing suburban community laced with major highways carrying thousands of cars, buses, and trucks every day.

Beginning in the 1920s, the pace of road-building quickened. And it was in the 1920s that the William Penn Highway was built, following the route of the Northern Pike. Opening in 1924, it was the first paved road to Pittsburgh. Before that, it took nearly a day to get to downtown Pittsburgh by horse and buggy to Turtle Creek, and then by streetcar to Pittsburgh.

Better roads encouraged the traveling public, and for a time, Monroeville became a destination: a place for the weary city dweller to escape to on a pleasant day drive to the country. Recognizing the allure of the pristine scenery and fresh air, a group of entrepreneurs built Burke Glenn Amusement Park along William Penn Highway in 1926.

In the 1930s and 40s Monroeville was still a sparsely-populated, largely rural community of woods and fields, farmhouses and barns with fenced pastureland. There was not much commercial activity in the farming village except for a few stores along William Penn Highway. Well into the 1940s, many local families still ran farms, complete with barns, cows and horses; horse shows in Monroeville, Irwin, and Greensburg, were major events. Cattlemen drove their cattle in herds from Westmoreland County through Patton Township over the Northern Pike to the stockyards in East Liberty.

In the 1940’s and early 50s, the center of village life was the Farmers’ Auction Barn, where livestock could be bought and sold three nights a week. One of Monroeville’s first commercial attractions, the Auction Barn drew buyers from all over the region, as well as from several surrounding states.

But the horse was to give way to the automobile as Monroeville continued its evolution from a farming community to a suburban one, with increased housing and commercial development.

In the 1940s the New William Penn Highway was built. Originally designed as a by-pass to Old Route 22, new US Route 22 set the stage for today’s business strip that defines the core of modern Monroeville.

By the 1950s, a commercial core was already developing along Route 22 including: grocery stores, a pharmacy, a frozen custard stand, a gas station, and a restaurant. A little further down the road, a drive-in theater was established where the present-day (2005) Lowe’s Home Improvement Center is now located.

During this time there were still many who worked in the mills of the Turtle Creek valley, but now they might get there by car, continuing a tradition of working commuter as Monroeville became something of a “bedroom” community.

Soon a series of asphalt roads and concrete highways, were crisscrossing Monroeville. And in what was surely a fateful decision, Monroeville was designated as the Pittsburgh interchange for the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Once the Pittsburgh interchange was completed at Monroeville in 1950, the possibility of bringing customers from the surrounding communities into Monroeville for shopping became a logical next step.
The economic potential of US Route 22 was seen by a group of farsighted businessmen who bought some property along Business Route 22 and proceeded to build a major shopping center -- The Miracle Mile. The new shopping center was the biggest of its kind between New York and Chicago when it opened in November, 1954. Life in Monroeville changed forever with the coming of the Miracle Mile, as a rural village was launched on its way to becoming a major commercial center.

Following the lead of Miracle Mile, other shopping strips sprang up along Route 22, as did gas stations, car dealerships, fast food stands, and banks. It was a classic case of improved roads and greater access leading to commercial development that, in turn, fueled the need for more housing and better roads.

In 1963, the eastern extension of the Penn-Lincoln Parkway was completed, giving commuters a direct modern highway into downtown Pittsburgh. Residential and business construction in Monroeville soared, and there was a dramatic surge in population.

As Monroeville grew, companies and corporations were increasingly drawn to the attractive suburb. US Steel consolidated its research labs here in 1953, followed by a host of others. Westinghouse built its nuclear research facilities here in 1965 and 1971; Koppers Company opened a research center in 1961; Bituminous Coal in 1962, and later, PPG Industries.

The area grew in importance as a shipping hub with the construction of the Conrail Inter-modal terminal that used a portion of the old Pitcairn Railway Yards for the trans-shipment of cargo in containers hauled by trucks to trains. At the same time, Monroeville’s reputation as a commercial and shopping center was given additional stature with the opening of the Monroeville Mall in 1969.

Today Monroeville is a Municipality of some 30,000, and roads, travel, transportation and commerce remains the lifeblood of the community.