

Telegraph Road is one of the busiest highways in Metro Detroit. However, little has been written about its history because its origins were obscure. Telegraph Road was originally constructed as a telegraph access path and a shorter route connecting Dearborn and Flat Rock. Until the late 1910s, Telegraph remained a minor dirt road.

Pardee Street was the original main road heading south out of Dearborn toward Flat Rock and Monroe. In the early 1830s and 40s references, the route was sometimes known as the “State” or “Territorial” Road between Dearbornville and Flat Rock or Monroe. This mostly meant it was state-sanctioned rather than actually state funded. Local commissioners who were supposed to spearhead construction were appointed when the road was initially approved in 1835. It remained for years an extremely rudimentary route, and residents in 1842 petitioned the state for money in helping make it “passable.” Its course was determined by farm boundaries and natural obstacles that shaped the landscape south of Dearborn.

In 1847, John James Speed built a telegraph line connecting Ypsilanti and points west with Detroit along the Michigan Central Railroad that ran through Dearborn. In 1848, his company also built a telegraph line that connected Ohio with Detroit. An 1850 state plank road charter document mentions there were telegraph wires running along a path between Flat Rock and Dearbornville. As Speed’s Ohio telegraph was one of only two telegraphs heading south from the Detroit area at the time, his line was likely the origin of the Telegraph Road name.

Progress was slow on Telegraph Road. A Taylor Township map by Detroit surveyor Bella Hubbard suggests the route was not a through road until at least several years into the 1850s. Until the 20th century, it was maintained by small township road crews. Early 20th century photos show it would have been a difficult route to use with an early automobile.

Initially, both Telegraph Road and Pardee connected with a road heading southwest out of Dearborn. This road would follow portions of what is now known as Monroe and Madison Streets. One 1906 map listed Madison and Monroe Streets as Telegraph Road. This suggests the 1848 telegraph line in the area may have been built up those streets into the old village of Dearborn. Telegraph Road was only extended up to Michigan Avenue initially to serve farms nearby.

Starting in the 1910s, Telegraph Road changed rapidly into a major road beginning with improvements made by the village of Dearborn. In 1919, the Wayne County Road Commission took over the road and focused on paving and extending Telegraph Road. It was extended as far north as Grand River Avenue in 1923 and finally made it up to Pontiac by the 1930s. In the late 1930s, the railroad overpass and interchange at Michigan and Telegraph Roads was finally built.