

FORGOTTEN TRAILS: JEFFCO'S "TERRIBLE" TOLL ROAD

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Life was harder, transportation was slower, and the word "terrible" didn't even begin to describe the toll road that took intrepid travelers from Bradford City to high country placer mines.

For two hours our exertion to make our horses go any other way than backwards proved futile.

—Surveyor S.G. Jones describing a trek up Bradford Hill.

Before he was elected treasurer of Arapahoe County, New York emigrant Webster D. Anthony made the trip from Denver to Oro City (near Leadville) in 1860. In the November 1934 issue of *Colorado Magazine*, the tax collector recalled awaking early on Tuesday, July 10, to follow a new road—the Bradford Road—toward a mining town near present-day Leadville.

By 10 a.m., Anthony's group reached a narrow pass through the Dakota Hogback. They "wended their way toward Bradford City," he wrote, referencing the new town that the *Rocky Mountain News* advertised as "flourishing." For the thousands of miners, merchants, and trappers who traveled the area between 1860 and 1867, reality quickly supplanted high expectations.

A Lost City

Ken-Caryl's history begins in 1859, when pioneer and entrepreneur Robert Boyles Bradford purchased a tract of land west of Denver. He built a home and stagecoach stop—today's Bradford/Perley House—to service his new wagon road.

The road started near Auraria, in downtown Denver, and ran a purported eight or nine miles to Bradford City, which is now Ken-Caryl Valley's North Ranch neighborhood. From Bradford City, a toll road offered a direct route through the wilderness, promising to get travelers to the South Park and Blue River mines a day faster than existing paths.

By some accounts, Bradford City was poised to be a major Front Range municipality, and there was plenty of

hype surrounding the alleged town. In a *Rocky Mountain News* article from February 22, 1860, for example, John Hughes and Walter J. Welsh reported, "[S]ome hundred houses are either built or in the course of construction." Other reports cited twenty homes. Decades after his trip, Anthony remembered seeing "about thirty vacant houses." And yet another traveler wrote, "The town consists of four houses, uninhabited, and presented rather a desolate appearance."



Bradford/Perley House with outbuildings, circa 1900.

Photo courtesy of the Ken Caryl Ranch Historical Society Archives.

Judging by a photograph from 1900, Bradford City consisted of a single, albeit stately, stone house (Bradford's primary residence), plus a few outbuildings. While newspaper articles described Bradford's home as a hotel, most travelers recounted stories of pleasant nights camping in Bradford City.

Commuters bought supplies and meals in Bradford City, and Bradford "gave guests all he had," one traveler noted, including flour, soda, a bunch of onions from his garden, and milk from the dairy.

Mouths dry from a dusty ride in, everyone in Anthony's party would have been thrilled to find a wide stream carrying fresh mountain snowmelt through the rugged landscape. While records regarding Bradford City vary, most visitors described the area's picturesque setting, flush with abundant grass, "limitless" wood, and plenty of water.

The Road to Riches

In January 1860, S.G. Jones surveyed Bradford's Road. His initial reports praised the route for being short and swift, and in the winter of 1859 and 1860, the legislative assembly organized a company to build Bradford Toll Road.



Robert B. Bradford.

Photo courtesy of the Ken Caryl Ranch Historical Society Archives.

Portions of the wagon road had already been cut out by prospectors and miners the previous fall, according to a *Rocky Mountain News* article from May 22, 1867, and Bradford's company reaped the benefits of work done by laborers whose names we will never know. To get directly through the foothills, Bradford's company took advantage of a preexisting migratory Ute trail, too.

Road construction continued through the winter and into the spring, and the route officially opened by March of 1860. Initial reports described it as a well-graded, time-saving road about eighteen-feet wide and adequate for wagons to pass. The first leg from Denver might not have been so bad, but the segment of road running through the foothills behind Bradford's home was so steep, it quickly became known as "terrible Bradford Hill."



Bradford Toll Road.

Photo courtesy of the Ken Caryl Ranch Historical Society Archives.

About halfway up the hill, travelers came to a toll gate, where they forked over \$1.50 to pass—the equivalent in purchasing power of about \$56.45 today.

Newspapers advertised toll fees as \$1 per wagon and team, each additional span 25 cents, horsemen 10 cents, livestock 5 cents, sheep 1 cent. By all first-person accounts, though, the price was \$1.50, and people traveling to church and funeral services passed for free. During its heyday, the road apparently brought in \$500 dollars a week.

1860 Rocky Mountain News article.

Photo courtesy of the Ken Caryl Ranch Historical Society Archives.

The Bradford and Colorado Wagon Road.

IT'S NOW OPEN and in good order. Persons who desire to go to Tarryall, to the Blue River mines, or to the mines on the head waters of the Platte and Arkansas, will save money and time by taking this Route.

	MILES.
From Denver to Tarryall.....	65
“ “ Blue River.....	80
“ “ Arkansas Mines.....	95

It is believed that this is the best Mountain road in the Territory, and shorter by 18 miles than any other route from Denver to the same points.

2111 R. B. BRADFORD, President.

For some travelers, the toll was a small price for convenience, but for many destitute "Fifty-Niners" it represented a barrier to opportunity. Colorado's Native people

paid the biggest price of all. Records indicate that before they were relocated to Utah, Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe people used the toll road, too, and were quite possibly charged a fee for traversing a path they had traveled for centuries.

Terrible Bradford Hill

Anthony never forgot his ride up Bradford Hill. Past the toll gate, he recalled, "Still the steep hill is before us, and the inquiry naturally arises how are we to get up?"

For an estimated three miles, Bradford Road carved through rocky outcrops and dense forests as it snaked its way past steep slopes. Switchbacks eased the climb, but the grade was still thirteen percent in some places. At times, passengers were required to hop out of their 400-pound wagons and hoof it.

Remembering the harrowing, white-knuckle ride, Anthony wrote, "At some points the road looks dangerous and if an accident happens certain destruction awaits..." What a relief it must have been to make it to the top of Jeffco's "terrible" toll road. The path descended to Turkey Creek Canyon, and proceeded to Bradford Junction (now Conifer), where it joined other wagon roads.

Despite its perils, thousands used the so-called "Air Line" route. Coloradans were still decades away from completing railroads to Leadville, and Bradford's Road saved an estimated 16.5 miles—"a good day's mountain travel with oxen," Ruth Beckwith wrote in her book *Stage House Toward the Hills*.

Doomed to Fail

Maintaining Bradford Toll Road was a fool's errand, a constant battle against the elements. As soon as the Turkey Creek Wagon Road (parts of today's Highway 285) was completed in 1867, Bradford's Road fell into disrepair. When a spring storm washed away miles of roadbeds and bridges, the infamous toll road was left

to return to nature, though some evidence of its existence is still visible today in the foothills above Ken-Caryl Valley.

Bradford lived in his home in Bradford City, until he died in 1876. "Lucy," he once said to a niece, "Someday people will come out here and see this place, and they will call it Bradford's Folly!" But it's hard to imagine that any modern-day Ken-Caryl residents gazing out upon the carefully preserved landscape would think it was all a mistake.