The King's Road in Finland

By Lauri Poropudas

Along the southern coast of Finland lies a centuries-old route known as the King's Road. This route connected Turku (Åbo) and Viipuri (Vyborg) and has been one of the main post routes across Finland and especially to and from Finland, Sweden, Russia, and the Baltics.

This route was formed – at least partly – in the 9th century and the complete route was known by the 13th Century and mentioned in 15th Century documents. In 1638 it became a post road connecting Stockholm, Turku (Åbo), Viipuri (Vyborg), Nyen (the town inhabited mostly by Finns in the place where Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg in 1703), and Sweden's new areas in the Baltics.

In addition to facilitating communications, the rudimentary road served to bind together the new parts of the country. As an emerging European power, Sweden wanted to know what was happening in different parts of the huge country with new nationalities and surrounded by the hostile countries of Russia and Denmark. It was important to have a good network of information and communication between the local rulers and the capital in Stockholm.

This is known as "Sweas Rikes Postwägar Anno 1698," the oldest map showing the post routes in Sweden and Finland. The King's Road is one of the routes. The map belongs to the Postmuseum in Copenhagen.

A drawing from the old map shows the post routes more clearly. The King's Road follows the Finland's south costal line. The King's Road was also called lower Vyborg Road. The Upper Vyborg Road went from Helsinki via Tavastehus (Hämeenlinna). (Drawing by Heikki Pahlman.)

Names of the road

The King's Road has been known by many names that tell us something about its history and importance. Because the road follows the coast of the Gulf of Finland it has been called the Coastal Road or the Great Coastal Road. Vyborg Road is another name that has been used. Lower Vyborg Road separates it from Upper Vyborg Road, which goes inland via Hämeenlinna, 100 kilometers north of Helsinki. (It is seen in the old post map.)

The road also was known as the Summer Road since it was difficult to traverse in the spring and autumn because of water and broken or weak ice. Winter travel was easier when rivers, lakes, and the sea along the coastline were frozen. Travel by either land or water routes was convenient in the summer.

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Although rarely traveled by kings, the King's Road was used by diplomats, couriers, and ordinary travelers. The name King's Road meant that it was built and kept up by the king and the central power. County and local roads were built and kept in order by local authorities, many of whom were selected by the king.

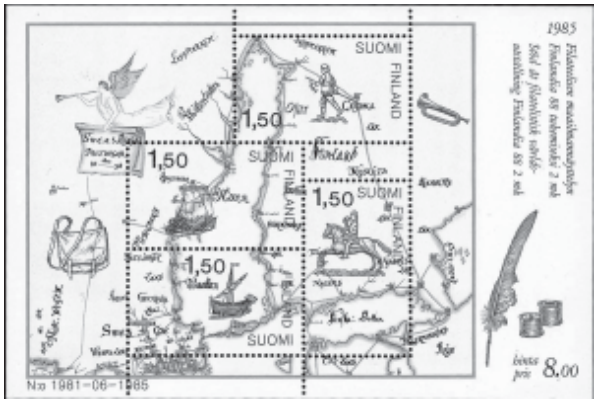
The present day Finnish Tourist Board describes the King's Road this way:

> "For centuries, the road between Stockholm and St. Petersburg was maintained by royal decree. The road was imperative for communication between the kings and queens of the Baltic nations. Without it wars could be fought, commerce would be halted. Land along the road would be given to those loyal to the crown so that it would always be preserved. Here along the road life flourished and the little villages and hamlets sprung up to support international commerce – medieval style."

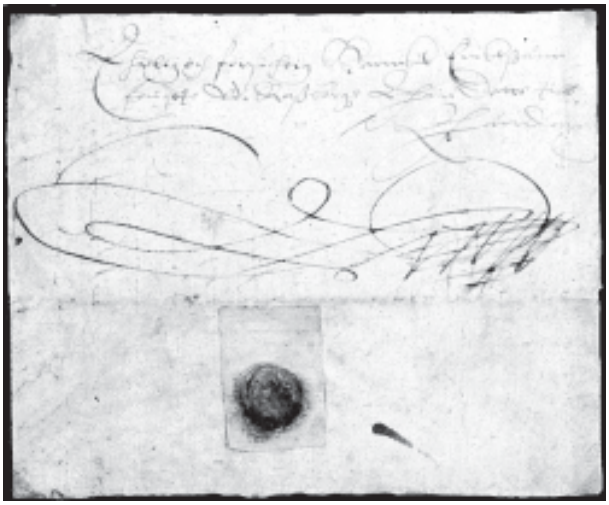
Post road from 1638

The King's Road was a postal route for general post since 1638 when royal bailiff Bernhardt Steen von Steenhausen created the route when traveling to his estates near Nyen. This was the year Finland got its first post office.

It was about this time that other postal routes were decided. The Upper Vyborg Road (Torneå, Haparanda, Uleåborg [Oulu]) went north from Vyborg to Oulu, opening about 1644. A route north from Turku was used when there was weak ice on the Sea of Åland but still not possible to use the water route; it could take two months for the post to be transported to Tornio and Haparanda and then to Stockholm and vice versa. The Finnish portion of the King's Road was about 570 kilometers from Turku to Vyborg.



The 1698 post route map was used in the design of Finland's first miniature sheet issued in 1985 to promote FINLANDIA 88.



This may be the oldest Finnish letter outside the archives, dated July 30, 1599 at Turku Castle. It is addressed to the royal manor in the Raseborg near Tammisaari (Ekenäs). This must have been carried along the King's Road from Turku. (From Heikki Pahlman's collection.)

An ancillary route went from Helsinki to Hämeenlinna and another from Porkkala to Reval (Tallinn) in Estonia. Started in 1640, this route (via sail and rowboat) made the post route much shorter than across the bottom of Finland. For example, it took 7-10 days to travel from Turku to Nyen (St. Petersburg) whereas the same trip on the southern side of the gulf took 2-3 days from Turku to Porkkala and 1-2 days over the sea if the weather was good for rowing (about 80 kilometers).

Post offices and letter carriers

The King's Road got its first post offices when the route opened in 1638. Offices were at Turku (Finland's oldest city), Helsinki, Porvoo, Vehkalahti (1664, later 1723 Hamina) and Vyborg. Still on the route was Käkisalmi on the Lake Ladoga shore, which got its post office in 1638. Porkkala, near Helsinki, where the route to Reval started, was opened in 1640.

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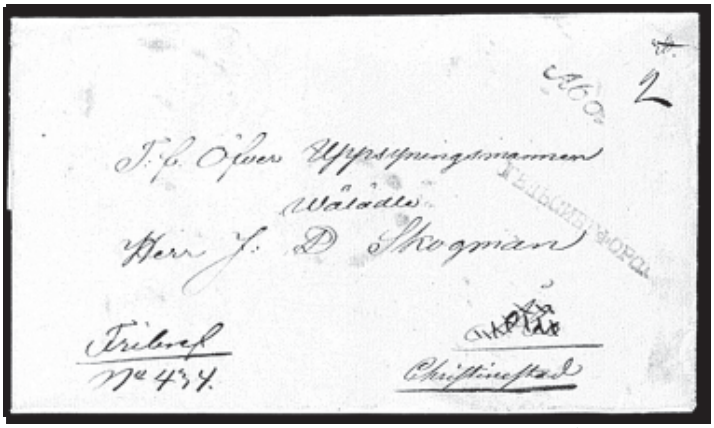


A Christinestad forwarded letter from 1842 bearing Åbo and Russian Helsingfors postmarks. It probably was carried along the King's Road from Helsinki to Turku. (Kaj Hellman auction photo from February 2003.)

Between the post offices, peasant farmhouses were selected to be postal houses. The ideal situation was for postal houses to be 12-20 kilometers apart. The post peasants were relieved of military service, day-labor, and feeding and providing shelter for travelers. These responsibilities were carried by the rest of peasants.

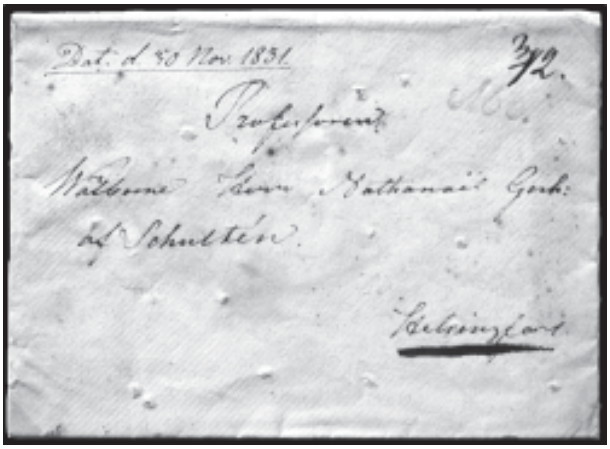
"Postal masters" in these houses were supposed to be literate and usually had a son or a worker to carry the post bag to the next postal house immediately upon its arrival. The deliveryman was supposed to carry the bag by running or certainly in haste, but there was no way of checking if this was done. Later in the 18th Century, horses and carriages were added for deliveries. The postal house or the carriers were not permitted to accept any mail along the route. All letters were to be left at a post office. When this was difficult, exceptions were made – some with permission, some without.

The road was little more than a muddy path in the 17th Century. Maintaining roads was an unwelcome burden for the peasants who were not eager to do this since they had no need for the roads themselves. Neither the climate nor soil conditions are conducive to building and maintaining roads.

Different types of posts developed at different times in the sparsely populated, largely illiterate countryside. There was an official or general post open to all but utilized mostly by persons in official positions. There was a crown post for kings and local and county authorities. There was a church post carried by church servants. The army had its own post. They all used the same routes with various circulation methods. For example, church mail might move from one church to the next and so forth.

Post offices were opened slowly, first in Ekenäs (Tammisaari) ca.1735, then in Degerby 1745-1752 (later Lovisa 1752-) and Karis (Karjaa) ca. 1751. In the last part of the 17th Century, Finland accounted for 2.5-4.8 percent of the income of the Swedish post office. There were 95 post offices in the Swedish system in 1680, of which 17 were in Finland. Turku ranked eighth in income and Vyborg was 15th. Those two towns accounted for one-half to two-thirds of the income for the post from Finland.

There are a few estimates from those years concerning the amount of mail. In 1698, for instance, some 5,748 letters were sent to southern Finland from Stockholm (11,733 if the Baltic areas are included). Most of these went by sea and not over the King's Road. Those numbers are 4.8 percent of all letters sent from Stockholm, but 31.6 percent of all letters going to Finland were official mail with 16.9 percent to other addresses. On the northern route via Haparanda-Torneå (Tornio)- Uleåborg (Oulu), 9,825 letters were carried that year.



Disinfected letter from Turku (the first Åbo postmark was in 1812). Åbo and Wiborg/ Vyborg were written in Latin letters, the remaining 26 in Russian letters. The letter to Helsinki, dated November 11, 1831, was perforated for disinfection. (From Heikki Pahlman's collection.)

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Identifying King's Road mail

The first postmarks were used in 1812 when Finland became a part of the Russian Empire. The cancels were single-row name cancellations without the date. There were 28 post offices that received a postmark, eight of them situated along the King's Road or near to it. The names were spelled in Swedish but written in Russian letters except that Åbo and Vyborg were in Latin letters: Åbo (Turku), Karis (Karjaa), Ekenäs (Tammisaari), Helsingfors (Helsinki), Borgå (Porvoo), Lovisa (Loviisa), Fredrikshamn (Hamina) and Vyborg (Viipuri).

There were five more offices that had postmarks along the route from Åland to Kexholm (Käkisalmi) on Lake Ladoga. This means that one-half of Finland's earliest postmarks were along the King's Road.

The postmarks help to tell the routing. If the destination was along the King's Road we can be sure it traveled that route. Before the use of postmarks, however, routing is a bit complicated. We can say that all post from Sweden or Åland to Russia or to the Baltic region and vice versa went along the King's Road or possibly via the Upper Vyborg Road. Summertime mail from Stockholm to the Baltic and vice versa traveled the King's Road.

Towns mentioned in this article. Listed first are the names in Swedish (used on postmarks of the period) followed by the Finnish spellings in parenthesis.

Vyborg/Wiburg/Wibourg (Viipuri)
Åbo (Turku)
Helsingfors (Helsinki)
Ekenäs (Tammisaari)
Karis (Karjaa)
Kexholm (Käkisalmi)
Uleåborg (Oulu)
Torneå (Tornio)
Haparanda (Haaparanta, on the Swedish side, sister town for Tornio)
Abborfors (Ahvenkoski)
Tavastehus (Hämeenlinna)
St. Pertersburg (Pietari)
Borgå (Porvoo)
Lovisa (Loviisa)
Fredrikshamn (Hamina)

Declining Post, Rising Tourism

The situation changed when Sweden lost its areas in the Baltic. The border shifted to the West and 1725 saw a border post office in the Taskula and after the next war in the Ahvenkoski (1743). On the border, the post master was also the border officer checking passports and examining mail crossing the borders.

The border traffic was quite heavy in the middle of 18th Century because of wars in Europe. For example, Russia was fighting from 1756-63 with Prussia and Austria. These years increased the importance of the King's Road as a postal route. Diplomats, officers, and the post were using the King's Road between Russia and Sweden and into Central Europe. After these wars, Russia used a route via Memel in Lithuania. In addition, there was considerable mail from Russians who occupied areas in east Finland and in Carelia (Karelia) to their relatives inside Finland and Sweden.

The status of the King's Road began to decline after 1809 when Sweden ceded Finland to Russia. Steamboat traffic, which included the post, began in the late 1830s. Rail traffic began in 1862 and in a few decades became the primary courier of the post.

Today the King's Road is promoted as a tourist attraction extending "east to the court of the Czars in St. Petersburg, and west, across Finland and the Baltic Sea, to Stockholm."

The author is Editor of Filatelisti *in Finland.*

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