

# Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway

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## Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway

by Richard F. Weingroff

*The plan to designate a transcontinental highway to honor the President of the Confederate States of America was conceived in 1913. Today, remnants of that highway periodically generate controversy. The following is presented to explain the origins of this highway from America's past.*

The Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway was conceived in 1913 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (U.D.C.). In that era, it was common for private organizations to identify a route, give it a name, and promote its use and improvement. In 1912, Carl Fisher had announced his plans for a "coast to coast" rock highway to be called the Lincoln Highway; the route was announced in September 1913.

Mrs. Alexander B. White conceived the idea of a comparable southern route named after the President of the Confederate States of America. She explained the origins of the route:

During the Chattanooga Confederate Reunion, May, 1913, while talking to my cousin, T. W. Smith, a Confederate Veteran of Mississippi, highways were mentioned, and I said, "I wish we could have a big, fine highway going all through the South."

He said, "You can. Get the 'Daughters' to start one. The Lincoln Highway is ocean to ocean, you can match that with" and I exclaimed, "Jefferson Davis Highway, ocean to ocean." All during that summer I considered the feasibility and wisdom of so great an undertaking for the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the probability of my being called on to put my project through.

Later, while I was preparing my report as president-general to the New Orleans convention, United Daughters of the Confederacy, in November, 1913, Mrs. Robert Houston, Mississippi, made this same suggestion to me. This increased my courage and ended my indecision, so into my report went this recommendation: "That the United Daughters of the Confederacy secure for an ocean to ocean highway from Washington to San Diego, through the Southern States, the name of Jefferson Davis National Highway; the same to be beautified and historic places on it suitably and permanently marked." This recommendation was adopted and the highway project endorsed as a paramount work.

In addition to the transcontinental route, the U.D.C. designated two auxiliary routes:

1. One from Jefferson Davis' birthplace at Fairview, Kentucky, south to Beauvoir, Mississippi, where he lived in later years; and
2. A route through Irwinsville, Georgia, following his route at the end of the Civil War before his capture.

As was the common practice among the named trail organizations, the U.D.C. developed an official marker to be displayed on poles and trees, consisting of three bands, six inches wide of red, white, and red, with the letters "J D H" four inches high, placed one below the other in the center of the stripes. A metal marker was later designed to carry the markings.

Eventually the Jefferson Davis National Highway was extended north along the Pacific Coast via U.S. 99, with the designation completed in 1939 in Washington State. Because the route had an existing number (following adoption of

the U.S. numbered highway system in 1926), the new name was little used. The Jefferson Davis Highway remained a southern affair.

The U.D.C.'s decision to extend the highway to the Canadian border in the Northwest may seem odd. However, the link is not as odd as it may seem. On May 24, 1941, at the instigation of the U.D.C., a monument marking the northwestern terminus of the Jefferson Davis National Highway was unveiled near the Peace Arch at Blaine, Washington. The memorial was justified on the basis that Jefferson Davis, as U.S. Secretary of War before the Civil War, had obtained appropriations and directed surveys for wagon roads and railroads to the North Pacific Coast.

After the U.D.C. conceived the highway and selected its route, it sought support from the States. However, in the early 1910s, most States had weak highway agencies. Some Southern States did not have a State highway agency before 1916-1917. Thus, the U.D.C. was free to promote its highway, including the placement of markers on trees and other objects facing the road. Over time, however, many States adopted the name officially and participated in placing Jefferson Davis Highway monuments along the road.

By the mid-1920's, over 250 named trails had been designated by private organizations (with such names as the Atlantic Highway, the Dixie Highway, the National Old Trails Road, the Pacific Highway, and the Yellowstone Trail). Because this method of designation created confusion for motorists trying to find the best way across the country, State and Federal highway officials created the U.S. numbered system in 1925 to replace the trail names for the Nation's main interstate highways. Under the plan, the transcontinental and major named trails were to be split among several numbers to eliminate the names and the organizations backing them.

Before adoption of the plan in November 1926, many trail support groups, often with congressional help, sought to preserve their trail by securing a single U.S. number for it. The U.D.C. was no exception. Congressman Earl B. Mayfield of Texas took up the cause in a telegram on July 30, 1925, to Chief Thomas H. MacDonald of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR). Mayfield supported designation of the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway as a National Highway and pointed out that the route is an all-year open road that "touches every Southern capitol but four." He added, "This highway was proposed and fostered by the United Daughters of the Confederacy which organization has one hundred thousand members and its name was endorsed by the General Federation of Womens Clubs which has two million members."

MacDonald was out of town, so the July 31 reply was signed by the BPR's E. W. James, who was Secretary of the Joint Board on Interstate Highways, the Federal-State board creating the U.S. numbering plan. James replied:

A careful search has been made in our extensive map file in the Bureau of Public Roads and three maps showing the Jefferson Davis highways have been located, but the routes on these maps are themselves different and neither route is approximately that described by you, so that I am somewhat at a loss as to just what route your constituents are interested in. For instance, there is the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway which extends from Miami, Florida to Los Angeles (but not to San Francisco); and there is another Jefferson Davis Highway shown on the Rand-McNally maps which extends from Fairview, Kentucky the site of the Jefferson Davis monument, by a very circuitous route to New Orleans, but I find no route whatever bearing the name Jefferson Davis extending from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco.

There are over 250 named routes in the United States which have been sponsored by more than a hundred organizations of one kind or another and as they all have been unofficial in nature, that is, not recognized by the Government, it has not been felt necessary to secure detailed information regarding all of them. From the description in your telegram I am inclined to think that the route in question probably laps the Bankhead Highway or the Lee Highway and other named routes over a large part of their length. If this is the case, then the greater part of the Jefferson Davis Highway is probably included within the tentative selection so far made of proposed interstate routes.

Then, James included an explanation of the Joint Board's work that appeared in one form or other in the dozens of letters he would write in 1925-26 while the U.S. numbered highway system was in the works:

Because of the large number of named routes, their somewhat indefinite location in many instances, their overlapping, their duplication, and occasionally their faulty location, the Joint Board, appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture to select interstate highways for uniform marking, decided at the inception of their work that they could not undertake to recognize any of the named routes as such, but must select for interstate highway purposes connected routes, which on their merits deserved classification as of first importance. As a matter of fact this process will result in including the greater part of the main, direct, continuous highways across the country in both general directions and between metropolitan centers of importance and it will likewise automatically exclude the undesirable locations and features of routes laid out and named because of minor local interests.

The Joint Board has available a large amount of information which has been collected by the Bureau of Public Roads during the entire course of Federal aid administration regarding the highways of the country, and with such additional information as can be furnished by the various State highway departments it feels itself fully equipped to make a selection based entirely on merit. As there will be probably not in excess of fifty routes all told, nor more than six transcontinental routes east and west, I think you will clearly see that this procedure is much more practicable than would be a selection from among the 250 named routes, some 200 of which would have to be rejected, and from the twenty transcontinental routes of which a dozen or more will have to be rejected. The only sound method has been to proceed on the basis of merit, practically disregarding the named routes as such.

The work of the Board is so entirely disinterested that the responsible trail organizations interested are fully recognizing the soundness of the policy adopted, and feel that they will receive the fairest and most considerate treatment by this method, and I have taken the liberty of outlining the situation to you at some length in order that if your constituents approach you further in the matter you will be able to explain the situation to them.

On July 29, 1925, Miss Decca Lamar West of Waco, Texas, wrote to Chief MacDonald. Miss West, who was Honorary Chairman of the Jefferson Davis National Highway Committee, elaborated on the comments in Congressman Mayfield's short telegram:

I am appealing to you in the name of one hundred thousand Daughters of the Confederacy endorsed by the General Federation of the Women's Clubs, which numbers two million women . . . .

We have worked through State Legislatures, and Highway Commissions' and through committees in our own association, for beautification where road is completed, therefore we have no specific highway organization to boost our claims-no paid directors, in other words. Our work has been both patriotic and practical. Our original plan to parallel the Lincoln Highway historically has met with approval North and South, despite a few personal statements to the contrary. We have secured many branches also by legislative enactment that will not only touch historic points, but facilitate rural education and transportation for truck farming in localities which need to be helped.

It was my good fortune to hear you on your Southern tour a few years ago, at a banquet in Waco, Texas, and your clear elucidation of the practical needs has enabled me to interest women as never before in the subject, for when you show them how good roads mean cheaper, better and more wholesome food for starving city children, you touch their hearts.

The Jefferson Davis Highway directors are doing constructive work in every state, and patriotically the women of the United States feel that nothing could tend to the greater unity and understanding of the people than that two transcontinental highways should be named for the two great leaders of the critical period of American history. The Lincoln Highway is, of course, an established fact, and the naming

officially of the Jefferson Davis National Highway would be a great progressive step. As it is already legally designated in all but three states through which it passes, it would seem the people have expressed themselves and are entitled to recognition.

The August 10 reply again came from James:

You will understand, of course, that the Government has never officially recognized any of the named trails sponsored by various civic organizations. It was not the purpose of the Joint Board, nor had it authority to recognize such trails or to alter their location, but its function was rather to select and number routes which follow the prevailing flow of traffic.

Maps of the Jefferson Davis Highway available were not consistent, but it appears that among the numbered routes selected by the Joint Board a very substantial part of the route so called has been included.

Mrs. Charlotte Woodbury, Chairman of the Jefferson Davis National Highway Committee from 1923 to 1950, wrote to James on August 22 to clarify the location of the route. She was surprised by his comment that maps were not consistent. "I reckon you will think I am a very ignorant person but I really do not know just exactly what you mean. Will you please explain this?" She enclosed a folder of information about the highway, noting that "of course our organization cannot compete with the literature sent out by some of these roads, we wish we could, but we spend most of our money educating boys and girls who are not able to get a better education for themselves."

James replied on August 27:

Receipt is acknowledged of your letter of August 22, regarding the Jefferson Davis Highway and enclosing a map on which the highway appears to be shown in heavy black. I am very glad to get this map, which is apparently the first complete map of the Jefferson Davis Highway available to this office.

My remark about the inconsistency of available maps referred to the fact that we found two entirely different routes on separate maps, one of which showed the Jefferson Davis Highway from Hopkinsville, KY., to New Orleans; no other part of the route was shown. Another map showed the Jefferson Davis Highway from Washington to San Francisco. The present map includes them both, and my conclusion is that the Jefferson Davis Highway is in reality a collection of routes, there being several in Texas as well as the two general routes above mentioned.

All the transcontinental named routes, including the Lincoln Highway and the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway, were split among several numbers when the American Association of State Highway Officials adopted the U.S. numbering plan in November 1926. The Jefferson Davis National Highway was split among U.S. 1, U.S. 15, U.S. 29, U.S. 80, U.S. 90, and others.

The Federal Government had no role in official designation of the named trails. In general, the trails were designated along roads that were owned by the States. As with the Jefferson Davis National Highway, some names were adopted by the State legislatures or through State administrative processes. The "U.S." route designation did not alter this relationship to denote Federal ownership or control. The U.S. numbered highway system was simply a marking device for identifying the Nation's best interstate roads to help motorists as they "navigated" around the country. The roads remained under State control.

As reflected in earlier comments, the U.D.C. continued to promote its route with designation ceremonies, placement of monuments, and extension along the West Coast. For years, the U.D.C. wanted to place a terminal marker in Washington, D.C. Mrs. Benjamin Grady, Director for the District of Columbia, "worked endlessly" to secure permission according to a U.D.C. history.

Year after year she, with the help of many other interested Daughters, turned every wheel and followed every path trying to arrange for this. Time and again their hopes were dashed to the ground to rise again with the next session of Congress. They had many friends and much support, but not enough to overcome the obstacles in the way. There was no objection in the Senate, but Mr. Walcott of Michigan and Mr. Tabor of New York persistently blocked the bill in the House of Representatives. Finally, after twice presenting the bill, Senator Alben W. Barkley of Kentucky suggested that the marker be placed on the Virginia side of the Potomac.

On May 23, 1946, the BPR's Thomas MacDonald authorized Virginia to erect the 14-ton monument at the intersection of the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway with the Pentagon Network, then still under construction to serve the Pentagon, which was also still under construction. The monument would be placed on U.S. 1/the Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway (named after the head of the Virginia highway agency from 1922 until his death on July 16, 1941).

The Eastern Terminal Marker was accordingly placed at the Virginia end of the Fourteenth Street Bridge which crosses the Potomac from Washington. Standing as it does within the triangle where the Virginia roads converge onto the bridge, and where traffic must slow down, the marker may be seen from all sides. It was unveiled on June 3, 1947, the 139<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the man in whose honor the highway is named.

Senator Barkley was the main speaker at the ceremony, part of a 3-day U.D.C. observance of the anniversary in Washington. He praised Jefferson Davis but added:

As we dedicate this marker, we cannot forget our responsibilities now as a united Nation. I'm proud to feel that our Nation today, from every section, has given of our blood, toil and resources so that the rest of the world can know democracy and freedom.

As traffic crossing the Potomac River on the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge increased, the monument became a traffic hazard. Following a fatal crash in early 1964, the BPR consulted the U.D.C. before arranging for the Virginia State Highway Department to move the monument to a safer location. The BPR, according an article in *The Washington Post* on June 2, 1964, consulted the U.D.C. about the move before shifting the monument to a temporary location on U.S. 1 just west of its intersection with the access road from the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. The article concluded:

The UDC had no objections, a Bureau spokesman said, but the Virginia State Highway Department reported an explosion from an unidentified lady who threatened to take her case to Sen. Harry F. Byrd (D-Va.). She had seen the monument was not in its familiar spot but had not spotted it in its new location.

"We told her we didn't see how anyone could just up and cart it off," said a Highway official. Finally someone told her where it went. She apparently went away happy.

Although the named trails have mostly faded from today's road maps, some parts of the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway still carry that name. For example, much of U.S. 1 in Virginia is still called the Jefferson Davis Highway, as is U.S. 80 in Alabama. In Alabama, the segment from Selma to Montgomery is the most famous part of the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway today. On this road, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., led the 1965 Voting Rights March that helped prompt Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. In 1996, the U.S. Department of Transportation designated the Selma-to-Montgomery Scenic Byway an All-American Road under the National Scenic Byways Program. In addition, under the National Park Omnibus Act of 1996, this stretch of the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway was designated the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail. The segment is still called the Jefferson Davis Highway and U.S. 80, but it is as a National Historic Trail that the Selma-to-Montgomery stretch of U.S. 80 has become an international symbol of freedom.

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