

Dr. S. M. Johnson: A Dreamer of Dreams

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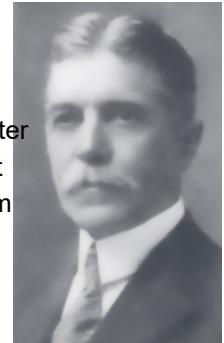
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Dr. S. M. Johnson - A Dreamer of Dreams

by Richard F. Weingroff

Introducing Dr. Johnson

Dr. S. M. Johnson was proud of his Virginia roots. However, his family had joined the westward movement of the 18th century when his grandparents moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1832. After a childhood in country or village homes, he graduated from Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa. At Princeton University, he earned a literary degree in post-graduate studies, before graduating from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois.



S.M. Johnson

He served as a Presbyterian minister for 18 years in Corning, Iowa; Denver, Colorado; and Chicago. A biographical sketch by C. H. Huston, president of the Lee Highway Association, explained how these years shaped the man:

The activities of those eighteen years developed the qualities of altruism, leadership, the ability to build up and direct an organization including financial operations and ability as a public speaker and a writer, all of which Dr. Johnson possessed in such degree that he became known nationally and internationally. Calls to service led him out on trips throughout the country-north, south, east and west, until he came to know the United States as a whole and to think, speak and act in terms of the national life.

These years of achievement came to an abrupt end in Chicago when Dr. Johnson experienced a nervous breakdown that "compelled an absolute change to life in the open air," according to Huston.

Dr. Johnson moved to Charlotte in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, where he lived for 7 years. Finding little success on a cotton plantation, he became a land developer whose chief problem, as Huston put it, was "transportation-how to extend the pavement of the Charlotte streets to the suburban tract he platted." When local governments would not provide the pavement, he built the roads himself to serve the land he was developing.

While in Charlotte, he married Ida Vail, whose father had been an officer under General Robert E. Lee during the Civil War. Her father also was Chairman of the Board of Road Commissioners of Mecklenburg County for 30 years. Mecklenburg County had been a good roads leader under an 1885 State law that allowed the county to collect a small property tax for road improvement. Miss Vail's father had, according to Dr. Johnson, built the first mile of macadam road in the South.

The young family moved to Lincoln County, New Mexico, where they established a ranch to grow apples in the Ruidoso Valley. Again, Huston fills in the details:

Isolated on the ranch and compelled to make a living out of the soil where most of the proceeds of sales were consumed by transportation costs, he learned through hard experience what a heavy burden the nation's producers were under for lack of proper facilities for highway transport. It was thirty miles over mountains to the nearest railway station, seventy-five miles to the nearest town of any size and one hundred and fifty miles to El Paso, Texas, the nearest city affording a market for the choice apples which were the main product of the ranch. In Charlotte he had learned the vital necessity of pavement from the business center to the suburb; in the far Southwest he learned the value of the road from farm to market.

Although Dr. Johnson faced "years of privation, hardship and labor to make ends meet," the experience proved to be a "forge, heated to white heat" that turned him into an apostle of good roads.

The Apostle of Good Roads

In 1910, he and Dr. J. W. Laws organized the Lincoln County Good Roads Association to improve the area's roads. He helped secure approval of a good-roads bond in a county election. And much to the amusement of the county's old timers, he predicted that one day, a transcontinental highway would traverse the county. According to Huston, the prediction had been inspired by a joke:

In the closing hours of Congress more than a decade ago, in the time just before adjournment given over to jokes and chaffing, Representative Broussard of Louisiana had sprung a joke in the Lower House by moving that the Government build five transcontinental highways along parallels of latitude, one of which was the thirty-second. The wires flashed the joke over the country, the "El Paso Herald" carried it to the ranch under the thirty-second parallel where Dr. Johnson read it. He then resolved he would devote the remainder of his life to making that joke a reality.

Several ideas had formed in his mind. He was convinced the automobile would change America in the 20th century as dramatically as the railroad had in the 19th century. Roads were needed to serve this new means of transportation, and he was convinced they should be built according to science, not in the haphazard fashion that was common in rural areas. They should be arranged according to function in a system of main trunk lines and laterals according to the service each would provide. The Federal Government should help the States build the roads. In addition, the Federal Government should help States that have large amounts of nontaxable public land, such as New Mexico, pay for roads across the public reservations.

His first efforts, from 1910 to 1912, focused on constructing a road linking Roswell, New Mexico, and El Paso, to be called the Borderland Route. He helped secure changes in State law to get the work underway.

These early successes led to his selection as a delegate to a February 1913 conference in Asheville, North Carolina. Led by Governor Locke Craig of North Carolina, 15 southern Governors had appointed commissioners to select a route for a southern transcontinental highway from Washington, D.C., to California, to be called the Southern National Highway. With Dr. Johnson on hand, the commissioners included his Borderland Route from El Paso to Roswell.

While in the East, he attended the Second National Good Roads Federal Aid Convention on March 6 and 7 at the Raleigh Hotel in Washington. The conference was sponsored by AAA to discuss plans for Federal involvement in road building, then under consideration in Congress. Dr. Johnson spoke on the subject of Federal help for public lands States. Although the Convention did not adopt a resolution on the subject, his presentation helped him gain national recognition and the friendship of many leaders of the good roads movement. One of those new friends was Senator John H. Bankhead, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads.

The \$29 Million Apples

On November 9-14, 1914, Dr. Johnson was one of 5,000 delegates to the Fourth American Road Congress in Atlanta, Georgia. The Congress was sponsored by AAA and the American Highway Association, an umbrella group of good roads boosters formed by Logan Waller Page, Director of the U.S. Office of Public Roads (OPR). During a discussion of a presentation on convict labor, Dr. Johnson addressed the group. He described his background, explaining that he was a minister of the gospel who had experienced a nervous breakdown that changed his life. He said that "being unable to take up the active work of a pastorate, I have given the most of my energies to promoting the gospel of good roads."

We have called upon the United States government to help us out of the mud. We have appealed to the boys and girls of our high schools to help us. We are not getting the cooperation of the ladies and I tell you it is time to ask the ministers and priests of this country to enlist in the campaign for good roads.

He knew the text:

Does not the Good Book say to make the crooked straight and the high places low and the low places high and to make smooth the way of the Lord? It is time that we interpreted that rightly. Does it not say that we live and move and have our being in Him? Well, the moving is pretty tough in some places and therefore good roads have a great deal to do with religion.

Then, he said, he wanted to show the convention some apples. Huston explained how Dr. Johnson, the apple grower, made his presentation:

[He] slowly removed a tissue-paper wrapping from a marvelously beautiful red apple five inches in diameter. He unwrapped and displayed another, then a third. The three, laid in a row on the speaker's desk, spanned over thirteen inches.

He told the delegates the apples had been grown in the White Mountains, a few miles west of Roswell at an elevation of 5,750 feet-and 25 miles from the nearest shipping point. Because the surrounding land had been set aside as Lincoln National Forest, "it is impossible for us to tax it to build roads." He explained:

Now I am feeding apples like these to the hogs of Lincoln County, because the United States government has not thus far lifted a finger to improve the roads across its own land.

Dr. Johnson commented on the term "Federal-aid," which was in common use as the government considered creating a road building program. He said that for him, the term meant something different than its usual interpretation of government aid to State or local governments for better roads:

It means that we frontiersmen out in New Mexico have to aid the United States government to make the roads. Last summer I took my car and three men and went and fixed the impossible places on Uncle Sam's domain in the Lincoln National Forest on my way to my market and shipping point.

The Federal Government also had not improved the road across the Apache Indian Reservation, which Dr. Johnson indicated was the worst stretch of the Southern National Highway. He convinced Otero County to give him \$1,000 and he fixed the road "on Uncle Sam's Indian reservation."

He was all for through roads and better roads elsewhere. The through roads would allow people to come "and see and get well and help us develop the magnificent boundless resources of our great West." The Federal Government, as far as he was concerned, was looking at the problem with one eye when it needed to use both:

When we find that the United States Office of Public Roads is simply a branch of the Department of Agriculture, we say that the Office of Public Roads should be a department by itself and we should have the through routes that are as essential to the development of our great country as it is that the farmer should have his. We want you to have your roads, that is the thing for Georgia and Iowa and the farming States, but we want you to help us to get our roads that are vital to the development of our country.

The American Road Congress adopted a resolution in support of his goal:

Resolved, That the federal government be urged to build highways across all Indian and forest reservations and all other federalized areas, where such connecting links are essential parts of established through routes of travel.

On July 11, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson approved the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, which established the Federal-aid highway program. A leadership committee of the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) had drafted the basic bill, which Senator Bankhead introduced at the urging of OPR Director Page. It authorized \$75 million in Federal-aid to the States over 5 years for road building. An amendment introduced on May 1

by Senator Thomas James Walsh of Montana was included. It authorized an additional \$10 million-\$1 million a year for 10 years-for roads and trails within or only partly within the National Forests. The funds, Senator Walsh explained, were to come from receipts for the sale of timber, fees for grazing privileges, and all other receipts from forest reserves (then about \$250,000 a year, but he expected the total to increase as roads were improved).

Huston, who included photographs of the three apples in his booklet, noted:

Since then a total of \$19,000,000 has been appropriated [in addition to the initial \$10 million] for this purpose and the policy has been fixed whereby the work will continue until completed. Dr. Johnson shows his friends the tree upon which three apples grew which were sold for \$29,000,000.

Along the Southern National Highway

In 1915, leaders of the Southern National Highway in California made the first official trip over the highway from San Diego to Washington. Financed by the Cabrillo Commercial Club, the motorists included Colonel Ed Fletcher, a leading San Diego booster; William Gross, an associate of Colonel Fletcher's; Wilbur Hall, a magazine writer; and Mr. B. H. Burrell of the OPR. Burrell joined the tour after Colonel Fletcher asked Page to provide an official observer. Mr. Harry Taylor, their chauffeur, was an employee of Fletcher's who would marry his oldest daughter Catherine. The group left San Diego on November 2. On November 8, they expected to travel from El Paso to Roswell in 1 day. The trip report by Gross explained that "soon after we started out from El Paso our hopes went a glimmering as the conditions of the road did not admit of fast driving."

They reached Ruidoso where they spent the night at the White Mountain Inn. There, they met Dr. Johnson, "a prominent good roads booster and State Organizer of the Southern National Highway Association for New Mexico," according to Gross.

Dr. Johnson had been notified of our coming, and had been out hunting all that day, hoping he would be able to treat us to some venison steak and wild turkey. We knew the Doctor's intentions were good, but we had to satisfy our appetites with just a plain chicken dinner.

The next day, Dr. Johnson took the group on a tour of a prehistoric irrigation canal that ran through his property for several miles. He had written an article about the flume for *Engineering News* (March 25, 1915).

The group reached Washington on November 27 after a 3,247-mile journey. The OPR's Burrell reported that the Southern National Highway is "a feasible highway, which could be traveled at the present time without undue hardship or difficulty." Nevertheless, the Southern National Highway and the association formed to back it failed. The route would become the Broadway of America, with Colonel Fletcher as vice president of the Broadway of America Highway Association. It, too, would never become a major, nationally known highway.

Dr. Johnson learned from the experience as he went on to other projects.

After the Great War

The Federal-aid highway program established in 1916 was hindered the following April when the United States entered the Great War in Europe, now known as World War I. The war effort drained resources and men that could have been used to implement the new program of road building. At the same time, the war opened the U.S. Army's eyes to the value of motor vehicles in wartime. While the movement of trucks to ports in the United States had caused the roads to deteriorate, the excellent roads of France had demonstrated the potential of road transportation for military purposes.

Shortly after Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, Dr. Johnson attended a reception for national good roads leaders in Washington. He proposed that the Federal Government-which had accumulated the largest fleet of motor trucks in the world during the war-transfer the surplus military equipment to the States for highway work. He then drafted a bill for

Senator Bankhead to introduce. Congress approved a series of bills that directed the Secretary of War to transfer to the Secretary of Agriculture all surplus vehicles, construction equipment, and supplies that could be used to improve highways. The distribution of about \$215 million in equipment, arranged through the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, was substantially completed in 1925 and played a major part in the improvement of roads during the 1920's. The Bureau retained an additional \$7.8 million in equipment for its own use.

On July 7, 1919, the U.S. Army launched its first transcontinental convoy of military vehicles from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco. Dr. Johnson had suggested that the War Department launch a convoy to see if, in an emergency, the Army could move across the United States as it had across France. The Lincoln Highway Association, which had suggested a similar idea, took the lead in working with the Motor Transport Corps to arrange the convoy. Because one purpose of the trip was to spread the Good Roads Movement, Dr. Johnson went along as the convoy's "official spokesman," a representative of AAA, and a guest of the Lincoln Highway Association.

The convoy began after a ceremony that included the dedication of a temporary marker for the Zero Milestone on the Ellipse south of the White House (see related story). The vehicles headed north to Gettysburg and traveled the rest of the way to San Francisco on the Lincoln Highway. At each town and city, the convoy was greeted by dignitaries and residents who wanted to see the soldiers and the wondrous vehicles that had helped secure the victory in Europe. The commander of the expedition, Lt. Colonel Charles W. McClure, would address the crowd at each stop and Dr. Johnson would make his presentation on good roads.

In *American Road: The Story of an Epic Transcontinental Journey at the Dawn of the Motor Age* (Henry Holt and Company, 2002), Pete Davies provides a flavor of Dr. Johnson's message. In Bedford, Pennsylvania, he proclaimed:

We are crossing the continent to impress upon all leaders of public action in the world that the next step in the progress of civilization is to provide road beds upon which rapid transit motor vehicles may be operated with economy and efficiency. This is true, not only of backward peoples, but also of the most advanced nations, including our own.

In Wooster, Ohio, Dr. Johnson told his listeners:

We are at the beginning of a new era of American progress and history. Now that we have finished the job on the other side [in Europe], the next great job will be the improvement of the highways so that automobiles and motor trucks can be operated on them economically.

In this comment, he was echoing the words of Secretary of War Newton Baker during the ceremony on the Ellipse. "This," Secretary Baker had said, "is the beginning of a new era."

One participant on the convoy, Lt. Colonel Dwight David Eisenhower, considered the speeches along the way to have been one of the biggest hardships the men had to endure. Davies observes that this applied to Dr. Johnson as well as Colonel McClure, Governors, Mayors, and other dignitaries who greeted the convoy at every stop. In Wooster, Davies explains:

Presumably having heard Dr. Johnson's address once too often already, the searchlight crew broke his rhythm when they started playing their beam across the evening sky. Unperturbable, Dr. Johnson plowed on. "We are speaking to the entire family of the nation," he declared.

When the convoy reached Fort Wayne, they were on Dr. Johnson's home territory. Davies summarizes Dr. Johnson's remarks:

When his grandparents had traveled to Fort Wayne in 1832, he said, they'd made 10 miles a day. Now you could go twice that distance in an hour. Already, more people were traveling by car than by train. Already, the nation had 500,000 trucks on the road. Soon, he prophesied, it would be ten times that

many. They had to come, and there had to be good roads for them, because "the railway is no longer capable of meeting the transportation needs of the country."

In this speech as in others, one of Dr. Johnson's goals was to generate support for the Townsend Bill. Introduced by Senator Charles E. Townsend of Michigan, the bill would create a National Highway Commission to build a national system of highways. The Commission would also operate the existing Federal-aid highway program to help the State highway agencies improve State roads. The bill, he told his Fort Wayne audience, would mean \$20 million from Washington for Indiana's roads.

Dr. Johnson continued this theme along the way. The night before the convoy left Iowa, he told a Council Bluffs crowd that, "Once a road led to somewhere near in the vicinity. Now it will connect the extremities of the country." Only the Federal Government could build such a road. In Nebraska, he predicted that if the Townsend Bill passed, the Lincoln Highway would be paved from Omaha to Wyoming in 5 years.

The convoy reached San Francisco on September 6, 1919. In the final ceremony, Dr. Johnson received one of the gold medals presented by the Lincoln Highway Association to all participants. The men were happy to be there because it meant the end of the bad roads, their toils, and the speeches they had endured for 2 months. Davies provides a finish for Dr. Johnson's work:

Even Dr. Johnson got a cheer-in his case an ironical one for his public admission that, to avoid the worst of the Nevada desert, he'd taken the train from Eureka to Carson City. Then he said once again that every city in the West should back the Townsend Bill; once again, he urged that its projected appropriation for road building be raised to \$1 billion.

The Townsend bill would not be adopted. In 1921, Congress approved a compromise under which Federal-aid would be made available to the State highway agencies to improve roads included in a Federal-aid system. The system would include up to 7 percent of the Nation's total rural road mileage, with three-sevenths of the system being "interstate in character."

The Lee Highway

The Southern National Highway, now the Broadway of America, was still on Dr. Johnson's mind. By the end of 1918, he had conceived an idea to build a direct highway, named in honor of General Lee, from Washington to Memphis where it would meet the original line of the Southern National Highway that would take the route through Roswell, New Mexico to San Diego. When he mentioned the idea to AAA officials, they informed him that a movement was underway in Virginia to establish a Lee Memorial Highway. Professor D. W. Humphreys, a professor of engineering at Washington and Lee University at Lexington, Virginia, had proposed extending the Valley Turnpike, the Shenandoah Valley's main highway, to link Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

On February 22, 1919, Dr. Johnson, Professor Humphreys, and others met in Roanoke, Virginia, to discuss the proposed memorial highway. An organization was established on December 3, 1919, called the Lee Highway Association, to support Professor Humphreys' idea of a Gettysburg-Chattanooga line. The association also intended to promote extensions to establish a direct route "for pleasure and business" between New York City and New Orleans. Dr. Johnson's idea of a transcontinental highway through New Mexico was lost.

During this period, Dr. Johnson was working with the War Department on the transfer of surplus equipment for highway building, participating in the U.S. Army convoy, and engaging in other matters, so he initially took only a limited role in the proposed new highway. However, Professor Humphreys, the primary backer of the Lee Highway as originally conceived, died shortly after the Lee Highway Association was formed. In April 1920, the association offered Dr. Johnson the position of General Director. In Dr. Johnson's view, that is when the active work of the Lee Highway Association began.

The Lee Highway Association, under his leadership, soon was backing a transcontinental highway. It would begin at the Zero Milestone in Washington, traverse the Shenandoah Valley on the Valley Pike, then continue to New Orleans, as conceived by Professor Humphreys, and end in San Diego. The association adopted the nickname "The Backbone Road of the South." Decisions were made and revised about the location of the Lee Highway during the next few years. In 1920, the Lee Highway Association agreed to follow the road from Washington to Alexandria through Fairfax Court House, Middleburg, Aldie, and Boyce to Winchester, where it would turn south on the Valley Pike. The following year, the Association decided to change the route to eliminate the "elbow" where the route dipped to Alexandria then turned northwest. The route was shifted to pass through Falls Church, Fairfax Court House, Gainesville, Warrenton, Sperryville, and Luray into the Shenandoah Valley at New Market.

Late in 1920, the route was set between Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee, and Knoxville via Kingsport, Rogersville, Tate Springs, and Rutledge. On January 20, 1921, the route to Chattanooga was finalized via Lenoir City, Loudon, Sweetwater, Athens, and Cleveland.

At this point, the Lee Highway Association made a crucial decision to turn away from Professor Humphreys' vision. The Board of Directors, meeting in Chattanooga on February 28, 1921, decided to abandon New Orleans as a stop on the Lee Highway. The adopted resolution observed that:

Whereas: serious difficulties have been encountered in the effort to locate the cross-continent route from New Orleans, including the fact that feasible routes have already been preempted by other highways,
Therefore be it Resolved: That the Executive Committee is requested to investigate the cross-continent routing with a view to a decision before organizing the line from Chattanooga south.

In July, the association met in Houston with officers of the Old Spanish Trail Association to consider linking the Lee Highway to the Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine, Florida, to San Diego). The Old Spanish Trail Association, which had been formed in December 1915, was one of the stronger named trail associations. When it was not willing to combine with the newer association and change the name of its western portion to Lee Highway, the possibility of a merger was dropped.

Designation of the western segment would be in flux for several years. In some cases, the preferred route was not included when that State's 7-percent Federal-aid system was approved under the Federal Highway Act of 1921. With no Federal-aid funds available to improve the segment, an eligible alternative had to be found that would be eligible. The western routing would eventually traverse:

- Arkansas-Forrest City, Brinkley, Little Rock, Hot Springs, and DeQueen;
- Texas-Idabel, Hugo, Durant, Ardmore, Healdton, Loco, Walters, Frederick, Vernon, Paducah, Plainview, Muleshoe, Farwell;
- New Mexico-Elida, Roswell, Glencoe, Tularosa, Alamogordo, Newman, El Paso (Texas), Las Cruces, Deming, Lordsburg;
- Arizona-Duncan, Safford, Globe, Phoenix, Buckeye, Gila Bend, Aztec, Wellton, Yuma;
- California-El Centro, Jacumba, San Diego.

The Southwest had few routing options, so the Lee Highway Association was unable to find a separate route for its highway. In the three Southwestern States, segments of the Lee Highway followed segments of Apache Trail, Atlantic-Pacific Highway, Bankhead Highway, Broadway of America, Old Spanish Trail, and others. The association approved extensions to New York City and San Francisco, but these were over existing highways; the primary concern of the association was improving the main roadway from Washington to San Diego.

In November 1926, when AASHO adopted the U.S. numbered highway system to replace the named trails, the Lee Highway was split, east to west, among U.S. 211, U.S. 11, U.S. 72, U.S. 70, U.S. 366, and U.S. 80.

Arlington Memorial Bridge

Dr. Johnson was not satisfied with the routing of the Lee Highway across the Georgetown Bridge (Francis Scott Key Bridge) over the Potomac River and in Northern Virginia. He wanted a grand memorial entrance into Washington for his highway.

He learned of an idea that the great orator Daniel Webster, in a speech on July 4, 1851, attributed to President Andrew Jackson as a way of symbolically linking North and South:

Before us is the broad and beautiful [Potomac] river, separating two of the original thirteen States, which a late President, a man of determined purpose and inflexible will, but patriotic heart, desired to span with arches of ever-enduring granite, symbolical of the firmly established union of the North and South. That President was General Jackson.

Later Presidents supported the idea and Congress periodically funded studies. A design competition was authorized for a memorial bridge in 1899. Donald Beekman Myer, author of *Bridges and the City of Washington* (Commission of Fine Arts, 1974), described the result:

The competition attracted a dramatic series of colossally monumental designs all of which ran from the base of Observatory Hill near the foot of New York Avenue across the Potomac to Arlington Cemetery.

Congress was not interested in the grandiose plans.

In 1901, the Senator James McMillan of Michigan, Chairman of the Senate District Committee, sponsored a resolution that established a commission to improve the city's parks. The McMillan Committee (Daniel H. Burnham, Charles F. McKim, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Augustus Saint-Gaudens) released its report in 1902. It included a plan for developing the National Mall and surrounding areas that largely shaped its development since then. One of the commission's proposals was to shift the District end of the proposed Memorial Bridge to the site of a proposed Lincoln Memorial rather than farther north as in earlier plans. After much debate about an appropriate commemoration, the Lincoln Memorial was authorized in 1911 at its present location. Construction began in 1914 and was completed in 1922. The Lincoln Memorial was dedicated on February 12, 1922, the anniversary of President Lincoln's birth.

In 1913, Congress authorized \$25,000 for a commission to investigate a suitable design for a Memorial Bridge linking Washington with Arlington National Cemetery. In the absence of a companion appropriation, the funding could not be used.

Although the idea was dormant, it fit with Dr. Johnson's vision of a grand entrance for the Lee Highway into the city:

It was not to be a glorification of the Confederacy, but a work for the unification and development of the United States of today and tomorrow, and as such it began the movement which is spreading to be part of the plan to link together the names of Lincoln and Lee.

In 1920, Dr. Johnson conferred with Chairman Charles Moore of the Commission of Fine Arts. They agreed to work together to secure funding for a bridge on a line connecting the Lincoln Memorial with the Lee Mansion (the Custis-Lee Mansion, where General Lee and his family lived before the Civil War) in Arlington National Cemetery. In June 1920, the \$25,000 authorized in 1913 was finally appropriated to establish the Arlington Memorial Bridge Commission.

With the approval of President Warren Harding, the commission adopted the idea contained in the McMillan Commission's report as suggested by Moore and Dr. Johnson. Instead of placing the bridge on a line with the main axis of the city (through the Capitol, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial), the bridge would be placed on a southwest link between the Lincoln Memorial and the Lee Mansion.

President Calvin Coolidge transmitted the report to Congress on April 22, 1924. The report explained the Lincoln-Lee connection as one reason for the location. It also suggested "the compelling patriotic motive" of a direct broad

boulevard from the Capitol through B Street extended (now called Constitution Avenue), past the Lincoln Memorial to Arlington National Cemetery. It added:

There is a third great motive in the complete plan and that is the provision of a magnificent entrance to Washington from Virginia for the Lee Highway coming across the entire country from Los Angeles, California.

The axis of Columbia Island affords an opportunity to recognize the great Lee Highway undertaking and to make it an integral part of the whole composition. This highway, which at present passes over the Georgetown Bridge into Washington by a circuitous and highly congested route, can be given a splendid direct approach over the brow of the imposing Arlington Heights, exactly on the prolongation of the axis of the Mall.

Noting that Ancient Rome had five great avenues of approach and Washington had none, the report observed that, "in this proposed terminus of the Lee Highway will be created the first and most magnificent of all possible entrances to the National Capital." It would be, the President said, the greatest symbol "of the binding together of the North and South in one indivisible Union, knowing no sectional lines."

Now the effort turned to funding. The proposal covered \$15 million in projects, including the bridge (\$7.5 million), construction of a plaza and water gate on the District side, extension of B Street, and the widening of 23rd Street from Washington Circle to B Street. President Coolidge believed in a limited government and was seeking to reduce expenditures. Congress was having difficulty funding even a limited bill for public works in the District of Columbia. Therefore, the Lee Highway Association, with financial help from the National Highways Association, launched a publicity campaign to drum up support for Arlington Memorial Bridge. Copies of the President's report were distributed and stories were sent to 8,200 newspapers. When Congress failed to enact the Bridge Bill for the Memorial Bridge Approach in 1924, the Lee Highway Association sent telegrams to the Nation's Governors and copies of the bill to chambers of commerce around the country soliciting their support.

Congressional action was swift in 1925. President Calvin Coolidge approved the Arlington Memorial Bridge bill on February 24, 1925. In recognition of the role of the Lee Highway Association, the President gave a pen he used to sign the bill to the association.

The New York firm of McKim, Mead and White designed the bridge, with Joseph P. Strauss (later the Chief Engineer on the Golden Gate Bridge) serving as a consultant. Construction began in 1926. The 2,138-foot bridge was completed in February 1932 at a cost of \$6,650,000. Myer, the historian of Washington area bridges, has called it "Washington's most beautiful and successful bridge."

Lee Boulevard

Dr. Johnson's vision, however, was incomplete. His vision, called Lee Boulevard, was a 200-foot right-of-way from the Memorial Bridge westward 110 miles to the Shenandoah Valley. It would include a 56-foot speedway (speed limit: 35 mph) without grade crossings, a bridle path for horse traffic, two frontage roads for local traffic, landscaping, and a 60-foot zone on both sides of the road from adjacent buildings to the curb. He formed the National Boulevard Association to promote the vision and began seeking donations of right-of-way for the project.

In March 1927, Dr. Johnson resigned as General Director of the Lee Highway Association to devote time to his boulevard idea, which he expanded to the construction of a boulevard from Bar Harbor, Maine, to Miami, Florida. A 1927 brochure by the National Boulevard Association indicated he retained a direct role in the Lee Highway Association. He served as a Director and on the Executive Committee of the Lee Highway Association, as well as its Honorary President.

The office remains in Washington in his charge. He still handles the business, receives and deposits the funds and signs checks. He says he is so identified with Lee Highway that he will never cease to

advance its interest.

In essence, he had relieved the association of his salary.

Still, with creation of the U.S. numbered highway system, the Lee Highway had been split among several numbers and its value diminished. Dr. Johnson was ready for new challenges.

The proposed boulevard proved controversial in Arlington County. Two location options became known as the straight-to-the-bridge route and the southern route, each with its advocates and critics. A third faction favored improving the existing Lee Highway first. The Lee Highway Association announced its preference for the southern route in July 1926. The route had been scouted by Major Carey H. Brown of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; he served as engineer for the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. He had assisted the Lee Highway Association with the approval of his superiors. Major U. S. Grant III, Director of Public Buildings and Parks, fully approved Major Brown's conclusions.

On August 1, 1926, an article in *The Sunday Star* explained why Major Brown had selected the southern route:

. . . it avoided the congested and narrow main streets of town, where traffic would be bottled up at frequent intervals, but also because the construction of a short road on the south side of Arlington National Cemetery would connect the Lee Boulevard with the proposed new highway to Mount Vernon. The mere widening of the present road along the cemetery, he said, would suffice to complete the link between two great highways of the future.

The southern route would not pass through any town, he said, but would be close enough for a connection by a short road or street.

Describing the route as an "engineer's dream of the future," the article described the present appearance of the southern route: "At present it is nothing but a trackless line of corn fields, berry thickets, forests and a few scattered settlements." The article also observed that throughout its length, the southern route was within a mile of the straight-to-the-bridge route.

By the date of the article, Dr. Johnson had secured donation of up to 90 percent of the land for the southern route. The remainder would have to be purchased, with the houses on the sites removed.

On July 26, 1927, Henry G. Shirley, Chairman of the Virginia State Highway Commission, held a public hearing on the proposal at the Arlington County Courthouse. Over 300 residents attended. The headline in *The Evening Star* reflected the continuing anger over the proposal-and the continuing sensitivities of Virginians about General Lee:

"BOOS" BROWN OUT HIGHWAY LEADER

Boulevard Hearing in Turmoil as Lincoln and Lee Are Compared

Shirley devoted the first 10 minutes of the meeting to advocates of prompt widening of the present Lee Highway. Frank Ball, speaking on behalf of Lee Highway advocates, described the road as "crooked and dangerous" and indicated he didn't care which alternative was selected for the boulevard as long as the existing road was improved first. Mrs. Ruby Lee Minar, a Washington area realtor, echoed his sentiments.

The Lee Highway, especially from Rosslyn to Falls Church is in wretched condition, and I have seen five automobiles over turned in a single week. I do not think that the members of the commission will find any opposition anywhere to the prompt widening of this arterial thoroughfare.

An hour was then allotted to advocates of the southern route. Dr. Johnson took up most of that time explaining his preference. He made it clear, however, that he agreed with the sentiment that Lee Highway should be improved first.

Next came advocates for the straight-to-the-bridge route. Mrs. Catherine M. Rogers called Lee Boulevard "the road of tomorrow" and said her preferred route was the only one that would bring people to the county. M. E. Church of Falls Church reminded the Commissioners of their "grave responsibility" and argued that the straight-to-the-bridge route was absolutely necessary. Charles T. Jesse indicated that the county's business interests were behind the straight-to-the-bridge route. George F. Harrison, a representative of Fairfax County, said his county was concerned about the choice, but favored the direct route.

Charles Moore of the Fine Arts Commission and Major Brown testified as well. They stressed that regardless of the location, it would be foolhardy to allow a difference of opinion over location to result in defeat of the idea.

One of the most "caustic assailants" of Lee Boulevard was Colonel Ashby Williams. He characterized the idea as a "wholly impractical dream." He explained:

I have no quarrel with dreamers, but dreams are usually carried on at night. But this Lee Boulevard dream is a day time dream. One that in the name of common sense should not be realized.

The hearing nearly came to an abrupt end during the testimony of Major E. W. R. Ewing, leader of the straight-to-the-bridge backers. He claimed that the Lee Boulevard adherents were commercializing the name of General Lee and that the whole proposal was simply a business proposition.

As a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans for 6 years, he felt that he spoke for the men and women of the Southland. He then set off what *The Evening Star* called an "hysterical demonstration" when he stated "there was no comparison between Lee and Lincoln." This slur on General Lee was intolerable to many of those in attendance:

A salvo of boos and other expressions of disapproval, accompanied by hissing, drowned out any remarks that Maj. Ewing contemplated relative to the comparison of Lee and Lincoln and for the moment it appeared that the conference would break up in wild disorder with H. G. Shirley, chairman, vainly pounding for order.

The situation worsened when Colonel. J. G. Pepper demanded that Shirley extract an apology from Major Ewing who replied "they led me to it." Scores of people had started to leave in protest of Major Ewing's comment.

The situation was saved at this moment when a women rose from the rear of the courtroom, sobbing convulsively and informing the spectators that she had two sons in the World War and that both Lee and Lincoln were equally great men.

Her comments restored order and everyone returned to their seat.

The hearing adjourned soon after this turmoil.

The comment about dreams appears to have rankled Dr. Johnson and the Lee Highway Association. On August 16, 1927, the association published a 12-page booklet called:

A "DREAMER OF DREAMS"
AND
BUILDER OF HIGHWAYS
The Eighteen-Year Record
of
Dr. S. M. Johnson

The Zero Milestone Man
The Surplus War Property for Highways Man
The Lee Highway Man

The 200-Foot Bar Harbor-Miami Boulevard Man
Author of the Slogan:
"A Paved United States in Our Day"

The pamphlet summarized Dr. Johnson's life and achievements. In response to the charge of commercialism, the pamphlet explained that Dr. Johnson's success in securing donations did not originate with real estate speculators. It was part of his "dream of a monumental highway."

As the cover letter stated, "dreams have been known to come true" and so it was for the southern route. The groundbreaking ceremony for the first section of the boulevard (Fort Myer to Fort Buffalo, now called Arlington Hall) was held on May 1, 1931, at Fort Buffalo. President Herbert Hoover was scheduled to turn the first spade of earth, but he was not able to attend; he was occupied with the official duties occasioned by the visit of the King and Queen of Siam.

Instead, Governor John Garland Pollard of Virginia officiated, with several descendants of General Lee in attendance. "This road," the Governor said, "will serve as a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee, idol not only of the South, but of the whole world, and provide a fitting entrance to the National Capital." He also referred to a new controversy, namely objections by the Associated General Contractors of America to the State's plan to use convict labor on the project. As the Governor turned the first spade of dirt, he said, "This much of the boulevard, at least, will not be done by convict labor."

A special Lee Boulevard advertising supplement in *The Washington Post* on March 25 had carried an article by W. S. Hoge, Jr., of Arlington County. He expected the territory opened by Lee Boulevard to "become the Greater Washington of the future and within a reasonable time will show a development of beautiful residences, lovely homes and estates as have heretofore been but dreams." He assured readers that, "Wealth, culture, education, patriotism and happiness will all reach a higher plane via Lee boulevard."

The first section linking the two forts would be 6 miles long but it would not quite reach Arlington Memorial Bridge. Congress had failed to enact legislation that would allow construction across a corner of Fort Myer to provide the needed link. As a result, Virginia State highway maps through the late 1930's warned motorists that Lee Boulevard was not a through route to Washington. Motorists were advised to take U.S. 211 (Lee Highway) to Washington. The connection was not completed until the late 1930's and was shown for the first time on the 1939 State highway map.

Although Dr. Johnson intended the Lee Highway Association to adopt his boulevard for the route, the name remained where it was. Today, the former U.S. 211 in Northern Virginia is part of U.S. 29 (Ellicott City, Maryland, to Pensacola, Florida), and is still called Lee Highway. When Arlington Memorial Bridge opened in February 1930, it became part of a new routing of U.S. 50 (Ocean City, Maryland, to Sacramento, California) through Washington. U.S. 50 would shift again in June 1964 when the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge opened just north of Arlington Memorial Bridge. On June 29, 1965, AASHO approved a request by the District and Virginia to shift U.S. 50 onto the new bridge, with appropriate alterations in two jurisdictions.

Lee Boulevard remained part of U.S. 50. However, the connection to General Lee had been lost in the 1950's. In 1951, the American Legion Post in Arlington suggested changing the name of the boulevard to avoid the confusion of two parallel roads named after General Lee. In January 1952, State Senator Charles Fenwick introduced a bill in the General Assembly to change the name to Arlington Boulevard. Several other names had been considered. For example, the Veterans of Foreign Wars wanted to name it the Veterans of Foreign Wars Boulevard. However, the General Assembly approved Senator Fenwick's bill. Lee Boulevard, the dream of Dr. S. M. Johnson of New Mexico, became Arlington Boulevard on June 29, 1952.

The Dreamer of Dreams

The Lee Boulevard supplement of *The Washington Post* referred to Dr. S. M. Johnson as the "most potent, persistent, and colorful personality in the whole good roads movement in America." It added:

To him has come no material gain from his monumental visions and concrete accomplishment, but his efforts have made marketing cheaper, touring more comfortable, and the cultural unity of the Nation nearer.

He had coined the slogan, "A Paved United States in Our Day." He was known as the Apostle of Good Roads and as the Spirit Incarnate of the Lee Highway. But perhaps most appropriately, he was known as a Dreamer of Dreams-that came true.



Click on map for larger version

Zero Milestone - Washington, DC

by Richard F. Weingroff

[Zero Milestone Photo Gallery](#)

If you've ever visited Washington, DC, perhaps you went to the Ellipse, where you can get a great view of the South Lawn of the White House. At the best spot for taking a photo, you may have noticed a hip-high monument that claims to be the point for measuring distances from Washington. Perhaps you noticed the statement on one side about the Lincoln Highway or the statement on the other about the Bankhead Highway. And perhaps you wondered, "What is this thing?" Here is its story.



The Zero Milestone was conceived by good roads advocate Dr. S. M. Johnson in 1919. He explained it in a proposal submitted on June 7, 1919, to Colonel J. M. Ritchie of the U.S. Army's Motor Transportation Corps:

It seems to me the time has come when the Government should designate a point at which the road system of the United States takes its beginning, and that the spot should be marked by an initial milestone, from which all road distances in the United States and throughout the Western hemisphere should be reckoned.

Rome marked the beginning of her system of highways which bound her widely scattered people together by a golden milestone in the Forum. The system of highways radiating from Washington to all the boundaries of the national domain and all parts of the Western hemisphere will do vastly more for national unity and for human unity than even the roads of the Roman Empire

This stone will endure as the generations and the centuries come and go, till time shall be no more. If that golden milestone in Rome still has the power to fire the imagination of men, how much greater will be the appeal of the Washington milestone as time goes on and American history grows ever richer in deeds of service to humanity.

The spot should be marked and, he added, serve as the starting point for the motor convoy the U.S. Army was preparing to send across the country.

Colonel Ritchie submitted the letter to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, who approved the idea. Now it was up to Dr. Johnson to provide the Zero Milestone. Dr. Johnson learned that an Act of Congress would be needed before a monument could be erected in the District of Columbia. With time short before the motor convoy left Washington on July 7, he secured a permit from the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds for a temporary marker that could be replaced with a permanent marker after the necessary legislation had been secured.

A New Era Begins

On July 7, 1919, the temporary marker for the Zero Milestone was dedicated on the Ellipse south of the White House during ceremonies launching the U.S. Army's first attempt to send a convoy of military vehicles across the country to the West Coast. The temporary marker unveiled during the ceremony had been provided as a gift from Mr. F. W. Hockaday of Wichita, Kansas, president of the National Highway Marking Association.

Secretary Baker accepted the temporary marker on behalf of the government. Then he launched the convoy-initially called a "motor truck train" in news accounts. He told the assembled dignitaries and prominent local citizens:

This is the beginning of a new era. The world war was a war of motor transport. It was a war of movement, especially in the later stages, when the practically stationary position of the armies was changed to meet the new conditions. There seemed to be a never ending stream of transports moving along the white roads of France.



One of the remarkable and entirely new developments of the war was the inauguration of a regular timetable and schedule for these trucks. In the daytime they were held in thickly wooded sections, but at night each one started out with a map and regular schedule which was as closely followed as the modern railroad. In no previous war had motor transportation developed to such an extent.

Then, he directed the leader of the convoy, Lt. Colonel Charles McClure to "proceed by way of the Lincoln Highway to San Francisco without delay" They were to drive to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where they would turn left on the Lincoln Highway, the most famous highway of its day, and head to San Francisco. Representative Julius Kahn of California presented two wreaths to Colonel McClure to be given to California Governor William D. Stephens.

As it turned out, they faced nothing but delay. After all, they would be taking what *The Evening Star* newspaper of Washington called the "longest and most thoroughly equipped and manned Army motor train ever assembled" on a highway that, just a few years earlier, had been described as "an imaginary line, like the equator!"

The Evening Star described the start of the journey:

This long Army motor train, composed of over sixty trucks and with a personnel of more than 200 men, rumbled slowly out of the city on a journey across the continent shortly after 11 o'clock this morning. It is to be self-maintained and self-operated and carries road and bridge building equipment, so that in case of a wash-out repairs can be speedily made.

The Tank Corps Observer

The convoy is best known today because a young officer, brevet Lt. Col. Dwight D. Eisenhower (soon to return to his peacetime rank of Captain), participated in it. He almost didn't go. He was thinking of leaving the Army-he didn't see much future for himself, stuck in a tank unit, never having made it to Europe during the war. He decided to go along as an observer "for a lark." He missed Secretary Baker's speech and the opening ceremonies. Instead, he joined the convoy in Frederick, Maryland. By then, the convoy had already experienced its first breakdowns--a kitchen trailer broke its coupling, a fan belt broke on one of the staff cars, and one of the trucks had to be towed into camp with a broken magneto. The 46-mile trip had taken over 7 hours.

Driving across the country, the convoy would need their road and bridge building equipment. Participants experienced every nightmare common to interstate motoring in the 1910's, plus additional troubles unique to the heavy vehicles they were taking across the country. Aside from regular mechanical problems, the convoy had to deal with vehicles

stuck in mud or crashing through wooden bridges, roads as slippery as ice (25 trucks skidded into a roadside ditch west of North Platte, Nebraska), roads with the consistency of "gumbo" or built on shifting sand, and extremes of weather from desert heat to Rocky Mountain freezing.

And everywhere they went, people turned out to greet them and offer them food, lodging, and friendship. Officials estimated that more than 3,250,000 Americans greeted the convoy, which gave America an opportunity to thank the Army for winning the war and to see some of the vehicles that made the victory possible. Everywhere, too, there were speeches, speeches, and more speeches by Army officers, Governors, Mayors, local dignitaries, important citizens, and Dr. Johnson. The tireless good roads advocate who had conceived the idea of erecting the Zero Milestone had also worked with the Lincoln Highway Association to arrange the convoy. Now he accompanied it west, making good roads speeches from coast to coast.

Colonel McClure finally led the convoy into San Francisco on September 6. Two destroyers escorted the ferryboats on which the convoy crossed the bay from Oakland to San Francisco. The participants passed along gaily decorated streets and between cheering lines of people to Lincoln Park, the terminus of the Lincoln Highway. The men received special medals for their exploits, but what Eisenhower later recalled was, "On the last day, the speeches ran on and on."

The 3,200-mile trip, Eisenhower said later, "had been difficult, tiring, and fun." His formal "Report on Trans-Continental Trip," dated November 3, 1919, stated that the roads east of Illinois and in California were good, although some old wooden bridges were in poor shape. He concluded:

Extended trips by trucks through the middle western part of the United States are impracticable until roads are improved, and then only a light truck should be used on long hauls. Through the eastern part of the United States the truck can be efficiently used in the Military Service, especially in problems involving a haul of approximately a hundred miles, which could be negotiated by light trucks in one day.

All participants came away convinced of the necessity of improving the Nation's roads. The difference was that, someday, Eisenhower would be in a position to do something about it. In his memoir, he recalled the impact of the 1919 convoy on him:

A third of a century later, after seeing the autobahns of modern Germany and knowing the asset those highways were to the Germans, I decided, as President, to put an emphasis on this kind of road building. When we finally secured the necessary congressional approval, we started the 41,000 miles of super highways [now 42,800 miles] that are already proving their worth. This was one of the things that I felt deeply about, and I made a personal and absolute decision to see that the nation would benefit by it. The old convoy had started me thinking about good, two-lane highways, but Germany had made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across the land.

President Eisenhower was never in the slightest doubt that the Interstate System was one of the most important accomplishments of his two terms in office. And he always cited the 1919 convoy as one of the reasons he clearly grasped the importance of good roads.

When Secretary Baker said, "This is the beginning of a new era," he had no idea how right he would prove to be.

The Second Convoy

The second convoy was promoted by the Bankhead Highway Association to follow its route from Washington to San Diego, California. The Bankhead Highway was established in Birmingham, Alabama, in October 1916, and named after U.S. Senator John H. Bankhead of Alabama. The Senator, a long-time booster for the cause of good roads, had been the chief sponsor of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, which President Woodrow Wilson had signed on July 11. The 1916 Act created the Federal-aid highway program that is still in operation today.

After several pathfinding tours, the Bankhead Highway Association ratified its 3,450-mile route in February 1920. The association estimated that 1,000 miles had "been improved with either permanent paving or hard substance." In January 1920, Senator Bankhead had asked Dr. Johnson to visit General Charles B. Drake, Chief of the Motor Transportation Corps, to present the following letter:

I have requested Dr. S. M. Johnson to call on you and present in person our request for a Motor Convoy Expedition over the Bankhead Highway. I am cognizant of the results of last summer's Convoy, and it is my deep desire that a similar benefit may accrue to the South and Southwest through another Convoy.

I am sure that, while the regions of my particular interest would receive special benefit, the entire nation would profit through the stimulus given to the movement to which the nation should address itself-the construction of a system of national highways.

In May, the War Department approved the proposal to dispatch a convoy over the Bankhead Highway under Colonel John F. Franklin, the Expeditionary Commander. Franklin, a West Point graduate with 20 years of Army experience, had served in Pershing's supply train in 1916 during the Army's incursion into Mexico following Pancho Villa's raid into New Mexico-one of the military's first uses of motor vehicles--and later served in France. J. A. Rountree, secretary of the Bankhead Highway Association, went along as field director and spokesman.

On June 14, dignitaries gathered on the Ellipse at the site of the temporary Zero Milestone marker that had been placed at the site at the start of the first U.S. Army convoy in July 1919. Secretary of War Baker was joined for the ceremony by Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Secretary of Commerce Joshua W. Alexander, Comptroller of the Currency John Skelton Williams, and Governor W. P. G. Harding of the Federal Reserve Board.

One person missing was Senator Bankhead. The 77-year old Senator had died on March 1, the Senate's oldest member to that time and its last survivor of the Civil War.

Secretary Baker explained the importance of good roads and motor trucks to the French victory against the Germans at Verdun. He urged the men to live up to the standard set in that war. Navy Secretary Daniels admitted he had been skeptical about the wisdom of spending so much money on good roads-his theory being that before long, everyone would be flying. However, since flying was still only indulged in by the few, the Secretary felt that for the present generation, good roads were an economic necessity. Commerce Secretary Alexander hoped the United States would soon have a chain of national highways and that every dollar used for this purpose would bring a large return. Mr. Harding, a close friend of the late Senator, called him "The Father of Good Roads in the United States."

General Drake of the Motor Transportation Corps explained why the U.S. Army had decide to dispatch the convoy:

[To] assist in the development of a system of national highways by bringing before the public in an educational way the necessity for such a system; to provide extended field service in connection with the training of officers and men in motor transportation; to recruit personnel for the various branches of the army; to secure data on road conditions throughout the territory in the immediate vicinity of the highway along which the convoy will operate; and to secure data relative to the operation and maintenance of motor vehicles.

Two wreaths were presented to Colonel Franklin for delivery to Governor Stephens of California. Secretary Baker presented the first wreath. The second came from Mrs. A. G. Lund, Senator Bankhead's daughter. An account of the ceremony in AAA's *American Motorist* magazine observed, "her presence at the starting ceremonies added a touch of sentiment to the occasion that was felt by all present who were acquainted with the lifetime hopes and ambitions of her distinguished father."

The plan was for Colonel Franklin to travel 40 to 65 miles a day and arrive in San Diego on September 15. The convoy, which consisted of 32 officers and 160 enlisted men traveling in 50 trucks and automobiles, was then to

proceed to Los Angeles, where the equipment would be distributed as part of the government's distribution of surplus war equipment to State and local governments.

The convoy proceeded to Atlanta, Georgia, with Governors and other dignitaries greeting and accompanying them along the way. They arrived on June 30 after experiencing little trouble on the roads despite bad weather. Heavy rains, however, created major problems for the convoy as it struggled to Memphis, where it found that floods in Arkansas had inundated the roads between Memphis and Little Rock. The convoy detoured to Helena, where the vehicles were ferried across the Mississippi River. The convoy also had to ferry across the White River in Arkansas. The Bankhead Highway Association's account of the convoy observed that, "The 'black gumbo' of Mississippi proved very troublesome and the heavy trucks had difficulty in getting through."

After another detour to avoid construction of the new road between Arkadelphia and Fulton, the convoy reached Texas, which consumed 1,087 miles, practically a third of the total distance of the Bankhead Highway:

The trip, long as it was, would have been made quicker had it not been for high waters that cut off both highway and railroad travel at one point for more than a week. At Sweetwater the convoy was held up because the roads were under water, and trains were stopped because the tracks were in the same condition.

As the convoy rolled into El Paso, the participants felt "a sigh of genuine relief . . . for the worst was over." On the "excellent highway" into El Paso, one sergeant said he did not believe there was such a road left in the world. Colonel Franklin, who was fully familiar with the roads of New Mexico and Arizona, assured them that they would not encounter the mud that had "proved so troublesome." Unexpectedly, therefore, the road between Tucson and Yuma, Arizona, would prove to be "the worst encountered by the convoy." The Bankhead Highway Association's account explained:

From Ajo to the Pima county line the road was passable. But just across the Pima county line in Maricopa and before reaching Yuma county, the convoy met the worst stretch of road, having difficulty in extracting itself from the clinging sands. From Sentinel to Wellton heavy sandy road was encountered in spots which caused the convoy's speed to be materially reduced. From Wellton to Yuma the convoy made record time, experiencing no difficulty on the road.

The association's account offered the following defense of Arizona:

According to the officers in charge of the convoy, the roads in Arizona are on the whole as good as the roads found in any other state through which the convoy has passed. However, that is not saying a great deal, for the country as a whole has not as yet awakened to the fact that good roads are as essential in modern life as railroads.

The arrival of the convoy was big news in each town and city. As had happened in 1919 during the passage of the first convoy, the Bankhead Highway convoy was greeted by welcoming ceremonies and, in the last town each day, dances. And speeches, including Rountree's good roads speeches.

At last, on October 2, the convoy reached San Diego. A local delegation greeted the convoy at 2 pm and led the way into the city. The *San Diego Union* described the entry:

Headed by the car occupied by [local booster and good roads advocate] Colonel [Ed] Fletcher, Major Franklin and J. A. Rountree, secretary of the Bankhead Highway Commission and field director of the convoy, the procession wound slowly down into the city.

At Fourth and Walnut, the convoy was met by motorized detachments representing the navy activities here, the army stations of Fort Rosecrans and Rockwell Field, and two naval bands The convoy went into camp in the park, north of the exposition buildings, and as the men turned out for "Assembly,"

Colonel Fletcher, introduced by the commanding officer, made what one dusty truck driver termed "the best speech of the whole trip."

Colonel Fletcher's speech was not oratory, nor intended as such. Simply and directly, he told the officers and men of San Diego's welcoming spirit and invited them to take part in the celebration planned in their honor. Applause such as only a crowd of army men can give greeted him as he told the men of the chicken dinner to which the American Legion last night invited them, of today's "launch ride" about the bay in a navy destroyer, of the free bathing privileges of the Service plunge and the auto ride about the city, planned for the enlisted men.

While the enlisted men were enjoying their "feed" in the Cristobal Cafe in Balboa Park and a dance sponsored by the women's auxiliary of the San Diego post of the American Legion, the officers were entertained at a banquet in the U.S. Grant Hotel. After a series of speeches, Colonel Fletcher presented a silver loving cup to Rountree. On one side it was inscribed:

Presented to J. A. Rountree, secretary Bankhead National Highway Association, on behalf of its members and admiring friends in recognition of his splendid service in conducting the Bankhead Highway Transcontinental Convoy, Washington, D.C., June 14th, San Diego, October 6, 1920.

On the other side, a map of the Bankhead Highway had been engraved.

Rountree then carefully unwrapped a wreath given to him in Washington by Senator Bankhead's widow, Mrs. Tallulah J. Bankhead,^[1] for delivery to "the city of the Silver Gate." Mayor L. J. Wilde accepted the wreath.

Colonel Franklin was then introduced. The *San Diego* Union account explains that his address was delayed by lengthy applause:

"After 111 days on the road," began [Colonel] Franklin, "you will believe me when I tell you it is a pleasure to be here." Then, in an address replete with interesting incidents well told, he related some of the obstacles met and overcome in the long run. His story of the big trailer "hanged on" the convoy by the ordinance department, and of how it was finally "ditched"-off the Talapoosa bridge and the narrow escape of a truck which crashed through its flimsy floor-of the "Admiral of El Paso," who did convoy duty across the Rio Grande-of the "gumbo" and bad bridges of Mississippi, and the hot stretches of sand and waste in the western states, was voted a classic in impromptu narrative.

According to the association's account, "Washington sent the convoy off with an impressive ceremony, and San Diego received it in like manner."

The main purpose of the convoy had been achieved with the arrival in San Diego, but a few more details remained to be accomplished. The convoy left San Diego on October 4 and arrived in Los Angeles the following day. During 3 days in the city, Colonel Franklin presented the two ceremonial wreaths, given to him in Washington, to Governor Stephens. By then, the U.S. Army had ordered the convoy to continue to San Francisco, which was reached on October 13. At the Presidio, the Bankhead Highway convoy was over.

As far as Rountree was concerned, it had been a total success. He estimated that the convoy traversed more than 4,500 miles. He had delivered over 250 addresses on good roads to more than 500,000 people. With Congress considering legislation, known as the Townsend bill after Senator Charles E. Townsend of Michigan, that would create a National Highway Commission to build a national system of highways, Rountree was convinced the Lincoln Highway and the Bankhead Highway would be taken over by the Federal Government and rebuilt to high standards. The two convoys had proven their national importance.

Things did not work out that way. The Townsend bill was defeated. Instead, Congress passed the Federal Highway Act of 1921, which corrected defects in the original Federal-aid highway program. The Federal Government would not

build national highways. Instead, with help from the State highway agencies, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads would designate roads that would be eligible for improvement with Federal-aid highway funds. The Federal-aid system would include up to 7 percent of the Nation's total road mileage, with three-sevenths of the system being "interstate in character." Federal-aid funds would be made available to the State highway agencies to help improve the roads.

Securing the Permanent Milestone

Even before the second convoy had left for its cross-country trip on the Bankhead Highway, Dr. Johnson had secured approval for the permanent Zero Milestone. He had drafted a bill authorizing the permanent marker. With the endorsement of Secretary Baker, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, the American Automobile Association (AAA), the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, and other organizations, Congressman Kahn introduced the bill on January 5, 1920.

H. J. Res. 270, which was approved on June 5, 1920, authorized the Secretary of War to erect a Zero Milestone, the design to be approved by the Commission of Fine Arts and installed at no expense to the government. At the Secretary's request, Dr. Johnson took charge of the details. He hired Horace W. Peaslee, a Washington architect, to design the Zero Milestone and supervise its construction. Dr. Johnson also raised funds. The principal contributors, according to Dr. Johnson, were:

[The] children of the late Senator Bankhead, also F. W. Hockaday, of Wichita, Kansas; F. A. Sieberling, of Akron, Ohio; Charles Springer, of Santa Fe, New Mexico; Charles Davis, of Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Durant Motors Company; F. G. Chandler, of Cleveland, Ohio; R. D. Chapin, of Detroit, Michigan; Packard Motor Company; General Motors Corporation; W. O. Rutherford, of Akron, Ohio; Henry B. Joy, of Detroit, Michigan; Col. Benehan Cameron, of Stagville, North Carolina; American Automobile Association; National Highways Association; the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce; and Lee Highway Association.

This was a who's who list of good roads advocates. For example, Sieberling, closely associated with the Lincoln Highway, headed Goodyear Tires. Joy, president of Packard, was also long associated with the Lincoln Highway. Chapin, an auto executive, was president of the Chamber, while Davis was president of the National Highways Association. Cameron was president of the Bankhead Highway Association.

Peaslee decided to engrave the purpose of the Zero Milestone on the side facing south toward the Washington Monument:

POINT FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF DISTANCES FROM
WASHINGTON ON HIGHWAYS OF THE UNITED STATES

The west face notes the 1919 tour:

STARTING POINT OF FIRST TRANSCONTINENTAL MOTOR CONVOY OVER THE LINCOLN
HIGHWAY, JULY 7, 1919

The engraving on the east face commemorates the second Army convoy:

STARTING POINT OF SECOND TRANSCONTINENTAL MOTOR CONVOY OVER THE BANKHEAD
HIGHWAY, JUNE 14, 1920

According to information Dr. Johnson provided at the time, the bronze disc on top of the milestone is "an adaptation from ancient Portolan charts of the so-called 'wind roses' or 'compass roses' from the points of which extended radial lines to all parts of the then known world-the prototype of the modern mariner's compass."

The Zero Milestone is located at the Meridian of the District of Columbia, 77.02', which previously was marked by the "Jefferson Stone" placed in 1804. The latitude is 38.53' 43.32". The elevation is 23'65" above sea level. A brass plate placed on the ground at the north base of the milestone-now illegible from wear and tear-originally read:

THE U.S. COAST AND GEODETIC SURVEY DETERMINED THE LATITUDE LONGITUDE AND
ELEVATION OF THE ZERO MILESTONE.

Dedicating the Milestone

The permanent Zero Milestone was dedicated in a ceremony on June 4, 1923. The ceremony coincided with the opening of the Washington Convention of the Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. As a result, according to Dr. Johnson, the occasion brought together "more automobiles than were ever before assembled in the city." About 8,000 people attended the ceremony.

Early on, the U.S. Army Band performed "Hail! Hail! The Caravan!" The march had been written for the occasion by Virginia Monro (words) and Wilmuth Gary (music). "The magic links of byways, the golden chains of highways," the lyric proclaims, "radiate from our DC enduring ties of liberty."

With President Warren Harding in attendance, the ceremony continued with brief addresses by Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace, Chief Thomas H. MacDonald of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, and auto industry representatives. Then, Dr. Johnson presented the Zero Milestone to the Nation. After explaining the origins of the milestone, he concluded:

We have taken our stand for a paved United States. This monument is placed here to mark the beginning of a system, but a beginning implies continuance and completion. The use of the automobile is universal, therefore pavement must be universal. Until this is accomplished, we will not be living in the spirit of the age in which our lives are cast.

Mr. President, on behalf of Lee Highway Association, and through the cooperation of a number of public-spirited citizens, including the children of the late Senator John H. Bankhead, father of the Federal Highway Act, and of national organizations, including the American Automobile Association, the National Automobile Chamber of the Commerce, and the National Highways Association, I have the honor to present this monument, to be the beginning of our system of national highways, a standard of linear measurement on the highways radiating from this place and as a symbol of the spirit of this, the motor age of progress.

President Harding accepted the milestone on behalf of the Federal Government. He began with references to the original Golden Milestone in Rome:

My countrymen, in the old Roman forum there was erected in the days of Rome's greatness a golden milestone. From it was measured and marked the system of highways which gridironed the Roman world and bound the uttermost provinces to the heart and center of the empire. We are dedicating here another golden milestone, to which we and those after us will relate the wide-ranging units of the highway system of this country.

He explained that placing the Zero Milestone in Washington was appropriate. Referring to the two decades of highway development since the beginning of the motor age, he said:

[Our] advance in this respect has been phenomenal, making it most fitting that a recognized center of the highway system should at this time be set up.

It is appropriate, too, that our golden milestone has been here placed in the National Capital, the spiritual and institutional center of the nation. From it will diverge, to it will converge, the ceaseless tides

whose movement will always keep our wide-flung population in that close intimacy of thought and interest and aim which is so necessary to the maintenance of unity and nationality.

There was, he added, another reason for its location:

It marks the approximate meeting place of the Lincoln Highway and the Lee Highway; of the northern and southern systems of national roads. From it we may view the memorial to Lincoln and the home of Lee [the Custis-Lee Mansion, which in that time was visible just beyond the Lincoln Memorial on a hill at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia]. It marks the meeting point of those sections which once grappled in conflict, but now are happily united for all time in the bonds of national fraternity, of a single patriotism, and of a common destiny.

In closing, he said:

We may fittingly dedicate the zero milestone to its purpose in the hope and trust that it will remain here through the generations and centuries, while the republic endures as the greatest institutional blessing that Providence has given to any people.

Other Zero Milestones

Advocates attempted to spread the Zero Milestone idea to other cities. The value of many milestones "will be at once recognized," as AAA explained in the October 1923 issue of its magazine *American Motorist*:

Motorists are familiar with the conflicting statements of roadside markers as to the distance to or from a certain city or town, all because the mileage was measured from different points With official milestones in each city and town, all disputes as to distances between certain cities or towns can be accurately settled as the understanding will be that the distances between milestones will be taken.

Several milestones were placed around the country. On November 17, 1923, for example, the Lee Highway Association placed the Pacific Milestone in Grant Park opposite the U.S. Grant Hotel at the western terminus of the Lee Highway in San Diego, California. President Harding had expected to participate while on an extended western tour. However, he died in San Francisco on August 2, 1923. Nevertheless, presidential participation was arranged for the ceremony. President Calvin Coolidge pressed a key in the White House to release an electric impulse that started the ceremony, which was attended by 20,000 people. Colonel Fletcher read President Coolidge's remarks, which concluded:

The monument may well be dedicated to the purpose of marking the meeting place of the splendid highway with the waters of the Pacific, in the hope that it may hasten the coming day of a perfected system of highway communication throughout the entire nation.

The marble milestone included a bronze tablet:

THE CITIZENS OF SAN DIEGO IN DEDICATING THE PACIFIC MILESTONE, NOVEMBER 17, 1923,
HEREBY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE UNTIRING EFFORTS OF COL. ED FLETCHER IN THE
CONSTRUCTION OF A SOUTHERN TRANSCONTINENTAL HIGHWAY

A similar milestone was dedicated in Nashville on May 12, 1924, in the southeast corner of Memorial Park at Union Street and Sixth Avenue. The canvas cover was pulled from the Zero Milestone at 2 pm by two "little misses," as they were described in *Tennessee Highways and Public Works*. The children were Sarah Peay, daughter of Governor Austin Peay, and Elizabeth Cornelius, whose father Charles was president of the Nashville Automobile Club. The Governor declared that the marker will remain through the years as the "headstone of the State Highway System."

A Gathering of Visionaries

Given the link to President Eisenhower and the 1919 convoy, the Zero Milestone on the Ellipse was the site of a gala honoring the "[Visionaries of the Interstate](#)" on June 26, 1996. The gala commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which President Eisenhower signed to launch the Interstate System (actually signed June 29, 1956). During the ceremony, Vice President Al Gore honored four of the Founding Fathers of the Interstate System: President Eisenhower (accepted by his granddaughter, Susan Eisenhower), Congressman Hale Boggs (his wife, former Congresswoman Lindy Boggs, accepted the award), former Federal Highway Administrator Frank Turner (present for this honor), and the Vice President's father, Senator Al Gore, Sr. (one of the chief authors of the bill, also present).

Vice President Gore said:

Tonight we meet to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Interstate Highway System and the four great Americans who made it possible And as we celebrate this anniversary, I really can't think of a better place to gather than on the Ellipse, at the Zero Milestone Marker. The Zero Milestone, of course, is the marker from which all distances from the nation's capital are supposed to be measured. In many ways the Interstate Highway System is a marker itself from which all legislation should be measured. Our nation's greatest accomplishments, whether the Interstate Highway System or the Marshall Plan or many others, are often those that receive bipartisan support.

And so it stands. The Zero Milestone in Washington never became the American equivalent of Rome's Golden Milestone. Today, it remains in place, baffling tourists and serving mainly as a resting place for their belongings while they take photographs of each other standing in front of the White House. It is forgotten for the most part. Periodically, it is threatened with removal by the National Park Service as it considers options for revitalizing the Ellipse. But for historians, the Zero Milestone marks the place where "a new era" began.

[\[1\]](#) The actress Tullulah Bankhead was the granddaughter of Senator and Mrs. Bankhead.

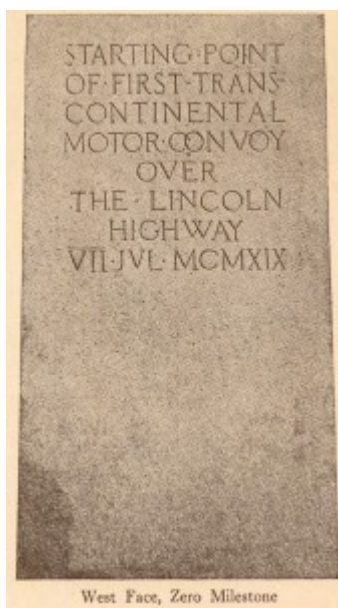
[Zero Milestone Photo Gallery](#)

Zero Milestone - Washington, DC Photo Gallery

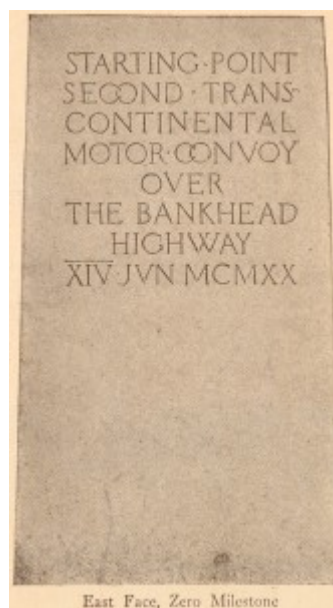
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North Face, Zero Milestone



West Face, Zero Milestone



East Face, Zero Milestone



Zero Milestone (South Face) and The White House (1923)



President Warren G. Harding speaks at the Zero Milestone dedication ceremony in Washington D.C.



The Memphis (Tenn.) Milestone, with the Hon. Thomas B. King, Vice-President of Lee Highway Association and Manager of the Highway Division of the Chamber of Commerce of Memphis, Tennessee



The Pacific Milestone, Col. Fletcher, second from left