

U.S. 6: The Grand Army of the Republic Highway

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U.S. 6 - The Grand Army of the Republic Highway

by Richard F. Weingroff

In October 1925, the Joint Board on Interstate Highways recommended a 75,884-mile U.S. numbered system. One of the routes in the proposal was U.S. 6:

From Provincetown, Massachusetts, to New Bedford, Fall River, Providence, Rhode Island, Hartford, Connecticut, Danbury, Brewster, New York.

This routing was consistent with the Joint Board's concept of the numbering system. The Joint Board assigned even numbers to routes of prevailing east-west traffic and odd numbers to routes that were predominantly north-south. The principal east-west routes were numbered with a multiple of 10 and ended in zero, up to U.S. 90 in the south. Other routes were numbered within the grid created by the principal routes.

Because the highways in the system were owned by the States, the Secretary of Agriculture submitted the Joint Board's proposal to the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) for approval. During late 1925 and throughout 1926, AASHO considered requests for changes in the Joint Board's proposal. By the time AASHO approved the proposal on November 11, 1926, U.S. 6 was one of the routes that had changed. The first official AASHO log of the U.S. routes, published in 1927, defined the new route:

United States Highway No. 6 **Total Mileage, 707**

Massachusetts Beginning at Provincetown via Sandwich, New Bedford, Fall River to the Massachusetts-Rhode Island State line at East Providence.

Rhode Island Beginning at the Massachusetts-Rhode Island State line on Waterman Avenue, East Providence, via Providence, North Scituate to the Rhode Island-Connecticut State line at South Killingly.

Connecticut Beginning at the Rhode Island-Connecticut State line at South Killingly via Danielson, Brooklyn, Clarks Corners, Willimantic, South Coventry, Coventry, Bolton Notch, Manchester, Burnside, Hartford, Farmington, Plainville, Bristol, Terryville, Thomaston, Watertown, Minortown, Woodbury, Southbury, Sandy Hook, Danbury, Mill Plain to the New York-Connecticut State line west of Mill Plain.

New York Beginning again at Kingston via Kerhonkson, Wurtsboro to Port Jervis.

Pennsylvania Beginning at the New York-Pennsylvania State line at Port Jervis via Matamoras, Milford, Honesdale, Carbondale, Scranton, Clarks Summit, Tunkhannock, Wyalusing, Towanda, Mansfield, Canoe Camp, Wellsboro, Coudersport, Farmers Valley, Kane, Warren, Corry, Waterford to Erie.

As this description suggests, U.S. 6 came to a halt at the Connecticut-New York border west of Danbury, then resumed a considerable distance to the north on the west side of the Hudson River at Kingston. AASHO filled the gap in 1928:

New York - A change in U.S. No. 6 was granted, and the route is described as follows; beginning at the Connecticut-New York State line at Mill Plain via Brewster, Mahopac, Peekskill, Highland Falls, Central Valley, Monroe, Goshen, State Hill to Port Jervis, and the route formerly designated U.S. 6; from Port Jervis via Wurtsboro, Ellenville to Kingston, was given the No. U.S. 6 North.

The route was changed again on June 8, 1931, when AASHO's Executive Committee approved State highway agency requests to modify the route in Pennsylvania and extend U.S. 6 to Greeley, Colorado. The approval read:

U.S. 6, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado. U.S. 6, which now begins at Provincetown, Massachusetts, and ends at Erie, Pennsylvania, is extended so that the original description of U.S. 6 stands as heretofore, except that from Waterford, Pennsylvania, to Erie, Pennsylvania, it shall be known as U.S. 6 N. Then beginning at Waterford, Pennsylvania, the following additional routing is established temporarily: Cambridge Springs, Meadville, Conneaut Lake, Pennline to the Ohio-Pennsylvania line west of Pennline. OHIO, beginning at the Pennsylvania-Ohio line, west of Pennline, via Andover, Chardon to Cleveland (it being clearly understood that the final designation of this route between Waterford, Pennsylvania, and Cleveland, Ohio, is subject to a more definite location, dependent upon certain road improvements contemplated by the State Highway Departments of Pennsylvania and Ohio). Further permanent location of this route continues as follows: Cleveland, Lorain, Fremont, Bowling Green, Napoleon, Bryan, Edgerton to the Ohio-Indiana State line, west of Edgerton. INDIANA, beginning at the Ohio-Indiana State line, west of Edgerton, via Waterloo, Kendallville, Ligonier, Nappanee, Bremen, Lapaz, Walkerton, Westville, Hobart, Hyland, Munster to the Indiana-Illinois State line, west of Munster. ILLINOIS, beginning at the Indiana-Illinois State line, west of Munster, via Joliet, Mendota, LaMoille, Rock Island to the Mississippi River, opposite Davenport, Iowa. IOWA, the description of U.S. 6 across Iowa is made by the absorption of the present U.S. 32 in Iowa. NEBRASKA, the description of U.S. 6 in Nebraska is the same as present U.S. 38 and absorbs that number. COLORADO, the description of U.S. 6 in Colorado is the same as present U.S. 38 and absorbs U.S. 38, terminating at Greeley.

U.S. 32 was a 505-mile highway from Chicago to Council Bluffs. The portion in Iowa added to U.S. 6 was described in the 1929 log of U.S. numbered highways:

Iowa Davenport 27, Wilton 31, Iowa City 31, Marengo 68, Colfax 23, Des Moines 39, Dexter 28, Adair 23, Atlantic 27, Oakland 27, Council Bluffs.

(The number following the name of a city indicates the mileage between that city and the next one given.)

U.S. 38 was a 598-mile route from Omaha to Greeley. The routing in Nebraska and Colorado was:

Nebraska Beginning at Omaha 38, Ashland 28, Lincoln 20, Milford 37, Fairmont 46, Hastings 36, Minden 70, Arapahoe 43, McCook 73, Imperial 22, Lamar 18.

Colorado Holyoke 21, Haxtun 40, Sterling 42, Brush 10, Fort Morgan 54, Greeley.

After U.S. 6 absorbed these segments, the number "38" disappeared from the next log, published in 1932. U.S. 32 remained in the log, shortened to 181 miles between Chicago and Davenport.

These changes left two spur routes with the designation U.S. 6 N. The U.S. 6N in New York, from Port Jervis and Kingston, was discontinued in 1933.

On June 21, 1937, U.S. 6 became a transcontinental highway. Officials of AASHO extended U.S. 6 to Long Beach, California, 3,652 miles from Provincetown on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. The eastern terminus was at New Beach Circle; the western terminus at the intersection of the Long Beach Freeway and Pacific Coast Highway (U.S. 101). The extended route was described as follows:

Colorado Holyoke 18, Haxtun 25, Sterling 36, Brush 10, Fort Morgan 15, Wiggins 66, Denver 47, Empire 31, Dillon 12, Wheeler 23, Leadville 25, Redcliffe 27, Eagle 43, Glenwood Springs 66, Grand Junction 26 (when Colorado improves the highway between Wheeler and Redcliffe, U.S. 6 will go from Wheeler via Redcliffe to Eagle instead of via Leadville), Mack 147.

Utah Price 11, Helper 45, Thistle 13, Spanish Fork 14, Santaquin 21, Eureka 55, Delta 7, Henckley 153.

Nevada Ely 171, Tonopah 42, Coaldale 16, Basalt 17.

California Benton 37, Bishop 44, Independence 16, Lone Pine 62, Brown 12, Freeman 43, Mojave 24, Lancaster 8, Palmdale 37, to junction with State Route 4 south of Newhall 31, Los Angeles 24, Long Beach.

At the same time, AASHO revised U.S. 6N:

Pennsylvania Beginning at junction with U.S. 19 west of Mill Village 7, Edinboro 13, Albion 8, to a junction with U.S. 20 at West Springfield.

The routing remains essentially the same today.

When U.S. 6 achieved transcontinental status in 1937, it was the longest U.S. route at 3,652 miles. It was not, however, paved the entire distance. When paving was completed in 1952, the news received national attention. On September 21, 1952, *The New York Times* noted that paving had been completed a week earlier in 100-degree heat in Utah. A planned 2-day celebration would "mark completion of thirty-three and one-half miles of arrow-straight asphalt pavement running from a point just beyond Hinckley, about six miles west of here, to Skull Rock Pass in the Little Drum Mountains."

As *Business Week* pointed out in its issue of October 11, 1952, the paving was much needed:

It was designated a transcontinental highway in 1937. Technically, it was. You could get from Provincetown to Long Beach on it if you chose to try. But from Delta, about 80 mi. east of the Utah-Nevada border, to Ely, some 80 mi. west of the border, you ran into trouble. Much of this stretch of road was nothing but a wagon trail-rutted, filled with dust. It was one of the worst chunks of federal road in the country.

The celebration in Delta was a sign of hope for the communities along this stretch of U.S. 6:

What this means, citizens hope, is that their restaurants, gas stations, and hotels are in for some comparatively roaring business.

The ceremony was appropriately joyous:

They staged parades, ate barbecued beef, listened to speeches on how the area was scheduled for vast economic growth. In a final burst of enthusiasm, they closed off four blocks of U.S. 6 and ran a 1,500-man square dance.

Culmination of the two-day shindig came when Sen. Arthur V. Watkins (R., Utah) and Sen. Pat McCarran (D., Nev.) rode down U.S. 6 in, respectively, an 1898 Columbus-Firestone and a 1902 Oldsmobile. Driving for Watkins was Gov. J. Bracken Lee of Utah; driving for McCarran was Gov. Charles Russell of Nevada. The dignitaries chugged into Delta, disembarked, and cut a foot-wide ribbon stretched across the road. This symbolized the opening of U.S. 6.

One more change in terminus remained to be made. Under State Senate Bill 64, California renumbered its State highway system, effective July 1, 1964. The State law provided that each route should have a single number, with precedence given to retention of present sign route numbers in the following order: Interstate routes, U.S. numbered routes, and State sign routes. To comply with this requirement, the State asked AASHO's U.S. Route Numbering Committee to approve a shift in the western terminus of U.S. 6 to Bishop, thus eliminating the combined section of U.S. 6/395 between Bishop and Brown. On June 18, 1963, the committee approved the request. While the route retained the U.S. 395 designation between Bishop and Brown, the former segment of U.S. 6 beyond Brown became State Route 14.

After the 1963 change in California, U.S. 6 became the second longest highway in the country (3,227 miles). The longest was and remains U.S. 20 (3,345 miles).

Grand Army of the Republic Highway

Major William L. Anderson, Jr., of the U.S. Army conceived the idea of designating U.S. 6 the Grand Army of the Republic Highway to honor the Union forces during the Civil War. Based on his recommendation, the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War began promoting the idea in April 1934. Because the highway was owned by the States, the organization asked each State to act on the proposal. The first to do so was Massachusetts when Governor Charles F. Hurley signed a bill on February 12, 1937, naming the route. Over the years, the States gradually adopted the name. For example, California did so in 1943 and Indiana in 1946, while Governor James Duff of Pennsylvania named the State's segment of U.S. 6 in 1948.

A formal dedication of the Grand Army of the Republic Highway took place on May 3, 1953, in Long Beach. The occasion was a gathering of the five related service organizations, including the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. The five organizations held their own meetings, but came together for the dedication on that Sunday afternoon to place a monument in front of the Municipal Auditorium:

GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC HIGHWAY
U.S. 6

This monument marks the western end of a coast to coast highway extending a distance of three thousand six hundred fifty-two miles through fourteen states. It was erected by the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War in memory of the heroic services and unselfish devotion of the Union soldiers, sailors and marines who laid down their lives on the altar of sacrifice during the Civil War. National Highway first proposed by Major William L. Anderson, Jr., U.S.A. of Massachusetts. For what they did and dared, let us remember them today.

The Devoted Eccentric

In the late 1940's, when George R. Stewart was considering a text-and-picture book about a transcontinental highway, he thought about but rejected U.S. 6. He selected U.S. 40, instead, and wrote *U.S. 40: Cross Section of the United States* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953). Stewart, in explaining why he chose U.S. 40, commented, "By comparison, Route 6 runs uncertainly from nowhere to nowhere, scarcely to be followed from one end to the other, except by some devoted eccentric."

One "devoted eccentric," unknown to Stewart, found U.S. 6: Sal Paradise, protagonist of Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road*. Paradise was headed to Chicago and points west:

I'd been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the roadmap was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started.

He hitched rides to Bear Mountain where he planned to connect with U.S. 6.

Five scattered rides took me to the desired Bear Mountain Bridge, where Route 6 arched in from New England. It began to rain in torrents when I was let off there. It was mountainous. Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared into the wilderness. Not only was there no traffic but the rain came down in buckets and I had no shelter.

He was desperate to get going:

Finally a car stopped at the empty filling station; the man and two women in it wanted to study a map. I stepped right up and gestured in the rain; they consulted; I looked like a maniac, of course, with my hair all wet, my shoes sopping But the people let me in and rode me north to Newburgh, which I accepted as a better alternative than being trapped in the Bear Mountain wilderness all night. "Besides," said the man, "there's no traffic passes through 6. If you want to go to Chicago you'd do better going across the Holland Tunnel in New York and head for Pittsburgh," and I knew he was right. It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes.

In the end, therefore, even one of the most devoted eccentrics in literature didn't take U.S. 6.
