

U.S. 11: Rouses Point, New York to New Orleans, Louisiana

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U.S. 11 - Rouses Point, New York, to New Orleans, Louisiana

by

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In October 1925, the Joint Board completed its report, which explained the new numbering system and presented the companion signs, including the U.S. shield. That initial system included U.S. 11:

From Rouses Point, **New York**, to Watertown, Syracuse, Binghamton, Scranton, **Pennsylvania**, Harrisburg, Chambersburg, Hagerstown, **Maryland**, Winchester, **Virginia**, Staunton, Bristol, Knoxville, **Tennessee**, Chattanooga, Birmingham, **Alabama**, Tuscaloosa, Meridian, **Mississippi**, Hattiesburg, New Orleans, **Louisiana** (bold added).

Secretary of Agriculture William M. Jardine forwarded the Joint Board's report to the State highway agencies' national organization, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO), on November 18, 1925. He recommended that they adopt the proposal: "The clear designation of important routes of travel will be a distinct advantage not only in eliminating confusion, but also in furthering systematic and continuous construction." Secretary Jardine's recommendation to the States reflected the fact that the U.S. numbered system did not-and still does not-include federally owned roads. The roads were then, and are now, State highways.

Reaction to the plan varied from State to State and community to community. For example, according to the January 1926 issue of *Good Roads* magazine, Colonel Frederick Stuart Greene, Superintendent of New York State's Department of Public Works and a member of the Joint Board, felt the only problem was that too many routes had been designated:

In laying out the roads in New York state for the United States highway system, I had one north and south route running from New York clear through to Montreal and a road running from Boston, passing south of Buffalo and entering Pennsylvania near Lake Erie. A third road was approved from Rouses Point along the upper part of the state, the St. Lawrence river, through Watertown, Syracuse, Binghamton and then on to Washington. Also, a road running from New York to Boston, only a small portion of which is in New York state.

I found there was a disposition on the part of some of the other states to add more roads in New York and this I positively refused to do, thinking that they wanted to try to justify their great amount of roads by having New York pursue the same ridiculous policy.

Pennsylvanians objected to several of the routings in their State. *Good Roads* also quoted J. Clyde Myton, Secretary of the Motor Club of Harrisburg, as saying, "The route selected from Lewistown to Selinsgrove, Sunbury, Wilkes-Barre and Scranton is not a natural travel route." This would be the alignment of U.S. 11 west of Selinsgrove.

Throughout 1926, AASHO considered changes in the system. Many were prompted by named trail promoters who did not want their route split among several numbers or wanted recognition for segments of their route not included in a U.S. numbered highway. After acting on the proposals, AASHO approved the new U.S. numbered system by State ballot on November 11, 1926. The first official log of the U.S. numbered system, published in 1927, described U.S. 11 this way (spellings as in the original):

United States Highway No. 11

Total Mileage, 1,696

New York Beginning at Rouses Point via Canton, Watertown, Pulaski, Syracuse, Cortland, Binghamton to the New York-Pennsylvania State line south of Kirkwood.

Pennsylvania Beginning at the New York-Pennsylvania State line north of Great Bend via New Milford, Alford, Kingsley, Clarks Summit, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Shickshinny, Bloomsburg, Danville, Sunbury, Clarks Ferry, Harrisburg, Carlisle, Chambersburg and Greencastle to the Pennsylvania--Maryland State line south of Greencastle.

Maryland Beginning at the Pennsylvania-Maryland State line at State line, south of Greencastle, via Hagerstown to the Maryland-West Virginia State line south of Williamsport.

West Virginia Beginning at the Maryland-West Virginia State line south of Williamsport via Martinsburg to the West Virginia-Virginia State line north of Bunker Hill.

Virginia Beginning at the West Virginia-Virginia State line north of Bunker Hill via Winchester, New Market, Staunton, Lexington, Roanoke, Wytheville, Abbingdon to the Virginia-Tennessee State line at Bristol.

Tennessee Beginning at the Virginia-Tennessee State line at Bristol via Kingsport, Rogersville, Knoxville, Lenoir City, Athens, Chattanooga to the Tennessee-Georgia State line south of Wauhatchie.

Georgia Beginning at the Tennessee-Georgia State line south of Wauhatchie via Trenton to the Georgia-Alabama State line south of Rising Fawn.

Alabama Beginning at the Georgia-Alabama State line south of Rising Fawn via Fort Payne, Attalla, Gadsden, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, Livingston to the Alabama-Mississippi State line southwest of Cuba.

Mississippi Beginning at the Alabama-Mississippi State line southwest of Cuba via Kewanee, Meridian, Laurel, Hattiesburg, Poplarville to the Mississippi-Louisiana State line east of Pearl River, Louisiana.

With this alignment, U.S. 11 began at a junction with U.S. 2 at Rouses Point and ended near the Louisiana border at a junction with U.S. 90, which provided a link to New Orleans. In this way, U.S. 11 connected the two major east-west border routes in the U.S. numbered system, while crossing all the transcontinental and major east-west routes.

Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), prepared an article for the July 1927 issue of *The Highway Magazine* on the condition of the newly designated U.S. routes. In "Closing the Gaps," he included a paragraph on U.S. 11:

Route 11 which runs from Rouses Point, N.Y., to New Orleans is 98 per cent surfaced with some kind of surfacing varying from sand-clay to pavement, and the 2 per cent remaining will be completed in 1927. This route passes through Syracuse, Scranton, Harrisburg, Hagerstown, Martinsburg, Winchester, Bristol, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Gadsden, Birmingham, Meridian, and Hattiesburg; and is continuously improved with gravel, sand-clay, macadam, or higher types of surfacing from the Canadian border to the Georgia line.

At the time, the BPR was preparing press releases describing many of the main U.S. routes. Although the BPR does not appear to have issued a press release on U.S. 11, information was gathered for such a release. It is in the form of a memorandum from "Mr. Mills" to the BPR official and historian who wrote the press releases, Albert C. Rose. The memorandum, dated June 29, 1927, began:

The geography of United States Highway No. 11 is unique among the routes east of the Mississippi in that throughout practically its whole length it follows the Appalachian range, crossing the parallel ridges from valley to valley as topography dictates.

The memorandum ([see sidebar reproduction](#)) described the route only to Bristol, Virginia. The [accompanying map](#), similar in format to those prepared for the press releases on other routes, showed the route continuing to New Orleans. As the log indicated, however, the route came to an end at U.S. 90 just east of the Mississippi-Louisiana State line; motorists could take U.S. 90 to New Orleans via Pearl River and Slidell.

At Louisiana's request, AASHO approved a change in the alignment of U.S. 90 on June 21, 1937:

U.S. 90 - Louisiana. Via Rigolets cut-off. New Orleans (on Broad Street at Canal Street) 20.9 miles to west end Chef Menteur Bridge. 9.9 miles to Rigolets cut-off (0.06 miles east of Rigolets Bridge), 8.6 miles to east and Pearl River Bridge (Louisiana-Mississippi State line) 39.4 miles in Louisiana.

This change routed U.S. 90 over a new highway south of the former alignment.

Louisiana followed up in 1939 by requesting a change in routing for U.S. 11. On June 28, the Executive Committee, meeting in Chicago, approved routing U.S. 11 onto the former alignment of U.S. 90 through Pearl River and Slidell:

U.S. 11, Louisiana. U.S. 11 in Louisiana is changed to read as follows: Pearl River, Slidell, Pontchartrain Bridge, New Orleans.

The Pontchartrain Bridge had been constructed across the eastern portion of the lake, a 5-mile concrete viaduct from Pointe-aux Herbes to North Shore. Although the Louisiana Highway Commission had administered the construction contract, the New Orleans Pontchartrain Bridge Company owned the bridge and operated it as a toll facility after it opened in 1928. The Legislature by Act No. 71 in fiscal year 1937 authorized the Louisiana Highway Commission to purchase the bridge for \$600,000 and operate it as a toll-free bridge. With this action completed, the State asked AASHO to route U.S. 11 over the bridge to a connection with U.S. 90 south of Lake Pontchartrain. From there, U.S. 11 continued into New Orleans on the U.S. 90 alignment.

The next official log, published in 1939, showed the new southern routing of U.S. 11 (the numbers shown are point-to-point distances):

Mississippi Kewanee 19, Meridian 27, Pachuta 29, Laurel 30, Hattiesburg 39, Poplarville 25, Picayune 8, Santa Rosa 15.

Louisiana Pearl River 7, Slidell 9, Rigolets Bridge 42, New Orleans.

The route was 1,761 miles long.

On October 21, 1941, AASHO's Route Numbering Committee approved a request from the State highway agency to change the Louisiana terminus:

Establishing a new southern terminus of the route at the junction with US 90 in East New Orleans rather than downtown New Orleans. This shortens the route.

The new terminus was the route's junction with U.S. 90.

U.S. 11 has continued to evolve, but its termini remain Rouses Point and U.S. 90 in east New Orleans, with a routing via Pearl River, Slidell, and the Pontchartrain Bridge. The most recent route log, published in 1989 by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, listed U.S. 11 as 1,780 miles long.

The Tennessee Split

The Joint Board on Interstate Highways had routed U.S. 11 in eastern Tennessee through Kingsport and Rogersville, following Lee Highway. A parallel road was assigned a branch number:

511 - From Bristol, Tennessee, to Johnson City, Morristown, Straw Plains.

The prefix 5 indicated it was the fifth branch off of U.S. 11.

When AASHO approved the U.S. numbered highways in November 1926, the designations of U.S. 11 and U.S. 511 remained in place. The formal designation of U.S. 511 read:

Tennessee Beginning at Bristol via Bluff City, Jonesboro, Morristown to Strawberry Plains.

U.S. 511 was 284 miles long.

This routing reflected the preference of Governor Austin Peay, who had sent a telegram on September 30, 1925, to the BPR's E. W. James, who was the Joint Board's secretary. The Governor threatened to take Tennessee out of the numbering plan because it was "fraught with trouble." He explained:

But if the marking must be done then federal arterial number one through Tennessee by all means should be continued as a matter of justice via Kingsport and Rogersville and should not be diverted via Johnson City and Greenville because of shorter distance and the heavy investment of the counties on the faith of the State . . . I disagree with the recommendation of my highway department in this matter and insist upon the disposition of it in accordance herewith.

Although Tennessee was not represented on the Joint Board, this telegram indicates that the Joint Board's members had deferred to the State highway agency in routing U.S. 11 via Johnson City on the preliminary map of the U.S. numbered highways.

James replied by telegram on October 21, 1925:

Will include Tennessee in report of Joint Board as confirmed by State highway department except will substitute Kingsport route for Johnson City route.

A notation on the copy of this exchange in the National Archives indicated that it was prompted by backers of the transcontinental Lee Highway, which followed the Kingsport routing.

The original routing of U.S. 11 and U.S. 511 as approved by AASHO on November 11, 1926, was a result of this correspondence. Local interests, however, were not satisfied, as Governor Peay would learn. According to Leland R. Johnson, author of *Memphis to Bristol: A Half Century of Highway Construction* (a history of the Tennessee Road Builders Association, which published the book in 1978):

J. A. Summers of Johnson City headed a group of business and civic leaders from communities located along present Highway 11-E who objected to the designation of present Highway 11-W as federal Highway 11 and therefore the main route between Bristol and Memphis. They complained to Governor Peay.

"Two and one-half strenuous years in this office," Governor Peay protested to the Bureau of Public Roads, "and consequent contact with the highway problem has revealed to me how very sensitive are the various communities on this subject and how zealously they regard their highways."

Although the original plan for carrying U.S. 11 on a single alignment went into effect, the State proposed a change to AASHO. On June 3, 1929, AASHO approved a split designation for U.S. 11 in Tennessee:

U.S. 511, from Bristol via Bluff City, Jonesboro and Morristown to Knoxville, is changed to U.S. East and
U.S. 11, from Bristol via Kingsport and Rogersville to Knoxville, is changed to 11 West.

As reflected in Governor Peay's letter, splits of this type occurred because of rivalry among communities seeking tourist dollars. The three-digit route was perceived as the inferior alternative, thus diverting traffic-and tourist dollars-to the "better" two-digit route.

The changes were reflected in AASHO's 1929 log of U.S. 11:

Tennessee Bristol. Here alternate routes, No. 11 East and No. 11 West, diverge, meeting again at Knoxville.

United States Highway No. 11 E.
Total Mileage 127

Tennessee Bristol 14, Bluff City 21, Jonesboro 56, Morristown 36, Knoxville.

United States Highway No. 11 W.
Total Mileage 125

Tennessee Bristol 25, Kingsport 34, Rogersville 66, Knoxville.

In 1934, AASHO consolidated the U.S. numbered system based on experience. The October 1934 issue of AASHO's *American Highways* magazine explained the policy changes, one of which was:

When the U.S. numbered system was started in 1925, a few optional routings were established which were designated with the affix: "North," "South," "East," or "West." This procedure has never been to the traveling public, and while there are but a few roads numbered in this manner in the entire country, it is believed that they should be eliminated wherever possible, by the absorption of one of the optional routes into another route.

Wherever these optional routes are not of sufficient length for them to become a part of another numbered road, it is proposed to give the regular number to the older or shortest route, and the other route is to bear the same number with a standard strip above the shield carrying the word "Alternate."

Based. upon this procedure, the Executive Committee of the American Association of State Highway Officials . . . as of this date, June 22, 1934, will proceed to absorb one of the "lettered" routes by adding it to another route or designate it as an "alternate route" as outlined above.

With this change, the U.S. 11 split officially ended. The original alignment, U.S. 11 West, was once again U.S. 11. The road that had been U.S. 511 and U.S. 11 East was assigned U.S. 411. The number "411" had been assigned to earlier U.S. routes. The Joint Board on Interstate Highways assigned the number to a route from Bristol, Virginia, to Corbin, Kentucky. The 1927 U.S. route log listed U.S. 411 as a 110-mile route from Bristol, Virginia, via Gate City and Jonesville to Cumberland Gap. By 1932, it was assigned to a route entirely in North Carolina (Madison to Rockingham). Now, after the 1934 consolidation, it began at Bristol and ended in Gadsden, Alabama, as shown in the 1935 log:

United States Highway No. 411
Total Mileage 374

Tennessee Beginning at Bristol 14, Bluff City 21, Jonesboro 26, Greenville 27, Newport 60, Maryville 29, Madisonville 17, Etowah 14, Benton 13, Oldfort 22.

Georgia Chatsworth 26, Fairmont 21, Cartersville 26, Rome 28.

Alabama Cedar Bluff 30, Gadsden.

Officially, that is. The U.S. numbered system has always relied on voluntary compliance; AASHO had no enforcement mechanism. In this case, Tennessee ignored the 1934 revision of U.S. 11. Tennessee's official highway road signs and maps never dropped the U.S. 11 East/West split.

Other States had also yielded to local pressure and ignored AASHO's decision to end split designation. By 1952, AASHO concluded that it could no longer ignore the discrepancy between its official logs and the signing reality that confronted motorists and mapmakers. It surveyed the States, with the intention of "harmonizing discrepancies" during AASHO's summer meeting in St. Louis, July 18-19, 1952. However, the session had to be postponed because eight States, including Tennessee, had not yet provided the requested information.

Eventually, AASHO compiled a five-page list by comparing State highway maps with the AASHO route logs. Over half the States had some sort of discrepancy. Tennessee had six differences, including the split in U.S. 11, described as follows:

U.S. 11 shown on Tennessee map as U.S. 11-W. Tennessee map shows a U.S. 11-E over State Route 36 from Knoxville to Greeneville and doubling U.S. 411 from there to Bristol. Log books show no multiple routing on U.S. 11 in Tennessee.

During AASHO's Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, on December 8, 1952, the issue was addressed after routine changes had been addressed. On January 2, 1953, Executive Secretary Hal H. Hale sent his usual letter to mapmakers describing the changes. After listing the routine changes, he said:

In addition to the above listed changes, the U.S. Route Numbering Committee, with the concurrence of the Executive Committee, approved the following harmonizing changes. These changes in the official records of the U.S. numbered highways are approved by the States concerned and have been accomplished in order to eliminate differences between those official records and the actual, on the site, markings in the States involved.

This harmonizing plan was initiated last spring and listed here are the changes that have been agreed upon up to this date.

The listing for Tennessee's portion of U.S. 11 read:

The designation of the presently recorded U.S. 11 between Bristol and Knoxville as U.S. 11-W, and the route from Bristol to Knoxville by way of Johnson City and Greeneville as U.S. 11-E.

The route through Tennessee has retained this split since then.

The harmonizing affected one other segment of U.S. 11, this one in Alabama. The compilation had described the discrepancy:

Marking of U.S. 11 on two routes between Gadsden and a junction east of Springville.

With the State's concurrence, the Committee approved the following harmonizing change:

Designate as U.S. 11 the route directly through from Attalla to junction northeast of Springville, and discontinue the U.S. 11 marking through Gadsden. Extend U.S. 411, which now has its southern terminus at Gadsden, through to U.S. 11 at the above junction via St. Clair Springs and Ashville.
