

Designating the Urban Interstates Naming the Interstate System

Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles

June 2017



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, DC 20590

The original format of this document was an active HTML page(s) located under <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/history.cfm>. The Federal Highway Administration converted the HTML page(s) into an Adobe® Acrobat® PDF file to preserve and support reuse of the information it contained.

The intellectual content of this PDF is an authentic capture of the original HTML file. Hyperlinks and other functions of the HTML webpage may have been lost, and this version of the content may not fully work with screen reading software.

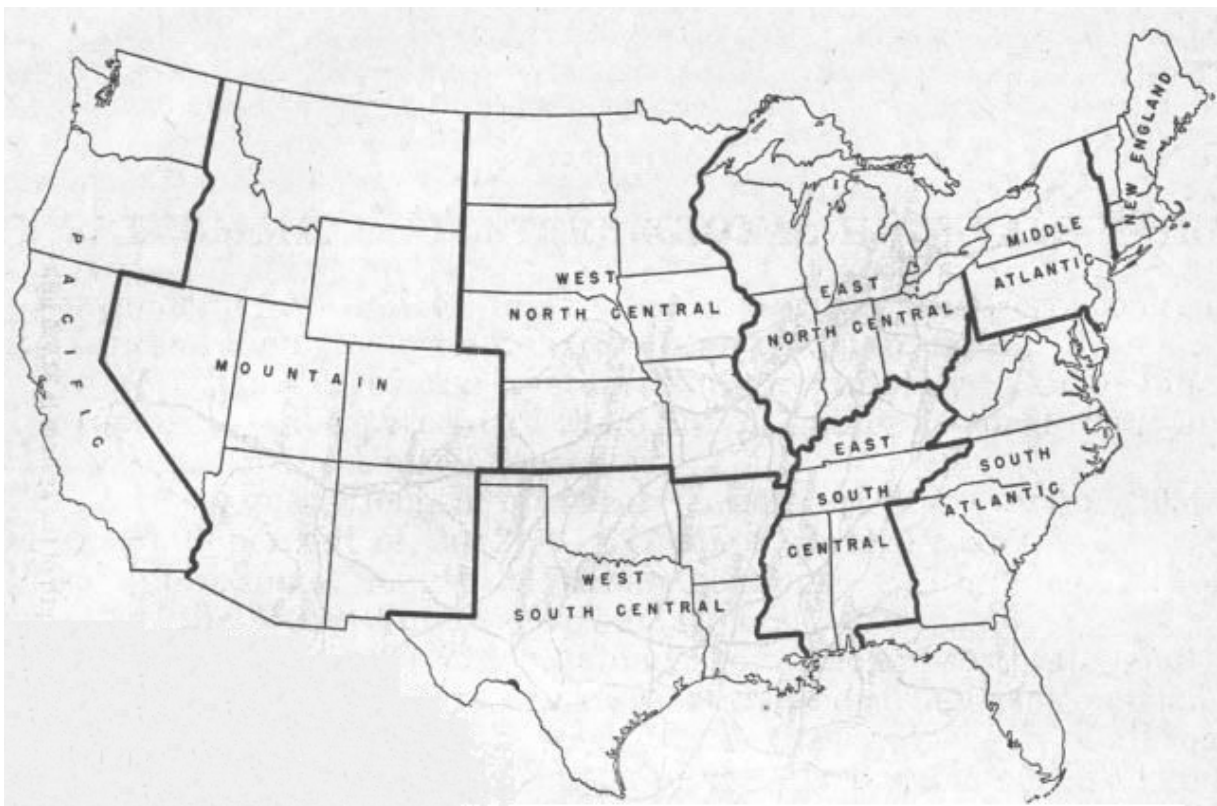
Designating the Urban Interstates

Naming the Interstate System

The following is an expanded version of a sidebar accompanying "The Genie in the Bottle" (*Public Roads*, September/October 2000).

The proper name for the proposed expressway system came up unexpectedly when Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads, testified before the House Committee on Roads on April 28, 1944: whether "National System of Interregional Highways," the name used in Section 7 of the House bill, was a good name for the proposed highway network. He seems to have been surprised by the issue and frustrated that this side issue was taking so much time away from what the important issue he intended to talk about.

MacDonald got off to a bad start by displaying a Department of Commerce map of the Regions of the United States that seems to have confused some Committee members. However, the possibility that Rexford G. Tugwell, Frederic A. Delano, and the National Resources Planning Board—all symbols of the "socialistic" planners in the Roosevelt Administration that many, particularly in the Republican Party, had come to despise—were in some way associated with the choice of "interregional" ended the possibility that the word would be used.



When Thomas H. MacDonald displayed this map of the Regions of the United States during testimony before the House Committee on Roads, he unexpectedly doomed the use of the word "Interregional" in the name of the new expressway system he advocated. A footnote in *Interregional Highways* (1944) explained, "These regions are composed of contiguous States

grouped together by the U.S. Bureau of the Census because of generally similar population and economic characteristics."

The issue was raised in questioning primarily by Representatives Hugh Peterson of Georgia (a 45-year old lawyer and Democrat who served in Congress from 1935 to 1947) and Leon H. Gavin of Pennsylvania (a 51-year old Republican from Oil City who served in Congress from 1942 to 1963). The following excerpt, which began after MacDonald summarized the history of the National Interregional Highway Committee, is edited (without ellipses for ease of reading) to cover only the relevant discussion:

Mr. MacDonald. This is called an interregional highway, because it was not designed on the basis of transcontinental routes to provide for traffic which is nonexistent. This chart shows the regions as outlined by the Department of Commerce. The outline has been made on the basis of all the statistical information on characteristics of the regions in these various State groupings.

Mr. Peterson. Mr. MacDonald, before you leave that, I cannot help but take issue on setting up these regions. Many of the most important highways cut right straight across your regions. Now, aren't you cutting across your system and cutting it up here in a way that is inevitably going to lead to friction?

Mr. MacDonald. No, I wouldn't agree with that statement. This selection of routes is not materially influenced by the location of the regional lines.

Mr. Peterson. Then why set up these possibilities for friction in the future?

Mr. MacDonald. We are perfectly willing to have that term "interregional" left completely out of the designation. It was our choice to avoid the use of such terms as "transcontinental" or "superhighways."

Mr. Peterson. But in this bill you specifically set out that the authorities of the States within a region shall confer and agree among themselves.

Mr. MacDonald. We are perfectly willing to leave that out.

Mr. Gavin. Why should you leave that out? Why shouldn't they confer in the various areas or districts to evolve a plan that will give greater satisfaction to all of our people?

Mr. MacDonald. By saying that we are willing to leave that out, I don't mean the conferences. It is the expectation Georgia would be brought into consultation with the States contiguous to Georgia and the same process would be followed in the case of all the other States. We can use the term "areas" and it would be agreeable to us. We didn't want to use the term "transcontinental" because we have tried to get away from the idea of building long-distance roads and instead provide for highways that will adequately connect the population areas of the country.

Mr. Peterson. Now in your map there you have Atlanta and Birmingham, not so many miles from each other, you have one in one region and one in another.

Mr. MacDonald. I think your criticism would be fully met if they were made "areas" in place of "regions," wouldn't it?

Mr. William M. Whittington (D-Ms.). Will you just summarize for me the reasons for that section 7?

Mr. MacDonald. I would like to show you a few of these charts. This chart shows the recommended location in relation to cities in the various population groups.

Mr. Peterson. Now, Mr. MacDonald, that map very clearly brings out the point I am trying to make here. You notice that the major portion of those main highways there cut right square across your regions.

Mr. MacDonald. Yes, sir.

Mr. Peterson. And if you are going to cut up those regions to where those people cannot work harmoniously together in the determination to work on those routes, it just appears to me you are bringing on trouble.

Mr. MacDonald. Those regions are purely arbitrary as far as we are concerned.

Mr. Peterson. I don't see any necessity for them, though.

Mr. MacDonald. Apparently we chose a poor word. Transcontinental would have been a worse word, in my judgment.

Chairman J. W. Robinson (D-Ut.). Superhighway would have been still worse.

Mr. MacDonald. Yes, superhighway would have been still worse.

Mr. Gavin. On this interregional set-up, when did that originate?

Mr. MacDonald. The first directive--the first request of the President to appoint a committee was in '41, but Congress in 1943 directed the Commissioner of Public Roads to make a report.

Mr. Gavin. Yes, in 1943, is that the first we heard of the interregional business? How did you work before you had the United States broken down into interregional areas that you are talking about?

Mr. MacDonald. Neither the President's directive nor the Defense Highway Act called it an interregional system. They called it an express highway system, and we are content with that name.

Mr. Gavin. What I am trying to get at: When did the interregional business take place? I understand that at one time [Rex] Tugwell had some idea in this interregional business. How was he hooked up with it?

Mr. Nat Patton (D-Tx.). He is hooked up with it now. That is what is wrong with it.

Mr. MacDonald. When Mr. Tugwell was chairman of the city planning commission in New York for a short time he became a member of the committee. He attended two meetings of the committee and has been out of the country since [as appointed Governor of Puerto Rico].

Mr. Gavin. Just what did he have to do with it?

Mr. MacDonald. He attended one or two meetings in the beginning.

Mr. Alfred J. Elliott (D-Ca.). What are the other two members' names?

Mr. MacDonald. Originally there were seven members. Mr. Donald Kennedy. Mr. Purcell. And Mr. Delano; Mr. Bartholomew, one of the well-known city planners--

Mr. Gavin. Mr. Delano; is that the National Resources Planning Board--

Mr. MacDonald. Yes, sir.

Mr. Gavin. Are they active now, doing anything?

Mr. MacDonald. No, sir.

Mr. Peterson. But they are the ones who recommended this interregional set-up?

Mr. MacDonald. The National Interregional Highway Committee was appointed by the President in 1941 and he also directed me, to get this report out. The Public Roads Administration was responsible for the preparation of the whole report.

Mr. Peterson. But it incorporates this interregional idea that they had initiated?

Mr. MacDonald. Yes. There is absolutely no significance in this interregional term.

Mr. Peterson. Wouldn't the discussion of strategic highways be a much smoother proposition than interregional highways?

Mr. MacDonald. Yes. We wanted to get away from the idea of transcontinental highways because that was associated with a lot of schemes that we thought were wholly unsound. We also wanted to get away from the use of the term "superhighways." There is no intention, where a two-lane highway is adequate, as it is on some of these western routes, of building a superhighway of 4 or 6 or 12 lanes as some people have advocated.

Chairman Robinson. Why couldn't we delete the word "interregional?"

Mr. Gavin. Well, this committee isn't inflicting its ideas on you now as to interregional highways.

Mr. MacDonald. No.

Mr. Peterson. But this interregional idea was originally introduced by this group he is referring to.

Mr. Gavin. Then why not take it out?

Chairman Robinson. Couldn't we just delete the "interregional" and say, "There shall be designated within the continental United States a highway system not exceeding 40,000 miles?"

Mr. MacDonald. That's all right.

Mr. Whittington. And those lines there are to connect large centers of population.

Mr. MacDonald. Yes. This shows the system. May I call them express highways from now on?

Mr. Elliott. It would sound a lot better.

Mr. Gavin. That would be satisfactory.

On May 16, 1944, Representative James Mott (R-Or.) introduced H.R. 4811, the latest version of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944. Mott, like many Republicans, despised the Roosevelt "planners," particularly singling out the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB) as an "amazing outfit" that planned to control and regiment the lives of every citizen "not only from the cradle to the grave, but for a considerable period beyond." Congress killed the NRPB by not appropriating funds for it in FY 1943, but Mott complained that its members were active in other agencies, "still planning-planning to regiment the country in the post-war period, when they almost succeeded in making the depression a permanent institution."

Section 7 of H.R. 4811 authorized designation of a 40,000-mile "National System of Interstate Highways." Who chose the word "Interstate" for the new system is unknown, but MacDonald's testimony makes clear why "Interregional" was dropped.
