

The Man Who Saved the Interstate System

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The Man Who Saved the Interstate System

Rex Marion Whitton was born on a farm in Jackson County, Missouri. He worked on the farm while attending school. At the University of Missouri, he waited tables and made beds at boarding houses to help pay his way. In April 1920, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering although, as he put it, his grades were "just average, and maybe I'm bragging a little when I say that."

Eleven days later, he began work with the State highway agency as levelman on a 15-mile stretch of road in Johnson County. By 1924, he had been promoted to project engineer. While serving as project engineer on a 20-mile grading project in Johnson County, he met Callie Maude Lowe and they married a year later. Whitton would attribute his success to his wife. "She goes everywhere with me and makes my life wonderful," he said. He acknowledged another reason for his success. "I always figured I wasn't too smart, so I had to work just a little harder to make up for it."

Whitton's gradual progression with the Missouri State Highway Commission led to his selection as Chief Engineer in 1951. The following year, he launched a 10-year road program to improve the State's road network.

As president of the American Association of State Highway Officials in 1956, Whitton represented the Nation's State highway agencies in congressional testimony leading to passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which launched the Interstate Construction program. He also ensured that Missouri let the first contract under the 1956 Act just a few weeks after President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the legislation. Under Whitton, Missouri also began construction on the first project under the program.

On December 27, 1960, President-elect John F. Kennedy announced that Whitton would be Federal Highway Administrator. Whitton had been reluctant to leave Missouri, where he could walk to work. However, when Secretary-designate of Commerce Luther Hodges told Whitton he owed it to the country, he accepted. Whitton and his wife lived in an apartment in northwest Washington, commuting to work in the Matomic Building at 1717 H Street, NW., on a shuttle bus operated by the apartment management. They were rarely seen on the Washington social scene, which did not appeal to Whitton who had given up drinking and smoking 40 years earlier.

A contemporary profile of Whitton in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* gave a sense of the man:

You might expect ... to meet a human dynamo. On the contrary, Whitton moves and acts like a man with low metabolism. He moves slowly, speaks softly, smiles rarely and gives the impression of relaxed friendliness Almost six feet tall and slender, Whitton could pass for a man in his early fifties [he was in his 60s]. His dark brown hair, showing a little gray, is still thick. He keeps his weight at 170 pounds by watching his diet.

His long-time secretary told the reporter that Whitton had a temper, but "It takes something pretty big to make him mad." Whitton explained, "A man's only as big as the things that make him mad."

The new Administrator faced a tough task, restoring public and congressional confidence in the Interstate Highway Program. Accounts of waste, fraud, and abuse, as well as controversies in urban areas, had led to calls for an end to the program. Whitton would later say that during his first year, he was in "the hot seat" because, "The public was shocked." Whitton would help resolve this issue as well as the financing and urban controversies contributing to the "hot seat" when he took office. (See accompanying article for details.) He would help the BPR and the State highway agencies adapt to the growing environmental movement, while working with the State highway agencies to open more

than 50 percent of the Interstate System (then 41,000 miles long) by midway through a program that was expected to end in the early 1970s.

Although Whitton was dedicated to construction of the Interstate System, he shunned the new freeways when he and his wife took road trips in pursuit of their hobby, collecting antique glass. "We take the back roads," he told a reporter. "That's the finest way to travel unless you're in a big hurry to get somewhere. It's more relaxing and you see more scenery."

When the time came to step down at the end of 1966, Whitton told the *Kansas City Star* that at 68, "I want to get out while I am still winning-or at least I think I am still winning." His job had been "rewarding, exciting and challenging, and only occasionally depressing."

Returning to Missouri, Whitton bought a home at 4320 Montclair Avenue in Independence. He drove to his new job as an associate partner with the engineering firm Howard, Needles, Tammen, and Bergendoff in Kansas City. In his spare time, Whitton supervised three farms totaling 281 acres in Jackson County. He also enjoyed being closer to his son, Rex Whitton, Jr., and three grandchildren. Whitton retired from his consulting work in 1975.

When Bill Johnson, executive editor of *FHWA News*, caught up with Whitton in 1976, he was "still the possessor of one of his outstanding traits-a phenomenal memory." He referred to his wife as "Mrs. Whitton" with "all the tenderness and dedication in his voice of a newlywed," according to Johnson. Whitton explained that, "I accepted my last position only on the condition that Mrs. Whitton be permitted to travel with me." With a smile, he added, "You know, I've retired Mrs. Whitton, too; no more cooking. I prepare a small breakfast; we drive out for other meals."

They continued to pursue their hobby. "We attend auction sales every Saturday. I am a collector of antiques; it's challenging and great fun. We also enjoy driving on the little back roads, keeping a map of each one we travel. We both love gardening and attending church on Sunday, then there is our son, Rex Jr., and his three children. Mrs. Whitton and I are enjoying life together." He was not planning to "un-retire." He explained, "No-I have given my 'time.'"

Rex M. Whitton, the Man Who Saved the Interstate System, passed away on July 7, 1981, at the age of 82. Perhaps he gave the best summary of his approach to life and his career in a 1962 speech:

I have never seen a problem that did not present an opportunity; nor an opportunity that did not present problems. In any sector of human striving it has always been true that problems and challenges are the bedfellows of progress.
