

# Ask the Rambler: Was I-76 Numbered to Honor Philadelphia for Independence Day, 1776?

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## Ask the Rambler: Was I-76 Numbered to Honor Philadelphia for Independence Day, 1776?

*I-76 goes through Philadelphia, where the Founding Fathers crafted and signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Surely it's no coincidence that I-76 happens to go through the city where the United States was born.*

*It's a nice thought. The Rambler thought so, too, and then he did some research.*

Interstate numbering follows a pattern based on the numbering plan devised in the mid-1920's for the U.S. numbered highways. The main east-west U.S. routes were given even numbers ending in zero, with the lowest number in the north (from U.S. 2 along the northern border, chosen to avoid use of "U.S. 0," to U.S. 90 through the southern and southwestern States). The main north-south routes were given odd numbers ending in 1, with the lowest number in the east (from U.S. 1 on the East Coast to U.S. 101 on the West Coast). A numbering ending in 5 was used for lesser multi-State north-south routes. The remaining one- and two-digit routes were designated based on their east-west (even) or north-south (odd) orientation and their location in the grid created by the numbers assigned to the main routes.

The numbering plan for the Interstate System was approved by the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) and the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) in September 1957. The idea was to number the Interstates in a mirror image of the U.S. numbering plan. The main east-west routes were again given even numbers ending in zero but with the lowest number, I-10, in the south and the highest, I-90, in the north. The main north-south routes were given odd numbers ending in 5 with the lowest, I-5, in the west and the highest, I-95, in the east. Within the grid created by the main routes, the other routes were numbered based on placement. To avoid confusion, no State was assigned an Interstate number that would duplicate the number of one of its U.S. routes.

### Establishing Pennsylvania's Basic Numbering Plan

The numbered September 1957 map shows I-80 from the Pennsylvania-Ohio border, into Pittsburgh, then along the line of the Pennsylvania Turnpike to Harrisburg, where the number split, with I-80S going to a connection with I-95 in Philadelphia and I-80N going via Allentown to Easton near the New Jersey border. An Interstate route along the northern tier of the State (essentially U.S. 6 across the State) was identified as part of I-84. The map did not reflect the fact that on May 22, 1957, Federal Highway Administrator Bertram D. Tallamy of the BPR had approved a request from the State to relocate the Interstate from U.S. 6 to a more central east-west alignment known as the Keystone Shortway.

On June 26, 1958, the Route Numbering Subcommittee on the U.S. Numbered System met in Charleston, South Carolina, during AASHO's Summer Meeting. One of the subcommittee's goals was to complete the numerology of the designated Interstate System. Several actions affected Pennsylvania's Interstate System. The Keystone Shortway (Youngstown, Ohio, to New York City) was assigned the number 80. Formerly I-80 (Pennsylvania-Ohio State line to Harrisburg) was renumbered I-80S, with that designation remaining on the section from Harrisburg to Philadelphia.

Based on these changes, the official descriptions of the routes in question became:

I-78 From a junction with I-81 near Indiantown Gap, via Allentown, to the New Jersey State Line near Easton.

I-80 From the Pennsylvania-Ohio State Line southwest of Farrell to the Pennsylvania-New Jersey State Line at Delaware Water Gap.

I-80S From the Pennsylvania-Ohio State Line southwest of New Castle, via the vicinity of Harrisburg, to the Pennsylvania-New Jersey State Line between Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey.

Based on the I-80S designation, several three-digit routes were numbered in the Philadelphia area:

I-280 From a junction with I-80S at King of Prussia to a junction with I-95 near Bristol.  
I-480 From a junction with I-95 in the vicinity of Chester to a junction with I-280 near Norristown.  
I-680 In Philadelphia, from a junction with I-80S southeasterly to the Pennsylvania-New Jersey State Line between Philadelphia and Gloucester, New Jersey.

According to the approval letter, "Route 480 is accepted at this time with the understanding that later studies may make it necessary to revise the description." (I-180 was the Reading spur.)

## A Major Revision

On April 16, 1963, Pennsylvania wrote to AASHO to suggest a major revision of its Interstate numbers. The request was prompted by approval of a new route, I-79 from West Virginia to Washington, Pennsylvania. Noting that this addition overlapped the previously designated I-79 terminus in Pittsburgh, Secretary of Highways Henry D. Harral said that he and his staff had decided to address this and other route problems. Some of the problems related to I-80S:

The Pennsylvania Turnpike has been designated as I-80S between the Ohio border and Valley Forge Interchange. I-80S then continues on the Schuylkill Expressway and terminates at the junction of I-295 in New Jersey. It does not connect to I-80 at the eastern end. I-70 overlaps I-80S between the Monroeville and Breezewood Interchanges.

The spur routes from I-80S have the designations I-180, I-280, I-480 and I-680. Since none of these connect to I-80, we believe that these designations will be misleading, and should be ceded to the route to which they connect.

Along with other revisions, Secretary Harral proposed to assign a new number to I-80S:

New route number (I-76 for reference, but number to be assigned by AASHO) from point B (Pittsburgh) through points C (Monroeville) and D (New Stanton) to point E (Bellmawr, N. J.), 320.9 miles.

Under this proposal, the I-76 designation would begin in Pittsburgh and continue through Monroeville to connect with the Pennsylvania Turnpike at New Stanton. The number would remain on the turnpike to the Valley Forge interchange, where it would turn southeast into Philadelphia and cross the Delaware River to Bellmawr. To go along with this change, Secretary Harral proposed revising the three-digit Interstates to appropriate numbers ending in 76, including:

I-280 as I-276  
I-480 as I-476  
I-680 as I-676

Under this proposed change, the turnpike would carry the designation I-276 from Valley Forge to a connection with I-95 north of Philadelphia. Between New Stanton and Breezewood, the Pennsylvania Turnpike carried two numbers, I-70 and I-76. From New Stanton to the Pennsylvania-Ohio State line, the turnpike would be I-80S.

The Route Numbering Subcommittee considered the changes during AASHO's Summer Meeting in Boyne Falls, Michigan, on June 18, 1963. On August 15, AASHO Executive Secretary A. E. Johnson informed Secretary Harral that the changes were approved, subject to agreement by the New Jersey State Highway Department and the BPR. Johnson added, "you must designate for project identification purposes the section of the one or the other of the jointly marked sections of Routes I-70 and I-76 between New Stanton and Breezewood."

On November 12, 1963, Pennsylvania submitted the proposal to BPR Division Engineer J. L. Stinson in Harrisburg for approval. Stinson forwarded the proposal to Regional Engineer August Schofer on November 15 (the Regional Engineer was the conduit between Headquarters and several States in his region). Stinson agreed with the proposals and pointed out that New Jersey had provided oral agreement with the elements that affected that State. In providing the correspondence to E. H. Swick, Director of Right-of-Way and Location in Washington, Schofer recommended favorable action for the most part but noted some concerns. One involved I-80S:

It is felt that consideration should also be given to the extension of proposed Route 76 designation over the portion of Route 80-S retained west of Pittsburgh and over the section of Route 80-S in Ohio. Termination of Route 76 would then be on Route 71 east of Lodi in Ohio. This would eliminate Route 80-S in its entirety and reduce confusion in the Interstate System route designations.

Swick agreed, but had another suggestion, as described in his memorandum of December 23, 1963, to Schofer:

It might also be advantageous to consider assignment of the Route 76 number designation to the eastern portion of the Turnpike (present proposed Route 276), so that the entire Turnpike would be numbered Route 76. All this would involve changes in the proposed numbers of routes into the Philadelphia area, as well as a change in the number of present proposed Route 76 into Pittsburgh. It would also require discussion with the State of Ohio.

Swick recognized that the Division had coordinated the proposal with the State, that New Jersey had orally agreed to the changes, that AASHO had approved them, "and that contracts for signing already entered into may complicate any consideration of further number changes." Nevertheless, he asked his field staff "to get early reaction" from the State:

The objective is, of course, to facilitate travel on the Interstate network with the simplest and most logical numbering arrangement providing continuity and a uniform pattern of marking.

Stinson forwarded the recommendations to State highway officials on January 3, 1964. Before replying, the Pennsylvania Department of Highways issued a January 7 press release announcing the changes. The announcement referred to the additional mileage on I-79 from the West Virginia line near Waynesburg to Washington. According to State Traffic Engineer Edmund R. Ricker, this set off a "chain reaction" that resulted in a logical series of steps to improve the entire Interstate numbering in Pennsylvania:

One of the principal results will be the continuous numbering of Interstate 76 from the Golden Triangle in Pittsburgh through the center of Philadelphia. This route will include the Penn-Lincoln Parkway East, the Pennsylvania Turnpike and the Schuylkill Expressway to Vine Street where it will cross the Benjamin Franklin Bridge into New Jersey.

The State retained I-80S for the western extension from the Pennsylvania-Ohio State line southwest of New Castle to the junction with I-76 east of Pittsburgh. The announcement explained that all loops and spur routes connecting onto I-76 would be changed, citing only two changes

Thus Interstate 680 - the lower part of the Schuylkill Expressway will be Interstate 676. In a similar manner Interstate 180 - the Reading Spur - will be Interstate 176.

In a letter to Stinson on January 24, 1964, N. A. Staples, Deputy Secretary and Chief Engineer of the Pennsylvania Department of Highways, explained why the BPR's suggestions had not been adopted. Regarding I-76, he said:

We do not feel it would be advantageous to change route 76 so as to coincide with the Pennsylvania Turnpike on either the westerly or easterly end. The designation 76 is now applied to one of the heaviest long distance traffic movements in the state-that between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Signs have already been erected showing this number, and wide publicity given to the recently approved changes. To make a further change at this time would create a great deal of confusion. The State of New Jersey has agreed to the recent changes and we would be reluctant to suggest further changes to them and Ohio. In summary we feel that the designation of 76 is proper and most suitable for the Interstate system.

The BPR soon agreed to the revisions as proposed and announced by the State. As Stinson pointed out in a memorandum to Schofer on February 10, 1964, transmitting the State's letter:



We can agree that additional alteration would be undesirable because of the wide publicity already given to the routing of I-76 as submitted. It will be recalled, also, that AASHO previously gave approval to the numbering changes as originally tendered by the State.

In view of AASHO's action, agreement by New Jersey to number changes in eastern Pennsylvania, and the State's desire not to initiate further revision of I-76 for reasons as offered, we again recommend approval . . . .

Schofer forwarded Stinson's memorandum to Swick on February 12. In discussing I-76, Schofer said:

Our previous suggestions for extension of I-76 to include I-80S in Ohio was [sic] based on the nationwide rather than an individual State point of view in providing continuous designation for a single route. Acceptance of the proposal by Pennsylvania for this route will create a confusing situation to the traveling public using present I-80S in cross country and Interstate travel. I-80S will be left with termini at a point on I-71 near Lodi in Ohio and a point on the Pennsylvania Turnpike east of Pittsburgh. Our opinion expressed in the initial submission remains unchanged on revision of this route numbering.

In view of the State's insistence in this case, we would have no objection to approval if you concur in their viewpoint.

On February 26, 1964, Federal Highway Administrator Rex M. Whitton approved Pennsylvania's route descriptions as proposed by the State. The descriptions associated with the I-76 changes read:

- I-76 From a junction with I-79 in Pittsburgh via the vicinity of Harrisburg to the Pennsylvania-New Jersey State line between Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey.
- I-176 From a junction with I-76 south of Reading to Reading.
- I-276 From a junction with I-76 at King of Prussia to a junction with I-95 near Bristol
- I-476 From a junction with I-95 in the vicinity of Chester to a junction with I-276 near Norristown.
- I-676 In Philadelphia, from a junction with I-76 southeasterly to the Philadelphia-New Jersey State Line between Philadelphia and Gloucester, New Jersey.
- I-80 From the Pennsylvania-Ohio State Line southwest of Farrell to the Pennsylvania-New Jersey State Line at Delaware Gap.
- I-80S From the Pennsylvania-Ohio State Line southwest of New Castle to a junction with I-76 east of Pittsburgh.

The description of I-70 noted that it would share I-76 between New Stanton and Breezewood.

## Completing the Pattern in Philadelphia

A few last changes were needed before the current numbering in the Philadelphia area was achieved.

By the early 1970's, Pennsylvania was considering a change involving I-76 and I-676. After consulting with local officials and counterparts in New Jersey, Pennsylvania's Deputy Chief Highway Engineer, D. C. Sims, wrote to Division Engineer George F. Fenton on February 24, 1972, about "the definite advantages to be gained through the renumbering of I-76 and I-676." The change would improve traffic operations and signing, as well as afford "better route continuity over the present system." (The BPR had become a bureau within the newly named Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) when the U.S. Department of Transportation was established on April 1, 1967.) Sims explained:

The proposed renumbering, in brief, would simply exchange I-76 and I-676 beginning at their present junction at Vine Street. Interstate 76 would replace the present I-676 via the "Schuylkill Expressway" across the Walt Whitman Bridge to existing I-76 in New Jersey. Conversely I-676 would be relocated along the present I-76 via the "Vine Street Expressway" across the Ben Franklin Bridge and junctioned at the present interchange in New Jersey.

The State had coordinated the proposal with the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT), the city of Philadelphia, Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (RPC), and the Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission. The RPC, in a letter dated July 23, 1971, had expressed concerns because the Interstate numbering had been changed twice before "and further renumbering, which requires a significant effort and expenditure, in resigning and remapping, may meet with some resistance locally." In addition, the RPC wanted to ensure that the NJDOT would concur before the proposal was submitted to the FHWA. The

NJDOT's Commissioner of Transportation, John C. Kohl, concurred on January 27, 1972 ("I am happy to inform you that New Jersey has no objection to your suggestion."). The city had voiced support on August 13, 1971, in a letter from Leo Goldstein, Commissioner of Streets:

We feel that it would be very desirable for the Schuylkill Expressway to have the single designation of I-76 for its entire length, for the present change at Vine Street is both confusing and difficult to sign. In addition, the geometrics at the Vine-Schuylkill Interchange, are much more suited to the proposed changes.

By the time R. I. Kellum, the FHWA's New Jersey Division Engineer, provided comments on the proposal, some concerns had arisen in the State. His memo of May 25, 1972, stated:

We do not see where there will be any benefit to New Jersey. In all fairness, we can not see what advantage this change will be to Pennsylvania.

We can see where this revision, if approved, could be the source of major embarrassment to New Jersey. Four hundred thousand (400,000) copies of the 1972 official tourist map have just been printed. These are expected to last for two years and, of course, show the existing Interstate numbers in the Camden-Philadelphia area. In addition, there will be the usual problem of converting existing project numbers to the new numbers although this is not an insurmountable task.

Kellum had checked with the NJDOT and learned that the State "is reevaluating their position in this regard."

In the end, New Jersey offered its support for the numbering switch. The U.S. Route Numbering Subcommittee approved the switch during AASHO's Summer Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, on June 19.

Designate as I-76 the Interstate highway, currently designated as I-676 between intersection of I-76 and I-676 crossing the Walt Whitman Bridge to the intersection of I-76 and I-676. The route currently designated as I-76 crossing the Benjamin Franklin Bridge to be designated as I-676.

Acting Federal Highway Administrator Ralph R. Bartelsmeyer approved the revised number on August 29, 1972.

Today, I-76 is designated from Camden, New Jersey, through Philadelphia to I-71 west of Akron, Ohio. (A western I-76 is designated between Denver, Colorado, and I-80 in Nebraska near Big Springs, where the duplication of the number would not cause any confusion for motorists.)

### **So, Was "76" Selected to Honor Independence Day?**

Looked at in the context of the numbering plan as it existed when 76 was first used, the designation of I-76 makes sense. Because the route was an east-west route between I-70 and I-80, the numbering choices were 72, 74, 76, and 78. As noted, 78 was in use and 74 was also taken (Cincinnati, Ohio, to Davenport, Iowa). That left 72 and 76. Pennsylvania highway officials proposed 76, but as the quotation from the application suggests, they were open to other numbers if AASHO or the BPR preferred. The application does not suggest the State wanted 76 because it would tie in with Independence Day 1776.

Moreover, of the two possibilities (72 and 76), 76 was the logical choice. The route was just south of 78, so selecting 76 would allow for easy addition of an I-72 if a new Interstate route were built to the south. (In 1995, 72 was applied to a new route in Illinois between Springfield and Decatur.)

So, returning to the original question, the Rambler draws this conclusion about whether 76 was chosen because of its evocation of Independence Day, 1776: its selection was a coincidence—a lucky coincidence, perhaps—that after years of unrelated numbering changes and a chain reaction from the addition of I-79 in western Pennsylvania, 76 was the best choice.

### **While You're At It, What About the Pittsburgh Area?**

Earlier, the Rambler discussed the I-76 and I-80S designations in western Pennsylvania. They changed, too. So in the interest of going above and beyond the call of duty, the Rambler presents the rest of the story.

During AASHO's Summer Meeting on June 29, 1970, in Williamsburg, Virginia, the U.S. Route Numbering Subcommittee approved a series of related changes proposed by the Pennsylvania Department of Highways for the Pittsburgh area. The primary changes involved I-79 and its offshoots, but one involved I-76, which was the new number for that portion of former I-79 between the intersections of I-76 and I-79 and

the intersection of I-79 and I-279 in Pittsburgh. In addition, I-479 was renumbered I-876 between I-76 and revised designated I-279 in Pittsburgh. AASHO's Executive Committee approved the changes the following day; the Federal Highway Administration had approved them on June 15.

In 1971, officials of the Ohio Department of Highways became concerned about I-80S. Director J. Phillip Richley wrote to Ohio Division Engineer Rex C. Leathers on July 13, 1971, to discuss renumbering of the route:

Our interest and concern are a result of the confusion that the motorists are experiencing in attempting to differentiate between the I 80 and I 80S route designations at the same interchange, west of Youngstown.

Richley recommended using I-76 to eliminate I-80S:

It would require extending I 76 over the Pennsylvania and Ohio Turnpikes from Interchange No. 6, east of Pittsburgh, northwesterly to the existing I 80-I 80S interchange, west of Youngstown, and thence westerly to I 71. It is our understanding that existing I 76, from I 79 in downtown Pittsburgh easterly to the Turnpike, could be designated as Interstate No. 176 since it is a penetrating route into a major traffic generator.

An article in the *Youngstown Vindicator* on August 13, 1971, summarized the problem:

I-80S begins now at I-71 near Medina and comes east through Akron to where it crosses the Ohio Turnpike near North Jackson. At that point, I-80S goes on the Ohio Turnpike eastward and I-80 comes off the turnpike and onto the freeway eastward, leading motorists to the big Austintown intersection where it swings northeast to cross the northern part of Pennsylvania I-80.

The article quoted Allan V. Johnson, Executive Director of the Ohio Turnpike Commission:

Our toll collectors are continually redirecting confused motorists.

In a June 23 letter, Robert D. McMillen of Ohio's Bureau of Traffic had asked Robert J. Doughty, Director of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's (PennDOT) Bureau of Traffic Engineering, to consider the change. Doughty replied on July 20, indicating the State would not support the proposal to shift the I-76 designation:

PennDOT, in June 1970, petitioned AASHO and received approval for changes in interstate route numbering involving Interstate routes 76, 79 and 279 in the Pittsburgh area. The changes made were, from Pennsylvania's viewpoint, important geographically and undertaken only after discussions, which resulted in concurrence, with the City of Pittsburgh, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission and the Division Office of the FHWA. Moreover, these changes have been implemented within the Department in correspondent [sic] files etc. and in the field wherever possible. In short, we consider Interstate 76 in its present location to be inviolable.

Nevertheless, Doughty understood the problem motorists were experiencing at the I-80/I-80S convergence. Therefore, he recommended changing I-80S to an I-76 spur designated I-376.

Although the FHWA favored the Ohio proposal, its officials delayed action until the two States could agree on a single solution. In a September 23 memo to Schofer, FHWA's Associate Administrator for Planning, G. E. Marple, explained that he understood Pennsylvania's reluctance to alter designations that had been approved only the previous year. "However," he added, "because I-80S is an intercity route and a major link in the Interstate System, a two-digit number is appropriate and should be retained." Marple offered two suggestions:



Recognizing Pennsylvania's desire to retain the present numbering within Pittsburgh, we offer the following suggestion: Extend I-76 from its terminus northerly, dual with I-79, to present I-80S, thence northwesterly over (and replace) I-80S to I-71 west of Akron, Ohio. I-80S northeast of Pittsburgh would then be renumbered I-176 or I-376 (an even-numbered prefix is preferred, but all have been used at Philadelphia). The only changes in this plan would be the renumbering of I-80S and dual numbering of a portion of I-79.

Another possible alternate would be to extend I-76 northerly over and replace present I-279 to I-79, thence dual with I-79 to I-80S, thence over (and replace) I-80S to I-71 west of Akron, Ohio. The section of present I-76 from downtown Pittsburgh to I-79 would become I-376, and the remainder of I-80S northeast of the city would become I-176.

On October 13, 1971, Pennsylvania's Secretary of Transportation, Jacob G. Kassab, wrote to Ohio's Richley. Pennsylvania had petitioned interested agencies and municipalities about the proposed elimination of I-80S and its replacement by I-76:

To date, we have received the approval and concurrence of Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, Allegheny County, the City of Pittsburgh, PennDOT Engineering District 11-0 and tentative agreement with the Harrisburg Division Office FHWA.

Therefore, PennDOT is willing to support your request for the rerouting of Interstate 76 over existing Interstate 80S and is preparing our petition to AASHO as a co-sponsor of the joint resolution.

Secretary Kassab closed the letter by expressing the hope that the change "will prove to be a benefit to all motorists including many Pennsylvania drivers and motorists destined to Pennsylvania."

Deputy Chief Highway Engineer Sims followed up with a letter on October 18, 1971, to FHWA Division Engineer Fenton. In supporting Ohio's application, Sims indicated that other changes would be necessary in the Pittsburgh area:

Because all the routing revisions are related and contingent upon the other it is proposed the following five (5) Interstate route numbering revisions be executed simultaneously, in accordance with the attached sketches:

1. Elimination Interstate 80s (Control points A-B)
2. Elimination (Control points C-B) and Relocation of a portion of Interstate 76 (Control points A-B) over the vacated I-80s.
3. Extension of Interstate 279 (Control points D-C) over a portion of vacated I-76.
4. Establishment of Interstate 376 (Control points D-B) over a portion of vacated I-76.
5. Eliminate of Interstate 876 and Renumbering to Interstate 579 (Control points E-F).

AASHO's U.S. Route Numbering Subcommittee acted on the changes affecting I-76 in the western part of the State and Ohio during the organization's Annual Meeting in Miami Beach, Florida. On December 3, the subcommittee approved the following Pennsylvania-Ohio proposal:

Redesignate as I-76 that route between the intersection of I-71 near Seville, Ohio and I-76 northwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania which is now designated as I-80S.

The subcommittee also approved Pennsylvania's related applications:

Redesignate as I-376 that route in Pittsburgh between the intersection of I-76 and I-80S and the intersection of I-76 and I-279 now designated I-76.  
Redesignate as I-279 that route in Pittsburgh between the intersection of I-76 and I-279 and the intersection of I-76 and I-79 now designated as I-76.  
Redesignate as I-579 that route in Pittsburgh between the intersection of I-279 and I-876 and the intersection of I-876 and I-76 now designated as I-876.

Federal Highway Administrator Frank Turner confirmed the changes by transmitting revised route descriptions to the two States on January 11, 1972.

**Update:** Speaking of Breezewood, the Rambler discussed the lack of an interchange between I-70 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike at Breezewood while answering the question: Why Does The Interstate System Include Toll Facilities? You will find the answer at [www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/tollroad.cfm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/tollroad.cfm).