

History of Scenic Road Programs

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History of Scenic Road Programs

In July 1988, the FHWA cosponsored a conference called Scenic Byways '88: A National Conference to Map the Future of America's Scenic Roads and Highways. IN preparation for the conference, the FHWA published *Scenic Byways* as a guide and reference for participants. It contained the following background information:

History of Scenic Road Programs

Since the early 1900s when America came to rely on motorized transportation, the Nation has had increasing examples of outstanding scenic roads and parkways. The first scenic roads did not exist as a result of any organized coordinated program, if a program is defined as a predetermined plan of action or development. In this sense, with a few exceptions, no organized plan of action for scenic roads was adopted in the first half of this century. Rather, these travel corridors were developed in bits and pieces-a segment here and a limited route there. It was not until the 1960s that a coordinated national scenic program effort began to evolve.

Early Projects

It cannot be asserted that any one State or locality was the first to provide a scenic road or byway. Several significant projects were designed and constructed in the early part of this century all at about the same time, each drawing on the lessons, experiences, and technologies learned from the others. The most that can be done is to identify some of the earliest examples.

New York: Westchester County Parkways

In Westchester County, New York, four parkways were built between 1913 and 1930. These parkways were considered far ahead of the times and the forerunners of many highways to follow. The parkways were named Bronx River, Hutchinson River, Saw Mill River, and Cross County.

First built was the Bronx River Parkway. The parkway opened in 1922, 9 years after construction began in 1913. This parkway was acclaimed an engineering marvel as well as a beautifully landscaped work of art. It almost predated the automobile, which was becoming the Nation's primary mode of transportation. Portions of the parkway's original alignment were designed for horse-and-buggy speeds. The Bronx River Parkway is significant, however, because it was the first acknowledgement of driving for pleasure on a scenic byway.

The other three parkways were patterned after this model. The Hutchinson River Parkway opened to traffic in 1928, Saw Mill River Parkway in 1929, and Cross County Parkway in 1931. The purpose of the parkways was not to provide the faster or most direct route between origin and destination. These parkways were designed for moderate driving speeds to permit the fullest enjoyment of the scenery.

Texas: Upper Port Caddo Road

Hundreds of miles to the west and the south of New York's Westchester County parkways, east Texas offers a fine example of an old historic trail. Carved out of red-banked canyons, the Upper Port Caddo

Road is one of the earliest and most beautiful roads in Texas. Its beauty speaks of the historic travels of pioneers in ox-drawn wagons, travelers in stage coaches, and riders on pony express deliveries.

Written history of the Upper Port Caddo Road began in the late 1820's. This history demonstrates the importance of this road as a transportation force in settling Texas. Today, the Upper Port Caddo Road is part of an 80-mile scenic byway known as the Caddo Trace, which is sponsored by the Harrison County Historical Society.

Virginia: Mount Vernon Memorial Highway

Completion of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway in 1932 fulfilled an idea that started in 1886. Citizens from Alexandria, Virginia proposed this highway as a memorial to the first President of the United States.

This modern arterial parkway was the first of several constructed by the Federal Government. The U.S. Congress authorized surveys for the route in 1889, and nearly 40 years later, in 1928, passed enabling legislation.

The parkway links the home of George Washington at Mount Vernon, Virginia with Washington, D.C. at the Arlington Memorial Bridge, 16 miles north. Construction of this scenic parkway began in late 1929 and was completed in the spring of 1932.

Influenced by the design of the parkways in Westchester County, New York, the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway borrowed some earlier ideas and added some new. This highway's design incorporated several new concepts and technologies in the road geometrics, bridges, pavement design, and construction. These ideas further served as models for other highways and parkways to come.

The right-of-way for the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway had a 200-foot minimum width, except through the city of Alexandria. Additional rights-of-way were acquired to protect the scenic features and restrict encroachments. The design included scenic overlooks and historic features. Subsequent construction of a parallel pedestrian walkway and bicycle path along the length of the parkway has increased the recreational use and enjoyment of this superb and historic parkway.

Historical State Contributions

Several States have a long history of dedication to the evolution and development of scenic roads. California, Maine, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin and others are among those with early noteworthy contributions. The accomplishment of two States, Oregon and Vermont, are highlighted to provide examples of such contributions.

Oregon

As early as 1913, Oregon began to establish a pattern of developing roads to complement and preserve the beauty of its natural resources and history. At the same time, the State set the stage for some of the earliest scenic road program efforts in the Nation.

These efforts are noted in the publication, *Oregon Historic and Scenic Highway Program* (an overview published by the Oregon Department of Transportation, undated).

In 1913, the first state highway commission was authorized to build a state highway system, which included the Pacific Highway, Columbia River Highway, Oregon Beach Highway, the Dalles-California Highway, Central Oregon Highway, McKenzie Highway, and an east-west highway from Eugene to Prineville, and from the Central Oregon Highway to Ontario. The enormous task of constructing the

Columbia River Highway in the Columbia Gorge focused on the need to construct a scenic highway that would complement the beauty of the area.

This concern for enhancement of scenic areas is reflected in many of the early records of highway building.

Concern for the state's scenic features was apparent during the 1919-20 biennium when the highway commission supported legislation that would protect standing timber and allow the planting of new trees along state highways. Efforts to improve conditions for the highway user during this period included the development of roadside rest areas, tree planting, and outdoor advertising regulations.

Oregon's successful efforts prompted the Federal Bureau of Public Roads (now the Federal Highway Administration) to establish new policy in 1934. That year, the bureau required each State to expend not less than one percent of its total Federal-aid apportionment for appropriate roadside landscaping. (This expenditure was authorized under the National Recovery Act.) The one percent requirement was later replaced for a more permissive policy under the Federal-aid highway program.

Beginning in the late 1950's and continuing into the 1960's, Oregon used Federal assistance to help strengthen its scenic road efforts. Under a Federal bonus program, Oregon began to control outdoor advertising in 1958. In the 1960's, Oregon took advantage of Federal funding for the acquisition of scenic easements along State highways.

In 1961, Oregon responded to the emerging national interest in highway beautification by creating a seven-member Scenic Area Board. The board's task was to identify areas along highways that exhibited unusual natural scenic beauty. Scrap yards and billboards were largely prohibited in these areas. Approximately 3,500 miles of scenic roads were designated under this program.

Oregon undertook studies for its in-place roadside rest areas in 1959 and 1960, with a view toward upgrading and expanding them. Following Oregon's recommendations, the Federal Bureau of Public Roads adopted Federal-aid funding policies for the location, design, and construction of roadside rest areas. Oregon's major highway systems are complete with modern motorist roadside rest facilities. Many of these roadside rest areas have been developed into major recreational and camping facilities.

In 1971, Oregon came into full compliance with the 1965 Federal Highway Beautification Act, which further advanced State control of outdoor advertising. Scrap yards also were screened or eliminated on designated classes of highways.

In 1983 and 1985, State legislation directed the study of historic elements of the State highway system. Thus far, the State has designated 25 historic and scenic highway and bridge routes.

Vermont

Vermont's concern for preserving roadside beauty was clear as far back as 1937. The Vermont Legislature directed the State Highway Board to lay out a scenic route "extending through the central portion of the State from Massachusetts to the Canadian border." This became Route 100.

The 1960's witnessed new laws involving beverage container disposal, billboard placement, and land-use control. By 1966, the State legislature had created the 10-member Scenery Preservation Council (SPC), with broad representation from the interest groups involved with scenic values.

The Vermont Scenic Road Law of 1977 contained a specific mandate "to preserve through planning the scenic quality of (Vermont's) rural landscape." The following year, the SPC developed a practical 30-

page manual entitled *Designating Scenic Roads*, which contains a simplified evaluation system.

Major Parkways and Scenic Roads

It was typical of the history and evolution of scenic roads and byways that several specific routes throughout the Nation were identified for development and preservation during overlapping periods. The Westchester County parkways and the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway heralded in an era of parkway and scenic road efforts starting in the 1930's.

This pattern continued to evolve for many reasons. Some scenic road efforts began as a result of the Nation's economic recovery plan, while others began as preservation measures. A few of these projects are highlighted to show the concepts and ideas that shaped the development of these efforts. These early experiences led to the outgrowth of scenic road programs that began in the 1960's.

Great River Road

The Great River Road runs along the Mississippi River from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. The 3,000-mile network of Federal, State, and county roads that make up the Great River Road crisscrosses the river at various points and quietly traverses woodlands, river towns, peaceful farm lands, and quaint villages of the North and South.

The idea for this scenic road was first introduced in 1938, when the Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MRPC) met with Federal officials concerning the need for developing this facility. The commission consisted of members appointed by the governors of the 10 States along the Mississippi River. Each State had its own parkway commission comprised of State legislators, State and county officials, and gubernatorial representatives. From these commissions, the national MRPC was formed. Today, the MRPC assists and coordinates developments involving scenic, historic, recreational, and related elements.

After World War II, the U.S. Congress appropriated funds for a feasibility study on the road. In 1954, the Congress approved the road, and the Great River Road development has continued ever since, using State funds, specifically appropriated funds, and regular Federal-aid apportioned funds.

In 1964, the Congress extended the northern terminus of the Great River Road from Lake Itasca in Minnesota to the Canadian border. This permitted the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba to connect the 5,000-mile Trans-Canada Highway with the Great River Road. All 10 States have placed the distinctive scenic highway marker along the route. This marker, depicting a steamboat steering helm, is a guide to travelers of the Great River Road.

George Washington Memorial Parkway

Linking with the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, the George Washington Memorial Parkway was authorized in 1930. The parkway provides a scenic view of the Potomac River, while at the same time continuously protecting the shore line, scenic, and historic features along its route. A drive along the parkway takes a traveler from Mount Vernon to Great Falls in Virginia and from the District-Maryland boundary west of Georgetown to Great Falls in Maryland. Originally, the parkway on the Maryland side of the Potomac, would have extended from Fort Washington in Maryland northerly along the Potomac River through Washington, D.C. and Georgetown to the District boundary, but it was never authorized.

Construction started on the Virginia portion of the George Washington Memorial Parkway in 1935, but was interrupted during World War II. After the war, construction resumed in 1948 and was completed in 1960. The Maryland section was started in 1958 and was essentially completed in 1965. Many of the parkway design and construction features demonstrated on the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway were

incorporated and further developed on the George Washington Memorial Parkway. As along the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, the parkway rights-of-way widths were kept purposely wide to maintain scenic vistas and wooded landscapes in an otherwise urban setting.

The National Park Service maintains the Mount Vernon section and the two northerly parkway sections as a single parkway under the George Washington Memorial Parkway unit. The National Park Service describes this total 32-mile unit as follows:

Considered a commuter route by many local residents, the George Washington Memorial Parkway offers the traveler much more than convenience. It is a route to scenic, historic and recreational settings offering respite from the urban pressures of metropolitan Washington. It also protects the Potomac River shoreline and watershed. The Parkway links a group of parks that provide a variety of experiences to over 9 million people each year.

Blue Ridge Parkway

The Blue Ridge Parkway is a jewel in the crown of America the Beautiful and stands out as one of the premier scenic parkways. The parkway follows the crests of the Southern Appalachians (Blue Ridge Mountains) for 470 miles, linking the 100-mile long Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. In addition to the two States, the parkway traverses 29 counties, 7 Congressional districts, and approximately 5,000 adjacent private properties.

This magnificent scenic wonderway was initially proposed during the economic depression of the 1930's, when New Deal legislation sought to cope with mass unemployment by creating the Public Works Administration. From 1935 to 1942, contractors, craftsmen, destitute farmers, and hundreds of men from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were provided with gainful employment in constructing the first segments of the Blue Ridge Parkway. By 1942, World War II caused officials reluctantly to cease all improvement efforts.

After the end of hostilities, governments and private individuals struggled to complete the parkway. Location arguments, design difficulties, right-of-way acquisition problems, concessionaire issues and funding problems had to be resolved. By the late 1960's, the parkway was almost completed except for a 7-mile section near Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina. This remaining section was completed in 1987.

The Blue Ridge Parkway, with its 160 bridges, 26 tunnels, and countless masonry retaining walls, stands as an architectural and scenic monument to America's persistence in blending modern mobility with recreation, and cultural and historic preservation.

National Scenic Road Programs

As one of the first organized efforts to pinpoint recreational opportunities in America, President John F. Kennedy established the Recreation Advisory Council in 1962. It included the following members:

- Secretary of the Interior.
- Secretary of Agriculture.
- Secretary of Defense.
- Secretary of Commerce.
- Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.
- Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency.
- Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

In 1964, the Recreation Advisory Council recommended the development of a National program of scenic roads and parkways. The Department of Commerce was commissioned to conduct a study of such a possible program. [At the time the Bureau of Public Roads was under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The U.S. Department of Transportation was authorized in 1966, and opened in April 1967, with the newly named Federal Highway Administration as one of the Modal Administrations.]

The following reasons were cited as the rationale for the study:

- Because driving for pleasure is one of America's most popular outdoor recreational pursuits.
- Because of the steeply mounting number of families owning automobiles and possessing the leisure time, income, and desire to see and enjoy America's wealth of scenic and natural beauty, both close to home and at far distances.
- Because our rapid urban and metropolitan growth is increasing the need for and decreasing the open-space resources for outdoor recreation.
- Because of substantial economic benefits generated by tourism and sightseeing made possible by attractive roads and parkways.
- Because of the great potential gains in aesthetic and recreational benefits known to be associated with future road planning, design, and construction activities

The interagency study, *A Proposed Program for Scenic Roads and Parkways*, was published in June 1966. This study is perhaps the most exhaustive review of the subject matter. Its principal elements included the following:

- Reasons for a scenic program.
- Benefits of a program.
- Definitions and criteria for scenic roads and corridors
- Engineering and landscape technical considerations.
- Complimentary [sic] facilities and their operation.
- Existing scenic roads (local, State, and Federal).
- Survey and inventory data.
- Recommended minimum program.
- Expanded program.
- Financing, administration, and planning.
- Research and development.
- Signs and markers.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent a special message to the U.S. Congress on natural beauty for America. In it the President discussed beauty for America's cities, countrysides, highways, and rivers, as well as issues such as pollution, clean water, clean air, solid wastes, and other environmental concerns.

White House Conference on Natural Beauty

The President called for a White House Conference on Natural Beauty. This conference was held May 24 and 25, 1965, with some 800 delegates and additional observers. Among its important panel discussions was one on scenic roads. The conference proceedings, *Beauty for America* [published by the Library of Congress, 1965], are well worth reviewing.

Highway Beautification Act of 1965

During the same time when much was being said and written on the need to undertake scenic preservation programs, the U.S. Congress enacted the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. It provided

for the scenic development and road beautification of the Federal-aid highway systems. Following these efforts, nothing further was done because of competing budgetary and policy demands until 1973.

Feasibility of Developing a National Scenic Highway System

In 1973, the U.S. Congress directed that a study be made to examine the feasibility of developing a national scenic highway system. (Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1973, Section 134(a).) The Federal Highway Administration prepared the report to Congress, *An Assessment of the Feasibility of Developing a National Scenic Highway System*. This [1974] report was based upon analysis performed by contract and an interagency advisory committee.

Five major issues were identified:

- National designation of scenic roads.
- Corridor protection and scenic enhancement.
- Complementary facilities.
- Urban emphasis and energy efficiency.
- National connectivity.

The report sketched three alternative potential programs and recommended a preferred approach. In view of national objectives involving the conservation of energy resources (oil embargo), it was found desirable not to establish a new categorical grant program providing funds exclusively for scenic roads. Rather, it was suggested that basic highway construction costs should be funded from existing Federal-aid programs. Finally, the report suggested that Federal legislation provide for the designation of existing high quality scenic highways and for the protection and enhancement of scenic resources on and adjacent to such facilities.

American Outdoors

Outdoor recreation and the scenic road are inextricably interrelated with each other. During the early 1960's, the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC), chaired by Laurance S. Rockefeller, undertook a series of studies on recreation in America and environmental elements. These studies concluded, "that the Nation's recreational patterns were being transformed dramatically by expanding population, increased leisure time, greater mobility, and growing affluence."

To follow up the work of the ORRRC, in 1985 President Ronald W. Reagan, by Executive Order 12503, established the Commission on Americans Outdoors. This commission, chaired by Lamar Alexander, published its findings in 1987, updating the ORRRC reports of the 1960's. The 1987 report includes three recommendations outlined below, that are specifically related to scenic roads:

- Local and State governments should create a network of scenic byways and take action to protect the resources.
 - The U.S. Congress should establish an incentive program of matching grants from the Highway Trust Fund to encourage scenic byway designation, development, and protection.
 - Private sector and government partnerships should provide information on scenic byways.
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