

# Ask the Rambler: Why Is the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge Named After Woodrow Wilson?

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## Ask the Rambler

### Why is the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge Named after Woodrow Wilson?

The Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge carries the Capital Beltway, I-95/495, across the Potomac River. Although President Woodrow Wilson's life was filled with many accomplishments and distinctions, he is not known for links to the Potomac River or for crossing it.

So why is the bridge named after him?

On August 30, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Public Law 83-704, "An Act to authorize and direct the construction of bridges over the Potomac River, and for other purposes." One provision stated:

The Secretary of the Interior . . . is authorized and directed to construct, maintain, and operate a six-lane bridge over the Potomac River, from a point at or near Jones Point, Virginia, across a certain portion of the District of Columbia, to a point in Maryland, together with bridge approaches on property owned by the United States in the State of Virginia.

The sum of \$14,925,000 was authorized to be appropriated for the Jones Point Bridge. However, the cost of the approaches and improvements to collateral streets and highways was to be borne by the States of Maryland and Virginia:

The Secretary shall not begin construction of the bridge . . . until the State of Virginia and the State of Maryland have taken such steps as the Secretary deems adequate to give assurances that there will be constructed and maintained, by and in such States, such approaches to such bridge as will be reasonably adequate to make possible the full and efficient utilization of such bridge.

On May 22, 1956, President Eisenhower signed Public Law 84-534, which transferred responsibility for the project to the Secretary of Commerce, whose Department included the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR). The same day, the President signed Public Law 84-535, which renamed the "Jones Point Bridge" the "Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge." This honor was part of the centennial celebration in 1956 of Woodrow Wilson's birth on December 28, 1856.

So there you have it. That's why the bridge was named after Woodrow Wilson. Having answered the question, the Rambler could pursue other topics, but there's a reason he's called "The Rambler."

### Opening the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge

The issue of maintenance and operation of the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge was addressed in Public Law 87-358, which President John F. Kennedy approved on October 4, 1961. It provided that:

The bridge being constructed by the Secretary of Commerce . . . shall be maintained and operated at the expense of the States of Maryland and Virginia and the District of Columbia in accordance with such arrangements as shall be agreed upon by such States and the District of Columbia: *Provided*, That the annual portion of such expense to be assumed by the District of Columbia shall not exceed one-third of the total annual cost of maintaining and operating such bridge.

In accordance with this Act, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the State of Maryland, and the government of the District of Columbia entered into a maintenance agreement on December 18, 1961. Maintenance responsibilities and expenses were divided among the three jurisdictions.

Construction of the 5,900-foot bridge had begun in 1958. The work was supervised by BPR's Region 15 Office (now the Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division in Sterling, Virginia). Work was completed in 1961, with the bridge designed for an estimated 75,000 vehicles a day.

Ceremonies dedicating the bridge took place in the middle of the bridge at 2 p.m. on December 28, 1961, the 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the former President's birth. A brief dedicatory speech was prepared for Secretary of Commerce Luther H. Hodges (a former Governor of North Carolina). The remarks began by saying the bridge was " a source of deep pride for me." He continued:

It is singularly appropriate that this bridge was named in memory of our 28<sup>th</sup> President. This lofty span, dedicated to the service of the people, is a fitting symbol of Woodrow Wilson's character and ideals.

Nothing that " this occasion has been a long time in coming," the remarks joked that, " I won't take the blame for that-I've been in Federal office for not quite a year" :

I'm told that first serious consideration for a Potomac River bridge south of Washington came in 1940, 21 years ago, so this bridge, on its dedication day, is really coming of age. Since 1940 there have been a number of studies of crossing for the Potomac in this vicinity. They all pointed to the serious need, although they didn't all agree as to the location.

But I'm not going to try to teach you history today. Suffice it to say that in 1954 the Congress authorized money for the construction of what was then commonly called the Jones Point bridge. In 1956 Congress gave the job of building the river crossing to the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Public Roads, and the proposed span was formally named the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge.

As for the new span:

While marble, granite, and limestone have been used along with the steel and concrete, the design emphasizes unity, simplicity, and continuity. It is a beautiful, graceful structure, well deserving of the approval it received from the National Commission of Fine Arts.

The bridge was " one small, though certainly not insignificant segment of an even more impressive undertaking." It was the southernmost point on I-495, " the circumferential highway which will scribe a giant circle around the Nation's capital." The circumferential could be compared with a " ring," because, " It certainly will be-and 14-carat solid gold-in its effects on the entire metropolitan area":

The motoring businessman, the trucker, the tourist, ranging far on their trips north and south, east and west, will speed safely past Washington and its inner suburbs. Their passage on this ring will free interior arterial routes and city streets for the traffic that has real reason to be there. The ring will also provide far better inter-communication among the communities surrounding Washington. I think everyone measures his travel more in minutes than in miles, nowadays, and with this new beltway it won't be very many minutes from one place to another, all around the metropolitan area.

Two other portions of the Capital Beltway had opened recently, segments in Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia:

Already, along the newly opened and planned sections of the circumferential highway, residential developments and particularly commercial and industrial establishments are springing up. They are

attracted by the promise of fast, congestion-free highway service for both customers and employees and the movement of goods. Research and electronics plants have especially found this ring a logical focus.

The Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge had a larger role as part of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways:

This bridge, and all the rest of the interstate system, will pay for themselves many times over in the savings in time and vehicle operation costs they will effect, and in the economic growth they will stimulate. They'll save a lot of us heart attacks from fits of temper over traffic congestion. And they'll save at least 5,000 lives a year from sudden or lingering death resulting from traffic accident.

Finally, the brief remarks stated:

I want to conclude by saying that this magnificent structure epitomizes the vision of our people and our progress as a nation. Its beauty and utility bear witness to our drive to move ahead. It is a fitting tribute to its distinguished namesake, Woodrow Wilson.

The Rambler likes that speech, but having written a few speeches himself, he is saddened to report that the biting wind and near-freezing temperatures prompted Secretary Hodges to cancel his speech. *The New York Times* explained:

Hodges cut short the scheduled brief dedicatory speech by ignoring his text and telling the several hundred shivering spectators:

"I know you just can't wait to hear an address on a day like this. Here it is."

With that, he dropped the folder containing his notes onto the lectern and said that, since Federal money had been used to build the \$15,000,000 bridge, it belonged to everyone, " so let's cut the ribbon."

Mr. Hodges walked from the speakers platform, grabbed a scissors, and snipped the red, white and blue ribbon strung across the bridge's six-lane roadway.

As for the poor writer who drafted that speech and was perhaps in attendance hoping to hear his words uttered by the Secretary, no one really cared. Whoever you are, the Rambler feels your pain.

Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, the 89-year old widow of the President, was to have unveiled a plaque in memory of her husband, but illness prevented her from participating. President Wilson's son-in-law, Francis B. Sayre, Jr., unveiled the dedication plaque. Mrs. Wilson, who had been suffering from a respiratory ailment since Thanksgiving, would die at 10:45 p.m. later that same day.

As noted in BPR's annual report for fiscal year (FY) 1962, the bridge is a major link in the Capital Beltway, I-495:

The bridge was opened to traffic on December 28, 1961, and although only a short segment of the Beltway on each side of the river was open for use, traffic volume quickly reached 18,000 vehicles per day.

## Ownership of the Bridge

The 1954 Act, as amended, provided that the Secretary of Commerce should acquire, by purchase or condemnation, any land in the State of Maryland not under Federal or District jurisdiction or control that is needed for the bridge, with the title to be taken directly in the name of the United States. However, none of the legislation enacted during the planning or construction phase addressed ownership of the bridge. Indeed, for many years, no attention was paid to ownership.

In the late 1970's, however, with the bridge deteriorating, the issue of ownership and maintenance responsibilities surfaced. After reviewing the legislative background, FHWA officials realized that the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge was the property of the FHWA-the only part of the Interstate System owned by the Agency. As a briefing prepared at the time noted:

In the absence of . . . congressional direction, no action was ever taken to convey the bridge [to the States and the District]. The result is the unfortunate jumble existing today. Three jurisdictions operate and maintain a structure belonging to a fourth. Efforts at improving the bridge are stymied by jurisdictional disputes and coordination problems. Federal responsibilities, as owner but not operator or maintainer of the bridge, are confusing and unclear . . . .

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) owns no property of the nature and magnitude of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. That ownership is the result, not of any conscious intent or direction, but of happenstances and, probably, congressional oversight. For years, few recognized that ownership resided in the Department, and no decisions as to how to manage the responsibilities of that ownership were made.

Following negotiations among the parties, the issue was resolved legislatively with enactment of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1981 (Public law 97-134). Section 9 authorized \$60 million for the reconstruction, resurfacing, restoration, or rehabilitation (4R) of the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge. Actually, this was one of those cases The Rambler loves where instead of mentioning the bridge by name, Congress came up with generic language that could apply only to this one facility: " any bridge on the Interstate System which is both owned by the United States Government and located in two States and the District of Columbia."

The Secretary of Transportation was authorized to approve the 4R project only after execution of an agreement by the Secretary, the States, and the District ". . . for future maintenance and rehabilitation of the bridge." On June 28, 1982, the three jurisdictions and the FHWA executed the new maintenance agreement, which cleared the way for a major rehabilitation and redecking project to be administered by the State of Maryland.

In 1983, the bridge was resurfaced and widened to cantilever the superstructure and increase the width of the roadway to 44 feet (from 38 feet). The added width did not change the six-lane capacity of the bridge, but did allow room for a 7-foot shoulder for breakdowns. The project also provided an improved riding surface. Additional projects were later developed to rehabilitate the mechanical apparatus operating the bascule span and strengthen and increase the height of the outside and median concrete barriers.

The agreement approved following the 1981 Act provided for development of an agreement stating the terms under which the State of Maryland, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the District of Columbia would be willing to accept title to the bridge. The followup agreement was executed on April 19, 1985:

Upon completion and final acceptance of the construction work to be done as a result of the design and engineering drawings that are being prepared by the District's contractor, which will include rehabilitation of the bridge bascule span and minor substructure rehabilitation, the State, Commonwealth and the District agree to accept and FHWA agrees to convey joint title to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.

Although the agreement divided responsibilities for the bridge among the three jurisdictions, the FHWA accepted some responsibilities as well:

FHWA, in recognition of the unique history of the bridge, will employ its best efforts to secure and make available the requisite funding for the cost of such future reconstruction, and widening, as may become necessary. Such additional future funding is understood to be in addition to, and not deducted from, the Interstate 4-R allocations, apportionments or obligation limits due or to become due to the three jurisdictions.

The assumption behind this agreement was that when the projects initiated to rehabilitate the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge were completed, ownership would be transferred. In September 1989, a draft agreement was completed to transfer title to the bridge, but the three jurisdictions did not execute it. Recognizing that the agreement called for them to assume responsibility for a bridge that was in need of much additional work, probably including replacement, the States and the District decided against accepting the title and responsibility for the cost of the needed work.

By then, efforts were underway to address the long-term problems caused by an aging movable bridge that had become a bottleneck on one of the area's most heavily traveled roads—a six-lane bridge carrying 160,000 vehicles per day on the eight-lane Capital Beltway. On October 20, 2000, construction of the 7.5-mile long, twin-span Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge Replacement Project began with dredging operations.

## President Woodrow Wilson

Although President Wilson didn't have anything to do with the bridge, he did have a lot to do with the agency that built it and the program it administered.

Woodrow Wilson was born in the Shenandoah Valley town of Staunton, Virginia. The son of a Presbyterian pastor, Wilson became a scholar and educator. After graduating from Princeton University, he attended the University of Virginia Law School. He was admitted to the bar in 1882, but practiced law for only 2 years before becoming a history and political science teacher at Bryn Mawr College. He received a Ph.D. in political science from Johns Hopkins University in Maryland and taught at Wesleyan University in Connecticut before returning to Princeton in 1890 as a professor of jurisprudence and political economy. In 1902, he became the President of Princeton and, in 1910, was elected Governor of New Jersey, the position he held when he ran for President in 1912.

Prior to the Democratic Party convention in Baltimore, Maryland, Governor Wilson had given up hope of winning the nomination and taking on President William Howard Taft. He was second in delegates, but far behind Speaker of the House Champ Clark of Missouri. Through ballot after ballot, Governor Wilson gradually surpassed Clark, but not with enough votes to take the nomination. Finally, the break came on the 46th ballot. Senator John Bankhead of Alabama withdrew the candidacy of Alabama's Favorite Son, Senator Oscar W. Underwood, throwing the State's delegation to Governor Wilson. That signaled the end of the fight; very soon thereafter, Wilson had the nomination.

On September 30, he addressed the American Road Congress (sponsored by the American Highway Association, which had been established by Director Logan Page of the U.S. Office of Public Roads as an umbrella group for highway interests). In the Greek Temple on the Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Governor Wilson began by discussing the importance of highways:

A nation is bound together by its means of communication—its means of communication create its sympathy, they are the means by which the various parts of it keep in touch with one another . . . . I tell you very frankly that my interest in good roads is not merely an interest in the pleasure of riding in automobiles, it is not merely an interest in the very much more important matter of affording the farmers of this country and the residents in villages the means of ready access to such neighboring markets as they need for economic benefits, but it is also the interest in weaving as complicated and elaborate a net of neighborhood and state and national opinions together as it is possible to weave. I believe that the development of great systems of roads is, psychologically speaking as well as physically speaking, a task of statesmanship. I believe that it is the proper study of the statesman to bind communities together and open their intercourse so that it will flow with absolute freedom and facility.

After noting that the United States, up to this time, had "simply let the energies of its people drift," the Governor concluded:

You cannot rationally increase the prosperity of this country without increasing the road facilities of this country.

On election day, voters faced a three-way race. Wilson was running against the current President, Taft, and Taft's popular predecessor Teddy Roosevelt. Roosevelt, having decided against running for reelection in 1908, designated Taft, his Secretary of War, as his successor. The Republican Party followed Roosevelt's lead and selected Taft as its candidate to run against the Democratic nominee, William Jennings Bryant.

Taft and Roosevelt, who had been close friends and associates when Roosevelt was in office, had a falling out over a variety of issues, prompting Roosevelt to decide to seek the Republican Party's nomination in 1912. When the party renominated Taft, Roosevelt decided to run as the Progressive Party candidate (nicknamed the Bull Moose Party when Roosevelt assured reporters he felt as fit as a bull moose). In the three-way split of votes in November, Wilson defeated the incumbent President Taft and Roosevelt, taking office on March 4, 1913.

Although Governor Wilson had minimized the pleasures of driving, compared with other benefits of roads, the new President and First Lady, Ellen Wilson, took full advantage of those pleasures in Washington. They became avid motor tourists. Biographer Gene Smith, in *When the Cheering Stopped: The Last Years of Woodrow Wilson* (William Morrow and Company, 1964), summarized their motoring habits:

In the afternoons when the weather was good he and one or more of his womenfolk [his wife and daughters] went riding in one of the White House Pierce-Arrows, big open cars with right-hand drive and the President's Seal on the door. He mapped out a series of routes, and the chauffeur was not allowed to deviate from them: The Number One Ride, The Southern Maryland Ride, The Potomac.

On August 6, 1914, the First Lady died, leaving the President devastated. Seeing the President's deteriorating physical and emotional condition, his doctor stressed the importance of recreational activity, particularly golf and auto rides. Soon, President Wilson found a companion for those drives. In the spring of 1915, the President met Mrs. Edith Galt, a widow whose late husband had left her a jewelry store. She traveled around town in an electric auto that she claimed was the first ever owned and operated by a Washington woman. She and the President often went for drives that kept their courtship out of the public eye.

On May 4, 1915, the President asked Mrs. Galt to marry him. "Oh, you can't love me," she said, "You don't really know me. And it is less than a year since your wife died." If she had to say yes or no that night, the answer had to be no. The situation had changed by September. The President and Mrs. Galt went for a ride through Rock Creek Park with the President's cousin, Helen Bones, a Secret Service man, and the chauffeur. Mrs. Galt put her arms around the President's neck and said, "Well, if you won't ask me, I will volunteer." They announced their engagement the next day.

They married on December 18, 1915, and continued their motoring adventures in the Washington area and while vacationing. An article about the motoring President in the September 1916 issue of *Northwestern Motorist* noted that the President, unlike Taft, "lacks the speed mania and prefers an appreciative passage through pleasant country scenes to the thrill that comes from speeding."

The article added that the President had drafted the Democratic Party's good roads plank adopted in June 1916 prior to Wilson's reelection campaign:

The happiness, comfort and prosperity of rural life, and the development of the city, are alike conserved by the construction of public highways. We, therefore, favor national aid in the construction of post roads and roads for military purposes.

Despite his interest in good roads, President Wilson played a limited role in development of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, the landmark bill that launched the Federal-aid highway program. One indication of his interest, however, is contained in an article in the January 1916 issue of *Southern Good Roads* magazine regarding a draft bill prepared by a committee of the American Association of State Highway Officials with Page's assistance:



Although President Woodrow Wilson has made no expression upon the subject there is a conviction, based on substantial evidence, that he has seen the plan of the association and that it meets with his approval. On the committee which drafted the measure is E. A. Stevens, state highway commissioner of New Jersey, who was named while Wilson was Governor of New Jersey, and who is a close friend of the President. Colonel Stevens was unwilling to pass upon the proposed bill finally until the President's views had been obtained.

Stevens and Wilson had been classmates at Princeton and friends since then.

Senator Bankhead, who was Chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, introduced the AASHO bill, which was enacted with few changes to create the Federal-aid highway program.

Perhaps 1916 was not a good year for President Wilson to play a big role in development of the highway legislation. He faced a tough reelection campaign against New York Governor Charles Evans Hughes. The outcome was by no means certain. Smith recounted Wilson's experience on election night, which he spent in New Jersey:

He [was there] through Election Day, when it seemed that Charles Evans Hughes was the winner. The apparent loss did not ruffle the President; he went to bed early after remarking that it seemed his programs had not been completely understood by the voters . . . . The tally was that close. It came down in the end to how California would go, and when the last returns from the mountain polling places were in, the state was in the Democratic column.

As Smith adds, by 1916, domestic programs were in the background, "for the talk was all of whether the United States would go to the war" that had broken out in Europe in August 1914. Wilson's slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War," would be widely credited with his reelection, but the pressure to enter the war, along with the difficulty of staying out of it, were building throughout the year.

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson and the First Lady drove through the rain along Pennsylvania Avenue to Capitol Hill to address Congress. Smith set the scene:

His fingers trembled as he turned the pages, and in the silences between his sentences the sound of drops could be heard hitting upon the roof. He said, "It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace. . . . To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured.

The war, which would undercut the Federal-aid highway program by diverting workers, material, and resources to Europe, ended in November 1918. President Wilson, who had tried so hard to keep the country out of the war, dedicated himself to creating a lasting peace via a League of Nations. Facing stiff opposition in Congress to American entry in the League, he embarked on a nationwide speaking tour to build support for his plan. In September 1919, while in Pueblo, Colorado, he experienced a stroke, following by a thrombosis the following month that left him an invalid for the remainder of his life.

He remained President although contemporary observers doubted that he ever regained the ability to perform the functions of his office. They suspected that Mrs. Wilson was acting as President. However, as he gradually regained some of his strength, he resumed his motoring adventures, but this time, as Smith explained, with a difference:

He got it into his mind that any car that passed his own was going dangerously fast, although at his orders the chauffeur rarely went faster than fifteen or twenty miles an hour. When a car went by he would order that the Secret Service vehicle overtake it and bring back the driver for questioning.

The Secret Service would pursue half-heartedly but allow the speeder to escape.

He brooded over this and wrote to Attorney General [A. Mitchell] Palmer asking if the Presidency carried with it the powers of a justice of the peace; if it did, he told his people, he was going to make sure the speeders were caught and himself try their cases there by the roadside. (The Secret Service men desperately killed the plan by saying to him that the idea was beneath his dignity.)

President Wilson left office on March 4, 1921, turning over the White House to Senator Warren G. Harding, a Republican from Ohio. Wilson died on February 3, 1924.

Historians have ranked Woodrow Wilson among the country's greatest Presidents. As for the bridge named for him, historians, especially those who are also motorists in the Washington area, have been less kind. It was the best bridge the BPR could build for a mere \$15 million, but is known today more as a traffic chokepoint than a "vision of our people and our progress as a nation," as a disappointed speechwriter once put it.

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