

Where Was the First Walk/Don't Walk Sign Installed? Addendum: The Barnes Dance

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Where was the First Walk/Don't Walk Sign Installed?

Addendum: The Barnes Dance

After reading this article, several people commented on the reference to the "scramble," during which all traffic at an intersection is halted so pedestrians can cross in any direction, including diagonally. The readers suggested that Henry A. Barnes, who had been traffic commissioner in Denver, Baltimore, and New York City, invented the concept, which became known as the "Barnes Dance."

In Barnes' autobiography, *The Man With the Red and Green Eyes* (E. P. Dutton and Company, 1965), he doesn't claim to have invented the Barnes Dance. He traces his involvement in the concept to a presentation he made in Los Angeles to the Institute of Traffic Engineers while was working in Denver. (Throughout the book, Barnes is vague on years, but the presentation, "Denver Installs a Modern Signal System," was delivered in September 1951.) He decided to talk about pedestrians, inspired by dropping his daughter off at school and watching her and her friends dash across the street between parked cars. Then he had watched adults trying to cross streets, and found they were taking their lives into their hands:

As things stood now, a downtown shopper needed a four-leaf clover, a voodoo charm, and a St. Christopher's medal to make it in one piece from one curbstone to the other. As far as I was concerned--a traffic engineer with Methodist leanings--I didn't think that the Almighty should be bothered with problems which we, ourselves, were capable of solving. Therefore, I was going to aid and abet prayers and benedictions with a practical scheme: Henceforth, the pedestrian--as far as Denver was concerned--was going to be blessed with a complete interval in the traffic signal cycle all his own. First of all, there would be the usual red and green signals for vehicular traffic. Let the cars have their way, moving straight through or making right turns. Then a red light for all vehicles while the pedestrians were given their own signal. In this interim, the street crossers could move directly or diagonally to their objectives, having free access to all four corners while all cars waited for a change of lights. [See pages 108-110]

Barnes pointed out that he did not invent the concept. He said, "There were a few such installations in Kansas City, Vancouver, and a couple of other cities. But we would put them throughout the entire business area." [Page 110]

After predicting doom before the concept was put into effect, the local newspapers had to admit the concept worked well-and it didn't take long for people to get used to it. Barnes added:

There were other stories, too, including a feature article by the City Hall reporter, John Buchanan. For me, it was very pleasant reading, and John ended it by saying, "Barnes has made the people so happy they're dancing in the streets." And that's how the name, "The Barnes Dance," came into being." [Page 116]

[The First Walk/Don't Walk Sign](#)
