

U.S. 666: "Beast of a Highway?"

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U.S. 666: "Beast of a Highway"?

On May 31, 2003, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials approved a new number for the remaining segments of U.S. 666 in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. At the request of State transportation officials, the route became U.S. 491, a spur of U.S. 191.

This is the story of why it was numbered U.S. 666 in the first place.

by **Richard F. Weingroff**

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The numbering plan devised by the Joint Board on Interstate Highways had several components. East-west roads were given even numbers; north-south roads, odd. Transcontinental and main east-west roads were assigned two-digit numbers ending in zero, while the main north-south routes carried numbers ending in one. Three-digit numbers were assigned to alternate routes and branches of main roads.

For the history of U.S. 666, the New Mexico designations are of interest. The September 1925 issue of *New Mexico Highway Journal* listed routes that had been identified during the final conference in August of the Joint Board on Interstate Highways in Washington. The routes listed in the article were not yet numbered, or arranged in their final configuration as part of interstate routes:

1. From Raton, via Las Vegas, Santa Fe and Albuquerque to El Paso.
2. From Clovis via Roswell and Alamogordo to El Paso.
3. From Texico via Clovis, Willard, Estancia, Tijeras Canyon, Albuquerque approved November 11, 1926 and Gallup to Holbrook, Arizona.
4. From Las Cruces via Deming and Lordsburg to Duncan, Arizona.
5. From the Texas Line near Clayton via Des Moines to Raton.
6. From Glenrio via Tucumcari and Santa Rosa to Las Vegas.
7. From Willard via Scholle, Abo Pass, Socorro, Datil to Springerville, Arizona.
8. From Caballo, via Hillsboro, Silver City, Lordsburg and Rodeo to Douglas, Arizona.



New Mexico's U.S. highway network as

The article added that another New Mexico route had been added during a regional meeting held in Denver on September 9, 1925:

This route established a connection between Gallup, The Mesa Verde National Park, and Salt Lake City, and is described in New Mexico as from Gallup via Shiprock to Cortez, Colorado.

Prior to its inclusion in the U.S. system, the route was known as the Navajo Trail and also was included in the National Park to Park Highway (a loop connecting many of the National Parks west of the Mississippi River).

The routes described in the article were reconfigured as parts of interstate highways by the time the Joint Board applied its numbering plan to the national map. The Joint Board's numbering plan was contained in its October 1925

report. This report assigned the number "60" to a Chicago-to-Los Angeles crescent route, with five branches numbered east to west:

- U.S. 160: Baxter Springs, Kansas to Coffeyville, Independence.
- U.S. 260: From Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to Okemah, Henryetta.
- U.S. 360: From Amarillo, Texas to Farwell, Clovis, New Mexico, Roswell, El Paso.
- U.S. 460: From Los Lunas, New Mexico, to Route No. 70.
- U.S. 560: From Gallup, New Mexico, to Cortez, Colorado.

New Mexico had two cross-State highways in the Joint Board's plan. The original designation of U.S. 60 took it through Tucumcari, Newkirk, Santa Rosa, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, Bernalillo, Albuquerque, Los Lunas, McCarty, and Gallup to Holbrook, Arizona. (At the time, New Mexico did not have a good road linking Santa Rosa and Albuquerque, so interstate traffic took the route via Santa Fe). The other cross-State highway, U.S. 70, went through Clovis, Fort Sumner, Willard, Scholle, Socorro, Magdalena, Springerville to Holbrook. (This routing is well to the north of the modern routing of U.S. 70 (Clovis, Roswell, Ruidoso, Alamogordo, Las Cruces, Deming, Lordsburg).

With these main routes in mind, the New Mexico branches of U.S. 60 made sense. U.S. 460 was linked to U.S. 60 at Los Lunas and U.S. 70 west of Scholle. U.S. 560 was linked to U.S. 60 at Gallup.

AASHO's Executive Committee approved a sixth branch of U.S. 60 during its meeting on January 14, 1926, in Chicago. The new route in New Mexico-from Hondo to San Antonio-had not been part of the Joint Board's plan. Because it was east of the Gallup-Cortez route, the new route was numbered U.S. 560. It did not link to U.S. 60, but was linked to U.S. 360, which connected with U.S. 60 at Amarillo. With this January addition, AASHO had approved six branches of U.S. 60. Therefore, U.S. 560 became U.S. 660.

The Fight Over 60 Changes the Map

Following complaints from Kentucky and other States in the East that "60" should have been assigned to a transcontinental route through their States, the number "60" became the subject of the most protracted and bitter controversy involving the numbering plan. The compromise solution was to assign "60" to a route from Virginia Beach, Virginia, to Springfield, Missouri, and "66" to the Chicago-to-Los Angeles route. AASHO sent ballots to the States involved seeking approval. By August 7, 1926, enough States had approved the change for AASHO to consider the matter closed.

The change to "66" meant that the former branches of "60" had to be renumbered as branches of the new number. Therefore, the sixth branch, U.S. 660, became U.S. 666.

When the U.S. 60/66 controversy was resolved in early August, some additional adjustments were necessary to accommodate other changes that had occurred during the months since the Joint Board's report. Executive Secretary W. C. Markham wrote to the Executive Committee on August 11, 1926, to provide a copy of his letter to the State highway agencies involved in the 60/66 controversy notifying them that it had been resolved. He added:

In view of the settlement of this controversy it becomes necessary for us to change a ballot which you have already approved affecting New Mexico, and this is to advise that the ballots which I have on hand from you concerning this New Mexico adjustment will be changed to read as follows in the record:

Moved:

"That Route No. 285 between Raton and Route 66 south of Las Vegas be numbered 385, and that Route 466 between La Joya and Isleta be numbered 570 instead of 460."

This change meant that U.S. 66 would have only five branches, but the fifth would retain its number, 666. (On the ballots, "60" was converted to "66" by a pen mark on the zero.)

The Fate of 460

For U.S. 460, the change to U.S. 570 would not last long. On August 10, State Highway Engineer James A. French of New Mexico wrote to Markham to ask AASHO for a shift in U.S. 85. The State Highway Commission had approved a resolution on July 27:

. . . . This road leaves the Canadian border running in a general southerly direction to Raton, N.M., and then abruptly turns southeasterly thru Clayton to Bowie, Texas, connecting with U.S. Highway 81. The Commission believes that the Camino Real from Raton in New Mexico by way of Las Vegas, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Socorro and Las Cruces to El Paso should bear Federal Number 85, as this is the most general north and south route and most direct route from the Canadian border to the Mexican border.

The alignment from Raton via Clayton to Bowie was part of the established Colorado to Gulf Highway/Puget Sound to the Gulf Highway.

French pointed out that the suggested change would make U.S. 85 "a true north and south road" from Canada to Mexico. Moreover, it would incorporate *El Camino Real* (The King's Highway), "the first road created by law in New Mexico and used as a highway for 250 years previous to that time." He noted that from Raton to Santa Fe, the route had been part of the old Santa Fe Trail. He added:

A situation is developing which is extremely unpleasant for the highway department and somewhat antagonistic toward the U.S. Highway System. It seems to me that a change as suggested by the Commission in making the route from Raton to connect with Route No. 81 in Texas, No. 585 could be easily effected without protest.

Markham replied on August 23. The change "appears very reasonable," but it would "necessarily involve a number of lapping routes." Although "it is a little late to take up any general change," New Mexico's proposal would involve only one other State, Texas. He agreed, therefore, to take the matter up with the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee approved the change on September 7, shifting U.S. 85 onto the historic road from Raton to El Paso. Former U.S. 85 from Raton via Clayton to the Texas State line became U.S. 385. The new routing of U.S. 85 would absorb U.S. 570 (former U.S. 460/466).

With U.S. 570 now part of U.S. 85, no other routes were available for the "4" branch, leaving it undesignated in the plan approved on November 11, 1926. Therefore, the branches of U.S. 66 were as follows:

- U.S. 166: Baxter Springs to South Haven, Kansas.
- U.S. 266: Oklahoma City to Warner, Oklahoma.
- U.S. 366: Amarillo, Texas, via Clovis, New Mexico, to El Paso, Texas.
- U.S. 566: Hondo to San Antonio, New Mexico
- U.S. 666: Gallup, New Mexico, to Cortez, Colorado
- U.S. 666 was listed as 141 miles long.

Later Changes

On June 8, 1931, AASHO approved a series of changes in New Mexico and Texas when U.S. 60 was extended from Springfield, Missouri, to Los Angeles, California. U.S. 70 from Farwell, Texas, to Holbrook, Arizona, became part of extended U.S. 60 and U.S. 260. At the same time, "70" was reassigned to the southern alignment familiar from a modern map. Related changes included creation of U.S. 380 from Albany, Texas, to Socorro, New Mexico. This new route absorbed and eliminated U.S. 566. For the same reason, "470" in (Willard to Moriarity to Albuquerque) was eliminated and its route redesignated U.S. 366. With this series of changes, all branches of U.S. 66 in New Mexico were linked to the route.

With these changes, U.S. 66 had four branches:

U.S. 166: Baxter Springs to South Haven, Kansas
U.S. 266: Warner to Henryetta, Oklahoma
U.S. 366: Willard to Albuquerque, New Mexico
U.S. 666: Gallup, New Mexico, to Cortez, Colorado.

The first route log to include U.S. 466 was published in 1935 (Kingman, Arizona, to Las Vegas, Nevada, to Morro, California). The route was the sixth branch of U.S. 66 to be designated, but it was west of U.S. 566, the reverse of the normal pattern.

By the 1942 log of U.S. numbered highways, AASHO had approved extension of U.S. 666 to Douglas, Arizona, by incorporating the rugged Coronado Trail and bringing the route to a total of 556 miles. The Coronado Trail (initially from Springerville to Clifton) was named in 1926 because the explorer and conquistador, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, passed through the area in 1540. The route has been improved since 1926, but remains a challenge to motorists. Travel writer James T. Yenckel, in an article in *The Washington Post* on December 29, 1991, commented:

No structural evidence of Coronado's passing remains, but the verdant countryside, abloom in summer wildflowers, is largely untouched, and it must look now as it did when he struggled through. The route was a struggle for me, too. An almost empty highway to nowhere, U.S. 666 climbs to above 9,000 feet along the Coronado Trail in a cliff-hanging series of twists and turns so sharp the speed limit often drops to only 10 miles per hour. The reward for this little test of nerves is a picture-postcard panorama of pine-draped ridges leap-frogging across the horizon.

The route was extended to Monticello, Utah, in June 1970 as part of a series of changes requested by State highway officials in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah. Its new length was 605 miles.

In 1985, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO, as AASHO is now called), eliminated the number "66," at the request of the States involved, after the highway had been replaced by Interstate highways. This change did not automatically result in new numbers for the former branches of U.S. 66. However, the link between the numbering of U.S. 66 and U.S. 666 was lost.

Any change in branch numbering had to be initiated by the State transportation departments and approved by AASHTO. (The Federal Highway Administration has no role in the numbering of the U.S. numbered highways.) In June 1992, at the request of the transportation departments of Arizona and New Mexico, AASHTO approved a numbering change affecting U.S. 666 in those States. The route became an extension of U.S. 191 from Chambers at I-40 to Douglas. The segment of U.S. 666 that ran along I-40 to Gallup, New Mexico, was eliminated as a U.S. route. These changes to the branch route are consistent with elimination of U.S. 66 in 1985. However, north of Gallup through Colorado to Monticello, Utah, the route remained U.S. 666. The three States involved had the sole authority to request a change.

As for the other branches of U.S. 66, only two have survived with a "66" number, namely U.S. 166 (Joplin, Missouri, to South Haven, Kansas) and U.S. 266 (Warner to Henryetta, Oklahoma). U.S. 366 was eliminated in the late 1930's, while U.S. 466 was dropped in the early 1970's.

The Number of the Beast

Over the years, U.S. 666 has sometimes been the object of controversy because "666" is the "number of the beast" (or Antichrist) in the Bible. *Revelation* 13:18 states:

Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.

This association is a result of gematria, a system of numerology that assigns a value to each letter of the alphabet. A word can, thus, be counted by adding the value of each letter. Through gematria, "666" is the biblical "number of the

beast" because the letters comprising the name of the "beast" add up to 666. The identity of the "beast" is unclear, although the Roman Emperor Nero is a possibility.

The association with the "beast" earned U.S. 666 the nickname "Devil's Highway." *USA Today* quoted a State trooper who recalled one drunken-driving suspect on U.S. 666 who told him, "Triple 6 is evil. Everyone dies on that highway" (August 4, 1990). *The Wall Street Journal* titled an article "Beast of a Highway: Does Asphalt Stretch Have Biblical Curse?" (August 3, 1995). Referring to the highway's dangers, the article quoted a resident who "blames Satan. After all, 'the highway has the devil's name.'" It was also the subject of a cartoon in *The New Yorker's* issue of February 23/March 2, 1998 (a Corvette-type open top sports car is passing the U.S. 666 sign; the driver and his passenger are depicted as satanic figures).

In 2001, Lions Gate Home Entertainment released "Route 666," a movie starring Lou Diamond Phillips. He and Lori Petty play FBI agents assigned to deliver a government informant to court. The Internet Movie Data Base summarized the plot:

Smith, a mob informer hiding out with the Witness Protection Program, decides to make a break for it and hide out in the Arizona desert. The Feds catch up with him and rescue him just before a group of hitmen can manage to silence him for good. In the course of getting Smith away from the mafia thugs, the pair of agents assigned to protect him turn onto an abandoned stretch of highway nicknamed "Route 666" after the mysterious death of a prison chain gang. As the three continue on their way, they soon discover just what happened to the chain gang, and how the highway earned its name.

The route also played a small part in director Oliver Stone's controversial 1994 movie *Natural Born Killers*.

Despite the biblical reference and the image U.S. 666 has gained over the years, the gematria calculation had nothing to do with the numbering of the route. Boring though it may be to contemplate, the route was simply the sixth branch of U.S. 66 in early August 1926-and retained that number when U.S. 466 was dropped a few weeks later.

The Copper Crucible

Lawyer and journalist Jonathan D. Rosenblum discussed U.S. 666 in his history of the 1983-1986 strike by the United Steelworkers of America against the Phelps Dodge copper company in Arizona and Texas (*Copper Crucible*, Cornell University Press, Second Edition, 1998). Rosenblum began chapter 1 with a description of the highway:

Route 666 rides the rugged eastern seam of Arizona from the Petrified Forest, south, across the Zuni River, through the Apache National Forest, and into the mountain mining towns of Clifton and Morenci. Unlike the straightforward, gentle passage of retired Route 66 ("America's Highway"), U.S. 666, its descendant, is tortuous, wild, and as strange as its name. In little more than one hundred miles, the surrounding altitude ranges from twenty-nine hundred feet to more than eleven thousand feet. With some four hundred twisting curves in one sixty-mile stretch, the road has sent more than its share of travelers crashing off cliffs. If, as Nat King Cole sang, drivers get their kicks on Route 66, they take their risks on 666.

He pointed out that from the start, the people living along the road "worried over a possible connection between ancient symbolism and their modern fate." He adds:

At the road's dedication in the 1920s, local Apaches reacted with curiosity to the white people's numerology; they performed a ceremony called "the Devil's Dance."

Because of its location in the midst of the copper district, U.S. 666 was at the center of the 3-year strike. Strikers marched the route and negotiators mediated disputes on its pavement. One example occurred on August 8, 1983, at a Phelps Dodge employment office near the Open Pit bar on U.S. 666 near Morenci after the union had declared this to be "the day everything stopped." When the first replacement workers arrived, they were "greeted by furious unionists"

who demanded that employment director Dick Boland close the office, which they surrounded. The crowd relaxed when Boland assured the strikers the two replacement workers wouldn't go to work:

But within minutes, a rumor spread that the men had been allowed in a back entrance of the Phelps Dodge mine. As the clock ticked down toward the 3:00 P.M. shift change, protesters surged toward the gate, making a half-mile human chain along U.S. 666

With the workers demanding closure of the mine, State police were not certain they could control the crowd. Commander Ernie Johnson picked one of the workers who appeared to have some authority, Rick Melton, and suggested that a meeting could be arranged with the mine manager, John Bolles, if the crowd would refrain from attacking strike breakers as they left or entered the mine during the shift change:

The scene had all the markings of an Old West showdown. Two Phelps Dodge officials-Bolles and company attorney Jim Speer-appeared from behind the mine gate, smelter smokestacks in the background. They walked down the highway, away from the mine entrance. Two union members, Melton and boilermaker Angel Peralta-walked slowly up the highway to join them . . . Johnson came over to mediate. The five men gathered directly in the center of U.S. 666. Hundreds in the crowd followed and formed a cordon behind this nervous convocation.

Bolles said he would keep the mine open, but would cancel the shift changes for 24 hours. He also informed Melton and Peralta that Governor Bruce Babbitt and top union and company negotiators were to meet in Clifton to try to find a solution to the dispute. When Melton and Peralta agreed, Bolles tried to get the first bus of workers out of the mine and onto U.S. 666, but the angry strikers surrounded the bus and began rocking it. Melton succeeded in calming them, but had to get on the bus and escort it through the crowd. After the crowd finally dispersed, the remaining workers in the mine had the option of spending the night or going home. "Fearing the wrath of the protesters, most decided to spend the night on cots inside the mine."

The strike ended on February 19, 1986, when the National Labor Relations Board rejected the unions' decertification appeals. Rosenblum explained, "more than one thousand unionists from the Steelworkers coalition had remained on strike and in contact with their unions for the full thirty-two months-some taking jobs elsewhere, some unemployed, and a few working for the struggling locals." The strike was over, and the union was decertified. Rosenblum summarized the conclusion by saying:

And it all led to indisputable ends: Phelps Dodge survived to become one of the most profitable mining companies in the world ("an emerging superstar," in the words of the business press) and the union locals were dead.

He added that "it became evident that an era of American labor history ended in the 1980s along the desolate highway between Clifton and Morenci, Arizona."

The End of 666

On January 21, 2003, Governor Bill Richardson delivered his first State-of-the-State Address to the New Mexico Legislature. The new Governor discussed many topics of importance to his State, including the fate of U.S. 666:

We must coordinate the business interests of Native Americans and the state. After years of neglect in Santa Fe, I am proud to announce my wholehearted support for the renovation of Highway 666 (a name we are working to change) from Gallup to Shiprock, on the Navajo Nation, and I have directed the secretary of transportation to cooperate fully with the Navajo Nation in this effort.

It was the death knell for "666."

The New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department joined with Colorado and Utah transportation officials in submitting a recommendation to eliminate the last remaining segments of U.S. 666 and establish a new route, U.S. 393, in its place. After summarizing the history of the route, New Mexico's application explained the reason for the change:

There has been such an outcry from people living on or near US 66 in New Mexico and from the traveling public who avoid traveling on US 666, that House Joint Memorial 60 and Senate Joint Memorial 49 were passed by the 2003 Legislature of the State of New Mexico, to request assignment of a new designation for US 666 as quickly as possible.

The identical Joint Memorial Resolutions described U.S. 666 as "the site of many accidents," noting that "although the rate of accidents has decreased due to road improvements, it is still a dangerous stretch of highway." Then the resolutions got to the point:

WHEREAS, people living near the road already live under the cloud of opprobrium created by having a road that many believe is cursed running near their homes and through their homeland; and
WHEREAS, the number "666" carries the stigma of being the mark of the beast, the mark of the devil, which was described in the book of revelations in the Bible; and
HEREAS, there are people who refuse to travel the road, not because of the issue of safety, but because of the fear that the devil controls events along United States route 666; and
WHEREAS, the economy in the area is greatly depressed when compared with many parts of the United States, and the infamy brought by the inopportune naming of the road will only make development in the area more difficult.

Based on these considerations, the Joint Memorial Resolutions requested a new numeric designation as quickly as possible, adding that, "changing the numeric designation of United States route 666 would provide an added degree of comfort for those using the road."

New Mexico's application explained why the three States had settled on U.S. 393 as the new number:

Renumbering U.S. 666 to U.S. 393 would keep changes to the branch route consistent with the elimination of U.S. 66. U.S. 666 is also a north south route, and therefore should have an odd route number, rather than an even route number.

Before considering "393," the States had apparently thought about basing the new number on the fact that the northern terminus of U.S. 666 was its intersection with U.S. 191 at Monticello, Utah. However, because the numbers 191, 291, and 391 were used for State routes in New Mexico or Colorado, the States concluded they could not maintain the numbering sequence for variants of U.S. 191.

They chose 393, which was not in use in any of the three States. The problem was that the number implied that the highway was a branch of U.S. 93 (Port of Rossville, Montana, to Wickenburg, Arizona) even though neither U.S. 666 nor U.S. 191 intersected U.S. 93. Moreover, U.S. 93 did not have any branches; if AASHTO were to number branches of U.S. 93 in sequence, the first would be U.S. 193, not 393.

At the suggestion of AASHTO, the States agreed to renumber the route as a spur of U.S. 191, with "491" chosen to avoid duplicating State route numbers. After AASHTO's Standing Committee on Highways approved the change, it became official on Saturday, May 31.

As S. U. Mahesh of the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department told the *Albuquerque Journal*, which number ended up on the highway was not important. "As long as it's not 666 and it's nothing satanic, that's OK."
