

# On The Right Side of the Road

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# Highway History

## On The Right Side of the Road

by **Richard F. Weingroff**

The Federal Highway Administration has often been asked about the American practice of driving on the right, instead of the left, as in Great Britain, our "Mother Country." Albert C. Rose, who served as "unofficial historian" of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads during much of his long career with the agency (1919-1950) researched why.

Rose found that, "All available evidence seems to indicate that the RIGHT-HAND travel predominated in Colonial America from the time of the earliest settlements." The ox-team, the horseback rider, the handler of the lead horse, and even the pedestrian all traveled to the right. Travelers with hand guns carried their weapons in the hollows of their left arms and traveled to the right, the better to be ready if an oncoming stranger proved dangerous:

When wagons came into general use, they were hauled by two, four or six horses and the driver rode the left rear (wheel) horse like the Old World position. Handling the reins or jerk line with the left hand [and] the long black-snake whip with the right, these drivers traveled to the right so as to watch more closely the clearance at the left. The heavy Conestoga wagons introduced about 1750, in the vicinity of Lancaster, Pa., gave an added impetus to right-hand travel. The drivers rode the left wheel horse, postilion fashion, or rode the "lazy board" at the left side of the wagon, or walked along the road at the left side of the horses.

He also noted a "smoldering opposition to customs of the Old World."

Thus no valid reason existed for transplanting the English left-hand rule especially since the nationals of other European countries had established in America widely separated settlements in which their own customs were observed.

Australian historian M. G. Lay agreed with Rose that the Conestoga wagon provided a "major impetus for right-hand driving in the United States":

The wagon was operated either by the postilion driver riding the left-hand near horse-called the wheel horse-or by the driver walking or sitting on a "lazy board" on the left-hand side of the vehicle. He kept to the left in both cases in order to use the right hand to manage the horses and operate the brake lever mounted on the left-hand side. Passing therefore required moving to the right to give the driver forward vision.

Rose found that no formal rule of the road was adopted by the new country or any State until 1792. In that year, Pennsylvania adopted legislation to establish a turnpike from Lancaster to Philadelphia. The charter legislation provided that travel would be on the right hand side of the turnpike. New York, in 1804, became the first State to prescribe right hand travel on all public highways. By the Civil War, right hand travel was followed in every State. Drivers tended to sit on the right so they could ensure their buggy, wagon, or other vehicle didn't run into a roadside ditch.

Lay also emphasized the ditches as an influence:

With the growth of traffic, the roadside ditches also led to a growing tendency in the United States in the late nineteenth century for drivers of light horse-drawn vehicles to both drive on the right and sit on the

right to avoid the greater evil of the ditch. It was also common practice with bench-seated drivers of single-line horse drawn carriages, where the need to accommodate the whip in the right hand predominated.

When inventors began building "automobiles" in the 1890's, they thought of them as motorized wagons. As a result, many early cars had the steering mechanism-a rudder (or tiller), not a wheel-in the center position where the side of the road didn't make any difference. Lay points out that technical innovation created the configuration we are familiar with in the United States:

However, with the introduction of the steering wheel in 1898, a central location was no longer technically possible. Car makers usually copied existing practice and placed the driver on the curbside. Thus, most American cars produced before 1910 were made with right-side driver seating, although intended for right-side driving. Such vehicles remained in common use until 1915, and the 1908 Model T was the first of Ford's cars to feature a left-side driving position.

By 1915, the Model T had become so popular that the rest of the automakers followed Ford's lead.

Lay traced the first regulation of one-side-or-the-other to the Chinese bureaucracy of 1100 B.C. The *Book of Rites* stated: "The right side of the road is for men, the left side for women and the center for carriages." This Western Zhou dynasty rule applied only to the dynasty's wide official roads and was "more concerned with protocol than avoiding head-on collisions." Over 3,000 years later, Lay concluded, "there are no technical reasons for preferring driving on either the left or the right side of the road."

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**Reference:**

*Ways of the World: A History of the World's Roads and the Vehicles that Used Them* (Rutger's University Press, 1992)