

U.S. 231 – Indiana to Florida: How a Highway Grew

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U.S. 231 - Indiana to Florida: How a Highway Grew

The U.S. numbering plan was developed in the mid-1920's by the Joint Board on Interstate Highways, which included representatives of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (now the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)) and the State highway agencies. The idea was to identify the main interstate roads of the era and give them a number and a distinctive sign.

The original U.S. numbering plan was as follows: East-west routes were assigned even numbers, with the transcontinental or major east-west routes receiving numbers ending in "0." North-south routes were assigned odd numbers, with the main routes receiving numbers ending in "1" or "5." Other routes were assigned numbers within the grid established by the main routes. In addition, branches off the main roads were assigned three-digit numbers in sequential order (for example, the first branch of U.S. 40 would be U.S. 140, the second would be U.S. 240).

The Joint Board's October 1925 proposal included a description of interstate routes with numbers assigned. One of the numbers, 231:

From Montgomery, Alabama, to Dothan, Marianna, Florida

The numbering plan was submitted to the State highway agencies, which owned and operated the roads. The States approved the plan on November 11, 1926, and controlled it through their national organization, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO). All numbering requests (such as designation of routes, changes in existing numbered routes, or deletion of routes) were submitted by the State highway agencies to AASHO and its successor, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, for review and action. The FHWA is not involved in the numbering of U.S. highways.

The original U.S. numbered highways approved in 1926 included U.S. 231 as a 161-mile route from Montgomery, Alabama, to Mariana, Florida. The route was described in the first official log as follows (spelling as in the original):

Alabama Beginning at Montgomery via Troy, Ozark, Dothan to the Alabama-Florida State line north of Campbelton.

Florida Beginning at the Alabama-Florida State line north of Campbelton to Mariana.

The three-digit designation indicated that U.S. 231 was the second branch of U.S. 31 (Mackinaw, Michigan, to Mobile, Alabama), branching off at Montgomery. The first branch, U.S. 131, ran from Acme, Michigan, to White Pigeon, Michigan, a distance of 238 miles.

Miss Alma Rittenberry

The origins of U.S. 231, however, go back a few years to one of the few women to make an impact on the Good Roads Movement of the early auto days. In an era when government support for roads was limited, private individuals and groups promoted the cause of good roads by identifying long-distance routes, giving them a colorful name, and promoting their improvement and use. Miss Alma Rittenberry (as she was known) of Birmingham, Alabama, originated the Jackson Highway, one of the earliest named trails to be proposed by a woman. A member of the Birmingham Equal Suffrage Association, the Poetry Society of Alabama, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Miss Rittenberry conceived the route in 1911 to honor General and President Andrew Jackson. Her linked Chicago and New Orleans. Although she promoted the route tirelessly through the Jackson Highway Association, she gradually lost control of the route, which was shifted to run through eastern Mississippi, with a branch to Montgomery and Selma.

The final break came in January 1917 when the organization came under the control of men who supported a routing of the branch between Birmingham and Nashville via Gadsden and Huntsville instead of the "bee-line" route via Decatur advocated by Miss Rittenberry. Feeling betrayed by the men who had "played thunder" with her association, she resigned, saying, "If Andrew Jackson knew the unchivalrous act of you men, he would turn in his grave; he was at least courteous to women." A week later, she formed a rival association to support a new route, initially called the North-South National Bee-Line Highway. It shared termini with the Jackson Highway, but followed her preferred routing south of Nashville, including her bee-line routing in Alabama from Montgomery to Mobile. At the insistence of interests in Dothan, she agreed to a southeastern branch to Florida.

When the U.S. system was approved in 1926, it incorporated much of her new trail (U.S. 31 from Montgomery to Nashville, U.S. 41 from Nashville to Chicago). The branch from Montgomery to Florida was numbered U.S. 231. When Miss Rittenberry died in 1930, her sister Mary said:

To her, life was a rainbow of hope with the proverbial pot of gold at the end. She was impulsive and quick tempered, but ever true to her better self. Capable and honest, she hated sham and to the end she remained the Captain of her own soul.

Her good roads work reflect this eulogy.

(Meanwhile, the Jackson Highway Association failed to follow through on its plans. By 1923, when a good roads booster from Indianapolis decided to follow the route, she reported, "it had fallen into almost complete obscurity and disuse.")

Changes in Routing

The first change in routing for U.S. 231 appears in the AASHO log issued in 1935. As requested by the Florida highway agency, the change shifted the Florida routing away from Marianna. It now went through Campbellton, Cottondale, Round Lake, and Youngstown to Panama City. The revised routing, a more direct route for motorists, was 209 miles long.

The final major jump in the route occurred on August 22, 1952, when AASHO approved a request by the State highway agencies to extend U.S. 231 to Indiana. The new description read:

Indiana Route begins jct. U.S. 41 S. St. John, Crown Point, Hebron, Lafayette, Spencer, Worthington, Elliston, Bloomfield, Jasper, Rockport . . . to **Kentucky** Owensboro, Morgantown, Bowling Green, Scottsville . . . **Tennessee** Bransford, Murfreesboro . . . **Alabama** Huntsville, Oneonta, Ashville, Pell City, Harpersville, Sylacauga, Rockford, Wetumpka, Montgomery . . .

The routing was logged at 932 miles.

Over the years since then, U.S. 231 has been shifted in some areas onto better highways as they became available. The cumulative mileage as of the last AASHTO log (in 1989) was 912 miles.

Because of its length, U.S. 231 has lost its identity as the second branch of U.S. 31, but the number and the general routing remain the same today as the 1952 extension. In fact, the route no longer intersects with U.S. 31 in Montgomery. The two routes are carried around the city-U.S. 231 on East Boulevard; U.S. 31 on West Boulevard. However, U.S. 231 coincides with U.S. 31E between Bransford, Tennessee, and Scottsville, Kentucky. U.S. 231 also briefly coincides with U.S. 31W in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
