

Lady Bird Johnson's I-95 Landscape- Landmark Tour- Highway History- FHWA

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Lady Bird Johnson's I-95 Landscape-Landmark Tour - Highway History - FHWA

by
Richard F. Weingroff

If It's Beautifying They Want

In the 1964 presidential campaign, President Lyndon B. Johnson defeated his Republican rival, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, in a landslide victory. From the perspective of the 21st century, historians find many intriguing aspects of this pivotal election and how it altered the political landscape and set changes in motion that shaped our world. History, for the most part, has overlooked its impact on roadside beauty.

As the President and his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, criss-crossed States by road during the campaign, she informed her husband of her feelings about the roadside junkyards they saw along the way. During remarks on conservation in Portland, Oregon, on September 17, 1964, the President told his audience that the auto junkyards they had seen during the campaign "are driving my wife mad." She had speculated that if he lost the election, "one of the advantages of getting defeated is to give her some time to get out and do something about cleaning up the countryside and these old junkyards along our beautiful driveways." He preferred to win the election and then "develop a national policy for the control and disposal of technological and industrial waste."

As the campaign continued, his Administration began searching for solutions. As *U.S. News and World Report* explained, the President's references to the subject during the campaign prompted applause, so "the President observed: 'If it's beautifying they want, it's beautifying they'll get.'"

On February 9, 1965, within 3 weeks of renewing his oath of office, President Johnson submitted a message to Congress on stewardship of the country's natural bounty. "It would be a neglectful generation indeed, indifferent alike to the judgment of history and the command of principle, which failed to preserve and extend such a heritage for its descendants." His proposals covered, cities, counties, pollution, and rivers, as well as highways.

One of the culprits was the modern highway, which "may wipe out the equivalent of a 50-acre park with every mile." Recognizing that "ours is an automobile society," the President did not want to

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- [How the Highway Beautification Act Became a Law](#)
- [Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#)

Contact

- **Richard Weingroff**
[Office of Infrastructure](#)
202-366-4856
[E-mail Richard](#)
[Richard's Bio](#)

curtail roads. He wanted to make roads the "highways to the enjoyment of nature and beauty." The task was twofold. "First, to insure that roads themselves are not destructive of nature and natural beauty. Second, to make our roads ways to recreation and pleasure."

In a lengthy interview in *U.S. News and World Report* for its issue of February 22, 1965, Mrs. Johnson discussed the wide range of ways to beautify America. As for the junkyards that prompted her husband's initiative, she said:

One of the things that's most frequently mentioned-and certainly seems to be the quickest answer-is to shield them with trees and shrubs.

Another thing is the "Prolerizing" plans that squash those old cars flat as a pancake. But there are only four of those plants in the whole nation, and there are about 5 million automobiles being junked each year now.

Still another suggestion is a sort of "burial tax" that you would pay when you bought a new car. It would be used to dispose of an old car.

But the screening and planting seems to be the quickest answer-that and the enforcement of existing zoning regulations.

Asked if she was responsible for the President's suggestion that the national highway program be used to encourage the planting of wildflowers, she replied:

I expect that my great love of getting home in April to see the wildflowers along the Texas highways-I suppose, just by osmosis, some of that got through to him.

You know, driving for pleasure is the No. 1 American recreation. We are a nation of people who use automobiles. And so, to make the highways more beautiful would certainly add a lot to our pleasure in living.

I am particularly proud of the Texas highways, perhaps because I know more about them than I do other States. For about 30 years, we have had a wildflower-seed-planting program there which has really made it a glorious experience to drive across the State between about the middle of March and June. The roadsides are a carpet of color if there has been rain.

Mrs. Johnson answered a question about the need for a national law to control billboards "so people could see all these flowers":

Well, it's a big industry. It's private enterprise. I do think, though, that public feeling is going to bring about regulation, so that you don't have a solid diet of billboards on all the roads.

Asked if the country needed a "Department of Beauty," Mrs. Johnson did not think so. However, she was optimistic that the country would be prettier in 10 years.

The President's conservation message got such a tremendous response that you just know this is a yearning of people, and it is something that they think they can do, and want to do I think the time is ripe-the time is now-to take advantage of this yeasty, bubbling desire to beautify our cities and our countryside. I hope all Americans will join in this effort.

Landscape-Landmark Tour

The President launched several highway initiatives. He directed Secretary of Commerce John T. Connor, whose Department housed the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), to ensure landscaping would be part of all Interstate and Federal-aid primary and urban highways. Johnson also planned to introduce legislation on effective control of billboards and "unsightly, beauty-destroying junkyards and auto graveyards along our highways."

Despite the positive reception the President's America the Beautiful initiative received from the public and in the press, it proved controversial when the rights of private property owners clashed with public interests. Billboards, for example, had been criticized for decades, but attempts to control them had met with limited success. For example, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1958 had declared that control of outdoor advertising was "in the public interest" and had launched a Bonus Program for that purpose. The bonus was a 0.5-percent increase in the Federal share of Interstate construction costs, with the revenue coming from the general treasury rather than the Highway Trust Fund. However, by 1965, only 20 States, with one-fourth of Interstate mileage within their borders, had entered into bonus agreements, despite several extensions of the original time limit (from July 1, 1961, to June 30, 1965). At its peak, the bonus program covered 25 States, two of which dropped out before receiving a bonus. A total of some \$44.65 million was paid to the 23 remaining States (Congress has not appropriated funds for the program since the early 1970s).

Given this limited success, the prospects for President Johnson's efforts to control billboards were uncertain. Because the First Lady was closely identified with this initiative, she decided to embark on a "Landscape-Landmark Tour" into Virginia on May 11, 1965, to promote the America the Beautiful campaign before the opening of the White House Conference on Natural Beauty, May 24 and 25. The tour also coincided with the President's "See America" drive to encourage Americans to "visit the U.S.A." as a way of improving the balance of payments by spending their money in their home country, rather than foreign countries.

The tour began at the White House, where President and Mrs. Johnson greeted Mary Connor, wife of Secretary Connor, and the wives of all other members of the President's Cabinet except Secretary of State Dean Rusk's wife, Virginia, who was not able to participate; Laurance Rockefeller, chairman of the White House Conference, and his wife; Nash Castro of the National Park Service (NPS); State Senator Fred Farr, who would be appointed the Federal Highway Administration's first Highway Beautification Coordinator; and Federal Highway Administrator Rex Whitton and his wife, Callie Maud.

[Photo Gallery 1](#)

At about 8:30 a.m., participants entered a chartered bus that would take them on the tour. The President, who grumbled about the early hour, told them, "Y'all have a good time." A second bus carried 40 or so reporters from all media, including the news bureaus of the three television networks.

The tour began with a roundabout scenic journey on the George Washington Memorial Parkway along the Potomac River and then on I-495/Capital Beltway to the Henry G. Shirley Highway (I-95), instead of the more direct route south from the White House via the Shirley Highway. Whitton provided a running commentary as the bus rolled along. Two uniformed bus hostesses passed out homemade cookies provided by Mrs. Whitton along with coffee and soft drinks.

The extra time needed for the circuitous journey allowed Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey's wife, Muriel, to catch up with the tour. Because of heavy traffic in Rock Creek Park, she had missed the departure from the White House. Her car caught up with the group at the intersection

of the Capital Beltway and Shirley Highway. The bus pulled over to let her aboard. The two tour buses continued south on I-95, which had been completed to Richmond the previous October.

In her diary, Mrs. Johnson described her thoughts as the tour got underway:

What fun it is to be off with them on a trip that promises a good time and real talking, as well as work We had come without hats, soon slipped out of our high-heeled shoes, moved around the bus from person to person, while we drank coffee and munched homemade cookies that Mrs. Rex Whitten [sic] had brought along. [All excerpts from Johnson, *Lady Bird, A White House Diary*, A Dell Book, 1970, pages 294-298]

The first stop was the Dumfries Wayside Shelter on I-95. Mrs. Johnson joined Virginia Governor Albertis Harrison in unveiling a plaque marking the occasion.

Silver-haired Governor Albertis Harrison, Jr., the very prototype of a Governor, and Mrs. Harrison met us there for a ceremony dedicating this complete facility for the tourist-picnic tables under an attractive little roof, a barbecue pit, water fountain, and rest room-against the backdrop of native trees-many dogwood, with a few azaleas planted, as [friend, arts patron] Mary Lasker would say, "like lipstick on a woman."

There was a small crowd, a few speeches, the unveiling of the stone which attested my dedication of the shelter. They hope to have a tourist facility like this on all the major Virginia highways, located every twenty or forty miles. The shelter had a verse I like on it-"The ones who travel far are doubly blest/First, with a chance to roam and then to rest."

During the ceremony, Whitton said:

Highway builders were thrilled, as were millions of other Americans, when our President, Lyndon B. Johnson, said, 'I want to make sure that the America we see from these major highways is a beautiful America.'" They took new heart when he declared, 'A new and substantial effort must be made to landscape highways and provide places of relaxation and recreation wherever our roads run.'

He then introduced Mrs. Johnson, saying:

The inspiration for the President's program is well known. We are honored to have that inspiration with us today, and we are honored that she will dedicate this wayside shelter as a symbol of what will be done on highways throughout our nation.

Mrs. Johnson said:

When I think of our hope for a more beautiful America, I think of Virginia as a state blessed by nature and sustained by foresighted beauty-loving citizens.

Thousands will enjoy this spot as they cross the countryside to visit the historic shrines of Virginia in the years to come. Here they will find hospitality that is legendary, gardens exquisite, as well as reminders of our country's proud beginnings.

No one can drive this scenic highway without feeling a deep sense of gratitude for such a lush, green land, and a rush of pride in man's increasing determination to keep it within eyesight of the motorist.

This lovely hillside shelter will beckon to many wayfaring families through the years.

She added:

I need not enumerate all the individuals and organized agencies from governors to garden clubs; from agencies to engineers, that go into creating the scenic superhighways. I am sure each of you here today know that you have indeed been given a great gift to your country.

[Photo Gallery 2](#)

According to an account of the trip in the June 1965 issue of the BPR newsletter *News in Public Roads*:

Other stops on the first day's trip included one of I-95 to view the scenic highway and to examine the roadbuilding technique adapted to topography, leaving trees and other objects of natural beauty in place. This was followed by another stop on I-95 to view highway planting by the Virginia Department of Highways in cooperation with the Associated Clubs of Virginia for Roadside Development. Here Mrs. Johnson planted a dogwood.

Mrs. Johnson recalled the day in her diary:

Next down the road we saw a blazing exhibit of azaleas, dogwood, pansies, marigolds, planted by the Associated Clubs of Virginia for Roadside Development. I spaded up the dirt to plant a dogwood. This is the Year of the Shovel for me! The woods were laced with dogwood, white and fairylike in the brilliant morning.

The wife of Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall complained to Castro of the NPS, "Nash, that dogwood is never going to live if its planted that deep." He promised to have someone from the NPS replant the tree at a higher level.

[Photo Gallery 3](#)

The tour left I-95 for a brief trip along U.S. 1, the parallel highway that had once been the East Coast's main road:

Briefly we got off of Interstate 95 to go down to Highway One, to compare the two roads, one a narrow right-of-way with uncontrolled access. What we saw was a tunnel of filling stations, billboards, neon signs, and dilapidated little buildings. And yet these enterprises are conveniences for people, and this is private enterprise. What is the answer? Some control by government and some raising of taste levels? But the contrast of frenetic billboards on one road and only nature on the other was a significant lesson.

With this comparison in mind, she said:

The chief lesson of this morning is the opportunity of seeing what has been done with Interstate 95, which has a broad right-of-way and complete control of access, by selective cutting, by skillfully maintaining the best native trees and shrubbery, by planting the banks for erosion control, by preserving the vistas. This highway is a beautiful drive, even if it frequently comprises six, or even eight, lanes. It is a model of what can be done, and the median strip is a great plus.

[Photo Gallery 4](#)

The Landscape-Landmark Tour left I-95 to travel to Charlottesville to visit Monticello, the well preserved home of the third President and primary author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. "Many times I've been here," Mrs. Johnson told her diary, "but never in this fashion, trailing forty newspaper people with heavy camera equipment, and met by the Trustees of Monticello." Participants in the Landscape-Landmark Tour enjoyed a buffet luncheon on the Terrace Promenade at Monticello, including Virginia ham, Sally Lunn bread, an oyster cooked according to Jefferson's recipe, and Crème Brûlée. Mrs. Johnson commented, "I threw discretion to the winds and ate everything."

During the ceremonial part of the visit, Mrs. Johnson donated a seedling from the South Lawn of the White House. It was from a flowering horse chestnut tree that grows on a mound President Jefferson had designed and called "The President's Park."

According to an account by Nan Robertson in *The New York Times*:

When a woman congratulated Mrs. Johnson on her beautification drive, she responded, "Beauty is the happiest thing in the world to be interested in-to just see and unfold something beautiful for others."

[Photo Gallery 5](#)

The group took a brief tour of the University of Virginia's Botanical Gardens before departing on Laurence Rockefeller's plane for Abingdon. They motored to the Martha Washington Inn behind two high school marching bands. A sizable crowd turned out to see the First Lady's convoy despite the rain that had caught up with them. That night, Mrs. Johnson and her companions enjoyed William Shakespeare's play "Julius Caesar" at the Barter Theatre, before having dinner. As Nan. Robertson explained:

In the tradition of the Barter Theater, Mrs. Johnson and the others bargained their way in with food or growing things. The President's wife presented a seedling from a magnolia tree that Andrew Jackson planted on the South Lawn of the White House.

By then, Mrs. Johnson told her diary, she was "starving." She wondered:

What can there be about such a day to make one so hungry? Maybe trying to learn about everything that is put before you and projecting your appreciation of it and your interest in it does take muscle and effort, although it doesn't always look as if it does.

On May 12, the Landscape-Landmark Tour visited the Blue Ridge Parkway before Secretary Udall, who had joined the tour in Charlottesville, took reporters on a climb up the last 1,500 feet of Sharp Top. The tour also visited the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild exhibit before traveling by bus to Roanoke for a flight back to Washington.

Highway Beautification Act of 1965

One of the most prominent results of the President's beauty initiative was the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. As expected, it had been controversial. When the House considered its version of the bill on October 7, the debate lasted into the early morning hours of October 8. A pointed but tongue-in-cheek amendment by Representative Robert Dole (R-Kan.) to strike out the

term "Secretary of Commerce" wherever it appeared in the bill and insert the words "Lady Bird" lost by a voice vote. Representative Harold R. Gross (R-Iowa) suggested that when the bill passed, as he knew it would, the President should have his signing ceremony in front of a Texas billboard advertising the Johnson family's television station.

After the House and Senate reconciled differences between the two versions of the bill, Congress approved the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 on October 14. The signing ceremony took place at the White House on October 22, the day after the President returned from surgery at Bethesda Naval Hospital. Recalling the ride from the hospital along the George Washington Memorial Parkway, the President said, "not one foot of it was marred by a single unsightly man-made obstruction-no advertising signs, no junkyards. Well, doctors could prescribe no better medicine for me." Saying, "Beauty belongs to all the people," he signed the bill and gave the first pen to Lady Bird, along with a kiss on the cheek.

For a more detailed account of passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, go to <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/beauty.cfm>.

The billboard portion of the Act, which became Section 131 of Title 23, United States Code ("Highways"), required the States to provide effective control of outdoor advertising along the Interstate System and Federal-aid primary system highways (within 660 feet of the nearest edge of the right-of-way and visible from the main traveled way). Federal-aid apportionments could be reduced by 10 percent for States that did not do so. Some signs would be permitted, namely directional and other official signs, signs and other devices advertising activities conducted on the property on which they were located, and signs advertising the sale or lease of the property on which they were located. The Secretary was to enter into an agreement with each State regarding the size, lighting, and spacing, consistent with customary use, on control of outdoor advertising.

Signs that did not comply with the new requirement were to be removed, but not before July 1, 1970, with just compensation for those that had been erected legally before enactment of the law. The Act authorized \$20 million a year for FYs 1966 and 1967 for this purpose, with the funds coming from the general Treasury, not the Highway Trust Fund, and a Federal share of 75 percent.

To promote the safety and recreational value of travel and preserve natural beauty, the 1965 Act also required effective control of the establishment of junkyards along the Interstate System and the Federal-aid primary system (Section 136 of Title 23, United States Code). Effective control meant screening by natural objects, plants, fences, or other means, with a 10-percent penalty on apportionments for States that did not comply. The Federal share of junkyard screening projects was 75 percent, again with \$20 million a year (FYs 1966 and 1967) from the general Treasury.

The first billboard did not come down until April 27, 1971. The 15- x 45-foot billboard, 30 feet high, was in a pine grove off the northbound lanes of I-95 near Freeport, Maine. It was a double-faced billboard that had most recently advertised a Brunswick restaurant and a Falmouth music store. The owner of the billboard, the Donnelly Advertising Company, was paid about \$1,000 for its removal.

An article in *The Boston Globe* explained how this billboard came to be first:

Since Maine pioneered in enacting its own billboard control legislation, it got the first Federal allotment, of \$510,000. Hence a billboard in Maine, a few miles beyond Portland, got national priority in the removal program.

With 100 or so people on hand for the occasion, Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe explained that removal of billboards "represents the realization that the majestic vistas along our

rural highways belong to the people, and it returns those vistas to the people legally through the due process of laws." He added:

This program also represents a triumph for constitutional fair play and our free enterprise system. We realize that while the beauty of our landscape is more important than billboards, the billboard itself is not intrinsically evil. Therefore, this legislation provides just compensation for those whose signs are taken to benefit the commonwealth.

Volpe climbed a stepladder as if to take the sign down himself, but instead said, "Take her down, boys," as a crane pulled the facing off the billboard. Completion of the task would take about 2 days.

The Highway Beautification Act of 1965 has been amended several times, in part to address changes in outdoor advertising. As amended, it requires us to ensure that the State transportation departments maintain "effective control of the erection and maintenance" of outdoor advertising signs along the Interstate System and the National Highway System. The law allows State and local officials to determine whether more stringent controls than those imposed by Federal law are appropriate for these routes. The result varies from State to State and even from community to community, with some States essentially banning billboards while others allow them to the maximum extent permitted under the Federal law.

For information on the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, go to: <http://www.wildflower.org/>

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