

The National Parkways

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The National Park Service's parkways epitomize the harmonious integration of highway engineering and landscape design.

America's National Park Roads and Parkways,
Editors: Davis, Timothy; Croteau, Todd A.; and Marston,
Christopher H., Historic American Engineering Record
(HAER), The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004

Landscape architects Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted are said to have coined the term "parkway" in the 1860s for the Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn to describe a road designed for pleasure riding, not commercial activity. As the idea evolved, the Bronx River Parkway, authorized in 1907 but not completed until 1923, was a model for the automobile age. It was designed to fit into the topography, featured a landscaped roadside, and excluded commercial traffic.

George Washington Memorial Parkway – Under 1930 legislation, the National Park Service (NPS) collaborated with BPR to design and build the 38-mile parkway. It incorporated the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, which BPR had completed as a parkway without NPS involvement, in 1932. The George Washington Memorial Parkway in Virginia extends from Mount Vernon to the Capital Beltway. On the other side of the Potomac River, the parkway (renamed the Clara Barton Parkway in November 1989), is between the Capital Beltway in Maryland and Chain Bridge in the District of Columbia. The final section was opened in 1970. According to HAER, the parkway "embodied state-of-the-art design principles and strongly influenced parkway and highway development throughout the country." Its beauty aside, the parkway has become a major commuter route during peak periods.

Colonial Parkway – The 1930 law authorizing Colonial National Monument in Virginia (becoming Colonial National Historical Park in 1936) included provision for a Colonial Parkway linking Jamestown (first permanent English settlement in North America (1607)) and Yorktown (where General Charles Cornwallis surrendered to General George Washington in the final major battle of the Revolutionary War (1781)) via Williamsburg (Virginia's colonial capital (1699-1780) but famous today for Colonial Williamsburg, its popular historic district and living-history museum). The HAER publication stated that in designing the 23-mile route, NPS and BPR "integrated parkway design principles standardized in Westchester County, New York, with the Park Service's own traditions of landscape architecture." Its development was "marked by routing conflicts, war, limited funding, and land acquisition problems." The Colonial Parkway, completed in 1957, "is a continuous strip of concrete with gentle sweeping curves set in a broad, tree-lined right-of-way devoid of commercial development."

Blue Ridge Parkway - The goal was to link Shenandoah National Park and Great Smoky Mountains National Park with a parkway for pleasure driving, but its motivating goal in the 1930s was to relieve unemployment; contractors were required to hire as many local men as possible. Running through the countryside and wild mountain landscapes in North Carolina and

Virginia, the parkway follows the Blue Ridge Mountains for 355 of its 469 miles. The remainder crosses some of the most rugged of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Routed “along mountain sides, plateaus, streams, and through broad river valleys,” the HAER explained, the parkway provides “visitors with one of the most diversified motoring experiences in the world.” Construction began in 1935 and was completed in 1987 with the opening of the award winning Linn Cove Viaduct, part of a 7.7-mile segment around Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina.

Natchez Trace Parkway – The parkway, established in 1938, from Nashville, TN, to Natchez, MS, roughly follows the Old Natchez Trace. This old trace provided a return route for traders who traveled the Mississippi River by flatboat to the port at Natchez. Unable to return against the river’s flow, they walked the old trace. Construction of the 450-mile parkway began in 1937, with one of its most remarkable features being the Double Arch Bridge opened in 1994 over TN 96, the first precast segmental concrete arched bridge in the country. The HAER described the parkway as “a remarkable achievement, merging a modern roadway with its surrounding rural landscape, and making scores of natural and cultural resources related to the Old Trace accessible to the public.”

Baltimore-Washington Parkway – This parkway was conceived as an alternative to the dangerous, heavily commercialized U.S. 1 between Baltimore and Washington. Getting the concept through Congress required a compromise. The NPS and BPR would design and build the 19-mile parkway segment from Fort Meade near MD 175 to U.S. 50 near the MD/DC line. Maryland would build the extension, called the Baltimore-Washington Expressway, to freeway standards into Baltimore. The two segments cost about the same, roughly equaling the 50-50 State/BPR matching shares under the Federal-aid highway program. Unlike the pre-World War II parkways, the “BW,” as it is known locally, incorporates features that allow for “moderately high-speed, efficient and safe movement of traffic,” according to HAER. Although routed though “an ever-changing succession of attractively composed views of native forest, meadows, and picturesquely located specimen trees,” the scenic parkway is an often-congested commuter route between the two cities.

Foothills Parkway – Administered by Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Foothills Parkway crosses the foothills of Great Smoky Mountains in east Tennessee linking U.S. 129 along the Little Tennessee River in the west and I-40 along the Pigeon River in the east. Congress authorized the 72-mile Foothills Parkway in 1944,, but construction has been delayed by lack of funds and geotechnical issues. Only a total of about 22.5 miles of the parkway has been opened.

NOTE – Three NPS parkways in the Washington area were built by other agencies before NPS assumed control. The 2.5-mile **Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway** from the Lincoln Memorial to the National Zoo was authorized in 1913, with principal construction from 1923 to 1936. North of the zoo, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under Captain Lansing H. Beach built the first park road, known in his honor as **Beach Drive**, around the turn of the century. Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1933 reorganization of the executive branch, NPS assumed responsibility for park facilities in the District, including the parkway and drive. NPS and BPR completed a tunnel under zoo property to link the two segments in 1966. . . . **Suitland**

Parkway connects South Capitol Street in the District with Joint Base Andrews Naval Air Facility, home of Air Force One. The Public Roads Administration (BPR's name in the 1940s) administered design and construction contracts for the War Department during World War II to provide a link between Andrews Field (its name at the time) and what is now called Bolling Air Force Base. When the War Department declared the parkway surplus after the war, legislation in 1947 transferred the facility to NPS.