

Herbert S. Fairbank  
Tribute to an Unknown American  
By  
Pyke Johnson  
At the Dedication of the  
Herbert S. Fairbank Research Station  
June 24, 1964

*On June 24, 1964, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads named its highway research facility in McLean, Virginia, the Herbert S. Fairbank Research Station. A plaque was unveiled at 2:30 by Mrs. Francis Fairbank, wife of his cousin, when his sister, Miss Grace C. Fairbank of Baltimore, Maryland, was unable to attend due to illness. One of the featured speakers was Pyke Johnson, who had been a highway lobbyist for decades, most recently as president of the Automotive Safety Foundation. Johnson had been a friend and associate of Fairbank's since 1918.*

*Fairbank, a lifelong bachelor, had lived for many years with his sister Grace. Each year, they vacationed together, often in Vermont's Green Mountain. He retired in April 1955 when he was unable to recover from an illness contracted while he and Grace were vacationing in Italy the year before. He died on Dec. 14, 1962, following a heart attack.*

*The following is Johnson's tribute to Herbert S. Fairbank.*

Many Americans, too many, when they think of our Nation's Capital tend to look at it in the image of a single man—a Wilson, Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, or a Johnson. Their viewpoint then is colored by what they think of the individual.

But there is another Washington. It is the community made up of hundreds of thousands of dedicated men and women who spend their entire adult lives, usually anonymously (some of these here today) working for the public good. It is from them that most of the best things of government flow whether it be in the fields of health, education, science, transportation or whatnot. Unsung and unknown to all but their immediate colleagues, their devoted efforts still help to shape our destinies.

No better example of this corps could be found than the man whose memory we are gathered here to honor today—Herbert S. Fairbank.

I first met "Jack," as many of us came to call him later, on a notable day in November 1918. The armistice had been signed. The time had come to pick up civilian life. What was the status of the road program? It was from him that I learned that only 12.5 miles of road had been built with Federal-aid [since it's inception in 1916], not all in one place. This was the beginning of a friendship that lasted through his lifetime.

Later, it developed in many ways and through many experiences. On one occasion, we had a

special train from Detroit to Springfield, Illinois. To see the Bates Road Tests [1920-1923], the results of which were to show that heavy trucks must turn to pneumatic tires. There was a little game of Black Jack staged that night. He protested that he had never played, but won all the money. From that time forward he was known as “Jack” to the losers.

On another occasion, we were on a motor trip through the Western deserts locating the Zion Road [in Zion National Park, Utah] and looking in on the Indians on the Enchanted Mesa of the Painted Desert [in Arizona].

This time Jack and I were serving as Chambermaids of the desert. Chief Thomas H. MacDonald [who headed the Bureau of Public Roads from 1919 to 1953] was head of the expedition and in the evenings he roasted corn and prepared other tasty dishes as the Great Chef. Doc Hewes [Laurence I. Hewes, who directed the Federal highway construction programs in the 11 western States and the Territories of Alaska and Hawaii] used a saw to cut off huge slabs of bologna. Jack and I had the lowly tasks of putting up the tents and making the beds. He, at least, did his part uncomplainingly as he did everything in life and I might add, efficiently as well.

I recall too that as we traveled around the countryside after the formal sessions of the Permanent Association of International Road Congresses [held in Washington, D.C.] in 1930, Jack’s voice could be heard as one of a chorus who sang lusty ballads led by Trueman Thompson. It was simple incidents such as this that made up Jack’s life. At home he was an avid reader and a devoted brother.

As Rex [Federal Highway Administrator Rex Whitton] has noted, Herb was already a veteran in the Office of Public Roads when MacDonald appeared [in 1919], but never in any organization I have seen did two men so complement each other. MacDonald was a product of the Marston school of thought at Iowa [Dean Anson Marston at Iowa State College], a pragmatic engineer who had had long, practical political experience at the State level. Fairbank was a graduate of Cornell whose whole experience had been in the Federal government. Together, they symbolized the Federal-State partnership which has resulted in the greatest system of roads in the world’s history.

As head of the Office, it was MacDonald’s part to appear publicly. As head of the Public Information Service [1927-1943], later as top man in the Research Division [1943-1955], Jack did the spade work behind the scenes, a role which he preferred to all others.

There his output was not only prodigious but his vision was truly awesome.

Take, for example, the report which he wrote, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, published in 1939. If all of the recommendations made in that report could have been carried out in the decade that followed its publication, the face of America today would not have the scarred landscapes that now appear on many of our routes of travel.

Thousands might be living, hundreds of thousands of others would have escaped crippling accidents. Billions of dollars in property damage and waste motion could have been saved. The planned growth of our metropolitan areas would have been notably advanced. We would have escaped many of the multiple burdens of taxes and service charges that face us now as population

and traffic increase.

All that is hindsight, however. The answer is that in this field as in many others, this self-effacing man was far ahead of his time.

While at the time, the question of toll roads was more important in the public eye, actually the outstanding phase of the report is its treatment of the urban and interregional problems.

The very essence of today's urban problem is diagnosed in a paragraph which is quoted in full:

In the larger cities generally only a major operation will suffice—nothing less than the creating of a depressed or an elevated artery (the former usually to be preferred) that will convey the massed movement pressing into and through, the heart of the city, under or over the local cross roads without interruption by their conflicting traffic. Such facilities are not required in any city for the service of through traffic alone. They are not required solely for the service of the traffic entering the city from typically rural highways. There usually is added to these streams in the outer reaches of the city or its immediate suburbs a heavy movement of purely city traffic that mounts to high peaks in the morning and evening rush hours. Movements of this latter sort largely follow the same lines as the traffic entering the city from main rural highways simply because the peripheral city areas and suburbs in which they are generated have developed along such highways. There are cases in which the daily “peak” of “in-and-out” city traffic exists without any substantial addition from main rural highways. For such cases, the requisite facility—an express highway—is in all essentials similar to facilities designed to carry external traffic across the city.

Succeeding paragraphs set forth the present plight of the cities in clear language. “The costs of securing rights-of-way have often blocked municipal action . . . . As motorists move out of suburban areas, land values decay and slums arise” . . . . Finally as the Government enters the field to assist in urban renewal, “there is danger that these new properties will block the logical projects of the needed new arteries into the city center . . . . They should be planned now.”

Typical of the far-sighted view contained all through this report is the comment on the need for belt-line distribution roads around the larger cities and by-passes around many of the smaller cities and towns.

“Only in this way,” said Jack, “can traffic originating either outside the city or in any of its outer areas, avoid the necessity for going directly through the down town area and so adding to the congestion already there.” Such roads must be constructed of the freeway type. Otherwise they eventually become “ribbon developments.”

Turning to the interregional phase of traffic movement, Jack called attention to the great need which existed in 1939 for a Primary Highway System. Out of the information received from the State highway departments and the War Department, he set up a tentative selection of a 26,700-mile system. Commenting on this, the report says:

The system tentatively selected is believed to include substantially every major line of

interregional travel in the country . . . . It joins the populous cities of the United States, almost without exception . . . .”

In 1941, *Toll Roads and Free Roads* reached President Roosevelt. [NOTE: Roosevelt had seen the report before it was submitted to Congress in 1939.] He read it and summoned Chief MacDonald to the White House. The Chief suggested that the President might well name a committee to go into the matter in more detail.

The President approved and in a letter dated April 14, 1941 named a National Interregional Highway Committee of seven members to serve in an advisory capacity to Administrator John Carmody of the Federal Works Agency [home in the 1940's of FHWA's predecessor agency, then called the Public Roads Administration].

In addition to MacDonald, the President invited G. Donald Kennedy, then State Highway Commissioner of Michigan; Bibb Graves, former Governor of Alabama; C. H. Purcell, State Highway Engineer of California; Frederick A. Delano, Chairman of the National Resources Board; Harland Bartholomew, City Planning, St. Louis; and Rexford Guy Tugwell, Chairman, New York Planning Commission.

From the speaker's standpoint, the most important appointment was that H. S. Fairbank was named as secretary. So there was provided continuity of action.

It was not until January 1, 1944 that the President's Interregional Highway Committee was ready to report. Then, following along the general lines laid down in *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, this report [*Interregional Highways*] and the *Highway Needs of the National Defense* published in 1949 became the forerunners of the Clay Committee report of 1955 out of which was born the present Interstate Highway Act.

In sum, the Committee recommended designation of an interregional system of about 39,000 miles. Specifically, it recommended the general location of nearly 34,000 miles constituting principal routes of the system. It suggested further an additional mileage of 5,000 miles should be composed of circumferential and distribution routes in and around the city.

Here again the teamwork of MacDonald and Fairbank is shown at its best.

It is typical of MacDonald's recognition of his associates that he wrote in a letter to General Philip B. Fleming who had succeeded Carmody: "The research and writing of this report are the work primarily of Mr. Fairbank."

Enough has been said to show that H. S. Fairbank under the leadership of Thomas H. MacDonald, was a major factor in every major report issued by the Bureau of Public Roads during his long tenure of service.

That the men in the highway service of the States recognized his unusual capacity for service is best attested by the record. He served as chairman of the Highway Transport Committee of the American Association of State Highway Officials from 1943 to 1948. He was chairman for many

years of the Department of Economics, Finance and Administration of the Highway Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences. He was a member, too, of the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances.

He participated in international affairs as well. He was a United States delegate to the International Road Congress in Munich in 1934 and was vice-chairman of the U.S. Delegation to the United Nations Convention on Road and Motor Transport in Geneva in 1949.

In 1947, Jack received the George S. Bartlett Award, highest honor in the highway field, given jointly by the American Association of State Highway Officials, the Highway Research Board, and the American Road Builders Association.

The United States Department of Commerce Exceptional Service Award (a gold medal) was presented to him in 1950. In 1953 he was given the Roy W. Crum Award by the Highway Research Board for outstanding achievement in highway research.

He was the first recipient in 1957 of the Thomas H. MacDonald Award for outstanding contributions to highway progress.

Like the Ulysses of whom Tennyson wrote, he could say: "I am a part of all that I have met. Yet all experience is an arch where-through gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever as I move."

Let me quote the words of an anonymous writer as I close:

The mobile American public is his debtor. His monument, still being built, is an efficient highway system, planned for the future and soundly financed.

May this station named in his honor, give him lasting recognition for a great job, well done.

*On May 5, 1983, Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole and Federal Highway Administrator Ray Barnhart participated in a ceremony dedicating a new building that had been under construction at the research center since 1980. With the opening of the Francis C. Turner Building, the center was renamed the Turner-Fairbank Highway Research Center.*