

**ASK THE RAMBLER:
Was the Lincoln Highway the First Transcontinental Highway?**

Identifying “firsts” is a treacherous business. The initial problem is figuring out which is the first thing/idea/activity. Often, people trying to solve the same problem in different locations come up with the same or similar solutions and then squabble, sometimes in court, over who was first. Second, claimants to the status of first often have strong partisans who jump on anyone who claims someone else was first. That said, The Rambler will proceed with this question, protected as he is by a shield of anonymity. (“The Rambler” is not his real name.)

The Lincoln Highway has been described as:

- The first “Coast-to-Coast Paved Road.”
- The “nation’s first major highway devoted specifically to the needs of the automobile.”
- “A formal road across the country was not available until the Lincoln Highway (Route 30) was opened in 1923.”
- “The Lincoln Highway Association was the first of the named-highway associations.”
- “The first of the modern interregional highway efforts.”
- “The idea of a truly national, coast-to-coast highway did not occur to anyone until . . . Carl Fisher suggested one in 1912.”
- “The Lincoln Highway was completed in 1916 For the first time, a truly national road existed.”
- “The country’s first east-west, coast-to-coast highway . . . was not completely paved until 1935. However, the Lincoln Highway did become the nation’s first hard-surfaced transcontinental highway.”
- “Carl Fisher . . . and Henry Joy created the idea for the first transcontinental highway.”
- “1925 - The transcontinental route is completed.”
- “. . . not until 1923, when the government stepped in, was the highway actually finished.”

The sources will remain anonymous, but The Rambler assures the reader that these quotes are from actual sources.

But was the Lincoln Highway the first?

From early in the Good Roads movement of the 1890s, booster groups attempted to persuade Federal, State, and county officials to improve roads outside cities—initially so bicyclists could enjoy the fresh air and freedom of the road without crashing, injuring themselves, and scaring the horses. By the start of the 20th century, boosters began forming private associations to back a specific interstate or intrastate trail.

The Jefferson Memorial Road in Virginia was one of the earliest named trails, if not the earliest, of the Good Roads era. The memorial road began around 1900 when Martin Dodge, Director of

the U.S. Office of Public Road Inquiries (ancestor of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)), suggested an object lesson project to improve the road connecting Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello with the University of Virginia, which he had founded. (Since the mid-1890s, Dodge's agency had built short "object lesson" roads around the country as a way of demonstrating the value of good roads and encouraging their extension on the theory that "seeing is believing.") When Albemarle County authorities were slow to act, local good roads advocates formed the Jefferson Memorial Road Association to promote a memorial road named after the former President. (For more information, see "A Maximum of Good Results: Martin Dodge and the Good Roads Trains" at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/highwayhistory/dodge/dodge.pdf>. A search of the article for Jefferson will get you to the right spot.)

The New York and Chicago Road Association was another early trail association. The association, organized on June 17, 1902, promoted construction of a continuous road between the two cities (actually, the eastern terminus was in Fort Lee, New Jersey).

However, the 1910s and early 1920s were the heyday of the named trails and their supporting associations. The associations chose a road, gave it a name to serve as a rallying point for tourists, who might deposit money in businesses along the way, and State and local officials, who might be tempted to improve the route. The associations collected dues from communities, individuals, businesses, and other supporters for use in promoting the route. Promotion included marking the trail, usually by painting the trail's symbol on barns, poles, trees, or any other object facing the road. The associations rarely attempted to pay for construction, which was beyond their resources and impractical since the roads were public property.

The Lincoln Highway was one of the reasons for the expansion of the named trails and the named trail associations. In September 1912, automotive entrepreneur Carl G. Fisher held a dinner in the Old Deutsches Haus in Indianapolis to ask industry leaders to join him in paying for a "coast-to-coast rock highway" from New York City to San Francisco. Fisher estimated the project would cost about \$10 million, with the automakers providing basic roadbuilding materials to local officials who would provide the labor and oversee construction. The highway could be finished in time to carry thousands of motorists to the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Diego and San Francisco. "Let's build it," he urged his colleagues, "before we're too old to enjoy it!" He soon christened his road the Lincoln Highway.

In July 1913, Fisher and his backers incorporated the Lincoln Highway Association and embarked on a route-finding trip to the West Coast with a publicity team in tow. They announced the route on September 14, 1913. Masterful publicity in 1913 brought the Lincoln Highway to the Nation's attention and kept it there throughout the named trail era. However, the association soon abandoned the idea that the automobile industry would pay for the Lincoln Highway. It was impractical. The \$10 million estimate was too low and even if all the funds were available, the highway could not have been built in time for the 1915 exposition.

Nevertheless, from 1913 to the late 1920s, the Lincoln Highway was the Nation's best known

highway. The Lincoln Highway Association was the most powerful of the named trail associations and was a major contributor to the cause of good roads, in part because its example provided the model for so many other named trails. Some of the major roads were:

- Atlantic Highway (Fort Kent, Maine, to Miami, Florida,)
- Dixie Highway (Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, to Miami),
- Jefferson Highway (Winnipeg, Canada, to New Orleans, Louisiana),
- Lee Highway (Washington, D.C., to San Diego, California, with extensions to New York City and San Francisco, California),
- Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine, Florida, to San Diego),
- Pacific Highway (Vancouver, Canada, to San Diego), and
- Yellowstone Trail (Boston, Massachusetts, to Seattle, Washington).

By the mid-1920s, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR, another FHWA ancestor) estimated that the Nation's interstate roads carried about 250 such names, many on overlapping routes. Motorists and mapmakers as well as Federal, State, and local officials, used these names. Sometimes, the designations were official (Iowa, for example, registered the named trails on its roads) while in other cases, everybody used the names even though they had no official status.

The Lincoln Highway was sufficiently important that in 1919, the U.S. Army agreed to send its first transcontinental motor convoy across country on the route. The convoy left Washington, D.C., traveled to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and turned west, following the Lincoln Highway to San Francisco. The convoy, despite using the best known road in the country, encountered miserable conditions, at times having to send scouts out to find the highway, and endured muddy roads, wheels stuck in sand, bridges too weak or narrow, and other deficiencies all interstate motorists of the day expected. The Rambler is certain that everyone reading this edition of Ask the Rambler knows that one participant in the convoy was named Dwight D. Eisenhower and that his two months on the road with the convoy played a part in his support for the Interstate System when he became President in 1953. (If not, see <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/03mar/05.cfm>.)

The Lincoln Highway Association would survive until the end of 1927. By then, its officials realized their work was done and they could move on to other business with pride in what they had accomplished. The association decided on one final publicity stunt. At 1:00 p.m. on September 1, 1928, teams of Boy Scouts placed approximately 3,000 concrete markers at sites along the route. The signs carried the Lincoln Highway insignia, a bronze medallion depicting President Lincoln ("This Highway Dedicated to Abraham Lincoln"), and a directional arrow.

(FHWA's Highway History Web site includes a short history of the Lincoln Highway at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/lincoln.cfm>.)

Okay, the Lincoln Highway was influential and well-known. But was it "first"?

The idea of a transcontinental highway was nothing new in September 1912 when Carl Fisher approached his industry associates. In 1895, General Roy Stone, who headed the U.S. Office of Road Inquiry (FHWA's original ancestor), proposed construction of the Great Road of America. It consisted of one road joining the East Coast States, one joining the three States of the West Coast, and a transcontinental road linking the other two roads from Washington to San Francisco. Others suggested similar ideas, none of which were adopted in an era when railroads were the most practical mode for long-distance surface transportation.

In the 20th century, long before Carl Fisher proposed the Lincoln Highway, individuals and groups had suggested construction of transcontinental roads. Virtually from the inception of auto clubs such as AAA, they promoted transcontinental roads. Members of Congress took up the idea as well, with many bills introduced to fund single transcontinental roads or networks of such roads. The Rambler will cite one example. On March 26, 1910, Representative Richmond P. Hobson of Alabama introduced a bill (H.R. 23591) to establish a commission to build national highways along the 35th parallel of north latitude and a route from Canada to Mexico along the 23rd meridian west from Washington. The commission would issue bonds that the government would buy to pay for construction.

Southern Good Roads magazine wrote, "The stupendous task blocked out in the measure suggests that the brain which conceived it has dipped very far into the future, indeed, farther, in fact, than most dreamers can see." The idea was certainly desirable, but the magazine predicted that "the bill will gather much dust in some pigeon hole of the committee on ways and means, to which it has been referred." It did. ["Bill for Two National Highways," *Southern Good Roads*, April 1910, page 10]

Since those earlier examples don't really match what the Lincoln Highway was, The Rambler proposes to define our term. The "first" has to be transcontinental and backed by a trail association that mapped it for motorists, arranged for signing, published promotional material, encouraged Federal, State, or local governments to build the road, and secured recognition of the name by mapmakers, the public, and officials. The question, then, is whether any road meeting this definition was proposed before the Lincoln Highway.

And the answer is yes.

On April 17 and 18, 1912, the National Old Trails Road Convention took place in the Commercial Club Rooms in Kansas City, Missouri. The association's goal was the National Old Trails Ocean-to-Ocean Road, a transcontinental road from Baltimore, Maryland, to Los Angeles, California, along such historic roads as the National Road, the Boonslick Road, and the Santa Fe Trail. The association formed chapters in the States the route passed through, collected dues, promoted construction of the road, printed maps and other literature advertising its virtues to motorists, and held annual conventions. The group's president, Judge J. M. Lowe of Kansas City, testified before Congress not only on the need for Federal involvement in the project but on the Federal role in road development. (The Rambler likes the following anecdote, which he

reports here even though it doesn't have anything to do with the subject: In spite of his interest in good roads, Judge Lowe advised a congressional committee in 1920 that, "I do not even own an automobile, and would not know what the dickens to do with it if I had one.")

On April 29 and 30, 1913, the association held its second annual convention, again in Kansas City. The convention adopted the following resolution:

That we recognize with sincere appreciation the great business movement of a great and rapidly expanding industry, in process of promotion by Carl G. Fisher, of Indianapolis, whereby the money is being rapidly raised with which to construct at least one transcontinental road of the highest type known to modern engineering ability. Not an exclusive "Automobile Road," but a great national free thoroughfare, for the accommodation of all sorts of transportation. We commend the enterprise, and endorse with heartiest approval, this effort as being the greatest business and philanthropic scheme ever conceived by the mind of men; and when consummated it should, and we have no doubt will be taken over by the Government and maintained as a National highway for all time to come.

The resolution reflected the hype Fisher generated even before he had incorporated the Lincoln Highway Association, conducted a route-finding tour, announced the route, and determined that the automobile industry would not be willing or able to pay for it.

In short, if a named trail association backing a transcontinental highway adopted a resolution during its second annual convention commending Carl Fisher's new proposal for a transcontinental highway, the idea can't possibly have been first.

The Rambler isn't claiming the National Old Trails Road, as it was better known, met the definition of "first." To that, The Rambler answers: Who knows? Advocates for other trails can battle it out. But The Rambler is saying that the Lincoln Highway wasn't first.

(For information on the early years of the National Old Trails Road, see the two-part history on this Web site: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/trails.cfm> and <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/not2.cfm>.)

ASK THE RAMBLER BONUS

Was the Lincoln Highway completed in 1916, 1923, 1925, or 1935?

The Rambler hates to be the bearer of double ill-tidings, but the claim that the Lincoln Highway was completed in any of those years, or any other, isn't correct. The Lincoln Highway was not paved from New York City to San Francisco when the Lincoln Highway Association closed its doors on December 31, 1927. But let's look at those dates to see if at least one of them makes even remote sense.

1916

The Lincoln Highway Association did not claim its route was completed in 1916. Instead, its 1916 Lincoln Highway motorist guide described a transcontinental trip on the Lincoln Highway as “something of a sporting proposition” that would take 20 to 30 days. In advising motorists on the extensive list of necessities for such a trip, the guide included this evocative tip: “Don’t wear new shoes.” The guide also advised that when approaching Fish Springs, Utah, motorists who became stuck in the mud should build a sagebrush fire. A certain Mr. Thomas, who could see the fire from 20 miles off, would come with a team of horses to pull the vehicle out of the mud.

In 1916, by the way, President Woodrow Wilson approved the Federal Aid Road Act that created the Federal-aid highway program of assistance to the State highway agencies for road improvement. Perhaps this legislation confused the misguided author into claiming the Lincoln Highway was completed in the same year.

1923

The Federal Highway Act of 1921 improved the Federal-aid highway program by restricting Federal-aid highway funds to a designated system of roads comprising no more than 7 percent of the roads in each State. Three-sevenths of each State’s total had to be “interstate in character” and the State highway agencies could spend as much as 60 percent of their Federal-aid funds on these roads. At the time, the country’s rural public roads totaled 2,859,575 miles. A 7-percent system, therefore, would be 200,170 miles long.

As FHWA’s Bicentennial history explained, working with the States to select the 7-percent system “was the largest and most important task ever assigned to” BPR up to that point. By October 1922, all but nine States had submitted tentative system maps. As States developed their proposals, BPR officials negotiated with neighboring States when their proposed State line crossings did not align. Regional conferences in the heavily populated States differed from those in the west “where population was scattered, road distances great, and financial resources very limited.” According to BPR’s annual report for Fiscal Year 1922:

The designation of a system of roads in such States adequate at once to serve local requirements and at the same time correlate satisfactorily with the roads of adjoining States demands very careful adjustments in order to keep the mileage, the resources, and the service value of the roads properly balanced and economically justified.

BPR faced many contentious State line disputes, but one of the most difficult was the Lincoln Highway Association’s fight with Utah officials over the route into Nevada. The association argued that Utah had committed to its alignment, which crossed the State line east of Ely, Nevada. However, now that only one “interstate in character” link between northern Utah and Nevada could be included in the 7-percent Federal-aid system, Utah backed the Victory Highway alignment north of the Lincoln Highway as the preferred route via Wendover to northern

California. Backers of the Victory Highway Association had named their trail following World War I to support a route that shared the Lincoln Highway's termini of New York City and San Francisco, but used a different routing, including much of the eastern National Old Trails Road.

The Lincoln Highway Association claimed that its alignment was superior because it provided an efficient route through Nevada to a point equidistant from northern or southern California while the Victory Highway served only northern California. For access to southern California, Utah officials preferred the alignment of the Arrowhead Trail (Salt Lake City through southwest Utah to Las Vegas, Nevada, and into Los Angeles via Barstow, San Bernardino, and Pasadena) because it kept Los Angeles-bound motorists, and their money, in the State longer than the Lincoln Highway alignment.

The Lincoln Highway Association asked the Secretary of Agriculture to overturn Utah's decision, but he concluded that he had authority under the 1921 Act to approve or disapprove only State proposals. He could not act on a proposal by a trail association. If Utah preferred the Victory Highway alignment and Nevada agreed, the Secretary had no choice but to approve the two States' decision.

Finally, the job was done, as the Bicentennial history explained:

The huge job of designating and approving all of the 48 State systems and correlating them across State lines was completed November 1, 1923, the work published by the Bureau of Public Roads in the form of a national map of the Federal-Aid Highway System. Because many States designated less than 7 percent of their total on the Federal-aid system, the roads shown on this map totaled only 168,881 miles, or 5.9 percent of all U.S. roads The Bureau of Public Roads estimated that for the country as a whole at least 90 percent of the population resided not more than 10 miles from a Federal-aid road, and in a few States, this figure was as high as 97 or 99 percent. The BPR estimated that at least 94 percent of the cities of 5,000 or more population were directly on the system. [*America's Highways 1776-1976: A History of the Federal-Aid Program*, Federal Highway Administration, 1976, pages 108-109]

Perhaps the authors who thought the Lincoln Highway was finished in 1923 thought that publication of a map of the Federal-aid system in November 1923 meant all the roads were completed. The Rambler doesn't like to be one of those annoying people who point out the obvious, but the Lincoln Highway's Utah/Nevada link was not on the map because it had not been included in the 7-percent system.

The Lincoln Highway did not have a satisfactory route across the State line until 1927. Having reluctantly conceded it would never win its battle with Utah, the association in its final active days switched its road to Utah's preferred alternative, a unique engineering accomplishment completed across the Great Salt Lake Desert west of Salt Lake City in the mid-1920s and known as the "Wendover Cutoff." The association's leaders were bitter about having to switch the

Lincoln Highway routing across the State line. They did not adopt the Victory Highway alignment across Nevada (later the route of U.S. 40 and then essentially the route of I-80), but left motorists to find their way south to the Lincoln Highway at Ely on a road that was barely passable at the time. From Ely, motorists followed the road across Nevada that became part of U.S. 50, known in recent years as “The Loneliest Road in America.”

1925

By the mid-1920's, the country's Federal and State highway officials concluded that allowing private groups to designate and name interstate roads was impractical. By then, the Federal-aid highway program was functioning at a high level; road officials at the time considered the 1920's the Golden Age of road building. It was time for these officials to take the lead in deciding which roads were best for interstate motorists. Working together, they conceived the U.S. numbered highway system and planned it to ensure the multi-State named trails would be broken up among several numbers. The idea was to help the named trail associations realize their best days were behind them.

E. W. James, the BPR official who did as much as anyone to create the U.S. numbered highway system, wrote years later about the thinking at the time:

The scores of named routes, roads and trails must be eliminated. Such a method of designating so large a system of roads on a fairly established pattern was not feasible. It was too cumbersome, it had a bad background of unintelligent but kindly, serious and friendly efforts by hundreds, maybe thousands of good road advocates and effective road boosters. In opposing such a group we were pushing aside some of the biggest and best support we had for the big road plan. The good would have to go with the bad. Organizations like the Lincoln Highway, the Dixie Highway, the Old Spanish Trail Associations which were sound agencies could not be reserved while three or four score “skip-by-night” agencies were to be ignored and washed out.

In 1925, the Secretary of Agriculture convened the Joint Board on Interstate Highways, consisting mainly of State highway officials and three BPR officials, to find a better way to select and mark interstate highways. The Joint Board conceived the U.S. numbered highway system, held regional meetings to select the roads that would be included, created uniform signs, and recommended the plan to the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO). AASHO represented the State highway agencies that owned and operated the roads.

James knew the plan would be controversial, especially among named trail association officials who would recognize that their survival was threatened. Therefore, he took several steps that he “hoped would take the whole job off the slate at once.” One of those steps involved the Lincoln Highway Association:

Having assisted the Lincoln Highway Association in the First World War, I next went

to Detroit to their headquarters and laid my scheme before them, very frankly telling them that it would mean the end of the Lincoln Highway Association, the Dixie, and all others. They understood it all; said they were for a big plan for roads across the U.S.; would be with my scheme if I would give the Lincoln Highway recognition so far as possible in the No. 30. I agreed to do all I could to put it across, and so had their support toward washing out all the named routes. They were the strongest of all the Associations and with them with us, who could be against us?

AASHO approved the U.S. numbered highways on November 11, 1926. State highway officials who had helped create the plan they had approved through AASHO ballot put the plan into effect quickly by installing the new road signs they had approved as part of the scheme.

Although James may have secured the Lincoln Highway Association's private understanding and support, its officials were unfavorable in public to the breakup of the Lincoln Highway, along with all the long-distance routes, among several numbers. Henry B. Joy, president of the Packard Motor Car Company and a founder and sometime-president of the Lincoln Highway Association, lamented the change:

The Lincoln Highway, a memorial to the martyred Lincoln, now known by the grace of God and the authority of the Government of the United States as Federal Route 1, Federal Route 30, Federal Route 30N, Federal Route 30S, Federal Route 530, Federal Route 40 and Federal Route 50.

As Joy's recitation shows, a large part of the Lincoln Highway became U.S. 30 (from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to about Granger, Wyoming), but the eastern and western ends carried different numbers.

The named trail associations soon lost their reason for existence. As noted, the Lincoln Highway Association ended operations on December 31, 1927. The National Old Trail Road Association remained in operation long after that, with another Missouri judge as its very active president. His name was Harry S. Truman, the future President of the United States.

(If you can't get enough about the history of the U.S. numbered highway system, The Rambler recommends "From Names to Numbers" at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/numbers.cfm>. James's recollection of events will be found at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/ewjames.cfm>.)

1935

Perhaps the fact that U.S. 30 was the first paved transcontinental highway explains why some writers think the Lincoln Highway was the first paved transcontinental highway. As noted, however, U.S. 30 and the Lincoln Highway were not the same. The termini of U.S. 30 were

Atlantic City, New Jersey, and Astoria, Oregon. The last link in the road from Atlantic City-to-Astoria was a 30-mile section near North Platte, Nebraska. It opened on November 5, 1935. President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a telegram to be read during the opening ceremony:

Completion of the last link of pavement on United States Route Thirty is an event of such importance that I am happy to send my congratulations. The perilous trail of the pioneers is at last transformed, by joint efforts of the Federal and State Governments, into a coast to coast highway. With full appreciation of the manifold benefits of this modern avenue of communication, it is especially gratifying to recall that its construction has been a part of the great program of highway building that has given needed employment in recent years to hundreds of thousands of our citizens.

Completion of a paved road from Atlantic City to Astoria does not mean a paved road was completed on a route that had lost its identity from New York City to San Francisco.

Conclusion

The Rambler knows that authors can easily find misinformation to cite in a footnote as the source of their own errors. The Rambler hopes that this edition of Ask the Rambler will end these specific mistakes.

But he's not holding his breath.