

Highways- Part 2: North Carolina's Highway System Takes Shape ^[1]

Highways

by David Southern, 2006

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See also: [Blue Ridge Parkway](#) ^[2]; [Good Roads Campaign](#) ^[3]; [Highway Commission](#) ^[4]; [Powell Bill](#) ^[5]; [Roads](#) ^[6].

[Highways- Part 1: Introduction](#) ^[7]

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Part 2: North Carolina's Highway System Takes Shape



Highways, ca. 1924. Map by Mark Anderson Moore, courtesy North Carolina Office of Archives and History,

Raleigh. (Click to view map.) ^[10]In the early nineteenth century, visionary state leader and jurist [Archibald D. Murphey](#) ^[11] preached a dual vision of state-supported education and infrastructure to elevate North Carolina from its chronic poverty. Some who followed Murphey promoted a system of linked and branching state-owned, east-west railroads designed to connect inland markets with ports. The corridor from Morehead City to [Asheville](#) ^[12] became the path of the first unified "motor-road" in North Carolina. Connected and improved during the administration of [Governor Locke Craig](#) ^[13] (1913-17), it was called at first the "Central Highway," sometimes the "Main Street of North Carolina," later "N.C. 10" or "Old No. 10," and finally, with the advent of a [Federal Highway System](#) ^[14], "U.S. 70."

In 1921 the [General Assembly](#) ^[15] passed a \$50 million bond issue to be paid with a raised license fee and a one-cent-per-gallon tax on gasoline. This bond endowed serious civil engineering and directly financed the pavement of 5,500 miles of roads connecting [county seats](#) ^[16]. In the process many dangerous railroad grade crossings were eliminated, many curves were straightened, and gradients decreased with cuts and fills to an optimal 4 percent. Moreover, the erection of new concrete bridges shortened mileage significantly (the bridge over the [Roanoke River](#) ^[17] cut the distance from Windsor to Williamston from 140 to 17 miles). North Carolina's highway program of the 1920s proved such a conspicuous success that in 1929 Louisiana governor Huey "Kingfish" Long ^[18] hired away chief engineer Leslie R. Ames and 21 staff members to repeat the miracle in his state.

By the Highway Act of 1921, the state government in [Raleigh](#) ^[19] officially became responsible for the maintenance of North Carolina's highways to "relieve the counties and cities and towns of the state of this burden." In 1931, under the pressure of widespread economic failure of county governments during the [Great Depression](#) ^[20], the state added to its purview the maintenance of practically all roads in North Carolina. In the early 1920s the principal through highways were N.C. 10, N.C. 15 (now U.S. 21, intertwined with Interstate 77 almost border to border), N.C. 20 (the old [Wilmington](#) ^[21]-[Charlotte](#) ^[22]-[Asheville](#) ^[12] Highway, now U.S. 74), and N.C. 75 (today, parts of U.S. 15 and 64 via Oxford, [Durham](#) ^[23], Chapel Hill, Pittsboro, Siler City, and Lexington). Also crossing the state were the Capitol-to-Capitol Highway (soon to become U.S. 1 from Calais, Maine, via Washington, D.C., to Key West, Fla.) and the unfinished Bankhead Highway emanating from Washington, D.C., and marked with yellow-and-white-striped telephone poles (the South's answer to the [Lincoln Highway](#) ^[24]).

Keep reading >> [Highways- Part 3: The Establishment of Federal Highways and the Interstate System](#) ^[8] ➡ ^[8]

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Additional Resources:

U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration:
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