

A Brief History of West Virginia's State Route System

The 1917 West Virginia Legislature replaced the existing State Road Bureau, a four-member body created by the Legislature in 1913, with the two-member State Road Commission (SRC). The purpose of the SRC was "to provide a complete system of laws governing the construction and maintenance of public roads and ways, the traffic thereon, to classify such roads and provide for a connecting system of highways throughout the State, to provide for the cooperation of the State and Federal Governments in raising and expending such revenues."

Among its other duties, the SRC was required to furnish information for the location, construction, and maintenance of Class A roads, which were, in the statewide system of roads, the inter-county or main county roads, and all receiving State aid--a total of more than 4,000 miles. All other public roads were known as Class B roads. No county could have more than two Class A roads, which were selected by the county courts, and approved by the SRC, if they complied with the provisions of the laws. Usually, these roads extended border to border within a county, from west to east and from south to north. The Class A designation referred to location only and in no way to improvements.

The Good Roads Amendment of 1920, passed by popular vote on November 2 of that year, made provisions for a system of state roads and highways connecting at least the various county seats of the State and with important roads of adjoining states. The following year, the State road system was established, under the control and supervision of the SRC, which now was composed of three members. In this new system, all public roads were known as either State Roads or County-District Roads. Although the SRC had no control over the County-District Roads, it was required to furnish county courts with information relative to the construction, repair, alteration, and maintenance of roads, highways, bridges, and streets, when requested.

No mileage limitation was placed on the State Road System, which was designated by the SRC and included as much as was necessary or advisable of the old Class A system that it superseded. The SRC was given direct and complete authority over the roads which it was authorized to designate as parts of the State system. However, any road designated as a State route remained a County-District road, under the control of the county court, until responsibility for construction or maintenance was assumed by the SRC, at which time it became a State road. The SRC was permitted by law to acquire any part of a State route for construction, whenever funds were available, but no portion that had been improved by a county could be acquired for maintenance until improvements were in accordance with State standards. Construction on State routes by the county was required to be performed under the supervision of the SRC. Each county was required to furnish the rights-of-way for State roads within its boundaries. No road within any incorporated town or city with a population of more than 2,500 persons could become a part of the State system, with the exception of the National Road in the City of Wheeling.

In 1921, Congress directed each state to recommend for adoption by the federal government a connected road system on which federal aid might be given. The

Federal Aid (FA) Highway System for each state was limited to seven percent of the total public road mileage in that state. Of this seven percent, three sevenths could be classified as primary or interstate highways, and the other four sevenths as secondary or inter-county highways. The FA Primary and Secondary systems approved for West Virginia were approximately 911 and 1,005 miles, respectively. Although established during the same time frame, the FA systems were designated independently of the State Road System, although a number of State Road miles were included within the FA systems and were eligible to receive federal financial assistance.

The designation of the State Road System was completed in 1922. The routes were numbered throughout the State using the following system: odd numbers were assigned to routes that followed an west/east path, while even-numbered routes were to be south/north. The first sequentially numbered routes established by the SRC (Nos. 1 through 4) were intended to be the main through highways across the state. The SRC believed that, while the local roads required by the road law to be built in each county were of importance in enabling people to pursue their daily occupations with greater convenience and profit, considerable attention also should be given to through routes and, as a result, endeavored to first complete these four main routes by making the construction of county seat connections coincide to the degree possible with the construction of the main routes, and by filling gaps between county seat connections.

On roads maintained by the State, route numbers were marked on telephone and telegraph poles along the road. The original State route marker, created in 1922, consisted of two red bands six inches wide separated by a space of twelve inches painted white, upon which the number of the route was stenciled in figures six inches high. The only exception to this system was the National Pike through Ohio County (originally State Route No. 29--now US 40), which had the same form of marker but colors of red, white and blue, to conform to the marking of this route in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

During the fall of 1925, the Joint Board on Interstate Highways, previously appointed in March by the US Secretary of Agriculture, presented its system of interstate routes (now known as the US Numbered Highway System) and a uniform highway sign to be used on this system. The original US Numbered Routes in West Virginia were US 11, US 19 (which replaced State Route No. 4), US 21, US 40, US 50 (which replaced State Route No. 1, the Northwestern Turnpike), and US 60 (which replaced a large portion of State Route No. 3, the Midland Trail).

The establishment of the US Numbered Highway System resulted in a new State route marker in 1926. This sign was a metal rectangle, 10 x 12 inches, with the letters "W. Va." followed by the route number, with black letters and figures on white. On the United States Highways, the old State route numbers were dropped and the United States Highway numbers erected on metal shield markers. This shield bore the letters "W. Va." at the top, with "U.S." and the route number below, and black letters and figures on white.

A law enacted by the Legislature on May 16, 1933, brought under direct State control every public road in West Virginia. Streets and bridges within

municipalities, forming connecting parts of primary roads, also were placed under State jurisdiction, with the exception of traffic regulation. The highways of the former State Road System (4,417 miles) were designated as Primary State highways. On July 1, 1933, the State assumed responsibility for the construction and maintenance of some 31,000 miles of roads previously under the jurisdiction of the 55 counties; these roads were designated as the Secondary State highway system. The law also replaced the three-man State Road Commission with one Commissioner and an advisory State Road Commission of four members.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 authorized designation of a 40,390-mile "National System of Interstate Highways." This system was to be selected by joint action of the state highway departments and would connect, as directly as practicable, the principal metropolitan areas, cities, and industrial centers, would serve national defense, and would connect at suitable border points with routes of continental importance in Canada and Mexico. Wherever possible, these interregional highways would follow existing roads, thereby preserving the investment in earlier stages of improvement.

The Public Roads Administration announced the designation of the more than 37,680 miles of interstate highways in August 1947. After several years of slowly progressing construction, the 41,000-mile National System of Interstate and Defense Highways (now known as the Eisenhower Interstate System) was designated with the enactment of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. In some cases, the alignment of Interstate routes was in close proximity to, or concurrent with, existing US Numbered Routes. As a result, some US Numbered Routes now follow existing Interstate routes for short distances, while other US Routes were eliminated or reclassified as State Routes. In the case of US 21, however, the reclassification of the route was more dramatic, since the remaining segments of what was US 21 are now classified as County Routes. This reclassification was necessitated by the fact that I-77 was completed and serves the traffic previously served by US 21.

In the late 1940s/early 1950s, the State Route marker was altered slightly by removing the "W. Va." from the top of the marker. As a result, the marker now is a white rectangle with black border, with the State Route number in black within the rectangle. During the same time period, the US Numbered Route marker was altered in the same manner--the state abbreviation was removed from the top of the sign.

The 1967 WV Legislature enacted legislation whereby the previous Primary and Secondary systems were replaced with the Expressway, Trunkline, Feeder (X-T-F) system, which was closely equivalent in total mileage to the Primary system, and the State Local Service (SLS) system, which was closely equivalent in total mileage to the Secondary system. The intent of the WV Department (now Division) of Highways was to assign a State Route designation to all routes within the X-T-F system, with the exception of existing Interstate and US Numbered Routes, which would retain their current designation. With the exception of some existing Feeder routes carrying County Route designations, this route-numbering scheme has been implemented.