

Road Facts

A West Virginia Local Technical Assistance Program Resource

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A Brief History of West Virginia's Roads



The first overland routes in what is now the State of West Virginia evolved from Indian and game trails, forming an extensive system of turnpikes prior to the Civil War. In the late 19th Century, roadway construction slowed, leading to the deterioration of established routes. Bicyclists and farmers pushed for road repair in the 1890s, advocating for better roads to transport their produce to market. At this time, counties were responsible for road construction, and their focus was on building roads within their respective county to their own county seat.

The dawning of the automobile era brought about a statewide *Good Roads Movement*, which sought to “help pull West Virginia out of the mud.” However, winding roadways, with tight curves, long driving times, and numerous accidents were still very much a challenge to navigate; few travelers ventured beyond their own locality.

The State Road Commission, now known as the West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH), was established in 1917 to build, maintain, and classify public roads, aiming to establish a statewide system of connecting highways.

In 1933, West Virginia enacted legislation that brought every public road in West Virginia under direct state control. This law designated more than 4,400 miles of roads as primary state highways and reclassified some 31,000 miles of county roads as secondary state highways.

Next came the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, which authorized designation of a “National System of Interstate Highways” that would connect principal metropolitan areas and industrial centers and serve the national defense. In 1947, the legislature appropriated funds for the West Virginia Turnpike, the state’s modern, long-distance, multi-lane “superhighway.” Completion of the 88-mile turnpike from Princeton to Charleston came in 1954 at a cost of \$133 million, funded through the sale of bonds paid from tolls.

The West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH) was established in 1969 and is responsible for planning, engineering, rights-of-way acquisition, construction, reconstruction, traffic regulation and maintenance of more than 35,000 miles of state roads. West Virginia owns a vast majority of the roadways within the State and does not split roadway jurisdiction with a county or a township system. This equates to 89% of the public roads being the responsibility of the WVDOH with the remaining 11% being owned by a municipality, a federal agency, or the West Virginia Parkways Authority.

Sources

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WVDOH Website Pages:

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