



Tennessee's interstat

A year ago I wrote a column about urban renewal, a federal government project that changed life in Tennessee. Now I'd like to talk about the other big federal project from that same era: the interstate highway system.

The U.S. government, under the leadership of President Dwight Eisenhower, first started funding the national interstate system in 1956. The idea was to make it easier to get from one part of the country to another, especially in case of a national military emergency. Designed for speed and with limited access, American interstates were modeled after a German superhighway called the autobahn. Under the original American program, taxes raised by the federal government would pay for 90 percent of the cost of the interstate highway system.

U.S. Sen. Albert Gore Sr. of Tennessee was one of the main congressional sponsors of the interstate plan. (He is also the late father of former Vice President Al Gore Jr.) Largely because of this, interstates leading into Tennessee are marked the "Albert Gore, Sr. Memorial Highway."

It took a long time for the interstates to be built. It was, after all, the largest government purchase of land in state history. Bridges had to be built and new routes found and cleared through mountainous regions such as the Cumberland Plateau. The first stretches of interstate highway through Tennessee were opened in 1958, with most of Interstate 40 and I-65 through the state completed during the 1960s. The new superhighways weren't opened all at once but



one stretch at a time; for many years a driver had to get an updated road map to find out which stretches of new, shiny interstate were open.

Today there are more than 1,100 miles of interstate highway in Tennessee. These highways have dramatically shrunk the time needed to travel from one part of the state to another. Prior to the creation of I-40, for instance, it might have taken 10 hours to drive from Nashville to Knoxville through towns such as Lebanon, Sparta, Crossville, Rockwood and Kingston. Now, traffic permitting, it only takes three.

Here are a couple of navigation tips about using interstates: First of all, east-west routes have even numbers (I-40 and I-26, for instance), and north-south routes have odd numbers (such as I-75 and I-65). Secondly, small signs on the side of Tennessee's interstates tell you exactly how many miles you are from that spot to the western or southern Tennessee state lines. After you cross the Mississippi River, heading east into Memphis on Interstate 40, you see a sign that says "1." At the other end of the state, right before you cross into North Carolina, you see the sign for mile marker 455.

Today the interstates make it possible to live in one county and work in another and have turned once-small towns such as Franklin, Farragut and Bartlett into bedroom suburbs for Nashville, Knoxville and Memphis, respectively. The freeways also make it possible to drive from one part of the state to another simply to watch a sporting event. Before the advent of interstate superhighways, it is hard to imagine 100,000 people going to a football game in Knoxville. Now, with I-40 and I-75 in place, this happens routinely, about half a dozen times every fall.

Interstates have also made travel by car infinitely safer than it used to be. The chances of getting killed or hurt on the road are far

Large tracts of rough and rugged terrain had to be cleared in order to bring the interstate highway system into and through Tennessee.



Tennessee History for Kids

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Highways play role in history



Above, a roadside sign details the financing of the interstate highway system — 90 percent from the federal government and the remaining 10 percent from the state. At left, interstate travel has become a part of everyday life, greatly reducing travel time unless traffic is gridlocked. Below, one of the great challenges faced with building the interstates was construction of new bridges.

less now than they were, say in the 1950s, partly because the roads are wider, safer and better designed.

Most people view the interstates as positive changes. But interstates have affected the landscape in more ways than people realize. Commercial activity in towns like Cookeville, Manchester and Jackson has completely shifted from the town center to the nearest interstate exit. If you drive to these town squares today, you can see definite signs that there used to be a lot more happening then than there is now.

Interstate construction has also proven to be very controversial in Tennessee's cities. To this day, some members of the African-American community in Nashville say that the route chosen by I-40 just west of town split black Nashville in half. And in Memphis, residents of the Overton Park area organized against the construction of I-40 through their part of town in the 1960s. Eventually this case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which, in the case of *Citizens to Preserve Overton Park v. Volpe*, ruled in favor of the group fighting I-40. This is why the interstate loops around Memphis rather than going right through it.

Today it is hard to imagine life without interstates. But if you drive through Tennessee along an interstate, you don't really experience the state in the same way as if you travel the old two-lane highways. You don't see the small roadside motels or the courthouses or the roadside picnic stands that impressed people in the 1940s. So the next time you are traveling through the state, you might want to travel along one of the old two-lane highways such as Highway 70, 41 or 11. You see things that way that you don't see on the Eisenhower Interstate System. ☺

