History of Iowa’s Highways

Are historic highways for more than just travel?

Before automobiles began to make a significant impact on Iowa roads around 1910, railroads were the way that people traveled from one town to another. Horse-drawn buggies and wagons moved residents from farm to town and for local travel. Cars, however, enabled Iowans to travel long distances to locations away from train depots and on their own schedule. They brought a new burst of freedom, and Iowans, especially farm families, were among the first to take advantage of the opportunity.

When most travel was local, maintenance of the roads was a local issue. Farmers graded and hauled gravel in their own neighborhoods while the county built bridges along main-traveled routes. When the demand for town-to-town travel and beyond increased with the advent of cars, drivers demanded better roads than the former system could supply. Responsibility for highways connecting major cities fell to the state and eventually even to the federal government. Two of the earliest and most famous highways crossed in central Iowa, providing Iowa drivers access to both coasts and the Gulf of Mexico.

Lincoln and Jefferson Highways

The Lincoln Highway was the creation of a private association that mapped a transcontinental route from New York City to San Francisco. State organizations along the way picked out their own routes as cities competed to be on this major thoroughfare. In Iowa, it ran from Clinton on the Mississippi River to Council Bluffs. Local authorities assumed responsibility for maintaining the roadway and sometimes even paving it. Shortly after the end of World War I, Dwight D. Eisenhower was a young veteran officer with an army tour displaying tanks and other armaments to promote the Lincoln Highway. Military officials cited the need for routes that could quickly transport troops in case of another conflict. Towns along the route fed and hosted the traveling troops and vigorously promoted the effort. Greene County became the first in Iowa to pave the Lincoln Highway from border to border.

In 1915, the multi-state Jefferson Highway Association was created, modeled on the experience of the Lincoln Highway. Organizers of this north-south route designated Winnipeg, Manitoba, as the northern terminus and New Orleans as its southern stopping point. The highway entered Iowa at Northwood along the Minnesota border and exited at Lamoni just above the Missouri line. All along the way, communities, businesses, car clubs and other driving enthusiasts cooperated to maintain, mark and promote the route as a major American thoroughfare.

With the absence of detailed maps or a common system of signage, promoters along the way designated the route by painting markers on telephone poles and fence posts along the way. On the Lincoln Highway, there were occasional statues of Lincoln, as well as metal symbols. The Jefferson Highway adopted a red-white-and-blue logo of a big “JH.”

Boost to Local Economy

Location on a national highway boosted the economies and visibility of towns along the route. Filling stations, cafes, motels and camp sites, and tourist attractions sprang up to service travelers. The highways usually ran through the middle of the town to the delight of hometown merchants. However, due to increased traffic, long-haul trucks, and safety concerns, the Iowa Highway Commission in the 1950s began plans to by-pass the Lincoln Highway around towns to speed travel. The towns resisted strongly, but the routes were changed. With the increased traffic and need for ever-wider roadways, the federal and state government took over road maintenance and adopted a numbering system to synchronize markers from state to state. The Lincoln Highway became U.S. Highway 30. The Jefferson Highway was originally Iowa Highway 1 but later designated as U.S. Highway 65.

Local historical groups have recognized the significance of these early highways and the romance of the automobile. They have formed highway associations to restore the original markers (not replacing modern signage) and preserving some of the buildings that once served early drivers. Some gas stations are now museums, and local motel cabins attract visitors trying to reconnect with the excitement of cross-country travel.
Supporting Questions

How have highways like the Lincoln Highway (Highway 30), Jefferson Highway (Highway 65 and 69) and Interstate 80 contributed to Iowa’s rich history?

- Excerpts from “A Picture of Progress on the Lincoln Way,” 1920 (Document)
- Iowa Road Map with the Original Route of the Lincoln Highway, 1994 (Map)
- Excerpts from “The Lincoln Highway,” 1995 (Document)
- “Brief History of the Lincoln Highway,” 2019 (Document)
- History of the Jefferson Highway from Iowa DOT, Date Unknown (Document)

In what ways have Iowa’s highways impacted Iowa socially and economically?

- “The Perfect Spot: Iowa 80’s Journey from Iowa Cornfield to the World’s Biggest Truckstop,” 2004 (Document)
- Youngville Cafe on Lincoln Highway Added to National Register of Historic Places, 2007 (Document)
- “Iowa All Over: Preston’s Station in Belle Plaine still a draw for passing drivers,” June 21, 2015 (Document)

In what ways have Iowa’s highways impacted Iowa socially and economically?

- Application to Register Jefferson Highway's Route, May 6, 1916 (Document)
- “Lincoln Highway Heritage Byway - Iowa,” November 26, 2014 (Video)

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

Official Map of the Lincoln Highway
This website is an interactive map of the Lincoln Highway. The user can track different generations of the route that travels from New York City to San Francisco.

Iowa Lincoln Highway Association: Counties
This website contains material and research from the Iowa Lincoln Highway Association. The user can search by county to pull information about the route and influence of the Lincoln Highway on that particular Iowa county.

“Ike’s Interstates at 50: Anniversary of the Highway System Recalls Eisenhower’s Role as Catalyst”
This article written by David A. Pfeiffer was featured in Prologue Magazine and looks at the influence President Dwight D. Eisenhower had on the development of interstate travel in the United States.

Reed/Niland “One-Stop” Corner in Colo, Iowa
This website is dedicated to the history and restoration of the Reed/Niland corner stop that was at the intersection of the Jefferson and Lincoln highways. The stop is located in Colo, Iowa, just East of Ames, and still includes Niland’s Café and Colo Motel.
Excerpt from “A Picture of Progress on the Lincoln Way,” 1920

Description
This text was created by the Lincoln Highway Association, and it outlines the progress in creating the Lincoln Highway. The section on Iowa details the plans for paving the highway and how this debate impacted political and economic interests in the state.

Transcript of Excerpt from “A Picture of Progress on the Lincoln Way”

Source-Dependent Questions
- What led to the decision for paving the Lincoln Highway through Iowa? How did this decision impact the political race for governor in 1916?
- How was Iowa unique compared to other Lincoln Highway states? Why was this an important factor in improving the highway?
- How quickly did the work progress during 1919? What were the plans for 1920?
Iowa Road Map with the Original Route of the Lincoln Highway, 1994

Description
This is an Iowa road map from 1994, and it shows the original route of the Lincoln Highway in red.

Source-Dependent Questions
- Look closely at the historical route (in red) of the Lincoln Highway. You may notice that in some areas (for example, near Cedar Rapids) are different than the more recent route. Why do you think the route was altered compared to the more recent version of Highway 30?
- Compare this to a current road map of Iowa. What do you specifically notice about the historic route that is different than today's highway? What towns are now bypassed by the new Highway 30 route?
- Connecting to the text, how do you think the historical route influenced small town Iowa life? Can you infer how the more modern route could have affected the bypassed smaller towns?
Excerpts from “The Lincoln Highway,” 1995

Description
The excerpts selected from this book, “The Lincoln Highway,” focus on Alice Ramsey’s journey across America. The document chronicles some of her travels along the Lincoln Highway.

Transcript of Excerpts from “The Lincoln Highway”

Source-Dependent Questions
- After reading the first quote from Alice Ramsey as she crossed the Mississippi into Iowa, what do you predict her journey will be like as she continues through Iowa along the Lincoln Highway?
- Reading through the excerpts from each county, describe the travels of Alice Ramsey. How did each county offer similar and different stories?
- How is the story of Belle Plaine, Iowa, an example of how this highway impacted the culture and people of the town?
“Brief History of the Lincoln Highway,” 2019

Description
This document is a page from the Iowa Lincoln Highway Association website. The material details a brief history of the creation and development of the Lincoln Highway.

Transcript of the “Brief History of the Lincoln Highway”

Source-Dependent Questions
- What was the original purpose of building the highway?
- What was the “dream” of the original designers of the highway? Did the final outcome meet the expectations or plans of the original designers?
- Describe the experiences of a traveler on this highway.
- What was the role of the Lincoln Highway Association early in the highway’s history, and how did that role evolve over time?

Citation Information
History of the Jefferson Highway from Iowa DOT, Date Unknown

Description
A document is a webpage from the Iowa Department of Transportation. It describes the creation and development of the Jefferson Highway.

Transcript of the History of the Jefferson Highway

Source-Dependent Questions
- What was the original purpose for creating what later became the Jefferson Highway?
- Describe the factors and decisions that were made in designing the location for the highway. What complications were created as a result of some of these factors? How were they resolved?
- What transportation innovations were created as a result of building the Jefferson Highway?
- How did the Jefferson Highway impact the history of Iowa and its communities?
- Compare what you know now about the Jefferson Highway with the previous documents about the Lincoln Highway. Which do you believe had the greatest impact on Iowa (and the United States)? Support your answer with textual evidence.

Citation Information
“Historic Auto Trails: History of the Interstate Trail, Jefferson Highway and Jefferson Association,” Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT), Date Unknown. Courtesy of Iowa DOT
"The Perfect Spot: Iowa 80’s Journey from Iowa Cornfield to the World’s Biggest Truckstop,” 2004

Description
This book provides a brief history on the Iowa 80 Truckstop, which is the largest truck stop along Interstate 80. The selected text focuses mainly on the social and economic impact of the stop.

Transcript of “The Perfect Spot: Iowa 80’s Journey from Iowa Cornfield to the World’s Biggest Truckstop”

Source-Dependent Questions
- How does the Iowa 80 Truckstop provide for the needs of travelers along Interstate 80? In turn, how does this impact the economic activity?
- How would you describe Iowans’ response to the winter storm of 1978 at the Iowa 80 Truckstop?
- How does Interstate 80 contribute to the economic success of the Iowa 80 Truckstop and all of its businesses?

Do you think it would be as successful if the highway didn't exist? Support your answer with information from this text.

Citation Information
Youngville Cafe on Lincoln Highway Added to National Register of Historic Places, 2007

Description
The Youngville Cafe was a one-stop roadside business on the Lincoln Highway. It was in operation from the 1930's to 1967. After going through restoration, it is now part of the National Register of Historic Places.

Transcript of Iowa Heritage Illustrated Excerpt about Youngville Cafe

Source-Dependent Questions
• Known as a “one-stop roadside business,” what did the Youngville Cafe offer to travelers when in opened in the 1930's?
• What is significant about the source mentioning that it is a new opportunity for female business owners?
“Iowa All Over: Preston’s Station in Belle Plaine still a draw for passing drivers,” June 21, 2015

Description
This is an article from The Cedar Rapids Gazette about Preston’s Gas Station in Belle Plaine, Iowa. Preston’s started operations during the peak years of the Lincoln Highway. Since closing, it has became world famous for its uniqueness and history. The article details the process of restoring the station as a historic landmark.

Transcript of “Iowa All Over...” Newspaper Article

Source-Dependent Questions
• What changes occurred that made it less likely for travelers to stop at gas stations like this one?
• How might technological advancements like global positioning systems and the internet change the way people travel, as implied in the article?

Citation Information
Application to Register Jefferson Highway’s Route, May 6, 1916

Description
This is the application for registration of highway routes for the Jefferson Highway submitted May 6, 1916.

Transcript of the Application to Register Jefferson Highway’s Route

Source-Dependent Questions
• What is the purpose for submitting this application?
• What were some of the other names for the Jefferson Highway that were listed by the writer of the application?
• Why do you think Des Moines is listed as the principal place of business?

Citation Information
“Registration of Highway Routes - Application,” Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT), 6 May 1916. Courtesy of Iowa DOT

Description
This is an official road guide that describes various points along the Lincoln Highway, and includes several advertisements for specific stops along the highway. This was used to describe the route through Iowa.

Transcript of “The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway”

Source-Dependent Questions
• What were some of the key phrases used to describe what a tourist would see along this famous highway?
• What was the significance of Colo, Iowa, to this highway and other highways mentioned in other materials within this text set?
• How do the maps in this document help to preserve the history of the Lincoln Highway?


Description
This is an excerpt from a document that included the original mapped route of the Lincoln Highway. It also includes information about the different significant stops, photos and advertisements from the early years of the highway.

Transcript of Excerpts from “The Lincoln Highway Iowa Map Pack: A Great Iowa Tour”

Source-Dependent Questions
- What do the historic photos and advertisements from this document tell you about the history of the Lincoln Highway, as well as the culture and people of that time period in Iowa?
- Read the insert about Tama, Iowa, from 1924 on pg. 16. Based on what you have learned from other documents, why would this advertisement have attracted people to stop along the Lincoln Highway?
- How does the map on pg. 15 provide the reader some history about the highway as it went through Benton County, Iowa?
“Lincoln Highway Heritage Byway - Iowa,” November 26, 2014

Description
This video was produced by Prairie Rivers of Iowa, and it focuses on the history of the Lincoln Highway/Byway. The video highlights facts about the highway from its creation to today, and it also features photos from throughout the years to show the rich history of the highway.

Source-Dependent Questions
- As you watch the video, what do you notice about the various pictures of the highway, and the changes in the highway from the past to the present?
- What facts do you read about the highway do you would find valuable or important to recognize and know?
- How does this video demonstrate the preservation of the rich history of the highway, and the effort to educate others about this historical highway?

Citation Information