

The 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act: The Turning Point That Reshaped America

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Process Paper

When choosing our topic, we wanted to consider subjects that we hadn't learned about extensively in school. We also considered the interests of all our group members. After deliberation, we decided we all had an interest in transportation history. The Erie Canal, the steam engine, railroads, and automotive infrastructure were all under consideration. With our interest in transportation in mind, we decided to investigate a specific aspect of automotive infrastructure – the United States Interstate Highway System. We then narrowed that down to one specific turning point: The 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act.

We began our research by gaining background information on our topic, using mostly secondary sources at first. We then visited local libraries and began discovering more credible online databases. By far, our most helpful database was the online archives at the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). There we found primary source audio archives, a large collection of highway and automobile-related statistics that allowed us create our student-composed graphs, and dozens of detailed articles about our topic, many of which included primary source quotations and documents. Richard Weingroff, the information liaison at the FHWA and one of our interviewees, wrote many of these articles. Our continuous email contact with him following our telephone interview proved valuable – he even sent us research materials through the mail! We also conducted interviews with authors of two of our most useful books: Tom Lewis, author of *Divided Highways*, and Earl Swift, author of *The Big Roads*. Our last interview was with a professor of economics at Brown University, Nathaniel Baum-Snow, who has done extensive research on the economic and social effects of highways in the U.S. We also

used the Eisenhower Presidential Library Archive, which contains many primary source documents. With these multiple databases and the help from the three historians and one economist that we interviewed, we were constantly led from source to source.

Choosing a website was the easiest decision, as all of our members have a passion with computers. Also, since our group has the maximum number of five people, a website is very efficient. A website also allow us to be able to show our topic using a variety of interactive media: documents, graphs, videos, and images to underline and demonstrate our claims. Our own interactive, student-composed graphs, we believe, are among the most effective elements of our website, allowing us to present information in a unique and creative way that makes the most sense to viewers.

Our topic relates to this year's theme because the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act led to substantial economic and social turning points in the U.S. The concept of "federal-aid" had been established in 1916, but developments before the landmark 1956 act were not sufficient enough to construct the highways the nation so desperately needed. What made the 1956 act so ample and successful was that it contained a unique financial concept. The passing of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act was in itself a gradual, but substantial turning point in the whole of American society. **(499 words)**