

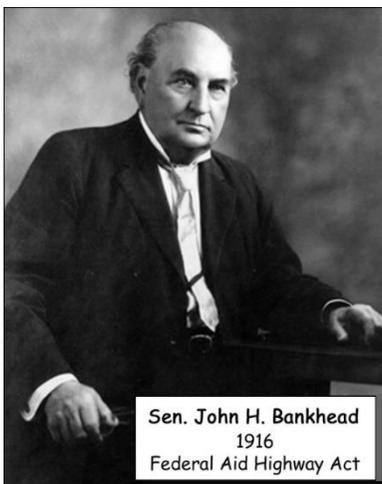
*America's First
All-Weather
Transcontinental
Highway*

by
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Whether driving on neighborhood byways or cross-country interstates, we take roads so much for granted now that few ever give a thought to what travel must have been like in the early motoring years. In a word, a hundred years ago America's roads were awful. They were mainly dirt and barely usable in wet weather, even by horse and buggy. Few roads went any distance. An hour's drive to a nearby town today may have taken a full day back then. The idea of reliable long distance highways was still years away. Even so, Good Roads Enthusiasts in the 1890s began lobbying for better roads – at first in response to a growing craze for bicycles! Soon, automobiles became more affordable and numerous, and more and more citizens began to realize that although building and maintaining better roads were expensive, the economic cost of coping with poor roads was even more costly.

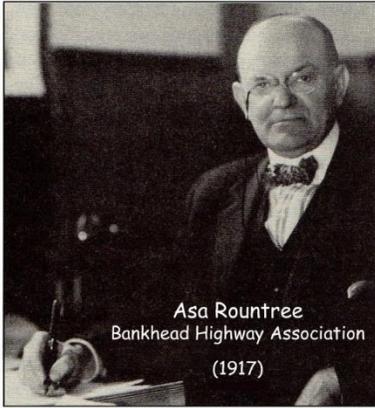
A problem was, just who was responsible for road building? The money and labor usually came from counties, and as often as not taxpayers wanted their money spent on local roads, not longer-distance highways that many felt they wouldn't use anyway. The Good Roads Movement was bolstered by some who supported specific highway routes – which they named – that began to crisscross the country, at least on paper. In the early decades of the 20th Century, hundreds of such named highway associations were formed. A few were much more successful than most. One of those, the Bankhead Highway, became the first transcontinental road in America that could be relied upon year-round. Its route across the South avoided most of the mountains and winter weather that plagued the more northern routes.

The good roads groups and named roads associations did not actually build any roads. That was the responsibility of county and state road officials. (The federal government was not yet in the road-building business.) Instead, the road associations worked tirelessly to sell the idea of better roads, driving home the ideas of convenience, safety and economic sense. They received a major boost in 1916.



Sen. John Hollis Bankhead of Alabama, later referred to as the "Father of Good Roads," played a key role in the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916. Known also as the Bankhead Bill, it made federal funds available to state highway departments, for the first time, to share the costs of building and maintaining roads. Funds were allocated to states based on mileage, thus Texas would receive a lion's share of the total funds. A problem was, Texas then was the only state without a highway department! That was soon remedied when the Texas governor signed the Texas Highway Department into law in early 1917. No time was lost in drawing up plans for a network of numbered highways in Texas. Texas Highway 1 would connect El Paso and Texarkana.

Meanwhile, in Alabama, John Asa Rountree had his own ideas about a highway. He had established the United States Good Roads Association in 1913 and was its Secretary (Chief Executive). The president was no other than Sen. Bankhead. Like the Senator, Rountree was a Southerner through and through. The South still struggled economically, even years after the Reconstruction which followed the Civil war. Asa Rountree understood that better roads were the route to economic recovery, and how better to achieve that than a highway across the South? And what better name for the highway than to honor Sen. Bankhead? The Bankhead Highway Association was incorporated following the 1916 annual convention of the U. S. Good Roads Association. Rountree was Secretary of both organizations, of course.



Asa Rountree was well connected with other Good Roads groups and the named highway associations around the country. He was a prolific publisher and benefited from dues paid by members as well the many publications of his own road organizations. The Bankhead Highway Association established many local and state associations, members of which participated in annual conventions, which were large gatherings where attendees learned about progress in road building and heard from many political dignitaries, including Sen. Bankhead and other officials. The best route for the Bankhead Highway was carefully determined. At the conventions members heard reports from pathfinders who had been dispatched to explore proposed routes, then the best route was approved for the segment of the highway in question.

The Washington - Atlanta route was established at the 1917 convention; then Atlanta to Memphis in 1918. The 1919 convention was in Mineral Wells, Texas, where the Bankhead route from Memphis to El Paso was determined. An "All Texas Route" (Texas Highway 1) was chosen over a competing route across southern Oklahoma. When the route from El Paso to San Diego was determined in 1920 the Bankhead Highway was complete – at least on paper. Most of the 3000 mile route was dirt, and in West Texas many miles were as yet little more than trails across the prairie, but thanks to the Bankhead Bill improvements were already underway.

America's entry in the Great War in Europe in 1917 slowed road construction, but the war heightened awareness of the economic and military importance of better roads in America. As a result, the 1920s roared with sounds of road construction. Texas 1 was nearly a third of the national highway. Oil rich counties such as Eastland were better able to fund road improvements – including the Thurber brick roads which still cross the county – while poorer counties lagged behind. The Texas 1/Bankhead was not hard-surfaced all the way across the state until the 1930s.



The Bankhead, and the hundreds of other often over-lapping named highways, had unique route markers, which led to confusion. In 1926 the federal Bureau of Public Roads, now heavily invested in highways, coordinated a system of numbered highways. The Bankhead, from Dallas west to San Diego, became part of US-80. From Memphis to Dallas it was part of US-67. During the 1930s the Bankhead Highway assumed yet another designation, one intended to boost tourism – it was part of the "Broadway of America." Sweetwater and a few other Texas towns even renamed their main streets Broadway.

Despite the name changes, most of the early Texas Bankhead remains as state and county roads which connect the towns that modern interstates bypassed. The Bankhead name lives on in public memory, as do miles of Bankhead pavement from the 1920s.

