

# Impact of interstate highway system



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As the largest public works project in American history, the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways not only changed transportation methods in the United States, but systematically affected certain cultural landscapes across different regions of the country. When the act was signed into federal law in 1956, both the public and officials were unaware of the potential negative and positive influence of highways over urbanism and cityscape issues such as the creation of the idealized American Suburbia, the reduction of urban downtowns, and the destruction of scenic and tourist locations in the United States. These major highway-influenced landscape changes can be categorized into a term called 'roadscares.'

In order to research adequately on what these 'roadscares' are, the history of the Interstate system must be examined in order to understand how it influences certain cultural and urban landscapes. Although invented years prior, the automobile was introduced into the American mainstream market in the early 1900's, mostly influenced by the invention of the mass production assembly line. As a direct byproduct of the use of automobiles, safer roadways became a concern for public officials across the United States, as most cities and rural infrastructures were still only suitable for horses and carriages. Most of these routes, which were generally unpaved, were created as a result of how the population moved within and between cities, with oftentimes major roads connecting nodal points in downtown districts. When the automobile became the primary use of transportation among most of these unpaved roadways, travel became dangerous due to inconsistent quality measures. During the 1920's, there were no uniform

construction methods over these ‘ trails’, leading to what Dan McNichol stated in his book, *The Roads That Built America*, chaos reigned over the road (Reid 3).

From the 1920’s until the mid 1950’s, there were multiple factors that convinced public officials and engineers in establishing and constructing a federally controlled highway system that stretches from coast-to-coast America. During World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower moved his armies easily along routes in Nazi Germany, on expressways known as the *autobahns*. As his signature legislation when elected into office, Eisenhower decided that the United States was in need for a public highway infrastructure similar to that of Germany (Reid 4). Although the ‘ superhighways’ of America were marketed as a public use to boost automobile transportation, Congress’s decision during the Eisenhower Administration to enact the law was driven by the ability to move convoys and infantry units much faster across the country than ever before. Another factor that played into the creation of the highway system were alarming anxieties about the Cold War, with the public fearing that Americans needed to quickly be able to evacuate large cities under threat of nuclear attacks. These major possibilities allowed the highway system to be pushed as a defensive measure in Congress, as the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways (Blas 128).

Within the first few years after the construction of the Interstate in some parts of the country, immediate impact on economic growth allowed certain industrial and manufacturing markets to grow, such as farming (Blas 129). However, the highway system led to long-term negative impacts on not only

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the natural landscape it is built upon, but the cultural and urban landscapes of the already existing cities and communities it connects, or does not connect, in some cases. Despite having numerous effects, the three significant changes further analyzed as part of the “roadscape” phenomena are the reductions of the importance of urban downtowns, the creation of idealized suburbia, and the lack of access to scenic routes and rural towns along previously existing Federal Routes.

The first major roadscape is the Interstate’s general disregard for existing urban downtowns. Urban downtowns are generated by concentrated populations and also the connections within major points of such city. The determining factors of most urban downtowns and the growth of cities in America are credited to the location of rivers and railroads (Voss 33).

However, population changes in most American cities followed the creation of the Interstate System, affecting the importance of urban downtowns.

When the Federal Highway Act was being countered in Congress during the early 1950’s, traffic was of major concern. One of the primary opposition to the Highway Act was that it should focus more on improving the conditions of the existing Federal Route system, which already generally connected cities and their urban areas.

However, Eisenhower believed that with the rise of the automobile, about 5 million sold annually during the 1950’s, the network of newly created ‘superhighways’ should connect cities, but not into their downtown regions, to prevent escalation of traffic problems (Reid 4). Financially, though, the decision to not place the Interstate within highly concentrated urban areas were largely based upon the amount of buying out civilian properties to

replace with the Interstate. Both rural areas and lower income districts surrounding downtown areas, which consisted of weaker opposition from the community, were cheaper locations to construct the highway.

Therefore, constructing what is known as ' beltways' around cities such as Houston and Washington D. C. led to the first major roadscape phenomena: the fall of urban downtowns and the rise of economy around these once previous rural locations, creating pseudo-urban forms. Houston is a primary example of having major Interstate routes existing as physical belts around the downtown district. Originally designed as a port city connecting to the Gulf of Mexico through the Houston Ship Channel, the downtown area faced economic downfall as the primary modes of industrial transportation shifted to the Interstate, located in the surrounding suburbs. This led to the rise of major ' pseudo-downtown' business districts directly connected to the Interstate such as Southwest Houston and the Energy Corridor. While the beltway concept is used in demonstrating negative roadscares around cities, two other city interstate systems were generally also constructed: the " loop" and the " spur". The loop system, for example, used in Philadelphia, is similar to a beltway; however, a loop is constructed to bypass the city entirely primarily for traffic concerns. Loops affect downtown areas in the same way beltways do. A spur, which is less common than all three, is constructed as a highway entering from a beltway into a downtown area and terminates into a standard roadway. While all three types of techniques yields different results, the introduction of the Interstate in these cities changed how the urban downtown functions and interacts with the rest of

the city proper. Therefore, pseudo-downtowns are part of the roadscape phenomena.

The second major roadscape analyzed is the role of the Interstate in the idealized American Suburbia. The notion of suburbia indirectly correlates to the rise of economic activity outside of the urbanized form. However, the idea of suburbs can be traced back to the 1920's, as a result of rapidly growing cities. Generally, civilians of inner-city areas did not move out to the suburbs because of the lack of ease of transport, even with the automobile. Suburbs were being slowly developed around World War I, but it was the introduction of the Interstate that greatly increased the suburbanization process, in relationship to the rise of automobile production.

As the beltways around congested cities were constructed, businesses and job opportunities grew away from the inner-city (Blas 130). The idealized American Suburbia was then born, an area that was not densely populated, consisted rows of picturesque houses, and did not suffer congested physical conditions of the urban landscape. The major factor introduced in separating the ideal American Suburbs from the contextual meaning of 1920's suburb is the ability to access the interstate easily and travel to and from urban areas, which became locations not for living and culture but for working and business ventures. The interstate eventually would lead to the demise of the city as the center of life and culture (Cioc 676).

Most Federal freeways are located in small-scale to medium-scale residential zones, which ties directly to suburban locations in larger cities. In fact, in most of the urban metropolitan areas in the United States, the interstate

only accounts for 3% of all roadways within the urban landscape, yet they yield 40% of daily traffic (Brown 174). Highways also promoted the creation of entirely new suburban locations in the United States. In the early 1970's, the interstate allowed people to move from older-created urban cities in the north and northeast states, such as Philadelphia and Boston, to generally newer states in the "Sunbelt" region, where climates were favored, such as Miami and Phoenix (Blas 130). Before the Interstate, migrating from Megalopolis to newer urban cities such as those in California were too costly and too timely. While the American Suburb is a unique type of roadscape, it can be seen as a direct correlation to the demise of urban downtowns and creation of pseudo-downtowns, as previously analyzed.

However, the final and vastly different major roadscape phenomena involves the relationship of the Interstate and the once used scenic and tourist routes. Predating the creation of the Interstate Act in 1956, one chief proposal envisioned by Thomas MacDonald, the head of the U. S. Bureau of Public Roads, was that the US Route roadways, built in the mid 1920's, should simply be repaved and improved with modern construction, in order to handle the ever increasing load of vehicular traffic. However, headed mostly by engineers, the proposal to build superhighways across the landscape and connect urban areas without increasing traffic on currently existing roadways, such as the US Route system, was eventually favored by the Eisenhower administration (Reid 3).

However, since the 1920's, the US Route system connected not only existing urban landscapes, but spurred scenic and tourist growth in rural towns and locations alongside these routes. When the Interstate paved way for the <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-interstate-highway-system/>

ability to drive over rivers and through mountains, some cities grew, but even more places declined economically as traffic passed further away (Blas 131).

There are numerous cases in which cities became ghost towns due to the realignment of traffic due to the Interstate system, such as Route 66 and Highway 301. Route 66 was colloquially known as the Main Street of America, which connected Chicago, ran through Missouri and Arizona, and into Santa Monica, California. During the Dust Bowl, Route 66 grew in popularity as people migrated west. Most of the Scenic Route designations alongside Route 66 were located in New Mexico and Arizona, in the Sonoran Desert. However, when the Interstate was established, most of these towns, which were economically supported by gas, declined and eventually a few of these towns were deserted, such as Montoya, New Mexico, and Canyon Diablo, Arizona. Route 66 usually took two weeks during its heyday, whereas the trip from Chicago to Santa Monica on the Interstate can be completed in 29 hours.

Another example is Highway 301, which caused similar fates in cities along the route, such as Starke, Florida. However, when the Interstate expanded even further away years after the traffic declined on Highway 301, Starke city officials did not object to the new proposal. They foresaw that despite lower traffic numbers, the economy of Starke would still thrive on the charm of Highway 301, a scenic attraction (Blas 131). By the late 1970's, it was clear that the accessibility of the Interstate system was greatly favored over scenic routes, causing Starke to essentially turn into a ghost town. This leads to the obvious difference that scenic highways, which were hampered by the <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-interstate-highway-system/>



lack of advanced civil engineering techniques during its construction in the 1920's, are contoured by the landscape it sits on, whereas Interstates were simply tunneled through mountains and bridged over rivers and valleys where deemed necessary for shortage of travel time. As the third major phenomena, abandoned scenic routes and the disregard to small rural towns can be considered another type of roadscape.

During the research of the Interstate system the United States, it became evident that even though it is one of the most, if not, the most innovative application of technology and systematic networking in the United States, it led to a different and new phenomena known as roadscaapes. These roadscaapes were changes in cultural and urban landscapes directly influenced by the establishment of the Federal Highway system, whether positive or negative. However, while it generated numerous ghost towns along scenic routes and toppled the organizational strategies of urban cities, it allowed the United States economy to succeed under the modern way of life, including the automobile and fast travel.

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