

Adobe Tower # 9
by Jerry Hall and Loretta Hall

The Rush Is On!

Immediately after President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 on June 29, 1956, the Secretary of Commerce signed a Certificate of Apportionment for the first year's (FY 1958) authorization of \$1.125 billion for the new Interstate System. A month later, he issued the apportionment for the FY 1959 authorization of \$2.55 billion. With all of this money in the pipeline, states rushed to get their share and get started building the new highway network. In typical American fashion, the states also rushed to claim credit as being *first*.

Who won? It depends on how you define *first*. Here are the main record setters:

First out of the gate: Missouri claims this title on two counts. On August 2, 1956, the Missouri State Highway Commission (MSHC) signed a contract for work on a section of US 66 that became a part of I-44. As soon as the signatures were on paper, the district engineer for the Bureau of Public Roads phoned BPR headquarters in Washington, DC, to make sure this was the first Interstate System contract signed in the country.

That same day, the MSHC signed a second Interstate System contract for construction of the Mark Twain Expressway, a section of US 40 that would become part of I-70. The \$1.87 million project got under way on August 13, with a large sign proclaiming "This is the first project in the United States on which actual construction was started under provisions of the new Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956."

First to the finish line: Not to be outdone by its neighboring state, Kansas laid claim to its place in Interstate history by erecting a large roadside sign: "This is the first project in the United States completed under provisions of the new Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956." The 8-mile-long section, which had been part of US 40, was incorporated into I-70. The segment had already been under construction before Eisenhower signed the Interstate System legislation, but the pavement contract was signed August 31, 1956, and paving began on September 26, marking the first paving operation on an Interstate highway. Kansas governor Fred Hall presided at a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the completed project on November 14. Designed to meet the new Interstate standards, the two-lane highway was 24 feet wide, and the concrete pavement was 9 inches thick. A parallel roadway destined to carry opposite-direction traffic was expected to be started within a year. The median would be 60 feet wide, rather than the minimum requirement of 36 feet, to allow room for eventually adding two more lanes.

First built: Pennsylvania claims this title with a 160-mile-long portion of the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the eastern part of the state. It officially became part of I-70 on August 21, 1957, when 2,100 miles of toll roads in fifteen states were added to the Interstate System. But by then, it had already been an operational roadway for nearly seventeen years, having been opened to traffic on October 1, 1940.

New York could challenge Pennsylvania's right to this title, though. A section of the Grand

Central Parkway completed in 1936 in Queens became part of I-278. Under a reconstruction project begun in 1959, two lanes were added to the road, along with a median, wider shoulders, and acceleration and deceleration lanes, bringing it up to Interstate standards.

First state border-to-border completion: Michigan became the first state to complete a border-to-border Interstate route. The 205-mile-long section of I-94 between Detroit and New Buffalo was finished in 1960.

First state-wide completion: There is no clear-cut winner in this category.

- Nebraska claims that on October 19, 1974, it became the first to complete its *mainline* Interstate System (481.5 miles).
- Arkansas claims that in 1975 it became the first state to complete its *original allotment* of Interstate miles (525 miles).
- According to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), in June 1975 Rhode Island became the first state to open *all* of its Interstate mileage (70.8 miles).
- North Dakota claims that in 1977 it became the first state in the nation to finish its *assigned* mileage in the “Federal Controlled Access Highway System.”

Nationwide milestone: On August 22, 1986, the first coast-to-coast Interstate route (I-80) was completed just west of Salt Lake City, Utah. Numerologists will note with interest the connection to the 1869 completion of the first transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, about 65 miles to the northwest, across the Great Salt Lake.

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This is the ninth in a series of articles tracing the development of the Interstate Highway System.