

Travel Talk September 2018

by Chase Binder

New Hampshire's Second Highway Commissioner a General under Eisenhower

Frank D. Merrill was born in Hopkinton, Massachusetts on December 4, 1903. He enlisted in the Army in 1922, and graduated from West Point in 1929.

By 1941, he was promoted to Major and assigned as General Douglas MacArthur's Intelligence Officer.

In 1943, Merrill became Operations Chief for Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell. As such, he organized the 5307th Composite Unit, a long range penetration group, for a hazardous mission in Burma against the Japanese.

"Merrill's Marauders" as they became known, became the first American infantrymen to fight on the Asian mainland.

After retirement from the Army as a Major General, Merrill moved to Concord to become New Hampshire's second Highway Commissioner in 1949.

He supervised the planning of the New Hampshire Turnpike and also developed the plans for the roads that eventually became New Hampshire's segment of the Interstate Highway System. He died in 1955.

I've said it often. Bud and I adore road trips. We've hit the pavement in places as dreamy as New Zealand, as challenging as South Africa and as fearsome as the cliff-hugging, no-guardrails road from Montenegro through the mountains to Bosnia Herzegovina.

Our plan was always to see (and drive, if possible) far-flung destinations while we were younger. There's lots we wanted to explore in the USA, of course, but we thought we'd save that for our "slowing down" years.

Well, we're now in those years, but not slowing down so much! Since 2013 we've done seven NH-FL round trip drives (count them, 21,000 miles!). This has brought us squarely face-to-face with the American system of highways, a system that I honestly had given little thought to. Florida is south, California is west and everything else is scattered in between, right?

Doing the NH-FL-NH runs, we normally find I-95 and keep going.



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This involves the NY-DC corridor, generally a horror of multi-lane highways, almost unfathomable traffic, insane construction and muscle-bound 18 wheelers. Not fun, but a straight arrow. In August, though, Bud wanted to try an inland route through VA, WV, MD and PA recommended by folks doing the same run. This meant a combination of Interstates, US Highways and state roads. It's NOT something we'll do again... ever (more about that later). But it did get me thinking about American roads.

I had a vague notion that our highway system was championed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower after World War II. Research confirms that's true, but the story is a bit more layered. In 1919, a young Lt. Colonel Eisenhower signed up for the US Army's first transcontinental motor convoy. It took 62 days for the 81 motorized vehicles to make it from DC to San Francisco and so imprinted Eisenhower that highways became a legacy of his presidency 50 years later.

During those decades, while Eisenhower was working through the ranks of the US military, America was busy building cars and roads. By the mid-1920's, some overall plan was clearly needed. Federal and state officials got together and devised our first coherent national highway number system—US Highways. North/south highways have odd numbers with the lowest numbers starting in the east. Think US Route 1, which stretches 2,369 miles from Fort Kent, ME to Key West, FL. Even numbers go east/west with lowest numbers in the north and a "0" designates a coast-to-coast route. Think US Route 20 (the longest road in the US) which runs 3,365 miles from Boston to Oregon. These routes are mostly two-lane, though not always.

But back to Eisenhower. While he was learning about critical importance of roads in troop movements, there were conversations in the White House about the need for

a better national system of highways. In 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt took a map of the US and drew lines to indicate where he thought they should go. Strangely enough, this became the template for our Interstate Highway System!

During World War II, as the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe, General Eisenhower was stunned by the speed and ease with which the German forces (and their equipment) could move across Germany. His assessment, as a soldier, was that the German autobahn (the modern highway system created during the Third Reich) enabled Germany to extend the war in Europe for two years!

Eisenhower returned from Europe victorious, got elected president and, ever-mindful of the close relationship between infrastructure and defense (and impressed by Germany's Autobahn), set about creating the Interstate Highway System. Laws and budgets passed in 1956. America got to work building highways to "meet the requirements of national defense in time of war and the growing needs of peacetime traffic." Construction of the first interstate segment in New Hampshire, I-93 began in December 1956, in Concord.

We now have a pretty comprehensive system of Interstates, which sometimes parallel the US Highways. The numbering system assigns odd numbers to north/south routes and even numbers to east/west routes, but the numbers increase from south to north and west to east to differentiate them from US Highways. Think Interstate 95 from Maine to Florida and Interstate 10 from California to Florida. Nationally the interstates are 1.2% of paved miles but carry 25% of the travel. Unlike US Highways, Interstates have limited access and can carry tolls, especially for critical bridges, tunnels and special access fast lanes.

Confused yet? It gets better. There are exceptions to all these schemes and sometimes Interstates, US highways and state highways all use the same actual road. Gotcha!

So how did stepping off our time-tested, straight-arrow FL-NH route up 95 in August go? Not well! It added 160 miles and 2 ½ hours to our trip. Some stretches were US Highways that had actual stop lights. Because US Highways don't necessarily conform to federal standards and shoulders were often non-existent. There was no consistent/planned array of rest stops. Construction could stretch for miles. Worst, no tolls means many, many more trucks at all hours of the day and night.

We'll go back to our I-95 plan when we head south in December. Sure, we'll avoid trucks by using a few "cars only" options like the Saw Mill River Parkway, the Garden State Parkway and the high speed EZ Pass access lanes around DC.

We'll still use my cell for Google Maps, which is eerily accurate in predicting traffic problems and rerouting you. It's also specific enough to say "get into the far left of the three left turn lanes" coming up, gives us routes to upcoming gas stations (and prices!) and photos of hotels and restaurants with one-click dialing direct to the business.

To keep ourselves entertained and sane, we'll also continue to use Cracker Barrel's audio book rentals on CDs. Pick one up in, say, Londonderry, and return it when you're done—usually Florida. Total cost runs \$4-6 depending on the number of discs.



For more fascinating images of the 1919 convoy, visit www.eisenhower.archives.gov and search for 1919 convoy.

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