

GEORGIA DOT: THE EARLY DAYS

ROAD BUILDING IN GEORGIA

In 1755, Georgia, as a British Colony, passed its first road building law. This Act provided that Georgia was to be divided into nine districts and provided for the appointment of six surveyors. It was their duty to lay out and maintain roads and assess highway taxes in the districts. The actual work was done by citizens in the district who were required to spend as many as twelve days each year working on highways.

After the American Revolution, many laws were passed by the Legislature for the improvement of highways. Of these, the "Statutory Method" was the principle means.

The "Statutory Method" was brought by colonists from England. Again, counties were divided into districts and male citizens between 16 and 60 were required to work from 5 to 15 days each year. When a new road was to be built, these men were expected to bring their own tools, usually picks and shovels and axes and ordinary farm plows. The sheer size of the task and the primitive methods used worked against any solid accomplishment. Nonetheless, as late as the founding of the Highway Department of Georgia, some counties were still using this system.

By 1829, considerable support had amassed for the improvement of roads and rivers in Georgia. Consequently, the General Assembly appropriated \$70,000 for the purchase of 200 slaves. Two superintendents were appointed by the Governor and work commenced.

Support for the use of slaves soon waned. Most of the work was accomplished in or near larger cities like Columbus, Macon, Milledgeville and Augusta and rural law-makers repealed the act.

Soon thereafter, corporations throughout the State began making applications for charters to construct and operate turnpike (toll) roads. This was the primary vehicle for Georgia road construction until the Civil War.

After the Civil War, these charters began to expire and the General Assembly largely refused to renew them. And, road building lapsed back to the "Statutory Method."

Perhaps the first progressive movement in highway construction came in 1891 when an act was passed by the General Assembly which authorized County Commissioners, with a Grand Jury recommendation, to levy a special two mill tax which was used to buy mules and machinery and to employ labor at regular wages. Also, the law provided that citizens could pay the tax by working on county roads at the rate of 50¢ per day. This milestone law marked an

enormous improvement in Georgia's highways.

Although this system was better, it could but maintain roads that were already in place, most of which were laid out entirely by chance and were poorly engineered. And, this meant they were expensive to maintain.

In 1908, the convict lease system was abolished and prisoners were turned over to the counties to be employed in road construction. Using convict labor, the counties were able to relocate many of their roads under competent engineering supervision.

TIMES CHANGE

The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 (HR 7617), Public Law No. 156 as passed by the 64th Congress changed all that had gone before. In part, it read, "...to cooperate with the States, through their respective highway departments, in the construction of rural post roads; but no money apportioned under this act to the states shall be expended therein until its legislature shall have assented to the provisions of this act..."

And, in those simple words the Federal government mandated the formation of a highway department for Georgia and all the states as a condition of receiving Federal matching money.

On August 16, 1916, the Georgia General Assembly approved an "Act creating the Highway Department of Georgia."

ORGANIZATION: FEDERAL/STATE

In the beginning it was the United States Department of Agriculture through its Bureau of Public Roads that was charged the administration of federal funds for roads.

The Highway Department of Georgia had a most colorful beginning. The caption of the enabling legislation read, "An Act to designate the Prison Commission of Georgia, together with the State Geologist, the Dean of the College of Civil Engineering of the State University, and the Professor of Highway Engineering at the Georgia School of Technology, as the Highway Department of Georgia..."

The act also empowered the Prison Commission to, "employ such civil engineers as therein (reference to the FARA of 1916) provided.

The Prison Commission and the three ex-officio members of the highway department were to receive no additional salary. And, these men were referred to as the Highway Commission in subsequent legislation. Essentially, they are the forerunner of the present ten person State Transportation Board.

By January of 1918, the "Highway Commission" had hired a staff consisting of a State Highway Engineer (Mr. Warren R. Neel), a

Chief Draftsman and three Assistant Engineers. The State Highway Engineer was paid the princely sum of \$3000 per year and was expected to be the "office secretary of the Department." Further, \$5000 was to go "to pay the expenses of maintaining said department, including such supervisors and engineers as may be needed..."

State Funding came from motor vehicle tag fees. The Act read, "And be it further amended, that not more than \$15,000 of said funds so received may be used by the State Highway Department..."

Things did not go easily for the staff at first. There wasn't enough office space in the Capitol Building so they used loaned space provided by the Fulton County Commission. The State Highway Engineer, the Chief Draftsman and the Assistant Engineers reported for work at the Fulton County Courthouse.

HOW GEORGIA ROADS WERE BUILT, THEN

Essentially, the Department was formed to bring Georgia into compliance with a Federal law. No funds were appropriated by the General Assembly for actual construction.

This left the task of matching the 50-50 federal aid to the counties, a task they set to with vigor. The First Annual Report of the Highway Department of Georgia tells us, "It is encouraging to note that the counties of the State are enthusiastically issuing bonds to match this money. From present indications they will without a doubt raise a great deal in excess of the amount provided

for by the (Federal) Government."

It was the counties' job to build the roads but it was the Department's job to prepare the plans and supervise the work. By June of 1919, 72 projects were underway and the General Assembly was told, "...the county authorities are working in harmony with this Department in building these roads according to the approved engineering methods..."

Of course there were problems and in some ways the complaints were the same as today. State Highway Engineer Neel reported, "As Federal Aid Funds became available the project engineers were assigned the work in the various counties to which allotments were made. In this way the surveys and maps were prepared which were inspected, checked and approved by the engineers working directly for the State and then submitted to the United States district engineer in Montgomery for his approval and from there were sent on to Washington for the final approval.

This final approval was necessary before work could actually begin and consequently great delay was occasioned the result of which has been the construction of very few roads up to the present time."

In its first year of operation the Department received \$134,329.48

in Federal aid; in 1918 \$268,658.96; in 1919 it rose to \$403,909.45. For 1920, the Department was estimating that Georgia's Federal aid would amount to \$538,417. When combined with special Federal appropriations Georgia's share of Federal aid would amount to \$2.7 million.

Of that amount \$657,943.69 was to be spent on 53 bridges; \$950,714.64 went to the grading and paving of 63 miles of highway and the remaining \$1,170,101.42 was spent on grading of dirt roads -- 600 miles.

In completing his first report to the General Assembly, Mr. Neel made a prediction: "It is apparent that the motor vehicle will become the principle means of transportation over the highways of the State owing to its increased velocity over that of horse drawn vehicles and its range of travel is greater in the same proportion."