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Taking the High Road

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Two States share different approaches to protecting historic and cultural resources along America's highways.



Nebraska Department of Roads/Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office

The brick section of the Lincoln Highway, west of Omaha in Douglas County, NE, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

What happens when a transportation project is scheduled to move a road closer to a historic farmstead or a planned interstate route cuts through the cultural heart of a major city? Transportation planners across the country frequently grapple with conflicts between transportation needs and the desire to preserve historic and cultural resources. When project planning fails to identify stakeholders in such properties and to take their views into consideration, projects can run into costly schedule delays sparked by disagreement among stakeholders.

Generally, historic properties are defined as those that are at least 50 years old and possess historic, archaeological, engineering, or architectural significance. Any type of building, structure, historic district, or site that is listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places—the official national list of cultural resources worthy of preservation—is considered a historic property. Examples include a late 19th-century school, a neighborhood of early 20th-century bungalows, a park developed by the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, a gas station constructed when an early highway was built, or a downtown commercial center.

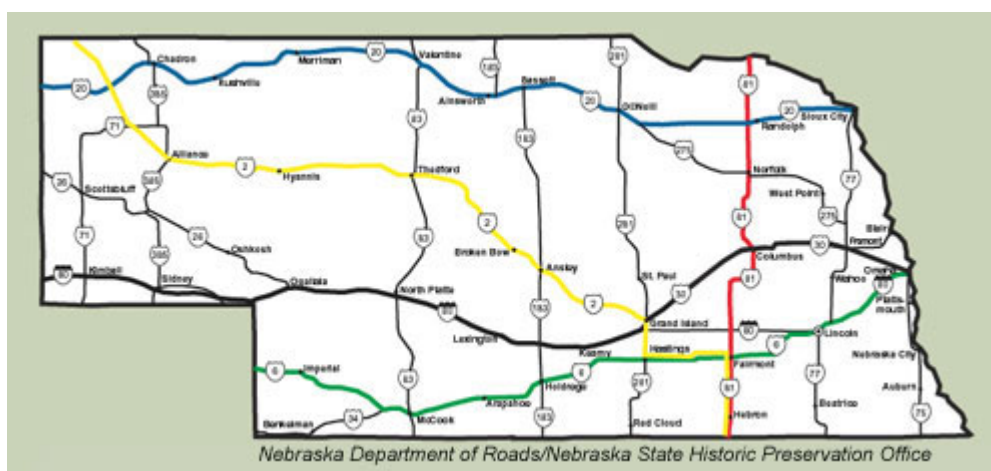
Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 requires that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), often working through State departments of transportation (DOTs), take into account the effects of road projects on historic properties. Two State agencies—the Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR) and the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)—are leading the way by adopting proactive approaches toward preserving and revitalizing sites of historic significance.

Through thoughtful planning, interagency cooperation, context-sensitive design solutions, and strong partnerships with FHWA, both States have taken the high road when it comes to preserving history.

Nebraska's Historic Highway Survey

In 2001, the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) initiated an unprecedented, comprehensive statewide survey of historic properties along five of the State's earliest automobile routes. The goal of the year-long study, completed in cooperation with NDOR, was to solve a reoccurring problem facing both agencies: a lack of knowledge of where historic roads and related resources are located. This shortcoming could hinder the successful and timely identification and evaluation of historic properties, as required by Section 106 regulations, and result in project delays.

NDOR and SHPO, which is a division of the Nebraska State Historical Society, both have roles in planning highway projects and managing cultural resources. During a review of proposed projects, SHPO began investigating the historic significance of road segments and related properties that might be affected by future highway improvements. Rather than face repeated conflicts over the question of historic significance, the two agencies partnered to conduct a survey of historic roads statewide. "The survey offered us a great opportunity to team with NDOR on a project that will make our respective agencies' Section 106 responsibilities easier on future projects," says SHPO Resource Planning Program Associate Bill Callahan.



This map of Nebraska shows the major historic highways that were the focus of the recent study. (Red route = Meridian Highway, Green route = Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway, Black route = Lincoln Highway, Yellow route = Potash Highway, Blue route = U.S. Highway 20).

The project was funded by SHPO under its annual Historic Preservation Fund Grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Park Service, as well as matching funds from NDOR. The agencies collaborated to develop the work scope, participate in progress meetings, and review the survey results. "The survey is a tremendous addition to our understanding of how vehicular culture and the evolution of highway construction have shaped our State's built environment," Callahan says.

NDOR and SHPO selected historical consultants to study the historic contexts for the following roads: Interstate 80, Lincoln Highway, Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway, Meridian Highway, Potash Highway, and U.S. Highway 20. All represent major highways of regional or national scope and were developed in the early- to mid-20th century to serve America's automobile travelers. The consultants also conducted a survey of the historical and architectural features along the highways, with the exception of Interstate 80.



Thousands of historic properties, such as the Belvidere Filling Station along the Meridian Highway, were identified and evaluated during the survey.

The consultants drove thousands of miles to identify the historic routes and inventory the different types of road-related resources, such as buildings, objects, and structures. The survey focused on property types specifically associated with the historic transportation routes frequented by automobile tourists, including sections of early roads and waysides, bridges, gas stations, cabin courts and motels, diners and drive-in restaurants, and vintage tourist attractions. "Historic roadside resources, including gas stations and cabin courts, are quickly disappearing from our landscape," says Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Bob Puschendorf from the Nebraska State Historical Society.

According to Puschendorf, developing a historic context has led to a better understanding of the history of road development and construction in Nebraska. Although intact examples of historic gas stations are increasingly rare, the survey found that historically this was a common type of property along the roadways studied. "These resources," explains Puschendorf, "tell a significant story about the development of roads, road-related services, and tourism across the State."

Cindy Veys, NDOR's environmental section manager, indicates that NDOR and SHPO are using the survey results for future project planning, NEPA development compliance activities, and outreach efforts to educate the public about the significance of the State's historic properties. She adds that her agency is benefiting from the project's products—historic contexts, the survey report, and Multiple Property Document Forms for the National Register—all of which "facilitate [NDOR's] decisions regarding the eligibility of roadways and road-related resources [for listing in the National Register] in cases of Section 106 compliance." As a result, NDOR has an early understanding of what historic properties may be affected, which in turn provides greater opportunities to avoid potential conflicts and streamline the NEPA process.

Nebraska's Survey Methodology

To gain an understanding of the evolution of its historic highways and related resources, the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Nebraska Department of Roads prepared a statewide historic context (a document tracing the historic significance of properties), beginning with the development of formalized road construction at the turn of the century and concluding with the completion of Interstate 80 in 1974. The historic context

document includes the following topics: Nebraska's major road development efforts from the turn of the 20th century through post-World War II, State and Federal road legislation and funding, road signage, and statewide trends in road improvements and pavement.

Historic contexts also were prepared for five individual roads, which are representative of well-known, early automobile routes established between approximately 1911 and 1925 (Lincoln Highway, Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway, Meridian Highway, Potash Highway, and U.S. Highway 20). Research efforts relied heavily on materials in the collections of both agencies, including annual reports, project log records, historic maps, automobile guidebooks, period newspaper articles, county and local histories, and historic photographs.

For each of the five historic highways, the consultant identified multiple alignments spanning from the roads' earliest alignments through subsequent changes dating to approximately 1940. The project budget and timeframe limited the number of road segments that could be observed in the field, so a peak period for development and use of each road was identified for evaluation. The consultant conducted an architectural survey along the identified alignments to identify historic road segments, bridges, and road-related property types that served the traveling public, such as gas stations and motels. Properties were surveyed and mapped for documentation. In addition, photographs were taken of structures that were constructed before 1960 and structures that continue to function as road-related resources, such as gas stations.

Documented properties generally were located within 0.4 kilometer (0.25 mile) from the right-of-way. In total, approximately 5,600 kilometers (3,500 miles) were surveyed, and more than 900 road-related property types were documented.

The Advantages of a Holistic Approach

The survey offers long-term benefits as well. NDOR will save time and money in project development because the historic properties already have been identified prior to road improvements or bridge replacement projects. And the development of a statewide historic context makes the evaluation of resources easier, faster, and more objective than ever before.

With the comprehensive study, NDOR and SHPO can evaluate small sections of roads and determine the eligibility of particular road segments for the National Register. The results can be applied on a project-by-project basis, enabling the agencies to come to agreements quickly. The plan is to house the data in a geographical information system layer that can be updated as needed.

The survey project was completed in 2002, and the results already are helping shape new transportation projects, according to NDOR Highway Environmental Program Manager Len Sand. NDOR and SHPO are distributing the final report to local groups to support their efforts to preserve historic roadside properties through the Nebraska Transportation Enhancement Program, Nebraska's Scenic Byways, and the Nebraska Lied Main Street Program. "We've received enthusiastic responses on the final survey report from both NDOR personnel and the public," says Sand. "We're already printing additional copies."

A book intended to expand the public's knowledge and appreciation of Nebraska's highways and road-related historic properties also may be forthcoming from the Nebraska State Historical Society. In

addition, NDOR recently provided funding to SHPO for a pilot project to enter the survey results into its geographic information system (GIS). After mapping the surveyed properties, NDOR and SHPO will be able to use the GIS to identify the locations of potential historic sites quickly when planning projects.

To learn more about the survey or Nebraska's historic highways, access the final report, *Nebraska Historic Highway Survey*, on the Web at www.dor.state.ne.us/docs/NE-Hist-hwy-surv.pdf and www.nebraskahistory.org/histpres/historic_highway_book-web.pdf. The report provides a history of road development in Nebraska and highlights the results from the survey, including significant historic properties.



This 7.3-kilometer (4.5-mile) stretch of the Meridian Highway in Pierce County retains its original alignment, design, and historic character-including this small metal truss bridge-and has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.