You Can't Get There From Here: the coming of the Interstates to Vermont

By Nancy Columb

Interstate 89 between Williston and South Burlington in 1962 and then two years later in 1964. These photos illustrate the transition from small roads to major highways.
The first idea for a set of superhighways came from President Eisenhower when he traveled across the US as a lieutenant colonel in the army (right) and when he was in Germany and witnessed the Autobahn.

The Autobahn increased vehicular safety and could be used for military purposes; this is what President Eisenhower envisioned for the United States.
In 1956 President Eisenhower received support from the Federal-Aid Highway Act to begin constructing what he called the “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.” ³
It didn’t take long for construction to start in Vermont. This is the beginning of some construction on Interstate-91 in Brattleboro in 1958.
There was more than just road to be built when it came to Vermont’s hilly and uneven areas. This is construction of bridges on Interstate-91 in Rockingham.
Signs had to be posted as well so that drivers would know how far to the next destination they were, and where to expect an exit ramp; another example of safety features.
The terrain around Vermont was not always conducive to straight-up paving of roads. Here outside of Montpelier a crane removes steep rock outcroppings along where the road will go.

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Before the Interstate Highway System, many places in Vermont were farmland with a few scattered houses and one or two main roads. This aerial photo from 1927 of some land along the Winooski River between Williston and Richmond depicts that scenario.
Here is the same area along the Winooski River in 2004, now with many more houses and Interstate 89 running through the middle. Even the covered bridge was replaced with a metal one.
But as a result of skyrocketing farming prices and the increasing ease of importing goods due to railways and the Interstate, much of the previous farmland has been reforested. That is evident here in Royalton, Vermont in 1927, where much farmland is visible.
In the same area, 77 years later, some of the area is still open but there is much more forest than before. Interstate 89 is also a major change to the area.
Here is the very beginning of road layout and an exit ramp for Interstate-89 in Williston, Vermont around 1961.
Three years later, in 1964, the road is finished and complete with road signs. It is now available for cars to travel on.
Here men from the Vermont Highway Department dump roadside litter into the truck. Aside from the accumulation of litter, many other large trucks could travel the interstate allowing for growth of business by speeding up the delivery process and driving down warehouse storage costs.
From all the construction and planning by the state and federal governments came the Interstates of today that we all know and love: I-89 and I-91 here in Vermont, such as this stretch outside of Middlesex.
From dirt roads and covered bridges…

To asphalt, cement, and metal.

