

Simple Stuff Highway Numerology

by Bob Vitrikas

Ever wonder how our highways got their numbers? No? Well read on anyway and maybe you'll find a tidbit to educate and amuse you.

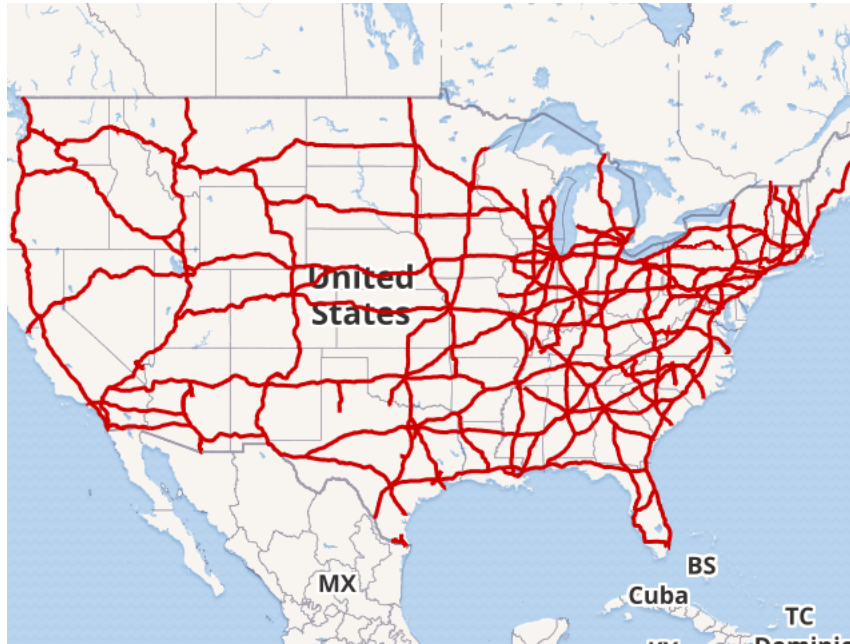


The U.S. Numbered Highway System, sometimes called Federal Highways, were established in 1926. Today these routes total 157,724 miles.

Prior to 1926 highways were named, not numbered, if they were identified at all. In 1925 the states agreed that there needed to be a rationalization of the hodge-podge of highway names. Numbering the routes would make it easier for folks to find their way. Their numbering was coordinated among the states and hence are sometimes known as Federal Highways. Nevertheless they are built and maintained by the state or local governments. Route numbers and locations are coordinated by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. The Fed is only involved via a non-voting seat the U.S. Department of Transportation. After much discussion on November 11, 1926 the Department of Agriculture approved the U.S. Highway System.

Fast forward to 1956 when President Eisenhower pushed for the establishment of the Interstate Highway System. His inspiration was his experience on the 1919 military

convoy which followed the Lincoln Highway for most of its arduous journey from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco. It was not pretty! Seeing the German autobahn system in action during WWII sealed the deal. Something had to be done with America's abysmal highway system. The result was the "Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways." As of 2020 approximately 25% of all vehicle miles are



driven on Interstate Highways which total 48,756 miles.

The smaller numbered routes generally start in the northeast and increase as they work their way southwestward. Odd numbered routes run north-south and even numbered routes run east-west. So US Rt 1 was the easternmost route in the U.S. and ran north-south. Generally major north-south routes end in "1" and east-west routes end in "0." Of course like any good bureaucratic enterprise there are exceptions...

Interstate highways are numbered exactly the opposite, smaller numbers in the west and south and increasing as you move east and north. This has the benefit of not having the same US highway and interstate numbered routes going through the same city. Even numbered interstate highways follow the old convention, running east-west and odd numbered run north-south.

Mainline Interstate and federal highways are identified by one or two digit numbers, i.e. US Rt 1, Rt 29, I-5 or I-95 etc. Mainline interstate highways running east-west end in a "0" and those that run north-south end in a "5." Three digit numbers denote spurs,

The primary Interstate Highway System. Not shown are interstate highways in Puerto Rico, Alaska and Hawaii.

loops, or beltways that connect mainlines. Examples include I-295, I-495, etc. Oops, so how did US Rt 250 happen? Beats me. I simply don't know.