



Paving the Way: A Century of Road Building in Nebraska

The Route 66 Centennial and the National Highway Legacy

By Benjamin Thompson, Director of Research

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- On November 11, 1926, the American Association of State Highway Officials approved the U.S. Numbered Highway System, including Route 66. That same year, Nebraska began erecting highway markers featuring the iconic covered wagon emblem still used today.
- The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 launched the federal-state partnership model for highway funding. Nebraska responded immediately, appropriating \$640,000 in 1917 to match federal funds and establishing its state highway system.
- Nebraska became the first state in the nation to complete its mainline Interstate Highway System when I-80 was finished on October 19, 1974.
- The state now maintains over 10,000 miles of state and federal highways and approximately 93,000 miles of public roads. The FY 2026 Surface Transportation Program commits \$722 million to 92 projects across 560 miles of highway and 83 bridges.

A National Movement for Better Roads

For much of American history, road building was a strictly local affair. Farmers struggled with impassable mud tracks, and long-distance travel by automobile was an adventure measured in broken axles rather than hours. The Good Roads Movement, which gained momentum in the 1880s among bicycle enthusiasts and later automobile owners, pressed government at every level for improved highways (FHWA, 2016). By 1912, more than 500 organizations across the country were advocating for paved roads.

That year, Indiana entrepreneur Carl G. Fisher proposed a transcontinental highway from New York to San Francisco. The Lincoln Highway Association was founded in 1913 and designated a route through 13 states, including more than 450 miles across Nebraska following the Platte River valley (Hokanson, 1988). Towns along the route paved streets, renamed roads, and competed for automobile traffic. Nebraska's stretch was among the last to be fully paved, with the final section near North Platte completed in 1935 (National Scenic Byway Foundation, n.d.). Today, the route is known as U.S. Highway 30 and is designated the [Nebraska Lincoln Highway Historic Byway](#).

1916 and 1926: Federal Milestones

Two landmark dates shaped the national road system. On July 11, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Aid Road Act, the first federal highway funding law. It provided \$75 million in matching funds to states for rural post road construction (Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, Pub. L. 64-156). By 1917, every state had established a highway agency to administer these funds.



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A decade later, on November 11, 1926, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) approved the U.S. Numbered Highway System, replacing a patchwork of named trails with a rational grid of numbered routes (FHWA, 2016). Among the new designations was U.S. Route 66, running from Chicago to Los Angeles through eight states. Although Route 66 did not pass

through Nebraska, the same system assigned familiar numbers to routes that did: U.S. 6, U.S. 30, U.S. 77, U.S. 81, U.S. 275, and U.S. 281, among others.

DID YOU KNOW?

Route 66 was designated on November 11, 1926, and celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2026. Eight states along the route are hosting centennial events, with the national kickoff in Springfield, Missouri on April 30.



Nebraska Builds Its Highway System

Nebraska was among the first states to act on the 1916 federal law. The Legislature in 1917 appropriated \$640,000 to match the initial federal allocation and authorized the State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage to begin construction (Koster, 1997). Working with county officials, the board devised a plan to connect all county seats with approximately 5,000 miles of designated state highways.

During the 1920s, Nebraska laid gravel across its state highway system and ranked 14th nationally in graveled or better highway mileage by the end of the decade. In 1925, the Legislature enacted a gas tax of two-cents per gallon as an ongoing source of revenue to support the new roads (Grimes, 1992). The following year, the Bureau of Roads and Bridges began installing the first state and U.S. highway markers, using the covered wagon emblem for state routes (NDOT, n.d.).

Innovation continued into the next decade. In 1929–30, a section of what would become U.S. 281 near O’Neill served as a federal test site for bituminous road surfaces. The experiment proved so successful that bituminous mat became Nebraska’s principal paving material through the 1950s (Nebraska State Historical Society, n.d.). In 1941, the state completed its first four-lane divided highway along U.S. 73/75 from Omaha to Fort Crook.

The Interstate Era

The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 authorized the construction of the Interstate Highway System, providing 90 percent federal funding and transforming American transportation. In Nebraska, I-80 construction began in June 1957 with a 6.4-mile section near Gretna. The Legislature responded by splitting the Department of Roads and Irrigation into three separate agencies, creating the first state entity solely responsible for highway planning, construction, and maintenance (AARoads Wiki, n.d.).

Construction proceeded rapidly. The Omaha-to-Lincoln section opened in August 1961, and a continuous freeway stretched from North Platte to Omaha by December 1966. On October 19, 1974, Governor J. James Exon presided over the dedication of the final segment, making Nebraska the first state in the nation to complete its mainline Interstate. The 455-mile corridor across the state carried transcontinental freight and tourism traffic along the same Platte River valley that had served emigrants, railroads, and the Lincoln Highway before it.

KEY STAT

455 miles

Length of I-80 across Nebraska, making it one of the most heavily traveled transcontinental routes in the United States.

Route 66 and the National Context

While Route 66 ran from Chicago to Los Angeles through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, its story parallels Nebraska’s own highway history. Both emerged from the same Good Roads Movement and the same 1926 federal numbering system. Both served as economic lifelines for small towns and agricultural communities. And both were eventually superseded by the Interstate system—Route 66 was officially decommissioned in 1985 when I-40 was completed, just as the Lincoln Highway gave way to I-80.



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The Route 66 centennial in 2026 has prompted a national conversation about the role of highways in American culture and economic development. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has partnered with Google Arts & Culture and over 20 organizations to document the road’s history (Route 66 Centennial Commission, 2026). The national kickoff celebration will take place in Springfield, Missouri, on April 30, 2026, the anniversary of the 1926 telegram from the city to Washington, D.C. requesting the Route 66 designation. Nebraska’s own transportation heritage, though centered on the Lincoln Highway and I-80 corridor rather than Route 66, is part of this same national story of roads connecting communities, enabling commerce, and shaping the American landscape.



Looking Ahead

Today, the Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) oversees more than 10,000 miles of state and federal highways and approximately 93,000 miles of public roads across the state. The FY 2026 Surface Transportation Program commits \$722 million to 92 projects impacting 560 miles of highway and 83 bridges statewide (NDOT, 2025). Major investments include expansion of the U.S. 275 expressway corridor in northeastern Nebraska, widening of I-80 segments near Lincoln, and capacity improvements in the Omaha metropolitan area.

Federal funding continues to play a central role. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, enacted in November 2021, increased federal transportation investments, and the Build Nebraska Act of 2011 dedicates a quarter of one percent of state sales tax revenue to roadways. As the state marks a century since its first highway markers went up in 1926, the challenge remains the same one that animated the Good Roads Movement: connecting communities, supporting agriculture and commerce, and keeping Nebraskans moving safely across a vast landscape.

Sources

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Nebraska Road Construction: Key Milestones

Year	Milestone
1913	Lincoln Highway designated through Nebraska
1917	Legislature funds state highway system
1926	U.S. highway markers and covered wagon emblem adopted
1935	Last section of Lincoln Highway paved near North Platte
1941	First four-lane divided highway completed (US 73/75)
1957	First Interstate project begins near Gretna
1961	I-80 opens between Omaha and Lincoln
1974	Nebraska first state to complete mainline Interstate
2011	Build Nebraska Act dedicates sales tax to roads
2026	NDOT commits \$722M to 92 highway projects

Source: *Nebraska Department of Transportation; FHWA.*

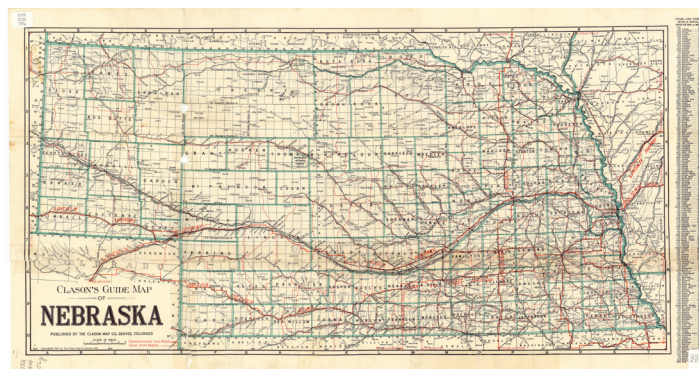


Image Credit: [Nebraska State Historical Society](https://www.nebraskahistory.org/)