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highway signs

NEW JERSEY
STATE HIGHWAY
DEPARTMENT

New Jersey State Library
bureau of
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EARLY SIGNS (Directional)

Traveling in pre-historic days was much simpler than it is today. If the cave man wanted to mark his trail so he could find his way back, he merely piled a few stones as route markers at occasional spots along the way.

Later, our forefathers adopted the Indian custom of notching trees along the route to serve as directional signs. They "blazed the trail".

(Regulatory Signs)

While directional signs are as old as history, regulatory signs are of more recent vintage. Regulatory signs (those that govern conduct on the highway), were used in ancient Rome to control chariot parking. Also, the Romans had driving regulations along the 50-thousand mile system of highways that held their empire together. Nevertheless it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that regulatory signs came into widespread use. It is reported that the first such sign in New Jersey regulated bicycle operations.

NEAREST TOWN

In New Jersey, and the rest of the country, early signs were crude, usually home-made by county officials or farmers who got tired of being asked for directions. Generally they listed the name of the nearest town with, sometimes, a rough estimate of the mileage. Road maps were equally vague. "Turn left at the red barn on right, proceed a mile and one tenth to cross-road store", etc.

AFTER WORLD WAR I

After World War I, as the speed of cars increased and traffic doubled, state and local authorities found it necessary to supplement the route and direction markers with an increasing number of speed limit, hazard warning and other traffic control signs.

At first each state developed its own system of signs. They varied widely from state to state in color, shape, size and wording. A motorist might drive half-way across an adjoining state before he discovered he was missing vital signs because they were different from those with which he was familiar.

UNIFORMITY

To end this confusion the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) set up a Uniform Traffic Control Device Committee to work out a standardization program and carry out continuous research to keep signs and other traffic control devices in step with automobile travel. In 1948, a manual on uniform traffic devices for streets and highways resulted from the work of the committee.

NEW JERSEY PROGRAM

New Jersey went even further than the prescribed manual. In 1955, it began a complete revamping of its sign program. All signs were to be reflectorized or illuminated, made larger and easier to read. The old so-called "totem pole" directional signs, that sometimes carried as many as twelve messages, were replaced by larger signs with larger wording. A directional sign, as a rule, would carry no more than

three messages. Large sign bridges that span the highway, usually at interchanges, permit the motorist at a glance to determine his route. Route markers were enlarged and simplified. Where a route marker in the past would carry, for example, "N.J. U.S. 206" the enlarged sign would carry only the route number. By eliminating "U.S." and "N.J." the Department was able to double the size of the route numbers. All state route numbers were similarly enlarged. Small speed limit signs, placed usually at one-mile intervals, gave way to six-foot-high speed signs placed approximately five miles apart.

ROUTE NUMBERS

The highway route numbers today even tell you what section of the country you are driving through. For example, on the Interstate System the odd numbers run north and south, the even numbers east and west. The lower odd numbers are in the west, the higher in the east. The lower even numbers in the south, the higher in the north.

Basically the Interstate system of numbering followed the U.S. Route numbering system which was started in 1925, when AASHO selected a system of major connecting routes throughout the nation. As with the Interstate, even numbers run east and west, odd numbers north and south.

The U.S. routes, however, have no legal status. Most U.S. numbered routes are state highways with state markings. Generally only routes that cross state lines are included in the U.S. system but a

connecting route with different state markings is often included. For example, U.S. 206 in New Jersey connects with U.S. 6 in Pennsylvania going westward.

STATE ROUTES

State route numbering in New Jersey is similar to the U.S. and Interstate systems in that odd numbers run north and south, even numbers east and west. The direction of the state system is measured from east to west and from south to north. So, while some routes may seemingly be running contrary to this numbering system, their terminal points will be to the west or north of their starting points.

There are approximately sixty-five thousand signs of all types on New Jersey highways; directional, speed limit, stop, warning, educational signs and signs bearing route numbers. Signs vary in shape and in size, from 18 by 24 inches to six feet by 21 feet. One of the largest sign bridges in the United States projects huge overhead directions for Interstate Route 295 travelers. While educational signs, such as historic markers, may differ from state to state, the directional and regulatory signs you find in New Jersey will not differ in meaning from those of any other state.

SIGN SHOP

All the official signs along the State Highway System are fabricated and repaired by the Department's sign shop in Trenton. Some ten thousand new signs are turned out each year, at a cost of approximately \$17 each. In addition, all signs that have deteriorated or have been vandalized are replaced.

SIGN VANDALISM

Each year more than 800 signs are stolen or vandalized which cost New Jersey taxpayers an average of \$14 thousand to replace or repair. Aside from the waste of money, the theft of highway signs may prove dangerous, and cause accidents and fatalities. If a motorist driving through strange territory is confused or lost, an accident may occur. And the danger of misleading strangers is most unpleasant and discourteous.

TRIP PLANNING

Because it is impractical to list the names of locations that can be reached from some sign locations on the highway (if we did we would be returning to the era of "totem poles"), the Department has established criteria, or order of importance, for all directional sign messages. In essence they are important road junctions or communities, county seats, and important traffic generating localities.

So, the wise motorist will plan his trip in advance with the use of the many excellent free maps which are available.

If you do need to consult a map, don't stop or slow down in high speed, high volume traffic. This maneuver can end your trip suddenly in disaster. Pull off into a rest area, or, if further information is needed, turn off the expressway at the nearest interchange.

THE FUTURE

Forecasters tell us that we can expect many drastic changes in transportation technology within the next two decades. But just as the

big reflective signs are a far cry from the caveman's pile of rocks, the trees blazed by our ancestors and the colored bands around the telegraph or telephone poles, sign technology will keep pace.

Some Types of Signs:

REGULATORY

Stop
Yield
Speed Limit
No U Turn
No Passing
Slow Traffic Keep Right
Do Not Enter
One Way
No Litter \$50 Fine

GUIDE

Route Markers
Junction
Direction Arrow
Temporary
Alternate
By Pass
Business Route
Detour
Destination & Distance
Exit & Entrance
Service & Parking
Mileposts
Historical
Trailblazers

WARNING

Turn
Curve
Winding Road
Stop Ahead
Yield Ahead
Merging Traffic
Pavement Width Transition
Narrow Bridge
One Lane Bridge

