

Jefferson Highway history is traced

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Contributing writer

Members of the New Orleans Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution recently re-dedicated the Jefferson Highway monument on its 80th anniversary.

Despite its name, this monument is not on the busy Jefferson Parish highway but in the heart of the Central Business District, at St. Charles Avenue and Common Street.

It marks the southern terminus of a highway that ran from New Orleans to Winnipeg, capital of the Canadian province of Manitoba. It was named for President Thomas Jefferson, who bought the Louisiana Purchase territory through which the highway ran for nearly all its length.

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Frederick C. Jung Jr., Sons of the American Revolution, left; and DAR officers Shirley Stakelum, Mary Jane Becker, Nadine Miller and Gloria Marcotte at obelisk.

STAFF PHOTO BY ELIOT KAMENITZ

Marker

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In the early days of automobiles, the Jefferson Highway was a 2,200-mile-long "Pine to Palm" route that proceeded northwest from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, Alexandria and Shreveport before reaching Denison, Texas. There, it turned north through Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota to Winnipeg.

Shirley Stakelum, the chapter's commemorative events chairwoman, became interested in the highway and monument in 1988 and researched their history.

She learned that in the first two decades of the 20th century, although the number of autos was multiplying fast, there were no national or even state highways. Motorists who ventured far from home had to depend upon markers placed by members of local associations and auto clubs to find the most direct routes and avoid getting lost or sidetracked.

Perhaps the first national highway, or at least the first multistate route that was marked, was the Pikes Peak Ocean-to-Ocean Highway. In 1915, Lewis Stubbs of St. Joseph, Mo., suggested marking auto trails by painting colored bands around utility poles, and the work was carried out by the Automobile Club of St. Joseph.

By 1924, there were at least 240 auto trails sponsored by more than 100 separate, competing organizations whose efforts were at best uncoordinated and often overlapping or worse. Some roads carried as many as eight different markers, and sometimes alternate routes had the same name.

In that year, to create some order from this chaos, the American Association of State Highway Officials asked the federal government to oversee a national highway numbering and marking system. The plan was approved and went into effect two years later.

The Jefferson Highway originally was conceived as a north-south trading route, affording easy transportation of the grain and manufactured goods of the North and the cotton, rice, sugar and other produce of the South. But it also was a popular tourist route, with several touring groups traveling all the way from New Orleans to Winnipeg and vice versa.

Newspapers of the time published articles about the visits, and the travelers were received and entertained with much ceremony. New Orleans Mayor Martin Behrman and Louisiana Gov. Ruffin G. Pleasant, traveling with one group, were met at the Canadian border by the premier and attorney general of Manitoba, along with 60 carloads of people.

Among those making the trip

another time were two women from New Orleans, with one driving all the way, at the suggestion of the Chamber of Commerce, "just to show what American women can do."

The round-trip journey could be made comfortably in about three weeks, "a splendid demonstration of how modern methods of transportation have triumphed over weather difficulties and other obstacles," reported a piece in *The Winnipeg Tribune* in 1925.

Over the decades, the granite of the Jefferson Highway obelisk in the CBD had become very dirty, and the bronze plaque was so tarnished that it was barely legible. The monument was removed and stored during the demolition of the nearby building that used to be the John Mitchell Hotel, then cleaned and reinstalled at its original site after the construction of the Courtyard by Marriott Hotel.

The plaque again clearly reads "The End of the Jefferson Highway Marked by the New Orleans Chapter D.A.R. 1917," and below that, incised into the granite, is the notation "Winnipeg to New Orleans."

Among those celebrating the rededication of the monument were members of the Daughters of the Society of 1812, the Sons of the American Revolution and several D.A.R. chapters.