Fairfield Historical Society – Fairfield’s First ‘Highway’

Let’s start with a question: What was the first official New Jersey numbered highway to pass through Fairfield?

1.) Route 46
2.) Route 12
3.) Route 6
4.) Route 8

Answer:

From the mid-19th century, the building and maintenance of roads had been seen as a state and local responsibility. As a result, America’s roads were generally in poor condition, especially in rural areas like our own Caldwell Township.

The first federal aid bill was submitted to Congress in 1902, proposing the creation of a Bureau of Public Roads. There were about 20,000 automobiles in the U.S. then, and only eight years later this total increased to 458,000 vehicles!

The first significant Federal and State Government Highway legislation began in 1916. There were two competing interest groups at stake: Our Farmers wanted sturdy, all-weather post roads to transport their goods, and urban motorists wanted paved long-distance highways. The bill that eventually passed leaned in the favor of the rural populations by appropriating $75 million for the improvement of post roads. It also included a stipulation that all states have a highway agency staffed by professional engineers who would administer the
federal funds and ensure that all roads were constructed properly. New Jersey was already actively mapping out an intrastate highway network in 1916 with the “Egan Bill” that designated 13 ‘highway’ routes throughout the State.

One of these original routes was Route 12 that ran west from Paterson all the way to Philipsburg N.J. (From Denville to Hackettstown Route 12 ran concurrently with Route 5).

Route 12 looks fairly straight on the above map, but it ran an irregular route locally because it was mostly just connecting already existing 1916 roadways. Heading west from Paterson you took McBride Avenue to Totowa Road to Union Boulevard, then onto Main Street in Little Falls. Continuing west on Main Street through Singac to Little Falls Road into Fairfield. Past the Van Ness Homestead
then connecting with Fairfield Road passing by the Dutch Reformed Church. Continuing west to Clinton Road to the Oak Road loop into Bloomfield Avenue and over the Pine Brook Bridge. (Sure hope they had good highway signs along this roundabout route. I also wonder if anyone stopped at DeBauns Garage and asked him for directions? Unfortunately he was blind but operated his Garage despite his handicap. No, I don’t make this stuff up).

In 1927 the Holland Tunnel opened and construction of the George Washington Bridge was just starting. The Fairfield / Willow Brook (Wayne) Bridge over the Passaic River was also under construction at that time. When New Jersey Highways were ‘renumbered’ in 1927, Route 6 replaced much of former Route 12. This new bridge made the previous Singac/Little Falls Rd. section obsolete.

Route 6 still followed Fairfield Road-Clinton-Oak Road Loop-Bloomfield Ave route to the Pine Brook Bridge. About 15 years later, another bridge was built over the Passaic River joining Fairfield with Pine Brook. This eliminated the Clinton-Oak Road Loop (now NJ Route 159) diversion.
Route 6 was a State Highway that was designed to connect the GWB with New Jersey’s Delaware River Crossing at Delaware N.J. (Henry V.B. Darlington’s Private Toll Bridge there). In the mid 1930’s U.S. 46 was similarly planned and later replaced N.J. Route 6. Portions of Route 46 were built to ‘Freeway Standards’ and Fairfield was fortunate that these standards were applied in our country stretch.

Why? Because five overpasses were constructed in roughly four miles within Fairfield: Passaic Ave., Dey Overpass, Hollywood Ave., Horseneck Rd., and Gately Overpass. Only the Clinton Rd. / Plymouth St. crossing was not provided an overpass of some type. Don’t take these for granted because there were virtually no overpasses west of Fairfield in Morris County. We had one traffic signal in 4.5 miles. Pine Brook/Montville/Parsippany now has seven traffic signals in that same 4.5 mile distance.

The first Farmers Roadside Stand on Route 46 in Fairfield belonged to the Pollio Brothers Pasquale (‘Pat’) and Peter. This ‘Stand’ replaced a similar one on the main farm located on Fairfield Road (Route 6). A large greenhouse was added shortly after this photo was taken.

Many of us can remember when the Clinton Road/Plymouth Street – Route 46 traffic signal was the only one in town. Not counting a flashing light at Passaic Ave. and Little Falls Road. We now have at least 15 signals around town.
Route 46 was the ‘super slab’ in the 1950’s and 1960’s. And any Fairfield Motorist could tell you about State Police Radar Traps that were set up westbound between Hollywood Ave. and the Gately Overpass almost every Sunday.

(Absolutely True) Route 46 Radar Story

The NJSP set up one of their radar traps under the Horseneck Road Overpass behind the center pier column. Their small tripod (similar to the one pictured above) was on the center median close to the ‘fast lane’. I was at our Family’s road stand selling Easter flowers when I saw a red Triumph ‘Spitfire’ speeding well over 70 MPH towards the radar trap. Maybe even 80 MPH.

The Spitfire driver spots the radar device and slams on his brakes. He loses control and swerves onto the median and smashes the radar device into a thousand pieces! No fib, not a piece larger than a quarter could be seen anywhere. He pulled over on the west side of the bridge to await his fate. In five minutes there were four NJSP cruisers surrounding the Spitfire. In fifteen minutes there were eight NJSP cruisers on the scene. I have never seen so many NJSP cruisers before (or even since) in one place. One trooper was measuring the skid marks with a (high tech) distance measuring wheel. Funny, I’ll bet they needed all nine Troopers to write all of the tickets that poor guy received that day.
Hope you enjoyed this latest trip through memory lane. If you are interested in a comprehensive history of New Jersey Highway’s (222 pages) follow this excellent Link (Control/Click):

https://www.state.nj.us/transportation/publicat/historicroadwaystudy.pdf

Have a great Thanksgiving Everyone! ...............Paul Pollio November 21, 2018

Early 1920’s Road Map showing Route 12 that ran from Paterson to Phillipsburg. From Denville to Hackettstown Route 12 ran concurrently with Route 5.