

Whatever Happened to Georgia's Dixie Highway?

BY ED JACKSON

Occasionally in Georgia, you will see an “Old Dixie Highway” street sign. You may wonder what the Dixie Highway is (or more appropriately *was*). Built mostly between 1915 and 1927, the Dixie Highway was the first north-south interstate paved highway in the U.S., stretching from the Canadian border to Miami, Florida.

As late as 1910, few highways existed in America, and inter-city highways were considered an unneeded luxury in most of the South. People rode the train to travel any distance inland. Locally, they traveled by wagon, buggy, or city streetcar. Very few paved roads existed in America, except for brick and concrete streets in large cities. So-called “improved roads” outside the cities were typically graded dirt, clay, or gravel. Across the nation, but especially in the South, most roads were filled with ruts that turned into mud when it rained.

In one sense, the Dixie Highway was an outgrowth of the Good Roads Movement, a national effort launched in the 1890s by bicycle clubs but joined by automobile owners who had experienced what it was like to drive on dirt roads—especially after a hard rain. The U.S. Post Office supported better roads for its Rural Free Delivery service routes, and farmers desired reliable roads to get their crops to market.

Although there were a variety of voices calling for better roads, it is Carl Fisher who is considered the Father of the Dixie Highway. Fisher was an entrepreneur, promoter, land speculator, and auto enthusiast. In 1912, he purchased an undeveloped island that would later become Miami Beach, Florida, in hopes of creating a winter vacation mecca for snowbirds from Midwestern states. Henry Ford's Model T offered an affordable means of travel, but Fisher knew that one essential thing was missing – a paved highway that could withstand heavy rain.

In 1914, Fisher proposed a north-south paved highway to connect Chicago with Miami. He asked Indiana governor Samuel Ralston to contact fellow governors to meet and discuss what Fisher had dubbed the Dixie Highway. At the first meeting, held in April 1915 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the Dixie Highway Association (DHA) was formed. The DHA embarked on an unlikely goal– to build an interstate highway without federal or state money or regulations.

Local leaders would have to fund and oversee paving the highway through their individual counties.

Numerous cities and counties in different states wanted to be on the Dixie Highway—but it was impossible to



accommodate every request. Once Michigan and the Carolinas joined the DHA, officials decided to have a Dixie Highway West and a Dixie Highway East—with Sault Ste. Marie, located in Upper Michigan on the Canadian border, as the northern terminus. From there, both highways would run roughly parallel routes southward, converging in Miami.

As interest spread, the association decided to allow connecting highways between the main Dixie Highway routes. The result was a network of roads all claiming the name Dixie Highway. To the extent possible, the Dixie would follow existing roadbeds. Because many roads did not cross county or state lines, a lot of new road construction was needed.

Initially, community leaders and auto enthusiasts contributed money for paving the Dixie in their county. But, often that was not enough—so, many counties held bond referendums. As a result, the Dixie varied in width, appearance, composition, and durability from county to county. In some cases, it was clay, gravel, or a dirt road coated with sprayed tar. In a few cases, it was built of brick or shell. In most cases, the pavement was concrete or a mixture of crushed stone sealed with tar or asphalt.

Construction of the Dixie Highway began in 1915 by a loose confederation of counties. That changed in 1916, when Congress passed the Federal Aid Road Act. States wishing to receive the limited funding provided by the act were required to create a state highway agency, and in 1916 Georgia complied.



The Dixie Highway network from Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, to Miami, Florida.

In 1917, construction of the Dixie Highway was stalled by World War I. After the war, the prosperity of Roaring Twenties meant more Americans had jobs with good salaries. Many families now had the means to own an automobile and take extended vacations. With the coming of the auto age, the Dixie Highway was heralded as an avenue to allow snowbirds to escape the winter cold by vacationing in the South—especially Florida.

Because of Georgia's location, both routes of the Dixie Highway extended through it. Connecting routes and a loop through Rome were added to the network. The most important connector was formally designated the "Central Dixie Highway." It departed the Dixie Highway West at Macon, heading southeast to Waycross on to Jacksonville, where it joined the Dixie Highway East. (*see map on page 3*)

In 1921, the Georgia General Assembly imposed a one-cent per gallon motor fuel tax to raise funds for road construction. That same year, new federal legislation provided states with increasing amounts of funding for two-lane interstate roads. This allowed Georgia's State Highway Department to assume responsibility for road construction and maintenance, including the Dixie Highway. The motor fuel tax was raised to three-cents per gallon in 1923.

In 1926, highway officials gave all federally funded highways numbers instead of names. The Dixie Highway was not given a single U.S. highway number. Instead, segments of the Dixie were incorporated into different newly numbered highways. (*see map on page 4*)

By 1927, the Dixie Highway Association considered its goal achieved and disbanded. In reality, however, portions of the Dixie Highway in Georgia remained unpaved until 1939.

Dixie Highway Routes Through Georgia, 1924



Both routes of the Dixie Highway extended through Georgia. The Dixie Highway West entered northwest Georgia at Rossville, proceeding south to Dalton, Marietta, and Atlanta. Rome was included on the route through a DHA authorized loop. The Dixie Highway West went into downtown Atlanta, then proceeded south to Jonesboro and Macon. South of Macon, it took a southwesterly route through Fort Valley, Americus, Albany, Thomasville, and on to Tallahassee—then through central Florida to Miami.

The Dixie Highway East entered Georgia from South Carolina at Augusta, continuing on a southeastern route to Waynesboro, Sylvania, Savannah, Jacksonville, and down the eastern Florida coast to Miami.

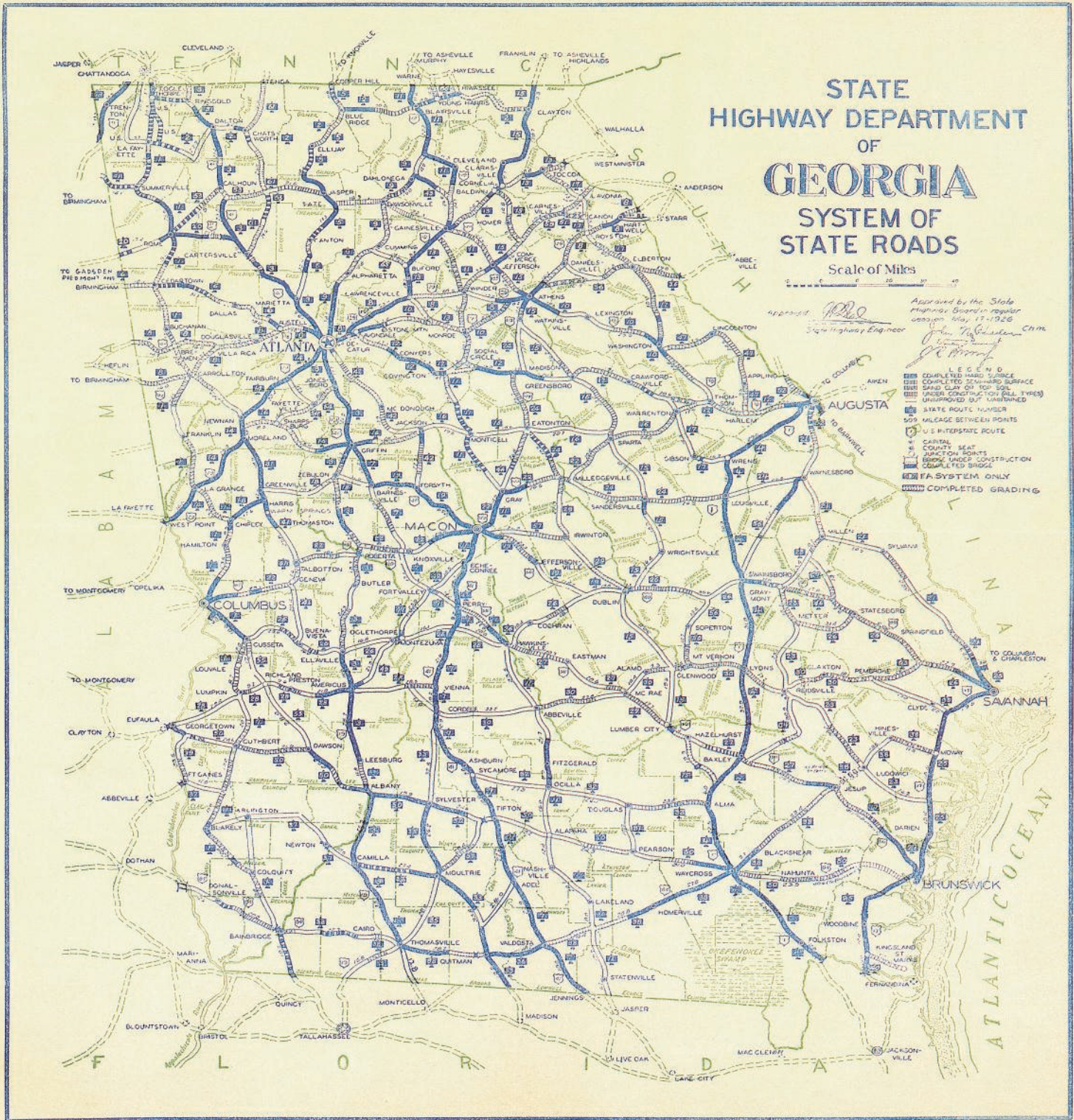
In 1916, DHA authorized two east-west connecting highways. The northern connector went from Atlanta to Stone Mountain, Madison, Milledgeville, and Louisville, finally connecting with the Dixie Highway East at Waynesboro. The longer connector was formally designated the “Central Dixie Highway.” It departed the Dixie Highway West at Echeconnee south of Macon, continuing south to Perry, then southeast to Waycross, Folkston, and Jacksonville, where it joined the Dixie Highway East.

After taking over responsibility for paving the Dixie Highway in 1919, Georgia’s State Highway Department placed a high priority on paving the road from Perry to Tifton to Valdosta and on to the Florida border (a route designated U.S. 41 in 1926). Because of the route’s popularity, the Dixie Highway Association added the Perry-Valdosta route to the Dixie Highway network in 1924, though never formally designating it with a title.

1929 Georgia Highway Map

Courtesy of Ed Jackson

OCTOBER, 1929.



The Dixie Highway West from Rossville to Atlanta to Macon to Valdosta and southward into Florida became U.S. 41. South of Macon, the original route departed from U.S. 41 at Echeconnee and proceeded southwest on Ga. 49 to Americus, where it followed U.S. 19 to Albany, Thomasville, and Tallahassee.

The Dixie Highway East entered Georgia from South Carolina at Augusta on what was designated U.S. 25, continuing to Waynesboro, where it took Ga. 24 on a southeastern route to U.S. 301, then proceeding to Sylvania, where it followed Ga. 21 to Savannah. From Savannah, the eastern route followed U.S. 17 to Jacksonville, where the Dixie Highway became U.S. 1.

Building the Dixie Highway



Considered the Father of the Dixie Highway, Carl Fisher proposed the north-south paved highway to connect Chicago with Miami.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Georgia did not have a highway department, and road construction and maintenance were strictly city and county functions performed mainly by county and state prisoners.



Concrete Dixie Highway in central Georgia, 1927.



Some poorer counties on the Dixie Highway connectors could only afford to spray tar on a graded dirt road.

THE DIXIE HIGHWAY



NOVEMBER, 1917

The Dixie Highway magazine was published by the Dixie Highway Association from 1916 to 1926. It had national subscribers and was full of information on the importance of the highway, the status of its completion, and recommendations for motorists on a variety of matters.

This issue of the Dixie Highway magazine stressed the military importance of the Dixie Highway, which ran through Fort Oglethorpe near Rossville. The magazine details the results of tests to see how quickly and efficiently Army trucks could be used to haul supplies and troops from Fort McPherson in Atlanta to Fort Oglethorpe. The importance of highways to the military was later used as a rationale for Congress authorizing the Interstate Highway System in 1956.

Legacy of the Dixie Highway



Almost immediately, construction of the Dixie Highway gained national attention. Prior to 1915, winter resort hotels in Florida were accessible and affordable only to the well-to-do. The Model T and Dixie Highway changed that, bolstering Florida as both a year-around vacation site and a place to live. In 1920, a land boom began in Palm Beach County. Word spread across the country that a fortune could be made buying and selling land in Florida, and a land rush followed. Tens of thousands of speculators and families loaded up their cars and headed south on the Dixie Highway to Florida. Swamps were drained and quickly sold to eager buyers, who hoped to re-sell the land at a big profit to newcomers. This worked for while, but the bubble burst in 1926. Many families who had come to Florida to get rich now had difficulty finding gas money to return home.

The Dixie Highway was one of the early examples of the economic impact of highway construction. Under the best of conditions, a trip from Chicago or Detroit to Miami could take two weeks. While hotels and restaurants along the way benefitted from some travelers, many families could not afford to eat out or stay in a hotel each night of their trip. So, they packed a tent and everything needed to camp out along the way—often loaded into a small, open trailer pulled behind their car. Families would set up camp in an open field or at a church or school along the way and then be on their way in the morning—hopefully before anyone noticed them.

Eventually entrepreneurs along the highway created tourist camps. For as little as a quarter families could set up their tents and enjoy the luxury of water and a bathroom. In some cases, towns would set aside an area of land for Dixie Highway travelers to camp—sometimes without charge in the hopes of attracting tourist dollars. Local grocers and restaurant owners complained about what they called “tin can tourist camps” because most of the travelers brought their own food with them in tin cans. The name became a point of pride to the “tin can campers,” who later adopted a tradition of holding tin can camp reunions.

Tourist camp owners began adding small cabins for travelers. Initially these were known as tourist courts and were the primitive precursors of what more fashionably became known as motor courts, motor hotels, and finally motels. Thousands of “mom and pop” travel camps and lodges developed along the Dixie Highway. Joining these were gas stations, auto repair shops, small restaurants, grocers, fruit and pecan stands, souvenir shops (many of which had chenille bedspreads displayed outside for sale), and other enterprises.



By the 1930s, small camping trailers were becoming popular. They were followed by small trailer homes, which contained a tiny sofa, table, kitchen, and bed (though no bathroom). After World War II, trailers became larger and included a bathroom. Not only could families vacation in Florida inexpensively, many older couples from colder climates decided to live there permanently in one of the exploding number of trailer parks for retirees. Almost all of Florida’s growing population would travel down the Dixie Highway through Georgia.

Camping Along the Dixie Highway



In the early years of the Dixie Highway, many families could not afford to stay in a hotel each night of their trip, so they would pull off the road and set up a tent in an open field or in a church or school yard.



Ford Model-T pulling camping trailer

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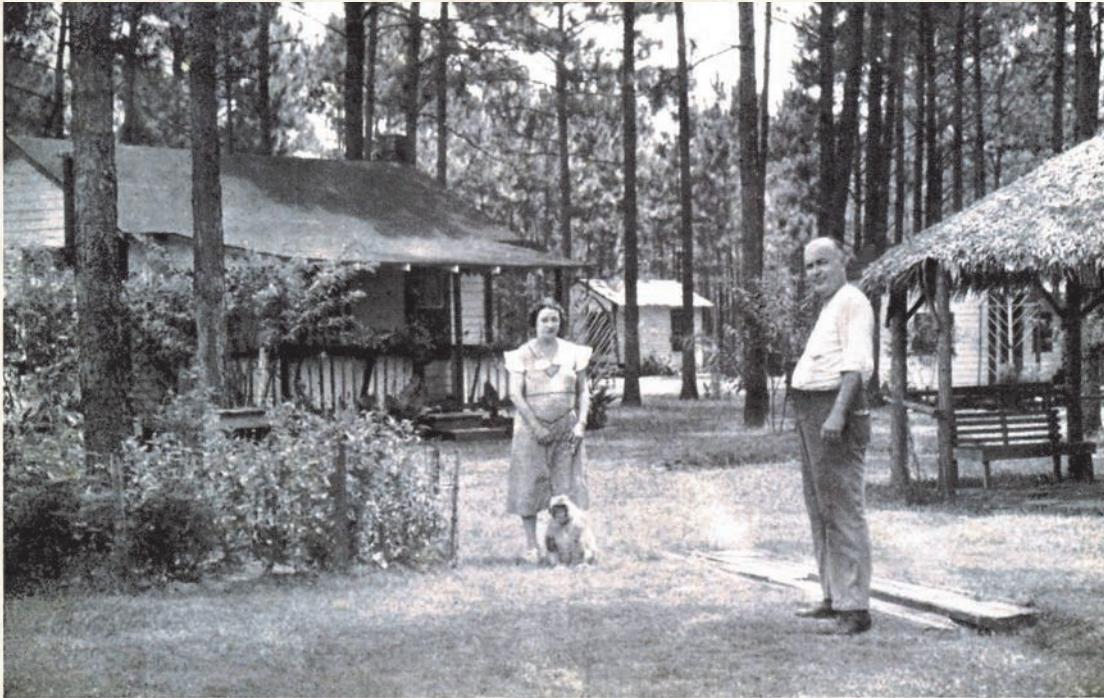
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Camping Along the Dixie Highway



DIXIE CAMP - U. S. No. 1, City Limits South - WAYCROSS ,GA.

Many tourist camps and lodges were operated by husbands and wives, such as the case with the Dixie Camp, which was located on the Central Dixie Highway (U.S. 1) south of Waycross.



Wilson's Tourist Camp was located south of Atlanta just off the Dixie Highway near Lakewood. Here travelers could set up a tent. The owner also sold gas, auto supplies, repaired tires, and probably had a few grocery items for sale.

Florida via the Dixie Highway



Model-T with Illinois license plate parked at Miami Beach, 1922.

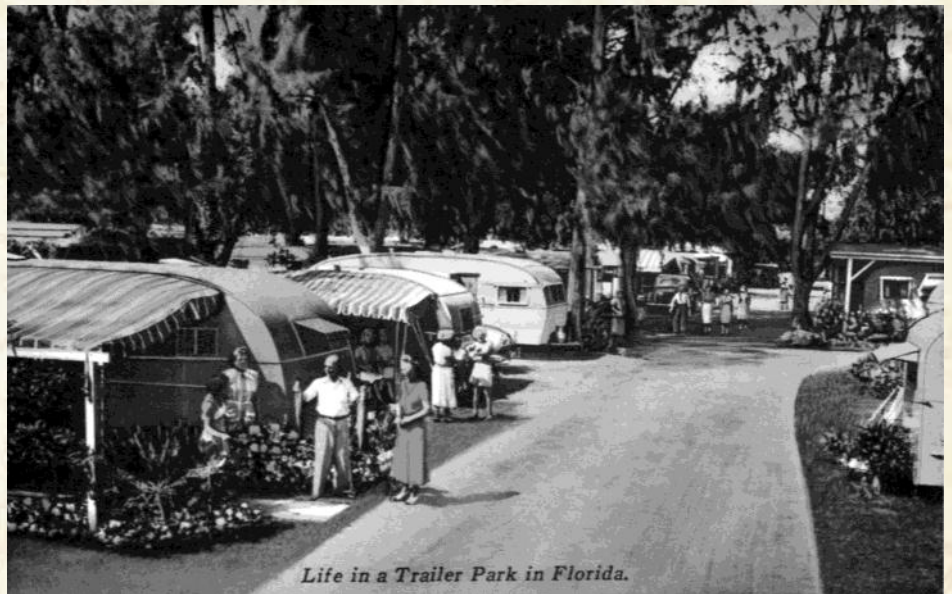


Miami Beach sign

Florida via the Dixie Highway



Bradenton Trailer Park



Florida trailer park



Buyers waiting in line to buy lots on Davis Islands owned by famous developer D.P. Davis.

In 1924 and 1925, during the height of the Florida land boom, potential buyers would wait hours in the hot sun for a chance to buy a piece of Florida real estate with the hopes of turning around and selling it at a much higher rate. Easy credit and a strong belief that land prices would continue to climb in value fueled the real estate frenzy.

The Dixie Highway Today

Today, the Dixie Highway is mainly a memory—though a few reminders remain. The old Dixie Highway still runs through Adairsville, and short segments elsewhere can be found. Occasionally, you'll see the remains of what once was a motel that served travelers. But, most of the original highway is gone, renamed, paved over, or re-routed to newer highways. The final death knell of the Dixie Highway as a contiguous, driveable route came in the 1970s, when the final portions of I-75 and I-95 in Georgia were completed.

Amazingly, despite its importance to Georgia and to motorists driving to Florida, there is a single state historical marker plus several stone markers in Georgia dedicated to the Dixie Highway. But each spring, the highway's name resurfaces in what is called the "Dixie Highway 90-mile Yard Sale"—a 90-mile venture between Ringgold and Acworth, Georgia, where residents set up tents in their front yard with junk or treasure for sale.



Georgia Dixie Highway Association Logo. The Dixie Highway 90-mile Yard Sale is hosted by the GDHA.



Dixie Highway 90-mile Yard Sale

GHS is partnering with GDOT and the Federal Highway Association on a project coordinated by New South Associates to study and document the Dixie Highway. The Society's library and archives will be the repository of records collected during the project.

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All images in this article are courtesy of Ed Jackson.