

The cultural legacy of Vermont's Interstate highways is preserved online

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Scenes that are now common to the collective American experience – taking a cross-country road trip, shopping at a mall or superstore, and dining at a chain restaurant – are easier today than they were 50 years ago because of the largest and most expensive construction project ever undertaken by the United States government. Though it has been more than half a century since the Federal-Aid Highway Act passed Congress, was signed into law by President Eisenhower, and construction of the Interstate highways began, the cultural legacy of this enormous undertaking is still unfolding.



The farmhouse that Sara Gluckman's grandparents once occupied in Barton. This 1970 photograph shows part of the Interstate 91 right-of-way in the foreground.

Although the effect of Interstate highway construction on life in urban areas has been widely studied (e.g., Connerly 2002, Mohl 2004, Napolitan 2008), much less is known about the impact of the Interstates on rural populations and landscapes. Vermont is a profoundly rural state where Interstate highway alignments mostly bypassed cities and towns. Instead of breaking up a neighborhood, a newly constructed highway would often separate farmer from field.

Here in Vermont, unique among states, we have a robust photographic record of Interstate construction between 1958 and 1978. Held by the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, these images show 321 miles of Interstate highway roadway before, during, and after construction, primarily taken by Donald Weidenmayer and other photographers working with him. Images of construction on feeder routes are also part of the collec-



Ground-level photography shows the magnitude of landscape changes as well as closeups of large machines used to build highways. This image captures the clearing of trees and rock in Middlesex in 1959.

tion. The photography program was originally designed as a way to safeguard the state of Vermont in the event of a dispute over the value of properties seized by eminent domain, but highway photography continued for more than 20 years as construction continued. As a result, more than 36,000 photographs, (mostly large format negatives) show transformation of the landscape. This project, called “Interpreting the Interstates,” has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. These images are now available to view online (www.uvm.edu/interstate). They are part of a larger, searchable archive of historic Vermont imagery that we have maintained at the university since 1999 with the support of the National Science Foundation (www.uvm.edu/landscape). Using these photographs, in conjunction with oral histories and anonymous attitude surveys, we are documenting the legacy of the Interstate Highway System in Vermont.

The photographs in the collection weave a compelling and moving narrative. Some of the most haunting images are those of doomed homes. Often families were occupying the homes while the photographs were taken, and the things of daily life – family photos on the wall, toys on the floor, and fastidiously made beds – make the viewer feel like a voyeur. Other times, families had already moved on and the homes looked empty and decrepit with snow falling in through the front door, piles of discarded clothes

in a corner, and wires hanging where appliances had once been.

The highways drastically changed the Vermont landscape. Aerial photographs from the collection show the scale of change wrought by Interstate construction. Ground-level images show machines pushing tons of rock, dirt, trees, and buildings to make way for the coming highway. These photographs of empty or soon to be empty homes and altered landscapes are one legacy of the Interstate; they show both destruction of what was and the creation of something new.

To understand how the construction of the highway system in Vermont affected people, we used two different tools. We collected 182 attitude surveys to understand people's attitudes about the highway system and we collected 16 oral histories. Our anonymous-attitude survey included basic demographic information such as age, duration of residence in Vermont, and extent of Interstate highway use, as well as more specific questions



This summer 1965 photograph taken in Swanton shows Interstate highway 89 soaring over the Missisquoi River and bisecting farm fields. The splitting of farms was a much more common occurrence in Vermont than splitting of neighborhoods.

about opinions such as whether the person completing the survey thought towns closer to the Interstate were more prosperous, and whether the Interstate affected businesses in a positive or negative way. The surveys were distributed in a paper form during talks at grange halls, libraries, and senior events. A similar version of the survey was distributed via an Internet link.

Interview subjects for oral histories were found primarily through talks – the same talks where the surveys were distributed – and through the recommendations of community members. Interviews focused on peoples’ experiences related to the Interstate highway system including their memories of planning and construction. The interviews were unscripted and lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to more than an hour.

The average survey responder was 54 years old and had lived in Vermont 35 years. Most responders did not use the Interstate highway on a daily basis; 42 percent used the highway once a week and 30 percent used the road once a month. Somewhat less than half of those surveyed believe or strongly believe that the highway improved their quality of life on a daily basis.

This assertion that the quality of life and convenience has improved since the construction of the Interstate highway system was made during many of the interviews. For example, Anne Nash, a Dummerston resident believes that,

“It (the Interstate highway) is mainly a way to get from point A to B. I appreciate the fact that we can get there sooner than we would have otherwise ... I remember the time before the interstate was built and we had to drive on those slow roads. It was difficult and it wasn't fun.”

Convenience, however, comes at a price and some Vermonters did not believe that the convenience was worth it. Ruth Barton, another Dummerston resident believes that,

“[Without the Interstate highway] people wouldn't have as high a standard of living but I'm not sure that it's necessary ... My father said it would change Vermont and maybe not for the better, and I think he was right.”

Vermonters believe that the Interstate highway changed their state. More than 90 percent of those surveyed agree or strongly agree that towns closer to the highway experienced more change than towns further away, and more than 50 percent of responders believe that the culture or overall feeling of their town has changed since the coming of the highway. Many

people discussed these changes during interviews. For example, Alexei Hudak of Swanton responded that,

“I think (the Interstate highway) has led to the sort of general homogenization of Vermont culture. Not that we don’t still have good Vermont culture but it has definitely led us down that road more and more so. You know, places start to look like anywhere USA.”

This sense of identity being lost is perhaps best illustrated by a quote from Ginger Isham of Williston who, when asked if it bothers her that people only associate Williston with the conglomeration of shopping centers at Taft Corners replied,

“Yeah, it bothers me. I don’t like to have people think Taft Corners is what Williston is like. All of Williston is not like that. They don’t understand that south of the Interstate is not Taft Corners.”

While many interviews help to illustrate the results of the anonymous survey, the strength of the oral histories is that they allow the conversation to flow to topics important to the interviewee. For instance, Ginger Isham, who was quoted earlier, discussed how different it is to travel on the Interstate highway versus the smaller state roads.

“The Interstate is so commercial, it’s non-friendly I think. But there’s times, because of the fast life we live now, that you want to avoid certain areas that are so congested that you’ll get on the Interstate. When we travel toward Montpelier, we will go on the Interstate but we will come back along the friendly roads just because we like to see Vermont’s beauty, we want to see the environment; we want to see the changes in these small towns that you can’t see on the Interstate. It makes you stop and become aware of your surroundings . . . For instance it’s wonderful to go to Middlebury. There’s no Interstate and there’s two or three ways to get to Middlebury, and you feel like you’re connected to Vermont. You feel like, ‘This is the real Vermont.’ The Interstate, it doesn’t make you feel this is the real Vermont as these back roads do.”

Ginger Isham was not the only Vermonter to speak passionately about a subject the survey could never hope to capture. Steven Coon of St. Albans Town discussed the car culture of the 1960s and the Interstate.

“By 1968 the segment up here in St. Albans, St. Albans to Burlington

was completed and it was fantastic. As a sixteen-year-old kid you jump in your car and you can drive 65 to 70 miles an hour down the road and the cars were cooler back then. You know if you take a look at the really cool cars, the late 60s had really cool cars. The whole culture was built around muscle cars and the price of gas was around 30 cents a gallon and you could fill up your car for 5 bucks and drive wherever you wanted.”

Sherman Gage, a former chief engineer for the Vermont Agency of Transportation, made similar statements about car culture and the freedom of the open road.

“It’ll always be the car. We all have different opinions on that but look at the car companies, look at the designs. People like that freedom. That’ll never change.”

People’s occupations and life experiences influenced which stories we heard. One such person was Sara Gluckman of Glover. When she was young her grandparents owned a farm in Barton. She discussed her grandparents buying the farm and working it, recounting with pride that her family’s farm was the first in the area to own a cooling milk tank. Her grandparent’s farm, including the farmhouse itself, was directly in the path of Interstate 91 and was demolished (Figure 7). Even years later she expresses her grief at the loss of her grandparent’s home,

“There’s a little hole in your life because it’s not there any more . . . My grandparents had their 50th wedding anniversary in that house.”

Many other Vermont farms lost buildings and acreage to make way for the Interstate highway. While some farms, like that of Sara Gluckman’s grandparents ceased to exist, others lost only part of their land. Warren Blodgett of Orleans had nine acres of prime land on the edge of his farm taken. With the money he received for those nine acres, he bought 23 acres from a neighbor and continued to run his dairy farm.

More than 36,000 photographs taken during Interstate highway construction in Vermont document the transformation of a profoundly rural state between 1958 and 1978 and are available to the public free of charge at www.uvm.edu/interstate. Since construction began, a half century has passed but the memories of a dying generation – those who remember an America before a network of highways linked our cities – remain passionate and strong. Though for some the memories are painful, nearly everyone interviewed commented on the positive effects the highway system had on

the state of Vermont, and on our country as a whole. It then seems that the cultural legacy of the interstate in Vermont is one of change, encompassing both loss of the past and the creation of something new and useful.

References

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