



The AAG Review of Books

ISSN: (Print) 2325-548X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrob20

The Jefferson Highway: Blazing the Way from Winnipeg to New Orleans; Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930; The Garage: Automobility and Building Innovation in America's Early Auto Age

Joe Weber

To cite this article: Joe Weber (2017) The Jefferson Highway: Blazing the Way from Winnipeg to New Orleans; Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930; The Garage: Automobility and Building Innovation in America's Early Auto Age, The AAG Review of Books, 5:2, 116-120, DOI: [10.1080/2325548X.2017.1292587](https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2017.1292587)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2017.1292587>



Published online: 04 Apr 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 360



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

REVIEW ESSAY

The Jefferson Highway: Blazing the Way from Winnipeg to New Orleans.

Lyell D. Henry, Jr. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2016. 220 pp., notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-6093-8421-0).

Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900–1930.

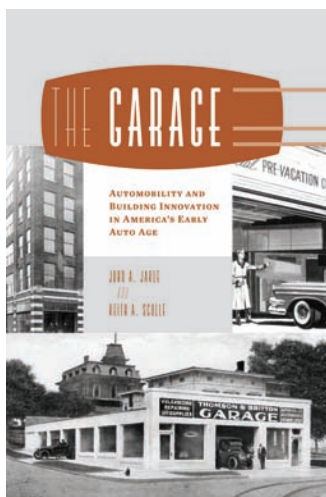
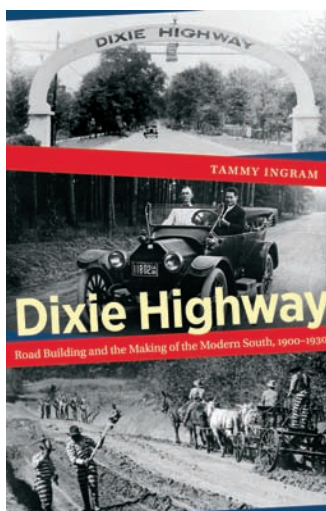
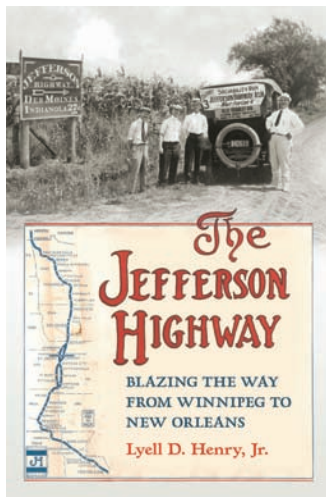
Tammy Ingram. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 272 pp., notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-4696-2982-7).

The Garage: Automobility and Building Innovation in America's Early Auto Age.

John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2013. 263 pp., notes, illustrations, index. \$29.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-57233-958-3).

*Reviewed by Joe Weber,
Department of Geography,
University of Alabama,
Tuscaloosa, AL.*

The early automobile era in the United States was a time of tremendous change in technology, land use, and social patterns. Among the changes to the built environment in the early twentieth century were an expanding road network and new types of businesses and buildings. Many books have been written on these subjects, and recent decades have seen many new ones added every year. These three books cover these new features, the first two discussing the short-lived phenomenon of named highways promoted by entrepreneurs and organi-



zations, the third covering new automobile-oriented businesses and the buildings developed for them.

The Lincoln Highway, running between New York and San Francisco, was initiated in 1912 and remains the most famous of the more than 400 named highways that were created by private organizations in the early twentieth century. These were dreamed up by promoters who sought to create a long-distance route out of existing local roads. They named their routes after important people or a regional description and raised what money they could to improve sections of road and mark telephone poles with their highway's initials or colors. In later years these organizations might have been little more than attempts to extort money from towns wanting to be on the route, but they represented an important stage in highway development. When the Bureau of Public Roads and state highway departments created a national numbered highway system in 1926, it signaled the demise of these routes. The names were soon replaced by numbers displayed on standardized signs and most soon faded from memory. Hokanson's (1999) *Lincoln Highway: Main Street Across America* helped bring these routes to attention again, and has drawn increasing attention to other roads, many now celebrating their hundredth anniversary.

Author Lyell D. Henry, Jr., a retired political science professor, presents a detailed account of the Jefferson Highway, one of these forgotten auto trails, which ran from Winnipeg, Canada, to New Orleans. The idea for this road largely originated in Iowa, already traversed by the Lincoln Highway, and much of the book focuses on that state. The highway was named for President Jefferson as it traversed states added by the Louisiana

Purchase. Iowa billed itself as the crossroads of the nation thanks to having both the Lincoln and Jefferson Highways. The book is based largely on archival material relating to the activities of the organization in Iowa and newspaper accounts of the highway.

The first half of the book is a history of the highway and its eventual demise. Iowan Edwin Meredith came up with the idea and name in 1915 and sought others to share it. Civic leaders in New Orleans were early supporters. A conference of supporters was convened to create the Jefferson Highway Association, decide routes, and begin seeking money for improvements. Deciding on the route of the Jefferson Highway was a contentious process, and several alternate routes were eventually created to appease interests from different areas (as would later happen with the Dixie Highway).

Promoting the highway was an essential undertaking, the focus of the second chapter. The route was promoted not just for its economic benefits to towns, businesses, and land owners that it passed near, but also as a means of improving communication among different parts of the country. It was thought that it would produce not just more commerce, but better citizens. Auto tours were used as a means of promoting the route. The Jefferson Highway was not the only highway being promoted, and there were competing routes to fend off.

Next Henry discussed the process of raising money to fund improvements and efforts to get local governments to engage in road building. This included grading and later paving the road and building or replacing bridges. Considerable progress was made in doing so within ten years, but this was due largely to increasing state involvement in highway building, which in turn was funded by the federal government after 1916. The final years of the highway, the demise of the Jefferson Highway Association, and its replacement by numbered routes provides the final historical chapter. Paving of the road brought about lessened enthusiasm to support the Association, and it was in decline before the new numbered highway system was initiated in 1926. The Jefferson Highway faded and was replaced by U.S. 65 and 69 through Iowa. The Association was last heard from in 1930, and seems to have been swiftly forgotten, even in Iowa.

The final three chapters provide a description of the historic Jefferson Highway route across Iowa today, describing the route's evolution, the history of towns it passed through, and surviving buildings and landmarks. The chapters cover the route through the state from north to

south and are divided geographically. These three chapters make up over half the book's text. Many segments of the old road, historic buildings, and people and events along the road are discussed in detail. Reading these chapters makes the reader wish the author had continued this exploration throughout the whole length of the Jefferson Highway. The chapters are accompanied by photographs taken by the author illustrating particular buildings or sections of road detailed in the text. The book is well illustrated with vintage and contemporary photos, but there are few maps. Instead, the book has a companion Web site (not reviewed) offering detailed Google-based maps of the road. Having the maps included in the book would have been welcome.

Another early highway receiving attention is the Dixie Highway, which ran from Michigan to Miami. Tammy Ingram is a history professor whose interest in the subject began with a dissertation on the history of the Good Roads Movement and led to this book. The title is a bit misleading in that the book includes not just the Dixie Highway, but the larger story of rural road improvements in the South, and especially Georgia.

Ingram begins by examining the beginnings of the automobile era from 1900 to 1913. This was the era of bad roads and the beginnings of the Good Roads Movement, and much of the chapter is devoted to the history of this movement. Like the Jefferson Highway, the Dixie Highway can be traced back to one person, in this case Carl Fisher, a headlight manufacturer and auto enthusiast from Indiana who was the founder of the Lincoln Highway in 1912. He went on to propose the Cotton Belt (soon renamed Dixie) Highway in 1914 as a north-south complement to the Lincoln, running from Michigan to Miami.

The second chapter begins with Fisher's highway proposal and ends with the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 and the beginnings of federal assistance to states for improving roads. Fisher's interest in the Dixie Highway stemmed in part from his enthusiasm for roads as well as his real estate investments in south Florida. A convention was organized in Chattanooga and the Dixie Highway Association was launched amid a high expectation that the route would receive federal assistance, although, as with the Jefferson Highway, the fight over which local roads would be chosen for the Dixie soon became a bitter contest. Ingram devotes considerable attention to several routing battles in Georgia. Better opportunities for tourism were a frequent claim made by proponents of a particular route. Whereas the Jefferson ended up with

several alternate routes, the Dixie ended up as a north-south network of roads with many interconnections. The passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 finally provided federal aid to road building, but given to states and often then to counties, with the result that road building remained uncoordinated and usually ineffective.

Ingram provides an interesting discussion of the impact of World War I on roads, a topic often lacking in highway histories. The war allowed highway promoters to argue for the military utility of this form of transportation, made more pressing by the inability of the nation's railroad system to handle wartime needs. The Dixie Highway promoters saw this crisis as an opportunity for roads. They argued that better roads were necessary to carry wartime traffic that the railroads were clearly unable to move, as well as to serve as a vital backup in case of attack on coastal rail lines. Other highway's promoters made similar claims, but those of the Dixie were reinforced by the large number of new military bases set up in the South to train new recruits and new pilots. Businesses seized on these calls to lower transport costs for them and their customers. The "See America First" campaign also resulted in tourists taking to the road throughout the country. Unfortunately, many trained engineers were lost to the war effort and even less money for road building was available during the war.

Next, the author examines the early postwar era and the place of chain gangs for road building. This was a common phenomenon, but one seldom remembered or written about. The use of convicts for road building was widely popular (and not just in the South) but was increasingly seen as a problem for building modern roads, which relied on mechanization and expertise, not manual labor. Convict labor was widespread in the South after the Civil War, and was vital to railroad construction and mining long before road building was an important concern. That convict labor was administered harshly and relied disproportionately on black prisoners was of no concern. Economic abuses of the system and unfair competition with free labor led to changes, but the use of convicts to work on county or state road projects remained common. The popularity of gasoline taxes in the 1920s helped provide funds for road building but also to expand chain gang use on public highways.

As with the Jefferson Highway, the story comes to an end in the 1920s with the arrival of the numbered highway system. As in Iowa, this unleashed a new flurry of boosterism designed to keep each town and region on the main roads. The Dixie Highway Association was part of this ef-

fort, seeking to keep its markers along the road and then to get a single number assigned along its entire route, but failing in both campaigns. Once the numbers went up, the Dixie Highway slowly faded into memory.

Much of the book is concerned with struggles over who was to be in control of road building. Many citizens and local officials were leery of state involvement in road building and even more so of federal involvement. Yet involvement by higher levels of government provided the only means of obtaining adequate funding and directing road building toward a meaningful system rather than scattered projects. Although many agreed about the value of roads, there was no consensus (then or now) as to how to pay, who should pay, who should benefit, and who should be in control. This book covers much the same era and location as Preston's (1991) *Dirt Roads to Dixie*. Preston provided more Good Roads coverage of other southern states and discussed other named highways in the South, such as the National Highway and Bankhead Highway, and paid more attention to the point of view of drivers than does Ingram. Ingram, though, provides a more in-depth view of the local politics of road building. The book also provides a different view of early highways than that for the Jefferson Highway, one that focuses on the political battles rather than the road itself, and not at all on roadside features.

The book contains numerous photos of early automobil- ing, newspaper and magazine illustrations, and several maps, but it is not an effort to document the road and the roadside landscape. Although it relies on generaliza- tions rather than detailed examples or case studies, it does provide background on road building, the role of World War I, and convict labor that is not often included in highway histories. It would, however, be interesting to see a comparison with Georgia from other parts of the state, perhaps the Midwest. How typical were the attitudes expressed by rural Georgians about government spending, taxation, or convict labor?

Regardless of who built and paid for roads, the early automobile era was accompanied by many new types and forms of businesses. Retired geographer John A. Jakle and historic preservationist Keith A. Sculle have written a series of books detailing these, among them *The Gas Station in America* (Jakle and Sculle 1994), *The Motel in America* (Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996), *Fast Food* (Jakle and Sculle 1999), and *Lots of Parking* (Jakle and Sculle 2004). Having tackled motels, gas stations, diners, and facilities for urban parking in previous works, they turn their attention to garages, which encompass a broad range of

structures with the shared purpose of storing cars. This book follows a similar format to their other works, and like them relies heavily on articles and advertisements in trade magazines from the time period covered as sources of information and illustrations. Although the book is focused largely on commercial businesses offering maintenance services, it also covers dealerships, as these often included maintenance work, and there is a chapter on domestic garages. For that reason the book lacks the clear focus of their other works, which can be distracting at times.

The authors start by discussing the origins of garages as distinct businesses and building types with origins in hardware stores, blacksmith shops, and stables. These early garages were necessary for frequent maintenance and repair work on early cars as well as for winter storage. Subsequent chapters describe the evolving garage business and locations from the earliest years of this building type to the 1950s, including changing locations and floor plans. After this period, the traditional garage building was replaced by larger structures set well back from the street and surrounded by large parking lots. The decade therefore represents a break from the early automobile era garage and the authors use it as a convenient ending point. In this it is similar to the other books by these authors.

The authors also broaden the scope of the book beyond the evolution of a roadside building type. One chapter looks at automobile dealerships, which replaced the practice of selling cars at factories and allowed cars to be purchased in even the smallest towns. Unfortunately, this history of car selling does not fit well with the rest of the book. Another chapter examines domestic garages, beginning with their origin in sheds, garages, barns, and other utilitarian structures, often converted for auto use. These early structures required room for tools and storage for car maintenance and soon became more sophisticated and integrated with the house itself in the 1920s. Debate over how visible the garage should be, and how prominently integrated with the house it should be, are not recent concerns but date back to the beginnings of the automobile era. Another chapter discusses the changing nature of the garage business, new types of services added over time, and increasing specialization in these services. The wide-ranging focus of the book in these chapters can be frustrating at times.

A concluding chapter looks at the changing economic fortunes of the garage business and includes a few thoughts on the place of surviving old garages in the

built environment as well as the possibilities for historic preservation. Unlike diners, motels, and even gas stations, there are many fewer preservation or reuse options for old garages. Many of these presented a blank façade to the street and concealed the work done within, for which reason they lack the features that make so many old motels or restaurants interesting. They also do not have the same level of nostalgia associated with them as do the more familiar roadside businesses, again making them less attractive for preservation. This discussion of possibilities is, however, short and lacks the depth of other books by these authors.

As with other works by these authors, the book is well illustrated with postcards and illustrations or advertisements from period trade magazines; these are used to illustrate important concepts discussed in the text rather than to showcase attractive roadside structures. Coverage of these illustrations and the book's examples are weighted heavily toward the Midwest. The book would benefit from some sort of case study, perhaps of a particular city, as is provided in some of their other books. Identifying how the geography of garages (or their reuse) has changed in a particular place would be very useful. Giving examples of specific buildings rather than generic examples from trade magazines would also be helpful.

All three books take readers on a journey from the origins of the automobile era to a time in which the pioneering era has ended. For the two road books, this is the 1926 U.S. numbered route system, still in place. For *The Garage* it is later, at the midcentury transformation of cities and the creation of the modern automobile-oriented metropolis. Each of these books provides fascinating glimpses of an earlier era, roads not taken, and the sometimes striking reminder that there was actually a time when continual road building wasn't seen as an obvious good idea. They represent the efforts of business leaders, local government officials, and ordinary people to come to terms with disruptive technological change with tremendous spatial impacts. Many books continue to be written over ongoing battles between cars and those opposed to them, most recently in debates over urban sprawl. Reading these three books makes it clear that although battles might continue, the war was lost long ago. At the same time, though, they provide many examples of alternate possibilities and also of the fragility of the highway system and automobility that undermine many arguments against the car and its impacts on society. They also help humanize the automobile era by showcasing individuals who worked to create and improve highways and businesses to support their users.

References

- Hokanson, D. 1999. *The Lincoln Highway: Main street across America*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Jakle, J., and K. A. Sculle. 1994. *The gas station in America*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1999. *Fast food: Roadside restaurants in the automobile age*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 2004. *Lots of parking: Land use in car culture*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Jakle, J., K. A. Sculle, and J. S. Rogers. 1996. *The motel in America*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Preston, H. L. 1991. *Dirt roads to Dixie: Accessibility and modernization in the South, 1885–1935*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.