

THE JEFFERSON HIGHWAY

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The Jefferson Highway was started around 1915 as part of the National Auto Trail system. It was nicknamed the “Pines to Palms” highway because it stretched from the pine trees of Canada to the palm trees of New Orleans. Named for President Thomas Jefferson the highway was inspired by the east – west Lincoln Highway, one of the earliest transcontinental highways for automobiles across the United States of America. A 1917 article told of four Canadian officials driving the entire 2,267 miles from Winnipeg to New Orleans. They crossed seven states, seventy-nine counties and 264 cities, towns and villages.

The earliest record of the Jefferson Highway in Lamar was mentioned in an article dated November 11, 1915. The article, titled “**LAMAR IS PUTTING HER SHOULDER TO THE ROAD**”, talks about the highway and the benefits of it coming through Barton County. Five delegates from Lamar were chosen to go to the Jefferson Highway Conference in New Orleans on November 15. Three hundred delegates from 11 different states attended the meeting.

For the next couple years townships like Union, North Fork and Richland scrambled to get their roads in shape so the Jefferson Highway would pass through their area. Others wanted no part of it. Some even said these “horseless buggies” were just a passing fad and would eventually go away.

The JH was an ever-evolving entity. Records indicate that the JH came through Lamar from the north in three different ways throughout the years. The oldest route had the JH coming south from Sheldon pretty close to the old 71 Highway (or outer road). It then turned east on 1st Street and went over the 1st Street bridge. You then turned south on Gulf Street, through the west side of the Lamar Square all the way to 17th Street. You would then turn east and head towards the old college. But before the college and just across the railroad tracks you would turn south again on the old Carthage Road, or KK Highway as it is now designated. From there you went on to Boston.

Another way that was mentioned was the route that went south out of Sheldon and turned east on 20th Road. This would be where the old Ozark rural school was. It is now the Community of Christ Church. From there you would travel east and could either turn south on 10th Lane or go another half mile and end up just north of the dam.

If you turned south on 10th Lane it would eventually turn in to Walnut Street and you would be just west of the nursing home. From there you would continue south until you got to the school on 6th Street. You would then go east a couple blocks to Gulf and then south again through the square.

If you continued on east on 20th Road for 1 ½ miles you would end up north of the dam. You would then go across the old light plant bridge that spanned Muddy Creek. This was a popular place to fish and picnic and was surely the reason why people went the extra couple miles out of their way. The bridge was replaced in 1926 with a steel and truss bridge that was installed on the west side of the railroad

bridge. The abutments from the old JH bridge east of the railroad bridge are still visible on John Dille's property.

After you left the dam area, you would travel south on Truman (which was Kentucky back then) and end up by Barney Eagon's station at 6th and Truman. From there you would make your way back south either by going down Grand or Gulf. Both streets would take you to 17th where you would get on KK Highway to take you on to Boston then Jasper.

The route all along the Jefferson Highway was marked. First with just the simple JH logo painted on telephone poles. Later stenciled signs were used and then eventually porcelain signs. The Historical Society was fortunate enough to acquire one of these rare signs in 2014. We have also uncovered two earlier photos, so far, that show the JH markings on the telephone poles. One is hard to see but was on the pole in front of the Standard Oil Station on the northwest corner of Gulf and 160 Highway. The other is more visible. It was on the southeast corner of 9th and Gulf. This would have been right in front of the Commercial Hotel.

In the late 1920's, the Jefferson Highway was replaced with the new numbered US Highway system. And as with most things "back in the day" progress took over. Much like the demise of Route 66, the Jefferson Highway was bypassed by one of the new interstates that criss-crossed the country. Although you could still travel on the JH (old 71), the marketing campaign and promotion of the highway soon faded away.

But as with most things "back in the day", the Jefferson Highway is trying to make a comeback. This historic highway, which is over a decade older than Route 66, is still known as the Jefferson Highway in parts of Minnesota, Kansas City, and especially in the New Orleans area. In 2011, the Jefferson Highway Association was formed to revitalize and bring back the once popular route. New signs are being made, driving tours are going on and conferences are being held.

On Saturday, April 30, the Jefferson Highway Association will take a bus tour of much of the area's old Jefferson Highway. The group is scheduled to visit Lamar including the Barton County Historical Society and Truman's birthplace.