

Gilbert: Interstate Impact

Wednesday, 06/06/12 5:55pm

[Listen \(3:18\)](#)

[MP3](#) | [Download MP3](#)

By [Peter Gilbert](#)



(Host) Commentator and Vermont Humanities Council executive director Peter Gilbert tells us about the development of the Interstate Highway System and a research project that is documenting the construction of the interstates here in Vermont.

(Gilbert) In the summer of 1919, a young Lieutenant Colonel named Dwight D. Eisenhower participated in the first Army transcontinental motor convoy. It was a test of the military's ability to move troops and equipment from one coast to the other during wartime. The trip from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco took 62 days. Eisenhower learned first-hand about the difficulties of traveling cross-country on poor, mostly dirt roads. This early experience influenced his decisions as President to champion the building of the interstate highway system. That's why it's named the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

The interstates are a tangle of consequences - both intended and unintended.

Interstate construction began about 50 years ago, in 1958 and lasted into the 1970s - and in Vermont they spurred great economic development; they made travel more convenient and remote places more accessible. They also cut family farms in two, paved pastures, bull-dozed historic buildings, and reshaped the landscape itself. They contributed to, among other things, sprawl, the decline of the railroads, and the growth of the auto and gasoline industries, air pollution, and climate change. Some businesses and communities thrived, others suffered, depending on where entrance and exit ramps were. Suddenly houses in the Northeast Kingdom and Champlain Islands became potential weekend getaways for residents of Boston and even New York.

UVM professor Paul Bierman is leading a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities to study the cultural changes to rural America caused by the coming of interstates, using Vermont as a case study. Central to the project is an archive of 34,000 large-format negatives, taken before, during, and after the construction of Interstates. Some of the images were taken to document and value what property was taken by eminent domain to build the highways.

The images have been scanned, described, and indexed; about 20,000 are accessible on the website of UVM's Landscape Change Program. Field researchers will document land use changes, environmental impacts, and patterns of construction and development resulting from the highways. UVM student researchers are anxious to capture the oral histories of people who witnessed the highways' construction and whose lives were affected, positively and negatively. And in the fall, UVM students and others will visit fairs and libraries around the state to display images of the highways' construction and discuss the project.

The interstate highway system was, for better and for worse, the last massive federal investment in national infrastructure; the political and economic climate in which the highway system was built was very different from today's.

The late Charles Kuralt, who knew something about being on the road, said that "Thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel across the country from coast to coast without seeing anything." Now it's time to look carefully at the highways themselves and see what we will see.