

Paving the Way to Success:  
How the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 Shaped the American  
Frontier

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From the beginning, I wanted to do a project that hadn't been overdone. Since the theme for National History Day was "Frontiers in History," I thought originality would be hard, since so many social and physical frontiers have been used in multitudes of projects and programs.

As I was perusing through topics on the internet, I saw an article that discussed the highway system, specifically the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. I didn't know much about its origin, and when I dug deeper into its story, I was intrigued. Something as mundane as the highway system—something that I and millions of others took for granted—had been a significant frontier in so many ways, from revolutionizing the way we travel, to changing the way we live. However, it hasn't been talked about as much, save for a handful of articles discussing the FAHA's 50th anniversary in 2006.

As I continued to research the FAHA of 1956, I learned so much about the era, as well as the man behind the accomplishment—Dwight D. Eisenhower. His experiences as a young Army Lieutenant Colonel, and, later, during the Second World War, helped shape his policies as President, including his push for an Interstate Highway System. I also discovered many other fascinating stories, such as the tireless negotiations with Congress to pass the legislation, as well as the fallout from communities displaced by the construction of the network.

I began to formulate my thesis, debating how to present my argument most effectively. A website seemed to be the perfect presentation, because I would be able to weave historical stories and facts with modern media and technology—a blend of old and new like the connections made by the Interstate Highway System itself.

I started researching by finding government websites that talked about the Interstate Highway System. The Department of Transportation's website provided an extremely helpful

overview. Then, I looked at the Eisenhower Library and academic research papers for primary sources and media.

My next step was to compile my sources into a workable outline, as my argument began to take shape. I added and eliminated my points, based on whether I could support the claims with direct evidence. I found this to be the most interesting part of the project, since I mentally debated with myself during the process as I considered all sides and evidence.

After completing my research, I became even more convinced that it was a perfect fit for this year's "frontier" theme. I finalized my argument that the Federal-Aid Highway Act, as one of the biggest government projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literally and figuratively "paved" the American frontier, and "drove" America into the modern world.

Life in America changed drastically after its creation, and so many previously impossible dreams were suddenly attainable.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

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The National WWII Museum provided me with an image of Eisenhower delivering his State of the Union Address in 1954, which I used as a visual element in my website.

“1960 Pontiac Bonneville.” *Www.vanguardmotorsales.com*, [www.vanguardmotorsales.com/inventory/1886/1960-pontiac-bonneville-four-door-vista-hardtop](http://www.vanguardmotorsales.com/inventory/1886/1960-pontiac-bonneville-four-door-vista-hardtop). This site provided me with a picture of a 1960s-era car, which I used to contrast long blocks of text, as well as accent my claim that the IHS increased the car industry.

“Bad Road Conditions of the 1940s | Photograph.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, 7 June 2006, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM40313](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM40313). This site provided me with an image of the horrible road conditions of the 1940s, before the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 was passed. It strengthens my argument that the Federal-Aid Highway Act greatly improved road conditions by showing what they were like prior to the act.

Cash, Johnny. *I’ve Been Everywhere*. 1996.

I used Johnny Cash’s song, I’ve Been Everywhere, as a soundtrack for a video mapping all the interstates since the video lost its sound during the editing process.

Duranton, Gilles, and Matthew A. Turner. “The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion: Evidence from US Cities.” *American Economic Review*, vol. 101, no. 6, Oct. 2011, pp. 2616–52, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.101.6.2616>.

This article provided me with statistics on the highway system, which I used to strengthen my argument that the IHS reduced traffic and decreased travel times.

Eisenhower, Dwight D. *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*. Eastern Acorn Press, 1981.

This book provided quotes from Eisenhower regarding the development of the IHS, and what drove him to make the push for an interstate highway system.

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. "FRED." *Stlouisfed.org*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2022, [fred.stlouisfed.org/](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/).

I used FRED, the Federal Reserve Economic Data, for a chart of the U.S.'s GDP by year. This provided me with a nice visual element in my website.

"Heritage | Peterbilt." *Www.peterbilt.com*, [www.peterbilt.com/about/heritage](https://www.peterbilt.com/about/heritage).

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This paper provided me with statistics on the highway's effect on economic growth, which helped me strengthen my argument that the IHS positively impacted American life.

Nadis, Steven J., et al. *Car Trouble*. Beacon Press (MA), 1993.

This book provided me with statistics on air quality that was affected by highways and gave me a good perspective for a counter argument against the FAHA.

National Endowment for the Humanities. "Evening Star. [Volume] (Washington, D.C.) 1854-1972, August 05, 1962, Image 112." *Chroniclingamerica.loc.gov*, 5 Aug. 1962, p. 16, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1962-08-05/ed-1/seq-112/](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1962-08-05/ed-1/seq-112/).

I used this article from *Chronicling America* for an average American's opinion on the Interstate Highway System. This helped me gain a human aspect while talking about the interstate's impact on American life.

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*Chroniclingamerica.loc.gov*, 15 July 1956, p. 12,

[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86075096/1956-07-15/ed-1/seq-12/](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86075096/1956-07-15/ed-1/seq-12/).

I used this article for another view on the FAHA. It supported me in my claim on how the IHS was one of the biggest government undertakings in the 20th century.

O'Carroll, Ryann. "How Roads Impact Wildlife – Habitat Fragmentation – Ryann O'Carroll."

*Rocarroll.unepportfolio.org*, 6 June 2020, [rocarroll.unepportfolio.org/2020/06/06/how-roads-impact-wildlife-habitat-fragmentation/](http://rocarroll.unepportfolio.org/2020/06/06/how-roads-impact-wildlife-habitat-fragmentation/).

This article provided me with an image of habitat destruction due to highways. I used it to support a counter argument against the FAHA.

Pfeiffer, David A. "Ike's Interstates at 50." *National Archives*, 15 Aug. 2016,

[www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/summer/interstates.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/summer/interstates.html).

This article provided me with photos of the early interstates after they finished construction. I used those photos to show what the interstate was like after completion, and how the interstate made driving much easier.

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[www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/photographs](http://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/photographs).

The Eisenhower Library provided me with a multitude of images for my website. I used the photos to support multiple claims and provide nice visual aids for my arguments.

Sacquety, Troy. "Gen. Lucius D. Clay, a 'Brilliant Administrator.'" *Www.army.mil*, 11 Jan. 2019, [www.army.mil/article/216006/gen\\_lucius\\_d\\_clay\\_a\\_brilliant\\_administrator](http://www.army.mil/article/216006/gen_lucius_d_clay_a_brilliant_administrator).

This article from the U.S. Army site provided me with a photo of General Lucius D. Clay, whom Eisenhower appointed to come up with a plan for the Interstate Highway System.

Souza, Sergio. *Aerial View of Highway*. [www.pexels.com/photo/aerial-view-of-highway-3907943/](http://www.pexels.com/photo/aerial-view-of-highway-3907943/).

I used this stock photo of a highway as a colorful background for my website. I chose this because it balances out the plain, two-tone appearance of my text and black-and-white photos.

Tanzilo, Bobby. "11 Vintage Photos of Milwaukee Gas Stations." *OnMilwaukee*, 30 Mar. 2020, [onmilwaukee.com/articles/vintage-gas-stations](http://onmilwaukee.com/articles/vintage-gas-stations).

OnMilwaukee provided me with a photo of a gas station attendant from the late 1950s, which I used as a visual aid to break up long blocks of text.

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I used this video for a presentation of the interstate routes, displayed in numerical order. The video is a nice way to show all of the interstates, and their locations across the United States.

Witcher, T. R. "How the Interstate Highway System Connected — and in Some Cases Segregated — America." *Www.asce.org*, 15 July 2021, [www.asce.org/publications-and-news/civil-engineering-source/civil-engineering-magazine/article/2021/07/how-the-interstate-highway-system-connected--and-in-some-cases-segregated--america](http://www.asce.org/publications-and-news/civil-engineering-source/civil-engineering-magazine/article/2021/07/how-the-interstate-highway-system-connected--and-in-some-cases-segregated--america). This article provided me with an image of interstate I-10 cutting through a Black community in New Orleans. This image was an impactful visual aid for a counter argument against the IHS.

### Secondary Sources

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This page provided me with how long it took the Motor Transport Corps convoy to cross the country in 1919. It was helpful in backing up the claim of another site.

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[www.artba.org/2021/06/28/americas-economy-rides-on-interstate-highways/](http://www.artba.org/2021/06/28/americas-economy-rides-on-interstate-highways/).

This page gave me quantitative data on the Interstate Highway System and supported some of my main arguments.

Archer, Deborah N. “Transportation Policy and the Underdevelopment of Black Communities.” *Papers.ssrn.com*, 4 Mar. 2021, [papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3797364](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3797364).

This provided me with a good counter argument to the FAHA, with the claim that the interstate racially segregated neighborhoods.

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[www.fhwa.dot.gov/bipartisan-infrastructure-law/](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/bipartisan-infrastructure-law/).

I used the Federal Highway Administration for information on what the presidential administration is doing to curb greenhouse gas emissions. This was helpful in showing how the country is reacting to the environmental impacts of the highway system.

Britannica. “Federal Aid Highway Act | United States [1921] | Britannica.” *Www.britannica.com*,  
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This article talks about what is being done to combat the negative environmental consequences of the Interstate Highway System.

Cournoyer, Caroline. “Why More Poor People Are Driving Cars.” *Www.governing.com*, 6 Apr. 2018, [www.governing.com/archive/gov-car-ownership-poverty.html](http://www.governing.com/archive/gov-car-ownership-poverty.html).

This article provided me with statistics on car ownership based on income, and the increase in people with lower income owning cars.

Cox, Wendell, and Jean Love. “The US Interstate Highway System: 40 Year Report.”

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This article provided me with important statistics on the highway system, which I used to back claims I made about the interstate’s impact.

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This article provided me with the impacts of the interstate and provided me with a starting point for my arguments on how the FAHA improved America.

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This article provided me with information on Eisenhower's push for a national highway system, and his reasons for why he did so. This article was helpful in crafting the historical background section of my website.

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I used this article from the Center for American Progress to support the claim that the FAHA was one of the biggest government projects in the 20th century.

Eschner, Kat. "Three Ways the Interstate System Changed America." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 29 June 2017, [www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/three-ways-interstate-system-changed-america-180963815/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/three-ways-interstate-system-changed-america-180963815/).

I used this article to get a better idea of the impacts of the Interstate Highway System. This helped me with my claims on how the IHS impacted America.

Evans, Farrell. “How Interstate Highways Guttled Communities—and Reinforced Segregation.”

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This article provided me with more information on the claims that highways are racist, which I used as one of the counter arguments to the FAHA.

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Feigenbaum, Baruch. “Importance of Interstate Highways, Shipping and Trucking Highlighted by

COVID-19 Crisis.” *Reason Foundation*, 13 Apr. 2020, [reason.org/commentary/importance-of-interstate-highways-shipping-and-trucking-highlighted-by-covid-19-crisis/](http://reason.org/commentary/importance-of-interstate-highways-shipping-and-trucking-highlighted-by-covid-19-crisis/).

This article provided me with some important statistics on the highway system, which helped me better support my main arguments.

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Hale, Richard. “History of Trucking and Transportation.” *Truckers Logic*, 25 Nov. 2015,

[truckerslogic.com/history-of-trucking-and-transportation/](http://truckerslogic.com/history-of-trucking-and-transportation/).

This article provided information on the history of trucking, and how it was positively affected by the highway act. I used this to support the claim that the highway improved American life.

Hill, Jacob. "Environmental Science." *Environmentalscience.org*, 2014,  
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This article provided me with information on the environmental impact of roads and highways, which I used to support my counter argument.

Jet, Johnny. "How Long Would It Take to Drive across the Country?" *Forbes*, 12 Aug. 2018,  
[www.forbes.com/sites/johnnyjet/2018/10/12/how-long-would-it-take-to-drive-across-the-country/?sh=f80804a557fb](http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnnyjet/2018/10/12/how-long-would-it-take-to-drive-across-the-country/?sh=f80804a557fb).

This article provided approximately how long it takes to drive across the U.S.A., which I used as comparison to show the impact of the FAHA and the interstate.

King, Noel. "A Brief History of How Racism Shaped Interstate Highways." *NPR.org*, 7 Apr. 2021,  
[www.npr.org/2021/04/07/984784455/a-brief-history-of-how-racism-shaped-interstate-highways](http://www.npr.org/2021/04/07/984784455/a-brief-history-of-how-racism-shaped-interstate-highways).

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Klein, Christopher. "The Epic Road Trip That Inspired the Interstate Highway System." *HISTORY*,  
[www.history.com/news/the-epic-road-trip-that-inspired-the-interstate-highway-system](http://www.history.com/news/the-epic-road-trip-that-inspired-the-interstate-highway-system).

This article provided information on the Motor Transport Corps convoy that went across America in 1919, and how it inspired the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956.

"Lucius Clay Private Briefing for White House on Clay Commission Report." *Www.enotrans.org*, 18 May 2017, [www.enotrans.org/eno-resources/lucius-clay-private-briefing-white-house-clay-commission-report/](http://www.enotrans.org/eno-resources/lucius-clay-private-briefing-white-house-clay-commission-report/).

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This article provided me with some quantitative data on the highway system, which was very helpful in showing the impact of the interstate.

Reeves, Thomas C. "Dwight D. Eisenhower | Cold War, Presidency, & Facts." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 12 Oct. 2018, [www.britannica.com/biography/Dwight-D-Eisenhower](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Dwight-D-Eisenhower).

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SCRC SME. "A Brief History of the Highway Transportation System in the U.S. | Supply Chain Resource Cooperative | NC State University." @*SupplyChainNCSU*, 5 July 2006, [scm.ncsu.edu/scm-articles/article/a-brief-history-of-the-highway-transportation-system-in-the-u-s](http://scm.ncsu.edu/scm-articles/article/a-brief-history-of-the-highway-transportation-system-in-the-u-s).

This page contains basic information on the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. It explains a few of the reasons why President Eisenhower decided to sign the act, as well as some of the effects.

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This article provided me with facts about the interstate highways, which spurred me to research deeper into some of the claims.

“The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 and Its Impact on America | Free Essay Example.”

*StudyCorgi.com*, [studycorgi.com/the-interstate-highway-act-of-1956-and-its-impact-on-america/](https://studycorgi.com/the-interstate-highway-act-of-1956-and-its-impact-on-america/).

This article provided me with helpful information on the Federal Aid Highway Act and its impacts. This was one of my first sources and it gave me a lot of claims that I later quantified.

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[www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/dwight-d-eisenhower/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/dwight-d-eisenhower/).

This page provided additional information on Dwight D. Eisenhower, which I used in the background of the FAHA.

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*Highways.dot.gov*, 1996, [highways.dot.gov/public-roads/summer-1996/federal-aid-highway-act-1956-creating-interstate-system](https://highways.dot.gov/public-roads/summer-1996/federal-aid-highway-act-1956-creating-interstate-system).

This page gives a detailed look into the Federal Highway Act of 1956, and its creation. This article was helpful in providing me with a good look into the FAHA, and helped me support some of my claims.

Wendorf, Marcia. “The Complex History of the U.S. Interstate Highway System.”

*Interestingengineering.com*, 15 Sept. 2019, [interestingengineering.com/transportation/the-complex-history-of-the-us-interstate-highway-system](https://interestingengineering.com/transportation/the-complex-history-of-the-us-interstate-highway-system).

This article gave some background into why Eisenhower saw the need for a national highway system and improved my page on the historical background of the interstate.

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This article provided me with some information on the counter argument that highways segregated communities. I found it important to understand the opposing arguments to better show a multisided view on the interstate.