

A New Deal for the American Motorist: The PWA and the Overseas Highway to Key West

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With the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as president of the United States on March 4, 1933 came the initiation of his New Deal for America and the rise of a national passion for automotive travel. The Public Works Administration (PWA) under the leadership of Harold Ickes encouraged and funded the construction of a vast number of highways, roads, bridges, and thoroughfares for the new American motorist. The American motorist was seen not only as a symbol of American freedom, but also as a driving force behind national economic recovery in the 1930s, spending an estimated \$3,125,000,000 during a record summer of motoring vacations in 1935.¹

The PWA projects designed to aid the motorist touched all parts of the American landscape. While many were located in rural areas as means to help tourists better appreciate the wilderness, others were intended to reconfigure America's urban regions. These included PWA funding for the widening of Constitution Avenue and the reconfiguration of the Mall in Washington, D.C., and the construction of the Triborough Bridge and the Lincoln Tunnel in New York City. As Ickes pointed out, such bridges and tunnels were designed to "open up new areas for home owners and [to] bring the suburbanite and commuter closer to his office or to the store and shop within the city."² Ickes never questions the impact on city fabric itself of bringing increasing numbers of people in automobiles into the city. In fact, he celebrates the increase in motorists traveling into Manhattan from nearly 14,000,000 per year in 1926 to over 30,000,000 in 1935.³

The PWA also funded road building that choreographed scenic or historic experiences. One of the most famous examples of these was the creation of the Colonial Monument Parkway



Fig. 1. Postcard of the Overseas Highway to Key West.

in Virginia, which connected Yorktown to Colonial Williamsburg and Jamestown. This national urge to choreograph the motorist experience and to connect specific places and landscapes takes its most dramatic form in the Overseas Highway to Key West, which was the third largest PWA project in the United States after the Hoover Dam and the Tennessee Valley Authority, the largest and one of the last PWA roadway projects in America.

The history of the Overseas Highway is closely linked to that of Miami and Key West during the crisis of the Great Depression. Miami had slipped into an economic depression well before the rest of the country in 1926 after a building bust and devastating hurricane. Yet it was also one of the first areas of the nation to show signs of recovery starting in 1933 when several critics and forecasters, however, pointed to better economic times for south Florida during the following winter of 1933/34. The first reason was a general sense of optimism over the national economic outlook after the inauguration of Roosevelt as president of the United States on March 4, 1933 and the introduction of his New Deal. The second was the

enormous success of the Florida Pavilion during the summer of 1933 at Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition where over 90,000 people sought information about vacations in Florida. And the third was the political instability and general anti-American sentiment in Cuba at the time, which, it was assumed would force many vacationers to go to Miami instead of Havana.

Key West, however, did not follow Miami and show signs of recovery during the 1933/34 tourist season. The island received only one hundred vacationers that season.⁴ Key West's geographical location at the end of the long chain of islands making up the Florida Keys, its rich history as a city of sea-based industries, and its lack of natural fresh water sources gave it a character distinct from its northern neighbors, Miami and Miami Beach. Its industries included the naval base and district Coast Guard headquarters, sponge and commercial fishing, salvage operations, and cigar and salt manufacturing plants. During the 1920s and early 30s, these had been in a steady decline. Cigar production moved to Tampa, the sponging industry went to Tarpon Springs, and pineapple canning factories lost economic viability with prohibitive tariffs on imports from Cuba.⁵ Between 1919 and 1927, the population had decreased thirty-two percent. By 1934, Key West was unable to collect enough in tax revenue to continue to provide basic services for its residents.⁶ The city declared bankruptcy on July 4th, 1934. This brought it under the direct control of the state. Florida's governor, David Sholtz, in turn, looked to Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) for help. Federal authorities, including FERA's director for Florida, Julius F. Stone, Jr., evaluated the situation and determined that, with Miami and Miami Beach as examples, they could turn Key West into a successful vacation destination. The success of this venture would come to symbolize, as one contemporary report noted, the administration's great ambitions for its \$54,800,000,000 World Relief Bill.⁷

After forming the Key West Administration (KWA), Stone took his cue from pages of recent history in neighboring Miami. In the first part of his \$2,000,000 five-year plan, the KWA engaged in "engineering projects, modernization and construction of dwellings, sanitary work and art." Taking advantage of the new state rule allowing publicity campaigns for municipalities, KWA

officials brought "well-known artists" to the island to document the city through photographs and drawings.⁸ In order to oversee the rapid clean-up and construction projects that needed to be completed between July 1934 and the beginning of the tourist season in January 1935, Stone moved to Key West. Fifty thousand cubic yards of trash were taken from the city streets and dumped into the ocean.⁹ Other projects included draining swampland, clearing streets, and repairing houses. Stone's administration encouraged owners of the more "modern and spacious" homes to "lend them to the relief administration as quarters for visitors."¹⁰ This was the beginning of what would become a lucrative mainstay of bed and breakfasts on the island.

To connect the island to the mainland of Florida, engineers completed a series of bridges along the Key West roadway that improved automotive transportation while maintaining existing railroad connections. Once these were in place, the route from Miami took a day. It involved two ferries, one between Lower Matecumbe Key and Grassy Key and the other between Marathon Key and No Name Key. For those wishing to arrive by means other than automobile or train, Pan American Airlines offered daily service from Miami and there was passenger service on the Peninsular and Occidental Steamship Company from Tampa.¹¹

By March 1935 when members of Roosevelt's White House staff visited the island to observe its progress, these efforts were considered "self-liquidating." A *New York Times* reporter commented that the city "glistened" from above as members of the Roosevelt team flew in to town.¹² While the president fished off the Florida coast, his staff explored the island city. They proclaimed the "clean and shining tourist haven" a highly successful example of the administration's efforts. In fact, over 1000 people visited the island during the 1934/35 tourist season, many of whom stayed in the newly reopened Casa Marina Hotel.¹³ As the historian Stuart McIver commented, Julius Stone and FERA turned "the poorest city in America into one of Florida's most delightful destinations."¹⁴

Key West again provided a contrast to the story of the south Florida mainland. Heralded in March of 1935 as a model of New Deal recovery, Key West suffered a series of setbacks. The first incident was the deadly hurricane of Labor Day,

1935. The storm killed four hundred veterans and civilians working on the federal construction of the overseas highway between Lower Matecumbe and Tavernier Keys. It washed out railroad tracks, bridges, and federal veterans camps on Matecumbe and Islamorada Keys.¹⁵ Bowing to the financial pressure caused by the disaster, the Florida East Coast Railroad went bankrupt in July 1936, which left Key West accessible only by infrequent boat service and flights (three times per week from Miami) until March 1938. The storm also broke water mains from Miami, thereby severely limiting viable tourist activity on the island.

Reconstruction of the island city took place at a feverish pace. In early March 1937 a new Key West again become the focus of national attention. A new \$500,000 naval base provided a much-needed boost to the local economy. Money and tourists trickled in as contracts were written for work on a new Oversea Road and Toll Bridge District. Train service was eliminated entirely as a new two-lane automotive highway covered the 12.9 miles of existing railroad bridges, which had been widened to accommodate automobiles. Pieces of train track were used as guardrails along the bridges and served as a reminder of Henry Flagler's ambitious plans. An additional 19.7 miles of coral reef was paved to meet the existing bridges. The ride by car was estimated to take only four or five hours and opened, once again, the Florida Keys to the middle-class American tourist.¹⁶

Debates rages over how the Overseas Highway and the introduction of the motorist would alter the Keys and their culture. Meyer Berger in *The New York Times Magazine* commented that the island was a "Sleeping Beauty" waiting for the "magic touch of the overseas causeway."¹⁷ Many questioned, however, whether Key West would retain "her slumbering charm," when awakened by the annual flood of more than 100,000 automobiles expected



Fig. 2 View from the Keys of Overseas Highway, NARA, 1938.



Fig. 3 View from ground showing the widened railroad bed for automotive traffic at Matecumbe Key. NARA, 1938.

to arrive on the new causeway. The older part of the island had been built to maximum density, forcing new development to "have to spread over the keys to the north." Berger noted the battle for the city's identity was approached in terms of gender, fashion, and heredity.

The situation holds the seeds of a whooping family war. The blue-blooded ladies of Key West are proud of the old town as it is. They love its esthetic beauty, its charming old salt-crusted dwellings of mixed Nantucket, West Indian and Virginia Colonial architecture...They do not want the awakened Sleeping Beauty stripped of her colorful rags and done over in modern dress. Before they reach some compromise on the subject with their merchant banker and land-owning husbands, some tender shins should be barked.¹⁸

As another contemporary commentator noted, the highway could be a "blight or a blessing...or both," Key Westers wouldn't know until they "get the sand out of their eyes."¹⁹ The highway revealed its origins as a train line in the reuse of the original rails as guardrails. Part amusement ride, part tribute to modern engineering, the highway allowed the motorist to fly between the water and sky touching land wherever and whenever they wished.

The struggle to maintain Key West's isolation was ultimately lost. On March 29, 1938, the one-hundred-and-six-mile Overseas Highway opened a non-stop thoroughfare for motorists between Miami and Key West. Photographic images of the roadways and bridges along the highway abounded. In newspapers and on postcards, crisp, its clean bridges, many of which once supported railroads were depicted marching over calm seas, and across tranquil island enclaves. The photographs



Fig. 4. Rails reused as guardrails on new portion of Overseas Highway to Key West. NARA, 1938.

collapsed onto the modernity of the engineering achievement, an aura of ancient splendor associated with Roman bridges and aqueducts. One of the most prominent photographers of the Overseas Highway was Francis E. Lee of Atlanta. His photographs in the National Archives are both poetic and descriptive. They imply connections between the flow of automobiles and the flow of the tides beneath them. One journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, commented that the Overseas Highway was "the only highway in the world by which the motorist actually goes to sea in his car... [providing] one of the most unusual and scenic drives in America."²⁰ Another contemporary journalist considered the destinations to be more important and longed for the day when a ferry was added to Cuba that would afford the "tourist [the] additional advantage of enjoying the excellent Cuban highways with their fascinating scenery. The establishment of such a ferry would allow the traveler to breakfast in Miami, lunch in Key West and dine in Cuba."²¹

The connection to Cuba became a focus of the opening ceremonies and pointed toward larger ambitions for the Overseas Highway in terms of foreign policy. Delayed until July 4, 1938, the opening ceremonies featured a "Miss Key West" flanked by Spanish Conquistadors. The Anglo-appearing queen rules over, (or is she protected



Fig. 5 Map of Gulf of Mexico with New Deal route traced by author.

by?), her Spanish guards, and recalls the region's thorny past of imperial conflict and conquest.²² With the inclusion in the parade of the United States Coast Guard and the Cuban Army band who arrived on the Cuban gunboat "Cuba," there could be little doubt that Pan American policy was central to the new American motorist on the Overseas Highway. Dr. Luis Machado, president of the Cuban tourist board. Machado optimistically commented that "Cuba as well as all Florida will reap benefits from the Overseas highway."

The Overseas Highway, however, was just a small part of a much larger social and cultural agenda that had developed around Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America, which he articulated as part of this inaugural address in 1933. This was made explicit in a radio address broadcast nationally from the opening ceremonies.

The fact is, this highway to Key West is only the beginning of an even more ambitious and far-seeing highway program...with the ultimate aim of connecting the eastern section of the United States and Canada with Cuba, Mexico, Central and South America... this branch of the Pan-American highway will carry traffic southward through Florida to Miami and then by this new Overseas highway to Key West and thence over the Cuban National highway 120 miles to the western tip of Cuba and thence by ferry 110 miles to the Yucatan peninsula and from Yucatan southwestward some 500 miles to Guatemala City... At Guatemala City it will connect with the main road of the Pan-American highway en route to South America which enters Mexico at Laredo, Texas.²³

Or as the chief of the Division of Highways summarized it in *The New York Times*:

[With] the opening of the Overseas Highway...the first critical step has been taken toward a motor tour through lands touching on the Gulf, which was the theatre of much of America's early history.²⁴

This New Dealer motorist "grand tour" through American history around the Gulf of Mexico embodied the administration's political and economic visions for the region. Although well-intentioned, the broad strokes used to implement such large-scale plans occasionally overlooked the ways in which sensitive social and cultural environments might be altered by these interventions. Perhaps New Dealers, and Americans in general, were over-confident in the ambassadorial abilities of the American motorist, who was sent off to complete the conquest of the Americas. As tourists raced from modern Miami to cosmopolitan Havana, across Mayan and Aztec ruins, through sprawling Mexico City, across the vast state of Texas, and on to Creole settlement of New Orleans, would they grasp the complex interrelations of the cultural heritages they were passing? Would the accompanying development of hotels, resorts, restaurants, and entertainment centers destroy local landscapes and lead to an American cultural hegemony? To varying degrees the answer to both questions may be a qualified yes. Yet, this New Deal vision of the American motorist laid the groundwork for modern mobility and its relationship to history, place, and space for years to come.

ENDNOTES

1. Victor H. Bernstein, "New Peaks Reached in Travel," *New York Times* (NYT) (Sep. 8, 1935), p. XXI.
2. "Texts of Addresses of Officials at the Formal Opening of the Lincoln Tunnel," NYT (Dec. 22, 1937), p. 28.
3. Ibid.
4. Memorandum to Harry L. Hopkins from Alan Johnstone, Field Representative, Subject: Florida 1/18/35. Roosevelt Library. Group 24 Papers of Harry L. Hopkins Federal Relief Agency Papers FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports Florida Container 56.
5. Von Briesen, Hans, *Why Not Know Florida. An Informal Guide for the Motorist*, (Jacksonville, FL: The Drew Press, 1936), 103
6. "A Changing Nation Revealed by the Census," NYT (Aug. 17, 1930), p. 109
7. "Roosevelt's Aides See New Key West," NYT (Mar. 30, 1935), p. 17 This story has also been told most thoroughly by Durward Long. "Key West and the New Deal, 1934-1936." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (January 1968): 209-218, and more recently by Stuart McIver, "Editor's Notes" In *South Florida History* vol. 24, no. 3 (Winter 1997).
8. Durward Long. "Key West and the New Deal, 1934-1936." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (January 1968), 215-216. See also Von Briesen, Hans, *Why Not Know Florida. An Informal Guide for the Motorist*, (Jacksonville, FL: The Drew Press, 1936), 103. Both these reports rely on information from the Key West Administration, which eventually produced by writers in the WPA sponsored Key West Writers Program.
9. "Roosevelt's Aides See New Key West," NYT (Mar. 30, 1935), p. 17 And McIver, "Editor's Notes."
10. "Roosevelt's Aides See New Key West."
11. Von Briesen, Hans, *Why Not Know Florida. An Informal Guide for the Motorist*, (Jacksonville, FL: The Drew Press, 1936), 103
12. "Roosevelt's Aides See New Key West," NYT (Mar. 30, 1935), p. 17.
13. For the number of tourists see Memorandum to Harry L. Hopkins from Alan Johnstone, Field Representative, Subject: Florida 1/18/35, Roosevelt Library and Research Center. For the opening of the Casa Marina, see Hans Von Briesen, *Why Not Know Florida. An Informal Guide for the Motorist*, (Jacksonville, FL: The Drew Press, 1936), 108.
14. McIver, "Editor's Notes."
15. For the veterans camps on the Florida Keys see "Weekly Report February 14 - 20, 1935 of Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer" Roosevelt Presidential Library, Group 24 Papers of Harry L. Hopkins Federal Relief Agency Papers, FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports, Florida, Container 56.
16. Meyer Berger, "Old Key West Awakes," *NYT Magazine* (March 21, 1937), p. 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Meyer Berger, "Old Key West Awakes," NYT (Mar. 21, 1937), p. 136.
20. "Motorist Goes to Sea in Own Car Traveling Overseas Highway From Miami to Key West," *The Wall Street Journal* (December 12, 1938), 9.
21. S. R. Winters, "A Highway to Key West," NYT (Nov. 21, 1937), p. 196.
22. "Two Nations Unite in Key West Fete," *The Miami Herald*, (Jul. 5, 1938), 1-A.
23. "Highway Links Canada to Cuba," *The Miami Herald*, (Jul. 3, 1938), p. 3-C.
24. "Encircling Gulf by Car," NYT (Feb. 5, 1939), p. XX7.