

What was the “Long Route” Before the “Florida Short Route?”

Imagine no Highway 280; the road, stores, neighborhoods, congestion headaches, even Lloyds—the whole corridor—doesn’t exist. Ridges, trees and the Cahaba River are in its place. It’s difficult to grasp. However, Highway 280, previously known as the “Florida Short Route,” is only about 80 years old. Completely unrelated historical events created it: geography, cholera, and air conditioning.

The geography of the area southeast of Birmingham is characterized by the steep ridges of the southern Appalachian Mountains. During the 1800’s, no easy route existed through the ridges, nor motivation to travel southeast.

In 1873, a Cholera outbreak almost wiped out the Magic City. The epidemic spurred the development of another source for Birmingham city water. Difficult as it was, Lake Purdy and the Cahaba Pumping Station on Sicard Hollow Road were created. A road was built to the southeast from Birmingham for access to the water facilities: the embryonic Highway 280.

Enter an unrelated historical event: air conditioning (AC) was invented in 1902. Prior to AC, Florida was a sweltering, mosquito laden, alligator infested wasteland (or so northerners assumed). But with AC, Florida became a vacation spot for the east coast US. The peninsula of Florida was the most desirable because of rail access from cities such as New York.

Parallel to the acceptance of AC, the automobile was growing in popularity. Its cost decreased with mass production and it became a primary means of long distance transportation; that is, where there were roads.

Enter the “Good Roads Movement.” From about 1880 till the 1920s there was a national push by farmers, bicycle clubs, the American Automobile Association (AAA), and towns that did not have railroad access, for the construction of all-weather, long distance roads. The movement became so powerful that its endorsement of candidates decided elections.

These separate trends united into the “short route.” Counties southeast of Birmingham wanted the benefit of moving farm products to market, and the goods and services brought by road transportation. Further, the counties saw the financial potential for serving tourists traveling from the Midwest to Florida. The counties paid for a road from Birmingham to be routed through such towns as Sylacauga and Auburn. And so, the extension of Birmingham’s pump station road southeast through Alabama came to fruition.

The road would shorten travel time to Florida’s Atlantic coastline from the Midwest. Hence the name “Florida Short Route” was coined as a promotion to lure tourist traffic through Alabama. The name still appears on a few maps of the original route, for example, the “Narrows” near Chelsea. To answer the opening question of what was the long route preceding the short route: there was no direct road, long or short, from Birmingham to peninsular Florida before Highway 280.

In 1939, to improve maintenance, the federal government took over the road and extended it to east Georgia. The feds treated the route as a spur of federal Highway 80, a pre-interstate cross-country road that runs east-west across Alabama through Montgomery. The feds added a “2” to “80” and that is how the Florida Short Route acquired the official moniker of “Highway 280” that we use today.

Highway 280 was an integral part of some curious historical anomalies, like its role during Prohibition. But those stories will have to wait for future issues of Dunnavant Valley Neighbors.

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