Looking Back: Transportation through the Decades

In celebration of ITE’s 90th anniversary, throughout 2020 ITE Journal will feature a monthly snapshot of the transportation industry by decade, beginning with the turn of the 20th century through present day. These are the technologies, events, and key players that transformed transportation to bring us where we are today.

1950s
The 1950s saw the authorization of a multibillion-dollar package for an interstate highway system in the United States, the largest public works project in America at that time. As the road system grew, freight trucking presented competition for railroads—by the early 1950s, trucks carried 17 percent of all freight ton-miles (today, truck freight accounts for more than 57 percent).¹

Major Deegan expressway outside New York City, NY, USA had six lanes to accommodate increasing suburban commuter traffic in 1957.

Highway Capacity Manual – January 1, 1950

National system of interstate and defense highways as of June 1958.
Traffic Signs and Signals

1954 MUTCD Revision

Though no new editions of the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) were published the 1950s, a revision to the 1948 MUTCD was released in September 1954. Significant changes:

- Stop sign color went from black on yellow to white on red.
- Prohibited the use of secondary messages on stop signs (a common practice before the revision).
- The yield sign was first introduced, in the form of a yellow triangle with a black “yield right of way” legend.3

![Stop and Yield Signs]

Before the 1950s, the U.S. stop sign was black on yellow. The triangle yield sign appeared in the 1954 MUTCD revision.

AASHO Interstate Manual

In the 1950s, traffic engineers felt that current MUTCD standards did not adequately address the needs of the high-speed, controlled access nature of the new interstate highways. To fill the gap, AASHO published the first edition of the Manual for Signing and Pavement Marking of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways in February 1958.3

New features:
- White on green guide signs
- Lowercase letters
- Green on white service signs
- Utilized larger sign sizes

ITE Presidents – 1950s

Harry E. Neal
1950–1951

Nathan Cherniack
1951–1952

F. Bruce Crandall
1952–1953

Donald M. McNeil
1953–1954

Harry Porter Jr.
1954–1955
September 25, 1950 – ITE Board of Direction forms first “Technical Council”
The Board of the Institute of Traffic Engineers directed the formation of a “Technical Council” to make recommendations to them on technical matters. The Technical Council organization consisted of six technical committees, each with their own set of subcommittees and projects.

ITE published a 1950 edition of the Traffic Engineering Handbook (the first edition appeared in 1941). For more than 70 years, ITE has continued to publish the Traffic Engineering Handbook. Now in its seventh edition, the manual has maintained its reputation as the go-to source of essential traffic engineering solutions.

AASHO Road Test – January 1, 1955
The Bureau of Public Roads endorses the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) Road Test. The test, a $27 million USD investment, studies the performance of highway pavement structures of known thickness under moving loads.

Federal Aid Highway Act – June 29, 1956
President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, authorizing $25 billion USD for the construction of 41,000 miles (66,000 kilometers) of the Interstate Highway System.

ITE Headquarters Relocates to Washington, DC – 1956
ITE moves its headquarters from Strathcona Hall at Yale University in New Haven, CT, USA to 2029 K Street NW, Washington, DC, USA. itej

ITE Presidents – 1950s

Charles W. Prisk
1955-1956

J. Carl McMonagle
1956-1957

Joseph E. Havenner
1957-1958

Matthew C. Sielski
1958-1959