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.

1940s

Speed limits in Washington, DC, USA were lowered from 40 to 35 miles per hour to conserve gas during World War II, 1942.

World War II – 1939-1945

The United States joined World War II in late 1941, putting critical transportation materials like gasoline and rubber in short supply. With a ban on automobile manufacturing from 1942-1945, automakers became part of the war mobilization effort, making airplane engines, tanks, trucks, munitions, and other war materials.

The National Interregional Highway Committee – April 14, 1941

The National Interregional Highway Committee was appointed by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt on April 14, 1941 to investigate the need for a limited system of national interstate highways.¹

Early ITE Publication: War Worker Transportation – 1943

This 1943 report was prepared for the Institute of Traffic Engineers by ITE pioneer Theodore M. Matson, Director, Bureau for Street Traffic Research, Yale University.
Traffic Signs and Signals

As traffic signs and signals became part of everyday life for drivers and pedestrians, they were seen as a type of public gathering place, and began to feature advertisements, government signage, and even newspaper stands.

The War Emergency Edition:
Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways – November 1942

Because of the war’s many restraints on highway travel and traffic control in the United States, the Joint Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices reconvened in May 1942 to consider revisions to the original MUTCD. The committee agreed to a manual with emergency standards for traffic control devices adapted to existing and foreseeable wartime conditions.4

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Newsboy’s stand and traffic signal light, 1942, Los Angeles, CA, USA.

Sign on traffic stop-light in Hartford, CT, USA indicating housing shortage, 1941.
Federal Aid Highway Act – January 1, 1944

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 approved the 40,000-mile (64,000-kilometer) National System of Interstate Highways, establishing a federal-aid secondary system of principal secondary and feeder roads.

Post-World War II: Urban Expansion

According to ITE’s Pioneers of Transportation: the end of the war led to the “suburban explosion” of the nation, with returning servicemen starting new families. “The need for new housing created whole new cities. Shopping centers and new business sprung up to serve the needs of the automobile-oriented suburban population.”

Traffic on the West Side Highway, New York City, NY, USA.

Aerial view of suburban housing developments sprawling from Los Angeles, CA, USA.