

HIGHWAYS TO THE SKY: A CONTEXT AND HISTORY OF COLORADO'S HIGHWAY SYSTEM

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1.1 Historical Context

For more than a century, road builders and highway engineers have transformed the physical and social landscape of Colorado. Those designers and builders overcame the challenges of building a cost-effective highway system in a sparsely populated, climatically varied region with one of the world's largest mountain ranges looming as an obstacle. Responding to the demands of resident drivers and incoming visitors, state and federal highway authorities transformed a network of trails into uniform and safe roads, and in some cases built modern highways over terrain deemed impassible by previous generations of travelers. The earliest roads and highways improved travel and communications throughout the state and helped bring cohesion to the state's economy. In the late 19th century, the improved travel arteries helped foster the state's mining and agricultural industries. In the 20th century, an ever-expanding network of automobile roads fostered the rise and dominance of the tourism and recreation industries in Colorado.

Latter-day Coloradoans speak abstractly of a "Wild West" past as the most important element of the state's heritage, in part because that era is so much removed from modern life as to attain a romantic and idealized status. The single most important historical event separating the Wild West or pioneer era from today's Colorado was the introduction of the automobile at the close of the 19th century. Travelers could conquer distances more quickly, safely, and comfortably by automobile than by personal horse-drawn vehicle, and the automobile provided far greater flexibility than any stagecoach or railroad could offer. The freedom to go almost anywhere by car or haul anything by truck profoundly influenced the nature and location of commercial and residential

development in the 20th century. This report addresses the historic importance of roads to Colorado's development and why certain examples are worth preserving.

1.2 Purpose and Sponsorship

There are few historic context studies of Colorado's roads and highways, in part because these transportation features remain functional components of the modern landscape. With the exception of the Interstate highway system, nearly all of Colorado's highways were constructed in some form more than 50 years ago. Some modern highways have historical associations that began long before the automobile era, such as the portion of U.S. Highway 50 that follows a segment of the Santa Fe Trail. Other highways have associations with important events in more recent history, such as State Highway 141, parts of which were built with funding from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission to promote uranium mining in the 1950s. Still other highways contain features that represent periods or steps in the evolution of highway building in Colorado, such as original concrete paving in segments of U.S. Highway 85 near Aguilar, or the New Deal-era stone retaining walls on Colorado State Highway 74 outside of Morrison.

The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) is responsible for planning, building, and maintaining a statewide system of highways. CDOT carries out its mandates with funding from the state legislature and from federal grant-in-aid programs. As a state agency and recipient of federal funds, CDOT must comply with environmental and historic preservation laws and regulations, most notably the National Historic Preservation Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Transportation Act of 1947 as amended and reauthorized. One requirement of these laws and regulations is consideration of possible effects of CDOT's activities on historic resources, which are defined as properties that are eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (see discussion of criteria in Chapter 12). The ultimate purpose of this report is to provide a basis for evaluating the historical significance and National Register eligibility of individual highways or highway segments throughout Colorado. Information gathered for this report may also be useful for interpretation of routes for public appreciation.

With funding and technical assistance from the Colorado Historical Society (State Historical Fund), CDOT initiated a systematic effort to identify historic highways statewide in early 2001. In April 2001, CDOT contracted with Associated Cultural Resource Experts (ACRE) to prepare an historic highway context. ACRE prepared this context through examination of resources relating directly to the design, construction, use and maintenance of Colorado's automobile roads.

This context is limited in scope. It does not include study of roadside commercial or residential architecture, unless those resources are directly and inherently related to a highway. For example, the architecture of gas stations and motels is not addressed in this study. Substantial bridges are also excluded from this study; bridges were extensively addressed in an earlier historic context. Historic trails are addressed briefly as antecedents to automobile roads and highways. This study is intended to provide information for the specific purpose of evaluating National Register eligibility of highways; the study is not intended to be a complete history of highways, highway transportation, or CDOT and its precursor agencies. This study also focuses nearly completely on highways in the state highway system; it does not extensively address roads and highways built and maintained by county and local governments. This study is also not intended to be a cultural resource management plan for historic highways in Colorado.

1.3 Methods and Procedures

This study focuses on five major questions or information requirements:

- A. What is the current state of knowledge concerning historic automobile roads and highways, and what information sources are available?
- B. Can the history of automobile roads and highways be understood in terms of specific geographic contexts within Colorado? If so, how are those contexts spatially and thematically defined?
- C. What are the themes and subthemes of highway development in Colorado, and how are those themes and subthemes reflected in physical resources?
- D. In light of the particular history of Colorado highways, what registration (significance and integrity) criteria are appropriate?
- E. Which highways in the state highway system may be eligible for the National Register, and what data gaps remain to determine eligibility?

To address these questions and information requirements, extensive research was conducted in primary and secondary source materials. An historical context for Colorado highways had not been prepared previously, but several other states had produced or were in process of producing highway contexts. ACRE contacted architectural historians in all 50 State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO), asking if they had produced a highway context for their respective state and if the existing context was used for evaluation purposes. ACRE also inquired if each SHPO had suggestions for improving on the character of previously prepared highway contexts. Twenty SHPOs responded to the request for information, and SHPOs in Arkansas, Connecticut, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin provided copies of historic highways contexts. In September 2001, copies of these contexts were submitted to CDOT's Environmental Program Branch. Those responses helped determine the scope of this current context.

Primary resources were gathered from CDOT's central files, Right-of-Way Section, and library. CDOT's office in Evans, Colorado, also provided engineering and construction designs for highways in the northern and northeastern parts of the state. Space at CDOT's headquarters in Denver does not allow for a century's worth of letters, memos and policy statements. The bulk of those documents are located in the Colorado State Archives under the classification of "Transportation." The archives maintains older Colorado Department of Highways/State Highways Commission records, letters, maps and memorandum from 1910 to the early 1970s. These documents offered the only opportunity to gauge the opinions and motivations of the highway department's policy makers and engineers in their own words.

ACRE conducted research in a number of local textual repositories. The Denver Public Library's Western History Department and Government Documents Section hold a great deal of primary and secondary information about road development in Colorado. The Colorado Historical Society's State Historical Preservation Office is the repository of site survey documentation of the state's roads and bridges. Credit is also due to William

Dunn and Robert Brown of the Rocky Mountain Philatelic Library in Aurora for providing the project use of rare automobile maps of Colorado.

During the course of this project, research turned up one nearly forgotten source of documentation. The University of Colorado's Mathematics Library in Boulder holds a collection of Rocky Mountain Contractor from 1937 to the present day. From 1937 to the early 1950s, the State of Colorado published Rocky Mountain Contractor to update the engineering and construction communities on the progress of state, public and private works projects with an emphasis on road building.

Regarding the federal influence on Colorado highway and interstate development, the National Archives-Rocky Mountain Region in Lakewood holds a very limited collection of Bureau of Public Roads (Record Group 30) memorandum and letters from the 1920s and 1930s. The bulk of Record Group 30 is located in National Archives II in College Park, MD.

During January and February 2002, ACRE staff conducted site surveys of 10 selected Colorado highways based on discussions between CDOT, Colorado Historical Society and ACRE. These highways were selected for their historical integrity and importance to their local communities. A further description of each road and a separate site survey is found under separate headings later in this document.

This report also provides an extended bibliography of all resources identified during the records search. This bibliography will assist future researchers in locating records that are not easily accessible.

1.4 Further Areas of Research

Like any research project, a researcher cannot gather every piece of information on a certain subject. Other potential locations for future highway research include CDOT's 11 district offices. These offices hold blueprints, designs and correspondence on every

road in that district. Each office also contains the staff's institutional memory of the difficulties and triumphs surrounding design and construction.

When examining a road through a certain county for further research, another potential resource is in that county's engineering office. Each county engineer should have technical information regarding alignment, construction and maintenance on a particular highway. In addition, each county clerk's office holds that county's commissioner minutes detailing a road's funding, construction, and maintenance.

Another potential area of research is the federal government's influence over highway construction in Colorado. Unfortunately, the collection at the National Archives in Lakewood is limited. Most of the records of the Bureau of Public Roads (Record Group 30) are in the National Archives II at College Park, MD.

Staff Historian Robert Autobee, M.A., developed the context with assistance by Teela Labrum, Staff Historian and Deborah Dobson-Brown, M.S. Architectural Historian. Robert Autobee and Deborah Dobson-Brown conducted the field reconnaissance survey during the months of January and February, 2002. Kurt Schweigert served as the project manager. All work was conducted under contract number 01HAA00247. Dianna Litvak and Lisa Schoch are historians for the Department of Transportation and reviewed the documentation.