

Historic Roads Defined

Historic roads are roads that, through design, experience, or association, have contributed to our culture in a meaningful way. The type of road, its history, and current condition will determine the most appropriate action for preservation.

The National Task Force for Historic Roads (NTFHR) identified three types of historic roads: aesthetic routes, engineered routes, and cultural routes.

Aesthetic Routes

Aesthetic routes represent historic roads for which the primary rationale for development was the design and provision of a specific visitor experience. Aesthetic routes such as parkways and park roads have, historically, been intensively designed and developed for the purpose of leisure, recreation, and commemoration. They have a documented origin and construction date. Never intended as the fastest or quickest route, such roads typically follow the natural topography of the region, and are most often associated with a designed landscape or park space. In urban areas, park boulevards and monumental avenues exhibit an equally high level of detail and composition. Aesthetic Routes are roads for which the alignment and details are key to the experience. Special materials, plantings, lighting, and even building facades contribute to the special character of these roads. Alterations to any component of these roads (alignment, details, and affiliated landscape) will significantly impact the historic integrity of the resource.

Examples of aesthetic routes include:

The Bronx River Parkway, Westchester County, New York

The Colonial Parkway, Virginia

Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia

The Chicago Boulevard system

The Rockefeller Carriage Roads, Acadia National Park, Maine

Engineered Routes

Roads designed for a specific transportation goal represent a larger category of roads than those designed for aesthetic purposes. Engineered routes, like aesthetic routes, will have a documented idea, mandate, or construction date. These are roads that may have been developed to open isolated areas to commerce, link the nation, or simply serve our communities; roads for which the aesthetic experience was often secondary. Their alignment and detail are important in their representation of technology and culture. Most generally, for these resources, speed, safety and economy determined the design. Due to location or remaining details, however, many engineered routes have taken on aesthetic qualities and associations. Many city grid patterns and our first transcontinental highways are typical of this category.

Examples of engineered routes include:

The Lincoln Highway, New York, New York to San Francisco, California

The National Road, Cumberland, Maryland to Vandalia, Illinois

US Route 66, Chicago, Illinois to Los Angeles, California

The grid pattern City of Nashville, Tennessee
Dixie Highway, Ontario, Canada to Miami, Florida

Cultural Routes

Cultural routes represent roads that evolved through necessity or tradition without a formal initial goal or objective guiding location. These roads, now in automobile use, have generally undergone significant changes and modifications since their inception, often leading to multiple layers of development. Multiple layers of development and change often provide interesting historical juxtapositions, but are also a challenge for preservationists. These may be roads that evolved from Native American or colonial trails, or simply from convenient connections between farm villages. Generally the only original feature of these roads is the historic corridor through which they pass. Remaining roadside features such as churches and inns may give a clue to the history of the route, their spacing a clue to settlement and travel patterns. Remember too, road construction projects at different times in the route's history may left different layers of interesting historic resources.

Examples of cultural routes include:

The Boston Post Road, New York to Boston

Ministerial Road, Rhode Island

El Camino Real, California and Texas

Main Street, Virginia City, Montana

River Road, Louisiana

*From [Saving Historic Roads: Design and Policy Guidelines](#), by Paul Daniel Marriott for the
National Trust for Historic Preservation.*

**For more on Historic Roads visit the National Trust for Historic Preservation Rural
Heritage Program's www.historicroads.com.**