

Interstate Highways from the Ground Up ^[1]

Though it is considered “the largest single construction project in the history of the NCDOT” (the North Carolina Department of Transportation), the I-26 corridor in Madison County is only nine miles long. Completed in 2003, the corridor is located in Madison County, North Carolina, and connects NC-213 near Mars Hill to US-23 in Tennessee. When North Carolina finished building this corridor, it meant that I-26, an interstate highway that stretched from Charleston, South Carolina, up to Columbus, Ohio, was completed.

The reason that the nine-mile project is such a large construction project is because of the steep mountain terrain and the type of rock on which it was built. Over twenty six million cubic yards of material had to be displaced by dynamite, bulldozers, and other heavy machinery. When a 400-foot cut was made into the side of the mountain, unstable colluvium deposits were taken away and replaced by a more stable rock. Trucks had to carry all of that material away from the site, and dispose of it properly.

NCDOT resident engineer Stan Hyatt lived in Madison County most of his life, and he loved hunting and exploring the mountain when he was younger. This interstate he helped design and build meant the destruction of some of the environment where he grew up.

On this page are three excerpts from an oral history interview with Stan Hyatt, in which he talks about some of the reasons behind why the interstate was built as well as how he felt about it.

History and safety

Stan Hyatt talks about some of the reasons behind why the interstate was built as well as how he felt about it.

Follow-up questions

1. Stan Hyatt mentions that 100 years ago, the road was a “drover’s route,” which was a path used by people who were moving their livestock from their farms to a city center to be sold or butchered. Why would humans continue to use the same general route?
2. How much did the traffic count increase since the 1930s?
3. What vehicles exist now that didn’t exist in 1930?
4. What was unsafe about the old road?
5. What were some reasons Stan Hyatt mentions why the old road couldn’t be improved?

Impact on people and places

Stan Hyatt talks about some of the reasons behind why the interstate was built as well as how he felt about it.

Follow-up questions

1. What surprised you in listening to this oral history excerpt?
2. What considerations would need to go into moving a cemetery?

3. What were some of the environmental considerations?
4. What were the three major issues in building the highway?

Personal impact

Stan Hyatt talks about some of the reasons behind why the interstate was built as well as how he felt about it.

Life is a balance, and you take the good and the bad. And you have to make choices. Life is full of choices, and this to me was a choice. In my mind when I looked at the alternatives of leaving traffic where it was, and realizing the importance of the road system, I justified in my own mind. This road has to be built. When I look at it from a corridor standpoint, a 600-mile road from Columbus, Ohio to Charleston, South Carolina, I say, "Well, this is the only nine-mile section that's not been built." If we didn't build it here, we would have had to move it over into the next valley a half a mile over and build it there. And we would have had these same type problems. It's just a balance of choices that had to be made. In this case, I'm comfortable with the fact — and I think I always will be — that we had to do what we had to do. That we had to cut trees, and we had to put pipes in where there were beautiful little streams with waterfalls. I didn't like to do that! But I had to do it.

Follow-up questions

1. What is the best reason you have heard so far for why they built this part of the corridor?
2. What is the biggest negative impact that was mentioned?

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[Post, Kristin](#) ^[14]

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