Transportation improvements in the 1920s

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“Travel by Railroads, Cars, and Planes in the 1920s”

by Walter R. Turner

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When World War I ended in 1918 and the troops came home, folks felt optimistic about the future and eager to get on with their lives. This optimism led to an extraordinary decade that brought major changes in the way citizens traveled by rails, on roads, and in the air.

People had been traveling by train for decades. During the 1920s Southern Railway \[2\] operated one hundred daily trains throughout the state. The railroad also operated a large maintenance and repair shop at Spencer (the current site of the North Carolina Transportation Museum \[3\] in Rowan County \[4\]). Another large railroad, Atlantic Coast Line Railroad \[5\], located a maintenance shop in Rocky Mount \[6\] and the company headquarters in Wilmington \[7\].

More than fifteen hundred towns or cities in the state had railway stations. Large stations with interesting designs still exist in Salisbury, Hamlet \[8\], Rocky Mount, and Greensboro \[9\]. Stations in Wilmington and Charlotte \[10\] have been torn down.

In the 1920s, railroads developed new programs for vacation travelers. Comfortable Pullman cars \[12\] for spending the night and quality food in dining cars made long-distance travel a pleasure. Florida was a popular destination. But railroads also encouraged visits to luxury resorts in Asheville \[13\] and Pinehurst \[14\].

If someone took the train to Asheville, he or she would likely transfer to a streetcar for a ride to the destined hotel or resort. At that time, more than a dozen North Carolina towns and cities \[15\] had streetcar systems, which offered convenient rides for only five cents between railroad stations, neighborhoods, and downtown areas.

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By 1929 the legislature had raised the gas tax to five cents per gallon. These funds allowed the state to pave more than three thousand miles of hard-surface (concrete or asphalt) highways. Also in 1929 the State Highway Patrol \[16\] was organized, consisting of ten officers and twenty-seven troopers who rode motorcycles. Because of these achievements, North Carolina developed a national reputation as the Good Roads State.

While travel by the state's railroads and highways increased, citizens across North Carolina also attended exciting barnstorming shows at local airfields. These shows featured wing-walking, daredevils jumping out of airplanes with parachutes, and the opportunity for airplane rides for five dollars a person.

In May 1927 Charles Lindbergh \[17\] flew nonstop from New York City to Paris in a single-engine airplane, the Spirit of St. Louis. It took him 33 ½ hours to travel the 3,610 miles. “ Lindy Reaches Paris!” screamed one newspaper headline. This dramatic event made headlines in every newspaper in the country and made the young aviator a national hero. To further promote aviation, Lindbergh flew the Spirit of St. Louis to every state in the nation during 1927. Excited crowds saw and heard him speak in Greensboro and Winston-Salem \[18\]. They wanted to fly, too.

The publicity from Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight and national tour encouraged the development of airports and scheduled passenger flights in North Carolina. New airports were built in Winston-Salem (now Smith Reynolds Airport \[19\]), Greensboro (Piedmont Triad International Airport \[20\]), and Wilmington (Wilmington International Airport \[21\]).

In many areas of the state, small aviation companies experimented with carrying passengers from one city to another. In 1930 Eastern Air Transport, soon renamed Eastern Airlines, began regular scheduled flights from New York to Miami, with stops in Greensboro and Charlotte. The airline added Raleigh as a stop the next year. These flights carried both passengers and mail.

But in North Carolina, the big transportation story in the 1920s was the creation of all-weather highways that brought together counties and regions and benefited farmers and those who lived in towns and cities. The number of vehicles tripled and led to new businesses, such as car dealerships, service stations, and bus and trucking companies. Indeed, the highways earned the state a national reputation as the Good Roads State.
A Century of Progress by the North Carolina Department of Transportation [xa].

Image credit:

Additional resources:
NC Department of Transportation documents [xa] in the NC Digital Collections (Government & Heritage Library and NC State Archives)

NC LIVE resources on the history of transportation in North Carolina [xa] [via WorldCat]

Resources in libraries on the history of transportation in North Carolina [xa] [via WorldCat]

Resources on transportation [xa] in Learn NC.

Transportation in North Carolina [xa] in Documenting the American South (UNC Libraries)

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