



Article and photos courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society/Written by Paul Carnahan, librarian

## VERMONT HISTORY

# Early Auto Trail

### *The Theodore Roosevelt International Highway Promoted Vermont Tourism*

**B**EFORE THE HIGHWAYS THAT CRISSCROSS OUR country had numbers, they had names. The Theodore Roosevelt International Highway was one of them. It cut across Vermont as it made its way from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon. In Vermont, the route followed what is now U.S. Route 2 from Waterford on the Connecticut River

to South Hero on the Champlain Islands, passing through St. Johnsbury, Danville, Marshfield, Montpelier, Waterbury, and Burlington. The “highway” utilized a ferry to transport motorists from South Hero to New York State.

Roosevelt admirers and transportation promoters in Minnesota created the 4060-mile route, which traced a line across the



In 1925, Theodore Roosevelt International Highway became Route 2, as seen here passing by Camel's Hump in Waterbury, c. 1935.

northern edge of the United States and briefly into Canada. An application for designating the first section of roadway as a memorial to the 26th president of the United States was submitted to the Minnesota Highway Department on March 11, 1919, just two months after the former president's death; it was approved six days later.

Designated trails were an important part of early automobile travel in the United States. One of the earliest was Lincoln Highway, dedicated in 1913. It covered 3,389 miles from New York to California through the country's midsection. Unlike later interstate highway projects, auto trails used existing roads to create a continuous whole. The designation of a state or local road as part of an auto trail was often used by local advocates to gain road improvements in their areas.

Colored bands on telephone poles and other posts marked auto trails, much as hiking trails are marked with colored blazes on trees today. Letters abbreviating their names indicated named trails. The Roosevelt Highway was marked with 3-inch white bands above and below a 12-inch red band with the blue letters "T.R." on it (see illustration). Other auto trails at the time in Vermont, marked but unnamed, included the Brattleboro to White River Junction route, designated by blue bands; the Brattleboro to Hoosac, New York route, sporting red markings with white bands; and the Wells River to Newport route, recognizable by blue bands with narrow white bands.

In late September 1919, workmen marked the telephone poles of the Roosevelt Highway from Waterford to St. Johnsbury. According to the *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, "Vice President G.H. Morrill of the Vermont Automobile Club was one of the interesting spectators to watch the painters at work. ... He had for several years advocated this trail to Burlington and had worked hard for its acceptance by the automobile club." By October the trail had been marked in Burlington toward Williston.

The Theodore Roosevelt International Highway was not explicitly a governmental effort, so it required a broad-based organization to carry out the plan in a "uniform fashion" across the country and into Canada. The highway association was headquartered in Duluth, Minnesota, led by a general president, general executive committee, and board of directors. The highway route was divided into three sections, each of which had its own president and general secretary. Within each section, each state had a president and a general council formed by local representatives.

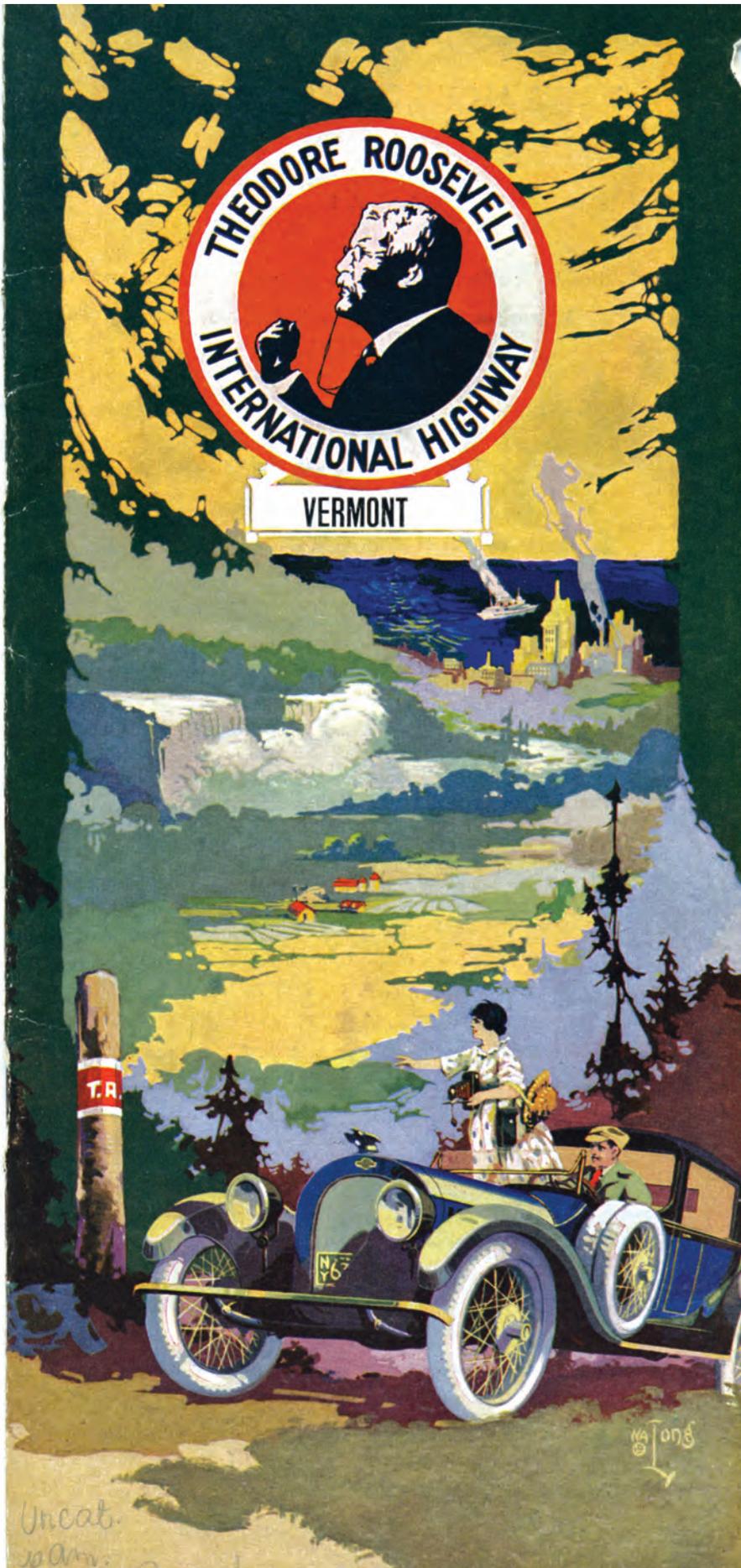
Max L. Powell, former President Pro Tempore of the Vermont Senate, two-time candidate for governor, and a Burlington insurance executive, served as the state president for Vermont. James P. Taylor, the erstwhile secretary of the Greater Vermont Association (later the Vermont State Chamber of Commerce), was the secretary of the Vermont "T.R.I. Highway," as it was known. The 23 Vermont towns along the highway each had three representatives on the state general council. Within each town, businesses and individuals were solicited for membership. In Burlington, which had the highest number of members, there were 92 members in 1922. Waterbury, by contrast, had 19 members that same year.



James P. Taylor of Burlington was the secretary of both the Vermont Division of the T.R.I. Highway Association and of the Greater Vermont Association. He wrote many promotional items, including the 1921 Vermont guide to Roosevelt Highway.



A faded trail marker can be seen on a telephone pole in front of the Village Tavern on Route 2 in Waterbury.



Vermont's T.R.I. Highway organization published a brochure with this stunning cover in 1921. The brochure described the state in glowing terms.

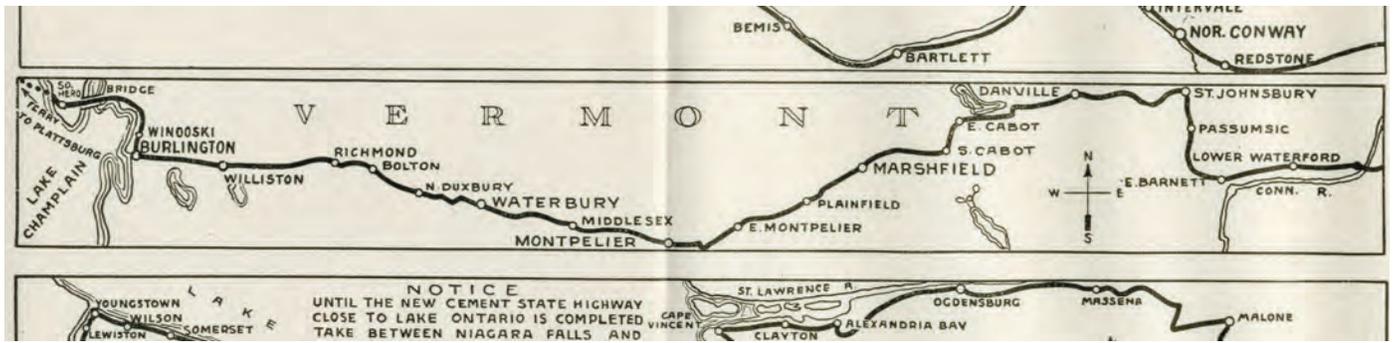
The purpose of the road was decidedly commercial; its aim was to promote tourism along the trail. As the *Burlington Free Press* explained in 1919, the highway “had its origin with business men” from the Duluth (Minnesota) Commercial Club “which has in mind the benefits to be gained through a mutual effort of all States along the Canadian border for the welfare of the touring public.”

A 23-page pamphlet published in 1921, two years after the trail was marked, extolled Vermont’s beauty as seen from the highway. The pamphlet, entitled “Glimpses Along the Roosevelt Memorial Highway in Vermont,” weaves together Vermont history, environmentalism, and Roosevelt’s life story. Its grand subtitle read: “A Pilgrimage for Every Patriotic American, Every Lover of Nature, Every Admirer of Theodore Roosevelt.”

Written by promoter James P. Taylor, the pamphlet encouraged the visitor to linger, since “The Vermonter’s road is not the road that’s quickest, but the road that is loveliest.” According to Taylor, “Vermont is just one Japanese garden after another, all with the same general theme, each unlike the rest: valleys everywhere, but with a thousand variations.” Taylor felt that once the visitor “caught the spirit of the Vermont landscape” he would be “eager to explore the Vermont labyrinth even to its tiniest, most exquisite valleys, each enlivened with its own brooklet, each crowned with its own personal hills.” Turning the tricky topography into a virtue, he wrote, “the joy of the maze of Vermont’s roads is that the quick succession of angles and curves means infinite variety, ever some new picture.”

Taylor’s use of the natural environment to promote tourism led the way for future state-sponsored promotional campaigns. We hear echoes of his words on the state’s [vermontvacation.com](http://vermontvacation.com) website today: “The best way to experience Vermont is to tour the roadways that wind through the mountains and meet in the valleys.”

The 1921 brochure draws as many links between Vermont and Theodore Roosevelt as possible, some of them strong, others rather tenuous. In the section on the western end of the trail, the brochure reads, with great hyper-

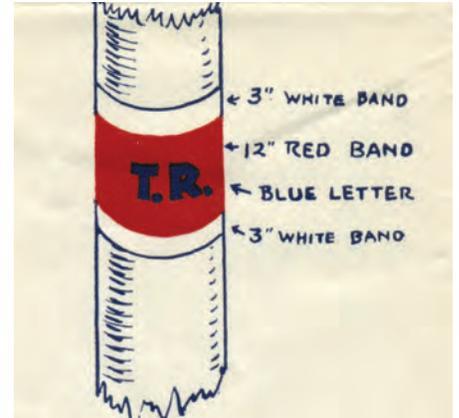


Vermont's 1921 brochure included this map of the route across the state. Although not detailed enough to be used when motoring, it shows the general path of the trail across the state over what would become U.S. Route 2.

bole, "Grand Isle County was the scene of the most fateful incident in the career of Roosevelt." It reports that it was there that Roosevelt "received the destiny-making telegram, telling of the assassination of President McKinley at Buffalo, and presaging Roosevelt's career as President and world leader."

The link that Taylor draws between Roosevelt and the Vermont State House is stretched rather thin. "To establish a bust of Lincoln as master at the entrance to legislative halls seems an altogether Rooseveltian thing to do," Taylor writes, because T.R. was an admirer of Lincoln and had his portrait in the oval office! Taylor goes on to point out that the hills and waters in Montpelier "were the playground of Admiral George Dewey, chosen by Theodore Roosevelt to go to the Philippines just before the Spanish War."

The Vermont Division of the T.R.I. Highway Association tried to assess the impact of these promotional efforts. In 1922, the association organized a group of volunteers to count cars and other vehicles along the trail. They counted cars in front of the "hospital farm" in Burlington from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. on selected days during August and determined that that location saw an average of 64 cars/hour on August 1; 69 cars/hour on August 9; 86 cars/hour on August 17; and 84 cars/hour on August 25. Jonesville, in Richmond, saw an average of 66 cars/hour on August 27 and in St. Johnsbury the observed rate was 35 cars/hour on September 21. By contrast, there were 9 horse-drawn vehicles/hour



The Theodore Roosevelt International Highway Association developed this directional sign (above, left) to be used along the highway. It is not clear if signs of this type were ever used in Vermont. Specifications for the bands that marked T.R.I. Highway (above, right), as promulgated by the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway Association in Duluth, Minnesota.



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ROOSEVELT HIGHWAY ENTERING WATERBURY, VT.



This postcard used the "Roosevelt Highway" label to identify this scene in Waterbury.

at the same spot and time in St. Johnsbury.

Because the association neither evaluated the results of their traffic study nor continued the study during a period of years, it is not clear what conclusions they drew. Were they satisfied with their efforts? Did their efforts bring more traffic to the businesses along the road? How many of these cars were from out of state? These are all questions that were left unanswered by the association.

In February 1923, the international president of the T.R.I. Highway Association announced that the organization would increase its scope of activities. The plans included issuing thousands of road maps showing the route through the New England states, publishing a 32-page monthly "art magazine" depicting the attractions of the route, and hosting Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., assistant secretary of the navy, at the annual meeting of the eastern division of the association in Burlington. None of this seemed to have come to pass, although in March of that year the national organization an-

nounced that it was nearing completion of the highway, five years after the effort started.

The initial enthusiasm for the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway in Vermont faded after about five years, perhaps because the state was taking more responsibility for the maintenance of major thoroughfares. The idea of "good roads" had taken hold and other marking systems were instituted. The Joint Board on Interstate Highways in 1925 created the U.S. numbered highway system, designating the T.R.I. Highway as U.S. Route 2. There are no newspaper accounts of Vermont T.R.I. Highway Association meetings or actions after 1923.

In 1934, the *Burlington Free Press* felt it necessary to explain to its readers that U.S. Route 2 "traverses the continent, at times dipping into Canada, which gives the title, the International Route, and sometimes is called the Roosevelt highway." In 1937, the well-respected Works Progress Administration's *Guide to the Green Mountain State* included an auto

tour from the New Hampshire line to Burlington along U.S. Route 2. However, it never mentions Theodore Roosevelt's connection to Vermont, so prominently featured in the 1922 brochure, or the early automobile trail named after him.

By 1951, the designation was all but forgotten in Vermont. In August of that year Don O'Brien, a columnist for the *Burlington Free Press*, suggested that U.S. Route 2 be named "the Warren Austin Highway," after the U.S. senator from Vermont and first ambassador to the United Nations. An alert reader wrote to tell him that he couldn't do that because it had been named for Theodore Roosevelt 45 years earlier. The columnist admitted to being ignorant of the fact but noted, "I've never noticed any sign anywhere to show that Route 2 was ever named for him." That is probably true, but Essex Junction resident Richard Boera remembers seeing a T.R.I. Highway sign on Route 2 east of Montpelier in the 1970s.

The T.R.I. Highway was not marked on state highway maps in 1951 when

O'Brien made his comment, but in 1964 it appeared on the state's official map and stayed there until 1995 when all of the named highway designations were removed from the map. Today, "Roosevelt Highway" is frequently used in published notices for Colchester and Bolton, and Google maps uses that label for the route through those two towns. The entire length of U.S. Route 2 is now entered into the Vermont Department of Libraries' "Named State Highways and Bridges" database as "Theodore Roosevelt Highway." Later this year the Vermont Agency of Transportation will be installing signs at pullouts in Danville and Alburgh recognizing the historic name of the route that honored the 26th president and that paved the way for tourist transportation across Vermont.

Although Theodore Roosevelt International Highway has been forgotten by most Vermonters today, the physical remnants of this cross-country trail are a reminder of a time when business and civic leaders created independent organizations to make touring by automobile easier for the public. It is also a reminder of the high esteem in which Theodore Roosevelt was held across the country in the period following his death and into the present day. 🍂

Paul Carnahan is the librarian of the Vermont Historical Society.

## JUST THE FACTS

To view a scan of the pamphlet "Glimpses Along the Roosevelt Memorial Highway in Vermont," along with images of the highway, visit [digitalvermont.org/collections/show/22](http://digitalvermont.org/collections/show/22).

### Vermont History Museum

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