

Numbering System for Highways: Until after World War I in this country, those wanting to make an extended trip on rubber tires had to rely on the Blue Book published by AAA, or something similar, to know where they were going. Without numbered highways, it wasn't easy. In the 1920s, however, a system of numbering for major highways was devised by Federal authorities (probably in cooperation with AAA), and these roads obtained U.S. Route numbers. Although the U.S. is not a perfect rectangle, nor are its major cities equally spaced, it was decided that the numbering should make some geographical sense, and that it did.

North-south major roads would bear odd numbers, and east-west roads even numbers. For example, U.S. Route 1, extending along the East Coast from Maine to Florida, touched every coastal state except Delaware (it passed through Philadelphia, Media, Kennett Square, and Oxford, Pennsylvania, en route to Baltimore). West of U.S. Route 1, north-south highways had higher odd numbers, terminating with U.S. Route 101 running close to the Pacific from San Diego to the Canadian border. U.S. 3, mostly in New Hampshire, went straight north from Boston and followed the Merrimac River. U.S. 5 went from New Haven up the Connecticut Valley, U.S. 7 went north from Norwalk, Connecticut, through the Berkshires and Vermont to the Canadian border, U.S. 9 north from New York up the Hudson (and south through New Jersey to Cape May), etc. U.S. 13 ran north-south through Delaware from Claymont to Delmar and continued south to the Carolinas. U.S. 25 was the "Dixie Highway," running from Detroit (if not from Sault Ste. Marie) to Florida.

Numbering on east-west highways started at the north, with U.S. 10 starting west of the Great Lakes and going to Seattle. Even closer to the Canadian border was U.S. 2, going across northern New England and picking up again on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In this area, U.S. 30 was also called the Lincoln Highway (which had been established a few years before numbering), starting at Atlantic City and ending at Astoria, Oregon, at the mouth of the Columbia River. U.S. 40 also began in the East at Atlantic City, crossing the New Castle-Pennsville Ferry, proceeding through Baltimore and ending in San Francisco. From Baltimore to the Mississippi River, it was known as the "Old National Road." U.S. 90 crossed the south, close to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mexican border. Important roads of shorter length usually had numbers between the "even 10s" (U.S. 6 started on Cape Cod and ran to the Cleveland area—possibly farther west as well). Many states soon followed suit with numbering, and state highways usually were numbered on a somewhat standard system. In many areas of the country, county and township roads have less prominent numbers, very helpful on steam car tours.

When Interstate Highways came along in the 1960s, numbering was easier, as there were not as many of them, and all were usually high-speed long-distance roads. North-south Interstates still carried odd numbers, but I-5 was in the far west and I-95 in the east, with "the 5's" representing, in most cases, the important north-south through highways. There are exceptions such as I-81, which runs from the Thousand Island Bridge over the St. Lawrence to New Orleans. Even-numbered interstates had the lowest numbers, such as I-10 crossing the south from coast-to-coast, and the highest numbers crossing the north (I-90 starts in Boston and ends in Seattle). I-80 crosses northern Pennsylvania, I-76 is the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and I-70 runs from Baltimore and Washington west to St. Louis, Denver, Salt Lake City and San Francisco. If you like geography, the understanding of the numbering of our major roads is great fun. Unfortunately, driving on them becomes less enjoyable as traffic increases, and it is indeed!