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Richard W. Judd
University of Maine

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GOOD ROADS FOR WHOM?

Farmers, Urban Merchants, and Road Administration in Maine, 1901-1916

BY RICHARD W. JUDD

The arrival of the automobile challenged Maine to rethink a road system that dated back to colonial times. But as auto advocates soon discovered, this was an immensely controversial issue, bringing years of political turmoil as contending groups questioned matters of road location, financing, and administration at every juncture. As key players in this drama, farmers fought for a road system that linked them to local markets or rail depots; tourist advocates, on the other hand, envisioned a system of “trunk lines” — well-constructed thoroughfares that would carry travelers from one end of the state to the other. Isolation, parochial living, and traditionalism, some historians suggest, biased farmers against the modern political agencies that took control over roads previously built and maintained by individual towns. In fact, they had solid economic reasons to oppose these modern administrative forms, and until their needs were met, Maine road policy remained at an impasse. Richard W. Judd received a doctoral degree in American history from the University of California at Irvine in 1979, and from 1981 to 1984 he edited the Journal of Forest History. In 1984 he joined the History Department at the University of Maine and became editor of Maine History. His publications include Natural States: The Environmental Imagination in Maine, Oregon, and the Nation; Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England; Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present; and Aroostook: A Century of Logging in Northern Maine.

SPEAKING BEFORE a gathering of state Automobile Association members in 1923, Maine’s Governor, Percival P. Baxter, announced the completion of a new statewide system of trunk-line, or through-state roads, a project that had been under discussion for over two decades. Commemorating the occasion, he observed that Maine people “universally agreed” that no branch of the state’s work was more important than building these roads.¹



Maine Governor Percival P. Baxter, 1921. In 1923, at the Maine Automobile Association convention, Governor Baxter commemorated the completion of Maine's state-wide system of trunk-line roads, marking the resolution of an issue that had been hotly debated over the prior two decades. Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society.

Baxter's claim that road programs enjoyed wide consensus in Maine would have raised eyebrows a few years earlier. In fact, thrashing out an acceptable highway policy brought years of political turmoil as contending groups questioned matters of road location, financing, and administration at every juncture. The particulars in this debate shifted frequently between 1901 and 1916, but the fundamental issue grew out of the changing locus of power and authority in American society. Partisans of the good roads movement in Maine and elsewhere argued that small-town officials failed to meet the challenge of twentieth-century road building. Responsibility, they felt, should be transferred to higher political levels, where experts armed with comprehensive outlooks and requisite training could best ensure the greatest returns from public resources.

The assault on small-town authority over road administration impinged upon a centuries-old New England tradition of local community planning and control. But the controversy extended beyond New England town government; it was part of a basic social development that historians Robert Wiebe, Louis Galambos, and others locate at the core of late-nineteenth-century America. As the focus of American business and public life shifted from small, isolated communities to urban and indeed national arenas, old forms of organization and administration no longer seemed functional. The Progressive era saw important areas of decision making pass from small-town government to higher levels of authority as elaborate networks of formal, hierarchical bureaucracies



AVOID THE MAN WITH THE WHEELBARROW

Cartoon from the July 1916 issue of *Better Roads and Streets*. There was much disagreement about which roads should be improved. Many were opposed to improving farm roads that “began nowhere and ended nowhere.” By 1923 it was generally agreed that no work was more important than building Maine’s new trunk-line road system.

came to dominate society. These changes also conferred increasing importance upon engineers and other experts who could render needed services in a more complex and extended world. Scores of new professions emerged, their common goals being systematic innovation, standardized process, bureaucratic order, and efficiency.²

Although not everyone conceded the necessity of this reform, historians have been mostly interested in those who did: the “new” middle classes of professionals and middle-management executives who replaced traditional decision makers. Given this focus, the reactions of those who resisted the new order – farmers, craftsmen, and other small-town citizens – are poorly understood and often stereotyped as backward-looking provincials fighting to maintain an outmoded world. Consequently the shift in power to higher administrative levels – the so-called “organizational revolution” in the Progressive period – appears awkwardly deterministic; new regulatory and administrative networks



Looking north from Turnpike Road, Camden, ca. 1920. In the 1890s, Maine boasted the worst roads in New England. Broken topography, steep hills, rocky soils, innumerable bogs and swamps, and Maine's long and harsh winters all contributed to the terrible conditions of the state's road systems. Courtesy of St. Croix Historical Society, Calais, Maine.

arise in somewhat mysterious fashion as a response to failures in the market system or the body politic.

The Maine good roads movement provides an arena for gauging resistance to the organizational revolution. As a largely rural state in a highly urbanized region, Maine accents the traditional resistance to urban-based professional road reform. Farmers bore the heaviest burdens of neglect on the nation's country roads, yet they were often the most vocal critics of administrative reform. Isolation and parochial living, some have suggested, biased them against broader systems of control, while rural habits such as self-reliance and community self-sufficiency predisposed them against outside control and specialized expertise. Historian Warren Berger adds that farmers opposed the good roads movement initially because it was sponsored by prosperous city folk and because good roads facilitated the invasion of the countryside by cyclists and automobilists.³ In short, farmers appear to have feared changes in political structures that shifted control beyond their limited horizons. The persistence of rural culture in northern New England and the political power farmers enjoyed in Maine provide an opportunity for understanding the politics of organizational reform.

Events in Maine suggest that resistance was indeed animated in part by tight-fistedness, anti-urbanism, and ingrained political conservatism. But rural opposition to the urban-based good roads movement rested



Snow roller, Caribou, 1930. The use of the snow roller was one example of changing ideas about better road maintenance at the end of the nineteenth century. A snow roller was an improvement over a snowplow as it packed down the snow on the roads, creating a wide, hard, smooth surface. Courtesy of the Caribou Public Library, Caribou, Maine.

mainly on perceived economic interest. Farmers embraced innovations that promised economic benefits, but resisted those that accelerated the shift in economic power to the cities. The distinction was apparent in editorial comments on the state's widening network of electric railroads. Maine's most prestigious farm journal noted that the new rail lines would "bring the rural section and town nearer together through improved science and reduced cost of transportation" but cautioned that "great injury" would be done if the lines were built simply to divert rural trade to urban, as opposed to small-town, merchants.⁴

Farmers likewise championed good roads in their own interest but objected to the notion that transportation systems should be built to serve the needs of urban promoters.⁵ Local control insured them a road system wedded to their own interests. The acrimony that plagued the good roads movement in Maine was not a struggle between "traditionalists" and a rising professional bureaucracy; it was rooted in diverging urban-merchant and agrarian class interests. The outcome, a political compromise that acknowledged the farmers' economic interests, paved the way for broader forms of administrative control. This grass-roots compromise preceded, and indeed was a necessary foundation for the

administrative “revolution” launched by the 1916 Federal Aid Highway Act.

Maine’s Good Roads Movement

It is difficult, by today’s standards, to appreciate the obstacles presented by late-nineteenth-century roads. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, a folklorist living in Brewer, recalled the many frustrations of overland travel in the late nineteenth century.

What one remembers about driving on our roads is the discomfort of storms and winds in cold weather and the dust in summer. Four inches or more of light dust was not uncommon which was stirred up by every passing team. It settled on all the roadside trees and bushes and smothered them in dirt. It settled on the occupants of teams, so that a dust-robe, or light covering was usually in every carriage. A shower laid it, only to make mud. Roads were rutted and soft and in spring when the frost was coming out were often impassible, wagons going down to the hubs in liquid mud which dripped from them in a sheet as they turned slowly. But it was all we had or knew, part of the game of living then.”⁶

In the 1890s Maine reputedly suffered some of the worst roads in New England, but tenacious local administration was only partly to blame for this. Broken topography, steep hills, rocky soils, and innumerable bogs and swamps complicated road construction and maintenance enormously, and Maine winters are long and springs characterized by alternate freezing and thawing. Maine in 1921 contained only about 10 percent of New England’s population but had built about 29 percent of its roads.⁷

A relatively large state with numerous small, evenly distributed towns, Maine faced substantial expenses for roads that served relatively few people. Moreover, there were few industrial incentives to build good roads in nineteenth-century Maine. Road building stagnated due to the state’s maritime orientation and its vast system of navigable rivers. Distance from large urban markets kept Maine’s small upland farm towns relatively self sufficient and less reliant on external transportation. The state’s traditional shipbuilding and fishing industries required little overland transportation, and its substantial lumber industry was well served by Maine’s expansive river system. Granite and limestone were quarried and processed on the coastal headlands or islands and loaded directly onto coastwise vessels, and the pulp and paper industry, the most vital sector of the state’s economy, adapted easily to existing rail

and river transportation. Maine presented a formidable challenge for town and county road commissioners at the turn of the century.⁸

In 1880 a state division of the League of American Wheelmen launched a campaign for better roads. But far more effective in laying the foundations for the good roads movement were Maine's upland farmers. In the second half of the century frustration spread among those who yearly rebuilt the roads with their own labor or tax money and lived with the system's shortcomings. Edging into a market economy as nearby cities expanded and railroads spread north from Boston, farmers warmed, albeit slowly, to the prospect of increased spending for roads.⁹

The farmers' good roads movement was spearheaded by the State Grange, a vigorous and politically active organization of some 60,000 rural residents, and the Maine Board of Agriculture, a forum for the several county agricultural societies. These organizations also apprized farmers of breakthroughs in steam power, electricity, communications, marketing, and other techniques that would give advantage to all those "keen enough to grasp them."¹⁰ As early as 1870 the Board of Agriculture took up the question of road improvement, and in the 1890s the Grange, following the lead of the national Grange organization, endorsed the good roads idea and urged towns to develop more systematic maintenance programs. Farmers looked to the good roads movement as a solution to pressing economic problems. The number of farms in the state peaked in 1880 at 64,309 and dropped to 62,013 in 1890, while the number of acres in cultivation dropped from 6.55 million to 6.18 million. As in other marginal agricultural regions in New England, farm abandonment in upland Maine was a fact of life, and stemming this drain was a constant in rural politics. Maine farmers devoted countless journal columns and Grange-hall lectures to the means of uplifting rural life and insulating farm youth from the lure of the city.¹¹

Rural reformers asserted that poor roads depressed the spirit, narrowed horizons, and drove youth from the farms. They were a tax on farm produce and a drain on labor, equipment, and draft animals. Good roads, on the other hand, would stimulate interest in "the advantages and privileges of the farm" and infuse stagnant communities with new life. The message had appeal. By 1907 Howland, an upper Penobscot Valley farming community, had received its first improved road, and an ecstatic citizen wrote a nearby newspaper editor that the town's new asset would "bless every man, woman and child" in the town. If good roads made Rome an empire, the correspondent concluded, surely they could elevate Maine agriculture to its former importance.¹²

Despite a cautious approach, farmers perceived the value of proper road construction and were beginning to address the problem in the 1890s. Town and county road commissioners recognized the causes of deterioration: roads were too narrow and too poorly drained; ditches were too deep, and shoulders too steep; roads were constructed of the wrong material, inadequately cleared of small stones, and repaired at the wrong times of the year. Routine maintenance, such as cutting bushes, improving drainage, and filling holes and ruts, was a hit-or-miss proposition. Road workers simply plowed out ditches on either side of a road with a primitive road machine, turned the sod and clay into the middle of the road, then broke the clods with a tooth harrow. For fill, they used, as one local commissioner put it, "any old dirt that is the nearest." Nevertheless, ideas for better maintenance were being shared across town and county boundaries; commissioners digested topics as esoteric as the tractive power of horses hitched to wagons and resistance to pull under various conditions and inclines, the costs of different maintenance strategies, and the kinds of wood and design suitable for snow rollers.¹³ By the mid-1890s the farmers' good roads campaign was animating conversation in Grange halls, post offices, town meetings, and country stores throughout upland Maine. No class of citizens, the secretary of the Board of Agriculture indicated, was "more directly interested in good public highways than the farmer."¹⁴

Rural reformers identified two general problems. First, Maine towns allowed citizens to work off taxes on the roads. The statute labor system encouraged widespread tax evasion, indifferent or incompetent work, and use of poorly broken horses and improper equipment. Often farmers refused to work outside their own neighborhoods. Nevertheless, it was difficult to extract the statute labor system from other aspects of rural culture. State and local taxes fell heavily on the farm population, and the labor system benefitted the cash-poor farmer in an agricultural society still on the edge of a market economy. It was also, some felt, democratic. Farmers who did their own work on their own roads knew precisely how their tax revenues were being spent, and could blame only themselves for the condition of their roads. Rural commentators were ambivalent about abolishing the statute labor system, and most preferred a local option that left tax policy completely in the hands of selectmen and the town meeting.¹⁵

Funding was a second general concern among rural proponents of good roads. Maine farms were predominately small, family-run affairs. Farmers engaged in a daily struggle to economize their own production

costs, provide for their families, and "lay by" for a day when old age reduced their earning power, were financially conservative by nature. Their weak market orientation and the lingering ideology of self-sufficiency further reduced the appeal of higher road taxes. Individually, the upland towns could not raise added revenue for better roads, and collectively they refused to vote a state tax to support roads.¹⁶

The Urban Good Roads Movement

Rural commissioners had reached an impasse on these two issues at a time when urban commercial leaders were beginning to take interest in the good roads movement. Commerce had flourished in early nineteenth-century Maine due to the north-south flow of eastern trade following coastwise shipping lanes. When railroads shifted the nation's commercial axis to an east-west orientation, the state was left somewhat isolated by its position north of the major trunk rail lines running west from the seaboard cities. Sensitive to the impact of geography and transportation on the regional economy, Maine chambers of commerce adopted the good roads movement as a means of reintegrating the state into the commercial life of the nation.

The most vocal urban good roads advocates, however, were representatives of Maine's rapidly growing tourist industry. A relatively undeveloped region located near major population concentrations, Maine offered ideal conditions for tourist development. The "summer trade" assumed importance as early as the 1860s when picturesque coastal landscapes, salubrious climate, and a vast inland game preserve brought elite Boston and New York "rusticators" and sporting enthusiasts to the state. Land-speculating syndicates began parceling the southern coast into hotel, camp, and beach cottage sites, and Maine's roster of "summer hotels" grew from 250 in 1887 to approximately 1,265 by 1914. By the 1890s Maine welcomed a flood of vacationers each summer, and the economic base of several seaside and lakeside towns had shifted predominantly to tourism.¹⁷

The 1890s brought a promotional extravaganza sponsored by railroad and steamship lines, hotel owners, land speculators, resort proprietors, and guiding associations. These diverse tourist interests issued vacation brochures and monthly travel magazines, established visitors' inquiry services, and sponsored lavish displays at various sportsmen's expositions. Portland assumed leadership in this effort. Over the years the city had witnessed a steady withering of its hinterland economy,

caused by a decline in traditional staples like lumber, agricultural produce, and fish. The city's business leaders turned to the vacation industry as a means of reinvigorating Portland's trade with the countryside. Hoping to revitalize the rural communities within the city's economic sphere, the Portland Board of Trade devoted great energy to arguing the economic benefits of the new industry. Tourism provided opportunities for country hostlers, sporting guides, market farmers, youth camp operators, teamsters, boat builders, wood craftsmen, and other rural entrepreneurs – new blood for anemic rural economies.¹⁸

Maine travel promotions offered a curious blend of rustic charm and modern opulence, epitomized by several nationally acclaimed hotels featuring steam heat, “Boston orchestras,” acres of landscaping and golf links, and other luxuries set amidst remote wilderness or pastoral landscapes. A night's run from Boston, these resorts offered country charm but also featured the amenities expected by a pampered class of urban travelers familiar with life at America's best watering places. The Lucerne-in-Maine, located in a wooded lake region southeast of Bangor, advertised a “vacation community made by Nature herself and left unspoiled.” Clients enjoyed log cabins complete with “de luxe” hot and cold running water, plumbing, and electricity. A “stately country club” served their more urbane needs. This combination of rural simplicity and urban comfort helped set the theme for the modern good roads movement in Maine.

In an increasingly mobile society, as historian Warren Balasco points out, sedentary tourist preoccupations gave way to bicycling, hiking, and carriage riding. When summer visitors arrived at a Maine resort, a travel magazine explained, “after the question of good beds and table are considered is the query— ‘are there any good drives?’”¹⁹ Good roads would permit the tourist to reach rustic, out-of-the-way resorts and enjoy unspoiled scenery without experiencing the discomforts that were obviously still a part of country life in Maine. From the perspective of urban merchants and hotel owners, broad, statewide planning was the key to better roads and a more vigorous economy. Local jurisdiction stood as an obstacle to this new progressive vision.²⁰ Officials in Maine's smaller towns and plantations did not necessarily design or maintain roads to connect effectively with those of a neighboring community, since this was generally immaterial to farmers carrying produce to local markets. Inter-town connection, however, was the essence of leisurely “touring” and of great concern to urban businessmen hoping to knit together a hinterland. Tourist promoters and other urban business leaders wanted



1914 Packard Touring Car. Auto accident at Goosefare Brook, Biddeford, 1914. In the early twentieth century, very few Mainers owned automobiles, and most rural farmers were hostile to automobile traffic. In part, farmers resisted a state-wide trunk-line system because they believed that touring automobilists littered roads, destroyed private property, and injured or frightened livestock. Courtesy of the McArthur Library, Biddeford. Maine Historical Photographs Collection (MS 316), Image 0031-01. Special Collections, Fogler Library, University of Maine.

a system of “trunk roads” – heavily engineered “permanent” thoroughfares connecting regional metropolitan centers. Farmers, on the other hand, hoped for improvement on the shorter “market” roads that linked each farm with the nearest town or rail depot. Market roads, which varied greatly in length, condition, and purpose, were best left to local administrators. Farmers and urban businessmen concurred on the need for better roads, but approached road reform with entirely different priorities.

Good Roads for Whom?

The campaign for good roads thus polarized the state’s most powerful economic interests. In the 1890s Maine, as elsewhere, received a flood of printed matter from the federal Department of Road Inquiry advocating systematic statewide road planning.²¹ Summarizing the federal arguments before a rural audience in 1892, University of Maine engineer G.



Board of Trade Building, Portland, 1907. In 1897, the Portland Board of Trade petitioned the legislature to establish a State Road Commission to oversee the construction of an improved state road system. The Portland Board of Trade moved its operations to 34 Exchange Street, the former Merchant Bank, in January, 1907. Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society.

H. Hamlin recommended a system of state funded and state controlled roads, a "radical change" in administration that would benefit both city and country. City merchants, bankers, manufacturers, lawyers, doctors, and others, he pointed out, were ready to aid the farmer in paying for this service. The argument failed to impress Hamlin's rural audience. Board of Agriculture President B. Walker McKeen pointed out that "other interests" looked at road policy "from their [own] standpoints," and he cautioned farmers to consider with great skepticism the agitation for good roads rising from the boards of trade in Maine's larger cities.²² To rural reformers these business organizations loomed as rivals rather than allies, and over the next few years differences between urban and rural reformers would divide the good roads movement in matters of funding, road design, and local control.

In 1897 the Portland Board of Trade petitioned the legislature to establish a state road commission and a basic system of macadamized roads. Taking issue with the urban businessmen, the Board of Agriculture instructed its rural legislators to reject programs that would "unwisely increase the burdens, already too heavy, on our rural communities." Farmers were aware of the need for greater expertise, but anticipated that expert road building would shift road policy to the advantage of urban planners. A farmer from the town of Union cautioned against reducing the autonomy of the minor civil divisions and denounced the new emphasis on expensive "permanent roads," which might represent true economy in densely trafficked areas, but were a costly extravagance in rural Maine. Country roads would be best improved through "more judicious outlay" of existing resources. The highway bill was defeated, and roads remained firmly in the hands of local users, a situation the *Maine Farmer* pronounced "just, equitable, and efficient."²³

A compromise of sorts was accomplished when state lawmakers responded to the growing pressure for road improvement in 1901 by providing state matching funds for locally-administered road programs. The 1901 act provided up to \$100 in state funds for road maintenance in any town that designated its main thoroughfare a "state" road. It encouraged "permanent improvement," but left control of road maintenance with town and county commissioners. Between 1901 and 1903 the appropriation was raised from \$15,000 to \$40,000, with 206 towns participating by the latter date. The funding plan met the concerns of rural legislators jealous of local prerogatives but left urban promoters unsatisfied. At a 1905 legislative hearing, State Board of Trade represen-

tatives argued that county and town commissioners lacked comprehensive understanding of Maine's transportation needs and consequently misallocated the state's funds. The board again sponsored a bill to hire a commissioner of highways, who was to investigate road conditions, compile information, and promote the "best known economical methods for building and maintaining highways." The information was to be made available to town selectmen and commissioners.²⁴

Despite various safeguards for local control, rural legislators showed little enthusiasm for the new bill. Although some objected to the \$5,000 appropriation, most rural opponents focused on the intrusion upon town government. Intimate knowledge of local needs and resources, they pointed out, was far more important than generalized engineering expertise. A northern Maine representative refused to believe that any official from his area would travel 300 miles to Augusta seeking expert advice on roads in his home town.²⁵ The legislature accordingly sanctioned the new office, but again left towns in full control of their roads. The commissioner's mandate was to be strictly educational, and towns were free to determine policy within the broad guidelines imposed through final inspection by the county commissioners.

Maine's Road Commission: Forging a Compromise

The new state office was placed in the hands of a young civil engineer with several years experience in railroad construction in eastern Maine. Like his progressive counterparts at the federal level, Commissioner Paul D. Sargent was interested in replacing local intrigue and petty town rivalry with disinterested professionalism and more exact information. But he approached his task with a firm appreciation for the political conflicts unleashed by the good roads movement. Sargent launched an educational campaign aimed at urban newspaper editors and the state's "leading men," but at the same time organized a series of meetings with local road commissioners to exchange ideas. Like other progressive-era experts, the commissioner sidestepped political controversy by stressing nonpartisan issues like technical improvement and systematic maintenance, and cautiously began levering the state's roads away from town officials. His efforts to unite rural and urban promoters paid off.²⁶ In several legislative committee hearings after 1905, Sargent received backing from the State Board of Trade, the State Grange, and the County Commissioners' Association.

In 1907 Sargent drafted a bill permitting the state office, on petition

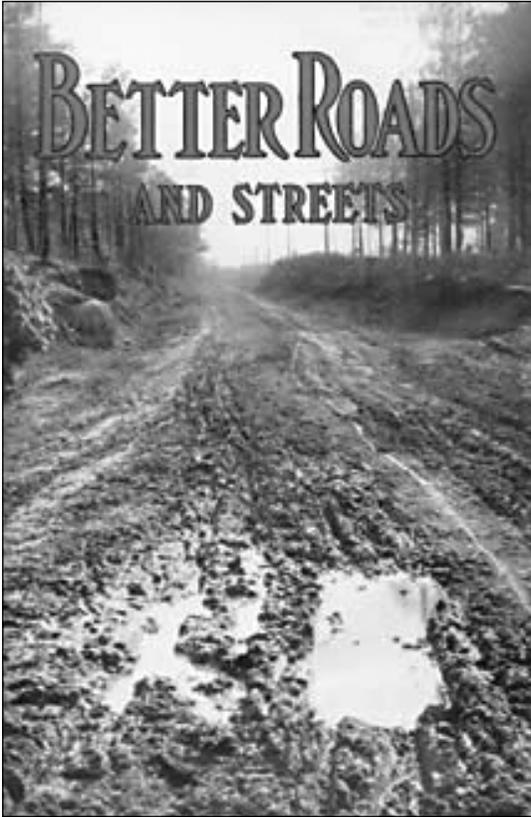
from any town, to design, improve, and maintain the town's main thoroughfare. Unlike the 1901 law, under which the commissioner simply advised local officials, this statute gave the commissioner power to determine the manner in which highways were to be built and prescribed a percentage of the cost from the town appropriations.²⁷ The bill also mandated a statewide one-mill property tax to pay for road construction. These innovations would prove to be a major test of the commissioner's ability to link the urban and rural good roads movements.

Sargent argued for his bill before several legislative committee hearings. He explained that over 90 percent of the cost of the state's roads fell to rural taxpayers, who could not be expected to shoulder further burdens to improve roads. Sargent assured farmers that trunk lines were a low priority and enticed rural legislators with a proposed statewide property tax, which would fall more heavily upon valuable urban property than upon rural lands. To urban good roads advocates, Sargent explained that in many cases the roads chosen by individual towns would form continuous "trunk-line" routes simply because they would follow old stage lines and county roads. Where the towns' selections proved discontinuous, the state could use unexpended road funds to link them.²⁸

The more difficult task lay in convincing urban legislative representatives to accept the one-mill statewide tax to fund the system, since most roads would be built in rural areas. A legislator from Eden (Bar Harbor) complained that his town "could not stand the added burden of the extra taxation," and Bangor's city editor railed at the "Socialistic Legislation" which, he assured readers, would "arouse sentiments of hostility between city and country that would prove difficult to quell."²⁹

Maneuvering between rural and urban opponents, Sargent agreed to several compromises that salvaged the bill. The House accepted an amendment that reduced the tax rate, and, for worried rural representatives, the penalties for failure to observe the provisions of the bill were removed. The bill's favorable reception from the State Grange, the State Board of Trade, the governor, and influential civic leaders across the state was a tribute to Sargent's political skills. Despite continued resistance in some quarters, the bill passed, and legislators congratulated themselves on "one of the most satisfactory and best legal instruments of the kind ever devised in any state in the Union." By 1907 some 467 local administrations had turned their main through road over to the state commissioner.³⁰

Nevertheless, the 1907 law failed to merge the disparate viewpoints of farmers and urban businessmen. As long-distance automobile travel



Cover photo, March 1916 issue of *Better Roads and Streets*. By 1908, many Mainers worried that the state's poor road conditions discouraged tourists from visiting and gave the entire state a "poverty-stricken, down-at-the-heel, look." In 1912, Rep. Dorsey W. Shackleford of Missouri introduced a bill in Washington to improve "farm to market" roads "to get the farmers out of the mud." Maine benefitted from the infusion of federal funds.

became technically feasible, the latter increasingly saw roads as important commercial and tourist links between urban centers. Urban good roads strategies were tied more firmly to the concept of trunk lines, and city boards of trade continued to press for comprehensive reform.³¹

The Automobiling Mecca of the East

Champions of the automobile, including the state's twenty-two car dealers and two automobile clubs, added a new and unstable element to the urban good roads movement. Automobile owners constituted a rela-

tively small section of the population. The state registered only 711 automobiles in 1905, and only 3,472 cars and trucks by 1915. Thus the automobile, like the bicycle before it, gave the urban good roads movement an elitist cast that further alienated Maine's overwhelmingly rural population. Farmers, as historians have pointed out, were initially hostile to auto traffic, often for good reason. Touring automobilists left roadsides strewn with garbage, destroyed shrubbery, crops, and orchard trees, and threatened livestock and poultry crossing roads. Farmers saw little utility in the automobile; early models were notoriously unreliable and cost as much as ten times the price of a good horse. Farmers failed to see the virtue of improving roads in a manner that permitted an invasion of arrogant and reckless auto tourists bent on destroying rural property and livestock and frightening teams.³² Sensitive to this judgment, the auto clubs suggested that the day was not far distant when the automobile would be priced within reach of "people of less means than can afford it now." Somewhat condescendingly, the Portland Board of Trade listed the elements of a bleak country existence and announced that impassable roads lay at the heart of the "rural problem."

"In far too many instances, the farmer's home and his family are all that he has during many long and tedious months of the year. No wonder that he sometimes becomes moody and morbid, and prey to strange notions and fancies. It is little wonder that crime and immorality in the more remote rural districts often exceeds that of the densely populated cities. Should we blame the farmer, then, if he deserts the farm now and then and goes where so many of his neighbors have already gone—to the city . . . ?"³³

Unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of the farmers' transportation needs, the auto clubs did little to allay the feeling that consolidated road administration would benefit only urban businessmen, wealthy auto owners, and out-of-state tourists.³⁴

Tourist promoters, now with visions of Maine as the automobiling Mecca of the East, took up the trunk line campaign. Across the nation the transportation infrastructure for the industry was changing as steamships, railroads, and grand hotels gave way to automobiles, auto camps, and motor courts. As autos grew in importance, Maine's tourist accommodations were increasingly disadvantaged. Poor roads discouraged tourists directly and, by one account, gave the entire state a "poverty-stricken, down-at-the-heel, look." The traveling public was "fickle in its notions and fancies," the Portland Board of Trade warned. By 1908 the road from the southern border at Kittery to Portland—the gateway to Maine—was the clearest source of tourists' aggravations.

Town roads in the Kittery section, one less than discrete traveler reported, were “the slouchiest, meanest, dirtiest cow-paths that ever disgraced civilization.” Confronted with the issue, Commissioner Sargent could recommend only stopgap measures for local commissioners, such as patrols organized in each town along the thoroughfare. Systematic town expenditures for “little things,” he advised, would improve initial impressions of the state’s gateway road. He had neither funds nor mandate to do more.³⁵

In July 1908 the Portland Board of Trade met to discuss the state of the Kittery road, and during the next few months the matter became the focus for a movement to legislate trunk-line roads throughout Maine. Trunk lines, one editor maintained, would “inaugurate such a season of prosperity as hotel and business men have often dreamed of but have seldom realized.” The trunk line proposal was a direct challenge to rural control over roads. Generally, selectmen devoted their entire state appropriation to rebuilding only the worst stretch of road in their town, which resulted in a pattern of improvements “scattered here and there . . . like dots and dashes on a telegraph tape.” Farmers benefitted from the repair of these impassable stretches along the line to the nearest market or transport center, but for businessmen interested in a statewide system, this was chaos: “one rides over solid . . . roadbeds for a few rods, and then plunges axle-deep and horse-belly deep into primeval . . . mud.”³⁶ Town construction methods were obviously inappropriate for the million-dollar statewide system envisioned by urban promoters.

Rural legislators, left unenthusiastic by those who spoke of Maine as the auto playground of the nation, continued to reject proposals that shifted state or town allocations to support automobiling and tourism. Grange leaders remained adamant that trunk lines were redundant, given existing steam and electric rail routes. Good local market roads, on the other hand, would “encourage and upbuild practically the only business in the world that can be said from its very nature to be a fundamental business.” Initially, commissioner Sargent distanced himself from the rising sentiment for trunk lines. Questioned about his larger plans in 1907, he had insisted that Maine would receive the “greatest amount of service for the least amount of material and labor” not from expensive statewide highways but from improved drainage on existing gravel roads. Despite an obvious desire to systematize Maine’s road situation, he was careful to point out that he opposed comprehensive laws forcing towns to improve only certain designated trunk lines. He hoped, however unrealistically, that the hodgepodge of local jurisdictions would ul-

timately result in a system of through roads connecting each town, "in order that after a series of years something approaching continuous lines of improved road may be realized."³⁷

As a professional, Sargent remained above the fray, but politicians did not. In 1909 Governor Bert M. Fernald pointed out in his annual address that other New England states were building roads on a "general plan" to benefit the entire region and urged Maine to do likewise. Fernald was no doubt responding to the suggestions of the Ricker family, owners of the prestigious Poland Spring Hotel, who had almost single-handedly funded the governor's successful 1908 campaign. Persuaded by Fernald's call for through roads, and perhaps convinced that the political tide had turned in favor of urban interests, Sargent announced a "tentative" 1,150-mile system of five trunk lines radiating out from Maine's principal cities to the state's borders. His office began surveying two of these. Predictably, one would replace the infamous Kittery-to-Portland post road. The other would improve a road leading from Portland through Lewiston and Poland Spring to the western border of the state.³⁸

The proposal was ambitious, given the state's low population density and conservative fiscal tradition, but the trunk lines attracted enthusiastic support from Governor Fernald, the state's powerful tourist interests, the boards of trade, and the urban good roads promoters. Echoing common arguments in the business community, Sargent pointed out that Maine was losing "valuable transient tourist business and permanent summer home seekers every year." Central administration of Maine's through roads "would be the best single advertisement that could go out from the state."³⁹

In June 1910 Grange leaders met with Commissioner Sargent and representatives of the State Board of Trade and the auto clubs. According to Sargent, the participants made an "honest attempt" to get at the real problems facing the country road commissioners. The Grange endorsed Sargent's bid for greater state authority over road construction, and Sargent agreed that Maine's poorer towns bore an inequitable burden in maintaining roads. But the discussion avoided, significantly, the prominent issue of trunk lines, a hiatus that spoke eloquently of the differences still remaining in the good roads movement.⁴⁰ Although farmers remained committed to the market-road concept, their opposition was broken down over the next few years by new funding techniques that shifted much of the burden for roads maintenance from small towns to urban centers.

Resolution

Between 1910 and 1913 Commissioner Sargent and state legislators developed a formula for road funding that demonstrated greater balance between population density, mileage in the area served, and general commercial benefits to the state at large. In 1911, for instance, the legislature imposed an annual tax on automobiles for maintenance of the trunk-line system. The new tax did much to disarm rural critics and increase the political leverage of the auto interests.⁴¹

In 1913 the State Board of Trade and Maine auto clubs initiated legislation for a state bond issue to raise funds for trunk lines. The lobby distributed brochures on technical matters from the federal Office of Public Roads and commissioned a group of town selectmen, automobilists, and businessmen to make a comprehensive survey of Maine's road situation. Armed with authoritative federal endorsements and representative Maine viewpoints, urban promoters pushed the bill through the legislature easily. In November, after passage of the bond issue, the Board of Trade secured the services of federal highway department expert E. W. James to advise the state commissioner on dispersing the new funds. James's report stated tactfully that Maine's roads were in "no worse condition than are the roads of any state that has never developed a state-wide system." He insisted, however, that road maintenance in the hands of local officials inevitably resulted in a "disjointed, irregular collection of short pieces of good road all over the state." Careful state management of the \$2 million bond issue would benefit out-of-state travelers as well as farmers hauling produce to local markets.⁴²

To balance the various perspectives on road reform, James recommended a state highway commission staffed by representatives of agricultural, business, and tourist concerns. James also recommended a three-part road classification that was becoming popular in other parts of the nation. "State roads," funded by the annual automobile tax and laid out by the commission, would link regional population centers, joining the economic sectors of the state together. "State-aid" roads, constructed by the state in cooperation with local officials, would remain largely in the hands of town and county commissioners and would serve primarily to connect rural settlements to their market and shipping points. "Secondary roads" would be left entirely to the local administrators. Without serious opposition, the legislature implemented James's recommendation in 1913, placing the state's highways, for the first time, under the guidance of a central coordinating agency with authority to complete the comprehensive trunk-line system.⁴³

James's carefully wrought political compromise did not entirely dispel rural opposition to trunk lines. Grange Master Clarence S. Stetson insisted that the newly funded program should be aimed primarily at improving country roads, "over which go so many million dollars worth of farm products each year"; the time had come for the state to encourage agriculture as vigorously as it promoted tourism. Grange members asked that the \$2 million be spent on pick-and-shovel road work on county gravel roads, not on a "\$10,000-a-mile boulevard to be used for an automobile race track." In his annual address in 1913, Governor William T. Haines equivocated: road maintenance would not be left in the hands of "political factions" at the local level, but on the other hand, he had no desire to wrest administration from the hands of the town officers. He simply offered "the assistance of more and better engineering."⁴⁴

The governor left the problem of distributing the \$2 million among the three classes of roads to the new Highway Commission, which promised a "complete elimination of all political consideration" from the program. Like Paul Sargent, who remained on staff as the chief engineer, the commissioners felt obliged to serve "the largest number of people possible" by developing jointly the farming, manufacturing, and summer resort resources of the state. But they also insisted that the commission, rather than the individual town, would strike this balance. To generate credibility the commissioners held a series of open forums across the state and sifted the gathered opinion to determine where the new roads moneys would be spent.⁴⁵

Despite pressure from the farm organizations, highway allocations over the next year seemed to reflect the strength of the state's tourist interests. Substantial improvements were made in the Kittery to Portland road, while the Fryeburg road, Maine's other southern gateway, was completed from the New Hampshire line to Bridgton. On the other hand, these priorities reflected the enormous burden of traffic the southern access routes were carrying. By 1914, more than 3,000 vehicles traveled the Beach route through southern Maine daily during summer months. And indeed, during the following year the commissioners turned their attention to the farmers' state-aid roads – the "feeders" to the state highway system.

The culminating effect of several strategic compromises eroded rural resistance to state control. Even though the commission still encountered considerable "local, personal, selfish interest" as it toured the emerging highway system in 1914, it reported that public opinion had turned in favor of developing a "real system of roads." Partly, this re-

flected the growing accommodation between farmers and automobiles. As Michael Berger points out, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century farmers were beginning to see profit for agriculture in auto tourism and were increasingly aware of the commercial value of farm trucks. Horses, too, were beginning to adjust to automobile traffic. In 1915 the Grange reaffirmed its opposition to new highways "located . . . expressly for the purpose of serving summer tourists and auto owners," but it also conceded that "where practical," state roads should connect, thus forming trunk lines. The Grange "welcomed" the auto age and admitted that well graded city-to-country roads would spread the benefits of modern living to the latter.⁴⁶

In 1916 farmers and the state's tourist interests broke through a final impasse. In February the Portland Chamber of Commerce, satisfied with progress on the southern access highways, launched a statewide campaign to encourage improvement on the state-aid and secondary roads so important to Maine's farmers. A committee appointed to investigate the condition of the country roads rendered its final report and recommendations in April. Good roads, Ralph M. Bacon wrote for the committee, were the farmers' lifelines, yet despite the state expenditures, thousands of rural citizens still traveled wretched secondary and state-aid roads to reach markets. The committee recommended greater attention to the state-aid system, reminding tourism promoters that these roads "lead over the ridges past some of the . . . most beautiful scenery in our state."⁴⁷ If improved, they would reduce traffic on the heavily traveled trunk lines.

The committee found that town selectmen were often responsible for the poor condition of their own secondary roads. Towns, they discovered, allocated the state-aid money to the state trunk lines rather than the feeder lines. By concentrating on only one main highway, selectmen avoided the high maintenance costs that a widespread system of partially reconstructed feeder roads entailed. The latter, in fact, in some cases were worse than they had been in 1913. The committee recommended rethinking state road financing in order to ensure the "greatest good for the greatest number." The solution seemed to lie in even closer state control of allocations for the state-aid roads.⁴⁸

By 1916 the Highway Commission was in an excellent position to right the wrong. In firm control of state funding and technical expertise, the commission was able to exert pressure on the selectmen to conform to more exacting standards. In accordance with the Board of Trade report, it inaugurated a program of systematic maintenance on state and



Display commemorating the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916 and its makers. The act, signed by President Woodrow Wilson on June 11, 1916, marked the first time the federal government was involved with road building efforts. The act provided federal funding to the states for road construction and maintenance. From the July 1916 issue of *Dependable Highways*.

state-aid roads. With legislative approval, the commission hired a small army of 373 patrolmen to maintain 3,379 miles of roads under joint supervision by the state and the towns. The patrol was a benchmark in consolidating state control, as it superseded the statute labor system on Maine's most important country roads. In addition to financing and location, the state had drawn maintenance work under its wing, this time specifically to benefit Maine's farmers.⁴⁹

By an act of Congress approved July 11, 1916, Maine received \$731,250 in federal matching funds for highways during the five years between 1916 and 1920. The funding was premised on the state's provision of a "definite scheme or program rather than individual projects . . . [conceived] in haphazard and aimless fashion." Having prepared the way for statewide planning through compromises during the previous two decades, Maine was able to submit a comprehensive plan in 1916 with a minimum of political controversy. The route would link Maine's largest cities, and the northern section would traverse "the richest agricultural section of Maine." It would facilitate the transportation of mail, move farm produce to market, improve communication between cities and towns, and encourage interstate and international travel.⁵⁰

The coming of the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1916 accelerated the shift away from town government, but the political basis for this organizational development had been worked out in Maine between 1901 and

1916. The development of the new statewide road system commemorated by Governor Baxter at the 1923 Automobile Association convention was not without its historical uncertainties. Defining the policy that received such widespread consensus was a consummate challenge for Maine's new-order bureaucrats, suggesting the difficult compromises that went into America's "organizational revolution." They confronted this challenge by balancing urban-merchant and rural interests, and the result was slow but steady progress toward a road system that met the needs of Maine's diverse population.

America's small towns yielded much of their administrative role in the twentieth century, first in road maintenance, then in welfare, police, and school administration, among other things. The consequences of this shift in the locus of power are complex, and perhaps cannot be generalized from a study of one state's road development policy. But Maine's highway history does suggest that the "organizational synthesis" of Progressive-era politics has not adequately accounted for the class interests of those who resisted these changes. Unquestionably, state intervention in road maintenance benefitted rural areas; it reduced insularity, integrated upcountry Maine into the metropolitan economy of the Northeast, and brought city conveniences to the countryside. But farmers who opposed the changes in power that brought these advantages were not merely "traditionalists." They simply qualified their enthusiasm for the new order with an acute sense of their own economic needs and priorities.

NOTES

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