Harry S. Truman had a lifelong interest in roads and automobiles. His interest was a personal one. And, as we will see, it was a political one, as well.

Truman’s interest in transportation and roads had roots in several of his own experiences. The importance of transportation in the career of his quite successful maternal grandfather, Solomon Young, made contributions. Young traded overland from Missouri to Salt Lake City, Santa Fe, and Sacramento, driving cattle and leading wagon trains. He also outfitted and advised pioneers making the trek west, and in his old age, he told his young grandson stories of his adventures. As a boy and young man, Harry had lived near the Missouri River, observed its unreliability as well as its uses, and after graduating from high school in 1901, he had worked briefly for a railroad. He farmed from 1906 to 1917 on the Young family farm that was less than twenty miles from Kansas City and connected to it by a rock road and two railroads that guaranteed easy access to the market. Harry, his father, John (slide 2), and his brother Vivian, served as road overseers in the region around Grandview, and Harry also participated actively in the Washington Township Improvement Association, a pressure group for better roads.

Harry’s first car was a 1911 Stafford automobile manufactured in KC by Terry Stafford of Topeka. The next two slides show a replica of that auto that recently toured at the Truman Library. (slide 3) It had a four-cylinder engine, right-hand drive a high brass-framed windshield, and Presto-Lite lamps. The car bore manufacturer number 24 (out of an estimated 315 total built by Stafford). Mrs. Truman paid $650 for it. (slide 4)

The Truman Library & Museum documents the importance of transportation in young Harry’s life in its “Life and Times” exhibit (slide 5), where kids can race to see whether his Stafford or the other modes of transportation—railroad and then streetcar—get him to Independence faster.

The Stafford automobile helped Harry with his social networking. It helped him become well acquainted with Jackson County’s poor roads and to court Bess Wallace, a young woman who lived in Independence. He enjoyed using the car to take Bess and others to a picnic at the Sugar Creek waterworks or on a fishing trip to the Blue River. (slide 6) This is a group of picnickers near the Little Blue River, seated in and gathered around Harry S. Truman’s Stafford car. From left to right: George Wallace, May Wallace, Frank Wallace, Natalie Wallace, Fred Wallace (seated on the running board); Mrs. Emma Southern, Harry S. Truman, et al., c. 1913.

After the onset of WWI, Harry took the car to Camp Doniphan, OK. (slide 7) Unknown men are in his car in this undated photo. There it became disabled and was sold to an unknown person. Its fate is unknown.
Historian Richard Kirkendall, from whom I have borrowed heavily for this talk, has commented that Harry Truman was one of the nation’s major road builders during the 1920s and early 1930s; Truman’s record as a road-builder was a success one.

The American interest in roads moved to a new high level during the 1920s, doing so in response to the rapidly rising number of automobiles and other motorized vehicles. The American people were as eager to build roads in the Twenties as they had been to build railroads in the nineteenth century, and they were as willing to use government resources as they had been to use them to build railroads. “Highways and bridges,” one historian of American business noted some years ago, “destined to be the biggest single type of investment other than building construction, fell into the hands of government without protest from private enterprise.” To get the roads, Americans accepted a new form of taxation – the gasoline tax. At the end of World War I, no state in the nation had such of tax; a decade later, people in all of the states had imposed it on themselves. Armed with the gas tax, governments invested the money and also supplied the plans and the management and contracted with private firms to do the rest of the work. The goal was a system of hard-surface roads capable of holding up under the heavy and mounting pressure from the rapidly growing numbers of cars, buses, and trucks.

Governments on all levels participated in the road-building enterprise. The federal government had begun to offer aid to the states for the building of highways in 1916, established a Bureau of Public Roads in 1918, and authorized the development of a system of federal highways in 1921. The next year, the nation added over 11,000 miles of federal highways to the new system, and during the decade, the project completed more than 10,000 miles nearly every year. In 1931, the number of additional miles reached nearly 16,000.

Enthusiasm for road building ran high throughout the state of Missouri. Although the state was well supplied with rivers and railroads, they did not offer a fully adequate system of transportation, especially now that Missourians had entered the automobile era. From 1916 to 1920, the number of automobiles in the state jumped from 76,000 to 297,000, more than all but eight other states. Little had been done to improve roads for many years, only a few existing ones had hard surfaces, and mud often prevented drivers from moving forward. Soon after the federal government offered to match state appropriations for this purpose, the Missouri legislator and governor accepted the offer and enacted the necessary legislation, and then, in 1920, the voters authorized a bond issue for the construction of 6,000 miles of connected and hard-surfaced roads reaching every county. That year, Missouri also elected a progressive Republican as governor. This was Arthur M. Hyde, an automobile dealer as well as a small-town lawyer, banker and insurance agent, and he championed development of a modern highway program, regarding it, as many did, as the key to economic growth. Early on, he promoted passage of a Centennial Road Law that shifted responsibility for the construction of an integrated system from the counties to the state, created a state highway commission to supervise and control construction and maintenance of the statewide system, and designated routes that would serve the interests of both urban and rural group and cover 7,640 miles.
Another road measure during his four-year term imposed a tax of two cents per gallon on the sale of gasoline. By the end of his term in 1925, Missouri had begun to pull itself out of the mud by constructing a new highway system capable of meeting the heavy demands of the new form of transportation. In a book on Missouri’s history, Dr. Kirkendall suggested this was the state’s “main achievement” during the 1920s.

Early in this great era of road-building, Harry ran for elective office for the first time and won. (slide 8) The job was Eastern District Judge of the Jackson County Court, an administrative position. As a campaigner, he talked often about roads. He called for the construction of roads could “stand up under the heavy traffic of the present day” with “five-ton and ten-ton loads moving at twelve to twenty miles per hour,” and he advocated reform in the selection of road overseers, suggesting that he “would rather have 40 road men for overseers who are willing to work than to have 60 politicians who care nothing about the work” and insisting that “honest work for the country is the best politics anyway.” One of his backers insisted that Truman had “steadily refused to make any promises either for the location of roads or for the appointment of men to the payroll.”

As judge, Truman devoted much of his attention to roads. One of his first assignments was to reorganize the road districts. He rearranged the boundaries and reduced the number, and the other judges accepted the changes. His colleagues assigned the hard work of personal inspection of the roads to the Eastern District judge and relied heavily on Truman’s reports. Truman acquainted himself with the roads and bridges, becoming so expert that Henry McElroy, the western judge, took his recommendations on faith. (last sentence is an SR insertion)

Nearly every day, after attending the morning session of the court, he would respond to calls from various parts of the county to take a look at road conditions. He drove and walked over every mile of county road and inspected every culvert, accumulating a vast store of knowledge of the system, and also became acquainted with the state highway system and the plans of the State Highway Commission for the western part of the state.

Truman persuaded his colleagues on the court to establish a Road Planning Commission to make a survey of the roads and point out where and how the road money should be spent. The court appointed one of his friends from the war, Colonel Edward M. Stayton, a former Highway Engineer, as one of the two commissioners, and the publisher and editor of the Independence newspaper, William M. Southern, applauded the moves, pointing out that there had never been a plan for building roads in the county and that one was desperately needed so that road money would no longer be spent in haphazard and wasteful fashion. The commission provided the court with some useful guidelines but had little impact on road building in 1924, an election year.

Truman failed to be reelected in 1924, but, as a road builder, he had benefited from his first experience in office would be ready if another opportunity became available. Out of office, he devoted his time to other activities, some of them important for a road builder. They included a job with the Automobile Club of Kansas City. (slide 9) In addition to paying a good salary to support Bess and daughter Margaret, who was born in 1924, this job provided opportunities to work for the improvement of roads in
Missouri. He also served as president of the National Old Trails Association, an 
organization that gathered information about the location of trails used by pioneers, 
placed monuments at places along the routes pioneers had used, and promoted road 
building.

A new political opportunity did come; it came quickly, and it was larger than 
before. In 1926, Harry sought and obtained the post of Presiding Judge of the County 
Court, an assignment that forced him to campaign for support from the voters of Kansas 
City as well as the rural areas and small towns of Jackson County and that gave him a chance to provide leadership in the county government. The county was large, growing from nearly 370,000 people in 1920 to 470,000 ten years later, and road building became much more important in the eight years he served as presiding judge than it had been during his two years as Judge of the Eastern District. A man capable of taking advantage of this large public interest could accomplish much as presiding judge of Jackson County in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Supported by labor as well as business and the major factions in the local Democratic Party, Truman won by over 16,000 votes and quickly provided leadership on road building. He had concluded from his study of the road programs in the county and elsewhere that to develop a modern road system he must not rely on pressure politics but must instead turn to scientific ways of laying out and building roads, so less than three weeks after taking office, he persuaded his colleagues to appoint a bipartisan planning commission composed of two engineers, Colonel Stayton, a Democrat and experienced man he knew and admired, and Nathan T. Veatch, Jr., (slide 10) a Republican who had worked with Stayton on a number of projects. Their job was to develop a comprehensive, long-term plan for the county that would be coordinated with state and city projects. According to one observer, the county had “at last taken a step which should bring some system out of the chaos of political road building which has existed in the county for forty years.”

By May, the commission had a plan. It called for the construction in two years of approximately 225 miles of new roads and a six and one-half million dollar bond issue to finance the program. (slide 11) The commission’s report stressed the inadequacies of the existing road system with its 350 miles of “pie crust” roads and recommended against a small program and continuation of the present costly and wasteful method of maintaining existing roads. An official of the Portland Cement Association called the plan “by far the most complete and comprehensive plan which I have ever seen laid before the people.”

In May 1928, the voters of Jackson County accepted the plan, and Truman had played a major role in the efforts to persuade them to do so. Even before it had been presented, he had arranged a meeting of county, city, and state officials along with leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, and they had agreed to cooperate in the development of Kansas City, Jackson County, and the surrounding counties. After the commission reported, he, his colleagues on the court, and the county highway engineer endorsed the plan and called a special election even though the voters, fearing corruption, had been rejecting bond proposals rather frequently and thus prospects for victory did not appear to be bright. MTD reported in her biography of her father that Jackson County
voters rejected over 70% of money that politicians requested in the 1920s. The judges and other county officials campaigned industriously for the bonds and promised that contracts would go to the lowest bidders and Stayton and Veatch would oversee road construction. The campaigners gained help and support from a number of organizations, including the Chambers of Commerce of Kansas City and Independence, the Engineers Society of Kansas City, the Taxpayers League, the Real Estate Board, the Merchants Association, the Business District League, the Central Labor Union, the Farm Bureau, the mayor of Independence, and Bill Southern of the Independence Examiner. The Kansas City Star suggested that the plan had been “approved by those to whom the uninformed would be expected to turn in any sincere effort to find intelligent guidance.” The people responded by voting for the bonds by a margin well above the necessary two-thirds of the votes cast.

In the next two years, the bonds were sold, the contracts let, and the program was carried to completion. Stayton and Veatch played major roles as consulting engineers, overseeing the work at every stage. The procedures employed enabled the county to get several more miles from the bonds than had been planned and constructed a concrete highway system that placed every town on a paved road and every farm within two and one half miles of one. Few counties in the country had a better road system.

Veatch was proud that the program had “brought contractors from quite a distance” because they had “been pretty well convinced that the job was really divorced from politics and that they would receive fair and just treatment.” Truman’s thinking about his obligations to his political organization, the Pendergast Machine, involved cooperation in the handling of patronage, not in the distributions of government contracts. Soon after taking office as presiding judge, he had awarded a contract to a South Dakota company, rather than a local firm, the Ross Construction Company. The outside firm had submitted a lower bid; Tom Pendergast had called Truman to his office to discuss the matter with Ross and other unhappy local contractors; the judge told the group that contracts had to go to the lowest responsible bidder as that was the legal and businesslike manner, and the boss supported him. During the campaign for the bond issue, Harry had discussed the question with Tom once again, telling him that contracts would be awarded to the lowest bidders and that a bipartisan board of engineers would be used on the project. Boss Tom promised not to interfere, and he kept his word. The presiding judge operated in accord with this agreement, although he was subjected to frequent pressure to award all contracts to local contractors. Outsiders obtained much of the work, and companies that were closely associated with the machine, like the Ross Company and the Ready Mix Concrete Company, contributed only when the conformed to the standards of the program.

Truman assumed that transportation facilities were of fundamental importance for urban development and prosperity. In his campaign for the bonds he promised that the road program would help to make the country “the richest and most important air, rail and highway center in this great republic.” If the campaign failed, the area would continue to fall “two years behind for every one we wait, and let Nebraska and Oklahoma, St. Joe and Springfield, with the backing of St. Louis and Chicago, ease us out of our place in the sun.”
In 1930, Truman sought funds that would enable him to go farther with his road-building project. The rough draft of the original Stayton-Veatch report in 1927 had called for the expenditure of about ten million dollars, but the judges had reduced the amount and cut out about eighty-five miles of roads from the project. Now, they became part of a Ten Year Plan for Kansas City and Jackson County. In his campaign for reelection in 1930, the Presiding Judge spoke of what more he wanted to do as a road builder: “I want to build 85 miles more of roads and a dozen bridges at a cost of $3,500,000 under the same plan as we have just finished.” He talked of making “Jackson County with its highways, its parks, its public buildings and its good government the model for the other 8000 counties in the United States,” and he envisioned Kansas City and its surroundings becoming “the greatest city and region in the country” and the equal of any of the great cities of the world in “utility, living conditions and beauty.”

Truman’s record as a road builder contributed to his reelection by a wide margin that year. He obtained nearly 110,000 votes and won by a majority of nearly 60,000. Outside the city, he carried every precinct and township, picking up more than 17,000 votes, winning by more than 9,000 and running ahead of all but one of the other winners in the area and in the county as a whole. According to his hometown paper, his service had “been of such an unusual and outstanding nature that the voters gave it especial recognition, the recognition of an additional six thousand votes” beyond that given to most of the Democratic candidates. The big-city Republican papers, the Kansas City Star and Times, referred to him as “much more than a routine official” and as “enthusiastically interested in county affairs” and one who had “contributed leadership to an efficient County Administration” and deserved “the reward of renomination.” Supporting him against Republicans as well as other Democrats, the Times argued that he “should be reelected on his record, especially in the efficient and economical expenditure of the … road bonds.” Other supporters, including James Aylward, the chairman of the Democratic County Committee, also stressed his accomplishments as a road builder.

After the election and confident that he had strong support, Truman pushed forward. He played an important part in the campaign for the bonds to support the plan, working again with his friends Southern, Stayton and Veatch and also with the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and Kansas City’s manager. Encountering no opposition, they produced a large victory for the bonds. To Truman’s supporters, the outcome demonstrated that the public had confidence in him and his colleagues. “The work done by the court and the engineers was so successful that the county was ready to vote 3 ½ million dollars additional to complete the system as originally planned, on the court’s pledge that the same engineering board and the same policies would be retained,” the Star maintained. “The public has come to expect of the court the same businesslike methods in handling the country road work that a private business would use.”

The road program moved forward rapidly, enabling Jackson County to celebrate the completion of the system on October 12, 1932. (slide 12) With Truman as the leader, the county had built more than 300 miles of concrete roads at a cost of approximately $10,000,000. Thousands of people, including many government officials from Missouri
and Kansas, attended the celebration, testifying to the fact that Truman participated in a significant movement.

The judge was proud of his accomplishments as a road builder. As a result of his efforts, everyone in Jackson County was within at least 2 ½ miles of a concrete road. (source: HSTL Museum exhibit sign by 1941 Chrysler). He was proud of the fact that solid highways had replaced the old “pie crust” roads. (slide 13) “This county has more all-weather roads than any other county in the United States,” he told a reporter in 1932. “Wayne County, in which is the city of Detroit, and Westchester County in which is New York City, claim to have more paved roads than Jackson County, but I doubt it.” He liked the orderly layout of the system and the way it connected with the streets of Kansas City and the national highways that passed through the county, and he predicted a great increase in tourist travel in the area. He was pleased with the way the system facilitated the movement of goods from farm to market and enabled the city dweller to enjoy the county’s natural beauty and recreational opportunities, which we would consider today to be “quality of life” amenities. “[H]ere in Jackson County there is as fine scenery as lies outdoors and the land is as rich as the valley of the Nile,” he boasted. He believed the road system would stimulate the development of a park system and that it provided a significant demonstration of the desirability and practicability of county planning. (slide 14)

“The administration of Judge Truman … will loom large in Jackson County history,” Truman’s hometown newspaper predicted at the beginning of 1935. “It is doubtful if in all the nearly 110 years since the organization of Jackson County with the County Court as the administrative head, any man serving as a member of that body has done as constructive work for the county as Judge Truman.” The great politicians, he would later insist, the men who were, according to his definition, called statesmen after their deaths, were men who had “really done things for this country.” He had “done things” for Jackson County, a rather large county; road building was his biggest task there; it was an issue of great local, state and national interest, and his accomplishments in this area were one of the forces that propelled him to the United States Senate. (slide 15) Photo of 1934 Senate campaign car

As Senator, HST served on the Interstate Commerce committee chaired by Burton Wheeler. It was a natural choice given his background in roads and highways, and his fascination with railroads. (McCullough, 217).

(slide 16) Chrysler Windsor sedan (right), purchased from Lon’s Car Exchange in Kansas City on November 9, 1940 for $1372.

(slide 17) Chrysler Royal Club Coupe (left), purchased from Lon’s Car Exchange in Kansas City on November 9, 1940 for $1,278. Both cars contained radios and a heater.

(slide 18) HST’s used this automobile log book to record the gas purchases and speedometer readings for his new 1941 Chrysler Royal coupe. Truman November 9, 1940 and filled his tank for the first time in Anderson, Missouri on November 12, 1940.
His first trip in his new car was from Independence to Hot Springs, Arkansas and back. As US Senator, Truman used an automobile to travel around the eastern US inspecting military facilities, a tour that resulted in the establishment of a special committee to investigate the national defense program. As a result of this committee, Truman received national recognition from FDR and Democratic Party power brokers who were instrumental in his nomination to be Vice President at the 1944 convention. Truman took office as President upon FDR’s death in April 1945.

(sl ide 19) Photo of HST behind wheel at Key West, November 23, 1946. Shown are General Harry Vaughan, Judge John Collet, John Steelman, and Admiral William D. Leahy.

(sl ide 20) Note Matthew Algeo’s book about HST’s 1953 road trip.

--Slide -- Former President Harry S. Truman (right) driving his black sedan out of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel garage in New York City. Mrs. Bess Truman is in the seat beside him, and daughter Margaret is in the back seat. Mr. and Mrs. Truman dropped Margaret off at her hotel in New York on their way back to Independence, Missouri, July 1953.

(sl ide 21) HST reflects on a thirty-year-old affection for Chryslers.

(sl ide 22) End slide—HST with 1929 Chrysler