

The History of Lee Highway

Compiled by Joyce Ann Kistner

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Bristol Historical Association

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Lee Highway, the first transcontinental highway in the United States, was based in Richmond, Virginia. The highway was very important in the early development of Bristol, Virginia – Tennessee.



An article from the New York Times, dated December 6, 1914, states “A project which is being considered in the South, and which is receiving considerable publicity is the Lee Highway, which it is proposed will run parallel to the Lincoln Highway, although south of the old Mason-Dixon line bisecting the two Virginias.”

Part I



Lee Highway, the First American Transcontinental Auto Trail

The Lee Highway was an early American transcontinental auto trail. It connected the nation’s capitol, Washington D.C. and San Diego, California, on the Pacific. An extension connected San Diego to Los Angeles and San Francisco via El Camino Real. The Lee Highway was a very important transcontinental route, and the name can be found on roads in Virginia, Tennessee, and Alabama.

Dr. David C. Humphreys of Lexington, Virginia, a professor at Washington and Lee University, had published articles calling for the extension of the Shenandoah Valley Pike southward to Chattanooga and New Orleans. On February 22, 1919, a group of fourteen men met in Roanoke, Virginia, at the Hotel Roanoke for the formation of a provisional Lee Highway Association. Despite Dr. S.M. Johnson’s call for a transcontinental highway, the first concept of Lee Highway was a north to south road running from Gettysburg to New Orleans.



The Lee Highway Board of Directors met in Bristol, Virginia, in 1919, with D.D. Hull Jr. as president. He was nominated by Henry Roberts of Bristol. A headquarters was set up in Roanoke, Virginia. Dr. S.M. Johnson was the General Director.

Dr. S. M. Johnson

LEE HIGHWAY ASSOCIATION

HENRY ROBERTS, President
Bristol, Virginia-Tennessee
F. W. WEAVER, Field Secretary
Luray, Virginia

Dr. S. M. JOHNSON, Gen. Director
Washington, D. C.
LEILA FOWLER, Secretary
Washington, D. C.
HORACE W. PEASLEE, Consulting Park Architect
Washington, D. C.

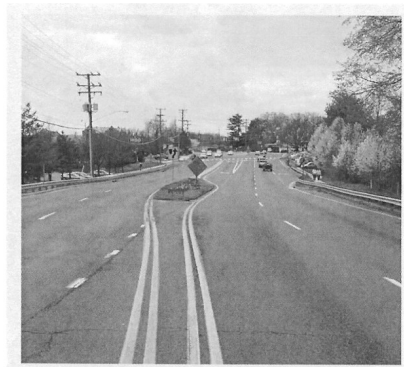
THOMAS B. KING, Gen. V.-Pres.
Memphis, Tennessee
CLAUDE N. BENNETT, Treasurer
Washington, D. C.

On July 8, 1923 Henry Roberts was nominated to be president of the Lee Highway Association. Other prominent Lee Highway members were J. Fred Johnson of Kingsport, a director of the Lee Highway Association, and Mr. Thomas King of Memphis, the man responsible for routing through Memphis, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Birmingham, and New Orleans. Mr. King raised support in western Tennessee and Arkansas, and the Association approved these states. By this time Lee Highway had evolved into a transcontinental route due to Dr. Johnson's influence.

In 1916, the automobile was a rare sight. That year, there were 2,700 cars operating on dirt roads in Virginia. By 1919, the automobile had ceased to be a rarity. Unfortunately, the rural roads of Virginia, which had been fine for slower horse-drawn vehicles, were now completely inadequate for the new machines. In good weather, old country lanes were unsatisfactory for early automobiles, but when it rained or snowed the ground turned to mud.

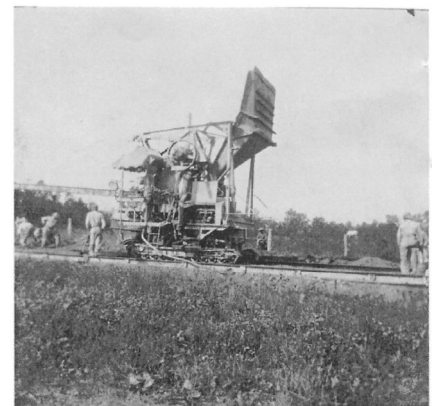


Lee Highway at Hatmark Branch looking Southwest toward the town of Fairfax, March 9th 1924. Note the creek flowing across Lee Highway. Blake Lane (not visible) is at the top of the hill. Photo courtesy of Lee Hubbard.

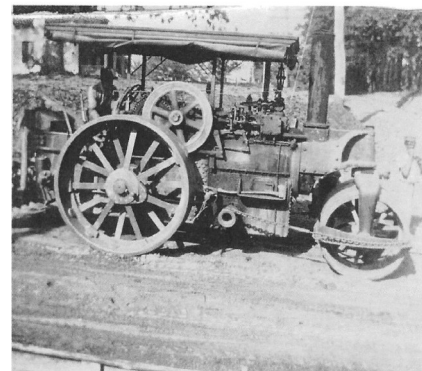


Lee Highway at Hatmark Branch looking Southwest toward the city of Fairfax, March 2008 the creek now flows UNDER Lee Highway! Intersection of Blake Lane is in the distance. Photo courtesy of Paige Johnson.

As incredible as it may seem, before 1920, there were no paved roads in Virginia to speak of, except in larger cities.



A Koehring paver in operation on Lee Highway in Fairfax near Blake Lane in the summer of 1924. This machine, built by the Koehring Machine Company of Milwaukee Wisconsin, was steam powered. Photo courtesy Lee Hubbard.



A Buffalo-Springfield Steamroller on Lee Highway at Blake Lane. The home of Frank and Wena Gibson is just visible in the upper left background. Summer of 1924. Photo courtesy Lee Hubbard.

The Virginia legislature created the Virginia Highway Commission, but the funding was slow.

In 1909, the first state appropriation for the actual construction was made. The \$25,000 given seemed like an afterthought as it came with the caveat, “out of any money in the state treasury not otherwise appropriated.”

Advocates had been lobbying for more funds for national roads. A major boost came in 1919, when the U.S. Army, following their experience of World War I, saw the need for a good network of national roads. They initiated the first transcontinental motor convoy utilizing vehicles that the U.S. Army had used in the recent war in Europe. Mileage covered was 3,251 miles from Washington D.C. to San Francisco, California, with a record travel time of two months at an average speed of 6 mph.

Part II A

Dreamer of Lee Highway, Dr. S.M. Johnson

The apostle of good roads, Dr. S.M. Johnson, was proud of his Virginia roots. Several ideas had formed in his mind as he was convinced the automobile would change America in the 20th century as dramatically as the railroad had in the 19th century. Roads were needed to accommodate this new means of transportation, and he was convinced they should be built according to science, not in the haphazard fashion that was common in rural areas. They should be arranged according to function in a system of main truck lines and laterals, according to the service each would provide.

Dr. S.M. Johnson was a Presbyterian minister for 18 years in Corning, Iowa, Denver, Colorado, and Chicago. These years shaped his development of qualities of altruism and leadership in addition to his ability to build and direct financial operations and his proficiency as a public speaker and writer. He became nationally and internationally known. Calls to serve came from North, South, East, and West. He often acted in the national interest of the United States. He found very little on a cotton plantation, so he became a land developer. His largest problem was transportation, how to extend the pavements of the Charlotte streets to suburban tracts. When local governments would not provide the payments, he built the road himself to serve the land he was developing.

Dr. Johnson and his young family moved to Lincoln County, New Mexico, where they established a ranch to grow apples in the Ruidoso Valley. His main crop were the big red apples, and for lack of markets and transportation, he had to feed them to the pigs. He felt isolated on the ranch and compelled to make a living out of the soil although most of the proceeds of sales were consumed by transportation costs and the lack of facilities for higher transport. It was thirty miles over mountains to the nearest railroad station, 75 miles to the nearest town, and 150 miles to El Paso, Texas. He learned the value of farm to market firsthand.

At a meeting involving the discussion of convict labor on the road, he described his ministry of the gospel. He had experienced a nervous breakdown that changed his life, and in giving up the pastorate, he said, “Now, my mission is to promote the gospel of good roads.”

Part II B

Lee Highway history

The federal government had not improved the road across the Apache Indian Reservation, which Dr. Johnson indicated was the worst stretch of the Southern National Highway. He convinced Otero County to give him \$1,000, and he fixed the road “on Uncle Sam’s Indian reservation.”

The Lee Highway Association worked with the war department on the transfer of war material to build highways. The Association adopted the nickname "The Backbone Road of the South." In 1920, the Association agreed to follow the road from Washington to Alexandria through Fairfax Courthouse, Middleburg, Aldie, and Boyce to Winchester, where it would turn south on the Valley Pike. The route shifted later to pass Church Hill, Fairfax Courthouse, Gainesville, Warrenton, Sperryville, and Luray into the Shenandoah Valley at New Mexico.

In late 1920, the route was set between Bristol, Virginia-Tennessee and Knoxville, Rogersville, Tate Springs, and Rutledge. On January 20, 1926, the route to Chattanooga was finalized via Lenoir city, Loudon, Sweetwater, Athens, and Cleveland.

The Southwest had few routing options. The Lee Highway Association was unable to find a separate route for the highway in the southwestern states; segments of the Lee Highway followed segments of Apache Trail, Atlantic-Pacific Highway, Bankhead Highway, Broadway of America, Old Spanish Trail, and others. The Association approved extensions to New York City and San Francisco, but these were over existing highways; the primary concern of the Association was improving the main roadway from Washington to San Diego.

Dr. Johnson learned of an idea that the orator Daniel Webster, in a speech on July 4, 1851, attributed to President Andrew Jackson as a way of symbolically linking North and South: "Before us is the broad and beautiful [Potomac] river, separating two of the original thirteen States, which a late President, a man of determined purpose and inflexible will, but patriotic heart, desired to span with arches of ever-enduring granite, symbolical of the firmly established union of the North and South. That President was General Jackson."

In 1901, Senator James McMillan of Michigan, Chairman of the Senate District Committee, proposed a plan to develop the National Mall and surrounding areas that largely shaped its development. One of the proposals was to shift the District end of the Memorial Bridge to the site of a proposed Lincoln Memorial. Congress authorized the Lincoln Memorial in 1911 at its present location, and it was dedicated on February 12, 1922, the anniversary of President Lincoln's birth.

In 1919, Dr. S.M. Johnson conceived the vision of Lee Highway between Washington and California as a southern counterpart to the Lincoln Highway (New York City to San Francisco). The idea was to promote the linking of the names Lee and Lincoln. Dr. Johnson had the vision of a memorial bridge as a grand entrance for Lee Highway into the Nation's capitol. In 1913, Congress had approved the Public Buildings Act which authorized \$25,000 for a commission to investigate a suitable design for a memorial bridge to link Arlington National Cemetery across the Potomac River to Washington. However, although Congress authorized the funds, it neglected to appropriate the funds so they could be used. The commission was, therefore, delayed.

In 1920, Dr. Johnson conferred with Chairman Charles Moore of the District's Commission of Fine Arts, and they agreed to work together to secure funding for a bridge on a line connecting the Lincoln Memorial with the Custis-Lee Mansion, home of the Lee family before the Civil War, in Arlington National Cemetery. In June 1920, Congress finally appropriated the \$25,000 authorized in 1913 to establish the Arlington Memorial Bridge Commission. The slow work began.

At the suggestion of President Warren Harding, the commission decided to face the bridge on a line with the main axis of the city. The bridge would be placed on a Southwest link between the Lincoln Memorial in the Lee mansion.

President Calvin Coolidge transmitted the commission's report to Congress on April 22, 1924. The report explained the Lincoln-Lee connection as one reason for the location. It also suggested the "compelling patriotic motive" of a direct broad boulevard from the capitol through B Street extending past the Lincoln Memorial to Arlington National Cemetery.

There was a third great motive in the complete plan of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, the provision of a magnificent entrance to Washington from Virginia for the Lee Highway coming across the country from Los Angeles, California, noting the ancient Rome had five great avenues of approach and Washington had none. It was observed that "in this proposed terminus of the Lee Highway will be created the first and most magnificent of all possible entrances to the National Capitol." The president called it "the greatest symbol of the binding together of the North and South in one indivisible union, knowing no sectional lines.

Congress's action were swift in 1925. President Calvin Coolidge approved the Arlington Memorial Bridge in full on February 24, 1925 in recognition of the Lee Highway Association. Dr. Johnson's vision was called Lee Boulevard. It was a 200 foot right-of-way from the Memorial Bridge westward 110 miles to the Shenandoah Valley. It would include a 56 foot speedway (speed limit 35 mph) without grade crossing, a bridle path for horse traffic, two frontage roads for local traffic, landscaping and a 60 foot zone on both sides of the road from adjacent buildings to the curb. He formed the National Boulevard Association to promote the vision while seeking donations of right-of-way for the project.

In March 1927, Dr. Johnson dedicated his time to his Boulevard idea, which he expanded to include the construction of a boulevard from Bar Harbor, Maine to Miami, Florida. A 1927 brochure by the National Boulevard Association indicated he retained a direct role in the Lee Highway Association and served as its honorary president and no longer received a salary.

The creation of the Lee Highway coincided with the creation of the numbered highway system in the United States. By the mid 1920's, there were over 250 named trails, a product of the pioneer days of auto travel when government took little interest in interstate roads.



Lee Highway Painting
by Joyce Kistner

Many of these trails overlapped leading to confusion. Trail boosters selected a route over existing—sometimes, barely existing—roads, gave it a colorful name, formed an association to it, and collected dues from businesses and towns along the way. The associations published trail guides and newsletters, held conventions, and promoted the improvement and use of their route. The named trails served a valuable purpose at one time, but they began to pass into history when the U.S. numbered highway system was adopted on November 11, 1926. Today, their remnants are scattered across the map, although motorists can still travel bits and pieces of many of them, including, the Lee.

Dr. Johnson was working with two options with regard to the Arlington Memorial Bridge project, the straight to the bridge

route and the southern route; each had its advocates and critics, and many thought Lee Highway should be improved first.

The Lee Highway Association announced its preference for the southern route in July 1926. Carey Brown of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had assisted the Lee Highway Association, and his superiors, including Major U.S. Grant III, Director of Public Buildings and Parks, fully approved Brown's conclusive southern route which would not pass through any town, but would be close enough to a short road or street. It was said "The Southern route was a trackless line of cornfields, berry thickets, forests, and a few scattered settlements." The southern route ran within a mile of the straight-to-the-bridge route.

Part III

On July 26, 1927, Henry J. Shirely, Chairman of the Virginia State Highway Commission held a public hearing on the Lee Highway proposal at the Arlington County Courthouse. Over 300 residents attended. The headline of the *Evening Star* reflected continuing anger over the proposal and the continuing sensitivities of Virginians about General Lee: "Boulevard Hearings in Turmoil.... Lincoln and Lee are Compared."

Shirely devoted the first few minutes of the meeting to present Lee Highway. Frank Ball spoke for a group on behalf of Lee Highway and described the road as "crooked and dangerous" and did not care which alternative was selected for the boulevard as long as the existing road was improved. One lady said the road was very dangerous between Rosslyn and Falls Church. She saw five vehicles overturned in a single week. She said no one would object to Lee Highway being widened in the arterial thoroughfare.

One vocal critic of Lee Boulevard was Colonel Ashby Williams. He dismissed the idea as a "wholly impractical dream....I have no quarrel with dreamers, but dreams are usually carried on at night. But this Lee Boulevard dream is a day time dream. One that in the name of common sense should not be realized."

The hearing almost came to an end when Mayor E.W.R. Ewing, leader of the "straight to the bridge" backers claimed the Lee Boulevard was commercializing General Lee and that the whole proposal was simply a business proposition.

An apology was demanded from Mayor Ewing as the crowd began to leave in protest. At this time, after many boos and hissing noises, a woman rose from the back of the room and came to the front sobbing convulsively, informing the spectators that she had two sons who were in the war and that Lee and Lincoln were equally great men. Everyone returned to their seats, and order returned.

The hearing adjourned.

The comment about dreams appears to have rankled Dr. Johnson and the Lee Highway Association. On August 16, 1927, the association published a 12-page booklet called:

A "DREAMER OF DREAMS" AND BUILDER OF HIGHWAYS

The Eighteen-Year Record of Dr. S. M. Johnson

The Zero Milestone Man

The Surplus War Property for Highways Man

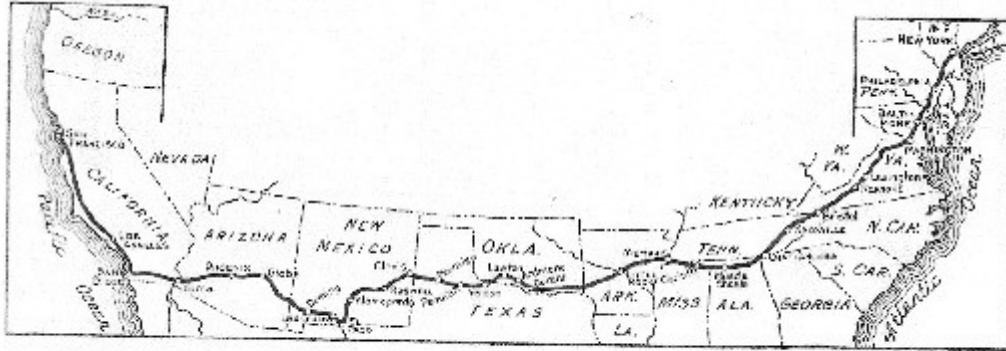
The Lee Highway Man

The 200-Foot Bar Harbor-Miami Boulevard Man

Author of the Slogan: "A Paved United States in Our Day"

Additional information for Lee Highway

1. Route 11, U.S. Lee Highway was 1,645 miles long in 1925.
2. The Virginia Department of Transportation maintains the road.
3. The Lee Highway travels over the Natural Bridge in Rockbridge County, Virginia, a geological formation on which cars can drive over the top of the bridge. The 20-story rock formation was once owned by Thomas Jefferson.



Map of Robert C. Lee Highway, National Auto Trail, Views Along Lee Highway, © 1923, The Lee Highway Association, Courtesy Lee Hubbard.

Part IV

Zero Milestones on the Lee Highway

One of Dr. Johnson's efforts was in establishing "zero milestones" in cities and towns across America. Highway mile distances would be measured from the milestones in cities for maps and guidebooks. The most important of these zero milestones was at the White House in Washington, D.C., the starting point of Lee Highway Bankhead Highway.



Left: The Zero Milestone in Memphis (Tenn.) Milestone, with the Hon. Thomas B. King, Vice-President of Lee Highway Association and Manager of the Highway Division of the Chamber of Commerce of Memphis, Tennessee



Right: The Zero Milestone on the Ellipse fronting the White House in Washington, D.C. This milestone was the starting point for the Lee Highway and Bankhead Highway.



The Third Milestone

Shown is Colonel Ed Fletcher (second from left), who was a vice president of the Lee Highway Association, as well as an officer on the Old Spanish Trail and Dixie Overland Highway associations. Fletcher is reading the Pacific Milestone dedication address from President Calvin Coolidge. The men are standing around the Pacific Milestone, the zero milestone in the center of San Diego, California. It was dedicated on November 17, 1923. The front of the milestone features the Lee Highway symbol, while another side is dedicated to the Old Spanish Trail. Colonel Fletcher is thanked for bringing the Southern Transcontinental Highway to San Diego.

Another milestone photo on the Lee Highway, in Hawkins County near Rogersville, Tennessee. On the front of the marker is a plaque depicting an old stagecoach wagon. This marker had been stolen but was recently replaced. The milestone is made of local Tennessee marble.



Cities and towns on Lee Highway in Virginia – Tennessee, the most towns listed of any state in a report by the Lee Highway Association in 1927. Some of these listed may no longer exist. In Virginia:

Rosslyn, Lyon Village, Cherrydale, Lee Heights, Falls Church, Fairfax, Centreville, Gainesville, Haymarket, Buckland, New Baltimore, Warrenton, Waterloo, Amissville, Ben Venue, Rediviva, Sperryville, Luray, Hamburg, New Market, Tenth Legion, Lacey Spring, Harrisonburg, Mt. Crawford, Burketown, Mount Sidney, Verona, Staunton, Greenville, Fairfield, Lexington, Fancy Hill, Natural Bridge, Buchanan, Troutville, Roanoke, Salem, Elliston, Christiansburg, Radford, Dublin, Pulaski, Wytheville, Groseclose, Atkins, Marion, McMullin, Seven Mile Ford, Chilhowie, Abingdon, Barytes, Bristol.

In Tennessee:

Bristol, Blountville, Eden's Ridge, Kingsport, Church Hill, Surgoinville, Rogersville, Cuba, Mooresburg, Bean Station, Bowen, Avondale, Rutledge, Joppa, Blaine, Skagstown, John Sevier, John Sevier Station, Knoxville, Bearden, Ebenezer, Concord, Martel, Lenoir City, Loudon, Philadelphia, Sweetwater, Niota, Athens, Riceville, Sanford, Calhoun, Charleston, Cleveland, Tucker Springs, McDonald, Mineral Park, Chattanooga, Powells Crossroads, Whitewell, Victoria, Sequatchie, Jasper, Kimball, South Pittsburgh, Richard City.

Part V

Text from letter (loaned by Tim Buchanan) describing how Bristol was involved:

Bristol – Washington Highway

Kingsport – Association, September 20, 1911, Bristol, Virginia

The New York to New Orleans Route

Dear Sir:

The Bristol to Washington Highway Association was organized in this city, August 11th, for the purpose of promoting the construction of a great National Pike between Bristol and Washington, connecting in this city with the highway which Tennessee has provided for from Bristol to Memphis. Much of this proposed highway through Virginia has already been constructed over certain routes that have been suggested, but there are a large number of gaps that must be filled in before we create a continuing Pike.

On the morning of October 2nd, a party of well-known highway engineers and good road advocates will leave Bristol for Washington, going via Roanoke and up the Shenandoah and returning from Bedford City to Roanoke. We will leave Charlottesville at 8 o'clock in the morning of October 12th, early enough on that date to put us into Lovingsston in time for a road meeting about 10 o'clock. Our party will leave that place directly after dinner at Am herst.

I am writing this letter to you at the insistence of Hon. P.E. Young of Shipman, who tells us that you are a representative citizen of Nelson County. Mr. H. Lewis Brown of Arlington is a member of the executive committee of this Association from our County. Our engineers will be very glad to meet a group of your people in Lovingsston immediately on their arrival from Washington, and I trust that it will be convenient for you and your friends to meet with us at the time.

Yours truly,

M. Runnels

Secretary-Treasurer

Bristol

The letterhead reads:

W.H. Aston, President, Meadowview, Va.

M.B. Corse, Vice President, Lexington, Va.

J.H. Marsteller, Vice President, Roanoke, Va.

F.M. Runnels, Secretary- Treasurer, Bristol, Va.

Part VI

Euclid Avenue – Lee Highway

Many people do not know that Euclid Avenue was designed to become our “Main Street” in Bristol, Virginia. Euclid was a small dirt road until July 15, 1942, when City Council voted to allot \$120,000 for streets and public works construction. The west end of Euclid was beginning to be developed by the building of a temporary school in 1943-1944. This school consisted of four rooms constructed on stilts to keep the building out of the water that drained underneath it when it rained. Martin Hassinger gave the wood material for construction of Stonewall Jackson School. Joyce Kistner went to this school. The year was about 1945-1946. An outdoor toilet was used by teachers and students alike. Joyce does not know how many years it was there. Stonewall Jackson school was designed by architect C.B. Kearfott. The builder was E.J. Hobbs construction company. Stonewall Jackson school opened around 1944 to 1945, and a new addition was added about 1948. Continuing on Lee Highway 11 W South past Stonewall Jackson school was Sparger Mill and one gas station. Lee Highway continued to grow with homes and businesses from the mid-40's and on.

Visible from the Lee Highway going along the 11WS roadway in Max Meadows is a magnificently displayed plantation house. It was built in 1839 -1840 by Joseph M. Garrock. The house, constructed in the Greek Revival architectural style, is a beauty. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. In later years, besides serving as a home, it has been used as a museum, restaurant, and special events venue. Its slave quarters and outbuildings were moved to Abingdon, Virginia.

While driving down Lee Highway 11WS, in a southerly direction, near Douglas school the highway abruptly stops at the intersection of Moore Street, Martin Luther King Boulevard, and Oakview Avenue, an intersection known as “Five Points.” Joyce drove back up to Euclid Avenue, turned left, and followed the route to Commonwealth Avenue. Close by were two Virginia state markers, one for 11W North, and one for 11 S, which leads to the continuation of Lee Highway, past Ballad Hospital and the Pinnacle shopping center, on to Kingsport.

Latest Lee Highway News

Route 29 in Arlington County Virginia has been officially renamed Langston Boulevard after the county board voted to drop the Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s name. On July 17, 2021 the Arlington Virginia County Board voted to rename the section of Route 29/ Lee Highway that runs from Rosslyn to Falls Church to Langston Boulevard, after John M. Langston, a trailblazing abolitionist and the first black Congressman elected from Virginia. It is perceived by some as an act of poetic justice that a name tied to racism will be replaced by that of a man who was one of the first African Americans to hold elective office in the United States. The new name will be approved at the July 17, 2022 Arlington County Board meeting, though it could take nearly a year for signage to be changed along the highway, a process estimated to cost taxpayers \$300,000.

Bibliography

1. Internet: The Fare Facs Gazette, The Newsletter of Historic Fairfax Inc., Volume 6, Issue one 2008
2. Newsletter: Lee Highway/Formation of its Association, Lee Highway Data Details, ND
3. Dr. S.M. Johnson, A Dreamer of Dreams, General Highway History, copied Department of Transportation.gov/infrastructure/Johnson.CFM
4. Information from individual Bristolians (nine to ten persons), contacted by Joyce Kistner, concerning the subject matter of Lee Highway history.