

# New Jersey's Historic Garden State Parkway

## THE SCENIC ROUTE: WHAT IS A PARKWAY?

In the mid-nineteenth century, an early definition of the term "parkway" typically described non-commercial, overland routes that traversed through or connected to a park. The design of parkways provided scenic, landscaped routes within a park-like setting while maintaining a low profile that would not disrupt the view or scenic value of the park itself (Cultural Landscape Foundation 2022). Early parkways used in this way often limited usage to small carriages, pedestrians, and bicycles, as opposed to modern parkways that primarily serve automobiles. One of the best-known examples of parkways used as scenic drives is New York City's Central Park. There, landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux incorporated parkways in their 1858 design, then known as the Greensward plan, which included four roads strategically placed out of view from various vantage points of the park. The parkways

were inconspicuous to visitors due to Olmsted and Vaux's clever use of grassy fields, waterways, and picturesque woodlands that created a continuous experience of the designed landscape (Castringo 2019; Cultural Landscape Foundation 2022; Figure 1).

The meaning of the term "parkway" evolved in the early twentieth century as automobiles rose in popularity. Parkway designs began to include limited-access recreational routes, excluding commercial vehicles and pedestrians, to allow for uninterrupted and scenic driving. As cities grew, these early parkways were incorporated into local transportation networks, and their recreational value began to decline (KSK Architects Planners Historians, Inc. [KSK] 2011). Nonetheless, the concept of a parkway as a scenic, landscaped route with limited or controlled access to enhance the driving experience persisted.



Figure 1: The 1858 Greensward Plan of Central Park showing early concepts of parkways. Image courtesy of New York City Department of Records and Information Services.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, rising recreational automobile use led to the construction and expansion of more vehicle-friendly scenic parkways. For example, in the 1920s, New York State's existing parkway system was expanded to connect parks on Long Island with other state parks in New York City. On a national level, the federal government began funding a system of National Parkways in the 1930s as part of the New Deal. These routes were constructed and maintained by the National Park Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps with the intention of commemorating historic roadways (Landscapes 1998; Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000, 2003). These projects reflect the prevalence of parkways in the early twentieth century and their early stages of transition from scenic park routes to modern highways. After World War II, parkways needed to adapt to suburban growth and increasing automobile traffic, and did so by incorporating features of wider, higher capacity thoroughfares. These higher capacity, higher speed highways with limited interruptions would inform

the designs of the interstates that most people are familiar with today.

Many post-World War II parkways were built to offer connections from population centers to disparate locations, or to expedite the suburban commute, rather than provide connections within and to park systems. Likewise, the construction of a parkway often initiated economic stimulus and improved transportation networks for the delivery of goods and services to otherwise remote communities. Despite an expansion of the meaning of the term "parkway" over the first half of the twentieth century, modern parkways generally retain common features such as controlled access, landscaping, limited or no advertisements, standardized signage, overpasses, toll stations, and safety features (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000, 2010, 2016; KSK 2011). One of New Jersey's most iconic roadways, the Garden State Parkway is a significant example of a post-World War II parkway whose design fuses the early ideas of a limited-access, scenic overland route with the concept of a modern highway.

## PAVING THE WAY: BUILDING THE GARDEN STATE PARKWAY

Constructed between 1946 and 1957, the Garden State Parkway (GSP) extends nearly 173 miles from New Jersey's southernmost tip in the City of Cape May to the New York State line (Figure 2). The GSP was constructed to alleviate traffic across the state as a result of population growth and increased automobile ownership and use during the mid-twentieth century. At the northern end of the state, population growth in urban areas was outpacing road construction, drawing in huge numbers of commuters and commercial vehicles alike. At the southern end of the state, the local road network was especially overburdened and clogged during the summer tourist season, which saw droves of people heading to the southern Jersey Shore to vacation. The GSP would improve transportation efficiency and safety across New Jersey, creating

the first route of its kind to span the entire length of the state.

The initial legislation for the GSP was enacted in 1945 under the Administration of New Jersey Governor Walter E. Edge. In 1946, construction for the GSP (originally known as Route 4) began in Clark Township, Union County under the purview of State Highway Commissioner, Spencer Miller, Jr. Initial construction of the GSP was slow as funding was difficult to sustain. By 1950, only 22 miles of the GSP had been completed due to a lack of funds. The 22 miles of completed roadway included a 10-mile section between Cranford Township and Woodbridge Township and two short sections near Cape May Courthouse and Toms River Township (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000).

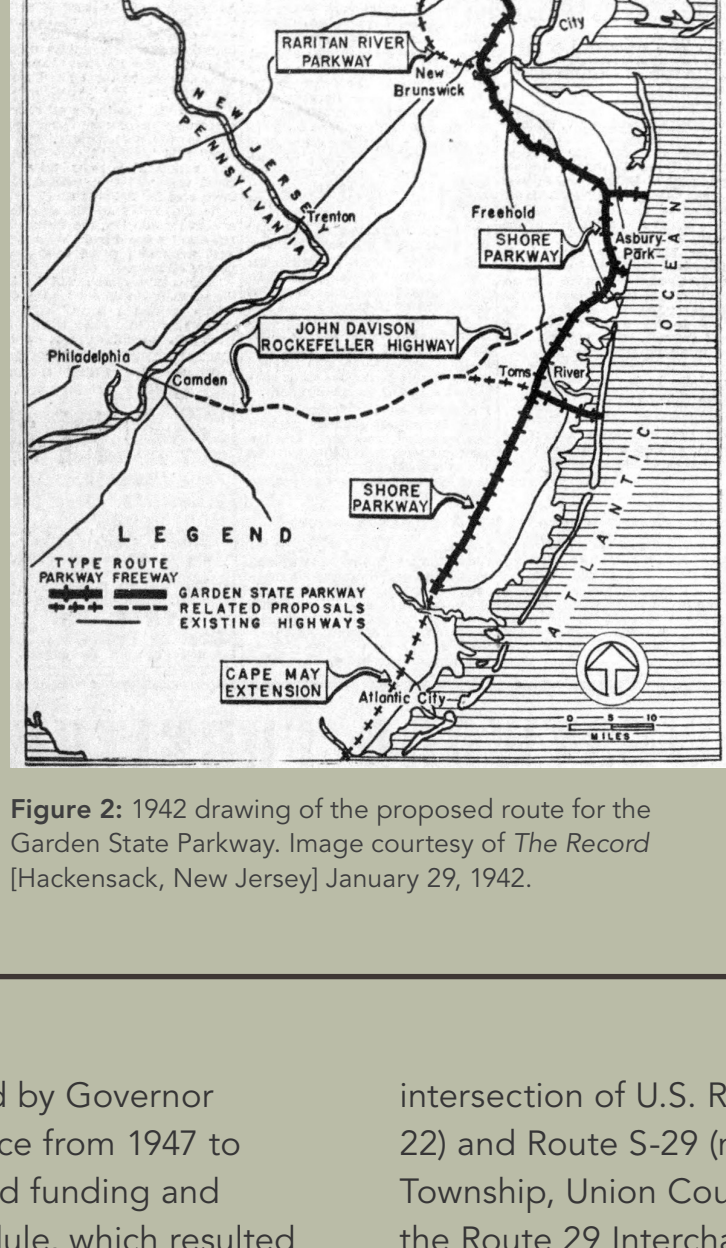


Figure 2: 1942 drawing of the proposed route for the Garden State Parkway. Image courtesy of The Record [Hackensack, New Jersey] January 29, 1942.

Governor Edge was succeeded by Governor Alfred E. Driscoll who held office from 1947 to 1954. Governor Driscoll secured funding and employed an aggressive schedule, which resulted in substantial construction progress on the GSP. In 1952, the State Legislature created the New Jersey Highway Authority, which was empowered to oversee the completion of the GSP (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000). Harold Griffith was appointed as the Chief Engineer of the GSP project that same year.

In 1952, the newly formed Highway Authority awarded its first contract to the George M. Brewster & Son who contracted the interchange at the

intersection of U.S. Route 29 (now U.S. Route 22) and Route S-29 (now NJ Route 82) in Union Township, Union County (originally referred to as the Route 29 Interchange). The interchange featured the confluence of three high-speed highways, so creating a design to limit traffic interruptions to each of the three routes proved challenging. This was accomplished through the use of distinct curved access ramps, gently curved embankments, all while incorporating the parkway landscape, uniform signage, and safety features that have come to characterize the GSP today (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000; Figure 3).

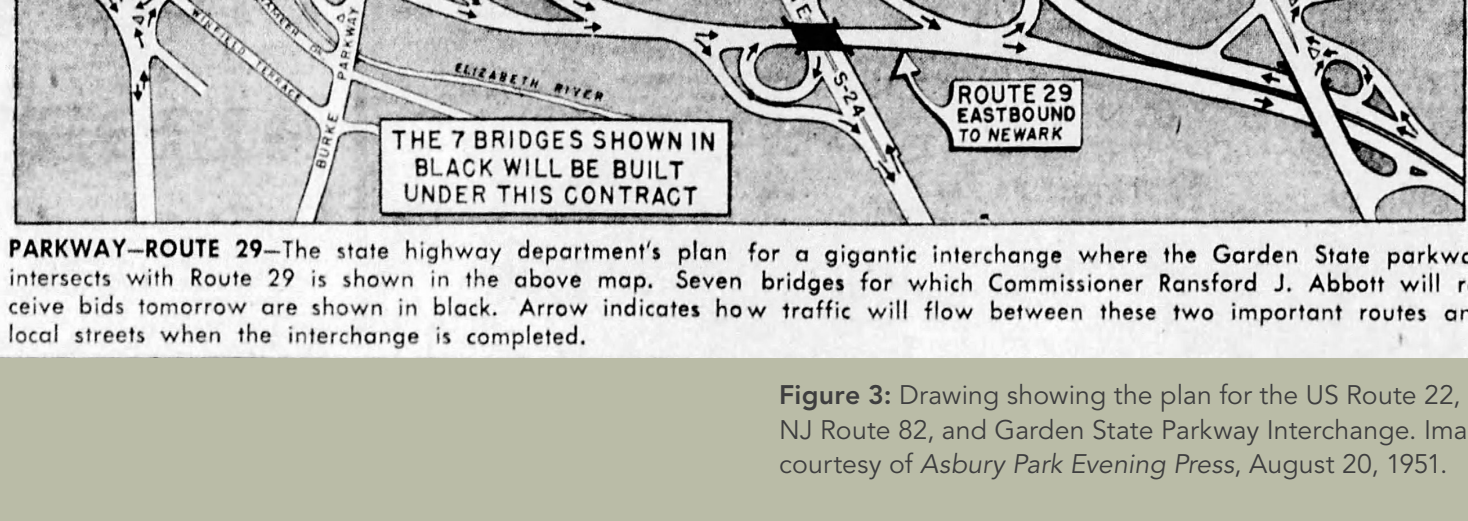


Figure 3: Drawing showing the plan for the US Route 22, NJ Route 82, and Garden State Parkway Interchange. Image courtesy of Asbury Park Evening Press, August 20, 1951.

After the completion of the Route 29 Interchange in Union Township, the other segments of the GSP were constructed relatively quickly. In October of 1954, the largest segment of the GSP opened. It was a 143-mile section between the Township of Irvington, Essex County and the GSP's southern terminus at the City of Cape May, Cape May County, which included a detour at Great Egg Harbor Bay. In May of 1956, a 1.5-mile bridge carrying the GSP over the Great Egg Harbor was completed. A year later, in 1957, a 9-mile extension was constructed to connect the GSP with the New

York State Thruway, bringing the GSP to its current length of 173 miles (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000). When completed, the GSP prompted significant commercial and residential development in remote Jersey Shore regions and elsewhere along its statewide route, as was anticipated, which led to phenomenal population growth. Ocean County in particular saw its population double every 10 years between 1950 and 1970, due in large part to the construction of the GSP (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000).

## THE MODERN RIDE: THE DESIGN OF THE GARDEN STATE PARKWAY

The design of the GSP incorporated the features of a modern interstate with a landscaped parkway. Drivers encountered a controlled visual experience that was dictated by the design of the roadway, landscape, and other aesthetic details such as uniform signage and the prohibition of billboards. As the route of the GSP passed through different regions of the state, the setting of the roadway varied, but was generally screened from its surroundings by a wooded buffer that supported a well-defined, distinguishable corridor consistent with that of early parkways (Figure 4). The GSP was designed to eliminate steep grades and sharp curves in the road by moving earth to create a more level, gently curving roadway. This design allowed motorists to reach the high speeds required of a modern interstate while simultaneously providing a scenic drive over gently rolling terrain. In some areas of the GSP, earthen mounds or swales

were created in the medians of the roadway as a safety feature, which reduced glare from oncoming traffic and the possibility of head-on collisions. Additional design features, such as controlled access with non-signalized interchanges, and acceleration and deceleration lanes for exits, entrances, and service facilities, promoted a continuous, uninterrupted flow of traffic on the GSP, arguably one of its key defining features. Roads that intersected the GSP were either carried under or over the roadway, further allowing for smooth, uninterrupted travel. Though a number have been replaced since the Parkway's construction, the bridges that carry the GSP and intersecting routes feature designs of several different configurations and materials. These include elliptical-arch bridges, many with stone facing, and bridges featuring concrete breastwalls and earthen embankments (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000).



Figure 4: Circa-1945 post card showing the Garden State Parkway near Red Bank, New Jersey. Image courtesy of Tichnor Brothers Collection, Boston Public Library.

## THE GARDEN STATE PARKWAY HISTORIC DISTRICT

In October 2001, the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office determined that the Garden State Parkway is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) as the Garden State Parkway Historic District (GSPHD). The historic district encompasses the entirety of the GSP's 173-mile highway corridor, as well as features that make the GSP recognizable as a modern, high-speed parkway. These features include the parkway's curated landscape, uniform signage and safety features, and several access points such as tollbooths, and controlled concrete and stone-faced bridges. The GSP is significant because its design combined the aesthetics of early parkways with modern engineering and traffic control to create a scenic, high-speed superhighway. Modern parkway designs like the GSP are rare. The GSP is one of just two fully developed parkways in New Jersey; the other being the Palisades Interstate Parkway, which was built between 1947 to 1958 and is

significantly shorter in length (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2000).

The GSP also had an incredible economic impact. The GSP connected northern New Jersey's more populated urban areas to the less populated southern Jersey Shore regions. This expanded automobile access to the Jersey Shore, spurring an increase in tourism, and in turn, suburban and commercial development. Municipalities all along the GSP's entire 173-mile-long corridor saw similar growth, but none so much as those along the shore, and near the parkway's previously isolated southern terminus. Construction of the GSP also coincided with a surge in popularity of automobiles during the mid-twentieth century. More Americans than ever before owned automobiles and were traveling for work and pleasure alike along the state-spanning GSP.

## About This Project

This publication was prepared by Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. on behalf of the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT), as a mitigation measure in response to adverse effects on the NRHP-eligible Garden State Parkway Historic District associated with improvements to the U.S. Route 22, NJ Route 82, and Garden State Parkway Interchange (Interchanges 140 and 140A) in the Township of Union, Union County, New Jersey. The improvement project includes renovations to

the above-mentioned interchange including the replacement of two bridges which contribute to the Garden State Parkway Historic District. In 2021, the NJDOT executed a Memorandum of Agreement to mitigate the effects of altering and replacing components of the interchange. Historic American Engineering Record documentation of the US Route 22, NJ Route 82, and Garden State Parkway Interchange was also completed as mitigation for the project.

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