

Rex Whitton

State Highway Engineer July 23, 1951 - February 10, 1961 FHWA

Administrator February 10, 1961 - December 30, 1966



Rex Marion Whitton, was born in 1898, in Jackson County, Missouri. He graduated from the University of Missouri in 1920 with a bachelor's degree in engineering.

Eleven days after graduating, he began a 40-year career with the Missouri State Highway Department.

He started out as a levelman on a survey crew surveying a 15-mile stretch of road in Johnson County, Missouri.

Rising through the ranks of the Missouri State Highway Department he held a number of positions, including assistant project engineer; project engineer; chief of survey party; designer; assistant division engineer; division construction engineer; engineer of special assignments; assistant engineer of surveys and plans; and division engineer.

Through all those roles and responsibilities Whitton became involved in and developed a deep knowledge of all phases of administration, economics, construction, operation and maintenance.

In 1936, Whitton was named the agency's engineer of maintenance. He developed what was regarded as one of the nation's top maintenance organizations and in the process established a national reputation. He was appointed chief engineer of the agency in 1951, leading to his role as president of the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO), as it was called then, in 1956.

Whitton represented AASHO before Congress during this critical year and oversaw revision of the 1945 geometric design standards for the Interstate System. The new edition was approved in July 1956 and quickly adopted by the Bureau of Public Roads. Whitton also had ensured in August that Missouri would have the first project to go to contract after President Eisenhower approved the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956.

On December 27, 1960, President-elect John F. Kennedy announced that Whitton would be Federal Highway Administrator. Whitton had been reluctant to leave Missouri, where he could walk to work. However, when Secretary-designate of Commerce Luther Hodges told Whitton he owed it to the country, he accepted.

Whitton and his wife lived in an apartment in northwest Washington, commuting to work in the Matomic Building at 1717 H Street, NW., on a shuttle bus operated by the apartment management.

The new Administrator faced a tough task, restoring public and congressional confidence in the Interstate Highway Program. Accounts of waste, fraud, and abuse, as well as controversies in urban areas, had led to calls for an end to the program.

Whitton would later say that during his first year, he was in "the hot seat" because, "The public was shocked." Whitton would help resolve this issue as well as the financing and urban controversies contributing to the "hot seat" when he took office.

Whitton began a public relations initiative to counter the bad press the Interstate program was receiving. The campaign included his appearance at highway openings around the country, each an opportunity to gain positive publicity in local newspapers. By the time he left office in December 1966, Whitton had attended more Interstate openings than any Federal Highway Administrator before or since.

During his initial months in office, Whitton was involved in securing new legislation to restore order to the Interstate Program. After considerable debate, Congress rejuvenated the program by passing the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1961. It increased revenue for the Highway Trust Fund and assured development would proceed on a pay-as-you-go basis.

Changes were needed to handle the expanded mission. During Whitton's tenure, he set up the Office of Planning, a function that had previously been combined with research. He also established the Office of Right-of-Way and Location to deal with two of the most difficult areas in the Interstate Highway Program, created the Office of Highway Safety, and brought in specialists (ecologists, behavioral scientists, civil rights specialists, etc.) to deal with the new circumstances.

Another change allowed Whitton to deal with what turned out to be exaggerated allegations of corruption (sometimes called "The Great Highway Robbery"). He created an Office of Audits and Investigations, headed by a former FBI agent, to toughen oversight capability. This office, plus increased inspections, sampling of materials, audits, and investigations, helped restore the program's reputation with the public and the Congress.

After stepping down as Administrator in 1966 Whitton returned to Missouri and bought a home at 4320 Montclair Avenue in Independence. He drove to his new job as an associate partner with the engineering firm Howard, Needles, Tammen, and Bergendoff in Kansas City.

In his spare time, Whitton supervised three farms totaling 281 acres in Jackson County. He also enjoyed being closer to his son, Rex Whitton, Jr., and three grandchildren. Whitton retired from his consulting work in 1975.

Whitton died in Kansas City in 1981 at the age of 82.

The foregoing text was adapted from public domain websites included in the following references.

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