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Developers made Rte. 128 the highway to everywhere - by Thomas House

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The poster child of circumferential highways, Massachusetts' Rte. 128 began as something rather innocuous - a chain of two-lane local roads that were daisy chained into a circumferential numbered route around Boston.

Of course, most of New England's numbered routes exist in precisely this fashion. The difference is that this jagged route was conceived in 1912 to circumambulate Boston. Running from Gloucester to Hull, it initially traveled on roads that many would be familiar with today including Montvale Ave., Neponset Valley Pkwy., and Highland Ave.

It was 1934 – ninety years ago – that William F. Callahan (yes, that William F. Callahan) revealed a plan for a limited access to traverse the routes radiated from Boston, and connecting towns between these routes.

In order to avoid local resistance, his route crossed field and fen, avoiding downtowns and was thus derided by the AAA as a 'highway to nowhere'. Shovels bit the dirt two years later, and the first two stretches (Dedham and Peabody) were completed before World War II interrupted.

After the war, construction of the route re-christened as the "Yankee Division Hwy." resumed, with the Federal Highway Act of 1944 guaranteeing half the tab.

The feds reduced the original six-lane design to four, reasoning that this would be sufficient for 20 years – but seven years later constructed sections were twice that anticipated volume.

Canton to the Braintree split was the last major section completed (1958), with a minor extension in Gloucester a year later.

Due to the route adjoining vacant land outside, developers of office and industrial parks quickly seized the opportunity to build, encouraged by an MIT study. They encountered minimal permitting restrictions, and the population along the 'highway to nowhere' quadrupled during the 1950s, and doubled again the following decade.

With the cancellation of I-95 through the center of Boston, most of 128 from Canton to Peabody was reassigned as I-95, and though concurrent with 128, the interstate shield is used exclusively on gantry signage and 128 is restricted to signposts.

Only Peabody to Gloucester is the sole proprietor of Rte. 128 designation.

Rinse and repeat: I-495

Just as work restarted on 128 following the war, Mass. DPW outlined a plan for an "outer circumferential highway" at a radius of 30 miles from Boston, twice that of 128.

In spring of 1958, just as Rte. 128 was nearing completion, the plan became official, first as "95W",

and a few months later, acquired official interstate numerology as 495.

This outer beltway – a fully federal highway – was built in fits and starts through 1975 from Salisbury to Foxboro. An extension to I-195 in Wareham was authorized in 1974 and was completed eight years later.

Most of the route traversed a rural and wooded landscape, making acquisition of a highway-grade right of way relatively easy, though the northern half, frequently referred to as “relocated Rte. 110” from its northern terminus to Littleton, included a number of smaller former textile mill cities, and comes within 400 ft. of the New Hampshire state line near Haverhill.

The “gateway cities” – Haverhill, Lawrence, and Lowell – of the northern reaches quickly became a magnet for new development, the former mills quickly converted into high tech hubs. Booming growth reached into New Hampshire as “relocated Rte. 110” crossed important north south routes 28, I-93, and U.S. 3.

This reality challenges Rte. 128’s self-proclamation as “America’s Technology Highway”, and pointedly, the once-roaring Digital Equipment Corp.’s headquarters were sandwiched midway between these two routes - and the company built its Spitbrook campus just over the border in Merrimack, N.H., now occupied by Fidelity Investments.

Growth and development of the northern arc rejuvenated milltowns devastated by the loss of its textile industries, and with a broad array of professional services beyond the software-centric Rte. 128, “relocated Rte. 110” fully delivered on the promise of dramatic economic growth.

For the full length of its completed arc, I-495 has strung together a necklace of the fastest-growing communities in Massachusetts, including once-isolated communities now dealing with the complexities of growth and change.

An office complex can give a town a different kind of complex

Just as 128 quickly drew more traffic than anticipated, the longer, wider, and more outlying outer route has also grown beyond its capacity. Traffic becomes congested at now well-known chokepoints.

And former farm towns struggle to deal with an influx of residents, and growth adds to the costs and challenges of infrastructure and schools.

Unlike the more-developed towns along 128, the arc of 495 runs through towns that seemingly had more cattle than people, with more acreage devoted to raising crops than raising families.

The cost of real estate and taxes has jumped as these towns quickly became desirable locations for people engaged in professional careers - and once ensconced, have pulled up the ladder behind them resulting in a wall of NIMBY constraints.

These, of course, are nice problems to have.

The highways to everywhere

Rte. 128, the first of its kind to be completed, was once derided as the highway to nowhere, and 495 was built beyond nowhere.

Given a ribbon of asphalt to work with, developers have turned these two highways to nowhere, carved into forest and fell, into highways of innovation and enterprise emulated throughout the United States.

And to that we lift a toast...of New England IPA, of course.

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