



Women and Their Role in the Creation of the Lincoln Highway

28th Annual Conference on Illinois History
October 1 - 2, 2026

The Coast-to-Coast Rock Highway

IN 1912, CARL G. FISHER HAD A VISIONARY IDEA...

TO BUILD A DURABLE AUTO ROAD STRETCHING 3,400 MILES FROM NEW YORK TO SAN FRANCISCO.

A GRASSROOTS EFFORT FOR GOOD ROADS

- The Lincoln Highway is the country's first transcontinental route, that connected the rural heartland, boosted tourism and connected Americans like never before.
- This feat was accomplished with funding from private donors and with the physical labor of local people.
- The Lincoln Highway inspired our modern highway network, giving it the moniker, "The Father Road."



Above: Carl Fisher and the official Lincoln Highway Packard (a 1914 Runabout model) in Elkhart, IN., 1915.



Below: Before the Lincoln Highway, the nation's rural roads were a disjointed web of dangerous dirt and gravel roads.

Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida, "Florida Memory" and the University of Michigan Library Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection.

DREAM OF THE "COAST-TO-COAST ROCK HIGHWAY"



Left: The LHA travelled 3,384 miles mapping the route by using as many existing trails as possible. The route skirted around large cities to provide a scenic, pastoral experience for travelers.

Right: Painting of the Lincoln Highway through the pastoral landscape of Pennsylvania. From a souvenir photo album, c. 1915.

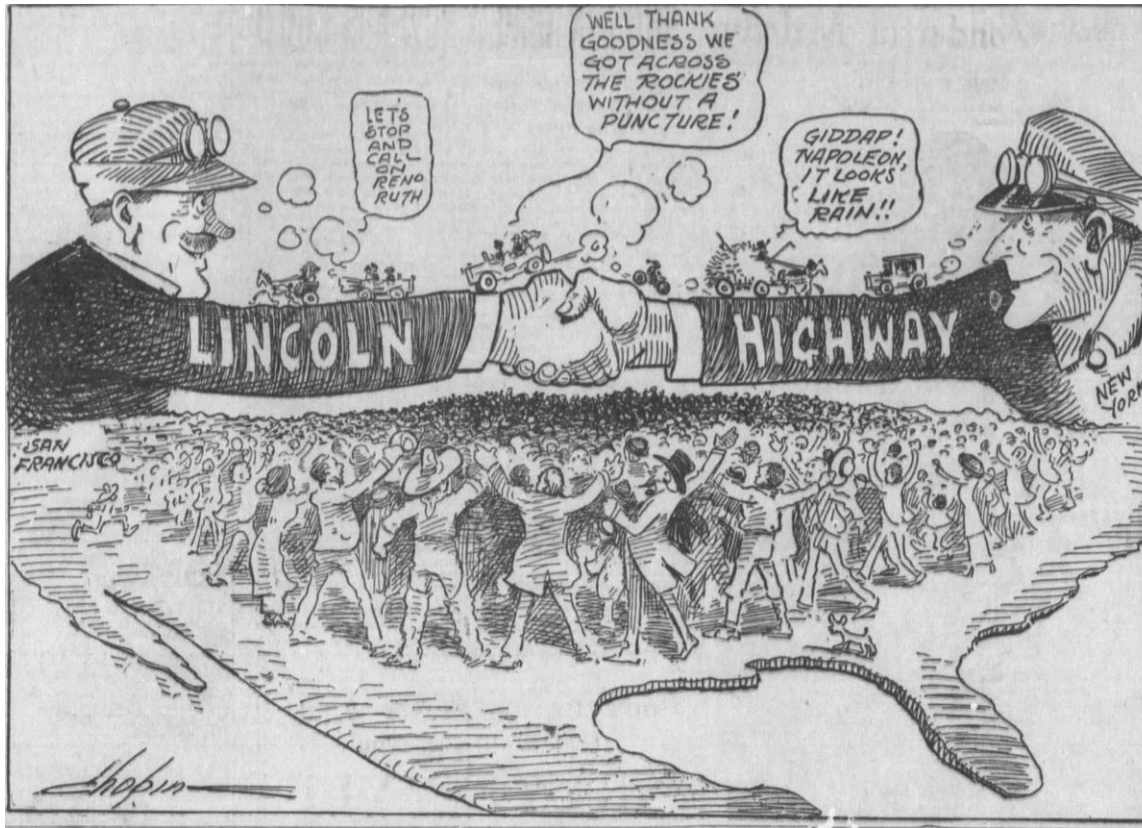


1912

In September 1912, Carl G. Fisher first announced his idea for a "Coast-to-Coast Rock Highway." He was an auto enthusiast who dreamed of taking his racing skills across America. However, safe, paved roads were still a dream.

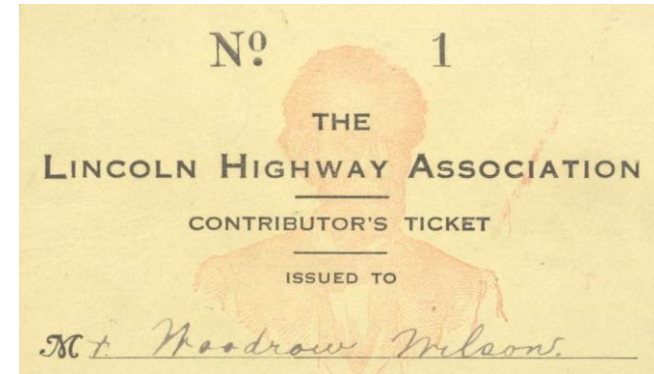
Courtesy of the Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, University of Michigan Library.

DREAM OF THE "COAST-TO-COAST ROCK HIGHWAY"



Left: A cartoon honoring the completion of the Lincoln Highway route, published in the *San Francisco Examiner* on October 31, 1913.

Right: Lincoln Highway donors received souvenirs, like this contributor's ticket signed by President Woodrow Wilson.
Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute Archives.



1913

The estimated cost of a 3,400-mile concrete road was **\$10 million!** Without government funding, the LHA sold \$5 memberships and memorabilia. Some auto companies pledged 1% of their annual sales, raising **\$1 million in two weeks.** With funds in hand, the Lincoln Highway was **completed by October 1913.**

DREAM OF THE "COAST-TO-COAST ROCK HIGHWAY"



Left: Malta, Illinois, built the first Seedling Mile with 2,000 barrels of donated cement from Marquette Cement Co.

Courtesy of the Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, University of Michigan Library.

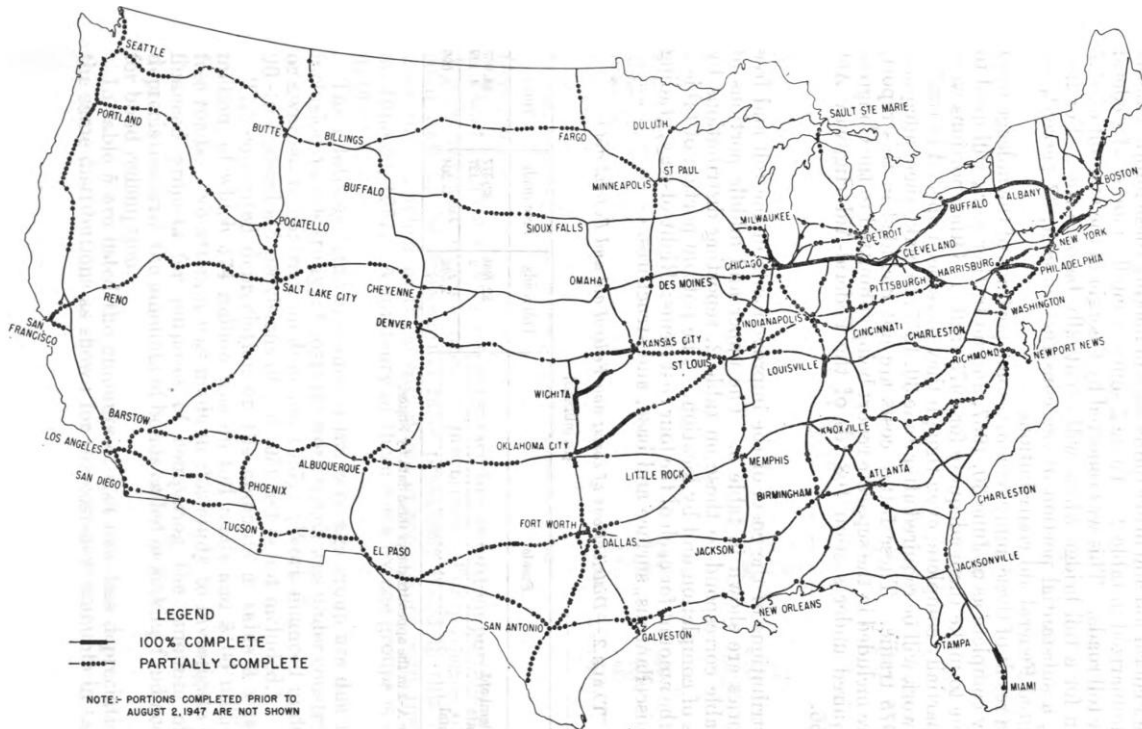
Right: *Concrete Roads*, published by Marquette's rival, the Portland Cement Co., claims that a seedling mile built with their donated cement in Mooseheart, Illinois, is the first, but it was second.



1914

The second step was to pave the highway, beginning with “Seedling Miles,” one-mile sections in rural areas. Malta, Illinois, was the first in the nation to fund and build its mile, all with volunteer labor and materials. A fervor of road development grew in Illinois, and it was the first state to complete the Lincoln Highway.

DREAM OF THE "COAST-TO-COAST ROCK HIGHWAY"



Left: In **1948**, the first Federal Funding for a national highway system resulted from an amendment to the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act, signed by President Truman (**above map**). However, the interstate system we know today resulted from a **1956** amendment to the act championed by President Eisenhower. Map courtesy of the Eno Center for Transportation.

Right: The **1961** opening of Illinois Interstate 74 between East Peoria and Morton. Photograph by Jim Engelhorn, held by the McLean County Museum of History.

1928 - 1948

The Lincoln Highway project was a privately funded effort spanning from **1912 to 1928**. Enthusiasm for the highway inspired several acts of legislation that would create our **national highway system**, paid for and managed by Federal and State governments.

Women on the the Lincoln Highway

Undoubtedly, the role of women was influential in the creation of the Lincoln Highway. The movement to create an “ocean-to-ocean boulevard” was in lock-step with a larger movement for equal rights for women during the turn of the twentieth century. The Lincoln Highway was vastly supported by leaders of national suffrage movements as it served as a symbol of progress into the modern age.

Probably there is not a woman in this audience who, even in her innermost thought, believes that the Lincoln Highway can be built, beautified, and operated in its superlativeness without the aid of women.

- Mary Hardy, Historian and Author of "The Lincoln Highway and its Possibilities," 1915.



Photograph published in the December 17, 1913, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

MARY C.C. BRADFORD



Left: Photograph of the Ratification of the 19th Amendment in Colorado, 1919.

Mary C. C. Bradford (circled in the photograph above) was an educator and national suffrage leader. She helped secure women's right to vote in Colorado in 1893 - 26 years before the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution.

Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

1911

Bradford called upon the women of the nation to support the highway as a dedication to Lincoln's memory. Because of her work, women took up the charge of beautifying, promoting, and funding the Lincoln Highway.

GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS



Women's Clubs formed **Lincoln Highway Beautification Committees** to create unique, yet cohesive, plans for plantings along the national highway. In Illinois, the women chose the Prairie Rose and the Burr Oak (top right photos) to represent the state's native landscape and to symbolize Abraham Lincoln's character...“a balance of tender and rugged.”

Left: *The American City* (Town and Country Edition), April 1916. **Right:** University of Michigan Department of Botany Records, photographers Junior Hayden and Ned Huff.

1914

“If that vast thoroughfare which is to run from the Atlantic to the Pacific...is the result of masculine imagination, the decoration of it, the women have determined, shall be their care.”

- Farmer City Journal, May 15, 1914.



Adela Kendall, a Chicagoan, was elected the chairman of the national Beautification Committee charged with tree planting along the full length of the Lincoln Highway.

Left: Adela Kendall, in the *Day Book* periodical published in Chicago on June 3, 1914.

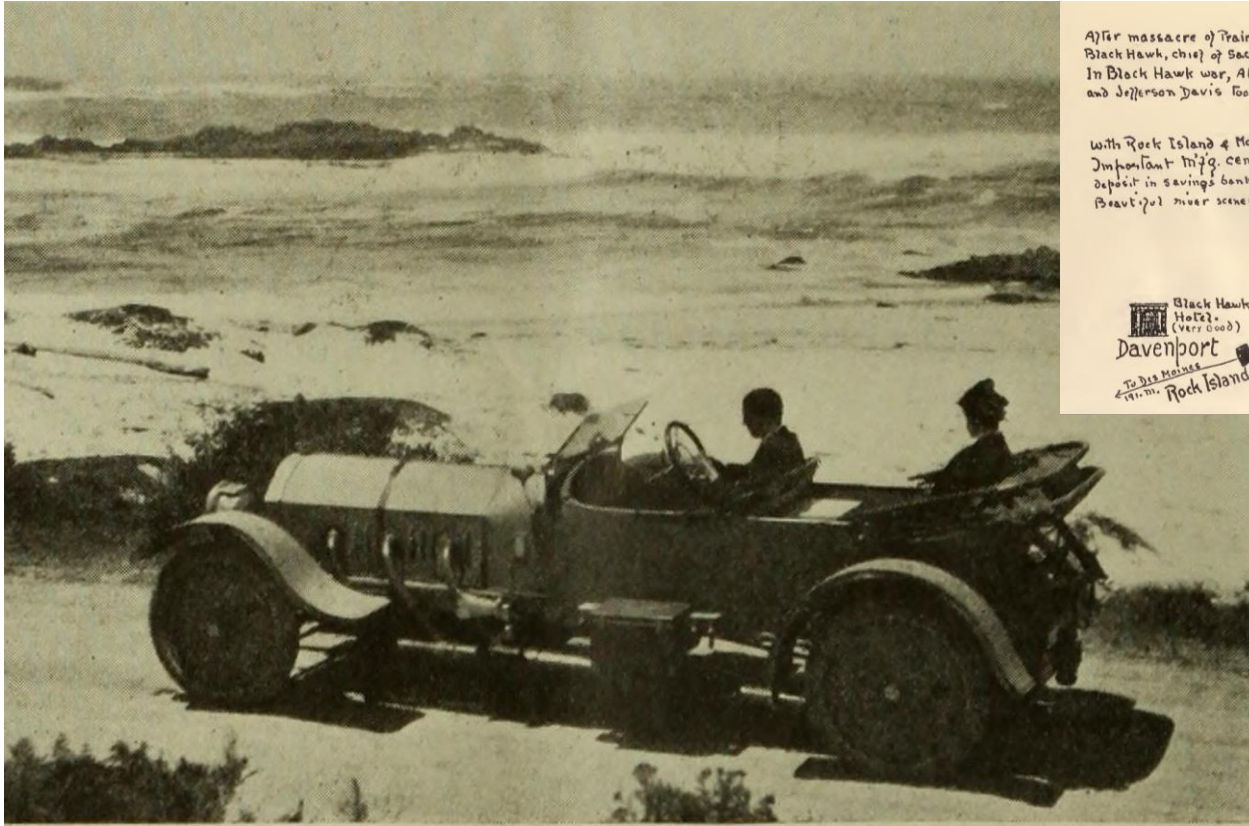
Right: Headline in the *Jersey Journal* published in Jersey City, New Jersey on October 3, 1914.

BEAUTIFICATION OF
LINCOLN HIGHWAY
PLANNED BY WOMEN

1915

The ideal of this committee will be a characteristic, artistic and harmonious, ocean to ocean boulevard, which will surpass anything in the history of the world...

- Adela Parker Kendall,
Argus-Leader, Sioux Falls,
October 12, 1915.



After massacre of Prairie du Chien,
Black Hawk, chief of Sac Indians chose Davenport seat of his Village.
In Black Hawk war, Abraham Lincoln was Capt. of Volunteers,
and Jefferson Davis took the Indian prisoner.

With Rock Island & Moline, Davenport is
Important Mfg. Centre \$23,000,000 of
deposit in savings banks, new \$350,000 school.
Beautiful river scenery.

A hand-drawn map showing a route from Chicago to Rock Island. The route starts at Chicago (marked with a dot) and goes west. Key locations and distances are marked along the route:

- Chicago** (starting point)
- Good road even in rain.** (written above the route)
- Die Kaleb** (written above the route)
- 174 mi** (distance from Chicago to Moline)
- 60.1** (distance from Moline to Rock Island)
- Moline** (marked with a dot)
- Good road when dry.** (written above the route between Moline and Rock Island)
- Rock Island** (marked with a dot)
- To Des Moines 141 mi.** (written below the route, pointing west)
- Davenport** (marked with a dot, located between Moline and Rock Island)
- Black Hawk Hotel. (very good)** (written next to Davenport)
- Rock Island** (marked with a dot, located between Davenport and Rock Island)
- Good road** (written below the route between Rock Island and Chicago)
- 101 mi.** (distance from Rock Island to Chicago)
- Chicago** (ending point)

Other notes on the map include:

- Important info:** (written at the top left)
- Deposit in savings banks, new 350,000 schd.** (written at the top left)
- Beautiful river scenery.** (written at the top left)
- Notelle** (written above the route near Chicago)
- bad road** (written above the route near Chicago)

The authority on social graces and manners, **Emily Post**, began her career as a newspaper journalist. In 1914, *Collier's Weekly* sent her on a motor car journey from New York to San Francisco to report on the modern road trip.

Left: A photograph of Post on her journey up the California coast toward San Francisco.

Right: Map of the Illinois section of Post's journey. Both illustrations were featured in *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (1916).

1916

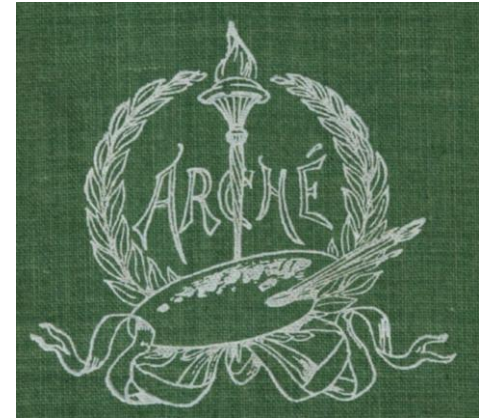
In DeKalb and Ogle Counties, Illinois, Emily approached the Lincoln Highway, finding it less improved than was rumored. In her later novelization of the journey, *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (1916), she tells the story in a chapter titled: “MUD!”

ARCHÉ CLUB

CLUB MOTTO:

"Forward till you see the highest"

—Tennyson



1916

In 1916, this public fountain on the Lincoln Highway was donated by the Arché Club of Chicago, a women's group that supported the arts. The fountain marks the location where the Lincoln and Dixie Highways intersect in Chicago Heights, Illinois.

Left: The Arché Fountain in Chicago Heights, Illinois.

Right: The cover image and motto of the Arché Club Yearbook, 1904, available on HathiTrust.

DEKALB WOMEN'S CLUB



The DeKalb Tourist Camp Grounds in 1922 (top) and in 2025 (bottom left).

Annie Glidden (bottom right), agricultural innovator, farmer, and the niece of Joseph Glidden, who popularized barbed wire.



1917

The DeKalb Women's Club purchased land from Annie Glidden to donate it as a park to the city. Glidden sold the land at half price.

Later, the land served as a tourist camp for travelers on the Lincoln Highway.

Photographs courtesy of *Lincoln Highway Forum*, vol v. no. 6, 1922 (Top); McGuire Igleski & Associates, 2025 (Bottom Left); and the Joseph Glidden Homestead, unknown date (Bottom Right).

CHICAGO POLITICAL EQUALITY LEAGUE



Above: The Chicago Political Equality League urges Chicago women to register to vote before the September Primaries of 1920. Photograph published in August 1920 in the *Chicago Tribune* and reprinted electronically on March 8, 2016.

The Lincoln Highway was a symbol of progress for suffragists. In 1914, the **Chicago Political Equality League** supported the highway by painting highway signs in the Chicago area.

1920

The 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920. In August of that year, a Chicago suffrage group paraded through Chicagoland, and along the Lincoln Highway urging women to register to vote.

Women on the the Lincoln Highway

Individuals and women's groups across the country raised awareness and crucial funding for the highway in the early years. During the construction of the highway, **women played a physical role in the actualization of the highway's vision and design.**

Other women supported the highway with adventurous travels across its length, alone. Promotions for these journeys generated significant media buzz for the Highway, as they documented some of the first examples of women traveling independently, despite societal norms that viewed travel as a male-only activity.



Left: Alice Ramsey 1909, National Automotive History Collection. **Center:** Anita King, *The Wichita Eagle*, April 2, 1916. **Right:** Billy Burke and Teddy Karlin, *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 1922.



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