

If ever a wise parent wanted to teach their child of the glorious beauty held within the United States they would select to spend a week or two to travel U.S. Route 6, the Grand Army of the Republic Highway. Historically the route travels from the very tip of Cape Cod in Provincetown to the golden shores of California in Long Beach, via the lush forests of the Mid-Atlantic Region, along the shores of Lake Erie, through the breadbasket of the Midwest, into the unforgiving Rocky Mountains and to the high Mojave Desert.

Sometimes touted as a “road to nowhere,” Route 6 has existed as a misfit for its entire existence. In the original plan for the U.S. numbered highways its routing was a series of compromises and conglomerations to appease elected officials and the residents of the communities it connected. Reviewing a map of Route 6 would indicate a road that connected very few cities of size and a number that just does not fit in with the rest of the grid. As a result Route 6 has never seen the through traffic nor the popularity of other roads of its length and vintage. But U.S. Route 6 may just travel the greatest diversity of geography of any highway in the United States.

As with many of the roads in the original 1926 AASHO plan, Route 6 started from the north and the east. The rationale was simple: that’s where the population was. The importance of connecting the towns in the northeast is punctuated by the routing U.S. 6 takes. At the present time there would be no reasonable rationale to create a national highway to run the entire length of Cape Cod due to a small permanent population and relatively few exports and imports off of the peninsula. But the route’s existence on Cape Cod punctuates the concept that this is an old road. In a time almost forgotten by the rushed pace of life today, Cape Cod was a place where even relatively common people were able to spend vast swaths of their summers engaged in quality time with their families. An entire family would rent a cottage and they would simply enjoy each other and the simply beauty and majesty that surrounds a person on the Cape. But Cape Cod is only the beginning of Route 6.

From Cape Cod, Route 6 heads into what is now the Rust Belt, the former heart of industrial America. In days gone by evidence of a strong America, hard at work was evident from Route 6 all of the way from Scranton to Joliet. This is where cars were built and steel was made. Today the route looks much different. While nature swiftly reclaims the northern tier of Pennsylvania, northern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois they are struggling to forge a renaissance out of the skeletons and ghosts of factories. Gary, Indiana is quite possibly the epicenter of devastation from the outsourcing of American jobs. If Pittsburgh was the king of steel, Gary was the next in the line of succession for the throne. When U.S. Steel closed most of the mill in Gary, the city was devastated. Since the 1970s, each census has described percentage population declines in the double-digits. While it is difficult to look in any direction in Gary and not see a ghost of a more prosperous time, there are inklings of a renaissance and renewed civic pride. A new industry has also found a home here: gambling. Two brand new casinos look like beacons in the sea, but their presence has been met with mixed feelings. It is yet unclear whether they will end up helping or hurting the city overall.

Before entering the towering mountains of Colorado, U.S. Route 6 visits the traditional breadbasket of America. Iowa and Nebraska are steeped in the history of agriculture in America. While agriculture is a chief industry in many of the states traversed by Route 6, here is where it is ingrained in the culture,

both urban and rural. This part of U.S. Route 6 was originally U.S. Route 32, but when it was decided U.S. Route 6 should become a transcontinental route, it claimed the entire distance of U.S. Route 32 across Iowa and U.S. Route 38 across Nebraska and into Colorado. Through Iowa and Nebraska the route travels between some major cities, and has even been "straightened" to better expedite travel between these larger centers like Iowa City, Council Bluffs, and Omaha. Straightening the route stripped it of some of its character and in some cases expedited the demise of some of the smaller agricultural towns. But with the construction of Interstate-80, some portions of Route 6 in Iowa were restored or re-routed to visit more of these smaller communities.

While thus far U.S. Route 6 has been a cross-section of American history, entering Colorado adds lessons in engineering and geography. Mountains have always posed a formidable challenge to transportation and Colorado holds some of the best! Throughout Colorado U.S. 6 links many of the major communities and was one of the first highways to do so. But probably the greatest highlight is the Loveland Pass. At 11,990ft, it is the highest pass in the United States that is routinely kept open year-round. U.S. 6 heading up and down the pass is characterized by an average grade of 6.7% and numerous hairpin turns. Until 1973 it was the most direct route from Denver to points west. In 1973 the Eisenhower Tunnel opened on I-70 which removed much of the traffic over the Loveland Pass, though over-height trucks and those carrying hazardous materials are still required to use the Loveland Pass rather than the tunnel. From the Loveland Pass, U.S. 6 descends into Glenwood Canyon as it travels westward to Utah in the Great Basin.

U.S. 6 both enters and exits Utah co-signed with U.S. 50, but 6 takes a much less direct route, epitomizing Route 6's role as a teacher rather than a highway for speed. Despite a less-direct route, Route 6 visits no major communities. However, due to 519 fatalities along the route between Spanish Fork and Green River from 1996 to 2008 it has been classified as being one of the most dangerous roads in America by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration. Through Nevada the scenery looks much the same, although the road becomes even more desolate. Further north is U.S. 50, which is dubbed the loneliest road in America, but Route 6 only passes through two settlements in the entire state, Tonopah and Ely, and there is a staggering 168 miles between them, boasting no services.

Entering California and approaching Bishop in the Owens Valley Route 6 is surrounded by history. The Owens Valley served as a proving ground for shipping water to what was, then, the fledgling city of Los Angeles which, to this day, relies primarily on water shipped to it via a complex network of aqueducts. In the present, Route 6 ends in Bishop because in 1964 the California Division of Highways implemented a major renumbering of its highways. Most of changes were purely bureaucratic and went unnoticed by travelers, but U.S. Route 6 was one of the exceptions to this, being largely replaced by CA-14, I-5, and CA-110. But until 1964 it was possible to follow Route 6 all of the way to the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach.

The route to Long Beach approached the greater Los Angeles area diagonally across the state through the Mojave Desert, at one point skirting the fringes of Edwards Air Force Base before taking on first the Soledad Pass and then the Newhall Pass, where it soon meets up with I-5. In the Los Angeles area

it is difficult to trace the remnants of most historic roads due to the aggressive construction of new freeways from the 1950s to the 1980s and that many of these old routes changed their routing frequently at the urging of local interest. But if you make it to the place where Long Beach Boulevard ends at Ocean Boulevard in Long Beach to find the Long Beach Performing Arts Theater, you will find a plaque commemorating the original end (or beginning) point of this famed route at it's peak.

Following the speediest highways in America today, it would only take 44 hours and 37 minutes of driving to drive from Long Beach to Provincetown, but it is truly impossible to see all there is to see across such a diverse country by taking the fastest route.