

The FRANK TURNER Story

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At the 75th Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board, David McCullough, the distinguished historian, reminded transportation professionals how important it is to remember and honor our “stories”—how our field has progressed, the major technical and institutional achievements, and the people who have made it happen. Maintaining our sense of history is the goal of the TRB Committee on Transportation History, which I currently have the privilege and pleasure to chair. At TRB’s 79th Annual Meeting in January 2000, the committee sponsored a special session to remember Francis C. Turner, whose talent, dedication, and enormous contributions to transportation over a lifetime of work merit a lasting place in history. The articles on the following pages spring from that session.

Frank Turner’s story is inextricably linked to that of the Interstate Highway System. He was one of a small group of individuals—including the man he worked for, President Dwight D. Eisenhower—who shared a vision to “change the face of America” and provided the leadership to make the national highway network a reality. Joining the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads in 1929, Turner spent his entire professional career at the Bureau and its successor, the Federal Highway Administration. He was appointed FHWA Administrator in 1969, after rising through the ranks to become the agency’s top career official. In 1994, *American Heritage* magazine named him as one of 10 “agents of change” who, although largely



Francis C. Turner receives the inaugural Frank Turner Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Transportation, established in his honor and made with his likeness.

unknown to the general public, transformed the lives of Americans in the previous 40 years. Turner was cited for “shaping the creation of the largest public-works project in the history of the world, the network of interstate highways that changed the country subtly as much as the transcontinental railroad did overtly.”

In his later years, I had occasion to get to know Frank personally as a member of an informal group—dubbed the “No-Name Group”—that he had helped organize, which met monthly for “show and tell” sessions on transportation issues. Although Frank, who was then in his eighties, was always the quietest member of the group, the meeting was always better when he was there. As his eyesight faded, I started picking him up and driving him to the meetings. Frank lived alone in a modest home in Arlington, Virginia, located, I thought ironically, in one of the worst traffic situations imaginable; his driveway backed onto a T intersection with blind spots in two of the directions. I shuddered every time I drove in or out.

I treasured those trips with Frank—particularly after sessions in which the talk triggered some long-ago stream of thought or experience that he shared as we drove home. The occasion I remember best was his recounting of how the initial attempts to get funding for the Interstate Highway System in 1955 had ended in failure in the Congress. He was disheartened—it was both a bitter loss and a situation from which he could see no successful way



Path is cleared for construction on portion of Interstate 94 in North Dakota.

out. He was sitting in his office feeling rather disconsolate when Francis Dupont, Bureau of Public Roads Commissioner, passed by, saw Frank, and went back to his office only to return with a gift. It turned out to be a fine watch that Dupont had acquired on a trip to Europe and had planned to present to Frank in celebration of his victory. Seeing Frank so discouraged, Dupont decided that his gift would do more good immediately. He told Frank that the watch was intended not only to cheer him up, but to serve as a reminder that time sometimes works in your favor and that patience and continued effort eventually pay off.

By that point in his story, we had reached Frank's house. Once inside, I waited while he rummaged about and then brought out the watch. As I sat in his living room and held it, he told me of the subsequent efforts to devise a way to fund the system. Of course, we now know that these efforts were successful: in 1956—due largely to Frank's influence—the Interstate Highway System was

born. And—as we say in our committee—the rest was history.

As Chair of the TRB Committee on Transportation History, I am delighted that TRB has chosen this mechanism to remember Frank Turner. I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce to the readers of *TR News* the work and thoughts of some very fine people about a very fine man. Appreciation must be expressed to Damian Kulash, President and CEO, Eno Transportation Foundation, and a member of the committee, for originally suggesting the session that was held at TRB's Annual Meeting in January 2000 to reflect on the life and achievements of this remarkable man, for assembling the panel members who contributed to this undertaking, and for organizing the materials from the session. I would like to thank all who served on the panel at the session and then turned the presentations into a permanent record that will be preserved so that in the future others can remember and honor the "story" of Francis C. Turner.

Gold Standard for Transportation Professionals

In 1999, in honor of Frank Turner, a group of individuals and transportation organizations, with TRB serving as secretariat, established the Frank Turner Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Transportation. The award—presented biennially—recognizes lifetime achievement in transportation, as demonstrated by a distinguished career in the field, professional prominence, and a distinctive, widely recognized contribution to transportation policy, administration, or research. Turner was the first recipient of the award, which honored his extraordinary leadership and accomplishments in the development and construction of the U.S. transportation system; the medal was presented to him at the 1999 TRB

Annual Meeting before his death at the age of 90 in the same year. Federal Highway Administrator Kenneth Wykle commented at the time of his death: "Through nearly 70 years of extraordinary service to the American people, Mr. Turner's contributions to transportation remain unparalleled in this century and provide a firm foundation to move us forward well into the 21st century. His visions and lifelong dedication to transportation have set a standard for our agency and for every federal highway administrator."

In January 2001, the Frank Turner Medal was presented to Mortimer L. Downey, former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation (see article, page 48).