Meeting the Challenges of Growth:

Road and Bridge Building
In Post-World War II
Fort Lauderdale

by PAUL S. GEORGE

During the decade of the 1940s, the City of Fort Lauderdale experienced remarkable growth and development. A large training base for members of the armed forces during World War II, the city saw its population climb from 17,996 at the outset of the decade to 36,328 by 1950. Fueling this population explosion was the return of many wartime visitors and servicemen as permanent residents.

This growth imposed new demands upon a city unprepared for them. Citizens demanded more housing, schools, additional police protection, new roads and bridges, a better water supply, and an improved sanitation system. When improvements were not forthcoming in a reasonably short period of time, Fort Lauderdale faced serious problems.1

Fort Lauderdale’s first postwar mayor, Harold Holden, decried the city’s growing traffic congestion, especially in the tourist season, citing a dearth of downtown parking and traffic bottlenecks at the approach to bridges. Holden warned that downtown congestion required immediate action since that sector was in danger of strangling on its traffic. Speaking in 1947, he addressed a problem that would bedevil urban centers across the nation: “Modern automobile

Perhaps more than any other phenomenon, the rapid proliferation of automobiles has transformed the face of America in the decades following World War II. The past half century has witnessed continuous road construction projects as cities have battled congestion, wilderness and countryside have been invaded by residential and commercial development, and interstate highways have tied the nation’s population centers closer together.

The challenge of providing roadways sufficient to accommodate the ever-increasing traffic has been intensified in Fort Lauderdale by South Florida’s tremendous population explosion, the region’s attractiveness to vacationing motorists, and the obstacles provided by the city’s miles of waterways.

This article, tracing the city’s numerous road and bridge building projects from the late 1940s to the present, is an adaptation of portions of "Broward’s Flagship City: Fort Lauderdale, 1945-1990," the final volume in a three-part comprehensive survey prepared for the Historic Broward County Preservation Board. Author Paul S. George, former director of the Preservation Board, is currently assistant professor of history at Miami-Dade Community College Wolfson Campus. He also conducts a series of popular walking tours of historic areas in Broward and Dade counties.

"Roadways to the Future," the pictorial selection which follows Dr. George’s article, features photos of Fort Lauderdale streets, bridges, and highways as they appeared in the 1960s, a decade of especially intense growth and change. These photos are from a collection donated to the Historical Commission by the City of Fort Lauderdale’s Traffic Engineering Department.
transport has super-imposed traffic on our streets designed for the horse and buggy. Holden argued for off-street parking in the downtown area as a means of relieving clogged roadways. Instead, the city chose to place parking meters along its main thoroughfares, thereby adding to the growing traffic congestion. Nowhere was congestion more evident than on those portions of Andrews Avenue and the Federal Highway that spanned the New River.

The Andrews Avenue bridge was thirty years of age and in danger of condemnation by the late 1940s, before the city began constructing a new bridge. The new structure, the fourth span at this crossing, was built from steel and concrete, was broader and stronger than its predecessors, and contained four lanes of traffic.

While construction was underway on the new Andrews bridge, Powell Brothers, the contractors for the project, built a temporary pontoon crossing at Southwest First Avenue. This narrow span was employed briefly, because the Andrews Avenue bridge was completed in only nine months, at a cost of $482,000. The bridge opened in October 1949, and relieved much downtown congestion. It would remain in operation until 1979. The county named the new span the H.C. Davis Memorial Bridge for the veteran county engineer responsible for its design.

The drawbridge crossing the New River at the Federal Highway presented even more serious problems than the span at Andrews Avenue. Built in the mid-1920s, this low, narrow, wooden structure stood in the upright position several hours daily, sometimes causing mile-long backups on Federal Highway. In the postwar period, this portion of the highway acquired an unenviable reputation as the "worst bottleneck of U.S. 1 from Maine to Florida." Fort Lauderdale business leader Emmett McTigue recalls that just a few years earlier the absence of traffic had permitted him to ride his bicycle along the center of the Federal Highway — without his having to grip the handlebars.

Because of the frequency of bridge openings, the city commission in 1945 directed the city manager to take whatever steps necessary to limit them to the half-hour. The following year, the New River Boatmen's Association was organized to solve such problems as "unnecessary bridge openings."

Many citizens and city officials, however, felt that more radical measures were necessary. As early as 1940, discussion had begun over the prospects of constructing a tunnel beneath the river at the Federal Highway crossing. During the postwar period, tunnel advocates grew louder in their demands. In 1948, the city employed a consulting firm to draw up preliminary plans for tunnels at the Federal Highway and New River, as well as at East Las Olas Boulevard and at Southeast Seventeenth Street where those arteries approached the water. The Florida State Road Department also became interested in the idea of tunnel crossings. It engaged its own consulting firm which recommended a tunnel at the Federal Highway and New River, but ruled against tunnels under the Intracoastal Waterway and Stranahan River at Las Olas Boulevard and Southeast Seventeenth Street. In the late 1940s, a new bridge featuring a high level bascule.
lift span replaced the antiquated structure over the Intracoastal Waterway at Oakland Park Boulevard. Not until 1960, however, after a great deal of controversy, would a tunnel under the New River at Federal Highway open to vehicular traffic.⁸

Fort Lauderdale's infrastructure grew proportionately with other sectors of the community in the expansive 1950s. The eastern portion of heavily traveled Sunrise and Las Olas Boulevard also acquired new spans over the Intracoastal Waterway. The completion of the A.H. Brooke Memorial Bridge at Southeast Seventeenth Street in 1956 marked the fulfillment of a long-held dream. This high-level span crosses the Stranahan River, that portion of the Intracoastal Waterway between New River and Port Everglades. One thousand feet in length, the bridge cost nearly $2 million to build and took two years to complete. The Florida State Road Department provided funding for the span.⁹

The Florida State Road Department was also responsible for construction of the Sunshine State Parkway or Florida Turnpike, Florida's first superhighway, which traversed the peninsula in a north-south direction. In 1957, the Turnpike opened between Fort Pierce and Miami. Motorists wishing to enter or exit the Turnpike in the Fort Lauderdale vicinity could do so at West Sunrise Boulevard and at State Road 84. In the 1960s the Turnpike was extended northward to Wildwood, allowing access to central and north Florida.¹⁰

Fort Lauderdale hosted several other highway and bridge construction projects throughout the 1950s. In the decade's final years, road, bridge, and tunnel building programs amounted to $10 million in construction costs. Bridge building projects accounted for spans over the Himmarshee Canal at Southeast Eighth Avenue, and across the New River at Southeast Third Avenue and at Southwest Twelfth Street. The new bridge at Southeast Third Avenue marked the culmination of a lengthy campaign by Robert H. Gore, Sr., and the Fort Lauderdale Daily News for a bridge at that site.¹¹

Construction of the tunnel under the New River at Federal Highway represented the most notable road-related project of the era. In 1951, the Florida State Road Department approved the Federal Highway tunnel project at a projected cost in excess of $4 million. Led by the Fort Lauderdale Daily News, which opposed the tunnel primarily because its estimated price exceeded that of a new bridge at the same site by a wide margin, the forces of opposition grew dramatically in strength, forcing the city commission to call for a referendum on the issue in 1956. Proponents of the tunnel won by less than 600 votes out of 13,443 cast.¹²

Under the arrangement with the State of Florida, the State Road Department would provide for tunnel construction while the city was required to contribute the right-of-way for the tunnel. Beginning in 1957, the City of Fort Lauderdale paid $1.1 million for the property comprising the right-of-way. Tunnel construction began in October 1958. Gasoline taxes returned to Broward County by the State of Florida provided for the financing. During the lengthy construction period, the state built temporary bridges at Southeast Fifth and Ninth Avenues. The major components of

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1960 road map showing the Sunshine State Parkway completed between Fort Pierce and Miami.

Bird's-eye view of the Southeast Third Avenue bridge, soon after its completion, 1960, looking northward toward downtown.
the tunnel were twin tubes which rested upon a steel ribbon several feet beneath the surface of the river. The New River at the tunnel crossing was fourteen feet deep. Dams on each side of the tubes kept the water away from the construction area.\textsuperscript{13}

The length of the tube, including the approaches to the submerged portion, measures 2,270 feet; the enclosed area stretches to 864 feet. The tunnel consists of two separate roadways, each with two twelve foot lanes. More than 200 laborers used 865 working days to complete it. Construction costs were just under $6.5 million. The only completely waterproof tunnel in the United States at the time of its completion, it was designed to handle 2,500 cars per day.\textsuperscript{14}

As the tunnel's completion date neared in the fall of 1960, the city prepared for an enthusiastic celebration. In early December, it erected grandstands over the tunnel entrance at East Las Olas Boulevard for visiting dignitaries, including Florida Governor Leroy Collins, who had indicated his intentions to attend the grand opening of the roadway. For one observer, the impending opening of the tunnel represented "the biggest drawing card in town."\textsuperscript{15}

On December 8, 1960, 2,000 spectators watched Governor Collins snip the ribbon surrounding the northern entrance to the tunnel, signalling its opening. Collins spoke about Florida's only underwater road. For the governor, its completion represented "the long delayed solution to one of the state's worst traffic problems." Originally called the New River Tunnel, its name was later changed to the Henry E. Kinney Tunnel in honor of a newspaperman who was also a champion of the project.\textsuperscript{16}

The tunnel's completion also facilitated the traffic flow along East Las Olas Boulevard in the vicinity of the Federal Highway. A portion of East Las Olas Boulevard had undergone a beautification campaign in the 1950s, with the planting of palm trees along its center. Beautiful black olive trees now graced the parking lots located just off the street. Many of the buildings in this sector were redesigned in the Spanish Eclectic or Mediterranean Revival architectural style. By the end of the decade, East Las Olas Boulevard could claim its place among Florida's most beautiful retail streets.\textsuperscript{17}

The western segment of Las Olas Boulevard pierced the heart of downtown, which, in the 1950s, was groping for ways to meet the challenge of competition from the new suburban shopping centers springing up near the perimeter of Fort Lauderdale. Responding to requests from downtown merchants for additional parking areas, the city converted such sites as the old Florida East Coast Railway station just east of the tracks into parking lots. New parking lots and garages appeared elsewhere in the downtown and surrounding areas. Burdine's department store, downtown's premier retail establishment, and other businesses also instituted improvements to their surroundings.\textsuperscript{18}

Downtown and other areas of Fort Lauderdale still operated according to the Masterplan of 1947, which, because of the city's rapid growth, was obsolete by the mid-1950s. Accordingly, Fort Lauderdale updated the Masterplan in 1956. The new version provided a revised traffic plan and placed major emphasis on zoning.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite the revised traffic plan and construction of new and expanded roadways and bridges, traffic congestion remained a problem in many areas of the city. A prime reason for this condition was the enormous increase in vehicular traffic. An estimated 25,000 automobiles negotiated the streets of Fort Lauderdale in 1950; according to one source, this number exceeded 100,000 by decade's end.\textsuperscript{20}

While traffic continued to vex motorists, businessmen, and planners, it also consumed a large portion of the time of the police and other elements of the city's government. Fort Lauderdale gained a measure of relief from the congestion downtown with the opening of the long-awaited bridge over the New River at Southeast Third Avenue in 1960. A few years later, the William Marshall Bridge opened at Southwest Seventh and Fourth Avenues. The city built additional bridges elsewhere. By the late 1960s, Fort Lauderdale could boast of ninety spans extending above and across its waterways. With the completion of a downtown storm drainage system in 1960, the city mitigated some of the flooding and attendant vehicular congestion that followed heavy rains. The city also resurfaced and widened many streets during this era.\textsuperscript{21}

In the realm of road building, the era was perhaps as notable for something that did not happen as for what happened. The city considered but rejected a plan to link Las Olas Boulevard with I-95 that called for the demolition of the venerable Sweet Building on South Andrews Avenue and everything west of it in the path of a proposed road to the new superhighway.\textsuperscript{22}

The era of the superhighway was at hand, as any observer of the giant construction project for I-95, west of downtown, could see. In 1965, approximately one mile of I-95 opened between

\textbf{At left is the U.S. 1 bridge over New River, 1958; at right is the tunnel which replaced it two years later.}
Griffin Road, south of Fort Lauderdale, and State Road 84. In 1968, the road reached the New River, and construction began on a massive bridge over the stream. In the following year, I-95 crept north to Davie Boulevard. By then, Fort Lauderdale's population had spread several miles west of the new highway. Road builders completed the superhighway through Fort Lauderdale in subsequent years. The last section of I-95 in Broward County, linking the interstate highway between Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach, opened in 1976.23

The 1970s brought additional highway construction in virtually every area of Fort Lauderdale, and set the stage for the enormous growth of superhighways in the city and Broward County in the 1980s. I-595, a multi-lane highway stretching in an east-west direction, opened in 1989, bringing motorists from I-95 as well as I-75 and other expressways in west Broward County to Port Everglades and the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. A mammoth cloverleaf just west of the airport in Fort Lauderdale links the city by highways with numerous other parts of south Florida.24

In the late 1980s, the State of Florida also commenced its ambitious expansion of I-95. The largest road building project in Florida history, it will add new traffic lanes to the busy highway, and replace many bridges and other segments of the roadbed with new construction. The "hump," the segment of I-95 crossing New River, which proved so difficult for trucks negotiating its steep incline, was dismantled and replaced by a larger, more level bridge. Despite the expansion of I-95, some wonder if the road will ever be large enough to accommodate the explosive growth in the number of motorists. Russell Baker, the talented humorist for the New York Times, predicted that by the time today's babies are purchasing their first automobiles, "I-95 between Miami and Fort Lauderdale will have to be 22 lanes wide to avert traffic paralysis."25

Behind Baker's hyperbole was the reality of explosive population growth and development that shows no indication of slowing. Indeed, as this article is being prepared, Fort Lauderdale and all of Broward County continue to open new roads, expand existing ones, and prepare for construction of new bridges. Road and bridge building will remain major priorities for Fort Lauderdale as the city prepares for the challenges of the next century.
Notes


4. Hardy, "Herbert Charles Davis," 2; Burghard and Weidling, Checkered Sunshine, 247.

5. MCC, May 6, 1946, 15; Stuart B. Melver, Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, An Illustrated History (Woodland Hills, Calif., 1983), 145.


7. MCC, December 17, 1945, 21, May 6, 1946, 15.


15. N.A., Tunnel Topics, No. 6 (December 12, 1960), 1.


17. McTigue Interview.


