

**Progressive Roads**  
**The Creation of the California State Highway System in the Progressive Era**  
By Nicholas Langer

My project analyzes the California State Highway System in the context of the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era was a time when thoughts about the role of government and the way the people participate in politics was changing. At the same time, technological change was also forcing people to reevaluate the social construction of space and the way that people move about it. California was at the head of this change. The state government was an early adopter of highway legislation, and this enthusiasm filtered its way down to the counties. Where California was most responsible for innovation on highway issues was the willingness of the state and counties to accept bonded debt to finance road works. This required a long-term outlook that bypassed purely local economics. Thus, the State Highway System that was approved by California voters in 1910 was an embodiment of the Progressive Era in two important ways. First, the State Highway System represented a belief that an activist government could work to solve societal problems, namely an improved transportation system. Finally, the management and logic of the highway embodied the progressive trend towards systematization and efficiency in government.