Exhibit Review: Looking for America on America's Mightiest Road

“What Exit? New Jersey and Its Turnpike.”
New Jersey Historical Society, September 26, 2001-July 3, 2002


“Oh public road. . . . You express me better than I can express myself.” —Walt Whitman, *Song of the Open Road*

THE NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE GATEWAY TO AMERICA

Everyone has a New Jersey Turnpike story, and that story usually isn’t about pleasant driving, clean restrooms, or kindly state troopers. Everyone who has ever been a child in the back seat of the family car remembers shouting “Yuck!” when passing the refineries at Exit 13. We all remember our worst days on the turnpike: breakdowns, speeding tickets, near misses, seemingly endless lines at toll booths. We usually forget that worst days are exceptional. Day in and day out, the turnpike works, getting us to our destinations faster than any other route.
How and why the New Jersey Turnpike was built, how it has handled its enormous and ever growing traffic load, and how the turnpike reflects the society it serves are leading themes of "What Exit?" As the curators note, the Jersey Turnpike is "more than just a road." Designed to accommodate the explosion of vehicular traffic in post-World War II America, the turnpike fueled the deconcentration of American metropolitan population. If it's not quite fair to say "no turnpike, no explosion of in suburbs and edge cities," it's impossible to see the New Jersey landscape developing as it has without the turnpike. The turnpike has also embedded itself in the habits and consciousness of millions of motorists, just as it has inspired poets, novelists, and songwriters.

"What Exit?" has a serious purpose but a light heart. Wandering through the gallery a visitor is invited to look, listen, and comment at stations that convey many strands of the road's textured story. We hear the whoosh of cars racing by as we begin the journey by confronting the history of the motorcar and the growing road congestion in mid-20th century America. We learn of Governor Alfred E. Driscoll's determination to solve the state's traffic problems. (Vain hope.) Proposed by Driscoll in 1947 and authorized by the legislature in 1948, funded through the sale of bonds, the turnpike was built in two years for a mere $230 million. From the moment it collected its first tolls in late 1951 the turnpike stoked the economic growth of New Jersey and the entire Eastern seaboard, earned plaudits for its innovations (such as rest stops featuring Howard Johnson's restaurants and modern service stations), and made history with the volume of traffic it handled.

Courtesy of Howard, Needles, Tammen, and Bergendorff, Consulting Engineers.

New Jersey Turnpike under Construction 1951.
Exhibit panels depict the highway's construction and the process of purchasing and clearing the land for the 118-mile-long roadway. Videos produced by oil companies convey the texture of the driving experience half a century ago, at least in its more smiling aspects. Similarly, early postcards portray the turnpike, as though it were a true parkway, featuring verdant vistas and carefree driving. As Governor Driscoll put it, with the opening of the turnpike, "motorists can now see the beauty of the real New Jersey." This big road was also a fast road. As Life magazine writer noted in 1951, "trucks and cars soar along at 60 with no thoughts of lights, traffic circles or crossroads, and make the 118-mile run between New York and Delaware in two hours flat." Little could the turnpike's admirers envision a future in which even a much widened roadway in the northern sections too often left motorists inching along (with nary a sylvan vista) in this piece of the "real New Jersey." Taking the turnpike to enjoy one's drive, a central motif in early promotional films, has long since yielded to an alternate talking point: that the turnpike has harnessed modern technology to assure a faster and safer journey for an ever increasing ridership—for example, by heeding sensors embedded in the roadway to warn motorists that congestion or other delays are in prospect, and by the introduction of E-Z pass.

If driving has become more a necessity than a pleasure for the average motorist, "What Exit?" makes clear that the turnpike nonetheless has devotees. Panels feature comments about the turnpike made by Americans who were randomly importuned with a self-addressed and stamped postcard to share their memories. Most of those encountered in this exhibit were wryly nostalgic. John Austin recalled that growing up he always rode in the back of the family station wagon, so "from my view, all of the New Jersey turnpike was backwards." One commentator, R. Gregory Turner, likened the construction of the turnpike and its overpasses to the Roman aqueducts! Turner has a point. The New Jersey Turnpike is a big deal in virtually every respect you can imagine—physical features, traffic levels, toll receipts, hamburgers served, gallons of gas pumped.

In the year 2000, 218 million drivers entered a tollbooth. This was more than ten times as many as in 1952, making the turnpike by far the most traveled road in America. I was not particularly impressed by the number 218 million. Big numbers are sometimes hard to absorb. However, I was impressed to learn that between exits 13a and 13b (Newark to Elizabeth) the Shop Rite Food distribution center alone contributes nearly 4000 trucks a day to the turnpike traffic stream. Keep in mind
that these are just the trucks going out! Also impressive was the fact that so many veterans work for the turnpike authority that it maintains its own VFW post.

Big hasn't eliminated human scale interactions, whether with toll takers or employees working at rest stops or in command central in New Brunswick. One of the nicer touches of the exhibit are the panels featuring mementos (and memories shared) of turnpike employees like Ralph Mercurio, a maintenance supervisor, and Rocky Sorrentino, who worked for more than three decades as a toll collector. Sorrentino's farewell plaque, which features the last toll he ever took ("Rocky's last buck") helps bring into better focus that face that the roadway could not operate without the dedication of hundreds of turnpike authority employee, representing their own close-knit subculture.

The exhibit's design can be described as "open" in two complementary ways. Exhibit flow enables individuals could take different routes through the gallery with equal ease. Just as important, visitors are encouraged at various junctures to share their own memories of turnpike travel and opinions about the costs and benefits of an automobile culture. While the thrust of the exhibit is generally perky and upbeat, it periodically offers a different kind of food for thought. For example, the panels on the construction of the turnpike describe what it meant to the people of Elizabeth a half-century ago who saw their community bisected by the great highway. One Elizabeth family lost two of its children, who drowned at a construction site. In the panel on racial profiling the exhibit not only connects the turnpike to mainstream racial prejudice, it invites viewers to share their own experiences with discrimination.

"What Exit?" is filled with unexpected insights and pleasures. Viewers are invited to explore "what's beyond the New Jersey turnpike," revealing bucolic scenes muskrat hunting in West Deptford), agricultural production (cranberry cultivation in the Pine Barrens) and other activities that out-of-staters have difficulty identifying with New Jersey (Cowtown Rodeo in Pilesgrove Township) precisely because they identify New Jersey mostly with its gritty turnpike. If it is true that the turnpike has not served New Jersey's image (unless refinery glow and asphalt are your thing) it is also true that poets, fiction writers, and pop musicians have repeatedly exploited the turnpike as a motif in their work. What better reminder of this road's iconic status?

The curator of "What Exit?" don't insist that visitors embrace this monument to America's car culture. Their general approach is more
appreciative than critical, but they take an “in the eyes of the beholder” approach to each major topic. Hence the turnpike can be seen on the one hand as New Jersey’s contribution to modernism and American economic vitality. On the other it can be viewed as an eyesore and an environmental desecration. I liked the exhibit for encouraging people to reflect on such matters as well as to enjoy what is a lively and often amusing encounter with the turnpike past and present. There are, inevitably, lacunae. “What Exit?” offers little about accidents, less about sex, and too little about the aesthetics of the roadway and its habitat. But it is impossible to do everything, and anyone interested in such topics can pursue them in Angus Gillespie and Michael Aaron Rockland’s insightful and balanced ethnography, *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989]. Insofar as the curators consider turnpike aesthetics, it is to emphasize the modernist lines of the tollbooths, overpasses, and rest-stop design. As a turnpike veteran, I’m more inclined to cite the brutalism of the turnpike and its environs from Secaucus at least to Exit 9, but each to his own taste. That “What Exit?” invites rebuttals is a sign of its success. That it offers an hour’s pleasure is equally to the good. I warmly commend “What Exit?” to every road warrior. The same holds for a brief book written by curator Ellen Snyder-Grenier, that features some of the exhibition’s most evocative photos and artifacts.

For Snyder-Grenier, the Turnpike in early 21st century America has become physically a different road than it was when it opened half a century ago. What it remains is “a common point of reference that embodies the way we feel about driving, highways, and ever-mounting traffic. Love it or hate it, like the World Series or a close election that rivets the nation’s attention, it has become something we all hold in common and about which most of us have an opinion.”

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