REST AREAS: INTERSECTIONS OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Beyond Places of Rest

Places of American Culture

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Abstract and Keywords

Americans have been intrigued by and called to travel since the country’s earliest days. Manifest Destiny that led Americans west, the Great Migration that ushered Black Americans north, and summer vacation road trips that take families and friends on new and familiar journeys are but a few of the iconic ways Americans have moved across the country with purpose and intentionality.

To facilitate the evolving modes and growing demand of road travelers over time, state and federal governments have directed funds to develop and improve the interstate system that crisscrosses the country. An important and yet often taken for granted aspect of highway infrastructure is the safety rest area. These roadside oases were first envisioned and implemented through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 with the goal of providing travelers a safe and easy opportunity to stop and tend to basic human needs while on America’s highways.

However, rest areas do much more than provide a place to rest and fulfill basic functions. They serve as important avenues for American culture, both reflecting national and regional priorities and interests and shaping aspects of American culture. Travelers who pause long enough will notice how architecture and design are used in rest area facilities, the opportunities that exist for civil engagement, how public health needs are addressed with available amenities, and the rules that are meant to keep travelers safe. If one pauses a bit longer, broader implications for American culture can be observed such as who has – and does not have – access
to rest area facilities, how states’ rights verses federal rights play out in America’s institutions, and how rest areas are evolving to meet the needs of the country and its travelers.

Key words: Rest areas, highways, American culture, travelers, driving, Federal-Aid Act of 1956.
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I. Introduction

American culture is reflected in all elements of society, including those that we don’t often think much about. Sometimes it’s the unexamined, the overlooked and the taken-for-granted that can offer us unexpected and yet telling glimpses into our society, our values, and the people who call themselves Americans. This thesis explores American highway rest areas and the important contribution they make to the American story, both reflecting and having impacted American culture. Beyond simply being places to quickly stop along the journey, rest areas should be embraced as destinations along the way and appreciated for the ways they reflect and impact not only aspects of the country’s physical infrastructure but also our cultural infrastructure.

American culture has long been characterized by a spirit of travel and exploration, both literally and figuratively. Historically, some of that movement was framed in Manifest Destiny when in 1620 the pilgrims traveled across the Atlantic Ocean, landed on America’s shores and in the early 1800s began the steady expansion westward fueled, at points overtime, by the gold rush and the desire for land, and seeking prosperity and a place to call their own. Other movement emerged from significant social injustice including the run-away slaves who fled barbarous living conditions in the south, aided in part by the underground railroad of the early 1800s; then in the first half of the 20th century, Black individuals and families who migrated north during the Jim Crow era seeking a place of peace and to establish themselves in a community in which they could fulfill their dreams like anyone else. Yet other movement has been driven by Americans’ love of the automobile and the joy found in adventure on road trips beginning in the mid-20th century. In all cases, individuals and families balanced risk and opportunity in making decisions about where to go and how to get there.
Through the evolution from footpaths, horseback and carriages to trains and most notably automobiles, this spirit of travel and exploration has remained a steady and ingrained aspect of American culture, and we continue to make calculations about the risks and opportunities in our decisions about where to go and how to get there. Travel can be exciting, rewarding and restorative, but it can also be anxiety-producing as we leave the comforts and knowns of home.

One of the staples of American road travel is the often-unassuming highway rest area. Typically located every 30 to 60 miles along the average American interstate, rest areas provide places for motorists to pull off the highway and use restroom facilities, stretch their legs, and maybe throw away trash they’ve collected along the journey. But ask the average motorist what they think about highway rest areas and you’ll probably get a strange look. “What do I think about rest areas? I don’t. I don’t think about rest areas!” Rest areas tend to serve a functional purpose for most people, places they quickly run in and out of on their way to somewhere else. Not the destination, simply a stop point. Others might show a look of concern as they imagine rest areas as places to avoid, places that are harbors for illicit behavior and visited by the nefarious underworld looking to perform their bad deeds out of the general eye of the public. Yet there are others who have fond memories of family road trips and of favorite rest areas at which to stop along the way as part of their tradition.

If one stops and actually takes the time to notice highway rest areas, they are a thriving reflection of and contributor to American culture. Not all rest areas are created the same, but they can reflect elements of America’s economic, political, and social structures. They might make travel comfortable and easy, or stressful and anxiety-producing, depending on the traveler and their particular needs. As America’s aging infrastructure reaches a critical point in its lifespan,
we are at a literal and figurative crossroads about how we want the highways of America’s future to look. No doubt, American’s will continue the long tradition of travel and exploration, crisscrossing the country and seeking opportunities to see ourselves and others reflected in the places through which we journey along our routes. Highway rest areas will surely remain an important part of our cultural infrastructure as they serve as intersections of the American experience.
II. Literature Review

Historical Context and Overview

Foremost notable in the field of rest areas and the intersections with American culture is historian Joanna Dowling. Dowling hosts the Rest Area History website which explores the historical relevance of rest areas, rest area architecture and design, and the need for thoughtful preservation to capture the American experience. She presented at the National Safety Rest Area Conference in 2008 and is quoted extensively in a variety of websites, articles and news stories.

While there aren’t many books specifically related to rest areas, there are many related to American’s love of the road and the travel experience of Americans. Ford, in her book The Last Stop: Vanishing Rest Stops of the American Road Side provides illustrations of rest areas largely from American’s southwest. The book includes a brief narrative by Joanna Dowling. Roker’s book Don’t Make Me Stop this Car! An Informal History of the Family Road Trip on family vacations and road trip culture is a wonderful read, sharing historical context and humorous stories that capture the development of American infrastructure and the family road trip.

With a more somber lens, Gretchen Sorin’s book Driving While Black and Mia Bay’s book Traveling Black provide a narrative on the challenges that Black drivers in America experience, both from a historical perspective and the inequities and racial profiling that exists today. The Negro Motorists Green Book provides information useful to Black travelers, shared by other Black travelers, about safe places to stop for food, gas, hotels, and other needs while on the road.

Federal Legislation and Agencies

Rest areas were first developed and constructed when President Eisenhower signed into law the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. Maintenance and beautification were ensured by
President Lyndon Johnson who signed into law Public Law 89-285 of October 1965. In addition to these federal documents that established the provision for rest areas, The Federal Register in 2016 outlines the Federal Highway Administration’s seeking of public opinion about future amenities at rest areas and how the original guidelines should be interpreted in the present. The Department of Transportation has issued articles about the history of the interstate highway system and whether there is adequate parking for commercial trucks. The FBI’s website includes a historical section that outlines famous cases, including the Beltway Snipers and how they were found at a rest area. The Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Development Opportunity provides a notification of Public Act 62 of 2016 that requires public entities, including rest areas, to post human trafficking awareness posters.

**Independent Research Studies**

Several studies have been done to provide states and the federal government with the analysis and guidance they need to help think about the future of rest areas. States struggle with operating, maintaining and upgrading their rest areas and seek council as they look to balance budgets while meeting the needs of in-state and out-of-state travelers. Ken Winter from the Virginia Department of Transportation and Robert W. Poole, Jr. from the Reason Foundation both have published reports that advocate for allowing public-private partnerships to ensure the sustainability of rest areas. Value Management Strategies, Inc. prepared an analysis for California to help them control costs as they looked to update their aging rest areas and Michigan State University provided a report to the Nevada Department of Transportation providing relative context as it considered the future of its rest areas.

**Scholarly Journals**
While there isn’t a tremendous amount of scholarly journal content, there are several articles that are particularly interesting and relevant. Dillette has authored several articles about the Black travel experience and the ways that Jim Crow laws impacted travel not only in the past but also in the ways that Black Americans travel today, compounded by the racial inequities that continue to persist even now. Anthony explores the way women, in particular, but also other groups of people including African Americans and the LGBTQ community experience inequities in restroom facilities and calls for the development of more gender-neutral public facilities.

Marquez’s paper is directed solely at analyzing the South of the Border rest area, located in South Carolina just south of the North-South Carolina border. Marquez examines the social factors at play where employees and guests of the rest area dressed up like Mexicans, mocked the Spanish pronunciation of English words, and sold Mexican-themed merchandise. The aim of white employees and guests, Marquez argues, was to belittle Mexican culture as a means of maintaining their white power and status in a social hierarchy that was being disrupted by changing social norms as Jim Crow laws crumbled in the south.

Several authors address the social phenomenon of men seeking sex with other men, whether they identify as gay or cis gender. Tewksbury and Corzine both highlight the ways that rest areas provide a place for men to be anonymous, to not risk their reputation, and to engage with other men without developing relationships, which makes rest areas safe. But at the same time, the rest areas are still used by people who are simply there for the intended purpose of using the restrooms, and this makes them dangerous. Tewksbury and Corzine identify this duality as exciting and compelling for men who engage in this behavior. Also related to sexual activity, Cook performed research to understand if rest areas were contributing to a syphilis
outbreak in a rural North Carolina community but was unable to draw a conclusion that supported that theory.

Human trafficking and the Amber Alert system were both mentioned in scholarly journals. Habermann asserts that departments of Transportation have a significant role to play in helping to stop human trafficking. Rest areas can be ideal locations for traffickers to operate because they are often relatively isolated and the people who are trafficked are without a means of escape. Miller performed an analysis and recommended that information related to missing persons might better be communicated to drivers at rest areas than on roadway signs because drivers have greater ability to focus at the rest areas without the distractions of the road.

The final category of journal articles relates to rest area usage from a safety and commercial lens. Bunn performed an analysis to determine the role that fatigue plays in crashes and observes the important role rest areas can serve in offering a safe place for drivers to stop and rest. King provides a nice summary of the demographics of rest area users and their patterns at rest areas. While the 1989 study is outdated, it provided an update to the previous study which was done in 1971. Corsi conducted research to determine the impact that allowing commercialization at rest areas would have on businesses currently operating at highway exits. The study was intended to be objective and inform the discussion without making a case on either side of the argument.

Articles

There are a wide variety of articles that have been published in print or as website content related to rest areas and American culture. People like to tell their stories and share their experiences and the articles cover a broad set of topics including the ways rest areas can be important venues for sharing local culture, helping to stave off crime, providing a place to
celebrate the arts, addressing public health issues, and finding ways towards sustainability that move society forward while honoring our past.
III. Methodology and Approach

The inspiration for this thesis came from noticing an older couple stopped at a roadside park in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in the summer of 2021. Their vintage silver bullet camper was parked off to the side as they enjoyed lunch, pulled out of a cooler, at a picnic table. Summer 2021 was of course one in which people continued to seek outdoor opportunities for recreation as the COVID-19 pandemic remained a disrupter of plans. Rest areas played an important role in the movement of both private and commercial travelers as other opportunities to stop for food and restrooms were often still limited.

Research related to the history of highway rest areas and the ways in which American culture intersects with them was conducted through a variety of mediums including books, scholarly papers, websites, and articles and news sources from mainstream media. While there are not many books specifically related to rest areas, other than travel guides and photographs of rest areas, there are several very interesting books related to travel, road trips, and drivers’ experiences which reference rest areas.

In addition, the author of this thesis embarked upon a week-long road trip through Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, and Kentucky to gather firsthand observations. One can read about the South of the Border rest area in South Carolina, for example, but it’s far more impactful to experience it and sleep overnight in the motor lodge. Likewise, only by visiting rest areas can one find the many aspects of American culture that don’t get written about, the ways rest area developers and programmers quietly incorporate aspects of American culture into the designs, and see and feel the local influence represented in rest areas across America. They are as diverse as are
Americans and the communities we call home. Photos included in this thesis were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.

Talking about this thesis also yielded interesting reactions and follow up conversations about individual’s experiences with highway rest areas. People sometimes initially found the idea unusual, but after just a few minutes of conversation about the many ways to see American culture play out at rest areas, they found it intriguing. A couple of people even followed up with interesting experiences they had had because they looked at rest areas with a new lens following our conversation, stopping at a rest area when they otherwise would have driven past for another option, or noticing things they otherwise would have overlooked.

The author of this thesis had hoped to attend the National Safety Rest Area Conference in fall 2022. Typically hosted in the even years, the conference was last held in 2018 and 2022 would have been an option. However, the conference was not offered this year and won’t convene again until 2023, presumably due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns. The author also emailed Joanna Dowling in an effort to connect but was unsuccessful in that outreach. Dowling presumably receives more invitations for conversations and interviews than she can be responsive to.

This thesis relies upon more references than was needed to tell the story. However, the breadth and depth of sources and content on the topic of rest areas, and how American culture is reflected in and impacted by the roadside assets, was intriguing and telling and therefore felt deserving of inclusion. While there isn’t much academic research on the topic, there are a considerable number of references in a variety of interesting sources: a radio station’s website, a conference presentation and website operated by a rest area historian, news outlets across the country and books on travel experiences. So, while the topic hasn’t necessarily caught the
interest of academia, it is of interest to the American public and the media, two core and interlinked elements of American culture and storytelling.
IV. History of American Rest Areas

America’s roads have an interesting history, both in terms of the physical infrastructure and the culture and folklore that Americans have embedded within them. This history spans back to the first roads and roadside parks that emerged, the legislation that was enacted for formalize the American roads and interstate system and the resultant development of rest areas as we know them today.

Early Roads and Roadside Parks

Pathways across America emerged first with walking paths, horse trails and wagon trains, and then evolved with technology to the railroads, bicycles and eventually automobiles. The earliest documented highway in America, which was well-traveled by mail carriers moving between New York City and Boston, dates back to 1673 (Kaszynski, p. 13). In 1893, the Secretary of Agriculture established the Office of Road Inquiry, the first federal agency dedicated and responsible for road maintenance and improvements. This action was prompted, in part, by citizens who started the Good Roads Movement, a group that aimed to raise awareness about the need for the government to properly maintain and support roads (National Archives). Even in these early days of America’s roads, we see how concerned and engaged residents were instrumental in pushing for government accountability in providing basic transportation-related services. Further evidence of the need for this kind of federal oversight, the Office of Road Inquiry was then combined with other offices in 1905 to establish the Agriculture Appropriations Act Office of Public Roads, the first permanent federal road agency (National Archives).

The need for safe and supported roads escalated with the manufacturing of automobiles. As personal vehicles grew in popularity and availability and became more accessible to a broader cross-section of the American public, an organic highway and roadside culture emerged. By
1910, as the number and diversity of travelers took to America’s roads increased, drivers began identifying places to stop for the night along the busier highways. These auto camps provided a lower cost alternative to hotels (Kaszynski, p. 45), making the roads more accessible to people of varying income levels. In addition to these overnight stopping options, travelers needed places to pause throughout the day and roadside parks became popular as people sought out easy and scenic places to rest along the road (Dowling, RestAreaHistory.org).

While historians aren’t exactly sure when or where the first official roadside park was developed, two specific states have claimed the title. Rest area historian Joanna Dowling recognizes two likely contenders for the earliest established roadside park. Connecticut has claimed the first roadside park with a date of 1928. While Dowling acknowledges there is some evidence for this claim, she believes it is more likely that Michigan can rightfully claim the distinction with its roadside park established in 1929.

Even if there is consensus that Michigan was home to the first roadside park, Michigan lore points to two different stories about the first parks and how they came to be. One story, supported by Dowling, claims that Allan Williams of the Ionia County Road Commission saw families trying to make do on the side of the road, balancing their picnic lunches on tree stumps and other natural occurring makeshift tables. He decided to address the issue and had his crew build picnic tables which were then placed on Michigan Route 16, 3 miles south of Saranac, thus becoming the first established roadside park (RestAreaHistory.org).
Another story places Michigan’s first roadside park along US-2, named after University of Michigan student Herbert Larson who came up with the idea in 1919, at a 320 acre forest preserve in Iron County after he and others were unable to find a place to stop for lunch along the road (Robinson).
For people and culture, stories matter. Being the first to do something new and innovative and being recognized for it is to be given a special place in history, to see one’s efforts and ingenuity as a contribution to society. Indeed, across America, historical markers signify important events and people from America’s history. So while we may never know which roadside park came first, the people, places and impact on history matter and become a part of the story that we continue to tell nearly 100 years later.

Even if we can’t settle with certainly the debate about which roadside park can claim the honor of being the first, the idea of safe and convenient places to stop along the road caught on as travel increased and people looked for places to stop along their journeys. By 1950, a well-developed system of roadside parks along America’s highways had been constructed and were
maintained by states (RestAreaHistory.org). Around the same time, the first privately operated service plazas along American’s turnpikes were being developed. In 1940, the first service plaza was opened on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, providing travelers with an expanded set of services including the chance to buy gas and food and to rest (Kaszynski, p. 128).

An interesting phenomenon was occurring during this period of road travel growth. The demographics on America’s roads were shifting with more women were traveling, either as the driver of the vehicle or as a passenger, and they wanted clean restrooms for themselves and their families (Kaszynski, p.73). As a result, gas stations began competing with one another for customers by offering sparkling – and even certified – clean restrooms. Some of the campaigns that were popular and aimed at touting to travelers how well restrooms were maintained included the White Patrol, Certified Clean Restrooms, Highway Hostess, Registered Restroom, and the White Cross of Cleanliness programs (Meyersohn, p. 4). This was an interesting cultural development in and of itself. As the demographics on the road changed, so did the business models including the services they made available and the way the delivered them. An entire industry shaped by the want for clean restrooms while traveling was born, and sparked competition among businesses aiming to service the basic needs of travelers, and specifically for women and their children. This example illustrates the way people have the ability to impact the kinds of services and service provision along the road, and importantly the role of women in very directly helping to shape road culture. If businesses were responsive to the needs of all of America’s travelers, what might the options and amenities that they offer look like?

The gas station restroom competition wasn’t to last forever. With the eventual passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 and the construction of interstate rest areas, the
importance of gas station restrooms began to wane and they eventually fell into the less desirable state that many consider them to be in today (Meyersohn, p. 7).

As roadside infrastructure evolved, not only did the travelers who were lured by new and affordable vehicles and travel options took notice but also the American government. It became clear to the highest levels of America’s leadership, including then President Eisenhower, that a more sophisticated road infrastructure was necessary to serve not only the interests of tourists and travelers but also the long-term prospects of the country.

**Legislation**

Eisenhower is credited with spearheading the move towards a national interstate highway system. He imagined a national highway system that could address five critical issues: 1) the annual death and injury toll, 2) the waste of money from detours and traffic jams, 3) the highway-related suits clogging the courts, 4) the inefficiency in transporting good, and 5) and the “appalling inadequacies to meet the demands of catastrophe or defense, should an atomic war come” (Weingroff, p. 4). Given his prominence in the American military, Eisenhower would have been keenly aware of the pragmatic and strategic need for America to be able to move people and infrastructure efficiently and an integrated highway system that spanned across the country’s borders was a part of that vision.

Eisenhower imagined a cooperation between state and federal officials to bring this interstate project to fruition. He dedicated $1.1 billion for the first year of what he considered “the greatest public works program in the history of the world” (Weingroff, p. 9). He further believed that the project “more than any single action by the government since the end of the war, would change the face of America” (Weingroff, p. 10). Just as it seems politics seeps into every facet of American policy and practice, Eisenhower articulated that “planning and
construction of highways should be free of politics” (Kaszynski, p. 32). Aiming to balance state and federal rights and responsibilities, the plan called for the federal government to support road development and construction with 90% of the needed funds and for states to provide the remaining 10% along with bearing responsibility for the actual design, construction and maintenance of rest areas (Dowling, Conference, p. 3).

America’s rest areas first came into existence following the passage of Public Law 627. More commonly known as the Title 1 – Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, the law was approved by members of Congress and signed into law by President Eisenhower. Section 108 of the Act – The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways – provided funding to complete a national system of highways with the goal of completing the project in all states at approximately the same time (Federal Government, Public Law 627, p. 378).

The Act also set forth the expectations that highways would be built to standards to meet the types and volumes of traffic at a future date of 1975 (Federal Government, Public Law 627, p. 380). At the time, therefore, the writers of the Act set forth a forward-looking approach in designing roads that would be appropriate for expected travel of the future. However, the 1975 window has come and gone and yet we’ll see that much of the infrastructure remains in place, outdated and sometimes in a state of disrepair.

Also of lasting impact, the Act prohibited commercial establishments at highway rest areas (Federal Government, Public Law 627, p. 384). The goal in prohibiting commercial activities was to prevent monopolies at the rest areas and to ensure travelers didn’t feel pressure to buy things at the stops (Krystal, p. 2). However, this limitation stands in contrast to commercial enterprises on toll roads which were allowed to continue operating their businesses (Weingroff, p. 5). This set into motion a dynamic that has been contended ever since, with states
and individuals pointing to the unsustainability of rest areas in this configuration that limits state’s ability to generate income and compete with travel plazas.

Subsequently, then President Lyndon Johnson signed into law Public Law 89-285 of October 1965 which set forth road beautification guidelines to “protect public investment, promote safety and recreational value, and preserve natural beauty” (Federal Government, Public law 89, p. 1028). It gave states the full authority to carry out this mission with federal funds and called for landscape and roadside development of rest areas to accommodate the traveling public (p. 1032). The popularity of roadside parks, as rest area’s predecessors, was a leading factor in the federal decision to standardize rest areas when developing the interstate highway system (Dowling, Saving Places, p. 3).

The Development of Rest Areas

By the late 1950s, states were opening newly constructed highway rest areas along new interstate highways and construction of these first-generation facilities continued through the mid-1970s (Dowling, RestAreaHistory.org). Beyond simply building infrastructure, states viewed the rest areas as public assets and a roadside feature that they had an obligation to provide (RestAreaHistory.org). The predecessor roadside parks had created “a model of place” and a “built environment of the roadway” and the new rest areas built on this by contributing to “a context of place” (Dowling, Saving Places, p. 2). This notion of a sense of place is important when drivers are speeding across the country, trying to get to their destinations within whatever target time they have established for themselves. When they stop at a rest area, it’s an opportunity for the designers and maintainers of that rest area to communicate to the driver what it means to be in that particular region, the kinds of assets they have, how they think about themselves. It provides a way to connect the driver to the place, even if the driver isn’t staying
for long, and to offer an experience that will resonate long after the traveler has rejoined the nondescript highway.

Some of the most important factors in the selection of rest area locations included the distance between rest areas or other stopping spots, the availability of drinking water, the ability to acquire land adjacent the highway, the scenic qualities of a location, and geological and historical features of the site or area (RestAreaHistory.org). While some of these factors are practical, others reflect the way rest area designers were intentional about including regional culture in a rest area design. The ability to include historical markers to highlight important people and events in the area was one way to individualize a rest area and make it interesting to visitors. Likewise, site selection based on scenic qualities could lead to a rest area that offered a tranquil and park-like setting, a respite from the road.

Just as there is an unsettled question about the first roadside park, it isn’t clear which state can claim the distinction of offering the country’s first rest area. However, rest area historian Dowling suspects Ohio opened the first rest area in 1959 (Conference, p. 7). The primary intent of the rest areas, first termed in full as Safety Rest Areas, was to provide a place for drivers to stop and rest, contributing to safe roadways, with toilet facilities, drinking water, picnic areas, and information. The federal Act’s recommended standardized features were also intended to promote a scenic and relaxing space with walking paths, scenic outlooks, and the use of natural plantings and landscapes to provide a sense of local place where possible (RestAreaHistory.org).
Beautiful flowering bushes and trees sheltering picnic tables at a North Carolina Rest Area

Interestingly, interstate highways offered a dichotomy of experiences to the American traveler. The highways at once “confined road travelers to a specific set of experiences” that were available on the interstate while also “opening new corridors of travel with a new kind of access to the nation” than had been available before (Dowling, Conference, p. 3). In this way, something was gained, but something was lost. The roads through small towns, with their people and culture, were lost. But on the interstate highways, travelers could get across the country safely, dependably, and in less time, experiencing the people and culture at their destination. The interstate both expanded and contracted access at the same time. This phenomenon was not lost on travelers, nor was it lost on the states and regions through which travelers journeyed. As a result, rest areas designers began expressing regionalism in highway rest areas as a way of connecting with tourists who might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the state or region through which they traveled.
V. Storytelling: Regional Reflections and Nostalgia

The writers of the Acts that established the design, construction and maintenance of interstate highways and rest areas set forth an expectation of standardization. However, even early in the implementation of rest areas, developers took liberties to bring regional reflections into the rest areas they created. This led to interesting architecture and engaging programming and served as an important way for travelers to interact with the communities through which they drove, even during a short and relatively functional visit. The fact that designers bucked the call for standardization and individualized their designs is not unexpected. People need and want to share their culture, their ways of life, the things that make them special and unique. Given the opportunity to develop stopping points along the interstate that would be visited by travelers originating from locations near and far, their desire to make the rest areas interesting and reflective of local culture is natural. These unique rest area designs are part of the intrigue, and part of what makes them memorable for travelers.

Regionalism in Rest Areas

The first generation of interstate rest areas was developed between 1958 and the late 1970s. Dowling divides the architecture across this time period into seven categories: 1) from 1958 to the mid-1960s, the designs were what she calls basic traditional and they served as a link between the roadside parks and the newly developing rest areas; 2) from the early to late 1960s, the designs are called modern and while they were constructed of a modern architectural form, they didn’t reflect culture or history of the state; 3) from the mid-1960s to the present are regional designs, reflecting local culture; 4) in the 1960s there was a design trend called rustic or regional modern that didn’t use regional design elements but that intentionally incorporated materials and design that complimented their natural settings; 5) in the 1970s, many rest areas
were constructed with a design called combined forms which was characterized by an unconventional building design with nothing regionally specific; 6) in the 1970s, the free form emerged, which included the use of natural forms with a relationship to the landscape but not regionally specific; and 7) in the 1970s a form developed called funk/revival with distinguishing roofs but not regionally specific (Conference, pgs. 6-9). It was during the 1970s that rest areas became larger with enclosed lobbies and more emphasis began to be placed on making travel information available to motorists (Conference, p. 9).

The initial rest areas of the late 1950s more closely reflected the straightforward requirements of the guidelines that called for rest areas to be functional and standard and not “excessive” (Savings Places, p. 4). However, this style didn’t last for long as developers “sought to equal in aesthetic experience what the interstate system was creating in engineering marvel” (Savings Places, p. 4). By the 1960s, rest area designers began incorporating more unique features to reflect the local culture and landscape. Initially, the design features inside the restroom buildings were fairly modest. The most common addition was colorful mosaic tiles, intended to reflect the region in which the facility was located. While this offered a modest enhancement to the rest area, the modifications to the exterior designs were more elaborate. Dowling observes that the picnic areas became the most notable space for creative design with “exaggerated expressions of regional flavor…that became as sculptural as they were functional” (RestAreaHistory.org). Features included tipis, oil rigs, and windmills and they were designed as much to attract the attention of travelers making their way down the highway as they were to then be entertaining once people were onsite (Saving Places, p. 5).

Rather than an afterthought, states and regions began to use interesting designs that reflected the local culture and landscape in their rest areas strategically. Before the construction
of the interstate, highways brought travelers through local communities where they would then experience the local culture and people. While this was lost with the construction of the interstate, states recognized that rest areas provided a way to recreate, even if on a smaller scale, this experience between drivers and the communities through which they traveled. Indeed, well-designed rest areas “added some humanity back to interstate travel” by creating a sense of place (RestAreaHistory.org).

Regionally Identifying Scenery at a Kentucky Rest Area

Beyond serving a functional purpose, there is quite a bit of evidence that states, and their residents, see their rest areas as reflections of themselves. Their highway rest areas may be the first or only opportunity to introduce themselves to travelers from across the country and beyond. This leads to a sense of competition, and an obligation to live up to the appropriate expectations. Dowling asserts that rest areas are state ambassadors and observes that some believe they are
even a reflection on the quality of state government and its citizenry (RestAreaHistory.org). Race affirms this perspective, arguing that states only have one chance to make a good first impression and he laments the condition of the rest areas in Indiana which he suggests are tired and lack design intentionality. He goes on to say the replacement rest areas that have been built look like tornado shelters or bunkers and that the state is missing an opportunity to “make a statement about the crossroads of America” and instead “reflects Indiana’s legislative chintziness and lack of pride in the state’s public domain” (p. 3). In contrast, he points to the Pure Michigan campaign that is reflected in the I-69 welcome center which he feels is particularly nicely done, as well as the interesting designs and quality maintenance that is observable in the rest areas in Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio. Well designed and maintained rest areas send a clear message to travelers that “your comfort in and impression of their state are important” (p. 3).

Large Windows Let in Sunlight Near Comfortable Benches at a Kentucky Rest Area
Meyer reiterates this notion in observing the way Iowa’s 19 rest areas have been designed to provide an “immersive” experience for visitors in the state’s history and culture because the rest area may be the only interaction travelers have with Iowa and its people (Meyer, Roadtrippers.com). Nott offers a similar sentiment about the quality of a rest stop and what it says about a state. He suggests that if travelers have a good experience at a rest area, they may seek out other opportunities in the state for exploration (p. 2). Nott credits New Mexico with having some of the best examples of regional rest area design in the country and of “communicating a sense of place” tied to the state’s identity (p. 3).

Interestingly, while most states have built rest areas to tell a positive story about its culture and its people, the South of the Border rest area provides a unique glimpse into a community struggling with changing social narratives in the south as the nation moved from the Jim Crow era. Seen as entertaining and intriguing by some and wildly inappropriate by others, the South of the Border rest area in South Carolina just across the state line from North Carolina is an example of what Kaszynski describes as multifunction stops that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (188). This spectacle of roadside culture is a Mexican-themed rest stop with a motel and campground, restaurants, gift shops, and entertainment such as firework sales and lizard exhibits. Throughout the complex visitors see the site’s mascot, Pedro, a caricature that holds signs attracting motorists with slogans like “You Never Sausage a Place” and “Everyone is a Weiner at South of the Border.”
Caricatures Throughout the South of the Border Rest Area
Marquez describes the early days of the site in which white southerners and visitors dressed up like Mexicans and acted in ways they imaged Mexicans to act “to make new meanings of race and region by consolidating whiteness and generating ideas about Mexicans” (462). He contends that they “played Mexican as a way to moderate their anxiety about the rapidly changing post-war south” (463). On the one hand, this stands in stark contrast to other rest areas that intentionally reflect a local regionalism to share their culture with tourists. In this case, there was no evidence of a Latino community near South of the Border, nor migratory labor streams (Marquez, 465). On the other hand, it did reflect a local culture that was afraid of the changes occurring in society and this is how that fear expressed itself and how they chose to deal with it. The stop and its practices led to “new ideas about Mexicans that were distinctly southern” (465) and this was propagated by the sale of merchandise emblazoned with the Pedro
character which “had the power to extend social control and racial hierarchy” among people in the south (468). They tried to maintain a white-centric culture with which they were comfortable and that protected the power and control with which they were accustomed. The importance of this rest area and the way it intersects American Culture is unique and it stands out as a tangible representation of the way the American story has played out on the roadways.

Nostalgia

While many people might not give much thought to rest areas outside of their functional purpose, or to worry about their safety should they stop, others embrace them as places and stops that help define the journey, or in some cases serve as the point of the journey in and of themselves. Race captures the sentiment that “nothing says summer vacation like a rest stop on the interstate” where his memories of the family vacation in the station wagon are punctuated by the welcome centers and rest areas they visited along the way (p. 1). Likewise, Krystal recalls with fondness the tradition of stopping at a particularly favorite rest area to explore the volcano and geology exhibits while on family road trip vacations (p. 2). Krystal goes on to give credit to the designers of Wyoming’s rest areas for featuring exhibits that represent every part of the state including a dinosaur dig and a replica of Butch Cassidy’s jail cell which make the rest areas “attractions in their own right” (p. 2).

Some travelers reflect on their road trips and have a list of the best and worst rest areas they’ve experienced. To Dowling, this is not unexpected. She suggests that rest areas are designed to serve our most basic needs and that this “intimate interaction” stands in contrast to interstate travel which can otherwise feel “isolating and monotonous” (Conference, p. 4). A Google search of “the best rest areas” provides several interesting lists of rest areas that are unique and offer the traveler an experience they might not have at other locations. The Fodors
list, which notes how rest areas can provide “a glimpse into local Americana,” includes Rio Grande Gorge which features waterways, a canyon, wildlife, and local vendors; Alligator Alley which is replete with a variety of wildlife including alligators and panthers; and the inspiring scenery of Bear Lake in Utah (Fodors.com).

Access to Big Cypress Preserve Hiking Trails at a Rest Area Along Alligator Alley in Florida

Briley curated a list that has some crossover with Fodors and also includes the Tamarack West Virginia rest area that features local food and artistic vendors; Guilford, Vermont that is award-winning for its pet-friendly area and tourism information; and the Patagonia, Arizona rest area that is a famous stop for birders (Briley, Travelchannel.com). For states and its residents, being included on a list of “the best” matters. Whether it’s the amenities, the scenic overlooks, or any number of other interesting features, people want to be recognized for their unique contributions and to be seen as a place and culture worthy of a visit.
This feeling of nostalgia and the regionalism reflected in rest areas are ways that aspects of American culture intersect, and one that historian Dowling says is intentional and to be expected. As roads expanded with the interstate highway system, and people were separated from the smaller towns through which they used to travel, rest areas “articulated the desire people felt to remain personally connected to their nation even as it was growing more disparate” (RestAreaHistory.org). She further suggests that rest areas are the very “embodiment of a cultural shift” that occurred as a more impersonal cross-continent form of transportation emerged as interstates were built and vehicles became more prolific (Architecture, p. 7). When Americans chose air travel in greater numbers, this phenomenon was amplified. Travelers literally fly over the very things that define our country and make each region unique. Ratay laments that we have turned the experience into a trip rather than a journey, and that we have lost the important
elements of a road trip that make a family vacation (p. 245) including missing out on the highway rest areas that provide a glimpse into local culture (p. 114).

Given their important role in American culture and the American travel experience, Dowling argues that it’s critical we find ways to tell the story of rest area history which to date “has not been properly documented in literature related to road building, roadside architecture, or American travel experience” (Saving Places, p. 9). There is an urgency to this as well as our aging rest areas become significant “historical artifacts” (Conference, p. 2) and begin to be replaced with updated and modern facilities.
VI. Access: A Place for Everyone?

As Americans, we like to image that we live in a country where everyone has an equal opportunity for advancement and success if they are dedicated and work hard. It’s the American dream. However, we know that far too many people have always been left out of this American dream, where opportunities are hard to find and no amount of dedication or hard work is enough to break through the intentional and unintentional barriers erected by those who construct them. This remains true today. Experienced in all aspects of American culture, highway rest areas are no exception to this phenomenon.

It can be stressful to leave the comforts of one’s home and travel out into the world where there are a great many unknowns. This stress can be compounded for individuals who experience the ongoing impact of bias and inequities such as LGBTQ individuals, the elderly, individuals who need assistance, and African Americans. Using a restroom is one of the most basic of human needs and uncertainty about where one might find a restroom and whether they’ll be able to access and use it can be enough to lead people to avoid leaving home.

Most highway rest areas feature men’s and women’s restrooms. That probably sounds comprehensive to rest area designers but there is a broad spectrum of people for whom those binary signs are inadequate. Even if we assume we are meeting everyone’s needs with the bifurcation present in the two-gendered system, those two banks of restrooms often create issues for travelers. It is unique enough a situation to find a men’s restrooms that includes a baby changing station that it’s deemed appropriate or necessary to include a sign on the door alerting visitors of such amenities. There are no signs on the women’s restrooms noting the inclusion of baby changing stations, it’s just a given. While more and more men’s restrooms in public and
private venues are beginning to feature baby changing stations, we still have progress to make in ensuring a baby can be cared for on the road by any parent or caregiver.

Another very practical issue is that women often experience long lines when attempting to use public facilities. For a variety of reasons that range from anatomy and biology to gender norms around family care, women often need more time in the restroom than men. Given this, one would expect that there would be more capacity built into women’s restrooms, but that isn’t how it’s implemented in practice. Anthony discusses the issue of “potty parity” and the social issues embedded in the current male-focused facility designs and suggests society should shift to more gender neutral and unisex restroom facilities to better serve everyone (p. 282).

There are other compelling reasons to shift to more or exclusively gender-neutral restrooms, including at highway rest areas. Proponents for this approach include the American Restroom Association which is also driving towards potty-parity and advocates for unisex family restrooms as a standard amenity at all public places, including rest stops (Easy Travel, p. 2).

Caregivers who are traveling with individuals who have dementia or other needs that require assistance in restrooms are often at a loss about what to do when they approach a rest area with its men’s and women’s restrooms. A parent traveling with a child that is a different gender must decide between the uncomfortable options – take the child in with them, which becomes more uncomfortable as the child gets older, or send the child in the restroom that matches their gender alone.
Individual Restroom Spaces Between the Men’s and Women’s Facilities at a Florida Rest Stop

The situation is also complicated for individuals who are transgender or non-binary. Which of the two options – men’s or women’s – should they choose when traveling? Neither option is quite right. This issue has gotten a lot of attention in the past several years, including perhaps most notably in North Carolina bathroom bill. In that case, a federal judge approved a settlement that prohibits the state government from restricting transgender people from using bathrooms in state buildings, including highway rest areas, that matches their identity (Levin).

Other advocates of LGBTQ rights argue that providing gender-neutral restrooms is important to obtaining greater levels of equity among all people, LGBTQ and beyond, and can help normalize the experience (Webb-Mitchell, UMOI.org).

The growing availability of apps for phones and other handheld devices is helping to impact how people address this issue. Working to change laws and practices is one way to make permanent systemic changes, but in the meantime, people are using apps to help inform one
another about restrooms that are friendly and equitable. For example, the Refuge Restrooms app is a crowdsourcing app where users tag restrooms that they find in cities that offer opportunities for the LGBTQ community to use safely (Allen, p. 2). Allen hopes that eventually we move away from the gendered nature of restrooms that currently have signs that show men, women, and/or a combination of a person made half with pants and half with a dress, and that we more fully embrace the idea with signs that simply show toilets. Crowdsourcing technology for this kind of use is not only a practical way to find a restroom when visiting in new city, but it’s a way that people experience this issue together, and build community around a basic human need.

Like the crowdsourced restroom app, The Negro Motorist Green Book was a publication that was informed by Black drivers and their experiences to help others navigate American roadways. It offered Black drivers the names and addresses of safe places to stop for a place to sleep, eat a meal, or find other necessary services while traveling across America. Published first in 1936 to assist motorist during the Jim Crow era, the book expanded its reach from safe places to stop on the east coast to stops on the west coast and then internationally. The Green Book was last published in 1966 as civil rights laws ended legal segregation (Green, p. 6).

A common theme in American culture is mobility and freedom. While the automobile introduced an expanded level of mobility and freedom for many in America, and African Americans had expectations of capitalizing on that as well, that isn’t what actually happened. While private vehicles allowed African Americans to escape the Jim Crow laws commonly experienced in trains, it wasn’t enough to escape the people insistent on maintaining inequality in America. Even though the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled against interstate travel segregation in 1956 and the Jim Crow signs began to be dismantled, the long- engrained practices remained in place and made road travel difficult and frightening (Sorin, p. 97), a reality that is
still experienced by Black drivers today. Bay asserts that travel segregation has merely adopted to the changing modes of transportation, from stages coaches and steamships to the current roads including the interstate rest areas (p. 3). This history continues to shape how African Americans travel even today, relying heavily on word-of-mouth recommendations for places to go and stop along the way (Dillette, p. 1358).

While some highway rest areas are being upgraded to expand the amenities and create more equitable access to restroom facilities, renovations or new construction is costly. In addition, politics and general lack of awareness of the needs of a diverse group of people can get in the way of progress (Easy Travel, p. 2). As a result, many travelers in American are left out of comfortable, accommodating and equitable access. The travel experiences of drivers across America are shaped by antiquated practices and policies passed down through generations that still impact our interactions today. Until we recognize the needs of all individuals, people will be excluded from the shared travel experience enjoyed by so many others.
VII. Safety: Real and Perceived Concerns and Contributions to Solutions

Many people have the perception that rest areas are unsafe. Despite the efficiency of stopping at a high rest area when traveling, people worry about the illicit activities that go on and the individuals who spend time there participating in unsavory acts. While illegal and undesirable activities do occur at highway rest areas, these highly frequented spots can also serve as a means of raising awareness and helping to stave off crime and by their very nature are designed to help increase the safety of highway travelers.

Crime Issues at Rest Areas

Rest areas are intended to be places where one can stop and rest, but it doesn’t mean that travelers don’t need to be vigilant just as they would be in any public place. Unfortunately, crime data from rest areas is not provided separately in national crime statistics, so it isn’t possible to know exactly how much crime occurs in these locations (Knight-Ridder, p. 1). As a result, travelers tend to draw conclusions about rest area safety based on anecdotal perceptions and experiences, and high-profile crime cases that make the news.

Travelers worry about being robbed, being physically attacked, and observing drug use and sexual encounters at rest areas. Stories abound like the two men who were arrested as they slept at a known hotspot for drug activity at a New Hampshire rest stop. Police were called to the rest area 132 times in 2019 alone, leading to 17 arrests (Edelstein, p. 1). Police and FBI agents arrested the Beltway Snipers John Allen Muhammed and Lee Boyd Malvo at a rest area in Maryland as they slept (FBI History, p.1). The two infamously shot individuals from a sniper’s nest crafted in the trunk of their vehicle. While it’s more common to find fugitives and stolen vehicles, a British tourist was murdered at a Florida rest area and another individual was murdered at a different Florida rest area in a drug deal gone wrong (Santana, p. 1).
Sexual encounters also occur at rest areas through prostitution, human trafficking, and the practice of men seeking sex with men. Corzine conducted research on men who seek sex with other men at highway rest areas and found that Friday and Saturday nights, between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m., were the days and times with the most activity (p. 176). The average traveler, therefore, is unlikely to be driving and stopping during these hours which both reduces the likelihood they’ll experience the activity and makes it more attractive for those who seek it. Corzine studied this from a sociological perspective and found that the rest areas serve as an ideal spot because men can meet strangers with little reputational risk compared to the potential of knowing someone if they check into a motel (188), the transient nature of people at rest areas is conducive to short term sexual relationships without lasting attachments (189), many men find the masculinity associated with truck drivers to be appealing (190), and find the danger that comes with meeting in a public space to be thrilling (190). Tewksbury observes that rest areas are ideal locations because the “taken for granted functions of the settings serve as a cloak of concealment for illicit activity” (p. 1). Meunier notes that rest areas can offer both one-time encounters for sex as well as opportunities for more physical intimacy for men who return to certain rest areas (686).

Knight-Ridder observes that we tend to relax when we go on vacation and inherently, therefore, let down our guard (p. 1). While most people are unlikely to experience a problem at rest areas, their location on highways makes it easy for criminals to commit a crime and then make a quick getaway. Regardless of other features rest areas incorporate to make them attractive and engaging places to stop, most people are most interested in being safe while at the rest area (Nott, p. 1). A 2017 survey found that 98% of parents traveling with kids want clean restrooms and 57% of travelers stress about whether a rest stop is clean and safe (Nott, p 1).
Highway safety rest areas, as their name implies, were designed to offer travelers a place to safely rest. Both commercial and private vehicles benefit from convenient places along the highway where drivers and their passengers can rest, stretch, and use the facilities.

While rest areas offer a place to fend off fatigue, some have argued that there aren’t enough places for commercial truck drivers to park and sleep. Studies have been conducted to better understand the correlation between tired drivers and accidents. Bunn suggests that “10% to 20% of all truck and bus crashes in the United States involve drivers who were fatigued at the time of the crash” (p. 1). Bunn’s research found a “positive correlation between the distance to rest areas with availability to stop and the occurrence of commercial vehicle drivers at-fault crashes involving sleepiness and fatigue” (p. 7) and led to the conclusion that more commercial parking on highways is needed to help reduce crashes (p. 8).

Koklanaris has also documented the issue with inadequate commercial parking options and cites various surveys that have been conducted with truck drivers and truck driver associations that point to the shortfall in availability. As is often the case, while people might agree on the issue, they don’t necessarily agree on the solutions. Consistent with other issues in America, the question about whether a shortage of commercial parking spots is a national, state, or local issue is relevant in this topic. The broad group of stakeholders that convened to address the issue in Koklanaris’s article decided that the solutions would likely be different in various parts of the country so local and state entities would best develop solutions for any given geography (p. 3).

Ways Rest Areas Can Help

In addition to offering safe places for commercial and private vehicles to stop and rest, state departments of transportation approach the issue of rest area safety in different ways but
common techniques include increasing lighting, improving site lines, installing security cameras, and offering additional security particularly at night. After several serious crimes and murders were committed at a North Carolina rest area, including the high-profile murder of Michael Jordan’s father, Operation Rest Assured was launched and “virtually wiped out” crime, including robberies and prostitution, at North Carolina’s rest areas (Knight-Ridder, p. 1).

In addition to the general efforts that can be made to increase the safety of travelers at rest areas, they can also be places to proactively raise awareness about victims of crimes, including those impacted by kidnapping and sex trafficking. Miller conducted a study to better understand the effectiveness of the current Amber Alert system. Miller concluded that people already have a lot to think about while driving and proposes that Amber Alert notices would be better received at locations where drivers are not already processing so much information, such as at highway rest areas (M. Miller, p. 15).
Rest areas can also play an important role in raising awareness about sex trafficking, an issue that receives a significant amount of national attention. The Polaris Project argues that sex trafficking often occurs at truck stops, rest areas, and welcome centers because of their “remote locations and the dominant male customer base that uses the facilities” (p. 1). By their very nature, rest areas tend to be isolated from local communities, populated with transient clientele, have reduced opportunities for detection, and less police presence. Collectively, this creates the unfortunate situation in which people paying for sex can easily access the opportunity but individuals being trafficked cannot often escape (p. 1).

Contact Information for Victims of Human Trafficking at an Ohio Rest Area
One of the techniques used to help victims of human trafficking at rest areas is to place stickers with contact information for the National Human Trafficking Hotline in every women’s restroom stall and lobby at rest areas. Thompson suggests that women sometimes don’t realize they are victims until they see the signs multiple times and this makes it really important to implement the strategy broadly and consistently (p. 1). Aligned with this approach, the Michigan legislature passed Public Act 62 of 2016 which requires welcome centers and rest areas to post human trafficking information and numbers to call or text for help (Michigan Department of LEO). Haberman suggests that given the centrality of the transportation industry to human trafficking, it has an important part to play in stopping the crime including raising awareness by displaying posters with information for victims to call for help; printing posters in language appropriate for the specific geography; passing state laws requiring display of posters; training department of transportation employees so they are better equipped to notice human trafficking victims and perpetrators; and partnering with local law enforcement to improve communication when DOT staff witness trafficking occurring including providing surveillance data and license plate information (p. 42).
Nott quoted a truck driver who said “In America, we give short shrift to public utilities like [rest areas]. We think undesirables hang out there” but truck drivers and private vehicle drivers alike need them. (p. 1). Identifying ways to keep visitors safe with both real and perceived safety measures is an important part of highway rest area messaging and operation.
VIII. Arts and Entertainment: Exhibits and References in Pop Culture

In addition to rest areas that reflect regionalism in their designs and programming, rest areas also can be venues for sharing arts and cultural exhibits and other interactive experiences with travelers. This provides a unique opportunity for travelers and local communities to come together and engage with local culture at highway rest areas through music, paintings, sculptures, historical exhibits, poetry, and more. Beginning with roadside parks, officials placed commemorative placards to inform and entertain travelers from as early as the 1940s. Then in the 1960s, larger scale art exhibits were placed in rest areas to attract drivers’ attention as they approached on the interstate and to then entertain them once onsite (RestAreaHistory.org). This same sense of sharing and community building is informing art and cultural experiences at rest areas across the country in unique and innovative ways today.

Homemade Quilts on Exhibit at the Tamarack, West Virginia Rest Area
The Ohio Department of Transportation staff developed a playlist of music by Ohio artists and streams the music at their rest areas as they receive upgrades (Bischoff, p. 2). As additional rest areas are upgraded, the music will be introduced at those rest areas as well, featuring artists such as Dean Martin, John Legend, and the Ohio Players. Vermont has massive sculptures at 14 of its rest areas, imagined by University of Vermont art professor and sculptor Paul Aschenbach to “foster peace though art and public art” (Evancie, p. 3). Some people have complained that the sculptors have fallen into disrepair with a lack of funding, that they lack plagues or signs that describe their history, that many are obscured by overgrown landscapes, and that they are unnecessary because people don’t linger at rest areas. However, Evancie counters that “maybe we should” linger (p. 6).

New Jersey is undertaking a campaign to upgrade their rest areas and then naming them after celebrities from their state as a way of raising awareness and calling attention to the talent from the state. So far, rest areas have been named after Whitney Houston, Jon Bon Jovi, Frank Sinatra, Connie Chung, Toni Morison, Judy Blume, Larry Doby, Grover Cleveland, and others. Interestingly, Bruce Springsteen declined having a rest area named after him following an incident on the highway with New Jersey police (Lungariello, p. 2).

On nice days at busy rest areas, travelers might also come across individuals singing, playing a guitar, or engaged in similar arts performances. While they might not be allowed to charge for the performances because of the rules against commercialization, there doesn’t appear to be any concern about them having a collection plate into which travelers who enjoy the experience can donate. Phil Madsen, an interstate truck driver and blogger, was intrigued to come across a live singer at a Pennsylvania rest area, the first of that kind of entertainment he had encountered. However, he wasn’t completely surprised because he found the live singer to
be consistent with the ambiance of the rest area that was particularly nice with a museum about coal mining and an interactive art exhibit for which travelers could vote on their favorite photos (Madsen, overdriveonline.com).

New York took live music one step further with a concert series at rest areas across the state in 2021. Called “Rest Stop Pop Up NY” the concerts featured a variety of kinds of music and state officials hoped people would travel to the outside concerts, taking advantage of the opportunity to enjoy an outdoor entertainment option as the pandemic continued to impact indoor venues (NYS Music). Interesting about this event, the organizers were very clear that concert-goers should avoid alcohol, because drinking and driving after their event would be a bad look, but instead “strongly encouraged CBD use” that would be sold by onsite vendors as an alternative (NYS Music).

Iowa has done an especially nice job at reflecting history in their rest areas through artistic expression, taking regionalism seriously with artistic displays. Located near the hometown of Grant Wood, the likeness of the man and woman in his piece American Gothic indicate the men’s and women’s restrooms. The lobby is adorned with etched glass, Gothic-style windows, fabricated hay bales, and colorful tiles with Iowa landscapes. Other Iowa rest areas are themed around a train depot; Lewis and Clark, with blue tiles representing the Mississippi River, weathered canoes serving as seats, and the names of the Corp of Discovery members on the wall; and the Underground Railroad at a rest area near Cedar County which, during the Civil War, offered 15 stops for runaway slaves (Meyer). As Meyer notes, nearly 17 million people visit Iowa’s rest areas every year and their rest area visit may be the only interaction they have with Iowa and its people so they are intentional about delivering a “memorable opportunity to experience the history and diversity of Iowa” (Meyer).
Eyerman explores the ways American culture and the love affair with the automobile and road trips plays out in other forms of arts media including films, stories, plays, music, short stories and books. While Eyerman doesn’t included references to rest areas in particular, he focuses on how notions of “hitting the road” and the “weightless life along the way” has a long cultural history in America (p. 53). He notes The Grapes of Wrath as the piece of work that best expresses this phenomenon in American culture, displaying the humanity of the road, and the risk and hope found therein (p. 57). The road as a symbol of freedom, to “move upward and outward, is one of the most central and persistent images America has of itself.” (p. 55).
IX. Politics: Civic Engagement in Public Places

Wherever we gather, we inherently engage in forms of civil society and interestingly, highway rest areas are no exception. Visit a rest area and you may see individuals collecting signatures for ballot proposals, panhandling, or collecting funds for veterans. People have also entered into debates and lawsuits about whether they can carry guns at rest areas, and about the kind of information they can display at rest areas. The primary point of contention in these debates and lawsuits is whether rest areas are public spaces and arguments are often centered around individual’s constitutional rights to freedom of speech verses states’ rights and control.

Visit a rest area on a busy summer day and you’re likely to see individuals situated at a table with clipboards and pens ready to engage with people on important issues of the day. Signature collectors are out seeking to move a broad set of initiatives ranging from expanding education scholarship funding to fighting against mask mandates during the coronavirus pandemic and more. Marini notes that signature collectors are allowed to solicit signatures in public spaces, including rest areas (p. 1). In fact, signature collectors receive $2 or more for each signature they obtain which incentives finding busy public spaces such as rest areas (Lessenberry, p. 1). Voting and public engagement are core values and interests for Americans. The fact that we find ways to interact with one another and participate in this process while stopping to use a restroom along a highway is intriguing and demonstrates a level of commitment on behalf of both the signature collectors and the travelers who sign the petitions.
Collecting Petition Signatures at a Northern Michigan Rest Area

Another issue that has arisen within the context of rest areas is whether drivers have the right to carry a gun on the premises. The Alabama Department of Transportation instituted a law banning guns at rest areas, citing their obligation to keep roadways and travelers safe. However, after significant public outcry from guns rights activists who challenged that the law made rest areas less safe, the governor required that all signs prohibiting guns be removed and reinstated travelers’ rights to carry guns at the state’s rest areas (Blannelberry, p. 2). Travelers need to be aware when crossing state lines that state laws vary across the nation and that what’s important as a right in one state may be a prohibited activity in another. These laws are reflective of the people in a state who vote for them and help define how we think about ourselves and our region. It makes sense that these kinds of debates would play out in rest areas, where people
from near and far intersect and have the opportunity to bring their personal and regional personalities with them.

Travelers may also observe individuals collecting money for themselves or for causes that they care about at rest areas. The Veterans in Need Foundation regularly has people out collecting money at Florida rest areas, though their tactics and genuineness have been called into question because it’s unclear that the funds collected are being used as donors believe (Walser, p. 1). Panhandlers also sometimes position themselves at rest areas hoping to receive cash from highway travelers. There is some debate about whether panhandling is an allowable activity or not per the federal rules and as a result each state grapples with the issue differently. Nebraska specifically prohibits panhandling, along with weapons and advertising of any type (Nebraska DOT, p. 1) and Idaho introduced a law prohibiting begging, panhandling, and hitchhiking (Miller, p. 1). In contrast, a Michigan bill prohibiting panhandling in public places was struck down as unconstitutional (Miller, p. 1) and Oregon allows panhandlers to collect funds, provided they don’t harass people, citing that it is a part of their constitutional rights to free speech (Associated Press, p. 1).

Another debate that often comes up at rest areas is related to the types of materials that can be displayed or distributed. This, again, typically reverts to a question about free speech, an issue that is fundamental to Americans and American culture. Departments of Transportation can display information that is informative and useful to drivers and travelers at highway rest areas, it’s part of stated purpose of a rest area. However, the question is whether citizens can do so as well. Despite federal acts that establish the rules about rest area activity, this is a topic of debate that plays out differently as states interpret the law.
While there are multiple cases and discussion about free speech at highway rest areas, the following two examples show how the cases can be reasoned to reach different conclusions.

In some cases, states have argued that they have a right and an obligation to limit the materials that are posted or distributed at rest area, particularly to promote the safety of rest area users. Lawmakers in Pennsylvania, for example, passed a law prohibiting the distribution of written materials, soliciting, picketing, or demonstrating. They pointed to previous court rulings in favor of the state saying the law did not violate free speech and that public expression can be restricted at rest areas (Pennsylvania DOT, p. 1). On the other hand, some cases have been found in favor of more broadly promoting free speech rights at rest areas. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People picketed and demonstrated South Carolina flying the confederate flag at rest areas, their right to do so was upheld because while rest areas are designed to promote safety, they are also intended to “provide information of interest to the traveling public” which their demonstration was doing (Karr, p. 4).

It’s clear that rest areas are dynamic locations where people inherently meet and engage in aspects of civil society. The same debates about individual and collective rights play out in these spaces as they do elsewhere. This is another way we maintain and foster a human element at even these locations where we quickly stop before continuing on our journey.
X. Public Health: Relevant Where People Convene

Rest areas serve as important spaces through which public health issues are addressed given the significant number of people who drive through and stop every day. Campaigns to address drug abuse, initiatives to curb suicide, studies around the spread of syphilis, avenues for depositing needles, and efforts to support commercial and passenger vehicles during the COVID-19 pandemic have all been carried out at rest areas. Some of these issues are more relevant in certain geographies and that has, accordingly, prompted local responses that may not be needed in other areas. This, again, is a way that rest areas are both shaped by local needs and interests and contribute to local culture.

Substance abuse is a concern to many Americans, whether they struggle with abuse themselves, know someone who does, or simply worry about the overall impact on society. Increased substance use among young people is particularly troubling. To help raise awareness about the issue and provide parents with the resources they need to address the issue with their kids, the TalkSooner initiative arranged to have posters installed at all Michigan rest areas. The campaign is aimed at reducing youth substance abuse and provides parents with the information they need on the issue as well as talking points to use with their kids. TalkSooner representatives note that the car can be a good place to have uncomfortable conversations and the campaign installed the posters at rest areas ahead of the 2021 Labor Day holiday with the aim of reaching families as they traveled during holiday weekend (97.5 Y Country, p.1).
New Mexico’s state secretary of Transportation advocated for an expanded patrol approach at one of its rest areas to help reduce suicides. The Taos rest area is located near the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, a spot where many people have taken their lives. The New Mexico budget includes funds for security guards at rest areas. The secretary has suggested that in addition to keeping rest area visitors safe, the guards could also patrol the bridge as a preventive measure to discourage people from taking their lives (Nott, p. 1).

Communities in rural North Carolina were struggling with an increase in syphilis cases and researchers wondered whether risky behavior at the highway rest areas and truck stops were
contributing to the issue. Cook conducted a research study to help understand this question and concluded that “despite anecdotal descriptions of risky sexual behavior at rest areas and truck stops, there wasn’t data on US truck drivers’ sexual behavior and, further, it seemed unlikely that the epidemic originated at rest areas because prostitution is discouraged, and they are patrolled by state police 24 hours a day” (p. 2).

People who require injections for health-related reasons can be challenged to find a place to take their injection and then safely dispose of the needle when in a public space. In some highway rest areas, needle depositories have been installed. This feature makes travel more accessible and comfortable for people who might otherwise feel hesitant to leave their homes if they worry about how they will address their basic health needs.

COVID-19 presented a unique challenge for all travelers, but for commercial truck drivers in particular. During the height of the pandemic, most restaurants were closed for indoor dining and restroom use. Private vehicles could take advantage of fast-food restaurant drive thru options for food, but could not run in to use the restrooms as is common. As a result, rest areas became a primary source for meeting that basic human need while on the road. However, travelers needed to do more planning than usual because some rest areas were closed in the early days of COVID-19 (Tate, p. 1). Like other states, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation closed many of its rest areas during the height of COVID-19 and offered a slimmed down array of services at others (Pryts, p. 1). This posed a particular challenge for truck drivers who can’t go through fast food drive thru lanes, and restaurants were not taking orders from patrons on foot. The closures also led to a reduction in the number of parking spots available at rest areas for truckers to sleep (Pryts, p. 2). To help address this challenge and aid in the ongoing shipment of products through essential travel, the Federal Highway Administration took the unusual step of
giving state highway departments waivers during the public health emergency for the customary restriction on commercial sales at rest areas. This meant that food truck vendors could sell hot meals to truckers at rest areas (Clark, p. 1).

Even as late as summer 2022, Michigan used its US 23 welcome center to offer travelers free COVID-19 testing with results in 15-30 minutes. A welcoming trailer was set up in the parking lot of the rest area inviting travelers to stop in for fast and free testing.

![COVID-19 Testing Unit at the Michigan Welcome Center](image)

New York state officials also took advantage of rest areas as creative outdoor venues for a summer concert series in 2021. However, in a stance that either reflected reality or defeat, depending on one’s perspective, officials stated that while they were encouraging social distancing per the recommendations to reduce the spread of COVID-19, they acknowledged that “if they don’t, we hope they’re spending money and we feel that tradeoff is worth the risk” (NYS
Music). Officials also encouraged attendees to buy CBD from onsite vendors and use that instead of consuming alcohol and then driving home. It’s beyond the scope of this analysis to fully explore the public health implications of these decisions, but there are clearly a couple of strands of important public health policy at play during these concerts at the rest areas.
XI. Evolution: The Future of Rest Areas

States across the country have, for many years, struggled to find the funding in their budgets to properly maintain and provide upkeep of their rest areas. As many of these roadside amenities reach the end of their useful lives, state leaders are going to need to determine how to move forward. At the same time, travelers rely on rest areas, and often see them as a part of their travel experience. Rest areas are an important part of American culture, but as the country evolves and new interests and priorities emerge, citizens and the government will need to wrestle with how they fit into a changing narrative. There are practical and philosophical aspects to consider on this issue.

States Considering Costly Repairs and Their Options

States are responsible for the expenses related to maintaining existing rest areas and constructing new ones. But as state leaders struggle to balance lean budgets, prioritizing the many needs of its residents is challenging and road infrastructure is but one aspect of the budget. As an example of the scale of repairs that can be necessary, a recent New Mexico budget included $30 million to upgrade the state’s more than 40 rest areas (Nott, p. 2). The replacement of a single rest area near Houghton Lake in Michigan was going to require $2 million to make it compliant with the American with Disabilities Act and address septic issues (Bergal, p. 3), which is on par with the estimated average cost for rest area renovations that include upgrades to lighting; plumbing; and heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems (Meyer, p.12).

Part of the challenge is that rest areas were not built to last long into the future. Dowling says they were essentially “built to be rebuilt” with a lifespan of approximately 20 years (Saving Places, p. 8). The expectation when they were initially developed is that infrastructure needs
would change, and hence so would the rest areas. States began making updates in the 1980s on the original rest areas, but without funding the progress has been slow.

When it comes to the roadways, states have been forced to focus on core infrastructure rather than rest areas, thereby resulting in rest areas with deteriorated conditions (Winter, Introduction). States across the country have considered or implemented plans to close rest areas to reduce costs. Some states have targeted less-visited rest areas with reduced services, fewer open hours, or closed them entirely. Virginia, for example, closed 19 of its 42 rest areas in 2009 during the Great Recession to save costs only to reopen them a year later following public outcry (Macabasco, p. 3).

States have hired organizations to perform studies to help them evaluate their options. Just as a few examples across the country, Michigan State University provided a proposal to Nevada as they considered how to move forward with outdated rest areas (Savolainen). California was deferring maintenance on its rest areas as it sought solutions to address American with Disabilities Act compliance and also move into the future with rest areas that serve as a “welcome mat” for tourists, contribute to the efficient movement of goods, and showcase environmentally sustainable design and practices (Value Management Strategies, p. 1). Michigan engaged the services of the Mackinaw Center for Public Policy to outline its options within the current regulations and guidance (Hohman).

**Privatization**

One of the seemingly most viable ways for state leadership to address the financial challenges that they face in maintaining rest areas is to enter into public-private partnerships for the operation, maintenance and redevelopment of interstate rest areas. With the tremendous costs associated with renovations, and the expectation that road travel will continue to increase,
public-private partnerships need to be considered (Copeland, p. 3). This approach could be beneficial to states, some of which are actively deferring upgrades to their rest areas in the hopes this option will become a reality (Winter, Introduction). The move would not only enable states to move the costs associated with maintaining rest areas out of the expense column on their budgets, but to receive a portion of the proceeds generated by the commercial partner that leases the state’s rest area land and sells gas, food and other items that travelers need (Strategic Partnerships.com).

Connecticut is a good example of how this can work. Leadership in Connecticut entered into a 35-year deal with a private entity with the goal of providing the first updates to its 23 state owned plazas since the early 1980s. The private entity, Project Service LLC, took on a $178 million project to either replace or upgrade the plazas, and has committed to another $17 million in upgrades just before the end of the deal when the plazas will be handed back to the state. Over the 35-year deal, Connecticut is expected to receive $300 million in proceeds as its portion of the sales (Reitz, p. 2). Perhaps more importantly, state leadership hopes the new plazas will be so nice that travelers and residents alike will visit, remember, and be repeat patrons of the new or upgraded plazas (Reitz, p. 3). At the same time, Connecticut is closing some of its more traditional rest areas or reducing services and hours in favor of utilizing these more economical plaza alternatives (Bergal, p. 4).

New Hampshire is following a similar approach, using a public-private partnership model to facilitate the updating of its rest areas with the goal of turning them into “must stop” destinations with a local feel. So far, the project is exceeding the expectations of the New Hampshire leaders who initiated the deal (McKeever, p. 6).
Both Connecticut and New Hampshire have been intentional about maintaining a local vibe when adopting a public-private partnership model. However, it’s something for state leaders and departments of Transportation to be mindful of, and to ensure that community and local culture are reflected in rest areas operated by private companies. Given the financial strains that most states are experiencing, state leaders could enter into a public-private partnership and intentionally or unintentionally yield local influence with the pressure they feel to address budget constraints.

Another concern is that the current law does not allow most states to adopt a public-private partnership model. Commercial rest areas were already in operation in 15 states before the 1956 Highway Act was enacted. While those sites were grandfathered in and allowed to continue operating, new rest areas were prohibited from commercialization. The limited exceptions to that rule are for the distribution of tourism information and food items offered for sale in vending machines operated by blind business operators.
Vending Machines for the Benefit of Visually Impaired Business Operators

Debate and Attempts to Repeal the Prohibition on Commercialization

If states are to have the opportunity to pursue public-private partnerships, and to sell gas, food and similar travel needs at rest areas, the prohibition of commercialization would need to be repealed. Several attempts to make this possibility a reality have been initiated by governors, state representatives, governors, and even presidents. And yet, the prohibition remains stubbornly in place. This is due in part to the fact that it’s already existing law and would require an act of Congress to change the federal statute; and despite vocal advocates, there are equally vocal proponents. Both sides of issue present valid arguments that should be seriously considered as the future of America’s rest areas take shape.

Corsi conducted an analysis that was meant to be objective and help inform the discussion about the impacts of allowing commercialization, without crafting arguments for
either side. The findings and observations of that study were that commercialization of rest areas would negatively impact gas, food and truck service sales at businesses situated at highway exits but that some of those businesses and/or staff might relocate to the enhanced rest areas (p. 19).

This primarily economic argument forms the crux of the debate about whether rest areas should be allowed to commercialize or not. Proponents of commercialization include state departments of transportation, the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, and many individuals on both sides of the political aisle. They argue that states, travelers, and truck drivers would benefit from repealing the prohibition. States would better meet their road improvement needs, more services could be provided to drivers, and states would receive the revenue from sales (Hohman, p. 2). Commercialization would help address the shortage of safe overnight parking for truckers, reverse the trend of closing rest areas due to budget cuts, help address the need for charging electric vehicles (Poole, p. 2) and help offset the costs of buying adjacent properties to facilitate the expansion as well as the design and building costs of new plaza (Poole, p. 18). Poole argues that restricting businesses from operating where there is demand in order to protect other businesses “is not how a free-market economy works” (p. 24).

Opponents of commercialization include the National Association of Truck Stop Operators, the American Trucking Association, and the National Association of Blind Merchants. These organizations point to several arguments including a Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study that found lifting the prohibition would lead to a $55 billion loss in annual sales to businesses off the highway which also negatively impacts local cities and their residents (Courtney, p. 3). The nearly 400 blind vendors who operate vending machines at rest areas would lose out on their sales (Courtney, p. 3). Many rest areas aren’t large enough to handle commercialization attempts, they are designed to accommodate motorists for only 15
minutes or less (Hohman, p. 2). NATSO claims that state departments of Transportation want to create state-sanctioned monopolies on highways and that commercial rest areas would “drain local businesses of customers, communities of jobs, and city governments of tax revenue” (Poole, p. 22). Senator John Barrasso argues that businesses, many of which are small, made significant investments near the highways; those businesses are often the largest taxpayers and economic backbones of communities; and public rest areas were acquired with public funds so can’t be sold to private investors (King, J., p. 2).

It’s unclear if American travelers will see any shifts in policy on this question. Lifting the prohibition has been included in several budgets and voted on multiple times. Examples include President Clinton’s 1998 Transportation Efficiency Act that would have allowed commercialization, Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) in 2009, the Georgia DOT in 2009, the Arizona DOT and then Governor Jan Brewer in 2010, a 2012 Senate vote to allow commercialization, House members Joe Courtney (D-CT) and Jim Banks (R-IN) in a co-introduced bill 2017, the Trump White House’s 2018 infrastructure proposal, a 2020 House infrastructure bill that would have added electric vehicle charging stations at rest areas (Poole, p. 20), and Arizona Governor Doug Ducey (R) asking to be a pilot for commercialization citing the current rule as “archaic and nonsensical” (Courtney, p. 3). The Federal Highway Administration asked for public input on how the current law should be interpreted and applied in the current context given the evolution of technology, particularly vending machines, and asking whether the current guidance on commercialization should be revisited (Department of Transportation).

The issue clearly is complicated such that even with advocates on both sides of the aisle arguing for commercialization at rest areas there isn’t a clear path forward. In the meantime,
states are left trying to determine how to best serve residents and drivers coming through their states while juggling complex budget issues.

**Responding to Changing Interests**

States are trying to be responsive to the needs and interests of drivers by updating rest areas with amenities that are reflective of travelers today. While fast food chains tend to draw travelers who are looking for fast and familiar options, rest area operators are watching trends and offering more options. These options include smaller regional chains, food trucks, healthy foods, and seasonal farmers markets, along with other amenities like office space (McKeever). Other options include local favorites like cheeses, meats and chocolates; free wifi; and electric vehicle charging stations (Copeland, p. 3).

Hohman argues that travelers could experience even more of these modern amenities through public-private partnerships and challenges the current status quo by contrasting today’s environment with yesterday’s where there was “pent-up demand for a roadside picnic” (p. 2). He further observes that speculators have purchased options to buy land adjacent rest areas so they are ready to capitalize on the opportunity should commercialization be allowed. Just as today’s travelers are not without, or necessarily looking for, picnic options, Illinois has conducted a survey of its travelers to learn more about their likes and dislikes at current and future rest areas, including whether they would like to see more private businesses developing rest areas. They received approximately 4,500 responses in the first two weeks the survey was active and will combine those public responses with other analysis and data to inform their future plans (Wisniewski, p. 4).

**Electric Vehicles and Charging Stations**
The growing interest in electric vehicles could push a conversation about road infrastructure upgrades in ways that other factors have so far failed to do. Americans are becoming more environmentally conscious and that could help drive demand for a shift from gas-powered to electric-operated vehicles. To support distance travel, the country’s automotive and infrastructure leaders are going to need to work together to ensure travelers can get to their destination and charge their vehicles enroute. Rest areas serve as one viable option for service provision, particularly given their locations along highways at intervals already meant to support drivers. The National Center for Sustainable Transportation at the University of California, Davis released a study in 2020 recommending rest area serve in this capacity (Poole, p. 11). However, the plan faces a significant current stumbling block: to install and operate electric vehicle charging stations at rest areas, states would need to be able to allow commercialization, unless the electricity is going to be given away for free.

In Florida, as one example, Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill in 2020 requiring the Florida Department of Transportation to develop a plan for charging stations along but not actually on the interstates (Poole, p. 10). The politics that might be at play are uncertain in this case. Perhaps DeSantis opposes commercialization of rest areas in support of small businesses at highway exits, or maybe he thought this was a compromise position within the current mandates. While charging stations may not be available, many Florida rest areas provide preferred parking spaces to travelers who are carpooling or driving energy efficient vehicles. In another example, a group of Midwest electric utilities announced a plan in 2020 for a network of fast-charging stations to span from Michigan to Kansas but because of the prohibition on commercialization, it wouldn’t be allowable (Poole, p. 10).
Preferred Parking Near a Florida Rest Area Entrance along with a Peaceful Water Feature

In contrast, some states are making headway in supporting electric vehicles with rest area charging stations. Ohio, New Jersey and New York have all announced or begun to install charging stations at their service plazas (Poole, p. 11). Electrical hookups at rest areas could serve to not only charge vehicles, but also provide a way for truckers to more efficiently operate the heating and cooling in their sleeper cars. The North American Council for Freight Efficiency reported that in 2017 alone US truckers used over a billion gallons of diesel fuel idling their engines overnight (Poole, p. 12).

Preservation and Evolution

In addition to the types of services and amenities provided at new and renovated rest areas, another aspect to consider in the discussion about the future of rest areas is the physical infrastructure, and how we value the past while moving towards the future. Rest areas are an important aspect of American culture, a part of road trip lore, and capture part of the American story. Yet, pragmatically, when they reach the end of their useful life, improvements need to be
made. How might we best go about preserving aspects of the past while creating infrastructure to serve the needs of motorists into the future?

American Rest area historian Dowling suggests that when a rest area facility needs to be rebuilt that developers look at ways to integrate a portion of the existing building into the design of the new building. In this way, developers honor the ways that rest areas are a part of our American story, retain a connection to history (Conference, p. 20) and mitigate “erasing history” (Conference, p. 14). Ford hopes that her work capturing photos of rest areas across the country will contribute to an interest in maintaining the existing rest area structures as part of the American experience (p. 21).

Innovations in technology and an increasing awareness about environmental issues can also drive rest area designs, beyond electric vehicle charging stations. Race was part of hosting a design competition for rest areas focused on environmental sustainability. Design ideas included going totally green and being off the grid, using energy efficient fixtures and heating, incorporating natural light, providing shade pavilions with solar panels, and ensuring healthy indoor air quality (Race, p. 1).
Travelers also appreciate that many rest areas offer an environment that is quiet, tranquil and park-like in contrast to the busy nature of service plazas and shopping areas off the highways (Bergal, p. 1). For example, though it may seem redundant, there is a traditional rest area located about one mile west of the Tamarack service plaza. For travelers looking for an easy place to stop without the crowds and congestion of the large and busy travel plaza, the modest rest area can be a delight. And not to be forgotten amidst innovation and evolution of services and amenities, the number one reason people stop at rest areas is to use the restroom facilities, which they prefer to be clean and feel safe above all else (Copeland, p. 4).
XII. Conclusion

Highway rest areas might be easily overlooked as important in America’s physical and cultural infrastructure; however, it’s clear that they are microcosms of society, providing opportunities for people, places and the American experience to intersect. Rest areas provide us with avenues to express our values, to showcase to others the things that make us unique and special, and to highlight the ways we contribute to the evolving American narrative. They also lay bare the ways in which we fail to meet our aspirations of inclusion and equity.

We have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the American story each time we drive on a highway. Rest areas are thriving and dynamic reflections of and contributors to American culture with elements of economic, political and social issues playing out as they do in any other American institution. We should take the time to stop, observe, participate and be intrigued by the way a roadside amenity seemingly so functional intersects with American culture. Do our rest areas tell the story we want to be told? In what ways do they communicate to others our priorities and values? As our rest areas age and become replaced with upgraded or new designs, we have the chance, and perhaps the imperative, to shape that narrative and our contribution to the ongoing American experience.
Appendix

Rest Area Road Trip
July 6 to 12, 2022

**Purpose**

The purpose of my trip was to visit some of the most unique and recommended rest areas on America’s east coast, as well as along the I-75 interstate which has long been a core and iconic travel route between the northern and southern states.

**Itinerary**

My trip spanned a week in the early part of July 2022. I visited 10 states along a route that took me through small American villages, large metropolises, rural areas, mountainous terrain, nature preserves, coastal highways, horse country, and more. The east coast and southern United States were at the time under the effects of an oppressive heat dome and I was thankful for my general proclivity towards warm and humid temperatures and a trustworthy vehicle! I built in two days in Florida that served as more traditional vacation time as well.

**Wednesday, July 6, 2022**

5 am to 1 pm: Drive to the Tamarack rest area  
1 Tamarack Park, Beckley, West Virginia

1 pm to 2 pm: Visit the Tamarack rest area, known for its regional arts and culture exhibits and Appalachian-inspired food options

2 pm to 7 pm: Drive to the South of the Border rest area  
3346 Hwy 301 N, Hamer, SC

**Overnight:** Visit South of the Border rest area, known for its Hispanic theme, seen as fun by many and inappropriate by many others

**Thursday, July 7, 2022**

7 am to 4 pm: Drive to Venice Florida

**Friday, July 8, 2022**

Time in Venice

**Saturday, July 9, 2022**

8 am to 10 am: Drive to Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center as a destination
10 am to 12 pm: Visit rest areas along the US 41 highway, known as Alligator Alley

Sunday, July 10, 2022

Time in Venice

Monday, July 11, 2022

7 am to 7 pm: Drive part way back to Michigan, stay in Lexington, K.Y.

Tuesday, July 12, 2022

7 am to 3 pm: Drive the rest of the way home

Findings

This was a fascinating trip. Always interested in travel and driving since my youngest days, I relished a summer trip spent on the road with a purpose of encountering interesting finds along the journey. I did not stop at every rest area along the way, I would have needed far more than a week to accomplish that. In addition, my purpose was not to document every rest area, but rather to stop and see the ways that American culture was reflected in a sampling of rest areas. I believe I was successful in that objective. I even sparked the interest of some colleagues who initially asked for daily check ins to monitor my safe passage each day but then became interested in my findings and looked forward to the daily highlights I provided along the way.

Below, I have provided an account of interesting finds at rest areas between Michigan and Florida and back. I did not take pictures of all features at all rest areas but rather representative selections. In addition, in some cases discretion did not allow a photo to be taken but the feature is described. Indeed I saw a great many ways American culture intersects with rest areas including the ways some rest areas reflected regional characteristics in their architecture, how they facilitate travel by offering dog walk areas for those traveling with pets, and economical and/or healthy ways to travel with picnic tables for those who want or need to pack their own food. Some reflected advancing environmental awareness with a green roof, with preferred parking for travelers with alternative fuel vehicles or who were carpooling, and recycling bins. The Michigan welcome center was offering free COVID testing with results in 15-30 minutes.

There are still ways that Americans are left out of convenient travel, as there have been since the country’s earliest days, but I was hopeful with some of what I saw on my journey to imagine the ways society tries to keep up with itself.

West Virginia
The first rest area I had scheduled to visit was the Tamarack rest stop in Beckley, West Virginia. This rest area is known for its regional arts and culture exhibits and Appalachian-inspired food options.

The approach to the Tamarack rest stop contained advertising beginning 50 miles out letting motorists know that the stop was “a cultural experience” and offered the opportunity to “eat local.” These advertisements continued at about 10 miles increments until arrival. There was also a more traditional rest area about two miles before the Tamarack for travelers who were looking for a simpler stop.

Upon my arrival, I found a bustling rest area and service plaza. The service area portion of the rest area contained more traditional venues for food including Sbarro Pizza and Burger King, as well as plentiful gas pumps and showers. The artisan exhibit space and local food eatery was positioned up a hill and indeed was beautiful inside and out. The building was museum-like with gift shops and artistic wares for sale including homemade quilts, paintings, and food items including honey, jams, and wine. The building itself was artistically designed and contained an outside sculpture exhibit. I enjoyed a fried green tomato sandwich for lunch. Garbage cans and stations with supplies to clean up after one’s dog were plentiful, but I didn’t observe any recycling bins which surprised me.
Interestingly, Beckley has several references in Green’s *The Negro Motorist Green Book Compendium* including hotels, restaurants, service stations, beauty and barber shops beginning in 1947 and then continuing in 1954 and 1963 (but not in 1938). However, the documentary film *Driving While Black* notes that 80% of the Green Book stops are no longer in existence and I was trying to outrun a severe thunderstorm approaching from the west so I didn’t take the time to explore whether the Beckley sites were still in existence. However, a Google search indicates
that in at least one instance, an address given in the Green Book as a service station is an auto repair shop today so it may or may not have ties to the original service station.

**North Carolina**

Driving into North Carolina, I stopped at a rest area with a visitor center. The site offered travelers ample picnic table options, both open and covered; free wifi; information, maps and brochures; trash and recycling; and vending machines. I knew I was in the south when the vending machine offered Moon Pies, and I was only all too glad to partake and enjoy as I drove the next stretch of highway.

![North Carolina visitor center beautifully situated in the trees](image)
Both open and covered picnic table options

As is common, the vending machines support blind business operators
My next stop was also in North Carolina and I thrilled at my findings at this rest area. Nestled upon a hilltop and nestled in the trees, the rest area promoted environmentally friendliness. Adjacent the facilities was a water feature that included a waterfalls. I followed the water feature up to the second layer where they had a well-established a green roof, raising awareness about the importance of reducing our environmental impact and seeking ways to offset our impact through green roofs. Picnic options were also plentiful.
Open and covered picnic table options

The waterfall feature
South Carolina

Just across the border into South Carolina sits a rest area that is a throwback to a former day in America and very much feels left over from a bygone era. Called South of the Border, this rest area is known for its Hispanic theme which is seen as fun by many but completely inappropriate by many others. Technically a rest area, and cited as such in popular culture publications as well as in at least one scholarly research article, the site featured a motor lodge with indoor pool, overnight truck parking, camping, several gas stations, gift shops, restaurants, and various forms of family-oriented carnival-type entertainment options. Given its popularity, I was surprised at how few visitors there were and how little foot traffic there was. While it would not be accommodations I would normally choose, I stayed in the motor lodge. It felt clean and safe so I felt like I needed to do it in the name of research!

Signs at the South of the Border rest area
Caricatures throughout the rest area

Mexican-themed shops and displays
Mexican-themed signs and features at every turn

Mexican-themed shops and displays
In contrast, the South Carolina welcome center just a couple of miles down the road was beautiful, more in keeping with the charm and elegance that I think of when I think of South Carolina and that the state presents in Charleston, for example. And while Charleston tourism is sometimes criticized for promoting its “southern charm” and not acknowledging its history of slavery as well as it might, this rest area is far more in keeping with the general branding of South Carolina in stark contrast to the South of the Border rest area site.
Further into South Carolina, I stopped at a rest area that had prominent signs posted with numbers for victims of human trafficking to call for help. I have sometimes seen paper bulletins posted inside individual stalls where people can pull off one of the tabs with a phone number to call for human trafficking support. These signs are more permanent and official in nature which means they will be in place to serve people for a longer period of time and they might also reassure victims that they will find help that has been vetted and endorsed by the highway commission that installs the sign. Consistent with other stops, this rest area also had signs reminding visitors that the vending machine sales benefit the blind.

Permanent sign with contact information for human trafficking victims
As I traveled through South Carolina, I also came across a couple of rest areas that were designated for commercial vehicles only and specifically advertised that there were no facilities onsite. This is an important service for commercial truck drivers who often struggle to find a place to park their truck while they rest. They are required to stop and sleep at specific intervals but the busy rest areas serving the travel masses often lack enough or adequate space for trucks.

Along the week’s journey I saw a variety of ways rest areas tried to regulate where and how trucks were allowed to park. Some allowed trucks to park on the highway entrance and exit lanes for the rest areas, so essentially they could park on the side of the road near the rest area and use the restroom facilities and purchase snacks. Other rest areas specifically had signs at these entry and exit points prohibiting the parking of trucks.

Another interesting feature I saw in some states was signage alerting truckers how many spots were available at upcoming rest areas. A single sign might advertise the number of truck parking spots at the next three rest areas so they could plan their stops accordingly. Some of these features I couldn’t take pictures of as I was moving with traffic and it seemed unsafe, as did pulling off the side of the road.

**Georgia**

I stopped at a rest area in Georgia and for the first time noted a single stall restroom. They may have been present at other stops but if so they didn’t catch my attention. However, even here, there was only the one option and I watched as families rotated through the one facility. Clearly there is an interest and need for this option despite its low prominence in general. The restroom
configuration has vast implications for a variety of travelers including those who identify as non-binary, parents traveling with opposite gendered children, people traveling with individuals who need assistance using the facilities, etc.

A single stall restroom

Florida

I noticed as I drove through Florida that there were fewer rest area options available than there had been in other states. I don’t know if this was a function of the roads I was traveling, and they just didn’t happen to warrant rest area sites, or if it was more a result of philosophy. There is certainly a national narrative about whether there should be more rest areas versus supporting local businesses. I don’t know if my observation was based on Florida purposely limiting the number of rest areas to drive travelers to local businesses given their more conservatively leaning political climate, or if it was just my perception, or if it was just the specific roads I was traveling.

On my way to the Everglades, I followed the highway signs to a rest area which was clearly not the more conventional rest area where the traveler doesn’t really leave the highway. This was a traditional highway exit with signs along the offramp advertising various restaurants, gas stations, and retail outlets in either direction and the rest area was one of the advertised destinations. It was a busy exit and the rest area was on the left hand side of the road. It would have been far easier to pull into one of the fast food eateries or gas stations to take care of one’s needs but I made my way to the rest area to investigate.
What I found was worth the extra work. Upon pulling into the rest area, I found the usual services one would expect, but it was done well, better than is often found in fact. The rest area boasted a nighttime security presence, reassuring travelers that they would be safe at night; signs about the allowable length of a visit, soliciting, and privacy expectations; a sign that vending machines are operated for the benefit of the blind; signage with numbers to call for help if a traveler is being held and made to work for any reason against their will, be it human trafficking, housework, farm work, etc.; and provided a bank of three individual restrooms. This restroom option proved useful as during my visit a dad with a small female child was able to safely and conveniently use one of the individual restroom spaces.
A sign with various rules about activities at the rest area

A sign raising awareness about missing persons
Three individual restroom spaces in between the men’s and women’s facilities

Contact information for anyone being made to work against their will
The Everglades National Park area featured a welcome center operated by the National Park Service. The Big Cypress Nathaniel P. Reed Visitor Center offered visitors restrooms; vending options; a short nature walkway with signs about the habitat; brochures, information, maps; and a nice giftshop.
About 30 miles north of the Big Cypress Visitor Center is a stretch of highway known as Alligator Alley. In addition to offering traditional rest area amenities, the rest areas on either side of the highway offered an array of services and features unique to this location including preferred spots for alternative fuel vehicles and car poolers, vending machines advertised as supporting blind vendors, nighttime security, two individual restrooms, posted signs with information for individuals to call for help if being held against their will, and a man selling hats to benefit veterans. In addition, the site provided a Big Cypress recreation access point within rest area and inside the facility there were signs about the kinds of snakes one might encounter on the trails. While I usually enjoy hiking, I worried about being carried off by panthers, snakes, alligators, and mosquitoes on these trails, particular since it was over 100 degrees and extremely humid, so I opted to continue on down the road.

Several of my photos from this site were inadvertently deleted or didn’t take and I was too far back to journey by the time I realized what had happened. Fortunately, I was able to capture some photos of similar features at a subsequent Florida rest area and I found an exterior photo of the facility online.

Alligator Alley highway rest area
Photo from https://www.nps.gov/bicy/planyourvisit/i-75-mm-63.htm?fullweb=1
Access point to Big Cypress Preserve hiking trails

Big Cypress preserve hiking trail
North of Tampa, I found a very nice rest stop. This particular rest area also offered nighttime security, preferred parking for drivers of fuel-efficient vehicles and had a water feature. Similar to the stop at Big Cypress, despite offering preferred parking for alternative fuel vehicles, neither offered charging stations. The Florida rest areas also offered some of their signage in both English and Spanish.
Georgia

I stopped at a rest area in Georgia which had a nice exterior design and an interior that stood out as nice and clean, featured lots of picnic tables, and offered an individual restroom option.

![Clean and nice with interesting exterior design](image1)

![Lots of picnic table options, these nearer the parking area](image2)
Tennessee

My drive through Tennessee was fairly direct and while I stopped at one rest area in the state, it was unremarkable, a traditional box shaped rest area without any unique features.

What was interesting about my drive through Tennessee was hearing a story on National Public Radio about the book Driving While Black, including an interview with the author Gretchen Sorin. I couldn’t have heard a more perfect and fitting story while on my journey documenting the impact that rest areas have had on American culture and how they reflect American culture. As I traveled north on the iconic I-75 highway, listening to Sorin discuss travel and migration from the south and the Black experience with cars and roads, I felt the presence of those who had gone before me and wanted to feel hopeful for those who would follow.

Kentucky

The Kentucky welcome center was everything one would imagine from Kentucky. The exterior was majestic with pillars and yet welcoming with rocking chairs. Horse statues adorned the yard which was lined with a white wood fencing. The site also offered a multitude of picnic spaces and the picnic tables included signs letting visitors know that the tables had been constructed by individuals from the Eastern Kentucky Correctional Complex as part of the vocational education carpentry program. I was also pleased to see an elderly couple enjoying a picnic lunch at this idyllic location since that was the origins of my thesis project. It was the summer of 2021 when I saw an older couple at an Upper Peninsula roadside park having a picnic at a roadside park near their camper and the project immediately began to take shape in my head. So while I saw other people enjoying picnics on my road trip, this particular setting and couple stood out to me.
Inside, the facility was bright with large windows and benches on which to sit. The facility offered several individual restroom spaces. In this particular case that worked well as a middle-aged man was pushing an elderly woman in a wheelchair into the facility while a young female child in a diaper toddled behind. I don’t know what that man would have done without the option to go into an individual restroom space. Inside the women’s facilities was a depository for used needles, the first time on my trip I had seen that available. As we think about the way travel is facilitated for a broad group of diverse individuals, these are the things to keep in mind.
A needle depository

Large windows let in sunlight near benches
Picnic tables constructed by local vocation education participants

A couple enjoying a picnic in the shade
Further north in Kentucky I passed a rest area with a facility that was made to look like two horse stables joining in the center. They were functional and traditional buildings but their trim and accent pieces reflected a regionalism in the design that let visitors know they were still in horse country and in Kentucky.

Ohio

I stopped at two rest areas in Ohio that were similar to one another. They both had nice landscaping with picnic tables and grills, offered individual restroom spaces, signs with contact information for victims of human trafficking, and signs letting visitors know that the vending machines benefitted blink business operators. At the second rest area I was unable to send a text from the main parking area, there wasn’t enough signal for the text to go through. However, as I moved nearer the rest area exit I tried again and was then successful.

Pretty landscaping
Ample picnic tables

Pretty landscaping
Contact information for victims of human trafficking

Vending machines for the benefit of blind business operators
Michigan

I made my way full circle and back into Michigan with a stop at the Michigan welcome center. This rest area reflected the Pure Michigan vibe that is promoted to residents and visitors alike. The site was green and filled with mature trees, under which were placed picnic tables and grills. There were multiple garbage and recycle bins, and the recycle bins stood out as they were not frequently observed in my other stops. The site offered individual restroom spaces and had a drinking fountain with faucets at two different heights to serve more people.

As a visitor center, maps, brochures, and information were available. As an individual who remains COVID-cautious, I was also very proud of Michigan for offering free COVID testing in a trailer at the rest area with results in about 15 to 30 minutes.

Welcoming exterior including sign advertising COVID testing
COVID testing site

Pure Michigan signage near picnic tables and grill
Mature trees shading picnic tables

This trip compliments some interesting observations at other Michigan rest areas including people seeking signatures on petitions, musicians playing for tips, and homeless individuals asking for money.

Collecting signatures at a northern Michigan rest area
Collecting signatures at a northern Michigan rest area

**Conclusion**

I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to travel around America seeing the ways American culture is reflected in our highway’s rest areas. Aspects of what I saw ranged from offering a basic service, capturing a region’s rich history, foreshadowing growing awareness of important society issues, and responding to emerging needs. There is so much more that one could see and experience on America’s roads, this is but a snippet. But it was a fascinating journey and I look forward to using this information to shape and contribute to my thesis project.
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