

Biography: Jackson Boulevard—From City Street to Grand Carriageway

Jackson Boulevard has carried Route 66 traffic for the entire period of the highway's official life, from 1926 through 1977. The town of Chicago was incorporated in 1834, and its original plat included streets named for all of the Presidents of the United States to that time. This included Andrew Jackson, who was then residing in the White House. Originally a mere 0.9 miles in length, running from State Street on the east to DesPlaines Avenue on the west, Jackson grew in both directions as Chicago grew from a town to a city.

At first, it was Jackson Street, not Jackson Boulevard. In 1869, the Illinois legislature approved the formation of the North, West, and South Park Districts—autonomous governmental bodies that had their own taxing and bonding power—to create around Chicago a rectangle of public parks, with grand boulevards to connect them. It was not long before these outlying parks were actually within the city limits of the growing metropolis. The park districts had the power to regulate all land use within 400 feet of the boulevards and to review the designs of all buildings to be constructed facing them.

The boulevards were meant for “pleasure drives,” a phrase in the pre-automobile era referring to horse-drawn carriages. Commercial traffic was prohibited, except for local deliveries, which meant no “teaming” of heavy cartage wagons along the boulevards, and no franchises for cable cars or electric street trolleys. Boulevards were often much wider than other city streets, and were among the first thoroughfares in the city to be paved with asphalt. Due to their smooth riding surfaces, the boulevards became the favored routes for the “wheelmen,” as the bicycling enthusiasts of the late 1800s were called.

By 1888, street rail encumbered all east-west streets in the central business district EXCEPT Jackson. Concerned citizens of the West Township felt that at least one thoroughfare connecting to the Loop should be reserved for light carriages and bicycles. A majority of property owners along Jackson between Garfield Park and Halsted Street petitioned the Common Council to turn over control of the street to the West Park Commission so that it could be transformed into a Boulevard. Despite objection from team-owners and street rail companies, the ordinance

From “West Side Drives,” *Chicago Tribune* August 28, 1892, p. 33

If it's any satisfaction to get out and be rolled over magnificent boulevards, unequaled anywhere, and view a panorama of progress that will fill you with amazement...then hitch up your horse some evening and follow directions. Put the members of the family in the family rig. If you haven't a family rig hire one from the nearest livery stable; and if you haven't a family go alone. Go on foot or on horseback or on the untamed safety wheel—any way to get there. It will pay you.

Jackson Boulevard with its unpretentious gate, flanked on one side by a theater building, on the other by a typical Halsted street saloon, stretches away ...as far as the eye can reach. The roadway, forty-four feet wide, smooth as a marble mantel in a parlor, is one of the best bits of asphaltum work in the world. On each side of the street is a parked strip of green running along the smooth asphaltum as regularly as binding on a garment, separating the sufficient sidewalks from the drive. At regular intervals, twenty-five feet apart, trees, young but full of promise, bear pretty if not abundant foliage, and between them at stated intervals are ornamental boulevard lamps on artistic supports. You drive along by rows of houses that are comfortable even if the elegance that you might expect to see on a boulevard is wanting.

Right here is where you want to bring your reflective and comparative quality into action, and figure it out that not much more than a year ago the boulevard was only a plain, hard working, every day street, so rough that the babies were liable to be jolted out of your family carriage during an afternoon's drive. You will be bound to admit that the asphaltum roadway can't be surpassed, and the beautiful foliage and the boulevard appurtenances generally grow more pleasing as you drive along.

And occasionally you see evidences of the boulevard spirit cropping out in improvements on the old houses that were good

enough for a “street” but were thought shabby for a boulevard. Here and there on each side you come upon a new residence that causes you to appreciate the fact that the boulevard spirit has been perfected.

“It was all a prairie here a year ago, and a good deal further east, too.” said the foreman in charge of the work. “We only stuck the first shovel into it a year ago, July 8, and now look at it.”

It was, indeed, a beautiful sight to look down the beautiful boulevard, behold the enterprise, and to view the general improvements about its western terminus. A year ago the great Van Buren street car barns and the buildings of the Servite order were the only structures of any consequence. Now comfortable, if not elegant, residences abound on every hand, and workmen are there with an energy which promises a lining of the boulevard with solid blocks of buildings before many more moons have waxed and waned.

A NEW HOME ON JACKSON BOULEVARD





Postcard of Ashland Avenue, looking north from Jackson Boulevard, postmarked 1907. New York Postal Card Co., Chicago. From the author's collection.

From the *Chicago Tribune*, August 14, 1897, p. 10.

NEW BOULEVARD IS OPEN

JACKSON, FROM MICHIGAN AVENUE TO THE RIVER, COMPLETED.

Stream of Wheelmen Glides Over the Asphalt Pavement, a Girl in Green Bloomers Leading—Union League Club Advances the Money for Uncle Sam's Share of the Expense—Error in Ordinances Leaves Bridge and Viaduct Under City Control.

Jackson boulevard, from Michigan avenue to Garfield Park, was completed and formally thrown open to the public last night by a man with a clay pipe, who let down the bars at Clark street and allowed a girl in green bloomers to ride through on her bicycle. Afterwards hundreds of bicyclists and scores of carriages and mail wagons tried the new asphalt and found it was good...

On account of a curious error in the ordinances turning the street over to the South Park Commissioners, the bridge and the viaduct over the railroad tracks at Canal street are still under city control, and are still street, though the South Park Commissioners call them part of the boulevard...the men who framed the ordinance fixed the west limit at the bridge

The Park Commissioners experienced more difficulty with the block between Clark and Dearborn streets, trying to find out who was to pay for the asphalt, than they did with all the rest of the street from Michigan avenue to Garfield Park. The bulk of the expense of paving between the two streets will fall on the United States government, which owns the whole north side of the block. It would have kept back the work to have waited till Congress could make an appropriation for its share in the paving, and so the Union League club, which shared the expense with the property-owners on the south side of the thoroughfare, advanced the money for Uncle Sam.

Bicyclists who used the boulevard last night called down blessings on the heads of the South Park Commissioners for the easy road to the West Side. Comparatively few vehicles, apparently, found out last night the street was open.

passed on October 22, 1888.

The transfer of Jackson from the city to the West Parks survived a court challenge, but lack of funding delayed completion of the paving and improvements until 1893. In the interim, some citizens wished to move further with boulevard protection of the eastern section of Jackson. On June 29, 1891, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "For some time leading West Side property owners, notably members of the Improvement clubs, have been discussing the problem of how the West Park [boulevard] system could be connected with the South Park system...At the present time the nearest points to which the West and South Side systems reach for connection are the intersection of

Jackson and Halsted streets and the intersection of Michigan avenue and Jackson street.

"It has been frequently suggested that Jackson street be made a boulevard between the two points indicated. This would make the connection complete. This was suggested when Jackson street west of Halsted street was made a boulevard, for the reason that it was the only east and west street entering the business district that was free from street-car tracks. It has also a magnificent double bridge, and there are few mercantile houses on it. Objection, however, was made by the team-owners and their friends in the Council, and the boulevarding project was abandoned" ("**To Connect The Parks,**" p. 8)

In December 1895, two competing street rail companies were proposing to lay track across the Jackson Street Bridge and west to Halsted. A February 19, 1896 *Tribune* editorial reported that an ordinance giving the West Park Commissioners the control of Jackson from Halsted street to the Chicago River had failed to win a majority vote in the Common Council. "Jackson street is for sale. To boulevard the street would be to take it out of the market and put an end to a chance of making a very profitable trade.

"An electric street railway company, which desires to enter into competition with the West [Chicago Street Railway]...is anxious to get a right of way on Jackson street. The latter company is not desirous to get the franchise itself, but does not want to see it in unfriendly hands. Whoever has the longest pole will get the persimmons" ("**Jackson Street Is For Sale,**" p. 6). It was assumed that Aldermanic graft would assure one of the railways would win out over the boulevard proposal.

However, less than a month later, the boulevard ordinance was again introduced and passed easily. The ordinance specified that property owners along the new boulevard section would only be assessed a tax of \$1 per front-foot for the improvements, even though the actual cost would be \$8 per foot of