

CNY VINTAGE

# Flashback: 'Big battle' over what to name I-81 in 1958

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Work continues on the construction of Interstate 81 through the city of Syracuse in the early 1960s. (Onondaga Historical Association)



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News broke earlier this month that the Department of Transportation's report about the preferred option for Interstate 81 in Syracuse would be not be made until 2019.

It ensures that the controversy about the future of the highway will continue for at least a few more years.

It sometimes seems like everything surrounding I-81 ends up being controversial.

Boy Wins Contest  
*Empire Stateway*  
*Name Selected*

A headline from the Feb. 1, 1958 Post-Standard announces the winner of a statewide contest to name Interstate 81. The name chosen was "Empire Stateway."

Sixty years ago, in 1958, there was even a debate about what to call it.

In the Post-Standard on Jan. 14, 1958, Luther Bliven wrote: "It appears there will be as much controversy about naming the new superhighway linking the Pennsylvania state line and the Canadian border as there was three years ago in choosing a route for the 200-mile, four-lane highway."

After a "big battle raged" over whether the new highway would go through Syracuse or swing east to near Utica, as construction began, a new "hassle has developed over what to call it."

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At first the proposed highway was referred to as the north-south expressway.

Then in 1955, Sen. Henry Wise, of Watertown, referred to it in legislation as the "Penn-Canada Highway."

But after New York Governor Averell Harriman dedicated a portion of the new highway south of Syracuse in 1957 he announced his dissatisfaction with any name which

included "Penn-Can" or "Penn-Canada." The name, he thought, should have something related to New York.

He suggested the state hold a contest to help select an appropriate name.

The idea was picked up the State Commerce Department who promised a 14-foot aluminum motorboat to the person who first submitted the name that was chosen to be best.

By Jan. 13, there had been close to 6,500 entries.

Despite the contest, Sen. Wise and Assemblyman George Ingalls, of Binghamton, planned to introduce a bill to name the highway the "Penn-Canada Freeway."

They believed that the name was chosen by the "Penn-Can committee" which had "spearheaded the drive which made the highway possible, on its present location."

Past and present National Guardsmen then got into the name game, waging a vigorous campaign to get the highway named "The 27th Division Memorial Highway."

The name was nominated in the governor's contest to honor "those who paid the supreme sacrifice in performance of duty to the State of New York and the United States of America."

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(The unit served on the Mexican border before World War I, cracked the Hindenburg line during the war and fought with distinction during World War II. In 1958, it was known as the 27th Armored Division, nicknamed the "Empire" division.)

The Post-Standard's editorial page was all for it, declaring it an appropriate way to honor the division's "glorious history, having served in two world wars and in state floods, riots and other emergencies."

The Guardsmen nomination was one of 11,415 submitted to the governor's naming contest.

The winner was chosen on Jan. 31, 1958 by a selection committee comprised of 22 Chamber of Commerce presidents.

The winner was "Empire Stateway," which was submitted 125 times. The first to do so was David Sussman, an 11th grade student at Great Neck High School in King's Point.

"I hope you will come around to Sands Point in your boat to see me next summer," Gov. Harriman wired the winner.

But the winning name next had to be sent to the state legislature for approval.

At the same time, a bill was introduced to name the highway after the National Guard Division, while another maintained that the name "Penn-Can Freeway" still be used.

On March 25, the name "Empire Stateway" was killed in the Senate. Majority Leader Walter Mahoney said the "matter needed more study."

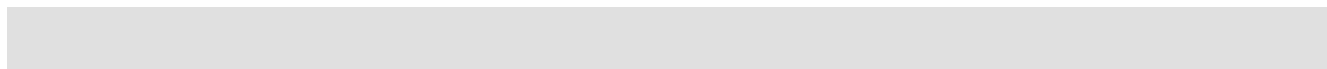
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About a week later, though, the State Public Works Department declared that it would be the only name they would use.

A spokesman from the department said legislative action was not necessary, "you can call a highway anything you like."

When asked what the department would do if the Legislature ever adopted another name for the highway, the spokesman said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Send your ideas and curiosities to Johnathan Croyle: [Email](#) | 315-427-3958.



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