

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

1273



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable". For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Meridian Highway

Other names/site number Meridian Road

2. Location

Street & number 4.5 miles of county road following 552 Ave, 853 Rd & 551 Ave

Not for publication

City or town Pierce

Vicinity

State Nebraska

Code NE

County Pierce

Code 139

Zip code 68767

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official

Date

10/12/01

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

Entered in the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain):

11-29-01

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

Meridian Highway

Name of Property

Pierce County, Nebraska

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many as apply)

- Public-local
- Public-state
- Public-federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
		Buildings
		Sites
14	1	Structures
		Objects
14	1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

TRANSPORTATION/road-related

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

TRANSPORTATION/road-related

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation N/A

Walls N/A

Roof N/A

Other EARTH, CONCRETE, GRAVEL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** Removed from its original location.
- C** A birthplace or a grave.
- D** A cemetery.
- E** A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** A commemorative property.
- G** Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

TRANSPORTATION

Period of Significance

1911-1939

Significant Dates

1911; 1915; 1920

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

N/A

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- Previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- Designated a National Historic Landmark
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location for additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: _____

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Approximately 36 acres

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	14	625230	4667190	3.	14	625190	4670400
2.	14	625210	4668800	4.	14	625150	4672000

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Christina Slattery & Chad D. Moffett, Historic Preservation Specialists / L. Robert Puschendorf, Deputy SHPO
organization Mead & Hunt, Inc. / Nebraska State Historical Society date July 2001
street & number 6501 Watts Road / 1500 R Street telephone 608.273.6380 / 402.471.4769
city or town Madison / Lincoln state WI / NE zip code 53719 / 68501

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Pierce County Board of Commissioners
street & number 111 West Court Room, Pierce County Courthouse telephone 402.329.4474
city or town Pierce state NE zip code 68767

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Description

Introduction and General Setting

The nominated section of the Meridian Highway is a 4.5-mile segment of the historic 1911 route in rural Pierce County. The road is located southeast of the city of Pierce and is presently designated as portions of county road. The nominated section of the Meridian Highway includes a small abandoned section of the original roadbed to the southwest of State Highway 13. Beginning at the intersection of 850 Road and the abandoned section of 552 Avenue, the nominated section of road travels north approximately 3 miles crossing the North Fork of the Elkhorn River before turning west for 1 mile and then north for ½ mile, ending at State Highway 98. Contributing historical features along the roadway include the roadbed, concrete culverts and markers, an "I"-beam girder bridge, and a truss bridge. Overall, the road and related resources retain excellent integrity and contribute to the feeling and association of travel on an early twentieth-century highway.

The rural landscape of this section of the Meridian Highway is a level plain, drained by the North Fork of the Elkhorn River and supporting agricultural cropland and pastures. Fence lines mark the right-of-way. Distinctive vegetation features along the roadway include stands of mature cottonwood trees that mark farmsteads, a row of red cedar trees on the east side of State Highway 13 oriented on a north-south axis, and a shelterbelt oriented on an east-west axis one-half mile in length along the north side of 853 Road. The shelterbelt consists of rows of red cedar trees, cottonwood, and other species of trees typical of 1930s shelterbelt programs. A canal draining an unnamed tributary of the North Fork of the Elkhorn River parallels the roadway on the west side of 552 Avenue south of its intersection with 853 Road.

Roadbed

1911

Contributing

The roadbed structure consists of an earthen embankment and earth-and-gravel grading, which create a surface, or crown. The crown angles downward towards the edges of the embankment. The standard roadbed crown used in Nebraska during the date of construction was 24 feet wide and had an elevation, or rise in height, of 6 inches.¹ Extending outward from the edge of the roadbed is a depression, or ditch, extending from the embankment to the adjacent property line, used to channel runoff water from the roadbed. The entire distance of the roadbed and ditch consists of the right-of-way. The nominated section of the Meridian Highway's right-of-way measures 66 feet, which is the standard right-of-way width established in Nebraska as the legal width of county roads.² An abandoned section of roadbed is located in a plowed agricultural field, and includes two extant culverts with markers that visually connect this section of roadway with the rest of the 1911 alignment.

In 1920 the Meridian Highway in Pierce County underwent improvements, and concrete culverts with markers and two sections of concrete overlay were added to the nominated section of the road. The concrete overlay sections were constructed where frequent flooding and washouts occurred. The concrete sections formed spillways and alleviated the poor roadway conditions. One concrete overlay section is located on 552 Avenue just over 1 mile north of the intersection

¹ State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage, *Twelfth Biennial Report of the State Board of Irrigation Highways and Drainage 1917-18* (Lincoln, Nebr.: State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage), 421.

² George E. Koster, *A Story of Highway Development in Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Department of Roads, 1997), 12.

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of State Highway 13. The concrete overlay pavement and shoulder spillway measures 185 feet long and is 16 feet wide. The second concrete overlay pavement section is located approximately one-tenth of a mile west of the shelterbelt on 853 Road and measures 57 feet long and has a width of 16 feet. In 1925-26 minor improvements were made to this section of the Meridian Highway, and a layer of gravel was added to the roadbed.

Truss Bridge

1915

Contributing

A steel pony truss bridge carries the Meridian Highway over the North Fork of the Elkhorn River. The bridge was constructed in 1915. The steel bridge replaced an earlier wooden bridge and was constructed in a Warren configuration by the Canton Bridge Company of Canton, Ohio.³ The Canton Bridge Company was responsible for the construction of a number of truss bridges in Pierce County and held the county's bridge contracts from 1905 to 1918.⁴

The steel truss members are stamped with "Jones and Laughlin," referring to the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation of Pittsburgh, which supplied steel to bridge companies. The bridge features a lattice railing marked "Cambria" probably referring to the Cambria steel mills of Pittsburgh, a supplier of steel to bridge manufacturers. The bridge measures 8 feet in height and is 16 feet wide and 81 feet long. The truss superstructure connects directly into concrete abutments. The deck of the structure is concrete over corrugated iron.

Steel Girder Bridge

c. 1920

Contributing

A small bridge constructed of steel "I"-beams parallel to the roadway crosses a smaller tributary of the North Fork of the Elkhorn River. The bridge is located immediately east of the intersection of county road 552 Avenue and 853 Road, about 3 miles north of State Highway 13. The bridge has a lattice railing and a concrete deck.

Culverts with Markers

1920

11 Contributing resources

Located along the Meridian Highway are 11 concrete culverts with markers. The concrete pipe and box culverts were constructed in 1920 during improvements to the highway. Concrete wing walls flank each side of the culverts and a 4-foot-high concrete marker shaped in the form of an obelisk rises up to mark each side of the roadbed. Eight culverts measure 24 feet wide. Three culverts located at road intersections measure 39 feet wide to accommodate the extra space necessary to turn from one road onto another. The culverts and attached markers are in varying degrees of integrity. In some cases the markers are fully intact, some have been damaged and are broken, while others have been broken off of the culverts completely. The concrete markers display remnants of white and silver paint.

³ *Pierce County Leader*, 15 April 1915; *Pierce County Leader*, 17 June 1915.

⁴ FraserDESIGN and Hess, Roise and Company, *Nebraska Historic Bridge Inventory* (January 1991).

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Statement of Significance

This 4.5-mile section of the Meridian Highway, delineated in 1911, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (National Register) under *Criteria A* and *C* as an example of an intact section of the original 1911 alignment of this early transportation corridor. Applying *Criterion A*, the nominated section of the Meridian Highway in Pierce County is significant as a section of the major north-south cross-county highway developed through the efforts of local citizens involved with the International Meridian Road Association. The nominated section retains integrity and represents an era of local and regional road development.

The Meridian Highway is also eligible for the National Register under *Criterion C* as an intact example of early twentieth-century road design retaining the original character and historic resources of the period. The 4.5-mile nominated section retains the feeling, setting, and design of the early Meridian Highway in the state, and includes a 1915 steel truss bridge, and the 1920s roadbed improvements and culverts, which demonstrate period road construction technology. The period of significance for this nominated section of the Meridian Highway begins in 1911 with the establishment of the alignment and continues to 1939 when the Meridian Highway (U.S. Route 81) was rerouted to its current location.

Development of the Meridian Highway

"It touches the great lumber and wheat belts of the north, swings straight into the land of corn and of cotton and carries its route into the tropics of the Mexican republic direct from the snow laden hills of northern and central Canada."

Description of the Meridian Highway from the Columbus Daily Telegram, Columbus, Nebraska, 7 May 1924.

During the early twentieth century, road development was largely initiated by private interests composed of local, state, or regional associations who cooperated in the promotion and improvements of cross-country routes. The Meridian Road was promoted by one of the earliest associations of its kind, which was organized in Kansas in June 1911 to establish a direct, north-south automobile route through the central United States. The objective of the promoters was to establish and cooperate with similar organizations in Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, and North and South Dakota to locate and mark an improved road from Winnipeg, Canada, to the Gulf of Mexico. At the June meeting, the name "Meridian Road" was selected for the proposed route because it would closely follow the Sixth Principal Meridian. Other meeting activities included the adoption of a sign, a map of a route through Kansas, and instructions for the association to promote the road south to the Gulf of Mexico and north to Canada.⁹

⁹ "Meridian Highway History," *Texas Oil News* (N.p., c. 1917-19), collection of the F.A. Long Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

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In May 1915, the Pierce Auto Club requested the county commissioners to place white posts on culverts on the Meridian Highway within a 10-mile-radius of Pierce. The purpose of the markers was to alert drivers to the presence of the culverts and prevent accidents.⁵ These white posts were predecessors to the 11 extant culverts and markers. The extant concrete culverts and markers date from 1920 when the Norfolk Bridge & Construction Company received the contract for the culverts on the Meridian Highway.⁶ Historically, state law required that culverts measuring 24 feet or less be marked at each end with a white post. By 1931, culvert lengths had increased from 24 to 28 feet, and the state highway department eliminated the marker posts on state-owned roads.⁷

Stream Gaging Station

c. 1960

Noncontributing

A stream gaging station owned by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) is located on both ends of the east elevation of the truss bridge. The structure to the southeast of the truss bridge is cyclical in shape and approximately 8 feet high and 3 feet in diameter with a door and metal conical roof. The structure to the northeast of the truss bridge is about 6 feet high and consists of a metal box on a cylindrical pedestal with a hinged door. The gaging station was installed in 1960 to measure hydrological conditions on the North Fork of the Elkhorn River. In 1997 the stream gaging equipment was moved 2 miles downstream. The gaging station is non-operational and is scheduled to be removed.⁸

⁵ *Pierce County Leader*, 20 May 1915.

⁶ *Pierce County Call*, 7 April 1920.

⁷ *Norfolk Daily News*, 7 August 1931.

⁸ Information obtained via e-mail exchange by the author with Glenn B. Engel, USGS, 13 March 2001.

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After an association was formed in Kansas and a route was chosen, the group solicited other states for support. In September 1911 John Nicholson of Kansas, originator of the road, spoke in Columbus to gain support for the development of the Meridian Road through Nebraska. As reported in the *Columbus Telegraph*, Nicholson explained that the main goal in outlining a route was not to follow the meridian line, but to follow "the main traveled roads leading to the county seat, and the principal towns located close to the line."¹⁰ At this meeting, representatives from communities along the proposed route organized the Nebraska Meridian Road Association. Committeemen from each county were selected to promote interest in the road and to identify the most practical route through their county. The original route in Nebraska traveled over 200 miles, crossing through nine counties north to south and connecting the communities of Crofton, Wausa, Pierce, Hadar, Norfolk, Madison, Humphrey, Platte Center, Columbus, Shelby, Osceola, Stromsburg, York, McCool Junction, Fairmont, Geneva, Strang, Bruning, Belvidere, Hebron, and Chester. The Nebraska association adopted a metal sign shaped like the state of Nebraska with white lettering "Meridian Road" on a blue background as their official sign.¹¹

Overall planning of the road continued quickly as the South Dakota and the North Dakota divisions of the Meridian Road planned a route in October and a Canadian division organized in November 1911.¹² In January of 1912, the International Meridian Road Association was formed, representing Canada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. The constitution and bylaws specified that "the Meridian Highway shall be a well graded, well drained Highway with permanent bridges, substantial culverts and kept in a condition to facilitate travel, and it shall be the aim and object of the Association to secure the construction and maintenance of a hard surfaced road as soon as conditions will warrant the same and is justified."¹³ The International Meridian Road Association adopted an official road sign consisting of white bands on poles 12 inches wide indicating straight ahead, and a 6-inch white band with 6-inch red band above on three poles before and three poles after each turn with the letters M.R. indicating turns in the route.¹⁴ Each state division of the Meridian Highway Association was responsible for the location, maintenance, and signage. The international organization was involved in advertising, tours, and general improvements to the road, and settled disputes over route location at the borders.¹⁵

The International Meridian Road Association was involved most directly with the overall promotion of the road to enhance its development across the entire route. On September 10, 1912, an "official party" comprised of officers of the International Meridian Road Association and others, including the editor of *Road Maker* and a representative of the *Automobile Blue Book*, started on a promotional tour along the Meridian Road traveling south to the Gulf of Mexico.¹⁶ The purpose of the trip was to observe the progress of the road and to meet with local officials to encourage the maintenance and improvement of the road. The party traveled over 100 miles a day and were met by large crowds in many cities. Each state provided the group with transportation and the towns furnished hotel and garage facilities free-of-

¹⁰ *Columbus Telegraph*, 8 September 1911.

¹¹ *Columbus Telegraph*, 8 September 1911.

¹² "Meridian Highway History."

¹³ Meridian Road constitution and bylaws in the collection of the F.A. Long Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

¹⁴ "Meridian Highway History."

¹⁵ "Meridian Highway History."

¹⁶ "Meridian Highway History."

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charge.¹⁷ A second booster trip was made in the summer of 1914. Approximately 50 cars of businessmen traveled from Texas and Oklahoma north to Canada accompanied by a film crew.¹⁸

Improvements along the road, by 1919 renamed "Meridian Highway," continued in various stages over the years, but perhaps the construction of the Meridian Highway Bridge at Yankton, South Dakota, in 1924 was the most significant. Meridian Highway officials had long recognized that permanent crossing over the Missouri River was a final link in making the highway a continuous, year-round and all-weather road system. The new bridge replaced a seasonal ferry and pontoon bridge over the Missouri River between Nebraska and South Dakota.

In 1922 the entire Meridian Highway route in Nebraska was designated as a state highway.¹⁹ Four years later, in 1926, the Federal Bureau of Roads designated the Meridian Highway as U.S. Highway 81 as part of the country's primary highway system.²⁰ By 1928, only 19 miles of the Meridian Highway in Nebraska remained earth – 10 miles were located between Columbus and Nebraska-Kansas state line, and 9 miles were located north of Wausa – and were under contract to be graded with gravel.²¹

Criterion A – The Good Roads Movement and Early Road Development

Road networks prior to the twentieth century in Nebraska and much of the country were largely undeveloped. The turn-of-the-century "Good Roads Movement" developed in response to the poor condition of the nation's road systems. Farmers supported good roads to accommodate farm-to-market access to rail service and local markets. Rural mail delivery (RFD), begun in 1896, depended on improved mail routes and focused further attention on the condition of rural roads. Town merchants supported good roads as a means to sustain and expand their trade areas. Local newspapers carried syndicated articles promoting road improvement techniques and good roads in general. Local commercial clubs, business associations, automobile clubs, and merchants contributed labor and funds to improve roads in their locale.

For the most part, early road development and maintenance in Nebraska was assigned to the counties. County roads consisted of long distances of unimproved rural roads, primarily section line roads. Little centralized support was provided by state and federal government. Limited resources of the counties were often supplemented by private sources of support from towns and farms alike, including volunteer labor, in-kind use of workhorses and equipment, and cash donations. In Pierce County, organizations such as the Pierce Commercial Club, reorganized in 1910; the Pierce County Automobile Association, founded in 1911 as an affiliate of the Nebraska Automobile Association; and private merchants, such as the Pierce County Bank, rallied to support road improvement.

During this period, the establishment of "automobile trails," the forerunners to today's highway systems, were similarly initiated by private interests, composed of local, state, or regional associations that cooperated in the promotion and

¹⁷ Samuel H. Lea, "Inspection Trip Over the Meridian Road," *The Road Maker* (Volume II, No. 3:1-4), 2.

¹⁸ *Hebron Journal*, 10 July 1914.

¹⁹ Dr. F.A. Long, Madison, to John C. Nicholson, Newton, Kansas, 4 February 1922. Personal correspondence in the collection of the F.A. Long Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

²⁰ Francis A. Long, *A Prairie Doctor of the Eighties* (Norfolk, Nebr.: Huse Publishing Company, 1937), 154-55.

²¹ *Norfolk Daily News*, 11 June 1928.

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improvement of cross-country routes. Towns rallied to be connected to the new auto trails, and highway associations sought support by connecting county seats and other towns with their routes. Citizen organizations like the Lincoln Highway Association and the Meridian Road Association were formed to lobby state, federal, and local governments to cooperatively plan and construct roads. The Meridian Road, promoted by one of the earliest associations of its kind, was organized to establish a direct, north-south automobile route from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. When the Nebraska Division of the Meridian Road was organized in September of 1911 in Columbus, "committeemen" from each county were selected to promote interest in the road and identify the most practical route through their county. The group identified a tentative map of Nebraska with county seat towns and a route from the town of Chester on the Kansas-Nebraska border to the Missouri River opposite of Yankton, S.D.²² By 1914, Nebraska boasted three major highways largely supported by local road enthusiasts and county governments: Meridian, Lincoln, and the Omaha-Lincoln-Denver Highways.

Most prominent of Pierce County's good roads "boosters" was Woods Cones (1858-1938), pioneer Pierce banker and automobile enthusiast. Cones served as vice president of the Pierce County Automobile Association and was a supporter of the Pierce Commercial Club and a member of its roads committee.²³ Due to his enthusiasm for good roads and automotive transportation, Woods Cones was requested to represent Pierce County in the Nebraska Meridian Road Association. In this capacity he was responsible for outlining the route through Pierce County in 1911.²⁴ From Norfolk, the route followed an existing northwesterly road through Hadar, then aligning north towards Pierce on a section road bisecting Cleveland and South Branch precincts and Pierce and Slough precincts. The route largely remained in this location until the highway was relocated to the east in 1939, bypassing the towns of Pierce County it once served.

Cones' involvement with the Meridian Highway continued after the road was routed. In 1918-19 the Nebraska Division of the International Meridian Road Association was divided into two divisions. Cones drafted bylaws for the northern division and was enrolled as the committee member representing Pierce County. The efforts of Woods Cones represent the role of private development and promotion of "good roads" and early "automobile trails" associations during a period when state and federal aid assumed a greater role in highway development.

"Good Roads" boosters and highway associations helped advocate both state and federal governments to take a more active role in road development. By 1916, the federal government entered the picture. The Federal-Aid Road Act appropriated \$75 million in federal assistance over a 5-year period to improve highways.²⁵ The first 3-year appropriation from the Federal Road Fund was matched by the 1917 Nebraska State Legislature, which also authorized the State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage to proceed with road construction projects. "By accepting provisions of the 1916 act, Nebraska was launched into the construction and maintenance of state highways."²⁶ The Nebraska State Legislature created the State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage to undertake road construction projects and devised a plan

²² *Columbus Telegraph*, 8 September 1911.

²³ *Pierce County Leader*, 3 November 1910.

²⁴ *Pierce County Call*, 19 October 1911 and 22 February 1912.

²⁵ *The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway*, 5th ed. (Tucson, Ariz.: The Patrice Press, 1993; Republished in facsimile from the 1924 edition.), 170.

²⁶ Koster, 19-20.

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to connect all county seats with highways.²⁷ In the 1920s most Nebraska roads were dirt or gravel; paved roads were found only in Omaha, Lincoln, and Grand Island.²⁸ Nebraska highway engineers advocated gravel for surfacing highways, rather than more permanent materials like concrete and bituminous asphalt. In Nebraska, soil conditions, less rainfall, and hard stone material for gravel (largely taken from the Platte River) made gravel an economical and acceptable choice for state highways.²⁹

Federal funding for the construction of highways continued with the Federal Highway Act of 1921. Under the Act, each state was eligible for assistance for the construction of 7 percent of its highways, and road designs were required to adhere to the federal government's minimum standards for width, grade, and roadbed type based on traffic load. In Nebraska the entire length of the Meridian Highway was designated under the 7 percent "rule." States were required to submit their plans to the Federal Bureau of Public Roads for approval.³⁰ Between 1917 and 1926, Nebraska spent over \$27 million on road construction of which approximately \$12.5 million was furnished by the federal government.³¹ Federal aid to the Meridian Highway was realized with major improvements planned, programmed, or accomplished in 1919-20, including projects from Columbus to Norfolk and north to Pierce.

The nominated section of Meridian Road represents the evolution of road development in the early twentieth century. The road was established by the early efforts of individuals and organizations that promoted good roads and continued to be improved with state and federal funding following the Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916.

Criterion C – Historic Road and Structure Design

Preliminary fieldwork for the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey has been conducted on original and subsequent alignments of the Meridian Highway in eight of the nine counties traversed by the historic highway. Currently, this section of road is believed to retain the highest degree of physical integrity of the early Meridian Highway in the state. Improvements to the road, beginning in 1920, display period road construction techniques expounded by the Nebraska Department of Public Works. The nominated section of road is eligible under *Criterion C* for its period design and engineering. The roadbed and related structures, including culverts and bridges, are located on the original route of the Meridian Highway and demonstrate early twentieth-century road building technology.

Traveling north from Norfolk, the route of the Meridian Road diverged from the section line roads that were most commonly selected for its course. The route selected in 1911 followed an existing cross-country road from Norfolk to Hadar in Pierce County. German families who arrived in the area beginning in 1866 established this northwesterly, cross-country road in northern Madison County and southern Pierce County. This alignment also served a railroad line that paralleled the road. The Meridian Highway in southern Pierce County followed this existing northwest diagonal road out of Norfolk adjacent to the railroad line until Section 7, Township 25 North, Range 1 West / 2 West, where the road turned west and then a quick turn north to put the Meridian Highway back on the section line. The turns may have been placed

²⁷ Koster, 19-20.

²⁸ Koster, 23.

²⁹ Nebraska Good Roads Association.

³⁰ *The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway*, 171-72.

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in the road instead of a curve for safety when crossing the adjacent railroad tracks. The nominated section of the Meridian Highway begins at this point where the Meridian Highway route returns to the section line.

In 1919 federal and state aid was designated for work on two roads in Pierce County, including the Meridian Highway, and a total of \$101,496.73 was allocated for the Meridian Highway and the Antelope Trail running through Randolph, Osmond, and Plainview.³² In 1920 the Edward Peterson Company of Omaha won the bid for the construction of the road from the Madison county line to 2 ½ miles north of Pierce, in Pierce County.³³

Drainage conditions for the level land crossed by this section of the Meridian Highway required the use of available standards set forth for building and maintaining dirt roads. The project was described as requiring "a careful survey of drainage conditions provided adequate structures . . . (s)pillways have been provided for excessive flows from the Elkhorn (River) and equalizing culverts placed at all points where there is danger of floods."³⁴ The 1920 dirt roadbed was designed to 24 feet wide, with an elevation of 6 inches forming a "crown" on the roadway. The road was paralleled by "gutters," or ditches that served to improve surface drainage on flat land roads. The roadbed and ditches conform to detailed standards reported by the State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage in its 1917-18 *Twelfth Biennial Report*, and largely evident today.

Two sections of concrete overlay or "spillways" are extant along this section of road. These were placed in locations where frequent flooding or washouts occurred and where culverts or bridges could not be built to accommodate occasional amounts of runoff from adjacent fields or swales. The design of concrete overlay pavement allowed runoff over the roadbed from one side, draining to the other where concrete aprons and/or the ditch carried water away.

In 1925-26 a 3-inch layer of gravel 21-foot-wide, specified as "sand-gravel surface course" (SGSC), was added to the roadbed. The use of gravel surfacing reflects a significant policy developed in Nebraska, as advocated by the Department of Public Works. State Engineer Robert L. "Roy" Cochran was the leading proponent of gravel for highway surfacing.³⁵ Cochran served as State Engineer from 1923 to 1934 and contended that Nebraska, unlike many other states, had less rainfall and a light, sandy loam that dried out quickly. Nebraska also had an abundant supply of sand and gravel. While pavement might be necessary in some conditions, gravel was an excellent and economical medium to use under these conditions and a good choice for Nebraska.³⁶ In its *Sixteenth Biennial Report for 1925-26*, the Department of Public Works stated that "Gravel roads are no longer an experiment in Nebraska. No more promotion work need be done on this type of construction as the entire state is fully sold on Nebraska's gravel roads. 'Would rather drive a gravel road than a pavement' is a common remark."³⁷ The *Biennial Report for 1927-28* stated that by adopting the sand-gravel road

³¹ Nebraska Good Roads Association, *Nebraska Highways*. Volume 1, No. 3 (Lincoln, Nebr.: Nebraska Publishing Company, 1927).

³² *Pierce County Call*, 24 April 1919.

³³ *Pierce County Call*, 7 April 1920.

³⁴ Department of Public Works, *Thirteenth Biennial Report for 1919-1920*, 616.

³⁵ Mary Cochran Grimes, "Establishing Nebraska's Highway System, 1915-1934 (*Nebraska History*, Winter 1992, Volume 73, No. 4),

³⁶ Koster, 27.

³⁷ Department of Public Works, *Sixteenth Biennial Report for 1925-26*, 33.

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program, Nebraska had been able to expand its mileage of improved roads to about 10 times the amount that would have been possible under a paving program.

Prior to 1923, the total of Nebraska's sand-gravel mileage was 133; 4 years later, Nebraska had constructed 2,861 miles of sand-gravel roads.³⁸ In a 1930 interview, Cochran affirmed that the gravel-surfacing program had been a sound one, adding however that increased federal aid and the higher volumes of traffic on some of the main routes was a matter as to how greatly this program should be expanded.³⁹ A movement towards hard surface pavement followed as demands and funding increased. Despite vocal public demands throughout the 1930s to pave the highway in Pierce County, the nominated section retained its gravel surface and today remains a gravel-surface county road.

Improvements to the road included concrete culverts, complete with wing walls, parapets, and markers made to standard state specifications. As early as 1916, the State Board of Irrigation, Highways, and Drainage discussed the use of concrete culverts that required on-site construction, using wood or metal forms.⁴⁰ In 1920 the Norfolk Bridge & Construction Company received the contract for the 11 culverts that remain on the nominated section of road.⁴¹

The Warren pony truss within this nominated section of Meridian Highway was constructed by the Canton Bridge Company. The bridge was constructed in 1915. A newspaper article reported "a new steel bridge is being constructed by the Canton Bridge Co. on the Meridian road near the Theo. Raubach farm . . . N.M. Nelson has charge of the construction work."⁴² The bridge was built according to the new state law. In 1913 the Nebraska legislature required counties to adopt standard bridge plans. The state engineer's office had prepared a set of about 250 standard highway bridge plans. Plans for pin-connected pony trusses ranged from 35 to 100 feet and riveted through trusses from 90 to 160 feet and pin-connected through trusses from 90 to 304 feet. All standard plans called for 16-foot-wide roadways, and truss designs were available with either wood or concrete floors.⁴³

The Canton Bridge Company, which held Pierce County's contract for bridges from 1905-18, was responsible for large clusters of bridges that survive in Pierce County, among other counties.⁴⁴ The Pierce County Commissioners' proceedings indicate that the Canton Bridge Company held the county's yearly bridge contracts beginning on November 8, 1905, when the commissioners awarded the Canton Bridge Company a contract for "building of a bridge," until June 17, 1918, when the commissioners ratified the existing contract with the Canton Bridge Company to be assigned to the Pioneer Construction Company.⁴⁵ N.M. Nelson of Pierce County was construction superintendent for the Canton Bridge

³⁸ Department of Public Works, *Seventeenth Biennial Report for 1927-28*, 59-60.

³⁹ *Pierce County Leader*, 10 July 1930.

⁴⁰ James E. Potter and L. Robert Puschendorf, Editors, *Spans in Time: A History of Nebraska Bridges* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Nebraska State Historical Society and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1999), 44.

⁴¹ *Pierce County Call*, 7 April 1920.

⁴² *Pierce County Leader*, 17 June 1915.

⁴³ James E. Potter and L. Robert Puschendorf, editors, *Spans in Time: A History of Nebraska Bridges* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Nebraska State Historical Society and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1999), 30.

⁴⁴ FraserDESIGN and Hess, Roise and Company, *Nebraska Historic Bridge Inventory* (January 1991), 11-12.

⁴⁵ Pierce County Commissioners proceedings on file at the Pierce County Courthouse, 1905-18.

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Company, overseeing the construction of local bridges from about 1912 to 1916.⁴⁶ Nelson served as a Pierce County Commissioner prior to his service to the Canton Bridge Company.⁴⁷

Relocation of the Meridian Highway

In 1933-34, a one-and-one-half section of the nominated section of the Meridian Highway was rerouted. Right-of-way was acquired through Section 25 east of Pierce to construct a "feeder road" from Pierce to Wayne (then Highway 113). The rerouted section is not included in the nomination because this is a minor deviation of the route and was only in place for 5 years before the entire highway was rerouted.

In the mid-1930s, plans were initiated to relocate the Meridian Highway (Highway 81), bypassing towns between Columbus and Norfolk, and Norfolk to Yankton. There was strong opposition from community leaders, businessmen, and farmers to reroute the highway. Representatives of towns that would be bypassed by the proposed relocation formed the U.S. Highway 81 Road Association to lobby against the efforts and traveled to Washington, D.C., in early August of 1939 to protest the relocation.⁴⁸ Locals were opposed to the rerouting because of the potential loss of revenue from travelers and also argued "that only 5 to 10 percent of the people use the highway for long distance travel and most users are local; therefore the highway should go through the towns, because that's where people want to go."⁴⁹

Despite local opposition, the relocation of Highway 81 north of Norfolk was proposed by the state and approved by the Federal Works Agency Public Roads Administration in 1939. The right-of-way purchase was completed by January of 1939 and relocation of Highway 81 from Norfolk north to Highway 20 was planned for completion by the end of 1939.⁵⁰ In August of 1939, construction bids were awarded for sections of the new Highway 81.⁵¹

Conclusion

The nominated section of the Meridian Highway is a good and rare example of an early twentieth-century road construction and transportation network, and is eligible for the National Register under *Criteria A* and *C*. In comparison with other sections of the Meridian Highway, this 4.5-mile section retains excellent integrity and a historic feeling and association that is not apparent in other rural stretches. This nominated section of the Meridian Highway has received minimum maintenance and limited improvements outside of the period of significance from 1911 to 1939. The road exhibits excellent integrity and has many historic resources, including bridges, culverts, and roadbed.

⁴⁶ *Pierce County Leader*, 2 March 1916.

⁴⁷ *Pierce County Call*, 29 February 1912.

⁴⁸ *Pierce County Call*, 17 August 1939.

⁴⁹ *Pierce County Call*, 17 August 1939.

⁵⁰ *Pierce County Call*, 18 January 1939.

⁵¹ *Pierce County Call*, 10 August 1939.

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Newspapers

Various articles in the Meridian Highway site file of the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office from these sources:

Columbus Telegraph
Hebron Journal
Pierce County Call
Pierce County Leader
Norfolk Daily News

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Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

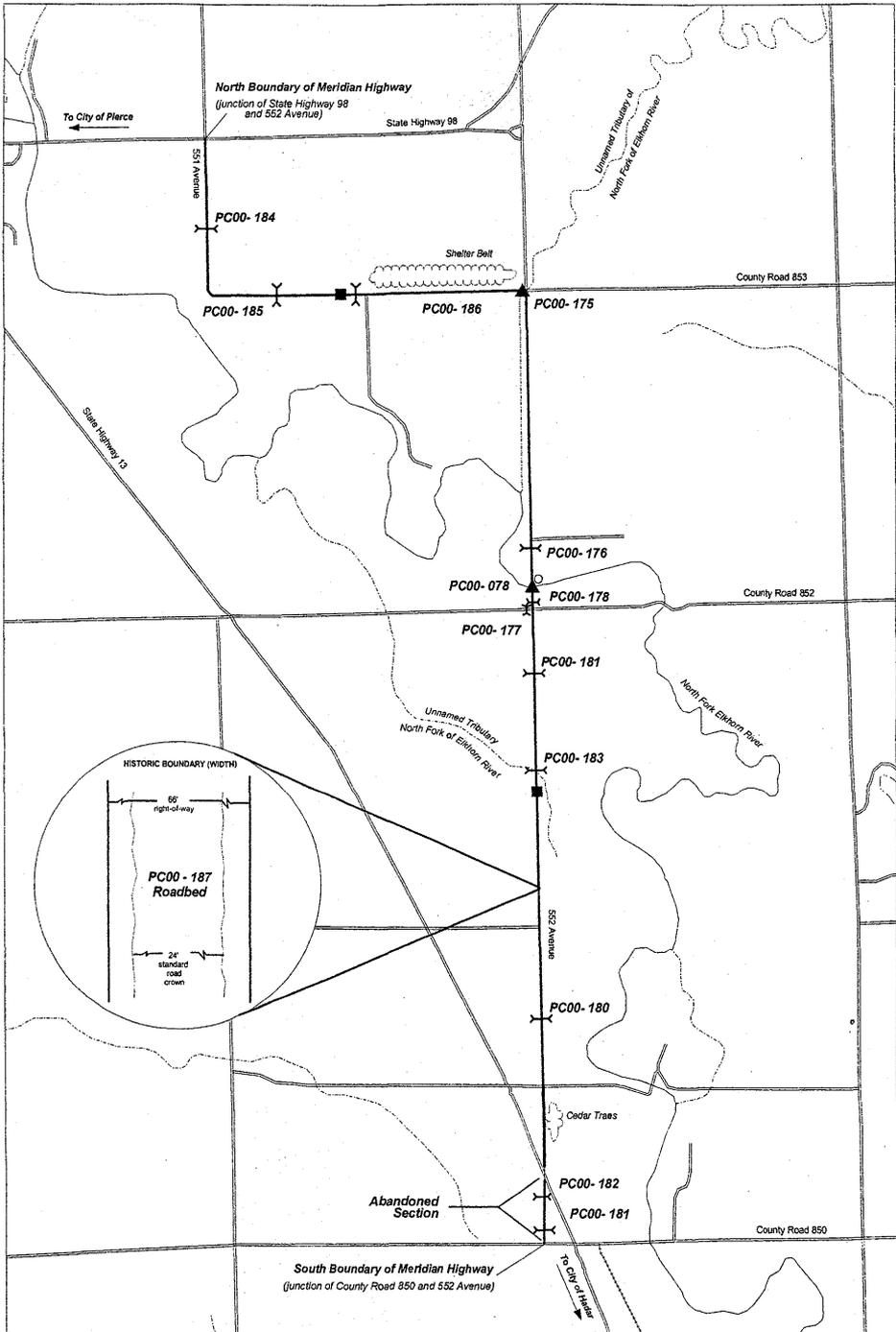
Commencing at the intersection of 552 Avenue and 850 Road, 3 miles due north to the intersection of 552 Avenue and 853 Road, 1 mile due west to the intersection of 551 Avenue and 853 Road, ½ mile due north to the intersection of State Highway 98. The north boundary is State Highway 98. The south boundary is the intersection of 850 Road and the abandoned section of 552 Avenue. The east and west boundaries are the lines of the legal right-of-way, which are 33 feet on either side of the center line of county road 552 Avenue.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the historic resources associated with the road. Encompasses features directly associated with the transportation corridor and does not include unrelated resources. The boundary is within the 66-foot legal width for a county road established by the state in 1860. The roadbed and associated structures and resources are within the 66-foot standard right-of-way width, 33 feet from centerline.

UTM References (continued)

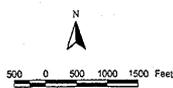
	Zone	Easting	Northing
5.	14	623530	4672000
6.	14	623500	4672280



**MERIDIAN HIGHWAY (1911 ALIGNMENT)
PIERCE COUNTY, NEBRASKA**

Prepared by MEAD & HUNT, Inc.

Historic Roadway Boundary:
4.5 miles in length, 66 feet in width



Landscape Features

- USGS stream gaging station
- Perennial Stream
- - - Intermittent Stream (non-contributing)
- ⊞ Vegetation
- Other Roadway

Contributing Resources

- ▲ Bridge
- ⊞ Culvert
- Contributing Roadbed
- Concrete overlay section

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Pierce County, Nebraska

Photographer: Chad D. Moffett, Mead & Hunt, Inc., March 2001

Negatives in the collection of the Nebraska Historical Society

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Meridian Highway – General view
View facing north

Photograph 7 of 12

Steel girder bridge
View facing northwest

Photograph 2 of 12

Meridian Highway with shelterbelt
View facing southwest

Photograph 8 of 12

Meridian Highway and culverts with markers
View facing east

Photograph 3 of 12

Meridian Highway with row of cedar trees
View facing southeast

Photograph 9 of 12

Detail of culvert with marker
View facing east

Photograph 4 of 12

Abandoned section of Meridian Highway
View facing north

Photograph 10 of 12

Detail of culvert with marker missing
View facing southeast

Photograph 5 of 12

Truss bridge and stream gaging station
View facing north

Photograph 11 of 12

Culvert marker in abandoned section
View facing northwest

Photograph 6 of 12

Meridian Highway and truss bridge
View facing southeast

Photograph 12 of 12

Shelterbelt
View facing northwest