

This is the first map for drivers of the Merritt Parkway in 50 years.

Early Merritt Parkway maps promoted the 1938 road as the "Gateway to New England" and advised travelers of the rules of the road. This new guide is designed to enhance the way neighbors, commuters, and passing motorists experience the Merritt Parkway, which connects and unifies the people and special places of Southwest Connecticut. It highlights some of the bridges and their remarkable details, great old trees, swamps and rivers, stone walls and rock outcrops. Additionally, many parks, arts and science centers, historic sites, and traditional town centers along (or accessible from) the Parkway have been included. Directions and phone numbers are provided for some of these locations.



The Merritt is more than just a beautiful road. It is part of the character of Fairfield County which links historic, verdant and even some offbeat places that, together with the Merritt itself, help give the county its sense of place.



This map helps drivers and passengers to see things along the Merritt that were previously not noticed. (Please drive safely while looking!) This guide also encourages people to venture off the Parkway to explore new places and to see the Merritt in a new way...a road through a "ribbon park," which connects people and communities.



Enjoy the illustrations, explanations, histories, stories and facts! The back of the map provides information about the Parkway and its significance.

Suggested price \$5.00

Brief History of the Merritt Parkway

ORIGIN During the 1920s, the manufacture and use of cars, trucks, and buses skyrocketed and the Boston Post Road (U.S. Route 1), the only major roadway in southwestern Connecticut, became increasingly congested. By the late 1920s, it was crowded with some 21,000 vehicles a day. Traffic poured up from New York City and crises arose for relief.

The Merritt Parkway was constructed to relieve this traffic congestion. It also provided jobs in the midst of the Great Depression, and the Parkway stimulated the development of Fairfield County. It provided a connection to the pioneering Westchester County Parkway system, linking New Yorkers to Connecticut Yankees.

While there was agreement that a road needed to be constructed parallel to Route 1, there was no consensus about what sort of road it ought to be. Some proposed a trucks-only route, others a multi-use highway or freeway. The Fairfield County Planning Association (FCCA), formed in 1924, had a keen interest in maintaining the rustic character of the county. FCCA pushed for a pleasure road which employed trained landscape architects in its design and construction, as well as necessary funding to be set aside for planting along the route. In essence, it wanted a parkway.

The Post Road's huge traffic volumes had attracted the construction of gas stations, hot dog stands and other roadside businesses, and a forest of billboards. A 1927 New York Times editorial condemned the commercialization of the Post Road. Others decried its "cheap stands and tawdry business developments." People wanted relief from the Post Road's blight as much as its traffic.

In the late 1920s, survey work began for the new road, land acquisition started in 1931, and in 1932, the roadway received its formal name: the Merritt Parkway, named in honor of Congressman Schuyler Merritt. Merritt was also the Chairman of the Fairfield County Planning Association.

LAY OF THE LAND Geologically speaking, the "crustal slope" posed a challenge to the Merritt's builders. Glacial scour created a series of north-south ridges and river valleys carved into the bedrock underlying eastern and western Connecticut. Glacial till created fields of stone (hence stone walls). Since the continents collided and split 250 million years ago in what is now Connecticut, observable bedrock is often folded, tilted or crumpled.

The only way to build a road across this challenging topography that would not feel like a roller coaster was to cut into the rocky ridge tops and fill many of the valleys with the resulting rubble. Even so, more fill was needed. A quarry was dug in Greenwich that provided additional needed fill and later became Toll Gate Pond.

The hills on the Merritt are some of its most enjoyable features (provided the downhill is taken at a manageable speed). Grades on the Merritt average three percent, with the steepest a brake-burning seven percent. Many of the rock cuts at or near the ridge tops remain visible today. As one crosses the valleys, especially during winter, it is possible to see the nine rivers below the Parkway. The road ends at the mighty Housatonic River in Stratford, changing into the Wilbur Cross Highway—another graceful roadway in New Haven County.

CONSTRUCTION Ground was broken on May 23, 1934 for the Merritt Parkway in Greenwich, Ct. Later that summer, as owing to one history of the Parkway several groups of sixty workers each began to clear a 100-foot wide swath of land through the swamps, poison ivy, and hardwood forests of southwestern Connecticut. Some of the land had been untouched since colonial times.

Because of the rock, drilling and blasting were a constant of construction. Grading followed clearing, with some topsoil set aside for use in landscaping and this was followed by pavement construction. Though the road was designed entirely by Connecticut at Highway Department employees, over 2,000 workers from 14 private companies carried out construction. Occasionally bridge construction preceded roadway clearing. For example, the bridge at Sport Hill Road in Fairfield was built beside a farmhouse and barn, long before the road itself arrived.

The first segment of the Parkway, from the New York state line to Route 7 in Norwalk, opened on June 25, 1938. The completed Parkway opened September 2, 1940.

SCANDAL! For several years before it was completed, rumors circulated about improper dealings in the acquisition of land for the Merritt. Then, in December 1937, six months before the Parkway was to open, the Bridgeport Post broke the story of the great Merritt Parkway land scandal.

The leading figure in the scandal was G. Leroy Kemp, a real estate agent and former-Darien state representative hired by Highway Commissioner John MacDonald in 1932 as a special land-purchasing agent for the Merritt Parkway. Kemp had the knowledge of the Merritt's route, Kemp worked out a kickback scheme with local real estate agents, by identifying the targeted parcel to an agent. The agent would become the landowner's representative. Kemp would buy the land for the state, and Kemp and the broker would split the commission. In January 1938, a grand jury charged that this series of events took place in no fewer than 60 transactions involving Kemp and brokers Thomas Cooke of Greenwich and Samuel Silverman of Stamford.

In the end, only Kemp went to jail. But the scandal reached the highest levels of state government. As Kemp's boss, and as a result of his own inability to defend a series of questions about the project, Highway Commissioner John MacDonald was forced to resign after sixteen years in office. In addition, tainted by the events, Governor Wilbur Cross was defeated in the fall election. Suffice it to say that the final parcels of right-of-way were acquired by condemnation.

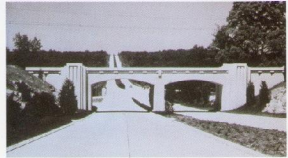
Distinctive features

The Merritt withstood the scandal and the tests of time to become one of America's most significant achievements in public architecture and public engineering in the twentieth century. Without question the Parkway's most important features are its bridges and landscape.

THE BRIDGES There were 69 original bridges on the Merritt Parkway and each one was unique. These were all designed by the Highway Department's George L. Dunkelberger (see following biography). Dunkelberger brought to his task an architect's eye and an understated whimsical spirit.

The bridges represent a range of 1930s architectural styles including French Renaissance, Gothic, Rustic, Art Deco, Art Moderne and Neoclassicism. The bridges also offer numerous details to amuse and engage those travelers who would take notice. Dunkelberger introduced plants, animals and mythical beasts into the Merritt landscape—the spikers and butterflies of Mervous Lane (Fairfield) are one example. At Comstock Hill Road (Norwalk), Dunkelberger honors Connecticut's history through Puritan and Indian bas-reliefs, while bas-reliefs on Burr Street (Fairfield) celebrate Parkway construction workers.

The Merritt's bridges are nearly all made of concrete, unusual for a parkway. This was done as a cost-saving measure over the loud protests of local residents, who favored the stone of Westchester County's parkway bridges. Nearly everyone was sure that nothing of interest, and certainly nothing in harmony with the local landscape, could be made of concrete.



The railroad bridge at New Canaan c. 1940

Dunkelberger rose to the challenge. He tinted concrete numerous colors, carved into it, put sculptures on it, and placed the bridges themselves in such a way as to take maximum advantage of the dramatic possibilities offered by each site. Location and light were particularly important. In sunny weather it is possible to observe, in Dunkelberger's own words, "[t]he different reflections during the entire day on the different portions of [each] bridge."

As it turns out, ornamenting the bridges was achieved at little extra expense. Leslie Sumner, responsible for engineering the Merritt's bridges, reported in 1937 that ornamentation cost about one percent of the total cost of bridge construction. For perspective on Dunkelberger's work, compare the individuality of his bridges with the bridges built in recent decades at interchanges with Routes 7, 8 and 35.

THE LANDSCAPE The Merritt Parkway landscape is as soothing as its bridges are striking. The landscape, too, bears the mark of a single individual; in this case, the Highway Department's Weld Thayer Chase (see following biography). Re-establishing the rural character of the existing landscape after the massive physical disruption of construction was no simple matter. But Chase proved more than up to the challenge.

Chase studied the vegetation and nature of the entire Parkway landscape, making extensive notes and sketches on engineering plans while in the field. Chase avoided formal plantings and his overall approach to design was naturalistic—he sought to re-establish whatever was already growing in a given location so that the plants looked, in his words, "as if they just grew there."

Chase's palette included pine, hemlock, cedar, maple, oak, dogwood, elm, sweetgum, beech, ash, rhododendron, Boston ivy, bitter-sweet, and mountain laurel. Many plants from the right-of-way were kept for re-planting. Another 70,000 trees and shrubs were purchased and planted. Local garden clubs also donated thousands of plants and shrubs for locations along the Parkway.



A stretch of the Merritt Parkway under construction, and completed

In the end, Chase's approach was so successful that the road looked as if it had been unrolled neatly through the existing countryside. This effect, together with the spring display of flowering trees and shrubs drew people from all over to the Parkway. One story relates that Eleanor Roosevelt drove the Merritt every year to see the mountain laurel and dogwoods in bloom. Said Chase, "My aim was to heal the landscape, so Dame Nature could pull it all together in time." And so it did.

Major Figures

Many people made important contributions to the Merritt Parkway project. Yet, three individuals are perhaps most responsible for what the Merritt has become.

U.S. Representative **Schuyler Merritt** (1847-1935) was a leading advocate for building a road to relieve congestion on the Boston Post Road. Merritt campaigned hardest for designing the new road as a parkway and not a highway. In 1927, the Fairfield County Republican organization recommended that Merritt's name be used for the road. Merritt said at the 1934 Greenwich groundbreaking that the Parkway was built so that the driver might "enjoy as you go." When the Merritt Parkway Commission was established to administer the project, Schuyler Merritt was named chairman.



Schuyler Merritt



Weld Thayer Chase in 1991

Weld Thayer Chase (1908-2009) designed and oversaw the construction of the Merritt Parkway landscape. A Newport, Rhode Island native, Chase spent the summers of his youth reading the gardens of seaside estates. In 1931 he graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a B.A. in botany. Two years later he had his masters in landscape architecture from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He spent the summer of 1933 bicycling through England and western Europe, touring 18th and 19th century gardens. Upon his return, he joined the Connecticut Highway Department's Bureau of Roadside Development. In 1935, at the age of 27, Chase was named chief landscape architect of the Merritt Parkway project. After the Parkway was completed, Chase transferred to the Connecticut State Park and Forest Commission, where he planned beaches, parks and forests. After his retirement from state service, Chase remained active in town and landscape issues in his home of Westfield.



Ann and George Dunkelberger c. 1920s

George Dunkelberger (1891-1966) designed each of the Parkway's 69 original bridges. According to one historian, Dunkelberger was "a Renaissance man who was as skilled as a musician or cartoonist as he was at solving architectural design problems." Born in Camden, New Jersey, Dunkelberger trained at the Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry and the Industrial Art School in Philadelphia. In 1919 he moved to Hartford, where he worked in several architectural firms. After returning from naval service in World War I, Dunkelberger established an architectural practice of his own in Hartford and worked in re-designing homes and apartment buildings. But as the Great Depression wore on, Dunkelberger's firm went bankrupt and he took a job as a junior draftsman in the bridge design unit of the Connecticut Highway Department. In 1935 he was given the job of designing the Merritt Parkway's bridges, service stations, tollbooths, and other structures. In 1941, Dunkelberger was promoted to Highway Architect.

Significance

The Merritt Parkway was Connecticut's first divided-lane, limited-access highway—free of trucks and advertising. It made travel between New York City and Fairfield County quick and convenient, opening southwest Connecticut to extensive residential development.

The magnificent outcome of the Connecticut Highway Department team of talented architects, landscape architects, and engineers was a road both functional and beautiful. The Merritt Parkway was distinctive in both architecture and design. The Parkway's bridges introduced modern architectural styles then used primarily for buildings, such as Art Deco and Art Moderne, into a new context: the parkway. The Parkway's landscape architecture blended the road into its natural surroundings almost seamlessly, becoming an early example of what is now called the context-sensitive design solution. It has earned state and national recognition.

But perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Merritt Parkway is the wonderful driving experience that it offers, while linking urban centers.

The Merritt Parkway's significance has been recognized by its listing on the National Register of Historic Places (1984), its designation as a State Scenic Road (1993) and a National Scenic Byway (1998), and the conferring of a Centennial Medalion by the American Society of Landscape Architects (1999).

The Merritt Parkway Conservancy

The Merritt Parkway Conservancy is a nonprofit organization working in partnership with other stakeholders to revitalize and celebrate the Merritt Parkway. The MPC facilitates a flow of private resources and expertise to landscape, bridge, service area, environmental and educational projects involving this historic road.

Support the Conservancy. Learn more about its efforts or become a member by visiting the Conservancy's website at www.merrittparkway.org or call (503) 651-3255.

Acknowledgements

The Merritt Parkway Conservancy gratefully acknowledges the supporters who made this map possible:

Essex/Mobil Foundation

Mobil

Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

National Trust for Historic Preservation

Individual private donors

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CTHP National Trust nomination
CT State Archive/DOT Photographic Collections
Printed on recycled paper

A NEW guide to the Merritt Parkway

FAMOUS BRIDGES

MAN-MADE & NATURAL FEATURES

PLACES NEARBY THAT ARE WORTH A VISIT



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