

Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 138

CDOT Route Nos. and Milepost (MP) Limits:

<i>CDOT Route</i>	<i>Route Description</i>
138A	From SH 6J and SH6Z in Sterling northeast via Crook and Julesburg To the Nebraska State Line just North of Julesburg
138Z	From SH 138-A in Sterling southwest via Broadway and 4th St To SH 6-Z at Chestnut Street

Highway Location:

Counties: Logan, Sedgwick
 Length (Miles): 60.349

OAHP Site Numbers (for previously recorded segments, if applicable)*:

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Assessment Date</i>	<i>Site Name</i>
None	No previously recorded segments are found on or adjacent to this highway		

Discussion of Site Forms (for previously recorded segments, if applicable):

No Colorado Cultural Resources Inventory forms for previously recorded segments of this highway were identified in Compass.

Historic Districts located within 250 feet of highway (OAHP Site Number and Name)*:

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>District Name</i>	<i>Assessment (If Applicable)</i>
None	No historic districts are found on or adjacent to this highway	

**Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP*

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Historical Data:

In its current configuration, US 138 is 60 miles long, between Sterling, Crook, and Julesburg, terminating at the Nebraska state line just north of Julesburg in Logan and Sedgwick counties. It predated Interstate(I)-76, and is located north of and parallel to the South Platte River, except where it crossed the river west of Merino. I-76 was constructed south of the river and did not replace any of the existing path of US 138, leaving the older highway essentially intact as a local connector for towns on the route.

US 138 (originally Primary Road 9) was also known as the Platte Valley Road, and was one of the first roads established by the Colorado Highway Commission in 1910. The original road was 112 miles, and it began in Fort Morgan and continued to the east past Julesburg to the Nebraska state line. The highway was renumbered US 138 by 1926. During the height of the Good Roads Movement, and the establishment of named highways to promote auto tourism, US 138 became part of the Lincoln Highway Loop in Colorado, established as a secondary part of the transcontinental Lincoln Highway in 1913, but removed from the main route in 1915 because it took too long to detour into Denver (Wolfe 1999: 6-7, 12; Autobee and Dobson-Brown 2003: E-22). The section between Fort Morgan and Sterling (which is no longer designed as US 138 and now follows US 6) was also part of the Omaha Lincoln Denver Road (later called the Detroit-Lincoln-Denver) through eastern Colorado to Sterling (Autobee and Dobson-Brown 2003:E-16). These named highways were a result of the Good Roads Movement to improve local roads. Named highways of the Good Roads Movement, such as the Lincoln Highway and the Omaha Lincoln Denver Road/Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway, utilized a network of preexisting local and state roads to provide regional connectivity as prominent transportation corridors. The Good Roads Movement resulted in the promotion and improvement of many of the roads that comprised the route, fostered automobile tourism, and were precursors to the development of the system of state and U.S. highways.

Between Merino and Brush, the road was designed in a stair-step pattern to follow the boundaries of nearby parcels, but by 1924 these turns had been straightened and portions of the road had been moved. The stair steps were also part of the road in Sedgwick County, between Sedgwick, Ovid, and Julesburg, but this section was straightened in the 1930s. The highway alignment also changed from the south side of the railroad to the north side of the railroad in the 1930s. These alignment changes make the current road an excellent example of a 1920s-1930s highway that has not been significantly modified or changed since that time.

Northeastern Colorado is within the physiographic province of the Great Plains, and more specifically, the area known as the High Plains. The terrain is relatively flat, with gentle hills and shallow waterways, and the climate is semiarid, with low levels of moisture. There are few trees and the region is known for weather extremes. The South Platte River and its tributaries is the primary source of water and the lifeline for communities in northeastern Colorado. The river has guided travelers for millennia, starting with trails used by Native Americans, trappers, and explorers. Beginning in 1858, after the discovery of gold at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River--today's Denver--the South Platte River Trail guided the majority of travelers to the gold camps and support towns. The trail began at the confluence of the North Platte and South Platte in North Platte, Nebraska, as a branch of the Overland or Oregon Trail. The transcontinental railroad also followed the river in 1881 when the Union Pacific Railroad built its branch line to Denver. After 1910, with the establishment of the Colorado Highway Commission, the river dictated the paths of the region's first major highways and bridges for river crossings.

Prior to the homestead era and the arrival of the railroad, the South Platte River valley was prime pastureland and ranchers took full advantage of the ability to run cattle freely for grazing. John Wesley Iliff and others amassed huge herds near the river in the 1860s and 1870s, buying key parcels and leasing state and federal lands in northeastern Colorado. The cattle were trailed to railheads in Cheyenne or Denver before 1881. After 1881, the railroad towns of Brush, Iliff, Sterling, and Julesburg became busy freight shipping points. Farmers formed cooperatives to build major irrigation systems based on priority water rights from the South Platte. Greeley was one center of activity where irrigation canals and storage reservoirs significantly increased the acreage for agriculture. Prior to these systems, crop raising was limited to fields in river and creek bottoms but irrigation made it possible for farmers to plant crops in fields on higher benches farther from the river. Fifty miles east of Greeley, Fort Morgan became the center of several irrigation systems that radiated to outlying farms and ranches, as did Sterling, another forty miles downstream (Wyckoff 1999: 164).

The region has always had a relatively sparse population. Larger towns such as Greeley, Fort Morgan and Sterling settled on the river, connected to the smaller towns of Ovid, Sedgwick, Crook, Iliff, Atwood, and Merino. Major irrigated crops included corn and feed crops for animals. Sugar beets became a prominent crop after 1910 in Weld, Morgan, and Logan counties. The Great Western Sugar Company built ten processing factories in the South Platte

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River valley at Loveland, Greeley, Eaton, Fort Collins, Windsor, Longmont, Sterling, Brush, Fort Morgan, and Ovid. The raising and processing of sugar beets also brought large numbers of field workers from other countries to the region, including Germans from Russia, Japanese, and Mexicans. While irrigated farming is possible in fields that have water rights to ditches or the underground Ogallala aquifer, dryland farming supported farms and ranches north of the river near the small communities of Peetz, Stoneham, Briggsdale and Keota. Major dryland crops include winter wheat, sorghum, milo, alfalfa, and field peas (Webb 1931: 373).

The MPS indicates part of this route is associated with the South Platte River Trail, which followed the South Platte River and was used by Native American tribes, fur trappers, traders, and the majority of travelers to the mining camps after gold was discovered near Denver in the late 1850s. It was a primary state highway that provided early and direct access for transporting agricultural goods between Nebraska, northeastern Colorado and Denver and was an early automobile tourism highway.

(Unless otherwise indicated, sources used in the preparation of this section included state highway maps, the Highways of Colorado by Matthew Salek, Highways to the Sky: A Context and History of Colorado's Highway System, Colorado State Roads and Highways, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Submission, plans in the Online Transportation Information System (OTIS), and site forms for previously surveyed resources in Compass when available.)

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Not Significant - No historical significance identified

Significant - Historical significance identified (see details below)

Property Type and Areas of Significance:

A detailed explanation why this highway possesses historical significance is provided in the Significance Statement below.

Cultural:

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)

Engineering:

Subtypes

- Farm-to-Market Road
- Limited Access, Multiple-Lane, Divided Highway/Freeway
- Highway Bypass

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)
- Engineering achievement (Engineering)

Aesthetic:

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)
- Engineering achievement (Engineering)
- Landscape architecture (Landscape Architecture)

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Historic periods of highway construction:

- Pre-territorial (pre-1861)
- Territorial and pre-automobile state roads (1861-1890)
- Automobile age (1890-1930)
- Depression and World War II (1930-1945)
- Postwar Interstate Era (1945-1973)
- Completion and Augmentation of Interstate System (1973-2000)

Level of Significance:

- Local
- State
- National

Significance Statement:

US 138 is classified as a Cultural and Engineered Route under the classification system in the MPS.

Criterion A

US 138 is a Cultural Route according to the property types described in the MPS because it is in the same general location as a trail that has been used by travelers along the South Platte River. As with other cultural routes, the earliest form of this road is no longer apparent. The road has been a state highway since 1910. It is an important example of an early or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (CHD) that followed the South Platte River to connect the communities in northeast Colorado to agricultural centers such as Julesburg, Sterling, and Fort Morgan with smaller communities located near the river, before it was bypassed by the construction on new alignment of I-76. SH 138 carried the Lincoln Highway while another section of the road, between Fort Morgan and Sterling (no longer designated as part of SH 138), carried the Omaha Lincoln Denver Road/ Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway in Colorado. Its role as a component of this named highway associated with the Good Roads Movement made it a contributing component of an important route that served as a popular route across Colorado during the first decades of the twentieth century. This highway possesses significance under Criterion A in the area of Transportation at the state level as part of the Lincoln Highway and an prominent project of the CHD as an Engineered Route, and as a Cultural Route under Transportation at the state level for its association with the South Platte River Trail.

Criterion B

Research did not reveal this highway to be directly associated with the events or work of a person important in history, nor does research indicate the highway represents the efforts of a specific individual to secure construction of this highway for the economic development of a community or area of the state. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion B.

Criterion C

There is some evidence that sections of US 138 represent 1910s highway construction as an Engineered Route, and possesses significance under Criterion C in the area of Transportation at the local level of significance. Although some sections have been changed, the highway is still in its original alignment for the majority of its length. There are small sections that have been realigned but no major widening has occurred and major modifications have not been made, beyond the continual maintenance required for the highway. For these reasons, this highway possesses significance under Criterion C in the area of Engineering at the local level as a representative example of a period of highway construction.

Criterion D

For a property to possess significance for information potential, the information yielded by the property must answer specific important research questions that cannot be otherwise answered. The technology of highway construction is well understood and documented. As such, this highway is unlikely to yield important information that cannot be discerned from archived plans and other records. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion D.

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