

Committee on Transportation

The House Transportation Committee was created in 1996 making it one of the newest standing committees in the Virginia House Delegates. Since its inception, there have been only five (5) chairmen – William P. Robinson, Jr (D-Norfolk); John A. “Jack” Rollison (R-Prince William); Leo C. Wardrup, Jr. (R-Virginia Beach); Joe May (R-Loudoun); and Thomas Davis Rust (R-Herndon).

While the Transportation Committee, as we now know it, is one of the newest standing committees of the Virginia House of Delegates, the committee’s origins run much deeper. Prior to 1996, for 180 years, transportation issues in the House of Delegates fell under the domain of the Committee on Roads and Internal Navigation. Created in 1815, the Committee on Roads and Internal Navigation at least through the start of the Civil War was among the most important committees in the legislature.

The committee origins and importance in the legislature are a true testament to the times. As we know, from the colony’s founding in the early 17th century through the colonial period and into the early 19th century, the state’s waterways were the primary means by which early settlers moved goods. The James, York, and Potomac Rivers were the interstate highways of the time and the Chesapeake Bay was the doorway through which goods were exported along the Atlantic seaboard and across the Atlantic to Europe ... and conversely where imports from those same locales were received and distributed to various communities in Virginia. But by the early 19th century the state was increasingly expanding westward. In 1634, Virginia consisted of just eight counties. By 1756 there were 52 – in fact, six new counties were added between 1752 and 1756 alone. In 1776, when the first state constitution was drafted, just four of the 24 original state senate districts were west of the Blue Ridge.

Throughout the first quarter of the 19th century Virginians in those counties west of the Blue Ridge felt the make-up of the General Assembly disproportionately favored the Tidewater and Piedmont regions of the state at the expense of the Shenandoah Valley and western counties. Ten times between 1810 and 1823 resolutions were introduced in the General Assembly calling for a constitutional convention to reconsider the basis of representation. On eight occasions the proposals failed to clear the House of Delegates and on the two occasions they did, they were quickly killed in the Senate by the eastern elite. It was this disparity in political power that ultimately in 1828 led to the successful call for a second constitutional convention – one which ultimately produced the Virginia Constitution of 1830.

While we know that the Constitution of 1830 failed to adequately address the disparity in political power between east and west and would eventually lead to yet another constitutional convention in 1850, it is important to understand that central to the

dispute over power in the General Assembly between east and west was the question of infrastructure and transportation.

As the state's population expanded west, across the Blue Ridge into the Shenandoah Valley, the state's rivers were no longer a suitable network for moving either imports or exports. While locks and canals, extended the reach of the James River from Richmond to Lynchburg, for the most part, the state's transportation infrastructure which continued to rely almost exclusively on navigable waters created a vast economic gulf between the Tidewater planters and western settlers.

Furthermore, the War of 1812 had exposed the vulnerability of a transportation network and economic structure anchored by the Chesapeake Bay.

For westerners, the improved modes of transportation (roads, canals, bridges, etc) were vital to economic prosperity and for communication, but they lacked the political muscle in the General Assembly in large measure because representation favored the east. Fully aware of the importance of developing better relations with and communications with the western areas, the General Assembly, in 1812, appointed a commission, chaired by Chief Justice John Marshall, for "viewing certain rivers within the commonwealth." While the Commission spent months surveying the James River from Lynchburg to the Ohio River and the report ultimately provided valuable insights into developing a means for improving traffic over the state's waterways, it nevertheless, continued to perpetuate the central belief that the state's waterways represented the means to moving goods from east to west and west to east.

It was thus in this environ that the first committee on Roads and Internal Navigation was created in 1815. And in 1816, it was what precipitated the General Assembly to create a Fund for Internal Improvement and a Board of Public Works to administer it. While the fund was entirely insufficient to meet the west's demands for turnpikes, canals, bridges and other transportation infrastructure it was at least a gesture towards appeasing the west's mounting demands.

As was previously noted, since its creation in 1796, three of the committee's six chairmen have represented Tidewater and three have represented Northern Virginia, but during the committee's hey-day this was hardly the case. In fact, the transition from Roads and Internal Navigation to Transportation signified more than just an updating of the committee's name, as evidenced by its six chairs, also marked a transition from a committee with a decidedly rural orientation to one focused on the transportation needs of the state's Golden Crescent.

For most of the 180 years the committee existed the vast majority of chairmen hailed from districts west of the fall line of the James. In fact, only one of the committee's first 26 chairmen represented district's east of Richmond and it would be 66-years before the committee was chaired by a member representing the Tidewater region of Virginia

(Thomas H. Cross of Nansemond). Indeed, for the 180 years the committee operated as the Committee on Roads and Internal Navigation, only Cross and Lewis A. McMurrin of Newport News could lay claim to representing districts in southeastern Virginia.

This is further exemplified by the fact that among the previous chairmen were future governors –James McDowell, John Tyler, John B. Floyd and John Letcher. Tyler and Floyd were both serving as chairman at the time of their election – Tyler in 1825 and Floyd in 1848. It should be noted that prior to 1850, governors were elected by the General Assembly, and not by popular vote, thus it is noteworthy that both Tyler and Floyd were elected by their peers in the General Assembly to serve as Governor while serving as the Committee’s chairman. (After serving as Virginia’s 23rd Governor, John Tyler would, of course, go on to serve in the U.S. Senate, as Vice President of the United States, and eventually as the nation’s 10th President.)

At least three other chairmen would later rise to preside over the House as Speaker - Oscar M. Cruitchfield, who served as chairman from 1839-1841 served as Speaker from 1852-1861; Hugh W. Sheffey, served as chairman from 1861-1863 and as Speaker from 1863-1865; and John F. Ryan, served as chairman from 1889-1894 and as Speaker from 1894-1899 and again from 1901-1906.

Other notable predecessors include:

- Robert Ould whose early legal career included service as the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia and who served as Assistant Secretary of War in the Confederacy under Judah P. Benjamin. During the Civil War he also served as judge advocate and seems to have been a high-ranking official in the Confederate Secret Service. After the Civil War, he was elected to both the Virginia Senate and House of Delegates, and in 1878, after completing his service in the General Assembly was elected president of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad Company.
- James A. Walker - Walker was an acting brigade commander at the Battle of Antietam. He was subsequently promoted to brigadier general and assigned command of the Stonewall Brigade in May 1863, leading it during the Gettysburg Campaign, where his regiment participated in the attacks on Culp's Hill. Badly wounded at the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House in 1864 after the death of Brig. Gen. John Pegram, Walker was assigned command of a division of Second Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. Walker was elected as a Democrat to the House of Delegates of Virginia in 1871 and 1872. Five years later, he was elected the 13th Lieutenant Governor of Virginia. In 1890, Walker was a charter member of The Virginia Bar Association and in 1893, Walker switched allegiances and joined the Republican Party. As a Republican he was twice elected to Congress (1895-1899) where he served as chairman of the Committee on Elections during his second term.

- Lewis A. McMurrin, Jr. Through his work in the Virginia General Assembly, he was instrumental in the founding of Christopher Newport University in 1960 as a two-year branch of the College of William and Mary. In 1964 the first building built for Christopher Newport University was Lewis Archer McMurrin, Jr., Hall, which today houses the government and history departments. In addition, McMurrin was the founding chairman of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, and continued as chairman until 1986 and was chairman emeritus at the time of his death in 1989.

During the 2015 Regular Session, the Transportation Committee was referred 100 House measures and 33 Senate measures for consideration. If you look at simply House measures, referrals have generally been on the decline. Overall, during the period 2002-2015, the Transportation Committee averaged 162.6 referrals per session. However, there is a significant difference if you break the numbers down by decade. Between 1981-1989, the committee averaged just over 100 bills per session (100.9) with a high of 127 in 1989 and a low of 79 in 1987. From 1990-1999, the committee averaged 127.8 House measures per session with a high of 182 in 1999 and a low of 84 in 1992. During this decade, 1992 was the only session in which referrals dipped below 100. From 2000-2009 the committee averaged 182.9 House measures per session, with a high of 225 in 2007 and a low of 133 two years later in 2009. So far this decade, during the period 2011-2015, the committee has averaged 115, with a high of 141 in 2010 and low this year of 100. Thus over the last 35 sessions (1981-2015) the committee has received fewer than 100 House measures only five times – none since 1992.