

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 23, 2020: [THE SPEED LIMIT](#)

In 1901, my home state of Connecticut was first in the country to set a speed limit for motor vehicles. Spoiler alert: you could not drive fast.

THE STORY

The law specified: "No motor vehicle shall be run on any highway or public place outside the limits of a city at a speed to exceed fifteen miles an hour, and no such vehicle shall, on any highway or public place within the limits of any city, be run at a speed to exceed twelve miles an hour."

First there were horse-drawn carriages, and then there were cars. The simplicity of that statement makes it very tempting to think that the changeover was equally tidy – that one day everyone just trotted their horses to the dealer, got zero down and no APR for a trade-in on that chestnut mare, and drove out into the future.

In truth, the transition to car culture took decades. Prior to the motor vehicle era, streets were [multi-purpose public spaces](#): a mix of horses, carriages, streetcars, pedestrians, kids at play and people conducting business, all with a side order of [horse doo](#). Cars introduced a new and disruptive variable into public roads, and since most cars in 1901 look like a [pram humped a lawn mower](#), they were very likely both to distract people and spook horses.

The Connecticut law was written to control the structure and civility of road space, and it did not mess around: the statute carried a two hundred dollar fine – over \$5,000 in modern equivalent – because if you can afford a car, moneybags, you can slow your roll or pony up (literally).

A federal speed limit was instituted in 1974 as a result of the OPEC oil embargo. It was [repealed in 1995](#), returning responsibility to the states.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

What's the speed limit in your area?
Do you think it is appropriate or useful? (Should there even BE a speed limit?)

If a speed limit isn't effective to help roads become safer, what do you think would help?

What took the place of the public street as a public space for business, socializing, etc.?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

To get an idea of what a city street looked like at the turn of the 20th century, take a look at [23rd Street in New York, circa 1901](#). (VIDEO)

Donna Sokol, "[Justifying Speed](#),"
Library of Congress

Brandon Keim, "[Did Cars Save Our Cities From Horses?](#)," *Nautilus*,
November 7, 2013