

## **Austin B. Fletcher**

California's First State Highway Engineer



Born in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1867, Austin B. Fletcher was educated at Harvard University. From 1893 to 1910 he was secretary and executive officer of the Massachusetts Highway Commission which was considered a model in highway practices in the United States.

In 1910 he was chosen as secretary engineer for the San Diego, California, Highway Commission after a careful consideration of the outstanding road engineers of America. In 1911 he was selected by Governor Hiram W. Johnson to head the first State Highway Department of the State of California, in which capacity he served until 1923. During this period he also served as Director of Public Works and President of the State Reclamation Board.

After his retirement in 1923 he served as Consulting Engineer for the United States Bureau of Public Roads in Washington, D.C., where he lived until the time of his death on March 8, 1928. Fletcher was particularly recognized as a great organizer and an adept at selection of personnel. He had extraordinary discernment in his analyses of the character, qualifications and integrity of applicants for positions at his disposal.

It became his duty to assemble the initial engineering field forces at the commencement of state highway activities in California in 1911 and from the outset he endowed it with the esprit de corps which was considered to be unequalled in any similar organization. By 1928 every district engineer and practically every department head of the California Highway Commission was brought in to the organization and trained and developed by him. A host of others in public employment elsewhere were the beneficiaries of his tutelage. The engineering principles and standards of highway development he devised persist to this day.

At a meeting of the Pacific Highway Association at San Francisco on August 5, 1912, Fletcher read the paper he had written establishing the principles on which the the California system of highways would be developed. California, unlike the Eastern states, did not provide for a Commission to investigate the needs of the State in the matter of highways before appropriating money for them. The California State Highways Act, passed on March 22, 1909, taking effect on December 31, 1910, authorized the Department of Engineering, which had been created on March 11, 1907, to issue \$18 million in bonds for a "continuous and connected state highway system" that would connect all county seats.

On August 7, 1911, the appointed members of the Advisory Board of the Department of Engineering, Towne, Blaney and Darlington, were commissioned by the Governor as the California Highway Commission, with complete control over State highway matters. Fletcher was designated as State Highway Engineer of the Commission.

The Engineering Department was under the direct supervision of the Assistant Highway Engineer and was divided into eight Divisions, numbered I, II, III, IV, V, VI, and VII. Each Division was managed by a Division Engineer, reporting directly to the Headquarters office.