

## **A History of the Vehicle and Traffic Law in New York State**

The first legislative recognition of the motor vehicle appeared in Chapter 531 of the Laws of 1901, when the existing definition of “carriage” was amended so as to include “automobiles or motor vehicles and all other vehicles propelled by electricity, steam, gasoline or other source of energy.” That same legislative action required the registration of motor vehicles, starting April 25, 1901, the owner of an automobile or motor vehicle required to file a statement with the Secretary of State and secure a registration certificate, upon payment of a fee of one dollar. This apparently was a permanent registration and fee. Persons acquiring a motor vehicle after the effective date of the act were given ten days in which to obtain the necessary registration. The Secretary of State was required to keep an alphabetical list of the names of the owners. As a means of identifying the owner of the vehicle, the separate initials of the owner’s name were to be placed upon the back of the vehicle in a conspicuous place, with the letters being at least three inches in height. This law made New York State the first state in the nation to require the registration of motor vehicles.

It was soon obvious that the original system of registration was inadequate, even considering the small number of motor vehicles then being operated on the public highways. The Chapter 625 of the Laws of 1903 required the Secretary of State to assign numbers to all certificates previously issued, in the order in which they had been issued, and to number all future certificates. Each vehicle was to have registration identification numbers displayed “in Arabic numerals black on white ground each not less than three inches in height and each stroke to be of a width not less than half an inch.” That same state law set up the first requirement for drivers’ licenses. Persons desiring to operate a motor vehicle as a mechanic, employee, or for hire were required to secure an “operator’s” certificate, for a fee of one dollar, with the certificate to be carried at all times when the licensee was operating an automobile. During the first year, a total of 2,382 “chauffeurs” were licensed.

As the number of automobiles was increasing it became necessary for the state to take a more comprehensive action. Chapter 538 of the Laws of 1904 was known as the “Motor Vehicle Act.” Superseding all prior license and registration provisions, this act provided that it should be controlling (1) upon the registration and numbering of motor vehicles and chauffeurs, (2) on their use of the public highways, and (3) on the penalties for violations. “Motor vehicle” was now defined as “all vehicles propelled by any power other than muscular power, except such motor vehicles as run only upon rails or tracks” and excluding motor cycles, motor bicycles, traction engines, and road rollers. (This is very similar to the current definition.) Each registered vehicle would have a circular seal, two inches in diameter of aluminum or some other metal, with the registration number inscribed on it. This seal would be placed on the rear of the vehicle. The one-time registration fee was increased to two dollars. “Chauffeurs” (i.e., persons desiring to operate a motor vehicle as mechanic, employee, or for hire) would be licensed at a doubled fee from previous and the licensed chauffeur would be required to wear an oval badge at all times when operating a motor vehicle on the public highways.

The next major change in motor vehicle laws in New York State came in 1910, with the so-called “Callan Law,” (Chapter 374 of the Laws of 1910. The most significant changes made by this Callan Law were (a) annual registration of motor vehicles, with the

amount of the fees for pleasure vehicles ranging from \$5 to \$25 dependent upon the horsepower of the vehicle; (b) sets of two number plates; (3) registration of dealers and manufacturers, with dealers' number plates issued for use on vehicles of the dealer.<sup>1</sup>

In 1919, New York City required all persons who drove more than ten days in a calendar year to have a driver's license. In 1924, New York State required all operators of motor vehicles to be licensed. Starting in June 1925, the registration of motor vehicles and the issuing of driver's licenses in New York State was taken from the Secretary of State and placed in the new Bureau of Motor Vehicles. At the time this went into effect, there were 1,953,988 licensed drivers. That same year, driver testing as we know it today was first instituted.

Between 1936 and 1948, people could choose between a one year driver license and a license for three years. In 1948, there were 4,915,209 registered vehicles in New York State.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, there were a total of 11,369,280 driver's licenses in New York State, with 24,758 of them in Seneca County.<sup>3</sup> In 2007, there were a total of 10,664,811 registered vehicles in New York State, with 28,143 of them in Seneca County.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Arnold W. Wise, *The History of the Vehicle and Traffic Law*, pp XV-XVII.

<sup>2</sup>Arnold W. Wise, *The History of the Vehicle and Traffic Law*, pp XV-XVII.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.nydmv.state.ny.us/Statistics/statli07.htm>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.nydmv.state.ny.us/Statistics/regin07.htm>