



Texas Department of Motor Vehicles

HELPING TEXANS GO. HELPING TEXAS GROW.

Vehicle Registration and License Plates: A Brief History

- The idea of requiring vehicle owners to display an individual insignia originated in the state of New York in 1901. Owners of 954 vehicles in that state were required to “place the separate initials of the owner’s name onto the back thereof in a conspicuous place.” Some people even painted their initials and numbers on the body of the vehicle or on the headlamps.
- Counties and cities in Texas began registering vehicles as early as 1907. The first Texas automobile license plate was issued that summer for a motor bus owned by W.B. Chenoweth of Colorado City.
- The early plates were handmade by the vehicle owners or local blacksmith from a variety of materials. There were wooden plates (roof shingles were popular), leather plates with tin numerals and a more expensive plate with individual porcelain letters inserted on a heavy steel frame.
- The Texas State Highway Department (today the Texas Department of Transportation) was created in 1917. Included in the legislation was the requirement that motorcycle and motor vehicle owners file an application for registration to the newly-created agency.
- The first official Texas license plates, manufactured by the Adams Stamp and Stationery Company of St. Louis, were made of sheet iron with white numbers on a dark blue background. Twenty railroad cars were required to bring the 300,000 plates to Austin. This design with a vertically placed “TEX” abbreviation on the right end of the plate was used from 1917 through 1922.
- By the end of 1917, the department had registered 194,720 motor vehicles.
- The county tax assessor-collectors became the official agents for the department in 1918. The fee, from 1917 until 1923, was 35 cents per horsepower of the vehicle with a minimum fee of \$7.50
- In 1933, the Texas Legislature passed a law authorizing the Texas Prison System in Huntsville to manufacture the state’s license plates.
- Since then the state has issued numerous general-issue license plate designs.



- In 1965, the legislature passed the “Prestige License Plate Act” that allowed Texans to personalize their license plates for an additional fee.
- License plates were replaced every year until 1975 when the department began issuing multi-year plates kept current by annual registration renewal.
- 1977 marks the last year all Texans were required to renew their motor vehicle registrations at the same time. For more than half a century Texans renewed their vehicle registrations between February 1 and March 31. “The deputies had to protect us during the week of March 31 when all registrations were due,” a tax assessor-collector recalled. “There were fist fights, even heart attacks, while folks waited in those long lines.”
- In 1978, the department introduced staggered registrations, much to the relief of citizens and tax assessor-collectors.
- Specialty license plates benefitting colleges and universities and non-profit organizations sprung up in the 1990s.
- In 2000, Lubbock County became the first in the state to offer online registration renewals.
- The state begins issuing customized windshield stickers for registration in 2004. Each sticker is printed with information that identifies it as belonging only to the vehicle for which it was issued.
- In 2005, the legislature required the department to begin working on a vendor-operated specialty license plate marketing program. Today Texans know that program as My Plates.
- The state’s first digital general-issue license plate was issued in 2009. The all-digital process eliminated the need for toxic chemicals in the manufacturing process. The former stamped plate process required 484 gallons of paint thinner and 396 gallons of petroleum-based ink each year, plus huge baking ovens to dry the ink.
- The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV) – a new state agency created by the 81st Legislature - became responsible for vehicle registration and license plates in 2009.
- On July 16, 2012, the TxDMV introduces The Texas Classic, a new black and white general-issue plate with an added security feature – two glass-beaded, laser-applied threads.
- Texas has 21.9 million registered vehicles, and the majority of them display the general-issue license plate. The Huntsville prison facility manufactures more than 40,000 Texas license plates each week day, using more than 2 million pounds of aluminum every year.