

History Markers — 2001, D&C, “Signs of past times”

WEDNESDAY, JULY 4, 2001

DEMOCRAT AND CHRONIC

Signs of past times

Blue and yellow roadside markers note historic events across New York — but like the facts themselves, they can be hard to track down

BY STAFF WRITER
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Monroe County historian Carolyn Vacca stands by a historic marker on Erie Street in Brockport with details about suffragist Frances Barrier Williams.

BURR LEWIS staff photographer

When Russell Case opened his tavern near Albany in 1799, he probably had no idea the site would be labeled with an official New York State Historic Marker more than 100 years later.

But Case's pub at the beginning of the Great Western Turnpike is among thousands of points of historic interest noted by the blue and yellow metal signs planted on the edges of roads that New Yorkers have driven past for almost 75 years.

Case's saloon is just one of more than 100 taverns that the state considered worthy of historic signage. The list also includes more than 200 church sites and 84 schools.

In Monroe County, the signs trace the route of the French army invading Seneca Indian territory.

In Ontario County, a sign on Case Road in Bristol marks a spring with natural gases so thick that the "water" can be ignited.

In Marion, Wayne County, a sign points out a spot on Route 21 that was a stop on the Underground Railroad in the days of slavery.

More than 2,800 of these official markers can be found across the state. But there are just as many unofficial but identically styled metal signs offering on-the-spot captions of history.

In addition, about 200 state-sponsored metal signs with lengthier text of varying dimensions describe the historical importance of entire regions, rather than an individual person, place or event.

"They're significant, especially with our emphasis on tourism now. A visitor to an area can get a kind of mini-running history if they stop to read these markers," said Dee Robinson, historian for the town of Gaines in Orleans County and president of the Association of Public Historians of New York State.

"Any time something of interest happens or someone famous does something or a significant event happens, you want someone to know about it. Even people who wouldn't buy a history book might stop to read a marker. At least you're getting history out to the public that might not otherwise be aware of it in an interesting way," Robinson said.

Although the signs have limited space, they often leave readers curious about the topic of the marker, which leads them to research the subject further.

"It's like a tease. It's like a commercial. It can spark interest and make you want to know more," Robinson said.

In Rensselaer County, for example, three signs point the way to Fort Craillo, where the song *Yankee Doodle* was written.

An arrow on a sign in the town of East Greenbush points to the fort four miles away. A sign in North Greenbush points to the fort five miles away. A third sign, in the town of Rensselaer, points to the fort 1,200

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Signs

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feet away.

But there is no marker at the site of the fort itself.

"They were put up when automobile touring became popular in the '30s. It was a way of getting people into the community, and hopefully they would stay overnight and fill up a bed," said Carol Kammen, a senior lecturer in history at Cornell University.

"For many, it is a way to appeal to pride about events that don't make the history books," she said.

The original, official state history marker program started in 1926 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the American Revolution.

Back then, individuals, organizations and municipalities applied for markers at sites they considered historically significant. After the state Education Department reviewed the supporting documentation and approved the marker, the applicant paid \$2 for the iron sign.

Funding for that program ran out in 1939, but individuals, organizations and municipalities could erect the markers at their own expense — but not on state property.

The official markers usually say State Education Department at the bottom.

In 1960, the focus of the state program shifted to signs in roadside rest areas, parks and sites away from the edge of the highways. Putting the signs along the edge of the road was considered dangerous because it encouraged drivers to slow down or stop to read them.

But the unofficial signs continued to be placed by roads.

Markers in the making

In the fall of 1998, a new state-funded program placed one marker in each county to honor the achievements of women in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, Seneca County.

The original state signs, as well as the local, unofficial markers, were made at the Walton East Branch Foundry in Walton, Delaware County, until about 1990.

It was the only foundry with the molds already made for casting markers of this particular design.

Probably any foundry could make the signs, but first-time set-up costs are significant, and orders are usually too few to make it worthwhile.



JAY CAPERS staff photographer

Boy Scouts from Troop 60 in Victor — including Josh Pancoast, 12; Dale Thomas, 11; and Trevor Rafferty, 16, left to right — remove a marker near where Ontario, Wayne and Monroe counties intersect. The marker will be repainted.

Thirty-five-year-old George Haynes is personally responsible for most of the markers created in the state since about 1983.

Back then, Haynes worked for the Walton foundry. In 1985, Haynes opened Catskill Castings in nearby Bloomville, Delaware County, and took over the mold for the state markers when the Walton foundry closed.

Catskill Castings still makes about 100 of the signs each year. The aluminum signs weigh about 50 pounds and cost \$595. Until 1989, the signs were made of iron and weighed 160 pounds. The iron signs rusted, cost more to ship because of the added weight and were less stable on posts.

The markers take about four to six weeks to make from the time of the order to delivery. But the actual time spent on the job totals about eight hours.

Catskill Castings has eight employees, counting Haynes, and they take great pride in being responsible for the markers.

"It's just nice to travel around the state and go through the towns and whatnot and see the history markers we've put up through the years," Haynes said.

Haynes is a bit of an amateur historian himself. He also owns a rubbish hauling business and col-

lects items unique to Bloomville, a hamlet in the town of Kortright.

Although the state Education Department has a Web site that lists the text and location of all the official markers, state officials acknowledge that the database is incomplete and sometimes inaccurate.

Many official markers that were damaged and removed for repair were never returned to their sites. Often markers were knocked down in automobile accidents or by snowplows. Sometimes they were moved to make way for construction projects and never replaced. Many markers simply were never entered into state records.

Signs of uncertainty

The most recent effort to inventory the markers was in 1994. The result was the database of 2,825 markers, but 40 percent may be missing, said Phil Lord, director of the Division of Museum Services for the state Education Department.

And there may be as many privately funded markers standing as there are survivors of the original state-funded program.

Because the original program depended largely on documentation from applicants,

"probably 20 percent of the signs out there have outright errors in them, not necessarily based on anything but poor data," Lord said.

For example, Genesee County historian Susan Conklin's favorite marker is on Ledge Road in the town of Alabama with the text: "Fording place of Grand Central Trail said to have been used by George Washington during the French and Indian War."

Conklin and most experts agree that the nation's first president never set foot in the area during that war. But there are local history records showing that a man named George Washington lived there during that time.

"That's my favorite marker ... It's like our pet," she said.

The sign was removed from the state database, but won't be removed from its post.

Conklin said her county has 90 markers, although the state database lists only five official signs.

Robinson, the president of the state historians' association, said Orleans County has about 80 markers, but the state lists only 18 official ones.

According to the state's list, a marker on a bluff overlooking Lake Ontario at Sea Breeze in Irondequoit labels the spot where the French army landed to invade the Seneca territory.

But it's not there.

Irondequoit historian Patricia Wayne is aware of a marker on the shoulder of Culver Road that points out the location of a French trading post. Even that sign has triggered a friendly debate between Wayne and Webster historian Richard Batzing over whether the trading post was actually located in Irondequoit or a short distance to the east in Webster.

Monroe County historian Carolyn Vacca says about 100 unofficial markers can be found in the county in addition to the 43 on the state list.

"There isn't an up-to-date inventory that actually tells us which ones are still standing and in good condition," Vacca said.

"I don't know which of these are still up or what condition these are still in. We really do need to update it, but there aren't the funds or manpower to do it," Vacca said.

Without the money, the markers could become lost remnants of the past, just like the people, places and events they memorialize. □

For more details on the state's history markers, visit

www.nysm.nysed.gov/srvmarker.html

Fig. 1. (page 1), and Fig. 2. (this page). These clippings are moderately reduced in size by the same amount relative to each other. Text is readable by zooming in.

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PRODUCTION NOTES

2015.08.12

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GENERAL INFORMATION LINKS

New York State Historic Markers

<http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/services/marker/srvmarkers.html>

Gen web

<http://www.mcnygenealogy.com/pics/index.php?category/83>