

Marking West Virginia's History

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn the history of the Historical Markers program.
- Participants will understand how locations are chosen.
- Participants will learn how they, as clubs or individuals, can help with this project.
- Participants will have the opportunity to learn about West Virginia and local history.

You can drive down almost any two-lane road in West Virginia and see a white sign explaining some historically significant aspect about the area. Where did these signs come from? Who decided what to write on them? Why this particular location? Why are these signs significant?

How Do We Come to Have These Signs?

Although civilizations have put up markers to note significant places or events for centuries, the first

edition of historical markers as we know them is found in the United Kingdom, where the first signs, or “blue plaques,” were erected in 1867.

Virginia was among the early states to adopt a Historical Marker program, with the first placements in 1926 along US 1 between Richmond and Mt. Vernon. Colorado, Indiana and Pennsylvania placed markers early on. In Massachusetts, 234 markers had been placed by 1930. In 1937, West Virginia's Commission on Historic and Scenic Highway Markers was created and identified 440 sites. The original sites chosen by the Commission were selected because of their historical significance, prehistoric interest, or geological or natural feature.



State Capitol Historical Marker, Kanawha Boulevard, Charleston, WV.
Photo source: flickr.com/photos/warrenlemay

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The original design had a circular state seal at the top and was 42 inches wide by 30 inches high and is still in use today. Signs have been made of cast aluminum and set on a steel post throughout most of the program's history. Most signs relay the same story on both sides, while a few have a separate message on the front and back. The first sign detailed the history of the State Capitol and was erected in Charleston on April 26, 1937.

These early markers were erected using money from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which was established through President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. However, the largest number of state-sponsored programs followed World War II. By the 1950s, road trips were a favorite form of vacation for American families, bringing great attention to the white signs that told America's history.

After the initial interest faded, the highway marks became popular again in the 1960s with the 100th anniversary of the Civil War. During this time many damaged and missing signs were replaced. In addition, around 300 signs were added to roadsides all around the state. New signs are still being established today. While some of the funding originally was provided by the state, most new signs are privately funded. Around 1976, the United States' bicentennial celebration sparked another renewed interest in preserving and documenting the country's history.

Who Decides What Gets Marked?

Today, the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History is the governing body of the historical roadside markers. A group or organization may apply using the official Highway Historical Marker Application. The group that applies for the marker is responsible for funding the project as well as maintenance once the marker has been established. The application and text submitted will be reviewed and thoroughly researched and may be edited



Wheeling, WV Madonna of the Trail historic markers about Chester D Hubbard, State's Birthplace, Joseph Thoburn. flickr.com/photos/jcsullivan24

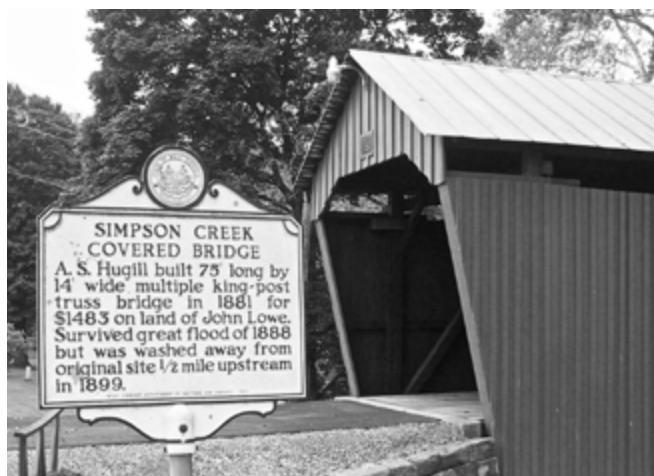
by the Highway Historical Marker Panel before the approval of the new sign. The process takes six to nine months to complete. This process is necessary to be sure the information provided is accurate, and when approved, will bear the State Seal of West Virginia.

Highway markers, official or not, bring attention to communities and history that may have otherwise been forgotten. These historical markers have brought tourism to many small towns through the years, whether accurate or not.

Sometimes, groups, businesses and individuals erected historical markers on their own. Those who made the sign get to tell their story. Throughout the southern United States, markers glorifying the southern cause during the Civil War were erected. Today, while some states have passed laws that established signs may not be removed, most states have started the process of reviewing signs, looking to correct one-sided history. In Minnesota, the Lakota people recently had a portion of their tribal land returned to them, including a historic supply house. There were several markers on the land



referring to the massacres committed by the Indians. However, the Lakota are now able to add their side to the story, explaining that the historical supply house was supposed to supply them with food when settlers came into the area, confiscating their land so they were no longer allowed to hunt or farm. During the Civil War, supplies were short and the Lakota were denied their rations.



The Simpson Creek Covered Bridge and historical marker, Harrison County, WV Photo source: flickr.com/photos/jcbwalsh

Find Historical Highway Markers Near You!

There have been several books compiled over the years of the historical markers within West Virginia. Now, there are database websites dedicated to documenting all of the historical markers and war memorials in the state, as well as the nation. The West Virginia Historical Markers Project, wvmarkers.com, believes they have photographed 99% of the states markers and can be searched by county. The Historical Marker Database, HMdb.org, as of 2025, has more than 3,800 markers identified in the state and is organized alphabetically by county, then sign. This site also includes a description of the location and a link to a picture of the marker.

Activities:

1. Take a picture or print a picture from a database of a historical highway marker in your county that is important to you and share with the club.
2. As a club, tour your community or county looking for historical highway markers. Take note of any maintenance that may be needed.
3. Ask club members to bring in a picture of a historical highway marker that interested them from a trip they took to share with the group. Markers from across the country can be found using HMdb.org.
4. Have club members go on a scavenger hunt, in person or virtually! Take a picture of a marker for each of the following:
 - a. Historical event
 - b. A prominent person
 - c. Prehistoric site
 - d. Different information on each side
 - e. Without the state seal
 - f. A battlefield
 - g. A landmark

Note: Prior to the club meeting have one or two club members find the Scavenger Hunt items online and share their contents at the meeting during this program.



Arthurdale Historic Marker. Photo source: flickr.com/photos/josepha



5. Historical marker signs are made by Sewah Studios in Marietta, Ohio, just across the Ohio River from West Virginia's Mid-Ohio Valley. You may watch a video about their construction on WTAP TV Parkersburg's "This is Home," which is a part of their evening news program's archives. This company makes historical markers for the state of West Virginia. Groups may make arrangements to have tour of their sign-making facility.



Lewis and Clark Sign in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia. Photo source: flickr.com/photos/beerandloathing

Resources

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