

Historical Marker Program

Introduction

History on a stick. Tombstones on posts. "Lyn' by the road." History by the spoonful. From academics to cartoonists to wisecracking backseat drivers, observers have taken note of the proliferation of historical markers in the state of North Carolina. During the latter two-thirds of the twentieth century, the Tar Heel State placed cast aluminum signs dedicated to selected subjects next to its roads. These ubiquitous roadside markers commemorate the formative events, people, and sites in the state's history. Each marker topic, the location of the sign, and inscription is selected only after much consideration and review. As these signs constitute, in a manner of speaking, the common heritage or the public memory of North Carolinians, it is only fitting that the history of the program and the process by which the decisions are made be laid plain. Viewed with the perspective of sixty-five-plus years, the marker program also can provide insight into the evolving conception of what is "historic."

The North Carolina General Assembly in 1935 established a program "to provide for the erection of markers at points of historic interest along the public highways" (*Public Laws of North Carolina*, 1935, c. 197). The North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program is one of the oldest such programs in continuous operation in the United States. Over the years it has been administered cooperatively by state agencies, initially the North Carolina Historical Commission, the Highway Commission, and the Department of Conservation and Development. The program today is the joint responsibility of the Research Branch, Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, and the Traffic Engineering Branch, Division of Highways, Department of Transportation.

Individuals active in the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association (founded in 1900) had long recognized the need to mark historic sites in the state. In 1917, R. D. W. Connor, first secretary of the state Historical Commission (the agency founded in 1903 which today is known as the Division of Archives and History), drew up a seven-page list of potential sites. In the prospectus Connor noted that "a visitor traveling through North Carolina will look in vain for any statue or monument, stone, bronze or marble tablet, with a very few striking exceptions, commemorating the services of eminent sons of the State, or marking the sites of historic events." To that date marker efforts in other states had been mostly scattershot private or local initiatives, from "Washington slept here" signs on New England inns to directional plaques placed along roadways by the American Automobile Association.

Between 1917 and 1935, the Historical Commission and private organizations, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, together sponsored a small number of historical markers and plaques. For the most part these early monuments denoted "shrines" associated with military leaders, statesmen, early settlers, or battlefields. The 1935 state program, modeled after one begun in Virginia in 1926, was an effort to standardize the practice of marking broader categories of sites of statewide historical significance.

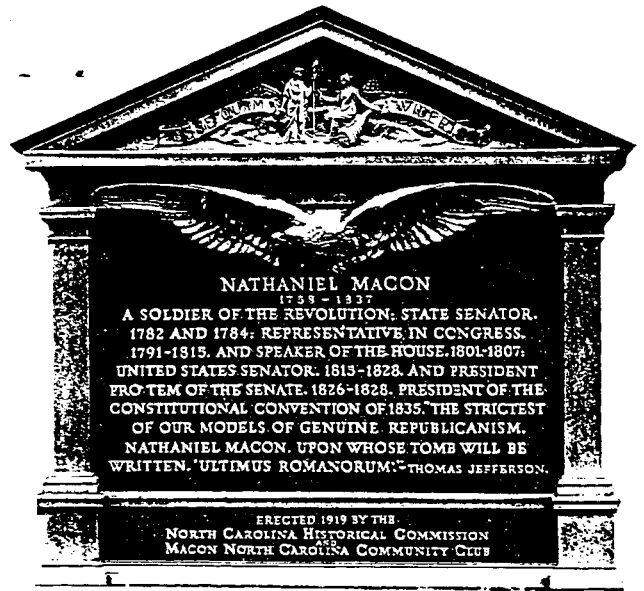
Speaking to the Raleigh Lions Club in November 1934, Albert Ray Newsome, then secretary of the Historical Commission, stressed the educational, cultural, and commer-

cial value of a standardized state marker program. "Such markers would emphasize the high spots of the construction of the civilization which we have inherited," Newsome told the group. Four legislators—Senators Dudley Bagley of Currituck County and Lee Graveley of Pitt County plus Representatives David L. Ward of Craven County and Harry R. Lindsay of Rockingham County—took the lead in guiding the legislation, which authorized an annual appropriation of five thousand dollars for the purpose, through the General Assembly. The legislative largesse was remarkably progressive and farsighted, coming in the midst of the Great Depression.

Christopher C. Crittenden, who replaced Newsome as Historical Commission secretary in 1935, pressed forward the program with typical enthusiasm. He circulated a twenty-seven-page list of potential topics among historians, writers, newspaper editors, leaders of patriotic organizations, and others, inviting their suggestions. A general call for topics was publicized through the state's newspapers. Jeb Stuart Hinckey of Roanoke Rapids suggested a tree behind which Confederate general Matt Ransom jumped to avoid being shot, but this went unmarked.

The legislation establishing the program also provided for the creation of the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Advisory Committee. That initial group was made up of Albert Ray Newsome, then affiliated with the University of North Carolina; William K. Boyd of Duke University; Forrest Clonts of Wake Forest College; Thomas W. Lingle of Davidson College; and Hugh T. Lefler, who had recently moved from North Carolina State College to take a teaching post at Chapel Hill. That group today is composed of ten four-year college and university faculty members who are experts in North Carolina history. Members are appointed by the secretary of cultural resources and serve five-year terms. The committee advises the Department of Cultural Resources on the historical authenticity, the comparative merit, and the appropriateness of proposed markers; approves or disapproves any proposed marker; fixes the wording of inscriptions; and establishes criteria for carrying out these responsibilities. No official state marker can be erected without the committee's review and approval.

During the fall of 1935, the advisory committee held several meetings in Raleigh and Chapel Hill. The first five topics approved for markers were the Roanoke colonies in Dare County, Green Hill Place in Franklin County, the homeplace of John Penn in Granville County, Calvary Episcopal Church in Henderson County, and the birthplace of Zebulon B. Vance in Buncombe County. The committee gave considerable thought to the design and materials for the signs. Marker program administrators in Virginia loaned two signs for examination and comparison. Professor Boyd of Duke University suggested the scroll or open book pattern and the raised State Seal emblem. Consideration also was given to use of the State Capitol dome in place of the seal. Two professors from State College, experts in casting and design, sat in on the planning meetings. Representatives



Between 1903 and 1935 the North Carolina Historical Commission, in cooperation with local organizations, erected a number of bronze plaques. This sign in Warren County, erected in 1919, is typical of those memorials.

from four manufacturers made presentations to the committee. Before settling on the use of cast aluminum, wrought iron and porcelain enamel were also considered as materials.

On January 10, 1936, a group of state officials, several members of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and others gathered in the Stovall community of Granville County for the dedication of the first marker erected under the state program. Among the officials present were Christopher Crittenden and Mattie Erma Edwards, collector for the North Carolina Hall of History (today the North Carolina Museum of History) and the marker program's first researcher. That first marker identified the homesite of John Penn, one of the state's three signers of the Declaration of Independence. (To commemorate the marker program's fiftieth anniversary, the original sign was retrieved in 1985 for safekeeping and display, and a replacement was ordered for the Stovall site.) Other staff members associated with the program over its history include Marybelle Delamar, William S. Powell, Edwin A. Miles, William S. Tarlton, Elizabeth Wall Wilborn, and Jerry C. Cashion.

The silver-and-black markers have become a familiar part of the landscape since 1935. To date, 1,434 markers have been erected across North Carolina, with at least one in each of the state's one hundred counties. Wake County with seventy-two markers has the most; New Hanover and Guilford follow, with fifty-nine and fifty-one, respectively. Efforts have been made over the years to avoid slighting any area, but the fact remains that topics of statewide historical significance can be commemorated by markers only at or near associated sites.

The first edition of the *Guide to North Carolina Highway Historical Markers* was published in 1939 and listed the inscriptions for 218 markers. As the program expanded, subsequent editions were published in 1940, 1949, 1956, 1961, 1964, 1979, and 1990. The present edition, the ninth, incorporates 136 new markers erected between 1990 and



North Carolina's first highway historical marker was dedicated at the Stovall community in Granville County on January 10, 1936. Among those present were Christopher Crittenden, secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission (fourth from left), and Mattie Erma Edwards, marker program researcher (second from right).

2001. The reader should note that all inscriptions are reproduced exactly as they appear on the markers. No attempt has been made to edit the discrepancies of punctuation and style that have appeared over the years. An effort has been made to check the marker locations against recent maps and to be as specific as possible regarding the sites. - •

From the outset the marker program has divided the state into seventeen districts, listed A through Q (see the map on the inside front cover). On the face of each marker the district letter and that marker's number appear. Several changes effective with this edition of the *Guide* are designed to make it simpler to use and more informative. First, the markers, listed in past *Guides* by district, here are grouped by county and arranged Alamance-Yancey. Second, the year the marker was approved appears in the listing following its location. With the county-by-county arrangement, it has been necessary to key the subject index to page numbers rather than to individual marker numbers. Finally, to accompany the text and photos, detailed county-level highway maps have been prepared by the Geographic Information Systems Office of the Department of Transportation.

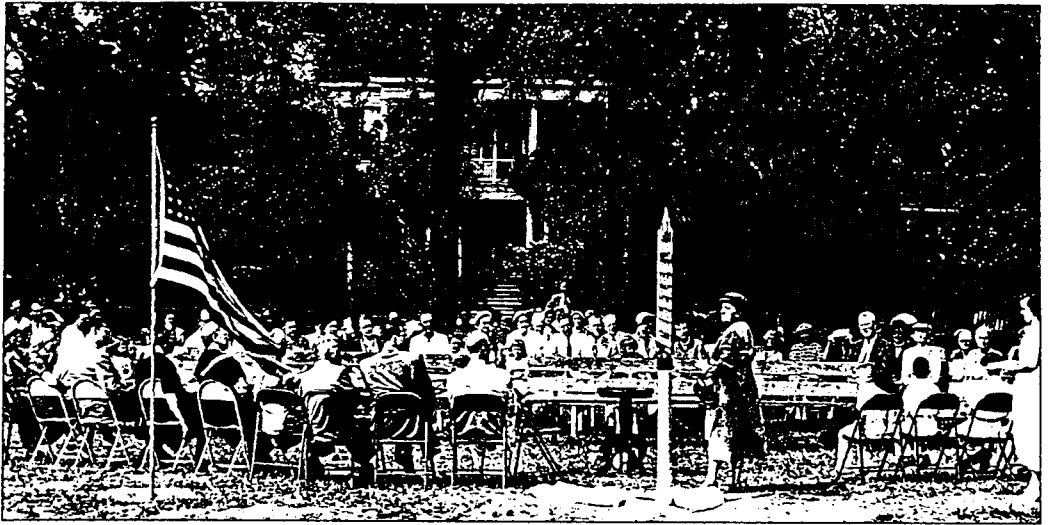
In the 1990s, the concept of public memory received attention from historians. In a 1992 study, John Bodnar wrote, "The shaping of a past worthy of public commemoration in the present is contested and involves a struggle for supremacy between advocates of various political ideas and sentiments." James W. Loewen in 1999 published a critical examination of markers and monuments. He was particularly critical of those with outdated interpretations or "politically incorrect" wording. The professors who have volunteered their time to serve on the Marker Advisory Committee in North Carolina over the years, in their deliberations, have established high standards of historical accuracy and have refused to authorize markers without sufficient documentary historical evidence. Their concern has been that the decisions stand the test of time and, to the extent possible, that contemporary opinion not intrude upon committee decision-making.

One check upon this intrusion has been the "twenty-five-year rule," the prohibition against the consideration of a subject until twenty-five years (or the rough equivalent of a generation) has passed. Early in the development of the North Carolina marker program, exceptions to this rule were allowed for former governors and U.S. senators. Applied consistently today to all individuals, the rule permits the review committee members to assess the importance of people and events with the perspective of time. Commemorative fever generally peaks around fifty years after an event as the participants and witnesses age. In many cases it is not those who were involved in an event who take the lead in commemorations but rather their sons and daughters, literal or figurative. This, it is generally acknowledged, was the case after the Civil War. The appearance of statues on courthouse greens accelerated early in the twentieth century. In our own time more attention has been given to veterans of World War II and the civil rights movement.

To be eligible for a state marker, a subject must be judged to be of statewide historical significance. Markers cannot be approved for subjects of only regional or local importance. Local organizations, church congregations, or individuals may purchase privately or locally financed markers or plaques. Such private or local markers are not considered part of the official state program, cannot bear the State Seal, must be erected



In January 1986, Mattie Erma Edwards Parker took part in a brief ceremony to retire the first marker. Also present were Jerry C. Cashion, research supervisor of Archives and History (left), and Michael Hill, marker program researcher (center).



The local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in Bladen County sponsored a dedication ceremony for the Thomas Robeson marker (I 37) in 1952.

outside the highway right-of-way, and must differ from state signs in design and color.

State historical markers are placed only on state or federal numbered highways but cannot be located on interstates or limited-access routes. The signs erected by North Carolina contain shorter blocks of text than those found in other states so that they can be read by passing motorists. Wherever possible, the marker is located at a turn-off or at an intersection where traffic slows. The inscriptions are limited to five or six lines of about twenty-four letters and spaces each.

Exceptions to this general rule are larger map markers that illustrate battles or historic events that occurred within a region. (These non-standard-size markers are designated in the text with double-letter prefixes, such as BB 1.) Smaller signs have been used to mark driving tours or to designate points of interest over wide areas such as the Bentonville and Aversboro battlefields. (The designations for these markers use triple-letter prefixes, such as BBB 1.) A number of signs of both types were approved and erected during the Civil War centennial in the 1960s. As these special markers have been replaced in recent years, they have been incorporated into the regular marker numbering scheme.

The overall design and appearance of the signs has changed little over the years. During World War II the program was suspended because of a shortage of materials necessary for casting the signs. Signs cast before 1947 bear all capital letters. A change in manufacturers in that year led to the present style, made of cast aluminum and bearing the title in capital letters with the text in upper and lowercase. Since 1947 the state's supplier has been Sewah Studios of Marietta, Ohio, the supplier of such signs to more than thirty states. In 1996, the foundry cast for the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh one-third size replicas of sixty-one state highway historical markers. These were installed on the grounds as part of the Museum Park Theater.

Anyone can submit a proposal for a new marker. A full listing of the criteria and an application form are available upon request. After a marker is approved, its location is subject to review by the Department of Transportation and the local governing body, that is, the board of county commissioners or the municipal government. The requesting party may wish to schedule a dedication and unveiling ceremony. In that event, the Division of Archives and History can assist with the planning and, in most cases, send a representative and cloth cover for unveiling purposes.

Many of the state highway historical markers have now been in service for more than sixty years. The marker materials and design were selected in part for their permanence.



In February 1999 several hundred members of the North Carolina Bar Association gathered on Edenton Street, just north of the State Capitol, to witness the unveiling of a marker (H 106) dedicated to that organization's founding in Raleigh one hundred years earlier.

Still, regular maintenance, such as painting, straightening, or post replacement, is required from time to time. Individuals wishing to report missing or damaged markers or to propose a subject for a new marker should address correspondence to: Research Supervisor, Research Branch, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 4611 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-4611.

Over the years the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program has spurred interest in state and local history. The distinctive signs are now in place in practically every city and town (as well as at many crossroads) across the state. For young people, the markers may spark a curiosity that leads to further study of and appreciation for the historical development of the region. The signs may be visitors' only exposure to the history of the Tar Heel State. For resident North Carolinians, a state marker can be a familiar landmark, serving as a reminder that an event of historical significance took place close to home. The Department of Cultural Resources and the Department of Transportation remain committed to the program as it nears its eighth decade.

All illustrations in this guide are from the files of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History with the following exceptions: John and Ruth Lanning, Asheville (marker photos on front cover and title page); North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill (p. 50); Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University (p. 78); North Carolina Bar Association, Cary (p. 11); *Greensboro News and Record*, Greensboro (p. 12, 99); *Wilmington Star-News*, Wilmington (p. 154); Trawick Ward, Research Labs of Anthropology (p. 157); and Richard Hunter, Warrenton (p. 205). For assistance with the editing and production of this volume I wish to acknowledge the contributions of Jerry C. Cashion, Lisa Kay Keenum, and Dennis F. Daniels of the Research Branch of the Division of Archives and History; Lang Baradell and Joe A. Mobley of the division's Historical Publications Section; and Terry Norris, Lori Mann, and Beverly Hunter of the North Carolina Department of Transportation.