

Michigan license plates

Fun facts and history

- Michigan license plates were first issued by individual cities beginning in 1903.
- The Michigan Secretary of State assumed the responsibility of statewide vehicle registration in 1905 with the enactment of Public Act 196.
- Michigan was not the first state to require license plates. That honor goes to New York, which began mandating plates in 1901. On the world stage, however, it was the French who first began issuing license plates – called “number plates” – in 1893.
- Michigan’s early plates were much different than what we see today. From 1905 to 1909, they were simply engraved aluminum discs, which were usually displayed on the dashboard.
- A registration number was added to the disc in 1907. It was the **vehicle owner’s** responsibility to put the registration number on a plate that could be hung from the rear of a vehicle. Owners made plates out of leather, steel, wood or rubber.
- After June 28, 1907, homemade license plates were required on the front and back of a vehicle. National mail-order companies such as Sears Roebuck were selling license plate kits for motorists. That business enterprise lasted until Florida became the last state to issue statewide plates in 1918.
- Michigan issued its first actual license plate in 1910. The plate was made of cast iron and had a glazed-on porcelain-like finish. It also featured the Great Seal of Michigan, though the seal was not officially adopted until 1911.
- The look of Michigan’s plates has varied over the years. Colors have ranged from the traditional blue and white to the less-conventional orange, magenta, maroon, cream, olive, black, light purple, dull silver, light gold, green, gray and chocolate brown. Some of the colors were used to pay tribute to various universities.
- Today, the Secretary of State registers more than 9 million vehicles and trailers.
- Michigan manufactures about 1.3 million plates a year.
- License plate fees are used for road construction and maintenance.

A long and winding road

License plates through the years

- 1903 – Individual cities in Michigan begin issuing license plates.
- 1905 – The Michigan Secretary of State assumes the responsibility of statewide vehicle registration with the enactment of Public Act 196. Early plates are simply engraved aluminum discs usually displayed on the dashboard.
- 1910 – Michigan issues its first actual license plates. In addition, the state begins issuing plates for motorcycles.
- 1914 – The annual fee for registering an automobile or motorcycle is set at a flat rate of \$3. Some states set fees according to a vehicle's horsepower.
- 1918 – Plates are first manufactured by the state's prison system. In 1919 production went back to the private sector, only to return to the prison system in 1920.
- 1920 – Trailer plates are issued for the first time.
- 1933 – Half-year passenger and trailer plates are issued in response to the Depression.
- 1935 – Veterans are recognized with plates having a “Vv” designation.
- 1939 – In search of a workable numbering system, the state adopts a Detroit police officer's recommendation of the two-letter, four-number system that was used from 1940 to 1970.
- 1943 – Metal tabs are issued and attached to the previous year's plate in an effort to conserve metal for the World War II effort.
- 1954 – The phrase “Water Wonderland” is incorporated on plates. Also, the 1954 plates have a maize-on-blue color combination to honor the University of Michigan.
- 1955 – The green-and-white color combination salutes Michigan State University.
- 1956 – A standard size is implemented for all U.S. license plates and is still used today.
- 1965 – Galvanized steel is used for the first time to make plates more resistant to Michigan's rugged winters. In addition, the phrase “Water-Winter Wonderland” replaces “Water Wonderland.”
- 1968 – The license plate slogan is changed to “Great Lake State.”
- 1970 – For the first time, plates carry the three-letter, three-numeral designation.
- 1971 – The Secretary of State's program to make license plates available by mail begins.

- 1973 – Motorists get the option of ordering personalized plates.
- 1975 – The state issues its first plates for permanently disabled motorists
- 1976 – Michigan introduces its bicentennial plate to honor the nation’s 200th birthday.
- 1980 – Year-round registration of vehicles according to birth date begins, eliminating the annual end-of-February rush to renew registrations.
- 1981 – The state starts requiring only one license plate per vehicle. Two plates had been required since 1957.
- 1982 – Michigan issues a plate featuring a Lake Superior-blue background, which becomes known as “Old Blue.”
- 1983 – All of Michigan’s possible letter/number combinations are exhausted. The state begins issuing plates with the letters and numbers reversed.
- 1995 – Michigan issues a first-of-its-kind plate to help support the U.S. Olympic Education Center in Marquette.
- 1996 – Michigan offers a plate commemorating the centennial of the automobile industry as an alternative to the standard “Old Blue” plate. Nearly 2 million are purchased during the single year of availability.
- 1997 – The “Great Lakes Splendor” plate goes on sale. The design – featuring a brilliant sunrise over the Straits of Mackinac – emerges as the winner from a statewide contest conducted the previous year.
- 2000 – Fundraising plates to benefit Michigan’s 15 public universities are offered.
- 2001 – Motorists can buy fundraising plates to support six worthy causes: clean water, agricultural heritage, the Children’s Trust Fund, non-game wildlife habitat, lighthouse preservation and the Veterans’ Memorial Fund. Also, a “Proud To Be American” plate goes on sale in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.
- 2003 – Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land introduces “Plate It Your Way,” a convenient online program allowing customers to check the availability of the number/letter configuration for their personalized plates from the comfort of their homes.
- 2005 – Renewing plate tabs goes high-tech when Secretary Land unveils Self-Service Stations that let customers do business with the swipe of a credit card.
- 2006 – Secretary Land announces a statewide contest for the design of Michigan’s new commemorative plate.
- 2007 – New standard plate and redesigned “Spectacular Peninsulas” commemorative plate become available Jan. 1.

Information provided by the Michigan Historical Center (www.michiganhistory.org), the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (www.alpca.org) and the Michigan Department of State (www.Michigan.gov/sos)