

Michigan Historical Commission Meeting Minutes

June 11, 2020

Michigan History Center

Commissioners in attendance (all by Zoom): Laura Ashlee, Joe Calvaruso, Timothy Chester, Brian James Egen, Delia Fernandez, Eric Hemenway, Tom Truscott and Larry Wagenaar.

Excused Absence: Susie Safford

Staff (all by Zoom): Sandra Clark, Michelle Davis, Suzanne Fischer, Mark Harvey, Heather Lehman, and Tobi Voigt.

President Egen called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. Commissioner Wagenaar hosted the meeting using the online facilities of the Historical Society of Michigan.

Approval of Agenda: Wagenaar moved to approve the agenda; the motion was seconded by Calvaruso and was unanimously adopted.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Chester moved to approve the April 30, 2020, meeting minutes as amended; the motion was seconded by Wagenaar and was unanimously adopted.

Marker Project – Clark reported that the project has stalled with the current COVID crisis and the issues surrounding it. However, this might be an ideal time to find funding while racial and social justice are in the forefront of the public mind. Clark noted there is still some work that needs to be done on the Mackinac Island markers and the Great Lake markers need to be drafted. Chester asked if the Foundation Director might have time to organize fundraising for this project and offered assistance if that is the case. After discussion, the commission agreed that doing exploratory work and moving forward is important. Clark agreed to discuss this project with Foundation Director Erin Burns and will report back to the commission.

Marker Program

- **Approval of Marker Text** – Two new marker texts were presented to the commission for review and approval.
 - ◆ **Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hillsdale, Hillsdale County**
 - ◆ **Woolsey Family Farm/Clinton F. Woolsey Memorial Airport, Northport, Leelanau County**

Ashlee moved to approve the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church marker text as amended; the motion was seconded by Calvaruso and was unanimously approved. Wagenaar moved to approve the Woolsey Family Farm/Clinton F. Woolsey Memorial Airport marker text as amended; the motion was seconded by Fernandez and was unanimously approved.

- **Reports:**
 - ◆ The Marker Status report was distributed prior to the meeting. Marker dedications have been postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

- ◆ The Marker Fund report was distributed prior to the meeting.

➤ **Marker Committee Proposal (Appendix A)**

The marker committee distributed the proposal prior to the meeting. The proposal addressed developing a policy allowing undesignated marker funds to be used to repair or refinish markers when individuals come forward asking for assistance.

After some discussion of the proposal, Truscott moved to accept the policy as presented. Further discussion followed the motion. While several commissioners agreed that the state has a responsibility to assist with maintaining the markers, there was concern surrounding the proposed amount of undesignated funds to be dedicated to this purpose. The proposed amount would limit the flexibility of being able to use marker funds for any other special projects. Ashlee briefly shared the options the marker committee discussed on how the funds would be distributed. Truscott withdrew his motion.

Ashlee moved approval of the proposal with the change of the amount of funds to be used from \$15,000 to \$10,000; the motion was seconded by Truscott. Commissioners supported the basic concept of having the state take some responsibility for maintaining the markers and having a clear policy that can be shared with all sponsors. They also raised various concerns about how such a program should be funded and administered. Ashlee withdrew her motion.

The commission asked the marker committee to explore options that protect marker fund flexibility and allow some funds to be used for general maintenance of existing markers. Ashlee agreed to discuss future proposed options with Clark before presenting them to the commission.

Staff Reports:

- Director's Report – Clark reported that MHC has not received approval to open the museum or to allow staff to work in the Lansing facility beyond a few exceptions. Some of the field sites are partially reopening in late-June.

Michiganology is up and running and generating some revenue. It cannot, of course, offset the admissions and store revenue lost since March. The state budget continues to remain a big concern.

The migration of Preservica to a new version is underway. The 1.3 million naturalization records that were digitized and indexed in a partnership with Family Search will be ready for the public by August.

The museum recently received a NAGPRA research documentation grant to reevaluate/review older collections that contain Native American objects that are not well described.

MHC has applied for an NEH CARES grant.

Currently all staff are taking one lay-off day per week, part of the state-government-wide effort to help with the budget crisis.

- Clark shared the center's statement on social and racial justice prior to the meeting. Staff are now working on a strategy to turn those words into action. She asked commissioners for their thoughts on this.

Egen noted that any action going forward needs to be authentic and genuine with a true purpose. He encouraged finding a variety of stories that represent the experiences of many groups that have faced similar situations.

Wagenaar shared that the Historical Society of Michigan also has a statement and has set up a diversity round table on Facebook to try to include more voices of people in communities of color for suggestions of authors and more diverse stories for publications. They hope to move toward a more diverse staff.

Truscott shared his past experiences with racial discrimination and how they directly impacted his life.

Fernandez said that it is not just about the content being created, it is about who we are employing to create that content. That is how we get to real authenticity and inclusivity. It is important to build a pipeline that engages different levels of education and focuses on helping students become interested in history. It is also important to create internships that target the underserved, silenced voices to make sure they are prepared to be hired at these institutions. To find ways to prepare for cultural shifts, we need to look to experts who are people of color in these fields to guide us through this effort.

Voigt noted her past outreach in Detroit communities, and said it is essential to build those relationships in other communities throughout the state. That doesn't come without some much-needed resources, time and a lot of listening. Voigt has been realigning the engagement unit to get members of her team out into the communities to begin building those relationships. It is important to spend time doing mass research and start asking and listening to what stories need to be shared – finding ways to empower communities to tell the stories the way they want them to be told.

Hemenway noted the tribes often fall off the radar when talking about racial equity and justice. Even though there are parallels, the struggles are often quite different. Therefore, it is very important to make sure all races and genders are included and not just the community that suffered the most recent atrocity. It is essential to look at each population separately and not lump them altogether to find a solution – the solution is often quite different for each. It is important to not alienate any population.

Clark noted the need to create an advisory group that has the diversity to share the narratives. Trying to expand the way our traditional audiences view Michigan's history will take time and care.

Fischer noted the importance of preparing staff to begin having sometimes difficult conversations with visitors and to be humble and good listeners.

Ashlee asked how the center communicates to the public to get them interested in sharing their stories with StoryCorp. Voigt responded that reaching out and making connections with local organizations is key to success. This means in-person meetings to gain trust

and build relationships. In-person interviews are on hold because of the pandemic need for social separation.

Clark noted she would like to have a conversation with Fernandez to discuss more about college students and finding ways to develop those connections and opportunities for the future. She will share information with the commission as things continue to unfold. This topic will be on the September agenda.

Business Updates

- Nominating Committee – The nominating committee recommended reelecting Egen as the president and Chester as the vice-president. Calvaruso made a motion to accept the nominating committee’s recommendation; the motion was seconded by Ashlee and was unanimously accepted with Egen abstaining.

Public Comments – No public comments

Commissioner Comments

- Wagenaar noted that the Historical Society of Michigan continues to provide as many remote and online activities and events as possible and has been dealing with budget concerns as well.
- Ashlee complimented Clark and MHC staff on the work they have managed to get done during the past several months. Ashlee suggested that Amy Arnold from the State Historic Preservation Office be invited to the next meeting to share information about her Civil Rights historic site documentation project
- Hemenway noted that the tribes have been dealing with budget issues as well since gaming has been shut down for an extended period. Many things have been cancelled, and they have been dealing with voluntary furloughs as well. He noted that ProQuest, a pay to play archive, has a wealth of information and some amazing stories. It may feed into some future projects with the Center down the road.
- Calvaruso said the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum has been closed since March, however they hope to have some employees come back at the end of the month. He announced his plans to be officially retired later this year.
- Fernandez stated it has been an unusual time at Michigan State University as well and hoped that as plans continue to unfold for resuming classes this fall, some stability will return.
- Egen noted that Safford asked to not be reappointed to the commission as she is spending more time out of the state.

Truscott moved to adjourn the meeting; Ashlee seconded the motion and the meeting adjourned at 12:48 p.m.



Sandra S. Clark, Executive Secretary

Michigan Historical Marker Program Marker Repair Proposal

PROPOSAL

The marker committee proposes that the commission annually set aside \$15,000 from the Marker Fund for the refinishing of markers.* Any funds remaining at the end of the fiscal year will roll over for use the following year when an additional \$15,000 will be set aside.

*This does not include corrections or replacement markers that are revisions.

Marker Fund

The marker fund comprises application fees of \$250 from each applicant as well as “mark-up” funds that are paid each time an applicant donates the money to pay for a marker. Applicants pay from \$190 added to the price of a small wall-mounted marker to \$780 added to the price of a small marker with the same text on both sides.

- The average applicant pays an average of \$750 in application fees and costs above the actual price of the marker.

As of April 24, 2020, the Marker Fund contained undesignated funds totaling \$74,982.60. The commission has approved the allocation of \$10,000 for “research to locate nontraditional sources for church history” as well as up to \$4,000 for Heather’s summer salary. That leaves roughly \$65,000 in undesignated marker funds.

The average annual income in the Marker Fund 2017-2019 was \$11,622 in undesignated funds.

Need for Repair Assistance

Michigan Historical Markers belong to the State of Michigan, but the state leaves it up to the public to repair the markers. This looks bad from a public relations angle, and it is not fair. The state needs to take responsibility for its property. In some cases, organizations and individuals have already raised funds to make the initial donation of the cost of the marker, the application fee, and the additional costs. Often groups come together specifically to erect a marker, but disband once the marker has been dedicated.

An average of five markers per year were refinished during 2017-2019. The costs were paid by the public.

Refinishing Costs (including delivery)

Refinishing of Large Marker: \$1,200
Refinishing of Small Marker: \$800
Refinishing of Identification Plaque: \$275
Replacement Posts: \$390 each

The Marker Committee requests that the commission adopt this proposal as policy.