



THE MICHIGAN HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

Since 1955, Michigan Historical Markers have told the story of Michigan and its people. They are a tangible reminder of where we have come from, an inspiration for where we might go, and the thread that ties our state together. They help Michiganders and visitors discover their sense of place. The roots of the program go back to the early part of the commission's existence.

After the Michigan Historical Commission's creation in 1913, it formed a partnership with the Mackinac Island State Park Commission that involved erection of several historical markers celebrating the history of the island.

In 1917, the legislature authorized county boards of supervisors to appropriate money for the marking of historical places. The single-section law, approved May 10, 1917, on the eve of America's entrance into the First World War, was succinct:

The board of supervisors of any county in the State is hereby authorized to appropriate any sum not exceeding two hundred dollars in any one year, for the purpose of marking historical places in their respective counties and for the erection of monuments or other memorials in commemoration of notable events connected with such counties. Such money shall become a county expense and shall be included in the taxes of such county.

Act 279 of 1917 stayed on the books until repeal on September 27, 1957.

In 1941, on the eve of American involvement in another world-wide conflict, the legislature authorized the commission to lead a historical marking program. The program was abandoned when the United States entered the Second World War.

In 1953, a growing interest in historical marking in other states inspired Governor G. Mennen Williams to appoint a committee to study methods by which Michigan's historical resources could receive greater attention. The committee consisted of Willis F. Dunbar, Lewis Beeson, and Arthur Wilcox. Based by the committee's research, the commission drew up a bill to provide authority to mark historic sites. On October 14, 1955, the Legislature responded positively. Act 10 of that year, provided for the registration of historic sites and the display at the site of "a suitable numbered marker, approved by the commission as to text and construction, indicating that the site is a registered state historic site." The modern Michigan Historical Marker program was born.

In the September 1955 issue of *Michigan History*, Commissioner Dunbar called on “history-minded citizens and local historical societies to effectuate the registration of all historic sites in Michigan having state-wide significance.” Markers would be installed where appropriate.



Michigan's first historical marker is covered on the side of Beaumont Tower as MSU President John Hannah (left) listens to Commissioner Vander Velde speak.

On October 22, 1955, the first Michigan Historical Marker under the new program was dedicated. Placed at Beaumont Tower it commemorated the 1855 founding of Michigan State University. The second marker, sponsored by the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, marked the beginning of the Lake Superior iron mining industry at Jackson Mine in Negaunee. The Ford Motor Company sponsored the third marker, erected at the Highland Park Plant to commemorate the Model T.

In the June 1957 issue of *Michigan History*, historian George S. May summarized the early status of the program. “What was for many long years only a dream shared by men and women struggling to promote a wider understanding of Michigan’s rich historical heritage has now become a reality.” The legislature appropriated \$25,000 for the erection of markers in 1956 and in 1957. By the end of 1966, public appropriations had funded 91 markers, and private sources had funded 112.

In 2002, the legislature revised the Markers Act, formalizing aspects that had been agency policy. The act made official the state’s ownership of all markers, safeguarded the green-and-gold wolverine-emblazoned image, and established penalties for vandalism and theft.

On February 15, 2007, the senate proclaimed May 23, 2007, “Michigan Historical Marker Awareness Day,” noting that some 1,500 marker locations and more than 2,800 sites in the State Register of Historic Sites had been commemorated.

In April 2009, during the state’s budget debates, consideration was given to privatizing the marker program. The commission reaffirmed “the essential public purpose of the Michigan Historical Marker Program” and called for “its preservation as a public, professional and official function of the state.” The program remained with the state and by its 60th anniversary encompassed more than 1,700 marker locations in 81 of 83 of Michigan’s counties, as well as in Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee and France.

Four publications have centered on Michigan historical markers. The first, entitled “Historical Markers and Memorials in Michigan” was published as Volume XV of *Michigan History Magazine*, Spring, 1931. It began:

The growth of interest in historical events and in marking historic and legendary spots has been rapid within recent years. The interest aroused has resulted in the erection of numerous markers by various patriotic, state, and civic bodies, business organizations, clubs, and individuals throughout the State, and in order to determine what has already been done in the different counties, the Historical Commission conducted this preliminary survey. ...

It is the hope of the Commission that this survey may not only be of use in the schools and to the residents of Michigan, but that it may serve as an incentive to other communities in the State to preserve the memory of historic events and notable persons in their vicinity.

The next 200 pages listed markers erected by various entities throughout Michigan, organized by county, with sixty-two counties listed. It did not contain an index.



In 1958, Governor Williams joined Stewart Woodfill and the commission: (left to right) Elizabeth Adams, Lewis Vander Velde, Willard Wichers, Lewis Beeson, Prentiss Brown and Chester Ellison.

contained locations, descriptions, and (for the first time) images and photographs relating to the sites. The preface stated: "Over two thousand sites have been listed in the state register and at least half display markers." It was arranged by county, with an index arranged by marker title.

A revised edition of the guidebook, was published in 2005 by the University of Michigan Press, again edited by Ms. Ashlee. Now mushroomed from 300 to 500 pages, the guidebook for the first time contained an index that included some subject matter headings.

Originally created in 1955 to promote heritage tourism, the Michigan Historical Marker Program has taken on additional roles of education and place-making. Its value to all three will increase with greater on-line access and integration into both linear and virtual trails throughout the state.

In 1967, using the John M. Munson Michigan History Fund, the commission published a stand-alone paperbound guide entitled *Michigan Historical Markers*. Edited by Commissioner Dunbar, the 200-page volume described 205 "official" historical markers. The index was arranged by county. A companion *Guide to Michigan's Historical Attractions* provided a map showing the location of all the markers.

In 1991, the Bureau of History and the commission published *Traveling Through Time: A Guide to Michigan's Historical Markers*. Edited by Laura R. Ashlee, coordinator of the State Historical Marker program, the volume



The 1977 dedication of the Elmwood Cemetery marker included William Schindler, Henry Ledyard, Mayor Colman Young, Barbara Wrigley, Secretary of State Richard Austin, and Councilman Ernest Browne.