

*We educate and engage the public through Kentucky's history to confront the challenges of the future.*

# Kentucky

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM



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# Kentucky's Roadside Historical Markers and The Historical Markers Society

- ▶ The story of Kentucky's roadside markers program begins at the height of the Great Depression. In December 1935 in Lexington, a group of businessmen and historians met to discuss the formation of a permanent organization with the goal of "developing considerable commercial advantages," by "marketing the bluegrass."
- ▶ They would later amend their goal to "starting a movement" that would continue on after their efforts
- ▶ The group members included a "who's-who" of the Lexington business and academic community. They were: Earl Wallace, Louis Hillenmeyer, Judge Samuel Wilson, J. Winston Coleman, Charles R. Staples, and many others.
- ▶ They would call themselves The Historical Markers Society

# The Historical Markers Society

- ▶ Initially, the Historical Markers Society's (HMS) ambitious goal was to place "100 historical markers in the Bluegrass." This would be pared down to 25 markers due to cost. Ultimately, 21 markers would be placed.
- ▶ The tablet, with the Seal of the Commonwealth of Kentucky prominent on top, was first designed and utilized by the HMS in 1936.
- ▶ Costs for manufacturing and placement in today's dollars are comparable to that quoted by the Kentucky Historical Society~ \$2000-\$3000. An extraordinary amount during the depression!
- ▶ Inscriptions committee historians debated and decided on a site list with both historic and tourism interests

# The Original Design



# Original and Newer KHS design



# The Historical Markers Society

- ▶ Of the 25 markers planned, 21 were placed. The impetus to start such a project, the Great Depression, was the same that contributed to its demise. In the end it lacked the funds to complete its goal and its supplier lost the master mold in bankruptcy
- ▶ The HMS helped to locate, mark, and memorialize historic sites within Lexington, and Fayette County. Theirs was the first organized effort to do such work. Their work led to an increase in tourism and general interest in Lexington, and Fayette County and provided a valuable educational opportunity for the community.
- ▶ Their intention of “starting a movement” that would grow and thrive beyond their initial efforts was successful and has had a profound impact on Kentucky.

# The Markers Today

- ▶ The markers, by their very nature, are historic in their own right as representative of the work accomplished by the Historical Markers Society
- ▶ Unfortunately, just 10 of the original 21 markers placed by the HMS remain
  - ▶ 8 are missing entirely, some having been reported stolen
- ▶ Not all have withstood the test of time...

# Markers then and Now



# The Markers Today

Marker #2 "Keenland"



Marker #6 "First Race Course"



# The Markers Today

Marker #3 "Morgan House"



KHS Marker #3 "Morgan House"



# Lexington History Museum Historic Marker Survey

- ▶ After further investigation, it was found that not only were many of the original HMS markers in need of repair or replacement, but other markers placed by the Kentucky Historical Markers Committee and the Kentucky Historical Society were also in danger
- ▶ The extent to which historical markers in Lexington and Fayette County are in need of attention is not known. As a result collaboration with the Lexington History Museum began.
- ▶ The Fayette County Historic Markers Survey was initiated to catalogue, photograph, and identify markers in need of repair or replacement

# KHS HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM HISTORY

**August 15, 1949** - the Kentucky Historical Highway Markers Committee organized.

**1949 to 1960** - Committee worked with the Kentucky Department of Transportation to set roughly 150 markers across the state.

**1962** - Committee disbanded; Kentucky Historical Society took over the day-to-day operations of the program.

**1992** - New markers were funded through private donations from community sponsors.

# TODAY'S HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

- Community driven effort
- At least one marker in every Kentucky county
- Program cost are the responsibility of the marker sponsor/applicant.
- Average of 40 marker applications per year



## FEATURED STORIES

# CHALLENGES TO TODAY'S HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

## Maintenance

As of 2019:

- Markers in need of refurbishments - \$11,000.
- Markers that need refurbishments and a new post - \$57,000.
- Markers that need complete replacements - \$242,360.
- Servicing a statewide network

Requires \$310,360 from community sponsors  
20 year backlog

# CHALLENGES TO TODAY'S HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

## Maintenance

Past 12 months:

- Markers Serviced: 82
- Replacement: 58 / Refurbishment: 24
- Counties Serviced: 57
- Percentage of Backlogged Markers Serviced: 39.0% (82 out of 210)

Support through KHS General Funds:  
\$146,715

# TODAY'S HISTORICAL MARKER

## Audit

Recent audit:

- 2,500 markers were assessed for condition and physical location
- 630 markers are of potentially contested subject or interpretive matter.
- Identification of glaring omissions in the Kentucky history narrative.
- Disconnect between the physical marker and the community.
- Entries into <https://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/> are highly indexed through Google yet not all markers are included in the app or tours

# The Future of KHS's HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

- Ground the program in:
  - helping Kentuckians see themselves in the stories of the people, place, and events and how they are tied to a broader Kentucky history, and
  - defensible historical evidence to support the interpretation,
  - connections between markers across communities, regions, and the state,
  - histories that represent the diversity of Kentucky and demonstrate a high confidence in community support to tell those histories.

# The Future of KHS's HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

- To leverage the grassroots strength of the program through deeper, lasting relationships with marker sponsors.
- Raise awareness of the program.
- Provide a mechanism of review.
- Sustainability of the program including a maintenance fund for the repair or replacement of damaged markers.

# Kentucky Sestercentennial Commission

**KHS recommended “pillars” for the  
America 250 KY**

- Education
- Heritage Tourism
- Signature Events
- Grant Programs
- Liaison to national partners



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