

LANCASTER FARMING ANTIQUES CENTER

Uniquely Local Markers Connect Past to Future

The Cast Iron Town Signs of Pennsylvania

JACK GRAHAM

Pennsylvania has hundreds of towns large and small, and most of them greet visitors with a simple sign along a main road noting the name of the town. Many of these towns have still more ornate greeting signs. Made of cast iron, right here in Pennsylvania, and painted the bright blue and gold colors of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, these special "Keystone markers," so named for their keystone shape, tell quite a bit more about the town a traveler is entering. They impart bits of information about the town's name, the date it was founded and perhaps the distance to the next town down the road.

A project of the former Pennsylvania Department of Highways back in the 1920s, many of these special pieces of local history have long since disappeared from the roadside, but a surprising number still remain. There were at least two per town, one at each end along the state highway that passed through. If a town was at the intersection of two state roads then there were four markers. Jonestown, Pa., in Lebanon County, still has and cares for all four, but sadly, in many towns only one, or none, remain today. Some towns have taken good care of these surviving signs, but in all too many cases, remaining markers stand as abandoned orphans along the roadside.

The signs officially belong to the state Department of Transportation (PennDOT), but the agency realistically has more important priorities, and so it is left to local communities, or volunteer groups or individuals in those communities to step forward and adopt and care for these markers if those that remain are to survive. Often all they need is a good cleaning up and repainting. Made of cast iron, including the ornate posts on which they stand, many of

the signs or posts have been broken by vehicle collisions. Many are in need of welding repairs. Many have been bolted back together. Some signs stand not on the original posts which are now gone, but rather on round pipe or wooden replacement posts. But the important thing is that the signs are still there. Someone thought enough of their importance to fix them, even if crudely. More such volunteers are needed.

A group of folks interested in the preservation of these signs was recently formed. This group, the Keystone Marker Trust, strives to document those signs that still stand as well as those that are now gone. Some of the group's members have been collecting information from the markers and photographing them for years before coming together as the trust. Over 700 of these markers, in 60 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, are listed on the "Find a Marker" section of the trust's new website. Forty-five of those are now, or once were, in Lancaster County towns (only Montgomery County had more) including Adamstown, Akron, Bainbridge, Bird-in-Hand, Blue Ball, Brickerville, Brownstown, Christiana, Churchtown, Clay, Columbia, Conestoga, Denver, East Petersburg, Elizabethtown, Ephrata, Gap, Goodville, Hinkletown, Intercourse, Kinzer, Lancaster, Landisville, Leaman Place, Lexington, Lincoln, Lititz, Marietta, Marticville, Maytown, Mt. Joy, Mountville, Neffsville, New Danville, New Holland, New Providence, Paradise, Quarryville, Reamstown, Refton, Rothsville, Salunga, Soudersburg, Strasburg and Talmage.

There may well be additional markers that are not yet on the trust's listing. (Although both blue-and-gold colored, the markers associated with the Keystone Marker Trust are different than those sponsored by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which have a different purpose and shape, and which specifically denote historic people, places and events.)

What is not known is how many of these town markers are still there, or what condition they are in. The trust urges town or township officials to step forward, locate and care for any of these markers in their communities, or to encourage local groups or individuals to do so. The Keystone Marker Trust is eager to provide assistance and technical advice regarding repairs, paint colors and roadside safety.

In many instances, the marker signs themselves have disappeared, but the lonely posts still stand on the roadside, forgotten and forlorn. If the original markers cannot be found (and often they turn up hidden away in the back corner of a borough maintenance shed), then the trust hopes to be able to provide them to another town where a remaining marker is not on an original post.

One of the trust's goals is to raise funds to restore markers in communities where no volunteers can be found, to make patterns of both the markers and the posts so that local foundries can produce accurate replicas. Interested towns could then replace these missing parts of their local history.

When redone in the rich blue and gold colors of the Commonwealth

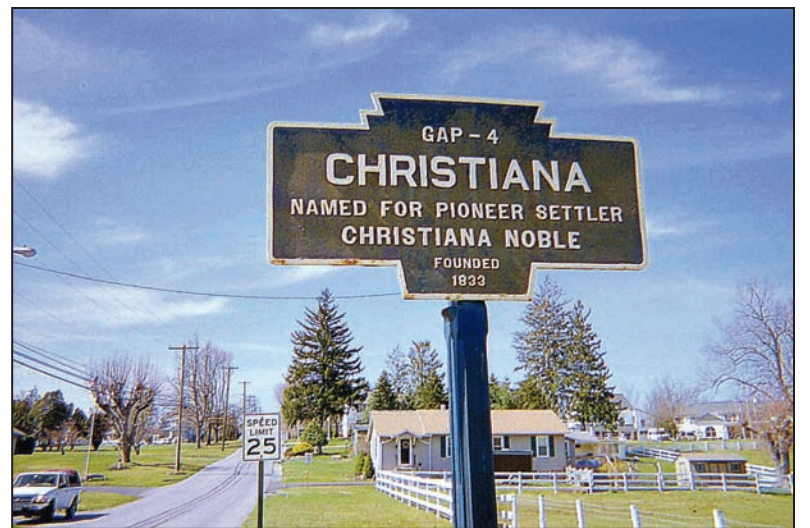


Photos by Jack Graham

Markers provide a link from Pennsylvania's past to its present and future.

of Pennsylvania, they serve as an impressive town entrance, welcoming residents and visitors alike, and giving a sense-of-place to their communities. The keystone shape promotes pride to Pennsylvanians, and pride in one's home town too. These markers and their posts are made of cast iron, and as such are a tribute to the iron and steel industry that for so many generations brought and kept Pennsylvania at the forefront of our nation's industrial might. Although that era is behind us, an attractive town entrance can promote tourism too.

For more information about the Keystone Marker Trust or to help with markers in towns in Pennsylvania, go online to the website at www.keystonemarkerttrust.org. The trust is seeking volunteers and other interested groups as well as good, up-to-date photographs and information about the markers. Jack Graham can be reached at 717-582-2235 or at jatogr@embarqmail.com.



Volunteers are sought by a newly formed group, the Keystone Marker Trust, to assist in identify, photograph and document markers.



Besides welcoming visitors to a town, markers often provide additional bits of information.



The town markers contribute to the sense of community within a town.



The poles holding the keystone markers are also cast iron.



Many markers are in need of repair, or are hidden away indoors someplace.



Some of these uniquely local markers have already been restored and repainted.