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PennDOT seeks help restoring Keystone Markers

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In the 1920s and 1930s, the former Pennsylvania Department of Highways installed thousands of Keystone Markers at entrances to municipalities and at streams.

The decorative 21- by 38-inch cast-iron blue and gold signs with cast lettering and matching raised outer edge provided travelers the name of the town, its derivation, the date of founding and the distance to the next municipality.

The stream signs contained just the name but often were double-sided, unlike the markers for communities.

Over the years, the signs have disappeared or fallen into disrepair because the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, which owns them, does not have the money to maintain them.

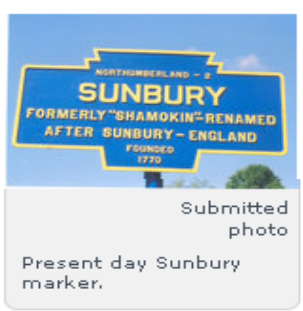
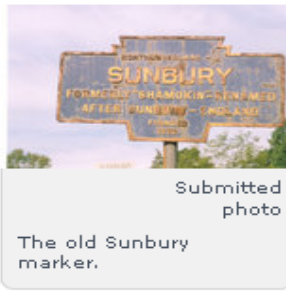
Those that remain are endangered, said Nathaniel C. Guest of Pottstown, who was the driving force in formation of the nonprofit Keystone Marker Trust, which was incorporated in 2010.

The trust consists of volunteers, some of whom have restored signs. Board member James G. Carn, a district judge in Williamsport, has done 50 of them in seven counties.

Another board member, John T. Graham of Elliottsburg, has restored markers in Duncannon, Loysville and Ickesburg plus one each in Fayette and Berks counties. Body shops are restoring signs for Landisburg and New Bloomfield, he said.

All the known markers in Perry County have or are in the process of being restored except those at Liverpool, he said. Two of those at Liverpool along Routes U.S. 11/15 are on wooden poles, he said.

Keystone Markers are distinctive symbols of Pennsylvania and serve to promote the cultural heritage of places, Guest said. That is the reason the trust has launched an initiative to restore the estimated 600 remaining markers and for the first time in 70 years get new ones.



“Every month, we’re coming across one no one knew about,” Graham said. “We have quite a few scouts out there for us. It’s sort of like a treasure hunt. It’s kind of exciting.”

Besides his restoration work, Graham has prodded communities to take over the maintenance of the signs. He also would like to see PennDOT include their restoration in highway projects.

The trust has informed PennDOT it will accept temporary custody of markers to keep them out of the trash, he said.

Today, most communities have only one sign, if any, Graham said. Hanover with five, Jonestown with four and Liverpool with three are among the exceptions, he said. The only one he is aware of in the Harrisburg area is Penbrook.

Guest proposes an adopt-a-marker type program similar to how organizations work with PennDOT to remove trash from roadsides as a way to get the markers restored. The trust is working on restoration guidelines, he said.

PennDOT would have to approve the design of any new signs and determine if the posts need to be the breakaway type in case they’re hit by a vehicle, Guest said.

Bringing back the signs should be a “no brainer,” he said. “Nobody else has anything like that.” Markers are needed because there is sometimes sprawl, and identification of communities is lacking, he said.

“We applaud the hard work of the association for its efforts to restore a piece of classic Americana here in Pennsylvania,” PennDOT spokesman Steve Chizmar said.

“The reality is PennDOT does not have the financial resources necessary to restore these markers and we are delighted this group has taken up this effort to preserve and restore a piece of Pennsylvania history.”

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