

About the Michigan Historical Marker Program

Dignitaries dedicated the first Michigan Historical Marker on October 22, 1955, at Michigan State University in honor of the institution's centennial. Earlier that year the Michigan state legislature had charged the Michigan Historical Commission with the task of identifying and marking sites of "historical interest."

The earliest markers focused on settlement, geology, geography, native peoples, and military conflicts. Markers dotted highway rest areas, state parks, places where historic events occurred, and only a few of the state's grandest historic buildings. During the first ten years of the program, only 48 of 283 markers were for historic buildings. During the 1970s the Michigan History Division (precursor of today's Michigan Historical Center) refined the state's fledgling historic preservation program. Although the historical marker program was then administered by the division's publications section, the markers began to be connected more regularly to historic resources, and historical "significance" replaced historic "interest" in the criteria. In 1988 the program was moved into the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

Consistent with trends in other arenas dealing with the past, the study and interpretation of the history of "common people" and local history has grown. Many markers honor the lives of prominent Michiganders, but they also tell us about lesser known pioneers, and Native Americans, and women, and minorities who helped shape our towns and thus the state. Most of the markers focus on subjects that pre-date the twentieth century. During the later years of the twentieth century, however, we began acknowledging the significance of historic resources dating from World War II and after—on rare occasions straying from the requirement that the site be fifty years of age or older. Places like the General Motors Technical Center (built from 1948 to 1985), Minoru Yamasaki's Temple Beth El (completed in 1973), and Michigan icons like the Motown Record Corporation (founded in 1959), reflect the ingenuity and creativity of Michigan in the second half of the twentieth century. While most of the markers tell positive stories or honor people's achievements, some markers tell about the darker side of our past and may be controversial. In 1991, after much discussion, the Michigan Historical Commission approved the placement of a marker about the Bath School Disaster in Clinton County. The Bath School Disaster continues to be one of the most tragic and dramatic events in the state's history. Although some stories make us uncomfortable, they need

to be told. The markers for Italian Hall, Paradise Valley, and the Ossian Sweet House tell sobering tales.

Perhaps the most important event related to the program during the last five years was the Michigan Historical Markers Act of 2002. This legislation “modernized” the marker program and formalized aspects of the program that had been merely policy up until then. The act made official the state’s ownership of all state historical markers and established strict penalties for the theft, vandalism, or unauthorized removal of a marker. It also protects the marker image from people who would seek to put up an unauthorized marker. In addition, the law requires that physical changes to any historic structure with a historical marker be made according to standards that ensure the historic character of the resource will be maintained.

The Michigan Historical Marker Program has now reached a fifty-year milestone of its own. As the program enters its next half-century we look forward to commemorating the significant people, events, architecture, and sites that reflect the Great Lakes State in the second half of the twentieth century.

Introduction

I don't remember when I first began craning my neck in the car to look at neat old buildings or when I first started pondering what life was like in the past. As a child, on car trips, I had what must have been an annoying habit of reading signage. "Howard Johnson two miles . . . Stuckey's Just Ahead . . . Don't Pick Up Hitchhikers . . . Keep America Beautiful." Of all the signs along the roadside, none generated as much excitement as "Historical Marker Ahead," and my parents indulged me whenever I asked them to stop. (It's a wonder we ever reached our destination.) Historic sites and historical markers fed my imagination and made me want to learn more, but I never thought about how the markers got there or who wrote them.

When I became the historical marker coordinator in 1988 I quickly realized how important markers are to the people who apply for them and to many of the people who read them. Citizens drive Michigan's historical marker program. Without their generous investment of time, spirit, and funds the program would not have thrived for fifty years. Before we can evaluate whether a site meets the criteria for a marker, the people who apply for them must conduct research, take photographs, and complete the application. Acceptable documentary evidence is often elusive. In addition, they raise the funds, which are substantial. People apply for markers because they believe they have an important story to tell. They want state recognition for their site—their town—their history—which we all share.

Roselle Sertich of Saugatuck was a special applicant. Whenever people think they can't come up with the money for a marker, I tell them about Mrs. Sertich, who raised twelve hundred dollars by selling homemade jam and baked goods after church so that she could pay for the Allegan Road historical marker. Why did she work so hard? She did it because she wanted everyone driving cars down Allegan Road to know that it was once a trail walked by native peoples and later became a route taken by rattling stagecoaches.

Markers and their related historic sites connect us to those who came before. Applicants facilitate that connection. The markers inform us about wealthy people who built opulent houses; native peoples who adapted to climatic and cultural changes over thousands of years; Native American villages that thrived and eventually dispersed; horses and men who hauled stone to build churches; African Americans who fled slavery; and towns that boomed and busted with the dawn and decline of the lumbering and mining industries.

Although one could think that marker applicants look back, I think they

look to the future. Certainly they feel tied to the town settlers or the church founders or the school children who came before them. But, in fact, the marker is about the future. It's about continuity. It's about education. It's about fostering understanding for what people experienced as they built lives, communities, industries, and a nation. It's about appreciation for what we have now. And, it's about doing something to build an appreciation for history so that people who read the markers now and in the future will also feel connected to those who came before.

Some people read markers casually, while others are anything but casual. "Marker hunters"—those who attempt to visit and record every marker out there—astound me. These people love history; they "collect" markers. Edward and Annemarie Herman are among the most methodical marker hunters. In a briefcase they keep their materials: a typed, cross-referenced list of every marker by county and by site number, their copy of the first edition of *Traveling Through Time* (they have a second copy because the first one got worn out), and a list of the markers left to find. On their main list they note whether they have been there, the year of their visit, and whether they took a photograph of the marker. Mrs. Herman told me that after they found all the markers in the guidebook (1,104 of them!), they looked for new ones in *Michigan History* magazine and asked friends to pass on newspaper reports of new markers. Upon hearing of new ones, they went out the next weekend—briefcase in tow—to find them!

Much has changed over the course of the historical marker program's fifty-year history. Requirements, grammar, and terms that are acceptable to use have all changed, but interest in Michigan's history has never waned. Marker dedication ceremonies haven't changed much. A member of the Michigan Historical Commission presents the marker, local officials speak, a band plays, and bunting decorates the podium. As for travelers—they still pull off US-2 to read the Northernmost Point of Lake Michigan marker, and throughout the state people still stand next to markers to have their photographs taken.

I hope *Traveling Through Time*, the markers, and Michigan's wealth of historic resources will fire your children's imagination as you visit the past together; that all of you will seek to learn more; and that you too will feel connected to the Michiganians who brought us all to this point in our history.

How to Use This Book

Traveling Through Time is a collection of state historical markers erected since 1955. The first marker was dedicated in October 1955, recognizing Michigan State University as the model for land grant colleges in the United States. Since 1955 over fourteen hundred historical markers have been erected.

Each historical marker record presented in this volume consists of two parts: (1) the marker text; and (2) the historic site information. The records are arranged alphabetically by county, then by the incorporated governmental unit in which the marker is located, and finally by the exact title. Titles beginning with “The” have been alphabetized by the second word in the title, and proper nouns are by the first word. You will notice that some records have two titles. These are two-sided markers with a different title on each side.

The reader should keep three things in mind: (1) this collection only includes official state markers; (2) there may be markers that we do not have record of; and (3) markers in this book are not definitive histories and, on rare occasions, factual errors have occurred.

In addition, identification plaques, which do not give historical information, but rather denote listing in the State Register of Historic Sites, are not included in this edition.

A sample record is shown below:

Charles Lang Freer House

Detroit industrialist Charles Lang Freer prospered primarily as a railroad car manufacturer. This house, considered Michigan’s finest example of the Shingle style, was designed by Wilson Eyre Jr. of Philadelphia and built in 1890. Here Freer (1854–1919) assembled one of the most extensive Asian art collections in the world. He also collected Pewabic pottery and the work of contemporary American artists such as Whistler, Dewing, and Tryon. A 1905 addition incorporated the “Peacock Room,” decorated by James Whistler, which was removed from a house in England and transplanted here as part of Freer’s art collection. In 1906 he donated his collection and the Peacock Room to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Merrill-Palmer Institute

This house was built for industrialist Charles Lang Freer in 1890. Upon Freer’s death in 1919, the executors of the will of Lizzie Merrill-Palmer purchased the house for use as a school devoted to improving the quality of parenting. This school became what is now known as the Merrill-Palmer Institute, one of the first institutes of child development established in the United States. Merrill-Palmer’s model, combining study, research, and work with children, was widely copied in other locations nationally. Its

preschool, opened in 1922, led the development of preschool education and child care across the nation. In 1981 the Merrill-Palmer Institute became part of Wayne State University.

| <i>Historic Site Name</i> | <i>Location</i> | <i>Common Name</i> | <i>State Register Number</i> | <i>Date Registered</i> | <i>Year Erected</i> |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| 71 East Ferry Avenue between Freer, Charles Lang, House (Merrill-Palmer Institute) | Woodward Avenue and John R Street | S315 | November 6, 1970; | 2003 | |

The site location consists of two parts: the physical location of the site and the municipality. We have made every effort to verify the location of each marker in this publication. We contacted municipalities, property owners, and historical societies. We also relied on reports from “marker hunters”—history enthusiasts who seek to visit every marker. However, we were unable to verify all of them. Note that some locations have been marked with an **M**, while others are marked **R**. The **M** means that the marker is missing from the site and that the State Historic Preservation Office does not know its whereabouts. The **R** means that the marker was removed from its historic site in a purposeful manner and that the state was consulted or has been told of its whereabouts. Keep in mind that the program is fluid. Some markers will be removed in the future, while others that have been removed will be reinstalled.

Each site commemorated with a Michigan Historical Marker has been listed in the State Register of Historic Sites. The historic and common site names were assigned when the sites were designated; therefore, the common name may be outdated. Some of the historic and common names contain the words “Informational Site,” “Informational Designation,” or “Commemorative Designation.” Informational sites are specific sites that were listed because of their association with a significant structure that was formerly located on the site or with an event that occurred at a specific site. Informational designations reflect the registration of an institution, person, or event that is not associated specifically with the site where the marker is located. The more recently used term “Commemorative Designation” can be for either of these types of sites.

Historic site numbers were assigned when the sites were designated; the registration dates are also included. In some cases these numbers and dates are lacking because a marker was inadvertently erected without the site being registered. The initials HB, S, and L indicate the level of significance of the site: HB = Historic Building; S = State Significance; L = Local Significance. (Note that the designation HB was used only in the early years of the program.) In some cases letters follow the numerals in the site numbers. Beginning in 1978 sites were classified depending on whether a historic building was registered, or whether the site was registered only for the purpose of a marker. The “A” classification was reserved for those historic buildings, fifty years of age or older, which retain historical integrity and reflect the period in

which they were built. The “B” classification was for those historic buildings, fifty years of age or older, which have suffered a loss of integrity, and the “C” classification was for informational sites or designations or commemorative designations. Type “B” sites are no longer registered and marked.

In addition to administrative aspects of the program changing over the years, grammar and style rules have also changed. Grammatical revisions have been made in order to promote consistency among the entries in this book. Spelling errors have been corrected, and factual errors that are known have been noted.