

THE PROBLEM OF HISTORIC MARKERS AND MONUMENTS IN MINNESOTA¹

Almost everyone is interested in history of some kind — provided it is not presented in the formidable manner adopted by some modern scientific historians — whether it be the reminiscences of grandfather and grandmother, the more or less formal family history known as genealogy, the story of the founding of the community, the state, or the nation. Historical interest in the home community, although latent, does not crop out during the years of settlement because people are then too busy living local history to worry about preserving it. But after the pioneering has been done and anniversary dates begin to roll around, the community begins to think over its past and to make plans to commemorate it.

Where now stands a substantial building, the first settler located his claim cabin; and his children followed an old Indian trail to the first school along what is now a broad paved street. Perhaps an Indian village from which warriors set out to meet the enemy in a neighboring valley occupied a slightly location on the shore of the neighboring lake where low mounds of earth are now to be found. Information about the past of the community is still current among a few of the "old-timers," but the average person knows nothing about it. How can such information be called permanently to the attention of the general public? The answer naturally comes: erect a marker or monument on the appropriate site.

It is easy enough to decide in favor of the erection of a marker, but markers must be financed. If the location, as is the case with a site selected recently for marking in Stillwater,

¹ A paper read at the tenth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota, held in connection with the eighty-first annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on January 13, 1930. *Ed.*

happens to be on the grounds of a big manufacturing concern, it may be possible to obtain the gift of a suitable tablet by that company or some member of it. The editor of a Wisconsin newspaper once offered to provide a bronze tablet for the marking of any historic site, provided assurance could be given that the spot would be beautified and kept in good condition.² If single individual benefactors are not available, group action is always possible. Many of the hereditary and patriotic societies lay great emphasis upon the marking of historic sites, and they have done much good work. Public service and luncheon clubs, women's clubs, boy scout units, and many other organizations — to some extent in this state and to a greater extent in states to the east — are engaging in this work of preserving for posterity knowledge of the places where historic events took place. County historical societies — such as those in Otter Tail and Goodhue counties — old settlers' associations, and town historical societies — such as that at Hutchinson — are finding in the marking of historic sites a practical and visible expression of their interest in historical matters. It is no small matter for a community of thirty-five hundred people to raise over five hundred dollars for the erection of four permanent bronze tablets, as was done at Hutchinson last summer. Furthermore, such marking activity is only a starting point, for the study required to prepare for marking a site leads directly to the preservation of reminiscent accounts, diaries, letters, and other historical material. One kind of historical activity automatically leads to another.

How much does a suitable marker cost? Estimates vary a good deal, for variable factors must be reckoned with. First of all there is the bronze tablet bearing the inscription — assuming that the usual and comparatively inexpensive method of fastening a cast bronze tablet to a suitable support is adopted.

² The editor was C. A. Broughton of the *Sheboygan Press*. *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 9: 227 (December, 1925).

Such tablets vary greatly in price in accordance with the size of the plate and the length and intricacy of the inscription, but they ordinarily cost in the neighborhood of seventy-five or a hundred dollars and frequently considerably more. Second, there is the matter of the support for the tablet. Large boulders, which can be bedded in concrete, make attractive backgrounds for bronze tablets. If the marker is erected in a boulder country, suitable stones can usually be secured at small expense for hauling. The secretary of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission once wrote that "one of the longest and most arduous" of his tasks had been the "search for stones of suitable shape and quality."³ If boulders are not readily available, marker bases may be made of poured concrete, into which the tablet can be set before the mixture has hardened. Such bases are inexpensive and permanent.

What shall be marked? An attempt to answer this question with a list of specific places would lead the writer far beyond the limits of the space allotted to him and probably into numerous difficulties, for the relative significance of historic sites is a matter of judgment. The following suggestions, however, are offered as a general guide in selecting sites for marking: military forts or cantonments of the past, whether permanent or temporary; battle grounds, whether of conflicts between whites, whites and Indians, or Indian tribes; the sites of vanished towns or villages, whether white or Indian; mound groups; early trails, canoe routes, military and stage roads; treaty sites and significant boundary lines under treaties, for example, the Sioux-Chippewa line of 1825; fur-trading posts; mission stations; birth and burial places of persons prominent in the nation, state, or community; places where certain specific events took place, such as incidents in the Sioux Outbreak, or where significant advances in agriculture, manufacturing, or science were made; locations of buildings that were of

³ *Marking the Historic Sites of Early Pennsylvania*, 19 (Pennsylvania Historical Commission, *Fourth Report*, 1926).

special historic interest; and "firsts" generally. Many other suggestions will undoubtedly come to mind, for no attempt has been made here to offer a complete list. The main thing is to call as much attention to and teach as much about the past of the community as possible.

Accuracy in the identification of a site and in the wording of the inscription placed upon it should be the aim of all who contemplate historic marking. The resources of the Minnesota Historical Society and the services of its staff members are available to assist in securing reliable information and in preventing the perpetuation of doubtful or inaccurate statements.

The next question that naturally arises is that of choosing between an actual though somewhat inaccessible site and an approximate but accessible one that will be noticed by passers-by. An historic marker has a dual purpose: first, to mark the spot where some significant event took place, and second, to commemorate that event and to call it to the attention of the general public. In that very duality of purpose, however, there lies a difficulty. Historic events did not always conveniently occur in the immediate vicinity of present-day arteries of travel. In part, of course, this is due to the change in methods of transportation. In early Minnesota the waterways formed the great natural highways, and hence events of special historical interest frequently took place close by a river bank. Near Little Falls, for example, is the site of Lieutenant Pike's stockade of the winter of 1805-06, on low ground on the west side of the Mississippi. This was located and marked by the Daughters of the American Revolution, but the raising of the water level through the construction of a power dam flooded the site and forced the removal of the marker to higher ground. Incidentally, the monument originally was on private ground, and in order to reach it one had to take down a section of a pasture fence and drive for some distance through a field. The

Redwood Ferry monument, which marks the place where Captain Marsh and his men met disaster on August 18, 1862, is on a site that was then accessible because the road from Fort Ridgely to the lower Sioux agency crossed the Minnesota River there. Now, however, it is far from the beaten path, on low ground that is occasionally flooded, and the monument is surrounded by such thick underbrush that even photographs of it are difficult to secure. And it is on private ground.

Monuments such as these, though they do constitute records for posterity, can do little toward informing the public about the history of a region, for few people see them. Even the monument erected by the state of Minnesota at Acton to commemorate the first episode in the Sioux Outbreak of 1862 is in the back yard of a farm house, a couple of hundred yards from the road. One of the automobiles that carried members of the Minnesota Historical Society tour in the summer of 1929 here encountered a flock of chickens, some of which met with disaster. Moreover, there is nothing on the main road to tell the traveler about this historic site and its state monument.

The writer is not prepared to recommend that the policy of erecting markers upon historic sites that are not readily accessible should be completely abandoned, for then the site-recording element would be virtually dropped from the picture, but he does believe that accessibility should be considered in the placing of a commemorative tablet. An inscription including a statement such as "Five hundred feet north of this spot" will often meet the difficulty; it will record the actual site and yet be available for the general public to read. Another solution to this problem is the use of two markers, one an indicative marker and the other the actual site marker. Far more public attention would be drawn to the battle site of Birch Coulee, for instance, if an indicative and directional marker could be placed at Morton. Although a state monu-

ment in this town commemorates the battle, it is a mile and a quarter away from the actual site and does not direct the traveler to the battle ground.

A project undertaken by the Minnesota highway department in coöperation with the Minnesota Historical Society will offer a partial solution for such difficulties, in connection with historic sites that are near state highways. Briefly, the plan is this. The Minnesota highway department will construct and place substantial markers of the informative type, with black letters on a white background, along state highways near points of historic significance. The Minnesota Historical Society is to designate the sites and prepare the inscriptions. Mr. Walter F. Rosenwald, the maintenance engineer for the highway department, is responsible for the idea and is in charge of the arrangement. A specimen marker has been prepared.⁴ It is large enough to carry an adequate inscription in letters of sufficient size to allow of easy reading from automobiles on the road. These highway markers, of course, will supplement, rather than take the place of markers on the actual sites. The chances are very good that the tourist, unless he is in a hurry or uninterested, will go to the site, once his attention has been called to its proximity by the highway marker. Some of these highway markers will of necessity call attention to historic happenings in a given region rather than at a specific spot, and presumably community pride will bring about the marking of such special places in the vicinity, if this has not already been done. Minnesota has the reputation of having developed a highway marking system that is a model for other states of the Union, and it seems as if the state is again showing the way with this new development.

Attention has already been called to the fact that many, perhaps most, of the markers on historic sites are on private ground. The question of the administration and care of his-

⁴ This sample marker was on exhibit when the present paper was read.

toric sites and markers now comes up. What assurance is there that markers and monuments erected at considerable expense on private ground will be permanent and that they will be properly cared for? Presumably the owner has given permission for the erection of a tablet or marker upon his land, but what assurance is there that his heirs or persons who may purchase the property in after years will respect the promises made by a previous proprietor? Furthermore, inspection of such markers is bound to be something of an annoyance to the owner, as was the case in connection with the visit to the Acton monument mentioned earlier in this paper. The danger of neglect of markers is real. Some of the stones erected by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society about 1900 were in poor shape when the present writer last saw them. Apparently there is no one to care for them.

Shall the state of Minnesota acquire historic sites on a generous scale, together with a right-of-way that will make them and their markers accessible? If so, one or more officials with adequate funds at their disposal must be placed in charge of that work. In 1926 when the writer visited the state-owned site of the battle of Birch Coulee, a small tract in the midst of privately owned land, he found that it had been farmed by the owner of the adjoining land as a part of his cornfield. At the site of the battle of Wood Lake the state bought an acre of land and erected a monument in 1910, but did nothing more with the tract until 1921, when five hundred dollars was appropriated to pay for a fence and for clearing away the underbrush. In 1923 the Honorable Ray P. Chase, the state auditor, under whose jurisdiction many of the state parks then were, made a detailed report containing recommendations on the subject of state parks and historic sites, and many of his comments still hold good.⁵ Perhaps the most pertinent was the

⁵ Ray P. Chase, *Statement to the Nineteen Hundred Twenty-three Legislature*.

statement that Minnesota should either adopt a well-planned and definite scheme for administering such state parks and monument sites under the direction of an expert or get out of the business entirely.

In North Dakota a plan for locating and acquiring significant historic sites was worked out by the state historical society about 1920. The idea was that many of these sites could be acquired by gift or purchased by the local communities in which they were situated, converted into parks, and then placed under the trusteeship of the historical society. Eventually markers would probably be erected by patriotic societies. In a recent letter the superintendent of that society indicates, however, that the arrangement has its administrative problems. He reports the acquisition, usually by donation, of between twenty and thirty historic sites ranging in area from a few square rods to twenty acres or more. "Our custom is to pay half of the expenses incurred in surveying, fencing, or beautifying the parks," he writes. "Many of them are bare areas of ground with nothing done to them, not even a marker erected. We have acquired parks faster than we have received money to take care of them. The only parks that have had any money spent on them in the way of improvements are those located within or near villages where local pride has stimulated an interest. In such cases the local park board makes improvements and we pay half the expense. Our biennial appropriation for park purposes is usually \$1,000."⁶

The Wisconsin Archeological Society and the landmarks committee of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin have done remarkable work in stimulating local groups to mark historic sites in that state. In many instances these groups have acquired the sites and undertaken to care for them.

For eighty years the state of New York has been acquiring historic sites, including buildings, by gift and purchase, and has been erecting imposing monuments at public expense. Dr.

⁶ Lewis F. Crawford to the writer, January 2, 1930.

A. C. Flick, the state historian, estimates in a recent report that the total value of this property exceeds three million dollars. It was administered in various ways until 1924, when a bond issue of fifteen million dollars to finance the unified control of the state's parks, historic places, and scientific reservations was authorized. A State Council of Parks was then created, with full jurisdiction, and this council eventually became a unit of the conservation department, with the state historian as a member. The historical side of the work, however, was overshadowed by the recreational. An experiment with regional park commissions later was made. Dr. Flick now proposes a "State Council of Historic and Scientific Reservations" to handle the historic and scientific properties of New York.⁷

Pennsylvania has tried another plan, namely, the creation of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission by legislative act, under a law of July 25, 1913, with subsequent amendments. This commission is charged with the duty of marking and preserving the antiquities and historical landmarks of the state. A report issued in 1926 shows that up to that time it had erected twenty-seven markers, and that "the expense of the average type of these markers, including the ceremonies, can be kept within \$1,000, although some of them have cost considerably more." As can readily be seen this commission has had considerable money at its disposal, although only its secretary receives a salary. The first appropriation under the act was ten thousand dollars for two years. The bill, as passed by the legislature, called for forty thousand dollars, but the amount was reduced by the governor. In 1917 the commission had fifteen thousand dollars, plus unexpended balances, at its disposal for the coming two years.⁸ There was some slight

⁷ Alexander C. Flick, "Suggestions for a State Policy Relating to Historical and Scientific Reservations," in New York State Historical Association, *Quarterly Journal*, 10: 180-184 (April, 1929).

⁸ *Marking the Historic Sites of Early Pennsylvania*, 19; Pennsylvania Historical Commission, *Second Report*, 1918, p. 7-10.

suggestion during the 1929 session of the Minnesota legislature that this state, through a marking commission, should undertake marking work in a systematic manner modeled on the Pennsylvania plan, but nothing came of it.

Minnesota is probably not ready to make such wholesale expenditures for marking purposes as Pennsylvania, but it is ready to survey the situation, find out which of its historic sites have been marked and by whom, ascertain what additional sites should be marked, and assemble the information that will be needed when an aggressive marking campaign is undertaken. To secure this information and for other purposes the Minnesota Historical Society has under consideration a plan for a state-wide survey of Minnesota's historical resources, to extend over a period of several years and to be conducted by a state-wide committee under the auspices of the society. The survey, if established, will attempt to get a list of all monuments and markers now in place, copies of their inscriptions, and other data about them; and it will then examine the field of unmarked sites that deserve to be marked. With this information on file recommendations for marking work can be made to individuals, organizations, and even to the state itself. When a survey such as this has once been thoroughly organized and is functioning, the machinery will have been created by which a fairly complete record of available historical material — county archives, official and private correspondence, manuscript collections of all kinds, newspaper files, and museum material — can be secured, and a tremendously valuable service to the historian of the future can be performed. Such surveys are under way or projected in several states.

Opinions may vary as to the most satisfactory solution of the markers and monuments problem. It is obvious from the experiences of other states that it is not as difficult to get sites marked as it is to have the sites properly administered and taken care of after the marking has been done. The care of monuments and markers and the ground on which they stand,

with the necessary easement to insure uninterrupted access to them, must necessarily involve the expenditure of funds.

The writer is inclined to favor the creation of a permanent historic sites commission, consisting of perhaps five members and including representatives of the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota history faculty, to be appointed by the governor and to serve without salary, but having a paid executive secretary. Such a commission could work in coöperation with, or even as a division of the department of conservation; it should be vested with the power, now inherent in that department, to acquire land; and it should have a moderate appropriation to cover expenses of operation. Private marking projects could benefit by the advice of this commission, and the systematic marking of significant historic sites in Minnesota would be fostered. So far as possible marking should be done by independent enterprise in coöperation with the commission, but if important sites were neglected the state body might act. The haphazard and expensive marking by legislative enactment would be done away with and the state's historic sites would be adequately marked for all time.

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