



Nathan Jones: New markers provide insight into overlooked history (Opinion)

By Nathan Jones

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The West Virginia Historical Highway Marker Program is perhaps the most geographically expansive museum in the Mountain State and contributes to an enriched understanding of our past that is beneficial to citizens and out-of-state visitors.

The program was created as a New Deal project during the turbulent decade of the 1930s and has since expanded to include nearly 1,000 of the iconic aluminum signs throughout all 55 counties in West Virginia.

Today the program is funded by private groups and organizations and administered by an interagency effort between the Division of Culture and History and the Division of Highways. However, during the preparation phase of the sesquicentennial commemoration eight years ago, the program received state and federal funding that allowed the section of Archives and History to establish 160 new markers for the memorial of important people, places and events related to the Civil War and the statehood movement.

Mired by the understandable stress of interagency coordination, issues with rights of way and the time-consuming research that is involved in accurately representing the historical record, many of these new markers were not ready for their June 2013 debut.

Fast forward seven years, and it seems as if these much-anticipated reminders of our past are racing against the Easter Lilies and other perennials to see which ones will dot the roadways in time for spring.

While traveling along Kanawha Boulevard earlier this week, I was surprised to find two new markers shimmering like windows into an oftentimes unrecognized or overlooked story.

After arriving at work, I contacted the director of Archives and History, Joe Geiger, to find out if these two new markers were indeed recently set in place, and to commend him and his staff for their inclusion and placement.

During that telephone call, I found out that there were three other markers placed along the Boulevard, bringing a total of 10 new sesquicentennial markers to Kanawha County within the past few days.

The signs that caught my attention earlier that morning recognize slavery in West Virginia and the 45th U.S. Colored Troops infantry regiment. Most recently, the discussion of slavery and enslaved people has garnered public attention and

understanding because of the efforts of historians and local authors, such as Dr. Cicero Fain III, in his recent book, “Black Huntington: An Appalachian Story,” and Larry L. Rowe, in his recent book, “Virginia Slavery and King Salt in Booker T. Washington’s Boyhood Home.”

What I was most excited to see that day was the long-overdue recognition of the sacrifice that African Americans made by contributing militarily to the Union war effort. The West Virginians of the 45th were free men and the formerly enslaved, but, by volunteering in this endeavor, they were actively proclaiming their stake in the America that would rise from the ashes of war: one where the rights and civil liberties of every American would take precedence.

Unfortunately, one would be hard pressed to find any information at all about the sacrifices of this regiment. A cursory search of the Kanawha County Public Library’s collection will result only in a few texts that barely mention the contributions of black troops during the Civil War, let alone the 45th regiment; however, the Marshall University Carter Woodson Project does have a thorough article written by Caleb Brownfield titled: “African American West Virginians in the Civil War: The 45th USCT,” for those who are interested in learning more about these particular soldiers.

Because of the scarcity of information within the deluge of Civil War literature regarding this specific topic, I am extremely excited to see this marker finally set in place and available for the public to learn a snippet of the past that will hopefully spawn a more thorough analysis.

I invite everybody to travel along the Boulevard in Charleston during these coming months to reflect upon our state’s new markers and perhaps even make your way far enough along the new pedestrian walkway to visit the historic Craik-Patton House and to learn more about West Virginia’s fascinating past.

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