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Preserving a bit of Pennsylvania history

By Mark D. Marotta
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Photo by Gretory Prichard
Collegeville is one of a number of communities receiving signs produced through the partnership between the Keystone Marker Trust and Spring City Electrical Manufacturing Co.

Those keystone-shaped cast iron signs you may have noticed somewhere along a Pennsylvania roadside have been there for much of the past century.

As president of the Keystone Marker Trust, Lower Pottsgrove resident Nathaniel Guest has been working not just to have the signs preserved, but to have new ones produced.

Guest described the trust as a statewide organization that advocates for and facilitates the restoration and reinstallation of the Keystone markers.

“Our hope is that it would be that restoring the markers is really part of re-establishing a program that strengthens the identity of Pennsylvania communities and encourages business to reinvest in their communities in the various senses of that word,” he said.

Guest said the markers were installed by the state Department of Highways, precursor to today’s Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, in the period between the two world wars. The Keystone

markers predated the blue-and-gold signs posted by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission on the sites of important events and locations.

The signs “were installed during a time when Pennsylvania was very proud of the fact that it was leading the nation in road-building. This was really how they wanted to market the state to people who would live here, and people who came to visit,” Guest said.

Pennsylvania, he explained, had the second official state highway department in the country.

“With the institution of state highway departments came the standardization of traffic rules, and along with the standardization of traffic rules came the standardization of signage,” Guest added. “The Keystone markers were really the first foray into a standardized set of signage.”

But while there was some standardization among the markers, there was also a great deal of variety. Three different styles of signs were mounted on two types of poles, which were about 11 feet high, including 3 feet set into the ground. While some signs were two-sided and mounted on the top of a pole, others were mounted on the front.

Guest added that there would have been a Keystone marker of some sort for any purpose for which a sign would have been needed.

“They were used for speed limits, directional signs and then, of course, school zones and all manner of other things that you can imagine,” Guest said. “They denoted streams, creeks, rivers and then also trails, borough lines and points of interest.”

Additionally, he pointed out, the signs were used for the purpose most commonly recognized today, “demarcating the gateways to towns, villages, cities.”

Guest said markers have been found in localities that were never incorporated or even had a post office.

Based on the number of towns in Pennsylvania, he estimated that at one time there were as many as 20,000 Keystone markers around the state. Currently only about 600 remain, in various states of repair.

Guest said that because so many of the signs have been lost, makes it difficult to recognize today that there has never been “another signage program that was so strongly identified with Pennsylvania.” The markers, according to Guest, “established the keystone as Pennsylvania’s symbol.”

The primary culprits for the decline in the number of the old signs, Guest maintained, include “highway projects that don’t take into consideration the possibility of reinstalling the marker. So, a road gets widened, they don’t put the marker back up.”

Additionally, he said, “the second issue is a little bit of self-help from neighbors who like them,” or, alternatively, haul them to a scrap yard under the mistaken impression that they may be worth a lot of money.

For a period of time, Guest said the markers were not valued, “and so PennDOT really didn’t enforce when these things would go missing.” Guest said that may be changing as people are recognizing “how cool these things are.”

He added that PennDOT has encouraged its engineering districts around the state to work with local municipalities and other organizations to adopt the signs. Guest said the intention seemed to be that the state would retain ownership of the markers, while “custody” is in the hands of someone else.

“For our purposes, that actually makes a lot of sense. It’s actually a very good thing, because that means it’s

much easier to standardize the care and treatment of these things,” he added.

Incorporated in 2010, the Keystone Marker Trust has had “an education and advocacy mission, both with PennDOT and communities,” said Guest.

The group had been working with PennDOT to identify the problems facing the markers, and how to address them. Guest said the trust had taken on a program to inform all of PennDOT’s engineering districts of the markers’ history and to encourage their restoration in connection with highway projects.

He added that the group’s mission also included outreach to communities about restoring the signs. In partnership with municipalities, historical societies or individuals, the trust will take on projects for sign repair or reinstallation.

“We’ll volunteer all the labor, of course,” Guest said. “Generally, we’ll ask for some sort of funding, whether it’s matching funds or materials cost, to do the restoration.” Such funding would come from the trust’s partner, and not PennDOT, he explained.

In some cases, the needed repairs have been pretty aggressive. “There have been whole chunks missing out of markers, and so we’ve replicated those missing chunks in fiberglass and attached them to the original markers,” Guest added.

When individuals want to restore markers on their own, the trust will provide them with guidelines for what to do.

“We can provide information about paint colors. We actually can provide paint itself, replacement parts, which is a major issue. We’re the only source of replacement parts,” said Guest.

And if there is no adopting organization, Guest said the trust will do the work itself if it thinks a marker is restorable. By Guest’s count, the trust takes on between 10 and 15 restoration projects a year.

In the summer of 2011, the organization signed an agreement with the Spring City Electrical Manufacturing Co. Inc. for the production of new Keystone markers, made from ductile iron.

Tracie Wolf, marketing coordinator for the Chester County foundry, explained that, with the addition of magnesium, the iron “becomes stronger” and better able to handle impacts. Spring City Electrical Manufacturing Co. was originally established in 1843, and Wolf said the Keystone marker project “just was a natural segue for us.”

Production of the new markers has meant that trust has taken on the mission of re-establishing the design standards, because so much has been lost.

“We didn’t have any drawings for the markers. We didn’t have any color analysis. We didn’t know what color they were supposed to be, what shade of blue, and what shade of gold,” Guest said.

He it was also necessary to work with PennDOT to make sure the new markers would meet modern highway standards.

When it comes to the new markers, the trust helps work out such things as text, layout, and location, which includes verifying with PennDOT that where the sign is being placed is acceptable.

The first new Keystone markers in 70 years were installed last November in Greensboro, Greene County, in the western part of the state. More locally, three signs for Collegeville have been produced and delivered, and Guest said that several are being restored for Birdsboro, which is also getting a new marker for Hay Creek.

Nearby Seifert, in Robeson Township, will be getting two new signs this spring or early summer.

Guest said that there were also plans for six markers for Pottstown, with a search underway for sponsors. He added that drawings for markers had been made for markers for Spring City, while the historical society in King of Prussia had talked about raising money for signs there.

“A couple times a week, I’ll get a request from a community, looking to get the markers,” Guest said, adding that one of the ongoing projects was to find dedicated sources of matching funding to help cover the costs.

In eastern Pennsylvania, Guest said, a few individual donors have stepped forward to provide funding.

“I’m also hoping to work with some larger organizations to be able to have statewide or regional programs to provide matching funding for markers,” he added. Another possibility for covering the signs’ cost might be to have sponsorship information or logos cast into the markers in ways that would not visually detract from them.

According to Guest, when his group has developed its own funding, it will use a set of “Keystone Marker Trust principles” for selecting which projects would be supported. Another project in the works is the development of an educational toolkit for teachers to use in developing lesson plans.

For the past nine months, Guest said, the trust has offered a tool called “This Marker Matters,” as a way to get people involved in the restoration of a marker, through the use of signs and photographs.

He added that the trust itself is looking for volunteers, as well as communities to partner with for marker restoration.

“The work that we do is meant to improve the gateways to our communities, and folks generally tend to appreciate it,” Guest said. “We’ve had a few benefactors that have really facilitated the work, but, for this to be true statewide program, it’s going to take more.”

For more information about the Keystone Marker Trust, visit its website at www.keystonemarkertrust.com.

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