

A “One Off,” It Ain’t Raleigh County’s Historical Marker Program

By Merle T. Cole

I would definitely say that we see more activity out of Raleigh County than anywhere else in the state, especially in terms of a specific sponsoring agency/group... I’m not sure who would be considered ‘next in line’ as most groups do markers as a one off, so to speak.

— Matt McGrew, former Cultural Program Coordinator for West Virginia Archives and History, September 9, 2020.

West Virginia developed official state highway historical markers in 1937, during the Great Depression, as a tourism lure and an inexpensive but effective public education tool. The program is run by West Virginia Archives and History (WVA&H), based out of the Culture Center in Charleston. Its goal is to “commemorate places, events, or persons prominently identified with the history or prehistory of the nation, state or region, and possessing some degree of unique significance in West Virginia in terms of history, architecture or cultural life.” The Raleigh County Historical Society (RCHS) Historical Marker Program (HMP) grew from my sister Pat’s suggestion we donate a West Virginia Wildflower Program plot in memory of our parents. I took the idea a step further and donated two adjoining plots in 2013. (The program was, unfortunately, terminated in 2022.)

I then tried to get an official state marker for my great-great-grandfather, James Bird Cole—first person (1842) to purchase a lot in Alfred Beckley’s “paper town” later known as Raleigh Court House, then Beckley. Cole also established the town’s first business, a forge and blacksmith shop at the junction of the Giles, Fayette, and Kanawha Turnpike with the Logan, Raleigh, and Monroe Turnpike under the landmark 23rd Mile Tree. I received my introduction to WVA&H’s demanding standards when my marker application was rejected for

“insufficient impact.” *Every town*, it seems, has a first resident and business owner. They may be important, even crucial, in local or county history—but very few generate the impact or uniqueness required to justify a state-level marker. WVA&H suggested I pursue local signage authorization. That tack proved more successful, and the Raleigh County Commission authorized affixing a bronze plaque to the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Building—site of Cole’s residence and across the street from his blacksmith shop.

I returned to the challenge inherent in the WVA&H standards, and in April 2017 brought off *two* successes! RCHS president Tom Sopher was always griping, “Someone should do a study and get a marker for the ancient Indian fortification on Big Beaver Creek.” My idea of an “Indian fort” was John Wayne and Fort Apache! But I gave it a shot and, using recent archeological studies, satisfied state criteria.

Totally unrelated, but equally satisfying, was winning approval for a state marker to memorialize the 1922-1933 West Virginia State Police (WVSP) training camp at Haywood Junction. David Houchin of the Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library provided invaluable assistance. Under the auspices of the Harrison County Historical Society, the marker was installed just south of Shinnston.

Buoyed by these successes, I suggested to President Sopher establishing a *perma-*



On the frigid morning of December 2, 2016, Jim Rowlands of Beckley Public Works (right) makes final adjustments to the James Bird Cole plaque, recorded for posterity by Annie Moore of WVVA-TV and Don Davis.



A Pomeroy Legends and Lore marker (right) shares a sunset with an older WVA&H official state marker at Wildwood House Museum.

ment marker program, with me in charge. He agreed, and the program was formally launched in February 2018. Since then, we have partnered with WVA&H on markers covering a wide variety of topics: City of Beckley (reinstallation); Beckley Mill Site; Glade Creek Reservoir, WVSP radio station/ Company D barracks and Shady Spring (all in one month!!); Camp Prince Army Station; Bill Withers; Governor Clarence W. Meadows; Logan, Raleigh, and Monroe Turnpike; and Little Jimmy Dickens.

In 2019, RCHS added the National Coal Heritage Area Authority (NCHAA) to its marker partnerships. NCHAA was created by the West Virginia legislature in 2002 as an economic development agency. One of its missions is to preserve the history of coal and related industries and community sites in a 13-county area via interpretive signage.

By law, NCHAA pays half of project costs. That is a major attraction for a small membership, low-dues outfit like RCHS. We have also been successful with community grants through the Beckley Area Foundation, and much of the balance of our project funding has come from individual donors or the City of Beckley.

Our third program partner emerged in June 2020—the William G. Pomeroy Foundation of Syracuse, New York. Pomeroy

grants are highly competitive and strictly juried, and marker inscriptions are tightly limited. These constraints are more than offset by the fact the foundation picks up fabrication and transportation costs—and even tosses in the mounting pole! Our first Pomeroy, in the Legends and Lore category, commemorates the Ferguson Rock and is also mounted at Wildwood House Museum.

One of our major program goals has been increasing community involvement via dedication ceremonies. We achieved this with the Shady Spring (September 2019) and Camp Prince (July 2020) events. The most recent example was dedication of the Bill Withers marker in May of 2021. Music and plaudits in the morning were paired with a free afternoon concert at the city's intermodal gateway facility.

A second Pomeroy Legends and Lore application, for Fay-Ral Airport at Maple Fork, was rejected as being more “purely historical” than legendary. But there was a very positive upside! Pomeroy invited RCHS to resubmit Fay-Ral as a pilot (pun intended) under a proposed new grant category. We did so. Fay-Ral Airport survived a tough documentation review, and made it to the foundation trustees, who voted favorably.



Local musicians render a Bill Withers tune during the marker dedication ceremony. (Becky Leach photo)

The Fay-Ral Airport marker illustrates a second major program goal—to “get out into the county more,” rather than continuing the past RCHS focus on Beckley. A quick review of our entries on the Historical Marker Database website shows we have attained that goal. Just under half of all projects are situated around the county. RCHS has definitely left its mark.

The closing months of 2021 saw an unprecedented surge of requests for new markers, most notably in support of the Raleigh General Hospital’s centennial observation, and a unique bilateral project with the Summers County Historical Society to memorialize the homeplace of William C. Richmond, the county’s first permanent white settler. The year ended on a high note with the formal dedication of a plaque to commemorate the birthplace of West Virginia Army National Guard Special Forces (Green Berets), initially headquartered in Beckley in 1959.

Surely, 2021 will go down as “Year of the Marker.” Almost half of all RCHS markers were installed during that twelve month! We look forward to pursuing a range of projects in coming years, to provide a baseline for continuing education of county residents and heritage tourists.🍁



The distinctive West Virginia old gold and blue color scheme of the Fay-Ral Airport marker mounted at Maple Fork Baptist Church, which was constructed beside the former runway. It is currently awaiting a community dedication ceremony.

MERLE T. COLE was born and raised in Raleigh County, graduated from Marshall University, and worked for various federal agencies before retiring to his native county. His most notable service was as director of the USDA Agricultural Research Service Research Position Evaluation Staff, and as a commissioned officer in the Maryland State Guard. He has made numerous contributions to GOLDENSEAL, most recently in our Winter 2022 issue.