Marking a Historic Trail Through Tampa

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Fifty years ago the use of cast aluminum in fabrication of plaques for marking sites of historical interest was unheard of. Up to that time bronze was the accepted standard for dedication and memorial plaques, wood and ferrous metals sharing about equal prominence as second choice. However, each of these materials had certain characteristics which limited their extensive use.

Bronze was durable but its high cost was prohibitive except where finances were no problem and even then an extensive state-wide marking program was impractical. In isolated areas, the scrap value of this brass alloy was an open invitation to thievery.

Ferrous metals were much cheaper to use but susceptibility to oxidation in the form of rust presented the problem of yearly maintenance expense. Wood was probably...
the most widely used because of low cost, but it too was unsatisfactory. When exposed to the elements of winter and summer, it was short-lived and warping created an unsightly appearance.

**THE PUBLIC WAS UNAWARE**

The lack of a practical material had so far made the value of a widespread marking program very questionable. Rather than invest in something which could prove to be more of a liability than an asset, the state and local historical societies confined their activities to research and compiling of historical data. History was being preserved for posterity, but only a very small percentage of the public was remotely aware of the fact.

In 1927, a man of vision and foresight became intensely interested in the possibilities of roadside historical marking. E. M. Hawes of Marietta, Ohio, was the founder of a small sign factory in which process a foundry operation was involved.¹
Mr. Hawes had traveled considerably and the need for a marking system designed for the motoring public was evident. First though, material which would meet the requirements of a practical marker must be found. Virginia and New York has used cast iron and they were either badly rusted or broken by traffic impact. Iron then was out of the question so he must look further.

THE LETTERS DISAPPEARED!

Aluminum was used in his foundry on a small scale, primarily for small thick castings. Little was known at this time of the use of aluminum alloys in the casting of large thin sections containing any detail, but actually no one had ever made a conscientious effort to do any research or work on the possibility.

So far the use of aluminum in construction of roadside historical markers had been limited to the casting of letters which were fastened to wooden panels. The letters had a habit of disappearing and after a period of time could be found above some barn door or on a mail box. This lightweight, inexpensive, and corrosion resistant metal had all the desirable qualities for use in making markers, if only a way could be found to use it.

Mr. Hawes was firmly convinced that it could be done and spent 18 long months proving his theory. Then success; the first cast aluminum marker with lettering on both sides was an actuality. Of course, it was only a sample plate, but the feasibility of the idea was proved and it was now only a matter of improvement in method and procedure. The entire facilities of Sewah Studios, which was the firm name of the Hawes enterprise, was devoted almost exclusively to this end. One problem would be solved only to be replaced by another; but through perseverance and determination the right combination of material, equipment, and process was determined.

THE REVOLUTIONARY TRAIL

About this time, 1929, the Ohio Revolutionary Trail Commission was set up by the State of Ohio. This group wanted plaques to mark the course of the Old Revolutionary Trail throughout the state. Sewah Studios had the product they wanted, if only the commission could be convinced.

It required all the resourcefulness at his command for Mr. Hawes to sell them on the idea of considering cast aluminum markers. It was unheard of and the members of the commission were skeptical of this new innovation. Finally, they were persuaded to, at least, look and consider the idea. Arrangements were then made for inspection of sample plates and complete markers of various designs and colors were constructed and set up on the factory grounds.

When the appointed day arrived and the delegates viewed the samples, they were
enthusiastic about appearance but could not believe that cast aluminum was durable enough for permanent installation. Sledge hammers were handed to them and each one had an opportunity to test the quality of the markers. Everything possible was done to the castings to determine just how much they could stand. They were bent, dented, and scarred, but not one of them broke and every letter was still legible. Everyone was finally convinced the Sewah Marker was what they were looking for and this was the debut of the thousands of roadside historical markers that are now seen throughout the

TAMPA BOASTED FLORIDA’S FIRST RADIO STATION

TAMPA’S WDAE was the first radio station in Florida to be licensed commercially to operate by the Federal Communications Commission. In 1972, on the 50th anniversary of WDAE’s founding, the Tampa Historical Society erected a marker at the Maas Brothers corner, site of the first broadcasting studio. Left to right are Donald K. Clark, then manager of WDAE; Tony Pizzo of the Historical Society, and Hampton Dunn, THS president and master of ceremonies.
United States. This initial project involved 110 large markers and some 400 smaller ones, all of which are still in service today.³

**CAPS AND LOWER CASE**

One thing that had a great deal of influence on the decision of this Revolutionary Trail Commission was the legibility of the copy on the test plates. It was set in upper and lower case letters, which was what everyone was accustomed to reading in practically all printed matter, and they at once recognized the fact that it could be read faster than the same text set in all upper case or capital letters.

This use of the alphabet was not a matter of chance or convenience, far from it. Mr. Hawes had at one time been a copywriter and from past experience knew that the ease with which printed matter is read has a direct bearing on how often it will be read. In his opinion, a plaque with the inscription in all upper case had to be studied rather than read and was not at all suitable for a roadside marker.

An extensive search revealed the fact that there was no firm which manufactured pattern letters for casting in both upper and lower case in a size smaller than one inch.

**DISPLAYS RESOURCEFULNESS**

The limitation imposed by large text letters did not fit in with future plans so some solution must be found. It was apparent that if no compromise was to be made, someone would have to design a letter to meet these requirements and here again, Mr. Hawes displayed an example of his resourcefulness. A cash prize was awarded for the letter design of his choice selected from entries submitted by several well-known hand lettering artists. The winning entry was chosen, a few changes made in design, and so was originated, the Sewah alphabet that is exclusive in its field. It is a derivative of the old Caslin Font, as are most of the popular printing types in use today.⁴

From the original drawings, patterns were made for letter sizes ranging from 3 inches down to and including 5/8 inches. Then began the casting and finishing of hundreds of pattern letters, which were required in the manufacture of markers. A portion of the work was farmed out to pattern and die-casting establishments, although a large portion was completed at the home plant.

This discussion of letter design is to a degree only a sidelight in the story of marker development, decidedly not irrelevant. The Sewah alphabet is directly responsible for a large number of historical organizations deciding to plan a marking system. In fact, during the past decade the history of Sewah Studios and the development of marker programs is so closely interwoven that it is almost impossible to separate one from the other.

**BLUE STAR MARKERS**
The outbreak of World War II, of course, called a halt to all major operations of this kind. Only a pittance of metal was available for non-essential use, and the increase in the number of marker installations during this period was very slight. Even after the war ceased, it was several years before restrictions were removed on material allotments.

About 1948, the situation was considerably better and once more activity was apparent among the historical groups throughout the country.

It was also in 1948, that three other projects of notable interest came into being. Vermont authorized a planned system and the additional Council of State Garden Clubs sponsored a memorial program honoring the ones who served in the defense of our country. Certain highways were selected by mutual cooperation and consent of the National Council and the state officials. Beautifying improvements were made and markers were erected dedicating these highways as memorials. Cost of the markers is borne by individual Garden Clubs and no assistance is forthcoming from any state or county funds. These Blue Star markers are all identical except for the signature line of the local club sponsoring the plaque, and they may be seen in every state in the union. This is probably the most widespread marking system in the country today and is under direct supervision of the National Council headquarters in New York.

**FLORIDA IS LEADER**

During the years from 1949 to 1952, the value of adequate marking of historical sites was widely recognized, and a large number of states made the necessary provisions. Cast aluminum was now the accepted standard and this specific material was called for in the specifications adopted by the states. Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Missouri, Florida, Washington and Kansas were some of the states who became active in the field of roadside marking at this time. All are long-range programs and are as yet more or less in their infancy.

If any one thing can be given more credit for this sudden interest on the part of state agencies to mark their highways historically, it is the tremendous increase in the tourist industry since World War II. More traveling was being done than ever before in the history of this country. Each one of the 50 states was and is doing its upmost to entice the vacationers by making highways as attractive as possible. A thorough study proved that informative and interesting marking was one of the surest ways of achieving this goal.

The execution of a planned program varies from state to state, depending on the political structure of the governmental agencies. In some cases, it is not possible to make any direct appropriations for marking purposes and some other means of financing must be arranged. In one of our southern cities, Tampa, Florida, a group of citizens organized as a historical society, received recognition from the state, and financed their project from private funds and have created over 30 plaques in Tampa alone, since its founding in 1971.

**EAGLE SCOUT PROJECT**

The history and photos of all of Tampa's historical markers, statues and plaques were done by Joe Garcia as an award winning Eagle Scout project in July, 1976. Joe Garcia, son of the prominent Tampa attorney, William F. Garcia, currently a student in journalism at Harvard, donated...
his project to the Tampa Historical Society and is on display in its library.

The research and the erection of most all of the historical markers in the Tampa Bay area has been accomplished and financed through the dedicated efforts of one man, a native Tampan and a founder of the Tampa Historical Society, Mr. Tony Pizzo. His life has been dedicated to research and writing about his beloved Tampa and Ybor City. He encouraged the Ybor City Rotary Club to sponsor more markers than any other organization in Tampa.

A visible, active and ever growing local historical society represents to new industry, business, tourists and new neighbors what Tampa thinks of itself: "We grow with the future but we have not forgotten our past and humble beginning."

FOOTNOTES


2 The Files of E. M. Hawes's Library.

3 Ibid.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Files of E. M. Hawes's Library.


Eagle Scout Project 1976 pictures, self-guided tour of all Tampa's historical markers by Joe Garcia.