



Bergen County, Where America Begins

THE BCHS MARKER PROGRAM AND HOW IT EVOLVED by Reginald McMahon

A brief description of the BCHS Marker Program.

The Society, since 1960, has had a continuing program of designating historic sites in the county with distinctive blue and silver markers. These markers are sponsored and paid for by individuals, clubs, institutions, business organizations and municipalities. It is the Society's most visible program with over 130 signs in Bergen County, NJ. They are designed to educate the general public with a "mini-history lesson" for a particular site or area and are also helpful in generating interest in historic preservation. The Historic Site Markers Booklet is available for purchase. (See our publications page)

Lew Owen slowly climbed the stairs of the Steuben House to the Board room carrying a fifty pound weight. Setting it on the meeting table for viewing, he explained to the assembled officers and trustees that it was the first of the new historic markers sanctioned by the Board. The year was 1960 and I was serving my first term as Trustee. The colorful sign impressed us all and myself in particular; little did I know that eight years later I would be in charge of the program.



Lewis F. Owen was an active Society member serving in many capacities including Trustee, Vice President and Trustee Emeritus. He was the driving force in 1959 to initiate a modern program commemorating historic sites in Bergen County. Earlier, in the 1920s and 30s, the Society had placed about six markers of various sizes, shapes and materials. Now there would be a standard sign easily recognized as that of the BCHS and planned to be a continuing program.

Owen had contacted various marker manufacturers for prices and types. Selected was Sewah Studios of Marietta, Ohio, the oldest, largest and most respected foundry. The cost of bronze was prohibitive and cast aluminum became the choice,

mounted on a free standing pole. A vertical format was favored rather than horizontal as they usually were installed near a road and a wide sign would be more susceptible to damage by vehicular traffic. It was mounted atop a seven foot pole (three feet underground) of concrete, internally re-enforced with steel rods and covered with an aluminum sheath to prevent chipping.

The sign itself was about three feet high and two feet wide. The confined space limited the silver lettering of the text which was duplicated on both sides to facilitate viewing when approached from opposite directions. Below, in small type, a credit line identified the sponsor who paid for the marker. At the very top appeared the official BCHS seal. To replicate, it cost the Society a one time fee of \$75 and is in use today.

Background color was Delft Blue which originated in Holland. The selection reflected the county's Dutch heritage and provided a distinctive contrast to the raised silver lettering. In 1960, the marker, post and delivery cost the sponsor \$120.00.

Lew Owen approached organizations to sponsor sites deserving of a marker. First to accept was the Book and Needle Club of Oradell for the Revolutionary War "Lafayette Encampment". Dedication took place on Saturday, December 3, 1960. BCHS President Henry "Harry" Dobson officiated at the ceremony attended by the sponsors and town councilmen. Harry, in his remarks, predicted that "it was the first of many to be erected throughout the county".

As marker chairman Owen continued to "ride herd" for the program as he later would say. Trustee Charles B. Kern became chairman as an expeditor and text writer in 1963. The old files reveal little about research sources; apparently the information was relayed by telephone. Later I was able to make educated guesses as to the persons who contributed one way or another. They were Lew Owen, Fred W. Bogert, Adrian Leiby, John Spring, Peter Henderson, Howard I. Durie, Thomas B. Demarest, Louise Burnett, Agnes Norton, Craig Mitchell, James Ransom, Virginia Mosley, Catherine Duboise and Claire Tholl – all ardent history buffs. Some are simply unknown.

In early 1968, after Kern's resignation, I was appointed to chair the program. The selection was based on previous writing experience and as a suitable "reporter" of historical information. Also, I suspect, no one else wanted the job.

Not satisfied with secondary or traditional accounts, my approach was to search for original sources whenever possible. Suggestions for repositories were generously offered by Howard I. Durie and Thomas B. Demarest. A necessary first step was a property title search to determine the various owners and to define land boundaries.

The principal repository is the Bergen County Courthouse for official records such as recorded deeds, mortgages, wills, old maps and road returns.

Visits to other county courthouses such as Passaic, Rockland and Orange (NY) have Bergen material as well as the New York Public Library, New-York Historical Society, New Jersey Historical Society and Rutgers University. Inquires were made to Trenton, Albany and the Library of Congress. Locally there is the BCHS manuscript collection, tax and census records and vintage newspapers. Persistence often paid off. It was a merry chase and I enjoyed the challenge.

Old deeds gave a property's metes and bounds in the survey measurements of that time - chains and links - which required conversion to feet in order to plot the configuration of a tract. Some deeds only gave names of adjacent property owners. These were investigated and frequently provided measurements for the actual property in question.

Old deeds were not always recorded; possession by the owner was sufficient. A few originals have surfaced in other collections or post-recorded many decades later. I also have found that lots inherited by heirs were eventually sold and their portions were recorded. One way or another, the original plot often emerged.

After the "plot" was determined, the "cast" of characters was investigating people who built the house and subsequent owners. Their genealogies were traced through various sources beginning with church records which included births, baptisms, marriages and deaths. As Historian of the First Reformed Church of Hackensack, I answered countless inquires from family descendants and checked other church records.

Family Bibles, diaries, tax and census lists were consulted as well as published genealogies. Genealogists Louise Burnett and Howard I. Durie also were of help. Inventories of deceased property owners at the Surrogate Office held clues to occupations, household possessions, crops grown and livestock raised. All of the above fleshed out the lives of individuals.

When structures are involved architecture is the third important element. The date of an old house is rarely known and an age sometimes attributed to them are based on tradition or hearsay. Examination of a building is essential to arrive at a probable date. A structure which has stood for a century or two has undergone alterations that combine several periods. Although aware of historic styles, when questions arose I solicited advise from others. One was Loring McMillen of New York's Landmark Commission who headed the restoration of historic Richmondtown on Staten Island and inspected a site on my request. At this time

Claire Tholl had yet to come into her own as an architectural historian but later she would be the chief consultant.

A historian has been compared to a detective but in a sense he is a time traveler, visiting a forgotten past. While ferreting out facts, voluminous information is collected that cannot be used in a marker. On my own initiative I began to use all the data in the form of an article with numerous end notes to cite sources, property plots, old maps and other suitable illustrations. They were sent to sponsors as a comprehensive study to supplement the brief marker texts. A volume of the articles was donated to the BCHS library and another will follow in the future. They are only those researched by myself.

To select the essentials from the bulk of the material and then compose a marker text to fit space limitations is a challenge in itself. They are written for the general public as a mini-history lesson and has become one of the most visible of BCHS programs.

In 1972 the Society decided to publicize the program with a give-away publication. Adrian and Emory "Tommy" Leiby arranged with a Hackensack bank for them to have it printed as a public service to the community. I was requested to design a six page fold out pamphlet with a brief description of the sites. From my photographs I selected those which would illustrate the diversity of the sites, including a marker close-up on the cover to show its physical appearance. The pamphlet served the Society well for over five years.

The Baylor Massacre site in River Vale was the only marker to be sponsored and paid for by the Society. The text was based on the writings of Adrian C. Leiby and Thomas B. Demarest. The latter had originated the search for the burials that resulted in the archaeological dig publicized in the late 1960s. Demarest's research of the findings was published in the Society's 1971 Bergen History Annual.

Dedication was on October 14, 1972 as part of the official opening of Baylor Park. In addition to a large public turnout there were representatives of County Freeholders who had financed the dig and established the park, the David Demarest Chapter of the D.A.R. who provided a small plaque and the American Legion Post 447 Color Guard. The main event was unveiling our marker by the Society's President, Albert B. Dearden.

There was need for criteria in acceptance of marker sites. The Board approved and a committee was formed to set guidelines and establish a fee schedule. President Marden Nystrom selected the committee which consisted of himself, myself (as chairman), Lewis F. Owen (originator), R. Worth Vaughan (Trustee and lawyer) and Howard I. Durie (researcher)

We met August 9, 1974 at my home. All ideas were discussed and agreement was soon reached. Criteria would include buildings, roads, transportation, cemeteries, places without structures and natural history sites that influenced social history.

For a building, however, a caveat gave the Society the right of refusal should there be severe architectural alterations. It has been invoked on several occasions. An extreme example was a frame house that the owner had "improved". My inspection revealed that only one old beam was retained.

The guidelines, meant for Society use only, as well as the fee schedule, was unanimously approved by the Board September 17, 1974. The minutes of that meeting included both forms.

The fee schedule was a result of sponsor cancellation after research and marker texts had been submitted. In most cases, they insisted on traditional stories rather than documented facts. Surprisingly, a few owners canceled because of marital problems.

With legal assistance by lawyer and past President Albert B. Dearden, we drew up a Marker Agreement Form which set forth the responsibility of the sponsor and the BCHS. It was signed by both parties and returned to us with a \$200 deposit, half held toward the total cost of manufacture and half for the researcher.

Often the recipient of the research fee, I did not request payment for all requests. Some required little time while others had been researched as personal projects. For example, the Van Buskirk-Oakley House in Oradell was a study undertaken for my wife Mary Ackerman whose maternal forebears were from those families. When completed, I proposed sponsorship of a marker to the owner which was readily accepted. Competent information came from other sources; Howard I. Durie was a professional title searcher who specialized in historic properties for his clients. Often the owner would later apply for a marker and Howard provided us with the site's history at no cost since he had already received compensation.

As many questions were asked about marker details, I wrote a Marker Information Sheet to describe the sign's size, colors, text limitations, delivery information and installation instructions. It was enclosed with the Agreement Form. With the approach of the 1976 Bicentennial some owners wished to participate by doing their own research. To accommodate the requests, I compiled a list of sources. Because of the complexity of historical investigation, they soon found that we were best qualified to research their properties.

My 1974 annual marker report to the Board suggested an updated version of the pamphlet as there had been so many additions. While being considered, I proposed

another idea in early 1975; we should have a booklet with a photograph of the sites along with the marker texts, Designed to be a "field guide", it would enable the public to tour the sites at their own convenience. The proposal was accepted by the Board.

Primarily a picture book, I continued to photograph sites. Because of the large number of negatives, it would be costly to print them commercially. Fortunately, I was introduced to Fred Van Dyke, a Society member and professional portrait photographer with a studio and darkroom in Bergenfield who offered use of his facilities. I purchased enlarging paper and between us 8" x 10" prints were made over several sessions. Claire Tholl agreed to update the map used in the old pamphlet. After composing a short explanatory introduction for the inside cover. I assembled a layout of 45 pages.

President Nystrom selected Bertram E. Tremble, owner of Tech Repro, Inc., of Hackensack as the printer. We met at his office to work out the details in December of 1975. Nystrom discussed prices and ordered 5000 copies as a smaller printing would not substantially reduce cost. It was also understood that the spiral binding would allow for future additions.

Final cost to the Society was \$2,800. At that time a copy was sold for \$1.00 but the price gradually increased. Publication was in 1976 to commemorate the U.S. Bicentennial and became one of the best sellers of Society publications.

In 1976 a controversy arose over a marker that had been installed in 1964, before my tenure. Located in Cresskill and captioned as Huyler's Landing Road, it noted among other facts that it was the route of British General Earl Cornwallis when he attacked Fort Lee in 1776.

The marker text was written and researched by John Spring, a future BCHS President. However, in the Bicentennial year there were those who believed a tradition that the road was further north in Closter. Arguments attracted extensive media coverage. A BCHS committee, including myself, examined the evidence and after many meetings which included Closter, the Society fully supported Spring's research and issued a position paper to that effect. At this time the marker was stolen, presumably by misguided Closter partisans. Later it was found and re-erected. Spring's difficulties were not lost on me for a challenge to my own research was in the making.

In 1971, at the request of Ramapo College, I began marker research for a very old house in Mahwah which they owned. The study broadened into surrounding lands with my "re-discovery" of the original parchment survey map of the Ramapo Tract. (It had been incorrectly indexed at the courthouse and unknown to modern

historians). In the meantime, the Bergen County Park Commission, hearing of my research, asked for a marker to note the history of their new, nearby park, "Ramapo Valley County Reservation". It was installed in 1973.

Three years later a man from the area wrote to the Society and Park Director that the marker was inaccurate and demanded it be replaced by one of his own. Informed of the allegations, I turned over my research to President Marden Nystrom with a request that it be reviewed by knowledgeable BCHS people. After examination, the Society answered all accusations in a letter sent to everyone involved that "it must stand by their accuracy". This should have ended the matter but it was only the beginning.

Not satisfied, the man (long since deceased and who will remain nameless) wrote of his complaints in the Ridgewood Sunday News of November 28, 1976 which now included the marker for the building now named the Laroe-Van Horn House. He also sent letters to the Park Commission and Ramapo College expressing strong disapproval, condemning the Society and myself in particular. Claire Tholl felt there was an urgent need for a reply and I patiently answered all accusations point by point, and sent them to our sponsors and the newspaper.

Motivation for the attack was difficult to understand; perhaps he thought his turf was invaded. However, from the beginning he had been consulted. I visited him at his Ramsey office and spoke to him later at a Mahwah Historical Society membership meeting where my research as well as Loring McMillen's architectural assessment was presented. It became evident that there was no substance to his allegations.

At first the Mahwah Historical Society considered the dispute between him and us. Escalation, however, prompted them to request a special meeting between representatives of both organizations (excluding the principals - him and me). Mahwah approved our research and text but desired elimination of the house builder's name in favor of a later owner in the marker caption. Another suggestion was the use of three family names but it would necessitate dropping other important names and facts from the text.

At the BCHS Board meeting of March 8, 1977, the following motion was proposed and passed: "A close re-examination of the evidence convinced the Trustees that there should not be any change of the sign". Later in the year Ramapo College published my study which is now into a second printing (Ramapo: From Indian Trading Post to State College.)

Vindication by my peers and marker sponsors was gratifying; However, further rumbles of negative publicity seemed likely, particularly from the media. Although

urged not to by the Board, I decided to resign to allow for a cooling off period. President Nystrom supervised the program as "Acting Chairman". New signs were erected, some using my research, but texts were written by others. The Ramapo problem faded and in 1980 my hiatus ended with re-appointment as Marker Chairman by President Richard Lenk.

Despite bumps in the road the marker program was a success, not only locally but nationally. In September 1980 the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) notified me that I had been given an award for my work on the 1976 marker guide. It came as a surprise. Later, Marden Nystrom explained that he had submitted the marker book along with examples of my reports as the principal researcher, editor and photographer. Actually, there were two awards - Certificates of Commendation - mine and a separate one to the BCHS for the marker program and publication.

Presentation, among other state awards, was made by Joan D. Hull, Executive Director of the New Jersey Historical Society at Chatham, NJ on November 1, 1980. President Richard Lenk accepted for our society and I was presented with mine.

The AASLH had sent notices to local and state media as it is considered a prestigious, national organization. They were published in newspapers and history newsletters. I was told that the publicity generated interest in the BCHS by new membership applications and increased sales of the marker book.

Further recognition came in an 1985 award by the Bergen County Historic Advisory Board, a government agency. BCHS President John Spring and myself accepted for the Society at a ceremony in the auditorium of Fort Lee Historic Park. The citation read that it is "particularly appropriate at to honor this outstanding educational program this year as the 100th marker was recently dedicated". (The 100th was for the River Road School, Lyndhurst).

Frequently, at a sponsor's request, markers have no credit line and were installed without ceremony. When a dedication was planned with a Society presence, the Board was notified and members were invited to attend. In most instances I was asked to be our official representative. My remarks to the assemblage were usually short, outlining the program's purpose and thanking the sponsors for their financial support of the project which educated the public of our county history.

When dedications involved sites which I researched, my talks were expanded to include more historical information. At Rockleigh some five markers were dedicated in one fell swoop They had been installed over a period of time in the

early 1970s. My address was given to residents, town officials, local historians and the district's Congressman at the Borough Hall.

At Englewood's Liberty Pole our marker was dedicated November 20, 1976 shortly before the Revolutionary War reenactment of the 1776 American retreat from Fort Lee. A large crowd assembled at the Pole - more to see the parade than the marker dedication. There were several addresses and I spoke of the site's early history. Claire Tholl published my researched article in the Society's 1977 Anniversary issue of Bergen History.

In another town, Ridgefield Park, another parade ended at the speakers' platform in front of the historic "Paulison-Christie House". As part of the Township's anniversary our marker was dedicated and I gave a talk about the house. My research was published in their hardcover, Ridgefield Park 1685-1985.

A memorable dedication took place before an audience of 250 at Bogota January 26, 1975. The marker commemorated the Dutch Achter Col Colony of 1642 based on my private research published in New Jersey History (1971 Winter Edition). I gave a 20 minute discourse about its history. The sponsor was the Ralph H. Hall Post, Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Ladies Auxiliary with the ceremony at the post home. For the occasion they reprinted my article which was distributed to the library, schools and civic organizations.

To publicize the program, a slide show was given at libraries, church groups and shopping malls. Aided by wife Mary, we often spoke alternately about the sites to enliven the presentation and passed around Society literature. These activities led to newspaper articles which explained our procedure for obtaining a marker.

When some early signs needed maintenance, the question arose as to who actually owned the markers. It was discussed by the Board with advice from member lawyers R. Worth Vaughan and Albert B. Dearden. Obvious was that Society ownership would be challenged by sponsors who paid for the sign which they installed on their property. Considered also was that our ownership would entail liability insurance should a marker be involved in an accident. The consensus was that the sponsor was the legal owner.

To maintain the Society's image, often I had cleaned signs with detergent. Due to weathering, however, colors faded, especially the silver lettering which required paint. Individuals or a town DPW sometimes would help with on site touchups but this method lasted only a year or two.

Professional service was needed and with the Board's approval, I obtained cost estimates from the manufacturer as well as auto and sign painter shops. My

recommendation was Signs by Bloom of New Milford, not only for the low price, then \$105, but their procedure. At the shop the entire marker was painted Delft Blue and the raised lettering was sanded to the aluminum base for the silver appearance. Next the entire sign was coated with a clear enamel to retard weathering.

The Society established a \$500 a year maintenance budget that lasted through several administrations. As costs rose Herbert Jackson of Oradell offered his services. An active Society member in many areas, he had a home work shop where he did a professional job at cost (\$95) using our refurbishing instructions. With Herb's death and elimination of the maintenance budget, the Society again relied on occasional volunteers, including the Boy Scouts, who often repainted on the site.

Inflation also effected new markers. In the 1970s and 80s price increments were frequent and considerable. Investigation of other sources proved to be even higher and we continued with Sewah Studios. Board members suggested doubling the research fee but since the likely recipient often would be me, I discouraged the idea to minimize sponsor discouragement for future markers.

Since the booklet was published the number of new markers had increased. I prepared a typed list to insert in many of of the booklets but they became outdated as well. A new booklet was needed; the Board was agreeable although time went by before a decision was made to start the project. It was to be a supplement bound with remaining copies of the 1976 version as it was the most cost effective.

My layout integrated old pages with the new that were about equal in number. Added to the front cover was "New Edition With Supplement". I wrote an updated explanation of the marker program and provided an index. Claire Tholl provided two new location maps.

Photographs were added from my negative collection but others were still needed. Trustee John M. Favre volunteered to record them and is credited under each of his pictures. The layout was completed in 1992 but further delay arose due to printing costs. Finally it was transferred to galley proofs, patiently executed by Trustee Deborah Powell.

After preparation for publication, ten new markers had been installed. They became an addendum, unillustrated, at the rear of the book which is now complete to the end of 1996. Containing 110 pages, it was published December 1996 and printed by Tech Repro, Inc., of Hackensack.

In 1990 I had asked Kevin Wright, Curator of the Steuben House, if he would be willing to research some marker projects while I convalesced from surgery. He agreed. However, further surgery left me physically handicapped and Kevin continued to research most of the new requests. From his reports, I composed the marker texts; the arrangement worked well.

The current marker price, set by the Board, is \$1300 with a required \$650 deposit before research begins. The manufacturer charges \$1000, the research fee is \$200 and \$100 is placed in a fund for deserving sites which have no sponsors. A future increase is likely as the price charged by Sewah Studios has not been changed since 1991.

At the end of 1996, 132 markers have been placed in 50 of the county's municipalities. They criss-cross Bergen from Edgewater to Mahwah and Lyndhurst to Alpine. The majority designate extant structures but also note sites of early colonies, Revolutionary War activities, cemeteries, old roads and town histories. New markers are in progress and by the millennium and beyond the BCHS program shall see continued growth.

Reginald McMahon

Trustee Emeritus

Marker Chairman

February 1997