

A WELCOMING SIGN

The cast iron history of Pennsylvania's road signs

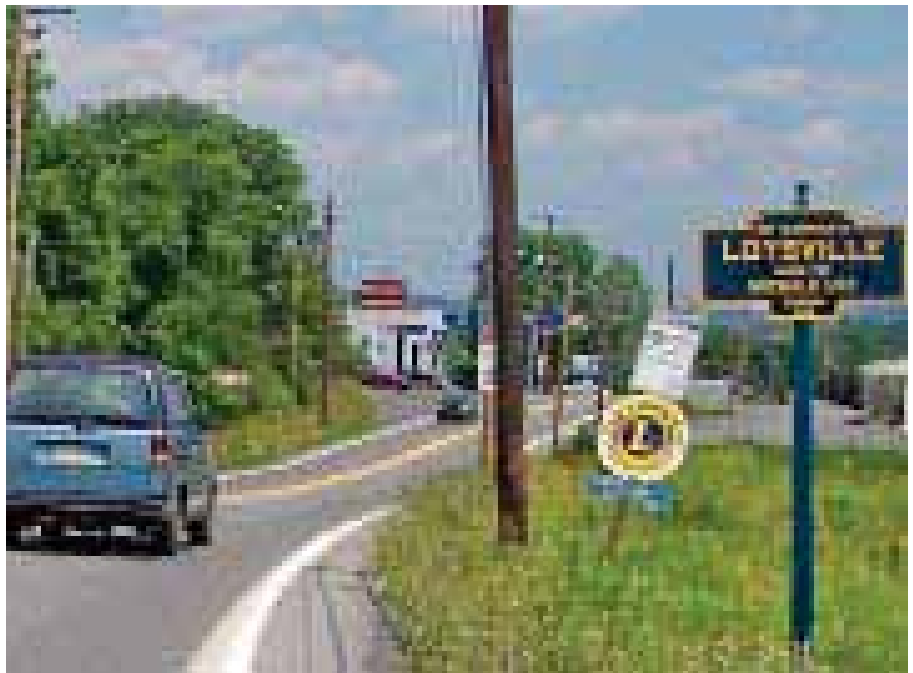
By John T. Graham



As one travels the through-ways of the Commonwealth, the boroughs and villages of our countryside present themselves. There are literally thousands of communities in Pennsylvania, and many introduce themselves to the traveler with roadside signs telling the name of the town being entered. The sign often tells only the name of the borough, but there are many places where the greeting sign says quite a bit more. Beginning in the 1920s, the Pennsylvania Department of Highways, predecessor to today's Department of Transportation (PennDOT), began a program of providing attractive cast-iron name signs. These were placed on the major highways entering communities across the state, and the newest of these old signs dates from the early 1940s. Although far too many have disappeared from the scene, a surprising number survive and can still be found at the side of the road.

A closer look at the Loysville sign shows it has been recently repaired and repainted. This town is fortunate to still have two of its name signs standing along PA Route 274. Loysville is fortunate too in that the signs were redone as a community service by a local body shop. The top line tells the traveler that it is 10 miles to New Bloomfield, the next borough down the road to the east. A brief bit of information about the name and date founded are the other items included.

Painted royal blue with bright yellow lettering when new, they stood at each end of communities located along a state numbered route. A place at the intersection of two such highways, Mifflintown for example, might have had four signs two on U.S. 22 and two more on PA Route 35. Today only one of these signs remains at Mifflintown, and as the photo shows, it is in need of attention. By bringing these signs to the attention of more people, we can both applaud



HEADING EAST Driving into Loysville, Perry County, you will find a recently refurbished historic sign.

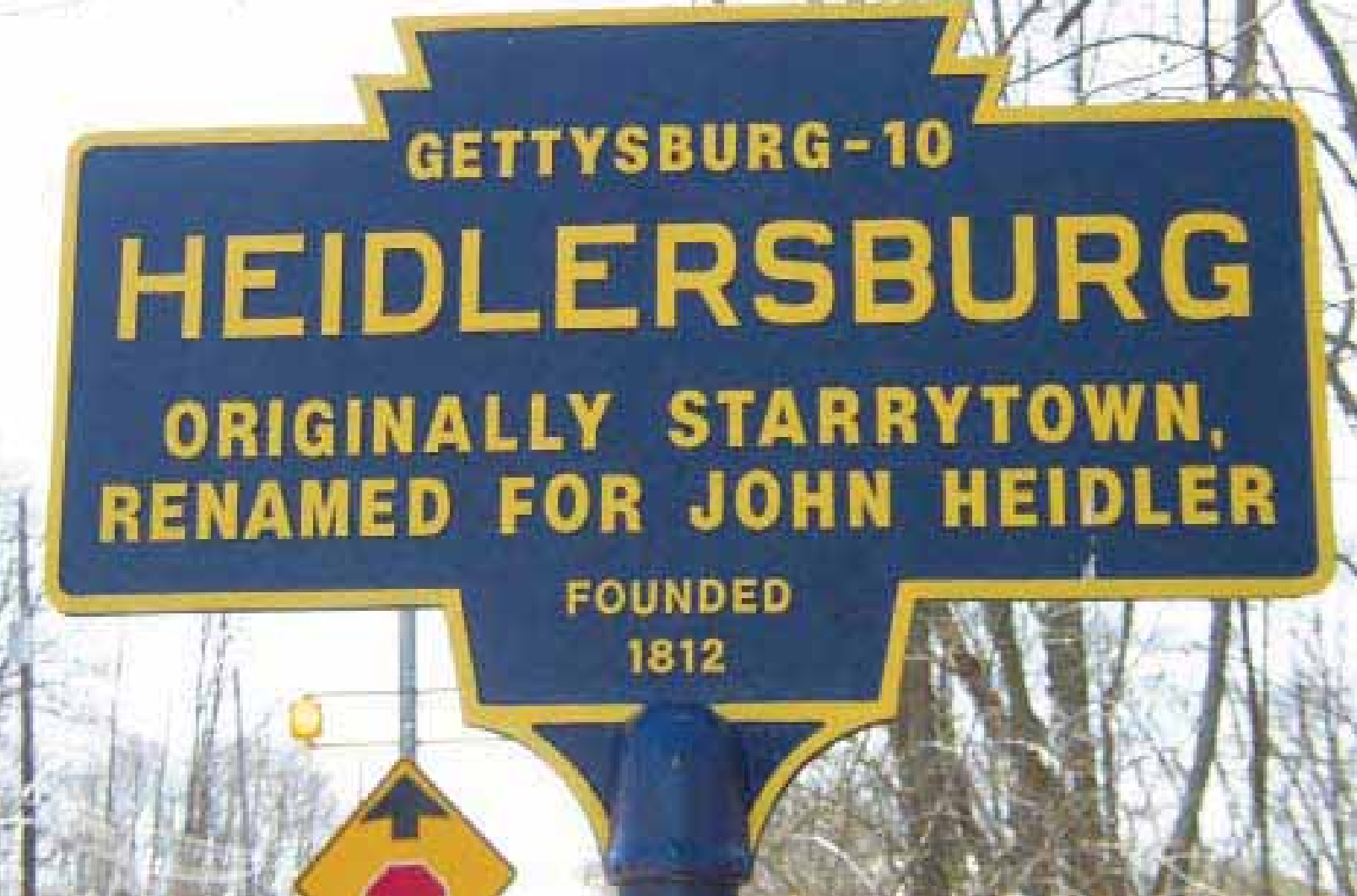
those communities that are caring for these important bits of local history as well as encourage individuals or groups to adopt and care for those that badly need such care.

A significant part of the problem is that the signs are truly orphans, and thus communities have been reluctant to do anything about them. It was the state Department of Highways that erected them over 70 years ago, but today's Department of Transportation wants little to do with them. These signs are similar in color to the "Historic Markers," which give information about specific sites, persons and events in Pennsylvania's colorful history. However, those signs are erected and maintained by the state Historic and Museum Commission (PHMC). The town signs technically do not belong to the municipalities in which they stand. That of course doesn't mean local governments can't take them under their wing if they choose to do so. That, in fact, is encouraged by PennDOT.

A little research into their history finds the following statement in the 1926-1928 Biennial Report of

the Department of Highways: "The Department makes a practice of marking the limits of boroughs with cast-iron signs on which are a few facts as to the date the community was founded and the derivation of its name." This is the earliest reference to these signs I have found in the state Archives as of yet. References to such "historical" signs can be found in Highway Department reports up to the time of World War II. Cast iron is a fragile material, thus many signs have fallen victim to traffic accidents. Road widening projects and municipal growth have also removed many from the roadsides. Any of these signs that have luckily survived deserve to be treated as the senior citizens that they are.

Many communities have made great effort to maintain or preserve these bits of history. A close examination of many signs reveal repairs made by either welding or bolting them back together. In addition, places such as Cashtown, Adams County, and Sigel, Jefferson County have made replica signs to replace the vanished originals. Heidlersburg, Adams County, had



A NEW TWIST Heidlersburg, Adams County had a replication sign made to keep the historic context

an aluminum replica made by Lakeshore Industries of Erie., the same company that made many of the PHMC markers. Where signs have been repainted, a wide variety of paint colors can be found other than the bright blue and gold of the original finish. The posts on which the signs are mounted are also made of cast iron and equally fragile when exposed to traffic. Many a post has fallen to the snow plow or other careless vehicle so that many remaining signs are now mounted on wooden or other replacement posts. In several towns the empty posts stand as silent reminders of signs that were once there but now are gone. Efforts are being made to reunite empty posts with post-less signs.

So what exactly do these signs tell us? A surprising number tell us,

not about the present name, but rather what the town used to be called. It is not uncommon to find similar place names in different areas of Pennsylvania. For example, there are at least eight counties with a municipality named "Centerville." Only the one in Washington County was large enough to merit its own post office. It was the expansion of the postal system and railroads that led to many places being renamed, so as not to lend confusion to the traveler nor the mailman.

A large number of the signs say they were named for a "pioneer settler," or other early inhabitant of the area, and some of the signs give clues as to the ethnicity of the early settlers. New Florence, Westmoreland County, for example, was named for a town in Italy. It's a good bet the early settlers

were Italian immigrants. New Germantown, Perry County was named for "old" Germantown, near Philadelphia and was settled by folks of German heritage as they moved west to the frontier.

The "founded" dates shown on the signs give at least a general indication of when early settlers first moved into the area. Many of those in Lancaster County, for example, bear dates in the 1730s and 1740s. The signs in Perry County, west of the Susquehanna, show founding dates from the 1770s.

At times there is a little humor to be found. The sign at Airville, York County, tells us it was named for the "pure air in the neighborhood." Today that sign stands practically in a barnyard, where the fragrance of cattle is hard to miss.

Sometimes the information on the signs can be up for debate. For example, the sign at the Perry County borough of Duncannon, states it was once called Petersburg, and that it was “renamed for the Duncan family” of early settlers. A local historian quotes an early history that states it was named for the Wexford County, Ireland town of Duncannon. We don’t know who got to pick the information on the signs and can only hope that they tried to be accurate. But occasionally, the information is just wrong—signs at Tylersport, Montgomery County state that it was named for “President James Tyler.” President Tyler’s first name was “John.”

Many of these signs have a maker’s mark on the reverse. Often found in small raised letters are the names of one of two companies: The Carlisle Foundry in Carlisle, or the Geiser Manufacturing Co. in Waynesboro. Though there were likely other sign makers, they likely suffered the same fate as these manufactures and closed their doors for business long ago.

I hope you can enjoy learning about these signs. If one or two remain in your area that are in need of care and repair, perhaps you will spearhead an effort to “fix up and paint up” these quickly disappearing bits of our local history.

A group of folks with great interest in these signs is being formed, under the name of the “Keystone Marker Trust,” with the intent to have castings made of original signs and posts, so authentic reproductions can be made for those who are interested in doing so. There are companies now that make “replicas,” but they are not quite the same design, nor do they use the same post mounting system as the originals. If you aren’t sure if your borough had a sign, or if they did and they are gone and no one recalls what the signs said, please contact me, I maintain a database of over 600 of them. **(B)**



TLC A little bit of attention, effort and paint will breathe new life into the sign marking the entrance to Mifflintown, Juniata County

Post Script

Although I have been “collecting” (i.e. stopping to copy down the info and take a photo) of these old signs for some 40 years, I am not alone in preserving this information. The website “Keystone Town Markers - A Unique Look At Pennsylvania Towns and Their Histories,” includes many photographs. These can be viewed at www.gribblenation.com/papics/keystone. Also, in the 1970s, Fred Yenerall took thousands of photographs of old barns, covered bridges, gristmills, iron furnaces and signs of all kinds. His photos can be viewed at www.fmyphotos.smugmug.com/Pennsylvania.

I would be indebted to any reader who knows of additional signs anywhere in Pennsylvania that are not part of these sites. I ask that you let the editor know. Including a photo would be great, and taking a quick peek on the back to see if a maker’s name is there would also be appreciated. You can contact me at jatogr@embarqmail.com, or you can email your editor, Courtney Accurti, at caccurti@boroughs.org.



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