HISTORY IN
CAST IRON
PENNSYLVANIA'S
ROAD SIGNS

by *John T. (Jack) Graham*

NEW BLOOMFIELD-10

LOYSVILLE

NAMED FOR

MICHALE LOY

FOUNDED
1830

CRIME
WATCH
IN OPERATION
LOYSVILLE

As one travels the through-ways of the Commonwealth, the towns and villages of our countryside present themselves. There are literally hundreds of communities in Pennsylvania, and many of them 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 town, 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 PennDOT, began a program of providing attractive cast-iron town-name signs. These were placed on the major highways entering towns and villages across the state. The newest of these old signs date from the early 1940s. Although far too many have disappeared from the scene, a surprising number have survived and can still be found at the side of the road. The photograph here shows a typical installation, seen as the traveler heads east on PA Route 274 into the Perry County town of Loysville.
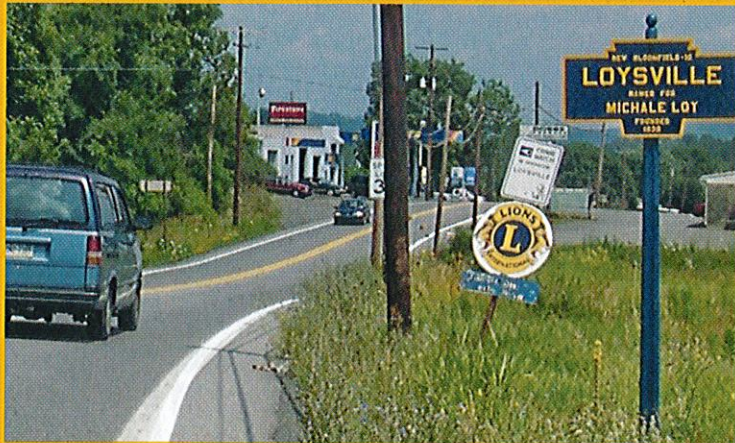
A closer look at the Loysville sign shows it has been recently repaired and repainted. This town is fortunate to still have two of its name signs standing along PA Route 274. Loysville is fortunate too in that the signs were redone as a community service by a local body shop. The top line tells the traveler that it is 10 more miles to New Bloomfield, the next town down the road to the east. A brief bit of information about the town name and the date the town was founded are the other items that are included.

Painted royal blue with bright yellow lettering when new, they stood at each end of towns located along a state numbered route. A town at the intersection of two such
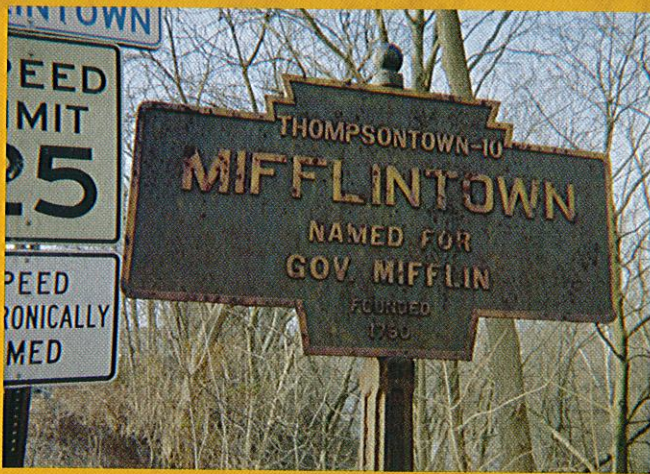
highways, Mifflintown for example, might have had four signs – two on U.S. 22 and two more on PA Route 35. Today only one of these signs remains at Mifflintown, and as this photo shows, it is in need of attention. By bringing these signs to the attention of more people, we can both applaud those communities 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 or to the "Historic Markers", which give information about specific sites, persons, and events in Pennsylvania's colorful history. However, those signs are put up and well maintained by the state Historic and Museum Commission, another agency that claims no interest in the town name signs. The town signs technically do not belong to the boroughs or townships 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 the author has found in the state Archives. References to such "historical" signs can be found in Highway Department reports up to the time of the Second World War. Cast iron is a fragile material, thus many signs have fallen victim to traffic accidents. Road widening projects and the growth of what were once small towns into bigger cities 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.
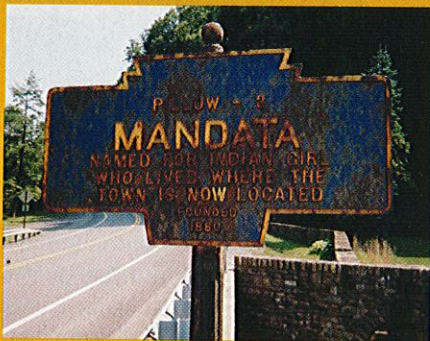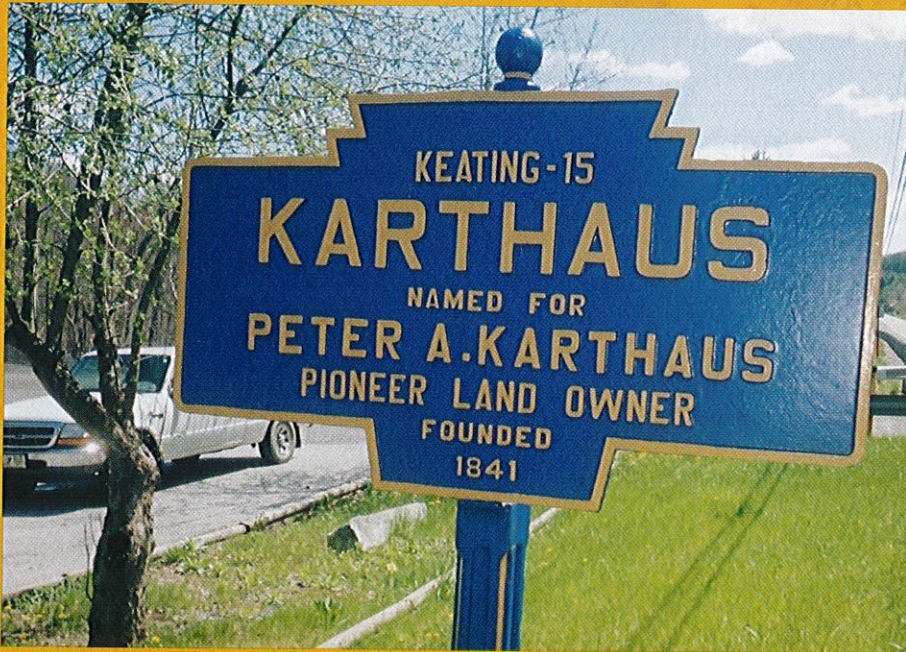
Many communities have made great effort to maintain or preserve these bits of history. A close examination of many signs reveal that repairs were made by either welding or bolting to put the signs back together. Cashtown, in Adams County, and Sigel, in Jefferson County, have made replica signs to replace the vanished originals. Heidlersburg, also in Adams County, has had an aluminum replica made by Lakeshore Industries of Erie, PA., the same company that made many of the Historic and Museum Commission 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 town 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 town named "Centerville". Apparently only the one in Washington County was large enough to merit its own post office. It was the expansion of the postal system, and of the railroads, that led to many towns 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.

Some of the signs give clues as to the ethnicity of the early settlers: New Florence, Westmoreland County, was named for a town in Italy. It's a good bet the early settlers were of Italian extraction. 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 towns of 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. The sign at the Perry County town of Duncannon, states that it was once called Petersburg, and that it was "renamed for the Duncan family" of early settlers. A local historian quotes an early town 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. Occasionally the information is just wrong. Signs at the Montgomery County town of Tylersport 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 PA, or the Geiser Manufacturing Co. in Waynesboro PA. Both of these companies are long out of business. Most likely there were other makers as well.

In summary, the author hopes the readers of this article enjoy learning about these signs, and that if one or two remain in your town that are in need of care and

repair, that 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 has been formed – the Keystone Marker Trust. Our goals are not only the documentation and preservation of those town signs that remain, but to make available authentic replicas of the original signs and posts, with the hope that towns where the originals have disappeared will want to replicate these lost bits of their history. 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. Any community interested in this should pass on their interest to the editor. If you aren't sure if your town had a sign, or if they did and they are gone and no one recalls what the signs said, visit *www.keystonemarkertrust.org*. The "Find A Marker" link lists what we know about over 600 of them. □

Postscript: 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.

Additionally, N. Clair Clawser of Lancaster County has also been collecting sign information and photographs. He has published several booklets and also produces calendars with town sign photos which are available through the Keystone Marker Trust website.

The author would be indebted to any reader who knows of additional signs anywhere in Pennsylvania. 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.

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