

Since 1936, the state of North Carolina has erected markers to remind natives, newcomers, and visitors alike that history has a place beyond the textbooks and the lecture hall. Over the years, the state highway historical marker program has designated almost 1,400 sites along Tar Heel roads as worthy of the familiar silver-and-black cast aluminum markers. The subjects – typically individuals, events, or institutions – have been judged by a committee of historians to be of statewide historical significance, that is, to have had an impact extending beyond the local area to affect the history of the entire state. Nearly 100 of these markers honor literary subjects, including creative writers, journalists, historians, and librarians and libraries.

Before 1936, the North Carolina Historical Commission, together with groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, placed a number of bronze plaques and similar memorials throughout the state. Generally, these tablets identified “shrines” such as the home of statesman William R. Davie in Halifax County and battlegrounds such as the site of the 1865 Battle of Kinston in Lenoir County. The state highway marker program, conducted as a cooperative venture among state agencies, was an effort to standardize this type of commemoration and provide a continuing source of state funding. Principal credit for spearheading the effort goes to Christopher Crittenden, who became secretary of the Historical Commission in 1935 and retired as director of Archives and History in 1968. Over the years, Crittenden presided over hundreds of marker dedication and unveiling ceremonies across the state.

After an initial meeting in Raleigh on 27 August 1935, in which organizational and procedural matters were discussed, Crittenden summoned a meeting of history professors to begin recommending appropriate subjects for markers. They met on 15

October 1935 in Professor A. R. Newsome’s Saunders Hall office on the University of North Carolina campus and were the first Marker Advisory Committee. (Hereafter, the committee would usually meet twice a year in Chapel Hill or Raleigh to deliberate the merits of subjects nominated for consideration.) The committee members chose a style of plaque designed to resemble the pages of an open book. The text on the plaque, they determined, should be kept to a minimum and set in letters sufficiently large to be read from a passing automobile. Crittenden and the committee modeled the program after one begun a decade earlier in Virginia.

In its inaugural year, the Marker Advisory Committee marked sites such as the birthplaces of Governor Zebulon B. Vance and Virginia Dare. It also began recognizing the importance of literary history by authorizing plaques commemorating the Guilford County birthplace and Asheville gravesite of short story writer William Sydney Porter (“O. Henry”), the Scotland County grave of poet John Charles McNeill, the approximate site in Greene County where explorer and historian John Lawson was killed by the Tuscarora (the marker has since been moved to Grifton in Pitt County), and the Polk County house in which writer and musician Sidney Lanier died in 1881. Before 1940, two sites associated with editor and ambassador Walter Hines Page were marked: his birthplace in Cary and his tomb in Aberdeen. Markers were also placed in honor of playwright Augustin Daly of Plymouth, *Progressive Farmer* founder Leonidas L. Polk of Polkton and Raleigh, novelist Frances Fisher Tiernan (“Christian Reid”) of Salisbury, and humorist Edgar W. “Bill” Nye of Fletcher.

North Carolina
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State Highway
Historical Markers:
Public Commem-
oration and
Literary History

by Michael Hill