



# Cast in Iron?

Rethinking our historical monuments

BY JAIME FULLER

**T**here are two historical markers outside the Six Nations Indian Museum, in Onchiota, in Franklin County. Both engrave the importance of the Haudenosaunee to the history of this area in rock, and were erected by the Akwesasne Mohawk Counselor Organization. The funds were raised for them by Ray Fadden, who built the museum more than 60 years ago. He spent his life trying to tell and preserve the indigenous history of northern New York, a tradition carried on by his son, John Fadden, who now runs the museum with his three sons.

These markers, built by the Native community to tell its history from its own perspective, are different from the familiar blue-and-yellow historical signs that dot New York State. “The ones who put up those signs are mostly the descendants of colonial people,” John Fadden says. “Their emphasis is on them. And that’s natural too, to talk about who you are, and make your kids proud of your grandfathers and great-grandfathers. But it’s a shame how they just neglect the reality of what was here once.”

New York’s historical marker program began in 1926 as part of the state education department’s plan to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the American Revolution. The catalyst for the program limited the subject matter of the signs from the very beginning. A 1959 article in the *Knickerbocker Times* reported that Hamilton County, one of only two counties completely within the bounds of the Adirondack Park, was the only

county in New York that had no marker at all. The article surmised that “until lumbermen, miners, and vacationers began going there, that Adirondack county didn’t experience much history,” an inaccurate conclusion—but one that could be easily reached if the only history you knew about the Adirondacks was collected through its state historical markers. The region’s markers leave an impression of history beginning with the French and Indian War and ending shortly after the creation of the park in the late 19th century, as if history started calcifying before anyone who lives here now was born, and that all the stories about what happened here have already been told.

There aren’t many state historical markers that acknowledge the indigenous history of the park. One in Essex is about Split Rock, a boundary between the territory of the Mohawk and Algonquin people. Other sites are summarized as places where white settlers sought refuge from Indians or were massacred by them, verbs of victimization preserving a fiction that has been told for a long time—that the mountains were not being used before white settlers arrived,

Photograph by Carrie Marie Burr

and that the empty land, therefore, was the settlers' to claim. It's a myth "based on this Western concept of where we spend our days," says Tim Messner, an archaeologist at SUNY-Potsdam who has excavated sites around the Adirondacks, finding artifacts that prove people lived here 10,000 years ago—both down by the water and up in the High Peaks. "For the majority of human history, people didn't live in one place ever. You're mobile hunter and gatherers; you live in a region. That was home."

The money appropriated by the state for these signs dried up shortly before the United States entered World War II. Applications in the 1940s, or notices of errors in signs that required fixing, were met by an apology from the education department that there was no money. By the 1960s, the state decided that innovation had rendered signs useless; someone in a car going 50 miles per hour wasn't going to be able to read them. Instead, the state transitioned into putting up new markers at visitors' centers along the highway. The history of the region was, for the most part, set in cast iron. Municipalities and organizations could put up new signs, but they would have to find the money to do so, as the state no longer ran the marker program. It still doesn't, even as stories of other states revising the histories told by their roadside markers have grown increasingly frequent.

Contemplating the addition of new historical markers to the Adirondack Park isn't a mere intellectual exercise. The William G. Pomeroy Foundation, based in Syracuse, has given grants for more than 600 new markers in the state since 2006, and continues to accept applications from municipalities and nonprofits for new signs. Some of those signs have been placed in the Adirondacks. Susan Hughes, the foundation's historian, thinks a marker in New Russia celebrating Lucy Bishop Millington, a botanist who discovered the dwarf mistletoe that was killing trees during the late 19th century, was a perfect example of a worthy addition to the state's roadside record. The organization would like to receive more applications that honor



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histories beyond those already well-represented in the existing signage. And if you listen to people in the Adirondacks, there are a lot of stories waiting to be made visible on the landscape.

Messner can list off many opportunities to recognize the region's indigenous past, while also preventing signage from becoming a beacon for looters looking for artifacts. A marker could go up, for example, on a highly visible part of Tupper Lake, noting that the oldest artifacts found in the region came from there,

**A marker on Tupper Lake could note that the oldest artifacts found in the region came from there, evidence of hunter-gatherers living in the Adirondacks at the end of the Ice Age.**

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Melissa Otis, who wrote the book *Rural Indigenousness*, a rigorous debunking of the Adirondacks' pre-colonial emptiness, says there are also plenty of opportunities to name specific people important to the region's indigenous history. In many cases, these figures made the contributions of already memorialized Adirondackers possible, acting as guides for surveyors and scientists and poets. A sign on Indian Lake could mention that it was named for the Penobscot-turned-Abenaki Sabael Benedict, who settled on its shore in the 18th century. The Sabattis family, which included a High Peaks guide and a Revolutionary War soldier, could also be recognized, she added.

Since the indigenous past of the Adirondacks often has a different relationship to place than the markers currently allow, the signs would have to evolve. A marker wouldn't tell a viewer that they are standing on history, or driving past it, but that this history is all around them.



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The markers' preference towards fixing history at an exact location can make it difficult to tell stories about people who moved away from the Adirondacks, or who only ever had a transitory relationship with it. In North Elba, John Brown, who left behind his house and his mouldering body, is well-represented in signage. But Timbuctoo, the community of black homesteaders briefly created in the 1840s by abolitionist Gerrit Smith—who helped fund Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry—is left unmentioned by the state signs. In 1821, a new state constitution raised the property requirements for black voters while getting rid of the requirement for white men. By 1826, as Sally Svenson's book *Blacks in the Adirondacks* shows, only 298 of the nearly 40,000 black people in New York could vote. Smith's land grants, offering black Americans the chance to own a piece of the Adirondacks, were a small attempt to correct this wrong.

Hadley Kruczek-Aaron, head of the anthropology department at SUNY-Potsdam and a board member of the nonprofit John Brown Lives!, has spent the last decade trying to add Timbuctoo to the commemorative record. "One of the challenges," she says, "is that it's not one spot on the landscape. It's in 40-acre lots scattered over Essex and Franklin Counties." Recipients of Smith's land grants also formed a community in Loon Lake called Blacksville that lasted about a decade; another community was in Vermontville, where children grew up to fight in the Massachusetts 54th during the Civil War. Kruczek-Aaron and her students have excavated the land where Lyman Epps—the Smith grantee who stayed in the Adirondacks the longest—once lived on Bear Cub Road, looking for evidence of his life. Nothing has turned up yet. But signs could still be placed, telling the stories of these communities and the people who lived here. John Brown Lives! plans to apply for a marker grant from the Pomeroy Foundation.

**Despite what many** of the markers and monuments in the region would have us believe, pride is not a certain byproduct of the past, although the past can be



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carved and buffed to appear so to the future—and often is in places that rely on tourism.

“Unfortunately there are a lot of things that happened in the Adirondacks that people don’t know about or don’t want to talk about,” says Alice Paden Green, executive director of the Center for Law and Justice and founder of the Paden Institute and Retreat for Writers of Color, in Essex. Her family moved to the Adirondacks from Greenville, South Carolina, during the Great Migration, and she grew up in Witherbee. She has always noticed the silences in the record, and has stories that she would like to see on markers. Without the mines and the lumberjacks and the railroad workers who built the way to transport iron ore out of the Adirondacks—and vacationers into it—the region as we know it would not exist. And yet labor history is a somewhat untapped vein for local historical markers. Green thinks that one should be placed honoring the black miners who lived on Elizabeth Street in Port Henry, where a black church was built in the 1950s.

These histories are not unknown. There are books covering them, museum exhibits honoring them, articles about them, and people sharing them with their communities—work that will continue regardless of whether new markers are erected. And there is the valid question of whether these signs, which only allow for a few words to conjure up a compelling image of the past, are the best way to tell these histories. “Sometimes I wonder about the value of historical markers,” Melissa Otis says. “It’s the conflict that history often creates,” the inevitable coda to every sign “...but there’s so much more. I’m a firm believer, even if it can make things messy or complicated, in telling the whole story.”

Martha Swan, the founder of John Brown Lives!, sees the historical markers as a complement to all the work being done in museums and in books and events. “Because they’re usually placed in the soil where a thing happened, that can have the particular power of place. And historical markers usually have a very short text. Hopeful-





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ly they are crafted in a way that delivers something to the passerby that will encourage a curiosity to learn more. And at that point the books and the exhibits have an enormous role to play.”

Could an app tell this history better? Perhaps, but the preexisting signage remains, asserting its position of what history is important to the people who live here, and offering its own answer to the question of what the Adirondacks’ shared history might be. And the people who aren’t represented by the historical markers still live here too.

There is a model for how to reappraise history just outside the Blue Line. In June 2020, the city of Plattsburgh will unveil a panel that amends the story told by the Samuel de Champlain monument. It will acknowledge that the French explorer did not discover Lake Champlain, and that he couldn’t have found the lake without the help of his indigenous guides. It will also note that the attempt to represent the indigenous on the monument thanked the wrong people, as the Natives at the foot of the statue, towered over by Champlain, are wearing the clothes of Plains Indians. The panel would not exist without locals who sought to learn more about where they came from, adding a new chapter to the present by looking backward, says former district attorney Penny Clute. Clute was part of a committee that formed after the violent clash over Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia, sparked a discussion on the Champlain monument. The group listened to Native elders and historians, and then worked to add what had been left out or told incorrectly. The work isn’t done, but one step just might lead to another.

History is often portrayed as an immutable pile of facts, but it is a living thing, constantly changing based on who is able to assemble the raw materials of the past into a narrative. “Who we decide to commemorate,” Kruczek-Aaron notes, “says something about who we are now. We should think really hard about who we want to remember. It sends a message of who we are to the next generation—and to the current generation.” ▲