

“1630-1930 Indian Reservation”

“These four and one-half acres have never belonged to the white man. Having been set aside in 1728 as an Indian reservation by the forty proprietors who purchased the praying Indian town of Hassanamesit.” Photo by Jaye Glenn (website at <https://jayeblue.com/>)

Marked Territory: Rethinking Massachusetts' Roadside Histories

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Editor's Introduction: *This 50th anniversary issue of the Historical Journal of Massachusetts is devoted to two major themes: reassessing traditional historical topics and exploring more contemporary historical developments over the past fifty years. This opening essay touches upon both of these objectives. The author asks readers to reconsider a group of historical markers that were erected in 1930. What historical biases and fallacies do they communicate to the public at large? Should the Commonwealth invest in their preservation and restoration? The author argues that the recent repair and reinstallation of number of these signs represented a “missed opportunity for a reexamination of how we interpret and communicate public memory.”*

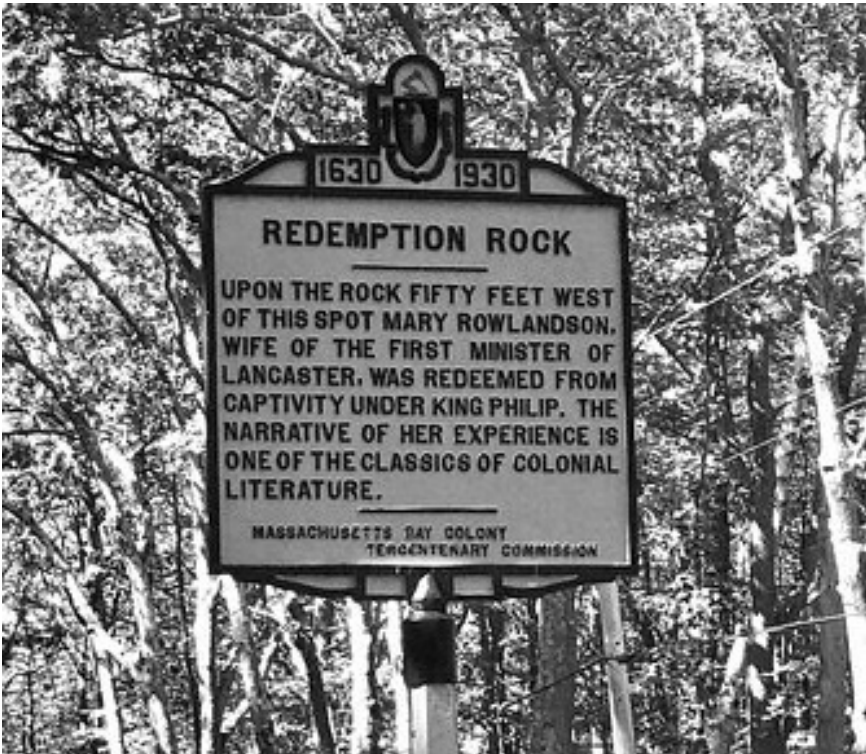
A later article in this volume offers a more detailed analysis of the content of all 275 of these roadside markers. In all, nearly one-third of the roadside signs reference “Indians” and a full 16% commemorated the site of an alleged Indian attack. Author Emma Boast has an M.A. in Public Humanities from Brown University. When she wrote this essay she was working as a Regional Arts and Culture Planner at Boston’s Metropolitan Area Planning Council, where she facilitated cultural planning projects.

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In 1930, the Massachusetts Bay Colony Tercentenary Commission erected 275 markers to commemorate the colony’s 300th anniversary. For

some, the markers highlight the “rich heritage of Massachusetts and local communities,” as the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) noted in its 2019 announcement of its plan to restore twenty of the markers. This is not true for everyone. As we reflect upon recent political and social upheavals, we ought to see these markers in a new light: as evidence of a failure to grapple with our shared past, but also as an opportunity to chart a new path marked by new narratives.

The markers are simple: they feature black text on a white background. Each is surrounded by a black frame and is topped with the state seal flanked by two dates: 1630 and 1930. Each highway marker describes a moment deemed important from the Commonwealth’s colonial history and connects that moment with a specific town or city. Many of these portray the 1600s not as a period of settler encroachment on Native American sovereign lands but rather as an era of undisputed settler sovereignty and Native American aggression. One marker in Hatfield, for example, offers a seemingly simple statement: “Before 1670 part of Hadley. Thrice attacked by Indians during

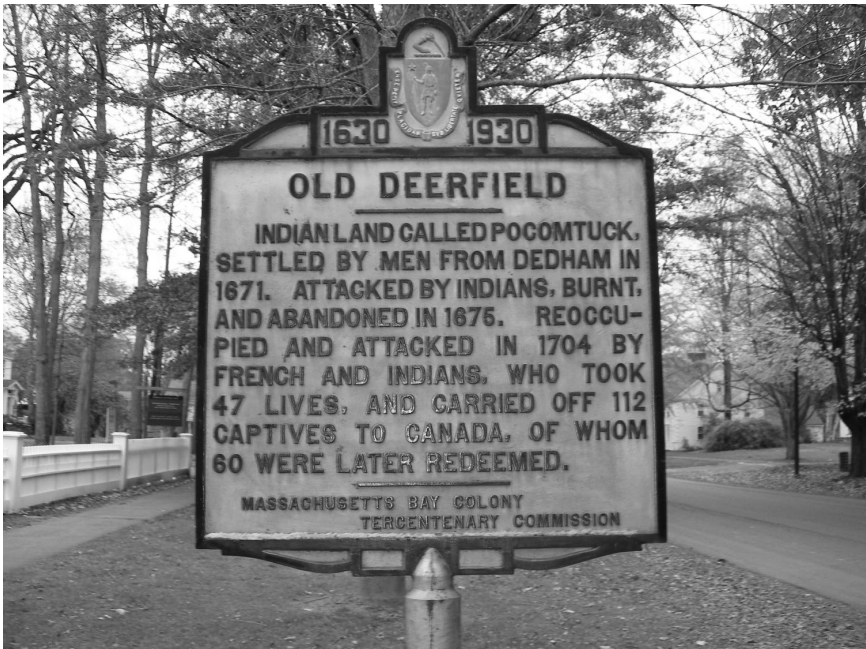


Credit: Jimmy Emerson, DVM, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

King Philip's War." In its dispassionate tone, the marker decontextualizes this violent episode, uprooting it from the larger story of a war fought on the grounds of Native sovereignty. Another of the highway signs restored by MassDOT in Deerfield reads:

Indian land called Pocomtuck, settled by men from Dedham in 1671. Attacked by Indians, burnt, and abandoned in 1676. Reoccupied and attacked in 1704 by French and Indians, who took 47 lives, and carried off 112 captives to Canada, of whom 60 were later redeemed [i.e. returned].

Much like the Hatfield sign, this one offers a black-and-white account of apparently unjustified attack. But this history is anything but black and white. Places such as Deerfield and Hatfield were founded far from the more densely populated early coastal settlements. They marked the vanguard of a settler colonial frontier and were characterized by fluid boundaries and shifting political alliances. Understandably, the colonists' incursion into new territory created conflict with Native Americans who were being displaced and dispossessed of their lands. These were contested territories, yet these markers would suggest otherwise. The crisp frame that surrounds each neat



narrative marks these historical accounts as bounded, definite, and seemingly beyond dispute.

A procession of pithy narratives, each enshrined in an indelible physical form, conveyed in a detached tone, and stamped, quite literally, with the state's seal of approval: these are marks of authority that justify the origins of injustice and legacies of harm that continue today.

The current version of the Massachusetts state seal, adopted in 1890, is no exception. It portrays the disembodied arm of Myles Standish, the first commander of the Plymouth Colony, a man who was known for his ruthless preemptive attacks on Native Americans, holding a sword over the head of a Native American figure who is standing in a peaceful pose. Here again, these signs represent the colony's monopoly on violence. In these markers, violent resistance to colonial expansion is reframed as unprovoked and unjustified, while violence against Indigenous and Native people is portrayed as a justified defense of rightful colonial territory.

Scattered across the state, these highway markers punctuate the land with an array of familiar myths: the peaceful "settlement" and transfer of lands. British colonists are represented as innocent victims under constant threat and one-sided, often vicious, attack. Native Americans, referred to almost exclusively as generic "Indians," are represented as abstract historical actors, rather than as individuals, much less members of contemporary communities throughout the Commonwealth. We know that this is not the full story, but these markers would have us believe that it is. Much like monuments, statues, plaques and other similar forms of commemoration, historical markers literally inscribe stories in place, lending weight and legitimacy to narratives by dint of their physical placement and straightforward assertions: "this happened here," "he lived here." This is what makes such markers so compelling: they help us understand that we stand on the same ground where others once stood. Yet these very same qualities can also elide the truth. Perhaps the colonial myths that undergird Massachusetts' identity are so persistent in part because they have acquired a patina of truth that has rendered them practically invisible.

MassDOT claims that the roadside markers are important, in part, because they inform residents and visitors about "notable events and facts." Yet what if the apparent factuality of these markers was, in fact, the very quality that makes them most in need of scrutiny?

A reevaluation of these markers requires not only interrogating the myths we have inherited about the colonial era but also understanding the context in which the markers themselves were made. As the decade of the 1930s dawned, white supremacy was ascendent as the country was developing

founding myths that could construct a national identity. The early decades of the twentieth century saw a wave of xenophobic immigration restrictions intended to limit the movement of those deemed undesirable, particularly immigrants of Asian and Southern and Eastern European descent, and the rise of white nationalism throughout the U.S. Much as the construction of Confederate monuments peaked in the early 1900s amid a violent backlash against the political project of Reconstruction, the establishment of the Commonwealth's 275 highway markers needs to be understood within the context of a national effort to construct a white identity and an entrenchment of racist policies and practices.

Similar to monuments, markers offer accounts and interpretations of what happened in the past—as shaped by the prejudices and political motives of the moment in which they were made. Seen in this light, the restoration of the Tercentenary Commission markers to their original condition was a missed opportunity for a reexamination of how we interpret and communicate public memory and how we can make our heritage more inclusive.

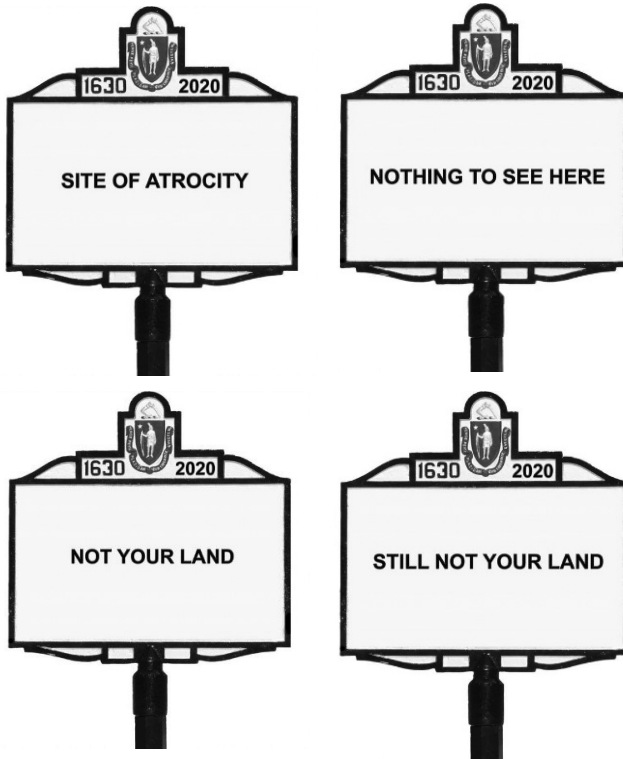
Could the Commonwealth's new investment in these markers and recent commitment to reevaluate its official seal and motto be a call for renewed attention to our past and offer an opportunity for a collective retelling of our history to fit our present moment? What if we were to see these physical objects not as "assets" to be saved and preserved but as opportunities to question ourselves, our messages, and our intentions, such as in artist Erin Genia's recent creative reinterpretation? That the Commonwealth of Massachusetts devoted public resources to upholding these stories without scrutinizing them, compounding harm done to Indigenous peoples over generations, indicates that there is a pressing need for planners, policymakers, and preservationists to develop new approaches to interpreting, evaluating, and managing historic markers as part of the commemorative landscape—and to do it in collaboration with Indigenous and other marginalized communities. For to ignore these stories and perspectives only perpetuates harmful myths, not to mention the myth that markers are history, rather than just one story we've told.

HJM

This essay has been slightly edited. It was originally published in January 2021 on the blog of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the regional planning agency serving the 101 cities and towns of Greater Boston: <https://www.mapc.org/planning101/marked-territory-rethinking-massachusetts-historical-markers/>

Notes

1. L. Mara Dodge, “Massachusetts’ 275 Tercentenary Signs: Commemorating Town Firsts, Famous Colonists, and Nefarious Indians in 1930,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, forthcoming.
2. Abigail Feldman, “State Announces Effort to Restore Historical Roadway Markers Dating Back to 1930,” *Boston Globe*, Aug. 27, 2019.
3. For the full text of all 275 tercentenary markers, see Samuel Eliot Morison, *Historical Markers Erected by Massachusetts Bay Colony Tercentenary Commission* (Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1930).
4. For a critical analysis of the “redeemed captive” narrative see: Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, “‘The Redeemed Captive’ as Recurrent Seller: Politics and Publication, 1707-1853,” *New England Quarterly* 77:3 (2004), 341-367.



“Ahysterical Marker”

Artist Erin Genia’s reinterpretation of the Tercentenary markers can be found at her website, www.eringenia.studio (accessed 4/2/22)



Goodrich Massacre

Occasionally local towns and historical societies have taken the initiative. In 2007 the Georgetown Historical Society and Board of Selectmen restored this sign using Community Preservation funds. A local reporter explained the sign's educational purpose, "Since 1930, a historic marker has stood at the site of the Goodrich Massacre to memorialize the family and to keep the tragic story alive in history. Seventy-seven years of exposure to the elements, however, took their toll on the sign, rendering it almost unreadable, and thus defeating its purpose to serve as a reminder of what one local family endured during those early and uncertain years in this new land" (emphasis added). "Keeping the tragic story alive" meant promulgating a one-sided historical narrative. Source: Renee Buckley, "Georgetown Massacre Remembered this Week," Oct. 24, 2007 at www.wickedlocal.com