

BY MARY GOW ✱

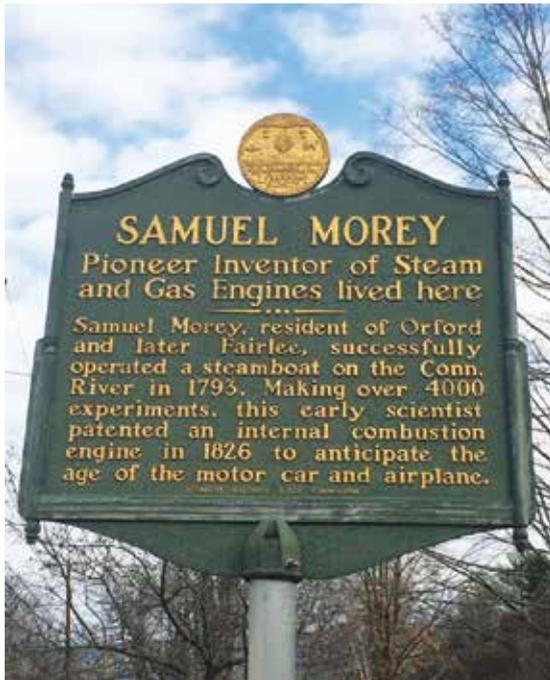
PHOTOS COURTESY OF STATE OF VERMONT DIVISION FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

# ON THE ROAD IN VERMONT

**EXPLORING THE STATE'S ROADSIDE HISTORIC SITE MARKERS**



The marker for the Taftsville Covered Bridge was installed in 2013.



**E**arly in the morning of February 5, 1887, a passenger train originating in White River Junction and bound for Montreal started across the wooden trestle bridge crossing the White River in Hartford. Something went wrong. The last car jumped the tracks and plunged to the river, dragging others—wooden passenger cars of the time—down with it. Embers from the cars’ coal stoves and oil from their lanterns ignited the carriages. Between the crash and conflagration, the accident took at least 30 lives. The catastrophe was a catalyst for change in railroad safety across the country, leading to regulations requiring electric lights and steam heat.

Clockwise from top left: The Samuel Morey marker in Fairlee was produced in 1948 and was the 30th marker placed in Vermont. The dedication ceremony for the marker for Vermont Equality for Same-Sex Couples was held at the State House in Montpelier on October 12, 2017. Governor Phil Scott and advocates of the legislation attended. Clarence Fitch’s family attended the dedication ceremony for his marker in Adamant in 2018. The marker designating the Fisk Trophy Race of 1937 and the Longest Running Alpine Ski Race Held at One Location in the United States, South Pomfret, was placed in 2019. Shown are racers from the 2020 Fisk Trophy Race.





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Above: The marker for the Chittenden Home in Arlington was produced in 1948 and restored in 2018. It is an example of the small markers, which are no longer produced.

Right: The marker for the Old State House, West Street, Rutland was produced and placed in 1948. This image shows the marker upon retrieval from New Jersey State Police in North Plainfield, NJ. It was retrieved and restored in 2016 and placed on West Street near the original location in 2017.

A few miles away from the crash site and nearly a century earlier, inventive and entrepreneurial Samuel Morey devised a steam engine-powered paddlewheel ferry boat in the 1790s. Living in Fairlee, he went on to explore other innovations and in 1826 was awarded the earliest United States patent for an internal combustion engine.

The disastrous train wreck and Morey's groundbreaking ingenuity are commemorated on Vermont Roadside Historic Site Markers. These handsome signs—green background with concise text in gold letters—publicly share history. They recognize people, places, and events of regional, state, and national significance at the places where their particular bit of history was made. The marker program, launched in 1947 and under the purview of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, offers glimpses of Vermont's past, insights into the present, and an introduction to the impact of Vermonters nationally and beyond.

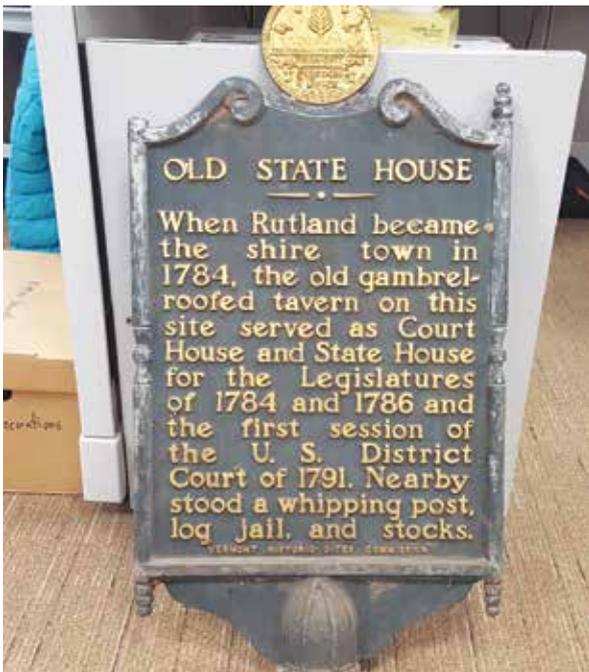
### Mini History Lessons

Today, there are 280 Vermont Roadside Historic Markers, a growing number with ongoing installations. Writers, industry, inventors, groundbreaking people and

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events, education, leisure, military history, birthplaces, unique buildings, and more are featured. Their subjects span millennia. A fossilized beluga whale, a denizen of the Champlain Sea 11,000 years ago discovered in 1849, is memorialized in Charlotte. In Montpelier, a marker standing between the Vermont State House and Supreme Court commemorates Vermont Equality for Same Sex Couples including the 1999 landmark court decision and subsequent 2000 and 2009 marriage equality legislation.

“It’s very important for not just tourists driving around but also for the local community. The markers offer a quick, easy way to provide education on the history of local places, larger community stories, and aspects of Vermont that reach beyond our borders,” says Vermont State Historic Preservation Officer Laura V. Trieschmann.

The program began with the legislature’s 1947 establishment of the Historic Sites Commission, a predecessor to the Division for Historic Preservation. Their charge was to oversee the two historic sites owned by the state by that time, Hubbardton Battlefield and Chester Arthur Historic Site, and create the marker

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program. Neighboring states were already making mini history lessons accessible to the motoring public. New York's historic markers, established in 1926 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of United States independence, brought hundreds of blue and yellow metal signs to their roadways.

For plaques, Vermont turned to Sewah Studios foundry in Ohio, still the makers of the markers today. Founded in 1927 and named for founder E.M. Hawes (spell it backward), Sewah anticipated the surge in states' interest in roadside history. Hawes brought innovation and style to the project. First, he turned to aluminum casting to make lightweight, durable, and affordable markers. Then, finding available lettering unsatisfactory, he ran a contest for typeface design, selected a winner, and tweaked the entry to create the Sewah script. This closely guarded Sewah secret is on thousands of markers across the country.

## Fascinating People, Places, and Events

Vermont's earliest markers focused largely on places. Among the first batch of about four dozen installed in 1948 to 1949 were birthplaces including Calvin Coolidge, Brigham Young, Thaddeus Stevens; military history of the Hubbardton Battle, Mount Independence Military Road, and several fort sites; some industry; several towns; and individual buildings with notable stories such as Rudyard Kipling's Brattleboro home "Naulahka" and Robert Todd Lincoln's "Hildene."

Recent markers continue to feature places, and also events and people. A Native American village dating to between AD 1400 to 1600, the Bohannon Site is commemorated on an Alburgh plaque. Archaeological investigation completed in 2007 found evidence of longhouses and thousands of artifacts there, shedding light on the community including its crafts, foods,

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and food processing. In Colchester, two markers for the “Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Ethan Allen” recognize the 10th US Cavalry stationed there for four years starting in 1909. One of the first peace-time all-black regiments, these soldiers were highly decorated during the Spanish American War.

A Burlington lakeside plaque celebrates the first documented international ice hockey game, an 1886 contest between Vermont’s Van Ness House team and the Montreal Hockey Club, which later won the first-ever Stanley Cup. The first documented reparative probation case heard in a United States court is featured on a Newport marker. “Reparative probation applies restorative justice to fix relationships and equilibrium in the wake of an offense,” it reads in part, noting that this 1995 case inspired the creation of reparative boards across Vermont and beyond. In a new feature of some markers, both of these are bilingual—English on one side, French on the other.

Not all Vermont markers are in Vermont, and not all of them are along roadsides. In Middletown, Virginia, a plaque honors the vital role of Vermont soldiers in the Civil War Battle of Cedar Creek. Atop Suicide Six Ski Mountain in South Pomfret, the Fisk Trophy Race of 1937 is celebrated; the ski race is the longest continuously held FIS slalom race in the country.

Some markers have their own history. The marker for the old state house in Rutland was stolen more than 35 years ago. “We got a call from the New Jersey State Police, which had it in evidence storage. Seems it was put on display in someone’s backyard and a neighbor called the police, who had it for a few years until we could retrieve it,” says Laura. Rehabilitated, it is once again in Rutland. ❶

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