

Department of Historic Resources

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FIVE NEW STATE HISTORICAL HIGHWAY MARKERS APPROVED

—Markers cover topics in cities of Richmond (3) and Salem, and Lee County—

[Note: The full text for each marker is reproduced at the end of this release.]

RICHMOND – Five new historical markers recently approved by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources will highlight the first black Girl Scout troop in the South, the first coeducational Presbyterian training school for lay workers, First African Baptist Church in Richmond, a popular 20th-century illustrator and artist from Salem, and a pioneering agricultural educator in southwest Virginia.

Three of the new markers will rise in Richmond.

A marker slated for installation on the Virginia Union University campus commemorates “the first African American Girl Scout troop in the South,” which began meeting in 1932 on the campus. “The Richmond Girl Scouts served as a model for other southern localities as the Girl Scout organization moved toward integration,” according to the marker. Although Girl Scout activities in Virginia were originally segregated, “by 1947 African American and white high school girls were working together on the Richmond Council newsletter,” the marker will read.

The “First Southern African-American Girl Scouts” marker is sponsored by the Girl Scouts of the Commonwealth of Virginia, which will cover the manufacturing and installation costs of the sign.

Another marker for Richmond, titled “Appointed to Serve,” recalls that in 1914 the Presbyterian Church U.S. founded “the church’s first coeducational ‘lay workers’ school.” Women who were barred from seminary “received a theological education” at the school, which today is part of the Union Presbyterian Seminary. Female faculty “taught classes in social welfare and Christian ethics, and practicum at the 17th Street Mission, Richmond factories, and parts of Appalachia,” according to the marker. “Students and professors broke gender and racial boundaries, even creating an integrated roller rink and housing participants of the Poor People’s March in the 1960s,” the sign’s approved text reads.

A marker titled “First African Baptist Church” will recall that this church in Richmond was “bought and organized by freedmen and slaves in 1841.” According to the marker, “The establishment of the First African Baptist Church led to the organization of other local black churches.” The site was also where in 1865 the first Republican State Convention in Virginia convened and where Jefferson Davis gave his last speech as president of the Confederacy, and where Booker T. Washington lectured.

Famous African Americans baptized at the church include the Rev. John Jasper, Henry “Box” Brown, and Maggie L. Walker. The sign will be installed at the site of the current church building, which was erected in 1876, in Richmond.

In the City of Salem, a historical marker will honor artist and illustrator Walter Joseph Biggs, who was born in Montgomery County in 1886. Biggs was raised in Salem and attended New York School of Art where one of his instructors was Robert Henri and his classmates were Edward Hopper and George Bellows. “Biggs illustrated magazines and novels, and won honors in art exhibitions,” the marker will read. He was inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame in 1963. He died in 1968 and is buried in Salem’s Sherwood Memorial Park.

In Lee County, a historical marker will be erected to honor William H. Starnes, a pioneering educator in agriculture. “Starnes established a successful framework for the practice of scientific farming in the tri-state region, beginning in 1924,” the marker will read. “Starnes traveled extensively to remote farms and gave evening lectures that attracted many farmers from across the region, including parts of Tennessee and Kentucky,” the text concludes.

The texts for the five new historical markers were approved by the Virginia Board of Historic Resources during its quarterly meeting in December.

The Virginia highway marker program, which began in 1927 with erection of the first historical markers along U.S. Rte. 1, is considered the oldest such program in the nation. Currently there are more than 2,500 official state markers, most of which are maintained by Virginia Department of Transportation, except in those localities outside of VDOT’s authority.

The manufacturing cost of each new highway marker is covered by its sponsor.

More information about the Historical Highway Marker Program is available on the website of the Department of Historic Resources at <http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/>.

Full Text of Markers:

(Please note that locations are only proposed; they have yet to be confirmed with VDOT or other officials in jurisdictions not overseen by VDOT; also, some texts may be slightly modified before installation.)

First African Baptist Church

Tracing its roots to 1780 as the First Baptist Church, the First African Baptist Church was bought and organized by freedmen and slaves in 1841. The present building was erected on the same site in 1876. The establishment of First African Baptist Church led to the organization of other local black churches. In 1865, the site hosted the first Republican State Convention held in Virginia and Jefferson Davis's last speech as president of the Confederacy, and later a lecture by Booker T. Washington. The Rev. John Jasper, Henry "Box" Brown, and Maggie L. Walker were baptized at First African Baptist Church.

Sponsor: First African Baptist Church Historical Commission

Locality: City of Richmond

Proposed Location: 301 College St. (corner of Broad and College Streets)

First Southern African American Girl Scouts

In 1932, the first African American Girl Scout troop in the South began meeting nearby on the Virginia Union University campus. Sponsors of the troop included Lena Watson, Janie Jones, and Mary Virginia Binga. Girl Scouts enjoyed activities such as camping, earning badges, and learning first aid. The Richmond Girl Scouts served as a model for other southern localities as the Girl Scout organization moved toward integration. Initially, Girl Scout activities in Virginia were segregated but by 1947 African American and white high school girls were working together on the Richmond Council newsletter.

Sponsor: Girl Scouts of the Commonwealth of Virginia

Locality: City of Richmond

Proposed Location: North Lombardy St., near the library (on the Virginia Union University campus)

Appointed to Serve

Founded by the Presbyterian Church U.S. in 1914, the Assembly's Training School was the church's first coeducational "lay workers" school. Through the school, women barred from seminary received a theological education. Among the earliest faculty were women who taught classes in social welfare and Christian ethics, and practicum at the 17th Street Mission, Richmond factories, and parts of Appalachia. Students and professors broke gender and racial boundaries, even creating an integrated roller rink and housing participants of the Poor People's March in the 1960s. Renamed the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in 1959, the school is now part of Union Presbyterian Seminary.

Sponsor: Union Presbyterian Seminary

Locality: City of Richmond

Proposed Location: Corner of Brook Road and Palmyra, near 1201 Palmyra Ave.

Walter Joseph Biggs

Born 4 June 1886 in Montgomery County, Walter Joseph Biggs was raised here on Second Street at Roanoke Boulevard. His New York School of Art instructors included Robert Henri. Edward Hopper and George Bellows were classmates. Praised by Norman Rockwell for “brilliant and poetic” application of color, Biggs illustrated magazines and novels, and won honors in art exhibitions. He was inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame in 1963. Several repositories hold his works, including the City of Salem and the Salem Museum, and Roanoke College owns a major collection. Biggs died 11 Feb 1968 and is buried in Sherwood Memorial Park.

Sponsor: Kevin Boggess, City Manager, City of Salem

Locality: City of Salem

Proposed Location: Salem City property at corner of Boulevard and Second Street, opposite Biggs family home

William H. Starnes: Agricultural Educator

Passage of the Vocational Education Act in 1917 brought agricultural training to high schools across the nation. Difficult terrain and poor roadways limited its success in southwestern Virginia. Pioneering educator William H. Starnes established a successful framework for the practice of scientific farming in the tri-state region, beginning in 1924. Founder of the Agricultural Department at nearby Thomas Walker High School and the Ewing Chapter of the Future Farmers of America, Starnes traveled extensively to remote farms and gave evening lectures that attracted many farmers from across the region, including parts of Tennessee and Kentucky.

Sponsor: Dr. William H. Starnes

Locality: Lee County

Proposed Location: U.S. Rte 58 (eastbound), about 100 yards west of intersection with State Road 879