

Department of Historic Resources

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Contact:

Randy Jones

Department of Historic Resources;

540-578-3031; Randy.Jones@dhr.virginia.gov

FIVE NEW STATE HISTORICAL HIGHWAY MARKERS APPROVED

—Markers cover topics in counties of Tazewell and King George, and the City of Richmond—

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

RICHMOND – Five new state historical markers approved recently by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources highlight Virginia’s coal-mining heritage in Tazewell County, a school in King George County that resulted from court challenges to segregation after World War II, and a bread riot in Richmond that took place during the Civil War.

Three of the new markers are slated for installation in the Town of Pocahontas, which sponsored the signs, all of which deal with aspects of the town’s coal-mining history.

The “Town of Pocahontas Commercial District” marker relays that the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company “developed a town at Pocahontas in 1881-82 to house its workers and support mining efforts.” In 1884, the Company Store, “the first and largest of its kind in the region,” became the “centerpiece” of the town, according to the marker.

By selling commercial lots, the mining company attracted entrepreneurs to the fledgling town, “many of whom were Jewish immigrants, who established drugstores, saloons, and general stores.” The marker also highlights the town’s “many buildings [that] bore elaborate iron-front facades, attesting to the importance of the coal-mining industry.”

The “Pocahontas Cemetery” marker recounts how a town cemetery became a necessity after a mine explosion on March 13, 1884 killed at least 114 miners. “Not until a month later were bodies recovered from the mine and buried together in what became the town’s first cemetery.”

The cemetery marker highlights the varied nationalities of those interred in the cemetery, where “gravestones bear inscriptions in Hungarian, Italian, Polish, and Russian, while others display the symbols of the Russian Orthodox faith.” The “broad array of European-inspired funerary art at the Pocahontas Cemetery is one of the best in the state,” according to the sign’s approved text.

It was the Virginia Improvement Company's opening of a mine at the Pocahontas Coalfield in 1882 and an extension of the Norfolk and Western Railway that brought "industrial development to Southwest Virginia," according to the marker "Pocahontas Mine No. 1." The marker notes the multi-ethnic labor force that arrived "from neighboring states and Europe to the area, including African Americans, Hungarians, Italians, Russians, Germans, and Welsh."

The "Ralph Bunche High School" marker, to be erected at the site of the one-time school building, recalls that the school "was built as a direct result of the Federal District Court case *Margaret Smith et al v. School Board of King George County, Virginia.*"

During the era of segregation, the judge in that 1947 case ruled "jurisdictions should ensure the 'equalization' of segregated school facilities for whites and African Americans," according to the marker. The ruling led to construction of Ralph Bunche High School, which "opened in 1949 and closed in 1968 after the county desegregated its schools," in the words of the marker.

The "Richmond Bread Riots" sign recounts "the largest wartime food riot in the Confederacy," which took place on April 2, 1863. The riot began after "a crowd congregated at the Washington equestrian statue in Capitol Square, and grew to at least several hundred," according to the marker. "The rioters looted warehouses on Cary and Main Streets, as well as in Shockoe Slip," the sign's text reads. The mob dispersed later in the day, after "Mayor Joseph Mayo, Gov. John Letcher, and Pres. Jefferson Davis attempted to quiet the crowd."

All five markers were approved by DHR's Board of Historic Resources during its September 20 quarterly board meeting.

The Virginia highway marker program, which began in 1927 with the 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 2,400 official state markers, most of which are maintained by Virginia Department of Transportation, a key partner with the Department of Historic Resources in the historical marker program.

The manufacturing cost of each new highway marker is covered by its respective sponsor, except for those markers developed by the DHR as part of a nearly decade-long program to create new markers that focus on the history of women, African Americans, and Virginia Indians.

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.)

Pocahontas Cemetery

Pocahontas Cemetery was created after the 13 Mar. 1884 explosion in the Pocahontas East Mine that claimed the lives of at least 114 miners. Not until a month later were bodies recovered from the mine and buried together in what became the town's first cemetery. Later interments, often grouped by ethnic and religious heritage, reflect the rich diversity of the Pocahontas community. Some gravestones bear inscriptions in Hungarian, Italian, Polish, and Russian, while others display the symbols of the Russian Orthodox faith. The broad array of European-inspired funerary art at the Pocahontas Cemetery is one of the best in the state.

Sponsor: Town of Pocahontas

Proposed Location: SR 102, 980 feet south of intersection with SR 604 (at the entrance to the cemetery) in Pocahontas

Town of Pocahontas Commercial District

The Southwest Virginia Improvement Company first developed a town at Pocahontas in 1881-82 to house its workers and support its mining efforts. The commercial district lay along Centre and St. Clair Streets. The 1884 Company Store, the first and largest of its kind in the region, was its centerpiece. To foster the growth of the town, the company sold lots to competing entrepreneurs, many of whom were Jewish immigrants, who established drugstores, saloons, and general stores. Many buildings bore elaborate iron-front facades, attesting to the importance of the coal-mining industry. Most development stopped by the 1920s, as the coal-mining boom that had driven growth slipped into a slow decline.

Sponsor: Town of Pocahontas

Proposed Location: SE corner of Centre Street at intersection with Water Street in Pocahontas

Pocahontas Mine No. 1

The Southwest Virginia Improvement Company opened Pocahontas Mine No. 1, the first to exploit the rich seams of the Pocahontas Coalfield, in 1882. An extension of the Norfolk and Western Railway soon followed, bringing industrial development to Southwest Virginia and linking it to Norfolk. The mine brought a mix of ethnic groups from neighboring states and Europe to the area, including African Americans, Hungarians, Italians, Russians, Germans, and Welsh. Miners produced about 1,000 tons of coal a day by 1883. In 1938, a closed section of the mine opened as the nation's first

Exhibition Coal Mine, which educated visitors about the industry. Mining operations ceased in 1955.

Sponsor: Town of Pocahontas

Proposed Location: Intersection of 215 Shop Hollow Rd/SR 659, 700 feet N of intersection of Exhibit Mine Rd and Boissevan Rd on the southbound side of Exhibit Mine Rd. in Pocahontas

Ralph Bunche High School

Ralph Bunche High School was built as a direct result of the Federal District Court case *Margaret Smith et al. v. School Board of King George County, Virginia*, which was filed in 1947. The judge ruled that jurisdictions should ensure the “equalization” of segregated school facilities for whites and African Americans. White segregationists hoped to avoid integration by constructing “separate but equal” facilities, but the NAACP quickly moved on to demanding the end of segregation altogether. Named after the noted political scientist and diplomat, Ralph Bunche High School opened in 1949 and closed in 1968 after the county desegregated its schools.

Sponsor: Ralph Bunch Alumni Association

Proposed Location: 10139 James Madison Highway, King George County

Richmond Bread Riots

On 2 Apr. 1863, the largest wartime food riot in the Confederacy took place in Richmond, the day after a group of women met at Belvidere Baptist Church in Oregon Hill met to complain about rising food costs, inflation, and speculation. In the morning, a crowd congregated at the Washington equestrian statue in Capitol Square, and grew to at least several hundred. The rioters looted warehouses on Cary and Main Streets, as well as in Shockoe Slip. Mayor Joseph Mayo, Gov. John Letcher, and Pres. Jefferson Davis attempted to quiet the crowd, which dispersed by late morning with the arrival of the Public Guard.

Sponsor: DHR

Proposed Location: Cary or Main near or along the path of the rioters in Richmond

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