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Historic Keystone signs get new life

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You may not have noticed it. It's not even on a main road anymore.

Or maybe you did, but didn't realize quite what it was.

The old blue cast-iron sign with the keystone on it, just outside Irvine on Old Route 6, doesn't just advertise the town name, but also a line of history — "named for Gen. William Irvine." It doesn't look like a typical modern town sign today, and to that, there is a story to tell.

Pennsylvania has the survivors of a statewide program coming up on a century of service — the "Keystone Markers," and

Warren County had many of them, including some of the very first. The blue-and-gold monuments once stood at the gateways of every city, town and village in Pennsylvania and designated river and creek crossings, as well as trail heads and borough lines. The markers effectively cast Pennsylvania's reputation as the "Keystone State" to the travelling public — visitors and residents alike.

The Keystone Markers were part of a statewide program instituted by PennDOT's predecessor organization, the Pennsylvania Department of Highways (PADOH), in the early 1920s just as the Good Roads Movement was

sweeping the nation just prior to the First World War. The PADOH, which was only the second such department formed in the nation's history, was an early leader in this movement, making "modern" highway travel accessible to all of the citizens of the Commonwealth for the first time.

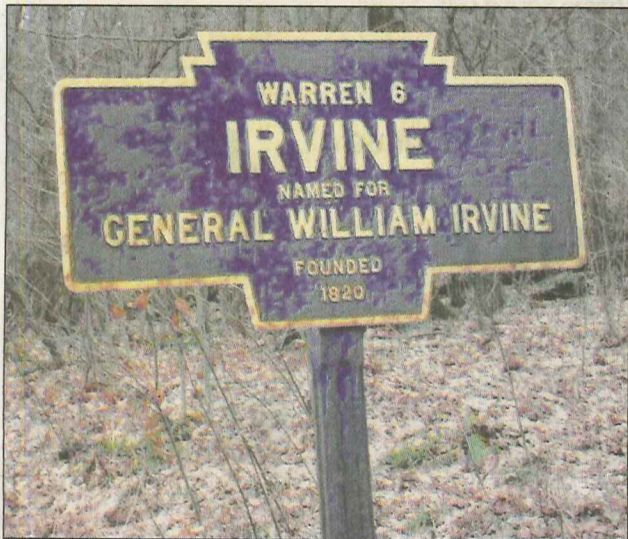
The Keystone Markers — a signature project of the highway department — were used not only as wayfinding devices and welcoming signs for tourists arriving by automobile, but also to convey every conceivable type of information along new Pennsylvania roads, from town names to speed limits, danger warnings to parking restrictions. No other state had a comprehensive program of this scale or purpose, and none created a symbol so easily recognizable and closely associated with the state in which they were found.

The sign at Irvine is a survivor still in its original place, and its companion sign on the other end of Irvine is now in the Wilder Museum. But Warren, Tidouete, Russell and nearly every local community on an original designated state or U.S. route also had these signs at one time. What happened to them?

Only 600 or so Keystone Markers remain of what were originally tens of thousands once found all across



The "Irvine" sign at the Wilder Museum



The other "Irvine" sign at the edge of town

the landscape of Pennsylvania just after World War II. Thanks to the efforts of the Keystone Marker Trust, a non-profit dedicated to finding and restoring old markers and installing replicas, the Keystone Markers are taking on renewed visibility. They were named to Preservation Pennsylvania's Most At-Risk List this year.

"The Trust believes that restoring and re-installing Keystone Markers is a great way to demonstrate collective civic pride in places and resources that are unique unto themselves and so uniquely part of Pennsylvania," said Nathaniel

Guest, KMT president.

"We look to partner with local groups and individuals to raise funds to restore and re-install the markers, which become real interest-gathering devices for tourists travelling on Pennsylvania's roads," he said.

If you know of an existing marker, or one lost to time, the Trust wants to hear from you. It maintains a database at www.keystonemarkert.org and is always looking for photos as well as condition and geocode updates. Many of the communities in Warren had these signs, and many are listed in the Trust

database, with current status unknown. Do you know where the signs went? You can find a marker update form at <http://www.keystonemarkert.org/Uploads/KeyStoneUploads/PdfUpload/MarkerPrintForm.pdf>. Here in Warren County, they would have been on the original roads, such as the Irvine marker on Old Route 6. They may have been "saved", or simply lost, or buried, but they are part of local history. If you are interested in helping to restore or re-install a marker, contact the Trust at www.keystonemarkert.org.