

The Beginning of Historical Markers in America

By Fred M. Prouty, Director of Programs
Tennessee Wars Commission

I recently had the pleasure of reading a New York Times Best seller by Nathaniel Philbrick entitled, *Mayflower, A Story of Courage, Community, and War*. Of special significance to me was a portion of the book describing primary journal accounts of those first Pilgrims as they began to populate and develop New England some 390 years ago.

Philbrick writes, “In July of 1624, two of the Mayflower's passengers, Pilgrims Edward Winslow and Stephen Hopkins, (while exploring the mainland) came upon a dozen Native American men, women, and children, who were returning to village after gathering lobsters in Plymouth Harbor – one of countless seasonal rituals that kept the Indians constantly on the move. As they conversed with their new companions, the Englishmen learned that to walk across the land in southern New England was to travel in time. All along this narrow, hard-packed trail were circular foot-deep holes in the ground that had been dug where, as the pilgrims wrote in their journals, “any remarkable act” had occurred. It was each of the Indians responsibility to maintain the holes and to inform fellow travelers of what had once happened at that particular place so that as Winslow wrote, “many things of great antiquity are fresh in memory.” Pilgrim Winslow and Hopkins began to see that they were traversing a mythic land, where a sense of community extended far into the distant past. “So that as a man travelleth...,” Winslow wrote, “his journey will be the less tedious, by reason of the many historical discourses [that] will be related unto him.”

To the Native inhabitants of the region, these memory holes were more important than ever before as they struggled to survive contracted illnesses (disease) transmitted by the colonists and loss of once abundant crops and tribal hunting lands. With so many of their numbers lost, the Indian's connection to the past was hanging by a thread – a connection that the memory holes, and the stories they inspired, helped to maintain.”

Nearly four hundred years later, these stories and quotes from our nation's distant past contain a clear link to our future. They show us the necessity of continuing to construct our twenty-first century “memory holes”, redefined (reconstituted), (reflected)? in our statewide historic marker programs and land acquisitions of significant historic Tennessee sites. And yes, as in 1624, these interpretive signs and trails allow us, “...as a man travelleth”, (to enjoy) “his journey (and) will be less tedious, by reason of the many historical discourses...related unto him.”

Today, members of the Tennessee Historical and Wars Commission strive to preserve, record, obtain and interpret those lands and properties that are of great significance to our state and nation at large. Our job is to preserve the truth in history and this is enhanced through our continued partnership with the Tennessee Department of Tourism, our respected ally in the future of historic preservation.

Reprinted from the Tennessee Wars Commission Report of Activities, October 24, 2014

For more information about the Tennessee Wars Commission contact:

Fred M. Prouty

Director of Programs

Tennessee Wars Commission

Fred.Prouty@tn.gov

615-770-1095

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