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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
http://www.nyfolklore.org

Marking New York Legends

BY DAVID J. PUGLIA

Throughout New York State, you've encountered the ubiquitous royal blue historical markers, wayside signage memorializing significant historical people, places, and events. These public adornments date to 1926 and the sesquicentennial celebration of the American Revolution.

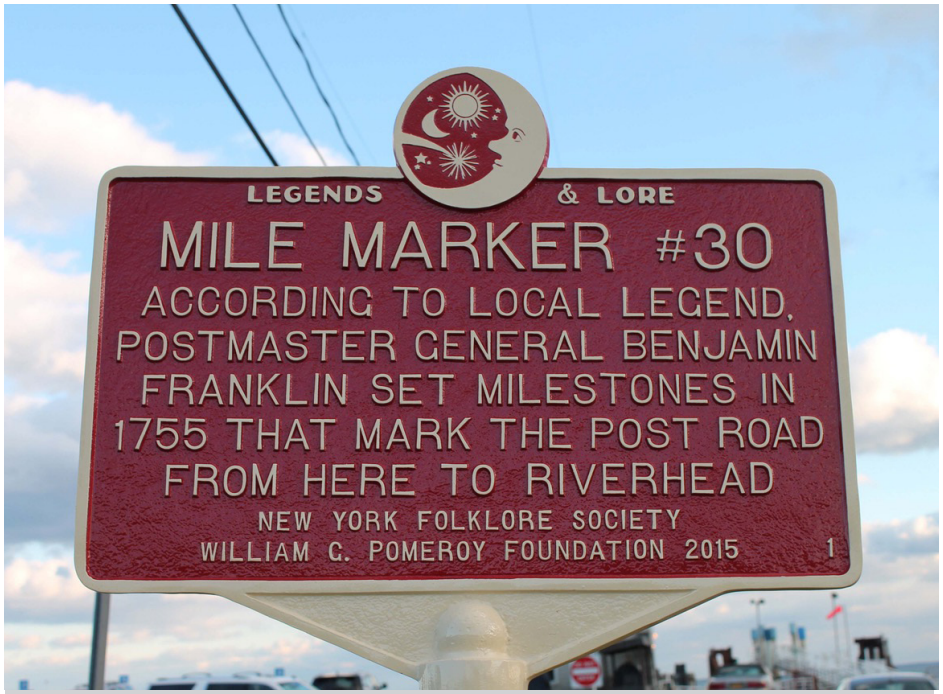
If you are wandering in Strykersville, Johnson City, Staatsburg, or dozens of other New York towns, you may be startled to see newer, ruby red markers. This is not a manufacturing error, but a cause for celebration: red signals the commemoration of local folklore. Over the past seven years, the William G. Pomeroy Foundation's Legends & Lore® program has erected 73 such legend-centric signs across New York State, ranging from well-known community legends, like the Headless Horseman in Sleepy Hollow and Champ the Lake Monster in Plattsburgh, to local oral traditions, like a cannon heist in Wilmington or a bear brawl in Queens.

Once the responsibility of the New York Education Department and the State History Office, the Pomeroy Foundation now funds the vast majority of all new historical and cultural markers in New York State. Who are these noble philanthropists honoring local lore? Located in Syracuse, the Foundation began after founder and trustee Bill Pomeroy's battle with leukemia. A successful match with a donor allowed for a stem cell transplant that saved his life, and he promised to help others do the same. The Pomeroy Foundation's first initiative was to diversify the bone marrow donor registry to facilitate donor matches. From there, the Foundation expanded into cultural matters, with a second mission to aid communities in celebrating and preserving their history by funding historical and cultural markers.

Since 2006, through six signature marker grant programs and others funded through partnerships, the Pomeroy Foundation has sponsored over 1,700 markers in 46 states and the District of Columbia. "Communities want the opportunity to recognize the history and heritage important to them," says Deryn Pomeroy, Trustee and Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Pomeroy Foundation. "Through the Foundation's mission, we are proud to support communities across the country achieve that goal by awarding grants for roadside markers and plaques. The impact is clear, and we deeply believe in the benefits of markers, including that they educate the public, encourage pride of place, promote tourism, and generate economic benefits" (Personal communication, Deryn Pomeroy, April 25, 2022).

Top: The "Beef on Weck" marker in West Seneca. *All photos courtesy of the William G. Pomeroy Foundation.*

Bottom: The "Michigan Hot Dog" marker in Plattsburgh.



The "Mile Marker #30" marker in Cutchogue.

The Pomeroy Foundation supports commemorative signage not just in its native New York, but across the country, and not just for history and folklore, but for foodways, women's suffrage, early transportation canals, and a host of other topics. In the Hungry for History™ program in New York, for instance, the Pomeroy Foundation has erected markers for beef on weck sandwiches in Buffalo, Michigan hot dogs in Plattsburgh, and chocolate jumble cookies in Esperance. In the Legends & Lore program, the first sign was planted in 2015, for the legend claiming Benjamin Franklin installed mile markers along the old post road in Southold. In partnership with New York Folklore, recent honorees include the "Lewis Giant" in Lewis, "Franklin Spring" in Ballston Spa, "New Hope Named" in Moravia, "Fiddler's Ghost" in Staatsburg, "Kau-Qua-Tau" in Cowlesville, and "Stryker Willow" in Strykersville. Sampled below are abbreviated legend narratives from the most recent round of markers. For the unabridged versions of these and many other New York legends, visit the Pomeroy Foundation's markers map on its website (*https://www.wgpfoundation.org/history/map*).

The Lewis Giant at 8583 U.S. 9, Lewis, New York

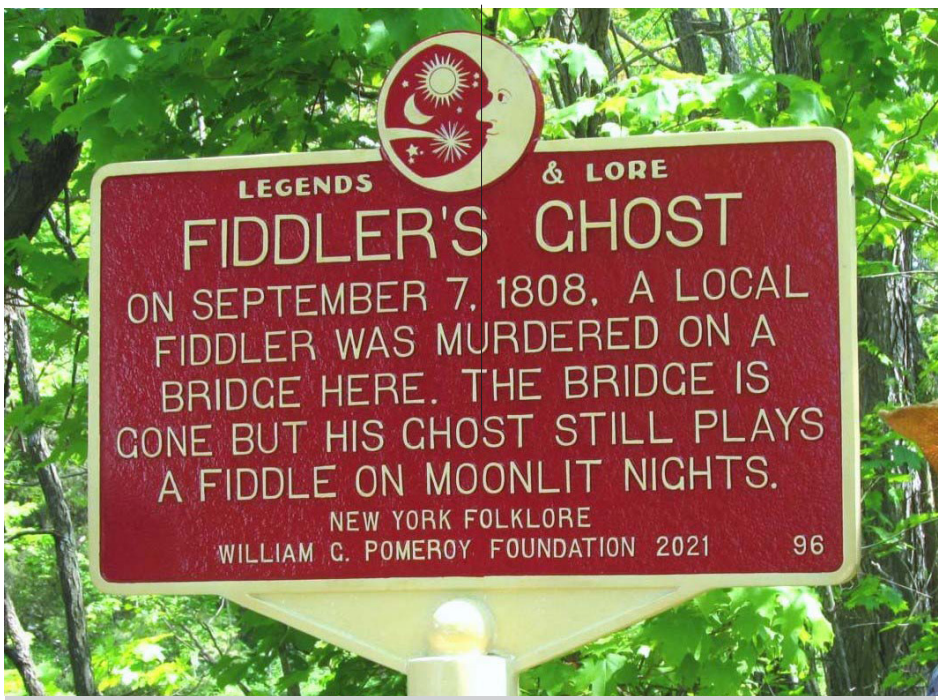
Joe Call was a 19th-century strongman and wrestler from New York's Champlain Valley. He came from a long lineage of large and powerful men with exceptional physical gifts. He stood 6 feet 3 inches tall, thickly muscled and broad shouldered with the purported strength of three men. Call is often referred to as the Lewis Giant, but he also earned the more whimsical nicknames of the Modern Hercules and the Paul Bunyan of the East. Unlike Paul Bunyan, Joe Call was very much a real person; but much like Paul Bunyan, a folk tradition grew around his legendary feats of spectacular strength. One tall tale tells of a foreign champion wrestler who made the long trip to New York specifically to wrestle Call. When the stranger found a formidable

The "Lewis Giant" marker in Lewis.

man plowing his fields, he asked to be pointed in the direction of the Lewis Giant's residence. Call lifted the plow with one hand, or in some versions the ox itself, and pointed it at the nearest farmhouse. The challenger sized up the man in the field, made an educated guess as to his identity, and promptly departed.

Franklin Spring at 190 Malta Ave, Ballston Spa, New York

Benjamin Franklin had a reputation as a convivial carouser who devoted himself to improving the nation, but did his gregariousness and patriotism extend itself to attending spiritual seances in the afterlife as a benign spirit directing mineral spring exploration? The wealthy Ballston Spa resident Samuel Hides dabbled in Spiritualism, a system of belief centered on communication with spirits of the dead through a medium and a popular movement in Central New York at the time. During a seance, the supposed spirit of Benjamin Franklin revealed himself, divulging a hidden mineral spring 715 feet beneath Hides' property, one with great medicinal value that could provide healing waters for the entire nation to enjoy. Franklin directed Hides to dig at a particular spot on his property, and when Hides hit that exact depth, a hundred-foot geyser burst from the earth. Hides constructed a cobblestone shelter and bottling house to aid in national distribution. The spring proved valuable and, as Franklin had foretold, provided coveted mineral waters shipped by request all over the United States. To acknowledge his otherworldly tipster, Hides named his discovery the Hides–Franklin Spring.



The "Fiddler's Ghost" marker in Staatsburg.

The "New Hope Named" marker in Moravia.

New Hope Named at 3716 NY-41A, Moravia, New York

Sodom, often paired with Gomorrah, was the ancient Biblical town destroyed by fire from heaven as punishment for its inhabitants' wickedness and depravity. It was also the unfortunate name of a small, struggling 19th-century hamlet located in Cayuga County. In 1823, Charles Kellogg built a gristmill in Sodom. This water-powered mill turned out fine flour that fed Central New Yorkers for generations, and locals remain loyal to the New Hope Mill's popular pancake mix. The improved fortunes that the mill brought the town also inspired a place-name legend that lives on. The year the mill was built, a thankful Sodomite climbed to the top of the mill, precariously balancing a jug of whiskey on his ascent. While some of the jug's contents was imbibed before the climb, enough remained when he summited for the man to douse the mill in a pseudo-christening ceremony. He proclaimed that the mill had saved the town, which was born again and should be renamed accordingly. From that moment on, the wretched Town of Sodom became the cheerful Town of New Hope.

Fiddler's Ghost at 469 Fiddlers Bridge Rd, Staatsburg, New York

Though the bridge is now gone, the Hudson Valley's Fiddler's Bridge ghost remains, sawing away for evening visitors. In 1808, an old fiddler who played at local hootenannies was murdered while walking home from a dance. His body was abandoned on the bridge, and ever since that fateful night, according to tradition, his ghost can be heard playing the fiddle on moonlit eves. Even a hundred years later, visitors to Clinton, often traveling up from New York City, would hear renditions of the legend of the musical ghost of Fiddler's Bridge. A local, Chris Carpenter, who also happened to be Clinton's town supervisor, was tired of visitors telling him the story was preposterous. One night, Carpenter crowded disbelievers into his hay wagon and shot off for the haunted site. As the wagon barreled toward the bridge, Carpenter's flabbergasted passengers heard the wails of a great fiddler at work. Even after the bridge was torn down, the town chose to name the thoroughfare Fiddler's Bridge Road in honor of the old fiddling ghost.

Kau-Qua-Tau at 979 Folsomdale Rd, Cowlesville, New York

The Ebenezer Cemetery in West Seneca is the site of a supernatural legend, one based in verified historical murders, trials, executions, and burials. In 1821, on the Buffalo Creek Reservation, a Seneca man fell ill and died. The medicine men considered the death suspicious and concluded it was an act of witchcraft. The prime suspect was the deceased's nurse, Kau-Qua-Tau. Sentenced to death, Kau-Qua-Tau fled to Canada, only to be lured back to Seneca territory, where she was executed and buried beneath her own cabin. Decades later, the Ebenezer Society purchased the land and redistributed the Seneca's abandoned cabins to its parishioners. The new residents who had the misfortune of receiving Kau-Qua-Tau's cabin complained of sleepless nights, strange sounds, and evil visions creeping up from the floorboards. The society's spiritual leader, Christian Mentz, attempted to quash the rumors by spending a restful night in the cabin. Early the next morning, Mentz ordered the cabin burned to the ground, confessing that the ghost of Kau-Qua-Tau, bound in chains and dripping blood, had revealed herself to him. The cabin was razed, and legend says that, to this day, no second person has ever been buried on that spot in Ebenezer Cemetery.

The "Kau-Qua-Tau" marker in Cowlesville.

Stryker Willow at 3815 Main St, Strykersville, New York

In 1810, Garrett Stryker purchased the untamed land that would become Strykersville. He packed up his wife and children for the move, piled all their worldly possessions into a wagon, and trudged the couple hundred miles to his newly acquired acreage. His wife, Saloma Stryker, led the oxen-pulled wagon the entire journey, guiding the team with her willow riding crop. When the footsore family arrived at their new home and hunkered down for the night, Saloma planted her willow riding crop in the dirt. Whether she was discarding it from exhaustion, pulling herself back to her feet, or staking her family's claim, no one knows for sure. However, it happened, the willow riding crop took root, and as Strykersville grew, so, too, did a majestic willow, standing tall and proud in the middle of Strykersville. According to locals, it was the first tree to bud in spring and the last tree to shed its leaves in the fall. But as all things must pass, the once mighty tree gnarled, wilted, and died. To this day, however, there are reports of a willow continuously sprouting in that same spot, no matter how many times it's ripped up.

Curious New Yorkers can explore the Pomeroy Foundation's interactive online markers map, which inventories every marker and plaque that they have funded across the United States—a potent resource for history buffs, culture lovers, and modern-day legend trippers alike. The

The "Stryker Willow" marker in Strykersville.

Voices readership can filter by programs to look only at Legends & Lore and only in the Empire State. Each legend includes an exact address, a pinned Google map, latitude and longitude coordinates, a legend narrative (including the extended versions of those recounted above), and the original marker inscription. The marker inscriptions are an art form in and of themselves, where unwieldy legends must be boiled down to their five-line essence, a sort of folklorist's haiku.

If you're reading this article or perusing the marker map and thinking, "Hey, why haven't those Pomeroy folks erected a marker in my town yet? There's a yarn that's been spun around here for decades!" then, you're in luck. The Legends & Lore program accepts applications twice per year. "The Pomeroy Foundation is committed to helping recognize special shared stories from across New York State with Legends & Lore roadside markers," says Deryn Pomeroy. "We offer two Legends & Lore grant rounds each year and welcome prospective applicants to share their ideas and ask questions about the program any time." Although the program's title emphasizes legends, the Pomeroy Foundation is willing to consider all folklore genres, including tall tales, myths, superstitions, place-name anecdotes, calendar customs, folk music, traditional medicine, and any other community tradition passed on person to person, generation to generation by word of mouth or imitation. The Pomeroy Foundation supports the entire cost of casting the marker, the pole, and the shipping, with no matching funds required. The grantee's only responsibility is for installation and maintenance, and public works, highway departments, and civic organizations are often willing to assist with those tasks.

To vet applications, the Pomeroy Foundation works closely with professional folklorists in each partner state through public folklore centers, nonprofits, and arts councils. Legends & Lore grants are available to 501(c)(3) organizations; nonprofit academic institutions; and local, state, and federal government entities within the United States. Interested New Yorkers should contact an eligible local organization to discuss applying for a marker grant on their behalf. To apply, organizations will need a contact person who will lead the effort, the GPS coordinates of the proposed installation location, a brief description of the folklore being commemorated, supporting documents, an argument for why the address is the appropriate site for signage, a first crack at a marker inscription, and a letter from the landowner granting permission to install a sign. Professional folklore consultants will be assigned to review the application, follow up with questions or concerns, assist in improving the application for clarity and storytelling, and if accepted, refine the inscription and write a full legend narrative for the marker map before final approval, casting, shipping, and installation.

"Once the marker is installed, it's time to celebrate," says Deryn Pomeroy. "The applicant will often organize a marker dedication that brings people together and highlights the legend or folklore being commemorated. This is an opportunity for community engagement, generating public awareness, and showcasing your community's story."

The Legends & Lore program offers ordinary New Yorkers the opportunity to stake a claim to the stories and customs that matter most to their communities, honoring ephemeral and intangible traditions with permanent cast aluminum markers.

David J. Puglia, PhD, is Associate Professor and Deputy Chairperson in the English Department at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York, where he teaches courses in folklore. He is the author or editor of four books on folklore and legend, including the Brian McConnell Award-winning *North American Monsters: A Contemporary Legend Casebook*. Photo courtesy of the author.

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