

Commemorating the past

The William G. Pomeroy Foundation's Deryn Pomeroy talks historical markers

[Editor's note: *The Illinois State Historical Society is the proud recipient of a three-year, matching grant from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation® (Syracuse, New York) to place 25 new historical markers around the state that focus on marginalized or neglected narratives in Illinois history. Deryn Pomeroy, Trustee and Director of Strategic Initiatives of the foundation, agreed to answer these questions we posed to her.]*



Pompey, New York, near where we live in Syracuse. It commemorates a hoax from the 1800s where it was once believed that this small boulder found by a farmer in his field was engraved by Spanish explorers in the 1500s. It was later revealed a prank, however, the story lives on as local lore. It is a pretty rural area and the marker itself was installed on the side of the farm pasture where the stone was found. Despite being miles from the nearest highway, I couldn't believe how many people turned up to show their support for this marker. It really speaks to the importance these local stories have in their communities.

Illinois Heritage (IH): You inherited your father's love of history. What, exactly, did William G. Pomeroy instill in your psyche to make you value history and honor his name with historical markers around the country?

Deryn Pomeroy (DP): Ever since I was a little girl, Dad impressed upon me the importance of understanding our roots, where we came from, both personally and as a society. Dad is a very curious person and he nurtured this quality in me. Every birthday and Christmas, he would gift me books, many with a historical theme of some sort – Latin American history, New York State history, the Revolution, etc. Inside the cover of each book he would write a special message about what I was about to discover between those pages. I love to read and ate it up. Additionally, when we were riding in the car together, it was a game to see who could first spot a historic marker. We would pull over and take a closer look, just like he used to do with his father. Historic markers have always been part of our family culture.

IH: What was your first new historical marker as an adult, and what did you learn from it?

DP: The first marker dedication I attended with Dad was for a Legends & Lore marker titled Pompey Stone, in

DP: Since 2006, we have funded nearly 2,000 markers in 46 states and the District of Columbia. We plan to celebrate our 2,000th marker very soon! To view and learn more about the markers we've funded to date, visit our digital, interactive marker map on the Foundation's website at www.wgpfoundation.org

IH: Any Pomeroy historical markers overseas?

DP: Not yet, but never say never. Our Pomeroy ancestry is traced back to England. In South Devon lies the ruins of Berry Pomeroy Castle, which is now a popular tourist attraction. Some say it is one of the most haunted castles in Britain. It seems only fitting that the castle should have a Pomeroy marker to help tell this tale.

IH: Does there seem to be a new narrative in the historical markers the Foundation is sponsoring?

DP: More and more, our marker programs use the power of place to



Deryn Pomeroy (far right) in Rochester, New York, at the unveiling of a historic marker for a home once owned by Frederick Douglass. The present owner, Sherri Dukes, is to the left of the marker.



Deryn Pomeroy at the unveiling of a marker on Goat Island (at Niagara Falls) with Denise Doring VanBuren, the former President General of the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution; Pomeroy Foundation Trustee Paula Miller; Lafayette Trail President Julien Icher; New York State Regent for the NSDAR Patricia Powley Birner; and Mark Mistretta, Western District Director for the New York State Parks.

illuminate history that is frequently underrepresented or not widely known but a vital part of our country's heritage. Programs such as the National Votes for Women Trail or the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail are a productive way to give a fuller view of past events and continue important conversations regarding diversity and inclusion.

IH: The Pomeroy Foundation has a food history marker program. How did that come about and what historic food markers have you put up?

DP: Foundation staff just happened to be talking, quite passionately, about local Syracuse area cuisine and their favorite dishes one day. Syracuse has a rich immigrant community, with many Italians and Irish who settled in the area to work in the salt flats and along the Erie Canal. Lucky for us, they brought their ingenuity and their cookbooks with them. We take a lot of pride in our local dishes, such as Salt Potatoes, Utica Greens, and Chicken Riggies. Out-of-town visitors are quickly directed to restaurants where they can find these tasty meals. The "Hungry for History" marker program allows communities all over the coun-

try to showcase their unique prepared dishes. It was just launched last year and, so far, we have granted ten markers: Barbequed Chicken (Cornell-style), Beef on Weck, Buckwheat Cakes, Chicken Bog, Chicken Brissil, Chocolate Jumbles, Michigan Hot Dog, Potlikker, Sonker, and Salt Potatoes. We will offer two grant rounds in 2023 for those interested in applying.

IH: Do you ever get to attend historical marker unveilings? If so, what is your most memorable?

DP: I do when there are dedications nearby. I just attended a dedication for a National Register marker at the Oneida Community Mansion House in Oneida, New York. Many of our markers are installed outside of New York State and we typically aren't able to attend. All of the ones I've attended are memorable, however one that really sticks out for me is for the very first marker in the National Votes for Women Trail. Installed in front of the Women's Club of Louisville, in Kentucky, it commemorates women's rights leader Susan Look Avery. It was marvelous to see this marker trail take

shape after countless hours spent by so many involved with this national project. Additionally, the members of the Women's Club of Louisville know how to host a party to celebrate a marker dedication. Now I understand the true meaning of Southern hospitality!

IH: Any historical marker topics you would like to see explored?

DP: Our Legends & Lore marker program has been very popular since it launched in 2015. Approved markers include Champy, the lake monster, in Plattsburgh, New York; Black folk hero John Henry "the steel-driving man" in Talcott, West Virginia; and a venue in Potlatch, Idaho, that Johnny Cash reportedly said was the "toughest town he ever played." We've awarded over 140 markers in thirteen states and we'd love to add Illinois to the list. However, before we can accept applications in your state, we need to partner with a folklore-related organization who will help us review and vet applications for accuracy.

IH: What history book(s) are you reading today?

DP: I wish I had more time to read these days. I just started Cokie Roberts' book, *Founding Mothers*, which I've heard rave reviews about. As a child in the '80s, my family moved to Mexico City for a short time and I was in awe of the archaeological sites we visited there. If it's a book about Mesoamerican history, then it's for me!

IH: The ISHS and the Pomeroy Foundation are collaborating on 25 new historical markers in Illinois. What is your hope for these new markers?

DP: My hope is that these markers will spark an interest and curiosity for the subject matter in all who stop to read them. Maybe they will inspire someone to pursue additional research on these topics at home. I also hope these new markers will help educate both residents and visitors in the communities where they are placed who may not already be aware of this history. 