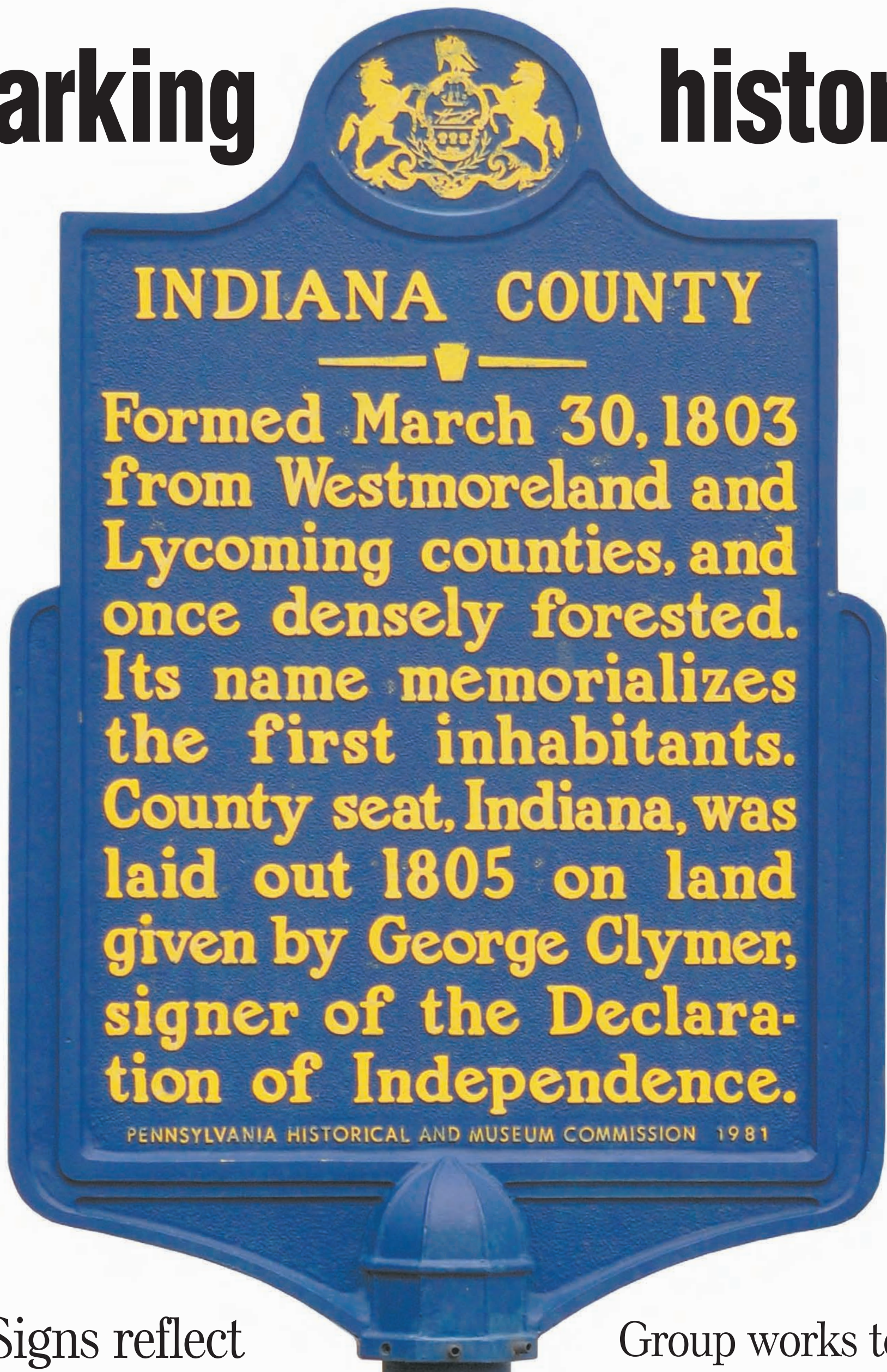


Marking history



Signs reflect county's history

By JASON L. LEVAN
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There is a history lesson awaiting in your own backyard.

Take a drive around Indiana County, and you'll find more than a dozen historical markers — some decades old, some that were dedicated just a couple of years ago. But they all denote a person or place central to the history of the county.

It's a nice way to commemorate the area's history, says Colleen Chambers, executive director of the Indiana County Historical and Genealogical Society, but it's a practice that won't continue without community support.

Traditionally, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission has provided matching grants to pay for the markers' manufacturing. But two years ago, the state decided not to fund the marker dedication program, leaving it up to local historical societies — many of which are also cash-strapped

— and interested individuals to handle.

"The financial cut is what really upset me," Chambers said.

One county marker is missing: the one dedicated in 1951 that pays homage to John B. McCormick, who designed the first modern wind turbine.

It is believed to be in private hands, Chambers said. The historical society would love to see it resurrected but that, too, will take community involvement.

"It will have to be a grassroots effort," Chambers said.

Markers cost about \$2,000 to make, she said, and the society does not have money available for that purpose.

The commission requires specific steps during the dedication process.

Detailed documentation is required to verify the historical accuracy of the subject.

A nonprofit organization or individual must sponsor the effort.

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Group works to save town name signs

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It's not just historic places and people that have their own signs.

Town-name signs dot the landscape as well. But they are slowly disappearing.

The majority of them were erected in Pennsylvania by the Department of Highways in the 1920s and 1930s.

But in the intervening decades, many have fallen down or have been stolen, often for the purpose of melting down the cast iron.

But a statewide group established last year called the Keystone Marker Trust has dedicated itself to preserving these two-sided signs. The organization says it has found at least one marker in 60 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

"We are volunteers with not a penny to our name but a lot of interest," said Jack Graham, a volunteer with the Keystone Marker Trust.

The group has documented photographically about 700 markers, some of which are visible at its website, www.keystonemarkertrust.org.

"Any that are out there are truly senior citizens and deserve some tender loving care," said Graham, of Elliottsburg, Perry County.

According to the group, town signs in the following Indiana County towns are either still pres-

ent or were at one time: Arcadia, Blairsville, Clarksburg, Commodore, Cramer, Creekside, Dixonville, Elders Ridge, Ernest, Glen Campbell, Heilwood, Hillsdale, Homer City, Hooverhurst, Indiana, Jacksonville, Locust, Mechanicsburg, Pine Flats, Plumville, Rossiter, Starford, Trade City and Waterman.

"One of our hardest tasks is to determine which of the markers we know once existed are actually still there. Often a town only has one left when they originally had two or more. Another situation we find is that they are still 'around,' but sitting in someone's garage or basement, or the town maintenance shed," said Graham.

The organization encourages people to adopt a marker and repair them as necessary, and to keep them painted as a matter of celebrating Pennsylvania's people and places.

"We encourage people to paint them blue and gold, but we're just happy if people preserve them. Take a little pride," Graham said.

Ultimately, the group works with foundries to produce accurate replicas and posts, as funding becomes available.

Nathaniel Guest, another volunteer, said the state Department of Transportation does not have the money to fund such an effort and has asked the Keystone group to take on the initiative.

THIS MARKER can be found at Ninth and Philadelphia streets in Indiana.

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■ Take a closer look at the county's 16 historical markers.