

# A Note from the Editor: Historical Markers of Massachusetts

By Lynn Betlock

The Spring 2011 issue of *American Ancestors* included an article by Walter W. Woodward, Connecticut state historian and associate professor of history at the University of Connecticut, entitled, “John Winthrop, Jr. and the Alchemy of Colonial Settlement.” The [article](#), based on his 2010 book, *Prospero’s America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606–1676*, began with a description of how Woodward found his topic: “Years ago, as a beginning graduate student, I took a wrong turn while trying to find the living history museum at Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts. I soon was hopelessly lost, and ended up parking on a winding, climbing road by a rusty old historical marker, south (I later found out) of my destination. The marker, barely readable, told me I was at the site where John Winthrop, Jr. had started a “black lead” mine in 1644. 1644? Mining? In the middle of the wilderness?” Woodward went on to spend years of research answering the questions posed by that historical marker.

In my role as editor of *American Ancestors*, I was responsible for illustrating the article, and I was determined to find an image of the sign. I had been vaguely aware of uniform historical markers throughout Massachusetts but I hadn’t known much about their creation. As I researched the topic, I became more and more interested. In the NEHGS library, I discovered the best possible source, [Historical Markers Erected by Massachusetts Bay Colony Tercentenary Commission, 1630–1930](#). The book reproduced the text of all the markers, and the resolution of 1930 that led to the markers’ creation: “The department of public works is hereby authorized to prepare and erect suitable signs and markers, including such as may be submitted by the Massachusetts Bay Colony Tercentenary Commission, with suitable inscriptions thereon, indicating the ancient ways of the Puritan times and the structures or places relating to or associated with the early settlements within the commonwealth.”

I found that nearly three hundred cast iron markers had been installed within the territory of the original Massachusetts Bay Colony, to commemorate pre-1750 events and structures. The text was the same on both sides of the tablet “in order that a passer-by from either direction may read the inscription without descending from his car.”

The text of the Sturbridge marker read: “Tantiusques. The graphite or blacklead deposit near by was valued by the Indians for face paint, and by the white men for pencils and other uses. John Winthrop, Jr., was ‘granted the hill at Tantousq’ in 1644, and began to exploit the mine in 1658.” Although there was no photograph of this marker in the book, I eventually found an image of it on an area blog, and the site administrator allowed me to reproduce it.

Even though I’d found what I needed in the book, I found it hard to put it back on the shelf. I kept perusing the volume for interesting tidbits and comparing my knowledge of an area with the historical marker text. I began to pay more attention to the historical marker signs when I was out and about, and I am now always happy to notice a new one.

Reading the *Boston Globe* Ideas section this past Sunday, I saw an eye-catching article by Chris Marshall, “ [History, Preserved in Sturdy Aluminum](#),\*” featuring six photos of markers, including, to my surprise, the Tantiusques one. Marshall wrote about the markers as “a standing museum of how the state saw its own past in the 1930s.” The man most responsible for the markers, colonial historian Samuel Eliot Morison, sought to humanize the Puritans and offer a richer portrayal of their lives and times. The markers “downplay the Puritans’ religion, and instead put forward a broad-shouldered portrait of the settlers as literate community builders, industrialists, and pathmakers.”

Marshall also wrote about Robert Briere, who first saw the Tantiusques marker as a Sturbridge teenager in the 1940s — and noticed when it disappeared in the late 1980s. After retirement, Robert Brierly and his wife traveled the state, using a copy of Historical Markers to help them determine how many markers remained (about 144), and which were damaged. (The Tantiusques marker was eventually found nearby, cleaned, and restored to its original position.) Brierly hopes a bill, filed to get the Massachusetts Department of Transportation to allocate money to restore existing markers and replace missing ones, will be successful.

I’m pleased to know that I’m not the only one who has discovered historical markers are worth a second look.

For more information:

[The Historical Marker Database](#)

[Wikipedia entry on historical markers](#)

(A listing at the end includes many state historical marker websites.)

[Waymarking.com](#) contains a subcategory on historical markers

[View a compiled list of roadside markers](#), prepared by Russell C. Bixby.

\*After I wrote this article, I realized that the *Boston Globe* has just begun charging for access to some of its online newspaper content. The article I quote requires you to be a *Globe* print or online subscriber (currently ninety-nine cents for four weeks) to access the article. In the future, I will make every attempt to reference articles that do not require a fee.