

# How to Get a State Historical Marker

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## How-To Guides

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This guide provides information on how to plan, apply for, and install a SC State Historical Marker. This includes tips and advice on things to consider before you decide on a marker, how to properly prepare for the application process, how to ensure your marker accurately represents your story, and advice on the installation process.

## What is a State Historical Marker?

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A historical marker is a large sign on a post placed at a historical site that gives a short description of the historical significance of that place. A state historical marker is one that is acquired through the state's official historical marker program, and is designed and written in a style that is consistent with the other state markers. Other types of historical markers do exist – some cities or counties have their own historical marker programs with their own unique designs – or sometimes non profits like the Equal Justice Initiative sponsor markers as well.

State markers are the black trimmed, white background, black text markers you have likely seen across the state. You will find them all across the state at historic sites such as historic schools, churches, libraries, community centers, places of business, and homes of key historical figures. You will also see them at cemeteries, documenting a historic district (such as a historic Black Wall Street), or at sites to document a particular important event that occurred there (such as a civil rights action, lynching or act of violence, historic court battle, etc).

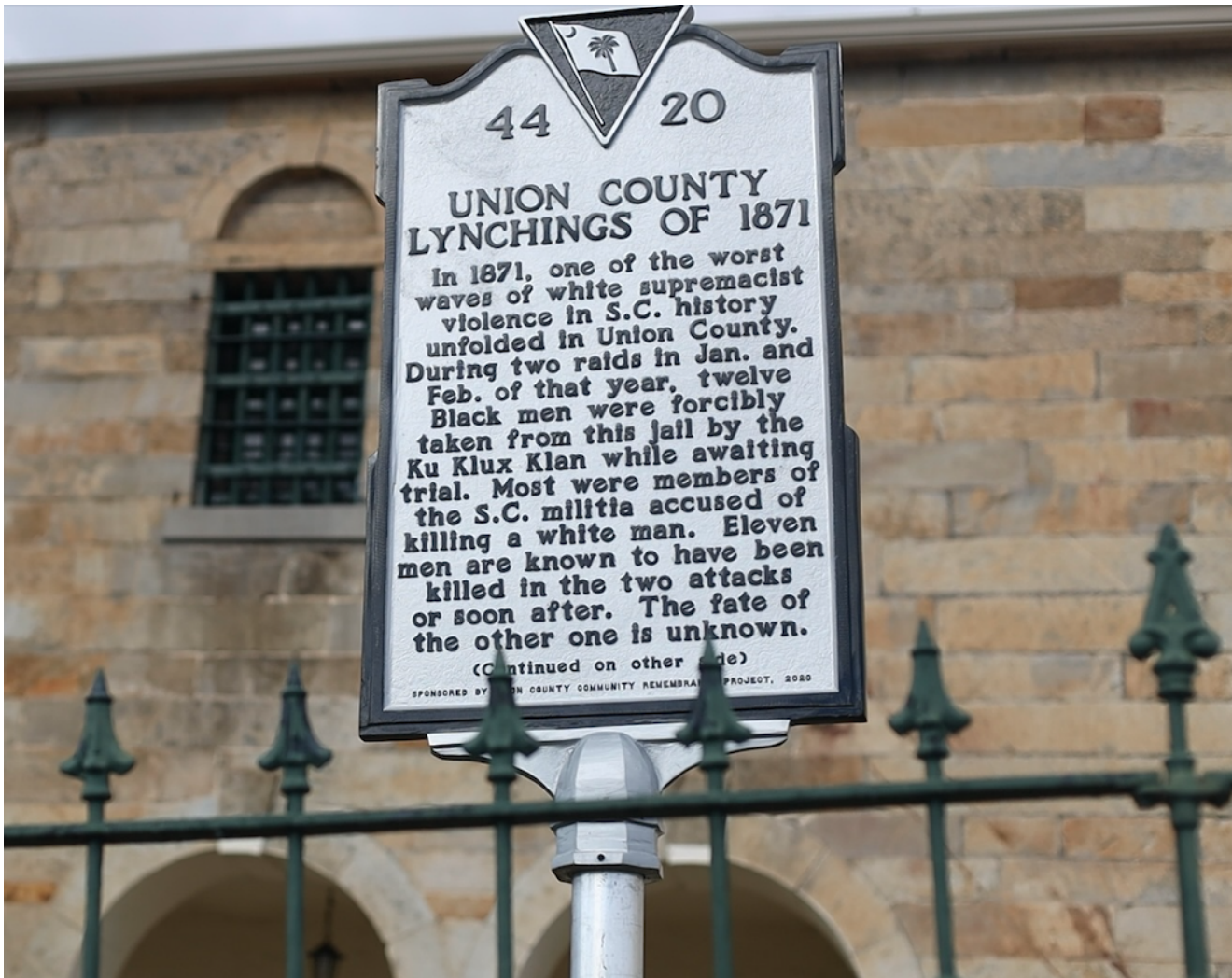
South Carolina Department of Archives and History (SCDAH) manages the State Historical Marker Program. They will work with you to write the marker text. But be aware that the State historical marker program does not fund or provide any resources for their historical markers – you will have to pay for or find funding for the historical marker yourself. It is also important to note that you will have to arrange for delivery and installation of the marker yourself.

### ***What is the purpose of a historical marker?***

Historical markers help signify to the public the importance of a historical site. They are a form of commemoration and public memory making. You might be interested in getting a marker to commemorate a historical site or event that means something significant to your community.







## Things to consider before you start

***Is a historical marker the best medium for the story you want to tell about this place/space?***

1. Historical markers help signify to the public the importance of a historical site. However, they can only convey a limited amount of information. They are an extremely short snippet of a historical event or place. They are meant to commemorate a place of importance and ignite interest in the history of that place, not to tell the full story.
2. If you are looking for a way to mark, draw public attention, or commemorate a historical site/event, then a historical marker might be a good option to explore. Markers exist to say: this important thing happened here at this time (or, this place was important at this time).
3. If you are looking to tell a more in-depth story of a place or people, tie your story to current events, feature the voices of community members, Or provide a historical narrative or details, then a historical marker is just one piece of what you should consider in addition to something else, or may not be the best option for your goals.

- ***Why is a historical marker important to you/your community?***
  1. Think through your motivations for pursuing a historical marker. Why is it important? What does it mean to you? What are your goals for the marker? Is it a means to an end or an end in itself (is it part of a larger project?)
  2. Many communities or organizations see a historical marker as an important part of a larger commemorative or preservation project. For example, many groups have put up markers as the first step in getting wider recognition and support for preserving a space such as a Rosenwald school. Others establish markers as a first step before working on the multi-year process of getting their site listed on the National Register. Discuss if this marker will be part of a larger vision around a site, or if the marker itself is the goal.
  3. Outline your goals as a team/community and have a discussion around what is important to you – what is the one key concept you wish to convey with this marker? Keeping in mind that markers have a very small and strict word limit, getting everyone aligned on what is most crucial to convey and how you want to say it will help later on during the process.
  
- ***Where will it go?***
  1. You don't need to decide exact specifics right now, but begin to think through where you want the marker to go. It needs to be publicly viewable and accessible, while still being as close to the historic site as possible.
  
- ***What is eligible?***
  1. The historical building/event the marker is commemorating has to be at least 50 years old. It can't document any person who is still living or modern events.
  2. Markers can commemorate a cemetery, but only as an entire entity, not individual graves.
  3. There is no requirement that historic buildings have to retain their historic character/appearance, no requirement to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the marker can commemorate a place/event that is significant locally, statewide, or nationally.
  4. Markers cannot be submitted by an individual, they must be submitted by a group or an organization. If an individual wants to submit a marker, they need to find an organization to sponsor it.

## ***Starting the application process***

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### ***What you need to gather***

1. Deciding where to place a marker – The two key considerations in placing a historical marker are 1) is it publically viewable and easy to approach to read? 2) is it close in proximity to the historical site/site of significance? It's not always possible to have the marker close to the historical site, but think through a spot that makes it clear and easy to understand where you're referring to. The best markers are those that draw people's attention to find out more about the place or site they are connected to.
  2. Marker location information – is the property privately owned? Is it owned by a collective group, like an alumni association or a religious organization? Is it government land? Is it in the Department of Transportation right of way? Finding this out now will help you during the application process.
  3. Permissions – permission from property owners to apply for the marker, possibly permission from any living family members/descendants to feature their ancestors, etc. Permission from the property owner is not technically required to apply for a marker, but you will want to begin these conversations early before formally applying.
  4. Research materials – begin collecting research on the history of the site/event, which might include archival documents, other primary source documents, photographs, books and secondary sources, oral histories etc.
- **Carefully read** through the [South Carolina Historical Marker Program Overview and Criteria packet](#) and the marker application at the end of it. Make sure you're familiar with the requirements and get your questions answered.
  - **Suggestions on developing a strong mission**
    1. A marker tells a specific story or commemorates a moment in time. Think back to your initial conversations as a group – what is that one key concept you want this marker to convey? This can become your “mission.”
    2. A strong mission and a cohesive vision is important because it will allow your community to advocate for a marker that best reflects why this place/site/event is significant to you. If you lack a cohesive mission and direction, it will be harder to work with SCDAH to get to a final marker text that both parties feel good about. It will help the process go much more smoothly if you can approach SCDAH already with a direction in mind.
    3. Work on answering the following questions:
      - What will this marker commemorate?
      - What is most important to convey in the text? (Markers have very limited words – outline in bullet points with simple language key things you want the text to say.)
      - Why is it significant to your community? (Be able to convey in clear and direct language why the place/site/event holds significance to you... “This place is important because...”)
  - **Research you need to do**

1. Part of the marker application process is providing research materials along with the application. This could be primary sources (original historical materials, often from archives) or secondary sources (reflections on the past by modern people, like books). SCDAH will want to see that you've collected primary sources and they request that you send copies of primary sources with the application.
2. Primary sources: look at local library history rooms, county archives, look online at state archives like SCDAH records, search newspapers online at Historical Newspapers of SC or newspapers.com.
  - Documents – deeds, bills of sale, church bulletins, school newsletters, etc.
  - Newspaper articles
  - Photographs – eg: school insurance photographs, historic building photographs, photographs of civil rights actions etc.
  - Oral histories – talk to alumni or former members, look if there are any recorded interviews with people who mention the place/site/event in archives.
- Secondary sources:
  - Books
  - Articles
  - Websites
  - Digital exhibits or physical exhibits
  - Documentaries/film
  - Programs that have taken place
- ***Get in touch with the South Carolina Historical Marker Program Coordinator before submitting the formal application***
  1. Introduce your sponsoring organization, your idea for a marker, and the location where you want it to go. Ensure the location and other details are eligible before you submit the application. Ask any questions you may have, and ask about submitting any relevant research documentation if you have questions.

## ***Application process with SCDAH***

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***What you need to know about application process with SCDAH (South Carolina Dept of Archives and History, which administers the South Carolina Historical Marker Program)***

1. Make sure to include all parts of the application, not just the application form. Make sure your organization/community feels confident and clear about the questions in 2c above and has gathered all the research materials.

2. SCDAH, usually the Marker Coordinator, will review the application and typically write the first draft of the marker text, and then send it to you for edits and approval. You may go through several revisions. Once the marker text is revised, the final text will be sent to the SCDAH Director for approval. You will then receive a formal acceptance letter.
3. Once final approval has been signed, SCDAH will send you information about how to order the marker through the production company they use, Sewah Studios. You'll need to know some additional details, like if you want a breakaway post system or regular system (more on that below in step 4.) You will work with Sewah directly and directly send them a check for the marker. Prices for the markers are listed on the application form, ranging \$2,500-3,000.
4. You will be responsible for coordinating with Sewah for delivery of the marker. After it is delivered, the installation is entirely up to you to coordinate. Make sure you have a team lined up to help you and that you have coordinated who is going to do the physical installation beforehand.

- ***Parts of the application***

1. Application form

- You'll need to include a proposed marker title, an address or map of the location of the marker, and the official sponsoring organization name you want to go on the marker.
- You can choose between a "city marker" (smaller, 24 x 36", for sites in incorporated towns or cities) or a "country marker" (larger, 42 x 32", for all other sites).
- Markers are dual sided. You will need to decide whether you want different text or the same text on each side.

- History Summary Narrative

- This is not a draft of the marker text itself, but a summary of the history of the site/place/event. It should be a 1-2 paragraph narrative that describes key historical details and events, as well as the significance of this place to your community.
- Key things to include:

1. Important events such as: founding, initial construction, or opening; closing or demolition; notable events that occurred there (eg: a civil rights protest, etc.);
2. How the site was used over time and any important changes – for eg: was it once a Rosenwald school that was used as a community center during the civil rights movement?
3. People associated with the site – founders, leaders, significant figures, important community leaders or organizations
4. Key dates
5. The significance of the site – what does this place mean to your community? Why is it important? What is remarkable about it? Why should someone stop to read a historical marker about it?

- Research Sources
  - Attach copies of your primary source materials along with the application form and narrative. These are sources you used to research the history of the site, and should corroborate what you wrote in the summary narrative.
  - Look to the above section for sources you might look for.
- There is a \$250 application fee, payable to SCDAH. More information on the application form.
- Mail in all these materials together. Instructions are on the application form.
- ***Tips on advocating for your community's story to be represented accurately***
  1. They do have a particular style and way of writing historical markers, and they want to ensure both accuracy and some consistency of style across these state markers. However, that does not mean that the marker shouldn't prioritize your community's goals and concerns, and advocating for this may be a necessary part of the process.
  2. Some groups or organizations who have sponsored many markers, and/or are equipped with historians or experienced text writers will ask the Marker Coordinator to write a first draft themselves or offer a highly edited second draft.
  3. Clearly outline in your application with a bulleted list the facts and statements you think are most important to include in the marker text. Make sure some of these hit on the significance of the place/site/event ("This is important because..." statements). This can help the Marker Coordinator write a text that aligns with your goals better.
  4. Only you can provide the community perspective – the Marker Coordinator does not know the significance to local communities of a site/place/event like you do. Get clear on what the significance is to your community beforehand and be able to communicate it simply (see section above for more and questions to think through.)
  5. State markers are often written in a factual style. Dates, places, and names are typically included as facts. SCDAH typically wants to avoid markers that use "biased" language, aiming for "neutral" language. We know that the connotation words carry is important. Although because it is a state program and a state marker it must convey information in a factual way, this does not mean you are left with no room to convey what is important to you. Push to have the significance included – it is a fact too – not just a list of who, what, when, where. Markers that only do 'who, what, when, where' are often the most overlooked because they don't compel people to read them. The most interesting markers tell a reader in very simple words why they should care about this place/site/event.
  6. Every word matters on marker text
    - Think carefully about the word choice and sentence structure of the text. Do certain words that are used convey a connotation that doesn't feel representative to your community? Does the way something is phrased feel like it misses the mark? Think through alternative words, phrases, or ways to say it that do represent your community better. Make those edits to the text and send it back.



- Do keep in mind that marker text is extremely limited so every word chosen carries weight.
- Send an explanation of why you made certain edits, chose alternative words, phrases, etc along with your edits. This will help communicate your goals and what is important to you.
- Don't be afraid of multiple drafts back and forth. This is ultimately your community's marker as you are paying for it and installing it, and it should reflect something you are proud to stand by. Take the time to do this and don't be afraid to push back your timeline in order to do so.
- **Funding**
  1. Cost of markers
    - Application fee: \$250
    - Marker cost: \$2,480-2,860, depending on size and text
    - Breakaway post system, if needed: varying, but estimated \$200-500. If you need this, Sewah does not provide it, but can give you a list of companies you can contact to order it from and find out pricing.
    - Installation costs: varying, depending on what type of surface it is going into, if concrete needs to be poured, if you need to hire a company to do this or if you can get it donated in-kind. Suggest budgeting \$500-1,000 to start and then get more details to find out the exact cost.
- Applying for grants to support
  - Funding these markers can be a barrier to many communities who lack the funds, especially considering all the extra costs that are beyond the cost of the actual marker itself. Applying for small grants is a great way to defray or entirely fund this project.
  - Look for small grants in the \$5,000 or less range. These types of grant programs are looking for small projects with an achievable outcome. African American markers are a perfect fit for these grants, and many markers get funded through such small grants.
  - Look at the SC Humanities Mini Grant program, which has a monthly revolving deadline and has funded many markers. Contact local family foundations focused on arts, culture, and history in your area. Look into local county or city grants or funding opportunities. You could even contact big companies or corporations in your area who might be interested in funding such a project as part of their community service or outreach.
- Fundraising options
  - Some organizations are able to raise some or all of the funds for a marker through local fundraising events and campaigns.
  - Organize through a local Black church, local Black alumni association, local library, etc. Host an event the community will come to and use it as an opportunity to show why this marker is important and get community buy-in to the project.

- SCDOT Right of Way protocol
  - It is your responsibility to contact SCDOT (SC Department of Transportation) to find out if the desired location of your marker is in a state right-of-way. A right-of-way is property that the state owns alongside roads in order to allow SCDOT to improve the roads.
  - The minimum right-of-way width in SC is 66 feet, by law.
  - Contact your county's SCDOT Maintenance Engineer to see if the location you have in mind is in the right-of-way. You can start this early on in the process, before your official application to SCDAH.
  - If it is in a right-of-way, you will have to apply for an SCDOT encroachment permit in order to place the marker. This cannot be done before your marker is finalized and approved, only afterward.
  - Inquire with the county engineer whether you will be required to install the marker using a breakaway post system. These are specialized systems that attach to the post of the marker, which add an extra expense and may need professional installation.
  - The marker fabrication company you will have to order your marker through, Sewah Studios, will need to know if your marker needs a breakaway system or not. Make sure to find this out before contacting Sewah to order. Sewah does not fabricate or supply breakaway systems, so you will need to order a system separately. Sewah may be able to recommend companies or contact the SCDAH Marker Coordinator.
  
- ***Timeline/Expectations***
  1. Expect to spend at least a couple months researching and preparing before applying. This timeline will vary depending on how much research materials you already have and how long it takes your group to solidify a clear mission for the marker.
  2. After submitting your application, the Marker Coordinator should let you know when to expect to hear back from them, but typically expect a couple months.
  3. Most marker projects take anywhere from 6 months – 1 year. Plan for time to install and hold an installation ceremony in your timeline as well.
  
- ***Who to contact***
  1. The SCDAH Marker Coordinator will be your main contact. Find their information [online here](#).
  2. You might wish to get in touch with other organizations or projects that have erected similar historical markers. Use the SC Preservation Toolkit's Project Map to find other projects.

## ***Preparing for your marker installation***

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### ***Location considerations/Securing permissions***

1. Who owns the land?

2. If it is city, county, state property, what are the rules/process you have to follow to secure the right to install? Cities and counties typically have regulations with approval processes you have to go through in order to install a marker on that property. If it is alongside a road, as many markers are, find out the boundaries of the SCDOT right of way, as this will require extra permissions (see above).

3. If it is private property:

- Do you know and trust the property owner? Who agrees to maintain the property around the marker? Who will protect the marker if anything happens to it?
- Know that the historic marker is not a protective designation – it does not carry any ability to preserve or protect the property. This, however, does not give a property owner the right to tamper with or damage the marker.

- **Installation**

1. Installation is not provided by SCDAH or any other state agency, so you will be responsible for figuring out installation on your own.
2. Decide early on who will do installation – will it be a local company you work with? A volunteer? How much do they charge for installation?
3. Installation needs and costs will vary depending on the situation, but think about where it is being placed – is it in grass or dirt or concrete? Does a concrete base need to be poured? What do you want it to look like in the immediate surrounding ground/area?
4. Find out if there is someone in the community who does construction or this type of work that you can ask to participate – they might even be willing to offer services as an in-kind donation.
5. Know that you will be responsible for coordinating delivery with Sewah and their delivery service. You will have to be on site and prepared to receive the marker. If you are not installing it immediately, you will need to be prepared to have a team on hand to move and store it (they are large and heavy).

- **Maintenance**

1. After installation, consider who will maintain the marker. Is it in an area that has grass that will need to be cut around the marker? Is it isolated?
2. Typically, the organization that sponsors the marker is responsible for ongoing maintenance and upkeep. You may think about working out a maintenance agreement with the property owners, if your organization is not the owner.
3. What happens if the marker is damaged? You may have to go back through the process to request a replacement. Ask early in the process for worst case scenarios, so you have a plan to address issues after installation.
4. See this [Historical Marker Maintenance pdf](#) from SCDAH.

## ***Public Dedication or Ceremony***

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1. Scheduling a public dedication, reveal, or ceremony emphasizes the importance of the work of the team and the community to bring the historical marker to completion.
2. Dedications are typically done shortly after installation of the marker. Some groups opt to keep the marker covered until the public reveal.
3. Invite the coalition of supporters and the larger community to your event.
4. The dedication may coincide with a significant date or existing event that helps to advertise and commemorate this important milestone. Leverage social media, local newspapers, and African American organizations for free advertising and participation.
5. Think about other opportunities you may want to bring into the reveal. Is there a ceremony, blessing, or consecration you want to be a part of the dedication? Will you have alumni, descendants, or community members speak about the importance of this place? If it is a site, will you offer guided tours of the site with more history?

## ***Other considerations***

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### ***Public pushback against African American history in markers***

1. There have been many stories, particularly in the last 5 years, about the defacement and vandalism of Black historical markers. Perhaps the most widely known one was the vandalism of the Emmett Till marker which was shot by students from University of Mississippi – that marker is now being replaced by a new bulletproof marker. The fact that we even have to consider making bulletproof and vandalism proof markers shows both the deep racial rifts in our society and the need for African American history to be preserved and taught more comprehensively.
  2. This pushback is something your group should consider. Markers in rural areas with infrequent public access tend to be more vulnerable than markers in frequently visited public spots, especially markers that speak to racial violence.
  3. You might reach out to local advocates on city or county council or in government to have them attend the public dedication and show their support. Other community organizations and groups can be invited to show their support and solidarity as well. Ask other African American history groups what they have done about public pushback in your area and if they have experienced any threats to historical markers/sites.
- ***Reach out to other African American community groups to ask advice.*** There are many organizations and groups that have sponsored markers, so there is likely to be a group that has done a similar marker to the one you are thinking about, and these groups offer a wealth of knowledge.

Some counties or cities offer local historical marker programs, so that might be an option if the state marker program doesn't work for you. Some examples are the [Richland County Historical Marker Program](#) and the [Town of Mount Pleasant's Historical Roadside Marker Program](#).

## **Explore Related Resources in the Toolkit**

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**Need help researching & writing your nomination?**

[Check out the Experts Database.](#)

**Want to explore funding opportunities?**

[Check out our Grants & Funding page.](#)

**Want to pair your National Register Listing with a South Carolina Historical Marker?**

[Check out our How-To Guide on How To Get a State Historical Marker.](#)