

A New Way to Historical Markers: The William G. Pomeroy Foundation

by Marvin Tupper Jones, AAHGS-James Dent Walker Chapter and the director of the Chowan Discovery Group



Photo by Carol A. Joice

Hobson R. Reynolds Civil Rights Trail marker upon unveiling: (left to right) Marvin Tupper Jones, Natalie Rodriguez of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, and C. Ray Edmonds, a senior historian for the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World (IBPOEW)

Yet again, I applied for a historic marker and the panel of historians turned it down. Most marker programs are competitive. I have failed six times to get historical markers. I've succeeded twelve times, and two of those successes had been rejected earlier, cutting my losses to four.

A lot of us love historical markers. They help establish our past existence and can validate our knowledge, research, and our families' experiences too. Three of my markers acknowledge my earliest known ancestors in North Carolina; a relative who served in the Civil War, who was a Juneteenth Soldier, and served in the state legislature; and the Civil Rights rallies I attended as a child.

However, erecting African American historical markers can be challenging for even the most diligent of advocates. For example, it was not until Douglas Wilder became the first African American governor of Virginia that he was able to place

a marker for the Nat Turner Rebellion. He told me that there was resistance from whites and frightened Blacks. In spite of initial reactions, the Nat Turner Rebellion Highway historical marker is now in its fourth decade. I get to drive past it frequently.

Besides resistance from local folks, there are more likely reasons for the failure of a marker nomination. Three examples of unsuccessful attempts from my experience are: two Indigenous towns from the 1580s have not been located; three nominees lacked state- and nationwide significance; and the citations for the sixth application were not fully given. I redeemed this last one when I resubmitted a better application.

I have learned from talking with successful marker nominators that marker nominations have common requirements:

- ▣ The nominator must represent a 501(c)3 organization.
- ▣ The nominee must be a person, site, and/or event, and must have lived or taken place some time ago (the timing varies from marker program to program). In the case of a North Carolina Highway historical marker, the individual must have died at least twenty-five years ago, and the event must have taken place over twenty-five years past. Also, the nominee must have state- and/or nationwide significance.
- ▣ Permission must be obtained from the landowner to place the marker.
- ▣ A narrative about the nominee must be given.
- ▣ Primary and secondary sources must be cited.
- ▣ Sometimes funds are needed to pay for the approved marker. Markers provided by the North Carolina State Office of Archives and History are free and are placed on state roads. Other states may require payment for the marker, which can run from \$1,500 to \$3,000.

The William G. Pomeroy Foundation marker grants are typically more attainable than state marker programs for honoring African American history. One of Pomeroy's foci is on the local history that state makers exclude. In the past three years, I received three of their North Carolina Civil Rights Trail markers and received a marker for our century-old Atlantic District Fairgrounds, perhaps the only remaining one established and owned by African Americans (of which I am a shareholder). As with state markers, each Pomeroy marker has a webpage.

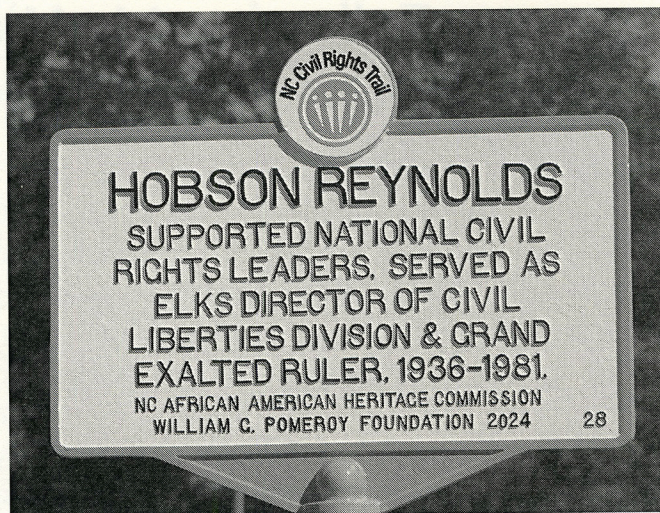
In October, the Pomeroy Foundation (<https://www.wgpfoundation.org>) and I convened a virtual meeting with many people from my network to promote the foundation's mission to expand availability of historical markers. AAHGS members Bessida Cauthorne White and Margo Lee Williams, both veteran marker advocates, took part in the conversation. Pomeroy's Executive Director Bill Brower and other Pomeroy staff presented the several marker programs and requirements. Unlike state programs which provide and install the markers, successful Pomeroy applicants are given grant money directly and a form to order the marker from a well-known marker fabricator, Sewah Studios in Ohio. If you have never received a grant before, here is your chance to get a start.

Here is a list of Pomeroy's programs:

- ▣ Hometown Heritage Marker Grant Program (which has been most useful to me)



Marvin Tupper Jones with the Atlantic District Fair marker, which will be erected later in Ahoskie, North Carolina, on the fairgrounds



The Hobson R. Reynolds Civil Rights Trail marker

- ▣ Hungry for History Marker Grant Program (focuses on local foods)
- ▣ Legends and Lore Marker Grant Program (includes folklore)
- ▣ Historic Transportation Marker Grant Program
- ▣ National Register Signage Grant Program
- ▣ New York State Historic Marker Grant Program

There are two other marker programs that the Pomeroy Foundation funds:

- ▣ North Carolina Civil Rights Trail marker, in partnership with the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission. I acquired three of the markers. To apply visit <https://aahc.nc.gov/programs/civil-rights-trail>.
- ▣ National Collaboration for Women's History Sites: National Votes for Women Marker.

While I have had significant success with the Pomeroy Foundation marker grants, I still encourage all to pursue the state marker programs and discover what they offer. Diligent researchers and marker seekers who explore all avenues are those who will reap the rewards of their efforts. The William G. Pomeroy Foundation is one more tool in your toolbox to honor your history and share your research. 