

January 15, 2024

To: Michael Behrendt, Durham Town Planner
Cc: Larry Brickner-Wood, Chair, Durham Historic District Commission
Cc: Todd Selig, Administrator, Town of Durham
Cc: Sarah Stewart, Commissioner, NH Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources
Cc: Benjamin Wilson, Director, NH Division of Historical Resources
Cc: Nadine Miller & Amy Dixon, NH Division of Historical Resources
Cc: Doug Karo, Janet Mackie & Nancy Sandberg, Durham Historic Association
Cc: Marjorie Smith, NH State Representative

Re: Oyster River Massacre Historical Marker #50 - Roundtable Discussions

Dear Michael,

As a 24 year resident of Durham, and a former president of the Durham Historic Association, I have great interest in the upcoming Oyster River Massacre marker roundtable discussions. I believe it is imperative that early in the January 18th meeting that participants from the NH Division of Historical Resources (NHDHR) provide the public with detailed background information involving the formation of its NH Historical Marker Advisory Group under the banner of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), the process it followed for identifying NH historical markers for reconditioning, retirement or revision, and a timeline of the events involving the Oyster River Massacre marker leading up to this first roundtable session.

In addition, it is critically important that the NHDHR answer the questions listed below and their responses documented on the public record.

This information will help put these roundtable discussions into proper context for the participants, the residents of Durham, and all other interested parties.

Questions for the NHDHR:

1. What was the genesis for forming the NH Historical Marker Advisory Group? What was the Advisory Group trying to achieve? What public agencies participated? What are the historical qualifications of the individuals in the Advisory Group to make decisions on each marker reviewed?
2. On 5/3/2021, the NHDHR informed the Town of Durham that the Oyster River Massacre marker was identified by the NHDHR and the NH Commission on Native American Affairs (NHCNAA) for revision, citing vague reasons of "inappropriateness, lack of context, or offensive/dated language." The NHDHR also informed the Town that the marker would be removed "while we determine the best approach moving forward". It is now almost 3 years later, and despite numerous requests, the NHDHR still has not provided any specific reason(s) or given any concrete examples of the marker's alleged "inappropriateness, lack of context, or offensive/dated language".
 - ✓ Q. What are the specific reasons why the marker was identified for revision by the NHDHR and the NHCNAA?
 - ✓ Q. What are concrete examples of the marker's alleged "inappropriateness, lack of context, or offensive/dated language"?
3. Sarah Stewart, Commissioner, NH Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources, informed me on 11/13/2023 that "Using the lens of physical condition / location and DEI, the advisory group recommended a list of 24 markers to be reconditioned, retired and or revised. Any marker that was slated for retirement, the town where the marker was located was offered the opportunity to revise the marker in coordination with the Advisory group. This was the case with the Oyster River Massacre Marker. The town was given the opportunity to revise the marker, at which time the town administrator agreed to help with".

- ✓ Q. Why did the Advisory Group target the Oyster River Massacre marker for retirement? Does this mean the NHDHR was planning to permanently remove the marker if the Town of Durham chose NOT to help revise the wording?
 - ✓ Q. The Town of Durham had agreed to work with the NHDHR to revise the text BEFORE the marker was taken down by the NH Department of Transportation (NHDOT) in November 2021. Why did the NHDOT remove the marker, at the NHDHR's request, BEFORE the NHDHR and the Durham stakeholders began the actual revision process?
 - ✓ Q. Who in the Advisory Group made the decision to remove the marker despite the Town's cooperation?
 - ✓ Q. What is the NHDHR's policy for removing markers prior to beginning the revision process with local stakeholders? Was the removal of the Oyster River Massacre marker consistent with this policy?
 - ✓ Q. Of the 24 markers identified by the Advisory Group, how many were removed in the same manner as the Oyster River Massacre marker? Which ones?
4. The NHDHR website has a document entitled "Guidelines for New Hampshire Historical Highway Marker Nominations", which was adopted on 1/30/2023 and revised on 5/12/2023. Under the section "Criteria for Approval of State Historical Highway Markers" on page 4 the first criteria reads, "The nomination is clear and organized and includes thorough documentation (with selected copies/scans and bibliographies from reliable primary and secondary sources) and verification of the facts claimed."
- ✓ Q. Does the NHDHR require that the revised wording of the Oyster River Massacre marker meet the same criteria as new markers as written in its own guidelines?
 - ✓ Q. Does the NHDHR require the new wording of the Oyster River Massacre marker be based on thorough documentation, reliable primary and secondary sources, and verification of the facts?
 - ✓ Q. How does the NHDHR balance its guidelines of fact-based historical markers with its DEI goals?

<https://mm.nh.gov/files/uploads/dhr/documents/highway-markers-nomination-guidelines.pdf>

In the spirit of full transparency to the public, the NHDHR must provide all of this crucial information to the residents of Durham and others in order to get everyone up to speed on the activities that have occurred since 2020. Only then can we confidently take the next step forward and revise the marker text in a factual, historically accurate way.

Please have this letter posted on the Town webpage with the other public comments.

Respectfully,

David Strong
Durham, NH