

# MARKING HISTORY

*Guidelines, Best Practices, and Templates for  
Interpretive Signage in Anne Arundel County*



**ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY  
OFFICE OF PLANNING AND ZONING  
CULTURAL RESOURCES DIVISION**

NOVEMBER 2020

Prepared by Jason Vaughan and adapted from  
*Wayside Exhibits: A Guide to Developing Outdoor  
Interpretive Signage* (National Park Service, 2009)

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## Key Factors for Effective Wayside Signage

Creating interpretive signage for an open environment presents a set of challenges different from signage in a “contained” environment, such as a historic site or national park. In a national park, one can assume that the audience has an interest in learning about the subject matter (historic, natural, cultural) that makes the place special.

NPS studies have shown that the average attention span for reading interpretive signage is between 30 to 45 seconds.

### Considerations for Wayside Interpretive Signage

**Visitor Access.** Is the sign placed where people can comfortably gather without interrupting the flow of foot traffic? Is the sign a safe distance from vehicular traffic? Is the sign physically accessible to those with disabilities?

**Compelling, Site-Specific Graphics.** Signage is of course a visual medium. Will the signage have interesting images that tell a story? Does the imagery connect to the significance of the site? Note that the wayside’s angle and position will direct the reader’s view. Is the direction appropriate for the sign’s subject matter?

Use of maps (both historic and contemporary) can assist a reader with putting the specific site within the larger context of the region’s geography.

**Regular Maintenance.** Is there a plan (and funding) for regularly checking the sign for graffiti or other damage? Has a replacement schedule been considered? Outdoor signage typically needs replacement every five to ten years.

### What Makes an Effective Wayside?

- Compelling graphics
- Appropriate direction of view
- Appropriate number of signs to convey messaging
- Attention-grabbing titles
- Active, succinct text that answers the question: “Why should I care?”

## What Is Interpretation?

Most people are familiar with language interpretation, either audibly between languages or visibly through a sign language interpreter. This type of interpretation is translating the meaning of one language into another.

Interpretation takes on a different context in the field of museums, parks, and historic sites. Interpreters in these fields “translate” the meanings of artifacts (and other physical objects, like buildings and monuments), landscapes, and historic events into a language that helps visitors understand these resources.

For an interpretive sign or exhibit, the sign’s text and graphics connect the interest of the reader with the meanings of resource(s). The meanings will better linger in the memory of the reader rather than details or facts. Consider a sign at a historic battleground: a good interpretative sign will illustrate why the battle was an important turning point in the war, rather than expound upon the battle tactics that secured victory or ensured defeat. Interpretation hones in on the reader’s ultimate question: “Why should I care?”

Freeman Tilden of the National Park Service explored the theories behind interpretation. In his 1957 book *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tilden outlines six principles of interpretation:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

The overall goal of any interpretive sign or wayside is to make the reader care about the site or resource. For those who make the connection, they are more likely to participate in preserving those resources so that future generations can enjoy them. When crafting the sign, determine what future action you want the reader to do. This is a critical piece of the exhibit planning process, explored later in this document.

## Best Practices in Crafting Content

Write for the reader's benefit. Explain why the reader should care about this place or this story. Can you help the reader understand something that cannot be seen?

**Keep it concise.** The average attention span is only 30 to 45 seconds. Be sure that your main point (why someone should care about this place or nugget of history) is conveyed in this timeframe.

**In limited cases, a lengthier narrative could be included.** Consider the location of the sign: a site near a bus stop, parking lot, or within a sheltered area (garden or park) might have a “captured audience” willing to spend more time delving into the subject matter.

**Keep it clear.** Avoid long words, jargon, and buzzwords. Use short, direct sentences and use active voice. For general audiences, write to an eighth-grade reading level.

**Use text hierarchies.** To help convey the main message within the short 45-second timeframe, consider using the most powerful concepts in the main body of the text. Other concepts and information can be presented in sidebars or in photo captions.

**Include hooks that create context.** Use connections with well-known moments in U.S. history that will help the reader understand periods of significance or points of interest; examples include “In the decades before the Civil War...”, “Soon after World War II...”, and “In the years following the Great Depression...”

**Follow style guides.** Content should conform with the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

Another resource to consider is the National Park Service's Editorial Style Guide, which supplements Chicago and provides specific guidance on terms and phrases about cultural, historic, and natural resources. The NPS guide is available online ([www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/hfc-editorial-style-guide.htm](http://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/hfc-editorial-style-guide.htm)).

### What to Avoid When Writing Wayside Exhibits

**Subject titles.** The title of the exhibit should express the significance of the story. Don't just label, like “WB&A Trail”—use a hook to pull someone into a story (“Modernity on the Rails: An Electric Railroad”).

**Too much data.** A wayside is not a book, but rather a means to express a single story about why a place matters. Waysides are not good media for expressing complex stories.

**Informing over interpreting.** Successful interpretive signage should provoke a response from the reader. The sign content should correspond to the desired outcomes and speak to the overall purpose of the signage plan.

## Best Practices in Designing Wayside Exhibits

**Focus through graphics.** A compelling singular image will attract attention. The title and main text should be aligned to enhance the focus of the main image.

**Visual layering.** With an average attention of 45 seconds, make sure the design has a clear focus and hierarchy. Consider a compelling title, single sentence main point, and secondary description with added details.

**Understand the limitations of designing outdoor signage.** Good contrast is necessary with changing lighting conditions. Avoid large areas of white that can cause glare under direct sunlight. Aim for neutral colors.

### What to Avoid When Designing Wayside Exhibits

**Too many colors and styles.** Visitors quickly scan wayside exhibits; rarely are they studied. Limit text, graphics, typefaces, and decorative elements. Use the county-chosen fonts (see next page).

**Too many small pictures.** Aim for a large image with just one or two smaller images. A wayside is not a guidebook.

**Long lines and small text.** Understand that the sign reader is outdoors, perhaps standing, and might be experiencing not ideal weather. Clear typography is a must. Avoid long lines of text, and adjust leading (space between lines) to ease reading. For main text, aim for at least 20 points. (Captions can be smaller, but generally not less than 12 points.)

### Should I use credit lines for images?

The National Park Service recommends avoiding using credit lines on images to prevent the sign design from becoming overly cluttered. Ideally, for each image used, a record will be made of the image source, rights agreements, etc. However, small organizations (especially volunteer-ran) may not have the capacity for recordkeeping.

As a general rule, the Cultural Resources Division recommends using credit lines. This provides an image source record for later staff. Partner organizations designing signage should consider its operational structure and determine the best path for including credit lines.

## Design Standards for County Wayside Signage

**Fonts.** To maintain consistency, only two fonts should be used in layout of the signage: Source Serif Pro and Source Sans Pro. These fonts are available via Google Fonts ([fonts.google.com](https://fonts.google.com)) for free, and are included in Adobe Fonts (free with a Creative Cloud license). As a general rule, Source Sans is appropriate for headlines, captions, and image credits. Source Serif is recommended for body text.

Source Sans Pro Light  
*Source Sans Pro Light Italic*

Source Serif Pro Light  
*Source Serif Pro Light Italic*

Source Sans Pro Regular  
*Source Sans Pro Regular Italic*

Source Serif Pro Regular  
*Source Serif Pro Regular Italic*

Source Sans Pro Semibold  
*Source Sans Pro Semibold Italic*

Source Serif Pro Semibold  
*Source Serif Pro Semibold Italic*

Source Sans Pro Bold  
*Source Sans Pro Bold Italic*

Source Serif Pro Bold  
*Source Serif Pro Bold Italic*

## Design Standards for County Wayside Signage

**Colors.** Color choices made by the designer depend on a variety of variables, largely driven by the images included in the layout.



ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY RED  
CMYK: 20/90/80/10



ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY GOLD  
CMYK: 0/29/75/0

### *Suggested Color Palettes*



CMYK: 60/30/70/58



CMYK: 45/77/77/66



CMYK: 76/63/61/60



CMYK: 81/59/53/38



CMYK: 13/35/100/0



CMYK: 24/88/100/18



CMYK: 83/51/33/9



CMYK: 80/41/63/24



CMYK: 13/35/100/0  
TINT 50%



CMYK: 4/69/100/8



CMYK: 44/22/15/0



CMYK: 53/16/98/1



## Design Standards for County Wayside Signage

**Design template.** A template for a 36-inch by 24-inch sign has been created to facilitate layout of signage by both county staff and its partners. An Adobe InDesign package is available.



# Design Standards for County Wayside Signage

**Design standards.** The following pages will break out recommendations for word counts, font usage, and font sizes.

### DARK BACKGROUND

This sign is located in an open space next to a roadway. A dark color was chosen for the background to reduce glare and provide adequate contrast for the text.

Ideally, the background should be single image (historical photo, map, or illustration). The detailed USGS topographical map was too visually distracting to serve as a background, so it was blended into a solid form.

### HIERARCHY OF TEXT

An introductory paragraph tells the short story of why this place is important.

### TEXT IN COLUMNS

Long lines of text are more difficult to read, especially for smaller font sizes. The main story is broken into three columns. A sidebar highlights secondary information.

## At the End of the Road, A Look Back into African American History

From this point, Conway Road begins to narrow as it winds its way east. The road comes to an end at the Amtrak rail line and the Patuxent Research Refuge's North Tract beyond. At the road's end was a small community established by Quakers in the 1790s, which later evolved into the predominately African American enclave known as Wilsontown.

The small town that arose at the end of Conway Road was typical of agrarian settlements across Anne Arundel County in the 1800s. Clusters of homes were built around a common resource, such as a post office, school, or general store. A Quaker meeting house served this purpose for this community.

In 1792, Quakers built the Indian Springs Meeting House, originally located west of the railroad tracks (built in the 1860s for the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad). Quakers were known for their strong abolitionist

beliefs and welcomed free Blacks to use the meeting house for religious worship and schooling. While additional research is necessary, it is probable that the Quaker and free African American community provided a safe haven along the Underground Railroad.

After the Civil War, residents organized the Forks African Methodist Episcopal Church, which took ownership of the meeting house in 1872. (The congregation built a new church at the site in 1908.) In 1888, Quaker Rachel Tyson deeded 77 acres to African American brothers Isaiah, John, and Dennis Wilson.

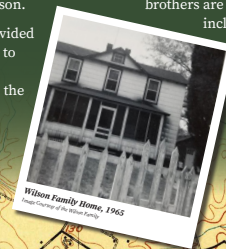
Proximity to the railroad provided not only transportation links to Washington, Baltimore, and Annapolis, but also jobs with the railroad's operations. Census

records and oral histories from residents reveal stories of African Americans from Wilsontown finding employment mending the tracks, serving as porters, and working in the railroad's warehouses.

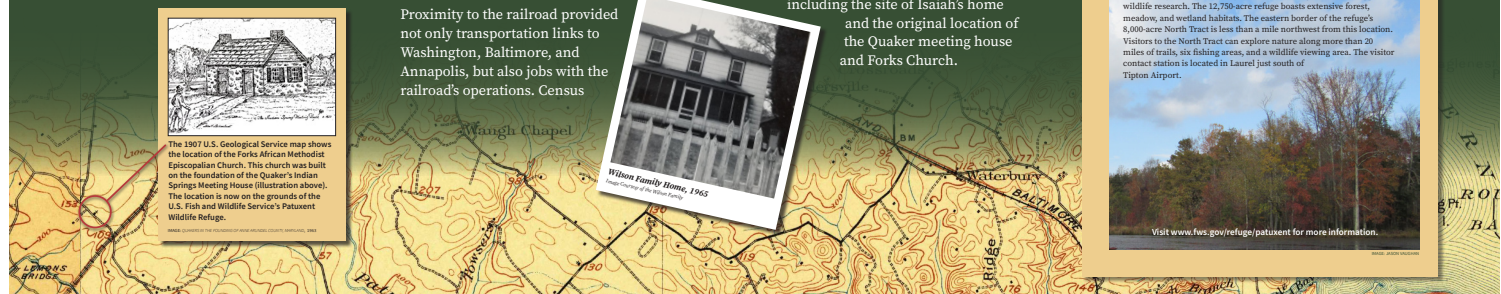
In 1942, areas of Wilsontown north of the railroad were acquired by the U.S. Government to expand Fort Meade during War World II. In 1991, this property was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and today is part of the Patuxent Research Refuge. Some of the original property deeded to the Wilson brothers are within the borders of the refuge, including the site of Isaiah's home and the original location of the Quaker meeting house and Forks Church.



The 1907 U.S. Geological Service map shows the location of the Forks African Methodist Episcopal Church. This church was built on the foundation of the Quaker's Indian Springs Meeting House (illustration above). The location is now on the grounds of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Refuge.



Wilson Family Home, 1965  
Head Center of the North Tract



Just one building survives that connects with Wilsontown's history as a 19th-century African American enclave. The church, located at the end of Conway Road, was built in 1842 for the African American congregation that traces its lineage to the free Blacks who worshipped at the Quaker's Indian Springs Meeting House. Many of today's parishioners are descendants of the church's original founders. In 1869, the congregation organized as Forks AME Zion, its name reflecting its geographic location between the forks of the Patuxent and Little Patuxent rivers. The congregation took possession of the Indian Springs Meeting House in 1872 and built a new sanctuary on its foundation in 1908. In 1942, the church property was acquired by eminent domain to expand Fort Meade. Parishioners used the compensation funds to purchase the six acres where the current church stands, now known as St. John AME Zion.

### Touching the Past

A small cemetery is located near the original site of the Indian Springs Meeting House and later Forks Church. The cemetery contains the remains of members of both congregations, reflecting the unique relationship between the Quakers and freed African Americans. Unmarked Quaker burials date to the late 1700s and include prominent families such as Hopkins and Snowden. Ariana Wilson (c. 1862-1919) was the wife of Isaiah, one of Wilsontown's original founders.

In 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing the wildlife refuge, the first and only devoted to support wildlife research. The 12,750-acre refuge boasts extensive forest, meadow, and wetland habitats. The eastern border of the refuge's 8,000-acre North Tract is less than a mile northwest from this location. Visitors to the North Tract can explore nature along more than 20 miles of trails, six fishing areas, and a wildlife viewing area. The visitor contact station is located in Laurel just south of Tipton Airport.

Visit [www.fws.gov/refuge/patuxent](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/patuxent) for more information.

# Design Standards for County Wayside Signage

**A NOTE ON IMAGES:** High-resolution images are a must for a well-designed sign. The standard is 300 DPI. Avoid really small images (less than 3 inches square).

**HEADLINE (90 pt)** Font size no less than 80 points.

## At the End of the Road, A Look Back into African American History

**INTRO TEXT (40 pt)**

Font size no less than 40 points with generous leading (60 points).

*Word count should be around 60.*

**STORY TEXT (25 pt)**

Font size no less than 20 points with leading as generous as possible.

*Word count is ideally about 200 words (300 max).*

From this point, Conway Road begins to narrow as it winds its way east. The road comes to an end at the Amtrak rail line and the Patuxent Research Refuge's North Tract beyond. At the road's end was a small community established by Quakers in the 1790s, which later evolved into the predominately African American enclave known as Wilsontown.

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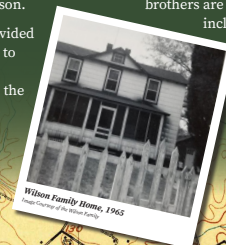
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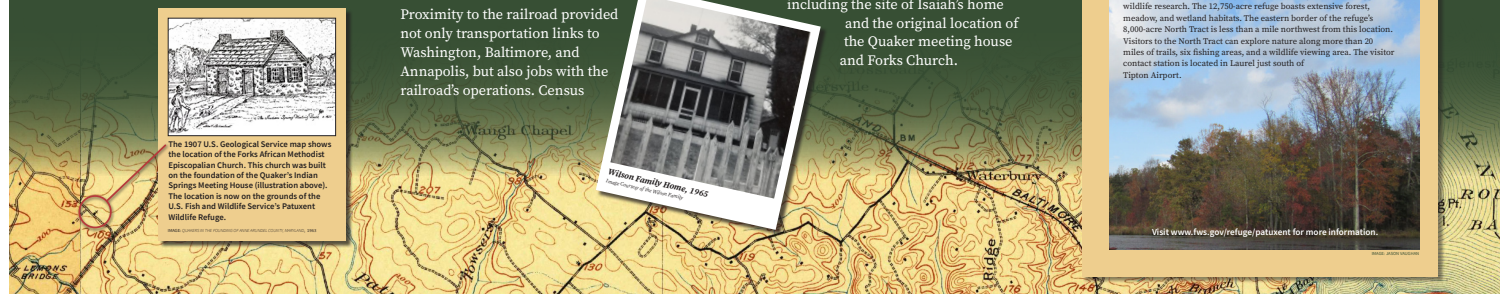
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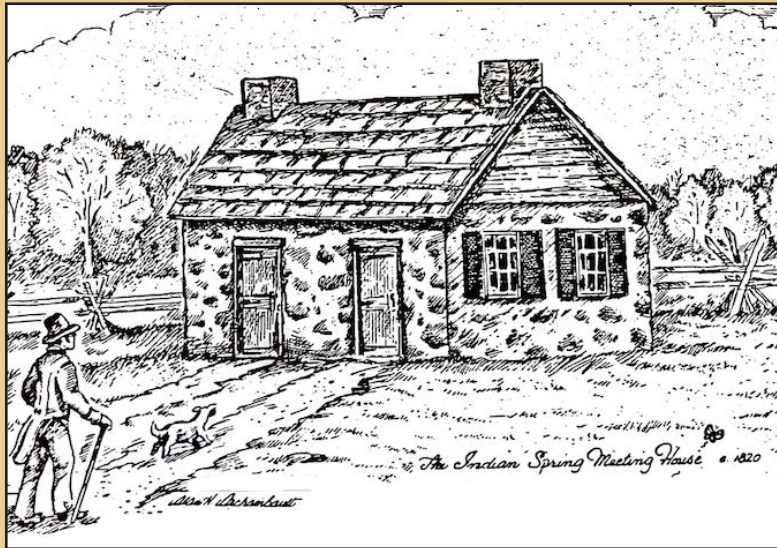
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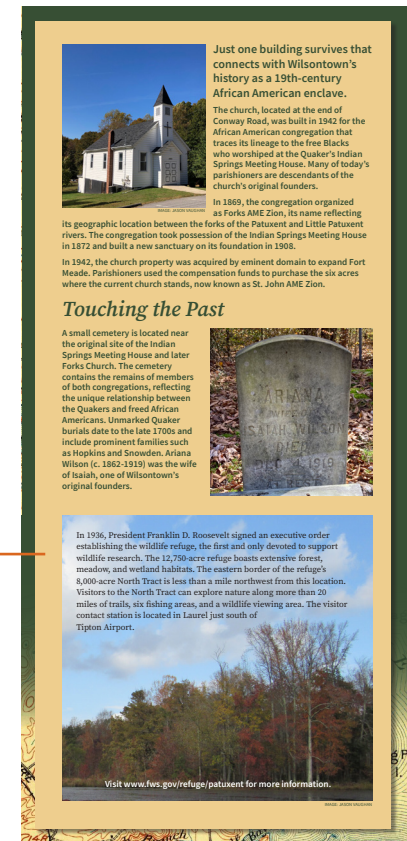


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IMAGE: QUAKERS IN THE FOUNDING OF ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MARYLAND, 1963

**CAPTION (15 pt)** Font size should be no less than 15 points. For this sign, secondary information in the caption and sidebar is set in a sans serif font. To create visual interest, text placed over the photograph was set in a serif font.

**IMAGE CREDIT (8 pt)** Font size should be range between 8 and 10 points.



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## For County Partners Creating Wayside Interpretive Signage

### WAYSIDE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Thoughtful and thorough planning will help ensure the signage development will proceed at an acceptable pace and achieve buy-in from all stakeholders. Consider the following planning steps when pursuing a scheme for interpretive signage.

#### *Project Start-Up*

1. Establish the project team and secure a general agreement on moving forward with the signage project.
2. Be as inclusive as possible when building the team who will carry out the signage project. In addition to the subject matter experts, writers, and designers, reach out to the Cultural Resources Division and the site owner.
3. Prepare a list of potential wayside sites and subjects in conjunction with a site visit.
4. Determine costs and timeframe. Secure quotes for wayside production (research, writing and design), and consult with CRD staff on any possible costs for fabrication and installation. Determine how the project will be funded and develop a timeframe for the project. Note that many grants require a funded project to be completed within a two-year timeframe.
5. Begin preliminary research. A useful first step for any historic research project is a survey of documentation available through the National Register of Historic Places and the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties. The Maryland Historical Trust's online database provides a wealth of information; visit <https://mht.maryland.gov/secure/medusa/>.

#### *Site Analysis*

**Conduct the project start-up meeting.** The start-up meeting should cover these items:

- Best practices in effective waysides and interpretive signage
- Timeline and process for sign development
- Concerns regarding sign accessibility and locations
- Signage structure (panel and base materials, size, etc.)
- Resources gathered and gaps
- Team roles and responsibilities

***Site Analysis (Continued)***

Analyze proposed sign sites.

- Visit potential sign sites with subject matter experts and relevant stakeholders (especially property owners)
- Identify site-specific significance and meaning
- Identify each sign’s purpose, orientation to landscape, and site conditions
- Photograph potential sign locations and site-specific features

***Project Proposal***

Prepare the signage project proposal.

- Document the selected sign locations and purposes, display specifications (panel and base), and any graphic needs, such as maps or images.
- Create a site map of the proposed sign locations
- Develop a detailed cost estimate

Share the proposal with all stakeholders and secure agreement from all parties.

**SPECIAL NOTE ON SIGNAGE TO BE INSTALLED ON COUNTY PROPERTY**

Revisions and content verification are an important part of the signage development process. A review committee, including staff from the county’s Cultural Resources Division (and when appropriate, other content specialists) should have ample opportunity to review and provide comment before any signs are approved for installation on county property.

## For County Partners Creating Wayside Interpretive Signage

### BUDGETING FOR AN INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE PROJECT

The elements below are integral to a comprehensive budget required by many grant applications. Some of these services can be provided by staff or donated by individuals. This may be beneficial for grant-funded projects where a cash or in-kind match is required.

#### Content Creation

Historian	Cost per project or hour will vary depending on level of experience and complexity and size of project.
Writer/Interpretive Specialist	
Proofreader	

#### Layout and Design

Graphic Designer	Cost per project or hour will vary depending on level of experience and complexity and size of project. Hourly rates for professional designers begin around \$100 per hour.
Image Rights	Typically, these are not expensive to secure for one-time use in outdoor signage. Estimate a minimum \$200 in a proposed budget.

#### Fabrication and Installation

Fabrication	Costs vary based on type and size of sign.
Installation	Costs vary. The fabricator commonly does the sign installation. If the signage is going on public property, special considerations need to be made with appropriate county agencies.