

History of the Blue Star Memorial Program

Blue Star Memorial Markers take their name from the blue star in the Blue Star Banner (also known as the service flag), which are displayed in homes with a family member serving in the Armed Forces.

At the close of World War II, the National Council of State Garden Clubs, (now National Garden Clubs, Inc.) like other public-spirited groups, was seeking a suitable means of honoring servicemen and women. It was agreed that as garden clubs, it would be better to help beautify and preserve the country the men and women had fought for than to build stone monuments. Working with the New Jersey Highway Commissioner, Spencer Miller, Jr., the New Jersey clubs had just finished beautifying a section of one of New Jersey's highways, in honor of servicemen and women who had served in World War II. The Garden Club of New Jersey planted dogwood trees along six miles of the highway, which had been designated a memorial by the New Jersey State Legislature, and it was named the Blue Star Drive. Mr. Miller suggested that the program be projected on a nationwide basis. This was just the kind of project that the National Council had been looking for. It was approved in October 1945. A Blue Star Memorial Highway system was outlined, consisting of one east-west and seven north-south highways. A uniform marker was designed to identify the highways. State presidents were asked to secure the collaboration of their state highway departments before undertaking a Blue Star project. This nationwide living memorial projected a ribbon of dedicated highways across the country, in every state, with markers placed at appropriate locations such as state lines, entrances to towns, intersections, and rest areas.

In 1951, the Memorial was changed to include all men and women who had served, were serving, or would serve in the Armed Forces of the United States of America. The Blue Star Memorial Program grew to extend thousands of miles across the continental United States, Alaska and Hawaii with new stretches of roadway added and many new markers dedicated each year.

There are three types of markers available. The Highway Marker is to be placed at sites along dedicated highways. A large Memorial Marker may be placed in national cemeteries, veterans' medical centers and other civic locations. The smaller By-Way Marker may be placed in civic gardens, parks and historical sites.

Illinois Blue Star History

U.S. Route 40 was the first Blue Star Memorial Highway in Illinois; it was officially authorized in January 1948. Twin markers were erected and dedicated on April 15, 1948 – one in Troy, near St. Louis and the other in Marshall, near the Indiana line. These two markers are the only two in Illinois that honor the World War II veterans only. After 1951, when the memorial was extended to include all men and women who had served, the first of the new-style markers in Illinois was placed at the Cahokia Mounds national Historic Site, also on U.S. Route 40.

In 1963, additional Blue Star Memorial Highways were officially authorized in Illinois – a north-south route (U.S. 51) down the middle of the state connecting Wisconsin and Kentucky; another north-south route (U.S. 45) originating at U.S. 40 in Effingham and continuing to Lake County where it formed an arm west along Route 176 to Marengo in McHenry County, joining U.S. 20 and then meeting U.S. 51 in Winnebago County. Illinois now has dedicated Blue Star Memorial Highways throughout the state.

The Illinois Blue Star Fund was formed in 1963 – member clubs donated to the Garden Clubs of Illinois Blue Star Fund and markers were placed in rest areas along the Blue Star Highways in Cooperation with the Illinois Department of Transportation. The first two Blue Star Fund-sponsored markers were placed in September 1964, one at the south junction of IL 176 and IL 47 in McHenry County and the other on U.S. 20 near Belvidere. In 1965, a marker was placed in a rest area on U.S. 51, south of Du Quoin and in 1968 the first marker was placed on U.S. 45 in a rest area in Tuscola.

Garden clubs also placed markers within their communities. The Garden Clubs of Illinois, Inc. and its member clubs have placed 145 markers since its inception in Illinois in 1948. Four markers are located

at veterans' hospitals, one at veterans' clinic, and three at veterans' homes in Illinois. Markers have been placed at both Camp Butler and Abraham Lincoln national cemeteries. Markers are located at both the Illinois and Du Quoin State Fairs. Markers have been placed in 27 interstate highway rest areas in Illinois. The Garden Clubs of Illinois are proud of their tradition of continually placing markers in honor of our nation's veterans, who have so courageously defended our country.