



History of the Plate



The first plate issued in Massachusetts has been in the Tudor family since 1903.



Plate sizes were not standardized until 1957.



A motorcycle "Watch Fob"



A new look appeared in 1908.

For her contribution to the history of the Massachusetts registration plate, a very special thanks is extended to Ms. Pat Wormstead who has devoted 30 years at the RMV to the public. Ms. Wormstead's extensive knowledge of special plates was an indispensable resource in compiling a meticulous and factual chronology. The history of the plate was also accomplished with the help of former Registry Inspector and Historian, Mr. Gene Baril and of Mr. Stewart Berg. Mr. Berg's passion for collecting plates, pictures and Registry anecdotes has been invaluable in preserving history that might otherwise have been lost.

The notion of the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) took shape as early as 1892 when the Massachusetts Legislature passed a bill creating a Commission of Inquiry to report on the condition of roads in the Commonwealth that were becoming congested with automobiles, horse drawn carriages and pedestrians. The Commission reported that more than 90 percent of the roads were in poor condition and would only deteriorate further with continual heavy and unregulated use. The investigation led to the creation of the Massachusetts Highway Commission (MHC). At the time, no laws were governing the rules of the road which led to a great deal of confusion on the thoroughfares as well as a lack of public safety.

Massachusetts first began issuing licenses and registration plates in June of 1903 as a result of Chapter 473 of the Acts of 1903. The public had until September of that year to comply with the law. The first plate, featuring the number "1" printed on it, was issued to Frederick Tudor in 1903 and is still held as an active registration by a member of his family. Mr. Tudor also received the first license issued under the new law. Before that time, only the city of Boston required its motorists to hold a license and to register vehicles that they would operate on the parkways and boulevards within the jurisdiction of the City. The City required that the owner make his own plate with the corresponding numbers that appeared on his registration certificate.

Although Massachusetts was not the first to register motor vehicles, we did lead the way in issuing registration plates. These plates were made of iron and covered by an enamel porcelain. They had a dark blue background with white numbers and "MASS. AUTOMOBILE REGISTER." printed across the top. The plates were not uniform in size as the number of characters needed for a particular registration governed the length. The year of issue was not printed on the plate from 1903-1907. Instead, all plate numbers were issued according to the following table:

Plate Number	Dates issued
#1 - #3241	Sept. 1, 1903 to Dec. 31, 1903
#3242 - #7013	Jan. 1, 1904 to Dec. 31, 1904
#7014 - #11902	Jan. 1, 1905 to Dec. 31, 1905
#11903 - #18474	Jan. 1, 1906 to Dec. 31, 1906
#18475 - #26207	Jan. 1, 1907 to Dec. 31, 1907

Massachusetts also required that the more than 500 motorcycles on the road display a registration. Motorcycle and automobile plates were the same size so the registration number for bikes began with the letter "Z" to distinguish it. They utilized this type of plate until 1910 when a brass "watch fob" bearing the seal of Massachusetts replaced the "Z" plates. The watch fob was to be carried by the operator while riding the bike. The brass watch fob was issued between 1910 and 1914 when the Commonwealth returned to issuing plates for motorcycles.

Print This Page

Email this page to a friend



In 1920, Massachusetts began producing plates in state prisons.

A new look for all registration plates was unveiled in 1908. They were white with blue characters and the year 1908 was printed length-wise along the right side of the plate.

Iron plates, used since 1903, were replaced by tin plates in 1916. Tin was used until 1919. Also in 1919, the MHC was abolished and the Department of Public Works (DPW) was created. The Commissioner of the DPW was authorized to appoint an official whose title would be the Registrar of Motor Vehicles. The Registrar would, "... have, exercise and perform all the rights, powers, duties and obligations of the MHC relative to motor vehicles and the operation thereof" (Act of 1919, sec. 115.) This act, with only minor amendments, still governs the office of the Registrar today. The first to occupy the newly created position of Registrar of Motor Vehicles was Mr. Frank A. Goodwin who was appointed in 1919 by then Governor Calvin Coolidge.



One of the first modifications implemented by Registrar Goodwin was to bring the responsibility of plate production into Massachusetts. The first plates made for the Commonwealth had been manufactured at the Baltimore Enamel & Novelty Company of Maryland and at the Ingram-Richardson Mfg. Company of Pennsylvania. But in 1920, the Charlestown State Prison began manufacturing and issuing Massachusetts plates. Prison Industries still produce all plates issued for Massachusetts vehicles. They have also supplied plates for New Hampshire, Maine and Rhode Island when these states had problems at their own plate facilities. Registrar Goodwin was the first to require that registration plates be illuminated. In 1923, a rear lamp of two candle power was used to make the plate visible at a distance of 60 feet.



The ill-fated Codfish plate and its successor.

Mr. George A. Parker was appointed Registrar in 1928 and was quickly embroiled in a conflict with Massachusetts fishermen. It was in 1928 that a depiction of a codfish, a symbol of the Massachusetts fishing industry, was the first picture to appear on a plate. The image, which resembled an oversized guppy more than a codfish, sparked controversy among local fishermen. After suffering one of the worst years in fishing history, the fishermen blamed the RMV for representing the cod swimming away from the word "Massachusetts" which was printed on the plates. The controversial image was removed from passenger plates in 1929 and a more realistic and detailed codfish shown swimming toward Massachusetts appeared on truck plates in that same year.



A maroon plate from 1942.

The Registry alternated between green and maroon as base colors for the plates issued between 1930 and 1942. However, halfway through 1942, the prisons ran out of maroon paint and had to finish the year with green. This created the possibility of receiving a set of plates with the same registration number, but printed in both colors.



The first standardized license plate.

In June of 1945, the RMV established a special Veteran's section, but it was not until 1949 that legislation was passed which allowed the issuance of plates specifically for Veterans and Disabled Veterans. Today, a variety of plates exist for different categories of U.S. Veterans which include Purple Heart recipients, Pearl Harbor survivors, and the standard Flag plates.



Massachusetts youngest registered driver.

Registration plates were not standardized until 1957. In this year, plate size was established at 6x12" and new sets of dies were created to accommodate this new size and the embossed Massachusetts name that appeared on the plates. It was also during 1957 that the Medical Affairs Bureau was created and the first handicapped plates were issued. These plates were designated for anyone who had been certified by a medical authority as legally blind or as having suffered the loss of or use of one or both hands or feet.

Mr. James R. Lawton was named Registrar in 1963 and encountered a plight more disastrous than the codfish fiasco of 1928. Substandard paint was used on the 1963 plates and as they were exposed to the elements, the paint faded. As a result of the premature weathering, most of the plates ended up as pure white and illegible. Customers were allowed to bring in their plates and exchange them for plates with stable paint at no fee.



The first antique automobile plate.

General Richard E. McLaughlin served his first of two terms as Registrar from 1964 to 1971 when he became the first Secretary of Public Safety. During his first term as Registrar, an important change took place regarding registration expiration dates. In 1968, the introduction of the staggered registration instituted a plate that expired every two years with the expiration month determined by the last numeric digit on the registration. Thus, a plate that ended with a "1" expired in January, a plate that ended with a "2" expired in February, etc. Color coded plate decals with expiration years printed on them stemmed from the advent of the staggered system and are still used today.

Before the staggered system was implemented, all registrations expired yearly at the end of December. At renewal time, the lines at the Nashua Street Registry extended the length of Nashua Street and around the corner to Causeway Street. These lines were commonplace



An early tin plate.



Cape and Islands Plate



Environmental Trust Plate



Olympic Spirit Plate

from the first working day after Christmas until after New Years Eve.

A Deputy Registrar from the Massachusetts RMV related a story that was typical of the wait in line to renew a registration before the staggered system. His father would drop him off at 10:00 a.m. with the family car renewal form and have him stand in line. His dad would then walk to Haymarket and do the family food shopping, complete several other errands and return to Nashua Street around 3:00 p.m. only to find his son still about an hour away from a clerk and successful completion of the transaction. Registry Police had to escort employees back in the building after lunch because customers who had waited all day became naturally short tempered and thought the employees were other customers trying to cut in line.

In January of 1987, the Registry began issuing the red "Spirit of America" plates. Originally, it was intended that a complete conversion to these plates from the single, green plate was to be completed by 1989, but due to funding problems, many green plates remain on the road today.

Mr. Jerold A. Gnazzo served as Registrar from 1991 to 1997. Due to Legislative activity in the area of special plates, more plate types have been introduced during this period than at any other one time in RMV history. In 1993 alone, several new types of Veteran's plates and the Basketball Hall of Fame plate were issued.

In 1995, the highly popular Environmental Trust or "whale plate" was introduced. This plate, the most successful plate issued to date, features the tail of the North Atlantic Right Whale, the world's most endangered large whale and two Roseate Terns, which are also endangered. A portion of the fee collected for this plate goes to the Massachusetts Environmental Trust, which was established by the Legislature in 1988 and is dedicated to improving and safeguarding the Commonwealth's natural resources and water quality.

In May of 1996, the Cape Cod and Islands plate was offered. This plate has been a success for the special interests of the Cape and Islands. And in July of 1996, the Olympic plate was offered. This proliferation of special plates has led to an increased discussion of the related public safety and fiscal issues. While this debate plays out, the Registry of Motor Vehicles will continue to respect the will of the Legislature, and continue its efforts to produce high quality and aesthetically pleasing plates.

Below is a chronological listing of the issue dates and a brief description of some of the plates Massachusetts has utilized:

- 1903 The first plate was issued. It had a dark blue background with white characters.
- 1911 The first truck plate was issued. The plates started with the letter "B" as a commercial designation for residents and the letter "X" for nonresidents.
- 1917 The first six digit plate was issued.
- 1928 First picture used on a plate when the failed codfish design was used.
- 1929 A more realistic codfish was used on truck plates but not passenger plates.
- 1931 The first Municipal plates issued to towns and cities.
- 1949 The first Veteran's and Disabled Veteran's plates were issued.
- 1951 Antique plates issued for the first time.
- 1952 Farm plates are available for issue.
- 1955 Consular Corps plates issued for dignitaries and other government officials.
- 1957 Plates were standardized to 6" x 12". Also, the first year of issue for Handicap plates.
- 1964 The first Amateur Radio (Ham Operator) plates issued.
- 1966 Vanity plates, with two to six characters, were issued. Also the first MD (medical doctor) plates were issued.
- 1968 Ambulance and Hearse plates issued.
- 1973 Antique Motorcycle plates were first issued.
- 1979 Handicapped Vanity plates available for the first time.
- 1987 Spirit of America plates first issued.
- 1993 A variety of specialized Veteran's plates were issued such as Purple Heart, Pearl Harbor Survivor, and the Flag plate. The Basketball Hall of Fame plate was also issued.
- 1995 The Environmental Trust or whale plate was introduced.
- 1996 The Cape Cod and Island plate and the Olympic plate were offered to the public.

