



CITY OF APPLETON

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 17, 2026
To: Historic Preservation Commission
From: Don Harp, Principal Planner
Subject: Wisconsin Historical Marker Text – Wisconsin Historic Marker Sign Installation in Houdini Plaza Honoring Harry Houdini

GENERAL INFORMATION

Property Owner: City of Appleton

Address/Parcel Numbers: Houdini Plaza – 121 W. College Avenue/31-2-0065-00 and 31-2-0067-00

Applicant/Submitted By: Jennifer Stephany, Executive Director of Appleton Downtown, Inc.

Historic Preservation Commission Meeting Date: March 17, 2026

Common Council Meeting Date: April 1, 2026

Background

February 23, 2026 – The Wisconsin State Historical Society granted pre-application approval for the proposed Historic Marker Sign honoring Harry Houdini.

STAFF ANALYSIS

Project Overview

Creative Downtown Appleton Inc. is requesting approval to install an official Wisconsin Historical Marker in Houdini Plaza honoring Harry Houdini's connection to Appleton and in recognition of the 100th anniversary of his passing on Halloween, October 31, 2026. (1926–2026). (See Attached Historic Marker Proposal)

Proposed Location

The marker is proposed near the Houdini bronze bust located on the south side of Houdini Plaza. Final placement of the marker sign would be coordinated with Parks and Recreation staff and the Parks and Recreation Committee and the Wisconsin State Historical Society to ensure pedestrian accessibility, visibility, and compliance with State marker and City sign ordinance standards.

Historic Preservation Commission Draft Marker Text Review

The Historic Preservation Commission is responsible for reviewing, editing and verifying all submitted sources for accuracy for proposed historic marker sign text located on public property, and recommending approval to the Common Council.

Marker Text (Applicant Submission)

“Born Erik Weiss in Budapest, Hungary, Harry Houdini became a world-famous magician and escape artist. His family immigrated to the United States when he was four years old, settling in Appleton in 1878. His father, Mayer Samuel Weiss, served as the first rabbi for Appleton’s Zion Reform Jewish Congregation. Throughout his career, Houdini proclaiming Appleton as his hometown. In 1897 he performed at the Appleton Opera House and challenged the local police by escaping from their handcuffs and a jail cell. Houdini’s career soared after traveling to Europe in 1900 where he did numerous escapes and stunts. Houdini was not only highly regarded as a performer but was an author, pioneer aviator, silent film star, inventor, and a collector. Appleton proudly remembers its connection to the legendary “Handcuff King,” as a testament to his enduring legacy and prestigious career.”

Sources:

- Book: Ken Silverman’s [*Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss*](#)
- Houdini-A Pictorial Life by Milbourne Chirstopher
- Houdini: His life and Art by Bert Randolph Sugar and James Randi
- Wild About Harry Houdini blog curated by John Cox
- History Museum at the Castle: <https://myhistorymuseum.org/houdini/>

Standardization State Marker Design: The proposed marker sign will follow the uniform standard design for cast aluminum markers featuring cream-colored letters on a tobacco brown background with the state badger symbol.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff requests the Commission review and approve the proposed marker text, or request revisions as needed, to ensure historical accuracy, clarity, and consistency with local history per the attached historic marker sign request.