Know Your VW License Plates:
License Plates Evolve

While the first "everyday" automobile hit the streets in 1908, license plates have actually been around for much longer. The first country to introduce the license plate was France in 1893, with the passage of the Paris Police Ordinance. Germany followed suit in 1896 and the Netherlands became the first country to introduce a national license plate known as a driving permit in 1898. Mid America Motorworks takes a look at the history of license plates, from a simple white plate with black letters to vanity plates that add personality to your ride.

Early German License Plates

In 1906, Germany issued the first license plates with a lettering plan. Plates used Roman numerals to indicate German states, with several of them incorporating a prefix that derived from the state's name.
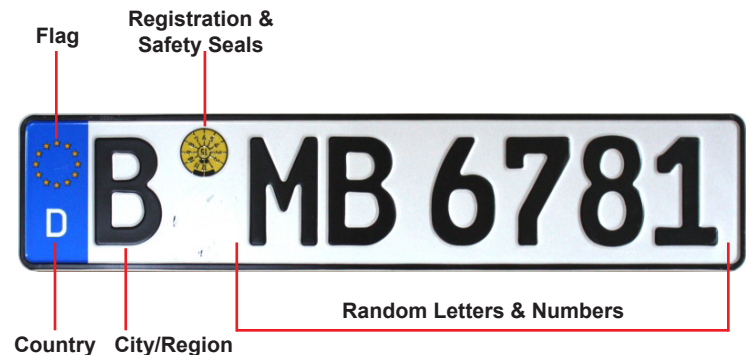
Military vehicles were given the designation "MK" during World War I, for "Militärkraftwagen des Deutschen Heeres," or military vehicles of the German Army. The lettering combinations changed over the years, as different regimes were in power. In the 1930s, German plates featured a trapezoidal shape with letter codes positioned above a number sequence. In 1956 West Germany introduced the current system, which is based on the districts where the vehicle was registered.

Current German License Plates

For several years, when Germans purchased a vehicle from someone living in a different city or county, or when they changed residences, they also had to change their vehicle documentation. However, as of January 1, 2015, a nationwide law went into effect saying owners were not required to change the vehicle documentation. It is no longer possible to tell where someone lives just by looking at their license plates.

Since 1994, Germany has used the same general format for plates, with a blue strip on the left side showing the shortened country code in white text. Next to that, a two or three letter abbreviation indicates the region where a car is registered.

Modern German plates use a typeface designed to keep certain letters – O and Q, P and R – from being painted to look alike. It is known as FE-Schrift and is also designed to be more easily read by optical character recognition software.

Flag

Registration & Safety Seals

Random Letters & Numbers

Country   City/Region

Classic Cars, "Historic"

Tax Exempt

Dealer Plates

Former Export Plates

Special Plate Codes
Some German vehicles have special plates, no different than cars in the US.

• Classic Cars are designated with an "H" for Historic

• Seasonal plates for motorcycles and other vehicles

• Tax-exempt plates for service vehicles, trailers, etc. have green lettering

• Dealers plates for test drives have red lettering

• Government, diplomatic and state office plates use special codes and configurations

• Oval country of origin plates were formerly used on vehicles being exported. Export plates are now distinguished by the lack of the blue Euro strip on the left.
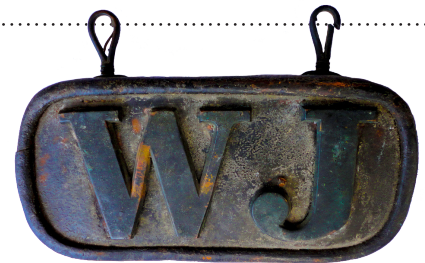
Across the Pond
License plates in the US have also evolved over time, with each state issuing to vehicle owners. New York State has required plates since 1901, first requiring owners to make their initials clearly visible on the back of the vehicle. New York was ahead of the curve in vanity plates!

The first license plates in the United States were made out of leather, rubber, iron and porcelain, and painted on the front in usually two different colors. One color was used for the background and another for the lettering. License plate formatting typically followed this method:

• Registration number in large digits

• Two- or four-digit year in smaller lettering on one side of the plate

• An abbreviated state name

Initially, plates were not government issued in most jurisdictions and motorists were obliged to make their own. In 1903, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts became the first state to issue plates. By 1918, virtually every state had adopted its own form of license plates.

New York Plates

Massachusetts Plates

License Plate Law
The University of Illinois published an engineering study in 1960 that recommended that the state of Illinois adopt a numbering system and plate design "composed of combinations of characters which can be perceived quickly and accurately, are legible at a distance of approximately 125 feet (38 m) under daylight conditions, and are readily adapted to filing and administrative procedures." It also recommended that a standard plate size be adopted through the United States. Today, a standard, full size license plate is 6 inches by 12 inches.

The main requirements for automobile license plates are pretty straightforward. Specifically:

• The plate should be currently valid and clearly visible.

• The plate should be mounted to the car in the proper place in a manner that is free of obstruction.

• All of the numbers and letters should be clearly visible, as well as any other identifying markers.
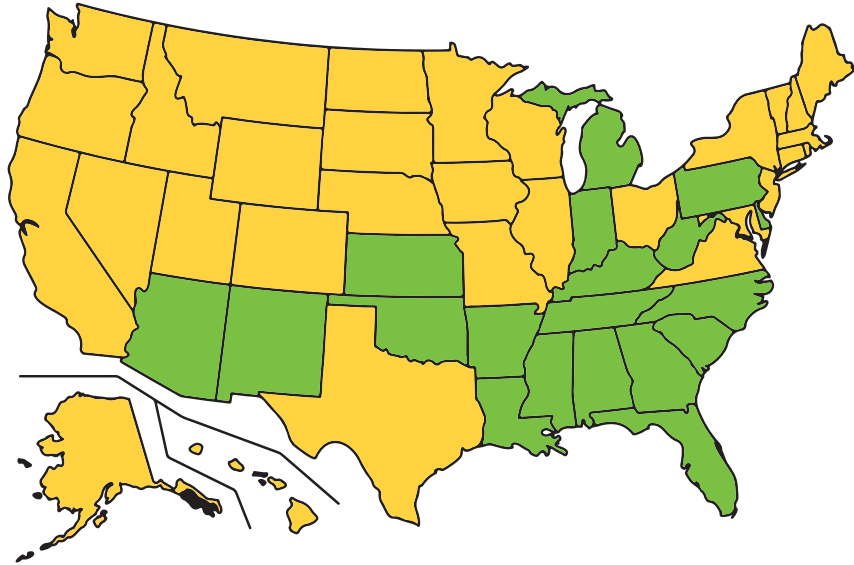
Some states require a license plate to be displayed on the front and rear of a vehicle, while other states only require rear plates.

The 19 states that require only the rear license plates are:

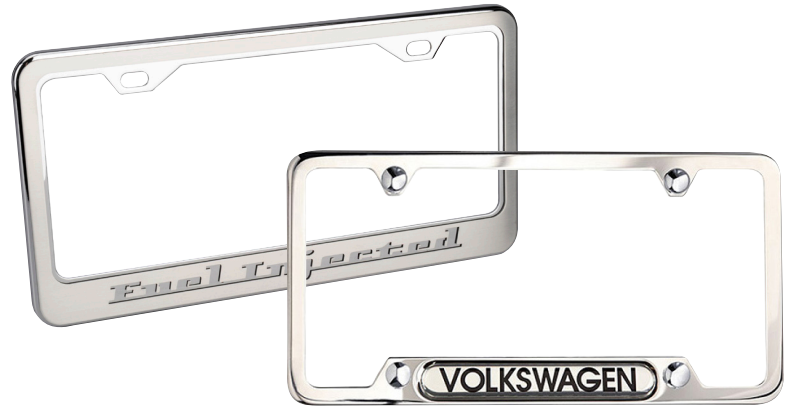|	
• Alabama	• Arkansas
• Arizona	• Delaware
• Florida	• Georgia
• Indiana	• Kansas
• Kentucky	• Louisiana
• Michigan	• Mississippi
• New Mexico	• North Carolina
• Oklahoma	• Pennsylvania
• South Carolina	• Tennessee
• West Virginia	

States that require Front License Plates

States that do not require Front License Plates

Add Your Own Style

Typically, your Air Cooled VW has been through at least one other owner before it found you. As we all know, one of the fun parts of owning a Volkswagen is personalization. It's easy to put your personal stamp on license plate with a variety of License Plate Frames. Frames are inexpensive and come in chrome, painted plastic, carbon fiber and stainless steel. The other factor you may consider when picking your license plate frame is the wording – or the absence of wording. Some VW owners choose a plain sleek license plate frame, while others choose a saying or design to add an element of fun.

While license plates are required in all states in the US and abroad, there are still many options to personalize your plates to match your Air Cooled style!