Are We Diluting History?

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Abstract: Are We Diluting History?

Historical markers are everywhere and therefore have the potential to transmit history to a wide range of audiences. But is the history they are promoting always “valid” history? Through this research project, I hope to show trends in the validity of historical markers, how time has had an effect on the historical significance of markers, and how they correlate to the median income of the areas where they are erected.

This research project will use the Ohio Historical Marker program for its case study. I will use a random sampling of 20-25% of the markers (approximately 300) and test them on a grading rubric as objectively as possible. The markers will be judged on four categories with the opportunity to score up to ten points per section. The four categories are:

1. Historical significance (broken down on a local, state, and national level)
2. The lasting integrity of the historical importance
3. The context of the marker, its text, and its location
4. The mechanics of the marker (grammar, skilled and complete writing, correctly numbered, etc.)

The data from this case study will then be gathered and examined. The rated historic validation of the markers will be compared by the dates the markers were erected and the median household income of the township. This will show that Ohio Historical Markers have declined in historical significance over time, and the least historically significant markers are found in areas with higher median incomes. These trends can cause
historically significant markers to appear diluted, and are most likely due to the broad requirements to obtain a marker, the judgment of the applications, and the purchasing of markers to increase property value.

Abstract Disclaimer

While the research that was conducted for this study was very informative, it sadly did not yield enough data to prove all of the theories proposed in the original abstract. Instead, this research (which is ongoing) is best used as a springboard for future research by proving that a holistic report is necessary. “Are We Diluting History?” has shown significant trends in the Ohio Historical Marker program, which will be outlined in a future section of this report, and has shown systemic flaws in the program as a whole.

Ohio Historical Markers

The Ohio Historical Marker program, as well as other state marker programs, can often be overlooked in the public history field, but are extremely important. These markers present opportunities to interact with the public while also educating them. The first U.S. historical marker can be traced back to Virginia in 1927, and a rise in historical markers throughout the country continued through the 1930s with The New Deal. The Ohio Historical Marker program was founded in 1957, and since then has erected over

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1 Pascal Bardet, “Demarcating Territory: Historical Markers in the United States”,
1,700 markers throughout the state of Ohio with approximately 20-30 new markers placed every year².

The characteristic bronze-colored plaques that scatter the landscape and state routes are managed by the Ohio History Connection (previously The Ohio Historical Society) out of Columbus. Yet, the website for the Ohio History Connection only has a single page with minimal information on the marker program. Instead the location to find the most on Ohio Historical Markers is a satellite website called “Remarkable Ohio”. While this site is meant to function as a database of all of the markers, and as an area for overall information regarding the program; it leaves a lot to be desired.

These markers are also fairly easy to acquire. Remarkable Ohio states the marker criteria as: “[addressing] at least one important aspect of Ohio’s historical, natural, or physical development in one of the following areas: history, architecture, culture, archaeology, natural history, or folklore”.³ These marker submissions are judged twice a year, and the finished product costs around $3,000+ depending on the bells and whistles associated.⁴ While they claim these markers are tracked and reported, there are many that go missing, and also a variety that were cast but never erected.

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⁴ Ibid.
Research Strategies

Grading Process

This study ("Are We Diluting History?") holistically examines Ohio Historical Markers: their quality and distribution throughout the state. There are currently over 1,700 Ohio Historical Markers and this number grows by roughly 20-30 markers each year. These markers present opportunities to interact directly with and educate the public in a way that few or no other medium truly does. As Pascal Bardet outlines in their article “Demarcating Territory: Historical Markers in the United States”:

When they are designated by a sign, places are given historical significance, even if they have been parceled out or transformed. However, historical markers also often mark the absence of what used to be; they symbolically fill the gap and inform us that this particular area now lacks what made it significant historically speaking.\(^5\)

Therefore, it is my belief that their location, content, and context is of great importance. When any of these qualities are sub-par or frivolous it is a reflection on the other markers in the Ohio Historical Marker program.

This study is composed of a random sampling of markers (327) that were chosen to represent approximately 20% of all Ohio Historical Markers, while making sure that each county was represented at least once.

All markers were graded on a ten-point scale in four categories: historical significance, historical integrity, context, and mechanics (total score out of 40 points).

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**Historical Significance:** Arguably the most important category, historical significance considers whether a marker is worthy of existing. This category also looks at the importance of a subject on a local, state, and national scale.

**Historical Integrity:** This category considers the longevity of a site or historical content, and whether the site has lasting historic value.

**Context:** This category looks at the contextual information in the historical marker as well as the marker’s surroundings.

e.g. can one understand the importance of the historical marker without any previous knowledge on the subject?

**Mechanics:** The final category looks at the nuts and bolts of the marker. This includes grammar, spelling, word choice, sentence structure, numbering errors, and similar basic issues.

The study’s lowest grade was a 6; highest grade was a 38; median grade was 27; mean grade was 26.48; mode grade was 29.

Below are examples of the grading process that was used for this research project. By using the lowest scoring marker, the median scoring marker, and the highest scoring marker from the current data, it shows the grades the markers received in each category as well as explanations on why they received the scores allotted. The complete text for these markers can be found at RemarkableOhio.org.
Lowest Scoring Marker

Marker # 127-18

Lewis Field Historic District

Cuyahoga County

Image: RemarkableOhio.org

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Significance</th>
<th>Historical Integrity</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The image of the “Lewis Field Historic District” marker shows the lack of content. Due to the small amount of information available on the marker it was almost impossible to grade in any of these categories, which accounts for the exceedingly low scores that have been attributed.
This marker lacks historical significance and historical integrity since the text only contains sponsors for this marker and the other Ohio Historical Marker that is nearby.

The most interesting (and problem-ridden) category for the “Lewis Field Historic District” marker is context. It is clear that this marker lacks any context, and leaves readers wondering what the Lewis Field Historic District even is. On top of poor (or absent) text, the marker is very close to another Ohio Historical Marker, and both are on restricted property that is only accessible via limited tours.

The mechanics of this marker are also considered poor since it is only a list of sponsors. The marker number is shared with the other marker on site, which is confusing for tracking, visiting, and organizing.

Historical markers are an integral part of public history due to their proximity to the general public. By making historical markers inaccessible, difficult to visit, and abandoned of any historic information they are no longer serving their purpose.

Not only is this marker inconveniently placed, but it is also acting as a billboard for sponsors instead of teaching history. This could come across as off-putting to some audiences, and therefore could reflect poorly on their views of the entire Ohio Historical Marker program. Not only will blatant advertising cause this response, but the lack of information available on the marker could also cause the public to rethink the quality of Ohio Historical Markers. For these reasons this marker easily sums up the purpose of this study: Are we diluting history?
The marker “Springvale Ballroom” from Cuyahoga County is a prime example of a median graded marker. The pattern of grading - as seen above - for this marker was common throughout the grading process for the other markers in the study. Many
markers scored mid-range for historical significance and historical integrity, but scored high for context and mechanics, which helped to boost scores.

After reading through this marker text, it seemed apparent that the Springvale Ballroom was held to a high-level of local respect and historic value when it was in its prime. This would give it a lower rating. Yet, after considering the rally to save the structure in 1994 with it being one of a few ballrooms left in the state, the historical significance was judged to be mid-range.

Historical integrity for this marker was considered on a similar basis. While the structure lacks some historic value (i.e. there were many, many ballrooms so how do we decide which ones to save?), saving the structure from demolition does give it historic integrity points. The Springvale Ballroom is now a structure that is still standing and is being repurposed for rental events like weddings and galas. The golf course is also still in use. Therefore, a mid-range grade settles the score between a site that is still operating, and a semi-historic past.

The context on this marker is done very well overall. The text not only discusses the importance of the Springvale Ballroom, but also the history behind the ballroom boom of the 30s and 40s. Though there is little context and background on the family who established the site and the golf course.

Lastly, the mechanics on the marker are fair. The numbering is correct and the marker is clear to read and comprehend. For a historical marker it is a bit long-winded, but overall is structurally sound.
Highest Scoring Marker

Marker #43-31

William Howard Taft/Robert Alphonso Taft

Hamilton County

It is not shocking that some of the highest scoring markers in this study were Presidential sites given their national importance. This marker scored very high on historical significance and historical integrity due to its connection to national history,
its location on the property of the Taft home, and the lasting impact that all U.S.
Presidents have on the nation.

The marker is not only for a very famous Ohioan, but it does a wonderful job at assuming that you do not know who William Howard Taft was. By highlighting his successes with the brief amount of text available on an Ohio Historical Marker, one can easily digest Taft’s significance as both Commander in Chief and Chief Justice. Once more, the marker being placed on the property of the William Howard Taft National Historic Site is also a large boost in Context scores.

The mechanics of this marker also scored very well. The text is clean and easy to read. The numbering is correct, and the grammar is in good standing. The use of “Side B” to discuss the achievements of William Howard Taft’s son, Robert Alphonso Taft is also a positive for mechanics.

Many Ohio Historical Markers waste their second side by having it contain the same text as “Side A” which means that they are not using the marker to its full potential. Others will use “Side B” as a continuation of information from “Side A”. This often creates information overload on a single subject that the passerby has no previous knowledge or interest in. Another common occurrence is a double-sided marker dealing with two different historic events/people/places/etc. that are extremely far removed from each other and have next-to-no similarities. The best marker planning can be found in ones such as #31-43 where there are two different sides to the marker that clearly relate to each other.
Findings

This study – though small and in its early stages – still presented many trends in the Ohio Historical Marker program. Surprisingly, there was a fair amount of minority representation. While this study is still preliminary and theoretically only represents 20% of the state’s markers, racial minorities and women were represented at a moderately consistent rate throughout the study. It will be intriguing to see if this trend continues through the full study of all 1,700+ markers.

Other trends found in the sample study are not as favorable: principally, the concept of “buying history” is demonstrated through this process. The majority of markers with the best grades came from counties with low population, low income, and a small number of Ohio Historical Markers. This means that the best markers are being found in areas that only have the ability to erect a few markers and are sure to make them formidable. In addition, the lowest scoring markers are often funded by fraternal organizations, churches, and municipalities. Once more this shows that the act of purchasing history is occurring. These small Ohio towns and organizations are buying markers in order for their syndicate to earn agency and interest in the community. e.g. homes and businesses have a higher market value in a “historic” area.
Another trend that was noticeable during research is represented in the graph above (Fig. 1). Over 50% of the 327 markers examined during this study were erected between the year 2000 and 2009. This trend, though significant, is predictable due to Ohio’s bicentennial in 2003. Basic Ohio Historical Marker research will show that in the years surrounding 2003 both the Ohio Bicentennial Commission and the Longaberger Company sponsored the majority of markers. This funding assistance surely boosted the applications and response to the marker program, therefore causing this noteworthy spike.
The above graphs (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3) show a breakdown of the 327 markers in the sample study by content. This yields some interesting data. For example, the content category regarding “disasters” is the highest rated in the study, yet it is also the lowest
content category represented with only three markers. In comparison, the content category represented the most is people/government and has a fair score (fifth of eighteen) for average grade; while the second highest represented category (homes, buildings, and architecture) is well below average.

In the end, the most disturbing trend found is the missed opportunities. As stated prior, historical markers are meant to educate and engage the public. Markers like “Lewis Field Historic District” do no such thing. Yet this is not a stand-alone marker. Multiple markers in this preliminary study posed more questions than they answered. This causes one to ask: why is the state historical society holding a poorly written historical marker, in a restricted area, that only contains sponsors as text on the same historic level and honor of a Presidential home and library?

Further Research

The first step for continued research on the Ohio Historical Marker program is to grade and collect data for all 1,700+ markers so that there is a complete analysis to examine for further research. After all of this data is collected, I would prefer to focus this study on the validity of markers compared to the average income of a county and/or township. There appears to be a correlation between the two; and I am eager to see if that trend continues.

It would also be ideal to improve the rubric against any biases, and to have a grading staff, as opposed to one person. Additionally, through discussions at a national conference, it appears that other states are dealing with similar issues or are unaware of their state historical marker program. After succeeding in covering all Ohio Historical
Markers in this study, it would be ideal to compare other state systems, programs, websites, marketing, and accessibility to state historical markers.

Works Cited


