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Buying History: Trends in Ohio Historical Markers

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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 in places that are not always seen as "traditional historic areas" (e.g. museums, battlegrounds, etc.). 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.[1] The Ohio Historical Marker program was founded in 1957, and since then has erected over 1,700 markers throughout the state with approximately 20-30 new markers placed every year.[2]

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, and anyone can send in an application. 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 vague marker guidelines could be one of the causes for the immense amount of historic-adjacent markers that seem to be scattered across Ohio's landscape. Marker submissions are

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[1] Pascal Bardet, "Demarcating Territory: Historical Markers in the United States," *Universite Toulouse*, no. 6 (2012): 2.

[2] "Historical Markers," Ohio History Connection, accessed April 2, 2019, https://www.ohiohistory.org/perserve/local-history-services/historicl-markers.

[3] "Propose a Marker," Remarkable Ohio, accessed April 11, 2019, https://www.remarkableohio.org/index.php?/page/propose.

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.

Are We Diluting History?

Previously presented at the NCPH (National Council on Public History) poster session at the 2019 annual conference in Hartford, "Are We Diluting History?" holistically examined Ohio Historical Markers: their quality and distribution throughout the state. The ever-growing 1,700+ markers present opportunities to interact directly with the public, and educate them in ways that few other mediums do. As Pascal Bardet outlines in his 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 can be argued that the location, context, and content of each marker is greatly important. When any of these qualities are sub-par or frivolous it can be seen as a reflection on the Ohio Historical Marker program as a whole.

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.

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Pascal Bardet, "Demarcating Territory", 2.

Grading Process

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).[6]

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.

Findings

When conducting this study there were some positive trends found in the sample study (like the inclusion of minorities and women), but there were also trends that were not as favorable. The graphs

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[6] Disclaimer: It is only fair to the reader to point out that this study was conducted solely by the author and therefore may contain some biases. The author was aware of this threat from the beginning, and there was diligent effort involved in avoiding these potential biases. These case studies are also small sample sizes and anecdotal information that may not be a trend reflected across the entire state of Ohio.

found below (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2) 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.

Fig. 1 (Nicole Slaven. 2019)

Average Grades by Marker Subject

Legend:
- Disasters
- Art
- Education
- Sports
- People/Government
- Nature
- Commerce
- Civil Rights/Slavery
- War/Military
- Native Americans
- Homes/Buildings
- Hospitals/Health
- Religion
- Towns
- Infrastructure
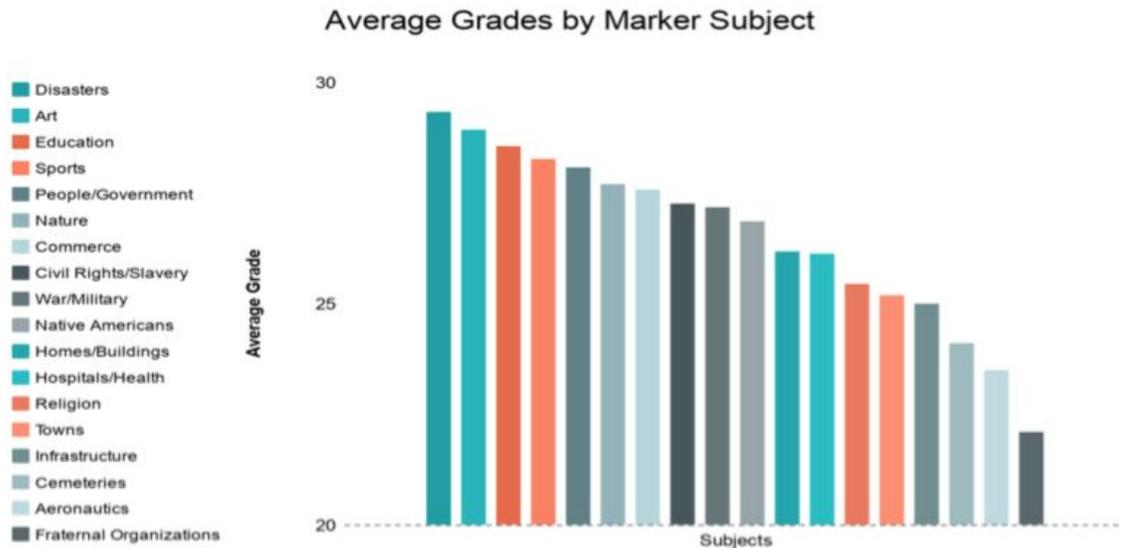- Cemeteries
- Aeronautics
- Fraternal Organizations

Fig. 2 (Nicole Slaven, 2019)

One of the most disturbing trends 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. The marker does not contain any content, but is instead a list of sponsors staged in a restricted area. Yet this is not a stand-alone marker. Multiple markers in this preliminary study posed more questions than they answered (e.g. What makes the "Lewis Field Historic District" historic?). The highest scoring marker, "William Howard Taft/Robert Alphonoso Taft", is not only about a nationally notable individual, but it is also housed on the William Howard Taft National Historic Site which boosted context scores, and it is written in a digestible manner. These two markers could not be more different, and yet both are given the same historic implications by being honored in the same way (an Ohio Historical Marker). 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 well-written marker about a Presidential home and library?

Additionally, the concept of "buying history" was demonstrated through this process. The majority of markers with the best grades came from counties with small populations, low average household incomes, and/or a small number of Ohio Historical Markers. This theorizes that the best markers are being found in areas that only have the ability to erect a few markers, and therefore are sure to make them historically significant. In addition, the lowest scoring markers are often funded by fraternal organizations, churches, and municipalities. These small Ohio organizations and towns are demonstrating an attempt at purchasing historic validity to control the narrative of a given area. e.g. homes and businesses have a higher market value in a "historic" area.

Case Study: Mahoning County[7]

Mahoning County can be found in northeastern Ohio, and is probably best known for its county seat and famous rustbelt city: Youngstown. For those not familiar with the area, Mahoning County was part of the Connecticut Land Company's Western Reserve until the 1790s when land was purchased to lay out a new settlement (Youngstown).[8] In 1802 the Hopewell Furnace was built in (what is now) Struthers, Ohio. It was the first blast furnace in Ohio, as well as the first west of the Allegheny Mountains, and has thus earned an Ohio Historical Marker.[9] This brought the beginning of the industrial epicenter that would embrace the county until deindustrialization hit the United States Heartland --now known as the Rustbelt-- in the mid-twentieth century. Youngstown was the top producer of steel in Ohio, and was second only to Pittsburgh in the United States by the early-twentieth century.[10] It was also home to one of
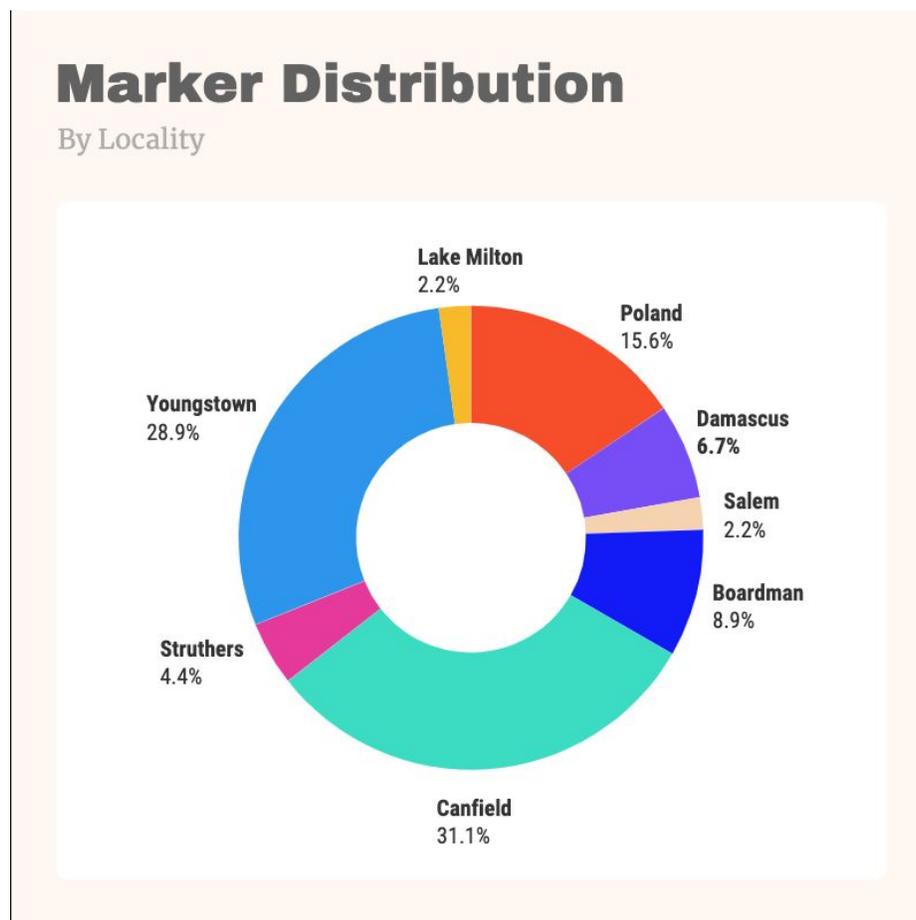
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[7] It is worthy to note that Mahoning County was not chosen at random to be featured in this case study. As a native of the area, I am familiar with the county, the history, and the markers that are contained in this case study. When I first visited the historical markers in the county, I began to notice the trends that are outlined in this research. Though some of these trends appear parallel to findings from the "Are We Diluting History?" study, this analysis is not necessarily a representation of Ohio as a whole.

[8] "Youngstown, Ohio," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/place/Youngstown-Ohio.

[9] "Yellow Creek Park," Mill Creek MetroParks, accessed September 29, 2019, https://www.millcreekmetroparks.org/visit/places/yellow-creek-park/.

[10] "Youngstown, Ohio," Ohio History Connection, accessed October 1, 2019, https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Youngstown,_Ohio.

the most well known blast furnaces in pop culture; thanks to Bruce Springsteen's 1995 song about deindustrialization: "Youngstown". In it he croons "My sweet Jenny I'm sinking down/Here darling in Youngstown"[11] in reference to Brier Hill's Jeanette Furnace (a great piece of rust belt history that does not currently have an Ohio Historical Marker).[12] Just as Springsteen implies in his song, Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley have not yet recovered from the fall of the steel industry like cities such as Pittsburgh have.

Marker Distribution
By Locality

- Lake Milton 2.2%
- Poland 15.6%
- Youngstown 28.9%
- Damascus 6.7%
- Salem 2.2%
- Boardman 8.9%
- Struthers 4.4%
- Canfield 31.1%

[11] Bruce Springsteen, "Youngstown," *The Ghost of Tom Joad,* Columbia Records, 1995.
[12] Sara Gulgas, "Youngstown: A Local Band's Rebuke of Springsteen's Representation of a Cite Struggling to Define Itself After Deindustrialization," in *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture,* William I. Wolff, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018): 31-44, 32.

Fig. 3 (Nicole Slaven, 2019)
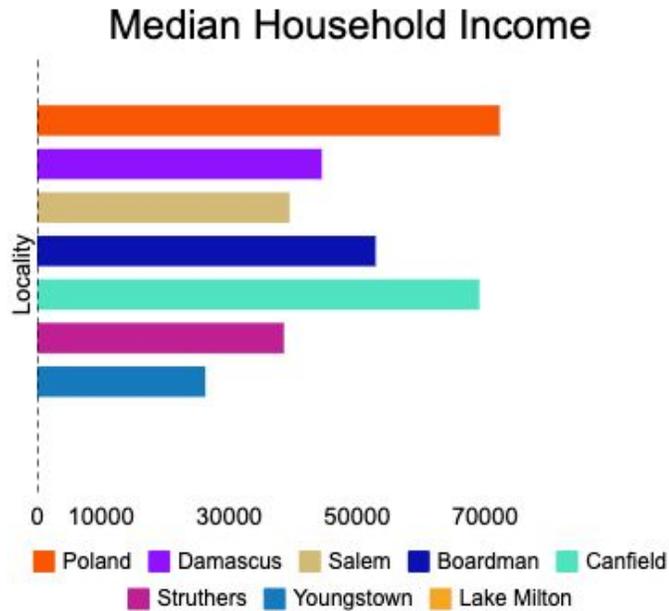
Median Household Income

Fig. 4 (Nicole Slaven, 2019)

There are currently forty-five Ohio Historical Markers in Mahoning County. As seen above in fig. 3, Youngstown, Canfield, and Poland are the localities that hold claim on most of Mahoning County's markers. Boardman is close behind, but the rest of the townships and municipalities have only a minute amount. When comparing these numbers to the data found in fig. 4 there are some patterns that manifest. There appears to be a correlation between the median household income of an area, and the amount of Ohio Historical Markers erected. More markers seem to be found in affluent areas, with the exception of Youngstown (due to its large population size and recent redevelopment efforts). Canfield and Poland rank

the highest on median household income ($69,118[13] and $72,283[14] respectively via the 2013-2017 American Community Survey), and hold the first and third spots for most Ohio Historical Markers in the county. Meanwhile, Struthers who holds the second-lowest median household income at $38,570[15] only has two markers. Youngstown may be an outsider in this trend, but observe these numbers with the addition of population side by side with Canfield:

	Population[16]	Median Household Income[17]	Number of Markers
Youngstown	64,958	$26, 295	13
Canfield	7,234	$69,118	14

As this chart shows, Youngstown has a population of almost nine times the size of Canfield. (That is a ratio of 1 marker to every 4,997 people in Youngstown compared to a ratio of 1 marker to every 577 residents in Canfield.) Yet Canfield has more markers than Youngstown, this study hypothesizes that this is due to Canfield's wealth. This also goes back to my original research regarding the dilution of history. When there are large amounts of markers that are put up in a concentrated area, these markers are more likely to have a lower rating of historical significance. This may be due to the residents and community

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[13] "Canfield city, Ohio," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 5, 2019, https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=canfield&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP&_charset_=UTF-8.

[14] "Poland village, Ohio," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 5, 2019, https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=poland+ohio&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP&_charset_=UTF-8.

[15] "Struthers city, Ohio," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 5, 2019, https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=struthers+ohio&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP&_charset_=UTF-8.

[16] Population numbers were acquired via the United States Census Bureau using the 2018 population estimate. United States Census Bureau, accessed September 5, 2019, www.census.gov.

[17] Median household income data was acquired via the United States Census Bureau using the 2013-2017 American Community Survey. United States Census Bureau, accessed September 5, 2019, www.census.gov.

having enough funds/time to put up a large number of markers to make an area "historic", or to craft a

local narrative.

To test this theory the grading system was applied to rate all of Mahoning County's current Ohio

Historical Markers; and the average grade for each locality and compared this to each area's median

household income. See fig. 5 and fig. 6 below.

Fig. 5 (Nicole Slaven, 2019): Average Marker Grade by Locality

Fig. 6 (Nicole Slaven, 2019): Median Household Income by Locality

Each blue point on the maps indicates an Ohio Historical Marker. Fig. 5 shows the average marker grade by location, and Fig. 6 indicates the median household income in the same locations. As one can see, the average marker grade for areas like Poland, Canfield, and Boardman (the three highest median household incomes) score 25, 24.5, and 23.75 respectively out of a 40 point total. Meanwhile Youngstown, Salem, and Struthers (the three lowest median household incomes) score 27.7, 28, and 29 respectively. While these are only differences of a few points, that can go a long way when looking at historical significance. The stand-alone in this trend is Damascus. While it has a mid-range median household income for the county, it has the lowest average score. Two of the three markers found in Damascus work in tandem, but are practically the same marker which caused them to score low on historical integrity, context, and mechanics therefore bringing down the score for the CDP.

The green in Canfield is a great example to further the association between more markers in affluent areas, and worse historical significance scores in places with a higher concentration of markers.

Fig. 7 (Nicole Slaven, 2019): Marker grades on the Canfield Green

The map above (Fig. 7) depicts the green in Canfield with the blue points signifying the markers, and the red numbers next to each point being the score for the marker. Less than ¾ of a mile radius is shown in Fig. 7. Yet in that small amount of space, eleven of Canfield's fourteen Ohio Historical Markers are located. This concentrated group of markers has an average of only 24.3 out of a possible 40 points, and has an average historical significance score of 5.4 out of 10. While these markers and scores are not as poor as "Lewis Field Historic District", these numbers are still subpar.[18]

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[18] I acknowledge that this case study only looked at four data points - locality, median household income, marker quality, and marker density. There are other important data points that deserve to be analyzed as well; such as time density, sponsorships, and general economic and population trends over the last thirty - forty years. With the continued extension of this research, I hope that these data points (and others) can be acknowledged in this study.

It is easy to criticize the marker program, and how the markers of Mahoning County are distributed, but it is my hope to do so in a productive manner. After recently attending the "How to 'Win' an Ohio Historical Marker" presentation by the Ohio History Connection at the Youngstown Historical Center of Labor and Industry, some words by Andy Verhoff (the History Fund Grant Manager for Ohio History Connection) stood out. He mentioned that Ohio Historical Markers are meant to "spark discovery of Ohio stories, embrace the present, share the past, and transform the future."[19] In this regard, most markers are doing their job by helping shape communities and educate the public. Verhoff also mentioned the core values of the program in his lecture: "relevance, stewardship, working together, authenticity, and inclusivity"[20]. The latter of which he stated was limited by marker applications. A representative from West Virginia Archives & History who places the West Virginia State Historical Markers also shared the same sentiment of their program that, "There are many topics that go 'unmarked' because no one submits applications for them. Many states are hamstrung by lack of funding and are somewhat at the (topical) mercy of sponsors. In this sense, history is written by those willing to write it."[21] Omission of important historical events, and inclusion of questionable historic significance can be found everywhere. There very well may be cases of it strewn across Mahoning County as reflected in the previous case study as well.

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Best Practices

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After grading hundreds of markers, reading hundreds more, and talking with the professionals who run marker programs in various states; I decided to end this paper with a best practices section to avoid poorly graded markers (at least in the state of Ohio).

Text

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[19] Andy Verhoff, "How to 'Win' an Ohio Historical Marker", Ohio History Connection, August 17, 2019.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Survey with West Virginia Archives & History, September 2019.

Though this may be obvious, all markers should be crafted in historic fact. If the information on the marker cannot be backed up by primary (or sometimes secondary) source material then it should not be on a marker. Facts on historical markers should be as rigorously examined as any other historical text. That being said, the text should not be too long (or too short either). Although it may be possible to put hundreds of words on a marker, most people will not read the entire thing. Ohio History Connection suggests 100-130 words per sign.[22] It is also important to craft the marker with fun facts (short, easily digestible, memorable, and effortless to regurgitate). This will allow the reader to educate others, and encourages further research. It is also best to not use any definitive words (e.g. 'first church in...') unless it can be proven by multiple sources, otherwise a marker may become obsolete. Likewise, it is important to avoid using words such as "now" or "currently", and instead use time periods and dates since one never knows when an area or building will change or disappear.

Location

As previously stated when discussing the grading rubric, it is always nice to see a marker in a contextual location. While it should always be the goal for a marker to be placed in a location that adds to the content, it is occasionally not the best option. Permission by the land owner is needed to erect an Ohio Historical Marker, and that can become a roadblock if the land owner does not wish to maintain a marker on their property. There is also the risk of prime contextual locations being in areas that are difficult to get to. Historical markers should always be placed in accessible areas to encourage the public to read them. It is also ideal for them to have pull-offs for cars and warning signage on busy roads for safety; and to steer clear of hectic intersections. Lastly, to stem off of the Mahoning County case study, location should be reconsidered if there is a large concentration of markers in one area. Too many markers can give the

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[22] Verhoff, "How to 'Win' an Ohio Historical Marker".

impression of the dilution of history (if everything is deserving of a historical marker, is anything really historic?)

Alternatives

If there is a question about whether or not a site deserves a state historical marker, it is important to seek alternative ways of historic commemoration. One of the best usages of historical markers that I have seen to date is in Carroll County, Ohio. This small rural county has only three Ohio Historical Markers, since there are only three events/people/places/etc. in the county that the community has considered distinguishable from state recognition. To commemorate the historic items of local importance, the county historical society made their own historical markers. While it may be a challenge for some counties to enact this type of program, it is a great alternative to the overpopulation of state historical markers in Ohio, and it allows communities to build their narrative and commemorate their history.

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Further Research

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Naturally, the next step for this research is to grade all 1,700+ Ohio Historical Markers in order to get full data for continued analysis, and to see if the trends described in this preliminary research are replicated throughout the rest of the state. This research would primarily continue to focus on the economic trends associated with erecting state markers. Secondly, it would be ideal to compare and contrast the Ohio Historical Marker program to other state marker programs across the country. This will be helpful to refine the best practices associated with state historical markers.

Lastly, Civil War Trails, Inc. has been in contact regarding ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance among all roadside historical markers. While ADA requirements are not a current goal

for the Ohio Historical Marker program, it would be helpful to see how many (if any) meet the

requirements, and also to see how many are inaccessible to the general public.

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