

Exploring The Public Value of Ohio's History



OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY



URBAN AFFAIRS CENTER
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INTRODUCTION:

There is no doubt that history plays a defining role in the formation of our personal and democratic ideologies. How history is defined, and imparted, is a crucial aspect of our maturity, both individually and as a nation. How we internalize, interpret, and use that history speaks volumes about who we are. However, like the study of geography, the emphasis on the study of history has significantly waned. In the face of aggressive STEM-focused curriculum, what is the role, or necessity, of teaching history and social studies? Historically, Ohio history was deeply engrained in students from an early age. Ohio prided itself on being home of the Great Serpent Mound, witness to Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry's stunning naval victory on Lake Erie, and as a "mother of Presidents." The impact of Ohio's industrial/technological giants, the Wright Brothers, Thomas Edison, and Harvey Firestone were recognized world-wide...and internalized by every student in the state by the time they graduated from elementary school. In the 1960s and early 1970s pioneer space voyagers John Glenn and Neil Armstrong took over those roles, while Ohio's earlier history began to fade into memory. As the 20th century entered its last quarter, and especially after the national Bicentennial in 1976, there was renewed interest in Ohio's history...historic sites and small museums proliferated, historic preservation became a mainstream activity, genealogy and historic recognitions flourished. But again in the ensuing years as the new century and millennium dawned, ostensibly more pressing matters of national security and financial stability overtook the nation, while funding for and interest in things historic again began to wane. That the legions of small historical societies and museums are sustained largely by post 60 year-old volunteers is worrisome. Who uses these sites? Who cares for them? Who will carry on their vital mission of protecting Ohio's patrimony? Should the state be ready to witness the 'E-bay' auctioning of the state's heritage?

By the 21st century, the recognition that Ohio's history and the value placed on it no longer held the imperative position it once was afforded has led some to believe that the importance and relevance of Ohio's history might be in crisis, or at least highly under-recognized, underutilized, and underappreciated. In the face of the now inextricable bond between communication and technology, history, the value placed on it, and the teaching of history seem to have taken a back seat to more modern, contemporary concerns. Is it time for the importance of Ohio's history to be re-established? Is it time for groups and individuals involved in promoting Ohio's history to re-invent themselves? And how would that happen? Inherently, everyone knows that history is a basis for sound decision-making and for understanding the context in which not only one's community and state, but also the nation, evolved to its current iteration. It is time for Ohio's history, indeed the very value placed on the state's vital and world-changing heritage, to once again assert the place of prominence it once enjoyed.

This report, undertaken by the Urban Affairs Center of the University of Toledo for the Ohio Historical Society, will address many of these concerns, and will provide multiple perspectives on the public value of Ohio's history yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

History should be studied because it is essential to individuals and to society, and because it harbors beauty. There are many ways to discuss the real functions of the subject—as there are many different historical talents and many different paths to historical meaning.

-- Peter Stern, *Why Study History*, American Historical Association, 1998

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

History plays a defining role in the formation of our personal and democratic ideologies, and how we internalize, interpret, and use that history speaks volumes about who we are. However, like the study of geography, the emphasis on the study of history has significantly waned. In the face of aggressive STEM-focused curriculum, what is the role, or necessity, of teaching history and social studies? The object of this report is to explore this question: What is the public value of history and historic preservation in Ohio? We begin with an exploration of the public value of Ohio's history, informed by four surveys, from four different perspectives:

- Administrators of Ohio's historic sites
- Visitors to those sites
- Ohio's social studies teachers
- The general public in and around Ohio

Site Administrators It is estimated that Ohio boasts nearly 1,000 local history organizations, most of them very small with very few budgetary or human resources. While the diversity of these sites appears to be well represented among the 96 administrators who replied to our survey, there are indications that larger organizations may be over-represented in comparison to the larger number of local sites which depend almost entirely on volunteers.

In an online survey, we asked administrators how Ohio could help them attract more visitors and better encourage an appreciation of Ohio's history.

- Not surprisingly, many administrators (23%) suggested that more funding would be most valuable.
- An even larger number of respondents, however (28%), would like to see Ohio do a better job of promoting its historic sites.

Site Visitors We also asked site administrators to make a brief questionnaire available to visitors as they exited the site. Many obliged, resulting in 246 responses from visitors, despite the fact that our study did not include the summer months during which most visits take place.

The responses show overwhelmingly that the visitors who replied to our survey found their trips to historic sites to be very much worthwhile on multiple levels.

- Nearly all found that the visit was an opportunity to engage in quality family time and called the visit a valuable learning experience (99%)
- At the same time, the vast majority (96%) said their visit was entertaining
- It also made them feel proud to be an American (97%)

Social Studies Teachers Considering the essential role of teachers, who are often the first to introduce new generations to history and historical experiences, it was imperative to solicit Ohio's teachers' views on Ohio's history. We received online responses from 574 social studies teachers, grades K-12. We looked at the value they find in field trips, and also how Ohio's history enriches classroom learning.

- The teachers unanimously say that field trips - especially those to local historic sites- not only enhance the students' learning experiences but also
- Help make teachers more effective in the classroom and provide a frame of reference for the textbook material
- Also, over 90% of the teachers said they turn to local archives and historic sites to obtain primary sources of information and documents to use in their lesson plans
- The teachers also expressed interest for even deeper integration of Ohio's history in their classrooms, including having an historian make a presentation at their school (77%) or being trained on both local history and the techniques of embedding local historic heritage in the curriculum (90%)

Teachers repeatedly asserted that neither society nor the government puts enough value in teaching history in general. One teacher observed that *"no one bled on the field or bravely stood up against tyranny because X=5; children grow into responsible citizens inspired by serious study of their history."*

Ohio residents In a random phone survey of residents of Ohio and neighboring counties, we explored how people define history. We looked at the importance of history to them and how they prefer to experience history. Then we considered the economic and political benefit of Ohio's history and historic sites for the general public today.

The results from more than 1,400 completed surveys show that the respondents conceive of history very broadly, including not only the big textbook topics they read about in high school like Ancient Rome (71%), but also more recent things that relate to their own personal daily lives, such as the Lucille Ball Show (94%) and their own childhood home (88%).

In addition to asking our phone interviewees to define history, we also asked questions to assess how important Ohio's history is to them. Overall, Ohioans expressed an impressive appreciation for their state's history – both at personal and collective levels:

- 86% say Ohio's history and historic places are important to them
- More than half (53%) of respondents say history is important to their career
- 76% say they think about the past when making important decisions
- 72% look to historic figures as role models

Today few people doubt the importance and value of civil society in America. We explore whether or not Ohio's history serves as a resource that contributes to a healthy, active civil society here in the Midwest. Based on responses to questions about their involvement in things like clubs, politics and daily neighborhood activities, we created several indexes which measure various levels of civic engagement. These indexes were combined to create an overall Civic Participation Index, which was then correlated with responses indicating the value people place on history.

- The result shows that Ohioans who say they value Ohio's history on average score 23% higher on the Civic Participation Index. We can confidently say the differences in overall civic engagement levels between people who say history is important and those who say it is not important exist not only in our sample, but throughout all of Ohio.

Measuring an abstract concept like public value is no simple task. With these four surveys we attempted to capture the multitude of benefits Ohio's historic heritage offers to its citizens. This includes not only economic benefits of employment and tourism, but also the civic enrichment of educated, engaged citizens. We also found evidence of the worth of Ohio's history on a personal level; these historic sites and museums give people a sense of pride, conjure fond memories, and offer a place for family time and special events. Because these benefits are not easily quantifiable, their importance can easily be overlooked.

Taken together, the four surveys show that these sites' public value is multifaceted. Not only do they seem to generate employment and local business revenue, but also they are valuable to teachers and parents as sources of education and places to spend quality time with family. They also are a source of pride for Ohioans and they are associated with civic participation. In short, families, schools, businesses, employees and even our democracy itself all have a stake in these historic sites and museums.

The report summarizes two economic opportunities: 1) the continued preservation, development, and promotion of our state's historic resources is an opportunity to stimulate Ohio's heritage tourism industry, and 2) the recognition that historic preservation is a key element of sustainable growth is an opportunity for the historic preservation community to join with environmental community to take part in projects that provide a stimulus for job creation, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure repairs.

Specific recommendations for policies and programs, informed by the research in this report, are provided. These include 1) involving state and local history organizations in the planning and implementation of Governor Ted Strickland's educational reform proposal and 2) using two rapidly-approaching commemorations - the War of 1812 and The Civil War – to promote an awareness of Ohio's role in these events and the historic sites throughout the state where they took place.

Finally, a series of vignettes – each representing a unique approach to utilizing history in an effective, relevant manner – are presented as examples of communities and programs that capitalize financially and culturally on the value of history. These include six historic sites and how they benefit their communities, the several sites being considered for inclusion in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Listing and three statewide programs – the Ohio Main Street Program, The Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program, and The Ohio Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program.

In an era of accelerated change, these vignettes offer a succinct review of successful history-based ventures where the “value of history” is foremost in the success equation.