



## ANDY'S HISTORICAL MARKER WRITING TIPS

How to "Win" an Ohio Historical Marker

OHLA Annual Meeting - October 4, 2019

### Suggested Marker Text

Question #10 on the Ohio Historical Marker Application asks you to draft a "suggested marker text." What makes for a successful marker text?

#### Elements of a well-written Ohio Historical Marker text

- **All facts are linked to their creditable sources via footnotes or endnotes.** *Andy says Please show your work. "Trust but verify."*
  - Citations are "trails of bread crumbs" that link statements on markers to their sources and enable us and later researchers to scrutinize the text.
- **Withstand the scrutiny of experts although are written for non-experts.**
  - Would a reasonable person not familiar with the subject draw approximately the same conclusions as you if they read the source?
- **Have a logical sequence.** The opening sentences tell you why the subject of the marker is worth knowing about. Following sentences expand upon the subject's significance. The closing sentences resolve the story.
  - First sentences: *Tunes played on fife and drum regulated a soldier's life in camp and his actions on the battlefield. Heard over the roar of battle and through the haze of smoke, fifes and drums – field music – communicated orders to massed troops quickly. Richard Willoughby Thompson (c. 1742-1837), buried in Fancher Cemetery, was a field musician during the American Revolution and the War of 1812...*
  - Last sentences...*Thompson was tragically murdered on December 28, 1837. Rebekah Lee Thompson (1762-1852) is buried beside her husband Richard...*
- **Are written in active voice.**
  - *City hall was built by the John Doe Company.* (9 words - passive)
  - *The John Doe Company built city hall.* (7 words – active - **better**)
- **Doesn't use two words when one will do and stays within word limits.**
  - The markers program strives to reduce word counts whenever possible.
    - Research, however, can reveal items that should be included to tell a more complete story – so more words needed.

- Text that will increase a marker's cost must be approved by applicant.
  - 1" text, approximately 100 words per side (less with image / art)
  - 5/8" text, approximately 130 words per side (less with image / art)
- **Uses specific information to evoke a broader idea.**
  - "...the congregation opposed slavery. In 1848, it adopted resolutions condemning the "peculiar institution" and asserting that Black people are "our brother[s] 'made of one blood' with us," instead of "the church was opposed slavery" (and yes, the first example is more words, but they evoke the congregation's stance more vividly)
- **Is easily understood by a lay reader.**
- **Shares one idea per sentence.**
- **Uses a judicious combination of short and medium-length sentences and varies sentence structure.**
- **Shares enough information to tell stand-alone story.**
- **Pique a reader's curiosity to learn more.**
- **Is grammatically correct.** The marker program style guides are
  - The Chicago Manual of Style.
  - Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

### **Other tips for texts:**

- Include birth-death dates for people named on marker, as appropriate.
- If a building is on the National Register of Historic Places, the marker should say so and indicate the year the building was listed.

### **Program Rules for Marker Text**

- No living person will be named on a marker.
- Markers do not include personal acknowledgements or dedications.

**NOTE: The Ohio Historical Marker Program reserves the right to edit all text and will consult with the named sponsor regarding any changes. Applicants must be amenable to revisions and collaborate with the marker program to arrive at a mutually acceptable final text.**

- Section #10. Marker Application: "All suggested texts are subject to revision at the discretion of the Ohio Historical Markers Program. Such editing may be done to ensure historical accuracy, to tighten the meaning, or to bring the text in a uniform marker voice."
- Applicants must sign-off on the final text before the marker is produced.

- If dealing with a committee, let committee members know from the start that finalizing a marker text is a collaborative process and that only one person will be the contact between the committee and the markers program.

## Sources and Bibliographies

**Question #11 on the Ohio Historical Marker Application asks for a formal bibliography listing all publications, manuscripts, or other references cited in your footnotes or endnotes or that proved significant during your research.**

Each bibliographic entry must include information that will help us find the exact fact you cite, plus contextual information if needed. Usually:

- Name(s) of author;
- Title of book / document;
- Place and date of publication;
- Page numbers cited / specific document cited.
- If a website, give the complete link, the date it was accessed, as well as the name of the author, title, date of publication.

*Your bibliographic entry is the information we use to find the facts you cite.* Bibliographies should only include the materials used to draft the “Suggested Marker Text” and “Statement of Significance.” You do not need to burden the application with materials you didn’t cite or find significant during your research.

Please include **two legible copies of all sources cited**. If we *can’t* read it with the naked eye, it is *not* legible. Do not send original archival materials, one-of-a-kind photographs, or rare books. **Legible** scanned or Xeroxed copies are fine.

What we mean by **creditable sources**:

- Primary sources from the time of the person, place, thing, or event to be marked;
- Peer-reviewed secondary sources;
- Nominations to the National Register of Historic Places (available from State Historic Preservation Office);
- Secondary sources that offer conclusions formed by the use of primary sources. Evidence of such use is found in the footnotes and bibliography of that source;
- Publically accessible oral historical information, or oral historical information cited by other creditable sources.

These source can **be helpful, but require verification** with reference to additional sources:

- Secondary sources that offer conclusions but do not reveal the use of primary sources;
- Present-day newspaper accounts of historical events;
- *Wikipedia* (check the end of the entry for sources used);
- Hearsay or local lore.