

# FORUM

G | THE PLAIN DEALER

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## Ohio's habit of neglecting its history risks a severe memory lapse

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**H**ave you visited an Ohio historic site or museum lately? The Buckeye State is home to about 1,000 of them. Did you know that several prehistoric sites in Ohio are soon to be included on the World Heritage List, alongside the Egyptian pyramids and the Grand Canyon? Did you know that nearly 3,700 historic properties in Ohio are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the third most in the country?

You probably know that the 40th anniversary of Ohio native Neil Armstrong's famous moon landing was recently commemorated.

But did you know that several other historic anniversaries — the Civil War sesquicentennial in 2011 and the War of 1812 bicentennial, to name two — are just around the corner?

The Ohio Historical Society re-

**ONLINE:** Find out more about the Ohio Historical Society and how to get involved at: [saveohiohistory.org](http://saveohiohistory.org)

ceives state funding in exchange for carrying out a host of state-mandated activities — operating 58 historic sites and museums, the state archives and the state historic preservation office, to name just a few. As the state's longtime preservation partner, we see firsthand how Ohio's history and prehistory provide people endless opportunities for learning, entertainment and even spiritual fulfillment.

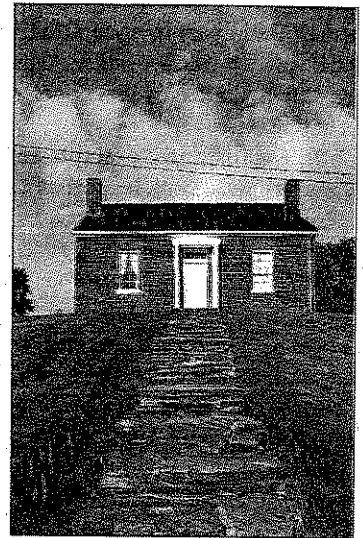
So why are history buffs wondering if history in Ohio has a future? The \$50.5 billion, two-year state budget enacted last month accelerated a decade-long disinvestment in preserving and promoting Ohio history. The Ohio Historical Society began the 21st century with nearly \$14 million in state operating support. It begins this fiscal year with less than

\$8 million, the lowest allocation since 1986. In other words, Ohio is dedicating a mere 69 cents per Ohioan to preserve its state history. Unfortunately, the bad news does not end there.

History supporters learned after the budget's passage that a new income-tax check-off provision to benefit local history organizations was removed from the budget. The voluntary contributions from the tax check-off were to serve as a pool of funds for the historical society to use for a competitive matching-grants program for local history-related organizations. Finally, standardized tests for fifth- and eighth-grade social studies were dropped as a budget-cutting move, ensuring that social studies will get even less classroom attention.

Why does any of this matter? First and foremost, history is about identity.

SEE HISTORY | 64



OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In Ripley, visitors can climb the hill from the Ohio River to the Rankin House, a route of escaping slaves in the 19th century.

## HISTORY

FROM G1

### Ohio risks memory lapse

"History is to the nation as memory is to the individual," Ohio native Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. once wrote. The real stuff of history is not contained in textbooks, but in your community and its institutions — the local archives, libraries, museums and the older buildings and neighborhoods

throughout Ohio. Ironically, many of the best historic buildings and most important artifacts are owned by those least capable of maintaining them — the public sector. It is incumbent upon the public to determine what is to be preserved and what value is to be placed on our shared history.

According to a recent survey of Ohioans by the University of Toledo's Urban Affairs Center:

- Eighty-six percent say that history and historic sites are important to them.

- More than half say history is important to their careers.

- More than three-fourths say they think about the past when making important decisions.

- Generally, Ohioans perceive that the state invests the same or less on history than neighboring states and are inclined to think that Ohio's elected leaders should invest more.

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, Ohio remains home to internationally renowned historic sites and museums, parks, world-class libraries and arts organizations. Unfortunately, these cultural resources and institutions — as well as the travel and tourism industry that supports them

— are also dealing with a perfect storm of forces impacting the entire economy and state budget cuts. These are the organizations that help make Ohio a place worth living in.

This should matter to all of us. With some additional investment, Ohio's infrastructure of history and culture has a hopeful future.

You and I must be an active part of it. Have you visited a local historic site, museum or library lately? Become a member. Contribute.

*Kleismit is the director of government relations for the Ohio Historical Society.*