

Remembering and Forgetting an American President: A Landscape History of the Harrison Tomb

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ABSTRACT: In the village of North Bend, Ohio rest the remains of little-known US President William Henry Harrison. After a long and distinguished military and political career and his election as president in 1840, Harrison earned the dubious distinction of the shortest term in presidential history after falling ill and dying after just one month in office. Following his wishes, Harrison was entombed in an inconspicuous crypt on his North Bend property. For decades afterward, the Harrison Tomb suffered from neglect and vandalism, an artifact that deteriorated along with the memory of this obscure president. There were numerous proposals to preserve the tomb, but nothing materialized. Shortly after World War I, new interest in preserving history and heritage arose, and the tomb received professional preservation and a monument. However, the tomb fell into disrepair again for several more decades until the Ohio Historical Society and a local non-profit restored the grounds and added enhancements to create a park and monumental setting in the 1990s. Through a landscape history approach, this paper traces the evolution of the Harrison Tomb from an austere crypt into a memorial landscape. An historical analysis and comparison to other presidential monuments shows an inequality in the way American society remembers its prominent leaders in the cultural landscape and attendant artifacts. I demonstrate that it was the knowledge and awareness of the Harrison Tomb's landscape and material culture that provided the impetus to restore it and create a monument for President Harrison after he was essentially forgotten. I argue that, by adopting a more expansive temporal context in which to study landscapes and sites, landscape history provides another perspective on historical research that geographers are well equipped to provide and that others often overlook, which allows historical geographers to enhance and add additional dimensions to the historical record through their specialized abilities in landscape interpretation and analysis.

William Henry *who*?

Approximately fifteen miles west and downriver from Cincinnati, in the small village of North Bend, Ohio, rest the remains of William Henry Harrison (Figure 1). Upon hearing that name, many might ask, "William Henry *who*?" And such a response is somewhat understandable, as he is not an overly familiar name to those who are not historians or history enthusiasts, though this is a regrettable thing to say about the ninth President of the United States. In fact, many rankings of presidents based on any factor (best, worst, familiarity, etc.) often omit Harrison from the list entirely, citing his presidential tenure as too brief to be considered significant (or memorable).¹ Much of this unfamiliarity relates to the fact that Harrison served as president for only about a month before his tragic death shortly after he took office. And it was only a matter of time before the memory of this historic military and political figure faded, both in the national narrative, and also materially through the desecration and deterioration of his burial site.

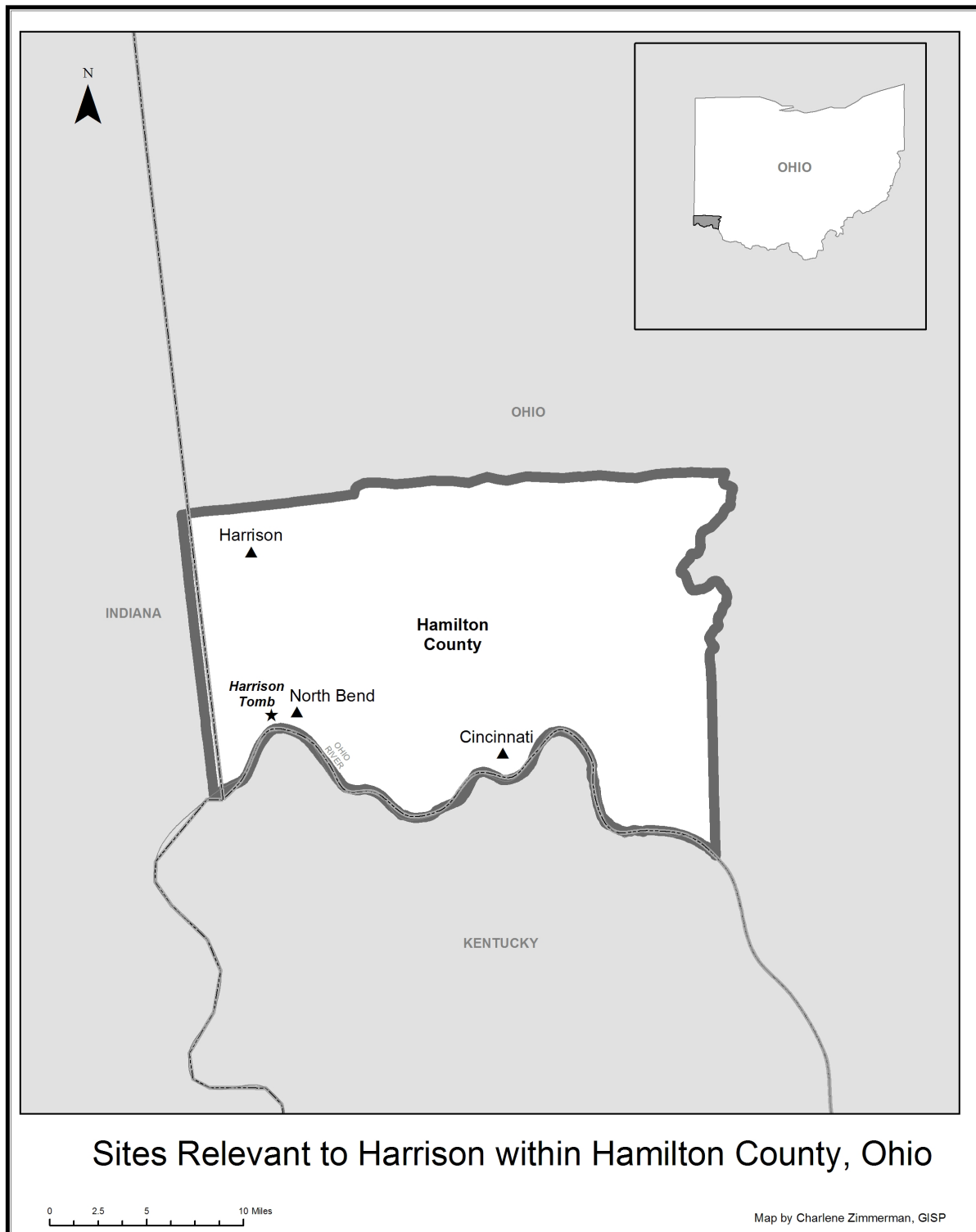


Figure 1. Map of Hamilton County, Ohio and study site. Map by Charlene Zimmerman.

Historian Richard Norton Smith proclaims, "Ohio is the mother lode of presidential gravesites" and, "by and large, chief executives from the Buckeye State demonstrate an inverse ratio between accomplishment in life and the lavishness with which that life is memorialized."² And while Ohio seems to be proud of its role in presidential history, it is noteworthy that the major, more recent general histories of Ohio barely even mention Harrison at all.³ While there are studies that document various periods in Harrison's life and the times in which he lived, they are usually written in the context of the history of Ohio, Indiana, or the Northwest Territory, and not always specifically on the man himself.⁴ There are also a number of biographies ranging from juvenile literature to serious scholarship, but even the number of these works is comparatively few when measured against most US presidents.⁵ Historian Reginald Horsman explains that Harrison "has always held more interest for historians of Indiana and the Old Northwest than for those interested in the national scene. Even his election to the presidency has usually been examined more in regard to the methods the Whigs used to secure this success than in terms of Harrison's fitness for office," adding that, as a national politician, he "remains a shadowy figure."⁶ Even more astonishing is how Harrison's biographies often abruptly end at his death, offering little, if any, analysis of the man or his legacy.

This paper shows that the limited legacy of William Henry Harrison did not end at his death and a further, significant story about him remains untold. Here, historical geography steps in where traditional historical research leaves off, as many Harrison biographers say little about what became of him after his death, instead shifting their focus to his successor, President John Tyler. This is somewhat understandable for the sake of chronology, but this paper explores how Harrison was memorialized through a landmark that was also forgotten—several times over, in fact—and how, or *if*, this artifact helped to memorialize him when he was effectively forgotten after his burial.

In this paper, I examine the evolution of the Harrison Tomb from an austere, neglected crypt into a memorial landscape. I trace the history of his burial site as a cultural landscape and how it and its condition (and meaning) changed over time. Due to the sporadic coverage of the tomb in the news over the last century and a half, and the fairly limited available sources, a fully comprehensive history of the site is difficult to construct, but I attempt to provide as complete a narrative as possible. I wish to be clear that it is not my intention to pass judgment or evaluation of Harrison, though I do want to advance my opinion that, despite his complicated biography and character, he was still a historically significant figure and that he is worthy of study despite his deceptively minor role in American history.

I begin the paper with an evaluation of the literature by geographers on monuments and memorial landscapes, a brief discussion of presidential gravesites, and introductions to the concepts of reputational politics and landscape history. The next section provides a brief biographical sketch of Harrison. While my purpose is to focus on the story behind the Harrison Tomb and the role that monument plays as a landscape feature perpetuating his legacy and memory, some detail on his life is necessary to provide information on this largely unfamiliar president. I then provide a landscape history of the Harrison Tomb, documenting how it was discovered by the public in deplorable condition, how people attempted for decades to preserve it and restore the memory of a former president, how it fell into disrepair again for many more decades, and how others stepped forward to care for it and offer Harrison the respect he deserved. I conclude with an analysis of Harrison's legacy and that of his tomb based on my research, and a call for geographers to engage further with landscape history as an additional means of demonstrating historical geography's potential to enhance the historical record.

I find that, despite his current obscurity in American history, William Henry Harrison is not an inconsequential person or president. While Harrison's biography is apparently controversial

in the sense that he was an “insignificant” president, it was the public’s interest in the landscape and artifacts that memorialize him, along with the stories behind those elements, which proved to be the impetus to preserve his legacy and gravesite. In fact, it is through a historical-geographical analysis of the public’s attention to the condition of the Harrison Tomb that we see what historical geography can add to the historical record. An assessment of the Harrison Tomb over the years demonstrates how concern with historically significant landscapes and artifacts provides a different approach to preserving heritage where traditional historical approaches (such as a controversial biography and legacy) did not prove sufficient. Landscape and material culture can serve as more than just a backdrop or context in studies of public memory, as they and the stories behind them can play a key role in helping to determine what society remembers (or forgets) in the landscape. From these points, I argue that, by adopting a more expansive temporal context in which to study landscapes and sites, landscape history provides another perspective on historical research that geographers are well equipped to provide and that others often overlook, which allows historical geographers to enhance and add additional dimensions to the historical record through their specialized abilities in landscape interpretation and analysis.

Memorial landscapes, reputational politics, and landscape histories

It is first necessary to review some relevant literature and concepts, specifically in regard to memorial landscapes, reputational politics, and landscape histories. The study of monuments and memorial landscapes has gained greater popularity in geography in recent years.⁷ These studies cover a variety of memorial landscapes including monuments, memorials, shrines, museums, and other forms of commemoration, guided by three principal concepts. First, before a site, event, cause, or figure can be commemorated, it must be deemed worthy of commemoration and have influential backing. Second, geography involves more than a physical setting for memorialization by not just reflecting, but often shaping how people perceive and interpret the past. And third, memorial landscapes are in a constant state of redefinition as political and social contexts change.⁸

Furthermore, geographers tend to analyze memorial landscapes through three conceptual lenses: one, the “textual” metaphor through critical analysis of the histories and ideologies that are both voiced and silenced through the landscape; two, the “performance” metaphor recognizing the bodily enactments and rituals that bring meaning to memorial landscapes; and three, the “arena” metaphor focusing on the ability of memorial landscapes to serve as sites for groups to debate the meaning of history and the commemorative process as part of larger struggles over identities.⁹ This case study on the Harrison Tomb most closely fits the “arena” metaphor.

While the distinction between a monument and a memorial is sometimes blurry, and scholarship does not always differentiate between the two, geographer Wilbur Zelinsky defines a monument as “any object whose sole function at present is to celebrate or perpetuate the memory of particular events, ideals, individuals, or groups of persons,” which provides a broad and fungible definition, but emphasizes those who have made significant contributions and are worthy of some form of permanent commemoration in the landscape.¹⁰ Zelinsky goes on to explain that a memorial serves more functions and goes beyond the single-purpose monument to include parks, gardens, forests, bridges, highways, buildings, or other kinds of institutions; he mentions that tombs and birthplaces of figures such as presidents often straddle the line between these two landscape features.¹¹ The official name for the Harrison Tomb’s location is the Harrison State Memorial, though I refer to the tomb itself as a monument within a memorial landscape for this study because it is located in a public space and it is marked through various forms of material culture, notably an obelisk, historical markers, and a park setting.¹²

Geographers in particular have contributed to studying memorialization by demonstrating the contestable and contradictory aspects of space and place, as the specific location of a given

monument affects how groups conceptualize and carry out memorialization, and locations can confirm, erode, contradict, or mute a memorial's intended meanings, as they simultaneously draw and give meaning to their surroundings.¹³ As such, the constitutive relationship between memory and place is most obvious through material culture and landscapes.¹⁴ More specifically, some geographers have examined the way in which historical figures are remembered in the landscape. Derek H. Alderman investigates the politics related to place in remembering Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia county through the process of naming streets after King.¹⁵ Alderman shows that the image of a person, regardless of whether it is positive, negative, or ambiguous, plays an important role in remembering the past and the interpretation of any historical figure is open to a multitude of viewpoints.¹⁶ In fact, Alderman argues through the example of King that these debates are not arbitrary, "but often accompany, revolve around, and participate in the production of memorial spaces and places."¹⁷

While today most Americans view King and his legacy in a positive light, other geographical studies similar to Alderman's show further complications in interpreting memorial landscapes. Jonathan I. Leib presents a case study of the controversy surrounding the mural of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia.¹⁸ Though Lee remains a problematic figure years after the Civil War ended, Leib focuses not on the fact of if, or which, icons of Lee will be erected or removed in Richmond's landscape, but where they will be placed and the problems that this can engender: "In this way the places themselves are intertwined in the construction of the meaning of symbols."¹⁹ Through a study of an arguably more ambiguous personality, Chris Post investigated the issues surrounding the landscapes that memorialize mid-nineteenth century abolitionist John Brown in Kansas.²⁰ Post's article concentrates on the differing interpretations of Brown through time and from his commemoration at different sites by different groups, highlighting a variation in the collective memory for this controversial figure and his resultant ambiguous stature in American history.

One important theme tying these three studies together and relating them to this one is the concept of *reputational politics*. Reputational politics comes from the work of sociologist Gary Alan Fine and his research on society remembering major figures whose reputations have not been solidified as heroic or with high social approval and who carry what Fine labels "difficult reputations," for those who are somehow tarnished or otherwise controversial.²¹ Alderman builds on this concept in geographical research, offering "an approach that focuses on the socially constructed and contested nature of commemorating historical figures and the discursive rivalries that underlie the memorialization of these figures."²²

The studies from Alderman, Leib, and Post all highlight the high subjectivity of memorializing specific people and the numerous ways that society can interpret or portray them either historically, presently, or in the future. The individuals that carry out the shaping and control of historical reputations are *reputational entrepreneurs*.²³ Geography is particularly important to commemoration and the processes behind it, because it offers tangibility and visibility. It is also notable that few geographers have explored the role that memorial spaces play in reputational politics by not focusing on the struggle to define the cultural meanings and significance of specific historical figures in the landscape.²⁴ I demonstrate below how Harrison's reputational politics may have created problems for how society chose (or forgot) to remember him in material form and how reputational entrepreneurs helped to redefine those politics by advocating for the preservation and eventual enhancement of his gravesite.

Additionally, geographers have not thoroughly explored what presidential memorial landscapes have contributed to the national narrative. Some geographical research that has examined presidential memory in the cultural landscape has come from Craig E. Colten and his study of Lincoln place names and their creation of a vernacular region in Illinois.²⁵ Larger

studies include Zelinsky's *Nation into State*, in which he covers the influence of major American historical figures, including presidents, and how they are reflected and remembered in place names, landscapes, material culture, and civic institutions, and their effects on the development of American nationalism.²⁶ In *Shadowed Ground*, Kenneth E. Foote significantly adds to the geographical literature on monuments and commemoration and devotes a chapter to monuments for the four assassinated US Presidents: James Garfield, William McKinley, Abraham Lincoln, and John Kennedy.²⁷ Though these works demonstrate some geographical research on presidential sites, overall there is still little scholarship on the topic by geographers, despite their notable contributions to the literature in memory studies and the large potential for further research on presidential sites.

In other disciplines writing about presidential gravesites, journalist Brian Lamb notes how each president has helped shape the direction of the United States and visiting a president's grave helps people learn more about the men who have held the highest office and the times in which they lived: "When we learn about these men, we learn more about our collective selves."²⁸ Presidential deaths are very public events and, Lamb argues, the graves of presidents are more about personal and political symbolism.²⁹ Building on this point, historian Douglas Brinkley mentions that a pilgrimage to a presidential gravesite is a way to pay a "quiet tribute to all of our glorious past" and that "all presidents--no matter how well they performed in office--are revered by most Americans simply because they represent our grandest political traditions."³⁰ As such, "presidents' graves serve as guideposts to our past and why a monument of quiet reflection in such places nourishes the soul and fuels the historical imagination. It's a way to make a connection with the lives of individuals who helped shape our nation," since "both the lives and deaths of presidents play a part in our national drama."³¹ Brinkley posits that regardless of a president's historical rank, one can find enlightenment at every presidential gravesite, as it is more important to pay homage to the *institution* of the presidency.³² Oftentimes, the death of a president signals that "it is a symbol that is being mourned as much as, or more than, the man himself."³³

Art historian Benjamin Hufbauer conducted several case studies of presidential libraries, which are less numerous than gravesites and have essentially only been around since 1940, though there are parallels to presidential resting places, as both are sites of commemoration.³⁴ Hufbauer observes the noticeable transformation in presidential commemoration since the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1922, and the monuments of the past (obelisks, classical temples) have been largely replaced by libraries located principally outside of Washington.³⁵ These commemorative places are attempts to construct sites of civil religion, acting as sacred national places attracting pilgrimages in an effort to raise national consciousness of presidents who are represented as being worthy of patriotic veneration.³⁶ Hufbauer notes that the president is, for some, the person who embodies the nation, and the presidential library (or other commemorative site) is a material manifestation of this reality.³⁷ This last point gives one pause to wonder what may have happened in the case of Harrison's tomb.

Landscape history, which urban planner Daniel J. Marcucci basically defines as the "biography" of a landscape, either cultural or natural, is often a multidisciplinary endeavor in an attempt to understand a landscape's form and meaning and explain it in a temporal context.³⁸ Landscape history is by no means a new concept, but it has not been a common approach in geography. According to geographer Richard H. Schein, a landscape history empirically documents when, where, why, and by whom a landscape was created, altered, and so on.³⁹ Landscape history is about a specific place, but it can also encompass larger scales.⁴⁰ It must explain how and why a landscape evolved, focusing on what Marcucci calls keystone processes, or the points that were influential in the development of that landscape.⁴¹ It not an area that

has always been attributed to historical geography, but often labeled as part of the “geographic factor in history.”⁴² Geographer William Norton notes that the general tendency in cultural and historical geography has been to incorporate time, but not necessarily to argue for time as a major component or overriding point of interest in geographical studies.⁴³ While many geographers have advocated for landscape history, relatively few case studies are available. And though many geographical studies have approached landscape from an historical perspective, they have not always focused on the concept or use of landscape history per se.⁴⁴

Leading historical geographer Michael Conzen notes that landscape history is perhaps the least developed approach to landscape studies in the United States and he maintains that because we exist in time, we must incorporate time into our studies of landscape.⁴⁵ Historically examining a landscape acknowledges it as both a history and as place, and focusing on its cumulative character recognizes that “nature, symbolism, and design are not static elements of the human record but change with historical experience”; in turn, this shows that the “geographically distinct quality of places is a product of the selective addition and survival over time of each new set of forms peculiar to that region or locality.”⁴⁶ Time is a key component to landscape history and each generation inherits landscapes shaped in certain ways, subsequently shaping and reshaping them with its own distinctive traits and selectively removing those from previous generations.⁴⁷ “The aim of the landscape historian, then,” writes Conzen, “is to distinguish the threads woven into this complex, changing fabric and account for their respective appearance, arrangement, and disappearance. Landscape elements vary widely in the speed of their formation and change, and time plays an important role in how historically composite a landscape may become.”⁴⁸

Geographer and archaeologist Richard Muir observes that landscape history has always had a complex relationship with historical geography, as they are closely intertwined, but never really merged, with the differences between the two difficult to pinpoint.⁴⁹ Muir posits that historical geographers tend to employ evidence from sites and subsequently develop theories about processes of change, whereas landscape historians often regard sites and landscapes as worthy subjects of study by themselves.⁵⁰ And while landscape is a popular topic for geographers, it is fragmented between those who identify as historical geographers and those as landscape historians.⁵¹ This dichotomy is complicated by the fact that the term *landscape history* has different roots and meanings on either side of the Atlantic, and even though historical geographers have been involved with the topic, it tends to have stronger ties to archaeology, as geographers and archaeologists view sites differently.⁵²

Eminent historical geographer Alan R.H. Baker discusses how landscape history, like environmental history, has not always been warmly welcomed in the discipline of history and it has struggled for acceptance: “Historians have been incorporating landscapes into their studies for a very long time, but landscape history as an identifiable sub-discipline is a relatively recent and not always appreciated addition to history’s extended family.”⁵³ Architectural historians have also been somewhat aloof to the concept and, in a paper entitled “Architectural History or Landscape History?” Dell Upton urges architectural historians to move away from their rigid concept of landscape and embrace a wider notion of the cultural landscape and all that it encompasses.⁵⁴ While some geographers have had difficulty in justifying the relevance of landscape history, it is my impression that another problem is that geographers have not sufficiently shown how landscape history is a particularly useful concept beyond the theoretical insights it can offer.

Furthermore, while geographers have devoted significant attention to the role of landscape in remembering or forgetting the past, extant studies in the literature often offer only a short time frame in their analyses. Geographer Karen E. Till discusses this shortcoming in a similar approach she calls site biographies, which typically provide nuanced accounts of ways that national histories, memorial cultures, and shared stories are remembered or forgotten with the goal of

analyzing changes to existing public cultures of memory within a specific national context.⁵⁵ The best results from such an approach examines “how seemingly stable material forms are dynamic in space and time, and elucidates how contestations over the significance of past narratives are given meaning within particular socio-political contexts,” while “at their worst, biographies [of sites] are narrow in their analyses of social exchange and power relations,” by focusing on the emergence of a site and related debates in a limited period of time, neglecting to explore “how sites change over time or how events, practices, and places may become institutionalized venues of official memory.”⁵⁶

In the case of memorial sites, such an approach is important, as Foote argues that sites themselves often play an active role in their own interpretation,⁵⁷ as I show below. But despite the spatial character of landscape history, papers on the topic in Anglophone scholarship are rare in major geographical journals and are more common in historical and archaeological periodicals.⁵⁸ This paper aims to contribute to historical geography by illustrating the significance and value of landscape history as more than a purely theoretical construct by demonstrating its usefulness both within and beyond geography, particularly with reference to applications in heritage and memory studies.

General biographical background

While Harrison’s life and presidency have been covered more thoroughly by historians and biographers, it is necessary to provide a brief and selective overview of his life to better understand the story behind him, his burial site, and his presidential legacy. Because Harrison was a minor president, he has not received nearly as much attention as other figures such as Washington, Lincoln, or Kennedy, and therefore the sources on his life are noticeably fewer. Perhaps this fact contributes to his intriguing story.

William Henry Harrison was born on February 9, 1773 on Virginia’s Berkeley Plantation along the James River, the seventh child and third son in a family of three boys and four girls in a prominent political family (Figure 2). His ancestor Benjamin Harrison was a Jamestown colonist who arrived in Virginia in 1633 and was elected to the local council. Benjamin’s descendants included prominent colonial politician Benjamin Harrison III and his son, politician Benjamin Harrison IV, and his son Benjamin Harrison V, governor of Virginia, member of the Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and also the father of William Henry.

Young Harrison was educated at home early on and his parents pointed him toward the medical profession. He enrolled at Virginia’s Hampden-Sydney College and pursued a classical curriculum, but was pulled out by his parents and subsequently sent to Richmond for a medical apprenticeship, eventually transferring to the Medical School of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pennsylvania) in 1791. Harrison’s father died that year and, without money, he began to seek a new career path.⁵⁹ He dropped out of medical school and enrolled in the army as an officer, arriving with the troops at Fort Washington near the young settlement of Cincinnati in the fall of 1791, at a time when the Northwest Territory was consumed with wars among the region’s Native Americans.

Harrison rose rapidly through the ranks. His mother died in 1793, but his inheritance did not provide much, and with his fading connections to Virginia, he began to focus his life and career westward.⁶⁰ He made a name for himself at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 and was promoted to commander. Harrison met and married Anna Symmes in 1795, and they moved to a one-hundred-and-sixty-acre farm near North Bend on land purchased from her father, judge and land developer John Cleves Symmes, where they eventually had ten children, allowing Harrison to move “smoothly from the Virginia gentry into the emerging political and economic elite of the Old Northwest.”⁶¹

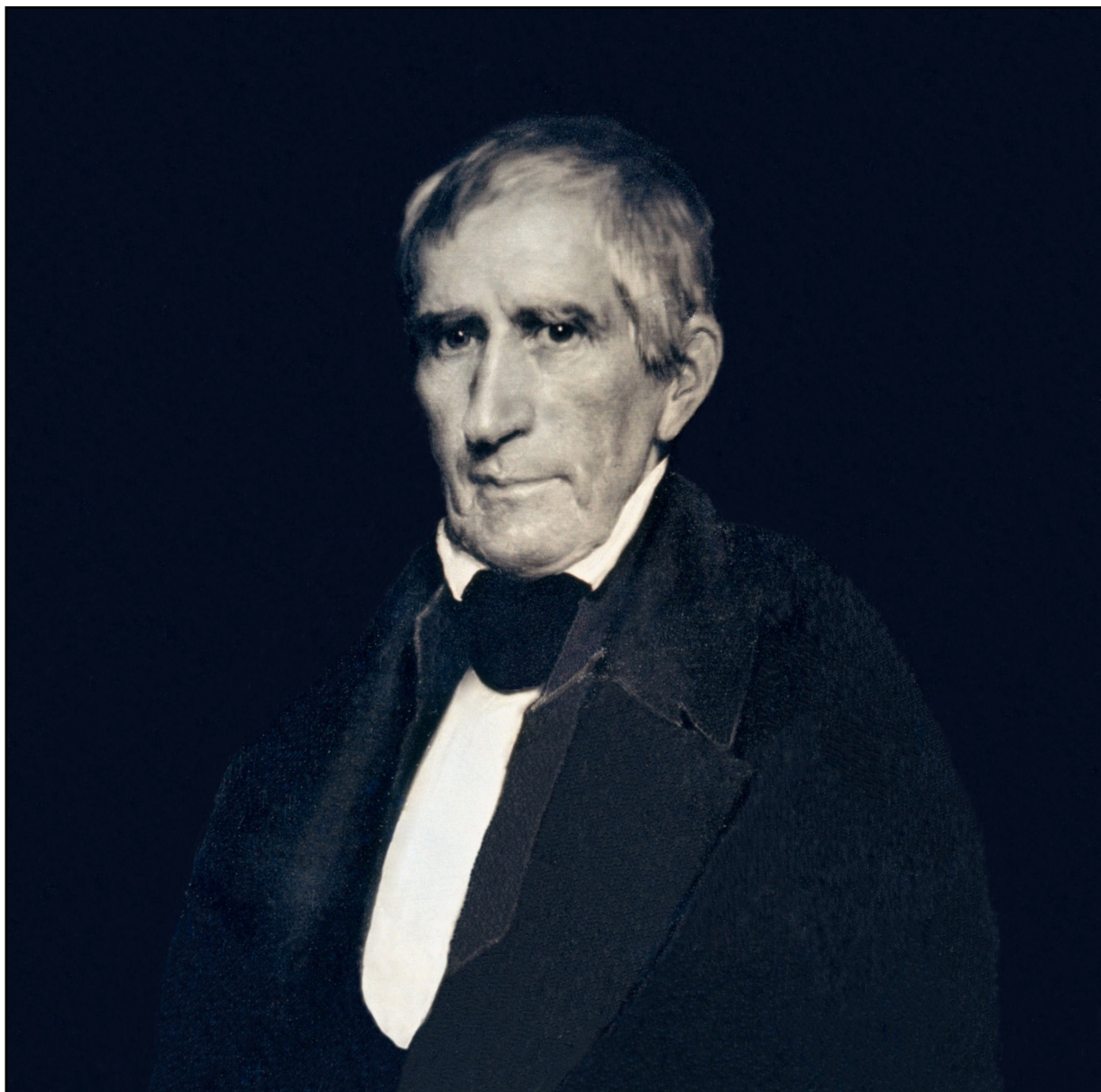


Figure 2. Portrait of President William Henry Harrison. Daguerreotype, circa 1850, copy of 1841 original. Photographed by Albert Sands Southworth, Josiah Johnson Hawes, and Albert Gallatin Hoit.

Harrison left the military in 1798 and got a job as secretary of the Northwest Territory, and he was elected as the congressional delegate of that territory the following year. Ohio became a state in 1803 and President John Adams appointed Harrison as Governor of the Indiana Territory (comprising present-day Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota), where his family lived well in an estate that William Henry called Grouseland in the then-capital of Vincennes. Harrison served as governor for twelve years, where his primary responsibility was to acquire land from Native Americans to promote settlement of whites, and he delivered by gaining millions of acres of land for the United States. Notably, much of the land that he obtained came through rather unscrupulous means, including coercion, bribery, and illegal purchases.⁶²

In fact, it was his aggressive actions in acquiring Native American lands⁶³ that caught the ire of some tribes, culminating in the Battle of Tippecanoe on November 7, 1811, along the Tippecanoe River in northeastern Indiana, which subsequently catapulted Harrison to national fame. The battle occurred as a result of mutual antagonisms between the various tribes of the Indiana Territory and the American settlers and, even though much of the battle is remembered for the partial truths deriving from its folk accounts rather than historical facts, it still resulted in a decisive victory for Harrison.⁶⁴ While the Americans suffered more casualties than the Shawnee, and Native American leader Tecumseh was not actually present at the battle, Harrison managed to scatter Native American attackers and destroy some settlements, but antagonisms actually increased after the skirmish and resurfaced the next year in the War of 1812.⁶⁵

At the onset of the War of 1812, Harrison left working in government to rejoin the army, where he became a general. His heroic efforts at the Battle of the Thames, which resulted in a far clearer victory than at Tippecanoe, propelled him to further fame, where he was second only to Andrew Jackson in iconic military status at that time.⁶⁶ In 1814, with the war still underway, Harrison submitted his resignation to President James Madison and “Old Tippecanoe” retired from the military to return to a quiet life in North Bend. But politics called again when Harrison returned to the House of Representatives in 1816, where he became a strong advocate for veterans throughout his life and remained a popular and prominent citizen, especially in Ohio. After his term ended in 1819, he returned to North Bend, but was nominated for the Ohio State Senate, where he served from 1819 to 1821.

Afterward, Harrison came home, disappointed that he was unable to gain a higher office and the financial security he craved,⁶⁷ though he returned to Washington, D.C. as one of Ohio’s U.S. Senators in 1825, spending another three years in the Capitol, where he unsuccessfully tried to get the vice presidential nomination under John Quincy Adams. As a consolation, Adams appointed Harrison as diplomat to Colombia until 1829. He did not stay there long, as Adams lost the presidential election to Andrew Jackson in 1828 and, due to deep hostility between Jackson and Harrison for many years, President Jackson recalled Harrison from his post when the new foreign minister arrived in Colombia later in 1829, again sending Harrison home to North Bend.⁶⁸

Back home, the Harrison estate had greatly expanded after the War of 1812 and, by Harrison’s homecoming, the farm, nicknamed The Point, extended for about five miles along the Ohio River, with much of the land parceled off to the Harrison children as they became adults.⁶⁹ His political career appeared to be over and he suffered from financial trouble due to numerous bad business deals and his many dependents. Because of these financial entanglements, Harrison eagerly accepted an appointment as Hamilton County Clerk of Courts in 1836, which was a major step down for someone of his stature.⁷⁰

What appeared to be a quiet homecoming ended due to a political sea change in the United States in the late 1830s, as Andrew Jackson’s presidency created two political parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. Harrison ran for president as a Whig against New York Democrat and Vice President Martin Van Buren in the 1836 election and, despite Van Buren being the favorite and winning the presidency, Harrison did well in the polls. The political climate quickly turned against Van Buren, however, as the Panic of 1837 set in and destroyed the US economy just weeks after he took office, resulting in a deep, widespread depression; another panic followed in 1839, exacerbating the economic situation further.⁷¹ At this point, national attention turned again to Harrison as a contender for the 1840 election against Van Buren.

The Whig party emerged from the economic turmoil of the Jackson administration and in opposition to his perceived authoritarian style of governance.⁷² Harrison gained greater support as the Whig nominee as a type of hero-candidate with popular appeal from his military success

and without Jackson's authoritarian tendencies;⁷³ he beat out Henry Clay for the nomination, which he received in December 1839, selecting Virginia Senator John Tyler as vice president on the ticket. Other suggestions for the vice president included Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, but

Webster and virtually everyone else who might have been a first choice rejected a post that had traditionally been regarded as meaningless at best. The vice president had so little to do that the men who occupied the job often never even bothered to come to Washington during their term of office. . . . And having made it through eight presidencies without any serious health crises, people had stopped seriously contemplating what would happen if Number Two suddenly became Number One.⁷⁴

During the campaign, people often didn't even bother to ask Tyler about his political beliefs.⁷⁵ The Whigs had no political platform and no core group of supporters, and their campaign was built with songs, slogans, and rallies.⁷⁶ The media branded Harrison the "log cabin and hard cider" candidate to emphasize his frontier background and genial, humble, and unpretentious image, contrasted with Van Buren's image as the urbane, affluent Washington insider.

Until more recently, presidential elections were essentially in the hands of America's landed elite, elected officials, and other political insiders. This began to change with the Whigs' election tactics, such as the log cabin imagery, referring to Harrison as "Tippecanoe," and through direct appeals to rural voters and common people, even though the Whigs had more aristocrats among them than the Democrats.⁷⁷ As a result, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" became a legendary slogan in American political history. Harrison began making speeches himself, directly addressing crowds of voters, which was a major political breakthrough,⁷⁸ and he actually went out and campaigned in person in the famously branded "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign. The voting public was attracted to and enthusiastically consumed the Whig Party's myths and emblems.⁷⁹ Though there was controversy regarding his age, Harrison used frequent speechmaking as a means to prove his fitness.

Voting commenced on October 30, 1840 and continued until November 18. Harrison was exhausted from all of the personal campaigning, but he was determined to prove that he was capable of the job.⁸⁰ While the economy was the foremost issue, slavery, Native American relations, and national expansion were other major topics at the time. Tippecanoe himself had a questionable status on some of these controversial issues, as he "consistently supported slavery," was a slave owner himself, and had a "mixed" record regarding Native Americans. He appeared sympathetic to Native Americans' plight, but was also willing to take advantage of them, historically gaining somewhat of a reputation as an "Indian killer"; his war record was also controversial and remains so today, and defending his military record was one reason Harrison sought to get back into politics.⁸¹ Harrison spoke in generalities and avoided directly addressing major issues except for the abuse of presidential power, spoke of only serving for one term, and stressed his military background and his life as a simple farmer.⁸² In the end, Harrison won only slightly more than Van Buren in the popular vote, but the Whigs won both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and Old Tippecanoe emerged victorious in an electoral landslide.⁸³ Indeed, the sudden jump from the lowly Clerk of Courts to successful presidential candidate marked his return to national prominence as "one of the great success stories in American political history."⁸⁴ The election of 1840 marked the first time two nationally organized political parties competed for the White House.⁸⁵

Harrison arrived in Washington on February 9, 1841, his sixty-eighth birthday, in the middle of a snowstorm.⁸⁶ Inauguration Day arrived on March 4 and, in the rain during a Washington winter, neglecting to wear an overcoat or even a hat during his address, Old Tippecanoe delivered a nearly two-hour speech, the longest inaugural address in US Presidential history, in front of a crowd of at least fifty thousand.⁸⁷ As a result, he contracted pneumonia. Prior to the speech, he had spent nearly a month almost endlessly walking around Washington, D.C. in the cold, wet weather, meeting with politicians and regular citizens alike, and the constant personal interaction exhausted him.⁸⁸ By March 26, he was beginning to show signs of illness and, on April 4, 1841, President William Henry Harrison died after barely a month in office.

Up to that point, the United States had never experienced the death of a sitting president and the country was naturally shocked and grief-stricken. Biographer Gail Collins succinctly sums up the sadness by stating that, despite his earlier fame and achievements, the country never really got the chance to know Harrison.⁸⁹ Congress was not even in session at the time of his death and John Tyler was in Williamsburg, Virginia, unaware of the president's illness; in fact, the press did not even mention that Harrison was ill until March 31.⁹⁰ Tyler received the news early on April 5 and left for Washington immediately to be sworn in as the tenth President of the United States.⁹¹ Though Harrison's life came to an abrupt end, the tragedy behind his public memory did not end with his death.

A landscape history of the Harrison tomb

News of Harrison's passing spread slowly throughout the country, "[bringing] sorrow to opponents as well as partisans," while ministers across the nation preached memorial sermons and "newspapers of both parties were 'clothed in mourning.'" ⁹² While Harrison's passing pleased some detractors (most notably Andrew Jackson), it created a major political problem, as "never before had a president died in office, and as word of the tragedy slowly spread throughout the country, outpourings of grief continued for weeks," including sorrow among some of the Native American tribes who knew Harrison.⁹³ His body rested in state at the Capitol until the funeral procession, which attracted some forty thousand people in Washington, D.C. on April 7, 1841, as they "reverently watched the melancholy procession make its way to the Congressional Cemetery."⁹⁴ The president was temporarily kept in a public vault in Washington's Congressional Cemetery until he could be laid to rest at North Bend in accordance with his wishes, though his tomb had to be built in response to his unexpected departure. Harrison's body did not actually arrive at the family property until it was delivered by ship from Pittsburgh in July 1841. In fact, it was not for years after his death that Harrison or his whereabouts garnered any significant attention in the media or the wider public.

In an 1872 article from *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, the pseudonymous Ithuriel recounts an "expedition" to find the whereabouts of Harrison's burial site in the early 1870s and the apparent mystery surrounding it by opening his piece declaring, "The vexed question of the death and burial place of the lamented W.H. Harrison has at last been settled."⁹⁵ Ithuriel, in the company of the Harrison Tomb Legislative Committee, took a train to North Bend in 1872 where they hired Native American guides who knew of the tomb's location to take them to it.⁹⁶ In the article, the author makes references to the "rumored" death of Harrison, implying doubt about his passing, and he mentions that some people even thought that his death was based on hearsay.⁹⁷ This account mentions that discussions to build a monument for Harrison had occurred for years to create a proper memorial site for the tomb that had been neglected for decades, even by that time.⁹⁸ The party found the site to be "cheap and unworthy" of the distinguished man resting

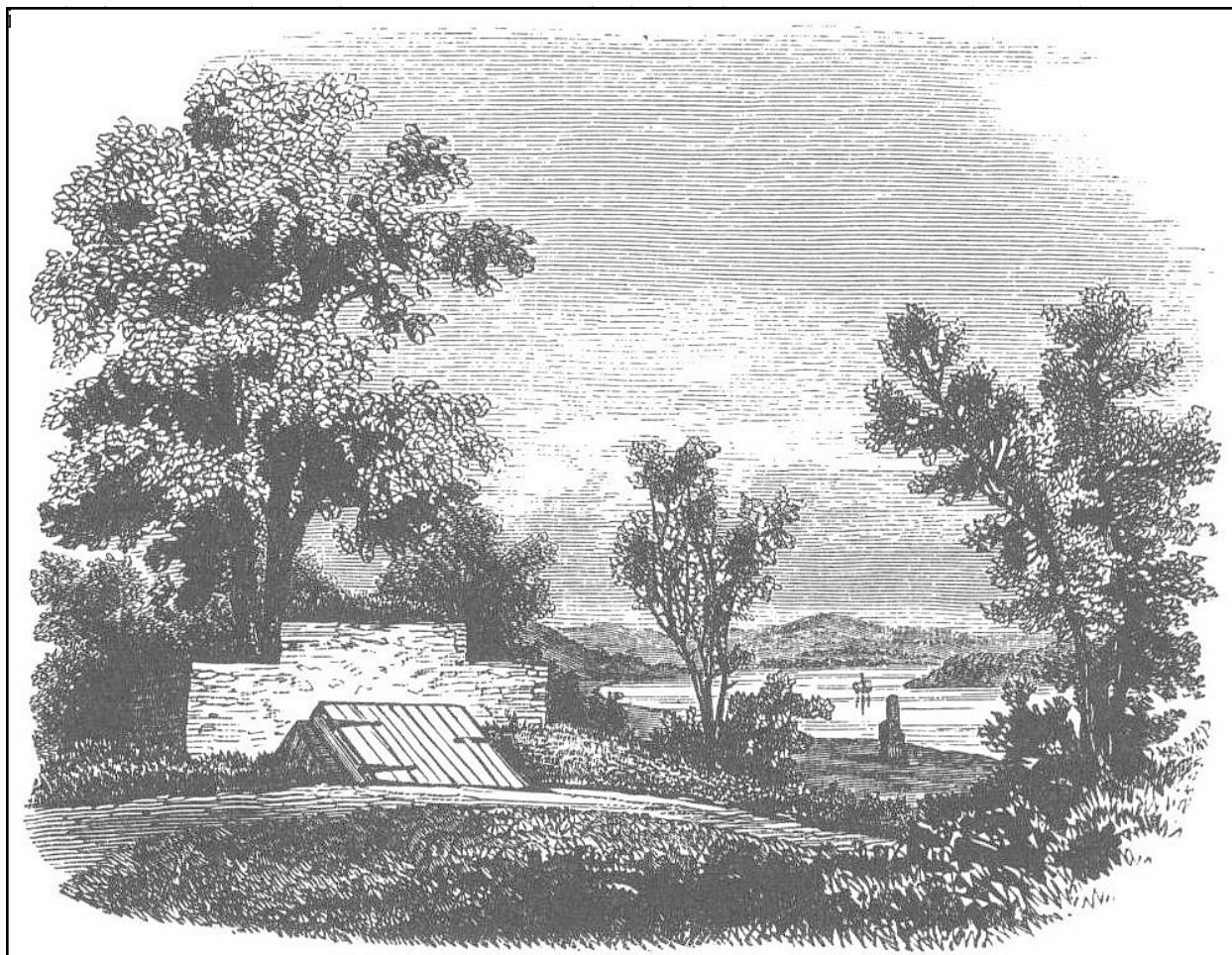


Figure 3. An illustration depicting the Harrison Tomb along the Ohio River, mid-nineteenth century. From Benson J. Lossing's *Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812*, 1869.

While accounts differ regarding the precise size of the original tomb, it was between approximately ten and fifteen square feet and between three and four feet tall. The *New York Times* mentions perhaps the first proposal for someone to obtain and care for the Harrison property, though neglect of the tomb was apparent as early as 1846.¹⁰⁰ The initial vault was “a simple, barrel-arched brick structure topped with sod.”¹⁰¹ Early on, the Harrison family installed an iron door to prevent desecration, but with little success.¹⁰² One notorious anecdote from local history came from 1878 when John Scott Harrison, son of William Henry, father of Benjamin, and an Ohio Congressman, died that year and was supposed to be buried in the Harrison Tomb. Grave robbery and body snatching were common in those days, particularly for medical schools in need of fresh cadavers in light of strict laws regarding dissection, even for scientific purposes, which resulted in an underground body snatching industry, and the Harrison family found itself to be victims of this crime.¹⁰³ In fact, they found that the body of John Scott Harrison and another relative had been stolen after the tomb was opened in preparation for his funeral. Both bodies were found and reburied, but the tale brought unease to the Harrison family and the local communities. In 1879, the family oversaw a reconstruction of the tomb after this incident, but it proved insufficient.

More public attention arrived in the 1880s, as two formal meetings in Ohio about proper care for the tomb failed to yield any results.¹⁰⁴ The *Louisville Courier-Journal* remarked on the sparse



Figure 4. The Harrison Tomb, circa 1890. Courtesy of the Harrison-Symmes Foundation.

quality of the grave and compared its poor condition to those of other presidential resting places. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* noted the contradiction of Harrison's resting place that lay unvisited, while hundreds of people would see a statue of him in downtown Cincinnati every day, and thus arguing that his gravesite was deserving of some memorial.¹⁰⁵ More public support turned out in October 1887 when two thousand five hundred people attended the first public demonstration to honor Harrison (albeit forty-six years after he was laid to rest), in an attempt to raise public interest in a monument, as "the utter neglect of the grave of the distinguished man has become a source of mortification to the pioneer citizens of the Miami and Ohio Valleys." The crowd found it especially noticeable that Indiana Senator Benjamin Harrison, William Henry's grandson, did not attend the event.¹⁰⁶

These events might have had an impact, as the condition of the tomb improved slightly by the 1890s (Figure 4). In 1896, an equestrian statue of Old Tippecanoe funded by the State of Ohio was dedicated in downtown Cincinnati that still stands, though no such monument was established at his tomb, even though the statue was originally intended for his burial site (Figure 5).¹⁰⁷ A spectator at that ceremony stated that the country would not have done "its full duty" until a proper monument stood at the president's tomb.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, Harrison's relatives and descendants created a new tomb in 1894, which added more crypts and was slightly enlarged. It was remade of limestone and laid in cement, as opposed to the original brick and mortar crypt.



Figure 5. Harrison's statue in downtown Cincinnati. Photo by author.

The doorway was deepened and, for the first time, a "Harrison" inscription was added to mark the tomb.¹⁰⁹ Earlier that year, the then-former President Benjamin Harrison had visited the tomb and, upset by its condition, made plans to replace the old structure and make improvements to the site.¹¹⁰ Before Ben Harrison's involvement, the public could not do anything about the condition of the tomb because it was still on the property of the Harrison family. While the view of original tomb was somewhat obscured, the new tomb was visible for several miles along the Ohio River and parties began discussing using the new site as a base for a monument around this time.¹¹¹

But the discussion went no further until new attention followed an article that again exposed the severe quality of the tomb and subsequently sparked renewed public interest, though little action.¹¹² The early twentieth century saw a rise in deforestation around the tomb for lumber and a movement began to preserve both the forest and tomb in the hopes of creating a government-operated park.¹¹³ Harrison's descendants, scattered around the country, began to plead for the government to care for his gravesite. One article mentions how the tomb was virtually forgotten on Decoration Day (now Memorial Day), referring to the ragged American flag flying over the tomb that had not been replaced for a significant amount of time.¹¹⁴ On Decoration Day of 1910, another group visited the "neglected tomb" that they discovered haphazardly, and acknowledged that its services were probably the first held at the site "in decades."¹¹⁵ The party was disturbed by the tomb's poor condition and decided at that moment to form the William Henry Harrison Club, with the organizational goal to restore the tomb and fly a large flag at the site.¹¹⁶

These concerns were partially addressed in 1912 by the Hamilton County Sons of Veterans Club, who asked for national assistance to create a "suitable monument" for Harrison's resting place and also to purchase and maintain the grounds of the tomb.¹¹⁷ The tomb was still in rough condition, with parts of it hacked away and stolen by "relic hunters," the grounds covered in weeds and underbrush, and many unmarked crypts.¹¹⁸ James Hendryx wrote in a newspaper article that "a visitor to this tomb is deeply impressed by the general air of dilapidation and neglect surrounding the final resting place of a former President of the United States of America," mentioning the high regard for Harrison at the national level during the time of his death and contrasting it to the condition of his tomb.¹¹⁹ Despite talk from groups to preserve the site, there was still no action by either the United States or the State of Ohio to do so, even amid public outcry.¹²⁰ Another group pledged to care for the tomb the next year, resulting in more fundraising, following more damage and vandalism, including the tattered flag that was raised there just a few years before, and a broken and vandalized door to the tomb.¹²¹

It was not until 1915 that some serious, formal attempts to preserve the Harrison Tomb and the memory of President Harrison were underway, when the Ohio Archeological and Historical Society (now the Ohio Historical Society) made a formal appeal in response to dire calls to care for the tomb and growing concern from Cincinnatians.¹²² The movement hoped to secure federal, or at least state, involvement in the tomb's preservation. An article describes the tone of the meeting as leaving "little doubt but that the outcome will start a concerted movement which will result in the tomb of William Henry Harrison being provided with a magnificent memorial like those which mark the last resting place of the three other Presidents that Ohio furnished to the nation – Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, and William McKinley."¹²³ One newspaper article recounted the years of neglect at the tomb and that people were largely unaware of the tomb's condition until articles and editorials were published.¹²⁴ Though there were moves to acquire the property and ask Congress for money to erect a memorial and maintain it, nothing ever happened. The article goes as far as to compare it to other presidential memorials, such as the large monetary value of Hayes's memorial and the grandiosity of the McKinley and Garfield monuments; in Ohio, the Harrison site was the only one which was not memorialized or formally recognized.¹²⁵ Thus, "it is now deemed to be high time that this action also be taken and the

dereliction of the past thus atoned for.”¹²⁶ In late 1916, Harrison’s descendants agreed to cede the land to the memorial association as long as the property received adequate care.¹²⁷

The momentum to preserve the tomb was also likely propelled by global events with far-reaching ramifications, namely World War I. In 1919, after the conclusion of the war, there was a renewed public interest in caring for veterans, and this sentiment was demonstrated by the Ohio state legislature that appropriated \$10,000 for improvements at the Harrison Tomb.¹²⁸ While groups tried for over fifty years to find help for the tomb, the war sparked the impetus to take meaningful action.¹²⁹ Civic groups used the money to restore the tomb, acquire the land, and add other improvements, such as better access by improving the roads to the site with the hope of turning the area into a park, as care for the tomb ceased after the last round of improvements in 1887.¹³⁰ One article chronicles the many groups that attempted to preserve the tomb, though they had only limited success in doing so.¹³¹

It appeared that the Harrison Tomb would finally receive its due status as state funding for the site was finally authorized in late 1920 and the State of Ohio gained title to both the tomb and the property, including a donation of land totaling thirteen acres for the site.¹³² Cincinnati architect Harry Hake created the plan and constructed the memorial free of charge. The groundbreaking for the park occurred on October 24, 1921, drawing a large ceremony and crowd including citizens, politicians, and Harrison descendants.¹³³ Media coverage documented the sense of shame from the crowd regarding the poor condition of the tomb. A local school superintendent mentioned how he “bowed his head in shame that a nation should be so ungrateful, and a state so neglectful, as to let the tomb of one of the founders of America fall into such decay.”¹³⁴ While Cincinnatians were largely familiar with Harrison’s equestrian statue located downtown, “few probably think of the long neglect of the grave of that great character,” pointing to the disparity in Harrison’s popularity in his life versus his death.¹³⁵ The landscaped entrance with its two pillars was completed in 1922 and the sixty-foot limestone obelisk was finished and dedicated in 1924. The obverse of the obelisk prominently lists Harrison’s major political positions:

WILLIAM
HENRY
HARRISON.

SECRETARY OF THE
NORTHWEST TERRITORY.
DELEGATE OF THE NORTHWEST
TERRITORY TO CONGRESS.
TERRITORIAL GOVERNOR
OF INDIANA.
MEMBER OF CONGRESS FROM
OHIO.
OHIO STATE SENATOR.
UNITED STATES SENATOR
FROM OHIO.
MINISTER TO COLOMBIA.
NINTH PRESIDENT OF
THE UNITED STATES.



Figure 6. Landscaped entrance to the Harrison Tomb. Photo by author.



Figure 7. A view of the Harrison Tomb obelisk and memorial site from the adjacent road. Photo by author.

The reverse of the structure lists his major military accomplishments:

ENSIGN OF THE FIRST
UNITED STATES INFANTRY
COMMANDENT
OF FORT WASHINGTON.
HERO OF TIPPECANOE.

MAJOR GENERAL
IN THE WAR OF 1812.
VICTOR OF THE BATTLE
OF THE THAMES.
AVENGER OF THE MASSACRE
OF THE RIVER RAISIN.

The protection and management of the site was officially passed from the Ohio legislature to the Ohio Historical Society in 1934 (Figures 6-8).

After the conversion of Harrison's austere crypt into a historical monument, all appeared to be well as Ohio and the United States had provided a proper resting place for a former



Figure 8. Harrison's crypt next to his wife, Anna Symmes Harrison, and other relatives. Photo by author.

president who had been all but forgotten. And yet, all was not well, as the Harrison Tomb would be forgotten again. There is scarcely any mention of the Harrison Tomb in any media for years after its dedication as a monument. In 1948, not terribly long after responsibility for the tomb came under the care of the Ohio Historical Society, a newspaper reported that the tomb was in "bad condition" and concerned citizens from the North Bend area appealed to the state for help, only to receive nothing.¹³⁶ Again, the face of the tomb had cracked, the flagpole was rusted and with a torn flag, with the road leading to the site being a "disgrace," and only one rusty highway marker pointing to the tomb's location.¹³⁷

The property suffered additional loss when, in 1958, local power company Cincinnati Gas & Electric (CG&E) destroyed the house where Benjamin Harrison was raised after it purchased some of the land.¹³⁸ Though William Henry's home burned down before the Civil War, much of the family continued to live at The Point for years after his death, and some structures remained on the property.¹³⁹ Initially, a chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution intended to erect a plaque documenting the childhood home of Benjamin Harrison, but the group was not even notified about the house's destruction, despite its plans for a ceremony or even a chance to place a marker.¹⁴⁰ Harrison biographer Gail Collins, whose father worked for CG&E at that time, mentions that The Point was a significant historic landmark, but due to insufficient funding to preserve it, CG&E's management did not want a historic landmark on its property.



Figure 9. Interpretive markers installed at the Harrison Tomb by the Ohio Historical Society in 2007. Photo by author.

They had some workers quietly destroy it, though the *Cincinnati Enquirer* claims that the house was destroyed for “safety reasons,” because it was beyond repair from dilapidation and it was a potential “hazard.”¹⁴¹ Notably, the Harrison Tomb was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970, but even then it failed to garner sufficient care or attention for about another twenty years. Indeed, the fortunes of the Harrison Tomb finally began to turn for the better beginning in the early 1990s.

The movement to preserve the tomb was initiated through the formation of the local non-profit Harrison-Symmes Memorial Foundation in 1991, which is staffed by a small group of civic-minded citizens who simply enjoy preserving local history and the memory of William Henry Harrison and his relatives. They educate the public through occasional tours and events, and through the operation of a small museum nearby. While the Harrison Tomb is still owned by the Ohio Historical Society, the Harrison-Symmes Foundation maintains the grounds through an annual stipend.¹⁴² By 1991, the tomb suffered from a leaking roof, the grounds were filled with litter, the view of the obelisk was partially obscured by dead trees, and a fallen tree had knocked out all of the electricity and lights, with the resultant darkness drawing substantial vandalism.¹⁴³

In 1996, care for the tomb was ensured through large renovations that year, the first preservation work at the site since 1922.¹⁴⁴ The Harrison-Symmes Foundation was able to obtain

grant money through political involvement with state senators and the governor of Ohio.¹⁴⁵ CG&E restored electricity and vandalism declined as the tomb received greater care, including clean stonework, repaired steps, new mortar, new lighting, new paving, a new flagpole, re-landscaping, and the addition of a wheelchair ramp.¹⁴⁶ The Ohio Historical Society erected several interpretive markers at the site in 2007 and a small parking lot was added to invite visitors to the park area (Figure 9). As of 2009, the tomb receives about 5,500 annual visitors.¹⁴⁷ While finding funding is a constant concern for the Harrison-Symmes Foundation, the Harrison Tomb is now in good hands and presently well cared for. But one important question remains: how could something as potentially important and historically significant as the grave of an American president be neglected for so long?

Creating a legacy for a president who never had the chance to be president

A geographical study of the Harrison Tomb reveals the paradox of how to address the legacy of a president and how to remember him in the cultural landscape when he was only president for a very brief time. After all, what *is* his legacy? It appears that, superficially, Harrison's presidency was basically a footnote in his life and career, and that, given the absence of presidential accomplishments and his treatment by many historians, he was only nominally a president. Without knowing the story behind Harrison *and* his tomb, it appears that the Harrison Tomb is a monument to an inconsequential politician, or possibly even a fluke.

Collins asserts that, "Harrison's one-month term in office was really nothing more than a list of nonachievements."¹⁴⁸ She points to the folklore of the Battle of Tippecanoe, noting that it was a minor fight against an outnumbered group of Native Americans, with the whites suffering more casualties, and arguing that Harrison was more successful in the War of 1812 and as governor of Indiana Territory by cheaply acquiring several states worth of land for the United States. She also argued that his greatest political achievement came "as one of the most ridiculous presidential campaigns in history," that depicted Harrison as the simple soldier who drank cider and lived in a log cabin.¹⁴⁹ Collins postulates that had he lived, Harrison would not have been a great president anyway and that the Whigs may have lasted a bit longer as a political party, but neither he nor his party would have prevented the Civil War.¹⁵⁰ "The William Henry Harrison story," she writes, "is less about issues than about the accidents of fate and silly campaigns."¹⁵¹ Historian Norma Lois Peterson mentions that Harrison never considered himself a great political leader and the Whigs picked him as their candidate because they believed that he had the best chance of defeating Van Buren and that, in power, he would be "pliable" and easily submit to the wishes of the party.¹⁵² She also suggests that Harrison would have been a weak and ineffective president.¹⁵³ Biographer Mary Jane Child Queen succinctly states her opinion that "inadvertently, President William Henry Harrison's one and only contribution came about due to his sudden death."¹⁵⁴ The dismissive tone from these writers seems to make Harrison out to be something of a joke. With such an attitude, it is little wonder that the Harrison Tomb suffered in a state of decay for decades. But a closer examination of the historical context around the time that Ohioans took action to preserve the tomb leads to some insight into how the crypt became the memorialized landscape that it is today.

Even back into the late nineteenth century, the memory of Harrison was dim. Before its enlargement, his tomb was visible from the Ohio River and, even before the Civil War, in the days of busier traffic along the river, it was customary for steamboats to blast a "salute" when passing North Bend and, for years, steamboats and other watercraft blew horns or tolled bells as they approached Harrison's tomb.¹⁵⁵ People tried to revive this custom in the early twentieth century, which may have inspired architect Frederick Garber to create a memorial (the obelisk) on top of the tomb itself and give it greater visibility.¹⁵⁶ Evidently, many travelers along the river did not

even know why there was such a custom and they did it out of habit; others knew that the salute was for President Harrison, but they mistakenly believed it to be for *Benjamin* Harrison.¹⁵⁷ What might have renewed public interest in Old Tippecanoe?

Much of the larger social impetus to preserve American history began during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Zelinsky observes that nationalistic monuments did not become common in the landscape until the 1850s when an “explosion” of monuments followed in the half-century following the Civil War.¹⁵⁸ During this time, the Civil War and Reconstruction were still in recent national memory and widespread socioeconomic polarization and economic depressions resulted from the Panics of 1873 and 1893. Rapid technological advances and increasing immigration contributed to the sense of alienation and instability that many Americans felt and experienced during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. These major changes had specific effects on Ohio through the growth of industry, a sharp decline in its rural population coupled with increasing population and urbanization, greater political involvement and activism, rapid technological advancement, and a stronger presence of labor unions and professional societies, with uneven social and geographical impacts between Reconstruction and World War I.¹⁵⁹

Historian Andrew R.L. Cayton sums up the zeitgeist, declaring, “Rural or urban, most Ohioans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed that their world was reconfiguring itself overnight.”¹⁶⁰ Following similar movements across the United States from the 1890s through the 1910s, a sense of revivalism swept through the Buckeye State, as many Ohioans believed that there were serious problems with their state and sought to reform government to reinvigorate public culture, which they premised upon restoring “a sense of common purpose in the midst of rapid change.”¹⁶¹ In an attempt to cope with these changes, some “wealthy and respectable Ohioans” became insistent on the value of a public culture, fearing that the world of the early nineteenth century was becoming more fragmented from the disparate voices in society, as people generally seemed more concerned with themselves than the greater good and material progress trumped moral progress.¹⁶²

The proliferation of institutions such as presses, libraries, schools, churches, and civic organizations, as well as parks, cemeteries, and memorials helped to revive Ohio’s public culture, especially in partial reaction to growing political radicalism, rapid immigration, and Americans’ subsequent xenophobia that accompanied this rapid social change and its perceived threats.¹⁶³ The outbreak of World War I, which had a particularly profound effect on Ohio, suspended efforts for reform in the state. However, it also reinvigorated the motivation for reform by enforcing certain cultural values, such as a “widespread insistence on cultural homogeneity and absolute patriotism” and the spread of “Americanization” through society and institutions promoting reconnections to American heritage.¹⁶⁴

Ohioans, like other Americans, became more conspicuous in their public displays of patriotism, whether they were saluting the flag, pledging allegiance to the United States, or talking about the necessity of law and order. Understandable as some of this hysteria was in the midst of a war, it represented a coercive period in the evolution of a public culture. At no point in the history of Ohio had a citizen’s political identity been so critical. Loyalty to the United States and to Ohio had to trump any and all personal loyalties.¹⁶⁵

Though most progressive reforms occurred at the local and state level, observers documenting the changes describe the sentiments as a reaction to the sense that “Ohio had lost its soul” and many Ohio progressives sought to restore a sense of order to economic and social worlds that had become disjointed during recent periods of industrial and urban growth.¹⁶⁶

This explanation corresponds to the impacts of World War I on the sentiments behind the Harrison Tomb that I covered in the previous section, when the monument directly benefited from renewed public interest and financial support from the state with greater improvements in the early 1920s. But his tomb was not the only landscape artifact dedicated to Harrison, as his memory is recorded in other landscapes and geographical features. For example, Harrison has statues, towns, counties, and schools named after him across the United States, and not just in Ohio. Beyond the equestrian statue in Cincinnati, these include his birthplace, Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, Virginia; Grouseland in Vincennes, Indiana; the Tippecanoe Battlefield Museum in Battle Ground, Indiana; a Harrison statue in Indianapolis; and a Harrison bust at the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond. But these sites and artifacts are relatively few reminders of Harrison in the landscape, especially compared to figures like Lincoln or Washington, and they suggest that he was more of a local or regional historical figure than a president. From this realization, we see a stark inequality in how American presidents are remembered in the landscape.

Richard Norton Smith wryly observes how “[Franklin] Pierce, [Millard] Fillmore, and [James] Buchanan are relegated to the *Jeopardy* Daily Double, while Lincoln’s Springfield [Illinois] tomb attracts 300,000 visitors each year.”¹⁶⁷ As a point of comparison, there is a wide inequality for the care, preservation, and promotion of presidential sites. In some cases in Ohio, the “Mother of Presidents,” some sites receive federal funding, such as the William Howard Taft House in Cincinnati or the James Garfield House in Mentor; Ulysses S. Grant has three sites commemorating his life in Ohio alone, despite being entombed in New York City.

Garfield provides an interesting comparison because there was no immediate, popular movement to memorialize him, as he was second only to William Harrison in having the shortest term as president and he left no imprint on American politics; his reputation rested solely on his career as a scholar, Civil War general, and Congressman.¹⁶⁸ Secondly, Garfield’s death occurred at a peaceful time in American history, and his presidential career was not tied to any major historical event.¹⁶⁹ “Yet,” Foote comments, “Garfield had led an impressive life, and his accomplishments seemed to demand commemoration,” and he eventually received it in the form of an ornate mausoleum in Cleveland and a statue in Washington.¹⁷⁰ For smaller presidential sites, particularly those of lesser known presidents like Harrison, “just managing to stay open is a triumph.”¹⁷¹ Many have to raise money locally, or are dependent on institutions such as the Ohio Historical Society, but they often struggle for funding, face constant maintenance problems, and have to deal with costly site preservation.¹⁷²

In addition to his seeming historical obscurity and insignificance, at least in contemporary public memory, Harrison’s legacy is also partially entangled in his own reputational politics. Much of his reputation is clearly related to the changes in how the public remembered him through time, and I suspect that, in general, Harrison might not have been viewed as problematically in the past and he might be today. Zelinsky notes that Harrison is among the heroic figures that entered the American scene in the development of American nationalism during the approximate seventy-five years between the Constitutional Convention and the outbreak of the Civil War.¹⁷³ And though none of these characters rivaled the stature of the Founding Fathers, their inclusion in this cohort and in the national narrative reveals much “about the character of the rising nation from their identities and their followings.”¹⁷⁴ While Harrison is heroically depicted in his equestrian statue in downtown Cincinnati and his tomb extolls his long list of political and military accomplishments, these sites certainly do not focus on his exploitation and killing of Native Americans or his support of slavery, as these were highly important political topics within the temporal context that Zelinsky frames. Historian Robert M. Owens describes Harrison’s record with Native Americans to be mixed, while at times he was helpful and protective of them,

at others he was quite the opposite. He even went as far as punishing whites who mistreated or killed Native Americans, though this was not always enforceable.¹⁷⁵ It becomes apparent that remembering Harrison through time became not only more complicated, but also carried politically charged connotations, further establishing him as a potentially “difficult reputation” and affecting the reputational politics behind his legacy.

Reputations fluctuate over time, especially when claims are contested and, as society evolves, so does the reputation in question.¹⁷⁶ Fine affirms that not all attempts to establish reputations succeed because, for a reputation to sustain public memory, it must have an audience with shared values and beliefs.¹⁷⁷ This was difficult for Harrison as he never had the chance to carry out his presidency and cement a national reputation and legacy. Further historical context reveals that the deaths of Harrison and President Zachary Taylor (1850) while in office, “two sitting presidents who were also military heroes in their own right, resulted in little emotional turmoil,” which somewhat contradicts the historical descriptions of the impacts of Harrison’s death. It may show that “something about the status of the presidency during the antebellum period, namely, that it had not yet attained the olympian level that was to characterize it from the Lincoln administration onward,” as the deaths of these presidents occurred before Lincoln “lifted the office of president to soaring symbolic heights.”¹⁷⁸ Zelinsky’s description of this sentiment provides a partial explanation as to why Harrison’s tomb may have fallen out of public memory, but the shift in the push to preserve it also occurred at a pivotal time in which civic leaders were gaining greater prominence within the American political and cultural landscape and certain reputational entrepreneurs sought to redefine Harrison’s reputational politics.

An added geographical complication in the case of Harrison is that many Cincinnatians are unaware of the fact that he is buried in North Bend or that there is even a tomb there, and that is even if they know who Harrison is at all. That the tomb has no markers on the nearby interstate or local highways and has only a single, small, simple sign just a few hundred feet down the road pointing to its location indicates the level of stature and esteem that the Harrison Tomb holds in the local landscape (Figure 10). So, unlike the monuments of many other significant historical figures, the Harrison Tomb is in a decidedly remote location, only augmenting his obscurity and perhaps inadvertently rendering him to inconsequentiality. To prevent this, it stands to reason that his tomb was recreated into a monument. But what about a monument for something that does not seem to fit the occasion, such as a monument for a president who never really got a chance to be president? Some presidents receive more recognition and are remembered more clearly than others, but this is not necessarily because they were better or more effective chief executives, and this incongruity is sometimes apparent through the landmarks and artifacts that commemorate them.

These points help explain my interest in this topic, because it is worth asking whether people are interested in Harrison because of who he was or because he was an anomaly. Another illustration of his unusual status in American history is that a substantial amount of memorabilia from the 1840 campaign, such as flags, lapel ribbons, pins and buttons, ceramics, cigar cases, and print items, much of which emphasizes the log cabin image, still survives and can command thousands of dollars from collectors.¹⁷⁹ Much of the appeal surrounding Harrison seems to be related to his obscurity. The repeated references to his one-month term throughout historical writings only focus more attention on this unusual fact and draw attention away from the man himself, despite his many other accomplishments and his important role in early American history. Given the history of the site, and the long process in giving it proper care and respect, did Harrison get a *presidential* monument only because people felt they owed it to him? “Regardless of whether greatness is judged by reputation, position, or accomplishment,” argues Foote, “there arises a sense that the achievements of these individuals [prominent people who died violently or accidentally] demand commemoration.”¹⁸⁰



Figure 10. The sole sign pointing to the location of the Harrison Tomb, located in North Bend just slightly down the road from the site. Photo by author.

Significantly, it appears that Harrison's memory is also partly a victim of geography by its situation in an inopportune location. Post's study of John Brown's monuments in Kansas demonstrates how the location of some of Brown's monuments have a lower prominence in the landscape than others and therefore offer different contexts and perceptions of Brown for the public to debate, just as Harrison's various memorials in different locations honor him in disparate ways.¹⁸² Even today, the Harrison Tomb site is fairly remote and somewhat hard to find; its location certainly only fed the ambivalence that so many felt for it until people began to take notice of its poor condition. Foote remarks on how landscape is intimately involved in the emergence of historical traditions: "Not only do these traditions become inscribed on the landscape in the form of memorials and monuments, but in many cases the condition of the sites themselves precipitates debate over what will be commemorated as part of these traditions."¹⁸¹ But necessarily, time must pass before societies consider commemorating the past and commemorated sites go through a lengthy process of canonization; over time, it becomes easier to simplify the stories behind who or what we commemorate through a filtered view of the past after significant time passes.¹⁸² Much of this point obviously links to potentially difficult reputations and the way that reputational entrepreneurs wish to portray the figures that they champion, but while it takes time to create a monument and decide how to commemorate someone, its care and upkeep are another matter.

It is my belief that Harrison should not be diminished simply because he succumbed to an illness and thus only served a short presidential tenure. Although his presidency was brief, I view it as a capstone to an otherwise long and accomplished life and his sudden death and the odd circumstances and ramifications that it brought about should not negate his entire life and career. While the effects of what his presidency would have been are uncertain, and there may be disagreements about his reputation, "there is no doubt that he had great impact on the history of the young republic" from his military career until he assumed the presidency.¹⁸³ Despite a lack of achievements while in the White House, too few people seem to realize or appreciate that the United States would not be what it is today had it not been for Harrison's role in American history, seeing that he played a major part in the early stages of shaping what we now call the Midwest. While he does not have the name recognition of most other presidents, and is now essentially an obscure character in national memory, he was a historically significant local, state, regional, and national figure, in addition to being commander-in-chief, and I submit that, as a member of that office and institution, Harrison deserves the same level of basic respect as other presidents.

Fortunately, the story behind his tomb has a happy ending in the sense that Harrison finally received a proper monument and it is currently well cared for; historical markers now permeate a once-dilapidated landscape full of overgrowth. The site is now well lit, landscaped, has security cameras, and has local police patrol the adjacent streets on their regular route. But this case study does highlight the sad trend across the United States for the lack of sufficient care, and sometimes even basic interest, in the preservation of monuments dedicated to prominent historical American figures. While reputational politics always surround prominent personalities, one should not underestimate the effects of ignorance and apathy on behalf of the wider public. Writing in 1912, local historian Reverend Charles Frederic Goss wrote it was the "shame of our great state [that the Harrison Tomb had been neglected]...and no true patriot can visit that lonely and (architecturally) hideous sepulchre without a feeling of pain."¹⁸⁴ He continued, saying "it is hard indeed to refrain from bitterness and denunciation [seeing the state of the tomb]...and contemplating our lack of appreciation for our local heroes."¹⁸⁵ And yet, excepting the brief period surrounding its formal memorialization, the tomb continued to deteriorate for several more decades following Goss's observation. While Harrison's biographies and examinations of his presidency or political career offer insightful and valuable information on these topics, few seem to give serious consideration to his legacy or even mention what happened after his body left Washington in 1841.

Landscape history and its potential for geography

Given the movement to erect a proper monument for Harrison in the 1920s under the premise of honoring the president, the sincerity behind the motive is questionable because for sixty-plus years afterward, it fell into disrepair *again*, leaving the memory of an obscure president left to deteriorate in an obscure location. Interestingly, Harrison was remembered and forgotten in cycles, but without a more formal monument and prominent landscape feature, would he have been remembered at all? In some regards, his presidency was little more than a footnote, but that is no reason to let a presidential monument fall by the wayside and into decay for decades. Harrison may not have been an inconsequential personality, but society did seem to treat him that way. Hufbauer observes that in the context of presidential monuments, as memory fades, so does interest, and commemoration acts as an intercessor between death and societal memory.¹⁸⁶ Foote notes that it is common for memorial landscapes to take shape over long periods of time and the public interpretation and reception of these sites can vary with political, economic, social, and cultural changes through time.¹⁸⁷ Foote's observation and my case study help to affirm why a landscape history approach can be valid and insightful when studying memorials or many other types of landscapes.

This discussion of landscapes and artifacts, topics both popular and familiar within geography, illustrates another strand in the connections between geography and history by opening up the question regarding the treatment of public monuments to prominent historical figures and specifically to the inequality of treatment and memory of US presidents, an inequality that is often evident in the cultural landscape. Through this example, a geographical study utilizing landscape history reveals more than general historical or biographical sources and adds more to the story behind a major figure. Hopefully it illustrates an instance of how the re-adoption of landscape history could signify an important step toward creating a more coherent and balanced geographical approach to landscape.¹⁸⁸ "Through landscape history," argues Marcucci,

The issues, problems, and outcomes for a specific landscape can be reframed in a valid historical context. Enriching the popular perception of a changing landscape has the potential to alter the political willingness of a society for collective action directed at planning and managing the common landscape. Ultimately, this change of perception may result in a change of attitudes towards the land. Perhaps most importantly, the landscape history will change attitudes by educating people about the impact of human actions on the land and about the significance of place to the local culture.¹⁸⁹

The story behind the Harrison Tomb illustrates Marcucci's points quite well, demonstrating the effects of both actions and inactions in preserving a landscape.

This study also demonstrates that landscape is not simply a reflection of the debate regarding historical reputation and legacy, but that the reputation or prominence of the memorial landscape itself can become part of the debate. The poor condition and maintenance of the Harrison Tomb for so many years prompted public concern over Harrison's neglected reputation. A full consideration of reputational politics must be sensitive not only to the social actors and issues at play in public memory, but also the spatial issues and factors at play in the landscape, both historically and in the present. Through this example of the Harrison Tomb, landscape history considers how the cycles of a memorial landscape's development, decline, and subsequent redevelopments can generate social and geographical change in debates and discussions of the past and what those meanings may infer in the present, as well as what new meanings they could carry in the future.¹⁹⁰ Foote states, "Landscape is more than a passive reflection of a nation's civil religion and symbolic totems. Landscape is the expressive medium, a forum for debate, within which these social values can be discussed actively and realized symbolically. Moreover the debate never ends."¹⁹¹

The stories behind landscapes, either natural or cultural, illustrate what landscape history can add to further geographical and historical research and, hopefully, create a stronger bond between the two. Moreover, I hope to pique other geographers' interest and encourage them to do more work in landscape history. Due to the dynamic nature of landscapes, their limitless varieties, their unconfined geographies, and the myriad ways in which scholars can interpret and reinterpret them through changing historical contexts, landscape history provides a virtually inexhaustible area of research for both past landscapes and the evolution of contemporary landscapes. Geographers' skills at landscape analysis and interpretation suggest that they could make significant and meaningful contributions to this not-fully-explored field of research by telling or helping others to tell the stories behind landscapes, and consequently creating a more complete picture of significant people and places. Historical geographers in particular have much to offer in such a field and the public (and also other disciplines) could gain much from their insights. As we see from the case of the Harrison Tomb, without an awareness of the landscape

and attention to the artifact that it houses, along with its meaning, historicity, and symbolic significance, the resting place of an American president might have fallen into even greater obscurity than the man it entombs.

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