

# Using Historic Markers in Your Classroom

## Just What Are Historical Markers Anyway?

If you've read James Loewen's book, *Lies Across America*, you know there are basically four kinds of historic markers in the United States:

1. **Accurate** – markers that provide an accurate and reasonably complete (given space limitations) description of a historical event or location. One measure of accuracy and completeness is the degree to which multiple perspectives and groups are included.
2. **Incomplete** – markers that are factually accurate, but only tell a part of the story. For example, there's an old sugar plantation in Florida with a two-sided historical marker that provides great detail about its owners, equipment and buildings, and role in the Civil War. No mention is made of the Seminole Indians from whom the land was taken and the nearly 200 slaves whose labor made the plantation possible.
3. **Inaccurate and Sometimes Outrageous** – markers that tell us more about the period in which they were created than the period they describe. For example, in April 1873 white vigilantes murdered 150 African Americans in the Colfax, Louisiana. How is the event commemorated today in an official state historical marker? Erected in 1951, it reads: "On this site occurred the Colfax Riot in which three white men and 150 negroes were slain. This event on April 13, 1873 marked the end of carpetbag misrule in the South." This marker tells us very little about the actual events of 1873, but a great deal about racial attitudes in the South in 1951.
4. **Nonexistent** – for every historic marker that commemorates a historic event or person there are literally millions of people and events that lack any physical reminder. In most cases, this absence reflects the low status assigned to the people or events by the powerful and influential in society – i.e., slave insurrections, labor leaders, anti-war protestors, Native American religious sites, etc. Well, what are you waiting for?

## Key Ingredients for an Accurate and Useful Historical Marker

**Accuracy** – get your facts right; and where there's uncertainty (i.e., how many people died in the riot or who fired first), don't be afraid to acknowledge it.

**Did I Get Everybody?** – as noted in #2 above, the best historical markers discuss all the individuals and groups connected to a given site. Ideally, they also note the perspectives of these individuals and groups.

**Who Cares?** – why is this person, place, or event worthy of commemoration? Tell the reader why it's historically significant and not merely trivia.

## Some Ideas for Class Assignments

**Short writing assignments** – after learning about a particular historical event, place, or person, ask your students to write the text to a historical marker. You'll want to show them many examples of historic markers and remind them about the above Key Ingredients for an Accurate and Useful Historical Marker.

**Create historical markers for your town** (or correct and/or augment those that already exist) – history happens everywhere, even in little towns. Have your students research local history and conduct interviews to develop a series of historical markers for their town. Then have them petition the city council for funding and permission to put up the markers. If one or both is denied, students can create a set of virtual markers (along with maps, photos, documents, and links) on a website. Funding may also be obtained by applying for a grant. See James Loewen's book, *Lies Across America*, for inspiring examples of successful student projects like these.

**Participate in the Historic Marker Database project** ([www.hmdb.org](http://www.hmdb.org)) – students can add their town's historic markers to this website, along with additional information about the person or event being commemorated (especially if the marker is incomplete or inaccurate). They can also find markers from all across the country, research their accuracy, and then post corrections or needed additions.

**HOW SHOULD THIS HISTORICAL EVENT BE REMEMBERED?** Using the space provided, write a brief text for a historical marker to commemorate the event you have been learning about in class. Remember that you have limited space and that passersby will probably only spend a minute reading it. You will want to include the *key details* of the event, but also a statement of its *significance*. You will also want to have a banner headline. In every case, consider carefully the *interpretation* of the event you wish to present, whose *perspective* you will take, and the *words* you choose.

A large, vertically oriented rounded rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing a historical marker text. To the right of the bottom portion of this box is a smaller, horizontally oriented rectangular box, also with a thin black border, likely for a name or title.