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Public can follow Ohio's first road with new map

History group's work lets people travel Zane's Trace

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Written by **Holly Richards**

MUSKINGUM COUNTY -- While negotiating the steep and curvy terrain underneath a canopy of trees, one can appreciate what early pioneers endured as they made their way west.

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Venturing down the section of East Wheeling Road past the Rustic Ridge Road intersection, travelers are met with a narrow, sometimes curved lane with varying uphill and downhill grades. Nowadays it is paved, with a few sections featuring stone and gravel, but more than 200 years ago it was all dirt and mud, traversed by foot, horse and wagon.

"This was the first road into Ohio," said Dr. Lorle Porter, a regional historian and author. "We want people to get an idea of how difficult it was to get into the hinterland."

As a result of the tenacity of a group of history buffs, local residents and visitors can take a step back in time and get a feel for the course early trailblazers and settlers established.

Porter is among the members of the Friends of the Zane's Trace, a committee that has been working on a nomination for Zane's Trace to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Expenses and manpower

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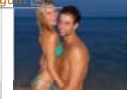
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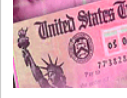
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A sign promoting Zane's Trace is displayed at the intersection of East Wheeling and Rustic Ridge roads. / Trevor Jones/Times Recorder

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Descriptive maps outlining the local route of Zane's Trace are available from the Cambridge/Guernsey County offices and Consulting Bureau in Cambridge.

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have rendered this venture unsuccessful, but the group with Porter at the helm was able to achieve a significant step.

Signs featuring a pointing hand and ZT (for Zane's Trace), have been placed on speed limit and road signs along a 7-mile stretch of county and township roads in Muskingum County. These guide drivers along an approximate path of the primitive frontier trail, first authorized by Congress in 1796.

Along with Porter, other committee members include Alan King (former director/site manager of the National Road/Zane Grey Museum in Norwich), Joe Steiger, Rich Morrison, John Morrow, Ed Wagstaff and Wendell Litt. About 10 years ago they formed the Friends of the Zane's Trace, united with the interest of preserving and presenting history for current and future generations.

"I've worked in teaching and [tourism](#), and we wanted to hit a niche market," Porter said. "A lot of people are interested in the National Road, and we want them to become aware of the Zane's Trace because it pre-dated it."

Porter said the group has hit a roadblock in achieving status through the National Register of Historic Places. The intensive process would include specific documentation, grants and a grant writer, an archaeologist working in each of the 11

counties the trail passes through and about \$40,000. Discouraged but not disheartened, the group pressed on and worked on their own to identify the path and produce [maps](#) for the public because of the road's historical significance.

"The Zane's Trace, the first land route into frontier Ohio, was completed in 1797," Porter said. "Prior to its opening, all [travel](#) was on river roads. The Ohio River froze during the winter, and Congress authorized this trail over land. The trace followed buffalo trails, and because buffalo do not like wet feet, the trace followed the high ridges of the countryside. The original trace crossed 11 future Ohio counties."

Steiger said the trace begins at Wheeling and crosses through Belmont, Guernsey, Muskingum, Perry, Fairfield, Pickaway and Ross counties, among others, and ends at Maysville, Ky.

Porter said Col. Ebenezer Zane and his brothers blazed the trail, coined "a tight fit for a fat horse" by Thomas Jefferson. In 1803, the new state of Ohio authorized development of the trace into a narrow wagon road. Until the National Road's construction almost 30 years later, Zane's Trace was the principal [vehicle](#) route through the interior of Ohio, Porter said.

Much of the original trace is inaccessible, but seven paved miles in eastern Muskingum County generally follow the original route. The final stretch on Old Wheeling Road is as close as one can get today to the pioneer experience.

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Near the intersection of Urban Hill and East Wheeling roads is a vacant farmhouse and land. From that point, visitors have a view spanning several miles, and they can see the AEP Conesville [power](#) plant towers.

"In 1807, Englishman Fortesque Cuming walked or rode the length of the trace and described the view as the highest point he had observed in Ohio," Porter said.

Throughout the years, it's been a taxing but interesting project, especially coming across surprising, breathtaking views such as the one Cuming described.

"It's a challenge to determine the location of the original trace," King said. "There's no clear-cut road that represents the trace, and little remains of what we think is the original road. It took a lot of educated guess work. We're pleased with the effort Dr. Lorle Porter has gone to to see this through; it's an important first step in getting Zane's Trace delineated."

"It's of local interest because it is why Zanesville is located where it is," Steiger said. "Ebenezer Zane saw the quality of the area, and it has a lot to do with the history of Zanesville."

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