CHALLENGES OF COMMERCE:
CHANGING TOWN PATTERNS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE, 1840-1875

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The places that people create can perform as dynamic witnesses of the outwardly expressive content of the people's lives. It is possible, with care and patience, to evaluate these places to deduce the values of their creators, maintainers, and changers. In particular, this study evaluates the formation and organization of towns and other small, named, inhabited places in Portage County, Ohio, during the mid-1800s in an effort to understand how values changed in a society and economy that was moving from agricultural to industrial and from local to national.

A place that is created or shaped by the activity of people is called a "cultural landscape." This type of landscape includes many different man-made elements, such as roads, factories, parking lots, signs, flower beds, buildings, telephone poles, sidewalks, orchards, trash containers, and monuments. The cultural landscape of a town, defined by its composition of ordinary (and, more rarely, extraordinary) elements, articulates a collective narrative that is formed by sets of choices and visions that are selected by individuals (participants) who have the capacity and opportunity to affect the landscape. These visions and choices are mediated by past experience, technology, motivation, available resources, and external economic, social, and political forces. This narrative can be interpreted to define values of the participants, including values which the participants intend to communicate, values which they accept but resist public admission, and values which, while unconscious, formulate basic cultural assumptions.

The definition of "collective narrative" is of key importance in understanding this methodology. In this context the term "collective" is developed from Ferdinand Tonnies' description of social entities in Community and Society. He defines it as a relationship that exists in the middle ground between informal, individual transactions and formal organization. It is "a multiple of persons so held together that there result--common intentions, desires, inclinations, disinclinations--in short, common feelings and ways of thinking." This "collective" cannot take action of and by itself. At that point which persons that participate in the collective organize to take action, they cease to perform as a collective and begin to act as a "social organization." This narrative, then, is not the telling of volition, of willful individual and corporate acts, but of a shared view of the meaning of acts.

In As a City Upon a Hill, Page Smith investigated the development of the American town and wrestled against a prevailing view that the formation of towns was almost always based upon economic motivations. He proposed the word "covenant" to identify those formal and informal, clearly understood agreements, by which, starting with the Mayflower Compact, persons selected to bind themselves together into a community. He described towns that were formed by this process as "covenanted communities." These definitions have been attractive to other scholars who have sought to develop frameworks within which towns can be shown to express meaning. However, several of these applications have stretched Smith's use of "covenant" to define a place's "character" or "general agreement about what is important." "Collective narrative" would seem to more accurately fit this stretched sense, and also describes, beyond "agreement," the levels of shared experience and tradition. Too, it respects the integrity of Smith's "covenant," enabling it to retain its useful, specific identity.
In application, it helps to clarify the methodology proposed earlier if its description is examined in reverse. With agreement that past experience, technology, motivation, resources, and external forces affect the choices and aspirations of individuals and, given that these sets of choices can be read as a value-laden collective narrative, it still remains for the narrative to be interpreted from observation and evaluation of the cultural landscape. At this point the method risks its reliability by being too dependent upon the subjective viewpoint of the observer—visual cues, while creating a language that is popularly understandable (at least to participants), lack a standardized dictionary. And, in order for the interpretation to be useful, it must be able to stand up to testing against data obtained by other researchers.

Reliability of the narrative can be reinforced with the development of techniques that search for repetitions, patterns, or, as termed by Amos Rapoport in *The Meaning of the Built Environment*, "redundancy." He admits that most cues to meaning rely greatly upon inference, "but the guesses can be good if the cues add up."5 If we look for visual elements that are repeated, that are placed in the same relationship in a number of similar contexts, we can confidently begin to deduce connections and meaning. Similarly, the more that people accept or agree upon the interpretation of a visual cue, the more confidence that we can place upon that interpretation.

For example, if we see both a United States and a Confederate flag on one flagpole in a town, we can immediately deduce that the meaning of the flagpole is, in substance, linked to the attachment of flags (being a common, popular assumption), and we can acknowledge (from historical background) the relationship between the United States and the Confederacy. Yet, solely on the basis of these two flags on a single pole we cannot generalize a cultural interpretation that has significance for the whole town. While this cue could have collective meaning, it may also be an individual statement. Alternatively, if both flags flew every day from all public and several private buildings in the same town, we could, with relative certainty, deduce a collective appreciation for values associated with both flags.

When the cultural landscapes of towns are studied over time, the changes in their collective narratives offer a source for determining changes in the values of participants. To demonstrate this method, a county in the Western Reserve was selected and examined for the period 1840-1875. Research included visits to each town, analysis of census records, and close inspection and comparison of individual maps, atlases, and plats. Portage County was chosen because it was inland and has remained relatively rural, rather than urban—the lake coast has a marked effect upon parts of the cultural landscape (such as road patterns, shapes of political divisions, and town typology) as does the emergence of a large city. These effects create issues that are beyond the scope of this study.

Portage County was established in 1807 and was reduced to its present size in 1840, when one-third of its area was taken to form, in part, neighboring Summit County.6 The original survey of 1796-97, led by Moses Cleaveland on behalf of the Connecticut Land Company, divided the land of the Western Reserve into townships that were as close to five miles square as instruments and conditions permitted. Portage County measures four townships east to west; five townships north to south. Of the 20 townships, permanent settlement began in each of 11 between 1798 and 1803; in five more by 1811; and in the last three in 1816, 1818, and 1822.7 The population increased rapidly, from 2,995 in 1810, to 10,095 in 1820, and to 18,826 in 1830. By 1830 settlement was substantially complete. Growth to 22,965 in 1840 was largely the result of natural increase. For the period of this study the population was relatively stable, reaching 24,419 in 1850, declining slightly to 24,208 in 1860, inching upward to 24,584 in 1870.8 (Fig. 1.)

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Clearly, by 1840 Portage County had passed from the settlement stage and had time to establish a realized cultural landscape. Whatever the intent of the original proprietors, whatever the cultural baggage brought from homes in the East (primarily New England), and whatever inventions and adjustments were caused by local conditions, the wilderness had been transformed by hard work guided by cultural values. The first step in studying compact settlements that were created by this time is to identify those places that were acknowledged by contemporaries. In 1840 the county had no incorporated cities or villages—the only organized governmental division, below that of the county, was the township. By 1880 the number of incorporated places had risen to four: Ravenna (county seat), Garretsville, Kent, and Mantua Station. However, maps and atlases of the period reveal many more places.

Published materials were examined rather than manuscripts based upon the presumption that because their intended circulation was larger, published materials were more likely to reveal general knowledge. As the nineteenth century progressed, published materials became increasingly available and provided much more detailed information. In specific, three maps of the Western Reserve, published in 1826, 1837, and 1842, cumulatively provide a base line of identified places in the early 1840s. An 1857 land ownership map of Portage County, with insets detailing the plans of many places, provides an interim view. And an 1874 Combination Atlas Map of Portage County, Ohio, with an extensive cartographic and visual display, completes this study. As stressed earlier, the view of any single source is not assumed to be authoritative, but trends and repetitions are relied upon.

Inhabited places can be and are very individualistic. When the cultural landscape of a place is analyzed, however, what is looked for is not the unique, but the common. Through review of the above sources, 33 places were identified. Analysis of the form and content of each place led to the development of classes or "types" of places: county seat, town center, mill seat, crossroads, canal port, and train station. The types are defined by the determining function that led to the origin of the place. It was not presumed that the determining function defined form and content, and, therefore, values—this was revealed through the analysis. Some places added one or more of these functions after origin and each addition modified the form, thereby increasing the potential for economic and population growth and changing the value orientation. By creating and using the types indicated above, it is not intended to suggest that other factors do not shape places. Indeed, it is implicit in the method that other factors are possible and present and it is affirmed that sorting could have been done from other perspectives to provide useful results. Following is a review of the dominant types of places, in the order that they flourished, in Portage County during the mid-1800s.

In that area, at that time, the primal place was the county seat, Ravenna. Inhabited since the start of settlement, it was located on the great Indian trail from the Cuyahoga River to the Mahoning, above the point where the watersheds met. Although early maps of Ohio vary in indicating major roads, Ravenna's presence on the network is constant. With the organization of the county in 1807, Ravenna enhanced its position as a crossroads: early major roads ran from major town to major town, and in pioneer days the "major town" was usually a county seat. Its watershed position made it a port when the Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal opened in 1840. This branch canal connected the Akron summit of the Ohio and Erie Canal with the Pennsylvania and Erie. The canal was abandoned and sold in 1877, at the end of its economic value. Having an established position on the patterns of commerce, Ravenna became a station on one of the first four railroads completed in northeast Ohio in 1849-52. As can be seen, the initial determining function, along with a fortunate position, aided in the addition of more determining functions. By definition, a county seat is a unique type within a county. With administrative activity
as a constant, the seat draws commercial activity by virtue of its being the one central (in a functional sense) place in the county that people need to go to transact business. It becomes densely populated (comparatively), supports and applauds commerce, but the courthouse square maintains a position to dominate all activity in the place. (Fig. 2.)

Few types of places have as revered a presence in the American psyche as the New England town center. The cultural geographer D. W. Meinig proposes that the town center, along with the Midwestern Main Street and the California Suburb, dominates our idealizations of American family life. If the Western Reserve region is "a stretch of land that is forever New England," as we have been told in a recent brochure published by the Ohio Office of Travel and Tourism, then the region should be dotted with this symbolic landscape.

To understand the town center in Ohio, it is first important to understand its origin in the East. Recent research has demonstrated that, except for the earliest settlements, the New England settlement pattern was dispersed, rather than compact, and what we imagine as the town center was a creation of increased prosperity and commerce between 1790 and 1830.(Perhaps not incidentally, Joseph S. Wood, whose work constitutes the basic support for this understanding, was born in Cleveland and graduated from Western Reserve Academy in Hudson.) Meinig describes our image of this place as "a village embowered in great elms and maples, its location marked by a slender steeple rising gracefully above a white wooden church which faces on a village green around which are arrayed great white clapboard houses." The village green, however, was a division of the meetinghouse lot and the "slender steeples" did not become a part of the architectural program until the very late 1700s. Prior to 1790 the New England town center was simply a place in the center of the town. Several roads, in their meanderings, might intersect and it was the site of the meetinghouse, which was used for both religious and political activity. Farming was close enough to subsistence that a commercial "service center" could not be supported.

In the Western Reserve, during the subsistence period of early settlement, the function of the town center was little different from early New England. However, the formalized survey improved the value of the center's location by creating a more orderly landscape than the traditional metes and bounds system. Since the townships were laid in a grid, a spot to be designated as a town center was likely to be located as close to the exact center of the grid as was practical and possible, although an attractive spot near the center, such as a mill seat, might pull the center slightly in one direction or the other. Most townships supported main roads which ran north-south and east-west and which intersected at the center. Many major diagonal roads led to the county seat. Homesteads, by mid-century, had sorted themselves into a linear pattern that followed a few roads—most of the people in many townships lived on roads that led, directly or indirectly, to the center. (Fig. 3.)

With a location favored by the survey system, the Western Reserve center grew as an institutional center before any economic imperative. First, it was the site of the town hall. More impressively, it was the location of two or three of the churches within the township. One of the district schools was certain to be at the center and often a cemetery was close. It was also attractive for a post office, a general store, and blacksmiths. The parsonage for a church and the homes of two or three nearby farmers completed the landscape. Many centers grew no larger; some added a few more homes and/or services; and some added determining functions and became slightly to greatly different. The primary distinction between the New England and the Western Reserve Town Center was that in the East, center growth was a function of a surge of commercial prosperity and in the Midwest, relative prosperity enabled the support of institutions.
that were sited in the centers. As time passed, the Western centers would have probably become more dominated by commerce, but the arrival of the railroads stalled this evolution. (Fig. 4.)

Of 33 places identified in Portage County from cartographic sources, 17 were indicated as the "center" of their respective townships. Of 18 places identified by 1842 (before the railroad), 13 were centers. The three townships with no centers indicated were Franklin, which was dominated by Kent (originally Carthage, then Franklin); Ravenna, which hosted the county seat; and Charlestown, adjacent on major east-west route to Ravenna.

A mill seat is a place where waterpower is available to operate a mill, whether for grinding flour, sawing wood, or operation of a factory. In many townships there were places that could furnish water power at some time during the year. Four places had enough of a drop in elevation with plentiful water that several enterprises were built to take advantage of the power. The industry also needed manpower, and towns emerged around the mills. These towns included Garrettsville and Kent, two of only six places to be indicated on the 1826 map. The two remaining seats that gained identity as places were Harrison, in Hiram Township, and Mogadore, half in Suffield Township and half in Summit County. The early road pattern of the mill seat is usually based upon the course of the river, rather than the overall grid. The determining function is power, power for processing and manufacture. Mills and mill races were sited for most efficient use of power. Commercial streets developed to service the industries and their customers. Institutions are scattered, not grouped pleasingly around a green. While the importance of waterpower in Portage County diminished with improvement of steam engines and ready access to coal, the industrial beginnings of Kent and Garrettsville enabled them to maintain an industrial base for several decades. This base gave Kent the economic strength to transform into an institutional center (Kent State University) and gave Garrettsville the resources to continue as a commercial center.

In Portage County the late arrival of the canal on a settled landscape had little effect: it added two small canal service points (Newport and Harrisport) and added a determining function to two existing towns (Kent and Ravenna). But the railroads, thrusting their "metropolitan corridor" through the countryside, permanently altered the present and future of both the towns they touched and the towns they did not. Mantua Station (later Mantua), Aurora Depot, and Atwater Station were the only identified places in the county that were originated due to the railroads, but their greatest impact was upon the continued growth of Kent, Ravenna, Garrettsville, and the town centers of Aurora and Windham.

The idealized landscape of the Midwest "Main Street" is bonded to the railroad. Main-Street-like landscapes sometimes occur a distance from the rails, but these are exceptions and clearly do not fit the rule nor the popular image. They link, in part because rows of adjacent brick blocks grew to line the streets of many places shortly after arrival of the railroad, and in part because the architecture of Main Street—the Italianate of the late 1800s is identical with the period that the railroads were strongest. It is a landscape compact to the extreme--rarely does any function other than commerce intrude into the solid block of storefronts. It was designed to service consumers. (Fig. 5.)

Even with commercial functions, the town center was oriented to producers--a losing effort as the agricultural producing population steadily declined during this period. Population grew, as a whole, only because of influx to the railroad towns. Town centers froze, changing little for decades, but remaining the center. The railroad towns were never the center, but a stop on a line, a bead in the necklace of an increasingly national culture.
If this new culture, bolstered by a changing economy and propelled by advancing technology, was a force beyond the control, and perhaps grasp, of the people of Portage County, their adaptation to this force was nonetheless local, and immediate in their lives. As the focus of places changed from institutions—church, town hall, school—to the consumer services of Main Street, so the focus of lives changed, in emphasis, from reliance upon local relationships organized around social needs to national relationships, reactive to commercial needs. The narrative of these changing values is written by the landscape.

NOTES


7Milton George, "The Settlement of the Connecticut Western Reserve of Ohio, 1796-1850," typescript at Cleveland Public Library (prepared for graduate credit at University of Michigan Department of Geography, 1949?), 37-49.

8Annual Report of the Secretary of State to the Governor of the State of Ohio for the Year 1871 (Columbus, Ohio: Nevins & Myers, State Printers, 1872), 152, 194.

9"Map of the Western Reserve Including the Fire Lands Ohio" (Nelson, Portage County, Ohio: William Sumner, 1826); "Map of the Connecticut Reserve, Compiled from the Latest Authorities" (Akron, Ohio: Lewis Robinson & Co., 1837); "Map of the Western Reserve" (Conneaut, Ohio: Reed and Rollo, 1842); P. J. Brown, "Map of Portage County, Ohio from Actual Surveys" (Philadelphia: Matthews & Tantor); Combination Atlas Map of Portage County, Ohio (Chicago: L. H. Everts, 1874).

10Places were considered "identified" on the 1826, 1837, and 1842 maps of the Western Reserve if the place was indicated in any way, by symbol and/or name. On the 1856 map and 1874 atlas of Portage County, places were only considered "identified" if the source contained a separate plan of the place.


Map of PORTAGE COUNTY Townships during 1840-1875 period

Fig. 1
PORTAGE COUNTY, OHIO ROADS, 1842
after Map of the Western Reserve published by Reed & Rollo,
Conneaut
STREETSBORO TOWNSHIP HOUSES, 1857
after Map of Portage County, Ohio published by Matthews Taintor,
Philadelphia

Fig. 3

- 45 -
Adapted from Plat on 1857 County Map
Methodist Church
Presbyterian Church
Academy
Disiciple Church
Morgan & Wadsworth's Store
Morgan & Wadsworth's Corner

WINDHAM

Morgan & Wadsworth

Farmers' Co. Store

Doctor

W. Shop

Doctor

Blacksmith Shop

Parsonage

Carpenter & Joiner

Adapted from Plat on 1857 County Map

Atlantic & Great Western Railroad

Tanner & Currier

Fig. 5