The question of who were the men that actually built the homes, churches, schools, and public buildings of the Western Reserve in the first half of the nineteenth century is one on which new information is being uncovered all the time, but which still has many perplexing aspects. What were the differences between the journeyman carpenter or mason and the master builder who could handle the tools of his trade, and also make plans, draw a Greek detail, and use the builder's guides such as those by Asher Benjamin, Edward Shaw, and Minard LaFever? In addition, what makes such a person an architect?

As I.T. Frary pointed out in Early Homes of Ohio in 1936, standard histories concentrate on politicians, soldiers, lawyers, ministers and physicians, but do not often mention the builders, who were considered mere workmen. Yet we know the names of many master builders, whose body of work, or even one outstanding structure, indicates that they were designers as well as craftsmen. The profession of architecture, on the other hand, did not begin to emerge until the middle of the century, and before 1850 the designer and builder were often the same person.

The contractor-builders were carpenters or masons. The typical frame building was constructed of heavy posts and beams fastened together with mortise-and-tenon joints. The smaller members -- joists, studs, and rafters -- were sawn and frequently pegged together. There were also buildings of brick in the Western Reserve as early as the teens, and buildings of cut stone not long after. Often the mason fired his own brick. All of these methods required no small degree of skill and craftsmanship, and from them there soon emerged buildings of taste and good proportion that could be distinguished by the term "architecture."

Both structural and ornamental details were found in the builder's guides which were published in the East and brought to Ohio. In some cases older books published in England were still in use. The American builder's guides are based very closely on English books for technical details, such as how to lay out a curving staircase, how to design a roof truss, and so on. But the designs in American books based on the classical styles are frequently original, and while they show a clear order and consistency, they were not slavishly archaeological. The practice of changing the details and proportions of the ancient classical orders was common even before the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Talbot Hamlin has pointed out some of the ways in which the changes from correct ancient or Renaissance practice took place. They included the combining of Greek forms with Roman, Renaissance or baroque details, and in the case of churches, the adaptation of the late baroque Christopher Wren-James Gibbs London church type to the Greek Revival. American practice also created new variations of the classical orders. The Doric frieze seldom includes the triglyph and metope of the Greek temple, but is absolutely plain. Columns often omit the fluting, sometimes for reasons of economy, but sometimes also clearly by choice. New column capitals were invented. And finally, authors like Asher Benjamin and Minard LaFever provided designs which are very personal interpretation of the ancient patterns.

Although Frary discussed six of the Ohio builders known in 1936, he declined to give a "roster" of other known builders. I think that a consideration of some of the other known builders may be useful in the Western Reserve. We have tended to think that much of the building was anonymous or spontaneous, or that many homeowners built their own. On the contrary, the overwhelming evidence shows that every settled community had its own builder, carpenter, or mason who was an integral part of the economic and social life of the community. But we can no longer think that because the work of Jonathan Goldsmith is well documented, for example, everything within a hundred miles of Painesville was built by him. Goldsmith was one of many, although one of superior ability and one of whom a record has remained. Who were some of the others?

There are a few documented builders who are known only in connection with building their own homes. Among them is Robert W. Henry, whose fine Greek Revival house on Pearl Road in Parma Heights boasts a robust Doric portico. Henry was brought to Cleveland from New York State at the age of seven. He apprenticed to a local carpenter, Henry L. Noble, and then worked briefly as his foreman. Henry moved to Parma in 1843, and family records show that he began building his own house in 1850. Henry secured his plans from published designs, but the specific source is not known.
In Medina County, Burritt Blakslee built himself a simple L-shaped Greek Revival framhouse in 1854. His life is recounted in a letter from his granddaughter, and in this case, she refers specifically to a copy of Asher Benjamin’s Practical House Carpenter as one of his books. Furthermore, she describes the variety of Blakslee’s skills -- finish carpentry, cabinet work, woodgraining, and casket making. Both Henry and Blakslee were already mentioned in Frary’s Early Homes of Ohio.

A surprising number of builders who built ordinary houses are known by name. Those who worked in cities or villages are more likely to be known than those who primarily built farmhouses. We know the names of such builders in places from Trumbull County, the original seat of the Western Reserve, to Sandusky in the Firelands. The best known is still probably Jonathan Goldsmith, because of the extensive section devoted to him in Frary’s book and the complete monograph by Elizabeth Hitchcock published in 1980. The story of Goldsmith’s arrival in Lake County and his work in Painesville, Mentor, and Cleveland are well documented in these sources, which in turn are based on original account books, letters, and memoirs. Of the fifteen or so buildings remaining today, perhaps half are still recognizable as buildings from the 1820s and 1830s. While a few of Goldsmith’s houses had the lengthwise five-bay facade of the late colonial house, his preferred form seems to have been the gable-fronted house with three windows across -- in fact, the form which is typically known as the “Western Reserve house.” Their details range from slender Federal pilasters and elliptical fanlights to the heavier Greek temple forms. Goldsmith’s designs were of a quality that, according to Talbot Hamlin, “rank well with the current work of New York or New England.”

Not far to the east in Madison, Lake County, Addison Kimball built many houses between 1825 and 1840. The majority are of one basic type, the lengthwise five-bay late colonial house, often with elegant ornamental detail in the Federal and Greek Revival styles. But Kimball’s masterpiece is probably the David Paige house, a large temple-fronted house with four two-story pilasters.

On the other side of the Reserve, at least two of the most remarkable houses on the remarkable West Main Street in Norwalk, which Daniel Porter called "the best individual street of homes in Ohio," are known to be the work of William Gale Meade. Meade was the grandfather of Frank B. Meade, a major Cleveland architect in the early twentieth century, thus providing some evidence for those interested in heredity. One of the Norwalk houses, the Vredenburgh house of 1830, is a charming Federal-style house with a center gable and a Palladian window. The Sturges house of 1834 was either built by Meade or later altered by him. Its octagonal columns, sometimes thought to be one of the more unusual variations from the Greek Revival period, turn out to be a later addition.

Several builders are known in Sandusky from the nineteenth century. The houses of Sandusky are different from those in the rest of the Reserve in that many are constructed of the native limestone. Samuel M. White was a builder and contractor who came to Sandusky in 1835. His own home is a square two-and-a-half story limestone house with a four-bay front and end parapets with chimneys. Samuel White continued to build in Sandusky well into the post-Civil War period.

Around 1841 Sandusky’s Ogden Mallory built a quaint one-and-a-half story stone house for himself with a steep gable roof and massive end parapets. There is also a possibility that Mallory built the Oran Follett house in 1834-1837, surely the greatest gem of the Greek revival period in that part of northern Ohio. Like a number of Sandusky houses, it stands on a high basement because the bedrock is so close to the surface, and the Follett house has a tall front stoop with curving flanking stairs rising up to it. The Follett house is one of the few in Sandusky built of a golden colored limestone instead of the more common blue-grey stone. As one of the finest Greek Revival mansions in Ohio, and if it was indeed built by Mallory, it would ensure his reputation as a master builder.

In Cuyahoga County, at least two builders are known in Chagrin Falls who have been documented by Elizabeth Rodgers. William C. Hutchings arrived in 1845, and after a hard winter, began contracting the next year. He soon gained a reputation for accurate estimating of the materials and cost of any project. His ability to get workers and keep them busy earned him the familiar title of "Boss Hutchings." Primarily a mason, he built houses of brick, operated a brick kiln and supplied much of the brick used locally. Hutchings also built several bridges for the county commissioners. His typical work displays an unevenly fired brick, but solidly built and well proportioned walls. His houses are either Greek Revival in style or in related vernacular forms, and he continued building into the 1870s.

Joseph O’Malley, on the other hand, was a carpenter who came to Chagrin Falls from Canada in 1869. Houses constructed by him into the 1880s can be identified, and they follow the current fashions, with details in the Victorian Italianate and Second Empire styles, and later Eastlake and
Queen Anne forms. By the post-Civil War period, however, the builder had a much greater range of pattern books at his disposal, and he combined details from different sources with even greater eclectic freedom.

Because it had been assumed that there were only a few qualified builders in the early years, a number of buildings were unquestioningly attributed to the ones that were already known. For example, it is known that Isaac Ladd was the master builder of the Frederick Kinsman house in Warren. Built in 1832, it has a monumental Greek portico of four Ionic columns. Several writers, noting the similarity between that porch and the one on the Simon Perkins, Jr., house in Akron, inferred that Ladd must have built the Perkins house also. The fact that Kinsman was married to Perkins' sister added to the plausibility of the attribution.

However, the responsibility for the Perkins house is divided. The stone mason of the Perkins house is identified in a Summit County history as John Gargett of Hinckley and Sharon in Medina County. Furthermore, Kinsman family recollections indicate that Perkins assisted Kinsman in the planning of his house, rather than the other way around. Therefore, the person most responsible for the design of both houses was probably Perkins, who instructed and worked with two different builders. In fact, the Perkins house is a far superior design, and we can assume that Perkins was apparently able to achieve best what he really wanted in his own house. At least one other house by Isaac Ladd was known in Warren -- the Quinby house, which also had a monumental Ionic porch, but it has been torn down. John Gargett's own house, also built of stone like the Perkins mansion, is still standing in Hinckley.

Given the fact that the master builders derived their designs from the builder's guides for the most part, it is especially interesting to trace the origins of certain buildings which are unusual or unique. One of the best known is the Tallmadge Congregational Church built by Lemuel Porter in 1822-1825. Considered the most perfect church of the New England type in northeastern Ohio, its design is nearly identical in general appearance, proportion and details with a group of churches in western Connecticut by the well-known architect David Hoadley. Porter was a carpenter and joiner, and we know that Porter and Hoadley were boyhood friends in Waterbury, Connecticut, having been apprenticed to the same clock-maker. Thus some communication between the two builders can certainly be inferred, but the interesting fact is that the Hoadley churches in Connecticut are later in date than the Tallmadge church. So far we have found nothing to show where the design actually originated, but recent research suggests that Porter may have been personally acquainted with Asher Benjamin while in Boston. In any case, Porter never produced another building as distinguished as the Tallmadge church. In 1826 he was given the contract for the first building of Western Reserve College in Hudson, and then began work on a second college building three years later. However, he died suddenly in September, 1829, and his son Simeon, aged 22, was appointed to fulfill the contract.

One of the most unusual designs in the Western Reserve is the Congregational Church in Kinsman, built in 1832. The builder was a William or Willie Smith, who came from Lisbon, Connecticut, along with John Kinsman, proprietor of the township, and his brother-in-law Simon Perkins, the founder of Warren and father of Simon Perkins, Jr. The Kinsman church has a porch which rises to four stories, making a high-shouldered front on which the belfry rests. It has been stated that it was patterned after the Old North Church in New Haven, but it is actually based on the Congregational Church in West Boston, Massachusetts, which was designed by Asher Benjamin and published in his American Builder's Companion of 1827. The Ohio builder substituted pointed Gothic arches on the windows for the round ones in the Boston prototype, and columns instead of pilasters on the first two stories. Willie Smith is also known to have built several houses in and around Kinsman, including the notable Peter Allen house, which is considered one of the finest examples of the Federal style in the Reserve. It is probably unsurpassed in the delicacy of its classical detail.

Among these builders of unique designs, one or two have attracted a much more thorough research and analysis. One is John Bosworth, Jr., builder of the Congregational Church at Atwater in Portage County. Bosworth has been the subject of a comprehensive study by Richard Sicha, a Hiram College student. He concludes that Bosworth drew on several specific sources in building the Atwater church, beginning with the accepted building practice of the day in timber construction, the design of earlier churches in the area, a builder's guide, and Eastern precedent.

Bosworth came to Ohio from Sandisfield, Massachusetts, before 1820. He married a niece of Jonathan Hale of Bath and settled in Rootstown in Portage County, where he lived until his death in 1840. Bosworth worked as a carpenter of the Hale house, now a part of the Hale Farm and Village museum, in 1826 or 1827, and it has been speculated that he knew and worked with Lemuel
Porter on the Tallmadge church. Bosworth also built churches in Rootstown and Ellsworth as well as Atwater. The Atwater church, begun in 1838, has a unique design combining three styles, a Greek Ionic portico with six columns, a late colonial steeple, and Gothic windows. Sicha traces the origin and relationships of each of these elements to published sources, nearby churches, and churches in the East. Without recapitulating the entire argument here, it is clear that the synthesis of the diverse elements was created by a person of great ability, and yet it is perfectly consistent with the spirit of the period.

A number of other master builders are known who built both houses and significant public buildings, especially churches. Hezekiah Eldredge was the builder of St. John’s Episcopal Church, the oldest church still standing in greater Cleveland. Born in 1795 and coming to Cleveland after a period in Rochester, New York, Eldredge was forty years old when he received the contract for the church in 1836. He also built numerous commercial and warehouse structures at the beginning of the canal era in Cleveland.

St. John’s Church was constructed under the tenure of Bishop Charles McIlvaine of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, and it is known that the bishop took an active interest in church building. By the mid-1830s the Gothic style was the "official style" of the Episcopal Church from Bangor, Maine to the Carolinas. St. John’s with its square central entrance tower, pinnacles, buttresses and pointed windows, follows very closely a standard plan in the early Gothic Revival style that had just been published in Vermont in John Henry Hopkins’ Essay on Gothic Architecture. In any case, Hezekiah Eldredge is one of the best documented builders that we know. The Western Reserve Historical Society holds contracts, account books, and plans for churches, houses, and business buildings drawn by him, including the plans for St. John’s.

The Episcopal Church’s plan was also furnished by Bishop McIlvaine for Christ Church in Hudson. It was erected in 1846 by Simeon C. Porter, the son of Lemuel Porter. It was a wooden frame building, and consequently some of the details were simplified compared to St. John’s. Simeon Porter, a skilled contractor in both carpentry and masonry, is another well-documented builder, having completed his father’s contract for the Western Reserve College building and then erecting five additional buildings for the college. Between 1830 and 1860, according to Frederick Waite, the son of an apprentice under Porter, Simeon and his brother Orrin “built not only the college buildings but all the best residences in town before the Civil War.” This is a considerable claim that should be looked at carefully again, since more recent evidence shows that Hudson was the home of several skilled and talented builders, among whom Leander Starr, Frederick Bunnell, and briefly, Archibald E. Rice, should be mentioned.

By 1844 Simeon Porter’s reputation brought him a contract to build in Brecksville in Cuyahoga County. The Brecksville Congregational Church was one of the purest Greek Revival designs known to have been done by Porter. Unfortunately it was destroyed by arson in 1965. The churches at Streetsboro (1851) and Twinsburg (1848), each only five miles from Hudson, are so similar to the Brecksville church that at one time it seemed likely that Porter built them also. However, their builders’ names are known as well. The Streetsboro church was built by James W. Clark, and although it has been moved to the Hale Farm and Village, Clark’s own home, a charming little Gothic cottage still stands on Seasons Road in Streetsboro Township.

As for other public buildings, we know that George W. Mygatt was the builder of the oldest county courthouse still standing in the Reserve. Built in 1840, the Lake County Courthouse in Painesville, which is now used as the city hall, happens to be one of the best examples of the mixture of Greek with Roman or Renaissance details. It has a portico of four massive fluted Doric columns, combined with a small dome supporting a cupola. The Roman forms were commonly used for courthouses because they were seen as appropriate for law courts, symbolizing the codification of civil law by the ancient Romans. Such a choice was due to the national influence of Thomas Jefferson’s Classical Revival, undoubtedly specified by the county commissioners and executed by the builder.

Here were some twenty builders, then, who began as craftsmen in one trade or the other, and evolved into designers of varying degrees of talent. Yet it is still a moot point whether many of them should be called "architect." The distinction between master builder and architect began to emerge in a city like Cleveland around 1850. In 1848 Simeon Porter moved from Hudson to Cleveland and the next year joined Charles W. Heard to form the partnership of Heard and Porter. Heard, the son-in-law of Jonathan Goldsmith, was listed in the city directory as "carpenter and joiner" beginning in 1837; from 1845 to 1849 as "master builder"; and then in 1850 as "architect." The business section of the Cleveland directory listed only master builders even longer, and these were divided into masons and carpenters. It was not until 1856 that there was a separate listing for architects. In 1859 the
Cleveland directory listed nine architects, 31 masons, and 72 carpenters and builders.

The men who called themselves architects in the 1850s had come from the master builder tradition or from the office of another architect. As yet there were no professional schools of architecture. But by 1850 the architects charged set fees for drawings and specifications, a percentage for full professional services, including contracts and superintending the construction, and in general, providing all of the services of a modern professional architect.

Heard and Porter designed commercial blocks, many public schools, several fine Euclid Avenue homes, and numerous churches, including the Old Stone Church of Public Square. After 1859 they continued their architectural careers separately, Heard designing Cleveland's great Second Empire City Hall; Lake Erie's College Hall, St. James Church and the Casement House in Painesville; and Ohio's building for the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Porter planned many public and institutional buildings around the Reserve in Akron, Ravenna, Kent, Alliance, and even in Michigan.

The contractor who built the Old Stone Church in 1855 and worked with Heard and Porter on many projects was Warham J. Warner. Warner was listed in the 1837 directory as a mason. In that year he built the American House, Cleveland's first large hotel. In the forties he took a carpenter as partner and built public schools and numerous fine homes. In 1858 Warner built Cleveland's first Post Office, Court House and Custom House, for which the architect was Ammi B. Young, who designed many federal buildings across the country. Warner also built commercial blocks in the Flats and the warehouse district, and continued as a contractor-builder until 1879.

These three men, then, illustrate the transition perfectly. All began as builders in the 1830s, i.e., as carpenters and masons. One had been trained in his father's trade, another in his father-in-law's. As the mercantile and industrial city grew in the decades before the Civil War, larger and more complex buildings began to be needed, and specialization took place. Heard and Porter became architects, and Warner became a contractor-builder. In another paper, one could show that a third branch of specialization produced the engineer. In any case, the era of the master builder was over.

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