18TH CENTURY
A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE
GEORGE WASHINGTON (1732–1799)

“It has always been my opinion that the shortest, easiest and least expensive communication with the invaluable back country would be to let the courses and distances be taken to the mouth of the Muskingum and up that river to the carrying place to the Cuyahoga, down the Cuyahoga to Lake Erie.”

George Washington

George Washington and the West

George W. Knepper

The topic of this paper, George Washington and the West, might appear to have little to do with the Western Reserve. As far as we know, Washington never set foot in it, and, as a Virginian operating under what was known as Virginia custom, his approach to western land development differed in detail from the experiences of the New England speculators responsible for developing the lands of the Connecticut Reserve. Furthermore, until 1775 Washington operated under the constraints of a royal colonial system that differed substantially from the controls imposed upon the Reserve, first by the State of Connecticut, and then by the Connecticut Land Company, an association of land speculators free to determine their own rules and procedures. It might be of some interest, however, to compare and contrast these two differing approaches to the problems associated with developing western lands—acquiring the land, surveying it, selling or leasing it, protecting it.

But first a word about George Washington. If one were to create an ideal type to lead in the late eighteenth century development of western lands, one would do well simply to clone George Washington. He was a visionary, physically vigorous, ambitious, brave, willing to take a chance on himself, a careful manager, somewhat self-righteous, and willing to plead preference for himself to those who could assist him. After marrying the wealthy widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, when he was just twenty-six years old, he had access to considerable fluid capital, an advantage that cannot be overemphasized in land speculations.

Washington’s first experiences in Virginia’s western lands are well known. At age sixteen, he worked with a crew surveying land in the Shenandoah Valley and beyond for Thomas, Lord Fairfax, and, with his first wages, he purchased several hundred acres of choice land. By the following year he had qualified as a county surveyor and, for the next several years, led his own crews beyond the Blue Ridge. Each year he bought additional land or took land as payment in lieu of cash. All this time he was learning about the characteristics of people who frequented frontiers and about the dangers and limitations they faced. This experience was a crash course for a young man whose whole life would be spent, as time allowed, pursuing his western interests.

Washington had figured out that land was a key to social preference, but by his twenty-first year he was also seeking preference in the military. In 1753 the royal governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, entrusted Washington to deliver a warning to the French commandant of fortifications along the Upper Ohio that his troops must vacate lands claimed by the British crown. The French commandant, asserting France’s counterclaims, refused to consider evacuation. In 1754, Dinwiddie placed Washington in command of Virginia troops and ordered him to seize the strategic Forks of the Ohio, an expedition that ended with humiliating defeat at Fort Necessity. The next year, Washington commanded Virginia troops that accompanied the ill-fated British troops under General Edward Braddock on their disastrous march toward the French fort recently built at the Forks. By the age of twenty-three, therefore, young George Washington...
was already a three time loser in western military forays. Despite these early disappointments, he continued to command Virginia troops along the frontiers of the colony for another dozen years, a period during which his efforts to promote his own advancement were uniformly unsuccessful. By 1763 the attractions of military preferment had faded, but personal preferment based on wealth, association with men of influence, character, and land ownership remained a principal focus of his life. As he matured he worked diligently to perfect positive character traits which ultimately helped him achieve the distinction he craved.

Washington's military experience had a direct bearing on his acquisition of western lands. As he traversed the countryside, he kept an eye out for good acreage. He became friends with officers who already lived along the Monongahela and the Youghiogheny in southwestern Pennsylvania and enlisted them as either partners or employees in seeking out promising lands which he was quick to add to his growing holdings. Captain William Crawford served Washington especially well by locating most of the 200,000 acres of western land promised by Governor Dinwiddie to the Virginia soldiers who had served in the 1754 campaign. The Virginia Council would never have honored these claims had not Washington been unremitting over the years in压urging them to do the honorable thing and in personally paying the considerable costs associated with locating the land, filing claims, and surveying it into appropriate sized lots. He was concerned for his men, but he certainly was not a disinterested party. As commander of Virginia's forces, he was entitled to 15,000 acres to which he added by purchasing at a discount land warrants from other veterans. His holdings amounted to more than 20,000 acres located in four tracts which Crawford had identified along the south bank of the Ohio and along the Kanawha River. As Douglas Southall Freemen said of Washington, he "was fully committed 'to his view that the road to wealth ran on the frontier, and he set no limit to what he would patent if he could find low-lying, easily developed tracts of the first quality.'"

Having placed Washington in his western context, let's compare his experiences with western lands to those of the Connecticut Land Company speculators as they worked to profit from opening the Western Reserve. First, in securing land Washington acted alone or in company with men he had employed. He could proceed as he wished as long as he acted within the law. In contrast, Western Reserve speculators were part of a common enterprise. The lands opened to them for development were defined in their contract with the State of Connecticut and they had to operate within specifically defined borders. They banded together to make rules that determined how much each investor was eligible to receive and how his lands were to be located. Whereas Washington paid his own developmental costs, the Connecticut Land Company set aside a portion of their joint holdings the sale of which was to pay the developmental costs for all of the investors.

Under Virginia custom, Washington could enter any lands Virginia had opened for speculative purposes, he could then select land of his choice under the indiscriminate claim method, and then he would have it surveyed under the metes and bounds method. Lands which he was eligible for under military warrant posed no immediate problem as to legitimacy. Other claims had to be registered and approved under rules set down first by the colonial Virginia Council and later by the land offices of the State of Virginia. After claims had been registered and approved, a metes and bounds survey provided the basis for issuing a deed to the land. Much could go wrong in this process, but Washington minimized chances for error and disappointment by personally viewing his claims whenever possible.

Western Reserve speculators, on the other hand, were buying a pig in a poke, taking whatever chance dealt them, sight unseen. There was no problem over legitimacy of their claim; it was well defined in contracts. The Connecticut Land Company chose to survey their holdings first, then divide it up on paper into marketable units, and finally to assign parcels to individual speculators by having them draw lots in a complex lottery system. Thus the individual speculator had no control over the lands he would receive. Large investors found themselves saddled with lands in several different locations widely separated from one another.

The quality of Reserve lands varied widely. We have mentioned Washington's concern that his lands be first quality, but he was also concerned about equity when working on behalf of others. While managing selection and development of the military lands of 1754, he instructed his western land agent to take care in surveying plots so that the better lands were apportioned among as many properties as possible. He
knew full well how nasty tempers could get if only a small number of claimants got all the best land, leaving the dregs to the rest.

The same problem faced the Connecticut Land Company. Realizing that by chance some investors would draw inferior land, the company provided "equalizing townships" containing land that could be used to compensate investors for drawing the swamps, bogs, and other marginal land so common in the Reserve. It would be optimistic in the extreme to believe that this well intentioned system proved equitable.

Basic to any practice for acquiring land was the survey. It was the defining skeleton on which all else rested. Virginia used the metes and bounds survey which allowed the acreage to take any shape so long as the boundary lines were straight. Corner markers, or monuments, were natural features, usually trees. Many of you are familiar with old deeds for land surveyed under the metes and bounds system. They may describe, for example, a line running 15 rods northeast from the white oak to the red Maple split by lightning, thence south by southeast 35 rods to the moss covered boulder, and so on. With the best will in the world, confusion arose over natural markers and, when one factors in the frequency of land fraud, chaos ensued. Washington tried to minimize problems by urging great care upon his surveyors.

The survey method chosen for the Western Reserve was patterned on the rational, rectilinear system pioneered in the West by the federal Land Act of 1785. This act established the famous federal grid. North-south, east-west lines formed townships six-miles-square. Most contained 36 one mile-square sections. Each north-south row of townships constituted a range. Every range, township, and section was numbered in a consistent sequence. Once the survey plat was recorded, government land offices conducted sales under the rules then in force. A deed from the government land office had security unmatched by the metes and bounds system.

The Connecticut Land Company used the successful federal model but modified it for its own purposes. Reserve lands were surveyed in townships five miles on a side. Some were subdivided into four lots of 4,000 acres each while others were given different configurations. Using twenty-five square mile townships facilitated the arithmetic involved in distributing the land by chance. Ranges (north-south rows of townships) in the Reserve were numbered sequentially from the Pennsylvania border westward. Townships were numbered from south to north starting at the 41st parallel, the southern boundary of the Reserve.

Once the land was surveyed and the plats registered, the hard work of recruiting settlers began. Under both the Virginia custom and the Western Reserve practice, land owners preferred to sell land outright because they always needed cash to pay taxes reduce mortgages, and so on. Selling also removed them from the hassles associated with discontented renters.

Washington relied heavily on his agents to sell, lease, and otherwise take care of western lands. He sent regular, detailed instructions to guide them, instructions that reveal his understanding of the whole span of problems involved with land sales and settlement. He offered limited inducements to would-be settlers including religious freedom to the English, Scots, Irish, German, and Dutch migrants most likely to purchase. He stopped short, however, of giving free land to first settlers, a practice resorted to by some western land developers.

Connecticut Land Company investors also relied on agents in the field to assist in managing their affairs. Often they combined their interests in a land company, with the agent serving all members. Land agents were among the foremost citizens resident on the early Reserve. One such, Simon Perkins of Warren, represented the Erie Land Company and, while managing its interests, pursued his own so successfully that he became a major landowner in his own right. Such men, physically present in the Reserve and known to its inhabitants, were more effective than the speculative gentlemen back in Connecticut. Indeed, among the most successful early settlements were those in which one or more of the investors actually led settlers to their new homes in the West. A case in point was David Hudson who, along with several others, bought a township and then led the first settlers to it, providing the drive, focus and determination that keeps others working toward a common goal. The major inducement held out to would-be purchasers of Western Reserve land was not free land, nor religious freedom, but reduced prices for land that was not selling, including town lots in newly platted Cleveland.
Settling the land was complicated with the need to deal with squatters, those free spirits who simply settled on any property that suited their fancy. Usually they made modest improvements to the property and often resisted efforts to remove them. This problem was more pronounced in Washington's lands than in those of the Reserve, one reason being that the Ohio River and over mountain trails made it easier to reach the Ohio Valley than it was to reach the isolated Western Reserve. One occasionally encounters a squatter family on Reserve land as was the case with Jonathan Hale who found a squatter already on lands he had purchased sight unseen in the Cuyahoga Valley. He compensated the squatter for improvements made, and they parted amicably.

Another critical issue that concerned Washington far more than it did proprietors of the Reserve was protecting settlers from Indian incursions. Isolated, sporadic attacks occurred along the Ohio Valley frontier from 1763 until 1774 when Dunmore's War kicked off what would become the American War for Independence in the trans-Appalachian west. Brutal frontier warfare was commonplace until 1782, and it was followed by occasional raids until the so-called Ohio Indian Wars again brought large scale fighting to frontier areas. The Treaty of Greenville (1795) effectively quieted those regions in which Washington had land.

In contrast, the Western Reserve never experienced severe problems with Indians. When the surveyors and first settlers arrived in 1796, they found only a small number of Indian inhabitants living in unorganized, dispirited circumstances, demoralized by alcohol and the breakdown of tribal affiliations. Until 1805 settlement in the Reserve was limited east of the Greenville Treaty Line of the Cuyahoga, the portage path, and the Tuscarawas, since lands of the Reserve west of this boundary were still reserved to the Indians. During the War of 1812 a number of false alarms about impending Indian incursions panicked some inhabitants, but Perry's victory over the British fleet on Lake Erie put an end to this apprehension.

The Reserve's most difficult problem in its early decades was isolation. It was much harder to reach than were lands like Washington's lying along the Ohio, the great highway to the West and virtually the only avenue to markets. Not until the first unit of the Ohio and Erie Canal was completed from the Portage Summit to Cleveland in 1827 did the Reserve start to blossom. The Penn-Ohio, or Crosscut/Canal, opened in 1840, stimulated settlement and provided access to markets for residents in the eastern tiers of townships. Long before these developments, George Washington had taken elaborate pains to find practical routes for a commerce that he believed would bring the West into full partnership with the eastern states. He was especially anxious to see western trade directed toward his native Virginia. Among the various trade routes he plotted was one that ran from Detroit to the Cuyahoga, up that river to the Portage Summit, and across the portage to the Tuscarawas and thence to the Ohio. Roads would then carry goods to the Potomac Canal which would funnel trade into Virginia. An alternative would be to portage goods from the Cuyahoga at modern Akron eastward to the Mahoning and thence to the Ohio. Both of these routes were later adopted by the canal builders and they did indeed have a salubrious effect on western commerce and national union.

Western land development at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries was risky in the extreme. Did it profit Washington? In a general way it certainly did although he had his share of disappointments and failures. His lands helped him to realize his life goals. He wanted honor, recognition, and wealth. He wanted to make a positive difference in the affairs of men. He succeeded in each case, and his cause was assisted by the attention he paid the West as it impacted his own preformament and as it advanced the interests of the nation. At his death in 1799, he still owned many thousands of acres in the Ohio Valley, but his estate lost coherence as it was divided among many relatives and heirs.

In telling the story of the Reserve, we are dealing with a minimum of 53 investors and, as one would expect, their experiences with western land varied. Most of the principal proprietors failed to realize the wealth they had anticipated. The most dramatic failure was Oliver Phelps, one of the chief organizers of the Connecticut Land Company and its largest investor. He owned more than 480,000 acres, a total that dwarfs Washington's western holdings. From the beginning, Phelps' expenses were high and growing, but sales lagged and he got no relief from those townships held in common by the Company for payment of expenses because land in those townships did not sell readily either. Eventually creditors circled Phelps, and when he could not meet their demands, they had him committed to debtor's prison where he died, deeply in debt.
Can we draw a moral from the contrasting experiences of George Washington and the Western Reserve proprietors as both sought to profit from speculative ventures in the wilderness? No moral, but perhaps a reminder that nothing comes easy to those who tie their hopes for wealth and preferment to the vagaries of land speculation in a difficult, rapidly evolving environment.