THE LAKE PORTS WEST OF THE CUYAHOGA, 1820-1880:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SUB-REGION WITHIN THE RESERVE

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Between 1820 and 1880 the Western Reserve matured both socially and economically. By the
end of the period Cleveland, the fastest growing city in the country, was quickly becoming an
industrial center. Also by 1880 the rural hinterland of the Reserve reached its population limits
and emerged economically as the dairy and maple sugar country we know today. But these were
not the only changes taking place in the Reserve. Along Lake Erie’s shoreline different soil,
milder weather, and, most importantly, a different perspective meant that the fortunes of lake
communities continued to change at a rapid pace as well.

This is especially true of the western lake ports of Sandusky, Vermillion, Huron, and Black
River. Their progress was determined in large measure by two interdependent factors: economic
opportunity and population response. Gradually over the period these ports realized they would
not become major lake centers but each could play an important, if reduced, role within the
changing economy of the lake and the Reserve. Gradually, too, they realized their life as
agricultural ports was short and their strength was based on the lake. Throughout these later
stages they also attracted and held a blend of ethnic and native unusual for the Reserve. It was
this interplay between the lake and the farm areas which made the ports a separate part of the
region.

The four settlements passed through similar stages; first, they established beachheads and
survived the lakeshore environment as these transplanted easterners waited for the hinterland to
develop; second, they gained residents as ports grew to meet a growing demand for local
products. Then they began to compete for harbor improvements and canal and railroad links as
they added immigrants to their populations. Even those which were successful at this stage
enjoyed only a brief heyday followed by disappointments created by changes in transportation
and technology. Finally, all four ports found success by specializing in a limited range of
products processed by a stable, heavily immigrant population.

The western portion of the Reserve was settled later than the eastern portion because the land
west of the Cuyahoga River remained in Indian hands until 1805. Settlement proceeded very
gradually for the next ten years. One of the chief causes of this slow development was the
availability of large amounts of attractive land further east. In addition, potential settlers
discovered that much of the shoreline was "to a great extent unhealthy, not from the waters of the
lake, but from the marshes which in several places line its border."¹ Like Cleveland, all lake sites
suffered from the miasmic swamps which sent many prospective settlers away. Even though
some settlers arrived before 1810, little development occurred along the lake until after the War
of 1812, both because some soldiers liked what they saw and returned and because many felt the
region was now safe.²

By 1820 the townships which held the best harbors grew slowly. Huron had the largest number of
settlers (651) while Vermillion had just over 250 people.³ Most townships had 50 households.
 Virtually all of the residents were native-born (but not Connecticut-born as we shall see later) and
most made their living through agriculture. A significant minority was engaged in commerce
(6.6%) and a substantial number in manufacturing (20%). In Huron and Sandusky (Perkins
Township) fully one-third were engaged in manufacturing in contrast to the entire county where
fewer than 12% were. Consequently, as early as 1820 the lake sites began to differentiate
themselves economically.

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Two decades later Huron, Vermillion, and Sandusky contained approximately fifteen hundred residents each. (Black River which had declined after some success had 780). Compared to the surrounding area, the port sites increased more rapidly but, as we will see shortly, potential increases were stymied by the growth of Cleveland which had four times as many residents (6,000) in 1840. Huron and Sandusky continued to be oriented to commerce and manufacturing. Curiously, no more than 5% were engaged in navigation of lakes and rivers in any of the townships, and in Black River no one was so employed!

This lack of a boom period can be explained by two factors. Disease continued to present problems throughout the period. Local environmental problems were multiplied when the sites first began to trade goods because diseases were transmitted quickly along the lake shore in contrast to the somewhat isolated interior of the Reserve.

A visitor to Sandusky in 1835 remarked "Sandusky is not so large a place as I had anticipated, judging from its early settlement and notoriety. The unsalubrity of its climate rendering it almost impossible for a stranger to live there, is without doubt the principal obstacle in its way. As a gentleman very significantly observed to me 'A great part of the inhabitants are over on the other side of the hill' for there is their cemetery." 6

The problem did not go away even after further development. In the late 1840s and 1850s at least three cholera epidemics swept the lakeshore. Commented Austin Johnson, "Disease and all forms of death triumph here but few old people [are] seen." 7 Interestingly, he was also amazed by the Sandusky's ability to rebound from cholera epidemics. After noting that 400 were "cut down" within a few hours in 1852, he said that the effects were "more among the foreign portion of the population than in 1849 . . . but it is astonishing what effect worldy gain has on Man." Instead of making people leave the area and inhibiting growth and prosperity of this city "just as in '49 those who survived and fled returned and soon after many others filled up the gap made by death." He continued, "The same has taken place this past summer and the increase in population for the past six months [September to March 1852-1853] has been great beyond former time." 8 These later attempts at survival proved more successful because of the prosperity Sandusky enjoyed in the late 1840s. So while it took five decades for disease to recede as a major problem, the town's economic fortunes were more flexible.

The second reason for the gradual population increase was economic. In some ways, the emergence of western lake ports within the Reserve was intimately connected with rural development. First, rural areas had to become part of a pioneer periphery, using Muller's construct, when its residents established permanent settlement, cleared land for agricultural production, and found exportable crops. Only then were ports needed. 9 After the 1820s the area became part of the "Specialized Periphery," a second stage marked by demand for the area's products on a regional or even national level. During this period, settlement intensified and interregional connections and specialized staple production developed. Here ports were more and more important. Moreover, before 1830 the areas beyond the Reserve along the lakes were not yet developed as either markets or rivals.

Therefore, the port sites (with the exception of Black River) prospered only as surpluses were produced by surrounding farms. Sandusky was blessed with "the largest and best harbor on the [Great] . . . lakes, having the advantage of a large and landlocked bay, while the other lake ports are at the mouths of rivers. The bay is eighteen miles in length . . . ." 10 It was not ideal, however, since winds often pushed water away from the shoals outside the entrance and necessitated pilots to guide vessels through the shallow water. 11 Nevertheless, partially because of considerable promotion, the village was laid out and within four years (1820) it had four wharves and thirty houses. 12
Prospects improved for Sandusky and Black River because they both were possible sites for one end of the state-built canal then under consideration. One prominent Sandusky resident expressed the sentiments of the entire village: "Sandusky never dreamed but what she would be the terminus of the Ohio Canal. It was the shortest and direct distance across the State from the mouth of the Scioto on the Ohio to the lake, and its harbor was expansive and safe. Instead of that, mainly through the efforts of Alfred Kelley, who then resided there and was one of the canal commissioners, Cleveland was made its terminus; thus increasing the distance by a winding tortuous course of perhaps thirty or more miles, yet bringing the canal nearer the big wheat fields and coal beds, and accommodating a larger farm population, a more densely settled older country." Several engineers' reports had also concluded there was not enough water to supply the canal on the route which ended in Sandusky. Cleveland did delight in directing barbs at its defeated rival after the decision was made in 1825. For instance, in 1829 after the northern portion of the canal was opened, the Cleveland Herald commented that Sandusky was a "forsaken city" where you could "skin catfish on the wharf" and where warehouses were filled with "stones used to pelt frogs." According to some reports, another Reserve lake site, Black River, remained in the running longer than Sandusky but probably lost because of its lack of political influence.

Despite these negative barbs and the bitter feelings which remained from the canal decision, the port sites did improve after 1826. This was because the canal did not draw from farms close to the lake since its hinterland was out of the Reserve to the south. By 1828 Sandusky's trade, which was mainly in corn and wheat, had doubled in two years and improvements made to the harbor at Huron immediately attracted capital from Detroit and Buffalo. Sandusky's paper began to see a new, if somewhat reduced role for the port, when it began calling Sandusky the metropolis of the Firelands (the westernmost portion of the Reserve) rather than the major port on the Great Lakes.

Neither Huron nor Sandusky thought the canal decision sealed their fate, however. Both applied themselves to creating a more prosperous future by promoting other canals, railroads, and harbor improvements. The leaders of Huron and Milan, a town eight miles south of Huron, began to discuss river improvement and a canal linking the two as early as 1823. Finally, in 1839 the canal was completed. Immediately, Milan became an important exporter of wheat, flour, along with pork, staves, wool, and grass seed, all products of regional farms. In contrast, Huron, which had a newspaper and considerable trade but which also contained low marshes and suffered in the cholera epidemics in the early 1830s, experienced a decline in population and real estate values.

The two other sites, Vermillion and Black River (known as Charleston), were both minor grain ports which were incorporated in 1837. By 1840 a town had been laid out at Black River and federally-sponsored harbor improvements caused it to "thrive rapidly" with thirty houses, four warehouses, and 300 residents. To continue its prosperity the Killbuck and Black River Canal was formed to link the lake with the Ohio Canal at Roscoe. The project failed in the aftermath of the Panic of 1836-7 and the area receded.

A decade earlier Sandusky Bay was viewed as "an important depot for merchandise from the seaboard destined for the interior and northern part of the State of Ohio, as it will necessarily become, also of the produce of that country, intended for the New York market." Without a canal Sandusky leaders began promoting railroads because they were not subject to weather problems. The Mad River and Lake Erie Railroad was chartered in 1832 and six years later the first fifteen miles were built. By 1848 the road tied Sandusky to Dayton and Cincinnati and complemented another link to Mansfield (which was completed to Newark in 1851).
the next several years Sandusky’s dream of becoming the most important port on Lake Erie became reality because of this virtual railroad monopoly of goods and especially of passenger traffic between Lake Erie and the Ohio River.

Already by 1843 the official trade of the port was $2.7 million and it doubled two years later ($5 million) because of the extension of railroads and interior connections.24 Sandusky had become "the natural key to the trade and travel between the northeastern and southwestern States, as well as between the northwestern and southeastern." Local officials noted with pride that Sandusky city’s $7.1 million in imports were higher than Cleveland ($4.5 million), Toledo ($4.0 million), Detroit ($4.0 million), and Chicago ($2.6 million). A detailed report shows imports of merchandise and express merchandise were valued at nearly $8 million. Other important imports include salt, fish, railroad iron, lumber and locomotives. Exports totaled $2.6 million with wheat and flour comprising nearly $1 million. Wool, merchandise, pork, and express merchandise make up the largest portion of other exports.25 As early as 1847 the number of passengers passing through Sandusky exceeded 123,000.26 As we shall see shortly, many people stayed as the population, despite the cholera epidemics, leaped from 1,500 in 1845 to 5,000 by 1850.27

It is ironic but typical of the decade in which rails replaced canals with such speed that within the same decade Sandusky’s fortunes fell not to canals but to other railroads. In this case, being first was only a brief advantage. The change was caused by several forces. First, railroad technology changed significantly from the 1830s to the 1850s. The Mad River was a strap road which was less reliable and less able to handle heavy loads.28 More importantly, rival ports completed heavy-duty connections rapidly after 1850. Cleveland was linked to Cincinnati in 1851 and to points east by 1853. At the other end of the state, Toledo emerged as a western rival for the lake ports when in 1855 it was directly tied to Cincinnati by the shortest route of any Erie port. Ultimately, the rise in Sandusky’s prosperity was determined by its location and distribution north and south but when railroad lines along the lake linked major cities easily it, like other smaller ports, declined.29 Moreover, the evolution of large lake vessels required water deeper than many of the smaller ports had, including Sandusky.30

While the most obvious changes were in transportation, the most significant change was the economic evolution of the Reserve and the Great Lakes. The ports passed through the initial stages of pioneer economic growth into the third stage where they were part of the emerging national economy. They were no longer the West either in terms of agricultural production or as a major conduit for travelers. Therefore, the ports searched for specific advantages which their locations provided.

Sandusky responded to the drop in passenger and grain traffic by relying on its own natural advantages. Beginning in the late 1840s, wood products, fish, ice, and shipbuilding began to replace some of the previous business. These developments were aided by raw materials such as wood imported from Michigan and Canada which arrived by raft and ship throughout the period. Commercial fishing on a large scale began in 1856 just as the short-lived advantages disappeared. Within four years, new, more efficient "pound nets" expanded fishing grounds along the south shore of the lake and Canadian grounds and catches made their way to Sandusky.31 The Daily Commercial Register noted that Sandusky shipped nearly two million pounds of fresh fish and over three million pounds of salted fish were exported in 1865.32 Two years later the industry expanded further as the process of freezing the catch was introduced.33 Ice houses began shipping ice just before the Civil War and expanded into the 1870s. Shipbuilding began at Sandusky in 1815 and by 1850 local craftsmen finished 44 sailing vessels. Over the next two decades production increased to thirty per decade. In addition, a number of passenger steamboats
were constructed. Sandusky’s industries also began to import large amounts of iron ore and, by 1878, 38,000 tons were received. The city gradually grew in population to 15,800 by 1880. This led the *History of the Firelands* written in 1879 to state "the growth of [Sandusky], in wealth and population, has not been rapid, but generally quite slow, yet constant."  

Black River had also benefited briefly from the grain trade in the late 1840s. Its 200 people and many stores and wharves were devastated by the Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati Railroad which redirected grain shipments. The local shipbuilding concerns which built over sixty ships and a large number of scows from 1850 to 1880 did employ some residents. However, attempts to entice other railroads failed, and hotels closed and merchants abandoned warehouses, giving away their wood for barns and fences. By the 1860s, it had become a "western paper-city failure." A charcoal furnace and sawmill did help keep hopes alive. Then in 1872, the Lakeshore and Tuscarawas Railroad finished a link to Black River. Two years later the town was incorporated as Lorain and trade increased ten times over by 1878. The population of the entire township had remained virtually the same from 1840 to 1870 (115-140 households). The new trade connections doubled the population by 1880 (266 households). But the real boom came in the 1890s when Johnson Steel mills moved to the location from Pennsylvania.

Huron and Vermillion also found niches. Huron, like Sandusky, found fishing important. It also specialized in wood processing, lime and plaster production, and imported iron ore to help local furnaces. Vermillion imported large amounts of lumber and building supplies and exported lumber and barrel staves. Since it was located near excellent stone quarries, it exported large amounts of stone during the 1870s. As we have seen, each port successfully adapted to the exigencies of a somewhat fickle regional and national economy.

Just as the lake ports were forced to change more quickly and more often than the rural areas of the Reserve, the people attracted to the lake ports were distinctly different from the hinterland they served. By 1840 more residents worked for commercial and manufacturing concerns than in the interior. Over the next forty years that trend continued. Most workers employed in the lake ports performed menial tasks. Immigrant day laborers, many acting as stevedores, and skilled workers, especially carpenters who processed the huge cargoes of wood, made up the bulk of the workers. Surprisingly, few workers were needed in trades which dealt directly with the lake such as sailors, fisherman, and ship carpenters who together typically comprised less than one in eight workers. An increasing number worked in heavy industry which developed in the 1870s. So while the ports were intimately connected with the lake, their major functions were to process and ship.

There were other important differences which began to appear in the 1830s but which can only be measured with certainty beginning in 1850. The most significant differences are the proportions of those natives born outside Connecticut and of foreign-born who live in the western ports. In the typical Reserve township, half the households were headed by Connecticut-born males at mid-century. By contrast, in Sandusky the largest group of native-born were not from Connecticut (5.8%) but from New York (14.5%), and in the other port townships New Yorkers made up an even larger proportion (27%). This concentration shows the importance of the second-generation migration from New England to western parts of the Reserve. It also meant that it took longer for native-born Ohioans to dominate. As late as 1880, Ohio-born residents [of native parents] made up one-third of all households in contrast to the eastern Reserve where three-fourths were Ohio-born. Possibly this slow change gave more power to those old families which had migrated early and stayed in the ports during their economic rollercoaster ride.
In the typical Reserve township less than one household in ten was headed by a foreign-born resident in 1850. In stark contrast, the lake ports contained high proportions of foreign-born who became long-term residents. The immigrants initially came in large numbers when the Erie Canal opened up the Great Lakes to travelers. Through the 1830s particularly large numbers of Germans fled war-torn regions in their homeland. By mid-century they had formed a nucleus in most lake ports which established ethnic institutions including churches, schools, and social organizations including singing clubs. This institutional base coupled with a job market in need of manual laborers and skilled craftsmen caused many immigrants to remain in the lake ports through 1880. In fact, even near the end of the period, when Lorain is formed and expands rapidly, the foreign-born came in large numbers to work in local industries.

Already by 1850 Sandusky, like Cleveland (67%), had 60% of its households headed by foreign-born. German-born residents comprised 30% of all and half of the foreign-born. The Irish of Sandusky [and Cleveland] headed one-fifth of the households. Not surprisingly, Sandusky was typical of a mid-nineteenth urban area.

What is more surprising is the considerable number of foreigners in the smaller ports. Here the attractions were not as obvious. At mid-century even in the nascent ports of Huron, Vermillion and Black River, the early German migration is obvious. Port townships contained from three to five times as many foreigners as did rural areas most of whom were German. Milan, an interior area connected by canal to Huron, was three-quarters native in 1850 with only small proportions of Germans (8%) and Irish (5%) for instance.

The importance of foreign-born continued through the 1870s. In Sandusky their proportions continued to grow until 1870 when they comprised three-quarters of household heads. The typical Sanduskyan was not American-born and probably had not been even in 1840. Even in 1880 the other ports were at least one-third foreign.

These residents had significant impact on the life in each port. The German-born were occasionally praised by contemporaries normally providing an implicit contrast to Irish-born immigrants who were less appreciated. A Sandusky newspaper editorial commented, "We are pleased to notice the enterprise and thrift manifested by our German population . . . Of the old residents not a few are Germans. Go to the docks and warehouses, or to the best blocks . . . go to the public offices, or almost anywhere and you will be quite certain to find the German there. They are industrious and make money at whatever they turn their hands to." Throughout the ports Germans affected the economy. They were especially prominent in the fishing and ice industries. In fact, one Sandusky firm was a major exporter of caviar to Germany. Germans were also part of the wine industry and in brewing which developed in the 1850s. Interestingly, most Germans were not employed as sailors, fishermen, or ship carpenters but in trades or as laborers. The Irish, who were predominantly laborers, were not as important numerically in the ports where they averaged one in twenty-five throughout the period.

What is curious about the role of Germans especially is that their contributions are not acknowledged in the nineteenth-century native-oriented histories of the region. On several occasions comments indicate New Englanders began industries but further developments are ignored. "In 1851 J. Spencer, with the foresight peculiar to New Englanders, came to Sandusky from Westbrook, Connecticut, to engage in the fish business." Several years later, Germans, not Yankees, virtually controlled the fish business. Ernst VonSchulenberg wrote his Sandusky: "Then and Now" with special regard to the local, German situation in 1889 because "although the German population of Sandusky seems almost the same as that of the native-born
and has become a powerful factor in the religious, political, and social life of the city, yet it is surely striking that in all the local histories... the German element was either completely ignored or at best treated like a step-child." His detailed listings of German contributions clearly evidence a vital life in this community which comprised the majority of Sandusky's citizens. German immigrants also affected the other ports making significant contributions to their cultural life as well as to the local and regional economy.

Therefore, in contrast to the hinterland the typical worker and resident in Sandusky, Vermillion, Huron, and Black River was a German-born laborer or skilled craftsman throughout the period.

As we have seen the lake ports developed into a distinct sub-region of the Western Reserve both economically and ethnically from 1820 to 1880. In one sense they failed to grasp early chances at national prominence because they imagined that economic control of the region was geared to geographical centrality rather than to political realities. In addition, changing national needs and demands made their limelight brief and difficult to regain. The ports succeeded, though not spectacularly, because they were able to attract people and goods throughout the period. They remained agile enough economically to continually find opportunities. Just as the rural Reserve found dairy products suited to its soil, the lake ports found in fish, wood processing and ice, industries which would continue their prosperity. They managed to achieve these objectives with a less homogenous population than the rest of the Reserve and one which supplied a different cultural context to the lake ports and to the entire Western Reserve.

NOTES


3All references to the population figures are taken from the federal census manuscripts for the year and location indicated. The microfilms were part of the collections of the Western Reserve Historical Society.

4See William Ganson Rose, ed., Cleveland: The Making of a City (Cleveland, 1950), 169.

5Sandusky had well over three-quarters of its population committed to manufacturing and commerce and Huron had one-third.


7See letter from Austin Johnson to an unnamed recipient January 31, 1861, Austin Johnson Papers, WRHS.

8Ibid., March 13, 1853.

Henry Howe, Historical Collections of Ohio in Two Volumes, (Cincinnati, 1908), 1:569.

See the Cleveland Herald, January 11, 1848.


Howe, Collections, 1:577.


Downes, Lake Shore, 104.


Howe, Collections, 1:580.

Peeke, Erie County, 1:109.

Warren Jenkins, The Ohio Gazetteer (Columbus, 1841), 81-82.

Campbell Graham to James Kearney, May 23, 1827, House Document No. 72, 20th Congress.


See House ex. doc. 50. 31st Congress, 1st Session. For a comparison of 1848-1852 exports see Commercial Register, December 31, 1851.

Peeke, Erie County, 1:177.

Peeke, Erie County, 179. While the volume and number of passengers were unusual, the other ports engaged in similar trade. For instance, Vermillion imported nearly $86,000 mostly merchandise with salt and fish the most important other imports. Exports of $121,000 included wheat and flour, wool, and lumber products. Huron did six times the business of Vermillion. Its $575,000 of imports were mostly merchandise and iron, while its exports were wheat and flour, corn, staves, high wines, and pork. Milan also imported and exported about $631,000.

Downes, Lake Shore, 164-166.


31 Aldrich, *History of Erie County, Ohio* (Syracuse, 1889), 405.

32 May 31, 1866.


37 W. W. Williams, *History of the Firelands* (Cleveland, 1879), 436.


39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 213-214.

41 *History of Erie County*, 472-3.

42 It exported 28,550 tons in 1872. The relative size of the ports can be easily measured in the 1870s. Sandusky averaged over 3,000 vessels per year, Lorain 352, Vermillion 170, and Huron 108. Corps of Engineers, *Documents*, for appropriate ports.


44 Wheeler, "The Town."

45 Ernst VonSchulenberg, *Sandusky: "Then and Now" with special regard to the local, German situation* (Cleveland, 1959), [translation of an 1889 original published in German], 125.

46 These ports were not yet separated from their surrounding townships so the figures available probably overstate the number of native Americans.

47 At Huron nearly one-third (31%), at Vermillion one-quarter (25%), and at Black River nearly half (45.9%) were foreign-born. Like Sandusky, Germans made up at least 2/3 of these residents.

48 Over half (50.9%) were German-born. In contrast, Cleveland Germans headed one-third (32%) of the households. The Sandusky Irish heads declined to 13% compared to 17% for Cleveland Irish.
Huron's slightly less than 1/3 were foreign-born with 2/3 of them being German. In Vermillion immigrants continued to increase until they reached 1/2 (49.2%) and Germans comprised 2/3 of them. In Black River foreign-born and Germans in particular declined but still nearly 44% were foreign-born, and when second generation are taken into account over half the household heads are foreign.

Daily Commercial Register, May 31, 1866.

Aldrich, History of Erie County, 407-408.

VonSchulenberg, Sandusky, 156-160. Members of German benevolent groups all have non-lake oriented occupations.

The census for Sandusky in 1870 indicates fully 85% were laborers, for instance.

History of Erie County, 404, (italics mine).

VonSchulenberg, Sandusky: "Then and Now," preface.