CHAPTER ONE

Women and the Ohio Frontier

AUTHORISED SETTLEMENT of the Ohio Valley, and in particular the area that would become the state of Ohio, began soon after the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787. However, missionaries had worked among the Native Americans much earlier. The birth of the first white child, Johanna Maria Heckewelder, the daughter of Moravian missionaries, was recorded as April 16, 1781, in the village of Salem near the Muskingum River. The missionaries, and the soldiers and their wives who occupied forts in the area, were considered transients. The first permanent settlers, a group including men, women, and children who came with the Ohio Company in 1788–89, established the first authorized settlement at Marietta.

Settlers from all parts of the early colonies immigrated to Ohio. New Englanders settled in the Marietta area on lands owned by the Ohio Company; emigrés from Virginia settled between the Little Miami and the Scioto Rivers; people from New Jersey took up residence on the Symmes tract; Pennsylvanians made their home on the “Seven Ranges”; and farmers with their wives and families poured into the Western Reserve from Connecticut and New York.

Ethnic settlements also developed during the frontier period. Travelers along Zane’s Trace commented on the dominance of Germans in the Lancaster area. Store owners printed signs in both German and English, and in 1817 the General Assembly authorized the printing of the state’s Constitution and laws in German. The Welsh settled in Licking, Butler, Delaware, Allen, Jackson, and
Gallia Counties. The French established a settlement in Gallipolis, and descendants of French trappers lived along the western shore of Lake Erie.³

As women encountered the frontier, they brought with them the values and expectations of their previous communities. Their encounters with the frontier would modify these values, resulting in changed behaviors. But just as these women were altered by their frontier experiences, the frontier was likewise transformed as the women built new lives for themselves and their families.

The hardships women endured on the journey to the Ohio Valley served as an indicator of the trials they would encounter on the frontier. Settlers traveled six hundred to eight hundred miles to reach the Ohio frontier, many walking the majority of the way over poorly kept or nonexistent roads through all types of weather. On her trip from Connecticut to Warren, Ohio, over the Forbes Road in 1810, Margaret Dwight wrote: “We found the roads past description,—worse than you can possibly imagine—Large stones and deep mud holes every step of the way—We were obliged to walk as much as we possibly could, as the horses could scarcely stir the waggon [sic] the mud was so deep & the stones so large—It has grown so cold that I feel we shall perish tomorrow.”⁴ Other women faced the perils of travel on Lake Erie. Rhoda Wills of Shelby, New York, came to Cleveland by boat with her four young children, while her husband made the trip on horseback. A storm came upon them while on Lake Erie, and she believed they would all be drowned. Upon landing in Cleveland, she and the children stayed the night at a log tavern. The next morning they began their walk to Brunswick. Similarly, Mrs. Wyatt Hartshorn, many years later, remembered her harrowing seven-and-a-half-week trip on a schooner from Buffalo to Sandusky as a young girl of thirteen.⁵

Many times the trip was made in small wagons, four feet by sixteen feet. Due to the lack of space, only necessities such as spinning wheels, beds, eating utensils, and iron pots could be brought to the settlers’ new homes, forcing women to leave behind many of the articles that they associated with home, such as china, hope chests,
and rocking chairs. Women also left behind the companionship of female kin and friends, something more valuable to them than any knickknack or piece of furniture. Those women who agreed to immigrate to the Ohio frontier only because they depended upon their husbands for livelihood and support felt the loss of this female communal society particularly keenly. Many of these women found themselves totally isolated from female companionship in their new homes. Most accepted the situation stoically and worked to establish the best possible home they could under the circumstances.

One of the primary roles that women filled in their new communities, particularly as these communities changed in response to external circumstances, was keeper of culture. The women pouring into the Northwest Territory, later the state of Ohio, especially those from New England, were faced with the challenge of preserving the old way of life in a new and dramatically different environment. The two primary institutions women attempted to preserve were religion and education (churches and schools). According to Andrew Cayton in *The Frontier Republic*, the founders of Ohio wished to establish a society similar to the one they had left behind, but improved—their new society would be without the flaws of the old and elevated to an even higher level of development. The society would be “overseen by firm national authority and secured by institutions like churches and schools” that would keep frontier society from disintegrating into a barbaric state.

The settlement of the Marietta area by the Ohio Company and the Western Reserve by the Connecticut Company produced two bulwarks of Puritanism and Congregationalism in the state. A strong Presbyterian faction was also introduced to the Mahoning Valley by settlers from western Pennsylvania. Women were instrumental in establishing the institutional presence of these groups as well as promulgating the moral values of each.

Women, in many communities, composed more than 50 percent of the charter members of early churches. When the early
settlers formed the Congregational Church of Marietta on December 6, 1796, seventeen of the thirty-two charter members were women. Six charter members, of whom four were women, established the First Congregational Church in Warren. A twenty-member committee, including ten women, established the Presbyterian church in Harpersfield in 1809. In areas where churches had not yet been established, women were noted for keeping people’s attention on their previous religious affiliation. Mrs. Noble H. Merwin found no public form of worship when she arrived in Cleveland in 1815. She promptly invited her neighbors and “led them to the log courthouse and opened her Bible, leading the services until a missionary was sent to the people.” Others, with the same goal in mind, taught Sunday school in their homes. Mrs. Mary Lake taught Ohio’s first Sunday school in Marietta in 1791. Others, such as Clarissa Rogers (Mrs. P. March) of Spencer, Medina County, followed in her footsteps. Mrs. March wrote Bible verses on scraps of paper for her charges to learn, since Bibles were not available. She organized the first church in Spencer in her kitchen, where the minister preached the first sermon.

Women’s religious participation was very public. They were active participants in the revivals and camp meetings held during this time. Mrs. Hannah Gillman participated in a revival in 1811 in Marietta. Others actually led services and preached. Rebekah Austin (Mrs. R. I. Coe) could be found preaching in Portage County after her arrival in 1824, and Ruth Boswell, a Quaker, preached the first sermon in Warren Township, Belmont County, in 1804. Men attempted to make a mockery of women’s public participation by accompanying them to the camp meetings, not to participate in the religious revival but to join in the gambling, fighting, and drinking that occurred on the periphery of the campgrounds.

Religions outside the mainstream also found women participants. A Shaker society formed in Warrensville, Cuyahoga County, in 1821 attracted a substantial number of women, as did the Mormon community established in Kirtland. Several women signed the Oberlin Covenant when Congregationalists established the town
in 1832. At its founding, the Covenant, which contained twelve ordinances, became the basis of the town’s ideological foundation and operating system. Catherine Creswell Criswill and her family came to Greene County in 1802, some of the first Seceders to arrive in Ohio. She helped establish the United Congregation of Massies Creek and Sugar Creek and “exerted a dominant influence in the creation of proper social conditions hereabouts in the days of the very beginnings of the settlement.”

The reinstitutionalization of these churches on the frontier added a needed tie to what had been left back home, whether in New England, Pennsylvania, Virginia, or Europe. Religion added a familiarity to the constantly changing situations and environment. It also had, in the eyes of the settlers, a civilizing effect. No matter how savage or unrelenting the frontier could be, the familiar nature of religion—its practices, values, and expectations—was still a link to civilization. Women’s participation in reestablishing formalized religious practices, along with their daily activities based on a “Christian” ethic, allowed society to flourish. As described by one pioneer, “they were, as a rule, pious women, diffusing about them an atmosphere of religious devotion and spirituality. . . . Such was the moral influence, not only on society then, but on later generations.”

Along with establishing churches and providing a moral tone for these new settlements, women were also instrumental in founding schools in these communities—many times starting by giving lessons in their homes and eventually moving to buildings specifically set aside for the purpose. Female teachers taught boys and girls basic subject matter along with deportment. Within one year of settlement in the Marietta area, formal classes had been established. These classes were taught by women and paid for by the Ohio Company and the students’ parents. The first female teacher in the Ohio Territory was Bathsheba Rouse, who began teaching in Belpre during the summer of 1789 or 1790. Other communities soon followed suit. Mrs. Williams of Cincinnati opened a school for young ladies in 1802. Betsey Diver of Deerfield, Portage County,
began teaching school in 1804. Miss Elizabeth Streator and Miss Rebecca Conant opened a school in a private houseboat in Windham, Portage County, one month after the first settlers arrived in 1811.  

Schools with the purpose of educating certain groups of students also opened in response to community expectations. During the late 1820s, Betsey M. Cowles opened infant schools throughout northeast Ohio. Still other communities saw the need for female academies. Professor and Mrs. Nutting opened such a school in Hudson in 1827. Community members in Kent established a similar female academy, where female teachers taught the basic academic subjects along with “embroidery and other fine needle work.”  

The salary received by these women varied depending upon the community — some receiving cash payments, others receiving goods. Lucinda Walden in 1812 received a dollar’s worth of flax and linen cloth per week, whereas Mentor hired Kate Smith for six schillings per week. In 1818, Mrs. Canfield in Wakeman, Huron County, received a dollar per week in produce and provided her own board. Similarly, Sarah Houghton was hired at seventy-five cents per week and rode on horseback to her school.  

Salary discrimination started immediately. A male teacher in Bedford, Cuyahoga County, received $20 per month for teaching sixteen male and six female students, while a female teacher received $4 per month for the same number of students. In Newbury, Geauga County, the directors denied teacher Martha Canfield (who in addition to teaching, also earned money by spinning) her salary of $1.25 per week because they “were afraid she would get rich too fast.”  

Most of the women engaged as teachers were either unmarried or widowed, and they usually taught school for a relatively short time. Initially school terms for girls were held only in the summer, when the boys were working in the fields, so many women taught for a brief time prior to marriage. Many young women conducted schools in their parents’ homes or the home of a local minister.
Few women continued to teach after marriage, but there were exceptions. In 1826, Abner Loveland Jr. brought his wife Amelia Dewolf to his log cabin, where she opened a school. Her students’ fathers paid the tuition by chopping and logging on Mr. Loveland’s clearing.¹⁹

Even though most women left the classroom upon marriage, they did not leave behind their role as educator. Community expectations were such that the primary responsibility for children’s formal education fell upon their mothers. Although circumstances on the frontier changed the educational needs and behavioral expectations of their communities, women on the Ohio frontier continued to instill the beliefs and demand the behavior of those communities from which they came. This attempt to duplicate both the religious and educational experiences of a previous place and time provided a needed connection to something familiar when everything else in the environment seemed so different. Literary and singing societies and other forms of entertainment served this same purpose.

Women demonstrated their social value on the Ohio frontier through their ability to populate the area; offer hospitality to new settlers, neighbors, and strangers; establish and maintain a relationship with the natives; and provide their services as healers. Women generally married young on the frontier. With parental consent, a woman could marry at age fourteen. Life expectancy was thirty-four years in 1750 and increased only four years by the turn of the century. During her twenty years of married life, the number of pregnancies a woman could expect ran into double digits. Polly McDaniels married Henry Tucker on December 17, 1780. Upon her death she had ten surviving children who would produce seventy-three grandchildren.²⁰

A woman’s social value also rested on her ability to offer hospitality. Quaker Anna Briggs Bentley, newly arrived from Maryland, wrote to a friend about the helpfulness of her new neighbor, Friend Miller. Miller helped nurse Bentley’s cow back to health and told her “now do send over for any vegetable and anything thee
stands in need of.”

It was also expected that when men came together to grub out underbrush, split rails, cut logs, or do any other work, women would provide the food and spirits. At the same time they would also be quilting, sewing, or spinning for some needy neighbor. Many women also opened their homes to total strangers. As settlers moved into the Ohio Territory, lodging was limited, and many travelers found themselves without shelter come nightfall. They would then ask for shelter at the next cabin, and it was expected that they would be taken in and provided with what they needed.

Women were also expected to interact with the Native Americans in the vicinity. Early settlers in the Northwest Territory were the Moravian missionaries. The first white child born in Ohio, Johanna Marie Heckewelder, was the daughter of missionaries who lived and worked among the natives at Salem, Gnadenhutten, and Schoenbrunn. This group of missionaries consisted of married couples, as well as single men and women. Prior to 1812, recorded interactions between the settlers and Native Americans were generally cordial but cautious. Sarah Porter Elam, who lived in Greene County in 1802, recalled years later that “Sometimes it was her responsibility to deal with the Indians.” When the men were working in the fields, “she would serve the Indians food and drink and treat them kindly, even though she would sometimes feel threatened with death if she were able to make a wrong move.” In 1803, Mr. and Mrs. Joel Owen found sixty natives living on their land in New Lyme, but the natives were peaceful and would often supply Mr. Owen with game in exchange for other goods. In another situation, Mrs. Oviatt of Hudson provided a lifesaving service for three Native Americans. She was able to speak Chippewa, Seneca, and Delaware, and because of this she acted as an interpreter and advocate for three natives who were on trial in Warren for their lives. Mrs. Samuel Ruple of East Cleveland hid a squaw from other members of her tribe who had condemned her as a witch. Mrs. Ruple fed the party looking for the young woman, in hopes of giving her time to escape. However, they captured the squaw the next day.
After 1812, when the British were removed from the area, more white settlers began to move into the Ohio country, especially along Lake Erie. Women recorded a large number of hostile interactions with Native Americans during this time, but a hysteria seems to pervade these writings. However, even given the raids and kidnappings between 1812 and 1825, which led to the “Indian Wars,” peaceable interaction was still possible. Mrs. Jane Holt Inscho in Hiram County reported that often the natives would stop at her cabin with venison and exchange it for wheat bread. They would fire their guns three times to signal their approach, and they would stack their guns in front of the cabin to denote peace and safety. By the 1830s, almost all Native Americans had been removed from the state, leaving one less responsibility for women.

Perhaps one of the most vital services provided by frontier women was that of healer. Out of necessity, pioneer women were both nurse and physician. Virtually every woman gathered herbs each season and tied them to the rafters to dry. Their stock of herbs usually consisted of sage, peppermint, pennyroyal, hops, thoroughwart, smartweed, Solomon’s seal, tansy, sassafras, ginseng, and a variety of roots and barks. It was reported that “Grandmother Chismark” of Euclid had a still where she distilled peppermint oil. As one local historian noted: “The process by which she procured opium was rather novel. . . . She grew large beds of poppies and as soon as the petals fell punctured the seed pods with a fine needle and after the milk dried, gathered them.”

Most women developed their medical expertise through trial and error and by sharing information with those around them. There were women on the frontier, however, who had received formal training. Liwwat Boke, who settled in Mercer County, received training as a midwife before emigrating from Germany. Mrs. John Stoneman (née Ann Newcomb) studied medicine with her father prior to her marriage. Mrs. Cox was the first traveling physician who made periodic visits to Brighton in Lorain County, and Mrs. Bartlett Leonard (Hannah Chapman) studied medicine in Massachusetts and was a “regular physician” in Williamsfield, Ashtabula
County. The community welcomed all these women for their expertise in dealing with medical conditions such as depression, childbirth, hernias, piles, sore throats, rheumatism, dropsy, bad eyes, and foot troubles. Mrs. Mary Lake, who served as a hospital matron at Fishhill and New Windsor during the American Revolution, aided her neighbors in Marietta when a smallpox epidemic swept through Campus Martius in 1790.  

Women’s value to frontier society was not confined to the normal sphere of female influence. Women, who owned and operated businesses, managed farms, traveled the state alone, and involved themselves in politics, greatly expanded the boundaries of acceptable social behavior.

Many women found themselves running businesses in conjunction with their husbands, and in the event of a man’s death, his wife might be called upon to take over the family business. In addition, women would often accept day-to-day duties of the business if their husbands were traveling or incapacitated. Mrs. Letitia Edwards in Mantua often ran gristmills in the absence of her husband, and Sally Randall in Kinsman tended the sawmill in her husband’s absence.  

Many couples ran inns together, with the wife assuming the role of hostess; upon the death of her husband, the wife might assume the running of the entire operation. Lydia Ford Hickox took over the Hickox Inn, “doing the managing herself, riding on horseback to Burton for supplies, mixing drinks at the bar for thirsty travelers openly and innocently.” Some women supported their husbands’ businesses behind the scenes by doing the paperwork, as did Mrs. Sprague, who filled out all papers for her husband. In some cases, the husband received the compensation while his wife did the work. Rev. Elias Morse of Williamsfield was postmaster in that town for thirty years. However, because the post office was in his home, his wife Abiah Phelps Morse did the actual work.

Most women found ways to supplement a family’s income or, in time of hardship, provide the majority of income through home businesses. Some earned extra money by weaving. Mrs. Bartram
was able to pay the taxes from her weaving earnings, while Lucetta Sage Crosby paid in weaving for the land upon which her first home was built. Elizabeth Woodruff Wittenbury earned thirty dollars per winter as an expert tailor. Other women raised poultry for “egg money” and produce to trade. Sugar making also provided supplemental income.

Many widows, upon the death of their spouses, had to run farms with the help of their children, while others had to devise other creative means to eke out a livelihood on the frontier. Mrs. Beckwith, whose husband died in 1803, remained in her cabin supporting herself and her children, in part by helping travelers cross the river with her canoe.31

Desertion of their families by husbands and fathers was not unknown during this time, and several women were left to raise families as best they could. Ruth Rising Harmon’s husband left her with the care of their family and the management of a salt manufacturing business. Mrs. Hannah McUmber Sage became the first woman to keep the post office in Dorset after her husband went west, leaving her with nine children to support.32

Women were also landowners on the frontier. Land companies often awarded land allotments to the wives of the first male settlers. The Connecticut Land Company gave Tabitha Stiles three parcels of land totaling 112 acres. In Burton, the company presented Mrs. Beard and Mrs. Umberfield each with sixty acres of land for being the first white women in the township. Other women purchased land in their own right. Sarah Pashall Adams, widowed before age forty, successfully bought a farm, built a house, and assisted in clearing the farm and building its fences — along with raising a family of six. The first settler in Fairfield, Huron County, was Mrs. Sample, a widow with a family who came from Newark, Ohio. As noted previously, Mrs. Lucetta Sage Crosby purchased her own land, to which she held the deed until her death.33

No matter the circumstances that brought these women to the Ohio frontier, most found themselves working in ways and under
conditions that they had not experienced previously. The work was endless—indoors and outdoors, season after season. While trying to maintain a home, women kept kitchen gardens, raised chickens, pumped water, separated milk and cream, churned butter, dipped candles, preserved food, dried deer hides, made cloth, and sewed clothes. Forced to use the materials at hand, Mrs. Beardsly of Vermillion, Erie County, made caps for her sons from the skins of raccoons, and carded and spun the hair from opossums and raccoons for stockings. However, even though they were faced with enormous responsibilities, women of all ages were still expanding their roles. Amelia Weeks Smith helped her husband make the rails to fence their land. Mrs. Harris drove the oxen for her husband to do his plowing. Mrs. Jonathan Crum “helped to harvest their first wheat crop using the sickle like a man, doing the loading in the field and pitching into the mow, afterwards helping to thresh it with a flail.” Mrs. Pettibone of Delaware laid all the bricks of the inside walls of her new home when her husband was unable to hire a mason.

Some women were known for their abilities to excel at “men’s work.” Tabithy Phelps Alderman challenged her adult son, saying that she could chop down a tree quicker than he could—and won. Mrs. Smiley from Rochester was a champion sheep shearer and could shear sixty sheep per day. Mrs. Sample out-reaped a man in a race across a ten-acre grain field.

Many women were left to do all this work with only their children for help. Rachel McElroy Marshall planted crops with the help of her children while her husband was in service during the War of 1812. Mrs. White was left to care for her family along with the cattle and farm, which meant she had to leave the children alone as she tended to the various chores. Female children, as they became older, often helped clear the land by trimming the felled trees and burning the brush. Other young women helped to sow and harvest the wheat crop. But young males were very seldom required to do “women’s work.” Chopping and carrying wood was the closest most men got to “female” activity.
Women’s ability to come and go on their own greatly expanded as they took on these new responsibilities. Women “healers” traveled the countryside on foot or horseback, most of the time unescorted. Those engaged in business had to travel great distances to reach Cleveland, Pittsburgh, or other trade centers. Mrs. Esther Sexton Dixon carried lace, cheese, and other products to Pittsburgh to exchange for calico, ribbons, tea, coffee, and other necessities. Mrs. John Durant walked to Cleveland and back in one day from Orange carrying “butter, eggs and chickens to the amount of 40 pounds.” Other women made even longer trips alone. Mrs. Edwards crossed the Allegheny Mountains seven times on horseback, and Mrs. Williams Steel returned on foot to her old home in Maine upon the death of her husband and child.  

Women’s expanded roles in the community led some to move into the area of political activity. By the mid-1800s Ohio would become a hotbed of women’s activism in the areas of temperance, abolitionism, and woman’s suffrage. But during the early frontier period, the women activists were not officially organized. There were women such as Liwwat Boke, who spoke about women’s equality and their rights—“We women are equals,” she insisted. Mrs. Nancy Card Hall, a businesswoman who had felt the unjust effects of the laws against women, encouraged agitation because she believed that women deserved to be fully equal under the law. “Let them agitate,” she stated; “they will never get anything too good for women.”  

Other women channeled their political activities toward specific projects in their own communities. Mrs. Caroline Gibbs, described as the first suffragist of Sharon Township, a Democrat, and one who was exceptionally well informed on current events, “personally helped clear the square; attired in suitable garments she grappled with logs and stumps of the new clearing.” Another civic-minded woman, Mrs. Kent of Bainbridge, galvanized the community to make the roads passable by appointing a day when every man, woman, and child would gather to work on the road. She then provided dinner for everyone. Most women engaged in these
activities with little realization of their political value. They became involved in these activities to improve the quality of life in their communities, not to make a political statement.

More politically astute women were making their presence felt in other ways. Mrs. Tappan cajoled her husband to push for the clearing of ground in Ravenna in order to obtain the Portage county seat before Franklin Mills, now Kent, did. Many women were interested in political affairs and quite capable of carrying on an intelligent conversation about current issues. Jesse Lindsley Rice “was as well informed as a majority of men and was I think, as capable of voting,” said one who knew her. 

A few Ohio women did hold positions of political power in a community setting. In York, citizens appointed Mrs. Leonard Bates postmistress, the first political official in town. Upon the death of Colonel John Garrett, the founder of Garrettsville, his widow Eleanor was left ownership and use of the lots for the village, and in the 1830s she became Garrettsville’s first postmaster. For the most part, however, women’s influence was felt behind the scenes.

The activities, homes, and lifestyles of women on the frontier depended upon many factors—among these the regions they migrated from, ethnic and religious background, class, and the frontier environment itself. The buildings and communities of early Ohio are particularly revealing of their residents’ backgrounds. We can examine factors such as town layout and building architecture to find clues about the inhabitants. Emigrants usually duplicated the style and building materials of the homes they had recently left. Clapboard homes in Granville, Worthington, Marietta, and the Western Reserve reflected the influences of New England architecture. Settlers coming from Pennsylvania built homes of stone and brick with Dutch doors and decorated woodwork. Brick residences dotted the landscape of southern Ohio, reflecting the tastes of settlers from Virginia and Maryland. Directors of the Ohio Company laid settlements out along the pattern of a New England town, including a commons, house lots, agricultural lots, and out lots for grazing. Each settlement was divided into sixty
squares, which were then divided by streets one hundred feet wide. They reserved four squares for public use, and the remainder were divided into house lots.44

Wealthy or well-to-do settlers, particularly those who arrived after the War of 1812, had less of a need to adapt to their new environment. These individuals were able to bring more goods with them and could hire laborers to help with the clearing of the land and the building of homes. However, even these settlers had to deal with environmental factors that were totally alien to them. Each group attempted to deal with its situation by introducing as much of its previous lifestyle as possible into this foreign environment, including literary societies, singing societies, dances, civic dinners, church services, and schools. The attempt to introduce previous activities and institutions resulted in something new, not a duplication of the previous experience. As one historian noted about the early cultural life of Chillicothe: “With the old it mixed the new; there was the characteristic rowdyism of the frontier and the prevalence of revivalism in place of the serene ritualism of the Anglican Church.”45

The first settlers coming into the Ohio country near Marietta were from New England. Many men had served as officers in the Continental Army; several had been educated at Harvard or Yale, and their wives had been prepared for the comfortable life of a wife of a professional. This group (along with their counterparts from Connecticut, who settled the Western Reserve) tried to establish their previous lifestyles in their new frontier setting. Leaders of these settlements laid out the town as if they were in New England. Houses were built around a common area and the local church was the center of all activity. Meanwhile, the women worked ceaselessly to set up churches and schools in their new settlements based on the needs and expectations of their previous experiences. But these expectations had to be modified due to the needs of the current situation. For example, schools could run only during the summer months, and formal church services employing ordained ministers were rare. The social life of a community, which had
previously revolved around church activities, now rested on the needs of establishing the settlement—activities such as log rolling, land clearing, and house raisings. These became the accepted activities through which social relationships were developed.

Many of these settlers from New England were also economically better off than others. This enabled them to transport more household goods such as china, linens, and furniture on the initial trip or to have them shipped at a later date. This availability provided an opportunity to reestablish a home similar to the one left behind. But even the most beautiful quilts and china looked out of place in most of the initial primitive dwellings in which these women lived. As one woman found out, even though she had a pan in which to bake bread, the oven was too small to hold the pan. Faced with this problem she took matters into her own hands and built a bigger oven, making and laying the bricks herself. In order to further adjust to changes in their lives, many women planted gardens and cleared walks soon after a dwelling was built.

Settlers moving into the Miami Valley and the Virginia Military Tract were generally poorer and unable to buy land directly from the government, but they were able to buy lots and small farms from speculators. These women settlers were forced by economic circumstances to live in lean-tos for a longer time and learned to live off the land rather quickly. One woman reported having slept in the treetops for several nights until a lean-to could be built, and then she had to wait until a clearing could be made in the forest before a one-room log cabin could be built. A log cabin such as hers “had a pitched roof covered with wooden shakes, a door, one or two windows commonly covered with greased parchment, a dirt floor or one covered with logs lengthwise with the smooth side up, a stone hearth and a chimney commonly made of sticks and covered with clay.”

These women had to learn quickly to be self-sufficient. Trading centers were far away, as were neighbors. Money was virtually non-existent, so women had to be ingenious in acquiring products that they could trade for necessities such as coffee, tea, salt, sugar, and
implements. They found themselves making whiskey, trapping game, making potash, and collecting honey and ginseng to barter. They became very well acquainted with their new environment—it was important to know its benefits as well as its dangers.

Settlers were at the mercy of nature, facing unpredictable floods, droughts, high winds, hail, and early frosts. Other environmental hazards and pests, such as squirrels wolves, bears, wildcats, deer, and raccoons, were easier to deal with but no less dangerous to their well-being. Women learned to use firearms or whatever was handy to scare off dangerous animals. Mrs. Samuel French (née Amelia Belden) scared off a wolf by brandishing her umbrella. But for most, the need to become handy with a firearm proved lifesaving. Women who needed to travel alone had to be able to protect themselves, and those left alone on isolated farms for long periods of time had to use a weapon either for protection or to provide food for their families.

The isolation of the frontier and its physical environment caused a myriad of other problems to which women had to respond. In her recollections, Liiwat Boke wrote: “Life is a long struggle. We must fell the trees, but also cope with droughts, deep snow, sudden flooding, cloudbursts, forest fire, swarms of deerflies and mosquitoes and midges, snakes, wolves, and twice the wolves were mad... There are many wild hens. Pigeons sometimes filt [sic] the woods here like clouds so that the sun is hidden! And they break the branches down. Squirrels in swarms eat up all the cornfields. In time some people here go completely mad, change, commit suicide. Countless people do not talk with their spouses; many women have miscarriages, then pregnancy lost.” Children and adults were constantly becoming lost in the forest. “In the spring the children play in the warm forest, scurrying around and looking about, and carelessly they get turned around, don’t recognize the surroundings, are lost!... After them the parents, unthinking and so badly upset, also become lost in their urgent haste.” Mrs. Oliver Forward of Aurora, Portage County, gave birth to a son and soon after became so despondent that she
wandered off in the snow. Concerned family and friends found her near Mantua and sent her to Connecticut to recuperate.⁴⁹

Accounts of frontier life reported that depression was a common occurrence in response to this isolation and constant work and fatigue. As one woman reported, “The women are not often praised, so they feel themselves abandoned in the world, facing their inner troubles. Also, the loneliness brings on drinking and suicide here.”⁵⁰ Domestic abuse was an all too common occurrence, and murder of a spouse was not unknown. Thomas Fishburn of Easton murdered his wife, Florence, and then cut his own throat.⁵¹

As more people moved into Ohio and technology developed, the settlers would indeed conquer their environment. But for the initial female settlers, the environment they encountered proved a life-changing experience—one that constantly provided them with new challenges. With these new challenges came new expectations based on necessity, and the roles of women changed somewhat to fulfill the needs of the new society. But as this frontier society moved away from survival mode, the previous expectations returned to limit the role of women. The frontier experiences, however, laid the foundation for some women to continue to fight the societal expectations imposed on them.