

INTRODUCTION



The Significance of Ohio in the Early American Republic

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The late-eighteenth-century Congregational minister and land speculator Manasseh Cutler could scarcely restrain his enthusiasm when he contemplated the future of trans-Appalachian North America. The region between the Ohio River and Lake Erie was destined to become “the garden of the world, the seat of wealth, and the *centre* of a great Empire.”¹ Educated Christian gentlemen would guide the transformation of the “dreary abode of savage barbarity” into a place where “the Gospel [would] be preached to the latest period of time; the arts and sciences be planted; the seeds of virtue, happiness, and glory be firmly rooted and grow up to full maturity.”² Cutler happily anticipated “beholding the whole territory of the United States settled by an enlightened people, and continued under one extended government.”³

Historians have found good reasons to scoff at Cutler’s overheated rhetoric. First, he had a financial interest in promoting settlement north of the Ohio River. In the late 1780s Cutler was a director of the Ohio Company of Associates and the Scioto Company, two speculative land schemes whose investors hoped to secure enough regular income to live as gentlemen. Second, Cutler had no respect for the American Indians and white settlers already living in the Ohio Valley. When he did not dismiss them as “lawless banditti,” he simply ignored them. One unique “advantage” of the land the Ohio Company purchased, according to Cutler, was its supposed virginity. “In

order to begin *right*, there will be no *wrong* habits to combat, and no inveterate systems to overturn—there is no rubbish to remove, before you can lay a foundation.”⁴ Third, Cutler was talking about a region in the interior of the continent far from his home in Massachusetts. Commerce and travel between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ohio Valley required an arduous trek through the Appalachian Mountains unless one went up the St. Lawrence River to lakes Ontario and Erie in British-controlled Canada or up the Mississippi River in Spanish Louisiana.

Fourth, the Ohio Country was a hotly contested borderland on the western fringes of the United States, itself a tenuous collection of states whose citizens were in the midst of debating the nature of authority in a republican empire few had imagined in 1775. Despite the creation of a system of colonial governance in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which allowed for the absorption of conquered territories as equal states, the United States exercised little real power in the Ohio Valley. American Indians as well as British and Spanish authorities were eager to stop the American advance. The struggle for dominion over the Ohio Valley that had commenced in the middle of the eighteenth century would continue long after Cutler had lost interest in trans-Appalachia.

None of this, however, should obscure the fact that Manasseh Cutler was prescient about the future of the Ohio Country. If anything, he underestimated it. The people who lived in what became the seventeenth state in the American Union in 1803 were not only at the center of a great empire, they were at the center of the most important historical developments in the revolutionary Atlantic World. Ohio embodied the major themes in the history of the Atlantic World from the middle of the eighteenth through the middle of the nineteenth century. It established patterns as well as represented them.

Ohio recapitulated the history of colonial encounter, conquest, and postcolonial development with breathtaking speed. When Cutler wrote, the region was a heavily forested world between Lake Erie and the Ohio River inhabited by a few thousand Indians and Americans locked in a bitter and brutal war for control of its future. Nowhere in North America was the struggle between Indians and Americans more prolonged than in the Ohio Valley. It was terrain contested in the 1780s and 1790s by people in villages along the Kentucky and Ohio rivers and people in villages along the Maumee and Wabash rivers. Raids and counter-raids were the norms of bor-

der warfare rooted in racial hostility and efforts at extermination that amounted to ethnic cleansing.⁵

In the 1780s the United States sought to exert its authority north of the Ohio River, first by outlining procedures for surveying land and organizing territories as well as negotiating several treaties with Indians, and then through military conquest. Miamis, Shawnees, and other Indians in the Wabash and Maumee valleys defeated military expeditions led by Josiah Harmar and Arthur St. Clair, however. It was not until 1794 that the Legion of the United States under the command of General Anthony Wayne subdued Indian resistance at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. The next year was a major turning point in the history of the region as well as the republic. The ratification of Jay's Treaty, by which the British finally evacuated forts south of the Great Lakes, the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania, and the signing of the Treaty of Greenville, by which Indians accepted white settlement north of the Ohio River, firmly established the authority of the United States. The Ohio Country would henceforth develop under its auspices and within the parameters of its constitutional requirements. By 1803 enough people had flooded the river valleys of southern Ohio that the region was able to achieve statehood. By the time Manasseh Cutler died in Hamilton, Massachusetts, in July 1823, Ohio was the fifth most populous state in the Union; of its 581,434 residents, some 370,000 were under the age of twenty-five.

Four decades later, on the eve of the Civil War, Ohio trailed only New York and Pennsylvania in population, with 2,339,502 people, of whom 36,673 were free people of color and 328,249 were born outside the United States. The Census of 1860 recorded only thirty Indians living within the borders of the state. Ranked third among American states in the value of its real estate and second in the cash value of its farms, Ohio was on the cutting edge of agricultural, commercial, and industrial development. Its largest city (Cincinnati) was one of the most ethnically diverse in the world. Its proliferating colleges inculcated ambition, discipline, and a taste for social reform. No other state was as strongly identified with the Underground Railroad or with resistance to the presence of African Americans. Ohio sent the most men per capita, including generals Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, into the Union army to suppress the Confederacy even as it nurtured the North's most prominent advocate of peace, Clement Vallandigham. More of its women joined

the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which was founded in Cleveland in 1874, than did those of any other state. Within Ohio's borders, the American Federation of Labor (1886) and the United Mine Workers of America (1890) would be organized. Here John D. Rockefeller would develop Standard Oil. Ohio would be the home of the first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings (1869). It would attract tens of thousands of immigrants from all over Europe and North America. Ohio would set the standard in municipal reform and practical inventions. The citizens of the Wright Brothers' hometown of Dayton would hold more patents per capita in 1900 than those of any other city in the United States. An obvious measure of Ohio's position in the nation and the world was the fact that most American presidents between 1869 and 1923 were from the state.

These facts add up to something greater than the sum of its parts. They suggest the degree to which Ohio reflected larger developments in the Atlantic World. Indeed, the state's early history speaks to most of the major questions that have preoccupied the legion of historians who have revived the study of the early republic in the last several decades. As the essays in *The Center of a Great Empire* make clear, students of Ohio must deal with colonial conquest and resistance; massive migration; the formation of political parties; cultural rebellion and assimilation; tensions over the nature and structures of political authority; the proliferation of evangelical religious denominations, including Methodism and Mormonism; the reconfiguration of public space; the construction of identity in a dialectic between the demands of citizenship and the claims of family, community, and religion; critical arguments about the meanings of race; and the emergence of a provincial bourgeois culture rooted in domesticity and earnest piety.

Ohio, in short, was conquered, organized, and developed at a critical moment in the history of the world and of North America. To Ohio came people to work, farm, and own property that would provide them with previously unimagined standards of living. Five years after arriving in the Ohio Valley with his wife and eight children in 1803, Massachusetts native Thomas Carter owned a home and a prosperous grocery store in Cincinnati. He had twenty dollars for every one he had had in Reading. "If the people of New England would believe the truth" about Ohio, "they would flock to this country in the thousands."⁶

One who did come was Connecticut-born Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96). In her immensely popular novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), enslaved Eliza looks at the Ohio River lying “like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side.”⁷ The image of Ohio as a place that celebrated freedom and labor was a commonplace trope by the 1850s, a trope invoked by travelers (including Alexis de Tocqueville [1805–59]) and fugitive slaves alike.

People from all over North America and Europe constructed a government and a society in Ohio on principles derived from the global transformations of the eighteenth century. Here was a full-fledged experiment in republican government, in the power of the market, in democratic social organization, and in the necessity of organized competition in politics, religion, labor, and commerce. “All power,” wrote Connecticut-born Chillicothe lawyer Michael Baldwin in 1802, ought to flow “from the people,” for they were “fully competent to govern themselves” and were “the only proper judges of their own interests and their own concerns.”⁸ Methodist minister John Sale, who expected Ohio to be “as the Garden of God,” was pleased “to live in a Country where there is so much of an Equality & a Man is not thought to be great here because he possesses a little more of this Worlds rubbish than his Neighbour.”⁹

Ohio was a world defined by the proliferation of villages as commercial crossroads sporting banks, stores, churches, and schools, all of them vying to acquire the keys to growth and prosperity—county seats, canals, roads, and colleges. It was hardly coincidental that when Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) set out to reform America and Isaac Meyer Wise (1819–1900) to reform Judaism, they came to Cincinnati. English critics Frances Trollope and Charles Dickens recoiled in horror from the materialism they found in Ohio because they thought it an exaggerated example of what was happening all over the Atlantic World in the nineteenth century. The Unitarian minister Moncure D. Conway, who met his wife and championed theater while living Cincinnati in the late 1850s and early 1860s, declared that in the Queen City of the West he “seemed for the first time to know something of all America” and that “every ‘new thing’ found headquarters there.”¹⁰

While the essays in this book outline the major contours of these developments, their authors are most interested in helping us think about *how* and *why* these developments happened as they did, *where* they did. In other words, these historians are concerned less with

Ohio than with locating the experience of Ohio within larger transformations in the Revolutionary Atlantic World. Why was Ohio at the center of so much change? Why did Ohio attract so much interest from so many diverse people all over the world? Why did Ohio become such a startling success story in the eyes of most of its own citizens? Why was Ohio such a breeding ground for education, anti-slavery, political parties, and evangelical religion?

Constructing answers to these questions returns us to the concerns of a large coterie of Ohio men and women who came of age in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Artisans and lawyers, clerks and ministers, teachers and farmers were stunned by the rapid development of the state and fascinated by how it had happened. The speed and thoroughness of the transformation of the Ohio Country were extraordinary even by the standards of the Age of Progress. Within a lifetime, forests had become fields and villages had been linked by railroads and telegraph wires. The rise of Ohio was a model of the possibilities of well-directed human power. Progress, while inevitable in the long run, was anything but inevitable in the short run. It was created and nurtured by the character and actions of thousands of individuals. Celebrating Ohio as the very model of a liberal society, many citizens (not just educated Yankee professionals in Cincinnati) were beginning by the 1830s to think self-consciously about what the state's history said about human history.

What made Ohio work so well for so many in such a short period of time? Kentucky-born Dr. Daniel Drake of Cincinnati informed members of the Union Literary Society in Oxford in 1834 that Ohio was an experiment in the viability of a new kind of society. The "restraints employed by an old social organization, do not exist—the government of fashion is democratic—and a thousand corporations,—literary, charitable, political, religious, are combined into an oligarchy, for the purpose of bringing up one set of artificial and traditional standards, the feelings, opinions, and actions of the rising generation; and thus the mind of each individual is allowed, in a great degree, to form on its own constitutional principles." Of all the advantages of Ohio, the most "salutary" were the cultivation of "a love of nature . . . a feeling of romance and enthusiasm—a keen sensibility to whatever is touching or magnanimous in the human character—a taste, in short, for all which the natural and moral world can present, to stir the imagination, and warm and elevate the feelings."¹¹

Offering a romantic, democratic revision of Cutler's vision, Drake exhorted the students: "You will contribute to raise up a mighty people, a new world of man, in the depths of the new world of history" by "prescribing the direction, and laying down the rule of action."¹² In the center of the American empire, according to Cincinnati poet and journalist William Davis Gallagher (1808–94), was "an Experiment in Humanity, higher in its character and sublimer in its results" than in any other place. The agents of the founding of "the freest forms of social development and the highest order of civilization" were "the schoolmaster and the missionary." A new day was dawning, when people would awaken "to a just sense of their real dignity and importance in the social scale, by proclaiming to them that they are neither slaves nor nonentities, but true men and women."¹³ The Buckeye tree, exclaimed Drake, does "not bow its head and wave its arms at a haughty distance, but it might be said to have held out the *right hand of fellowship*."¹⁴

Like most nineteenth-century Romantics, these Ohioans assumed that progress was intrinsically valuable and that the triumph of their values was inevitable.¹⁵ Yet they also believed in the contingency of their history, ascribing their victory to superior character both revealed and refined in an intense struggle to transform the Ohio Country. American Indians and rough-hewn frontierspeople mattered mightily in these narratives because their subordination confirmed the righteousness of the victors. Nineteenth-century Ohio was revolutionary to the extent that it eclipsed alternative as well as older worlds. The pioneers were remarkable for overcoming all sorts of difficulties with unparalleled labor, discipline, piety, and commitment to a cause larger than themselves. "The lights of science and art have removed the long reign of darkness, and the simple aborigines of the forest have been supplanted by civilization and the cultivation of the white man," wrote Marietta doctor and historian Samuel Prescott Hildreth (1783–1863) in an echo of Manasseh Cutler. As for Indians, "although we may deplore their misfortunes and pity their calamities in their removal from the land of their fathers, yet who shall say that the hand of God hath not directed it?"¹⁶

By the 1830s Ohio's historians had singled out individual Indians to admire as great men who had tested the virtue of the state's settlers. True glory rested in vanquishing a worthy opponent. Particularly prominent in this narrative was the Shawnee Tecumseh, who had tried to build a pan-Indian movement and was killed at the Battle

of the Thames in 1813. Benjamin Drake, brother of Daniel and a Cincinnati lawyer and journalist, offered Tecumseh as an ideal American. Opposed to polygamy, simple in manner, temperate, industrious, manly, “uniformly self-possessed,” a “poet of the heart,” he was above all “a patriot.” It was “his love of country [that] made him a statesman and a warrior,” not “mere prejudice or self-interest.” The defeat of so impressive a man testified to the righteousness as well as the inevitability of American conquest. As “Hannibal was to the Romans, Tecumseh became to the people of the United States.” “[B]ut for the power of the United States,” he “would, perhaps, have been the founder of an empire which would have rivaled that of Mexico or Peru.”¹⁷

The authors of the following essays are not Buckeye patriots, and their accounts are neither celebratory nor romantic. Still, they are pursuing issues that have fascinated people interested in Ohio for two centuries. Addressing familiar questions, they offer new answers and open up new paths of inquiry through investigations of general subjects such as race, education, politics, religion, commerce, colonialism, family, and communication. The essays emphasize contingency rather than inevitability and contention rather than progress. Downplaying the frontier character of Ohio, they stress the extent to which developments in the state were tied to developments in the Atlantic World. They focus on general developments in Ohio as a whole rather than on individual case studies. They are intended to question conventional wisdom and to identify areas for further research and reflection. And they are founded on the hope that future scholars will think of the history of the state as significant without as well as within its borders.

Manasseh Cutler would have been flabbergasted if he could have visited Ohio in the middle of the nineteenth century. If the state was not exactly what he had imagined it would be, its development still constituted an amazing phenomenon. At a terrible cost to American Indians and disappointed settlers, more of whom were migrating out of than into the state by the 1850s, the Ohio Country had been transformed with astonishing speed and thoroughness into a recognizable variation on Cutler’s relentlessly upbeat sales pitch. “Ohio is as good a place as I want to live in,” a Madison County schoolteacher wrote in his diary in summer 1853. “Perhaps it is not the garden of the world, yet I think it comes the next thing to it.”¹⁸

Notes

1. Manasseh Cutler, *An Explanation of the Map which Delineates that Part of the Federal Lands . . .* (Salem: Dabney and Cushing, 1787), 14.
2. Manasseh Cutler, "Sermon Preached at Campus Martius, Marietta, . . . August 24 1788," in *Life, Journals, and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler*, ed. William Parker Cutler and Julia Perkins Cutler, 2 vols. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987 [1888]), 2:445.
3. Cutler, *Explanation of the Map*, 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 20.
5. Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 189–236.
6. Quoted in Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 5.
7. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: New American Library, 1966 [1851–52]), 64.
8. Michael Baldwin to the Electors of Ross County, *Chillicothe Scioto Gazette*, August 26, 1802.
9. John Sale to Edward Dromgoole, February 20, 1809, in *The Methodists*, vol. 4 of *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783–1840*, ed. William Warren Sweet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 160.
10. Moncure D. Conway, *Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell and Co., 1904), 1:230.
11. Daniel Drake, *Discourse on the History, Character, and Prospects of the West: Delivered to the Union Literary Society of Miami University, Oxford, Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1834), in *The First West: Writing from the American Frontier, 1776–1860*, ed. Edward Watts and David Rachels (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 356, 358.
12. *Ibid.*, 366.
13. William Davis Gallagher, "Address to the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio" (1850), in Gallagher, *Facts and Conditions of Progress in the North-West* (Cincinnati: H. W. Derby, 1850), 26, 27, 9, 47.
14. Quoted in W. H. Venable, *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke and Co., 1891), 319.
15. David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).
16. Samuel Prescott Hildreth, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of the Early Pioneer Settlers of Ohio* (Cincinnati: H. W. Derby, 1852), 482–83.
17. Benjamin Drake, *Life of Tecumseh* (Cincinnati: E. Morgan and Co., 1841), 226, 230, 229, 235.
18. John M. Roberts, Diary, July 31, 1853, in *Buckeye Schoolmaster: A Chronicle of Midwestern Rural Life, 1853–1865*, ed. J. Merton England (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 49.