

Introduction

*P*EOPLE WHO MADE their homes in Ohio when the Civil War began in 1861 lived close to the center of the nation. In 1860, the population center of the country—the point that divided the population equally between north and south, as well as between east and west—was in Pike County, Ohio, twenty miles southeast of Chillicothe. That center point moved slightly to the south and west over the next twenty years, but remained in Ohio, northeast of Cincinnati.¹ Ohio at mid-century ranked third in population and wealth in the nation and was the largest and oldest state in the middle west—a region that was tied culturally, politically, and economically to the northeast and south. In the early nineteenth century, settlers from New England had moved into the Western Reserve in northeastern Ohio, while Pennsylvanians settled in eastern Ohio and Virginians crossed the Ohio River into south-central Ohio. These groups formed the main lines of migration into the state, but settlement patterns were more complex, as people from Kentucky, North Carolina, New York, and New Jersey also moved to Ohio in significant numbers. In many places, including Cincinnati, people who hailed from many different areas of the United States lived together and contributed to the diverse composition of the state.²

Ohio owed much of its growth in the nineteenth century to its fortunate geography, which offered access to the two great inland waterways—the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. After the development of canals, Ohioans could transport their products—corn, pork, wheat, wool, iron, lumber, reapers, candles, soap—to Lake Erie and the Ohio River and participate in the market economy. It was the railroad, however, that transformed Ohio's economy. By 1860, Ohio led the nation in railroad track mileage. The railroad spurred growth in industries like iron mining and gave more Ohioans access to markets. This allowed some to move into the emergent American middle class and to acquire status items like pianos and sewing machines. Ohio's social progress could be measured by its colleges; it had more than any other state in the nation.³ The state was also an important market for publishing, not only in the printing and selling of books, but also in the production and distribution of periodicals, pamphlets, newspapers, and sheet music.

Throughout the antebellum era, Cincinnati—the Queen City—was the largest of all western cities, just edging out St. Louis in population in 1860.⁴

Ohio's economic and material progress was uneven and in some places non-existent. Although Ohio was the fastest-growing state in the middle west during the first half of the nineteenth century, in the 1850s its population growth was just over half of what it had been only a decade before. While people continued to move to Ohio, many others left the state. Alexis de Tocqueville had observed the beginning of this process in the early 1830s. "I have spoken about emigration from the older states, but what should one say about that from the new?" he asked rhetorically in *Democracy in America*. "Ohio was founded fifty years ago, most of its inhabitants were not born there, its capital is not thirty years old, and an immense stretch of unclaimed wilderness still covers its territory; nevertheless, the population of Ohio has already started to move west; most of those who come down to the fertile prairies of Illinois were inhabitants of Ohio." The French observer attributed this to restlessness. "To start with, emigration was a necessity for them; now it is sort of a gamble, and they enjoy the sensations as much as the profit."⁵ The migration that Tocqueville had observed continued, resulting in a depopulation of some of the state's rural areas, though not of the newly settled northwestern counties. While Ohio's cities continued to grow, many farmers decided to leave the state for cheaper land and better agricultural prospects in other middle western states, accounting for large percentages of the population in those states. The president of the Ohio Board of Agriculture noted the problem in 1857, writing, "Those who have left us for more western homes, constitute a portion of our most intelligent, industrious and enterprising population."⁶ But agricultural Ohio also lost population to the state's own cities. Observers commented on the lack of farm laborers in the 1850s and complained that many farmers' sons moved to the cities to seek their fortunes. Cleveland, Toledo, and Cincinnati witnessed tremendous population and economic growth from the railroads that supplanted canals and reoriented trade along an east-west axis, but so too did smaller cities like Dayton, Sandusky, Zanesville, and Portsmouth.⁷

European immigration indelibly marked Ohio's ethnic, cultural, and political landscape in these urban areas and in the countryside as well. The arrival of newcomers convinced many people that the state was undergoing rapid—and not entirely welcomed—change. Germans composed the largest group of immigrants in antebellum Ohio. A diverse group, these immigrants hailed from all of the German states; they were Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, represented different classes, and had varied motives for moving to Ohio. Some, like the separatists who arrived in Tuscarawas County and established Zoar in 1817, sought freedom to worship, while others left Germany after the failed revolutions of 1848. Irish,

Welsh, and English immigrants also moved to Ohio, providing needed labor for the state's internal improvement projects and mining industries. At times, the state's various ethnic interests collided. In the 1853 Christmas Riot in Cincinnati, a group of Protestant Germans objected to the visit of the papal nuncio, and fighting broke out between the protesters and the municipal police, largely Irishmen. Two years later, when Cincinnati residents who were opposed to the increasing immigrant population destroyed ballot boxes in German neighborhoods during a municipal election, another riot ensued, this time involving nativists and German immigrants.

Issues of race dominated Ohio's antebellum history. Ohioans' ideas pertaining to freedom and citizenship were defined in opposition to slavery and sustained by a commitment to white supremacy. The institution of slavery shaped the state and its people.⁸ The Ordinance of 1787 mandated that the territory north of the Ohio River would be the province of free labor. Yet the national debates that swirled over slavery's existence, its expansion into the territories, and its benefit to Southerners' political power were deeply—at times painfully—felt in Ohio.⁹ When the state drafted its first constitution in 1803, it outlawed slavery and the extended indentures of blacks. It also barred blacks and women from voting. Legislation passed in 1803 declared that the state militia would be filled by white males, in effect prohibiting black military service. Additional state legislation, known as the Black Laws, circumscribed black rights. These laws mandated that blacks moving into Ohio had two years to prove they were free, register with local officials, pay a fee, and provide a bond from a property holder against the prospect that they would become a burden on local communities. Blacks in Ohio were not entitled to public education and could not testify in court against whites. Those harboring fugitives could be fined up to fifty dollars. For almost half a century, until their repeal in 1849, these laws provided legal limits on black rights, although their enforcement depended largely on local communities.¹⁰

The black population during the same period increased dramatically. In 1800, 337 African Americans lived in the state. Fifty years later Ohio was home to 25,279 black residents—the third-largest black population of any northern state. Blacks made up about 1 percent of the total state population, with just over half born outside the state. Cincinnati was home to 13 percent of the state's black population.¹¹ At midcentury, blacks made up almost 3 percent of that city's population. For blacks, Ohio offered more than legal freedom. The state offered numerous advantages, including economic opportunities and communities where black children could gain an education, either through private institutions or local provisions. By midcentury a quarter of Ohio's black children attended school, exceeding the percentage of attendees in many northern states and surpassing that of white children in some southern states. The percentage of black children attending school,

however, was significantly less than that of white children in Ohio.¹² African Americans' access to education varied throughout the state, as did their opportunities to work and prosper. Yet within a culture of white supremacy and extralegal repression, African Americans in Ohio formed communities that withstood challenges from without and within.¹³

Some Ohioans—white and black—worked assiduously to preserve the legal rights and protections of African Americans in the state and to oppose the institution of slavery. These efforts were part of a larger constellation of Protestant evangelical reform impulses that emerged from the religious revivals of the 1820s. With its emphasis on the free will of an individual and the ability of individuals to improve themselves and reform society, Protestant evangelicalism encouraged people to work toward a Christian republic. Thousands of Ohioans responded by addressing the problems they believed existed in their rapidly changing communities. Advocates for women's rights, public education, mental health reform, utopian socialism, and nativism were active throughout the state, but it was the temperance movement that gained the greatest following. By the 1840s, chapters of the Sons of Temperance and the Daughters of Temperance existed in the state. In 1851, at the state constitutional convention, temperance supporters demanded the legislature discontinue licensing taverns. The measure failed, but it indicated the influence of temperance within Ohio communities.¹⁴

The reform culture also inspired abolition. Opposition to slavery existed before the 1820s: the American Colonization Society, for example, was founded in 1816 and favored the gradual emancipation and the relocation of free blacks to Africa. Colonization appealed to those who were uncomfortable with slavery by employing ideals of Christian uplift and white supremacy, two ideas that flowed together in the minds of so many white Americans.¹⁵ It also provided the seedbed for more radical calls to end slavery. Charles Backus Storrs, a member of the American Colonization Society, became president of Western Reserve College. There, Storrs led the faculty and students to abandon gradualist arguments for colonization in favor of immediate emancipation. The Western Reserve itself was closely associated with abolition, although there were abolitionist networks throughout the state. As abolitionist Albert Gallatin Riddle later recalled, the area was “the home of the various *isms*, the vagaries, *mental ailments*, many called them, of a people noted throughout the land for this distinctive feature, so that whoever had a hobby [horse] elsewhere rejected, rode it straightway to the Reserve, where it was quite certain of hospitable pasturage and shelter.”¹⁶

The confluence of reforms, or “isms,” was dramatically evident in the rise of Oberlin College. Founded in 1833 by a Presbyterian minister and a missionary, the institution admitted men and women, many of whom were committed to

abolition. Even so, when abolitionists from Lane Seminary in Cincinnati revolted against their own administration and agreed to come to fledgling Oberlin, their demand that black students be admitted met with opposition from students, faculty, and trustees. As the division in the community of committed reformers demonstrated, support for abolition was not equivalent to a demand for racial equality. The faculty at Oberlin agreed to educate white and black students together, but the distinction drawn in the debate exemplified a tension inherent in the abolition movement.¹⁷

Abolitionists comprised but a small minority of people in Ohio. Most white Ohioans were ambivalent about the institution of slavery and did not support abolitionists' crusades in the antebellum era. Antiabolitionist violence and full-scale riots occurred throughout the state. In 1829, a race riot broke out in Cincinnati, prompting the exodus of many blacks from the city. In 1835, abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld wrote that in Geauga County "a mob gathered with tin horns, sleigh bells, drums, etc., and ding dong'd like bedlam broke loose, valorously pelted the ladies with rotten eggs, and performed divers other feats, all strictly in keeping."¹⁸ In 1836, a mob in Cincinnati destroyed the press of abolitionist editor James G. Birney. Whites destroyed the homes of three black families in Dayton in 1841, setting them on fire as the residents fled. The same year, riots between blacks and whites in Cincinnati prompted city officials to declare martial law. They arrested three hundred blacks but few whites.¹⁹ By midcentury, issues of race fused with politics in Ohio, contributing to the tensions between the northern and southern states, heightening divisions within Ohio, and ultimately shaping Ohio's war.