

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The articles that make up this thematic issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History* were delivered first at a conference on the Northwest ordinances held at Indiana University, September 4–6, 1987. Over a period of two days approximately three hundred participants, interested laymen, students, and scholars, heard a series of papers analyzing the ordinances. The papers provoked much discussion from the audience, confirming the organizers' conviction that serious meetings of this sort can attract a varied gathering of people, many of whom are not involved professionally in the scholarly world. The Indiana University History Department and the Alumni Association sponsored the Bloomington conference jointly.

The conference formed part of a wider celebration of the ordinances that involved activities in the five states of the Old Northwest and Minnesota. Besides the conference in Bloomington and similar proceedings held in the other states, one of the highlights of the celebration was an exhibit of materials designed to illuminate the Constitution and the ordinances and scheduled to appear at six major libraries and historical societies in the Midwest. The initiative in organizing this celebration came from Frank B. Jones, former director of the Indiana University Alumni Association. Funds for these activities were generously contributed by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, Indiana University, the Lilly Endowment, the George and Frances Ball Foundation, and the John W. Anderson Foundation.

In this bicentennial year attention to the ordinances seemed particularly appropriate for the Midwest. In a symbolic way the ordinances have long been seen, certainly in the states between the Ohio and Mississippi, as documents of constitutional import, similar if not equal to the Constitution itself. Popular wisdom, of course, has been inclined to celebration rather than critical examination and for good reason. If the ordinances proved to be ambiguous documents as the republic advanced across the continent, they established general principles that have served well the American inclination to reach beyond itself. State equality, partible inheritance, a wide distribution of land, public support for education, and a preference for freedom over slavery were only some of the ideals that found expression in the ordinances. Often at odds with the realities of American life and slow to realization, they have in time become enduring testimony to the genius of the founding generation. Scholarly attention has been inclined to stress the distance that so often persisted between principle and reality, though the point could not have been made if the principle had not itself been part of the reality. Oddly the ordinances have been neglected in

the last generation. The articles printed in this issue, each by a major scholar in the field, constitute an important effort to revitalize a critical area of American history.

On the cover of the issue appears one of the Vaughan portraits of George Washington painted by Gilbert Stuart. The painting, now owned by Indiana University, was the gift of Eli Lilly and served as the centerpiece of the traveling exhibition. Washington took no direct part in the making of the ordinances, but the article by W. W. Abbot in this issue will amply demonstrate his centrality in the opening of the West. As a frontispiece we have reproduced a watercolor by Lefevre J. Cranstone, a mid-nineteenth century artist, that offers a vivid glimpse of the water route followed by so many of the early settlers.

*Bernard W. Sheehan*