

The Urbanization of the Middle West: Town and Village in the Pioneer Period

FRANCIS P. WERSENBURGER

Many factors stimulated the growth of towns and villages in the five states which were carved out of the Old Northwest—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Among these factors may be noted the presence of French settlements, locations on important waterways, need for local marketing centers, natural resources, the establishment of land offices and state capitals, the formation of educational, religious, and health centers, and finally the rise of manufactures. A large portion of this development took place in the state of Ohio because that state had reached a much greater nonrural development than the other parts of the Old Northwest. This is indicated in part by the fact that in 1810, Ohio's population was five and five-eighths times as great as that of the rest of the Old Northwest; in 1820, two and three-fourths as great; and in 1840, it still was more populous than all the rest of the region.¹

In the present discussion, limitations of space will restrict the analysis of town and village life in the Northwest to a consideration of the principal reasons for the founding and development of the various communities. In the case of individual communities, many of them necessarily fall into more than one category.

In the first place, there were the towns which were a legacy of the French regime, places like Vincennes in Indiana, Kaskaskia and Cahokia in Illinois, and Detroit in Michigan. Of these, at the end of the pioneer period (1850), Detroit alone was of primary importance, with a population of 21,019, although Vincennes continued as a community of local significance.

On the other hand, by 1818 Cahokia was declining in population, as Kaskaskia—in earlier years the metropolis of the upper Mississippi Valley had done in the years from 1765 until 1807 when it had contained no more than fifty families. In 1809, however, Kaskaskia had been made the capital of the new territory of Illinois and had been designated a land office town. When the state was admitted to

¹ *Thirteenth Census of the United States, I: Population, 1910*, pp. 30-31.

the Union in 1818, the population of Kaskaskia was about a thousand people. But, one visitor to the place in 1819 thought it "not very important"; after a flood in 1844 the county seat was moved to Chester; and after a later flood, the cutting of a new channel by the Mississippi River severed the location from the mainland, and Kaskaskia became little more than an island with an historic past.²

A second reason for the location of some of the towns of the Northwest was a favorable position on an important river. That had accounted for the continued significance of Detroit, which even in 1830 had 2,222 people and in 1840, 9,102. Associated with the advantageous river location, for some years the proximity of a fort or stockade as security in case of Indian attack had been imperative. Thus, Marietta, settled in 1788 as the first authorized American community in the Old Northwest, was not only on the Ohio River and at the mouth of the Muskingum but it was protected by a fort, Harmar, across the Muskingum, and by its own Campus Martius.³ Similarly, Cincinnati (first called Losantiville) was not only on the Ohio River and opposite the mouth of the Licking River, but its development was under the protecting arm of Fort Washington. Such towns as Dayton and Chillicothe to the northward were established only after the Treaty of Greenville had removed the Indian menace. Even after Wayne's treaty, in Indiana Territory, farmers in the vicinity of Vincennes depended upon the security furnished by the stockade there, without which the 2,497 persons counted in that general vicinity by the census of 1800, could not have remained.⁴ Such river towns often developed into important centers of trade. On the Ohio River, not only Marietta and Cincinnati but Steubenville in Ohio, New Albany and Evansville (each laid out in 1812) in Indiana, and Shawneetown in Illinois, were developing commercial communities. In 1818, Shawneetown was the largest settlement on the Ohio River below Louisville, and was the metropolis of eastern Illinois. An attempt to establish a town at Cairo had failed in 1818 and only succeeded just before 1840, when

² Solon J. Buck, *Illinois in 1818* (Springfield, Illinois, 1917), 75-77, 59-60.

³ Randolph C. Downes, *Frontier Ohio, 1788-1803* (Columbus, Ohio, 1935), 71.

⁴ Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana* (2 vols., Indianapolis, Indiana, 1915), I, 155.

Shawneetown had 862 inhabitants.⁵ On the Mississippi, Alton had experienced great development as a commercial center from 1830 to 1840, and during the 1840's it continued as the leading market town of the state.

Some towns grew up similarly as commercial centers on the less important rivers. In the first half of the nineteenth century, before the period of rapid drainage, rivers maintained a much steadier level than in later years. Thus, the Muskingum was considered to be navigable to Zanesville and even to Coshocton, and the Illinois River as far north as Peoria and even Ottawa. During the 1830 season, steamers went up the river to Peoria.

A third factor in the development of villages and towns in the Old Northwest was the need for local villages and market towns in the interior. During a period when local roads were wretched, little villages in the forest arose almost with the cultivation of the first farms, in order to take care of necessary demands of the countryside. There would be found a store or two, a flourmill, a blacksmith shop, and perhaps a few dwellings. As early as 1799 in a petition to Congress, pioneers in the Miami Valley described such a process of settlement. They stated in part:

Those purchases [of land] were multiplied, untill [sic] several hundred families are settled without the patent; considerable improvements have been made and not only dweeling [sic] houses, but also mills and several respectable vilages [sic] houses, and now the Country is occupied from side to side.⁶

Similarly, larger communities developed as interior market towns for a considerable area. To these, local traders brought the products of the countryside and received in exchange goods which many times had been brought from afar. In Ohio, by 1840, there were many such communities, such as Urbana, Bucyrus, Cadiz, Marion, Circleville, Mansfield, and Mt. Vernon. A considerable degree of prosperity was found in many of these places. Thus, Lancaster, Ohio, in 1840 had 3,272 people, more than half as many inhabitants as Cleveland. At Mansfield, the county seat of the not inappropriately named Richland County, the Congregational church building was one of the finest edifices in the state, as was the

⁵ John M. Lansden, "Cairo in 1841," in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield, Illinois, 1908—), V (1913), 25 ff.

⁶ Clarence E. Carter (ed.), *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, III (Washington, 1934), 42.

Episcopal church, a large Gothic structure, at Mt. Vernon.⁷

In the fourth place, some towns developed because of special natural resources to be found in the vicinity. Thus, Shawneetown in Illinois owed part of its early importance to the location of the salt deposits twelve miles away.⁸

In 1830, Zanesville with over three thousand people, was the second largest city in Ohio, due largely to certain natural advantages. Important saltworks were located in the vicinity, and the water power near at hand was conducive to cheap manufacturing processes. Already the clays in that region were being used in manufacturing, and in 1840, of the ninety-nine potteries in the state, twenty-two of them were located in Muskingum County (of which Zanesville was and is the county seat). Similarly, East Liverpool was at that time beginning the manufacture of yellow ware.⁹

The presence of "decomposable pyrites" in the vicinity of Steubenville permitted the manufacture of copperas at that place in large quantities, and by the late 'forties there were seven copperas establishments in the vicinity of that city. Likewise the gypsum found near Port Clinton was being exploited commercially as were the limestone quarries at Berea.¹⁰

Some towns prospered as mining communities. Thus, Galena, Illinois, grew up from 1823 to 1829 with the development of lead production. Galena, however, was rather unstable in population, for the miners came there to work during the summer and left during the winter. In what is now Wisconsin, moreover, practically half of the population lived in the lead-mining villages of Iowa County.¹¹

In southeastern Ohio also, mining communities developed. In 1835, a capitalist, Valentine B. Horton, located in Nyesville, which he renamed Pomeroy, his wife's maiden name.¹² There he stimulated an interest in coal mining, and

⁷ Warren Jenkins, *Ohio Gazetteer* (Columbus, Ohio, 1839), 317.

⁸ Buck, *Illinois in 1818*, pp. 68-70.

⁹ Wilber Stout, "History of the Clay Industry in Ohio," in *Geological Survey of Ohio*, Fourth Series, Bulletin 26, (Columbus, Ohio, 1923), 7-102.

¹⁰ Benjamin Drake and Edward D. Mansfield, *Cincinnati in 1826* (Cincinnati, 1827), 11-12.

¹¹ Milo M. Quaife, *Wisconsin, Its History and Its People, 1634-1924* (4 vols., Chicago, 1924), I, 441.

¹² Asher Isaacs, "Valentine B. Horton," *Dictionary of American Biography* (21 vols., New York, 1928-1944), IX (1932), 238-239.

by 1848, two and one-half million bushels were being produced in the county annually. Similarly, David Tod, later Civil War governor of Ohio, experimented in utilizing the coal of the Mahoning Valley and helped in the pioneer industrial development of Youngstown.¹³

Likewise, a number of towns and villages owed their importance to the production of iron. Before the exploitation of the iron mines of northern Michigan, iron mined in Ohio and smelted in local furnaces was very important in the industrial life of the region. Especially significant were the iron furnaces in the so-called Hanging Rock region of southern Ohio, where in the villages of Gallipolis, Franklin, Wheelersburg, and Hanging Rock, there were twenty-two iron furnaces in 1849.¹⁴

Numerous communities of the Northwest developed because of their location on Lake Erie, Lake Huron, or Lake Michigan. Detroit, founded in the French regime, was of continuing importance because of its strategic position in relation to the Great Lakes. In Ohio, one of the towns which developed because of its position in relation to Lake Erie, was the place laid out as Portland in 1817 but later called Sandusky. Before the completion of the Ohio canals and to some extent thereafter, Sandusky was a popular port for those using Lake Erie in going to and from the lower Mississippi Valley. After the completion of the canals, Cleveland became increasingly more important, and Toledo grew in rapid fashion, as points where lake and canal traffic came together.

Chicago was, of course, the most outstanding example of a village located on one of the Lakes that developed in phenomenal fashion. At the head of the Great Lakes and directly on one of the important routes into the interior, when the Lakes became more important with the completion of the Erie Canal, Chicago's great future seemed assured. In 1850 its population was almost a thousand times what it had been in 1829. The growth of Chicago, of course, was due to many factors, and like Toledo and Cleveland, it profited by the construction of a state canal system. To it, the

¹³ *Historical Collections of the Mahoning Valley* (Youngstown, Ohio, 1876), 27-28.

¹⁴ *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* (New York, 1839-1870), XXI (1849), 130.

building of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, was a real boon as it was to interior towns like Peru and LaSalle.¹⁵

In Wisconsin Territory, the chief urban development during the decade of the 1830's was the rise of the lake port, Milwaukee. As yet unfounded in 1830, by 1840 it had 1,700 inhabitants and by 1850, a population of 20,061.¹⁶

Many villages and towns indeed were founded or developed as a result of the digging of the canals. In Ohio, as elsewhere, some private donations were made by individuals to the canal fund, sometimes on the condition that the route should pass through a particular locality. The expectations that existed as a result of the plans are illustrated by a letter from Portsmouth in October, 1827, "Business of every kind is very dull here; but we all hope to live on milk and honey and without labor when we get the canal."¹⁷

Dayton and Cincinnati both profited greatly by their locations on the Miami Canal, but Cleveland was especially benefited by the Ohio Canal. In 1830 Cleveland was a small village of scarcely a thousand inhabitants, in marked contrast to the twenty-five thousand who then comprised the population of Cincinnati. Gustave Koerner in 1833 found it "a small place,"¹⁸ but the completion of the Ohio Canal from Portsmouth to Cleveland was a great boon. During the decade from 1830 to 1840 it increased from 1,000 to 6,000 inhabitants, and it was described in 1843 as "a splendid city" with "surpassingly elegant" country seats above and below it on the lake road.¹⁹

Toledo was founded after 1830, when the prospects of a settlement at that place seemed brighter because of the developing interest in a canal through northwestern Ohio. By 1840 it had 1,112 inhabitants and 3,829 by 1850. Toledo was to be the eastern terminus of the Wabash and Erie Canal built by Ohio and Indiana. In the Hoosier State the development of this waterway was significant for the grow-

¹⁵ Bessie L. Pierce, *A History of Chicago* (2 vols., New York, 1937), I, 75ff., 44, 70-72, 119, 122.

¹⁶ *Tenth Census of the United States, XIX: Social Statistics of Cities*, Part 2, pp. 660-661.

¹⁷ John McDonald to D. McArthur, October 24, 1827, McArthur MSS, Library of Congress.

¹⁸ Thomas J. McCormack (ed.), *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896* (2 vols., Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1909), I, 280.

¹⁹ James L. Scott, *A Journal of a Missionary Tour through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan . . .* (Providence, 1843), 15.

ing importance of Fort Wayne, Peru, Logansport, and Lafayette.²⁰

A large number of towns owed their origin to the speculative interest of the town founders. Sometimes the city-builders considered matters of natural location and resources, but the initiative of individuals often contributed to the development of one community rather than another which possessed an equally advantageous natural location. Some of the proposed towns of course never became more than villages on paper.

In frontier days, one of the most important towns in Michigan was Tecumseh in Lenawee County. Proprietors of the place platted the village in 1824, and secured its recognition as a post office and county seat. A sawmill, gristmill, and a store followed soon afterwards; but the place became relatively less important when the county seat was transferred to Adrian in 1838.²¹

As we have seen, Kaskaskia, Illinois, declined in importance when the county seat was moved to Chester. In Ohio, before it became a state, real estate developers were so interested in the creation of new county seats that territorial governor St. Clair felt impelled to veto a number of laws establishing new counties. But the motivation continued, and finally in 1851, when the present Ohio constitution was approved, it provided for no additional counties to be established without an area of at least four hundred square miles.

Similarly, other towns developed to some extent because they were designated as land office towns. In Ohio, in 1813, Cincinnati, Chillicothe, Zanesville, Marietta, Steubenville, and Canton were land office centers, as were Wooster, Piqua, and Tiffin by 1820. In Indiana, Vincennes, Jeffersonville, Indianapolis, Crawfordsville, and Fort Wayne, all served as land office towns during the period before 1825.²²

In Michigan, during the territorial period there were land offices at Detroit (1818), Monroe (1823), White Pigeon (1831), Kalamazoo (1834), Flint (1836), and Ionia (1836). In Illinois during its territorial period, Kaskaskia, Shawnee-

²⁰ Esarey, *History of Indiana*, I, 352ff.

²¹ George N. Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan . . . 1805-1837* (Lansing, Michigan, 1916), 235-236.

²² *American State Papers, Public Lands*, II (Washington, 1834), 875; *ibid.*, VI (Washington, 1860), 629.

town, and Edwardsville prospered as land office towns as did other places at a later date.

In a more ambitious way, two important towns were established as state capitals, Columbus and Indianapolis. In Ohio, Chillicothe and Zanesville had, at different times, served as the state capital, but in 1812 a group of real estate speculators had promised to give certain lands and buildings if their land, the present site of Columbus, were selected as the capital site, and to that forest-born community the seat of government was moved in 1816. In Indiana, Vincennes had been the territorial capital from 1800 to 1813; then Corydon had served for a dozen years. In 1820 a site was selected for a new capital city. This was approved by the legislature the next year when the first sales of lots took place, and Indianapolis developed as the capital of a commonwealth.²³ Similarly, in Illinois, Kaskaskia had been the capital during the territorial period; then Vandalia served until 1839, when Springfield became the permanent seat of state government.

Some villages and towns developed primarily as educational centers. In this category we find Oberlin, Gambier, Oxford, and, to a lesser degree, Athens and Hudson, in Ohio. In Illinois, Jacksonville, practically from its founding, was a college community.²⁴ Towns such as Steubenville and Cincinnati were not known primarily as educational centers, but their private schools before 1850 attracted students from other states besides Ohio.

In Michigan, Ann Arbor was not established as a college community, but as early as 1832 it had gained a reputation for the excellence of its local academy, and by 1841 a traveler could compare the buildings under construction for the state university with those of Union College at Schenectady to the disadvantage of the latter.²⁵

Other towns developed as religious centers. Thus Kirtland, in northern Ohio, had an extensive development under the Mormons from 1832 to 1837, as did Nauvoo, Illinois, from 1839 to 1846. At its height, Nauvoo had a population

²³ Esarey, *History of Indiana*, I, 239-240, 277.

²⁴ Charles H. Rammelkamp, *Illinois College, . . . 1829-1929* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1928).

²⁵ Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan*, 231.

twice as great as Chicago or Alton with a real problem as to how to sustain it over any extended period of time.²⁶

Likewise, there were communistic settlements such as the Swedish colony known as Bishop Hill (1846) in Henry County, Illinois, and the more famous New Harmony community in Indiana. A recent writer has analyzed the history of more than a score of such settlements in Ohio.²⁷

A few villages were well-known at the time as health and recreational resorts. These included Yellow Springs and Delaware (both in Ohio), the latter the seat of a widely patronized Sulphur Springs.

Few if any places were founded as manufacturing villages, but a favorable location for water power or mineral supplies and accessible markets contributed to the development of many a village or town. In pioneer days, much manufacturing was done on a local scale in small shops. Thus, Giles Richards, a brother-in-law of Amos A. Lawrence, operated at Colerain, a small village sixteen miles northwest of Cincinnati, a number of industries from 1822 to 1835. These included a cotton-mill, a flourmill, a fulling and carding establishment, and sawmill, as well as a store, a tavern, and a dyehouse. Farmers took the wool from their own sheep to the village mill to be twisted into yarn and perhaps made into cloth.²⁸

Especially before 1840 there was much local manufacturing to meet the needs of an immediate vicinity. This is illustrated in the case of the village of Granville, Licking County. There, manufacturing establishments like an iron furnace and a flourmill had been in operation before 1825. Ten articles made from metal brought from Canada were also produced. Then came a factory specializing in old-fashioned open kitchen clocks, selling at first for fifteen dollars. A hat factory (1828), a cast-iron plow works (1831), a cheese factory (1833), a furniture establishment (1835), and shops producing brushes, boots, shoes, candy, and rope

²⁶ Theodore C. Pease, *The Frontier State* (Vol. II of *The Centennial History of Illinois*, 5 vols., Springfield, Illinois, 1918-1920), 348ff., 399.

²⁷ Kenneth W. McKinley, "A Guide to the Communistic Communities of Ohio," in *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* (Columbus, Ohio, 1887-), XLVI (1937), 1-15.

²⁸ Ophia D. Smith, *Life and Times of Giles Richards, 1820-1860* (Columbus, Ohio, 1936), 17-20.

were in operation before 1840.²⁹ Factory operations on a large scale were centered in the larger cities, which in 1840 in Ohio included Cincinnati, Akron, Dayton, Columbus, Zanesville, East Liverpool, Newark, and Canton. Cleveland had not yet become important industrially. The first coal brought to the city by canal in 1827, had caused the skeptical to question the possibility of "black stones being made to burn." Indeed, Cleveland's industrial status before 1850 is suggested by the comments in the *Ohio Gazetteer* for 1841:

Manufacturing is not carried on extensively; there are, however, 2 steam engine shops, 1 iron foundry, 1 sash factory, 1 brewery, 1 steam flouring mill, capable of making 120 barrels of flour daily, 1 chair factory, 3 cabinet shops, etc., etc.³⁰

Indeed, the industrial revolution by 1850 had only lightly penetrated the whole Northwest except for southern Ohio. The Western Reserve region of Ohio, later to become one of the great industrial regions of the country had as late as 1850 no towns of over 3,500 inhabitants, except Cleveland, and such a later industrial community as Lorain was not even mentioned in the federal census reports until 1880.

The villages and towns of the Western Reserve as late as 1850 were the pleasant white-painted communities reminiscent of the New England countryside, often with a common in the center and a Congregational or Presbyterian church nearby. Here lived persons interested in trade and the professions and in the agricultural activity of the township. Not uncharacteristic of these towns was Painesville which was described by a visitor in 1846:

Painesville is one of the most beautiful villages in the West: it is somewhat scattered, leaving ample room for the cultivation of gardens, ornamental trees and shrubbery. A handsome public square of several acres, adorned with young trees, is laid out near the centre of the town on which face some public buildings and private mansions.³¹

On the other hand, before 1850 the most important manufacturing section of the whole Northwest was the Miami country of southwestern Ohio where industrial development

²⁹ Henry Bushnell, *The History of Granville* (Columbus, Ohio, 1889), 280ff.

³⁰ Jenkins, *Ohio Gazetteer* (Columbus, Ohio, 1839), 126.

³¹ Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio* (3 vols., Columbus, Ohio, 1891), II, 294.

had attained a fairly advanced stage before 1820.³² Among the numerous communities with important industries was Dayton. In 1840, in addition to its several cotton spinning factories, there was a large carpet factory, then temporarily idle due to a lull in trade, two gun barrel and several agricultural implement manufactories, as well as plants for making boot and shoe lasts, pegs, and the wooden part of plows. Flourmills, distilleries, and a clock factory which turned out as many as three thousand clocks each year, were other industries which were aided by the abundance of water power and the ease of shipment by canal. The cotton factories employed mostly boys and girls. By 1850, other industrial units there included five oil mills which purchased from the neighboring farmers about 160,000 bushels of flaxseed to be made into linseed oil; five foundries, and three paper-mills. But Cincinnati, before 1850, was the urban community par excellence of the West, the Queen City. In 1830, it was eight times as large as its nearest competitor in the whole Northwest, Dayton, and in 1850 with 115,435 it far outdistanced Chicago which had 29,963 and Columbus with 17,882. The splendor of its development in contrast with that of other communities of the region was equally striking. One traveler in 1833, exclaimed:

At last I arrived at Cincinnati. The fame of the extraordinary rise of this city had beforehand excited my curiosity to the highest degree. Cincinnati was never mentioned in America without the addition of such surnames as "The Wonderful", "The Western Queen", etc. Flattering epithets of this kind are generally exaggerated, at least they often appeared so to me: but, in this instance, they were justified. Cincinnati is in every respect an extraordinary city; the only one perhaps, on record, which has, in the course of twenty-five years, sprung from nothing to a place of real consequence. . . . Banks, University, Museum, Theatre, Athanaeum, Bazaar, and Hospitals are now seen where a quarter of a century ago, nothing but the primitive forest was standing untouched.³³

An extensive discussion of Cincinnati as a manufacturing center cannot be undertaken, but before 1850 it was the great meat-packing center of the West. As early as 1841 as many as 200,000 hogs alone were slaughtered annually,

³² Frank P. Goodwin, "The Rise of Manufactures in the Miami Country," in *American Historical Review* (New York, 1895-), XII (1907), 761-775.

³³ C. D. Aufwiedson, *The United States and Canada in 1832, 1833 and 1834* (2 vols., London, 1834), II, 126-127.

enough, according to an ingenious calculation "that if put into sausages of the ordinary diameter, it would make a girdle long enough to encompass the whole globe along the line of the equator."³⁴

But Cincinnati's manufacturing was well diversified. In 1834, a French observer made pertinent observations on the versatility of the city's business life. He said:

The Cincinnatians make a variety of household furniture and utensils, agricultural and mechanical implements and machines, wooden clocks, and a thousand objects of daily use and consumption, soap, candles, paper, leather, etc., for which there is an indefinite demand throughout the flourishing and rapidly growing States of the West, and also in the new States of the Southwest, which are wholly devoted to agriculture, and in which, on account of the existence of slavery, manufactures cannot be carried on. Most of these articles are of ordinary quality; the furniture, for instance, is rarely such as would be approved by Parisian taste, but it is cheap and neat, just what is wanted in a new country, where, with the exception of a part of the South, there is a general ease and but little wealth.³⁵

By the decade of the 1840's this city was the chief furniture manufacturing city of the West, one firm alone manufacturing 180,000 chairs annually. It was also a great producing center of boots, shoes, and ready-made clothing. By 1851, ready-made clothing workers in Cincinnati numbered not only the 950 persons in the shops, but 9,000 women who did piece work in their homes. It was also in 1850 the greatest distilling center in the world. And the future seemed bright indeed. Horace Greeley after a visit there in 1850, exclaimed:

It requires no keenness of observation to perceive that Cincinnati is destined to become the focus and mart for the grandest circle of manufacturing thrift on this continent. . . . I doubt if there is another spot on the earth where food, fuel, cotton, timber, iron, can all be concentrated so cheaply . . . as here. Such fatness of soil, such a wealth of mineral treasure—coal, iron, salt, and the finest clays for all purposes of use—and all cropping from the steep, facile banks of placid, though not sluggish navigable rivers. How many Californias could equal, in permanent worth, this valley of the Ohio!³⁶

³⁴ James S. Buckingham, *The Eastern and Western States of America* (3 vols., London, n.d.), II, 394.

³⁵ Michael Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States* (Boston, 1839), 202-203.

³⁶ Charles Cist, *Cincinnati in 1851* (Cincinnati, 1851), 257.