

## THE PRAGMATIC HYPOTHESIS

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One of the enduring minor mysteries of the Connecticut Western Reserve is why it was surveyed into townships of twenty-five square miles instead of the thirty-six-square-mile townships employed nearly everywhere else in post-colonial America. The Connecticut Land Company sent its first surveying parties to the Reserve in 1795, a decade after the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established the thirty-six-section township for federal surveys, so why did Moses Cleaveland's party create townships that are only five miles square?

The Company left no record of their reasons, but the hypothesis being here advanced suggests that the Company had considerable freedom to select the format that worked best for their speculative venture and that the twenty-five-square-mile township was the superior, pragmatic choice.

The debate over the Land Ordinance of 1785 demonstrates that the question of township size was quite flexible and that the shapers of the ordinance had considered other township configurations before settling upon the final six-section-square arrangement. The proprietors of the Company were aware of these discussions and would have felt free to select the configuration that worked best for them.

Any number of motives for choosing five-mile-square townships can be hypothesized, and have. For instance, the Reserve's townships are exactly one quarter of the original "Hundreds" arrangement, the ten-section-square townships earlier proposed for the federal lands. Another possibility is that the five-by-five format (or any odd-numbered one) created a central section for churches, schools and the township seat of government.

But the hypothesis being advanced here argues from pragmatism: the twenty-five-square-mile township was probably selected because it worked better mathematically. The proprietors of the Company had paid \$1,200,000 for the Reserve and had determined that this represented 400 investment shares. And a thirty-six-square-mile township presented some mathematical, surveying and marketing problems that a twenty-five-square-mile township did not.

As a square-mile section equals 640 acres, a thirty-six-section township equals 23,040 acres, or 57.6 acres per share. A twenty-five-square-mile township, on the other hand, equals 16,000 acres and each share would represent a 40-acre plot. Surveyors could have quickly and cheaply laid out 40-acre plots, and multiples thereof, in a variety of different rectangles having sides that were even numbers of rods or chains in length. Allotting land to the proprietors in an unwieldy size like 57.6 acres would have been an unpopular and expensive choice for men who just wanted quick sales in order to meet their mortgage payments.