

NEW ENGLAND AND THE WESTERN RESERVE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: SOME SUGGESTIONS

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Today an array of scholars have shared their thoughts, and from the discipline of each of them we have gained perspectives on factors that have helped to make this region distinctive. It is fair, then, to tell you of my own perspective. I come to the symposium as a local historian, as the director of a local history institution. As such, I would underscore the validity and necessity not only of the study of regional historical and cultural developments, but local and community ones as well. I would like to proceed to a brief precis of the initial and following early Euroamerican settlement patterns in Connecticut's Western Reserve, and some suggestions about the impact that that pattern had upon nineteenth century cultural development in the section.

I think that one of the most interesting aspects of the Western Reserve is that, as a definable region, it was the result of a political and arbitrary imposition rather than of natural or geographical causes. That New England's influence was instrumental in forming and defining the cultural foundations of the Western Reserve has been a long-accepted and obvious tenet. Writing in 1840, when the region was only just beyond the frontier stage, Ravenna editor Lyman W. Hall remarked that the Reserve was "in its education, in its leading habits, sympathies [and] feelings, New England in miniature." In 1873, standing before a meeting of Geauga County Historical Society, Congressman James A. Garfield observed that "there are townships on this Western Reserve which are more thoroughly New England in character and spirit than most towns of New England today." In a turn of the century *Atlantic Monthly* article, Rollin Lynde Harte noted that in the Reserve "is the Puritan regimen of Massachusetts and Connecticut condensed and exaggerated. In what other part of the country, save in antique New England, could you have brewed such a strenuous leaven." In *Years of My Youth* William Dean Howells recalled "that remarkable group of counties in northern Ohio called the Western Reserve," a region of which "the population was almost purely New England in origin, either by direct settlement from Connecticut, or indirectly after the sojourn of a generation in New York State."(1)

Speeches, articles, memoirs and other writings from the latter half of the last century and the first years of the present one are studded with

observations similar to these. The Western Reserve as NEW ENGLAND IN MINIATURE or, indeed, as MORE NEW ENGLAND THAN NEW ENGLAND ITSELF has become commonplace wisdom. (2) I would like to say that I have not catalogued these thoughts in order to dismiss or destroy them. Especially in terms of the nineteenth century -- "the world the settlers made," in the phrase of the subtitle of this session -- I see no reason to revise that wisdom. Instead, I would like to suggest ways in which our understanding of the cultural foundations of the Western Reserve, and New England's undoubted influence upon them, may be refined.

The initial imposition of "New England culture" upon the Western Reserve was the result of a number of factors. Most important of these were a singular pattern of land acquisition and settlement, and of intent. For mostly arbitrary reasons, I will discuss the latter of these first.

When the states which held claims to western lands by virtue of colonial charter or purchase from Indian tribes ceded them to the Federal government in the 1780s, several retained small areas for their use. Connecticut reserved a portion of land running 120 miles west from the Pennsylvania line and from the 41 north latitude to the southern shore of Lake Erie -- a hefty chunk of land totalling more than three million acres (3,333,699). Thus from the outset, the Western Reserve would be a creature of the Commonwealth of Connecticut. When Moses Cleaveland's surveying party crossed the Pennsylvania line into the reserved territory, apparently providentially on the Fourth of July, 1796, the General ordered appropriate celebrations of the event. The men fired a fifteen round salute, one for each state of the Union, and then a sixteenth, for "New Connecticut." Cleaveland then broke open a cask of "grog" and offered several Independence Day toasts. The first was for the President of the United States; the second was the the "state of New Connecticut" (my emphasis). (3) We need not read too great a significance into the revelry of a surveying team to realize that such expressions were a clear indication that the implantation of a New England stamp -- more precisely, a Connecticut stamp -- upon the Western Reserve was neither accidental nor haphazard. It was, indeed, a modified repetition of the initial impulse to carry an "errand into the wilderness"

