

WESTERN RESERVE WATERWAYS

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All settlers who came to Ohio's Western Reserve recognized quite early the geographic and economic importance of Lake Erie and the rivers that flowed into that lake. Even the Native Americans located their village sites or forts near Lake Erie or on bluffs overlooking the Ashtabula, Grand, Chagrin, and Cuyahoga rivers. In 1796, Moses Cleaveland coasted along the southern shore of Lake Erie observing how well protected these future harbors from Conneaut to Cleveland were. Economic opportunity and population response would determine the progress of these lake ports, noted Robert Wheeler.

George Rogers Taylor, in The Transportation Revolution: 1815-1860, described the American economy in 1815 as largely extractive-commercial in nature, "organized and directed by the merchant capitalists residing in a few cities along the Atlantic coast." But these sedentary merchants also dominated the commerce of the future villages near the mouths of the rivers in Ohio's Western Reserve. Men such as Lorenzo Carter, Abraham Skinner, Eleazer Paine, David Abbot, Thomas Richmond, William Austin, Alva Bradley, and Ahira Cobb became townbuilders; they were also wholesalers and retailers; they built their own ships; they were often brokers; and they had manufacturing interests.

With the success of the Erie Canal in New York (1817-1825), canal-minded zealots in Ohio pushed for a main-line canal that would be supplemented by a system of branches or feeders. The Ohio and Erie Canal (1825-1833) brought eastern capital to Ohio and moved Ohio products to eastern markets. Cleveland, the northern terminus, prospered, and the beneficiaries of such trade were those farmers in northern Ohio situated closest to the canal. The hero of this great achievement was "Mister" Alfred Kelley, a man forgotten by today's Clevelanders.