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The Old New England Vision: Community and Religion on the Western Reserve

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The early western Reserve was a microcosm of the competing national strains of individualism, capitalism, tax-supported churches, and congregational autonomy. The early history of Tallmadge township suggests how they collided. David Bacon, a congregational minister and missionary, decided in 1804 to create in Tallmadge "one conspicuous example of a well organized and well christianized township, with all the best arrangements and appliances of New England civilization."

Unlike seventeenth-century planners who were given land by colonial governments, Bacon had to sign contracts with capitalist land owners to accomplish his goals. His plan included a town square and required an annual fee from each property holder to support the congregational church which he helped found in 1809. But sales did not go well and troubled brewed in the church. These hand-picked recruits "united like one in their opposition" to Bacon because he insisted on being their minister whether they liked it or not. Bacon held on. Several prominent church-oriented migrants, especially Elizur Wright, enhanced the settlement but not his place in it.

By 1810 the holy experiment began to unravel. He lost a court battle over the mandatory tax to support the Tallmadge church and his last recruiting trip to New England saw him abandon his concerns for the religious convictions of prospective settlers. As his final efforts failed Bacon returned to Ohio only briefly to gather he family, deliver a farewell sermon, and head east.

His cause was carried on in a more limited way by Elizur Wright who proposed several years later to make membership in the Presbyterian society of Tallmadge virtually permanent. Wright failed, too, because the legal system decided that Ohioans should be able to voluntarily leave any church organization.

The practical people of Tallmadge wanted both a significant christian experiment and one which confirmed the sanctity of their property and individual rights. It was a nineteenth century wish and both Bacon and Wright demanded more communal control than the community was willing to allow.