Women in Cleveland

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Hoping to profit from the Western Reserve land boom, James Kingsbury left New Hampshire in the fall of 1796 for the tiny settlement that would become Cleveland. Traveling with Kingsbury were his young nephew, his three small children, and his pregnant wife, Eunice. Leaving his family in the forests near Conneaut, Kingsbury returned to New Hampshire on business. There he became incapacitated by malaria. In his lengthy absence, Eunice gave birth as winter closed in. By the time her husband returned and could procure food, the newborn infant had starved to death. Eunice and the other children barely survived. The family finally reached Cleveland in spring 1797, and James Kingsbury went on to a distinguished career as a judge and state legislator. His wife bore and cared for six more children, served her family and community, and died in 1843. Like Eunice Kingsbury, Cleveland's pioneer women surmounted great hardships as they came to its forest-covered frontier on foot or horseback, in oxen-drawn covered wagons and lake vessels from small towns in New England, New York, and Pennsylvania.

In the earliest years of the republic, Americans went west, crossing the Appalachians into lands freshly won from the British and newly organized into territories. Some travelers speculated in the land, in search of profit; others planned to stay and build better lives for their families; some—like James Kingsbury—did both. For men and women, marriage, or at least life within a household, was crucial for the survival of indi-
viduals and the community in this wilderness as it had been in the seventeenth-century colonies. As wives and mothers, women nurtured the tiny community of Cleveland and their own large families and struggled to survive and tame the wilderness.

No women owned stock in the Connecticut Land Company, which in 1795 purchased the Western Reserve from the state of Connecticut, and no women became owners of Cleveland’s first lots when the intended capital of the Reserve was laid out in 1796. In 1798, however, the Land Company granted land to two women, acknowledging their importance to the community.

One recipient was seventeen-year-old Tabitha Stiles, who had accompanied the surveying party of Moses Clevelando to the city’s site in July 1796. She and her husband, Job Phelps Stiles, former schoolteachers from Vermont, were employed by the surveying party, Talitha as the cook. When the party returned to Connecticut in the fall, Talitha and her husband remained for the winter in a log cabin at Superior at West 6th Street, on the northwest corner of the area designated as the public square. Attended by American Indian women, Talitha gave birth to Cleveland’s first white child, Charles Phelps Stiles, in the spring of 1797. When the company awarded Talitha more than a hundred acres of land, she and her family moved to higher and healthier ground near Woodhill Road, in the area that became the township of Newburgh. There they lived for about fifteen years before returning to their native Vermont.

Mrs. Anna Gun also received a land parcel near Woodhill Road from the Land Company. She and her husband, Elijah, had accompanied the original party of surveyors as far as Conneaut and remained there for the winter. In spring 1797 the Guns became the second family to settle in Cleveland. After three years they too fled the malaria-ridden swamps near the Cuyahoga River for Newburgh, where Anna Gun cared for her own family and acted as nurse and midwife to her neighbors.

Talitha Stiles, Anna Gun, and other women settlers of Cleveland in the earliest years of the nineteenth century played their chief roles within their own households. As husbands cleared the dense forests for pasture and crops of corn or wheat, wives spun and wove clothing, made soap, candles, and medicine, raised and prepared food for the table, and tried to keep the house clean. (See Figure 3.)

Cleveland’s economy was already dependent on commerce. The first commercial enterprise was land speculation. The investors in the Connecticut Land Company did not intend to live in Cleveland, but bought stock only to sell to others. The grid design of the public square was supposed to make the lots easy to sell. Cleveland’s site at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River had been chosen because it had possibilities as a trade center, linked to the farming interior of the Reserve by the river and to other towns on the Great Lakes. The main street, Superior, ran
down to the river banks, where goods might be easily stored or loaded onto vessels.

Farm and domestic goods, therefore, were produced to be sold, not just consumed within the household, and women were expected to help out in the family’s commercial ventures. When Lorenzo Carter opened the city’s first tavern on the river bank, his wife, Rebecca Fuller Carter, attended to the tavern’s clientele in addition to her own family. She and her husband and three children had left Castleton, Vermont, in late summer 1796. They spent the winter in Canada; Rebecca bore another child in the spring and arrived in Cleveland in May. The Carters were considered the city’s first permanent settlers, since they continued to live within the village limits rather than moving to Newburgh. Carter’s tavern became the site for local celebrations such as the city’s first wedding, on July 4, 1797. Carter also sold whiskey to travelers and native Indians, earning a reputation as a successful but slightly disreputable entrepreneur. Rudolphus Edwards also moved from the foot of Superior Street to Woodhill, where he opened a tavern. His wife, Anna, did the cooking, sewing, spinning, and cleaning for its guests as well as her own ten children.

Women’s lives illustrate not only their economic significance but the hardships of life on the frontier. Travel to the

FIGURE 3. An 1800 sketch by Capt. Alan Gaylord shows the early settlement of Cleveland, looking north to mouth of the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie. Western Reserve Historical Society
Western Reserve was always difficult and often dangerous. The roads taken by the first surveyors and settlers were Indian trails or paths made by wild animals across the rivers and along the natural ridges through the forests. Later travelers could reach the city from the east on the barely passable girdled road from Pennsylvania along the Lake Erie shoreline through the vast forests or from the south by the Portage Path, an old Indian trail. The trip might take weeks, depending on the weather and the stamina of the oxen pulling the Conestoga wagons or the horses bearing the travelers. When Josiah Barber, the first mayor of Ohio City and one of its chief developers, came from Connecticut to the Western Reserve in 1817, he was on the road for six weeks.

Most women began the trip with husbands, but as Eunice Kingsbury discovered, wives were occasionally left alone in the wilderness with small children. Sarah Thorp also had a narrow escape. When her husband, Joel, left her in Ashtabula County to return to New Haven, she saved herself and her children from starvation by shooting a wild turkey. Her husband, a carpenter, soon moved the family from Cleveland to Buffalo. He was killed in the War of 1812, and the family’s possessions were burned by British and Indian forces.

Nor was travel on the lake much safer. Sudden storms capsized boats, costing travelers their possessions and sometimes their lives. As the family of Judge John Walworth sailed from Fairport Harbor to Cleveland, their boat was wrecked, and all aboard were cast into the water. Timothy Doan, with his wife, Mary, and six children, left Herkimer County, New York, to join his brother Nathaniel, the first settler of East Cleveland. From Buffalo, Doan and one son traveled on with some of the family’s livestock and household goods, and his wife and remaining children began the rest of the trip on the lake. At the mouth of the Grand River, their rowboat overturned. An Indian guide pulled the children from the shallow water, and Mrs. Doan, with the help of three men, rescued the family’s possessions. She insisted on making the rest of the trip by land, arriving in East Cleveland in April 1801 on horseback with a baby in her arms.

Safe arrival did not bring an end to difficulties or dangers. Cleveland’s first dwelling places were log cabins, hastily assembled out of available timber. The interiors were small and dark. The central room of the one-story building contained simple furnishings and a large hearth for heating and cooking. The few windows were covered by greased paper or blankets. The housewife shared this cramped living and working space with her whole family.

Precarious health added to the burdens of wives and mothers, the makers and dispensers of home remedies and chief caretakers of the sick. Men, women, and children were stricken by the ever-present, debilitating malaria, which dis-
couraged early settlers such as the Stileses and the Guns from remaining near the Cuyahoga River, and many more families from moving to the city at all. Samuel Huntington, later elected Ohio’s third governor, recorded that on his first journey to Cleveland, in 1800, all three families living near the stagnant abandoned channel of the Cuyahoga River had the ague. (Huntington moved his family to Fairport Harbor.) One settler recalled his own family’s travails. “Our journey was attended with the greatest suffering. My youngest sister was sick all the way, dying three days after her arrival. Father was then taken down with ague, so our house was built slowly. With the greatest difficulty mother hewed with an adze the stub ends of the floor boards, and put them down with the little help father could give her. We moved in, toward the close of November, our house possessing neither door nor window. At that time, two of the children were sick with ague. Father worked when the chills and fever left him for the day.”

Women experienced many pregnancies, and pioneer families were large, even though pregnancies sometimes ended in stillbirths and children often died in infancy. Anna Gun had four or six children; Sarah Thorp, seven; Eunice Kingsbury, nine. Rebecca Carter bore nine children; one died as an infant, two as small children, and a fourth drowned in the Cuyahoga River at age ten.

Cleveland also had sometimes-hostile neighbors. The white settlers’ claim to former Indian lands had been established (at least to the settlers’ satisfaction) by treaties in 1796 and 1805, but Senecas, Ottawas, Delawares, and Chippewas continued to come to the village to trade their furs. White and Indian children sometimes played together, and although Indian adults were usually friendly, when filled with rum or whiskey provided by Alonzo Carter or other traders, Indian men sometimes frightened white women living alone in the forest. Just as frightening were the wild animals—wolves, bears, and panthers—which roamed the woods and, according to local lore, sometimes chased women and children lost in the forests and even entered cabins uninvited.

British troops threatened Cleveland during the War of 1812, and many families fled to Newburgh, six miles farther from the lake. Several wives decided to remain, however, not to repel the British but to nurse the wounded. Oliver Hazard Perry’s defeat of the British at the Battle of Lake Erie, and the United States’ successful completion of the war, removed forever the British threat, and most Indians also moved from the Western Reserve.

Frontier life challenged emotional as well as physical hardihood, for pioneer women often found themselves isolated from kin and friends. Tabitha Stiles and her husband were the only family in Cleveland in the winter of 1797. In 1800 only seven people lived in the village; in 1810 only three hundred, and
only fifty-seven in the area nearest to the center of the settlement and the river. In 1814 Cleveland had only thirty-four dwellings and business places. Its public square, carefully laid out on paper by the original surveyors to resemble the New England towns from which they came, was in reality a pasture in which cows, pigs, and other livestock foraged for food through ruts and tree stumps. Settlers' homes were widely scattered around the periphery of the square, which was surrounded by forest. The two main roads leading in and out of the village—Superior and Water streets—were barely passable. (See Figure 4.)

Tied to home by domestic chores and child-rearing, women had even less chance than their husbands to escape this dreary solitude. There were few social organizations, no schools, and, more important, no churches, and only infrequent visits by missionaries. The Memorial to the Pioneer Women records the story of one intrepid woman so homesick that she hired a wagon and driver to take her and her three children back to Connecticut; when the driver became ill, she left him and the

FIGURE 4. Ahaz Merchant's map of 1835 shows Cleveland just prior to its incorporation as a city the following year. Western Reserve Historical Society
wagon and completed the journey herself, she and her children alternately walking and riding the horse.

Occasionally women’s loneliness on the crude and desolate frontier was documented in their correspondence with absent husbands, such as Hannah Huntington’s with husband Samuel. Hannah Huntington had been born in Norwich, Connecticut, the daughter of a prosperous merchant and judge, Andrew Huntington. (She was distantly related to her husband.) She bore the last of their six children just before the family moved to the new settlement from Connecticut in 1800. She was fortunate to have a cabin waiting for her family on her arrival in Cleveland and to have servants to help her with chores. Nevertheless, her husband was frequently away from home on business for the Connecticut Land Company or in pursuit of political office. “My dear husband,” she wrote in April 1805, “what am I to think this month is over & you are not return’d & I have nothing from you[,] [C]onjecture is lost in itself—I feel as though I was quite out of the reach of any communication of a public nature.” Alone, she survived family bouts of malaria, the death of one child, and the unmarried pregnancies of a female servant. She continued to manage the family finances and farm as Samuel served on the Ohio Supreme Court, as governor from 1808 to 1810, and in the legislature.

As the Memorial to the Pioneer Women noted, few historians have taken notice of these brave and resourceful first settlers. Nevertheless, their labors as wives and mothers were essential in Cleveland’s earliest years. Husbands and wives worked the family farm or family tavern together, and even white middle-class women did whatever was necessary for their families’ survival, whether that was shooting a turkey, building a log cabin, or traveling alone in the wilderness. As the frontier hamlet became a small town in the first decades of the nineteenth century, women’s lives would change too.