Ohio and the World, 1753-2053

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The Shawnee people moved to the Ohio valley as early as 1650. They were Algonquian speakers who had traveled south from the region of the Great Lakes and lower Canada to hunt the thick woodlands rich with game, and to fish the waters of what they called the Ohio, “the beautiful river.” Two centuries later French traveler Alexis de Tocqueville, seeing the area for the first time, called it, “one of the most magnificent valleys that has ever been made the abode of man.” The Shawnees loved the region, too. They saw it as the center of the world connected to the rest of humanity by the great river. That river would bring millions to the region, continuing its connection to the world; but by the time Tocqueville recorded his impressions, the Shawnees were almost all gone from this land, moved westward by the continued assault of white settlement.

During the eighteenth century the Ohio region remained connected to the world of Europe as French and then English forces claimed it, and then a great war for American independence at century’s end made it a territory of a new nation. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ohio was about to become a full partner in the American experiment. On the first day of November in 1802 the territory of Ohio held its first constitutional convention in the town of Chillicothe. The U.S. census in 1800 revealed a settler population above 45,000. These migrants were clamoring for statehood. Petitions, letters, and posters sparked speeches and toasts at parades and rallies that fueled the drive culminating in a convention that brought thirty-five delegates selected from nine counties to consider this important question. As with the campaign that had moved matters to this stage, convention debate was heated. Carved as it was from the southeastern portion of the Northwest Territory, Ohio stood at the intersection of emerging
national tensions. There was a national argument going on about the future economic, political, and cultural direction of the new nation. As Jefferson's revolution against Federalist power was well underway in national politics, so was it on the rise in the emerging state of Ohio. Under territorial rule Governor Arthur St. Clair, a Federalist appointee, had wielded significant executive power over the frontier settlements. Now there was great public pressure to place more control in the hands of what Jeffersonians called "the people," and strong Ohio populist forces pledged to do just that. Ohioans placed their faith in a strong bicameral legislative body limited by frequent elections, the lower house elected each year and the upper house every other year.

Ohioans had a vision of their future that in many ways paralleled America's vision during the heady days of growing Jeffersonian nationalism. Theirs would be a pure society, a beacon to the world showing what republican values could offer humankind. The "Chillicothe Junto," as they were sometimes called, were largely Jeffersonian Republicans, many of them Virginia migrants who had moved to the Ohio Territory in hopes of putting into practice the liberal principles of Jeffersonian democracy. They envisioned a land whose people reflected the values of early republican democracy. These would be small rural communities populated by free, largely self-sufficient, farmers, enlightened, practical believers in democratic government. It would be a homogeneous and progressive population with enough personal independence to be willing to work for the benefit of the community.

Edward Tiffin and Thomas Worthington were among leaders of the Ohio statehood movement, both having come to the territory from Berkeley County, Virginia. Tiffin married Worthington's sister, making them relatives as well as political allies. They made one other joint decision that affected their political stands at the convention. They both freed their slaves and determined to prevent their new state from coming under the influence of slavery.3

The disagreement over the future of slavery, which had dogged the nation even before independence, grew more heated when, shortly after the Revolution, Colonel Timothy Pickering, quartermaster general, argued that Congress should prohibit slavery in the Northwest Territory and open that area for settlement by officers of the Revolution. Pro-slavery supporters blocked the measure for four years until finally, in 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance outlawing slavery in the territory. This by no means ended the matter, however. The invention of the Cotton Gin in 1793 made the use of slave labor more efficient for the production of cotton, and the passage of America's first federal fugitive slave law, in the same year,
committed the national government to the protection of slave property which was at the time growing ever more valuable. It was in this atmosphere that Ohio’s first constitutional convention, and ultimately the Congress, debated the issue of statehood.

The question of slavery in Ohio was considered closely by the Chillicothe delegates. A small contingent of delegates, mainly from the Virginia Military Tract in the southwestern region of the state, favored a measure that would have overturned the antislavery provisions of the Northwest Ordinance as it applied to Ohio and opened the state to slavery. Another group, while not opposed to slavery in theory, sought to keep African Americans, both free and slave, out of Ohio. Finally, there were others, from Hamilton County near Cincinnati, and the Western Reserve in the northeastern section of the state, who were determined to make Ohio a free state. When the vote was taken on this issue, the convention decided 32 to 2 in favor of an anti-slavery provision to be included in the constitution, but the measure had originally cleared committee by a margin of only one vote. In the end, section two of the state constitution’s Bill of Rights provided that, “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in this State, otherwise than for the punishment of crimes.”

Ohio’s debate over slavery and freedom helped to shape the state’s governmental structure and also reflected the social and political tensions within the country. To the south and southeast across the Ohio River, lay slave states about to undergo a dramatic expansion of the presence and the power of slavery. To the east and north, lay northern states then in the process of abolishing that institution. Ohio was a kind of middle ground in which pro-slavery and antislavery forces sparred for control. Its relationship with the slave states and the non-slave states was significant in shaping its early development. In their vision of the long-term future of their state, most Ohioans assumed that their fellow citizens would be white. If they could not accept the permanent presence of slavery, neither were they anxious to welcome free African Americans into the state.

Despite the fact that fewer than four hundred blacks lived in the old Ohio territory, the citizens of the new state feared the influx of escaping fugitives from the adjacent slave states, or that Virginia or Kentucky masters might use Ohio as a dumping ground for their most unruly slaves. Already some worried about the few fugitives who had found sanctuary among the Wyandots, the Delawares, and the Shawnees in the Sandusky and Maumee River regions. To complicate matters, some of the African Americans had married into Indian families, further evidence in the minds of many whites that neither peoples were, or could be, fully civilized. Here was a compounded problem for white Ohioans concerned about the Native
American presence almost as much as they worried about African Americans, but also coveting Indian lands. The 1802 constitution was drafted with these concerns in mind.

Taking its cues from the Declaration of Independence, the state constitution declared that all men were “born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights.” Yet, it also denied black Ohioans the right to vote, to hold public office, and to testify against whites in court. Over the next five years, more racial restrictions were built into the law. African Americans could not legally live in Ohio without a certificate proving their free status, and that certificate had to be registered with the office of the county clerk. They had to post a $500 bond guaranteed by two or more white citizens in good standing, “to pay for their support in case of want,” and they were prohibited from joining the state militia. These Black Laws, as they were called, were designed to discourage African American in-migration, but they were not successful. Between 1800 and 1810 Ohio’s black population quintupled to almost 2,000. It more than quadrupled again to 9,568 by 1830 and exploded to 17,342 by 1840.

The state constitution did not mention Native Americans. Most Ohioans never believed that they would become citizens of the state. In these early years the Wyandots, Senecas, Shawnees, and Delawares still occupied large tracts of land especially in the region west and north of present-day Toledo. One visitor to a Wyandot settlement in the area proclaimed it to have a “civilized appearance,” complete with log homes, fences, and cultivated fields, but even this was not enough for most white settlers to consider that Indians could be civilized enough to be citizens of the state. After the British, who had been the allies of some of the tribal groups in the Northwest Territory, surrendered their land claims at the end of the War of 1812, Native Americans came under increased pressure from the United States and Ohio state authority. In a series of treaties that followed, unwilling Native Americans were pushed to settle on smaller and smaller plots of land, then to move farther west, and finally in 1842 were forced almost entirely beyond state boundaries.

The increase in Ohio’s black population was overwhelmed by the general population growth of the period. In the first decades of the nineteenth century the number of Ohioans jumped from just over 45,000 in 1800, to over 230,000 in 1810, to over half a million in 1820. By 1840 almost one and one half million people lived in the state. Migration patterns to the state helped to define the character of the regions within state borders. As Native Americans had used the two great water systems, the Great Lakes in the north and the Ohio River in the south as major avenues of travel, so did white settlers arrive via these waterways and over the ancient aboriginal
highways extending from the east and the south. Traveling westward along the “Great Trail” into the central regions of the state came the largest number of migrants during the first half of the nineteenth century. This migration continued Ohio’s link to the world as the state became a receiving ground for immigrants and their descendants. People with German and Scotch-Irish heritage from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and southern New York who brought their hopes for land and a better life on the Ohio frontier accounted for most of these.

In 1817 about three hundred German separatists, led by Joseph Bimeler, set down roots in Tuscarawas County, founding the religious settlement of Zoar. The society believed in equal political rights for men and women, but forbade dancing, novels or personal adornment, including jewelry or attractive clothing. Between 1822 and 1830 this community engaged in a period of celibacy, most living in gender-separate communal households identified by number rather than by family name. They supported themselves by farming, manufacturing textiles, and some flour milling. Like many other German groups of the period, these religious peoples had passed through Philadelphia, where they were sheltered by Quakers, and then moved west in search of a place of their own. Although Bimeler and his followers halted their migration at Zoar in the eastern part of the state, others moved on through Jefferson and Columbiana counties, beyond Tuscarawas County to the central part of Ohio to settle in the Miami Valley regions, sometimes reaching northeastern Ohio to Sandusky Bay. The farmhouses and barns in this area reflect the Pennsylvania Dutch architectural style and attest to the origins of its early white settlers. 

Even before Ohio achieved statehood, a group of Revolutionary War veterans under the name of Ohio Company of Associates petitioned Congress to purchase land in the southeastern section of the territory, specifically one and a half million acres north and west of the Ohio River. Revenue from the two settlements that grew up on this land provided funds for the establishment of the Ohio University in Athens, chartered in 1804 and opened in 1808 with a student body of three. It was the first institution of higher learning in the area carved from the Old Northwest Territory. In nearby Amesville, settlers started a library for the school, paying for its first books with animal skins, thus its name, the Coonskin Library.

Further north in this eastern region of Ohio is the Western Reserve, so called because of its origins: land set aside by Congress in the 1780s to satisfy the claims of Connecticut to a western reserve. They settled in areas that stretched from Trumbull County on the east to Cuyahoga and Huron counties in the west, bordering Indian lands south of the Western Reserve. The earliest white migrants to this area came from New England and
western New York, people of German, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh descent. This migration got a significant boost after the “Yankee Chill” of the summer of 1816, when in early June, temperatures in New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut dropped suddenly from the upper eighties and low nineties to below freezing. Some areas received as much as eighteen inches of snow. The sudden cold that came and went erratically for most of the summer killed crops and animals. It combined with a devastating drought to drive many farmers to the brink of bankruptcy and beyond. Even the hardiest of Yankees could do little more than pray for relief. Most believed, as one magazine editor explained, “That God has expressed His displeasure towards the inhabitants of the earth by withholding the ordinary rain and sunshine cannot be reasonably doubted.”

In reality there was a more scientific explanation for what New Englanders experienced that summer. In April of 1815 in the Indonesian Archipelago the Tambora Volcano erupted. The eruption hurled a hundred square miles of volcanic ash into the air that blackened skies for three days over a three-hundred-mile area, with a roar that could be heard a thousand miles away. This dramatic natural event lowered temperatures around the world and created a “year without a summer” throughout the northern hemisphere in 1816. In America, one result of the “Yankee Chill” was a rise in interest in the land to the west. Some saw Ohio as a land of salvation. “The lands to the westward are luxuriant, and the climate mild and salubrious,” claimed one Ohio land promoter. Many took him very seriously. During the summer of 1817, thousands set out from eastern New England for the “golden Ohio country” and other lands to the west, some simply walking away from their farms. Their numbers helped almost to double the size of Ohio’s population between 1817 and 1820 (380,000 to 581,434). They brought with them their traditions of dress, speech, food, and worship. This region that historian Roger Kennedy has called “Greater New England” was characterized by towns laid out in the style of a Yankee community, tightly grouped buildings clustered around a village green with a church as its central feature. Buildings constructed with pine board siding horizontally positioned and painted white in Greek Revival architectural style characterized the homes and churches. These were largely religion-based communities, predominately Congregational, but they also included Mennonite, Shaker, and a variety of more experimental sectarian utopian groups.

The volcano also revealed the possibilities and problems of living in Ohio. The land was certainly fertile and plentiful, and Ohioans knew about and saw opportunity in the worldwide crop failures of 1816. Consider, for example, the case of William Hand, a New Englander who had migrated
Hand then complained of “the delay of running down a 2,000 mile river” to the port at New Orleans, fighting all along the rapids, falls, mosquitoes, diseases, pirates, and drunken boatmen. Finally, after all that trouble, “this boasted supply arrives at last into the world’s highway and thoroughfare, the blue Atlantic.” The problem, Hand pointed out, was that “long ere this can be accomplished, the world has found a belly full and laughs “at this outlandish” produce, leaving it and its seller to “rot and ruin.” So by a “fair experiment,” Hand concluded, “tis fully proved Ohio corn will never come in time to make a yankee hasty pudding; nor will it ever sell where yankee flint corn comes to market.” Hand did not know what caused the crop failures, but he did know that, as of 1818, Ohioans could not take advantage of the state’s main asset: a powerful river that potentially connected Ohio to the rest of the world. Within a decade, steamboat travel diminished Hand’s criticisms considerably, and within forty years the railroads mocked him entirely. Hand, however, recognized the importance of the river and understood that it forced Ohioans to look south first as they engaged the rest of the world.

Migrants to the southern regions of the state generally came from Virginia, many settling in the Virginia Military District lands in the west central region. In the areas of southern settlement residents took up large farms and built houses in the style common in the South, brick homes with double porches. The dominant religion in these areas was Presbyterian and the largest percentage of the people were Scotch-Irish. Many had been slaveholders in Virginia and a few, like Thomas Worthington, freed their slaves and brought them to Ohio as free people. Worthington, however, retained control over the freed people’s lives, using indentured contracts to bind blacks into service and failing to follow through on promises of land grants to black families who worked for him. Samuel Gist, a wealthy
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Virginia banker, freed his nine hundred slaves at his death and provided for their settlement in Ohio in his will. In 1819, trustees of his estate purchased 2,200 acres of land in Brown and Highland counties, and hundreds of his former slaves took up residence there, in two settlements, much to the alarm of area whites. Reports circulated that the former Gist slaves were a “depraved and ignorant” lot who could never make a go of the settlement and posed a danger to white residents. In 1835 one newspaper declared the black community experiment a failure and the condition of its people “wrecked” and “unproductive.” In reality the trustees had made an ill-advised purchase. They paid $4,400 for land that was under water for more than half the year, making it very difficult for these black settlers to make a living. Still, the isolation of these black communities saved them from some of the most severe consequences of white hostility, and the settlements persisted into the 1850s. Then, because the residents had never received a deed to the land, their land titles were contested, and they were forced to forfeit their property.

In large part, Ohio’s location as a borderland between slavery and freedom, and the nature of its population shaped its economic connections and its politics. It was this contrast between slave Kentucky and free Ohio that struck Tocqueville in 1831:

These two States only differ in a single respect; Kentucky has admitted slavery, but the State of Ohio has prohibited the existence of slaves within its borders. Thus the traveler who floats down the current of the Ohio to the spot where that river falls into the Mississippi may be said to sail between liberty and servitude; and a transient inspection of the surrounding objects will convince him as to which of the two is most favorable to humanity . . . the men whose task it is to cultivate the rich soil of Kentucky are ignorant and apathetic, while those who are active and enlightened either do nothing or pass over into Ohio, where they may work without shame.

In 1828, English writer Frances Trollope had been equally impressed by the Ohio River, not for its political import in the new world but for its evocation of an old world idyll: “I imagine that this river presents almost every variety of river scenery,” she wrote, “and were there occasionally a ruined abbey, or feudal castle, to mix the romance of real life with that of nature, the Ohio would be perfect.”

Unfortunately, Mrs. Trollope was not as impressed with the dynamic city of Cincinnati. Initially called Losantiville at its founding in 1788, the settlement was renamed after the Society of the Cincinnati, an organization
of Revolutionary War officers founded by Henry Knox, a close associate of George Washington. In 1802, Cincinnati was chartered as a village, and in 1819 incorporated as a city. From its beginnings this southern Ohio community was tightly linked to the South. Just across the Ohio River lay slave-holding Kentucky, and the Ohio-Mississippi River complex connected it to New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta. Cincinnati became one of the fastest growing cities in the region, with a population that ballooned from 15,000 in 1810 to over 50,000 by 1830, propelled by the completion of the Miami Canal linking the city to Dayton to the north. By 1850 Cincinnati had grown to over 150,000 and was a major manufacturing and trading center, drawing flour, bacon, lard, pork, butter, beef, wool, beeswax, and linseed oil from the farming area of its hinterland in the Miami Valley and adding whiskey, furniture, barrels, and other products produced in the city. Farmers, merchants, and manufacturers combined to make Cincinnati the “Queen City of the West,” as named in a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and one of the most prosperous communities on the midwestern frontier. Its most important markets were the plantations of the western deep South. This trade made Cincinnati “Porkopolis,” the major midwestern center providing supplies to feed the slaves in the Delta who produced cotton on land too valuable for growing food. Cincinnati was thus economically and politically bound to the cotton South.

Cincinnati was, therefore, bound also to consider southern viewpoints when the United States engaged world markets. In 1828 and 1832, the federal government enacted tariffs on imported goods. These laws pleased northeasterners who demanded that the federal government protect domestic manufacturers from foreign competition, but angered southerners who believed that Europeans would retaliate against the importation of American cotton. The tariff issue triggered the Nullification Crisis in 1832, pitting federal authority against state’s rights advocates. A violent crisis was averted when Congress agreed to reduce the tariff over a period of years. Before that compromise, however, Louis McLane, the Secretary of the Treasury, sought information from the states about the influence of foreign competition and the effect of the tariff. In Ohio, the federal agent reported that businessmen “all assert, that, in no part of the west, are they beyond the reach of European competition.” The politically astute agent vigorously disagreed with his fellow Ohioans, knowing that McLane needed information that would allow a compromise on the tariff and knowing that southerners were important to Cincinnati’s prosperity. Because many Ohioans supported tariffs, the agent wanted McLane to walk a careful line. The conventional wisdom notwithstanding, the agent argued, Ohioans would benefit from a “judicious reduction of the tariff. How this reduction ought to be
apportioned requires much skill and caution, and ought to be the result of
the combined reflection of individuals from different parts of the union.”
Southerners were wrong about the tariff. It was not hurting them, the agent
testified. No law, however, should be passed if “the whole mass of an im-
portant section of the nation” opposes it. Implicitly, the agent indicated that
the benefits of the tariff were not worth the problems that Cincinnati’s biggest,
and angriest, customers could cause. The South shaped how Ohioans
responded to the world.14

Europeans, in turn, were aware of Cincinnati’s thriving economy, but
often lamented the lack of attendant social entertainments. Frances
Trollope observed that “I never saw any people who appeared to live so
much without amusement as the Cincinnatians. Billiards are forbidden by
law, so are cards. To sell a pack of cards in Ohio subjects the seller to a
penalty of fifty dollars. They have no public balls, excepting, I think, six,
during the Christmas holidays. They have no concerts. They have no din-
ner parties. . . . Were it not for the churches, indeed, I think there might be
a general bonfire of best bonnets, for I never could discover any other use
for them.”15 In any case, she left soon for London and, presumably, a more
agreeable social whirl. In the late 1830s, British naval Captain Frederick
Marryat recorded one local resident’s reaction to Mrs. Trollope’s criticism:
“A lady, who had long resided at Cincinnati, told me that they were not
angry with Mrs. Trollope for having described the society which she saw,
but for having asserted that that was the best society; and she further
remarked—‘It is fair to us that it should be understood that when Mrs.
Trollope came here, she was quite unknown, except inasmuch as that she
was a married woman, traveling without her husband. In a small society, as
ours was, it was not surprising, therefore, that we should be cautious about
receiving a lady, who in our opinion, was offending against les bienséances,”
or against the rules of decorum. While suggesting that Mrs. Trollope may
not have been worthy of the highest levels of Cincinnati society, Captain
Marryat pronounced that society to be “as good as any in the Union.”16

Obviously, people far beyond Ohio were interested in how life in
Cincinnati served as a general comment on American society. In fact,
Tocqueville, Trollope, and Marryat are only three of many who visited the
state and noted issues of race, gender, and the general social and cultural
habits of those whom many foreign observers took to be representative
Americans. The ease and comfort of riverboat travel on La Belle Révière, the
Ohio River, made Ohio almost an obligatory stop on every foreigner’s tour
of the United States. And most, like transcendentalist Harriet Martineau in
1838, were determined to visit Cincinnati, “the great City of the West.”
Martineau found society there to be neither as bad as Trollope had
described, nor as good as Marryat had claimed, but more what could be expected in a city that melded western culture with eastern wealth: “All the parties I was at . . . were very amusing, from the diversity in the company, and in the manners of the natives of the east and west. The effect is entertaining enough to the foreign guest, but not very salutary to the temper of the residents; to judge by the complaints I heard about sectional exclusiveness. It appeared to me that . . . the easterners should make large concessions and allowance. It would be well for them to remember that it was they who chose the western city, and not the city them.”

To the far northeast of Cincinnati, in the Western Reserve region, was Cleveland, named for U.S. General Moses Cleaveland, who surveyed the reserve land for the Connecticut Land Company in 1796. It was a much smaller settlement than Cincinnati, with only a reported seventy-six adult males in its first census of 1802. The Treaty of Fort Industry in 1805 forced Native Americans to relinquish their rights to lands just to its west, spurring Cleveland’s growth to 606 inhabitants in 1820 and to almost 5,000 in 1830. The 1840s were a dramatic decade that took the village of just over 6,000 to the rank of forty-first largest city in the nation with a population of over 17,000. Cleveland, as the name was first spelled in 1831 by the Cleveland Advertiser newspaper to fit its masthead, was to become the major commercial center in the northern part of the state. In terms of political outlook and economic allegiance, it was very different from Cincinnati. Tied to trade on the Great Lakes, Cleveland faced north and east across Lake Erie toward Buffalo and through the Erie Canal to the Hudson River, to New York City and beyond. Its population was transplanted from western New York and New England, more likely to be Catholic than in Cincinnati, and more likely to be white. Although the first black settlers in Cleveland had come from Maryland as early as 1809, their numbers remained small through the antebellum period. Whereas Cincinnati’s black population numbered over a thousand by 1830, about 4 percent of the city’s population, in all of Cleveland’s Cuyahoga County there were only seventy-six blacks at that time. Even as late as 1850 there were only 224 African Americans in the city, while in Cincinnati there were more than ten times that number (3,237). Historians have argued that the tiny numbers of blacks in Cleveland ultimately made the city a more racially liberal place than Cincinnati, and in many significant ways it was, but the small size of the black community may not explain the difference. Cleveland’s total population was so much smaller than Cincinnati’s that the percentage of blacks in the two cities, almost 2 percent in Cleveland and under 3 percent in Cincinnati, was not significantly different. It is true that Cleveland’s white workers did
not consider their town’s blacks dangerous competitors in the way that Cincinnatians did, but this reflected the fact that Cleveland did not border on the slave South and therefore whites were less concerned about a massive African American in-migration. The lower anxiety level among Cleveland whites helped to make them more racially tolerant. While in Cincinnati fugitive slaves and even free blacks were always in danger of being kidnapped into Kentucky, Cleveland was a safer place, made so by the willingness of authorities to protect its black residents. As early as 1819 two white men were charged with kidnapping when they captured and attempted to remove a runaway from the city. The law was clearly on the side of the slave catchers, but Cleveland officials protected the fugitives nonetheless. Such action was uncommon for the time even in The Western Reserve, but as the abolition movement became more influential, the area became a hotbed of antislavery activity.\(^{19}\)

The experience of John Malvin illustrates the important differences in life for blacks in the southern parts of the state and in the Western Reserve. Malvin was born in Prince William County, Virginia. The son of a slave father and a free mother, he was a free person under Virginia law, a fact that often had little practical value for his day-to-day life. In Virginia, Malvin was generally treated much like a slave. In 1827, at thirty-two years of age, he arrived in Ohio armed with his freedom papers, carpentry skills, and a rudimentary education received despite obstacles imposed by Virginia state law and southern racial custom. He made the journey of six days on foot as far as Marietta, Ohio and then took a flat boat to Cincinnati. In that city he found a rapidly expanding black community of about two thousand and explosive racial tensions fueled by white fears of this black population growth. The Black Laws designed to discourage African Americans settlement were sporadically enforced and did not seem to limit their numbers. Racially intolerant whites rationalized these laws, arguing that they were specifically designed to discourage African Americans from becoming a financial burden on society, even though middle-class blacks were not exempt. Virtually all blacks faced harassment. Many whites particularly resented black accomplishments and seemed to make successful blacks special targets. “If I earned property, I know not but my house would be pulled down over my head by a mob,” reflected one black Cincinnatian.\(^{20}\)

When, in the late 1820s, Cincinnati officials moved to rigidly enforce the state’s Black Laws, life grew increasingly complicated and uncomfortable for African Americans in the city. Almost immediately, Malvin became involved in community politics, calling a meeting of Cincinnati blacks to consider their options in light of the increasingly oppressive situation. With Israel Lewis, another former slave who had settled in Ohio, he mounted a
campaign that secured a delay in the enforcement of the black laws and formed a delegation to Canada to investigate the possibility of gaining permission from the Canadian government for Cincinnati blacks to settle in that country. Canada agreed to the establishment of the African American settlement of Wilberforce, named for the abolitionist who served in the British Parliament and was instrumental in the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Encouraged by these events, Lewis petitioned the Ohio state legislature for aid in settling blacks in Canada. The state refused, but Ohio Quakers helped support the venture, and soon community construction was underway. The mood was optimistic as Lewis personally supervised the building of roads in the colony, and Canada assured black settlers basic citizenship rights enjoyed by few African Americans. They could vote, serve on juries, and run for political office, and they had the full protection of the law. In granting their request, St James Colebrook, Canada’s governor general, sent a message to the American government: “Tell the Republicans on your side of the line that we Royalists do not know men by their color.”

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati, rumors spread that the growth in the city’s African American population was but the leading edge of a black invasion from the South that would fill the jobs and threaten the livelihood of white workers. Finally, in August of 1829, tensions exploded in three days of rioting as three hundred whites attacked “Little Africa.” The black community sustained heavy losses in property and lives, but armed black residents confronted the mob, killing at least one rioter and wounding several others. Still, the violence was enough to drive hundreds of African Americans from the city. As one former black Cincinnati wrote, “Farewell Ohio/ I cannot stop in thee/ I’ll travel on to Canada/ Where colored men are free.”

Most, however, did not leave but stayed to fight for the repeal of the black codes and improved conditions for blacks in the city. They organized in self-defense and struck alliances with sympathetic white reformers. Still, African Americans remained vulnerable in this city of southern sentiments.

Within two years of the riot, Malvin left Cincinnati. He moved northward, intending to settle in Wilberforce. However, his wife, Harriet Malvin, who had lived in Cleveland while he went on to investigate the situation in Canada, became much attracted to that place. Under her influence they settled the family there. Harriet’s judgment was sound: the Malvins found this small city in the Western Reserve not perfect, but a much more comfortable place for African Americans to live than Cincinnati. There was strong anti-slavery feeling in the community, and blacks found white allies dependable in protecting fugitives seeking shelter in the city. The Western Reserve was the home of Joshua R. Giddings, a successful lawyer in Jefferson, Ohio,
who, in 1838, became the first abolitionist to be elected to Congress. He represented the Western Reserve for over twenty years during which he drew congressional censure for his militant tactics in support of antislavery. As one abolitionist later remarked, “The feelings toward [blacks] in Cleveland and throughout the Western Reserve is very kind, and there they do better than in most places.” Giddings was in part responsible for these conditions.25

Cleveland provided Malvin with opportunities for economic stability and allowed him to continue his political activism. Starting as a cook on a vessel on Lake Erie, he worked as a mill engineer and eventually acquired a lake boat and became a successful businessman. He joined the abolitionist effort, assisted in underground railroad activities, and led a drive that integrated the local Baptist church. In 1832 he helped establish Cleveland’s first school for black children.26 Unlike the hostility that many black schools experienced in the southern part of the state, in the Western Reserve such schools found considerable sympathetic white support, and even some financial aid from the city. Although state law continued to require segregated education, separate black schools began to disappear in the Western Reserve before the Civil War.

The difference in regional roots and economic associations between the
Western Reserve and southern Ohio was striking, leading many to think of Cincinnati as a southern city in a northern state. The city’s blacks as well as its whites had deep roots in the South, and planters who made regular business trips there were its most influential visitors. In many ways Cincinnati’s concerns were those of a southern city. The advent of the steamboat which called regularly at the city by the 1830s reduced transportation costs dramatically so that Cincinnati dealers turned a considerable profit in the New Orleans and Delta trade. Steam power made up river travel so economical that it opened practical possibilities for commerce with the wider world through the Mississippi and Ohio River network to the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. Cincinnati merchants began to worry about the fluctuating prices of cotton and slaves in New Orleans and Natchez while business investors kept an eye on riverboat manifests and market preferences.

For African Americans in the city, river traffic brought news of friends and family in the slave South. Black travelers to Cincinnati from the South were regarded as messengers important for maintaining contact between the enslaved and the free. Black boatmen were routinely depended on for information of family and friends whenever they arrived from the South. They carried news southward on their return trips. One Cincinnati woman kept in touch with her mother enslaved in the Delta for more than three decades through messages smuggled by black boatmen. During these years she consulted her mother about her choice of a husband and informed her of the birth of children. Thus in 1843 the news of a grandchild’s enrollment at Oberlin Collegiate Institute found the proud grandmother in a Mississippi slave hut, bound in body, she reported, but free in spirit.27

By 1850, 70 percent of the Cincinnati black adults had been born in the South, making southern contacts highly valued. Even black children felt a personal connection to those enslaved in the South and expressed deep concern for their welfare. When students in Cincinnati’s black schools were asked to write an essay on the question, “What do you think most about?” many made clear the impact of slavery on their young lives. One seven-year-old wrote of his hope that “we get a man to get the poor slaves from bondage.” A twelve-year-old claimed to speak for the children and explained that “what we are studying for is to get the yoke of slavery broke and the chains parted asunder and slaveholding cease for ever.”28

Cincinnati may not have always been a comfortable city for free blacks, but more than in communities farther north it did offer the prospect of regular southern contact. When planters traveled to the Queen City, they were often accompanied by personal servants whom they generally quartered at the black-owned Dumas Hotel on McCallister Street. While masters pursued their business in the city, their slaves associated with Cincinnati’s free
blacks, exchanging valuable information. The Dumas was a place eagerly visited in anticipation of word from “home.” Information was critical to southern slaves seeking to escape, and these communication exchanges became significant for underground railroad operations as well as serving as a lifeline to loved ones.29

Abolition was a strong movement in the Western Reserve, and antislavery associations there found direct and important links with the Garrisonians of New England and the reformers of western New York’s “Burned-over District.” Yet, for slaves seeking escape, southern Ohio just across the river, in sight of slaveholding Kentucky, was often the most important stop on the route to freedom. In Cincinnati and in the smaller settlements on the Ohio River, abolition was a dangerous business engaged in by heroic men and women, whites as well as blacks, who risked property and life in the cause. Ripley, Ohio, about fifty miles east of Cincinnati, was one of the Brown County settlements established in 1819 by the slaves freed in Samuel Gist’s will. There, blacks and a few white allies formed an active underground railroad operation. One of the most dedicated white abolitionists in the settlement was Presbyterian minister John Rankin. His home on the bluffs, one hundred wooden steps above the Ohio River and little more than two hundred yards from the Kentucky shore, became a safe house for fugitives on the run.

This was no easy place to operate an underground operation against slavery. Only eight miles down the river on the Kentucky side was Maysville, a trading center made prosperous by commerce in grain, hemp, tobacco, and slaves. After Kentucky revoked its ban on the importation of slaves, enslaved African Americans poured into the state to be sold or traded to the lucrative markets farther south. The presence of Ripley, with its beacon of shelter to fugitives, was a constant thorn in the sides of Maysville traders. “Already the value of slave property has depreciated twenty percent in all the counties boarding the Ohio River,” complained one Lexington newspaper as early as 1838. Although that figure may have been an exaggeration, it was true that underground railroad operations in Ripley and other towns on the Ohio side of the river were taking their toll on slaveholders’ efforts to isolate and control their human property. Conditions were precarious for slaveholders, encouraging for slaves bent on escape, and ideal for slave hunters seeking to make a handsome profit from rewards paid for the capture and return of fugitives. Yet the determined antislavery efforts of many Ohioans made their task difficult.30

With his wife Jean and their thirteen children, John Rankin and the underground network operating out of Ripley may have aided as many as two thousand fugitives escaping through Ohio and on to Canada. One of
the many stories of rescue to emerge from Rankin’s abolitionist activity is that of one couple, escaping across the Ohio River in the dead of winter. The man had fallen into the icy water and was nearly frozen when they knocked on Rankin’s door in the middle of the night during Christmas week. The couple sought safety in Ohio, but they had left their children behind and were determined to go back for them. The man was in no condition to undertake such a venture and so leaving him in Rankin’s care, the man’s wife, Eliza, went back across the river for the children.

It was not until February that she was able to retrieve her youngest child. Eliza carried the child wrapped in a shawl and fastened to her back, and leaping from one ice floe to another across the river, she finally reached Rankin’s home. By this time abolitionists had sent her husband to Canada where she soon joined him, but her stay there was brief. She returned to Kentucky once again, this time to retrieve the five remaining children. Despite the efforts of those eager for the $1,300 reward for her capture, and with the assistance of John Rankin who at one point dressed in woman’s clothing to confuse the slave catchers, Eliza and her children managed to escape. They lived for two weeks in Rankin’s home before moving on, again passed along an abolitionist network to Canada, this time to settle as a family of husband, wife, and six children.

These and other stories circulated among antislavery workers, blacks and whites, to make Ripley a legendary place in abolitionist folklore. The community was also well known and much hated by slaveholders in the South. At one point in the late 1830s a number of Kentuckians offered a reward of $2,500 for the “murder or abduction of John Rankin.” Such blatantly immoral action only served to enhance Rankin’s standing and the community’s legend in antislavery circles. Ripley’s reputation drew the attention of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was a family friend of the Rankins. She visited Ripley to do research for a novel she was writing and used the story of Eliza as a model for a central character in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the best seller published in 1852 detailing the evils of slavery. The next year John Parker, a former slave, born in Norfolk, Virginia came to Ripley to join Rankin and others there in the effort to aid fugitives. Parker established a successful foundry behind his home and with the money he made in his thriving business, was able to finance many escapes. On several occasions Parker risked his own freedom by traveling into slave territory to lead fugitives to safety in Ripley. In the 1880s Parker dictated his memoirs recounting exciting and dramatic adventures of the underground railroad in southern Ohio. The book was published under the title *His Promised Land*.  

Southern Ohio may not have been as racially tolerant as the northern regions of the state, but there were strong interracial antislavery alliances
there, and abolitionists were extremely active. Cincinnati, with the largest concentration of blacks in the state, was also one of the state's most dynamic antislavery centers. In the early 1830s it gained a valuable leader in the campaign against slavery when Theodore Dwight Weld, a committed abolitionist, came to the city to study at Lane Theological Seminary. Weld became deeply involved in the efforts of reform-minded students to improve educational opportunities in Cincinnati's black community. They worked in the black schools, conducted Bible classes, helped to start a library, and gave frequent public lectures in support of abolition. In the process, interracial friendships developed, with some white students boarding with local black families, attending black churches, and participating in community social events. In 1834 Weld organized a series of antislavery debates at the seminary: five hours of lecture and discussion on each of nine evenings over the course of eighteen days. Most controversial among Cincinnatians was the appearance of a black student and former slave who participated with the sons of slaveholding families in discussions of the evils of slavery. The Lane trustees were so distressed that they pressured the students to limit their abolitionist activities and cease advocating and practicing social equality between the races. It also fired John Morgan, a professor who had taken the student's side in this controversy. In response, thirty-nine students, almost the entire student body, withdrew from the school.

At that moment, the abolitionist spirit was already on the rise in the Western Reserve. Western Reserve College, established in Hudson, Ohio in 1826, became a center of abolition and a hotbed of antislavery debate after Charles Backus Storrs took over its presidency in 1830. Storrs had been an officer in the American Colonization Society, organized in 1816 to promote gradual emancipation and encourage the emigration of free blacks to the West African colony of Liberia, established under its control in 1822. This was a moderate plan for emancipation that many African Americans saw as a scheme to deprive them of their citizenship rights and leave slavery more secure without its most ardent opponents. Ohio blacks joined with free blacks across the northern states in debating the society's African colonization plans and considering prospects elsewhere in the world. In statewide meetings they discussed conditions in Jamaica, Haiti, and other parts of the West Indies as well as Europe and Canada, and even corresponded with friends and acquaintances seeking and receiving assistance with their abolitionist efforts, but like most free blacks, they saw themselves as Americans. At a Columbus meeting John Mercer Langston of Ross County expressed the ambivalence of many, explaining that "I for one . . . am willing, dearly as I love my native land (a land which will not protect me however) to go wherever I can be free." He argued that "the very fact of our remaining in
the country is humiliating, virtually acknowledging our inferiority to the white man. . . ." Langston’s position was not upheld by the majority of the convention. Instead they passed a resolution saying to the world that, “our minds are made up to remain in the United States, and contend for our rights at all hazards.”

The abolition debate warmed considerably on the Western Reserve campus when its president took a more radical stand, rejecting colonization and favoring immediate emancipation. With the support of two faculty members, Elizur Wright Jr., professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, and Beriah Green, professor of sacred literature, Storrs made abolition a central mission of the school. While the Lane Seminary students struggled with college officials to make their abolitionist voice heard, on the campus of Western Reserve, antislavery action was encouraged at the highest level of the administration. There the debate was not between abolitionist and anti-abolitionist forces but between those who favored immediate emancipation and the colonizationists. “One who did not favor immediate abolition, lacked a conscience,” wrote Wright, in the pages of the Hudson Observer and Telegraph, in August of 1832. Green challenged the Christianity of anyone who favored colonization, and students sometimes refused to take courses from professors on the “wrong” side of the debate. Within a few months the entire college faculty had converted to immediate emancipation. Even as the argument raged at Western Reserve College and at Lane, in a small settlement in the Western Reserve region, not far from Hudson, an even more radical and daring experiment was unfolding. The students who had withdrawn from Lane Seminary struck a bargain in 1835 with a new college, Oberlin Collegiate Institute, in rural Russia Township. Oberlin, named in honor of German cleric and philanthropist John Frederick Oberlin, was founded in 1833 in the village of Elyria and was the utopian vision of John Jay Shipherd, a young Presbyterian minister from New York State. With Philo T. Stewart, his childhood friend who had been a missionary to the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi, Shipherd purchased some six thousand acres of land on which to begin this educational experiment in austere and pure living and evangelical reform. It was also an experiment in coeducation, even allowing male and female students to share classrooms and take meals together. In 1841, Oberlin graduated three women, the first three women in the western world to receive a baccalaureate degree from a co-educational college.

Preparation of women for a life beyond the domestic sphere was a tricky proposition in the mid-nineteenth century. The dictates of middle-class gender expectations would have limited women to concerns of home and family. In the popular literature of the time, women were warned about the
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dire consequences of delving into the public world, a message reinforced by religious and even medical advice. For women studying at Oberlin who associated with men on the basis of equality and who attended coeducational lectures, sitting in what were called “promiscuous audiences,” the risk of social disapproval, even danger to their health, as they were told, was extremely high. Thus, women who risked involvement in the abolition movement displayed a particular kind of commitment, one nurtured in the reform-focused curriculum at the college. Still, women determined to step outside traditional female roles were forced to justify their actions. Here especially women often argued that antislavery work was suited to women because women were being exploited under the system of slavery. As one group in Canton explained, “We consider that we are not moving out of our proper sphere as females when we assume a public stand in favor of our oppressed sisters.” If women were abused by slavery, free women argued, they had a special responsibility to focus society’s attention on the wrong being committed. These they saw as “mighty and soul moving reasons which render it peculiarly incumbent on women to act in the cause.” Not only in The Western Reserve, but all over the state, even in the south where abolitionist work was particularly dangerous, women, educated and those without formal education, worked in all-female groups and sometimes with men in the cause of antislavery. Oberlin was unique in that the college encouraged antislavery work and offered the opportunity for coeducational cooperation tolerated in few places.34

Oberlin also was committed to promoting economic diversity among its students. To encourage this, the school adopted a system of “manual labor with study” so that students could work their way through college. Initially, students were required to work four hours each day on farming, carpentry, housekeeping, or domestic projects in support of the school. This was a major part of its mission to “instruct the multitudes,” and at $10 to $14 for a year’s tuition, Oberlin was a bargain compared to Harvard’s yearly tuition of $72 or even the $40 required at Yale and Princeton.35

In December of 1833 the Oberlin Collegiate Institute opened its doors to receive its first forty-four students, many of whom had walked from as far away as Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont to take their place in the new college. These were young men and women of the Northeast, many socialized in community and family traditions heavily influenced by William Lloyd Garrison’s brand of radical abolitionism. All but ten of the 162 students in the class of 1836 were from New York, New England, or Ohio. Their regional backgrounds no doubt help to explain their willingness to be a part of this experiment that by the mid-1830s had thoroughly “abolitionized” the college.36
These noble efforts were, however, imperiled when in the summer of 1834 the college ran short of funds to sustain its operation and to hire a president and needed faculty. At this point former Lane students agreed to come to Oberlin in exchange for guarantees of freedom of speech and a faculty position for former Lane professor John Morgan. The students also requested a position teaching theology for evangelical abolitionist Charles Finney and asked that Asa Mahan, a radical abolitionist and former Lane trustee who had supported the students’ activities, be appointed president of Oberlin. Oberlin’s trustees accepted these conditions without much debate, but a final condition caused great dissension. The Lane students demanded that Oberlin admit black students on an equal basis with whites.

Despite the Western Reserve’s liberal traditions, and although there was strong antislavery feeling among most of the white residents of the region, the admission of black students to a college of white students, especially a white co-educational school, was, for many, going too far. “New England will scarcely bear to have young ladies at the same seminary with young white Gents . . . but to place black and white together on precisely the same standard will not most certainly be endured whatever the right may be [in] New England even.” This was a legitimate concern, for even the most radical abolitionists were not necessarily believers in racial equality. In a student straw poll taken at Oberlin in 1834, thirty-two of the fifty-three students on campus refused to accept black classmates. This seemed to confirm the warning from those who predicted that “as soon as your darkies begin to come in any considerable numbers, unless they are completely separated . . . the whites will begin to leave—and at length your Institution will change colour.” A concern for abolishing slavery and for the welfare of unfortunate African Americans was one thing, but in the reasoning of many, this did not justify destroying Oberlin or confronting the racial sensibilities of liberal white reformers. Some suggested that a more practical solution to promoting black education, if that was the aim, was to open a black college, “Dyed in the wool—and let Oberlin be.”

A trustees’ meeting called to consider the issue was moved out of Oberlin to avoid the emotionally charged atmosphere of the town, but even then they elected to postpone judgment. In the end, financial considerations played the major role. Charles Finney’s appointment to the faculty brought with it almost $60,000 from New York antislavery financiers Arthur and Lewis Tappan. Finney was not a racial egalitarian, but he informed the board that he would not accept a position at the college unless the faculty was allowed to make admission decisions. Shipherd, then, using the threat of the withdrawal of the Tappan’s contribution should Finney not join the faculty, pled the case for faculty control. He did so in language that would
appeal to the trustees who feared public reaction to the integration of Oberlin. "I did not desire to hang out an abolitionist flag," he advised, "or fill up with filthy stupid [N]egroes; but I did desire that you should say you would not reject promising youth who desire for usefulness because God had given them a darker hue than others." He also reminded the trustees that Oberlin would not be the first college to admit African Americans. They were educated at nearby Western Reserve College, as well as at colleges in the east, including Princeton, and that a few blacks had even been accepted at Lane Seminary. White students would not be forced to associate with blacks, he assured the board, and there would be no danger of "amalgamation." Then he warned that the rebellion of the students at Lane had to do not with the presence of black students, but with the heavy-handed tactics of the college's board of trustees.38

Finally, by the narrowest of margins, the trustees voted to leave the decision to the faculty. The faculty was agreed: the Lane rebels would come to Oberlin bringing Morgan to the faculty, Mahan would assume the presidency, freedom of speech would be guaranteed, and qualified male and female students would be admitted "irrespective of color." Theodore Weld came, along with the rest of the Lane rebels, and gave a series of lectures, but he refused an offer to teach on the faculty, deciding instead to devote himself to antislavery lecturing and organizing. In his travels, Weld was greatly effective in exciting the spirit among the reform minded. In the fall of 1835 he spoke to a gathering of women in Austinburg, so impressing them with what they called "the reality, extent, & unspeakable evils of the system of Slavery" that 150 joined the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society, more than tripling the organization's size.39

Despite the contentious debate that illustrated the limits of race and reform even in Ohio's most liberal areas, the placement of Oberlin in the Western Reserve served to reinforce the regional divide within the state. Ripley and Cincinnati continued their antislavery activities but always within the context of local hostility. Through the 1830s and the 1840s Ohio's position on the middle ground was seared by the regional quarrel blazing in the nation. James G. Birney, a southern lawyer turned abolitionist newspaper editor, moved to Cincinnati in the 1830s when he found that his home town of Danville, Kentucky would not tolerate his antislavery views. He established The Philanthropist, but soon found that the difference between northern Kentucky and southern Ohio on this question was almost indistinguishable. In 1836 a Cincinnati mob smashed into his printing office and threw his press into the river.

Abolitionists were forced to endure attacks from many who felt personally threatened by their message. Abolitionist speakers like those who trav-
eled the circuit in Ohio, crisscrossing the state from the Western Reserve to the far southwestern areas, constantly on the road and often in unfamiliar surroundings, were especially vulnerable. They constantly walked a thin line between inspiring and inciting their audiences, and as tensions over slavery and antislavery grew during the 1830s, it was often difficult not to incite even in the most liberal parts of the state. At one abolitionist meeting in eastern central Ohio, the speaker was pelted with eggs and threatened with assault by an angry crowd fast becoming a mob. His supporters tried to protect him with open umbrellas to ward off the projectiles, but that proved to be a futile effort. Finally a group of abolitionist women, counting on the prohibition against attacking respectable ladies, surrounded him, forming a human shield to escort him safely out of the hall. They were successful in this case, but in Ohio, as elsewhere, antislavery workers faced relentless opposition and had to be both resilient and determined.

Birney was both. Undeterred by his brush with danger in Cincinnati, he revived his newspaper and used it as a major political voice in the abolition movement. He moved to New York City where he became secretary of the American Antislavery Society, the radical abolitionist group founded by Boston’s William Lloyd Garrison. He remained an active publisher and writer, and in 1840 and again in 1844 he was nominated for the U.S. presidency on the abolitionist Liberty Party ticket. Although he lost both elections, Birney's abolitionist bid for office did much to raise the influence of antislavery. His campaign had not been popular in southern Ohio. Again that region had stood with the South.

Southern Ohio was willing to support a southern leaning presidential candidate, however. Virginia born aristocrat William Henry Harrison, who by 1840 had taken on a populist image as a war hero and frontiersman, was living on the Ohio River just west of Cincinnati when he and his running mate, John Tyler, former governor and U.S. Senator from Virginia, raised the Whig Party banner. As part of its folksy image, Harrison's “log cabin and cider campaign” also adopted the nuts of the buckeye tree, groves of which grew on Harrison's southern Ohio farm, as a campaign symbol. At the Whig convention, Harrison and Tyler delegates carried buckeye canes decorated with strings of buckeye beads. Their team won the Whig Party nomination, and with solid southern backing, Old Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too, captured the White House. They also carried Ohio, the southern part of the state more solidly than the north. At age sixty-eight, Harrison was, to that time, the oldest man to be elected to the presidency. He was also the first American president to die in office, serving barely a month before succumbing to pneumonia. The buckeye symbol lasted much longer, becoming permanently associated with Ohio.
So, too, did Ohio continue to reflect the regional differences in the nation, growing in intensity and becoming increasingly racially defined during the 1840s. As violence erupted throughout the South to curtail abolitionists activity and as violence broke out in New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere in the North against abolitionists and African Americans, so did it in Cincinnati, Dayton, and other Ohio towns. In the winter of 1840–41 anti-abolitionist attacks escalated into a full-scale race riot as white mobs destroyed a number of black residences. In late February of 1841 whites attacked and burned the homes of three black families in Dayton. The attacks occurred in the early hours of the morning, but as one African American newspaper reported, “The incendiaries were kind enough to wake the sleeping blacks, and while they were getting up the houses were fired.” This was apparently an attempt to intimidate black homeowners into giving up their property, which had become very valuable.

These kinds of racial attacks were by no means unique to Ohio and certainly not to Dayton. African Americans could not count on the protection of their rights anywhere in the country. Yet, differences between racial violence in Dayton and later that year in Cincinnati illustrate significant regional differences in Ohio. While the attack on blacks in Dayton was the covert action of a few, the racial violence in Cincinnati was extensive, almost amounting to racial warfare. Disturbances began when a white gang of young, mainly immigrant workers threw stones at “several well-dressed” black men. Other blacks then confronted the attackers. Late the next night fights broke out after an armed group of white men appeared at the Dumas Hotel and demanded the surrender of a black man who had been involved in the fighting the night before. Ominously, groups of white men from Kentucky began to gather in the streets. Led by 28-year-old J. Wilkerson, a mulatto from Virginia and said to be the grandson of a Revolutionary War colonel, African Americans armed themselves. At eight in the evening on September 3, 1841, a white mob moved toward the black residential area. They were confronted by armed blacks waiting in their homes, in the alleyways, and on the rooftops. Before the violence was over, hundreds of whites and blacks fought battles in the streets. They used stones, clubs, and rifles. At one point, whites dragged a cannon up from the river, but about fifty African Americans charged their position under covering fire from a nearby house. Blacks drove the invaders out of the neighborhood. Finally, city officials declared martial law in the black area and succumbed to white demands that the state’s Black Laws be enforced, that fugitive slaves be sought out and arrested, that abolitionism be repudiated, and that the city’s blacks be disarmed. No whites were arrested, but three hundred blacks were jailed. Once disarmed, they were attacked again by white mobs.

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These were difficult times, but by the end of the decade there were signs of softening racial attitudes in the state. The election of 1848 was a pivotal moment. That year Salmon P. Chase, antislavery member of the Ohio Whig Party, called upon his fellow Whigs to leave the party and to form a state branch of the antislavery Free Soil Party. Chase was reacting to the selection of Zachary Taylor, a southern slave owner, as the national Whig standard bearer in the presidential campaign. The defection of large numbers of Whigs who followed Chase into the Free Soil Party hurt the Ohio Whigs’ gubernatorial candidate Seabury Ford, an antislavery Western Reserve Whig with solid support in northern Ohio. In the closest election in the state’s history Ford won the governorship by a margin of just over 300 votes out of a total of almost 300,000. The election was a double victory for Ohio’s new Free Soilers and its antislavery Whigs. Although Taylor won the White House, he did not carry the state, and Ford, the antislavery Whig candidate, carried the governorship. Meanwhile, the election narrowly divided the state legislature between Whigs and Democrats, with the Free Soilers holding the balance of power. It was with the close cooperation of Whigs and Free Soilers and with strong support of the new governor that in 1849 the discriminatory Black Laws were finally repealed. Solid backing in the Western Reserve had made it possible, but in a subtle signal for the future, there were Free Soil votes in southern Ohio as well.42

As America entered the 1850s, the national struggle over slavery that divided the nation seemed to pressure Ohio to take a stand on one or the other side of the sectional debate. Although it was then impossible to predict with certainty exactly where it would position itself, there were signs that southern Ohio’s southern loyalties were giving way to the politics of upstate. Ohio, geographically positioned between north and south, was shifting its political position ever so slightly, from the middle ground toward the North. Further, it was doing so at a crucial moment, just as America entered the most critical decade in its history.

The “Slave Power,” as the South was increasingly termed by a growing northern antislavery movement, exerted substantial political and economic power over the federal government. In order to settle the debate over the disposition of new land brought into the nation as a result of the U.S. victory in the Mexican War in the mid-1840s, Congress attempted to institute a compromise aimed at satisfying competing slave and non-slave interests. The Compromise of 1850, which provided for the admission of California as a state free of slavery and that outlawed the slave trade in the District of Columbia, also wrote into law the most harsh fugitive slave provision in American history. Under this new law, slavery could reach into any free state
to retrieve runaways. Accused fugitives need not be brought before a court, but could be remanded to the South by any federal commissioner on the flimsiest of evidence. A slaveholder generally needed no more than an affidavit with a physical description of the runaway from a court in his home state. Meanwhile, accused fugitives were denied the right to speak in their own defense, and counsels or jury trials were not required to be a part of the process. Further, federal marshals were empowered to compel bystanders to assist in the capture of a fugitive, under penalty of a fine and a jail term for those who refused. This was a significant expansion of the 1793 fugitive law, and it made free blacks more vulnerable to kidnapping.43

Passage of this new law brought a torrent of protest from abolitionists, and troubled the consciences of many northern whites who had never been vocal about their unease with the existence of slavery. Upon hearing the news of its passage, Commissioner Stetson of Cleveland wrote out a resignation of his commission to be sent to his superiors should he ever be called upon to enforce the law. In Washington, in Boston, in New York, in the city council of Chicago, the law was soundly denounced. Almost all of Ohio’s Congressmen voted against it, including those from Cincinnati, Hamilton, and most other southern parts of the state. The only two Democrats who voted in favor of the law, Moses Hoagland of Millersburg and John K. Miller of Mount Vernon, were turned out of office at the next election in 1850. John L. Taylor of Chillicothe, the only Whig to vote for it, changed districts and managed to hang on to his seat until 1855.

As Ohio approached its first half century, its middle ground position was becoming more and more uncomfortable. The state remained a relatively affluent place, but its economic ties with the South complicated its political position and made it a focus of reform protest. Its population had grown to almost two million, making it the third most populous state in the union represented by 9 percent of the members of the House of Representatives. Ohioans remained a diverse people, as German immigration grew and Irish immigration exploded after Ireland’s potato famine of the mid-1840s. This was especially true in the southern part of the state, where by 1850 44 percent of Cincinnati’s population was foreign-born. And although its ethnic and religious diversity made Cincinnati a more interesting place to live and visit than many other areas in the Midwest, it also made for tensions that could become hostilities at almost any time.

Legal racial restrictions had been lessened, but African Americans remained handicapped by both custom and law. The underground railroad
continued its operation in Cincinnati and other southern Ohio communities, as in one 1848 incident when black women armed with shovels, rolling pins, and washboards successfully protected a group of fugitives from heavily armed slave catchers. Ohio’s abolitionists remained in regular contact with eastern abolitionists and abolitionist organizations in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, remaining a western branch of the world antislavery movement. Still, African Americans in the region were never completely safe from the slave-catching gangs that roamed the riverfront in search of fugitives to recapture or free blacks to kidnap.44

Times were changing in Ohio, but much remained the same, and change intensified long-standing anxieties. Like America itself, the state was a place in transition. In these complex and difficult times, Ohio struggled to find solid footing on the shifting ground of the national politics that was moving with ever quickening pace toward national conflict.

NOTES

1. Completion of this essay was made possible by the valuable research and editing services of Laurel Clark, Denise Meringolo, Kevin Strait, and Betsy Wiley. William Russell Coil was most generous with his knowledge and ideas. His suggestions have been invaluable. As always, Lois Horton provided encouragement and critical comments throughout.


10. *Niles Weekly Register*, June 30, 1821 (Baltimore, Ohio) reported the arrival of fifty-eight former slaves.
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15. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 74.
23. Leonard Curry disputes these figures, arguing that few blacks actually left Cincinnati as a result of the riot. Information drawn from the 1835 meeting of the Ohio Antislavery Society indicates that there was at least the perception that one thousand to two thousand blacks were actually driven from Cincinnati as a result of the violence. See Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 305 n. 22.
26. A number of African American adults also attended the school.
27. Records of the Treasurer’s Office, 1843, Oberlin College Archives.


37. Ibid., 523.

38. Ibid., vol. 1, 176.


42. The Free Soil Party was able to elect Lewis D. Campbell of Hamilton to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1848.


“Mail—The Connecting Link.” Sally F. Haley painted this post office mural in 1938 at McConnelsville (Ohio). It depicts the key themes of Ohio civilization in the second half of the nineteenth century. The train suggests how Ohio culture, politics, and economics became connected to the East. Water travel remained important, but oil figures prominently too, hinting at the rise of Cleveland, John D. Rockefeller, and the modern oil industry. The peaceful town is still there, but is connected to the hustle and bustle of the wider world through the United States mail. The original is oil on canvas, 5 x 17 feet. Courtesy, The Ohio Historical Society, AV 48, box 1, folder 13.