

Portage County: A Historical Perspective

Sale of vast western lands to the Connecticut Land Company by the State of Connecticut in 1795 heralded the settlement of Portage County. Those lands were known as the Connecticut Western Reserve, an area comprising 3.8 million acres extending 110 miles west of the Ohio-Pennsylvania border and 50 miles south from the shore of Lake Erie. The sale price was \$1.2 million, a paltry sum of 32 cents per acre.



Following a survey led by Moses Cleveland for whom Cleveland is named, shares of the lands in the Western Reserve were sold to residents of Connecticut and Massachusetts. Thus, began the migration of people from those two states into what then was an extensive wilderness. Here they found a virtually uncharted area from which they would carve their homes and farms. The eastern migration extended 24 years with the first settlement in Mantua in 1798 and the last in Streetsboro in 1822.

These first settlers were the original "do-it-yourselfers." They had to be; obtaining bare amenities in this then cruel land was a matter of necessity. They built their cabins and their furnishings with only simple tools. Should a settler contrive a new, crude tool and if a neighbor admired it, one was made for him. This really was the beginning of Portage County industry.



Hardly had the land been cleared and the simplest crops planted when the first Portage gristmills were built. They were essential because those settlers required a means to grind their grain for the making of corn bread. The first gristmill was in Mantua in 1799 and more were to follow in other Portage communities. Soon were to follow distilleries, as the making of whiskey was a secondary use of the corn crop.

Early writings tell us that one early settler remarked, "Corn is our main crop. There is no market for corn so we make it into whiskey. There is no market for whiskey, so we drink it." While his statement might have made good comedy, it was not an accurate one. Whiskey was a common medium of exchange in those early days. Even preachers and schoolteachers abided its acceptance for payment of services rendered.



With early transportation limited to wagon trains, outlets for farm products and early manufactured goods were likewise limited. Sawmills, distilleries, pail and basket factories, flourmills and glass-making enterprises were among Portage County's earliest industries. Portage County was particularly noted for the quality of its manufactured glass. The earliest factory was in Mantua in the early 1820's with Ravenna and Kent following soon thereafter. Today, Portage glass is highly collectible; the most prized pieces are on exhibit in the

Corning Museum in Corning, N.Y.

Coming in 1840, the Pennsylvania & Ohio Canal, which extended westward through Portage County from Beaver, Pa. to Akron, opened new markets for Portage Products. In that era, one of the sustaining business ventures was the manufacture of cheese. In the mid-1880's, Portage boasted 50 such factories. The product was shipped via canals to various points throughout Ohio and into neighboring states. Tanneries, hemp mills, scythe factories, hammer mills, woolen mills, brick plants were also prominent at that time.

Portage business and industry throughout the years closely followed the advent of new forms of transportation --- in succession, wagon trains, stagecoaches, canal passenger and freight boats, railroads and into the motor vehicle and air travel eras. Railroading was typical of the effect it had on industry and business progress. The first railroad came into Portage County in 1851. It and its successors spawned new and associated industries. For example, the railroad shops in Kent for fabricating freight cars and repairing locomotives which in the late 1800's employed as many as 800. Likewise, the horse and buggy era, which prompted industries such as harness shops, like the Riddle Coach & Hearse Company in Ravenna, which made carriages, and funeral hearses.



The advent of the motor age added a new dimension to Portage County progress. Eventually prominence of Railroads to move people and products diminished as private cars and motor cargo trucks took their place. The motor age made it possible for Portage residents to see more of the "outside world" and to provide more outlets for manufactured and agricultural products. As did burgeoning air transportation.

The World War I and II years altered the complexion of Portage business life as new plants came upon the scene to manufacture products such as rubber articles, machine tools, buses, aircraft parts, molded products and plastics. While many of the older industries have moved away or have been discontinued, new facilities have come about to create a highly diversified industrial complex. For example, products range from adhesives to lamp bulbs to containers to computer software.



Without question the most far-reaching business industrial development in the history of Portage County was the coming of the Ravenna Arsenal during the early World War II years. The arsenal loaded bombs and artillery shells on a 22,000-acre complex in eastern Portage County. With employment, which at one time reached 20,000 production and construction, employees, its effect upon the county's business, social, cultural, civic life and housing was remarkable.

During its nearly 200 years since first settlers set foot here, Portage County has developed into a vibrant community of more than 152,000 people. They value their heritage and they look to the future with promise.

Historical Perspective: Courtesy of Loris Troyer written for Portage County Economic Development Profile in 1993.

Editor's Note: Today, the Ohio National Guard uses part of the arsenal for training.