



## Daily Life in Ohio to 1903

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Learn about the everyday experiences of Ohioans and their home and family life.

### **Settlement of Ohio (1787-1803)**

The white population of Ohio grew from just a few surveyors and missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 60,000 in 1803. New immigrants often brought all of their goods along on long, treacherous journeys by wagon to reach their destinations. Many settlers came from eastern states, including Virginia, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Once in Ohio, settlers spent much of their lives clearing the vast stretches of forests and attempting to provide the necessities for their families. Children were not exempt from these tasks, and boys and girls began performing chores as soon as they were able. The prevalence of disease and untimely death in this era led to a large number of stepfamilies, since men and women needed to remarry as quickly as possible for economic reasons. It was not uncommon for one household to consist of twelve or more people, including relatives and hired help.

Families were not completely self-sufficient, however. They did provide much of their own clothing, furniture, and food, but goods such as salt, sugar, and tools could be purchased from merchants in the urban centers. Households often relied on neighbors in a system of borrowing and exchange.

### **Work (1803-1903)**

Work was an integral part of the daily lives of most Ohioans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ohioans who lived in rural areas faced many of the same challenges as the previous generation who settled the state. Work was strenuous and allowed very little time for leisure.

It was also divided strictly along gender lines. Most women's work centered around the hearth, where they could cook, launder clothes, sew, make soap, and tend their children. By the 1860s, some families had purchased iron cook stoves which, in addition to being cheaper to heat, allowed women greater flexibility and more control over their work. Men's work still involved agricultural labor, although the invention of new steel tools and scientific methods of farming began to transform the way it was performed.

Ohio's urban centers were little more than towns by today's standards. Men worked long hours as blacksmiths, storekeepers, doctors, and lawyers, and often practiced more than one trade or profession. With increasing wealth and prosperity, they began to build larger homes and decorate them with lavish furnishings. Women performed many of the same tasks as their rural counterparts, but some were able to hire servants to afford time for their increasing social responsibilities. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many urban homes had gas or electric lighting, telephone lines, and sewer systems.

### **Leisure (1803-1903)**

In rural areas that covered most of the state, women and men faced long periods of isolation. Quilting bees, harvest festivals, and church activities provided a few opportunities for social interactions. Canals, and later railroads, began to ease the isolation many farm families faced.



Another way for rural families to stay connected was through catalogs, newspapers, and books, and the extension of rural mail delivery by the 1830s allowed for a family to have such materials delivered directly to their homes.

More opportunities were available in the urban centers of Cincinnati, Zanesville, and Cleveland. Men and women socialized in fraternal and literary clubs, and attended musical and dramatic productions. Many towns had opera houses that featured both "high-brow" and "low-brow" performances. By the 1880s, larger towns featured department stores, where consumers could spend a day browsing a range of choice goods. Some cities featured public parks where residents could picnic, swim, or engage in sporting events. Baseball became "America's pastime" after the Civil War, and amateur teams formed in many communities.

### **Rituals: Births, Weddings, Funerals**

While the daily experiences of Ohioans were vastly different, most experienced the rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death. Before the Civil War, a midwife and a group of female friends and relatives often attended women in childbirth. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, however, male doctors were increasingly enlisted in the birthing room because of their ability to prescribe pain-relieving drugs such as opium and laudanum, and their use of technology such as forceps. Women also increasingly chose to have their children at hospitals rather than at home. Fertility rates decreased dramatically over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, corresponding with a new rise in children's culture. By the 1880s, children began to be given their own special nurseries, clothing, and toys.

Young men and women followed elaborate courting rituals, which were usually supervised by parents or friends. Once a couple agreed to marry, weddings often took place in the spring. Few women wore white dresses, however, since it was more practical to purchase a dress that could also be worn to church and on other special occasions. Gifts were common throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but until the 1890s were usually modest. Divorce, although uncommon during this time, increased to one in seven by 1903. Distribution practices varied widely, but divorced couples often simply went their separate ways and women returned home to their families.

19<sup>th</sup> century Ohioans faced a number of diseases, including tuberculosis, cholera, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and measles, that could lead to an early death. In the case of epidemics, funerals were often cut short in an attempt to stop the infection from spreading. More people began going to the hospital for the treatment of disease, and funerals began to take place in churches or funeral homes rather than at the residence of the deceased. Widows adopted traditional "mourning dress," which generally consisted of black dresses, thick veils, and black gloves. Nonetheless, they were expected to remarry after a reasonable amount of time had passed.



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