



## Immigration and Ethnic Heritage in Ohio to 1903

Discover Ohio's rich heritage through an exploration of migration patterns and regionalism, the immigrant experience, and social and cultural traditions.

### Introduction

Historian George W. Knepper has suggested that one of the defining qualities of Ohio's history has been the diversity of its inhabitants. In contrast to the homogenous ethnic and cultural landscape of other states, Ohio "has always been to a marked degree a salad bowl of peoples." This diversity has given Ohio a character representative of the larger mix of ethnic groups in the nation as a whole. In addition, the diverse traditions handed down by Ohio's immigrant groups over the generations have shaped the life and culture of the Buckeye State down to this day.

### Early Settlement

American Indians were the first to migrate into the Ohio Lands. Crossing the Bering land bridge from Asia some 20,000 years ago, American Indian migrant groups began to populate the North American continent, including the area now known as Ohio. Archaic, Adena, Hopewell and Ft. Ancient cultures left abundant evidence of their early civilizations in the form of impressive earthworks, sophisticated tools and ceremonial artifacts. By the time the first European explorers and settlers came to Ohio in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were many Native American tribes already inhabiting the land. Ottawa, Wyandot, Seneca-Cayuga, Miami, Delaware and Shawnee peoples pursued their own ways of life and put their own unique stamp on the cultural legacy of Ohio. American Indian rituals, arts, crafts, agriculture and religion were all important additions to Ohio's cultural heritage. The prevalence of American Indian cultures shrank dramatically, however, as the influx of European settlers increased in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Prior to the opening of the Northwest Territory, there were few established settlements in the Ohio Country. Although traders, soldiers and missionaries had lived and worked in limited regions of the state, serious settlement did not begin until the passage of the Land Ordinances of 1785 and 1786, and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

### U.S. Migration to Ohio, 1785-1850

Ohio occupied a special position with respect to the early settlement of the Old Northwest. On its southern boundary was the Ohio River, which became a major thoroughfare for migrants moving south and west; and to the north were the Great Lakes, which became an extremely important westward passage after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. During this pre-1850 settlement period, geographers Wilhelm and Noble described Ohio as "the smaller end of a huge funnel through which America's migrating masses were channeled on their way to the broad interior." Although Ohio's population in 1800 was only 45,000, by 1850 it had exceeded two million.

The predominantly American-born settlers migrated to Ohio from three cultural regions of the United States: New England, the Mid-Atlantic and the Upland South. Migrants from New



England settled predominantly in the Connecticut Western Reserve, located in the northeast part of the state, and neighboring Firelands. Marietta, Ohio's first authorized settlement, and other cities like Putnam, Granville and Worthington, were also settled principally by New Englanders. These migrants from the northeast brought with them distinctive cultural elements: for example, towns that were laid out with a central greens and commons area; Greek revival-style buildings; and protestant religious institutions like the Congregational Christian Church.

The largest number of migrants in the pre-1850 period came from the Middle Atlantic states, particularly Pennsylvania. Migrants from this border state were mainly German and Scotch-Irish and constituted 43% of all migrants during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the migration followed routes along Ohio's mid-state drainage divide and the southwesterly slope of Zane's Trace. The middle regions of Ohio are thus often connected with a strong German influence, manifested in distinctive log cabin styles and barn construction, and pietistic religious beliefs. Pietism was a Protestant revival movement, emphasizing an earnest and heart-felt approach to religious devotion. New Jersey and its neighboring states were also well represented in the settlement of Ohio, largely due to the Symmes Purchase, a real estate venture organized by a prominent New Jersey judge, John Cleves Symmes.

The majority of southern migrants came to Ohio from Virginia and settled in the Virginia Military District lands located in the west central portion of the state. Southern influence in this region can be seen in the greater number of large farms, the predominance of the I-house style of dwelling (long brick houses with a double porch), the larger percentage of Scotch-Irish and the prevalence of Presbyterian religious beliefs.

### **European Immigration to Ohio, 1775-1850**

Overseas immigration also contributed to the settlement of Ohio in the early half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The vast majority of immigrants came to Ohio from northwest Europe, particularly Germany and Ireland. By 1850, nearly one-half of Ohio's immigrant population came from various regions of Germany. In addition to settling alongside areas favored by the Pennsylvania Dutch, German immigrants also settled in the Scioto and Miami valleys and in Auglaize, Stark, and Tuscarawas counties. Cincinnati, Cleveland and other large Ohio cities also received German immigrants in great numbers.

Irish immigrants also came to Ohio in large numbers, constituting 22% of pre-1850 immigration traffic. The majority of Irish came to Ohio initially for economic opportunities and later to escape the economic hardship caused by the mid-century potato famines. Irish immigration tended to be more urban in character, although employment opportunities in the railroad and canal industries directed Irish immigrants into rural areas as well.

In addition to the Germans and Irish—the two largest groups of pre-1850 immigrants—Ohio also attracted peoples from many other countries: the English, who concentrated their settlement in the Western Reserve; French immigrants, who overcame a failed settlement in Gallipolis and later put down roots in southeastern Ohio; the Swiss, who settled in the Pennsylvania Dutch regions, as well as Monroe and Tuscarawas counties; and the Canadians,



who initially settled in the Refugee Tract of central Ohio, but later migrated to other areas of the state, primarily in regions where English-speaking communities already existed.

### **Immigration to Ohio, 1850-1903**

Immigration to Ohio in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by growing diversity. The significant migration trends of the first half of the century continued into the latter half, but immigrant groups became increasingly diverse, especially around the turn of the twentieth century.

German immigrants continued to come to Ohio in large numbers and set the cultural tone for many communities throughout the state. Cincinnati, in particular, was strongly influenced by its German population. The impact of their presence can be seen in a variety of areas, including their support and cultivation of the arts, the endurance of German language instruction and the German press, and their influence on the city's political machinery. German Jews in Cincinnati were also quite influential in the city and in addition, were the primary force behind the development of Reform Judaism.

The Irish continued to come to Ohio in significant numbers, constituting over 13% of all immigrants by 1900. The Irish from this period of immigration were mostly Roman Catholic and exerted a great deal of influence on parish life in their communities. Irish social life was also quite active, establishing many Irish societies and community celebrations.

British immigrant groups also made up a sizable portion of later 19<sup>th</sup> century settlement in Ohio. The Welsh played an important role in the industrial development of Gallia and Jackson counties. Though many Welsh in the area were farmers, others became involved in the growing charcoal iron industry of southern Ohio.

Toward the end of the century, the character of immigration to the United States began to change: immigrants from eastern and southern Europe began to increase as immigration from central and northern Europe began to stabilize and even decline. As a result of political and economic pressures overseas and growing opportunities in the expanding economy of Ohio, the state experienced a rapid influx of new immigrant groups to the state, especially in the northeast. Cleveland offers astonishing examples of the impact of turn-of-the-century immigration on Ohio: in 1900, 75% of the city's population was either foreign-born or first-generation descendants of foreign-born. Knepper also notes that in 1900, "more than forty languages could be heard on the streets of Cleveland."

At one time, Cleveland was reputed to host the largest Slovak community in the world and the second largest community of Hungarians. In addition, the city received a large influx of Italians, Russians and Poles. Other Ohio cities, particularly Toledo and Youngstown, also experienced a rapid rise of Eastern European immigrant groups. Although Germans and Irish continued to dominate immigration to Cincinnati in the latter decades of the century, the mix of groups coming to the Queen City diversified, including significant numbers of Hungarians, Italians and Greeks. Blacks migrating from southern regions also made up a significant portion of later 19<sup>th</sup> century settlement: by 1900, 4.4% of Cincinnati's population was African American.



### **Ethnic Tension and Multicultural Celebration**

Ethnic groups immigrating to Ohio were not always greeted with open arms. The anti-immigrant attitudes of 19<sup>th</sup> century nativists were strong in many cities experiencing rapid growth of migrant populations. Riots occurred in Toledo in 1862 and were directed towards the city's African Americans, whose increased presence was considered threatening by some white residents. In the mid-1850s, Cincinnati's Know-Nothing party and its nativist supporters threatened and intimidated German immigrants who were coming to the city in large numbers. Ethnic strife also occurred between immigrant groups. For example, ethnic divisions within the Catholic Church created tensions over church leadership and the development of parishes in many Ohio cities. In Cleveland, the city's Hungarians wanted to erect a statue to honor Louis Kossuth, leader of the independence movement against the Austrian Hapsburgs; but the Slovak community in Cleveland, who regarded Kossuth as an oppressor, protested vehemently and the statue was not built.

As Knepper has pointed out, however, the great strength of Ohio's ethnic history is that no one group grew to dominate the cultural landscape. Consequently, much of Ohio's diverse ethnic character has maintained its integrity over time. But at the same time, particular ethnic traditions have increasingly become traditions celebrated by a larger and more diverse population across the state. German singing traditions, for example, continue in Cincinnati's annual May Festival. St. Patrick's Day and St. David's Day are commemorated each year by more than just the Irish and Welsh. Architectural tourists can view neoclassical architecture in many areas of the state, particularly in areas settled by British immigrants like the Western Reserve. The enduring heritage of Ohio's Amish and Mennonite immigrants can still be enjoyed in Holmes, Geauga and Trumbull counties. At the Slavic Village Harvest Festival in Cleveland, visitors can celebrate the cultural legacy of that city's large Polish community. These examples are just a small selection of cultural expressions that document Ohio's varied ethnic heritage; a rich abundance of other examples can be found cities and towns all across the state.

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