

Longlots and the Northwest Ordinances

By 1787, the Continental Congress, acting under the Articles of Confederation, had passed a series of acts that we know today as the Northwest Ordinances that together provided for the systematic establishment of government in the territory north of the Ohio. The legislation is perhaps best known for its impact upon the subsequent settlement of that vast territory. Under its provisions five states were gradually accepted into the union on terms equal to the nation's original states. While also celebrated for banning slavery north of the Ohio (which it did not actually succeed in doing), its most important impact was to guide how the vast territory was to be settled. Arguably, the ordinance shaped the subsequent development of rural American society.

In a key provision that nonetheless is often over looked, the Northwest Ordinances provided for the systematic surveying of the entire territory. Each township, which was to be laid out continuously on a north-south axis, was to contain thirty-six, one square mile sections. Land was to be sold via auction, with the minimum parcel that could be purchased initially being a section of 640 acres. That requirement effectively denied most settlers the opportunity of purchasing land directly from the government since few could afford the cost of an entire section. Instead, land companies and speculators purchased the land and then resold it to settlers in typically 40 acre parcels, which represented what one family could in that pre-mechanized era successfully clear and farm.

Though terms of sale may not have been initially generous to the family farmer and though it clearly encouraged widespread speculation in land, the ordinances nonetheless encouraged settlement, if for no other reason than the systematic surveying of the land insured that settlers could secure firm title to whatever property they purchased. In time the government reduced the acreage necessary for purchase, as well as its cost, making it that much more easy for families to secure a homestead. Still, the ordinance did not completely govern how the frontier was settled. Squatters continued to move in advance of actual surveying, often because they could not afford the purchase price and hoped to at least be able to reap a profit on whatever improvements they may have made to the land. But squatters, like the agents for distant speculators, may also have hoped to secure the best land before other settlers arrived. Though the woodlands and prairie would to the unpracticed eye appear to have been an essentially flat, undifferentiated plain, parcels could differ greatly in value.

Initially, geography played the greater role and largely determined where the first settlers first broke the soil. Before the Deere plow enabled farmers to cut through the heavy prairie sod, woodland was preferred for settlement. Though it required extensive labor to clear woods for farming, woodland soil was comparatively soft and could be worked with the settler's existing iron clad plow. And, besides, farmers could more easily use whatever wood they felled for housing, fencing and fuel. The adjacent prairie, though too hard to plow when dry and too muddy when wet, did have high value for grazing and winter fodder. Settlers would next locate land that offered ready access navigable water. Without such access, it would prove too costly for the farmer to get any surplus produce to market. Farms during the frontier era were essentially subsistence but the small surplus

that these farms could produce enabled farmers to purchase those goods—such as gunpowder or cloth—that they could not produce themselves. Goods could be transported overland, though only so far as the cost was high.

Access to water that could at least float the draft of a goods-laden dugout or canoe following the fall harvest was such an essential requirement for any homestead that land that lay more than a few miles from such a waterway generally sat unclaimed, at least until rail lines were laid. Once lines were laid, however, the railroad effectively enabled any fertile land to be farmed for profit since railroads permitted the efficient shipment of goods to market. From that point on, settlement tended to reflect, not geography, but the rational, geometric patterns of the Northwest Ordinance's survey, as anyone flying above the Midwest can plainly see etched on the land below even today.

Thanks to the surveying requirements of the Ordinance, farms appeared in a regular, checker-board pattern across the land. The surveys ignored not only geography but also custom and history. In England and across much of Europe, the center of agricultural life was the village, not the farm. While private ownership of land was recognized, the village council would decide what crops would be planted, who would plant them and where they would be planted. Farmers—perhaps more properly “villagers”—would sow different crops in different parcels of land scattered around the village. The result may not have been terribly efficient, but it allowed those who farmed to live in the villages, walking but short distances to complete whatever tasks they needed to undertake on their land. Much of the work was done in common, with villagers sharing what little equipment was to be had and the challenge of plowing, planting and harvesting. The communal character of the European village was not unknown in America—the New England village shared many of its characteristics for decades after the initial settlement of those colonies. Even in Illinois a similar bow to geography and communal organization was initially followed. In Kaskaskia, Cahokia and other French settlements along the Mississippi, French *habitats* were granted narrow but deep plots along the river with each rectangular parcel having as a result access to the river.

With its call for systematic surveying based ultimately on the points of the compass, the Northwest Ordinance avoided the confusion all too often associated with the laying of land boundaries by the course of a river or creek, whose channels can change, with trees that can be felled and other natural geographical marks that could be altered, but it had offered its own set of problems and challenges. By simply overlaying land, boundaries could not recognize even the most significant of geographic factors—a given section of land might, for example, include only a small segment of arable land with the remainder being found in a swamp a land, effectively rendering all land within the section of little value. More subtly, though, the ordinance may have discouraged cooperation amongst settlers and for that matter the formation of villages and towns, if perhaps unwittingly.

By plotting parcels of land sequentially across a one-mile square grid, the ordinances spread farm families across the map, the later requirement that farmer's “prove” their ownership by residing on their land a portion of the year only emphasized this tendency. Farms were isolated as a result of this grid rather than by the choice of the people

themselves. In illustration, if a settler's parcel was, let's say, in the 35th section of a township, the settler would typically establish a homestead on that parcel rather than in a town that might be forming three or more miles across the township. Settlers became farmers on isolated farms rather than villagers who farmed. Located too distantly from any town the might be established, farmers had little choice but to live on their parcels of land. The myth of the isolated settler who moved westward once smoke from a new neighbor was seen may have had some basis in fact for some of the more iconoclastic frontiersmen but most settlers were far more gregarious and sought not only companionship but also the essential help that neighbors could provide.

The cost of the approach taken by the ordinances was high, though often overlooked. The Northwest Ordinance did—as its framer Thomas Jefferson had hoped—result in the widespread establishment of family farms across the Old Northwest, but those farms and the families that lived upon them were often isolated from one another and distant from any community.. Towns did, of course, form but by the time they did settlers had settled on their scattered homesteads. Having built their homes, they were not inclined to move to town, even when the town may have been within convenient distance.

The irony is that the rugged, individualistic settler of American lore may have been more the result of government legislation than what he may himself have desired to be.

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