of 40."[8] The record does not show where the reverend stayed on those occasions, but a comfortable night in the village would have served him best. And there he might have shared news of the road with another traveler or two.

It is the number of dwellings, more than their size, that tells us most about a village. The farm meant a single continuous ancestry. The houses in a village represented multiple histories. Most of those were complete stories including family, friends, and village life. A few, like those of the teacher and preacher, were incomplete and glimpsed only in passing.

Villages are still seen in northeastern Ohio, "anachronisms in an era of metropolitan expansion and transportation ease."[9] Most no longer function primarily as market places for surrounding farmers. People still live in them, some because their families have been there for generations and others because they are drawn by their quiet charm. But the sawmills, gristmills, and cheese factories are mostly gone. The general store may now feature antiques for weekend shoppers from surrounding cities while the locals shop at Wal-Mart and drive long distances to their daily jobs.

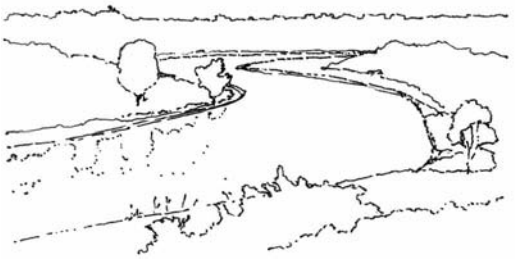
The Town

Lewis Mumford, the 20th-century urban historian and critic, observed that the change from village to town needed an "outer challenge" to pull the community sharply away from the central concerns of nutrition and reproduction: a purpose beyond mere survival. And so it was with the town of Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, on the southern shore of Lake Erie, that grew under the influence of Great Lakes trade.

Ashtabula Harbor began with a single cabin, alone in the wilderness. Later, a village "with its log tavern, blazing fireplace, whiskey toddy and a rough, hearty welcome from the landlord"

attracted traders on the lakes and travelers on their way farther west.[10] Finally, a town arose to meet the increasing challenge of Great Lakes trade. Its 200-year history tells a typical story.

Before the first settlers arrived, early explorers found the Ashtabula River gorge a forbidding place. An early history of the area reports, "Scarcely any place in the country has a wilder aspect than has this very gorge, so full of dark shadows, lined with tall dark pine and the overhanging hemlock which are only made more striking by the white, ghostly shapes of the great sycamores which fill up the valley. A weird, wild place, almost too fearful for human heart to attempt or for human footsteps to enter. Situated in the midst of the primitive wilderness, these deep gorges were still more shadowy than the forests themselves, fit resort only for the wild bear, the wolf, and other beasts of prey."[11]



Ashtabula River Surrounded by Wilderness.

Life in the first, isolated cabin was determined by wilderness rhythms. In 1803, a settler named George Beckwith brought his family to the forested mouth of the Ashtabula River where it empties into Lake Erie. The following year he perished in the January snow while carrying on his back salt and provisions from Austinburg, 12 miles to the south. His wife remained in the cabin, supporting her children by assisting travelers across the stream in her canoe.[12] The family's terrible isolation was finally relieved as more settlers arrived, but wilderness rhythms could not be entirely forgotten.

By 1812, a cluster of log houses marked the beginning of a village. Forests still covered most of the land and roads were only paths broken through the wilderness. The harbor was a mere opening into the creek. But the settlement grew until, by 1836, "407 steamboats and 156 other vessels entered the harbor loaded with coal, iron ore, limestone, salt and pine lumber."[13] Meanwhile, the