Ashtabula County, Ohio

Ashtabula County, in the northeast corner of Ohio, typifies the ways American life has changed during the last two centuries. Settlers began to arrive in the late 1700s and, throughout the 1800s, the county gradually filled with small family farms. Villages emerged as complements to the rural life around them, often located near a gristmill or sawmill. Finally, towns appeared "as foreign bodies set down, like boulders on a plain."[2] As people's circumstances changed, they measured their possibilities by a succession of different rhythms.

The northeastern corner of Ohio is a place of transition. The border with Pennsylvania marks the end of the Allegheny Mountains and the beginning of a more gentle terrain. For early settlers (random squatters followed by legitimate buyers) this meant that from here and as far west as anyone could imagine, there was land worth taking.

The region once lay beneath the great Pleistocene ice sheet that extended southward to the Ohio River. The retreating ice left behind it conditions of slope, drainage, and poor soils that were the result of ice and meltwater. Eventually a deep forest of broadleaf deciduous trees developed. Oaks, maples, hickory, and other hardwoods predominated.[3]

The earliest evidence of human settlement in these deep forests is sketchy. In other parts of Ohio, prehistoric "Mound Builders" left behind a few earthen structures dating back to approximately 300 BCE, but in Ashtabula County, there is no record until the earliest contact with Europeans, when French explorers and fur traders filtered into the region.[4] At that time, the Ashtabula River was the border between the Algonquin and Iroquois tribes. They were semi-sedentary hunters and farmers of corn, beans, squash, and tobacco in small clearings along the river.

The British wrested claim of ownership of the region from the

State of Ohio: Ashtabula County, in black, is located in the northeastern corner on the shores of Lake Erie.
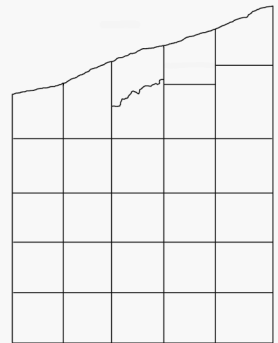
French in 1763. During their brief tenure, the British settled conflict with the Indians by agreeing to reserve a large portion of the area for Indian occupancy. However, within 2 decades, the British defeat in the Revolutionary War saw ownership pass to a new nation eager to expand. Indian rights were ignored as the Midwest was opened to successive waves of settlers from the east.

American land companies in New England sowed the first seeds of change in Ohio soil. In 1795, in meeting rooms far from the wilderness, the Connecticut Land Company set down rules for the orderly survey, sale, and settlement of land purchased in great tracts from the federal government. Each member of the Company contracted for a different township.[5]

The contract for Ashtabula County was typical. The articles allowed for " a survey of lands to be made into [square] townships containing each sixteen thousand acres [6,480 ha]; to fix on a township in which the first settlement shall be made, to survey the township thus into lots and to sell such lots to actual settlers only; to erect in said township a sawmill and a gristmill at the expense of the company and to lay out and to sell five other townships to actual settlers only."[6]

Ashtabula County: Divided into townships.

When the first settlers arrived, they found a land were water is the most active force. Winters are severe with significant amounts of snowfall. Summers are warm to hot and very humid. Over half the annual rainfall occurs in summer, draining into Lake Erie through short streams and rivers. In the spring and early summer, the area is prone to flooding. The weather can change abruptly from one day to the next and thunderstorms and tornadoes are frequent.

An 1815 account tells of a marriage postponed by rain and flooding.[7] The wedding of Reuben Mendell's daughter was to take place just north of the Ashtabula River in Sheffield Township. A friend, Chauncey Atwater, was given the task of walking 8 miles southwest to Jefferson, the County Seat, for the necessary license. He