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# Brief History of Religion in Northeast Ohio, A

George W. Knepper

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Cleveland State University

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGION IN NORTHEAST OHIO

BY  
GEORGE W. KNEPPER



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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGION IN NORTHEAST OHIO

by

George W. Knepper, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor of History, Emeritus  
University of Akron

### **Sacred Landmarks Monograph Series**

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## PREFACE

In this monograph, George Knepper Ph.D., distinguished professor of history emeritus at the University of Akron, presents a concise but comprehensive look at the history of religion in northeast Ohio. Starting with the early settlers from New England, Professor Knepper traces the increasingly diverse mixture of faiths that now characterizes the life of the sacred in northeast Ohio. In doing this, Professor Knepper is drawing on a lifetime of study into Ohio's history.

As the author of a number of books, book chapters, and articles on Ohio and its history, Professor Knepper's scholarship culminated in his 1989 *Ohio and its People*, the first general history of the state written in a generation. His credentials as the outstanding chronicler of the state are impeccable. Born and raised in Akron with a bachelor's degree from the University of Akron, Professor Knepper then studied at the University of Michigan, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. Professor Knepper's interests extend to many aspects of Ohio's past. We are grateful that religion is among these.

Professor Knepper served as president and trustee of the Ohio Historical Society, the Ohio Academy of History, and the Summit County Historical Society, among other professional organizations. He is a frequent lecturer and consultant and a former Fulbright Scholar at the University of London, England.

He brings all his scholarship to this study of religion in northeast Ohio.

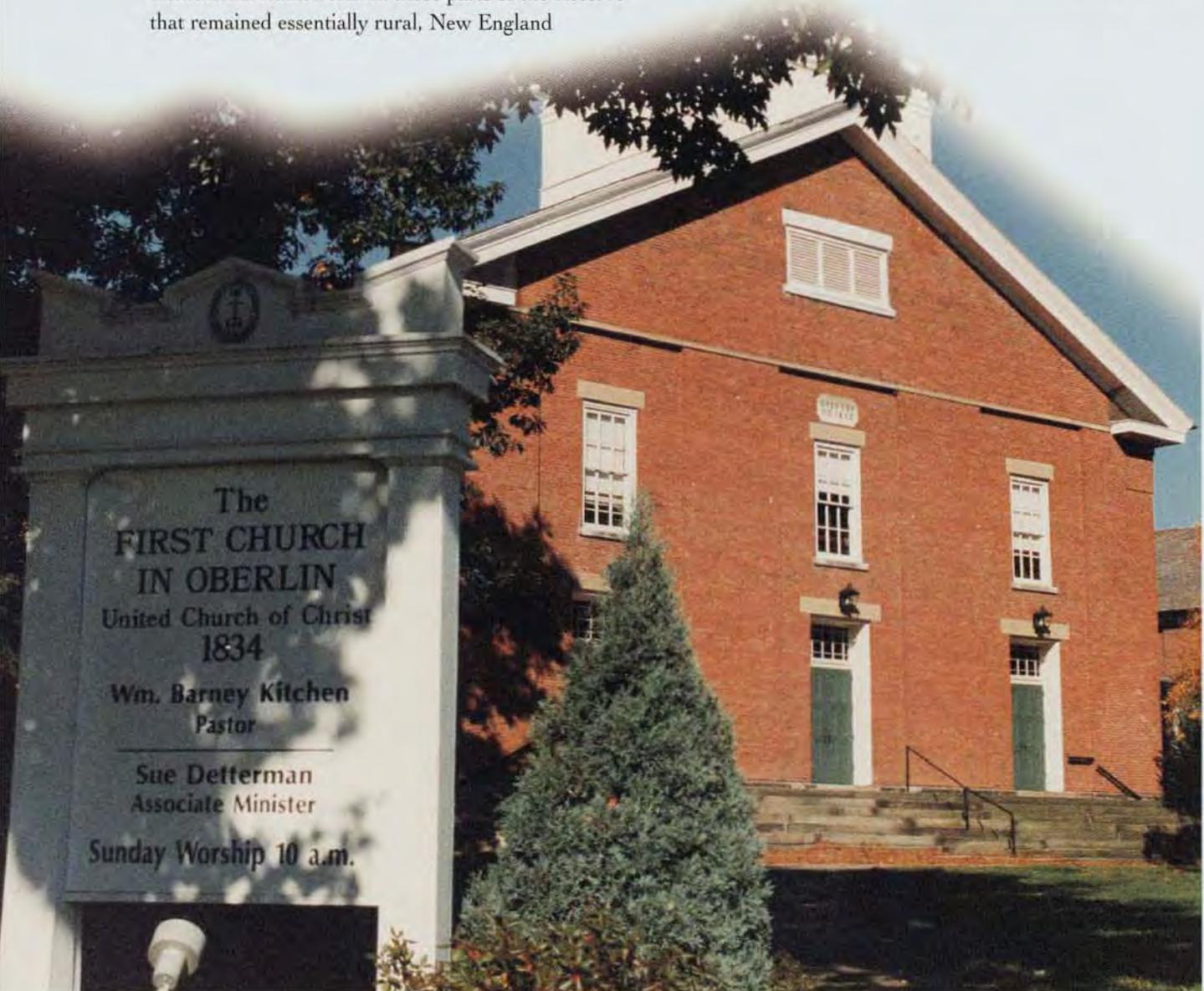
Michael Wells, Senior Editor  
Sacred Landmarks Monograph Series  
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## INTRODUCTION

The sacred landmarks of northeast Ohio reflect the diverse peoples who have called the Western Reserve home. From the first New England settlers to the most recent Hispanic newcomers, each group has brought along its cultural baggage; foremost among that baggage are religious beliefs and practices as represented by the churches each group has founded and sustained.

New Englanders were the Reserve's first settlers, and they established most of its early institutional framework. In those parts of the Reserve that remained essentially rural, New England

institutions would remain virtually intact well into the 20th century. The communities that were growing along the Ohio and Erie Canal, the Erie shoreline, and the Mahoning Valley were far more cosmopolitan. In 1837, for example, a canal worker said of the Akron region: "There is Dutch (i.e. Germans) a plenty, Irish, Scotch, Welch, English, French, Yankees, and plenty of rattlesnakes." Yet here, as elsewhere, New England influences would remain preeminent for decades to come. Churches, however, developed to serve the needs of the non-New Englanders almost as soon as they arrived in large enough concentrations to justify them.



First Church in Oberlin, United Church of Christ, Oberlin, Ohio

## EARLY HISTORY: NEW ENGLAND INFLUENCES

Contemporary readers with but a vague knowledge of pioneer society may assume that New Englanders, wherever they went, could scarcely wait to build churches and schools. In the Reserve, that was true when they settled in groups and established small communities. In Hudson, Canfield, Warren, and other small communities, New Englanders did build churches early on. Initially these were cabins that were replaced by frame buildings as population and wealth slowly

increased. It was later still before growing communities were able to sustain resident clergymen.

Most of the first families in the Reserve, however, lived apart from one another in isolated tracts. In their solitude they were unable to build churches; indeed, they were lucky to encounter an itinerant circuit rider with any frequency. Many isolates became spiritual backsliders. One tough-minded frontier lady, Mrs. Betsey Austin in what is now Ashtabula County, so despaired of the "Godlessness" of her fellow New Englanders, that she got on her horse, rode nearly 600 miles over lonely forest trails to her old home in

Connecticut, and cajoled her former pastor, the Reverend Giles Cowles, to return with her to save the spiritual health of the Reserve.

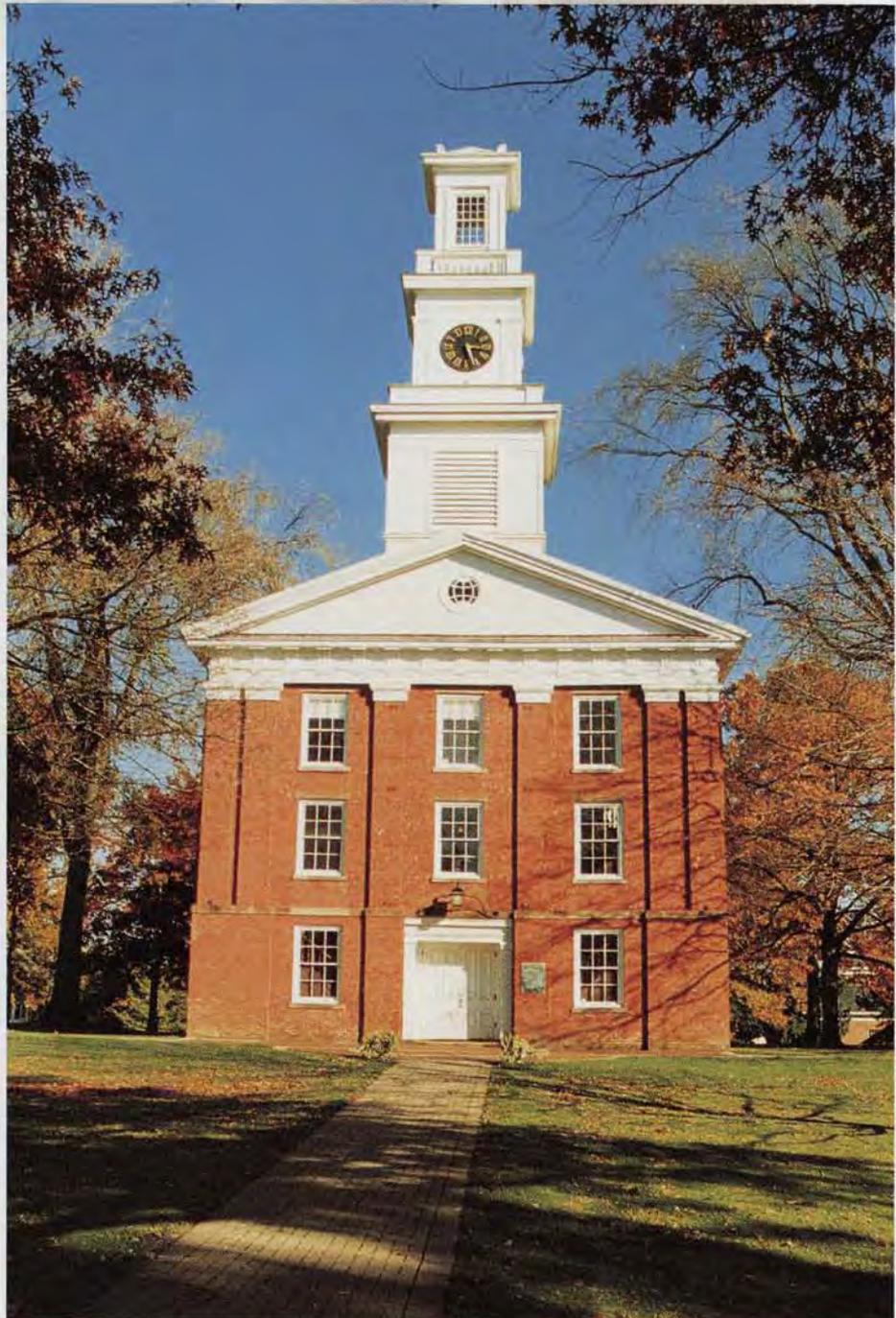
Though pioneer churches graced some communities, others lacked them. Zerah Hawley, a traveler skeptical about the wonders attributed to the Reserve, wrote in 1820 that Ashtabula was a town of 750 souls that had three large distilleries, several small ones, and not a church of any description. Cleveland, a backwater community until the canal era invigorated it, had no church until 1816. Akron, a johnny-come-lately canal town founded in 1825, had no church buildings until the early 1830s. Its numerous Irish Catholic canal workers were served by Father Henni, an itinerant priest who visited occasionally from his Cincinnati base. Akron's first Catholic church, St. Vincent de Paul, was organized in 1844, four years after Cleveland's St. Mary's on-the-Flats and seven years after Doylestown's Sts. Peter and Paul became the first church in what soon became the Cleveland Catholic diocese.



Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church, Doylestown, Ohio

## CONGREGATIONALISTS AND PRESBYTERIANS

In this formative period of settlement, New England-based Congregationalists and Presbyterians had the largest numbers of communicants and the most visibility. In 1801 they came to an uncommonly sensible agreement in a Plan of Union through which they agreed to cooperate rather than compete in reaching parishioners in the Reserve. In 1826, for example, they cooperated in establishing Western Reserve College in Hudson. As population grew, however, cooperation waned. Presbyterians soon dominated Western Reserve College, and, as antislavery furor stirred the tiny campus in the early 1830s, they urged "radical" Congregationalists to leave for newly established Oberlin College where they would be a better fit. The old Western Reserve College campus still contains a noteworthy sacred landmark, a beautiful 1830s style college chapel.



Former Western Reserve College Chapel, Hudson, Ohio

## EPISCOPALIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS

Episcopalians and Universalists were also among the religious denominations representing New England influence. Episcopalians were rather limited in numbers, but they tended to claim among their members a disproportionate number of persons on the upper end of the socioeconomic scale.

Their influence increased as they established strong churches in the Reserve's emerging cities. Universalists, only a generation removed from their American beginnings in old New England, flourished briefly but never attracted large numbers of communicants. In 1870, however, they joined other Ohio Universalists in establishing Buchtel College in Akron.



Statue of John R. Buchtel,  
Buchtel College,  
Akron, Ohio

JOHN R. BUCHEL  
1820 — 1892  
FOUNDER  
BUCHEL COLLEGE  
1870

## METHODISTS AND BAPTISTS

Methodists and Baptists were present in the Western Reserve from an early time. Some were of New England origins while others drifted into the Reserve from Pennsylvania and elsewhere. As the Reserve's small cities developed, each soon had its Methodist and its Baptist congregations. In the first days, however, both denominations were very much on the defensive. The Congregationalists and Presbyterians, with their college-educated clergy and their well-institutionalized religious structures, were sometimes appalled by the crude frontier ways of these



proselytizing evangelicals. Zerah Hawley was but one observer hostile to what he called "illiterate, itinerant Methodists." He claimed that people were receiving instruction from "the most uninformed and fanatical Methodist preachers," who were, he said, "the most extravagant ranters."

With surprising speed, given the difficulties involved, the Methodists gained status and position in religious affairs. By 1850, they were Ohio's largest denomination. Their circuit riders and camp meetings spread the word, and, soon, they too had college-educated clergy and became, in the process, major college builders across the state. In time, Baldwin-Wallace College would become their educational gem in the Western Reserve.



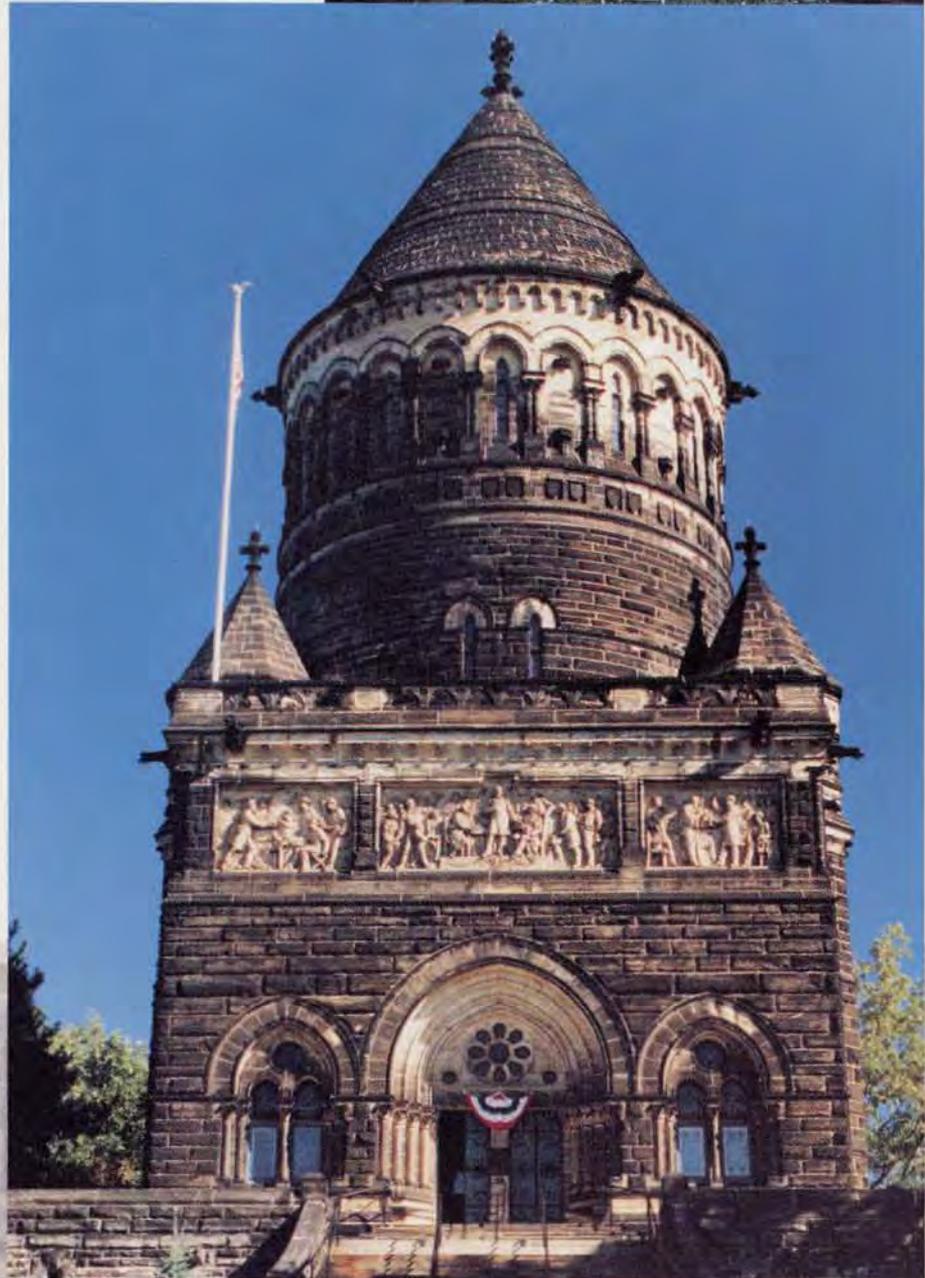
The campus of Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, Ohio

The Hiram Christian Church, Hiram, Ohio



## CAMPBELLITES

The New England population of the Reserve contained a strong perfectionist element, which became fertile ground for the new religious enthusiasms that proliferated in the region during the first four decades of the 19th century. Most enduring of them was the Campbellite persuasion, which later became known as the Disciples of Christ. Campbell, a Presbyterian clergyman from the panhandle region of western Virginia, was disenchanted with excessive denominationalism and argued that Christians should abandon the particularisms that separated them and unite on the great central truths that they all held. Forced on the defensive for his "radical" ideas, Campbell joined forces with Kentucky "Christians" led by Barton W. Stone. Ironically, Campbell's movement, which wanted to eliminate denominationalism, ended by becoming yet another denomination. The Disciples were blessed with powerful preachers who converted Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists within the Reserve. In 1850 the Disciples founded the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, now Hiram College, one of whose early presidents, James Abram Garfield, would rise to national prominence as the nation's 20th president.



James A. Garfield Memorial, Lake View Cemetery, Cleveland, Ohio



Kirtland Temple, Community of Christ, Kirtland, Ohio

## MORMONS

Among Campbellite converts were Parley Pratt and Sidney Rigdon. These perennial religious seekers heard about Joseph Smith's Mormons and traveled to Palmyra, New York, where they persuaded Smith to relocate his colony of believers to Kirtland in the Western Reserve. The move was made in 1831, and, two years later, the Mormons erected their first temple in Kirtland. The temple remains today as a well-maintained, carefully interpreted sacred landmark.

The early success of the Mormon venture in Kirtland petered out as more and more of their neighbors became skeptical of their communal land practices. When Joseph Smith opened an unauthorized bank, the Anti-Bank of Kirtland, and the bank issued worthless paper money, irate neighbors forced Smith and his followers to vacate Kirtland for more promising fields far to the west of Ohio.

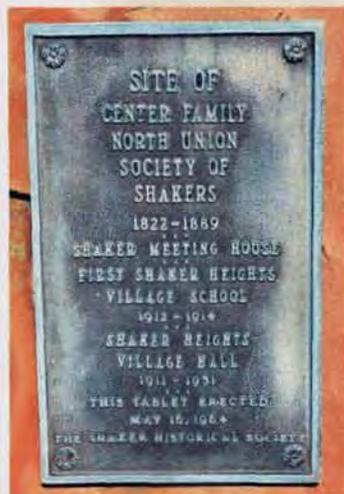


Finney Chapel, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio

## MILLERITES

At the beginning of the 1840s, a New England farmer named William Miller created religious fervor in his own region and in the Reserve by presenting some bizarre calculations purporting to show that Judgment Day would arrive on a specific date in the spring of 1843. Millerites split some existing congregations and caused turmoil among Protestant groups until Miller's predictions proved to be wrong. Miller was earnest, and, though he struck out in the 1840s, he was among the founders of the modern Adventist movement. Many Western Reserve communities have, or once had, Adventist churches.

Plaque at site of the original North Union Shaker Meeting House (corner of Lee Road and Shaker Boulevard), Shaker Heights, Ohio



## UTOPIAN SOCIETIES

While new religious enthusiasms were attracting religious seekers, utopian societies, promising a more effective social order, were enjoying modest popularity. Somewhat halting efforts were made to establish Christian communities in Oberlin, Berea, and Tallmadge. Although these efforts never reached fruition, Oberlin retains its college, founded on Christian principles and demonstrating to this day an active social consciousness; Berea's Methodist-inspired institutions gave a Christian tone to that village; and Tallmadge pioneers erected a magnificent Congregational church whose image often appears in illustrated books as a prime example of New England church architecture.

The North Union Shaker community, organized in 1822 and disbanded 67 years later, was the Reserve's most successful utopian effort. The Shakers left no surviving buildings, but their farms, mill sites, herb gardens, and the like occupied more than 1,000 acres. This land was ultimately controlled by the Van Sweringen brothers, who used the site for their Shaker Heights real estate development. It is interesting that the Shakers, a plain people who favored simplicity, were replaced by a suburb noted for its opulent homes.

## EARLY GERMAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

New England-derived religious institutions remained dominant in the Reserve through the pre-Civil War decades, but as canals, lake steamers, and railroads opened the land and gave rise to vigorous young urban centers, religious diversity proliferated. Germans from Pennsylvania and from overseas had been making their way into the Reserve from an early time. There were Protestant Germans, largely Lutheran, German Reformed, or German Evangelical in persuasion, as well as Catholics. Their numbers were small initially, but their religious diversity was great. In 1829, for example, German Catholic farmers settled at Randolph in southern Portage County. They established St. Joseph's church and eventually fashioned a scenic grotto on the church grounds. The church and grotto are still much visited today.

German Pietists—Brethren, Mennonite, Amish—were better represented outside the Reserve, although in time a large Amish presence would appear in Geauga County. The Germans were especially tenacious in holding to their language, and Lutheran pastors often conducted services in the German language and custom. Not all Lutherans were German, of course. A number of Akron's most visible families in the 19th century belonged to Trinity Church, which was in the English Lutheran tradition.

German Jews came to the Reserve in small numbers from an early time. Many were peddlers who accumulated some capital and then gravitated toward the cities and larger towns where they engaged in commercial activities. Israelite societies emerged in the larger towns. Cleveland's first such society dates from the 1830s and Akron's appeared shortly thereafter. By the 1850s Jews had formed congregations in both cities, sometimes using church structures that had originally housed a Christian denomination.



Liberty Hill Baptist Church, Cleveland, Ohio

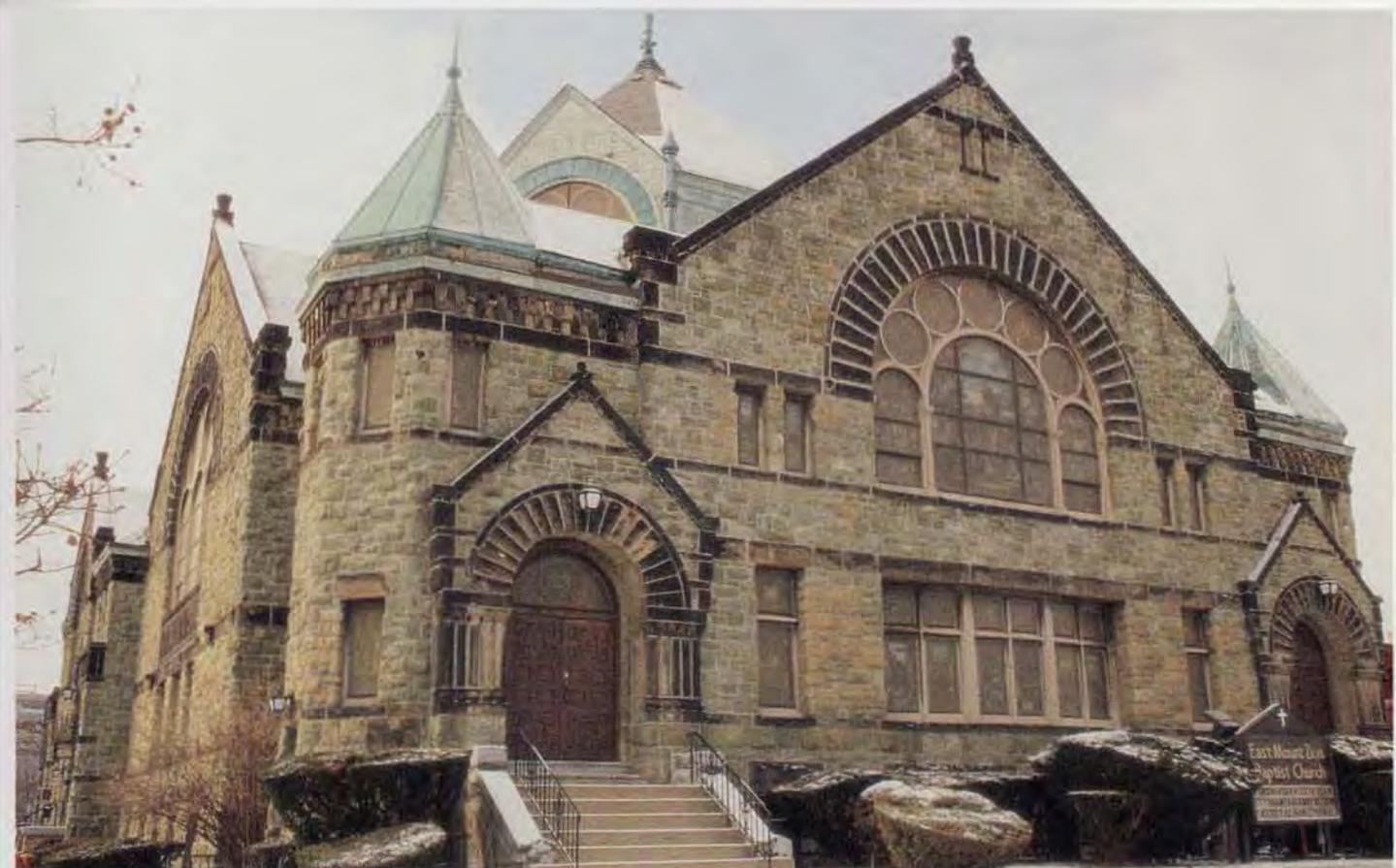
## EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Like the Jews, African Americans in the Western Reserve were overwhelmingly city and town dwellers. It is nearly impossible to get a reading on the first black churches, for records are nonexistent. We do know that Cleveland, in antebellum days, offered free blacks as much opportunity as any place in the nation, and some congregations gathered at an early time. The African Methodist Episcopal church was the strongest black denomination in America, but it was still in the early stages of institutionalization. By 1863, however, it was strong enough in Ohio to buy Wilberforce College from white Methodists, to operate the college, and to establish there the Payne Theological School to train its ministers.

## THE "NEW IMMIGRATION"

The Civil War provides a convenient, if somewhat artificial, dividing line for assessing demographic change in the Western Reserve. Its surge of industrial, technological, and urban growth was already underway by 1865, but the great flood of new immigrants had yet to reach its full measure. Once it did, the human face of the Reserve was radically changed.

The so-called "new immigration" describes the millions of newcomers from eastern and southern Europe coming to America's burgeoning industrial cities and to its mining regions, seeking jobs and a new life. Cleveland, Lorain, and the Mahoning Valley cities depended on this source of cheap labor to man steel-related industries. Even as the new immigrants arrived, thousands of "old" immigrants—British, German, and Irish—continued to move into the Reserve. While the "old" immigrants largely reinforced existing religious



East Mount Zion Baptist Church, Cleveland, Ohio



Taylor Road Synagogue, Cleveland Heights, Ohio

bodies, the new immigrants added to the region's religious diversity by greatly increasing its Roman Catholic presence, introducing many new eastern rite Catholic churches, and adding large numbers of Jews.

In sheer numbers, Roman Catholics dominated the "new immigration." Since its formation in 1847, the Cleveland diocese, under the direction of Bishop Louis Amadeus Rappe, sought to Americanize its people, resisting a call for nationality-related parishes. But the Germans and the Irish complained to Rome, resulting in the resignation of Bishop Rappe in 1874 and setting the stage for the great increase in nationality churches that followed the new immigrants to the Reserve. Poles, Italians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Czechs, and others from a Roman Catholic tradition formed nationality churches. The story of how each nationality group developed its religious life is far too complex to address here. Not only was Roman Catholicism affected, but each nationality group contained small Protestant cohorts and, in some cases, anticlerical agnostics or freethinkers.

Many Eastern Orthodox churches now appeared in the Reserve. Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, and other Orthodox Christians came from a tradition that had split with Rome. Each had its own parishes and clerical leadership. The onion-domed

churches associated in the public eye with eastern orthodoxy appeared in the cities, adding to the complexity of the religious and physical landscape.

By 1910 Greater Cleveland boasted more than 60 Roman Catholic parishes, about half of them nationality-related. Cleveland's more than 40,000 Germans in 1900 were the city's largest nationality group, divided, as we have noted, into many segments religiously. Cleveland's early Jewish settlers were largely of German background, and they formed a relatively stable community, but their hegemony was soon to be challenged.



The "new immigration" brought perhaps 85,000 Jews to Cleveland from Poland, Galicia, Russia, and a few other European sources. They were not always welcomed with open arms by the established Jewish community, which embraced a substantial element of Reform, or liberal religious practice. Indeed, the historic congregation known simply as "the Temple" was one of the more radical Reform congregations, known for its easy interaction with the largely Christian environment that surrounded it. The east European Jews quickly formed new congregations mostly in the Orthodox and Conservative traditions, and Cleveland competed with Cincinnati for leadership in Ohio's Jewish affairs.



## STEEL VS. TIRES: RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN AKRON

As Cleveland, Youngstown, Warren, Lorain, and other coal and steel centers were receiving large numbers of new immigrants, the diversified industrial city of Akron was also getting its share, but Akron constitutes a special case. It was not a steel city. Its newest thriving industry at the turn of the century was rubber, and within a very few years, as the automotive industry blossomed, Akron became synonymous with tires. Just as Akron's tire plants needed a vast new workforce, World War I and its preliminaries shut off

the supply of cheap European labor. Frantic rubber barons looked south, to Appalachia, for underemployed farmers, lumbermen, and miners whom they brought, virtually by the trainload, to toil in the rubber mills. Between 1910 and 1920, more than 100,000 white Appalachians and 5,000 southern blacks came to Akron to stay, while uncounted tens of thousands of footloose, itinerant workers passed through, working briefly and then going "back home" or passing on to another industrial city.

The Appalachians were overwhelmingly Protestant, and many reinforced Akron's existing, mainline Protestant churches. A dramatic new element



The Akron Baptist Temple, Akron, Ohio

# UPON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH



entered Akron's church life, however, as thousands of the newcomers sought to replicate their familiar fundamentalist, Bible-centered, "down home" religious services. This element gave rise to more huge, independent congregations than existed perhaps in any other city, certainly any city of Akron's size. Ultimately some of the new congregations built impressive physical plants: two of them boasted auditoriums that seated 5,000 people. They were media-oriented and highly evangelistic. One congregation built a television empire that reached over 340 stations worldwide; another maintains a worldwide ministry to this day. The largest of the present congregations, known simply as The Chapel, has 7,000 members and is contemplating a satellite facility in the suburbs for 2,000 more. The Chapel draws substantially from old-line Protestant churches whose services have strayed from the absolutes that traditionally sustained its people during difficult times.

Akron thus developed as a strongly Protestant city. The 1920 census revealed that Akron's population was two-thirds native-born. In contrast, the people of both Cleveland and Youngstown were two-thirds ethnic, meaning that they were foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents. People familiar with life in both Akron and Cleveland in the 1920-1960 period know the two cities had a different feel to them.

Cleveland looked and felt strongly ethnic; Akron looked and felt like an overgrown county-seat town. Foreign accents were heard in Cleveland, while the nasal twang of the southern hills was common in Akron.

One unhappy result of Akron's Appalachian presence was the strength of the local Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s. People from isolated rural regions saw themselves as the keepers of real American values and blamed "foreign" elements, especially Catholics and Jews, for most of the law-breaking associated with the Prohibition era. Akron's African Americans were few in number and politically powerless and thus largely escaped Klan intimidation. The Klan died out in Akron in the mid-1920s, as it did nationally, but its local presence was much stronger than it was in Cleveland or Youngstown.





The Grand Mosque at the Islamic Center of Greater Cleveland, Parma, Ohio

## THE POST- WORLD WAR I ERA

The 1920s also marked the beginning of strict new federal immigration laws that effectively cut off all but the most modest flow of new arrivals. Northeast Ohio industry began to draw its labor from the American South and from rural regions elsewhere. Foreign immigration resumed in the post-World War II period to a very limited extent under various displaced persons acts passed by Congress. Since 1965, relaxed restrictions have permitted a new immigration of modest proportions in the Western Reserve.

Meanwhile, African Americans came to the Reserve in increasing numbers, giving rise to a host of new black churches and reinforcing the strength of established congregations. Methodists and Baptists, once preeminent among black Christians, saw their influence challenged as some of their people joined Catholic, Episcopal, and other churches, partly because of their perceived attitudes toward civil rights. The rise of a black middle class led to the same upward social mobility that characterized the white middle class, and it was reflected in the religious realm by many fine new church structures with congregations led by well-educated, articulate, socially involved ministers.



Still more complexity and diversity in the religious life of the Reserve has emerged in very recent years. San Juan Bautista, established for the Hispanic Catholic community, opened in 1975. Puerto Ricans in Lorain and Cubans in Cleveland were served in their religious life. Asians—Chinese, Koreans, Indians, Pakistanis—have been arriving in small numbers since the 1960s and, still more recently, Vietnamese and Central American refugees have added to the mix. There are visible evidences of the non-Christian and non-Jewish practices brought by some of these recent arrivals. If you know where to look, you can find a Buddhist temple in Euclid, a Muslim mosque in Parma, and a newly erected Islamic Center in Cuyahoga Falls.

The new has in large part obscured the old. The Western Reserve today is a more or less typical slice of America, representing her diverse interests and peoples. It is a far cry from the region's earliest years when the Western Reserve was a unique part of America, a bit of New England set down in the Ohio wilderness. The Tallmadge church and other old New England-related sacred landmarks are still here to remind us of how far we have come. Will these visible reminders still be here after another 200 years? It would be fun to know the answer.

## ADDITIONAL READING

There is no single source that presents a comprehensive religious portrait of the Western Reserve. The story must be pieced together from a wide variety of sources. A general account of Western Reserve history is found in Harlan Hatcher, *The Western Reserve: The Story of New Connecticut in Ohio* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, rev. ed., 1991), but not even this overview carries the story of religious development. George W. Knepper, *Ohio and Its People* (Kent: Kent State University Press, rev. ed., 1997), places religious developments statewide into context and brings the story close to the present.

Every substantial religious body, denomination, or sect has its own literature. The quality is mixed, but one can find details not available elsewhere. Most churches and denominations have their own occasional publications, but these are hard to come by except by contacting individual churches directly. A convenient reference for Cleveland churches and religious movements is David Van Tassel and John Grabowski, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, second ed. 1996). Local histories often contain accounts of religious development, but they vary widely in quality.

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The Center for Sacred Landmarks is an entity within the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University, that provides information about Cleveland's religious structures and organizations and their past and present roles in strengthening and maintaining communities within the Cleveland metropolitan area.

The Levin College's Center for Sacred Landmarks is one of five such organizations that form the Sacred Landmarks Partnership of Northeast Ohio. This partnership includes sacred landmarks initiatives at the University of Akron, Kent State University, Lorain County Community College, and Youngstown State University, as well as the original center at Cleveland State University. Because preserving archival materials and artworks is a central purpose of the Center, a Sacred Landmarks Archive has been created and is maintained in partnership with the Cleveland State University Library. Libraries at the other partnering universities are also in the process of creating a web-accessible network of sacred landmarks archives.



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