

# THE HISTORICAL TIMES

*QUARTERLY OF THE GRANVILLE, OHIO, HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

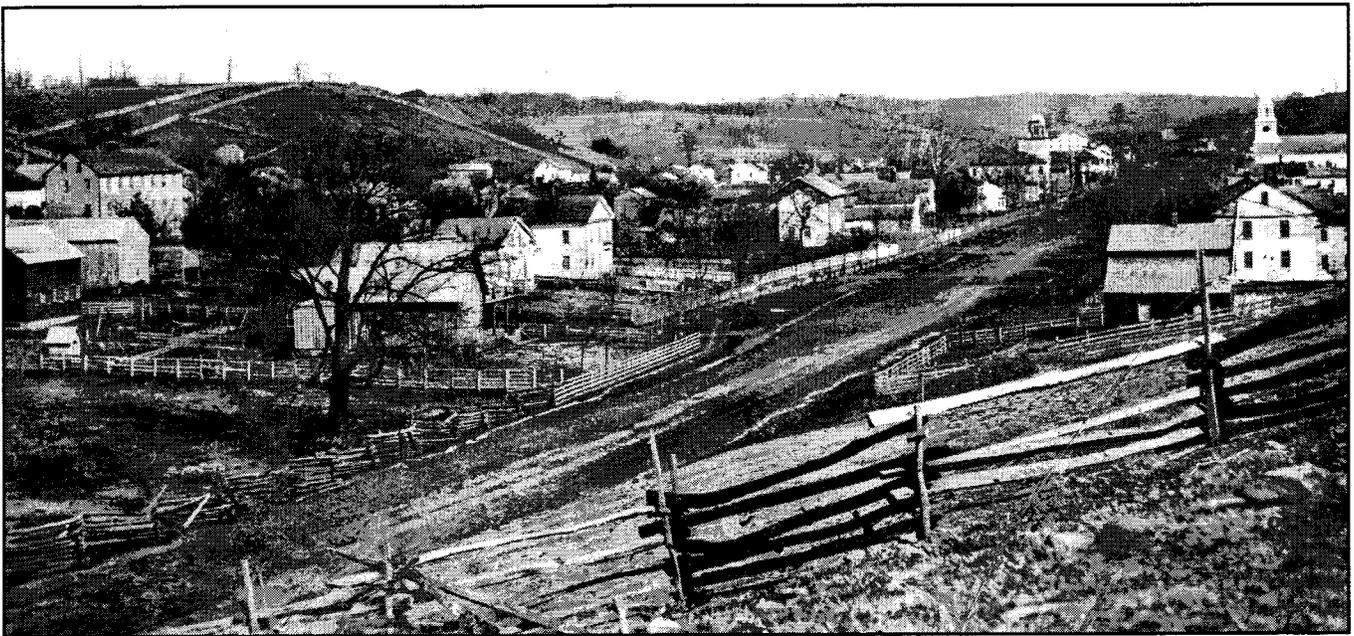
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## The Importance of Village Life in Early Nineteenth-Century Ohio

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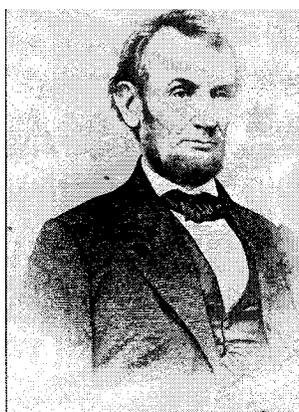


**T**his photograph, taken before 1860 from Sugar Loaf, shows the unpaved, ungraded Broadway, the old Congregational Church with domed steeple, the "old brown sem," Granville Female College in the distance, the old white Baptist Church, and Prospect (College) Hill with streets fenced off.

# The Importance of Village Life In Early Nineteenth-Century Ohio

The temptation in celebrating the anniversary of any place is to celebrate exceptionalism. But historians prefer to look for the common elements among places because it is discovery of repeated traits that help build our understanding of a people, a society, a nation.

In his Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln described the Civil War as a "people's contest": "A struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life."



This view of government and of the nation itself was widespread across the early and mid-nineteenth century North. It was rooted in the realities of small town life.

## Local Government

National government before the Civil War touched people's daily lives little. It collected no income taxes, coined no money, contributed little to transportation beyond improvement of rivers and harbors, and maintained only the smallest standing army posted on the frontier to contain the native-American population. State governments did little more. Yet interest in politics—especially in the northern states—was extraordinarily high. In Ohio, in the mid-19th century, elections typically attracted 90% of the electorate to the polls. Nearby Michigan and New York regularly experienced 85% turnout.

Historians are by now pretty well convinced that this was because Americans, especially in the North, were deeply invested in participatory local government. Local government—typically town govern-

ment (for even the smallest hamlets and crossroads organized themselves as towns)—were engaged in most of the important community functions, from education of children to road building to care of the aged and the poor. Local government engaged everyone's interest and made everyone feel like a participant in democracy. Consequently, respect for the principle of self-government and commitment to the law and order necessary to sustain it were not abstract subjects for political philosophers but part of everyday experience in local communities. In fact, it was the experience of participation—at least for adult males—that seemed the essence of government itself.

Between 1820 and 1850, southern aggressiveness in defense of a slave-based society seemed to be an affront to the values of participation and orderly political process so valued in northern communities. The South appeared to prefer government by planter oligarchy that did not value equal participation. Southern threats to nullify federal law or secede seemed to undercut the very rule of law and democratic process. The Southern-backed Fugitive Slave Law seemed to intrude directly into northern communities and challenge their autonomy. Finally, many northerners came to feel, like Lincoln, that the issue had become "whether we have a government or not." Northerners in communities like Granville, communities based upon participatory government, were willing to lay down their lives to answer that question.

## Granville Initiatives

You see this commitment to participatory government in Granville from the first. The Licking Company that founded the town held its first formal meeting on the site of Granville December 2, 1805 (almost a week before the more celebrated meeting to auction off the individual farm and town lots). In addition to organizing for such company business as selling off some of the cattle brought from Massachusetts, the meeting:

- Appointed a three-man committee to lay out the principal roads to Worthington, Mt. Vernon, and Lancaster.

Appointed another three-man committee for superintendence of the town roads.

❖ Appointed yet a third committee of three to erect a log building for use as a school and town hall.

+ Set aside a lot for a cemetery and provided for its superintendence (You've got it! By another committee!).

❖ Designated a militia parade ground, where presumably soon thereafter an election of officers took place by the men of the town themselves.

Voted for a three-man committee to receive subscriptions for the encouragement of a library and to draw up a constitution for it.

From the first, there was almost universal engagement (again, among adult men) in community affairs and evidence of a conviction that local government was the way in which communities got things done.

This set of values shows up in the most mundane places. Consider the early names given to Granville streets. Rose and Case, of course, were named for early community leaders, along with Licking—the name of the founding company. Market and Water and Stone and Solemn were named for the activities anticipated to take place along them. Cherry and Maple and Mulberry were named for the local flora. Evening and Morning denoted the west and east boundaries of the town. But Liberty and Equality streets were named for precious values that were not abstractions but lived experience in the community.

### **The "Publicness" of Life**

A couple of other themes worth exploring relate to early Ohio towns generally and Granville particularly. The first of these is the "publicness" of life. Communities in early Ohio (and surrounding states) were not so much collections of individuals but of families and, beyond that, of extended families. Family networks were critical for survival in the earliest years of towns. Extended kinship groups shared food, tools, and labor. Yet this was not exactly a primitive socialism. There was strong commitment to private property. In fact, early Ohioans were so

strongly committed to partible inheritance (where every child got "theirs" equally), that there ultimately would have been ruinous subdivision of farmland such as occurred in Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries. But the importance of family connection wound up facilitating intergenerational and sibling land "swapping" and the recombination of land through marriage in such a way that the viability of most farms was sustained.

Rather than a kind of private propertyless socialism, what was at work in small towns in the early nineteenth-century North was a sort of mutuality, an "I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine." Sometimes this was a matter of exchanging labor—at planting or harvest times or when a hunt was necessary to provide meat. Sometimes it was a matter of sharing teams of oxen or horses or tools. In most towns it was an expectation that such property—and assistance—would be shared without question. Early guidebooks for emigrants to the West, in fact, usually warned newcomers to expect their things to be "borrowed" and to loan them gladly. The "borrowing system," as it was called, wasn't based on a fixed exchange but on the notion that when the time came, the borrow could run the other way.

Sharing and borrowing were ritualized in the "frolic" or the "bee," the coming together of the community to share labor—and fun—in cabin raisings, log rolling, road duty, or militia musters. Even politics celebrated the notion of mutual exchange; well into the nineteenth century, voters gave their votes aloud and then were thanked by the receiving candidate for the investment of their confidence.

### **Granville as a "Town"**

A second observation worth making is that a "town" was the characteristic pattern of settlement in the early nineteenth-century North. Most people lived neither in large cities nor on isolated farms but in and around "towns," even if those were mere crossroads hamlets. Granville was certainly the "town" that its earliest residents thought it was. It had a population of almost 200 by the end of its first year, 1805. It doubled in size in the next twenty-five years and then nearly doubled again in the next fifteen. Residents really thought of Granville as a "town" and would be amused by our modern

insistence that it is just a "village" and perhaps equally amused by our tendency to view agriculture as the principal way of life.

After all, the object of a town was both self-sufficiency and production for export from the community in exchange for cash. Agricultural production would only fill part of that equation. We get an early hint that the founders understood the importance of production from the composition of the two foreparties that were sent out to prepare the way for the main body of settlers that was to come in the fall of 1805. The first scouting party of five men was set out in March to put in a crop of corn. But the second band of five that came in July included a millwright, a carpenter, and a blacksmith to build a mill to saw wood and grind corn.

Within half a dozen years of its founding, Granville had become a manufacturing town. No fewer than eleven water-powered mills were built in the town's first quarter century—mills for lumber, for woolen manufacture, for grinding corn, and for making wheat flour. The Granville Furnace began forging iron pots and pans and plowshares as early as 1816. A cloth factory debuted in 1823. Distilleries and cider presses abounded: the town produced more whiskey at one point than the market could bear. Tanneries, brickyards, hatmakers, shoemakers, furniture-makers, stone quarrymen and cutters, and even a clockmaker could be found in early Granville. The first bank had made its appearance by 1815 and a full-fledged general store by 1817, as well as a popular inn. Altogether, early Granville was a pretty noisy, smelly, busy and ambitious place—a town for sure!

### Significant Mobility

Finally, it's worth observing that in towns like Granville, a lot of people came and went. Of the original 200 settlers of Granville, only about a quarter were represented in the population, even by descent, by the coming of the Civil War. The rest had moved on and many others had passed through, staying in Granville only awhile. While it is easy to

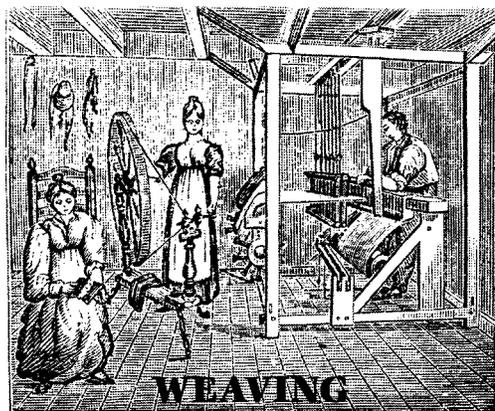
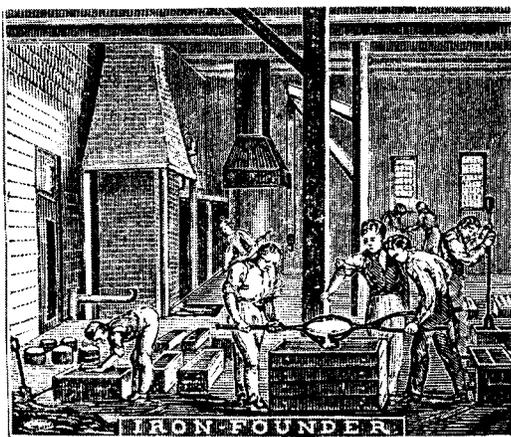
celebrate the families that stayed—at least long enough to have their name attached to a house, families like the Roses or the Bancrofts—much if not most of the history of this or of other towns like it was written by those who pressed on out of ambition or failure or the desire to restore family connections. But while they stayed they made their mark. Nineteenth-century Granville was always a town of newcomers.

What, then, do we have to celebrate in 2005? First, a dynamic community: one that was changing from the first and has continued to change—the very wishes of the founders. There is much in the past that we will want to commemorate, but we need to

be careful not to take a snapshot of just any one point in history and say this was Granville. Second, we ought to celebrate that this was a town founded on principles of participation. Remember Liberty and Equality Streets (now the much more boring South Prospect and East Elm Streets)? It was also a town founded on engagement, on the input of many voices,

and of informal sharing and mutual care. It was not—it is not just a place but a real community.

*President Dale T Knobel delivered this address on February 4, 2002 at the Breakfast for Community Leaders sponsored by the Granville 2005 Bicentennial committee. The editors of the Historical Times are delighted to present this address for the reading pleasure of our members.*





## Docents Needed

President of the Society, Maggie Brooks, has requested volunteers to serve as Docents for our museum, which is open on Saturday and Sunday afternoons from mid-April until Mid-October. Please consider helping Maggie as she endeavors to increase the visibility of our outstanding museum collection. No special prior knowledge is necessary to serve as a Docent, other than an interest in the rich history and fascinating artifacts of our village. The Museum Committee can provide the necessary knowledge for persons interested in serving our society in this way.

Please contact Maggie or Doris in care of the museum or at 587-6266.

### **Board of Managers of the Granville Historical Society**

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## Historian of the Year

At the annual meeting of the Granville Historical society in April, Denison President Dale T. Knobel received the 2002 Historian of the Year award.

President Knobel, as most Granvillians know, is a recognized Ph.D. historian in his own right, and his scholarly work on Irish immigration history is nationally known. But beyond that, President Knobel has taken a serious interest in the history of our village and surrounding area. He has several times shared with us the insights and reflections of his scholarly work in American history. Events that stand out are the joint Denison/Historical Society meeting in which President Knobel spoke about the Granville connections with Texas following the Civil War; his thoughtful remarks at the dedication of the Historical Marker for the Old Academy Building; and his full participation in the dedication of the Rosecrans Brothers Historical Marker in Homer in September 2001.

So committed was he to this dedication ceremony, he drove to Homer from an earlier Denison event in Columbus that morning. Finally, President Knobel kindly offered thoughtful remarks for the 2005 Bicentennial Commissions first breakfast meeting for community leaders in February 2002. Those remarks serve as the basis for the article in this issue of *The Historical Times*.

President Knobel has never refused any request for a Historical Society speaking event. His generosity of spirit for acknowledging our local history and his participation in that process have been extraordinary.



## Membership in the Granville Historical Society

Membership in the Granville Historical Society is open to all persons with an interest in the rich history of our village. The annual membership dues are but \$10.00 for the calendar year. Membership benefits include a subscription to *The Historical Times*, which is the quarterly publication of the society, free admission to and notification of all society sponsored events, and the participation in preserving for future generations the important history of Granville.

To become a member of the Society, now in its 116th year, please send a check payable to The Granville Historical Society for payment of one year's dues to the Membership Committee:

Lance Clarke  
Membership Chair  
The Granville Historical Society  
P.O. Box 129  
Granville, OH 43023-0129

If you have been a member and have not yet renewed your valuable membership to the Society, please do so right away! Many thanks!

## Museum Now Open

The museum operated by your society is now open for the summer months. Museum Committee Chair Cynthia Cort and her able cohort of workers have spent much time over the winter months re-arranging some of our fascinating exhibits of Granville history. Do plan on visiting the museum on Saturday or Sunday afternoons during the summer. You'll be glad you did!

## Letters to the Editor Welcome

While the editors have always been glad to hear from readers, we have not, except through the perfunctory imperative on the masthead, sought to increase the frequency of such delight by publishing a formal invitation. We do so now. We'd like to hear from you if you have information that amplifies,

ramifies, demystifies, or corrects something you see in our pages and that you know and care enough about to take the time to tell us. How or from where you happen to know what you happen to know will increase the likelihood of seeing your letter in print.

### R.I.P.

The Editors of *The Historical Times* warmly acknowledge the wonderful assistance offered by the late Sam MacKenzie-Crane of Denison University Office Services Department. Sam sadly died earlier this year following a difficult bout with cancer. Sam's tremendous knowledge of computer graphics permitted us to render in print the significant issues published last calendar year. We express our condolences to Laurie, Sam's wife and Walker, their son.

### ***The Historical Times***

is proud to be in its 16th year  
of publication.

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