

Thinking About Regions

Gregory Wilson, University of Akron

Publication Director, *Northeast Ohio Journal of History*

The *Northeast Ohio Journal of History* bills itself as a regional enterprise. However, this masks the many complexities involved in defining a region. Of course, the concept of a region is a human creation, an effort to simplify discussions of disparate events, or to generalize about certain trends, issues, and events noticed in various local or state locations. Within the history of the United States, writers have made great and frequent use of regions: the West, the Great Lakes, Appalachia, the Northwest, the Great Plains, the South and so on. By its nature, defining a region means creating an entity that is unique in some fashion, different from other places around it according to some combination of cultural, economic, environmental, political, or social attributes. Regional boundaries are fluid, flexible, and porous and thus it is a matter of debate as to what is or is not part of a region. For example, the South usually refers to the 11 states that seceded in 1861; yet at times, historians have expanded this to include West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland and Oklahoma. Including 11 makes the South a region defined politically by secession, but including 4 others means historians must go beyond political categories and search for other attributes that bind together people and places. In the case of the South, what makes the 4 others “southern”? The former presence of slavery? Accents and words in the language? Food and folkways? Geographic features? Economic data? Again, there are multiple factors at work in defining places as regions.

Regionalism layers over other factors historians use to analyze societies, such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, or disability. Within states, or within counties, or within towns, people regularly create regional distinctions based on compass points (the “East Side”, “Southern California”) that imply unique cultural forms, economic activities, or political beliefs. Regions celebrate difference over unity. Sometimes we get trapped within the contradictions inherent in working with regions. Writers on Appalachia, for example, have fought against attempts to essentialize the people there as “hardy mountain folk,” different and interesting because of their peculiar accents and fondness for moonshine. Appalachians, they argue, are no different than others. Writers defend the differences between Appalachian people, citing folkways and traditions as worth preserving and defending from mass consumer culture. Often, too, writers will attack “outsiders” as removing wealth in the form of timber and coal from the common people of Appalachia. This is not to defend nor criticize any of these views, but merely to point out that historians can not easily escape the contradictions inherent in using regions as places of analysis.

Knowing this, the editors of this journal quite deliberately chose the name *Northeast Ohio Journal of History*. In an admittedly arbitrary fashion, if one were to create 4 equal quadrants out of a map of Ohio, then it becomes easy to define what places and people inhabit Northeast Ohio

as opposed to Southwest, Northwest, or Southeast Ohio. Indeed, this is the basis for our name and the research areas we promote. Perhaps the only immediate problem with this method is that some counties will be split, and the historian or geographer must make a choice: does, for example, Tuscarawas County belong in Northeast or Southeast Ohio? But is this quadrant system merely a way to make editorial decisions easier by rejecting or accepting submissions based on lines drawn over a map? Can we define cultural practices, environmental factors, social or economic data that can be used to define Northeast Ohio? Here are few tentative suggestions, sketches of a limited nature that might generate dialogue among readers on the nature of regionalism in Ohio and beyond.

Writers, historians, and those living in the region have long noted the “Yankee” (read white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant) influence in what was once called the Western Reserve, the area claimed by Connecticut and ceded to the United States in creating the Northwest Territory, from which Ohio emerged as the 17th state. In cities such as Cleveland, Youngstown, and Akron, though, industrial development in the 19th century brought noticeably non-Yankee peoples to these places, including Southern blacks, as well as immigrants from Europe. Later patterns of mobility would add those from Africa, Asia and Latin America. All parts of Ohio with urban centers witnessed migration patterns similar to those in the Northeast, perhaps differing in degree and timing. Architecturally, many places in Northeast Ohio witnessed town construction that mirrored those in New England; and while mass consumption and production have transformed urban space, there yet remains the New England heritage in the built environment in many parts of the region. Immigrants from other areas have altered the built environment as well, for example the working class neighborhoods in Youngstown and other cities have witnessed their own types of built environments, influenced not only by immigrant workers but also by powerful businesses.

Regarding the environment, there are characteristics that make for a stronger case of regional identity. Northeast Ohio is the area largely based on the glaciated Appalachian plateau, one of 5 distinct topographical areas in the state. Moreover, the continental divide through Akron might also be a regional divide, placing those communities in the Tuscarawas Valley outside the realm of Northeast Ohio, whose streams flow north into Lake Erie as well as into the Ohio River. In addition, the Northeast area is that which contains most of the border with Lake Erie.

In terms of the political economy, perhaps the counties included in Northeast Ohio witnessed a greater concentration of urban and industrial development than other parts of the state, with places such as Youngstown, Akron, and Cleveland becoming industrial centers in the 19th century and all feeling the effects of deindustrialization in the years after the post-WWII boom. The region also has a reputation for being more “liberal” than other parts of the state. Perhaps it is the presence of several large urban centers in the region, with the connected factors of unions as well as ethnic and racial diversity that have given the region this reputation. Certainly, the greater presence of socialist activity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has also helped create this legacy. At the same time though, political leaders who have been considered conservative have also fared well in the region, and the powerful industrial leadership has been a conservative force in political economy for a century or more.

So while the *Northeast Ohio Journal of History* has used the political designations of counties

as its basis for publication, this in no way settles the question of regional definitions and identity. But careful consideration of multiple variables, only briefly mentioned here, is a requirement before being secure in designating such a place and is necessary when writing the history of regions and localities.