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Rhonda R. McClure

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Understanding Midwest Migration Patterns to Further Family History Research

By Rhonda R. McClure

The United States traces its beginnings to those early adventurous individuals who braved the unknown to settle in what to them was a new, untamed country. For many that initial motivation was for freedoms they found lacking, one of the most well known being religious freedom.

Every school child cuts his teeth on the stories of the Pilgrims and their fantastic voyage on the *Mayflower*. In the infancy of this country, small groups began to lead to larger groups; some arrived looking for the same religious freedom as the Pilgrims. Others were sent to the American colonies as a form of punishment; still others were seeking economic improvement in their life. As these immigrants arrived and began to etch out their place in the new land, they began to identify themselves with the new area. For instance, they were no longer British. Instead they were from New England or they were Southerners.¹

Due to the primitive nature of the roads in the 1600s and early 1700s, each colony was isolated from the others to a degree. While there was some movement between the colonies, most of those living in a given colony would remain there from birth to death. This was due more to the hazards of travel than anything else. While the word *road* was used to describe those ribbons that connected one community to another, the fact was that they were little

more than crude riding trails. From those trails would come some of the highways of today.

A significant move in the mid-1600s was the wish of King Charles II of England to be able to easily communicate with his governors in New York and New England. To accomplish this, a *post road* was created allowing a messenger to travel from one colony to the next with as little delay as possible. Unwittingly Charles II set in motion something that had an unexpected but permanent affect on the fledgling colonies.

Begun in 1664, the King's Highway eventually went through each of the original thirteen colonies. By 1750 the road went from Maine to Georgia. Though some parts were still little more than paths, wagons and stagecoaches could travel from Boston, Massachusetts, to Charleston, South Carolina. This road turned out to be more than just a way to communicate from one colony to another. It played a major role in the unification of the then thirteen separate colonies that would result in their banding together about twenty-five years later as a single entity that demanded its independence from England.

Many of the roads that eventually played a role in the migration of early colonists as well as later immigrants further west into the interior and away from the eastern seacoast were originally Indian paths. The Old Connecticut Path followed the Boston Post Road from Boston until it crossed the Connecticut River near Springfield. It met up with the Greenwood Trail from

¹ David Ward, "Immigration: Settlement Patterns and Spatial Distribution," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Stephan Thernstrom, editor (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 496.

Hartford, and then turned north and went up to Albany, New York. It played a part in the King's Highway.

Many of the roads used by migrants were built in times of military movement. As the military needed to get from one place to another, they often had to create the roads by which to do so. Some of the early roads carry the name of the military leader responsible for them. Two roads in Pennsylvania resulted from attempts by the British to get to Fort Duquesne, present day Pittsburgh, during the French and Indian War.

The first attempt would be that of Major General Edward Braddock. Sent from England to quell the hostilities of the French and Indians against its colonists, he realized that in order to get up to Fort Duquesne, he needed to build a road. Unfortunately he perished on this road. Braddock's Indian scouts deserted him; no doubt due to his "absolute contempt" for them, as George Washington, who served under him, later remarked.² As Braddock's forces struggled onward they were ambushed approximately eight miles from the fort. It was during this horrendous fighting that Braddock was shot in the lung and died. Washington and the other surviving British soldiers made a hasty retreat, and left Braddock's Road as the only evidence of that attempt.

When General John Forbes was put in command in 1758, he was given the same task—get to Fort Duquesne and remove the French. George Washington suggested that Forbes take his army on Braddock's Road, since it was already built. Forbes saw a flaw in this logic as the road was

heavily guarded and defended by the French. He elected to build a new road, slightly more northerly in order to surprise the French. When Forbes finished his road and reached Fort Duquesne, he found it already abandoned and burned by the French.³ He claimed the fort and renamed it Fort Pitt, from which Pittsburgh gets its name. Forbes Road, as it combined with the Lancaster Road was a major route from eastern Pennsylvania, first to the interior of Pennsylvania, and then eventually into the Midwest.

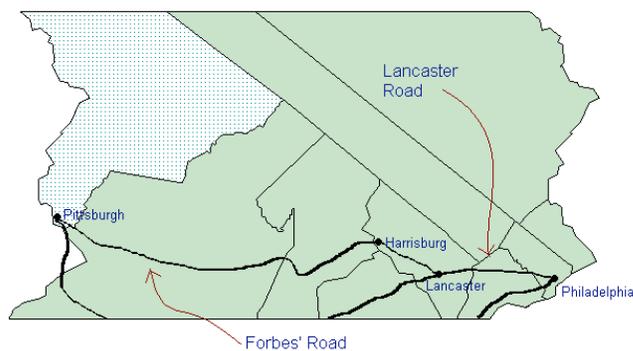


Figure 1: Early Pennsylvania Roads

Map Source: Rhonda R McClure

The year 1763 marks the end of the French and Indian War. One of the concessions made by the British was the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Using the Appalachian Mountains as a natural boundary, England decreed that all the land west of the Appalachian Mountains was set aside as Indian Hunting Grounds. The colonists were forbidden from granting lands in this area. The colonists did not like the limitation and the Royal Proclamation was yet another contributing factor that brought on the American Revolution.

² Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, *Mapping America's Past, A Historical Atlas* (New York, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

This ban on settlement was lifted in 1767. The English government, hoping to get a monetary return on its investment in the colonies, played both sides. They attempted to please the fur companies, who were using the Indians to hunt for them, by keeping the area west of the Appalachian off limits, while they also listened to and wanted to please the land speculators of the time. Due to the stories of the farmland lying along the Kentucky River, land speculators were eager to get into the hunting preserve and open it up to settlers. Indian hunting parties often attacked these early visitors.

All this came to an end in 1774 when the Treaty of Camp Charlotte ended the fighting in the area. The treaty opened up Kentucky to white colonists. The Indians agreed to remove their hunting parties north of the Ohio River and to stop attacking the white settlers. Two months later the Louisa Company was already advertising land in Kentucky for sale.

Reorganized and renamed the Transylvania Company, in March, 1775, the land company approached Daniel Boone and his axmen about cutting a road into Kentucky. The road went from what became Kingsport, Tennessee to the Kentucky River, where Boonesboro was founded and where Daniel Boone sealed his place in history.⁴

The American Revolution, while securing the independence of the American Colonies, relied heavily on its inhabitants during the years of fighting. There were soldiers to compensate, and this was going to be done through land grants.

Granting of land was something familiar to those living in the original thirteen states. When the first immigrants arrived back in the 1600s, the Kings of the various countries who laid claim to the given geographic areas gave land grants to individuals and groups. It was very much a form of payment. The problem with this approach was that while land was in abundance, most of the original states already felt that they owned the land. The early land grants written by the King of England often spelled out the northern and southern boundary. The eastern boundary was obvious – the Atlantic Ocean. In some cases there was no western boundary, or it was described in such a way, that the land grant extended westward as long as there was land to be found.⁵

The end result was that most of the states, as well as Spain and France all were claiming parts of those lands lying west of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. The new Congress, as part of the ratification process of the Constitution, had the states cede their trans-Appalachian claims. This was encouraged by the promise of the new government that the land would be sold, raising money for the operating of the government and thus delaying the inevitable—taxes.

The ceding of these lands did not happen overnight, but this prevented hostilities among the new states and gave the Congress a way to raise much needed money, as well as offer bounty land to pay off the services of those who fought for Independence.

⁴ Carrie Eldridge, *An Atlas of Appalachian Trails to the Ohio River* (Huntington, West Virginia: CDM Printing, Inc., 1998), 20.

⁵ Carnes and Garraty, 76.

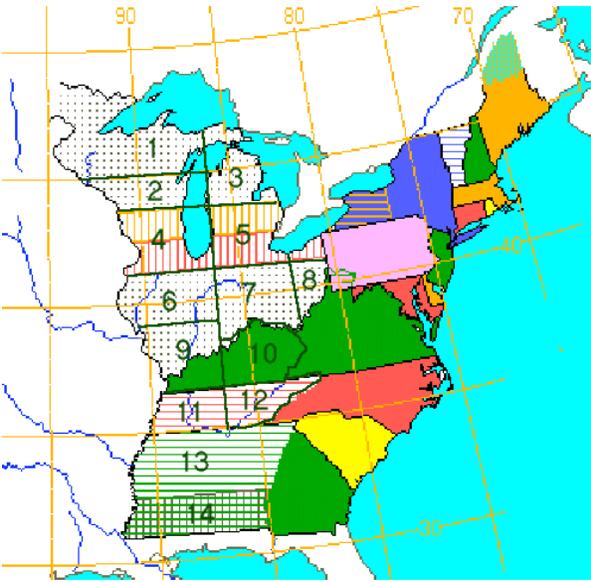


Figure 2: Thomas Jefferson's Proposal, 1784

Map Source: Rhonda R. McClure

Of course, once the land was the government's everyone had his own idea of how best to divide and govern this land. Thomas Jefferson's proposal, made in 1784, was the first step to what became the standard. The Northwest Ordinance, enacted 13 July 1787, set out how the Northwest Territory—the northern portion of the ceded lands—would be governed, and more importantly established the procedures for later territories to obtain statehood.⁶

The wording of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 called to divide the land represented in Figure 2 as numbers 1 through 9 into “not less than three nor more than five states.”⁷ The original plan was to divide the land into an Eastern, Middle and Western state. Eventually, though the land was divided into five states—Ohio (1803), Indiana (1816),

⁶ Thomas Aquinas Burke, *Ohio Lands, A Short History* (Ohio: Ohio Auditor of State, 1994), 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

Illinois (1818), Michigan (1837), Wisconsin (1848)—and the northeast section of Minnesota, which would become a state in 1858.

The birth of the Midwest was imminent. Some people saw great potential in this new land. Others were not so happy about the prospect of uprooting their established family and farm. So as soldiers were paid with bounty land in the untamed area, some felt it wasn't as great a deal as the government made it sound. They would have preferred monetary payments. Land speculators, such as Rufus Putnam, entered the scene willing to purchase the bounty land certificates from these soldiers.

Rufus Putnam helped populate a section of what eventually became Ohio, and he figured out how to make money at it. As was mentioned above, the Bounty Land warrants given to soldiers could be legally “assigned.” The certificates were valued at \$1.25 an acre. Rufus, and his fellow investors, would offer the soldiers pennies per acre. He also went to the United States government and offered to act as their agent if they would kindly group all his bounty land acreage together. In the end Rufus Putnam and his New Ohio Company purchased some 7 million acres, which ended up in a premium location in Ohio, along the Ohio River.

Ohio is an interesting state as it has many acres that were reserved for one reason or another. It also seems to have drawn a mix of population that comes from most of the original thirteen colonies.⁸ A good portion of Ohio was set aside for the bounty land warrants of those soldiers who did want to claim their own land. A portion of it was set aside to honor bounty land grants made by the states of Connecticut and Virginia,

⁸ Ward, *Immigration: Settlement Patterns*, 503.

when they thought they had title to those lands and the right to grant the land. Part of it was sold, and some, like that of the New Ohio Land Company was sold by land speculators.

Figure 3: Division of Ohio Lands

Map Source: *Ohio Lands, A Short History*



As is seen in Figure 3, if research has revealed settlement in a particular area of Ohio, knowing the history of that area and what it might have been set aside for could lead the researcher to additional records. In the case of the counties found in the U.S. Military District, there is the potential for a bounty land case file through the National Archives. For those settling in counties found in the Virginia Military District, it is possible that the ancestor fought in the American Revolution from Virginia. Those who settled in counties found in the Connecticut Western Reserve probably have connections to that state. Given that there are histories written about the Western Reserve and its early pioneers, it is possible that the researcher can learn

not only that an ancestor came from Connecticut, but where in Connecticut.

As these lands were opening up, settlers began to see the potential in the new area. Just as the trappers who traveled into early Kentucky came back east with stories of lush land, so too were stories coming back about the new Northwest Territory. Pioneers began to pull up stakes and head west. The method of transportation they used to travel to the new land depended on their place of origin.

For those in New York, one method was to get on the Seneca Road, which began in Buffalo and travel along Lake Erie until it went into the Lake Shore Trail. This continued around Lakes Erie and Huron and ended up in Detroit. Of course, for some the question was how to get to Buffalo in the first place. One way was to take the Mohawk Turnpike from Albany to Utica and then head west on the Great Genesee Road until the person reached Buffalo. Another route was the Catskill Turnpike. Located below the Finger Lakes, this route would eventually connect the Hudson River to the Allegheny River. These were the two major routes across New York until 1825 when the Erie Canal was completed.



Figure 3: New York Trails

Map Source: Rhonda R. McClure

For those in the Mid Atlantic, one method used was to travel down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. Many would work their way to either Forbes Road or Braddock's Road. They would then arrive in Pittsburgh where they would either buy or build a flatboat to travel down the Ohio River. This route brought many individuals into the settlements to the southeast, including the New Ohio Land Company. This route was not without danger. Some pioneers lost everything they owned. Such dangers afflicted many travelers as more families migrated westward.

Another road traveled in the Mid Atlantic was Zane's Trace. This road was named for Ebenezer Zane, who is considered to be the founder of Wheeling in what would eventually become West Virginia. This road was originally an Indian trail, as so many of the earlier roads were. The federal government decided to renovate it so that it was travelable by wagons. In return for his work on the road, Zane was given a land grant in Ohio. His land is known as Zanesville today. Ebenezer ferried folks from Wheeling, on his ferry, across the Ohio River, and then they traveled along his road into his town. Eventually, Zane's Trace would go from Wheeling through Ohio and then into Limestone, which is now Maysville, Kentucky. The trail met up with the Wilderness Road, which brought folks from the southern area of Virginia and West Virginia, as well as from the southern states. The Wilderness Road achieved the marvel of cutting through the Cumberland Gap.

While those living in the eastern states were beginning to venture west, there were always new waves of immigrants arriving

as well. Before 1820 these waves were more like ripples. Beginning in 1820, the waves began to get larger. By the time of the 1910 census enumeration approximately 15% of the population of the United States was of foreign birth.⁹ This is the most foreign born the United States has ever enumerated. After 1910, this number declined steadily for many decades due to limited immigration.

While some came for the same reasons as those early pioneers who settled the original thirteen colonies, there were some events in Europe that were motivating factors. The populations in many countries amplified. The Industrial Revolution also played a role in the immigration increase. Finally the change in farming systems left many of those who used to work the land homeless.¹⁰ To those who found themselves homeless or those who were tired of living in poverty in the old country, the United States sounded like an answer to their prayers.

In 1820, and continuing until about 1845, immigration was primarily from Great Britain and Germany, with a few from other countries. However, in the 1840s and continuing until about 1880, in addition to these countries, the Scandinavians also began to arrive in impressive numbers. The Scandinavians continued to arrive in large numbers, peaking in the decade from 1881-1890. As

⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Census Brief—Coming to America: A Profile of the Nations Foreign Born* (Washington, DC: Department of Commerce, 2000), as found online at the U.S. Census Web site <<http://www.census.gov/>>.

¹⁰ June Drenning Holmquist, editor, *They Chose Minnesota, A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Press, 1981), 4.

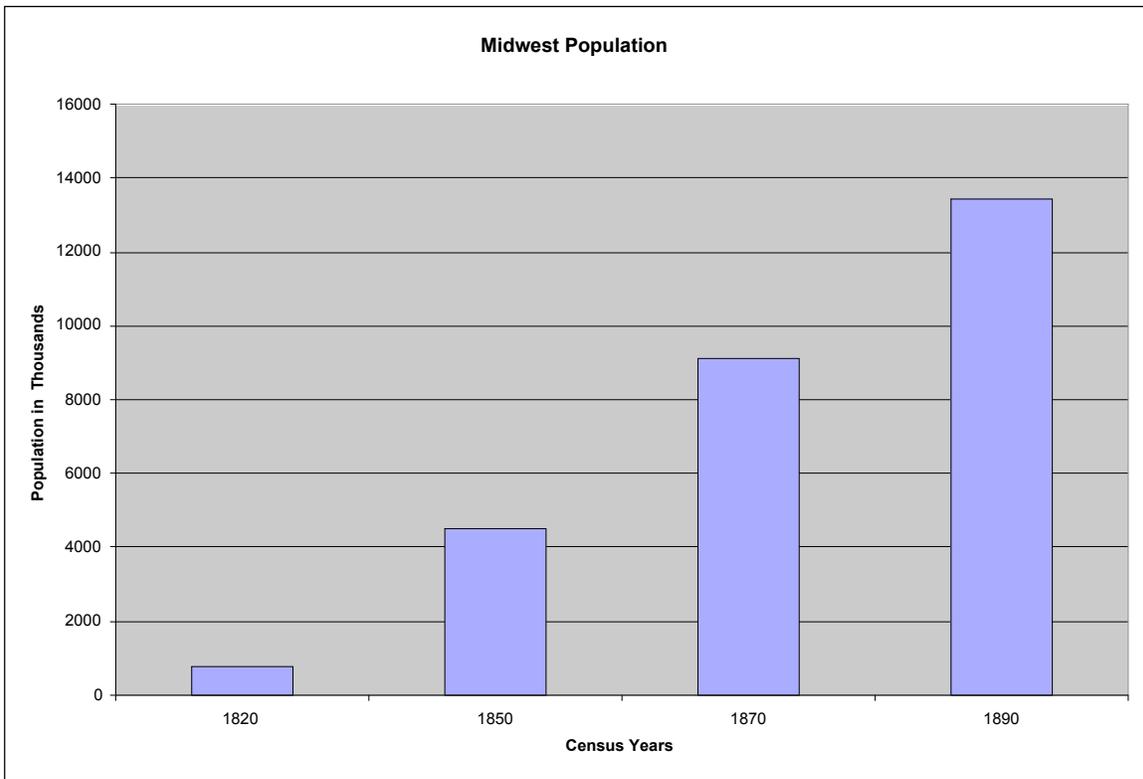


Table 1 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (White Plains, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1989), pages 24 -37.

immigration from Great Britain and Germany began to decrease beginning in 1880 and continuing into the 1900s, immigration from southern and western Europe was on the rise. The decade from 1901 to 1910 saw approximately 5.7 million immigrants from southern and western Europe.¹¹ Many of these traveled through Ellis Island, who in 1907 saw 7 million immigrants come through its processing center.

Many of these immigrants were searching for land to call their own. Some of them would head for the Midwest, especially those who arrived in the mid 1800s. In fact, the

¹¹ Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans, A History of Immigration*, 4th edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.

Midwest, which contained only 8% of the total population in 1820 would grow to about 18% in 1850 and by 1890 would account for 34% of the country's population, the highest of all the regions in that year.¹² Much of this was the direct result of immigrants flocking to the nation.

There were a number of different ports along the eastern seaboard. Boston, New York, Baltimore and Philadelphia were some of the busiest. Many of the Irish immigrants arrived either through Boston or New York. The English and those who arrived from Europe, including Scandinavians, came through New York. The Germans who left from Hamburg or Bremen often disembarked in Baltimore, and those coming from Le Havre

¹² Ward, *Immigration: Settlement Patterns*, 504.

sometimes docked in New Orleans.¹³ Of course how they continued their trip into the Midwest varied based on where they disembarked.

For those who arrived in New York, especially after 1825 when the Erie Canal opened, the easiest way was to go by water on the Erie Canal, and then continue on the Great Lakes, disembarking in Detroit, Chicago or Milwaukee. As previously mentioned, the Ohio River, which immigrants could travel from Pittsburgh, required an overland route from Philadelphia and across the Allegheny mountains.

of the road. While surveying and clearing began in 1808, it was not until 1815 that construction of the road actually began. It was not completed until 1838. While the original specifications for the road were to go from Baltimore to St. Louis, as shown in Figure 5, the actual road ended in Vandalia.

In addition to making it easier for those wishing to travel west, the National Road did something more for the cities along its route. Those cities began to rival the eastern seaports as trading centers and cities of culture. As people traveled the National Road, they knew they could find

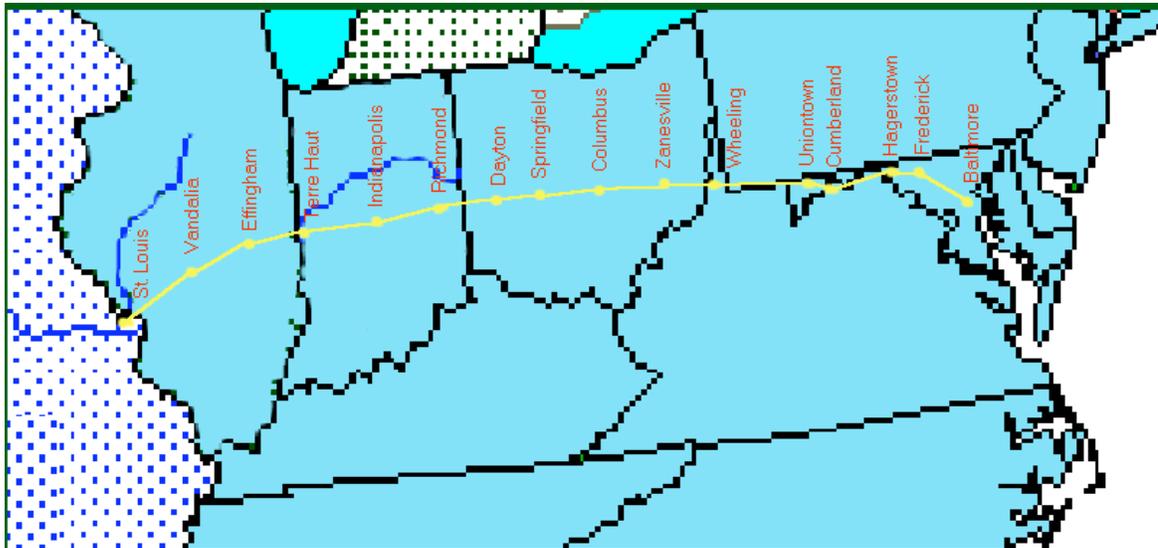


Figure 5: The National Road

Map Source: Rhonda R. McClure

The other route that some would take was the National Road. Begun after the War of 1812, the road was built using revenue raised by the sale of public domain land in Ohio. Congress passed an Act in 1803 that set aside 5% of the money made from the sale of this land to finance the building

hotels, theatres and good mercantiles in the cities along the road. Baltimore became a prime seaport because it was at the head of the National Road.

It is not unusual to trace an ancestral line back and find that children were born in towns near the National Road and that the lineage goes back to a Mid Atlantic state two or three generations before. Also it was not unusual for families that migrated

¹³ Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 5.

to Ohio, to then migrate further westward as the new states were opening up, including Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and finally Minnesota.

of birth outnumber those living in a state contiguous to their state of birth.¹⁴

Of those living in the United States, approximately 18% were living in the

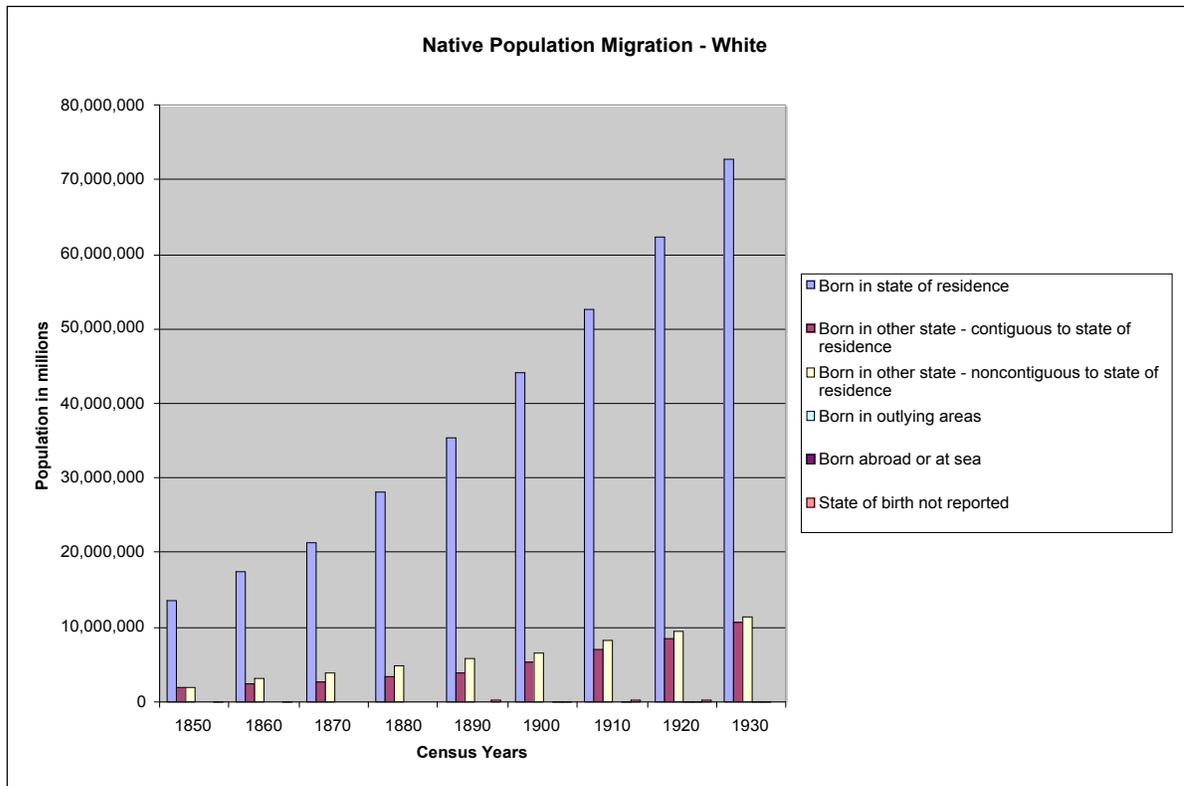


Table 2 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970* (White Plains, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1989), page 89.

While there was always a majority of White individuals still living in the state in which they were born, it is obvious by the statistics shown in Table 2 that beginning in 1860, those who were no longer living in the state of their birth had ventured beyond the next state over. This continued to be the trend well into the 20th century as people continued to seek a better life, better land, and the eternal move west. This trend was not the same for African Americans and other races. In fact, not until 1930 would the numbers of those living in a state noncontiguous to the state

Midwest by 1850. The U.S. Census Bureau has divided the country into regions. The North Central Region of the country was divided into two divisions, the East North Central Division, which includes the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin and the West North Central Division, which includes the states of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

¹⁴ Bureau of Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (White Plains, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1989), 89.

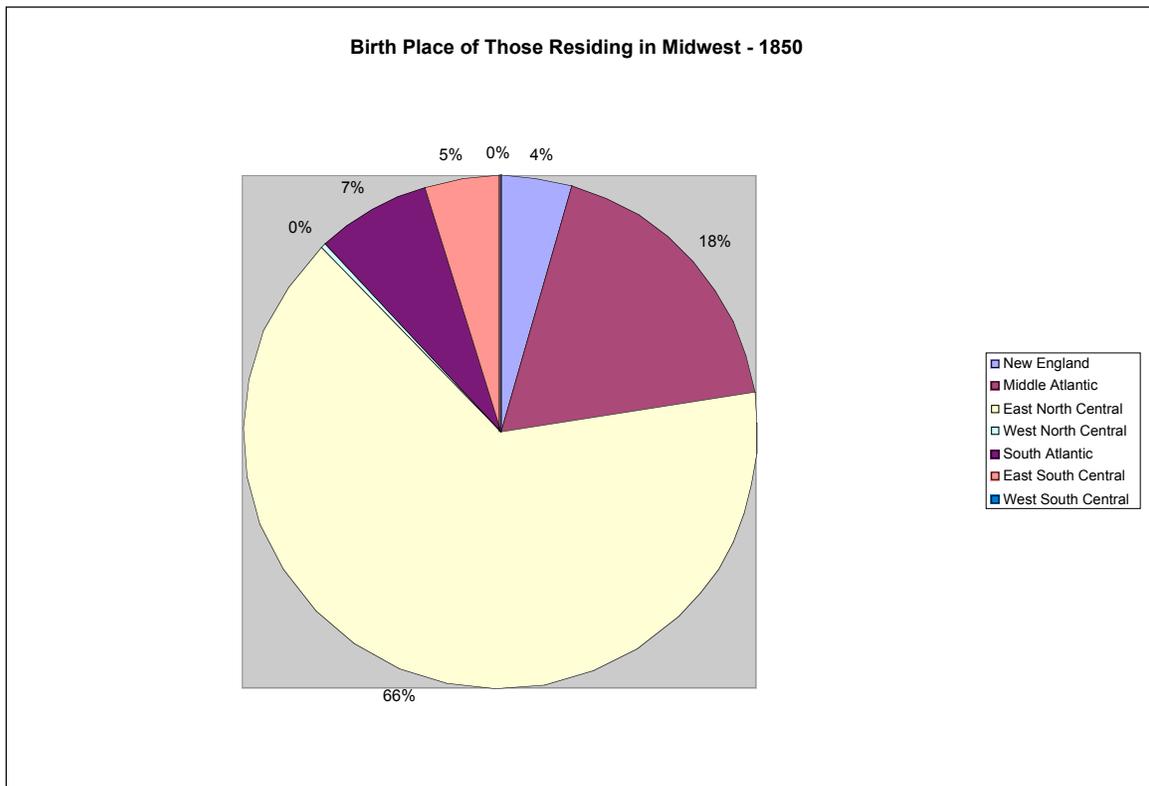


Table 3 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1870* (White Plains, New York: Kraus International Publications: 1989), page 91.

Of those born in the United States, approximately 3.9 million lived in the East North Central Division, known to many more as the Midwest. The percentages in Table 3 show a majority of the inhabitants were born either in the Middle Atlantic Division, which consisted of the states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, or in the South Atlantic Division which consisted of the states of Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Only 4% of those born in the New England states would have moved to the Midwest by 1850.

Of the half a million immigrants who had made their way to the Midwest by 1850, the majority of those came from Germany and Ireland. The states were just gearing up with their representatives and other efforts to entice immigrants to come and settle in their states. Eventually 33 states and territorial governments created immigration bureaus. In 1845, Michigan was the first state to send an immigration agent to the docks in New York City. His sole purpose was to recruit settlers to the state of Michigan. Wisconsin was the next state to do something similar in 1852. The immigration bureaus eventually added publishing of brochures and guidebooks as well as advertising in newspapers in Europe to their list of methods of

enticement.¹⁵ Of course each state highlighted the good aspects of the state, keeping quiet about any problems the state may have had, such as extreme bad weather at any time of the year. Most of the brochures and guidebooks were published in many different languages. Table 4 shows the old country percentages of the immigrants already living in the Midwest. Through the enticement efforts of most of these states they saw major immigrant growth in the coming years. The immigrant bureaus died out in the latter 1800s, but through their efforts millions of people arrived looking for the promised land, many of them heading to the Midwest.

Many of those living in the Midwest in the 1850s wrote glowing letters home to family left back in the old country. These letters, it turns out, were the most effective recruitment tools the states had at their disposal. Without realizing it, those immigrants who wrote home extolling the virtues of their new land were often the deciding factor to those family who had not yet been convinced that the trip was worth it. Other inducements sent home to lure family to the United States were prepaid tickets or money to be used for a ticket.

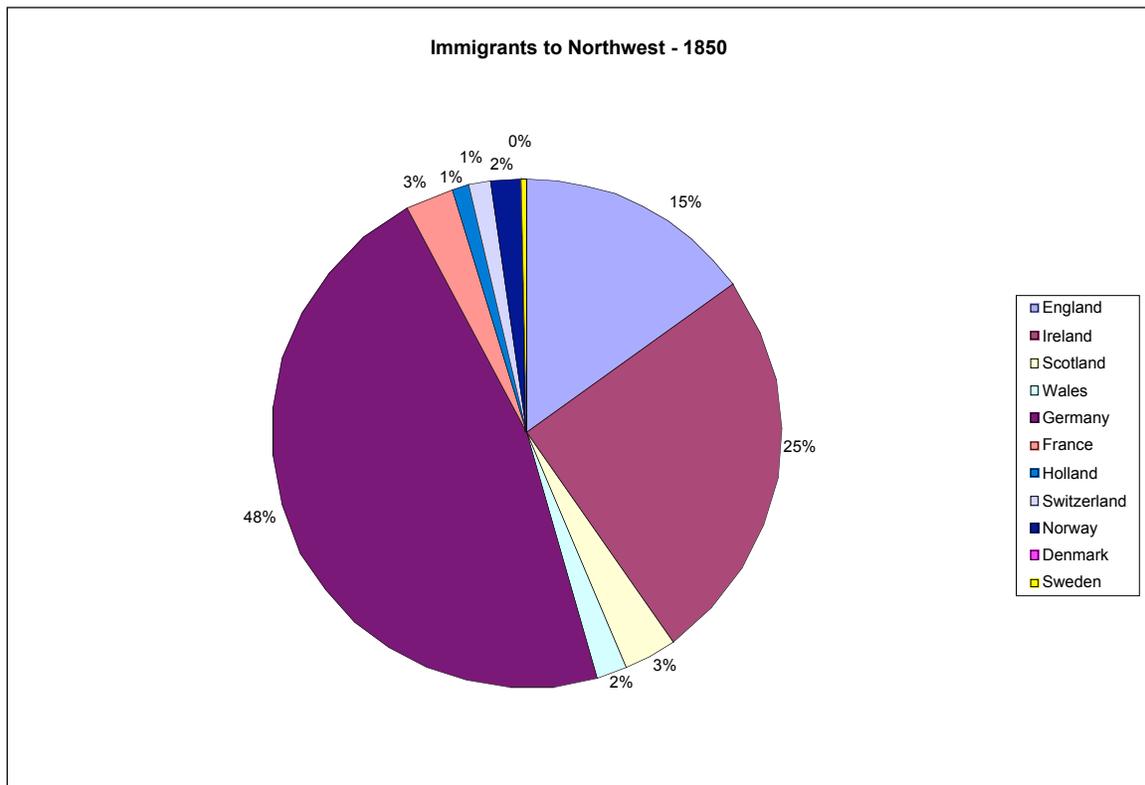


Table 4 Source: Nativities of Population by State of Residence, 1850, Seventh US Census, as found in Stephen Thernstrom, editor, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), page 1050.

¹⁵ Dinnerstein and Reimers, *Ethnic Americans*, 27.

Eventually the United States' Immigration and Naturalization Service instated quotas and other restrictions on who could enter the country, this slowed the tide of immigrants. However from the mid 1800s to the early 1900s, the immigrant gate was wide open and many headed to the shores of the United States and then helped to populate the Midwest as well as expand the country ever westward.

Knowing the history of the Midwest and the various routes used to enter the new land are important to genealogical researchers. It is through this understanding of how the land was acquired and for what purposes some of it was used that researchers begin to know where to look for additional information on the ancestral lines being investigated. Understanding how historical events affected travel and road construction offers insight into whether or not a family would have braved the new untamed wilderness and if they may have spent time in one state before eventually settling permanently in another.

Most states have published something on this subject. State historical societies in conjunction with University Presses offer the best avenue for detailed information about migration into a given state or region. These publications often include charts, maps and tables that allow the researcher an overview of a given aspect of migration into the area. Such publications are an invaluable tool for the genealogical researcher trying to determine the origins of an ancestor.

While this article has concentrated on the factors that influenced migration to the Midwest, a similar approach could be used for any region. There are publications and statistics available from the overview to

the minute on who was living in a given area at a given time and how they came to be there. With this knowledge, it is sometimes possible for the researcher who knows only a state or country of birth for an individual to actually identify the town or county from which the individual came, thus allowing the researcher to concentrate efforts in that part of the state or country in question.