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Rhythms of Perception

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The settlement of the U.S. can be matched up with changing rhythms of perception — the way that rituals and settings shape the possibilities we see for our lives.

Family farms and rural villages traditionally were steady. Natural rhythms offered people endless chances to recite the same tasks, presumably making slightly different choices and learning slightly different lessons each time. On the other hand, towns are landscapes of growth. People are constantly being disconnected from where they were and must exercise reason in order to make sense of the changing and more artificial rhythms in their lives.

This correspondence can be traced in the Midwest, which typifies the ways American life has changed during the last two centuries. First there was the land, which was inhabited by individuals then ordered by faraway companies (or the government) and sold to successive waves of settlers. Then villages emerged as complements to the rural life that surrounded them. Finally, towns appeared “as foreign bodies set down, like boulders on a plain. ...”¹ As people’s circumstances changed, as they moved from farm to village to town, they measured their possibilities by a succession of different rhythms.

Ashtabula County, Ohio

The northeast corner of Ohio is a place of transition. The border with Pennsylvania marks the end of the eastern mountains and the beginning of 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.

Seeds of change were sown not in the Ohio soil but in the land companies of New England. Here, in meeting rooms far from the wilderness, rules were set down by which associations of investors were to be governed. The rules included strict guidelines for the orderly survey, sale and settlement of land purchased in great tracts from the federal government.

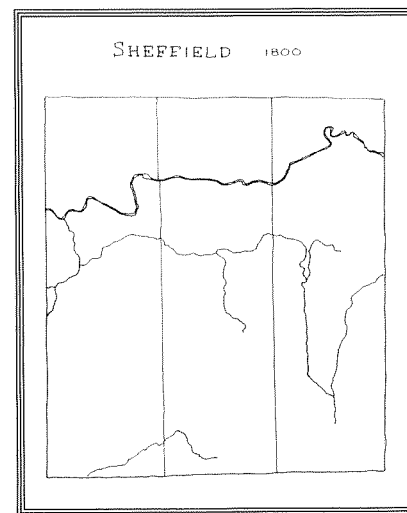
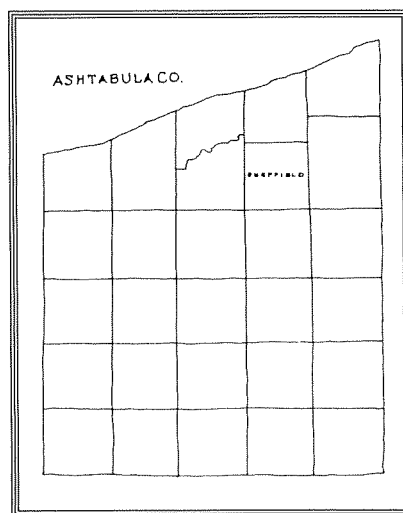
Typical was a contract for the territory of Ashtabula County. In 1795, the private Connecticut Land Company drew up articles of association. The articles allowed for "survey of lands to be made into townships containing each sixteen thousand acres; to fix on a township in which the first settlement shall 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."²

Stockholders contracted for different townships within the county. Each owner of a township was expected to follow company rules, but was nevertheless free to manage internally the subdivision and sale of lots for personal profit. Differences of attitude among stockholders as well as the natural variations among sites produced multiple arrangements. All, however, followed a simple rectangular survey.

Samuel Mather, Jr., a stockholder in the Connecticut Land Company, acquired Sheffield Township in the original 1798 division of parcels within the county. Instead of selling the land directly to settlers, he divided it among his three children, giving to each an equal share. The central part was not surveyed for actual sale until 1818, followed by the east and west parts in 1825.

But in the meantime, settlement without right or title or payment of rent had already begun. A rapidly



expanding squatter colony forced the survey of the middle part of the township. Along the road that had been improved by the first squatters, more were bound to arrive. Random settlement was constraining the future possibilities of Mather's heirs.

The first survey recognized existing farms. North of the Ashtabula River, in the moderately hilly terrain, lots were surveyed along the road and were made relatively small, averaging 80 acres. South of the river, on more level land where there was as yet no settlement, lots were defined by a grid. All the lots south of the river, with the exception of those adjoining the river, were perfect squares of 160 acres each.

When the east and west parts of Sheffield Township were surveyed and offered for sale, a few squatters were already on the west part, north of the river. A second road had been cut through just south of the river, thus increasing pressure on the owners and their agents alike to stay one jump ahead of a "growing tide."

These later surveys, like the earlier one, were more irregular in the north-

ern half of the township. This was partly the consequence of the presence of two existing roads and the river and partly because lot lines had to be adjusted and rights-of-way provided to serve existing farms.

Early squatters had all possibilities in their hands. If they had survived the grueling migration, they could take possession of a place. No artificial demarcations limited their choices.

The first surveys limited these possibilities. As the grid expanded, certain choices were eliminated. Fewer places could be had simply by squatting. Roads could not wander as they had once done, following the contours of the land as they wound toward their destinations. Henceforth, the land would be purchased in rectangles and the roads would run in straight lines.

Eventually, more lines dissected the first survey, signalling definite choices. The work of holding the land called forth altogether different rhythms than the act of taking it and selling it had. in the first place. As settlers became farmers, they ceded possibilities and faced a limited reality.

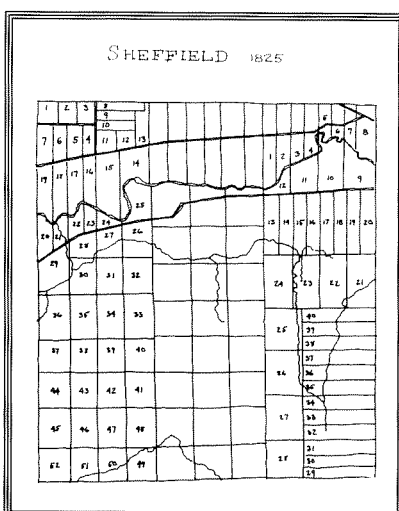
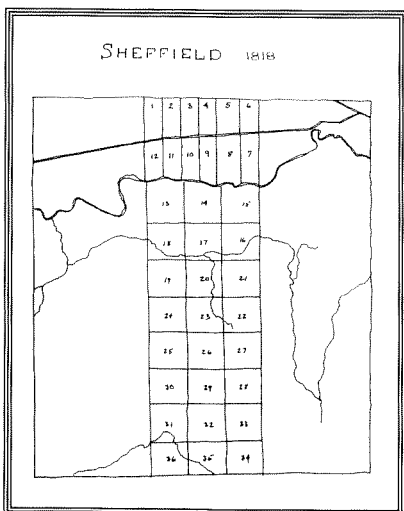
A Farm

Farm rhythms measure the possibilities of a single family. Daily chores are central to the life of the farm family; within these measured cadences most people expect to find their possibilities for self-fulfillment. The growth of the region presents new opportunities, but they emerge at the circumference of established life, too remote for most people to understand.

The tempo of a farm is uncontrived. Clocks are used, but chores are more a function of sunrise and first frost than of wound springs and pendulum works. Basic patterns are the result of continuously repeated actions.

Accents in the rhythms coincide with the forward movement of nature. The morning of each day and the spring of each year mark not only the start of natural cycles but also the beginning of canons. One round must be completed daily: cooking, collecting eggs, feeding pigs and sheep. Another round must be completed yearly: tilling the soil, harvesting the crops and grinding the corn into meal.

Shorter canons fit neatly within longer ones, each adjusting to varia-



Drawings by Ralph Knowles.

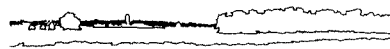
All plans, unless otherwise noted, are redrawn from *Atlas of Ashtabula County, Ohio* (Philadelphia: Titus, Simmons and Titus, 1874).

tions in the other: Days repeat within seasons; seasons repeat within years; years repeat within variations too sluggish for people even to notice that things are changing around them.

The farm, when seen in the landscape, appears timeless, complete and independent. The essentials of life are contained within its boundaries. Self-sufficiency (the provision of fresh water, waste, food, fiber and shelter) requires the ritual connection of five basic parts: land, well, house, privy and barn.



First, there is the cultivated soil. Some woods always remain; they are a trace of the vanished forest, useful for lumber and for game. But mostly the land is cleared. Orchards, field crops and, above all, pastures stretch toward the horizon. The few other discernible parts of the farm are clustered near the road, discrete elements in the landscape.



Every farm needs a source of potable water: Sometimes it is a spring or river, but more often it is a well. Unlike the survey's undifferentiated grid, the well provides a clear point of origin and starting point for laying out the farmstead. Around the well is arranged everything that relates to water: the scrubbing of floors and boots, of arms and necks, and of fruits and vegetables; the watering of livestock; the washing of clothes.

The early farmhouse is a two-story wood structure with four rooms. It is often high on the south with a porch, low on the north. Here, the kitchen, of all rooms, is most occupied. Except for

the stove anchored to a chimney flue, furniture is shuffled around. Even a piece as big as the kitchen table might be moved at regular intervals for canning or feather plucking.



The privy is a small building serving as the family toilet. Its location is critical. It must be close to the kitchen door for convenience, but it also must be downhill and beyond the well. Polluted water, no less than a failed crop, threatens the family.



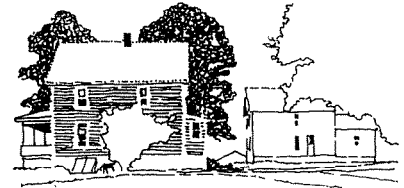
Last is the barn. This is the granary, the storehouse for the fruits of the earth as they are brought forth by the family's labors. The barn might be some combination of buildings, including a silo or corncrib. But their combined function is to store a great quantity of harvested material for people and for animals and, in bad weather, to provide shelter for the animals themselves.

These five parts are essential. None can be removed and any more would be redundant. They appear as discernible parts of a repeating pattern in the landscape.

The growth of a farm is proportioned to maintain a family. A new house can be added, but only to provide for uninterrupted succession. This first-hand account records how five generations occupy the same two houses:

"My story begins on October 3, 1883," writes Evelyn Lillie Austin. "My grandparents, Sidney and Phebe,

were married that day ... and after completion [of a new house] spent their entire married life there.



"My father Harry was their first child ... [and when he] married Esther Carlson, another new home was constructed on the same property. I was their first child followed by my brother Maynard. [Maynard and I] grew up living very close to our grandparents and [to our] cousins up the road....

"When Maynard married Lois Hayes in 1944, Grandma, now widowed, moved in with [my parents] and Maynard took over the vacated house. Grandfather Sidney and my father Harry [had been] partners in farming this property. [Then it was] Harry and Maynard....

"Maynard is still farming the land. After Esther's death, Maynard [and Lois] moved in with Harry....

"Duane [their second child] married and moved into the original homestead [where the fifth generation is now growing up].

"Those families still live there."

A Village

Village rhythms, in addition to supporting the rural life around them, measure the possibilities of a few clustered households. Traditional bonds of kinship are somewhat loosened to include outside relationships. Still, people know one another by name and are acquainted with each other's histories. They have their quarrels and settle them. They help one another and if anything unusual happens, band together.

There are accents in village life that do not appear in the rhythms of the farm. They are the result of collective enterprises that have loops of attention and energy that extend beyond the village itself. On Sundays or on special holidays, for example, families from surrounding farms flock to the village and stand around in the park with its maple trees. From here, they cross the road to the church or to the store where they peep through the windows at shoes or cloth from New York. Election days mark a political cycle in which the exchange or affirmation of ideas can affect unseen others.

The repeating patterns of village life, like those of the farm, have multiple layers, but they occupy different dimensions of possibility. There are household chores, small and private activities by which a house and garden are occupied. And there are public actions, shared with more people doing the same things at the same time.

Contrived variations are felt in the movement of village life. Most days are sluggish, apparently lacking momentum even to carry through the week. But the pace regularly picks up. There are even times, the Fourth of July, for example, that exhaust people. Afterwards, they are glad to fall back to a slower tempo.

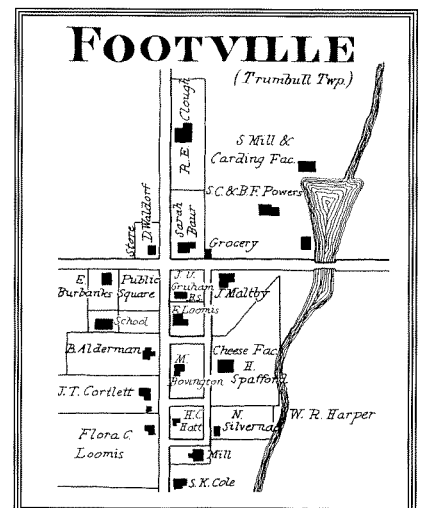
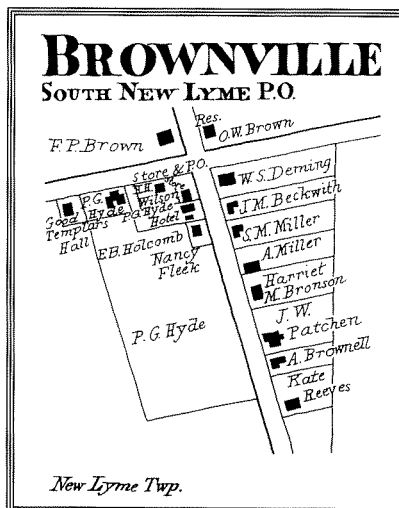
A village can appear as timeless in the landscape as a farm. One might see all or most of its parts just by standing in place and turning around. There are only a few parts, but each village can include different kinds and a different number. The parts are not quite so determined by survival as those of a farm and the connections among them are not as rigid. Still, the rhythms of connection remain familiar, easily recognized from year to year.

Houses, not land, are essential to a village. Behind every house is a vesti-

gial farm, smaller and less perfectly developed than its rural counterpart. There is a barn and a well. Beekeeping is customary; sometimes there is a cow or a few goats. And there is a garden that furnishes vegetables, fruit and, for festive occasions, flowers. A garden does not provide all the necessary sustenance, so most villagers work at some additional task. They occupy a village as well as a private household and take responsibility for preserving both. Houses, while standing separately, make a loosely connected set.

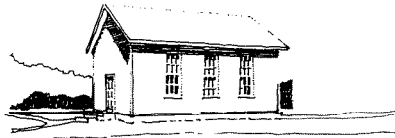


A public place — a piece of land specifically set aside for common use, undivided and owned by all — often marks the center of a village. Sometimes it is only an expanded crossroads; more often it is made distinctive in some way. Trees are planted for ornament and shade. Under the trees, pathways crisscross a flat lawn and

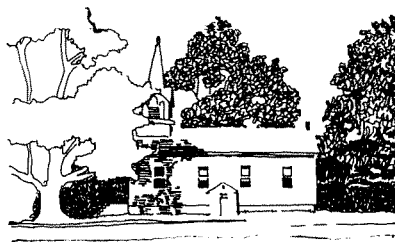


come out at streets on all sides. At the edges of the park, statues, or cut stones bear inscriptions of dedication, remembrance and inspiration. Across the streets and surrounding the park are the few other unique items in the village, buildings that focus the collective attention of people on education, worship, or trade.

Universal education and unusual fertility pack the early one-room school with pupils. One teacher and, perhaps, a young assistant make sure their wards arrive and have a midday meal. They teach the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Beyond that they instill temperance and respect for authority. The meal, temperance and respect are perhaps the best preparation for watching a loom, driving a team and counting. But the rest is not totally forgotten and is helpful in building a young nation. In the village of Sheffield Corners, the teacher is paid \$1183.89 per year for her dedication and effort.



Churches are the second most common public buildings and are given a central place in most villages. They are generally sited at the cross-roads or across the street from the park. They are conspicuous, standing out by size and shape from other surrounding buildings.



Each village is likely to have a store. This is not a specialty shop for buying only one kind of thing. Instead, it provides a general stock, a bit of everything. Farmers are mostly self-sufficient, but they need or want some things that they cannot grow or make for themselves. Shoes and certain kinds of cloth, patent medicines, spices, coal oil, pots and pans; these and other items need to be traded for or bought. Often there is a post office inside the store. Here people can send and receive messages and thus occupy a larger world.



Sometimes, in addition to a store, the village might contain a blacksmith shop or even a cooper's shed. These are less common, but small machines of various kinds need attention, horses need shoes and, in a place of dairy farms, there is a staple need for repairs to wooden casks and tubs.

The last major component, a manufacturing plant, is found at the edge of the village and away from the center of things. In Sheffield Township and surrounding areas it is most likely to be a cheese factory, but it might also be a saw or a grist mill, a tannery, or a carding factory. Not more than one such operation is located in a village and some villages have none at all. It depends on access to ample, free-moving water and, therefore, on proximity to a creek or river.

A village grows as necessary to maintain the rural life around it. Since that life is fairly steady, there is no need for indefinite expansion, although there can be hopes for it. Houses appear

one at a time, usually built by the families who will occupy them. But occasionally a village family will build a larger house than it needs, or even a hotel.

The young schoolhouse assistant usually comes from a village family, but the teacher might have arrived from a distant town. Lacking a family, she takes room and board in the village, perhaps with a widow trying to make ends meet as seamstress and landlady. The widow and teacher together make a new kind of household, not a traditional farm family, but a fellowship of mutual need just the same.

Like the teacher, a preacher might come from a distant place. It is recorded that in 1824 Elder Lane of the Erie Methodist Conference arrived to preach in Sheffield Corners (now Gageville) only once every four weeks. Then in 1844, a proper church was built. Here the membership grew and by 1875, the "Rev. E. S. Baker, who resided in Kellogsville, arrived nearly every Sunday to preach to a flock of 40." The record does not show where the reverend stayed on those occasions, but a comfortable night in the village would have served him best. And here he might have shared news of the road with another traveller or two.

It is the number of dwellings, more than their size, that tells us most about a village. The farm means a single and continuous ancestry. The 20 or so houses in a village represent multiple histories. Most of these are complete stories including family, friends and village occupation. A few, like those of the teacher and preacher, are incomplete and glimpsed only in passing.

A Town

The changing rhythms of American life can be traced through the growth of the town of Ashtabula Harbor. The

story begins with a single cabin, alone in the wilderness. Then a village "with its log tavern, blazing fireplace, whiskey toddy and a rough, hearty welcome from the landlord" forms attractions for traders on the lakes and travellers on their way farther west. Finally, a town rises to meet the challenge of Great Lakes trade. The growth is not merely in the number of residents, but also in the levels of possibilities.

The possibilities of an isolated cabin conform to wilderness rhythms. In 1803, a settler named George Beckwith was the first to bring his family to the mouth of the Ashtabula River. The following year, he perished in the January snow while carrying on his back salt and provisions from Austinsburg, 12 miles to the south. His wife remained in their cabin, supporting her children by assisting travelers across the stream in her canoe.

The terrible isolation is relieved by village life, but wilderness rhythms cannot be entirely forgotten. By 1812, a cluster of log houses marked Ashtabula Harbor. Forests still covered the land. Roads were only paths broken through the wilderness. The harbor was a mere opening into the creek. But starting in 1836, "407 steamboats and 156 other vessels entered the harbor loaded with coal, iron ore, limestone, salt and pine lumber." Meanwhile, the snows that killed George Beckwith now regularly locked vessels within the piers each winter, setting them free to ply their trade anew each spring.

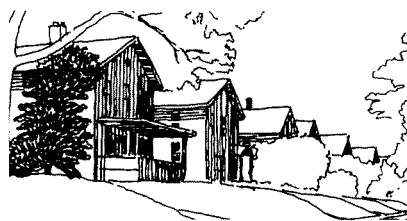
Town rhythms are more contrived, less natural. By 1837, framed dwellings had replaced log houses. There was still the river with its seasons, but the old village of 1812 had extended up the street two or three blocks. The period 1837-61 saw the building of an east-west railroad accompanied by slow but steady growth. Then the

Civil War generated a burst of activity based on two new rail lines to the south. Everybody still had household chores, perhaps even a garden to keep. They still went forth every day to work, shop and meet friends. But wartime connections to an outside world added unfamiliar rhythms of manufacture, trade and travel on top of the older, natural ones.

The parts of a town, unlike those of a farm or village, cannot easily be seen at one time. Even by moving around, one might not see all of life's essentials. Still, the town can be explained as being made up of a few distinct parts.

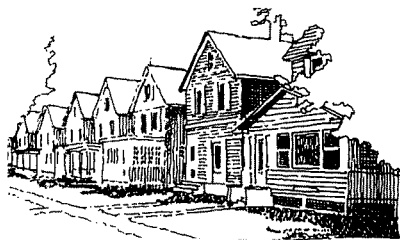
The main parts of a town number no more than the parts of a farm or a village. Lewis Mumford describes them as the shrine, spring, village, market and stronghold. But within each part, individual elements often multiply and lose their identity. Here we must shift our focus from things to classes of things in order to describe their changing connections.

Houses in a town differ in two significant ways from rural houses. First, each stands on a parcel of land too small for obtaining subsistence. Fresh water arrives by one set of pipes, and foul water departs by another. Behind the house may be a place for a carriage (later for automobiles) but there is no barn, no individual granary.



Second, the individual identity of each house is linked not so much with a family as it is with a uniform design set. Similarities among them can border on actual or near replication: The

building, lot and street all repeat with only slight variations at the hands of different occupants. The result is the anonymity of individual houses but distinctions between groups of houses based on social status or common site characteristics.



Other types of buildings in a town also appear in quantity. There is not one shop or office but many. Like houses, they do not stand alone. The ones that stand on corners may be special. Along the block each may try for individuality. But more often than not the buildings merge into a common theme.

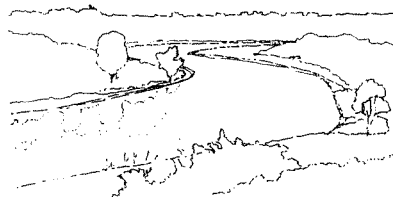


Districts, not individual structures, are the functional parts of a town. Even when there is a one-of-a-kind thing, such as the “basculer” bridge in Ashtabula Harbor, it is likely to fall into a much larger set of related things. The bridge is simply the most distinctive item in a distinctive section.

The districts of Ashtabula Harbor were formed around natural features and successive additions (labeled “adds” on the early plans) as farmers sold their land. An 1874 plan shows a critical moment when new growth was imminent. Farms were already being subdivided so that large sets of needed housing could be added to the existing

village. The way these additions were made, their geometry and succession, established the parts of the town and determined their rhythmic connections to each other.

The central feature of Ashtabula Harbor is the river and its riparian lands. Here, as the harbor developed, lake boats entered and tied up, safe from unpredictable Canadian storms. Loading and unloading was made easy by close proximity to railroad tracks laid on the sediments of the estuary. The railroads occupied most of this flat land and held it for future expansion.



The second part of the town is the whole of a vestigial village. Here can be seen traces of the earlier and more independent development. There are perhaps 20 or 30 houses, all identified with a family name. Two stores, a school and a blacksmith shop complete the typical set. The 1874 plan shows the village remaining as one of the parts of a much larger arrangement.

The third part of the town is an addition that expanded the village southward in a regular grid. One set of streets parallels the village and the lakeshore. The opposing streets enclose uniform blocks that are numbered and subdivided for future development. Streets are named but blocks and lots are only numbered. Missing from the addition are the identifications of a house with generations of a village family.

Like the third part of the town, the fourth and fifth parts are additions that contain house lots. What makes these parts separate is that each has a distinct

grid orientation and block pattern.

A sixth part is just emerging. It is recognizable as different but is not yet a complete quantity. It, like the other parts, remains visible today.

Ashtabula recapitulates the developing rituals of settings around the region. But here, all the stages can be seen in one place. First, wilderness life recites the secret rhythms of nature. Then village rites demonstrate an emerging public life. Finally, the repeated acts of a town are planned to make the fact of countless lives intelligible.

Over the course of time, the rhythms of parts within parts are re-created through combinations of independent rituals. The counterpoint shapes multiple possibilities. ●

Notes

1. From Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. All succeeding quotes and anecdotes, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from *A History of Ashtabula County, Ohio* (Philadelphia: Williams Brothers, 1798-1878).

2. These private surveys followed the general principles of the 1785 ordinance but with dimensional variations, such as a 25 sq. mi. township instead of the standard 36 sq. mi.

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