

Persistent Echoes of New England in the Western Reserve

By ALBERTA EISEMAN

A GRACEFUL white church looks out across a swath of emerald grass to the town hall, the two old buildings nestled in an oval-shaped green. Maple trees cast their welcome shade. It's the very image of rural New England.

In fact, however, it's Tallmadge Circle, in the heart of Tallmadge, Ohio, a small city that proudly traces its roots to early Connecticut — to Litchfield, to be precise.

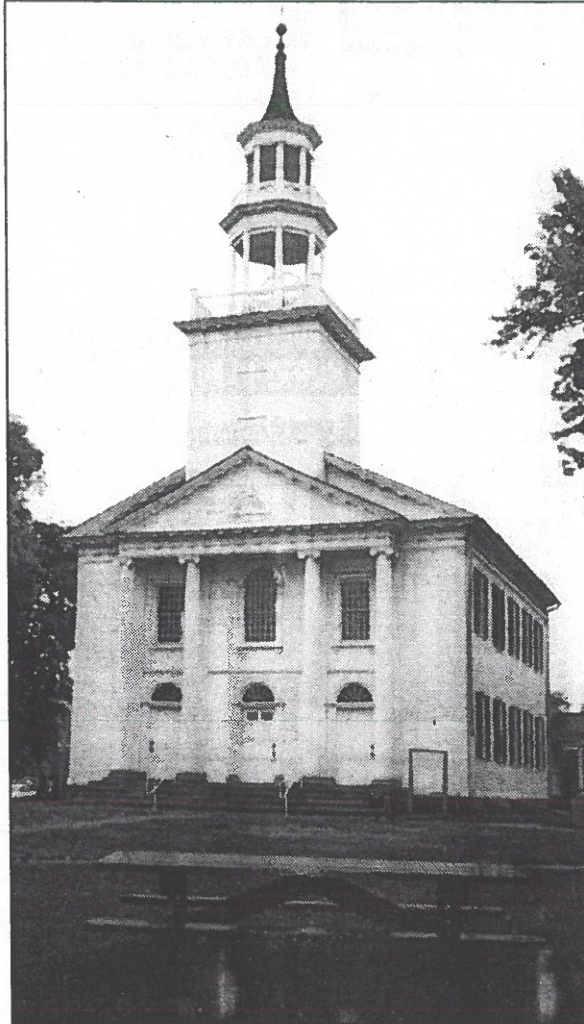
There was even some talk, a while ago, about the Tallmadge Congregational Church being a twin of the one facing Litchfield green; it was

Names from Connecticut linger on in the towns and cities of Ohio.

thought that the two buildings might have been designed by the same architect. That theory did not hold up to research, but certainly the two churches are similar and the histories of the towns are intertwined.

Tallmadge was founded in 1807 by the Rev. David Bacon, a young clergyman from Connecticut with a vision of a Puritan community whose pious residents would set an example for other towns. The minister, intending to resell the land to colonists of a religious bent, bought 12,000 acres of forest from Ephraim Starr of Goshen and Benjamin Tallmadge of Litchfield, naming the future settlement for the man whose vast holdings included western lands.

The minister then migrated to the West. From the log cabin he shared with his wife and young children he planned his Utopian community, establishing that "the section in the center of the township is to be left for the institution of the community ... the Church and the Town Hall." Although he struggled to recruit enough settlers to make the venture viable, his effort failed. After a scant



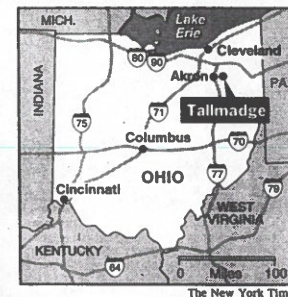
10 years he returned to Connecticut where he died, "broken in health and spirit," records say.

It wasn't until 1819 that the population of Tallmadge had grown large enough to consider building a church on the designated site. Even then, church records quote one of the parishioners as saying, "We are too poor to talk about that."

It wasn't until 1821, with the promise of a jug of whiskey to "the man getting the first stick of timber on the ground," that work began with volunteer labor and donated timber. One resident provided a chestnut tree large enough to make all the shingles and another delivered four black walnut trees that made the pillars in the front of the church.



Alberta Eiseeman



The New York Times

Markers on the Tallmadge green indicate that the Federal-style church, with its columned portico and elegant, two-tiered steeple, was designed and constructed by Col. Lemuel Porter, one of Ohio's earliest architects; that it was dedicated on Sept. 8, 1825, and that it is the oldest church building in Ohio "still in continuous use as a place of worship." (The latter statement is technically correct — special services are held there twice a year and it is frequently used for weddings — but in fact the congregation moved to a new building two decades ago.)

The town hall was built in 1859 in a congenial but less elaborate style. In

In Tallmadge, Ohio, any resemblances to Litchfield are strictly on purpose. That's true of many other 19th-century settlements traceable to Colonial grants.

time, the entire complex was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The historic ties that bind Connecticut to northeast Ohio are apparent throughout the then-underpopulated area known as the Western Reserve, reminders of the early 1800's when Connecticut men surveyed and built the towns and Connecticut families went West to settle them.

Why did so many men and women load their possessions on wagons and carts and travel to that specific area? The reasons go back to early Colonial days, to charters granted to the original Colonies by British monarchs.

Connecticut's 1662 grant included all lands lying "west from the Narragansett River, 120 miles on the coast and from there in latitude aforesaid to the South Sea" — the term that was then used for the Pacific Ocean.

In time, these grandiose claims were reduced by negotiation, but still Connecticut "reserved" a strip roughly 120 miles in length and 36 miles in width along the southern shore of Lake Erie — a compromise recognized by Congress in 1786 and known thereafter as the Western Reserve of Connecticut or sometimes as the New Connecticut.

Most of the land was soon sold by the state to the Connecticut Land Company, composed of merchants and land speculators who in turn sold it to individual settlers. Even after the area became part of the state of Ohio in 1803, pioneers from the small, land-hungry coastal state streamed West to build new homes, churches and schools and to develop the acreage they had bought with their life savings.

The towns often carry the names of their founders. The largest city in the region was named after Moses Cleaveland of Canterbury, general agent of the Connecticut Land Company who led the first surveying party in 1796. In Cleveland — the first 'a' was dropped — the Western Reserve Historical Society features displays on the travels and hardships of settlers coming from northeastern states.

It is the smaller towns, however, that best retain their New England atmosphere. An outstanding example is Hudson — named after David Hudson of Goshen, the first settler — which boasts many original 19th-century homes and commercial structures, a traditional green and the Yale-inspired campus of Western Reserve Academy.

A private secondary school, the academy occupies buildings erected in 1826 for Western Reserve College, which moved to Cleveland and became, in time, Case Western Reserve University.

Hale Farm and Village, a working farm and restored 19th-century village, brings to life the story of Jonathan Hale and his family, who left extensive records regarding their 1810 migration from Glastonbury, the farm they established and the brick house they erected on the site.

The small communities of the Western Reserve have grown and changed over the years, and constant traffic careers around historic places like Tallmadge Circle. Yet something of the New England heritage remains in the towns' names, in their layout, landscapes and in the architecture. ■