

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Courtesy George Rogers Clark National Historical Park.

THE BICENTENNIAL YEAR

In 1987, the United States is celebrating the Bicentennials of the Northwest Ordinance and the Constitution. As part of these observances, the National Park Service is highlighting these two landmark achievements in many of the 339 parks within the system.

Both the Northwest Ordinance and the U.S. Constitution were created at a time often referred to as the "critical period" of American history. The very existence of the Union was threatened by serious troubles, both abroad and at home. Yet out of this chaos came order. The documents endured and ensured the nation's stability and survival.

AFTER THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

America's initial great experiment in self-government seemed shaky, at best. The Articles of Confederation, the nation's first attempt at a system of government, were flawed and took four years to ratify. The Articles established a Congress that often bogged down in endless bickering and was unable to make or enforce decisions governing all of the states. Some believed the new nation was doomed.

THE NORTHWEST ORDINANCE OF 1787

In the midst of this chaos and confusion, Congress raised the question about the future of the Northwest Territory.

This territory was gained as part of the successful campaigns of George Rogers Clark and his frontier soldiers in 1778-79, which had greatly weakened the British hold on the lands north of the Ohio River. At the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Great Britain ceded this area to the United States, thus doubling the size of the new nation.

How would this territory be settled? Would it be a colony? How would the land be divided? What were the rights of settlers? What were the rights of the Indians there? How would it be governed? Would a powerful central government be necessary to manage so large an area? Would the members of the Continental Congress ever be able to agree on one plan?

Congress debated many proposals to resolve these questions about how our nation would grow. Ordinances were passed in 1784 and 1785, but they addressed only a part of the problem.



Although the Northwest Ordinance established the organization and machinery of government, there were still questions on how the land would be divided. What rights would the settlers and the Native Americans have? Unfortunately many battles would be fought to decide the answers.

In the words of President Abraham Lincoln:

"... that Ordinance was constantly looked to whenever a new territory was to become a state. Congress always traced their course by the Ordinance of 1787."



Present day states of the Northwest Territory and the dates they entered the union.

Then on July 13, 1787, the Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, which included the following provisions:

- The temporary appointment of government officials;
- A representative legislature, once a population of 5,000 adult males was established;
- Statehood, once a population of 60,000 citizens was present;
- Statehood completely equal to the rights and duties of other states in the nation;
- A Bill of Rights with:
 - religious freedom,
 - no slavery,
 - rights of English liberty, such as trial by jury,
 - just treatment of Indians,
 - means of education and schools.

Under the guidelines of the Ordinance, western expansion accelerated. New towns sprang up, followed by the new states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin.

The Ordinance did not fade away with the settling of the Northwest Territory. With the Louisiana Purchase, and other land acquisitions, the Ordinance remained the guiding light in developing these lands into states. Except for Texas, California, and Hawaii, all states west of the original thirteen colonies evolved into statehood under the policies of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

At the same time the Confederation Congress was meeting in New York City to adopt the Northwest Ordinance, the Constitutional Convention was assembling in Philadelphia. The need for a stronger central government than that authorized under the Articles of Confederation had become increasingly apparent over the years. Although initially beset by many conflicting interests and differences of opinion, the delegates at last reached a series of compromises that produced the final draft of the United States Constitution on September 17, 1787.



The Northwest Territory seal was used by the first Governor of the Territory, Arthur St. Clair, in 1788.

The summer of 1787 marked the birth of the Northwest Ordinance and the United States Constitution. One provided for national growth, the other for representative, democratic government. Both assured freedom and liberty.