



The Northwest Ordinance

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

January 2, 1778

Virginia Governor Patrick Henry instructs George Rogers Clark to lead a military campaign into the lands north and west of the Ohio River against the British. Clark's subsequent victories at Kaskaskia, Vincennes, and Fort Sackville allow the Americans to claim these lands at the end of the war.

December 20, 1783

Virginia relinquishes claims to land west of its border to the United States, a portion of which eventually becomes the Northwest Territory.

March 1, 1784

Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, the First Continental Congress passes the Ordinance of 1784 (a forerunner to the Northwest Ordinance), which establishes a framework for territories to become states. In addition to this framework, the Ordinance is also designed to alleviate the national debt and prevent conflict among the states in the event of state expansion.

Between 1785 and 1787

James Monroe criticizes the Ordinance of 1784 after visiting the territories, arguing that the boundaries established by the Ordinance are inconsistent with the geography of the territories. Moreover, Shays's Rebellion in 1787 leads to calls for centralized governance within the territories, a provision the Ordinance lacks. Because of these problems, the Ordinance is never implemented.

May through July 1787

Manasseh Cutler meets with members of Congress to discuss purchasing a vast tract of land in the territories on behalf of the Ohio company. On May 9, 1787, General Samuel H. Parsons makes a formal purchase offer to Congress on behalf of the Ohio Company. This offer promises to alleviate the pressing national debt and informs members of Congress that well-established rules of property and inheritance in the territory will encourage settlement.

July 9, 1787

Massachusetts delegate Nathan Dane chairs a committee to draft a new system of territorial governance. The committee ultimately submits three drafts to the Continental Congress.

July 13, 1787

The Continental Congress unanimously passes the last of the drafts submitted by Dane's committee, which comes to be known as the Northwest Ordinance. The Northwest Ordinance establishes a three-stage process for a territory to become a state. During the first stage, the territory is controlled by a congressionally-appointed governor. During the second stage, the territory remains under the control of

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the governor, but settlers are allowed to elect members to a general assembly. In the final stage, the territory achieves full statehood.

In addition to a system of territorial governance, the Northwest Ordinance also establishes rules of property and inheritance, guarantees religious freedom, promotes education, encourages good relations with the Indians, and outlaws slavery within the territories.

October 5, 1787

Congress appoints Arthur St. Clair as the first governor of the Northwest Territory.

April 7, 1788

Veterans from the War for Independence found Marietta, the first permanent settlement under the Northwest Ordinance.

August 1789

The first United States Congress reenacts the Northwest Ordinance with only minor revisions.

September 24, 1799

The Northwest Territory reaches a population of 5,000 free adult males, thus allowing for the first territorial legislature to convene.

October 3, 1799

The territorial legislature chooses William Henry Harrison as its delegate to Congress.

May 7, 1800

President John Adams approves division of the Northwest Territory, which creates the Indiana Territory. President Adams subsequently appoints William Henry Harrison as the territorial governor.

February 19, 1803

Ohio becomes the first former territory to become a state under the Northwest Ordinance.

December 11, 1816

Indiana becomes the second former territory to become a state under the Northwest Ordinance.

1836

Congress passes the Wisconsin Organic Act, which supersedes the Northwest Ordinance and allows a territory to become a state without requiring Congressional appointment of a territorial governor. Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota achieve statehood in 1837, 1848, and 1858, respectively, under the Act, thus changing the entirety of the Northwest Territory into states.

1850

In *Strader v. Graham*, the United States Supreme Court holds that the Northwest Ordinance's provision outlawing slavery in the territories has been superseded by the Constitution, thus rejecting a claim by antislavery advocates that slaves become free upon entering a free state.

September 19, 1859

In a speech in Indianapolis, Illinois Senator Abraham Lincoln argued that both the Constitution and the Northwest Ordinance indicated the founding fathers intended for the federal government to have the power to impose conditions on the territories and the states, including the abolition of slavery.