“The Father of Ohio’s Statehood”

This barn, a reconstruction, is located on the grounds of Chillicothe’s Adena Mansion, the estate of Ohio’s first senator and its sixth governor, Thomas Worthington. Though only 300 of the original 2,000 acres remain, the grounds have been maintained well and tours are given daily through the mansion.

Born in 1773 in the Colony of Virginia, Thomas Worthington was the youngest of six children in a family that, while not as wealthy as most Virginia planters – like Washington and Jefferson – was well off. Robert Worthington, father of Thomas, worked as a farmer, surveyor, and land speculator and resolved to serve in the Revolutionary War under George Washington, whom he helped during surveying. However, when about to raise a troop of calvary at his own expense, he suddenly got sick and died in October, 1779. A few months later his wife died, leaving six-year-old Thomas an orphan and in the care of his brothers. Each inherited about 1,500 acres of the family estate.

Being the runt of the family and probably neglected by his brothers, at age 14, according to the laws of Virginia in 1787, he was old enough to choose a guardian. His choice, Colonel William Darke, a former friend of his father’s and the namesake of Ohio’s Darke County, sent Thomas to school for a proper education. But, against the colonel’s wishes, Thomas, yearning to travel, rode on a merchant ship to the West Indies and invested in casks of molasses with intentions of selling them in Scotland. His noble idea backfired when he discovered the casks were filled with water. Lesson learned.

After returning to Virginia, Darke gave him his inheritance – about 1,400 acres and four slaves. From his service in the war, Colonel Darke had land warrants for over 8,000 acres in the Northwest Territory, which had recently opened for settlement. Since his only son had died, he asked Worthington to claim his land for him, which he did, although the Ohio country was wild and untamed in that era, a land of great forests.

In 1796 Thomas traveled to Massie’s Station (the original name of Chillicothe) and began surveying, a job that was in high demand. After purchasing 500 acres near the Scioto River, he was appointed Deputy Surveyor of the Northwest Territory, a prestigious position that provided a good income. A year later he returned and purchased three lots in this new town, which had about 150 families settled. One of Worthington’s lots had a 35-foot tall Indian mound.

Now established in this new territory, he sold his Virginia land and slaves and moved his family to their new home in the spring of 1798, giving his former slaves their freedom since slavery was not allowed in the Northwest Territory.

Thomas Worthington, now 25, a father and husband, was a man of ambition … and leadership: he was soon appointed a major in a local militia and, more importantly, surveyor general of the entire Northwest Territory. After being elected into the Territorial legislature in 1799, he began lobbying for Ohio statehood – against the wishes of General Arthur St. Clair, the present governor of the Northwest Territory. He also supported current state boundaries – with Chillicothe as the capital city – against the efforts of Cincinnati politicians, who hoped to form a state between the Scioto and Wabash Rivers, having Cincinnati as the capital. Worthington spent the winter of 1801 and the spring of 1802 fighting for his dream in Washington and returned home victorious in May. President Jefferson approved and on March 1, 1803, Ohio became the seventeenth state in the Union.

He soon began developing his estate, which he first named Mount Prospect Hall – after his estate in Virginia – though, after reading a book on ancient history, he came across the word Adena. In an entry in Worthington’s diary, dated September 18, 1811, the word Adena described “places remarkable for the delightfulness of their situation.” Accordingly, he changed the name to Adena. And, much as Mordecai Hopewell’s name became attached to a Native American culture, because Worthington's estate contained a conical mound that was the first to be excavated and turned out to be a representative example of the early (500 BC to 100 AD) mound builders in Ohio, archaeologists named this the Adena Culture. Located close to the current Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks National Park, the Worthington’s estate originally covered 2,000 acres and probably had more than one Indian mound.

Worthington became one of Ohio’s first senators and served two terms, leaving Congress in 1814 to become Ohio’s sixth governor. In his tenure, he accomplished much – improving rivers and roads, establishing poor houses, prison reform and creating a state library. During his governorship, the state capital moved from Chillicothe to Columbus. But Ohio was still a poor state.

Governor Worthington’s vision was to build a canal system, similar to those in New York and Pennsylvania, from Cleveland to Portsmouth, allowing farmers to buy supplies more reasonably and to sell their excess goods. He served as the chairman of the committee for choosing the canal route, which was routed along the Scioto, near many of Worthington’s businesses, and passed directly through Chillicothe. Worthington helped supervise construction, although he didn’t live to see the Ohio-Erie canal completed. By 1840 his dream had come true: the canal lifted Ohio to the third most prosperous state in the young country.

Though he had many other interests including farming, buy and selling land was his most lucrative source of income. Like his father, he was a land speculator, buying low, establishing a town, and then selling high. In 1800 he had over 18,000 acres and in 1827, the year of his death, he held 16,000 acres. However, as happened to many other land speculators in the early years of the United States, Worthington’s luck turned for the worse.

In 1819 a national financial panic caused many wealthy men to lose their fortunes. Worthington had to do his own plowing, a task of hard labor that, now aged 46, he would have preferred to hire out. As any realtor of today knows, there are good times and bad times. And, as his family fortune declined, so did his health. In 1825, the local sheriff came to Worthington’s Adena estate to take inventory of personal property, which was sold to pay his debts. Two years later he died.

However, though he was caught by the land speculation bug, in his early career he was a financial success and socially well connected. In fact, his connections were strong enough for him to hire Benjamin Latrobe, known as the father of American Architecture and the architect hired by President Jefferson to design the U.S. Capitol. Latrobe designed Worthington’s impressive stone mansion, which was completed in 1806-1807. Workmen quarried sandstone on Worthington’s estate. The two-story Federal style building, along with the Adena estate, was listed as a National Historic Landmark in 2003, after the state submitted a 230-page application.

Worthington was also a successful farmer, raising crops and livestock, initially to feed and clothe his family, but eventually to sell to others. He grew wheat, corn, barley, potatoes, oats, flax, and hay. His orchard provided apples, peaches, plums, pears, and cherries. And he raised cattle, hogs, and sheep, along with poultry and dairy cows. Wool from his sheep was made into linen in his textile mills. He owned a slaughterhouse in Portsmouth, where he sent his hogs for butchering. He built flatboats in Chillicothe, huge enough to carry 400 to 500 barrels (about 100 tons) of his products – wheat, corn, beef, pork and whiskey – down the rivers to New Orleans.

His massive estate originally had many buildings, including servant cabins, hen house, a stable, corn crib, carriage house, carpenter shop, cider press, a schoolhouse, a spring house, a smoke house (the only surviving original building), tenant farmer houses, a wash house, and several barns, one of which has been reconstructed on the existing stone foundation. This large bank barn, rebuilt in 1969 on the original footprint of 42 by 100 feet, was probably not the first barn on the farm, although an entry in Worthington’s 1803 diary states that they spent the summer in building a large barn. Most barns built around 1800, like the nearby twenty-by-twenty-foot Clark barn, were small, made either of logs or hand-hewn beams. Other diary entries mention that there were several other barns. The pond in front of the barn, originally crossed by a bridge, gives ambience to this bucolic scene.

Worthington also planted extensive terraced gardens that decorated the hillside setting, similar to the homes of fellow Virginians George Washington’s Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Worthington’s political achievements may have influenced historical lore, which claims that the Great Seal of the State of Ohio was based on the view eastwards from his farm. This seal illustrates Ohio’s natural scenery along with its agricultural past: Mount Logan in Ross County stands in the background, the Scioto River flows across the scene, and a harvested wheat field with a single sheaf of wheat occupies the foreground.

In 1896 when Martha Worthington, the last of the Worthington family, died, George and Clara Smith purchased the estate and used it as a summer home, passing it on to their daughter, Elizabeth Fetterolf, who complied with her parents’ requests and in 1946 bequeathed it to the state of Ohio – with the provision that it be perpetually used as a museum. Today a large visitor center, kept far away from the mansion and outbuildings, educates guests and arranges tours with docents, dressed in period clothing. Ohio has done well to preserve the Adena estate and the memory of its sixth governor, a man that rightfully is called the Father of Ohio’s Statehood.