BICENTENNIAL HISTORY
of
SHEFFIELD, OHIO
—1815-2015—

Charles E. Herdendorf

Sheffield Village Historical Society
and
Sheffield Bicentennial Commission

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Bicentennial present to Sheffield Lake and Sheffield Village—new Brookside High School and Middle School to be opened in 2015.
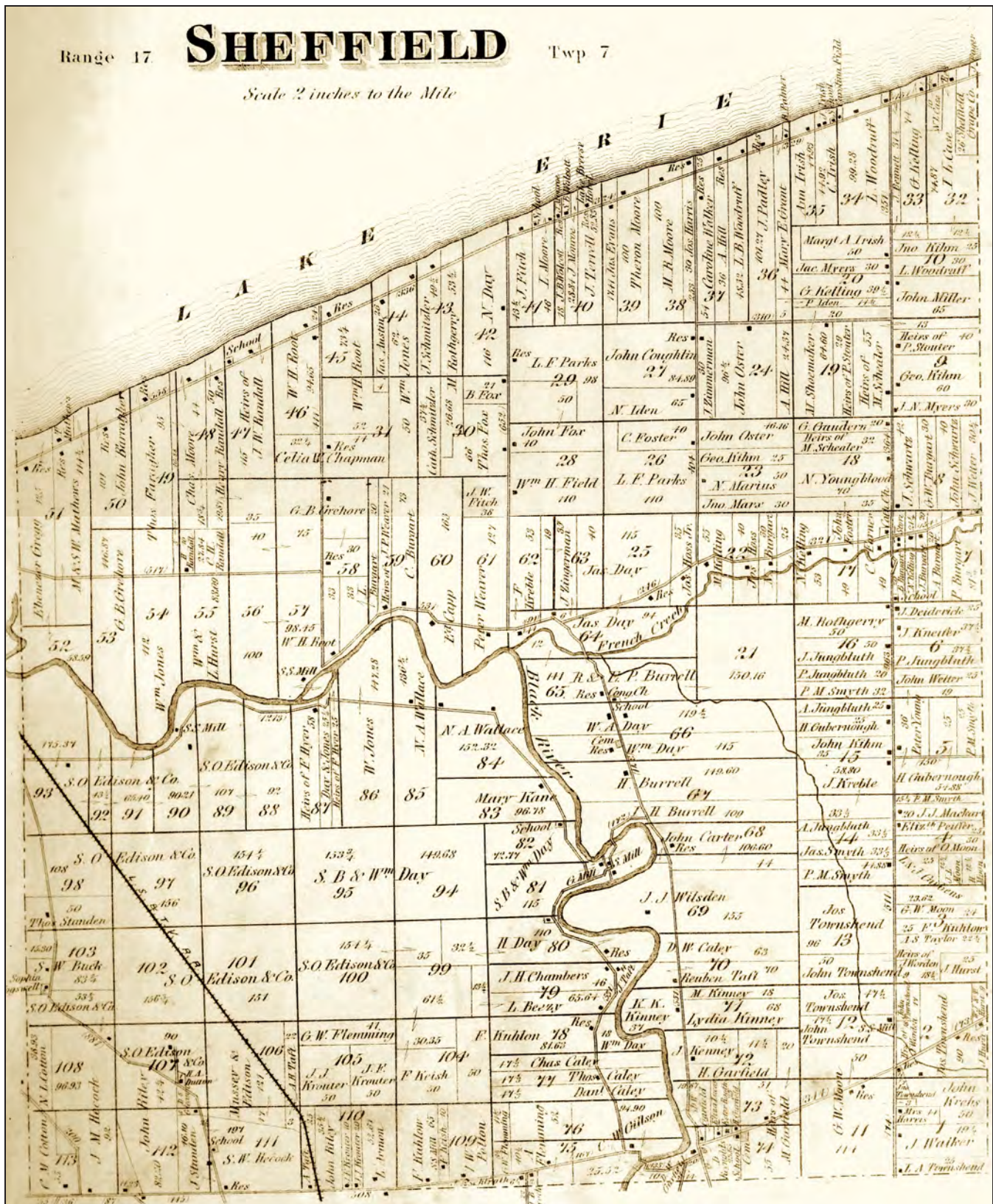
Map of Sheffield Township in 1874, depicting the original 1815 configuration of Township No. 7 of the 17ᵗʰ Range of Townships in the Connecticut Western Reserve.

BICENTENNIAL HISTORY OF SHEFFIELD
INTRODUCTION

Three Sheffields—Sheffield Lake, Sheffield Village, and Sheffield Township—are celebrating the bicentennial of their founding. But, 200 years is far too short a span of time if one is to fully understand the fascinating history of these communities. The geological and ecological events that formed the terrain upon which the early settlers built their homesteads are critical factors in this history. Likewise, 200 years also neglects the 13 millennia of occupation of the land by Native Americans before New England pioneers arrived. The first two chapters of this history are devoted to these topics in an attempt to more fully cover Sheffield's history.

The remaining chapters explore the Sheffield experience of the past two hundred years. Two centuries ago Indian hostilities in northern Ohio ceased as the War of 1812 ended. Soon after, settlers from New England and later New York began to take up farmland in what would become Sheffield Township. Originally known simply as Township No. 7 of Range 17 of the Connecticut Western Reserve, in 1815 two men from Sheffield, Massachusetts, Militia Captains Jabez Burrell and John Day, purchased the township, encouraged friends to join them, and began to clear the land for their farms.

Harrowing stories of the pioneer families as they trekked through the wilderness to create the Sheffield communities are filled with determination, perseverance, and willingness to overcome nature's many obstacles. By 1824, when Lorain County, Ohio was formed and the Township was officially recognized as Sheffield, 44 families occupied farms on the land bordering the Black River, French Creek, and Lake Erie.

Eager settlers were attracted to the fertile land as Sheffield's first century moved on. Once the dense forests were cleared and swamps were drained, fields of wheat, rows of corn, and lush pastures replaced them. Sawmills, gristmills, churches, and schools were built and lake schooners were launched along the river. Men like Robbins Burrell and Captain Aaron Root joined the abolitionist movement, hiding runaway slaves at their homesteads and carrying them in ships to freedom in Canada. Others, like Henry Garfield, sought adventure in the gold and silver fields of the West, some returning with fantastic tales of their exploits.

Fleeing instability in Europe, a new wave of settlers came to Sheffield in the mid-1800s. Bavarian families braved stormy seas to come to America and purchased tracts of land in Sheffield. Here these industrious pioneers cleared more land for their farms, orchards, and vineyards. They created the St. Teresa church and parish, which continue to flourish today.

As the nation divided over the issue of slavery, men from Sheffield, like George Smith who served in both the Army and
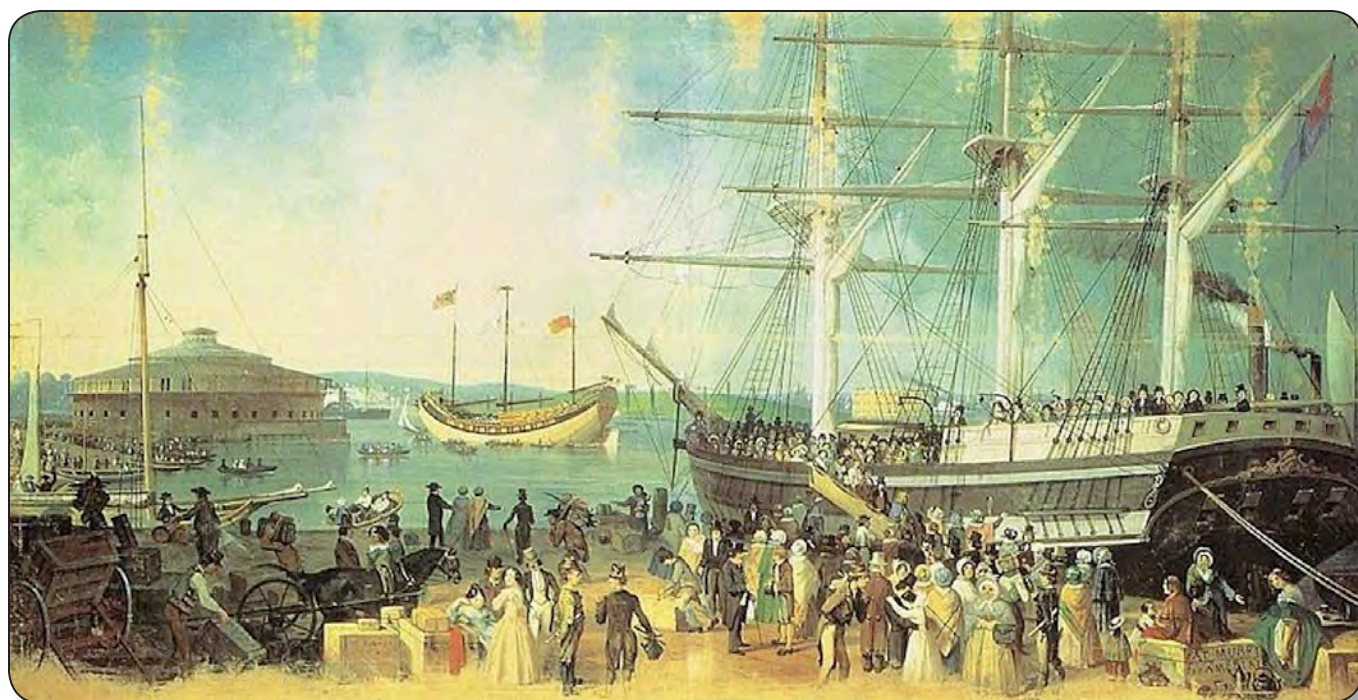
Emigrant ship from Europe arriving in New York, 1847 (painting by Samuel Waugh).

Navy, went off to fight in the Civil War—26 of them are buried in Sheffield's cemeteries. Women maintained the homesteads while their men were gone and some, like Maria Root and Delia Day, devoted a year at the Confederate's Andersonville Prison rehabilitating imprisoned Union soldiers that were too weak to return home and helping freed slaves enter society.

One Sheffield becomes three—From the beginning the Black River was an important transportation corridor and source of waterpower for the early mills, but it also formed a natural barrier that separated Sheffield into east and west halves. A river ford near present day East 31st Street was the only way to cross until the 1880s when a narrow steel-frame bridge was built at this location and another about two miles to the south at North Ridge—both necessitated a steep climb up the 100-foot-high shale bluff on either side.

In 1894, Tom Johnson purchased a large land holding—about 25% of the Township—on the west side of the river to construct a state-of-the-art steel mill and housing for his workers. Part of the arrangement to build the plant on the Black River included the annexation of the mill property by the City of Lorain. At about the same time, the lakeshore east of the river was becoming a popular summer cottage community, many of which were converted to year-round dwellings as economic conditions took a downturn in the 1920s.

Eventually these factors resulted in Sheffield Township being divided at the river. The residents on the east side formed the Village of Sheffield Lake in 1920 and those on the west side remained in the Township. Likewise, in 1934 the farmers in the southern part of the new Village recognized they had little in common with the lakeshore cottage community and a second split took place as they formed the Village of Sheffield. By 1960 the population of Sheffield Lake exceeded 5,000, establishing it as a city.

Later as decades passed, each Sheffield evolved into a residential/commercial community composed of numerous subdivisions—thus, many of the past differences have vanished. Now, all three—Sheffield Township, Sheffield Lake, and Sheffield Village—are coming together to celebrate and commemorate the 200th Anniversary of our founding. During the entire year of 2015 "The Sheffields" are honoring the founders and those who followed and strived to make our communities wonderful places to live, learn, work, and raise families.

We are in their debt!

Johnson Steel Company Office Building erected in 1895 on land that was originally in Sheffield Township. This building on East 28th Street now serves as headquarters for Republic Steel Corporation's Lorain mills. This structure is on the National Register of Historic Places.
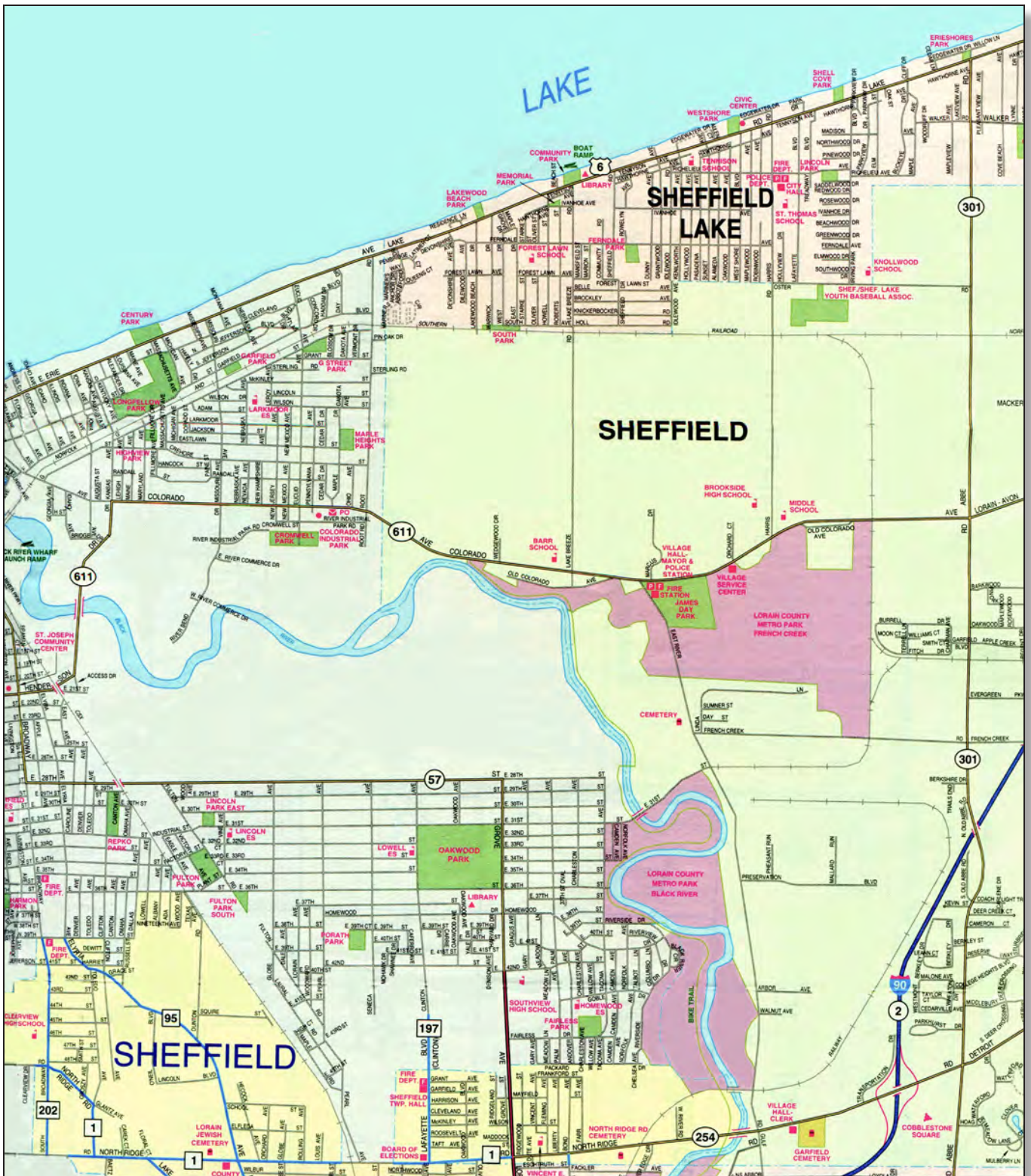
A portion of the 2014 Lorain County Highway Map depicting the area of the original 1815 Sheffield Township (Lorain County Engineer).

Black River shale bluff along East River Road, Sheffield Village (1980).