The Northwest Ordinance (1787)

In early 1786, Congress decided that it was necessary to provide some government to the settlements north of the Ohio River. On May 10, 1786 a committee led by James Monroe developed a plan to do so. This plan was called the Northwest Ordinance. The Ordinance was passed in 1787 in Philadelphia and became one of the most significant decisions made by the early US Government.

Congress needed a system to extend the republic westward and to arrange a way for new states to be added. It stated that all of the new states would be admitted as equals to the original states. The first state that was admitted under this ordinance was Tennessee, which was not part of the Northwest Territory. The other states admitted included Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan. Another very important part the Northwest Ordinance was the prevision that prevented slavery in the Northwest Territory. This was the first step abolishing slavery in the United States all together. It eventually created more tension between the north and south, but at the time, the idea of a Civil War could not have been predicted.

“Although originally applicable only to the Northwest Territory, this ordinance established the basic procedure for certifying statehood into the twentieth century. Tennessee, although not a part of the Northwest Territory, was the first territory to enter the Union under the Northwest Ordinance’s procedures in 1796 as the sixteenth state.” (Purvis 10)

“Congress had set up a system that extended republican government westward with the settlers. New states would be admitted as equals of the original states. The pattern established by the Northwest Ordinance continued well for over 100 years.” (Davidson, Lytle 152)

“This American way of growing gave instructions for what we call an Add-a-State Plan….The Ordinance also provided for religious freedom….slavery was prohibited there.” (Boorstin, Kelley 111-112)

“Rather than seeking to restrain white settlement as Parliament had attempted to do in the Proclamation Line of 1763, the central government in America’s “Empire of Liberty” sought ways to promote settlement’s expansion via land laws and Indian policies. In addition, settlements in the American West would not remain colonies subordinate to an imperial power, but would be fully incorporated as new states into the expanding American nation. These changes carried profound importance for the country’s future.” (Nash, et al)

“To many westerners, the plan to create up to sixteen states from the territory was unwise because there would be too many states with artificial boundaries; the westerners preferred fewer, larger states with natural feature for boundaries. As a result, by early
1786, Congress felt it necessary to provide some government for the settlements that were developing north of the Ohio River. A committee chaired by James Monroe drew up an ordinance on May 10, 1786, which provided for congressional government. "[I]t is in effect to be a colonial government similar to which prevailed in these States previous to the revolution." (Lamar 849)

“… the Northwest Ordinance slighted tribal land rights, discriminated economically against small farmers, and retreated politically from Jefferson’s ideal of self-governing democracy for the frontier. It [Congress] did not make the mistake of keeping its new territories as dependant colonies of the older, more powerful states. … [T]he Northwest Ordinance became the most enduring legacy of government under the Articles of Confederation…. [I]t outlawed slavery throughout the territory…. [B]y limiting the spread of slavery in the northern states, Congress deepened the critical social and economic differences between North and South…” (Davidson, Gienapp, Heyrman, Lytle, Stoff 238-239)
WORKS CITED


