

Rural Revitalization in Appalachian Ohio
Honors Thesis City & Regional Planning

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 100 years, the population of the United States of American has dramatically shifted from being heavily centered around rural communities to large urban center, all in thanks to changing standards of living, technological revolutions, and work opportunities. With this shift came the decline of small towns across the nation, leaving lasting and systemic socio-economic disparities between urban areas and their rural counterparts. Most of these disparities manifest as lower educational attainment and, in conjunction with that, a lowered household income. As the globe enters a new era that is dominated by remote work opportunities, more rural communities now have an unprecedented opportunity to positively change the narrative. This project explores the possibilities for rural towns to reinvent themselves through asset-based community development.

Specifically, this project has examined multiple rural communities within the State of Ohio that have previously diversified or are attempting to diversify their economies by focusing on tourism and recreation; especially ones that have historically hosted agriculture, natural resources, manufacturing, or other such services. The purpose of this is to examine the variety of strategies used by these communities and their peers to make tourism and recreational activities compatible economic opportunities. Additionally, the goal is to recognize the continued preservation of their unique identities and atmosphere as they vary in not only location, but regional identities and purpose. Focusing specifically on rural Ohio prevents harsh overgeneralization as many of these communities have a unique cultural background. By communicating and sharing the challenges and opportunities capitalized up by these communities, others looking for alternative pathways to find economic reinvestment may use this document as a guide.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1920, more Americans have lived in urban areas than any other point in American history; far surpassing the number living in rural parts of the nation.¹ Urbanization had created, redefined, and globally spread the concept of a truly American city; one that has ever-increasing standards of living, technological revolutions, and expanding job opportunities. This phenomenon has been at the expense of small-town America. The existing towns and villages that have been a lasting testament to the agrarian lifestyle has experienced seemingly perpetual economic decline, aging populations, and near abandonment.

More systematically depressed than the average rural community, Appalachian towns, villages, and cities have fallen victim to deindustrialization and increasing isolation. Multiple generations relied on coal mining, logging, and other agricultural careers for their livelihood and the decline of these industries resulted in the decline of the region.

In the wake of 2020's Covid-19 pandemic, the industrial careers and economic might that has kept major metros as an ideal place to live has started to falter. No longer are people tied to the physical office spaces. As the world enters a new era that is dominated by remote work opportunities and individuals seeking out new tourism and recreational experiences than ever before, rural communities now have an unprecedented opportunity to positively change the narrative surrounding them.

This project explores the possibilities for rural towns to reinvent themselves and diversify their economics through focus on their individual or shared regional assets. Many of these communities have historically only hosted agriculture, manufacturing, the mining of natural

¹ Jason Gauthier, History Staff. "Urban and Rural Areas - History - U.S. Census Bureau." United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban_and_rural_areas.html.

resources, or other similar industries. Beyond understanding what economic shifts have been made, this research also intends to understand how rural communities are actively preserving their unique regional and individual identities. This project broadly asks the following question:

How are rural Appalachian communities in Ohio actively revitalizing their economies and infrastructure while preserving their fundamental cultural components and history?

Through this analysis and the communication of the multitude of challenges and opportunities faced by these communities, other rural places can use this document and the experiences of their peer communities as a guide to revitalization and transformation.

Personal Statement

As the following narrative highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and community ownership, the inclusion of personal anecdotes is vital to highlighting the authentic experience of rural communities. I would feel amiss if I did not include my own personal involvements and reasonings for researching this topic.

Over the course of my academic career at The Ohio State University, I have noticed a lack of coursework pertaining regional planning practices. This became especially apparent after my year-long internship with the Village of Somerset, a rural Appalachian community that will be explored further into this essay. Here, planning practices and other technical skills I learned throughout my academic experiences did not translate. Ways to perform community outreach or hold community meetings simply did not work. I had to shape my approach and outreach around the informal structure that has lasted for generations – thus understanding that creating a personal connection outweighs any other practice. I also learned about the lack of resources or other funding opportunities that have been made available to rural places. Often lacking an income tax

or even a zoning code, places like Somerset have had to rely on community fundraising or digging through pages upon pages of confusing grant applications to create opportunities. Recognizing significant disparities, small towns, and their unique nuances, deserve to be an integral part of regional planning academia.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is intended to introduce the audience to some of the fundamental aspects of rural communities. Namely, this document will explore a definition of rural and how other entities recognize rural places. Additionally, research into the topic will help the audience understand how rural places have developed and in what ways they can control their future development. With some literature available on the topic, there is still a need for more conversation the variety of opportunities for rural places. This literature review hopes to add to the discourse and bring rural crises to center stage

Rural Community Definition

With various definitions circulating, understanding a common and clear definition of “rural” is vital to creating the necessary context needed to successfully analyze these communities. Often, the term “rural” typically refers to areas with a low population density, a lack of significant urbanization, and an economic focus that gravitates more towards agriculture and other natural resource-based industries. As a result, these communities often have lesser services and infrastructure compared to their urban counterparts. Roads, public transportation, health services, and utilities tend to be limited. With less supporting infrastructure, rural places have less land use and zoning regulations, allowing for more individual determination, and larger swaths of open spaces. ²

Cromartie and Bucholtz in “Defining the ‘Rural’ in Rural America” recognize the complexities when creating a working definition of a rural community. Often, the definition flexes as applicable to the situation. When government organization, nonprofits, or other entities need to separate an urban and a rural space, each select a variety of different factors to make

² Cromartie, John and Shawn Bucholtz, “Defining the “Rural” in Rural America.” *Amber Waves*. June 2008

their decisions. Most commonly, organizations debate whether to recognize municipal/jurisdictional boundaries, density of settlement, or the mapping of economic factors (such as commuting areas) is concrete enough to draw the line. Unable to create a national consensus in terms of boundaries, using population and density as a metric also becomes a source of contention. As pointed out by Cromartie and Bucholtz, government organizations also fail to agree on a consensus when it comes to setting a population limit. The United States Department of Agriculture, responsible for the dispersal of significant grant funding in rural America, has previously defined rural places as any area with a population of less than 5,000 individuals. With an even stricter definition, the United States Census Bureau has opted to recognize places with 2,500 individuals or less as rural.

Although their discussion feels largely inconclusive, Cromartie and Bucholtz highlight an important issue in rural development; no one knows how to clearly create a common definition of rural. Surely, there is some preconceived notion or thought on what a small town looks like. Typically, this conjures up thoughts of rolling hills, acres of fields, and a tiny ‘downtown’ that is adorned with a single stoplight. However, a stereotype is not acceptable when it comes to the disposal of grant funding. When federal or non-profit organizations cannot create a clear definition, many communities are left confused on what they can and cannot apply for. This confusion leaves a huge potential for funding to be left unclaimed and for communities to not trust the very entities that were created to help.

Taking inspiration from Cromartie and Bucholtz, this project has also taken into consideration the many multitudes of what ‘rural’ means. In doing so, the research team has created a broad definition that will drive the selection of case study communities. Rural, for the

purpose of this study, will refer to communities with less than 5,000 individuals and/or have a pronounced geographic remoteness or separation from another incorporated community.

Rural Growth Trends

Now settled with a reasonable understanding of what determines a community as being rural place, further analysis can be taken to understand growth and development within these places. Generally, population trend in Rural America has been mixed over the last couple decades, but, overall, has been trending towards decline over the last one hundred years or more.

Utilizing data from the USDA, growth trends over the last 30 years have been hard to narrow down and generally presents a mixed conclusion. According to the USDA, the rural population across the United States has been growing rather steady over the last 10 years. Even growing by 0.1% in 2016-17, through the addition of over 33,000 people.³ However, an analysis of subregions shows that this is an overgeneralization. Within Appalachia alone this is apparent. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) found that Appalachia gained nearly half a million people from 2010 to 2018.⁴ However, this metric has been influenced by growth in just two subregions. Located in northern Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and parts of Tennessee, this region averaged nearly 15% growth. On the other hand, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia experienced significant population loss.

A study performed in the late 1990s noted multiple series of growth and decline just between the 1980s and the 1990s. In this study entitled “Rural Economic Development: What Makes Rural Communities Grow?”, the ebb and flow of growth can be attributed to a vast array

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⁴ Population and Age in Appalachia.” Appalachian Regional Commission, 14 June 2021, <https://www.arc.gov/appalachias-population/#:~:text=Appalachia%20had%20a%20population%20of,the%20national%20average%20of%206.5%25>.

and socio-economic reasons. In the counties studied, both low labor costs and a low number of individuals receiving government support often translated to a location having a high attractiveness in terms of living. The study also identified that much of the factors contributing to growth are hard to assess or identify and often vary greatly based on regional conditions. General economic reasons can be an important tool for assessment, but there is enough vagueness in the explanation that unexplained local influences definitely play an important factor in development.⁵ The most important takeaway from this study is that local factors can be some of the greatest strengths and advantages for the development rural areas.

Rural “Brain Drain”

Many of these counties have been continually experiencing population loss due to a phenomenon called “Rural Brain Drain”, a consistent trend of young, well-educated individuals leaving rural places for better educational opportunities, careers, and other quality of life factors.⁶ In their 2009 article simply entitled the rural brain drain, husband-and-wife sociologists Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas traveled to interview more than 200 individuals who graduated from the same high school in rural Iowa during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In doing so, they identified an interesting paradox where many communities were actively destroying their economic futures. By schools encouraging the strongest and brightest kids to go off to college, often to never return, those students left had little encouragement and get trapped in the regions dying economies. Carr and Kefalas argue that small towns must equally invest in all their young persons; these are the individuals who keep their futures alive.

⁵ Aldrich, Lorna, and Lorin Kusmin. "Rural Economic Development: What Makes Rural Communities Grow?." (1997).

⁶ Carr, Patrick J. and Maria Kefalas, “The Rural Brain Drain.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 21, 2009.

Their research identifies several key factors that contribute to the rural brain drain, such as a lack of job opportunities, limited access to educational opportunities, limited access to health care, and a perception of few social amenities.⁷ Throughout their article, Carr and Kefalas discuss the role of government in addressing these concerns. Namely, promoting local business enterprises and advocating for better education and health care access. Carr and Kefala strongly share the importance of addressing this missing demographic to ensure the local economic and, generally, the vitality of rural areas.

Asset-Based Community Development Strategies

Looking to find ways to reshape and redefine their economies, many smaller communities tend to gravitate towards asset-based community development strategies. The major principles of asset-based community development (ABCD) revolve around allowing the community itself to drive investment and understanding how to leverage pre-existing talents, skills, and assets.⁸ Rather than allowing external entities or other sources to drive development, utilizing an asset-based strategies enables a greater sense of community ownership and high collaboration between local stakeholders. ABCD places particular emphasis on social capital and utilizes strong individuals and informal linkages.⁹ This recognizes something unique to rural small towns; important and time-honored and long developed relationships. Comparatively, these key relationships and fundamental local knowledge is what enables ABCD to work rather well in rural places instead of large urban communities.

⁷ Carr, Patrick J. and Maria Kefalas, "The Rural Brain Drain." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 21, 2009.

⁸ Cunningham, Gord, and Alison Mathie. "Asset-based community development: An overview." *Coady International Institute*. Retrieved February 4 (2002): 2009.

⁹ Cunningham, Gord, and Alison Mathie. "Asset-based community development: An overview." *Coady International Institute*. Retrieved February 4 (2002): 2009.

In order to facilitate an ABCD model, Gord and Mathie’s “Asset-based Community Development: An Overview” details specific guidelines for self-activation and implementation. There is an emphasis placed on the collection of stories and understanding the role of key local organizations, stakeholders, and other entities within the community. This creates a rather personal environment for informal conversations to flourish regarding goals and expectations for development and revitalization from both community members and leaders alike. From here, a core group can be organized. Then, these project leaders can define a clear community vision with the linkage of economic development assets and leveraging certain activities and resources that have been previously defined.

Asset-based community and economic development is actually a very realistic strategy for rural communities to revitalize or even develop their central cores. As an approach, ABCD helps leverage individual assets that is unique to a community rather than creating a prescribed checklist. With limited human and financial capital, any other approach often drains the resources of smaller communities. As such, ABCD is often used, intentionally or unintentionally, in rural communities.

Post-Covid Employment Trends

The Covid-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented shift towards remote work. With an attractive cost of living compared to major metropolitan areas, small towns can potentially see a population gain from remote workers. With more opportunities to explore the great outdoors and escape the hustle and bustle of city life, remote workers have been gravitating towards rural communities.¹⁰

¹⁰ Gines, Dell. “Does a Remote Work Strategy Make Sense for Rural Economic Developers?” Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 8 Oct. 2021, <https://www.kansascityfed.org/community/community-connections/does-a-remote-work-strategy-make-sense-for-rural-economic-developers/>.

Many rural places across the nation are excited by the prospect of this new remote workforce. An influx of new people to the area has the potential to cause significant economic growth via new businesses and services. This will create an elevated quality of life for both new and existing residents alike.

One of the largest challenges when it comes to the implementation of remote work and learning opportunities is the limited technological infrastructure for many rural communities. Already lacking reliable broadband internet, small towns were effectively isolated during the pandemic. Small towns will be required to significantly invest in technology infrastructure to capitalize on these new residents and businesses. Additionally, an influx of new residents will place a massive strain on housing. With a limited housing stock, rural places that attract new remote workers should expect an increase in housing prices and an inflated cost of living.¹¹

All in all, the potential impact of remote work and understanding its challenges will be complex for rural towns. Utah State University's Spring 2022 edition of Rural Connections recently addressed these increasing challenges. Here, the author of the article, Paul Hill plainly stated that small towns must "leverage their community assets and distinct strengths to attract new residents with remote jobs, and expand the local job market for current residents."¹² Hill's suggestions for small towns falls in line with many of the same principals as ABCD. This is just another point to advocate for many towns to adopt an ABCD model for their on-going workforce development.

Literature Review Takeaways

¹¹ Gines, Dell. "Does a Remote Work Strategy Make Sense for Rural Economic Developers?" Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 8 Oct. 2021, <https://www.kansascityfed.org/community/community-connections/does-a-remote-work-strategy-make-sense-for-rural-economic-developers/>.

¹² University, Utah State. "Rural Connections." Utah State University, <https://www.usu.edu/wrdc/rural-connections>.

This standardized definition and population trends enables critical thinkers to begin understanding what sets rural development apart for the typical urban or suburban planning experience. This can be a starting point for models for economic development, especially within the context of today's realities, to be crafted, shared, and replicated across the United States.

One of the major faults of the articles is their age. All, excluding those articles regarding the Covid-19 Pandemic, are 10 years older or more at the time of this project. Additional articles that were procured at the start of research were actually excluded from this study due to concerns over their age. This lack of current and relevant authorship on rural development processes and their socio-economic situations is a noteworthy issue in itself. As the global population and that of the United States of America continuously trends towards urban areas, rural areas are continuously left out of the narrative. With their problems ignored, small towns are left to sort out their own crises. This act not only further isolates rural communities but widens the gap for mutual understanding and collaboration between urban and rural entities.

CHAPTER TWO: An INTRODUCTION to APPALACHIAN OHIO



Source: Appalachian Student Resources, The Ohio State University

As seen through the literature review, further and more recent research is needed to understand the potential development of rural communities. With an ever-changing climate due to a recent pandemic and technological advancements, rural communities are seemingly closer than ever before. To better understand their realities, the audience will be introduced to a regional identity that encompasses many rural places. With a unique topography and cultural heritage that differs from the rest of the United States of America, Appalachia has become a researchable topic in its own right. Uniquely, Appalachia has been faced with its own set of struggles and challenges, largely as a result of past industry.

Defining “Appalachian”

The term Appalachia refers to a cultural region in the eastern portion of the United States of America that runs from southern Maine all the way down to the northern counties in Alabama and Georgia. Following the ridges of the Appalachian Mountains, this region has spouted a unique cultural identity. An array of traditional music, artistry, and storytelling has stemmed from the diverse mix of ethnic backgrounds that settled within the region. Abundant with natural resources, this region has been particularly tied to agriculture, forestry, and other extraction-based industries.¹³ With the decline of coal mining and an increase in geographic remoteness, Appalachia has also garnered a reputation for significant socio-economic decline and other associated challenges. Elevated levels of poverty and unemployment combined with limited access to healthcare and other social resources have created continued population decline.¹⁴

For the purposes of this essay and the subsequent exploration of Appalachian communities, it is important for the reader to note that the definition of Appalachia can vary drastically depending on who one talks to. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia consists of over 400 counties across a 13-state area.¹⁵ Other individuals or government organizations might add to this list or exclude certain areas from consideration. This ambiguity creates an interesting situation for the appropriate and methodical scientific study of the region. A broad and loosely defined definition opens up an opportunity for communities to self-identify with the greater Appalachian Identity, even if traditional boundaries exclude them.

¹³ Eller, Ronald D. *Uneven ground: Appalachia since 1945*. University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

¹⁴ “Population and Age in Appalachia.” Appalachian Regional Commission, 14 June 2021, <https://www.arc.gov/appalachias-population/#:~:text=Appalachia%20had%20a%20population%20of,the%20national%20average%20of%206.5%25>.

¹⁵ “Population and Age in Appalachia.” Appalachian Regional Commission, 14 June 2021, <https://www.arc.gov/appalachias-population/#:~:text=Appalachia%20had%20a%20population%20of,the%20national%20average%20of%206.5%25>.

To narrow down the scope of this research, the researcher has elected to focus specifically on Appalachian Ohio. This is intended to limit the risk of overgeneralization and create a more in-depth regional analysis. Appalachian Ohio specifically refers to a collection of 32 Ohio counties that belong to this greater Appalachian identity. Located in or within the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, this region is known for its pristine natural beauty and deep-rooted history. Historically, the economy of this region has been like that of its other Appalachian counterparts; having focused on agriculture, manufacturing, and mining. Uniquely, this part of the state is known for a vibrant cultural scene with many festivals, art galleries, and other cultural events throughout the year. This area is also home to a plethora of small colleges and universities. Most notably, Ohio University is located within the heart of Southeastern Ohio and serves as an anchor institution and is a leader in Appalachian public policy and research.

Historical Trends

Once a center of industry and ever-expanding agriculture, Appalachian Ohio has experienced subsequent population changes over the years. With the decline of its most important industries, the region began to experience significant and drastic decline in population as many people searched elsewhere for economic opportunities. Although this decline will be explored elsewhere in this essay, it is important for the reader to understand how this decline has derailed the development of so many Appalachian communities. According to the US Census, the population of Appalachia Ohio peaked in the 1970s at around 1.5 million people. In the years since, the region has experienced a constant decline in population with some counties losing nearly 40% of their population within the last 40 years.¹⁶ The loss of cornerstone industries put many towns, villages, and cities down a path of irrevocable loss.

¹⁶ “Appalachia: Demographic and Socioeconomic Trends.” PRB, <https://www.prb.org/projects/appalachia-demographic-and-socioeconomic-trends/>.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is meant to compile and analyze the historical experiences, current situation, and potential future transformations of villages, towns, and cities that are either located within or adjacent to the Appalachian region of the State of Ohio. This study employs the collection of qualitative data through a series of loosely structured interviews with local community leaders and other community representatives.

Participation Selection

Recognizing the depth and diversity of cultures represented within this area, the interviewer has elected to focus on the areas defined by the Ohio Governor's Office of Appalachia as either East Central Appalachian Ohio or Southeast Appalachian Ohio. Narrowing the field of research within these two zones creates a more cohesive network of comparable communities. Although comparable, it is vital to also recognize that even within these general regions, each community differs due to their historical heritage, demographics, and other resulting socio-economic factors. Compiling these different entities into one experience would not be holistic nor justifiable in any sense. As a result, a total of 4 different communities from this region will be selected to be used as individual case studies, which will be a combination of interviews and publicly accessible data. General contact information was obtained by the research team from each local government entity's publicly available website or social media platforms.

Interviews

At the commencement of each interview, the interviewer will use a verbal informed consent process, meaning the interviewer shared with participants the intent of the research and that transcription and note-taking will be taking place and there will be a resulting analysis of the conversation.

After verbal consent is obtained, the conversation would begin and last anywhere from 30 minutes (in the case of phone or video calls) or longer depending on the site visit and subsequent tour of the community.

Questions that were asked during each interview were meant to create a rather cohesive narrative regarding the past, present, and future of each selected community. The interviewer sought to understand the past conditions that caused the current socio-economic situation in each community. Questions sought to understand the foundation of the community and the historic economic activities; often seeking if those companies or occupations are still prevalent. Interview questions turned to mention new trends in redevelopment such as: which businesses were growing? What projects have been completed and/or are on-going in your community? Lastly, each interview ended with a conversation regarding important take aways and what other communities can take away from their personal experience.

Data Analysis

All information received from the individual interviews were entirely qualitative in nature. Any numerical data is public data that can either be found in local meeting minutes, census data or other public routes. This is meant to be a realistic study of the ins and outs of rural economic revitalization, recognizing that small-town politics and planning tends to have very personal ties is a thematic point of this essay and interview series. Opinions, mindsets, and bias is an important part of the narrative that needs to be shared. Information will be synthesized to

craft an appropriate narrative with respect to the interviewee and the community in which they represent. There will be an acknowledgement that some information could potentially be subjective or incorrectly attributed to the interviewee.

CHAPTER FOUR: INTERVIEW-BASED CASE STUDIES

To best understand the current situation of rural communities and the application of planning processes, a series of interviews were performed to create case studies. Each of these studies are a combination of largely qualitative data that has been gathered from the series of interviews and data that has been collected from publicly accessible sites. The data that has been gathered from online is often from publications from local governments, regional entities, and news outlets. These are intended to create a holistic narrative of each community, reflecting their respective historical and present identities. A singular case study would not appropriately address the specific nuances of each community. These case studies are meant to look at the relationship between real-world practices and strategies that have been previously identified in the literature review.

Nelsonville

“No one notices something until it breaks.”



Source: Appalachian Student Resources, The Ohio State University

Historical Background

Nestled in Athens County and a short distance away from Ohio University in Athens, Nelsonville has historically been a center for industry. Originally, Nelsonville thrived with coal mining, brick making, and commerce dominating as the predominant industries. Located along what was the former Hocking Canal and adjacent Hocking River, the transportation of goods lasted as a cornerstone of the community. Being just 60 miles from the major metro of Columbus, Ohio this location provided easy access for Nelsonville manufacturers and extractors to move their goods. Brands such as Rocky Boots, a family-owned and operated apparel and footwear brand,

and This enabled an early economic boom for the community. This era of economic might led to so much success that the participant noted during the interview that Nelsonville was the first city west of the Allegheny Mountains to be electrified. Eventually, the Nelsonville Electric Company would transform into

Present Population

Although having experienced population decline in the decades since, Nelsonville has fought to maintain its status as a city, a designation that so many Appalachian communities throughout this region have lost. The 2020 census placed the community just below the 5,000-person population threshold needed for a community to be declared a city. In response, the community engaged in an extensive canvassing campaign to count the number of inhabitants. Here, they were able to count a total of 5,373 residents, granting them city status.¹⁷ Recognizing that this population count voids Nelsonville’s status as a “rural community” in the eyes of the previously outlined criteria from the literature review section, Nelsonville’s struggle with declining opportunities, distance from major metropolitan areas, and rural sphere of influence keeps this community relevant in this conversation.

Community Assets

Recognizing the history of Nelsonville, significant investment has gone towards the preservation of its historic town square. Aptly named Public Square, this district looks to maintain its small-town charm through building restoration all the way down to maintaining the star brick sidewalk. Nelsonville’s code enforcement department has worked incredibly hard to maintain strict standards for historical authenticity while including care and consideration for modern

¹⁷ Doyle, Céilí. “Nelsonville Rejects Census Population Loss, Finds 700 More Residents in Recount to Regain City Status.” The Columbus Dispatch, The Columbus Dispatch, 13 Oct. 2021, <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/local/2021/10/12/nelsonville-rejects-census-fights-retain-city-status/6096571001/>.

activities. A major asset of the Public Square is Stuart's Opera House, an 1879 2nd story opera house. This is one of the last fully operational opera houses in the state as it hosts numerous concerts and other events throughout the year.

The Hocking Valley Train also calls Nelsonville home. This scenic railroad is a huge draw for tourism to the region throughout the summer and seasonally as well. Using historic tracks that once made Nelsonville one of the busiest train depots in the region, the Hocking Valley Train is a unique asset that is loved by all ages. The train weaves through the pristine Wayne National Forest and showcases the beauty of the region.

More modernly, Nelsonville has been a part of the Little Cities of the Black Diamonds, a tourism collaboration of many small towns, villages, and ghost towns that dot the hills of Southeastern Ohio. Each of these communities resulted from or have lasting traces of a coal mining past. The Little Cities of the Black Diamonds creates an opportunity to expand upon tourism opportunities within the region. Rather than just spend a day in Nelsonville, the Little Cities network places Nelsonville as a hub to explore each of the other communities from. This enables retail, hotel, and dining opportunities to flourish within the Little Cities and Nelsonville specifically.

Nelsonville is also the home of a technical college, Hocking College. Providing workforce training in specialty areas such as natural resources or broadband installation, Hocking College acts as a cornerstone of the community and provides additional revenue for Nelsonville. In partnership with local services, Hocking College provides a world-class culinary program. Here, there is the option for locals and visitors alike to have a taste at The Lodge, a hotel and event venue that enables Hocking's students to gain real-world experience. Beyond hospitality careers, The Lodge showcases the vineyards of the agroecology department.

Struggles

Presently, Nelsonville has been primarily focused on maintaining their decaying and ever-aging infrastructure. All significant fundraising has gone towards on-going sewer and water treatment updates and expansion. Community leadership recognizes a deep need to improve upon this system. Any additional opportunities for economic development, especially in terms of manufacturing, tourism, or residences, will depend on updating the 70-year-old system. As a self-described high-poverty area, Nelsonville must rely heavily on grants and other funding options due to the limitations of the tax base.

Lessons Learned

Nelsonville's success can be contributed to its leadership's dedication to regional collaboration and extensive planning. As seen through the formation of the Little Cities of the Black Diamonds, regional connectivity and community collaboration creates a network for tourism from which local opportunities can expand from. Leveraging their unique cultural assets, Nelsonville is becoming a very attractive place to live and visit.

When asked directly about their experiences, Nelsonville's representatives added that having a strategic plan is key to proper development. Once a guiding structure is in place, communities or other organizations can properly go after grants and other funding sources. Chasing the money, without having a plan, just exhausts the human capital.

Shawnee

“If Perry County was divided in half, then the southern half would actually be the poorest county in the state.”



Source: Appalachian Student Resources, The Ohio State University

Historical Background

During the late 1800s, Shawnee was created by the thousands of migrant workers that flocked to Southeastern Ohio and Greater Appalachia to work in coal mines. As their families joined, Shawnee soon grew into a tiny urban center with an assortment of local businesses. Clay and other mineral deposits nearby helped grow the area even more to enable the expansion of railroad lines into the community.

The United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation credits Shawnee with the having one of the most intact examples of “boomtown” within this region of the United States.¹⁸ Boomtown, meaning a town that suddenly experienced massive economic and population growth. Shawnee’s unprecedented growth is a direct result of industrial might and other economic incentives.

Coal mining in the region significantly died down by the end of the 1920s, resulting in significant economic decline. Many individuals and families left the area in search of other opportunities. As they left for jobs in larger cities such as Cincinnati, Columbus, or Cleveland, Shawnee began to experience rapid deterioration. Houses fell into disrepair and

Starting in the mid-1970s, significant efforts went underway to preserve Shawnee’s historic downtown. At the center of these early preservation movements was the Tecumseh Theater. Built in 1908, the theater harks back to Shawnee’s peak, when labor unions and fraternal orders dotted the town. Over the years, the multi-level structure hosted a confectionary, bowling alley, and a barbershop. The second floor hosted the theater space; in which generations of high school graduates walked across the stage, theater troops performed, and swing bands played late into the night.

The years of water damage took a toll on the building, and it was marked for demolition. This multi-level structure was saved in 1976 thanks to fundraising initiatives by the local community. Over the years, countless bake sales, fundraisers, and tournaments were held to save the theater. Showing Shawnee’s commitment to historical integrity for the next 50 years.

¹⁸ “Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.” ACHP, <https://www.achp.gov/preserve-america/community/shawnee-ohio#:~:text=Shawnee%2C%20a%20village%20in%20Perry,banks%2C%20stores%2C%20and%20saloons.>

Present Population

After demise and closure of area coal mines, Shawnee began to experience extreme population loss throughout the 20th century and well into the 21st century. The 1890 census recorded over 3,000 people living in Shawnee at its peak. Now, the population of the community hovers close to 625. In this time, the population of Shawnee has dropped nearly 80%.

This ever-falling trend in population is not unique to Shawnee. In fact, many of its neighboring communities are going through the same reality and, over the last 50 years, many have earned the title of “ghost town.” During the interview, the discussion touched on the different socio-economic experiences between the northern and southern portions of the county. Shawnee and many of the other communities in southern Perry County popped up around coal mines and, as a result, tend to be more geographically isolated due to more extreme topography. Meanwhile, northern Perry County thrived in comparison due to their proximity to major transportation routes, such as I-70 which runs along the northern county line. In recent years, these northern communities have experienced more economic investment and have pulled the remaining population away from the southern villages and townships. As a result, southern Perry County has become significantly economically disenfranchised which only speeds up the population loss.

Community Assets

With a wealth of historic structures for a town of its size and proximity to natural resources, Shawnee has looked to capitalize on ecotourism. Being located within the Wayne National Forest (the only national forest in Ohio) provides Shawnee’s residents and visitors with unparalleled access to the great outdoors. Local programming has capitalized on this. Most

recently, young programs have helped provide opportunities for future careers in ecotourism. Here, teenagers from this high-poverty area are exposed to different career options in outdoor recreation

Shawnee is also home to the headquarters for the Little Cities of the Black Diamonds, which was mentioned earlier during the conversation regarding Nelsonville. Shawnee earned a title for being a hub for regional connectivity. Shawnee is also home to the Buckeye Trail Association, an organization that maintains a large loop trail that encompasses the state of Ohio. Shawnee is a designated “Trail Town” and is a destination for hikers along the trail. These entities have promoted regional and state-wide connectivity and improved access to the great outdoors. Shawnee hopes to continue capitalizing on this connection to the great outdoors.

Struggles

The conversation touched on issues surrounding community engagement and cohesion. Shawnee has struggled with community engagement and ensuring that the everyone is on the same page. Litigation has arisen between local groups surrounding the direction of historical properties within Shawnee’s main historical district. As a result, a division has been created that has stalled development.

Lessons Learned

Since saving the Tecumseh Theater, Shawnee has learned the importance of leveraging local community assets to transform the very heart of the community. During the interview, the representatives from Shawnee highlighted the importance of regional connectivity and touching base with other communities to ensure a cohesive identity. It is a key point for local community assets to be leveraged to create a network within the region for tourism to thrive.

Somerset

“If you stand still, you fall behind.”



Source: Appalachian Student Resources, The Ohio State University

Historical Background

Zane’s Trace was America’s first federally funded highway and opened Ohio to new settlers interested in moving westward. With the need for food and lodging, taverns began to spring up along the route. Overtime, settlements began to form around the tavern; One of them being the Village of Somerset. Founded in 1807, Somerset quickly began to grow and reached its present population in 1840. Originally, Somerset was county seat for Perry County with a growing agricultural and commerce-based economy. Although the county seat moved to New Lexington after a battle between the two communities, Somerset flourished. As new businesses and settlers moved to the area Somerset developed around a central square. Many of these buildings still stand today and add to the historical charm of the community. The village offices

are located within the original Perry County courthouse. Dating back to 1829, this is the oldest continually operated government building in the Northwest Territory.

To preserve its historical integrity, the Somerset Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. From here the community has shown a continued commitment to preserving its history. The Perry County Historical Society owns and operates the Perry County Historical Museum. Many of the items in the museum celebrate the life of Union general Philip Sheridan, who spent his childhood in Somerset.

Present Population

Utilizing data from the 2020 U.S. Census, the present population of Somerset is roughly 1,400 residents. Being a rural place, Somerset has a large economic pull from the surrounding agrarian-based township. The inclusion of residents from Reading Township within this figure adds an additional 2,650 residents.

Community Assets

Steeped in history, Somerset has a unique historic business district that both adds to the community's charm and economic influence in the region. Over the years, Somerset has curated a diverse mix of locally owned businesses, including a western apparel store, local hardware store, grocery store, German restaurant, and a boutique that features hand-made décor and other goods. Nestled within the business district is the Somerset Builders Club (SBC). Created with a variety of different grants, the SBC is a community-driven makerspace that provides local programming, technology events, co-working spaces, and more. The creation of the Somerset Builders' Club enabled the preservation of a contributing building within the historic core and provides technology access to a traditionally underserved area.

An important part of the discussion was the historical character and charm that Somerset have possesses. Over the years economic development and tourism has been carefully crafted to not only honor this character but embrace it. Within the last 10 years, Jacob Miller's 1806 log Tavern building was rediscovered. An early settler of the community, Jacob Miller's Tavern would have been a vital stop for those travelling into the area. The log cabin survived decades of disrepair after it was hidden behind layers and layers of clapboard siding. Recently community members have taken on research and look to secure funding for restoration. Plans for the site include an event venue or perhaps a cidery, similar to how it would have been during Jacob Miller's time.

Over the past few decades, Somerset has also actively preserved its natural green space. Multiple parks and other green ways have been connected with the intention of creating a bike path that encapsulates Somerset. Not only will this serve as a community amenity, but this would link Somerset to other regional bike paths. These pathways have the potential to act as a catalyst for tourism and ensuring further regional collaboration and connectivity. For many community members, this “emerald necklace” will be an important legacy that sets Somerset apart from neighboring communities.

Struggles

This conversation touched on a variety of topics, however, one of the largest issues Somerset has faced has been project funding. Without an income tax, Somerset must rely on grants and other funding opportunities. With a wealth of historic inventory, Somerset fears the safety of these structures while waiting for much-needed funding. This coupled with a systemic resistance to government assistance makes it challenging to get projects off the ground. Somerset has noted that Appalachian Culture has made certain initiatives very difficult. Many community

members are wary of any government involvement, a lasting remnant of the coal mines and the other environmental hazards that have been left behind. Many have been resistant to development because of a fear of change.

Lessons Learned

Well-developed and with a growing economy, Somerset has refused to become a dying town. With community leaders that have continually been dedicated to its economic growth and historic preservation, Somerset has learned a lot about the development process. They encourage other communities to keep learning, researching, and communicating with their peers; stating, “If you stand still, then you will fall behind.”

Shreve

“Everything that could’ve been bad for a small community has happened to Shreve.”



Source: Appalachian Student Resources, The Ohio State University

Historical Background

In 1853, Shreve came into existence thanks to the westward expansion of railroads through the middle of Ohio. Forested and adjacent to water sources, the Killbuck Marsh and Shreve Lake, Shreve was the perfect spot for steam locomotives to stop and refuel. The coming of the train depot brought significant opportunities for the agrarian area. Soon enough, Shreve was a hub for farmers and other manufactures to ship their goods to Wooster, Akron, Cleveland, and beyond. Farmers came into town to either sell their goods and to see doctors, lawyers, and partake in other entertainment. Hotels, restaurants, and other secondary businesses began to flourish.

Back during the 1950s and 1960s, Shreve was a fully independent and self-sustaining community. With healthcare offices, a bowling alley, and car dealerships, life within Shreve was fondly remembered as lively and thriving.

With the decline of manufacturing and the closure of the Shreve train depot, the community began to lose population. This was only expedited through the 1990s and into the new millennium with the passing of older businessmen and other merchants. As a result, Shreve lost many important community staples.

Present Population

Located right on the border between Wayne and Holmes counties, Shreve has always been at the center of a large-scale agrarian community. Presently, about 1,500 people live within Shreve. Still surrounded by farmland, there's roughly 15,000 people within 15 miles of Shreve, creating significant traffic through the little town. Many take their business to neighboring Wooster which possess significantly more amenities.

Community Assets

With the looming threat of a becoming a food desert, a group from Shreve stepped forward to fundraise and strongly advocate for the continuance local grocery store. Here, they recognized that the closure of a fundamental business would be the final nail in the coffin for the community. A lack of necessities would only drive away more folks from the community. It was from this experience that Shreve's CDC was created in 2021.

In the 2 years since their development, the community group has identified key sites for development within their strategic plan. One of these key items has been the Wheaton Hotel. Built in the 1850s, this historic site is located right in the middle of town and presents an

opportunity to grow the core. Awaiting funding for a significant stabilization and restoration project, this site has the potential to be a boutique hotel or event venue.

Shreve's once perfect location for the railroad is what also makes it a perfect location for birders and other seasonal activities. Their Migration Sensation event in March is perfectly in tune with the migration paths of many waterfowl, attracting many birdwatchers to the area. Outdoor attractions and regional connections are a prime opportunity for Shreve to capitalize on for eco-tourism. Beyond the local attractions within Shreve, nearby is Mohican State Park, Malabar Farm State Park, and Killbuck Creek State Wildlife Area. Shreve is also steps away from one of the largest groups of Amish in the United States. Other communities have capitalized on the tourism associated with Ohio's "Amish Country." With growth in supporting businesses, Shreve has the capability to go its economic core with these overlapping tourism opportunities.

Struggles

Presently, Shreve has been struggling with two major categories; finances and strategic planning. Having such a limited tax base and a seemingly endless list of historical properties that need to be saved, Shreve has to solely rely on grant money to fund many of their projects. The application process adds extra length to the timeline of a project. As a result, many historical buildings must continue to sit without any preservation methods.

Located right along the county line, Shreve just barely misses being categorized as "Appalachian" by less than 10 feet. The State of Ohio recognizes 32 Appalachian counties and Wayne County is not on that list, but the other side of the county line, Holmes County, is. Although they identify with their Appalachian neighbors, Shreve misses out on a variety of funding opportunities that has been specifically designated for Appalachian communities.

Recently, the state of Ohio passed legislation that which will provide the Appalachian counties with half a billion dollars for community development and historic preservation. Shreve is unable to capitalize on this funding opportunity and cannot collaborate with its regional partners.

Lessons Learned

Presently, Shreve's leaders have learned the value and continued need for excellent community engagement and strategic planning. A cohesive community engagement program that connects residents, local leaders, and others is needed for success. Projects that are meant to breathe life back into a town require all community stakeholders to be supportive and invested within the process. Channeling everyone into the revitalization proves helps create community ownership. A new era for Shreve should be something that everyone can be proud of.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This exploration of four Ohio communities provides planners with incredible information on community development and growth. Further analysis of their similarities and differences adds to the conversation regarding best rural development practices. Additionally, this analysis enables local and regional leaders to find better ways to address the disparities and struggles seen throughout the region.

During the conversations, multiple similarities did rise. First, each of the communities mentioned a struggle to receive proper funding. From economic development to vital city services, many of the communities relied solely on grant funding to make their projects possible. As a result, many projects get shelved from improper funding. As many have historic preservation initiatives, this places historical properties in danger of collapse or erosion by the elements. With so many historic downtowns, the preservation of these buildings is important to preserving the historical integrity and charm of these small towns.

Additionally, many of the communities also planned for regional connectivity. By partnering with their neighbors, many of these places hope to create a web for tourism. In doing so, this would create a network for tourists to spend a weekend or extended vacation in the area, infusing the region with more income from tourism.

CONCLUSION

This exploration of rural revitalization and community development in Appalachian Ohio has provided useful information in understanding the disparities between prior academic research and the current realities. Unfortunately, much of the information available to scholars and the public is aging and failing to keep up with new developments in technology and communication. As seen through the literature review, rural places across the county have an opportunity to capitalize on technology and their social capital. This investment in young persons and the economies that are projected to soar is vital to keeping these places relevant. Frankly, many communities must invest in both technology and their young persons to survive the next 100 years. In our case studies, only one of the communities was actively addressing this concern, Somerset. The relationship between rural places, technology, and community development deserves more research and discourse. Throughout the creation of this process, many of the previously published materials within planning have created broad overgeneralizations or even have failed to discuss the topic. These communities need and deserve the support and analysis that experts in the field can provide them.

All in all, each of these communities (and the countless others just like them) have a rich historic charm that deserves to be protected. These buildings stand as a monument to those generations that invested their lives into building these places and act as a new opportunity for those that remain. After thoughtful analysis and discussion, it is apparent that the real story of these communities is the story of those that have stayed and those that have left. Those that have stayed have continued to champion the endless possibilities within their community. In doing so, they have the uncapped potential to help their communities flourish for decades to come.

