



2650 Richville Dr. SE., Suite 100, Massillon, OH 44646 • (330) 451-SOIL (7645) • info@starkswcd.org

Ohio's History is Linked to Drainage

Ohio's early settlers may have a reputation as rugged individualists, but for much of the state, creating productive homesteads out of wilderness took more than individual efforts. It took drainage, and drainage required cooperation with other landowners.

The first land settled was ground that drains well naturally, but more than half of the state's land was too wet to be farmed productively. Some land was barely habitable because stagnant water never drained away. Reports from settlers describe a persistent odor of decay, mold-encrusted belongings, and vicious biting insects, including mosquitoes that carried malaria. Even so, early Ohioans saw new possibilities in the rich soil of the state's wetlands.

At first, some landowners tried digging their own ditches, and this worked for those who could connect directly with a creek or river. But most poorly drained land had no outlet for excess water. Eventually, groups of landowners began working together to build drainage systems. Then starting in the 1840s, the State Legislature began passing drainage laws to guide the construction and financing of drainage projects that would benefit multiple landowners. By 1884, an estimated 20,000 miles of ditches had been built, draining 11 million acres or over 40% of Ohio's land.

Today, Ohio's drainage infrastructure includes open ditches as well as buried tile lines and streams that have been reshaped to enhance drainage. At least half the state's land is affected by this public drainage infrastructure.

Ohio's drainage laws have been updated many times as the state has grown and developed. And drainage systems that were originally built to enhance agricultural production have also made former wetlands suitable for communities, home sites and industrial development.

Today, municipalities manage water with their own set of drainage laws, but most rural drainage projects involving multiple landowners are organized under Ohio's Petition Ditch Law (Ohio Revised Code 6131) or Conservation Works of Improvement (Ohio Revised Code 1515). While there are important differences in how these two legal processes work, both fund projects with assessments on affected landowners and require that the financial benefits of a project exceed its cost.

Unfortunately, one flaw in the early ditch laws was that they didn't include provisions for ongoing maintenance. In 1957, legislation was passed requiring maintenance provisions for new drainage projects, but many of today's rural land uses depend on the drainage infrastructure constructed a century ago or even earlier. As older projects continue to age, many of them will need to be re-constructed to continue providing the drainage landowners and homeowners rely on.

Just as the early settlers did, today's Ohioans must manage drainage to make ground suitable for land uses that will meet the state's goals for the future.