



COOPERATIVE HISTORY

# WHAT'S IN A *name* ?

The name Firelands is not unique to your cooperative. Commonly used in and around Huron County, the moniker has a long history, dating back to before the United States even existed. Like the story of American rural electrification, the name's origin often gets lost in the annals of time. This month, Firelands Electric Cooperative celebrates its 86th anniversary, and to mark this milestone, let's take a closer look at the history of our namesake and our co-op.

### Connecticut connection

Although no significant battles took place in the Colony of Connecticut during the American Revolution, it did serve as an important site for the storage of weapons and ammunition for Colonial forces. The British, unable to seize control of the fiercely patriotic colony, resorted to raiding these storehouses and setting fire to everything in their path. From 1777 to 1781, the homes and livelihoods of Connecticut citizens in the following nine towns were completely destroyed: Danbury, New Haven, Fairfield, Norwalk, New London, Groton, Greenwich, Ridgefield, and East Haven.

Called the "Fire Sufferers," those affected by the British raids repeatedly petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly to receive some type of compensation. In May 1787, a resolution was finally approved to repay the sufferers for their losses. But there was one problem — the colony had no funds available to do so. Instead of monetary compensation, those whose homes had been destroyed were promised tracts of land located in the Connecticut Western Reserve, an area west of Pennsylvania between Lake Erie and the 41st parallel that belonged to the colony. With 1,870 families experiencing \$538,445.26 in losses, this was the only feasible option Connecticut had for repayment.

Half a million acres was set aside for the sufferers in 1792. The area, now commonly referred to as the "Fire Lands," would become part of the state of Ohio in 1803. It consisted of present-day Erie and Huron counties, Danbury Township in Ottawa County, and Ruggles Township in Ashland County.

Taking possession of the land, however, would not be easy. Located hundreds of miles from Connecticut, the area was still covered by heavy forest and occupied by Native Americans. In July 1805, nearly three decades after the devastating British raids, the U.S. and eight Native American tribes (the Wyandotte, Ottawa, Chippewa, Munsee, Delaware, Shawnee, Seneca, and Potawatomi) signed the Treaty of Fort

Native American signatures from the Treat of Fort Industry (1805). As part of the treaty, eight tribes relinquished all rights to "The Fire Lands."





Industry in what is present-day Toledo. For an annual sum of \$1,000, plus a one-time payment of \$16,000, the tribes relinquished all land in the Connecticut Western Reserve, including the Fire Lands. The way was now open for the sufferers and their descendants to move west.

### The story continues

Over a century later, a group of determined Ohioans living in the same area as the original “Fire Lands” was also trying to improve their quality of life. On May 28, 1936, the North Eastern Farm Bureau Electric Cooperative was created for the purpose of exploring options to bring electricity to the rural areas of Huron and surrounding counties. The creation of the federal Rural Electrification Administration (REA) just a year prior had prompted the national Farm Bureau organization to help educate, organize, and guide farmers in their quest for electric power — and the local farmers wanted in.

After a year and a half of research, North Eastern took the first steps to becoming an REA-financed rural electric cooperative. In late 1937, the board petitioned to change their name to Firelands Electric Cooperative, Inc., reflecting the history of those it would serve. The first official board meeting of Firelands Electric took place on Jan. 25, 1938, and the co-op’s articles of incorporation were officially amended just four days later.

With the help of the REA, Firelands Electric was soon building its first power lines, which it energized during the summer of 1938 utilizing an interconnection with the Norwalk City municipal generating plant. The number of co-op members would continue to grow and, by the mid-1940s, Firelands Electric would acquire the New London Power Company, greatly expanding its transmission capabilities. What had started out as the dream of a few had become reality for many.

Today, Firelands Electric Cooperative serves over 9,100 homes and businesses in Ashland, Huron, Lorain, and Richland counties. The cooperative also maintains nearly 1,000 miles of power lines and over 25,000 utility poles. To read more about Firelands Electric’s history, visit [www.firelandsec.com/cooperative-history](http://www.firelandsec.com/cooperative-history). Included on the page is a link to a summary of the cooperative’s history written in 2002 by former Firelands Director of Finance and Accounting Harold Kirkpatrick, who worked at the cooperative from 1955 until 1986.

### Sources

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*Fort Industry: An Historical Mystery* by Walter J. Sherman. Ohio History Connection. *Ohio History Journal*. Volume 38/April 1929/Number 2, pages 231–259. <https://resources.ohiohistory.org/ohj/browse/volumebrowse.php>

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*Shared service: The History of Electric Cooperatives and Ohio Farm Bureau* by Craig Lovelace. *Ohio Cooperative Living*. March 2017. <https://www.ohiocoopliving.com/shared-service-history-electric-cooperatives-and-ohio-farm-bureau>

FIRELANDS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE INC.