Robert S. Morrison (1909-2002) had been a car dealer all his adult life, but in 1948, decided to get into the production of a new material — fiberglass-reinforced plastic FRP.

He didn’t know it at the time, but Morrison’s move into fiberglass would soon take him back to the automobile industry. The company he founded, MFG, was approached by General Motors engineers as a possible supplier for the lightweight body of a new sports car — the Chevrolet Corvette. While Morrison was using reinforced fiberglass to produce bread trays, his plant lacked both the expertise and capacity to meet the 10,000 annual production numbers General Motors expected for its new product.

Undaunted, Morrison found a way to mass produce the bodies from FRP, which was still in its infancy. Within 10 months of getting the green light, Morrison and his team had developed the manufacturing techniques for mass production of the fiberglass bodies and built the factory in which to produce them.

The use of FRP for the Corvette body has been called a “watershed event” for the material and its industry. And sixty years after the first C1 Corvette bodies came off the assembly line wrapped in Morrison’s ingenuity, his company, MFG, remains headquartered in Ashtabula, Morrison’s hometown.

Industry and manufacturing in Ashtabula County are as diverse as the county’s physical landscape, but transportation is an oft-found thread. There is hardly a car on the world’s highways that does not have a part in it that was produced in Ashtabula County.

Photo: Richard Morrison, CEO of MFG, poses with a 1956 Corvette Model C1; his father, the late Robert S. Morrison, founded the company that produced the classic car’s body. MFG has plants in Ashtabula as well as other states, but its corporate headquarters remain in Morrison’s hometown.
A Diversity of Manufacturing

For example, Welded Tubes in Orwell produces the steel tubes that hold in place the headrest of many Honda, Ford, Toyota and Nissan vehicles. Welded Tubes also produces tubing that is probably in your home’s hot water heater or refrigerator.

Your home’s kitchen or bathroom is likely to have a cabinet or two built by Orwell’s Kraftmaid Cabinetry, which has several plants in this region and sells its products through national home-improvement stores.

Kennametal, another southern Ashtabula County manufacturer, makes metalworking tools and products for a wide range of industries. The company has been recognized by The Ethisphere Institute as one of the World’s Most Ethical Companies.

Even your toothpaste and the white paint in your home are likely to contain titanium dioxide produced by Cristal Global, whose Ashtabula Township facility employs 540.

In 2014, Cristal began work on a liquid gases plant that will both expand the plant’s capacity and further entrench the industry in Ashtabula County. The investment of equipment and infrastructure will cost the company $60 million and free it from dependence on external suppliers for liquid oxygen and nitrogen.

Several county industries already have seen demand for their products and services as a result of the shale-gas boom, which is moving toward Ashtabula County. Miscanthus, a biofuels/pulp source, is being grown in the county and presents opportunities for processing and export.

Photo: A flat strip of metal is formed into the round shape of a tube on machinery at Welded Tubes in Orwell. High Frequency current is delivered to the strip edges through the round coil, where the strip edges are bonded together without filler material to make a weld stronger than the parent material.

Photo courtesy of Welded Tubes/Orwell.

Inset: Presrite Corporation’s Jefferson plant has expanded production as a result of the gas drilling boom.
200 million gallons. That is the amount of water that the Ashtabula County Port Authority is permitted to withdraw daily from Lake Erie.

To put that in perspective, that’s how much water plummets over both the American and Canadian falls at Niagara in 26 seconds.

The authority withdraws only one tenth of that permitted volume, however. There is plenty of capacity in reserve, and, thanks to a grant from the U.S. Economic Development Agency (EDA), the infrastructure will be in place to pump and deliver fresh water to today’s and tomorrow’s industries.

The $1.5 million grant, matched with a loan from the Ohio Water Development Authority, funded the infrastructure improvements to the Port Authority’s Plant C, a former electric generation/water plant on Lake Erie in Ashtabula Township. The Port Authority purchased the plant when First Energy announced that it would be ceasing its generation and pumping activities there. At least 1,000 manufacturing jobs were preserved by the purchase and ensuring investments in the aging delivery system.

The industries that tap into this supply of fresh water are retiring the Port Authority’s debt on the project, making Plant C a great deal for taxpayers.

Another industrial infrastructure project recently was completed through the cooperation of the county, Ashtabula City Port Authority and Ashtabula city and county. The project extended a sewer line into the city’s East Sixth Street industrial park and the State/Lake Road area of Ashtabula Township, enabling industries and businesses to tap into the city’s under-utilized wastewater treatment plant.

Photo: Cristal Global is the major user of raw water pumped by Plant C, which is owned by the Ashtabula County Port Authority.
Photo Inset: Pumps and associated delivery system items at Plant C are being replaced under an Economic Development Authority award, thus saving more than 1,000 manufacturing jobs.
Bold colors run through great stories. They enhance products made of polymers, as well. But getting a batch of thermoset plastics to evenly accept a dash of red or gold is challenging.

MIT graduate and chemist Bey Blanchard took on the challenge and in 1970 started his company, Plasticores, Inc., in Ashtabula. For more than two decades, the small company focused only on dispersions that supported the thermoset plastics market. But in the late 1990s, Plasticores ventured into colorants for paints and coatings, a venture that set the firm on the path of acquisitions and growth.

In 2012 Plasticores, Inc., and Iovivik Industries’ ColorTrend, a global colorants business, merged to form Chromaflow Technologies, which is headquartered in Ashtabula.

The company maintains domestic production facilities, as well as in Canada, the Netherlands, Finland, Australia and China. And while the size and geographic distribution of the company has changed greatly from Bey Blanchard’s initial effort, Plasticores’ core values remain: quality, speed service.

At the end of 2013, European-based colorants business CPS Color, joined Chromaflow Technologies, further expanding Chromaflow’s spectrum of products and advancing the firm towards its vision: To be the premier provider of global colorant technology solutions.

Bey Blanchard, who died in 2001, no doubt would be proud of the rainbow he helped paint around our globe.

Photo: Chromaflow’s headquarters are in Ashtabula; several acquisitions by the original Plasticores have helped give the company diversity and worldwide presence.

Photos courtesy of Chromaflow Technologies
In 1991 Ashtabula County became the first in Ohio to have its high schools connected to a university branch, Kent State-Ashtabula, via fiber-optic cable. The connection enabled students to interactively attend classes offered at other high schools and the campus without leaving their home school.

While the Internet has since rendered that system obsolete, the county’s communications service providers continue to enhance infrastructure to meet the communications needs of education, business and medicine in Ashtabula County.

There are at least three providers with 10-gigabit backbones in the area. Where service is not already in place, most providers are willing to extend fiber in exchange for commitments. “Compared to a lot of areas, Ashtabula County is a great place to get high-capacity data service or high-speed Internet affordably,” notes Ken Johnson of Conneaut Telephone.

His company has deployed about 185 miles of fiber-optic cable in Conneaut and has another 55 miles of fiber from the Pennsylvania border west to Ashtabula, Saybrook, Geneva and Geneva-on-the-Lake. Other providers have fiber-optic cables to Orwell and Andover. Combined with long-haul cables that connect to major Ohio cities and national centers, “there is likely a solution for any business to get fiber-optic circuits in Ashtabula County and affordably connect to anywhere else in the country,” Johnson says.

Conneaut Telephone invested $1.5 million in two years building its fiber-optic network and upgrading services so the county will be ready for large-scale deployment, both today and in the future. Other service providers, which include Windstream, Time Warner and CenturyLink, are likewise investing in their capabilities.

Photo: Crews install the tubing that will hold fiber-optic cable and allow a human services complex in Ashtabula Township to greatly expand its data transmission rates. Conneaut Telephone Co. has invested more than $1 million in upgrading the county’s fiber-optic infrastructure.
The late Robert S. Morrison was a visionary in aviation as well as reinforced molded fiberglass.

In the middle of the 20th Century, when Morrison and his team of engineers were heavily involved with the Detroit automobile industry, the need for quick, convenient air transportation between Ashtabula County and business destinations became very evident to Morrison. He began a grassroots effort to build an airport in Ashtabula County capable of handling corporate jets. His goal was realized in the 1990s, when the Ashtabula County Airport was developed and opened in Jefferson.

Recently renamed the Northeast Ohio Regional Airport to better reflect its broader influence and service area, the airport is owned and operated by the Ashtabula County Airport Authority.

The revamping goes beyond a simple name change, however. Three Ashtabula County Aviation Trusts, operated by the Cleveland Foundation, were established to provide an economic foundation for the airport’s long-term viability. Further, the airport’s ARC C-II design standard was renewed recently by the Federal Aviation Administration, ensuring the facility’s ability to serve medium-sized corporate jet aircraft. The runway is 5,198 feet long, and the airport’s master plan calls for an extension that would take it to nearly 6,000 feet.

These improvements will allow the airport to continue to serve both the public and corporate jet segments while positioning the county to better serve the emerging energy exploration industry in northeast Ohio.

The airport’s progressive direction was recognized in 2014 by the Ohio Aviation Association. The group in naming Ashtabula County’s airport Ohio’s “Airport of the Year,” acknowledged that the airport has made the most extraordinary accomplishments in moving forward both the airport’s program and aviation in Ohio. More than 100 airports in Ohio compete for the honor.

The Morrison touch remains on this airport; the airfield bears his name and MFG’s corporate jet is based at Ashtabula County Regional. The airport meets the storage and aviation needs of several other Ashtabula County corporations.

Photo: A corporate jet lands at the Northeast Ohio Regional Airport. Photo Courtesy of R.A. Wiedemann & Associates, Inc.
“Five feet of water at a distance of 505 feet; 8 feet of water at a distance of 2355 feet.” These dismal depth readings for Lake Erie off Ashtabula were presented by land agent Col. William Hubbard as evidence of the need for federal investment in Ashtabula’s harbor.

Help arrived in 1826, when Congress appropriated $12,000 to remove obstructions. Soon, Ashtabula Harbor became an important Lake Erie port for shipping lumber, whiskey, livestock and passengers. Eastern goods and migrants heading for the Western Reserve and beyond poured through the port.

The shipping industry hit a sand bar in the early 1850s, when the first east-west railroad was completed, providing a year-around alternative to lake shipping. But with the arrival of the first north-south railroad in 1873, the harbor was revitalized and positioned for decades of greatness. A second railroad arrived the following year; eventually, the railroad giants Penn Central and New York Central competed for business in Ashtabula Harbor.

The harbor outpaced all other Lake Erie iron ore ports in the early 1900s, and as late as the 1960s, Ashtabula Harbor ranked third in the world for tonnage handled. While the volume of vessels, and sailors, has decreased dramatically in the past 100 years, Ashtabula Harbor remains a major bulk material handling port.

Much of the harbor to the east of Ashtabula River is controlled by Kinder Morgan, which owns the former A&B, Union and Pinney Docks. Collectively, the docks offer 10,000 feet of berthing capacity; slips are dredged to 28 feet, allowing Kinder Morgan to accommodate any ship that sails the Great Lakes. Tug service is available for salt-water vessels. These docks receive raw materials used by chemical producers in the region, as well as salt, sand, steel and agricultural materials. Coal and coke arrive by rail and depart on vessels. The dock also handles stone for highway construction and sells to contractors and government. Both CSX and Norfolk Southern railroads service the docks, which are located near Ohio Route 11 and Interstate 90.

Kinder Morgan’s Ashtabula facility is positioned for growth as the shale gas market heats up in Northeast Ohio; excess dock space could accommodate liquified gas for export.
Also at Ashtabula, the Norfolk Southern Railway Company has a coal loading dock on the west side of the Ashtabula River, while a stone dock operated by R.W. Sidley Co. is on the river’s east side.

Conneaut’s Pittsburgh and Conneaut Dock Company, a subsidiary of Canadian National Railway, receives iron ore and stone, and ships coal. The associated Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad services the dock and has connections to both Norfolk Southern Railway and CSX. A large tract of land is to the east of the docks, and the city and Port of Erie, Pa., are working on partnerships that could utilize Conneaut’s material handling and land resources.

Photo: A long line of Norfolk Southern Railway cars departs the railroad’s Ashtabula Harbor dock after discharging their cargo of coal.

Photo Inset (right): A Bessemer and Lake Erie train heads south on the line that runs from the Pittsburgh and Conneaut Dock Company along Conneaut Creek.
TOURISM: OUR LAKE AWAITS

A few days prior to the Fourth of July, 1869, Spencer and Pratt, two enterprising Geneva Township men, placed an advertisement in the Geneva Times for what they called their new “Pleasure Grounds” along Lake Erie.

The simple picnic/camping area at Sturgeon Point on Lake Erie would grow into Geneva-on-the-Lake, a summer resort community, and set a precedent for tourism as an Ashtabula County industry.

Lake Erie remains a key component of the county’s growing tourism industry. With 30 miles of shoreline, four major public beaches, a state park and lodge, marinas, and public launch sites, Ashtabula County’s tourism industry is literally built on the shores of Lake Erie.

Moving inland, the rivers and wooded areas of the county provide tourism opportunities for the adventure-seeking and sporting tourists. Manmade attractions like covered bridges, SPIRE Institute, 20 museums, family fun parks, golf courses and Pymatuning Lake further enhance tourism in the county.

Tourism is the county’s fastest growing industry, employing more than 15 percent of the workforce. In 2009, it provided one in nine of the county’s salaried jobs; just two years later, that statistic was one in seven.

Ashtabula County’s wineries are a major driver of tourism’s growth. One study showed that, on a typical weekend during peak tourism season (March-December), the counties’ wineries collectively drew 15,000 to 20,000 visitors (2010 Ohio Wine Producers statewide study).

Photos: Cooling off at the beaches of Geneva-on-the-Lake has been a summer tradition since 1869, when the first commercial tourism venture opened there. Today, the state park beach, Adventure Zone and Strip are among the places tourists can cool off, have fun and connect with friends.
The Ohio Legislature recently relaxed the state’s laws regarding licensing of distilleries, opening up yet another tourism venue. Gene Sigel of South River Vineyards, Harpersfield Township, worked with lawmakers on the change, which allows counties with small populations to have distilleries. His Red Eagle Distillery, housed in a barn where bootleg whiskey was allegedly produced during Prohibition, crafts bourbon and other distilled alcoholic beverages. The distillery provides the perfect complement to South River Vineyard’s winery — and Ashtabula County’s other attractions.

Many opportunities remain for further development of tourism. Indian Trails Park, with its high bluffs, riparian forest and proximity to city amenities, is ripe for adventure-sport development. Outdoor enthusiasts are starting to discover our three Scenic Rivers and numerous natural areas. Bridge Street in Ashtabula Harbor and the Route 534 Corridor in the Geneva area have become magnets for the arts, food and shopping. Photographers, artists and rural architecture fans have a new reason to explore our byways — The Ashtabula County Barn Quilt Trail. And agritourism recently got a huge boost with the opening of Windows on Pairings and the Terra Local farmers market in Geneva.

Any one of these emerging segments has the potential of becoming the next Geneva-on-the-Lake or wine industry tourism success story.

Photos: Cyclists enjoy the covered bridges and scenic countryside of rural Ashtabula County as they cycle to a winery. At left, The Polly Harper Inn in Harpersfield Township is sited in a vineyard near the Red Eagle Distillery on South River Road (top photo). The county has a number of golf courses, including Village Green near Lake Erie in North Kingsville.
From revolving loan funds to enterprise zone tax initiatives, Ashtabula County’s economic development community has resources in place to meet the financial challenges of starting and doing business.

The Ashtabula County 503 Corporation provides revolving loan funds. A private, non-profit corporation, the fund’s mission is job creation and economic growth. State and federal sources capitalize the fund. Additionally, the corporation serves as the county contact agency for the Small Business Administration 504 and State of Ohio Regional 166 loan programs.

Ashtabula County Commissioners have created an Enterprise Zone in which special tax incentives are offered to businesses that invest in real property improvements that result in job creation/retention. Eighty percent of Ashtabula County is within this zone. Within unincorporated areas, a reduction of 60 percent for a period of up to 15 years is allowed by state law. The reduction is up to 75 percent in incorporated areas.

Tax reductions within Community Reinvestment Areas (CRAs) are offered in the county’s cities plus the villages of Orwell and Andover and Ashtabula Township.

The Covered Bridge Development District, a Joint Economic Development District in Geneva City/Harpersfield Township, offers a job creation tax credit. Ashtabula City and the Village of Jefferson have similar credits.

The lead agency in assisting entrepreneurs with planning, site selection and financing of new projects is Growth Partnership for Ashtabula County. The non-profit organization can help businesses tap into state and federal low-interest loans, tax credits and training dollars.

Photo: Tax incentives allowed John Ringer of Wholesale Imprints to expand his warehouse operation and thereby keep up with the growth of his screen-printing business, housed in the Hewitt Industrial Park, North Kingsville.

“...When we had decided to expand our business in Ashtabula County, it was great to have tax incentive opportunities available. Working with the Enterprise Zone through the Growth Partnership has allowed us to save money and increase our work force from 12 employees in 2012, to 27 full time and 4 part time employees in 2014.”

John Ringer - Owner, Wholesale Imprints, Inc. North Kingsville
Cory and Katie Watts had no experience owning a business, but that could not chill their determination to purchase an ice cream shop in North Kingsville. Their enthusiasm and dedication to learning the ropes, along with a well-written business plan, helped the young couple obtain financing in their back yard.

The New Entrepreneurs Opportunity Fund (NEO Fund) is Ashtabula County’s community development financial institution. It provides microloans to the owners of start-up and existing business who otherwise lack access to traditional sources of funding. Cory’s brother, Ryan, used the fund to open a diner on Bridge Street, and he pointed Cory and Katie to NEO when they went looking for the money to purchase Whippy Dip.

“They played a very big role in this, from start to finish,” Cory says.

The fund’s directors insist that applicants write a business plan as part of the application process. The entrepreneur stays connected to the fund’s managers throughout the term of the loan and beyond. The fund managers and borrowing community provide support services, networking opportunities and coaching to each other. The goal is to minimize the risks inherent to running a small business while helping it grow to the next level.

“They really do pay close attention to make sure you are doing the right things to grow your business,” says Cory, who has since opened a second business, Loading Dox.

The fund’s client list includes Briquettes Smokehouse, Harbor Perk, Heath’s Marketplace, Geneva Spinal Clinic, Mary’s Kitchen and Beach’s Jewelry.

Photo: Katie and Cory Watts sit outside their North Kingsville ice cream shop, Whippy Dip, which they purchased in 2013 using the NEO Fund for financing. NEO Fund does more than provide money; it gives guidance in every aspect of running and growing a business.
THE CHANGING FACE OF AGRICULTURE

“I was so exceedingly surprised at seeing on the table a great variety of beautiful looking bread made both from fine wheat flour and Indian corn, that I exclaimed, ‘Bless me, we must be in Virginia.’”

A 1846 visitor to the Western Reserve, writing to family back in Virginia.

The “great variety” observed by a visitor to this land long ago continues to sum up agriculture in Ashtabula County. “About the only thing we don’t grow or raise here is tobacco,” says David Harrison, county director of the OSU Extension Office for Ashtabula County.

Ashtabula County produces more than $82 million of raw farm products annually. The trend is toward value added and new crops that benefit from the extended growing season of the lakeshore agricultural region.

The county is home to Ohio’s wine industry, with 70 percent of all the wine grapes produced in Ohio grown in Ashtabula County soils. It also is a pioneer in Miscanthus plantings; more than 4,000 acres of otherwise agriculturally marginal land are devoted to the biofuel and pulp grass.

With proper drainage, the county’s soils can be very productive. Even when taking into account the cost of adding drainage to the county’s farmland, the cost per acre is at least 20 percent less than farmland in the western part of the state.

Both water resources and transportation are readily available, with Lake Erie ports, rail and Interstate options. The presence of large population centers within an hour’s drive of the county opens many markets for both producers and re-sellers of agricultural products in Ashtabula County.

Regardless of the type of farming or size of the operation, growers in Ashtabula County have a network of professional associations and research resources within the community to assist them with everything from buying land and equipment to marketing. Of particular significance to this area is the 15 acre Ashtabula Agricultural Research Station operated by The Ohio State University.

Photo: The Smolen Family Farm on Route 46 in Jefferson Township, like many of the former dairy farms in the county, has shifted its focus to growing grain rather than raising livestock or milking a herd. The Western Reserve Cooperative’s new grain storage facility reflects that shift. Nevertheless, family farming remains a way of life for those with familial land resources. And, thanks in part to the research conducted at the Ashtabula Agricultural Research Station in Kingsville Township, the wine industry in Ashtabula County is thriving.
The Prochko family has farmed along Netcher Road in Jefferson Township since 1936. Mick Prochko’s father, Michael Sr., did general farming, grew pansies for a Cleveland market and eventually found his niche in dairy. Mick followed in his father’s boot tracks, but got out of dairy in 1999, while his son, Steve, was away at Delaware Valley College.

It was about that time Steve shared with his parents what had become a successful venture for the parents of some of his peers at college. They were converting their former dairy farms to truck farms that grew vegetables, for which there was a strong market in nearby metropolitan areas. In 2000 Mick and his wife Kay planted 100 pepper and 100 tomato plants and got into the truck farm business.

It was a substantial investment: drainage tile had to be installed in the fields, equipment purchased and barns revamped for vegetable cleaning, packaging and storage. Several days a week, a member of the family had to rise early, drive to an urban farmer’s market, sell their produce, tell their story and build relationships. They also signed up partners for a community supported agriculture (CSA), in which the consumer makes an annual investment in the farm by paying for a growing-season worth of fresh produce up front.

Today, their Covered Bridge Gardens has CSA customers from Avon Lake to Erie, Pa. They sell at markets in Cleveland and Ashtabula Harbor, and grow more than 80 different vegetables. The couple discovered that their land was especially well suited for growing popcorn, and they grow enough so they can offer it year around. More than 25 acres are in vegetable production at the farm.

Operated by the family — Mick, Kay and Steve — with hired seasonal assistance, Covered Bridge Gardens is redefining agriculture in Ashtabula County, which is ideally situated between three major metropolitan areas. Several other vegetable growers have followed their example and are successfully converting their farms to capitalize on the locavore food movement.

Photo: Mick and Kay Prochko, along with their son, Steve, operate a truck farm in Jefferson Township. Covered Bridge Gardens provides food direct to the consumer through Community Supported Agriculture and farmers’ markets.
Dr. Konstantin Frank, an immigrant from the Ukraine, was ridiculed for believing that he could grow the European _Vitis vinifera_ grapes in the cold climate of New York’s Finger Lakes region. 

Grow them, he did, however, and Frank’s success attracted the interest of an industrial engineer, Arnluf Esterer, who was fascinated by Frank’s cool-climate research. In 1968, Esterer and business partner Tim Hubbard began planting Markko Vineyard on the west side of Conneaut in an attempt to bring the European _vinifera_ varietals to Lake Erie’s shoreline. About the time Esterer and Hubbard were producing their first bottles of Chardonnay and Reisling, Anthony Debeve Jr. was returning from college, where he became aware of a trend among families who had operated juice-grape farms for decades — their orchards and farms were being converted to wine production.

Young Debeve convinced his father and mother, Tony and Rose Debeve, to take the leap of faith and convert their county-line Concord grape vineyard to wine production. Chalet Debonne, one of Ohio’s largest estate wineries, thus was born in 1971.

The pioneering wineries of Esterer and Debeve have been joined by at least 18 others in Ashtabula County, each blazing its own trail of innovation. Although there have been setbacks, most recently the devastating winter of 2012-14, the vineyard owners stay true to the promise that Esterer, “father of the _vinifera_ vine growing in Ohio,” built his vineyard upon — fine wines in the European tradition can be produced along the shore of Lake Erie, in Ashtabula County.

Our wine industry is part of the Lake Erie Appellation and includes the Grand River Valley Appellation. Although there are wineries in every city along the Lake Erie shore, Harpersfield Township is the hub of the industry and Geneva the gateway.

Regardless of where the glasses are raised in Ashtabula County, palates are pleased and the comment often heard: “We never knew that wines of such quality were made in Ohio! Bravo!”

Many of the smaller wineries in Ashtabula County harvest their grapes by hand. The Debeve family of Harpersfield Township (left) stand in their vineyard, just across the county line in Lake County. They were pioneers in growing wine grapes in this region. Arnluf Esterer (above) successfully cultivated _vinifera_ grapes in the Conneaut area.
Ashtabula County’s gateway to Ohio’s Wine Country, Geneva, is also a gateway to learning about wine, food and the business of wine-making.

Pairings, Ohio’s Wine and Culinary Experience, came about as a result of an asset-based economic development study. With Geneva solidly in the middle of wine country, it makes perfect sense to build a center dedicated to educating the public about wine and food in the city. And those with a dream of owning their own winery will be able to incubate it at Pairings, in one of the wine production suites.

Windows on Pairings, the first phase of this project, opened in June 2014. With a century-old carriage house at its nucleus, Windows features a tasting room, culinary education room and kitchen and reception area. A local foods market is on the campus. Framed by several demonstration vineyards, Windows hints at the great things to come when Pairings rises on the three-acre, downtown site.

It will offer three fully equipped wine production suites, a large kitchen and banquet facility, classrooms, shopping and expanded tasting area. Kent State University and the VESTA program are partners with the Pairings Board of Trustees and City of Geneva.

Pairings will cost $15 million. Its impact on the economy is projected at 50 to 60 new jobs, plus small business development, downtown revitalization and rural wealth creation.

Photo: Windows on Pairings is the first stage of Pairings, a wine and culinary education center planned for Geneva. Photo Inset (bottom): Culinary classes are offered at Windows on Pairings.

Tastings are part of the Windows on Pairings offerings. More than three dozen Ohio wines can be experienced there.
Robin and Deborah Boggs’ farm, Alfa Creek, is at the end of a dead-end road in Andover Township. While some might see that as a metaphor for the type of farming done here, Robin is banking on both his future and that of his children with a big investment.

More than $1 million will be spent constructing and equipping a new milking parlor that will replace the obsolete parlor dating from the 1970s, when Robin and Deborah purchased the farm, fresh out of high school. In order to make the cash flow work, the Boggs will have to double the size of their herd to 300 milking head.

“It’s a business decision to milk more cows,” Robin says, his blue eyes squinting in the bright July sun. “It’s not being done from the heart.”

A relatively small farm, Alfa Creek stands tall in the industry. In 2013, both their Holstein and Brown Swiss herds were Ohio’s top producers. Robin says they did it by being small and paying attention to details. And that being the case, he doesn’t like the idea of the farm getting bigger, but as he says, it’s a business decision, not one from the heart. And he doesn’t want the family dairy farm to evolve like so many others have. Along the country roads leading to Alfa Creek are hayfields, tired barns and abandoned silos, symbols of other farmers who also made business decisions and converted their aging dairy farms to grain farming.

His daughter, Nicki Britton, works on Alfa Creek Farm but is married to a grain farmer with thousands of acres in production. But Alfa Creek, which cultivates 450 acres of grain to feed its herd, is sticking to tradition. And so Robin’s father, Ross, a farmer and former state representative, drives the tractor every chance he gets. Nicki and her brother, Randy, work the farm alongside their father and mother. Granddaughters and neighbor kids adopt calves from the herd for 4-H projects.

“This is home, so this is where we farm,” Robin says.

Photo: Robin Boggs’ grandchildren, Kelestie and Emma Britton, show off one of the cows in the dairy farm’s herd.
Kevin and Susan Morris are the fifth generation to farm the Orwell Township land that has been in Morris ownership since 1860. Susan says their small dairy farm has survived because they disregarded the conventional wisdom of “bigger is better,” avoided debt and kept the herd size manageable. They also found a niche: artisan, farmstead cheese, that fit perfectly with the kind of milk their Holsteins produce.

The transformation began after Susan left her factory job and began researching alternatives to the dairy-farm model that was no longer working. She discovered that the feeding practices Kevin had continued to use on the farm resulted in milk that was well suited for producing cheese. After six months of researching the option, she and Kevin began shifting their farm to cheese production.

Susan, a master cheese maker, produces about 200 pounds of Gouda, Havarti and blue varieties every week. The cheese is served at fine restaurants in Ashtabula County, Cleveland and Columbus. Their products are available at Heinen’s Fine Foods and the creamery.

“The location is perfect,” Susan says, of their Route 322 site.

Photo: Kevin Morris continues the tradition of dairy farming on his family’s Orwell Township land, but much of the milk stays on the farm for use in the cheese-making business.

Photo Inset: Susan Morris makes a variety of Gouda and Havarti cheeses at her Mayfield Creamery.
A knack for the niche ...

He was the Mushroom King of Ashtabula. Roger W. Griswold, 1878-1965, grew more mushrooms in his Ashtabula hot houses than any other Ohio producer. Indeed, only the Philadelphia area grew more mushrooms than Griswold’s 300,000-square-foot hot house in Ashtabula.

Griswold’s mushrooms topped off steaks in some of the swankiest restaurants of Miami, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and New York. His hot houses also grew tomatoes, cucumbers, rhubarb and asparagus. An inventor and innovator, Griswold figured out a way to grow the fungi year-around.

This fungi empire, which peaked in the 1920s, has vanished from the horticulture scene, but the quirky nature of Ashtabula County agriculture endures. In addition to mainstays like corn, soybeans, dairy, beef and fruit, Ashtabula County’s farmers have a knack for the niche.

Sugar bushes scattered around the county are tapped in late winter for the mildly sweet sap that is boiled down to maple syrup. Several Ashtabula County families engage in the laborious process of transforming the sap into the flavorful sweetener.

Several orchards occupy the ridges of the ancient lakes that preceded Lake Erie. But growing fruit is just the beginning. Growers also press their apples into fresh cider and bake them into tasty pies sold right at the orchard.

The county’s proximity to the Cleveland restaurant market opens many opportunities for growers who cater to the locavore movement. One Jefferson Township livestock producer raises both grass-fed beef and acorn-fed pigs for an upscale restaurant. Another enterprising farmer offers fresh perch grown in farm ponds that are aerated by windmills. Amish farms offer produce and baked goods at roadside stands and farmers markets. Honey, goat-milk fudge, greens, pecans, berries and eggs from free-range chickens are likely to be found at our farmers markets, as well.

These markets operate from June to October in Geneva (Terra Local), Ashtabula Harbor, Conneaut and Jefferson. Roadside stands and Community Supported Agriculture provide further options for connecting growers to consumers. And several meat producers offer free-range meats.

The Frank family has been growing apples in Ashtabula County since the 1920s. Don and Lynn Frank are the third generation of owners at Cold Springs Orchard in Austinburg Township.

Several maple syrup producers operate in the county. The Robert Cline family has worked the maple trees of Kingsville Township for years; residents know spring can’t be far away when the sap buckets appear on the town’s maple trees.

Pumpkins and gourds are harvested from a field near Gageville; the autumnal orbs are destined for a market in the Cleveland area.
The Miscanthus grows so fast in June, you can almost see it getting longer, says Terry Lowe, who has more than 30 acres planted in the crop.

Throughout Ashtabula County, some 3,000 acres of otherwise marginal farm land are growing this vigorous grass that reaches heights of 12 feet or more in one season. Aloterra Energy, a Texas company, selected Ashtabula County as a target site for growing the grass due to the abundance of acreage, suitable climate and transportation options.

The grass can be processed into biofuels, but Aloterra CEO Jon A. Griswold feels that is just the beginning for this promising crop. When certified free of weeds, the grass’ leaves can be processed into mulch and used for soil reclamation, such as along highways after construction work. The stalks are dense and fibrous, like hardwood, but grow much faster and could be used in applications such as paper and cardboard.

Each growing/harvest cycle in Ashtabula County is teaching the company and contracted growers important lessons that will provide a foundation of knowledge for expanding Miscanthus production in the region.

Another renewable energy asset, wind, generates electricity to power Conneaut’s wastewater treatment plant. Other wind energy projects are under review in the county.

Main Photo: Miscanthus is a biofuels crop that grows well in Ashtabula County. Checking the growth in a Monroe Township field are Jon Griswold, CEO of Aloterra Energy, and property owner Terry Lowe.
It was called the Kingsville Experiment, and it would change the way students were educated in Ohio, and beyond.

In 1894, the Ohio Legislature passed a law specific to Kingsville Township, allowing its school board to use public funds for transporting students to school. Teamsters were hired to bring the youngsters to a centralized building rather than attending the iconic but far-flung one-room schoolhouses of the era. The experiment was gradually expanded to include all of Kingsville Township, and it soon became a model for centralization.

Years of centralization have resulted in seven public K-12 school districts in Ashtabula County. Three are city districts; four are locals. A technical career center, A-tech, provides career-oriented education for both senior high and adult learners.

Ohio’s open enrollment policy allows students from one district to open enroll in another county district. All of the county’s public districts permit open enrollment when space permits. High school students, upon meeting certain qualifications, can attend colleges and universities while still a public school student and receive credit for their classes, the tuition for which is picked up by the school district.

Most of the county’s districts have buildings that were erected in the past decade. All offer high school varsity sports programs, college preparatory and advanced placement classes and a range of extracurricular activities. Several Ashtabula County high schools have received national recognition in the US News and World Reports listing of the nation’s best high schools.

All of the public districts are served by the Ashtabula County Educational Service Center, which provides cost-effective, collaborative services.

These services include professional development, implementation of state and federal regulations and programming. Programs include special education schools and classroom intervention projects, opportunities for gifted students (Allegro), countywide scholastic competition, spelling bees and leadership and mentorship programs.

The city districts, for the most part, have campus-style schools. Most of the county’s districts provide busing to all students.

Photo: The campus of Lakeside High School reflects both the New England heritage of the region and the heritage of education in the Ashtabula community. Photo Insets: Kid hacks, horsedrawn wagons with seats in the wagon, brought students to the centralized school at Kingsville Township in a bold experiment in the use of public education funds: paying to bus students. Libraries are part of the county’s educational system and provide learning for all ages.