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STEPHEN MACK, JR.
FUR TRADER AND BUSINESSMAN
LIFE ON THE ILLINOIS FRONTIER

By Thomas A. Powers



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This representation of Stephen Mack the fur trader was painted by Barb Ramsby and her students at Kin Korner Art Studios in Rockton. Reprinted with permission.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In recent years, a lot of research has been done on Stephen Mack and the town of Pecatonic. The Macktown Restoration Foundation was formed to promote an awareness of the history of the area, and to encourage historical research and archaeology. This organization, now known as the Macktown Living History Education Center has sponsored several archaeological digs at the site of Pecatonic. They hold a number of historical events each year with a goal of educating both adults and children about life in the 1830s and 1840s. The Gathering, a recreation of an 1830s style fur traders rendezvous is held in Macktown Forest Preserve every spring.

I would like to thank Jim Mcaffee for his assistance in researching this article. Jim has done a great deal of research relating to Stephen Mack, the town of Pecatonic and the other early settlers in the town. His willingness to share his knowledge and point me to other resources was a great help.

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 968-5055.

Thomas Powers, Editor

SUMMER HISTORICAL TOUR

Saturday, June 30, 2001

8:15 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Bus leaves from Highcrest parking lot (by Canterbury Books)

Rockford Historical Society is planning a tour of St. Charles in the morning to be followed by lunch on a paddlewheel steamer. In the afternoon we will tour Cantigny, the estate of Col. Robert McCormick. The cost is \$30.

This should prove to be an interesting program. Put it on your calendar now. More information will follow at a later date.

STEPHEN MACK – FUR TRADER AND BUSINESSMAN LIFE ON THE ILLINOIS FRONTIER

The story of Stephen Mack's life is in many respects the story of life on the American frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century. He and his family played an important part in the western migration that began after the Revolutionary War. His father, Stephen Sr., was a successful businessman, fur trader and land speculator, first in Vermont and later in the Michigan Territory. His mother, Temperance, an Aunt of Joseph Smith, became one of the first converts to the Mormon Church. After the death of her husband, she traveled with the Mormons to Nauvoo, Illinois and eventually to Salt Lake City. Stephen Jr. followed his father west to Michigan and then to Illinois, becoming a successful fur trader, business man and land speculator in his own right.

Stephen Mack is well known in northern Illinois. He is generally

considered the first settler in what would become Winnebago Co. He was a fur trader and married a Potawatomi maiden named Ho-no-ne-gah. She bore him eleven children (two died in infancy). He founded the town of Pecatonic, more commonly known after its demise as Macktown. His home, built in 1839 still stands today in the Macktown Forest Preserve.

Much of what has been written about Stephen Mack has been copied from early histories such as the History of Winnebago County (H.F. Kett & Co., published 1877) and the History of Rockton (Edson Carr, published 1898). These authors did not document their sources, and some of what they wrote could not be confirmed from any other source. However, by piecing together information from a variety of sources and making some educated guesses, we can learn much about his life.

BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Stephen Mack's father, Stephen Senior, was born on June 15, 1764 in Marlow, New Hampshire. He enlisted in the army during the Revolutionary War when he was only fourteen. He served in the 6th Massachusetts Regiment during his first enlistment and enlisted three more times in other regiments before the end of the war. (Volunteers in state regiments could enlist for periods of only six months.) He later served with the Vermont state militia, where he attained the rank of Colonel. In 1788 he married Temperance Bond

and moved to Tunbridge, Vermont, where he went into the mercantile and tinning business. By all indications he was a successful businessman. Temperance and Stephen had twelve children including three sets of twins. Their sixth child, Stephen Mack Jr. was born on Feb. 20, 1798 in Tunbridge.

Little is known about Stephen Mack, Junior's childhood. He grew up in Vermont. When he was perhaps nine or ten years old, his father left his family behind to move his business to Detroit in the Michigan Territory. No

known letters survive from this period of his life. We do not know how often the family was able to visit with their father. Certainly travel was difficult and the trip from Detroit to Vermont would have taken weeks. It does appear from later letters that this was a close knit family that kept in touch by regular letters even when separated by great distances. Stephen senior wanted his children to get a good education, which would have been difficult in frontier Detroit. Some sources have stated that Stephen, Jr., attended Dartmouth College, but he actually attended Moor's Charity School, a preparatory school

that was run by the college. He graduated from this school in 1816 when he was eighteen. In September 1818 when he was twenty, he wrote a letter to his sisters from Boston where he was attending college. We do not know which school he was attending. He reports to his sisters that he has been in poor health, and that he hopes to join them in Detroit the following year. His father's intent was to have his family join him after the children had completed their education. It would take several years, but his wife and children did eventually join him in Michigan.

THE NORTHWESTERN FRONTIER

After the Revolutionary War, England ceded the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains to the United States. However, the British retained control of the forts and settlements in the west for many years after the war. They continued to dominate the fur trade even after the Americans took control of the land and eventually the fur trading companies. The French had occupied this land for over one hundred years prior to the French and Indian War. They had established a number of settlements and trading posts and had an extensive fur-trading network with the Indians. Many of the French settlers and fur traders remained after the British and then the Americans took over. Many of the major cities of the Midwest began as trading posts or forts founded by the French or British before the Revolutionary War.

After the Revolutionary War, thousands of settlers began moved into the new lands, many of them veterans

who had been given land grants for their service in the Revolutionary War. Many of these men went into unsettled areas of Maine, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee to start a new life. Later, as these states began to fill up new settlers moved further west into Indiana, Michigan and Illinois. Other settlers moved into the southern states as well. The Land Ordinance of 1785 established the Township and Range system of surveying and established a system of selling the new government lands north of the Ohio River. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a system of government for the new territory and laid out the rules by which territories and eventually states would be carved out of the Northwest Territory. It also set up the laws by which the territory would be governed.

The trouble was, this land was still occupied by many tribes of Indians. They were not anxious to give up their

land to these new settlers. Starting in 1785 the U.S. government signed many treaties with the various tribes, giving them money, trade goods, protection, and promises of land further west, in exchange for the land they currently occupied. Often these treaties contained annuities by which the government promised to pay money or trade goods annually for perhaps twenty years. Sometimes they agreed to set up a mill or a blacksmith shop for the use of the Indians. Whatever the terms, they often did not give up their land willingly. Often the Indians were convinced to fight the Americans by promises of support from the British who still occupied many of the forts and trading posts in the Northwest Territory. This support rarely materialized. Only after being defeated in battle were they persuaded to sign the treaties. Over the next few decades, land was obtained from the Indians one piece at a time, sometimes peacefully, sometimes not. Some treaties ceded only a few hundred acres while others ceded huge tracts of millions of acres at a time.

After land was obtained from the Indians, it had to be surveyed. Sometimes there were earlier settlers or landowners that had obtained their titles from the British or the French. The legitimacy of these claims had to be determined before the rest of the land could be offered for sale by the government. This all took time and some settlers did not want to wait. These "Squatters" settled on a piece of land with the intention of filing a claim when the land was offered for sale. Sometimes this took many years. Sometimes, as happened in Winnebago County, settlers formed "Mutual Claim

Societies to protect themselves from claim jumpers.

It was in this environment that Stephen Mack Sr. decided to go west. About 1807 he moved to Detroit in the newly created Michigan Territory. We do not know why he decided to move west or why he chose Detroit. Detroit had been the site of a fort and a trading post since 1701, but in 1807 it was still a very small settlement. Perhaps a few hundred people at most. He was an ambitious successful man. Perhaps he saw the potential to make more money selling merchandise to the settlers as well as trading furs with the Indians. He may have dreamed, as many did at that time, of the vast tracts of empty land. As land came on the market, people with money often purchased large tracts of land for a down payment of fifty cents per acre with the hopes of selling it in smaller pieces to potential settlers. Regardless of the reason, Stephen Mack Sr. with his partner Thomas Emerson opened up a store selling general merchandise and trading furs.

Mack left his wife and children behind in Vermont. It is generally believed that this was due to the greater educational opportunities available in Vermont, but safety may have been a factor as well. The British were right across the river in Windsor, Ontario and tensions were still high between England and their former colonies. In 1812 war broke out and the British laid siege to Detroit. Michigan Territorial Governor Hull surrendered the city after only token resistance. Stephen was reportedly captured by the British and held as a prisoner of war in Canada. After the

war he was released and returned to Detroit to reopen his business. In 1816 Mack's partner Thomas Emerson sold out his share of the business to Shubael Conant.

The new firm of Conant & Mack was very successful in Detroit. They became a major competitor to John Jacob Astor's American Fur Co. In 1816 they opened a branch in Chicago. John Crafts, their agent, opened a trading post for the firm four miles down river from Fort Dearborn. It was an excellent location. The Indians coming from the west traveled up the Des Plaines River, took the portage to the Chicago River at Mud Lake and would pass by Conant & Mack's trading post before they arrived at the U.S. government factory or the American Fur Co. post at Fort Dearborn. For several years Mack's company was one of the principal fur trading companies in the Midwest.

In 1818 land in Michigan territory was put up for sale by the government for the first time. Stephen senior, who was by now a trustee for the city of Detroit, formed an association called the Pontiac Company. It consisted of fifteen

men and Mack was named the agent for the company. He purchased 1,280 acres of land for \$3,000 on which they laid out the town of Pontiac, named after the great Chief. Mack and his associates then built a road to Detroit. They built a dam on the Clinton River and built a sawmill and a flourmill. They hoped to sell lots at a large markup to new settlers and thereby make a large profit. At this they succeeded. Pontiac became a thriving community. The town later became the county seat of Oakland County.

In 1817, the first of Steven Sr.'s children joined him in Detroit. Over the next few years, Temperance and all of the children moved to Detroit. Stephen Mack Jr. almost certainly came west in 1819. This is indicated from his letter to his two older sisters, Lovicy and Harriet written in 1818 from Boston where he was attending school. He tells them that he will be joining them in Detroit the following year. His mother in her memoirs *The Pilgrimage of Temperance Mack* confirms this.

STEPHEN MACK COMES WEST

We do not know what Stephen junior did in Michigan, or when exactly he came to Illinois. We can however, make some educated guesses. It seems likely that he worked for his father in Michigan, at least for a little while. There he would have learned about the fur trading business. He also was in Michigan to see his father's successful venture in Pontiac. This is probably one of the reasons why he decided to form his own town later in his life.

Edson Carr states in *The History of Rockton* that Mack joined a government expedition around the lakes from Detroit to Green Bay. There he heard from some fur traders that the Rock River Valley was a good place to trade. He traveled south through Wisconsin until he came to the Rock River at the present site of Janesville. From there he traveled down river to an Indian camp known as Turtle village near present day

Beloit. They gave him directions to the next village, in what is now Hononegah Forest Preserve in Rockton. He missed the camp, and continued down river until he came to the Potawatomi village near Grand Detour. There he stayed for two or three years, trading with the Indians, and there he met his future wife Ho-no-ne-gah.

Carr doesn't give us the source of this story. There was an expedition, led by the governor of Michigan that went around Lake Michigan and into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. There is no evidence that Mack was part of this expedition but it is possible. It does however seem odd that he could get lost trying to find a village only two or three miles away and end up fifty miles downstream. So how did he end up in the Rock River valley? As stated earlier, his father's company had a branch in Chicago. Perhaps he went to work for his father in Chicago. The Chicago trading post traded with Indians that came from a hundred-mile radius of the post. This included the Rock River valley. There were also other traders who worked along the Rock River and elsewhere who took their furs to Chicago and spent their summers there as Mack did. If he was in Chicago, either working for his father or on his own, he would have come into contact with these traders. Chicago in 1820 consisted of perhaps a dozen dwellings, most owned by fur traders. It would have been impossible not to know them even if he was not in the fur trade.

One of the fur traders who Mack may have known in Chicago was Pierre LaSaliere. He had a cabin near the Potawatomi village at Grand Detour where Mack had his trading post. Mack

bought this cabin and lived there with Ho-no-ne-gah. LaSaliere would have been an old man by the time he met Stephen Mack. He had been a fur trader in Michigan and Wisconsin for many years.

Another man that Mack certainly knew early in his career was John Baptiste Beaubien. The American Fur Co had brought Beaubien to Chicago from Milwaukee in 1818. He was a direct competitor of Conant & Mack. In 1822 the American Fur Company finally succeeded in buying them out. John Crafts, who had been the agent of Conant & Mack in Chicago, went to work for the American Fur Company with John Beaubien as his assistant. Beaubien would later become Stephen Mack's partner in the town of Pecatonic.

By an Act of Congress passed in 1822, the government run trading houses or factories were abolished. Instead, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs was to appoint Indian Agents at places such as Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Prairie du Chien and St. Louis. These Agents were authorized to issue licenses to traders who were required to specify where they would trade and to post a bond to guarantee that they would obey all the laws and rules governing the trade. The trader was also required to provide an invoice listing the quantity and value of the goods that he had for sale and the capital he had invested in the venture.

On October 20, 1823 Stephen Mack was issued a license to trade on the Rock River for one year with a capital of two thousand dollars. The license does not specify a particular place, but it is likely that he was already

established at Grand Detour. Mack was granted a second one-year license on September 6, 1824 and a third on October 5, 1826. There is no record of a license being granted to him in 1825, or anytime after 1826, but he remained in the fur trade for several more years. These licenses were issued by Alexander Wolcott, Jr., Indian Agent at Chicago. They were reported as required in an annual report to the Secretary of War. It appears however that these trading licenses were not always required, or were not reported. No licenses were reported for trading on the Rock River north of Prophetstown after 1827, despite the fact that Mack, John Dixon and others were trading there for a number of years.

For the next several years, Stephen Mack lived in Chicago during the summer months and spent the winters at his trading post at Grand Detour. He is listed as having voted in elections in Chicago in 1826, 1828, and 1830. In 1830 when the town of Chicago was platted and lots were sold for the first time, Stephen Mack purchased two lots. From letters to his sisters it would seem that he lived in Chicago until at least 1833.

One of the mysteries surrounding Stephen Mack is the origin of his wife Ho-no-ne-gah. There are a number of stories about her and how she met and married Stephen Mack. None of them can be confirmed from primary records. She is usually called an Indian "Princess" but that is likely a romantic fiction. One story has her saving Mack's life by warning him that the warriors of her tribe were going to attack him because he refused to sell them whiskey. Another has her nursing him

back to health after he became ill from some unknown disease. We don't know the origin of these stories. Mack never wrote of any of them in his surviving letters. No record of Ho-no-ne-gah's family has been found.

This is what we know about Ho-no-ne-gah. She was almost certainly of the Potawatomie tribe. In 1833 when the government signed a treaty with the Potawatomie, one of the provisions granted Steven Mack \$600 for his daughters Rosa and Mary as a payment in lieu of reservation. This provision would not be in this treaty if Ho-no-ne-gah was not a member of this tribe. She almost certainly lived at the Potawatomie village at Grand Detour where Mack had his trading post. Whether she was the daughter of the chief we will probably never know. We do not know the circumstances of their meeting or how they came to fall in love and marry. The stories mentioned above may be true, but they sound suspiciously like romantic fiction. The *History of Winnebago County* (H. F. Kett & Co, 1877) implies that it was a marriage of convenience for Mack in order to ingratiate him with the tribe. We can never know this for sure, but if so he certainly grew to love her. His letters to his family, and remarks of people who knew them make that clear.

The family bible states that Stephen Mack and Ho-no-ne-gah were married in 1829. Since it was an Indian ceremony there is no record of it in the county records. Mack had purchased Lasalier's cabin and the couple resided there for a while. Several sources state that they moved

to the Winnebago village known as Howaniga about 1829. We do not know why they moved. It is possible that she may have had relatives there. Perhaps Mack had a falling out with the chief at Grand Detour. Perhaps the competition around Grand Detour was getting too great. By the late 1820s there were several traders working the Rock River valley. Whatever the reason, Mack moved his base of operations to Howaniga in what is now the Hononegah Forest Preserve, about 1829 and became the first permanent white settler in Winnebago County.

The Macks welcomed their first child, Rose (sometimes called Rosa) on November 14, 1830. Due to a childhood illness Rose was a mute. She later attended the Illinois Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb at Jacksonville, married and became a teacher there.

In 1832 the Black Hawk war broke out. On May 24th Stephen Mack enlisted in Capt. J.S.C. Hogan's company, of Major David Bailey's Battalion of Cook County volunteers, stationed at Fort Dearborn, Chicago. His company was assigned to protect Fort Dearborn, and later went out in pursuit of the Indians who were responsible for killing fourteen people and burning several houses at Indian Creek in LaSalle county. They never found them. Mack reported this and another expedition against the Sauk Indians in letters to his sister. He also comments on the conduct of the war and the way that it is being reported. This is from a letter to his sister Lovicy on June 13, 1832.

You need be under no apprehension on my account for I can assure you that all of the accounts that you receive from the

seat of war are very much exaggerated. It is really amusing to me who see all the operation and know perhaps better than almost any one the real danger, to read the accounts of maneuvers of the enemy never thought of by them, and of battles never fought. And then to sit down and listen to the remarks of the raw Yankees who have recently emigrated to this country, one would think that Napoleon Bonaparte had risen from the grave and presented himself in the person of the Black Hawk and that the spirit of his millions of heroes were concentrated in the five or six hundred warriors led by that chief. I by no means wish to undervalue our enemies, they are brave and subtle and it may be dangerous to encounter them without an overwhelming force, but I can by no means approve of the tardy operations of our chief officers, for it gives time to the nimble footed Indians to ravage our frontier settlements and bathe their hands in the blood of helpless women and unsuspecting infants. Had more prompt measures been pursued in the commencement, I have no doubt but many lives would have been spared and we should have been at this moment in the full enjoyment of peace.

The Black Hawk war ended with the Battle at the Bad Axe River on August 1, 1832. Black Hawk surrendered shortly thereafter and was

imprisoned. That fall Stephen Mack returned to his trading post with the Winnebago. On July 15, 1832 Ho-no-ne-gah had given birth to their second child and named her Mary.

In 1830 the northern third of Illinois was still largely unsettled. There were many Indian villages. The various tribes had somewhat defined territories but they often overlapped. The Winnebago, who had migrated south from central Wisconsin, were generally west of the Rock River in the northern tier of counties. East of the Rock as far as Lake Michigan were the Potawatomi and the Menominee. Further south along the Rock and the Mississippi were the Sauk and Fox. There was mounting pressure to open the land up for

settlement. Lead had been discovered in the Galena area and had made the city a boomtown. Many would-be miners were attracted to the area and that created friction with the Indians, some of whom had mined the lead themselves. Also, the best land in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and southern Illinois was rapidly being claimed by settlers and speculators. The open prairie in northern Illinois was looking increasingly attractive. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 also increased the stream of settlers coming from New York and New England. For these reasons, the U.S. Government negotiated a series of treaties with these tribes to remove them permanently from Illinois.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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