
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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LINCOLN, ROCKFORD AND THE BLACK HAWK WAR

By Thomas S. Johnson



Black Hawk at age 70. He died at age 71 on October 3, 1838, at his home on a small reservation on the Des Moines River in David County, Iowa.

Painting of Black Hawk by Charles Bird King, 1837.
Reproduced from McKenney and Hall, *The History of the Indian Tribes of North America*

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an article by Thomas S. Johnson that attempts to answer a little researched question. Did Abraham Lincoln go through what would later become Rockford during the Black Hawk War? This article began out of a friendly dispute with Rockford historian Jon Lundin, just prior to his untimely death. Mr. Johnson, an amateur historian, is a Rockford native and a graduate of Rockford College and Harvard Law School. He is a senior partner at Williams McCarthy LLP, one of Rockford's oldest and largest law firms. He is a Regent of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois and chairs both the Academy's and the Illinois State Bar Association's Committees on the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial in 2009.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

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 986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

Thomas Powers, Editor

IN MEMORY ROBERT HJALMAR BORDEN 1926-2007

Robert Borden was born in Rockford, Illinois on July 16, 1926. In 1944 he graduated from East High School. He served his country in World War II aboard the USS Auburn. After the war he attended Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois where he received an A.B. degree in 1950. He majored in social sciences and education. He then attended Northern Illinois University and graduated with a Master of Science in Education. Mr. Borden went on to teach at a number of local Rockford schools, Morris Kennedy, Kishwaukee Consolidated and Harlem Junior High. Between 1955 and 1958 he left teaching to work in the private sector as a technical writer for Sundstrand Aviation in Rockford. In 1958 he returned to teaching as a civics and history teacher at Thomas Jefferson Junior High. He stayed at Jefferson until his retirement in 1986.

Along with his family and his career, Mr. Borden dedicated time to the Erlander Home and was President of the Swedish Historical Society. He was a Sunday school teacher and deacon at First Evangelical Lutheran church. He served as an active member of the Rockford Education Association and the American Legion Post No. 864, also called the Daniel Post. Mr. Borden's interest in local history led him to become a charter member of the Rockford Historical Society. He was a contributing member of the society as president, vice president, board member and editor from 1962 to 2002. He edited the Nuggets of History for 28 years. In the early years of the society as editor, he would take the articles home and then type them for publication. Many of the articles he researched and wrote himself. In 2006, Mr. Borden came back to the board to fill a vacancy. He continued to be an active contributor to the board up to the time of his death on October 6, 2007. We will miss him and that is why we dedicate this issue to his memory.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The annual History Fair will be at Midway Village on January 13, 2007 at 9:00. If you haven't attended this event in the past make a point of coming to see the exhibits put together by some of our local middle school students. You will be impressed by the quality of the work! We will need volunteers to judge the exhibits so if you can help, please plan on attending. The winning entries will go on to the Regional History Fair in Dekalb.

Lincoln, Rockford and the Black Hawk War

By Thomas S. Johnson

175 years ago -- in the summer of 1832 -- during the Black Hawk War -- General Henry Atkinson led army and militia troops through the Rock River valley into what is now Wisconsin in pursuit of Black Hawk.

Included in his troops was a tall, lanky, 23-year-old shop keeper from New Salem, Illinois. His name was Abraham Lincoln.

On Sunday, July 1, 1832, Atkinson's forces reached the Rock River near the south end of what is now the Rockford Park District's Recreation Path and proceeded north along the east bank of the river in pursuit of Black Hawk.

Earlier that year, Black Hawk had led a group of 400 Sauk warriors and about 1100 women and children across the Mississippi River into Illinois, seeking to return to their ancestral village ("Saukenaut") at the mouth of the Rock River -- the largest Indian village west of the Alleghenies. Their actions were in defiance of an Indian treaty of 1804 which many historians now view as unfair and perhaps invalid. Black Hawk's actions were more an act of civil disobedience than an act of war. (War parties do not normally include 1100 women and children.)

Illinois Governor John Reynolds, (who was up for re-election at the time), promptly called for volunteers from the Illinois militia to combat what he declared to be an Indian invasion.

"For hundreds of years, the Sauk Tribe had hunted and fished in the rich prairie valley of the Rock River," Carl Sandburg recounted in *Prairie Years*. "And now over the rolling prairie and slopes of timber bottoms along the Rock River, with a measureless blue sky arching over them, the red men and the white man were to hunt each other, trying to hand crimson death to each other."

One of the militia companies formed in response to the Governor's call was comprised largely of men from New Salem, and in accordance with the custom of the day, they elected their own commander, Captain Abraham Lincoln. By mid-May of 1832, Captain Lincoln's company had arrived at Dixon's Ferry, and on May 15, 1832, his company was part of the burial detail sent to Stillman's Run (near the present town of Stillman Valley), where inadequately trained and incompetently led militia troops, commanded by Major Isaiah Stillman, had suffered a stunning defeat the day before. After burying the dead soldiers at Stillman's Run, Lincoln's company returned to Dixon's Ferry.

On May 27, 1832, their enlistment having expired, Captain Lincoln's company was "mustered out" of United States service. Many of his men had been demoralized by what they had found at Stillman's Run and were glad to return home. But Lincoln and some of the officers from other militia companies remained at Dixon's Ferry and re-enlisted. Abraham Lincoln re-enlisted twice -- first for twenty days of service under the command of Captain Elijah Iles (one of the founders of Springfield) and then for

another thirty-day enlistment as a private under the command of Captain Jacob M. Early (a Methodist preacher and physician -- also from Springfield).

Captain Early's company was an independent unit which reported directly to General Atkinson, rather than through the normal chain of command. Lincoln, and all of the other "privates" in Captain Early's company, had previously served as officers in various militia companies but their status as officers ended when their original enlistment expired.

General Atkinson had been widely criticized for not being more vigorous in his pursuit of Black Hawk. In his letter of June 12, 1832, the acting Secretary of War, John Robb, told Atkinson that President Andrew Jackson viewed the inaction with "utter astonishment and deep regret". But by late June, General Atkinson was finally ready to leave Dixon's Ferry in pursuit of Black Hawk, who was believed to have retreated to Lake Koshkonong.



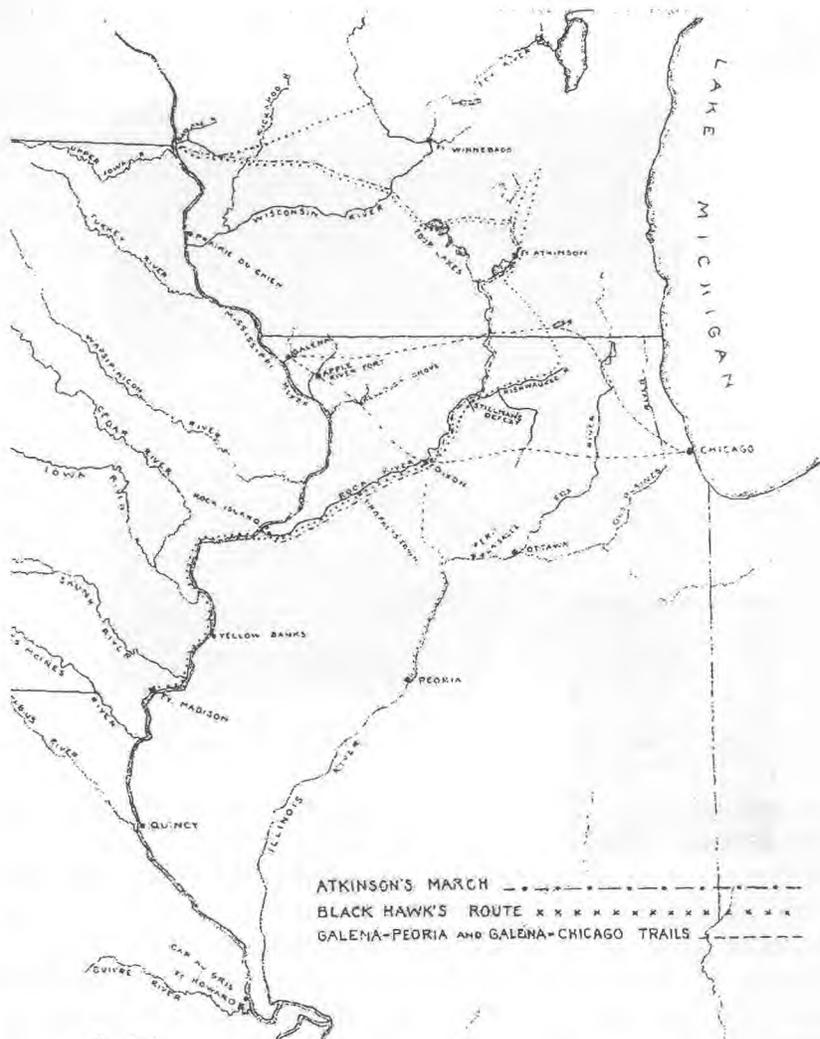
Gen. Henry Atkinson, known among the Indians as "White Beaver," commanded the Regulars and Militia during the war.

In his autobiography, Black Hawk reported that following his unanticipated victory at Stillman Run, "I did not know where to go to find a place of safety for my women and children, but expected to find a good harbor about the head of Rock River. I . . . thought my best route would be to go around the head of Kish-wa-co-kee, so that the Americans would have some difficulty, if they attempted to follow." A map included in the 1916 edition of Black Hawk's autobiography drawn by Dr. Mary Foster of the Wisconsin History Society indicates that Black Hawk passed well east of Rockford in his flight to Lake Koshkonong. William F. Stark, in his book *Along the Black Hawk Trail*, also reports that Black Hawk passed east of Rockford en route to Wisconsin.

Not all historians agree. In his historical narrative, *Twilight of Empire*, Alan W. Eckert recounts that Blackhawk left a false trail to the head of the Kishwaukee to mislead the Americans, and his actual route north was along the east bank of the Rock River. Similarly, in his 2007 book, *The Black Hawk War of 1832*, Patrick J. Jung

included a map showing that although Black Hawk proceeded to the head of the Kishwaukee, he then "doubled-back" around the head of the Kishwaukee, returning to the Rock River. In an unpublished account, Dr. Jung suggests that Black Hawk may have used more than one route from Stillman's Run to Wisconsin, and reports that at least part of Black Hawk's band (including his more than one hundred canoes) almost certainly passed on or along the Rock River through Rockford to Turtle Creek.

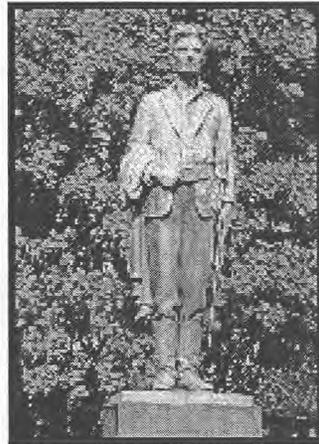
Although historians may never agree whether or not the main Black Hawk Trail followed the Rock River through what is now Rockford into what is now Wisconsin, there is no disagreement that the Army Trail did -- although there is some uncertainty as to the precise line of march.



This is Mary Foster's map from Black Hawk's autobiography.

The best source to determine the line of march followed by Abraham Lincoln and the other members of General Atkinson's army are the Journals of Lt. Albert Sidney Johnston, the young West Point graduate who was Atkinson's aide-de-camp and who later became one of the most talented of the confederate generals, dying at Shiloh.

The Johnston Journals report that Atkinson's forces left Dixon's Ferry early on Friday morning, June 29, 1832, encamped that evening at Stillman's Run, the ground occupied by Major Stillman's forces six weeks earlier, crossed the Kishwaukee four miles east of the Rock River, where they camped on Saturday, June 30, arrived at Turtle Creek on Sunday July 1, 1832, and encamped that night on the plain, between Turtle Creek and the Rock River at what is now South Beloit.



This statue of Lincoln by Leonard Crunelle is the only one in existence that shows him as a young soldier in the 1830s. It is located in Dixon, Illinois.

Source: www.dixonil.com

If Atkinson's forces traveled generally along the east bank of the Rock River, they would have traveled approximately 35 miles through what is now Rockford onto the Michigan Territory, which is now Wisconsin, arriving late, on Sunday, July 1, 1832.

There is a legend that Lincoln and the other members of what Atkinson called "The Army of the Frontier" encamped along the east bank of the Rock River near the center of what is now Rockford where Spring Creek flows into the Rock River. It is a wonderful story. Unfortunately, it never happened.

Although there is evidence that Lincoln encamped in what is now Rockford on the return trip, Johnston's Journal demonstrates that Atkinson's force did not do so as they traveled north through the Rock River valley in search of Black Hawk. Although there are inconsistencies between Johnston's Field Journal and the edited version, both versions indicate that Atkinson's Army did not camp at the confluence of Spring Creek and the Rock River during its march north through the Rock River valley, but rather encamped near what is now New Milford on Saturday, June 30th and made the 35-mile journey to Wisconsin in one day, arriving late on Sunday, July 1st. William F. Stark, in his book *Along the Black Hawk Trail*, reports that "Atkinson's march up the east bank of Rock River . . . was rapid and uneventful."

There is not total agreement as to the precise route taken by Atkinson's forces as they pursued Black Hawk into Wisconsin. Black Hawk War historians describe the Army Trail as moving north along the east bank of the Rock River (beginning at its

confluence with the Kishwaukee), but some Rockford historians believe that the Army Trail crossed the Kishwaukee several miles east of the Rock River, proceeded north from that point, and did not meet the Rock River until reaching what is now the center of Rockford.

For example, in 1882 (50 years after the war), the Rockford Journal reported that Atkinson's troops passed through what is now New Milford and continued north about a mile east of Rockford's 1882 eastern border. If the Journal report is accurate, Atkinson's troops passed north from New Milford into what is now Rockford along what is now the 20th Street corridor, i.e. about a mile east of the city's eastern border in 1882.

Charles Church (who had been the City Editor of the Rockford Journal until 1881), in his *History of Rockford* eight years later, seems to confirm the Journal's account. He reports that the Army Trail passed through the First Ward of Rockford and "met the river bank above the city at the dry run which is now bridged on North Second Street, near the residence of H. H. Hamilton."

Real estate records of the period indicate that H. H. Hamilton owned a large tract of land on the northeast corner of Oakland Avenue and North Second Street and a creek -- which has since disappeared -- is shown on the earliest real estate plats and on the 1892 city atlas as running from North Second Street to the Rock River, meeting the river about 100 feet north of the YMCA Log Lodge, where, according to Charles Church, the Army Trail met the Rock River. (Remnants of the railroad trestle which bridged the mysterious, disappearing creek are still visible near the west entrance to the main building on the YMCA campus, and the mouth of the original creek is readily apparent from the concrete embankment, built into the sea wall, just north of the Log Lodge. The creek did not actually disappear, of course. It is now buried in a culvert which runs under the YMCA building to the river.)

Under either version, Atkinson's forces -- including the independent company in which then Private Abraham Lincoln served -- passed through Rockford on Sunday, July 1, 1832, reaching Turtle Creek at South Beloit late that afternoon.

The precise route of the Black Hawk Trail and the Army Trail is not the only question about which Black Hawk War historians and Rockford historians are not in full agreement. Another relates to the role Stephen Mack played in the war. Widely acknowledged to be the first white settler in the area, Mack is believed by some Rockford historians to have been the guide for the militia troops in pursuit of Black Hawk. Charles A. Church, in his *History of Rockford*, identifies Stephen Mack as the guide, and in his letter of June 13, 1832, to his sister, Lovicy Cooper, Stephen Mack writes that "General Atkinson will be on the move again in a few days and General J. R. Williams . . . will probably move on to his assistance, in that case I shall join him . . ."

Although Stephen Mack may have intended to join Atkinson's forces, there is no evidence that he actually did so, and, in fact, General J. R. Williams (and his company of Michigan volunteers) never did. Stephen Mack's role in the early days of the War and his role in the final days of the War are documented, but there is no reference to

him in the Black Hawk War primary source documents for the period mid-June to mid-July -- the time during which Atkinson's forces were active in the Northern Illinois portion of the Rock River valley. Apart from Charles Church's account and the Stephen Mack correspondence, there is nothing in the Black Hawk War literature to confirm Church's assumption that Mack was the guide for Atkinson's "Army of the Frontier". On the contrary, most Black Hawk War literature acknowledges Billy Caldwell as Atkinson's primary guide. Caldwell, who was of Anglo-Irish and Mohawk ancestry, led a company of Potawatomi Indians -- one of the independent scouting companies which (like Lincoln's unit) reported directly to General Atkinson.

In *The Black Hawk War of 1832*, Professor Patrick Jung indicates that Atkinson led his army from their encampment near what is now New Milford to meet with Caldwell and the Potawatomis at the confluence of the Rock and the Kishwaukee on Saturday, June 30th and began their travels north through the Rock River valley. General Atkinson's papers corroborate Professor Jung's position. On June 28th, General Atkinson wrote to General Dodge that he intended to join with 75 Potawatomis at the mouth of Sycamore Creek (*i.e.* the south branch of the Kishwaukee River), and on that same day, Atkinson issued Order 47 directing Colonel Fry's regiment to the mouth of Sycamore Creek to provide protection for Caldwell and the Potawatomis until "the main Army comes up." All of this supports the Black Hawk War historians' belief that the Army Trail followed the Rock River (from its confluence with the Kishwaukee) rather than proceeding cross country from New Milford as Charles Church assumed. (It would have been easier to move 75 Indians to what is now New Milford, rather than to move the entire Army to the confluence of the Rock and the Kishwaukee, if Atkinson had not intended to march north along the east bank of the Rock River.)

Whether Atkinson moved north along the east bank of the Rock River from the confluence with the Kishwaukee River (as the preponderance of evidence seems to indicate), or met the Rock River near what is now the YMCA campus, the Rockford Park District's Recreation Path follows the route of the Army Trail (and, if Eckert and Jung are correct, perhaps the Black Hawk Trail as well).

Atkinson's "Army of the Frontier" arrived at what is now South Beloit late on Sunday, July 1st, and on Tuesday, July 3, 1832, Lincoln's company left the encampment at South Beloit, marched up the Rock River in advance of Atkinson's Army, made camp near the southern outlet of Lake Koshkonong, and spent the next several days as one of the scouting parties in pursuit of Black Hawk, never actually encountering him.

A week later, on Tuesday, July 10, 1832, running low on provisions, General Atkinson ordered all of the independent companies to be "mustered out" of service, including Private Lincoln's company, which began its return trip along the Rock River to Dixon's Ferry. In *The Black Hawk War*, Frank Stevens reports that the returning troops "fell down the river to Dixon's Ferry, along the same route pursued by them up that stream, but did not move so rapidly for the reason that many of them had lost their horses" (including Abraham Lincoln, whose horse was stolen the night before he started home).

Lincoln and his companions returned through what is now Rockford on July 11, 1832, and reached Dixon's Ferry on the night of July 12th and Peoria on July 15th, where they broke up and went their separate ways. In Peoria, Lincoln and George Harrison purchased a canoe and started down the Illinois River to Havana, where they sold the canoe and started afoot to New Salem, arriving July 19, 1832. There is evidence that Lincoln encamped on the east bank of Rock River, just north of where the Jefferson Street Bridge now stands, on July 11, 1832, while en route home. In his handwritten "Sketch of the First Settlement of Rockford," R. P. Porter wrote on June 20, 1876:

"Our Martyr President, Abraham Lincoln, told Judge Anson Miller, himself, that soon after the close of the Black Hawk War (over a year before Germanicus Kent and Thatcher Blake arrived here) he and a party of government officials encamped on the banks of Rock River just below the old dam. He also informed the Judge that both himself and party were stunned with the wondrous beauty of the scenery."

The "old dam" was located north of where the Jefferson Street Bridge now stands and if Judge Miller's report is accurate, Lincoln and his companions encamped along the river on their return from the Black Hawk War on July 11, 1832, near the present site of the indoor ice skating facility and the trolley station.

Of course, the "old dam" had not yet been constructed during Lincoln's trips to and from Wisconsin in 1832. But it was in place when Lincoln visited Rockford in July of 1855 to prepare for *McCormack v. Manning*, the most significant commercial law suit in the city's history. Lincoln met with inventor, John H. Manny, near the banks of the Rock River and it would have been entirely natural for him to have visited the site of his 1832 encampment a few blocks north -- thereby providing the basis for his comments in later years to Judge Anson Miller.

Judge Anson Miller was the probate judge and served in the Illinois Senate during Lincoln's last few years in Springfield. As a presidential elector, he was given the honor to carry Illinois electoral vote to Washington, which he proudly cast for Lincoln's re-election in 1864. It is a credible story. Lincoln and his companions could not have made the 34.8 mile Winnebago County portion of their return trip in one day - - since they were without horses. They would have had to camp somewhere during that portion of their return trip. A story-teller like Lincoln would almost certainly have recounted his trip through Rockford as he met Rockford friends in later years, and a story-teller like Judge Miller could be relied upon to repeat it.

Although Abraham Lincoln may have played only a small role in the Black Hawk War, most historians agree that the Black Hawk War played a very significant role in the life of Abraham Lincoln. In the words of Carl Sandburg:

" . . . Lincoln had seen deep into the heart of the American volunteer soldier, why men go to war, march in mud, sleep in rain on cold ground, eat pork raw when it can't be boiled, and kill when the killing is good. On a later day an observer was to say he saw Lincoln's eyes misty in his mention of the American volunteer soldier."

Although there is every evidence that Lincoln was proud of his Black Hawk War service and proud to have been chosen as a captain during the first of his three enlistments, he always downplayed his role in the war. "For political reasons, he used to poke fun at his military record," David Herbert Donald reports. "In 1848, when the Democrats named Lewis Cass for President, emphasizing his alleged military record in the War of 1812, then Congressman Lincoln reminded listeners that he, too, was a military hero. 'Yes sir,' he declared, 'in the days of the Black Hawk War, I fought, bled, and came away . . . if he saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did,' Lincoln conceded, 'but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes.'"

In August of 1832, Black Hawk's forces were finally overtaken near the mouth of the Bad Axe River in Wisconsin. "Farewell my nation!" he famously declared in his surrender speech. "Black Hawk tried to save you . . . He can do no more. He is near his end. His sun is setting, and he will rise no more."

A 90-day war, 175 years ago, is but a moment in the life of the Rock River valley. But the legend of Black Hawk -- and the war that bears his name -- continues to fascinate the people of the Rock River valley. They and generations yet unborn, standing on the ancient bluffs overlooking the confluence of the Rock and the Kishwaukee, will always be able to envision Black Hawk and Atkinson and Lincoln as they emerge through the mist of a summer morning to pass through **"the rolling prairie and the slopes of timber bottoms along the Rock River, with a measureless blue sky arching over them."**

Author's note: *This article began out of a friendly dispute with Rockford historian, Jon Lundin, just prior to his untimely death, as to how many times Abraham Lincoln had visited Rockford, and whether or not the old legend was true -- that Captain Abraham Lincoln, after helping bury the dead at Stillman's Run, led his militia company in pursuit of Black Hawk along the Rock River through what is now Rockford, encamping along the way where Spring Creek flows into the Rock River. Jon Lundin knew of the legend, of course, but didn't think it was true. Lincoln's only documented visit to Rockford was in conjunction with the famous reaper case in 1855. Although he did, in fact, help bury the dead at Stillman's Run, **Captain** Abraham Lincoln and his militia company did not pursue Black Hawk north through what is now Rockford. But six weeks later, **Private** Abraham Lincoln did, as part of General Henry Atkinson's "Army of the Frontier". Although they did not encamp in what is now Rockford on their trip north, Lincoln and his companions did on their trip home. And although Atkinson's forces may have reached the Rock River near its confluence with a creek, it was not Spring Creek, but rather a mysterious creek which somehow seems to have disappeared. Jon Lundin would have been fascinated with how our friendly dispute continues to evolve.*

Acknowledgments: *I had always heard of the generosity and encouragement provided by Rockford and Illinois historians to well-meaning amateurs, and I am now grateful to have experienced that generosity first-hand. Jon W. Lundin, Robert J. Lindvall, and Richard A. Rundquist provided guidance and support during the preparation of this paper. Real estate expert, Russell D. Anderson, helped decipher the early real estate records which clarified Charles Church's version of the Army Trail. John R. Cook, III, a life-long student of the streams and rivers of northern Illinois, and Wray M. Howard, President and CEO of the YMCA of the Rock River Valley, explained the mystery of the disappearing stream. The reference librarians in the Rockford Public Library's local history room and their colleagues at the Chicago History Museum and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, provided access to the treasures of their respective collections. Daniel Weinberg, a Black Hawk War collector and proprietor of the legendary Abraham Lincoln Bookshop in Chicago, and also Dr. Patrick J. Jung each pointed me in the right direction on several occasions. In Springfield, Dr. Thomas F. Schwartz, the Illinois State Historian, and Dr. James M. Cornelius, the Lincoln Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, introduced me to the work of Ellen M. Whitney, who collected and published virtually all of the primary source material relating to the Black Hawk War. Her papers are available in the manuscript division of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and are the starting point for all Black Hawk War studies. Finally, Abraham Lincoln's closest friends in Rockford were Ralph Emerson and Wait Talcott. Georganne Hinchliff Eggers, Ralph Emerson's great-granddaughter and Wait Talcott's great-great-granddaughter, provided encouragement throughout this effort and introduced me to the work of Alan W. Eckert, which I would not otherwise have found and which provided support for the theory that the Black Hawk Trail may have passed from the mouth of the Kishwaukee into what is now Rockford. It is a happy coincidence that the Eggers family retreat "the south forty" overlooks the confluence of the Rock and the Kishwaukee where -- 175 years ago -- it all began.*

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published quarterly by the Rockford Historical Society, 6799 Guilford Rd., Rockford, Illinois 61107. Society members receive NUGGETS upon payment of annual dues. New rates, effective January 1, 2007: Family @ \$20, Individual @ \$15, Contributing member @ \$25, Life member @ \$150. Mail check to: Membership Chairman, Rockford Historical Society, 6799 Guilford Rd., Rockford, IL 61107.

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