

Prelude to the End of the Trail

Black Hawk was a prominent war leader who led his followers to disaster in 1832. For at least 100 years before that year these Indians had migrated back and forth across the Mississippi River. Each fall they moved west or north to hunt and every spring they returned to their homes along the Rock River for planting. In defiance of the 1831 agreement to stay west of the Mississippi, or more probably because of misunderstanding, on April 6, 1832, about 900 Sac and Mesquiquies, many of them women and children and elderly folk, came east across the river to plant their crops. To their dismay they found their homes destroyed and the land claimed by the white settlers. This was not

understandable to the Indians as they believed land was there to be used, not to be claimed.

General Henry Atkinson led troops north to enforce the 1831 treaty. There were about 1,000 in Black Hawk's company with only about 300 being warriors. They did not want to fight so Black Hawk avoided the soldiers and moved his band northward. When he failed to get needed support from other tribes, he decided to return west. He tried to communicate this to the whites but a lack of interpreters led to fighting. Raiding parties seeking food from white settlements terrified the pioneers. On May 8, Atkinson mustered 1,700 Illinois militia into federal service.

By mid-July most of Black Hawk's band were in hiding in the Four Lakes region near present-day Madison, Wisconsin. There, unable to hunt or fish effectively, they suffered malnutrition. When the elderly and children began to die, Black Hawk led the party west toward the Mississippi. His brilliant rear guard action at the July 21st Battle of Wisconsin Heights, near present Sauk City, stalled the pursuing militia. This allowed the retreating Indians to get a head start as they fled toward the river. They reached the site of **Black Hawk Marker 1** on July 31, 1832. This Marker is in Crawford County.

The Black Hawk Trail Markers

[Boxes contain wording from the markers]

BLACK HAWK MARKER 1

Black Hawk Trail. 700 Sac Indians, July 31; 1200 soldiers, August 1, 1832 followed this ridge west into Vernon County over this ground. Two human skeletons were found at a spring west of Wilder's Hotel, Rising Sun, in 1852.

In the ravine across the road and to the northwest, a spring and abundance of trees provided an ideal overnight camp site for Black Hawk's dwindling followers on July 31 and for army troops the next night. There are still springs in the ravine today.

After four months on the move with little food and increasing danger, the Indians' situation was desperate when they arrived here. As early as mid-July, the elderly had begun dying from starvation as the party left the Four Lakes area. The children began to die of malnutrition before the band could travel the 30 miles to the Wisconsin River. After the Battle of Wisconsin Heights, the retreat became a debacle as the bloated bodies of previously wounded men lay beside the corpses of the children and elderly who died along the 60-mile line of flight.



BLACK HAWK MARKER 2

Black Hawk Trail. On night of August 1 & 2, 1832, Gen. Atkinson's army of 1200 mounted men in pursuit of Black Hawk encamped in this area from 8 p.m. until 3 a.m. The spring from which men and horses drank is 140 rods northwest.

It was from this camp that General Atkinson, for the first time, sent the regular army troops in pursuit of the faltering Indian band. Only the volunteer militiamen had fought so far.

BLACK HAWK MARKER 3

Black Hawk Trail. At shallow pond 115 rods due south Black Hawk's 700 Sac Indians encamped July 31, 1832. Soldiers found six decrepit Indians there and "left them behind". Lee Sterling in 1846 found a handful of silver brooches there, hence concluded those killed were squaws.

What a desperate situation in the Indian camp! But struggle on they must as they followed the trail north and west to the spot on the river that Black Hawk knew was the easiest place to cross as there were numerous islands and the water was not so deep.



BLACK HAWK MARKER 4

Black Hawk and Winnebago Trails.

Two trails ran across Dr. Bean's dooryard: the Black Hawk retreat trail and the Winnebago Trail which ran from Winneshiek's (De Soto) village to a large Winnebago town above the forks of the Kickapoo at Manning, prior to 1840.

This marker is a short distance to the south of where Dr. Bean's house stood. He was a loved and respected doctor in the community. His home was a place of beauty. Much to the dismay of many in the community, the house was torn down in 1992.

In their desperate need to reach the river, Indians fled more to the west as a shorter route. Black Hawk had sent 20 of his best warriors on to the north as a decoy in hopes that the army and militia would follow and thus give more time for the Indians to build rafts and escape. County Road UU is the route taken by Black Hawk's 20 warriors as well as by the troops under Gen. Atkinson.

BLACK HAWK MARKER 5

Black Hawk's Outpost. August 2, 1832, twenty picked Sacs were stationed here to decoy the U.S. Army northward and so permit the Indian main body with women and children to escape across the river. LeGrande Sterling in 1846 found twelve human skeletons near here.

Gen. Atkinson fell for Black Hawk's decoy and here encountered the pick of Black Hawk's warriors and killed them. Then they quickly turned towards the river, arriving on the bluff overlooking Battle Hollow where the battle between the militiamen and Indians was raging as Marker 6 describes.



BLACK HAWK MARKER 6

Battle Hollow. Severe fighting one mile east between Gen. Henry's 300 Illinois Militia and 300 Sac Indians, August 2, 1832.

Battle Island. Hard fighting opposite. 1200 white soldiers engaged, 17 killed, 12 wounded. Of Indians, 150 shot, 150 drowned, 50 taken prisoners. 300 crossed the river of whom 150 were killed by Sioux instigated by General Atkinson. Of the 1000 Sacs who crossed the river from Iowa in April 1832, "not more than 150 survived to tell the tragic story of the Black Hawk War".

— R.G. Thwaites

The militia had turned more to the west and as they neared the river, they encountered Black Hawk's rear guard in what is now called Battle Hollow. Pierce fighting ensued.

BLACK HAWK MARKER 7

Head of Battle Isle. On the eve of August 1, 1832, Black Hawk and his men, with a flag of truce, went to the head of this island to surrender to the captain of the steamer "Warrior". Whites on boat asked, "Are you Winnebagos or Sacs?" "Sacs" replied Black Hawk. A load of canister was at once fired, killing 23 Indians suing for peace.

What more can be said! The militia and army troops crossed over to the islands where the assault against the Indians continued. Men, women, and children were caught in the crossfire from guns on the steamer and sharpshooters on shore. The slaughter continued for eight hours. Witnesses reported that blood tinted the water along the shore and described American troops shooting mothers swimming with small children on their backs. Thus ended what has been called "The Black Hawk Massacre".

*"The Battle of Bad Axe ended the sorry spectacle we now call the Black Hawk War. The Indians stumbled into these events because of lies, misinformation, and stubborn, wishful thinking. The actual conflict began only because Gen. Atkinson authorized the undisciplined and poorly led militia units to precede his regular army troops and to travel without an interpreter. Black Hawk had sent a small group to ask for peace talks with Stillman's militiamen only to have his men shot. During the night after the Battle of Wisconsin Heights, Nampope tried to get the whites to agree to a surrender, but again the lack of an interpreter foiled that effort to end the fighting. Even their last-ditch white flag show to troops aboard the WARRIOR brought a hail of lead instead of a chance to surrender. Perhaps as many as a thousand people may have died for nothing!"**

* From *Black Hawk and the Warrior's Path* by Roger L. Nichols, page 135. Permission granted by Harlan Davidson, Inc., Arlington Heights, Illinois.