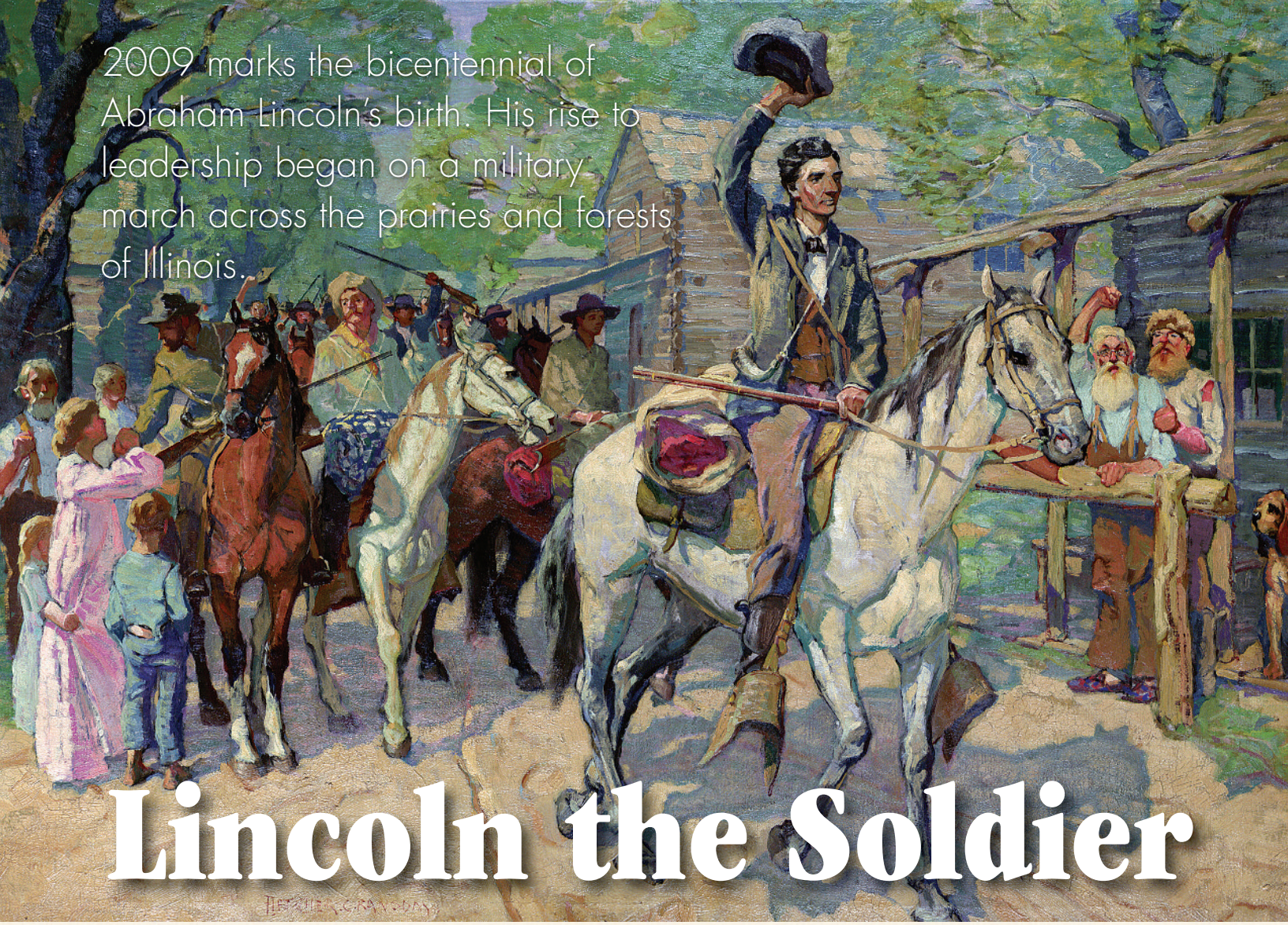


2009 marks the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. His rise to leadership began on a military march across the prairies and forests of Illinois.

Lincoln the Soldier

Story By Rich Wagoner
Photos Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Abe Lincoln drifted into central Illinois just as he had drifted his whole life—aimlessly. But he knew he was headed somewhere.

The fact that he had never stayed in one place long hadn't bothered him. It was as if his long legs were perfectly suited for wandering. He was a rare man, noted by others for his likeability and willingness to accept any type of living conditions, and he seemed happy wherever he went.

He was quickly accepted by his new acquaintances at New Salem in 1831, his 22nd year. No one envisioned this gentle soul as the commander-in-chief of more than 2 million soldiers 30 years later during the Civil War.

In this the bi-centennial celebration of Lincoln's birthday, we retrace Lincoln's travels during the Black Hawk War.

In April of 1832, the Sauk, led by Black Hawk, returned from Iowa and captured the attention of the pioneer settlers in the new state of Illinois. The men of New Salem voted to give Lincoln his first leadership role—captain of the New Salem Militia. He later wrote that he had not had "any such success in life which gave him so much satisfaction."

Lincoln's command was a volunteer company comprised of farmers and rural men from the New Salem area. The men were asked to line up and step next to the man that they wanted as their leader. Lincoln was the favorite. Instantly, the lost and self-doubting Lincoln found a reason to be confident and self worthy. He had already shown the men his great physical strength when he bested the leader of a gang of ruffians, Jack Armstrong, who became his friend and was appointed as Lincoln's first sergeant when they marched off to war. Lincoln could now hone the mental tools needed to be a leader.

Painted by Fletcher Ransom in 1941, this scene depicts the people of New Salem mingling cheers and farewells as Lincoln and some of his men leave to serve in the Black Hawk War. The painting is part of a series commissioned annually for 25 years by the Chicago & Illinois Midland Railroad Company to be used on the company's calendars.

Lincoln lived in New Salem from 1831 to 1837, working at Denton Offutt's store. Things weren't going well at the store and Abe was glad when asked to fight in the Black Hawk War. A group of men gathered to march to war, many never having been farther from home than the Sangamon County boundary.

From Richland, 8 miles south of New Salem, the militia marched to Beardstown where they met up with other troops called up by Illinois Governor Reynolds.

The militia camped at Beardstown for several days. Lincoln and Lorenzo Thompson, from Captain William Moore's company, wrestled for the best camping spot. Lincoln lost. Twenty-six years later Lincoln returned to Beardstown to participate in his most famous legal battle, defending a relative of Jack Armstrong in a murder trial called the "Almanac Trial." Today, visitors can stand in the courtroom where the trial took place and see the crude jail that held Duff Armstrong, who Lincoln saved from the noose.

Lincoln's men thought they were on a grand excursion, but soon learned that soldiering was a serious matter. At first the men cavorted and fired weapons in camp—whooping that they were out for revenge for damages done in the supposed Native American uprising. During his 30-day enlistment, Lincoln was arrested twice—once because one of his men fired a gun in camp and the second time he had to wear a wooden sword for two days when he accepted responsibility for his drunken troops after they broke into the store room and stole whiskey.

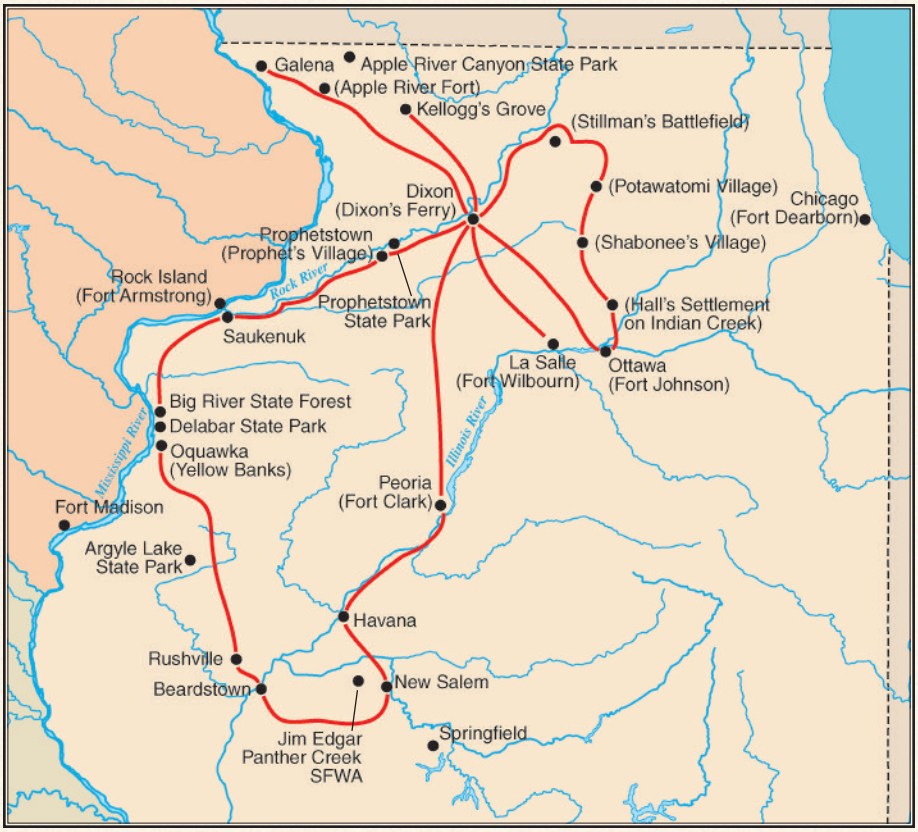
In Beardstown, Lincoln's troops were combined with the rest of Governor Reynolds's men, creating a contingent of 1,500 troops. They left for the "Yellow Banks" (Oquawka) on April 29, 1832. On May 1st, the men hiked 25 miles to Crooked Creek west of Macomb, beginning their march through the raw wilderness of western and northern Illinois. The fun was over. Men walked waist-deep in mud. Many officers' horses soon died from fatigue. Fighting malarial mosquitoes, constant physical activity and food shortages hardened the men and made them wish for home and family.

(Photo courtesy Hal Hassen.)

Apple River Fort, a hastily erected structure measuring 50 feet by 70 feet, provided refuge for 45 area settlers during the estimated 45-minute attack on June 24, 1832.

Black Hawk felt the treaties that ceded the Sauk lands were illegal and he was determined to try to stay in his ancestral lands—the bountiful streams and rich land of the Sinnissippi (Rock River). Black Hawk had re-crossed the Mississippi River at the Yellow Banks and Reynolds's army, under the command of Brig. General Samuel Whiteside, headed there to pick up their trail. Black Hawk sent messages to U.S. authorities that his intentions were peaceful. However, the pressure from mining and agricultural interests pressured the military to expel the Sauks. Progress was coming to this region and the native people were not to be a part of its future. Lincoln would soon realize from this early experience that not all intelligence derived from legitimate sources was to be believed at face value.

The next day the men marched 20 miles through wet prairie, camping south of the Yellow Banks on the Mississippi. Yellow Banks, so called because of the yellow-colored sand, was the home of the Sauk and Fox and they fished and hunted from both sides of the river. Lincoln loved this area and became friends with Alexis Phelps, founder of Oquawka. Phelps was a friend of the Sauk and saved many from being killed at the hands of unfriendly settlers. Lincoln returned there in 1858, when running for the Senate, and



Numerous historic structures and parks may be visited when retracing Lincoln's travels during the Black Hawk War.

(Photo courtesy Hal Hassen.)

South of U.S. Route 20 near Kent is a monument located on the site of Kellogg's Grove, an early settlement established in 1827 on a mail route between Peoria and Galena. Now on the National Register of Historic Places, it honors those killed in the Black Hawk War. Lincoln helped to bury five of the slain men.

attended Phelps' funeral with, as it is told, teary eyes.

Hungry and tired, the men resumed marching on May 5, heading toward Fort Armstrong at the mouth of the Rock River. The fort was located near the site of the former Sauk Indian village, Saukenuk, capitol of the Sauk nation and a large, well-organized community. U.S. troops occupied the site and there began their campaign to capture Black Hawk.

A 50-mile march brought Whiteside's troops to the mouth of the Rock River, whose clear waters were full of fish and mussels and beloved by the Sauk. Reynolds's troops camped near the ancient Saukenuk site for several days in early May.

On May 10, Lincoln was sworn in as a federal soldier by Zachary Taylor. The soldiers followed the north bank of the Rock River to Prophetstown, a city named in memory of Wa-bo-kie-shek (White Cloud), Black Hawk's advisor and a religious leader of the Sauk. The village was destroyed on May 10 by General Samuel Whiteside's troops.

The army then marched to Dixon's Ferry where an ill-fated expedition led by General Isaiah Stillman left to attack Black Hawk. Black Hawk had decided to surrender, and with 40 to 50 men he approached Stillman's force at Old Man's Creek, northeast of Dixon's Ferry, carrying a white flag of truce. Stillman's undisciplined men had been drinking and attacked and killed Black Hawk's truce bearer. An enraged Black Hawk thought he had nothing to lose so he savagely ambushed Stillman's much larger force and killed several poorly prepared men. Stillman fled west toward Fort Armstrong claiming that thousands of Indians had attacked him.

Old Man's Creek has been renamed Stillman's Run in memory of Stillman's disreputable actions. A monument and plaque there tell of Lincoln helping to bury the fallen soldiers of Stillman's Massacre.

Lincoln and his men never engaged in battle. They marched southward toward Ottawa, following the Fox River, where they were discharged.

Lincoln then re-enlisted under Elijah Iles (Springfield's Iles House has been beautifully restored and is open to visitors) and was given the oath of service by Lt. Robert Anderson. Anderson later commanded Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began.

The seeds of fate were sown. Men who would play important roles in Lincoln's life during the Civil War ordered their future commander back into the field for another 30 days. They marched back to Dixon's Ferry and were directed to Apple River Fort, hastily erected after news of the Stillman Massacre and the only fort attacked during the Black Hawk War. The fort, in Elizabeth along Illinois Route 20, has been painstakingly reconstructed.

After his enlistment expired, Lincoln re-enlisted in a spy company under Captain Jacob Early, originally a private in Lincoln's militia. Marching back toward the Apple River, Lincoln helped bury soldiers killed in the Battle of Kellogg's Grove, west of present-day Freeport. A monument honoring the men killed there stands in Kent.

The army then moved northward, following Black Hawk into Wisconsin before running low on provisions near present-day Fort Atkinson. General Henry Atkinson's answer to his dilemma was to dismiss the militia, essentially abandoning Lincoln in southern Wisconsin. From there, after his horse was stolen, Lincoln walked and canoed to Havana, then walked 20 miles to New Salem, glad to be back home among his many friends.

Meanwhile, Black Hawk and his people were captured or killed. After Black Hawk's capture, Zachary Taylor assigned Jefferson Davis, the future president of the Confederacy, to escort Black Hawk to prison.

Black Hawk died in Iowa on October 3, 1838, banished from his beloved Sinnissippi.

Lincoln was greatly affected by the Black Hawk War. He experienced the difficult life of a soldier and met people along his march who would influence his life, including his future law partner, John T. Stuart, who encouraged Lincoln to run for office.

No longer would these men march with him and listen to his campfire stories. Now they would advise and support him for postmaster, state representative, congressman, senator and finally the greatest office of all—president of the United States.

In 1865 those men wept by Lincoln's body.

And they were there to lay him to rest in the Prairie State—a land that he had loved and volunteered to protect as a soldier in the Black Hawk War.

The 3-foot bronze statue by Fred Torrey was created especially for Lincoln's Tomb and its 1930 reconstruction. It shows Lincoln, the Ranger, in the earliest period of his public career, in service during the Black Hawk War.