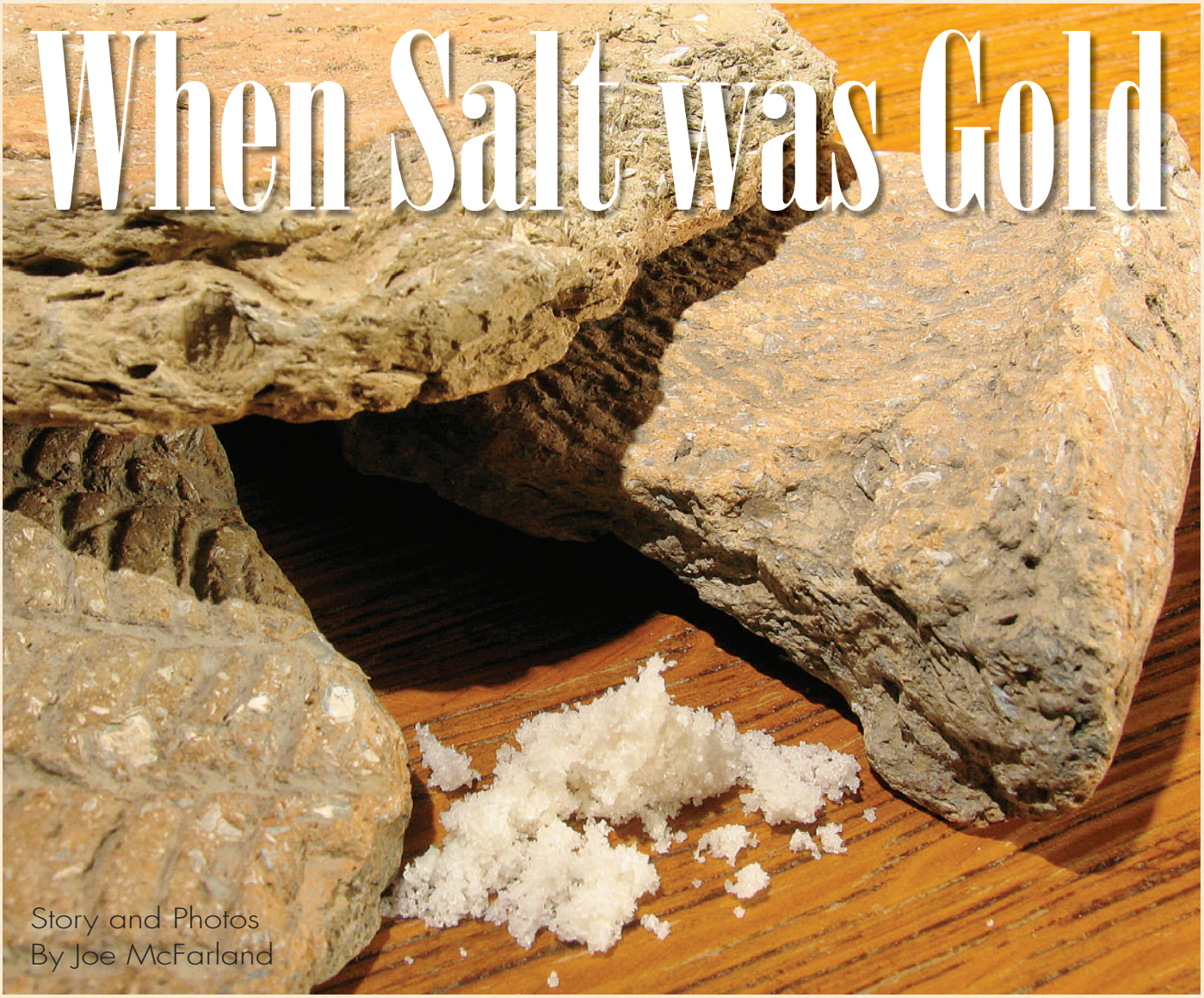
A distant chapter in Illinois history reveals the value of this once-precious commodity.

When Salt was Gold



Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

In a pinch, governments often turn to creative sources of funding to support essential services. In the late 1820s, as our young state was experiencing a financial pinch, salt cured the problem. More specifically, salt deposits located on thousands of acres of Illinois land were put up on the block to raise money for necessary state projects, including—and here's a bit of Illinois history trivia—construction of the state's first penitentiary.

Not only did the sale of the government's "salt reservations" in 1827 pay for a new penitentiary at Alton, the remaining half of the money earned from the sale of those 40,000 acres funded state infrastructure developments such as road-building and clearing rivers for navigation. Thus, as Illinois built itself into a proper state, the money derived from nothing less than common salt made it all possible.

Throughout history, salt has stood as a pillar of basic commerce and symbol of wealth. The scattered availability of it made salt deposits places of economic and strategic importance. As a necessary staple of life, salt was like water—everybody needed it because salt was the basic way everyone preserved food. As a rare commodity in many regions, salt was like gold. It's why, among the many tasks explorers Lewis and Clark were commissioned to perform by Thomas Jefferson in 1803, locating and documenting the known salt deposits in northwestern America was on their short list of duties. Once located, those deposits were claimed by the federal government as national salt reservations. Just as oil or uranium today represent resources of importance to governments, basic salt once was a resource of national importance.

Fragments of Native American "salt pans" recovered during archaeological investigations show the ancient history of salt production along the Saline River.

Sale of the government-owned salt reserves in Illinois paid for construction of the state's first penitentiary in Alton.

As Lewis and Clark departed the shores of the Mississippi River and left Illinois, at least one famous salt deposit in southern Illinois already was known. Not far from present-day Shawneetown, tucked into the Wildcat Hills in Gallatin County, a trickle of salt-rich water flows freely even on bitter cold winter days. The Great Salt Spring, as locals know it, actually is a few spots that release salt-rich water into the nearby Saline River. During prehistoric times, Native Americans would collect the salty water in large, earthenware pans for evaporation. Once the water evaporated or boiled away, people would scrape out the dried salt, then repeat the process.

The task was never easy, and the difficult business of manufacturing salt—often over hot fires—led to a lexicon of salt terms and colloquialisms still in use today.

"Back to the salt mine," exhausted workers mutter as they return to their jobs today. One might chide a co-worker: "That guy's not worth his salt."

"Making salt was not an easy job," agreed Mark Wagner, an archaeologist at Southern Illinois University where many artifacts from this local, prehistoric salt works are stored. "Getting the labor to work the salt works was always a problem."

Although Illinois was officially a free state, having voted against slavery in 1824, Wagner said a loophole allowed the owners of the Illinois salt works to hire slaves from other states. At its peak, the business of making salt required hundreds of workers. Since vast amounts of firewood were required to boil the saltwater, the workforce included tree cutters and crews to split and transport firewood to the constantly burning fires at the salt spring. Envisioning this demand for wood fuel, the thousands of acres of "salt reservations" the government had set aside included thousands of acres of timber required for the boiling operation.

As indicated by the massive investment of energy and labor required for salt production, salt in America was not the inexpensive commodity we know and take for granted today. Our essential need for salt, whatever its cost, is why the production of salt at this Illinois source continued even after all of the trees within a mile of the site had been cut down for firewood.

"What they did after the local source of firewood was exhausted was to build a pipeline to carry the saltwater a couple of miles away to where there still were trees," explained Mary McCorvie, an archaeologist for the U.S. Forest Ser-

Shawnee National Forest archaeologists recovered an original log used as part of a wooden pipeline to transport saltwater from the source in the 1800s.

The 19th century Crenshaw House, now owned by the state, was built by a former owner of the salt well.

vice, which now manages the Great Salt Springs as a national historic landmark. The pipeline was made from logs that had been drilled and fitted together, a job requiring, in itself, a significant effort as the pipeline was installed over hills and creeks within the treeless landscape. During archaeological excavations at the site, intact sections of this 150 year-old pipeline were discovered—still preserved by the briny water they once carried.

Eventually, coal-fired furnaces boiled the saltwater to extract the precious resource, which was scraped out of iron kettles, packed into barrels and delivered to distant markets. The arduous transportation of this hard-earned salt back to eastern markets or down-river to New Orleans finally proved to be an insolvent business liability. When a major salt deposit in West Virginia began providing cheaper salt to eastern markets, the end came quickly for our Illinois salt business.

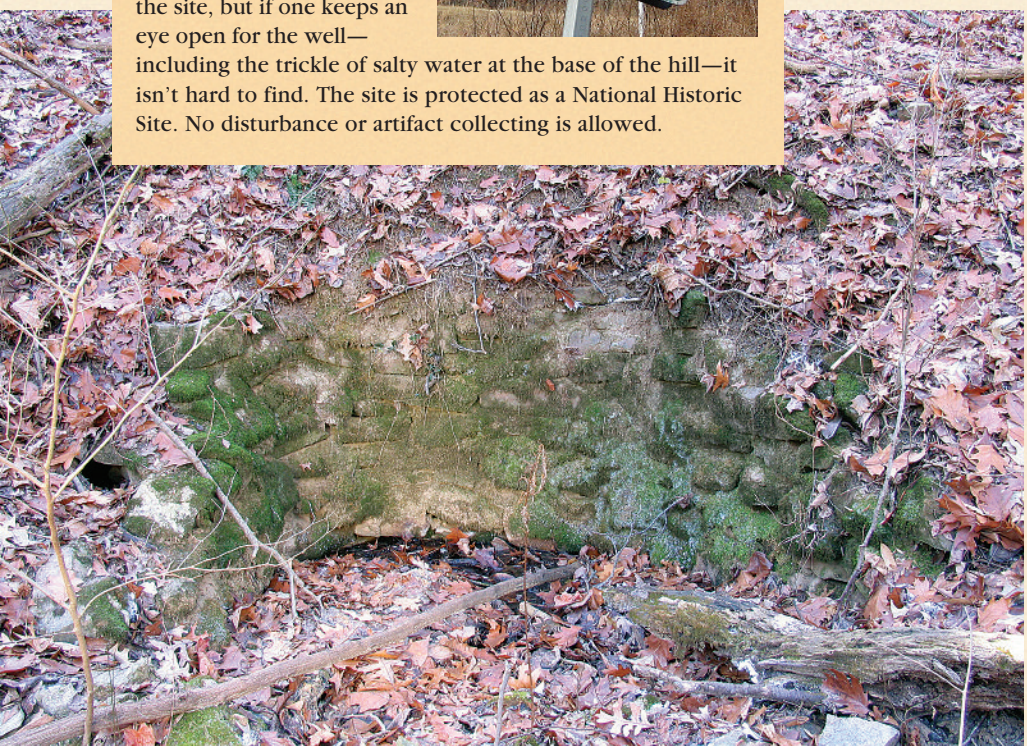
"West Virginia was a slave state," Wagner pointed out, adding that, not only was West Virginia closer to the populations of the east, slave labor undercut the Illinois labor expense. By 1870, commercial production at the Great Salt Spring in Illinois had ceased.

Each year, as national transportation improved and new deposits of salt in America were mined and delivered to market, the price of salt fell so low, consumers eventually forgot the once-precious value of salt.

More than 125 years later, much of the land cleared for firewood around Illinois' Great Salt Spring remains open as agricultural fields. Down a road stands a 19th century home, the Crenshaw House, once owned by businessman John Crenshaw, who operated the salt works. Over the years, rumors of this state-owned house being haunted—as well as legends of slave dealings—have led to its local reputation as "The Old Slave House."

But in the Forest Service-owned property immediately around the spring itself, the forests have regrown and there is little evidence of the crowds of workers that once worked the salt of the earth. The quiet trickle of salty water that flows into an old stone well, and eventually the nearby Saline River, is one of the few visible reminders of that not-so-ancient era when salt was gold.

Directions: From the intersection of Illinois Route 13 and Illinois Route 1, drive 2 miles to south to Salt Well Road. Turn west, following Salt Well Road as it immediately splits to the right (do not take the left fork, which is Grater Road). The well is located less than 1 mile ahead at the base of a hill on the left (south). The best time of year to visit is during cool weather when the vegetation has died back and the well is exposed. No major signs are posted near the site, but if one keeps an eye open for the well—including the trickle of salty water at the base of the hill—it isn't hard to find. The site is protected as a National Historic Site. No disturbance or artifact collecting is allowed.



The overgrown, rock-lined walls of a salt spring are all that remain of this major part of Illinois history.