Makataimeshekiakiak:
Black Hawk and his War

“We can only judge of what is proper and right by our own standard of what is right and wrong, which differs widely from the whites, if I have been correctly informed.”—Black Hawk

“Whatever may be the sentiment of the white people in relation to this battle, my nation, though fallen, will award me the reputation of a great brave in conducting it.” –Black Hawk

Makataimeshekiakiak, whose name has been translated as ‘Black Hawk’, was born in Saukenuk, the main village of the Sac people on the Illinois Rock River in 1767. His father was Pyera, the chief of the Sac tribe. His great-grandfather Nanamakee, (meaning “thunder”), has been credited with leading the Sac tribe from Montreal, Canada, and eventually to the point where the Rock River joins the Mississippi River. The Sacs established a village, Saukenuk, where the City of Rock Island now stands. There, Black Hawk spent his childhood, playing on the Mississippi island called Rock Island (now known as Arsenal Island), and learning to hunt the Sac territories, which stretched for miles along the Mississippi River.

At the age of fifteen, Black Hawk began his lifelong task of defending his people’s land. He was already considered a brave, or warrior, having wounded an enemy, although not on the battlefield. So, when the Muscow tribe asked the Sacs for men to help them fight the Osages, their common enemy, Black Hawk went to war for the first time and was given leadership over a small party of seven men. While on a scouting mission, they encountered a large party of the Osage. In the skirmish, Black Hawk lost no men, and killed one enemy. Because he had proved that he knew when to fight and when to retreat, he was allowed to lead larger parties. The battles went on until Black Hawk was 19, when the Sacs won a decisive victory and the Osages agreed to stay on their own lands.

The Sacs did not have much time to enjoy peace before they clashed with the Cherokee. In an early skirmish, which, according to Black Hawk, the Sacs technically won in the number of enemy slain, they lost many of their own men, including Pyera, Black Hawk’s father. Black Hawk was now chief of his people, responsible for their welfare.

While he was still in mourning over his father’s death, a small party of Osages tried to encroach on Sac territory. The more numerous and better-armed Sacs drove away the Osages without killing a single man, on Black Hawk’s orders. Black Hawk used this example to illustrate a major point in his code of honor: he did not kill those weaker than himself.

The Sacs had bartered for supplies with the Spanish and the British since they had first settled at Rock River. At the turn of the 19th century, the Americans moved into the St. Louis area and the Sacs lost their Spanish trade. They therefore welcomed Lieutenant (later General) Pike when he came upriver to meet with the leader of the Sac tribe. Lieutenant Pike asked that the Sacs stop trading with the British, but Black Hawk refused, saying that he would not take sides in the struggles between the British and the Americans. His people, he reasoned, would benefit by having two sources of goods.

In 1804, a treaty was signed which Black Hawk later called the “origin of all our serious difficulties with the whites.” The 1804 treaty, which Black Hawk did not sign, in effect gave away a wide strip of Sac land bordering the Mississippi River to the United States government, an area that included the Sac village on the Rock River.

To the Sacs, the sale of land was an almost impossible concept to understand. As Black Hawk explained, “Nothing can be sold but such things as can be carried away.” This aside, there was some question as to whether the Sac representatives were authorized to sign the 1804 treaty: Black Hawk maintained throughout his life that they were not. He claimed that four members of his tribe had been sent to St. Louis to negotiate the release of another of Black Hawk’s men, who was charged with murder. When his men returned, they admitted that they had been drunk the entire time and had signed away the land. The prisoner had been released from jail, but had been immediately shot before their eyes.

The American representatives maintained that they had entered the treaty in good faith and considered the agreement legal and binding. The Sacs would be allowed to continue living on the land as long as it remained
government property; as soon as the land was sold to private citizens, the Sacs would have to leave. Black Hawk refused to consider the possibility that he and his people would ever leave their village. For several years, the point appeared to be moot.

Meanwhile, the tension between the British and the Americans escalated into the War of 1812. Black Hawk told both sides that the Sacs would remain neutral—this was not their war to fight. In an attempt to confirm this neutrality, the United States promised the Sacs enough supplies on credit for the entire winter if they would stay out of the war and stop all trade with the British. Black Hawk agreed, but when he and his men went to collect the supplies, the American trader had been given no orders to extend credit to the Sacs, and refused to do so. As the Sacs could pay for nothing until after the winter hunt, they went away empty handed.

A British trader from Peoria arrived soon after and offered unlimited credit, which the Sacs were relieved to accept. On the trader’s recommendation, Colonel Dixon of the British army approached Black Hawk, saying that he knew the Americans had tricked the Sacs out of their land. Dixon said that the British, with the help of the Sacs, could drive the Americans out of the area. Black Hawk and a party of his men joined the British at Green Bay, Wisconsin.

The Sacs were soon disillusioned with the war. They had been told that the Americans would not put up much of a fight, but this was wrong. They grew tired of the long and often unsuccessful battles and the strange (to them) strategies of British command. After yet another long march to a battlefield, only to receive the order to retreat without engaging in battle, Black Hawk and twenty or so of his men left to go home to the village.

They were tracked by a party of Americans, one of whom, Elijah Kilbourn, managed to crawl through the underbrush to get a bead on Black Hawk, although he was unable to fire before he was discovered. Admiring the young man’s bravery, Black Hawk turned him over to his braves instead of killing him, telling them that he was going to adopt Kilbourn into the tribe as his son, to be renamed Waupekuk. After three years, the soldier escaped back to his people. Seventeen years later, he met Black Hawk again, facing him in the first battle of a bloodier war.

The British lost the War of 1812, and the Americans strengthened their hold on western Illinois and the Mississippi waterways. Although Black Hawk never mentions doing so, let alone his reasons, in 1816, he signed a treaty that recognized the 1804 treaty as valid. According to Franc Wilkie, an historian and contemporary of George Davenport, “contemptibly small.”

A few years after the war, the United States Army began the construction of Fort Armstrong on the high point of Rock Island (Arsenal Island), the island where Black Hawk had spent his childhood. Black Hawk claimed that he did not object to the Fort, but only where they were building it. Not only had the Sacs lost the fruit and fish from the island, but Black Hawk had truly lost a piece of the land he loved.

This loss was only the beginning. Settlers began to move into the area, and the resulting culture clashes were not pleasant for either side. Settlers began fencing in the Sac cornfields for their own use, either honestly not recognizing the fields as being cultivated, or simply not caring. While Black Hawk and his people were away on a yearly hunting expedition, some settlers moved into the lodges, assuming that they were abandoned. This was in violation of the treaties of both 1804 and 1816, as the land had not yet been sold to private citizens. The settlers knew that the Sacs would be leaving, and didn’t understand why they didn’t go. Black Hawk didn’t understand why anyone would think he could abandon his home so easily.

More conflicts arose. A Sac taking honey from a wild beehive was accused of stealing, as one of the settlers considered the tree to be on his property; other Sacs were beaten for trespassing, poaching, or simply for being Sacs. Alcohol, previously unknown among the Sac tribe, was introduced to the braves, some of who became addicted to the unfamiliar substance. Fearing that the uncontrolled tempers of a few drunken men would fuel violence against all, Black Hawk forbade the selling of liquor to his people. A few whiskey salesmen, not wanting to give up willing customers, continued to do so. During a heated exchange between a salesman and himself, a frustrated Black Hawk broke open a keg of whiskey. The settlers saw this as an example of the unrestrained violence of the Sacs, and of Black Hawk in particular.

Although the misunderstandings, and the crimes, were on both sides, the settlers could complain to the government, while the Sacs could not—or not with the same result. In 1823, on the advice of the Indian agent at Fort Armstrong,
the Sac and Fox tribes were asked by the government to relocate west of the Mississippi River. In the eyes of the government, the request was not unreasonable; the tribes would be required to leave anyway, once the government land was sold. They were only requesting to move up the inevitable.

Chief Keokuk agreed to the relocation on behalf of the majority of the Sacs and Foxes. However, due in part to a long-standing rivalry, Black Hawk did not recognize Keokuk as the authority between the United States and the tribes. According to the 1804 and 1816 treaties, he and his people were allowed to stay on the Rock River, and stay they would.

This decision did not make the situation easier for the Sacs. There were acts of violence against the villagers by settlers who felt threatened by the presence of Black Hawk’s ‘British Band’, as his braves had been called since the War of 1812. Black Hawk was hard pressed to keep his men from buying whiskey, or from retaliating against the settlers. The situation escalated, and in 1827, settlers burned the Sac village to the ground. Black Hawk and his people rebuilt and stayed.

In 1829, the government brought the former Sac lands to market, apparently so that the government could legally relocate the village. The government saw this as a way to protect both the Sacs and the interests of the settlers. George Davenport bought the parcel of land on which the village stood, telling Black Hawk at the time that he was willing to sell the land back to the Sac, although nothing came of this offer. Under the 1804 and 1816 treaty agreements, the Sacs would have to move, but Black Hawk resisted, ignoring Keokuk’s pressure to move the villagers away from a dangerous situation.

By 1831, Black Hawk threatened violence if the settlers would not stop plowing up fields that the Sacs had already planted for themselves. Alarmed, the Settlers accused the Sacs of threatening and vicious behavior, bringing up the whiskey keg incident and the purported ‘thefts’ of wild honey and game. Rumors were spread that Black Hawk was forming an army.

Believing these rumors, Illinois Governor John Reynolds ordered 700 soldiers to the Rock River to stop Black Hawk’s ‘invasion’. The more level-headed General Gaines ordered only 10 companies of men to Rock Island and held a conference with Black Hawk. As a gesture of good will, Gaines told Black Hawk that the government would give the Sacs corn to make up for the lost harvest, but Black Hawk considered the amount offered to be inadequate to keep his people from starvation. The Sacs went back to harvest the fields they considered theirs, and were fired upon.

Soon after this, 1600 troops arrived to move the Sacs to the other side of the Mississippi; outnumbered, Black Hawk was forced to capitulate and sign a treaty stating that he would not cross back into Illinois without permission. At the age of 65, Black Hawk had finally lost his home.

In 1832, Black Hawk received information from a trusted friend named Prophet (not to be confused with Tecumseh, who was nicknamed ‘The Prophet’) that the British and various tribes would help the Sacs retake their land. Neopope, one of Black Hawk’s advisors, confirmed that there were many tribes who would gladly join the Sacs against the Americans. Encouraged, Black Hawk first went to Keokuk, who refused to supply men for what he considered a foolhardy, hopeless venture. Black Hawk could find no help on the western side of the Mississippi, so he turned his attention to the east: In direct violation of the relocation treaty, Black Hawk and his entire village, men women and children, crossed the Mississippi into Illinois to look for allies.

When the Sacs were detected, Black Hawk sent a messenger to General Atkinson of Fort Armstrong, informing him that the Sacs had been invited by a nearby Winnebago village to plant corn on their lands, which was true enough. When they reached the village, the Winnebagoes were willing to raise crops with the Sacs, but they, like all the tribes Black Hawk contacted, would not risk their own people and lands by opposing the American army. Meanwhile, a suspicious General Atkinson led 600 troops after Black Hawk and his party, in case Black Hawk’s intentions were hostile.

The stage was set for what would be called Black Hawk’s War.
The first battle of this war began with a preventable incident. Major Stillman and about three hundred men scouted ahead of General Atkinson’s main force to Sycamore Creek, a few miles away from the Sac camp. Disillusioned about the support he was promised, Black Hawk sent three men under a flag of truce to invite the soldiers to his camp for a conference. Black Hawk wanted permission to return his people safely across the Mississippi.

Stillman’s men, who were mostly volunteers without battle experience, may have been nervous and excited about meeting Black Hawk’s “British Band,” about whom they had heard many rumors. But for whatever reason, the soldiers ignored the conventions of the flag of truce and shot one of the Sacs, capturing the others. When his men did not return, Black Hawk sent five more to find out what had happened. They encountered the militia, and two were killed on sight, but three managed to warn the camp. Only fifty braves were in the camp at the time. Outnumbered by more than five to one and outgunned, the Sacs made the incredible decision to attack. Strategically and temperamentally, this went against everything Black Hawk had previously ordered—and it worked.

The green troops, hearing the yells of the Sacs, and seeing them charge fearlessly through the trees, panicked, thinking that they were facing thousands of the enemy. In the confusion, Stillman’s orders could not be heard, and most of his men fled thirty miles to Dixon’s Ferry, some continuing on until they reached their own homes. One of Stillman’s men, a Methodist preacher on a slow horse, hid himself, and kept a count of the Sacs who chased the troops. When he joined up with his party at Dixon’s Ferry, he reported that he had counted only twenty-five Sacs—to the embarrassment of his superiors and his fellow soldiers.

The truth of the Battle of Stillman’s Run, as it was later called, was only realized after the war was over. Believing the original report of “2,000 bloodthirsty Indian warriors,” the United States Secretary of War ordered General Scott to take a thousand soldiers to the “seat of war” and assume command of the army.

One of the soldiers who had not run, and who was subsequently captured by the Sacs, was Elijah Kilbourn, the soldier who had been adopted into the Sac tribe in 1812. Black Hawk recognized Kilbourn, and set him free, telling him to carry a message to his superior:

“Black Hawk would have been a friend to the whites, but they would not let him, and . . . the hatchet was dug up by themselves and not by the Indians. Tell your chief that Black Hawk meant no harm to the pale faces when he came across the Mississippi . . . he would have gone back, but when he sent his white flag . . . one of [his men was] inhumanly shot. Tell him too, that Black Hawk will have revenge, and that he will never stop until the Great Spirit shall say to him, come away.”

Franc Wilkie’s history reports that “the whole proceeding—from the firing upon the flagbearer at the beginning, to their ‘turning tail’ to the Indians at the end—is the most cowardly affair on record. There is not a doubt but if the flag had been respected, and a conference held, that Black Hawk would have peaceably returned to the West side of the Mississippi.”

Instead, Black Hawk, according to some historians, began a ‘rampage’. Black Hawk’s account is less dramatic: he sent the women and children out of harm’s way and divided up his men to fight a path to the Mississippi. Black Hawk’s men raided a fort on the Apple River for supplies and horses, killing a few soldiers, and left before the army could track them. But some of the men from the fort came after them, and in the skirmish, Black Hawk lost nine of his men. Black Hawk later said that his braves had killed several soldiers and forty horses.

Both sides ambushed and attacked, and though the government lost men to the Sacs, they had endless replacements, as well as more ammunition and better food. Black Hawk’s Band was whittled away little by little. The surviving Sacs regrouped in a swampy marsh and camped there, knowing that the army wouldn’t be able to find them. But it was difficult to find enough food; the hunting and fishing was bad, and the camp was too far from settlements to get supplies. Several of the older Sacs died.

Black Hawk decided to move the women and the children across the Mississippi to safety. Twenty men, led by Neopope, stayed behind the main group to spy out any army activity. A mile from the Wisconsin River, Black Hawk’s group ran into a large company of soldiers. Half of the bravest turned to face the army, while the rest moved
the women and children to an island in the river. The Sacs were forced to fight uphill, a poor strategic position, and the battle did not go well for them.

Neopope’s men arrived too late to help. The enemy had cut them off, and Neopope had deserted his party to wait out the war in a Winnebago village. The rest of the braves, loyal to Black Hawk and their people, had returned on their own.

The battle raged until sunset. After the fighting had stopped, some of the Sacs, mostly women and children, broke with Black Hawk and went down the Wisconsin River, hoping to escape to safety. They met a party of soldiers from Prairie du Chein, who fired upon them. Those who were not shot, drowned, or captured, ran into the woods and from many accounts starved to death.

Black Hawk and the remainder of his people had no boats, and so started the trek across land to the Mississippi River. Most of the Sacs were on foot and starving, making for a slow and dangerous journey. The oldest and the youngest did not survive.

When the Sacs finally reached the river, they saw a steamboat, the Warrior, under Captain Throckmorton and carrying soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Kingsley. Black Hawk displayed a white flag of truce—a piece of cotton cloth on a stick—and called to the boat that he and his people were Sac and wanted to give themselves up in order to cross the river. A Winnebago was recruited to tell the Captain that Black Hawk wanted to come aboard under truce to discuss the possible transportation of the Sacs.

Instead, by mistake or treachery, the Winnebago gave the impression that Black Hawk would not surrender. The soldiers opened fire with guns and a six-pound cannon. The barrage did little harm, as the Sacs were able to take cover. Black Hawk believed that the Winnebago “must have either misunderstood what [he was to have] told, or did not tell it to [Kingsbury] correctly,” because Black Hawk had always considered Kingsbury “a good man, and too great a brave to fire upon an enemy when suing for quarters.” Official reports state that Kingsbury had told the Winnebago to warn Black Hawk that the soldiers would fire if Black Hawk did not surrender. The Winnebago had replied that Black Hawk would never surrender.

Black Hawk divided his people once again. Most stayed behind to cross the river any way they could, while Black Hawk and the rest went to meet a party of Chippewa for reinforcements. The army, under General Atkinson, came upon the Sacs who were trying to cross the river. No available account mentions whether the Sacs tried to surrender; all imply that the Battle of Bad Axe was more massacre than military campaign. Most of the women and children were shot, or drowned trying to escape. The braves, overwhelmed by numbers, decided to fight to the death. Only a few Sacs survived, either by escape or capture. Those who managed to swim across the Mississippi were killed by waiting Sioux as they came out of the water. The two-hour battle left sixty Sac dead, not including those who had drowned. Army loss was estimated at sixteen men.

Black Hawk heard of the destruction of his people from a surviving brave, and led the small remnant of the Sac nation to the refuge of a Winnebago village. Wilkie’s history states that Black Hawk was forcibly taken by the Winnebagoes to General Street. Black Hawk says in his autobiography that he asked the Winnebagoes to escort him to his agents. Whichever is true, on August 27, 1832, Black Hawk surrendered at Prairie du Chein.

There, Black Hawk and his men were taken downriver in a steamboat by a Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, who would later be declared president of the Confederate States of America. Black Hawk mentions the journey in his autobiography: “On our way down I surveyed the country that had cost us so much trouble, anxiety and blood, and that now caused me to be a prisoner of war . . .” It is said by a Lieutenant Mitchell that as the boat passed Rock Island, Black Hawk wept for the sight of his childhood home and for the graves of his people. The steamboat did not stop at Fort Armstrong, because of a cholera epidemic on the Island. Instead, the Sacs were imprisoned at the Jefferson Barracks through the winter.

The Black Hawk Treaty was signed on September 21, 1832 on the west side of the Mississippi across from Rock Island, as cholera still remained a danger. Black Hawk does not mention the treaty at all in his autobiography, but other histories relate that the United States received six million acres of Sac and Fox land. The acquisition was later called the Black Hawk Purchase; the land itself was called the Iowa District. In return, the tribes were paid twenty
thousand dollars per year for thirty years. Their debts were paid off, and the new Sac settlements were promised a blacksmith and a gunsmith.

Though Black Hawk signed the treaty, Keokuk was considered the official representative of the Sac-Fox nation. He presented several acres on the bank of the Mississippi to Marguerite LeClaire, who was the granddaughter of a Sac chief and wife to Antoine LeClaire, the government translator who later translated Black Hawk’s dictated autobiography. Three years later, the city of Davenport was plotted on this land.

Black Hawk was neither imprisoned nor released, but was instead taken on a tour of major American cities. With him were Keokuk and other members of the Sac and Fox tribes, Colonel George Davenport, Antoine LeClaire, and others. Black Hawk spoke in front of several different groups and earned the respect and admiration of many who had believed that Indians were inarticulate savages.

After the tour, Black Hawk and his family—his wife Asshewqua, his daughter Namequa and her husband, and his sons Nashashuk and Gamesett—settled on the Des Moines River. He had many visitors, who wanted to meet the ‘old war chief’ out of respect or curiosity. Whatever their reasons, Black Hawk made them all feel welcome. He was also invited to various celebrations and engagements: he spent the Fourth of July of 1838 in Burlington, Iowa, as the guest of honor. His speech, according to J. B. Patterson, included these words: “I am now old. I have looked upon the Mississippi since I have been a child. I love the Great river. I have dwelt upon its banks from the time I was an infant. I look upon it now. I shake hands with you, and as it is my wish, I hope you are my friends.”

In September of that year, Black Hawk started out to Rock Island to collect their annual payment from the government. He fell ill on the way, and returned home. On October 3, 1838, after two weeks of illness, Black Hawk died at the approximate age of seventy-one.

According to Captain James H. Jordan, who was present at the chief’s burial, Black Hawk was buried on the banks of the Des Moines River, in the northeast corner of Davis County. He wore a full military uniform, which had been given to him by General Jackson when Black Hawk had visited Washington, DC. At the head of his grave flew the American flag.

One would think that Black Hawk would have been able to find peace after death. But in July of 1839, his remains were stolen by a Dr. Turner of Lexington, Iowa, and taken either to Alton, Illinois, or to Warsaw, Illinois, so that his skeleton might be wired together for display. Black Hawk’s sons went to Governor Lucas of the Iowa Territory, who used his influence to bring the bones to Burlington, Iowa, in late 1839 or 1840. Nashashuk and Gamesett decided that their father’s remains would be kept safe in Burlington, and so left them in the care of the Burlington Geological and Historical Society. In 1855, the building of the Society burned down. Black Hawk’s remains were destroyed, although rumors persisted for many years that the bones were rescued from the wreckage, and kept by an officer of the Society.

Although the conflicts that led up to the Black Hawk War, and the War itself, took place on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River, the impact to the west cannot be exaggerated. The Black Hawk Purchase opened up Iowa for settlement. The Black Hawk Treaty, through the gift of Sac land to Marguerite LeClaire, is the foundation on which Davenport, Iowa, was built. In remembering this, one might also remember that the price for this crucial part of our history was paid by Black Hawk and his people.

Everyday reminders of Black Hawk—in the names of businesses, roads, and a state park, and in murals and in other images—may be found in the Illinois and the Iowa Quad-Cities. But as a true last impression of the chief, one might turn to the words of J. B. Patterson, as one who personally knew Black Hawk:

“In closing this narrative of the life of this noble old chief it may be just to speak briefly on his personal traits. He was an Indian, and from that standpoint, we must judge him. The make-up of his character comprised those elements in a marked degree which constitutes a noble nature. In all social relations of life he was kind and affable. In his house he was the affectionate husband and father . . . As a warrior he knew no fear, and on the field of battle his feats of personal prowess stamped him as the ‘bravest of the brave’.
“But it was rather as a speaker and counselor that he was distinguished. His patriotism, his love of his country, his home, his lands and this rights of his people to their wide domain, moved his great soul to take up arms to protect the rights of his people. Right was all that he demanded, and for that he waged the unequal contests with the whites.

“With his tribe he had great personal influence and his young men received his counsel and advice, and yielded ready acquiescence in his admonitions. With other tribes he was held in high esteem, as well as by English and American soldiers, who had witnessed his prowess on the field of battle.”

Compiled by Sarah Wesson, librarian, The Richardson-Sloane Special Collections Center


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