

The Black Hawk War— Reconstructing “Stillman’s Run”

by Jennifer Erbach

Note: The following is a retype of the lesson plan ***The Black Hawk War— Reconstructing “Stillman’s Run”*** by Jennifer Erbach. The original plan was digitized and copyrighted as part of the 2003 Illinois Historical Digitization Projects. Accessed and printed on 6 July 2005 from dig.lib.niu.edu/teachers/lesson4.html and found in the files at the Apple River Fort State Historic Site.

Students will compare several eyewitness accounts of Stillman’s Run, and discuss how a historian might use them.

Students will act as historians and try to reconstruct what happened during Stillman’s Run from eyewitness accounts.

Prior to the lesson, divide the class into three groups. Each group will be given one of the following testimonies concerning what happened during “Stillman’s Run.”

- Group 1: Testimony of Major Stillman
- Group 2: Testimony of Black Hawk
- Group 3: Testimony of Elijah Kilbourne

Students should read their assigned account and come to class with an outline of what happened according to their author.

Introduction:

Outline the Black Hawk War to give students a general idea of where the war took place, why it was fought, its major battles, and ultimate outcome. Note: go into little or no detail about the “Stillman’s Run” incident.

Part I:

Have students get out the outlines that they did for homework. Ask the students from Group 1 to tell you what happened during “Stillman’s Run.” (This should provoke a reaction from Group 2, since their version is very different.) Then ask Group 2 to give their version of what happened, followed by Group 3. Clearly, there is a discrepancy among the accounts, particularly between Stillman and Black Hawk’s versions.

Part II:

In order to try and figure out what actually happened during the incident known as “Stillman’s Run,” we’re going to have to examine the evidence (in this case, three eyewitness testimonies) as a historian would. Put the students into teams of three—one member from each homework group.

In teams, evaluate the three testimonies, using the following discussion questions:

- Where do these accounts agree? Where do they contradict each other? Do any of the accounts seem to be exceptionally different from the rest?
- From what perspective are the events being considered in each account? How might this affect what information the account gives?
- Consider the audience to whom each man was giving his account. How might this have affected their story?
- Where else could you look for evidence of what really happened during “Stillman’s Run?”

Part III:

Having examined the testimonies, what conclusions can you draw about what happened at the Battle of Stillman’s Run? Using the testimonies, try to piece together an accurate account of the events that took place on the night of May 14, 1832. Be sure to support your conclusions!

State Standards Addressed: **16.A.4b** Compare competing historical interpretations of an event. **16.A.5a** Analyze historical and contemporary developments using methods of historical inquiry (pose questions, collect and analyze data, make and support inferences with evidence, report findings).

Notes for the Instructor:

- Time required for this lesson should be less than two 45-50 minute class periods.
- [Additional bullet points not added due to dead links.]

Major Stillman's Account

This account, written by Major Isaiah Stillman, was published in "The Missouri Republican" on July 10, 1832, two months after the incident known as "Stillman's Run" took place. With minor edits for grammar, spelling, and clarity.

TO THE EDITORS OF THE MISSOURI REPUBLICAN.

Gentlemen.—I have this day discovered in your paper of the 22d ult. an account of an engagement between the men under my command and the hostile Sac, and other Indians, on Rock River. Finding the statement altogether incorrect, I take the liberty to give the outlines of the transaction, which I am compelled to do in the utmost haste.

On the 12th I received orders from his Excellency John Reynolds, Commander in Chief, &c. to march immediately from Dixon's Ferry, on Rock River, to what is commonly called Old Man's Creek, about thirty miles distance, and coerce such hostile Indians into subjection.—We took up our march on the 13th, and on the 14th, at 2 o'clock, one of our spies discovered two Indians on our left. The Indians immediately fired on him, and undertook to make their escape by swimming Rock River; this, however, they did not succeed in; our spy brought his gun to bear on the forward one, who was tumbled into the river—the horse immediately turned his course, and swam back;—the surviving Indian being, from the unmanageable disposition of his horse, compelled to follow, until he shared the fate of his complication. Both horses were brought in.

We reached our camping ground on the north side of Old Man's Creek, about 6 o'clock, after having used every precaution to guard against being deceived by the Indians—having kept out the most experienced spies and a very strong guard, front, rear and flank during the day.

Soon after our arrival, we discovered a small party of men in our advance, supposed at that time to be a part of our front guard. Lt. Gridley, being then mounted, passed up a ravine, for the purpose of ascertaining. It was soon after, however, ascertained that our spies, with the whole of our advance guard, had come in. Capt. Covall, with a party detached, followed. On the approach of Lt. Gridley, while rising the bluff, the Indians faced, and levelled their guns; when prudence directed a return. The Indians pursued, and were met by Capt. Covall, nearly at the same moment, when a fire was exchanged without effect. The Indians retreated, and were pursued. Three were killed and three taken, with the loss of one of our men, (as supposed.) Our men were all immediately

formed, and took their march in the direction of Sycamore Creek, about five miles above. After marching about three miles, an Indian appeared, and made signs of peace.

I was informed of the fact, and orders were given for a halt. Myself, together with most of the field and staff officers, advanced, with Capt. Eads as an interpreter. We were soon informed that the Indians would surrender, in case they could be treated as prisoners of war; this was promised to them, and they returned with the intelligence, after promising to meet us at a specified point. On arriving at that point, however, no Indians appeared to make their proposed treaty, which convinced us of treachery.

Directions were immediately given for our men to advance, while Capt. Eads proceeded a few yards alone to make further discovery. On reaching Sycamore Bluff, the Indians were discovered in martial order; their line extended a distance of nearly two miles, and under rapid march. Their signals were given for battle—the war-whoop was heard in almost every direction—their flanks extending from one creek to the other. Orders were given for a line of battle to be formed on the south side of a marsh between the two creeks, while the Indians were advancing with the utmost rapidity—their fire was tremendous; but on account of the distance, of little effect. Night was closing upon us in the heart of an Indian country, and the only thing to brighten our prospects, the light of our guns. Both officers and men conducted with prudence and deliberation, until compelled to give ground to a superior foe, when orders for a retrograde maneuver was given, and our men again formed on Old man's Creek. Here a desperate attempt was made by the Indians to outflank us, and cut off our retreat, which proved ineffectual—some clubbing their firelocks, others using their tomahawks and spears.

A party of our men crossed the creek, and with much difficulty silenced their fire, which made way for the retreat of our whole party, which was commenced and kept up, with few exceptions, in good order. Both officers and men conducted with firmness and prudence.

Many of our officers and men, having been at the battle of Tipacano, Bridgwater, Chippewa, and Fort Erie, have never faced a more desperate enemy. Having had the advantages of ground, the enemy being on an eminence, operated much in our favor. In passing Old Man's Creek, many of them got their guns wet, and were deprived of the use of them. Our force consisted of two hundred and six men; that of the Indians, not known, but consisted of the whole hostile band. Eleven of our men were killed, five wounded, with the loss of thirty-four of the enemy. From the report, their encampment consisted of 160 lodges. Our men mostly arrived at Dixon's Ferry about 3 o'clock, A.M. and it is to be hoped, that in a short time the number of troops stationed at that point,

and elsewhere, will be able to bring them into subjection, and relieve our frontier from our much dreaded foe.

I am, with much respect, your obedient servant,

I. STILLMAN.

Brig. Gen. 5th Brig. 1st Div. Ill Mi. and Act. Maj. Northern Ill. Volunteers.

In Camp, 19th June, 1832, On Frontier.

Black Hawk's Account

This passage is taken from Black Hawk's autobiography, written in 1833 (one year after the Black Hawk War took place) with the aid of a translator. With minor edits for grammar, spelling, and clarity.

After this deputation started, I concluded to tell my people that if White Beaver came after us, we would go back, as it was useless to think of stopping or going on without more provisions and ammunition. I discovered that the Winnebagoes and Pottowattomies were not disposed to render us any assistance. The next day the Pottowattomie chiefs arrived in my camp. I had a dog killed, and made a feast. When it was ready, I spread my medicine bags, and the chiefs began to eat. When the ceremony was about ending, I received news that three or four hundred white men on horse-back had been seen about eight miles off. I immediately started three young men with a white flag to meet them and conduct them to our camp, that we might hold a council with them and descend the Rock river again. I also directed them, in case the whites had encamped, to return, and I would go and see them. After this party had started I sent five young men to see what might take place. The first party went to the camp of the whites, and were taken prisoners. The last party had not proceeded far before they saw about twenty men coming toward them at full gallop. They stopped, and, finding that the whites were coming toward them in such a warlike attitude, they turned and retreated, but were pursued, and two of them overtaken and killed. The others then made their escape. When they came in with the news, I was preparing my flags to meet the war chief. The alarm was given. Nearly all my young men were absent ten miles away. I started with what I had left, about forty, and had proceeded but a short distance, before we saw a part of the army approaching. I raised a yell, saying to my braves, "Some of our people have been killed. Wantonly and cruelly murdered! We must avenge their death!"

In a little while we discovered the whole army coming towards us at a full gallop. We were now confident that our first party had been killed. I immediately placed my men behind a cluster of bushes, that we might have the first fire when they had approached close enough. They made a halt some distance from us. I gave another yell, and ordered my brave warriors to charge upon them, expecting that they would all be killed. They did charge. Every man rushed towards the enemy and fired, and they retreated in the utmost confusion and consternation before my little but brave band of warriors.

After following the enemy for some distance, I found it useless to pursue them further, as they rode so fast, and returned to the encampment with a few braves, as about

twenty-five of them continued in pursuit of the flying enemy. I lit my pipe and sat down to thank the Great Spirit for what he had done. I had not been meditating long, when two of the three young men I had sat with the flag to meet the American war chief, entered. My astonishment was not greater than my joy to see them living and well. I eagerly listened to their story, which was as follows:

"When we arrived near the encampment of the whites, a number of them rushed out to meet us, bringing their guns with them. They took us into their camp, where an American who spoke the Sac language a little told us that his chief wanted to know how we were, where we were going, where our camp was, and where was Black Hawk? We told him that we had come to see his chief, that our chief had directed us to conduct him to our camp, in case he had not encamped, and in that event to tell him that he, Black Hawk, would come to see him; he wished to hold a council with him, as he had given up all intention of going to war."

This man had once been a member of our tribe, having been adopted by me many years before and treated with the same kindness as was shown to our young men, but like the caged bird of the woods, he yearned for freedom, and after a few years residence with us an opportunity for escape came and he left us. On this occasion he would have respected our flag and carried back the message I had sent to his chief, had he not been taken prisoner, with a comrade, by some of my braves who did not recognize him, and brought him into camp. They were securely tied with cords to trees and left to meditate, but were occasionally buffeted by my young men when passing near them. When I passed by him there was a recognition on the part of us both, but on account of former friendship I concluded to let him go, and some little time before the sun went down I released him from his captivity by untying the cords that bound him and accompanied him outside of our lines so that he could escape safely. His companion had previously made a desperate effort to escape from his guards and was killed by them.

They continued their story:

"At the conclusion of this talk a party of white men came in on horseback. We saw by their countenances that something had happened. A general tumult arose. They looked at us with indignation, talked among themselves for a moment, when several of them cocked their guns and fired at us in the crowd. Our companion fell dead. We rushed through the crowd and made our escape. We remained in ambush but a short time, before we heard yelling like Indians running an enemy. In a little while we saw some of the whites in full speed. One of them came near us. I threw my tomahawk and struck

him on the head which brought him to the ground; I ran to him and with his own knife took off his scalp. I took his gun, mounted his horse, and brought my friend here behind me. We turned to follow our braves, who were chasing the enemy, and had not gone far before we overtook a white man, whose horse had mired in a swamp. My friend alighted and tomahawked the man, who was apparently fast under his horse. He took his scalp, horse and gun. By this time our party was some distance ahead. We followed on and saw several white men lying dead on the way. After riding about six miles we met our party returning. We asked them how many of our men had been killed. They said none after the Americans had retreated. We inquired how many whites had been killed. They replied that they did not know, but said we will soon ascertain, as we must scalp them as we go back. On our return we found ten men, besides the two we had killed before we joined our friends. Seeing that they did not yet recognize us, it being dark, we again asked how many of our braves had been killed? They said five. We asked who they were? They replied that the first party of three who went out to meet the American war chief, had all been taken prisoners and killed in the encampment, and that out of a party of five, who followed to see the meeting of the first party with the whites, two had been killed. We were now certain that they did not recognize us, nor did we tell who we were until we arrived at our camp. The news of our death had reached it some time before, and all were surprised to see us again."

The next morning I told the crier of my village to give notice that we must go and bury our dead. In a little while all were ready. A small deputation was sent for our absent warriors, and the remainder started to bury the dead. We first disposed of them and then commenced an examination in the enemy's deserted encampment for plunder. We found arms and ammunition and provisions, all of which we were sadly in want of, particularly the latter, as we were entirely without. We found also a variety of saddle bags, which I distributed among my braves, a small quantity of whisky and some little barrels that had contained this bad medicine, but they were empty. I was surprised to find that the whites carried whisky with them, as I had understood that all the pale faces, when acting as soldiers in the field, were strictly temperate.

The enemy's encampment was in a skirt of woods near a run, about half a day's travel from Dixon's ferry. We attacked them in the prairie, with a few bushes between us, about sundown, and I expected that my whole party would be killed. I never was so much surprised in all the fighting I have seen, knowing, too, that the Americans generally shoot well, as I was to see this army of several hundreds retreating, without showing fight, and passing immediately through their encampment, I did think they intended to halt there, as the situation would have forbidden attack by my party if their

number had not exceeded half of mine, as we would have been compelled to take the open prairie whilst they could have picked trees to shield themselves from our fire.

I was never so much surprised in my life as I was in this attack. An army of three or four hundred men, after having learned that we were sueing for peace, to attempt to kill the flag bearers that had gone unarmed to ask for a meeting of the war chiefs of the two contending parties to hold a council, that I might return to the west side of the Mississippi, to come forward with a full determination to demolish the few braves I had with me, to retreat when they had ten to one, was unaccountable to me. It proved a different spirit from any I had ever before seen among the pale faces. I expected to see them fight as the Americans did with the British during the last war, but they had no such braves among them.

Elijah Kilbourne's Account

Several years before the Black Hawk War, Elijah Kilbourne had been captured by Black Hawk's tribe and, according to their customs, adopted as one of Black Hawk's sons. He lived with the Sac tribe for a while, then escaped. He was part of Major Stillman's company during the incident known as "Stillman's Run." With minor edits for grammar, spelling, and clarity.

Many years after this I was a participant in the battle at Sycamore Creek, which, as you know, is a tributary of Rock river. I was employed by the government as a scout, in which capacity it was acknowledged that I had no superior; but I felt no pride in hearing myself praised, for I knew I was working against Black Hawk, who, although he was an Indian, had once spared my life, and I was one never to forget a kindness. And besides this I had taken a great liking to him, for there was something noble and generous in his nature. However, my first duty was to my country, and I did my duty at all hazards.

Now you must know that Black Hawk, after moving west of the Mississippi, had recrossed, contrary to his agreement, not, however, from any hostile motive, but to raise a crop of corn and beans with the Pottawattomie and Winnebago, of which his own people stood in the utmost need. With this intention he had gone some distance up Rock river, when an express from General Atkinson ordered him peremptorily to return. This order the old chief refused to obey, saying that the General had no right to issue it. A second express from Atkinson threatened Black Hawk that if he did not return peaceably, force would be resorted to. The aged warrior became incensed at this and utterly refused to obey the mandate, but at the same time sent word to the General that he would not be the first one to commence hostilities.

The movement of the renowned warrior was immediately trumpeted abroad as an invasion of the State, and with more rashness than wisdom, Governor Reynolds ordered the Illinois militia to take the field, and these were joined by the regulars, under General Atkinson, at Rock Island. Major Stillman, having under his command two hundred and seventy-five mounted men, the chief part of whom were volunteers, while a few like myself were regular scouts, obtained leave of General Whitesides, then lying at Dixon's Ferry, to go on a scouting expedition.

I knew well what would follow; but still, as I was under orders, I was obliged to obey, and together with the rest proceeded some thirty miles up Rock river to where Sycamore creek empties into it. This brought us to within six or eight miles of the camp of Black

Hawk, who, on that day—May 14th—was engaged in preparing a dog feast for the purpose of fitly celebrating a contemplated visit of some Pottawattomie chiefs.

Soon after preparing to camp we saw three Indians approach us bearing a white flag; and these, upon coming up, were made prisoners. A second deputation of five were pursued by some twenty of our mounted militia, and two of them killed, while the other three escaped. One of the party that bore the white flag was, out of the most cowardly vindictiveness, shot down while standing a prisoner in camp. The whole detachment, after these atrocities, now bore down upon the camp of Black Hawk, whose braves, with the exception of some forty or fifty, were away at a distance.

As we rode up, a galling and destructive fire was poured in upon us by the savages, who, after discharging their guns, sprung from their coverts on either side, with their usual horrible yells, and continued the attack with their tomahawks and knives. My comrades fell around me like leaves; and happening to cast my eyes behind me, I beheld the whole detachment of militia flying from the field. Some four or five of us were left unsupported in the very midst of the foe, who, renewing their yells, rushed down upon us in a body. Gideon Munson and myself were taken prisoners, while others were instantly tomahawked and scalped. Munson, during the afternoon, seeing, as he supposed, a good opportunity to escape, recklessly attempted to do so, but was immediately shot down by his captor. And I now began to wish that they would serve me in the same manner, for I knew that if recognized by the savages, I should be put to death by the most horrible tortures. Nothing occurred, however, to give me any real uneasiness upon this point till the following morning, when Black Hawk, passing by me, turned and eyed me keenly for a moment or so. Then, stepping close to me, he said in a low tone: "Does the mole think that Black Hawk forgets?"

Stepping away with a dignified air, he now left me, as you may well suppose, bordering in despair, for I knew too well the Indian character to imagine for a single instant that my life would be spared under the circumstances. I had been adopted into the tribe by Black Hawk, had lived nearly three years among them, and by escaping had incurred their displeasure, which could only be appeased with my blood. Added to this, I was now taken prisoner at the very time that the passions of the savages were most highly wrought upon by the mean and cowardly conduct of the whites. I therefore gave up all hope, and doggedly determined to meet stoically my fate.

Although the Indians passed and repassed me many times during the day, often bestowing on me a buffet or a kick, yet not one of them seemed to remember me as having formerly been one of the tribe. At times this infused me with a faint hope, which

was always immediately after extinguished, as I recalled to mind my recognition by Black Hawk himself.

Some two hours before sunset Black Hawk again came to where I was bound, and having loosened the cords with which I was fastened to a tree, my arms still remaining confined, bade me follow him. I immediately obeyed him, not knowing what was to be my doom, though I expected none other than death by torture. In silence we left the encampment, not one of the savages interfering with us or offering me the slightest harm or indignity. For nearly an hour we strode on through the gloomy forest, now and then starting from its retreat some wild animal that fled upon our approach. Arriving at a bend of the river my guide halted, and turning toward the sun, which was rapidly setting, he said, after a short pause:

“I am going to send you back to your chief, though I ought to kill you for running away a long time ago, after I had adopted you as a son—but Black Hawk can forgive as well as fight. When you return to your chief I want you to tell him all my words. Tell him that Black Hawk’s eyes have looked upon many suns, but they shall not see many more; and that his back is no longer straight, as in his youth, but is beginning to bend with age. The Great Spirit has whispered among the tree tops in the morning and evening and says that Black Hawk’s days are few, and that he is wanted in the spirit land. He is half dead, his arm shakes and is no longer strong, and his feet are slow on the war path. Tell him all this, and tell him, too,” continued the untutored hero of the forest, with trembling emotion and marked emphasis, “that Black Hawk would have been a friend to the whites, but they would not let him, and that 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, but came peaceably to raise corn for his starving women and children, and that even then he would have gone back, but when he sent his white flag the braves who carried it were treated like squaws and one of them inhumanly shot. Tell him too,” he concluded with terrible force, while his eyes fairly flashed fire, “that Black Hawk will have revenge, and that he will never stop until the Great Spirit shall say to him, ‘come away.’”