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Understandings of Frontier Illinois

By James E. Davis

Fifteen-year-old Sarah Aiken was discouraged, lonely, and far from home. Although she had not wanted to leave her home in New York, she and her family moved far away, to near Peoria, Illinois. On January 1, 1833, she began writing to Julia Keese, a close childhood friend in New York. In those letters she referred to Illinois as a "far distant country" and lamented, "O, for just one friend, Julia." Frontier labor shortages created high wages for workmen, which inconvenienced her parents, but nature's abundance impressed her: "The land is extremely rich and produces from 30 to 40 bushels of wheat per acre." At first she complained that frontier Illinois society "to be sure is not first rate" and she referred to "a low set of people" from the South, but she hoped frontier society would soon equal New York society. She observed "primitive glory" in the frontier, and observed the frontier "is entirely a new place." By the summer of 1836, she chirped, "O, this is a delightful country. Nothing would induce me to return to New York to remain." Even so, however, she missed her friends and assumed vast distances would keep her from ever seeing them again, so she admonished Julia, "Let us so live that in another world we may be where there is not separation and where all sorrow and sighing are done away." Impressions of frontier life filled her letters until her death from tuberculosis on January 28, 1839.

Three days later, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, an article by David Henshaw appeared in the Pittsfield Sun. Henshaw discussed sputtering construction of the Illinois & Michigan Canal, which in 1848 finally linked the Illinois River and Lake Michigan. He touted frontier growth and noted that Illinois was six times larger than Massachusetts, warning Massachusetts that Illinois and other western regions would soon be "as well peopled as they are vast-abounding in mineral resources and blessed with a soil of unrivaled fertility." He chided Massachusetts for ignoring Illinois' growth and potential market.

In late 1847, Charles Watts of Bureau County wrote about his migration from England to Illinois, which occurred in 1835: "Twelve years ago today I was riding on the bosom of the great Atlantic within soundings of the Newfoundland banks and enveloped in a thick fog, while the spray was freezing on the head of the ship & rigging full of hopes, doubts, and fears with a boundless uncertainty before me." Watts added, "I can see before me a good little farm containing some of the best land under heaven, a neat little house, and a comfortable fireside, an industrious, frugal wife ... and enough of the necessaries that nature requires, inalienable and secure while life shall last, the products of my own toil and economy." His buoyant sense of accomplishment and independence was shared by countless settlers.

The words of Aiken, Henshaw, and Watts provide glimpses into the frontier's natural and cultural features. The Illinois frontier lasted to the eve of the Civil War, shaping the evolving state and the nation. Three basic related factors influenced frontier life: nature, settlers and others on the frontier, and influential outsiders.

Nature bestowed great advantages to Illinois. Favorable climate included hot growing seasons, abundant rain during the growing season, mild harvest weather, and soil-restoring winter freezes. No mountains to the south blocked moisture-laden winds in spring and summer, and no mountains to the north deflected arctic blasts in winter. Climate and the root activities of grass produced superb soil, which cloaked gently undulating glacial deposits. Thick timber growth in the southern half of the state and abundant groves and timber-lined river valleys in northern regions provided vital fuel, building materials, fencing, and food for settlers and livestock. Billowing seas of prairie grasses, originally regarded with disfavor and even dread by settlers, and shunned by most, contained superb soils and became a great asset, once the task of breaking thick mats of roots was solved by the 1840s and once plowed fields checked the disastrous spread of yearly fires. Two great water highway systems, the Mississippi River and its tributaries and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence system, provided outstanding transportation to the Gulf of Mexico and to the Atlantic Coast. In Illinois these two systems nearly touch, providing relatively easy transportation for settlers heading to Illinois and for sending to market Illinois' products. Waterways within Illinois are essentially free from falls and rapids, and level portages between river systems' headwaters gave settlers and shippers significant inter-river connections. Although spectacular floods occurred, fields enjoyed reasonably good drainage, and bluffs near major rivers provided safe sites for settlement; major loss of life occurred primarily when people insisted on settling on floodplains. Illinois' central location, moreover, combined with fine water transportation to give settlers access to the deep South, the East, Canada, and eventually the Great Plains. This location allowed settlers to tap resources from various remote places and to ship Illinois' products in diverse directions. It also attracted a great variety of people.

Indians, settlers, and others who entered the new lands greatly affected frontier Illinois. Before Europeans arrived, the Iroquois, who were expanding from their traditional home in the East, pummeled tribes in Illinois, scattering some across the Mississippi. European ambitions and rivalries complicated this conflict and other struggles among Indians. In 1673, Illinois Indians greeted the first European visitors, Frenchmen from New France. The French sought furs and other economic gain, religious converts, increased national prestige, and adventure. By the 1720s France turned Illinois into the

keystone of an arc of settlements, forts, and towns from the Gulf of Mexico to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. This keystone centered on the incredibly fertile region between Cahokia and Kaskaskia, later known as the American Bottom. This small region produced wheat, hides, beef, and other products for French settlements along the lower Mississippi, in Canada, and in the Caribbean. By 1720, black slaves from the Caribbean worked alongside Indian slaves in this keystone. Defeated in war by 1763, France surrendered Illinois and the rest of North America to the British, who had to squelch Pontiac's fiery rebellion before establishing a thin chain of posts across the region. With the American Revolution, Illinois in 1778 became an arena in which small American and British units and their French and Indian allies fought for very high stakes: control of the entire region north of the Ohio River and the upper Mississippi and its tributaries. George Rogers Clark, Henry Hamilton, Father Pierre Gibault, Francois Vigo, and Indian leaders on both sides provided able, determined leadership. The Commonwealth of Virginia sponsored Clark's 1778 invasion of Illinois, and the first American settlers hailed from Virginia, Kentucky (then part of Virginia), and other southern places.

Various people in Illinois mingled and blended. Nowhere was this more true than among Indians and settlers, especially settlers of French descent. Early settlers and Indians created a transitory hybrid sub-culture, a middle ground, in which diverse people and traits of both major cultures mixed in rough equality. Settlers and Indians in the middle ground borrowed from each other, adapting in the process. Indians taught whites about medicines, ways of the prairie, and other lessons necessary for survival in the wilds. Whites introduced firearms, metal kettles, mirrors, and other forms of emerging technology, as well as white ideas of religion, justice, and the market economy. Intermarriage facilitated the growth of middle ground society. Eventually, of course, this hybrid sub-culture yielded to Euro-American culture, but hundreds of place names and the locations of many roads and settlements reflect Indian influence.

From the beginning of historical times in Illinois, outside influences shaped frontier Illinois. Foreign kings, diplomats, generals, religious figures, and merchants influenced frontier Illinois through the War of 1812, and they were followed by eastern merchants and bankers, religious leaders, and others who organized, planted crops, and supported colonies, and by countless easterners who helped others reach Illinois. Although such people as Charles Watts never set foot in Illinois, their actions shaped frontier life.

Nature, people in Illinois, and outsiders influenced frontier Illinois, but they did not determine it. Settlers and others chose from various options, and the society that emerged from the swirl of alternatives was only one possible outcome.

Pioneers often settled along the boundary of two or more natural regions, and for good reason: they could tap the differing resources of each region. Farmsteads and hamlets popped up where forest met prairie, or where bluffs met river valleys. Similarly, settlement on waterways gave access to distant regions and varied resources.

The frontier presented different realities to different people. But some traits were recognized by virtually everyone. The frontier, for example, involved relatively few people settling particular regions rather quickly, usually within a decade or two. Typically, during a region's frontier era, population jumped from under two permanent settlers per square mile to more than six, and some rapidly filling regions contained more than eighteen persons per square mile. Moreover, frontier regions offered land to people craving it, and additional available land lay just beyond current frontier regions; there was always another west.

Significantly, views of the frontier varied. For Sarah Aiken, Charles Watts, and others, a very significant frontier characteristic was its newness, its unbounded openness, its potential to renew individuals and society, and its limitless tomorrows. These folk valued and stressed in their accounts of frontier life the new animals (including buffalo before 1800), new plants, and such novel occurrences as tornadoes and the lethal Deep Snow of 1830-31. People, moreover, marveled at linguistic, religious, and other social traits among settlers who hailed from various states and countries.

Those like Charles Watts, who relished newness, saw numerous opportunities. To them Illinois was a Garden, a bountiful place of immense potential. Those fleeing repressive, discouraging conditions in the east and in Europe jumped at the chance to succeed in fresh lands, to achieve levels of prosperity and freedom they had never enjoyed elsewhere, and to earn considerable independence, self-worth, and social esteem. New evolving conditions allowed them to wipe the slate clean and start afresh in an unfolding society. By individual and collective efforts, they believed, they could become upwardly mobile and gain rough equality in a fluid society. For them, frontier Illinois was a golden opportunity, a splendid chance to attain social, economic, and even political heights. Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, Walter Newberry, Gurdon Hubbard, Charles Watts, and countless others found such success after coming to frontier Illinois.

Sarah Aiken and others voiced deep concerns about frontier Illinois and the potential for nature's abundance to generate indolence and sloth; for weak institutions and social restraints to permit social breakdown and barbarism; for shortages of hired help to produce citizens who would not accept their "place" in society; for loneliness and the

lack of healthy social contact to paralyze formerly energetic, productive citizens; for diverse populations to dissolve the restraining consensus and cause the fragmenting society.

For many people, in fact, frontier Illinois was a part of a vast battleground in the Mississippi Valley with competing elements of society, such as southerners and northerners, immigrants and natives, Roman Catholics and Protestants, and Mormons and non-Mormons, clashing to determine America's future. Yankees in Massachusetts, for example, and Yankee settlers dreaded the rise of southern, Catholic, foreign, and other non-Yankee institutions, values, and power. Jeffersonian yeomen, valuing self-sufficiency, contested Hamiltonian commercial farmers, who favored improved transportation and overall modernity. David Henshaw and other easterners, furthermore, fretted over the state's growing power. Finally, some timid people regarded Illinois as a land of mystery, awe, barbarism, social disintegration, and future decline.

Those who worried about Illinois did not want to wipe the slate clean and start anew. Rather, like Sarah Aiken, they tried to reproduce in Illinois what they had valued elsewhere. They imported values, institutions, and customs and tried to replicate them, shielding these sometimes fragile transplants from harsh forces. In short, they believed Illinois had to be won for their way of life, and this often involved combating perceived threats.

Most settlers probably wanted to do both: start over and replicate cherished conditions. Clearly, many labored to put failure behind them, but they also hoped to reproduce valued social features. As a result, frontier Illinois blended new and existing institutions, customs and social, economic, and political values.

Push-pull concepts provide understanding of settlers' motives. War, famine, oppression, and other hardships pushed some settlers from their original homes. Others willingly left comfortable surroundings to venture forth, some doing so to advance a religious cause or cultural undertaking. But why did people choose to come to Illinois? Simply put, Illinois attracted people, pulled people, in a variety of ways. Opportunities to get ahead, to farm incredibly rich soil or start a business, lured searching people to Illinois' prairies and forests. Most probably sought such opportunities. Sometimes, however, a vague wanderlust, to try something new and see new places, triggered migration to Illinois. Chain migration brought many new settlers who were urged by their Illinois friends and relatives to join them. Group migration eased the movement west, allowing some older people and the very young to make the journey.

Until steam power sped settlers into Illinois in a few days, especially in the late 1850s, settlers from eastern states often took six or eight grueling weeks to reach Illinois. Consequently, elderly people and toddlers often stayed behind for some months, with women often tending to them. The very early stages of settlement saw relatively few women, toddlers, and elderly, but those imbalances were quite slight and faded quickly. Sometimes advance parties blazed the way, locating sites, buying land, and making improvements before one member returned to retrieve those left behind. Group travel assisted migration and provided security and division of labor. Interestingly, practically every settler lived in a household; practically no one lived alone. Finally, many households and groups settled somewhere for awhile, learned about better conditions nearby, and moved. Such adjustment moves reflected flexibility and good sense, key ingredients for coping with frontier conditions.

Southern Illinois was settled first, largely by southerners via the Ohio River and its tributaries. They usually settled on or near rivers in forested regions, which were similar to their southern homes. Rivers in northern Illinois were important, but less so than in southern Illinois. Rapidly evolving technology (river steamboats, steam power in manufacturing, canals, Great Lakes steamships, telegraphs, plank roads, and trains) fostered rapid settlement in northern Illinois, helping banish frontier conditions by 1860. Moreover, technological advances linked eastern states to northern Illinois, attracting many northerners and foreigners there. By the frontier's demise, in fact, Illinois' ties with the East were much stronger than with the South, an important fact during the Civil War. The sequence of county creation and the movement of the capital from Kaskaskia to Vandalia, and then to Springfield reflect Illinois' south-to-north settlement pattern.

Frontier Illinois was also a social safety valve. Eastern urban dwellers left frustrating conditions and migrated west, many finding success and contentment. Rural easterners left dismal farm conditions, avoided alighting in eastern cities and adding to social pressures there, and came to Illinois. Other Americans never went west, but knowing that they could comforted them. Besides physical mobility, many settlers enjoyed upward mobility, both of which alleviated social pressures in thickly settled states. Finally, by 1840 Illinois was the staging area, the jumping-off point for pioneers seeking new homes beyond the Mississippi.

Indians, French, blacks, British, southerners, and Yankees, such foreigners as Germans, Irish, Portuguese, Norwegians, Dutch, and Swedes, and people of mixed ancestry lived in frontier Illinois. Those racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic sub-cultural layers mingled, producing an evolving blended culture.

With such a diverse population and sometimes chaotic conditions, Illinois contained ample ingredients for social turmoil and even explosion. Illinois' frontier, however, was remarkably tranquil. Cooperation flourished, even across ethnic and racial lines. Most conflict was channeled, muted, and ritualized. Unwritten, unspoken consensus generally contained conflict. Occasional outbursts of violence were truly shocking, triggering calls for law and order and the bringing of the full weight of society against lawbreakers. Consequently, Illinois escaped the brutal fights that sometimes took hundreds of lives in Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The largest single loss of life in historic times on Illinois' soil occurred in the opening weeks of the War of 1812, when several dozen whites and a dozen or so Indians died in the Fort Dearborn Massacre. The worst strife among whites was an ugly incident that killed perhaps fifteen Irish laborers in 1838.

Interestingly, times of trouble and hardship often glued diverse settlers together. Strangers assisted each other in settling, pulled together during floods, erected blockhouses during threats, and harvested, slaughtered hogs, and built churches and schools together. Much cooperation sprang from challenges, and spontaneous, voluntary cooperation far outweighed conflict among settlers.

Salient events during the 1850s, such as the purchase of the last chunks of public land and formation of the last of Illinois' 102 counties, both assisted by massive railroad construction, marked frontier Illinois' end. Worlds described by Sarah Aiken, Charles Watts, and David Henshaw had attracted hundreds of thousands of settlers, most of whom found satisfaction in new homes. But those worlds faded. New, rough, and sharply different trans-Mississippi frontiers the frontiers of Hollywood, TV westerns, and novels replaced the Illinois frontier, and these frontiers entered into American consciousness and myth.

Curriculum Materials

by Vicki Harrison and Helen S. Slaton

Main Ideas:

The following lesson will explore why people migrated to frontier Illinois. "Three basic related factors influenced frontier life: nature, settlers and others on the frontier, and influential outsiders." Students will be asked to answer the following: Who came, why they came, when they came, how they came, where they came from, where they settled, and what different points of view settlers had of the frontier as a place with vast potential, both good and bad.

Connection with the Curriculum:

This material may be used in teaching Illinois history, U.S. history, and social studies classes. Using this information to develop research and writing skills will encourage critical thinking skills as well.

Teaching Level:

Grades 8-11

Materials for Each Student:

- The narrative portion of the article
- Handouts 1-5
- Reference books for Illinois
- Internet access

Objectives for Each Student:

- Identify migrants to frontier Illinois
- Recognize the influence(s) of frontier Illinois
- Examine the pattern of settlement
- Distinguish between perceived advantages and disadvantages of frontier life in Illinois
- Determine the impact of social, economic, and political effects on settlement
- Utilize critical-thinking skills

Opening the Lesson:

Open discussion on moving to a new school, new neighborhood, etc. What influences caused the move? What improvements to your life did you experience? What disadvantages were there? List the pros and cons into categories of social, economic or political reasons. Ask students to read the narrative portion of this article. Assign activities in the handouts.

Developing the Lesson:

- Discuss what the students have read.
- For Handout 1
 - Collect Illinois brochures or pamphlets promoting tourism.
 - Analyze and discuss those advertisements.
 - Complete Handout 1.
- For Handout 2, divide the class into groups of four or five. Have students complete the research needed for this activity.
- For Handout 3, read the passage from the History of Schuyler and Brown Counties, Illinois.
- Students should answer the questions individually for Handouts 4 and 5.

Concluding the Lesson:

- Collect the advertisements and display them in the room. Discuss which aspects were included or disregarded.
- Discuss patterns of settlement found on the map and what they show about social, economic, and political influences.
- On the blackboard, list answers for each of the questions. Discuss how and why they differ.
- Have students role play how girls' lives were different.

Extending the Lesson:

If possible, organize a field trip to New Salem State Historic Site, the Illinois State Museum, or a frontier museum or nature preserve. You may visit New Salem online at www.lincolnsnewsalem.com/. If possible, show the TV mini-series "The Awakening Land," which was produced at New Salem. Locate web pages and other online resources on frontier life, such as primary sources available in the Library of Congress Digital Collections, www.loc.gov/collections/.

Assessing the Lesson:

From the class discussion under Concluding the Lesson, create a rubric for evaluation on the Handout 1 advertisement. Have students choose and write a summary on one aspect (social, economic or political influences) for Handout 2. Create a museum exhibit or web page dealing with life on the Illinois frontier in 1840. Students select and read aloud a few letters. Analyze letters for accuracy, similarities and details.

Handout 1 — Settlement Advertising

PUBLIC SALE OF LOTS IN THE TOWN OF FLORENCE,

In the state of Illinois.

50 LOTS in the town of Florence, will be offered at public sale on Saturday the 20th of August next in the town of Graysville. Florence is delightfully situated in the county of White, on the Wabash river, about eighty miles above its mouth, and is the only site in the whole intervening distance where a good landing for Steamers can be found, either on the Illinois or Indiana side of that river.-From this place the river is navigable for steam boats to the point of its junction with the Ohio; at all times when they run on the last mentioned river: and it is the only place below the Grand Rapids which is not subject to be overflowed in high water, on which a town could be advantageously laid out. Bon pas creek which flat boats descend from forty miles above its mouth, unites its waters with those of the Wabash at this point. Its situation is believed to be as healthy as any on this river. A few miles north west of it is the wealthy and flourishing settlement of Albion. The country around it, abounds with the finest timber - is inhabited by an enterprising and industrious population, and interaporaed with farms, which in luxuriance of soil and high state of cultivation, will not lose by comparison with any west of the mountains. It commands the trade not only of White, but also of several adjacent counties, and from the nature of its position, it is destined to be the dividing point of trade between the northern and southern portions of the rich valley of the Wabash. To the merchant, the manufacturer, the mechanic and the spectlator, it presents inducements of no ordinary character, as it may safely be asserted, that no town on the Wabash river, has better porspects of arriving at greater commercial importance, and a few indeed as good. A plat of the aforesaid town is open to inspection at the house of Thomas Bishop in Vincennes, and at the office of O.B. Ficklin in Mount Carmel, Illinois. Terms of payment made known on the day of sale.

THOMAS BISHOP and others, Proprietors.
Vincennes, June 24, 1836 24-8t

Read the advertisement, which appeared in the *Western Sun and General Adviser* to attract settlers to the town of Florence in present-day White County. What "pull" factors (positive inducements) are present in the advertisement?

Using the information from this article and other research material, create an advertisement for a local 1840 newspaper designed to attract new settlers. The advertisement should include the natural surroundings, the culture, and outside interests of frontier Illinois. Students should also find an example of current advertisements, such as a tourism brochure or real estate listing.

Students will share self-written advertisements with the class. Compare and contrast the "pull" factors in each ad. Determine which offered the more attractive bargain. Which arrangement would someone like Sarah Aiken be inclined to choose? Compare and contrast these "old" ads with the modern ones. Which ones seem more attractive and why?

Handout 2 — County by County

On the provided map of the counties of Illinois, use any research material to locate and name each county and find its date of establishment. Also locate and label the following cities: Chicago, St. Louis (MO), Kaskakia, Vandalia, and Springfield.

Identify patterns of progression from earliest to latest by date and location.

Delineate groups by race, religion, ethnicity, or other prominent factors.

Trace the changes in population density between the 1830 census and the 1850 census.

You will find the following sources useful:

1. Douglas K. Meyer, "Foreign Immigrants in Illinois, 1850; *Illinois History Teacher* 5:1 (1998), 16-21. www.lib.niu.edu/1998/iht519815.html
2. Norman Moline and James Schebler, "Movement," *Illinois History Teacher* 1 (1994), 24-36. www.lib.niu.edu/1994/iht19424.html
3. Paul E. Stroble, "Ferdinand Ernst and the Germany Colony at Vandalia, Illinois," *Illinois History Teacher* 4:1 (1997), 2-5. www.lib.niu.edu/1997/iht419702.html



Handout 3 — County Seat Conundrum

Read the passage below. Then choose a side. Answer the following questions: Should the county seat be moved? Or, should the counties be separated? Write an essay defending your position.

BROWN COUNTY

Was originally a part of Schuyler county, but in February 1839, Brown was cut off from Schuyler, the trouble of reaching Rushville, the county seat, on account of the high waters of Crooked Creek, being the main cause of the division. There was much talk before the division of establishing the county seat at Ripley, which is situated on the bank of the south side of Crooked Creek, but it was thought best to divide the counties. The county is bounded on the north by Schuyler county; east by Cass and Morgan counties; south by Pike, and west by Adams county. On the east the Illinois River and Crooked Creek on the north are the boundary lines. In length the county is about eighteen miles, and about the same in breadth, and contains three hundred and twenty-four square miles.

Handout 4 — Points to Ponder

1. In a letter to his brother, R. Tinkham wrote, "The inhabitants of this country feel very rich in prospect and this is the best kind of riches." Interpret this statement. Then list what you think made settlers in frontier Illinois feel rich.

2. Not everything settlers found in frontier Illinois garnered a positive reaction. List some negative aspects of what people encountered and tell how the individuals might have dealt with them and/or how they influenced the settlers' lives.

3. Imagine you and your family live in one of the east coast states in the mid-1800's, but are considering moving to Illinois. Why would you consider this move? What would be the advantages to moving? What would be the disadvantages? Finally, if you had the final decision, would you and your family go through with the move?

Handout 5 — Letters from the Frontier

1. As a friend, write a response to one of Sarah Aiken's letters after she writes in the summer of 1836, "Nothing would induce me to return to New York to remain."

2. Imagine that you are describing to a family member who has remained back East the new experiences that you have had. Choose to describe a new animal such as the buffalo or prairie dog; a novel occurrence such as a tornado or flood; an indigenous plant such as prairie grass; or a geographical feature such as the Mississippi River or the surrounding bluffs.