



THE SANGAMO

FRONTIER

HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY
IN THE SHADOW OF LINCOLN



ROBERT MAZRIM





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history & archaeology

in the shadow of lincoln

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History and Archaeology in the Shadow of Lincoln

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t h e u n i v e r s i t y o f c h i c a g o p r e s s

Chicago and London

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for Frank Robert Mazrim

1908–1985

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Acknowledgments

One of the more interesting aspects of the discipline of archaeology is its ability to bring together people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. The studies and excavations described in this book were conducted over a fifteen-year period, and relied on the efforts and support of a number of individuals.

In the late 1970s, John Walthall, chief archaeologist at the Illinois Department of Transportation, introduced historic resources to the massive transportation-based archaeological surveys. Nearly thirty years later, that program continues to provide a constant stream of information regarding the frontier period in Illinois, much of which is present in the overviews found in this book. John has also provided me with a number of resources over the last fifteen years, and my perspectives on early nineteenth-century material culture owe much to our frequent collaborations.

Program, Thomas Emerson was responsible for our work at the Old Village locale at Peoria in 2001, but perhaps more important, he has also managed to build a research-based environment in the difficult world of cultural resource management. That environment has both directly and indirectly fostered much of my work regarding frontier Illinois, and Tom's program at the University of Illinois will no doubt inspire new authors and studies in the future.

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a c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

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central Illinois on numerous occasions, and has brought his experience,

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Introduction

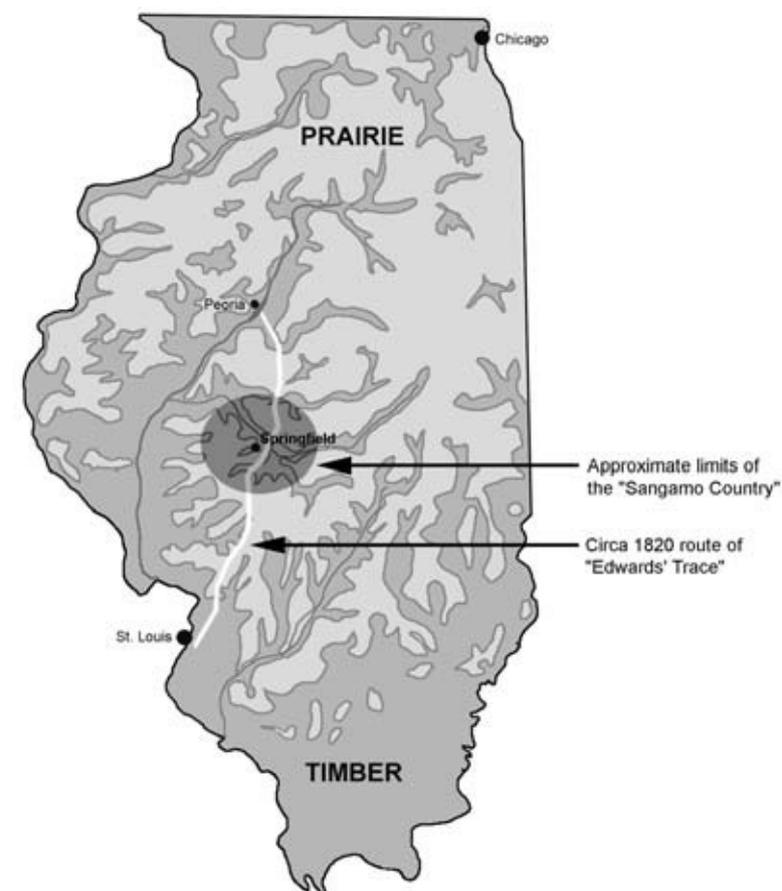
Journey to Sangamo

You have lived in the old house as long as you can remember. Each room has been permanently mapped in your head and is filled with more memory than furnishings. All corners are familiar, and each object has a story. With each passing year, you become less aware of the details of your surroundings, and the place becomes a comfortable blur.

Gradually, however, you find yourself looking at some of the rooms differently. You begin to spend more time in the basement — in areas that you had taken for granted for years. Not all at once, but over a few months, you begin to realize that there are rooms down there that you never knew existed; there are doors obscured from view by furniture so familiar that you looked right past them. One room, two, and possibly several more.

Inside these rooms are books. Some are written in languages that you recognize, and others appear foreign. Some water damage, some wormholes, and missing pages. You begin to read the stories. As strange as the texts appear, these stories are about places that you recognize as familiar and close by —up the road, or behind the place you used to ride your bike as a kid. There are even a few stories about the yard behind the house.

Those hidden rooms, those strange books, and those surprising and slightly surreal stories, are what archaeology has given to me. Archaeology is a science that relies on objectivity and a controlled examination of data. But once one acquires these things —kind of like the rules of



introduction

fig. 0.1

Location of the Sangamo Country frontier and route of Edwards' Trace.

grammar in a foreign tongue — one acquires a strange set of tools that can be used for much more than just composing a technical report. They can also open up new points of view and new ways of seeing.

This book is about the recollections and debris of a particular place at a particular time. The place is a roughly 1500-square-mile area in what we now call central Illinois (figure 0.1). The time was a roughly twenty-year period in the early nineteenth century. The Sangamo Country, named after a shallow river that cut through the prairies, underwent a great change as a young American culture poured itself into an aboriginal wilderness. The change was sudden, and for a short time this place

was the center of attention for many of those interested in living on the edge of the western American settlements.

The Sangamo Country was first colonized by American farmers and merchants between two wars — the War of 1812 and the Black Hawk War. In this region, both wars were essentially conflicts between colonial Euro-Americans (who had begun looking around Illinois during the Revolutionary War) and certain tribes of Native Americans, who had themselves only recently arrived. The landscape that both groups walked across, however, was littered by the debris of a century of French occupation, and by that of 100 centuries of many other Native American groups, most of whom we will never name. Twenty years before the Civil War, the area had been tamed. What was once a particular place with a particular history became connected and blended with other places and histories, to become simply another county in America's Midwest.

The archaeological excavations described in this book (as well as the histories that have been pieced together from the written record) help to better define a place and a time; they also allow us to see past the veneer of a familiar history and a modern landscape. When I began digging here —both in the ground and in the old papers —I did so to see through to a time when this place howled from the crash of the frontier. One of the goals of this book is to remind us that this place (like many places) was once much different. Not only different from

what lies before modern eyes, but also different from what we've come

to expect from our traditional notions of American history. Archaeology has a peculiar ability to enhance and also to challenge the written word, to uncover the little aspects of daily life long since passed. It also returns an authentic ghostliness to a landscape so flattened by the plow and by pavement.

Central Illinois Now, Sangamo Then

As you drive north out of St. Louis on Interstate Highway 55, the Gateway Arch towers overhead. The gracefully modern gesture set in front of the western sky memorializes the trans-Mississippi expansion of American settlement, which essentially began in St. Louis. Below, the chocolate-brown Mississippi River, swollen from the water dumped into its channel at the mouth of the Missouri River twelve miles to the north, flows toward New Orleans. Occasionally a barge or two rides the current southward, with containers full of corn, soybeans, or limestone gravel.

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Immediately across the river in Illinois looms a tangle of overpasses and exit ramps. Traffic is fast and congested. From the road, semi-trucks block the view of the traffic ahead, as well as the blighted, post-industrial landscape of East St. Louis located immediately below the elevated expressway.

The Illinois shoreline across from St. Louis forms the edge of an unusually large floodplain, stretching ten miles to the east. Topographically,

the landscape is like a hand print in the sand: the palm is the floodplain and the fingers are the various rivers and creeks that flow toward the Mississippi at the wrist. Beyond the tips of the fingers are the uplands. A few miles northeast, the remnants of the industrial landscape gradually give way to marshes that surround floodplain creeks that were long ago straightened, moved, or just filled in. Near the center of this modified landscape sits a massive, grass-covered hill on one side of the interstate. The great lump is a landfill, created by enormous quantities of garbage generated by thousands of households many miles away — millions of buried chicken bones, plastic wrappers, shampoo bottles. Beyond the landfill, there are more marshes and the traffic thins out a bit.

Within sight of the bluff line in the northeast is another large hill, on the opposite side of the road. Known as Monks Mound, this hill may also contain some incidental garbage, but garbage that is more than 700 years old. The largest prehistoric earthwork in North America, Monks Mound towers 100 feet above a massive archaeological site that was a thousand years ago a sacred city, populated by as many as 20,000 people. Now, gas stations and old residential neighborhoods have gouged the edges of the site. At its core, however, stands the mound, and a patch of manicured lawn that is now a state historical site.

As the highway reaches the edge of the floodplain, it rises up into the forested bluff line, continuing northeast across a rolling terrain, inscribed by small creek valleys and ravines. Twenty-five miles from the river, the view opens up, and the landscape flattens again. Gradually, architecture succumbs to cornfields. In August, the fields create a sea of green, com-

posed of a strangely perfect covering of corn or soybeans, each plant the same height and color. The crops are only occasionally interrupted by a few weeds or a fence line; it is hard to imagine who is going to use so much food. In November, the sealike plain is brown and barren, composed of naked, plowed soil, covered with the stubble of broken corn stalks. In the distance, tree lines mark the occasional creek valley. Along these small, shallow creeks are the thin forests of modern central Illinois, consisting primarily of young trees less than 100 years old.

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j o u r n e y t o s a n g a m o

Like much of the central Illinois uplands, this landscape is dotted with the shaded yards of two-story frame farmhouses. Usually painted white and about seventy-five to one hundred years old, some of the dwellings appear worn out or antique remnants of another time that has become history. For the world described in the following pages, however, such houses would be fancy, modern, and novel signs of the future. If you were leaving St. Louis in 1819, the westward expansion that would eventually be memorialized by the arch was still in its infancy. The entire town fit within the shadow that would be cast by the arch 150 years later. Activity west of town was still largely based on the fur trade. St. Louis essentially marked the western edge of civilization. If you did not live there, you had probably visited town to buy something, as the muddy riverbank was dotted with wooden warehouses and retail stores. The town was busy with commerce conducted both in English and French.

There was no bridge across the water. Instead, the river was crossed

by several flat, poorly made wooden ferries. Traveling on horseback, both you and your horse were charged for the ride. By the time you reached the Illinois shore, the sounds of the busy town were barely audible.

As you left the beach, it was not difficult to find your way east — there were several well-worn trails that meandered around the shallow, back-water lakes and through the tall grasses of the floodplain. The plain on the east side of the river was known as the American Bottom, a name coined by the French when the Spanish controlled the west side of the river, and the Americans the east.

On your ride across the floodplain, you would soon encounter a great mound that had been abandoned for 500 years. It was tree-covered, but clearly a relic of an ancient time. A group of Trappist monks had settled nearby ten years earlier, resulting in the unusual name Monk's Mound. Nearby, lay fragments of stone tools and large pieces of clay pottery in the freshly plowed soil. You would have recognized them as old, but you would have had no idea just how old they really were.

Approaching the forested bluffs, you might have noticed that the number of trails had diminished, but the one that you followed was well worn and easy to follow. You might remember the ferry operator referring to the route as Edwards' Trace — a reference to territorial governor Ninian Edwards. As you crossed out beyond the edge of the bluff and

followed the trail as it hugged a timberline, you would have begun to feel

the creeping sensation of leaving everything behind.

The uplands were known for their impressive expanses of prairie. If you were originally from Kentucky or Pennsylvania, you would have never seen anything like this. Oceans of head-high grasses, highlighted with patches of tiny, unusual flowers, blowing and swaying in the slightest breeze. Your revelry in the beauty of this scene would soon be tempered by the painful bite of several green-headed flies and by the realization that if you lost sight of the trail or the tree line on your left, you would be lost for days. The bright afternoon sun would soon become unwelcome.

In an hour or so, the trace would have dipped from the uplands down into a forested creek valley, where you would soon be greeted by a dark canopy of ancient oaks, walnuts, and hickories. The forest floor was free of brush and easy to navigate. A mile or so into the forest flowed a small creek—waist deep and fifteen or twenty feet wide — that had been visited for millennia. Down on your knees, you and your horse would drink.

Today, and about an hour and a half from St. Louis near mile marker eighty-five lies the outskirts the Springfield metropolitan area. The city of Springfield is the capital of Illinois, with a population of about 115,000. Downtown are the many state government offices and an imposing capitol building constructed just after the Civil War. Five blocks to the northeast stands an earlier, smaller capitol building, crafted of local limestone long before the war.

Tourists frequently mill about that old capitol, and even more visitors stream in and out of an old clapboarded house, surrounded by a suspiciously well-swept urban neighborhood. Most of the million or so people who visit the Springfield community each year do so for one reason: to hear stories and see places associated with a single individual who moved to the area about thirty years before the Civil War. The former home of a martyred president, the Springfield area is known as the Land of Lincoln. His old house has become a national park, and his name has become iconic.

Just north of town, out past the airport, flows a shallow, slow-moving river (figure 0.2). The Sangamon River is one of the larger tributaries of the Illinois River, stretching seventy miles east into the once prairie-covered uplands of central Illinois. Today, the river drains several thousand square miles of corn and soybean fields. That water empties into

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journey to sangamo

fig. 0.2

The Sangamon River.

the Illinois River, then Mississippi River, and finally ends up in the Gulf

of Mexico at New Orleans. On a steep bluff crest overlooking the Sangamon, and about fifteen miles northwest of Springfield, is New Salem, a place designed to look like the past. Its cluster of log houses are replicas, built on top of an archaeological site that was also once home to the former president. Constructed before Lincoln's clapboarded house and the stone capitol building in Springfield, New Salem's log houses, log stores, and log mills were abandoned before the birth of our great-great-grandparents. Rebuilt in the 1930s, the replica log village serves as a reminder.

Today, it is almost impossible to look beyond the highways, mown lawns, strip malls, and the many miles of fields broken by machines each spring to understand that this place was once so remote. Nearly 200 years ago, this region underwent an enormous change, from an ancient landscape ever so slightly altered by the ebb and flow of ten thousand years of aboriginal culture, to the beginnings of a landscape completely rearranged by the offspring of ideas born in Europe 500 years earlier. We use the word *frontier* to describe this transition, but that all-too-common word

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is no longer able to convey the distant, strange complexity of the beginnings of us here. What was once the Sangamo — an embryo of the things we understand as our life in Illinois today — is lost.

Just three years after the first American farmer built a little house made of logs (in lands that he really had no right to occupy) the change

was underway and unstoppable. Dozens of similar little houses were perched just inside the timber, surrounded by new clearings, stumps, and wood piles. Nearly two centuries later, all has been straightened, bridged, or plowed under. All but the tiniest, darkest corners have been long since illuminated. Like most places, the landscape has been tamed, and it is increasingly difficult to see the many previous lives of this place. Now and then, however, something punctures this veneer, reminding us of the antiquity of some things, and the extinction of others. Some bits and pieces — their garbage and our artifacts — become ambassadors. The descendants of European colonists who became “Americans” with the coming of the Revolutionary War arrived in what we call Illinois over 200 years ago. They found ancient forests and vast prairies that had been home to many others before them. The Americans brought with them old ways, new ideas, and thousands of objects made in far away cities. Most of this book will be concerned with the buried remnants of this complex luggage. Ideas, traditions, and provisions were used to craft new homes, which for a brief time were untethered from both their ancient roots and their new democratic inspirations. By their very setting, in the forested margins of an ancient prairie about to change forever, these were remarkable things.

In large part, the structure of this book mimics the way that a historical archaeologist considers and assembles information when first approaching an archaeological site in Illinois. It is a journey that often starts in a library, leads to a hole in the ground, and ends in a laboratory. In part 1, we begin with an introduction to the arrival of the Americans in Illinois,

an arrival that was announced by the sounding of a bell along the Mississippi River in the summer of 1778. That bell also signaled the start of the American frontier period in this region.

A century later, residents of Illinois began actively digging the ground in order to understand those who had lived here before them, thus introducing archaeological practice to the area. The earliest of these efforts centered on the excavation of ancient remains associated with prehistoric Native American inhabitants of Illinois. Not long after the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Illinoisans of Euro-

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pean descent became interested in the archaeological record of their own ancestors. Residents of central Illinois especially wished to better understand and portray the frontier lives of Abraham Lincoln and his neighbors.

The modern process of archaeology often begins with a wide-angle view of both the archival history of a region and an overview of what is already known of its archaeological record, which here is provided in part 2. We begin with the cultures that occupied the landscape before the summer of 1778, including a century of French occupation and over 10,000 years of Native American occupation. We then move on to look at the first Euro-American inhabitants of the region and the ways that they settled the landscape they would later call the state of Illinois.

Part 3 introduces the background information — archival and archaeological— that historic archaeologists draw upon to interpret the re-

mains of a particular site. This section of the book introduces readers to

frontier-era homes and farms, and to the types of goods used by families of this period.

With background information in hand, we are able to focus more tightly, both regionally and chronologically. In part 4, our slow zoom descends into a more detailed history of early nineteenth-century Sangamo Country. Part 5 features tours of the archaeological sites themselves, and represents the “discovery” part of the process. These places, all within the limits of the Sangamo Country and all abandoned long before the Civil War, include homes, stores, taverns, and a pottery shop. Each of these sites was also part of the frontier community that Abraham Lincoln found when he moved to the region in the summer of 1831. In fact, he visited several of them. His presence, or the shadow that he later cast, often preserved their memory, ensured their survival, and prompted the visits of archaeologists nearly two centuries later.

PART ONE

Americans, Frontiers, and Archaeology

chapter one

The Making of an American Frontier

They say it began with the ringing of a bell, down by the Mississippi River in a little town whose residents spoke French. It was early July, and it was probably hot. The river may have been a bit low, and the wheat would have filled the fields, waiting for rain. In the town of Kaskaskia, there were several hundred villagers whose parents and grandparents had built the little town around a mission chapel seventy-five years earlier. The mission had grown into a large, weather-worn church, inside which hung a big bell cast in France decades earlier. On the evening of July 4, 1778, it was ringing again. The Americans had arrived.

In the late winter of 1778, two years into the American Revolution, Lieutenant Colonel George Rogers Clark (under the guidance of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson) began planning an attack on a British post in the far western Illinois Country. It was Clark's brother William who, with Meriwether Lewis, would ascend the Missouri River twenty-six years later, ultimately making the West that was Illinois in 1778 into the Midwest that it is today. From Virginia, Clark raised a company of about 175 men who were to advance toward the Illinois Country, each with the promise of a land grant of 300 acres in the far western region, upon their success of capturing the British post at the old French town of Kaskaskia.

The village of Kaskaskia was already a historic one by the time of the

eastern seaboard knew nothing about it. The French founded Kaskaskia

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chapter one

in 1703 as a mission and fur trading post. At that time, Illinois was still

considered part of Canada by the French government. The village had

grown quickly into a stable colonial community, in many ways resem-

bling villages in France built centuries earlier. The French speaking res-

idents of the village encountered by Clark were second and third gener-

ation residents of Illinois. Most were descendants of French Canadian

fur traders, many of whom had married Native American women.

Ten years prior to Clark's arrival, the population of the village had

grown to about 900 (figure 1.1). In addition to those who farmed and

traded furs, there were merchants, carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, tai-

lors, bakers, physicians, and many slaves living and working in a village

that consisted of three principal east-west streets, and four or five small

side streets. At the center of the village stood a large church, built about

twenty-five years earlier, on the site of a least two others. In its bell tower

hung a bell that had been cast in La Rochelle, France in 1741. The big

church with its arched ceiling, white marble altar, carved reliquaries,

and large painting of the Immaculate Conception was the only structure

of its kind for hundreds of miles. It was also a little slice of old Europe,

surrounded by a wilderness none of us can know today.

In the spring of 1778, Clark and his men descended the Ohio River

from Fort Pitt (modern Pittsburgh) until they reached the Illinois shore

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