



MCHS News

September 2014

Opening Doors to Madison County History

Vol. 12 No. 5

715 N Main Street
Edwardsville, IL
62025

Hours:
Wed-Fri 9 am - 4 pm
Sunday 1 pm - 4 pm
Group Tours Available

Free Admission

Museum Phone:
618-656-7562

Library Phone:
618-656-7569

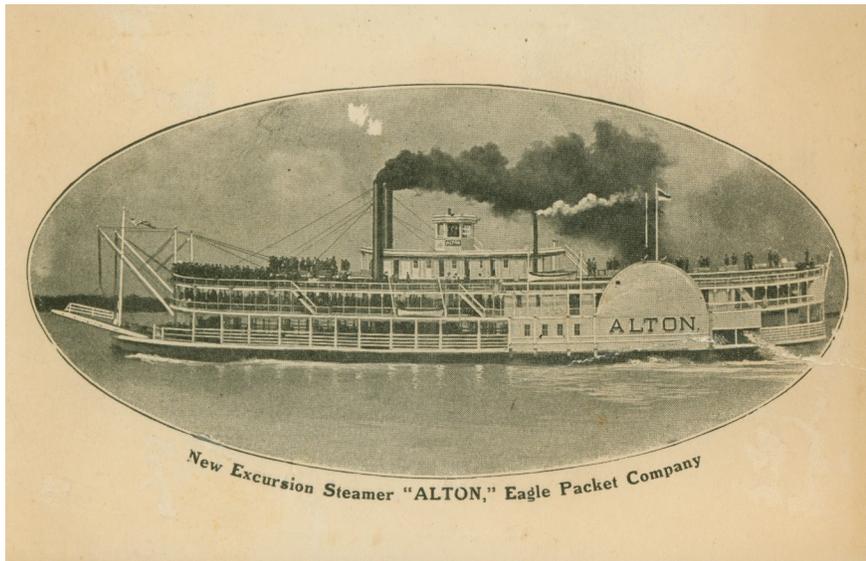
Web Address:
madcohistory.org

E-mail:
info@madcohistory.org

About Us:
The MCHS museum complex, consisting of a modern archival library, a museum in the 1836 Weir House and the Helms Collection Center, is owned by the nonprofit Madison County Historical Society and operated jointly with Madison County.

The Madison County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

ALTON AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER



By Donald J. Huber

Alton, Illinois, like many river cities, is located at a spot where one man saw his opportunity to prosper on the American frontier. Rufus Easton chose the future location of Alton in 1818 because he intended to establish a ferry crossing on the Mississippi at the north

Continued on page 6

FALL CALENDAR

Exhibit

November - January

VETERANS' VOICES

Madison County Historical Museum

Continuing Exhibit

OLD, NEW, BORROWED AND BLUE:

Wedding Traditions and Customs

Madison County Historical Museum

Program

Sunday, September 14, 2 pm

VETS AND FEDS IN THE FAMILY TREE

Madison County Archival Library

Events

Sunday, November 2

2014 DINING IN HISTORY EVENT

National Great Rivers Museum

VETERANS' VOICES

November 9 and 16

Historical Museum and Archival Library

VETS & FEDS IN THE FAMILY TREE

Do you have a family member who served in the United States military or as a civil servant for the federal government? You may be able to request his/her individual personnel record from the National Archives and Records Administration in St. Louis.

Many of the Army and Air Force records at the NARA depository in St. Louis were damaged or destroyed in a fire on the 6th floor of the depository in 1973. Restoration of these materials continues to this day and records from other branches of service were not damaged in the fire.

Join us on Sunday, September 14 at 2 pm at the Archival Library as NARA archivists Theresa Fitzgerald and Ashley Mattingly explain which records are available, what can be found within personnel records and how to request them.

This program is free and open to the public.

ABOUT US

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Archival Research Asst.
Jenn Walta
Curator

VOLUNTEERS

There are abundant and varied opportunities for volunteers at either the museum or the archival library. Please call if interested.

MEMBERSHIPS

Several membership levels are available to those interested in supporting the work of preserving Madison County history through an MCHS membership. Memberships run on the calendar year, Jan 1-Dec 31. Applications are available on our web site, at the MCHS Museum or at the Archival Library.

PUBLICATIONS

MCHS NEWS

6 issues annually
Cindy Reinhardt, Editor

WEB SITE

madcohistory.org

ARCHIVAL LIBRARY SPOTLIGHT

By Mary Westerhold, Archival Research Manager

Have you ever wondered what our ancestors did when they were “down on their luck”? What happened to mothers with small children when their husbands died leaving them with no income and no way to earn one? And where did the elderly go when they could no longer care for themselves and they had no one to care for them? Even workers who lived alone and were injured in the coal mines or on the railroad and needed assistance were without anyone to care for them. Many of these people would be found at the County Poor Farm.

The first mention of care for the poor of Madison County is during the first court session held in the county on April 6, 1813,

when six men were appointed as “overseers of the poor in Madison County.” From that time until the first permanent buildings were built on the property at South Main Street in Edwardsville, the care of the poor was in the hands of individuals who were then reimbursed for their expenses from the coffers of the county.

By the early 1860s, the first buildings were completed on the Poor Farm property. The property was a working farm and residents

were expected to work on the farm if their physical condition permitted it. As time went on, additional buildings were added until the complex included the superintendent’s residence, the residents building, an insane

Continued on page 4



Postcard view of the Madison County Poor Farm

MUSEUM SPOTLIGHT

By Jenn Walta, Curator

Recently an animated film depicted a group of men (and one small boy and reindeer) harvesting ice over a body of water. The characters in Disney’s *Frozen* sang of the dangers and wonders of ice while working in the frigid environment. While I am unsure if the men who harvested ice on the Mississippi sang while they worked, ice harvesting on rivers, ponds, and lakes, was a necessity in a time prior to the commonality of electric and gas refrigeration.

In cooler climates, it was considered relatively safe to store foods in deep wells, frigid streams, or cold cellars for short periods of time. Warmer areas, however, depended on the availability of ice for food storage.

The men harvesting the ice spent long hours working in



temperatures well below freezing to gather “frozen gold.” After identifying areas where the ice was at least 12 inches thick, they used shovels to clear snow and debris from the ice “fields.”

The areas were then measured and marked into squares. Workers employed a horse-drawn marker (also referred to as a horse-drawn ice plow) to complete the full line which was later grooved and sawed.

The first rows of blocks were sawn out by hand using an ice saw like the one in the museum’s collection to make a channel. Workers then used axes, chisels, and pry bars to split blocks of ice away from the rest of the ice field. The individual blocks were called “cakes.”

The blocks were “busted” off and flowed down the channel. Those chunks of ice eventually made their way to an ice house (sometimes via an ice elevator) where they were stored until needed.

The large ice saw shown here was owned and used on the Mississippi River by the late William Eberhardt (1891-1965) of Wood River. It was a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Suessen in 1974.

RECENT NEWS

Veterans' Voices

A new program aimed at collecting the stories and photographs of Madison County veterans, including those who have recently served, will begin in November. The launch of the program will be Sunday, November 9 and Sunday, November 16, when veterans or current members of the military are invited to come tell their stories.

The program offers a wonderful opportunity for families to collect these stories for their personal records while also archiving the information with MCHS for future generations. MCHS will prepare packets to guide veterans through the process of documenting their service. These packets will be available beginning November 2. If you are willing to also sit down for an oral history interview, please call the Archival Library to set up an appointment with a volunteer.

The museum is also interested in obtaining artifacts reflecting military service, along with the personal stories of these men and women who have served our country. Photographs of them in uniform or other documentation can be scanned by members of the Archival Library staff when family members do not wish to donate original images.

MCHS is also seeking the stories of women who served on the home front, our local "Rosie the Riveters" or those who worked with the American

Red Cross, an important service in earlier conflicts when bandages were not mass produced.

The Madison County History Museum will have an exhibit honoring the service of our Madison County military men and women beginning in November. In conjunction with that exhibit, MCHS News will focus on veterans for the November issue. Look for additional information in local newspapers, on our web site or on our Facebook page beginning in late October.

♦♦♦

MCHS Exhibit Update

The Wedding exhibit in the museum will continue through the end of the year. If you saw the exhibit in early June, you may want to make a return trip as additional materials were added to the display.

The Kane exhibit ended in mid-August. Look for a new exhibit on Madison County veterans in the coming months.

♦♦♦

ISHS in Madison County

On Saturday, August 16, the Illinois State Historical Society held their Annual Awards Reception in the LeClaire Room at the Historic N. O. Nelson Campus of Lewis and Clark Community College in Edwardsville.

MCHS Director Suzanne Dietrich was instrumental in bringing the event to our area. The awards reception had not previously been held in Madison County.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

New and Renewing Memberships

July through August 2014

Thank You for Your Support!

Alton, IL

Charlotte Johnson

Edwardsville, IL

Irma August

Robert Mallory

Stoneham, MA

Charles Dietrich

Bonus Time for New Members!

This is the time of year when new members can receive a bonus of up to four extra months with their MCHS membership. For those who join in the Fall, membership privileges extend through December 2015.

If you know of someone with an interest in local history who might be interested in joining the Madison County Historical Society, consider providing them with a gift membership, or ask us to send them an introductory letter regarding the Society's work.

Membership in MCHS is a supportive membership. Members are invited to attend programs and events they find interesting, but there are no required membership meetings.

Wondering when it's time to renew your membership in MCHS? We make it easy. All member dues are renewable on the first of January.

MARY'S

RESEARCH TIP

I am always looking for a new way to get past a brick wall in research I am doing. That's why I am constantly looking for educational opportunities to help me. Local genealogy societies often offer one day conferences with a nationally known keynote speaker. I attended one recently and several times during the day I found myself thinking "I never thought of that!" and jotting a quick note to remember a useful tip.

I seldom miss a national conference if it is held in the area, even if I can only attend one day of a three or four day conference. I also try to attend several of the monthly meetings of local genealogy societies even though my ancestors were not from the area where I live.

In addition, there are many ways to learn from your home. Check out the web sites of local, state, and national genealogical societies along with those of nationally known speakers. Frequently the sites offer links to free blogs on specific topics. Don't forget to check out your public library for books and classes they might offer.

If you have hit a brick wall in your research or just can't quite find that elusive ancestor, change your research approach to one of learning instead of searching. The answer to your problem is out there, and someone is willing to share it.

DINING IN HISTORY 2014

by Cindy Reinhardt

At last year's Dining in History event, MCHS took guests to the historic 1909 Wildey Theatre in Edwardsville. For 2014, we're hosting a "night at the museum" as they say in the movies, or, to be more accurate, an "evening" at the museum.

We invite you to join us on Sunday, November 2, for our 2nd annual "Dining in History" event as we dine in the National Great Rivers Museum beside the Melvin Price Locks and Dam on the Mississippi River in Alton. Guests can take a tour of the facility, browse the museum, enjoy a meal of comfort food (as would have been typical along the river), and then sit back to enjoy a special program on river history. The historical part of "Dining in History" this year is, of course, the mighty Mississippi River which has played a major role in the development of this region for hundreds of years.

If you have lived in Madison County for any length of time, even if not directly on the river, it has likely had an impact on your life. I wasn't born in Madison County, but I grew up in a river town, Savanna, a small town in northwestern Illinois. The river was part of our family

history as my great grandfather, William Ritchie, was for many decades a lamp lighter on the river, rowing north a few miles one day to fill the lamps on the channel markers, then south the next day to do the same. The family had their own dock, Ritchie's Landing, where steamboats would pull over to get wood for the boilers.

Ritchie's Landing was long gone by the time I came along, the ground purchased by the government as part of the Savanna Army Depot. But we remained connected with the river because my grandparents had a home on the river for many years. We often swam in the Mississippi, and the family enjoyed outings on sand bars, boating, and fishing, pastimes still enjoyed on the river today.

We also marveled at the power of the Mississippi River in flood stage when river traffic came to a halt and the water threatened our town whose Main Street paralleled the river. So although I didn't move to Madison County until 1975, my experiences along the river were very similar to proud "river rats" everywhere.

Please join us for an evening along the Mississippi River as we celebrate the history and grandeur of Madison County's most prominent landmark.

MADISON COUNTY POOR FARM (CONT FROM PAGE 2)

department, a blind department, a hospital, a surgery, a bake house, a laundry, and various outbuildings.

While all of the buildings are gone, some of the records remain. At the Archival Library, we have the known existing records of the Madison County Poor Farm beginning in 1880 until the last admission date of May 26, 1958.

Several volunteers and staff members have been working to compile an index of these records so they are useful to family history researchers. The records were maintained by date. Several books exist covering various years. Since there is no overall index, finding a name requires going through every page in the book.

The index will include the name, source and page number, date of birth or age, date admitted, date of death or discharge, and place of burial. Sometimes there are additional comments and when that existed in the books, we merely note "See Comments."

The amount of information varies considerably, with the earliest records containing the least information while the later records may include information on the resident, their parents, children, and siblings. While not every record will provide the missing information a family historian may be seeking, hopefully it will help locate someone who may have been lost from the records.



DINING IN *History*
Opening Doors to Madison County History

Sunday, Nov 2

**National Great
Rivers Museum**

Melvin Price Lock & Dam

#1 Lock and Dam Way
East Alton, Illinois

Dining in History
is an event sponsored
annually by MCHS
featuring historic
venues all over
Madison County.



**Madison County
Historical Society**

For more information
madcohistory.org
618-656-7569 (Wed - Fri 9-4)
618-656-1073 (After hours)

Last date for reservations
Wednesday, October 29, 2014

Tickets
\$30 Members
\$35 Non-Members



Program

Guided Tours 4 pm - 6 pm
Melvin Price Lock and Dam

Cocktails 5:30 pm - 6 pm

Evening Meal 6 pm
Served in the National Great
Rivers Museum Gallery
Catered by
Mac's Time Out Restaurant

Program 7 pm
Mississippi River History

EARLY RIVER HISTORY

The Mississippi was a major thoroughfare for for thousands of years before Europeans entered the Americas. Native Americans named it the “Father of Waters” and like all rivers, big and small, it was the primary highway of its day. It also defined boundaries between often hostile nations as well as being a major source of food.

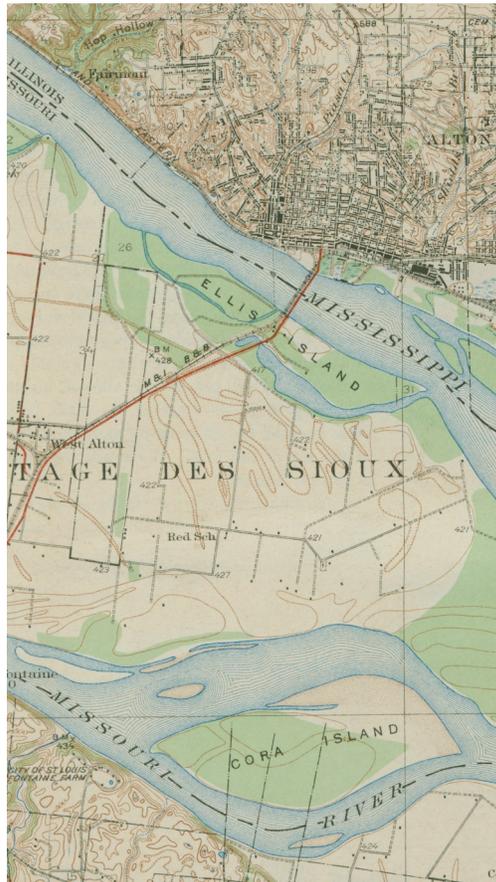
The natives also knew the intricacies of the ever changing river and knew that the river was very shallow in some spots and thus easy to cross. The site of present day Portage des Sioux was one such spot and Native American guides leading early Americans westward regularly steered the settlers across the river at that ford. The name comes from the Sioux nation’s understanding that when descending the Mississippi River to the Missouri River much time could be saved by carrying their canoes across the flatland between the two rivers. Portage de Sioux was the location chosen in 1815, when William Clark, August Choteau and Ninian Edwards negotiated a Peace Treaty between the United States and the Indians who had fought with the British in the War of 1812.

ALTON

end of the American Bottoms. Travelers would continue across the peninsula between the Mississippi River and the Missouri River, now called Missouri Point, and ride Halls Ferry across the Missouri River.

Easton competed with George Smeltzer, who operated a ferry between Hop Hollow, present day Godfrey, Illinois, and Brick House Slough, near West Alton, Missouri. (Smeltzer is said to have buried his fortune in Hop Hollow, a legend that survives to this day.)

For the next fifty years the steamboat era would define Alton’s place as a significant port and commercial cen-



This 1934 U. S. Geological Survey Map shows the City of Alton and surrounding areas. Note Hop Hollow at the upper left corner in Illinois and the Missouri River as it nears the confluence of the two rivers. Across the river from Alton is Ellis Island, previously known as Sunflower Island or Smallpox Island. Soon after this map was made, the lock and dam was constructed, raising the level of the river and flooding the island.



The Altonian ferry circa 1894. (Photo courtesy of Don Huber)

ter on America’s Western frontier. Although some chose the three-month journey from New Orleans to St. Louis, for most settlers the primary mode of transport toward the western frontier was still by horseback or on foot which required a method of crossing the Mississippi River. Ferry operators reaped large profits from the tolls they extracted and naturally enjoyed a monopoly on river crossing until the Eads Bridge was built in 1873.

Rufus Easton platted Alton, named after his son, Alton Easton, in 1818 around a small creek called Fountain Creek or Little Piasa Creek. His ferry was to be located near the mouth of the creek which was about a mile above the mouth of the Missouri River. One year prior, on August 2, 1817, the first steam powered boat, *the Zebulon Pike*, arrived in St. Louis from New Orleans. Although the boat was poorly powered and battled the strong current, it signaled the beginning of booming population and commercial growth along the river. Alton was now right on the main commercial byway to the frontier and one mile above the mouth of the Missouri River and its vast watershed. As the volume of river traffic grew, so did Alton.

Alton’s growth and settlement was stunted at the beginning by something Madison County is now famous for nationwide: litigation. Easton was sued by Nathaniel Pope and Ninian Edwards

AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

who claimed he could not show clear title to the land. Charles Hunter had purchased acreage east of Easton's platted town where Hunterstown was developed while the court cases stagnated. A settlement was finally arranged in 1828 and Alton's population began to grow rapidly. The growth was spurred by the wave of homesteaders moving west but also by the coming of more powerful steamboats, such as the *Maid of New Orleans* and the *Cincinnati*, which could make the upriver trip from New Orleans in 12 days instead of three months. The steamboats brought tons of manufactured goods to the area but also brought people, immigrants entering the United States from the Port of New Orleans or now traveling upriver from the mouth of the Ohio.

German immigration exploded in Alton and St. Louis in the late 1830s and through the 1840s, providing labor for newly established businesses such as William Manning's Steam Flour Mill, established in Alton in 1831 and rapidly followed by two other flour mills.

Commerce in Alton quickly adapted to the river trade. Within a three-square block of Alton near the river, there were soon five hardware stores and three grocery wholesalers, many who concentrated their sales to the steamboat trade.

The 1840s brought two great changes to the face of transportation in



River stages for several Alton floods are painted on the corner of Johnston Hardware, corner of State and West Broadway in Alton. The Flood of 1844 is the highest mark, followed by 1848, 1943, 1944 and 1951, the year the photo was taken. Since then there have been several floods worse than in 1844, most notably in 1993. (Photo courtesy of Don Huber)

Alton. The first was the Flood of 1844. The river had flooded before at Alton but not since the New Madrid Earthquake of 1811 had nature wrought such havoc on the area. The Missouri and Mississippi Rivers became one across the Missouri Point and steamboats no longer followed the river channel, they simply headed in a straight line for St. Louis. Businesses in Alton along the river closed, some lost everything to the raging water. When the water receded the brute force of nature was revealed as the mouth of the Missouri River had moved downstream over two miles.



In 1902 Frederick Oakes Sylvester, moved from St. Louis to Elsah, Illinois, where his work turned primarily to scenes like the one above showing the Mississippi and the river bluffs near Elsah. Painted in 1911-12, the central scene of the river is flanked by side panels of sycamore trees that form one continuous scene. This painting can be seen in the Genealogy and Local History Room of the Hayner Public Library in Alton.

FREDERICK OAKES SYLVESTER

The Mississippi has been the subject of many authors and artists from Mark Twain to today's photographers. One of the truly great painters and poets inspired by the Mississippi River was Frederick Oakes Sylvester.

Sylvester was born in Massachusetts in 1869 and studied at the Massachusetts Normal Art School. He taught in Massachusetts and later in New Orleans before moving to St. Louis in 1883. While in St. Louis he taught at St. Louis Central High School and later at The Principia School before moving to Elsah, a small river town located just below Grafton.

Sylvester had a somewhat Impressionistic view of the river and its environs and painted prolifically, usually with the river as his theme. He once said the *Spread Eagle*, one of Eagle Packet Company's steamboats, was considered "just a boat which goes to Alton and back again... to me it is a body of light and shadows and color."

Sylvester was also an accomplished poet, best known for "The Great River" which was published in 1911 and

Continued on page 12

ALTON



Ice harvesting on Mississippi River near Alton. (Courtesy of Don Huber)

The second event that would keep Alton at the forefront of transportation on the Eastern side of the river was the construction of the Alton and Sangamon Railroad that began in 1848. Benjamin Godfrey and Simeon Ryder raised close to \$200,000 by subscription for the construction that was to take the line to Springfield by 1852. The line eventually extended to Chicago but for the next few decades, Alton was the southern terminus of the rail line and the primary connection from Chicago to St. Louis went through Alton. The Alton - St. Louis Packet company was founded to transfer freight and passengers from Alton to St. Louis. Coal, discovered north of Alton in 1840, soon displaced cord wood as the primary fuel for local steamboats. The Golden Age of Steamboats had begun.

The direct impact on Alton's economy was obvious. Trade and population increased, and insurance and salvage operations became important businesses in Alton. The life span of a riverboat was extremely limited, due to snags (sunken trees in the river), shifting river sandbars, fires and

boiler explosions. The insurance business grew with the surge in steamboat traffic. One area of Alton became known as "Insuranceville" because of the large number of companies in a small area of Middletown.

The Civil War brought a period of prosperity to Alton that is

typical in times of war. The position of the rail terminating in Alton meant soldiers heading South to fight were routed through Alton by the thousands, as were the supplies and support materials that were necessary to fight a war. The river returned to its role as a dividing line between warring nations once again. Although Missouri never officially seceded from the Union, its status as a slave state under martial law meant constant vigilance against incursion across the river. The fact that several of the farms on the Missouri Point, just across the river from Alton, included slaves among their workers only heightened the anxiety, although there were no such incidents.

Following the war, river trade dominated until the completion of the Eads Bridge at St. Louis. Despite a deal brokered by a legislator from Springfield that secured the state capitol for Springfield instead of Alton, which



One incarnation of the Spreading Eagle, a boat that was destroyed several times over the years but replaced with another of the same name. Photo is circa 1894. (Courtesy of Don Huber)

AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

was to become the railhead in Southern Illinois, Mr. Eads' bridge moved that rail head to Illinois Town. Alton's geography was not yet a problem, but that day would come.

Alton's river business continued to flourish throughout the late 19th century and Alton did as well. Several manufacturing plants opened, including Illinois Glass in 1873. Illinois Glass meant employment for thousands of German and Irish immigrants. The railroads expanded to serve these plants and move their products but some areas depended solely on the steamboats for their trade. Calhoun County is one of only three counties in Illinois never to have a rail line. As the orchards and farms of that county became more and more productive, steamboats hauled ninety percent of their goods to market.

Alton had a number of boat companies that thrived during this time period, the Eagle Packet Company probably the largest. Some boat captains emerged as leaders in the community. Captain W.P. LaMothe was a well-known pilot, as were Captain John A. Bruner and Captain Joseph Brown. Captain LaMothe settled across the river from Alton and had a town named for him. Ironically, the town, LaMothe, Missouri, later became West Alton, Missouri, at the request of the Burlington Railroad. Captain Joseph Brown became mayor of Alton and later, mayor of St. Louis.

As alternate forms of transportation developed in the 20th century river traffic diminished. Regular runs between Alton and St. Louis



Construction of the first lock and dam at Alton in 1935. (Courtesy of Don Huber)

and upriver to Grafton, Elsah and Chautauqua continued until 1918. Great changes in the river began to occur in the 1930s when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began their work on inland waters. The Locks and Dam at Alton were begun in 1933 and completed a few years later. Alton's riverfront was changed dramatically. Alton residents rode the Illinois Terminal Interurban Line south to St. Louis after 1906.

After the Corps of Engineers began maintaining the nine foot channel on the Upper Mississippi River in 1936, heavy transportation shifted back to the river. Grain, coal, scrap metal and petroleum products relied heavily on river transportation to cut costs. (One barge holds the equivalent of 15 train cars or 60 trucks.) All of these industries save coal had operations in the Alton area. Large quantities of limestone products were also shipped from Alton.

Recreation on the river increased after the construction of Lock and Dam 26. The resulting pool became known as Alton Lake, a broad, flat haven for sailors and water skiers in the summer and duck hunters in the winter.

Most readers have been alive for the rest of this narrative. Alton began to lose population in the 1960s when subdivisions became the rage and factories began to move south and west. One factory or refinery seemed to close every few years until our largest employers became a gambling boat and the school system. The interstate highways passed by in the 1970s and 80s when our location on the bluffs and near the river put us a little off the convenient path.

Alton's newest growth industry is tourism. The city's waterfront sports a new marina and entertainment amphitheater.

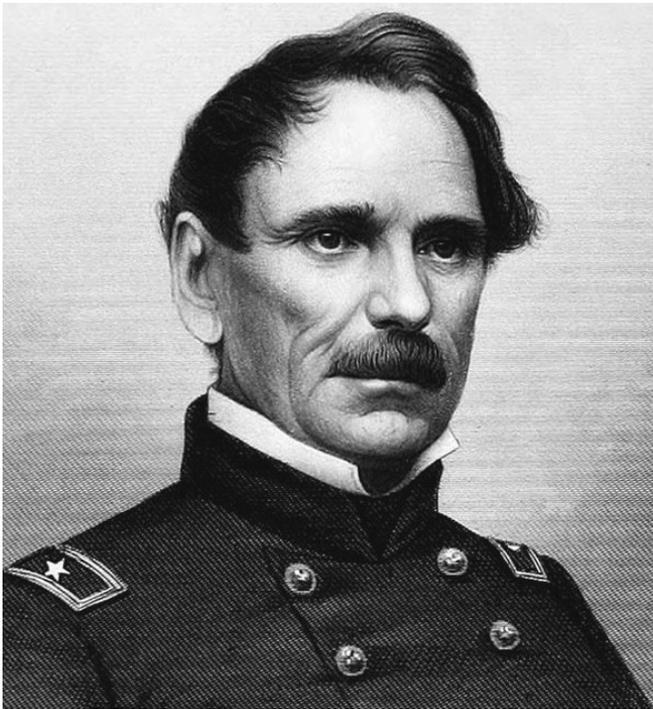
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SUNFLOWER ISLAND AKA SMALLPOX ISLAND

By Donald J. Huber

This island, located about 90 feet off the Missouri shore, was called by various names prior to the Civil War. At the time of the Lincoln-Shields duel, the island was most commonly called Sunflower Island for the large crop of volunteer sunflowers that thrived on the island. Following the construction of the Henry T. Rainey Lock & Dam 26 in the 1930s, the river level behind the dam raised about 8 feet and inundated the island. During low water, tree stumps are still visible on the site.

There are two prominent stories about the island. The first and less ominous involved a duel between a future U.S. President and a prominent Union general in an activity that was totally illegal in Illinois at the time. Dueling was not only illegal, but a death caused during a duel was murder. The idea of two prominent citizens becoming involved in an act so daring and blatant is somewhat absurd, but it happened none the less. The cause of the duel may be even more absurd

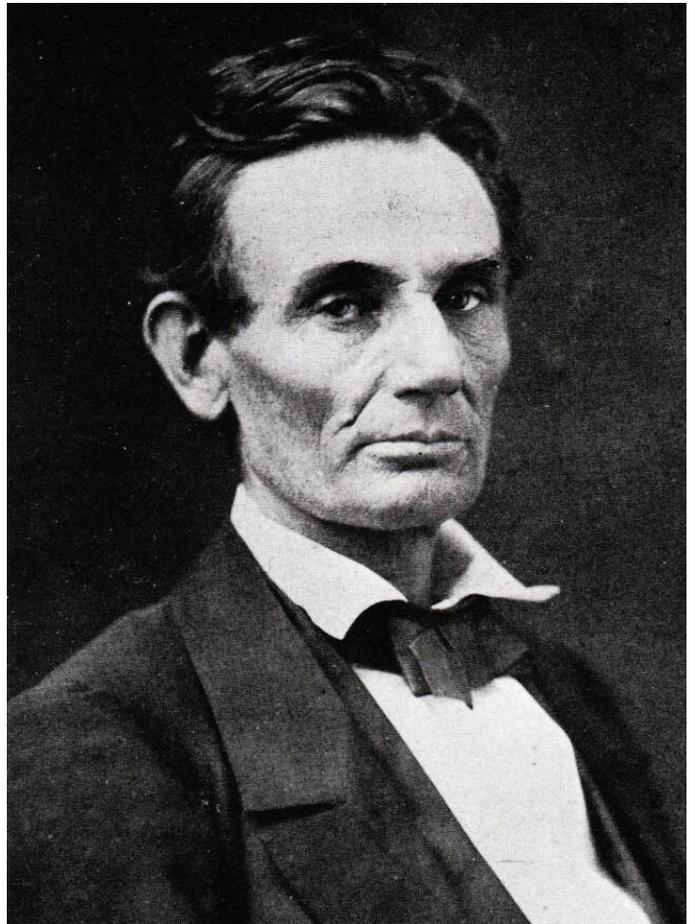


General James Shields

in its petty nature. James Shields was offended by letters published in a Springfield newspaper allegedly insulting his looks and honesty. The letters were written by Mary Todd, Lincoln's fiancé, and Julia Jaynes, later to be Mrs. Lyman Trumbull. Miss Jaynes, a graduate of nearby Monitcello Seminary, was known for her stunning good looks and rapier like wit. Shields was not amused.

Since dueling was not a crime in Missouri, the two combatants rowed to the island near the Missouri

shore to escape Illinois law and reduce the number of witnesses. Lincoln, as the challenged party, was allowed to choose the weapons for the duel. He selected military sabers, known by members of the U.S. Cavalry as "wrist breakers." When Shields arrived at the island, Lincoln was whacking at willow branches high above the ground. What an imposing figure he must have been. Lincoln, at 6' 4" towered over Shields, who was barely 5'3" tall. At this point Shields must have realized that the continued animosity was



Abraham Lincoln

pointless as well as exceedingly dangerous and decided to settle the matter amicably.

Abraham Lincoln was known for his love of a joke, practical or otherwise, and seemed to find an opportunity on this occasion to spring one on the citizens of Alton. Upon leaving the island, Lincoln reclined on the floor of one of the boats and was covered in oil cloth. As the boats approached the Alton shore they encountered a large crowd of spectators awaiting news of the outcome of this notorious duel. Since Lincoln was not visible in the boats rumors began to spread that he was dead until he sprang from the floor of the boat, much to the relief of the crowd.

SMALLPOX ISLAND (CONT)

The next day's newspapers roundly criticized both Lincoln and Shields for their participation in such an illegal activity. "Our city was the theatre of an unusual scene of excitement during the last week from the visit of two distinguished gentlemen of Springfield, who, it was understood came here with a view of crossing the river to answer the requisitions of 'the code of honor' by brutally attempting to assassinate one another in cold blood." The newspaper went on to ask how they should get away with it when someone of lesser means and status would otherwise be "hurried to the county jail....as guilty offenders, and all who have been concerned in the late attempt at assassination (brought) to justice...."

Imagine the uproar today if two of our legislators pulled guns on one another in public. A career ending exercise perhaps?

The second event of significance that took place on the island was one that incurred much more suffering and death and very little pleasantness. Smallpox became the scourge of the Alton Military Prison almost from the very beginning.

The prison opened in February of 1862 and by August smallpox had appeared among the prisoners. The hospital conditions in the prison were poor at best and totally inadequate for the facility. Quarantine and inoculation were the preferred treatments of the day and since the prison was located in the mercantile area of Alton there was no proper space to open a quarantine hospital in the surrounding area. Local residents were reluctant to rent space to the military

Following a period of local dissent about the construction of a quarantine hospital, a site was located on Sunflower Island, across the Mississippi River near the Missouri shore. Soldiers who exhibited signs of smallpox or other highly contagious diseases, like rubella, were rowed over to the island for isolation. For a time the patients were housed in tents erected on the island, each with a small stove for heat. A wooden hospital building was erected later and conditions improved to the point that some prisoners were recover-

ing following a week or two of physical hell.

One such prisoner was Private Dewitt Clinton Thomas, a member of Willis' Texas Battalion, who was captured at Tullahoma, Tennessee, in October of 1863 and arrived in Alton in November of the same year. The winter was particularly cold that year and the prisoners routinely broke the ice from the water barrels when they arrived each morning from the river. Early in January of 1864, Private Thomas began to feel ill and soon was diagnosed with "the pox." Since the river was frozen over by this time, Thomas and his



The long white building near the bottom of this photo is the Alton Civil War Prison. This image taken in 1861 does not show Smallpox Island which was located slightly north of the view in this photograph. (Courtesy of Donald Huber)

guards marched over the ice to the island, now dubbed "Smallpox Island."

Prisoners died around Private Thomas nightly. Each morning one or two bodies were removed from the hospital for burial. Sometimes bodies lay covered in a tent for a week or more until the ground thawed sufficiently to bury them. Soldiers who died on the island were not returned to shore for burial but were buried in a cemetery established on the island.

Private Thomas stayed in the hospital for almost a month before he was deemed fit to return to the prison. He states that the sun had shone for about a week before he was to return to shore and when he walked the mile back to Illinois the ice had begun to turn to

Continued on page 12



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*Continued from page 7
Sylvester*

SMALLPOX ISLAND (CONT FROM PAGE 11)

can be found online. In the poem, he expresses his love of Elsay, saying “Here is a glory of the Elsay hills, That shall forever win my songs of praise...”

Paintings by Sylvester are now highly sought after in this area. In the collections of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis is a large Sylvester painting of the Eads Bridge. A favorite subject when he lived in St. Louis, Sylvester painted the Eads Bridge over 100 times. Hayner Public Library in Alton also displays one of his works in their Genealogy and Local History Room. A copy of that painting, still admired a century later, is on page seven of this newsletter.

slush and he was soaked by the time he reached shore. The cold walk back to the prison resulted in a second round of illness that he concealed from his captors to avoid being returned to the hospital. After recovering from his second illness, Private Thomas was sent to Fort Delaware, on Pea Patch Island in Chesapeake Bay. There he was exchanged and later returned home.

The quarantine hospital operated until March of 1865 when high water inundated the island and it had to be evacuated. By that time the smallpox problem had been brought under control by regimented inoculation and better care. In addition, there was only one active case of smallpox in the prison.

During the time of its operation, from August 1863 to March of 1865, 268 persons succumbed to the ravages of disease on Smallpox Island, 235 soldiers and 33 civilians, including one Mrs. Barbara Dunavant who had been imprisoned for secreting mail across rebel lines in her skirts.

Most of the more deadly diseases, that took the lives of prisoners and guards alike, are now routinely treated by antibiotics. Those unfortunate souls who died on the island are now memorialized by the Corps of Engineers with a marker at the Lincoln Shields Recreation Area on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River.

ALTON AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER (CONT FROM PAGE 9)

A magnificent bridge brightens Alton’s entrance and once again the river is Alton’s focal point. The Mississippi is a major part of our past and it will continue to be vital to our future.



Guest author Donald J. Huber is a life-long resident of Alton who studied History and Political Science at SIUE. He has been Alton Township Supervisor since

1993. His interest in local and regional history, especially in connection with the Civil War prison in Alton, has led to involvement with several local organizations including the Alton Cemetery Board where he is serving his sixth term. He was one of the founders of Alton Cemetery’s *Vintage Voices* where actors represent “residents” of the historic cemetery to tell their stories.