The Illinois South: Culture and Identity in Southern Illinois

Joseph Adams

As I drive the roads, I see the layers of experience that have preceded me and that surround me, and of which I only learn the smallest fragment.


Abstract

This essay examines Southern Illinois in the 18th and 19th century as a Southern region, with characteristics brought by early settlers from Virginia and other southeastern states. Geography, politics, and prejudices set the region apart from the rest of the state, resulting in turbulent times as the area struggled to find its own identity. It also discusses the importance of local folklore and history that was vital to the Southern Illinois culture, giving it a distinct and original presence in the Ohio and Mississippi River Valley.

Introduction

In the preface to her ethnography, *The Transformation of Rural Life: Southern Illinois, 1890-1990*, Jane Adams introduces the lives of seven Union County farm families during one hundred years of change in Southern Illinois. Her work is personal, herself growing up on a farm in Jackson County only a few miles away from the county she wrote about. For her, the rapid and complex economic and technological changes that affected farming life also made an impact on a rural family’s social life. Her story focuses on the value of work and how the changes made in the name of progress influenced the earlier bonds that brought families and

---

1 An earlier version of this essay won the 2016 WIU Department of History Judy Thompson prize for best undergraduate research essay.
3 Jane Adams is a retired Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University.
friends together. It is academic in terms of its research, but it is almost autobiographical in

ture:

The landscape encodes memories that always threaten to escape, to disappear. Perhaps
people like us, who lack a strong oral tradition, have no other means to store our inchoate
memories, and so the landscape takes on a power it may not have for other people in
other times or places. Each barn that collapses, every century-old house that burns down,
and each bend of the road that is straightened removes a piece of our collective identity,
feels like a personal loss, and threatens to undo us even as it is undone.⁴

Today, Southern Illinois has indeed changed. The economic, educational, and social
advancements over the decades have made it in various ways a unique story in the American
experiment. Cities such as Carbondale (home of Southern Illinois University), Marion, and
Mount Vernon (“The King City”) have assimilated into modern, Midwestern communities with
modern, Midwestern ways. Metropolitan areas are grouped toward the Mississippi River near St.
Louis. Like other areas, Southern Illinois also has its abandoned and diminishing towns, villages,
and farms that hint at its agriculturally active past, now absorbed by larger farms or deserted for
the urban lifestyle.

However, Southern Illinoisans take pride in their distinctive heritage. Literature abounds
with cultural history. It was a land forged out by settlers that came from Virginia, Kentucky, and
Tennessee, looking for land and opportunity that could no longer be found in the east. The
people of Southern Illinois created by their own volition a new and hopeful presence, adjusting
to their new environment with the influences of their homes back east. With them came valued
social mores, traditions, ambitions, and close-knit relationships that reflected the southern dignity
that gave them their identity. With them also came political and racial turbulence that divided
them during times of agitation. As a unique region, the Illinois South set itself apart from central

⁴ Adams, Transformation of Rural Life, xvii.
and upstate Illinois, and has been historically more closely tied to its southern heritage, an identity separate from its northern counterparts.

**Where the Illinois South Begins**

The landscape of Southern Illinois can be viewed as a world by itself, carved out of the landscape and shaped by the southeastern immigrants that settled there. The vast prairie and stretches of farm fields typically identified with the state transform into a hilly terrain where roads almost disappear from view. The shady ceiling of the forest appears as a quiet refuge from the droll and hectic highway. The tall, overarching cliffs that tower from both sides on roads and paths of the Shawnee National Forest reach several stories high. As an early settlement, it was an isolated, remote, sparsely populated region, making it difficult to meet or enforce the full provisions of its overseer, the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Southern Illinois stretches farther south than neighboring Indiana, bordering Kentucky at the southern end and meeting Missouri to the West. Cairo in Alexander County has been called “the most southern city of the north.” There have been disputes over the accuracy of Illinois geography. In his article, “Where Does the South Begin?” Patrick Ottenhoff writes: “Many historians and sociologists decided long ago that the Mason-Dixon Line was too clumsy and that U.S. Route 40—the old National Road [the main trek from the east to the west in the early 1800s]—was a more accurate border. The road extends … across southern Illinois, and out to St. Louis.”\(^5\) The counties designated as Southern Illinois appear to correspond with Ottenhoff’s assessment, not only geographically but also culturally. The region occupies the southern one-third of the state, the upper portion crossing from the east in Lawrence County to St. Clair County in the west.

Arguably, the territory was not viewed as a “southern” place at all, but was part of a westward movement during the Revolutionary War. Eastern newcomers—European whites—began settlement as early as the 1770s; by 1787, as the colonies were working toward individual statehood, the southern Illinois region was designated as part of the Northwest Territory, also known as the Northwest Ordinance. The movement was partially due to the east’s increasing population, making it extremely difficult to purchase good tidewater land for planting. In addition, Virginia’s frontier had reached the “fall line,” an area where rivers became too difficult to navigate back to the Atlantic for trade. After reports about the fertile soil west of the Appalachians and along the great waterways reached home, the age of the pioneers had begun.

Early settlers in the “County of Illinois,”6 as it was sometimes known, were mixed. Clarence Averton writes that settlers along the Mississippi found that "nature offered her gifts with bounteous hand," and described the climate as "warm and enervating, inducing in man a love of indolence and repose rather than the more virile emotions."7 Others were not so pleased. In the summer, the ponds and streams became stagnant and the "breeding places of myriads of mosquitoes" spreading germs and disease. In spring, the Mississippi floods stretched into Illinois, stopping only at the bluffs and running onto the opposite shore.8

The Ohio River became an important waterway as a trade route, connecting commerce between the manufacturing north and the agricultural south. It also was also a significant route for emigrants from the north. Rafts of timber and flatboats carrying merchandise often carried migrants who had heard of the area's fertile soil and land availability. These floats sometimes

6 This reference to the early settlement was used by multiple authors and was also referred to as the “County of Virginia.”
7 Clarence Walworth Averton, The County of Illinois (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1907), xiii.
8 Ibid., xiv.
had the convenience of shanties, accommodated with kitchen space, a sleeping area, and a storehouse. As a trading route, the growing activity on the Ohio created a new era of river life as these handmade floats carrying their cargo and eager newcomers navigated the waterway. They seemed to come from everywhere, with “the moving picture of life on board the boats, in the numerous animals large and small … [and] their different loads, evidence of the increasing agriculture of the country above.” Folklore historian B. A. Botkin called them “floating towns,” ships carrying planks from the pine forests of New York to Kentucky’s whiskey and tobacco trade from the south. One Southern Illinois native wrote of an ancestor’s trading enterprise on the “Great River:”

For a few years he would go to Cincinnati, Ohio, and buy or build a barge and stock it with tinware, calico, whiskey, needles, thread, and anything the settlers would buy and trade for. He would first float down the Ohio and tow up at the landing and trade and sell. When he got to Cairo he would sell everything including the barge or (flatboat) and buy a horse and go home.”

Perhaps the most praiseworthy images of the early river age are the paintings of George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879), who epitomized the flatboat life in his paintings. During the mid-nineteenth century, Bingham’s other artworks were overshadowed by his river images, albeit he represented an optimistic view of river life with such pieces as “The Jolly Flatboatmen” (1846) and "Raftsmen Playing Cards" (1847). Nevertheless, his works depicted an era of river history preceding the coming of steamboats.

---

In most cases, the trek from the southeastern states was arduous, covered wagons filled with chickens, perhaps a cow or two tied to the rear, and supplies leaving barely any room for large families to shelter themselves. Wagons often got stuck in small and muddy paths as they traveled over the Appalachians and into the Ohio River. Broken axles, inclement weather, sickness, and limited food were all common hardships on the trail, as well as the threat of bandits and hostile Native American tribes.

**Culture and Religion in the Illinois South**

Once the movement into Illinois began, traditions carried from the home states were adjusted and cultivated in the new land, replaced with the necessary means of survival forged out of the changed landscape. Hunting, felling, and building became an integral part of pioneer life. The farming community was for the most part isolated, with self-sufficiency dependent on families’ ability to live off the land. The tobacco farms and seaport trades of Virginia were replaced by corn, wheat, and other small grains, supplemented by livestock and household manufacturing.

From the start, frontier families often lived in meager conditions, dwellings “consisting of one room with a loft, and a hole under the middle of the room for the cellar.”\(^{12}\) Each had their duties, the men foraging or planting while the women cooked and cared for the children. She did her cooking over an open fire and made her own soap. As the “manufacturer for the household,” she made and mended the family’s clothes, and she also played the role of the physician, making her remedies from the indigenous weeds and plants.\(^{13}\) The children were expected to start

---


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
carrying their weight at an early age, assisting their mother with household chores and their fathers in the field.

In spite of the hardships, the people were able to adjust and sustain a living. Prosperity brought them respect by neighbors in nearby towns and villages, and the customary “Sunday-go-to-meeting” events such as church functions, annual celebrations, or the erection of a new barn or church were important aspects of the social life of the farming community. In time, Southern Illinois entered a new era where their hard work paid off. With the arrival of steamboats, river towns flourished as important highways of commerce and travel, as well as occasional entertainment on showboats.

Customs from life in the east, particularly Virginia, remained in the meridional “folkways” of Southern Illinoisans. Schools and churches were being established at a rapid pace, and new inventions, such as the mechanical reaper and the steel plow, became hallmarks in agriculture technology. Apart from the customary southern character prevalent in the south, education and religion were important to the settlers, albeit they had a different view on their institutions than their northern neighbors.

In 1787 protestant churches appeared in the region. The first churches to be established were by the Methodists and the Baptists. The evangelical missions of the northeastern states (New York, Philadelphia, and Boston) were ambitious to move westward, particularly to the Mississippi River Valley. As the federal government sought to secure the ties between the east and west through commerce and transportation, the large religious denominations opened the doors to establish their own influence. Ambitious and pretentious, the east used print media as

---

its most powerful tool, delivering pamphlets and other literature downstate by way of the Ohio River. However, regional print cultures emerged in Southern Illinois and began publishing on their own, much of it opposed to northeast efforts to establish a pan-evangelical presence in the territory.\textsuperscript{15} The efforts to recruit new members to the eastern conferences were challenged by the Mississippi Valley’s independent religious movement. A potent force in the early to mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, publications such as the Methodist’s \textit{Central Illinois Advocate} brought a new mission to the area. The effort to bring religious autonomy in the west brought such “subversive acts” like this to alert the eastern conferences and to “define themselves as distinct from a general or dominant culture.”\textsuperscript{16} In addition, “far from being the peripheral hinterland that eastern evangelicals had constructed in their minds, the Mississippi Valley became the American heartland to evangelicals living in the region.”\textsuperscript{17}

Methodism made a large presence in Southern Illinois, but the area also witnessed a strong presence of Baptist, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian denominations. At about the same time the Methodists were establishing their presence, Baptists were also creating a strong voice. Edward P. Brand, the General Superintendent of the state’s Baptist Convention, wrote that both Methodist and Baptist denominations were started at a place called “New Design” in Monroe County.\textsuperscript{18,19} In 1793, Baptist churches with a congregation of more than one hundred formed an

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Before 1800, the New Design Settlement was the largest colony in Illinois.
\end{flushleft}
association, and by the end of the century, the Methodists and Baptists were the strongest denominations in the territory.\(^{20}\)

The Methodists and the Baptists “excoriated” the slave practice when in 1823 pro-slavery legislators proposed an amendment to the state constitution, partly due to the success of the Missouri Compromise that permitted the institution of slavery in that state. The Baptist “Friends of Humanity” preached the “sinfulness of human bondage,” and oftentimes religious movements that were outspoken about slavery met with harsh consequences. The most notably is Elijah P. Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and journalist who encountered opposition in both Missouri and Illinois for his “crusades” that attacked various religions, alcohol, and especially, slavery. He left the *St. Louis Observer* for the *Alton Observer*, where he was greeted with proslavery residents that threw his press into the river. Defiantly, Lovejoy procured another printing press and refused to leave. In November of 1837, he was shot outside of his Alton office and the press was destroyed.\(^{21}\)

In the 1880s a religious crisis appeared to hit the country. Barton E. Price writes that in 1883, an article in *The Central Christian Advocate* posed the question about faith in the United States: “Some believed that the course of events had robbed Americans of any innocence they had, and led many to question the bases of their religious beliefs.”\(^{22}\) Agnosticism was taking hold in the “Gilded Age” with figures such as Robert G. Ingersoll, a lawyer and speaker that had resided in Marion and Shawneetown in Southern Illinois. As a civil war veteran and leading politician during “The Golden Age of Free Thought,” his case for agnosticism was promoted

\(^{20}\) Biles, 32.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 86.
through his strong oratory: “Religion can never reform mankind because religion is slavery. It is far better to be free, to leave the forts and barricades of fear, to stand erect and face the future with a smile.”

His utilitarian view of life struck a chord with the public: “Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.”

With the purported “moral deconstruction” period that historians have pointed to as Evangelicalism’s decline, the Southern Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church was regarded as the “antithesis of the cultural refinement of New York or Chicago.” Ingersoll’s influence had a significant impact, promoting a religious uncertainty that sometimes compared him to Voltaire.

Methodist opposition, however, was convinced that the United States was the “redeemer nation.” The Advocate believed in spite of Ingersoll’s rhetoric, “the conscience of the people more readily responded to the plain truths of evangelical preaching.”

The religious movements in Southern Illinois served as a foundation of the differences the settlers would realize in the new homeland. As northern emigration grew southward, the region witnessed other differences that threatened their southern identity.

“Clash of Cultures” in the Illinois South

James C. Cobb, author of Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity, wrote that much of what is viewed as the “south” is relative since it invariably must have a “north” by

---


25 Ibid., 172-173.

26 Ibid., 172.
which to make the comparison. The north was not a “geographical place” at all, wrote Cobb, but an “emotional idea,” a “superior America both literally and figuratively beyond and without the ever-problematic south.”

Cobb suggested that the “larger-than-life idea” of the north, with its accomplishments and virtues, contrasted with a seemingly failed and guilty south following the Civil War. He quoted Edward L. Ayers about a “relative situation” that had become “an absolute characteristic:” Not only had southern cultural identity become ‘a fiction of a geographically bounded and coherent set of attitudes to be set off against a mythical non-South,’ but, one might add, that mythical non-South had become virtually synonymous with the idea of America itself.” As a northern state predominately settled by southern emigrants, the ideological polarization affected north and south relations.

Roger Biles writes in Illinois: A History of the Land and Its People, the “Yankee invaders,” that came to Illinois in the 1830s and 1840s caused apprehension bordering on animosity from their southern counterparts. The emigrants from the northeast brought with them values of “hard work, thrift, and order,” believing in progress, industry, and “higher taxes to improve the commonweal.” They viewed the Southern Illinois residents “as lazy and decadent, attributing to the primitive condition throughout much of the state to the indolence of the earlier inhabitants.”

---

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Northern sentiment, according to Biles, viewed Southern Illinoisans as given to a laid-back approach detested by the business-minded, education-promoting, and church-going northerners. They were “[a]ccustomed to living at a slower pace, seemingly less determined to succeed economically, and indifferent—if not openly hostile—to formal education.”\(^{32}\) The Yankees tended to not only degrade the southern lifestyle but also transform it. However, change was not invited and when it was, the ingratiation was seldom welcomed. Southern Illinoisans felt they were being “Yankeed,” and were discordant about the “cultural imperialism whereby they sought to remake other people in their own image—an image that southerners suspected was more imaginary than real.”\(^{33}\) To them, it was nothing more than “high-minded Yankee rhetoric [that] masked base motives.”\(^{34}\)

The contrast between “northern” and “southern” people made a significant impact on lawyer, writer, and poet Edgar Lee Masters. His famous work, "Spoon River Anthology," is a fictional (and sometimes biographical) collection of poems about dead residents of Spoon River, named after the river that ran close to the author’s Lewistown, Illinois, home. Born in Kansas in 1868, Masters’s family moved to Lewistown in 1880, regularly visiting his grandparent's farm at Sand Ridge near Petersburg. In his introduction to an annotated edition of the author's collection of poems, author John Hallwas writes about the geography that influenced the “clash of cultures” that Masters observed in his youth:

"The village of Spoon River is, in fact, based on two Illinois communities (not "several") where the poet grew up: Petersburg, on the Sangamon River in Menard County, and Lewistown, forty miles farther north, near the Spoon River in Fulton County. They are on opposite sides of the historic Illinois River, which flows through western Illinois diagonally to the southwest before emptying into the Mississippi north of Alton and East

\(^{32}\) Ibid.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
St. Louis. During the nineteenth century the two communities were also on opposite sides of a cultural divide.\textsuperscript{35}

In the lower part of the state, writes Hallwas, people were more likely to be "whiskey-drinking frontier people who celebrated courage, stressed kinship, prized hospitality, opposed abolitionism, advocated individual rights, idolized Andrew Jackson, and supported the Democratic party," of which Masters’s father was a member.\textsuperscript{36} The Northerners, or "Yankees," projected the appearance of a more disciplined culture, "modernizers" that "were more apt to be community organizers, business founders, churchgoers, schoolteachers, and social reformers."\textsuperscript{37} The northern mindset, opposed to drinking and slavery, was predominant in the poet’s Lewistown.

Although the natural boundaries of Illinois did not take into account the cultural and social differences inherent among these diverse people, Southern Illinois captivated outsiders interested in its origins to confirm its status as an exclusive entity. It carried various place-names, the most famous being “Little Egypt.” The nickname faded in the Twentieth Century except for its historical significance, and the “Illinois South,” perhaps a culturally stronger designation, today acts as a substitute for the less inclusive “Southern Illinois.”

**Little Egypt**

Jesse W. Harris wrote: “Any study of the origin of place names inevitably leads one into the area of folklore.”\textsuperscript{38} In addition, place-names often carry an official name and a popular

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 4.
nickname. The southern counties gained popular attention when the region was dubbed, "Little Egypt," or simply "Egypt." How the area was given this name is uncertain, and like other place-names, there are several origins attributed to it. One origin might have been due to towns bearing Egyptian names such as Cairo, Thebes, Karnak, and Goshen. Another goes to a St. Louis businessman who platted the town of Cairo, and, viewing the Ohio where it converges with the Mississippi, likened it to the Egyptian Nile. The most credible account is attributed to a prominent Franklin County attorney and circuit judge, A.D. Duff, who referred to the harsh winter ("the winter of the deep snow") and cool summer of 1830-1831, resulting in a poor planting season in the north. With decayed and unripened crops, farmers looked southward to buy corn for their livestock. In Southern Illinois, the crop harvest did well, and Duff compared it to the story of Jacob in Bible lore (also known as the story of Joseph’s brethren), declaring, "We’re going down to Egypt for corn.” According to Duff himself, the name evidently stuck.

John W. Allen, author of Legends and Lore in Southern Illinois, wrote that the area’s new nickname did not immediately result in the inhabitants being referred to as “Egyptians.” Instead, they were often called “suckers.” The nickname was not appreciated. As Allen explained, the reference could have one of several meanings. One origin refers to poor settlers that emigrated from southern tobacco fields. The useless sprouts at the end of tobacco plants, which grow from the stem once the leaves are plucked back or topped, are called “suckers,” which feed on the plant leaves and affect their growth. It was attributed to the poorer southern emigrants that were

39 Ibid.
40 Herbert Halpert, “‘Egypt’—A Wandering Place-Name Legend,” Midwest Folklore 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1954): 165.
41 “And all countries came into Egypt to Joseph for to buy corn; because the famine was sore in all the earth.” —Genesis 41:57
living off of the economy without contributing to it, and evidently spread to the southern region’s people as a whole.

Another popular folklorist, B.A. Botkin, wrote of the 1778 expedition of then Lieutenant General George Rogers Clark. Clark and his men were going to Kaskaskia to overtake the French in Illinois who were viewed as being enemies of the United States’ policy of anti-slave and liberty policies. They got lost and were suffering from heat and thirst. Upon reaching Kaskaskia, they saw on the banks of the river townspeople sitting on porches drinking mint juleps, a drink introduced by the French and adopted in Virginia. Overwhelmed, Clark’s troops reportedly shouted, “Surrender, you suckers, surrender!” At the time of Botkin’s 1978 book, A Treasury of Mississippi River Folklore, the nickname was reportedly still used for residents of Little Egypt.

Mount Vernon in Jefferson County is known for its name from George Washington’s Virginia plantation, but it also carries the name of “King City.” A legend of its origin refers to the corn famine of the 1830s that was responsible for the region’s name, “Egypt.” The story was related by local historian John Howard, who suggested that because of Mount Vernon’s importance to the crisis, it was compared to the Pharaoh, or “King” of Egypt. The nickname is in popular use today in business and advertising.

In the mid-1800s, the Egyptians gradually showed their propensity for “southerness.” “These Egyptians betray their southern ancestry in a number of ways,” wrote Charles Neely in Tales and Songs of Southern Illinois. “[I]n their speech, in their friendliness, in their easy-going

---

43 Ibid., 43.
44 Botkin, Mississippi River Folklore, 508-509.
ways, in their clannishness, in their racial prejudices… and in their love of oratory whether it be on the political stump or on the pulpit.”⁴⁶ Many of the inhabitants were sympathetic to their southern neighbors as the Civil War approached. Neely illustrates this close bond with the South as an “Egyptian [who] is likely to feel more at home in Kentucky and Tennessee than he is in Northern Illinois, for his heritage is largely derived from those states.”⁴⁷ Other writers have likened the Egyptian persona to well-known southern locales, such as Louisville, Kentucky and Little Rock, Arkansas.

**Slavery in Little Egypt**

Although the state fought for the Union, slavery became a contentious issue that further strained relations from within the state. Slavery in Little Egypt existed in some form prior to the war, and the deeply dividing issue pitted the predominately northern abolitionists against the southern Illinois “slave-holding” population. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 explicitly stated “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in said territory;” and the 1818 Illinois Constitution essentially modeled the same policy, but with one difference: the delegates brought before the people the question of slavery and directed their representatives to argue for either temporary or unlimited slavery. It was decided, written into Article VI of the state constitution, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall hereafter be introduced into the state,” allowing slave-holding citizens to fulfill their present contracts.

In spite of the provision, the practice continued throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century. As Darrell Dexter writes in *Bondage in Egypt: Slavery in Southern Illinois*, “Laws are subject to interpretation and enforcement, and an examination of the history of Illinois shows

⁴⁷ Ibid.
that the law was construed … in such a way as to permit slavery there for many decades after the ordinance became law.”

When Abraham Lincoln moved to Illinois in 1830, so-called “indentured servitude” was still practiced. By 1860, then President Lincoln was fully aware of the southern state’s opposition, brought on by the pressing concerns by politicians about anti-Union sentiment in the southern part of the state. When the word reached the President, he ordered an “Egyptian Brigade” to “keep Egypt right side up.”

However, the outbreak of the Civil War finally revealed the hostile division of the state. “Copperheads,” northerners that opposed the war and Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves, were denounced as traitors, provoking disharmony for the Union cause and often reprimanded for harassing and heckling Union Soldiers as they traveled through the area southward. In 1863, Isaac Funk, an Illinois Senator and a wealthy McLean County farmer, won an audience with the Illinois Legislature to vent his frustration over the Copperhead activities he witnessed, and he accused legislators for allowing it: “I say there are traitors at heart in this Senate. Their actions prove it. Their speeches prove it. Their [Copperheads] gibes and laughter and cheers here nightly, when their speakers get up to denounce the war and the administration, prove it.”

Southern Illinois was centered between two factions that led to retaliation by abolitionists in the already established network known as the Underground Railroad. The beginning of the railroad is difficult to trace, but it gained momentum up until the war due to fugitive slave laws that only accelerated the movement’s mission. The original 1793 Fugitive Slave Act permitted

---

48 Darrell Dexter, preface to Bondage in Egypt: Slavery in Southern Illinois (Cape Girardeau: Center for Regional History, Southeast Missouri State University, 2010), ii.
slaveholders to reclaim their “property” from anti-slave states, and the act of 1850 went further by requiring the government and citizens to return captured fugitive slaves to their owners in an effort to suppress Underground Railroad activity. In spite of these laws, the Underground Railroad developed into a covert, well-organized network in both the North and South.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain writes about Huck’s and fugitive Jim’s adventures down the Mississippi, intending to reach Cairo to help Jim to freedom. After missing Cairo in the fog they decided to paddle up the Ohio River to the protection of Ohio, where the underground railroad was strong. Critics have questioned why Twain used this scenario, alleging it was a clear oversight. Jim hid out on Jackson’s Island near the Illinois shore and could have swum his way to free soil, but simply reaching the abolitionist state did not make him free. As Thomas Cooley notes, “Illinois, and especially southern Illinois, where kidnapping and slave catching were a thriving business, enforced the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, thus Jim, without papers, would be subject to arrest and indentured labor until claimed by his "owner." Twain obviously knew about this, wrote Cooley, and assumed everybody else did too.

There was also the Reverse Underground Railroad, a threat to freed and fugitive slaves alike. The kidnapping of slaves was a lucrative business where they were either kept as indentured servants or taken to Southern states to be sold at market. Warning posters were found throughout the free states, warning about law enforcement officials that apprehended fugitive slaves by order of the local government.


52 Ibid., 217.
The Reverse Underground Railroad was referred to by Writer Martha Collins in her book-length poem, *Blue Front*, a story about her father who witnessed a lynching in his home town of Cairo in 1909. Looking through his eyes as he watches the hanging, she reflects his thoughts about freedom in years past and the threat of the Reverse Underground Railroad:

yes there was also the railroad the underground
railroad that ran on the water around the town around
the roads yes this was the place where Huck and Jim
should have crossed the river brown to blue...

but there was the other railroad the railroad talked
about even less the reverse underground railroad with
its bounty its tickets back to the south...  

Attempts were made in the years following the Civil War to honor those that were free from bondage. “Emancipation Day” in parts of the Illinois South and Paducah, Kentucky area was observed about twenty years after the war. Its first observance was held in Elizabethtown in Hardin County in 1882, when one Moses Barker, a former slave and a farmer, asked some friends if they would be interested in the idea. According to John W. Allen, after discussing it with the town leaders, it was approved. An “old-time fiddler” and “banjo-picker” provided the music; meats provided by local businesses were barbecued in long pits, and square dances became the popular attraction of the event. The celebration at Paducah became a sensation, attracting people from St. Louis and Chicago, Louisville and Cairo, and as far away as Memphis. The celebration in Hardin County continued yearly, but by 1940 much of the black population had moved to urban areas, so only about twenty were present at the event. Other similar events were held, but they were more advertised and commercialized with performances

---

and noted bands. The events evidently did not have the same spirit or purpose as the earlier celebrations.

The racial attitudes before, during, and after the Civil War is relevant to the entire question of slavery in America. As Jane Adams notes, “Those who live in this region are no more free of bigotry than men and women anywhere else in the United States.” Of course, racism has been an ongoing struggle, evident of the suppression experienced during restoration to the violence of the early twentieth century; the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s, and the question of reparations being debated today.

**Folklore and Local History**

A great deal of regional folklore has been captured by such scholars as John W. Allen and B.A. Botkin. Allen, apart from his involvement in teaching, school administration, and historical societies, was an avid researcher in regional folklore. Two of his works, *Legends and Lore of Southern Illinois* and *It Happened in Southern Illinois* have set a precedent in the way people view the history of the area and its inhabitants. From famous individuals such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to not so likely associations with Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis, Allen also wrote extensively about Little Egypt folklore, flathead Indians, and regulators (think Jesse James), as well as the most intriguing aspect of regional folklore: the supernatural.

Abraham Lincoln is an inspirational subject for numerous writers, not only in the field of history but in studies of Lincoln the man. Many today believe that he was one of the most mysterious men that ever lived, and researchers spend long hours finding new information that might give us a closer understanding of him.

---

According to John W. Allen’s writings, Lincoln was first nominated for the presidency in Southern Illinois in Wayne County. The future president was well-known by that time, not only as a lawyer and legislator, but also his grassroots background as a farm hand and rail splitter. He had also been a flatboatman, which likely won him favor with the river towns. The well-known Lincoln-Douglas debates had been held as far south as Jonesboro in Union County, and it was at the Illinois Republican Convention that met at Fairfield in Wayne County that nominated him to the national convention in Chicago in 1860.56 Today there is a marker on the Fairfield courthouse lawn commemorating the president and the county’s contribution.

It is evident that southerners and southern sympathizers were not favorable toward Lincoln during his presidency. Following his assassination, when some residents in Walpole, Hamilton County, heard of the President’s assassination, they celebrated “by firing anvils (firing anvils into the air using gunpowder), an accepted method of noise making.”57 While courts adjourned and vigils held publicly honoring the late president, Allen writes that the “divergence of feelings that still lingered” was an example of the strong biases that continued to separate Southern Illinoisans.58

Folk tales provided a variety of entertainment: Outlaws were hidden in every nook and cranny, not far from the witches’ shacks that abound in almost every secluded spot. Southern Illinoisans became the people of folk songs and ballads. “Tall tales abound in the region,” Allen wrote, told by “tale tellers,” who were found “about the hot stoves of quiet and dimly lit grocery stores,” or “protected nooks on the sunny side of some sheltering building,” and “on park

56 Allen, Legends and Lore, 24-25
57 Ibid., 293.
58 Ibid., 294.
benches in a kindly shade.” Storytelling was an important part of their lives. “There was nowhere to go,” writes Allen. “Stories, songs, narrations of personal experiences, yarns, pleasantries, mere chatter and gossip filled the evening.” They were attracted to the mysterious, or, in the words of Washington Irving about his own Hudson River lore, filled with “local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions.”

Not all of the region’s folklore was original, nor was it necessarily southern. Some of it was borrowed or influenced by other sources and given a regional setting. Popular tales such as “The Golden Arm,” and the urban legend, “The Hook,” have been retold almost everywhere, set with names and locations familiar to the region. One obvious “borrowed” story is about Lakey’s Ghost, purported to be related to an actual event. Set in Hamilton County, Lakey, (his first name is unknown), was an early settler of the region. He was building a cabin and nearly finished, putting the final touches on the roof. A traveler passed by the cabin one day and saw Lakey’s body, his head a few feet away and an axe fixed into a stump. Allen writes:

On the day following Lakey’s burial and just at nightfall, two men living west of McLeansboro were passing the Lakey cabin site as they returned from a trip to the Wabash. A few rods [sic] east of Lakey’s Creek they were joined by a strange and fearful companion. A headless horseman on a large black steed, on the left hand or downstream side, moved along toward the creek with them. The two riders commenced crossing to the middle of the stream, where the phantom horseman turned and disappeared in a pool of water, avoiding the stream. The writer asserts that a ghost cannot cross running water, suspiciously similar to Washington Irving’s 1819 tale, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” In spite of the similarity, Lakey’s Ghost is still a popular

59 Ibid., 72.
61 Allen, Legends and Lore, 59.
Southern Illinois ghost story.

Interest on the preservation of regional folklore has evolved from a hobby in generations past to an academic discipline. In early America, Folklore was traditionally passed down by word of mouth. Today, it has become a field in itself. Folk life and fieldwork has been a popular way of interpreting history in one’s own “backyard,” and many writers of folklore and folk life focus their efforts on an area they are familiar with. It is important to show their distinction from other regions; for them, it has become an important enterprise for young and old alike: and those that want to learn the significance of their own heritage and those who want to preserve it.

Folklore scholarship has survived through writers, teachers, anthropologists, and sociologists. Beliefs, prejudices, family and work values, and social ties have all been somewhat influenced by folklore, all playing a role in the understanding of our life and the cultural history that have, in part, evolved us into who we are. In addition to folklore literature, Southern Illinoisans have their share of songs and ballads that contribute to the spirit of the region. Songs like “The Old Girl of Cairo Town,” and “My Horses Ain’t Hungry” are reminiscent of the southern humor the region shared. River ballads also were prevalent during the nineteenth century, songs such as “Along the Banks of the Ohio,” “Roustabout Holler,” and “De Boatman Dance” that share the spirit of river life. B.A. Botkin, in *Mississippi River Folklore*, devotes an entire chapter titled “Where the Blues Begin,” featuring tunes reminiscent of the roots of regional popular music when the river was king.

Of course, the popularity of Mark Twain’s Mississippi writings made him the most famous author of the steamboat era. Taking events from his youth in Hannibal, Missouri, Twain created a fictional world that captured the spirit of life on the river. His connection to Illinois in his writings are sparse (he refers to Chester in Randolph County and Grand Tower in Jackson
County in *Life on the Mississippi*), but his influence carried far and wide, particularly to those who shared in his southern humor and river lore. It was stories such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that aided the southern regions to appreciate their ties to the South.

Apart from the attraction of regional folklore, local history has become an institution in itself in the United States. It is the development of a “sense of place,” as local historians chronicle the events and notable persons that make them unique. David E. Kyvig’s and Myron A. Marty’s popular series, *Nearby History*, asserts that while the “new social history” of the 1960s focused on national government, economics, and foreign relations, it appeared to leave out vital components of American life: art, literature, theater, music and sports, as well as thought, religion, and superstition. The “new cultural history” that grew out of this awareness gave local communities a renewed sense of excitement to the idea of history, particularly those that knew it and could write it.

A similar framework for Southern culture and fieldwork can be found in the *Foxfire* series, a fifteen-book collection of southern culture recorded by high school students that was started in the 1960s by writer and instructor Eliot Wigginton. What was simply going to be a class project to engage unruly and disinterested students, Wigginton sent them out interviewing and observing the backwoods people of the Appalachians, recording their customs and stories and compiling them into a book. The subtitle of the first edition, simply titled “The Foxfire Book,” read “hog dressing; log cabin building; mountain crafts and foods; planting by the signs;....

Southern Illinois tales about “Egyptian Cotton,” making “gritted meal,” “Hog-Killing Time,” and other customs, ring with a spirit about the ways and means peculiar to the south.

Conclusion

There had been periods during the establishment of statehood in which settlers believed Southern Illinois should secede from the state, and with the onset of the Civil War, opinions in that region questioned whether it should secede from the Union entirely. Some of these separatist sentiments carried through the early twentieth century, only to be temporarily sidetracked by more pressing matters such as the Great Depression and two world wars. The world was indeed becoming smaller and modernized. Expansion and settlement, feuds and entitlements, and the founding of new communities began to fade as industrialization, community development, and a new age of progress became the focus.

However, being a separate state did not disappear entirely. Occasionally, the idea of state succession emerged. In 2009, the Southern Illinoisan published an article about a three-member committee that assembled in Carbondale to discuss Southern Illinois becoming its own state. Nobody showed. Chairman Greg Stover said it was “not a fly-by-night-idea,” arguing that Southern Illinoisans are paying for road work farther north and the state is “being oppressed financially, constitutionally, and politically.” He called the state a “sinking ship,” adding that the people in the south part of the state are also “culturally different.”

---

Today, Southern Illinois holds fast to its heritage in many ways, much of it showing in historical societies, libraries, and archives that hold on to these aspects of early America. One could say that you can find every type of culture in Southern Illinois today. But there remains the remnants of earlier times, such as William Faulkner’s fictional world of Yoknapatawpha County: “. . . a basically agricultural economy, life of farms, villages, and small towns, an old-fashioned set of values, and a still vital religion with its cult, creed, and basic norms of conduct.”

Of course, the Confederate flag does not wave above government buildings or institutions, but they can still be seen on front porches and in the windows of pickup trucks. Molly Parker wrote in The Southern on July 11, 2015: “Cultural influences in this region, situated near Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, tend to sway more to the ways of the South than the North in attitudes, political beliefs, and social behaviors. Southern Illinois is not the same as Mississippi, but that state can be reached much more quickly from Marion than can Chicago.”

But this obviously does not speak for the hard-work, patience, and other virtues of the Southern Illinois people. As Jane Adams describes:

People did back-breaking work over the hot coals and cold frames and weeding the fields. ‘What good old days?’ they say. And yet the nostalgia creeps in, for between the hardship, drudgery, and Mother with the switches that made you work, there are the fond memories of the smells of new-plowed earth, of leaves rotting in the woods, of thunderstorms and flooded creeks, of the pungent dust of late summer.

If asked how southern Southern Illinois is, James C. Cobb might have had the most appropriate answer: “It depends on who’s asking—and when and why.” The region has long

---

66 Adams, Transformation of Rural Life, xvii.
67 Cobb, Away Down South, 38.
past been reconciled to the notion that geographical borders suggest cultural boundaries, a sentiment Southern Illinoisans could rightly withhold. Charles Neely noted that much of the old ballads and stories from the “Old South” of Illinois are dying and that many of the superstitions are fading. However, blog entries and discussions still remark on the “southernism” of the state by people that grew up and presently reside there. Even with a predominant mix of cultures, there inevitably remains some of the culturally characteristic southern tendencies in the Illinois South.
Bibliography


Halpert, Herbert. “‘Egypt’—A Wandering Place-Name Legend,” Midwest Folklore 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1954): 165-168.

Harris, Jesse W. “Illinois Place-name Lore.” Midwest Folklore 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1954): 217-220.


70


Images
Image 1:

Image 2:

George Caleb Bingham, *Jolly Flatboatmen Playing Cards*. Metropolitan Museum of Art
Image 3:
Online Map of the National Road, the “real” dividing line between north and south, according to Patrick Ottenhof’s, “Where does the South Begin?” *Atlantic Monthly*, 2016.
“Little Egypt” is designated for the southern tip of the state. The name is not recognized as an established geographical place name, but rather a cultural division between the north and south within the state. (Map: Donato Internoscia, 1938).
Illinois, outlining the counties in the area known as “Egypt,” (Map: Donato Internoscia, 1938).
A warning to African Americans about the Reverse Underground Railroad, Boston, 1851.

CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE
OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,
You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and
advised, to avoid conversing with the
Watchmen and Police Officers
of Boston,
For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR &
ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as
KIDNAPPERS
AND
Slave Catchers,
And they have already been actually employed in
KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING
SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY,
and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, Show
them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS
on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for
KIDNAPPERS, and have
TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

authendichistory.com
Image 8:

Thomas Hart Benton’s mural, “Huck Finn,” at the Missouri State Capitol, 1936.