

# Battle at Bad Axe

## Background Information

The Battle of Bad Axe was the last Indian-American battle fought east of the Mississippi River. After realizing the futility of fighting the U.S. troops, Black Hawk's British Band of Sauk attempted to escape across the Mississippi River. At this point the last battle began, resulting in the deaths of nearly 150 of Black Hawk's followers.



This two-day long battle took place in what is now the Black Hawk Recreation Park and the surrounding floodplain and uplands.



**a-La-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak**, known as **Black Hawk**, was the elder Sauk war chief who refused to leave his home, called Saukenuk, in order to appease the new U.S. government. Black Hawk's followers, called the "British Band", consisted of approximately 500 warriors and nearly 1500 women and children. In 1832, the British Band returned to Illinois, triggering the reaction of frontier militia and the U.S. Army. During the war, Black Hawk guided the band through Wisconsin wilderness attempting to avoid conflict.



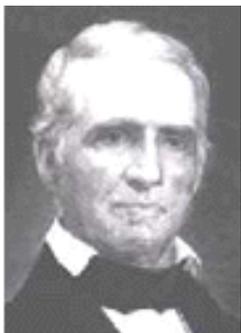
**White Cloud**, also known as "The Winnebago Prophet" invited Black Hawk and the British Band to return to his village on the Rock River, an act seen as an invasion by the Governor of Illinois.



**Keokuk**, another Sauk war chief, chose to move to Iowa, splitting the Sauk tribe.



**Brigadier General Henry Atkinson** was commander of United States troops and militia forces pursuing the British Band from Saukenuk to the site of the Battle of Bad Axe. It was Atkinson's strategy to split up his forces in order to sweep the entire area of the Bad Axe. He actually did not see direct action in the battle.



**Colonel Henry Dodge**, commander of the southwest Michigan Territory (lead district) militia, along with Alexander Henry, first engaged the British Band at Wisconsin Heights. Dodge and Henry's militia also first encountered the Band on the Mississippi floodplain near the Bad Axe River as they were attempting to cross the river.

## Tensions Begin to Surface

Saukenuk, at Rock Island Illinois, had been the principle Sauk village for nearly a century before the U.S. made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Here, they farmed in the summer and went on annual winter buffalo hunts in Iowa. Following the Louisiana Purchase, tensions rose between the Sauk and American settlers, who began moving into the area. Soon thereafter, a party of Sauk killed several settlers, causing the government to demand that the murderers be turned in. In Sauk custom, retribution was offered. The government refused and demanded a treaty, which contained a provision allowing the Sauk to remain on the land until it was sold to private parties. This provision was not understood by the unauthorized Sauk delegation which signed the document.

## Tribal Differences

The continuing tension between the Sauk and the Americans led to division within the Sauk tribe. Black Hawk and his followers chose to stay at Saukenuk, while others followed the war chief Keokuk, who sought to lessen the impact of American settlers on their lives by leaving for Iowa to the west.

During the lead boom of the 1820's, some of the Sauk left for Iowa, but Black Hawk's British Band returned to Saukenuk until 1830-31. White settlers began moving into the area when land sales began around 1829. After a near attack by militia troops in 1831, Black Hawk signed a treaty agreeing to American terms. However, Black Hawk and his followers soon returned to the Rock River after believing stories of support from the Winnebago, Potawatomi, and the British in Canada.

## Start of the War - April 1832

At this time, Black Hawk's "British Band" consisted of some 2000 men, women and children. At the age of 65, Black Hawk returned with his band to White Cloud's Winnebago village. The arrival of U.S. troops under the charge of General Henry Atkinson caused the band to move further up the Rock River. Here Black Hawk learned that the other tribes and the British Army would not support the British Band.

## Stillman's Run - Surrender Attempt

The mounted militia, in advance of U.S. troops, burned White Cloud's village and continued to pursue the band. A delegation of the band was sent to surrender to 200 militia members under Isaiah Stillman. The militia distrusted the band's white flag, and killed one of the scouts. Black Hawk responded by setting up a small defensive ambush in which several of the militia were killed.

## July 1832

The British Band fled north to the swamps of southeast Wisconsin for several weeks. Finally, facing starvation, the band headed north and west through the Madison Lakes around the lead district towards the Wisconsin River. Meanwhile, two militia patrols under Henry Dodge and Alexander Henry found the trail and set off in pursuit.

## Battle at Wisconsin Heights - July 21, 1832

Dodge and Henry's militia caught up with the band as they prepared to cross the Wisconsin River. A rear guard tried to divert the militia away from the main body of women and children, and suffered heavy casualties. When the shooting stopped, the remainder of the band crossed the river. Some opted to float down the Wisconsin towards Iowa while 500 followed Black Hawk northwest towards the Mississippi River.

Atkinson reorganized his troops at Fort Blue Mounds and the abandoned town of Helena, selecting 1300 of the best equipped for the final chase. Although the band gained a five day lead, their progress was slow due to their starved condition. The band's trail was easy to follow due to an increasing number of corpses and discarded belongings.



## Battle at Bad Axe - August 1, 1832

The remnant British Band crossed the Kickapoo River and followed the ridgetop to the present day village of Red Mound. At this point, the band began working its way down Battle Hollow to the floodplain bench at its mouth. Once the floodplain was reached, the band prepared to cross the Mississippi River by stripping elm trees for bark canoes and cutting timber for rafts.

The pursuing army was only 10 miles behind, having crossed the Kickapoo at Soldiers Grove, and headed for the ridgetop. There they passed the bands previous night's camp near present day Retreat.

### August 1 - 4 p.m.

Shortly after the British Band reached the banks of the Mississippi River, the steamboat WARRIOR approached from upstream and the troops on board observed their presence. The Sauk stood unarmed along the shore and offered a white flag.

*"Lieutenant Kingsbury, who commanded, stated that they hoisted a white flag but would not send [a representative] aboard the steam boat...so accordingly he fired his six pounder, and likewise opened a fire of musketry upon them when they commences a heavy fire upon the boat" -John Wakefield, Surgeon's Mate*



For the next hour or so, the Indians skirmished with the WARRIOR, their musketry having little effect, while the cannon and musketry from the boat took greater toll. As the boat ran low on fuel it quit the fight returning to Prairie du Chien to refuel and rearm.

The first day of the Battle at Bad Axe resulted in the deaths of 23 Sauk, who were apparently buried that evening. That night, Black Hawk and three lodges left

the main body with the intent of joining the Chippewa to the north of the LaCrosse Winnebago. This group backtracked eastward up the bluffs, where they became aware of the Army's proximity. They then established a rear guard between the Army and the main Sauk band on the floodplain below.

*"I now began to fear that the whites would come up with my people and kill them before they could get across. I had determined to go and join the Chippewas; but reflecting that by this I could only save myself, I concluded to return and die with my people..." -Black Hawk*

### **The Battle Continues - August 2, 1832**

Atkinson awoke his troops at 2:00 a.m. to continue their march. The army broke camp while Alexander and Henry's militia brigades were delayed in trying to gather their horses. An advance moved westward over the ridgetop with Brigadier General Alexander Posey's Brigade in the rear.

As the sun rose, the troops witnessed the fog filled Mississippi Valley looking down on Battle Hollow. About 6:00 a.m., Dickson's spies encountered the rear guard of Indians and shooting began.

*"During the battle that ensued, my command killed fourteen Indians. After a short time, say an hour's engagement, General Dodge with his force and General Atkinson with this regular army, arrived at that place where I had engaged this party consisting of about forty Indians; and at about the time of their arrival, we had killed and dispersed the whole party." -Captain Joseph H. Dickson, Michigan Territory Militia*

During the skirmish the Indians lost about 14 while the spies suffered one critically wounded. The remaining rear guard attempted a diversion by withdrawing northward into the wooded ravines leading towards the Bad Axe River and away from the main band on the Mississippi.

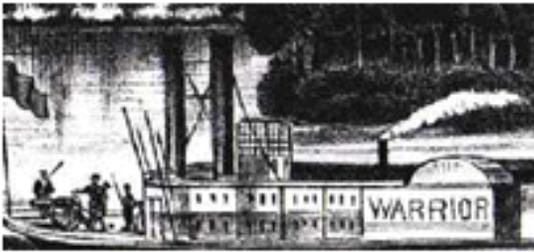


Atkinson arranged his forces into five parallel lines. The northern three of which followed the diversion towards the Bad Axe River.

Bringing up the south position was Henry's militia which found the Sauk trail leading down Battle Hollow. He and Dickson's spies followed this to the floodplain finding the main camp at what is now the Black Hawk Recreation Area.

At about 9:00 a.m., Dodge's militia and some Infantry troops descended Battle Bluff to the floodplain and joined the fighting.

The Indians fought back with desperation, but little effect. The dense forest and underbrush, fallen logs, backwater sloughs and thick marsh grass offered numerous hiding places and slowed the attacking forces, but also caused confusion in which the army killed untold numbers of women and children. The soldiers' advances forced some Indians into the river, while others continued to resist fleeing down the floodplain onto a series of willow bars. Here more Indians were killed while others jumped into the river. "...many of them men, women and children fled to the river and endeavored to escape by swimming in this situation. Our troops arrived on the bank and threw in a heavy fire which killed great numbers, unfortunately some women and children which was much deplored by the soldiers..." -Lieutenant Albert Sidney Johnson, Atkinson's Aide de Camp



Then the steamboat WARRIOR returned from Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien and immediately began raking a series of islands with the cannon. This drove some Indians who had made it across the channel into trees while sharpshooters on the boat picked off others seeking protection along the bank or swimming in the river. Later, the WARRIOR transported Zachary Taylor's Infantry and some militia over to the islands, which were swept in

extended fashion, resulting in the killing of several Indians while a number of women and children were taken prisoner.

## Aftermath of the Battle

*"they were now completely overthrown and beaten with the loss of 150 killed, 40 women and children taken prisoners and their baggage and about 100 horses killed and captured with a loss on our part of five regular killed and four wounded, six of Dodge's battalion wounded, six of Henry's wounded; one mortally and one of Posey's brigade, this action was decisive, the remnant of the band fled to the west of the Mississippi..." -Lieutenant Albert Sidney Johnson, Atkinson's Aide de Camp*

By early afternoon, the battle diminished and the Army established a headquarters and surgery on the east bank of the river. Later the prisoners and wounded were transported to Fort Crawford on board the WARRIOR. Along the way, the passengers observed bodies floating down river and noted that the river was tinged red from the blood.

For the rest of the day and next, troops and militia busied themselves with gathering their horses from the bluff, collecting valuables and capturing Indian horses. It also appears that five whites and a Menominee ally killed during the battle were buried at the battle site. On August 4, Atkinson ordered his entire force back to Prairie du Chien; the infantry aboard the steamboat WARRIOR and the mounted militia via the east shore of the river.

Most estimates of the number of Indians killed at the Battle of Bad Axe refer to upwards of 150. The full figure will never be known due to those shot or drowned in the river. Other than the 23 persons allegedly buried on the night of August 1, it is probable that the other Indian casualties were left on the surface or perhaps were dumped into the river.

This event was the catalyst for the Sauk losing land in eastern Iowa and the Winnebago losing land from western Wisconsin.

## Further Information

A driving tour of Black Hawk War Markers in Vernon and Crawford Counties, WI has been established by the Vernon County Historical Society. This tour allows individuals to follow the route traveled by Black Hawk and his band, learning about the war as they go.

## Children's Books on the Black Hawk War

LaVere Anderson  
*Black Hawk - Indian Patriot*

Jim Hargrove  
*The Story of the Black Hawk War*

Miriam Gurko  
*Indian America: The Black Hawk War*

Joanne Oppenheim  
*Black Hawk - Frontier Warrior*

**References for Adults**

Donald Jackson, editor  
*Black Hawk: An Autobiography*

Crawford B. Thayer  
*Massacre at Bad Axe in the Black Hawk War*

Roger L. Nichols  
*Black Hawk and the Warrior's Path*

Robert Boszhardt, producer  
*Battle at Bad Axe - video*

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\*All photos courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.