Black Hawk was a prominent war leader who led his followers to disaster in 1832. For at least 100 years before that year these Indians had migrated back and forth across the Mississippi River. Each fall they moved west or north to hunt and every spring they returned to their homes along the Rock River for planting. In defiance of the 1831 agreement to stay west of the Mississippi, or more probably because of misunderstanding, on April 6, 1832, about 900 Sac and Mesquakies, many of them women and children and elderly folk, came east across the river to plant their crops. To their dismay they found their homes destroyed and the land claimed by the white settlers. This was not understandable to the Indians as they believed land was there to be used, not to be claimed.

General Henry Atkinson led troops north to enforce the 1831 treaty. There were about 1,000 in Black Hawk’s company with only about 300 being warriors. They did not want to fight so Black Hawk avoided the soldiers and moved his band northward. When he failed to get needed support from other tribes, he decided to return west. He tried to communicate this to the whites but a lack of interpreters led to fighting. Raiding parties seeking food from white settlements terrified the pioneers. On May 8, Atkinson mustered 1,700 Illinois militia into federal service.

The Black Hawk Trail Markers

Black Hawk Trail Marker 1

Black Hawk Trail. 700 Sac Indians, July 31; 1200 soldiers, August 1, 1832 followed this ridge west into Vernon County over this ground. Two human skeletons were found at a spring west of Wider’s Hotel, Rising Sun, in 1852.

In the ravine across the road and to the northwest, a spring and abundance of trees provided an ideal overnight camp site for Black Hawk’s dwindling followers on July 31 and for army troops the next night. There are still springs in the ravine today.

After four months on the move with little food and increasing danger, the Indians’ situation was desperate when they arrived here. As early as mid-July, the elderly had been dying from starvation as the party left the Four Lakes area. The children began to die of malnutrition before the band could travel the 30 miles to the Wisconsin River. After the Battle of Wisconsin Heights, the retreat became a debacle as the bloated bodies of previously executed Indians were discovered. John Hawk’s dwindling followers on July 31 and for army troops the next night. There are still springs in the ravine today.

The militia had turned more to the west and as they neared the river, they encountered Black Hawk’s rear guard in what is now called Battle Hollow. Fierce fighting ensued.

By mid-July most of Black Hawk’s band were in hiding in the Four Lakes region near present-day Madison, Wisconsin. There, unable to hunt or fish effectively, they suffered malnutrition. When the elderly and children began to die, Black Hawk led the party west toward the Mississippi. He turned towards the Mississippi and here encountered the pick of Black Hawk’s warriors on to the north as a decoy in hopes of where Dr. Bean’s house stood. He was a loved and respected doctor in the community. His home was a place of beauty. Much to the dismay of many in the community, the house was torn down in 1992.

In their desperate need to reach the river, Indians fled more to the west as a shorter route. Black Hawk had sent 20 of his best warriors on to the north as a decoy in hopes that the army and militia would follow and thus give more time for the Indians to build rafts and escape. County Road UU is the route taken by Black Hawk’s 20 warriors as well as by the troops under Gen. Atkinson.

This marker is a short distance to the south of where Dr. Bean’s house stood. He was a loved and respected doctor in the community. His home was a place of beauty. Much to the dismay of many in the community, the house was torn down in 1992.

In their desperate need to reach the river, Indians fled more to the west as a shorter route. Black Hawk had sent 20 of his best warriors on to the north as a decoy in hopes that the army and militia would follow and thus give more time for the Indians to build rafts and escape. County Road UU is the route taken by Black Hawk’s 20 warriors as well as by the troops under Gen. Atkinson.

What a desperate situation in the Indian camp! But struggle on they must as they followed the trail north and west to the spot on the river that Black Hawk knew was the easiest place to cross as there were numerous islands and the water was not so deep.

The Black Hawk Trail Markers

Black Hawk Marker 2

Black Hawk Trail. On night of August 1 & 2, 1832, Gen. Atkinson’s army of 1200 mounted men in pursuit of Black Hawk encamped in this area from 8 p.m. until 3 a.m. The steamer from which men and horses drank is 140 rods northwest.

It was from this camp that General Atkinson, for the first time, sent the regular army troops in pursuit of the faltering Indian band. Only the volunteer militiamen had fought so far.

Black Hawk Marker 3

Black Hawk Trail. At shallow pond 115 rods due south Black Hawk’s 700 Sac Indians encamped July 31, 1832. Soldiers found six decrepit Indians there and “left them behind”. Lee Sterling in 1846 found a handful of silver brooches there, hence concluded those killed were squaws.

What a desperate situation in the Indian camp! But struggle on they must as they followed the trail north and west to the spot on the river that Black Hawk knew was the easiest place to cross as there were numerous islands and the water was not so deep.