
The Autobiography of Black Hawk 1833

President Andrew Jackson's signing of the Removal Act in 1830 shifted U.S. federal policy toward American Indian nations by legally redefining them as "domestic dependent nation[s]," whereas they had once been considered foreign and sovereign entities. This change extended state sovereignty over Indian territories, in some cases leaving Indian relations beyond federal jurisdiction. This policy of the Jackson administration encouraged the harassment of Indians at the local level in attempts to expedite their removal. The Black Hawk War (1832) represented not only the culmination of 28 years of Sauk confusion regarding the 1804 Treaty of St. Louis but also resistance to the coercive U.S. policy of removal. The authenticity of Black Hawk's (1767–1838) autobiography has been questioned by many scholars, because it was dictated by Black Hawk to an interpreter and further edited into manuscript form by a newspaper editor. Citing the style of prose as its main flaw, this skepticism was only refueled when the same editor re-edited the work in 1882, by adding additional text not included in the original publication. Despite these criticisms, Black Hawk's autobiography continues to be accepted as a rare (if problematic) account of Indian removal from an Indian perspective. —Benjamin Reiss

Bibliography: *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, edited by Donald Jackson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1955); Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

[A] *The meeting at which the Treaty of 1804 was signed was originally convened to arrange the release of a Rock River Sauk imprisoned in St. Louis for killing an American. Instead, the result was the cession of lands in Lower Wisconsin and Upper Illinois. Black Hawk himself did not attend this signing and his understanding was dependent on accounts given to him by Quashquame, one of four men sent to negotiate the release of the Sauk prisoner.*

[1] Quashquame and party remained a long time absent. They at length returned and encamped near the village, a short distance below it, and did not come up that day, nor did any one approach their camp. They appeared to be dressed in fine coats and had medals. From these circumstances we were in hopes that they had brought good news. Early the next morning the Council Lodge was crowded, Quashquame and party came up and gave us the following account of their mission:

[2] On our arrival at St. Louis we met our American father [William Henry Harrison] and explained to him our business, urging the release of our friend. The American chief told us he wanted land. We agreed to give him some on the west side of the Mississippi, likewise more on the Illinois side opposite Jeffreon. When the business was all arranged we expected to have our friend released to come home with us. About the time we were ready to start our brother was let out of the prison. He started and ran a short distance when he was SHOT DEAD!¹ This was all they could remember of what had been said and done. It subsequently appeared that they had been drunk the greater part of the time while at St. Louis.

¹ Territorial governor William Henry Harrison's account differs from that of Black Hawk. Quashquame and his party accompanied the prisoner to St. Louis, who was turning himself over to American authorities as a peace offering. Not having heard that he had been pardoned by President Jefferson (Jefferson learned the Sauk man had killed in self-defense), the prisoner was shot while attempting to escape (Jackson, 54).

[3] This was all myself and nation knew of the treaty of 1804. It has since been explained to me. I found by that treaty, that all of the country east of the Mississippi, and south of Jeffreon was ceded to the United States for one thousand dollars a year. I will leave it to the people of the United States to say whether our nation was properly represented in this treaty? Or whether we received a fair compensation for the extent of country ceded by these four individuals? I could say much more respecting this treaty, but I will not at this time. It has been the origin of all our serious difficulties with the whites.

[B] *The Sac planned to sign a peace treaty with the U.S. following the War of 1812 but failed to travel to St. Louis in 1815 when one of their civil chiefs fell ill. The Sauk instead sought the council of the British over the disputed 1804 treaty. Unknown to the Sauk, the peace treaty they eventually signed in 1816 only reaffirmed the conditions of the 1804 treaty. Black Hawk was present at the 1816 treaty signing and here gave his account of its events.*

[1] The great chief at St. Louis [William Clark] having sent word for us to come down and confirm the treaty, we did not hesitate, but started immediately that we might smoke the peace pipe with him. On our arrival we met the great chiefs in council. They explained to us the words of our Great Father [President James Madison] at Washington, accusing us of heinous crimes and many misdemeanors, particularly in not coming down when first invited. We knew very well that our Great Father had deceived us and thereby forced us to join the British, and could not believe that he had put this speech into the mouths of those chiefs to deliver to us. I was not a civil chief and consequently made no reply, but our civil chiefs told the commissioner that, "What you say is a lie. Our Great Father sent us no such speech, he knew that the situation in which we had been placed was caused by him." The white chiefs appeared very angry at this reply and said, "We will break off the treaty and make war against you, as you have grossly insulted us."

[2] Our chiefs had no intention of insulting them and told them so, saying, "we merely wish to explain that you have told us a lie, without any desire to make you angry, in the same manner that you whites do when you do not believe what is told you." The council then proceeded and the pipe of peace was smoked.

[3] Here for the first time, I touched the goose quill to the treaty not knowing, however, that, by the act I consented to give away my village. Had that been explained to me I should have opposed it and never would have signed their treaty, as my recent conduct will clearly prove.

[4] What do we know of the manners, the laws, and the customs of the white people? They might buy our bodies for dissection, and we would touch the goose quill to confirm it and not know what we were doing. This was the case with me, and my people in touching the goose quill for the first time.

[C] *Black Hawk described the developing conflict on the frontier between white settlers and the Rock River Sauk over disputed land claims.*

[1] The party opposed to removing called on me for my opinion. I gave it freely, and after questioning Quashquame about the sale of our lands, he assured me that he "never had

consented to the sale of our village.” I now promised this party to be the leader, and raised the standard of opposition to Keokuk, with a full determination not to leave our village. I had an interview with Keokuk, to see if this difficulty could not be settled with our Great Father [President Andrew Jackson], and told him to propose to give any other land that our Great Father might choose, even our lead mines, to be peaceably permitted to keep the small point of land on which our village was situated. I was of the opinion that the white people had plenty of land and would never take our village from us. Keokuk promised to make an exchange if possible, and applied to our agent, and the great chief at St. Louis, who had charge of all the agents, for permission to go to Washington for that purpose. This satisfied us for a time. We started to our hunting grounds with good hopes that something would be done for us. During the winter we received information that three families of whites had come to our village and destroyed some of our lodges, were making fences and dividing our cornfields for their own use. They were quarreling among themselves about their lines of division. I started immediately for Rock River, a distance of ten days’ travel, and on my arrival found the report true. I went to my lodge and saw a family occupying it. I wished to talk to them but they could not understand me. I then went to Rock Island; the agent being absent, I told the interpreter what I wanted to say to these people, viz: “Not to settle on our lands, nor trouble our fences, that there was plenty of land in the country for them to settle upon, and that they must leave our village, as we were coming back to it in the spring.” The interpreter wrote me a paper, I went back to the village and showed it to the intruders, but could not understand their reply. I presumed, however, that they would remove as I expected them to. I returned to Rock Island, passed the night there and had a long conversation with the trader. He advised me to give up and make my village with Keokuk on the Iowa River. I told him that I would not...”

[2] I returned to my hunting ground, after an absence of one moon, and related what I had done. In a short time we came up to our village, and found that the whites had not left it, but that others had come, and that the greater part of our cornfields had been enclosed. When we landed the whites appeared displeased because we came back. We repaired the lodges that had been left standing and built others. Keokuk came to the village, but his object was to persuade others to follow him to the Iowa. He had accomplished nothing towards making arrangements for us to remain, or to exchange other lands for our village. There was no more friendship existing between us. I looked upon him as a coward and no brave, to abandon his village to be occupied by strangers. What right had these people to our village, and our fields, which the Great Spirit had given us to live upon?

[3] My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon and cultivate as far as necessary for their subsistence, and so long as they occupy and cultivate it they have the right to the soil, but if they voluntarily leave it, then any other people have a right to settle on it. Nothing can be sold but such things as can be carried away.

[4] In consequence of the improvements of the intruders on our fields, we found considerable difficulty to get ground to plant a little corn. Some of the whites permitted us to plant small patches in the fields they had fenced, keeping all the best ground for themselves. Our women had great difficulty in climbing their fences, being unaccustomed to the kind, and were ill-treated if they left a rail down.

[5] One of my old friends thought he was safe. His cornfield was on a small island in Rock River. He planted his corn, it came up well, but the white man saw it; he wanted it, and took his teams over, ploughed up the crop and replanted it for himself. The old man shed tears, not for himself but on account of the distress his family would be in if they raised no corn.

[6] The white people brought whisky to our village, made our people drink, and cheated them out of their homes, guns and traps. This fraudulent system was carried to such an extent that I apprehended serious difficulties might occur, unless a stop was put to it. Consequently I visited all the whites and begged them not to sell my people whisky. One of them continued the practice openly; I took a party of my young men, went to his house, took out his barrel, broke in the head and poured out the whisky. I did this for fear that some of the whites, might get killed by my people when they were drunk.

[7] Our people were treated very badly by the whites on many occasions. At one time a white man beat one of our women cruelly, for pulling a few suckers of corn out of his field to suck when she was hungry. At another time one of our young men was beat with clubs by two white men, for opening a fence, which crossed our road to take his horse through. His shoulder blade was broken and his body badly bruised, from the effects of which he soon after died.

[8] Bad and cruel as our people were treated by the whites, not one of them was hurt or molested by our band. I hope this will prove that we are a peaceable people--having permitted ten men to take possession of our cornfields, prevent us from planting corn, burn our lodges, ill-treat our women, and beat to death our men without offering resistance to their barbarous cruelties. This is a lesson worthy for the white man to learn: to use forbearance when injured.

[9] We acquainted our agent daily with our situation, and through him the great chief at St. Louis, and hoped that something would be done for us. The whites were complaining at the same time that we were intruding upon their rights. They made it appear that they were the injured party, and we the intruders. They called loudly to the great war chief to protect their property.

[D] *Black Hawk expressed disbelief towards the United States' reselling of Sauk ancestral lands.*

[1] I was told that according to the treaty, we had no right to remain on the lands sold, and that the government would force us to leave them. There was but a small portion however that had been sold, the balance remaining in the hands of the government. We claimed the right, if we had no other, to "live and hunt upon it as long as it remained the property of the government," by a stipulation in the treaty that required us to evacuate it after it had been sold. This was the land that we wished to inhabit and thought we had a right to occupy.

[2] I started early to Malden to see the chief of my British Father, and told him my story. He gave the same reply that the chief on the Wabash had given, and in justice to him I must say he never gave me any bad advice, but advised me to apply to our American Father, who, he said, would do us justice. I next called on the great chief at Detroit and made the same statement to him that I had made to the chief of our British Father. He gave me the same reply. He said if we had not sold our lands, and would remain peaceably on them, that we would not be

disturbed. This assured me that I was right, and determined me to hold out as I had promised my people.

[3] I returned from Malden late in the fall. My people were gone to their hunting ground whither I followed. Here I learned that they had been badly treated all summer by the whites, and that a treaty had been held at Prairie du Chien. Keokuk and some of our people attended it, and found that our Great Father had exchanged a small strip of the land that had been ceded by Quashquame and his party, with the Pottowattomies for a portion of their lead near Chicago. That the object of this treaty was to get it back again, and that the United States had agreed to give them sixteen thousand dollars a year, forever for this small strip of land, it being less than a twentieth part of that taken from our nation for one thousand dollars a year. This bears evidence of something I cannot explain. This land they say belonged to the United States. What reason then, could have induced them to exchange it with the Pottowattomies if it was so valuable? Why not keep it? Or if they found they had made a bad bargain with the Pottowattomies, why not take back their land at a fair proportion of what they gave our nation for it! If this small portion of the land that they took from us for one thousand dollars a year, be worth sixteen thousand dollars a year forever to the Pottowattomies, then the whole tract of country taken from us ought to be worth, to our nation, twenty times as much as this small fraction.

[4] Here I was again puzzled to find out how the white people reasoned, and began to doubt whether they had any standard of right and wrong.

[E] *Black Hawk returned to Rock Island finding that conditions had only worsened. Complicating matters was that Keokuk, a Sauk civil chief, advocated Sauk migration west of the Mississippi. Though defiant, Black Hawk was hopeful that a peaceful resolution could be reached.*

[1] On my arrival again at my village, with my band increased, I found it worse than before. I visited Rock Island and the agent again ordered me to quit my village. He said that if we did not, troops would be sent to drive us off. He reasoned with me and told me it would be better for us to be with the rest of our people, so that we might avoid difficulty and live in peace. The interpreter joined him and gave me so many good reasons that I almost wished I had not undertaken the difficult task I had pledged myself to my brave band to perform. In this mood I called upon the trader, who is fond of talking, and had long been my friend, but now amongst those who advised me to give up my village. He received me very friendly and went on to defend Keokuk in what he had done, endeavoring to show me that I was bringing distress on our women and children. He inquired if some terms could not be made that would be honorable to me and satisfactory to my braves, for us to remove to the west side of the Mississippi. I replied that if our Great Father could do us justice and make the proposition, I could then give up honorably. He asked me "if the great chief at St. Louis would give us six thousand dollars to purchase provisions and other articles, if I would give up peaceably and remove to the west side of the Mississippi?" After thinking some time I agreed that I could honorably give up, being paid for it, according to our customs, but told him that I could not make the proposal myself, even if I wished, because it would be dishonorable of me to do so. He said that he would do it by sending word to the great chief at St. Louis that he could remove us peaceably for the amount stated, to the west side of the Mississippi. A steamboat arrived at the island during my stay. After its departure the trader told me that he had requested a war chief, who was stationed at Galena, and was on board the steamboat, to make the offer to the great chief at St. Louis, and that he would soon be back and

bring his answer. I did not let my people know what had taken place for fear they would be displeased. I did not much like what had been done myself, and tried to banish it from my mind.

[2] After a few days had passed the war chief returned and brought an answer that “the great chief at St. Louis would give us nothing, and that if we did not remove immediately we would be driven off.”

[3] I was not much displeased with the answer they brought me because I would rather have laid my bones with those of my forefathers than remove for any consideration. Yet if a friendly offer had been made as I expected, I would, for the sake of our women and children, have removed peaceably.

[4] I now resolved to remain in my village, and make no resistance if the military came, but submit to my fate. I impressed the importance of this course on all my band, and directed them in case the military came not to raise an arm against them.

[F] *Meeting with federal officials again in St. Louis to settle the dispute over lands previously ceded in 1804, Black Hawk remained defiant in his refusal to endorse Sauk relocation west of the Mississippi. Promised by the Winnebago prophet Wabokieshiek that other tribes in the Mississippi Valley would ally with the Sauk, as would the British, Black Hawk resisted removal westward. These hopes were false, and ultimately the Black Hawk War that ensued lasted only 15 weeks with mainly Sauk casualties.*

[1] The war chief [Major General Edmund P. Gaines] arrived and convened a council at the agency. Keokuk and Wapello were sent for, and with a number of their band were present. The council house was opened and all were admitted, and myself and band were sent for to attend. When we arrived at the door singing a war song, and armed with lances, spears, war clubs, bows and arrows, as if going to battle, I halted and refused to enter, as I could see no necessity or propriety in having the room crowded with those who were already there. If the council was convened for us, why then have others in our room. The war chief having sent all out except Keokuk, Wapello and a few of their chiefs and braves, we entered the council in this warlike appearance, being desirous of showing the war chief that we were not afraid. He then rose and made a speech.

[2] He said: “The president is very sorry to be put to the trouble and expense of sending so large a body of soldiers here to remove you from the lands you have long since ceded to the United States. Your Great Father has already warned you repeatedly, through your agent, to leave the country, and he is very sorry to find that you have disobeyed his orders. Your Great Father wishes you well, and asks nothing from you but what is reasonable and right. I hope you will consult your own interests, and leave the country you are occupying, and go to the other side of the Mississippi.”

[3] I replied: “We have never sold our country. We never received any annuities from our American father, and we are determined to hold on to our village.”

[4] The war chief, apparently angry, rose and said: “Who is Black Hawk? Who is Black Hawk?”

[5] I responded: “I am a Sac! My forefather was a Sac! I and all the nations call me a Sac!!”

[6] “I came here neither to beg nor hire you to leave your village. My business is to remove you, peaceably if I can, forcibly if I must! I will now give you two days in which to remove, and if you do not cross the Mississippi by that time, I will adopt measures to force you away.”

[7] I told him that I never would consent to leave my village, and was determined not to leave it!

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Black Hawk describe the proceedings for the St. Louis Treaty of 1804?
2. What impact did the language barrier and differences in traditions (oral vs. written) have in affecting each party’s perception of treaty proceedings?
3. What role did the Black Hawk War have in facilitating Sauk removal west of the Mississippi? Was it really a war, or just U.S. Indian removal policies already at work?

SOURCE: *Autobiography of Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak, or Black Hawk, Dictated by Himself*, interpreted by Antoine Leclair and edited by J. B. Patterson (St. Louis: Press of Continental Printing Co., 1882; first edition, 1833). Section and paragraph numbers have been added.

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