

DOCUMENTING THE EDWARDS TRACE

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1812, tensions in the Old Northwest Territory were high. Shortly after war was declared, the occupants of Fort Dearborn (in the Chicago area) were attacked with heavy loss of life, creating panic in the settlements to the south.¹

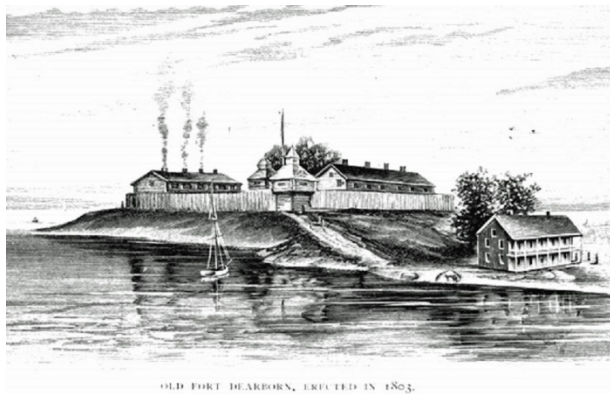


Figure 1: Fort Dearborn, 1803

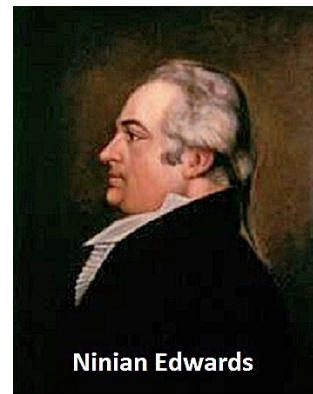


Figure 2: Governor Ninian Edwards

In the fall of 1812, Territorial Governor Ninian Edwards and some 350 Army Regulars and State Militia marched from Camp Russell near Edwardsville, Illinois, north to Peoria Lake to attack Native American villages thought to be aligned with the British.² They followed a worn pathway that coursed northward across the prairie, likely used by Native American groups for a millennia, and which would become known as the Edwards Trace in honor of the Governor's march. After the war ended in 1815, land treaties were made with the Native American groups who lived within Illinois' boundaries and opened the prairie for settlement. By the 1820s, settlers began the northward expansion into the prairie following the pathway made famous by Edwards. As the land parcels were sold, the geometric property lines began to alter the meandering course of the trail. By the mid-1800s, much of the original trail was abandoned and, in many cases, plowed into the topsoil and forgotten as Illinois transformed into the agricultural powerhouse it is today. The following text recaps efforts underway to locate the Edwards Trace with physical proof and ultimately assign a date to the trail based on cultural sites within the trail's corridor. If the trail can be mapped onto modern topography, it may aid future studies by creating a window into human migration across the landscape in early Illinois' history.

THE MAPS

Several cartographers show the course of the Trace in detail, such as Rene Paul's 1815 map, Major Stephen Long's military maps in 1816, Jacob Judy's road survey map in 1819, and Daniel Smith's 1819 Kickapoo Treaty map. Additionally, there are many county plat maps and

GLOs (Government Land Office surveys) from the 1820s to the 1870s that show portions of the road in short segments that had avoided the plow. It is from these maps that much was learned about where the Trace crossed the landscape. 3

Major Stephen H. Long was a Dartmouth College trained mathematician and cartographer/explorer who was one of ten Topographical Engineers in 1816. 4 He was assigned to Fort Belle Fontaine in Missouri near St. Louis in the summer of 1816 and charged with evaluating the fortifications within the Illinois Territory as well as improvements that could be made to transportation, such as a canal that could link the Illinois River to Lake Michigan.

His first trip was by boat up to Fort Clark at the foot of Peoria Lake to evaluate the fort. He then returned to Fort Belle Fontaine overland, passing through central Illinois. It appears he crossed the Sangamon River north of present day Springfield, Illinois, then followed the western timber south, passing through the Chatham area and following the west side of the Macoupin Creek timber and rejoining boats at the junction of the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. On his next trip in September, he followed an overland route passing through Cahokia Mounds, Edwardsville, and followed the Trace to Peoria, and eventually Chicago and Fort Wayne. 5

Of the two maps he created, he used a sextant, mercurial horizon, chronometer and compass to plot a course across the landscape similar to ocean navigation. A position was noted at various points, with a straight line connecting the fixes. No notes can be located from his 1816 sorties and we are only left to guess what he saw or who he met from information gleaned from his maps, each seven feet wide by ten feet tall when all ten panels are placed together. Trying to reconcile his maps onto modern topography has proven to be quite a challenge. His north/south distances are accurate as latitude can be fixed from the sun, but the longitude distances are off a bit as calculations are made with a chronometer, and time keeping was far from perfect in the day. 6

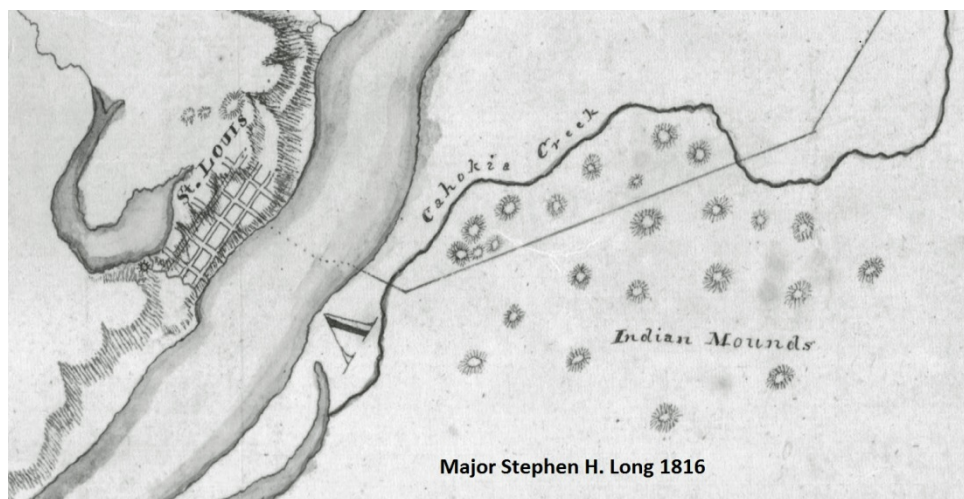


Figure 3: Major Stephen Long's 1816 map showing trail from St. Louis through the East St. Louis Mound Group and crossing Cahokia Creek.

Long is best known for his western explorations and he logged over 20,000 miles mapping the new country. He was later assigned to river improvements, dabbled in emerging railroad engineering, and died shortly after the Civil War and is buried in Alton, Illinois.

Daniel Smith was involved in the 1819 Kickapoo Treaty deliberations in Edwardsville. He drafted a map of Illinois to represent the land the Kickapoo were signing away and relied on landmarks that the Kickapoo would recognize. On the map, the Trace is shown passing by familiar points, streams and land features. Early settlers are shown such as Latham's Farm at Elk Hart Hill and Musick's Farm on Sugar Creek. The map is colorful and detailed with surprising accuracy given the date when created.

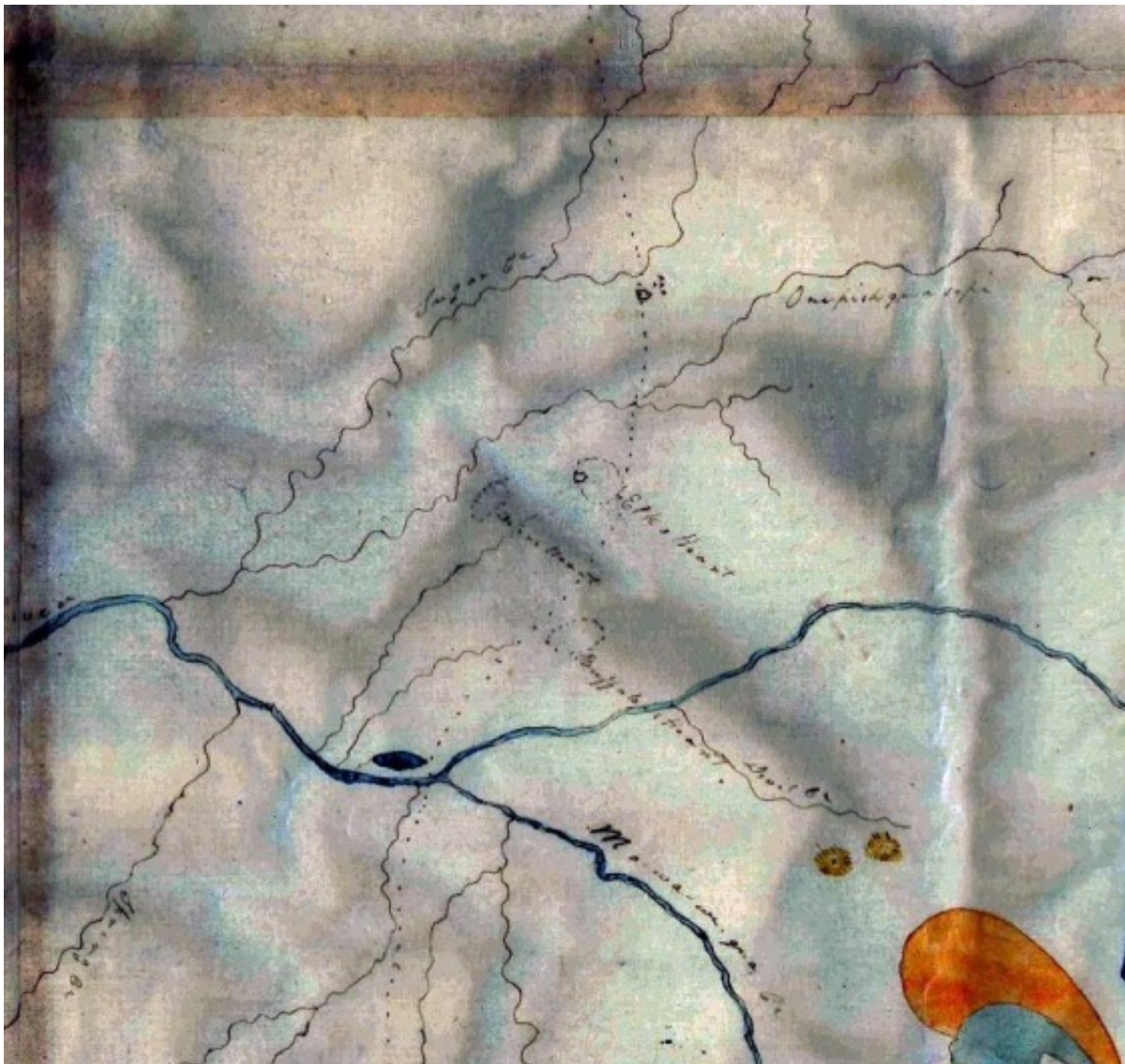


Figure 4: Section of Daniel Smith's 1819 map showing the Edwards Trace as a dotted line in the center as it passed through central Illinois.

The third map, and perhaps the most informative, is Jacob Judy's 1819 map of the Trace as it coursed from Edwardsville to Clear Lake on Springfield's east side. Madison County was petitioned in 1819 to draft a plan for a road for future settlements in the Sangamon Country. In the fall of 1819 Jacob Judy was contracted to survey the road in detail, assign mile posts, and report back to the Commission with a map in the spring of 1820. The resulting map gives the most detailed course of the trail to date and has proven quite valuable in locating the old road. Reconciling Judy's map onto modern topography has been an easier process due to his accuracy, although not without challenges, one of which was his inclusion of an extra mile somewhere between Macoupin Point and Clear Lake, which became known as the Glenarm Triangle. After many attempts to get the map to fit, the errant mile was removed and the track fell into place.

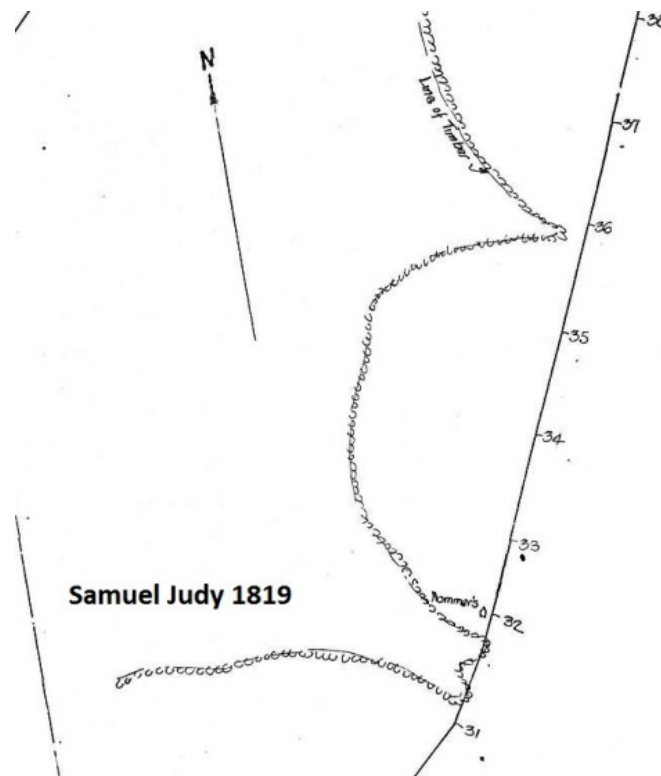
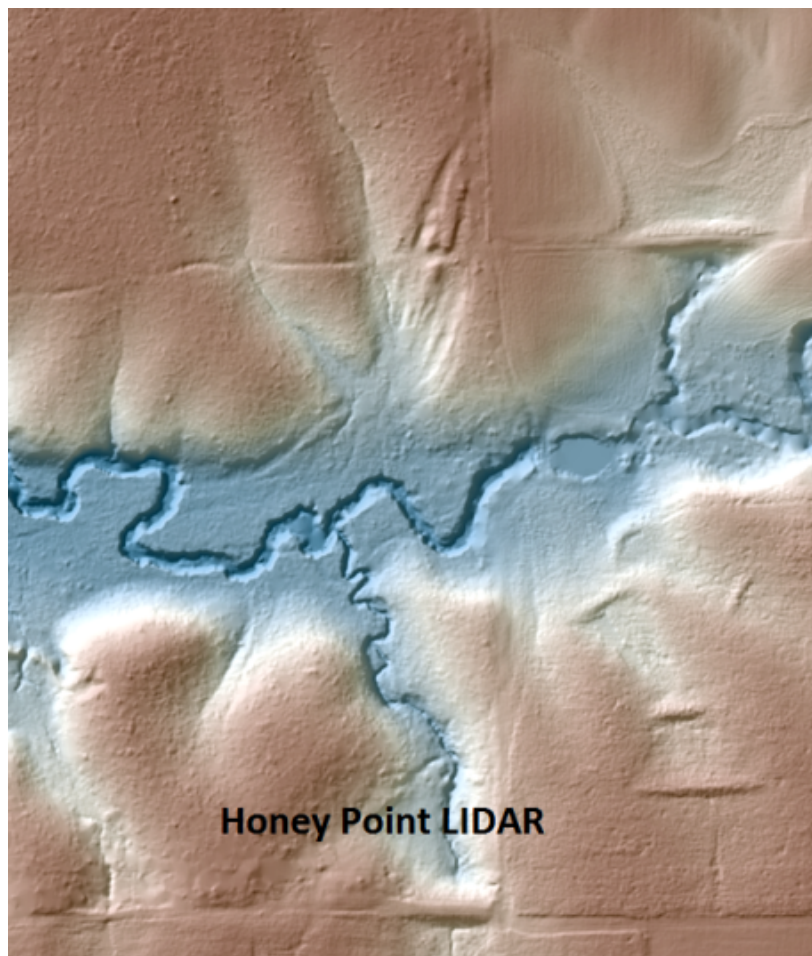


Figure 5: Portion of Jacob Judy's 1819 map, showing mile markers, tree line, and a home.

Although Judy depicts a singular track on his map, it is believed the trail had multiple tracks running adjacent to one another, as unimproved dirt roads were subject to wet conditions. The wagons of the day impacted the top soil and soon scoured a rut, which rain water and snow melt would fill, creating a muddy bog. LIDAR imaging of Honey Point shows several tracks running parallel to each other. Weather conditions would have dictated the best track to take. For the traveler, mud, and more mud, was the norm.

At several locations in the Dry Point area, multiple tracks are seen in the LIDAR imaging, similar to Honey Point. But north of the Sangamon River, the trail splits into at least two distinct tracks, one following the War Trace that Edwards followed, bypassing Buffalo Heart

and the east side of Elk Heart. [*Editor's Note: the towns are variously known as Elk Heart, Elk Hart, Elkhart and Buffalo Heart or Buffalo Hart on the maps and throughout their history; today they are known as Elkhart and Buffalo Hart*]. The other trail crosses Sugar Creek south of the Sangamon crossing, following the western edge of the Sangamon timber through German Prairie, then crossing the Sangamon to the west of Wolf Creek (later identified as Chapman's Ferry) and Portland Landing, a paper town where the *Talisman* landed in the 1830s. Eventually the two trails rejoin north of Elk Hart before reaching Salt Creek. Once Latham built his tavern on the west side of Elk Hart Hill, the die was cast and the trail re-established itself close to what would eventually become the Route 66 corridor. Research shows that the trail was not abandoned in one fell swoop, but over many years as bits and pieces were aligned with modern roads as population centers and property lines were established.



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b

Figure 6: (a) Honey Point Lidar image showing remnants of the Trace, and (b), a remnant of the Trace still visible as a rut in the surface.

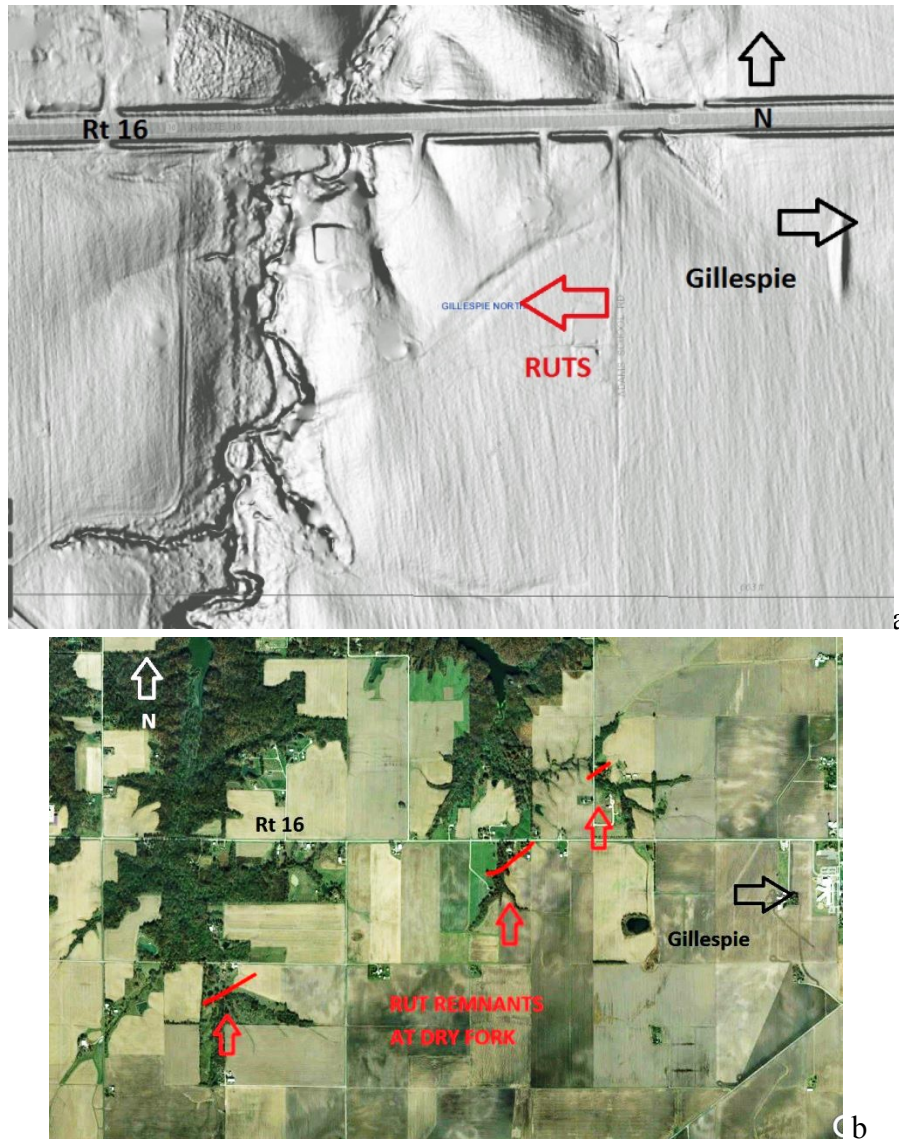


Figure 7: (a) Dry Point area Lidar image, showing a section of the Trace with several tracks or ruts, apparently made to go around muddy areas, and (b), an aerial view of that region showing several areas where visible ruts still can be seen on the ground.

ACROSS THE PRAIRIE

The early trail followed the natural topography of the landscape using tree points, riverine environments, and open prairie expanses guiding the course. Although the landscape between Edwardsville and Peoria was mostly prairie, the trail never strayed far from timber, avoiding the openness of the prairie where possible. Jacob Judy's map shows how the tree points guided the course to give the traveler line of sight navigation references. The names of the points reflect their landmark status and soon found their way onto modern topographic maps. Names such as Dry Point, Honey Point, Shaw Point, and Macoupin Point guided the traveler along the trail, providing shelter, food and fuel and, in many cases, fresh water to replenish man and beast. The

sight of a tree point must have been reassuring to travelers along the trail, as being lost in the open prairie likely created heightened stress.

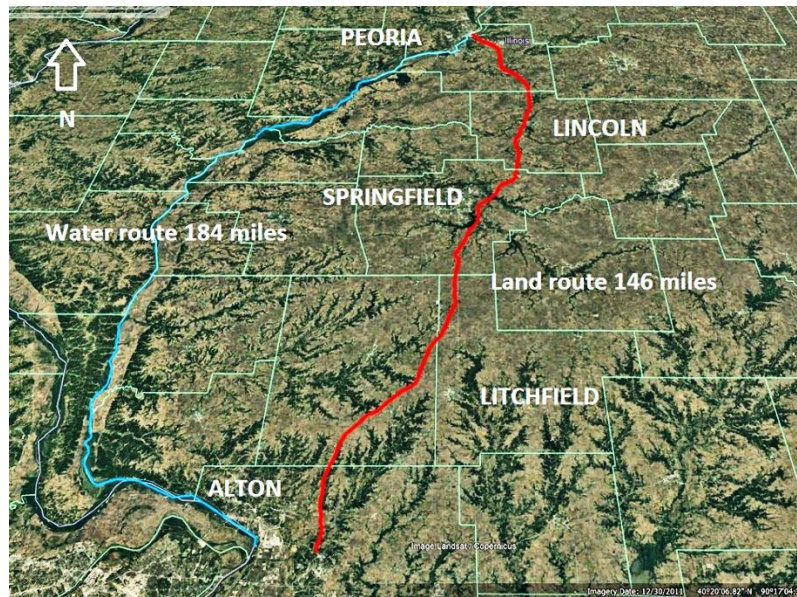


Figure 8: Aerial view showing the path of the 146-mile-long Edwards Trace from Edwardsville in the south to Peoria in the north.

In 1856, Mrs. John Kinzie writes in her autobiography, *Wau-Bun*, about being lost in a northern Illinois prairie in January 1831...*“In this open country there are no landmarks. One elevation is so exactly like another, that if you lose your trail there is almost as little hope of regaining it as of finding a pathway in the midst of the ocean... The ride was as gloomy and desolate as could well be imagined. A rolling prairie, unvaried by forest or stream- hillock rising after hillock, at every ascent of which we vainly hoped to see a distant fringe of timber.”* 7 The prairie landscape offered little protection from wind or foe, and the grass was a poor fuel for fires.

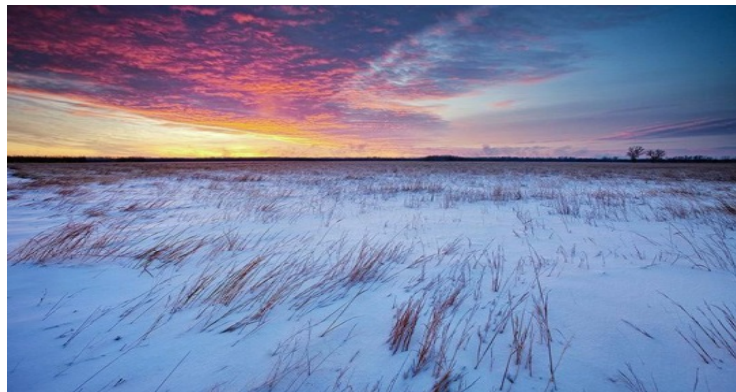


Figure 9: The Illinois prairie in the winter showing the bleakness of the terrain.

William Keating, who accompanied Major Long to Minnesota in 1819, writes...*”In traveling over a prairie country the party were often obliged to lengthen, or shorten their day’s journey, in order to accommodate themselves to the security of water and wood.”* 8 Though largely dry, there were marshy areas to navigate around or risk being caught in a quagmire. The terrain between Bunker Hill and Springfield has many ancient glacial drumlins, with lowland swales between the ridge tops. Formed during the Illinoian Glaciation some 130,000 years ago, the ridges created when the ice retreated played a role in the course of the trail, which diverted here and there to remain up on the elevated ground, and which can be seen in LIDAR images.

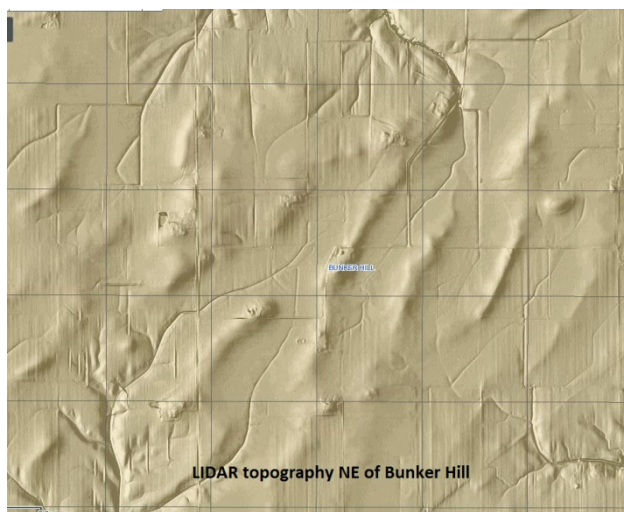


Figure 10: LIDAR image of Bunker Hill area showing glacial drumlins across the terrain.

From Lincoln northward to Peoria, the trail passes over moraines and other glacial deposits from the more recent Wisconsin Glaciation some 12,000 years ago and the topography becomes more exaggerated and less worn by time and elements. It is sometimes difficult to imagine that glaciers shaped the trail route. When traveling across the landscape in central Illinois, one gets the impression that the flat featureless topography is an untouched savanna. But, at Brush Creek crossing immediately NE of Divernon, a large erratic stone sits perched on the stream bank, having been deposited some 130,000 years prior by ice.



Figure 11: Erratic boulder at Brush Creek, deposited by glaciers.

It is just south of this area where we used a feature seen on the Judy map to align the track onto modern topography. At mile 51, Judy draws a sharp course deviation, which we call the Judy Wiggle, just north of Macoupin Point, or modern day Farmersville. At first it was difficult to imagine why, as the area of the wiggle is an unremarkable prairie expanse. However, topographic maps and images give us a hint. The wiggle was a needed course correction to circumnavigate a marshy spot in the prairie. Just to the east is another larger marshy area, so the trail had to squeeze between the marshes using ancient drumlin ridge tops to keep on dry ground. LIDAR imaging recently became available for Macoupin and Montgomery County and the images bear this out.

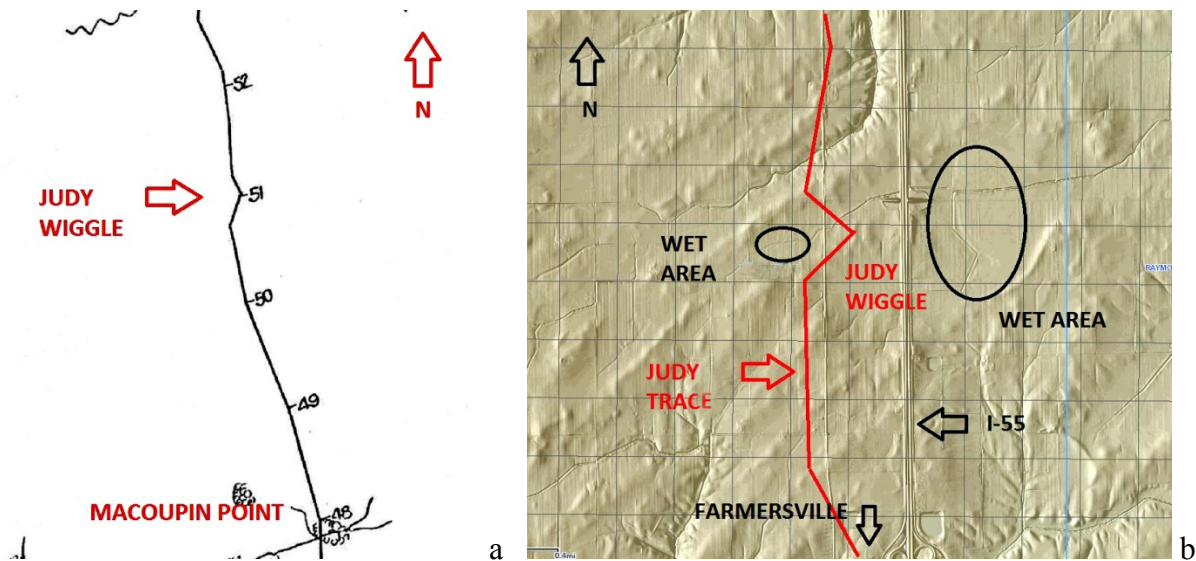


Figure 12: (a) The Judy map showing the “wobble” at Mile-51 north of Macoupin Point (modern Farmersville); (b) A Lidar map of the same general area with the Trace superimposed and showing the “wobble” was made to avoid some wet, boggy areas.

Although the Trace was crossing the highest point separating the Macoupin and Sangamon watersheds, spring water seeps up through the grass creating a bog in an otherwise dry expanse. This wobble feature is also seen on Daniel Smith’s 1819 Treaty map, so evidently the marshy area was well known to Native American and Euro-American travelers alike.

The Judy wobble and the marshy area created a reference point to align the 1819 map with modern topography giving a more complete picture as to where the trail ran, and to allow research to pinpoint pedestrian surveys to gather clues in the terrain. As Judy terminates his map at the shores of Clear Lake, from there northward the location of the Trace is less clear. We know Edwards marched just west of Buffalo Hart, and just east of Elk Hart, and crossed the Salt Creek close to present day Lincoln, as they reported seeing the Kickapoo Village (Rhoades Site) to the west, but from there the course gets sketchy. Musick placed a ferry at his farm across Sugar Creek and the Musick property location is known, but Long’s map suggests a crossing a bit farther east and follows the West Sugar Creek timber. 1820s GLO’s of present day Tazewell County show the Fort Clark Road a bit farther out west in the open expanse of the prairie, so again we are faced with the dual tracks, and which is to be identified as the Edwards Trace? A lot more research is called for, especially in the northern portion of the Trace.

THE AGE OF THE ROAD

Research has been centered on locating the trail with little study on the cultural sites associated with it, which may assist in identifying an age to assign to the trail. The Historic Period has been widely written about, such as during the War of 1812, and the settlements that followed, land sales records, road commission reports, and personal essays. But prior to the arrival of the Americans to the American Bottom, written clues are scant. Historical mentions of French Jesuit travels, warring tribes relocating within the boundaries of Illinois, fur traders and merchants in the days of New France, would certainly suggest the trail was used for over a century before the Americans arrived. Some cultural sites may bear this out.

For the Prehistoric Period, clues will have to be found in the soil. A lot of research will be required to categorize the cultural sites along the pathway to see if a common thread can be found. As a sedentary farming culture, perhaps the Mississippians could provide a clue. Early results, though far from conclusive, suggest a linear settlement pattern of Mississippian sites may be seen. There are several sites along the Trace corridor that appear in alignment with the trail, such as the Mississippian household in Glenarm, several time appropriate sites on Springfield’s east side, and several more sites in the Lake Fork area south of Lincoln, all within the boundaries of the trail.

From the survey report of the Glenarm Site, some of the pottery shares similarities with pottery from the Chilton Site at Lake Fork south of Lincoln, perhaps suggesting a connection between the two. Long’s 1816 map shows the trail he followed passing through the East St. Louis Mound Group and through the Cahokia Mounds site near Collinsville, Illinois, then northward into the prairie. Is it possible the trail he followed was 800 years old? It was likely the

Mississippians followed an overland route north to Peoria Lake and points beyond. As the Trace is 40 miles shorter to Peoria Lake than a water route, perhaps it was an easier and more desirable path.

Another factor to consider is food production, as it may have been necessary for the Cahokia inhabitants to import bulk food such as maize to feed their masses. Perhaps the farmstead at Glenarm, although at some distance away, may have helped provision Cahokia, funneling food down the Trace to supplement food stocks. Another thought is that the Trace passes close to several shallow lakes where a tuber was harvested known as *macoupin*, identified today as the yellow pond lily or common spatterdock.



Figure 13: Illustration of the Macoupin plant

This much sought after food source was readily available at Macoupin Point, Keys Lake at the Sugar Creek, Clear Lake, and Lake Fork east of Elk Hart. All of these shallow wetland habitats are within feet of the trail, and Native Americans along its course likely harvested the plant root.

In May 1804 at Camp Dubois, Capt. Meriwether Lewis writes... *“There is another root found in the marshy lands or ponds which is much used by the Kickapoos Chipaways and any other nations as an article of food called by the Chipeways Moc-cup-pin this in its unprepared state is not only disagreeable to the taste but even dangerous to be taken in small quantity... a small quantity will kill a hog yet prepared by the Indians it makes not only an agreeable but nutritious food... thus prepared they are fit for use and will keep for years if not exposed to wet...”*⁹

Prior to the Mississippian era, during the Woodland period, Native Americans relied more on hunting and gathering, although they did cultivate a number of seed crops but Cahokia did not exist yet. So, finding Woodland settlements along the Trace, if it existed then, may prove to be a greater challenge. James Wickersham was a law clerk in Springfield in the late 1870s and had an interest in ethnology. He documented seven mound groups on Springfield’s east side near the location where the old trail crossed the Sangamon River and wrote a report to the Smithsonian Board of Regents in 1883. In these seven groups he documented at least 50 individual mounds and excavated several of the mounds describing the artifacts recovered.



a



b

Figure 14: (a) James Wickersham; (b) Mud Lake Mound near the Edwards Trace on the east side of Springfield.

No follow up studies have been done at the sites and the default cultural assignment to the group has been Woodland period, the predominant mound building culture in the region. However, it is not clear if they were associated with the Trace.

After passing the Bar, Wickersham moved west, eventually becoming a district judge in Alaska and is said to have travelled his circuit by dogsled and steam boat. He is credited for changing the name of Barnette's Cache to Fairbanks and went on to become somewhat a political legend in Alaska's Legislature. His home in Juneau is now a museum and stored away up on the second floor of the Wickersham Museum is a wooden box containing the artifacts he recovered from Sangamon County in the 1870s. 11 The mound groups he described are within yards of the old road in a nucleated settlement pattern. A thought that comes to mind is, did the early Native American groups use the Sangamon crossing of the old trail to enhance hunting along a migratory trail? Perhaps this could explain the cluster of settlements in the immediate area. A lot of research would need to be done to answer if the trail existed in the prehistoric period or influenced prehistoric settlement patterns in central Illinois.

Another site we are exploring is the elusive location of Fort Russell, an 1812 fortification where Edwards commanded his militia and supplied the blockhouses along the frontier's northern boundary. Long details the location on his map, even sketching the floor plan as it appeared in the fall of 1816, although it was likely abandoned by that later date. We are expanding pedestrian surveys and sub-surface testing in an effort to locate the fort while working in the shadow of the early road.

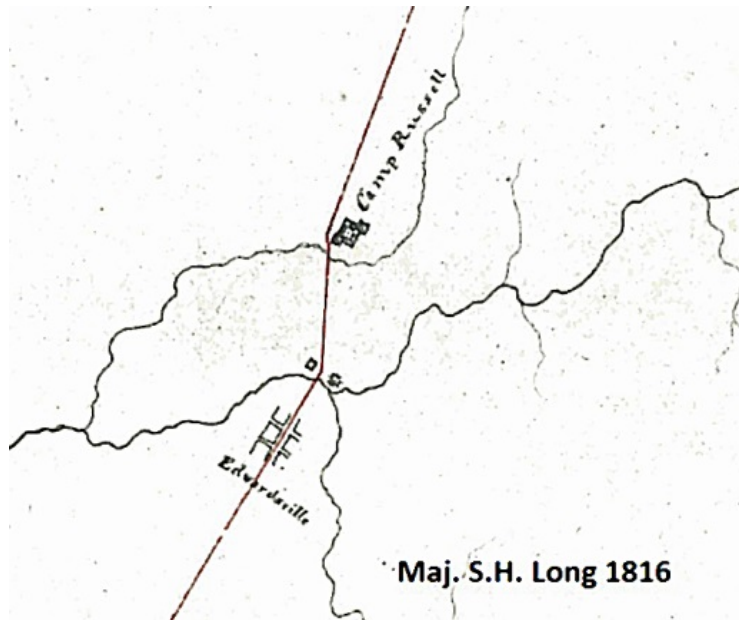


Figure 15: Detail from Long's 1816 map of the Edwards Trace, showing it passing through Edwardsville and by Fort (Camp) Russell.



Figure 16: Screening dirt, looking for Fort Russell

THE TRAIL TODAY

If you would like to drive the Trace, start at Edwardsville on Route 159 north to Bunker Hill, as the modern road closely follows the Trace within a few feet. One mile west of Dorchester you can shadow the trail as it crossed the open expanse following Heyen and Spencer Roads that still retain the NE trajectory of the trail as it followed ancient drumlin ridge crests. One-and-a-half miles west of Gillespie on Route 16, you can pass within feet of the trail as it passed the Dry Point tributary headwaters. Then jump up to Honey Point and find Timberline Drive, some five miles west of Litchfield. This meandering and undulating stretch of narrow asphalt follows the trail exactly as shown in the 1818 GLO maps, skirting the Honey Point timber and giving the

viewer a sense of the Trace. Where Timberline Drive meets Woodland Road at the stop sign, to your left is the site of Aaron Hammer's Tavern, the first settler in Macoupin County.

Driving north on I-55 you will pass over the Trace twice just north of Divernon as it navigates around the Brush Creek headwaters. South of Divernon the Trace is off to your left, and north of Divernon it is to your right. Then, travel to the east side of Lake Springfield to East Lake Shore Drive and stop in at Lake Park to walk along a remnant of the old trail marked by signage. Located here, on this narrow strip of high ground between the Horse Creek and Sugar Creek watersheds, the visible rut remains today within the city park. Continuing north on I-55 to Lincoln, the Trace is just off to the east, closely shadowing the Interstate Highway. As I-55 passes Route 10 at exit 126 west of Lincoln, you will pass within feet of the Kickapoo Village that the militia burned in 1812 on their way to Peoria Lake. Continuing north on I-155, the Trace follows closely on the east and crosses to the west between Tremont and Morton.

Other remnants of the trail survive and are located on private property. As LIDAR data becomes available for Sangamon County, it is likely more discoveries of the old trail are ahead. The Edward's Trace is 146 miles in length as it courses from Edwardsville to the foot of Peoria Lake, and perhaps in the future it can be documented as Illinois' largest cultural site and preserve the trail for future generations.

Many thanks to all who have assisted with this ongoing research. A special thanks to the Illinois State Museum, the Illinois State Archaeological Survey, the Illinois State Geological Survey, Madison and Sangamon Counties, and all the great folks who allowed us to access their land in our effort to document the Edwards Trace.



Figure 17: Some of the hardworking crew along the Trace somewhere in Sangamon County.

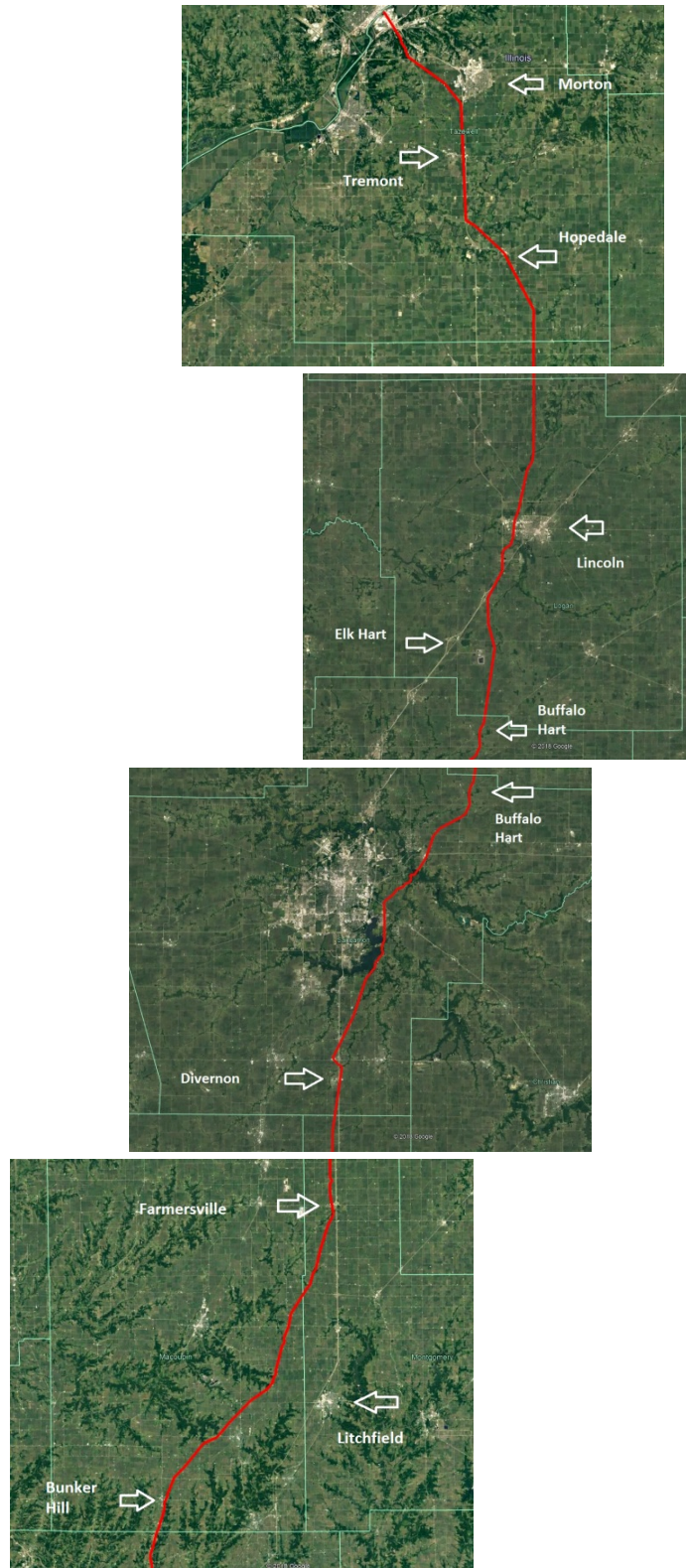


Figure 18: *Edwards Trace superimposed on modern aerial photos from north of Edwardsville to East Peoria area (overlap is not precise but relatively close).*

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