

## The Pursuit of Black Hawk

By David L. Gjestson

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It really wasn't a war, but a chase. In April of 1832, an aging warrior by the name of Black Hawk led about 1,200 men, women and children across the Mississippi River from Iowa with the intent of peacefully reclaiming the Sac and Fox village of Saukenuk, located just upstream on the Rock River. What occurred was an ethnic tragedy that had dramatic impact on the state of Wisconsin.

Black Hawk soon learned that he and his followers would not receive the promised help of tribal allies or the English in Canada thought to have arms and ammunition for them. An attempt to negotiate a peaceful return to Iowa May 14, failed at a place later called Stillman's Run, and America's so called war with Black Hawk began.



Black Hawk's followers comprised of Sac, Fox and Kickapoo supporters were able to avoid the military called out to suppress the rebellion, for the most of three months by trekking up into Michigan Territory (present-day Wisconsin) and hiding in the swamps near Lake Koshkonong. Their longevity in hiding was extended because Winnebago scouts leading the army secretly supported Black Hawk, having family members among his followers.

**Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiah, a Saukie Brave.**

A color lithograph published in Volume I of "History of the Indian Tribes of North America" (1848). Creator: Bowen, J.T. Permission Wisconsin Historical Society. WHS Image ID 3772.

A Winnebago scout stumbled into Black Hawk's trail on July 18 and he was unable to hide his discovery. The chase was on! Militia troops under the leadership of General Henry and Colonial Dodge pushed hard west through the area of the four lakes with Black Hawk just hours ahead. After an overnight on the north end of Lake Monona, and sensing they finally had the elusive old warrior, they pushed through the isthmus between the lakes and northwesterly toward the Wisconsin River.



**Wisconsin Heights Battleground.** (1856) Brookes, Samuel M.; Stevenson, Thomas H. Oil painting in the Wisconsin Historical Museum. Permission by Wisconsin Historical Society. WHS Image ID 2286

Black Hawk's people were caught at the Wisconsin River on July 21. Because of high water, they needed time to make rafts to carry them across. Seeing the potential for his tribe's slaughter if caught in this condition, he selected about 60 warriors and returned to some high ground called "Wisconsin Heights." Here, he effectively fought off some 600 militia late in

the day. Nightfall ended the battle and enabled Black Hawk to elude the military yet again. Another surrender attempt was ignored by the military. The tribe escaped to the west.

The soldiers regrouped at Fort Blue Mounds before picking up Black Hawk's trail again. Re-provisioned and tripling their strength with regular troops and more militia under the command of General Henry Atkinson, the new force crossed the Wisconsin River near present-day Spring Green and soon picked up Black Hawk's westward trail. They caught up with them at the Mississippi River on August 2, 1832. The final battle near the Bad Axe River was really a massacre. Only about 150 Indian survivors were accounted for in the record of the event.

The elusive Black Hawk had escaped capture yet again by heading north and hiding at a small lake near today's Sparta, Wisconsin. He finally surrendered to some Winnebago warriors who turned him over to the soldiers at Fort Crawford August 27, 1832. The chase was finally over. Without an Indian war threat, Wisconsin Territory was created just four years later and rapid settlement produced statehood in 1848.



Map created by Brian Conant, 2002. Reprint permission by Abraham Lincoln Digitization Project.