

The Black Hawk War, 1832

See a lesson plan related to this material on the [Wisconsin Historical Society website](#).



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Letters – "The Massacre at Bad Axe: Black Hawk's account"

We had been [at the Mississippi] but a little while, before we saw a steam boat (the "Warrior,") coming. I told my braves not to shoot, as I intended going on board, so that we might save our women and children. I knew the captain, [Throckmorton,] and was determined to give myself up to him.

I then sent for my white flag. While the messenger was gone, I took a small piece of white cotton, and put it on a pole, and called to the captain of the boat, and told him to send his little canoe ashore, and let me come on board.

The people on the boat asked whether we were Sacs or Winnebagoes. I told a Winnebago to tell them that we were Sacs, and wanted to give ourselves up!

A Winnebago on the boat called to us "to run and hide, that the whites were going to shoot!"

About this time one of my braves had jumped into the river, bearing a white flag to the boat--when another sprang in after him, and brought him to shore.

The firing then commenced from the boat, which was returned by my braves, and continued for some time.

Very few of my people were hurt after the first fire, having succeeded in getting behind old logs and trees, which shielded them from the enemy's fire.

The Winnebago, on the steam boat, must have either misunderstood what was told, or did not tell it to the captain correctly; because I am confident that he would not have fired upon us, if he had known my wishes. I have always considered him a good man, and too great a brave to fire upon an enemy when suing for quarters.

After the boat left us, I told my people to cross, if they could, and wished: that I intended going into the Chippewa country.

Some commenced crossing, and such as had determined to follow them, remained--only three lodges going with me.

Next morning, at daybreak, a young man overtook me, and said that all my party had determined to cross the Mississippi--that a number had already got over safe, and that he had heard the white army last night within a few miles of them.

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, if the Great Spirit would not give us another victory! During our stay in the thicket, a party of whites came close by us, but passed on without discovering us!

Early in the morning a party of whites, being in advance of the army, came upon our people, who were attempting to cross the Mississippi. They tried to give themselves up--the whites paid no attention to their entreaties--but commenced slaughtering them! In a little while the whole army arrived. Our braves, but few in number, finding that the enemy paid no regard to age or sex, and seeing that they were murdering helpless women and little children, determined to fight until they were killed! As many women as could, commenced swimming the Mississippi, with their children on their backs. A number of them were drowned, and some shot, before they could reach the opposite shore.

One of my braves, who gave me this information, piled up some saddles before him, (when the fight commenced,) to shield himself from the enemy's fire, and killed three white men! But seeing that the whites were coming too close to him, he crawled to the bank of the river, without being perceived, and hid himself under it, until the enemy retired. He then came to me and told me what had been done. After hearing this sorrowful news, I started, with my little party, to the Winnebago village at Prairie La Cross. On my arrival there, I entered the lodge of one of the chiefs, and told him that I wished him to go with me to his father--that I intended to give myself up to the American war chief, and die, if the Great Spirit saw proper! He said he would go with me. I then took my medicine bag, and addressed the chief. I told him that it was "the soul of the Sac nation - that it never had been dishonored in any battle--take it, it is my life--dearer than life--and give it to the American chief!" He said he would keep it, and take care of it, and if I was suffered to live, he would send it to me.

During my stay at the village, the squaws made me a white dress of deer skin. I then started, with several Winnebagoes, and went to their agent, at Prairie du Chien, and gave myself up.

On my arrival there, I found to my sorrow, that a large body of Sioux had pursued, and killed, a number of our women and children, who had got safely across the Mississippi. The whites ought not to have permitted such conduct--and none but cowards would ever have been guilty of such cruelty--which has always been practiced on our nation by the Sioux.

The massacre, which terminated the war, lasted about two hours. Our loss in killed, was about sixty, besides a number that were drowned. The loss of the enemy could not be ascertained by my braves, exactly; but they think that they killed about sixteen, during the action.