

# New Salem at 100



## *State historic site celebrates anniversary and plans for the future*

**T**he winter of the deep snow, a landmark footnote in Illinois history, buried the Prairie State in a wintry blanket in the fall and winter of 1830-'31, first with a continuous snowfall for some 60 days, then with a layer of ice that made life in the settled parts of Illinois impossible for wildlife, livestock, and many early settlers. It was also the year that Thomas Lincoln and his family chose to move to Illinois, where they lived in a lean-to cabin on the bluffs above the Sangamon River about 5 miles west of present-day Decatur.



At the same time the newly established village of New Salem in present-day Menard County was digging in for winter, with no foreknowledge of the weather to come. We don't know how those hardy settlers endured the winter of the deep snow, nor do we know how many of them did not survive. Our knowledge

of those early months in New Salem is shadowed by Lincoln's arrival in the village the following Spring, when he built a flat boat (some say it was 80 feet long) in the upriver community of

Sangamo Town and floated it down the Sangamon, where it hung up on the Rutledge-Cameron dam.

Lincoln historian Guy Fraker, a prairie romantic at heart, speculates



what would have happened to Lincoln if his flatboat had not been lodged on the rocks at New Salem. "He would not have met the villagers who gave him reason to return to New Salem the following summer. He would not have met the poet loafer Jack Kelso, who introduced him to Shakespeare and Burns; he would not have met his fellow soldiers from the Black Hawk war who encouraged him to study law, or the townsfolk who taught him surveying and later elected him to the Illinois legislature." Nor would Lincoln have met Ann Rutledge, a young woman whose life and death changed the trajectory of his life, and sent him alone on his path to Springfield.

New Salem winked out in 1839, with many of its original settlers finding new homes in Petersburg, Atterbury, Oakford, Sandridge, and elsewhere. By 1890, there was nothing left of the old town except a single cabin, a falling-down chimney or two, a few witness trees, and several myths that survive to this day. The village that we walk through today did not return to life until the 1930s. It is a landmark historic site, the early Illinois experience nearly every school kid from Waukegan to Cairo learns about and, if she is lucky, tours as part of her American history education.

At 100 years old (the anniversary is



tied to the purchase of the property and a donation from William Randolph Hearst) New Salem is still the village of our memory. Hearth fires, oxen in the pasture, re-enactors in period costumes wandering the grounds, militia musters—this is New Salem come to life, mostly through the good work of the New Salem Lincoln League, a volunteer organization that helps breathe life into the restored village.

Under the new leadership of the Department of Natural Resources,

which took over the site in 2017 from the old Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, New Salem is on a new course, looking for ways to protect and preserve the property and all its buildings for its second century as an historic site. Take time to visit New Salem in 2019. Bring your family and remember what it was like to experience the Prairie State when it was still an American dream, buried in snow and waiting for Spring.

*Photos by William Furry*

