

## **For pioneers, river crossings sometimes matter of life and death**

Of all the hardships faced by pioneers, the danger of crossing swollen rivers and creeks is one of the more difficult for present-day folk to fully appreciate. Today, paved highways and byways on raised roadbeds, as well as concrete and steel bridges, enable us to speed across the countryside, oblivious to the landscape and the interplay between topography and surface water.

That was a luxury wholly unimaginable to the early settler, whose world was often defined by rain, snow, ice and mud.

During the pioneer era, before the coming of the railroads and the erection of substantial bridges, crossing a creek or river often meant discomfort and delay. And heavy rains or snowmelt could transform an intermittent stream or peaceful prairie river into a roiling, insensible force of nature, threatening to dispatch unfortunate souls to their “watery graves.”

Safely traversing a watercourse often meant using fords, places where crossing was easier, often due to some natural feature such as gently sloping banks or a shallow or calm stretch of water.

One of this area’s most important fords was Newcom’s, which crossed the Sangamon River in Champaign County, roughly halfway between Urbana and Cheney’s Grove in western McLean County. The ford, located in a forested tract known as the Sangamon Timber, was named for Ethan Newcom, who settled there with his family in the late 1820s. This ford proved so popular that the Newcoms established a wayside to offer room and board to weary travelers. “Sometimes, in the fall of the year, 25 or 30 teams would stop there at once,” noted Etzard Duis in his 1874 compilation of early settler biographies.

During high water, Newcom’s, like most other well-used crossings, ceased to be a ford at all. In the summer of 1827, George Hinshaw, Jr. was 6 years old when his pioneer family migrated to what would become McLean County. During their journey, the rains came so hard and so often that “the whole of the country seemed covered with water.” To cross Newcom’s Ford, the family had to build their own raft, a delay that cost a week’s travel time.

During the pre-railroad days of the Eighth Judicial Circuit, Judge David Davis of Bloomington, attorney Abraham Lincoln of Springfield and others forded one creek or river after another on their way to one county seat and court session after another. For example, from the former Woodford County seat of Metamora the troupe would travel by horseback or wagon the 30 miles to Bloomington. Such a journey required crossing a still-existing ford at Panther Creek (see accompanying image), the largest tributary of the Mackinaw. After passing through or staying the night in Bowling Green—a town that,

excepting a limestone-lined well, exists only in historic memory—they would cross the Mackinaw River at Wyatt’s Ford.

In 1902, local historian A.V. Pierson penned a brief history of fords on the upper Mackinaw River. Included in the overview were Henline and Wiley fords, immediately south of what would become the community of Colfax in Martin Township. Downriver, there were a half-dozen or more fords in Lexington Township alone, including those named Thompson, Rocky and Myers. And there was Adams’ Ford, just south of Pleasant Hill, which was still in “general use” when Pierson wrote his 1902 history.

He also recounted the story of Albert Dodd, one of the county’s most promising lawyers, who in June 1844 drowned while attempting to cross a Mackinaw River ford just southwest of Lexington. A Yale-educated New Englander in his mid-twenties, Dodd was part of a small party returning to Bloomington from a political meeting or convention in either Ottawa or Joliet (accounts differ).

A wooden bridge had been washed away, leaving the travelers with the choice between a daring crossing or waiting out the high water. “Dodd had not gone 30 feet until his horse was swimming,” noted Pierson, basing his account on that of George Flesher, who was part of the rescue party. “When he reached the main channel either by his horse losing his balance or by the rush of water, Mr. Dodd was swept from his horse and he was drowned.”

A rescue party from Lexington was quickly organized and a raft constructed to recover Dodd’s body. Word reached Bloomington, and the next day a more organized recovery effort included a larger raft and grappling hooks fashioned by Lexington blacksmith Charles Tilbury. On the third day, hundreds more residents from Lexington and Bloomington turned out and at long last Dodd’s lifeless body was found, a mere 50 yards from the ford.

Contemporary songwriter Laurelyn Dossett penned the tragic ballad “Anna Lee,” recorded by folk rocker Levon Helm in 2007. The song tells the story of a mother forced to ride into town to care for her sister. Though she promises to return to her two children—“as the sparrow returns to her nest”—she never makes it back home.

*The wind it did rise and the rain it did fall  
The river, a shadowy wave  
Anna Lee never heard danger’s dark call  
And was swept to her watery grave.*