

Iowa Without Borders: Iowa History from European Contact to Statehood

PATRICK J. JUNG

THE DAUNTING SPAN of 173 years separates French entry into the upper Mississippi Valley in 1673 and Iowa statehood in 1846. Examining this substantial stretch of time requires historians to literally “think outside the box” of present-day Iowa’s borders. Doing so provides contexts that enrich our understanding of Iowa history. The last three decades have witnessed a dramatic shift in historians’ understanding of Native peoples and Euro-American colonialism in the Midwest. Eastern Iowa was tied to the upper Mississippi Valley and the western Great Lakes, both of which historically have formed a single geographical expression within the Midwest. Western Iowa and the Missouri River Valley were tied to the Great Plains. The imperial powers—France, Britain, Spain, and the United States—laid claim to both regions at various times, and the upper Mississippi Valley and the western Great Lakes in particular was a contested borderland. However, contemporary historians stress the two regions largely remained under Native sovereignty from 1673 to 1846. Only with the advent of settler colonialism, a project that distinguished the United States from the other imperial powers, did this epoch of Native control end.

Iowa is called the “Land Between Two Rivers,” a term that describes its eastern and western borders, the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, respectively.¹ However, what we today see as borders were, before statehood, highways and hubs that drew people together and allowed for the movement of peoples and their cultures over vast distances. The Mississippi’s tributaries, particularly the Wisconsin and Illinois Rivers, provide access to the western Great Lakes, and eastern Iowa was an integral component of this region long before Europeans’ arrival. Recent works by

1. Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Iowa City, 1996), ix.

Jacob Lee, Stephen Aron, and Robert Morrissey emphasize the importance of waterways and remind scholars they must not let contemporary state borders limit their research into the history of pre-statehood Iowa.²

Within these greater geographic contexts, the importance of Iowa's Native inhabitants from 1673 to 1846 becomes clear. American Indians have called Iowa home for at least 11,000 years. They have left a rich archaeological legacy but produced no written records, which are the mainstay of historical research. Morrissey cautions researchers to eschew the sharp divide that has separated "pre-history" from "history" and writes, "history is distorted and misunderstood by beginning our trajectories at the moment of 'contact.'"³ Thus, when the French explorer Louis Jolliet and his missionary companion Jacques Marquette arrived in the upper Mississippi Valley in 1673, they entered not a "New World" but quite an old one that already possessed a long history.⁴ Nevertheless, French penetration opened a new chapter that has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in the past three decades. In 1991, Richard White introduced the concept of the "Middle Ground" whereby the imperial powers (particularly France) and the Native peoples created a mutually intelligible world that "depended on the inability of both sides to gain their ends through force."⁵ Inherent in the Middle Ground is the notion that the Native societies and imperial powers exercised roughly equal measures of power.⁶ A spate of important works in the last two decades by Kathleen DuVal, Michael Witgen, Brett Rushforth, Michael McDonnell, and others have shifted White's Middle Ground decisively in favor of Indigenous power. Historians today speak of the region of the upper Mississippi Valley and western Great Lakes as a "Native Ground" where

2. Jacob Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters: Indian Nations and Colonial Ambitions along the Mississippi* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 8, 23–29, 95; Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), 3; Robert Morrissey, *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country* (Philadelphia, 2016), 90.

3. Lynn Alex, *Iowa's Archaeological Past* (Iowa City, 2000), 37–53; Morrissey, *Empire by Collaboration*, 248n5 (quotation). Also see Daniel Smail and Andrew Shryock, "History and the 'Pre,'" *American Historical Review* 118 (2013), 709–37.

4. Laura Chmielewski, *Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet: Exploration, Encounter, and the French New World* (New York, 2018), 85–92, 109–40.

5. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991), ix–x, 50–52 (quotation).

6. Susan Sleeper-Smith, "The Middle Ground Revisited: Introduction," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006), 3–8 (quotation).

American Indian societies dictated to the imperial powers the nature of their relationships regarding trade, alliances, war, and more intimate activities such as religion and intermarriage.⁷ Anne Hyde makes a similar argument for the Missouri River Valley.⁸

This historiographic shift does not mean historians have ignored the imperial powers and their legacies. Laura Chmielewski reminds us:

Until the late twentieth century, general treatments of early North American history privileged events from the perspective of English exploration, expansion, movement, and political development. . . . During the last forty years . . . scholars have produced studies that have upended the idea that the English story in North America is the only one worth telling by including the “alternative Americas” of various peoples, including Native Americans, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the French.⁹

Iowa straddled several imperial divides. Under the French, everything south of the line running from present-day Davenport, Iowa, to Danville, Illinois, on both sides of the Mississippi River fell under the jurisdiction of Louisiana. This included the Illinois Country, roughly coterminous with the southern portions of present-day Illinois and Missouri. Everything to the north belonged to the western precincts of Canada. Historians such as Carl Ekberg have heeded Chmielewski’s entreaty and have produced important works on the Illinois Country, where Frenchmen and Indian women intermarried and produced a unique *métis* culture that borrowed liberally from both societies.¹⁰ To the north, Prairie du Chien on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi developed a

7. Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia, 2006), 5–12; Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia, 2012), 114–39; Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 192–207; Michael McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (New York, 2015), 14–19, 337n23–338n23; David Nichols, *Peoples of the Inland Sea: Native Americans and Newcomers in the Great Lakes Region, 1600–1870* (Athens, OH, 2018), 51, 136, 149.

8. Anne Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (Lincoln, NE, 2011), 12–13, 35–39.

9. Chmielewski, *Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet*, 10–12 (quotation).

10. Carl Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (Urbana, IL, 1998), 32–33. Also see Morrissey, *Empire by Collaboration*, 62–84.

similar *métis* society that has attracted the attention of scholars such as Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Mary Elise Antoine.¹¹

Present-day eastern Iowa stood between the Illinois Country and Prairie du Chien. It was bereft of French settlements and remained so after France transferred Louisiana to Spain in 1762. Under both regimes, fur traders generally used Iowa only as a shortcut by ascending the Des Moines River and portaging to the Missouri River.¹² The first Euro-American settlement in Iowa arrived in 1796 when Julien Dubuque received a land grant from Spain to extract lead ore at what became the Mines of Spain at the site of present-day Dubuque. Surprisingly, little recent historical research has been done on early Dubuque and the Mines of Spain. Scholars such as David Weber and Gilbert Din have produced important works concerning Spanish Louisiana, but little of the extant scholarship examines the region of Upper Louisiana north of St. Louis.¹³ Archaeologists, on the other hand, have produced a growing body of studies that indicate Native people mined lead throughout the upper Mississippi Valley before the arrival of Europeans and continued to do so afterward.¹⁴ Recent archeological studies by James Collins and Shirley Schermer provide important new details about Dubuque's mining operation and his relations with the local Meskwaki Indians.¹⁵ What is missing in the recent scholarship are historical and ethnohistorical examinations of Iowa's first Euro-American settlement.

11. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *Great Lakes Creoles: A French-Indian Community on the Northern Borderlands, Prairie du Chien, 1750–1860* (New York, 2014), 1–23; Mary Elise Antoine, *The War of 1812 in Wisconsin: The Battle for Prairie du Chien* (Madison, WI, 2016), 1–14.

12. Schwieder, *Iowa*, 23–24; Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters*, 182–83.

13. For historiographic assessments, see David Weber, "The Spanish Borderlands of North America: A Historiography," *OAH Magazine of History* 14 (2000), 5–11; and Gilbert Din, "Empires Too Far: The Demographic Limitations of Three Imperial Powers in the Eighteenth-Century Mississippi Valley," *Louisiana History* 50 (2009), 261–92.

14. Larry Abbott, "Frontier Lead Mining in the Upper Mississippi Valley," *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society* 35 (1988), 1–15; Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers: Indians, Métis, and Mining in the Western Great Lakes, 1737–1832* (Lincoln, NE, 2000), 79–84; John Broihahn, "Meskwaki Mining Metamorphosis: Mining Archival and Archaeological Resources for Insights on Meskwaki Mining and Smelting in Upper Mississippi Valley Lead Fields," *Wisconsin Archeologist* 89 (2008), 98–118.

15. Shirley Schermer, "The Archaeology of the Mines of Spain: The Meskwaki and Julien Dubuque," *Wisconsin Archeologist* 89 (2008), 132–49; James Collins, "Meskwaki Mining in the Upper Mississippi River Lead District During the Era of Julien Dubuque," *Wisconsin Archeologist* 89 (2008), 150–61.

After securing the Louisiana Purchase and present-day Iowa in 1803, the Americans brought a radically different ideology than their French, British, and Spanish predecessors. Lee succinctly notes, "Rather than alliance and trade, which had been the cornerstones of previous empires, the United States sought land."¹⁶ More specifically, the United States practiced settler colonialism, a topic that has been heavily researched in the past decade, including by historians who focus on the Midwest.¹⁷ Bethel Saler examines state formation as a product of settler colonialism in Wisconsin, while John Reda provides a similar assessment of Illinois and Missouri.¹⁸ Settler colonialism and state formation in Iowa await similar research. In contrast, the Black Hawk War of 1832 has been extensively examined by historians such as Kerry Trask, Patrick Jung, and John Hall. These researchers agree that this event initiated wide-scale white settlement of Iowa (and thus settler colonialism) after the Sauks and Meskwakis ceded much of eastern Iowa to the United States in the wake of the conflict.¹⁹

Western Iowa, as mentioned, looked toward the Missouri River and Great Plains rather than the Mississippi and the Great Lakes. The key difference between eastern and western Iowa is that the western part of the state remained Native Ground well into the period of Iowa statehood. The Missouri River, as Hyde reminds us, was every bit a riverine highway in the same manner as the Mississippi, and family networks such as those of the Chouteau family of St. Louis extended deep into the heart of the continent; this included Iowa and its Native people who resided along the Missouri River and its tributaries.²⁰

16. Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters*, 212–13 (quotation). Also see Nichols, *Peoples of the Inland Sea*, 41.

17. Nancy Shoemaker, "A Typology of Colonialism," *Perspectives on History* 53 (2015), 29–30; Jeffrey Ostler and Nancy Shoemaker, "Settler Colonialism in Early American History: Introduction," *William and Mary Quarterly* 76 (2019), 361–68; Michael Witgen, "A Nation of Settlers: The Early American Republic and the Colonization of the Northwest Territory," *William and Mary Quarterly* 76 (2019), 391–98.

18. Bethel Saler, *The Settlers' Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest* (Philadelphia, 2015), 1–12, 25–27, 87; John Reda, *From Furs to Farms: The Transformation of the Mississippi Valley, 1762–1825* (Dekalb, IL, 2016), 1–13.

19. Kerry Trask, *Black Hawk: The Battle for the Heart of America* (New York, 2006), 304; Patrick Jung, *The Black Hawk War of 1832* (Norman, OK, 2007), 186–87, 198–201; John Hall, *Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies in the Black Hawk War* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 254–56. Also see Roger Nichols, "Black Hawk and the Historians: A Review Essay," *Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 61–70.

20. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 6–9, 17, 34–37, 224–26.

Curiously, a pattern on the Missouri River emerged that mirrored that on the Mississippi. Just as pre-statehood Iowa was largely bereft of French settlements along its eastern border, the centers of the Missouri River fur trade tended to be on the lower Missouri where the Chouteaus established several important trade forts in present-day Missouri. To the north, the upper Missouri River was the second great center, and Fort Union near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers became one of the major commercial entrepôts. Established in 1824, Council Bluffs, like many trade sites on the Missouri River, became the nucleus of later Euro-American settlement. Just as Hyde details the fur trade on the lower Missouri, Barton Barbour's history of Fort Union provides a wealth of information about the upper Missouri trade.²¹ Council Bluffs, like Dubuque, merits a scholarly assessment that examines the dynamics of the fur trade in the middle Missouri River region.

A principal difference in the histories of eastern and western Iowa was that the Missouri River Valley, due to its isolation, was relatively untouched by the imperial rivalries that raged for over a century in the western Great Lakes and upper Mississippi Valley. While the fur trade was every bit as important in both regions, the French, and later the Spanish, failed to develop significant military or political institutions west of St. Louis.²² The United States made the first feeble attempt to establish control over western Iowa with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The bicentennial of the expedition from 2003 to 2006 resulted in a flood of books on the subject, none of which specifically examine the Lewis and Clark Expedition in the Hawkeye State.²³ This promises to be another avenue of research into the history of early Iowa that has been neglected.

While it is impossible in an essay of this length to examine the many new historical approaches that might influence future research into pre-statehood Iowa, interpretive frameworks such as the Native Ground and

21. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 44–48, 60, 245; Barton Barbour, *Fort Union and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman, OK, 2001), 16–28, 158–59.

22. Daniel Royot, *Divided Loyalties in a Doomed Empire: The French in the West from New France to the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Newark, DE, 2006), 39–44, 60, 89–99, 242–46, 154–58.

23. For examples of recent works on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, see James Ronda, *Finding the West: Explorations with Lewis and Clark* (Albuquerque, 2001); Carolyn Gilman, *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* (Washington, DC, 2003); and Robert Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Westport, CT, 2006). For a useful reference work, see Stephen Dow Beckham, Doug Erickson, Jeremy Skinner, and Paul Merchant, *The Literature of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: A Bibliography and Essays* (Portland, OR, 2003).

settler colonialism are reshaping our understanding of the history of the upper Mississippi Valley and western Great Lakes as well as the Missouri River Valley. Placing present-day Iowa into these larger contexts frees historians from the constraints of state borders that neither the Native societies nor the imperial powers would have recognized. While pre-statehood Iowa lacked the extensive French settlements that characterized present-day Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri, the early history of Dubuque clearly awaits greater examination, as do settler colonialism and state formation in Iowa. To the west, the centrifugal forces of the fur trade favored the lower and upper Missouri River. Hopefully, this essay will point future historians toward these fertile fields of inquiry.

Iowa Agricultural History: Old Perspectives and New Directions

J. L. ANDERSON

IN 1939, IOWA STATE COLLEGE history professor Louis Bernard Schmidt outlined a research program for the history of agriculture in Iowa in an essay for *Agricultural History*, the scholarly journal of the Agricultural History Society. In "The Agricultural History of Iowa as a Field of Research," Schmidt recommended multiple topical and geographic perspectives, including county-level studies, land tenure, agricultural education, transportation, and marketing. He even included a call for work on "miscellaneous topics," many of which would be described as social history today. Schmidt's ambitious proposal was notable for its agenda of understanding the total rural experience.

Seven years later *A Century of Farming in Iowa* established the boundaries of the field with brief and reliable essays.¹ In the following decade, historian Earle D. Ross wrote the foundational historical survey, *Iowa Agriculture* (1951), which focused on what is sometimes labelled

1. Thanks to Olivia Garrison, Reference Coordinator, Special Collections and University Archives, Iowa State University Library for providing information regarding historian Louis B. Schmidt. Iowa State College and Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, *A Century of Farming in Iowa, 1846-1946* (Ames, 1946). For a notable earlier work in Iowa ag history, see John A. Hopkins Jr., *Economic History of the Production of Beef Cattle* (Iowa City, 1928).