



# SANGAMON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# HISTORICO

308 East Adams Street • Springfield, Illinois 62701 • (217) 522-2500

DECEMBER, 1991

## LOOKING AHEAD - "ON THE ROAD AGAIN"

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Do you remember back when Route 66 was THE road around here -- back when main highways went through cities and towns and not around them? Tom Teague, the author of Searching for 66, will present the December program for the Sangamon County Historical Society on Wednesday, December 17, at 7:00 P.M. at the West Branch of Lincoln Library, 1251 W. Washington. His topic is "Searching for 66; an Oral History of Route 66." Tom is a native of Kansas, and spent his youth living in the neighboring states of Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Illinois. He moved to Springfield nearly 20 years ago. He has a Bachelors Degree from Simpson College in Iowa, and a Masters Degree from Sangamon State University. A former journalist, he presently works for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and also does freelance writing. To gather material for his book Tom traveled the length of the highway and interviewed older people who had recollections of it. The book is illustrated by Bob Waldmire, whose family operates the Cozy Dog Drive-In, along the original Route 66 here in Springfield. Autographed copies of the book will be available at the meeting.

PLEASE NOTE the change from our usual meeting place. Parking is available at the West Branch Library in the lot behind the building, entered from Washington Street on the west side of the library, or along the street.

## A LOOK BACK - HOW ILLINOIS WAS KEPT A FREE STATE

The Sangamon County Historical Society met at Lincoln Library on November 19 to hear Kathleen Friedman speak on the work of Governor Edward Coles and Morris Birkbeck in the turbulent days of our state in the early 1800's. The persistent work of these two men had a lasting effect on Illinois, keeping it a free state when a plunge into slavery would have caused turmoil for years to come.

When the second Treaty of Paris (1783) ended the American Revolution, the Mississippi River became our country's western boundary. Conflict arose over land claims of the original seaboard colonies - which now were states - until they gave up these claims to the federal government and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was passed. The ordinance served as the government of the territory lying between the Mississippi River, the Great Lakes and the Ohio River. No more than five nor less

than three states were to be formed from this area. Provisions for these future states were to include freedom of religion, equal treatment for all, public education and a ban on slavery. The prohibition of slavery was a sensitive point, as on the western boundaries, in the American Bottoms along the Mississippi (later part of Illinois), slavery did exist. Early 18th century French settlers had brought in slaves, whom they were allowed to keep. Later, after Illinois became a state, in December, 1818, further accommodations were needed to deal with slaves brought in while Illinois was still a territory. Their work in the salines - especially the salt springs near Shawneetown and Equality - was very important to the state. Much of the state revenue was provided by the salines and a great deal of labor was required to gather the harvest of salt. The Negroes who provided the labor might be referred to as "indentured servants" but in reality they were slaves. The state, however, was by law a free state, and it was because of this that Edward Coles came to Illinois.

Edward Coles was a 5th generation Virginian, born in 1786 to a distinguished family of Irish descent. By 1808 he had inherited both land and slaves in Albemarle Co., Virginia, but considered slavery to be a moral wrong. His education at the College of William and Mary, under an Anglican minister, may have influenced his belief on this matter. For six years Coles served as private secretary to President James Madison in Washington, and even lived at the White House. He was a cousin of Dolley Madison, and was surrounded by the social life of the capital. However, although his background was that of a southern gentleman, he persisted in his abhorrence of slavery, and even wrote to Thomas Jefferson urging him to gradually free his slaves. Jefferson thought that he could not do this at his time of life, but encouraged Coles, as a young man, to carry on the fight against slavery. In 1806 a Virginia law was passed requiring that freed slaves must leave the state within twelve months of liberation. For Edward Coles this meant that he could not free his slaves and continue to live in Virginia, but must find a new home for them. He resigned his post with Madison and made an "exploratory" trip to Shawneetown and Kaskaskia. He was called back by President Madison to go on a diplomatic mission to Russia to correct a misunderstanding between Czar Alexander I and the United States. After his success in this assignment, Coles traveled for a time in Europe. In France he met Morris Birkbeck, an Englishman traveling with his friend George Flower. Later, in 1818, Coles returned to Kaskaskia where the constitution for the new state of Illinois was being decided. Some pro-slavery feelings were in evidence, but Illinois was admitted as a free state and Coles decided to settle in Edwardsville. The new constitution was not entirely pleasing to him, as a form of limited slavery was still allowed, but he returned to Virginia, sold his plantation, and on April 1, 1819, started for his new home, with his slaves. Going to Pennsylvania by wagons, he transferred his party to flatboats on the Ohio River, and when they were into the Northwest Territory, on July 4, 1819, he told his slaves they were free, giving each a certificate of liberation. He told them that they could go ashore if they wished or could go with him to Illinois, and all accompanied Coles to the new state where each head of a household was given 150 acres of land. Coles was appointed by President Monroe as the land registrar in Edwardsville, where he became a prominent citizen. In 1821 he sought the election as an anti-slavery candidate for governor, and was elected as our second governor due to a split ballot among the pro-slavery candidates. He continued to press for freedom for all slaves in spite of a hostile legislature and a mostly pro-slavery press. An attempt was launched by these forces to change the state constitution to allow slavery. Coles' campaign against this was based on high principles, but he did