

THE GEOGRAPHIC VALUE OF THE GALLATIN COUNTY SALINE.

MISS DEETTE ROLFE, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

The most important geographic factors are not necessarily the largest nor the best known. Neither are they always the ones which have been operative over the longest periods of time. It is the character of man's response and extent to which it affects the course of his development that determine their value.

Man responds most readily and most unmistakably to those factors which supply his actual daily needs. If, in addition, he derives from those factors, either the incentive or the means for developing new lines of activity or of thought, their influence may become far-reaching in its effect. An apparently insignificant factor may thus be of large geographic value.

Such is the case with the Gallatin County or Wabash Saline. Situated in the midst of a swampy area, inaccessible through considerable portions of the year, and to-day all but unknown to many of the residents of that part of the state, it, nevertheless, was one of the most potent factors in the early development of southern Illinois.

Its first value lay in the fact that it supplied a vital need. In the case of civilized man, the need for salt is so imperative that his use for the substance is regarded as one index of his position in the cultural scale. This is because his food—largely vegetable in character and rich in potassium salts—so tends to reduce the salt content of his blood, that in order to maintain its normal amount, the addition of free salt is necessary. Meat—especially raw or half-cooked meat—does not make the same demand upon the salt content as do vegetables, and for that reason, savages living on an almost exclusively flesh diet do not need salt nor care for it.

Because salt supplies a direct need, settlement has everywhere followed closely upon the discovery of salt sources. At a time when transportation facilities were poor, when there were no railroads or steamboats, and when the in-

terior of the country was largely an uncharted wilderness, it was of great importance to be situated near to a supply of salt. To be freed from the necessity of making long trips for it meant more than one can realize today. As a result, all through the West there was a decided tendency toward the concentration of settlement at or near the salines.

In the case of the Wabash Saline, but a short period of time elapsed between its cession to the United States by Indian treaty in 1803¹ and the formation of a considerable area of settlement in southeastern Illinois. Within a bare year and a half, a sparse colony had formed about it,² and the rapid growth in population which followed, and which made possible the early formation of the state, was distinctly related to the Saline. In 1818, when Illinois entered the Union, perhaps one-sixth of the entire population of the southeastern part of the state was concentrated within a few miles of the salt works.³ This was due not only to the natural drift of population toward the region of supply, but also, and in far greater degree, to the commercial and industrial opportunities which it offered. The first people who came into the territory recognized these possibilities, and before long, in conjunction with the Federal Government which reserved the salt lands⁴ and then leased them to individuals,⁵ they had developed an industry which not only supplied salt to the inhabitants of Illinois, but furnished considerable amounts for shipment into Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee.⁶ By 1810, the works were yielding about 150,000 bushels a year,⁷ and boats and barges laden with salt were of common occurrence upon the Ohio, Cumberland, and Tennessee rivers. Within a few more

1. Treaty with Delaware, Shawans, Pottawatomi, Miami and Kickapoo, June 7, 1803. (7 *Statutes at Large*, 74).

2. Reynolds, John, *My Own Times* (Ill. 1855), 47.

3. Estimate from data given in Buck, Solon Justus. *Illinois in 1818* (Chicago, 1918), Chapter III.

4. Sec. 6, Act for Disposal of Land in Ind. Territory, *Annals*, 8th Congress, 1st. sess., App., 1289.

5. Greene, Evarts B., and Alvord, Clarence W. (ed.), *Governor's Letter Books 1818-1834* (Springfield 1909); Edwards, Ninian, *Life and Times of* (Springfield, 1870), and Washburne, E. B. (ed.), *Edwards Papers* (Chicago, 1884) contain much valuable correspondence relative to salt leases.

6. Worthen, A. H., *Geological Survey of Illinois*, VI. (Boston, 1875), 214.

7. Cramer, *The Navigator* (Pittsburg, 1814), 272.

years production had increased to 200,000 bushels,⁸ and salt had become a leading basis for the commercial prosperity of southern Illinois.

Shawneetown, situated on the Ohio River 12 miles east of the salt works, owes both its origin and much of its subsequent importance to the salt trade. It was never a large town; the fact that at first individuals could not hold title to their property, because until 1814 it was part of the salt reservation, undoubtedly had a depressing effect upon its size and upon the character of its improvements. For a number of years, however, it did an amount of business out of all proportion to its size, and most of that business was directly related to the salt trade. As early as 1807, Cumming wrote that it possessed a more enterprising appearance than he had seen west of Pittsburgh.⁹ It was the place of shipment for much of the salt, and as a consequence, it soon became a center of keelboat traffic. The building and outfitting of boats at its wharf, the making of barrels, etc., were all subsidiary industries. The opening of the United States Land Office in 1814 was a direct response to the movement of population into the area, and in the selection of Shawneetown in 1817 as the site for one of the territorial banks, the revenue which would come to it from the salt works was of considerable moment.¹⁰

The early history of the town of Equality was also intimately connected with the salt trade. The offices of the salt works were located there;¹¹ it was the place of residence of many of the laborers, and, after the construction of the locks and dams at Saline Mines and Island Ripple which were necessary to make the Saline River navigable, it became a second port for salt. Elizabethtown, founded in Hardin County in 1808, was the logical outgrowth of a ferry established where the trail which led from Nashville, Tennessee, to the salt works crossed the Ohio River.¹²

8. Wood, John, *Two Years in...the English Prairie...* 1823.
(Reprinted in Thwaites, *E. W. T.*, X.), p. 254.

9. Cumming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, 1807-9.
(Reprinted in Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, IV.), p. 271.

10. See editorial from *Western Intelligencer* for Jan. 1, 1817, in Buck, 148-150.

11. *History of Gallatin, Saline, Hamilton, Franklin and Williamson Counties, Illinois* (Chicago, 1887), p. 122.

12. Smith, George Washington, *History of Southern Illinois* (Chicago, N. Y., 1912), I., 479.

Much salt was hauled in wagons on that road, or carried on horseback. It was only one of a number of such roads which led to the salt works from all directions. Some of them were short and perhaps illy defined, while others were well made and extended long distances, as, for example, the one which crossed the state to Kaskaskia. While these roads were built largely for the purpose of facilitating the movement of salt, they served also to encourage settlement in the areas through which they passed. Such was true on the Kentucky side of the river as well as in Illinois.

The number of people who came from the South for salt strengthened the bond between the two regions and rendered more difficult the proper adjustment of the slavery issue in Illinois. The Wabash Saline was responsible, in large measure, for the virtual existence of slavery in territory which has been prescribed by Congress as free, for much violent pro-slavery agitation in the early days of state-hood, and for a political fight which all but disrupted the commonwealth. From the time when Governor St. Clair, by his interpretation of the Ordinance of 1787, permitted slaves which were owned outside the Territory to be brought into it for the purpose of working at the Saline, until 1824, when the call for a convention for framing a new state constitution which should legalize slavery was finally defeated, the salt interests led the pro-slavery fight.¹³ The fact that the first Constitution did not prohibit the institution entirely and at once, but contained instead a temporizing clause which permitted slave labor at the Saline until 1825, indicates the hold which it had gained upon an industry that was felt to be essential to the welfare of the state. At the same time, it is suggestive of the place which the industry occupied in the life of the people. The large number of workmen required not only in the actual manufacture of salt, but also in cutting and hauling wood for fuel, in making barrels, etc., made the low cost of slave labor and its perpetuation seem a matter of much moment to the operators of the works. According to Prof. Worthen, the number of employees sometimes ran as high as one or two thousand.

13. See Harris, Norman Dwight, *Negro Servitude in Illinois*; Flower, *English Settlement*; Pease, Theodore Calvin, *The Frontier State*.

Also, because of the revenue which accrued to the state from the Saline, certain persons not connected with the works favored the legalizing of slave labor. For some years after the transfer of the salt reservation to the State in 1818,¹⁴ the rentals therefrom made up a considerable proportion of the entire income of the state. In 1821, for instance, they amounted to over twenty-five per cent of the total revenue.¹⁵ The claim of the leasees that without slave labor the works could not be kept open was thus regarded with much uneasiness by some of the inhabitants, who, in the end, cast their lot with the pro-slavery party—for the time being, at least. All such arguments were unavailing in the final outcome, however.

The later history of the Saline; its decline due to the competition offered by Kanawha salt and the growing scarcity of fuel nearby; the gradual sale of the woodland reservation¹⁶ and then of the Saline itself, with the utilization of the moneys received in public improvements; the second period of prosperity through which it passed after the discovery that the coal which lay close at hand could be used for fuel and that from deeper wells could be obtained stronger brine, and then the rapid decline which followed the coming of the railroad into the region, end the story of man's response to one of the least of the state's resources and yet one of the greatest measured in terms of influence exerted. Only a few of the many influences have been traced; the others await our inquiries.

14. As the territories which contained salt sources became converted into states, Congress transferred the salines to their jurisdiction and gave title to them. The transaction was, in every case, part of a pact between the United States and the state seeking admission to the Union, whereby, in return for the salt lands and various other emoluments (school lands, funds for college, or for University, and for the improvement of roads and canals), the state was to provide "by an ordinance, irrevocable without the consent of the United States," for certain tax exemptions in accordance with the government land policy. Illinois had to bind herself also to the principle of equal taxation for resident and non-resident proprietors. (See Thorpe, *Constitution and Organic Laws*, II., 969-970).

15. Pease, *Frontier State*, 62.

16. The reservation in 1816 covered 98,500 acres, of which a large part was woodland. At first, the wood was cut and hauled to the furnaces which were situated near the wells. Later, the furnaces were moved back into the timber and the water was pumped to them through wooden pipes.