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Illinois' "Egypt" and its History of Slavery

The state of Illinois today, for many, can be understood as a microcosm of the greater United States. With its vast metropolis of Chicago, scattered industrial cities, and productive agricultural belt, the state seems to fit that mold nicely. The history of the state, too, supports the metaphor. A complex and rich history similar to that of the United States at large makes Illinois, historically, a place of multiple and often contradictory opinions. Exemplary of this turbulent state and national history is the great political divide over the role of slavery in American society that led to the U.S. Civil War. During this polarizing moment in American history the country was tearing itself apart along the boundaries of northern free-labor industry and southern slave driven agriculture. Illinois was not the exception. Inhabitants in Northern and Central Illinois generally supported the abolitionist ideals of the emancipation of the slave class. However, those in the southern geographical tip of Illinois, often referred to as "Egypt,"¹ did not support those ideals of the Northern Illinoisans. As a result, the region of Southern Illinois began to be called "Egypt." This paper will explore the origins of the term Egypt and its political use in Southern Illinois to highlight the links to its pro-slavery past which set the region apart from the rest of the state.

Scholars contributing to the historiography of the state of Illinois provide various narratives explaining the genesis of the term "Egypt" as a place-name and its relationship to Southern Illinois. For example, in his book *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*, George W.

Smith suggests that the term Egypt and its references to Southern Illinois date back to as early as the late 1780s.² Darcey O'Brien in her book, *Murder in Little Egypt*, argues that Egypt's use as a synonym for Southern Illinois emerged as a result of the northern hardships experienced by the harsh winters of 1834 and 1831.³ According to O'Brien, Northern Illinois experienced the misfortune of extraordinarily long, cold, and harsh winters during the years of 1824 and 1831. Accordingly, in order to sustain their livelihood, Northern Illinoisan farmers had to travel to Southern Illinois to buy the necessary provisions to sustain themselves to the next year.⁴

As Northern Illinoisans traveled south, they linked biblical references to the motives of their journey.⁵ O'Brien suggests that the northern farmers gradually connected their experiences to those of the biblical Jacob, in Genesis 42, to draw this religious imagery.⁶ In the biblical story, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt in search of grain and other basic necessities to sustain the lives of his family.⁷ As the result of their voyage "down to Egypt," Jacob and his sons enjoyed bountiful commodities for living, just as the northern farmers of the 1820s and 1830s had done. The link between the Egypt-bound biblical travels of Jacob's sons and that of the crop-deprived farmers of Northern Illinois was solidified, thus coining Egypt as Southern Illinois' new title.

Scholars from the region of Egypt, such as John W. Allen in his book, *Legends and Lore of Southern Illinois*, draw geographical similarities between Ancient Egypt and Southern Illinois to explain the region's moniker.⁸ For example, the aptly named city of Cairo, located in Southern Illinois' river-dominated geographical tip, draws references to the similarities of Ancient Egypt's great Nile Delta. The name of this southernmost Illinoisan city alone reveals its resemblance to that of ancient Egypt, given that Cairo is

the capital of the ancient Egyptian empire as well as the modern day nation-state. City proprietors of Cairo took note to mention the opportunistic location of the city for trade and commerce like that of its primordial sister-city nestled along the banks of the Nile River in North Africa.⁹ It is of no coincidence that only a few short years after Cairo's official founding, Egypt emerged as an ever-popular metaphor for its encompassing areas.

Scholars note Egypt's distinct political culture was unlike that of the rest of Illinois. Mabel Rauch in her work, *The First Memorial Day*, sheds light upon the origins of the term Egypt and its distinctive political culture. Rauch explains that some of the initial waves of settlers that came into Southern Illinois originated from slave holding states such as Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee.¹⁰ As the settlers coming from these regions were accustomed to slavery practices, they were prone to bring the same habits with them.

George Smith demonstrates the magnitude of Egypt's pro-slavery sympathies in his book *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*. Much of Smith's claims are supported by the fact that the area was settled primarily by people originating from southern slave-holding territories. For example, Smith illustrates this point through the use of salvaged political correspondence, with one such letter that went as far as to refer to Egypt as a "dark corner of Illinois."¹¹ In his book *Illinois in the Civil War*, Victory Hicken supports Rauch's argument as he further explains the extent and effects of Egypt's pro-southern and pro-slavery sentiment.¹² Research into the history of Southern Illinois reveals that the term Egypt was used as a reference to the region neither in the historiography nor in primary sources from before the debates over slavery. What the sources and literature indicate is

when political discussion about slavery gained importance in Illinois and across the nation, so did the term Egypt.

Southern Illinois had a distinctive identity in comparison to the rest of the state; outsiders took no heed to personify the area's pro-slavery ideology as something contradictory to its northern counterparts. By referring to Southern Illinois as Egypt, northerners highlighted the differences of region from the rest of the state. Waves of migrants from slave-holding territories such as Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee were instrumental in the settlement of Southern Illinois. As migrants gravitated towards southern Illinois, they "gave Egypt, as this region was soon to be known, the make-up of a southern state."¹³ These settlers brought with them, "Physical courage, the love of home, and a touch of the old plantation life."¹⁴ Over time this southern-like culture began to transform Egypt's local culture to resemble the characteristics brought by its pro-slavery southerners. With many migrants flooding into Illinois territory, it was only a matter of time before the territory gained statehood. In 1818, Illinois officially became the twenty-first state in the union.¹⁵ The newly founded state did not have the luxury of a protracted era of peace in national politics. Only a few decades after Illinois was granted statehood, the question of slavery began to tear the fabric of the United States.

The question of slavery was never fully addressed by the American forefathers, and Illinois paid the price. Under the Land Ordinance of 1787 slavery was to be forbidden throughout the Northwest Territories including Illinois.¹⁶ However, a loophole in the legislation allowed for slaves already in the region, as well as their children, to continue to be used as slaves.¹⁷ This enabled Illinois Southerners to use slaves as they wished, as long as the slaves were already there before 1787.

Along with Illinois, other states began to muster the population numbers needed to receive statehood. As new states entered the union, the balance of slave to free states was certain to tilt in the free-state camp's favor. To appease the growing tensions between the free North and the Southern slave states, Steven Douglas proposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Act gave states the authority to vote on the issue of slavery without federal intervention. The form of popular sovereignty sought to appease both parties. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act was officially ratified, appearing to provide a long-term solution to the question of slavery in the United States. Questions regarding the legislation emerged, spurring the issue of slavery even more and eventually culminating in the American Civil War.

Southern Illinois had many residents who supported slavery. A remark from a prominent and influential Egyptian, John P. Mann reveals the pro-slavery sentiment among the local population. During a gathering between John Mann and his local peers, an individual remarked that it was an abolitionist of Hungarian ancestry, who had immigrated to Southern Illinois, who contributed to the economic success of the region. Upon hearing this, however, Mann, "Immediately denied his assertions."¹⁸ Mann, outraged by the fact that such an influential individual was an abolitionist, deprived the figure of recognition as a means to strengthen southern values. Another example of Southern Illinois' or Egypt's unique pro-southern character can be seen in political correspondence written by Joseph Medill to David L. Phillips. Concerning the upcoming 1856 presidential election Medill wrote to Phillips:

We want you to have a complete ticket for every county so far as there are any county offices now in opposition to the Buchaneers, and both kinds. Fremont and Fillmore electors with the anti-Nebraska Act ticket on them. Steps must be taken immediately to have this [done] to all your counties.

Some good trusty man must go over to...Carmi, Fairfield and other points where there are printing offices and have tickets printed.¹⁹

As shown in the letter above, the majority of Southern Illinoisan counties supported the Democratic nominee James Buchanan, indicating Democrats in the 1850s generally supported slavery. Thus, Medill sought to have “some good trusty man”²⁰ have tickets printed and possibly garner more votes that could be taken from the pro-Southern Buchanan.

Further evidence of Illinois’ troubled internal political relationship began to appear during the slave debates leading up to the Civil War. More specifically, these manifestations appeared after the signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This act is important in understanding the use of Egypt as an encompassing term to Southern Illinois for a number of reasons. Worthy to note is that the Act was signed only seven years before the Civil War began. In hindsight, the Kansas-Nebraska Act served as a final effort from the U.S. legislature to maintain the integrity of the Union in such a politically volatile time. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was only a short-term solution that failed to fully tackle the greater issue of slavery. Correspondence between Illinois politicians John A. Logan and Steven A. Douglas indicates the growing tensions concerning slavery. Just three years after the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed, Douglas wrote to Logan:

I regret that I will not be able to carry out my cherished object of paying you a visit this fall. I have yet to have made a thorough tour through Egypt...I regret mournfully that I could not have seen you...I shall necessarily be absent until mid summer...The prospect now is that the [coming] battle is to be fought over again. Come what may the principle of the Nebraska Act...I stared at that principle and will wherever its logical consequences may carry me, and defend the position against whoever may avoid it.²¹

In the letter, Steven Douglas provides an insightful look at Illinois' political divide in the late 1850's. For one, Douglas mentions Egypt as a reference to John A. Logan's political districts within Southern Illinois, thus carving a separate entity from the rest of the state. Douglas also mentioned a debate about to occur in the Illinois legislature over the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the coming spring. Noteworthy is that this letter was written to Logan in 1857, three years after the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed and implemented as national policy.²²

As another debate was to begin, Douglas' letter illustrates that Illinois failed to harmonize a statewide acceptance to the Kansas-Nebraska Act.²³ The letter does not go as far as to explain exactly why the debate was to begin, but given the national context and Illinois' political makeup, one can speculate on the cause of the debate and the actors involved. It is likely that pro-slavery Southern Illinoisans had a large part to play. In addition, Douglas saw it relevant enough to stress the debate and his personal stance on the matter to his Southern counterpart, John A. Logan.

Pre-Civil War Southern Illinois simply had a different political culture than that of the rest of the state. As American southerners had originally settled the region, there was an acute pro-slavery sentiment among its civilian ranks. One inhabitant of Southern Illinois, David L. Phillips from Anna, Illinois, blatantly exclaimed the opinion he had of Egyptians. Phillips reported to the presidential nominee, Abraham Lincoln, that, "Egypt will give a good account of itself yet. This fall we must have your help to revolutionize this dark corner of Illinois."²⁴ To 1858 Republicans, Egypt personified the backwardness of the pro-slavery inhabitants of Southern Illinois.²⁵ Accordingly, this gave Northern

Illinoisans more of an incentive to personify Southern Illinois by referring to the region with a separate name, Egypt.

Despite Egypt's contradictory stance on slavery, Lincoln, a Republican who opposed slavery, took Egypt's pro-slavery stance with a light heart and managed to garner votes from the region. During the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates for the U.S presidency, Lincoln responded, after his visit to Egypt, "Did the judge talk of trotting me down to Egypt to scare me to death? Why, I know this people better than he does."²⁶ The judge's comments are understandable because, unlike most southern Illinoisans, Lincoln would have appeared as a political black sheep who supported abolitionist ideals.

Election results for Egyptian counties give credence to the area's slavery-prone nature, thus indicating that the region retained stronger political ties with the Democratic south as opposed to the Republican north. Jefferson County is an excellent example to represent this political trend. Its 1860 presidential election results showed only 18.6% of its population voting Republican while a staggering 75.0% voted Democratic. Jefferson County is not an exception. Similar regional counties experienced similar lopsided political results. Only in Randolph, Wabash, Richland, and Lawrence counties were the election results less skewed. In these counties the Democratic ticket still beat the Republican nominee by over ten percentage points. Only Edwards and St. Clair remained as outliers attached to the Republican Party.²⁷

Egypt's political uniqueness solidified its name as a metaphor to Southern Illinois. With its southern heritage, unique history, and consequently inimitable political culture, Southern Illinois provided a stark contrast to the rest of the state. During the slavery debates this was more apparent than ever with Stephen Douglas and others perceiving

Egypt as a sensitive area for Lincoln during his public debates. Election results from Southern Illinois can be used to prove Lincoln and his abolitionist Republican Party's political weakness in the area. The vast majority of Southern Illinois counties voted lopsidedly against Republican presidential nominees in 1856 and 1860. It is no wonder then that Southern Illinois retained its distinct and unique Egyptian title for many years. Egypt was the name for a unique place and politicians were only too eager to use an area's exclusive qualities to further the aims of their political agendas. Therefore, Egypt's meaning symbolized something more than just its geographical or biblical resemblances to that of its ancient counterpart. Egypt became increasingly known as a political term rather than just a geographical one.

The name Egypt is celebrated today throughout Southern Illinois. Contemporary Egyptians are proud of the unique qualities that their region enjoys. With its protected antebellum architecture, lively vineyards, unique history (including the birth homes of such characters as Popeye and Superman), and small-town etiquette, modern Egyptians immerse themselves in the magnificence of their surrounding countryside. Egyptian-linked words are found in abundance throughout Southern Illinois as a way to celebrate the region's particularities. These include the titles to businesses,²⁸ team mascots,²⁹ names of cities and bridges,³⁰ and of local newspapers and magazines,³¹ to mention just a few. However, what contemporary Egyptians often ignore is that these Egyptian titles are seeded by a complex radicalized past, which fostered the tradition of slavery and set the Egyptian region apart from the rest of the state.

Southern Illinoisans today do not often hear about how the name Egypt is complexly rooted in the region's pro-slavery past. Its heightened use during the slave

debates served to solidify its connection to the region even more, forever cementing Egypt as a metaphor for Southern Illinois. As troubling as it may be to Southern Illinoisans today, the region's uniqueness is historically tied to its pro-slavery roots. Altogether, Egypt's use as a term representative of Southern Illinois was seeded by the effects of its pro-slavery past. Thus, Egypt became solidified as a representative term for Southern Illinois due to its unique political, social, and cultural makeup that set it apart from the rest of Illinois.

¹ In this article the words "Egypt" and "Southern Illinois" will be used interchangeably unless otherwise stated when referring to the Egypt located in the Middle East.

² George W. Smith, *When Lincoln Came to Egypt* (Herrin, IL: Crossfire Press, 1993) 3.

³ Darcey O'Brien, *Murder in Little Egypt* (Herrin, IL: Crossfire Press, 1993), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ King James Bible, Gen. 42:1-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ John W. Allen, *Legends and Lore of Southern Illinois* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), 40-42.

⁹ City of Cairo, Published by the Proprietors, A.D. 1818. 1818, Box 2, Folder 3, History of the City of Cairo, Illinois manuscript, 1718-1910, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

¹⁰ Mabel Rauch, *The First Memorial Day* (Champaign, IL: Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, 1947), 213.

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- ¹¹ Smith, *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*, xxxiv.
- ¹² Victory Hicken, *Illinois in the Civil War* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois: from its Commencement as a state in 1818 to 1847* (Champaign, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 1857), 10.
- ¹⁶ Smith, *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*, 3.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ John P. Mann. *Transcript of J.P. Mann Journals, January 1852-May 17, 1836*. Box 1, John P. Mann Family Papers. Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.
- ¹⁹ Joseph Medill to David L. Phillips. *David L. Phillips Correspondence, 1856-1858*. ID: 1/9/1950. David L. Phillips Correspondence, 1856-1858. Special Collection Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Steven A. Douglas to John A. Logan, November 29, 1857. *Stephen A. Douglas Correspondence*, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Smith, *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*, xxxiv.
- ²⁵ Republicans at this time were mainly abolitionist and did not agree with the pro-slavery stances of Southern Illinois.
- ²⁶ Smith, *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*, 140.
- ²⁷ Howard W. Allen and Vincent A. Lacey, *Illinois Election, 1818-1900 Candidates and County Returns for President, Governor, Senate, and House of Representatives* (Carbondale, IL.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 144.
- ²⁸ Such as Egyptian Electric, an energy provider within Southern Illinois.
- ²⁹ Southern Illinois University Carbondale's team mascot, the Saluki, which in antiquity was considered the Royal Dog of Egypt.
- ³⁰ Such as the city of Cairo and the close-by Thebes Bridge.
- ³¹ Such as the Southern Illinois University Carbondale's daily newspaper *The Daily Egyptian* and the popular 1940s magazine *The Egyptian Key*.