

Not Southern Scorn but Local Pride

The Origin of the Word *Hoosier* and Indiana's River Culture

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Discovering the origins of Indiana's mysterious nickname "hoosier" requires a knowledge of when the word first came into use. Most standard reference works (including the *Oxford English Dictionary*) erroneously cite as the first known writing of the word a letter written in Missouri in 1826.¹ The error is significant because such an early reference, from a site so far west, gives credence to the assumption of Jacob P. Dunn (writing roughly a hundred years ago) that the word had been a term of contempt in general use in the South before it became specific to

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J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (New York, 1989), 7:372. See also Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (Edinburgh, 1988), 490; J. E. Lighter, ed., *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1997), 148; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston, 2000), 845; and Robert Hendrickson, ed., *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2004), 357. "Current" entries at Wikipedia.org, Dictionary.com, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://www.oed.com>) and the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (<http://www.etymonline.com/>) repeat the error. The *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (New York, 1988), 296, states enigmatically that the word "has been found in its present-day meaning of Indianan as far back as 1829."

inhabitants of Indiana.² Dunn's work is still regarded as the most authoritative on this topic, and his assumptions form the basis for current conventional wisdom.³ While my own research is more indebted to Dunn's than at odds with it, my findings also demonstrate that his fundamental assumptions about the age and generalized use of the word bear questioning. In particular, my discovery of two previously unnoticed print references helps refocus attention on details that suggest that the term originated around 1830 with specific reference to Indiana farmer-river boatmen; the more generalized and contemptuous use came later.

The frequent reference to the Missouri letter of 1826 is decisively misleading because the letter was actually written in 1846.⁴ The manuscript—which is extant and has for some time been correctly catalogued in the manuscript collection of the Indiana State Library—bears in large letters at the top the town and county of its origin: Oregon in Holt County, Missouri. Holt County was organized in 1841, and the town of Oregon was newly named in the same year.⁵ The letter writer, James Curtis, did write “1826” as the date, but this was clearly a slip, perhaps influenced by his having just written the day as “2/24.”

Although Dunn felt confident that evidence corroborating his assumption of an early nineteenth-century southern origin would steadily accumulate, it never has.⁶ For a full century since Dunn's time, researchers have examined a host of period letters, journals, papers, and published works—many prepared by observers keenly interested in

²Though Dunn began publishing his findings in newspapers in 1902, they are compiled in Jacob Piatt Dunn, “The Word Hoosier,” *Indiana and Indianans*, 5 vols. (Chicago, 1919), 2:1121-55.

³Jeffrey Graf comprehensively documents both authentic sources and popular theories in “The Word *Hoosier*” (<http://www.indiana.edu/~librcsd/internet/extra/hoosier.html>). Graf writes: “The best evidence . . . suggests that ‘Hoosier’ was a term of contempt and opprobrium common in the upland South and used to denote a rustic, a bumpkin, a countryman, a roughneck, a hick or an awkward, uncouth or unskilled fellow.” And, paraphrasing Dunn's analysis: “[The word] had long been used in the south as a derogatory term for a rough countryman.”

⁴James Curtis to Thomas Beeler, February 24, 1846, box 1, folder 2, Joseph Beeler Papers (L 14), Manuscript Section (Indiana State Library, Indianapolis). This was first revealed to me by Eric Mundell, head of reference services for the Indiana Historical Society, in response to my inquiry about the letter.

⁵After reviewing an early draft of this article, Graf confirmed in the census records for 1830 and 1840 that the letter's author lived in Indiana in both those years. Graf, “The Word Hoosier.”

⁶Dunn, “The Word Hoosier,” 1153-55. The sentiment is also apparent in the *Chicago Tribune's* story (June 2, 1949) about the discovery of the “1826” letter which concludes, “So far, so good. A few more years of digging for old letters in attics may solve the hoosier problem.”

regionalisms and language quirks—but not a single reference to the word “hoosier” has been found before February 11, 1831.⁷

If indeed “hoosier” was coined closer to 1830 than previously supposed, then more weight must be given to an 1833 attempt by a Cincinnati newspaper editor to explain the word’s origin: “The appellation of Hooshier has been used in many of the Western States, for several years, to designate, in a good natural way, an inhabitant of our sister state of Indiana.” The author notes that “[m]any of our ingenious native philologists have attempted, though very unsatisfactorily, to explain this somewhat singular term.” The writer provides two examples—one that a troop of Hussars were mistakenly called Hooshiers and the other the familiar tale of surveyors being greeted with “Who’s here?”—and deems neither “deserving any attention.” The author finally explains: “The word Hooshier is indebted for its existence to that once numerous and unique, but now extinct class of mortals called the Ohio Boatmen.—In its original acceptation it was equivalent to ‘Ripstaver,’ ‘Scrouger,’ ‘Screamer,’ ‘Bulger,’ ‘Ring-tailroarer,’ and a hundred others, equally expressive, but which have never attained to such a respectable standing as itself.” And regarding the term’s tie to Indiana: “By some caprice which can never be explained, the appellation Hooshier became confined solely to such boatmen as had their homes upon the Indiana shore, and from them it was gradually applied to all the Indianians, who acknowledge it as good naturedly as the appellation of Yankee.”⁸

Dunn dismissed the Cincinnati editor’s explanation as conjecture stemming from the probability, as Dunn saw it, that the “rather rough-looking class of flat-boatmen” acquired an insulting nickname as they traveled through the South.⁹ But the earliest cited use of the generalized term in the South is 1836;¹⁰ so the available evidence suggests that Dunn

⁷An 1827 journal entry by Sandford Cox is often cited, but this cannot be taken seriously as evidence. Cox’s “Recollections,” first printed in the *Lafayette Daily Courier* in 1859, casually mixed the purportedly original letters and journal entries with reflective editorial comments. The reference to “Hoosier” at the very end of a piece is almost certainly the latter, and the word is used nowhere else in the letters or journals. Sandford Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* (1859; Indianapolis, 1970), 53.

⁸“Hooshier,” *Cincinnati Republican*, n.d., reprinted in [Indianapolis] *Indiana Democrat*, October 26, 1833. Dunn reprints the entire article verbatim in “The Word Hoosier,” 1134.

⁹Dunn, “The Word Hoosier,” 1135.

¹⁰Lighter, ed., *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, Vol. 2, 148.

may have had origin and effect reversed, and that the editor was closer to the truth than he was.

The earliest known reference, in fact, occurs in a February 11, 1831, letter written from Cincinnati by G. S. Murdock, a rather hapless soul, who was desperately trying to impress one of Indiana's more important early citizens, General John Tipton, then serving as Indian Agent at the outpost of Logansport. Tipton had advertised for bids to deliver staples such as salt, tobacco, iron, and steel to Logansport, on the Wabash River. Murdock's letter, written with both haste and flair, was not so much a bid as a plea to be given a chance to do the job with a steamboat that was still being built (in Cincinnati, which is, incidentally, a very long river trip from Logansport). He caps his appeal by announcing that his new steamboat would be named "The Indiana Hoosier."¹¹ These words are writ large and with evident pride, whether real or faked convincingly for purposes of persuasion. It seems unlikely in this context that the writer (writing from outside the state) would choose a term of contempt and opprobrium common in the South to make a good impression on a leading citizen of Indiana. The two unmistakable connections—to pride and to river transport—are consistent with the Cincinnati editor's attempt to explain the word's origin, just two years later.

Indeed, all of the known print references appearing between the 1831 Murdock letter and the 1833 editorial prove consistent with a river-related term of pride, specifically attached to Indiana farmers who depended on the waterways to sell produce and livestock. Most of these documents are already recorded, and had been, for the most part, when Dunn was writing. I have discovered two newspaper references from the same period not previously noted, the wording of which I find significant. I will discuss both the previously known and the newly discovered items to demonstrate the consistency of their context.

The earliest known published use of the word was as a pseudonym in the June 25, 1831, issue of the *Lawrenceburg Palladium*. The piece allegorically treats an upcoming congressional election as a steamboat race, and its author calls himself "HOOSHER," ostensibly in reference to the subject matter. Dunn cites this article, adding that "the quotations

¹¹G. S. Murdock to John Tipton, February 11, 1831, box 7, folder 71, John Tipton Collection (L 160), Manuscript Section (Indiana State Library).

from [the *Palladium*] show that the word was already being applied to Indiana people.”¹² This is technically true, insofar as the writer was an Indiana person, but the author’s pseudonym provides no indication that the word applies to all Indianans. No other columns in contemporaneous issues use that pseudonym; its choice clearly relates specifically to the steamboat theme.

One week later, on July 2, 1831, the *Wabash Herald* published an article that also satirized the upcoming election, but at greater length and employing the conceit of a horse race. About the horse obviously representing Governor Noah Noble, the *Herald*’s columnist says, “[h]e has been corned, littered, and kept in Indiana and may be called a ‘Hoosher.’”¹³ Out of context, the end of this sentence may seem to stem simply from the main clause.¹⁴ But virtually from the founding of the *Herald*, the newspaper had shared with Governor Noble intense support for a canal connecting the Wabash River with Lake Erie thus opening northeast markets to Indiana farmers.¹⁵ Noble’s nickname comes from his support of the canal, an identification made still clearer by the sentence preceding the Noble paragraph, which states of one of Noble’s opponents “that the flying banner floating on the Wabash inscribed, ‘Wabash and Erie Canal’ will be apt to frighten [sic] his rider and make him bolt.” Further connection between the word “hoosher” and support for the canal appears in another section of the same article, not previously noted, presumably because Dunn cited only a reprint of the article

¹²“Steam Boat Racing,” *Lawrenceburg Palladium*, June 25, 1831; Dunn, “The Word Hoosier,” 1154.

¹³“Sportsmen Attend,” [Rockville, Ind.] *Wabash Herald*, July 2, 1831. The piece is undersigned by “Jeremiah Sweepstakes” with the date June 10, and there is no reason to question that as the date when it was first written or submitted. Two weeks previous, the editors had mentioned receiving the piece but decided to defer publication of an item “rather tart for the public palate.” *Wabash Herald*, June 18, 1831. Their minds may have been changed by reading the *Palladium* steamboat piece a week later. Incidentally, the *Palladium* was published in eastern Indiana near Cincinnati while the *Herald* was published in western Parke County. There seems to have been a steady correspondence between the editors of the two papers.

¹⁴Many other people of the period (including Noble’s opponents) had lived in Indiana for some time without acquiring the nickname. In fact, a long letter published just over one month previous in the same newspaper extols Indiana citizens but uses only the words “Indianians,” “inhabitants of Indiana,” or “people of Indiana.” “Q in the Corner” to Mr. Editor, *Wabash Herald*, May 28, 1831.

¹⁵Founded in April 1831, the earliest extant issue of the paper is May 28, 1831, and contains a long editorial by “Richard,” a long position paper by Noble, and a report on a stump speech by Noble—all strongly advocating the Wabash and Erie Canal.

in the *Palladium*, July 30, 1831, which dropped the section.¹⁶ The original *Herald* article had covered political races all the way down to congressional and state legislature contests not relevant on the east side of the state. Discussion of the state senate race (“the Parke Senatorial purse”) employs the word “hoosher” three times with consistent application to canal support. The first candidate, writes the *Herald’s* correspondent, “is called the ‘Canal Hoosher,’ . . . and groomed by a Jockey who wears a scarf with ‘Wabash and Erie Canal, public faith kept sacred,’ printed in large capitals upon it. . . . Bets offered freely in his favor.” The second candidate has a strike against him in that he is “kept by a ‘Railroad,’ . . . [and] it is thought that the canal banner floating at the ‘Hoosher stable’ . . . will impede his speed.” The section concludes by anticipating a good race “between him and the ‘Canal Hoosher.’”¹⁷ The theme of canal-railroad politics recurs throughout this political allegory, and all four occurrences of the word “hoosher” (including the reference to Noah Noble) are tied to support for the canal. It may be, in fact, that the word’s rapid rise from obscurity to popularity resulted from its association with a key demographic group in the hottest issue of the era.

The *Herald* carried another relevant article—not previously noted in the literature on this topic—the following week. Authored by “Common Sense” and entitled “The Wabash River,” the article argues that improvements will be needed to the Wabash River whether the canal is completed or not, since the need for farmers to get to the Ohio River and on to points south would remain in any case. I quote at some length to make clear the context in which the word “hoosher” is introduced, with significant wording:

Not only the State of Indiana but also the State of Illinois requires that the obstructions should be removed from this river. The staple articles of this as well as that State, seek a market on the coasts of the Mississippi and in all probability will, for years to come; farmers who have their produce ready to depart for a foreign market are now compelled to lay at anchor, until the flood gates are hoisted on the Monongahela and Alleghany, to swell the Ohio, and float her thousands to market, —Pennsylvania,

¹⁶Dunn, “The Word Hoosier,” 1154.

¹⁷“Sportsmen Attend,” *Wabash Herald*, July 2, 1831.

Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio have all had a passport ere the farmer of the Wabash can cut his cable in safety. What is the consequence? The traders from those States have arrived at their destined ports in a *propitious* hour, have received a *good* price for this produce, and return with a stiff knee, heavy *purse* and a light *heart*, while the “*Hoosher’s*,” (as the boatmen term them) are just escaping from the Wabash and going with a glut to a full market.¹⁸

With the parenthetical phrase “as the boatmen term them,” this writer not only identifies the original meaning of “hoosher” as a farmer-boatman from Indiana but also the word’s origin in Ohio River commerce culture. The piece corroborates the February 1831 use of the word by Murdock (who was indeed a boatman), the June 1831 printing of the word in association with steamboats, and the 1833 analysis by the Cincinnati editor.

Subsequent known printings (while the word presumably gained oral familiarity very quickly) remain consistent with the river commerce context and the specific denotation of an Indiana farmer-boatman. Dunn cites two examples from the first half of 1832. The first, a “Carrier’s Address” poem in the January 3 issue of the *Indiana Democrat*, introduces the word (again, significantly, in quotation marks) in a lengthy if somewhat obscure passage about the canal debate.¹⁹ The second example perfectly illustrates the difference between Dunn’s analysis and mine. A small, trivial piece appearing in the *Northwestern Pioneer and St. Joseph’s Intelligencer* on April 4 concerns an enormous sturgeon that left the more natural habitat of Lake Michigan to swim some distance up the

¹⁸“The Wabash River,” *Wabash Herald*, July 8, 1831, emphasis in original.

¹⁹“Carrier’s Address,” *Indiana Democrat*, January 3, 1832, as excerpted in Dunn. “The Word Hoosier,” 1153-54. Since a federal law granted lands for the Wabash and Erie Canal in 1827, pro-canal forces looked to this law as a “promise” that the canal would be built. The writer phrases the pro-canal position as “A full compliance with all contracts” and emphasizes that “purchasers of Canal lands” are clamoring for the canal to be built, while the “remote and sordid” people from the southern part of the state (who, with access to the Ohio, had less need of a canal) are more interested in keeping their taxes low. Less clear is exactly what it means that these southerners “Ask for our ‘hoosiers’ good plantations.” It may refer to some other specific alternative political proposal, or it may just be a sarcastic way of saying these anti-tax people want the “hoosiers” to stay put on their farms, operating a plantation rather than a traveling commercial enterprise.

St. Joseph River before it was caught. The article is headlined “A Real Hoosier.” Dunn, noting that the newspaper’s editors John and Joseph Defrees hailed from Tennessee, concluded that they were “no doubt familiar with the use of the word in the South,” and their using it implies that “the ‘real Hoosier’ was a rough-looking individual, like the sturgeon.”²⁰ But the brief article says nothing about the looks or demeanor of the unfortunate fish; it is entirely concerned with the fact that an unaccustomed visitor has come up the St. Joseph from Lake Michigan—a concern which (on a more serious level) was a near-obsession with the Defrees brothers. They had, in fact, left Tennessee prior to their higher education, and had more recently migrated to South Bend from Cincinnati, which, the evidence suggests, was a much better place to have picked up the word “hoosier.” Like the newspapers discussed above, their South Bend paper had been newly established virtually on the banks of a river, and with a strong resolve to lobby for improvements to enhance river commerce. In fact, on January 19, 1832, John Defrees was appointed secretary of a citizens’ group formed explicitly to lobby (ultimately unsuccessfully) for steamboat traffic from Lake Michigan all the way into South Bend.²¹ Between its November 1831 founding and July 1832, the newspaper printed increasingly excited articles and editorials about that possibility.²² One article cites a letter from John F. Wright of Buffalo, New York, speaking of a nearly completed steamboat that the optimistic Wright hopes will arrive on the St. Joseph by the first of June—a close parallel to the form and purpose of the 1831 Murdock letter.²³ The Defrees brothers, in short, were in the thick of the political milieu in which “hoosier” first gained currency.

²⁰Dunn, “The Word Hoosier,” 1153.

²¹Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana*, 3 vols. (Dayton, Ohio, 1923), 3:178; Timothy Edward Howard, *A History of St. Joseph County, Indiana*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1907), 1:226.

²²Howard, *History of St. Joseph County*, 1:224-28.

²³*Northwestern Pioneer and St. Joseph’s Intelligencer*, May 9, 1832, quoted in Howard, *History of St. Joseph County*, 1:228. Steamboat travel intertwined in a complex way with canal politics. Lake Michigan may not seem the best way to get from the Wabash to Lake Erie, but the paper took an expansive view of the advantages of being connected to the “great inland seas,” explaining that a steamboat originating in Erie, Pennsylvania, could potentially arrive in South Bend via Lake Michigan. The newspaper also had a “Plan B”—in the absence of a canal, the sixty-six-mile overland journey from South Bend to the Wabash could function as a canal substitute. Howard, *History of St. Joseph County*, 1:227.

The term's rapid progression out of that particular context into a general application to the people of Indiana seems to have begun on New Year's Day, 1833, with the publication of a John Finley doggerel poem now known as "The Hoosier's Nest." In this paean to "Blest Indiana," described as "this rising 'Hoosher' nation," "Hoosher" is placed in quotation marks, suggesting both a new word and a "buzz" word, and is first introduced in a political context: "With equal tact the 'Hoosher' loons,/Hunt offices or hunt raccoons." But, having established a "theme" of "'Hoosher' manners," Finley's imagination carries him into a description of a "'Hoosher's' nest," a humble cabin for a large and provident family, with no explicit connection to the river or the canal debate.²⁴ Whether Finley was simply reflecting a generalization of the term that was already taking place, or had created the chief stimulus for such a change (or, as is likely, a combination of the two), just a week later Indiana was toasted at a well-publicized event as the "Hooshier State."²⁵

It was perhaps inevitable that a funny-sounding state nickname would become a term of derision in other places; and, given Indiana's "backwoods" nature at the time, that its derisive meaning would relate to rural or roughhewn qualities. But the word does not appear in print with a generalized (i.e., non-Indiana) and pejorative meaning until 1836; before that time (as far as can be demonstrated in known evidence) it appears exclusively as a term of pride adopted by Indianans to apply to themselves.²⁶ Both the "Common Sense" writer in 1831 and the Cincinnati editor in 1833 imply that the word bore recent origins. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, not a single person in the two different newspaper markets where the Cincinnati piece appeared

²⁴John Finley, "Carrier's Address," *Indiana Journal*, January 1, 1833. No copy of this leaf, printed separately from the newspaper, is known to exist. Dunn, "The Word Hoosier," 1123-27, prints the poem from the poet's manuscript, which may not have matched the original printing. The date has been variously given, but the poem's reference to Andrew Jackson's recent re-election and the nullification crisis confirms the 1833 date.

²⁵Dunn, "The Word Hoosier," 1127.

²⁶This point could be partly disputed by citing Charles Fenno Hoffman, *A Winter in the West*, 2 vols. (New York, 1835), 1:296: "The term 'Hooshier,' like that of Yankee, or Buck-eye, first applied contemptuously, has now become a *soubriquet* that bears nothing invidious with it to the ear of an Indianian." There is no way of knowing the basis of Hoffman's opinion that contemptuous use preceded proud use, instead of vice-versa; he may be simply assuming an analogy with the other two words mentioned. He does not, in any event, claim that the contemptuous use was general before it was applied to Indianans.

wrote in to say that parents or grandparents had used the word long ago in the hills of Tennessee. I know of no record of anyone, anywhere, claiming to have heard the word before the late 1820s.²⁷

Thus, known evidence suggests a word of relatively recent coinage, sometime around 1830, associated for some reason with Indiana flatboat or steamboat farmers, given currency by the Wabash-Erie Canal issue, and then rapidly embraced statewide after a celebrated poem on the first day of 1833. All of this remains consistent with the Cincinnati editor's observation, in mid-1833, that many people were suddenly talking about this nickname, and wondering where it originated.

Of course this body of evidence still does not address where the word actually *did* come from, or why it was peculiar to *Indiana* farmers. The Cincinnati editor, by listing several boasting terms—"Ripstaver," "Scrouger," "Screamer," "Bulger," "Ring-tailroarer"—allied himself implicitly with a story of a fight among boatmen or other waterfront workers (such fights were everyday affairs), after which the Indiana victor declared himself a "husher," or something similar. This story has come down in several seemingly independent analogs, the most interesting of which is a brief article by Oscar D. Short in 1929.²⁸ Short identifies the actual fighter as Aaron Short, the brother of his grandfather, and sets the scene at the Louisville and Portland Canal construction site (which appears recurrently in these stories) and the date as 1830. Short's article has been absolutely ignored at least since 1949, the time of the discovery of the "1826" letter, which, if factual, would have made nonsense of the article. But as of now no known facts contradict Oscar Short's version of the word's origin, and its very existence and dating are worthy of some attention. Even if this particular case is merely Aaron Short insinuating himself into a story he had heard second-hand, the set of cognate stories about celebrated fights close to 1830 may (like cognate words) get us

²⁷See Dunn, "The Word Hoosier," 1130, for an interesting recollection written in 1860, in which the writer begins with late 1824, but adds "but it might have been as late as 1826 or 1827, when the Louisville and Portland Canal was being made."

²⁸Oscar D. Short, "Origin of the Term 'Hoosier,'" *Indiana Magazine of History*, 25 (June 1929), 101-103. See also *Indianapolis Journal*, January 16, 1860. Dunn, "The Word Hoosier," 1130-33 quotes a fight story used as the chief explanation in John Russell Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases, Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States* (New York, 1848) and another fight story from Aaron Wood, *Sketches of Things and People in Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883).



The Jolly Flat Boat Men, painted by George Caleb Bingham (1846),
engraved by Thomas Downey (1847)

Though prepared nearly two decades after the word *Hoosier* was coined along Indiana's riverfront, Bingham's work captures the nature of the river life that gave rise to Indiana's nickname.

Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

closer to the common root. Indeed, a point in the fight story's favor arises in its address of the perennial question of how the origins of a popular word could be so mysterious, since the very witnesses to its coinage might disagree about what the speaker was trying to say, even as the fame of the funny-sounding word spread rapidly.

It no doubt frustrates the contemporary reader that this information brings us no closer to the precise etymology of "hoosier," but my more specific concerns here have been to identify the era in which the word came into popular use, and to uncover its original meaning. In challenging the conventional paradigm of a southern insult going back many years, I have endeavored to focus the search considerably. Obviously the word was in use before G. S. Murdock wrote it for persuasive effect, and we need to examine closely river life around 1830 to determine how that use began. This magazine recently published the 1834 journal of Indiana boatman Asbury Jaquess, who referred with easy familiarity to his fellow "hoosiers"—fellow flatboat farmers from

Indiana.²⁹ By 1834, of course, he could have referred to *anyone* from Indiana as a hoosier; but how long had he and his peers been using the term more specifically for people exactly like themselves? The headnote introducing that journal quotes the Rev. Timothy Flint writing, in 1828, that any boat then on the waterways “could produce a journal of no inconsiderable interest.” I can only say “Amen” to that.



²⁹“The Journals of the Davy Crockett commencing December 20th 1834,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, 102 (March 2006), 8-24.