

In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an English émigré, named Morris Birkbeck, set up a colony, in what was then Illinois Territory. In 1819, a thousand English and American settlers were there. The manuscript you're looking at is a first-person, unpublished account of someone who was headed to that colony from Boston, in Lincolnshire. We learn from the manuscript that the narrator sells his goods, his stock in trade, and someone takes over his premises in December of 1817, and in 1818 he takes a ship from Bristol to Philadelphia. The crossing is 8 weeks, and it's a harrowing experience, and he describes it with sensitivity and the kind of inflated language that an educated person could use. He quotes Shakespeare to talk about how magnificent the storms he encounters are. When he gets to Philadelphia, we see the same kind of sensitive articulate person. He has two weeks there, he explores the city, he talks about the architecture, the trees, the gardens, the theaters. He talks about public health; he comments on race relations. He's astonished, actually, that Black Americans are treated so poorly. This is particularly germane because he takes a mail coach from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, a 6-day journey. He gets in the coach, there's 10 people, including a lawyer, a female, and the rest are men. They stop periodically to bring on mail, to put off mail, to bring on passengers, to let off passengers. In the middle of the night, a woman and two children get on to replace three passengers who get off. No one sees who the people are because it's the dark of night. When the sun rises, the people in the coach realize that the woman and the two children are Black, and the lawyer explodes and says that it's an outrage to have this woman in the coach, she must be thrown off, and it's a long argument about what to do. And our Englishman actually prevails and prevents the poor woman from being thrown off. He arrives in Pittsburgh, and he gets on a boat and goes down the Ohio River, more than 1,000 miles. He goes through Louisville, Cincinnati, Steubenville. In fact, in Steubenville, he sees on the shore, a German, who had been to the Birkbeck colony and who warned against going there and told him to go back, but he said they'd come this far, they weren't about to turn around. He gets within 60 miles of the Birkbeck colony, and then the manuscript breaks off abruptly. The account has the immediacy of a journal, of a diary, but we know because of a couple comments that the narrator makes that the writing took place after the journey was over. He refers to "my time in the States," indicating that he's returned, and we know in fact, that that was the case. The manuscript would be valuable and absorbing even if we didn't know who wrote it, but because of clues that the narrator drops and because of independent external research, we can identify the person on the journey. He's a druggist from Boston in Lincolnshire, 37 years old, and he leaves because basically, he's not succeeding where he is doing what he's doing. The life for him in this agrarian colony in Illinois obviously didn't work out very well, and he's recorded as dying at age 53 in 1833 in Lincolnshire. The way we know this is that we can verify his identity by looking at newspaper accounts. First of all, the sale of his premises and the manifest of his ship, the Achilles, that he took to America. And there's a death notice in 1833 where his name, Thomas Wright is given. It's a common name, but one of his executors is Charles Wright, identified as a Boston merchant, and that fits. Manuscripts like this that deal with settlers coming to America in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are uncommon in the marketplace. And those that are written by the kind of discerning and sensitive and articulate observer like this one are rarer still. There's much left here to research. And the editing and publishing of this account is surely a valuable undertaking to contemplate.