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200 years ago, Illinois took step to statehood

Exactly two centuries ago, in November and December 1817, the Illinois Territory began a campaign to become the 21st state.

The southernmost third of the territory was occupied by mainly white settlers, the majority near the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Settlers were often emigrants from Virginia and the Border States, especially Kentucky. After Illinois broke off from Indiana Territory in 1809, it gained a measure of self-government. (See my column “... and be called Illinois,” Feb. 26, 2009, in the Law Bulletin.)

However, the territorial governor, Ninian Edwards, a native Virginian, was a presidential appointee. He held an absolute veto over bills passed by the territorial legislature, whose members were elected by residents of the territory.

Land claims were often in dispute, especially purchases from old French settlers and Native Illinoisans. As a result, there were regular armed conflicts between the tribes and the territorial militia.

Nathaniel Pope, a native Kentuckian and a cousin of Edwards, was the Illinois territorial delegate to Congress. Pursuant to federal law, Congress substantially governed the territory from afar.

One newcomer from Kentucky, Daniel Pope Cook, who was 23 in 1817, saw an opportunity to advance the cause of Illinois and his own career. He must have known that Congress had begun admitting new states in pairs: one free soil state, one slave state.

Indiana was admitted in 1816, then Mississippi in 1817. Why not

Illinois in 1818? The population of Illinois was growing fast and the rate of acceleration increased after the War of 1812 ended in 1815. Illinois had fertile land, at least in the southern woodlands. There were fruit orchards, small homestead farms and even mines.

Rivers crossing the state provided transportation from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

On the other hand, there were few white settlers in the prairies covering the central and northern parts of the state. It was assumed that nothing could grow on the prairies. There was a trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River at Lake Michigan.

Although Fort Dearborn, which guarded the post, was burned on Aug. 15, 1812, the Army had rebuilt the fort in 1816. There was no reason to believe that the settlement would ever be more than a trading post and port.

Cook was a nephew of the Illinois delegate to Congress, Nathaniel Pope. Cook was also clerk of the territorial legislature's

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House of Representatives, a position that allowed him to influence legislation. He was also part-owner of the only Illinois newspaper, the Western Intelligencer.

In November 1817, Cook made

LAW AND PUBLIC ISSUES



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his move. On Nov. 20, 1817, a column appeared in the newspaper calling for a “discussion” of applying for statehood. The Nov. 27 issue denounced the powers of the governor and argued that Illinoisans were mature enough to

assume the responsibilities of statehood.

On Dec. 2, 1817, Edwards proposed to the House that a census be taken “preparatory” to applying for statehood. The House passed a resolution creating a

committee to draft an application to Congress to admit Illinois as a state. On Dec. 6, the House resolved that “this territory be admitted as a state, with all the rights and privileges of a state government.”

On Dec. 10, the Senate approved the resolution, which also estimated the population at 40,000 (clearly an exaggeration) and asked that Congress give financial aid to the new state “in the form of a percentage of proceeds from land sales.”

Edwards approved the petition. Apparently, there was no opposition to statehood among Illinois politicians.

The application for statehood moved quickly. Cook and Edwards acted in concert and persuaded other Illinoisans that the time for statehood was ripe. They must have known that Pope, Edwards' cousin, also favored statehood.

Later, in 1821, Cook, who was Pope's nephew, married Edwards' daughter. Together, the three men — Pope, Cook and Edwards — would lead the campaign for statehood. Clearly, from the beginning, a political motto of Illinois has been all in the family.

What was Pope's reaction when he received the petition applying for statehood in Washington, D.C., in January 1818? After all, he had not been part of the campaign in Illinois a month earlier. What did Pope do?

That part of the story must wait for the second in this series of columns on the Illinois Bicentennial, which should appear regularly during the next year.

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