A History of Illinois

Ephyia Publishing

Table of Contents

Introduction

To tell the story of Illinois is to tell a story of the heart of a nation. It has been called a microcosm of America, a state where the country's own complicated narrative of conflict and invention, of division and unity, can be seen in sharp relief. Its history is one of constant transformation, a relentless churning of people and ideas on a landscape that has itself been dramatically reshaped, first by ice and then by human

hands. From the sprawling prairies that gave it its most enduring nickname to the steel and glass canyons of Chicago, Illinois holds within its borders the full spectrum of the American experience.

Positioned at the continent's crossroads, its destiny has always been shaped by geography. The state is defined by water, bounded by the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash rivers, and anchored to the northeast by the vast freshwater expanse of Lake Michigan. This unique location made it a natural hub for movement, trade, and settlement long before the first Europeans arrived. It was here, near the confluence of the great rivers, that the Mississippian culture erected the monumental city of Cahokia, a testament to a sophisticated, pre-Columbian society that thrived for centuries. The legacy of these first peoples, and the Illiniwek confederation who gave the state its name, forms the foundational chapter of our story.

The arrival of French explorers in the 17th century, paddling down the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, marked the beginning of a new era. For a century, Illinois was an outpost of New France, a sparsely populated frontier of trappers, missionaries, and soldiers before it was ceded to the British and, soon after, claimed by the fledgling United States during the Revolutionary War. The transition to American control set the stage for a dramatic shift. Migrants from the South poured into its southern regions, while settlers from the East, utilizing new arteries like the Erie Canal, populated the north. This confluence of cultures, of Southerners with pro-slavery sentiments and Yankees with abolitionist convictions, made Illinois a critical battleground for the nation's soul.

That great struggle is personified by the state's most famous resident, Abraham Lincoln. It was in the frontier towns and burgeoning capital of Illinois that Lincoln forged the political philosophy and moral clarity that would guide the nation through the Civil War. His story is inseparable from that of Illinois, a state that contributed immense resources and more than a quarter-million soldiers to the Union cause. Lincoln's journey from a log cabin to the White House elevated Illinois in the national consciousness, forever branding it the "Land of Lincoln."

In the decades following the war, Illinois underwent a second, even more profound transformation. The prairie was tamed by the steel plow, its rich soil turning the state into an agricultural powerhouse. Simultaneously, the Industrial Revolution arrived with explosive force. Railroads, converging on Chicago, made the city the nation's unrivaled transportation hub. Mills, stockyards, and factories drew waves of immigrants from every corner of Europe, and later, a great migration of African Americans from the rural South. Chicago’s meteoric rise, its rebirth from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1871, and its emergence as a global city of audacious architecture and relentless energy, is one of the most compelling narratives in American urban history.

The 20th century brought new complexities. Illinois became a crucible for the labor

movement, a center of social reform pioneered by figures like Jane Addams at Hull House, and a stage for the organized crime that defined the Prohibition era. It weathered the Great Depression, mobilized for two world wars, and became a key arena for the Civil Rights Movement. Its political landscape grew famously intricate, from the powerful Chicago machine to the distinct concerns of its downstate agricultural communities. In more recent times, the state has navigated the pains of deindustrialization and embraced the promise of a new economy driven by technology and innovation.

This book seeks to navigate that rich and often turbulent history. It is a story of immense diversity—of landscapes that range from the rolling hills of the Shawnee National Forest to the flat, fertile plains of the central counties, and of a population that reflects the varied tapestry of the nation. It is a history marked by contrasts: between the urban and the rural, the industrial and the agricultural, the progressive and the traditional. In exploring the journey of Illinois, from its earliest inhabitants to its place in the 21st century, we gain a deeper understanding of the forces that have shaped not just a single state, but the United States itself.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before Illinois: Pre-Columbian Societies

Before there was Illinois, there was ice. Great continental glaciers, in some places a mile or more thick, repeatedly ground their way south over the North American continent. During several distinct glacial periods over nearly two million years, these immense sheets of ice scoured and reshaped the landscape, flattening hills and filling ancient river valleys with pulverized rock and earth. The most recent of these, the Wisconsin Glaciation, covered the northeastern part of the state in a deep freeze until it finally began its slow, dripping retreat around 17,000 years ago.

The world left behind was a profoundly different place. As the ice melted, it released colossal amounts of water, carving new paths for the Mississippi, Illinois, and Ohio rivers and depositing vast quantities of sand and gravel. The landscape immediately south of the retreating ice was a damp, chilly tundra, dominated by hardy sedges and spruce forests, more akin to modern-day northern Canada than the cornfields of today. This was a land of giants. Herds of woolly mammoths and American mastodons roamed the cold forests, alongside giant beavers the size of black bears, imposing stag-moose, and lumbering ground sloths.

Into this stark, post-glacial world came the first people. Archaeological evidence suggests that humans arrived in what is now Illinois around 13,000 years ago, near

the very end of the last Ice Age. These pioneering groups, known to archaeologists as Paleo-Indians, were nomadic hunters and gatherers. They lived in small, mobile bands, leaving behind a faint archaeological footprint that makes their lives difficult to study in detail. They were likely following the great herds of Ice Age megafauna, which provided not only food but also hides for clothing and shelter, and bone for tools.

The signature artifact of these first inhabitants is the Clovis point, a masterfully crafted spearhead with a distinctive "flute" or channel at the base, which allowed it to be securely fastened to a wooden shaft. These points, made from high-quality stone, were formidable weapons, essential for hunting the massive animals of the era. Hundreds of Clovis points have been discovered across Illinois, from the uplands along the Kankakee River to the river valleys of the south, indicating a widespread, if sparse, human presence. While no skeletal remains of these Paleo-Indian people have been found in Illinois, their stone tools tell a story of constant movement and adaptation.

Direct evidence of Paleo-Indians hunting megafauna in the region is rare but compelling. At the Kimmswick site, just south of St. Louis in Missouri, archaeologists from the Illinois State Museum unearthed a Clovis point in direct contact with a mastodon bone, a clear indication of a successful hunt thousands of years ago. Finds like this give us a dramatic glimpse into the challenges and triumphs of life in the waning days of the Ice Age. Some sites in Illinois, like the Lincoln Hills site in Jersey County, were revisited many times, likely because they were near crucial resources like high-quality stone for toolmaking. Here, ancient people would camp, repair their toolkits, and prepare for the next leg of their journey across the vast, cold landscape.

As the climate continued to warm, the world of the Paleo-Indians vanished. The great ice sheets melted away entirely, the spruce forests retreated northward, and the megafauna, stressed by the rapidly changing environment and perhaps by the efficiency of the new human predators, died out. This ushered in a new chapter in Illinois' human history, known as the Archaic period, which lasted from roughly 8,000 BCE to 1,000 BCE. The environment began to resemble that of today, with the development of deciduous forests and the vast prairies that would come to define the state.

Archaic peoples adapted to this new world by shifting their focus from large-game hunting to a more diversified strategy. They hunted smaller animals like white-tailed deer, fished in the increasingly productive rivers, and became expert foragers, gathering nuts, seeds, and wild plants. Their technology evolved as well. The atlatl, or spear-thrower, became a common tool, effectively a lever that allowed a hunter to throw a spear with greater force and accuracy. They also developed ground stone tools, such as axes for clearing forests and grinding stones for processing plant foods.

Perhaps the most important archaeological site in North America for understanding the Archaic period lies in the lower Illinois River valley: the Koster Site. Excavations at

Koster, in Greene County, revealed a stunningly preserved record of human occupation stretching back nearly 10,000 years. The site contains at least 15 distinct occupation layers, or "horizons," stacked one on top of the other like a layer cake of history. This unique stratification allowed archaeologists to see how human life changed over millennia.

The discoveries at Koster were revolutionary. Archaeologists unearthed the remains of some of the earliest permanent houses found in North America, dating to around 6,500 BCE. They found evidence of dogs being buried with care, suggesting they were not just work animals but companions. An 8,500-year-old campfire was unearthed, surrounded by the bones of a white-tailed deer, a testament to a successful hunt. The site showed that by the Middle Archaic period, people were living in more settled base camps for longer portions of the year, a significant shift away from the constant wandering of their Paleo-Indian ancestors.

The deep record at Koster also illustrates a growing sophistication in tool use and resource management. Bone and shell were fashioned into fishhooks and ornaments. The inhabitants cultivated specific resource-rich areas, returning to them season after season. They also engaged in long-distance trade. Stone tools found at Koster were made from materials sourced from as far away as northwestern Indiana, indicating complex networks of exchange and travel. The site provides a uniquely detailed window into a world where human societies were becoming more complex, populous, and settled.

Around 1,000 BCE, another series of innovations marked the beginning of the Woodland period. The most significant of these was the invention of pottery. For the first time, people could create durable, fire-proof containers for cooking and storing food. This simple but profound technological leap changed cooking methods, improved food storage, and allowed for a more sedentary lifestyle. Early Woodland pottery was thick-walled and crude, but it was a revolutionary development nonetheless.

The Woodland period also saw the dawn of agriculture in Illinois. People began to deliberately cultivate native plants like squash, sunflowers, and other starchy and oily seeds. This collection of cultivated plants is now known as the Eastern Agricultural Complex. While not yet the intensive, large-scale farming that would come later, this early horticulture provided a more reliable food source, supplementing the diet of hunted and gathered foods. This, in turn, supported larger, more permanent villages.

The most defining characteristic of the Woodland period, however, was the rise of elaborate mortuary rituals and the construction of burial mounds. Groups began burying their dead in prominent earthen mounds, often accompanied by ceremonial artifacts. This practice suggests a growing complexity in social structure and religious beliefs. These mounds were not just graves; they were sacred sites, territorial markers, and a link between the community and its ancestors.

This trend reached its zenith during the Middle Woodland period (c. 200 BCE – 500 CE) with the rise of what is known as the Hopewell tradition. The term "Hopewell" does not refer to a specific tribe or nation, but rather to a vast network of cultural and religious practices shared by different groups across a huge swath of eastern North America. At its heart was a trade network of unprecedented scale, often called the Hopewell Interaction Sphere.

Through this network, exotic materials and finished goods traveled hundreds, even thousands of miles to be deposited in burial mounds in the river valleys of Illinois and Ohio. Copper from the Great Lakes, obsidian (volcanic glass) from the Rocky Mountains, mica from the Appalachian Mountains, and seashells from the Gulf of Mexico have all been found in Illinois Hopewell mounds. These materials were worked by skilled artisans into breathtakingly beautiful objects: intricate copper breastplates, razor-sharp obsidian blades, and animal-effigy platform pipes carved with stunning realism.

The people of the Hopewell tradition were also master earthwork engineers. They constructed massive earthen mounds, some in geometric shapes, others in the forms of animals. These monumental structures would have required immense labor and sophisticated organization to build. They served as the ceremonial centers for the surrounding communities, places of ritual, burial, and social gathering. The Illinois River and its tributaries were a major center of Hopewell activity, and numerous mound groups in the region attest to the power and sophistication of these ancient societies.

For reasons that are still not fully understood, the Hopewell Interaction Sphere began to decline around 400 CE. The great trade networks faltered, and the construction of monumental earthworks ceased. This was followed by the Late Woodland period, which in some ways appears to be a step back in terms of artistic production and long-distance trade. However, this period also saw two crucial developments that would set the stage for the next great cultural explosion: the widespread adoption of the bow and arrow, which revolutionized hunting, and the introduction of maize, or corn, agriculture.

The cultivation of maize, a highly productive crop that originated in Mesoamerica, transformed everything. Farming shifted from small garden plots to extensive fields. For the first time, societies could reliably produce large food surpluses. This agricultural revolution laid the foundation for the most complex and populous pre-Columbian society north of Mexico: the Mississippian culture.

Beginning around 1000 CE, the Mississippian way of life blossomed. It was characterized by intensive maize agriculture, a hierarchical social structure known as the chiefdom, and the construction of large, planned towns centered around earthen

platform mounds. These were not the burial mounds of the Woodland period; they were massive, flat-topped pyramids of earth upon which temples, council houses, and the residences of the elite were built.

The undisputed center of the Mississippian world was a massive city located in the fertile floodplain of the Mississippi River, near present-day Collinsville, Illinois. We know it today as Cahokia. At its peak, around 1100 CE, Cahokia was a sprawling urban center with a population estimated between 10,000 and 20,000 people, a population not surpassed by any city in the United States until Philadelphia in the late 1700s.

Cahokia was a city of incredible ambition and monumental architecture. Its central precinct was surrounded by a two-mile-long defensive palisade made of some 20,000 logs. Inside this wall was a vast, 40-acre Grand Plaza, leveled and engineered by hand, which served as the city's public heart. Surrounding the plaza were dozens of mounds, the largest of which is Monks Mound. Built in stages over several centuries, this colossal structure rises 100 feet into the air, covers 14 acres at its base, and contains an estimated 22 million cubic feet of earth, all moved by human labor in baskets. Atop its summit stood a massive building, likely a temple or the residence of the city's paramount chief.

Life in Cahokia was highly organized. A powerful elite, likely combining political and religious authority, governed the city and its surrounding territory. Evidence for this social stratification is stark. Excavations of one smaller burial mound, known as Mound 72, revealed the tomb of a powerful leader, buried on a cape of 20,000 shell beads. He was surrounded by the remains of more than 250 other individuals, many of whom appear to have been young women sacrificed to accompany him in the afterlife. This grim discovery speaks to the immense power wielded by Cahokia's rulers.

Cahokia was also a center of scientific observation. Archaeologists have discovered the remains of several large timber circles, now called "Woodhenges," which were used as solar calendars. Upright posts aligned with the rising sun at the solstices and equinoxes, allowing the city's inhabitants to track the seasons, a crucial function for an agricultural society. The city was a bustling hub of trade, art, and ceremony, its influence radiating out for hundreds of miles, with smaller Mississippian towns and farmsteads dotting the river valleys of the Midwest.

Yet, as spectacular as its rise was, Cahokia's decline was equally dramatic. Beginning around 1250 CE, its population began to shrink. By 1350, the great city was largely abandoned. The exact reasons for its collapse are still debated among scholars. Theories include environmental degradation from over-farming and deforestation, prolonged drought or flooding, the spread of disease in the crowded urban center, and social or political unrest. It was likely a combination of these factors that led to the city's downfall.

The abandonment of Cahokia was part of a broader pattern. Across the region, the great Mississippian centers began to decline and fall apart. This marks the beginning of the Late Prehistoric period, a time of transition and reorganization. The centralized power of the great chiefdoms waned, and people began to live in smaller, more dispersed communities. This era has sometimes been referred to as the "Vacant Quarter," as large areas of the central Mississippi valley appear to have been largely depopulated after the fall of Cahokia. The stage was being cleared for a new cast of characters, the peoples who would eventually form the Illiniwek confederation, who began to move into the now-empty lands of a once-mighty civilization.
