

History of Illinois Immigration

by Cathy Duoba

Original Residents of Illinois

The first immigrants to America crossed the Siberian-Alaskan Bridge during the Ice Ages and worked their way slowly south and east across the continent. By 15,000 years ago, these Paleo-Indians had reached Illinois and by about 1000 B.C.E. the Woodland culture Indians were growing corn, still a major Illinois crop. The later Mound Builders, Indians of the Mississippi culture, built the first large towns in Illinois around 1000 C.E. – the largest, Cahokia, was home to 15,000 with nearby Monks Mound, the largest prehistoric earthwork in the United States, which can still be climbed today.

By 1400, new tribes had migrated into Illinois and formed the Illiwek (“the men”) Confederacy. The original Peoria, Kaskaskia, Tamaroa, Cahokia, and Michigamia were joined later by the Sauk, Fox, Winnebago, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and Shawnee. They had all sought the rich farm lands and forest hunting along Illinois rivers; all spoke the Algonquin language.

The first Immigrants to Illinois

About 1650, the fierce Iroquois started raiding the Illini tribes, so they agreed to French promises of protection. Some French immigrants to Illinois sought to extend their fur trade and built forts/trading posts and some sought to extend their Catholic faith and built missions. However these French forts built along the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers in western Illinois failed to protect the Illini from the raiding of the eastern Iroquois and many Illini tribes were pushed to the far southern tip of Illinois or across the Missouri River. There were 20,000 Native Americans in Illinois when the French arrived about 1650. By 1700, there were just 6,000, but the small French town-forts, with their trading posts and churches remained.

The French founded Kaskaskia in 1703, Prairie du Rocher in 1732, but remained mostly traders not settlers. Interestingly the 1752 census counted 768 French citizens with 446 African slaves in Illinois. After the French and Indian War (1754-1763) control passed to the English who made little effort to trade or settle in Illinois. The towns remained only nominally English. There was a slight decline in population as some French moved across the Mississippi, but most remained at Peoria and Kaskaskia. In 1778, George Rodgers Clark and his 175 men captured the British forts (Kaskaskia in Illinois) of the Northwest Territory for the rebelling American colonies thereby insuring westward expansion for the colonists.

The Settlement of the Illinois Territory 1780 to 1820

Early American settlers in Illinois stayed near the forests (seen as more fertile) and rivers (for transportation), plus the prairie was too hard to plow.

These early settlers traveled to Illinois down the Ohio River. The Yankees, from New England with stops in Ohio and Indiana, were merchants, tradesmen and some farmers following the moving frontier. The Southerners, of both English and Scottish ancestry, came because they could not compete with Southern slave-labor farming and could not afford the expensive Kentucky and Tennessee land. Southerners formed clannish farm family work units with strict religious/moral values.

The different values and social patterns caused Yankees to consider their Southern neighbors as lazy, shiftless, and uncultured “poor Whites” while Southerners viewed Yankee traders as inhospitable, greedy, and materialistic.

In 1800, population was 2,450; by 1810, about 15,000. When Illinois became a state in 1818, population was 35,000 of which 2/3's were Southerners and only 1/6th were Yankees. Because of this imbalance in immigration, the northern state boundary was moved up 40 miles to include Chicago and its outlet to the Great Lakes. “The reason given for this change was that if the Mississippi and Ohio rivers were the only outlets of Illinois trade, the interests of the state would become identified with those of the southern states; but a Lake Michigan outlet provided closer relations with the northern and middle states.” One of the first examples of gerrymandering.

Early Statehood 1820 to 1850

As more settlers moved into Illinois, about 1000 Native Americans made their last stand in 1832 under Chief Black Hawk – most were killed. By 1833, all Indians in Illinois had been removed from the state, eventually restricted to a Kansas reservation. The Erie Canal (1825) linking the Great Lakes to New York and the Illinois and Michigan Canal (started in 1836) linking the Illinois River and Lake Michigan, opened up the northern and prairie parts of Illinois and encouraged settlement from the northern states and immigrants entering the United States through northern ports. Deere's plow (1838) conquered the tough prairie sod.

The Mormons settled briefly in Illinois in 1839, made Nauvoo the largest Illinois city by 1845, but were driven out in 1847. From the 1830's onward, many European immigrants found settlements in Illinois. The first Swedes came to Illinois in the 1830's to escape religious persecution from the State Lutheran Church and settled in northwest Illinois. In 1831, the Amish people from Switzerland sought "a simple life," settling along the Illinois River.

By far the largest immigrant populations came from Germany and Ireland. Starting in the mid 1830's, German farmers came fleeing the land barons and the oppressions that culminated in the failed 1848 Revolution. These Germans came with enough money to start farms on free government land. The Irish however came fleeing poverty and the potato famine of 1845; they lacked any money to start farming and settled in the larger cities, especially Chicago. The Irish command of English helped somewhat in finding jobs, especially building railroads. In the year 1850 alone, 16,000 German and 13,000 Irish immigrants came to Illinois.

Railroads and the Start of Industrial Growth 1850 to 1890

Railroads Between 1850 and 1860, about 10,000 miles of railroad track was laid in Illinois more than any other state; and Illinois, with its coal for factories, became an industrial center. Chicago, on the Great Lakes, became the rail hub. Railroads provided better transportation for agricultural and industrial products and brought many manufactured goods and immigrants to Illinois from the East.

Rise of Industry The Union Stockyards (1865) used railroads from the west; the Chicago Iron Company (1868) used Illinois coal to produce steel. By 1880, other steel companies in Chicago, Joliet, Belleville, and Edwardsville made Illinois fourth in the nation's steel production. However, Illinois farmers were beset by post Civil War lower farm prices and exploitation by the railroads. Throughout the period, a steady flow of native farmers left the state for "the unfilled lands over the rainbow" touted by the railroads.

The "New" Immigrants of the 1870's Industrialization meant more jobs. Immigrants from Russia, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Sweden, Norway, and Bohemia (later part of the Czech Republic) joined the usual immigrants from western Europe. Since free land for farming in Illinois was gone, immigrants mostly settled in cities with industrial jobs. Competition caused by this large influx of immigrants meant low wages and long hours. Wages were so low, the women and children worked also. Workers started to form labor unions. Labor strife in 1873 was blamed by the press on foreigners. The *Chicago Evening Journal* blamed the Haymarket incident of 1886 on "the Polish rioters."

In many towns, the diversity of the immigrants fed the growth of industrialization. For example, in Collinsville, originally a coal town, a mixed population of Germans, Bohemians, Slavs, Croats, Austrians, Italians, English, Welsh and Lithuanians kept the financial base diversified enough to avoid the sad plight of the one-industry town. Collinsville became the home of a large zinc smelter (using coal), a machine shop, a canning factory (tomatoes), a brickyard (clay), breweries (corn), a packing plant (cattle), and two bell foundries (coal).

Their Numbers 1870 to 1900, over 450,000 immigrants entered Illinois, bringing the total born population to 966,747 or 20% of the state's population. By 1890 Illinois ranked fourth in the nation for the natives of Great Britain, second for natives of Germanic nations, fourth for the Irish, second for Scandinavians, third for Slavs, seventh for natives of Canada and Newfoundland, and sixth in natives of Latin America. (See index for 1890 breakdown).

Why They Came: Push/Pull Famine, religious persecution, the failed 1848 European revolutions, and war were strong factors "pushing" emigrants toward the United States. Low-cost land, religious and political freedom, and economic opportunity have been the major "pull" factors. Also "pulling" was the demand for new people to man the factories. Frenzied real-estate speculation needed a constant supply of buyers, so boosters and railroad agents encouraged immigrants. In 1880, the *Chicago Times* reported "one thousand tickets have been sent from Sterator, this year, to bring immigrants from the old Country."

Assimilation & Churches Church membership was almost as much a part of citizenship as choice of party. The early denominations were Presbyterian and Methodist with Southern Baptist gaining ground by 1880. Immigrants early in this period were mainly Lutherans and Catholics from Germany and Ireland. French Catholic communions in the Cahokia-Kaskaskia area remained strong. For all immigrants, their churches provided a social life and cultural continuity with the Old Country and eased the transition into American society.

Assimilation & Public Schools The effectiveness of public schools as vehicles for assimilation was hurt by high absentee rates in immigrant children. Religion remained an obstacle for the Irish (e.g. the Episcopal King James Version of the Bible used in public schools) and they started parochial schools. Another difficult problem was language. In New York, Chicago and San Francisco, reformers launched the first efforts at bilingual education to bring immigrant children into public schools. Chicago school officials began holding classes in German to draw students away from the "private schools," hoping that "the children of all nationalities" would be "assembled in the public schools, and thereby be radically Americanized." By 1877, eight states in the Union had some form of bilingual education.

Chicago's Immigrants By 1860, Chicago was the largest city in the state due to its location and endless supply of immigrant labor. Chicago's chief rivals, St. Louis and Cincinnati, fell behind when their rural areas were ravaged by the Civil War. The Great Fire of 1871 swept through a city of 298,000; 1880 saw a city of 503,185; and 1890 saw 1,000,000 Chicagoans.

Railroad promoters and confidence men clustered about New York harbor in the 1850's touting the wonders of Chicago and shipping off carloads of bewildered immigrants in ships and trains. The Irish numbered 20% of the city's population in 1850. In 1858, foreigners outnumbered native-born residents by 54 to 46%. Due to the Civil War embargo by 1870 native-born outnumbered immigrants in the city although even in 1890, 77.9% of the city's population both in numbers and in influence and that power continued into the 20th century. Both the Germans and Irish were active in politics. The importance of the German influence is seen in the bi-lingual public school classes; the strength of the Irish in their domination of jobs in the police and fire departments and city government.

By the mid-1890's, Chicago was the leading population center for Poles, Bohemians, Croatians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, and Greeks as the immigrant population shifted to southern and eastern Europe. Italians were the poorest of the large nationality groups. In 1879 fewer than 3,600 African-Americans had migrated north to Chicago settling on the south side; by 1890, the number was 14,271.

The Industrial Age 1890 to 1920

In 1890, most Illinoisans still lived in farming areas and small towns. By 1900, more Illinoisans lived in cities. The river towns of southern Illinois lost their transportation business to the railroads; the clay soil of "Little Egypt" could not support farming. Chicago grew from 1,000,000 in 1880 to 2,200,000 in 1910. Downstate grew too from 1,600,000 in 1860 to 3,200,000 in 1910, largely because of the growth of towns and small cities. Industry needed labor, both unskilled and semi-skilled. In 1900, seven of the country's 22 industrial plants with >4,000 workers were in Chicago. Less than a third of Illinois labor force worked in agriculture. In the Immigration Act of 1891, Congress created the Immigration and Naturalization Service making immigration a federal responsibility and established formal procedures and standards for admission to the U.S.

Major Industries of Illinois Illinois in 1914 ranked third in the nation for manufacturing, benefiting from a large labor force, coal for power, excellent rail and water transportation, and agricultural raw materials. Many of the top industries were closely linked with agriculture—meat packing, distilling, agricultural implements, flour and grist mills. Illinois also produced more agricultural products than any other state, and its coal-mining production was second only to Pennsylvania's.

The Immigrants In 1910, 4,433,277 white residents born in the U.S. resided in Illinois. Of these, 1,723,847 (or 39%) had foreign-born parents. These second-generation immigrants were likely to be German, Irish, Austrian, or Swedish and to have achieved economic success because they were skilled workers and assimilated into American society.

In 1910, foreign born immigrants in Illinois numbered 1,205,314; blacks migrating from the South to Illinois numbered about 72,000 in 1910. Those "old" immigrants still coming from Germany, Austria, or Sweden, were guided into an easy adjustment into American life by the established "old" immigrant communities.

The period from 1890 to 1920 saw the largest influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Unlike the Irish, who at least spoke English, or the Germans, who arrived with money to start farming on free/cheap land or had schooling and trade-skills, these "new" immigrants were largely peasants with no chance to start farming. They were seen as too traditional/narrow-minded, ignorant of "modern" life, unschooled and unskilled, non-Protestant and non-English speaking. The few modernizers in their midst were often revolutionary Socialists. The "new" immigrants of this period were mostly male and came without their families. They were largely unskilled workers, unaccustomed to urban life. They chose to live and work with their countrymen who shared the same language, customs, and values. Once established, many sent for their families, while others chose to return home.

In 1910, over 70% of all immigrants in Illinois were living in Chicago and Cook County, where unskilled industrial jobs could be found. Smaller cities with industries, like Rockford, Joliet, Aurora, and Elgin, had large immigrant populations. Large groups of Slavs and Italians moved in near mines, replacing Irish and German miners escaping the dangerous conditions.

The "new" immigrants worked 60 – 80 hours/week (before 1903) for an average 22 cents/hour, with no guarantee of work the next day. Almost 32,000 foreign born and black women worked as domestics in Illinois in 1900. Child labor practices were notorious. State and municipal laws segregated the races. Immigrants were often crowded into tenement buildings in filthy neighborhoods lacking garbage pick-up and sewer services. Crowded slum conditions made tuberculosis, typhoid

and diphtheria major scourges. Chicago's south side held 90% of its black residents. The population of the "Black Belt" doubled between 1910 and 1920, yet the boundaries hardly changed.

The Rise of Anti-Immigration This was the age of the "Robber Barons." Low wages, unstable employment and unsafe/poor working conditions fed the rise of unionism. Violent labor strife served to alienate the immigrant both from the working man who saw his job threatened by foreign scabs and from employers who feared the pro-union European background. The native-born, middle-class American blamed the ills and conflicts of cities and rapid industrialization on the newcomers. Labor violence, corrupt political machines, saloons, and falling wages created uneasiness about the stability of American society and the American standard of living. The outbreak of European war in 1914 ended the mass influx of peasants.

The Century of Progress 1920 to 1950

Scientific and technical advances led to improved living conditions for many. Automobiles and electricity were greatly changing the lives of most people in Illinois. Anti-immigrant feeling was fueled by the hardship of the Great Depression of the 1930's which caused widespread unemployment and left many people homeless and penniless. Farmers suffered heavy crop losses due to droughts. Coal miners were torn between rival labor organizations.

Anti-immigrant feeling climaxed in the establishment of quotas for various nationality groups based on the 1890 census, first enacted on a temporary basis in 1920. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 made the quota system permanent for the next 40 years. Based on the 1910 census, it favored northern over southern Europeans. Some countries rarely filled their quotas while others, in central, eastern, and southern Europe, often had long waiting lists. Latin American, Caribbean, African and Asian countries not excluded by legislation in 1882 and 1917 had miniscule quotas. Between 1925 and 1929, the total quota was 164,667 people per year, a striking contrast to the 1.2 million immigrants in 1914, the last year before World War I. In the 10 year period from 1930 to 1939, only slightly more than a half million immigrants entered the U.S. (compared to 6 million in earlier decades). Immigration was sparse during World War II (1939 to 1945). In 1943 there were only 23,700 immigrants, the lowest since records began in 1820. Some exceptions to nation quotas were made in 1948 and 1952 for refugees from WWII.

From the 1920's through the mid-1940's, when federal law and World War II curtailed immigration, the most striking aspect of the era was the decline in the importance of ethnic identity. The major immigrant nationalities entered their third generation in the U.S. and hostility to their presence had lessened. While cultural pluralism was suspect, by the mid-20th century, diversity based on religious belief was seen as a form of pluralism that could be tolerated.