Located in the middle of a continent and blessed with outstanding soil, plenty of rivers and streams and an abundance of natural resources, the area that became Illinois was home to numerous people even before the first Europeans arrived. In the 1100s Cahokia, located on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River by present-day St. Louis, was the largest city in North America. With a population estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000, it was larger than London, England.

By the time the French explorers, trappers and missionaries arrived in the 17th century, all that remained of Cahokia were earthen mounds. To this day, these mounds rank as some of the largest pyramids in the world. The French ruled the Illinois Territory until 1763, when it ceded the land to the British following the French and Indian War. French rule over the territory is mostly remembered by the designation of “Illinois,” which is the French adaptation of “Illiniwek” — a Native American word for “men.” The 20 years of British rule (1763-1783) left even less of an imprint than the French period, although British agitation during the War of 1812 did lead to the famous Fort Dearborn Massacre, when Native American allies of the British fought American soldiers and residents as they evacuated the fort located in present-day Chicago.

Illinois became part of the Northwest Territory following the American Revolution. Under the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the northern border of Illinois ended at the southern tip of Lake Michigan, but when Illinois applied for statehood in 1818 its forward-thinking delegate to Congress, Nathaniel Pope, convinced Congress to expand the border 61 miles north. This area of Illinois contains present-day Chicago, Rockford, Galena and roughly 60 percent of the state’s current population.

Chicago was far from becoming the population center of the state in the early 1800s. With the railroad and other means of transportation not yet invented and good roads and bridges scarce to nonexistent, Illinois was settled from south to north. Early settlers, mostly from Southern states, came to Illinois down the Ohio River and then up the Mississippi and Wabash rivers. It was thought that the land was more fertile along the rivers, and clearing timber and brush was easier than plowing through the tough prairie that covered more than 60 percent of the state. Kaskaskia, located on the Mississippi River 80 miles south of St. Louis, became the first state capital when Illinois became the nation’s 21st state in 1818. Two years later, the capital was moved to the newly created town of Vandalia, approximately 100 miles north on the Kaskaskia River. In 1840, the capital relocated to the geographic center of the state, Springfield, where it remains today.

Illinois grew rapidly prior to the Civil War, aided by improved transportation that made traveling to northern parts of the state easier. The Sauk and the Fox tribes were the last Native Americans to leave Illinois, exiting after the 1832 Black Hawk War and opening up more land for settlement and the Galena area for lead mining. John Deere of Grand Detour successfully invented a steel plow in 1837, which made breaking up the prairie to reach the rich Illinois soil easier. Cyrus McCormick improved harvesting methods when he developed the mechanical reaper and opened the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company in Chicago in the 1840s. Illinois became not just the leading agricultural state that it is today but a leading agri-business state, with companies like John Deere, Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and Caterpillar continuing the tradition.

Settlers to Illinois were now arriving primarily from the Northeastern states, with many immigrants coming from Western and Northern Europe. Some settlers created their own communities based on ethnicity or religion, such as the Mormons and French Icarians.
in Nauvoo, the Swedish at Bishop Hill and the English at Albion. The Irish, Germans and English had the largest percentages of European immigrants to Illinois before the Civil War. Most of the people arriving in Illinois worked in agriculture but industry, mining and the professions were growing as well. Irish immigrants were key to the building of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which extended from the Chicago River to the Illinois River. The canal linked the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and, eventually, the Gulf of Mexico. By the time the canal opened in 1848, the railroad had arrived in Illinois, reducing the need for the canal. The first railroad in Illinois opened in 1838, and by the start of the Civil War Chicago had become a major railway center for the nation.

Illinois provided more than 285,000 soldiers to the Northern war effort during the Civil War (1861-1865), as well as President Abraham Lincoln of Springfield and Generals Ulysses S. Grant of Galena and John Logan of Murphysboro. The demand for Illinois products grew dramatically during the war. The end of the war prompted the formation of the Union Stockyards in Chicago, creating a centralized processing area for meat packaging companies. For the next century, Chicago was the leading producer and packager of meat products in the nation. Illinois Poet Laureate Carl Sandburg described Chicago as the “Hog Butcher for the World.”

After the Civil War, the frontier moved west and Illinois became one of the largest, most important states in the union. The population increased from 1.7 million in 1860 to 4.8 million in 1900. Chicago became the second-largest city in the country and by 1890 Illinois was the third-largest state. In 1893, just 22 years after the devastating Chicago Fire, the city hosted the World’s Columbian Exposition — perhaps the greatest world’s fair in history. Immigrants continued to stream into the state from Europe, however now more Eastern and Southern Europeans made up the mix and more were heading to urban areas. Illinois industrialized and booming factories and mills appeared on the shores of Lake Michigan, along the Mississippi River and in small and mid-sized Illinois cities. In 1870, agricultural products accounted for a higher sales value than manufactured products, yet 20 years later manufactured goods had five times the value of agricultural products. Coal mining had also become a major industry in southern and central Illinois.
Rapid expansion and industrialization resulted in wealth for some and poverty for many. Economic inequality led to the creation of labor unions for workers and similar collective actions for farmers. Hardworking conditions also led to labor strife, as evidenced by the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886, the Pullman Railroad Strike of 1894 and the many mine wars in southern Illinois. Progressive reformers at the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century helped alleviate some of the worst aspects of the inequality, with Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founding Hull House as a model settlement house in Chicago, Florence Kelly fighting for child labor laws and to alleviate tenement sweatshops and Frances Willard leading the fight for temperance and women’s suffrage.

Social inequality proved just as difficult to tackle as economic inequity. Women did not receive the right to vote in presidential elections until 1913, although Illinois became the first state east of the Mississippi to grant women this right. African-Americans did not arrive in large numbers in Illinois until the Great Migration from the South began around World War I. Before and after the migration, African-Americans faced discrimination and segregation, culminating in race riots in Springfield in 1908, East St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919.

Railroad expansion helped bind the state together after the Civil War. A similar transportation revolution occurred in the 20th century, with the expanded use of the automobile and the resulting push to build hard roads in Illinois. Voters approved a $60 million bond issue to pave 4,800 miles of road in 1918 and in 1924 voters supported a $100 million bond issue for an additional 5,100 miles of paved road, as Illinois pulled itself out of the mud.
Improved technologies brought electricity and radios into homes and reduced labor costs, especially in mining and manufacturing. Illinois contributed more than 350,000 soldiers to the war effort in World War I, of which more than 5,000 died. Unfortunately, during the Prohibition era (1920-1933), Illinois may have been most famous for its bootleggers and mobsters, with the likes of Al Capone of Chicago, Charlie Birger of Williamson County and the Shelton Brothers of Wayne County.

With an economy mixed between manufacturing, agriculture and natural resource extraction, Illinois prospered during the economic boom of the 1920s, but the Great Depression hit the state hard. By 1933, 1.5 million Illinoisans were unemployed and more than a quarter of a million families were receiving some sort of relief. Nine special sessions of the Illinois Legislature were called between 1931 and 1938 to try to address the situation. The state was on the way to recovery when World War II began. Approximately 1 million Illinois men and 13,000 women served in the Armed Forces. More than 17,000 Illinoisans were killed during the war. Training facilities were built or expanded at Ft. Sheridan and the Great Lakes Naval Station both north of Chicago; Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul; Scott Field, now Scott Air Force Base, near Belleville; Camp Grant south of Rockford; and Camp Ellis near Ipava. Equipment and munitions were tested and produced at the Joliet Arsenal, Rock Island Arsenal and the Sangamon Ordnance Plant near Springfield. The first successful experiment of the atomic bomb occurred under Stagg Field at the University of Chicago. As in World War I, many manufacturing facilities converted to producing war materials and hired women to work in their factories. With the nation on a wartime footing, Illinois farmers met or exceeded all wartime production goals established by the federal government.

By mid-century, Illinois was a leading producer of steel, cement, machinery, coal, oil, meat products and fluorspar. Its agricultural output was increasing as well, even though a smaller percentage of the population worked in farming. Illinois ranked first in the nation in the production of soybeans and hybrid seed corn and second in field corn and the value of its livestock and livestock products. The state’s population in 1950 was 8.7 million,
nearly double of what it had been in 1900. Chicago’s population alone was 3.6 million, which remains its all-time high. More than 70 percent of the state’s population lived in urban areas — a percentage that would continue to increase throughout the rest of the century.

The post-war baby boom, increased economic opportunities and mobility led to many changes in the decades following the war. State highways were turned into interstates. Residents of cities flocked to suburban areas, which were opened up in the Chicago area by newly built expressways. Illinois public universities expanded and the state created the Community College System. Air travel increased and Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport became the nation’s busiest airport. In 1969, the John Hancock Building opened in Chicago as the second-tallest building in the world. Four years later, Chicago’s Sears Tower opened and for a quarter century had the title as the world’s tallest building. Changes continued in every aspect of life in Illinois, with a new state constitution in 1970 designed to modernize government. Still in effect today, it is the state’s fourth constitution and was the first new one in a century.

Illinois was an epicenter of the turbulent 1960s. Nearly 3,000 Illinois soldiers died fighting in the Vietnam War. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led open housing marches in Chicago in 1966, which helped lead to the National Fair Housing Act. Rioting broke out in several Illinois cities following his assassination in 1968. The 1968 Democratic National Convention was held in Chicago and police and national guardsmen had violent clashes with demonstrators. In 1970, anti-war protests occurred on several Illinois’ college campuses.

Four Illinoisans have been elected as U. S. President, including Barack Obama, who in 2007 announced his candidacy at a rally at the Old State Capitol in Springfield. In this never before published photograph taken just before making the announcement, candidate Obama visits the House of Representatives chamber inside the Old State Capitol, where another Illinoisan who became President, Abraham Lincoln, once served. (Photo courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.)
By the 1970s, Illinois began transitioning to a service economy. Manufacturing was hurt in the 1980s as many companies moved out of state or simply could not compete in a changing world. The Union Stockyards closed in 1971. Between 1980 and 2001, the giant steel mills on Chicago’s South Side closed, eradicating an industry that once employed 200,000 workers in steel manufacturing and related jobs. Illinois had more than 330 operating coal mines in 1950, however that number shrank to 54 in the early 1980s and to 21 in 2015. In 1990, nearly 1 million Illinoisans worked in manufacturing but by 2015 that number had declined to less than 600,000. Agriculture remains strong in Illinois, as it ranks second in the nation in corn and soybean production and fourth in hogs and pigs, although the number of Illinois farms has declined from 98,000 in 1982 to roughly 73,000 in 2016. The number of acres farmed during the same time period declined from 28.7 million acres to 26.9 million.

During the course of the last 35 years, the demographics of Illinois have changed greatly. The Great Migration that began around World War I resulted in increasing the state’s African-American population from less than 2 percent in 1910 to nearly 14.5 percent in 1980 — a percentage of the population that has been roughly maintained to 2016. However, in 1980 the state’s Hispanic/Latino population was only 6 percent of the total population and in 2016 it was 15.8 percent. Similarly, the percentage of the population of Asian descent has increased from less than 1 percent in 1980 to 4.5 percent in 2016. In 1980, the five largest cities in Illinois were Chicago, Rockford, Peoria, Springfield and Decatur. Chicago’s population has declined steadily since its peak in 1950, but with 2.7 million residents it continues to be the largest city in Illinois and the third-largest city in the nation. However, the next four largest Illinois cities are now Aurora, Rockford, Joliet and Naperville. Illinois is the fifth-largest state in the nation, with a 2010 population of 12.84 million. As Illinois enters its third century of statehood, it remains a major agricultural, manufacturing and resource producing state and a transportation and shipping hub for the nation. But, when all is said and done, the history of Illinois is about its people. Many of its residents have shaped or changed the course of the nation. Illinois lays claim to four American Presidents (Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama), one Vice President (Charles Dawes) and a host of giants in the fields of literature and the arts, manufacturing and business, politics and academia. Millions of people from all walks of life and in all different ways have contributed to the state’s history and made it what it is today and what it will be tomorrow.

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