



Prairie Pages

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Education Services

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

Pioneers



Early pioneers built their homes near forests and rivers.

The first white people to settle Illinois were frontiersmen. Many were French in the period before Illinois became a state in 1818. Some were also from the southern states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Frontiersmen were not permanent settlers. They liked living in isolated places. Often they moved away once more people moved into the area.

Travel in pioneer Illinois was dangerous. The roads were poor and there were no bridges. People could get lost in the prairie grass, which grew as tall as a man. Many pioneers traveled to Illinois by walking. Some built flatboats and floated down rivers.

Southern Illinois was the first part of Illinois to be settled.

Southern Illinois was the first part of Illinois to be settled. Pioneers built their homes near rivers and woods. Rivers provided easy transportation. The forests furnished building materials and fuel for heating their homes and cooking.



New settlers were advised to arrive in Illinois in the spring and summer. Many traveled by walking alongside a wagon. One of the most important items owned by a pioneer was his long rifle.

Early pioneers did not settle on the prairies. The prairies had no trees. Settlers thought nothing would grow on them.

Pioneer homes were made of logs fitted into a rectangle. Logs

were notched to fit into each other. Cutting the logs to fit took great skill. The cracks between the logs were filled with small wedges of wood and mud to keep the cold and damp out. Pioneers did not have glass, nails, screws, or bolts to use in their homes. Glass and nails were expensive. Windows were covered with shutters or greased animal skins. Doors were hinged with wooden pegs. The fireplace, used for cooking and heating, did not keep people warm. Pioneers complained that when they stood facing a fireplace their backsides were cold. Life in pioneer Illinois was very hard.

Before people could buy land it needed to be surveyed by the government. Property was sold to the highest bidder. Land that was not purchased was sold at auctions for \$1.25 an acre. Pioneers who came to Illinois before the government sold land were called squatters. They did not legally own their property. Sometimes they lost their land if someone else bought it.

Planting a garden was one of the first jobs a pioneer had to do. Gardens supplied vegetables and fruits. Early settlers found food in the woods before their gardens were ready. They ate dandelions, wild strawberries, nuts and many other wild plants. Early settlers trapped and hunted bear, deer, wild turkey, prairie chickens, squirrel, and quail. Most pioneers grew Indian corn. They made hominy, mush, and corn bread from it.

Most pioneers brought a cow and some hogs with them. Livestock did not live in barns. They lived and grazed in the woods. Pioneers thought animals could take care of themselves. Early hogs were called razorbacks. They provided ham, sausage, and bacon.



An ax was an important tool owned by early settlers. With it they were able to chop down trees to build their homes.

Most things needed by pioneers were made at home. They made soap, candles, clothing, shoes, and furniture. Items they could not make such as dishes, iron tools, gunpowder, and ammunition, were purchased in shops. But

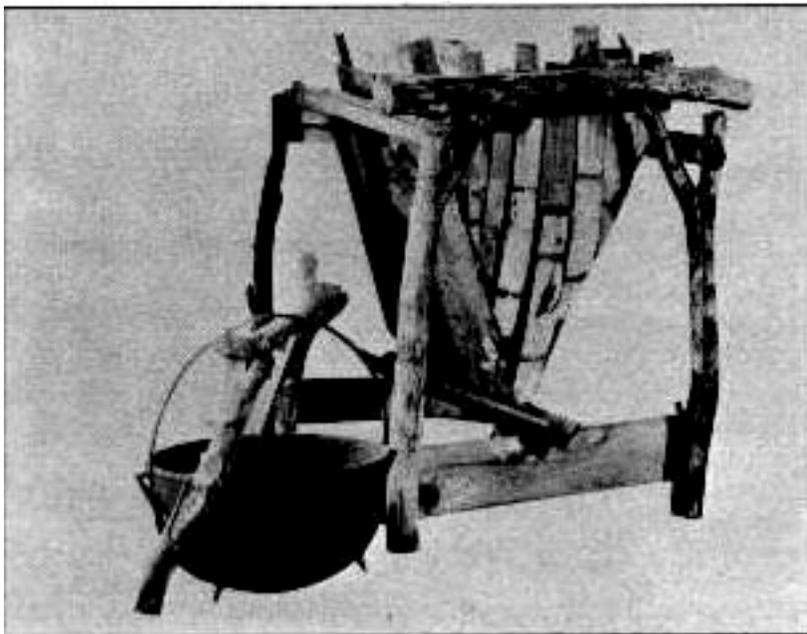
money was not used. Rather pioneers bartered —traded— for items they needed. If someone needed an iron pot he/she might buy it with a chicken or a dozen eggs.

Early Illinois was a very unhealthy area. It was infested with insects. One reason people got sick was because they did not understand basic sanitation. Fevers and ague were very common. Ague was a form of malaria caused by mosquito bites. Malaria caused chills and burning, shaking, headache, and backache. People who got the ague stayed in bed for weeks. It made people suffer. They could not work or take care of their homes. Doctors thought the ague was caused by decaying vegetables and bad air. There were many home remedies for the ague. One was to

swallow pills made from cobwebs. When farmers drained standing water from their fields there was less ague because the mosquitos habitat was destroyed.

Pioneer children often had to remain home to help with the farm instead of attending school.

Early settlers worked much of the day. They lived far away from each other. They had little time to socialize. But they found time to have fun. People got together at quilting and apple paring parties. Hog butchering and house raisings were times to have fun when the work was done. Favorite games and sports were card playing and horse and foot races. Men enjoyed wrestling and shooting matches.



Pioneers made their own soap using an ash hopper. It was filled with fireplace ashes and covered with water. It dripped a strong solution that was combined with animal fats to produce soap.

Many children did not attend school. They were needed at home to help with farm work. Early teachers traveled from home to home. They boarded with families who wanted their children educated. Early schools were called subscription schools. Parents had to pay for children to attend.

The home was the center of pioneer life. Families were large. Parents had between six and ten children. Boys began working in the fields when they turned six years old. They were expected to learn a trade. Many were apprenticed to other families. Girls helped with heavy housework. Hired help was not needed if there were many children to do the work.

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