



# Prairie Pages

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Education Services

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

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## How Illinois Became the Prairie State

### Geography

#### Glossary

**glacier**—an extremely slow moving mass of ice and snow

**fertile**—rich in material needed to grow plants

A prairie is a large area of flat, rolling grassland, with few trees and very rich soil. The word *prairie* comes from a French word meaning “meadow.” The prairie in Illinois was created by what happened hundreds of thousands of years ago. **Glaciers** drifted into Illinois from the north four different times and covered the state with huge layers of ice. As the sheets of ice slowly moved across the land, they crushed boulders and smaller rocks into drift (also called bowler clay), which is a type of soil that made the land **fertile**. The last glacier covered the central region of the future United States fifteen to fifty thousand years ago.

Goose Lake Prairie  
Nature Preserve  
southwest of  
Chicago. Courtesy  
Illinois State  
Museum.



When the last glacier retreated, it left a flat prairie that covered 55 per cent, or a little more than half of the

## Glossary

*agriculture*—farming

*coal*—material formed from fossilized plants, it is composed almost entirely of carbon and used as a fuel

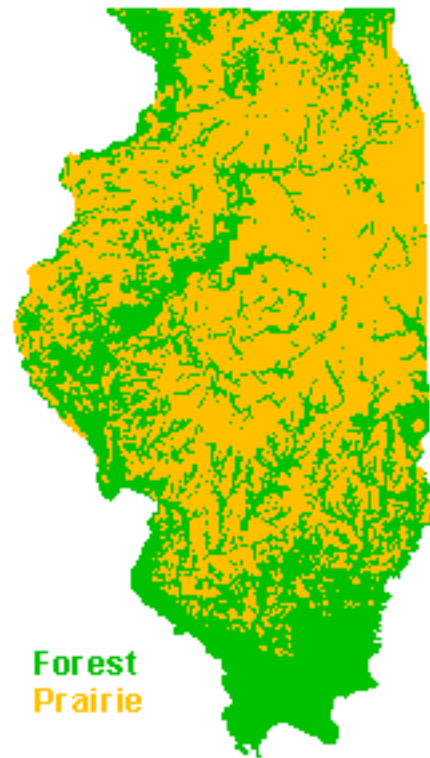
*petroleum*—an oily liquid found underground which can be burned; the material from which gasoline, kerosene and many other products are obtained

*terrain*—the physical features of an area of land

state. The very rich soil under the prairie makes Illinois one of the greatest regions in the world for **agriculture**. Illinois' soil contains many minerals that help crops grow well. This is important because the soil under the vast prairies is the most important natural resource in the state. The fertile soil in Illinois helped early prehistoric cultures thrive. The fertile soil was one of the reasons why many Americans moved west to settle on the prairie. The increasing settlement brought about by the excellent farming conditions and the easy transportation on natural water routes helped Illinois become one of the most important states in the Midwest.

Some of Illinois' wealth lies below the prairie soil. Millions of years before the glaciers arrived, this part of North America was covered by shallow seas. Below the water were layers of sedimentary rock which are now under the ground. Many important minerals are contained in the earth under Illinois. Huge deposits of **coal** are found under much of the state. Parts of Illinois also have **petroleum**, the second most important mineral in Illinois. Southeastern Illinois has many active oil wells.

Not all of Illinois was covered by the glaciers. The last glacier stopped before reaching the southern part of the state. The Shawnee Hills region has a rugged, rocky **terrain** with bluffs and forested land. Another area not



Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

covered and flattened by glaciers is in the northwest corner of Illinois near Galena.

## Glossary

*landforms*—the features that make up the earth's surface such as mountains or valleys

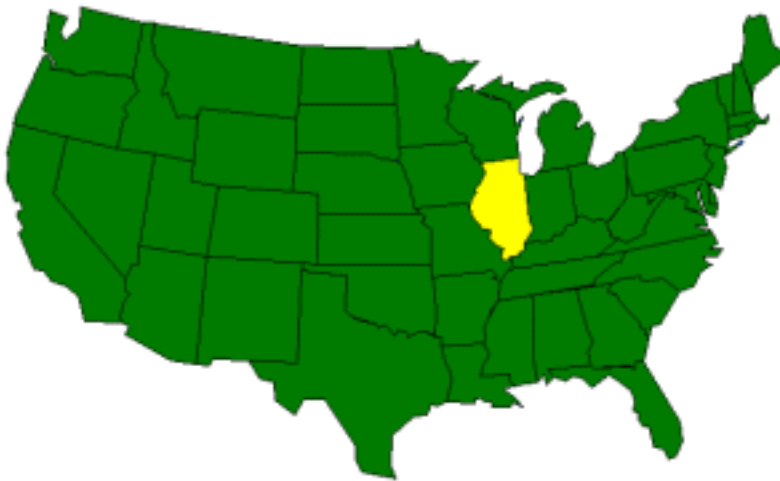
*hub*—a center of activity

## Geography of Illinois

Physical Geography is the study of the surface of the earth, its land and water areas, **landforms**, climate, plants, and animals. Geography also looks at how geography influences animals and people, as well as how animals and people in a particular place can have an impact on geography. In Latin *geo* means “the earth” and *graph* means “to write.” Geographers study the features of the earth's surface.

Illinois is in the middle of the United States and in the middle of the continent of North America. Because Illinois has this central location, people and goods move through the state to the rest of the country, continent, and world. Illinois has other geographical advantages over neighboring states. It has many rivers and access to the

Great Lakes to help move people and goods. Illinois' central location also means that the state is a **hub** for airlines, railroad lines, and interstate highways that connect Illinois to the world. The location of Illinois in North America, combined with its agricultural riches, rivers, and Great Lakes, makes Illinois a very important state.



Illinois is located in the middle of the United States. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

Illinois is the twenty-fourth largest state in the United States of America. At the widest point, measuring from Quincy to the Indiana border, Illinois is 200 miles across. From the southern tip of the state to the Wisconsin border is 380 miles.

## Glossary

*suburb*—the edge of a town or city where most of the buildings are homes rather than businesses or factories

*urban*—having to do with a city



*rural*—having to do with the country; not in a city

Illinois has four very distinct seasons with a wide temperature range. This is due to Illinois' northern latitude and location in the middle of a large land mass. Southern Illinois enjoys mild winters and hot summer temperatures, while northern Illinois has harsher winters and somewhat cooler summer temperatures. High summer humidity levels make the temperatures feel hotter than the thermometer shows. Temperatures in Illinois can reach over 100 degrees in the summer and drop to -25 degrees in the winter.

Illinois is a first-class agricultural state because of its rich soil. The length of the growing season for plants is also a factor. The average number of days the temperature stays above freezing, or 32 degrees, determines the growing season. The growing season is 200 days long in southern Illinois, but in northern Illinois it averages only 160 days a year.

Illinois has two distinctly different population regions within the state. There is a sizable urban population in northeastern Illinois. Some call this area "Chicagoland" because of the many **suburbs** which surround the city of Chicago. Chicago is the third largest city in the United States. Cook County, in which most of Chicago is located, has a population of more than 5 million people. Combined with the populations of the four counties surrounding Cook, the number swells to over 8 million. The rest of Illinois (97 counties) has a population of only 4.5 million. In other words, Illinois has five densely packed **urban** counties and ninety-seven more sparsely populated **rural** counties.



 Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, and Will counties, 8 million people  
 97 remaining counties, 4.5 million people

Courtesy  
Illinois State  
Museum.

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