



Prairie Pages

Vol. 3 # 1

Education Services

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

The Native Peoples of Illinois

What the Europeans Found

Glossary

confederation—groups of people who share a common culture, language, or purpose and work together for the good of the larger group

missionary—a person who persuades people to join their religious group

The peoples living in Illinois when the first Europeans arrived relied upon farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering for their food. They were part of a **confederation**, or group of tribes, called the *Illiniwek* or the Illinois. One French **missionary** thought this word meant “the men,” but later studies of the language show that it may have come from the word “*irenweewa*,” which meant “he speaks in the ordinary way.” Another tribe borrowed this word, which in their language became *illinwe*. The early French heard this word and wrote it as *Ilinois* or *Illinois*. The Illiniwek Confederation consisted of the Cahokia, Michigamea, Kaskaskia, Peoria, and Tamaroa tribes. According to French explorers, trappers, and missionaries, the Illiniwek were tall, healthy, handsome people who displayed a calm disposition.

In 1673, the year the first Europeans laid eyes on what would become the state of Illinois, the land looked very different from the way it does today. It was mostly prairie, but there were also areas of swamps, marshes, and forests. Herds of bison, elk, and deer roamed northern Illinois, while bears and



A Kaskaskia Indian. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Glossary

maize—corn

voyageurs—French fur trappers and traders

mobile—moving from place to place



French Voyageur and Native America greeting on a riverbank. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

longhouse—a house for several families; constructed of a wooden frame covered with reed mats or sheets of bark

mountain lions were common in what is today the Shawnee National Forest. Imagine the thunder of a herd of bison charging across the prairie or the growl of a bear deep in the woods. No modern farms, cities, highways, or skyscrapers existed. The native peoples had fields of **maize**, beans, squash, and melons, but these fields would seem tiny compared to the 25 million acres of crops that cover much of the state today. Even though Illinois was quite a different place 330 years ago when the Illinois Indians called this part of North America their homeland, one thing has stayed the same—the importance of natural resources.

Fertile soil and an extensive river system played an

important part in the development of Illinois, and they continue to be important to people today. The Mississippi, Ohio, Wabash, and Illinois rivers were traveled by the native peoples, French **voyageurs**, British soldiers, and later, by settlers from the eastern states. Now the rivers carry millions of dollars in

goods and materials. Illinois' rich soil provided food for the Illiniwek, just as it does for millions of people today.

The Illiniwek

At the time of contact between Europeans and the natives peoples the Illinois tribes were **mobile** and lived in three different kinds of villages in the course of the year. During the warmer months of April and May they lived in summer villages located near the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. Six to eight families lived together in structures called **longhouses**.

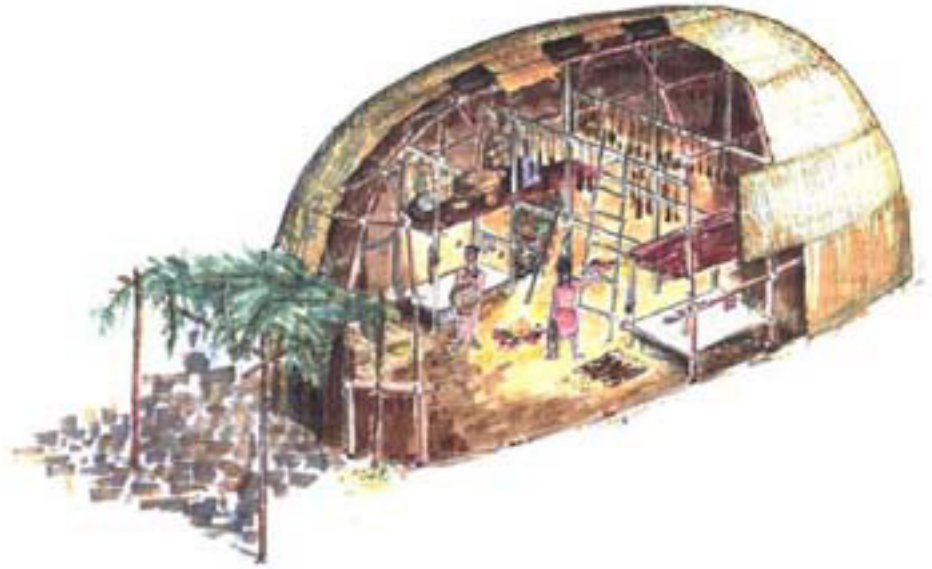
Preparing the soil to grow crops was hard work. The

Glossary

smoking—a method of preserving meat by exposing it for long periods to smoke from a wood fire

drying rack—a wooden frame on which smoked meats were placed to dry out in order to preserve the meat for later use

river bottom—the land on the sides of the river that is covered if the river floods its banks



As many as eight families occupied each Illinois longhouse in Illiniwek summer villages. Drawing by Lynn E. Alden. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

Illiniwek returned to the fields year after year so that the women did not have to do as much to prepare them for planting corn, squash, melons, and beans. This gave the women more time to tend to other needs of the family. In June and July huge numbers of people left these villages for bison hunts on the prairie. Temporary shelters of poles and bark were constructed at the summer hunting camps. The group hunt helped all the members of the tribes by providing meat and other animal products. The meat was preserved by **smoking** it on **drying racks**. After the big hunt everyone returned to the summer village to harvest the crops. In mid-October the large villages split into smaller groups and moved to winter villages located in **river bottoms**. These smaller villages had from five to twenty lodges called **wigwams**. Men continued to hunt smaller game. In early spring the groups



Capitaine de La Nation des Illinois, drawing by Charles Becard de Granville, ca. 1701. An Illinois chief smoking a Calumet pipe. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

Glossary

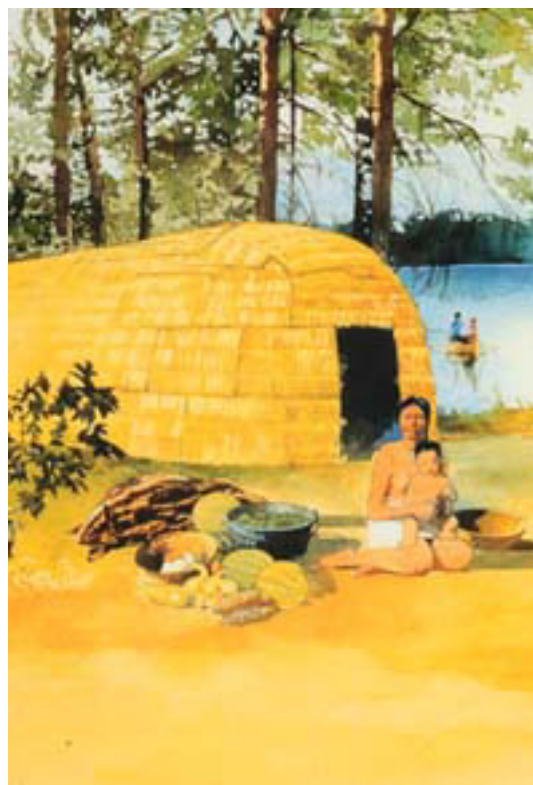
wigwam—a small domed structure, usually for only one family, made of a frame covered with bark, mats, or hides

tattoo—a permanent mark or design made on the skin

shaman—a person who acted as a go-between for people and the spirit world

lacrosse—a game created by American Indians, played by two teams with each player using a stick with a net at the end for catching, carrying, or throwing the ball; each team tried to get a ball into the goal

Illinois woman with some of her produce from her garden including corn, beans, squash and watermelon. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.



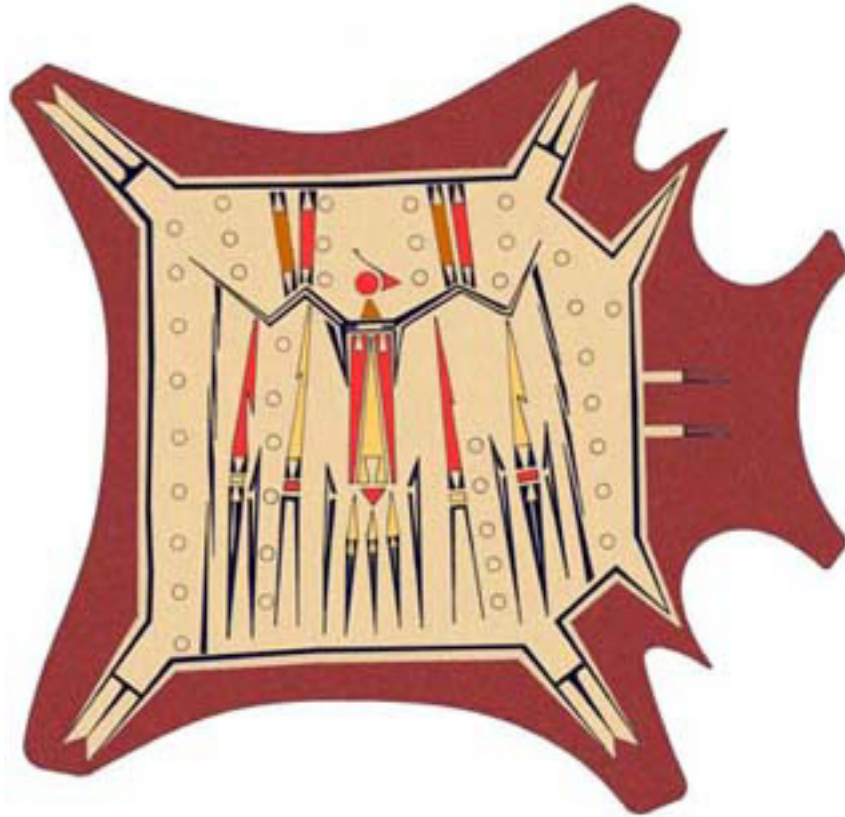
reassembled in the summer villages and the yearly cycle began again.

The clothing worn by the Illiniwek was made from the skins and fur of bison, deer, and other animals. In hot weather both men and women wore very little clothing, but in winter they kept warm in leather cloaks and fur robes. Men and boys had very different hairstyles from women and girls. The people wore ornaments, which included carved stone and shell-bead necklaces, porcupine quill work, and feather headdresses shaped like crowns. Both men and women decorated their skin with **tattoos** and paint.



Medicine man curing a patient. Original lithograph based on a watercolor by Seth Eastman, 1853. Robert E. Warren Collection. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

Most of the work among the Illinois Indians was divided by gender. Men were primarily hunters, fishers, traders, and warriors. They defended their villages from attacks and raided other tribes. Being a brave warrior gave a man a place of honor among his people. The purpose of the raids was not necessarily to kill enemies, but to take prisoners who were then treated as slaves. Men had most of the important leadership roles, although



Painted deer hide.
Courtesy Illinois State
Museum.

Glossary

cure—preserve meat

manitou—a personal, guardian spirit that appeared in the form of an animal such as a bison, bear, or wolf and through which the person could communicate with their supreme god

wild plant foods and firewood. Women constructed the houses and made most of the farming tools, containers, utensils, clothing, and moccasins. When the men returned to the village with the bison, deer, antelope, elk, and bear they hunted or the rabbits, squirrels, beaver, and other small animals they trapped, it was the women who **cured** the hides and smoked the meat. It was also women who did the cooking and cared for the children. Boys and girls were expected to watch and learn from the adults in the tribe. Boys practiced the skills they would need as men, just as girls worked beside their mothers learning all the tasks that would be expected of them.

The Illiniwek worshiped one spirit, called *Kitchesmanetoa*, which they believed to be the maker of all things. Each man had a personal guardian spirit that connected him to Kitchesmanetoa. This guardian spirit, or **manitou**, took the shape of an animal such as a bison, bear, or wolf. An Illiniwek war chief would carry a woven container holding the dried skins of the animals representing the manitous of all the men in his war party.

women did sometimes serve as chiefs and **shamans**. Men made and cared for their hunting and fishing tools as well as their weapons. Those who excelled at hunting earned respect among the members of the Illiniwek. Although men had many responsibilities, they found time for games like **lacrosse** and various kinds of gambling. Women did many, many chores and they did not have much time to relax. They prepared and planted the fields, harvested the crops, and preserved and stored what was not used immediately. They gathered

Illinois Confederation Comes Under Attack

Glossary

Jesuit—a Roman Catholic priest belonging to the religious order the Society of Jesus

immunity—being safe from contracting a particular disease

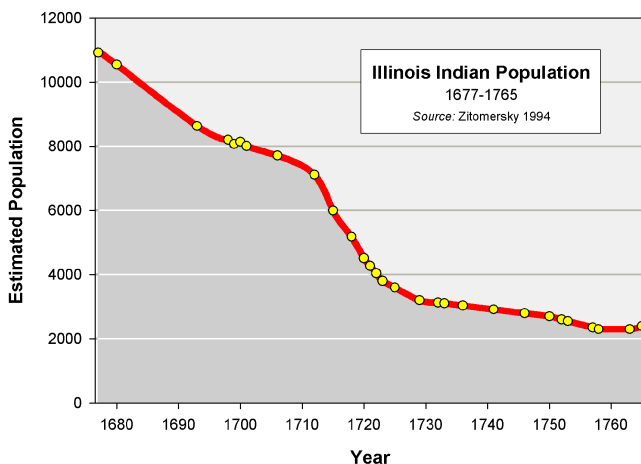
One of the largest settlements of the Illiniwek Confederation was located on the banks of the Illinois River near present day LaSalle-Peru. The French explorers called it the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia or *La Vantum*. One of the first European visitors to the village was a **Jesuit** priest, Father Jacques Marquette, who counted about 300 lodges at the site.

Unfortunately for the Illiniwek, the village was attacked in 1680 by an aggressive confederation of five tribes called the Iroquois. These fierce warriors were being pushed westward from their homes in the northeastern part of the continent. Because of their early contact and trade with the British and the French, they had acquired guns, which gave them an advantage. Also the attack on the Grand Village came at a time when the village was vulnerable because most of the men were away.

Accounts of what happened vary in detail, but the main result was the destruction of the village and the defeat of the Illiniwek, many of whom were killed or captured.

In the following years there were more attacks from the Iroquois. Tribes were also forced from their homelands by the increasing numbers of European settlers. Tribes moved into Illiniwek lands from the east, and there were also old enemies to the northwest, west, and south. Fearing more attacks from the Iroquois, Fox, Sauk, Kickappo, and Potawatomi as well as the Osage, Shawnee, and Dakota, the

Illiniwek chose to live near the French forts and trading centers hoping for protection. This exposed them to diseases like smallpox and measles, for which they had no **immunity**. They also had easy access to alcohol at this time, which caused terrible problems. By the early 1800s, there were relatively few survivors of the Illiniwek Confederation. Only the Peoria and Kaskaskia tribes continued to exist.



The Illinois Indian population dropped dramatically from 1677 to 1765. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

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