



## Early Years of Illinois Agriculture

### Glossary

*maize*—corn

*surplus*—extra

Native Americans called it **maize** and people today call it corn. Regardless of the name, corn has long been one of the most important crops for Illinois' people. Of all the crops planted by the native peoples, it was corn that would become Illinois' leading crop. Add rich soil, new inventions, and an excellent transportation system, and Illinois' importance as an agricultural leader in the United States and the world was guaranteed.

Many early arrivals to the Illinois Territory in the late 1700s were pioneer hunters who did not buy land. They chose to build small, somewhat temporary cabins near tree-lined streams

or rivers where they cleared a small amount of land for planting

However, the next wave of settlers bought property to build farms and businesses. These people wanted a better way of life, and the Illinois frontier gave them this opportunity. Illinois was their new home and they worked hard to improve and expand their property. Their first jobs were to build a cabin and to break ground so it would be ready



Frontier cabin next to a river. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

for planting corn. These fields were protected by the split-rail fences that the settlers constructed. Their cows and pigs were not penned, but allowed to roam free in the nearby woods. After the harvest, any **surplus** corn or wheat was traded by the farmer for coffee, sugar, flour, salt, spices, tools, farm implements,



Clearing land.  
Courtesy Abraham  
Lincoln Digitization  
Project, Northern  
Illinois University  
Libraries, <[http://  
lincoln.lib.niu.edu](http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu)>.

## Glossary

**revolution**—a sudden and extreme change

**scythe**—a tool with a long handle and a long, curved blade, used to cut grass, crops, or similar plants by swinging the blade from side to side

**blacksmith**—a person who makes and repairs things made from iron and metal

kitchen utensils, and other needed items for the family, farm, or cabin. Money was seldom used by farmers during the early years of settlement.

After Illinois became a state in 1818, people from eastern and southern states continued to move into Illinois.

Settlements were now reaching onto the prairies of the central part of the state.

The earlier misunderstanding that the nearly treeless prairies had poor soil was put aside as farmers soon discovered that the soil was very rich and that crops grew extremely well. Later they would learn this was some of the richest soil in the world.

In the 1820s and 1830s farming methods remained unchanged, but soon after this, agriculture in Illinois experienced a **revolution**. It was very hard for farmers to remove the tall, tough prairie grasses and harder still to plow the soil. Two inventions soon changed agriculture in Illinois and other prairie-covered states.

The first invention was the McCormick reaper in 1831. It allowed a farmer to harvest 15 acres of wheat or cut the same area of prairie grass in the

amount of time it would take one

man to do the same



Harvesting with hand scythe. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

work with a hand **scythe**. The inventor, Cyrus Hall McCormack, moved to Chicago from Virginia. He saw that farmers needed a better way to clear their fields and harvest their wheat crops. His reaper was the solution to the problem. The second invention was the idea of Illinois resident John Deere. He is given credit for the invention of the curved steel plow in 1837. Deere was a **blacksmith** in Grand Detour, Illinois who created a plow to break the prairie. His steel plow was a major improvement over the wooden plows used at the time to cut into the tough prairie

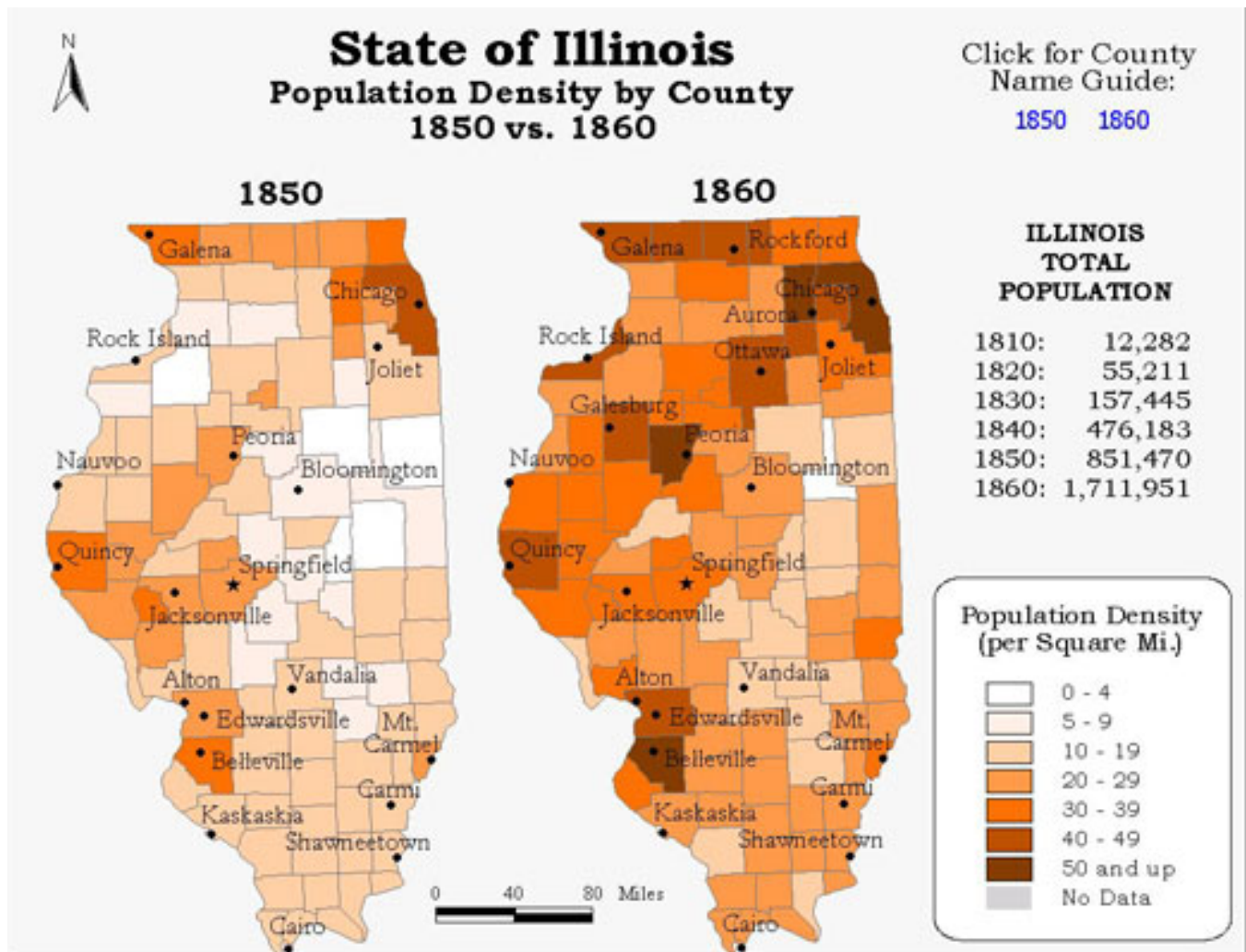
## Glossary

**isolated**—far away from other people, farms, or settlements

**undeveloped**—not using available resources

sod. Using the new Deere steel device, farmers took fewer hours to plow more acres. Farming on the Illinois prairie grew quickly during the next two decades because of these inventions. In the 1850s the population of Illinois doubled, from about 850,000 to more than one and a half million people. New residents meant more workers to help produce food for the growing United States.

By the time the 1860 census was tallied, Illinois had grown to be the fourth most populated state in America. The fast growth of Chicago was a major reason for the increase, but other areas of the state were also growing. For example, in 1849 more than 40% of the land in the state was owned by the federal government. This land was in **isolated** and **undeveloped** areas, located away from major rivers or access to other kinds of major



State of Illinois, Population Density By County. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University Libraries, <<http://Lincoln.lib.niu.edu>>.



transportation. However, the construction of the Illinois & Central Railroad gave eastern Illinois a cheap way to transport crops to market. By 1855, almost every acre of federal land had been purchased from the government for use as farmland. Farming was the fastest growing business in Illinois and Chicago was becoming a center for shipping farm products and livestock to the entire United States.

In 1870, Illinois' total agricultural production was second only to New York. Illinois, however, ranked number one in corn, wheat, and swine production. Illinois was second only to Texas in beef cattle production and third to New York and Pennsylvania in the production of dairy cattle. A combination of many things led to Illinois' agricultural growth. The invention of new farm implements helped to turn vast amounts of prairie into farmland. Faster, cheaper transportation allowed Illinois farmers to ship their products to large markets. All of these things occurred at a time when the nation's population was growing rapidly and needed what Illinois had to offer.

Handbill advertising land sales in the unpopulated areas of eastern Illinois. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.



Written by Peter C. Harbison, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency  
Edited by Laura Reyman  
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WebMaster: Karen E. Everingham