

## ILLINOIS

Illinois is often considered a microcosm of the entire United States, with its diverse cultural influences and varied landscape. Its history shows it has always been a progressive and forward-thinking state.

Illinois is the fifth most populous and twenty-fifth largest state in the U.S. It's situated right in the center of America. Wisconsin and Lake Michigan are to the North, Indiana and the Wabash River to the East, Kentucky and the Ohio River to the South, and Missouri, Iowa, and the Mississippi River are to the West.

It boasts the largest city in of the Midwest: Chicago, also known as Illinois' cultural capital. Its official capital is Springfield.

Illinois' landscape includes small towns situated between extensive cornfields, dense cities, forests and lakes. It also has hundreds of small, rural villages, like Roscoe, where I grew up.

Illinois is referred to as "the Prairie state," "Land of Lincoln," and, my personal favorite, "Baja Wisconsin." Chicago has its own extensive share of nicknames, including "the Windy City," "the Second City," "City of Broad Shoulders," and, of course, "Chi-town."

The word "Illinois" comes from the French interpretation of Illiniwek, the tribes native to the territory. There is a strong influence of Native American culture in Illinois. In fact, Native Americans had been living in the territory for at least 7,000 years by the time European and African Americans arrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Illinois officially became a U.S. territory in 1809, and became the 21<sup>st</sup> state in 1818.

Immigration to the state took off during the nineteenth century. Development of the steel plow transformed the prairies into fertile farmland, drawing immigrants from Germany and Sweden. The industrialization in northern cities and development of coal mining during the late nineteenth century attracted immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe to Illinois. The Great Migration in the early to mid-twentieth century of African Americans from the South enhanced the state's vibrant culture.

Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and Barack Obama have all called Illinois their home at some point. So have writers Carl Sandburg, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, and Upton Sinclair. Illinois, and Chicago in particular, is also an important musical hub. Jazz, blues, and gospel developed there in the early twentieth century. More recent musicians from Chicago include Kanye West and the Smashing Pumpkins. Improvisational comedy took off in Chicago, and it was also an important center in the development of surrealism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chicago is also considered the “Best Sport City” in the US. It’s home to the Chicago Bulls, the Cubs, and the Bears. Illinois is also known for its fantastic universities, which include the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois, and Northwestern University.

Typical food in Illinois is hearty and traditional American. In small-towns, dishes made with local produce, such as sweet corn on the cob and apple pie, are common. Chicago is also known for its deep-dish pizza and hot dogs, which are especially good during a Cubs game at Wrigley Field.

If you’re ever in Chicago, you have to visit one of its many breweries, which date back to the earliest days of the city. Although the days of large commercial breweries ended during Prohibition in the 1920s, since then microbreweries and brewpubs have become part of the Chicago scene.

So where do I fit into this picture of Illinois? My mom was born and raised in Rockford, a small city outside of Chicago. My great-grandparents migrated from Sweden to Rockford for its economic opportunities and prominence as a center of furniture manufacture. My father, a native of England, was drawn to Illinois in the 1980s for technology and engineering, and the excitement of a fresh start in America.

Growing up in a small village in Illinois meant hiking through forests during the gorgeous flowery springs, going to the county fairs in summers, camping in colorful autumns, and enjoying the Christmas tree farms in snowy winters. For those who, like me, appreciate nature and the outdoors as much as the excitement and vibrancy of the city, Illinois is a fantastic destination.

I like to think of Illinois as one of the most typically American places in the U.S. I hope you’ve enjoyed this video and learned a bit about my home state. As a native Illinoisian, I encourage you to visit and to experience America at its heart.