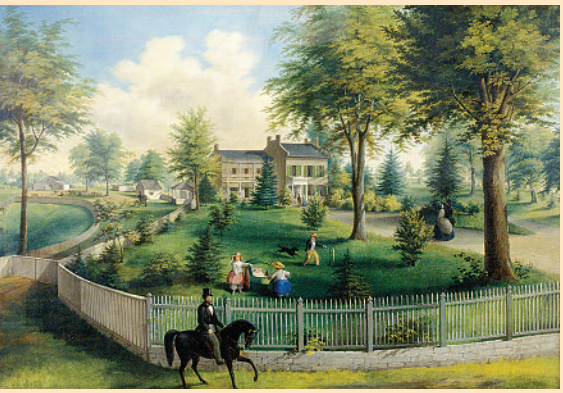
Illinois State Museum premiers exhibit documenting the transformation of Lincoln's Illinois, 1830-1861.

From Humble Beginnings



"Country Home of A. E. Mills, Alton" by Conrad Roeder and "Old Man Grey" by John W. O'Brien

These two paintings demonstrate the diverse living conditions present in Illinois in Lincoln's era. From the earliest years of settlement, wealthy settlers brought their finery or traveled to urban centers to purchase desired household goods. Most settlers, however, emigrated with bare necessities and improved their home furnishings as they could, often in ways that reflected their values and social aspirations.

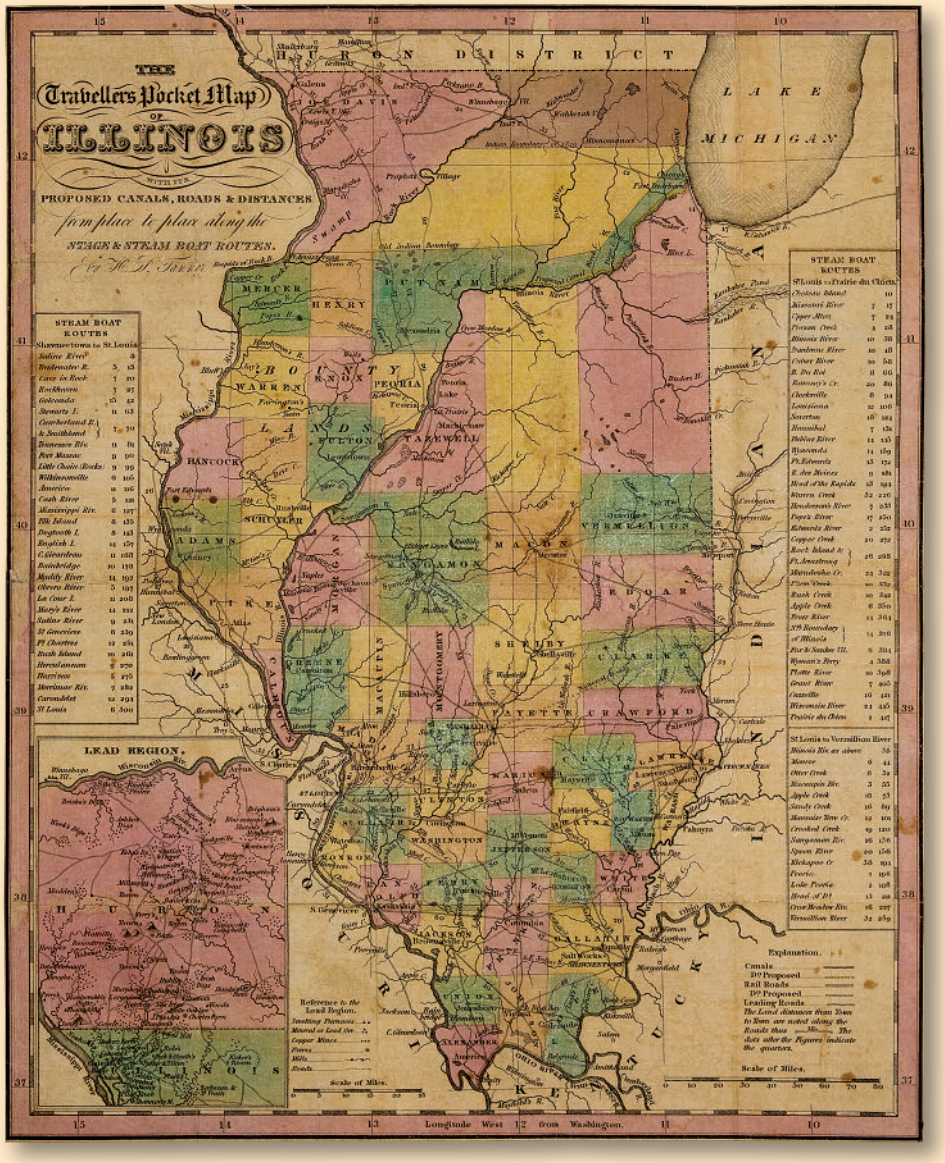
Story By Angela Goebel-Bain
Photos By Doug Carr

In 1830, like thousands of southerners before him, Abraham Lincoln drove his team of oxen with his family to frontier Illinois in search of a better life. Thirty years later, a train carrying the sixteenth President of the United States—Abraham Lincoln—steamed out of an Illinois station.

When the Lincolns first arrived, Illinoisans depended on waterways for efficient travel and to transport products to southern markets. By 1861, railroads tied the state to the industrial northeast, sparking a general expansion of industry and agriculture in Illinois. With improved transportation, northeasterners and Europeans flooded the state, creating an intensely dynamic population—a microcosm of America which Lincoln was determined to represent.

To celebrate the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial, the Illinois State Museum premiered an original exhibition, "From Humble Beginnings, Lincoln's Illinois 1830–1861," exploring all aspects of the state that Lincoln called home between 1830 and 1861. "From Humble Beginnings" presents a captivating perspective of the Lincoln era in Illinois through the objects and stories of the people who lived here. Featured in the exhibition are historical maps, archaeological artifacts, household furnishings, animal mounts, a rare John Deere plow, herbarium specimens, fine art, quilts, rifles, pistols and many other objects that demonstrate the dynamic changes that helped transform Illinois from a frontier region to a powerful state. The exhibition draws primarily on artifacts from the Illinois State Museum collection, and also borrows from institutions around the state.

The "From Humble Beginnings" exhibition provides the context of Abraham Lincoln's life in Illinois by looking at the events occurring around him, and the ways in which the state changed in the years he lived here. In exploring the settlement of the state, its agricultural growth and dynamic social relations, and the ways in which transportation and technological innovations impacted Illinois' development, we can consider how the state matured alongside Lincoln.



"The Travellers Pocket Map of Illinois", 1830

This map shows towns primarily clustered along waterways or serving as county seats. The "Old Indian Boundary" and Native American Indian villages are noted in the northern part of the state. Proposed railroads and canal routes express Illinois citizens' ambitious development plans which were not realized for more than a decade. (Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.)

Illinois in 1830

When Abraham Lincoln arrived in 1830, the vast majority of the state's 157,445 residents lived in the heavily forested land south of Vandalia. In ice-free months, steamboats plied the Mississippi, Ohio, Wabash and Illinois rivers, easing Euro-American settlers' movement into the Mississippi and Illinois river valleys. Traveling waterways and overland routes called "traces," most Illinoisans had emigrated from the upland south: Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina.

While most people lived in the southern parts of the state, in 1830 Springfield's Sangamon County and Jacksonville's Morgan County were the most densely populated in the state, each topping 12,000 residents. In the same year, Cook County had not been established, and the village of Chicago was yet to reach 100 permanent Euro-American residents. Native American tribes controlled most of the northern third of Illinois, inhibiting widespread Euro-American settlement.

Land and Agriculture

Reports of Illinois' rich natural resources reached eastern states and Europe, bringing thousands of settlers to the state in the years Abraham Lincoln lived in Illinois. Some established prosperous farms, others squatted and later either purchased their farm, rented their land or moved to undeveloped western territories.

While settlers encountered fertile farmlands, they also found prairie soils difficult to break with iron plows from the east and fields too wet to plant. Farm families with easy access to waterways could more efficiently send surplus crops to large markets. Those rely-

John Deere Plow

John Deere revolutionized American agriculture by pioneering the first commercially successful self-scouring steel plow. This plow was one of 8,000 mass-produced by Deere & Chapman at their Moline manufactory in 1855. Its steel plowshare remained sharp as it cut the tangled prairie roots, and the prairie's sticky soil easily slid off its smooth steel surface, saving labor and money. (Courtesy of the John Deere Corporation, Moline.)

Nauvoo—Between 1838 and 1846 more than 10,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints lived near their church headquarters at Nauvoo. These stone working tools were used to erect the first temple built there, and are displayed with an original temple stone.

The Struggle for the "Civilization" of the West

In the 1830s, following Black Hawk's war, a flood of northerners and Europeans came to Illinois. Until then, Native Americans and upland southerners dominated the state. This influx made the Euro-American population more diverse and dynamic but brought with it competing points-of-view.

Rooted in their different sets of cultural expectations, Illinois' Yankee-Southern clashes surged between 1830 and the 1850s. A major point of contention stemmed from Yankees trying to transplant their way of life on the frontier by launching reform movements that challenged southerners' traditional ways of life. Religious revivals sparked reforms in such issues as poverty and temperance, and opened the door to questioning traditional Christianity, giving rise to new sects. Over time, slavery became an increasingly contentious issue.

Expansion

When rivers served as the major thoroughfares, Illinois farmers transported surplus produce over land to the nearest river where it was shipped

ing on overland transportation frequently worked enough land to support their family, and small surpluses were sold or bartered at the local store.

In the years Abraham Lincoln called Illinois home, Euro-American settlers cleared thousands of acres of woodlands and plowed millions of acres of the prairie. Clearing woodlands destroyed the natural habitat of mountain lion, fisher and black bear, leading to their extirpation. Tilling the prairie and establishing towns severely reduced the numbers of many specialized animals including the greater prairie-chicken, badger and eastern massasauga rattlesnake. Much of the prairie lands remained untapped by Illinois farmers, however, until innovations in farming implements, drainage systems and transportation made the expansive prairies suitable to development.

Alton Riot—One section of the exhibition explores the riot at Alton where an abolitionist newspaper editor, Rev. Elijah Lovejoy, was shot defending his press from a pro-slavery mob.

New Philadelphia—Vast tracts of undeveloped land provided opportunities typically out of reach for some settlers. Former slave "Free Frank" McWorter founded a town and sold lots to purchase his family members out of slavery. His town, Pike County's New Philadelphia, was the first legally established by an African-American in the United States.

to southern markets. In 1848, the opening of the Illinois & Michigan Canal was key to connecting the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean. Water transportation, however, remained slow and seasonal. Railroads overcame these problems and reoriented Illinois' economy more directly to eastern industrial cities. Trains quickly transported people and goods between New York City, Chicago and beyond, making Chicago the new center of the west.

By 1860, shipping costs plummeted making it cost-effective for farmers to increase production. At the same time, industrialists had begun mass-producing their earlier agricultural inventions, enabling more farmers to purchase labor-saving machines and expand their farms.

With these changes, many Illinoisans elevated their standard of living. Reduced shipping costs made household goods increasingly affordable to a wider range of families, presenting opportunities to express oneself as a member of polite society in an effort to enter the emerging middle class.

Illinois in 1861

By the time American voters elected Abraham Lincoln president in 1860, his home state ranked among the most populous and productive in the nation. In his time in Illinois, Lincoln saw the state's population grow from 157,445 to 1,711,951.

Illinois' frontier period ended with the advent of the telegraph and railroads. Information spread rapidly throughout the state and nation, spurring the economy. By 1861, 11 railroad lines and nearly 2,800 miles of track tied Illinois' communities together and to profitable eastern markets. In 1861, travelers and goods could reach the eastern seaboard in two days on the train, while in 1830 the trip had taken three weeks in the best conditions. Railroads and aggressive draining strategies, and control of raging prairie fires, also enabled Euro-American settlement of the prairie areas.

Between 1830 and 1861, settlers of many cultures intermixed throughout the state, forming a dynamic population. Tensions on the national stage over the expansion and legality of slavery stressed the state.

In the 1860 presidential election, two Illinoisans, Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, were among the four major candidates. These two men had equally strong support in the state. Lincoln carried the largely Republican-leaning north, while Douglas garnered much support in the steadfastly Democratic, pro-slavery southern counties, underscoring the continued diversity of political thought and culture that remained in Illinois.

Plan to visit

"From Humble Beginnings: Lincoln's Illinois 1830-1861" will run through Jan. 10, 2010, and is made possible in part by a grant from the Illinois Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Illinois State Museum Society's 1877 Fund and the Illinois General Assembly.

The Illinois State Museum is located at 502 S. Spring Street (corner of Spring and Edwards Streets) in Springfield, and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is free. Parking is available nearby, and the building is ADA accessible. Further information is available at www.museum.state.il.us.

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Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

The fragmentation of once-extensive forests led to the decimation of the ivory-billed woodpecker.