

Hello. It's real important to know about all of the states. But books can make it seem complicated, too. We think they can be packed full of facts no one will remember, which is why we simplified everything and created our 'snapshot' books.

But we can go a step farther. We can take you through the basics before you even read a word. And that is what we are going to do here. So listen on – and why not make some notes, too? At the end you will have your own state book written in your own words. How great is that!

OK, let's get started!

1. Illinois is home to about 13 million people. It stretches west from Lake Michigan, one of the Great Lakes, and it is part of the Mid West. Illinois is a mix of megacity, small town, heavy industry and small farms, and it is about half way between the largest and smallest states in terms of area – in many ways a microcosm of the U.S.

2. So let's start with the land. Flat is beautiful. At least if you are a farmer or a railroad engineer. And that is what most of Illinois is like. But who would have thought that Illinois was a result of the Ice Age? Don't Ice Ages cut deep valleys among mountains? They do, but all the rock scraped off the land by ice sheets has to go somewhere, and in Illinois it mainly was left as gently undulating clay. And when the ice melted away, the winds blew and carried silt about, and in Illinois this settled on the clay. Geologists call it loess, and it makes some of the world's most fertile soils. And that was the foundation of Illinois' success – literally.

Even the Great Lakes, which make transport so easy, were created by the Ice Age. The weight of the ice buckled the land down, and when the ice melted, it filled with water. And what mighty lakes they are. So folks who go for a walk along the beach in Chicago can imagine they almost by the sea.

And then there are the rivers. They move fairly sluggishly over the state, but that, too, is an advantage. Did you know that Illinois has more miles of the Mississippi River than any other state? Since Native Americans first came to this region people have used the river system for getting about. And later, with just a little bit of help from engineers to make a linking canal, the Great Lakes were connected to the Mississippi, helping to make early Illinois an industrial hub.

3. Weather. Being a long way from the moderating influence of the ocean does have problems. Illinois has cold, snowy winters, cold enough to make Lake Michigan freeze over. It has hot, wet summers with thunderstorms and even tornadoes between April and June. But what about that reputation for being the windy city? In fact it's a myth! Illinois winds are mostly light. That was just a New York journalist labeling Chicagoans as "loudmouth and windy". Nothing to do with the weather. In fact, New York has a higher average wind speed. So there is one myth put truly to bed.

4. Plants. Michigan is right on the border of what used to be prairie grasses and woodland. Not much of either remain today. Almost all of the land is now used for growing crops, or is covered with roads, and suburbs. And the same fate has removed the buffalo, elk, bear, and wolves that once roamed freely.

5. History.

The earliest people to live in Illinois probably arrived soon after the glaciers retreated, at the end of the last ice age.

Just over 2000 years ago, the Hopewell culture flourished all over the American mid-west. And they have left traces that can still be found as the thousands of burial mounds dotted across the state. The Hopewell people were succeeded by the Mississippi people. They were immensely well organized, and they built large cities, often along riverbanks with huge flat-topped earthen mounds which they used for ceremonies. The most famous of these are the Cahokia mounds in the south west. For centuries, Europeans thought they were natural features, they were so large. But, over the centuries, the Mississippians, too were replaced, this time not by large groups of organized people, but by warring tribes including the Iroquois, Sioux and Winnebago. These were the

people the first Europeans began trading with. They traded beaver pelts and other furs for guns and other iron goods. And as the pelts became scarce through over-exploitation, tribes fought with one another for what was left, something known as the Beaver Wars.

The French built several small forts including one near today's Peoria. This is when they began using the name Illinois and calling it part of first New France. But they were not the only colonials with an eye on this region, and by 1763 the area passed to the British when they defeated the French in the French and Indian War.

Very few French had ever settled in Illinois, and few British or American settlers moved there because the British government had agreed it should be part of the territory west of the Appalachians reserved for Native Americans .

But the cost of the French and Indian war was so large that the British government tried to raise more taxes from their colonies. This quickly led to the Revolutionary War and this, in turn, was to have a dramatic effect on the history of Illinois.

After the Revolutionary War, the entire Northwest Territory, which included Illinois, became part of the United States and the government began to encourage immigrant farmers to come to the land. This was eventually to lead to the loss of what had previously been Native American lands.

In 1809, Congress authorized the creation of Illinois Territory. By 1818 the population of the territory had reached 40,000 and Illinois was admitted to the Union.

The fertile prairies were also prized by settlers from the south, especially Kentucky where farmers had already overused their land. The federal government owned most of the Illinois land, and were quick to sell it off cheaply. The people who arrived were every bit as much pioneers as those made famous later by the Oregon Trail. And it was not easy land to begin with, either, for the roots of prairie grasses can be three feet deep and so hard to grub out.

And then the whole country was put in turmoil by the Civil War. During the Civil War, Illinois sent more than a quarter of a million

men to fight in the Union, and supplied the Union armies with huge amounts of food, feed, and horses.

And then the war was over. Before the war Chicago had already been linked to the east coast by the Erie Canal, and now cross-continent railroads were being built, with Chicago as a natural hub of the railroad network.

Chicago rapidly grew to become the main city between the Appalachians and the Rockies. However, in this period something quite new happened. And it was nothing to do with farming. It was to do with factories and the Civil War. Immigration began to take place from the south, as many African-Americans moved from poor jobs on farms in the south to Illinois in search of better jobs in the factories that were being built there.

But it was not just Chicago that prospered. As railroads reached out from Chicago to other states, hundreds of small towns and cities within Illinois also prospered.

Now it seemed that nothing could stop the growth of steel mills, meat-packing plants, factories, warehousing, banking, and transportation. The Merchandise Mart in Chicago, was a sign of what was happening. When it opened in 1930, it was the world's largest building, with 4 million square feet of floor space.

6. So let's wrap this up. We have taken you on a journey through landscape and climate to history and modern times. That will give you a framework to keep in your head. Now read our books, and watch the videos. Learning can be real easy.

