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Teaching Illinois History Through Primary Sources

Laura Fowler

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Many students in my undergraduate History of Illinois class hail from Illinois. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUe) draws from a primarily local undergraduate population of students who live in southwestern Illinois. Though the area is commonly referred to as the “Metro East,” linking it to St. Louis a mere 35 miles west, the students and the region define itself as wholly Illinois. These students learn about the history of their region periodically throughout their primary and secondary schooling, but when they arrive in my 300-level class, much of what I teach is new.

I am from Chicago. Chicago’s location in the northeast corner of the state places it geographically north of almost all of the rest of Illinois. Interstate 80 serves as a southern boundary to which all Chicagoans deem “southern Illinois.” Drivers still have almost 400-miles to go before reaching the southern border. Students who hail from SIUe’s surrounding counties clearly identify themselves from southwestern Illinois – geographically and culturally distinct from Carbondale or even Cairo – “southern” Illinois cities. My colleagues questioned my instruction of this course: “But you study Chicago, not Illinois!” Indeed. And while my predecessor taught the class without any mention of Chicago, the Windy City did not emerge until 1837 – a lifetime in the history of Illinois. From Cahokian civilization through industrialization, Illinois’ history is vast, varied, and integral to understanding core themes in American history.

As I have developed the course over the past 6 years, I personally have uncovered a tremendous amount of new research on Illinois, specifically in the “frontier” period. Our area, our city of Edwardsville specifically, holds important lessons in the history of as a territory, state, and a frontier outpost of a new America. One of the older towns in Illinois, Edwardsville had a place and a history for itself long before statehood (and even the University!). Illinois’ development and settlement presents many themes in American history in a concise and limited geographic locale. Through our study of early Illinois, students can learn of cultural diversity, the slave trade, Native American traditions, British and French colonial policies, and the development of American land settlement patterns. There are a variety of primary sources that illuminate these themes for undergraduate students. Using primary sources as the main method of instruction also reinforces the experiential side of history and engages students to ask critical questions of their region and the source. This article will highlight some key primary sources available online that

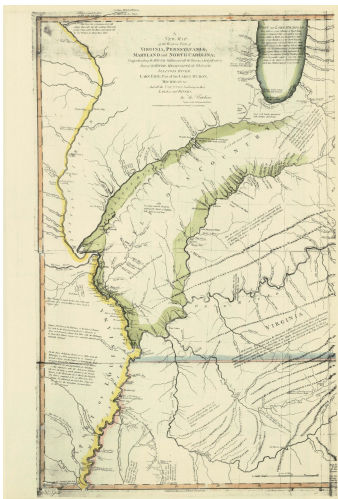
enhance students' understanding of early Illinois history and how these varied primary sources can yield creative findings.

Slavery and the Black Codes

When people settled in the American Bottom, they brought slaves. The French brought slaves with them from Europe. French Jesuit priests were the largest landowners and largest slave owners in the eighteenth century. France brought slaves to Illinois up the Mississippi River from the port of New Orleans, but banned the import of slaves to "Illinois Country" in 1747. Black slaves continued to reproduce and increased in numbers despite the ban on new purchases. French *Codes Noir* (Black Codes)¹ governed slaves in the colonies and offered some rights, but still enforced the condition of bondage.² Most familiar with nineteenth-century American slavery, students are slow to see the reasons why these proscriptions existed. Students grapple with how these laws were really enforced and why, given their rudimentary knowledge of American slavery, the French would enact laws that seemed to protect the human condition, even if the status of bondage still remained. These codes come into sharp relief when students later study Illinois' Black Laws passed by new state residents in 1819 to restrict the civil rights of free blacks.

France's *Code Noir* decrees many punishments against slaves should they bear arms against their masters, attempt escape, gather together, or attempt to sell crops or commodities. In sharp contrast to the American system of slavery, however, the *Code Noir* offers some protections and rights to slaves. Slaves are required to be Baptized as Catholics, should be kept together as a family unit, and once freed, are to be afforded all of the rights and privileges of any other French citizen, naturalized or by birth; "We grant to freed slaves the same rights, privileges and immunities that are enjoyed by freeborn persons. We desire that they are deserving of this acquired freedom and that this freedom gives them, as much for their person as for their property, the same happiness that natural liberty has on our other subjects."³ Though not flawless and of dubitable ethics⁴, it serves as a bright contrast to policies of British North America and later of the United States.

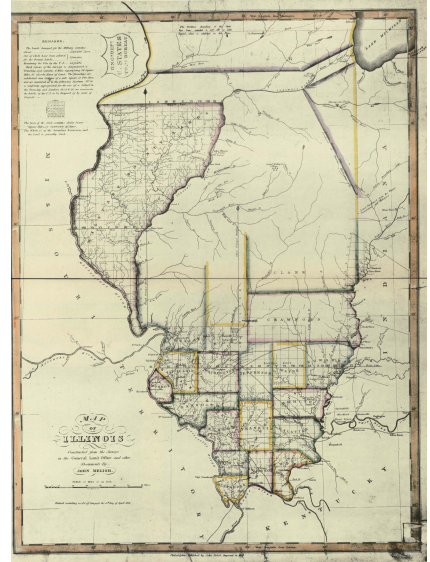
Historic Maps of Illinois



Maps offer a visual clue to the vast space "Illinois Country" occupied before Illinois' statehood in 1818. When class begins I urge students to try to forget contemporary boundaries and state lines and instead to focus on the topography and natural features that defined this region. Until they see and study historic maps of the area, few truly understand the vast and amorphous territory. The 1787 territorial map shows "Illinois Country" as a large swath of land in the middle of the United States.⁵ The lack of borders reinforces the fluid nature of the landscape and the ease with which settlers might have moved about. This map challenges both their perceptions of "Illinois" and of a Midwestern geography. If the new Congress in 1787 consulted maps like this one, it would be easy to see how they envisioned the land as a

tabula rasa, despite the remnants of French and Creole civilization and the complex American Indian populations left on the land.

Students can see a sharp contrast in the 1818 map of Illinois. Counties are carved out in the southern portion of the state, but not nearly to the extent of present day. SIUe's location in Madison County is of particular interest, as Madison County in 1818 extends almost up to the Wisconsin border. This map highlights how settlement patterns concentrated development in the southern quadrant of the state. Blank spaces on the map prompt questions about *why* there are no organized (lined) county boundaries.⁶ This leads to a discussion of American Indians, natural resources, and the role of the military in fostering and controlling settlement. Often, the 1818 map can be re-introduced when discussing the Black Hawk Wars of 1832. Merely stating that there were “Indians” in northern Illinois is less effective than showcasing the visual expansion of settlement after 1832. This map also is instrumental in helping students visualize that Illinois was so close to the “south” with regards to issues surrounding slavery. Knowing that Upland Southern residents migrated to southern Illinois and Yankees to the northern sections makes some sense but when visual strata on a map reinforce it, students are better able to internalize the geographic distinctions.⁷



Travel Narratives

Other types of sources that speak to students well are travel narratives and settlement diaries. Though some populations are omitted from this genre, the historical language, literary images portrayed, and subject matter captivate students. Some more famous visitors to this young country, like Rudyard Kipling, and Alexis de Toqueville traversed the Illinois landscape at various times. Rebecca Burlend's *A True Picture of Emigration* (widely available in digital format) is quite useful in conveying the complexities and hardships of pioneer settlement. Hailing from England, Burlend tells of her journey over the Atlantic, up the Mississippi River, and to the Illinois prairie. After many semesters teaching this publication, I have narrowed the scope of discussion to a few pages from a few chapters. Together as a class, we closely analyze the prose and ascertain what one can learn from a source like this. Specifically, I have students consider what class Burlend was, what her religious priorities and cultural proclivities were, and how we can determine what the prevailing culture already was on the Illinois frontier. This source is most effective when coupled with John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek*, an excellent secondary source on internal settlement. Finally, as an in-class writing assignment, I ask students to write their own travel narrative of their journey to class that day. We share them and discuss the challenges of using words to describe everyday activities and what future historians might need to glean from these accounts.⁸

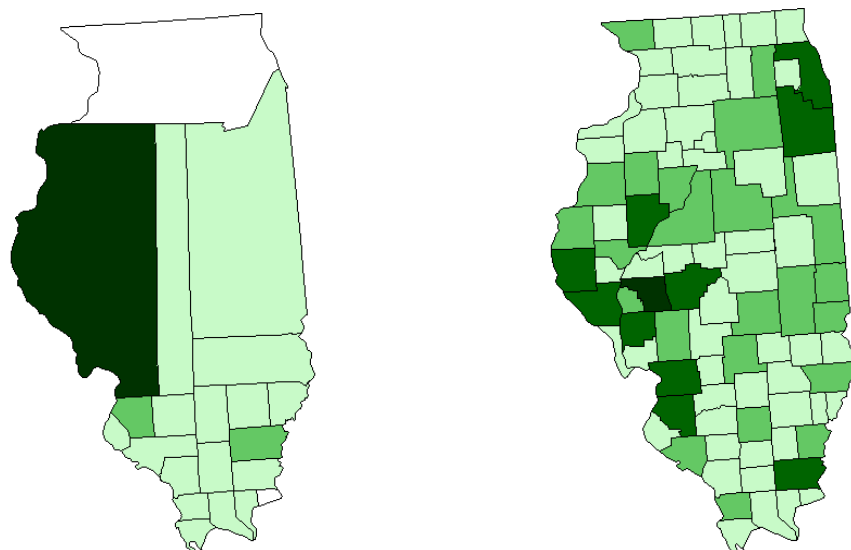
Census Data

The University of Virginia has done a fantastic service to historians of any period in digitizing census data in their Historical Census Browser.⁹ Manipulating the data from these census tracks can lead to many discoveries in an undergraduate class. Through this data, students can see the effects of population growth, regionalism, slavery, and the development of Chicago. I use this data in my class in two ways: to show the spread of the slave population after statehood and to explain population growth and the development of Chicago.

Slavery is one of the more complicated issues to discuss with students because Illinois' relationship with its "free" status is nebulous at best. Though slavery dated back to the French period, American settlers who came from the Upland South - Kentucky in particular - brought slaves with them and expected a certain level of privacy and economic freedom from their settlement on the frontier. Though slavery was banned in Section VII of the 1785 Northwest Ordinance, its authors did not plan for settlers and squatters, and perhaps the strong-headedness of the Scots-Irish who populated much of Illinois. The intent was to allow for a plan as America grew, but with few officials to enforce the Ordinance, its provisions were silent on the frontier. Illinois was therefore "forced" to enter the Union as a "free" state, but instead proffered up Section VI of the 1818 Constitution that banned slavery in name only. It changed the terminology to "indentured servant" and leaders later enacted draconian Black Laws that replicated the culture of servitude. Free blacks were banned from moving to Illinois, and those who were there already required a "Certificate of Freedom," or else risked being deemed a fugitive.¹⁰

This Census data allows students to select specific populations from among a choice of free blacks, free men or women, all slaves, or all free people. By years, we can see that in 1820, all of Illinois held 457 free blacks and 917 slaves. When mapped by county, students get reinforcement that Illinois' population was centered in the south, and also understand that Gallatin County, the only county where slavery was legal (because of the salt mines), had the most slaves in the state. By 1830, the free black population grew to 1,637 and the slave numbers remained reasonably high at 747. Students often ponder how a "free" state could still have over seven hundred slaves twelve years after statehood. When compared to Indiana, which had 3 slaves counted in the 1830 census, the question is valid. Reading that the Illinois constitution allowed for "indentured servitude" is notable, but the numbers crystalize the relationship between free and slave.¹¹

The census data is also useful for showcasing Chicago's growth. Students learn that Illinois' population was strongest in the south because of general migration patterns but also because the Indian settlements in northern Illinois were prolific and hostile to white settlement. Until the Black Hawk Wars in 1832, northern Illinois was virtually vacant of European and American white communities. After William Henry Harrison negotiated a deal for the land up to the current Wisconsin border, Chicago incorporated as a town in 1833 and as a city in 1837.¹² University of Virginia census data for the total population of Illinois in 1830 shows 157,445 people, but the number jumps to 476,183 just ten years later. The program's unique "Map it" function then creates a visual for students to see density of population growth and location. The 1840 map contains county lines clear north to the Wisconsin border in sharp contrast to the 1820 map that has details for the southern portion of the state and open land further north.



(Images from Historical Census Browser. Retrieved November 2, 2012.)

Subsequent manipulations yield different lessons. We can explore the growth of immigration in Illinois and Chicago, population shifts, and the ancestry of many new residents. Ideally, students will have their own computers to play with the data, but the lesson works if there is only one central computer with the instructor controlling the data.

In addition to these small lessons with primary sources together as a class, I have begun assigning students the task of finding their own primary sources and bringing them to present for their peers. Students conduct good research and many find journals, descriptions, newspaper articles, and photographs that likewise illuminate the history of Illinois. Short of a published primary source reader, these options help crystalize the history of Illinois while giving students concrete skills in research, critical thinking, and analysis.

These ideas clearly work in the undergraduate classroom, but many of these ideas can expand into the secondary or even primary curriculum. Creative writing prompts related to travel narratives or cognitive maps of the students' neighborhood or school relay the challenges faced by surveyors, mapmakers, and settlers. Though geared clearly to Illinois history, the themes of settlement, the transition from frontier to territory to statehood, industrialization and immigration are universal in American history and can stretch easily into a more generalized class on United States history.

Exploring active learning *through* primary sources instead of using them as a supplement has been a priority in my teaching and our department curricular goals. Though listed as a solid undergraduate course, students are pushed to understand more complex historiographical themes such as agency, community development, and changing power dynamics. Once students have a firm grounding in the settlement and early statehood of Illinois, they are better able to understand challenges to Illinois' history in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Primary sources of Chicago's history reflect the city's complicated racial and industrial past. Of late, I have been assigning Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House* and excerpts from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. From these sources, students get a better understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants and

other workers in Chicago's industrial heyday. And as with the other sources, these accounts allow us to discuss the challenges associated with contemporary fiction, memoirs, and memory.

The role of state history is also at issue. Though Illinois can certainly be used as a pedagogical tool to teach broader themes of American history, the role of local and state history within a curriculum is important. My students, and students in many other classrooms, benefit from understanding their local past and regional history. In an attempt to create life-long, critical learners, knowing how the complex processes of settlement in Illinois unfolded give students a perspective to use long after the semester ends.

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