

# Illinois

By Tom Kirvan

## THE LAND OF LINCOLN IS STEEPED IN HISTORY

Illinois, the so-called epicenter of North America, is home to approximately 12.7 million people, making it the sixth most populous state in the country. Known for its diverse population, with significant African American, Hispanic, and Asian communities, particularly in urban areas like Chicago, Illinois has a rich cultural heritage, shaped by waves of immigrants from Europe, Latin America, and Asia. The state's population is concentrated in the northeastern part, especially in the Chicago metropolitan area, while the rest of the state, characterized by smaller cities and rural areas, is known for its agricultural roots.

Illinois is a state of varied landscapes, ranging from the bustling urban environment of Chicago to the rolling plains and farmland that stretch across much of the state. The state covers an area of 57,914 square miles and features a variety of geographic regions, including the fertile plains of the central and northern parts, the Shawnee Hills in the south, and the western boundary defined by the Mississippi River. Illinois is part of the Central Plains, with its landscape dominated by flat to gently rolling terrain, making it ideal for agriculture. The state also has a network of rivers, including the Illinois and Ohio Rivers, which contribute to its importance as a transportation hub.

Illinois has a rich history that dates back to the indigenous peoples who lived in the region long before European exploration. The Illiniwek Confederation, a group of Native American tribes, were the original inhabitants of the area. French explorers, including Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet, arrived in the late 17th century, marking the beginning of European influence in the region. The state's history is deeply intertwined with the expansion of the railroads, the growth of Chicago as a major economic and cultural center, and its significant role in the Civil War. Illinois was the home of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, whose legacy is celebrated throughout the state. Long known as the Land of Lincoln, Illinois also bears the nickname of the Prairie State.

Illinois has a robust economy, driven by a combination of agriculture, manufacturing, finance, and technology. The state is a leading producer of corn, soybeans, and other agricultural products, thanks to its fertile soil and favorable climate. Chicago, the largest city in Illinois – and third most populous in the U.S. – is a global financial center, home to major institutions such as the Chicago Stock Exchange and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The city is also a hub for manufacturing, transportation, and logistics, with its strategic location making it a key player in national and international trade. Illinois is



## Fast Facts

Capital: Springfield  
Population: 12.7 million  
Highest point: Charles Mound (1,235 feet)  
Economic Engines: Manufacturing, agribusiness, life sciences, and biotech  
Major Rivers: Mississippi, Illinois, and Ohio

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a leader in education and research, with institutions like the University of Illinois contributing to advancements in technology, engineering, and medicine. Tourism, particularly in Chicago, adds to the state's economic vibrancy, drawing millions of visitors each year.

Springfield, located in the central part of the state, is the capital of Illinois. With a population of around 115,000, Springfield is known for its rich history, particularly its association with Abraham Lincoln, who lived there before becoming president. The city also is the site of several historical landmarks, including the Lincoln Home National Historic Site and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Chicago, on the other hand, with a population topping 2.7 million, is a global city renowned for its architecture, cultural institutions, and diverse neighborhoods. Chicago is a major economic, cultural, and transportation hub, often referred to as the "Windy City" and is famous for its iconic skyline, museums, and deep-dish pizza.

## Top 5 Must-See Tourist Destinations

- **Millennium Park, Chicago:** Millennium Park, located in downtown Chicago, is one of the city's most popular and iconic attractions. The park is home to several famous landmarks, including the Cloud Gate sculpture, commonly known as "The Bean," which reflects the city's skyline and is a favorite spot for photos. The park also features the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, an outdoor concert venue designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry, and the Lurie Garden, a beautiful space showcasing native plants. Millennium Park hosts numerous events and festivals throughout the year, making it a vibrant cultural hub in the heart of Chicago.
- **Navy Pier, Chicago:** Stretching out from the Lake Michigan shoreline, Navy Pier is a historic landmark and a must-visit destination in Chicago. Originally opened in 1916, Navy Pier has evolved into a major entertainment and cultural venue, offering a variety of attractions for visitors of all ages. Highlights include the Centennial Wheel, a towering Ferris wheel that provides stunning views of the city and lake, the Chicago Children's Museum, the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and numerous dining and shopping options. Navy Pier is also the site of fireworks displays, boat tours, and seasonal events, making it a lively and dynamic destination.
- **Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield:** The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum is a world-class facility dedicated to preserving the legacy of one of America's greatest presidents. The museum offers a fascinating and immersive experience, with exhibits that explore Lincoln's life, from his humble beginnings in Kentucky and Illinois, to his presidency and the Civil War. The museum features life-sized dioramas, interactive displays, and historical artifacts, including original documents and personal items belonging to Lincoln. The adjacent library houses an extensive collection of books, manuscripts, and other materials related to Lincoln and Illinois history.
- **Starved Rock State Park:** Starved Rock State Park, located along the Illinois River in north-central Illinois, is a natural wonder that offers stunning scenery and outdoor adventures. The park is famous for its steep sandstone canyons, beautiful waterfalls, and lush forests. Visitors can hike the park's extensive trail system, which leads to scenic overlooks, canyons, and the iconic Starved Rock, a prominent bluff that offers panoramic views of the river and surrounding landscape. The park is also popular for fishing, boating, and birdwatching, especially during the winter migration of bald eagles.
- **Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site:** Cahokia Mounds, located near Collinsville in southwestern Illinois, is the site of the largest pre-Columbian settlement north of Mexico. This UNESCO World Heritage site was once home to a thriving Native American city that flourished between 1050 and 1350 AD. The site includes more than 80 mounds, including Monks Mound, the largest earthen structure in North America. Visitors can explore the mounds, learn about the ancient Mississippian culture that built them, and visit the interpretive center, which features exhibits and artifacts that provide insight into the lives of the people who once inhabited this remarkable city.