

# STATE GUIDE

## ILLINOIS

by LISA A. ALZO

**THROUGHOUT THE PROHIBITION ERA**, notorious gangster Al “Scarface” Capone made a name for himself as one of America’s most-feared mobsters. While living in Chicago, Capone raked in millions of dollars from many illegal endeavors, and bribed city officials to look the other way. It wasn’t until 1931, when Eliot Ness’ team of federal agents—the “Untouchables”—brought down Capone for tax evasion, that the gangster served prison time.

Of course, plenty of Illinois’ law-abiding sons and daughters have made headlines, too. Author Ray Bradbury, feminist Betty Friedan, film icon Walt Disney, and jazz musician Miles Davis were all born in Ollis. And four US presidents—Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama—all had significant ties to the Prairie State.

Whether your Illinois forebears were famous, infamous or average Janes and Joes, it’d be a crime to not to investigate their lives. The state’s superb online databases and libraries—along with this research advice—make it easy to conduct a full background check.

### HISTORICAL RAP SHEET

Nomadic Paleo-Indians and their descendants explored what’s now Illinois long before the first Europeans, Frenchmen Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet, arrived in 1673. Two decades later, French priests founded a settlement at Cahokia, and in 1717, the area became part of French Louisiana. It was the French settlers who changed the original Indian name for the region, Illiniwek, to Illinois.

England gained the region from France in 1763; Virginia took control in 1778. Illinois was folded into

Indiana Territory in 1800, then achieved separate territorial status nine years later. It became the 21st state in 1818. The new state’s capital moved to Kaskaskia and Vandalia before taking root in Springfield in 1839.

### ARRESTING REPOSITORIES

Genealogists don’t have to worry about Illinois records being untouchable. The challenge is getting up to speed on the state’s myriad family history resources.

Start with two volunteer-run websites, the ILGenWeb Project <[illinoisgenweb.org](http://illinoisgenweb.org)> and Illinois Genealogy Trails <[genealogytrails.com/ill](http://genealogytrails.com/ill)>, which are packed with free research helps and databases. Illinois GenWeb provides links to county landing pages and state histories, plus tombstone transcriptions and marriage, church, military and other records. At Illinois Trails, you can view transcriptions of vital records, censuses, newspapers and more.

You’ll also want to familiarize yourself with the state’s top research repositories (see the Toolkit), in particular:

★ **ABRAHAM LINCOLN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY:** Formerly the Illinois State Historical Library, this downtown Springfield repository holds pre-20th-century genealogical resources such as county histories, published genealogies, atlases and plat books <[www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/Pages/default.aspx](http://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/Pages/default.aspx)>. It also houses transcriptions and indexes to censuses, cemetery inscriptions, vital records and naturalizations, plus collections of local newspapers and city directories.

★ **ILLINOIS DIGITAL ARCHIVES:** Be sure to check the Digital Archives <[idaillinois.org](http://idaillinois.org)>, a repository for the

### FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1818
- ★ **First federal census:** 1820
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1916
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1962
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 102
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Illinois Department of Public Health, Division of Vital Records, 925 E. Ridgely Ave., Springfield, IL 62702, (217) 782-4977 <[dph.illinois.gov/topics-services/birth-death-other-records/genealogy](http://dph.illinois.gov/topics-services/birth-death-other-records/genealogy)>



LAKE MICHIGAN

INDIANA

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digital collections of the Illinois State Library as well as other libraries and cultural institutions in Illinois. Here, you'll find historical images and documents, plus "Lincolni-ana" materials about the famous president.

★ **ILLINOIS STATE ARCHIVES:**

Illinois residents can request a variety of genealogy records (limit to two items or names at a time) electronically by submitting an Archives Reference Request Form <[www.ilsos.gov/isa/refrequestform.jsp](http://www.ilsos.gov/isa/refrequestform.jsp)>. Consult the section specific to your inquiry to determine what information and fees are necessary.

★ **NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT CHICAGO:**

NARA's Chicagoland regional facility <[www.archives.gov/chicago](http://www.archives.gov/chicago)> is a must-visit for researchers. It has indexes to federal court

## timeline

**1673**

Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette arrive in Illinois

**1804**

Lewis and Clark's expedition starts near Wood River

**1827**

Hostilities between Indians and white settlers lead to the Winnebago War

**1832**

Treaties and removals after the Black Hawk War drive Indians from the region

**1848**

The Illinois & Michigan Canal is completed

**1871**

The Great Chicago Fire destroys nearly a third of the city



The Chicago River in Downtown Chicago

records, including naturalizations, WWI and WWII draft registration cards, and microfilmed censuses and passenger lists. You'll also find papers on organized crime and the labor movement. Check the finding aid for more details.

★ **NEWBERRY LIBRARY:** One of the top genealogical libraries in the country, Chicago's Newberry Library <[www.newberry.org](http://www.newberry.org)> maintains published indexes, abstracts and transcriptions of cemetery, court, deed, probate, tax and vital records. It also houses more than 17,000 genealogies and an extensive collection of county, town, church and local histories for regions in the United States, Canada and the British Isles.

### LIFE-AND-DEATH SITUATIONS

Statewide registration of births and deaths began in 1916, but Illinois law required counties to keep track of all vital records starting in 1877. Marriage records are kept at the county level.

The Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD) system, part of the state archives, will point you to vital records

housed at seven state universities. Search IRAD's Local Government Record Database at <[www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/IRAD](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/IRAD)> for the term *birth* (or *marriage* or *death*) to see which IRAD depository holds records for your ancestral county. For instructions on obtaining copies, see the Research Policy page <[www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/IRAD/refpol.html](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/IRAD/refpol.html)>.

If you don't find the birth records you want using IRAD, contact the county clerk's office where the birth occurred. For post-1915 births at least 75 years old, you also can contact the Division of Vital Records (see Fast Facts).

Illinois has a wealth of vital-records indexes online. Find marriages (1763–1900) and deaths (various pre-1916, plus 1916–1950) at <[www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/)>. At the free FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> and subscription site Ancestry.com <[ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com)>, you'll find statewide and Cook County indexes. The Genealogy Unit of the Cook County Clerk's Bureau of Vital Records <[genealogy.cookcountyclerk.com](http://genealogy.cookcountyclerk.com)> offers indexes back to 1872 and access to noncertified vital records.

### 1893

Chicago World's Fair introduces the Ferris wheel and Juicy Fruit gum

### 1906

The Chicago White Sox beat the Cubs in both teams' first World Series

### 1992

Carol Moseley Braun becomes the first African-American woman to serve as a US senator

### 1998

The Chicago Bulls win their sixth NBA championship in eight years

### 2008

Senator Barack Obama of Illinois is elected the first African-American US president

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

**Cyndi's List: Illinois** <[cyndislist.com/us/il](http://cyndislist.com/us/il)>

**FamilySearch Wiki: Illinois** <[familysearch.org/wiki/en/Illinois,\\_United\\_States\\_Genealogy](http://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Illinois,_United_States_Genealogy)>

**ILGenWeb** <[illinoisgenweb.org](http://illinoisgenweb.org)>

**Illinois State Archives** <[cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/services.html](http://cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/services.html)>

**Illinois Trails** <[genealogytrails.com/ill](http://genealogytrails.com/ill)>

## Books

**Chicago and Cook County: A Guide to Research** by Loretto Dennis Szucs (Ancestry)

**Finding Your Chicago Ancestors** by Grace DuMelle (Lake Claremont Press)

**Genealogical Research Series Pamphlets (Office of the Illinois Secretary of State)** <[cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/gen\\_research.html#pamphlets](http://cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/gen_research.html#pamphlets)>

**Illinois Genealogical Research** by George K. Schweitzer

**Research in Illinois** by Diane Renner Walsh (National Genealogical Society)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum**  
112 N. Sixth St., Springfield, IL 62701, (217) 558-8844,  
<[www.alplm.org](http://www.alplm.org)>

**Illinois State Archives** Margaret Cross Norton Bldg.  
Capitol Complex, Springfield, IL 62756, (217) 782-4682,  
<[cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives](http://cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives)>

**Illinois State Genealogical Society** P.O. Box 10195,  
Springfield, IL 62791, (217) 789-1968 <[www.ilgensoc.org](http://www.ilgensoc.org)>

**Illinois State Historical Society** 5255 Shepherd  
Road, Springfield, IL 62703, (217) 525-2781, <[www.historyillinois.org](http://www.historyillinois.org)>

**Illinois State Library** Gwendolyn Brooks Building,  
300 S. Second St., Springfield, IL 62701, (217) 785-5600,  
<[cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/library/home.html](http://cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/library/home.html)>

**National Archives at Chicago** 7358 S. Pulaski Road, Chi-  
cago, IL 60629, (773) 948-9001, <[archives.gov/chicago](http://archives.gov/chicago)>

**Newberry Library** 60 West Walton Street, Chicago, IL  
60610, (312) 943-9090, <[www.newberry.org](http://www.newberry.org)>

## MOB MENTALITY

The US government counted Illinois residents every 10 years starting in 1810, with the 1940 census being the most recent available. That initial census was lost, and only Randolph County remains from the 1810 enumeration. The 1890 census (except for a few names from Mound Township in McDonough County) was destroyed by fire. Find census records on FamilySearch, and on subscription sites Ancestry.com and MyHeritage <[myheritage.com](http://myheritage.com)>.

Use tax lists, voting records and city directories as substitutes for missing or lost enumerations. Look for these sources on FamilySearch and Ancestry.com, or check with a local or state historical society.

Illinois also took territorial and state censuses for at least some of its counties in 1818, 1820, 1825, 1830, 1835, 1840, 1845, 1855 and 1865. Ancestry.com has indexes to all; FamilySearch has indexed images to 1855 and 1865, as well as a name index and images of mortality schedules from 1850 to 1880. Some early Illinois residents also appear in Indiana's 1807 territorial census.

## TIME SERVED

Illinois keeps track of its veterans. The state archives web- site has indexes to those who served in the War of 1812, Black Hawk War, Mexican War, Civil War, Spanish-American War and even the Winnebago War (fought in what's now Wisconsin in 1827).

There are other places to find military data, too, both in libraries and online. The FHL and Ancestry.com have Civil War service and pension records, and the Lincoln Presidential Library has many regimental histories. Illinois Trails has a variety of military indexes. WWI and WWII draft registration cards are on microfilm at NARA and online at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch. Subscription site Fold3 <[fold3.com/search-results/state/illinois](http://fold3.com/search-results/state/illinois)> has a variety of databases as well.

## LAND OF LINCOLN

After Illinois became a state in 1818, New Yorkers and New Englanders migrated and claimed land there. Look for federal public land sales at the Bureau of Land Management's land office site <[www.glorecords.blm.gov/patentsearch](http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/patentsearch)> and the Illinois Public Domain Land Tract Sales database at the State Archives website <[www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/data\\_lan.html](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/data_lan.html)>. NARA holds the originals. Subsequent land sales are recorded in deeds, which you can look for in the IRAD database or in the county recorder's office.

If your ancestor was an early French settler, he might have filed a private land claim. Check NARA—but don't mob the archivists. ●