

Illinois

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and
Rural Life)**

Provided by University of Illinois (no author attribution) as part of “Preserving the History of United States Agriculture and Rural Life: State and Local Literature, 1820-1945. Phase VI 2006-2008. A proposal submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Preservation and Access on behalf of the United States Agricultural Information Network”

ILLINOIS

Illinois is a state rich in important agricultural history. Native Americans were raising crops in Illinois as early as 500 B.C., with crops mainly being maize, beans, squash, and tobacco. Settlement by Europeans was originally begun by the French in the late sixteen hundreds. The earliest years saw settlements nearest rivers and the Great Lakes, as this was an important avenue of travel in those times. Settlement of the land progressed inland from those waterways. Greater settlement by English speaking people began around the time of the Revolutionary War, and Illinois attained statehood in 1818.

The earliest settlement of Illinois by farmers was in southern Illinois, and progressed northward based on land acquisition treaties that were arranged with the many Native American tribes that occupied Illinois in those days. Types of early farming were often controlled in part by access to the waterways. Farms near waterways often raised crops and livestock, while farms distant from waterways focused mainly on range raising livestock. Grain farming became popular in northern Illinois as land became available, due to the existence of the Great Lakes and Erie Canal waterway to the Atlantic Coast. The land between northern and southern Illinois was open prairie, which proved to be the most difficult to settle due to distance from waterways and lack of timber.

Much of early Illinois was composed of prairie wetlands, which were drained to make available the rich black soil seen in Illinois today. Techniques of drainage were brought to Illinois, and the rest of America, from the tile drainage systems originally based in Europe. Much of the earliest beneficial agricultural literature was based on European work, but there was great need for a literature based on the unique needs of America.

Farmers in Illinois were quick to adopt methods of mechanization that lead to greater agricultural production. The need for plows, reapers and other farm machinery in Illinois and surrounding frontier states was great. Early innovators in farm machinery found homes for their factories in Illinois. Cyrus Hall McCormick based his reaper factory in Chicago in 1847. Blacksmith John Deere opened his steel plow factory, which was originally a home-based workshop, in Moline in 1847. By 1860, Illinois was the leading state in the Union for producing agricultural machinery. Illinois had also become the leading producer of corn and wheat in the Union by 1860, in large part due to mechanization of farming.

Mechanization also helped open Illinois farms as transportation methods were improved. Canals were built to open the lands of Illinois to potential markets. Railroads followed the canals, and these opened the Illinois prairie to settlement to an even greater degree. As the lands were opened to travel, people flooded to Illinois to farm the rich land. Early settlers came from a very diverse assortment of ethnic groups from Europe. Improved methods of transportation allowed the prairie farmers to ship their crops to the markets of the day.

As the home of Abraham Lincoln and Jonathan Baldwin Turner, many consider Illinois to be the birthplace of the Land Grant University system. Most Americans are familiar with the influences of Abraham Lincoln on our society. Jonathan Baldwin Turner was an early educator in Illinois. He gained his education at Yale University. Turner lobbied relentlessly for common education in Illinois as early as the 1830's. He was a great influence in establishing strong educational programs in the state. Another lobbying project he undertook was to have the federal government establish "industrial universities", which became the foundation of the present Land Grant University system. Turner began his push to establish a national industrial university system in 1850 and continued to pursue this end until the Morrill Bill was signed in 1862. Turner's original plan for establishing these universities, his tireless efforts at promoting the idea, and his relationship with Abraham Lincoln helped greatly in establishing the present Land Grant University system.

There were many significant agricultural publications available for Illinois before 1870, but widespread acceptance by Illinois farmers was not gained in the early years of the state. This hesitance to use the available literature was largely due to a general lack of education by most of the population during those early years of the state. There were efforts to educate the masses regarding the importance of adopting scientific methods of farming, and these were largely undertaken by regional agricultural societies. Agricultural societies in Illinois would come and go during the first half of the nineteenth century. They would typically spring up with great enthusiasm for a few years, only to fall by the wayside after a short life. Many of these societies were based at the county level, and few had regular publications in the early days. Agricultural societies in Illinois received a great boost in the 1850's when the state legislature made funds available for both a new state agricultural society and for a society in each county. There were ninety-four agricultural societies in existence in Illinois in 1858. The Illinois State Agricultural Society became the Illinois Department of Agriculture in 1871.

It was typical during the pre-1870 period for these societies to maintain small libraries of books from outside Illinois intended to improve the farming techniques employed by the local citizenry. School libraries were also established across the state in the 1850's. Many of these early collections consisted of agricultural literature. The Illinois-specific literature common in such libraries included agricultural periodicals, annuals and almanacs. Important publications were generated by agricultural societies, and the discovery and preservation of the most important of these will be a priority. An example of such a publication is the *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, which was first published beginning in 1853. This society was first founded in 1817. The Illinois State Horticultural Society was also an important publisher of early agricultural literature in Illinois.

Much of the pre-1870 agricultural publishing in Illinois occurred in newspapers and a few journals. *The Western Ploughboy* is an agricultural journal that was first published in Illinois in 1831. *Illinois Farmer* and *Prairie Farmer* were also early important

agricultural magazines in Illinois. *Prairie Farmer* was begun in 1841 and is still published today. The importance of this journal for documenting the agricultural history of Illinois is great. *Prairie Farmer* staff issued a number of monographs during the magazine's long history.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the Land Grant University for Illinois, was first chartered in 1867. A virtual explosion in publishing of agricultural literature followed this date, much of it originating from the university and state government offices. Many societies and state agencies flourished after that time as well, with associated publishing efforts. Due to the importance of agriculture to the Illinois economy, much research and publishing has been undertaken since the 1870's. The agricultural literature of Illinois is extensive and much is in need of preservation treatment.

Some titles of interest are:

Cook County Alliance of the State of Illinois. *The Western Rural Rules of Order and Rallying Song Book : Also a History of the Farmers Alliance Movement, Which Began in 1880*. Chicago: Western Rural, 1882.

Farlow, Lawrence. *The Farmers Elevator Movement in Illinois*. Farmers Grain Dealers Association of Illinois, 1928.

Fraser, Wilber John. *Economy of the Round Dairy Barn. Bulletin* / University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign Campus). Agricultural Experiment Station; No. 143. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station, 1910.

Orange Judd Farmer. Chicago. 1888-1930