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# African Americans in Illinois

Many Africans came to the new world as Part of explorers' crews, as servants, and as slaves. The first Africans arrived in 1720 when Illinois was part of the French colony of Louisiana (Illinois would not become a state until 1818). A Frenchman, Phillipe Renault, put slaves to work in saline (salt) mines near the French-built Fort de Chartres in Randolph County. The mines were unsuccessful, and Renault sold his slaves to settlers in the area. By 1763, when the French surrendered control of Illinois to the British, the slave population was nearly six hundred.

Illinois was first claimed by American government in 1778, and nine years later it was declared by the Northwest Ordinance to be part of the Northwest Territory. The Northwest Ordinance prohibited slavery but allowed slave owners from other areas to reclaim escaped slaves from the Territory. The Ordinance was unpopular with some slave-owning settlers, who believed that they would be forced to give up their slaves. However, Territorial governor Arthur St. Clair interpreted the controversial Ordinance to mean that no new slaves could be brought into the Territory but that those already there could legally remain slaves.

In 1800 Illinois became part of the Indiana Territory, which was created from the old Northwest Territory. The territorial government enacted a "Black Code" that effectively barred slaves from gaining their freedom by permitting lengthy terms of "indentured servitude," which bound workers to a particular person for a period of time in return for shelter and food. Indentured servitude allowed landowners to acquire cheap labor despite the prohibition of slavery in the Indiana Territory.

Slavery was a controversial issue when Illinois residents were considering the state's entry into the Union. Some residents wanted slavery to be permitted. However, Illinois was admitted to the Union in 1818 as a free state. However, the constitution of 1818 allowed for limited slavery in the salt mines and allowed current slave owners to retain their slaves. The General Assembly also passed legislation that severely curtailed the rights of free blacks residing in the state and discouraged the migration of free blacks. If a black person was unable to present proof of their freedom they could be fined \$50 or sold by the sheriff to the highest bidder. Not long after the passage of the constitution, the state's general assembly adopted a pro-slavery resolution that announced its approval of slavery in slave-holding states and at the same time condemned the formation of abolition societies within Illinois' boundaries.

Elijah Lovejoy (1802-1837) was an important abolitionist. He published a newspaper, *The Observer*, which attacked the evils of slavery. His views were unpopular in his home state of Missouri. His printing press was destroyed, and he was forced out of St. Louis. Across the Mississippi River, at Alton, Illinois, Lovejoy set up a new press and renewed his attacks on slavery. Businessmen in Alton, under pressure from those in St. Louis, again threw Lovejoy's press into the river. In the fall of

1837, Lovejoy angered local pro-slavery forces when he co-founded the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. The group resolved to buy a new press to continue Lovejoy's work. While Lovejoy and his abolitionist friends kept watch over the new press in an Alton warehouse, an armed pro-slavery mob gathered to demand Lovejoy turn over his press. Lovejoy refused and the mob prepared to set fire to the building. Lovejoy ran out of the warehouse in an attempt to stop the fire, but was killed by gunfire. Several others protecting the press were injured and eventually fled the warehouse. The mob then seized the press and threw it out the third-story window of the warehouse.

A complex system of routes and hiding places called the Underground Railroad helped an estimated 45,000 slaves achieve freedom. Known to have existed as early as 1786, the Underground Railroad was increasingly more active following the War of 1812. By the 1830s Illinois and other northern states had become a part of the network. Illinois had stops and hiding places in cities and towns such as Chicago, Quincy, Alton, and Chester. Owen Lovejoy, Dr. Richard Eells of Quincy, and Julius A. Willard of Jacksonville were key leaders of the system in Illinois.

Some slaves were able to purchase their freedom. Frank McWorter or "Free Frank" was born into slavery in 1777 in South Carolina. As an adult, Frank hired himself out for an annual cash payment. He also began a saltpeter making business and managed to buy his freedom by the time he was 40. He moved to Kentucky and later to west central Illinois where he founded the township of New Philadelphia in 1836. There he began farming and raising stock. At the time of his death in 1854, Frank had managed to buy the freedom of his wife, 13 children, and 6 grandchildren for a total of about \$15,000.

Still other slaves used the court systems to try to gain freedom. In 1857 a slave, Dred Scott, petitioned the courts in Missouri for his freedom. At the trial he claimed he should be free because he had resided in Illinois and in the Wisconsin Territory where slavery was banned. Despite the ruling by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1843, which declared that a slave who entered or resided in a free territory or state was entitled to freedom, Scott's appeal to the United States Supreme Court was denied. The grounds for that decision were that a slave had no rights under the constitution and therefore could not bring suit.

Soon a battle for civil rights and the Union was underway. With the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860, many southern states seceded from the Union. On April 23, 1861 the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter. In 1863, the first black Union regiments were organized and about 1,800 blacks from Illinois enlisted. One regiment, the 29th U.S. Colored Infantry, fought with great courage at the Battle of the Crater (Virginia) in 1864. Eager to fight for the freedom of their fellow blacks, they advanced 200 yards before falling back. Members of the 29th were mustered out of service in November, 1865.

Illinois repealed the "Black Code" laws following the Civil War in 1865. The United States Congress ended the legal institution of slavery with the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865. To help ensure the rights of newly freed blacks, the 14th Amendment was passed in 1868. This amendment

provided for equal protection under the law and allowed Congress the authority to enforce the Amendment with additional legislation. Black men were given the right to vote in 1870 by passing the 15th Amendment. In 1874, state laws forbidding segregation were passed. The Illinois Civil Rights Act of 1885 was passed forbidding discrimination in public facilities and places such as hotels, rail roads, theatres, and restaurants.

But anti-discrimination laws had little effect on long standing racial tensions. Several race riots erupted in the new century. In 1908, a riot broke out in the city of Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln had lived for many years before his election as president in 1860. The riot led to the lynching of two black men. Four white men were killed, many others were injured, and the black section of Springfield was demolished by fires and vandalism. These events shocked the state and the nation. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was organized as a result of the riot. Race riots also occurred in St. Louis in 1917 and in Chicago in 1919.

Racial tensions continued even as blacks headed overseas to fight in World War I. Illinois sent 314,000 troops to Europe. Among them were several black units, including the 8th Infantry Regiment. The 8th, re-designated the 370th Infantry of the 93rd Division, was the first American regiment to reach the French fortress at Laon. They fought bravely to drive the enemy out of France and take back the French fortress. The regiment also fought in the last battle of the war. Shortly after the Armistice was signed the 370th captured a fifty-car German train and its crew. Twenty-one men of the regiment received the Distinguished Service Cross, and Colonel Otis B. Duncan received the Distinguished Service Medal. France also recognized 68 men of this courageous regiment with its Croix de Guerre. The regiment was demobilized at Camp Grant in Illinois on March 3, 1919.

In the time between the World War I and World War II, African Americans began leaving the southern states for Illinois and other northern states. This "Great Migration" increased the Illinois African American population by 81% from 1920 to 1930. More African Americans were elected to public office and attained jobs in arenas where no other blacks had previously served. John W. E. Thomas was elected state representative in 1876. Republican Oscar DePriest was elected the first black alderman in Chicago in 1915. In 1924 Chicago elected Albert B. George its first black municipal court judge, Adelbert H. Roberts was the first black elected to serve on the Illinois State Senate, and Vivian Gordon Harsh was appointed the first black librarian at the Chicago Public Library. Arthur W. Mitchell was elected the first black Democrat to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1934. Two important legislative measures forbidding discrimination on state contracts for public works and buildings, and on contracts for defense were passed in 1933.

During the Great Depression black protests against discrimination increased. Blacks began to boycott businesses in black neighborhoods that would not hire black workers. Their slogan "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," emphasized economics as a means for fighting racism. In the North,

blacks also held school boycotts in response to the poor treatment of their children. Under the influence of his wife Eleanor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt opened federal jobs to blacks.

During World War II, Illinois sent more than one million men and women to the armed forces. "Tuskegee Airman" Ellsworth Dansby of Decatur was the first black Master Sergeant of the 99th Fighter Squadron, the first black fighter squadron. The squadron saw little action, but many blacks fought bravely for their country in World War II. Many Southern blacks who had not gone to war migrated to northern and western cities for new jobs in the wartime economy. At the end of the war, President Harry S. Truman, despite opposition, desegregated the U.S. military.

Following the war, racial tensions began to grow again. While the military was desegregated, much of the rest of society was not. Many African Americans who had come north to find new opportunities found themselves segregated and discriminated against at home and at work. President Truman submitted a proposal to Congress for equal employment and civil rights for blacks, but it was rejected. Equal educational opportunities were at the forefront of the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) legal defense fund. The suits filed by the NAACP led to the landmark decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* in May of 1954, which overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* of 1896. Few schools in the South were desegregated in the first years following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling. Desegregation proceeded slowly in the South with the White Citizen's Council fighting it at every step. In some cases the federal government used the National Guard to enforce the policy.

Segregation of public facilities, lunch counters, drinking fountains, and buses was still common in the South. Blacks under the leadership of Rev. Martin Luther King, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Ella Baker, the NAACP, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) boycotts and sit-ins were organized across the country to protest segregation and discrimination. In the early 1960s, the SCLC organized a direct-action campaign. This campaign involved hundreds of people who were willing to be arrested and jailed for the cause. Their persistence and a massive march on Washington led to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited segregation in public places, prohibited discrimination in education and employment, authorized the U.S. Attorney General to bring suit against schools and public facilities not in compliance with the Act, and further protected voting rights. Everett McKinley Dirksen, U.S. senator and Republican party leader from Illinois, played a vital role in the passage of the Act. His skills as a negotiator helped the bill pass the Senate. Passage of this act spurred many white supremacists to join the Ku Klux Klan, which had been present in Illinois since the end of World War I. White backlash and the continued campaigning on the part of SCLC spurred the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Act banned the use of literacy and other voter qualification tests that had been used to discourage black voters.

Rev. Martin Luther King visited Chicago in 1965 to address the problems of segregation in housing and discrimination in education and hiring. He staged numerous demonstrations in all-white neighborhoods and urged political leaders to take action. He drew attention to the poor living conditions of many blacks in Chicago. His trip was largely unsuccessful, but it did bring the issues of segregation and discrimination to the forefront in Illinois. King's young disciple, Rev. Jesse Jackson, a graduate student of the Chicago Theological Seminary, initiated Operation Breadbasket, which advocated the use of economic pressure from the black community to combat discrimination.

With the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King in 1968 and Malcolm X in 1965 the Civil Rights movement came to a near stand still. Rioting broke out in Chicago and across the nation in response to the deaths of the two leaders. Other leaders stepped forward such as Rev. Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam—but none have been as compelling or effective.

With the dismantling of the legal institutions that sustained slavery, segregation, and discrimination, the realization of equality for African Americans now lies in the attitudes and integration of society as a whole. In the 1970s, Affirmative Action, which promoted the hiring and advancement of minorities, attempted to remedy some of the social and economic disparities. Affirmative Action often has been controversial, and some universities and corporations have abandoned the practice.

Chicago elected its first black mayor, Harold Washington, in 1983. Ironically, Washington defeated the city's first female mayor, Jayne Byrne. Washington built an interracial, progressive regime to reform the Democratic party in Chicago, despite having run as an independent. He wanted to bring more blacks and minorities into the government. Unfortunately he died during his first term in 1987.

In 1992 Illinois elected the first African American woman to serve in the U. S. Senate. Carol Moseley-Braun of Chicago failed to win re-election to the Senate, but was later appointed Ambassador to New Zealand by President William J. Clinton. Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam organized several marches on Washington D.C., the largest and most publicized was the Million Man March.

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., questioned whether American society could live up to the principles of liberty and equality stated in the constitution. The answer remains to be seen.

Written By  
Karen E. Everingham  
Education Services

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