

ILLINOIS'S WAR

The Civil War in Documents



EDITED BY MARK HUBBARD

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Introduction

ILLINOIS WAS AT the heart of the national crisis over slavery. Many Northerners saw Illinois, with its booming city on the lake, its rich agricultural fields and growing industries, as a model of what the West should be: a dynamic, enterprising society that fairly rewarded free white labor. The state's geography was also pivotal. Bordered by two slave states—Missouri and Kentucky—and three major commercial arteries—the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash Rivers—Illinois was an entry point for countless runaway slaves. As slaves acted to free themselves, river towns such as Alton, East St. Louis, and Cairo became the scene of dramatic escapes, and equally dramatic rescue efforts by Illinoisans operating a loose network that stretched into Canada—the famous Underground Railroad—set up to aid fugitives in their flight to freedom. Illinois statesmen played starring roles in the crisis. Its leading U.S. senator, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, attained national prominence by shepherding the Compromise of 1850 through a bitterly divided Congress. Four years later he sent shockwaves across the nation by authoring the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1860 the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln to the White House precipitated secession and civil war.

As the war unfolded, Illinois proved essential to the Union cause. Only the more populous states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio sent more troops into battle on the Union side. Most of the 259,000 Illinoisans who served did so in the western theater, where Union troops outfought the Confederates early and built momentum toward ultimate victory. The state was home to several of the Union's best field commanders, including Ulysses S. Grant, the chief architect of those successful western campaigns. Illinois supplied key resources, such as coal and foodstuffs that fueled the Union's wartime industries and fed its massive armies. Illinois's largest city, Chicago, itself played a significant role in Union victory. The city's diverse residents responded enthusiastically to the calls for volunteers. Camp Douglas, located on the city's south side, was a major training site for troops and later a notorious prison for captured Confederates. Chicago's industries answered the demand for war resources, while its superior railroad and canal connections made it a hub for the collection and transport of supplies and men into battle.

Illinois underwent sweeping changes in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. But amid the multitude of issues that Illinoisans confronted, certain broad themes stand out. First, the deep political divisions that beset Illinois in these years—over the expansion of slavery, the place of blacks in society, and the policies of the federal government both during and after the Civil War—grew out of the state's demographic transformation. Throughout the antebellum decades

migrants from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and other slave states settled southern and central Illinois. Overwhelmingly rural in economic orientation, these “upland Southerners” brought with them a socially and politically conservative culture that emphasized limited government and personal autonomy. Beginning in the 1830s, however, Illinois’s population slowly diversified with the arrival of newcomers attracted to the availability of cheap land and an abundance of new jobs linked to the steady growth of the state’s economy. Midwesterners from Indiana and Ohio, immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia, and Yankees from the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast poured into Illinois in search of economic opportunity. Between 1850 and 1870, Illinois’s population nearly tripled, growing to over 2.5 million, as diverse settlers found irresistible Illinois’s verdant prairies and burgeoning cities. Most of the newcomers settled across central and northern Illinois, and the Yankees in particular brought a moralizing, progressive outlook that clashed significantly with the conservative worldview of upland Southerners. The era’s intense political battles reflected the growing influence of those segments of Illinois society who differed, sometimes sharply so, from the state’s initial upland Southern majority.

The influx of new settler groups redefined the state’s political geography. As Illinois became more cosmopolitan, the center of gravity in state politics tilted steadily northward, giving rise to a new generation of political leadership. Initially it was Stephen Douglas who capitalized on the new demographic and economic currents shaping the Prairie State. Born in 1813 in Vermont, Douglas migrated to Illinois at age twenty, part of the Yankee diaspora then spreading out toward the frontier West. Settling at first in Jacksonville, Douglas studied law and soon entered into his lifelong passion, politics. Later Douglas moved to Chicago, invested heavily in lakefront property, and became one of the city’s greatest boosters and political assets. Douglas compiled a distinguished record of public service in Illinois, at various times serving as secretary of state of Illinois, justice on the Illinois Supreme Court, state representative, U.S. congressman, and, by the 1850s, as a U.S. senator battling with Abraham Lincoln for the hearts and minds of the Illinois electorate. Douglas’s enormous popularity in Illinois owed to his political ideology, forged in what Douglas self-consciously described as his “Western feelings[,] principles and interests.”¹ Douglas linked traditional Jacksonian ideals—especially white supremacy and democratic self-rule, popular among the state’s upland Southerners—with an aggressive nationalism that served the interests of newer, more affluent settler groups. These were the principles of a new generation of Democratic Party leaders calling themselves Young America, and Douglas was their chieftain. Douglas and his Young America allies knew that the key to the nation’s greatness lay in western expansion. Sowing the seeds of civilization across the vast continental expanse was nothing less than America’s manifest destiny.

Fulfilling that destiny would assure his adopted home state's continued growth and prosperity, for Illinois was best poised to profit from the vast territorial riches that lay across the Mississippi. Combining traditional Jacksonian themes with a nationalist-expansionist agenda, by the 1840s Douglas's Democratic Party enjoyed unrivaled strength and support across the entire state.

It is easy to forget that before 1860 it was largely Douglas's vision—not Lincoln's—that provided a measure of political coherence to the state's staggering economic and social development, a second major theme of Illinois's history in these years. In the decades surrounding the Civil War, Illinois transitioned from a comparatively homogenous, rural society to an increasingly heterogeneous, commercial, and industrializing one. Chicago led the way, but cities such as Galena, Moline, Peoria, Quincy, and Springfield grew impressively as well. Meanwhile new towns sprung up along the Illinois Central Railroad, which had commenced in early 1851, after Douglas, an avid promoter, crafted the land-grant scheme in Congress that funded its construction. Soon after, the Illinois General Assembly began authorizing secondary trunk lines to serve other towns across the state. By the eve of the Civil War, Illinois had over 2,800 miles of railroad, nearly all of which had been laid during the 1850s, a decade of frenzied investment and growth.

The state's railroads connected increasing numbers of people to markets and launched Illinois's economic transformation. Agriculture and livestock, shipping and warehousing, real estate and construction, mining and industry—all sectors of Illinois's economy flourished in the new age of cheaper and faster transport of goods. Springfield's Milton Hay, uncle of Lincoln's wartime secretary, John Hay, later remembered the coming of the railroad "as the dividing line in point of time between the new and the old. Not only our homemade manufactures, but our homemade life and habits to a great measure disappeared. . . . We began to build houses of a different style and with different materials. We farmed not only with different implements but in a different mode. Then we began to inquire what the markets were and what product of the farm we could raise and sell to the best advantage."² A new economic order had dawned.

Illinois's river and railroad connections positioned its people to take full advantage of the Civil War's economic stimulus. The coming of war enlarged the scope of the social and economic transformation that had begun in the antebellum era. Illinois farmers prospered during the war years, purchasing labor-saving machinery that increased the output of crops and livestock. The expansion of the state's industrial workforce during the 1860s also registered the war's effect, as did the rising value of the state's industrial output, which by 1870 for the first time nearly equaled that of its agricultural sector. By the 1870s the changes wrought in the lives of ordinary Illinoisans were scarcely imaginable just a generation before. For much of the antebellum era Illinois was a rural frontier. Now the state stood at

the center of trade and communication networks that spanned an entire continent. The Prairie State emerged in the postwar years as the nation's doorway to the trans-Mississippi West, a principal beneficiary of the subsequent growth and development of that region.

Inevitably Illinois's transformation caused tensions and anxieties among its people. The first signs appeared in the mid 1850s when many native-born Illinoisans, distrustful of immigrants, joined the anti-immigrant Know Nothing movement. Chicago especially witnessed clashes between native-born Protestants and recently arrived German and Irish Catholics that reshaped the city's politics. Then during and after the war, workers and farmers grew restless over the course of economic change. In general, Illinoisans hailed their state's economic progress, seeing it as proof of the superiority of free labor over slave labor. But as a practical matter not everyone shared equally in Illinois's bounty. During these crucial decades it became clear that Illinois's ongoing economic transformation concentrated wealth and power in the hands of those with capital to invest, goods to sell, and property to let.

Of the many changes that Illinoisans experienced in these years, the end of American slavery was by far the most dramatic. The unfolding of new racial politics in the wake of emancipation was a third major theme of the state's history in this era. Illinois had always been a free state (though throughout its early history there were efforts to introduce slavery within its borders), because it was territory organized by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, which had explicitly banned slavery. In fact many of those upland Southerners who initially settled Illinois did so because they disliked living and working among black slaves. Nevertheless, the movement against slavery proceeded very slowly in Illinois because nearly all residents shared an abiding faith in white supremacy. Any proposal to free the South's slaves necessarily raised difficult questions: What would become of them? If free, might they follow the example set by so many whites and settle on the Illinois prairie? Might they take the choicest lands, the best jobs? Indeed, might the American birthrights of democratic equality and economic freedom be tainted by their extension to black slaves? The related questions of race and slavery had powerful economic and psychological dimensions in a state that began its steady growth and social diversification at precisely the moment when radical abolitionism first appeared on the scene. From the 1830s onward Douglas's Democratic Party purposefully exploited the racial fears of ordinary Illinoisans jealously guarding their social and economic privileges against the "threat" of black incursion. The power of those fears was made plain in 1837 when the general assembly, by a vote of 77 to 6, passed a resolution condemning abolitionism and affirming slaveholding "a sacred right" of the Southern states. Later that year an enraged mob in Alton set fire to the warehouse where the abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah P. Lovejoy,

who had recently migrated to Illinois from Maine, kept his printing press. Lovejoy escaped the fire only to be gunned down by the mob.

If Illinoisans would not permit racial slavery to efface the prairie, neither would they risk a flood of imbruted ex-bondsmen into their prospering white utopia. Hence the violent fury directed at the abolitionist Lovejoy. The political economy and social psychology of white supremacy imprisoned the minds of nearly all Illinoisans before the Civil War, Lovejoy and his tiny band of followers notwithstanding. Illinois would be a white state (in fact almost entirely so) in a white republic; the state's Democratic leadership all but promised that the freedoms and opportunities enjoyed by white Illinoisans would never be extended to people of color. It would take decades of political strife and a bloody civil war before this way of thinking gave way, if only grudgingly and incompletely, to something different. In complex ways the long struggle against Southern slavery, the wartime origins of emancipation, and the postwar efforts to define the status of blacks in America all profoundly impacted Illinois and set its people on a new course. Illinoisans, like Americans everywhere, believed theirs was a special nation founded on the self-evident truths of freedom and equality among men. The Civil War era raised those questions anew and made those truths appear anything but self-evident.



The problems of race and slavery were uppermost in the mind of Abraham Lincoln as he prepared to give an address at Peoria in October 1854. Much had changed in Lincoln's life as he rose to speak that evening. Born in 1809 in Kentucky, nine years before Illinois became a state, the young Lincoln and his family relocated many times in the face of hardship and poverty. These early years filled Lincoln with a burning ambition for something more than rural farm life. At age twenty-two he left his family, now residing in Coles County, Illinois, to pursue a legal and political career, eventually settling in Springfield. By 1840, a year after it was made Illinois's state capital (replacing downstate Vandalia), Springfield was a bustling commercial town full of opportunity for young lawyers and rising politicians like Lincoln. Throughout his early political career, which included four stints in the Illinois General Assembly, Lincoln cultivated a following among the more affluent and upwardly mobile people settling central and northern Illinois. Like Lincoln, these Illinoisans identified with the Whig Party, which rose in the 1830s to challenge Democratic supremacy in the state. Whigs often aligned themselves with the moral reform movements of the era, including Christian missionary work, temperance, and even antislavery. But their core program—and Lincoln's primary concern before 1854—was the promotion of a national economy through improved transportation networks, protective tariffs, and the proliferation of banks and industrial enterprises. The idea of using government in systematic and positive

ways to improve the nation's commercial and industrial position dated back to Founding Fathers like Alexander Hamilton. More recently it was the grand design of the Kentucky slaveholder and Whig Party founder Henry Clay, whom Lincoln idolized. This was an agenda suited to the aspirations of a new generation of Illinoisans who most welcomed and benefited from the state's economic transformation.

And yet by the time of Lincoln's Peoria speech, tariffs, banks, and the like no longer animated Illinoisans as they once did. The sole subject of Lincoln's address that evening was Stephen Douglas's recently enacted Kansas-Nebraska Act. Douglas had long envisioned Illinois, and Chicago in particular, as the chief beneficiary of western expansion. After all, his own real estate investments would boom in value should Chicago become the central link in a chain of railroad communications connecting East with West. In order for Douglas's vision to be realized, however, Nebraska Territory had to be opened to settlement. The problem was that this land was part of the old Louisiana Purchase, and slavery had been explicitly banned from it under the terms of the 1820 Missouri Compromise. Under pressure from Southern congressmen, Douglas, who also entertained presidential ambitions, included an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise in order to guarantee his bill's passage. With the slavery restriction now lifted, territorial settlers would decide the question of slavery themselves through democratic processes. The idea of letting settlers vote whether or not to have slavery, known as popular sovereignty, was a cardinal principle of Northern Democrats like Douglas, who sought to remain political partners with Southern Democrats without appearing to be pro-slavery to their own Northern constituents.

By repealing the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act thus opened new western territory to the prospect of slavery, and it was this issue—the potential expansion of slavery—that Lincoln's Peoria audience gathered that night to consider. In a sense those listening to Lincoln that evening could see both their past and future unfolding before them, all bound up in the question of whether or not slaveholders would be permitted to expand their system of unfree labor onto western soil. For many, the thought of an American West populated by arrogant slaveholders and their degraded black chattel was galling.

Lincoln lambasted Douglas for over three hours that night. When he wasn't assailing Douglas for betraying the interests of Illinoisans and the nation, Lincoln spoke philosophically about the larger issues of race and slavery in American life. He would not blame Southerners for slavery. Indeed Lincoln emphasized the inherent difficulty in freeing the slaves. "My first impulse," he said, "would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia,—to their own native land." But Lincoln admitted that colonizing the nation's four million slaves out of the country was financially and logistically impractical. What then? Lincoln chose his words carefully:

Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them equals. It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the south.

Lincoln would never fully admit blacks as his equal, not that night in Peoria, not throughout the remainder of his life. Lincoln's endorsement of gradual emancipation distinguished him from Illinois radicals like Owen Lovejoy, brother of the martyred Alton abolitionist and champion of immediate emancipation. Nevertheless Lincoln always insisted that slavery was a "monstrous injustice." "The great mass of mankind . . . consider slavery a great moral wrong," he declared at Peoria, "and their feeling against it, is not evanescent, but eternal." Yet in Douglas's view, the question of whether the American West "shall be slave or free, is a matter of utter indifference."³ Lincoln wanted Illinoisans to occupy a higher ground. He wanted his listeners to recognize that the institution of slavery was incompatible with America's moral fabric and traditions. In Lincoln's view, America, founded on principles of democratic equality and economic freedom, was as much a moral as it was a political and constitutional enterprise. When it came to slavery, all Illinoisans must feel their own interest in preventing its spread.

If Lincoln understood slavery to be a moral wrong, he also understood the limits of his own racial attitudes and those of his fellow citizens in the audience that night in Peoria. As the nation divided, Illinoisans reached diverse answers to the vexing problems of race and slavery that Lincoln had illuminated. No one listening to Lincoln that night could imagine how much their courage, their capacity for sacrifice, and their values would be tested in the coming years. As their worlds changed, Illinoisans learned much about themselves.

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