

Native Americans have lived in the Illinois River Valley for at least 12,000 years, developing distinctive cultures, communities, and practices as the region's landscape and circumstances evolved over millennia. Their history in this valley is marked by adaptation, movement, and change, shaped first by environmental shifts and later profoundly altered by European contact and settlement.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

### **Early Inhabitants and Cultural Changes**

The earliest peoples in the Illinois River Valley were hunters and gatherers who later developed woodland villages and ceremonial mound-building, influenced by the Ohio Valley and Mississippian cultures. Communities began to construct pottery, develop agricultural practices like growing maize, and increased village sizes and numbers, eventually adopting ceremonial burial customs and mound-building traditions.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **The Illinois Confederation (Illiniwek)**

By the time of European contact, the region was mainly inhabited by the Illiniwek (or Illinois Confederation), a loose confederation of 12–13 tribes including the Cahokia, Kaskaskia, Peoria, Michigamea, and Tamaroa. These tribes spoke Miami-Illinois languages (Algonquian) and lived in seasonal cycles, shifting between semi-permanent villages and hunting camps while cultivating corn, beans, pumpkins, and squash. They were partially nomadic, moving to follow bison hunts and seasonal harvests.<sup>[2][4][5]</sup>

### **French Encounter and Mission Era**

In the late 1600s, French explorers Marquette and Joliet encountered large Illinois villages in the river valley, including the "Grand Village of the Kaskaskia" near present-day Peoria, which later became the site of Catholic missions. French trade and missionary activity began to reshape tribal life, and the Kaskaskia proved particularly receptive to Christianity.<sup>[5][2]</sup>

### **Displacement and Transformation**

After 1745, the Illinois tribes weakened due to wars, disease, and inter-tribal pressures, leading to migrations of the Three Fires Confederacy tribes—Potawatomi, Chippewa, and Ottawa—into the valley. By the 1830s, the Indian Removal Act forced most native peoples west of the Mississippi River, ending their longstanding presence in the region. Those remaining consolidated as the Peoria Tribe in Kansas and Oklahoma.<sup>[4][6]</sup>

### **Lasting Legacy**

Despite forced removal, Native American sites, mounds, and villages remain integral to the Illinois River Valley's historical landscape. Archaeological studies and landmarks continue to reveal insights into thousands of years of indigenous history shaped by adaptation, resilience, and cultural transformation.<sup>[1][3]</sup>

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1. <https://www.illinoisriverroad.org/historical-sites/>
2. <https://mythicmississippi.illinois.edu/native-illinois/>
3. <https://accessgenealogy.com/native/illinois-indian-tribes.htm>
4. <https://www.sih.net/news/2023/native-american-heritage-month>
5. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/illinois-tribe/>
6. <https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com/2022/11/01/the-era-when-the-fox-river-valleys-indians-and-settlers-lived-along-side-each-other/>
7. [https://www.museum.state.il.us/publications/epub/indian\\_villages\\_il\\_country\\_wayne\\_temple.pdf](https://www.museum.state.il.us/publications/epub/indian_villages_il_country_wayne_temple.pdf)
8. <https://dnrhistoric.illinois.gov/experience/visit-native-americans.html>
9. <https://libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu/OCA/Books2012-06/historyofillinoi1/historyofillinoi01cong/historyofillinoi01cong.pdf>
10. [https://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat\\_amer/post/htmls/il.html](https://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/post/htmls/il.html)