

HISTORY BELONGS TO ALL OF US

Community Conversations



Illinois
Humanities

Community Conversations: History Belongs to *All of Us*

Project overview

The **Community Conversations: History Belongs to All of Us** toolkit will anchor Illinois Humanities' annual program, [Community Conversations](#), which relies on facilitated dialogue in communities across the state to reflect upon significant texts while building connections across diverse perspectives. Read more about Community Conversations [here](#).

Community Conversations: History Belongs to All of Us commemorates the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the United States through the lens of the history of Illinois. Its emphasis is on the joy of investigating history in its rawest form: the primary document and the artifact. Activities will encourage participants to investigate and interpret primary documents from our state's archives and visit and examine our material history in the form of collected objects and historic sites.

A primary objective of **History Belongs to All of Us** is to uncover histories that reflect the diversity of Illinois's people and perspectives at the moment of the American Revolution and as the revolution unfolded over the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Diversity is a key component of our approach because, as historians of colonial North America and the Early Republic have demonstrated, the United States has been a polyglot and ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse nation from inception. Illinois is no exception and we know the archives and material culture of our state are crucial elements in more comprehensively representing our peoples' dynamic histories.

How the toolkit is organized

Community Conversations toolkits are organized around opening and closing dialogues that explore the same text from different perspectives. In between the opening and closing dialogues, we offer several text-anchored activities that contain a mix of facilitated dialogue and active skill-building.

For **Community Conversations: History Belongs to All of Us**, our opening and closing dialogues will revolve around the Declaration of Independence as a primary document. The activities that occur in between will be built upon the variety of artifacts and documents that expert archivists, collections managers, museum professionals, educators, and historians have helped us identify.

Below are sub-themes and prompts that help move us chronologically from the colonial period to the present. Each sub-theme has at least one associated historical artifact (a document, site, or object).

SUB-THEME: LANDSCAPE AND TERRITORY

How do we tell history through the ways we interact with, adapt, and change the landscape? How do we try to build understanding when we don't speak the same language?

Time Period: Pre-colonial/Colonial era

Artifacts

- Edwards Trace: [Documenting the Edwards Trace](#) and [Relive the True Mother Road](#)
- [Fort du Chartres](#)
- [French map](#), Le cours du Missisipi ou de St. Louis fameuse riviere d'Amerique Septentrionale... [The Course of the Mississippi, or the St. Louis, the famous river of North America]
- [A new map](#) of the western parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina; comprehending the River Ohio, and all the rivers, which fall into it; part of the River Mississippi, the whole of the Illinois River, Lake Erie; part of the Lakes Huron, Michigan &c. and all the country bordering on these lakes and rivers, Thomas Hutchins, 1778

SUB-THEME: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

Do freedom and equality mean the same thing to everyone who was and would be impacted by the Declaration of Independence? What are other ideas of freedom and equality that those who lived in Illinois might have had? What are some ways we can talk about unfreedom and/or inequality?

Time period: Pre-colonial/Colonial/Early Republic

Artifacts

- Salt Kettle, used by enslaved and indentured laborers to produce salt for trade
- Phoebe, A Woman of Color v. William Jay, 1828 (no case number in original), majority opinion
- Northwest Ordinance of 1787
- Illinois Constitution of 1818

SUB-THEME: MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION

Illinois transformed tremendously once it became part of the Northwest Territory and then a state. Who settled in Illinois and why? How did they describe this land? How did they establish “American” homes? How did those who already lived in Illinois reconcile or conflict with newcomers?

Time period: Revolutionary period to Early Republic

Artifacts

- Morris Birkbeck, *Letters from Illinois*, 1818, Letter VII
- Undated letter (circa 1835) to William Hodge and wife from unknown in North Carolina, Rockingham County.
- Nicholas Welch, War of 1812 Land Grant

SUB-THEME: REVOLUTIONARY VISIONS

How did the ideals of the Revolution, catalyzed by the Declaration of Independence, continue to influence movements for freedom and equal citizenship in Illinois? How did Illinoisans think about their American-ness in the first 250 years of the nation?

Time period: 1776 to present

Artifacts

- Colored Convention, Alton, 1853
 - William Jennings Bryan, "Cross of Gold Speech", Democratic National Convention, Chicago, July 9, 1896
- American Indian Chicago Conference, 1961, "Declaration of Indian Purpose" and Proceedings

SUB-THEME: HOW WE REMEMBER

How has Illinois commemorated the Revolution and U.S. history through centennial and bicentennial celebrations and through monuments?

Time period: 1876 to present

Artifacts

- Poster of Wagon Trains / Bicentennial under DeKalb County Historical Society
- Monument to George Rogers Clark
- John B. Drake, "Address to the People of Illinois, by some of her prominent citizens, on their interest in and duty toward the centennial celebration and international exhibition, to be held in Philadelphia, in 1876," 1875. Published by Chicago Evening Journal Book and Job Print, held at Newberry Library

Community Conversations: History Belongs to All of Us

Opening Dialogue Guide

INTRODUCTIONS AND ICEBREAKER

You can choose your own or try one from a website like this: [ICEBREAKER IDEAS](#).

SUGGESTED INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your participation in Illinois Humanities' 2026 **Community Conversations: History Belongs to All of Us**. This year's theme commemorates the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the United States through the lens of the history of Illinois. Its emphasis is on the joy of investigating history in its rawest form: the primary document and the artifact. Activities will encourage participants to **investigate and interpret** primary documents from our state's archives and **visit and examine** our material history in the form of collected objects and historic sites.

The opening dialogue for this program will focus on the [Declaration of Independence](#). The goal is not only to reacquaint us with the founding document of the United States, but to consider the ways it asserts a form of government that empowers a free and equal citizenry in contrast to a "tyrannical" monarchy.

Note: For this activity, Illinois Humanities will provide you with a large, printed version of the Declaration of Independence to affix to a wall.

Please have sticky notes and writing implements available for your participants. Please also have an individual copy of the document available for each participant.

Read aloud the [Declaration of Independence](#).

Invite participants to take a few moments to reflect on what they have heard and begin writing comments or questions about the document on sticky notes. After 5-10 minutes, participants should affix their sticky notes to the printed version of the Declaration on the wall next to the appropriate phrases.

When everyone has had a chance to add their notes, allow time for the participants to review each other's notes and reflect.

Have an initial discussion.

Prompts:

- What phrases or ideas emerge for you?
- What surprises you about what you have read and/or what others have highlighted in their notes?
- How does this reading compare to what you remember from reading the Declaration at other times in your life?
- Are there any ideas or points made here that resonate with your experiences today?

If there is time and participants are interested in digging deeper, consider the following prompts as well:

- On July 4, 1776, the State of Illinois was yet to be defined. It was not part of the United States or the British Empire. How do you think people who lived in what is now Illinois understood the Declaration of Independence at the time? What hopes, expectations, or apprehensions do you think they might have had?
- Among the complaints that form the main body of the Declaration of Independence, the writers identify some specific behaviors that they associate with tyranny. Can you find any of these in the text? Do you agree or disagree that they constitute tyrannical rule? Why or why not?
- One of the major concerns of the Declaration of Independence is that the King was disconnected by miles and by sentiment from the colonists' everyday experience. Yet, at the same time, he restricted them from governing or making decisions that would allow them to thrive. If the King had been more tuned-in to the colonists and allowed them to make more independent decisions, but still remain part of the British Empire, do you think there would have been a Revolution? Why or why not?
- The Declaration of Independence wasn't just a letter sent from the Continental Congress to the King in an official communication. It was also printed on huge posters called "broad­sides" and pasted all over the colonies. If Americans felt the need to submit a new Declaration of Independence in 2026, what do you think would be the best way to notify the public and get their focused attention?
- It is important to read the Declaration of Independence as a document that is anchored in the belief that all people have natural, undeniable rights. This is in contrast to a tyranny in which rights are bestowed upon people by an absolute ruler. However, many people living in the United States would argue that, throughout history, our country has toggled between these ideas of natural rights vs. those bestowed upon (or withdrawn from) the people by a ruler. With this in mind, do you think the American Revolution has ever been completed? Why or why not?

CLOSING REFLECTION

After the discussion has ended, ask participants to revisit the wall and make note of a word, phrase, or idea that will linger with them. Ask participants to go around the room and share what they have chosen, if they wish.

Migration and Immigration: Morris Birkbeck's *Letters from Illinois*

Intended audience: Middle School to Adult

Estimated length of activity: 60-90 minutes

Objectives: Born in 1764 in Settle, England, Morris Birkbeck traveled to the emerging United States in 1817. He eventually landed in what would be known as the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois. In two texts, *Notes on a Journey in America, from the Coast of Virginia to the Territory of Illinois* (1817) and *Letters from Illinois* (1818), Birkbeck shared his story of emigration, impressions of the new nation and its inhabitants, and opinions about the American form of government. He also worked to persuade other English people to move to Illinois and help build his town. Together, we will examine two of his letters and explore the themes of immigration that resonate or contrast with our current moment.

Anchor Text: "Letter VII" and/or "Letter XXII" *Letters from Illinois*, Morris Birkbeck, 1818.

INTRODUCTIONS AND ICEBREAKER

You can choose your own or try one from a website like this: [ICEBREAKER IDEAS](#).

Introduce Morris Birkbeck and *Letters from Illinois* to Participants

For an excellent overview of who Morris Birkbeck was and his relationship to Illinois history, the Illinois History and Lincoln Collections at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has [a well-researched and detailed introduction](#) on its website.

As the site explains, *Letters from Illinois* (1818) was a compilation of letters Birkbeck had written to convince other English people to settle in Illinois. He fervently believed that life was more abundant and the government more just in Illinois than it had been in England, particularly for those who labored and farmed. The book was well-received in England and translated into German, though it is difficult to know just how many of his readers took the plunge and moved to the United States.

Read aloud an excerpt from or the entire text of "Letter VII." Note that this letter is the shorter and least detailed of the two. In it, Birkbeck speaks to some of the differences between England and Illinois and the reasons he feels his life in Illinois is superior.

Questions to consider:

- What is happening in this letter?
- What reasons does Birkbeck cite for leaving England?
- How does Birkbeck describe his life in England versus his new home in Illinois? Pick out some details, if you can, and consider what these tell you about him.
- How does Birkbeck use the word “patriotism”? What does it mean to him? What does it mean to you?
- What, if anything, surprises you or gives you a new understanding when you read or listen to this letter?

Read aloud excerpts or the entire text of “Letter XXII.” Note that this letter is quite long and contains a letter within the letter. “Letter XXII” outlines Birkbeck’s frustrations with the United States Congress and the ways its priorities and operations contrast with how Birkbeck himself believes the nation should be governed. In particular, Birkbeck is disappointed that Congress does not support his efforts to build a “colony” of English laborers in Illinois. He also includes a brief commentary expressing his thoughts about slavery.

Questions to consider:

- What is happening in this letter?
- What is Birkbeck’s “plan of colonising”? Why do you think he is interested in pursuing this plan?
- How, in Birkbeck’s telling, does Congress respond? What do you think this says about the United States government’s views on immigration at the time? What other values or principles seem to be part of the government’s response?
- While they are not mentioned in this letter, Native people lived in the same area as Birkbeck. In particular, the Kaskaskia, Peoria, Miami, and Council of the Seven Fires made homes in and around what became the English Settlement. What attitudes do you imagine Native people had to the changes they were witnessing? How do you think they might have responded?
- Clarify what Birkbeck means by “muscles and sinews” (i.e. laborers, but particularly those who are enslaved when he first uses the phrase).
- What are Birkbeck’s attitudes toward slavery? (Note: It might be interesting to share that Birkbeck’s good friend and fellow English immigrant, George Flower, was a strong advocate for the antislavery movement. He was also appointed by the U.S. government to help lead the American Colonization Society, which eventually led to the creation of the West African nation, Liberia.)
- Do any of the points in the letter leave you with additional questions for research? If so, what questions do you have?

CLOSING REFLECTION

While Morris Birkbeck's letters are testimonials to many different topics relating to the early days of the State of Illinois, they are first and foremost the words of a new immigrant.

In this closing reflection, ask the group to consider the ways in which Birkbeck's immigrant experience echo or contrast with the experiences of immigrants today. You might consider the image he draws of Illinois for his readers, the hopes he shares with his letters' recipients, and any evidence you might detect that not all aspects of immigration are as rosy as he often suggests. Invite participants to share their own stories of immigration or those of family and friends.

Freedom and Equality: Phoebe, A Woman of Color v. William Jay, 1828

Intended audience: Middle School to Adult

Estimated length of activity: 60-90 minutes

Objectives: This activity relies on the landmark case of Phoebe, a young Black woman in Illinois, who sued for her freedom in 1828. Phoebe's case illustrates the different levels of freedom and unfreedom that were present in the first decades of Illinois' statehood even as its constitution declared the state free of slavery. Participants will closely read portions of the case, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, and the Illinois Constitution of 1818.

Anchor Text: Phoebe, A Woman of Color v. William Jay, 1828 (no case number in original), majority opinion

We will read two excerpts from the case itself, as well as an excerpt each from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and Illinois Constitution of 1818.

INTRODUCTIONS AND ICEBREAKER

You can choose your own or try one from a website like this: [ICEBREAKER IDEAS](#).

CLARIFICATIONS AND CONTEXT

Clarify what is happening in the case:

Phoebe is indentured to Joseph Jay in November 1814 and the contract is supposed to last for forty years. Around 1828, Joseph Jay passes away and his son, William, inherits his property. The question is: as an indentured servant, does William also inherit Phoebe? And can he compel her to serve him through violent means, such as whipping?

That year, Phoebe takes William Jay to court to sue for her freedom arguing that her indenture amounts to involuntary servitude, or slavery, under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Illinois Constitution of 1818, both of which prohibit slavery. However, an 1807 Act passed in Indiana Territory and adopted in Illinois Territory adds a layer of complexity. The court reviews the arguments and issues a decision.

Clarify the following terms:

- *Indenture*: Indenture is a legal contract that is signed by both an employer and a laborer. In an indenture, the laborer agrees to provide services in return for certain provisions, such as food and lodging. An indenture is a limited contract, which means that it is not intended to last for a lifetime, but it also cannot be ended if the laborer is simply unhappy with the agreement. The laborer is free only when the agreed-upon, contracted time has come to an end. While a contract presupposes free-will on both sides of the agreement, laborers usually signed under circumstances of coercion and desperation.
- *Slavery*: Slavery is a condition in which a laborer is treated as property without free will. It is intended to last a lifetime and is passed down to subsequent generations. Slaves do not work for compensation and are more often than not treated with brutality. Ultimately, slavery dehumanizes and denies people who are enslaved basic rights.
- *“A woman of color”*: In early Illinois, a person “of color” typically denoted a person of African heritage, including those who may be of mixed heritage.
- *Northwest Ordinance of 1787*: See “Northwest Ordinance of 1787” activity for more in-depth discussion. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 created a new territory of the emerging United States that encompassed present-day Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. This allowed for the United States’ form of government to be applied to a new area. Among the most important provisions were the prohibition of slavery in the Northwest Territory and the introduction of a bill of rights, which protected religious freedom, trial by jury, and basic civil liberties.
- *Act of 1807*: In 1807, Indiana Territory passed a law concerning indenture that contradicted the Northwest Ordinance. It allowed slaveholders who moved to Indiana Territory, where slavery was considered illegal under the Northwest Ordinance, to transform their slaves’ legal status to “indentured servant”. This was a go-around that allowed a form of slavery to continue to exist in Indiana. This could be done easily, simply by going before a magistrate and agreeing to a contracted term of service. Illinois Territory adopted the Act as well.
- *Illinois Constitution of 1818*: See “Illinois Constitution of 1818” activity for more in-depth discussion. The Northwest Ordinance outlined a three-step process by which an area of the Northwest Territory could become a state. Among the steps were the creation of a representative government and the drafting of a state constitution. An important part of the state constitution was the prohibition of slavery and involuntary servitude, but the constitution did not prohibit indenture. The United States Congress ratified the Illinois Constitution in 1818.

DISCUSS

Read aloud Excerpt 1 from the case of Phoebe, A Woman of Color v. William Jay, 1828.

Questions to consider:

- What is the complaint Phoebe is making against Jay?
- What are the terms of Phoebe's indenture?
- Are there any details in this description that you leave you with questions? What are they? (You may want to make note of these as you read additional excerpts.)
- This summary of the case is written by the judge. Reading between the lines, can you hear Phoebe's voice in this excerpt? Can you hear Jay's voice? Whose has more prominence for you and why?

Read aloud excerpt from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Questions to consider:

- What resonates with you from this excerpt?
- What does the Northwest Ordinance say about slavery? About indenture?
- Why do you think the Northwest Ordinance takes the position it does with regard to slavery and involuntary servitude?

Read aloud excerpt from the Illinois Constitution of 1818.

Questions to consider:

- What resonates with you from this excerpt?
- In terms of slavery, is the Illinois Constitution consistent with the Northwest Ordinance? If not, how is it different?
- In terms of indenture, is the Illinois Constitution consistent with the Northwest Ordinance? If not, how is it different?
- Why do you think Illinois was interested in preserving indenture?

Prior to reading aloud Excerpt 2 from Phoebe, A Woman of Color v. William Jay, ask participants what they think the outcome of the case will be and why. Then read the Excerpt for clues to the answer.

Questions to consider:

- What do you think is happening here?
- What are the different ideas that Justice Lockwood is weighing?
- What seems to be the outcome of the case?
- What questions still remain for you?

Note to facilitator: Pages 102-103 of *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois* help summarize the case more clearly. Ultimately, Justice Lockwood upheld Phoebe's indenture meaning that, despite the prohibition of slavery in Illinois, Phoebe was still forced to serve William Jay for 26 more years. Legal scholars often refer to this case in documenting the prehistory of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States.

CLOSING REFLECTION

This is a complicated and emotional case. Participants may need to take a moment to breathe or write down their thoughts and feelings before entering into a reflective discussion.

In reflection, we suggest stepping away from the details of this case to more broadly consider Phoebe's struggle for freedom and equality. While we only know Phoebe from this moment in her life, what else might we imagine about her? What kind of person do you think she was? Does she tell us something about what it means to be American? What do you think happened after the case was decided? How do you imagine her descendants might remember her?

Appendix

EXCERPT 1 FROM PHOEBE V. JAY

“This is an action of trespass, assault, battery, wounding, and false imprisonment, to which the defendant plead that the plaintiff, on the 26th day of November, 1814, before Wm. C. Greenup, clerk of the court of common pleas of Randolph county, Illinois territory, agreed to and with one Joseph Jay, the father of this defendant, and who is now deceased, to serve him as an indentured servant, for and during the term of forty years from and after the day and year aforesaid, and then and there entered into and acknowledged an indenture, whereby she bound herself to serve the said Joseph Jay forty years next ensuing said date aforesaid, conformably to the laws of the Illinois territory, respecting the introduction of negroes and mulattoes into the same; and defendant avers, that the said Joseph has since departed this life, leaving this defendant, his only son and heir at law, and who is also his administrator. That plaintiff came to his possession lawfully, after the death of said Joseph. That in order to compel plaintiff to attend to and perform the duties of an indentured servant, in doing the ordinary business of him, the said defendant, and remain in his said service, he had necessarily to use a little force and beating, which is the same trespass, etc.”

NORTHWEST ORDINANCE EXCERPT

Art. 6. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: Provided, always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.

ILLINOIS STATE CONSTITUTION EXCERPT

Art. 6.

1. Neither slavery or involuntary servitude shall hereafter be introduced into this state, otherwise than for the punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted; nor shall any male person, arrived at the age of 21 years, nor female person arrived at the age of 18 years, be held to serve any person as a servant, under any indenture hereafter made, unless such person shall enter into such indenture while in a state of perfect freedom, and on condition of a bona -fide consideration received or to be received for their service. Nor shall any indenture of any negro or mulatto, hereafter made and executed out of this state, or if made in this state, where the term of service exceeds one year, be of the least validity, except those given in cases of apprenticeship.
2. No person bound to labor in any other state, shall be hired to labor in this state, except within the tract reserved for the salt works near Shawneetown; nor even at that place for a longer period than one year at any one time; nor shall it be allowed there after the year 1825: any violation of this article shall effect the emancipation of such person from his obligation to service.
3. Each and every person who has been bound to service by contract or indenture in virtue of the law of Illinois territory heretofore existing, and in conformity to the provisions of the same, without fraud or collusion, shall be held to a specific performance of their contracts or indentures; and such negroes and mulattoes as have been registered in conformity with the aforesaid laws, shall serve out the time appointed by said laws: Provided however, that the children hereafter born of such person , negroes or mulattoes, shall become free, the males at the age of 21 years, the females at the age of 18 years. Each and every child born of indentured parents, shall be entered with the clerk of the county in which they reside, by their owners, within six months after the birth of said child.

EXCERPT 2. PHOEBE V. JAY:

“Nothing can be conceived farther from the truth, than the idea that there could be a voluntary contract between the negro and his master. The law authorizes the master to bring his slave here, and take him before the clerk, and if the negro will not agree to the terms proposed by the master, he is authorized to remove him to his original place of servitude. I conceive that it would be an insult to common sense to contend that the negro, under the circumstances in which he was placed, had any free agency. The only choice given him was a choice of evils. On either hand, servitude was to be his lot. The terms proposed were, slavery for a period of years, generally extending beyond the probable duration of his life, or a return to perpetual slavery in the place from whence he was brought. The indenturing was in effect an involuntary servitude for a period of years, and was void, being in violation of the ordinance, and had the plaintiff asserted her right to freedom previous to the adoption of the constitution of this state, she would, in my opinion, have been entitled to it. But by the third section of the sixth article of the constitution of this state,^{a1}“Each and every person who has been bound to service by contract or indenture, in virtue of the laws of the Illinois territory heretofore existing, and in conformity to the provisions of the same, without fraud or collusion, shall be held to a specific performance of their contracts or indentures, and such negroes and mulattoes as have been registered, in conformity with the aforesaid laws, shall serve out the time appointed by such laws.”