IN 1774, VIRGINIAN GEORGE ROGERS CLARK accepted the surrender of the British garrison at Kaskaskia, initiating claims from the incipient United States on the disputed Illinois Country. Eighty years later, in 1854, Illinoisan Stephen Douglas forced passage of the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress, initiating the rise of fellow Illinoisan Abraham Lincoln to the presidency and catalyzing a path towards disunion, civil war, and abolition. In the eighty years separating Clark’s expedition and Lincoln’s dramatic return to politics, Illinois and its surrounding regions underwent a series of historical changes as profound as that of any other state, region, or section in the Union.

In 1774, the Illinois Country was a heavily contested borderland of overlapping imperial and Native American claims. Its prairies, woodlands, and valleys were inhabited by a diverse group of Native Americans, French traders and farmers, British merchants, and African slaves. Its economy was dominated by the provisioning trade oriented towards the lower Mississippi Valley to New Orleans, and the fur trade through the Great Lakes to Canada. Politics in the Illinois Country revolved around leading Euro-American and Native American men who allied themselves with one imperial power or another, and dispensed favors and gifts to subordinates. Eighty years later, in 1854, Illinois sat at the center of an increasingly divided continental empire. Sectional divisions within Illinois mirrored larger sectional divisions in the Union. Northern Illinois’ economy, society, and politics was increasingly oriented by canals and railroads, which carried Illinois’ agricultural surplus to eastern cities. Southern Illinois remained tied to the river trade that carried agricultural
surpluses to the slave states. Northern Illinois would move quickly to the Republican cause while southern Illinois would continue to support Democrats. In the years immediately following passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Illinois hosted the Lincoln-Douglas debates, helped determine the outcome of the presidential elections of 1856 and 1860, provided the nation with its two leading presidential candidates, and made decisive contributions to the Union cause.¹

A century ago, Illinois celebrated its statehood centennial by commissioning a multi-volume history of the state, initiating serious, scholarly inquiry into Prairie State history. University of Illinois professors Clarence Walworth Alvord, Solon Justus Buck, and Theodore Calvin Pease produced the three volumes covering the period that is the focus of this article. Those volumes, *The Illinois Country, 1673–1818* (1920); *Illinois in 1818* (1918); and *The Frontier State, 1818–1848* (1918) reflected the conventions of historical writing in the early twentieth century, which was focused on origins and civilizational struggles; nationalism, nation-building, and national development; and statesmanship and high politics. Thus, Alvord's volume focused on the often violent conflicts that led to the eventual transition from Native American control of Illinois to its inclusion in the United States. In Alvord's account of colonial Illinois, the French first planted European civilization among ahistorical Native American savagery in the 1670s. Over the next century a continental contest between Gallic and Anglo-Saxon civilizations culminated in the triumph of first the British Empire, and then its former colonies. Buck's volume provided a portrait of Illinois in transition. On the one hand, red and white savages continued to engage in bloody conflicts, hastening the inevitable decline and removal of Native Americans. But in the midst of this wilderness savagery stood pockets of frontier settlement and civilization, poised to move Illinois into statehood and progress. Less civilized southern emigrants sought to impose slavery on Illinois, but progress inevitably won out, securing Illinois’ place in the Union as a free state, albeit one still tainted by slavery and servitude. Pease's volume followed the inevitable transition from an uncivilized, wilderness frontier to civilized Prairie State, a state that stood ready to save the Union in its ensuing, darkest hour.²

Though these volumes varied in their focus and reflected the peculiarities of their authors, certain themes permeated all three works. As one
would expect from these century old volumes, Native Americans lacked any agency of their own. Uncivilized, savage, and inevitably declining in the face of superior European ways, they served as pawns of the various European and American powers who sought dominion over the Illinois Country and the territory and state of Illinois. As Buck matter-of-factly observed at the beginning of his volume, by 1818 Native Americans were no longer “a factor in Illinois history.” The three volumes also provide a seemingly encyclopedic account of settlements and institutions, population figures, and economic activities. Statewide in scope, all three works are filled with an extraordinary amount of detail, including vignettes and judgments of men who ranged from the great to the mediocre to the downright malicious. All three volumes seem to agree that though Britain and the United States sent their fair share of the mediocre and the malicious to Illinois, superior and successive waves of Anglo-Saxon, American, and northern peoples and institutions ultimately prevailed. In 1918, Illinoisans could rest assured that they were the heirs of a superior history and civilization.

Just as Illinois underwent significant changes in the eighty years separating Clark’s expedition and Lincoln’s rise into national politics, so too has historical analysis in the century separating the centennial and bicentennial. Illinois remains the subject of a robust and engaging historiography that ranges widely from neoclassic community studies focusing on a single prairie settlement, to regional histories that place Illinois at the center of the Great Lakes region, the Ohio Valley, and the Mississippi Valley. The subjects of that historiography are equally diverse, ranging from enslaved African Americans working at salt licks to female abolitionists, from grain mill operators to small Native American nations, and from the politicians who built a two-party system in Illinois to the habitants—descendants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French settlers. Rather than analyzing “progress”—the movement from savagery to civilization and frontier to nation—historians now seek to understand the various phases of Illinois history on their own terms, and as significant in their own right. Lacking the comforting certainty of the centennial works, the best contemporary historiography on Illinois is marked by contingencies and uncertainties.

A comprehensive accounting and analysis of the historical literature produced since the centennial is beyond the scope of this or any article.
This essay instead tries to make sense of the sprawling literature on Illinois in a long, early national period, stretching from the American Revolution in the 1770s to the antebellum period in the 1850s. It does so by focusing on the most historiographically significant works and themes in Illinois in a chronologically broad early national period. It also divides the history of Illinois in the early republic into an “early” early republic phase, stretching from the 1770s through the 1820s, and then a “later” early republic phase that moves from the 1820s through the Civil War.

Any attempt to grapple with the diverse, wide-ranging history and historiography of Illinois in the early republic must contend with the many regions of which Illinois forms a part. At the same time, the geographical diversity of Illinois necessitates that historians pay due consideration to Illinois’ numerous sub-regions. Thus, some of the best historical analyses of Illinois at least implicitly address the question of “where is Illinois?” They also examine how the history of a particular place in Illinois was shaped by the larger region of which it forms a part. In short, the most useful scholarship on Illinois almost always looks beyond the state’s borders to join the particular history of Illinois with broader regional histories and historiographical themes. What is William Cronon’s “Nature’s Metropolis” without the “Great West”?4

Historians and scholars have most frequently situated early national Illinois in the Ohio Valley, the Old Northwest, and an “emerging” Midwest. In other cases, Illinois is analyzed as part of the trans-Appalachian West, the frontier West, or the Great Lakes. Increasingly, historians have located Illinois in midcontinent borderlands, the upper Mississippi Valley, the middle Mississippi Valley, and the “American Confluence,” the region surrounding the confluence of the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri rivers. This essay, then, tries to make sense of those historiographical geographies and the interpretive approaches to Illinois history embedded in them. And while it examines the history of Illinois in the early American republic, its focus is more narrowly on the ways that historians have thought and written about Illinois history, and how they may do so in the future.

From Old Northwest to Midwest
Illinois in the early republic has most frequently been situated in a regional continuum that begins with the Ohio Valley and the Old Northwest in the 1770s, moves into an emerging Midwest in the 1810s and 1820s,
and then realizes itself as the Midwest in the antebellum and Civil War era. Broad analyses of the origins and character of the Ohio Valley, the Old Northwest, and the Midwest occupied a central place in the historiography of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, entered a lull in the 1960s, but have appeared regularly since the 1980s. In *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (1990), Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf provided a review of Midwest historiography along with a narrative account of midwestern history from the 1770s through the Civil War era. Drawing on the local and regional histories of the 1970s and 1980s, and their own work on the uses of state power in the trans-Appalachian West, Cayton and Onuf offered a strikingly original interpretation of midwestern history. Diverse peoples from various regions and sections in the East migrated to the Old Northwest beginning in the 1770s. They carried with them diverse class outlooks, aspirations, and religions. Their differences produced conflicts over everything from the proper means of surveying land, to the propriety of slavery and servitude for black people; from conflicts pitting popular democracy versus elite republicanism to debates over commercial versus subsistence-oriented agriculture. Diversity and conflict prevailed from the 1770s through the 1850s, but after mid-century, a near-hegemonic middle class culture, democracy, and market-oriented agriculture reigned over much of the Old Northwest. As they noted, “The Old Northwest in the 1850s was a veritable bastion of liberal capitalism. Increasingly integrated into an expanding national (and international) market economy, it was one of the most highly commercialized agricultural areas in the world.”

Like so many other regional histories of the Midwest, Cayton and Onuf challenged Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, which had dominated analyses of the Old Northwest and the Ohio Valley into the 1970s. According to Cayton and Onuf, activist state and federal governments imposed specific visions of settlement and development on the Old Northwest, and fostered a transportation revolution. That transportation revolution rapidly gave rise to a broader market revolution. The expanding, commercial market created a series of disruptions and divisions within the Midwest’s communities, states, and sub-regions. Those who made peace with the market adopted the middle class and midwestern values of self-discipline and reform. Fostered through the creation
of institutions such as schools, lyceums, and temperance societies, and cultural ideals such as female domesticity, bourgeois values became the norm, even if significant segments of the population resisted both the market and bourgeois values, particularly in areas settled by southern-born migrants. By the Civil War, divisions over the market and bourgeois values had supplanted older divisions based on religion, sectional origins, and ethnicity. Conflicts over the market and bourgeois values also manifested themselves in a political system that pitted Whigs and then Republicans against Democrats. For Onuf and Cayton, the Old Northwest, the Midwest, and Illinois are worthy of study because they were the site of intense ethnic, sectional, and class diversity and conflict from the 1770s through the 1850s. Diversity and conflict were then supplanted by bourgeois cultural values that became the middle class and Midwest-American norm after the Civil War.

Building on Onuf, Cayton, and the new regional histories of the 1980s, in *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787–1861* (1996), Nicole Etcheson produced a foundational text arguing that upland southerners—migrants from the less heavily enslaved portions of Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky—created a distinct political culture and regional identity in the Old Northwest and then Midwest. Upland southern migrants to the Old Northwest carried with them a motley mix of beliefs and practices about republican government, race and class, gender and manhood, agriculture and commerce, work and labor. These upland southern migrants forged a distinct set of practices, values, and beliefs in opposition to the reformist northern “Yankee” culture they encountered in the Old Northwest, and the aristocratic planter elites they left behind in the South. In particular, they distrusted party elites, demanded a certain kind of masculinity from political leaders, and remained singularly focused on equal opportunity to obtain land and individual rights for themselves while relegating others to dependency and subordination. Despite these differences and conflicts, upland southerners and northern migrants forged a durable political culture defined by “shared republicanism, shared political partisanship and shared Westernness.” Emerging regional identity eventually trumped sectional origins, creating a durable and distinct midwestern political culture. Like Onuf and Cayton before her, Etcheson concluded that the Old
Northwest became the Midwest, "a uniquely American region typified by the dominance of the middle class and its business culture."9

Susan E. Gray and Andrew Cayton’s *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (2001) built on the series of probing monographs and journal articles on Old Northwest and midwestern history that appeared throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While Gray and Cayton rightly feted these works, they found little cause for celebration. Outside of historians whose research interests were squarely in the Midwest, the historical profession paid little mind to works on Illinois and its attendant regions, the Ohio Valley, the Old Northwest, and the emerging Midwest. With their works dismissed as mere local and regional history, Gray and Cayton lamented that “Historians writing about the Midwest carry a historiographical burden loaded with irony: rather than argue for the distinctiveness of the Midwest, they must always demonstrate the national, even universal, significance of what is generally considered both the most American and the most amorphous of regions.”10 Despite the best efforts of historians such as Onuf, Cayton, Etcheson, and Gray, the history of Illinois in the Ohio Valley, the Old Northwest, and the emerging Midwest is still too frequently cited as aberrations of more important developments in the South or the Atlantic states, dismissed as mere parochial, regional history, or simply overlooked by historians of the early American republic.11

The interpretive problems created by situating “early,” early republic Illinois into the Ohio Valley-to-Midwest regional construct creates additional and unique interpretive problems for the history and historiography of the Prairie State. For one, Illinois is frequently either excluded from histories of the Old Northwest and the Ohio Valley, or analyses devote far more attention to Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. The minimization of Illinois stems from the chronology of Illinois history as well as the orientation of Old Northwest history. Old Northwest history typically moves from east to west, beginning with Ohio and Kentucky and ending with Illinois. The chronology of Old Northwest/Ohio Valley history begins with settlement in Kentucky in the 1770s and in Ohio in the 1790s. The westernmost state of the Old Northwest to be admitted to the Union in the early national period, the fourth state to enter the Union from the Ohio Valley, and the third state to be formed out of the Old Northwest,
Historians frequently present developments in Illinois history in one of two ways. In some cases, Illinois history is treated as the logical—in some cases inevitable—fulfillment of developments that first took place in Ohio and Kentucky, and then later in Indiana. In other cases, developments in Illinois are treated as aberrations from the Ohio and Indiana norm, with these aberrations attributed either to Illinois’ unique colonial legacy, or to Illinois’ distinct environment and geographical position as the southernmost or westernmost state of the Old Northwest. In my own work on slavery in the Old Northwest, the defeat of efforts to repeal the Northwest Ordinance’s Article VI prohibition on slavery in Illinois at statehood is shoehorned as something of an afterthought into the conclusion of a chapter on slavery in Indiana. The chapter on Indiana follows a chapter on Ohio, and precedes a chapter that examines the origins of a “free Northwest” regional identity in Ohio and Indiana while overlooking Illinois entirely. When approached from an analysis that began in the 1790s in Ohio, Illinois was too west, too late, and too easy for its own chapter. When approached from the perspective of antislavery politics in Ohio and Indiana, Illinois stood out as an aberration due to its unique colonial history as part of French North America. Likewise, in an article that argued for the unity of the Ohio Valley as a region in the early republic, historian Kim Gruenwald almost entirely overlooked Illinois. When viewed chronologically in an early, early republic, and when analyzed from an orientation that moves from east to west, Illinois loses its significance. Illinois history too frequently becomes either the fulfillment of developments that already took place in Ohio, Indiana, or Kentucky, or a variation on more general patterns of regional development.

Historians have been far more effective in integrating Illinois into the Ohio Valley and the Midwest in the “later” early republic, or when they have approached Illinois’ supposed aberrations as significant in and of themselves. Historians have been most successful with this approach when focusing on race, slavery, and unfree labor, a topic where Illinois differed significantly from its Old Northwest neighbors. For example, in a recent article, M. Scott Heerman produces a subtle, nuanced, and sophisticated analysis of struggles by enslaved African Americans in Illinois to gain freedoms within slavery and servitude, and then freedom from slavery and servitude. As Heerman demonstrates, slaveowners perpetuated slavery in Illinois well into the 1820s by making slavery an
extralegal institution. At the same time, African Americans held in various states of bondage created openings where they claimed greater freedoms within bondage and then freedom from slavery entirely. While Heerman focuses on what made Illinois unique, Dana Elizabeth Weiner and Stacey Robertson instead integrate Illinois into a broader Midwest in the “later” early republic. Focusing mainly on the rise of abolitionism and anti-abolitionism after 1830, these authors make Illinois an integral part of an emerging Midwest and its longstanding battles over slavery, race, and sectionalism. Most recently, Christopher Philips integrates Illinois into a larger Midwest and Ohio Valley, but he too does so primarily from the perspective of the “later” early republic and as a prelude to the Civil War.

The Old Northwest-to-Midwest interpretations of Illinois, though valuable for the “later” early republic, nonetheless create its own set of interpretive problems. For one, it encourages historians to analyze Illinois in terms of what it would become in the 1850s—the heart of the Midwest and perhaps the nation’s most significant northern battleground over race and slavery—rather than what it was from the 1770s through the 1830s; a hotly contested borderland marked by contingencies and a still undetermined future regarding race and slavery. At the same time, by focusing on an Illinois that became overwhelmingly white, Old Northwest-to-Midwest interpretations, regardless of period, repeat the most glaring shortcoming of frontier-to-civilization interpretations that treated the frontier as a clearly demarcated line. With the exception of works that focus on race, abolitionism, and anti-abolitionism, frontier and Old Northwest-to-Midwest interpretations tend to minimize the lives and agency of African Americans and present Native American defeat and removal as a foregone conclusion, if any attention is paid to Native Americans at all.

Finally, caught in the conundrum identified by Onuf, Cayton, and Gray, historians who practice Midwest history too often assert that Illinois history is important simply because what happened in Illinois and the Midwest was different from what happened in the East. In turn, Illinois becomes important because it fills in details overlooked by historians practicing their craft in the Atlantic states, provides a contrast between East and Midwest, and provides historians fodder to debate the ahistorical and inane question of what region was more essentially American,
the Northeast or the Midwest. Even works that deliberately move beyond
the “it-happened-differently-in-the Midwest” approach to Illinois his­
tory too frequently have their arguments simplified in the historiography.
Stacey Robertson's *Hearts Beating for Liberty* (2010) seeks to understand
midwestern female abolitionism as significant in its own right. In book
reviews, however, her subtle arguments are reduced to midwestern his­
tory's tired trope: “Scholars need to study the work of Midwestern abo­
litionists, which was in many ways fundamentally different from that of
antislavery activists on the East Coast.”

Too frequently, Old Northwest­to-Midwest interpretations situate Illinois history at the end of a series
of developments that culminate in Illinois' fulfillment as the heart of
the Midwest and perhaps America itself. While the Old Northwest­to­
Midwest approach to Illinois history remains valuable, historians must
recognize its interpretive limitations.

**Illinois as Midcontinent Borderland**

Since the 1990s, a radically different approach to Illinois history has
emerged in the scholarly literature. This interpretive approach—for lack
of a more elegant term, call it the “midcontinent borderlands” interpreta­
tion—draws on recent literature on empire, borderlands, frontiers, trans­
national history, Native American history, and post-colonialism in the
greater Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes region. In these interpre­
tations the Illinois Country’s location as a contested borderland astride
the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri valleys serves as
the most important force shaping the broader region's history from the
1750s through the 1820s. As this literature demonstrates, Illinois was part
of a larger Great Lakes world that connected with lower Canada, and part
of a larger Mississippi Valley world that began in the upper Ohio, upper
Missouri, and upper Mississippi valleys, converged at the southernmost
point of Illinois, and terminated in New Orleans.

A dizzying array of peoples lived in or moved through the Illinois
Country from the 1750s through the 1830s. European-Americans in
Illinois—both those who were long settled like the *habitants* and more
recent migrants such as upland southerners—possessed and developed
diverse cultural, economic, and political beliefs and practices that fre­
quently came into conflict with one another. Likewise, the Native Amer­
ican groups in Illinois from the 1750s through the 1830s ranged from
independent villages and refugee bands to more powerful nations and
confederacies. Algonquian-speaking refugees from the Seven Years’ War
and then the American War for Independence fled to Illinois in the 1770s,
joining Sauk and Fox who had resided in northern Illinois and southern
Wisconsin since the late 1600s. Shawnee and Delaware traversed Illi­
nois on their way to forced and voluntary settlement in Missouri. Some
Sauk and Fox bands, such as those associated with Keokuk, voluntarily
migrated across the Mississippi in the face of growing settler pressure
and intervention by the United States government. Other bands, such as
those associated with Blackhawk and the “British Band” sought to forge
a new Indian-British alliance to halt U.S. expansion and expulsion. The
enslavement of African Americans had been practiced in Illinois since
the 1720s, and was long intertwined with Native American slavery. Afri­
can Americans in Illinois long struggled to gain freedoms within slavery
and freedom from slavery; they recreated institutions such as families,
and worked through institutions such as churches and courts. The influx
of Euro-American settlers that began in the 1770s changed the compo­
sition of the African American community, as the long-settled Franco­
phone African population was joined by a new and growing Anglophone
population who were born in the southern states. Economic changes also
changed African American life, as the Illinois Country shifted from the
fur trade towards agriculture. From the 1790s through the 1840s, African
Americans in Illinois frequently found themselves in a dynamic nether­
world between slavery and freedom. In sum, Illinois in the early repub­
lic served as home or transit point for motley and ever-shifting groups of
peoples. Rather than analyzing the Illinois Country as a place in constant
transition from Indian Country to Prairie State, borderlands interpreta­
tions seek to analyze a place of intense conflict and cooperation involving
a multitude of peoples, nations, and conflicting imperial and local visions
of settlement and development.

The unique location of the Illinois Country made it a site of con­
lict, cooperation, and co-habitation involving various peoples, nations,
and empires. From the 1760s through the 1830s, shifting groups of Native
Americans claimed, inhabited, used, met in, fought over, and traveled
through the Illinois Country. From the 1760s through the 1810s, five
Euro-American powers—France, Britain, Spain, Virginia, and the United
States—claimed the Illinois Country as its own. Dominion over the
Illinois Country remained open until the War of 1812 more or less settled competing British, Native American, and United States claims in both the Great Lakes region and the upper Mississippi Valley. Various systems of bondage were utilized in Illinois, including Native American slavery associated with the fur trade and African American servitude associated with agriculture. From 1787 onward, nominally free Illinois bordered the slave territories and states of Kentucky and Missouri, and various systems of bondage and unfree labor continued in Illinois for the next half-century. Native Americans, African Americans, and European-Americans fought with themselves and each other—and cooperated with themselves and each other—depending on the unique circumstances they encountered at any given moment or place. War, commerce, and diplomacy—along with individual and collective struggles for autonomy and hegemony—provided myriad opportunities for conflict and cooperation, whether between individuals, self-identified peoples, or states and empires.

Drawing on and contributing to this body of literature, Stephen Aron's *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (2006) and John Reda, *From Furs to Farms: The Transformation of the Mississippi Valley, 1762–1825* (2016) make a compelling case for understanding Missouri and Illinois as part of an imperial and Native American borderland that sat astride arguably the most significant riverine confluence on the North American continent. In Aron and Reda's rendering, the borderlands of the American Confluence were fraught with conflict from the 1760s through the 1820s. Competing Native American nations, European American settler groups, and European and American imperial states all staked claims of titular sovereignty in and across the region. All sought to turn claims of titular sovereignty into effective sovereignty for themselves, advantage over their rivals, and supremacy over conquered peoples. With so many competing groups, conflicts in and over the borderlands of the American Confluence and the Illinois Country were endemic. So too was cooperation, even if much of it was temporary and of immediate convenience. Thus, Native Americans sold off the claims of rival nations to the United States. Anglophone and Francophone settlers who agreed about little in the Illinois Country readily worked together to keep African Americans in bondage. Sioux bands massacred followers of Blackhawk as they sought escape from pursuing Illinois militia companies and the U.S. army. Importantly, rather
than taking mid-nineteenth century borders and tracing their evolution forward, Aron and Reda analyze these overlapping regions on their own terms, while situating them into the broader histories of the North American continent and the Atlantic world. And while both Aron and Reda examine the transition from contested borderlands to definitive borders, neither assume that the outcome of U.S. dominion was inevitable.

How did the transition from contested borderland to definitive borders come about, and how did the United States emerge as the dominant imperial power in the American Confluence? Taken collectively, the works employing a midcontinent borderlands interpretation suggest that the Mississippi Valley and the American Confluence sat at the center of a broader eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperial history of the North American continent. Recent works that treat the United States as an imperial nation-state provide insight into what an imperial history of the Illinois Country might look like, and how the history of Illinois fits into the larger imperial history of the North American continent.

Historians who take a long view of United States history have demonstrated that in inheriting the core of Britain’s eighteenth century North American empire, the United States acted as an aspiring imperial state from its inception. Historians of the early American republic have effectively treated the United States as one of several nation-states, confederacies, and imperial powers competing for sovereignty, supremacy, and dominion over the peoples and places of North America. Like historians of the early American republic, practitioners of the “New Western History” have moved from Far West to Midwest, and from the early twentieth century into the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. In doing so, New Western historians have increasingly examined how state power stood at the center of conflicts over the division of territory, control of land and labor, the meanings of race and ethnicity, voluntary and involuntary migration, autonomy and sovereignty, conquest and subjugation. Moving backwards from Western history, and forward from the early American republic, what once formed distinct histories of the expansion of the United States before and after the Civil War is increasingly converging as the distinct field of North American history. At its best, North American and imperial history examines how various states, peoples, and groups sought autonomy, sovereignty, and mastery for themselves, and control over others. These same issues stood at the center of conflicts
in the Illinois Country from the 1760s through the 1820s as the British Empire and then the United States sought to establish sovereignty over the region, and again as sectional tensions heightened between the 1820s and the 1860s.25

The history of the Illinois Country and the American Confluence, then, is perhaps best understood as a series of local struggles that were part of a larger imperial conflict for supremacy on the North American continent. Historian Paul Kramer defines “the imperial” as “a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”26 Employing his own notions of empire and the imperial, Max Edling counters interpretations that normalize the United States’ conquest of the core of the North American continent by deeming it “expansion.” In reducing “conquest” to “expansion,” historians turn a verb and a series of contingent, contested processes into a noun and an inevitability. Edling instead argues that the United States operated as the last of the great, imperial European states. As Edling demonstrates, the establishment of a European-style, fiscal-military state enabled the United States to claim and establish sovereignty over an enormous swath of the North American continent. The United States became North America’s most successful imperial power in the nineteenth century because it adopted the fiscal policies of North America’s great eighteenth century imperial power, Great Britain. The United States emerged as the dominant power on the North American continent because its political and economic institutions allowed it to deploy the accoutrements of state power—especially war and state-sanctioned violence—more extensively than any polity or group of people claiming sovereignty in contested regions. In the Illinois Country in the early nineteenth century, the United States emerged as the state and imperial power best positioned to “produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”27

Placing the Illinois Country and the American Confluence at the center of a larger imperial struggle for North America allows historians to transcend the traditional criticisms of Illinois and Midwest history as parochial and regional. Indeed, Aron and Reda’s analyses of the Illinois and Missouri countries are valuable because they are about something much larger than the states of Missouri and Illinois. And as recent works
Hammond, *Midcontinent Borderlands*

demonstrate, the history of Illinois speaks to histories and historiographical issues that transcend the Prairie State and the Midwest. In a magisterial account of Anglo settler colonialism, James Belich shows that the conquest and settlement of Illinois and the Old Northwest was part of a larger set of processes that created an Anglo empire that stretched from Africa to the Americas to Australia in the long nineteenth century. Moving from North American and Anglo to global history, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper’s grand synthesis of empires in world history treats the nineteenth century United States as a great landed empire. As Burbank and Cooper demonstrate, the United States’ conquest of large swaths of North America contained important parallels with the Russian Empire’s conquest of an even greater expanse of Eurasia. Imperialism and North American history provide a useful set of analytical tools for historians seeking to understand long-term changes in the Illinois Country and the American Confluence. They also offers historians a valuable conceptual framework for writing trans-national, continental, Atlantic, and global histories of the Illinois Country and the American Confluence.28

The United States established hegemony over the Illinois Country and the American Confluence—not because it was the heir of a superior civilization or culture—but because its fiscal-military state was able to devote resources to conquest and development over an extended period of time. State formation, imperialism, and contests over the uses of state power helps to connect the “early” and “late” phases of Illinois’s history in the early republic. State formation and state power also provides important connections between the history that took place within the borders of Illinois, and the broader imperial conflicts over the Great Lakes region and the American Confluence. Bethel Saler’s *The Settlers’ Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America’s Old Northwest* (2014) provides a model of what histories of the Illinois Country that focuses on state formation and the uses of state power might look like. Saler’s analysis, which focuses on territorial Wisconsin, treats the United States as “a postcolonial republic” in the East with a “contiguous domestic empire” in the West. Saler’s approach to Wisconsin history is especially valuable to Illinois historians because its dual emphasis on post-colonialism and settler imperialism allows her to address political, social, cultural, and economic history, all within a larger framework that links Wisconsin to manifestations of Anglo-settler imperialism in places such as Australia,
New Zealand, and Canada. Saler's use of post-colonialism allows her to focus on the social, cultural, and economic practices of long-time local settlers and Native Americans, and the ways these practices came into conflict with the federal government's preferred visions of settlement and development. Her focus on settler imperialism allows her to examine how distinct systems of white supremacy, commercial agriculture, patriarchy, and property ownership were created through politics, law, and the uses of state and federal power.29

Over the past two decades historians have produced a prodigious amount of literature on local, state, and national politics within Illinois, along with conflicts over race, gender, citizenship, and religion. Too much of that literature, however, is filiopietistic, overly detailed and encyclopedic, obsessed with origins and firsts, and antiquarian. Too much of it also remains decoupled from larger historiographical questions and concerns. As historians we have many detailed studies of what happened in Illinois from the 1770s through the 1850s. What's lacking is a robust body of scholarship that explains why that happened, its relationship to larger changes and continuities, and why what happened in Illinois matters beyond a mere antiquarian interest in the history of the Prairie State. A focus on the contested uses of state and federal power in a region that stood at the center of the larger contest for imperial supremacy on the North American continent offers a unifying historiographical theme for historians writing on Illinois in the early republic.

As much as anything, local, territorial, state, regional, national, and imperial politics in Illinois from the 1770s through the 1850s centered on access to, and the contested uses of, local, state and federal power.30 Illinois voters and politicians fought over how, when, and where state power would be used for Indian dispossession and removal.31 Illinois voters and politicians fought among themselves and with national politicians over the survey and sale of federal lands. Voters and politicians fought over the state's authority to tax, and the use of tax monies to support schools and banks, roads and canals, churches and preachers.32 Voters and politicians fought over the uses of state power to permit or exclude slavery; to keep black people in slavery or to safeguard black efforts to secure freedom north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi; to uphold the property rights of slaveholders and to deny the rights of abolitionists to criticize slavery and slaveholders.33 Free blacks and female abolitionists fought
with politicians over using state power to force free blacks into servitude, or to elevate them to the privileges of citizenship. Voters and politicians fought over the proper uses of state power in a republican society. Voters and politicians fought over welcoming Mormons to Illinois, the roles of women in Mormon society, and whether state power should be used to drive Mormons out. In the 1850s, Illinois voters and politicians would plunge into an erupting battle over the uses of state and federal power in backing competing free labor and slave labor regimes struggling for hegemony across the broader North American continent. If Illinois history is to matter—if it is to rise above mere antiquarianism and origins debates—historians must look beyond particular political battles to analyze how contests over the uses of both state and federal power structured political, cultural, economic, social, and racial conflicts in Illinois. Post-colonialism and imperialism, midcontinent borderlands and North American history, and contests over the uses of state power provide frameworks for analyzing the larger significance of social, economic, political, and cultural histories of Illinois.

Midcontinent borderlands, North American history, settler imperialism, and a focus on the contested uses of state power are also valuable because they offer a degree of conceptual and chronological coherence to Illinois history from the 1760s through the 1860s. As Anglo-American settlers, the British Empire, and then the United States entered the Illinois Country in the 1760s, a series of midcontinent borderland conflicts erupted. The issues this created—issues centering on land, labor, commerce, settlement, race, ethnicity, migration, hegemony, and sovereignty—occupied a central place in the history of Illinois through the 1820s. These issues would be largely addressed by 1830. Native Americans and Euro-American settlers would not live together in Illinois in peace. Commercial agriculture would prevail over subsistence agriculture. Democratic individualism won out over republican paternalism. White supremacy reigned supreme in law, politics, and everyday life. In short, by 1830, the series of issues that animated Illinois history from the 1760s through the 1820s had been more or less settled.

Beginning in the 1820s, however, a new series of borderland conflicts would erupt in Illinois. Nominally free, Illinois shared a border with the slave states of Kentucky and Missouri. Upstate and downstate Illinois would be settled by two very different groups of people, and the regions
would differ profoundly in their responses to the demands of southern politicians and northern Doughfaces. To give but one example, while Chicago effectively nullified the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and jailed slavecatchers, downstate Illinois provided active assistance and encouragement to slavecatchers. Economically, the state became divided between the upstate regions connected to the cities of the eastern seaboard, and downstate regions connected to the lower Mississippi Valley. By 1860, Illinois stood at the center of a new round of borderland conflicts. Southern slaveholders sought the nationalization of slavery through the imposition of slaveholder property rights and slave state law on the free states and federal territories. Northern advocates of free soil sought to return the favor by advocating for a federally financed program of compensated emancipation and forced removal. At the same time, free-soil imperialists and the advocates of an empire for slavery each sought to use federal power to fasten their preferred systems of labor on the region stretching from the plains to the Pacific. Given Illinois' unique location in the borderlands between slavery and freedom, and its position as an emerging gateway to the trans-Mississippi West, it is unsurprising that it gave rise to Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, prominent politicians who possessed profoundly different visions of an expanding American empire.

What does the future hold for Illinois history? The Illinois Country of 1774 was one particular kind of midcontinent borderland. The Illinois of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas was a midcontinent borderland of a different kind. Historians will find much to write about in the history of Illinois—whether it be in the Illinois Country, the Illinois Territory, or the Prairie State. The best of that scholarship will use the particular history of Illinois to write histories of the American Confluence, the Great Lakes region, and the Midwest, along with larger histories of the imperial history of North America in the half-century stretching from the 1750s through the 1820s, and again from the 1820s through the 1860s. Importantly, historical societies and archives scattered across the state contain collections of primary sources that are as vast and fertile as the Illinois prairies. Equally important, the pages of the *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society* provides a welcoming place for innovative scholarship on Illinois, while the presence of three excellent university presses in the state offer scholars institutional support for the publication of monographs.
Hammond, *Midcontinent Borderlands*

**Notes**

This article is dedicated to the late Drew Cayton. Drew taught me that Midwest history matters.

1. For Illinois' place in the antebellum Union, see Theodore J. Karamanski's excellent contribution to this volume.


11. For a recent call to revitalize midwestern history that includes an extensive review of Midwest historiography stretching back to the early twentieth century, see Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013).


15. See, for example, Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West*.


Hammond, Midcontinent Borderlands


