

Understanding Early Farmers: Journals, Articles, Ledgers, and Books

**This lesson can be done as part of the unit or independently as a written or oral report.*

Objectives:

Students will:

Know that there are print resources available to find out about life in early Illinois.
Report on given topics after reading about them in settler's print resources.

Materials:

Books from the Bibliography or local sources

Internet sites of early writings on Illinois:

(search Google.com with the name of the person or family you are researching.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lhtnhtml/lhtnhome.html>

This Library of Congress site's *American Memory* section on "Travels in America" has author and title indexes (search on "Illinois" or look for authors you know about.)

(Some Authors: William Cobbett, John Woods, Thomas Hulme, Morris Birkbeck, and Richard Flower)

Opening:

Procedure:

1. Students will use some of the following (whatever is available for their subject of research) to find and write up information on farming:

Account Books and Ledgers: Libraries, historical societies, the Internet, and some families have copies of farmer's ledgers and account books that tell what farmers spent for various items and what they received for their crops and stock. **Bills of sale** are also revealing.

Here is an interactive activity about an 1872 **farmer's account book** (in the Museum's At Home in the Heartland Web Exhibit)

<http://webdev.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1850/clues/wheeler.htm>

Estate Inventories and Wills of farmers also contain information about the running of a farm.

Here are examples of **Estate inventories** from the same Web Exhibit:

<http://webdev.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1700/clues/index.html>

Personal Letters to and from farmers and their relatives and friends reveal information about what was happening on a farm. Some letters were published, such as those of [Morris Birkbeck](#), who wrote glowing letters back to England to encourage people to come and buy land from him in southern Illinois in the 1820s.

<http://webdev.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/art/sadorus/gallery.html?TopicID=farm>

These **postcards** from Frank Sadorus reveal bits of information about crops, timber, animals, and events.

Journals and diaries kept by farm family members help us understand life on a farm. Little House on the Prairie is an example of a farm diary. Some of the early Illinois diaries have been transcribed into printed book form and can be found on the Internet. [John Woods](#) kept a journal of his trip to Illinois, and then after he had settled down, he wrote one about his new farm and sent it back to friends in England for publication as a **book**.

Census Data can be found in state archives and sometimes online (1880 especially). They tell us how many family members and servants there were, and the age and occupations of people. Earlier ones show foreign birthplaces.

The image shows a handwritten census form for the year 1910, with entries for two families highlighted in red. The first family (marked 949) includes William Adams, head of household, and his wife Amelia. The second family (marked 970) includes William Adams, head of household, and his wife Francis. The form includes columns for name, relationship, age, sex, race, and birthplace. Birthplaces listed include New York, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Tennessee, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and England. Occupations listed include Farmer, Day Laborer, and Housekeeper.

Excerpt from 1910 Bath, Illinois census page showing two farmer's families (marked in red)

Link to [larger image of full page](#)

- As students read these sources, they should take notes, bookmark pages online, and take good bibliographical information for their sources.
- Students can use **people** as resources. Who in their family knows or knew a farmer, was a farmer? Do they have another teacher who has studied agriculture? Who in their town knows about farming (the manager of a feed store, a rural farm agent, the local branch of the Future Farmers of America, to name but three)?
- After doing the research and taking notes, the students should then organize their notes and images or maps into an order of their choice that tells a clear story. (Chronological order, geographical order, a story that centers on one farmer's life and thoughts)
- After organizing, the students will write up their story on their subject. They can write longhand first, or go right into the word processing program and edit there. Save to disk or hardrive in the group's folder with a clear label marking the file by writer's name and topic.

Closing:

Ask the students to relate their experiences with real historic research. What lucky finds did they make? What finds did they make through hard work? What weren't they able to find that they wanted to and what are the possible reasons they could not find it?

Remind them that their hard work will be the print contribution to the group's farm story and presentation. They can continue to work on it and add to it if they find more facts or photographs or maps.

Assessment Suggestions:

- Students understand how an historian uses primary and secondary sources to find information about a person, place, or subject of history.
- They understand that there are public records and private writings published and in storage that hold valuable information about the past.
- They know to use targeted people in their community as resources.