

# Timeline of Rockford Immigration

Many Native American groups called Northern Illinois home before outside settlers. This included – but is not limited to – the Illini, Miami, Sauk & Fox, Potawatomi, Ottawa, Chippewa, Shawnee, Delaware, Winnebago, and Menominee.

1814 - The first white settlement in Northern Illinois is located at La Pointe (now Galena).

1818 - Illinois becomes the 21st state.

1830 - The Indian Removal Act is passed, forcing Native American communities to settle west of the Mississippi River.

1832 - After an extreme winter in Iowa, Sauk leader – Black Hawk – leads over 1,000 Sauk and Fox back to their homeland. In response, Illinois settlers form a militia and attack the group – starting the Black Hawk War. After weeks of fighting and fleeing, only 150 Sauk and Fox make it back to Iowa.

1834 - Germanicus Kent and Lewis Lemon establish a community on the west side of the Rock River, midway between Galena and Chicago.

1838 - First stagecoach arrives in Rockford from Chicago.

1843 - The Oregon Trail opens, sending pioneers west in search of land.

1845 - A disease affects potatoes in Ireland, causing massive countrywide famine. Over the next seven years, nearly a quarter of Ireland's population will leave the country in search of better opportunities. Irish immigrants, laboring to build the railroads, start to arrive in Rockford. They establish a community in Rockford called the "Irish Patch" on the north side of the Winnebago Street viaduct.

1849 - The Gold Rush begins in California.

1850 - The first formal census gives the village of Rockford a population of 2,563.

1852 - The first train of the Galena & Chicago Union Railway arrives. Later that year, Swedish immigrants ride to the end of the Galena & Chicago Union line and decide to stay. Initially they work on farms, repair shoes, tailor clothes, and do other general labor. Before long, due to woodworking skills, Swedes become fixtures in the growing Rockford furniture industry.

1859 - War breaks out between Italy and Austria. Soon, France joins Italy in declaring war on Austria.

1861 - The American Civil War begins.

1862 - The American Homestead Act passes, allowing anyone to apply for a grant of land outside the original 13 colonies.

1866-1868 - A grain shortage hits Sweden, Finland, and other parts of northern Europe, causing widespread famine.

1869 - The first transcontinental railroad is completed in the United States.

1870 - Rockford's population is 11,049.

1880 - Census figure for Rockford show a population of 13,129.

1882 - The Chinese Exclusion Act bans Chinese immigrants from entering the United States for the next ten years.

1883 - The first electric service in Rockford is provided by Forest City Electric and Power Company.

1886 - The Statue of Liberty is dedicated in New York Harbor.

1888 - The first passenger train on the Illinois Central line pulls into Rockford.

1890 - Census figures show a population of 23,534.



Midway Village Museum  
*Rockford's*  
HISTORY MUSEUM

*Midway Village Museum collects, preserves and interprets the diverse history of the Rockford region and is committed to educating and enriching our community by providing state-of-the art exhibits, programs and events.*





# Timeline of Rockford Immigration

**1891** - Rockford industries are booming. Ingersol Milling Machine Co. moves to the city and Barber-Colman Co. and Mechanics Machine Co. open.

**1892** - Ellis Island opens.

**1893** - A growing credit shortage creates panic, resulting in a depression. Over the course of this depression 15,000 businesses, 600 banks, and 74 railroads fail.

**1898** - As result of the Spanish-American War, Cuba gains its independence, and the United States gains control of Guam and Puerto Rico.

**1907** - Juan Cervantes becomes the first Mexican man to settle in Rockford, fleeing violence ahead of the Mexican Revolution.

**1910** - Census figures for the city of Rockford show a population of 45,401. The Mexican Revolution officially begins in 1910. The first Hispanic families—approximately 25—arrive in South Rockford, fleeing persecution.

**1914** - World War I begins in Europe. Rockford industries begin working overtime to provide for the war effort.

**1915** - The Great Migration begins. Over the next 15 years, 1.3 million African Americans will leave the south to head north and west. The population of African Americans in Rockford climbs from 490 in 1920 to 1,100 in 1930.

**1917** - Camp Grant opens to house 41,160 men. By the end of the war, about one million men will have entered, trained, or demobilized at Camp Grant. This included around 6,000 African American men, some of whom stayed in the Rockford area. The Immigration Act of 1917 was passed, implementing literacy tests and a higher tax for new immigrants on entry. This also created a “barred zone,” which included much of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and India. The Jones-Shafroth Act makes Puerto Rico a United States territory, making Puerto Ricans US citizens.

**1918** - An influenza epidemic strikes, causing the city to close schools and public places. 323 Rockford residents will die; and 1,400 Camp Grant residents.

**1919** - Wong S. Tong settles in Rockford after moving to Chicago from China almost 20 years earlier. He is the second Chinese man to permanently live in the region and opens King Joy Lo Chop House at 118 W State St.

**1920** - Census figure for the City of Rockford is 65,651. With the end of WWI, large groups of immigrants enter the United States from southern and eastern Europe. The Italians end up in two segregated areas of Rockford—some on the east side of the river, but more in South Rockford, where the Irish had settled. The area of Little Poland is formed around Seminary Street.

**1921 & 1924** - The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924 set yearly limits on immigration to the United States by country. These quotas favored northern and western European immigrants, while making entrance to the country more difficult for others.

**1928** - A tornado hits the southeast end of Rockford, killing 14 and injuring over 100. The disaster destroys houses and factories, causing over \$2 million dollars in damage.

**1929** - The Wall Street stock market crashes, signaling the beginning of the Great Depression.

**1936** - Buses replace electric streetcars on Rockford streets.

**1939** - WWII breaks out in Europe.

**1941** - With the attack on Pearl Harbor, America joins WWII. Over the next four years, more than 16,000 men and women from Rockford will enter military service—almost 12 percent of the population.



Midway Village Museum  
*Rockford's*  
HISTORY MUSEUM

*Midway Village Museum collects, preserves and interprets the diverse history of the Rockford region and is committed to educating and enriching our community by providing state-of-the art exhibits, programs and events.*





# Timeline of Rockford Immigration

**1948** - The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 allowed individuals displaced by Nazi persecution to immigrate to the United States and allowed permanent residency to those already in the country who met the requirements. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the United States passed a variety of refugee acts which allowed immigration for individuals fleeing political turmoil and violence.

**1956** - Rockford held its first Mexican Independence Day celebration, with a community numbering around 200.

**1960** - A year of highs and lows: Rockford officially becomes the second largest city in Illinois. That same year, snowstorms, floods, and hailstorms damage the city, leaving 1,700 people homeless.

**1963** - Rockford's official population is 132,835.

**1965** - America enters the Vietnam War, and refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos flee to the United States. Laotian and Vietnamese refugees come to Rockford with the aid of local churches. President Johnson announces open entry to Cubans fleeing Castro's regime. An airlift program, active from 1965 to 1973, brought over 250,000 Cuban refugees to the United States.

**1974** - Leaders in Rockford's Latino community estimate a population of around 7,000, including Colombians, Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans.

**1991-2001** - The Yugoslav Wars were a series of conflicts for independence, which ended with the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (composed of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia [including parts of Kosovo and Vojvodina], and Slovenia). Due to the conflicts, the Rockford region saw an influx of refugees from the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia.

**2006** - Rockford's official population is 147,794.

**2007 to today** - The military-led, Burmese government enacted a new constitution in the 1970s and began tightening restrictions on citizenship for ethnic minorities – including the Rohingya and Karen. A constitutional revision in 2008 doubles down on restrictions and ushers in a new era of violence. In 2007, Karen refugees began to resettle in Aurora, Rockford, and other communities in Northern Illinois. A 2021 article estimates that of the 6,000 Karen who have migrated to Illinois, around 2,000 settled in the Rockford region. The Syrian Civil War erupted from protests against the Assad family's rule and is the largest ongoing, global refugee crisis. The Syrian Community Network estimated 6.6 million refugees worldwide, and another 6.7 million internally displaced. Rockford welcomed the first Syrian immigrants before the conflict but escape from war and desires for better education continue to drive Syrian refugees to the community. Since 2014, 7.72 million Venezuelans have been displaced due to economic crisis, repression, and political instability. Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been ongoing since the late 1990s with the Rwandan Genocide, the First Congo War, and the Second Congo War. The situation has worsened recently due to conflict over natural resources and a violent national election in 2023. As of 2024, the United Nations estimates over 500,000 refugees and 7.2 million internally displaced persons. Rockford has welcomed many impacted by instability in the DRC, with an estimated 400 families in the region as of October 2024. Factors such as persecution, poverty, extortion, gender-based violence, climate change, and lack of access to education and employment continue to contribute to displaced persons and refugees from Central America and beyond.

**2020** - Rockford's official population is 148,655.



Midway Village Museum  
*Rockford's*  
HISTORY MUSEUM

*Midway Village Museum collects, preserves and interprets the diverse history of the Rockford region and is committed to educating and enriching our community by providing state-of-the art exhibits, programs and events.*





# Timeline of Rockford Immigration

## Winnebago County's Changing Ethnic Flavor: 1870-2000

*% is amount of the county's population as a whole*

### 1870

Great Britain	1804	6.2%
Sweden/Norway	1707	5.8%
Ireland	1543	5.3%
Canada	1059	3.6%
Germany	465	1.6%
WC Imm. Pop.		22.9%

### 1880

Sweden/Norway	2105	6.9%
Great Britain	1941	6.4%
Ireland	1314	4.3%
Germany	594	1.9%
Scotland	521	1.7%
WC Imm. Pop.		21.6%

### 1890

Sweden	6204	15.8%
Great Britain	1632	4.0%
Ireland	1082	2.8%
Germany	1079	2.8%
Canada	728	1.8%
WC Imm. Pop.		28.1%

### 1900

Sweden	7792	16.3%
Germany	1168	2.4%
Great Britain	863	1.8%
Ireland	844	1.8%
Canada	583	1.2%
WC Imm. Pop.		25.7%

### 1910

Sweden	10050	16.0%
Great Britain	1225	1.9%
Germany	1168	1.8%
Italy	1138	1.8%
Russia	688	1.0%
WC Imm. Pop.		26.2%

### 1920

Sweden	10480	11.5%
Italy	2969	3.2%
Great Britain	1240	1.4%
Germany	1104	1.2%
Lithuania	1081	1.2%
WC Imm. Pop.		22.9%

### 1930

Sweden	11419	9.7%
Italy	3284	2.8%
Germany	1214	1.0%
Lithuania	976	0.8%
Great Britain	858	0.7%
WC Imm. Pop.		18.3%

### 1940

Sweden	8231	6.8%
Italy	2936	2.4%
Germany	908	0.8%
Great Britain	832	0.7%
Lithuania	806	0.7%
WC Imm. Pop.		13.7%

### 1950

Sweden	6116	4.0%
Other European	2603	1.7%
Germany	742	0.5%
Great Britain	723	0.5%
Finland	687	0.5%
WC Imm. Pop.		9.0%

### 1960

Sweden	4087	2.0%
Italy	1943	0.9%
Germany	1381	0.7%
Great Britain	776	0.4%
Norway	540	0.3%
Mexico (13th)	112	0.1%
WC Imm. Pop.		5.5%

### 1970

Sweden	2126	0.9%
Italy	1437	0.6%
Germany	841	0.3%
Great Britain	778	0.3%
Poland	439	0.2%
Mexico (10th)	234	0.1%
WC Imm. Pop.		3.5%

### 1980

Sweden	1221	0.5%
Italy	1151	0.5%
Mexico	912	0.4%
Germany	903	0.4%
Great Britain	692	0.3%
WC Imm. Pop.		3.7%

### 1990

Mexico	1934	0.8%
Italy	812	0.3%
Great Britain	704	0.3%
Germany	641	0.3%
Laos	596	0.2%
WC Imm. Pop.		3.7%

### 2000

Mexico	7474	2.7%
Laos	973	0.3%
Bosnia	675	0.2%
Poland	604	0.2%
Italy	592	0.2%
WC Imm. Pop.		6.1%

2007 Source: US Census Records (NLA 2024)

<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>

2025 Updated Source

<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1883/dec/vol-01-population.html>

<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1901/dec/vol-01-population.html>



Midway Village Museum  
*Rockford's*  
HISTORY MUSEUM

Midway Village Museum collects, preserves and interprets the diverse history of the Rockford region and is committed to educating and enriching our community by providing state-of-the art exhibits, programs and events.





# Timeline of Rockford Immigration

## Additional Resources

### Native Americans

[https://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat\\_amer/post/](https://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/post/)

<https://dnrhistoric.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dnrhistoric/research/documents/illinivol1n1.pdf>

<https://rockfordparkdistrict.org/native-american-history#:~:text=Northern%20Illinois%20was%20home%20to,%2C%20Kickapoo%2C%20and%20Dakota%20Sioux.>

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS464>

### General Immigration

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/CIR-1790Timeline.pdf>

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act#:~:text=The%201917%20Act%20implemented%20a,decisions%20over%20whom%20to%20exclude.>

<https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/refugee-timeline>

<https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1917-barred-zone-act/>

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/global-timeline/>

<https://www.wrapsnet.org/archives/>

IDHS Report on Illinois Foreign-Born Population, with Special Focus on Low-Income Limited-English Proficient Persons & Legal Permanent Residents Eligible for Naturalization (from 2014 data)

[https://www.dhs.state.il.us/onenetlibrary/27894/documents/Report\\_On\\_Illinois\\_Foreign-Born\\_Population.pdf](https://www.dhs.state.il.us/onenetlibrary/27894/documents/Report_On_Illinois_Foreign-Born_Population.pdf)

### Rockford Region

<https://www.northernpublicradio.org/illinois/2024-04-05/nonprofits-share-their-experiences-serving-migrants-in-winnebago-county>

<https://www.wifr.com/2024/09/25/rockford-community-members-work-eliminate-myths-about-immigrants/>

<https://www.rrstar.com/story/news/local/2018/02/24/moving-to-north-for-job/13985289007/>

### Chapters of "We the People"

#### Spanish-American War & Puerto Rico

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/spanish-american-war>

<https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/jones-shafroth-act>

<https://immigrationhistory.org/item/jones-shafroth-act/>

#### Yugoslav Wars

<https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>

#### Karen/Burma

<https://karenwomen.org/background-of-the-karen-people/>

<https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide/timeline>

<https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide/chapter-2/gradual-erasure>

<https://centralusa.salvationarmy.org/rockford/news/how-majors-steve-and-latdavanh-are-loving-their-refugee-neighbors/>

<https://www.centerforburmastudies.com/karen.html>

#### Syrian Civil War

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#:~:text=Since%202011%2C%20more%20than%2014,live%20below%20the%20poverty%20line.>

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11080>

<https://www.syriancommunitynetwork.org/history>

<https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>

#### Venezuela

<https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/venezuelan-refugee-crisis/>

<https://www.iom.int/venezuelan-refugee-and-migrant-crisis>

<https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/venezuela/>

#### The Democratic Republic of Congo

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-refugee-crisis-explained/>

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/democratic-republic-congo> <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/democratic-republic-congo-situation>

<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo>

<https://www.mystateline.com/news/local-news/winnebago-county-welcomes-more-african-refugees-than-any-other-illinois-county-outside-of-chicago/>



Midway Village Museum  
*Rockford's*  
HISTORY MUSEUM

*Midway Village Museum collects, preserves and interprets the diverse history of the Rockford region and is committed to educating and enriching our community by providing state-of-the art exhibits, programs and events.*

