Illinois’ capital has always been Springfield, right?
Wrong! Illinois has actually had three different capitals and Chicago has not been one of them. Don’t peak below…besides Springfield, can you name the other two towns that have served as capitals of our state? Did you say Peoria, Decatur, Rockford, Carbondale, Moline or Cairo? None of those are correct. Kaskaskia and Vandalia are the correct answers.

Let’s talk about our three capitals and answer the question, why is Chicago not the capital of Illinois?

So, why is Chicago not the capital of Illinois? Sorry residents of Chicagoland, even though most of you don’t think so, Illinois is more than just Chicago. Yes, today about 70% of the people living in Illinois reside in the Chicagoland area, but for many years, Chicago was nothing more than a small insignificant town in northern Illinois. In fact, in 1840, less than 1% of Illinois’ population lived in Chicago. For many years Kaskaskia, Vandalia and Springfield were much more important to Illinois than Chicago. Also, in most cases, the largest or most famous city in a state is not usually the capital. Los Angeles is not the capital of California, New York City is not the capital of New York, Miami is not the capital of Florida, etc. Many times capital cities were established near the geographic or population center of a state. Since, populations change and shift, sometimes it may not make sense why a particular city is now the capital of a state.

2. At one time Kaskaskia was a major trading center on the Mississippi River. Furs and agricultural products were shipped up and down the Mississippi from Kaskaskia. The town, about 75 miles from St. Louis, was located on a peninsula that jutted out into the river. Kaskaskia has been controlled by the French, British and after the American Revolution, the United States. In the 1700s, the town’s population reached 7,000 residents. When Illinois became the 21st state in 1818, Kaskaskia was chosen as the state capital. Within a few months though, the General Assembly decided to move Illinois’ capital to an area less likely to flood and more centrally located in the state. In 1820, Vandalia, located 100 miles northeast of Kaskaskia, became the new state capital.

A series of floods nearly wiped out Kaskaskia and in the 1880s, erosion by the Mississippi River actually made Kaskaskia into an island separated from the rest of Illinois. By the 1970s, the population of Kaskaskia declined to a few hundred people. In 2019, only about 20 people lived on the island. Oddly, even though Kaskaskia is part of Illinois, the only way to access the island by land is by using a bridge on the Missouri side of the Mississippi.
The town of Vandalia was originally a wooded area known as Reeve’s Bluff. The site was chosen as the new location of the state capital even before a town existed there. Vandalia was probably named after a group of Germanic barbarians known as the Vandals, but some people believe the town’s name came from other sources. In 1820, Vandalia became the capital of Illinois. The original capitol building was only two stories. The Illinois House of representatives met on the 1st floor and the Illinois Senate met on the 2nd floor. Fire destroyed the original building. Discussions about moving the state capital to another town worried the residents of Kaskaskia. They quickly built another state capitol building to replace the original that was destroyed in the fire. Unfortunately, they were more worried about getting it done quickly rather than the quality of the building. According to the city of Vandalia website, the walls of the capitol began to bulge and the floors warped. By 1836, most people were afraid to even enter the building. A young member of the Illinois House of Representatives named Abraham Lincoln, yes that Abraham Lincoln, introduced legislation to move the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield. Citizens of Vandalia were again worried their town would no longer be the capital of Illinois. In 1836, the town spent $16,000 to build a much sturdier brick state house, hoping this would impress the state government and stop any discussion of moving the capital. Instead, when the General Assembly returned to work in 1837, they voted to move the capital from Vandalia to Springfield.

Springfield has been the capital of Illinois since 1839. Construction of a capitol building in Springfield began in 1837. The building was the site of many famous events. It’s probably most well known as the site of Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided Speech”. The “Old State Capitol” still exists. Visitors can take a 30 minute guided tour of the complex. Illinois’ current capitol building was completed in 1888 at a cost of $4.3 million. Not only is it home to the Illinois General Assembly, it features a number of historic exhibits, paintings and statues. The capitol building has a dome that is 92.5 feet in diameter and every door knob in the capitol building is stamped with the state seal of Illinois.

Influential legislators such as Abraham Lincoln, Paul Simon and Barack Obama, have all served in the General Assembly. Unfortunately, our state government has seen its share of corrupt politicians. A recent study by the University of Illinois Chicago labeled Illinois as the third most corrupt state in America. Chicago claimed the top spot as the most corrupt big city in the U.S.

Today, Illinois faces serious economic and social problems. The work done in Springfield by the General Assembly and Executive department impacts every citizen of Illinois and their work is vital for the future success of our state.

**Interesting Fact:** As of 2019, four of the last 10 Illinois governors have been convicted of crimes. Otto Kerner, Dan Walker, George Ryan and Rod Blagojevich all served time in prison. Hopefully, that trend will not continue!
Use the glossary to define the words below.

1. Insignificant

2. Peninsula

3. Erosion

4. Exhibits

5. Economic

The title of this Unit is “Illinois’ Capitals: Is Kaskaskia even in Illinois?”. Why would someone think Kaskaskia is not in Illinois? Why do you think the author chose this title?
Illinois’ Capitals: Is Kaskaskia Even in Illinois?

Use the Informational Text to answer the following questions with complete sentences.

1. Why is Chicago not the capital of Illinois? Cite at least two reasons from the Informational Text.

2. What was the problem with Kaskaskia’s location that led to the capital being switched to Vandalia?

3. Vandalia was only the capital of Illinois for 19 years. Explain some reasons why the capital was eventually moved to Springfield. Cite at least two reasons from the Informational Text.

4. What interesting features could you see if someone was to visit the current Illinois Capitol building that was built in 1888.

5. Use this website to find your elected officials:
https://www.elections.il.gov/ElectionOperations/DistrictLocator/AddressFinder.aspx

Write down the name of of your:

- US Representative ________________________________
- State Senator _________________________________
- State Representative ______________________________

Think of a concern you have about your hometown. Compose an email you could send to one of your elected officials above describing your concern. Ask your teacher and parents for permission to send the email!
The following excerpt is from a bill introduced by Abraham Lincoln in 1837. The purpose of the bill was to decide if the capital should remain in Vandalia or be moved elsewhere. The bill called for lawmakers to cast a vote for the location of the capital of Illinois should be located. Springfield received the most votes, beating out Vandalia, Alton, and Jacksonville. After Springfield won the vote, Lincoln moved to Springfield.

1. Why do you think Abraham Lincoln moved to Springfield after the vote took place?

2. What does the document say would happen if no place received a majority of the vote?

3. How do you think the state of Illinois may be different today if the capital of Illinois was not moved to Springfield?

4. How do you feel Lincoln’s years working in Illinois government prepared him to be President of the United States?