

Five Themes of Geography

How does Iowa compare to other places on Earth?

Factors in descriptions reflect the information that one wishes to know. There are many ways that Iowa's location can be identified: latitude and longitude, relationship to neighboring states (south of Minnesota) or height above sea level. Each can be correct. This primary source set focuses on five themes of geography: location, place, human-environment interaction, movement and region.

Landscape and Agriculture

Iowa's landscape is often described in terms of the types of agriculture that each area fosters. The hilly northeast is more suitable to dairy and beef cattle. North Central Iowa has some of the richest farm land in the world spread across relatively flat and well-drained prairies. Western Iowa receives less rainfall than other parts of the states as it starts a transition into the more arid Great Plains. Southwestern and South Central Iowa have hilly pastures like the northeast and support many cattle operations. Southeastern Iowa was originally the most heavily forested region at the time of initial European settlement, especially along the major river valleys that drained the rest of the state.

The Iowa landscape owes much to the series of Ice Ages that brought glaciers scraping down from the northeast. It is generally acknowledged that the far northeastern corner of the state had only minimal glaciation, leaving the rugged hills intact. In the last Ice Age ending some 14,000 years ago, the unstable climate produced glacier fronts that advanced and retreated across hundreds of miles, breaking up the rock into gravel and fine silt that became incredibly rich topsoil over the next two millennia. Agriculture has also vastly changed the Iowa landscape. Almost all of the forests that once covered 15 percent of the state and the prairie cultures that greeted pioneers have been cut down to produce fields for crops and livestock.

Regional Divides

In the early days of European settlement, rivers were the major routes of transportation for both people and goods. Railroads appeared in the 1850s and opened vast tracts of the Midwest to rapid settlement and agriculture commerce. Cars and trucks transformed rural and urban life in the early 20th century followed by commercial air travel starting in the 1930s. The interstate highway system linked the nation more closely than ever in the 1950s.

A regional definition of Iowa also depends on what one considers to be the most significant factors. In agriculture, we are the heart of the Corn Belt that extends from eastern Nebraska through western Ohio. Our Mississippi river towns are similar to the industrial centers of the Great Lakes states. Politically, our loyalty to the Union in the Civil War led to the domination of the Republican Party for over a century and distinguished us from our Democratic neighbor to the south.

Who we are, where we are, what we are ... these are all questions that reflect the principal interest of those asking the questions.

Supporting Questions

Location: How can Iowa's location be described?

- [Galbraith Railway Mail Service Map of Iowa, 1897 \(Map\)](#)
- [Dissected Map of the United States, 1900 \(Map\)](#)
- [Standard Map of the World, 1942 \(Map\)](#)

Place: How does Iowa's geography compare to other areas of the world?

- [Merchants of the Sahara Desert in North Africa, between 1880 and 1923 \(Image\)](#)
- [Workers Cutting Bananas from Trees in Costa Rica, between 1910 and 1920 \(Image\)](#)
- [Farm Land in Monona, Iowa, May 1940 \(Image\)](#)

Human-Environment Interaction: How has Iowa's environment been changed?

- [Gowers' Land Agency, 1855 \(Document\)](#)
- ["Beautiful Prairies of Early Iowa" Newspaper Article, August 30, 1911 \(Document\)](#)
- [Freshly Plowed Land in Greene County, Iowa, April 1940 \(Image\)](#)

Place: How does Iowa's geography compare to other areas of the world?

- [Bird's-Eye View of Iowa City in Johnson County, Iowa, 1868 \(Image\)](#)
- [Railroad Map of Iowa, 1881 \(Map\)](#)
- [Highway next to Farm Land in Grundy County, Iowa, April 1940 \(Image\)](#)

Human-Environment Interaction: How has Iowa's environment been changed?

- [Railroad Map of the American Midwest, 1858 \(Map\)](#)
- ["National Parks of the Midwest," 1968 \(Map\)](#)
- ["Opening of the Midwest" Mural in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2011 \(Image\)](#)

[*Printable Image and Document Guide](#)

Galbraith Railway Mail Service Map of Iowa, 1897



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Galbraith, Frank H., "Galbraith's railway mail service maps, Iowa," 1897

Description

This is a large-scale map of Iowa that shows the routes and post offices of the Railway Mail Service. This map was designed by Chicago railway mail clerk Frank H. Galbraith to help employees of the Railway Mail Service quickly locate counties and post offices. The maps were rented for practicing or prospective workers, who numbered over 6,000 and traveled over a million miles a year on the rails sorting mail.

[Transcript of Galbraith Railway Mail Service Map Key](#)

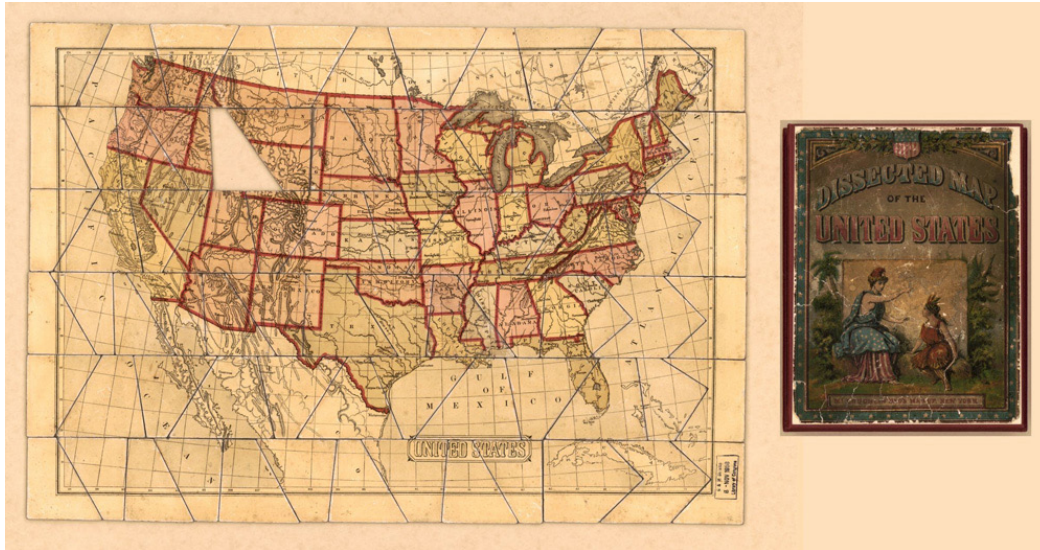
Source-Dependent Questions

- Describe what this map is designed to show.
- Find the county that you live in. Which counties border your county?
- Which direction is Story County from Warren County?
- Which rail lines run through Sioux County?
- Which rail line would you need to take to travel from Burlington to Cedar Rapids?
- How might this map be useful in understanding Iowa, its unique geography and location?

Citation Information

Galbraith, Frank H., "Galbraith's railway mail service maps, Iowa," 1897. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Dissected Map of the United States, 1900



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Dissected Map of the United States," McLoughlin Bros., Inc., 1900

Description

This is a jigsaw puzzle of the United States that is referred to as a dissected map. It was created by the McLoughlin Brothers from New York. It shows all of the 48 contiguous states. One piece appears to be missing in the puzzle.

Source-Dependent Questions

- Which Iowa cities are shown on the map?
- What two lines of latitude and two lines of longitude does the city of Des Moines fall between?
- What states border Iowa?
- Which river forms most of Iowa's western border? Which river forms Iowa's eastern border?
- Looking at the map, what makes Iowa's geographic location similar to and different from other states?
- Compare this map to a current map. Compare the locations of Des Moines, Iowa City, Sioux City and Dubuque. Is this map accurate? Why or why not?

Citation Information

"Dissected Map of the United States," McLoughlin Bros., Inc., 1900. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Standard Map of the World, 1942



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Standard Map of the World," Geographia Map Company, 1942

Description

This is a map of the world that was printed in 1942 by Geographia Map Company from New York. This is a Mercator Projection, the map is in color and it shows lines of latitude and longitude. It is laid out in a grid system with North and South America at the center of the map.

Source-Dependent Questions

- Using the grid coordinates at the top and side of the map, what coordinates would all of Iowa be in?
- What grid coordinates would Bombay, India, be in?
- How many hours ahead of Iowa is the city of Cairo, Egypt?
- How many hours behind Iowa is Honolulu, Hawaii?
- Describe where Iowa is in relation to Brazil.

Citation Information

"Standard Map of the World," Geographia Map Company, 1942. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Merchants of the Sahara Desert in North Africa, between 1880 and 1923



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "North Africa. Merchants of the Sahara Desert," between 1880 and 1923

Description

The photograph shows two merchants in the Sahara Desert with very large wares on the backs of camels. They are traveling merchants through the desert. The image shows how different places in the world have different types of climate and landscapes than Iowa.

Source-Dependent Questions

- Examine the image and describe what you see.
- What might the men be carrying on the camels?
- Describe the vegetation in the background of the image.
- How does Iowa's geography differ from the Sahara Desert in North Africa?
- How does this image compare to the photos of [workers in Costa Rica](#) and [farm land in Monona](#)? What do all three images have in common? How are they different?

Citation Information

"North Africa. Merchants of the Sahara Desert," between 1880 and 1923. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Workers Cutting Bananas from Trees in Costa Rica, between 1910 and 1920



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Costa Rica - workers cutting bananas from trees," between 1910 and 1920

Description

The photograph shows laborers working to cut bananas from trees in Costa Rica. The photo comes from the Frances Carpenter Collection and was taken sometime between 1910 and 1920. This image shows how different places in the world have different types of vegetations and commodities for farmers.

Source-Dependent Questions

- Examine the image and describe what you see.
- What does the man in the middle appear to be holding on his shoulder?
- Describe the vegetation in the background of the image.
- How does Iowa's geography differ from Costa Rica's?
- How does this image compare to the photos of [merchants in the Sahara Desert](#) and [farm land in Monona](#)? What do all three images have in common? How are they different?

Citation Information

"Costa Rica - workers cutting bananas from trees," between 1910 and 1920. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Farm Land in Monona, Iowa, May 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Vachon, John, "Western Iowa farm land. Monona County, Iowa," May 1940

Description

This photo from 1940 shows the landscape of Monona, Iowa, which is located on the western side of the state. This image shows farm land and the area is generally flat and wide open. There are some trees in the background, but mostly it is plowed farm land.

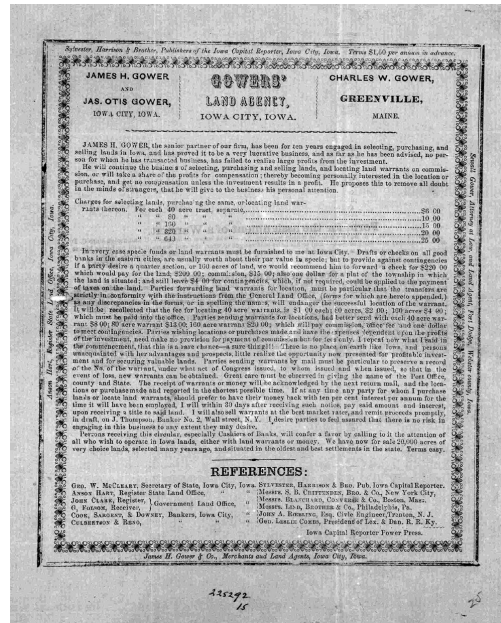
Source-Dependent Questions

- Describe the image. What appears to be in the foreground?
- What do you think this land is used for?
- Describe the landscape. What does it tell you about this place in western Iowa?
- How does this image compare to the photos of [workers in Costa Rica](#) and [merchants in the Sahara Desert](#)? What do all three images have in common? How are they different?

Citation Information

Vachon, John, "Western Iowa farm land. Monona County, Iowa," May 1940. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Gowers' Land Agency, 1855



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Gowers' Land Agency, Iowa City, Iowa," 1855

Description

This advertisement was created in 1855 by the Gowers' Land Agency to sell Iowa land, presumably for farming.

Transcript of Gowers' Land Agency

Source-Dependent Questions

- When was this document made?
- What is the central idea of the document? Why was it created?
- Summarize the document from beginning to end.
- How does this document provide evidence for how Iowa's land was changed? Explain

Citation Information

"Gowers' Land Agency, Iowa City, Iowa," 1855. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Beautiful Prairies of Early Iowa” Newspaper Article, August 30, 1911



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Beautiful Prairies of Early Iowa,” *The Denison Review*, pp. 3, 30 August 1911

Description

This article was published in *The Denison Review* and describes the beauty of the Iowa prairie. In the 1911 article, the author quotes poetry, describes the beauty of the wildflowers in Iowa, discusses fires and reveals that the prairie is gone because of the plow.

[Transcript of “Beautiful Prairies of Early Iowa” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Beautiful Prairies of Early Iowa” Newspaper Article](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- How does the author describe Iowa prairies?
- What does the author say happened to the Iowa prairies?
- Choose a quote from above to provide evidence that the author thinks the Iowa prairie was beautiful.
- What does the author say about the prairie fires?
- How does this document provide evidence that Iowa’s land has been changed?

Citation Information

“Beautiful Prairies of Early Iowa,” *The Denison Review*, pp. 3, 30 August 1911. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Freshly Plowed Land in Greene County, Iowa, April 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Vachon, John, "Fresh plowed land, Greene County, Iowa," April 1940

Description

The image was taken in Greene County, Iowa, by photographer John Vachon in 1940. It shows a line down a field where one side is freshly plowed and the other is not. There is a train going by in the background.

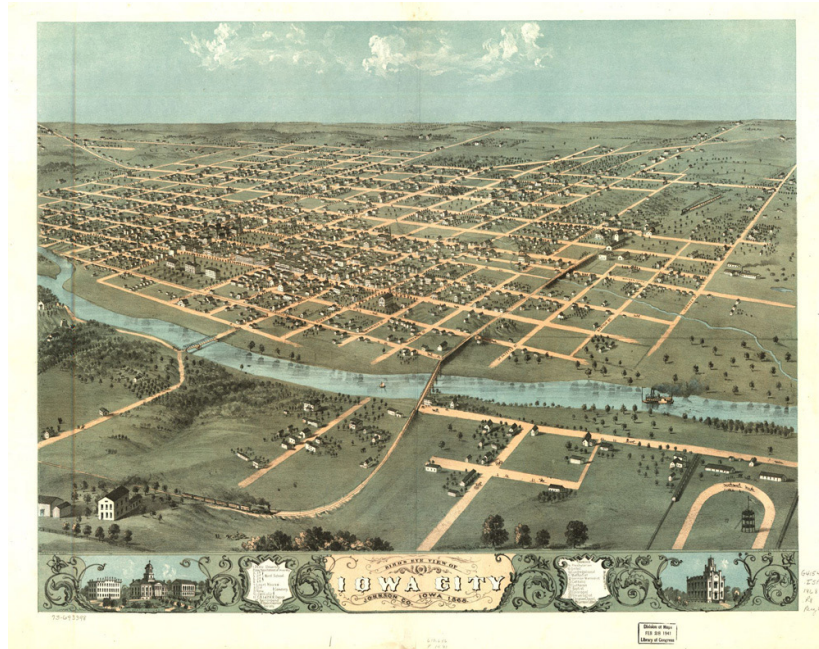
Source-Dependent Questions

- What man-made features can be seen in the photograph?
- Do you suppose the land on the right always looked this way in Iowa? Explain.
- What has happened to the land on the left side of the image? Why has this happened?
- What are some examples of things in the image that show how Iowa's land has been changed? Explain why they have been changed.

Citation Information

Vachon, John, "Fresh plowed land, Greene County, Iowa," April 1940. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Bird's-Eye View of Iowa City in Johnson County, Iowa, 1868



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Ruger, A., "Bird's eye view of Iowa City, Johnson Co., Iowa," Chicago Lithographing Co., 1868

Description

This is a hand-drawn, bird's-eye view of Iowa City, Iowa, located in Johnson County. The illustration is from 1868 and shows the city next to the Iowa River. The town is laid out in a grid pattern, and the image shows that there is not a lot of trees and the area is relatively flat, but green. It appears that farmland is located off in the distance.

Source-Dependent Questions

- What year was this image created?
- Describe the image. How is the town laid out?
- Describe the landscape around the town. What do you notice about the land around the city?
- What do you suppose the land around the city might be used for?
- What are three modes of transportation that you can see in the image?
- Compare this photo to the [1881 Railroad Map of Iowa](#) and the photo of [farm land in Grundy County](#). Based on these photos, describe the changes to how people and goods have moved throughout Iowa over the years.

Citation Information

Ruger, A., "Bird's eye view of Iowa City, Johnson Co., Iowa," Chicago Lithographing Co., 1868. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Railroad Map of Iowa, 1881



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Railroad map of Iowa, 1881," Iowa Board of Railroad Commissioners, Western Litho Co., 1881

Description

The map shows the many railroads running through the state of Iowa in 1881. It was published by the Western Litho Company, but was created by the Iowa Board of Railroad Commissioners, which served as an independent regulatory railroad agency.

Source-Dependent Questions

- How many rail lines appear on the map?
- The map was stamped by the Library of Congress in 1935. However, what year does it appear that this map was made?
- How does this map help answer the supporting question: How do people and goods move throughout Iowa?
- Compare this photo to the [Bird's-Eye View of Iowa City](#) and the photo of [farm land in Grundy County](#). Based on these photos, describe the changes to how people and goods have moved throughout Iowa over the years.

Citation Information

"Railroad map of Iowa, 1881," Iowa Board of Railroad Commissioners, Western Litho Co., 1881. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Highway next to Farm Land in Grundy County, Iowa, April 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Vachon, John, "Highway through fertile land of Grundy County, Iowa," April 1940

Description

This photo captures a car driving through Grundy County, Iowa, in 1940. The image shows a farm in the background and the road is passing through fertile farm land.

Source-Dependent Questions

- What man-made features are seen in this image?
- Does any part of this image show how Iowa looked prior to being settled?
- How can this image be used to show one way people move across Iowa?
- Compare this photo to the [Bird's-Eye View of Iowa City](#) and the photo of [1881 Railroad Map of Iowa](#). Based on these photos, describe the changes to how people and goods have moved throughout Iowa over the years.

Citation Information

Vachon, John, "Highway through fertile land of Grundy County, Iowa," April 1940. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Railroad Map of the American Midwest, 1858



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Colton, G. Woolworth and Rufus Blanchard, "Indiana, Illinois, Missouri & Iowa with parts of adjoining states," 1858

Description

This is a railroad map of the American Midwest. The map shows Indiana, Illinois, Missouri and Iowa.

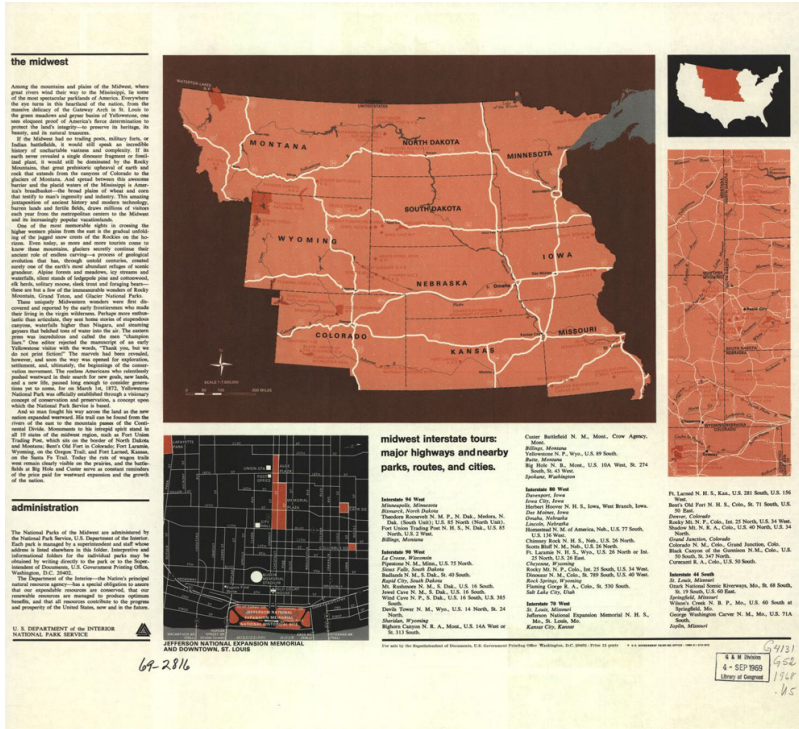
Source-Dependent Questions

- What does this map show? What is its purpose?
- Which states are visible on the map?
- Name a railroad line that runs through Iowa.
- Name some things that you notice on this map that make Iowa unique as compared to the other states featured.

Citation Information

Colton, G. Woolworth and Rufus Blanchard, "Indiana, Illinois, Missouri & Iowa with parts of adjoining states," 1858.
Courtesy of Library of Congress

"National Parks of the Midwest," 1968



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "National Parks of the Midwest," National Park Service, 1968

Description

The "National Parks of the Midwest" article and map was created by the National Park Service to highlight different regions of the country, and to encourage travel to those regions. The document includes a description and brief history of the region, as well as a map with recommended places to visit in each state.

[Transcript of "National Parks of the Midwest"](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- Which two sites are highlighted for visitors to see in Iowa?
- Which states are considered part of the Midwest at the time of this publication?
- What are some of the places that are highlighted in the description section?
- Do you suppose the author considers the Midwest to be beautiful land? What evidence is there in the text to support your claim?

Citation Information

"National Parks of the Midwest," National Park Service, 1968. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Opening of the Midwest” Mural in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2011



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Highsmith, Carol, “Mural “Opening of the Midwest,” by Robert Francis White at Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse, Cedar Rapids, Iowa,” 2011

Description

This mural is located at the courthouse in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. It depicts the Midwest region’s major industries as Americans moved West. The image shows men working on the railroads, turning prairie land into farms and the rise of factories in the region. The mural was created by Robert Francis White in 1937.

Source-Dependent Questions

- Which three industries are represented in the image?
- What is the significance of the first panel on the left?
- How has the middle panel impacted the state of Iowa?
- Explain what the third panel is showing.
- What do all the panels suggest about the uniqueness of the American Midwest?

Citation Information

Highsmith, Carol, “Mural “Opening of the Midwest,” by Robert Francis White at Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse, Cedar Rapids, Iowa,” 2011. Courtesy of Library of Congress