**History**

Hydrocarbon production in Illinois began in 1853 when marsh or drift gas was produced from two water wells drilled near Champaign. This gas came from rotting vegetation buried in the glacial deposits. At the time, people knew little about where gas or oil came from or how to search for it.

In the early 1860s, several holes drilled in Clark County produced enough oil for the name Oilfield to be given to a small town there, even though commercial-scale production in the county did not begin until 40 years later. The search for oil and gas in the county began in earnest in 1866 when the Clark County Petroleum and Mining Company established its headquarters at Marshall. Natural gas seeps near Oilfield led the company’s owners to think that commercial quantities of oil and gas existed there. However, because well casing technology did not yet exist, water from the upper layers of earth flowed into and filled the wells; the heavier water prevented most of the oil in deeper layers from seeping out of the rocks.

Farther west, near Litchfield, holes drilled during the late 1860s to search for coal leaked oil and water into the workings of a mine, and, for several years, people skimmed oil off the water and sold the oil. By the early 1880s, natural gas also had been discovered in the area and was being piped to Litchfield for domestic use. Continued drilling eventually established oil production, and, in 1889, area wells produced 1,460 barrels of oil. By 1902, when production ceased, the wells had produced only 6,576 barrels of oil. (A barrel equals 42 U.S. gallons, or 158.9 L, and is a standard unit of volume measurement in the petroleum industry.)

Commercial oil and gas production began in Illinois around 1904, although early oil field operations (Figure 15-1) were primitive. Commercial production refers to

![Figure 15-1](Image) Oil field operations in the early 1900s near Bridgeport, Illinois. The oil steamer in the foreground was used to separate oil from water, and the wooden derricks in background were used to drill and service wells. (Photograph by R. S. Blatchley, Illinois State Geological Survey, Oil and Gas Section collection.)