

# About Westward Expansion Before the Civil War

## THE HISTORY OF THE FRONTIER

The word *frontier* refers to the edge of European or American settlement adjoining Native American territory. Native Americans lived beyond the frontier. The frontier shifted as the nation's boundaries moved. Originally, the frontier was just west of the Atlantic coastal plain. By the time of the American Revolution, the frontier line had moved farther west to the Appalachian Mountains. After independence, people began to push inland into the newly acquired lands of the Old Northwest Territory and the Old Southwest. The Old Northwest would become the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The Old Southwest was the area south of the Ohio River and would become the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Mississippi. (Note that the Old Northwest is not the same as the area we consider the Northwest today; nor is the Old Southwest the same as the modern Southwest.)

By 1803, when Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from France, the frontier had moved west to the Mississippi River. The Louisiana Purchase opened up an area west of the Mississippi that stretched as far as the Canadian border to the north, the British Territory of Oregon in the Northwest, and Spanish lands in the far west, including the present-day states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming. The former Mexican-held area of Texas joined the Union in 1845. The United States acquired the Oregon Territory (Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Montana and Wyoming) in 1846. It was not until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War (1848), that the Mexican lands in the far west became U.S. territories.

## ADVANCEMENTS IN TRANSPORTATION

### Flatboats and Steamboats

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The first people to move beyond the mountains traveled down rivers or overland through the valleys and gaps between mountains. Going downstream was the easiest way to travel, using canoes, rafts, and flatboats to carry passengers and freight. Overland, people used wagons and pack animals to carry them along dirt roads and rough mountain trails.

In the 1760s, James Watt of Scotland invented the first practical steam engine. In 1807, Robert Fulton adapted the steam engine for use in boats. Steamboats, being fast and large, could carry many passengers and much cargo. They could also navigate upstream against the current.

### Canals

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Although rivers were an important means of travel, some rivers were not navigable, or not navigable beyond a certain point, and others did not connect to important bodies of water. To overcome these limitations, Americans built canals that connected rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water. The most famous of these canals was the Erie Canal, which joined the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Erie and to the Great Lakes beyond.

Opened in 1825, the Erie Canal was the largest public works project of its time, employing thousands of workers to dig a three-hundred-mile canal. In addition to the digging of the canal, the construction of canal locks was an important engineering achievement. The canal helped New York City become the largest and most important city in the United States. The canal also dramatically cut the cost of transporting goods.

## Wagon Trains

Before the transcontinental railroads and regional rail lines were built, people went west by wagon. The wagons, called prairie schooners, were small, four-wheeled vehicles with canvas tops and wooden bodies. They were light enough that they would not sink easily into the soft prairie sod. Teams of oxen, rather than horses, often pulled the wagons.

Some pioneers, including women, traveled west alone. Others traveled in small groups, either on foot or on horseback. The most common arrangement was for several families to travel together in an organized wagon train. An experienced leader or an elected head assisted by guides would take command of the group.

## Railroads

Railroads had several advantages over roads, rivers, and canals. Railroads were dependable, cheap, and convenient. The first railroads were built in British coal mines, but in 1831, the Mohawk and Hudson line was inaugurated between Albany and Schenectady, New York. In 1853, when the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad reached Wheeling, West Virginia, it achieved what the Erie Canal had done years earlier—it crossed the Appalachians to join East and West. A rail network spread quickly across the Northeast and the upper Midwest in the 1840s.

The 1850s were the great railroad-building years in the Southeast. By 1861, some three hundred thousand miles of railroad track had been laid down in the United States. The Midwest was the focus of much of this track laying, making it easier for people to travel there from the East. As a result, land in the Midwest became more expensive as more and more settlers arrived. The fast, cheap transportation that the railroads provided allowed for goods such as wheat and corn to be easily shipped to the Northeast for sale. Manufactured items, such as farm tools from the Northeast, could, in turn, be shipped to consumers in the Midwest.

## EARLY EXPLORERS OF THE WEST

### Daniel Boone

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Daniel Boone was born in Pennsylvania in 1734 and took part in the French and Indian War in 1755. In 1769, Boone and some others passed through the Cumberland Gap in the Appalachian Mountains into Kentucky. They found a land filled with wildlife, as well as meadows perfect for farming.

In 1775, Boone blazed the Wilderness Road, which ran from Virginia through the Cumberland Gap and into the Ohio River valley. The Wilderness Road allowed settlers to travel through the Appalachian Mountains more easily. Settlers moved along the road into what would become the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. The road was a main route west in the Southeastern states until the National Road was completed in 1837.

### Lewis and Clark

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In 1802, Americans were banned from using the French port of New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi. This meant closing the major route by which settlers in the Midwest and South shipped their goods to market. President Thomas Jefferson sent representatives to France with an offer to buy New Orleans. France agreed to sell the entire Louisiana Territory for \$15 million. The Louisiana Territory stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico. Thus, the United States acquired land that more than doubled the nation's size.

Jefferson was eager to find out what exactly the United States had purchased. He appointed naturalist Meriwether Lewis and soldier William Clark to lead an expedition into the territory. Together, they signed up forty-eight men for their Corps of Discovery, and in the spring of 1804, they left St. Louis and set off up the Missouri River.

By the fall of that year, the Corps had reached what is today North Dakota. There, they met a French Canadian trader named Toussaint Charbonneau and his Shoshone wife, Sacagawea. Lewis and Clark decided to take them on as guides and interpreters.

In April, the explorers continued their journey northwest. By late summer, the Corps had crossed the Continental Divide in what is now Montana. After sailing down the Columbia River, they reached the Pacific by November. There, they spent the winter of 1805–1806. When spring arrived, the Corps began their return trip home. By September 1806, two years after leaving St. Louis, the Corps was back home.

The Corps discovered that the Rockies stood in the way of an all-water route to the Pacific. The expedition did, however, establish official relations with many Native Americans bands. The most valuable information brought back from the expedition was the notes, drawings, and specimens that documented the trip. The Lewis and Clark expedition stimulated interest in the West and brought thousands of settlers into the territory.

## WESTWARD MIGRATION

### Oregon Trail

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Between 1840 and 1860, more than 250,000 people went west. The most famous route was the Oregon Trail, which began in Independence, Missouri, and then diverged in southern Idaho, with one branch going to Oregon and the other to California.

### Mormon Migration

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The Mormons are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The church was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith. Smith and his followers moved from their original home in New York State to Ohio because they were attacked for their religious beliefs. After being persecuted again, they moved to Missouri, but controversy and resistance followed them, and they were forced to move a third time. In 1844, after they settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, conflict again broke out, and Smith was killed. Under the leadership of Brigham Young, in 1847, the Mormons moved far west to the Great Salt Lake basin in what is now Utah. At the time, the area was part of Mexico.

There, the Mormons irrigated the desert and established farms. They built a prosperous community, and in 1849, after the Mexican-American War, they formed the state of Deseret with Young as governor. In 1850, Deseret was recognized as the Utah Territory. Utah became a state in 1896.

### California Gold Rush

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In January 1848, John Sutter hired James Marshall to build a sawmill on the American River near Sacramento, California. Marshall noticed gold in the riverbed. Word got out about the discovery, and soon, the rush to find gold was on. Much of it was easily found in streams and riverbeds by panning.

By the following summer, one hundred thousand people had arrived in California—from the East Coast of the United States, Europe, and the Pacific Basin, especially China. Most came overland by horse and wagon train, but many came by boat. Some sailed around Cape Horn at the tip of South America and up the coast, while others sailed to Panama, trekked overland, and took a ship again from the west coast of Central America. Even though few miners found a substantial amount of gold, many stayed for the climate and the rich farmland.

## Manifest Destiny

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The term *manifest destiny* was coined in the 1840s in an editorial that said the United States had a “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence.” The writer meant that God had given the United States a clear right to extend its authority across the continent and that the nation was destined to do so. This idea was popular with many Americans during the 1840s and 1850s. They had seen their country growing and concluded it was destined to continue growing until it covered the whole continent. “Manifest Destiny” was an expression of pride in the young, growing nation, but it was also a way of justifying the displacement of Native peoples and supporting other land-hungry actions of the 1800s.

## Texas and Conflict with Mexico

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During the 1820s, small numbers of Americans began moving into the Mexican province of Texas from the Southeast to raise cotton and sugar on plantations. Less than a decade later, there were 25,000 Americans, including many enslaved workers, in Texas. The settlers outnumbered the Mexicans living there. Concerned about the growing imbalance, the Mexican government banned all further settlement by Americans and all further importation of enslaved labor.

Texans—transplanted Americans and native Mexicans—asked several times for autonomy. They declared that they needed enslaved labor to work their plantations and wanted to rid themselves of Mexican government in general. American Stephen Austin was jailed by the new Mexican dictator, General Antonio López de Santa Anna, for delivering the most recent request for autonomy, and the Texans rebelled.

The Texas Revolution ended almost as quickly as it had begun. The fighting lasted from late 1835 to April 1836. The most memorable battle of the revolution was the Battle of the Alamo in San Antonio. The siege began in February 1836 and ended twelve days later. During the Battle of the Alamo, Mexican and American Texans proclaimed their independence. Two months later, in the Battle of San Jacinto, Texans defeated Santa Anna and secured their independence. They chose Sam Houston as their first president.

## The Mexican-American War

Texas asked for annexation by the United States but was initially refused. Annexation would mean war with Mexico, and Texas would be a slave state at a time when the United States was trying to reach a compromise over the issue of slavery. In 1844, Texas became a major campaign issue in the presidential election.

James K. Polk ran on a platform of annexation against the incumbent, President John Tyler, and won. Early in 1845, the United States annexed Texas. The Mexican-American War was fought to determine where the southwestern boundary between Texas and Mexico lay. The war lasted from May 1846 to September 1848. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the war, Mexico ceded to the United States all or part of what became the following states: California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Arizona.

## NATIVE AMERICAN RESISTANCE

From the beginning, the United States’ dealings with Native Americans resulted in a string of conflicts, misunderstandings, epidemics, skirmishes, wars, broken treaties, and unfulfilled promises. At first, the federal government recognized Native Americans as sovereign nations and negotiated treaties with them for their land. Sometimes these treaties were freely negotiated, and other times they were the result of wars.

## Tecumseh and the Battle of Tippecanoe

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Beginning around 1811, Tecumseh, a Shawnee chief, and his brother Tenskwatawa tried to unite Native peoples east of the Mississippi in a giant confederacy. The two men believed that if the Native American nations banded together and refused to sell land to Americans, they could hold back American settlement.

General William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory, was concerned about the growing influence of Tecumseh and his brother. In 1811, Harrison led a thousand soldiers to a Shawnee village on Tippecanoe Creek, near what is now Lafayette, Indiana. Tecumseh was not there, but Tenskwatawa was.

Although Tecumseh had warned of the dangers of fighting the U.S. military, Tenskwatawa attacked Harrison's force at night. Before attacking, Tenskwatawa gave an impassioned speech in which he promised his troops that the white man's bullets could not hurt them. Although Harrison suffered heavy casualties, he and his men defeated Tenskwatawa and burned the Native American village. Harrison also claimed that his men had found British weapons in the Native American camp. The "war hawks" used Harrison's claim to press for a war with Great Britain. This was one of the reasons for the War of 1812. Tenskwatawa lost most of his supporters after the Battle of Tippecanoe, but Tecumseh continued the struggle. During the War of 1812, Tecumseh allied with the British. When he died while fighting in Canada, so did his dream of a Native American alliance.

## Indian Removal

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The Native American nations of the Southeastern United States—the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminoles—became known as the "Five Civilized Tribes" due to their adoption of constitutions, laws, and other aspects of culture deemed to be "civilized." The Cherokee, in particular, adopted European-American ways by becoming farmers and converting to Christianity. That did not stop settlers from coveting tribal lands in the Southeast.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson supported passage of the Indian Removal Act, which gave him the power to force the Native Americans of the Southeast to move to what was known as the Indian Territory, now part of the state of Oklahoma. The Choctaw left first, followed by the Creek and the Chickasaw. The last to leave were the Seminoles.

The Cherokee fought removal in the courts. The Supreme Court upheld the Cherokee's rights to their lands, but President Jackson and the state of Georgia ignored the court's decision. Seeing the inevitable, some two thousand Cherokee agreed to move. By 1838, some fourteen thousand still remained in the Southeast. Jackson was no longer president, but his successor, Martin Van Buren, decided to enforce the move. The Cherokee's forced march to the Indian Territory became known as the Trail of Tears. The four-month trek took place in winter, and it is estimated that about four thousand men, women, and children died along the way. The cost of the removal was subtracted from the money to be paid to the Cherokee for their lands.

The Cherokee and the other nations removed to Indian Territory were promised that this land would remain theirs forever. "Forever" lasted a generation. First, they lost part of their land to other Native American peoples whom the federal government resettled in the territory in 1866. By 1907, Native Americans were outnumbered in the territory, and it was made part of the new state of Oklahoma.

## Osceola and the Seminole

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When the Seminoles were told they had to leave Florida and resettle in Oklahoma, Chief Osceola and his supporters refused. By 1835, the Second Seminole War was underway. For two years, Osceola and his warriors foiled successive American campaigns, even though they were outnumbered. In 1837, Osceola arranged to meet the commander of the U.S. troops under a flag of truce. Despite the truce, Osceola was taken prisoner. The Seminole continued to fight until 1842, by which time most of them had been killed. Over four thousand Seminoles were deported to Oklahoma.