

About Continued Expansion, Conflict, and Compromise

MANIFEST DESTINY

The term *manifest destiny* was coined in 1845 in an editorial by journalist John O’Sullivan, who wrote that 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.

CONFLICT WITH MEXICO

Texas Independence

With the encouragement of the Mexican government, 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 twenty-five thousand Americans, including many enslaved workers, in Texas. The settlers outnumbered the Mexicans (called Tejanos) living there. Concerned about the growing imbalance, the Mexican government banned all further settlement by Americans and all further importation of enslaved labor.

Texians—Anglo-American settlers—and some Tejanos 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. Texian Stephen Austin was jailed by Mexican ruler General Antonio López de Santa Anna for delivering the most recent request for autonomy, and the Texians 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 with a complete Mexican victory. During the battle, the Texians proclaimed their independence. Two months later, in the Battle of San Jacinto, the Texians defeated Santa Anna and secured their independence. They chose Sam Houston, the commander at San Jacinto, 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 become a slave state at a time when the United States was repeatedly struggling to reach compromises over the issue of slavery.

In 1844, the fate of Texas became a major campaign issue in the presidential election. James K. Polk won the election, running on a platform of annexation against the Whig candidate, Henry Clay. Early in 1845, the United States annexed Texas. Officially, the Mexican-American War was fought to determine where the southwestern boundary between Texas and Mexico lay. In reality, President Polk provoked Mexico into an attack by ordering U.S. troops to cross into territory claimed by Mexico after the Mexican government had rebuffed his attempts to purchase present-day California and New Mexico. The war lasted from May 1846 to February 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 states of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Resistance to War

The Mexican-American War did not have widespread support, particularly in the North, where many believed the war was simply an attempt to spread the practice of slavery into the Southwest. Then congressman Abraham Lincoln denounced the war as immoral, demanding to know exactly where Mexicans had “shed American blood on American soil,” as claimed by President Polk. Thomas Corwin of Ohio saw the war as yet another example of American injustice to Mexico, stating, “If I were a Mexican I would tell you, ‘Have you not room enough in your own country to bury your dead?’” Henry Clay declared, “This is no war of defense, but one of unnecessary and offensive aggression.” Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison also spoke out forcefully against the war.

The best-known protest against the war came from essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau, who was arrested in July 1846 for refusing to pay taxes in protest of America’s involvement in the war. This act of civil disobedience inspired Thoreau to write a long essay on the topic (titled, naturally, “Civil Disobedience”), in which he argued that it was the duty of all citizens to refuse to obey unjust laws.

WESTWARD MIGRATION

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.

Oregon Country and the Oregon Trail

Both Britain and the United States claimed the Oregon Country, which was situated north of California in the Pacific Northwest. President Polk originally wanted all of the Oregon Country, which extended as far north as the boundary of Alaska (claimed by Russia) at the latitude of 54°40'. Polk’s supporters used the slogan “Fifty-Four Forty or Fight” to suggest that the United States should be willing to go to war with Britain to obtain all of the region. However, Polk’s congressional opponents preferred diplomacy, which ultimately resulted in the 1846 agreement to divide the Oregon Country at the forty-ninth parallel. The states of Washington, Oregon, and most of Idaho were created from the Oregon Country.

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

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, where they were attacked for their religious beliefs, to Ohio. After being persecuted again, they moved to Missouri, but controversy and resistance followed them, and they were forced to move a third time, settling in Nauvoo, Illinois.

In 1844, 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 after it passed a law prohibiting polygamy.

California Gold Rush

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, coming 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 sailing 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. Plus, with the huge increase in population, there was work of all sorts as well as business opportunities.

DEVELOPMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

Telegraph

The modern telegraph was developed in the 1830s and 1840s by Samuel Morse and other inventors. Many claimed to have been the first to invent the device, but Morse was the first to secure political and financial support to make it work as a viable concern. With financial backing from Congress, in 1843 Morse built a telegraph system extending from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore, Maryland. The next year, the first telegraph message—"What hath God wrought?"—was transmitted. Further innovations helped the telegraph spread quickly. In 1861, Western Union Telegraph Company (formed in the 1850s through consolidation of several smaller firms) laid telegraph lines across the nation. Telegraph messages were used for a wide variety of communication purposes: controlling railroad traffic, spreading pieces of news, making business orders, wiring money, and sending personal messages.

Pony Express

By the late 1850s, the flood of miners, settlers, and would-be entrepreneurs had swelled the population of the West to almost five hundred thousand. However, mail service from the East to the West was slow. Mail traveled via steamship from New York to Panama, then from there to ships sailing for San Francisco. It could take as long as four weeks for mail to be delivered from coast to coast.

The Pony Express operated for only a short time (April 1860 to October 1861). It used a relay system of horse-mounted riders to carry mail from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California, and from there to San Francisco—a journey of nearly two thousand miles (3,219 km). The first half of the route followed the Oregon Trail. There were about two hundred stations along the route, and riders typically rode seventy-five to one hundred miles (120–160 km) at top speed, changing horses every ten to fifteen miles (16–24 km). The Pony Express employed about eighty riders—the lighter the better.

Delivery of letters and newspapers from St. Joseph to San Francisco was promised in ten days. Efficient but expensive, the service was used mainly by newspapers and businesses. The Pony Express was never intended to be a long-term venture—it was expected to cease operation once the transcontinental telegraph line had been completed—but the venture caught the imagination of the public.

IMPACT OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

Before completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, travel across North America by stagecoach cost \$1,000 and took up to six months. Using the railroad, the trip could be completed in five days at a cost of \$150.

Completion of the railroad utterly changed life in the United States. People, goods, and ideas could now easily and inexpensively move from one end of the country to the other. But no group experienced as much change as the Native Americans of the Great Plains. Railroad companies considered Native peoples little more than roadblocks to be removed. General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote in 1867, "The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next year." A key component of this strategy was the near-complete eradication of the bison, the main source of food for Plains tribes. Railroad companies advertised "hunting by rail" parties, in which hundreds of people fired on bison herds from the comfort of their train cars, killing thousands.

THE HOMESTEAD ACT

Under the Homestead Act of 1862, the U.S. government gave citizens (or future citizens) up to 160 acres (65 hectares) of public land—most of it located in the Great Plains—if they lived on it and "improved" it for five years and paid a small registration fee. However, farming the land was challenging at best. The Great Plains was known as the "great American desert" due to the scarcity and unpredictability of rain in the region. The hard sod was difficult to plow, and water could be hard to find. Farming equipment—wagons, wells, fencing, seed, and so forth—was expensive. And life on the prairie was harsh and lonely. A settler's nearest neighbor could live tens of miles away. Winter blizzards and summer insects were constant threats. The lack of trees on the open plains forced many settlers to build homes of sod. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of people took the government up on its offer. Under the Homestead Act, the U.S. government distributed more than 270 million acres (109 million hectares) of land to more than 1.6 million applicants.

Despite America's growing population in the mid-1800s and the demand for increased agricultural output, homesteading laws faced opposition in both the North and the South. Northern factory owners were afraid of losing cheap labor; Southern planters feared that development of the West by small farmers would increase antislavery sentiment. Congress failed to pass versions of the Homestead Act on three separate occasions in the 1850s. Congress approved a homesteading bill in 1860 only to see President James Buchanan veto it. The secession of Southern states during the Civil War removed many opponents of homesteading laws in Congress, and the Homestead Act finally became law in 1862.

On January 1, 1863, Daniel Freeman and more than four hundred others filed the first claims to land under the Homestead Act. The settlers who followed eventually filled the Great Plains, built communities, and created new states despite opposition and resistance from Native Americans.