**Westward Expansion**

**General Summary**

After the War of 1812 much of America's attention turned to exploration and settlement of its territory to the West, which had been greatly enlarged by the Louisiana Purchase. Families of pioneers swept westward and founded new communities throughout what is now the Midwest, and between 1816 and 1821, six new states were admitted to the Union.

The land boom was fed by encouragement from the federal government and the actions of land speculators, who bought up large tracts of land in order to sell it in parcels to farmers at exorbitant prices. These farmers did not mind high prices and high interest on loans due to the growing success of American agricultural products. Most western farmers became cash croppers who sometimes neglected subsistence farming in order to focus on marketable commodities. Soon the farmers' dependence on distant markets caught up with them, however, as the state bank system that had sprung up to support speculation collapsed, dragging agricultural prices and land values down with it. Many western settlers suffered greatly during the Panic of 1819, but most survived and continued the conquest of the West.

A major aspect of the conquest of the West was the removal of the Indians who dwelled there. Under the leadership of President Andrew Jackson, the Indians who remained East of the Mississippi were cruelly and violently driven from their homes and concentrated in reservations in what is now Oklahoma. The US Army crushed any resistance to removal. With the West cleared of this obstacle, westerners focused on developing new methods of transporting their goods to market. The canal and railroad systems, which grew up in the North, facilitated a much larger volume of trade and manufacturing while reducing costs a great deal. Great cities sprang up throughout the North and Northwest, bolstered by the improvement in transportation.

After the Midwest had been substantially developed, the national focus turned toward the far west. The territory of Texas, controlled by the Spanish, was settled by Americans, who eventually undertook the Texas Rebellion in efforts to win independence. When the United States admitted Texas to the Union in 1845, the Mexican government was outraged, and from 1846 to 1848, the two nation's squared off in the Mexican War. With a resounding victory, the United States gained control of Texas, New Mexico, and California. The Oregon territory was annexed in 1846 as well, and the US controlled the land all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

As the population of the West soared and the prospects of statehood for western territories appeared clearer and clearer, the nation battled over the future of slavery in the West. This battle was one reason for the Civil War, which slowed the acceleration of expansion. However, the last three decades of the nineteenth century saw the return of accelerating expansion due to the successful struggle to contain the Plains Indians in reservations, and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. By the early twentieth century, the organization of the West was completed, and the United States consisted of all 48 contiguous states.

**Context**

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century the United States grew drastically, in power and in geographical size. The Louisiana Purchase more than doubled the nation's size and opened up a little known region to exploration and eventual settlement. Soon, explorers were returning from forays into the wilderness with stories of great stretches of beauty and fertile land. Some Americans ventured westward, but the nation was largely consumed by its struggle to maintain its neutrality in the face of threats from Britain and France. The War of 1812 settled this issue, leaving the United States free to pursue North American goals. The nation turned its attention to the issue of expansion. The founding fathers had envisioned the United States as a bastion of freedom that would cover territory reaching all the way across the North American continent. Their descendents had not forgotten this desire, and encouraged expansion into western territories through laws and rhetoric.

The first wave of westward expansion accompanied the rise of manufacturing in New England and increasing mobility throughout the nation. As settlers moved to what is now the Midwest, the national infrastructure grew up around them, connecting the nation's cities and towns through a system of roads, canals and railroads. Accompanying the rise in new methods of transportation came progress in the fields of agriculture and medicine, as new machines were invented and new treatments for disease discovered. American culture developed in the form of writing, acting, and painting, and American intellectuals gained worldwide respect. Many painters and writers cited the American West as their inspiration, and the West began to symbolize the American identity: rough and rugged individualism willing to face new challenges.

However, expansion did not occur exclusively in an atmosphere of progress. The age of Jacksonian Democracy saw the rise of political strife between the ruling Democrats and the opposition Whigs. As the two-party system matured, political tension became clearly focused around the issue of slavery. As the West gradually developed, the existing states were rapidly torn apart. Economic and social divisions became accentuated and both North and South clung to their beliefs and customs.

In 1848, the Mexican War concluded, and the United States gained full control of the Texas, California and New Mexico territories. As settlers poured into these regions, it was clear that the westward expansion was closely linked to the future of slavery. North and South focused significant energy on pursuing their political desires in regard to slavery in the settled territories of the West, and the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates had at their core the future of slavery in the West. Despite efforts at reconciliation, most notably the Compromise of 1850, the Union was thrown into a civil war over the issue of slavery from 1861 to 1865, and western expansion slowed due to the conflict.

After the Civil War and period of Reconstruction faded, expansion began again in the late 1800s. Now western settlers were spurred onward by the development of the transcontinental railroad, a major byproduct of the period of industrialization that had begun in earnest. The expansion and immigration of the late 1800s merged with this industrialization to provoke the growth of American urban society. As the needs of industrial workers became ever more important, the national political scene became dominated by the discrepancy in needs between America's rural and urban populations, as well as the needs of the new classes created by industrialization and the abolition of slavery. By the early twentieth century, the United States consisted of 48 contiguous states stretching clear across the North American continent, and with its devastatinv defeat of the Spanish in 1898 had become a legitimate international power. US cities increasingly traded with foreign markets and the nation became involved in international politics. The economic and political evolution that had accompanied, and in part resulted from, westward expansion culminated with US involvement in World War One.

**Important Terms, People, and Events**

**Terms**

**Alamo** - During the Texas Rebellion, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's Mexican force of 4,000 troops laid siege to the town of San Antonio, where 200 Texans resisted, retreating to an abandoned mission, the Alamo. After inflicting over 1,500 casualties on Santa Anna's men, the defenders of the Alamo were wiped out on March 6, 1836. The Alamo became a symbol of the Texans' determination to win independence.

**Compromise of 1850** - The Compromise of 1850 was a major effort at quieting sectional conflict in pre-Civil War American politics. In terms of expansion, its most important clauses were those admitting California to statehood as a free state and dividing the remainder of the Mexican cession after the Mexican War into two sections, New Mexico and Utah, neither of which would be subject to restrictions on slavery.

**Dawes Severalty Act** - Passed in 1887, the Dawes Act called for the breakup of the reservations and the treatment of Indians as individuals rather than tribes. It provided for the distribution of 160 acres of farmland or 320 acres of grazing land to any Indian who accepted the act's terms, who would then become a US citizen in 25 years. The act was intended to help the Indians to integrate into white society, but in reality helped to create a class of federally dependent Indians.

**Donner Party** - The exploits of the Donner Party exemplified the difficulties of the overland journey to the Far West. Led astray by the erred advice of a guidebook, the Donner Party found itself snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and arrived at its destination in California only after turning to cannibalism.

**Empresarios**  - In efforts to attract American settlers and trade to Texas during the 1820s, the Mexican government gave large land grants to agents called empresarios in return for their efforts to encourage colonization.

**Erie Canal** - The first canal project of the 1820s, the 363-mile Erie Canal was completed in 1825, connecting Buffalo, New York, on the Great Lakes, with Albany, on the Hudson River. The Erie Canal made cost effective shipping possible via waterways from New York City to the West by way of the Great Lakes. The North and Northwest were soon crisscrossed by an extensive canal system which greatly improved domestic transportation and trade.

**Indian Removal Act** - The Indian Removal Act, passed in 1830, granted President Andrew Jackson funds and authority to remove the Indians by force if necessary. He pursued a determined effort to coerce the Indians into expulsion.

**Manifest Destiny** - Journalist John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" in 1845. He wrote of "our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of our continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty." Manifest Destiny referred to the belief of many Americans that it was the nation's destiny and duty to expand and conquer the West in the name of God, nature, civilization, and progress.

**Mission** - The mission was the main tool in Spanish and Mexican colonization of the Far West. Missions were established all along the California coast and into the interior of Texas and New Mexico. The Franciscan missionaries tried to convert the region's Indians, and built towns around their missions. By 1823, over 20,000 Indians had converted and were living in the missions of California.

**Oregon Trail** - Perhaps the most well known of the overland trails to the Far West, the Oregon trail led many settlers to Oregon's Willamette Valley between 1840 and 1848 and was representative of the hardships of overland travel.

**Santa Fe Trail** - Southwestern travelers more often than not used the Santa Fe Trail to move westward. The trail linked St. Louis and Santa Fe, leading to the establishment of strong economic connections between the regions surrounding the endpoints of the trail.

**Trail of Tears** - In 1835, federal agents persuaded a pro-removal Cherokee chief to sign the Treaty of New Echota, which ceded all Cherokee land for $5.6 million and free transportation west. Most Cherokees rejected the treaty, but resistance was futile. Between 1835 and 1838 bands of Cherokee Indians moved west of the Mississippi along the so-called Trail of Tears. Between 2,000 and 4,000 of the 16,000 migrating Cherokees died. The Trail of Tears became a symbol for the harsh treatment of the Indians at the hands of the federal government.

**Transcontinental Railroad** - On May 10, 1869, the first transcontinental railroad was completed when the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads joined their tracks at Promontory Point, Utah. The railroad rapidly affected the ease of western settlement, shortening the journey from coast to coast, which took six to eight months by wagon, to a mere one week's trip.

**Wilmot Proviso** - The Wilmot proviso was an amendment proposed to an appropriations bill regarding the West, which proposed that slavery be prohibited in all of the Mexican cession other than Texas. The proviso passed the House but stalled in the Senate, where it was the cause of further arguments between northern and southern politicians.

**Worcester v. Georgia** - In the case of Worcester v. Georgia, Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that the Cherokees comprised a "domestic dependent nation" within Georgia and thus deserved protection from harassment. However, the vehemently anti-Indian Andrew Jackson refused to abide by the decision, sneering "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it."

**People**

**Stephen F. Austin** - The most successful of all Texan empresarios, Stephen Austin became an influential political leader in Texas. He did not support independence at first, and his misgivings restrained any major move towards independence among the Texan people. However, once he threw his support behind the Texas Rebellion in 1835, it benefited greatly from his leadership and support.

**George Armstrong Custer** - Custer, a Civil War hero, was dispatched to the hills of South Dakota in 1874. When gold was discovered in the region, the federal government announced that Custer's forces would hunt down all Sioux not in reservations after January 31, 1876. Many Sioux refused to comply, and Custer began to mobilize his troops. At the battle of Little Bighorn, in June 1876, Custer unwisely divided his troops, and a numerically superior force of Indians wiped out him and all of his men. This battle, known as "Custer's Last Stand," convinced the army that the Sioux were a powerful force, after which a war of attrition, rather than direct confrontation, was begun.

**Robert Fulton** - Fulton is credited with the invention of the first effective steamboat, which he unveiled with his business partner, Robert Livingston, in New York in 1807. The Steamboat revolutionized river travel because it could move rapidly upstream, a feat no other type of watercraft could match.

**Andrew Jackson** - Andrew Jackson was President of the United States from 1829 to 1837, and thus oversaw much of the nation's expansion. Jackson's most prominent role in westward expansion was his continuing struggle to eject the Indians East of the Mississippi from their lands to free up land for American settlers. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 granted Jackson the funding and authority to accomplish this goal, which he pursued determinedly throughout his presidency.

**James K. Polk** - Polk was President of the United States from 1845 to 1849. He oversaw the annexation of Oregon and of Texas, and is credited with beginning the Mexican War in earnest. Polk was a firm believer in expansion and pursued his goals with vigor. However, many northerners saw him as an agent of southern will, expanding the nation as part of a plan to extend slavery into the West.

**John Tyler** - Tyler became President of the United States in 1841, when William Henry Harrison died after a month in office. Tyler and his secretary of state, John Calhoun, a fierce advocate for slavery, tried by dishonest and manipulative means to gain support for the annexation of Texas. The treaty they presented to the Senate for annexation was voted down, but the issue of annexation had risen to the fore of American politics.

**Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna** - Santa Anna, the president of Mexico, organized a mass purge of Mexican liberals from his government in 1834. This accomplished, he began to place restrictions on the governments of the Mexican territories to the North. Fearing tyrannical rule, Stephen F. Austin and other American settlers in Texas sparked the Texas Rebellion to win independence. Santa Anna was captured during the rebellion and forced to sign a treaty giving Texas its independence, and was shortly ousted from the Mexican government.

**Events**

**Panic of 1819** - The state banks that had risen up to financially support speculation and expansion had issued notes far in excess of what they could realistically redeem. In reaction to this situation, the Bank of the United States insisted that the state banks redeem all notes that had passed into the hands of the Bank of the US. In order to pay the Bank of the US, the state banks had to demand payment of debts by the farmers of the Midwest. The result was a vast restriction in the amount of circulating money, and a substantial cutback in the amount of credit offered farmers and speculators, dramatically slowing the economy. The Panic of 1819 punctured the land rush and the agricultural boom that had been underway since 1815, and alerted farmers to the need for more effective transportation to distant markets.

**Texas Rebellion** - As the population of American settlers in Texas had grown, relations with the Mexican government had steadily soured. When, in 1834, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna purged the liberals from the government and began restricting the independence of the Mexican territories, many Texans decided it was time for a clean break. Texan leaders met and declared independence, soon beginning a series of battles that culminated with the April 1836 capture of Santa Anna himself. Though the Texans forced him to sign a treaty declaring Texas independent, the Mexican government never officially recognized the treaty, and the status of Texas remained in question, to be decided by the Mexican War.

**Wounded Knee** - After an excited Native American fired a rifle shot in a non-combat situation, US Army troops massacred 300 Indians, including seven children. The massacre was the symbolic final step in the war for the West, and after Wounded Knee the Indians succumbed to the wishes of the federal government, resigning themselves to reservation life.d

Information accessed from: http://www.sparknotes.com/history/american/westwardexpansion/summary.html