



The Diverse American West

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Informational Reading

Grades: 4-6

Background: The history of the American West includes people from dozens of Native American nations, white and African American settlers, Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and immigrants from Europe and parts of Asia.

Objective: Students will read and take notes on this overview of the history and diversity of the American west.

Sources: The Clever Teacher and CILC Maker Space



Directions: Use the graphic organizer to take notes while you read this essay.



What was Westward Expansion?

Westward Expansion refers to the 19th-century movement of settlers into the American West, lasting roughly from 1787-1860. During the 19th century, the United States gained a million square miles of land west of the Mississippi River. This land was acquired through purchases, treaties, and war. During this time, Americans moved West seeking land, adventure, riches, and new opportunities. This new frontier would become an important factor that shaped early American life.

Although the term “Westward Expansion” is common, not all settlers moved west during this time period. People migrated north from Mexico, east from China, and enslaved African Americans were forced to move from the Upper South to the Deep South.

In addition, this time period was not considered “expansion” by everyone. Indigenous people had been living in North America for thousands of years before Europeans arrived. The movement of white settlers onto their land was seen as invasion and dispossession. Mexican Americans similarly saw the movement of settlers as an “invasion” rather than an “expansion.”



Navajo family outside their home (1880)

Why did people move West?

Land and Technology

There were many forces that drove Westward Expansion. At this time the U.S. population was growing quickly. Between 1790 and 1860 the US population grew from about 4 million to 21 million! These people crowded the East, and many people began to look West for more space, land, and opportunity. Many people believed they could have a better life if they moved West. They hoped to make more money through new ventures like farming and mining.

The U.S. government incentivized people to settle the western territories by offering free land. The 1862 Homestead Act let U.S. citizens apply for 160 acres of free land called "homesteads". This was a tremendous opportunity for many people, including immigrants and formerly enslaved people.

New technology and transportation advances also made Westward Expansion possible. The telegraph made it easier to communicate across long distances. Barbed wire made building fences faster and easier, allowing more people to set up their own land. Steamboats, canals, and railroads made long-distance travel faster and more accessible.



African American farmers in Kansas (Library of Congress)

Manifest Destiny

Westward Expansion in the United States can't be taught without studying Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was the 19th-century idea that Americans were chosen by God to settle all of the land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Not only did Americans believe it was their destiny to settle this land, but many believed it was their destiny to spread their religion, language, culture, and government.

Many people believed that America was special and should be an example to all other countries. The idea that America has a special destiny dates back to America's founding. During the Revolution, Thomas Paine wrote about America's unique opportunity to "begin the world over again." Later, in 1845, a journalist named John L. O'Sullivan officially coined the term "Manifest Destiny" in an article urging the U.S. to annex the Republic of Texas.

There were several issues with the idea of Manifest Destiny. Inherent in Manifest Destiny is the belief that American white culture is better than other cultures. It also assumes that America's right to settle the West is more important than land claims by people already living there, like Native and Mexican Americans.



Source: <https://www.thecleverteacher.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-teaching-westward-expansion/> retrieved 04.25.22



Name _____

Taking Notes

Directions: Use this organizer to take notes on the essay.

list of key words

words I need to define

summary of main points

timeline of key events

questions I have