

CHAPTER 13

The Contested West, 1815–1860

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The West has held a special place in the American imagination and has been depicted in a variety of ways by historians. While Frederick Jackson Turner contended that the western frontier shaped the American character and fostered American democracy and American exceptionalism, the tendency among modern scholars is to see the West as a meeting place of cultures. If we see the West in that way, Chapter 13 returns us to the major theme of Chapter 1 of this textbook: the interactions among peoples of different cultures and the impact of that interaction on the participants.

During the first half of the nineteenth century writers of popular fiction, artists, and promoters depicted the West in a variety of ways, sometimes realistically but usually romantically and idealistically. For many early nineteenth-century Americans, the West represented the availability of land, the hope of economic independence, and the chance to improve one's socio-economic status. For Native Americans, the West represented forced removal from their ancestral lands at the hands of an American people and an American government that held an ethnocentric and racist frame of reference. As a result, the American migrants to the West and the government that aided them had little regard for those already living in the West or for their cultures. Americans of the early nineteenth century, like the English settlers of the early seventeenth century, tended to believe in white superiority and to believe that they had a superior right to western lands and to the profits to be extracted from those lands.

In the section entitled “Expansion and Resistance in the Old Northwest,” we look at the first of three regions that constitute “The West.” In looking at the migration of Americans into the Old Northwest (now generally referred to as the Midwest) during the 1820s and 1830s, we consider the reasons migrants decided to move and the variety of factors that affected their decision of where to move. In making the latter decision, we find that the status of slavery was, for many, a major factor. Although some southerners hoped their move would increase their chances of owning slaves, other white southerners and most white northerners wanted to move to an area that was not only free from slavery but also free from all African Americans. This racist frame of reference led some Midwestern states in the 1850s to enact laws barring the entry of African Americans, slave or free. In addition, settlement of the Midwest depended, in the minds of most potential white settlers on the removal of Native Americans. In some cases attempts by Indian groups to resist such removal led to violence, as seen in the Black Hawk War, which, with the defeat of Black Hawk and his followers and the subsequent imprisonment of Black Hawk in 1833, marked the end of Indian resistance in the Old Northwest.

As promoters began to depict the Midwest as a land of opportunity, labor saving devices such as the McCormick reaper and the steel plow made settlement in the region more attractive to Northeastern farmers. As farmers moved into the area, many had to undertake the long and often arduous task of clearing their wooded land to make it suitable for cultivation. Although most migrants to the Midwest were farmers, the depletion of forests in the East led lumber companies and their workers to move into the area around the Great Lakes, an area that became the center of the nation's lumber industry by the 1840s. In addition, river settlements and the emergence of

cities around the Great Lakes furthered river settlements and the emergence of cities around the Great Lakes furthered settlement in the Midwestern countryside, and these cities, in turn, became bustling commercial centers.

In the next section, “The Federal Government and Westward Expansion,” we first discuss the characteristics of fur traders who migrated into the West prior to large-scale Anglo American migration. As these fur traders searched for better and quicker means of transporting their furs to market, they charted the Santa Fe Trail and rediscovered the South Pass. However, we find that large-scale settlement was eventually made possible by exploratory expeditions sponsored by the federal government. Therefore, we look at the objectives and accomplishments of such federally sponsored expeditions as those headed by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Zebulon Pike, and John C. Frémont, who, as a second lieutenant in the U. S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, undertook three expeditions to the West. Not only was the Army Corps established by Congress for the express purpose of exploring the West in advance of settlement, but the American military was also assigned the task of improving transportation routes, assisting overland migration, and aiding in the removal of Indians. Furthermore, the federal government was instrumental in preparing public lands for settlement and, through the General Land Office, oversaw the distribution of those lands. Because the policies of the General Land Office favored speculators over individuals, farmers pressed for a federal policy of preemption. Such a policy was adopted by Congress in the Log Cabin Bill of 1841 and was extended to unsurveyed land with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862.

We next turn to the Southwestern Borderlands where we look at the characteristics of Southwestern slavery and at the characteristics of the New Mexico and the Texas frontiers. In our discussion of the Texas frontier we concentrate on the interaction among Native Americans, Tejanos, and Anglo Americans and at the consequences of the meeting of these three cultures. Large scale Anglo migration to Texas began under the auspices of the *empresario* system, begun by Spanish authorities in 1821 when Moses Austin received a land grant of some 200,000 acres in return for his promise to bring 300 Catholic families and no slaves with him when he settled the land. Ultimately, after Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, it was the elder Austin’s son, Stephen, who was the beneficiary of this grant of land. As both the economic hardships in the United States associated with the Panic of 1819 and the promise of cheap land in Texas drew large numbers of Anglo Americans into the region in the 1820s, Mexico, in 1824, passed the Colonization Law of 1824 to further expand the *empresario* system. Even though one of the stipulations of the *empresario* system was that settlers were to bring no slaves, the Mexican government proved unable to adequately patrol its northern border and, therefore, was unable to enforce this provision. Rather than becoming Mexicanized and assimilating into Mexican society as the Mexican government had hoped, Anglo-Americans migrant settled in their own separate communities and, by 1826, some had begun to call for secession from Mexico and the establishment of an independent republic. Despite attempts by the Mexican government to weaken the American presence in Texas, the independence movement gained momentum. After Santa Anna declared himself dictator of Mexico and led his army toward Texas, Anglos staged an armed rebellion that ended in the creation of the Lone Star Republic in 1836.

In turning our attention to the Far West, the third region that constitutes “The West,” we once again look at the motives of migrants into the region. In some cases, such as that of Narcissa and Marcus Whitman and Eliza and Henry Spalding, migrants went to the Far West for the purpose of converting the inhabitants to Christianity. It is in this discussion that we find that an air of cultural superiority born out of an ethnocentric frame of reference led to tragic consequences for the Whitmans. After discussing the experience of the Mormons in Utah, the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, and armed conflict between the Mormons and the United States Army, we turn our attention to the majority of migrants who trekked along the Oregon and California trails in search of fertile farmlands and a better life for

themselves. Although these migrants faced many physical and emotional hardships, for most of them the journey they took was not extremely dangerous. However, there were factors that caused tension between the migrants and the Native Americans they encountered. One such factor, the theft of livestock, was the spark that led to the Grattan Massacre in 1854, an incident that forever altered relationships between Anglo Americans and Native Americans along the Oregon Trail.

In our discussion of the Far West, we see the federal government, through the Office of Indian Affairs, attempting to pave the way for American settlement. In its efforts to negotiate treaties with Native Americans, the Indian Office not only attempted to prevent Indian interference with western migrations but also attempted to protect the commercial interests of the United States. We also see, as had been the case with the first contacts between Europeans and Native Americans during the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, the impact of diseases on Indians and the ecological impact of Anglo American migrants on Indian lands and cultures. A case in point is seen in California, where the discovery of gold and the subsequent Gold Rush brought swarms of “forty-niners” with a get-rich-quick mentality into the region. This sudden sweep of people into California adversely affected Indian cultures, led to the California agricultural boom, and, with the introduction of mining companies, had adverse ecological consequences.

Having looked at American settlement of the Midwest, the Southwestern Borderlands, and the Far West, we next turn our attention to “The Politics of Territorial Expansion.” Here we look at the ideologies of the Democratic and Whig parties with regard to western expansion and western settlement. And, once again, through the concept of Manifest Destiny, we encounter an ethnocentric frame of reference that provided a political rationale for westward expansion. The concept of Manifest Destiny held that the American people were a God-chosen people who were destined to carry their civilization and their culture throughout all of North America. Within this framework, we discuss the election of the expansionist James K. Polk to the presidency in 1844, the successful negotiations with the British over the Oregon Country, and the annexation of Texas to the United States. Texas annexation caused friction between the United States and Mexico. This friction, and the expansionist agenda of President Polk, would eventually lead to the Mexican War, a war that would propel the question of the expansion of slavery into the territories onto the national political stage and eventually lead to the Civil War.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss ways in which the West has been defined, described, and portrayed by:
 - a. historians,
 - b. migrants to the West in the early nineteenth century, and
 - c. literary and artistic images of the West during the early nineteenth century.
2. Discuss the factors present in the first half of the nineteenth century that led to American expansion and settlement in the Old Northwest (the Midwest), the Southwestern borderlands, and the Far West, and explain the consequences of this expansion.
3. Explain the characteristics, goals, and motives of those who chose to migrate to and settle in the Old Northwest (the Midwest), the Southwestern borderlands, and the Far West during the first half of the nineteenth century; and explain the extent to which migrants were successful in achieving their goals.

4. Examine the interaction between American western migrants and the West's indigenous inhabitants during the first half of the nineteenth century; and discuss the impact of this interaction on migrants and the West's indigenous inhabitants.
5. Discuss the reality of the lives of fur trappers in the trans-Appalachian West during the first half of the nineteenth century, and explain the characteristics of the fur trade during that period.
6. Explain the goals and achievements of individual explorers and federally sponsored exploratory expeditions to the West during the first half of the nineteenth century.
7. Discuss the role of the United States military and the federal government of the United States in readying the West for settlement during the first half of the nineteenth century.
8. Examine the rationale behind, the specifics of, and the consequences of the policies of both the federal government and state governments toward western Indian tribes during the first half of the nineteenth century; discuss the reactions of Indians to those policies; and explain the consequences of those policies.
9. Discuss the impact of prejudice and discrimination on nonwhite inhabitants of and nonwhite migrants to the West during the first half of the nineteenth century.
10. Discuss the characteristics of the New Mexico frontier and the Texas frontier in the early nineteenth century.
11. Discuss the migration of Americans to Texas during the first half of the nineteenth century, and explain the Spanish and Mexican policies that propelled this migration.
12. Discuss the causes and consequences of the armed rebellion by Anglo American Texans against the Mexican government in the early nineteenth century.
13. Explain the emergence of California as the population center on the West Coast in the late 1840s and early 1850s, discuss the experiences of "the forty-niners," and discuss the causes and consequences of California's agricultural boom.
14. Examine the variety of forces and beliefs that contributed to the emergence of expansionist sentiment within American society during the 1830s and 1840s, discuss the objectives of expansionists, and explain the debates over the Texas and Oregon territories.
15. Examine the issues in the presidential election of 1844, and explain the election's outcome.

IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

After studying Chapter 13 of *A People and a Nation*, you should be able to identify *and* explain fully the historical significance of each item listed below.

- Identify each item in the space provided. Give an explanation or description of the item. Answer the questions *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*.
 - Explain the historical significance of each item in the space provided. Establish the historical context in which the item exists. Establish the item as the result of or as the cause of other factors existing in the society under study. Answer this question: *What were the political, social, economic, and/or cultural consequences of this item?*
1. Frederick Jackson Turner

2. Davy Crockett

3. George Catlin

4. the Black Hawk War

5. the fur trade

6. Zebulon Pike

7. John C. Fremont

8. the office of Indian affairs

9. the Log Cabin Bill

10. the Homestead Act of 1862

11. Tejanos

12. American *empresarios*

13. Stephen Austin

14. Battle of the Alamo

15. the Lone Star Republic

16. the Mormon War

17. the California gold rush

18. Manifest Destiny

19. “Fifty-four Forty or Fight!”

20. President James K. Polk

21. the annexation of Texas