

# American History

From Revolution to Reconstruction and beyond



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## Westward

The frontier did much to shape American life. Conditions along the entire Atlantic seaboard stimulated migration to the newer regions. From New England, where the soil was incapable of producing high yields of grain, came a steady stream of men and women who left their coastal farms and villages to take advantage of the rich interior land of the continent. In the backcountry settlements of the Carolinas and Virginia, people handicapped by the lack of roads and canals giving access to coastal markets, and suffering from the political dominance of the Tidewater planters, also moved westward. By 1800 the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys were becoming a great frontier region. "Hi-o, away we go, floating down the river on the O-hi-o," became the song of thousands of migrants.

The westward flow of population in the early 19th century led to the division of old territories and the drawing of new boundaries. As new states were admitted, the political map stabilized east of the Mississippi River. From 1816 to 1821, six states were created -- Indiana, Illinois and Maine (which were free states), and Mississippi, Alabama and Missouri (slave states). The first frontier had been tied closely to Europe, the second to the coastal settlements, but the Mississippi Valley was independent and its people looked west rather than east.

Frontier settlers were a varied group. One English traveler described them as "a daring, hardy race of men, who live in miserable cabins.... They are unpolished but hospitable, kind to strangers, honest and trustworthy. They raise a little Indian corn, pumpkins, hogs and sometimes have a cow or two.... But the rifle is their principal means of support." Dexterous with the axe, snare and fishing line, these men blazed the trails, built the first log cabins and confronted Native American tribes, whose land they occupied.

As more and more settlers penetrated the wilderness, many became farmers as well as hunters. A comfortable log house with glass windows, a chimney and partitioned rooms replaced the cabin; the well replaced the spring. Industrious settlers would rapidly clear their land of timber, burning the wood for potash and letting the stumps decay. They grew their own grain, vegetables and fruit; ranged the woods for deer, wild turkeys and honey; fished the nearby streams; looked after cattle and hogs. Land speculators bought large tracts of the cheap land and, if land values rose, sold their holdings and moved still farther west, making way for others.

Doctors, lawyers, storekeepers, editors, preachers, mechanics and politicians soon followed the farmers. The farmers were the sturdy base, however. Where they settled, they intended to stay and hoped their children would remain after them. They built large barns and brick or frame houses. They brought improved livestock, plowed the land skillfully and sowed productive seed. Some erected flourmills, sawmills and distilleries. They laid out good highways, built churches and schools. Incredible transformations were accomplished in a few years. In 1830, for example, Chicago, Illinois, was merely an

journalist Horace Greeley, young men could "go west and grow with the country."

Except for a migration into Mexican-owned Texas, the westward march of the agricultural frontier did not pass Missouri until after 1840. In 1819, in return for assuming the claims of American citizens to the amount of \$5 million, the United States obtained from Spain both Florida and Spain's rights to the Oregon country in the Far West. In the meantime, the Far West had become a field of great activity in the fur trade, which was to have significance far beyond the value of the skins. As in the first days of French exploration in the Mississippi Valley, the trader was a pathfinder for the settlers beyond the Mississippi. The French and Scots-Irish trappers, exploring the great rivers and their tributaries and discovering all the passes of the Rocky and Sierra Mountains, made possible the overland migration of the 1840s and the later occupation of the interior of the nation.

Overall, the growth of the nation was enormous: population grew from 7.25 million to more than 23 million from 1812 to 1852, and the land available for settlement increased by almost the size of Europe -- from 4.4 million to 7.8 million square kilometers. Still unresolved, however, were the basic conflicts rooted in sectional differences which, by the decade of the 1860s, would explode into civil war. Inevitably, too, this westward expansion brought settlers into conflict with the original inhabitants of the land: the Indians.

In the first part of the 19th century, the most prominent figure associated with these conflicts was Andrew Jackson, the first "Westerner" to occupy the White House. In the midst of the War of 1812, Jackson, then in charge of the Tennessee militia, was sent into southern Alabama, where he ruthlessly put down an uprising of Creek Indians. The Creeks soon ceded two-thirds of their land to the United States. Jackson later routed bands of Seminole Indians from their sanctuaries in Spanish-owned Florida.

In the 1820s, President Monroe's secretary of war, John C. Calhoun, pursued a policy of removing the remaining tribes from the old Southwest and resettling them beyond the Mississippi. Jackson continued this policy as president.

In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, providing funds to transport the eastern tribes beyond the Mississippi. In 1834 a special Indian territory was set up in what is now Oklahoma. In all, the tribes signed 94 treaties during Jackson's two terms, ceding millions of hectares to the federal government and removing dozens of tribes from their ancestral homelands.

Perhaps the most egregious chapter in this unfortunate history concerned the Cherokees, whose lands in western North Carolina and Georgia had been guaranteed by treaty since 1791. Among the most progressive of the eastern tribes, the Cherokees' fate was sealed when gold was discovered on their land in 1829. Even a favorable ruling from the Supreme Court proved little help. With the acquiescence of the Jackson administration, the Cherokees were forced to make the long and cruel trek to Oklahoma in 1838. Many died of disease and

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