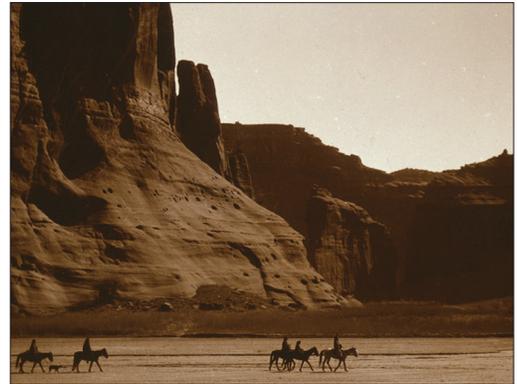


# WESTWARD EXPANSION: ENCOUNTERS AT A CULTURAL CROSSROADS

In the nineteenth century, the United States expanded its territory westward at a dramatic pace, leading to conflict, national growth, and ongoing cultural exchange within a transformed continent.



Canon de Chelly-Navaho  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96514482/>

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The expansion of the United States into the territory west of the Mississippi River began with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. President Thomas Jefferson nearly doubled the size of the nation by negotiating a price of \$15 million to purchase 828,800 square miles from France, including all or part of 14 current states. In 1804, Jefferson sent an expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the area. The three-year expedition produced new understanding of the geography and resources of the western part of the continent. In the 1830s and 1840s, "manifest destiny," the idea that the United States was destined to expand across the entire continent, was used to promote further territorial expansion. And the nation expanded quickly:

In 1845, the United States annexed Texas;  
In 1846 the Oregon Treaty ended British claims to Oregon Territory;

In 1848, following the Mexican-American War, Mexico ceded much of the Southwest to the United States;

In 1853 the United States bought an additional tract of land from Mexico.

States joined the Union at a relatively fast pace: California became a state in 1850 and Oregon in 1859, Nevada in 1864, Nebraska in 1867, Colorado in 1876, South and North Dakota, Montana, and Washington in 1889, Wyoming and Idaho in 1890, and Utah in 1896. As new towns like Denver and Phoenix sprang up in these new states, established towns and cities underwent a surge in growth to accommodate the new industries and new populations that westward expansion brought with it.

While trappers, settlers, and miners headed West from the eastern United States prior to the Civil

War, the most rapid migration occurred after the war. One factor in encouraging settlers to move west was the Homestead Act, passed in 1862, which allowed settlers to claim 160 acres of land for free. Another important factor was completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869; the railroad led to much more rapid Western migration and also facilitated economic development.

In looking at the history of the American West, it is important to keep in mind the myths that arose around the settling of the West in the second half of the nineteenth century. The influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner described a uniquely American



Lone Eagle Peak, Colorado  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/90716547/>

personality forged by the experience of taming the wilderness and critical to the success and growth of the United States. That view of the West as a frontier where heroic white settlers and cowboys struggled to bring civilization to a savage land framed popular and scholarly thinking for years to come.

More recently, however, historians have questioned the notion of the frontier. Instead, they have argued that the nineteenth-century West was a crossroads of cultures. The trans-Mississippi West was home to some 40 tribes of Native Americans. The lifeways of the Native American groups varied considerably. Some with nomadic lifestyles required large amounts of rangeland to maintain their families; other groups lived in settled communities, where they farmed and raised livestock brought to the West by the Spanish. The cultural diversity was heightened by the addition of tens of thousands of Native Americans forced west from the established areas of the United States.

Spain ruled what is today the southwestern United States between 1598 and 1821; it used land grants to promote settlement and protect this remote region of its empire. Spanish policy was to give settlers free land owned by the government. The Republic of Mexico followed many of the same policies when it governed the Southwest between 1821 and 1848.

Thus, when white settlers began pouring into the West, they were entering a region in which indigenous peoples and Spanish settlers had been living for hundreds of years. Nor was east the only direction from which settlers came into



Chinese miners  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001700332/>

the American West. African Americans came from the southeast, Spanish settlers came from Mexico in the south, and workers came from the west, across the Pacific from China. The same hope for economic advancement that brought white settlers to the West also brought workers across the Pacific, primarily from China. Chinese immigrants worked in mining, ran small businesses, and helped build railroads across the West; however, they were often met with hostility and violent attacks when they attempted to settle into communities.

Expansion in the American West continues today, as its population centers continue to expand into even the most remote areas of the region. The many different cultural encounters that occurred in this era, however, also continue to have an impact on everyday life in the United States, and may prove to be among the most important legacies of the great era of westward expansion.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The documents in this set can be used to help students explore Westward expansion of the United States and the resulting interactions among the West's many cultural groups.

- Students could imagine that they are settlers from the East or Midwest, journeying to the West to start a new home. Using letters from *Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862-1912* as a model, they could write letters home, describing encounters with people or places described in the documents. What do they learn about the West from each encounter?
- Completing the Transcontinental Railroad was one of the most important events in connecting the West into the United States. Challenge students to use a map to decide where they would build a railroad from the Midwest to California. Where would they start? Where would they end? What route would they follow? When they have drawn their route, have them compare it with a Library of Congress map of one of the completed railways. How close was their route to the actual route?
- Perspectives on westward expansion varied dramatically when it was taking place. Challenge students to examine a positive representation of westward expansion, such as one of the ones in this set, and to speculate about the point of view of its creator. Then, they might find a document or image in the Library's digital collections that represents a different point of view, and identify the ways in which the two items disagree.
- Documents in the American Memory collections provide evidence of conflict among the cultural groups that met each other in the American West. Challenge students to find evidence of conflict and prejudice in the documents in this primary source set. Can they also find evidence of cooperation and acceptance? Assign students to create a political cartoon about race relations in the nineteenth-century West.



Central Pacific Train  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/CA0018/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



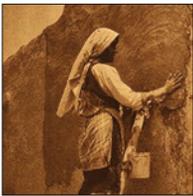
### **History of the American West, 1850-1920; Photographs from the Collection of the Denver Public Library**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/codhtml/hawphome.html>



### **The Chinese in California, 1850-1925**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award99/cubhtml/cichome.html>



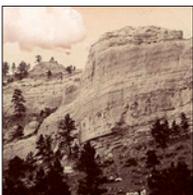
### **Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/curthome.html>



### **Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862-1912**

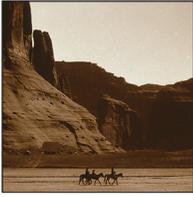
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhtml/pshome.html>



### **Trails to Utah and the Pacific: Diaries and Letters, 1846-1869**

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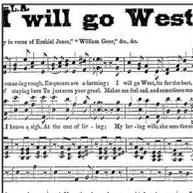
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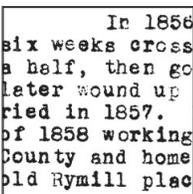
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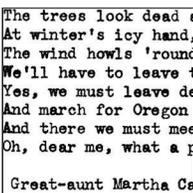
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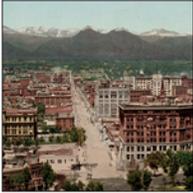
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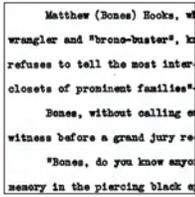
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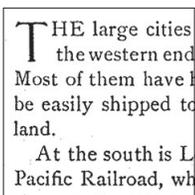
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