An Overview of U.S. Westward Expansion

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.28.17

The first Fort Laramie as it looked before 1840. A painting from memory by Alfred Jacob Miller in 1858-60. Fort Laramie lay at the crossroads of an old north-south Native American trail and what became known as the Oregon Trail. It was called Fort Laramie because of the nearby Laramie Mountains. Originally established as a private fur trading fort in 1834, Fort Laramie became the largest military post on the Northern Plains before its abandonment in 1890. It witnessed the entire saga of America’s western expansion and Native American resistance to expansion into their territories.

President Thomas Jefferson bought the territory of Louisiana from France in 1803. Known as the Louisiana Purchase, this new territory stretched from the Mississippi River west to the Rocky Mountains, and from Canada south to New Orleans. It doubled the size of the United States.

Jefferson believed that the young country should continue to grow. The original states in the east and south were not enough. He felt that it was important that the United States claim more land out west. This growth was known as Westward Expansion.
Jefferson believed that owning land, especially farming land, was the key to independence and freedom. A man who owned land did not need to work for anyone else. He was his own master. In order to provide enough land for all of its citizens, the United States would have to continue to expand, Jefferson believed.

**Westward expansion and slavery**

By 1840, nearly 7 million Americans lived in the West. Most had left their homes back east in search of better jobs and money. Like Thomas Jefferson, many of these pioneers believed that owning land was the path to freedom. The western frontier seemed to offer a chance at independence for all.

Meanwhile, one difficult question remained unsettled. Would slavery be allowed in the new western states?

Slavery was permitted in the Southern states, but not in the North. Many Southern farmers relied on slaves to do work on farms. Their African-American slaves worked for free and could be bought and sold like farm animals. Northern farmers were angered by this. Many believed it gave Southern farmers an unfair advantage in making money.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was an attempt to settle the problem. It admitted Missouri to the United States as a slave state. But, it declared that slavery would not be allowed north of Missouri.
However, the Missouri Compromise did not cover new territories that were not part of the Louisiana Purchase. Because of this, the fight over slavery was not really settled.

Westward expansion and the Mexican War

Americans kept on moving west in the years after the Missouri Compromise. Thousands moved into the Mexican territories of California, New Mexico and Texas. In 1837, Texas won independence from Mexico. It then asked to join the United States as a slave state.

In 1844, Southern farmer James K. Polk was elected president. Two years later, in 1846, Texas joined the United States as a slave state.

That same year, Polk declared war against Mexico and invaded it. Many Northerners were against the war. They saw it as an attempt to expand the area in which slavery would be allowed.

The Compromise of 1850

In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican War. It added more than 1 million square miles to the United States. The territory taken from Mexico was even larger than the Louisiana Purchase.

Fights soon broke out over whether slavery would be allowed in this new territory.

In 1850, Kentucky Senator Henry Clay proposed another compromise. California would enter the Union as a free state. No slavery would be allowed there. However, in the rest of the Mexican territory, the settlers themselves would decide if slavery would be allowed.

Bleeding Kansas

In 1854, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas proposed that two new states, Kansas and Nebraska, be established. Both were inside the Louisiana Purchase territory.

According to the Missouri Compromise, both states should have been free states. They were both north of Missouri. However, the Douglas plan gave settlers the right to decide whether their state would be slave or free.

Northerners were angry. “Free-soil” settlers were against slavery. They established their own government in the Kansas territory. Civil war broke out in Kansas between people who wanted slavery and those who did not. Hundreds of people died in the fighting, which became known as “Bleeding Kansas.”

Ten years later, the fight over slavery led to the nation’s Civil War. The question of slavery in the West nearly tore the United States into pieces.
Quiz

1. What are the MAIN ideas of this article?
   (A) Thomas Jefferson believed that the West was better for farming; it later became a problem to decide how many western states there would be.
   (B) Thomas Jefferson wanted Americans to farm their own land; it later became a problem to decide if Texas would allow slavery.
   (C) Thomas Jefferson started the process of westward expansion; it later became a problem to decide which western states would allow slavery.
   (D) Thomas Jefferson started the process of the Louisiana Purchase; it later became a problem to decide which states would be a part of Mexico.

2. Which sentence from the article is MOST important to include in its summary?
   (A) Jefferson believed that owning land, especially farming land, was the key to independence and freedom.
   (B) Most had left their homes back east in search of better jobs and money.
   (C) Many Southern farmers relied on slaves to do work on farms.
   (D) But, it declared that slavery would not be allowed north of Missouri.

3. What was the relationship between westward expansion and slavery?
   (A) Slavery caused westward expansion to happen slowly.
   (B) Slavery caused westward expansion to happen quickly.
   (C) Westward expansion created conflict over whether the South should allow slavery.
   (D) Westward expansion created conflict over where slavery would be allowed.

4. Which section of the article explains WHY Jefferson thought Westward Expansion was important?
   (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
   (B) "Westward expansion and slavery"
   (C) "Westward expansion and the Mexican War"
   (D) "The Compromise of 1850"
Answer Key

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