
The British colonies that declared their independence in 1776 were a string of loosely united states bordered by the Atlantic Ocean in the East and the Appalachian Mountains in the West. By 1848, the United States had become a continental republic with borders stretching to the Pacific. Settlement, war, and negotiation led to rapid territorial expansion, but that expansion was always accompanied by conflict and internal divisions.

Causes and Consequences of Expansion

While many factors drove expansion in the early American republic between 1783 and 1840, the most important was white Americans’ great desire to own land. From ordinary farmers to wealthy and well-connected planters, land ownership had an importance that was understood in far more than simple economic terms. Land ownership provided economic independence for families and social and political independence for men. For planters, landed wealth was a respectable means of acquiring and maintaining wealth without labor. For the wealthy and the well connected, land speculation was a sure means to prosperity in a society where land was always in great demand. Other factors also led to expansion. The United States remained acutely concerned about the security of its Western borderlands, frequently leading to the acquisition of additional territory through heated negotiations, invasion and war, or both. Finally, a sense of providential design that the United States should rule over the heart of the North American continent, most evident in the mid-century rhetoric of “manifest destiny,” also contributed to rapid expansion after the Revolution.

Expansion was rapid between 1783 and 1840, but it was also challenged, uncertain, and accompanied by dissension, disputes, and often war. White settlers in the West often fell out among themselves, as settlers and smallholders clashed with planters and speculators. White Westerners could unite, however, when their common interests seemed threatened by the federal government in the East, American Indians in the West, or both. American expansion often led to war, most frequently with Indian nations that refused to recognize inflated American claims to their territory. Expansion also caused frequent political conflicts between the major political parties. Republicans, and later Democrats, generally favored expansion, while Federalists and Whigs generally opposed it. Finally, after 1840, expansion would become the most important source of sectional conflict.

Settlement and Expansion, 1783–1840

The American War for Independence decisively shaped postwar expansion. Various American colonies had long made claims to the trans-Appalachian West (the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River) and the Ohio Valley, and the war presented an opportunity to strengthen territorial claims there. State forces and local militias launched campaigns against British posts from western New York as far west as the Mississippi River in present-day Illinois. Although these battles would have little influence on the war's military outcome, American
victories validated claims to the trans-Appalachian West. The 1783 Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, marked American borders at the Great Lakes in the north, the Mississippi River in the west, and a disputed region along the 31st parallel (the present-day northern border of Florida) in the south.

It would take nearly two decades for the United States to create an effective system for settling and integrating the West into the Union. Taken together, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the Constitution of 1787, and the Harrison Land Act of 1800 provided a constitutional, political, ideological, and economic framework for a lasting American empire in the West. The Northwest Ordinance created a model for establishing territorial governments in the West, and then leading those territories to eventual statehood. The Northwest Ordinance established that the United States would not govern its Western territories as colonies and guaranteed certain rights to settlers. The Constitution created a more powerful federal government that was explicitly granted the authority to govern the United States’ vast Western territories. Finally, passage of the Harrison Land Act of 1800 (and its numerous modifications in later years) created a standard system for surveying and selling federal lands in the West. Economically and ideologically, the Harrison Land Act reflected popular demands that the federal government favor actual settlers over speculators by selling land in small parcels, at low prices, and with generous credit terms, even if this system did not always favor actual settlers in practice.

With the implementation of the Northwest Ordinance and the ratification of the Constitution, settlement in the Ohio Valley increased rapidly. Nonetheless, in the 1790s the United States could maintain only the barest presence in the West, provoking frequent challenges to American authority. Although the federal government hoped to avoid wars with the still-powerful and numerous Indian nations in the West, settlers repeatedly encroached on Indian lands, triggering costly and often disastrous Indian wars. At the same time, American officials feared that British and Spanish officials operating out of Florida and Canada were inciting Native Americans to make war against American settlers. Squatters illegally settled on federal lands, depriving the government of a needed source of revenue. Finally, the inability of the federal government to address the interests and concerns of Western Americans stoked fears of disunion between the Atlantic states and the trans-Appalachian West. Adding to fears of disunion, European powers retained an abiding interest in the Western borderlands of the United States and the Mississippi Valley. American officials, trusting neither the loyalty of American settlers nor the intentions of European imperialists, feared that agents of those powers would seize on Western discontent to break the trans-Appalachian West away from the United States. These fears were manifested in the failed conspiracies involving Tennessee senator William Blount in 1797 and former vice president Aaron Burr in 1804.

The main source of Western discontent and foreign intrigue was the failure of the United States government to secure American access to the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans. The entire commerce of the trans-Appalachian West flowed down the Mississippi, and whatever power controlled the lower Mississippi Valley and the port of New Orleans could exert inordinate influence over Western settlers. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the United States both secured access to the Mississippi River and New Orleans and doubled in size by extending its borders to the Rocky Mountains. Before the United States continued its Western expansion, however, more immediate threats east of the Mississippi would lead to another war.
with Great Britain, the conquest of additional Indian lands, and the American acquisition of Spanish Florida.

In the decade preceding the War of 1812, American encroachment on American Indian lands led to escalating violence. Although Indians had good reason to oppose American expansion, American officials and Western settlers were convinced that the British were responsible for supplying them with weapons and inciting Indian attacks against Americans. By 1810, Western Americans insisted that war against both the British and hostile Indian nations was necessary to bring order, peace, and security. In the West, the War of 1812 was a war between Western Americans and Indian tribes as much as it was a war between the British and the United States. The war effectively established American supremacy east of the Mississippi River. After 1815, the British ceased supporting the tribes and abandoned their long-standing policy of harassing the United States in the West. Finally, American victories over Indian nations destroyed the ability of Eastern Indians to mount effective, united resistance against American expansion. In the war's wake, federal officials and state governments began the long process of dispossessing American Indians of their territorial claims east of the Mississippi.

With American claims to the trans-Appalachian West secure, the brief “Era of Good Feelings” (1817–1824) was marked by both expansion and consolidation. By late 1818, six Western territories had either received or were on the verge of receiving statehood. Britain acknowledged some American claims to the Oregon Country on the Pacific coast. Spain stood ready to cede Florida after Andrew Jackson launched an unauthorized invasion of the Spanish province in 1818. Finally, some Southern politicians claimed that the Louisiana Purchase gave the United States legitimate claims to Spanish Texas.

Postwar expansion was soon derailed by slavery. In 1819, Northern congressmen demanded that Missouri become a free state as a condition of statehood. The Missouri controversy involved heated debates over the past and future expansion of slavery and the balance of free and slave states in the Union. It would take the better part of two years before the Missouri Compromise settled the issue of slavery expansion in the Louisiana Purchase by admitting Missouri as a slave state but closing off the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase north of the 36°30′ parallel to slavery. More immediately, the Missouri crisis would have a chilling effect on the rapid expansion that had marked the immediate postwar years.

The effects of the Missouri crisis were felt most immediately in the negotiations to acquire Spanish territory bordering the Southern and Western United States. After Andrew Jackson's 1818 invasion, Spain readily ceded Florida. More heated negotiations centered on the boundaries between the United States and Spanish Mexico. Shaken by the Missouri controversy, Southern politicians insisted that the United States force Spain to relinquish Texas, which some Southerners expected would yield three to five future slave states. Led by Henry Clay, Southern expansionists demanded that the Monroe administration acquire Texas as compensation for the Missouri Compromise's limiting slaveholders’ access to the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase. While more moderate Southern leaders, such as Pres. James Monroe and Sec. of War John C. Calhoun, hoped to acquire Texas, they also realized that the North would adamantly oppose bringing more territory for slavery into the Union. In the end, the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty ceded American claims to Spanish Texas in exchange for Spain's recognizing American claims to the Oregon Country stretching to the Pacific Coast. The final ratification of the Adams-
Onís Treaty in 1821 was followed by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Warning European powers to stay out of the affairs of the Americas, the doctrine was understood at the time as a defensive measure designed to protect new American territory and claims, and not as a rationale for American intervention in Latin America, as it would become in the later nineteenth century.

The 1820s and 1830s were marked by both settlement of existing territory and the expropriation of American Indian lands. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 connected the once sparsely populated Great Lakes region with the East, leading to the rapid settlement of northern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and southern Michigan and Wisconsin. In the Southwest, the expansion of the plantation economy led to increased American encroachment on remaining Indian lands stretching from North Carolina to Florida. Between 1825 and 1840, the United States government and the states of the Old Southwest waged a protracted series of legal, political, and military battles that forced Eastern tribes to cede their land and relocate west of the Mississippi. The initiative for removal, along with new calls for expansion, was driven by the emergence of the Democratic Party, a diverse coalition of land-hungry Southern planters, Northern and Southern farmers, and Northern urban workingmen who hoped that expansion would relieve population pressures that drove down wages in Northeastern cities. Expansion was nonetheless stalled by the emergence of the Whig Party in the late 1820s. Favoring settlement and development of territory already owned by the United States, Whigs opposed rapid Western expansion, the acquisition of Texas or other Mexican territory, and the forced removal of American Indians. Though Whigs were agreeable to expansion, they insisted that it be done in a deliberate, orderly fashion, directed and controlled by the federal government.

Whig opposition and fears of sectional conflict could only forestall expansion for so long. In the 1840s, Democrats cast expansion in terms of “manifest destiny.” This term was first articulated in a famous essay by John L. O'Sullivan titled “Annexation,” which appeared in the Democratic Review in July 1845. O'Sullivan declared that the United States was destined “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”

**Slavery, Expansion, and Sectional Conflict, 1840–1860**

The absence of sectional discord that marked the 1820s and 1830s would not last. In 1844, the Democrats nominated James K. Polk on a platform of the annexation of Texas and American expansion to the Pacific, turning the decidedly sectional policy of Texas annexation into the nationalist agenda of manifest destiny. Polk's electoral victory led to the annexation of Texas in early 1845, which was followed by war with Mexico a year later. In the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War (1846–1848), Mexico ceded much of the present-day American Southwest—from Texas to California—to the United States.

The sectional implications of Texas annexation and the conquest of so much territory could not be avoided. In August 1846, Northern Democrats—who had ardently supported annexation, expansion, and war—introduced and overwhelmingly supported the Wilmot Proviso, the stipulation that slavery be barred from all territory acquired from Mexico as a result of war. Slavery was now irrevocably tied to expansion. Four years of sectional battles over the expansion of slavery would be required before the Compromise of 1850 addressed the immediate problems of slavery in the territory acquired in the Mexican War. The compromise, however,
failed to address the larger problem of slavery expansion, which would become the most vexing issue of sectional conflict in the 1850s. Indeed, by 1860, expansion divided Northern Republicans and Southern whites more than any other issue.

Between 1776 and 1848, the United States expanded from a string of seaboard colonies into a continental republic. By the 1840s, Southern demands that slavery be permitted wherever the United States expanded meant that expansion would ultimately lead to disunion and civil war.

**Bibliography and Further Reading**


