Chapter 14: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1830s–1850s

Chapter Review

I. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: Texans and Tejanos “Remember the Alamo”

In February and March 1836, 187 Texas holding the fortified Alamo mission in San Antonio held out against Santa Anna and 5,000 Mexican troops. In the final assault, all the defenders of the Alamo were killed. Although the heroic defense of the Alamo became a rallying cry for the Texas independence movement and a cherished memory for generations of Texans, few have recalled the role of Tejanos—Spanish-speaking Texans—in the struggle. Although Tejanos played a large role in the new Republic of Texas, continued “white” settlement and the forces of manifest destiny progressively marginalized the Tejanos as the frontier west became intolerant of diversity, rejecting Indians and Hispanics as real Americans. The “American” community of the nineteenth century had different meanings for different groups.

MHL document: A Tejano Describes the Beginning of the Texas Revolution in 1835–36 at www.myhistorylab.com

II. EXPLORING THE WEST

American settlement seemed to be unstoppable. By 1840, settlers had occupied all of the land east of the Mississippi River and had organized most of the area into states. This rapid expansion was caused by the market revolution and the extraordinary expansion of transportation and commerce that accompanied the market revolution. The speed and success of the expansion was a source of great pride for Americans and encouraged further settlement. By 1848, the United States had become a continental nation.

a. The Fur Trade

From the 1670s to the 1840s, the fur trade was an important spur to North American exploration. In 1824, William Henry Ashley instituted the rendezvous system, a yearly trade fair (modeled on traditional Indian trade gatherings) to which trappers brought their catch of furs. The event was a many-day affair characterized by trading, drinking, and gambling, bringing together many nationalities and people of mixed race in a short-lived community. By the 1840s the population of beaver in the West was virtually destroyed and settlement would replace frontier trade.

b. Government-Sponsored Exploration

The federal government played an important role in the exploration and development of the West. The Lewis and Clark expedition had set a precedent for government-funded expeditions. Several missions followed. During 1806–07, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike led an
expedition to the Rocky Mountains and from 1819 to 1820 Major Stephen Long explored and mapped the Great Plains. In 1843 through 1844, John C. Fremont mapped overland trails to Oregon and California. The results of these surveys were published by the government, complete with maps and illustrations. These images of the American West made a powerful contribution to the emerging American self-image. After explorers came settlers as the federal government sold western public lands at low prices.

c. Expansion and Indian Policy

To make way for American settlers, eastern Indian tribes were being removed from their homelands to Indian Territory, a region west of Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa on the eastern Great Plains, which was popularly known as the Great American Desert. The government officials who negotiated these removals failed to take into account how quickly western settlement would progress. As a result, encroachment of Indian Territory was not long in coming. In 1854, the government abolished the northern half of the Indian Territory and opened these areas to immediate white settlement. Despite these setbacks, those members of the southern tribes who had survived the traumas of forcible removal quickly created impressive new communities.

III. THE POLITICS OF EXPANSION

America’s rapid expansion reinforced the American notion that they were pioneers. The repeated experience of settling new frontiers across the continent had shaped Americans into uniquely optimistic, adventurous, and democratic people.

a. Manifest Destiny, an Expansionist Ideology

Americans justified their endless quest for westward expansion as “manifest destiny,” a term coined by newspaperman John O’Sullivan. Manifest destiny argued that Americans had a God-given right to bring the benefits of American democracy to other people, by force if necessary. After the Panic of 1837, many politicians also became convinced that the nation’s prosperity depended on continued westward expansion. Expansionism was deeply tied to national politics. Most Democrats, following Jefferson’s agrarian ideal, supported westward expansion while most Whigs opposed it, in part because they feared it would raise the divisive issue of slavery’s extension into the western territories. But the average western settler was motivated, not by politics, but by hope for economic advancement.

MHL document: A Newspaper Man Declares the “Manifest Destiny” of the United States in 1845 at www.myhistorylab.com

b. The Overland Trails

The 2,000-mile trip from the Missouri River to Oregon and California took seven months or more. Pioneers often arrived at their destinations with little food and few personal belongings. Despite the risks, settlers continued to move west, motivated by a sense of
adventure, economic opportunity, and the desire to experience the unknown. Few pioneers
traveled alone because they needed help crossing rivers and mountains in heavy wagons.
All pioneers were part of a new, westward-moving community in which they had to accept
the advantages and disadvantages of community membership. In addition to exhaustion and
boredom, wagon trains were often beset by illness and accident. Despite these risks, by
1860 almost 300,000 people had traveled the Overland Trails to Oregon and California. In
1869, the completion of the transcontinental railroad ended the era of the wagon train.

MHL document: Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (1847) at
www.myhistorylab.com

MHL document: Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer, Oregon Trail Journal (1847, 1848) at
www.myhistorylab.com

c. Oregon

The American settlement of Oregon began with commercial contacts between the
region’s Indian peoples and European and American traders, in a relatively open “frontier
of inclusion,” such as at the polyglot British Fort Vancouver founded in 1824. The effect
of the fur trade on native peoples was disastrous and they were decimated by European
disease. The second stage of settlement, the “frontier of exclusion” occurred gradually as
white settlers to the territory began to outnumber the original native population. This
occurrence signaled the arrival of the “frontier of exclusion.” Americans and British
maintained a joint occupation of Oregon until 1846, when America and Britain signed a
treaty that placed the U.S.-Canada border at the 49th parallel. Disease and war reduced
Indian populations until Oregon was admitted as a state in 1859.

MHL document: Mariah and Stephen King to their Family (1846) at
www.myhistorylab.com

d. The Santa Fé Trade

Commerce with Santa Fé had long been a goal of American traders. Spain forcefully
resisted American penetration into their territories, but independent Mexico welcomed
American traders in Santa Fé. Settlements and trading posts soon grew up along the Santa
Fé Trail. The three small communities of Pueblo, Hardscrabble, and Greenhorn were
populated by men of all nationalities and their Mexican and Indian wives. This racially
and ethnically mixed existence was characteristic of all early trading frontiers.

e. Mexican Texas

When Mexico gained its independence in 1821, Texas had 2,200 or so Tejano residents
on scattered missions, presidios, and ranchos, among them were vaqueros, mixed-blood
people renowned for their horsemanship skills. Tejanos tended to be small farmers or
common laborers. A final group living in the Texas region was the nomadic Comanche
Indians who followed the buffalo herds and had no interest in Christian conversion or incorporation into Tejano communities.

f. Americans in Texas

The American settlement of Texas differed markedly from that of other frontiers. The Texas settlement was fully legal and land ownership was permitted through formal contracts with the Mexican government. Stephen F. Austin encouraged prosperous southern slave owners to move to the territory to expand their land holdings devoted to the cultivation of cotton. Soon, Americans outnumbered Tejanos two to one. American settlements were highly organized slave plantations producing cotton sold in the international market. Austin’s settlers were predominantly Southerners who viewed Texas as a natural extension of the cotton frontier in Mississippi and Louisiana. The Americans in Texas were immigrants to another country and were thus prevented from setting up American-style governments in their settlements. As the Mexican government restricted American immigration and outlawed slavery, American settlers discussed rebellion. In fall 1835, war broke out and by May 14, 1836, Santa Anna signed a treaty recognizing the independence of the Republic of Texas. The Mexican Congress, however, refused to recognize Texas independence.

g. The Republic of Texas

The United States Congress refused to grant the Republic of Texas statehood when it applied for admission to the Union in 1837. Members, led by John Quincy Adams, protested the admission of a 14th slave state. Texans continued to push for annexation to the United States and the matter soon became an urgent matter of national politics. James K. Polk won the presidential election of 1844 in part due to his campaign promise to annex Texas. His election was interpreted as a popular mandate for expansion and in response John Tyler, in one of his last acts as president, pushed a joint resolution through Congress for the annexation of Texas. Texas entered the Union in December 1845 with tensions between whites, Tejanos, and Indians still unresolved.

MHL video: The Annexation of Texas at www.myhistorylab.com

IV. THE MEXICAN–AMERICAN WAR

President James K. Polk, the “manifest destiny president,” added Oregon to the United States in 1846 and in 1848 he acquired Mexico’s northern provinces of California and New Mexico as well. With the annexation of Texas, the United States, in three short years, increased its land by nearly 70 percent.

MHL document: James K. Polk, First Inaugural Address (1845) at www.myhistorylab.com

a. Origins of the War
In June 1845, Polk sent Zachary Taylor to Texas and by October a force of 3,500 Americans were on the Nueces River with orders to defend Texas in the event of a Mexican invasion. Polk also secretly instructed the Pacific naval squadron to seize the California ports in Mexico in case of war. In November 1845, Polk sent secret envoy John Slidell to Mexico to offer $30 million or more for the Rio Grande border in Texas and Mexico’s provinces of New Mexico and California. The attempt was unsuccessful and in April 1846, after a brief skirmish between Mexican and American soldiers, Polk, claiming Mexican aggression, sent a war message to Congress. On May 13, 1846, Congress declared war on Mexico.

MHL map: The Mexican-American War at www.myhistorylab.com

b. Mr. Polk’s War

From the start, the war was divisive. Whig critics in Congress including Abraham Lincoln questioned Polk’s account of the border incident that sparked the war and called it “Mr. Polk’s War.” Polk used the war as an opportunity to expand and redefine the role of the president as commander-in-chief during times of war. Thoreau went to jail rather than pay taxes to support the war. Only after months of often brutal fighting Mexico City fell to American forces, ending the war. In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed February 2, 1848, Mexico ceded its northern provinces of California and New Mexico and accepted the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas. The United States agreed to pay Mexico $15 million in return for the land. Despite Northern concerns over expansion and southern doubts that “coloreds and mixed breeds” could be made American, Polk reluctantly accepted the treaty. Congress later paid Mexico $10 million for the Gadsden Purchase to facilitate a southern railroad route.

MHL audio: A New Englander Calls for Civil Disobedience to Protest the Mexican War at www.myhistorylab.com

c. The Press and Popular War Enthusiasm

The Mexican-American War was the first war to be extensively covered by the news media and presented to the American public on a near daily basis. This was due in large part to the invention of the telegraph, which sped up the time it took to send information from one area to another. For the first time in American history, accounts by journalists, not the opinions of politicians, became the major shapers of popular attitudes toward the war. Reports united Americans, although briefly, in a common cause and concern and war news continued to have a deep hold on the popular imagination.

V. CALIFORNIA AND THE GOLD RUSH

In the early 1840s, California was inhabited by many seminomadic Indian tribes and Californios, descendants of the Spanish Mexican pioneers who began settling there in 1769. Then came the Gold Rush of 1849 and California was permanently changed.

a. Russian-Californio Trade
The first outsiders to penetrate the isolation of Spanish California were the Russians. Californios, evading the prohibition of former trade imposed by Spanish Mexico, traded with the Russian American Fur Company in Sitka, Alaska. When Mexico became independent in 1821, the California trade was opened to ships from all nations but Californios continued their special economic relationship with the Russians. When agricultural productivity in the region declined, the Russians turned to the rich farms of the Hudson Bay Company for trade. In 1841, with the sale of Fort Ross, the Russian-Californio connection came to an end.

MHL document: Richard Henry Dana, Two Years before the Mast (1840) at www.myhistorylab.com

b. Early American Settlement

Johann Augustus Sutter, a Swiss who had settled in California in 1839 and became a Mexican citizen, would serve as a focal point of American settlement in the 1840s. The 1840s immigrants made no efforts to intermarry with the Californios or to conform to Spanish ways. They aspired to take over the territory. In June 1846, these Americans staged the Bear Flag revolt, declaring independence from Mexico. American takeover of California did not become formal until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, but few California remained a remote frontier little noticed by most Americans.

c. Gold!

In January 1848, James Marshall discovered gold flakes at Sutter’s Mill. The east coast did not hear about the discovery of gold in California until the autumn of 1848. Thousands of people left their jobs and headed west, by land and by sea, to make their fortune. These “forty-niners” transformed a quiet ranching paradise into a tumultuous community in search of wealth. Eighty percent of forty-niners were Americans from every state. Chinese also immigrated to the California in the hopes of finding riches. The distinctive appearance of the Chinese and their perceived economic threat aroused American hostility. By the 1870s, Chinese immigration to the United States had been sharply curtailed. Although few miners struck it rich, others like Levi Strauss succeeded by clothing and supplying the miners. The gold rush caused explosive population growth in parts of California and in 1850, California was admitted to the Union as a state.

d. Mining Camps

Most mining camps boomed and emptied within a few short years, leaving behind “ghost towns.” The crowded mining camps were often cheerless, uncomfortable, and unhealthy. Most miners were young, unmarried, and unsuccessful in their search for riches. Supplying miners and the towns with goods and services they wanted was a more promising path to riches. Violence, often racially motivated, was endemic in mining camps. By the mid-1850s the gold rush had passed but California was left with a large population, thriving agriculture, and a corporate mining industry. It was much more
multicultural than the rest of the nation because many immigrants from other countries remained in California after the gold rush ended. Tragic consequences of the gold rush included the virtual extermination of the California Indian peoples, the dispossession of many Californios from their lands, and the increasing racial animosity towards the Chinese in America.

MHL document: Edward Gould Buffum, from Six Months in the Gold Mines (1850) at www.myhistorylab.com

VI. THE POLITICS OF MANIFEST DESTINY

From 1845 to 1848, the territory of the United States grew by an astounding 70 percent. This expansion, pushed by economic desires and feelings of American cultural superiority, led directly to the emergence of slavery as the dominant issue in national politics.

a. The Wilmot Proviso

In 1846, almost all Whigs opposed Polk’s expansionism on antislavery grounds. However it was Democratic congressman David Wilmot who opened the door to sectional controversy over expansion with his proposal of an addition to a military appropriations bill, that slavery be banned in all the territories acquired from Mexico. Southern Whigs joined with southern Democrats to vote against the measure while Northerners of both parties supported it. Wilmot’s proviso triggered the first breakdown of the national party system based on sectional interests.

b. The Free-Soil Movement

The dramatic rise of the Liberty Party, founded in 1840 by abolitionists, threatened to take votes away from both the Whigs and the Democrats. The Liberty Party took an uncompromising stance against slavery and proposed to prohibit the admission of slave states to the Union. Although the Liberty Party’s stance was too uncompromising for most Northerners, from this movement the Free-Soil Party, a more moderate party opposed to slavery, was born. The free-soil argument focused on how slavery posed a threat to northern expansion and established a direct link between expansion and sectional politics. Free-soilers were willing to allow slavery to continue in the states where it already existed but they refused to allow the extension of slavery into the western territories, not only for economic but racist reasons, as few whites were willing to consider equality for African Americans, slave or free.

c. The Election of 1848

Lewis Cass of Michigan, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1848, proposed applying the doctrine of “popular sovereignty” to the slave-free issue, leaving the resolution of the issue up to the territories and states rather than Congress. The Whigs supported war hero (and slave owner) Zachary Taylor as their candidate in the 1848 election. Taylor, was deliberately vague about slavery and focused on his appeal as a
national candidate above sectional disputes. Martin Van Buren ran as a spoiler in the election as the Free-Soil Party nominee. Zachary Taylor won the election with only 47 percent of the popular vote because Van Buren’s candidacy effectively drew voters away from Cass and the Democratic Party. When Taylor died in mid-term, the dim hope of national unity he offered died with him as the sectional debate reignited.

VII. CONCLUSION

The national expansion of the 1840s seemed to confirm the promise of manifest destiny but, as the election of 1848 revealed, also revealed political problems that, unresolved, would lead to civil war. Expansion, rather than uniting the nation, nearly destroyed the one community all Americans shared in the federal Union.

Learning Objectives:

Students should be able to answer the following questions after studying Chapter 14:

1. What was manifest destiny?
2. What were the major differences between the Oregon, Texas, and California frontiers?
3. What were the most important consequences of the Mexican-American War?
4. What was the link between expansion and slavery?
5. What were the issues in the election of 1848?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. Define and discuss the concept of manifest destiny.

   Answer: Manifest destiny was a belief that America had a God-given right and responsibility to settle the West, displacing Indians, Mexicans, and any others who stood in the way. Many believed that expansion was necessary for American economic prosperity as well.

2. What were the different ways in which the frontiers in Oregon, Texas, and California moved from frontiers of inclusion to frontiers of exclusion?

   Answer: As Native people were decimated by disease and the number of white settlers increased, Oregon moved to a frontier of exclusion. In Texas this process occurred as settlement was legal, even when the region had been a Mexican territory. Southerners were encouraged to move there with their slaves. As Texas became an independent Republic, seeking admission into the United States, white native-born Americans came to dominate the economic and political order. In California, the discovery of gold attracted people from the United States as well as China and elsewhere seeking their fortune. The rapid population growth by whites in particular led to California becoming a state in 1850.
3. What issues were raised by the U.S.–Mexican War and what issues (if any) did it solve?

**Answer:** The war with Mexico was criticized by many Whigs who believed it unnecessary. The war was seen as a land grab, especially for slave owners. The issue of the expansion of slavery, one of the primary causes of the Civil War, emerged because of the war, creating more problems than it solved.

4. What were the effects of the California Gold Rush on its participants, on California, and on the nation as a whole?

**Answer:** The California Gold Rush transformed a quiet agrarian community into a raucous, rapidly growing state. Few people got rich, but many remained, becoming ranchers and farmers. Although California remained multicultural, most of the native population was wiped out, Californios (descendants of the early Mexicans in California) were disposed of their lands, and Chinese immigrants faced increasing racial animosity. In addition, the debate over the entry of California divided the nation between slave and free.

5. What were the factors that made the free-soil doctrine politically acceptable and abolitionism so controversial?

**Answer:** Free soil was more acceptable than abolitionism because free-soilers advocated allowing slavery to persist where it currently existed, but to prevent its expansion into the new territory of the west. Although many northerners opposed slavery, they did not want black competition for jobs and land. Thus, the free-soil ideology remained consistent with the free labor ideals that had come to dominate the north.

**Lecture Outline**

American Communities: Texans and Tejanos and the Alamo

Exploring the West
- The Fur Trade
- Government-Sponsored Exploration
- Expansion and Indian Policy

The Politics of Expansion
- Manifest Destiny, an Expansionist Ideology
- The Overland Trails
- Oregon
- The Santa Fé Trade
- Mexican Texas
- Americans in Texas
- The Republic of Texas

The Mexican-American War
- Origins of the War
Mr. Polk’s War
The Press and Popular War Enthusiasm

California and the Gold Rush
Russian-Californio Trade
Early American Settlement
Gold!
Mining Camps

The Politics of Manifest Destiny
The Wilmot Proviso
The Free-Soil Movement
The Election of 1848

Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Web
The Black Hawk War of 1832: http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/blackhawk/index.html

The Mexican-American War: http://dig.lib.niu.edu/mexicanwar/about.html

PBS web site on the U.S-Mexican War:
http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/index_flash.html

Films/Video
The Gold Rush, American Experience video describing the diverse characters hoping to strike it rich in California. (PBS Video, 2006)

Remember the Alamo, American Experience video that successfully integrates Tejanos into the story and myths of the Alamo. (PBS Video, 2004)

My History Lab Resources

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

Read the Documents
A Tejano Describes the Beginning of the Texas Revolution in 1835–36
William Barret Travis, Letter from the Alamo (1836)
A Newspaper Man Declares the “Manifest Destiny” of the United States in 1845
Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (1847)
Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer, Oregon Trail Journal (1847, 1848)
Mariah and Stephen King to their Family (1846)
While the phrase manifest destiny was coined in 1845 to characterize the events of the nation’s western expansion, the principles behind its expression—an ordained progressive future of success for the American people—have been expressed in other periods as well, albeit with different names. Students could discuss the similarities and differences of these movements at various periods in American history.