Westward expansion involved the massive migration of thousands of Americans across the western half of the North American Continent from the mid-1700s through the latter part of the 19th century. The move westward shaped much of American history, and in fact, for many, characterized the American dream that hard work would eventually lead to financial success. For middle-class Americans and newly arrived foreign immigrants, the West was truly the land of opportunity.

**Pre- and Post-Colonial Expansion**

Since the founding of the first British colonies on the Eastern seaboard of North America, settlers have attempted to spread west across the continent. In a remarkably short span of time, American colonists moved from the small communities founded along the seashore toward the interior of the country, often facing great hardships as they did so. Settlers felled forests and cleared meadows for farming, often suffering through extreme conditions of weather and encountering fierce opposition from Native Americans, who resented the colonists' efforts to claim and dominate large tracts of land that had previously been open for their use.

By the mid 18th century, much of the eastern coastline and the adjacent interior had been settled, and adventurous colonists struck out even further west in search of more farming land. As increasing numbers of European Americans crossed the Appalachian Mountains to settle land in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys, relations between whites and American Indians became significantly strained. This westward migration also led to conflict between English colonists and their French counterparts, all of whom claimed the land.

After the British defeated the French in the French and Indian War and seized their North American holdings in 1763, the British government hoped that such conflicts would subside. However, tensions remained high between Native Americans and English colonists, resulting in a series of attacks and counterattacks between the two groups. Not wanting to maintain a large military presence in this interior region of the continent, King George III issued the Proclamation of 1763, declaring that no British colonists could settle west of the Appalachian Mountains. The majority of colonists despised the proclamation, and it became one in a long list of colonial grievances against the British.

After the American Revolution, thousands of settlers moved through the Cumberland Gap along the Wilderness Road of the Appalachian Mountains. Initially, the migrants settled mostly in the Ohio River Valley, which was also known as the Old Northwest. Most of the new arrivals were farmers, who labored long to turn wilderness into cultivated land. By 1795, over 200,000 European Americans lived in this region, and the white population rate showed a dramatic increase over the course of the next half century. By 1810, over 1 million people lived in this region, and by 1850, that number had climbed to more than 6 million.

**American Indian Wars**

This rapid expansion westward into the trans-Appalachian West inevitably led to conflict with the Native Americans who had lived for centuries in this area, as European-American settlers seldom recognized
American Indian claims to land. Sporadic yet violent American Indian wars erupted throughout the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. During the first few decades of the 19th century, some American Indian groups managed to stymie white settlement, with the two most prominent examples being the Creek in the South and a confederation of tribes led by Tecumseh in the Old Northwest. Although these conflicts often slowed white settlement, they could not stop it, particularly as the European-Americans usually had the backing of the federal government.

First in the War of 1812, when many Native American groups allied themselves with the British, and then in the Creek War and Black Hawk War, the Native American threat was removed and the American Indians pushed further west or onto reservations. President Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policy, introduced in 1829, forced any Indians remaining east of the Appalachians all the way west of the Mississippi River to what was dubbed Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

This movement from the Eastern seaboard across the Appalachian Mountains and into the Mississippi River Valley was the first stage of westward expansion. The most significant westward migration, however, occurred in the mid 19th century and spread westward from the Mississippi River across the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and to the Pacific Ocean. Between 1840 and 1870, over 300,000 Americans migrated to the West, many of them making the arduous journey in caravans of covered wagons, facing innumerable challenges and dangers along the way.

**Incentives and Justifications**

This territory came under control of the U.S. government throughout the 19th century, starting with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and culminating in the 1848 Mexican Cession following the Mexican-American War. In between these two overwhelming additions, the U.S. government had successfully bullied or negotiated with Spain and Great Britain to relinquish their claims to other territory in Florida and the Pacific Northwest respectively.

As overcrowding and land shortages emerged as problems in the East due to the burgeoning population, more and more Americans began to move west in search of better opportunities. Most of these settlers were fired with a spirit of adventure and purpose that promoted westward expansion. Known as manifest destiny, the drive to spread American culture and values across the continent served as the higher moral goal that inspired and justified this massive wave of migration. Manifest destiny, however, also encouraged Americans to denigrate and dismiss other non-American cultures as inferior.

The U.S. government encouraged westward expansion, rightly believing that American settlements would strengthen U.S. claims on these regions. The Land Ordinance of 1785, which oversaw the governing of the Old Northwest, served as an important precedent for legislators. The legislation had been drafted by Thomas Jefferson and enacted to ensure the smooth acceptance of new territory into the federal Union. Jefferson devised a system whereby land was surveyed and then marked into sections of one square mile and quarter sections of 160 acres each. The government then sold the land at public auction at a reasonable price. The act also established a procedure by which the Old Northwest would be broken into five territories, which could then apply for admission to the federal Union after meeting certain requirements, most of which concerned population and securing the right of self-government. This provision ensured that future states could enter the Union on equal footing with the original 13 states, serving as a further inducement to creating states across the continent.

**The Homestead Act**

Congress enacted numerous additional land laws during the 19th century,
but the basic system created by the Land Ordinance remained predominant. The most significant piece of land legislation passed in the 19th century was the Homestead Act (1862), proving essential in encouraging westward migration into the Great Plains and points further west. The act granted 160 acres free to anyone, either citizen or noncitizen, who agreed to build a house on the land, live there, and farm it for five years. The law also included a provision that allowed settlers to buy the land outright after they had lived on it for six months at the nominal price of $1.25 an acre.

The passage of the Homestead Act corresponded to the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Completed in 1869, the railroad linked Omaha, Nebraska with Sacramento, California, transforming an overland journey that had taken several months by wagon or stagecoach into one that lasted just five days by train. The impact of the railroad cannot be overstated. Not only could people move more easily from one end of the continent to the other, but farm products could be transported to distant markets with relative ease. Although the railroad owners made astronomical profits from the venture, farmers also had the opportunity to tap into markets that had previously been beyond their reach, thus encouraging further settlement and cultivation of land.

Between 1862 and 1890, approximately 2 million people settled on nearly 375,000 farms claimed through the Homestead Act. The act did not meet the needs of many Western farmers, however. The allotment of 160 acres was too small for effective ranching and farming in the arid West, and without irrigation, much of the West would remain uncultivated. To remedy this problem, Congress passed a series of laws that granted more land to individuals in the West, including the Timber Culture Act of 1873 and the Desert Land Act of 1877. With these laws and others, thousands of individuals and families moved westward and settled.

Once again, however, European-American settlers encountered hostility from Native American groups in the West, who were increasingly being pushed off their land and forced onto reservations. A series of Indian wars on the Great Plains and along the Pacific coast erupted in the second half of the 19th century, slowing but not halting white migration to these regions. With the full backing of the U.S. government, which ordered the U.S. Army to clear a path for white settlement, western migrants ultimately prevailed, virtually destroying the last remnants of Native American power by 1890.

**Economic and Social Motivators**

The motivations for migration were widely varied. Most individuals and families who chose to migrate did so for economic reasons. A significant proportion of the migrants were family farmers who lived in the Midwest or Upper South. They were neither greatly successful nor terribly poor. Their migration, they hoped, would improve their economic fortunes.

This motivation proved especially true for those moving to mineral rushes. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, the California gold rush the following year led to massive migration of mostly single men who became known as forty-niners. Approximately 120,000 individuals moved to California during the gold rush years. This group was the largest single group of migrants, although they did not achieve the stability the farmers often enjoyed. Farmers were never far behind the miners, however, and the rough-and-tumble lifestyle of gold and silver prospectors was invariably succeeded by the growth of more stable communities.

Economic motives were not the only reasons for such massive migration, however. Many came to the
West seeking greater personal freedom than they could enjoy in the established East. With the population sparsely settled, the West offered an environment of fewer laws and societal restrictions. Many nontraditional religious groups sought this freedom to worship as they pleased, but no group came in such large numbers as the Mormons. Migrating to the banks of the Great Salt Lake in the territory of Utah in the late 1840s, the Mormons established a thriving society of their own in the West. Hundreds of families followed what became known as the Mormon Trail to establish what they hoped would be a religious utopia in the West free from the persecution they faced elsewhere in the United States.

Similar to the Mormons, African Americans, many of them newly freed from slavery, migrated to towns on the Great Plains as well after the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, hoping for more opportunities. By 1880, 15,000 African Americans lived in the West, where they found a greater degree of equality with whites, although racial prejudice was still strong in many areas.

**Challenges to Migration**

Despite the promise of a better life in the West, the decision to migrate was not an easy one. In addition to the hardships and dangers of facing hostile American Indians and a myriad of physical challenges imposed by the wilderness, the journey itself cost a significant amount of money. Although the Homestead Act offered free land to migrants, other costs remained. In the 1840s and 1850s, it cost between $750 and $1,500 to journey to Oregon or California and establish a farm. That high cost meant that the very poor were unlikely to migrate.

In addition, migrants packed all they needed into a 2,000- to 2,500-pound wagon, 10 feet long with two-foot sides. A team of four oxen pulled the wagon. The families brought with them staples of bread, bacon, and coffee for nourishment along the way but had to find additional sustenance on the trail. Some brought along chickens and drove cattle, which helped provide food on the overland journey but added to the size and unwieldiness of their caravans. Most migrants came west in groups, the mythical wagon trains of Western folklore, which offered protection and companionship on the difficult journey. Although wagon trains formed up in St. Louis and other jumping-off points, many times the families traveling together were related or old friends.

There were four basic overland routes, each of which presented enormous challenges for migrants. The Oregon Trail took mostly families into the Oregon Country, where many settled in the Willamette Valley and later in the Puget Sound basin of what is today Washington State. The forty-niners and those who traveled to profit from the gold rush in other ways took the California Trail. Many traveled the older Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico. Finally, the Mormon migration used the Mormon Trail to the Great Salt Lake.

Regardless of the route, travelers faced similar challenges. Migrants had to leave Missouri, or some other beginning point, in the spring or early summer because there had to be grass for their animals to eat. In addition, they had to cross the western mountains in the fall before snowstorms blocked their way. Their journey of 2,000 miles was accomplished in daily travels of about 15 miles. About 10,000 migrants died on the westward trails. Accidents and Indian fighting took some lives, but disease was the biggest factor, causing 90% of all deaths.

**Changes over Time**

Westward expansion changed dramatically over time. Since the number of migrants became so substantial, the U.S. Army built forts along the way to protect American migrants. Entrepreneurs added stores to serve the travelers, which sold goods at incredible mark-ups and proved quite profitable. One observer calculated merchants' profits up to an astounding 1,800%.
The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 also had a dramatic impact on westward migration by shortening and easing the trip. Covered wagons virtually disappeared after 1870, as new arrivals packed their families and belongings onto trains. As more and more people moved west, towns also sprang up along migration routes, offering rest and supplies for travelers. People continued migrating to the West for decades, but the nature of westward expansion changed with the coming of the industrial age that accompanied the railroads that crossed the West by the end of the 19th century.

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Further Reading


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