

Manifest Destiny and the Growing Nation

15.1 Introduction

A century and a half ago, the words “**Manifest Destiny**” inspired vast hopes and dreams among Americans. They led to a war with Mexico. And they changed the map of the United States.

The phrase manifest destiny means “obvious fate.” It was coined in 1845 by John O’Sullivan, a New York newspaperman. O’Sullivan wrote that it was America’s “manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent.” Looking at the land beyond the Rocky Mountains, he argued that “the God of nature and nations has marked it for our own.”

The fact that Great Britain claimed part of this land—a huge territory known as Oregon—made no difference to O’Sullivan. After all, the United States had stood up to Britain in the War of 1812 and survived.

Nor was O’Sullivan impressed by Mexico’s claims to much of the West. Like many Americans, he believed that America had a duty to extend the blessings of democracy to new lands and peoples. It was God’s plan, he wrote, for Americans to expand their “great experiment with liberty.”

When Americans began their “great experiment” in 1776, the idea that the United States might one day spread across the continent seemed an impossible dream. By 1848, however, the dream was a reality. In this chapter, you will learn how the United States tripled its size in a little more than a single lifetime.

As America grew, it became far more diverse. Its new territories were home to many native peoples, as well as settlers from France, Spain, Mexico, and other countries. America’s growth would have a major impact on the people who were already living in the West.

Manifest Destiny took many forms. America grew through treaties, through settlement, and through war. As you read this chapter, think about the way each new territory was acquired. Was O’Sullivan right that this expansion was a matter of destiny? Or was it a matter of diplomacy and sometimes dishonorable dealings? Could Americans have made different decisions along the way?

15.2 The Louisiana Purchase

America’s first opportunity for expansion during the early nineteenth century involved the vast territory to the west of the Mississippi River, then known as Louisiana. The United States wanted the port city of New Orleans, near the mouth of the Mississippi River. By 1800, thousands of farmers were settling the land to the west of the Appalachian Mountains. To get their crops to market, they floated them down the Mississippi to New Orleans. There they loaded the crops onto ships bound for Europe or for cities on the East Coast.

The farmers depended on being able to move their crops freely along this route. “The Mississippi,” wrote James Madison, “is to them everything. It is the Hudson, the Delaware, the Potomac, and all the navigable rivers of the Atlantic States formed into one stream.”

Louisiana Across the Mississippi lay the unexplored territory of Louisiana. This immense region stretched from Canada south to Texas. From the Mississippi, it reached west all the way to the Rocky Mountains. First claimed by France, Louisiana was given to Spain after the French and Indian War. In 1800, the French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte convinced Spain to return Louisiana to France.

Napoleon had plans for Louisiana. He hoped to settle the territory with thousands of French farmers. These farmers would raise food for slaves who toiled on France’s sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

Napoleon’s plans alarmed frontier farmers. New Orleans was part of Louisiana. If Napoleon closed the port to American goods, farmers would have no way to get their crops to market.

“A Noble Bargain” President Thomas Jefferson understood the concerns of American farmers. So, in 1803, he sent James Monroe to France with an offer to buy New Orleans for \$7.5 million. By the time Monroe reached France, Napoleon had changed his plans. A few years earlier, a slave named Toussaint L’Ouverture had led a slave revolt in the French Caribbean colony known today as Haiti. The former slaves defeated the French troops who tried to take back the colony. As a result, Napoleon no longer needed Louisiana.

In addition, France and Britain were on the brink of war. Napoleon knew that he might lose Louisiana to the British. Rather than lose Louisiana, it made sense to sell it to the United States.

Napoleon’s offer to sell all of Louisiana stunned James Monroe. Instead of a city, suddenly the United States had the opportunity to buy an area as big as itself!

It didn't take long for Monroe to agree. On April 30, 1803, he signed a treaty giving Louisiana to the United States in exchange for \$15 million. Said the French foreign minister, "You have made a noble bargain for yourselves, and I suppose you will make the most of it."

The Purchase Debate To most Americans, the Louisiana Purchase looked like the greatest land deal in history. The new territory would double the country's size at a bargain price of just 2 to 3 cents an acre!

Still, not everyone approved. Some people worried that such a large country would be impossible to govern. Politicians in the East fretted that they would lose power. Sooner or later, they warned, Louisiana would be carved into enough new states to outvote the eastern states in Congress.

Others fussed about the \$15 million price tag. "We are to give money of which we have too little," wrote a Boston critic, "for land of which we already have too much."

Opponents also accused Jefferson of "tearing the Constitution to tatters." They said that the Constitution made no provision for purchasing foreign territory.

Jefferson was troubled by the argument that the purchase was unconstitutional. Still, he believed that it was better to stretch the Constitution than to lose a historic opportunity.

Late in 1803, the Senate voted to ratify the Louisiana Purchase treaty. Frontier farmers cheered the news. "You have secured to us the free navigation of the Mississippi," a grateful westerner wrote Jefferson. "You have procured an immense and fertile country: and all these great blessings are obtained without war and bloodshed."

15.3 Florida

Having acquired Louisiana through **diplomacy**, President Jefferson turned next to Florida. Spain had colonized this sunny peninsula in the late 1500s. By the 1800s, Florida had a diverse population of Seminole Indians, Spanish colonists, English traders, and runaway slaves. In 1804, Jefferson sent two diplomats to Spain to buy Florida. Spain's answer was "no deal."

Many white Americans in the Southeast wanted the United States to take over Florida. Slave owners in Georgia were angry because slaves sometimes ran away to Florida. (Some of the runaways were accepted and welcomed by the Seminole Indians.) In addition, white landowners in Georgia were upset by Seminole raids on their lands.

Over the next few years, Spain's control of Florida weakened. The Spanish government could do nothing to stop the raids on farms in Georgia by Seminoles and ex-slaves.

Andrew Jackson Invades Florida In 1818, President James Monroe sent Andrew Jackson—the hero of the Battle of New Orleans—to Georgia with orders to end the raids. Jackson was told that he could chase raiding Seminoles into Florida. But he did not have authority to invade the Spanish colony.

Despite his orders, Jackson marched into Florida with a force of 1,700 troops. Over the next few weeks, he captured nearly every military post in the colony. He arrested, tried, and executed two British subjects for stirring up Indian attacks. He also replaced the Spanish governor with an American. Later Jackson said that he was sorry that he didn't execute the governor as well. Spain demanded that Jackson be called back to Washington and punished for his illegal invasion.

"Govern or Get Out" Fearing war, Monroe asked his cabinet for advice. All but one of his cabinet members advised him to remove Jackson and apologize to Spain. The exception was Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. Rather than apologize, Adams convinced Monroe to send a blunt message to Spain. The message was, either govern Florida properly or get out.

Equally fearful of war, Spain decided to get out. In 1819, the Spanish government agreed to yield Florida to the United States. In exchange, the United States agreed to pay off \$5 million in settlers' claims against Spain. The United States also agreed to honor Spain's longtime claim to Texas.

Not all Americans were happy about leaving Spain in charge of Texas. One newspaper declared that Texas was "worth ten Floridas." Even so, the Senate ratified the Florida treaty two days after it was signed.

15.4 Texas

There was a reason many Americans felt that Texas was so valuable. Much of this region was well suited for growing cotton, the South's most valuable cash crop, and many southerners hoped that one day it would become part of the United States.

Americans Come to Texas The Texas tale begins with Moses Austin, a banker and businessman who dreamed of starting an American colony in Spanish Texas. In 1821, Spanish officials granted Austin a huge tract of land. When Moses died suddenly that year, his son Stephen took over his father's dream.

Stephen arrived in Texas just as Mexico declared its independence from Spain. Now Texas was a part of Mexico. Mexican officials agreed to let Austin start his colony—under certain conditions. Austin had to choose only moral and hardworking settlers. The settlers had to promise to become Mexican citizens and to join the Catholic Church.

Austin agreed to the Mexican terms. By 1827, he had attracted 297 families—soon known as the “Old Three Hundred”—to Texas.

Rising Tensions The success of Austin’s colony started a rush of settlers to Texas. By 1830, there were about 25,000 Americans in Texas, compared to 4,000 Tejanos, or Texans of Mexican descent. Soon tensions between the two groups began to rise.

The Americans had several complaints. They were used to governing themselves, and they resented taking orders from Mexican officials. They were unhappy that all official documents had to be in Spanish, a language most of them were unwilling to learn. In addition, many were slaveholders who were upset when Mexico outlawed slavery in 1829.

The Tejanos had their own complaints. They were unhappy that many American settlers had come to Texas illegally. Worse, most of these new immigrants showed little respect for Mexican culture and had no intention of becoming citizens.

The Mexican government responded by closing Texas to further American immigration. The government sent troops to Texas to assert its authority and enforce the immigration laws.

The Texans Rebel Americans in Texas resented these actions. Hotheads, led by a young lawyer named William Travis, began calling for revolution. Cooler heads, led by Stephen Austin, asked the Mexican government to reopen Texas to immigration and to make it a separate Mexican state. That way, Texans could run their own affairs.

In 1833, Austin traveled to Mexico and presented the Texans’ demands to the new head of the Mexican government, General Antonio López de Santa Anna. The general was a power-hungry dictator who once boasted, “If I were God, I would wish to be more.” Rather than bargain with Austin, Santa Anna tossed him in jail for promoting rebellion.

Soon after Austin was released in 1835, Texans rose up in revolt. Determined to crush the rebels, Santa Anna marched north with approximately 6,000 troops.

The Alamo In late February 1836, a large part of Santa Anna’s army reached San Antonio, Texas. The town was defended by about 180 Texan volunteers, including eight Tejanos. The Texans had taken over an old mission known as the Alamo. Among them was Davy Crockett, the famous frontiersman and former congressman from Tennessee. Sharing command with William Travis was James Bowie, a well-known Texas “freedom fighter.”

The Alamo’s defenders watched as General Santa Anna raised a black flag that meant “Expect no mercy.” The general demanded that the Texans surrender. Travis answered with a cannon shot.

Slowly, Santa Anna’s troops began surrounding the Alamo. The Texans were outnumbered by at least ten to one, but only one man fled.

Meanwhile, Travis sent messengers to other towns in Texas, pleading for reinforcements and vowing not to abandon the Alamo. “Victory or death!” he proclaimed. But reinforcements never came.

For 12 days, the Mexicans pounded the Alamo with cannonballs. Then, at the first light of dawn on March 6, Santa Anna gave the order to storm the fort. Desperately, the Texans tried to stave off the attackers with a hailstorm of rifle fire.

For 90 minutes the battle raged. Then it was all over. By day’s end, every one of the Alamo’s defenders was dead. By Santa Anna’s order, those who had survived the battle were executed on the spot.

Santa Anna described the fight for the Alamo as “but a small affair.” But his decision to kill every man at the Alamo filled Texans with rage. It was a rage that cried out for revenge.

Texas Wins Its Independence Sam Houston, the commander of the Texas revolutionary army, understood Texans’ rage. But as Santa Anna pushed on, Houston’s only hope was to retreat eastward. By luring Santa Anna deeper into Texas, he hoped to make it harder for the general to supply his army and keep it battle-ready.

Houston’s strategy wasn’t popular, but it worked brilliantly. In April, Santa Anna caught up with Houston near the San Jacinto River. Expecting the Texans to attack at dawn, the general kept his troops awake all night. When no attack came, the weary Mexicans relaxed. Santa Anna went to his tent to take a nap.

Late that afternoon, Houston’s troops staged a surprise attack. Yelling “Remember the Alamo!” the Texans overran the Mexican camp. Santa Anna fled, but he was captured the next day. In exchange for his freedom, he ordered all his remaining troops out of Texas. Texans had won their independence. Still, Mexico did not fully accept the loss of Texas.

To Annex Texas or Not? Now an independent country, Texas became known as the Lone Star Republic because of the single star on its flag. But most Texans were Americans who wanted Texas to become part of the United States.

Despite their wishes, Texas remained independent for ten years. People in the United States were divided over whether to **annex** Texas. Southerners were eager to add another slave state. Northerners who opposed slavery wanted to keep Texas out.

Others feared that annexation would lead to war with Mexico. The 1844 presidential campaign was influenced by the question of whether to expand U.S. territory. One of the candidates, Henry Clay, warned, “Annexation and war with Mexico are identical.” His opponent, James K. Polk, however, was a strong believer in Manifest Destiny. He was eager to acquire Texas. After Polk was elected, Congress voted to annex Texas. In 1845, Texas was admitted as the 28th state.

15.5 Oregon Country

Far to the northwest of Texas lay Oregon Country. This enormous, tree-covered wilderness stretched from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. To the north, Oregon was bounded by Russian Alaska. To the south, it was bordered by Spanish California and New Mexico.

In 1819, Oregon was claimed by four nations—Russia, Spain, Great Britain, and the United States. Spain was the first to drop out of the scramble. As part of the treaty to purchase Florida, Spain gave up its claim to Oregon. A few years later, Russia also dropped out. By 1825, Russia agreed to limit its claim to the territory that lay north of the 54°40’ parallel of latitude. Today that line marks the southern border of Alaska.

That left Britain and the United States. For the time being, the two nations agreed to a peaceful “joint occupation” of Oregon.

Discovering Oregon America’s claim to Oregon was based on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Between 1804 and 1806, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had led a small band of explorers to the Oregon coast. You will read more about their epic adventure in the next chapter.

Lewis thought that many more Americans would follow the path blazed by the expedition. “In the course of 10 or 12 years,” he predicted in 1806, “a tour across the continent by this route will be undertaken with as little concern as a voyage across the Atlantic.”

That was wishful thinking. The route that Lewis and Clark had followed was far too rugged for ordinary travelers. There had to be a better way.

In 1824, a young fur trapper named Jedediah Smith found that better way. Smith discovered a passage through the Rocky Mountains called South Pass. Unlike the high, steep passes used by Lewis and Clark, South Pass was low and flat enough for wagons to use in crossing the Rockies. Now the way was open for settlers to seek their fortunes in Oregon.

Oregon Fever The first American settlers to travel through South Pass to Oregon were missionaries. These earnest preachers made few **converts** among Oregon’s Indians. However, their glowing reports of Oregon’s fertile soil and towering forests soon attracted more settlers.

These early settlers wrote letters home describing Oregon as a “pioneer’s paradise.” The weather was always sunny, they claimed. Disease was unknown. Trees grew as thick as hairs on a dog’s back. And farms were free for the taking. One joker even claimed that “pigs are running about under the great acorn trees, round and fat, and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them so you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry.”

These reports inspired other settlers who were looking for a fresh start. In 1843, about 1,000 pioneers packed their belongings into covered wagons and headed for Oregon. A year later, nearly twice as many people made the long journey across the plains and mountains. “The Oregon Fever has broke out,” stated a Boston newspaper, “and is now raging.”

All of Oregon or Half? Along with Texas, “Oregon fever” also played a role in the 1844 presidential campaign. Polk won the election with stirring slogans such as “All of Oregon or none!” and “Fifty-four forty or fight!” Polk promised that he would not rest until the United States had annexed all of Oregon Country.

But Polk didn’t want Oregon enough to risk starting a war with Britain. Instead, he agreed to a compromise treaty that divided Oregon roughly in half at the 49th parallel. That line now marks the western border between the United States and Canada.

The Senate debate over the Oregon treaty was fierce. Senators from the South and the East strongly favored the treaty. They saw no reason to go to war over “worse than useless territory on the coast of the Pacific.” Senators from the West opposed the treaty. They wanted to hold out for all of Oregon. On June 18, 1846, the Senate ratified the compromise treaty by a vote of 41 to 14.

Polk got neither “fifty-four forty” nor a fight. What he got was even better: a diplomatic settlement that both the United States and Great Britain could accept without spilling a drop of blood.

15.6 War with Mexico

You might think that Texas and Oregon were quite enough new territory for any president. But not for Polk. This humorless, hardworking president had one great goal. He wanted to expand the United States as far as he could.

Polk's gaze fell next on the huge areas known as California and New Mexico. He was determined to have them both—by purchase if possible, by force if necessary.

These areas were first colonized by Spain, but they became Mexican territories when Mexico won its independence in 1821. Both were thinly settled, and the Mexican government had long neglected them. That was reason enough for Polk to hope that they might be for sale. He sent a representative to Mexico to try to buy the territories. But Mexican officials refused even to see him.

War Breaks Out in Texas When Congress voted to annex Texas, relations between the United States and Mexico turned sour. To Mexico, the annexation of Texas was an act of war. To make matters worse, Texas and Mexico could not agree on a border. Texas claimed the Rio Grande as its border on the south and the west. Mexico wanted the border to be the Nueces River, about 150 miles northeast of the Rio Grande.

On April 25, 1846, Mexican soldiers fired on American troops who were patrolling along the Rio Grande. Sixteen Americans were killed or wounded. This was just the excuse for war that Polk had been waiting for. Mexico, he charged, “has invaded our territory and shed American blood on American soil.” Two days after Polk's speech, Congress declared war on Mexico.

To Mexico, the truth was just the opposite. Mexican president Mariano Paredes declared that a greedy people “have thrown themselves on our territory.... The time has come to fight.”

The Fall of New Mexico and California A few months later, General Stephen Kearny led the Army of the West out of Kansas. His orders were to occupy New Mexico and then continue west to California.

Mexican opposition melted away in front of Kearny's army. The Americans took control of New Mexico without firing a shot. “General Kearny,” a pleased Polk wrote in his diary, “has thus far performed his duties well.”

Meanwhile, a group of Americans led by the explorer John C. Frémont launched a rebellion against Mexican rule in California. The Americans arrested and jailed General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, the Mexican commander of Northern California. Then they raised a crude flag showing a grizzly bear sketched in blackberry juice. California, they declared, was now the Bear Flag Republic.

When Kearny reached California, he joined forces with the rebels. Within weeks, all of California was under American control.

The United States Invades Mexico The conquest of Mexico itself was far more difficult. American troops under Zachary Taylor battled their way south from Texas. Taylor was a no-nonsense general who was known fondly as “Old Rough and Ready” because of his backwoods clothes. After 6,000 troops took the Mexican city of Monterrey, an old enemy stopped them. General Santa Anna had marched north to meet Taylor with an army of 20,000 Mexican troops.

In February 1847, the two forces met near a ranch called Buena Vista. After two days of hard fighting, Santa Anna reported that “both armies have been cut to pieces.” Rather than lose his remaining forces, Santa Anna retreated south. The war in northern Mexico was over.

A month later, American forces led by General Winfield Scott landed at Veracruz in southern Mexico. Scott was a stickler for discipline and loved fancy uniforms. These traits earned him the nickname “Old Fuss and Feathers.” For the next six months, his troops fought their way to Mexico City, the capital of Mexico.

Outside the capital, the Americans met fierce resistance at the castle of Chapultepec. About 1,000 Mexican soldiers and 100 young military cadets fought bravely to defend the fortress. Six of the cadets chose to die fighting rather than surrender. To this day, the boys who died that day are honored in Mexico as Los Niños Héroes—the heroic children.

Despite such determined resistance, Scott's army captured Mexico City in September 1847. Watching from a distance, a Mexican officer muttered darkly, “God is a Yankee.”

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo Early in 1848, Mexico and the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexico agreed to give up Texas and a vast region known as the Mexican Cession. (A *cession* is something that is given up.) This area included the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as parts of Colorado and Wyoming.

By this agreement, Mexico gave up half of all its territory. In return, the United States agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million. It also promised to protect the 80,000 to 100,000 Mexicans living in Texas and in the Mexican Cession. (As you will learn in Chapter 17, most of these promises were not kept.)

In Washington, a few senators spoke up to oppose the treaty. Some of them argued that the United States had no right to any Mexican territory other than Texas. They believed that the Mexican War had been unjust and that the treaty was

even more so. New Mexico and California together, they said, were “not worth a dollar” and should be returned to Mexico.

Other senators opposed the treaty because they wanted even more land. They wanted the Mexican Cession to include a large part of northern Mexico as well. To most senators, however, the Mexican Cession was a Manifest Destiny dream come true. The Senate ratified the treaty by a vote of 38 to 14.

“From Sea to Shining Sea” A few years later, the United States acquired still more land from Mexico. In 1853, James Gadsden arranged the purchase of a strip of land just south of the Mexican Cession for \$10 million. Railroad builders wanted this land because it was relatively flat and could serve as a good railroad route. With the acquisition of this land, known as the Gadsden Purchase, the nation stretched “from sea to shining sea.”

Most Americans were pleased with the new outlines of their country. Still, not everyone rejoiced in this expansion. Until the Mexican War, many people had believed that the United States was too good a nation to bully or invade its weaker neighbors. Now they knew that such behavior was the dark side of Manifest Destiny.

15.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about how Americans extended their nation to the west and the south. You used a map of America’s acquisitions to study how and why the United States expanded into these territories.

In the 1800s, many Americans believed that they had both the right and the duty (an idea called Manifest Destiny) to spread their way of life across the continent.

America’s first great expansion was the Louisiana Purchase. Next, Florida was added to the United States through a treaty with Spain. A treaty with Great Britain added Oregon Country.

Americans in Texas rebelled against the Mexican government there and created the Lone Star Republic. Ten years later, the United States annexed Texas.

In 1846, the United States went to war with Mexico and acquired California and New Mexico as part of the Mexican Cession. Later, the Gadsden Purchase completed the outline of the contiguous United States.

America’s expansion across the continent was now complete. Yet much of the West was only thinly settled. In the next chapter, you will learn about the people who moved into this vast area.