

History 201

Lectures 7

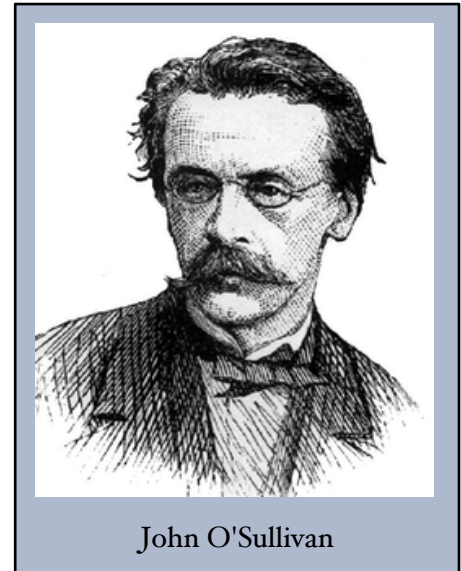


Western Expansion

Among the motives that historians attribute for western expansion is Manifest Destiny. The phrase was coined by a newspaperman John O'Sullivan when he wrote in 1845: "the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent [was] allotted by providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." In other words God wants us to have the whole continent. The simplest definition of Manifest Destiny is summed up in a sentence that John F. Kennedy used to describe Soviet imperialism in the 1940s and 50s. "what's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine."

Manifest Destiny is not unique to Americans or to American history. The idea has appeared itself in many nations at many times. In the last few centuries it has shown up in Napoleonic France, in Hitler's Germany, in Hirohito's Japan. Even the Crusades are a form of Manifest Destiny. The Puritans were on a providential mission, as John Belushi would put it, a mission from God, to found a Bible Commonwealth, to convert the heathen savage, to maintain the pure faith. The idea came to America from Europe, brought by Spaniards, Frenchmen, the Portuguese and the British. In the New World, all of the European colonizers had some form of the vision. Whenever two cultures clashed in the New World, the European idea was that the Christian culture had a God given right to conquer the "heathen" culture. The Manifest Destiny idea also embraced a "doctrine of use." Those who used the land for agrarian purposes had a better right than those who used it to hunt and gather. It served well up to the 1740s. Then Europeans began to get in each others' way. So for the English, the idea expanded. Protestants had a better right to the land than Catholics, and English Protestants had a better right than other Protestants. (Catholics had similar views, only vice versa)

During the American Revolution the idea became more secular, but still important. People like Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine viewed the Revolution as a providential spark that would ignite revolutions all over the world, and bring liberty by force of example. It took only a short step, to expand the idea that if providence balked where liberty should go, then force might be necessary to give providence a little push in the right direction. Republican institutions had a providential right to expand at the expense of monarchy,



John O'Sullivan

and other forms of tyranny. American republicans talk about expanding the *area of liberty*, rather than about grabbing lands owned by the Spanish, the French or the Indians.

So, in 1845, these old ideas received a new name—Manifest Destiny. By the 1830s the American idea had a few definite characteristics:

- 1) Nationalism: the United States as a chosen nation, a new Israel, thus what Americans wanted was what God wanted;
- 2) American institutions were superior to any others, so Americans had not only a right, but a duty to expand and bring American institutions to those who were living without them;
- 3) Americans believed that the preservation of America liberty required constantly expanding borders, a kind of American *lebensraum*, we have already talked about Jefferson and others' view that only the expansion of new lands would make America safe for new generations of yeoman republican farmers;
- 4) An absolute belief in the doctrine of use: this idea acquired spin-off doctrines as the nation grew. One of these was the old notion of "natural boundaries," that God designed the world with easily identifiable natural political boundaries, like mountain ranges, oceans, rivers, and so forth. As America grew, passing by one natural boundary, the next obvious natural boundary became the one that god actually intended for Americans to use for borders. When colonists first arrived in North America, the first natural boundary was the Appalachian Mountains. Settlers had crossed this boundary, and, in spite of George III's attempt to slow down settlement in the trans-Appalachian West, by the end of the Revolution settlers had put down farms in the valleys of the Appalachians and moved into the lands around the Ohio River. The Mississippi provided the next natural boundary, American settlers crossed it and had settled on the Western banks by the 1830s.

So, for Americans, expansion was providential in both a divine sense, and a republican one. Given these premises, anyone who was critical of the idea was both evil and opposed to freedom. Manifest Destiny took on a missionary spirit. American expansion took three forms: annexation,

negotiation, conquest. We will be looking at expansion and its implications over the next few classes.

Expansion by Annexation: Texas. East Texas was cotton country. In 1820 Moses Austin led a group of American settlers into Spanish Texas. In order to use the land there, these Americans had promised to become Spanish citizens, to convert to Roman Catholicism, and to give up slavery, which was illegal in Spanish Texas. They did none of these things. They attended Mass occasionally, but brought with them Protestant ministers. They freed their slaves, then immediately forced them into lifetime indentures. They preserved the letter of their agreement with Spain, but not the spirit. The Spanish didn't particularly care. American settlement was good for the Spanish in two ways; first, Americans presented a first line of defense against the growing threat of the Comanches to the north. By the 1820s, the Comanches, had already created an empire of their own in north-west Texas, and the area of Texas where Americans intended to settle was between the Comanche lands and the more settled and wealthier Spanish settlements in South Texas (like San Antonio) and Northern Mexico. Secondly, the settlement was profitable both to the settlers and the Spanish, who received small payments for the land, and small annual taxes from the settlers.



Map shows territory controlled by various tribes in 1849. Comanche territory by 1820 circled.

Problems arose early in the settlement. American settlers on a frontier that had no real law. What appeared was often called border law, it ran thinner than in more civilized areas. Settlers protected themselves, and the law was what they made it on the spur of the moment. Lots of people who lived in the United States on the margin of the law went to Texas – people like Jim Bowie, a gambler and adventurer, and William Travis, a country attorney, and found opportunities for wealth and excitement in Texas, where law was thin that they could no longer find in the United States.

Texas also became a safe haven for even less law abiding folks. If you look in court logs in Virginia in the 1820s and later, you often find the letters “GTT,” gone to Texas, in the margins. This indicates that someone jumped bail and headed for Texas where the long arm of the law didn’t reach.

By 1830, Texas was part of the independent Republic of Mexico. There were some 35,000 Texans of American origins in Texas. Many were slave owners, a few were desperadoes, most were used to living on their own without much government interference or taxation. The Mexican government wanted to tighten government control over its frontier provinces. The government sent more troops and bureaucrats to Texas, and levied higher taxes than had been previously paid by Texans. They began to complain to Texans that they were using slave labor in spite of the fact that slavery was illegal. Many Texans began to see in the new Mexican restrictions and taxes, a parallel with British oppression in the period before the American Revolution. They began talk about responding with a revolution of their own.

It is at about this point that Sam Houston entered Texas. Houston in many ways typifies the characteristics of the frontier American. His life was inconceivable anywhere *except* on the frontier. Born into a well-to-do planter family in Virginia, he had eight brothers and sisters. The family moved in the best circles, but his father was nearly bankrupted by a military career. In 1807, the Houstons moved west

and settled in Tennessee. Sam’s father died there, and the family moved into western Tennessee. Houston was less enamored with being a Tennessee farmer than he had been at being a Virginia planter. Houston began to disappear for days, then weeks, then months at a time into the wilderness. He had befriended a local Cherokee tribe. He preferred the Indian lifestyle to the American ways of farming and clerking, both of which he had done and failed at. Houston was adopted by the Cherokees who named him Raven. He found himself in debt so he moved back into town and took up teaching at the local school. He taught for six months until his debts were paid off, then returned to the Cherokees.

In 1812, Sam joined the army and went to war. His mom was delighted, she hoped that young Samuel would make a man of himself, and hoped that this time it would be a white man rather than a Cherokee. In one year Sam went from private to an officer on Jackson’s staff. He was wounded several times, and left for dead twice. For the rest of his life one arm was useless. He had impressed Jackson, who began to take an interest in him. Houston became a valuable agent among the Cherokee. With Jackson’s backing Houston flourished. He took up residence near Nashville, and became a lawyer. He took up non-Indian garb and became something of a social climber and fashion leader in the area. By 1828, there was talk that Houston might be Jackson’s heir to the presidency somewhere down the road.



Sam Houston

Houston arranged for a very good marriage into the Allen family. A few days after the marriage his wife left him in hysterics. People began to ask “what had the beast done?” Houston stayed silent on the matter. He refused to defend himself against the growing scandal.

Houston went west instead. He vanished into the wilderness again. He returned to the Cherokee, burned his European clothes, and became, once more, the Raven. Missionaries began to complain that a drunken white man in Indian dress was stirring up trouble. In January of 1831, Houston showed up in Washington, and demanded to see

The Surrender of General Antonio López de Santa Anna to General Sam Houston after the Mexican defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto.



Jackson. He demanded that the Indian agents among the Cherokee be fired. Then he returned to his Indian wife and his bottle. The Cherokee gave him a new name, “Big Drunk.” A little later, rumors began to seep in that linked his name with Texas. By 1835 there was some speculation that Houston had become Jackson’s *agent provocateur* in Texas.

Houston was to become the first president of the new republic.

Andrew Jackson wanted Texas in the Union. He regretted that the United States had a treaty with Spain that made annexation of Texas all but impossible. But he began to argue that the treaty was void when Mexico got its independence, and began to try to get Texas annexed. This was another factor that led to Mexico clamping down on Texas.

Houston began to organize the settlers and bring in Cherokee allies. In 1834, he made a trip to Washington and New York, probably to raise support and funds. At the same time, men began to quietly drift across the Sabine River into Texas, armed to the teeth and waiting. These factors did not escape the attention of a very worried general Santa Anna, who decided to order more troops into Texas. By 1836 Santa Anna declared martial law in Texas, leaving the Texans with no alternative but to fight. They set up a

provisional government at Washington on the Brazos, and wrote their equivalents of a Declaration of Independence and Constitution. The defeat of Santa Anna at San Jacinto in April of 1836 created an independent republic. Washington society began drinking toasts to the three great American generals—Washington, Jackson, and Houston.

Aaron Burr was heard to comment of Houston “his patriotism was my treason.”

Texas requested annexation shortly after gaining independence, but Jackson, caught in a political dilemma, refused either to annex Texas or even recognize its independence. Relations with Mexico, and the growth of abolitionism made annexation politically inconvenient. In January, 1831, abolitionist William Garrison issued the first edition of his abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* in which he called for the immediate emancipation of all slaves by whatever means

necessary. In 1832, Nat Turner’s rebellion took place in Virginia. Slavery was too hot an issue to allow for the addition of a new slave state. Jackson feared that annexation would destroy his national party coalition, so he waited. At the same time he wrote to Houston that annexation would be easier if a few conditions were met. Most importantly, Texas must



General Antonio López de Santa Anna

claim California, this would mollify the North which wanted Pacific harbors. The Van Buren administration was also unable to raise the Texas question. Only John Tyler, a president from the South with no party to speak of, could annex Texas and without having to worry about problems that annexation might cause to his political career (he had none) or his party. This he did in 1844. So Texas was acquired by annexation. It is the only sovereign republic that ever voluntarily entered the Union.

Expansion by Conquest—War With Mexico

The annexation of Texas moved the United States one step closer to war with the Republic of Mexico. But many other factors led to the war which finally broke out in 1846. At the root of the conflict with Mexico was the notion of Manifest Destiny. American settlers had settled in many areas of the vast territories that Mexico had inherited from Spain. These American settlers fervently believed that it was the manifest destiny of the United States to expand from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. In the 1830s and 40s Mexico was torn by revolution and social strife. The government was powerless to control local affairs. Many American settlers found themselves caught up in local power struggles. The Americans were known trouble makers. Many were thrown in jail, many were deported. In 1835, the Mexican government executed 22 American citizens suspected of plotting to overthrow the Mexican government were executed.

In addition to these problems, the Mexican government owed money to many American concerns. In 1839, an international commission examined American claims against Mexico and awarded the U.S. claimants a two million dollar settlement. By 1845 Mexico had paid only about 20% of these claims. The Mexicans also had grievances against the United States. They were bitter about American expansion into Texas, and they blamed the Texas Revolution on the United States. They feared that the annexation of Texas was only the beginning.

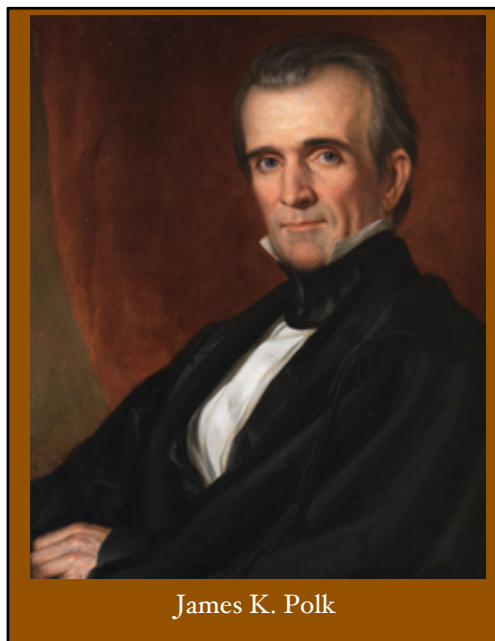
Gradually, between 1838 and 1842, the military of the United States began to beef up its forces along the American-Mexican border. Naval commanders had already worked out a scenario for landing and offensive action in the event that the United States should go to war with Mexico. In 1842, Commodore Thomas A. C. Jones, upon hearing a false rumor that war had been declared, sailed to Upper California, seized the provincial capital at Monterrey, hauled down the Mexican flag and hoisted the Stars and Stripes. The next day, on hearing that he had goofed, he surrendered to Mexican authorities, apologized profusely, and withdrew.

In the presidential election of 1844, the Democrats demanded the annexation of Texas and the Oregon country. At the Democratic Convention of 1844 the Democrats blocked the nomination of Martin Van Buren because of his opposition to Texas annexation. Instead the party chose house speaker, James K. Polk. Polk promised that he would annex both areas if elected. The Democrats won the

election, but before Polk went into office the lame duck John Tyler had already annexed Texas. The Mexican government had never formally recognized the independence of Texas. As far as Mexico was concerned, the United States was in the process of annexing a part of Mexico. The Mexican government broke off diplomatic relations with the United States.

President Polk had hoped that he would be able to employ diplomacy to obtain upper California and New Mexico from Mexico. Once Mexico cut diplomatic ties with the United

States, Polk realized that the only way that he would acquire these territories was by means of warfare. Several members of Polk's cabinet urged the president to delay a declaration of war. They felt that it would be better for the Democratic Party if the Mexicans committed some act that would outrage the American people enough that they would demand war. In January of 1846, U.S. Troops under the command of General Zachary Taylor, were moved from the north bank of the Nueces



James K. Polk

River (which the Mexicans claimed to be the border between Texas and Mexico), to the north bank of the Rio Grande. Since the area was in dispute, Polk expected the Mexicans to defend it. Polk could then declare war. Unfortunately for President Polk, the Mexicans were not eager to provide him with a cause for war.

Months passed without incident. Polk grew impatient. Finally, on May 9, 1846, Polk had had enough. He notified his Cabinet that he intended to declare war on Mexico within a few days. That very night he received a message that the Mexicans had crossed the Rio Grande and had fought with American forces. As to the question of which nation actually started the war, it is impossible to tell. The U.S. government said that it was started by Mexican aggression; the Mexicans said that the American army fired the first shot. A junior Congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, brought up a resolution in 1847 that questioned whether the spot where the first American soldier was killed was actually on American soil. If it was an American spot, he reasoned, then the Mexicans were the aggressors. The resolution was nicknamed the Spot Resolution.

It is possible that Mexico felt that they could win a war against the United States. They may have felt that either the war would be unpopular in the United States and thus receive little support; or that Great Britain would ally with Mexico to help defeat the United States. In either case Mexican hopes were misplaced. Mexico did not have the military power necessary to even defend its home territory and Britain didn't come to the rescue.

At the onset of the war, the U.S. Military operated in three areas. [1] upper California and new Mexico; [2] the Pacific coast (naval); and [3] the Rio Grande. We will look briefly at each. Upper California fell almost immediately. American volunteers under William B. Ide, an American settler in California, had already made plans to rebel against Mexico. They met with Captain John Fremont of the U.S. Navy, proclaimed Upper California to be the Bear Flag Republic and began to make attacks into Lower California and northern New Mexico. United States naval forces landed at Monterrey on July 7. Commodore J. D. Sloat defeated the disorganized Mexican force and declared California to be part of the United States. Bear Flaggers and other irregulars moved south and took Los Angeles and San Diego under the command of Fremont. Fremont then moved west across New Mexico. He was met in Santa Fe by General S. W. Kearney. Kearney had led an invasion force from Fort Leavenworth on the Missouri River. Zachary Taylor won several victories along the Rio Grande. He then went into Mexican territory and took Monterrey, Mexico. He moved south to Buena Vista and defeated Santa Anna. Despite numerous defeats, the Mexicans continued fighting. Santa Anna refused to accept surrender.

In order to win the war, President Polk ordered a third expedition to attack Mexico City. This combined body of Army and Marine forces united under the command of General Winfield Scott, landed at Vera Cruz



General Winfield Scott enters Mexico City.



on the east coast of Mexico. After days of constant fighting American troops entered Mexico City on September 8, 1847 and Santa Anna surrendered, after visious house-to-house combat, on September 15. The war was over.

In 1848, Upper California, New Mexico and almost the entire Southwest were in American hands. The Mexicans were forced to sign the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo in 1848. The treaty forced Mexico to give up, California, and New Mexico, and any claim to Texas. In return for this area (called the Mexican Cession) the United States gave Mexico \$15 million and agreed to pay Mexico's outstanding debts to U.S. creditors (about \$3 million). The United States also promised to respect the religious, civil and property rights of all Mexicans in the newly acquired territory. In 1853 the United States paid Mexico an additional \$10 million for a small area on the Gila River (the Gadsden Purchase). The dream of many Americans had come true. The southwestern boundary of the United States had reached the Pacific Ocean.





The West in Fact and Fantasy

The Frontier Reveries of Frederick Jackson Turner—By the 1830s, as we have seen, Europeans had begun to note that Americans have emerged distinct from their European ancestors to become a peculiarly American species. So what caused these changes? What made them different, and how were they different? The question was important to understand, because the nature of Americans, the “American character” was tied to the nature of politics. Rising politicians were those, like Jackson, and Harrison, who understood how to get American votes and ride the wave of popular support into the White House, losing politicians were people who couldn’t figure it out. This need to explain what made Americans American gave rise to the most persistent myth in America history. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin, postulated his “Frontier Theory” of American history as a way of explaining American national character. He took one characteristic of the American experience that wasn’t in Europe—the wilderness—to explain how we were different. Turner argued that the frontier changed Europeans into Americans. As people came into contact with the wilderness, they became more cooperative, more democratic, more self-reliant, more free than the Europeans that they were before the experience. The frontier molded people, and in the process molded American culture. The people were transformed themselves as they transformed the wilderness. Not all of the facts fit the theory very well. The frontier did have an effect on people, but not necessarily the one that Turner imagined. One big question has to do with why Americans went west. Turner said that they went to bring civilization. We should ask the question, were frontiersmen advancing civilization or trying to escape from it? We have already talked about Sam Houston, who used the frontier to escape from civilization. Was he unique? Not really. Folks like Daniel Boone and Davie Crockett spent most of their lives trying desperately to stay a few miles and a few months ahead of the western advance of civilization. When things got too crowded ol’ Dan’el and Davie pulled



Frederick Jackson Turner

up stakes and moved again. The point is that frontiersmen had lots of different reasons for moving west, and none of them were likely to have been to help Professor Turner coin a hypothesis about American character.

We will look at two images of frontier folks and see what the process was like. First, we'll look at the mountain man and the fur frontier, and try to sort out the myth and the reality. Then we'll look at the trail west and one of its most famous wagon trains and do the same.

The image of the mountain man—among them, on the rare occasions when they come together there is a rough equality, a mountain democracy amongst them. Alone the mountain is in his element. He is independent, free, self-reliant, alone against the elements of the wilderness. This is the image perpetrated by writers, movies, and television shows. This is the myth of the mountain man. The real life of the trapper was very different. From their earliest existence fur men kept one golden rule in mind: there is safety in numbers. Fur trappers didn't go anywhere alone. A lonely trapper was a dead trapper. They moved in large groups, called fur brigades, large armed base camps. They had to defend themselves from Indians, in some areas British soldiers and competitors, and from other American fur brigades. So much for rugged individualism.

How about independence and free enterprise? Fur was big business. Trappers were employed by fur companies that did all that they could to discourage free enterprise. The greatest magnate of the fur business was John Jacob Astor, president of the American Fur Company. In 1812, he founded his fur company, it was so big that trappers simply referred to it as "the Company." The U.S. government used a system called the factory system to trade furs with Indians. Under the factory system, furs were traded at a fixed price to protect Indians. This cost Astor money, so in 1822, he was able to get Congress to eliminate it. Astor wanted to pay less for furs and sell his trade goods for a higher price to the Indians. Astor encouraged an illegal trade in



John Jacob Astor

whiskey with the Indians. He watered the whiskey and traded it with at a markup of about 6000%. Astor was a shrewd business man. For him competition was horrible, it was unprofitable. He was known to hire Indians to attacks rival fur trappers. He made profits of about a million dollars a year at the height of the fur market. And about one year before the fashion for beaver fur hats gave way to silk, he sold the business. At his death Astor was worth \$20 million.



Trappers were dependent on a system that stretched from the mountains, where the fur was, to St. Louis, to New York, to Europe where the demand for fur top hats was. The turn around for profit on beaver fur was almost two years. So the trapper needed the fur company and vice versa. But trappers always got the short end of the deal. They needed supplies, and the companies were happy to provide their employees with the best, at a 2000% markup. Many trappers went into debt and, like sharecroppers, spent the rest of their short lives trapping to pay them off. Debtor trappers had to agree to work only for one company

at whatever price the company paid. In addition trappers often began their careers beholden to a company, because the startup cost to become a trapper was high, you needed traps, rifles, supplies, and all that stuff cost money.

So who were trappers? Did they look like and act like the Robert Redfords and Charlton Hestons that portray them in the movies? Evidence suggests that the fur frontier drew from the fringes of society—sociopaths—people who possessed qualities that were likely to get them hanged in Philadelphia were survival qualities in the mountains. There is an element here of what has been called “the west as a safety valve.” People who couldn’t make it in the stratified, law abiding East, went West where the more lawless aspects of their character were a plus instead of a liability to them.

But, to sum up, the myth of the independent fur trapper, living alone and free in the wilderness is a just that, a myth. The fur frontier was a business, and the trapper was a worker at the bottom of a multinational multimillion dollar concern. This was often true of the frontiers, it was true of the sod frontier, too. Farming the West was made possible first by canals like the Erie and others that connected Western Pennsylvania and Western New York with the East. Later, the railroads supported and were enriched by western farmers.

Pioneering was unhealthy and dangerous. Indians, illness, and cures all killed. Many trappers lived like Indians, they married Indian women, ate Indian delicacies, like bear’s liver, and sometimes the livers

of other species that often walked on two legs. They took, and lost scalps, drank buffalo blood. Trappers were a rare breed in this respect, most pioneers feared and despised Indians.

Health is another one of those places where the West is romanticized. In the movies pioneers absolutely *glow* with good health. Settlers were pretty much ignorant about how to stay healthy and about medicine. Sickness went west with a vengeance, what cures there were in the first half of the 19th century stayed East. Malaria was everywhere, West and South. There is no cure for it, but it can be treated with quinine, which there was in the East and South, but not in the West. Typhoid fever was also prevalent. In most western communities garbage disposal took place just out the back door. Surface water provided drinking water which led to typhoid. There was also tuberculosis, rheumatism, scarlet fever, diphtheria, small pox, tetanus, and pneumonia (to name a few). Lots of people just died from rotten teeth or pink eye. Asiatic cholera traveled from Philadelphia to the Rockies in 1830. Insects contributed their share to human misery in the West—mosquitoes, fleas, bedbugs, spiders (some like the black widow, that could kill, others that had bites that made folks anywhere from sore to miserable). The common house fly flourished, and of course all manner of snakes. Some Indian cures helped, most western folk cures didn’t. For some diseases folks took mercury, or ate rolled up spiderwebs, employed horse-dung poultices.



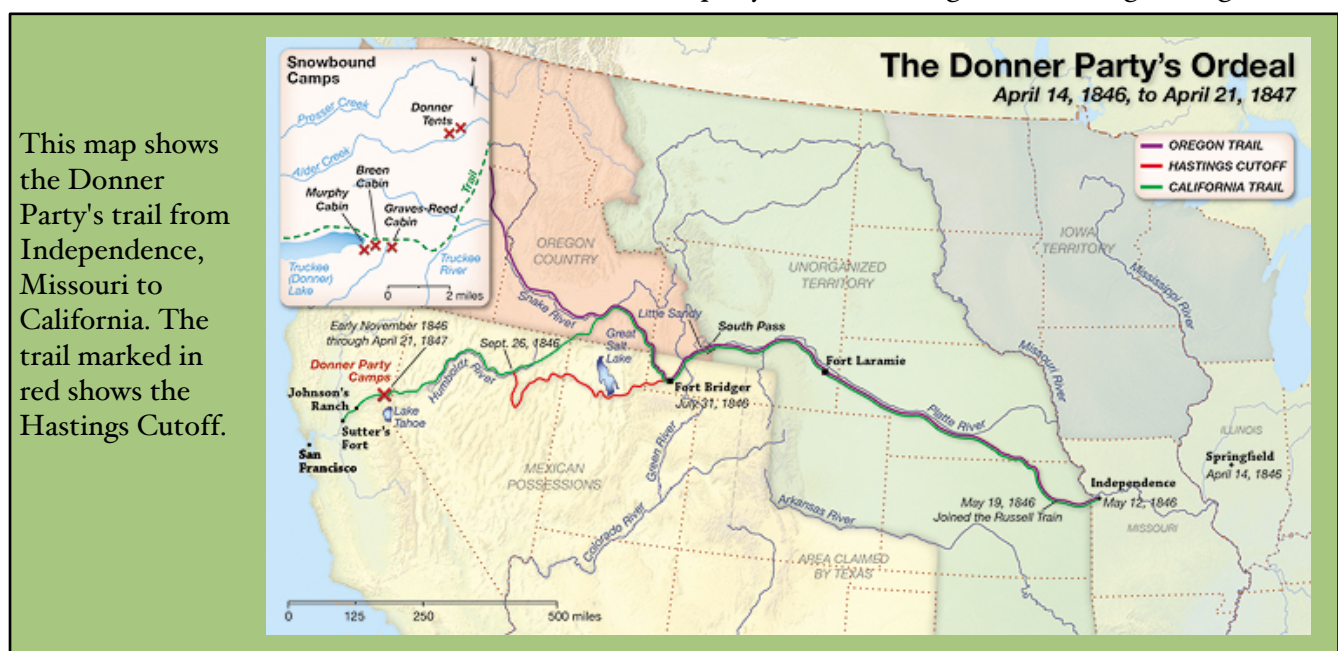
There were frontier doctors, but not many. Usually frontier doctors had either been chased West for malpractice, or had studied a little medicine under a real doctor. The saying went that on the frontier you had a 50/50 chance if you got very sick. 50% to die from the ailment, 50% to die from the cure. All in all the way West was tough no matter why you went. But it still remains that the West was populated.

So the next question after acquisition is how will the United States populate the West? You have all heard the story, in movies and Television series, or at least, we used to hear that story, they aren't as popular as they used to be. We used to watch movies and TV sows about the great wagon trains, traveling over the trails heading for new lands, and settlement and farms, new opportunities in the West. The movies would always focus on the dangers—desert, snakes, Indians—these are the obvious ones. But there were others that weren't so obvious, and gave the obvious bunch considerable help in raising the death toll. The two most deadly were bad information and plain stupidity. More people were probably killed by the desire to cut a few days off of their journey than snakes, for sure, and probably Indians.

So, let me illustrate . We will look at the Donner Party as a case study. The Donner family were from Springfield, Illinois. They decided to move to California. Most of the party that collected around the Donners were well off. The poor couldn't afford

to buy the wagons and supplies necessary for the trip West. If they went at all they worked their way west either as train guards if men, or domestic servants if women. Donner had read guides published by land speculators about how to get to California. These books pointed out that California was a sort of new Eden, where crops grew better than anywhere else and it was warm all year round, the usual propaganda to get people to go. The party prepared itself poorly for the trip. One family group, for instance, had purchased three wagons, one for the family, one for supplies, and a third to carry just about everything they owned that would move—beds, dressers, mirrors, books, booze, furniture, a piano, etc. The party began the trip overloaded.

They met at Independence, Missouri. Here they decided not to hire a trail boss, but to chose one of their own party to lead them west. There were lots of men available to work as guides and trail bosses. These folks had made the trip, often numerous times, and knew what they were doing, but they were expensive, and Mr. George Donner had read the guides, so why waste money on someone to act as a guide and push the party members around? Before the party left Independence, the whole party met and decided that, in spite of Mr. Donner's extensive reading on the subject, it might be a good idea to put their safety in the hands of someone who knew what he was doing. The 32 or so families (with 50 wagons) in the party, hired a trail boss, a fellow named William H. Russell. On the first day out the party ran into a disagreement. Wagons began to



This map shows the Donner Party's trail from Independence, Missouri to California. The trail marked in red shows the Hastings Cutoff.

break off from the group for various reasons, Russell was fired and rehired and fired again, more arguments took place among the party members, and the train became increasingly disorganized. It was spring on the western plains, and the party dawdled along the trail. They stopped to see the sights, they slowed down to avoid making a lot of dust, that out of consideration for the wagons in the rear that had to eat it. They should have been moving as quickly as possible during this leg of the trip, and they weren't. Most wagon trains were poorly disciplined, except for the Santa Fe freight trains, and the Mormon trains (the latter because Mormon trail bosses had the authority of God almighty and weren't afraid to use it to keep discipline). Movies always show wagons traveling in these neat single file lines. Except for the cases mentioned above (Santa Fe freight and Mormons) this rarely happened. Wagons tended to spread out. There was no road, just a broad plain, so to avoid eating the dust of the next guy in front you moved to the side. The whole train might be spread out across a two-mile area by the end of the day. So at night it might take hours to get all the wagons into one place for the night where the wagons were circled.

Indians attacked stragglers. If you stray too far from the train you would quickly get an opportunity to meet the interesting local natives and become dead. Indians would attack a straggling wagon, a lone rider, or stray livestock, but not a close knit, well organized train. The movie image of Indians riding in circles around a circled train, graciously allowing everyone in the party to shoot at them, appeals to Hollywood directors considerably more than it did to the Indians.

By mid Nebraska the land begins to roll. Here the Donner party split again. The strain was beginning to tell, and this began to lead to fights among settlers. This is also the point when the people start to die—the old, the ill, the very young, the very stupid. Here also they began to get sick. The lack of fresh fruits and veggies caused scurvy. The heavy meat and flour rich diet, and changing water supplies cause diarrhea or constipation, or often, both at the same time.

At the Nebraska/Wyoming border things began to

get even more difficult. On this rough landscape it might take a whole day to travel 500 yards. Often wagons and teams had to be hauled across streams and ravines. They also began to drop stuff to lighten their load. They left behind them furniture, books, anything that they decided they could live without. They had by now arrived in desert sage country. It was hot, dry, and dusty. Their livestock began to die here. People, too. This was where wagons began to turn back in earnest. Sometimes whole trains would give up and turn back. The Donners, however went on.

The party reached Fort Laramie. This was the first stop on the trip. Here they could rest, repair, regroup and resupply. From Ft. Laramie you can also see, in the distance, the Rocky Mountains. They look pretty scary if you are planning to cross them in a wagon. The Donners began to employ their rest time looking at maps for a short cut. Mountain men who were at the fort told the party not to leave the main trail, but the Donners ignored the advice of these dirty, hairy, buckskin clad savages (who knew the country like the backs of their hands). Donner had read *the Immigrant's Guide to Oregon and California*

by Lansford Hastings. Hastings was a California land speculator. He wrote the book to get people to go to California. The next stop after Laramie was Fort Hall. There, the distance from Oregon to California was about the same. So Hastings wrote about a shortcut to California, the Hastings Cutoff, that he assured settlers would safely cut several weeks off their trip to California. It should be pointed out that Hastings didn't have a clue what he was talking about at the time he wrote the book. The Cutoff would carry travelers between Fort Hall and the Great Salt Lake. What is there is vast expanses of desert.



Lansford Hastings

At Fort Hall the party split again. Several families followed the mountain men's advice and followed the trail. They lived to get to California. The Donners cut southwest before Fort Hall. And traveled to Fort Bridger which they left in August. From there, they took the Hastings Cutoff. They camped for 6 days in the Wasatch Mountains. On August 27, they reached the Great Salt Lake. There they began to die. At the south end of the Great Salt

Lake they ran across a small stone cairn, the kind that settlers used to mark messages. This one had a message from Hastings. He had decided to try his cutoff, and left messages all along it telling travelers to turn back. The salt lake is 80 miles across. The Donners left half of their wagons on it. The party was running out of food. By November the Donners had arrived in the Low Sierras. Indians had begun to kill the party's oxen. It was already snowing in the Rockies. Finally, the party bogged down in snow in the Sierras. The shortcut had taken three months so far. Four attempts were made to rescue the party from Sacramento. Before they were rescued the Donners were forced to resort to cannibalism to survive (not as rare as we might like to think). 82 party members had survived the Hastings cutoff as far as the Sierras, some four months later 47 of them were rescued.

California, the 49ers! And sectional disunity: California became a slippery issue after the Mexican War, and even more so in the period from 1848 to 1850. When the Democratic Convention met to select a presidential candidate in 1848, two different groups of delegates demanded to be seated, and a credentials brawl broke out between anti-slavery Democrats (called Barn Burners) and regular Democrats. The Barn Burners left the convention, but they still left a divided party. Some key southern delegates demanded that no candidate be considered who opposed slavery. When they failed to get their demands, *they* walked out of the convention. The remaining Democrats nominated Lewis Cass of Ohio. The Democratic platform of 1848 was vague and issueless.

Similarly, the Whigs had no real issues to present in their platform either. They attacked the Democrats, but presented no real issues to debate. Henry Clay was the clear choice of Southern Whigs, while Daniel Webster was the northern choice. The party hacks, led by one Thurlow Weed manipulated the convention to win the nomination of General Zachary Taylor. They expected that his military record would win him the White House. Taylor was a good choice. He was a national hero after the Mexican War, and a southern planter/slave owner, So the Whig political manipulators figured that he could win the country on his military merits, and, at the same time be safely, though not radically, pro-slavery.



An election poster touting Zachary Taylor.

third party appeared in the election of 1848 -- the Liberty Party. Although this abolitionist party was more powerful and better supported than it had been, and was bolstered by the Barn Burners. It had no prayer to succeed, because it had no support in the South. They were important because they were the only party to address any issues in the election. They opposed the expansion of slavery into the territories, they supported the expansion of free soil (no slaves in West so that free men could work the soil without unfree competition), they demanded that the territories acquired in the Mexican War be free of slavery. They demanded free land for settlers, lower taxes, and internal improvements at federal expense.

In the election lots of votes were cast for sectional reasons. Southern Whigs and Democrats united for Taylor. The Northern Democrats supported Cass. Once again, a North/South coalition (but this time not a party one) elected the president and Taylor won. There was no real change in the congressional makeup in the election, and so Congress got back to its usual bickering. By now slavery dominated every issue. John Calhoun got busy during the period after the election trying to create a southern pro-slavery political party that could carry the whole South

against the free-soil northern block. In short the nation was beginning to unravel on the question of slavery. Some solution to the question of slavery and territorial expansion became more urgent when, gold was discovered late in 1848 at Sutter's Mill in California. In 1848 there were about 14,000 people in California, about half of them were Americans. Workers at a new mill site on the vast Sutter lands in California stumbled upon gold. The initial reaction of Californians was to stifle the news, but by late January of 1849 word got out. And within a few months people from all over the world began to appear in California eager to try their luck and get rich mining gold. The first effect of the Gold Rush was to give an enormous boost to the transport industry. The money was not really in mining but in miners. Commodore Vanderbilt made his first million transferring would-be miners from back East to California.

At first this frontier fit Turner's vision of equality on the frontier. There were lots of people and none of them had much of anything. Only a few of the first arrivals and some of those who were already there struck it rich. A larger number of people made a modest living panning for gold. The average individual take from the mine fields in 1849 was about \$20 a day, by 1850 it was \$10, by 1855 it was \$3. It was not a pleasant life, and the names of the mine towns reflected the general attitudes of the miners toward their circumstances—Hangtown, Dry Diggins, Skunk Gulch. Camps grew up that had the specific purpose of separating the miners from their gold. Mining towns had casinos, saloons, stores, brothels (92% of the inhabitants of gold towns were male). Prices skyrocketed. In a producing goldfield the price of a room was \$1,000 a month. A dozen fresh eggs cost \$10 gold, a mug of beer that cost a nickel in Philadelphia went for \$1 in a mining town. The service industry created fortunes for the service sector of the economy in California in boomtowns the grew like mushrooms around the main mining camps. Millions of dollars went back East and the national economy, depressed since the late 1830s began to boom. The GNP in 1849 was \$10 million, by 1852 it had risen to \$81 million.


Congress was pressed to admit California to statehood, to provide order and government. Taylor requested that Congress admit California and was shocked when it refused to accede to his orders. The problem was that California was a military territory, not even a regular territory yet. In order to receive statehood, the California territory would be expected to write a constitution and apply for statehood. But if it wrote a constitution the question would crop up as to whether it would be free or slave. Here Congress balked.

Men, and even a woman, panning for gold in California, 1850.




There was no real question that California would be a slave state. This would disturb the sectional balance in Congress, and this worried the South, and the political parties that staked their national strength on North/South alliances. Taylor decided to skip the territorial stage and move California directly to statehood, which didn't really solve the problem. Would it enter as slave or free?

The South began to clamor for a decision. Calhoun's hand was strengthened. He formed committees of correspondence throughout the South. Southern states held conventions and called for petitions to address the California question. The issue drew support in the South from both Democrats and Whigs, and began to threaten the solidarity of both parties. The disunity of the major parties in Congress gave the small, but unified Free Soilers a great deal of power. Henry Clay began to fear disunion, so he worked out a compromise that would, he hoped satisfy everyone. He created, and Congress passed an omnibus compromise bill in an attempt to forestall collapse of the Union. California would enter the Union as a free state. Residents in the New Mexico and Utah Territories could choose for themselves whether their territory might enter the Union as a free or slave state. The slave trade, but not slavery, in the District of Columbia would be banned in order to appease the angst of Northern Congressmen who were offended by the existence of slave markets within a block of the Capital. To appease southerners a new, tough fugitive slave law was created that required northern states to assist in the capture of runaway slaves. Congress passed the Omnibus Bill, but Taylor vetoed it. He complained that bills should not contain so many provisions. Congress broke the massive bill into several smaller bills. By that time, Taylor had died, and his successor, Vice President Millard Fillmore, signed the legislation that would be known as the Compromise of 1850. We will talk more about the Compromise of 1850 later. But the point is that admission of California threatened the solidarity of the Union.



Henry Clay

The Compromise of 1850



John C. Calhoun

