

“Go West, Young Man . . .” Westward Expansion in American History and Mythology: Overview of Course

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The entire quotation – “Go West young man and grow up with the country” – is attributed to an 1865 editorial written by New York newspaperman Horace Greeley (although no one has found these words in Greeley’s newspaper). But even if we can’t prove that Greeley actually wrote these words, he clearly agreed with the sentiment – along with virtually all Americans. The call of The West was a driving force throughout American history. In this course we will examine the big questions of westward expansion – Who moved Where, When, Why, and How. And perhaps most importantly: With what Consequences?

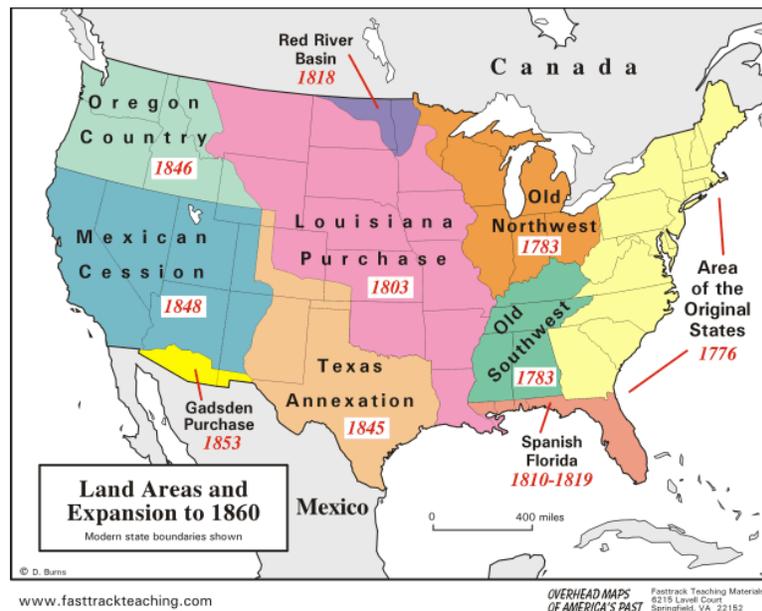
Session 1:

In the first session, we will examine several topics:

1. The historical and cultural significance of The West. American historian Loren Baritz described this best in his article, *The Idea of the West*, published in 1961 in *The American Historical Review*:

ONCE upon a time, dragons lived in the west, and sirens whose sea voices gave men to the sea, and monsters who preyed on fools, and to the west was darkness and danger and death. In its wisdom the sun daily searched the western sky in its flight from the east. At that point where the sun crossed the horizon, there was a happy otherworld hidden from men, and toward that place earthly glory and power tended. Perhaps the creatures who defended this place could be slain, perhaps men could turn deaf ears to the sea voices, perhaps the storms could be weathered and the darkness pierced. Then the promise of the west would be known as men tasted the fruits of their yearnings and hopes, as the brave fools who sailed in ignorance became wise in their victory. If men were brave enough, strong enough, and perhaps good enough, they would be able to climb the mountains or cross the seas or placate or vanquish the creatures that stood just east of Elysium. And, once there, the condition of men would be profoundly altered, for there nature's bounty was endless, happiness was certain, and death was banished forever. As a whole, this composite west was not the usual inspiration of any single man; the shadings of the idea would lighten and darken in time and place. But one of these strands seems virtually constant in the human story: a yearning for a land of laughter, of peace, and of life eternal. The location of this land, whether Elysium, Eden, or the Isle of Fair Women, engaged the attention of poets and sailors, and frequently it was located to the west of the man who wondered where it was. Another important strand revolved around the concept of the destiny of nations, the notion that the secular sword must be taken by a nation to the west. From Troy to Greece, Rome, and England, "westward the course of empire takes its way."

2. The “Frontier Thesis” promulgated in 1893 by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in a paper, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, presented before the American Historical Association during the Chicago World’s Fair. In that paper he proposed that a unique American character was formed by the frontier experience and westward expansion – characterized by informality, violence, crudeness, democracy, and initiative that the world recognized as “American.” He was motivated to write this paper by a statement made by the director of the United States Census, who said in 1890 that the “frontier was closed.” By this, he meant that the census definition of the frontier – an area inhabited by fewer than 2 people per square mile – no longer allowed a connected line to be drawn across the country. There was no longer an identifiable frontier line, and his analysis suggested that the closing of the frontier would bring about a change in the character of Americans.
3. The fixation Americans have on their own West. Beginning in this session and continuing throughout the three sessions, we’ll look at the imagery and cultural icons of the West. After setting the stage for this in the first two sessions, we’ll dive deeply into this cultural meaning in the third session.
2. A quick review of the territorial growth of the United States, from its beginnings in 17th century small settlements clinging to the eastern seaboard through the geographic expansion that was essentially completed by 1850. We’ll look at the various elements of expansion, including territorial acquisition (through war, purchase, and annexation) and admission of new states to the Union. We’ll touch on the broad outlines of this expansion – the post-revolution settlement in the Old Northwest and Old Southwest, the acquisition of Louisiana in 1803, the establishment of boundaries in Florida and Oregon, the Mexican War, gold rushes, Mormon expansion, and the trails west between 1820 and 1860. This map will remind you of this sequence of events and give you an idea of elements of history you might want to think about before this class meets



3. A deeper dive into this story, examining the progression of settlement within each of the major land expansions. Settlement patterns differed not only among the different territories but also within each territory, depending on the external circumstances at the time.

Session 2:

In this session, we'll build on the framework established in the first session. We'll focus on the following topics:

1. The West as a moving construct: an area that was always just beyond what people perceived to be the edges of their civilization. The earliest expansions into The West were movements into the unsettled western parts of the original colonies – fostering the same speculation and expectations that were generated by the “Far West” in later centuries. The next expansions involved the leap over the mountains – into The West of the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys between the end of the American Revolution and the 1830s. Then came the expansions into what we generally think of as The West today – the land between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean.
2. The motivations and methods of westward expansion. Underneath the broad historical sweep we reviewed in the first session, hundreds of thousands of people made individual and group decisions to leave one area and moved to another. This analysis will involve a more granular examination of the settlement of each new area added to the United States during the 19th century. We will look at how each of the expansions was made possible by innovations in transportation infrastructure (improved roads, steamboats, canals, and railroads), by economic conditions that either impelled people to move from where they were living or drew them into new areas, and by international events that changed sovereignty over the land and thus opened new areas to settlement.

Session 3:

During this session we will explore the impact of The West on American society and culture. Turner posited that America was formed by the fact that it had The West. Even today, Americans judge themselves by the standard of a West which is both historical and mythical, and modern America doesn't always stand up well to these comparisons. In the course of examining how The West still has great meaning for our popular culture, we'll take a quick look at all of the following:

1. The stereotypes associated with the west – the outlaw and the lawman, the laconic cowboy, the noble (but also vicious) savage, the woman (the schoolmarm as well as the prostitute with a heart of gold), the gunfighter, and more.
2. The West in Literature – James Fenimore Cooper, Dime Novels, and comics
3. The West in popular entertainment
 - A. The Wild West Shows
 - B. Dime novels and comics featuring the characters of The West.
 - C. “The Westerns” of movies and television
 - D. The evolution of country and western music, from The Singing Cowboys to the “Hat Acts” (Alan Jackson, Garth Brooks, etc.) of the 1990s and beyond
4. Western images in advertising and politics.