
GROWTH OF A NATION

Manifest Destiny



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Introduction

In 1814, a young lawyer and poet named Francis Scott Key witnessed the awesome shelling of Fort McHenry, in Baltimore, during the War of 1812. As British bombs exploded overhead, Key rightfully wondered whether the fort—and the United States, itself—would survive.

Out-gunned and out-numbered, Americans rose to the defense of their outpost. And, by the first light of dawn, Key could see the fifteen stars and fifteen stripes waving defiantly about the garrison, declaring the American victory.

So it was throughout the nation’s early history. Time and again the fledgling republic faced challenges and embraced opportunities to achieve its destiny.

This is the story of an exhilarating era—when the United States set its historic course. This is the story of the Growth of a Nation.



Westward Migration

The story of early America is one of constant motion. Even before the colonies won their independence, settlers were navigating the Cumberland Gap into what are now the states of Kentucky and Tennessee, as well as parts of the Ohio Valley and the Deep South. The Old Northwest Territory beckoned to settlers in the years after the War of 1812.

Many Americans believed it was their God-given right and duty to populate the unsettled lands of the West. In 1845, the political editor John L. O’Sullivan gave voice to this divine-inspired urge saying it was the nation’s “...manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”



And so, with a sense of cultural superiority, beginning in the 1840s pioneers breached the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains. Drawn to distant points by the prospect of land, gold, or religious freedom, they followed the nation’s first overland routes: the Santa Fe Trail to the southwest...the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest...the California Trail to the coast...and the Mormon Trail to the Great Salt Lake.

For transportation, the travelers chose a high-sided wagon pulled by horses or oxen. Part rolling home and part moving van, the iconic Conestoga Wagon could even be adapted to float across rivers. Few families dared the arduous westward march alone. They banded together in wagon trains to share dangers and hardships. Indian attacks, sickness, accidents and weather often stood between success and miserable failure.

By 1843, migration to the Oregon Country, in the Pacific Northwest, ignited a dispute over the nation’s border with British Canada. Great Britain wanted the border set at the Columbia River. The U.S. argued for a boundary near the fifty-fourth parallel of latitude. Some Americans even seemed ready to battle over the issue. “Fifty-Four Forty or Fight” went a popular saying of the day. Fortunately for peace, diplomacy prevailed. In 1846, the two nations concluded the Oregon Treaty establishing the nation’s northern border along the 49th parallel. The deal gave the U.S. clear possession of the Pacific Northwest and the country’s first important Pacific port, the area of Puget Sound. As a result, more than 350,000 people settled in the Oregon Country between 1840 and 1860. Many put down roots in the fertile Willamette Valley and built towns such as Portland, Salem, and Eugene.

If migration to the Oregon Country was a steady stream, the rush to California was a flood of titanic proportions. In January 1848, gold was discovered on the property of John Sutter, about 40 miles east of Sacramento. Virtually overnight, treasure seekers from far and

wide sold their homes, closed their businesses and set-out to strike it rich in the California Gold Rush. Armed with little more than a pick-axe and shovel, these "'49ers," as the gold prospectors were known, caused California's population to explode—from just 8,000 non-Indian inhabitants in 1848 to 300,000 by 1855. In just one year, San Francisco was transformed from a quiet oceanside town of just 800 to a bustling commercial hub and the region's most important seaport. The "city by the bay" welcomed treasure hunters from America's East Coast, Europe, Asia—even Australia and New Zealand. In 1849, it seemed that everyone—everywhere—was trying desperately to get to California.

More than \$200 million dollars in gold was pulled from the ground in the four years following its discovery—nearly \$5 billion dollars in today's money. Yet, only a relatively few prospectors found real wealth in the bottom of their pans. Those who did often sold it to pay for booze, gambling or other distractions. Much of the money was made in towns like San Francisco or Sacramento where entrepreneurs "mined the miners," so to speak, charging extravagant rates for room and board, food, clothing, and other essentials. This makeshift restaurant offered a square meal for just twenty-five bucks—more than \$700 today! The Levi Strauss Company struck it rich by selling miner's trousers tailored from heavy cotton cloth. At the height of the boom, sales at Brannan's general stores topped \$5000 dollars a day—making Sam Brannan California's first millionaire.

As the supply of easily-extracted surface gold disappeared, independent prospecting gave way to organized mining companies. Many of the forty-niners who remained went to work for wages. The boom faded, but it's legacy lived on. The Gold Rush ensured California's bid for statehood, which came in 1850; the influx of miners from around the world made California the most ethnically diverse in the Union; and it gave rise to a promise of the "California Dream"—where with a bit of luck and a lot of hard work, one could find fame and fortune.

Texas Revolution

In 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain. In the years that followed the new government invited American speculators, to acquire large tracts of land in its province of Texas. Stephen Austin was one of these colonization agents—or empresarios. Austin contracted to bring 500 families to the region. Over time, he established dozens of communities in the province. Within a decade there were roughly 20,000 American settlers in

Texas. For many, the lure was cheap land and wide open spaces. For others—debtors and fugitives, among them—the region offered the promise of a new beginning. As a group, these settlers were rugged individualists. When friction with the Mexican government developed over slavery and other issues, Texans, in 1835, declared their independence and prepared to fight.



In 1836, Mexico’s president and military dictator, Antonio López de Santa Anna led a contingent of troops into Texas—determined to put down the rebellion. They attacked the Alamo, an old Spanish mission where a handful of Texian rebels had taken refuge. Among those inside, a young officer named William Travis issued an urgent message: “I am besieged, by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna... The enemy has demanded a surrender... otherwise the garrison are to be put to the sword. I call on you in the name of Liberty, or patriotism and everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid, with all dispatch.”

The rebels refused to surrender and they were slain—virtually to the last man, perhaps two-hundred lives in all. The Battle of the Alamo was a crushing defeat, but it inspired Texians and other Americans to take-up arms against Mexico. Across the land, cries rang out to “Remember the Alamo”

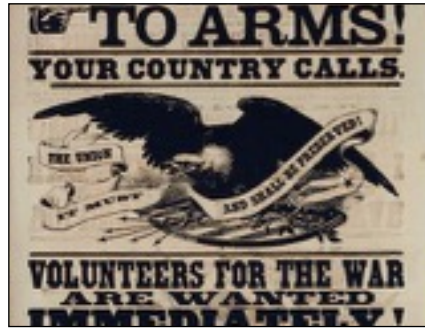
Six weeks later, General Sam Houston turned the tables. His Texian rebels lured Santa Anna’s army to the coast—and then turned and attacked. At the Battle of San Jacinto, Houston’s men gained victory in a skirmish that lasted just eighteen minutes. Santa Anna was captured and conceded to Texian demands for independence—an agreement he later renounced.

The independent Republic of Texas became a linchpin in the American debate over westward expansion and the future of slavery. Between 1836 and 1840 the population of

Texas nearly tripled. The slave population alone eclipsed 12,000. But the republic's very existence remained precarious. The government in Mexico City refused to recognize its sovereignty. And the United States, fearing the wrath of northern abolitionists, refused to consider Texas for statehood.

Mexican War

The fate of the Texas Republic was a central issue in the presidential campaign of 1844. The Whigs nominated, Henry Clay, who came out against the annexation of the republic. While the Democrat's ticket—which featured James K. Polk—strongly favored the measure. Ultimately, Polk carried the day on the campaign pledge of “Texas or Disunion.” After a fierce months-long debate between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces in Congress, Texas was admitted as the 28th state of the Union, in December 1845. But, statehood for Texas only exaggerated tensions in the region.



Mexico had long-refused to recognize Texan independence. And the republic's western border had never been firmly established. Mexico argued that the Nueces River represented the western extent of Texas—while the United States maintained the territory extended all the way to the Rio Grande. This created a large swath of disputed territory that was claimed by both nations. At the same time, white settlers were populating the Mexican-owned regions of New Mexico and California.

President Polk sought to avert conflict with Mexico. He offered to buy the disputed strip of Texas plus New Mexico and California for a sum of \$40 million, but his offer was firmly rejected. Spurned, Polk ordered 3,000 troops into the no-man's land between the Nueces and Rio Grande to assert U.S. ownership of the territory. In April 1846, a Mexican cavalry force attacked an American scouting patrol, leaving sixteen men killed or wounded.

President Polk seized on the event. He called on Congress to declare war, arguing that Mexico had “invaded our territory and...shed American blood upon the American soil.” Congress quickly complied.

The Mexican-American war was the first U.S. armed conflict fought primarily on foreign soil. The U.S. Army was small and woefully unprepared at the outset. But, after the outbreak of fighting, the nation quickly mustered the necessary troops. About 100,000 men saw action during the two-year conflict. More than three-quarters of these troops were so-called “volunteers,” each called to service for a 12-month tour-of-duty.

As a group, the conscripts had little or no battlefield experience. But they benefited from excellent leadership. Many of the war’s junior officers would become household names during the 1860s. Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, and countless others would, in time, be forced to choose blue or gray, but in Mexico they fought side by side as brothers-in-arms.

The conflict inspired political intrigue on both sides of the border—and a simultaneous uprising of American settlers in California—called the Bear Flag Revolt. That the United States would prevail in the Mexican war was never in much doubt. But, President Polk and his military commanders underestimated the rabid anti-American nationalism that propelled Mexico to keep fighting.

On the home front, public enthusiasm waxed and waned based on the latest news from south of the border. New means of communication, such as the telegraph and Pony Express, meant that reporters could deliver their accounts directly from the battlefield. As a result, for the first time, popular opinion was shaped by independent unfiltered news coverage, rather than politicians. These reports often promoted the exploits of America’s top military commanders.

Zachary Taylor—nicknamed “Old Rough and Ready” by his subordinates—won decisive victories at Palo Alto and Monterrey before engaging Santa Anna at the Battle of Buena Vista. It was said that Taylor’s exploits there were so legendary, he would be elected president in 1848 by “spontaneous combustion.”

General Stephen Watts Kearny commanded the “Army of the West.” His troops captured Santa Fe in August 1846, before clashing with Mexican “lancers” near San Diego at the famous Battle of San Pasqual. Ultimately, Kearny was credited with securing both New Mexico and California for the United States.

General Winfield Scott was the top general in the Mexican war and perhaps the greatest military commander of his day. Contrary and flamboyant, he was often called “Old Fuss and Feathers.” While Taylor was occupied in the North, Scott staged a heroic amphibious landing in southern Mexico at Vera Cruz. After defeating the port city, his army battled across the Mexican desert—capturing the capital of Mexico City on September 14, 1847.

The formal end to the war came in February 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. At a cost of 17,000 lives and \$15 million dollars, the United States received undisputed possession of Texas, and all of New Mexico and California territories. 500,000 square miles in all, these lands would eventually include all or parts of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, and Wyoming. With the addition of the Gadsen Purchase five years later, the United States finally stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

This triumph of Manifest Destiny reopened the heated debate over the extension of slavery to newly acquired territories and hardened the already bitter divisions between North and South. It might well have reminded Americans of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s prophecy, made early in the Mexican conflict. “The United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man swallows the arsenic, which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us.”

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