

Homesteading: Myth vs. Reality

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

Sustained military and assimilation campaigns against Native Americans, along with federal measures such as the Homestead Act and the construction of the transcontinental railroad, opened significant amounts of Western territory for settlement during the 19th century. Western settlement is among the most celebrated episodes in American history.

This tutorial examines some of the myths, dreams, and realities associated with homesteading in the West, in five parts:

1. [Manifest Destiny: A Refresher](#)
2. [Perceptions of the West](#)
3. [Homesteads and Bonanza Farms](#)
4. [African Americans and Hispanic Americans in the West](#)
5. [The West: Myth and Reality](#)

1. Manifest Destiny: A Refresher

Since at least the time of Thomas Jefferson, many Americans were fixated on the West. During the first half of the 19th century, the federal government fueled their interest by acquiring additional territories, including the Louisiana Purchase (1803), and by financing exploration. The most notable instance of the latter was the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806), which traveled up the Missouri River, across the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific coast, and back again.

In 1845, a newspaper editor named John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase **Manifest Destiny** to justify American acquisition of Western territories.

TERM TO KNOW

Manifest Destiny

The phrase that came to stand for the idea that White Americans had a calling and a duty to acquire and settle parts of Western North America.

Acting on the belief that the nation was destined—indeed, divinely ordained—to expand westward, the United States acquired Texas, secured claims to Oregon, and fought a war with Mexico to acquire much of the present-day Southwest—all by 1850.

TERRITORIAL GROWTH

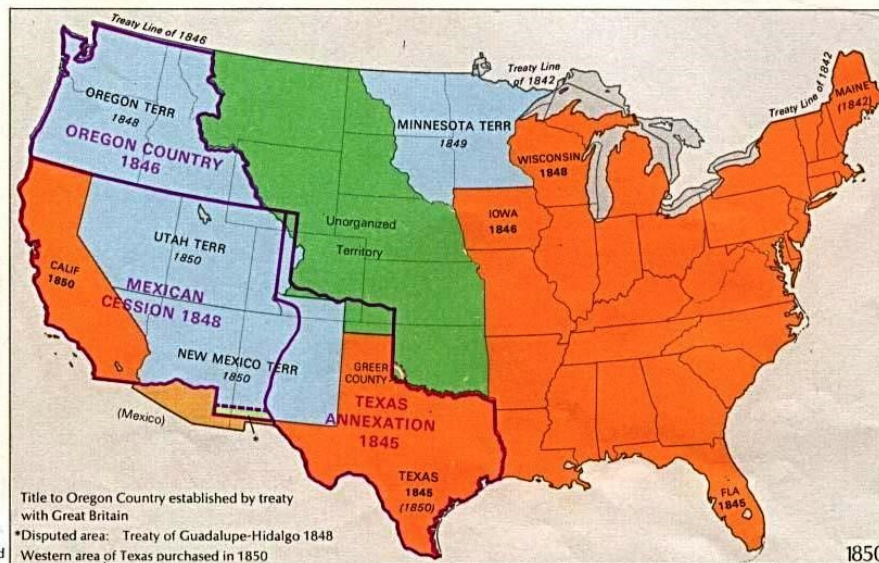
COLONIAL PERIOD: 1775

- Original Thirteen Colonies
- Other British territories

UNITED STATES: 1790–1920

- States
- State claims
- Special status areas
- Territories
- Unorganized territories
- Claimed areas
- Foreign areas

1803 Dates of territorial acquisitions
1805 Dates of initial territorial organization
(1809) Dates of latest change within given time period
1812 Dates of admission to the Union



Map scale 1:34,000,000. Compiled by H. George Stoll, Hammond Incorporated, 1967; rev. by U.S. Geological Survey, 1970.

During the Civil War, Northern Republicans in Congress passed a series of measures to encourage Americans to settle on and develop the land and natural resources of the West. The most notable of these measures was the **Homestead Act**.

Homestead Act

Promoted Western settlement by granting free land to heads of households who promised to improve it.

This act enabled any head of household, or individual over the age of 21—including unmarried women—to claim a parcel of 160 acres for a nominal filing fee. All that recipients were required to do in exchange was to “improve the land” within 5 years of taking possession. The standards for improvement were minimal: owners could clear a few acres, build small houses or barns, or maintain livestock.

Along with the belief in Manifest Destiny, the Homestead Act indicated that Western lands and resources were available for the free use of Americans who claimed them.

2. Perceptions of the West

American Progress, painted by John Gast in 1872 and reproduced in several publications thereafter, reinforced the belief that Western resources were the rightful possessions of adventurous settlers.



The figure in the center of the image, representing American liberty, overlooks numerous processes associated with Western settlement. Native Americans, along with symbols of the untamed West, including bison and bears, retreat into darkness in the left portion of the image. Behind them are hunters and prospectors, and a covered wagon. Next come images representing subsequent stages of settlement, including a farming family and locomotives. Liberty holds a telegraph wire in one hand, indicating the technological innovations that were making their way across the continent.

BRAINSTORM

Recall what you’ve learned about the Indian Wars and assimilation policy. How are Native Americans portrayed in this image, and what key aspects of Western conquest does the image overlook?

Above all, *American Progress* celebrates the bounty of land and resources in the West. It also salutes the rugged, independent Americans who aimed to make use of them. Hunters sought to profit from the hides and pelts of bison and other wild animals. Prospectors hunted for gold and other minerals. In the lower right portion of the image, farmers are plowing the prairie. *American Progress* leaves its viewers with the sense that Western settlers will profit from their hard work.

3. Homesteads and Bonanza Farms

Many of the settlers who moved West were homesteaders who hoped to claim free land through the Homestead Act. By the 1870s, a number of homesteaders, known as *sodbusters*, settled on the Great Plains, particularly Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. Others settled in the upper Midwestern states of Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The number of settlers from a range of backgrounds who made the trek westward was staggering. Most were men, although families also migrated. Many immigrants to the United States also traveled west, with the largest numbers coming from Northern Europe and Canada. Members of ethnic groups tended to settle close together, creating rural communities that mirrored the life they had left behind.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By 1900, one-third of the population of Wisconsin was foreign-born.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Immigrants comprised 45 percent of the population of North Dakota by 1900.

Plains farmers encountered a harsh environment with weather that could change at a moment's notice. Significant variations in precipitation and temperature made crop cultivation difficult. Tornadoes, droughts, and blizzards could inflict devastation without warning. If these challenges were not enough, Plains farmers also endured periodic invasions by swarms of locusts and other pests.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1878, a Kansas newspaper reported a locust swarm in which the insects devoured “everything green, stripping the foliage off the bark and from the tender twigs of the fruit trees, destroying every plant that is good for food or pleasant to the eye, that man has planted.”

While an image such as John Gast's *American Progress* suggested that American settlers were capable of overcoming the environmental challenges to starting a farm on the Great Plains, it overlooked important economic factors.

The Homestead Act and railroad companies offered free land in the West, but starting a farm cost money. Horses, livestock, wagons, wells, fencing, and seed were necessary, but could be hard to come when the population was sparsely distributed across a vast area. Railroads charged high rates to ship farm equipment and other goods west, and to ship farm products east. Banks charged high-interest rates on loans made to farmers and, when debts were not paid, foreclosed.

Great Plains farmers required capital in addition to hard work and perseverance in order to be successful—or just survive. Large farms devoted to the production of wheat or other crops, known as **bonanza farms**, reflected this fact.



TERM TO KNOW

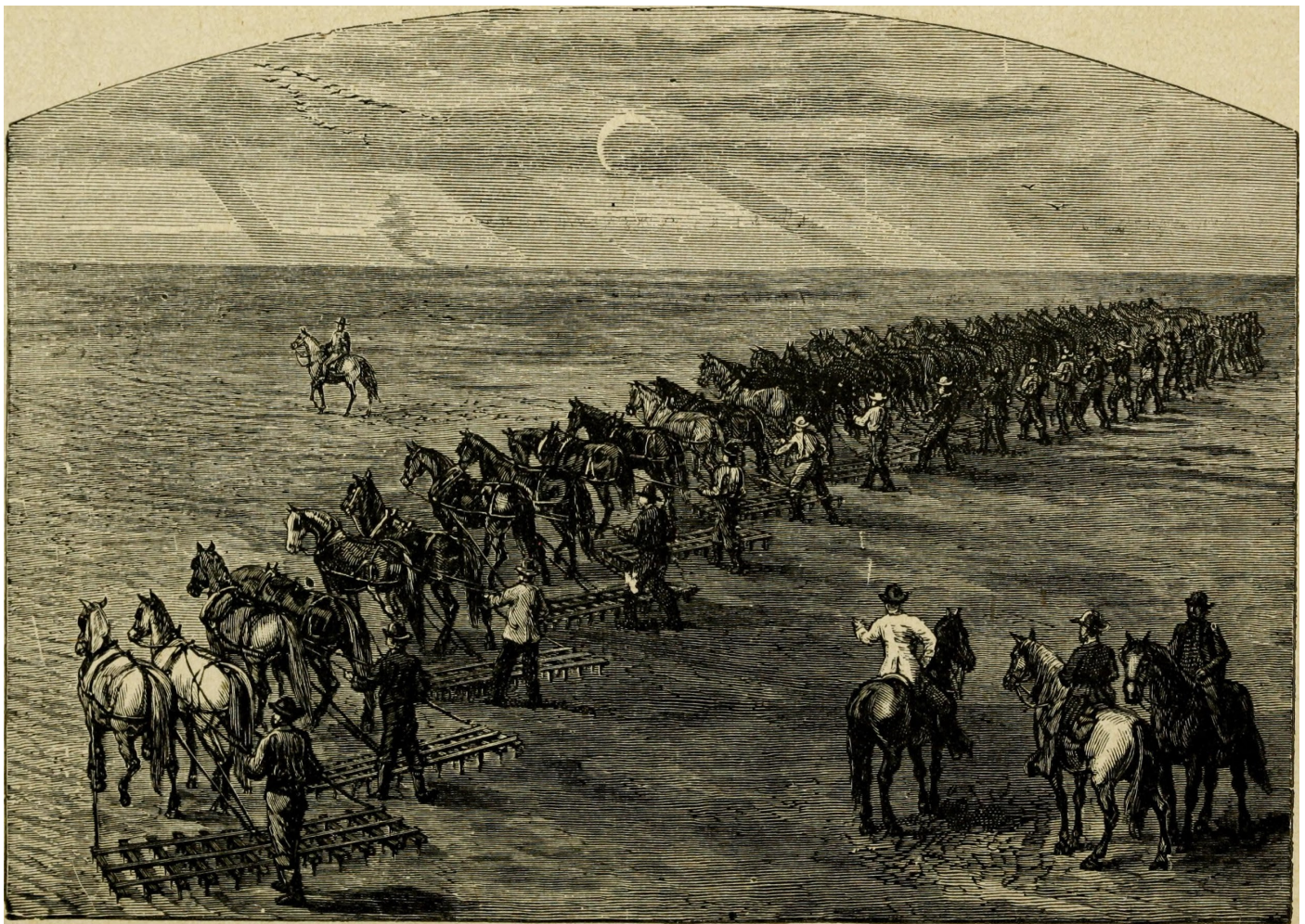
Bonanza Farms

Large farms owned by speculators who hired laborers to work the land.

Speculators in large Midwestern cities like Chicago invested in farms that covered thousands of acres in Minnesota and the Dakotas. Many bonanza farms were sponsored by railroad companies, which meant that they could secure better shipping rates for their crops than independent farmers. Since they had sufficient capital, bonanza farms could purchase better farm equipment, including hay mowers and threshing machines, that increased production. They hired migrant laborers who traveled from farm to farm to operate these machines, harvesting wheat and other crops for urban markets. Many would-be landowners who were lured westward by the promise of cheap land through the Homestead Act became migrant workers on bonanza farms instead, working land owned by others, for wages.



Many of the first houses built by Plains settlers were made of mud and sod with thatch roofs, since there was little timber available.



Harrowing on a Bonanza Farm.
[By permission of Harper & Brothers, New York.]

A depiction of a bonanza farm in North Dakota published in a guidebook for the Northern Pacific Railway, 1899.

MAKE THE CONNECTION

One could argue that bonanza farms were among the first instances of corporate agriculture in American history. What parallels do you see between the bonanza farms of the late 19th century and corporate farms/feedlots of the early 21st century?

4. African Americans and Hispanic Americans in the West

Although James Gast's *American Progress* celebrated the land and resources available in the West, it ignored the fact that the West was a diversely-populated region that included groups other than White Americans and Europeans.

Tens of thousands of African Americans, including many formerly enslaved people, moved West after the Civil War. They did so to escape the racism and violence that had emerged in the "New South," as well as to pursue economic opportunities. In reference to the Biblical flight from Egypt chronicled in Exodus, a number of African-American homesteaders who migrated from the South to Kansas became known as **exodusters**.

TERM TO KNOW

Exodusters

African-American homesteaders who migrated from the South to Kansas to escape racial violence and find economic opportunity.

DID YOU KNOW

Over 25,000 exodusters arrived in Kansas in 1879–1880 alone.

A number of Black migrants worked as cowboys in the cattle industry that developed on the Great Plains during the 1870s and 1880s. Among the most notable was Nat Love, pictured below.



At the age of fifteen, Love left Nashville, Tennessee, for Kansas. At Dodge City, which was a prominent endpoint for Texas cattle drives, Love signed on with a group of cowboys (which included other Black men) who had just delivered a herd from Texas. He became one of approximately 12,000 African-Americans who worked as cowboys in the Texas drives.

These cowboys worked the famous Chisholm Trail and other routes from Texas, where ranchers (often financed by Eastern or European businessmen) rounded up large herds of wild longhorn cattle, and drove them to railroad depots in Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge City, Kansas. The animals were then transported by rail to Midwestern and Eastern cities, bringing \$30-\$50 per head.

Contrary to 20th-century Western movies, life as a cowboy was dirty and unglamorous. They did not live as independently as was later romanticized. Like migrant farmers on bonanza farms, Nat Love and other cowboys were wage laborers who worked for large ranches, many of which were financed by Eastern capital that took advantage of free grass in the West. If he was lucky, a cowboy might earn \$30 a month. This pales in comparison to the thousands of dollars that ranch owners earned.

A number of other Western ranch hands were Hispanic. Many facets of cowboy culture—Western-style saddles, lassos, chaps, and lariats—originated with Mexican *vaqueros*. While White Easterners, immigrants, and African Americans were moving westward, several hundred thousand Hispanics were living in the American Southwest, especially New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Most were American citizens under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War (1846–1848).



Cattle drives were an integral part of Western expansion. Cowboys worked long hours in the saddle, driving hardy longhorns to railroad towns where they were loaded onto trains and shipped east.

One of the key terms of that treaty, in which the United States acquired much of its Southwestern territory from Mexico, was that Mexicans who lived in those locations could become American citizens if they remained in the U.S. Mexicans who remained within U.S. borders retained rights to their language, religion, culture, and property.

Despite these guarantees, the same economic forces that marginalized homesteaders and cowboys impacted Hispanic communities. In many cases, the federal government ignored Hispanic land claims, making their land subject to the Homestead Act and other laws. The expansion of the railroads into the Southwest was accompanied by the expansion of commercial farms and ranches owned by White Americans.

5. The West: Myth and Reality

Despite the realities of Western settlement, images such as John Gast's *American Progress* and stories about pioneers and cowboys contributed to the myth of the West as a land of individual freedom. This appealed to people of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Perhaps this is why images and stories of rugged individuals establishing themselves in the West remain popular.

By the end of the 19th century, growing evidence suggested that belief in the West as a place for individualism was an illusion. To create a profitable farm, ranch, or business in the West, capital was required. Most of it came from urban, Eastern investors and businessmen.

The poem “Don’t Fence Me In,” originally written by Montanan Robert Fletcher and converted into a song by Cole Porter during the 1930s, indicates that many Westerners struggled with this reality and continued to profess their individualism.

“Don’t Fence Me In,” by Robert Fletcher

“Oh, give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above Don’t fence me in Let me ride thru the wide-open country that I love Don’t fence me in....

Just turn me loose Let me straddle my old saddle underneath the western skies On my cayuse Let me wander over yonder till I see the mountains rise I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences Gaze at the moon until I lose my senses I can’t look at hobbles and I can’t stand fences Don’t fence me in.”



BRAINSTORM

Compare “Don’t Fence Me In” with John Gast’s *American Progress*. Although they were created decades apart, what do they have in common?



SUMMARY

Driven by their perception of the West as open, free land, and by federal laws like the Homestead Act, which seemed to make the perception a reality, waves of settlers moved westward during the late 19th century. Popular images, like John Gast’s *American Progress*, depicted settlers as White Americans, but the West was a diverse place. European immigrants made the trip. African Americans, seeking to escape racism and find economic opportunity, went west, too. Hispanics already

lived in the region. All of them viewed the West as providing an opportunity to achieve their dreams unencumbered by outside forces. However, the environment, capitalism, and the expansion of railroads and corporate interests made their dreams difficult to realize.

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- [Image of Nat Love](#) | License: Public Domain
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TERMS TO KNOW

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Exodusters

African-American homesteaders who migrated from the South to Kansas to escape racial violence and find economic opportunity.

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The phrase that came to stand for the idea that White Americans had a calling and a duty to acquire and settle parts of Western North America.