

Looking West

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

While Alexander Hamilton and many Federalists looked to Europe, specifically Great Britain, as the desired model for American development, others were looking westward.

In this tutorial we'll examine those who believed that western expansion was a natural right of the United States. But expansion brought with it many questions related to acquisition, administration, and disposal. How the early American government answered these questions had profound implications for the American landscape and the future of the American republic.

Our discussion of breaks down as follows:

1. Origins of the Public Domain

Per the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1783), Great Britain relinquished all of its claims east of the Mississippi River to the United States. However, jurisdiction over this vast territory did not transfer automatically to the national government, which was still under the Articles of Confederation. Rather, many of the states claimed this territory, which contributed to a chaotic situation.

During the colonial period, many of the charters that the English Crown distributed to establish colonies in eastern North America featured land claims that extended all the way to the Pacific.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The colonial charter for Virginia claimed territory in eastern North America and insisted that such claims extended “from Sea to Sea, West and Northwest.”

Throughout the colonial period, colonies competed with each other for these western land claims. Such competition continued even after the United States achieved independence.

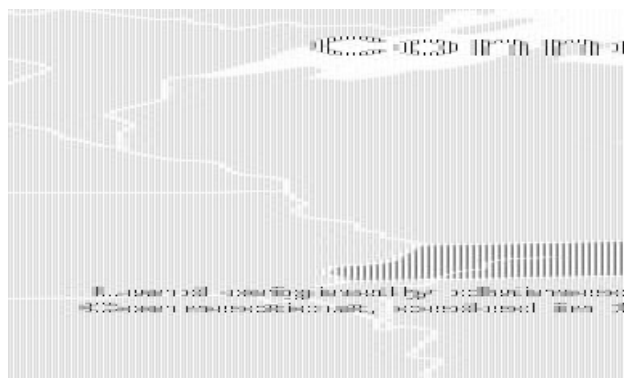


DID YOU KNOW

The famous Mason-Dixon line that ultimately came to define the division between the “free North” and the “slave South” by the mid-19th century was originally surveyed in the 1760s in an attempt to mediate conflicting land claims between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia.

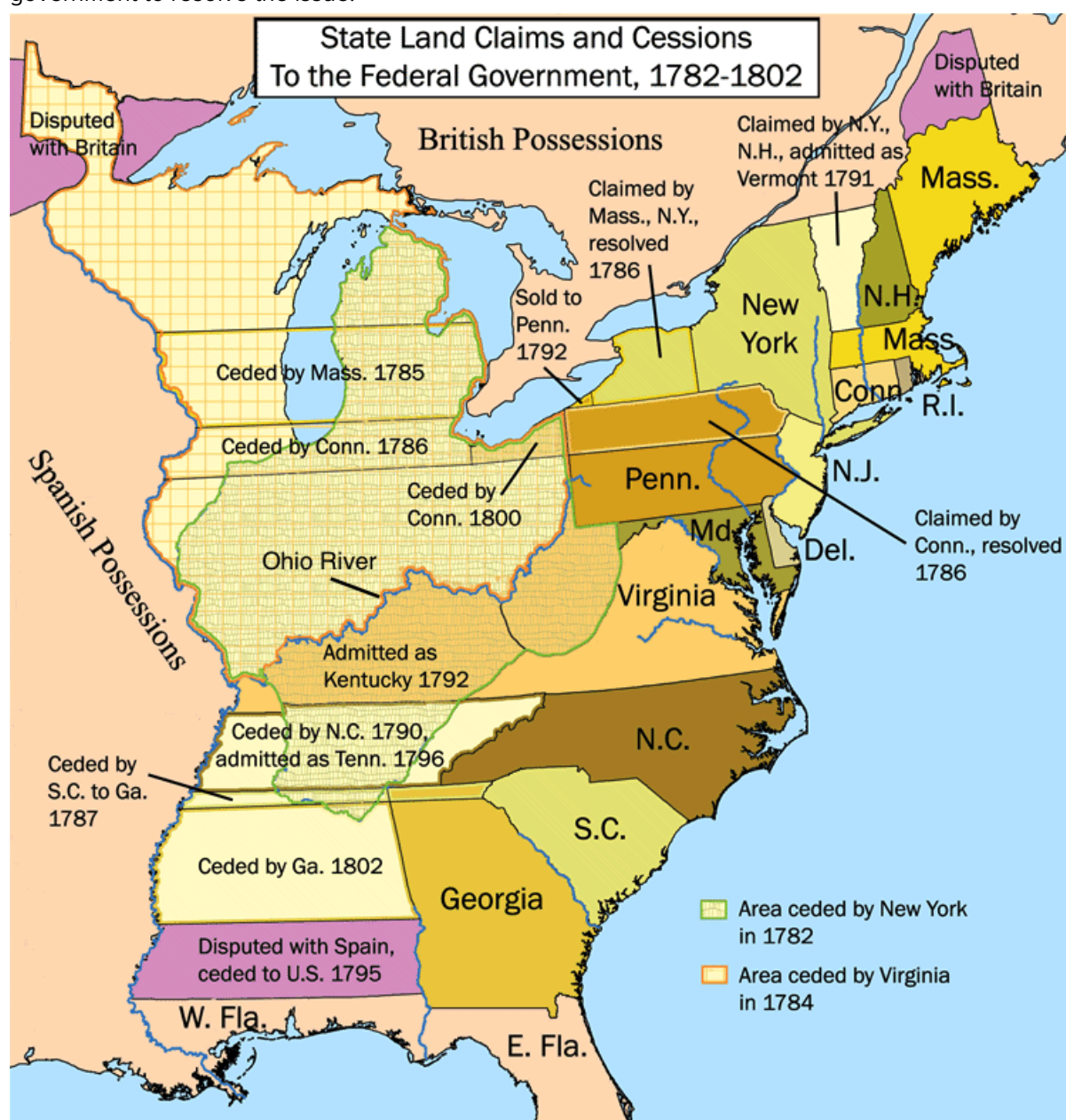
It was within this context that, in 1784, the state of Virginia surrendered its western land claims—which extended throughout the Ohio River Valley and embraced up to 283 million acres according to some estimates—to the national government (see map below). Virginia did so largely out of self-preservation, as it faced a number of problems with its western territory, including:

- Conflict with land speculators from neighboring states that also claimed territory in the Ohio River Valley.
- Western separatists, whom eastern Virginians referred to as “turbulent and unruly,” attempted to create the independent principalities of Transylvania (present-day Kentucky) and Vandalia (in what is now West Virginia).



Under such conditions, Virginia politicians, many of whom originated from elite, tobacco-growing, slaveholding families in the eastern part of the state, concluded that they could no longer govern such a large territory and they looked to the national government to resolve the issue.

Connecticut used its colonial charter to claim western lands in Pennsylvania and the Ohio River Valley. For this reason, northeast Ohio was originally known as the Western Reserve.



DID YOU KNOW

Other states with western claims, which included Georgia, North Carolina, New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, also ceded their western land claims to the national government. Altogether, the cessions amounted to 233.4 million acres, which was slightly larger than the entire area of the original 13 states.

2. The Land Ordinances

It was in the national government's attempt to answer the question of what to do with these western lands, that Thomas Jefferson stepped in. Jefferson proposed a series of ordinances that laid the blueprint for western expansion, reinforcing his vision of the West as a land for independent property owners.

Jefferson's first ordinance, issued in 1784, directed that the western territories would be organized in a manner in which they would create new states, each of which could be admitted to the Union on equal standing with the original states. Jefferson's next ordinances outlined exactly how this process would occur for the lands north of the Ohio River.

The first initiative, known as the **Land Ordinance of 1785**, had one primary objective: to transfer western lands into private hands as quickly as possible. To facilitate this process, the ordinance outlined the following procedures:

1. The division of western land into rectangular plots in order to prepare for the government sale of land.
2. The division of these rectangular plots into townships of six square miles. Townships would be subdivided into 36 plots (or sections) of 640 acres each, which could be subdivided further.
3. The price of an acre of land was set at a minimum of one dollar, and the land was to be sold at public auction under the direction of the Congress.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 was designed to prepare western lands for sale to American citizens, the proceeds from which would raise revenue to boost the nation's economy.



TERM TO KNOW

Land Ordinance of 1785

Proposed the division of western lands into rectangular plots in order to prepare for sale under the direction of the national government.

Meanwhile, the **Northwest Ordinance of 1787** provided the foundations for the governance of western lands by organizing all lands north of the Ohio River into a new territory—the Northwest Territory—and providing an orderly method for the creation of new states from this territory:

1. Once the population in a particular area reached 5,000, citizens could organize a territorial legislature.
2. When the population reached 60,000, the territorial legislature could write a constitution and apply for statehood. Upon admission to the Union, the new state would continue to enjoy all of the rights and liberties already enjoyed in the original states.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a framework for the future states of the Northwest Territory. It provided for the orderly creation of new states from this territory. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a framework for the future states of the Northwest Territory. It provided for the orderly creation of new states from this territory. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a framework for the future states of the Northwest Territory. It provided for the orderly creation of new states from this territory.

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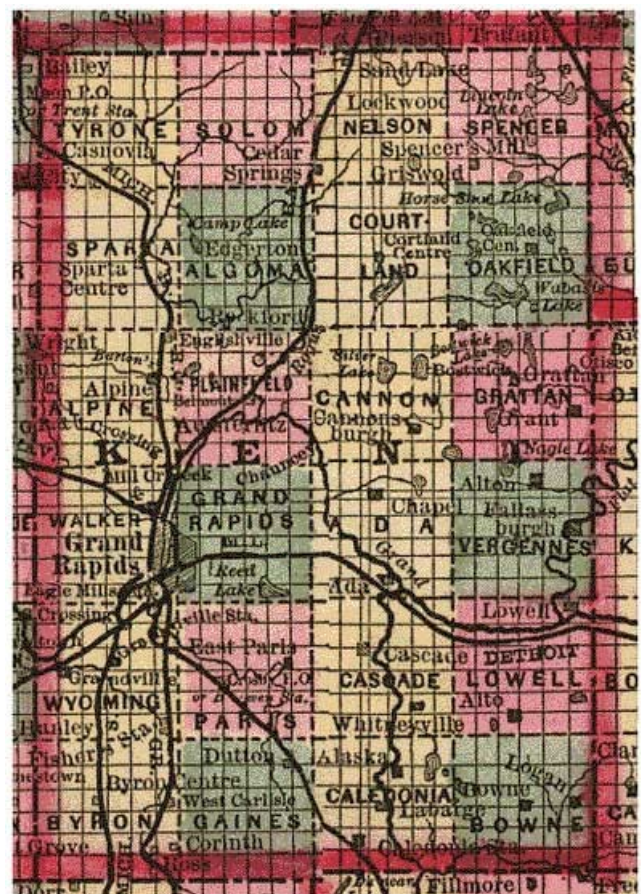
Northwest Ordinance of 1787

Organized all lands north of the Ohio River into the Northwest Territory and provided for the orderly creation of new states from this territory.

Together, these ordinances provided the foundations for Jefferson’s vision of the West as an “empire of liberty.” Rather than rule over western lands as a colonial power (much like Great Britain), the United States would admit western territories as states equal to those that originally comprised the United States. For Jefferson, republican governments and western expansion were supposed to go hand in hand.

DID YOU KNOW

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 forbade slavery in the Northwest Territory, which laid the foundations for future sectional conflict between North and South over western expansion. In the meantime, a number of slaveowners brought enslaved people to the Northwest Territory. Some defended their actions by claiming that the people they enslaved had voluntarily signed labor contracts.



By the late 19th century, the effects of Jefferson’s ordinances were clear on American maps. This 1885 map of Kent County, Michigan, clearly illustrates the township-section system juxtaposed on a natural landscape of lakes, streams, and rivers.

3. The Louisiana Purchase

Jefferson continued to look westward even after he became President in 1801. Indeed, he achieved his greatest triumph on behalf of the “empire of liberty” in 1803, when the United States bought the territory of Louisiana from France in a transaction known as the **Louisiana Purchase**.



Louisiana Purchase

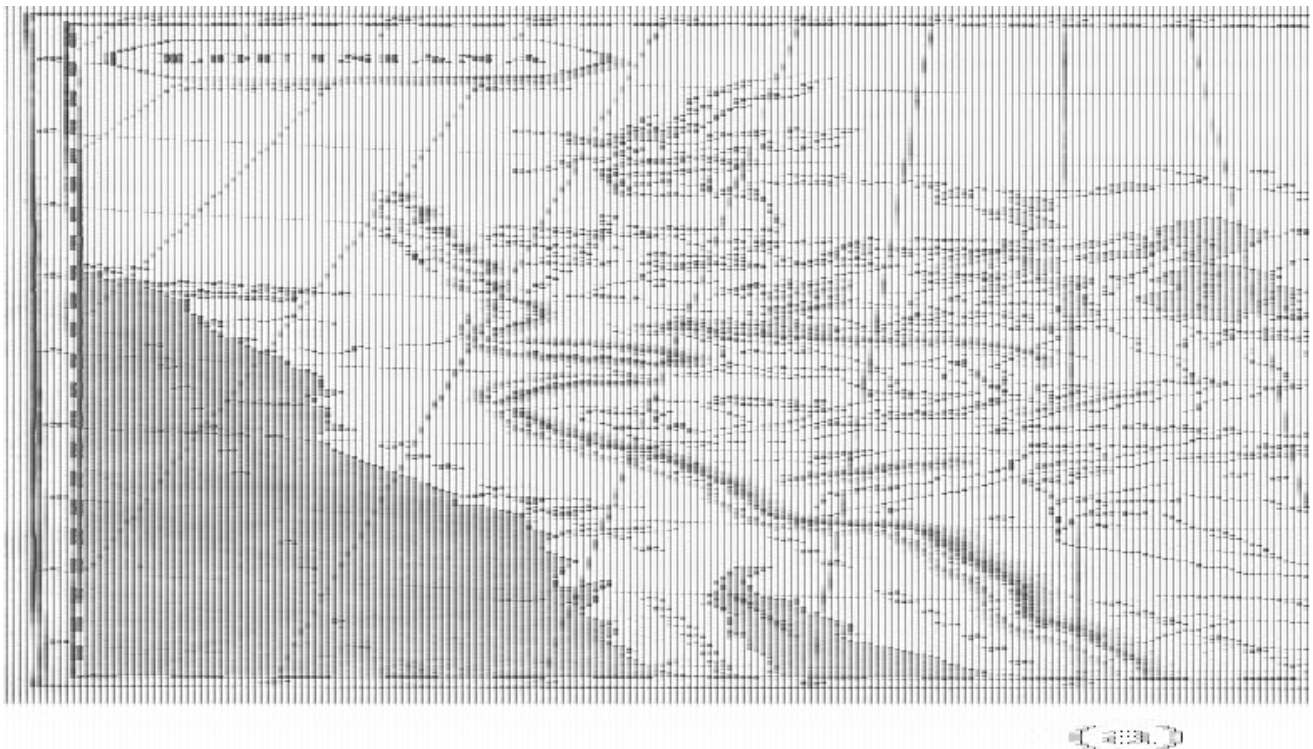
The purchase of the Louisiana territory from France by the United States in 1803; for \$15 million, the United States acquired territory west of the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains.

The purchase of Louisiana came about largely because of international circumstances beyond Jefferson's control. Until 1800, Spain had controlled the port of New Orleans and had given the United States the right to traffic goods in the port without paying customs duties. That year, however, the Spanish ceded control of the city (and all of Louisiana) to France, which was now under the control of Napoleon.

Napoleon's acquisition of Louisiana was tied to the Haitian Revolution. Rather than accept an uprising on the Caribbean's most valuable sugar colony, Napoleon sought to retake Haiti. Louisiana played a key part in Napoleon's plans, as he envisioned that the area would provide valuable foodstuffs to the island once the French had quelled the Haitian Revolution.

Concerned with retaining trading access to New Orleans, Jefferson sent envoys to France. The timing at which Jefferson sent his envoys proved advantageous, however. In 1801, Napoleon had dispatched an enormous army (40,000 troops in all) to retake Haiti. A year later, however, when Jefferson's envoys arrived, Napoleon's New World army had succumbed to yellow fever and was defeated. Napoleon was now desperate for funds as he prepared for yet another war against Great Britain, and at this point Louisiana appeared disposable.

In early 1803, Napoleon agreed to a deal with the United States. For \$15 million, the United States received all of Louisiana. It was perhaps the greatest real estate deal in American history.



This 1804 map (a) shows the territory added to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Compare this depiction to the contemporary map (b).



How does the 1804 version differ from what you know of the geography of the United States and what might be the reasons for the differences?

4. Looking West

Jefferson was ecstatic upon hearing the news of the purchase, in large part because it confirmed his hopes that the future of the United States lay westward rather than eastward. Jefferson envisioned the United States as a republic in which farmers — people he had once referred to as “the chosen people of God” — could acquire property (thanks in large part to his land ordinances) and work the land. In addition, by securing the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans, Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase provided western farmers with an essential outlet to outside markets. In Jefferson’s mind, farmers would send their produce down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where it would be sold to American and European traders.

Jefferson always remained optimistic toward western expansion because he believed that, as long as settlers adhered to certain principles, most notably those associated with “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” they would remain Americans no matter where they lived.

Regardless of Jefferson’s vision of the West as an “empire of liberty,” western expansion posed important challenges for the future of the United States for the following two reasons:

- Jefferson’s vision did not include Native Americans. Thanks in large part to his land ordinances and the organization of the Northwest Territory, thousands of American settlers flooded into the Ohio River Valley and took over indigenous land claims, contributing to persistent conflict on the frontier.
- Jefferson’s vision did not include African-Americans. Early on, the issue of western expansion was accompanied by the question of whether slavery could expand. Some Federalists opposed the Louisiana Purchase for fear that it would enhance the political power of slaveholding states at the expense of the Northeast. Meanwhile, for southern slaveholders, western expansion could be a boon for their cash-crop economies while, at the same time, it furthered the suffering of the human beings they claimed ownership over.

Albert Gallatin, a western land speculator who would ultimately become Thomas Jefferson’s Secretary of the Treasury, commented the following in 1796:

Albert Gallatin, Western Land Speculator

“If the cause of the happiness of this country was examined into, it would be found to arise as much from the great plenty of land in proportion to the inhabitants, which their citizens enjoyed, as from the wisdom of their political institutions.”



What do you think Gallatin meant by this statement?



Despite its limitations, Jefferson’s vision for an “empire of liberty” represented a profound shift in the national perspective, one in which Americans started to look westward—toward the frontier—rather than eastward as they envisioned the future of the United States. Jefferson provided many Americans with the means to do so. His series of land ordinances created a system through which individuals and companies could purchase land from the national government. They also provided the stipulations through which western territories could enter the Union as states—a true “empire of liberty” in which western expansion, republican governments, and independent landowners went hand in hand. Finally, the Louisiana Purchase provided the United States with ample room to achieve this vision, as well as grapple with its more unsavory characteristics that could prompt division rather than unity.

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REFERENCES

The Second Charter of Virginia (May 23, 1609), The Avalon Project, Yale Law School. Retrieved from bit.ly/2iKSP0V



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Map of US land claims and cessions](#) | License: Creative Commons
- [Map of Kent County, Michigan \(1885\)](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Land Ordinance of 1785

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Louisiana Purchase

The purchase of the Louisiana territory from France by the United States in 1803; for \$15 million, the United States acquired territory west of the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains.

Northwest Ordinance of 1787

Organized all lands north of the Ohio River into the Northwest Territory and provided for the orderly creation of new states from this territory.



DATES TO KNOW

1783

The Treaty of Paris ends the American Revolution.

1784

Virginia cedes its western land claims to the federal government.

1785

The Land Ordinance of 1785 outlines plans for dividing western lands.

1787

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 creates the Northwest Territory.

1801

Thomas Jefferson becomes president.

1803

The United States purchases the Louisiana territory from France in the Louisiana Purchase.