

Manifest Destiny

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

A number of Americans continued to look westward after President Thomas Jefferson completed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. By the mid-19th century, however, confidence in Jefferson's "empire of liberty" evolved into a concept known as "Manifest Destiny." This concept expressed confidence in the right and responsibility of the United States to expand across North America and spread the benefits of American culture.

By the 1840s, Americans focused on two western places in particular: Texas and Oregon. The motivations for moving to these areas were economic as well as ideological.

Our examination of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion breaks down as follows:

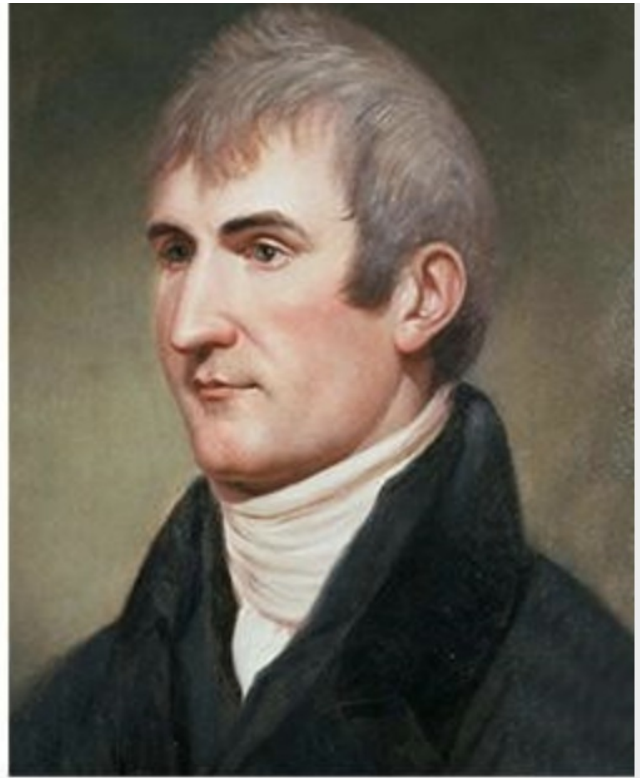
1. Westward the Course of Empire

Many Americans remained obsessed with the western part of North America. Beginning under Thomas Jefferson and continuing throughout the first half of the 19th century, the federal government sustained this interest in and obsession with the West by financing exploration and surveying expeditions.

The most famous of these expeditions was that of **Meriwether Lewis and William Clark**, whom President Jefferson commissioned to explore the Louisiana Purchase.



(a)



(b)

Charles Willson Peale, celebrated portraitist of the American Revolution, painted both William Clark (a) and Meriwether Lewis (b) in 1810 and 1807, respectively, after they returned from their expedition West.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

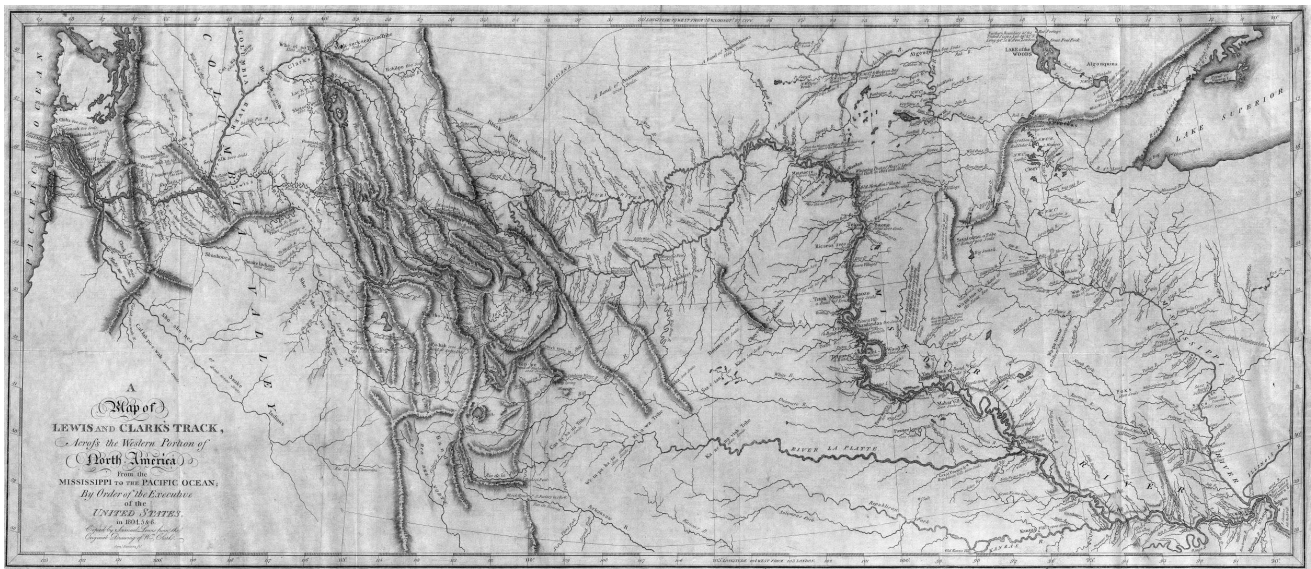
Meriwether Lewis and William Clark

Commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to explore the Louisiana Purchase in a journey that lasted from 1804-1806.

Between 1804 and 1806, the Lewis and Clark expedition secured American claims to much of the American West by traveling up the Missouri River, across the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific coast, and back again.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The party established relationships with many Native American tribes in the region, which paved the way for American fur traders like John Jacob Astor to establish trading posts along the Missouri and Columbia rivers, solidifying American claims to Oregon.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Lewis and Clark accurately mapped the region through which they traveled, and these maps provided a valuable reference to future explorers, surveyors, and settlers.



This 1814 map of Lewis and Clark's path across North America from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean was based on maps and notes made by William Clark. The expedition added greatly to American knowledge of the territory that lay west of the Mississippi River. Of particular note, this map accurately located the source of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers and also denoted the location of the Rocky Mountains.

Lewis and Clark, as well as subsequent explorers of western expeditions, also encountered a variety of people in the West.

➤ **EXAMPLE** By 1820, Jedidiah Morse estimated that nearly half a million Native Americans lived in the United States, most of whom were situated west of the Mississippi River in the lands comprising the Louisiana Purchase.

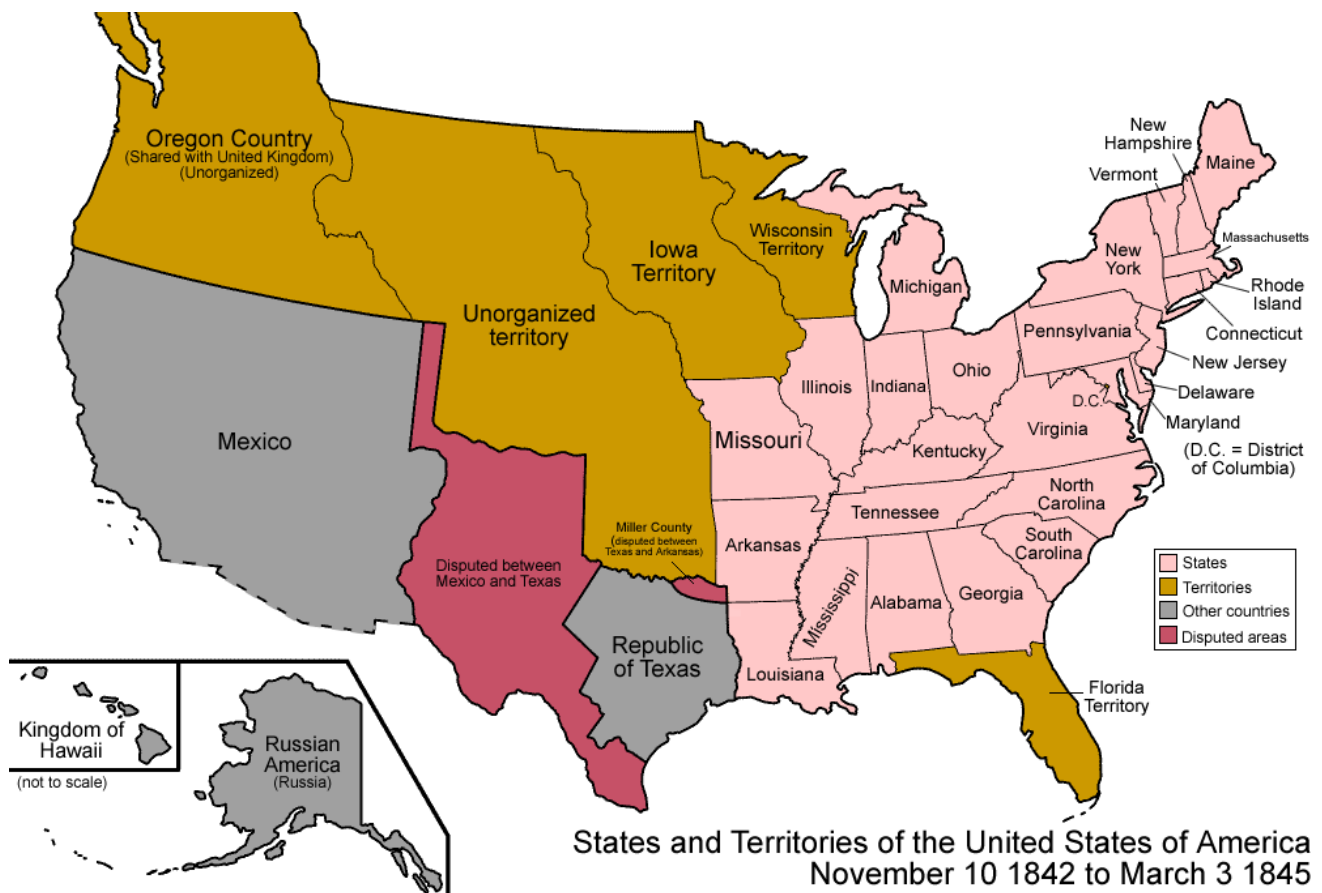
➤ **EXAMPLE** The West also included a number of people of Spanish descent. By the 1820s, anywhere between a third and a half million of such individuals lived in present-day California, New México, and Texas. These territories were originally under Spain's control until 1821, when Mexico gained independence.

Additional Resources

Travel the Lewis and Clark Expedition with the [National Park Service](#).

Despite its contradictions, many Americans continued to embrace Jefferson's concept of the West as an "empire of liberty." Economics and ideology continued to provide the major motivations behind western settlement. Land and property ownership remained among the most important goals for aspiring commercial farmers. These farmers could use the nation's rivers, as well as new transportation technologies such as canals and railroads, to move their goods to market. In addition, much like Jefferson, a number of Americans were convinced in the superiority of their political and economic institutions compared to those of Native Americans or neighboring countries such as Mexico. By the 1840s, Americans were convinced that most — if not all — of North America was to come under the civilizing rule of the United States.

When coming to this conclusion, Americans looked to two places in particular: Texas and Oregon.



By the early 1840s, Americans looked westward to two places in particular—Texas, which gained its independence from Mexico in 1836, and Oregon, which the United States occupied jointly with Great Britain.

2. Texas

Beginning in 1819, Spain began actively encouraging Americans to settle their northern provinces, particularly Texas (*Tejas*). At the time, Texas was sparsely settled, and the few farmers and ranchers who lived there were under constant threat of attack by Native American tribes, especially the Comanche, who supplemented their hunting with raids in pursuit of horses and cattle.

To increase the non-Native American population in Texas and provide a buffer zone between its hostile tribes and the rest of Mexico, Spain began to recruit *empresarios*.



TERM TO KNOW

Empresario

A person who brought new settlers to Texas in exchange for a generous land grant.

Moses Austin, a once-prosperous entrepreneur reduced to poverty by the Panic of 1819, requested permission to settle 300 English-speaking American residents in Texas. Spain agreed on the condition that the resettled people convert to Roman Catholicism. On his deathbed in 1821, Austin asked his son **Stephen Austin** to carry out his plans. Mexico, which had won independence from Spain the same year, allowed Stephen to take control of his father's grant and passed additional colonization laws to encourage migration to the region.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Stephen Austin

Leader of a group of American colonists who established residence in the Tejas province of Mexico and who eventually declared Texan independence.

Thousands of Americans, primarily from slave states, flocked to Texas and quickly came to outnumber the *Tejanos* (Mexican residents of Texas).



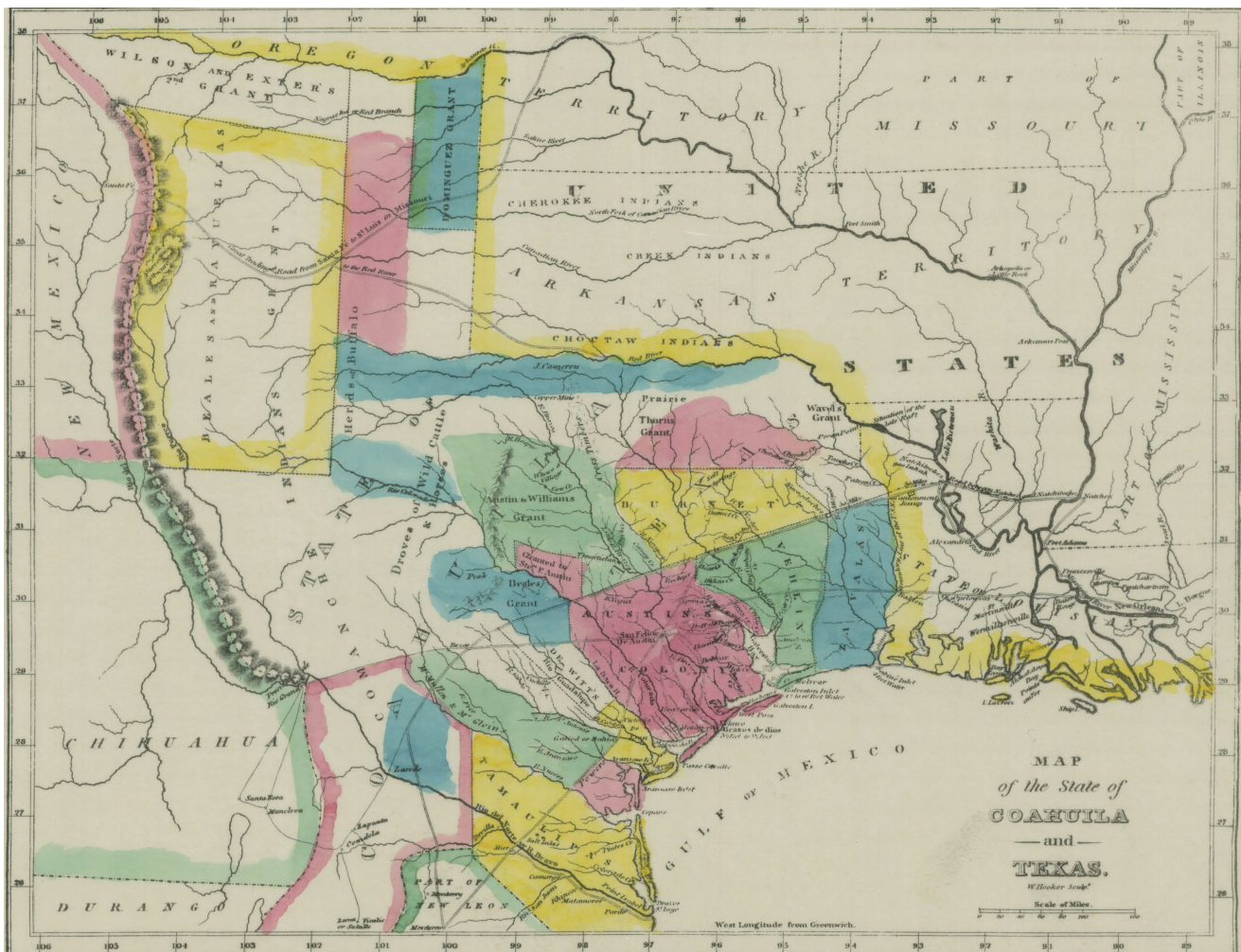
DID YOU KNOW

Unlike the U.S. government, Mexico allowed prospective buyers to pay for land in installments and did not require a minimum purchase.

Many of the Americans who migrated to Texas were convinced of the superiority of American institutions and, as a result, ignored many Mexican laws and customs.

➔ **EXAMPLE** American migrants ignored Mexico's requirement that all settlers in Texas convert to Catholicism.

Slavery complicated the situation in Texas even further. Mexico had abolished slavery upon declaring independence, but Austin's original land grant allowed Americans to bring enslaved people into the territory. Plentiful land, along with soil and a climate suited to cotton cultivation, encouraged the spread of slavery into Texas.



This 1833 map shows the extent of land grants made by Mexico to American settlers in Texas.



DID YOU KNOW

By 1835, over 20,000 Anglo-Americans lived in Texas. The growing presence of American settlers and enslaved people in Texas, along with their reluctance to abide by Mexican law, caused the Mexican government to grow wary and consolidate its control over the region. In 1835, when an army under General **Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna** arrived to exert Mexican authority in the area, Americans and their *Tejano* allies revolted, initiating the Texas War for Independence.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna

Mexican general who signed a treaty that recognized Texas independence after defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836.

After suffering some initial losses, most notably the killing of 187 American and *Tejano* defenders of the Alamo in San Antonio, a Texas army under **Sam Houston** defeated Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, and forced the general to sign a treaty that recognized Texas independence. By the time he returned to Mexico, however, Santa Anna was removed from power. In addition, the Mexican Congress refused to be bound by Santa Anna's treaty with Texas and continued to insist that the territory still belonged to Mexico.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Sam Houston

Leader of the Texas army that defeated General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836. The new Republic of Texas promptly applied for admission to the United States. Yet, mindful of the debate over Missouri almost 20 years earlier, American politicians were reluctant to admit Texas to the Union (a process known as *annexation*) or, indeed, even to recognize it as a sovereign nation. Annexation would almost certainly mean war with Mexico, and the admission of a state with a large enslaved population would bring the issue of slavery once again to the fore in national politics. Thus, Congress shelved the issue of annexation and, for the time being at least, Texas became the fledgling Lone Star Republic.



DID YOU KNOW

The United States did not recognize Texas as an independent nation until March 1837.

3. Oregon

The second western place that many Americans fixated upon by the 1840s was Oregon.



DID YOU KNOW

At the time, the famed "Oregon Territory" of the Pacific Northwest was considered to stretch northward to Alaska (including present-day British Columbia).

The following map displays the extent of the Oregon Territory, as well as the respective claims of the United States and Great Britain, during the first half of the 19th century.



Beginning in 1818, Great Britain and the United States had agreed upon a joint occupation of the territory. Great Britain's influence in the area was manifested by the Hudson's Bay Company, which sent agents throughout the territory on behalf of the fur trade, as this type of trade remained a big business in the region.

However, American influence increased in the region during the late 1830s and early 1840s. More and more people migrated to the area by making a 2,000-mile journey along the Oregon Trail. Many of these individuals and families settled in the Willamette Valley (situated in the southern part of the territory) in search of Thomas Jefferson's "empire of liberty," namely the opportunity to own land and prosper by utilizing the region's natural resources.

A variety of technological developments — specifically well-constructed wagons, the electric telegraph, and improved infrastructure in the eastern United States (canals and railroads) — facilitated this movement westward and allowed the American population in Oregon to surpass that of the Hudson's Bay Company by the mid-1840s.



DID YOU KNOW

Between 1840 and 1845, approximately 5,000 Americans made the trip to Oregon. In contrast, only 700 citizens of Great Britain lived in Oregon Territory by 1844. Most of these individuals were in the territory on temporary assignment with the Hudson's Bay Company.

Permanent American settlement in the territory tipped the balance of power in Oregon in favor of the United States. The balance of power in the region, which had originally been in favor of Great Britain during the time of Lewis and Clark, had shifted in favor of the United States.

4. Manifest Destiny

Americans agreed upon a term to explain the events occurring in Texas and Oregon, which appeared to display the superiority of American institutions and the inevitability of American expansion: **Manifest Destiny**.



TERM TO KNOW

Manifest Destiny

The phrase that came to stand for the idea that White Americans had a calling and a duty to seize and settle in western North America.

A New York journalist named John L. O'Sullivan is credited for coining the term. During the summer of 1845, O'Sullivan addressed the issue of westward expansion and Texas annexation in the *Democratic Review*, which was among the most widely-read publications in the United States at the time. He asserted that the addition of Texas to the United States represented "the fulfillment of our Manifest Destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." He went on to assume that other territories in western North America, most notably California, would soon follow suit.



DID YOU KNOW

O'Sullivan's article originally appeared unsigned in the *Democratic Review* (which was customary at the time), and some historians speculate whether O'Sullivan actually wrote the article.

Regardless of who invented the slogan, Manifest Destiny quickly entered the American vernacular by serving as a label for what Thomas Jefferson would have referred to earlier as the "empire of liberty." Moreover, Manifest Destiny would serve to justify policies that would otherwise be seen as evidence of American imperialism during the late 19th and 20th centuries.

American historians have concluded that Manifest Destiny comprised of three key elements:

- White supremacy

White Americans perceived the West as an underdeveloped region occupied by inferior peoples that was ripe for the taking. Furthermore, they were convinced that White American culture and land use methods would improve the landscape and the lives of those who might otherwise resist American institutions.

- The frontier as a "safety valve"

The second element of Manifest Destiny was the sense that westward expansion would guarantee the survival of the United States by providing economic opportunities for American settlers. The development of northern manufacturing and other characteristics of a modern capitalist economy, including periodic economic depressions such as the Panic of 1837, caused some to question the promise of urban America. Thus, like Jefferson before them, these individuals encouraged Americans to seek economic success and stability by migrating westward. In turn, migration westward would alleviate growing demands for employment and services in eastern, urban America.

- Sense of mission

By writing that North America was "allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions," John L. O'Sullivan was expressing the belief that western settlement was part of God's divine plan for the United States. Such an idea conformed with those of other Americans who believed that the United States was to serve as a beacon of democracy and freedom for the rest of the world and, in turn, represent progress on behalf of human civilization.

Thus, the ideas behind Manifest Destiny were simple: White Americans were destined — indeed, divinely ordained — to expand their political, economic, and cultural institutions throughout North America. For instance, examine the image below, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, which Emanuel Leutze completed in 1861:



Emanuel Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1861)



THINK ABOUT IT

Refer back to the three elements of Manifest Destiny. Are all three elements present in this image? Do you think one element was prioritized over the others?

John L. O'Sullivan may have coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" and Emanuel Leutze may have presented the idea in dramatic fashion, but the concept had its roots in Jefferson's "empire of liberty." The central figure in the center of Leutze's painting, with one arm stretched toward the west while the other holds a woman (who is, in turn, holding a child) suggests that the West was available for the benefit of all Americans. The men below him, holding axes in the forest, express faith that Americans were capable of conquering the western wilderness. What the image fails to portray, however, is that other individuals already occupied the West. Thus, not only would Americans use Manifest Destiny to justify their perceived right to acquire territory from other groups, they would also use the concept to absolve themselves of any questionable tactics they employed in order to acquire western territory.



SUMMARY

Throughout the first half of the 19th century, Americans remained obsessed with the West, convinced that the frontier could provide the foundations for an "empire of liberty." However, events in Texas and Oregon by the 1840s allowed Jefferson's original hopes to evolve into a new concept. Under the slogan of Manifest Destiny, White Americans extolled the belief that it was their divine right to explore

and settle western North America in the name of the United States. Such a slogan, underpinned by the impulses of White supremacy, faith in the frontier, and a sense of mission, would have profound consequences for the United States.

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REFERENCES

John O'Sullivan Quote retrieved from The American Yawp bit.ly/2nMdlKC



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way \(1861\)](#) | Author: Emanuel Leutze | License: Public Domain
- [Map of the United States \(1842-1845\)](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Map of Western United States based on expedition of Lewis and Clark \(1814\)](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Empresario

A person who brought new settlers to Texas in exchange for a generous land grant.

Manifest Destiny

The phrase that came to stand for the idea that White Americans had a calling and a duty to seize and settle lands in western North America.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna

Mexican general who signed a treaty that recognized Texas independence after defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark

Commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to explore the Louisiana Purchase in a journey that lasted from 1804-1806.

Sam Houston

Leader of the Texas army that defeated General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836.

Stephen Austin

Leader of a group of American colonists who established residence in the Tejas province of Mexico and who eventually declared Texan independence.

**1803**

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

1804–1806

The Lewis and Clark expedition secured American claims to much of the American West.

1818

Great Britain and the United States agree upon a joint occupation of Oregon.

1819

Spain encourages Americans to settle in Texas.

1820

Moses Austin receives a land grant to settle 300 Americans in Spanish Texas.

1821

Mexico gains independence from Spain.

1825

Over 20,000 Anglo-Americans live in Texas.

1835–1836

The Texas War for Independence resulted in the formation of the Republic of Texas.

1837

The United States recognizes Texas as an independent nation called the Lone Star Republic.

1840–1850

American migrants head west along the Oregon Trail.

1845

John L. O'Sullivan coins the term "Manifest Destiny".

1861

Emanuel Leutze completes *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*.