

# The Frontier in American History

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

By the 1890s, the Indian Wars had subsided and much of the territory between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Coast had been settled. Many Americans wondered whether an important historical era had ended. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner believed that it had. In 1893, he asserted that Western expansion had been instrumental to national development. Historians have considered the meaning of the frontier in American history ever since.

This tutorial examines the significance of the frontier in American history in four parts:

## 1. The End of the Indian Wars

A number of Native American tribes continued to fight against the U.S. army and to resist assimilation after Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce surrendered in 1877. They were opposed by an onslaught of soldiers, missionaries, homesteaders, and miners. By the early 1880s, the Utes were forced to give up their lands in Western Colorado for a reservation in Utah. In Montana, the Blackfoot and Crow tribes were restricted to reservations. In the Southwest, the Apaches, under chiefs Cochise and Geronimo, resisted government efforts to relocate them to a reservation until the mid-1880s.

Facing military conquest, assimilation, restriction to reservations, settlers and the market economy, some Native Americans sought relief in a religious movement: the **Ghost Dance**.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Ghost Dance

A religious revival, initiated by the Paiute holy man Wovoka, that swept across Western Native American reservations by 1890.

Sometime in the late 1880s, a Paiute named Wovoka began to have visions of his ancestors. They told him that if Native Americans returned to their traditional ways, the buffalo would return and White Americans would be swept away. Members of other Native American tribes traveled to Wovoka's home in Nevada to hear him speak about these visions. When they returned to their reservations, they organized ceremonial gatherings that became known as the Ghost Dance movement.

When the movement spread to the Lakota (Sioux) reservation in South Dakota in 1890, authorities worried that Sitting Bull, who was still regarded as a leader of the Lakota, would join the movement and lead an uprising against the United States. On December 15, 1890, the authorities sent tribal police to arrest Sitting Bull, but

when they attempted to do so, they were prevented by tribal members who sought to protect him. The standoff deteriorated into violence: thirteen people were killed, including Sitting Bull. The U.S. army subsequently conducted a roundup of all Lakotas in the area.

In late December of 1890, approximately 350 Lakota followers of the Ghost Dance surrendered to the army and established a camp along Wounded Knee Creek. On December 29th, military officers entered the camp and ordered the Lakota to turn over their firearms. When some of the Lakota resisted, the **Wounded Knee Massacre** began.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Wounded Knee Massacre

The killing of approximately 150 Sioux Native Americans by the U.S. military in South Dakota on December 29, 1890.

Accounts of the massacre are unclear, but a possibly-accidental rifle discharge by a young man laying down his weapon led the soldiers to fire indiscriminately on those assembled. Some of the Lakota attempted to defend themselves by firing back with rifles they had concealed, but the soldiers ultimately killed 150 people, including many women and children. The army suffered 25 fatalities during the fight, most of whom were killed by crossfire from other soldiers.

The Wounded Knee massacre shattered the Ghost Dance movement and is considered to be the last of the Indian Wars.



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1900, the Native American population in the United States had declined to 250,000, the lowest in American history.

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## 2. The End of the Frontier

While the Native American population in the Western United States plummeted, the settler populations soared. The U.S. Census Bureau released a bulletin in 1890 which included the following statement:

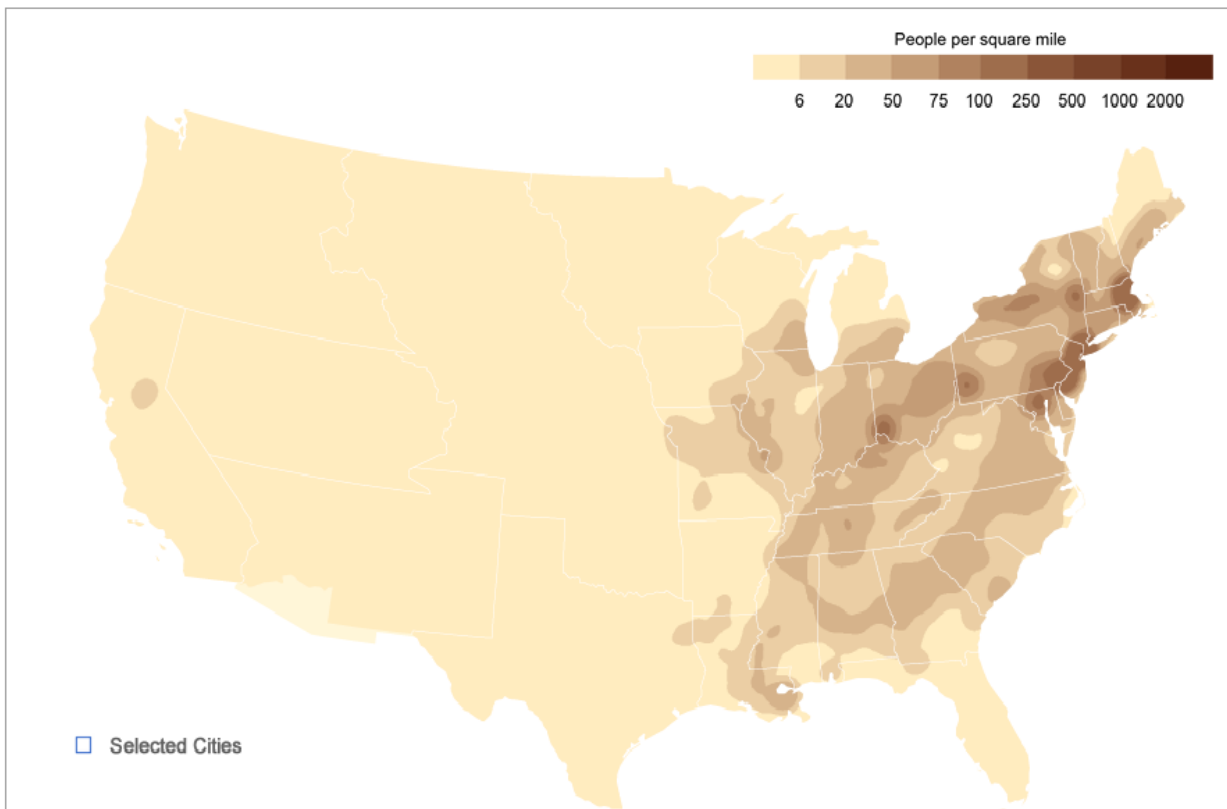
##### U.S. Census Bureau, 1890

“Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.”

Prior to 1890, the Census Bureau defined any portion of the Western United States as frontier territory if it featured a population density of less than two people per square mile (excluding Native Americans). In previous reports, such as in the map of American settlement in 1850 provided below, the Bureau was able to indicate a distinct “frontier line” that continually marched westward across the continent.

##### Additional Resource

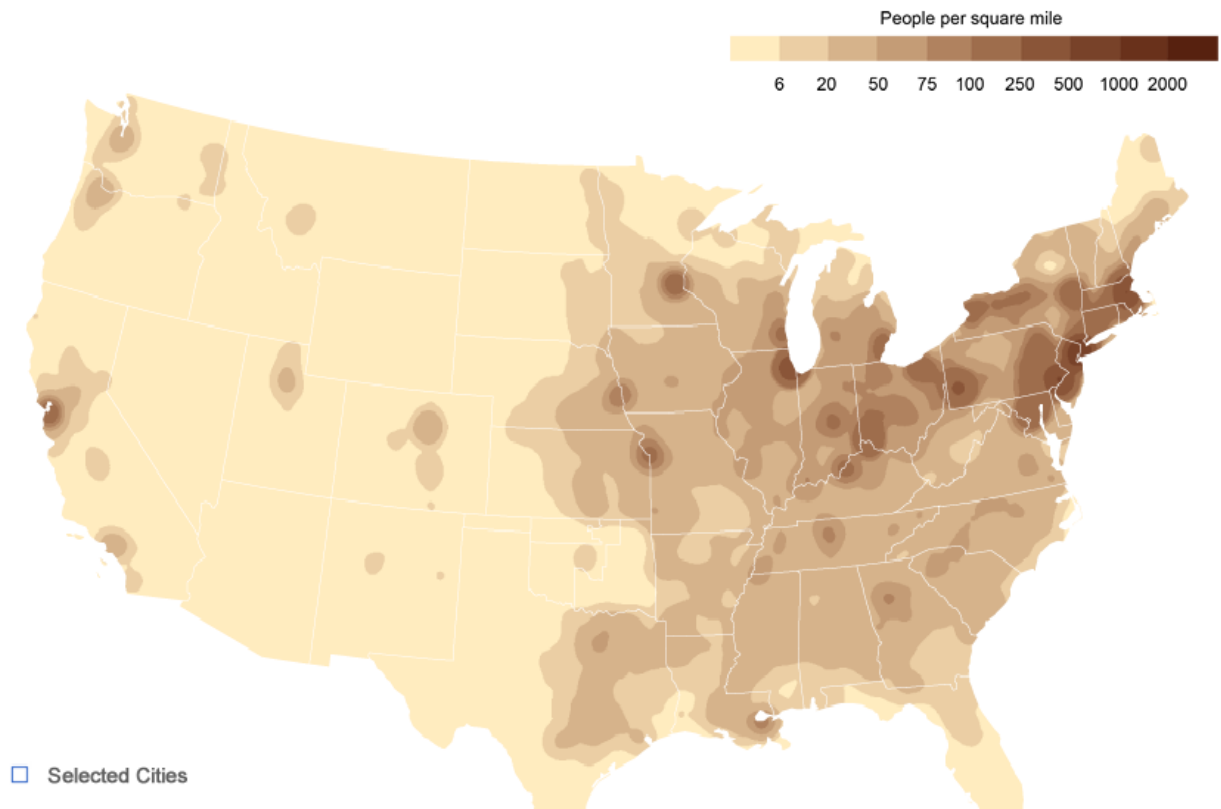
Explore this interactive from the [United States Census Bureau](#) to learn more about frontier expansion between 1790 and 1890.



**1850**

According to census reports from 1850, the “frontier line” had crossed the Mississippi River and a number of cities, including New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati had high population densities. Following the discovery of gold in California in 1849, the Census Bureau began to chart another frontier line that gradually moved eastward from the Pacific coast.

By 1890, the Census could no longer locate any part of the United States with fewer than two people per square mile. This suggested that settlers had populated the West in significant numbers.



1890

Although settlement in much of the West was widely dispersed, the region had begun to develop urban centers on the Pacific coast, and along the front range of the Rocky Mountains. The Northeast and the Midwest also experienced significant gains in population density.

### 3. The Significance of the Frontier

It was in the context of these developments—the end of the Indian Wars, and of the frontier, and the continued expansion of American industry—that members of the American Historical Association (a professional organization for U.S. historians) met during the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in the summer of 1893.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The World’s Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World’s Fair, was held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to the New World.

During the meeting, a young historian from Wisconsin, **Frederick Jackson Turner**, presented one of the most important papers ever written by an American historian: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Frederick Jackson Turner

Late-19th century historian who argued for the significance of the frontier to the development of American democracy and American identity.

In his paper, Turner argues that Western expansion had been integral to the development of American

democracy, as well as to the development of aspects of the American character. These included rugged individualism, optimism, adaptability, and self-reliance. According to Turner, Western expansion had made the United States unique among nations:

**Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”**

“...Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.... Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West...” (Turner, p. 19)



**THINK ABOUT IT**

According to Turner, why was Western expansion integral to American development?

Turner’s argument was simple, but effective. According to him, Western settlement, or frontier expansion, was a process in which settlers acquired “free land,” returned to “primitive economic and political conditions” while settling the territory, and eventually developed higher forms of economic, social, and political organization that paralleled those in the Eastern United States. In his view, this process served as a “safety valve” that enabled people who were dissatisfied with their economic or social position in Europe or the Eastern United States to find new lives and opportunities on the frontier. Turner asserted that this process had repeated itself throughout American history by relying on imagery and characters in contemporary depictions of Western settlement:

**Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (Continued)**

“Stand at Cumberland Gap (in the Appalachian Mountains) and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between.”

Recall what you've learned about the interpretation of John Gast's *American Progress* (1872). Compare it to Turner's paper, which was written two decades after *American Progress*.



#### BRAINSTORM

1. What similarities do you see between Gast's image and Turner's description of frontier settlement?
2. How are Native Americans depicted in each of these works?
3. Consider both of these depictions of frontier settlement: who was the ideal frontier settler? Given what you've learned about Western settlement, was this ideal settler the same as the real ones?

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## 4. The Frontier and the Study of History

John Gast's *American Progress* and Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" both contributed to the perception of the West as a land of opportunity for individual White Americans. Examining the strengths and flaws of this perception has continued to be an important task for American historians, especially those who study the West.

During the last years of the 19th century and the initial decades of the 20th, most American historians accepted Turner's core assertions, which reinforced widely-held perceptions of American progress and exceptionalism. By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the American economy continued to expand and the United States acquired territory overseas. These gains enabled the nation to count itself among the world's great powers. Advocates of American economic and imperial expansion suggested that both trends continued processes that Turner associated with the settlement of the West during the 19th century.

Turner's conclusions about the processes of Western settlement received their first significant criticism during the 1930s and 1940s—during the Great Depression and World War II. The economic devastation of the

Depression challenged American optimism and faith in “progress”, both of which underlay Turner’s conclusions. Historians, including Walter Prescott Webb, viewed Turner’s frontier thesis as insufficient in explaining the development of the West as a distinct region in the United States.

Webb argued that the Western environment, particularly the lack of water in much of the region, affected settlement patterns and the evolution of Western society in ways that Turner did not consider. Webb suggested that the environment of the Great Plains—vast expanses of treeless prairie, “a climate deficient in rainfall”—played a significant role in settlement:

**Walter Prescott Webb, Excerpt from *The Great Plains***

“As one contrasts the civilization of the Great Plains with that of [the Eastern United States], one sees what may be called an institutional fault (comparable to a geological fault) running from middle Texas to Illinois or Dakota.... At this fault the ways of life and living changed. Practically every institution that was carried across it was either broken and remade or else greatly altered. The ways of travel, the weapons, the method of tilling the soil, the plows and other agricultural implements, and even the laws themselves were modified.”

Webb went on to argue that settlement in the environment of the Great Plains would not have succeeded without the industrial advances of the late 19th century, including railroads and windmills, which enabled Plains farmers to pump water from underground.



**THINK ABOUT IT**

How did Webb’s insistence that the West, particularly the Great Plains, was a distinct region, challenge Turner’s view of the processes of Western settlement?

Historians have recently focused on groups and individuals that Turner did not consider when reaching his conclusions. When he examined frontier settlement, Turner grouped people into broad categories like hunters, miners, and farmers. This led him to overlook the range of individuals present in the West, as well as the different groups that lived there.

Criticism of Turner’s omissions took many forms by the late 20th century and continued into the 21st.

- In her 1987 book, *The Legacy of Conquest*, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick urged readers to reconsider Turner’s celebration of frontier settlement as an era of Western conquest, in which White Americans subjugated Native American tribes and prevented Hispanics, African Americans, and others from benefiting from Western resources.
- In a 1993 article published in the *Journal of the Early Republic*, historian Glenda Riley pointed out that Turner “overlooked the ladies,” suggesting that his omission of women’s experiences perpetuated myths of the West as a haven for rugged men.
- Anne Hyde, John Mack Faragher, Elliot West, Richard White, and other historians continue to examine the ways in which individual settlers, families, and Native American tribes interacted with each other to create unique societies on the frontier.
- Donald Worster and subsequent generations of environmental historians continue to investigate the ways in which Western settlers’ beliefs, institutions, and motives clashed with the constraints of various Western environments.





## BIG IDEA

Opinions on the significance of the frontier in American history today are mixed, and more complex than Turner's. The history of the frontier is a story of success and failure; of gain and dispossession — and conquest. Because the frontier remains part of our national mythology, and a subject of great popular interest, historians continue to ask new questions about the significance of the Western frontier for 21st-century Americans.



## SUMMARY

Interest in the history of the Western frontier had grown by the 1890s as two important processes associated with Western settlement came to an end. The first was the Indian Wars, which ended with the Wounded Knee massacre. The second was the U.S. Census Bureau's finding that a distinct, unbroken line marking the extent of Western settlement no longer existed in 1890. In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner attempted to understand the implications of these developments. His essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", provoked discussion and research on the importance of the West to national development that continues to this day. Stories about Western settlement remain popular, and historians continue to investigate the significance of the frontier in American history.

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## REFERENCES

Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890. Retrieved from [bit.ly/2n69uND](https://bit.ly/2n69uND). This product uses the Census Bureau Data API but is not endorsed or certified by the Census Bureau

Turner, F. J. (2008). The significance of the Frontier in American history. London: Penguin

Webb, W. P. (1981). The Great Plains. (p. 6, 8-9) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [American Progress \(1873\)](#) | Author: Gast, J. | License: Public Domain



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Ghost Dance

A religious revival, initiated by the Paiute holy man Wovoka, that swept across Western Native American reservations by 1890.

### Wounded Knee Massacre

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## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **Frederick Jackson Turner**

Late-19th century historian who argued for the significance of the frontier to the development of American democracy and American identity.