When the Constitution was ratified, the United States claimed territory that stretched to the Mississippi River. Most of its 4 million free white citizens, however, lived within 100 miles of the Atlantic coast. Dozens of Indian tribes, consisting of several hundred thousand Indian people, occupied and controlled the rest of the continent. Foreign powers like Spain and England also claimed or controlled vast territories throughout the hemisphere, but their people were sparsely settled in North America.

A great many early Americans expected that eventually, the United States would fully occupy North America (and perhaps beyond). It took decades to realize this vision, which came to be known in the 1840s as “Manifest Destiny,” or the belief that America — and in particular Americans of European decent — were ordained by God to rule the continent and beyond. It was, they believed, their right to do so.

Louisiana Purchase

Louisiana was the first major acquisition after the Revolution. In 1803, during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, the United States approached France with the idea of buying the port city of New Orleans. Because it was located at the end of Mississippi River, New Orleans was an important destination for American farmers who needed to get their crops to northern and European markets. Because travel over land was expensive and time consuming, nearly everyone shipped their goods down the rivers that flowed into the Mississippi and down to the Gulf of Mexico.

France had once claimed the territory but had lost it to Spain 40 years earlier. France had only recently regained Louisiana from the Spanish. At the time, France was struggling to put down a revolution in Haiti. Needing money badly, the French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte offered to sell the entire Louisiana Territory to the United States for $15 million. The boundaries of the purchase were not entirely clear. However, the Louisiana Purchase, completed in 1804, instantly doubled the size of the nation, adding 850,000 acres of territory that would eventually produce 15 new states. Jefferson described Louisiana as a national blessing — an “Empire for Liberty” — that would guarantee peace and prosperity for generations to come. As white settlement in the west increased in the coming years, American Indian tribes faced a difficult choice of resisting or trying to steer clear of the new arrivals.

Florida and Texas

Spain had claimed Florida since the 16th century but had never done much to settle or govern it. Britain claimed the territory from 1763-1783 but returned it to Spain after the American Revolution. As white settlers expanded into the old Southwest, they encountered resistance from Indian people who often sought help from Spain. Spanish Florida also became a refuge for many escaped American slaves who often blended into Indian tribes. Both circumstances were constant sources of annoyance for American leaders, who insisted that the Spanish assert more control over it. Spain eventually grew tired of trying to maintain its colony (and fend of American aggression), and in 1819 it agreed to the Adams-Onis Treaty, which transferred Florida to the United States.

As Florida was absorbed into the US, the people of
Mexico were in the process winning their independence from Spain. The Republic of Mexico (1821) soon attracted thousands of American settlers into Texas, where they eventually launched a rebellion of their own in 1835-1836. After defeating the Mexican army at the Alamo and Goliad in 1836, Texas declared their independence and asked for admission to the United States. Because Mexico refused to acknowledge Texas’ independence, American leaders knew that annexation would mean war with Mexico. Other Americans objected to the fact that slavery was legal in Texas, and they did not want to give the slaveholding states more power in the national government. Thus, from 1836 until 1845, the Republic of Texas remained in limbo.

THE MEXICAN CESSION AND OREGON TERRITORY

During the early 1840s, the Democratic Party was most closely associated with the idea of “Manifest Destiny,” arguing that national expansion would spread American civilization and increase economic opportunities for ordinary workers and farmers. The party had also strongly supported Indian removal (including the removal of the Cherokee along the infamous Trail of Tears). In the presidential election of 1844, Democrats argued that Texas should be annexed and that the United States should demand all of the Oregon Territory, which up to that point was jointly occupied with Great Britain. Crying “54-40 or Fight!” Democrats insisted that Britain give up all of Oregon up to the 54th parallel (in present-day British Columbia).

After the Democrats won the election, Congress passed an annexation bill, and Texas joined the union in 1845. The following year, President James Polk negotiated a treaty with Great Britain to divide Oregon in half, with the United States taking everything south of the 49th parallel. That same year, a series of incidents along the disputed border between Texas and Mexico led to the war that many had predicted. Two years of fighting transformed the map of the United States once again. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo resulted in the American acquisition of more than 525,000 square miles of Mexican land, referred to as the Mexican Cession. Including the loss of Texas, Mexico had been reduced by half in three years. It could have been worse, in fact. By the end of the conflict the United States had actually occupied the capital of Mexico City, leading some Americans to insist that the US take “All of Mexico.” Obviously, this did not happen, although a few years later, in 1853, the United States purchased another section of Mexico in what was called the “Gadsden Purchase,” about 75,000 square miles in what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico.

In the decade after the Mexican Cession and Oregon dispute, Americans would fight amongst themselves (and with Indian tribes) over the future of those territories, as well as those gained in the Louisiana Purchase. Supporters of slavery insisted that the institution spread westward as whites settled it; opponents of slavery demanded that the new territories remain free. These disputes would eventually help spark the American Civil War. In addition, the common opinion that whites were entitled to Indian land resulted in decades of conflict from the upper Rockies to the southwestern desert and from the Great Plains to California.

CONSEQUENCES

The fruits of national expansion included access to raw materials like timber and iron, valuable metals like gold and silver, and the creation of new pathways to global trade. The acquisition of new territory spurred new settlement patterns, created opportunities for industrial expansion (including railroad and mining industries), offered farmers the opportunity to till new soil, and enlarged the scope of the union.

But manifest destiny also came with a high human cost, especially for American Indians who were forcefully removed from their land and placed onto ever-shrinking reservations. The territorial growth of the United States also spurred the expansion of slavery, and the political disputes this provoked led eventually to the Civil War.

By the end of the 19th century, visions of an American nation that governed the continent had been partly realized. Following the American Civil War, the United States would purchase Alaska from Russia (1867) and lay claim to a handful of uninhabited Pacific islands, which laid the basis for the expansion of American commercial and military power into Asia. A renewed expansionist spirit took hold in the late 19th century. In 1898, the United States fought a brief war with Spain that led to acquisitions in the Caribbean and the Pacific (including Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines), and it would annex Hawaii at the same time.

Many Americans would dream of an even larger republic that included parts (if not all) of Canada, Central America, and even more islands in the Caribbean. Those fantasies did not come to pass, but they were powerful reminders of the expansionist impulse that dominated the 19th century.
Bumper stickers often show a humorous slant on an event or political point of view. They usually include short, witty sentences, drawings or thoughts. Create 3 bumper stickers for a wagon that is moving west. The stickers should show 3 challenges and/or conquests of the Manifest Destiny. Each bumper sticker should have a brief explanation beneath it that reveals your understanding of what happened.

**#1 THE ANNEXATION OF TEXAS**

Explaination:

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________

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**#2 THE MEXICAN CESSATION**

Explaination:

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________

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**#3 THE OREGON TERRITORY**

Explaination:

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