At the dawn of the nineteenth century, people in the United States referred to the region west of the Mississippi River as “Indian Country.” In 1803, U.S. President Thomas Jefferson organized an expedition, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, to explore these western reaches of North America. Many in the United States believed it was the nation’s destiny to expand clear across the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

The Lewis and Clark expedition was an important step towards U.S. domination of much of the continent. Over the next fifty years, the United States would achieve its goal and reach the Pacific, taking more and more land from native groups through trade, treaties, and often through violence.

When did the history of the West begin?
According to many traditional accounts, the history of the American West begins with the Lewis and Clark expedition. But human history in the region began thousands of years before the arrival of Lewis and Clark.

“We have lived upon this land from days beyond history’s records, far past any living memory, deep into the time of legend. The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story.”
—A Taos Pueblo elder

The lands that were new to Lewis and Clark were actually very old, populated by a series of societies, cultures, and communities over the course of thousands of years. Civilizations rose and fell here as they did in other parts of the world. At the same time the ancient civilizations of Rome and Greece were thriving in Europe, native societies were developing the western regions of North America. In 1250, the population of Cahokia, a city along the Mississippi River, may have been larger than that of London. Indian groups built great cities, developed intricate cultures and religions, and adapted to changes brought on by environmental events and population shifts.

The West was a multicultural place long before Lewis and Clark arrived. Indian groups saw themselves as very different from each other, and rivalries and alliances fueled cooperation and conflict. Europeans were the latest newcomers in a long history of migration and change across this region. Indian societies adapted to the changes brought by Europeans as they had adapted to other changes in the past.

Europeans and Western North America

Lewis and Clark made their trek from 1804 to 1806, but native groups west of the Mississippi felt the impact of newcomers in North America long before the expedition’s arrival. Compared to groups in the East, who faced wave after wave of British settlers, western groups had less contact with Europeans. There were French traders in the North and Spanish missionaries in the South, but these groups were not interested in settling large amounts of territory. Instead, they wanted resources and influence among local Indian groups. These Europeans had a strong impact on western groups. European diseases, religions, weapons, goods, and livestock all traveled along Indian trade networks and sparked significant changes among western Indian societies.

How did European horses, guns, and diseases change the West?
While many of the things Europeans brought with them affected Indian societies, the three that caused the most profound changes were horses, guns, and disease.

The horse had been extinct in North America for thirteen thousand years when the Spanish arrived in present-day Mexico in the sixteenth century. At the time, most western Indian groups lived on the outskirts of the
Great Plains, an inhospitable land that people in the United States would later refer to as the “Great American Desert.” They foraged, fished, grew crops, and sometimes led hunting parties on foot into the Plains to hunt buffalo and other game. As Spanish colonists moved northward, the horse quickly made its way into the West—by trade and by theft—and revolutionized life on the Great Plains. The horse became a form of transport, a way to trade across large distances, and a weapon in war. Indians became skilled horse breeders and trainers, and soon were able to hunt buffalo in new and highly effective ways across ever-growing territories.

The horse encouraged some groups to completely change their ways of life. Groups like the Cheyenne gave up agriculture and divided into small bands. They moved onto the Plains and became nomads, migrating with the seasons to hunt buffalo and care for their horses. Groups like the Comanche that already relied on hunting could now hunt much more efficiently. Other groups continued to farm on the lands they had inhabited for generations but now, hunting on horseback, they could kill an abundance of game. It was a time of great prosperity for societies that hunted on the Plains, as they were able to get their food, clothing, tools, weapons, and bedding from the plentiful buffalo herds.

It was also a time of growing conflict. Horses allowed Indian groups to lay claim to vast areas, and groups increasingly clashed over territory and resources. They also clashed with Spanish settlements in the south. Guns made these conflicts ever more deadly. Guns and horses became necessary for survival in this new, volatile world, and Indian rivals fought for access to these goods.

The same trade networks that carried horses, guns, and other European goods through the West also spread European diseases. Smallpox, chicken pox, cholera, measles, and other illnesses took a devastating toll on Native societies. New epidemics killed anywhere from 15 to 90 percent of the populations they infected. For example, the Omaha Indians, who lived near the Missouri River in what is today Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota, had a population of as many as three thousand towards the end of the eighteenth century. By 1802, after a deadly smallpox epidemic, they numbered just three hundred.

The Omaha experience was not unique. Indian groups in North America had no previous exposure to these diseases and so had no natural immunity. Groups across the continent suffered immeasurable loss as their populations were decimated by disease. Powerful tribes were reduced to mere fractions of their original numbers. Survivors struggled to recover socially and politically as well as emotionally.
"What little we could spare we offered to the Bad Spirit to let us alone and go to our enemies. To the Good Spirit we offered feathers, branches of trees, and sweet smelling grass. Our hearts were low and dejected, and we shall never be again the same people."
—Saukamappee, a Cree Indian, recounting a 1781 smallpox epidemic in his community

With small populations, groups could not defend themselves or their territories. Sometimes small bands of survivors from different groups joined together, but this could lead to problems of leadership and authority. Groups that were divided into small, mobile bands, such as the Apache and Comanche, tended to be less susceptible to devastating population loss than groups settled in large, farming communities. New groups rose to power in the wake of massive population change.

Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings
Cultural differences between Indians and Europeans were widespread, both in the West and the East. These differences caused confusion, affected the way groups related to each other, and even led to conflict. Here are examples of some important differences in the ways these groups understood their interactions.

Trade: Most Indian groups understood trade to be an exchange of gifts to make or keep alliances and friendships. By contrast, Europeans believed the primary purpose of trade was to make a profit. For some, like the French, trade and profit were the main goals of settlement in North America. The goods Europeans offered encouraged Indians to value trade for its material gains. One effect was increased Indian hunting for pelts to trade, which depleted game stocks and diverted resources from Indian communities to European traders. Trade also made Indian societies dependent on the goods they could get from Europeans—not only guns and horses, but also cloth, tools, and alcohol.

Land: Indian groups and Europeans also viewed the land differently. While Indian groups had ties to specific territories for cultural, spiritual, and economic reasons—and in many cases fought to defend their claims to that land—they did not believe the land was something to be owned in the sense of buying and selling. Europeans, and the British in particular, insisted on owning land. They made land into a commodity that could be bought, sold, stolen, or signed over in treaties.

Treaties: Treaties were often a source of cultural misunderstanding. In many cases, European groups assumed the treaties they signed applied to whole Indian nations or multiple nations across a particular region. But often, the Indians who signed treaties believed they were only signing for their own bands or communities. In addition, Europeans believed that the result of the treaty negotiations was the document that was signed at the end. Native Americans, for their part, believed what was said at the meeting was more important than what was written down. In many cases, Europeans exploited this cultural difference and the language barrier by giving themselves far greater gains in the document than what had been discussed at the negotiations.

"We have often seen (and you know it to be true) that the White people by the help of their paper (which we don't understand) claim Lands from us very unjustly and carry them off."
—Iroquois Indian to Sir William Johnson, British Indian superintendent, in 1769, as recounted by Johnson
How did Indians and Europeans interact?

As Indian societies adapted to the new environment created by diseases, horses, guns, and other European goods, they also interacted with European people in a variety of ways. For western groups, the nearest European settlements were the French in the north and the Spanish in the south. Some groups formed alliances with Europeans to gain power. By establishing trading relationships, Indian groups could gain access to goods—like guns and horses—that brought them power. In addition, having military alliances with Europeans could strengthen a group’s position against its adversaries. Weaker groups could make new allies against their enemies; groups that were powerful suddenly faced rivals for power. Some groups led raids against European settlements to steal livestock, guns, and other goods. Others tried to avoid any contact with Europeans.

Europeans had their own reasons for building relationships with Indians. Indian allies made trade possible. This was important both to send goods back to Europe, and to gain supplies for the European settlements in North America. Alliances with Indian groups also gave a military boost to these small European outposts, helping them challenge their European rivals on the North American continent and defend against Indian enemies. At the time, both France and Spain had colonial empires stretching through large parts of the Americas.

Just as Indians adapted to the changes brought about by Europeans, European settlers had to adapt to the “new world” they found themselves in. Indians played an important role helping Europeans navigate this new environment. Indians introduced new foods, showed them how to access the supplies they needed, and acted as guides and interpreters in a physical and cultural landscape that was completely foreign. With few European women in these settlements, many settlers married Indian women. Some joined Indian tribes, and some Indians joined European settlements.

How did some groups oppose the changes brought by Europeans?

Indian groups interacted with Europeans and adapted to the changes brought by their arrival on the continent, but they did not completely transform their societies to follow European models. Instead, they adopted what fit well with their existing values and practices—for example growing European crops that could extend the growing season—and ignored the parts of European society that did not.

In some cases, Europeans forced their values on Indian groups. For example, throughout their colony of New Spain (present-day Mexico, Central America, and the U.S. southwest), the Spanish established missions, or settlements aimed at educating Indians and converting them to Catholicism. Spanish missionaries encouraged converts to raise European livestock, grow European crops, and practice European trades. The Spanish kept their converts on the missions by threat of force.
While many groups initially accepted elements of Spanish society, the costs for some, like the Pueblos in present-day New Mexico, soon became too great. The Spanish demanded labor and resources from the Pueblos, and outlawed their religion. In addition, at least seventeen-thousand Pueblos died from European diseases in the seventeenth century alone.

In 1680, Pueblos in more than two-dozen towns rose up against the Spanish. Within a few weeks, the Pueblos had killed or frightened off all the Spanish people in New Spain’s province of New Mexico. Some Pueblo leaders called on their people to reject all things Spanish, but most Pueblos continued to use European goods and technologies that improved their daily lives. The Spanish retook the region in the 1690s and allied with the Pueblos in order to oppose other, stronger enemies like the Apache and the Comanche.

**U.S. Westward Expansion**

As these changes were transforming the West, the British settled more and more territory in the East, causing far-reaching changes among Indian societies there. In 1776, these British settlers rose up against Britain and declared themselves an independent nation, founded on the ideals of personal liberty and individual rights. The leaders of this new country believed that their nation was exceptional. They wanted it to be a beacon of liberty in a world of European empire, tyranny, and oppression. The new country’s treatment of native people would contrast sharply with the ideals it set for itself.

**Why did U.S. leaders believe the United States should expand westward?**

Since their arrival on the continent, British settlers had taken land from Indians—by trade, treaty, trickery, and violence. As the colonies grew, they took more and more land for their growing populations. The American Revolution was fought, in part, because the British government put limits on the expansion of the colonies. During the war, most Native American groups in the East joined the side of the British in the hopes of limiting the expansion of the settlers. After the war, the United States claimed the lands of all Indians who had fought against them.

Many early U.S. leaders believed that land ownership was key to preserving liberty and equality among the nation’s white men. Some, like Thomas Jefferson, argued that the nation needed to be built on the backs of small farmers in order to prevent the rise of oppressive landlords. With a growing population, this would require more and more land.

U.S. leaders believed their system of representative government and individual land ownership was the highest form of civilization and superior to every other system that existed. As the nineteenth century progressed, this national identity became linked to Anglo Americans’ belief in their own racial superiority. (Anglo Americans are white, English-speaking residents of the United States.) Supporters of expansion argued that the United States was a chosen land and Anglo Americans were a people chosen to bring “civilization”—in the form of Christianity, representative government, and land ownership—to the people of color that lived across North and Latin America. People in the United States used this ideology of racial superiority to justify the violent dispossession of Native Americans and the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans and African Americans across much of the new nation. (Dispossession is taking away something people own, typically land or property.)

As the country’s national identity developed, some people began to believe it was the United States’ destiny to expand across the continent. Many of them were ardent Christians and believed that this was a destiny that God had ordained for the country. The term “manifest destiny” was coined in the 1840s to describe this idea.

"The American claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and possess the whole of the"
Why was there disagreement within the United States about westward expansion?

Proponents argued that expansion would unite the country and lead to great economic growth. The country would widen its agricultural base and tap new natural resources. But not everyone believed that the United States should expand beyond its current boundaries. Some leaders argued that it was unconstitutional—there was no provision in the Constitution about incorporating new territory into the Union. They worried that unchecked expansion would divide the nation, stretch the country’s limited resources too far, and create a dispersed and ungovernable population. With British, French, and Spanish settlements along U.S. borders, it could also spark an international war.

As politicians debated the merits and legality of expansion, ordinary citizens in the frontiers continued to push the U.S. border westward. By expanding their homesteads and letting their livestock graze on Indian lands, they persisted in pushing Indian groups off their lands. Population pressure also contributed to the demand for more land. Between 1776 and 1850, the U.S. population nearly doubled every twenty-five years. There were economic incentives as well. Farmers in the South began to specialize in lucrative crops such as cotton, which could be sold internationally. With slavery legal in that part of the country, they could make huge profits as they expanded their plantations across more and more land.

What was the Louisiana Purchase?

Even as the country debated westward expansion, its leaders faced situations that forced them to make decisions about the country’s future. Spain, France, Britain, and Russia still had claims to large sections of North America, including the city of New Orleans—an essential port for U.S. farmers along the Mississippi River. The U.S. government was fearful that its access to this port would be restricted when Spain transferred the region to France in 1800. In 1802, President Thomas Jefferson sent diplomats to offer France up to $2 million for New Orleans and West Florida. But France, eager to pull out of its failing North American empire, surprised the U.S. delegates with a counteroffer: for $15 million the United States would gain the Louisiana Territory, more than 800,000 square miles of land. This would extend the U.S. western border from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and double the size of the country.

The Louisiana Purchase gave the United States control of the Mississippi River. It also opened new lands for U.S. settlement. These lands had been sparsely settled by the Spanish and French, and had remained largely in the control of Native American groups. In the early nineteenth century, thousands of U.S. settlers, eager for land, descended upon Louisiana.

What France sold to the United States was its claim to the Louisiana Territory. In the halls of Europe, the United States was recognized as the owner of these lands. But to the thousands

U.S. Expansion Beyond Mainland North America

In the nineteenth century, it was not clear that the Pacific Ocean was the endpoint of U.S. expansion. In the 1820s, the U.S. government discussed annexing the Spanish Caribbean colony of Cuba, and in the 1850s there was talk of annexing what is today the Dominican Republic. U.S. interests in the Caribbean led to the Spanish-American War in 1898. The United States occupied Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico at the end of the war—Puerto Rico is still a U.S. territory today.
U.S. Westward Expansion Through Maps
An excerpt from
Westward Expansion: A New History

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of Native Americans that lived there, U.S. claims were meaningless. Throughout the nineteenth century, the United States would fight more than fifty wars and negotiate with dozens of Indian groups for the sale of Indian lands in Louisiana.

Why was the Lewis and Clark expedition significant?
At the same time Jefferson sent delegates to buy New Orleans from France, he began preparations for an expedition to explore the western part of the continent. The main objectives of the Lewis and Clark expedition were economic. Jefferson wanted to establish relationships with Indian groups in the northwest to give the United States a share in the fur trade there. He also hoped to find a water route across the continent so that the United States could more efficiently reach Chinese markets in the Pacific.

When Lewis and Clark crossed the continent, they passed through lands that had experienced profound upheaval in the previous two centuries. They met Indian people who rode horses, wore European-style clothing, could speak some French or English, drank alcohol imported from Europe, and bore the marks of smallpox. They also passed village after empty village, symbols of the devastation that European diseases wrought on Indian societies.

Lewis and Clark did not find a water route across North America, but they did build relationships with a number of Indian groups in the West. Most Indian groups believed that these U.S. citizens would be like the Europeans who came before them—interested in trade rather than settlement. But the arrival of U.S. citizens in the West marked a new era. For people in the United States, the Lewis and Clark expedition shifted the idea of “the West” westward. As U.S. citizens settled further and further inland, they began to view the lands west of the Mississippi as “the West”—and as ripe for U.S. expansion.

Why was the War of 1812 a turning point in U.S.-Indian relations?
Prior to the American Revolution, the British had claimed a region to the west of the thirteen colonies called the Northwest Territory—a region that today is comprised of the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and part of Minnesota. After the war, the United States claimed this territory as its own. But Britain, with colonies in Canada, continued to ally with Indian groups in the Northwest Territory. British leaders hoped to keep the United States from expanding too close to Canada’s borders. Despite U.S. attempts to settle the area and its incorporation of the state of Ohio in 1803, Native American groups, with the support of the British, refused to give up their lands.

“Brothers; —Money, to us, is of no value, & to most of us unknown,
and...no consideration whatever can induce us to sell the lands on which we get sustenance for our women and children.... We desire you to consider Brothers, that our only demand, is the peaceable possession of a small part of our once great Country. Look back and view the lands from whence we have been driven to this spot, we can retreat no further, because the country behind hardly affords food for its present inhabitants. And we have therefore resolved, to leave our bones in this small space, to which we are now confined."

—Delegates from a number of Indian groups in the Northwest Territory to U.S. commissioners, 1793

In 1812, the United States went to war with Britain and Britain’s Native American allies. The War of 1812 raged for three years, with neither side gaining an advantage. But after the war, the British agreed to give up its alliances with Native American groups in the Northwest Territory in return for U.S. promises not to expand into Canada.

This treaty signaled not only the end of British support for tribes in the Ohio region, but also the end of European support for Native American groups opposing U.S. expansion. The United States had sent a clear signal about its strength and intentions to the European powers on the continent. From this point onward, Europe did not challenge U.S. expansion in North America. Indian groups were alone in their struggles to halt U.S. growth.