CHAPTER 11

"To Overspread the Continent"

Westward Expansion and Political Conflict, 1840–1848

Manifest Destiny and Changing Visions of t[h]e West p. 318

> **"Our manifest destiny [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."**
>
> Newspaper Editor, JOHN L. O'SULLIVAN, 1845

Artist Richard Caton Woodville's painting *War News from Mexico* (1848), captures th[e] excitement generated by the Mexican War, the first conflict in American history in which news traveled almost instantaneously by telegraph from the frontlines back to Americans. Woodville's painting shows a gathering of white men standing on the front porch of the "American Hotel," a symbol of the American nation. The central figure reads the latest headlines from the war front. The men's faces reveal a range of attitudes, from astonishment to concern, suggesting the diversity of Americans' opinions about the war. A white woman looking out from a window is safely inside the "American Hotel," part of the same nation as the white men but not privy to their political discussion in the public area on the porch. Woodville's painting also shows those excluded from power: A black man sits on the lowest step, and a young African American girl stands entirely outside the building. The Mexican War facilitated westward expansion, bringing new lands into American possession, but it also vastly complicated American politics by making slavery a central issue.

By 1840 all the land east of the Mississippi (excepting the territories of Florida and Wisconsin) had been organized into new states, but Americans remained hungry for land. By this time many had come to believe that America was destined to conquer and settle the entire North American continent, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. As a result tens of thousands of Americans migrated west in search of land and opportunity. Some were part of the migration along the Overland Trail to the Pacific Northwest, others came with the large Mormon migration to the Great Salt Lake.

The American defeat of Mexico dramatically increased the size of the nation. The United States incorporated a huge swathe of new territory, stretching from Texas to California. The war was also deeply divisive, exacerbating th[e] divisions between Democrats and Whigs and intensifying the conflict between abolitionists and pro-slavery forces.

What impact did the Mexican War have on American politics?

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Manifest Destiny and Changing Visions of the West

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, American fur traders had engaged in a lucrative trade with western Indian tribes. The interactions between the traders and Indians created a "middle ground" (see Chapter 3) in which trade and cultural interaction prospered. By the early 1830s, however, the distinctive multiracial society the Indians and white Americans had created was largely gone. The fur trade went into decline as overtrapping drove down beaver populations and as changing tastes among consumers made them less eager to purchase furs.

By the middle of the 1840s, a new attitude toward the West was emerging in American thought. The world of the fur trappers was gone. Americans began viewing the West as a region that had to be incorporated into an expanding America. Additional land would help preserve the ideal of a yeoman republic of honest and independent farmers that would now stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Americans embraced the idea of westward expansion as both their destiny and a practical necessity given the nation's expanding population. The rights of the indigenous Indian tribes of these regions mattered little to the champions of westward expansion. Even among those who sympathized with the plight of Indians, many believed that Indian civilization was doomed to extinction. The conquest and settlement of the West became an important theme for artists who helped visualize the West for those Americans who did not make the trek westward. In many cases artists memorialized an ideal version of the process of western expansion, helping to forge an important set of American myths about intrepid pioneers taming a frontier wilderness.

The Trapper's World

During the colonial era French and British traders depended on Indians to trap or help them trap fur-bearing animals. American fur traders gradually gained control over this lucrative trade, and by the 1820s they were the dominant fur traders. The key figures in the trade, the trappers, or "mountain men," played an indispensable role in the early exploration and settlement of the West. Between 1822 and 1840 at least three thousand white trappers and traders entered this region.

Many mountain men formed liaisons with, and sometimes married, Indian women. The vast majority of these marriages proved stable despite the long separations that hunting and trapping required. Artist Alfred Miller's 1837 painting, *The Trapper's Bride* (**11.1**), depicts one wedding ceremony, which was a complex economic and cultural transaction. In addition to the mountain man and his bride, the artist shows the woman's father and her tribal chief, who holds the calumet, or peace pipe, in his hand as a symbol of friendship. The particular marriage contract depicted in this painting included a generous payment by the trader to the bride's father of a variety of highly desired goods, including guns, blankets, cloth, and alcohol.

The economic hub of the fur trade was the yearly **rendezvous**, a festive gathering held in the Rocky Mountains in which Indians and mountain men came with pelts to exchange for a variety of goods offered by traders. The system allowed fur trappers, Indians, and traders to remain in the wilderness for much of the year and sell at a specified time and location. With alcohol pouring freely, gambling aplenty, and a relaxed attitude toward sex among the participants, the rendezvous, which could attract as many as a thousand participants, was a carnival-like, often riotous affair.

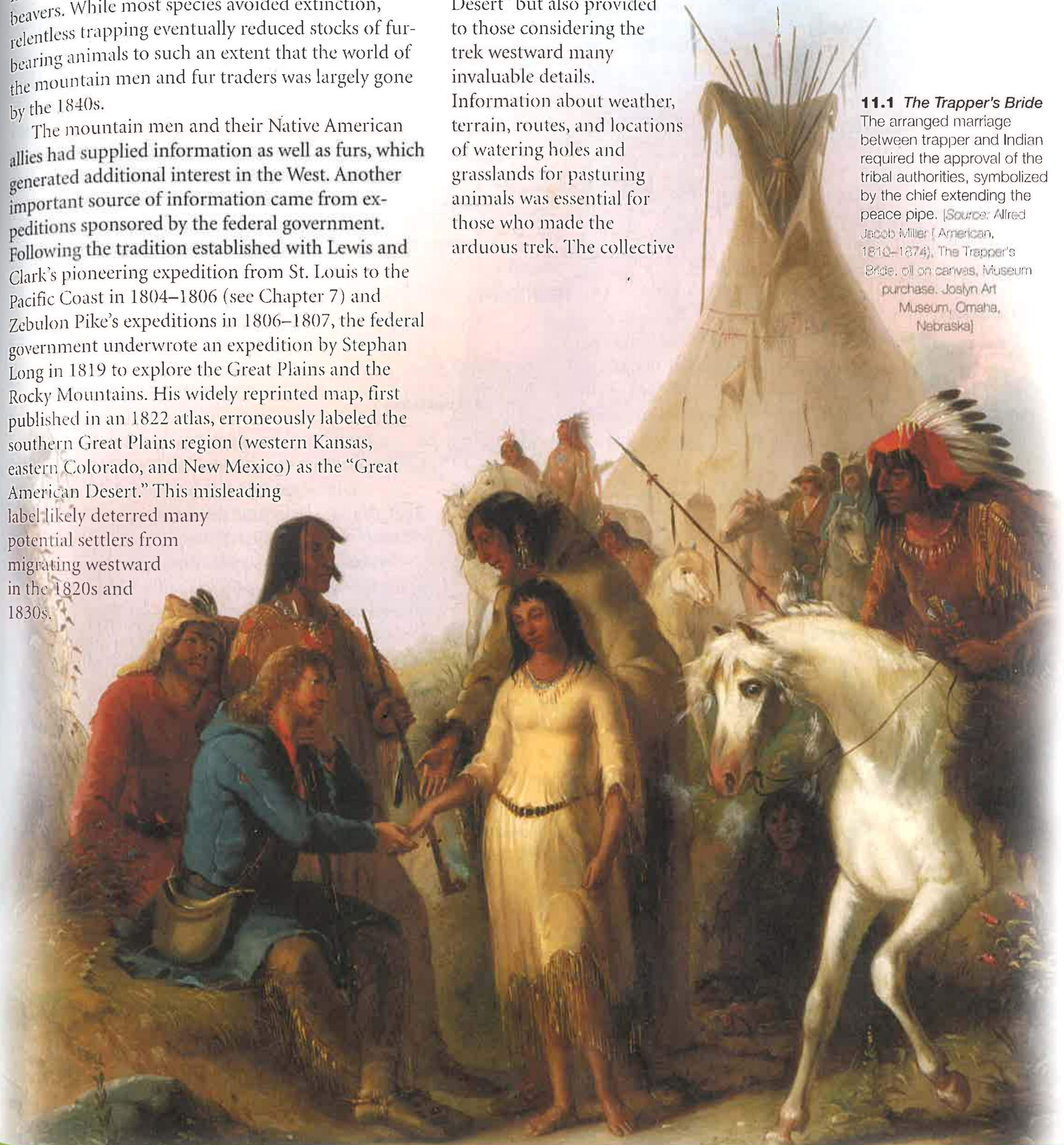
The fur trade yielded huge profits for some men. The most famous trader, John Jacob Astor, was the son of a German butcher who immigrated to America in 1784. Astor became America's first multimillionaire, amassing by the time of his death in 1848 a fortune of twenty million dollars (more than one hundred billion dollars in today's terms).

What function did the yearly rendezvous play in the culture of fur trappers?

While such traders prospered, their trade had disastrous ecological consequences for otters and beavers. Once numerous, the sea otters off the California coast were nearly extinct by the middle of the century. Only a shift in consumer preferences from fur to silk as the fashionable material for hats in the mid-1830s helped stave off extinction for beavers. While most species avoided extinction, relentless trapping eventually reduced stocks of fur-bearing animals to such an extent that the world of the mountain men and fur traders was largely gone by the 1840s.

The mountain men and their Native American allies had supplied information as well as furs, which generated additional interest in the West. Another important source of information came from expeditions sponsored by the federal government. Following the tradition established with Lewis and Clark's pioneering expedition from St. Louis to the Pacific Coast in 1804–1806 (see Chapter 7) and Zebulon Pike's expeditions in 1806–1807, the federal government underwrote an expedition by Stephan Long in 1819 to explore the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. His widely reprinted map, first published in an 1822 atlas, erroneously labeled the southern Great Plains region (western Kansas, eastern Colorado, and New Mexico) as the "Great American Desert." This misleading label likely deterred many potential settlers from migrating westward in the 1820s and 1830s.

Americans gradually developed a more favorable vision of the West, in part due to the explorations of Lieutenant John C. Fremont of the Army Topographical Corps. Fremont published a popular account (largely written by his wife, Jessie) of his expedition in 1845 that not only dispelled the myth of a "Great American Desert" but also provided to those considering the trek westward many invaluable details. Information about weather, terrain, routes, and locations of watering holes and grasslands for pasturing animals was essential for those who made the arduous trek. The collective



11.1 ***The Trapper's Bride*** The arranged marriage between trapper and Indian required the approval of the tribal authorities, symbolized by the chief extending the peace pipe. [*Source:* Alfred Jacob Miller (American, 1810–1874), *The Trapper's Bride*, oil on canvas, Museum purchase. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska]

How did exploration of the West both impede and encourage migration?

11.2 Western Trails
This map shows the main trails taken by Western emigrants on the way to Oregon, California, and Santa Fe.

efforts of these explorers (**11.2**) helped America physically map the West and intellectually comprehend its potential for the first time.

Manifest Destiny and the Overland Trail

By the early 1840s, the accumulation of information about the West, and its ever more positive impression, sparked a growing interest in migration beyond the Mississippi. Momentum spiked too as the result of an in increasingly popular notion called **Manifest Destiny**. First coined in the summer 1845 issue of the *Democratic Review* by editor and columnist John O'Sullivan, it gave voice to the belief that God had destined America to spread westward to the Pacific. "Our manifest destiny," wrote O'Sullivan, "[is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." Only one year later Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri echoed O'Sullivan's vision of America's future, explicitly framing it in both racial and religious terms: "The White race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth!" he asserted. "Civilization or extinction has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the track of the advancing Whites." Manifest Destiny combined the language of Jacksonian Democracy, stressing opportunity for all white Americans, with a Protestant millennial vision, which defined the nation's future in terms of the progress of "civilization" and the triumph of Christianity over "savagery." Few believed there was room for Native Americans in this vision of geographical expansion and white man's democracy.

Even before O'Sullivan and Benton voiced the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, word of the lush agricultural lands of Oregon had reached east by the early 1840s. The economic dislocations caused by the Panic of 1837 (see Chapter 8) and the absence of cheap land suitable for agriculture in the East and Midwest also sparked interest in Western migration. Propagandists for Western settlement eagerly exaggerated the region's riches to help attract potential migrants to the fertile lands of Oregon. One promoter concluded a rhapsodic description of Oregon by claiming, with a wink to be sure, that "in Oregon the pigs ... [were] already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them so that you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry!"

Drawn by these promises many joined an 1843 expedition known as the Great Migration. This 2,000-mile trek along the **Overland Trail** (11.2) consisted of more than one hundred wagons and helped pave the way for subsequent waves of migrants in the coming years. This trail soon became the main route taken by American settlers traveling from the East and Midwest to new settlements in Oregon, California, and Utah. By 1845 at least five thousand settlers had made the arduous five- to six-month-long overland trail journey to Oregon territory.

Migration westward placed an especially heavy burden on women, whose husbands seldom

What were the most important ideas associated with Manifest Destiny?

consulted with them before deciding to move. Estimates are that two-thirds of women opposed the idea of relocating to the West. Mary Richardson Walker, the wife of a Protestant missionary who headed to a settlement on the Walla Walla River in what is now Washington, vented her frustration in her diary, confessing about her trying circumstances. "I find it difficult to keep up a usual degree of cheerfulness, " she wrote, "If I were to yield to inclination I should cry half my time." Giving up friends and family and dealing not only with their normal responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and childcare but also the added burdens of a long and perilous journey made the prospect of moving West terrifying.

During the move many women were expected to take on traditional male jobs, such as repairing wagons or helping to construct bridges, while carrying on their traditional roles as mothers and wives. In effect the workload of most women doubled during the move westward.

Few Americans, male or female, were aware of this grim reality. Indeed their impressions of the West continued to be shaped by writers, speakers, and a growing host of artists who traveled with the migrants and painted scenes that reflected the rosy vision of Manifest Destiny. This mythic image of the West, created by artists, almost a generation later, was captured by Albert Bierstadt in his 1859 painting, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* (**11.3**). Bierstadt depicts a group of settlers pausing on their westward journey to allow their sheep and cattle the opportunity to graze and drink. Above them rises a stunning depiction of the Western landscape, while in the foreground Bierstadt places the skeleton of a buffalo. These bones, like the Indian village barely visible in the distance, represent the West's past, while the settlers symbolize the West's future. The sun's location in the Western sky evokes the notion of God's blessing and the optimistic vision of Manifest Destiny—a powerful symbol of both the settler's and the nation's bright future.

> "The North Americans will spread out far beyond their present bounds. They will encroach again and again upon their neighbors. New territories will be planted, declare their independence, and be annexed."
>
> DeBow's Commercial Review, 1848

The Native American Encounter with Manifest Destiny

One danger associated with western migration that figured prominently in representations of the West, both in paintings and sensational newspaper accounts, was the threat of attack by hostile Indians. Even though such attacks were relatively rare, these representations of Indians came to dominate popular culture. Once again, American artists helped spread a popular vision of the West. Charles Wimar's 1856

11.3 *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* In Bierstadt's painting, a caravan passing through Indian-controlled territory on the western trek to Oregon heads toward the bright sun, symbolic of America's Manifest Destiny.

How does the painting of the Oregon trail reflect the ideas of Manifest Destiny?

painting, *Attack on Emigrant Train* (**11.4**), casts the Indians as bloodthirsty savages and accentuates the horror of the emigrants trying to fend off the attack. This painting became a model for later images of Indians and was even used a century later by Hollywood directors as a model for Western fight scenes between Indians and settlers. Americans had been prepared for such a view of Indians by a long tradition stretching back to the earliest European representations of the New World (see Chapter 1) and rendered in paintings such as *The Death of Jane McCrea* (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.16) and in popular literature by *Crockett's Almanac* (see Chapter 8).

Wimar's painting reflected one of two radically different visions of Native Americans that were deeply rooted in American culture. From the very beginning of European contact with the Americas, Indians had been depicted as either bloodthirsty savages or noble savages (see Chapter 1). The image of the noble Indian chief had been propagated by a variety of artists, such as Benjamin West in *The Death of General Wolfe* (see Chapter 3). Artist George Catlin borrowed from this tradition when he set out to capture the culture of Western Indian tribes. After traveling throughout the West and living among several tribes in the 1830s, Catlin returned east and organized an enormously popular traveling exhibit of his paintings and the Indian artifacts he had gathered. Acutely aware that American expansion would likely result in the destruction of much of the Native American societies of the West, Catlin believed that he had a responsibility to future generations to preserve a visual record of Indian culture. These themes are discussed in *Images as History: George Catlin and Mah-to-toh-pa: Representing Indians for an American Audience* page 324.

A small number of Americans rejected both the image of the Native American as a barbaric savage who ought to be exterminated and the noble savage tragically doomed to extinction. A number of Whig and Protestant reformers expressed sympathy for the plight of Native Americans and opposed the forced relocation of Eastern tribes (see Chapter 8). These same groups also opposed the racist and expansionist vision of Manifest Destiny articulated by O'Sullivan and Benton. William Ellery Channing, a Boston minister and reformer, attacked the arrogance and shortsightedness of the ideal of Manifest Destiny: "We are destined (that is the word) to overspread North America; and, intoxicated with the idea, it matters little to us how we accomplish our fate." For Channing and other like-minded reformers, American expansion was not an unqualified good to be obtained at any cost, but something that demanded that Americans act in an honest and respectful manner to Indians and do their utmost to protect them. Yet, despite the qualms of reformers American demand for Western land was nearly insatiable.

11.4 ***Attack on Emigrant Train*** Although Indian attacks on Western emigrants were rare, this image was so powerful that it influenced portrayals of Indians in Western movies made by Hollywood more than a century later. [Source: Charles Ferdinand Wimar, "Attack on Immigrant Train", 1856, Oil on Canvas, 139.9 × 200.8 cm, Bequest of Henry C. Lewis, University of Michigan Museum of Art, Acc#1895.80]

Why were tales of Indian attacks on immigrants so popular in American culture?

Images as History

GEORGE CATLIN AND MAH-TO-TOH-PA: REPRESENTING INDIANS FOR AN AMERICAN AUDIENCE

Through his paintings of Western Indians, George Catlin sought to preserve a visual record of their culture and accomplishments. He also believed he had an obligation to portray these "doomed" peoples in a noble light. Capturing the nobility of Indians required representing them in a way that would evoke sympathy and respect from his American audience.

One of the many Indian figures George Catlin painted during his years in the West was the Mandan chief Mah-to-toh-pa, also known as "Four Bears." In the diary he kept of his experiences in the West, Catlin noted that the chief wanted to be painted in a manner that reflected the Mandan notions of beauty and masculinity. Both were closely tied to the ideal of the warrior. Accordingly Mah-to-toh-pa dressed for the painting in all the trappings of a warrior chief. Catlin noted in his journal, "His dress ... was complete in all its parts, and consisted of a shirt or tunic, leggings, moccasins, head-dress, necklace, shield, bow and quiver, lance, tobacco-sack, and pipe; robe, belt, and knife; medicine-bag, tomahawk, and war-club."

Yet Catlin omitted most of these items, believing that they distracted from the chief's "grace and simplicity." The notions of beauty that shaped Catlin's artistic decisions stretched back to antiquity and were different from those of the Mandan chief. In essence Catlin painted his subject as if he were a frontier Cincinnatus, an Indian George Washington. The resulting painting was an idealized version of how an American Indian chief ought to appear to an American audience, not a representation of how a specific Indian chief wished the American people to see him.

How did Catlin fashion his Indian subject and represent him to his American audience? What do these decisions tell us about American attitudes toward Indians in the early nineteenth century?

Catlin's journal informed his viewers that only a warrior of "extraordinary renown" was allowed to wear horns on his headdress.

By omitting the chief's war club, tomahawk, and other objects associated with his prowess as a warrior, Catlin made the chief less frightening to an American audience.

Mah-to-toh-pa
[*Source:* George Catlin (1796–1872), "Mah-to-toh-pa, Four Bears, second chief, in full dress (Mandan)". 1832. Oil on fabric; canvas mounted on aluminum, 29 × 24 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC / Art Resource, NY]

To make Mah-to-toh-pa a great figure in the eyes of his American audience, Catlin painted him as if he were a Roman general or a modern Cincinnatus like George Washington.

Jean Antoine Houdon, *George Washington*

How did Catlin represent his Mandan subject for an American audience?

The pressure to make more Indian land available for settlement only grew as Americans streamed westward. Following the policy that had been adopted regarding Eastern tribes, such as the Cherokee (see Chapter 8), the federal government forced Midwestern tribes in Iowa territory, including the Sauk and Fox, to relocate to Indian Territory, present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska, after their defeat in the Black Hawk War of 1832. By the early 1840s the massive relocation of American Indians was nearly complete. One of the few tribes to successfully resist removal, at least temporarily, was the Seminole in Florida. The American army fought a long and costly war to force the tribe to relocate. For nearly seven years, from 1835–1842, the Seminoles fought off American forces. In the end, the American government spent ten times the amount of money allocated for all of Indian removal to relocate the Seminole.

While Americans in this era generated many descriptions of westward expansion, there exists relatively little material written from the Indian perspective. One rare and outstanding exception is the memoir of Sarah Winnemucca, a Piute Indian from Nevada who became a champion of the rights of indigenous peoples (see 15.16). Her memoir vividly recounts the full range of experiences with whites, from interactions with "good white people" who traded fairly with her family and her people to traumatic encounters with hostile settlers. In one of the more harrowing episodes, she describes an occasion when a band of white men appeared while the village men were away hunting. Winnemucca's mother and the other women feared that the whites intended to kidnap or sexually assault their children, so she and the other women hid them, burying them in mud and covering their faces with brush. Winnemucca described her anguish—"heart throbbing and not daring to breathe"—as she lay hidden "all day" till the hostile visitors left the village.

The Mormon Flight to Utah

Most of the immigrants streaming into lands once the home of Western Indian tribes went in search of economic opportunities. The members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints were an exception to this rule. This sect, whose members were popularly known as Mormons, had been founded by Joseph Smith in New York in the early 1830s (see Chapter 10). Smith and his followers had been the victims of violent persecution wherever they settled in the East and later in the Midwest. The Mormon trek westward was the largest organized migration in American history. Nearly sixteen thousand members of the religious group migrated between 1845 and 1847 to the Great Salt Lake in present-day Utah.

Prior to their exodus the Mormons endured a long period of internal dissension and harassment by their non-Mormon neighbors. After leaving New York Joseph Smith established a series of Mormon communities in Ohio and Missouri. In Ohio the Mormons experimented with a variety of communal economic arrangements. The Mormon doctrine of "consecration and stewardship" required individuals to deed their property to the church, which then provided an allotment of land the size of which was tied to the size of the family unit. Mormons also created cooperative agricultural enterprises, pooling their resources and labor. Non-Mormons resented the economic advantages such cooperation brought to Mormon farmers and businesses.

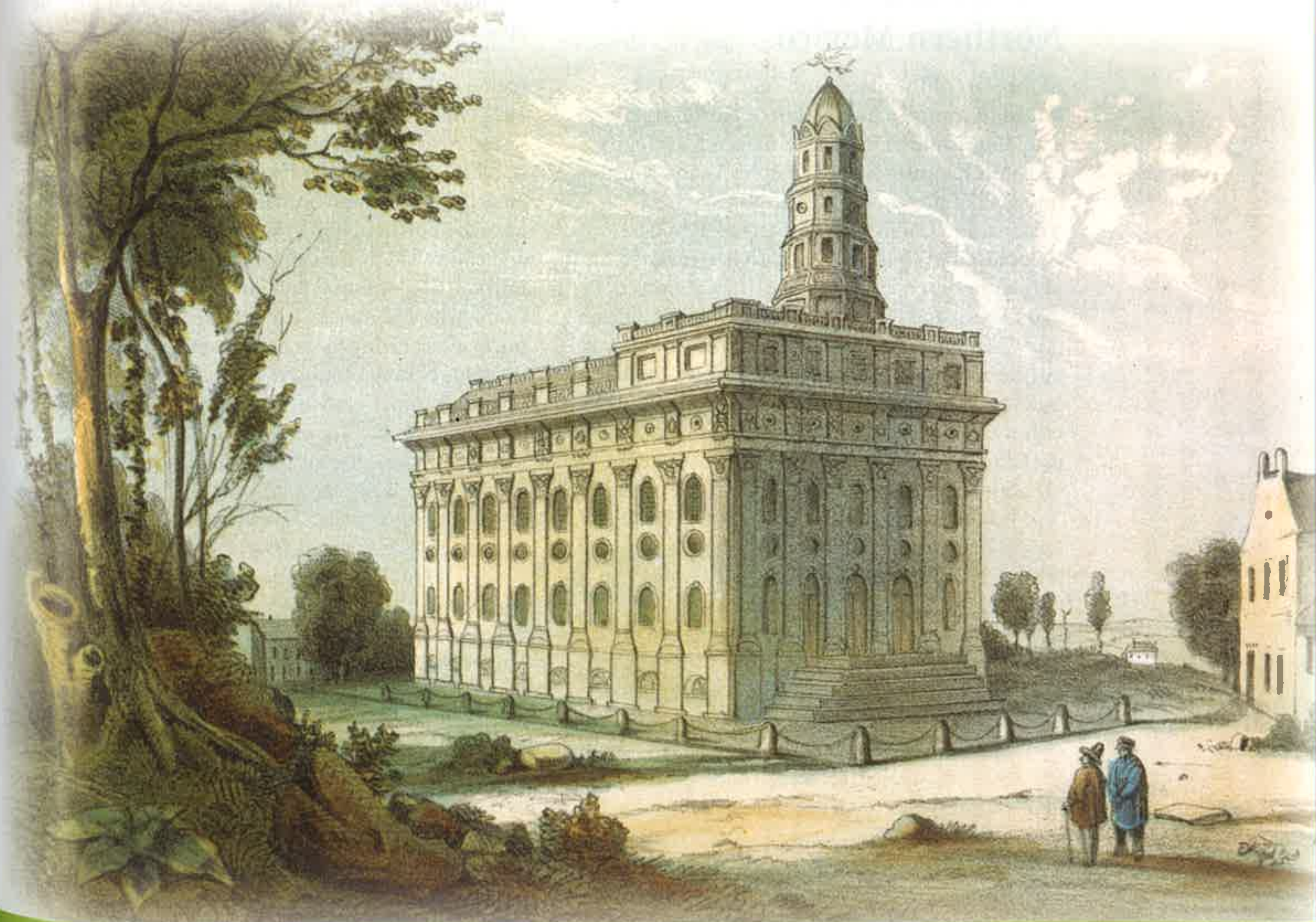
As tensions between Mormons and non-Mormons rose, Smith moved most of his followers to the town of Nauvoo, Illinois, on the Mississippi River. The fastest-growing town in the Midwest in the 1840s, surpassing even Chicago, Nauvoo was a boomtown shaped by a distinctive religious vision. By the end of the 1840s, the Mormon population of this booming city had soared to over ten thousand. The Mormons in Nauvoo replaced the earlier policy of requiring members to donate their property to the church with a system of tithing (required donations to the church). This system of fund-raising built up the financial resources of the church, allowing it to accumulate substantial land holdings and build a monumental temple in Nauvoo. As this contemporary image shows, the Temple (**11.5**) was an imposing structure, that dominated the landscape around it.

As Smith and his followers faced increasing hostility from their non-Mormon neighbors, the church also encountered the problem of internal dissent. When a group of dissident Mormons founded an anti-Smith paper in Nauvoo, Smith took decisive action that set in motion a tragic sequence of events. Outraged by this attack Smith, who was also the mayor of Nauvoo, ordered the city marshal and Nauvoo militia to shut down the paper and destroy its printing press. The governor of Illinois intervened and ordered the state militia to seize Smith and bring him to nearby Carthage, Illinois, for trial. An angry crowd burst into Smith's jail cell and shot him to death.

How did the Mormon immigration differ from other westward migrations?

In response to these tragic circumstances, Smith's successor, Brigham Young, decided to move the entire Mormon community to the West, beyond the reach of the church's critics. Some sixteen thousand Mormons eventually migrated to the Salt Lake Valley of what is now Utah. Young's organizational skills and an almost military-like discipline among his people helped them negotiate the difficult journey westward. It also helped the Mormons adapt to and eventually thrive in their new environment. During the first years of settlement, when food rationing became necessary, Young ordered food surpluses confiscated and distributed to those in need. Once again Mormon communalism helped the community through a difficult time.

Over time, building on the lessons learned at Nauvoo, the Mormons built an economic and religious community that combined elements of communalism and private enterprise. Safely ensconced in the Great Salt Lake Basin, far beyond the control of the federal government, they also began openly to practice polygamy, the practice of men taking more than one wife. Brigham Young himself may have had as many as twenty-seven wives and fathered forty-seven children. Polygamy shocked Americans, particularly in an era when the dominant culture venerated the conventional nuclear family and the cult of true womanhood (see Chapter 10). In striving to remake the conventional idea of the family, the Mormons resembled the Shakers and Oneida perfectionists, two other religious movement of the day that experimented with different models of the family and alternative sexual practices (see Chapter 10). Mormon law required men to provide for their wives and children, which meant that most could not afford to engage in polygamy. So while the Mormon economic and religious elite practiced polygamy, the vast majority of Mormons continued to be monogamous.



11.5 The Nauvoo Temple
The Mormon temple at Nauvoo stood on the highest point of land in the new town, and it towered over the surrounding landscape. The architectural design includes elements of Greek revival architecture, Masonic symbolism, and ideas drawn from Mormon theology.

What role did Mormon communalism play in their experiences at Nauvoo?

American Expansionism into the Southwest

Hoping to stabilize and secure its northern territories that bordered the United States, Mexico adopted a number of new policies that transformed its northern provinces in the West and Texas. Changes were made in the way Indians were treated under the old colonial system in California and New Mexico, and Mexico opened Texas to American settlers in the 1820s. Rather than become integrated in Mexican society and help stabilize the northern provinces of Mexico, the Americans in Texas became a source of discord. Strongly committed to slavery and reluctant to adopt Mexican ways, the Americans eventually fomented an uprising of settlers that resulted in the creation of the Republic of Texas. The subsequent annexation of Texas by the United States only whetted the appetite of proponents of American expansionism. In 1846 the United States declared war on Mexico. The war proved unpopular with many Americans but nonetheless resulted in an American victory and seizure of northern Mexico, vastly increasing the size of the United States..

The Transformation of Northern Mexico

At the start of the nineteenth century, Spain continued to control a huge swath of North America, a holding acquired in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (see Chapter 1) and constituting all of present-day Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California and parts of Nevada, Colorado, and Utah. The Spanish had invested most of their resources in the mineral-rich regions of Peru and Mexico and the sugar islands of the Caribbean (see Chapter 2), and had largely neglected this northern region of their colonial empire. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Spanish had begun to organize California into four coastal presidios (forts) at San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco.

These administrative and military jurisdictions included twenty-one Catholic Missions run by Franciscans monks and extending as far north as Sonoma California. Under this **mission system** thousands of Native Americans were forced to convert to Catholicism and to labor for the Spanish. Held in an oppressive condition little better than slavery, they were forced to herd livestock, tend crops, and work as skilled and unskilled laborers. Indeed the Russian artist and explorer Louis Choris painted this view (**11.6**) of the Presidio of San Francisco in 1816. This image showing Indian laborers being herded at the point of a lance by a mounted Spaniard illustrates Choris's belief that the Spanish treated Indians little better than cattle.

The economy, politics, and social structure of this region underwent significant change beginning in 1821 when Mexico declared its independence from Spain. Apart from achieving internal political stability, one of the new nation's chief concerns was securing its northern border with the United States. Mexico's northern borderlands were underpopulated and controlled by the Comanches and Apaches. The introduction of horses and guns had allowed the Comanche and Apache tribes to become very powerful, in effect giving them nearly complete control of the trade between Mexico City and its northern provinces. America's westward expansion also posed a threat to Mexico's control of its distant provinces. Mindful of these threats Mexican officials took several steps to gain greater control of the region.

To speed economic development in California, Mexico abolished the mission system and released Indians from their dependent status as bound laborers. In the mission system's place, they adopted the *ranchero* system in California and New Mexico. Huge tracts of former mission-owned land came into the possession of a relatively small number of families. Much of the labor on these rancheros was performed by poorly paid Indians. To encourage population growth and economic development in Texas, the Mexican government took a different approach. In 1824 it enacted a new policy offering land grants to American settlers who agreed to

What was the ranchero system?

> "The arrival [of the caravan in Santa Fe] produced a great deal of bustle and excitement among the natives. "Los Americanos!" ... "La entrada de la caravana!" [The Americans! The caravan has arrived!]."
>
> JOSIAH GREGG, *Commerce of the Prairies, or the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader* (1845)

adopt the Catholic religion and learn Spanish. Thousands accepted the offer, and by 1830 almost seven thousand American Texans outnumbered the region's four thousand Hispanic Texans, known as Tejanos. The American settlers were an economic boon to the region. Texans exported an estimated $500,000 worth of goods to the port of New Orleans, mostly cotton and cattle.

Additional trade networks developed elsewhere along the Mexican-American border. In California, New England merchants sought seal and sea otter pelts to sell in China. Beginning in 1821 American traders established a trade route from Missouri to Santa Fe. Far safer and less rugged than the nearly 1,700-mile journey to Mexico City, the Santa Fe Trail soon became a thriving trade route. American traders, whose profits on the sale of goods ranging from cloth to manufactured goods such as umbrellas sometimes reached 40 percent, often received hard currency as payment. Indeed trade with Santa Fe became so crucial to the Western economy that the Mexican silver peso became the unofficial unit of exchange for much of the western United States.

The Clash of Interests in Texas

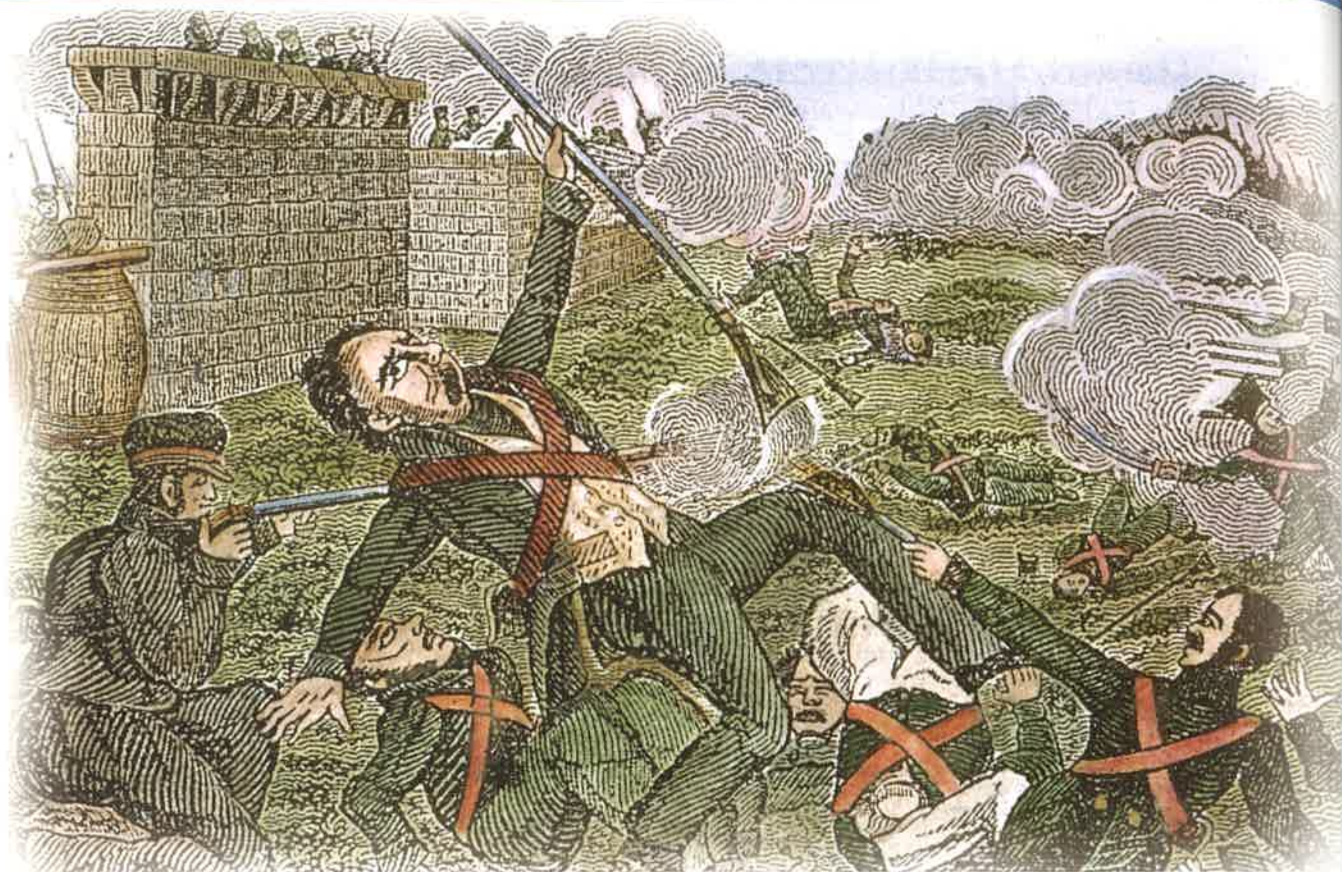
While Mexico benefited from the increased trade with the United States, the presence of so many American settlers in Texas worried Mexican officials. Three issues were particularly troubling. First, the Americans flouted the laws requiring they learn Spanish and convert to Catholicism. Second, they brought thousands of slaves into Texas at a time when Mexico was heading toward the abolition of slavery (a goal it achieved in 1829). Third, many American settlers did little to conceal their interest in eventually joining the United States.

A small uprising in 1826 of Americans hoping to secede was easily crushed by the Mexican army. The Mexican government reacted to the threat by banning further immigration from the United States. Still Americans came, and Mexico lifted the ban in 1833. Before long the American population in Texas had swelled to more than thirty thousand.

A well-organized effort to separate from Mexico occurred in 1834. This time Americans took advantage of the instability of Mexican politics. In 1834 Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna

11.6 View of the San Francisco Presidio
This depiction of the mission system captures the exploitation of the Indian population.

What advantages did Americans have over Mexicans in the lucrative trade with Santa Fe?



11.7 ***Fall of the Alamo—Death of Crockett***
The heroism of the Alamo's defenders is captured in this crude woodcut, which shows Crockett's bravery in the face of battle.

staged a coup, set aside the constitution, and assumed dictatorial powers. When American settlers in Texas revolted, demanding a restoration of the constitution, Santa Anna decided to crush the rebellion. The ensuing war between Santa Anna's forces and the American Texans was brutal. One of the bloodiest battles occurred in early 1836 near San Antonio at the Alamo, an old Spanish mission defended by a small body of Texans, including legendary frontiersman and politician Davy Crocket and Jim Bowie (for whom the Bowie Knife was named). When the fierce fighting was over, 187 Americans and more than 600 Mexican troops were dead. Images such as this woodcut of the death of Davy Crockett inspired Americans, whose battle cry for the rest of the war against Mexico became "Remember the Alamo" (**11.7**).

Even as Santa Anna's forces assaulted the Alamo, American Texans declared independence from Mexico (March 2, 1836) and drafted a new constitution. Meanwhile his victory at the Alamo convinced Santa Anna that the Texas forces were no match for his army. Overconfident he recklessly divided his troops, leading to his defeat and capture at the Battle of San Jacinto by the Texans under the command of Sam Houston.

The Republic of Texas and the Politics of Annexation

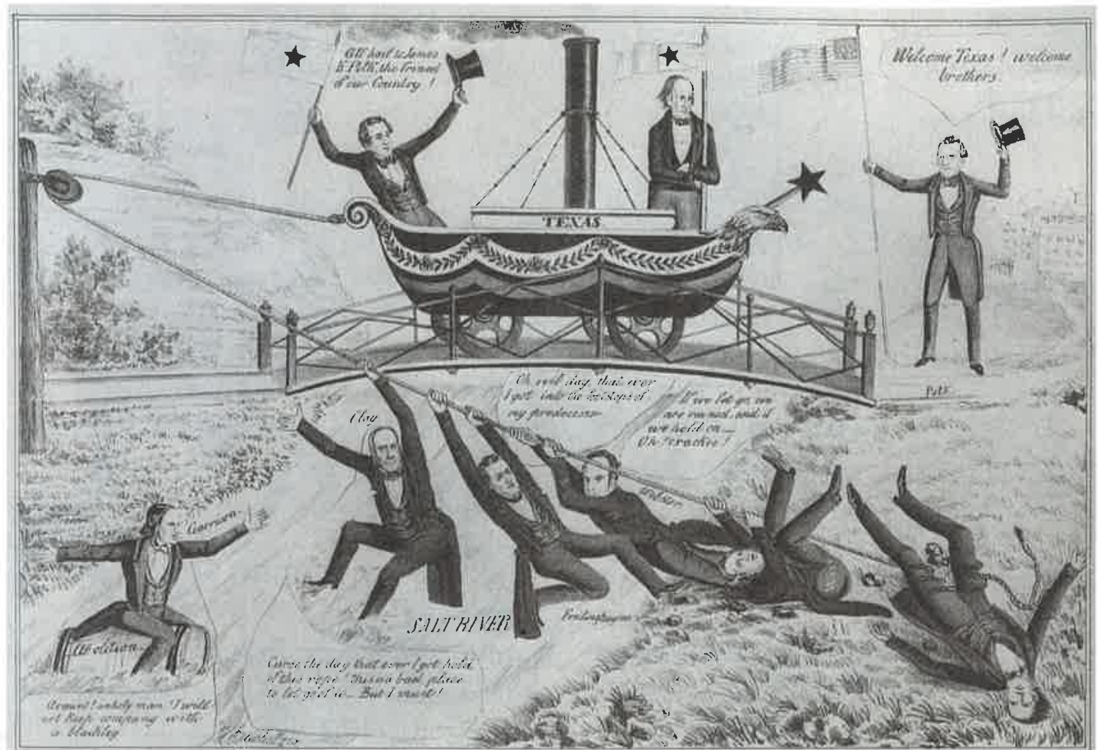
The citizens of the now independent Republic of Texas expected the United States government to act quickly and annex Texas into the expanding American Republic. They would have to wait nearly a decade, however, as annexation proved to be a controversial issue. Opponents of slavery vigorously opposed annexation of Texas, fearing that it would upset the delicate balance between free states and slave states. Conversely Southerners and others who favored slavery supported Texas annexation. Heated debate in 1836 and 1837 eventually died down as both the Democrats and Whigs sought to avoid the contentious Texas issue. For the moment the bitter dispute between Whigs and Democrats over the Panic of 1837 (see Chap. 8) occupied Americans.

Texas annexation reemerged as a major political issue in 1844, reviving sectional tensions over the issues of slavery and western expansion. It started when President John Tyler, a pro-slavery Whig, began touting his support for annexation in the hopes that it would help him gain the support of Southern Whigs and secure the party's nomination. His strategy backfired, however, when many within

How did Anglo-Texans make use of their defeat at the Alamo to rally support for their cause?

his Whig party opposed his plans for Texas annexation, viewing it as a thinly veiled effort to expand slavery into Western territory. Tyler's pro-slavery stance cost him the nomination for president when the Whigs, seeking to avoid the controversy, chose Henry Clay, perhaps the best-known Whig politician in America, as their candidate.

The Democrats were likewise shaken by the annexation and slavery issues. Although Martin Van Buren was the leading figure in the Democratic Party, Southerners opposed him because of his abolitionist leanings. After nine ballots the Democrats finally settled on a pro-slavery Southerner, James K. Polk, as their candidate. Polk favored annexation of Texas, In this political cartoon from the election of 1844 (**11.8**), the Whigs, including Henry Clay, attempt to block Texas from entering the Union. James K. Polk stands holding an American flag, ready to welcome Texas into the Union. Texans Stephen Austin (left) and Samuel Houston (right) each wave the Lone Star flag of the Texas Republic. Polk's expansionist agenda appealed to Southerners but also struck a resonant chord with Northerners who hoped that westward expansion would mean more land for white farmers.



11.8 Polk Election Banner
Polk welcomes Texas, while Whigs vainly try to hold back the Lone Star Republic from joining the Union.

Polk's strong stance on annexation rattled the Whigs, including Henry Clay, who feared the Democratic Party's aggressive stance on Texas was popular enough to give it an electoral victory. Clay equivocated about opposing annexation, and his flip-flop on Texas drove many antislavery Whigs in the North out of the party and into a small third party, the newly formed **Liberty Party**. The staunchly antislavery, anti-annexation Liberty Party was short-lived, but captured 62,000 votes, a small number but enough to effectively rob Henry Clay of electoral victories in New York and Michigan, thereby handing Polk the presidency in 1844.

Emboldened by Polk's victory the sitting president, Tyler, proclaimed Texas annexation by a joint resolution of both Houses of Congress, a parliamentary maneuver that allowed him to bypass the constitutional requirement that treaties be approved by a two-thirds majority in the Senate. Tyler could have never mustered enough votes to approve a treaty of annexation, so he used his proclamation to effectively bypass the constitutional road block preventing the acquisition of Texas. Opponents of slavery viewed his actions as yet another example of the unscrupulous nature of proslavery forces. In 1845 Texas entered the Union as a slave state.

Polk's Expansionist Vision

A Tennessee lawyer and a protégé of Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk earned the nickname "Young Hickory," which was a reference to his mentor Andrew Jackson's reputation as "Old Hickory" (see Chapter 8) Polk shared Jackson's vision of politics, including his view of the importance of a strong executive and his belief in the necessity and inevitability of western expansion. Polk also shared Jackson's racial views, which included support for slavery and disregard for Native American rights. Indeed former president John Quincy Adams, who became a prominent Whig, denounced Polk as a

What role did the Liberty Party play in American politics?

11.9 Mexican War Map
The major offensives of the war are depicted in this map.

"Slave-holding exterminator of Indians." Polk wasted very little time in acting on his expansionist vision for America.

Polk first moved to acquire Oregon, an area that the United States and Britain had been wrangling over for decades. In the presidential election of 1844, Polk campaigned on the slogan, "Fifty-four Forty or Fight," a reference to the U.S. demand that the geographical boundary separating Oregon from British Canada be fixed at the latitude 54° 40'. Ultimately Polk settled the issue by agreeing to a border farther to the south that extended across the 49th parallel. This shrewd compromise secured to the United States the most valuable agricultural lands sought by American settlers. The settlement of the Oregon issue in 1846 cleared the way for Polk to focus his attention on Mexico. As the ardently pro-expansion Democratic paper *The New York Herald* noted, "We can now thrash Mexico into decency at our leisure."

The annexation of Texas in 1845 had left open the question of the exact boundary between the United States and Mexico. Seeking to exploit the boundary dispute to exact further land concessions from Mexico, Polk sent John Slidell, a New York City lawyer and Democratic politician on a diplomatic mission to Mexico. Polk charged Slidell with negotiating a settlement to the boundary question and lingering issues about debts that Mexicans owed to Americans. Slidell was also instructed to inquire about the possible purchase of California and New Mexico from Mexico. This aggressive negotiating posture reflected the Polk administration's expansionist desires. Polk and his advisors feared that Mexico might pay off part of its debts to Britain by ceding California to America's chief commercial rival, Britain. By adopting such a belligerent negotiating stance, Polk ensured that the negotiations would fail. Still angry over the loss of Texas, Mexicans were not interested in yielding any further lands to America.

The specific issue dividing the United States and Mexico was the exact boundary between Texas and Mexico. In the view of the Mexican government, the southern boundary of Texas was the Nueces River, not the Rio Grande as the United States claimed (**11.9**). The position of the Rio Grande farther south gave Texas more territory at the expense of Mexico. Polk dispatched American troops under the command of General Zachary Taylor into the disputed zone between the two rivers. When a small group of Mexican forces attacked Taylor's troops on April 25, 1846, Polk called for war, informing Congress that "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, and shed American blood on American soil." Congress formally declared war on Mexico on May 13.

The Mexican War and Its Consequences

The Mexican-American War lasted only two years and ended in a resounding victory for the United States. America now controlled most of northern Mexico. Although supporters of Manifest Destiny had seen geographic expansion as a panacea for the nation's economic and social problems, few could foresee how the defeat of Mexico and acquisition of new lands would usher in an era of greater, more intense political conflict. The debate over whether to allow slavery in the territories gained from Mexico would place an enormous strain on the two-party system, splitting Whigs and Democrats into Northern and Southern wings. A new third party, the Free-Soil Party, emerged during this period committed to blocking the spread of slavery.

A Controversial War

The Mexican War divided Americans largely along sectional lines and caused splits in both the Democratic and Whig parties. Southern Whigs supported Polk's efforts. "Every battle fought in Mexico," one South Carolina paper averred, "insures the acquisition of territory which must widen the field of Southern enterprise and power in the future." Northern Whigs, in contrast, denounced the war as an unjust conflict manufactured by Polk to secure California and New Mexico. "This war is waged against an unoffending people, without just or adequate cause," argued one outraged Whig, "for the purposes of conquest; with the design to extend slavery."

The strongest and most stinging criticism emanated from Northern abolitionists who denounced "Mr. Polk's War." William Lloyd Garrison went so far as to welcome "the overwhelming defeat of the American troops, and the success of the injured Mexicans." The most profound critique of the war came from the literary figure and transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau (see Chapter 10), who defended the ideal of peaceful opposition by citizens to unjust government action. See *Choices and Consequences: Henry David Thoreau and Civil Disobedience* (page 334).

The Mexican War was the first conflict America fought primarily on foreign soil. It was also the most logistically complex war in the nation's brief history, involving multiple fronts, long supply lines, and the complex task of coordinating ground and amphibious assaults. The Mexican War also produced two of the greatest generals in American history, Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. Taylor was the common soldier's general, a man without pretensions whose reputation for bravery in the face of enemy fire earned him the nickname among his troops, "Old Rough and Ready." Scott was in many respects the opposite of Taylor. A brilliant tactician and strategist, "Old Fuss and Feathers" was arrogant and fond of pomp and ceremony. The Mexican War also provided a proving ground for a host of future military leaders who later became important generals of the Civil War era, including Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, George McClellan, George G. Meade, and P. G. T. Beauregard.

The United States had clear military superiority over Mexico. American forces under the command of Zachary Taylor scored a notable early victory in May 1846 at the battle of Palo Alto on Mexico's Gulf coast (11.9). General Stephen Kearny then opened a second front by marching from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to Santa Fe and then on to California, where he joined up with an army under Captain John C. Fremont. Fremont had already paved the way for the conquest of California by instigating a rebellion against Mexican authority in California known as the "bear-flag revolt." The revolt was named for the emblem that decorated the flag of the rebels, which carried an image of a grizzly bear.

Leading the final phase of the conflict, General Winfield Scott's successful amphibious assault at the coastal town of Vera Cruz established a staging ground for an assault on Mexico City. It took five more months of fierce fighting, but they eventually captured the Mexican capital on May 1, 1847.

What were the most important differences between the leadership style of Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott?

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war between the United States and Mexico (1848). It settled the border dispute between Texas and Mexico and ceded to the United States a vast swath of new territory—some 500,000 square miles—in the Southwest comprising present-day California, New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of Texas, Utah, Colorado, and Nevada. The United States had effectively seized 55 percent of Mexico's territory.

Divided at the outset of the war, Americans remained divided in its aftermath. The treaty arrived in Washington for ratification just as the city was celebrating the dedication of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument. One orator took the occasion to celebrate the victory over Mexico as the triumph of Manifest Destiny. Comparing American liberty to a "locomotive" that was speeding down the "track of human freedom," he declared that "the whole civilized world resounds with American opinions and American principles." Offsetting this ebullient optimism, however, was a sense of foreboding most vividly expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who predicted that expansion and all its attendant political questions, especially those concerning slavery, would prove as much a burden as a blessing: "Mexico will poison us."

Images of the Mexican War

The Mexican War was the first conflict in American history that professional journalists covered and reported to the people directly via the new medium of the telegraph almost daily. Competing for readers newspapers pioneered new techniques for gathering and reporting news, including sending "war correspondents" into battle. This practice freed newspapers from reliance on the military and government, allowing the press to exercise a more independent role. To be sure many papers continued to simply echo the official view of the war provided by the government. But many other editors used their papers to voice dissent. Abolitionists in particular used their antislavery newspapers to challenge the goals of the Polk administration and denounce the war. Indeed one military officer's complaint about the negative impact of a "thousand prying eyes and brazen tongues" was a direct result of "a free and uncontrolled press."

An equally significant innovation in war coverage involved the use of images by papers like *The New York Herald* to explain important events in the Mexican War. The Mexican War was also the first military conflict in America to be captured on film. The daguerreotype, an early form of photography, produced images that seem fuzzy by the standards of modern technology but that seemed miraculous achievements in their day. Americans approached the new technology as if it were an actual facsimile of reality and not merely another artistic representation of it. Indeed the *Herald* proclaimed that it intended its war coverage to be "daguerreotype reports," a term meant to convey unbiased and accurate report of reality in nearly real time. Americans embraced the new pictorial art form enthusiastically. Before shipping off, a soldier might sit for a

What role did images play in shaping American perceptions of the Mexican War?

daguerreotype which he gave to family or loved ones. Soldiers might also carry daguerreotypes of loved ones into battle. Daguerreotypists even followed soldiers into Mexico, setting up temporary studios and recording battle scenes. At least one artist died recording America's war effort. An especially haunting image produced during the war was a daguerreotype of the gravesite of Henry Clay Jr., son of the noted Whig politician, killed at the battle of Buena Vista (**11.10**).

The scene is desolate: a cross, an open grave awaiting a coffin, and an adobe vault over Clay's grave, a necessity that protected the burial site from being attacked by wolves or desecrated by grave robbers. Such an image was likely seen only by a small number of people, but its emotional impact would have been immense.

This sober image contrasts with a heroic representation of Clay's death in a popular print produced for a mass audience (**11.11**). Rather than capture the desolation of a grave in a distant wilderness, the lithograph shows a fallen leader urging his troops on to eventual victory. The artist focuses on Clay's final dramatic gesture with the pistol given to him by his father. "Take these pistols to my father," he tells a comrade, "and tell him I have done all I can with them, and now return them to him." Heroic images of this sort proved the most popular and influential representations of the war. Nathaniel Currier's venerable firm alone produced at least eighty-five different images of the war for an American audience eager to purchase them.

11.10 and **11.11** **Clay's Grave and the *Death of Colonel Clay***
These representations of the death of Henry Clay's son capture radically different views of the war. The haunting daguerreotype (left) was a deeply personal artifact, while the more widely distributed lithograph was more inspirational than morbid.

Why did the artist pose Henry Clay in the same posture as General Wolfe and General Warren?

Choices and Consequences

HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

In 1846 Transcendentalist author Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax as a protest against the Mexican War. Thoreau's refusal to pay the tax landed him in jail for a night. In Thoreau's view the only place for a just man in an unjust legal and political system was in jail!

Thoreau explored the reasons for his act of defiance two years later. In a lyceum lecture called "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government," he formulated a sketch of this theory of civil disobedience. A year later a small literary journal published a revised version of this lecture, entitled "Resistance to Civil Government."

Thoreau's essay framed the options available to citizens facing government action they believed to be immoral in concise terms. "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" Here are the options as Thoreau envisioned them:

Choices

1 Accept government's decision and refrain from criticism.

2 Obey the law but work to change it.

3 Protest the law by refusing to obey it and suffer the legal consequences for challenging it.

Decision

Thoreau chose the third option and spent a night in the Concord jail.

Consequences

Thoreau's actions had almost no impact at the time, and his essay attracted little attention immediately. It did, however, became one of the most influential political essays ever written. His theory of civil disobedience influenced the twentieth-century Indian political leader Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolent protest movement against colonial British rule in India and mid-twentieth-century American civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s campaign against racial discrimination.

Young Texas in Repose

Continuing Controversies

Is the notion of a legal right of civil disobedience a contradiction in terms? Philosophers continue to debate the morality of civil disobedience. If one condones civil disobedience, does this principle invariably lead to anarchy, that is, lawlessness and political disorder, or is it possible to support the rule of law and still accept the moral legitimacy of civil disobedience? Another controversial issue that continues to divide supporters of resistance theory is the role of nonviolence. Must civil disobedience always be nonviolent, or can one legitimately use violence to further the ideals of justice and morality? Abolitionists extensively discussed this latter issue as they pondered what to do about the evil of slavery. The issue continues to divide supporters of the ideal of civil disobedience, many who continue to affirm that the idea can only claim the moral high ground and be effective if it forswears violence.

How significant was Henry Thoreau's essay at the time it was published?

The Wilmot Proviso and the Realignment of American Politics

For a young, up and coming Whig politician from Illinois, the War with Mexico was a decisive moment. Abraham Lincoln opposed the war and viewed further territorial expansion as a threat to America's future. Whigs continued to argue that economic development, not geographical expansion, was the key to America's prosperity. In what would become a hallmark of his distinctive style of rhetoric, Lincoln translated this Whig ideal into a folksy idiom. "[Whigs] did not believe in enlarging our field," Lincoln observed in 1848, "but in keeping our fences where they are and cultivating our present possessions, making it a garden, improving the morals and education of the people." Supporters of slavery held quite a different vision: acquiring a huge new swathe of territory would be a potential boon for slavery. The problem of what to do about slavery in the territories gained from Mexico would place an enormous strain on America's new two-party system, splitting Whigs and Democrats into Northern and Southern wings.

The Wilmot Proviso

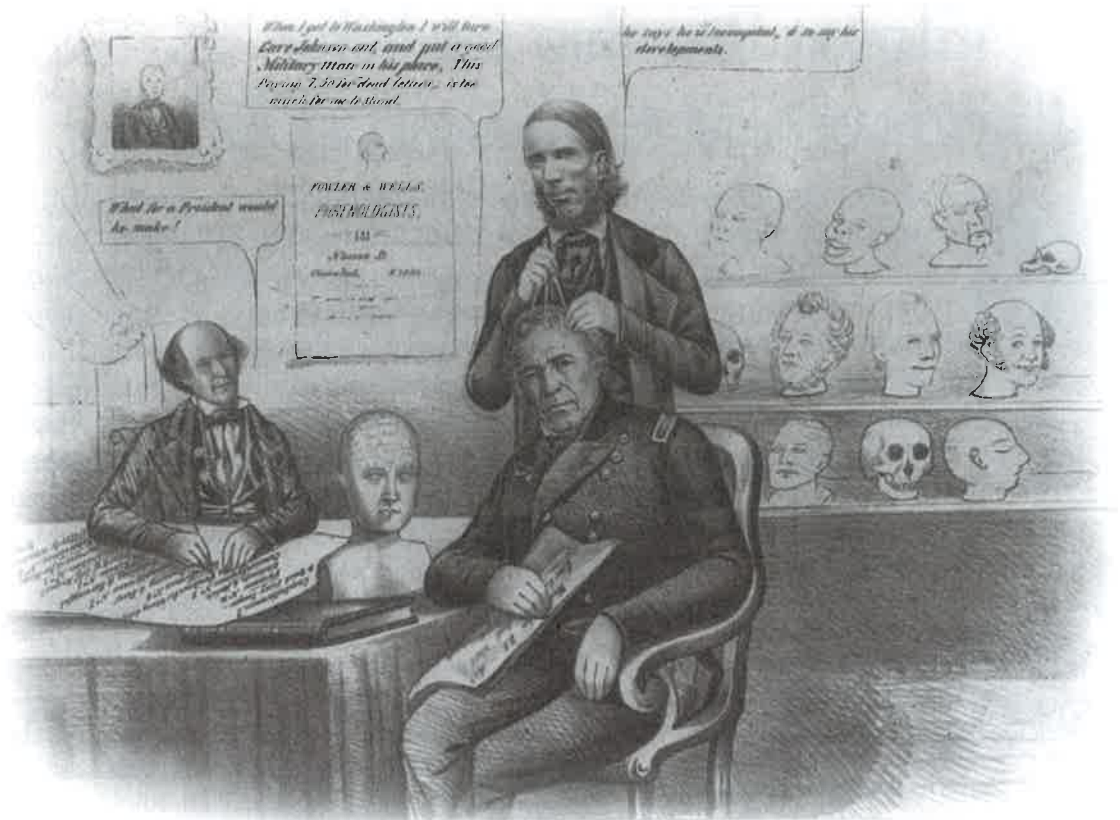
In response to concerns that land seized from Mexico would lead to the spread of slavery, Congressmen David Wilmot introduced a measure to stop the spread of slavery. The **Wilmot Proviso** banned slavery from all territory acquired from Mexico. The bill created a political fire storm. The controversy over the Wilmot Proviso ushered in a new era of heightened sectional tensions and conflict over the future of slavery. Southerners denounced it as a thinly veiled attack on slavery, while Northerners denied this charge, insisting that it left slavery untouched where it already existed. The Proviso passed in the House of Representatives, where Northern delegates outnumbered Southern, but it was defeated in the Senate, where the balance between slave states and free states prevented either side from passing legislation objectionable to the other.

The Wilmot Proviso shifted the terms of American political debate to the problem of slavery in the territories, splitting both parties into pro-slavery and free-soil factions. In response a number of politicians tried to find a way to resolve the sectional argument over slavery. President Polk supported a proposal, modeled on the Missouri Compromise (see Chapter 7), to extend the 36° 30' line across the Louisiana Purchase territories separating free states from slave states all the way to the Pacific coast. Northerners opposed this idea because most of the land gained from Mexico lay below this line and seemed likely to enter the Union ultimately as a slave state. Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan suggested another compromise proposal, **popular sovereignty**, a policy that would allow the people in each territory to decide for themselves whether to permit slavery. Hoping to garner both Northern and Southern supporters, Cass intentionally omitted a crucial detail: *when* this decision on slavery would be made. Most Northerners believed this decision would be made when a territorial legislature was established. Most Southerners, however, accepted John C. Calhoun's interpretation that the decision over slavery would not be made until settlers wrote a state constitution, a delay that opponents of slavery feared would allow slaveholders extra time to firmly establish slavery in a territory.

Sectionalism and the Election of 1848

The Wilmot Proviso and the slavery question defined the presidential election of 1848. Both the Democratic and Whig parties tried to downplay the question of slavery in order to attract voters in the North and South. Democrats nominated moderate Lewis Cass, champion of the theory of popular sovereignty, for their presidential candidate. The Whigs had a more difficult time choosing a candidate. Henry Clay had been the clear frontrunner, but his adamant

Why was the Wilmot Proviso so controversial?



11.12 *The Candidate of Many Parties*
A phrenologist probes General Zachary Taylor's head, looking for some sign of what the presidential candidate thought about the key issues of the day. Taylor's campaign tried to avoid taking stands on issues that might alienate voters.

opposition to the seizure of lands from Mexico was a difficult political position to take. Clay had hoped to avoid having to take a stand on this issue, but the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo undercut his stance: after the Treaty, Clay's policy made no sense. Americans had to decide what to do about slavery in the new lands won from Mexico.

Casting Clay aside the Whigs eventually settled on General Zachary Taylor, a Mexican War hero who cast himself as a "no party man" and a unifier who was above partisanship. Even more useful to the party, because he was a career soldier, Taylor's views on a wide range of political issues were unknown, including his stand on the Wilmot Proviso. This humorous political cartoon from the election of 1848 shows a phrenologist (see Chapter 10) probing the general's skull, supposedly to find some clues to his political beliefs (**11.12**). The title of the cartoon, *The Candidate of Many Parties*, underscores Taylor's attempt to be all things to all people. Indeed the Whigs ran two different campaigns in the two regions of the country. To capture Southern voters they stressed the fact that Taylor owned slaves, asserting that no slaveholder would betray the interests of the South to Northern interests. To appeal to Northerners the Whigs emphasized Taylor's credentials as a Mexican War hero and his support for one of the Whig Party's cardinal principles: opposition to a strong executive, including the use of the presidential veto. By stressing his belief that the veto should only be used in exceptional cases where a law was clearly unconstitutional, Taylor signaled to Northern Whigs that he would not veto a Wilmot Proviso-like law. Embracing this cherished Whig constitutional ideal not only allowed Taylor to underscore his Whig credentials to those who doubted them but also it allowed him to deftly side-step the slavery issue. Taylor's election strategy allowed him to do the seemingly impossible: campaign as a pro-slavery candidate in the South and as a pro-Wilmot Proviso candidate in the North.

The dynamics of the 1848 election were further complicated by the emergence of a third party—the Free-Soil Party. This party brought together disaffected Democrats who supported the Wilmot Proviso and resented the growing influence of Southerners within their party. Led by former president Martin Van Buren, anti-slavery democrats were known as "Barnburners," a nickname that derived from an old Dutch tale about a farmer who burned down his barn to get the rats out. In 1848 the

Why does this political cartoon show a phrenologist examining Taylor's skull?

> "Let the soil of our extensive domains be kept free for the hardy pioneers of our own land, and the oppressed and banished of other lands, seeking homes of comfort and fields of enterprise in the new world."
>
> Free-Soil Party Platform, 1848

"rats" were the proslavery wing of the Democratic Party. A contemporary political cartoon shows Van Buren setting fire to a barn and rats, proslavery Democrats, fleeing the burning building (**11.13**). The Free-Soil Party also attracted disaffected Whigs who, unwilling to support a slaveholder as their party's candidate, came to be known as Conscience Whigs. It also gathered abolitionist supporters of the Liberty Party (the antislavery party founded in 1840). Under the slogan "No more Slave States and no more Slave Territories," the Free-Soil platform took the moderate position of opposing only the extension of slavery into the West.

The Whig, Taylor, won the election handily, but his victory revealed the importance of the slavery issue. See *Competing Visions, Slavery and the Election of 1848*, page 338. He won eight of fifteen slave states, largely because he was a slave owner. The race was much closer in the North, but Taylor prevailed in the key states of Pennsylvania and New York. He owed his narrow margin of victory in the latter state to the Free-Soil Party, which drew thousands of votes away from the Democrats. Overall the Free-Soil Party failed to win a single state, but it polled an impressive 300,000 votes (10 percent of the total) and elected two senators and nine representatives to Congress from states in the Northeast and Midwest.

11.13 *Smoking Him Out*
In this political cartoon Martin Van Buren is shown in front of a burning barn, while proslavery Democrat Lewis Cass and several rats flee the building. The antislavery democrats were nicknamed "Barnburners."

Who were the Barnburners?

Competing Visions

SLAVERY AND THE ELECTION OF 1848

The problem of what to do with the vast territory acquired from Mexico became a deeply contentious issue in the election of 1848. The two party system fractured, producing a new third party, the Free-Soil Party, which was committed to opposing the spread of slavery westward. The new party met in Buffalo, New York, reflected in the cartoon showing Martin Van Buren, the party's candidate, riding a buffalo. The party platforms of the Democrats, Whigs, and Free-Soil Party each adopted a different approach to the slavery issue.

The Democrat Party Platform reasserted its commitment to the ideal of states' rights and the corollary of this belief: slavery was something that the Constitution had left for the individual states to decide.

The Congress has no power under the Constitution to interfere with or control the domestic institutions of the several states, that such States are the sole and proper judges of everything appertaining to their own affairs, not prohibited by the Constitution; that all efforts of the Abolitionists or others made to induce Congress to interfere with questions of slavery ... are calculated to lead to the most alarming and dangerous consequences.

The Whig Platform avoided mentioning the divisive issue of slavery. Rather than articulate a constitutional theory, the Whig Platform focused on the merits of the Whig candidate for president, Zachary Taylor. Whigs championed Taylor, who was presented as a war hero and a man who put the interests of the nation ahead of any sectional interest.

That we look on General Taylor's administration of the Government as one conducive to Peace, Prosperity, and Union ... we have a candidate whose very position as a Southwestern man, reared on the banks of the great stream whose tributaries, natural and artificial, embrace the whole Union, renders the protection of the interests of the whole country his first trust.

The Buffalo Hunt

What were the most important differences between the strategy of the Whigs and Democrats in the election of 1848?

Conclusion

During the 1840s Americans looked to the West as a land of economic opportunity and in the case of the Mormons a place of religious refuge. Westward expansion was shaped by the idea of Manifest Destiny, a vision of America's future where the nation, with God's blessing, took possession of the entire continent to bring to it the values of the market and American democracy. The establishment of the Overland Trail in 1840 led to rising numbers of whites migrating into the West and the mounting difficulties for Native Americans whose land the settlers coveted. Despite the fact that Indian attacks claimed only a small number of casualties among westward migrants, American popular culture cast Indians as a serious threat to the unfolding of Manifest Destiny.

One area in the West that attracted many thousands of Americans was the region of Mexico known as Texas. At first the Mexican government welcomed the newcomers, but by the early 1830s it became clear that many American settlers in Texas wanted the region to be annexed by the United States. After a revolt by Americans led to the establishment of an independent Texas republic, annexation was stalled for nearly a decade as the fate of Texas became entangled with the deeply divisive issue of slavery. Support for annexation was strongest in the South. Many Northerners opposed annexation because Texas would enter the Union as a slave state, thereby strengthening slavery and harming the interests of free whites. Brushing their opposition aside, President Tyler annexed Texas as a slave state in 1845.

Weeks later the newly inaugurated President James K. Polk entered the White House determined to expand American territory by acquiring a large piece of northern Mexico. When Mexico rebuffed efforts to buy the territory, Polk and Congress seized on a border clash between American and Mexican forces in April 1846 to declare war on Mexico. The Mexican War resulted in the United States acquiring a large swath of new territory. Even before the war was over, however, it reignited and intensified the already contentious issue of slavery. The Wilmot Proviso, a proposal to ban slavery from all of the territory acquired from Mexico, placed the issue of slavery at the very heart of American political debate, vexing the greatest minds of the age and straining the delicate political balance that held the nation together. The election of Zachary Taylor in 1848 provided only a brief respite from the growing conflict over slavery.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1804–1819

Federal exploration of the West by Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, and Stephan Long
Americans gain accurate information about the West

1821–1825

Mexico declares independence from Spain
Independence ushers in a period of instability in Mexican politics

First fur rendezvous
Indians, traders, and trappers gather to buy, sell, and promote intercultural exchanges

Congress creates Indian territory
An important part of the federal government's policy of Indians approved by Congress

1835–1837

Texas revolts against Mexico
Texans achieve independence

Review Questions

1. What role did ideas of race play in the theory of Manifest Destiny?
2. What symbolic function did Indians play in American artists' representations of the West during the era of expansion?
3. How did the Mormon flight westward differ from the experience of those Americans who headed to Oregon?
4. Why did some Americans oppose the annexation of Texas?
5. How did the representations of the Mexican War in the press and in prints compare with the realities of war?
6. What was the Wilmot Proviso, and why did Southerners react negatively to it?
7. Who were the Barnburner Democrats, and how did they get their name?
8. How did Zachary Taylor's campaign in the election of 1848 deal with the divisive issue of slavery?

1843

Thousands of pioneers trek west to Oregon
First important wave of overland migration begins

1844–1845

Polk elected president
American government pushes Polk's expansionist agenda

John O'Sullivan coins term Manifest Destiny
O'Sullivan helps formulate and promote expansionist agenda for America

1846

Mexican War begins
Armed conflict with Mexico erupts over border dispute

Wilmot Proviso
Provision to ban slavery from any land gained from Mexico heats up the slavery question in American politics

1848

Taylor elected president
Whigs find a candidate able to unite the party across regional divisions

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
Mexican War ends

Key Terms

rendezvous A festive annual gathering held in the Rocky Mountains in which Indians, mountain men, and traders would gather together to exchange pelts for a variety of goods. **318**

Manifest Destiny A term coined by editor and columnist John O'Sullivan to describe his belief in America's divine right to expand westward. **320**

Overland Trail The 2,000-mile route taken by American settlers traveling to new settlements in Oregon, California, and Utah. **320**

mission system The colonial system devised by the Spanish to control the Indian population, forcing them to convert to Catholicism and work the land. **326**

Liberty Party The staunchly antislavery, anti-annexation, party was short lived, but captured 62,000 votes, a small number, but enough to effectively rob Henry Clay of electoral victories in New York and Michigan thereby handing Polk the presidency in 1844. **329**

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo This treaty formally ended the war between the United States and Mexico (1848). In addition to settling the border dispute between Texas and Mexico, the United States gained a significant swath of new territory in the Southwest. **332**

Wilmot Proviso Bill introduced by Congressman David Wilmot would have banned slavery from the territories acquired from Mexico. **335**

popular sovereignty An approach to the question of slavery in a newly acquired territory that would have allowed the people in each territory to decide for themselves whether to permit slavery. **335**