



CHAPTER 16 | SEA TO SHINING SEA

In this chapter, I will tell you about the presidency of James K. Polk. He only served for one term (1845-1849), but it was an eventful one! The size and shape of America changed dramatically by the end of Polk's time in office. Four states were added to America, which meant the flag (and the number of white stars) changed four times.

During his administration, Americans were excited about expanding westward, as we learned last week when we explored the idea of Manifest Destiny. Polk led America into a war with Mexico and won. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (signed in 1848) added new land—over 500,000 square miles—which was equal to a quarter of the existing United States. It gave clear and undisputed claim to what is now Texas, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, and Oklahoma.

Gaining this western territory fueled American pride and boosted the nation's economic growth. Expansion into the rich interior of the continent enabled the United States to become the world's leading agricultural nation. However, the Mexican American War also helped widen the gap between the North and South, and this added to the tensions that brought on the Civil War. Americans continued to disagree about whether states that were made from this new territory would allow slavery to be legal. The Mexican American War was also the training ground for several important generals during the Civil War.

AMERICA MOVING INTO MANIFEST DESTINY

A variety of forces acted together and at once to push Americans towards westward expansion.

First, the challenge of transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one was proving difficult in America. The market-based economy placed new emphasis on materialism, commitment to trade and industry, and a wider, more “common man” electorate. Republican values (which included self-sacrifice for the good of the nation as a whole, self-government, and patriotism) were endangered by a stagnant and increasingly materialistic society.¹

As factories replaced farms, and city leaders gained political control over rural communities, Americans struggled to identify core beliefs and values in a rapidly changing world. Expansionism offered an opportunity for renewed patriotism and fervor for republican values. It would give the growing population a place to put their energies and take America from a localized, parochial, insulated people to a hemispheric power.²

For quite different and more economic reasons, those who were alarmed at the rapid industrialization and urbanization of America also found good in Manifest Destiny. They saw expansion into the West as a balancing motion. It would open up new lands for agrarian living, thereby slowing the growth of industrialization overall. They also realized that farm surpluses and overstocked warehouses could find new markets if they expanded westward.

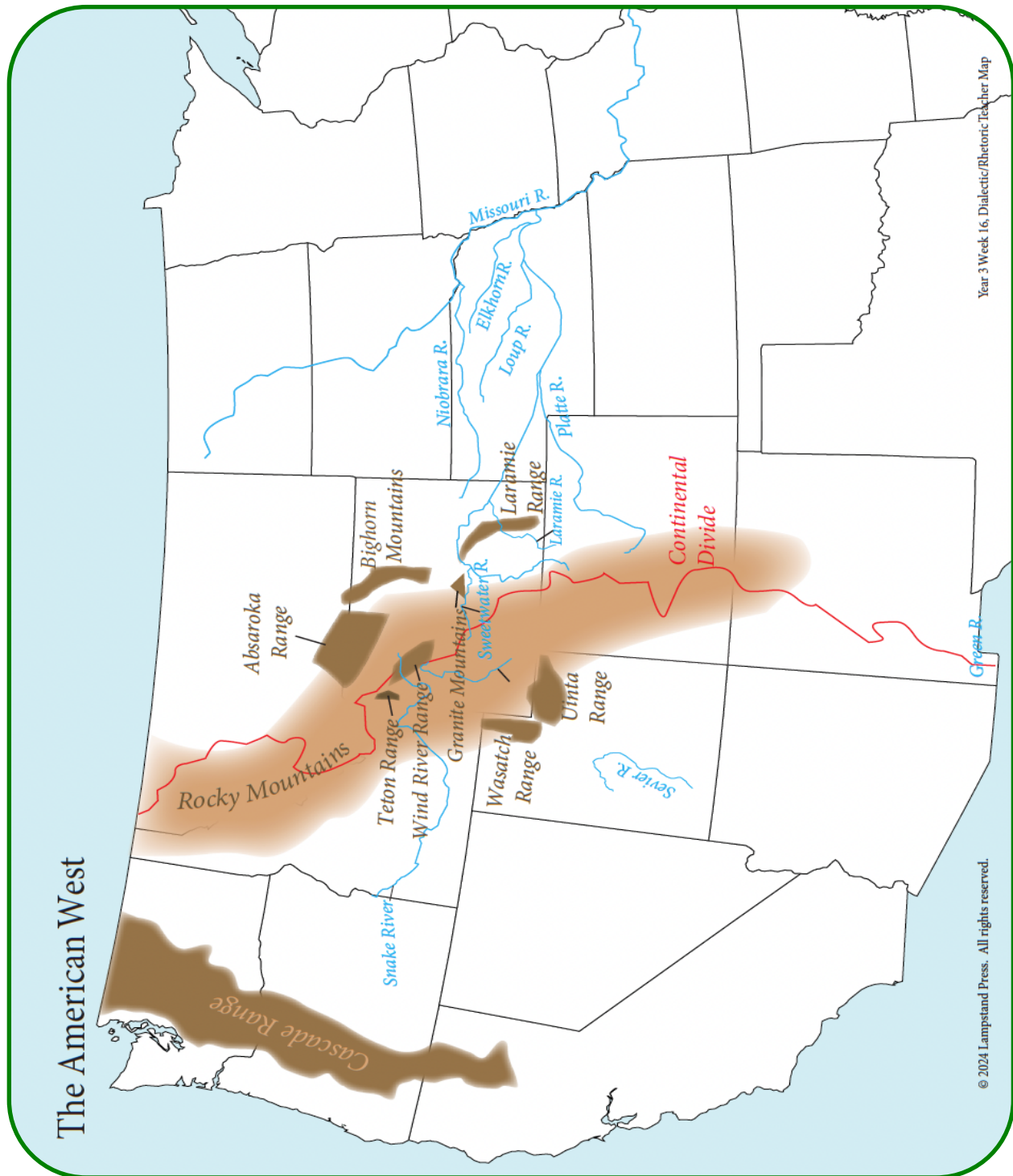
At the time, there were also the pressures of growth in population and recent financial panics, which threatened ordinary Americans' independence and mobility. These people needed to find new vision and direction for their work so that their futures might prosper, especially economically.

1. William Dudley, *Antebellum America: 1784-1850* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003), p. 256.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 256.



Some Americans feared that pro-monarchy Europeans were planning to lay claim to lands to the south and west of America, and that the Europeans wanted to contain American growth so that slavery would die and democracy decay, thus giving them an opportunity to control North America. Full of idealism and patriotism, many Americans viewed their democratic government and lifestyles as the apex of mankind's experiment in living. They had zealous desires to see that bounty spread to "oppressed" regions of North America, such as Texas, California, and Oregon (and, perhaps, to keep European powers at bay).



Year 3 Week 16, Dialectic/Rhetoric Teacher Map

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JAMES K. POLK

A dark horse candidate is one who is not well known when nominated. Often, political insiders take little interest in such a candidate during an election. Polk was considered the first dark horse presidential candidate because, although he had served in politics for many years, he had not been considered for the presidential nomination. In fact, one of his opponents' slogan was, "Who is James K. Polk?"

Who was James K. Polk? He was a man from Tennessee, like his mentor, Andrew Jackson. In fact, he was so strong a supporter and admirer of "Old Hickory" (Jackson's nickname, you recall) that people called Polk "Young Hickory."

Although Polk had no formal education until he was eighteen, when he began attending the University of North Carolina, he quickly found his footing in the political arena. Polk won a seat in the Tennessee House of Representatives in 1823, when he was twenty-eight. In 1825, he began a fourteen-year tenure as a member of the House of Representatives. He also served as the House speaker for four years.

Throughout his years as Speaker of the House, Polk strongly supported President Jackson's controversial policies. Polk was a nationalist and expansionist. He was also committed to the annexation of Texas, an issue on which Van Buren, concerned about sectional issues, waffled. Then, after leaving presidential office, "Old Hickory" encouraged "Young Hickory" to run for the office of governor of Tennessee. Polk was elected and served as Tennessee's governor from 1839-1841.

In 1844, Polk decided to run for national office, thinking he might land a spot as vice president. Everyone expected ex-President Martin van Buren to get the Democrat nomination, but then van Buren publicly opposed the annexation of Texas because he thought adding Texas might lead to war with Mexico. Polk immediately called for both the annexation of Texas and the occupation of Oregon.

At the Democrat Convention, van Buren could not get a majority of delegates to choose him as the candidate for president. The delegates voted seven times for other men and still couldn't agree on any of them. Then, someone suggested Polk. On the next ballot, Polk won unanimously. The rest of America had little idea who he was, so they called him a "dark horse candidate" and the Whigs' campaign slogan was, "Who is James K. Polk?"

The Whigs thought America would pick the well-known Henry Clay, but Henry Clay tried to be too clever by half on the subject of Texas. He wasn't clearly for annexing the slave state, nor was he clearly against it. Polk, by contrast, campaigned on a bold, clear platform that handled the ticklish issue of Texas by calling for immediate annexation while claiming the Oregon Country, too. In the long run, that would keep the balance between the free and slave states—and it appealed to the nation's sense of destiny.

There was also the matter of Andrew Jackson's support. He remained the undisputed leader of his party even after his terms were over, and he was Polk's political ally. Jackson arguably made Polk president just as he had made van Buren president before. Jackson died just after having the satisfaction of seeing Polk elected and inaugurated as president.

Polk made four major campaign promises during his campaign in 1844. Although people might argue about how important or valuable his goals were, and after he won, he delivered on every one of his promises. That is why he has been called the second most successful president ever (after Washington).



- ❑ First, he promised to serve only one term. He kept this promise, refusing to run for reelection when the time came; he was the first U.S. president to do so.
- ❑ Second, he promised to pass a new tariff that would be acceptable to both North and South. He had the new protectionist tariff legislation drafted and ready when Congress convened after his election.¹ The tariff rate was lowered and the prices were fixed by a new method. Rather than figuring the tax on the basis of the quantity of items in a shipment, the new tariff was assigned according to the value of imported items.
- ❑ Third, he promised to restore fiscal order to the federal government through the establishment of an independent treasury. Polk had authored a bill that he had worked successfully to pass when he was in Congress, but it was repealed by the Whigs a year later. Now, he was in a position to pass it again. Accordingly, Democrats created Polk's Independent Treasury System (rather than independent banks or a national bank) to hold government funds.
- ❑ Fourth, he promised to settle the Oregon border, which was disputed by Great Britain. Polk orchestrated the Oregon Treaty between the United States and Britain in 1846. This treaty established the compromise border of the 49th parallel, as it is today.

Biographers note that Polk was not a kind or merciful individual, and that he was quick to sacrifice others' welfare in pursuit of his agendas. People of his own day did not respect him for these flaws. He also wasn't much of a politician—he never became popular, and perhaps he knew that it would be useless to seek a second term.

Polk's wife Sarah, on the other hand, was a woman whom even her husband's opponents regarded with respect. She was very well-educated and used her gifts to serve her husband. For example, she helped him by drafting speeches and letters. It is said that Sarah Polk asked Dolley Madison (considered one of the best first ladies) for advice on how to be an excellent first lady. She must have taken Dolley's advice in earnest because she was considered a graceful hostess.

Polk was not highly esteemed during his day, and he also paid dearly for his achievements. He was a faithful worker and a man of his word—two essentials for a President. He may have literally worked himself into the grave. Three months after leaving office, he died.

OREGON TERRITORY

Early in his term, Polk tackled the dispute over the area Americans called the Oregon Country and Britain called Columbia. This area was the region from the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains westward to the Pacific Ocean. It ran from the northern border of the state of California up to the southern border of the state of Alaska.

Ever since 1818, Great Britain and the United States had agreed to share control of this territory. Britain only had a few settlers living there, but Americans were moving to the Oregon Country in droves along the Oregon Trail. It was heavily traveled for about twenty years, from the 1840's to the 1860's. Pioneer missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, about whom I will have more to say in the next chapter, were among the very early expeditions to Oregon.

1. The tariff rate was lowered and the prices were fixed by a new method. Rather than figuring the tax on the basis of the quantity of items in a shipment, the new tariff was assigned according to the value of imported items.



I will have more to tell you about Marcus and Narcissa Whitman in the next chapter, but allow me to introduce them here in the words of Miles Cannon,

Narcissa Prentiss, daughter of Judge and Mrs. Stephen Prentiss, first saw the light of day in the village of Prattsburg, New York., on March 14th, 1808. She was the third child in a family of nine children, and was reared in the atmosphere of culture, refinement and learning. Her father ranked high as a citizen and jurist and they all were active members of the Congregational Church; Narcissa having united at the age of 11 years with a class of some 70 souls.

She was a plump, fair, golden-haired, blue-eyed girl and is said to have presented a very beautiful picture as she stood at the altar and took upon herself the vows of a Christian—vows that were never broken even to the end. Miss Prentiss attended the Miss Willards Seminary at Troy, New York, and completed her education at the Franklin Academy in the town of Prattsburg. Afterwards she and her sister Jane established a sort of kindergarten school at Bath, where she remained until 1834, when she removed with the family to Angelica, N. Y. , at which place she was united in marriage in February, 1836, to Dr. Marcus Whitman, of Rushville, N. Y.

Dr. Whitman was born in Rushville in September, 1802, received a good common school education and took a course in the Berkshire Medical College, at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, from which he received a diploma. He practiced several years in Canada, when he returned to his old home and became a part owner with his brother in a saw mill. He first united with the Congregational Church in January, 1824, but in February, 1833, joined the Presbyterian Church and became a ruling Elder within a month. Miss Prentiss united with the Presbyterian Church soon after moving to Angelica, in 1834.

Narcissa's family was large, educated, and actively involved in their local church. Narcissa herself, when she grew up, wanted badly to bring the gospel message to the Native Americans when the call for help came from the American Board of missionaries. When Narcissa married Dr. Marcus Whitman in 1836, they both seem to have chosen the marriage primarily because it would help them to achieve their goals of becoming a missionary work in the West.

Their reasons for marrying would not have been unusual for that time: marriages arranged for practical reasons or by parents have been the norm far longer than marriages based on mutual romantic affection. (Ironically, Narcissa turned down the Rev. Henry H. Spaulding, also known as "Hank," who is supposed to have asked for her hand in marriage on many occasions, only to find that he and his wife would join herself and her husband as missionaries to Oregon!)

America wanted a northern border that would include all of the Columbia and Fraser Rivers. Expansionist Democrats made the most extreme claim: "54-40 or fight!" (If you remember what longitude and latitude are, then you'll understand that 54-40 was the line of latitude that marked southern border of Alaska. At this point in history, Alaska belonged to the Russians, the Americans hadn't bought it yet.)

Polk purposefully broke off negotiations when the British refused to accept the modified proposal of a border on the 49th parallel. He returned to expansionist demands for "all Oregon," which escalated tensions along the border. However, although "54-40 or fight!" were tough words, Polk wasn't quite as bloodthirsty as he made himself out to be.



Neither England nor America really wanted to declare war over the Oregon Territory. A compromise agreement was drawn up, called the Oregon Treaty of 1846. In it, Britain gave the land south of the 49th parallel (except for Vancouver Island) to the United States. That is the border to this day, and though it was south of the 54th parallel, most Americans were still satisfied.

The land the US got from this treaty included present day Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, plus parts of Montana and Wyoming. The whole region was organized into the Oregon Territory in 1848. The State of Oregon was admitted to the Union in 1859.

MEXICAN AMERICAN WAR

Moving Towards War

Polk solved the argument about Oregon without bloodshed, but it wasn't as easy to deliver on his desire to get Texas and California from Mexico. Mexico insisted that Texas rightfully belonged to them even after Texans had fought for and won their independence in 1837. The annexation of Texas in 1845 deepened the bitterness of Mexican leaders towards the United States.

The United States made Texas a state in 1845. Americans believed that the border between Mexico and American territory should be at the Rio Grande, while the Mexicans believed that it should be placed farther north, at the Rio Nueces. When Polk became president, he sent an ambassador to Mexico in an attempt to end the border dispute and to negotiate an offer to purchase New Mexico and California. Polk's ambassador also offered to forgive the 3 million dollar debt that the Mexican government owed American settlers.

The Mexican government was insulted and angered by the propositions. In their minds, they still owned Texas; to them, the United States's "kind" offers arrogantly assumed that they were in agreement with the terms. The Mexican government recalled their ambassador from the United States, ending diplomatic relationships. That sort of thing sends a strong warning signal to the US that Mexico was not going to cooperate and would likely cause trouble.

Believing that war with Mexico was imminent, Polk sent General Zachary Taylor and U.S. troops to patrol the border along the Rio Grande. That was well within the territory claimed by Texas. The problem was, Mexico claimed that the border was well to the north, at the Rio Nueces. If you look at a map of Texas, you'll see that everything from Brownsville to Corpus Christi was disputed territory.

Then, as the saying goes, "the banana hit the fan." In 1846, about eighty American troops advanced on a Mexican fort they had been told was abandoned, only to find it occupied by 2,000 Mexican soldiers. Both Mexico and the United States claim the other side fired the first shot, but whoever started it, a battle began that lasted throughout the evening. The captain of the American force, Seth Thornton, was killed, and most of his men were taken prisoner.

Polk's famous response to the news of the Thornton Affair in 1846 was, "American blood has been shed on American soil!"¹ Polk's statement would have been true if the border was the Rio Grande, but Mexico did not acknowledge the Rio Grande as the border between itself and Texas. Texas claimed that this border had been established when Santa Anna signed the treaty that ended the Texas War of Independence, which was true except for the important detail that Mexico had never ratified the treaty.

1. Sheila Nelson, *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Philadelphia: Mason Crest Publishers, 2005), p. 24.



Nevertheless, Polk asked Congress for permission to declare war on Mexico. However, the fact that the border was in dispute made Polk's request questionable. To the Mexicans, the Americans were the invaders of their territory. The fact that the border hadn't been agreed on and the Mexicans thought they were on their own territory didn't keep Congress from acting. Two days later on May 13, 1846, the US declared war on Mexico.

The Pre-War National Mood

A majority of Americans warmly supported the war, heavily influenced by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. In 1846, Americans tended to regard their own society as the finest available and, indeed, God's gift to mankind, so the war of conquest was not presented as such. It was said to be heroic, patriotic, and dictated only by benevolent desires to share American institutions with those less fortunate. In this respect, then, the Mexican-American War a natural result of the mood of the country in 1846.

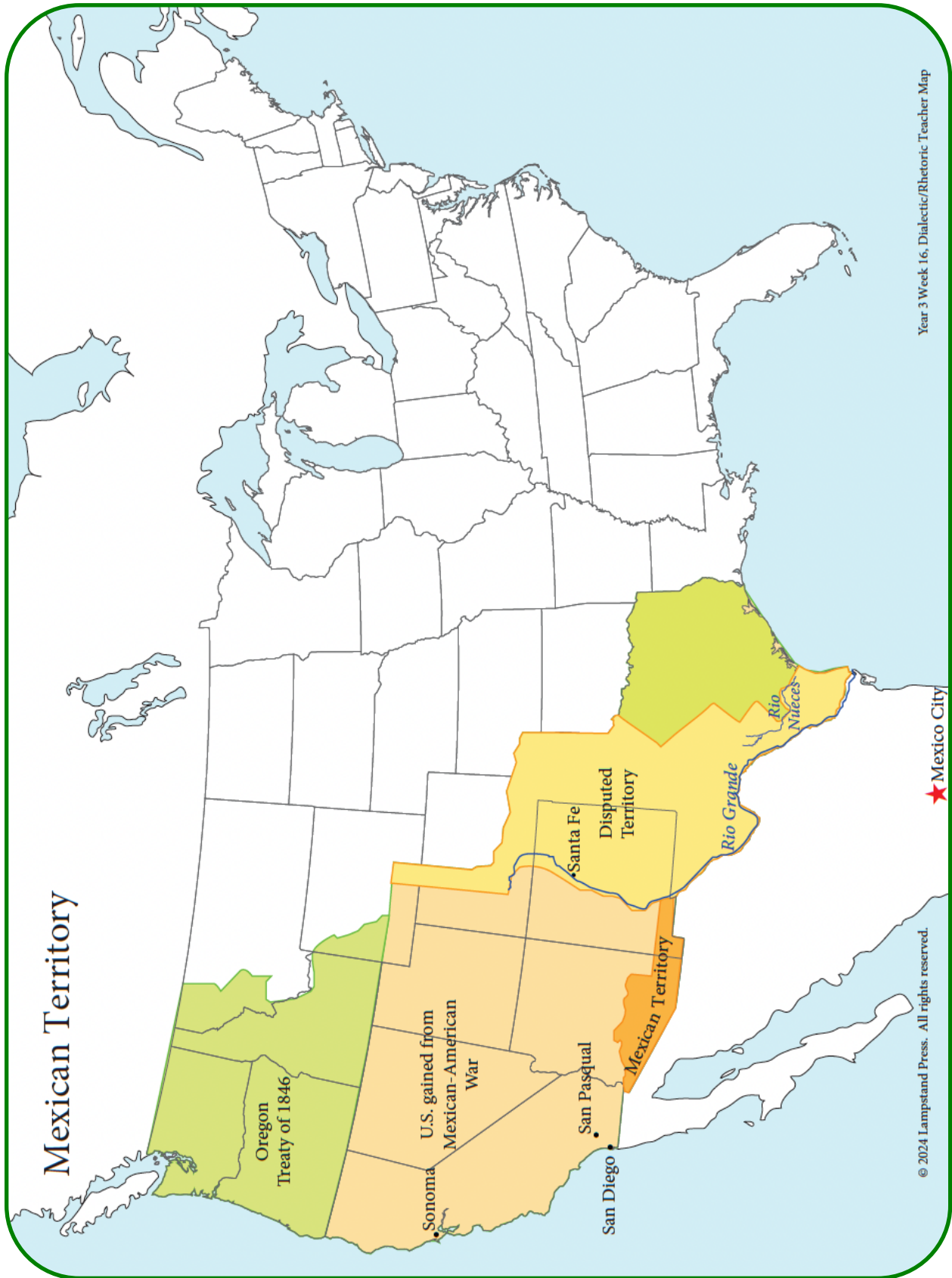
(If this notion of spreading American ideals sounds familiar, it should! Napoleon had a similar desire to spread the blessings of French institutions (liberty, equality, and fraternity) over the rest of Europe—at the point of a gun or bayonet. Another parallel can be drawn to the spread of both Islam and Christianity via warrior crusaders in the Middle Ages.)

Many Americans had what they believed were good intentions: to pursue America's Manifest Destiny to control the continent and to spread the blessings of democracy to those who wanted to be free of Mexican rule. This rhetoric was powerful, but many people of that time—and many more since—believed that the idea of Manifest Destiny was wrong in itself and that it disguised a selfish greed for land and power. Opponents to the war claimed that the shedding of American blood was just a good excuse for pursuing an unjustified desire for Mexican territory (particularly in California) and a way to expand slavery.

Some southern Democrats did frankly want more slave territory to secure the power of the South. Pro-war Americans also wanted more land in general (including California, if possible). They hoped also to establish the border at the Rio Grande (which had been fixed at the conclusion of the Texas War of Independence), and to expand free territory (promoted in the Wilmot Proviso, which Congress did not pass).

Despite all these supporting voices, the war was, as I have said, not universally popular. There were quite a few outspoken opponents. Senator Abraham Lincoln believed that the war was unnecessary and not permitted under the Constitution. A famous philosopher, essayist, and poet named Henry David Thoreau was so opposed to the war that he famously demonstrated his disapproval by not paying his taxes.

Some Americans said that war with Mexico was a just a scheme to acquire the territory of California, which belonged to Mexico. Others, particularly Northerners, believed that the war was an angle to acquire more slave territory.



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Action

The United States annexed Texas in 1845, leading to tensions with Mexico, which had never recognized Texas' independence. Then, disputes over the border between the Rio Grande (claimed by the United States) and the Nueces River (claimed by Mexico) led to hostilities in 1846.

On April 25, 1846, Mexican forces attacked a U.S. patrol led by Captain Seth Thornton, marking the first engagement of the war, which was called the "Thornton Affair." On May 13, 1846, the United States declared war on Mexico following a request by President James K. Polk. The United States argued that Mexico had "shed American blood on American soil."

The first move was Mexico's. On May 3–9, 1846, Mexican forces unsuccessfully besieged Fort Texas (present-day Fort Brown) along the Rio Grande. The first major battle was the Battle of Palo Alto (May 8, 1846), resulting in an American victory under General Zachary Taylor. Then, at the Battle of Resaca de la Palma (May 9, 1846), American forces won another engagement against Mexican forces, solidifying control over the Rio Grande.

During 1846 and 1847, American forces, including the California Battalion, occupied New Mexico and California. Colonel Stephen Kearny led the march on Santa Fe in New Mexico, which he captured without a shot fired on August 8–14th of 1846. Once Santa Fe was taken, Kearney also helped set up the civil government.

From September 21st to 24th, 1846, American forces led by Taylor captured the city of Monterrey. Terms to end the Mexican War in California were signed in the Articles of Capitulation in 1847 at San Diego in California.

As troops poured into Texas, American settlers in California got word of the war. President Polk had begun sending federal troops to conquer California, but it would take some time for them to arrive. Instead of waiting to be liberated from the Mexican authorities, a handful of settlers took matters into their own hands.

Thirty-three settlers marched towards a Mexican fort north of San Francisco called Sonoma. To their surprise, the Mexican general did not put up a fight, but rather admitted that he wanted to be governed by the United States instead of Mexico. The California settlers raised a home-made flag with a star and a grizzly bear on it and declared themselves the California Republic.

American soldiers began arriving not long after—only a few hundred of them—and fought a series of small battles with loyal Mexican troops. The explorer and writer, John Frémont, led troops to Monterrey, California. General Stephen Kearny also led 100 horse soldiers overland into California.

Commodore Robert Stockton's arrived with a squadron of ships that carried marines who helped end the fighting. Unlike the Mexican American War, in which hundreds of thousands fought, California was conquered with just a few thousand men.



Treaty

American troops were generally outnumbered in Mexico, but they were better trained and equipped. General Winfield Scott landed a force by sea at Veracruz and marched on Mexico City. His victory there did not immediately make Mexico surrender, but the Mexicans finally decided to negotiate for peace when people started suggesting that America take all of Mexico instead of just the northern territories of California and New Mexico.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848, in a little village outside Mexico City. America paid Mexico \$15 million, and Mexico gave up about 525,000 square miles of land (one third of its territory) including all of the territories that would become California, Utah, and Nevada, plus large parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. This was called the Mexican Cession.

In addition, the treaty officially fixed the southern border of Texas at the Rio Grande. Technically, this treaty also ended Mexico's claims to Texas (the Texans believed they were already independent of Mexico). If you believe the Mexican's version, then, including Texas, the United States gained a grand total of 915,000 square miles. The Louisiana Purchase was 828,000 square miles. Therefore, the land that the Americans acquired in the Mexican-American War was the largest amount ever added to the United States.

The Post-War National Mood

Since many Easterners sent their sons to war, the events and ideals of expansionism became personal to them and to their neighbors. They were no longer merely the abstract ideas of remote visionaries, editors, and politicians. The soldiers who fought this war returned with many stories to tell of lands, peoples, and customs that were entirely different than the domesticated East.

Imagine the contrast for such soldiers between the terrains in the east and west, their foods, their expanses of sky and land, the trees (or lack thereof), and the mountains. All these, for Easterners, were exotic and intoxicating. After the war, they felt nearer to it than they had before it.

As is typical, people were united in a new way against a foreign enemy. On July 4th, 1848, Washingtonians celebrated their military victory and patriotic optimism by remembering their recent victory over the Mexicans and by laying the foundation stones for the Washington Monument. By day's end, the news of the successful completion of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was announced as well. As a result, American territory increased by 525,000 square miles!

International Prestige

Europeans understood and respected America's impressive military victories in the Mexican-American war. This led to both a sense of national pride and an enhanced sense of security for most Americans on a scale not experienced since Andrew Jackson's belated victory over the British in New Orleans after the War of 1812. America had shown fighting spirit.

Americans had also engaged in a foreign war by mobilizing volunteers and resources and without compromising their democratic values (unlike France, for instance, which changed from a republic to mob rule to a dictatorship, and then returned to a monarchy). These facts earned the United States a new degree of international prestige and respect, which Polk used to strengthen the Monroe Doctrine. America thus became the undisputed major power of the Western Hemisphere (though not ranked with the Great Powers of Europe quite yet). Europeans would never again challenge America for control of bordering territories.



Americans also found themselves in control of shipping on the Pacific coast since they controlled all the finest harbors of that western seaboard. Thus, America acquired a springboard to significantly influence Pacific commerce. Also, by gaining control of the Pacific coast of North America, Americans gained an opportunity to share in the rich trade of the East and involve themselves in Asian affairs. (Within a decade, Americans had negotiated favorable trading contracts with Asian nations.)

"Then" and "Now"

The socio-political values of the Mexican-American War era were far different than they are today. American society has come a long way in valuing the rights and worth of each individual, regardless of handicaps or differences in race, religion, or ethnic background. So different are we today than Americans were in the mid-1800's that it's hard for us to understand the views of Americans back then.

However, if you really want to understand history, you must learn to look at it from multiple perspectives. It's not enough to say "well, we generally know more now than they did then, so there's nothing left to say about their choices except 'Ew, gross.' and be grateful that we could never be so wrong." It may be true that we know more about some things, but these Americans also considered themselves the smartest and most enlightened people around they made their choices.

Therefore, part of the real trick of learning from history is to identify how they reasoned back then, and what principles guided their thinking. If we can do that, we can perhaps find parallel ways of thinking our own thinking today that may be equally dangerous. (There are more of these than you may realize because human nature does not change.) The Mexican-American War provides us with a perfect opportunity to practice this trick of perspective.

At the time, open and zealous patriotism was a positive trait. All of society reinforced and fueled it. Most Americans revered and esteemed America as a divine gift to mankind. In their eyes, she was the city set upon a hill so that the whole world could be inspired and helped. Thus, if you see parallels between this attitude and the attitude of some Americans today, that doesn't necessarily mean ardent patriotism is a bad thing to have, but that it can lead in bad directions and bears watching.

At the time, social classes were still regarded as "natural" and "right" by the majority of Americans. Though the distinctions were not as stratified or fixed by traditions as in the United Kingdom, and though there was much talk of egalitarianism and the merits of the "common man," most Americans were uncomfortable with the logical conclusions of equality (such as abolition). Similarly, if you see people today who preach "equality" but seem unwilling to extend that equality to areas that are uncomfortable for them, that is another thing worth watching.

When it was going on, the Mexican-American War was seen by most Americans as a just war because, if Americans could control western lands, they could spread the blessings of America (and all that American represented) to more of the earth's population. For most, the war was just because America was righteous. If you see Americans who think in this way, that also is not necessarily all wrong (American values have been translated to many nations in helpful ways), but bears watching.

At the time, there were some who decried the Mexican-American war. These tended to be radical abolitionists who were concerned with the advance of slavery in the new territories that Americans were seeking to gain control over, or those who opposed the expense of the war and the whole agenda of expansionism for its own sake.



These would have been people in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson: those for states' rights, limited federal government, and a strict interpretation of the Constitution. Such voters were usually against nationalistic policies, urbanization, and industrialization as well. These people tended to be anti-slavery Whigs, but even those who opposed the war did so with mild sentiments compared to today's strong convictions. This may sound closer to an acceptable modern point of view, but bear in mind that being against urbanization and industrialization, zealously supporting states' rights, and having *mild* anti-slavery feelings, had not always benefited either America or American slaves much up to this point in America's history.

Those who supported the war in that day would have said that the American government had decreed it (point 1), that the Mexicans had done wrong by attacking Americans on "American soil" (point 2), and that America was advancing good and not evil by extending the blessings of American institutions over land that the Mexicans did not deserve because of their disorderly government, practices of tyranny, and lack of an occupying population in the territories in question (point 3). As you know, several of these are questionable in the same way that some of America's most recent wars have also been questioned and questionable.

Let us now consider the modern perspective. Modern Americans view the Mexican-American War with distaste. Gone are the patriotic pride and sense of a divinely ordained "Manifest Destiny" that sustained and justified the Mexican-American War to some of those who supported it and fought in it. Like the Trail of Tears and the Plains Indian Wars that occurred later in the century as the West was settled, they often see the Mexican-American War as an unpardonable, unvarnished war of conquest without any redeeming characteristics.

Modern Americans would say that though the government declared the war (point 1), the charge of wrongdoing (attacking Americans on "American soil") was conveniently trumped up and highly debatable since the border was in question (point 2). Modern people might also say that Americans had an inflated view of the "goodness" that they were bringing to the new territories (point 3) given the practices of slavery, materialism, and oppression of the Native Americans that the Americans of that day then perpetrated in the West.

Though the Mexican-American War brought about huge changes in America (and arguably for the good in some ways—recall the Mexican general in California who preferred the United States' rule to Mexico's rule), modern Americans would like to forget that it ever happened. Are they entirely right to do so?

Well, I will leave you with this thought: if we ignore the parts of history that we find shameful, how are we ever to understand our mistakes well enough to avoid repeating that shame? Conversely, if we condemn good elements (for instance, love of one's country and desire to share valuable ideas with others) purely because they lie mixed in with the bad or can be taken to wrong extremes, how are we to preserve what is good?

PRELUDES TO THE CIVIL WAR

Many officers learned their craft and began to establish a reputation in the brief Mexican-American War. Ulysses S. Grant, George McClellan, William T. Sherman, George Meade, Ambrose Burnside, Robert E. Lee, Albert Johnston, "Stonewall" Jackson, James Longstreet, Joseph Johnston, and Jefferson Davis are names that perhaps mean little to you now. They certainly meant little to Americans in the 1840s. However, each of these men became generals or important leaders in the American Civil War.



Other preludes to the Civil War can be found in the Mexican-American War. For instance, most folks could see the obvious hypocrisy of the warmongers' rhetoric that this was a just war to spread the blessings of liberty and republicanism, especially when those warmongers also supported the for the spread of slavery into the newly conquered territories.

This juxtaposition of values gave abolitionists even more ammunition, but slave owners were more than ready to defend themselves. The war (and especially the Wilmot Proviso to a war appropriations bill in Congress) caused both Democrats and Whigs to split along sectional lines by reintroducing the question of slavery in the newly won territories. They never really recovered cross-sectional unity, and their divisions would eventually lead to the Civil War.

The Wilmot Proviso

The Wilmot Proviso was a proposed legislative measure in the United States Congress that aimed to address the issue of slavery in territories acquired from Mexico during the Mexican-American War. Introduced by Democratic Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania in August of 1846, the proviso was meant to prohibit slavery in any territory acquired as a result of the war.

The Wilmot Proviso was first introduced to the House of Representatives in August 1846 as an amendment to a funding bill for the ongoing war with Mexico. Its key point was that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist" in any territory acquired from Mexico.

The proviso sparked intense debates in Congress over the expansion of slavery into newly acquired territories. Southerners, who were protective of their interests, vehemently opposed the measure, while many Northerners supported it. Northern Democrats saw in Wilmot's Proviso an opportunity to raise objections to the further spread of slavery without being branded rabid abolitionists. Southern Democrats labeled Congressman Wilmot and those who stood with him as traitors.

Whigs split into the "Conscience Whigs," who opposed slavery and welcomed the Proviso as heaven-sent, and the "Cotton Whigs," who supported slavery and censured Wilmot and his Whig supporters as troublemakers. The Wilmot Proviso passed in the House of Representatives multiple times but faced significant opposition in the Senate, where Southern senators held considerable influence.

The Wilmot Proviso was a reflection of the growing sectional tensions between the Northern and Southern states over the issue of slavery's expansion. It highlighted the broader debate about whether slavery would be allowed in the newly acquired territories and the balance of power between free and slave states. Despite multiple attempts to attach the proviso to different bills, it never became law. Southern senators consistently resisted any legislative efforts that sought to restrict the expansion of slavery.

The debates over the Wilmot Proviso foreshadowed more extensive conflicts over slavery that would culminate in the Compromise of 1850 and, later, the events leading to the American Civil War. It was one of the early instances where the issue of slavery became a focal point in congressional debates. The Proviso debates laid bare the deep divides between the North and the South on the question of extending slavery into newly acquired territories.

For the moment, however, the dangerous balance between free states and slave states was apparently preserved. You read in the last chapter that Florida entered the Union (as a slave state) at the end of Tyler's administration. Texas was also annexed during that time, but it was not admitted to the Union (also as a slave state) until after Polk became president. During Polk's tenure, Iowa (1846), and Wisconsin (May of 1848) entered as free states to balance Texas and Florida.



Famous Names

General Zachary Taylor, “Old Rough and Ready,” as he was known became so famous during this war that he was elected President after Polk.

- ❑ General Zachary Taylor was called “Old Rough and Ready” by his soldiers, both because of his firm leadership as a general and his often-disheveled appearance. His involvement in the Mexican-American War would later support him in his run for the presidency. Like Jackson and Harrison before him, he ran for president as a war hero.
- ❑ John Frémont was an American explorer and writer who, with the aid of American troops, was tasked to lead a group of adventurers in rebellion against the Mexican army in Monterrey to help create the California Republic.
- ❑ Kit Carson became a famous frontiersman who was known for his skill as a soldier, trapper, and scout. Partly due to the reports written by John Frémont, Kit Carson became famous throughout America. He also played an important role in helping Colonel Stephen Kearny fight for California’s independence.
- ❑ Once Santa Fe was taken, Colonel Stephen Kearny left for California and encountered Kit Carson, who told him about the California Republic and the skirmishes still taking place. Kearny and his men were overwhelmed at one of the battles there, but Carson escaped and sent for reinforcements. With the help of these reinforcements, Kearny’s troops were victorious. They made the march to San Diego where the Articles of Capitulation were signed, and the California rebellion was ended.
- ❑ General Winfield Scott landed a force by sea at Veracruz and led the final march towards Mexico City. His forces captured the city, which helped to establish victory for the United States.

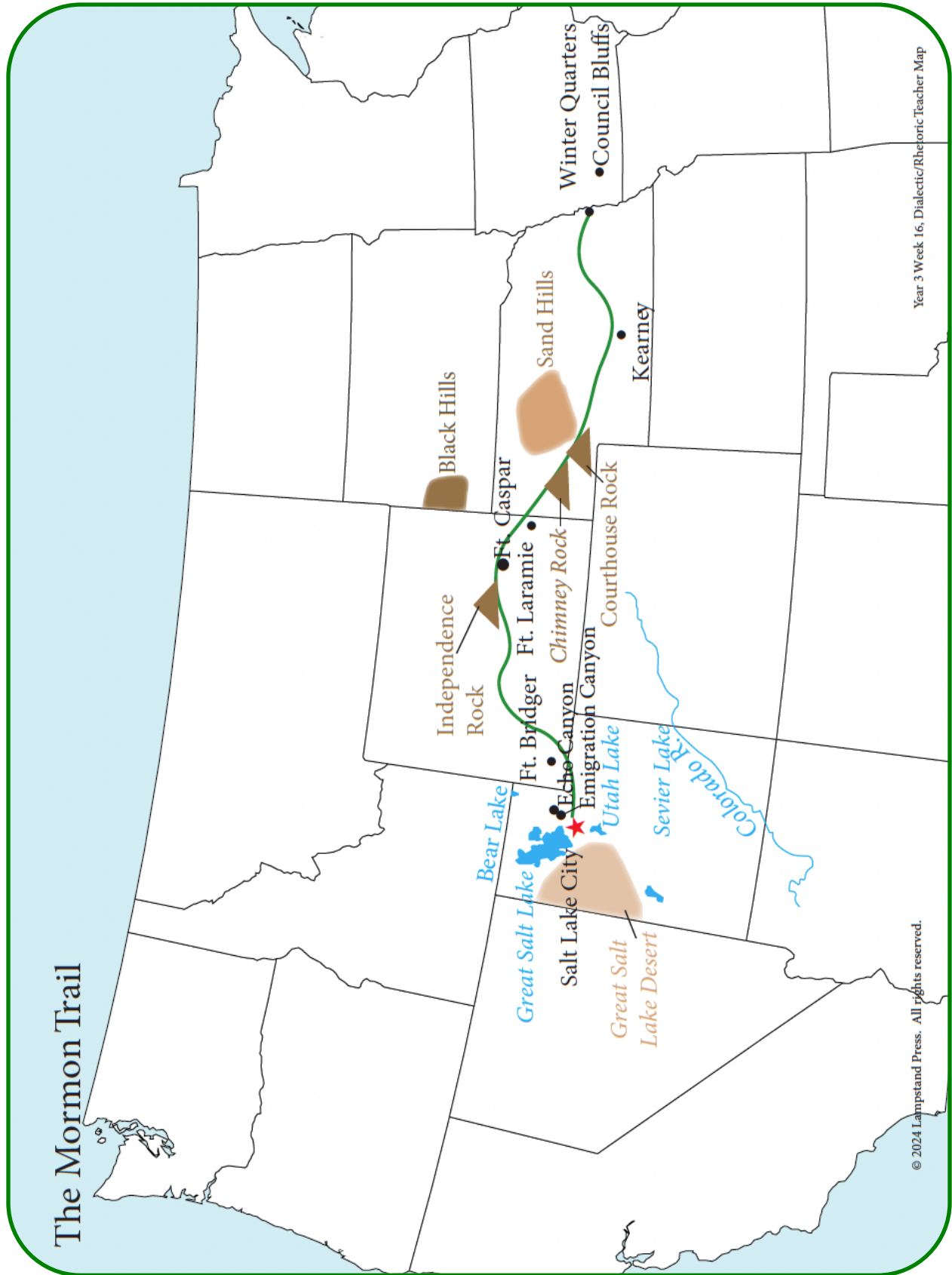
MORMONS

As you may recall from the last chapter, Joseph Smith was the founding leader of the Mormons. Joseph Smith said he had a vision of an angel named Moroni who led him to find the golden plates on which, he claimed, the Book of Mormon was written. The Book of Mormon, supposedly translated by Smith, contained a history that was different from the Bible. It told the tale about a Hebrew family who traveled to America and became ancestors Native American tribes.

As he founded and developed his church, Smith also taught and supported many ideas and practices that were very different from Christianity. For instance, Smith allowed the practice of polygamy (having more than one wife), recording that God had revealed to him that this was a new command. When Smith was killed, Brigham Young took over leadership.

The Mormon community grew rapidly. Wherever they settled, they established whole towns that were economically independent of the outside world. In fact, some Americans were afraid that the Mormons would ruin the American economy because they were so self-sufficient. Others began to see the Mormons’ beliefs, practices, and lifestyle as strange and as a threat to orthodox Christian beliefs. Still others were afraid of the potential power that the Mormons could wield due to their numbers, isolationism, and their commitment to their faith.

In the late 1840’s, the Mormon’s settled in the Salt Lake Valley of Utah. I will tell you more about this in the next chapter.





FABULOUS FORTIES INVENTIONS

President Polk was elected in the “Fabulous Forties.” It was a time of expansion and inventions. For example, James Polk was the first president to be photographed in office, using Louis Daguerre’s daguerreotype which had been invented in France in 1839.

- ❑ McCormick Reaper (1834, but gained popularity in the 1840s): Although patented earlier, Cyrus McCormick's mechanical reaper gained widespread use in the 1840s, revolutionizing agriculture by automating the harvesting of crops.
- ❑ Photographic Processes (1840s): Various photographic processes, such as the daguerreotype of Louis Daguerre (1839) and the calotype (1841), were developed, marking the early days of photography.
- ❑ Potato Chips (1840s): The invention of potato chips is often credited to George Crum, a chef in Saratoga Springs, New York, who supposedly created them in the 1840s.
- ❑ 1843 Webster's Dictionary (1843): Noah Webster published his famous dictionary in 1843, standardizing American English spelling and language.
- ❑ Telegraph (1844): Samuel F.B. Morse and Alfred Vail developed the telegraph and successfully sent the first telegraph message, "What hath God wrought?" in 1844.
- ❑ Corkscrew (1845): Reverend Samuel Henshall patented the corkscrew, providing a more efficient way to open wine bottles.
- ❑ Rubber Band (1845): Stephen Perry of London patented the rubber band, providing a simple yet effective means of binding objects together.
- ❑ Anesthesia (1846): William T.G. Morton successfully demonstrated the use of ether as an anesthetic during surgery, revolutionizing medical procedures.
- ❑ Howe Sewing Machine (1846): Elias Howe patented the sewing machine, revolutionizing the textile industry and significantly speeding up the process of garment production.
- ❑ Machine Gun (1847): The "Puckle Gun," a manually operated machine gun capable of firing multiple rounds, was patented by James Puckle in 1718, but a prototype was built in the 1840s.
- ❑ Safety Pin (1849): Walter Hunt invented the safety pin, providing a secure and convenient way to fasten clothing.

The Morse Telegraph

Perhaps the most spectacular of these inventions, at least to the public, was the telegraph. Various kinds of telegraphs were invented beginning in 1816. However, it took another twenty-one years to create the first electric telegraph system that was cheap enough to build and use on a large scale. In the interim, during the 1830s, an English inventor (William Fothergill Cooke) and an English scientist (Charles Wheatstone) developed an electric needle telegraph.

The Cooke and Wheatstone telegraph was the first commercial telegraph system, but needle telegraphs used electricity to move needles that pointed to letters. These required multiple wires, one for each needle in use. Far cheaper, and in some ways faster and easier to use, was the electric telegraph system developed by Morse.



The Morse telegraph, created by Samuel F.B. Morse, used only one wire to create clicks that the operators could hear. Using one wire was cheaper than the multi-wire needle systems of his competitors. Morse and his assistant, Alfred Vail, created a code using a combination of short and long pauses between clicks for letters and numbers.

The phrase, ‘What hath God wrought?’ was an apt first message sent by telegraph in 1844. Prior to the electric telegraph, news traveled as fast as a horse could ride and letters were the only way of sending news at a distance. The telegraph, therefore, seemed a miracle in its time. Telegraph operators were soon able to simply listen to the clicks, understand the message, and then write it down for customers. Morse code became the international standard alphabet for telegraph communication around the world in 1865.

Skepticism

In both Britain and America, there was widespread skepticism about the practicality of the telegraph. Those who observed Morse’s code and Cooke’s jumping needles pursed their lips in doubt. Ordinary people could not connect these with real communication. The telegraph seemed to be a conjurer’s trick until it communicated events and messages that mattered to them.

In Britain, Cooke won approval to string a line between two railway stations: Paddington and Slough (about 18 miles), but found he had to finance the majority of the line out of his own funds. Cooke sold the license for this line to a promoter, who attempted to interest the public. Most people thought of the electric telegraph as a scientific curiosity, and the project seemed to be losing ground in 1843.

The first message that made the British public sit up and take notice of the telegraph occurred when Queen Victoria gave birth to her second son, Alfred. The news came by wire from Windsor Castle to London with impressive speed. In a related incident, when the Duke of Wellington boarded a train in London for Windsor Castle to attend a celebratory dinner, he forgot his evening wear. He telegraphed back to London, and his suit was put onto the next train. The story was related amongst the lords and ladies in attendance at the dinner, who all saw the merit of the invention. Even more impressive were two successive arrests of fleeing criminals within days of one another. Promoters hailed the worth of the telegraph in protecting life and property from thieves in the Commonwealth.

Meanwhile, America’s Samuel Morse fruitlessly marketed his invention in America, Great Britain, and on the European continent for years. He finally returned to Washington for one final effort. In December of 1844, he made a demonstration that won enough support from Congressmen to provide him with an appropriation of \$30,000. Even after Morse won his funding, however, many congressional leaders remained highly skeptical of the telegraph.

Nevertheless, a line was duly strung between Washington and Baltimore. On May 24th, 1844, the first message from Baltimore to Washington—“What hath God wrought?”—did cause a ripple of sensation, as did Morse’s ability to transmit from Baltimore to Washington the names of the Whig nominees from their convention in Boston to Washington D.C. When messages about real, important news ran between the two cities faster than trains could, the skeptics began to thaw slightly.

Still, Morse faced an apathetic public and government who could not see the usefulness of the telegraph. An attempt to charge for messages sent between Baltimore and Washington ended in dismal failure. The government lost interest completely and turned the line over to private individuals, who agreed to maintain it at their own expense. Morse’s partners extended the line to Philadelphia and New York, and charged \$0.25 per ten-word message. The early results were encouraging, and the idea finally took hold.



Early Applications

There was explosive demand for the invention, with miles of telegraph lines being erected in a few short years. Telegraphs were first used primarily by railroads to help coordinate trains and schedules. However, the ability to send a message almost instantly over hundreds of miles was appealing to many people.

As a result of telegraphs, not only were trains less likely to crash into each other, but also people could communicate urgent news. Businesses could send important information; family members could send important or urgent news about a baby being born or someone being sick; and the government could send orders to soldiers so that they could respond more quickly to attacks or emergencies.

Telegraph wires were soon being strung throughout the country, which was a good thing because the country was about to get much bigger! Newspapers used the telegraph to send important news stories all over the country in a matter of hours. In a big country with lots going on, the telegraph helped to keep Americans connected to each other.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it only took four short years for America to change dramatically! Photography and the spread of telegraphs changed how people communicated. Now it was possible to have exact pictures of places and people, and people could talk to each other across thousands of miles in just a few moments with the click of a telegraph key. America grew in size, but shrank in other ways at the same time, thanks to railroads and telegraphs.

1846 in particular was an amazing year for America: Iowa became a state; the Oregon Treaty was signed; America declared war on Mexico; anesthesia and the sewing machine were invented. It must have been strange to live through, but it is exciting to read about!

James K. Polk was the first “dark horse candidate,” a man little known before the Democrats chose him as their nominee since they couldn’t agree on anyone else. Four years later, he had won a war and filled out most of the map of the continental United States. As American settlers pushed westward in their wagon trains to the Oregon Territory along the Oregon Trail and to the southwest along Santa Fe Trail, they expanded America’s horizons.

Polk said he would only run for one term when he started, and he kept that promise, too. Four years may seem like a long time to you kids, but it flew by! Next week we’ll be talking about what life was like during these four years for the immigrants, missionaries, and settlers who traveled the Oregon Trail in search of a better life for themselves and their children.