

AP United States History
Unit 6: The Nation Expands
Topic- The West- Part 1 of 2

The West

Explain the causes and effects of the settlement of the West from 1877 to 1898.

Following the Civil War, government subsidies for transportation and communication systems helped open new markets in North America.

Railroads were an important component of the Union victory during the Civil War. Trains were used to deliver ammunition, supplies, and troops during the war to strategic points throughout the South. Prior to the war, the North had built a substantial rail network, which ferried goods, services and people throughout that section of the country. During the war, as Northern industries grew and developed to support the war effort, so did the railroad network.

The desire to build a railroad network that would span the continent started with the acquisition of California after the Mexican War and the discovery of gold in the new state in 1849. The California Gold Rush led to the development of boomtowns— almost overnight. But with other strikes of precious metals in the new states of the West such as Colorado, Nevada, Idaho, and Montana, the desire to build a transcontinental railroad system grew in the years leading up to the Civil War, so much so, that we sometimes forget that the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which is quite often cited as one of the major causes of the war, was created in-part because of the desire to build a transcontinental railroad system that would link San Francisco, California, in the west, with Chicago, Illinois, as its eastern terminus and hub— thereby connecting the western states to the growing railroad network in the East. While the war may have led to the continued growth and development of the eastern railway network, in 1862, the Federal government introduced the Pacific Railways Act, which sought to create a transcontinental railroad system for the first time. It was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln.

Building the transcontinental railroad system was a gargantuan task that was handled both by the federal government and private railroad companies. Much like the earlier creation of the Erie Canal, the transcontinental railroad system was created as a result of a public-private partnership. Financed by both American and European banks and investors, plus through generous land-grants from the federal government, the transcontinental railroad system began to take shape. The development of it brought large numbers of immigrants into the building process as Irish immigrants helped develop the tracks which moved westward, while large numbers of Chinese immigrants worked in the opposite direction— even using dynamite and other explosives to make their way through the rugged Sierra Nevada mountain range. In 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in Utah.

The building of transcontinental railroads, the discovery of mineral resources, and government policies promoted economic growth and created new communities and centers of commercial activity.

As it was mentioned earlier, the mining boom of the period influenced the creation of the transcontinental railroad system. But, once it was created, mining towns, and hubs for farming and ranching developed throughout the West. It would influence the settlement of the Great Plains, as farmers began to move into the region to tame the landscape. It led to the development of the fabled cattle drives which saw herds of cattle driven from Texas into developing railroad hubs near Kansas City, Missouri, Wichita, Kansas, Denver, Colorado, Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Amarillo, Texas. The shipment of metals, minerals, cattle, grains, and

agricultural produce led to an industrial boom which shaped the modern American economy beginning in the years during the Civil War and continuing into the present. But, while both the raw materials for manufacturing and the agricultural produce of the West helped fuel the industrial revolution in the East, the materials for building homes— wood, glass, paint, and finished products came from the East to help build the towns of the developing West.

It is also very important to mention that alongside the growth of the transcontinental railroad system, came the development of a national communications system— first, based on the telegraph, later, it would incorporate a new innovation from the period— the telephone, which was invented in 1876. With the development of a transportation and a communications network which spanned the continent, a truly national market emerged during this period. In fact, the railroad system also gave us our sense of time. In 1883, because of the need for consistent and accurate times for shipping goods and transporting people, the system of standard time was born. It would grow and develop to the point that American business and industrial interests were beginning to look into forging more of a global presence than ever before by the 1890s. However, the most important element which came into the West during this period was not the raw materials that jump-started an industrial boom, but thousands and thousands of people (many of them immigrants), who would come to populate its growing towns and cities.

Improvements in mechanization helped agricultural production increase substantially and contributed to declines in food prices.

Prior to the Civil War, settlers had started the process of moving onto the Great Plains. After the war came to an end, this process of migration accelerated. Once again, generous land-grant policies provided by the federal government would play an important role in this process. In 1862, Congress passed two critical acts that accelerated the process of settling the Great Plains. The first act was the Homestead Act. With it, settlers who could pay a small fee, could obtain a generous parcel of land for the purpose of creating a farm. The second act was the Morrill Land Grant Act. This important act took the sales of public lands and used them to fund the development of land-grant based colleges and universities throughout the West. It led to the creation of such universities as the University of California, the University of Nebraska, the University of Wisconsin, Kansas State University, Oklahoma State University, and even Texas A&M University. Both of these critical acts which led to the development of the American West were signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862.

The introduction of new technologies made farming much easier and far more productive than it had been before the Civil War. Implements such as steel plows, and mechanical reapers and threshers made farming easier. These implements made planting, harvesting, and maintaining crops more efficient. In turn, these developments also led to higher crop yields. Americans went from subsistence farming, where families were farming to feed themselves, to creating large-scale commercial farms during the period. Throughout the period, American farmers began to produce enough to the point that their farms were able to produce enough food to feed people around the world.

The Transcontinental Railroad system led to the development of the American meat industry. Cattle were driven from places, such as South Texas, through Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) to railroad hubs in Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, and Wyoming from 1866-1885. Though it only lasted for about two decades, the cattle drives still hold an important place in the mythology of the American West. But, contrary to myth, the cattle drives were a team effort, no lonely cowboys working on the open range, and the cowboys who actually made these historic journeys were often immigrants, African-Americans, or of Hispanic heritage. The growth of the railroad system, the invention of barbed wire by Joseph Glidden in 1874, and the development of new innovations brought the fabled cattle drives to an end. One of the most important innovations during this period was the development of the refrigerated railroad car in 1871. This innovation meant that both meat and produce could be shipped to markets across the country. It also meant that food could be preserved for longer

periods of time. By 1890, cattle shipped from Texas via the railroad system were often sent to Chicago, Illinois, where they packed and then transported to consumers throughout the country.

Many farmers responded to the increasing consolidation in agricultural markets and their dependence on the evolving railroad system by creating local and regional cooperative organizations.

With the growth of commercial farming, farms became larger and much more productive throughout the period. But, due to the production of higher yields, the prices for farm products consistently fell throughout the period. Falling prices made it more difficult for smaller farmers to stay in business and make a living. When the Panic of 1873 struck, because the financial crisis impacted the railroad industry first which farmers heavily depended on, it led to a disaster, particularly for small farmers. While many small farmers simply went out of business, or picked-up their belongings and moved their families into the growing industrial cities of the East, others took a very different approach. In 1867, prior to the financial panic, a number of small farmers had created an organization called The Patrons of Husbandry– it would later become known as simply, the Grange. Farming families living on the Great Plains struggled with insects, the weather, financial hardship, and social isolation. As an organization, the Grange saw its membership surge as the Panic of 1873 gripped the nation. The Grange organized what are now known as farmers cooperatives. A cooperative is where groups of farmers pool their resources, so that prices for goods can be cheaper on the one hand, but on the other, it offered storage options for farm products, so that they help to curb falling prices by taking a surplus of a product or commodity off of the market (in essence, storing it until the price of the commodity rises). By 1875, the Grange continued to promote advances in agriculture, and to offer assistance for the social and economic needs of farmers, but it became more politically active. Grangers pushed for changes to America's banking system, feared the growing power of the railroad companies on whom they depended, and began to slowly grow increasingly distrustful of the two political parties which in their view had always been more supportive of the interests of businesses and banks in the East. By the 1890s, the Grange was being replaced by a much larger organization, known as the Farmers Alliance. The Farmers Alliance also established large-scale cooperatives and organized farmers, as well. It was this organization that would have a tremendous impact on the political movement– known as Populism, which would influence the development of the Progressive politics of the early 20th century.

With the growth of mining boomtowns, the success of the cattle drives, and the development of commercial farming, the Transcontinental Railroad had started the process of developing the West. But, one obstacle to this growth and development remained– the Native Americans who had lived on the Great Plains since the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.