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## THE BIG PICTURE

Following the momentous 1844 election, the United States embarked on a course of aggressive territorial expansion that led to a costly and controversial war with Mexico and expanded the nation's border to the Pacific. Nationalistic themes also reverberated in popular entertainment, literature, and new patterns of travel and communication.

**California News.** War, conquest, and long-distance communications stoked the fires of westward expansion.





The background features a historical document on the left with text including "SAN FRANCISCO", "CHOO", and "Cushman, Master". To the right is a portrait of a man with a beard and a wide-brimmed hat, likely a Western figure. A red ribbon banner at the top contains the years "1844-1854".

1844-1854

# EXPANSION, NATIONALISM, & AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Writing in a New York literary magazine in 1845, James Kennard, Jr., of New Hampshire posed a question of some importance to the magazine's elite readership. "Who are our National Poets?" asked Kennard provocatively. Ever since 1776, Americans had been trying to declare their cultural independence. This required proving not only that artists in the new republic could create plays, novels, paintings, and poems of comparable merit to the best European works, but also that American art expressed the special circumstances of American life and the particular genius of the American people. Beginning in the 1820s, white Americans often produced works of art and literature that featured Indian subject matter in order to distinguish American culture from that of England or the European continent (see Chapter 9). But Kennard wanted more than just distinctively American subject matter. He wanted distinctively American artists, uncorrupted by the influences of other national traditions. Surveying the cultural landscape in 1845, Kennard argued that the real national artists were slaves. "The negro poets . . . in the swamps of Carolinas," he imagined, produced original poems that were then recorded by whites, reproduced on the minstrel stage by white actors in blackface, and spread all over the globe. And this, according to Kennard, was American culture.

Kennard's essay was both playful and perverse, but his ideas reflected two important developments in American life by 1845. One was a rising nationalism



among many sectors of the population, energized by mounting confidence in the unique character of the United States and new expectations that the nation would continue to grow. The same year Kennard's essay appeared, a new Democratic president entered office with a powerful commitment to national expansion. James Knox Polk believed that it was the destiny of the United States to stretch across the continent to the Pacific. By the time he left office four years later, his vision had been realized and the nation had doubled in size. Territorial growth was fueled in part by mass migrations of American settlers seeking cheaper land, but it was mostly the product of a major military invasion of neighboring Mexico. The U.S.-Mexican War would dominate Polk's presidency, unsettling the political rivalries between slave and free states and between Democrats and Whigs. The 1848 discovery of gold in the foothills of the newly acquired American territory of California, a find that Polk corroborated in his farewell address, accelerated both westward expansion and the political conflicts it triggered.

Kennard's essay also indicated the importance of popular culture to the new American nationalism. Actors, athletes, singers, and dancers enjoyed mass celebrity during the 1840s and 1850s, and their performances became occasions for expressing national pride and building national identity. The particular performances that Kennard cited, which purported to represent plantation slavery, became especially popular and politically significant. Minstrel shows depicted the bodies, voices, and experiences of African Americans, but they also spread new ideas about whiteness and helped to define America's national identity as specifically white, just as war supporters were Americans describing the Mexican enemy as a

## KEY QUESTIONS

- How did ideas about the United States' national destiny influence the decision to extend U.S. sovereignty over new territory?
- What were the causes of the U.S.-Mexican War?
- What major westward migrations occurred in the United States in this period, and how did they differ from one another?
- What were the leading popular entertainments in the United States in these years, and how did they help shape national identity?
- How did communication and publishing contribute to American nationalism?



Blackface minstrelsy became popular nationalist entertainment.

different race. Minstrel skits and songs also provided important venues and vehicles for spreading the expansionist ideology of Polk and the Democrats. Even more genteel artists, such as the novelists and poets who participated in the era's literary renaissance, would take an interest in the territorial growth of the United States and the spread of its political institutions.

Not all Americans supported the war against Mexico or clamored for westward expansion. For many northern Whigs, for example, nationalism meant tightening the bonds of commerce and communication across the country rather than adding new territories. They pushed for cheaper postage rates and celebrated the spread of telegraph wires and railroad tracks. But Americans in both parties and regions developed grander and more ambitious visions of the republic's historical destiny and global reach.



## MANIFEST DESTINY AND THE ROAD TO WAR

Nationalist movements in the United States looked to the west in the 1840s, imagining a country that spanned the continent. Access to the Pacific Ocean had been an explicit goal of the United States since before the days of the Lewis and Clark expedition (see Chapter 8). What was new was the argument that westward expansion was more than simply good trade policy or military strategy; it was now more often described as the fulfillment of the nation's destiny. Several powerful obstacles stood in the way of this destiny, however (see Map 13.1). The British still claimed the Oregon Territory, which had been ruled since 1818 under a "joint occupation" agreement with the United States. Further south, various native groups, especially the Apache, Comanche, Navajo, and Kiowas, imposed their considerable military power over large regions. Even more of

the Southwest lay within the political borders of Mexico, which had been an independent republic since 1821 and held a population of around seven million in the 1840s. During the space of a few years, the United States committed itself to the project of wresting enough land from these other powers to realize the dream of a transcontinental nation.

### TEXAS AND THE POLITICS OF EXPANSION

By the 1840s, debates about territorial expansion focused on the borderland with Mexico. Texas had declared independence from Mexico in 1836 (see Chapter 11), but the Mexican government refused to recognize either its independence or the Lone Star Republic's claim to extend all the way to the



**Map 13.1 North America in 1844.** Between the two independent republics of Mexico and the United States lay a disputed region that included the Lone Star Republic of Texas, whose borders and status Mexico did not recognize. In addition, powerful Indian polities such as the Apache, Comanche, and Kiowa held sway in much of northern Mexico and the U.S. West.



Rio Grande (see disputed area on Map 13.1). Violence flared frequently between Texas and Mexico in the decade following independence, which intensified tensions between Mexico and the United States. Ironically, Mexico had encouraged the emigration of white, American settlers to Texas in the 1820s in an ill-fated attempt to create a buffer that would impede U.S. expansion into northern Mexico and protect Mexicans from Comanche attacks. But now Texas was independent, dominated by English speakers with allegiance to the United States and desires to join the union. No longer a buffer, Texas was a prime target for foreign annexation and attack.

Though the prospect of annexing Texas appealed to many Americans, opponents (mostly northern Whigs) argued that annexation was tantamount to declaring war against Mexico. Some also worried that taking Texas would embroil the United States in a struggle with the Comanche Indians, who remained the major military power in that region. But the greatest opposition to annexation came from northerners concerned about the spread of slavery and the balance of power between slave states and free states in the Senate. By 1840, the question of Texas had become the primary touchstone for sectional conflict over slavery.

During the Texas controversy, the White House was occupied by John Tyler, who succeeded to office in 1841 upon the death of William Henry Harrison, just thirty-one days into his term (see Chapter 10). A slaveholding Virginia Democrat who had alienated the Jacksonian establishment in the 1830s by supporting states' rights, Tyler was tapped by the Whigs for vice president in 1840 in an effort to attract southern support. He shared few of his new party's views, however, and they disowned him soon after he became president. Planning to run for reelection as an independent candidate, Tyler advocated adding Texas and instructed Secretary of State John C. Calhoun to prepare an annexation treaty with Texas in 1844. But Calhoun fanned the flames of the slavery controversy by arguing that annexation was necessary to foil British plans to encourage abolition in the Lone Star Republic. Calhoun also took the occasion, in a letter to the British minister, to tout the benefits of slavery. With the approach of the 1844 presidential election, a divided Senate rejected the annexation treaty.

## THE ELECTION OF 1844

As both major parties headed toward their nominating conventions, it seemed possible that the burning question of Texas might not be a major campaign issue. The Whigs rallied behind Henry Clay, who was known to oppose annexation but sought to avoid the controversy. On the Democratic side, former president Martin Van Buren was the presumed nominee, and he too intended to avoid the annexation question and run largely on the economic issues (such as bank regulation, tariffs, and internal improvements) that had dominated the campaigns of the previous decade. But Van Buren faced opposition within his party, especially among annexation advocates. After successfully pushing a rule requiring the nominee to get a two-thirds majority of the delegates, the rebels

threw their support to Lewis Cass of Michigan (an annexationist) and the convention was deadlocked. Finally, on the ninth ballot, a surprise candidate emerged. James Knox Polk, a Tennessee slaveholder who had been Speaker of the House and a protégé of Andrew Jackson, won the Democratic nomination and became the standard-bearer of a party suddenly committed to annexing Texas.

To shore up their support in the North, the Democrats called for the “re-occupation” of Oregon from Britain as well as the “re-annexation of Texas” (which Democrats claimed had been included in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France). Slavery was unlikely to flourish in the Oregon Territory, which was being settled by families planning to work the land themselves, and the eventual admission of a free state from the Northwest could appease northerners by balancing out Texas. Polk's campaign trumpeted the Oregon cause more loudly than Texas, making northern rather than southern territory the symbol of the party's expansionist ideology. But everyone understood that a vote for Polk was a vote for taking Texas. This turn of events undercut President Tyler's hopes to win reelection as an independent on an expansionist platform. Rather than split the southern vote, Tyler endorsed Polk and withdrew from the race.

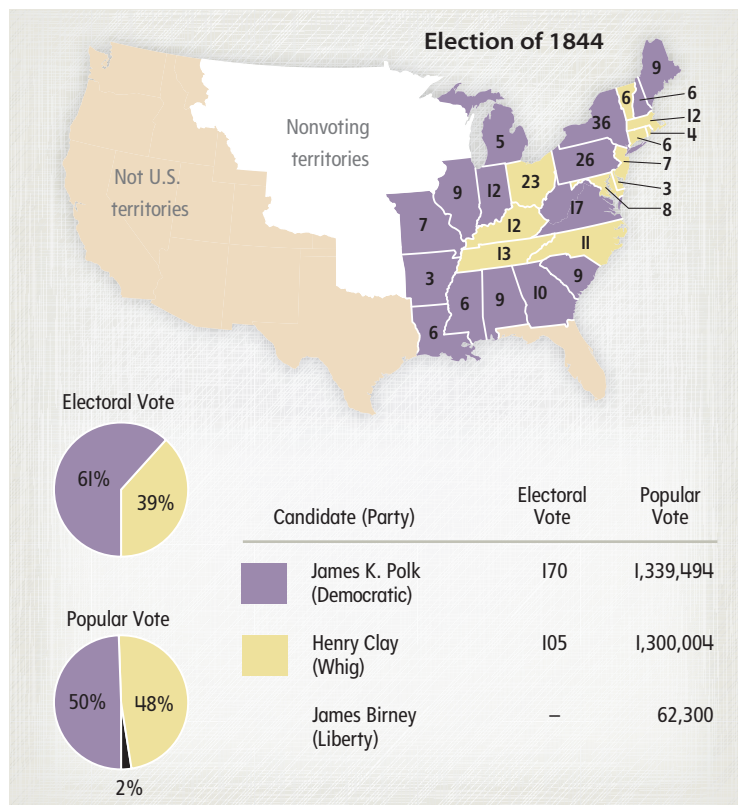
Faced with an expansionist opponent, Clay could no longer dodge the Texas question. Trying to hedge his bets, he claimed to be willing to consider annexation if it could be achieved “without dishonor, without war, with the common consent of the Union, and upon just and fair terms.” This position reassured none of the expansionists, but it alarmed slavery opponents in the North. In an extremely close election, voters opposed to slavery and annexation made a difference. Although abolitionist candidate James Birney, running on the Liberty Party ticket, polled only 2.3 percent of the total, he drew enough support away from Clay in Michigan and New York to secure victory for Polk (see Map 13.2). In one of the most consequential elections in American history, the Democrats recaptured the presidency and claimed a popular mandate for aggressive expansionist policies.

Before leaving office, President Tyler invoked this mandate and asked Congress to admit Texas to the union. Congressional Democrats were able to win approval for Texas annexation by treating it as an application for statehood, which required only a majority in both houses, rather than a treaty with a foreign nation, which required a two-thirds majority that the Democrats did not have. John Quincy Adams, one of the bill's bitterest opponents, remarked that this maneuver had violated the Constitution, reducing it to “a menstruous rag.” Over such objections, Texas entered the union, its status and borders still angrily contested by Mexico.

## YOUNG AMERICA, RACE, AND MANIFEST DESTINY

As they contemplated and justified annexing and conquering western lands, Americans spoke explicitly about what they saw as the character of their nation. It was in this





**Map 13.2 Election of 1844.**

context that the famous words **manifest destiny** entered the political vocabulary. The phrase was introduced in the pages of John L. O’Sullivan’s journal, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, in 1839, though the term was probably coined by one of his writers, Jane McManus Storm, who published under the name C. Montgomery. In 1845, Storm used the term in widely circulated articles to argue for acquiring more territory. Annexing Texas, she wrote, would fulfill “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for our yearly multiplying millions.” The American claim to greater Oregon was said to rest on the exact same foundation—“our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given for the development of the great experiment of liberty.”

As both a political slogan and a political argument, “manifest destiny” meant a few things. First, expansionists were claiming that the westward spread of the United States was not simply a matter of policy or expedience; it was preordained by divine will. Second, the divine plan for the United States to expand was revealed not in sacred texts or prophecies, but in the working of history itself. The growth of the American population and its steady westward migration was what made this destiny clear, or *manifest*. Third, America was destined to expand in order to model and spread its free and democratic

political institutions. “A higher than earthly power still guards and directs our destiny,” wrote Polk’s secretary of the treasury, “and has selected our great and happy country as a . . . centre of attraction for all the nations of the world.” *Manifest destiny* expressed a utopian vision of the United States, propelled by the hand of God in history, introducing new political ideals to a changing planet.

Older countries might stake their claims to territory in the past—treaties, traditions, generations of occupancy—but the new ideologues of American expansion emphasized the future and touted the youth of the republic as a reason why older nations ought to give way to U.S. interests. American expansionists in the late 1840s rallied under the banner of **Young America**, a name introduced earlier in the decade by the philosopher and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson. Significantly, the Young America moniker was adopted both by politicians advocating American expansion and by writers like Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who advocated a distinctive American literature (see National Literature, below).

But manifest destiny was a racial ideology as well. If America’s youthfulness became an argument for why Great Britain ought to concede Oregon, what about Mexico, which was a new republic as well? Expansionists made many arguments against Mexican claims to greater Texas, including the point that Mexico had failed to colonize its northern states successfully because it had not wrested control of that territory from Indians. Ultimately, however, what seemed to justify taking Mexican lands was the fact that Mexico was a racially mixed society that therefore did not share the national destiny of the United States. When John O’Sullivan and others celebrated the movement of settlers westward, they called it an “irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration.” In the words of a Maryland congressman, “We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific ocean, and be bounded only by its roaring wave. . . . It is the destiny of the white race, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race.” Manifest destiny meant white destiny.

## WAR AND CONQUEST

Polk entered office with Texas already annexed and his eye on the Pacific Ocean. He hoped to acquire both the Oregon Territory and Mexican California in order to bring the harbors of San Diego, San Francisco, and the Puget Sound under U.S. control. Polk wished to avoid military conflict with Great Britain and acquire as much of Oregon as possible through negotiations while he prepared to invade Mexico. He expected war with Mexico to be relatively brief, since Mexico would not be able to defend its northern states while simultaneously waging war against raiding Indian armies. Despite repeated battlefield victories, the U.S.-Mexican War dragged on for seventeen months, taking many lives and provoking serious political debates about the future of the union.



## THE INVASION OF MEXICO

Mexico did not recognize the U.S. annexation of Texas. Moreover, Mexico disputed the boundaries that the United States had claimed for Texas, citing the traditional boundary of the Nueces River, not the Rio Grande as Texans had asserted. (The Rio Grande border also included the commercial centers of Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Taos; see Map 13.3.) For the United States to press its claim to the region between the two rivers, it would need to send troops into land that Mexico viewed as its own. Polk did so quickly, ordering General Zachary Taylor to take up a position along the Rio Grande. Predictably, Mexico's general Mariano Arista responded by launching an attack against Taylor's men in late April 1846. When news of the attack reached Washington, Polk (who had been preparing a war message anyway) announced to Congress that "the cup of forbearance has been exhausted." Mexico had

"invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil." Facing a choice between accepting Polk's account of the conflict with Mexico and denying reinforcements to Taylor's army, Congress declared war.

Back along the Rio Grande, Taylor and Arista's armies clashed for two days in the Battle of Palo Alto (the Americans would refer to the second day of fighting as the Battle of Resaca de la Palma), where outnumbered U.S. troops took advantage of their lighter, more portable cannons to inflict heavy casualties. Mexican soldiers retreated across the river, Taylor maintained his position, and in September 1846, he besieged the city of Monterrey. Five months into the war, northeastern Mexico was under American control.

At the same time, Colonel Stephen Kearny led an expedition from Missouri into New Mexico, occupying Santa Fe two months before Taylor's siege of Monterrey. Three months later,



**Map 13.3 Major Battles of the U.S.-Mexican War.** After sending troops into the disputed territory west of the Nueces River, the United States launched a multi-front invasion of its neighboring republic.

Kearny marched into San Diego, California, entering a Mexican state where, farther north, the explorer John Frémont had initiated a revolt of American settlers against Mexican rule earlier in the year. Though the fighting was fierce, the two-pronged invasion of northern Mexico by Taylor and Kearny seemed to be working. In a final burst of resistance, General Santa Anna (whom the Americans had naively brought back to Mexico from Cuban exile in the hopes that he would help negotiate a peace) mustered a massive army to expel the invaders from Monterrey. But in the Battle of Buena Vista (February 1847), where both sides suffered heavy loss of life, Taylor's troops fought to a standstill, and Santa Anna decided to withdraw southward. The Mexicans had missed their best chance to resist the invasion.

Despite the succession of victories, American war aims remained elusive. Had the United States simply wanted to annex and defend greater Texas, the conflict might have ended. But all along Polk had wanted the invasion to force Mexico to negotiate a settlement that would cede New Mexico and California as well. In 1845, before the war began, he sent minister John Slidell to Mexico to offer cash for all of these territories (including \$25 million for California), but the Mexicans had rebuffed him, and a slew of U.S. military victories in the north had not changed their minds. The United States decided that the only way to force Mexico to negotiate would be to bring the war south to the capital.

For the second phase of the war, Polk called upon General Winfield Scott, rather than Taylor, to land a large force on the Gulf coast city of Veracruz and march from there to Mexico City. Following lengthy preparations, Scott arrived in Veracruz in March 1847, occupied the city after an eighteen-day siege, and headed west. After defeating a force led by Santa Anna at Cerro Gordo on April 17 and 18, Scott's army moved slowly toward the

capital. On September 14, Mexico City's authorities surrendered, and the U.S. flag was hoisted above the Mexican National Palace.

## FOLLOWING THE WAR AT HOME

More than any prior war in American history, the conflict with Mexico unfolded in full view of the populace. Though it took place on foreign soil, the war engaged all Americans because they had unprecedented access to its progress. This was the first war to be covered by the new mass medium of the cheap daily press (see Chapter 10). Newspapers all over the country actively relayed news from the front. In New Orleans, which was the principal staging point for troops, supplies, and information, nine daily newspapers competed for the most up-to-the-minute accounts of the war.

The U.S.-Mexican War was also the first American military conflict to take place after the introduction of the electromagnetic telegraph in 1844 (see National Communication, below).

### War News from Mexico, by Richard Caton Woodville, 1848.

Americans gathered at post offices, telegraph offices, and newspaper offices to receive and discuss the war's progress. Most of these spaces were dominated by men, but note here the presence of a woman leaning out the window of the hotel to listen to the discussion. **Questions for Analysis:** What seems to be the perspective of the African American man and child in the foreground? Why might the artist have included them?





Within weeks of the war's outbreak, messages could be exchanged instantaneously between New York and Washington. By the war's end, New York was connected via telegraph wire to Charleston, South Carolina. News could now travel from New Orleans to the national capital within three days. Whereas just three decades earlier, no one in Washington knew of the Battle of New Orleans until weeks after it had taken place, residents of one city now formed something closer to a real-time audience for events in the other. Slow communication between President Polk and his officers on the Mexican battlefields continued to plague the chain of command and affect the conduct of the war, but many Americans, especially those living in cities, could experience the course of the conflict as a series of current events.

A majority of Americans greeted the war news enthusiastically. The Declaration of War and the early successes at Palo Alto and Resaca de La Palma fanned the flames of patriotism throughout the country. Books, pamphlets, plays, and songs about the war proliferated, especially in the urban North. In New York theaters, actors and actresses interrupted their scenes to deliver passionate addresses in support of the war effort. Stores advertised special consumer goods, including Palo Alto hats and Palo Alto root beer.

War fever also helped swell the ranks of the army, which at the time war was declared consisted of barely seven thousand personnel. Young men rushed to enlist, quickly filling the fifty thousand spots called for by Congress. Volunteers were encouraged not only by the promise of generous land bounties in any territory that might be conquered, but also by a variety

of well-publicized patriotic gestures of local governments and businesses. Volunteers in Indiana were promised an extension on their taxes. State quotas filled quickly, prompting men to cross state lines to volunteer for the war.

Soldiers came from all walks of life, including men who were not yet U.S. citizens and even a few Indians. About half of the enlisted men were foreign immigrants, many of them Catholics from Ireland. The Mexican army sought to lure Catholic immigrant soldiers away from the U.S. military with pamphlets and posters, asking why they participated in the invasion of a Catholic country alongside “those who put fire to your temples in Boston and Philadelphia.” Some Irish immigrants switched sides, and close to three hundred of them were organized into the San Patricio battalion, which fought for Mexico in the battle of Buena Vista. The San Patricios were in the minority, however. Thousands of Irish immigrants fought for the United States (forming over a quarter of the soldiers under Zachary Taylor's command). The war gave them an opportunity to demonstrate their fitness for American citizenship—an opportunity denied to African Americans. By taking up arms against a Catholic country on behalf of their new country, Irish immigrants made a powerful claim to the destiny of white America.

## WAR AND SLAVERY

From the start, the war had its critics in the United States. Many northeastern Whigs vocally opposed Polk's claim that Mexico had started the war, and they denounced the invasion

***The Hanging of the San Patricio Battalion Deserters at the Battle of Chapultepec, September 1847, by Sam Chamberlain.*** The immigrants who joined this battalion represented a small fraction of the 9,207 U.S. soldiers (all volunteers) who deserted during the U.S.-Mexican War as the war dragged on beyond most volunteers' expectations. This was the highest rate of desertion in any American war. Chamberlain fought in Mexico at the Battle of Buena Vista and also deserted in 1849. He later became colonel of the all-black Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry Regiment during the Civil War.



at every stage. As a young Whig congressman, Abraham Lincoln branded it a “war in conquest fought to catch votes” and repeatedly challenged the Democrats to identify the precise spot where U.S. soil had been attacked. The Massachusetts legislature branded the invasion “wanton, unjust and unconstitutional” and a “war against humanity.” Nonetheless, Whigs continued to vote for war appropriations, claiming that they did not wish to deny the soldiers the support they needed.

The war’s most outspoken opponents attacked it as a war for slavery. The abolitionist ex-slave Frederick Douglass railed against the “disgraceful, cruel, and iniquitous war with our sister republic.” Henry David Thoreau refused to pay taxes to support the war, and the night he spent in jail for this defiance became the basis for his famous 1849 essay, *Resistance to Civil Government*. Radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison went so far as to root for the success of the Mexicans. “We only hope that, if blood has had to flow,” he wrote, “that it has been that of the Americans.”

Though most northerners did not adopt the views of Douglass, Thoreau, or Garrison, they were still attuned to the connection between the war and slavery. Some northern expansionists who had supported Polk’s aggressive stance on both Oregon and Texas began to wonder about Polk’s priorities once they saw how differently the two frontiers were handled. Whereas the United States mounted a costly invasion of Mexico, Polk settled the Oregon question through diplomacy. After the British proposed a settlement at the forty-ninth parallel (far short of the Democrats’ campaign promise to push for all of Oregon), Polk submitted the Oregon settlement treaty to the Senate, where it was ratified in June 1846 with minor revisions (see Map 13.4). After the Oregon compromise, more northern and western Democrats began expressing doubts about the wisdom of war policy in Mexico. Manifest destiny held broad national appeal, but the U.S.-Mexican War was more popular in the South than in the North.

The sectional divide over the war came to a head in August 1846, when Pennsylvania representative David Wilmot proposed a rider to a war appropriations bill, prohibiting slavery in any of the Mexican territories that might be acquired in the war. Wilmot, a Democrat, was not an abolitionist and made clear that his intention was to preserve the West as a place where white men could till the soil “without the disgrace which association with Negro slavery brings upon free labor.” Polk expressed shock that anyone would see a connection between “slavery and making peace with Mexico,” but Wilmot’s northern Democratic colleagues were eager to sever any possible connection between their support of the war and the westward extension of slavery. The Wilmot Proviso passed in the House, but the larger appropriations bill stalled in the Senate. After the 1846 elections, when Whigs won control of the House, the Proviso passed there again, but Texas provided the necessary two-vote margin to defeat it in the Senate. Although the proviso never became law, ten state legislatures endorsed



**Map 13.4 Settlement of the Oregon Question.** An 1846 treaty between Britain and the United States set the boundary at the forty-ninth parallel with the exception of Vancouver Island, which remained under British control.

it, and it became a rallying cry for northern Democrats uncomfortable with their party’s slavery stance. The popularity of Wilmot’s Proviso cast a political pall over the war effort, hinting that the addition of new territory might bring new troubles to Washington. It also augured deep fissures within the Democratic Party.

## SURRENDER AND THE MEXICAN CESSION

Even after the fall of its national capital, the Mexican government (temporarily relocated to Querétaro, 125 miles away) refused to make land concessions that were satisfactory to the United States. Part of the problem was that, by the end of 1847, the U.S. position was unclear, because American political opinion was deeply divided over what to ask for. Whigs now controlled the House of Representatives and many Whigs opposed acquiring any new territory. Polk’s long-standing war aim had been to wrest all of New Mexico and Alta California from the Mexicans and gain recognition of the Rio Grande as the border of Texas. But



the success of the war had persuaded him that the United States should be able to get Baja California too along with much of what is now northeastern Mexico—as far south as Tampico (see Map 13.3).

Disagreement and uncertainty over how much territory to demand was not simply tactical; it reflected ambivalence on the American side, even among the war's most enthusiastic supporters. Hard-liners framed their demands as a kind of assessment to compensate the United States for the costs of the war. But their real justification for taking territory lay in the ideas of manifest destiny. All along, war supporters had spoken of the invasion of Mexico as a kind of Indian war, where the United States was expediting the removal of primitive peoples who were not making good use of the land—rather than vanquishing a foreign nation. “The Mexicans are *Aboriginal Indians*,” one expansionist declared, “and they must share the destiny of their race.” The fact that much of northern Mexico was still under the control of Indian nations seemed to support this notion, but Americans also emphasized the fact that Mexico itself was a mixed-race society, where the lines between European and native stock had been transgressed. Mississippi senator Robert Walker, a major ally of the president, characterized Mexicans as “an ignorant and fanatical colored race . . . composed of every poisonous compound of blood and color.” From this perspective, many Democrats argued for taking possession of all of Mexico.

But the analogy between invading Mexico and removing Indians proved deeply misleading. U.S. soldiers encountered established cities, many of them older and larger than anything they had seen before. If the United States were to annex all of Mexico, what would they do with its seven million inhabitants? Would they simply absorb the country and extend citizenship to people they considered racially inferior? Would they subjugate Mexico as a colonial dependency? Would they enslave the population or incorporate Mexico's system of peonage into the southern slave economy? Or would they, as one senator recommended, dispossess Mexicans and place them on reservations? All of these options were unpalatable to most Americans, and Polk pushed instead for taking only those portions of Mexico that would not force the federal government to choose between its commitment to white supremacy and its commitment to republican equality.

Polk had entrusted the task of securing a peace treaty with Mexico to Nicholas Trist, a former protégé of Thomas Jefferson and aide to Andrew Jackson. Unbeknownst to the president, Trist harbored deep objections to the U.S. invasion of Mexico and was far more eager than Polk to make peace. But Trist found negotiations with Mexico difficult, and in October 1847 Polk decided to recall him, partly as a tactical maneuver to make the United States seem less eager to make peace. The recall message (which was too sensitive to be conveyed via telegraph) took a month to reach Trist, who decided to ignore it, on the grounds that political



## How Much Is That?

### *The Mexican Cession*

By the standards of the time, the \$15 million Mexico received for the lands ceded to the United States was trifling. It is dwarfed by the amount Mexico spent waging the war (nearly \$100 million, not counting pensions) and the amount the United States offered Spain (\$50–100 million) later that same year in an unsuccessful bid to purchase Cuba. In 2013 dollars, the sum represents approximately \$440 million, or \$1.31 per acre.

developments in Mexico had created a timely opportunity to negotiate a deal. Two and a half months after being recalled, Trist reached an agreement with a new Mexican government. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in Mexico on February 2, 1848, the United States acquired five hundred thousand square miles of Mexican territory (not counting Texas), an area that covered the future states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada and included the coveted Pacific harbors of San Francisco, San Diego, and Monterey. In return, the United States assumed \$3.25 million in private claims against Mexico and paid the Mexican government \$15 million (see How Much Is That?). The United States also agreed to grant citizenship to all Mexicans residing in the ceded territories, to assume responsibility for preventing all Indian raids into Mexican territory, and to prohibit the enslavement of Mexicans captured by Indians on either side of the new border.

Polk was furious with Trist for disobeying his orders and disappointed that the agreement did not wrest even more territory from Mexico. But with congressional opposition to the war mounting and guerrilla attacks against the U.S. invasion force taking a toll, the president submitted the treaty to the Senate, where it was ratified in March. After seventeen months, a long and costly war had come to an end. Not counting the treaty payments, the United States spent \$98 million on the war effort, far more than anyone had expected. More tragically, 12,518 U.S. soldiers were killed, most of them as a result of disease. This would be the last great burst of American territorial acquisition on the North American continent. With the exception of a small slice of the southern parts of present-day New Mexico and Arizona acquired in the 1853 Gadsden Purchase to facilitate a railroad route, the United States had achieved its current contiguous borders (see Map 13.5).



**Map 13.5 The United States in 1854.** After a decade of annexation, border settlement, war, and land purchase, the nation had extended its sovereignty over the continent and claimed its current continental borders.

## EXPANDING WEST

America's westward expansion during the middle of the nineteenth century followed two paths. The United States used diplomacy and military force to extend its sovereignty over the western third of the continent, pursuing what politicians, journalists, and artists described as the nation's historical destiny. At the same time, westward expansion was the result of countless individual and group decisions by Americans and foreign immigrants to pick up stakes and pursue opportunities in those lands that the United States was in the process of conquering.

### OVERLAND MIGRATION

During the first third of the nineteenth century, the few Americans who traversed the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains had been fur traders. But in the early 1840s, two well-publicized

expeditions established the feasibility of a two-thousand-mile wagon voyage from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean in about six months. By 1850, the number of annual migrants on the **Overland Trail** reached over fifty-five thousand.

Typical overland travel parties in the 1840s formed wagon trains each spring in what were called jumping-off cities along the Missouri River, namely Independence and St. Joseph, in Missouri, and Council Bluffs, Iowa (see Map 13.6). Most of the men and women who embarked on the Overland Trail were midwestern white family farmers who lived in Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana. They were transient people who had moved at least once before, often several times, in search of cheap, arable land farther west. Crossing the Rockies entailed a bigger commitment, however, since the supplies necessary for the journey cost about \$600. But the lure of a homestead in Oregon was great, even before the United States took possession in 1846.

The decision to travel west was usually made by a man on behalf of his wife and children. Women often resented the move,





**Map 13.6 The Overland Trail.** Between 1846 and 1860, over two hundred thousand travelers trekked from the Missouri River across the Rockies to the west coast, typically in canvas-covered wagons, each weighing between 2,000 and 2,500 pounds and pulled by teams of oxen and mules.

especially the dissolution of their social networks, but they had no social or legal foundation for contesting their husbands' decisions. Wagon trains brought different families together, however, creating mini-societies with their own organization and social world.

Overland migrants passed through Indian lands, including areas controlled by the relatively nomadic tribes of the southern plains whose raids on northern Mexico had made it difficult for the Mexicans to resist the U.S. invasion. But Indian attacks on American travel parties were rare, especially before 1854. The route was not without peril, however. Diseases such as cholera took the lives of thousands of migrants. Overland travelers also needed to time their movements carefully. In 1846, for example, the Donner party started too late and took an ill-advised shortcut across the Utah desert, where many of their animals died, forcing them to cut loose wagons and supplies. They made their way to Truckee Lake (later renamed Donner Lake),

the last serious mountain barrier, but became trapped by heavy snowfalls for four months. The ghastly and well-publicized tale of their ordeal, including starvation and cannibalism, dramatized the perils of the Overland Trail.

### GOLD DISCOVERED IN CALIFORNIA

Before 1848, Oregon was the primary Pacific destination of westward migrants. But in January of that year, while Nicholas Trist was in Mexico City negotiating an end to the war, James Marshall discovered gold in the middle of the Mexican state of Alta California, which Trist was at that very moment demanding from Mexico as the price of peace. The world did not immediately pay attention to Marshall's discovery at Sutter's Mill. But by June word had spread to the San Francisco Bay region, where men left their homes, their military posts, and their ships in droves to pan



**The Overland Trail, ca. 1871.** Luminist painter Albert Bierstadt, famous for his large canvases of dramatically lit mountain landscapes, made several expeditions to the American West starting in 1859. In painting the wagon train at dusk, Bierstadt prioritized romantic setting over fact. The travelers would have had to make camp before nightfall.



**Donner Lake in California's Sierra Nevada.** One of the most famous tales of western migration took place near here. Trapped by snow in this treacherous terrain, seventeen members of the Donner party tried to make it out of the mountains on foot but could not get beyond the snow on the western slope. Only seven of the seventeen survived, subsisting on the corpses of those who did not make it. Back in the main camps, thirteen migrants would starve to death and become food for the others before the rescue parties arrived.

for gold in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Later that summer, the news had reached Hawaii and the west coast of Mexico. By the end of the year, newspapers all over the Atlantic seaboard were fanning the flames of gold fever. In less than twelve months, about eighty thousand people descended on California, now part of the United States. A year later, in 1850, California would draft a state constitution and enter the union as part of a national compromise over slavery (see Chapter 14). By 1854, Marshall's discovery had attracted more than three hundred thousand people to California.

The California gold rush differed from other migrations to the American West. Only a portion of the newcomers took the Overland Trail. Most arrived by ship, even those from the eastern half of North America. Some sailed around Cape Horn at the tip of South America, while others traveled by steamship to Panama or Nicaragua, crossed the isthmus by foot, mule, and canoe (there was no canal in Panama), and boarded another ship on the Pacific side. Gold rush migrants were also far more heterogeneous in origin. In contrast to the white midwestern farmers who packed the wagon trains of the more steady overland migration, those who followed the scent of gold hailed from many different places, especially Chile, Mexico, China, Australia, France, and the United States. The people who rushed to California between 1848 and 1854 thus had a very different relationship to the larger project of U.S. territorial





**French Guidebook to California, 1850.** In Paris, which was reeling from social unrest and failed revolution, news of the gold rush struck fast and hard. Within a year of the discovery of gold in California, advertisements were flooding the papers and sprouting up on walls all over the city. Between 1849 and 1850, eighty-three French companies were formed to sponsor digging expeditions. In all, over twenty thousand French-speaking people joined the gold rush.

expansion than homesteaders heading to Oregon. For some of the new arrivals, the journey to the Sierra was northward or eastward, rather than westward. For many of them, it was their first encounter with the United States.

Immigrants arrived in large numbers from the Cantonese-speaking parts of southern China, especially from the Pearl River delta, where the First Opium War had left a legacy of economic hardship. Most were young single men bent on bringing wealth back home. A minority were women, brought over to work as prostitutes in gold rush cities or in the mines. African Americans came as well, mostly as slaves brought by their owners to a territory in which the legal status of chattel slavery remained uncertain at first. The largest and most influential group of **forty-niners**, as the migrants became known, were white, English-speaking Americans, mainly from New England and the mid-Atlantic states. Mostly middle-class men, these gold seekers came as temporary migrants hoping to return to the communities from which they hailed with greater wealth and enhanced status. Few struck it rich, but gold brought people from all over the world and built new polyglot worlds on the California coast.

**“California Gold Diggers: Mining Operations on the Western Shore of the Sacramento River,” ca. 1849–1852.** This lithograph depicts the range of ethnicities and nationalities of the men who mined gold.







**“View of San Francisco, Formerly Yerba Buena, in 1846-7 Before the Discovery of Gold.”** Prior to the gold rush, Yerba Buena was a compact trading village at the northeastern corner of present-day San Francisco.

The other distinguishing characteristic of the gold rush migration was its gender imbalance. Forty-niners were overwhelmingly male, and men outnumbered women by as much as ten to one in the mining areas. Migrants complained of the absence of women and the domesticating influence they were supposed to provide. Prostitution flourished in the mines and especially in the growing cities on the San Francisco Bay and along the rivers, often involving women from France and China. But this only confirmed the sense of transplanted northerners that they were living in a masculine world cut off from female society. Gold rush culture was rugged and male dominated; the major events of interest and the chief topics of discussion were, as one newcomer reported, “gambling, Duelling, Murdering, Lectooning and Digging.” There were also other, less violent, expressions of this all-male culture. Out in the mining camps, men joined together for festive merriment and dancing, partnering up with one another. On one occasion in the town of Angel’s Camp, half the assembled, marked by colorful patches on their pants, would be ladies for the evening. But for most Anglo men, the absence of white, middle-class women was an excuse to construct a social world that featured the rough, same-sex pleasures of the bachelor culture that thrived in eastern cities at the time.

## NATIVES AND CALIFORNIOS

For the people who had been living in California long before the 1840s, the gold rush brought about even more momentous changes than the U.S.-Mexican War. At the beginning of the decade, over 150,000 Native Americans lived in California. This represented about half the size of the indigenous popula-



**San Francisco Harbor, ca. 1850.** Almost overnight, San Francisco became a dense urban settlement.

tion just seventy years earlier, when Spanish settlement began introducing new diseases to the region. But relatively few Hispanic colonists immigrated to California. Indians made up over 90 percent of the population in 1848, even after a malaria epidemic had almost wiped out native life in the Central Valley and after the U.S. invasion. The discovery of gold completely changed the demographic situation. Within a few years, whites outnumbered natives by about two to one.

Because Mexico had granted citizenship to the native population in 1824, California’s Indians were eligible, in theory, to become U.S. citizens under the 1848 treaty. Instead, Indians were banished, relegated to second-class citizenship, or simply killed by private militias financed by the State of California. Their livelihoods disrupted by the tide of migrants, surviving Indians developed new economic activities and resources, including stealing and selling horses but also performing their Indian identities in the immigrant towns. Within a few years of the gold rush, small groups of natives would dance in ceremonial regalia for spectators and then pass around the hat.

California’s much smaller Mexican population, the **Californios**, already outnumbered by Americans even before California was ceded to the United States, also struggled to survive the onslaught of new arrivals (see *Singular Lives: John Rollin Ridge, Cherokee Novelist*). Although the new state constitution of 1850 granted rights only to “free white persons,” this category included Mexicans of Spanish descent. Wealthy Californio rancheros, who had received substantial land grants from the Mexican government, were represented in the framing of a new state constitution and sought to define themselves as white in the eyes of the law. They held significant political power in southern California, where the gold rush had not diluted their strength. But after California joined the union, Anglos began challenging the rancheros’ land titles in court and pressuring them to sell.





## SINGULAR LIVES

### John Rollin Ridge, Cherokee Novelist

When Andrew Jackson removed Indian tribes from the Southeast, he promised them security in western lands. But southeastern Indians did not simply relocate and disappear. Facing internal divisions, conflicts with the native population of their new homelands, and the westward march of white American settlement and U.S. territorial sovereignty, groups like the Cherokees enjoyed none of the peace promised by removal advocates.

The remarkable career of John Rollin Ridge, also called Yellow Bird, dramatized the dilemmas and fate of the Cherokee diaspora in the era of U.S. expansion. Ridge came from a distinguished and politically powerful Cherokee family. His grandfather had fought alongside Jackson in the Creek War, his father (who attended a missionary boarding school in Connecticut) became a prosperous landowner and slaveholder, and his cousin Elias Boudinot founded the *Cherokee Phoenix*. All three signed the controversial Treaty of New Echota that transferred Cherokee land to the United States and moved voluntarily to Oklahoma in 1836, using their cash settlement with the United States to establish stores that would serve the new arrivals. But when those Cherokees who had opposed the treaty arrived two years later along the Trail of Tears, the Ridge family became the targets of bitter animosity. In 1839, when John Rollin Ridge was twelve years old, treaty opponents executed his father in front of his eyes.

Young Ridge's white mother moved him to Arkansas and then sent him to be educated in Massachusetts. He returned to Arkansas at age twenty, took up the law, and, like his father before him, married a white woman. But the feud between the two Cherokee groups followed Ridge to Arkansas, and when he killed a man over a conflict about a horse, he decided to flee rather than face Cherokee justice. Ridge traveled first to Missouri in 1849, and a year later joined the

exodus to California. After a brief and unhappy stint in the mines, Ridge turned to writing and in 1854 produced the first novel published by a Native American author.

Ridge's novel, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, was based loosely on the life of a Mexican bandit who had become a legend in the American mining camps. In Ridge's version, Joaquin is a noble and honest Mexican miner who turns to crime to avenge the rape of his wife by white Americans. The novel condemns white racism and criticizes whites for failing to live up to the individualist values that Ridge admired in American culture. Ridge's attitude toward Mexicans seemed more ambivalent.

Joaquin is a superhero, but the book's preface makes a point of distinguishing him from other, lesser Mexicans. On the surface, the novel raised questions about what it meant to be an American in this new land, but it also reflected its biracial author's own conflicted relationship to the United States. Though he shared his family's interest in acculturation and adaptation, John Rollin Ridge had spent his life fleeing violence, racism, and family vengeance, and his novel transported those themes to the nation's westernmost setting. Despite Ridge's embrace of white civilization, he criticized the U.S. government's Indian policies, clung to his



**John Rollin Ridge and His Daughter, Alice Bird.** Author of one of the earliest novels in California, Ridge remains an important figure in the region's literary history.

Cherokee identity, aspired to launch a Cherokee newspaper, and longed to return to the Cherokee Nation, which he hoped would enter the union as its own state. Thwarted in that effort, Ridge remained a Californian. He died in 1867.

#### Think About It

1. How did John Rollin Ridge fit into the larger pattern of California migration during the gold rush?
2. Why might a Cherokee author have identified with a Mexican bandit in gold rush California?

Farther north and inland, Anglo Americans used their superior numbers to muscle Mexicans (and other groups) out of the gold mines. In April 1850, the newly formed state legislature passed the first of two Foreign Miners Taxes, which imposed a prohibitive fee of twenty dollars a month on all

non-American miners. It was ultimately reduced and then repealed, in part because of the organized opposition of European and South American gold seekers. A more modest imposition of the tax was reintroduced a year later, aimed largely at Chinese miners.

## SAN FRANCISCO: INSTANT CITY

To get to the mines, most gold seekers passed through harbor towns on the San Francisco Bay, creating in the process a bustling urban society. The largest of these towns had been founded in 1835 by William Richardson, an independent entrepreneur of British birth who secured a private land grant from the Mexican government in the hopes of trading with small Mexican communities around the bay. Originally called Yerba Buena, the town was renamed San Francisco in January 1847, which may have contributed to the city's growth by identifying the new settlement with the more famous bay. When the gold rush hit, news, goods, and packages destined for the mines via the San Francisco Bay were addressed to San Francisco rather than

to the rival town of Francesca, later named Benicia, which stood at the gateway to the interior. At the time gold was discovered, about a thousand people lived in San Francisco; just eight years later, it was home to fifty thousand.

For many migrants, the booming economy of San Francisco was enough of a lure to detain or divert them from the mines. Wages in many sectors of the local economy skyrocketed. Washing clothes became so expensive, for example, that some residents sent their laundry to Hawaii, while others simply bought new clothes when their favored garments got too soiled. One enterprising new arrival from New York brought with him 1,500 outdated copies of the daily *Tribune*, a two-cent paper, and sold them quickly and easily for a dollar each.



**“Lola Has Come.”** In a city with few women, Lola Montez became a major superstar in 1853, personifying San Francisco's culture of male-oriented sensational entertainment, where she assumed the mantle of the nation's leading sex symbol. Born Eliza Gilbert in Ireland in 1818, Montez moved to Spain as a young woman, adopted a Spanish name, and entertained European audiences with her “spider dance,” in which she writhed provocatively and removed clothing while appearing to shake a spider off her body. In this cartoon, Montez performs before a theatrical manager and two other men. **Question for Analysis:** Why does the man reading a book cover his eyes?



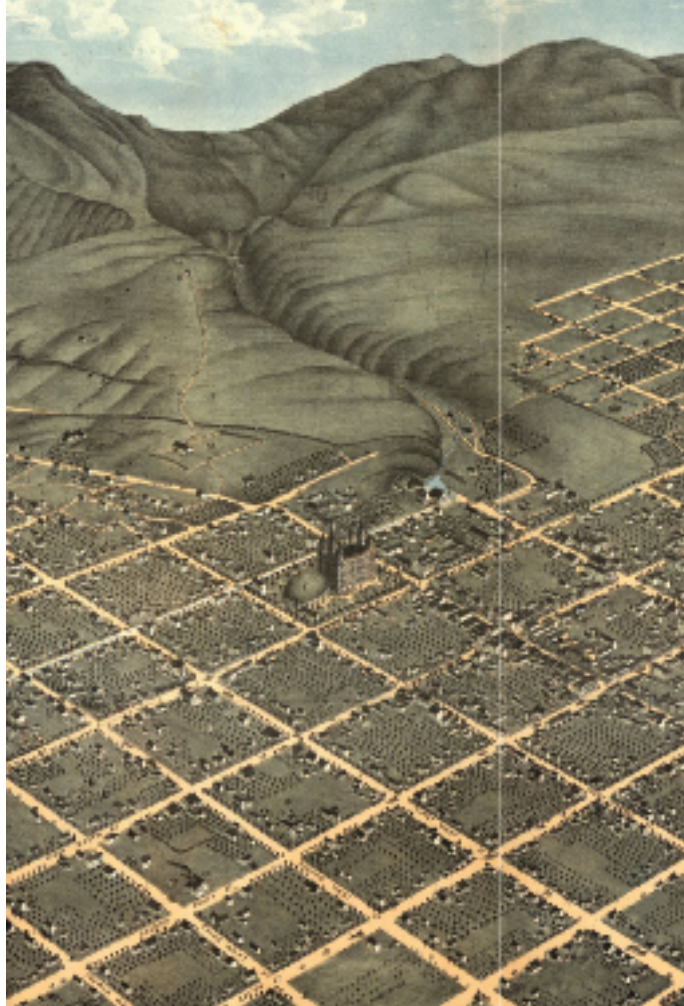
Land values in the city soared, so that urban real estate became as much of a bonanza as mining claims. Some of these economic pressures and opportunities were the result of the sudden influx of gold. But many of them came from the compression of older patterns of urban growth into such a short time. “It’s an odd place,” a new arrival said of San Francisco in 1849. “[I]t is not created in the ordinary way but hatched like chickens by artificial heat.”

Not all of the residents of San Francisco approved of the rough masculine culture that characterized the instant city as well as the mines. Opponents of this culture, mostly middle-class, American-born Protestants, saw disorder both in the violent streets and in the corruption of the city’s nascent political institutions. In 1851, they formed a Committee of Vigilance to execute “prompt and summary punishment” of public offenders. Over the next two years, they took ninety-one prisoners, exiling about a third of them from the city, whipping one, and hanging four others. Five years later, a more ambitious Committee of Vigilance arose. They captured a shipment of federal arms intended for the state militia and arrested the chief justice of the state’s supreme court. For ninety-nine days, the committee ruled the city, jailing and executing men associated with gambling, commercial sex, political corruption, and the Democratic Party.

## MORMON EXODUS

Oregon-bound families and gold seekers in California pursued new economic opportunities in the American West, but the large migration of Mormons from Illinois to the Utah desert had different motivations. After the murder of their prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo (see Chapter 10), Brigham Young took over the church, made provisional peace with the community’s enemies, and led a Mormon exodus to a promised land in the West in 1846. In contrast to other overland travelers, Young chose a location where he figured the prospects for agriculture or mineral extraction were so poor that no one would bother them. Whereas other westward migrants were following or anticipating the progress of U.S. territorial expansion, the Mormons were seeking a distant refuge from the United States. From their perspective, the American continent was sacred, but the American nation was a place of persecution. The promised land near the Great Salt Lake was technically Mexican territory when Young arrived with the vanguard of his followers in 1847, but Young envisioned a society where the church held all political power and no other sovereign nation had real jurisdiction.

Young declared the existence of a state called Deseret (derived from a word meaning “honeybee” in the Book of Mormon) and renounced any intention “to have any trade or commerce with the gentile world.” The self-sufficient economy of Deseret depended on a complex system of irrigation works and a cooperative ethos that contrasted sharply with the competitive individualism of the California gold rush. By 1852, twenty thousand Mormon converts had settled in the



**Bird's-Eye View of Salt Lake City, 1870.** The temple city of the Church of Latter-Day Saints grew almost instantaneously, holding 4,200 people within a year of its creation. But unlike San Francisco, Salt Lake City was a carefully planned and controlled urban space, where wide streets were laid out on a flat grid, land was divided by lottery, and real estate speculation was prohibited.

Utah Territory, which was by that point part of the United States but largely ignored by the federal government. That year, Young first proclaimed publicly that the church sanctioned plural marriage (for men only), more widely known as polygamy. Outcry over this aspect of Mormon doctrine prompted the federal government to send troops to Utah in 1857 to assert U.S. sovereignty over the territory. More than a year later, after a prolonged standoff with federal forces and a massacre of non-Mormon overland migrants by a Mormon militia, the Mormon government negotiated a peace deal, agreeing to accept the sovereignty of the United States in return for a withdrawal of the troops and promises of freedom of religion in Utah.

## NATIONALISM AND POPULAR THEATER

Most Americans living in the age of nationalist expansion did not enlist in Taylor’s army, trek across the Rockies, or sail to California in search of gold. Many of them experienced



## STATES OF EMERGENCY

### *The Astor Place Riot*

Prior to the Civil War, the bloodiest riot in an American city began over a performance of *Macbeth*. In May 1849, two rival actors with a history of deep personal animosity were starring simultaneously in competing New York productions of the Shakespeare play. One was the English actor William Macready; the other was the American Edward Forrest of *Metamora* fame (see Chapter 9). Forrest's partisans managed to disrupt Macready's performance at the recently opened Astor Place Opera House at the intersection of Broadway and the Bowery, drowning out his lines with catcalls and hisses, pelting him with potatoes, pieces of wood, and stink bombs, and driving him offstage. Set to return to his homeland, the mortified English actor was persuaded to stay by a letter signed by forty-seven prominent citizens (among them the writers Washington Irving and Herman Melville) and promising the restoration of order at Macready's next performance.

This time precautions were taken. Only respectable gentlemen known to be friendly to Macready could purchase tickets. Policemen moved about the audience, and the Seventh Regiment state militia stood close by. Though a big crowd gathered outside the opera house, the play began smoothly. But soon after, the performance was disrupted, some arrests were made inside the theater, and the men on the street grew angrier. Members of the crowd tore up iron railings, broke into a marble yard, and started chucking rocks at the theater. Militiamen appeared on the scene. They first fired into the air and then turned their firearms on the crowd, killing twenty-two people and injuring over fifty others.

How could Shakespearean drama stir up such bitter and violent passions? The Astor Place Riot of 1849 was not simply a theater review turned nasty. The issues raised and the animosities vented extended to fundamental questions of politics, class relations, and national identity. To the crowd assembled outside the theater, Macready and the opera house represented, among other things, aristocratic privileges and foreign influence on American popular culture. But the conflict also pitted competing visions of how one ought to behave at the theater. The signatories of the letter imploring Macready to stay saw theater as an art form to be appreciated respectfully by a city's leading citizens. The hundreds who stormed the opera house saw things differently. In the words of the lawyer defending the riot's organizers, "The right to hiss an actor off the stage is an undisputed right of anyone who goes into a theatre." The Astor Place Riot marked a turning point in this debate. The courts did not buy the rioters' free speech argument and ruled that purchasing a ticket entitled spectators to nothing other than the right to a seat. What they did in that seat would be subject to the dictates of the theater manager.

#### Think About It

1. Why might Forrest's supporters have objected to an English actor?



**Astor Place Riot Broadside.** Organizers of the riot, who included the nationalist author Ned Buntline, creator of the Buffalo Bill character, summoned Forrest's supporters to the scene with posters like this, which skillfully appealed to patriotic sentiments.

2. How might Irish immigrants and native-born American workers have read the poster differently but still found common cause in the riot?
3. Why did the rioters think that the theater was an important and appropriate place to express one's views and opinions?
4. What does the event suggest about the status of Shakespeare's plays in American culture in 1849?

nationalism and expansion primarily as ideas, sources of inspiration or humor, and subjects of conversation and debate. This period of war, annexation, and westward migration was also a time of major growth and consolidation in American popular culture. Americans of different classes flocked especially to the theater in the mid-nineteenth century, and stage performances became major venues for spreading—and testing—ideas about politics and nationality.

## BOISTEROUS AUDIENCES

Theatergoing in U.S. cities during the first half of the nineteenth century was strikingly different from the quiet, decorous experience we now associate with dramatic entertainment. Instead of sitting in silent, rapt attention, audience members shouted, wandered around, got drunk, and engaged in all kinds of informal behavior—including spitting, throwing nutshells, and breastfeeding. When spectators disapproved of a performance,





**Barnum's American Museum, New York City.** Between 1841, when P. T. Barnum purchased the museum, and 1865, when it burned to the ground, the American Museum was the grand cathedral of middle-class entertainment. A massive building by contemporary standards, it contained six floors of exhibition space by 1865 and formed one of the most imposing and recognizable landmarks on the New York cityscape.

they might groan, hiss, shower the offending actor with fruits and vegetables, or wreak more serious havoc (see States of Emergency: The Astor Place Riot). When they approved, they might press an actor to repeat a line (or an entire scene). On other occasions, audience members might caution a stage character to beware of some imminent danger, or they might suddenly disrupt a performance of Shakespeare with a rendition of “Yankee Doodle.” Lights were left on, so that spectators could see and be seen. The audience was part of the show.

Significantly, these theater audiences tended to be heavily male. Before the 1850s, respectable women saw plays only in the company of a male escort and tended to avoid the theater altogether. In most cities, prostitutes were admitted free of charge to a designated tier of the gallery, where they might negotiate and even consummate their business. But theaters, like saloons and polling places, were sites of public life where men dominated. This not only licensed drunkenness and rough behavior; it also marked theaters as appropriate places to air political views and allegiances.

## P. T. BARNUM AND MUSEUM THEATER

Now remembered mostly for his later association with the American circus, Phineas Taylor Barnum was famous in his time as a curator of curious exhibitions, an impresario of popular entertainments, and a master of deceptions. Barnum

was a founding father in the world of mass culture. He shaped and marketed commercial entertainment for multiple generations of Americans in the nineteenth century. Raised in Connecticut in 1810, Barnum moved to New York City in his early twenties in search of opportunities to make money by catering, as he later put it, to “that insatiate want of human nature—the love of amusement.” Barnum’s opportunity came knocking in 1835 in the form of a slave named Joice Heth, who was reputed to be 161 years old and have nursed a young George Washington. Barnum purchased her for \$1,000 and peddled her and her bogus story throughout the Northeast. Thus began the career of America’s greatest showman. Seven years later, Barnum had another major hit on his hands in the form of the Fejee Mermaid, which was actually made from the body of a fish and the head and hands of a monkey and exhibited to a skeptical but fascinated paying public as a major scientific discovery.

Such popular hoaxes, or “humbugs,” as they were called, made Barnum a household name and drew customers to his American Museum on New York’s Broadway. The museum would become the best attended entertainment venue in the United States by the late 1840s. For twenty-five cents admission, New Yorkers and the growing body of out-of-town visitors would tour a collection featuring exotic animals and fish, skeletons, ethnological artifacts, recent inventions, wax portraits, and various curiosities. Or they might observe a baby contest or enjoy the performance of the talented or freakish. Barnum’s

museum combined the zoo, the aquarium, the natural history museum, the circus, the lecture hall, and the art gallery.

In 1850, Barnum's Museum also became an important theater. But instead of offering the typical stage entertainment of the era, Barnum dedicated the museum's lecture room to what he called "moral drama," a form of theater introduced in Boston a few years earlier by Moses Kimball. **Moral drama**, or "museum theater," as it was sometimes called, promised its patrons stage entertainment without any of the profanity or lewdness with which theater had long been associated. The plays themselves were typically melodramas that reinforced the popular middle-class reform causes of the era (see Chapter 12). Titles such as W. H. Smith's *The Drunkard*, Charles Saunders's *The Gambler*, and F. S. Hill's *Six Degrees of Crime; or Wine, Women, Gambling, Theft, and the Scaffold* reassured spectators that any depiction of vice would be framed by a morally instructive lesson. Museum theater managers also exerted tight control over their lecture halls, guaranteeing that the boisterous behavior of the traditional theater audience would not be tolerated.

These innovations were designed to make theatergoing a legitimate activity for women and families. Museum theater helped expand the American theater audience, repackaging the drama as a site of moral education, and redefining theater as a mixed-gender activity. By the end of the century, women would outnumber men in American theater audiences. More immediately, Barnum's lecture hall would provide the stage for numerous plays about slavery and race that would shape national debates in the antebellum era.

## BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY

The new moral melodramas competed with Shakespearean tragedies and plays about the war in Mexico for the attention and disposable income of America's growing theater audiences, but no form of staged entertainment proved quite so popular in this period as **blackface minstrelsy**. Blackface entertainment took many forms in nineteenth-century America and proved adaptable to many different dramatic genres (including Shakespeare and moral melodrama), but its defining feature was the appearance on a public stage of a performer, typically but not necessarily a white man, with burnt cork or black paint on his face. Introduced in large northern cities around 1830, it achieved the height of its popularity in the late 1840s, and remained the dominant form of homegrown theater throughout the antebellum period and for some time thereafter. Blackface shows were immensely popular, but they also bore the stamp of elite approval. Minstrel troupes performed for several presidents, including Abraham Lincoln. It was the music of the blackface show that critics celebrated as America's national art.

Different blackface performers followed the same basic format, employed the same stock characters, and showcased many of the same songs and dances. American audiences throughout much of the North, Midwest, and far West were consuming essentially the same entertainment product (blackface was somewhat less popular in the South, in part because it was a

primarily urban form of entertainment). The standard minstrel troupe featured four or five blackface performers wearing oversized, ragged costumes, and armed with banjos, fiddles, bone castanets, and tambourines. The show typically consisted of three parts: a selection of songs; a medley of novelty acts such as farcical dialogues, stump speeches riddled with malapropisms, and drag performances; and a narrative skit, usually set in the South, with dancing, music, and burlesque.

In these performances, the use of blackface was linked with representations of African Americans. The two stock characters who reappeared most frequently on the blackface stage popularized two stereotypes of black America. **Jim Crow** (which was the name of both a character and a dance) was a happy-go-lucky, contented plantation slave. Zip Coon, his northern counterpart, was an urban dandy, prone to mispronouncing or misusing big words, possessed of an inflated sense of social importance, and given to excesses of predatory sexual desire.

Much blackface performance rested on a foundation of racial contempt and animosity. White people dressed up as black people and ridiculed their bodies, their speech patterns, their



**Virginia Serenaders, Sheet Music, 1844.** By the 1840s, blackface minstrel troupes were appearing in most big cities in the North, filling five huge theaters in New York, for example, where large auditoriums seated several thousand spectators. **Question for Analysis:** Why does the title page show the Serenaders both in and out of their blackface costume?





## INTERPRETING THE SOURCES

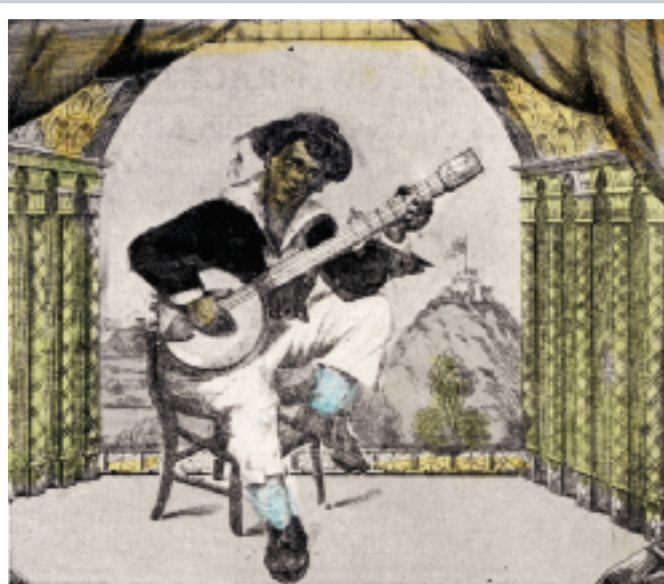
### “Oh! Susanna”

It is difficult for modern readers to appreciate just how mainstream blackface entertainment was in the nineteenth century and how enduring its impact on American popular culture has been. Though its overt and crass racism might make it seem like a distant episode in the American past, much of what is now fondly remembered as classic American music had its origins on the blackface stage. The works of Stephen Foster are a good example. Foster’s best-known songs, including “Camptown Races” (1850), “Old Folks at Home” (1851), “Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair” (1854), and “Old Black Joe” (1860), were written for the minstrel stage and designed to be sung with black inflections and performed in blackface. The original lyrics of one of Foster’s best-known compositions, “Oh! Susanna” (1848), show this connection explicitly:

*I came from Alabama, Wid a banjo on my knee,  
I'm gwyne to Louisiana, My true love for to see.  
It rain'd all night the day I left, The weather it was dry,  
The sun so hot I froze to death; Susanna, don't you cry.*  
Chorus:  
*Oh! Susanna, Oh don't you cry for me,  
cos' I've come from Alabama, Wid my banjo on my knee  
I jumped aboard the telegraph, And trabbled down the riber,  
De lectric fluid magnified, And killed five hundred nigger.  
De bullgine bust, de horse run off, I really thought I'd die;  
I shut my eyes to hold my breath, Susanna don't you cry.*  
CHO: Oh Susanna...  
*I had a dream the odder night, When ebery thing was still  
I thought I saw Susanna A Coming down de hill;  
The buck-wheat cake was in her mouth, The tear was in her eye;  
Says I, "I'm coing from de south, Susanna, don't you cry."*  
CHO: Oh Susanna &c.  
*I soon will be in New Orleans, And den I'll look all round,  
And When I find Susanna, I will fall upon de ground.  
And If I do not find her, Dis Darkie'l surely die,  
And when I'm dead and buried, Susanna, don't you cry.*  
CHO: Oh Susanna &c

#### Explore the Source

1. Who is the speaker, and why might he and Susanna be living apart?
2. Does the song present the speaker in a sympathetic light?
3. How would you explain why this song became the anthem of white gold-seekers bound for California in 1849?



### OH, SUSANNA.

Written by S. C. Foster. Sung by Wood's Minstrels, 414 Broadway.

*I've come from Alabama with the banjo on my knee,  
I'm gwine to Louisiana my true lub for to see.  
It rained all night the day I left, the woddier it was dry,  
De sun so hot I froze to deff, Susanna don't you cry.*

CHORUS AND REPART.

*Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me,  
I've come from Alabama,  
With the banjo on my knee.*

**Sheet Music for Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susanna!”** Born near Pittsburgh in 1826, Foster moved to New York as a young man to become a songwriter. He stayed there until his alcohol-accelerated demise in 1864, but in his short career he became the first American to earn a living by writing music. While tens of thousands of urban Americans heard Foster’s songs at blackface performances, many more encountered them in more intimate and informal settings, performed by amateurs who bought the sheet music.

social aspirations, and their claims to human dignity—all before an appreciative white audience. Enjoying a blackface performance was a way of claiming one’s whiteness, which is part of the reason the shows proved particularly popular among new immigrants from Ireland, who hoped to gain equality with their nativist detractors under the white banner.

But the appeal of blackface to urban audiences went beyond racism. Many of the skits and songs did not touch on explicitly

racist themes but used blackface to mark the performance as popular rather than elitist. Jim Crow and Zip Coon were American types who exposed the pretensions of the well-born and often had the last laugh. As such, blackface performances helped white Americans declare cultural independence from Europe. In addition, under the protective cover of blackface comedy, bawdy burlesque humor could be indulged, and transgressive sexual pleasures, such as cross-dressing and homoeroticism,

could be both expressed and disclaimed. Blackface also created a sense of common culture among a transient urban population. Many of the most popular songs from the blackface stage, such as “The Old Folks at Home,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” and “Oh! Susanna” drew on themes of displacement and longing for home (see Interpreting the Sources: “Oh! Susanna”). Finally, skits and songs about carefree characters leading undisciplined work lives may have appealed with special force to an urban working class facing the early stages of industrialization.

Blackface promoters claimed that minstrel songs and dances were rooted in the slave experience and that blackface shows were what James Kennard called “operas of negro life.” But blackface, like all popular American theater, was an urban phenomenon.

Minstrel composers grew up mostly in frontier cities like Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, and their initial audiences were in places like New York and Philadelphia. There is no evidence that blackface entertainment was the product of slaves or a reflection of slave life. Instead, it reflected white perceptions and fantasies of African American life in the North. Blackface emerged in places of racial intermingling and was a product of the encounter between white performers and the free people of color who sang, danced, dressed expressively, paraded, and socialized in the public spaces of northern and midwestern cities. Famous African American performers, such as William Henry Lane would appear on the blackface stage, and minstrel song lyrics referred to events and personages in the black dance world. Less flatteringly, blackface publicized the forms of ridicule by which whites attacked the aspirations of emancipated urban blacks to assert their freedom in public space.

Although blackface was a mass entertainment form that drew fans from across the social and political spectrum, it enjoyed a special relationship with the ideology and culture of the Democratic Party. Most of the major minstrel performers and composers were identified with the Democrats. Henry Wood, New York’s leading minstrel promoter, was the brother of Benjamin and Fernando Wood, two of the leading Democratic politicians of the 1850s. Stephen Foster, blackface’s preeminent composer, was related by marriage to Democratic president James Buchanan and wrote Democratic campaign songs. Blackface performances tended to embrace what the party stood for in the North—westward expansion, aggressive nationalism, anti-abolitionism, inclusive definitions of whiteness that accommodated recent immigrants, deep suspicion of reformers and evangelical pieties, and the championing of urban working-class entertainment tastes in defiance of elitist prejudices.



**William Henry Lane.** Better known as Master Juba, Lane achieved a transatlantic reputation as an acrobatic dancer and is sometimes credited as the inventor of tap dancing.

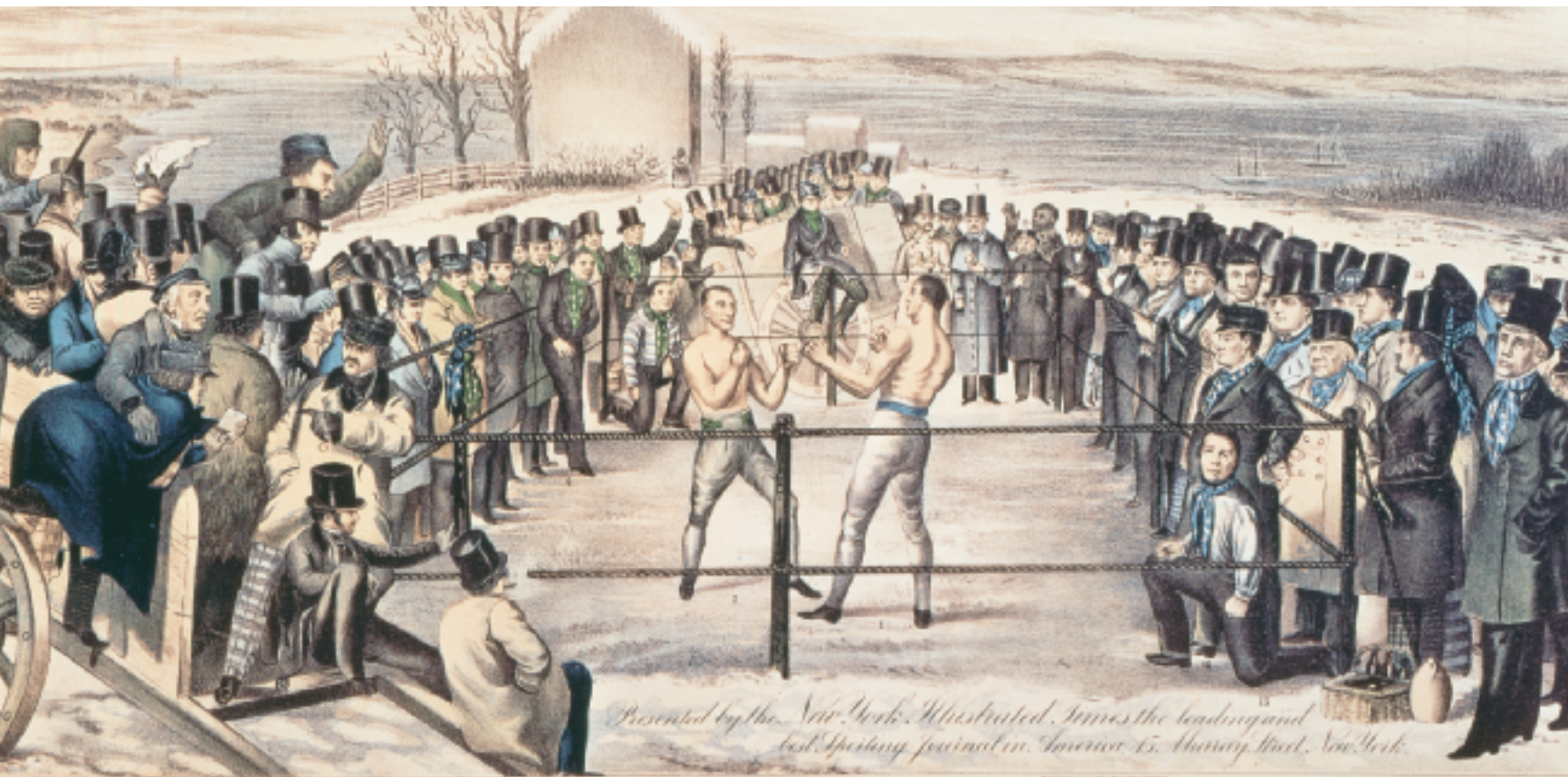
## NATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Much as the original creation of the United States had required new processes of communication (see Chapter 7), the territorial expansion of the American republic posed new communication challenges. The expanded nation required new infrastructure and new symbols of shared identity to bind together a diverse citizenry spreading to unfamiliar parts of the continent. Already in the 1840s, a network of railroad tracks was beginning to form in the Northeast. By the middle of the next decade, the railroad would thoroughly displace the canal system as the nation’s most powerful force and most conspicuous symbol of economic consolidation and long-distance connection (see Chapter 14). But long-distance communication in this period was not simply about building roads, canals, or rail lines. Various important innovations in the way Americans communicated with one another facilitated the mobility of people and ideas in the era of national expansion.

### THE TELEGRAPH

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the time it took for information to pass between one part of the country and another had been radically reduced—by improved roads, artificial waterways, entrepreneurial news providers, and more frequent and dense patterns of travel and commerce. But generally speaking, information moved only as fast as the human beings or animals that conveyed it. The exceptions to this rule were various optical signal systems, which had been introduced in France in the 1790s. These signal systems, which involved a series of visual displays relayed from one hill or tower to another, were known as *telegraphs*. Already in 1820, forty-five American newspapers used that word in their names to express the ideal of rapid communication over distances. Optical telegraphy was expensive to set up and limited in its reach, but in 1837 Samuel Morse (a painter by training) and Joseph Henry (a physicist) demonstrated the possibility of transmitting electromagnetic signals over wires. Morse, who secured a federal patent for the electromagnetic telegraph in 1840, synthesized and applied the discoveries and inventions of numerous scientists, promoted the new device with great vigor, and also developed a code that would become the international language of telegraphy.





**Hyer versus Sullivan.** In this 1849 bare-knuckle fight, one of the first American sports events to be followed by a national audience, American-born Bowery butcher Tom Hyer (the taller boxer) knocked out Irish immigrant Yankee Sullivan in less than twenty minutes.

In 1843, Morse persuaded Congress to appropriate \$30,000 for the construction of a telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore. Though he squandered \$23,000 of the grant trying to bury the wires below ground, Morse succeeded in building the line, and on May 22, 1844, he successfully transmitted the Biblical phrase “What hath god wrought” across forty miles. Morse fully expected the federal government to purchase his patent and regulate the use of the telegraph through the Post Office. He offered the patent for \$100,000 and tried to drum up support by staging exhibitions and chess games over the wires. But Congress refused, and Morse turned to private investors, who funded the rapid construction of telegraph lines. By 1850, twelve thousand miles of telegraph wire stretched across the eastern half of the continent; by 1853, the total reached twenty-three thousand miles.

Because sending a message across these wires was extremely expensive—as much as \$1 per word in the early years—the telegraph did not transform the way Americans communicated with one another. Telegraphy was used mostly by merchants, bankers, and others who needed to check someone’s credit, relay commodity prices, or lock in the terms of a commercial transaction. But the impact of Morse’s device on popular culture was nonetheless considerable, because the telegraph affected the way news was reported. In 1846, six major New York

dailies agreed to share the costs of transmitting news from the Mexican War. This arrangement did not simply make it possible for New Yorkers to follow the war as it unfolded; it created the first wire service, called the Associated Press. Wire services created a new standard for speedy news flow and helped turn newspaper offices in large urban centers into major gathering spots for the reception of official information.

Although initially intended to harness the power of the telegraph for relaying war news, wire services could be used as well to turn other items of popular interest into mass media events. When boxers Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan squared off in a \$10,000, winner-take-all prize fight in 1849, the bout attracted considerable interest. Partisans of Hyer (a native-born Whig) and Sullivan (an Irish-born Democrat who would later die in a San Francisco jail, facing trial at the hand of the Committee of Vigilance) identified passionately with their respective champions and wagered an estimated \$300,000 on the outcome. Because prize-fighting was illegal, the Hyer versus Sullivan match was held in a secret location in Kent County, Maryland, in front of only a few hundred spectators. But all over urban America, fans crowded around newspaper offices to hear the results relayed round-by-round. In this way, the telegraph helped create the modern sports event as a contest followed in real time by a national audience.





**Mail Call.** Post office lines in San Francisco and Sacramento were notoriously long, and numerous reports told of men refusing offers of five, ten, even twenty dollars for their spot on line. Forty-niners were eager for news from home—and eager to show those they had left behind that their letters were more precious than money. Images of post office crowds were often designed as stationery in California and used for mailing letters home.

## CHEAP POSTAGE

Although the federal government got out of the telegraph business, it continued to provide the infrastructure for national communication through the U.S. Post Office. During this period, postal service underwent a major transformation, however. In its early decades, the Post Office had been used primarily by merchants to conduct business and by publishers to circulate newspapers. Up until the 1840s, the mail was important for ordinary Americans primarily as a source of news. Sending a letter to friends or relatives was a significant event reserved for special occasions, except for those wealthy enough to afford very high rates of postage. Letter writers (or, more typically, letter recipients) were charged per sheet of paper and according to distance. Postage on a two-page letter traveling four hundred miles, say from Albany to Pittsburgh, would be fifty cents—more than half the average daily wage of the time. By the early 1840s, it cost eighteen and a half cents to mail a one-page letter from New York City up the Hudson River to Troy, New York, but just twelve cents to ship a barrel of flour over the same distance.

Beginning in 1845, a major change took place in the history of postal correspondence. Around the same time that private telegraph companies began assuming some of the role in news broadcasting and commercial exchange that had been the domain of the Post Office, Congress decided to enact postage reform, helping to turn the nation's postal system into a popular interactive medium. According to a new law in 1845, letters would now be assessed primarily on the basis of weight rather

than distance, and rates were lowered radically to five cents per half-ounce for close distances and ten cents per half-ounce for greater distances. The Postal Act of 1851 extended this reform by setting the basic letter rate at five cents for a half-ounce letter addressed virtually anywhere in the country. If the sender prepaid the postage (for which purpose postage stamps had been introduced in 1847), it would cost only three cents. Citing a model introduced a few years earlier in Great Britain, postal reformers argued that the lower rates would be offset by the much higher volume of correspondence, because more Americans would develop new letter-writing habits. Lower postage was especially popular among Whigs, who placed a high premium on literacy and saw improvements in long-distance communication as essential to national expansion. But the fact that congressmen from both parties supported the reforms reflected their general optimism that enough Americans would want to send letters across the expanding nation to justify the new strategy. The era of postal reform marked the emergence of the mail as a popular medium for maintaining personal relationships at a distance.

Postal reductions and westward expansion went hand in hand. Westward migrants were especially likely to want to correspond with the communities they left behind. And events like the war with Mexico and the California gold rush dramatized before a national audience the utility of a postal network for connecting temporarily separated family members. Forty-niners left for California with promises to send news (and wealth) back to their wives and children, and upon arrival they





## HOT COMMODITIES

### Daguerreotype Portraits

When photography was introduced in France and Britain in 1839, its inventors and promoters imagined it would be primarily suitable for still-life depictions and landscapes. There was little reason to expect the camera to be used for personal portraiture. The daguerreotyping procedure, named for the French inventor Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, could produce remarkably faithful images, but it required lengthy exposure times—five minutes to an hour in its early years. Even once exposure times were reduced to twenty seconds, the composure necessary to sit for a portrait could be excruciating. Daguerreotype artists would position their subjects against iron head rests, and many early portraits show men and women in apparent discomfort.

Nonetheless, portraiture quickly became the dominant use of the daguerreotype in the United States. By midcentury, 90 percent of daguerreotypes taken nationwide were posed portraits of individuals or (less commonly) families. Daguerreotype portrait studios became big business, especially in cities. Within a decade of Daguerre's invention there were a hundred such studios in New York alone. And in the instant city of San Francisco, dozens of daguerreotype studios and salons appeared within a few years of the discovery of gold.

Daguerreotypes allowed middle-class families the opportunity to emulate the traditionally genteel, even aristocratic practice of displaying the portraits of relatives and ancestors. They also allowed Americans on the move to maintain visual contact with friends and family living at a distance. After the postage reductions of 1845 and 1851, daguerreotype portraits also became mobile. Before 1845, enclosing a picture in the mail would have doubled the cost of sending a one-page letter, but once the Post Office began charging by weight rather than by the sheet, photographs could be included at no extra charge.

#### Think About It

1. Why would photographic portraits have been especially popular in American cities and in California?
2. How might the circulation of photographic portraits have changed social relationships in the United States?



**Sojourner Truth's Carte de Visite.** After the introduction of photography, Americans could exchange calling cards that featured their own likenesses. By 1851, wet-plate collodion processes allowed for the mechanical reproduction of unlimited (and cheap) copies of a single image, and politicians, authors, and actors began using these cartes de visite as a form of publicity. The abolitionist orator Sojourner Truth used cartes de visite to support herself and raise funds for her cause.

wrote frequently of their desire for letters from home (see Hot Commodities: Daguerreotype Portraits). On “steamer days,” when mail from the eastern states would be unloaded, the post offices in Sacramento and San Francisco became mob scenes.

## NATIONAL LITERATURE

The decade after President Polk's election was also a time of explosive growth in American literature. An expanding publishing industry, headquartered in northeastern cities, circulated unprecedented volumes of fiction. Americans read much of this fiction in serial installments in newspapers and magazines, or in cheap soft-covered pamphlets sent in the mail. Because there were no international copyright laws (Congress was more interested in promoting the spread of reading than in protecting the property rights of authors), publishers could reprint foreign works without having to pay royalties. But several American

authors produced best-selling books as well. Female novelists such as Maria Cummins, Susan Warner, and Fanny Fern reached tens of thousands of readers in the middle of the nineteenth century with fiction that explored and celebrated the private feelings and sympathies of their characters and focused on family relationships. This body of novels, often classified by critics as **sentimental literature**, included Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (see Chapter 14), which would become the best-selling American novel of the century.

Stowe's novel also had elements of another popular fiction genre, often designated **sensational literature** and typically authored by men. Best-selling sensational fiction included the adventure stories and melodramas of the nativist author Ned Buntline, reform tracts such as T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (see Chapter 12), the soft-core pornographic novels of George Thompson, and George Lippard's *The Quaker City*. Lippard's 1845 novel, which was based on a Philadelphia

murder that had dominated the local news, promised to expose the “Secret Life of Philadelphia” and entertained readers with stories of seduction, rape, murder, and the corruption of city life. Lippard himself was a prominent advocate of westward expansion and donated much of the money he earned from his literary career to a campaign for distributing western land to the nation’s urban working class. More generally, popular sensationalist fiction after 1845 celebrated the expanding American frontier as a place where adventurous men from different classes, parties, and regions could overcome their differences and unite under the banner of American manhood.

It was in this same short period that the poets, novelists, and essayists now considered the giants of nineteenth-century literature produced their classic works. Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne were not nearly as well read in their day as Warner, Lippard, or Stowe, but by the middle of the twentieth century, they became part of the American cultural canon and their work came to represent what critics call the **American Renaissance**. Their most enduring writing (including *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Walden*, and *Leaves of Grass*) first appeared in print in the years 1850–1855, at a time when Americans were grappling with the implications of their expanded nation.

Several of the leading figures in the American Renaissance, including Melville, Whitman, and Hawthorne, were part of a New York–based literary circle that revolved around the nation’s most famous expansionist journal, the *Democratic Review*. The journal’s literary editor, Evert Duyckinck, became a spokesman for the Young America movement in American literature. Authors in this circle cared deeply about politics and attributed enormous political significance to literature. They were optimistic about the United States and eager to enhance its reputation, spread its influence, and expand its territorial sovereignty. They also supported nationalist republican movements in Europe (see The Revolutions of 1848), were obsessed with youth, were friendly to the labor movement, and favored extending suffrage across class lines. But they were far cooler to middle-class reform causes such as temperance, women’s suffrage, and abolitionism; and like the blackface performers and promoters, they were strongly identified with the Democratic Party.

## THE AMERICAN NATION IN THE WORLD

Because the Mexican cession and the Oregon settlement added territories that extended the United States to the Pacific and established what are more or less the nation’s current continental borders, it is tempting to think that the project of expansionism was complete and America’s manifest destiny fulfilled. But nationalists in 1848 did not see it that way. Many American politicians, writers, and adventurers gazed with interest at other parts of the globe and saw new opportunities for American influence and new frontiers for U.S. expansion.

## THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1848

On February 21, 1848, with new the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo freshly arrived at the U.S. capital, Americans learned of the Paris uprising that signaled the beginning of a new revolution against the French monarchy. This was the first of the revolutions of 1848, which erupted through much of the European continent. Over the course of the year, liberal nationalist movements sought to establish new republican governments within the sprawling, multiethnic Hapsburg Empire centered in Austria. Uprisings in Hungary, Bohemia, German-speaking lands, the Balkan region, and the Italian peninsula declared independence from the Hapsburgs and envisioned a new era of liberal nation-states in central Europe. By 1849, however, some of the coalitions that had supported these uprisings had fallen apart and conservative forces were able to restore Hapsburg rule.

American nationalists greeted the revolutions of 1848 enthusiastically. Many relished the prospect of the toppling of old European regimes. Some celebrated the idea that republican revolutions were extending an American empire of liberty eastward. When the exiled Hungarian nationalist leader Lajos Kossuth toured the United States in 1851, following the defeat of his revolution by Russian forces, he received a hero’s welcome throughout the country. Tens of thousands of spectators met his ship upon arrival in New York, a congressional banquet was held in his honor, and Kossuth paraphernalia appeared in stores across the nation. Supporters of the Young America movement were among Kossuth’s loudest fans and portrayed him as the representative of American freedom in an Old World ruled by despots.

Kossuth hoped to parlay his American popularity into foreign aid that would enable him to launch a second revolution, but here he failed. Though private individuals donated to the Hungarian cause, the U.S. government was loath to antagonize the Hapsburgs and become enmeshed in European wars. And over the course of his visit, the Kossuth mania subsided. Irish Americans, many of whom saw Kossuth as an enemy of the Catholic Church, grew critical. Southerners worried that his speeches on behalf of freedom would embolden the critics of slavery. Kossuth was careful to avoid that topic, but this only alienated abolitionists, who accused him of pandering or hypocrisy. Unable to navigate the tensions of U.S. sectional politics, he headed back to Europe in 1852 without having achieved his real goal, but the American nationalism that had turned Kossuth into a star did not diminish.

## FILIBUSTERS

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo did not satisfy many Americans’ desires for territorial expansion. Democrats in particular clamored for further acquisitions and made expansionism a consistent plank in their party platform even after the war. In 1848, they ran Lewis Cass for president against the Whigs’ war hero, Zachary Taylor. Cass had advocated taking all of Mexico during the war and supported annexing Cuba as well. Cass was defeated by Taylor (who died in 1850 and was succeeded by Millard Fillmore), but Democrats continued to push for expansion into Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and the





**President Taylor's Death.** Like William Henry Harrison (the only other Whig elected to the presidency), Zachary Taylor served a short term in office. Conspiracy theorists would later accuse the Slave Power of orchestrating the deaths of these two presidents out of fear that they would thwart the expansion of slavery. Forensic evidence supports the hypothesis that Taylor died from acute gastroenteritis.

Pacific. When Democrats retook the presidency in 1852 with the election of Franklin Pierce, the United States pressed Mexico to cede more land, resulting in the Gadsden Purchase, and tried hard to wrest Cuba from the Spanish.

Where the U.S. government failed or refused to go, individual American citizens took matters into their own hands. The Mexican War triggered a rash of filibuster campaigns in which private armies used American territory and American expansionist ideals as a launching pad for invading foreign countries. Derived from a Spanish word meaning freebooter (pirate), American **filibusters** (the word denotes both the invader and the invasion) entered British Canada, Mexico, Ecuador, Honduras, Cuba, and Nicaragua—and contemplated invasions of the Hawaiian Islands. These campaigns violated international law, which the United States had reaffirmed in the 1818 Neutrality Act, and the federal government officially disavowed them. But filibusters enjoyed significant popularity during the postwar years, in both the North and the South, especially among Democrats.

Filibusters were motivated by various desires for private gain, adventure, and masculine honor, but most of the men who led these expeditions also imagined that they would ultimately be extending U.S. sovereignty over new land. This was not an entirely unreasonable expectation. After all, Texas provided a model for how a revolution by Americans acting without the sanction of their government could ultimately bring about annexation. The filibusters who invaded Sonora, Cuba, or Nicaragua anticipated a

similar process as they sought to fulfill the nation's manifest destiny.

Though thousands of Americans participated in the filibusters, they did not succeed. Joseph Morehead's foray into the Mexican state of Sonora was rebuffed in Baja California in 1851. California state senator Henry Crabb met his death while leading a similar expedition in 1857. Venezuela-born Narciso López founded the Junta Cubana in New York in 1848, attracting significant American support for his attempt at revolution in Cuba, but he was executed on the island in 1851. Tennessean William Walker seized power in Nicaragua from 1855 to 1857 (he reintroduced slavery there, hoping to attract southern support for annexation), but he was ousted and eventually shot to death in Honduras in 1860.

In retrospect, these ventures may seem foolhardy, but filibusters saw themselves as the vanguard of

American imperial expansion, fighting on the side of history. They had no reason to believe that the pace of U.S. territorial acquisition would slacken. In 1853, the *Democratic Review* (a prominent supporter of the López filibuster) imagined the nation's borders creeping progressively southward into Mexico and spreading "a penumbra over the West Indies." Several years later the magazine asserted that "no well-informed person entertains the shadow of a doubt" that Cuba and Mexico would become states in the growing union.

## NEW COMMERCIAL FRONTIERS

Whigs were less eager to add new territory to a nation already beset by sectional controversy over the extension of slavery. Instead they sought to expand the nation's power and influence by opening up new trade networks and building a commercial empire in the Pacific. Whig president Fillmore instructed naval commander Matthew Perry to sail to Japan with heavily armed ships, to pressure the Japanese to open up their ports to American traders. The first Perry expedition reached Edo (now called Tokyo) in 1853 and conveyed a letter from President Fillmore. A year later, a second expedition resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa, under which Japan agreed to limited diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States. The United States would now be able to compete in the growing world of Pacific trade.

## CONCLUSION

A decade after Congress voted to annex Texas, the United States was a sprawling transcontinental nation with new links to the Pacific world. Many of its citizens expected further extension of the nation's borders and harbored ambitions for an expansive American empire. But even the way things stood in 1854, the United States had become a very different place in a very short time. Territorial expansion attracted new streams of foreign migration and accelerated the dispersal of the native-born population. Various forces, including railroads, telegraph wires, cheap postage, print culture, and commercial entertainment, helped forge links among a mobile populace. But the era of nationalist expansion would pose new threats to the political unity of the country. By 1854, the compromises and coalitions that had contained sectional conflict over slavery were already straining and struggling to survive.

## STUDY TERMS

Texas annexation (p. 324)	Gadsden Purchase (p. 330)	moral drama (p. 341)
manifest destiny (p. 325)	Overland Trail (p. 331)	blackface minstrelsy (p. 341)
Young America (p. 325)	Donner party (p. 332)	Jim Crow (p. 341)
electromagnetic telegraph (p. 327)	California gold rush (p. 333)	Associated Press (p. 344)
San Patricio battalion (p. 328)	forty-niners (p. 334)	Hyer versus Sullivan (p. 344)
<i>Resistance to Civil Government</i> (p. 329)	Californios (p. 335)	postage reform (p. 345)
Oregon settlement (p. 329)	Foreign Miners Taxes (p. 336)	sentimental literature (p. 346)
Wilmot Proviso (p. 329)	Committee of Vigilance (p. 338)	sensational literature (p. 346)
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (p. 330)	Mormon exodus (p. 338)	American Renaissance (p. 347)
	Deseret (p. 338)	revolutions of 1848 (p. 347)
	Astor Place Riot (p. 339)	filibusters (p. 348)
	American Museum (p. 340)	

## TIMELINE

- 1844** Samuel Morse successfully demonstrates electromagnetic telegraph  
James Knox Polk elected president on an expansionist platform
- 1845** Texas annexed  
First postage reduction passed by Congress
- 1846** Congress declares war on Mexico  
Britain and United States settle Oregon boundary  
Associated Press created in New York  
Brigham Young leads Mormon exodus to Utah



- 1848** Gold discovered in California  
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed  
Nationalist revolutions break out across Europe
- 1849** Astor Place Riot kills twenty-two people in New York  
Hyer versus Sullivan boxing match becomes major sporting event
- 1853** Matthew Perry's expedition arrives in Japan  
United States acquires additional land from Mexico in the Gadsden Purchase
- 1854** Treaty of Kanagawa initiates new era of Pacific trade relations
- 1855** William Walker assumes power in Nicaragua
- 1856** For the second time, a Committee of Vigilance takes over San Francisco



## FURTHER READING

Additional suggested readings are available on the Online Learning Center at [www.mhhe.com/becomingamericatc](http://www.mhhe.com/becomingamericatc).

- James Cook, *The Arts of Deception* (2001), treats P. T. Barnum as the central figure in a popular culture obsessed with fraudulent or misleading appearances.
- Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts* (2008), explains the importance of Indian raids to the course of Mexican history and the success of the U.S. invasion of Mexico.
- John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (1979), explores the experiences and world views of rural white midwesterners who trekked across the Rockies at midcentury.
- Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (2005), shows the importance of competing ideas of masculinity in the controversies over filibuster expeditions and nationalist expansion.
- Amy Greenberg, *A Wicked War* (2012), chronicles the political dramas and bitter controversies surrounding the U.S. invasion of Mexico.
- Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (2007), includes an especially strong account of the politics of the U.S.-Mexican War and the role of information exchange in that event.
- Albert Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (1990), details the impact of Mexican and American settlements on native life in California.
- Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp* (2000), studies gender roles in the southern mining camps of the California gold rush.
- Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1991), illuminates the connections between American popular culture and Democratic Party politics.
- Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations* (2002), analyzes the images of Mexico, race, and imperial expansion that suffused popular literature during this period.
- Graham White and Shane White, *Stylin'* (1998), describes the expressive culture of free blacks in the North, which became the subject of racist ridicule on the blackface stage.