

# America, 1840-1859

## The Great Plains in 1840

In 1840, the vast stretch of land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains was known to many as the 'Great American Desert'. It wasn't a desert at all, but to white Americans, it seemed harsh and uninhabitable. This attitude reflected a lack of understanding of the region's geography and the people who had lived there for generations – the Indigenous Nations of the Plains. White Americans believed in 'Manifest Destiny,' the idea that they were destined to spread across the entire continent. This belief justified their expansion westward, even at the expense of the Indigenous peoples who had their own deep connection to the land.

The Indigenous Nations were diverse, each with its own social structures and ways of life. Tribes like the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Comanche lived as nomads, moving with the buffalo herds that were central to their survival. Their culture was shaped by a respect for nature and a belief that the land could not be owned, only used in harmony with the environment. These beliefs put them at odds with white settlers, who saw land as something to be bought, sold, and cultivated. It can be argued that conflict over land was inevitable.

The Indigenous peoples also had a unique attitude toward war and property. They didn't fight over land in the way white settlers did, but warfare between tribes was common, often centred around honour, hunting grounds, or horses. As white Americans moved westward, they sneered at the Indigenous peoples' way of life, seeing them as 'savages' and obstacles to progress.

## Populating the Plains

As the 1840s progressed, more and more white settlers made the decision to leave their homes and travel west, lured by the promise of rich farmland or the possibility of gold in California. The 1849 California Gold Rush was a major turning point, as thousands of people – from within the United States and even from overseas – rushed west to seek their fortune. But the journey itself was dangerous and often deadly. One of the most tragic examples of this was the Donner Party, a group of pioneers who became trapped by snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains; desperation led to cannibalism, a grim reminder of how perilous the journey could be.

Another group that made the journey west were the Mormons, led by Brigham Young. Persecuted for their religious beliefs, the Mormons sought a place where they could practice their faith in peace. In 1846-47, they embarked on a mass migration to the Salt Lake Valley, which was then part of Mexico. The Mormons were remarkably well-organized, and their settlement at Salt Lake City became a model of cooperation and community. However, not everyone welcomed their presence. Tensions between the Mormons and non-Mormons boiled over in 1857, leading to the Mountain Meadows Massacre, where around 120 settlers were killed by Mormon militia. The massacre and its aftermath cast a long shadow over relations between the Mormons and the US government.

While pioneers and settlers moved west, a new industry was booming – cattle ranching. The open range of the Plains was perfect for raising cattle, and entrepreneurs like John Iliff, Joseph McCoy, and Charles Goodnight helped build the cattle industry into a massive enterprise. Cow towns like Abilene became famous as centres of cattle trade, and the development of the railroad network allowed cattle to be shipped east to markets. Cowboys, seen ever since as rugged and romantic, lived hard lives herding and driving the cattle, especially during the harsh winter of 1886–87, which devastated the open range. The decline of the cattle industry, combined with the spread of homesteading, marked the end of an era.

Homesteaders, encouraged by government acts like the Homestead Act of 1862, also began to flood the Plains; they were promised 160 acres of free land if they could farm it for five years. However, farming on the Plains was no easy task. The soil was rock hard, water was scarce, and the weather harsh and unpredictable. New technologies like the steel plough and wind pumps helped, but life was still on a knife-edge. Many homesteaders faced conflict with the ranchers who had once dominated the region, culminating in events like the Johnson County War of 1892, where tensions between ranchers and homesteaders erupted into violence.

Meanwhile, the towns that grew up in the West faced their own problems, with widespread lawlessness and outlaws like Billy the Kid. Early lawmen like Wyatt Earp became legends, and the shootout at the OK Corral in 1881 became one of the most famous events in the history of the American West. Federal authorities gradually stepped in, sending governors, courts, marshals and sheriffs to enforce the law and tame the West.

## Conflict with the Indigenous Nations

As white settlers and the US government expanded westward, the Indigenous peoples were pushed further and further from their lands. Initially, the US government promised that the lands west of the Mississippi would remain the 'Permanent Indian Frontier'. However, as more settlers arrived, this promise was broken. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 tried to give the Indigenous Nations their traditional hunting grounds as specific 'reservations', but this policy of concentration failed as white settlers, lured by gold, fertile land, and the cattle industry, kept encroaching on Indigenous territory.

The construction of the railroads was particularly devastating for the Indigenous Nations. It cut through their hunting grounds, disrupted the migration of the buffalo, and brought even more settlers into their lands. The spread of cattle ranching also damaged their way of life, as ranchers took over land that had once been travelled by buffalo herds. This led to increased conflict. Little Crow's War in 1862 and the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864 were brutal reminders of the tensions between settlers and Indigenous peoples. Red Cloud's War from 1866 to 1868, including the infamous Fetterman's Trap where 80 US soldiers were killed, was one of the few conflicts in which the Indigenous peoples managed to win significant victories.

Consequently, after 1865, the US government shifted its policy toward confining Indigenous peoples to small reservations. The second Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 marked a turning point, as it promised to leave the sacred Black Hills to the Sioux, only for that promise to be broken when gold was discovered there. This led to the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, where General Custer and his men were wiped out by a coalition of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. It was a pyrrhic victory, because all that happened was the US Army overwhelmed the Indigenous Nations. The Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 marked the end of resistance, and the Dawes Act of 1887 further undermined Indigenous culture by dividing communal tribal lands into individual plots.

By the end of the 19th century, the 'frontier' was considered closed. The Indigenous Nations had been destroyed and displaced, their lands taken, and their way of life changed, and their children sent to Boarding Schools to be 'civilised'. The once vast and open Plains were now owned by ranchers, farmers, and railroads.

## The American Civil War

The American Civil War, fought between 1861 and 1865, was the bloodiest conflict in US history and had its roots in deep divisions between the North and the South. The key issue was slavery. The wealthy and powerful of the Southern states depended on enslaved labour to run their plantations, while the North, which was more industrialized, opposed the expansion of slavery into new western territories. This division became more pronounced as the US expanded westward, with new states having to decide whether to be 'free' or 'slave' states.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had tried to keep a balance between 'free' and 'slave' states in the Senate, but by the 1850s, this balance was breaking down. Abolitionists in the North, including figures like John Brown (who tried to start a revolution of the enslaved people), argued that slavery was morally wrong and should be abolished everywhere. The South, on the other hand, feared that their way of life would be destroyed if slavery were outlawed. When Abraham Lincoln, who was opposed to the expansion of slavery, was elected president in 1860, several Southern states seceded from the Union, forming the Confederate States of America, led by Jefferson Davis.

In the Civil War that followed, the Union (North) eventually triumphed over the Confederacy (South), but the cost was enormous – both in terms of lives lost and the destruction of property. The war had a profound impact on civilians, particularly in the South, where entire towns and plantations were left in ruins.

The 13th Amendment, passed at the end of the war, abolished slavery, but the fight for civil rights was far from over. The period of Reconstruction that followed the war, from 1866 to 1877, was a time of deep political conflict. The federal government tried to enforce civil and political rights for the newly-freed Black Americans in the South, but resistance from Southern states was strong. Laws like the Civil Rights Act (which became the 14th Amendment) and the 15th Amendment (which gave Black males the vote) were nullified by 'Jim Crow' laws passed by Southern state governments. The rise of terror groups like the Ku Klux Klan showed how difficult it was to change deeply entrenched attitudes. By 1877, when Reconstruction ended, many of the gains made by African Americans had been rolled back, setting the stage for nearly a century of segregation.

The balance between federal and state powers, a key issue before the war, remained contentious after it. The Civil War had reshaped the United States, but it left behind a legacy of division.