

Expansion of the west in the late 1800s



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This “ think piece” will cover the westward expansion from the 1860s to the 1890s. There will be three contributing factors which helped facilitate the expansion that will be discussed in this paper. The main focus point will cover major cities, railroad networks, improved agricultural land, states and territories in the timeframe discussed. The railroad played an important and valuable role throughout the westward expansion of the United States.

Improvement of land was extremely important to expansion. Furthermore, we will identify the role in which the railroad networks played and the gold rush during the timeframe of 1860 through 1890.

In the early beginnings of the 1860s, there were a few major cities, primarily along the East Coast of the United States. During that time, New York City, New York as well as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania were the two largest cities with populations of approximately five hundred thousand personnel. Most of the other cities that were established along that coast were established by immigrants who came from overseas. By the mid-1870’s more cities sprouted in the northeastern United States along with New Orleans, Louisiana in the south and San Francisco, California in the west, which would later become one of the largest cities in the United States. As people continued to migrate into the States, they continued to move primarily to the west, this, in turn, helped facilitate the expansion and the birth of new cities that are frequented today.

In the early months of the 1880s, Chicago, Illinois, and New York City, New York had populations of approximately one million people and are still very populated cities to this day. As the United States entered the year of 189, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania joined the list of cities with populations of a

million people. Brooklyn, New York was nearing that list with a population of five hundred thousand. Major cities that expanded in the west/mid-west were Minneapolis, Minnesota, Kansas City, Kansas, Omaha, Nebraska and Denver, Colorado. The cities that grew within a thirty to forty-year span, are still some of the most populated metropolitan cities today.

There were many contributing factors which assisted with facilitating with the expansion and the migration of people out west but the list was narrowed down to three for this short paper. The first factor was the Homestead Act which was passed in 1862 where it opened up millions of acres. The Homestead Act allowed ahead of a household and any persons over the age of twenty-one, to include a woman who was not married to buy approximately one hundred and sixty acres for approximately one dollar and twenty-five cents. The only requirement was to improve the land within five years of accepting the deal. The improvement standards were very minimal and could be met by simply clearing out a few acres.

The second contributing factor was the Pacific Railway Act which was passed in 1862. This act granted the right of ways for the Union Pacific Railroad to promote the construction of a transcontinental railway system. It also granted the Central Pacific Railroad the rights to build a railway system east from Sacramento, California, which eventually lead the two companies to join the railway system and allowing travel from coast to coast. The third contributing factor was the federal government building forts throughout the west to protect settlers throughout the migration. Some of these forts later became trading posts for miners as years passed by.

The railroad was first proposed to Congress by merchants and played a

pivotal role in the expansion westward. During the 1860s the railroad network was limited to the east coast of the United States. As of 1869 the railways were connected from the coast to coast and migrating into the central parts of the country. The railroad which connected the east coast and west coast was completed by an eight-man crew of Chinese immigrants. As the railroad finished its construction, it went through both territories and states.

Between the late 1880s and early 1890s, the railroad grew with the expansion of people moving west. During the 1890s the railroad network was very well connected in every state and/or territory with the exception of Alaska. The railroad system made traveling to the west coast easier. There were thirteen territories confirmed, four unorganized territories, and thirty-four states in the 1860s. Both North Dakota and South Dakota have split down the middle, leaving half territories and half unorganized territories.

Moving forward ten years to the 1870s, North and South Dakota became territories leaving only two of the known four unorganized territories which were Alaska and Oklahoma, which was still Indian Territory. The remaining eleven territories were still in place along with the states. Colorado and Kansas who gained statehood by the 1880s, leaving ten territories left and continuing leaving Alaska and Oklahoma as unorganized territories. Many residents who lived in territories opposed statehood simply due to many of them thinking it would be a financial burden and they would not be able to afford the expansion by population. In the 1890s, there were three territories remaining which were Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. In 1896, Utah joined statehood after making several attempts over a fifty-five year period. Both

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New Mexico and Arizona joined statehood in 1912, which made Arizona the last of the forty-eight contiguous states to become a state.

In conclusion, the westward expansion was necessary. Sooner rather than later it was going to happen. If the expansion would have taken any longer, the east coast would have been overpopulated long before cities started becoming heavily populated. The Pacific Railroad Act, the Homestead Act, and the building of forts all elevated the incredibility of life and allowed for growth within the United States and the people. The building of the railroad made the shipping of goods and the capableness to travel west and move outstandingly easier in comparison to covered wagons. All of these factors listed made the expansion west accessible to more people. Although the growth of the country was in its early stages, we as a country continued to grow.

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