

Expansion in the west  
from 1840-1890  
essay sample



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When an area is settled for the first time, there are certain things that shape the development of the land and the people who settle it. From the 1840's to the 1890's, the natural environment, among other things, shaped the development of the West beyond the Mississippi River and the lives of those who lived and settled there. Some examples of places that were shaped and/or affected by the natural environment are Texas, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the California/West Coast area.

Texas was one of the first areas past the Mississippi to be settled. Ever since the Republic of Texas accepted annexation in 1845, it was a truly "frontier" land in many senses of the word. There was always a certain myth about Texas, even before it became a state. There were rumors of it being nothing more than one enormous desert. The people living there, ever since being recruited by the empresarios, knew that Texas was more than just a large chunk of dry land. Those settlers knew that it was useful farmland with much potential to attract many American settlers. As far as natural environment goes, Texas was a large chunk of dry land that proved to be surprisingly more than adequate for the farmers who lived there. As stated above, this property of the land helped make it attractive to farmers. Texas was also a fairly flat land, which was the perfect environment for longhorn cattle to flourish in.

This came to help Texas very much as the formation of the cattle frontier arrived. When the age of the cowboys and long cattle drives from Texas to Abilene, Kansas began, it was the people on the "ground-floor" of this frontier who truly struck it rich, adding further to Texas's mystique. In addition to the natural environment, the history of Texas prior to being an

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American state also was a large and important factor in shaping the lives of the people who settled there. This fact can be perfectly illustrated in Document D. In that picture, it is clear that San Antonio, even as early as 1849, was a thriving place with a heavy Mexican-Spanish influence. If it weren't for the American flag waving in the background, one would think that the city was Mexico City, Vera Cruz, or any other thriving Mexican city.

A second area that was settled west of the Mississippi that was affected by its natural environment is the Great Plains. Probably more than any other region of the West, the natural environment played havoc with those living there. As a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, a huge number of people moved West planning on making a living by farming on 160 acres of essentially free land. When they finally arrived on their homesteads, they must have been surprised to discover that their land was very, very difficult to farm on and there were, for the most part, no trees around. As a result of this, the families of farmers had to do what Americans had been doing for at least 150 years- they adapted to their new circumstances. To counter the difficult soil, farmers dabbled their feet, many of them for the first time, in the "modern" and exciting new world of machine agriculture that included the McCormick Reaper and the John Deere steel plow. These machines made life on the Plains easier to bear and made the work not quite as back-breaking.

Another thing that farmers on the "farming frontier" used was the windmill. In an area where water was difficult to get, nothing could quite help out with wells like a self-regulating windmill. Since the dry soil would not grow grain well, Great Plains farmers had to rely on growing the new "hard" wheat, <https://assignbuster.com/expansion-in-the-west-from-1840-1890-essay-sample/>

which was brought from the Ukraine. In response to the additional problem of cattle getting loose and grazing beyond their limits, settlers used the newly-invented barbed wire to help and fence them in. Unfortunately, the arrival of barbed wire on the farming frontier pretty much brought an end to the cattle frontier.

In a nutshell, farmers brought in modern appliances and technology to help and “conquer” the problems that the natural environment of the Plains presented. Another important factor in the settlement of the Great Plains region was the ever-present threat of Indian hostility. While settlers pretty much kept a wary eye to this problem, it was handled mostly by the government. The government sent in the Army to take care of the problem and keep renegade Indians in check. In addition to this, it also kept Indians on their reservations where American citizens could not go.

Another region of the West that was affected by the natural environment was the Rocky Mountains. The name says it all, as the land was very hilly and rocky, making farming difficult and passage by cattle for the cattle frontier even harder. What the Rocky Mountain region was good for was a third frontier, the mining frontier. Although the mining frontier did not start or end in the Rocky Mountain region, there were many gold strikes in the Rockies. The mining frontier was a short-lived and colorful era, that attracted many people to the Rockies, as can be shown in Document G. In this picture, it is visible that Greeley, Colorado, went from a few shacks and a flooded road in 1870 to a thriving city with all of the eastern-style niceties. Many cities in the Rockies sprang up like this, and most of them were products of the mining-frontier. In summary, because gold was found at numerous sites, <https://assignbuster.com/expansion-in-the-west-from-1840-1890-essay-sample/>

such as the Comstock Lode along the Carson River in Nevada, the Rocky Mountains region went from seemingly uncharted territory to a thriving region with its own economic advantages and disadvantages.

The final region of the West to be affected by the natural environment was the California/West Coast region. This region, like the Rocky Mountains, played a major part in the mining frontier. Ever since gold was first discovered in 1849 in California, there was always a contingent of miners there looking to strike it rich by being the first on the scene at the next big lode to be discovered. But mining was not the only thing people sought to do in California. Many families traveled all the way across the country to find a nice 160-acre lot of farmland on the West Coast. One can see the troubles that these families faced in Document E. The author, Lucy Henderson, uses words like “ we had to press on,” we lived on boiled wheat and boiled peas that summer,” and “ we were out of food and our cattle were nearly worn out.”

Through true-to-life testimonies like this, modern-day Americans can get a good feel for the sorts of struggles people went through just to get to the West Coast. Though the soil wasn't nearly as bad on the West Coast as it was on the Great Plains, West Coast farmers still used farming machinery to help make their work easier. The West Coast, much like the regions of Texas and part of the Great Plains, was home to two frontiers. In the West Coast's, these two frontiers were the farming and mining frontier. This was a result of the natural environment of both hills where gold could be found and flatter, more even land which was suitable for farming.

The regions of Texas, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the West Coast, all West of the Mississippi River, were affected by a number of small factors, but most of all by the natural environment of the region. It was the natural environment of the region that was responsible for the mining, cattle, and farming frontiers. It was the natural environment of the Great Plains that required farmers to buy farm machinery, in turn affecting the Eastern economy. These are a few of many examples of how the natural environment of the West shaped the development of the west and the lives of those who lived and settled there. What is important is that settlers of the West, like immigrants to America and natural-born Americans always have, adapted to the natural environment and met with, for the most part, successful ends.