
The American Frontier

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—The American Frontier: an Introduction—

It is a story filled with adventure, risk, courage, tragedy, and dreams. It is a saga of movement and endurance; of seeking a new place and a better life, a search for what lies beyond the next mountain, the next river, the next forest, and the next rolling prairie. Those who were a part of its unfolding drama and myth—Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Sam Houston, Buffalo Bill—continue to inspire the imaginations of many readers and spark our curiosity with scenes of trailblazing, fur trapping, buffalo hunting, and empire building.

It is the story of the American frontier. A constant thread throughout the history of the developing United States, the era of the American frontier reveals the stories of those who led the way west; those who helped to tame and settle the lands which today comprise a nation of over 280 million people with its mix of races, nationalities, and ethnic diversity.

So much of this period of American history is clouded over with legends, tall tales, and well-intended mythology, it is sometimes difficult to separate fact from fiction. Everyone knows that Daniel Boone, the great Kentucky trailblazer, wore a coonskin cap; that Davy Crockett went to his death at the Alamo swinging his empty Kentucky rifle against Mexican soldiers; that Indians were cruel and savage people who stood in the way of American progress; that Lewis and Clark were the first white men to reach the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains; and that wagon trains on the Oregon Trail regularly faced the threat of Indian attack and so circled their wagons, as warriors on horseback rode endlessly around the circular caravan, their war whoops echoing across the Plains.

In fact, all those “facts” are false. Daniel Boone did not like wearing coonskin caps. Instead, he wore felt hats. Davy Crockett probably surrendered



at the Alamo and was executed after the battle was over. Native Americans were not typically cruel and savage, but rather were themselves victims of deceit at the hands of Anglo-Americans and the federal government. Lewis and Clark, in fact, encountered other white men on their expedition,

including a fur trader named Charbonneau, who was “married” to Sacajawea, the famous Indian guide. And Indian attack against wagon trains rarely happened at all.

How, then, do we come to have such enduring images of the American frontier which are simply untrue or misleading? A portion of the answer lies in how the westward movement has been portrayed on television and in motion pictures, as well as in American literature.

Throughout nearly all of the 20th century, motion pictures have portrayed the frontier as a place filled with brave pioneers, treacherous Indians, intrepid mountain men, and cowboys ready to fight for the underdog. In fact, the first motion picture with a plot was a western, *The Great Train Robbery*, filmed in 1903.

Television programs, beginning in the 1950s, and even more recently, regularly included “westerns” in their evening lineups—from *Gunsmoke* to *Bonanza*; *The Young Riders* to *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Such programs typically bypassed the true reality of western life: hard work, crude living conditions, and little glamour.

Popular fiction has also often distorted the true nature of the American frontier, the West of the imagination, with images of gunfighters, barroom brawls, and swaggering cowboys ready to draw down at the flick of a well-trained wrist.

The purpose of this book is to draw an accurate and realistic picture of what life was like on the frontier. The true story, as you will see, can be as exciting as the myth.

The Moveable Frontier

Before taking up the history of the American West or the frontier movement in American history, it is important to have a clear understanding of at least two historical terms, both of which have already been used in this introductory sentence: the West and the frontier.

What exactly is meant by each of these two terms? Do they refer to the same thing? And if they do, what is that “thing”? Is the West a place or a time period? Where, specifically, is the frontier? Answers for these questions are not as easy as they seem.

To begin, let’s attempt to nail down a definition for the term, frontier. After all, it’s part of the title of this book. The term frontier generally refers to a marginal reality lying between two places. In some respects, those ‘two places’ can be identified as the known and the unknown. When an Englishman sailed in 1607 from his home in England (the known) to the site later called Jamestown in colonial Virginia, he landed in an America he had never seen before (the unknown). That place where he settled (Fort James, or later Jamestown) was a marginal reality called the frontier.

We can identify the term frontier, as it related to American history, then, as the place lying between civilization (the known) and the wilderness (the unknown). Obviously, that Jamestown settler of 1607 came to live in the wilderness, an untamed land of virgin forests, unpolluted rivers, and unspoiled meadows. But, simply by his being there, having left another place behind, and bringing with him Old World skills, ways of thinking, values, traditions, technologies, and social institutions, the wilderness he occupied did not remain wild.

In time, the Jamestown colonist and thousands like him, felled the trees, built houses and a fort, established churches, organized themselves socially, elected representatives to an assembly, farmed the meadows, and tamed their world. Once these changes were introduced (and many others besides), the marginal existence of life in Jamestown ended and Old World civilization, as

well as New World influences, came together to create a new civilization in America. As that process progressed, the frontier, in that place, ceased to exist.

The frontier experience in our example at Jamestown, then, lasted from 1607 through a generation or so, then ended. Once civilization alters the wilderness, that region can no longer be called wilderness. Those years of transition are frontier years. So, the “frontier” in American history was a place always in transition.

This means that the frontier was always moving, as well. As people moved west, they established new settlements, each attached to a new wilderness place, and the process of taming the frontier and establishing the elements of civilization began all over again.

Defining “the West” is equally tricky. In the first place, “west” refers to a geographical location or direction. But when used in connection with “the frontier,” it is not only a direction, it is a region. And, just as with the frontier, where “the West” was depended on where people were at the time. For a resident of 17th-century Jamestown, “the West” was the Appalachian Mountains and the Piedmont region. For the pioneer of 1750, “the West” was Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee. For those who migrated along the Oregon Trail a century later, “the West” might be California or Oregon.

The West, then, as a place, has constantly changed throughout American history. As people and time moved, so did the places known as the West and the frontier. Both terms refer to a place, perhaps of the imagination, which was always evolving into somewhere else.

Review and Write

In defining “the frontier,” it is necessary to distinguish it from another term, “the West.” While they might overlap, the two terms have different definitions. Explain the differences between “the West” and “the frontier.”

Two Great Frontiers

An examination of the American Frontier is actually a study of at least two frontier periods in U.S. history. The first spanned the decades from approximately 1750 and 1850. This was the era of the Trans-Appalachian frontier. This frontier era included the expansion of Anglo-Americans west to the Appalachian Mountains and beyond, to the lands lying just west of the Mississippi River.

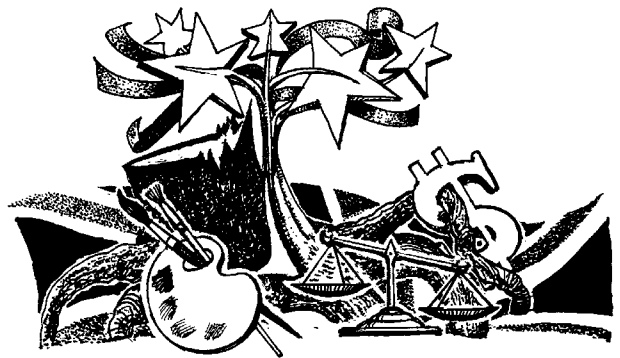
During this period, two great migrations of people moved across the frontier. The first migration pushed its way west to the Mississippi Valley, while, later, the second included settlers from the East and Midwest who moved across to the Great Plains in huge caravans of wagons bound for Oregon or California.

The second era was a shorter period of time, but one filled with kinetic movement and ultimate settlement of people across the Great Plains, west of the Mississippi River, throughout the Rocky Mountain region and the Pacific Coast. This period, from 1850 to 1890, marks the establishment of the Western Frontier, or the Trans-Mississippi West. It was a world of the cowboys, the open range, stage-coaches and the transcontinental railroad, Homesteaders, and rollicking mining towns.

Before taking up the subject of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier, a bit of background is needed. From the early 1600s, Europeans had landed by the boatload along the Atlantic seaboard, establishing colonial outposts, trading centers, plantations, and hopeful communities of immigrant-settlers, all eager to make a new place for themselves in America. While many of those who settled in the colonies stretching from New Hampshire and Massachusetts to the southern settlements of the Carolinas and Georgia were of English descent, others came from France, Holland, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and Scotland, as well as dozens of other points of origin. Africans also became part of the New World mix of peoples when they landed here by force during the early 17th century.

The experiences of these colonists along the Atlantic Coast constitutes, in a way, the first of the

American frontiers. They built homes in the wilderness, whether they were gold-seeking gentlemen in Jamestown, or pious Pilgrims in Plymouth, or Salzburg Jews in North Carolina. These early immigrants experienced hard times, including food shortages, disease, discouragement, Indian attack, and hostility from other Europeans. But cling they did, and together they formed the basis for what was to develop as a largely Anglo-American population in North America.



The term *Anglo-American* refers to the large majority of immigrants to the original thirteen colonies along the Atlantic Coast who came from the British Isles, including England, Wales, and Scotland. America's roots lay in English traditions, customs, laws, institutions, and arts.

For over a century and a half, these first colonists remained close to the Atlantic Coast, rarely venturing out to the unknown west, where Indians remained in significant numbers, and the extensive range of ridges called the Appalachian Mountains stood in the way of progress into the interior.

Moving west, however, was just a matter of time. As more and more people settled in the thirteen colonies, land became less available, causing increasing numbers of settlers to look to the West.

Review and Write

What differences in time and place are given here concerning two American frontier eras?