

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

Overview

The new American republic prior to the Civil War experienced dramatic territorial expansion, immigration, economic growth, and industrialization. The increasing complexity of American society, the growth of regionalism, and the cross-currents of change that are often bewildering require the development of several major themes to enable students to sort their way through the six decades that brought the United States to the eve of the Civil War. One theme is the vast territorial expansion between 1800 and 1861, as restless Americans pushed westward across the Appalachians, then across the Mississippi, and finally on to the Pacific Ocean.

A second theme confronts the economic development of the expanding American republic--a complex and fascinating process that on the one hand created the sinews of national identity but on the other hand fueled growing regional tensions.

A third theme interwoven with the two themes above can be organized around the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.

Connected to all of the above is the theme of reform, for the rapid transformation and expansion of the American economy brought forth one of the greatest bursts of reformism in American history.

One theme is the vast territorial expansion between 1800 and 1861, as restless Americans pushed westward across the Appalachians, then across the Mississippi, and finally on to the Pacific Ocean. Students should study how Americans, animated by land hunger, the ideology of "Manifest Destiny," and the optimism that anything was possible with imagination, hard work, and the maximum freedom of the individual, flocked to the western frontier. While studying how the frontier experience indelibly stamped the American character, students should explore its ambivalent aspects: the removal of many Indian nations in the Southeast and old Northwest, acquisition of a large part of Mexico through the Mexican-American War, and abrasive encounters with Native Americans, Mexicans, Chinese immigrants, and others in the West.

A second theme confronts the economic development of the expanding American republic--a complex and fascinating process that on the one hand created the sinews of national identity but on the other hand fueled growing regional tensions. In the North, the first stage of industrialization brings students face to face with the role of technology in historical change and how economic development has had profound environmental effects. In studying the rise of immigrant-filled cities, the "transportation revolution" involving railroads, canals, and trans-regional roads, the creation of a national market system, and the proliferation of family farming in newly opened territories, students will appreciate how Tocqueville might have reached the conclusion that the Americans seemed at one time "animated by the most selfish cupidity; at another by the most lively patriotism." In studying the expanding South, students must understand the enormous growth of slavery as an exploitive and morally corrupt economic and social system; but they should also comprehend how millions of African Americans struggled to shape their own lives as much as possible through family, religion, and resistance to slavery.

A third theme interwoven with the two themes above can be organized around the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800. The rise of the second party system and modern interest-group politics mark the advent of modern politics in the United States. However, students will see that the evolution of political democracy was not a smooth, one-way street as free African Americans were disenfranchised in much of the North

and woman's suffrage was blocked even while white male suffrage spread throughout the states and into the newly developed territories.

Connected to all of the above is the theme of reform, for the rapid transformation and expansion of the American economy brought forth one of the greatest bursts of reformism in American history. Emerson captured the vibrancy of this era in asking, "What is man born for but to be a reformer?" Students will find that the attempts to complete unfinished agendas of the revolutionary period and to fashion new reforms necessitated by the rise of factory labor and rapid urbanization partook of the era's democratic spirit and religious faith and yet also reflected the compulsion of well-positioned Americans to restore order to a turbulent society.