

FREE LAND!



Many maps showing American westward movement in the 18th and 19th centuries conjure images of wagon trains, log cabins, and Indian wars. In little more than a century after the Revolutionary War, American settlers crossed the continent by the millions. They established mines, ranches, and farms, then they organized the frontier territories into states.

“Free land” meant public land – unsettled land either individual states or the federal government claimed. The land usually became available for settlement as a result of treaties forcing Native American tribes to move to different lands. Before the land was sold to settlers, it was surveyed. Then the government sold huge lots of thousands of acres, sometimes for pennies an acre, to land companies or “land speculators.” Speculators sold farmstead and township plots to settlers at much higher prices; they justified their profits by noting that they often purchased the acreage many years before they could resell it, and any number of events could occur to make the land worthless.

The American West seemed virtually endless; each generation had its own frontier. After the Revolution, pioneers spent several decades settling the gulf states (Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi), the middle South (Kentucky and Tennessee), and the Northwest Territory (Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois). By the War of 1812, settlement had progressed west of the Mississippi into the Missouri and Arkansas territories. During the

1820s, immigrants followed the Natchez Trace through Mississippi to reach Texas; and by the 1830s wagon trains had begun traveling on the Oregon and California trails.

Families headed west to embrace new opportunities, to fulfill a sense of adventure, or to escape financial failure. Most settlers had gambled their life savings to purchase land thousands of miles away. They endured long, dangerous journeys to reach new towns and farms. When they arrived, many struggled for years to achieve success. Many fell ill or starved; some gave up and returned home. But the successful pioneers had a saying: “The cowards never started, and the weak died along the way.”

In 1890, the superintendent of the United States Census declared that the American frontier had been settled. In response, a young historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, wrote an essay entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” In this essay, Turner argued that the existence and settlement of the western frontier played a significant role in shaping the American character, individualism, and political independence. He concluded his essay by declaring that the closing of the frontier brought on the establishment of a new era in the history of the nation: “And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”

Later generations of historians have challenged aspects Turner’s thesis for failing to take into account ideas such as cooperation in the settlement of the west, the role of the federal government, the lives of those not on the frontier, and the lives of non-whites and women, which were shaped in different ways. But despite the criticisms of his thesis, Turner’s recognition of the importance of the western frontier in the development of American history continues to be embraced and discussed today.