Westward Expansion: Geographic and Economic Causes

A long-held belief also influenced American westward expansion. This belief, called Manifest Destiny, was held by many Americans in the 1840s. It was the belief that the United States would benefit from expansion and had the right to expand its people and government across the North American continent. Between 1801 and 1861 thousands of settlers began leaving the 13 original states and heading west. These brave pioneers made the dangerous journey over the Appalachian Mountains and into the vast new territories of the American frontier. What geographic and economic factors persuaded the settlers to move westward?

There were a number of geographic factors that led to western migration in the United States. During the early 1800s, population growth was a problem as the eastern states became more and more crowded. In addition, farmlands that were once fertile were being overworked and large plantations in the south were crowding out small farmers. If Americans were willing to leave their homes and move westward, huge areas of fertile land were available at very cheap prices. As a matter of fact, in the early 1800s, a farmer could buy 2 ½ acres of land in the western territories for only $1.25!

Another geographic factor that influenced westward migration was the availability of rivers and manmade waterways called canals. These waterways helped to make transportation cheaper and faster. Rivers provided an important means of transportation and communication between the eastern and western territories. Great rivers like the Ohio and the Mississippi became important migration routes for people and supplies. In addition, the newly invented steamboat became the main form of river transportation. Trips that once took months now took only days. Canals were built by the early settlers and connected the east to the western territories. By the early 1800s there were hundreds of miles of canals in the United States. One of the most famous was the Erie Canal located in the state of New York. It was 363 miles long and was the longest canal in the world!

An additional geographic factor influencing western migration was the growing knowledge of overland trails. Two of these trails, or migration routes, were the Oregon Trail and the Santa Fe Trail. The Oregon Trail began in Missouri and ended in the Oregon Territory. Thousands of American pioneers loaded up farm wagons and Prairie Schooners with all their belongings and set out on a dangerous six month, 2,000 mile journey. They encountered treacherous river crossings, terrifying storms, jagged mountain ranges, Indians, and diseases such as cholera on their way to the fertile soil of the Oregon Territory. The Santa Fe Trail also began in Missouri. The 1,200 mile trail that ended in New Mexico took about 8 weeks to travel. This journey was also a test of strength and endurance as the pioneers faced shortages of food and water, dangerous weather conditions, Indian raids, and bandits.
Westward Expansion: Geographic and Economic Causes (cont'd)

There were also a number of economic factors that led to western migration in the United States. New territories in the West made more land available for agriculture. Farmers of all types began to leave the rocky soil of the Northeast and the overworked soil of the South in search of rich farmland in the new territories. Farmland was easy to get and very cheap. Some land was even free. If a farmer built a house and cleared the brush, he could claim the land as his! As word spread, more men and women left their homes to take advantage of this rich interior land of the growing nation.

In addition to cheap and plentiful farmland, the availability of timberland was also an economic factor that influenced westward movement. As more and more settlers moved west, they needed timber for their homes, businesses, and towns. As a result, commercial logging companies began to prosper in the Northwest Territories where forests of towering trees covered the land. The harvesting of timber was called logging. It quickly became the top manufacturing industry in the west.

Another economic factor that influenced westward expansion was the discovery of gold in California. In 1847, during the construction of a sawmill, several gold nuggets were found in a nearby river bed. By 1849 the California Gold Rush had begun and gold fever spread quickly across the continent. More than 80,000 "forty-niners" charged west in search of riches and new lives.

Enslaved African Americans seeking freedom also ventured into the western territories in search of a better life. The growth of trade on major rivers, such as the Ohio and Mississippi, provided opportunities for escape. Runaway enslaved African Americans posed as free men or hid themselves on steamboats as they traveled west.