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Lecture Seven: Westward Expansion

1.1. Introduction

In the early 19th century, the United States experienced significant growth in both power and territory. The acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the nation's size and opened up new opportunities for exploration and settlement. Explorers returned with tales of beautiful and fertile lands, enticing Americans to venture westward. However, the nation was preoccupied with maintaining neutrality amidst threats from Britain and France. The War of 1812 resolved this issue, allowing the United States to focus on its North American aspirations.

The concept of manifest destiny, rooted in the ideology that the United States had a divine mission to expand its territory, played a central role in driving westward expansion. This movement was fueled by factors such as the gold rush, the Oregon Trail, and the belief in the country's destiny to extend across the entire continent. Laws and rhetoric were employed to promote and facilitate the settlement of western territories, reflecting the deep-rooted desire to fulfill the vision of the founding fathers and create a nation that defended freedom and encompassed the vast expanse of North America.

1.2. Reasons of Westward Expansion

Manifest Destiny: Coined by journalist John O'Sullivan, it was a belief in the providential mission of the United States to expand westward and eventually across the continent.

Population Growth and the Need for More Cities: The increasing population in the eastern states created a demand for new urban centers and opportunities for settlement in the West.

Availability of Cheap and Fertile Land: The Homestead Act provided an opportunity for individuals to claim and cultivate vast tracts of land, particularly for agricultural purposes such as cattle ranching.

Economic Opportunities: The discovery of gold and other valuable minerals in the West attracted prospectors and miners, stimulating economic growth and development.

Improved Transportation: The construction of railroads facilitated faster and cheaper transportation of people, goods, and supplies to and from the West.

Knowledge of Overland Trails: The existence of established trails, such as the Oregon Trail, provided a pathway for settlers to travel safely and efficiently to their desired destinations.

Adventurous Spirit and the Allure of the "Wild West": The idea of adventure and the romanticized image of the frontier enticed many Americans to seek new experiences and opportunities in the West.

Belief in Divine Will: Many Americans believed that expanding the country was a God-given mission and saw westward expansion as part of their destiny.

1.3. Effects of Westward Expansion

Economic Development: The expansion led to advancements in transportation infrastructure, the growth of cotton production due to the invention of the cotton gin, the evolution of canal systems, and the establishment of a vast railroad network.

Impact on Slavery: The expansion of agriculture and industry, particularly in the South, contributed to the widespread use of slavery, causing tensions between the northern and southern states and eventually leading to the American Civil War.

Annexation of Territories: Westward expansion resulted in the annexation of additional territories, such as Texas, New Mexico, California, and Oregon, leading to the United States controlling land from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

Displacement and Conflict with Native Americans: Native American tribes faced the destruction of their environment, confiscation of their land, and depletion of natural resources. They suffered from battles with settlers and the American army, loss of food sources such as buffalo herds, and forced removal from their ancestral lands.

Government Policies and Acts: The Indian Removal Act and the Dawes Act had detrimental effects on Native American culture and land ownership, resulting in the destruction of their way of life.

1.4. Conclusion

Rooted in the concept of manifest destiny, Westward Expansion embodied the belief that the United States had a divine right and responsibility to expand its territory and impart its culture. This expansion resulted in both positive economic development and negative consequences for Native Americans, leading to their displacement and cultural disruption. The image of the "Wild West" captivated the American imagination, driving individuals to seek adventure and new opportunities in the vast frontier.