Historical Background

Thomas Jefferson was a great supporter of westward expansion. One of the greatest achievements during his presidency was the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which doubled the size of the United States (read more about complex history of the Louisiana Purchase here). People began to move west in great numbers with the newly gained information of the western territory from the Lewis and Clark expedition, the discovery of gold, and the promise of new hope and opportunities. Several different trails, such as the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail, aided in opening the West for settlers. Later, the establishment of the Transcontinental Railroad provided yet another route and means of transportation connecting the East to the West. Remnants of the trails still exist today and are both important reminders of American history and contributions to the historical landscape of America.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS:

The Library of Congress has many different types of primary sources related to westward expansion. This primary source set contains a collection of sources on several trails used for westward exploration and expansion:

- p.2 Lewis & Clark
- p.3 Santa Fe Trail
- p.4 Oregon Trail
- p.5 Pony Express Trail
- p.6 Transcontinental Railroad

Have students locate on a map the many different trails and routes used to move people west. What were some of the challenges and struggles people endured while traveling west? How did westward expansion effect Native American communities?

Assign each student in the class one of the trails included in this primary source set. Have students create a poster, brochure, or write an essay on their assigned trail. Where was the trail? What are some of the important points of interest on it? Are their any important people associated with the trail? What is the significance of the trail in the overall history of America? Does any of the trail still exist? Have students present their poster, brochure, or essay to the class. What did you learn from this activity?

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Rivers, Edens, Empires: Lewis & Clark and the Revealing of America](#)
- [Thomas Jefferson: The West](#) (exhibition)
- [The Louisiana Purchase: A Legislative Timeline](#) (presentation)
- [Primary Documents in American History: Pacific Railway Act](#)
- [Built in American Collection](#) (look here for images of the buildings still remaining on the trails)

Lewis and Clark map, with annotations in brown ink by Meriwether Lewis, tracing showing the Mississippi, the Missouri for a short distance above Kansas, Lakes Michigan, Superior, and Winnipeg, and the country onwards to the Pacific [1803?]

Thomas Jefferson peace medal [1801]

Jefferson’s cipher for the Lewis and Clark Expedition [1803]

Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, June 20, 1803

Meriwether Lewis, April 20, 1803, Expedition Estimate

Sitting Rabbit (I Ki Ha Wa He, also known as Little Owl) [Map of Missouri River from South Dakota-North Dakota boundary to mouth of Yellowstone River] [1906-1907]
Santa Fe Trail

Santa Fe Trail, Kansas City, MO. [c. 1909]

Santa Fe Route [1825]

Don Jose Albino Baca House, Old Santa Fe Trail, Las Vegas vicinity, San Miguel, NM [c. 1940]

Cottonwood Creek, Sunday April 10th 1859

Gregg's Commerce of the prairies, or, The journal of a Sante Fe trader, 1831-1839 [1905]
Oregon Trail

Devil’s Gap, Sweetwater rocks, Sweetwater River, Oregon Trail [between 1880 and 1900?]

Arapahoe camp: Near Casper, Wyo. On the site of the old Oregon Trail [between 1800 and 1910?]

Wagon tracks on Old Oregon Trail, Scottsbluff, Nebraska [1941]

Topographical map of the road from Missouri to Oregon, commencing at the mouth of the Kansas in the Missouri River and ending at the mouth of the Walla-Wallah in the Columbia [1846]

Hollenberg Pony Express Station, Route 243, 6.9 miles south of Nebraska border, Hanover vicinity, Washington, KS [after 1933]

Granger Stage Station, Old Route 30 North, Granger, Sweetwater, WY [1974]

Pony Express Stables, 914 Penn Street, Saint Joseph, Buchanan, MO [after 1933]
Transcontinental Railroad

John Chinaman on the railroad: Union Pacific Rail Road: From Miscellaneous Selections: Chinese and Westward Expansion [1867]

Union Pacific Railroad Company, Progress of Their Road. New York: Brown & Hewitt, Printer: 1867

New map of the Union Pacific Railway, the short, quick and safe line to all points west. [1883]


King, Nicholas. [Lewis and Clark map, with annotations in brown ink by Meriwether Lewis, tracing showing the Mississippi, the Missouri for a short distance above Kansas, Lakes Michigan, Superior, and Winnipeg, and the county onwards to the Pacific]. Map. c. 1803. From Library of Congress: Map Collections. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(g4126s+ct000071))].


Brown, Joseph C. Santa Fe route. Map. 1825. From Library of Congress: Map Collections. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(q4052s+ct000190))].


Frémont, John Charles. Topographical map of the road from Missouri to Oregon, commencing at the mouth of the Kansas in the Missouri River and ending at the mouth of the Walla-Wallah in the Columbia. Map. 1846. From Library of Congress: Map Collections. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(g4127o+mf000054)).


New Map of the Union Pacific Railway, the short, quick and safe line to all points west. Map. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1883. From Library of Congress: Map Collections. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(g3701p+rr005950)).
