

SECTION 1 The Oregon Country

Guide to Reading

Main Idea

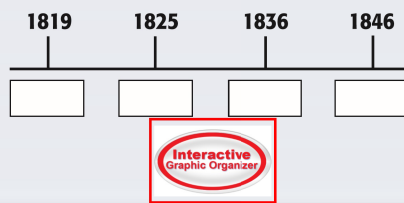
Manifest Destiny is the idea that the United States was meant to extend its borders from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

Key Terms

joint occupation, mountain man, rendezvous, emigrant, Manifest Destiny

Reading Strategy

Sequencing Information As you read Section 1, re-create the diagram below and in the boxes list key events that occurred.



Read to Learn

- why large numbers of settlers headed for the Oregon Country.
- how the idea of Manifest Destiny contributed to the nation's growth.

Section Theme

Economic Factors Many fur traders and pioneers moved to Oregon for economic opportunities.

Preview of Events

◆ 1820

1819
Adams-Onís
Treaty is signed

◆ 1830

1836
Marcus Whitman builds
mission in Oregon

◆ 1840

1840s
"Oregon fever"
sweeps through
Mississippi Valley

◆ 1850

1846
U.S. and Britain
set the Oregon
Boundary at 49°N



Doll owned by a young pioneer

AN American Story

On an April morning in 1851, 13-year-old Martha Gay said good-bye to her friends, her home, and the familiar world of Springfield, Missouri. She and her family were beginning a long, hazardous journey. The townsfolk watched as the Gays left in four big wagons pulled by teams of oxen. "Farewell sermons were preached and prayers offered for our safety," Martha wrote years later. "All places of business and the school were closed . . . and everybody came to say good-bye to us." This same scene occurred many times in the 1840s and 1850s as thousands of families set out for the Oregon Country.

Rivalry in the Northwest

The **Oregon Country** was the huge area that lay between the Pacific Ocean and the Rocky Mountains north of **California**. It included all of what is now Oregon, Washington, and Idaho plus parts of Montana and Wyoming. The region also contained about half of what is now the Canadian province of British Columbia.

In the early 1800s, four nations laid claim to the vast, rugged land known as the Oregon Country. The United States based its claim on Robert Gray's discovery of the **Columbia River** in 1792 and on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Great Britain based its claim on British explorations of the Columbia River. Spain, which had also explored the Pacific coast in the late 1700s, controlled California to the south. Russia had settlements that stretched south from **Alaska** into Oregon.

Adams-Onís Treaty

Many Americans wanted control of the Oregon Country to gain access to the Pacific Ocean. Secretary of State **John Quincy Adams** played a key role in promoting this goal. In 1819 he negotiated the **Adams-Onís Treaty** with Spain. In the treaty the Spanish agreed to set the limits of their territory at what is now California's northern border and gave up any claim to Oregon. In 1824 Russia also surrendered its claim to the land south of Alaska. Only Britain remained to challenge American control of Oregon.

In 1818 Adams had worked out an agreement with Britain for **joint occupation** of the area. This meant that people from both the United States and Great Britain could settle there. When Adams became president in 1825, he proposed that the two nations divide Oregon along the 49°N line of latitude. Britain refused, insisting on a larger share of the territory. Unable to resolve their dispute, the two countries agreed to extend the joint occupation. In the following years, thousands of Americans streamed into Oregon, and they pushed the issue toward resolution.

Mountain Men

The first Americans to reach the Oregon Country were not farmers but fur traders. They had come to trap beaver, whose skins were in great demand in the eastern United States and in Europe. The British established several trading posts in the region, as did merchant **John Jacob Astor** of New York. In 1808 Astor organized the American Fur

Company. The American Fur Company soon became the most powerful of the fur companies in America. It allowed him to build up trade with the East Coast, the Pacific Northwest, and China.

At first the merchants traded for furs that the Native Americans supplied. Gradually American adventurers joined the trade. These people, who spent most of their time in the Rocky Mountains, came to be known as **mountain men**.

The tough, independent mountain men made their living by trapping beaver. Many had Native American wives and adopted Native American ways. They lived in buffalo-skin lodges and dressed in fringed buckskin pants, moccasins, and beads.

Some mountain men worked for fur-trading companies; others sold their furs to the highest bidder. Throughout the spring and early summer they ranged across the mountains, setting traps and then collecting the beaver pelts. In late summer they gathered for a **rendezvous** (RAHN•dih•voo), or meeting.

For the mountain men, the annual rendezvous was the high point of the year. They met with the trading companies to exchange their "hairy

“To explore unknown regions . . . was [the mountain men’s] chief delight.”

—Clerk in a fur trade company



banknotes”—beaver skins—for traps, guns, coffee, and other goods. They met old friends and exchanged news. They relaxed by competing in races and various other contests—including swapping stories about who had been on the most exciting adventures.

As they roamed searching for beaver, the mountain men explored the mountains, valleys, and trails of the West. Jim Beckwourth, an African American from Virginia, explored Wyoming’s Green River. Robert Stuart and Jedediah Smith both found the **South Pass**, a broad break through the Rockies. South Pass later became the main route that settlers took to Oregon.

To survive in the wilderness, a mountain man had to be skillful and resourceful. Trapper Joe Meek told how, when faced with starvation, he once held his hands “in an anthill until they were covered with ants, then greedily licked them off.” The mountain men took pride in joking about the dangers they faced.

In time the mountain men killed off most of the beaver and could no longer trap. Some went to settle on farms in Oregon. With their knowledge of the western lands, though, some mountain men found new work. Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, and others acted as guides to lead the parties of settlers now streaming west.

 **Reading Check Identifying** What North American territories did Russia control in the early 1800s?



Alaska

Is Alaska the largest state? If you calculate by area, Alaska is far and away the largest state, with more than 570,000 square miles. It is approximately 2,000 miles from east to west. If placed on top of the mainland area of the United States, it would stretch from Atlanta to Los Angeles. Population is another matter. Alaska’s population of 626,932 makes it the third least populous state. There is about 1.0 person per square mile in Alaska, compared to more than 79 people per square mile for the rest of the United States.

Settling Oregon

Americans began traveling to the Oregon Country to settle in the 1830s. Reports of the fertile land persuaded many to make the journey. Economic troubles at home made new opportunities in the West look attractive.

The Whitman Mission

Among the first settlers of the Oregon Country were missionaries who wanted to bring Christianity to the Native Americans. Dr. Marcus Whitman and his wife, Narcissa, went to Oregon in 1836 and built a mission among the Cayuse people near the present site of Walla Walla, Washington.

New settlers unknowingly brought measles to the mission. An epidemic killed many of the Native American children. Blaming the Whitmans for the sickness, the Cayuse attacked the mission in November 1847 and killed them and 11 others. Despite this, the flood of settlers continued into Oregon.

The Oregon Trail

In the early 1840s, “Oregon fever” swept through the Mississippi Valley. The depression caused by the Panic of 1837 had hit the region hard. People formed societies to gather information about Oregon and to plan to make the long trip. The “great migration” had begun. Tens of thousands of people made the trip. These pioneers were called **emigrants** because they left the United States to go to Oregon.

Before the difficult 2,000-mile journey, these pioneers stuffed their canvas-covered wagons, called **prairie schooners**, with supplies. From a distance these wagons looked like schooners (ships) at sea. Gathering in Independence or other towns in Missouri, they followed the **Oregon Trail** across the Great Plains, along the Platte River, and through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains. On the other side, they took the trail north and west along the Snake and Columbia Rivers into the Oregon Country.

 **Reading Check Explaining** How did most pioneers get to Oregon?

MORE ABOUT...

The Oregon Trail

The Importance of the Trail The Oregon Trail was much more than just a trail to Oregon. It served as the most practical route to the western United States. The pioneers traveled in large groups, often of related families. Some went all the way to Oregon in search of farmland. Many others split off for California in search of gold.

The Journey The trip west lasted five or six months. The pioneers had to start in the spring and complete the trip before winter snows blocked the mountain passes. The trail crossed difficult terrain. The pioneers walked across seemingly endless plains, forded swift rivers, and labored up high mountains.

Problems Along the Way Although the pioneers feared attacks by Native Americans, such attacks did not often occur. More often Native Americans assisted the pioneers, serving as guides and trading necessary food and supplies. About 1 in 10 of the pioneers died on the trail, perishing from disease, overwork, hunger, or accidents.

When did use of the trail stop? With the building of a transcontinental railroad in 1869, the days of using the Oregon Trail as a corridor to the West were over.



“We are creeping along slowly, one wagon after another, the same old gait, the same thing over, out of one mud hole into another all day.”

—Amelia Stewart Knight, 1853

“After Laramie we entered the great American desert, which was hard on the teams. Sickness became common. . . .”

—Catherine Sager Pringle, 1844



The Division of Oregon

Most American pioneers headed for the fertile **Willamette Valley** south of the Columbia River. Between 1840 and 1845, the number of American settlers in the area increased from 500 to 5,000, while the British population remained at about 700. The question of ownership of Oregon arose again.

Expansion of Freedom

Since colonial times many Americans had believed their nation had a special role to fulfill. For years people thought the nation's mission should

be to serve as a model of freedom and democracy. In the 1800s that vision changed. Many believed that the United States's mission was to spread freedom by occupying the entire continent. In 1819 John Quincy Adams expressed what many Americans were thinking when he said expansion to the Pacific was as inevitable “as that the Mississippi should flow to the sea.”

Manifest Destiny

In the 1840s New York newspaper editor John O'Sullivan put the idea of a national mission in more specific words. O'Sullivan declared it was



The Presidency

Who was the first “dark horse” president? A dark horse is a little-known contender who unexpectedly wins. In 1844 the Democrats passed over Martin Van Buren, John C. Calhoun, and other party leaders. Instead, they nominated James K. Polk, the governor of Tennessee. The Whigs were confident that their candidate, the celebrated Henry Clay, would win the election easily. Contrary to all expectations, Polk won the election, becoming at age 49 the youngest president in American history up to that time.

America’s “**Manifest Destiny**” to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us.” O’Sullivan meant that the United States was clearly destined—set apart for a special purpose—to extend its boundaries all the way to the Pacific.

“Fifty-four Forty or Fight”

The settlers in Oregon insisted that the United States should have sole ownership of the area. More and more Americans agreed. As a result Oregon became a significant issue in the 1844 presidential election.

James K. Polk received the Democratic Party’s nomination for president, partly because he supported American claims for sole ownership of Oregon. Democrats campaigned using the slogan “Fifty-four Forty or Fight.” The slogan referred to the line of latitude that Democrats believed should be the nation’s northern border in Oregon.

Henry Clay of the Whig Party, Polk’s principal opponent, did not take a strong position on the Oregon issue. Polk won the election because the antislavery Liberty Party took so many votes from Clay in New York that Polk won the state. Polk won 170 electoral votes to 105 for Clay.

Reaching a Settlement

Filled with the spirit of Manifest Destiny, President Polk was determined to make Oregon part of the United States. Britain would not accept a border at “Fifty-four Forty,” however. To do so would have meant giving up its claim entirely. Instead, in June 1846, the two countries compromised, setting the boundary between the American and British portions of Oregon at latitude 49°N.

During the 1830s Americans sought to fulfill their Manifest Destiny by looking much closer to home than Oregon. At that time much attention was also focused on Texas.

Reading Check Explaining In what way did some people think of Manifest Destiny as a purpose?

SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT



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Checking for Understanding

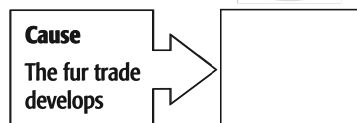
- Key Terms** Use each of these terms in a complete sentence that will help explain its meaning: **joint occupation, mountain man, rendezvous, emigrant, Manifest Destiny.**
- Reviewing Facts** Name the four countries that claimed parts of the Oregon Country.

Reviewing Themes

- Economic Factors** How did the fur trade in Oregon aid Americans who began settling there?

Critical Thinking

- Making Generalizations** How did the idea of Manifest Destiny help Americans justify their desire to extend the United States to the Pacific Ocean?
- Determining Cause and Effect** Re-create the diagram below. In the box, describe how the fur trade led to interest in Oregon.



Analyzing Visuals

- Picturing History** Study the painting on page 359. Do you think it provides a realistic portrayal of the journey west?

Interdisciplinary Activity

Informative Writing Imagine you and your family are traveling to the Oregon Country in the 1840s. A friend will be making the same trip soon. Write a letter telling your friend what to expect on the journey.