

Manifest Destiny and U.S Westward Expansion

The phrase “**manifest destiny**” originated in the nineteenth century, yet the concept behind the phrase originated in the seventeenth century with the first European immigrants in America, English Protestants or **Puritans**.

Manifest destiny is defined as “the concept of **American exceptionalism**, that is, the belief that America occupies a special place among the countries of the world.” The Puritans came to America in 1630 believing that their survival in the new world would be a sign of God’s approval. As their ship the *Arbella* neared shore, group leader **John Winthrop** gave a sermon entitled “A Modell [*sic*] of Christian Charity,” in order to prepare his fellow passengers for what lay



American Progress, 1872, John Gast, chromolithograph, Library of Congress

ahead. His sermon stressed the importance of this experimental religious settlement in the new world, and how it would come to serve as an example for all settlements thereafter, stating “For wee [*sic*] must consider that wee [*sic*] shall be as a citty [*sic*] upon a hill. The eies [*sic*] of all people are upon us.” Winthrop also recalled God’s instruction in the Bible about the need to expand and prosper, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.” The ideology of manifest destiny continued through the eighteenth-century as victorious America won independence from Great Britain, an event that many occasioned to be preordained and lauded by God and an example of American exceptionalism.

*Yes, more, more, more! . . .
 . till our national destiny is
 fulfilled and . . . the whole
 boundless continent is ours
 – John L. O’Sullivan, 1845*

The use of the term “manifest destiny” did not enter conventional conversation until 1845, when journalist **John Louis O’Sullivan** wrote that it was “our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.” Nineteenth-century **expansionism** went

hand in hand with the concept of manifest destiny, each signaling that there was a God-given, sanctioned right to conquer the land and displace the “uncivilized,” non-Christian peoples who, it was believed, did not take full advantage of the land which had been given to them. This

ideology served as justification for the violent displacement of native peoples and the forceful takeovers of land by military means. Nineteenth-century Americans expanded upon Winthrop's notion of "a city upon a hill" to encompass the idea that all countries should look to the United States as a model nation. Just as sixteenth-century Puritans had seen it as their divine right to "tame and cultivate" the frontier, so too did nineteenth-century capitalists and politicians see the expansion of the frontier as providential, their personal and professional profit in harmony with the nation's economic development.

U.S. Territorial Expansion

The European settlers who came to America in search of a new life believed that land acquisition was crucial to their future prosperity. Following the **Louisiana Purchase** of 1803 from France and the subsequent exploration of that western territory by **Meriwether Lewis** and **William Clark**, the nation's appetite for expansion grew. The Louisiana Purchase, which tripled the size of the young country, effectively started a chain reaction for U.S. territorial expansion. The next fifty years of American history saw the nation increase its land holdings exponentially: in 1845 Texas was incorporated into the U.S.; Britain's 1846 treaty with the U.S. gained the young nation the disputed Oregon territory; California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah were incorporated following the 1848 war with Mexico; and finally, in 1853, the **Gadsden Purchase** completed the last contiguous land purchase in the continental U.S., finalizing the southern borders of New Mexico and Arizona as we know them today. In 1846 **Walt Whitman** wryly opined on the relentless territorial expansion, stating "The more we reflect upon annexation as involving a part of Mexico, the more do doubts and obstacles resolve themselves away. . . . Then there is California, on the way to which lovely tract lies Santa Fe; how long a time will elapse before they shine as two new stars in our mighty firmament?"

Expansion and the Artwork

Emmanuel Gottlieb Leutze's mural study for the Capitol in Washington, D.C. celebrates the idea of Manifest Destiny just when the Civil War threatened the republic. The surging crowd of figures in the painting records the births, deaths, and battles fought as European Americans settled the continent to the edge of the Pacific. Like Moses and the Israelites who appear in the ornate

"Let me propose, that a series of pictures representing the history of our country may be painted for the capitol, with just regard to the truth of history, with regard to the exhibition of the glorious examples of our great men for the benefit of future generations, and as a token of a nation's glory, that they may be continued as our history advances..." – Emanuel Leutze to Montgomery C. Meigs, Captain of the U.S. Engineers, February 14, 1854

borders of the canvas, these pioneers stand at the threshold of the Promised Land, ready to fulfill what many nineteenth-century Americans believed was God's plan for the nation.

Leutze's painting depicts westward expansion as a difficult task leading to a heavenly reward represented by the fertile golden valley below. Yet actual pioneers made the overland trek, either by wagon or train, only to discover that the so-called Promised Land at the end of their journey was a lonely, inhospitable place. In *Six Years on the Border, or, Sketches of Frontier Life* (1883) Mrs. J.B. Rideout describes how her family had left New England for the West because they "had heard of a village on the banks of a beautiful river, surrounded by a rich country fast filling up with intelligent people . . ." After the hazardous trip overland, the Rideouts arrived at their destination:

We reached the town of which we had read such glowing accounts before leaving the East . . . and as I stood in the village which had appeared to my imagination in so many different forms, feeling homesick and discouraged, I looked around and counted the buildings. One blacksmith's shop, one small store, one dwelling-house and two little cabins . . ."

Traveling an average of fifteen miles a day, the pioneers usually took between five and six months to reach Oregon or California. During the journey they faced skirmishes with Native Americans and diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever. Often trapped in the mountains by winter snows (instead of gloriously reaching their summits, as Leutze's imagination shows), the pioneers often had to slaughter their mules and oxen for food and proceed on foot. Leutze's painting includes a burial, a man with a bandaged head, and other references to the hardships the pioneers actually faced. Yet his image remains a glorifying account of westward migration.

In order to achieve the realism of the Pacific Coast Mountains, Leutze made the decision to make the arduous journey out west in order to sketch the views from life. Having received an advance on his salary, the artist traveled out to the Rocky Mountains in August 1861, specifically to Pike's Peak in Colorado, to study the topography of the western mountains. Leutze stated that it was his intent "to represent as near and truthfully as the artist was able, the grand peaceful conquest of the great west . . . Without a wish to date or localize, or to represent a particular event it is intended to give in a condensed form a picture of western emigration, the conquest of the Pacific slope." His preparatory drawings were full of such rich detail, that little to no changes had to be made in the mural study concerning the topography and natural elements. Writing to the engineer of the Capitol, **Montgomery C. Meigs**, Leutze stated that he believed he had seen more of the West in his trip to Colorado than he would

have had he gone as far as California.

Glossary

American exceptionalism: the theory that the U.S. is inherently different from other countries.

expansionism: the belief that a country should grow larger; a policy of increasing a country's size by expanding its territory.

Gadsden Purchase: the U.S. acquisition of a region in present-day Arizona and New Mexico via a treaty signed on December 30, 1853 between the United States and Mexico. The purchase's purpose was so that the U.S. could build a southern route for the Transcontinental Railroad. This was the last territorial acquisition in the contiguous United States. The purchase is also known as the Sale of Mesilla.

John Louis O'Sullivan: (1813-1895) American editor who coined the phrase "manifest destiny" in 1845 to promote the annexation of Texas and the acquisition of the Oregon territory.

John Winthrop: (1587-1649) English Puritan lawyer who led the first wave of Puritan immigrants to America in 1630.

Louisiana Purchase: (1803) purchased from France during President Thomas Jefferson's administration, the region of the United States encompassing land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.

manifest destiny: the nineteenth-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.

Meriwether Lewis: (1774-1809) American explorer, soldier, and politician. He is most well-known for his role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition, exploring the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase.

Montgomery C. Meigs: (1816-1892) U.S. Army officer, civil engineer, and Quartermaster General during the Civil War. Meigs had a role in building many landmarks including the U.S. Capitol Building and Arlington National Cemetery.

Puritans: members of a sect of English Reformed Protestantism which emerged from the Church of England in the 16th century. Puritans, believing the church only partially reformed, sought to rid the church from all Roman Catholic practices. They practiced and advocated for

greater strictness in religious discipline and for the simplification of doctrine and worship.
Large-scale Puritan migration from England to America occurred from 1620 to 1640.

Walt Whitman: (1819-1892) American poet and journalist.

William Clark: (1770-1838) American explorer and soldier. He best known as one-half of the exploring team of Lewis and Clark. Following the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark were charged by President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 to explore the newly acquired territory west of the Mississippi River. For the next two years the expedition explored and mapped the western territory, studying plant and animal life, and establishing trade with Indian tribes.