Chapter 10 Lesson 2

Westward, Ho!

In 1800 the territory of the US extended as far west as the Mississippi River. The area west of the river – known as the Louisiana Territory – belonged to Spain. The Louisiana Territory was an enormous area of land, stretching south to the city of New Orleans and west to the Rocky Mountains. Its northern boundaries remained undefined.

During the early 1800’s, Americans continued to move west in search of land and adventure. Pioneers, many of which were farmers, settled in Kentucky and Tennessee. Many continued on to settle the lands of the Northwest Territory. They journeyed over the Appalachian Mountains, they had to travel along rough, muddy roads or cut their way through thick forests.

These pioneers loaded their household goods into Conestoga wagons, sturdy vehicles topped with white canvas. Settlers traveled with their two most valued possessions: rifles and axes. Rifles for protection and hunting and axes to cut paths for their wagons through dense forests.

Many settlers set up farms along the rivers that fed the Upper Mississippi River. Farmers needed access to the Mississippi to transport their crops to markets. Their goods traveled down the Mississippi to New Orleans, where workers loaded them onto other ships headed for markets on the East Coast. The Spanish controlled the region, but they allowed the Americans to sail on the Lower Mississippi and trade in New Orleans. For western farmers, this agreement was vital to their economic survival.

The French Threat

The Spanish allowed American goods to move freely in the territory. In 1802, the Spanish suddenly changed their policy no longer allowing American goods to move into and beyond New Orleans. President Jefferson learned that France and Spain had secretly agreed to transfer the Louisiana Territory to France. Jefferson believed that France had also gained Florida in its secret agreement with Spain.

This news was alarming. This secret agreement between France and Spain posed a serious threat to the United States. France’s leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, had plans to create empires in Europe and the Americas. French control would put American trade along the Mississippi at risk. Congress authorized Robert Livingston, the new minister to France, to offer as much as $2 million for New Orleans and West Florida in order to gain control of the territory.

Napoleon and Santo Domingo

Napoleon dreamed of a Western empire. He saw the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo as an important naval base from which he could control such an empire. Events in Santo Domingo, however, ended Napoleon’s dream. Inspire by the ideals of the American Revolution, Toussaint L’Overture led enslaved Africans and other laborers in Santo Domingo in a revolt against the island’s plantation owners. After fierce fighting, the rebels won and declared the colony an independent republic. L’Overture established a new government.

In 1802, Napoleon sent troops to regain control of Santo Domingo, but they were not successful. By 1804, the French were driven out of Santo Domingo. The country took its original name, Haiti.

An Expanding Nation

Napoleon had a problem: he needed money to finance his war against Britain. Without Santo Domingo, Napoleon had little use for Louisiana. In order to solve his money problems he decided to sell the Louisiana Territory. A French official told US representatives Robert Livingston and James Monroe that the entire Louisiana Territory was for sale. The offer took Livingston and Monroe by surprise. They did not have the authority to accept such an offer.

The deal was too good to pass up. The new territory would provide plenty of cheap land for farmers for generations. It would also give the US control of the Mississippi River, which would protect domestic shipping interests. These benefits convinced Livingston and Monroe to complete the deal, even without authorization. After a few days of negotiation; the parties agreed on a price of $15 million.

Jefferson worried that such a purchase might not be legal. The Constitution said nothing about acquiring new territory. What authority did he have to make the purchase? He thought of seeking a Constitutional amendment but did not have time. Jefferson decided the government’s treaty-making powers allowed the purchase of the new territory. The Senate approved the purchase of the new territory in October 1803. The purchase of the Louisiana Territory doubled the size of the US.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition

Americans knew little about the land west of the Mississippi, and Jefferson wanted to learn more about the land the US had acquired. He persuaded Congress to pay for an expedition to gather information about the new land. The expedition would document findings about the territory’s people, plants, and animals and recommend sites for new forts.

The second goal: finding and mapping the fabled Northwest Passage. In order to trade with Asia, Europeans had to sail around Africa. Because the trip was long and costly, Europeans searched, unsuccessfully, for a more direct route. Once the Americas were colonized, Americans and Europeans continued to sail around Africa or around the tip of South America in order to reach Asia. A more direct route across North America became more important than ever.

Jefferson chose Meriwether Lewis, his 28 year old private secretary to head the expedition. Lewis joined the militia during the Whiskey Rebellion and had been in the army when Jefferson hired him as his private secretary in 1801. Jefferson looked forward to exploring the continent and hired Lewis with that in mind. William Clark was co-leader of the expedition. Clark was 32 and a friend of Lewis’s. Clark also brought along York, an enslaved African American and lifelong companion of Clark’s. York was a key member of the expedition. York was helpful building ties with Native Americans, many of whom had never seen an African American and were drawn to him.

Lewis and Clark were well informed, amateur scientists. They had experience doing business with Native Americans. Together they assembled a crew of expert sailors, gunsmiths, carpenters, scouts and a cook. Two men of Native American and French heritage served as interpreters.

In the spring of 1804, the expedition left St. Louis and worked its way up the Missouri River. On May 5, 1805, Lewis described what they encountered along the trail in his journal:

“Buffalo Elk and goats or Antelopes feeding in every direction…[T]he buffalo furnish us with fine veal and fat and beef….We have not been able to take any fish for some time past. The country is as yesterday beautiful in the extreme.” -from the journal of Lewis and Clark

The expedition encountered many Native American groups on the journey. A Shoshone woman named Sacagawea joined the group as their guide.

After 18 months and nearly 4,000 miles, Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific Ocean. They spent the winter there, heading back east in September 1806. The explorers had collected valuable information about people, plants, animals, and the geography of the West. Perhaps most importantly their journey inspired people to move westward.

Pike’s Expedition

Lewis and Clark were not the only explorers Jefferson sent. Lt. Zebulon Pike led two expeditions west between 1805 and 1807. He traveled through the Upper Mississippi River valley and into present-day Colorado. In Colorado, he found a snow capped mountain he named Grand Peak, later known as Pike’s Peak. From his travels, Americans learned about the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. Pike also mapped part of the Rio Grande and traveled across northern Mexico and what is now southern Texas.

A Federalist Plan to Secede

The Louisiana Purchase troubled Federalists in the Northeast. They feared that westward expansion would diminish their influence in political and economic affairs. A group of Federalists in Massachusetts plotted to secede, or withdraw, from the Union. New England would become the “Northern Confederacy.”

The plotters realized that if the confederacy were to last, it had to include New York as well as New England. The Massachusetts Federalists needed a powerful friend in New York who would support their plan. They turned to Aaron Burr.

Hamilton and burr Duel

Alexander Hamilton was concerned about rumors of secession. He had never trusted Burr and now he heard that Burr had secretly agreed to lead New York out of the Union. Hamilton accused Burr of plotting treason. Meanwhile, Burr was suffering setbacks in his political aspirations and he blamed Hamilton for these setbacks. Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel.

The two men-armed with pistols-met in Weehawken, NJ in July of 1804. Hamilton hated dueling, which though illegal, was popular among upper-class Americans. Hamilton pledged not to shoot at his rival, but Burr took no such pledge. He aimed to shoot Hamilton, and he was successful. Seriously wounded, Hamilton died the next day and Burr fled to avoid arrest.