Chapter 11 Lesson 2: Moving West

Headed West

In 1790 the first census – official count of a population – revealed that there were nearly 4 million Americans. At that time, most of these people lived in the narrow strip of land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean. That pattern was changing. For years, a few rugged American settlers had been crossing the Appalachian Mountains and settling in western lands. Now a steady stream of settlers began moving west.

Daniel Boone and the Wilderness Road

Explorer and pioneer Daniel Boone was among the early western pioneers. In 1769 he explored a Native American trail through the Appalachian Mountains, called Warrior’s Path. The Warrior’s Path led Boone through a break in the mountains – the Cumberland Gap. Beyond the gap lay the gentle hills of present day Kentucky. For two years, Boone explored the area’s dense forests and lush meadows.

In 1775 Boone rounded up 30 skilled foresters to make the trail easier to traverse for pioneers headed west. Boone’s crew widened Warrior’s Path, cleared rocks from the Cumberland Gap, cut down trees in Kentucky, and marked the trail. The new Wilderness Road, as it became known, served as the main southern highway from the eastern states to the West. More than 100,000 people traveled it between 1775 and 1790.

Building Roadways

The nation needed good inland roads for travel and to ship goods. Private companies built many turnpikes, or toll roads. Tolls or fees paid by travelers helped pay the cost of building them. Many roads had a base of crushed stone. In some areas workers built “corduroy roads.” These roads had a surface made up of logs laid side by side, like the ridges of corduroy cloth.

Ohio became a state in 1803, the new state asked the federal government to build a road to connect it to the east. In 1806 Congress approved funds for a national road to the west, though it took 5 more years to agree on the route.

Work began in 1811 in Cumberland, MD. The start of the War of 1812 with Great Britain halted construction. As a result, the road’s first section, which ran from Maryland to Wheeling in present day West Virginia, did not open until 1818.

The route closely followed that of a military road George Washington had built in 1754. It eventually reached Ohio and then Vandalia, Illinois. Congress viewed the road as vital to military readiness but did not take on any other road-building projects.

Traveling on Rivers

River travel was more comfortable than travel by road, which was often rough and bumpy. Boats or river barges could carry far larger loads or farm products or other goods.

River travel had two major drawbacks, however.

1. Most major rivers in the eastern region flowed in a north-south direction while most people and goods were headed east or west
2. Moving downstream was easy, moving upstream was slow and tedious (against the current)

In the 1780’s and 1790’s, boat captains were already using steam engines to power boats in quiet waters. Early engines did not have enough power to overcome strong currents or winds found in large rivers, lakes, or oceans.

The Clermont’s First Voyage

In 1802 Robert Livingston, political and business leader, hired Robert Fulton, a political and business leader to build a steamboat with a powerful engine. Livingston wanted the steamboat to carry cargo and passengers up the Hudson River from New York City to Albany.

In 1807 Fulton launched his steamboat, the Clermont. The boat made the 150 mile trip in 32 hours. Using only sails, the trip would have taken 4 days.

The Clermont offered many comforts. Passengers could sit or stroll on deck or relax in sleeping compartments below deck. The engine was noisy, but its power provided a smooth ride.

Steamboats ushered in a new age of river travel. Shipping goods and moving people became cheaper and faster. Regular steamboat service began along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Natchez, Mississippi, in 1812. Steamboats also contributed to the growth of river cities such as Cincinnati and St. Louis. By 1850, some 700 steamboats were carrying cargo and passengers within the US.

New Waterways

Steamboats improved transportation but were limited to major rivers. No such river linked the East and the West.

DeWitt Clinton in New York developed a plan to connect New York City with the Great Lakes region. They would build a canal – an artificial waterway – across the state. The canal would connect the Hudson River with Buffalo on Lake Erie. From these points, existing rivers and lakes could connect to a much larger area.

The Erie Canal

Thousands of workers, many of them Irish immigrants, helped build the 363 mile Erie Canal. Along the way they built a series of locks – separate compartments in which workers could raise and lower the water level. The locks worked like an escalator to raise and lower boats up and down hills.

Canal building was hazardous, many workers died as a result of cave-ins or blasting accidents. Another threat was disease, which bred in the swamps where the workers toiled.

After 8 years of hard work, the Erie Canal opened on October 26, 1825. Clinton, who was now governor of New York, boarded a barge in Buffalo and traveled on the canal to Albany. From there he sailed down the Hudson River to New York City. As crowds cheered, officials poured water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic.

Canal Travel Expands

At first, the Erie Canal did not allow steamboats because their powerful engines could damage the earthen banks of the canal. Instead, teams of mules or horses hauled the boats and barges. A two-horse team pulled a 100 ton barge about 24 miles in one day. This was fast compared to travel by wagon. In the 1840’s, workers strengthened the canal banks so that steam tugboats could pull the barges.

The Erie Canal’s success did not go unnoticed. By 1850, the country had more than 3,600 of canals. Canals lowered shipping costs and brought prosperity to towns along their routes. They also linked regions of a growing country.

The Move West Continues

The US added 4 new states between 1791 – 1803 – Vermont, and the western states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio. Then between 1816 and 1821, Indiana, Illinois, Mississippi, Alabama, and Missouri also became states.

The formation of states reflected the dramatic growth of the region west of the Appalachians. In 1800 only 387,000 white settlers lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. By 1820, that number had grown to more than 2.4 million people. Ohio, for example, had only 45,000 settlers in 1800. By 1820, it had 581,000 residents.

Early pioneer families often settled in communities along the great rivers, such as the Ohio and the Mississippi. These waterways provided a type of highway for shipping crops and other goods to markets. The growth of canals helped expand the area open to settlement. People were able to settle on lands farther from the large rivers.

People preferred to settle with others from their original homes. It was mainly people from Tennessee and Kentucky who settled Indiana. Michigan’s pioneers mostly came from New England.

Western families often gathered together for social events. Men took part in sports such as wrestling. Women met for quilting and sewing parties. Both men and women took part in cornhuskings. These were gatherings where farm families shared the work of stripping the outer layers from corn. Life in the West did not have many of the conveniences of Eastern town life. The pioneers had not traveled to the West to live a pampered life. They wanted to make new lives for themselves and their families.

At the same time, these new settlers brought with them many of the same hopes and dreams held by people in the East. In this way, the western migration of American pioneers helped spread an American culture and way of life