To Americans in the 1770s, the West was a vast, heavily forested, and little-known wilderness. Lying between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, the West's northern edges were bounded by the Great Lakes and British-held, but French-speaking, Canada. To its south was the Gulf of Mexico, while the western boundary—Spanish-held Louisiana—extended from New Orleans to the Missouri River and the Great Plains.

This area was thinly populated by many diverse groups of Native Americans. These tribes hunted, trapped, and farmed. They also traded with European colonists who lived in settlements and forts that were scattered across the region. The Indians offered pelts of fur-bearing animals in return for goods from the Europeans' home countries.