The West—and how people explored it, claimed it, fought over it, and settled it—is central to America's story in the 1800s. When Thomas Jefferson took office as the third U.S. president in 1801, he set the tone for the new century with his support of westward expansion. Stories about the frontier had started to trickle back to Americans living on the East Coast. They were carried by fur traders and mountain men who had journeyed into the wilderness. Jefferson had long wondered what lay on the other side of the Mississippi River, and the stories made him only more curious. He decided to organize an expedition to find answers. Then, in 1803, the United States acquired the vast territory claimed by France that lay west of the Mississippi River.

EXPLORATION
The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States and pushed America's new western boundary to the Rocky Mountains. The timing was perfect. Jefferson’s expedition, the Corps of Discovery, was prepared to set out. Before the men left in 1804, they learned that they would be exploring U.S. territory, not French territory as they originally thought.

The Corps returned after two years of exploration. Their journals and maps noted geographic features, Native American villages, and plants and animals. Adventurers and settlers used the information to pioneer new emigrant and trade routes on the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail,
Comanche, and Apache, resisted the expansion. They fought to prevent settlers and the U.S. Army from taking their traditional land. Native American resistance often led to additional U.S. Army units being sent to protect nonnative settlers and travelers.

Political and social debates also heated up. Northern and southern states had opposing views on whether or not slavery should be allowed to expand into western territories. Violent struggles resulted after the creation of the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854. It reopened the debate over how territories and states would determine slavery’s role within their boundaries. It led to a deadly border war between residents of Kansas and Missouri.

**GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**

The U.S. government pushed for greater settlement of the American frontier during and after the Civil War (1861–1865). It passed the Homestead Act of 1862 to promote new farms. The act gave settlers the opportunity to claim 160 acres of farmland. In exchange, homesteaders agreed to make improvements on that land over the course of five years. The federal government also passed the Pacific Railway Act. The act provided federal support for loans and land to be made available to railroad companies to build railroad lines linking the Pacific Coast with the East.

**DEMANDS ON THE WEST**

Urban centers in the East also demanded resources from the West. Cowboys drove herds of Texas longhorn cattle northward along now-famous cattle trails, such as the Goodnight–Loving Trail and the Chisholm
and the California Trail. The federal government also sent military expeditions to map the routes, sign treaties with Native American groups, and build forts to protect travelers and settlers.

**SETTLEMENT**

In the 1840s, many Americans hoped to claim land all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The belief that Americans were destined to settle the continent from coast to coast became known as Manifest Destiny. It resulted in a compromise between the United States and Great Britain to settle ownership of the Pacific Northwest. The two countries agreed on the present-day boundary between the United States and British-controlled Canada.

A support of Manifest Destiny also led to the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–1848). As the victor in that war, the United States took possession of lands previously claimed by Mexico, which included California and most of the American Southwest. By the mid-1800s, the United States extended to the Pacific Coast.

**NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

The discovery of gold in 1848 attracted a large number of emigrants. The California gold rush created such a dramatic spike in population that California became a state without first forming a territory. Thousands of miners headed west across the Oregon and California trails. Additional gold and silver rushes in present-day Nevada and Colorado in the 1850s brought new settlers and businesses. Mining communities were established in present-day Montana, Idaho, Arizona, and New Mexico in the 1860s and 1870s.

As the populations of mining towns grew, other businesses flourished to support those communities. Freighting companies shipped goods. Stagecoach lines brought passengers and mail. Farmers claimed nearby land and provided produce to miners. Others established ranches to provide cattle and horses to the growing populations.

**VIOLENT CLASHES**

The settling of the American West produced great internal conflicts. Native Americans had lived in the Midwest and West for thousands of years before the United States formally claimed the region. In addition, the descendants of Spanish, French, and Russian settlers found themselves in the way of American expansion. Those groups resented the way in which Americans moved onto and claimed land without regard to other peoples’ traditional uses of them.

Many Native American groups in the West, such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Modoc, Cayuse, Nez Perce,
Wagon trains of settlers carved trails through the Great Plains as emigrants headed west in the 1840s.

Trail, to reach meat markets in Colorado and Wyoming and stockyards in Kansas. As the railroad continued to expand westward, steam-powered locomotives needed additional supplies of coal to continue operation. New mining regions opened in the West to meet the need.

Larger populations increased the demand for electricity and paper. Copper mines in the West provided metal for electrical wiring. Mountain logging camps provided the lumber to make paper. Sometimes western settlers fought among themselves to protect the natural resources from competitors. Range wars broke out among cattlemen.

**LAW AND ORDER**

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, new communities were established in the West. Many of the small towns struggled to maintain law and order. Town marshals, such as James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok and Wyatt Earp, often used their pistols to keep order. Community members also took the law into their own hands. They formed vigilante groups to capture and punish men who were suspected of breaking the law.

**THE WEST’S APPEAL**

Ultimately, the stories that came out of the West captured Americans’ imaginations. It was a place of natural beauty, open spaces, and great potential. It offered opportunity to groups such as European immigrants, former slaves, and former Civil War soldiers who were in search of a better life or a fresh start. It provided a dramatic background to the wars between the U.S. Army and Native American groups trying to preserve their traditional way of life.

By 1890, less than 100 years after the Louisiana Purchase, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the American frontier effectively had been settled. It was around that time that Wild West shows became popular. The stories those shows brought to life have left a lasting impact on how the West is remembered today.

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