

Q4. The westward expansion was a story of annexation, concessions and purchases, since the Declaration of Independence. Discuss.

1. Introduction

"Away, away with all these cobweb issues of the rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, ... [The American claim] is by the right of 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."

John L. O'Sullivan, Democratic Review, 1845

The story of the westward expansion of the United States of America is deeply grounded in the American belief that it was their 'manifest destiny' to gain possession of the entire continent of North America. To achieve this end, the American people and their leadership placed much focus on the acquisition of larger and larger tracts of territory lying west of the land of the original thirteen colonies. On its part, the U.S. government under the leadership of various presidents carried out a number of measures such as annexation, concessions, cessions and purchases in order to expand towards the west. The importance of this rapid expansion towards the western frontier finds an explanation in Frederick Jackson Turner's 'frontier thesis.' First and foremost however, it is imperative to chronologically analyze the major territorial acquisitions during the history of the United States.

2. Westward expansion of the United States: a chronological list

The territorial expansion of the U.S. towards the western frontier indeed began soon after the Declaration of Independence. Subsequently, a mix of treaties, annexations and purchases united the East and the West coast in the form of the territory of the United States seen today.



Figure: Major Territorial Acquisitions of the United States⁶

2.1. Treaty of Paris (1783)

At the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the original 13 colonies were confined to a particular area along the Atlantic coast. The victory of the colonists against the British Empire gave birth to the United States of America as an independent nation, through the Treaty of Paris of 1783. The western boundary of this

new nation was to be the Mississippi River, thus extending the territorial expanse of the original 13 colonies into the western frontier. This can be seen as the first concession whereby the U.S. expanded its territory towards the west.

2.2. The Battle of Fallen Timbers (1794) and the Treaty of Greenville (1795)

One major impediment towards westward expansion of the United States was the presence of a number of American Indian tribes which populated the Ohio River Valley. These tribes, including the Shawnee, Delaware, Iroquois, among others, united under the leadership of the war chief Little Turtle and formed the Northwest Confederacy. Since this posed a threat to Americans trying to settle in the west, President George Washington authorized General Anthony Wayne in 1794 to lead the U.S. army in an attack on the Northwest Confederacy. The consequent Battle of Fallen Timbers in northwestern Ohio resulted in a victory for the U.S. army. The defeated American Indian tribes thus had to rescind their claims to the Ohio Territory in the Treaty of Greenville signed with the United States. This treaty opened up lands of the Ohio Territory for American settlement.

2.3. The Louisiana Purchase (1803)

The Louisiana Purchase is perhaps the most influential as well as the most controversial acquisition of territory by the United States. The land was retaken from Spain in 1800 by Napoleon Bonaparte, who aimed to restore the French Empire in North America.

The territory was considered a valuable tract of land, as it housed both the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and also contained the important trade port of New Orleans. American settlers in the Kentucky and Indiana territories relied on the port of New Orleans, which had been declared open for use to the Americans in the Pinckney Treaty of 1795 signed with Spain. In 1802 during the presidency of Thomas Jefferson however, the Spanish who were de facto in control of the port, shut it off for American traders. This alarming news motivated Jefferson to seek control of New Orleans, in order to once and for all reduce any chances of getting embroiled in European affairs.

The ministers sent by Jefferson to France were instructed to offer at most \$10 million for New Orleans and some territory adjacent to it. However the French, desperately in need of finances to fight Britain, offered the entire Louisiana Territory for \$15 million – an offer which the American ministers readily accepted.

The purchase became controversial due to a constitutional complication. Nowhere in the Constitution of the U.S. was the president authorized to purchase foreign land. This was circumvented by President Jefferson, who placed the purchase agreement before Senate and got it ratified in line with the president's power to make treaties with foreign nations.

The addition of the Louisiana Territory doubled the size of the nation's territory, extending the western frontier well beyond the Mississippi river. This territorial expansion towards the west would open up opportunities for the United States to continue its inexorable expansion towards the West Coast of North America. For instance, the expedition of Lewis and Clark which traversed the Louisiana Territory would later be used to strengthen American claims on the Oregon territory.



Figure: Territory of the United States in the mid-1820s

2.6. The Texas Annexation (1845)

The controversy surrounding the annexation of Texas began earnestly in 1823, when American settlers began pouring into the region, attracted by Mexican policies which sought to populate the province and increase economic activity. Over time, by around 1830, Americans began to outnumber Mexicans in Texas by three to one.

Differences began to develop between the Mexican authorities and the numerous American slave-owning settlers when Mexico outlawed slavery in 1829 and also required American immigrants to convert to Catholicism. Refusal to obey the orders prompted the Mexicans to close off the border to further American immigration. American settlers however, continued to pour into Texas by the thousands in defiance of the ban on entry into the Mexican province. In 1834, the new dictator of Mexico, General Santa Anna, tried to enforce Mexico's laws in Texas, only to face a revolt by the American settlers led by Sam Houston.

Sam Houston, as the leader of the revolt declared Texas to be an independent republic in 1836; and as the first president of that Republic, appealed to the U.S. to annex Texas into the United States. Houston's appeals for annexation of Texas kept being denied by subsequent presidents until 1845 when President John Tyler, influenced by the expansionist mood of the American public, pushed for its annexation through Congress.

The border of the newly acquired territory of Texas was finally settled after the War with Mexico (1846-1848). In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), a defeated Mexico agreed to U.S. terms which recognized the Rio Grande River as the southern border of Texas.



Figure: Territory of the United States following the Annexation of Texas

2.7. The Mexican Cession (1848) as part of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo also laid out the terms of The Mexican Cession, through which the U.S. gained possession of the Mexican provinces of California and New Mexico. The United States paid \$15 million to acquire these territories, thus it was a purchase agreement.

2.8. Gadsden Purchase (1853)

The last instance of western expansion along the Southern border of the United States happened in the form of the Gadsden Purchase under the presidency of Franklin Pierce. The U.S. bought thousands of acres of desert land for \$10 million in order to be used for the construction of a railroad. Currently, this land forms the southern sections of present-day New Mexico and Arizona.



Figure: Territory acquired through the Mexican Cession (which was part of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) and the Gadsden Purchase (1853)

2.9. Expansion into Oregon (1846)

The Oregon territory was disputed between Britain and the United States. This large tract of land along the Pacific coast was largely populated in the 1840s by American farmers and missionaries. The expansionist zeal of the 1840s had convinced the American public that it was the manifest destiny of the United States to acquire complete possession of the Oregon country.

President James K. Polk had even campaigned on the slogan, "Fifty-four Forty or Fight!" which signified the latitude, the extent to which the United States claimed the Oregon territory. However, the war with Mexico in 1846 had complicated the situation and rather than risking a war with both Mexico and Britain, President Polk settled for just half of the Oregon country. The 49th parallel – the same line of latitude used as the border for the Louisiana Territory – was decided as the boundary of American claims to the Oregon territory. The treaty was ratified in 1846, thereby opening up new lands in the Northwest for expansion.

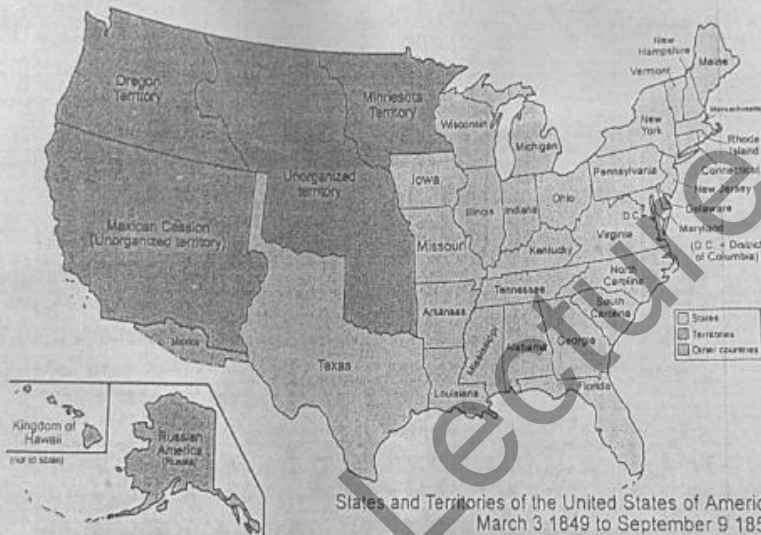


Figure: Territory of the United States at the end of the 1840s

2.10. Alaska Purchase (1867)

The vast Alaskan territory was originally disputed between Russia and Great Britain. Once Russia assumed control over Alaska however, it remained skeptical of a British takeover of the land. The territory soon became an economic burden for Russia, which tried to seek buyers for it. William H. Seward, the Secretary of State at the time, was keenly interested in purchasing Alaska for the United States and in 1867 Congress was convinced to buy Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million.

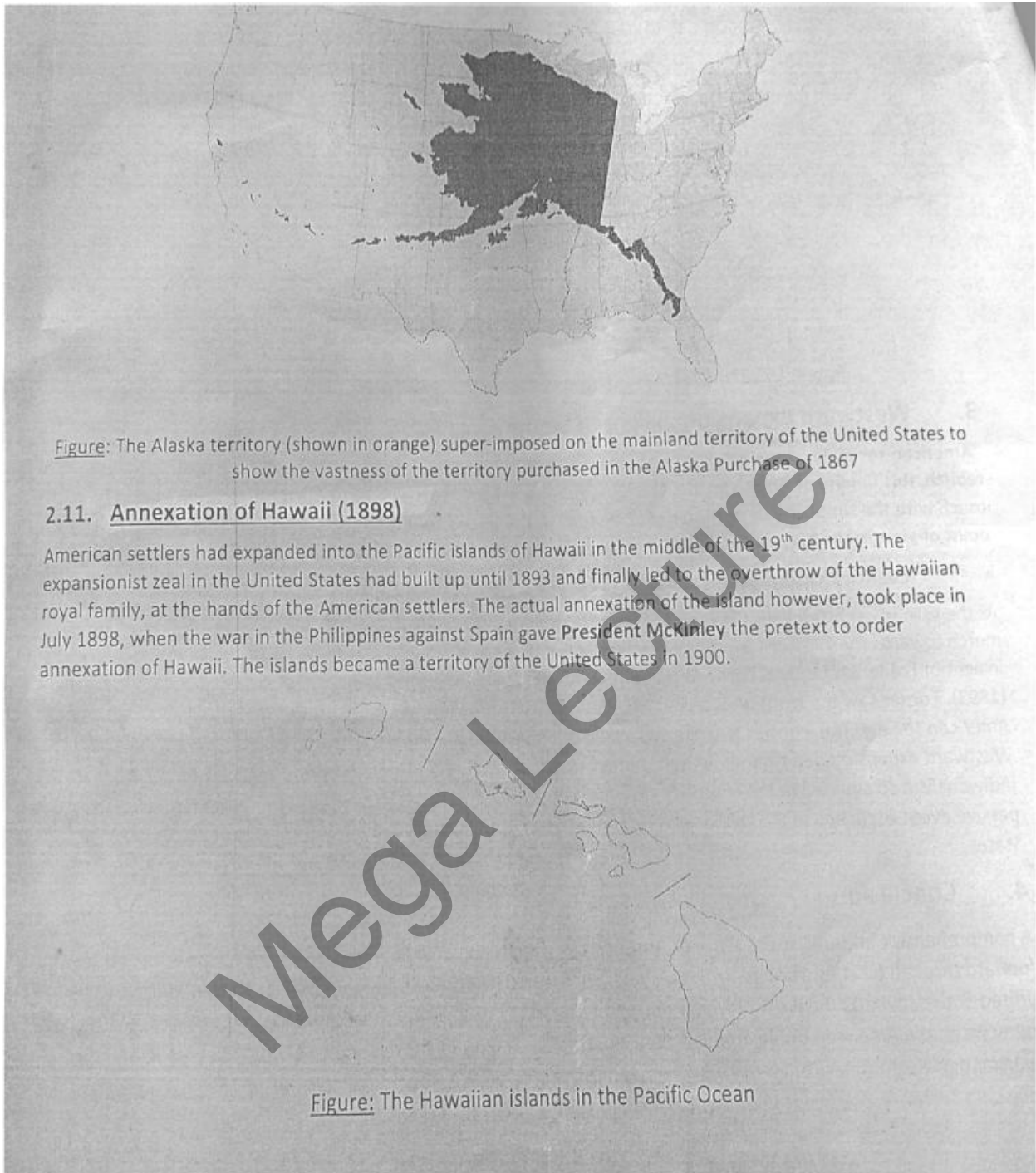




Figure: Location of Hawaii, relative to the United States (towards the South-West)

3. Westward expansion in light of Frederick Jackson Turner's 'Frontier Thesis'

"American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."

- Frederick Jackson Turner, 1893

As the extensive chronological account of the United States of America's westward expansion suggests, the march towards the Western frontier is truly an integral part of U.S. history. This phenomenon is best understood in light of Frederick Jackson Turner's influential essay, "*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*" (1893). Turner saw the frontier as a kind of safety valve – it provided an outlet for the release of discontent in American society. The frontier was seen as a land of opportunity, a fresh start and a powerful social leveler. Westward expansion had reinforced and shaped American culture and gave birth to the idea of a rugged individualism so coveted in the United States. Seen in this regard, westward expansion is not so much merely a passive event occurring in U.S. history, as it is an active event which played a part in the evolution of the United States.

4. Conclusion

A comprehensive account of the story of America's westward expansion shows quite clearly how it is driven forward through treaties, concessions, cessions, annexations, conquest and purchases. This expansion of the United States towards the west played an integral role in the development of American culture and society. In many ways, the American public fulfilled their own vision of a manifest destiny to acquire possession of the heartland of North America: all the way from a narrow strip of the 13 original colonies on the East Coast, to the Louisiana Territory, the Great Plains, the West coast and beyond.