



# THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

## Decades of Westward Expansion: The 1850s

The Museum of Westward Expansion provides many opportunities for looking at the past. Visitors may choose to follow the history of a specific group of people who lived in the West, such as the soldiers, explorers, or American Indians. Or they may choose to follow the timeline rings embedded in the ceiling of the museum, in order to discover what was happening during a specific decade of the 19th century. This gazette serves as a guide to the 1850s, a period of massive change, growth, apprehension and tension in the United States.

If we journeyed back to the 1850s, we would immediately be impressed with the silence - missing would be the hum of electricity, the beeps of computers, the noise of automobiles. Instead we would hear the sounds of the natural world - bees buzzing, trees rustling, rain falling, horses clip-clopping along unpaved lanes. We would also notice the lack of neighbors - only 31.5 million people lived in the entire United States in 1860.

The United States was primarily a land of farmers, who, with the use of the new McCormick reapers and plows, were able to produce a surplus. In the 1850s, the average farmer still drew water from a well, heated the house and cooked food over a fireplace or cast-iron stove, took infrequent baths in a kitchen washtub, and used a privy or "necessary" in the backyard. The church and the tavern, located in small town centers, were the nucleus of social life. Existence was harder in terms of physical labor, but farmers enjoyed a simpler, slower pace of life.

The little streams which flowed across the farmlands ran into rivers, which in turn powered gristmills and sawmills. Further downriver, larger mills made cloth from cotton, wool and silk; iron was cast for buildings, bridges, stoves, and steam engines; and machines were powered to make rifles, traps, and furniture. Factories like those of Paterson, New Jersey, and Lowell, Massachusetts, grew quickly during the 1850s. Lowell had 50 mills and over 13,000 workers, most of who were female, native born, and in their early twenties. A typical workroom consisted of 80 women tending machinery, with two male supervisors. A woman made from \$2.25 to \$4.25 a week. The work day began at 5 a.m. and was 12 to 14 hours long; the average woman worked 73 hours a week. Many suffered from brown lung disease caused by the cotton fibers. Manufacturing increased tenfold between 1820 and 1850, and most New England factory owners easily cleared a 60% profit in an era without income tax. By 1850 there had already been two major labor strikes in Lowell.

New England offered another life, away from the farms and factories: the life of the sea. Operating out of towns like New Bedford, Massachusetts, whalers hunted sperm whales, whose oil shone the brightest in lamps. The sperm whale also provided a bonus, for in its head was five tons of spermaceti (which could be made into candles), and its body contained the whalebone for women's corsets. In 1850 there were 736 ships actively hunting whales, which brought home an annual catch of about \$8 million.

New England was also the center of overseas trade. On March 8, 1853, the United States crashed the trade barrier with Japan, when a fleet of American naval vessels under Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Yokohama. Lavish entertainments were given for the Americans, who came bearing gifts which included a quarter-scale steam railroad and 370 feet of track, as well as a half-mile of telegraph wire.

The United States was being tied together by a web of steel, as railroads brought about swifter transportation and cheaper freight costs. In 1850, 8,500 miles of track crossed the country; by 1857 there were 24,000 miles. Trains chugged along at speeds of 25 to 30 m.p.h., and track was completed as far west as St. Louis by the end of the decade.

Only 15% of Americans lived in cities, exemplified by New York, which as a seaport, commercial center, and ethnic melting pot, was soon unrivaled. Cramped living conditions were normal, crime was rampant, epidemic diseases frequent and incurable, disposal of garbage and sewage virtually unknown. In addition, five million immigrants arrived in the U.S. between 1820 and 1850, quadrupling the nation's population; most initially settled in cities. St. Louis, for example, had a huge influx of German and Irish immigrants during this period. The ideal urban woman had an erect posture, and no longer sported the girlish figure of the 1830s and 40s. By the late '50s, she also adopted the huge hoop skirt, a fashion which was extremely impractical but all the rage.

The image of the South in the 1850s is one of large plantations tended by hundreds of slaves. In reality, the South was just as diverse as the North. Great cities such as Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans were commercial centers from which the major cash crop, cotton, was shipped. England was the largest purchaser of cotton, and 1.75 billion pounds were exported from the South in 1859 alone. Only one in four Southerners was a slave owner, and only one in five owned more than five slaves. In many ways, Southern farmers were very much like their Northern counterparts. As the decade wore on, however, it was the question of slavery which began to

absorb the nation. Southerners who had in the past wished to eventually eradicate slavery began to react to attacks by northern abolitionists by presenting slavery as a "positive good" rather than a "necessary evil."

Between 1830 and 1860 over 100,000 slaves were spirited out of the South along the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and hiding places. Conductors such as Harriet Tubman risked their lives in defiance of increasingly harsh fugitive slave laws, while the eloquent Frederick Douglass, himself an escaped slave, toured the north, speaking out against the "peculiar institution." Tensions between North and South grew, as Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a best-seller, dramatizing the problem of slavery for millions of Americans. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act provided for popular sovereignty, that is, the right of the people of a territory to decide whether or not slavery would be allowed. This prompted an influx of pro and anti-slavery settlers who made "Bleeding Kansas" a pre-Civil War battleground. By 1857, the struggle of St. Louis slave Dred Scott to free himself and his family under the law gained national attention. The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, which declared that blacks were not citizens and had no rights under the law, polarized people on both sides of the issue.

The problem posed by the slavery question was exacerbated during the 1850s by the influx of new territory acquired through the Oregon Treaty with Great Britain in 1846, and the War with Mexico in 1848. Gold had been discovered at Sutter's Fort in 1848, and made the name California synonymous with fortune. Thousands of people poured west by two routes: overland along the Oregon/California Trail, or by sea around Cape Horn in a three-month ocean voyage. San Francisco was transformed from a sleepy mission town into a city literally overnight, and California was admitted as a state in 1850.

"Go west, young man" was the advice of the era, and west they went. Although the majority traveled overland for gold, many went for land, and over 40,000 Mormons traveled west for religious freedom. There were 160 free acres of

land in Oregon for every family in those early years. About 10,000 emigrants never made it, succumbing to disease, drownings and accidental gunshot wounds.

At the height of this massive migration, the overlanders' draft oxen, milk cows, and horses were denuding the prairies in a swath several miles wide. The pioneers cut what little timber existed, slaughtered buffalo for food and sport, and littered the plains along their route. Thomas Fitzpatrick, a former mountain man and Indian agent, decided that the Indians deserved compensation. A general treaty between the United States and the Plains Indian nations was negotiated at Fort Laramie in 1851. It ensured intertribal peace and provided annual payments of \$50,000 in goods and provisions to the Indians for losses in game and grass from the overlanders. Great hopes were held out on all sides for the treaty.

Indians came to Fort Laramie to receive their annuity each summer. All went well until August 17, 1854, when a cow wandered away from a wagon train, toward the camp of the Lakota, who were waiting patiently for their annuity. A Lakota warrior could not resist the cow, killed it, and fed his family. The people in the wagon train complained when they reached the fort, and hotheaded young Lt. John Grattan marched out with 29 volunteers to arrest the man responsible. The Lakota refused to hand him over, and Grattan formed his troops into battle line among thousands of Indian warriors. After many tense moments, one of the nervous soldiers fired his rifle, killing an Indian. Grattan ordered his men to open fire; their volley was answered by thousands of arrows, which killed all the soldiers. The 50-year peace between the United States and the plains Indians, which began with Lewis and Clark in 1804, was broken, and the "Indian Wars" had begun.

But the immediate problem was slavery. On Sunday, October 16, 1859, John Brown and a number of his followers came into Harper's Ferry, Virginia, and seized the Federal Arsenal there, hoping to set off a slave insurrection throughout the South. Brown was quickly captured, tried

and hanged. Before he died, he wrote a prophetic epitaph: "I am firmly convinced that the crimes of this guilty land can be purged only with blood."

The tensions over the slavery issue and the cries of Southerners for "states rights" made the election of Abraham Lincoln as President in 1860 the culminating event of the decade. It caused the Southern States to secede from the Union, and resulted in the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861. No one then understood the immensity of what was about to happen, and how the innocent America of the 1850s would be changed forever.