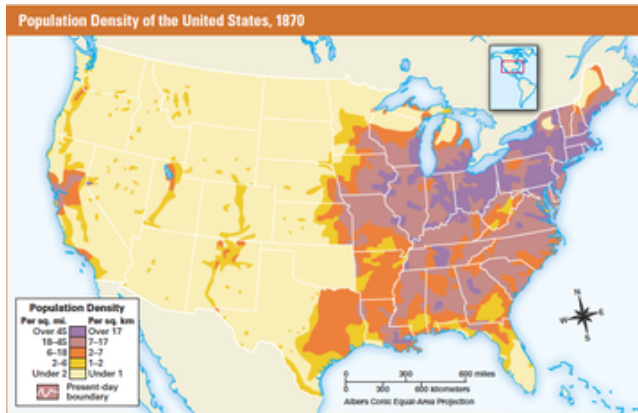


Setting the Stage - Migration and Industry

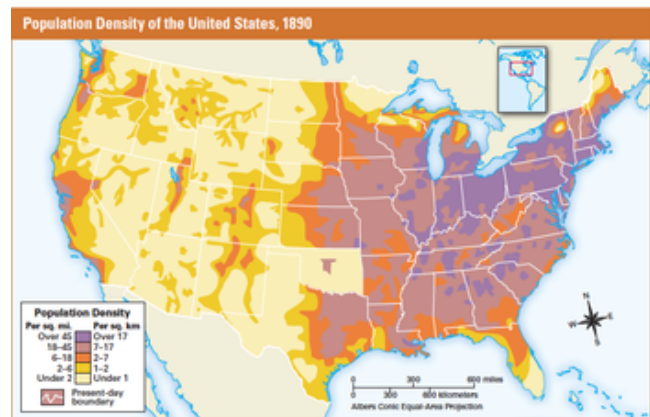


In this unit, you will learn about the growth of industry and agriculture in the decades after the Civil War. Mining, ranching, and farming boomed on the Great Plains and farther west. So did manufacturing in the East. The key to this growth, and the link that connected the nation geographically, was the railroad.

The map on this page shows the nation's main railroad lines for two different years, 1870 and 1890. Compare railroads in the country by 1870 with railroads by 1890. Notice the difference between the amount and location of track. In fact, the total miles of track in the United States more than tripled between 1870 and 1890.

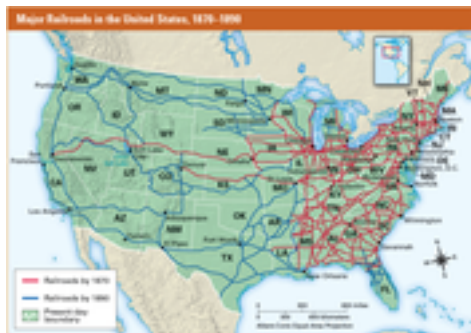
Think about being a farmer on the Great Plains in 1870. It would be a hard life and, for many, a lonely one. Farm machinery and luxuries such as glass for windows would not be easy to obtain. The cost of transporting such goods from eastern factories by wagon would make them very expensive. But railroads changed that. By 1890, such goods could travel most of the way to the Great Plains by train.

The people, machinery, and other goods that trains carried west spurred the growth of mining, ranching, and farming. The same trains also moved ore, livestock, and farm



products east to

become raw materials for the nation's industries. The growth of industry created jobs, and people came to the nation's industrial cities to fill those jobs.



The maps on the opposite page show the nation's patterns of settlement in 1870 and 1890. The population changes they show, especially in the West, are almost as dramatic as the changes in the railroad maps. That is because, to a great extent, railroad growth was directly or indirectly responsible for them.

Section 1 - Introduction

In the spring of 1889, two white women arrived at the Nez Perce lands in Lapwai, Idaho. One of them, Jane Gay, had nursed soldiers during the Civil War. The other, Alice Fletcher, had been a leader in the growing movement for women's rights. Now a new cause had brought these women west. They wanted to improve the lives of American Indians.

Gay and Fletcher were just two of the thousands of Americans who moved west after the Civil War. As you have read, during this period politicians in the East were arguing over Reconstruction. Meanwhile, railroad builders, miners, ranchers, and farmers continued to move westward. In this chapter, you will learn how the settlers' dreams of freedom and opportunity clashed with the dreams of the American Indians who already lived in the West.

The conflict between settlers and Indians was not just a fight over land. It was a conflict between two very different cultures and ways of seeing the world.



Jane Gay and Alice Fletcher discovered these deep differences soon after they arrived at Lapwai. Like other Indians, the Nez Perce had already been forced onto reservations—areas of land set aside by the government—to make way for new settlers. Now Fletcher told the Indians that the government wanted to divide the Lapwai Reservation into farm plots. Each family would receive one plot. Then the Nez Perce could live like other Americans.



The Indians listened in stony silence. Settlers might think of owning a plot of land as a way to be free. But to a Nez Perce, being tied to one spot of earth would be like being in jail.

Finally, one man spoke. “We do not want our land cut up in little pieces,” the Indian said. “We have not told you to do it.”

This Indian’s words show why tensions were bound to develop between settlers and American Indians. As you read about the Nez Perce and other Indian groups, you will discover the great impact that the settlement of the West had on American Indians.

Section 2 - The Nez Perce

For centuries, the Nez Perce freely roamed the lush mountains and valleys where Oregon, Washington, and Idaho come together today. Their name, which means “pierced nose” in French, was given to them by French explorers. The French had confused the Nez Perce with other Indians who decorated their noses with pieces of shell. In reality, the Nez Perce did not usually pierce their noses or wear nose ornaments.

When horses arrived in the Northwest in the 1700s, the Nez Perce became expert riders and horse breeders. They developed their own special breed, the Appaloosa. These beautiful, spotted horses were fast and strong. The Nez Perce trained them to ride into stampeding buffalo herds and single out one animal for the kill.

The Nez Perce treasured their homeland and way of life. But after the Civil War, more and more settlers came from the East to settle in the Pacific Northwest. The world of the Nez Perce would never be the same.

Friendship with Whites For decades, the Nez Perce were among the friendliest of all western Indians toward whites. In 1805, they saved Lewis and Clark and their expedition from starvation. They were also friendly with the first trappers, traders, and missionaries who came to the Northwest. The Nez Perce had never killed a white person.



Americans’ hunger for land and riches finally broke that friendship. In the 1860s, miners swarmed over Nez Perce land, looking for gold. Settlers followed. Some Nez Perce signed treaties in which they agreed to give up their land and move to a **reservation [reservation: an area of land set aside by the federal government for the use of an American**

Indian tribe] in Lapwai, Idaho. Other members of the Nez Perce tribe refused to sign any treaty.



One of these “no treaty” groups of Nez Perce lived in the Wallowa Valley of eastern Oregon. It was led by a man whose Indian name meant “Thunder Rolling in the Mountains.” The settlers called him Chief Joseph. In 1877, representatives of the U.S. government presented Chief Joseph with a terrible choice. You can give up your land peacefully and move to Lapwai, they told him, or army troops will come and force you to relocate there.

Fearing a war he could not win, Chief Joseph agreed to move. “I would give up everything,” he said, “rather than have the blood of white men upon the hands of my people.”

Blood Is Shed That summer, 700 Nez Perce left the Wallowa Valley, their hearts filled with bitterness. One night, a group of angry young warriors slipped out of camp and murdered several whites. Chief Joseph knew that the killings would bring soldiers to punish his people. For the first time, the Nez Perce would be at war with whites.

The soldiers came. Still hoping to avoid war, Indians carrying the white flag of peace came forward to talk. The troops opened fire anyway. Minutes later, 34 soldiers lay dead. “I have been in lots of scrapes,” reported a survivor, “[but] I never went up against anything like the Nez Percés in all my life.”

The Flight to Canada In desperation, the Nez Perce headed for the one place where they might still live free—Canada. For the next three months, Chief Joseph led the U.S. Army on a chase of more than 1,000 miles through rugged mountain country. Although greatly outnumbered, his warriors won several battles.

The chase ended less than 40 miles from the Canadian border. Forced to surrender, Chief Joseph spoke his heart in these words:

*I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed . . .
The old men are all dead . . . It is cold and we have no blankets.
The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are . . .
Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired; my heart is sick and sad.
From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.*

After their surrender in 1877, Chief Joseph and his followers were sent to a barren reservation in Oklahoma. There they began to fall sick and die. Soon they had a cemetery just for babies, with more than a hundred graves.

Chief Joseph begged the government to allow his people to join the rest of the Nez Perce in Lapwai. Although some did go to Lapwai, others, including Chief Joseph, were sent to the Colville Reservation in Washington in 1885. They never went back to their homeland. When Chief Joseph died in 1904, the doctor listed the cause of death as “a broken heart.”

Section 3 - New Interest in the West



Settlers had been gradually forcing American Indians from their land ever since the first colonists arrived in North America. Still, by the start of the Civil War, the West was populated mostly by Indians and huge herds of buffalo. Then, in 1862, Congress passed two laws that stirred new interest in the West—the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act.

The Homestead Act The Homestead Act offered farmers 160 acres of public land in the West for free. All the farmer, or **homesteader [homesteader: a farmer who is given a plot of public land, or homestead, in return for cultivating it]**, had to do was clear the land and farm it for five years. At the end of that time, the homesteader received ownership of the land.

The impact of the new law was enormous. Year after year, the promise of free land drew hopeful homesteaders westward. Between 1860 and 1910, the number of farms in the United States tripled from 2 million to more than 6 million.

The Pacific Railway Act The Pacific Railway Act called for the building of a **transcontinental railroad [transcontinental railroad: a railroad that crosses a continent]** to link the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. This huge construction project was given to two railroad companies: the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific.

To help the railroad companies pay for the project, Congress gave them **subsidies [subsidies: money or other things of value, such as land, that a government contributes to an enterprise considered to benefit the public]** in the form of sections of free land for every mile of track they laid. The railroads could sell this land to settlers later. The government also loaned the two companies more than \$60 million.

The Pacific Railway Act kicked off the greatest period of railroad construction in the nation's history. By 1900, the railroads had laid 170,000 miles of track, much of it in the West. "Rail barons" like the Central Pacific's Leland Stanford and Charles Crocker made vast fortunes.

Railroads opened the West to a flood of new settlers. The newcomers included farmers and ranchers, prospectors and preachers, and more than a few crooks. But most were ordinary people who dreamed of a new start. For them, the West was a place where a lot of hard work and a little luck could make their dreams come true.

Section 4 - Railroad Builders

The plan for building a transcontinental railroad looked simple enough on paper. The Union Pacific would start in Nebraska and build tracks westward across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Meanwhile, the Central Pacific would start in California and lay tracks eastward across the mountains of the Sierra Nevada and then across the Great Basin. The two lines would meet somewhere in between the starting points. The company that laid the most track would get more land, more loans, and more profits.



Laying track was hard work. First, the surveyors studied the land and chose the route for the tracks. They were followed by the graders, who prepared the land. Armed with picks and shovels, the graders cut through hills and filled up valleys to make the route as level as possible.

Next came the tracklayers. They put down wooden ties and hauled in heavy iron rails. One rail weighed 700 pounds, and there were 400 rails in each mile of track. Last came the spikers. The spikers nailed the rails to the ties with spikes—ten spikes per rail, three hammer blows for every spike.



The Union Pacific Builds West The Union Pacific Railroad got off to a slow start. Then, in 1866, a former Civil War general named Grenville Dodge took charge of construction. Dodge had built railroads before the war, and, as a military officer, he knew how to lead men. Now he commanded a force of 10,000 workers. Most of them were Irish immigrants who were fleeing the slums of eastern cities. They were joined by other immigrants, ex-soldiers, Mexicans, and freed slaves. All were young men who needed jobs. Most of all, they hoped to start new lives in the open spaces of the West.

By 1867, Dodge's crews were laying as much as seven miles of track a day across the plains. The workers lived in tent cities that followed the tracks west. These portable towns were rough and often

dangerous places. A reporter wrote, "Not a day passes but a dead body is found somewhere in the vicinity with pockets rifled of their contents."

For the Plains Indians, the railroad was an invasion of their homeland. They watched as millions of buffalo were slaughtered to feed railroad workers, destroying their main source of food. Some Indian warriors attacked the work crews and derailed supply trains by prying up sections of track. Grenville Dodge demanded military help, and soon he had 5,000 troops guarding his crews as they inched their way west.

The Central Pacific Builds East In California, the Central Pacific Railroad faced different problems. Soon after the company began laying track, many of the workers dashed off to newly discovered silver mines in Nevada. Construction practically stopped.

In desperation, Charles Crocker, the head of construction, hired 50 Chinese workers. He doubted that the Chinese were big enough to do heavy construction. But the Chinese surprised him. They could do as much work in a day as any other crew, and often more.

Crocker was so impressed that he sent agents to China to hire more workers. The agents were lucky. War and unrest had driven millions of Chinese into poverty and debt. Young men jumped at the chance of going to America to build a railroad. Most of them planned to save their money and return to China as wealthy men.

More than 12,000 Chinese laborers worked for the Central Pacific. They cleared trees, shoveled dirt, blasted tunnels, and laid tracks. At least 1,000 Chinese workers lost their lives in explosions, snow slides, and other accidents. Despite these losses, the workers managed to lay up to ten miles of track in a day.

The Two Lines Meet On May 10, 1869, the two lines came together at Promontory Summit in Utah Territory. A golden spike was driven in to complete the 1,800 miles of track. In time, a network of railroads would bring new settlers, encourage the construction of towns and cities, and allow mail and supplies to be shipped clear across the country.

The Chinese workers, who had contributed so much to building the railroad, were not **acknowledged [acknowledged: to recognize; to show that something is seen or accepted]** at the celebration. Their reward for their years of hard work was to lose their jobs. A few of them fulfilled their dream of returning to China. But most stayed on in America, helping to build new farms and businesses across the West.

Section 5 - Miners

A second group of pioneers, the miners, dreamed of striking it rich. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 set off a great treasure hunt in the mountains and deserts of the West. By 1874, gold or silver had been found in what are now the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. Although some immigrants also came to seek their fortunes, most miners were young, white American males who dreamed of striking it rich.

Boomtowns and Ghost Towns Mining in the West followed a predictable pattern. First came the discovery of gold or silver. Soon, fortune seekers from around the world flocked to the site. Almost overnight, mining camps grew into fast-growing settlements called boomtowns.

Newspaper reporter J. Ross Browne described the birth of one such town, Gila City, in present-day Arizona:

Enterprising men hurried to the spot with barrels of whiskey and billiards tables . . . Traders crowded in with wagons of pork and beans. Gamblers came with cards . . . There was everything in Gila City within a few months but a church and a jail.

Boomtowns had no government, no law, and little order. Robbery and murder were common. Miners fought back by forming “vigilance committees” to control crime. The members of these committees, called vigilantes, handed out quick justice. A suspected murderer might be arrested, tried, convicted, and hanged all in the same day. If asked about their methods, the vigilantes pointed out that there were no courts or jails nearby. No miner had time to waste guarding criminals.

When the easy-to-find gold or silver was gone, most miners moved on. Just seven years after its birth, for example, Gila City was a ghost town. All that remained, wrote Browne, were “three chimneys and a coyote.”

Mining Changes the West In many ways, mining was destructive. It damaged the land and displaced many American Indians. But most Americans saw mining as a source of wealth and opportunity. Some boomtowns, like Reno and Denver, survived to become prosperous cities. Mining also opened up the West’s mountains and deserts to other settlers. Some were businesspeople who invested in the heavy equipment needed to extract hard-to-find ore from western mountains. Others were farmers and ranchers. These were the people who would turn territories into new western states.

Section 6 - Ranchers and Cowboys

A third group of western settlers consisted of ranchers and the cowboys who tended their herds of cattle. At the end of the Civil War, millions of longhorn cattle roamed the Texas plains. The cattle earned their name from their impressive horns, which could measure more than seven feet from tip to tip. The market for all this beef was the crowded cities of the East. Cattle worth \$3 a head in Texas might be sold for \$50 in New York or Chicago. The problem was how to transport the cattle to the cities. This challenge was complicated by the presence of Indians and stampeding buffalo herds.

The Extermination of the Buffalo The railroads made the ranchers' task much easier. As the railroads moved onto the Great Plains, buffalo hunters followed. The hunters killed huge numbers of buffalo for their hides and bones, which were shipped by rail for sale in the East.



The Plains Indians, who depended on the buffalo for food, were horrified by the slaughter. So were some other Americans. In 1874, Congress passed a bill outlawing the killing of more buffalo than could be used for food. But President Grant refused to sign the bill into law. General Philip Sheridan supported Grant's decision. "You ought to give each hunter a medal," he said. "Let them kill, skin and sell until the buffalo are exterminated [wiped out]. Then your prairies can be covered with cattle and the cowboy."

By 1880, the buffalo had all but vanished. With their food gone, the Plains Indians had little choice but to move to reservations. The plains were now open to ranchers and their cattle.

The Long Drive The railroads also solved the ranchers' transportation problem. In 1867, Joseph McCoy built a stockyard next to the railroad in Abilene, Kansas. A stockyard is a large holding pen where cattle are kept temporarily. That summer, cowboys herded a few thousand cattle from Texas to the Abilene stockyard, in what they called the "long drive." There the cattle were loaded into boxcars and shipped east. Over the next 20 years, cowboys drove more than 5 million cattle to Abilene and other "cow towns" beside the rails.

Being a cowboy was dangerous and low-paying work. Still, life on the trail attracted many young adventurers. Most were Texans. About a third were of Mexican or African American heritage. Rarely, however, were black cowboys promoted to trail boss. Jim Perry, for example, was an expert rider, roper, and trail cook. Prejudice against blacks, he believed, was the only reason he was not the boss of his own team.



During the long drive, cowboys worked 17 hours a day, seven days a week, for three to four months. Much of the work was boring— except for moments of terror when a herd stampeded. By the time they reached the end of the trail, most cowboys were ready for rowdy fun, including drinking, gambling, and brawling. That made the cow towns wild, noisy, and often dangerous places.

The most notorious cow town was Dodge City, Kansas. An eastern newspaper described it as "a wicked little town." Between 1872 and 1878, 64 victims of gunfights were buried on the hill above the town. Later, several graves were dug up to make way for a new school. The gravediggers turned up a fine collection of skeletons, most still wearing their cowboy boots. To this day, the Dodge City cemetery is known as Boot Hill.

The End of the Long Drive After growing rapidly for 20 years, the cattle industry collapsed in 1887. The winter of 1886–1887 was the worst anyone could remember. Whole herds of cattle froze to death. Ranchers called that terrible winter the "Great Die-Up." Many of them lost everything. The ranchers who were still in business reduced their herds and fenced their grazing lands. They built barns and raised hay so that they could shelter and feed their animals in winter. The days of the long drive were over. Wild cow towns became **civilized [civilized: well organized and socially developed]** ranching centers. Adventuresome cowboys settled down to work as ranch hands.



The cattlemen's glory years faded into the past. Still, they had left their mark on the West. They had opened the Great Plains to settlement. And they had created an industry that remains an important part of life in the West today.

Section 7 - Homesteaders

Farmers followed the ranchers onto the Great Plains. For half a century, the plains had been viewed as too dry for farming. Mapmakers labeled the area the “Great American Desert.” Then, in the 1870s, a few homesteaders plowed and planted the grassland. They were lucky. These were years of plentiful rain, and their fields yielded fine crops.

The western railroads and land dealers made the most of this good luck. Maybe the plains used to be too dry for farming, they said, but not any more. Some even said that rain had followed the rails west. “The increase of railroads,” wrote a Colorado journalist, “has the . . . effect of producing more showers.” Others gave farming the credit for the wet years, claiming that “rain follows the plow.”

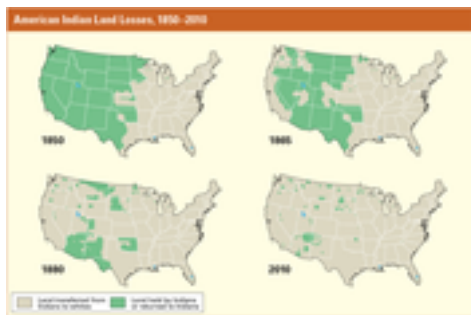
Homesteaders Arrive Rain might not follow the rails or the plow, but a rush of new settlers did. By 1900, some 500,000 homesteaders had moved onto the Great Plains. Many were farm families from the East who were lured west by the promise of free or cheap land. Some were former slaves looking for a new start in freedom. Tens of thousands of European immigrants also settled the plains. While most of them were seeking land, one group, Russian Mennonites, came looking for religious freedom.

Farming the Dry Plains The homesteaders faced huge challenges as they struggled to turn grasslands into grain fields. Rain was unreliable. Some years their crops withered under the hot prairie sun. Other years, locusts—large grasshoppers that travel in swarms—swept across the plains, eating everything in their path. In addition, the plains had few trees, so there was little wood for homes.



Over time, the homesteaders solved these problems. Instead of using wood, they built houses out of chunks of sod, or soil held together by grassy roots. They used windmills to pump water from deep in the ground. They learned how to plow deeply to reach moist soil. The Mennonites introduced a type of winter wheat that thrived on the plains. With hard work and the right crop, homesteaders made the Great Plains the most productive wheat-growing region in the world.

Section 8 - War on the Plains



The flow of miners, ranchers, and farmers to the West led to a change in federal policy toward American Indians. Under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, American Indians had been promised lands in the Great Plains in exchange for giving up their homelands in the East. By the mid-1800s, however, whites were pushing deep into this “Indian Territory.” A number of small wars raged as Indians resisted the tide of white settlement. More and more, government officials saw Indians as standing in the way of the agricultural and industrial development of the West.

In 1867, Congress tried to separate American Indians and settlers by moving the Indians onto reservations. In exchange for their land, Indians were promised food, farm tools, and schools where their children would learn to “live like whites.”

The new policy was backed up by force. The U.S. Army was authorized to round up Indians and keep them on reservations.

Many American Indians fought this effort to take away their land and change their way of life. In the 1870s, the wars on the plains would settle the issue once and for all.

Reservation Life The nomadic Plains peoples hated the idea of being penned up on a reservation. A Sioux chief named Sitting Bull spoke for many Indians when he said,



I will remain what I am until I die, a hunter, and when there are no buffalo or other game I will send my children to hunt and live on prairie mice, for when an Indian is shut in one place, his body becomes weak.

Despite Sitting Bull's words, the buffalo were disappearing, and most Plains Indians had little choice but to move to reservations. Once they did, however, the promised food often failed to arrive. Sometimes dishonest whites, working as federal agents, sold it to settlers instead. Often the food was spoiled by the time it reached the Indians.

Hungry and unhappy with reservation life, many warriors left the reservations to look for game or to attack settlers. When they did, they were hunted down by army troops.

General George Crook sympathized with the Indians. "I do not wonder that when these Indians see their wives and children starving they go to war," he wrote. "And then we are sent out to kill. It is an outrage."

The Battle of the Little Big Horn The most famous battle in this long struggle was fought near the Little Big Horn River in present-day Montana. The Battle of the Little Big Horn soon came to be known by another name: "Custer's Last Stand."

The conflict began when soldiers led by a former Civil War officer named George Custer found gold in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory. Within months, 15,000 gold-hungry whites were swarming over Sioux land. Rather than remove the miners, the government demanded that the Sioux sell the Black Hills. The Sioux refused. "I never want to leave this country," a leader named Wolf Necklace told the government agents. "All my relatives are lying here in the ground, and when I fall to pieces I am going to fall to pieces here."

The army was ordered to force the Indians out. In June 1876, army scouts reported that several thousand Sioux and Cheyenne were camped beside the Little Big Horn River. Custer was ordered to locate the camp and then wait for reinforcements.

Once Custer spotted the Indian camp, however, he decided to attack at once. The attack ended in disaster. Custer split up his troops, and the group that he led suddenly found itself surrounded by angry warriors.



The battle, one warrior said, lasted no longer than a hungry man needs to eat his dinner. In those few minutes, Custer and all his men—about 260 soldiers—were killed.

Angry whites called the battle a massacre. Over the next few months, the army tracked down the Sioux and Cheyenne and forced them onto reservations. Ignoring earlier treaties, Congress took the Black Hills and another 40 million acres of land away from the Sioux.

By 1887, most American Indians had been moved onto reservations. Never again would Indians roam freely across the West.

Summary



In this chapter, you read about tensions that developed between settlers and American Indians in the West after the Civil War.

The Nez Perce For centuries, Nez Perce Indians had roamed the area where Oregon, Washington, and Idaho come together today. The Nez Perce saved the Lewis and Clark expedition from starvation in

1805. As settlers moved west, American Indians were pushed off their lands and onto reservations. In 1877, when the Nez Perce resisted relocation, the U.S. Army chased them and their leader, Chief Joseph, almost to Canada. The Indians surrendered and were sent to a barren reservation, where many died.

The Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act During the Civil War, two government acts aroused new interest in the West. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave homesteaders a plot of land to cultivate. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 resulted in the building of a transcontinental railroad that made it easier for settlers to travel westward.

Railroad Builders, Miners, Ranchers and Cowboys, and Homesteaders The completion of the first transcontinental railroad—built by Chinese and Irish immigrants, ex-soldiers, Mexicans, and freed slaves—in 1869 opened the West to a flood of new settlers. Miners came in search of gold and silver. Ranchers and cowboys introduced large-scale cattle ranching to the Great Plains. Homesteaders turned the Great Plains into the most productive wheat-producing region in the world.

War on the Plains The flow of settlers led to changes in federal policy toward American Indians. Under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Indians had been promised lands in the Great Plains in exchange for giving up their homelands in the East. In 1867, Congress tried to force American Indians onto reservations, promising them food, farm tools, and schools in exchange for their land. Ongoing wars between settlers, soldiers, and Plains Indians came to a head in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, also known as Custer’s Last Stand, in June 1876. The Indians won the battle, but the U.S. Army soon tracked them down and forced them onto reservations. Most American Indians had been moved onto reservations by 1887. They would never again freely roam across the West.

Write two acrostic poems about the clash of cultures that resulted from the settlement of the West. One poem should be from the perspective of white settlers. The other should be from the perspective of American Indians. Begin the lines in each poem with the letters in the word *settlement*. Two examples are given below.

Reading Further - Black Exodus

In the 1870s, the end of Reconstruction and the return of “white man’s rule” caused many African Americans to flee the South. Thousands moved west, hoping to start a new life as homesteaders on the Great Plains. What they found there was not a paradise, but it did give them a taste of freedom.

In 1879, a remarkable event took place across the South. Thousands of African Americans left their homes and set out on a great migration. Some of them traveled on foot, following roads leading west. Others crowded onto the banks of the Mississippi to catch riverboats bound for St. Louis. From there, they moved on to Kansas and other western states. The migrants, called exodusters, were part of a migration known as the “Exodus of 1879.”

The exodusters were trying to escape hardship and oppression in the South. After Reconstruction, conditions had worsened for southern blacks. White leaders restricted black voting rights and imposed segregation through Jim Crow laws. They passed black codes, laws that restricted African Americans’ freedoms. Some of the laws prevented blacks from buying or leasing land, thus keeping them under the control of white landowners. Whites also used violence to terrorize black communities. Although slavery had ended, most African Americans in the South still did not feel free. As one black Texan, C. P. Hicks, noted in 1879,

There are no words which can fully express or explain the real condition of my people throughout the South, nor how deeply and keenly they feel the necessity of fleeing from the wrath and long pent-up hatred of their old masters.

The migrants were not only being pushed out of the South by harsh conditions. They were also being pulled out by the prospects of a brighter future elsewhere.

For many, that future seemed to lie in Kansas. Many southern blacks believed that Kansas was the Promised Land, a place where they could own their own land and live as free men and women. This dream did not turn out quite the way they imagined. But despite great challenges, many of the migrants would still find a better life outside the South.

Black Pioneers

The 1879 exodus was not the first time African Americans had gone west. Black explorers, trappers, and missionaries had roamed the West in the early 1800s. Black miners had gone west to seek their fortune during the California gold rush.

Other African Americans moved west to escape slavery. In 1864, for example, Howard Bruce and his future wife fled from bondage in Missouri. They went to Leavenworth, Kansas, where they settled down.

Black families also moved west as pioneer settlers after the Civil War. Nancy Lewis went to Leavenworth as a teenager in 1865. She married a black soldier stationed there. The two of them later joined a wagon train to Colorado, where they made their new home.

Why Kansas?

Kansas appealed to migrants because it had lots of land for homesteading. But it also held a special appeal for many former slaves, who saw it as a symbol of freedom.

This idea stemmed from the antislavery struggles of the 1850s. At the time, some Kansans had fought to prevent Kansas from becoming a slave state. One southern black man later wrote to the governor of Kansas, "I am anxious to reach your state . . . because of the sacredness of her soil washed by the blood of humanitarians for the cause of freedom."

In the early 1870s, black leaders and businessmen began to promote Kansas as a destination for migrants. Two important promoters were Henry Adams and Benjamin "Pap" Singleton. Adams was a former slave and Union soldier. He favored black migration to the African country of Liberia. But he also backed migration to Kansas as a way to get blacks out of the South.

Singleton, also a former slave, was even more involved in the Kansas migration. He gave speeches and printed fliers praising the benefits of Kansas. With partners, he formed several black "colonies" in the state and began to take settlers there. He would later claim, "I am the whole cause of the Kansas migration!" Although this was an exaggeration, Singleton did play a major role in promoting migration. By the late 1870s, he had helped plant the seeds for the great exodus.

Kansas Fever!

In the spring of 1879, interest in Kansas suddenly exploded in a mass movement. Rumors began to circulate that the government was offering free land, transportation, and supplies to migrants who arrived in Kansas. These rumors were false, but they sparked great excitement. "Kansas fever" quickly spread across the South.

Many people began to pack up their belongings and head west. Six thousand exodusters moved in the first few months of 1879. As many as 20,000 people had migrated by the end of the year. They joined some 30,000 blacks who had already gone west during the 1870s.

This mass migration caused a panic among white southerners. Fearing the loss of black farmworkers, they tried to prevent the exodusters from leaving. They blocked roads and warned riverboat captains not to pick up black migrants. They even threatened to sink boats carrying exodusters.

Many migrants were left stranded along the Mississippi with no way forward. Others got to St. Louis, but then discovered there was no free transport to Kansas. Some of them got stuck there and had to rely on donations of food and clothing to survive. Others returned to the South. Under these circumstances, the exodus quickly lost steam. Within a few years, it was over.

Many of those who did get to Kansas were overjoyed, though. When John Solomon Lewis arrived with his family in 1879, he said it was like a dream come true.

*When I landed on the soil,
I looked on the ground and I says this is free ground.
Then I looked on the heavens, and I says them is free and beautiful heavens.
Then I looked within my heart, and I says to myself
I wonder why I never was free before?*

Others had a different reaction. Williana Hickman could hardly believe her eyes when she arrived in Nicodemus, a black settlement on the treeless plains of western Kansas, in 1878.

*I said, "Where is Nicodemus? I don't see it."
My husband pointed out various smokes coming out of the ground and said,
"That is Nicodemus." The families lived in dugouts [in the ground] . . .
The scenery was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.*

Life on the Plains

Williana Hickman got over her disappointment. Within a few years, she and her husband had managed to build a new life for themselves. Her husband, Daniel, was a Baptist minister. Together, they founded the First Baptist Church in Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was one of more than a half-dozen black settlements in Kansas and more successful than most. Founded in 1877, it took several years to get on its feet. The first winter was especially hard. The settlers lived in sod dugouts. It was cold, and many settlers went hungry. But when spring came, they planted their first crops and began building houses.

By 1880, around 700 people lived in Nicodemus. The town had three churches, a bank, two hotels, several stores, and a newspaper. It continued to grow throughout the 1880s, adding more churches, a second newspaper, and even a baseball team.



The residents of Nicodemus hoped that the Union Pacific Railroad would build a rail line through their town. When it didn't, the town began a slow, steady decline. Today, it has only a handful of residents. But it remains the oldest surviving western town founded by African Americans. In 1996, it was declared a national historic site.

Black migrants also settled in other Plains states, including Nebraska. By 1890, there were nearly 9,000 African Americans living in Nebraska. One descendant of these early settlers, Ava Speese Day, wrote about her experiences growing up in western Nebraska in the early 1900s. She and her family lived in a one-room sod house. They planted corn, beans, and vegetables. They also raised cattle. "We fought tumbleweeds all year round," she wrote. "It was a never ending battle. In spring they came up thick . . . Come fall they dried and tumbled across the land. Some were bigger than we were tall."

Poverty remained a problem for many African Americans who moved west. Many also experienced racism and discrimination from white residents.

Overall, though, life for most migrants seemed to improve. Blacks in the West were generally more prosperous than they were in the South. They enjoyed more economic opportunity and more political freedom. The black exodus of the 1870s may not have led to the Promised Land, but it did lead to a better life for most migrants.

Preparing to Write: Taking Notes on Details

More than 50,000 African Americans left their homes and migrated west in the late 1870s. Individuals and families had both unique and shared experiences.

- 1) What conditions motivated African Americans to leave the South in the 1870s?
- 2) What drew the migrants to Kansas and other states?
- 3) What were two difficulties the migrants faced in making their exodus?
- 4) Describe the houses that many of the migrants lived in once they settled.
- 5) How did the new lives of most migrants compare to their lives in the South?

Writing a Diary Entry

Suppose you were an African American living in the South in 1879 who decided to migrate to Kansas. Choose one of the following times in your life: making the decision to leave, on the way west, arriving in Kansas, or five years after you settle. Write a diary entry describing that time. Include feelings and experiences in your entry, based on factual details.

Use this rubric to evaluate your diary entry. Make changes in your entry if you need to.

Score	Description
3	The diary entry clearly describes both feelings and experiences. It includes factual details. There are no spelling or grammar errors
2	The diary entry describes some feelings and experiences. It includes some details. There are few spelling or grammar errors
1	The diary entry does not describe both feelings and experiences. It does not include factual details. There are many spelling or grammar errors.

Enrichment Essay - The Homestead Act and the Rise of Private Property

The Homestead Act was one of the most revolutionary laws for distributing public land in world history. Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862, after the southern states had left the Union. Signed into law by Abraham Lincoln, the act took effect on January 1, 1863. The new law released vast amounts of “unoccupied” public property to private citizens.

The Homestead Act allowed hundreds of thousands of settlers to become property owners. It also changed the face of the West. Let’s look at how the act worked, the lives of homesteaders, and the lasting impact of this far-reaching law.

How the Homestead Act Worked

The Homestead Act provided that a citizen or intended citizen could claim 160 acres (one quarter of a square mile) of surveyed government land. The only qualification was that a homesteader had to be a head of household at least 21 years of age.

The first wave of homesteaders after the Civil War hailed mostly from the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. They were joined by eastern farmers without land of their own, war widows and other single women, and former slaves. Later, railroad companies encouraged European immigrants to come to America and become homesteaders. The railroads hoped to profit by giving farmers and ranchers a way to ship their crops and livestock to market.

People interested in homesteading first had to file their intentions at the nearest land office. The homesteader paid a filing fee of \$10 to claim a parcel of land and a \$2 commission to the land agent.

Homesteaders had to “prove up” (improve) the land in order to keep their claim, free and clear. Proving up the land included building a home, growing crops, and living on the land for five years. After completing these requirements, homesteaders became the legal owners of the land.

Changes in the Homestead Act continued through the 19th century, especially with the addition of Alaskan land. In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act substantially decreased the amount of land available to homesteaders in the West. But the Homestead Act remained in effect until it was repealed in 1976. Provisions for homesteading in Alaska continued until 1986.

The Homesteading Life

By 1900, homesteaders had filed 600,000 claims for 80 million acres of land. Most pioneers settled on the western plains in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Dakota Territory. The majority became farmers. Some homesteaders bought additional land and ranched.

The lenient rules of the Homestead Act contributed to the undoing of many settlers. Homesteaders did not need to own equipment or know anything about farming. Many were unprepared for the challenges of life on the plains. In some

places, there was not enough water available for small claims to support a family. In many locations timber was scarce, so settlers built homes of sod. These mud huts barely protected people from hailstorms, drought, prairie fires, blizzards, and relentless wind. From 1874 to 1877, swarms of locusts darkened the western skies, consuming crops.

Human battles were equally challenging. Early homesteaders lived in fear of Native Americans fighting for their lands. Although Indian attacks were rare, settlers had to depend on the U.S. Army for protection. Farmers faced heavy debt, lack of cash, and high fees for rail transportation and grain storage. When prices dropped, farmers sank deeper into debt. In some areas, ranchers resisted dividing up the open range for farms.

Eventually, frame and brick houses replaced the sod. Trees grew high to shield dwellings, and windmills pumped water from deep underground. Technological advances helped make farming profitable. Yet crises continued for many farmers, leading to protests and political action in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s.

The homestead life is depicted in the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867–1957), who grew up on homesteads. Her books later became the basis for the television show “Little House on the Prairie.” Homesteaders are also the subject of a “living history” center, the Homestead National Monument, in southeast Nebraska.

The Lasting Impact

The impact of the Homestead Act is still felt today. One important impact was on the environment. In the mid 1800s, great herds of grazing buffalo roamed the plains. The buffalo all but disappeared as they were killed by settlers and starved by dwindling grazing lands. In their place came non-native species of cattle and sheep imported by homesteaders. The native grasslands of the prairies were replaced by rows of corn.

While settlers benefited from the Homestead Act, the native peoples of the West suffered dearly. The Homestead Act was based on the idea that the land was, legally speaking, “unoccupied.” Of course, Native Americans had lived on the prairies for thousands of years. Indians saw their land taken by the government and their primary food source (buffalo) destroyed. Many died fighting to defend their way of life. Others were forced to live on reservations.

Native Americans had viewed the land as a good to be shared by all. This view gave way to the concept of private property. Thousands of miles of open space became a patchwork of farms and ranches, crisscrossed first by rails and then by highways. Settlements and forts became towns and cities. Today we can only imagine the endless view of open land that greeted homesteaders just 150 years ago.

- 1) How did the Homestead Act work?
- 2) What three words best describe the lives of homesteaders? What evidence best supports your choice of each of the three words you chose?
- 3) What were several of the lasting effects of the Homestead Act?
- 4) Imagine you are a representative in Congress serving at the time the Homestead Act was debated. If you could go back in time and vote for or against the act, how would you vote? Explain your vote to white settlers and to Native Americans living at the time.