

Chapter 57 -- Westward Expansion Re-Opens Questions About The Destiny Of Blacks In America



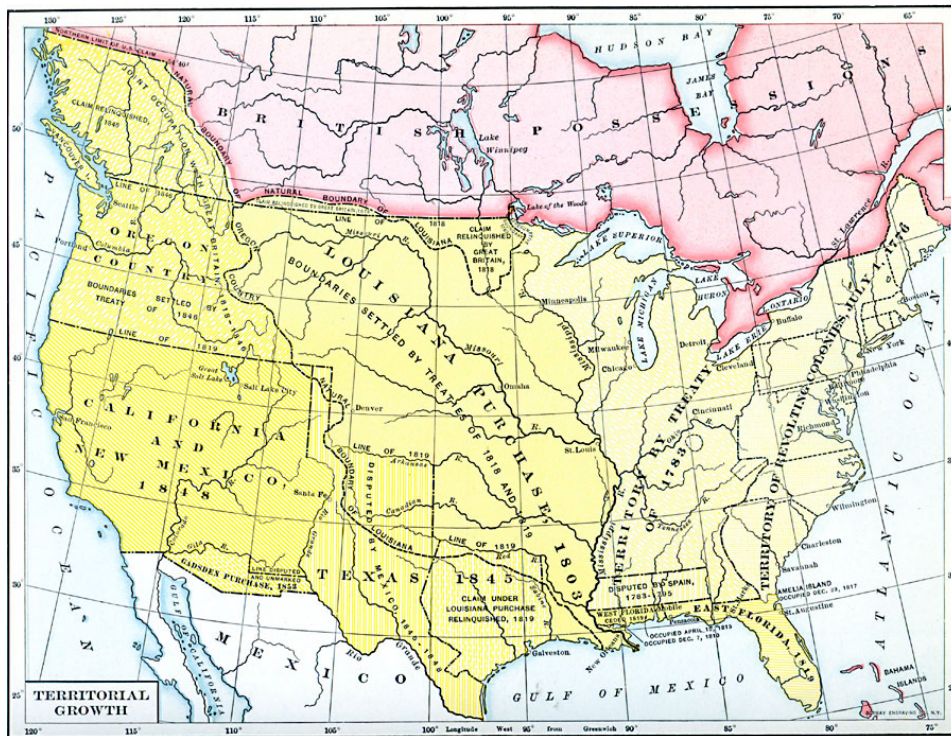
Dates:
1804-1816

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Time: 1775-1815

Westward Expansion Reveals The Depth Of Anti-Black Racism Across The North



Map of US Territories and Expansion Westward

By the time Napoleon's attempt to conquer Europe ends, America's attempt to expand westward is already well on its way.

In 1775 Daniel Boone has crossed the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky in search of creating a 14th colony he calls Transylvania. He is followed in turn by many other western explorers.

The rugged Meriwether Lewis and his aristocratic partner William Clark voyage down the Ohio River, up the Missouri, across the Rocky's and the Columbia River, and to the Pacific in their 1804-1806 expedition.

In 1805 General Zebulon Pike heads north along the Mississippi River to discover its headwaters in Minnesota, followed by his 1806-1807 expedition southwest into New Mexico and Colorado.

To the north, the fur trader, John Jacob Astor, has traversed the Canadian border from east to west, with an outpost established in 1811 on the Pacific coast in Oregon at Ft. Astoria.

By 1815 then, American settlers are primed to pack up their families and possessions and move en masse to the western territories.

This migration brings with it a host of issues for federal officials, beyond surveying, pricing and recording sales of the new lands. The most challenging relates to the process by which a new territory will achieve statehood and, in turn, be admitted to the Union.

As of Madison's first term, a total of four new states have been admitted, west of the Appalachians – Kentucky (1792), Tennessee (1796), Ohio (1803), and Louisiana (1812). Each has reached a threshold population level within its borders, held a convention to draft a constitution, had it approved by a local vote, and applied for acceptance to the federal Congress.

On the surface this process appears clear and simple.

But in practice, the task of arriving at a state constitution forces the settlers in each state to deal with the same thorny issue that almost sabotaged the founding father's efforts in 1787 – namely, how to deal with black people within their borders, be they enslaved or free.

Resolution is, of course, easy in the South. About-to-be states like Mississippi (1817) and Alabama (1819) will build their economies around the need for enslaved black people – to work their existing plantations, and to be bred for sale to those hoping to start-up new plantations.

In the North, however, where slavery is already banned, the issue becomes one of how the dominant white settlers intend to deal with freed blacks who hope to settle in the new states.

The answer will quickly become evident in language written into the initial state Constitutions for Ohio (1804), Illinois (1816) and Indiana (1818).

Time: 1804

Ohio Takes The Lead In Trying To “Cleanse Itself” Of All Blacks



Two Veteran Chimney Sweeps

Ohio is the first “western state” to express its views regarding the presence of blacks within its borders.

Under the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, slavery is banned in Ohio, although masters are still allowed to come and go with “their property.” But it is the body of “freed men” who might wish to take up permanent residence in the state that most troubles the white settlers.

To deal with this perceived threat, Ohio first passes a series of “black codes” aimed at “cleansing” the state of these freed men. The centerpiece of an 1804 bill sets up two hard-to-meet requirements for all blacks seeking permanent residence:

- Produce court papers proving they are free rather than run-away slaves; and
- Post a \$500 bond backed by two people to guarantee their “good behavior.”

Beyond these hurdles and humiliations, free blacks in Ohio experience the same daily deprivations heaped upon their brethren back east – segregation, poor housing, and the lowliest jobs, little to no education.

The message here from white Ohioans is obvious: “blacks keep out.”

It is overlaid by the threat of physical violence, most evident along the banks of the Ohio River, where black refugees from Kentucky – slaves or freedmen – hope to cross to a semblance of freedom.

As one self-defined guardian of the border puts it:

The banks of the Ohio...are lined with men with muskets to keep off emancipated slaves.

Time: 1800-1816

Indiana’s Black Codes Follows Ohio’s Lead

Indiana follows suit with its own set of “black codes,” after a history of even more contentious internal disputes.

The territory is officially organized on July 4, 1800, with frontier fighter, William Henry Harrison, serving as first Governor from 1800-1812. Harrison grows up on Berkeley Plantation in Virginia,

surrounded by slaves. Despite early brushes with Dr. Benjamin Rush and Quaker abolitionists, he concludes as Governor that Indiana would be more economically attractive to settlers were slavery allowed.

From 1803 onward, he attempts to skirt the sanctions imposed by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance.

White settlers from the South begin to filter into Indiana with slaves in tow. Harrison touts this fait d'accompli to federal politicians, including Jefferson (who opposes it), but still fails to change the law. His next ploy is to recast all of the Indiana slaves as "indentured servants, serving terms of 90+ years."

What follows is an open battle between white factions in the state that will be replicated over the next sixty years as America move west. On one side are southern slave owners who insist on the "right" to bring their "property" with them as they settle. On the other are northern whites who want absolutely nothing to do with any blacks – slave or free – within their state.

The level of anti-black vitriol among the latter group is evident in "petitions" they address to the provisional state legislature at the time:

Your Petitioners also humbly pray that if your hournable boddy think propper to allow a donation of land to Setlers, People of Color and Slaveholder may be debarred from the lands so appropriated.

We are opposed to the introduction of slaves or free Negroes in any shape...Our corn houses, kitchens, ' smoke houses...may no doubt be robbed and our wives, children and daughters may and no doubt will be insulted and abused by those Africans. We do not wish to be saddled with them in any way.

As usual, the Africans are caught in the middle between those whites who wish to treat them as cattle and those who hope they will disappear completely.

By 1810 the population of the Indiana Territory is approaching "admission to statehood" levels, with 23,890 whites counted and 630 blacks – 237 recorded as slaves, 393 as freed.

This leads to a battle over writing a Constitution that includes a direct reference to the "black issues."

With William Henry Harrison off to fight the War of 1812, the thought of converting Indiana into a slave state vanishes, and popular interest shifts to a "cleansing" solution.

In the end, Indiana follows suit with Ohio in its 1816 black codes. These require that all blacks must be able to "show their papers" on demand.

I, Andre Lewis, clerk of the Gibson Circuit Court, hereby certify that Lilly Ann Perry, a negro age 28 years, with light complexion, born in the state of North Carolina, resides now in Gibson, Indiana..

They also include posting of the \$500 bond to guarantee good behavior.

But then Indiana goes even further, piling other constraints on its free blacks – by barring rights to schooling, to testifying in court, to serving in the militia, and to voting.

Henceforth Indiana's free blacks may not be officially declared the equivalent of cattle, but the treatment they receive as state residents mirrors that perception.