Immigration, Expansion, and Sectional Conflict

1840–1848
VISITORS TO TEXAS will find a thoroughfare named after José Antonio Navarro (1795–1871) in his native San Antonio, an official Navarro Day, and Navarro County. A monument to him in front of Navarro’s county courthouse is inscribed “Lover of Liberty, Foe of Despotism.” He was one of two native Texans to have signed the state of Coahuila-Texas’s Declaration of Independence from Mexico in 1836, and he became a member of the Congress of the independent Republic of Texas. After Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845, Navarro served as a member of the convention that drew up the state’s constitution and served in its senate.

In sum, Navarro is justly remembered as a founder of Texas. But Tejano (a native Texan of Mexican descent) was just one of several identities thrust upon him and his father Angel Navarro in the course of their lives. Asked to bestow a name on the seat of Navarro County, he suggested Corsicana (it stuck) to commemorate his father’s birthplace, the craggy Mediterranean island of Corsica. Angel had enlisted in the Spanish army and eventually made his way to Mexico.

In 1811, three years after Angel’s death, Mexicans began the struggle that would lead to independence from Spain in 1821. San Antonio was a center of resistance to Spanish rule, and Navarro, who observed many skirmishes during the war, was now proud to be a Mexican. But in the 1820s other Mexicans began to call him an “Anglicized Mexican.” Although Navarro never learned to speak English, he had become friends with American citizens (“Anglos”), including James Bowie, who married his niece and who would die at the Alamo, and Stephen F. Austin.

Austin exemplified the shifting allegiances of many Anglos on the American frontier. Born in Virginia, he had followed his father in 1798 to what is now Missouri but was then Spanish territory. His father became a Spanish citizen. Stephen eventually moved to Texas to fulfill his father’s dream of settling American families there. Navarro, who had become a merchant and lawyer, ardently supported this goal, for Texas was underpopulated and vulnerable to Indian raids. Navarro, the Anglicized Mexican, formed an alliance with Austin, the “Mexicanized Anglo,” to turn Texas into an agriculturally and ethnically rich province.

Resentment against the centralizing tendencies of the Mexican government and its indifference to the welfare of remote Texas led Navarro and Austin to support Texas’s successful battle for independence from Mexico. Then, in 1841, Navarro signed on to an expedition to Santa Fe, still part of Mexico. The expedition’s goals—perhaps trade and

GOLD MINERS At first, gold rushers worked individually, each with a shovel and pan. By the 1850s, devices like the one shown here, a “long tom,” were making mining a cooperative venture. (Unknown maker, American. Gold Miners with Sluice, ca. 1850, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.116)
perhaps liberating Santa Fe from Mexican rule—are less clear than its fate. It became lost in the trackless wilderness that still covered much of Texas and was captured by Mexican troops. To Mexicans, Navarro was a traitor for having signed Texas’s Declaration of Independence. Mexican president Antonio López Santa Anna personally saw to it that Navarro was confined to the filthiest prison in Mexico, but then offered him freedom and wealth if he would renounce his allegiance to Texas. “I will never forsake Texas and her cause,” Navarro replied. “I am her son.”

Navarro made a daring escape from prison and returned to San Antonio, only to find that the now dominant Anglos were forsaking people like him. In their eyes, a Tejano was just another Mexican, and no one needed Mexicans. “The continuation of greasers [Mexicans] among us,” a resolution drafted by Anglos in Goliad proclaimed, “is an intolerable nuisance.” Navarro was starting to realize that the Texas in which he had first entered public life, a place where Anglos and Tejanos lived in harmony, was being swallowed by the relentless expansion of the United States. Although urged to run for a vacancy in the U.S. Senate in 1849, Navarro declined and never held public office again.

Many others tried to escape the reach of what Americans called their “Manifest Destiny.” To escape persecution after the murder of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith (see Chapter 10), between 1845 and 1847 Brigham Young led the main body of Mormons on a trek from Illinois to the Great Salt Lake Valley, then part of Mexico, only to find the land that Mormons called Deseret had been absorbed by the United States at the conclusion of its war with Mexico in 1848. “Americans regard this continent as their birthright,” thundered Sam Houston, the first president of the Republic of Texas, in 1847. Indians and Mexicans had to make way for “our mighty march.” This was not idle talk. In less than a thousand fevered days during President James K. Polk’s administration (1845–1849), the United States increased its land area by 50 percent. It annexed Texas, negotiated Britain out of half of the vast Oregon territory, and fought a war with Mexico that led to the annexation of California and New Mexico. Meanwhile, immigrants poured into the United States, mainly from Europe. Of these, 4.2 million arrived between 1840 and 1860, with the Germans running a close second. Smaller contingents continued to immigrate to the United States from England, Scotland, and Wales, and a growing number came from Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Holland. But by 1860, three-fourths of the foreign-born were either Irish or German.

**FOCUS Questions**

- How did immigration in the 1840s influence the balance of power between the Whig and Democratic parties?
- What economic and political forces fed westward expansion during the 1840s?
- How did westward expansion threaten war with Britain and Mexico?
- How did the outcome of the Mexican-American War intensify intersectional conflict?

**Newcomers and Natives**

Between 1815 and 1860, 5 million European immigrants landed in the United States (see Figure 13.1). Of these, 4.2 million arrived between 1840 and 1860, 3 million of whom crowded in from 1845 to 1854, the largest immigration relative to population (then around 20 million) in American history. The Irish led the way as the most numerous immigrants between 1840 and 1860, with the Germans running a close second. Smaller contingents continued to immigrate to the United States from England, Scotland, and Wales, and a growing number came from Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Holland. But by 1860, three-fourths of the foreign-born were either Irish or German.

**Expectations and Realities**

A desire for religious freedom drew some immigrants to the United States. Mormon missionaries actively recruited converts in the slums of English factory towns. But a far larger number of Europeans sailed for America to better their economic condition. Travelers’ accounts and letters from relatives described America as a utopia for poor people.
German peasants learned they could purchase a large farm in America for the price of renting a small one in Germany. Britons were told that enough good peaches and apples were left rotting in the orchards of Ohio to sink the British fleet.

Hoping for the best, emigrants often encountered the worst. Their problems began at ports of embarkation. Because ships sailed irregularly, many spent precious savings in waterfront slums while awaiting departure. Squalid cargo ships carried most of the emigrants, who endured quarters almost as crowded as on slave ships.

For many emigrants, the greatest shock came when they landed. “The folks aboard ship formed great plans for their future, all of which vanished quickly after landing,” wrote a young German from Frankfurt in 1840. Immigrants quickly discovered that farming in America differed radically from European farming. Unlike the compact farming villages of Europe, American agricultural areas featured scattered farms. Although meeting occasionally for revivals or militia musters, American farmers lived in relative isolation, and they possessed an individualistic psychology that led them to speculate in land and to move frequently.

Clear patterns emerged amid the shocks and dislocations of immigration. Most of the Irish settlers before 1840 departed from Liverpool on sailing ships that carried English manufactures to eastern Canada and New England in return for timber. On arrival in America, few of these Irish had the capital to become farmers, so they crowded into the urban areas of New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, where they could more easily find jobs. In contrast, German emigrants usually left from continental ports on ships engaged in the cotton trade with New Orleans. Deterred from settling in the South by the presence of slavery, the oppressive climate, and the lack of economic opportunity, the Germans congregated in the upper Mississippi and Ohio valleys, especially in Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Missouri. Geographical concentration also characterized most of the smaller groups of immigrants. More than half of the Norwegian immigrants, for example, settled in Wisconsin, where they typically became farmers.

Cities, rather than farms, attracted most ante-bellum immigrants. By 1860, German and Irish immigrants formed more than 60 percent of the population of St. Louis; nearly half the population of New York City, Chicago, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Detroit, and San Francisco; and well over a third that of New Orleans, Baltimore, and Boston. These

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**FIGURE 13.1** GERMAN, IRISH, AND TOTAL IMMIGRATION, 1830–1860

Irish and German immigrants led the more than tenfold growth of immigration between 1830 and 1860.


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“The folks aboard ship formed great plans for their future, all of which vanished quickly after landing.”
fast-growing cities created an intense demand for the labor of people with strong backs and a willingness to work for low wages. Irish construction gangs built the houses, new streets, and aqueducts that were changing the face of urban America and dug the canals and railroads that linked these cities. A popular song recounted the fate of the thousands of Irishmen who died of cholera contracted during the building of a canal in New Orleans:

Ten thousand Micks, they swung their picks,  
To build the New Canal  
But the cholera was stronger 'n they.  
An' twice it killed them awl.

The cities provided the sort of community life that seemed lacking in farming settlements. Immigrant societies like the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick took root in cities and combined with associations like the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland to welcome the newcomers.

The Germans

In 1860, there was no German nation, only a collection of principalities and small kingdoms. German immigrants thought of themselves as Bavarians, Westphalians, or Saxons rather than as Germans. Moreover, the German immigrants included Catholics, Protestants, and Jews as well as a sprinkling of freethinkers who denounced the ritual, clergy, and doctrines of all religions. Although few in number, these critics were vehement in their attacks on the established churches. A pious Milwaukee Lutheran complained in 1860 that he could not drink a glass of beer in a saloon “without being angered by anti-Christian remarks or raillery against preachers.”

German immigrants spanned a wide spectrum of social classes and occupations. Most were farmers, but a sizable minority were professionals, artisans, and tradespeople. Heinrich Steinweg, an obscure piano maker from Lower Saxon, arrived in New York City in 1851, anglicized his name to Henry Steinway, and in 1853 opened the firm of Steinway and Sons, which quickly achieved international acclaim for the quality of its pianos. Levi Strauss, a Jewish tailor from Bavaria, migrated to the United States in 1847. On hearing of the discovery of gold in California in 1848, Strauss gathered rolls of cloth and sailed for San Francisco. When a miner told him of the need for durable work trousers, Strauss fashioned a pair of overalls from canvas. To meet a quickly skyrocketing demand, he opened a factory in San Francisco; his cheap overalls, later known as blue jeans or Levi’s, made him rich and famous.

For all their differences, the Germans were bound together by their common language, which strongly induced recent immigrants to the United States to congregate in German neighborhoods. Even prosperous Germans bent on climbing the social ladder usually did so within their ethnic communities. Germans formed their own militia and fire companies, sponsored parochial schools in which German was the language of instruction, started German-language newspapers, and organized their own balls and singing groups. The range of voluntary associations among Germans was almost as broad as among native-born Americans.

Other factors beyond their common language brought unity to the German immigrants. Ironically, the Germans’ diversity also promoted their solidarity. For example, because they supplied their own doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, merchants, artisans, and clergy, the Germans had little need to go outside their own neighborhoods. Native-born Americans simultaneously admired Germans’ industriousness and resented German self-sufficiency, which they interpreted as clannishness. German refugee Moritz Busch complained that “the great mass of Anglo-Americans” held the Germans in contempt. The Germans responded by becoming more clannish. Their psychological separateness made it difficult for the Germans to be as politically influential as the Irish immigrants.

The Irish

Between 1815 and the mid-1820s, most Irish immigrants were Protestants, small landowners, and merchants in search of better economic opportunity. Many were drawn by enthusiastic veterans of the War of 1812, who had reported that America was a paradise filled with fertile land and abundant game, a place where “all a man wanted was a gun and sufficient ammunition to be able to live like a prince.” From the mid-1820s to the mid-1840s, Irish immigrants became poorer and more frequently Catholic, primarily comprising tenant farmers whom Protestant landowners had evicted as “superfluous.”

Protestant or Catholic, rich or poor, nearly one million Irish immigrants entered the United States between 1815 and 1844. Then, between 1845 and the early 1850s, blight destroyed harvest after harvest of Ireland’s potatoes, virtually the only food of the peasantry, and created one of the most devastating famines in history. The Great Famine
laborer in America as “despicable, humiliating, [and] slavish”; there was “no love for him—no protection of life—[he] can be shot down, run through, kicked, cuffed, spat upon—and no redress, but a response of ‘served the damn son of an Irish b—right, damn him.’” Yet some Irish struggled up the social ladder. In Philadelphia, which had a more varied industrial base than Boston, Irish men made their way into iron foundries, where some became foremen and supervisors. Other Irish rose into the middle class by opening grocery and liquor stores.

Irish immigrants often conflicted with two quite different groups. The poorer Irish who dug canals and cellars, worked on the docks, took in laundry, and served white families competed directly with equally poor free blacks. This competition stirred up Irish animosity toward blacks and a hatred of abolitionists. At the same time, the Irish who secured skilled or semiskilled jobs clashed with native-born white workers.

Anti-Catholicism, Nativism, and Labor Protest

The surge of Irish immigration revived anti-Catholic fever, long a latent impulse among American Protestants. For example, in 1834 a mob, fueled by rumors that a Catholic convent in Charlestown, killed a million people. One landlord characterized the surviving tenants on his estate as no more than “famished and ghastly skeletons.” To escape the ravages of famine, 1.8 million Irish migrated to the United States in the decade after 1845.

Overwhelmingly poor and Catholic, these newest Irish immigrants usually entered the work force at or near the bottom. The popular image of Paddy with his pickax and Bridget the maid contained a good deal of truth. Irish men dug canals and railroad beds. Compared to other immigrant women, a high proportion of Irish women entered the work force, if not as maids then often as textile workers. By the 1840s, Irish women were displacing native-born women in the textile mills of Lowell and Waltham. Poverty drove Irish women to work at an early age, and the outdoor, all-season work performed by their husbands turned many of them into working widows. Winifred Rooney became a nursemaid at the age of seven and an errand girl at eleven. She then learned needlework, a skill that helped her support her family after her husband’s early death. Because the Irish usually married late, almost half the Irish immigrants were single, adult women, many of whom never married. For Irish women to become self-supporting was only natural.

Most Irish people lived a harsh existence. One immigrant described the life of the average Irish
“Vote Yourself a Farm.”

Nativism fed on an explosive mixture of fears and discontents. Protestants thought that their doctrine that each individual could interpret the Bible was more democratic than Catholicism, which made doctrine the province of the pope and bishops. In addition, at a time when the wages of native-born artisans and journeymen were depressed by the subdivision of tasks and by the aftermath of the Panic of 1837 (see Chapter 10), many Protestant workers concluded that Catholic immigrants, often desperately poor and willing to work for anything, were threats to their jobs.

Demand for land reform joined nativism as a proposed solution to workers’ economic woes. Land reformers argued that workers’ true interests could never be reconciled with an economic order in which factory workers sold their labor for wages and became “wage slaves.” In 1844, the English-born radical George Henry Evans organized the National Reform Association and rallied supporters with the slogan “Vote Yourself a Farm.” Evans advanced neo-Jeffersonian plans for the establishment of “rural republican townships” composed of 160-acre plots for workers. Land reform offered little to factory operatives and wage-earning journeymen who completely lacked economic independence. In an age when a horse cost the average worker three months’ pay and most factory workers dreaded “the horrors of wilderness life,” the idea of solving industrial problems by resettling workers on farms seemed a pipe dream.

Labor unions appealed to workers left cold by the promises of land reformers. For example, desperately poor Irish immigrants, refugees from an agricultural society, believed they could gain more by unions and strikes than by plowing and planting. Even women workers organized unions in these years. The leader of a seamstresses’ union proclaimed, “Too long have we been bound down by tyrant employers.”

Probably the most important development for workers in the 1840s was a state court decision. In Commonwealth v. Hunt (1842), the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that labor unions were not illegal monopolies that restrained trade. But because less than 1 percent of the work force belonged to labor unions in the 1840s, this decision initially had little impact. Massachusetts employers brushed aside the Commonwealth decision, firing union agitators and replacing them with cheap immigrant labor. “Hundreds of honest laborers,” a labor paper reported in 1848, “have been dismissed from employment in the manufactories of New England because they have been suspected of knowing their rights and daring to assert them.” This repression effectively blunted demands for a ten-hour workday in an era when the twelve- or fourteen-hour day was typical.

Ethnic and religious tensions also split the working class during the 1830s and 1840s. Friction between native-born and immigrant workers inevitably became intertwined with the political divisions of the second party system.

Immigrant Politics

Few immigrants had ever cast a vote in an election prior to their arrival in America, and even fewer were refugees from political persecution. Political upheavals had erupted in Austria and several German states in the turbulent year of 1848 (the so-called Revolutions of 1848), but among the million German immigrants to the United States, only about ten thousand were political refugees, or “Forty-Eighters.”
The West and Beyond

As late as 1840, Americans who referred to the West still meant the area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River or just beyond. West of that lay the inhospitable Great Plains, a semiarid plateau with few trees. Winds sucked the moisture from the soil. Bands of nomadic Indians—including the Pawnees, Kiowas, and Sioux—roamed this territory and gained sustenance mainly from the buffalo. They ate its meat, wore its fur, and covered their dwellings with its hide. Aside from some well-watered sections of northern Missouri and eastern Kansas and Nebraska, the Great Plains presented would-be farmers with massive obstacles.

The formidable barrier of the Great Plains did not stop settlement of the West in the long run. Temporarily, however, it shifted public interest toward the verdant region lying beyond the Rockies, the Far West (see Map 13.1).

The Far West

By the Transcontinental (or Adams-Onís) Treaty of 1819, the United States had given up its claims to Texas west of the Sabine River and in return had received Spanish claims to the Oregon country north of California. Two years later, Mexico won its independence from Spain and took over all North American territory previously claimed by Spain. Then in 1824 and 1825, Russia abandoned its claims to Oregon south of 54°40' (the southern boundary of Alaska). In 1827, the United States and Britain, each of which had claims to Oregon based on discovery and exploration, revived an agreement (originally signed in 1818) for joint occupation of the territory between 42° and 54°40'—a colossal area that contemporaries could describe no more precisely than the “North West Coast of America, Westward of the Stony [Rocky] Mountains” and that included all of modern Oregon, Washington, and Idaho as well as parts of present-day Wyoming, Montana, and Canada.

Despite these agreements and treaties, the vast Far West remained a remote and shadowy frontier during the 1820s. By 1820, the American line of settlement had reached only to Missouri, well over two thousand miles (counting detours for mountains) from the West Coast. El Paso on the Rio Grande and Taos in New Mexico lay, respectively, twelve hundred and fifteen hundred miles north of Mexico City. Britain, of course, was many thousands of miles from Oregon.

Far Western Trade

After sailing around South America and up the Pacific, early merchants had established American

Contemporaries could describe Oregon no more precisely than as the “North West Coast of America, Westward of the Stony [Rocky] Mountains.”
and British outposts on the West Coast. Between the late 1790s and the 1820s, for example, Boston merchants had built a thriving trade, exchanging eastern goods for western sea otter fur, cattle, hides, and tallow (rendered from cattle fat and used for making soap and candles). Between 1826 and 1828 alone, Boston traders took more than 6 million cattle hides out of California; in the otherwise undeveloped California economy, these hides, called “California bank-notes,” served as the main medium of exchange. During the 1820s, the British Hudson’s Bay Company developed a similar trade in Oregon and northern California.

The California trade created little friction with Mexico. Hispanic people born in California (called Californiaos) were as eager to buy as the traders were to sell. Traders who settled in California, like the Swiss-born John Sutter, learned to speak Spanish and became assimilated into Mexican culture.

Farther south, trading links developed during the 1820s between St. Louis and Santa Fe along the famed Santa Fe Trail. Each spring, midwesterners loaded their wagons with tools, clothing, and household sundries and rumbled westward to Santa Fe, where they traded their merchandise for mules and New Mexican silver. Mexico welcomed this trade. By the 1830s, more than half the goods entering New Mexico by the Santa Fe Trail trickled into the mineral-rich interior provinces of Mexico, with the result that the Mexican silver peso, which midwestern traders brought back with them, quickly became the principal medium of exchange in Missouri.

The profitability of the beaver trade also prompted Americans to venture west from St. Louis to trap beaver in what is today western Colorado and eastern Utah. There they competed with agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company. In 1825, on the Green River in Mexican territory, the St. Louis-based trader William Ashley inaugurated an annual encampment where traders exchanged beaver pelts for supplies, thereby saving themselves the trip to St. Louis. Although silk hats had become more fashionable than beaver hats by 1854, over a half-million beaver pelts were auctioned off in London alone that year.
For the most part, American traders and trappers operating on the northern Mexican frontier in the 1820s and 1830s posed more of a threat to the beaver than to Mexico’s provinces. The Mexican people of California and New Mexico depended on the American trade for manufactured goods, and Mexican officials in both provinces relied on customs duties to support their governments. In New Mexico, the government often had to await the arrival of the annual caravan of traders from St. Louis before it could pay its officials and soldiers. Although the relations between Mexicans and Americans were mutually beneficial during the 1820s, the potential for conflict was always present. Spanish-speaking, Roman Catholic, and accustomed to a more hierarchical society, the Mexicans formed a striking contrast to the largely Protestant, individualistic Americans. Further, American traders returned with glowing reports of the climate and fertility of Mexico’s northern provinces. By the 1820s, American settlers were already moving into eastern Texas. At the same time, the ties that bound the central government of Mexico to its northern frontier provinces were starting to fray.

**Mexican Government in the Far West**

Spain, and later Mexico, recognized that the key to controlling the frontier provinces lay in promoting their settlement by civilized Hispanic people—Spaniards, Mexicans, and Indians who had embraced Catholicism and agriculture. The key instruments of Spain’s expansion on the frontier had long been the Spanish missions. Paid by the government, the Franciscan priests who staffed the missions endeavored to convert Native Americans and settle them as farmers on mission lands. To protect the missions, the Spanish often had constructed forts, or presidios, near them. San Francisco was the site of a mission and a presidio founded in 1776, and did not develop as a town until the 1830s.

Dealt a blow by the successful struggle for Mexican independence, Spain’s system of missions began to decline in the late 1820s. The Mexican government gradually “secularized” the missions by distributing their lands to ambitious government officials and private ranchers who turned the mission Indians into forced laborers. As many Native Americans fled the missions, returned to their nomadic ways, and joined with Indians who had always resisted the missions, lawlessness surged on the Mexican frontier, and few Mexicans ventured into the undeveloped territory.

To bring in settlers and to gain protection against Indian attacks, in 1824 the Mexican government began to encourage Americans to settle in the eastern part of the Mexican state known as Coahuila-Texas by bestowing generous land grants on agents known as *empresarios* to recruit American settlers.
most Americans, like the empresario Stephen F. Austin, were content to live in Texas as naturalized Mexican citizens. But trouble brewed quickly. Most of the American settlers were southern farmers, often slaveholders. Having emancipated its own slaves in 1829, Mexico closed Texas to further American immigration in 1830 and forbade the introduction of more slaves. But the Americans, white and black, kept coming, and in 1834 Austin secured repeal of the 1830 prohibition on American immigration. Two years later, Mexican general Manuel Mier y Téran ran a sword through his heart in despair over Mexico’s inability to stem and control the American advance. By 1836, Texas contained some thirty thousand white Americans, five thousand black slaves, and four thousand Mexicans.

As American immigration swelled, Mexican politics (which Austin compared to the country’s volcanic geology) grew increasingly unstable. In 1834, Mexican president Antonio López de Santa Anna instituted a policy of restricting the powers of the regimes in Coahuila-Texas and other Mexican states. His actions ignited a series of rebellions in those regions, the most important of which became known as the Texas Revolution.

**Texas Revolution, 1836**

Santa Anna’s brutality in crushing most of the rebellions alarmed the initially moderate Austin and others. When Santa Anna invaded Texas in the fall of 1835, Austin cast his lot with the more radical Americans who wanted independence.

Santa Anna’s army initially met with success. In February 1836, his force of four thousand men laid siege to San Antonio, whose two hundred defenders, often Tejanos, retreated into an abandoned mission, the Alamo. On March 6, four days after Texas had declared its independence, the defenders of the Alamo were overwhelmed by Mexican troops. Most were killed in the final assault. A few, including the famed frontiersman Davy Crockett, surrendered. Crockett then was executed on Santa Anna’s orders. A few weeks later, Mexican troops massacred some 350 prisoners taken from an American settlement at Goliad.
Meanwhile, the Texans had formed an army, with Sam Houston at its head. A giant man who wore leopard-skin vests, Houston retreated east to pick up recruits (mostly Americans who crossed the border to fight Santa Anna). Once reinforced, Houston turned and surprised the complacent Mexicans at San Jacinto, just east of what is now the city of Houston. Shouting “Remember the Alamo,” Houston’s army of eight hundred tore through the Mexican lines, killing nearly half of Santa Anna’s men in fifteen minutes and taking Santa Anna himself prisoner. Houston then forced Santa Anna to sign a treaty (which the Mexican government never ratified) recognizing the independence of Texas (see Map 13.2).

**American Settlements in California, New Mexico, and Oregon**

Before 1840, California and New Mexico, both less accessible than Texas, exerted no more than a mild attraction for American settlers. Only a few hundred Americans resided in New Mexico in 1840 and perhaps four hundred in California. A contemporary observed that the Americans living in California and New Mexico “are scattered throughout the whole Mexican population, and most of them have Spanish wives…. They live in every respect like the Spanish.”

Yet the beginnings of change were already evident. During the 1840s, Americans streamed into the Sacramento Valley, welcomed by California’s Hispanic population as a way to encourage economic development and lured by favorable reports of the region. One tongue-in-cheek story told of a 250-year-old man who had to leave the idyllic region in order to die. For these land-hungry settlers, no sacrifice seemed too great if it led to California.

To the north, Oregon’s abundant farmland beckoned settlers from the Mississippi valley. During the 1830s, missionaries like the Methodist Jason Lee moved into Oregon’s Willamette valley, and by 1840 the area contained some five hundred Americans. Enthusiastic reports sent back by Lee piqued interest about Oregon. An orator in Missouri described Oregon as a “pioneer’s paradise” where “the pigs are running around under the great acorn trees, round and fat and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them so that you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry.” To some, Oregon seemed even more attractive than California, especially because the joint American-British occupation seemed to herald better prospects for eventual U.S. annexation than California’s.

**The Overland Trails**

Whether bound for California or Oregon, the emigrants faced a four-month journey across terrain little known in reality but vividly depicted in fiction as an Indian killing ground. Assuming that they would have to fight their way across the Plains, settlers prepared for the trip by buying enough guns for an army from merchants in the rival jump-off towns of Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri. In reality, the pioneers were more likely to shoot themselves or each other by accident than to be shot by the usually cooperative Indians, and much more likely to be scalped by the inflated prices charged by merchants in Independence or “St. Joe.”

Once embarked, the emigrants faced new hardships and hazards: kicks from mules, oxen that collapsed from thirst, overloaded wagons that broke down. Trails were difficult to follow—at least until they became littered by the debris of broken wagons and by the bleached bones of oxen. Guidebooks to help emigrants chart their course were more like guessbooks. The Donner party, which set out from Illinois in 1846, lost so much time following the advice of one such book that its members became
snowbound in the High Sierras and reached California only after its survivors had turned to cannibalism.

Emigrants responded to the challenges of the overland trails by close cooperation with one another, traveling in huge wagon trains rather than alone. Men yoked and unyoked the wagons, drove the wagons and stock, and hunted. Women packed and unpacked the wagons each day, milked the cows brought along to stock the new farms in the West, cooked, and assisted with the childbirths that occurred on the trail at about the same frequency as in the nation as a whole.

Between 1840 and 1848, an estimated 11,500 emigrants followed an overland trail to Oregon, and some 2,700 reached California. Such numbers made a difference, for the British did not settle Oregon at all, and the Mexican population in California was small and scattered. By 1845, California clung to Mexico by the thinnest of threads. The territory’s Hispanic population, the Californios, felt little allegiance to Mexico, which they contemptuously referred to as the “other shore.” Some Californios wanted independence from Mexico; others looked to the day when California might become a protectorate of Britain or perhaps even France. But these Californios, with their shaky allegiances, now faced a growing number of American settlers with definite political allegiances.

The Politics of Expansion, 1840–1846

Westward expansion raised the question of whether the United States should annex the independent Texas republic. In the mid-1840s, the Texas-annexation issue generated the kind of political passions that banking questions had ignited in the 1830s, and became entangled with equally unsettling issues relating to California, New Mexico, and Oregon. Between 1846 and 1848, a war with Mexico and a dramatic confrontation with Britain settled all these questions on terms favorable to the United States.

At the start of the 1840s, western issues received little attention in a nation concerned with issues relating to economic recovery—notably, banking, the tariff, and internal improvements. Only after politicians failed to address the economic issues coherently did opportunistic leaders thrust issues relating to expansion to the top of the political agenda.

The Whig Ascendancy

The election of 1840 brought Whig candidate William Henry Harrison to the presidency and installed Whig majorities in both houses of
Congress. The Whigs had proposed to replace Van Buren’s darling, the Independent Treasury (see Chapter 10), with a national “fiscal agent,” which, like the defunct Bank of the United States, would be a private corporation chartered by Congress and charged with regulating the currency. The Whigs also favored a revised tariff that would increase government revenues but remain low enough to permit the importation of foreign goods. According to the Whig plan, the states would then receive tariff-generated revenues for internal improvements.

The Whig agenda might have breezed into law. But Harrison died after only one month in office, and his successor, Vice President John Tyler, an upper-crust Virginian put on the ticket in 1840 for his southern appeal, assumed the presidency. A former Democrat, Tyler had broken with Jackson over nullification, but he favored the Democratic philosophy of states’ rights. As president, he repeatedly vetoed Whig proposals, including a bill to create a new national bank.

Tyler also played havoc with Whig tariff policy. The Compromise Tariff of 1833 had provided for a gradual scaling down of tariff duties, until none was to exceed 20 percent by 1842. Amid the depression of the early 1840s, however, the provision for a 20 percent maximum tariff appeared too low to generate revenue. Without revenue, the Whigs would have no money to distribute among the states for internal improvements and no program with national appeal. In response, the Whig congressional majority passed two bills in the summer of 1842 that simultaneously postponed the final reduction of tariffs to 20 percent and ordered distribution to the states to proceed. Tyler promptly vetoed both bills. Tyler’s mounting vetoes infuriated Whig leadership. “Again has the imbecile, into whose hands accident has placed the power, vetoed a bill passed by a majority of those legally authorized to pass it,” screamed the *Daily Richmond Whig*. Some Whigs talked of impeaching Tyler. Finally, in August, needing revenue to run the government, Tyler signed a new bill that maintained some tariffs above 20 percent but abandoned distribution to the states.

Tyler’s erratic course confounded and disrupted his party. By maintaining some tariffs above 20 percent, the tariff of 1842 satisfied northern manufacturers, but by abandoning distribution, it infuriated many southerners and westerners. In the congressional elections of 1842, the Whigs paid a heavy price for failing to enact their program. Although retaining a slim majority in the Senate, they lost control of the House to the Democrats. Now the nation had one party in control of the Senate, its rival in control of the House, and a president who appeared to belong to neither party.

**Tyler and the Annexation of Texas**

Although disowned by his party, Tyler ardently desired a second term as president. Domestic issues offered him little hope of building a popular following, but foreign policy was another matter. In 1842, Tyler’s secretary of state, Daniel Webster, concluded a treaty with Great Britain, represented by Lord Ashburton, that settled a long-festering dispute over the boundary between Maine and the Canadian province of New Brunswick. Awarding more than half of the disputed territory to the United States, the Webster-Ashburton Treaty was popular in the North. Tyler reasoned that if he could now arrange for the annexation of Texas, he would build a national following.

The issue of slavery, however, clouded every discussion of Texas. Antislavery northerners viewed proposals to annex Texas as part of an elaborate southern conspiracy to extend slavery, because Texas would certainly enter the Union as a slave state. In fact, some southerners dreamed of creating four or five slave states from Texas’s vast area.

Nevertheless, in the summer of 1843, Tyler launched a propaganda campaign for Texas annexation. He alleged that Britain had designs on Texas, which Americans would be prudent to forestall. Tyler’s campaign was fed by reports from his unofficial agent in London, Duff Green, a protégé of John C. Calhoun and a man whom John Quincy Adams contemptuously dismissed as an “ambassador of slavery.” Green assured Tyler that, as a prelude to undermining slavery in the United States, the British would pressure Mexico to recognize the independence of Texas in return for the abolition of slavery there. Calhoun, who became Tyler’s secretary of state early in 1844, embroidered these reports with fanciful theories about British plans to use abolition as a way to destroy rice, sugar, and cotton production in the United States and gain for itself a monopoly on all three staples.

In the spring of 1844, Calhoun and Tyler submitted for Senate ratification a treaty annexing Texas to the United States. Among the supporting documents accompanying the treaty was a letter from Calhoun to the British minister in Washington, defending slavery as beneficial to blacks, the only way to protect them from “vice and pauperism.” Abolitionists now had evidence that the annexation of Texas was linked to a conspiracy to extend slavery. Both Martin Van Buren, the leading northern Democrat, and

“Again has the imbecile, into whose hands accident has placed the power, vetoed a bill passed by a majority of those legally authorized to pass it.”
The issue of Texas annexation split his party. Trying to appease all shades of opinion within his party, Van Buren stated that he would abide by whatever Congress might decide on the annexation issue. Van Buren’s attempt to evade the issue succeeded only in alienating the modest number of northern annexationists, led by Michigan’s former governor Lewis Cass, and the much larger group of southern annexationists. At the Democratic convention, Van Buren and Cass effectively blocked each other’s nomination. The resulting deadlock was broken by the nomination of James K. Polk of Tennessee, the first “dark-horse” presidential nominee in American history and a supporter of immediate annexation (see Technology and Culture).

Jeering “Who is James K. Polk?” the Whigs derided the nomination. Polk was little known outside the South, and he had lost successive elections for the governorship of Tennessee. Yet Polk persuaded many northerners that annexation of Texas would benefit them. Conjuring an imaginative scenario, Polk and his supporters argued that if Britain succeeded in abolishing slavery in Texas, slavery would not be able to move westward; racial tensions in existing slave states would intensify; and the chances of a race war, which might spill over into the North, would increase. However far-fetched, this argument played effectively on northern racial phobias and helped Polk detach annexation from Calhoun’s narrow, prosouthern defense of it.

In contrast to the Democrats, whose position was clear, Clay kept muddying the waters. First he told his followers he had nothing against annexation as long as it would not disrupt sectional harmony. In September 1844, he came out against annexation. Clay’s shifts on annexation alienated his southern supporters and prompted a small but influential body of northern antislavery Whigs to desert to the Liberty party, which had been organized in 1840. Devoted to the abolition of slavery by political action, the Liberty party nominated Ohio’s James G. Birney for the presidency.

Annexation was not the sole issue of the campaign. The Whigs infuriated Catholic immigrant voters by nominating Theodore Frelinghuysen as Clay’s running mate. A supporter of temperance and other Protestant causes, Frelinghuysen confirmed the image of the Whigs as the orthodox Protestant party and roused the largely Catholic foreign-born voters to turn out in large numbers for the Democrats.

On the eve of the election in New York City, so many Irish marched to the courthouse to be qualified for voting that the windows had to be left open for people to get in and out. “Ireland has reconquered the country which England lost,” an embittered Whig moaned. Polk won the electoral vote 170 to 105, but his margin in the popular vote was only 38,000 out of 2.6 million
Manifest Destiny, 1845

The election of 1844 demonstrated that the annexation of Texas had more national support than Clay had realized. The surging popular sentiment for expansion that made the underdog Polk rather than Clay the man of the hour reflected a growing conviction among the people that America’s natural destiny was to expand into Texas and all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Expansionists emphasized extending the “area of freedom” and talked of “repelling the contaminating proximity of monarchies upon the soil that we have consecrated to the rights of man.” For young Americans like Walt Whitman, such restless expansionism knew few limits. “The more we reflect upon annexation as involving a part of Mexico, the more do doubts and obstacles resolve themselves away,” Whitman wrote. “Then there is California, on the way to which lovely tract lies Santa Fe; how long a time will elapse before they shine as two new stars in our mighty firmament?”

Americans awaited only a phrase to capture this ebullient spirit. In 1845, John L. O’Sullivan, a New York Democratic journalist, supplied that phrase when he wrote 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 and federated self-government entrusted to us.”

Advocates of Manifest Destiny used lofty language and invoked God and Nature to sanction expansion. Inasmuch as most proponents of Manifest Destiny were Democrats who favored annexing Texas, northern Whigs frequently dismissed Manifest Destiny as a smoke screen aimed at concealing the evil intent of expanding slavery. In reality, many expansionists were neither supporters of slavery nor zealous annexationists. Most had their eyes not on Texas but on Oregon and California. Despite their flowery phrases, these expansionists rested their case on hard material calculations. Blaming the post-1837 depression on the failure of the United States to acquire markets for its agricultural surplus, they saw the acquisition of Oregon and California as solutions. A Missouri Democrat observed that “the ports of Asia are as convenient to Oregon as the ports of Europe are to the eastern slope of our confederacy, with an infinitely better ocean for navigation.” An Alabama Democrat praised California’s “safe and capacious harbors,” which, he assured, “invite to their bosoms the rich commerce of the East.”

Expansionists desired more than profitable trade routes, however. At the heart of their thinking lay an impulse to preserve the predominantly agricultural character of the American people and thereby to safeguard democracy. Fundamentally, most expansionists were Jeffersonians. They equated cities and factories with class strife. After a tour of New England mill towns in 1842, John L. O’Sullivan warned Americans that should they fail to encourage alternatives to factories, the United States would sink to the level of Britain, a nation that the ardent Democratic expansionist James Gordon Bennett described as a land of “bloated wealth” and “terrible misery.”

Most Democratic expansionists linked the acquisition of new territory to their party’s policies of low tariffs and decentralized banking. Where tariffs and banks tended to “favor and foster the factory system,” expansion would provide farmers with land and with access to foreign markets for their produce. The acquisition of California and Oregon would provide enough land and harbors to sustain not only the 20 million Americans of 1845 but the 100 million that some expansionists projected for 1900 and the 250 million that O’Sullivan predicted for 1945.

Trumpeted by the penny press, this message made sense to the laboring poor of America’s cities, many of them Irish immigrants. Expansion would open economic opportunities for the common people and thwart British plans to free American slaves, whom the poor viewed as potential competitors for scarce jobs.
In 1837, Samuel F.B. Morse was a forty-six-year-old art professor at New York University trying to get over some disappointments. His talent as a painter was widely recognized, but he was passed over when Congress selected four artists to paint scenes for the rotunda of the Capitol in Washington. He was also well known as a nativist who fiercely opposed Catholic immigration and who had written anti-Catholic tracts. Nativism was on the rise in the 1830s, when more than half a million immigrants arrived in New York City alone. That many of these were Catholics alarmed Morse, who, as an art student in Europe, had been attracted by Italy’s beauty but repelled by what he saw as the submissiveness of its people to the pope. In 1836, he had run for mayor of New York City on the ticket of an anti-Catholic nativist party, only to finish last in a field of four.

Since 1832, Morse had been developing one other interest: sending information by electrical currents on wires. That even a crude battery could transmit a shock to a person holding an iron wire had long been known. Benjamin Franklin’s kite experiments nearly a century earlier had shown that lightning was a form of electricity. If messages could be sent at the speed of lightning, close to 200,000 miles a second, then the era of instant messaging was at hand.

Fearing needlessly that inventors in France were about to beat him to the punch, Morse moved quickly. He constructed a crude telegraph, which consisted of a battery and a transmitter that sent electrical impulses to an electromagnetic receiver. Once energized, the receiver moved an arm and recorded coded signals on a band of paper. Short impulses appeared as dots, longer ones as dashes. In manifold combinations, these dots and dashes stood for different letters of the alphabet and became known as Morse Code.

With the help of physicists, he improved his device and successfully demonstrated it in a university lecture hall in September 1837. Next, eager to show the public that electrical messaging over long distances was practical, he teamed with Samuel Colt, the inventor of the revolving pistol (see Chapter 11). Colt, whose gun company had gone bankrupt, wanted to persuade Congress that an electrical current could detonate gunpowder. If so, it would be possible to lay mines in the nation’s harbors and explode them when hostile warships approached. Morse recognized that if electrical impulses could be transmitted through water, telegraph cables could cross the nation’s innumerable rivers. In 1842, before an audience estimated at forty thousand—including the secretary of war—Colt and Morse ran an electrical cable from one ship in New York harbor to another, aptly named the Volta, which had been stripped and mined. The current triggered the mines. “Bang! bang! bang!,” reported the Herald, “combusti-blowup eruption...1,705,901 pieces.”

Six months later, Congress approved a grant of $30,000 to build a telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore. Construction went slowly. Morse’s plan to bury the cable had to be abandoned because of insulation problems, forcing a resort to lines in the air from wooden post to wooden post. But by May 1844, twenty-two miles had been completed, just in time for news of the Whig national convention, meeting in Baltimore, to be carried by train to Annapolis Junction and then transmitted by wire to dignitaries assembled in the chamber of the Supreme Court in Washington.

Within a few weeks, the line had been completed to Baltimore, where the Democratic national convention was also meeting. Morse asked a friend to send a message of her choice to Baltimore, and she chose (from the Bible) “What hath God wrought?” History books have made this one of the most memorable quotations in American history, but contemporaries were more interested in the next question: “Have you any news?” Much was at stake. The Whig nominee, Henry Clay, had come out against the annexation of Texas. Martin Van Buren, the likely Democratic nominee, had tried to evade the issue. But southern opponents of Van Buren had put in a new rule, requiring a two-thirds majority for nomination. This rule stopped the Van Buren steamroller and eventually led to the nomination of the dark horse, James K. Polk. No less important than the news of Polk’s upset victory was its delivery as breaking news. Here was real excitement. “Mr. Brewster is speaking in favor of [James] Buchanan;...Mr. Brewster says his delegation will go for V[an] B[uren] but if VB’s friends desert him, the delegation will go for Buchanan;” and then “Illinois goes for Polk...Mich[igan] goes for Polk...Polk is unanimously nom[inated].”

At first, newspaper editors worried that the telegraph would put them out of business. Since news would arrive instantly, no editor could beat his rivals to a story. Soon they saw their error. With the telegraph, stories could be put out
in installments that recorded each new development. Were a story really spicy, newspapers could put out several editions a day. Further, the construction of telegraph lines was just starting, with much of the capital coming from newspaper publishers. By 1848, a line ran from Boston all the way to New York City. As yet, no line connected Boston with Halifax in Canada, where steamers from Europe first docked. Newspapers were potentially the most valuable cargo carried by these steamers, for they contained news of prices of European commodity markets. A New Yorker who speculated in wheat futures and who became the first to learn that wheat was up (or down) on the Brussels exchange could make an overnight fortune. Rival newspaper editors hired riders and fast horses to speed news of commodity prices from Halifax to Boston, but they were no match for the ingenious Daniel Craig, who successfully trained carrier pigeons to carry information about European prices over the same route. Craig was so successful that he was hired by the newly formed Associated Press, a consortium of New York City editors who pooled their resources to gain access to news before it reached the telegraph.

In the five years after the opening of the Baltimore-Washington line, the United States expanded to include Texas, the vast Oregon territory, and all or part of the present states of California, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, and Colorado. Morse, who long had feared that European monarchs were conspiring with the pope to infiltrate Catholic immigrants into the sparsely settled West, was confident that his invention would make it possible to protect American liberty against “Catholic plots.” The nation would become a lightning-bound network of communities within instant reach of each other. Should European despots threaten invasion, the whole nation could be activated in a moment. Ironically, European monarchs would pose less of a threat than Americans themselves to the safety of the Republic, which would implode in civil war in 1861.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- What obstacles had to be overcome before Morse’s invention came into wide use?
- What role did newspapers play in overcoming these obstacles?
Expansionism drew ideas from Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and other leaders of the early Republic who had proclaimed the American people’s right to displace both “uncivilized” and European people from the path of their westward movement. Early expansionists, however, had feared that overexpansion might create an ungovernable empire. Jefferson, for example, had proposed an indefinite restriction on the settlement of Louisiana. In contrast, the expansionists of the 1840s, citing the virtues of the telegraph and the railroad, believed that the problem of distance had been “literally annihilated” (see Technology and Culture).

Polk and Oregon

The growing spirit of Manifest Destiny escalated the issue of Oregon. To soften northern criticism of the still-pending annexation of Texas, the Democrats had included in their 1844 platform the assertion that American title “to the whole of the Territory of Oregon is clear and unquestionable.” Taken literally, this statement, which Polk later repeated, pressed an unprecedented American claim to the entire Oregon Territory between California and 54°40’, the southern boundary of Alaska.

Polk’s objectives in Oregon were more subtle than his language. He knew that the United States could never obtain all of Oregon without a war with Britain, and he wanted to avoid that. He proposed to use the threat of hostilities to persuade the British to accept what they had repeatedly rejected in the past—a division of Oregon at the forty-ninth parallel. Such a division, extending the existing boundary between the United States and Canada from the Rockies to the Pacific, would give the United States both the excellent deep-water harbors of Puget Sound and the southern tip of British-controlled Vancouver Island. For their part, the British had long held out for a division along the Columbia River, which entered the Pacific Ocean far south of the forty-ninth parallel (see Map 13.4).

Polk’s position aroused American support for acquiring the whole territory. Mass meetings adopted such resolutions as “We are all for Oregon, and all Oregon in the West” and “The Whole or None!” Furthermore, each passing year brought new American settlers into Oregon. John Quincy Adams, no supporter of the annexation of Texas or the 54°40’ boundary for Oregon, believed that the American settlements gave the United States a far more reasonable claim to Oregon than mere exploration and discovery gave the British. The United States, not Britain, Adams preached, was the nation bound “to make the wilderness blossom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase, multiply, and subdue the earth,” all “at the first behest of God Almighty.”

In April 1846, Polk forced the issue by notifying Britain that the United States was terminating joint British-American occupation of Oregon. In effect, his message was that Britain could either go to war over American claims to 54°40’—or negotiate. Britain chose to negotiate. Although the British raged against “that ill-regulated, overbearing, and aggressive spirit of American democracy,” they had too many domestic and foreign problems to welcome a war over what Lord Aberdeen, the British foreign secretary, dismissed as “a few miles of pine swamp.” The ensuing treaty provided for a division at the forty-ninth parallel, with some modifications. Britain retained all of Vancouver Island as well as navigation rights on the Columbia River. On June 15, 1846, the Senate ratified the treaty, stipulating that Britain’s navigation rights on the Columbia were merely temporary.

The Mexican-American War and Its Aftermath, 1846–1848

Between 1846 and 1848, the United States successfully fought a war with Mexico that led Mexico to renounce all claims to Texas and to cede its provinces of New Mexico and California to the United States. Many Americans rejoiced in the stunning victory. But some recognized that deep divisions
over the status of slavery in New Mexico and California boded ill for their nation’s future.

**The Origins of the Mexican-American War**

While Polk was challenging Britain over Oregon, the United States and Mexico moved toward war. The impending conflict had both remote and immediate causes. One long-standing grievance lay in the failure of the Mexican government to pay some $2 million in debts owed to American citizens. Bitter memories of the Alamo and the Goliad massacre reinforced American loathing of Mexico. Above all, the issue of Texas poisoned relations between the two nations. Mexico still hoped to regain Texas or at least to keep it independent of the United States. Beset by internal strife—Mexico's presidency changed hands twenty times between 1829 and 1844—Mexico feared that, once in control of Texas, the “Colossus of the North” might seize other provinces, perhaps even Mexico itself, and treat Mexicans much as it treated its slaves.

Polk's election increased the strength of the pro-annexationists, for his campaign had persuaded many northerners that enfolding Texas would bring annexationists, for his campaign had persuaded itself, and treat Mexicans much as it treated its slaves. Once in control of Texas, the “Colossus of the North” might seize other provinces, perhaps even Mexico itself, and treat Mexicans much as it treated its slaves.

Confronted by Texan timidity and Mexican belligerence, Polk moved on two fronts. To sweeten the pot for the Texans, he supported their claim that the Rio Grande constituted Texas’s southern boundary, despite Mexico’s contention that the Nueces River, a hundred miles north of the Rio Grande, bounded Texas. The area between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was largely uninhabited, but the stakes were high. Although only a hundred miles south of the Nueces at its mouth on the Gulf of Mexico, the Rio Grande meandered west and then north for nearly two thousand miles and encompassed a huge territory, including part of modern New Mexico. The Texas that Polk proposed to annex thus encompassed far more land than the Texas that had gained independence from Mexico in 1836. On July 4, 1845, reassured by Polk’s largesse, a Texas convention overwhelmingly voted to accept annexation. In response to Mexican war preparations, Polk then made a second move, ordering American troops under General Zachary Taylor to the edge of the disputed territory. Taylor took up a position at Corpus Christi, a tiny Texas outpost situated just south of the Nueces and hence in territory still claimed by Mexico.

One reason for Polk’s insistence on the Rio Grande boundary for Texas was to provoke a war with Mexico, then the United States could seize California and for its fine harbors of San Diego and San Francisco. In fact, Polk had entered the White House with the firm intention of extending American control over California. By the summer of 1845, his followers were openly proclaiming that, if Mexico went to war with the United States over Texas, “the road to California will be open to us.” Reports from American agents persuaded Polk that California might be acquired by the same methods as Texas: revolution followed by annexation.

Continued turmoil in Mexico further complicated the situation. In early 1845, a new Mexican government agreed to negotiate with the United States, and Polk, locked into a war of words with Britain over Oregon, decided to give negotiations a chance. In November 1845, he dispatched John Slidell to Mexico City with instructions to gain Mexican recognition of the annexation of Texas with the Rio Grande border. In exchange, the United States government would assume the debt owed by Mexico to American citizens. Polk also authorized Slidell to offer up to $25 million for California and New Mexico. But by the time Slidell reached Mexico City, the government there had become too weak to make concessions to the United States, and its head, General José Herrera, refused to receive Slidell. Polk then ordered Taylor to move southward to the Rio Grande, hoping to provoke a Mexican attack and unite the American people behind war.

The Mexican government dawdled. Polk was about to send a war message to Congress when word finally arrived that Mexican forces had crossed the Rio Grande and ambushed two companies of Taylor’s troops. Now the pro-war press had its martyrs. “American blood has been shed on American soil!” one of Polk's followers proclaimed. On May 11, Polk informed Congress that war “exists by the act of Mexico herself” and called for $10 million to fight the war.

Polk’s disarming assertion that the United States was already at war provoked furious opposition in Congress, where antislavery Whigs protested the president's high-handedness. For one thing, the Mexican attack on Taylor’s troops had occurred on land never before claimed by the United States. By announcing that war already existed, moreover, Polk seemed to be undercutting Congress's power to declare war and using a mere border incident as a pretext to acquire more slave territory. The pro-Whig *New York Tribune* warned its readers that Polk was “precipitating you into a fathomless abyss of crime and calamity.” Antislavery poet James Russell Lowell of Massachusetts wrote of the Polk Democrats,

*They just want this Californy So’s to lug new slave-states in*
But Polk had maneuvered the Whigs into a corner. Few Whigs could forget that the Federalists’ opposition to the War of 1812 had wrecked the Federalist Party, and few wanted to appear unpatriotic by refusing to support Taylor’s beleaguered troops. Swallowing their outrage, most Whigs backed appropriations for war against Mexico.

Polk’s single-minded pursuit of his goals had prevailed. A humorless, austere man who banned dancing and liquor at White House receptions, Polk inspired little personal warmth. But he had clear objectives and pursued them unflinchingly. At every point, he had encountered opposition on the home front: from Whigs who saw him as a reckless adventurer; from northerners of both parties opposed to any expansion of slavery; and from John C. Calhoun, who despised Polk for his high-handedness and fretted that a war with Britain would strip the South of its market for cotton. Yet Polk triumphed over all opposition, in part because of his opponents’ fragmentation, in part because of expansion’s popular appeal, and in part because of the weakness of his foreign antagonists. Reluctant to fight over Oregon, Britain had negotiated. Too weak to negotiate, Mexico chose to fight over territory that it had already lost (Texas) and for territories over which its hold was feeble (California and New Mexico).

**The Mexican-American War**

Most European observers expected Mexico to win the war. Its regular army was four times the size of the American forces, and it was fighting on home ground. The United States, having botched its one previous attempt to invade a foreign nation, Canada in 1812, now had to sustain offensive operations in an area remote from American settlements. American expansionists, however, hardly expected the Mexicans to fight at all. Racism and arrogance persuaded many Americans that the Mexicans, degraded by their mixed Spanish and Indian population, were “as sure to melt away at the approach of [American] energy and enterprise as snow before a southern sun.”

In fact, the Mexicans fought bravely and stubbornly, although unsuccessfully. In May 1846, Taylor, “Old Rough and Ready,” routed the Mexican army in Texas and pursued it across the Rio Grande, eventually capturing the major city of Monterrey. War enthusiasm surged in the United States. Recruiting posters blared, “Here’s to old Zach! Glorious Times! Roast Beef, Ice Cream, and ‘Three Months’ Advance.’” Taylor’s conspicuously ordinary manner—he went into battle wearing a straw hat and a plain brown coat—endangered him to the public, which kicked up its heels in celebration to the “Rough and Ready Polka” and the “General Taylor Quick Step.”

After taking Monterrey, Taylor, starved for supplies, halted and granted Mexico an eight-week armistice. Eager to undercut Taylor’s popularity—the Whigs were already touting him as a presidential candidate—Polk stripped him of half his forces and reassigned them to General Winfield Scott. Scott was to mount an amphibious attack on Vera Cruz and proceed to Mexico City, following the path of Cortés and his conquistadors. Events outstripped Polk’s scheme, however, when Taylor defeated a far larger Mexican army at the Battle of Buena Vista, on February 22–23, 1847.

While Taylor was winning fame in northern Mexico, and before Scott had launched his attack on Vera Cruz, American forces farther north were dealing decisive blows to the remnants of Mexican rule in New Mexico and California. In the spring of 1846, Colonel Stephen Kearny marched an army from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, toward Santa Fe. Reaching New Mexico, Kearny took the territory by a combination of bluff, bluster, and perhaps bribery, without firing a shot. The Mexican governor, following his own advice that “it is better to be thought brave than to be so,” fled at Kearny’s approach. After suppressing a brief rebellion by Mexicans and Indians, Kearny sent a detachment of his army south into Mexico. There, having marched fifteen hundred miles from Fort Leavenworth, these troops joined Taylor in time for the Battle of Buena Vista.

California also fell easily into American hands. In 1845, Polk had ordered the Pacific Squadron under Commodore John D. Sloat to occupy California’s ports in the event of war with Mexico. To ensure victory, Polk also dispatched a courier overland with secret orders for one of the most colorful and important actors in the conquest of California, John C. Frémont. A Georgia-born adventurer, Frémont had married Jesse Benton, the daughter of powerful Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Benton used his influence to have accounts of Frémont’s explorations in the Northwest (mainly written by Jesse Benton Frémont) published as government documents. All of this earned glory for Frémont as “the Great Pathfinder.” Finally overtaken by Polk’s courier in Oregon, Frémont was dispatched to California to “watch over the interests of the United States.” In June 1846, he rounded up a small force of American settlers, seized the village of Sonoma, and proclaimed the independent “Bear
Mexican towns they took. But the Americans benefited from the unprecedented quality of their weapons, supplies, and organization.

By the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (February 2, 1848), Mexico ceded Texas with the Rio Grande boundary, New Mexico, and California to the United States. In return, the United States assumed the claims of American citizens against the Mexican government and paid Mexico $15 million (see Going to the Source). Although the United States gained the present states of California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, most of Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming, some rabid expansionists in the Senate denounced the treaty because it failed to include all of Mexico. But the acquisition of California ultimately satisfied Polk. Few senators, moreover, wanted to annex the mixed Spanish and Indian population of Mexico. A writer in the Democratic Review expressed the prevailing view that “the annexation of the country [Mexico] to the United States would be a calamity,” for it would incorporate into the United States “ignorant and indolent half-civilized Indians,” not to mention “free negroes and mulattoes” left over from the British slave trade. The virulent racism of American leaders allowed the Mexicans to retain part of their nation. On March 10, 1848, the Senate ratified the treaty by a vote of 38 to 10.

**BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA** On February 23, 1847 an American army led by Major General Zachary Taylor defeated a larger Mexican force under Antonio López de Santa Anna. Lt. Col. Henry Clay, Jr., the son of Henry Clay, was killed in the battle. The battle was Taylor’s last. He returned to the U.S. to pursue the political career that led him to the presidency. (Library of Congress)
to a small minority, abolitionists, who opposed any extension of slavery on moral grounds, posed a minor threat to Polk. More important were northern Democrats who feared that expansion of slavery into California and New Mexico (parts of each lay south of 36°30’) would deter free laborers from settling those territories. These Democrats argued that competition with slaves degraded free labor, that the westward extension of slavery would check the westward migration of free labor, and that such a barrier would aggravate the social problems already beginning to plague the East: class strife, social stratification, and labor protest.

The Wilmot Proviso

A young Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, David Wilmot, became the spokesman for these disaffected northern Democrats. In August 1846, he...
Nicholas Trist, a Virginian who signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo for the United States in February 1848, had been recalled by President Polk four months earlier. Polk had become convinced that recent American military victories warranted greater concessions by Mexico than Trist had originally been ordered to extract. Trist refused to return to Washington because he thought that, if forced to accept Polk’s terms, Mexico would disintegrate into anarchy. Polk’s diary indicates what the president wanted from Mexico.

Sept. 7, 1847. I submitted for the consideration of the Cabinet, whether, as the Mexican Government had continued stubbornly to refuse to enter upon negotiations for peace for several months after they had been notified that Mr. Trist was with the headquarters of the army clothed with full diplomatic powers, and as the United States had been subjected to great expense since Mr. Trist’s instructions had been given to him in April last: whether under the changed circumstances since that time Mr. Trist’s instructions should not be modified. The distinct questions to be submitted were, whether the amount which Mr. Trist had been authorized to pay for the possession of New Mexico and the Californias through the isthmus of Tuanpec should not be reduced, and whether we should demand more territory than we now did… [Secretary of State James] Buchanan suggested that this sum should be reduced from thirty to fifteen millions, and that the cession of the right of passage through the Isthmus and Lower as well as Upper California and New Mexico should be made a sine qua non [non-negotiable demand]. He suggested that the line should run on the parallel of 31° or 31°30’ of north latitude from the Rio Grande to the Gulf of California, which Mr. Trist had been authorized to accept. … In the course of discussion the Attorney General expressed the opinion that if an army took possession of the City of Mexico, and the Mexicans still refused to make peace, that Mr. Trist should be recalled, and that Mexico and the world should be informed that we had no further propositions of peace to make, and that we should prosecute the War with the whole energy of the nation and over-run and subdue the whole country, until Mexico herself sued for peace.

Oct. 4, 1847. Mr. Trist is recalled because … his remaining longer might and probably would impress the Mexican Government with the view that the United States were so anxious for peace that they would ultimately conclude one upon the Mexican terms.

Trist later wrote to his wife about his feelings at the signing of the Treaty:

For though it would have not done for me to say so there, that was a thing for every right-minded American to be ashamed of, most cordially and intensely ashamed of. … Had my course at such moments been governed by my conscience as a man, and my sense of justice as an individual American, I should have yielded in every instance. Nothing prevented my doing so but the conviction that the treaty would then be one which there would no chance for the acceptance of by our government.


**QUESTION**

1. Was Trist, an appointee of an elected government, justified in resisting his recall?

Go to the website at www.cengage.com/history/boyerenduring7e for additional primary sources on this period.
introduced an amendment to an appropriations bill. This amendment, known as the Wilmot Proviso, stipulated that slavery be prohibited in any territory acquired by the war with Mexico. Neither an abolitionist nor a critic of Polk on tariff policy, Wilmot spoke for those loyal Democrats who had supported the annexation of Texas on the assumption that Texas would be the last slave state. Wilmot’s intention was not to split his party along sectional lines but instead to hold Polk to what Wilmot and other northern Democrats took as an implicit understanding: Texas for the slaveholders, California and New Mexico for free labor.

With strong northern support, the proviso passed in the House but stalled in the Senate. Polk refused to endorse it, and most southern Democrats opposed any barrier to the expansion of slavery south of the Missouri Compromise line. They believed that the westward extension of slavery would reduce the concentration of slaves in the older regions of the South and thus lessen the chances of a slave revolt.

The proviso raised unsettling constitutional issues. Calhoun and fellow southerners contended that since slaves were property, the Constitution protected slaveholders’ right to carry their slaves wherever they chose. This position led to the conclusion (drawn explicitly by Calhoun) that the Missouri Compromise of 1820, prohibiting slavery in the territories north of 36°30’, was unconstitutional. On the other side were many northerners who cited the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the Missouri Compromise, and the Constitution itself, which gave Congress the power to “make all needful rules and regulations respecting the territory or other property belonging to the United States,” as justification for congressional legislation on slavery in the territories. With the election of 1848 approaching, politicians of both sides, eager to hold their parties together and avert civil war, frantically searched for a middle ground.

The Election of 1848

The Whigs watched in dismay as prosperity returned under Polk’s program of an independent treasury and low tariffs. Never before had Clay’s American System seemed so irrelevant. But the Wilmot Proviso gave the Whigs a political windfall; originating in the Democratic Party, it enabled the Whigs to portray themselves as the South’s only dependable friends.

These considerations inclined the majority of Whigs toward Zachary Taylor. As a Louisiana slaveholder, he had obvious appeal to the South. As a political newcomer, he had no loyalty to the discredited American System. As a war hero, he had broad national appeal. Nominating Taylor as their presidential candidate in 1848, the Whigs presented him as an ideal man “without regard to creeds or principles” and ran him without any platform.

The Democrats faced a greater challenge because David Wilmot was one of their own. They could not ignore the issue of slavery in the territories, but if they embraced the positions of either Wilmot or Calhoun, the party would split along sectional lines. When Polk declined to run for reelection, the Democrats nominated Lewis Cass of Michigan, who solved their dilemma by announcing the doctrine of “squatter sovereignty,” or popular sovereignty as it was later called. Cass argued that Congress should let the question of slavery in the territories be decided by the settlers. Squatter sovereignty appealed to many because of its arresting simplicity and vagueness. It neatly dodged the divisive issue of whether Congress had the power to prohibit territorial slavery. In fact, few Democrats wanted a definitive answer to this question. As long as the doctrine remained ambiguous, northern and southern Democrats alike could interpret it to their respective benefit.

In the campaign, both parties tried to ignore the issue of territorial slavery, but neither succeeded. A faction of the Democratic Party in New York that favored the Wilmot Proviso, called the Barnburners, broke away from the party, linked up with former Liberty party abolitionists, and courted antislavery “Conscience” Whigs to create the Free-Soil party. Declaring their dedication to “Free Trade, Free Labor, Free Speech, and Free Men,” the Free-Soilers nominated Martin Van Buren on a platform opposing any extension of slavery.

Zachary Taylor benefited from Democratic disunity over the Wilmot Proviso and from his war-hero stature. He captured a majority of electoral votes in both North and South. Although failing to carry any state, the Free-Soil party ran well enough in the North to demonstrate the grass-roots popularity of opposition to slavery extension. Defections to the Free-Soilers, for example, probably cost the Whigs Ohio. By showing that opposition to the spread of slavery had far greater appeal than the staunch abolitionism of the old Liberty party, the Free-Soilers sent the Whigs and Democrats a message that they would be unable to ignore in future elections.

The California Gold Rush

When Wilmot announced his proviso, the issue of slavery in the Far West was more abstract than practical because Mexico had yet to cede any territory.
and relatively few Americans resided in either California or New Mexico. Nine days before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, however, an American carpenter discovered gold in the foothills of California’s Sierra Nevada range. The California gold rush began within a few months. A San Francisco newspaper complained that “the whole country from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the shore to the base of the Sierra Nevada, resounds with the sordid cry to gold, GOLD, GOLD! while the field is left half-planted, the house half-built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes.”

By December 1848, pamphlets with titles like The Emigrant’s Guide to the Gold Mines had hit the streets of New York City. Arriving by sea and by land, gold-rushers drove up the population of California from around fifteen thousand in the summer of 1848 to nearly 250,000 by 1852. Miners came from every corner of the world. A female journalist reported walking through a mining camp in the Sierras and hearing English, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Hawaiian. Conflicts over claims quickly led to violent clashes between Americans and Hispanics (mostly Mexicans, Chileans, and Peruvians). Americans especially resented the Chinese who flooded into California in the 1850s, most as contract laborers for wealthy Chinese merchants, and who struck Americans as slave laborers. Yet rampant prejudice against the Chinese did not stop some American businessmen from hiring them as contract workers for the American mining combinations that were forming in the 1850s.

Within a decade, the gold rush turned the sleepy Hispanic town of Yerba Buena, with 150 people in 1846, into "a pandemonium of a city" of 50,000 known as San Francisco. No other U.S. city contained people from more parts of the world. Many of the immigrants were Irish convicts who arrived by way of Australia, to which they had been exiled for their crimes. All the ethnic and racial tensions of the gold fields were evident in the city. A young clergyman confessed that he carried a harmless-looking cane, which "will be found to contain a sword two-and-a-half feet long." In 1851, San Francisco’s merchants organized the first of several Committees of Vigilance, which patrolled the streets, deported undesirables, and tried and hanged alleged thieves and murderers.

With the gold rush, the issue of slavery in the Far West became practical as well as abstract, and immediate rather than remote. The newcomers attracted to California in 1849 included free blacks and slaves brought by planters from the South. White prospectors loathed the thought of competing with either of these groups and wanted to drive all blacks, along with California’s Indians, out of the gold fields. Tensions also intensified between the gold-rushers and the Californios, whose extensive (if often vaguely worded) land holdings were protected by the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Spawned by disputed claims and prejudice, violence mounted, and demands grew for a strong civilian government to replace the ineffective military government in place in California since the war. Polk began to fear that without a satisfactory congressional solution to the slavery issue, Californians might organize a government independent of the United States. The gold rush thus guaranteed that the question of slavery in the Mexican cession would be the first item on the agenda for Polk’s successor and, indeed, for the nation.
### CHRONOLOGY

**1822**  
Stephen F. Austin founds the first American community in Texas.

**1830**  
Mexico closes Texas to further American immigration.

**1835**  
Santa Anna invades Texas.

**1836**  
Texas declares its independence from Mexico.  
Fall of the Alamo.  
Goliad massacre.  
Battle of San Jacinto.

**1840**  
William Henry Harrison elected president.

**1841**  
Harrison dies; John Tyler becomes president.

**1842**  
Webster-Ashburton Treaty.

**1844**  
James K. Polk elected president.

**1845**  
Congress votes joint resolution to annex Texas.  
Mexico rejects Slidell mission.

**1846**  
The United States declares war on Mexico.  
John C. Frémont proclaims the Bear Flag Republic in California.  
Congress votes to accept a settlement of the Oregon boundary issue with Britain.  
Tariff of 1846.  
Wilmot Proviso introduced.

**1847**  
Mexico City falls to Scott.  
Lewis Cass’s principle of “squatter sovereignty.”

**1848**  
Gold discovered in California.  
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.  
Taylor elected president.

### CONCLUSION

The massive immigration of the 1840s changed the face of American politics. Angered by Whig nativism and anti-Catholicism, the new German and Irish immigrants swelled the ranks of the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the Whigs were unraveling. The untimely death of President Harrison brought John Tyler, a Democrat in Whig’s clothing, to the White House. Tyler’s vetoes of key Whig measures left the Whig party in disarray. In combination, these developments led to the surprise election of James K. Polk, a Democrat and ardent expansionist, in 1844.

Wrapped in the language of Manifest Destiny, westward expansion appealed to Americans for many reasons. It fit their belief that settlers had more right to the American continent than the Europeans (who based their claims on centuries-old explorations), the lethargic and Catholic Mexicans, and the nomadic Indians. Expansion promised trade routes to the Pacific, more land for farming, and, in the case of Texas, more slave states.

Polk simultaneously rode the wave of national sentiment for Manifest Destiny and gave it direction by annexing Texas, provoking a crisis with Britain over Oregon, and leading the United States into a war with Mexico. Initially, Polk succeeded in uniting broad swaths of public opinion behind expansion. Polk and his followers ingeniously argued that national expansion was in the interests of northern working-class voters, many of them immigrants. By encouraging the spread of slavery to the Southwest, the argument went, the annexation of Texas would reduce the chances of a race war in the Southeast that might spill over into the North.

Yet even as war with Mexico was commencing, cracks in Polk’s coalition were starting to show. The Wilmot Proviso exposed deep sectional divisions that had only been papered over by the ideal of Manifest Destiny and that would explode in the secession of Free-Soil Democrats in 1848. Victorious over Mexico and enriched by the discovery of gold in California, Americans counted the blessings of expansion but began to fear its costs.
KEY TERMS

Tejano (p. 369)
Stephen F. Austin (p. 369)
German and Irish immigrants (p. 371)
nativism (p. 374)
Commonwealth v. Hunt (p. 374)
Oregon country (p. 375)

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FOR FURTHER REFERENCE


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