

## THE LAST WEST AND THE NEW SOUTH, 1865-1900

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

Frederick Jackson Turner, 1893

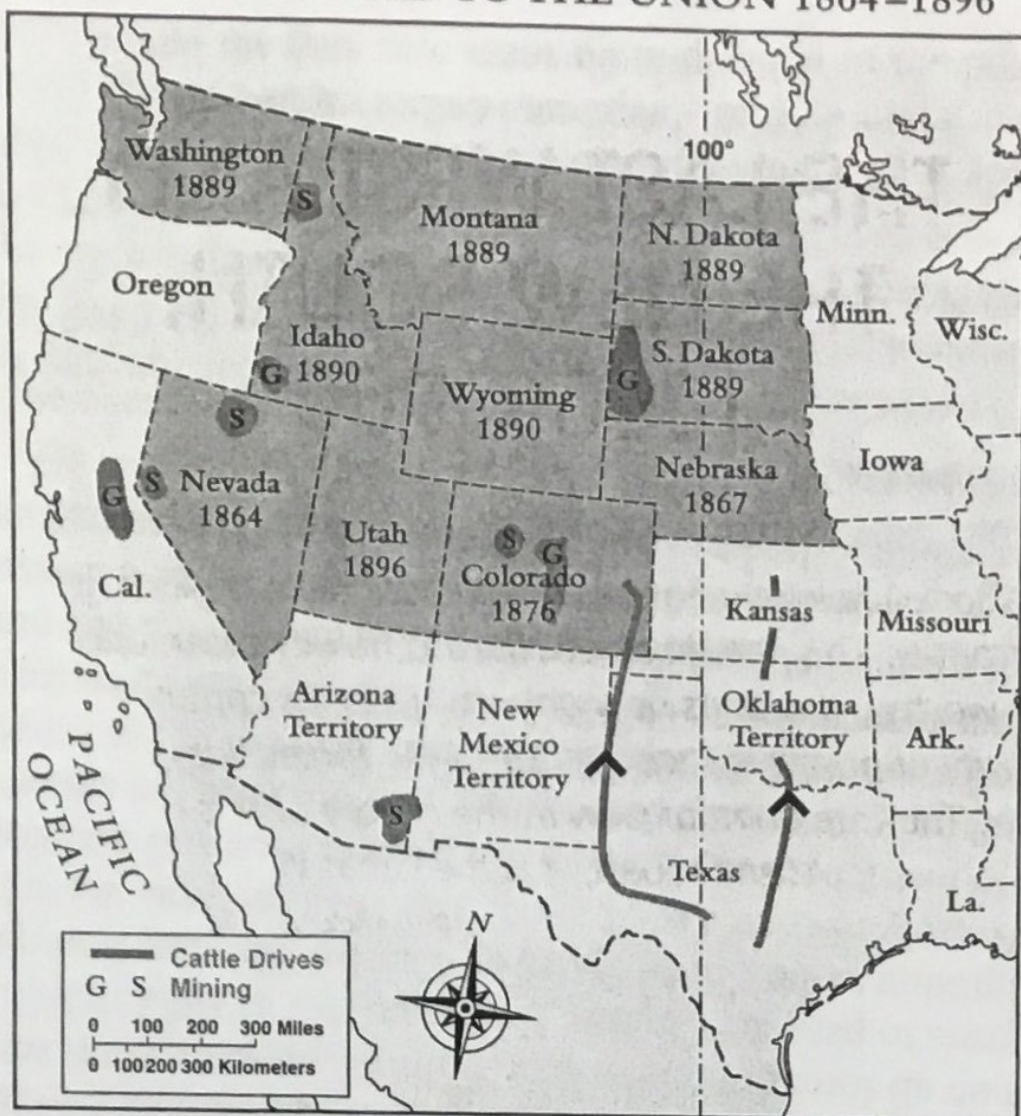
**D**uring the post-Civil War era most of the large-scale industrial development took place in the Northeast and Midwest, while the South and West most often supplied raw materials and consumed northern manufactured goods. Some in the South and West resented this apparent colonial status, which helped to shape the politics in the final decades of the 19th century. However, the South and West were not defined by their economic roles alone. Their geography, people, and cultures shaped their regional characteristics well into the future.

### **The West: Settlement of the Last Frontier**

After the Civil War, many Americans began settling in the vast arid territory in the West that included the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Western Plateau. Before 1860, these lands between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Coast were known as "the Great American Desert" by pioneers passing through on the way to the green valleys of Oregon and the goldfields of California. The plains west of the 100th meridian had few trees and usually received less than 15 inches of rainfall a year, which was not considered enough moisture to support farming. While the winter blizzards and hot dry summers discouraged settlement, the open grasslands of the plains supported an estimated 15 million bison, or buffalo. The buffalo in turn provided food, clothing, shelter, and even tools for many of the 250,000 American Indians living in the West in 1865.



## STATES ADMITTED TO THE UNION 1864–1896



In only 35 years, conditions on the Great Plains changed so dramatically that the frontier largely vanished. By 1900, the great buffalo herds had been wiped out. The open western lands were fenced in by homesteads and ranches, crisscrossed by steel rails, and modernized by new towns. Ten new western states had been carved out of the last frontier. Only Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma remained as territories awaiting statehood. Progress came at a cost. The frenzied rush for the West's natural resources not only nearly exterminated the buffalo, but also seriously damaged the environment. Most significantly, the American Indians who lived in the region paid a high human and cultural price as land was settled by miners, ranchers, and farmers.

### ***The Mining Frontier***

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 caused the first flood of newcomers to the territory. The California Gold Rush was only the beginning of a feverish quest for gold and silver that would extend well into the 1890s and would help to settle much of the region. A series of gold strikes and silver strikes in what became the states of Colorado, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Arizona, and South Dakota kept a steady flow of hopeful prospectors pushing into the western mountains. The discovery of gold near Pike's Peak, Colorado, in 1859 brought nearly 100,000 miners to the area. In the same year, the discovery of



the fabulous Comstock Lode (which produced more than \$340 million in gold and silver by 1890) was responsible for Nevada entering the Union in 1864. Idaho and Montana also received early statehood, largely because of mining booms.

California's great gold rush of 1849 set the pattern for other rushes. First, individual prospectors would look for traces of gold in the mountain streams by a method called placer mining, using simple tools such as shovels and washing pans. Such methods eventually gave way to deep-shaft mining that required expensive equipment and the resources of wealthy investors and corporations.

Rich strikes created boomtowns overnight—towns that became infamous for saloons, dance-hall girls, and vigilante justice. Many of these, however, became lonely ghost towns within a few years after the gold or silver ran out. Some towns, such as Nevada's Virginia City (created by the Comstock Lode), did grow, adding theaters, churches, newspapers, schools, libraries, railroads, and police. Mark Twain started his career as a writer working on a Virginia City newspaper in the early 1860s. A few towns that served the mines, such as San Francisco, Sacramento, and Denver, expanded into prosperous cities.

**Chinese Exclusion Act** Most of the mining towns that endured and grew were more like industrial cities than the frontier towns depicted in western films. As the mines developed, mining companies employed experienced miners from Europe, Latin America, and China. In many mining towns, half the population was foreign-born. About one-third of the western miners in the 1860s were Chinese immigrants. Native-born Americans resented the competition. In California, hostility to foreigners took the form of a Miner's Tax of \$20 a month on all foreign-born miners. Political pressure from western states moved Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prohibited further immigration to the United States by Chinese laborers. Immigration from China was severely restricted until 1965. The 1882 law was the first major act of Congress to restrict immigration on the basis of race and nationality.

Mining not only stimulated the settlement of the West but also reshaped the economics and politics of the nation. The vast increase in the supply of silver created a crisis over the relative value of gold- and silver-backed currency, which became a bitter political issue in the 1880s and 1890s. The mining boom left environmental scars that remain visible today, and it had a disastrous effect on American Indians, who lost their lands to miners pursuing instant riches.

### ***The Cattle Frontier***

The economic potential of the vast open grasslands that reached from Texas to Canada was realized by ranchers in the decades after the Civil War. Earlier, cattle had been raised and rounded up in Texas on a small scale by Mexican cowboys, or *vaqueros*. The traditions of the cattle business in the late 1800s, like the hardy "Texas" longhorn cattle, were borrowed from the Mexicans. By the 1860s, wild herds of about 5 million head of cattle roamed freely over the Texas grasslands. The Texas cattle business was easy to get into because both the cattle and the grass were free.



The construction of railroads into Kansas after the war opened up eastern markets for the Texas cattle. Joseph G. McCoy built the first stockyards in the region, at Abilene, Kansas, to hold cattle destined for Chicago. There, they could be sold for the high price of \$30 to \$50 per head. Dodge City and other cow towns sprang up along the railroads to handle the millions of cattle driven up the Chisholm, Goodnight-Loving, and other trails out of Texas during the 1860s and 1870s. The cowboys, many of whom were African Americans or Mexicans, received about a dollar a day for their dangerous work.

The long cattle drives began to come to an end in the 1880s. Overgrazing destroyed the grass and a winter blizzard and drought of 1885–1886 killed off 90 percent of the cattle. Another factor that closed down the cattle frontier was the arrival of homesteaders, who used barbed wire fencing to cut off access to the formerly open range. Wealthy cattle owners turned to developing huge ranches and using scientific ranching techniques. They raised new breeds of cattle that produced more tender beef by feeding them hay and grains. The Wild West was largely tamed by the 1890s, but in these few decades, Americans' eating habits changed from pork to beef and people created the legend of the rugged, self-reliant American cowboy.

### ***The Farming Frontier***

The Homestead Act of 1862 encouraged farming on the Great Plains by offering 160 acres of public land free to any family that settled on it for a period of five years. The promise of free land combined with the promotions of railroads and land speculators induced hundreds of thousands of native-born and immigrant families to attempt to farm the Great Plains between 1870 and 1900. About 500,000 families took advantage of the Homestead Act. However, five times that number had to purchase their land, because the best public lands often ended up in the hands of railroad companies and speculators.

**Problems and Solutions** The first “sodbusters” on the dry and treeless plains often built their homes of sod bricks. Extremes of hot and cold weather, plagues of grasshoppers, and the lonesome life on the plains challenged even the most resourceful of the pioneer families. Water was scarce, and wood for fences was almost nonexistent. The invention of barbed wire by Joseph Glidden in 1874 helped farmers to fence in their lands on the lumber-scarce plains. Using mail-order windmills to drill deep wells provided some water. Even so, many homesteaders discovered too late that 160 acres was not adequate for farming the Great Plains. Long spells of severe weather, together with falling prices for their crops and the cost of new machinery, caused the failure of two-thirds of the homesteaders' farms on the Great Plains by 1900. Western Kansas alone lost half of its population between 1888 and 1892.

Those who managed to survive adopted “dry farming” and deep-plowing techniques to use the moisture available. They also learned to plant hardy strains of Russian wheat that withstood the extreme weather. Ultimately, dams and irrigation saved many western farmers, as humans reshaped the rivers and physical environment of the West to provide water for agriculture.



## ***The Closing of the Frontier***

The Oklahoma Territory, once set aside for the use of American Indians, was opened for settlement in 1889, and hundreds of homesteaders took part in the last great land rush in the West. The next year, the U.S. Census Bureau declared that the entire frontier—except for a few pockets—had been settled.

**Turner's Frontier Thesis** Reacting to the closing of the frontier, historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote an influential essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). Turner argued that 300 years of frontier experience had shaped American culture by promoting independence and individualism. The frontier was a powerful social leveler, breaking down class distinctions and thus fostering social and political democracy. Furthermore, the challenges of frontier life caused Americans to be inventive and practical-minded—but also wasteful in their attitude toward natural resources.

The closing of the frontier troubled Turner. He saw the availability of free land on the frontier as a safety valve for harmlessly releasing discontent in American society. The frontier had always held out the promise of a fresh start. Once the frontier was gone, would the United States be condemned to follow the patterns of class division and social conflict that troubled Europe?

While many debate the Turner thesis, historians acknowledge that by the 1890s the largest movement of Americans was to the cities and industrialized areas. Not only was the era of the western frontier coming to a close, but the dominance of rural America was also on a decline.

## ***American Indians in the West***

The American Indians who occupied the West in 1865 belonged to dozens of different cultural and tribal groups. In New Mexico and Arizona, Pueblo groups such as the Hopi and Zuni lived in permanent settlements as farmers raising corn and livestock. The Navajo and Apache peoples of the Southwest were nomadic hunter-gatherers who adapted a more settled way of life, not only raising crops and livestock but also producing arts and crafts. In the Pacific Northwest (Washington and Oregon), such tribes as the Chinook and Shasta developed complex communities based on abundant fish and game.

About two-thirds of the western tribal groups lived on the Great Plains. These nomadic tribes, such as the Sioux, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Crow, and Comanche, had given up farming in colonial times after the introduction of the horse by the Spanish. By the 1700s, they had become skillful horse riders and developed a way of life centered on the hunting of buffalo. Although they belonged to tribes of several thousand, they lived in smaller bands of 300 to 500 members. In the late 19th century, their conflicts with the U.S. government were partly the result of white Americans having little understanding of the Plains people's loose tribal organization and nomadic lifestyle.

**Reservation Policy** In the 1830s, President Andrew Jackson's policy of removing eastern American Indians to the West was based on the belief that lands west of the Mississippi would permanently remain "Indian country." This expectation soon proved false, as wagon trains rolled westward on the



Oregon Trail, and plans were made for building a transcontinental railroad. In 1851, in councils (negotiations) at Fort Laramie and Fort Atkinson, the federal government began to assign the Plains tribes large tracts of land—or reservations—with definite boundaries. Most Plains tribes, however, refused to restrict their movements to the reservations and continued to follow the migrating buffalo wherever they roamed.

**Indian Wars** In the late 19th century, the settlement of thousands of miners, ranchers, and homesteaders on American Indian lands led to violence. Fighting between U.S. troops and Plains Indians was often brutal, with the U.S. Army responsible for several massacres. In 1866, during the Sioux War, the tables were turned when an army column under Captain William Fetterman was wiped out by Sioux warriors. Following these wars, another round of treaties attempted to isolate the Plains Indians on smaller reservations with

### AMERICAN INDIANS IN THE WEST





federal agents promising government support. However, gold miners refused to stay off American Indians' lands if gold was to be found on them, as indeed it was in the Dakotas' Black Hills. Soon, minor chiefs not involved in the treaty-making and younger warriors denounced the treaties and tried to return to ancestral lands.

A new round of conflicts in the West began in the 1870s. The Indian Appropriation Act of 1871 ended recognition of tribes as independent nations by the federal government and nullified previous treaties made with the tribes. Conflicts included the Red River War against the Comanche in the southern plains and a second Sioux War led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse in the northern plains. Before the Sioux went down to defeat, they ambushed and destroyed Colonel George Custer's command at Little Big Horn in 1876. Chief Joseph's courageous effort to lead a band of the Nez Percé into Canada ended in defeat and surrender in 1877. The constant pressure of the U.S. Army forced tribe after tribe to comply with Washington's terms. In addition, the slaughter of most of the buffalo by the early 1880s doomed the way of life of the Plains people.

The last effort of American Indians to resist U.S. government controls came through a religious movement known as the Ghost Dance. Leaders of the movements believed it could return prosperity to American Indians. In the government's campaign to suppress the movement, the famous Sioux medicine man Sitting Bull was killed during his arrest. Then in December 1890, the U.S. Army gunned down more than 200 American Indian men, women, and children in the "battle" (massacre) of Wounded Knee in the Dakotas. This final tragedy marked the end of the Indian Wars on the crimsoned prairie.

**Assimilationists** The injustices done to American Indians were chronicled in a best-selling book by Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor* (1881). Although this book created sympathy for American Indians, especially in the eastern United States, it also generated support for ending Indian culture through assimilation. Reformers advocated formal education, job training, and conversion to Christianity. They set up boarding schools such as the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania to segregate American Indian children from their people and teach them white culture and farming and industrial skills.

**Dawes Severalty Act (1887)** A new phase in the relationship between the U.S. government and American Indians was incorporated in the Dawes Act of 1887. The act was designed to break up tribal organizations, which many felt kept American Indians from becoming "civilized" and law-abiding citizens. The Dawes Act divided the tribal lands into plots of up to 160 acres, depending on family size. U.S. citizenship was granted to those who stayed on the land for 25 years and "adopted the habits of civilized life."

Under the Dawes Act, as intended, the government distributed 47 million acres of land to American Indians. However, 90 million acres of former reservation land—often the best land—was sold over the years to white settlers by



the government, speculators, or American Indians themselves. The new policy proved a failure. By the turn of the century, disease and poverty had reduced the American Indian population to just 200,000 persons, most of whom lived as wards of the federal government.

**Changes in the 20th Century** In 1924, in partial recognition that forced assimilation had failed, the federal government granted U.S. citizenship to all American Indians, whether or not they had complied with the Dawes Act. As part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, Congress adopted the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), which promoted the re-establishment of tribal organization and culture. Today, more than 3 million American Indians, belonging to 500 tribes, live within the United States.

### ***The Latino Southwest***

After the Mexican War ended in 1848, the Spanish-speaking landowners in California and the Southwest were guaranteed their property rights and granted citizenship. However, drawn-out legal proceedings often resulted in the sale or loss of lands to new Anglo arrivals. Hispanic culture was preserved in dominant Spanish-speaking areas, such as the New Mexico territories, the border towns, and the barrios of California.

Mexican Americans moved to find work, such as to the sugar beet fields and the mines of Colorado, and the building of western railroads. Before 1917, the border with Mexico was open and few records were kept for either seasonal workers or permanent settlers. Mexicans, like their European counterparts, were drawn by the explosive economic development of the region.

### ***The Conservation Movement***

The concerns over deforestation sparked the conservation movement, and the breathtaking paintings and photographs of western landscapes helped to push Congress to preserve such western icons as Yosemite Valley as a California state park in 1864 (a national park in 1890), and to dedicate the Yellowstone area as the first



Source: Logging in California, 1909. Library of Congress



National Park in 1872. Carl Schurz, as Secretary of the Interior in the 1880s, advocated creation of forest reserves and a federal forest service to protect federal lands from exploitation. Presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland reserved 33 million acres of national timber.

With the closing of the frontier era, Americans grew increasingly concerned about the loss of public lands and the natural treasures they contained. The Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and the Forest Management Act of 1897 withdrew federal timberlands from development and regulated their use. While most “conservationists” believed in scientific management and regulated use of natural resources, “preservationists,” such as John Muir, a leading founder of the Sierra Club in 1892, went a step further, and aimed to preserve natural areas from human interference. The education efforts of the Arbor Day, Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club were another sign of a growing conservation movement by 1900.

## **The New South**

While the West was being “won” by settlers and the U.S. Army, the South was recovering from the devastation of the Civil War. Some southerners promoted a new vision for a self-sufficient southern economy built on modern capitalist values, industrial growth, and improved transportation. Chief among them was Henry Grady, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Grady spread the gospel of the New South with editorials that argued for economic diversity and laissez-faire capitalism. To attract businesses, local governments offered tax exemptions to investors and the promise of low-wage labor.

## **Economic Progress**

The growth of cities, the textual industry, and improved railroads symbolized efforts to create a “New South” in the late 19th century.” Birmingham, Alabama, developed into one of the nation’s leading steel producers. Memphis, Tennessee, prospered as a center for the South’s growing lumber industry. Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the Confederacy, became the capital of the nation’s tobacco industry. Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina overtook the New England states as the chief producers of textiles. By 1900, the South had 400 cotton mills employing almost 100,000 white workers. Southern railroad companies rapidly converted to the standard-gauge rails used in the North and West, so the South was integrated into the national rail network. The South’s rate of postwar growth from 1865 to 1900 equaled or surpassed that of the rest of the country in population, industry, and railroads.

## **Continued Poverty**

Despite progress and growth, the South remained a largely agricultural section—and also the poorest region in the country. To a greater extent than before the war, northern financing dominated much of the southern economy. Northern investors controlled three-quarters of the southern railroads and by 1900 had control of the South’s steel industry as well. A large share of the profits from the new industries went to northern banks and financiers. Industrial workers in



the South (94 percent of whom were white) earned half of the national average and worked longer hours than elsewhere. Most southerners of both races remained in traditional roles and barely got by from year to year as sharecroppers and farmers.

The poverty of the majority of southerners was not caused by northern capitalists. Two other factors were chiefly responsible: (1) the South's late start at industrialization and (2) a poorly educated workforce. Only a small number of southerners had the technological skills needed for industrial development. The South failed to invest in technical and engineering schools as did the North. Furthermore, in the late 1800s, political leadership in the South provided little support for the education of either poor whites or poor African Americans. Without adequate education, the southern workforce faced limited economic opportunities in the fast-changing world of the late 19th century.

## ***Agriculture***

The South's postwar economy remained tied mainly to growing cotton. Between 1870 and 1900, the number of acres planted in cotton more than doubled. Increased productivity, however, only added to the cotton farmer's problems, as a glut of cotton on world markets caused cotton prices to decline by more than 50 percent by the 1890s. Per capita income in the South actually declined, and many farmers lost their farms. By 1900, more than half the region's white farmers and three-quarters of the black farmers were tenants (or sharecroppers), most of them straining to make a living from small plots of 15 to 20 acres. A shortage of credit forced farmers to borrow supplies from local merchants in the spring with a lien, or mortgage, on their crops to be paid at harvest. The combination of sharecropping and crop liens forced poor farmers to remain tenants, virtual serfs tied to the land by debt.

Some southern farmers sought to diversify their farming to escape the trap of depending entirely on cotton. George Washington Carver, an African-American scientist at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, promoted the growing of such crops as peanuts, sweet potatoes, and soybeans. His work played an important role in shifting southern agriculture toward a more diversified base.

Even so, most small farmers in the South remained in the cycle of debt and poverty. As in the North and the West, hard times produced a harvest of discontent. By 1890, the Farmers' Southern Alliance claimed more than 1 million members. A separate organization for African Americans, the Colored Farmers' National Alliance, had about 250,000 members. Both organizations rallied behind political reforms to solve the farmers' economic problems. If poor black and poor white farmers in the South could have united, they would have been a potent political force, but the economic interests of the upper class and the powerful racial attitudes of whites stood in their way.

## ***Segregation***

With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the North withdrew its protection of the freedmen and left southerners to work out solutions to their own social and economic problems. The Democratic politicians who came to power in the



southern states after Reconstruction, known as redeemers, won support from two groups: the business community and the white supremacists. The latter group favored policies of separating, or segregating, public facilities for blacks and whites as a means of treating African Americans as social inferiors. The redeemers often used race as a rallying cry to deflect attention away from the real concerns of tenant farmers and the working poor. They discovered that they could exert political power by playing on the racial fears of whites.

**Discrimination and the Supreme Court** During Reconstruction, federal laws protected southern blacks from discriminatory acts by local and state governments. Starting in the late 1870s, however, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down one Reconstruction act after another applying to civil rights. In the *Civil Rights Cases* of 1883, the Court ruled that Congress could not legislate against the racial discrimination practiced by private citizens, which included railroads, hotels, and other businesses used by the public. Then, in 1896, in the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court upheld a Louisiana law requiring “separate but equal accommodations” for white and black passengers on railroads. The Court ruled that the Louisiana law did not violate the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of “equal protection of the laws.”

These federal court decisions supported a wave of segregation laws, commonly known as Jim Crow laws, that southern states adopted beginning in the 1870s. These laws required segregated washrooms, drinking fountains, park benches, and other facilities in virtually all public places. Only the use of streets and most stores was not restricted according to a person’s race.

**Loss of Civil Rights** Other discriminatory laws resulted in the wholesale disfranchisement of black voters by 1900. In Louisiana, for example, 130,334 black voters were registered in 1896 but only 1,342 in 1904—a 99 percent decline. Various political and legal devices were invented to prevent southern blacks from voting. Among the most common obstacles were literacy tests, poll taxes, and political party primaries for whites only. Many southern states adopted so-called grandfather clauses, which allowed a man to vote only if his grandfather had cast ballots in elections before Reconstruction. The Supreme Court again gave its sanction to such laws in a case of 1898, in which it upheld a state’s right to use literacy tests to determine citizens’ qualifications for voting.

Discrimination took many forms. In southern courts, African Americans were barred from serving on juries. If convicted of crimes, they were often given stiffer penalties than whites. In some cases, African Americans accused of crimes were not even given the formality of a court-ordered sentence. Lynch mobs killed more than 1,400 men during the 1890s. Economic discrimination was also widespread, keeping most southern African Americans out of skilled trades and even factory jobs. Thus, while poor whites and immigrants learned the industrial skills that would help them rise into the middle class, African Americans remained engaged in farming and low-paying domestic work.

**Responding to Segregation** Segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching left African Americans in the South oppressed but not powerless. Some responded with confrontation. Ida B. Wells, editor of the *Memphis Free Speech*,



a black newspaper, campaigned against lynching and the Jim Crow laws. Death threats and the destruction of her printing press forced Wells to carry on her work from the North. Other black leaders advocated migration. Bishop Henry Turner formed the International Migration Society in 1894 to help blacks emigrate to Africa. Many African Americans moved to Kansas and Oklahoma.

A third response to oppression, advocated by Booker T. Washington, was to accommodate it. Washington, a former slave, had graduated from Hampton Institute in Virginia. In 1881, he established an industrial and agricultural school for African Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama. There, African Americans learned skilled trades while Washington preached the virtues of hard work, moderation, and economic self-help. Earning money, he said, was like having “a little green ballot” that would empower African Americans more effectively than a political ballot. Speaking at an exposition in Atlanta in 1895, Washington argued that “the agitation of the questions of social equality is the extremist folly.” In 1900, he organized the National Negro Business League, which established 320 chapters across the country to support businesses owned and operated by African Americans. Washington’s emphasis on racial harmony and economic cooperation won praise from many whites, including industrialist Andrew Carnegie and President Theodore Roosevelt.

Later civil rights leaders had mixed reactions to Washington’s approach, especially his Atlanta speech. Some criticized him as too willing to accept discrimination. For example, after 1900, the younger African American leader W. E. B. Du Bois would demand an end to segregation and the granting of equal civil rights to all Americans. (See Chapter 21.) In contrast, other writers have praised Washington for paving the way for black self-reliance because of his emphasis on starting and supporting black-owned businesses.

## **Farm Problems: North, South, and West**

By the end of the 1800s, farmers had become a minority within American society. While the number of U.S. farms more than doubled between 1865 and 1900, people working as farmers declined from 60 percent of the working population in 1860 to less than 37 percent in 1900. All farmers—white or black, westerner or southerner—faced similar problems.

### ***Changes in Agriculture***

With every passing decade in the late 1800s, farming became increasingly commercialized—and also more specialized. Northern and western farmers of the late 19th century concentrated on raising single cash crops, such as corn or wheat, for both national and international markets. As consumers, farmers began to procure their food from the stores in town and their manufactured goods from the mail-order catalogs sent to them by Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck. As producers, farmers became more dependent on large and expensive machines, such as steam engines, seeders, and reaper-thresher combines. Ever larger farms were run like factories. Unable to afford the new equipment, small, marginal farms could not compete and, in many cases, were driven out of business.



**Falling Prices** Increased American production as well as increased production in Argentina, Russia, and Canada drove prices down for wheat, cotton, and other crops. And since the money supply was not growing as fast as the economy, each dollar became worth more. This put more downward pressure on prices, or deflation. These figures tell the depressing story for farmers:

Wheat and Corn Prices per Bushel, 1867 and 1889		
Year	Wheat	Corn
1867	\$2.01	\$0.78
1889	\$0.70	\$0.28

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

As prices fell, farmers with mortgages faced both high interest rates and the need to grow more and more to pay off old debts. Of course, increased production only lowered prices. The predictable results of this vicious circle were more debts, foreclosures by banks, and more independent farmers forced to become tenants and sharecroppers.

**Rising Costs** Farmers felt victimized by impersonal forces of the larger national economy. Industrial corporations were able to keep prices high on manufactured goods by forming monopolistic trusts. Wholesalers and retailers (known as “the middlemen”) took their cut before selling to farmers. Railroads, warehouses, and elevators took what little profit remained by charging high or discriminatory rates for the shipment and storage of grain. Railroads would often charge more for short hauls on lines with no competition than for long hauls on lines with competition.

Taxes too seemed unfair to farmers. Local and state governments taxed property and land heavily but did not tax income from stocks and bonds. The tariffs protecting various American industries were viewed as just another unfair tax paid by farmers and consumers for the benefit of the industrialists.

### **Fighting Back**

A long tradition of independence and individualism restrained farmers from taking collective action. Finally, however, they began to organize for their common interests and protection.

**National Grange Movement** The National Grange of Patrons of Husbandry was organized in 1868 by Oliver H. Kelley primarily as a social and educational organization for farmers and their families. Within five years, Granges existed in almost every state, with the most in the Midwest. As the Grange expanded, it became active in economics and politics to defend members against middlemen, trusts, and railroads. For example, Grangers established *cooperatives*—businesses owned and run by the farmers to save the costs charged by middlemen. In Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, the Grangers, with help from local



businesses, successfully lobbied their state legislatures to pass laws regulating the rates charged by railroads and elevators. Other Granger laws made it illegal for railroads to fix prices by means of pools and to give rebates to privileged customers. In the landmark case of *Munn v. Illinois* (1877), the Supreme Court upheld the right of a state to regulate businesses of a public nature, such as railroads.

**Interstate Commerce Act (1886)** The state laws regulating railroad rates ran into numerous legal problems, especially with railroads that crossed state lines. States could regulate only local or short-haul rates. Interstate commerce, on the other hand, was a federal matter, and railroad companies adapted to the Granger laws by simply raising their long-haul (interstate) rates. The Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Wabash v. Illinois* (1886) that individual states could not regulate interstate commerce. In effect, the Court's decision nullified many of the state regulations achieved by the Grangers.

Congress responded to the outcry of farmers and shippers by passing the first federal effort to regulate the railroads. The Interstate Commerce Act of 1886 required railroad rates to be "reasonable and just." It also set up the first federal regulatory agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), which had the power to investigate and prosecute pools, rebates, and other discriminatory practices. Ironically, the first U.S. regulatory commission helped the railroads more than the farmers. The new commission lost most of its cases in the federal courts in the 1890s. On the other hand, the ICC helped railroads by stabilizing rates and curtailing destructive competition.

**Farmers' Alliances** Farmers also expressed their discontent by forming state and regional groups known as farmers' alliances. Like the Grange, the alliances taught about scientific farming methods. Unlike the Grange, alliances always had the goal of economic and political action. Hence, the alliance movement had serious potential for creating an independent national political party. By 1890, about 1 million farmers had joined farmers' alliances. In the South, both poor white and black farmers joined the movement.

**Ocala Platform** Potential nearly became reality in 1890 when a national organization of farmers—the National Alliance—met in Ocala, Florida, to address the problems of rural America. The alliance attacked both major parties as subservient to Wall Street bankers and big business. Ocala delegates created a platform that would significantly impact politics. They supported (1) direct election of U.S. senators (in the original U.S. Constitution, senators were selected by state legislatures), (2) lower tariff rates, (3) a graduated income tax (people with higher incomes would pay higher rates of tax), and (4) a new banking system regulated by the federal government.

In addition, the alliance platform demanded that Treasury notes and silver be used to increase the amount of money in circulation, which farmers hoped would create inflation and raise crop prices. The platform also proposed federal storage for farmers' crops and federal loans, which would free farmers from dependency on middlemen and creditors.



The alliances stopped short of forming a political party. Even so, their backing of local and state candidates who pledged support for alliance goals often proved decisive in the elections of 1890. Many of the reform ideas of the Grange and the farmers' alliances would become part of the Populist movement, which would shake the foundations of the two-party system in the elections of 1892 and 1896. (See Chapter 19.)

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: HOW DID THE FRONTIER DEVELOP?

Frederick Jackson Turner set the agenda for generations of historians with his frontier thesis. He presented the settling of the frontier as an evolutionary process. The frontier, according to Turner, began as wilderness. The hunting frontier came first, which was followed by either the mining or the cattle frontier, and then the farming frontier. Finally, the founding of towns and cities completed the process.

Later historians challenged Turner's evolutionary view by arguing that frontier cities played an early and primary role in development. For example, Charles Glaab documented the role of town "boosters," who tried to create settlements on the frontier overnight in the middle of nowhere. After laying out town plots on paper, boosters of different western towns strove to establish their own town as a territory's central hub of development by competing to capture the county seat or state capital, a state asylum, a railroad depot, or a college. Many would-be towns, promoted as the next "Athens of the West," proved a booster's false prophecy and died as ghost towns.

Historian William Cronon argued that the frontier and cities grew up together, not sequentially. In his analysis of the growth of Chicago in the 19th century, (*Nature's Metropolis*, 1991) Cronon argued that the "frontier and the metropolis turn out to be two sides of the same coin. . . . The history of the Great West is a long dialogue between the place we call city and the place we call country." Urban markets made rural development possible. The cattle ranchers' frontier developed because it was linked by the railroads to Chicago and eastern markets. By "reading Turner backward," Cronon demonstrated how Chicago helped to create the mining, cattle, lumber, and farming frontiers as it developed into the great city of the West, or "nature's metropolis." By integrating the history of the city and the settlement of the frontier, Cronon challenged the perspective that urban areas and rural areas are necessarily in conflict. Not only the development of the American frontier, but the growth of cities and rural areas is clarified, when we begin to understand, as Cronon argued, "every city is nature's metropolis and every countryside its rural hinterland."



## KEY TERMS BY THEME

### Western Environment (GEO)

Great American Desert  
100th meridian  
buffalo herds  
Great Plains  
mineral resources

### Western Development (WXT)

Mining frontier,  
boomtowns  
Chinese Exclusion Act of  
1882  
commercial cities  
longhorns, vaqueros  
cattle drives  
barbed wire  
Joseph Glidden  
Homestead Act  
dry farming

### American Indians (MIG, POL)

Great Plains tribes  
Southwest tribes  
federal treaty policies  
causes of "Indian wars"  
Little Big Horn  
assimilationists  
Helen Hunt Jackson  
Dawes Act of 1887  
Ghost Dance movement  
Indian Reorganization  
Act of 1934

### Mexican Americans (PEO)

Mexican War aftermath  
Spanish-speaking areas  
Migration for jobs

### Conservation Move- ment (GEO)

deforestation  
Yellowstone, Yosemite  
Department of Interior  
conservationists and  
preservationists  
Forest Reserve Act of  
1891  
Forest Management Act  
of 1897  
John Muir, Sierra Club

### Southern Development (WXT)

"New South"  
Henry Grady  
Birmingham (steel)  
Memphis (lumber)  
Richmond (tobacco)  
integrated rail network  
agriculture's dominance  
sharecropping; tenant  
farmers  
George Washington  
Carver  
Tuskegee Institute

### Racial Discrimination (MIG, POL)

white supremacists  
Civil Rights Cases of  
1883

### *Plessy v. Ferguson*

Jim Crow laws  
literacy tests, poll taxes,  
grandfather clauses  
white primaries, white  
juries  
lynch mobs  
economic discrimination  
African American  
migration  
Ida B. Wells  
Booker T. Washington  
economic cooperation

### Farm Protests Move- ments (POL)

markets and farmers  
crop price deflation  
railroads and middlemen  
National Grange  
Movement  
cooperatives  
Granger laws  
*Munn v. Illinois*  
*Wabash v. Illinois*  
Interstate Commerce  
Commission  
Ocala Platform of 1890

### Frontier Closing (CUL)

census of 1890  
Frederick Jackson Turner,  
"The Significance of  
the Frontier in Ameri-  
can History"  
role of cities, "nature's  
metropolis"