Westward Expansion of the United States

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Introduction:  
Go West! The decision to travel west has had different meanings over time. Columbus sailed west in order to reach the Indies in the East. But, most of us link going west with movement into the American frontier beyond the colonies and over the Appalachians in the late 1700s, or moving into what became the Northwest Territory in the 1780s. When we think of the West, we might also imagine the rugged path traveled with the Lewis and Clark Expedition from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean or the dusty trails followed by those seeking gold in California. Heading west has had many meanings, but in any of these historic periods it meant breaking ties with the familiar and striking out to face adventure, danger, hardships, possibilities, and sometimes devastation. It also meant going into areas already occupied by Native Americans who thought of the land, not as the West, but as home.

These lesson plans are designed to help students begin to build understanding of the significance of westward expansion in American history. By examining the waves of expanding settlements from the east to the far West, students will learn that settlers often sought economic improvement by trapping furs, by acquiring more fertile land, or by seeking the rewards of mining. In the process, frontier life promised both more social and political equality and freedom for the settlers and a drastically changed way of life for Native Americans.

Goal:  
To build an understanding of the causes, phases, and outcomes of westward expansion in United States History and to build students, understanding, comprehension, and knowledge of key events in the history of the West.

National Standards:  
This lesson plan addresses the NCSS Curriculum Standards associated with the themes of:
- Culture
- Time, Continuity and Change
- People, Places, and Environments
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption, and
- Civic Ideals and Practices

Introduction to Educator:  
Lesson activities build on the background knowledge students are beginning to acquire about the movement of people westward. Depending on reading level and preparation, students may need some guidance and additional reading time before pursuing some of these activities. Teachers can find background information to share with their students by searching The History Channel website at History.com. Some topics and terms related to the West that teachers might want to review with students include: The Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the Northwest Territory, the Oregon Trail, and histories of Native American groups in the West before territorial expansion.

The activities below will help students build background knowledge through interactive experiences designed to support their growing understanding of westward expansion in thoughtful and engaging ways. Students will also practice a variety of skills through experiences such as creating models, researching, preparing illustrated reports, making time lines and booklets, creating maps, and designing a mural. Throughout the lessons a focus on the local perspective relevant to this important period in American history allows students to see the ways that concepts brought to bear during westward expansion still influence their everyday lives.
Activity #1: (Primary) Pioneers: Traveling West

Find pictures of pioneers, wagon trains, and Conestoga wagons at sites such as The History Channel historychannel.com/thcsearch/thc_resourcedetail.do?encyc_id=206288 and at the Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers available at oregonpioneers.com/ortrail.htm. Tell students about early pioneers who led the way into new lands for settlement. Ask them to think about the families that decided to move west. Many traveled on rough and uneven dirt trails for miles and miles, by foot or in covered wagons, to find a new life in the West. Conestoga wagons could travel about 15 miles in a day (as much as we might travel in a car in about 20 minutes on a highway). If the roads became muddy because of rain, the wagon might only be able to go 1 mile in an entire day. Sometimes the journey west took six months or longer. Pioneers traveled in wagon trains (many wagons traveling at the same time together) for protection and assistance. The Native Americans, who already lived in the areas pioneers crossed and in which they might decide to settle, sometimes attacked pioneers to protect their own families and their way of life. Pioneers faced dangerous rivers to cross; hot, dry plains; or high, rugged mountains. Sickness and disease were a constant threat. The risks were great but pioneers streamed west hoping for a better life.

Your task: Ask the students to look at pictures of the Conestoga wagons available at oregonpioneers.com/wagon.htm, endoftheoregontrail.org/wagons.html, americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/es/nd/seward_1, and americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/es/or/trail_1.

- Ask the students to talk about these questions:
  - Why did pioneers take so little with them on such a long trip?
  - How did the families decide what to take?
  - Why did several families usually travel together in a wagon train?
- Ask students to think about what a family might take along in a small covered wagon – remembering that the wagon had to carry what the family needed to survive on the trail and what they needed to start afresh when they found a place to settle.
- Show your students the National Archives site at archives.gov/research/american-west/.
- Ask students to think about what a family of four (mother, father, two children) might have to put in the wagon to survive and to begin a new life in the west.
- Ask students to make their own lists of what items they would bring on the journey west. These lists can be decorated with images and pictures depicting westward migration.
- The teacher can use tape to mark out the size and shape of a Conestoga wagon on the classroom floor and then bring in cardboard boxes to represent some of the items pioneers would take with them (e.g., wood stove, bureau, tool chest). This will help students visualize how little space was available and what kinds of decisions had to be made.
- Ask kids to think about how people move today and what similarities/differences there are with pioneers in the 1800s.
Activity #1: (Primary) Pioneers: Traveling West (continued)

Making History Local: (Primary, Intermediate) - Pioneer Day: Living Like a Pioneer

- Find pictures of the daily life of pioneers once they settled in their new location. The pictures might include food, clothing, housing, occupations (such as candle-making), recreation, and music. Discuss the pictures with the children. Ask the children to discuss:
  - What do you see in the picture? (e.g., what activity, what environment...)
  - How was pioneer life like and different from our lives today?
  - Find something in the picture that shows the likeness or difference that you described.

Invite persons from the community who can demonstrate various pioneer activities to the children. Ask the children to develop some questions to ask guests before they arrive (e.g., What was life like for the first settlers in our local area? How did you learn about the life of early settlers? What led people to settle in our area? Who was in the area when the pioneers arrived?)

- Enlist parent and community help to plan a “Pioneer Day” with stations at which children can try some of the pioneer activities. Ideas for centers include a story corner where children can listen to pioneer stories; a quilt-making corner where children produce a quilt square out of paper that can be put together into a paper quilt; stations devoted to pioneer games; a picture corner with pictures of pioneer life for children to discuss and paper for children to draw their own pioneer scenes, and a place to learn a pioneer song. Sites that provide some ideas are available at crawfordcountry.org/events_pioneer_days, gen.bham.wednet.edu/3pioncon.htm, and fwparker.org/tour/2005pioneer/.

- After students have visited the centers, ask them whether they believe that children had more or less responsibility and fun in the 1800s than today. Ask them to provide reasons for their responses.
Activity #2: (Primary, Intermediate, and Upper)
Pioneers: Who, What, When, Where and Why?

Young learners can explore books and appropriate sites to learn about pioneers - what is meant by that term and how the lives of pioneers were both similar to and different from our lives today (dress, transportation, occupations, food, shelter...).

On the side labeled “Then,” ask the children to draw a picture of some aspect of pioneer life that they have learned about. On the side labeled “Now,” ask them to draw a picture of life today comparing the same aspect they selected for pioneers (e.g., clothing, or shelter, or transportation). Title the pictures “Then” and “Now.”

- Ask each child to explain his/her two pictures to a partner (for practice). Using their pictures, ask the children to explain what they have learned about pioneers to students in the whole class, or another class, or for a gathering of parents.

- Extension Activity: Ask the students to explore various resources to write an illustrated report about pioneers - who they were, what they did, when they traveled west, where they left from, where they settled, and why they made such a long and dangerous journey.

- Students can use sites such as library.thinkquest.org/6400/default.htm, americanwest.com/, and campsilos.org/mod2/students/life2.shtml.

- Students can share their illustrated reports to build backgrounds about pioneer life and to help them plan a mural.

- Ask the students to plan a mural to depict pioneer life for display in the school. Panels could include:
  - life before moving west
  - the journey
  - a map of the journey
  - setting up a new home
  - The students should include captions and labels to help those unfamiliar with pioneer life. Relate the questions Who, What, When, Where, and Why to the pioneers in the mural.

Making History Local
(Primary, Intermediate, Upper Elementary)

- Ask a local historian to come to your class to discuss the first “pioneers” who settled in your own community and the natives who lived here first. The first settlers in your community may or may not have moved west or be considered typical “pioneers,” but it will be interesting to learn who the first settlers in your own community were. Ask Who, What, When, Where, and Why of the guest.

- Add a panel to the pioneers mural depicting “pioneers” in your own community.

Suggested Activities:
- Use a variety of sources to build knowledge of pioneer life. (Pictures of early pioneer life on the prairie are available at campsilos.org/mod2/teachers/r_index.shtml. Pictures of pioneer life in Nebraska are available at nebraskastudies.org/0500/frameset_reset.html, and nebraskastudies.org/0500/stories/0501_0207.html.

- Discuss how pioneer life is alike and different from our own using a VENN diagram in a whole class discussion. The left circle on the diagram is for items specific to pioneer life, the right circle for items specific to life today, and the overlapping area for items that pioneer life and modern life have in common.

- Ask students to divide a piece of paper into two parts - one part labeled “Then” and one part labeled “Now.”
Activity #3: (Intermediate and Upper)
Where was the West and How Does Our Community Fit into the Picture?

When historians speak of the West, they mean very different places depending on what period in American history they are explaining. So, exactly where was the West?

Making History Local
(Intermediate and Upper Elementary)

Suggested Activity: It is important to link your local history to the history of our nation. Suppose that you have been asked to put together a visual presentation about westward expansion for your local historical society. The society wants to display a visual history of the westward movement and where your community fits into the picture. To complete this task, divide into eight research teams. Each team will choose a topic (below) and use the following questions for research:

- What was considered the “West” at a specific time in our history? Draw that area on a physical map of the United States (an 8 ½” x 11” map)
- How did that part of the country come to be settled (trails, ocean routes...)?
- Who were the original inhabitants and what do we know about their culture?
- Who is a person or persons famous for being instrumental in making it possible for others to settle in that part of the west?
- What event or events led to the settlement of that part of our country (battles, purchases...)?

Each team will prepare a visual presentation for the rest of the class, for other classes, or for members of your local historical society. Some sites are listed to support your research. Use more than one source and be sure to share good sources with other research teams as you find them.

General sites that will support several of the research teams are:
- Think Quest site at library.thinkquest.org/6400/where.htm and Worldbook at www2.worldbook.com/features/lewisandclark/html/pushing.html
- Research Team 1 - East Coast in the 1600s. See Social Studies for Kids at socialstudiesforkids.com/graphics/13mapnew.htm, and socialstudiesforkids.com/articles/ushistory/13colonies2.htm.
- Research Team 2 - Settlement in the Old West beyond the Appalachian Mountains by 1760s. See The History Channel website Encyclopedia: Daniel Boone at historychannel.com/thcsearch/thcresource/detail.do?encyc_id=203401 and America’s Story – Daniel Boone available at americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/revolut/boone_1.
- Research Team 4 - The Louisiana Purchase (1803) and explorations of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery. See www2.worldbook.com/features/lewisandclark/html/index.html.
- Research Team 6 - The Far West-The Oregon Trail. See www2.worldbook.com/features/lewisandclark/html/settling_exploring.html#oregon.
- Research Team 7 - The Far West-California. See www2.worldbook.com/features/lewisandclark/html/settling_exploring.html#california.
- Research Team 8 - Your own community. Your assignment is to find out where your community fits into westward expansion. Create a U.S. map showing which part of westward expansion included your region and explaining the answers to the research questions above for your local region. Also note any people from your region that were instrumental in paving the way for westward expansion in other parts of the country.
Activity #4: (Primary, Intermediate and Upper)
How Do Paintings and Accounts Help Us Learn about the West?

(Primary)
Teachers may use some of the following paintings to help young children see artists’ concepts of the West and hear the words from pioneer journals. Use these materials as discussion starters and to build background before asking children to role-play a scene or replicate their own version of a specific type of source.

(Intermediate and Upper Elementary)
Records do not exist to provide us with information for many of the early travels into the West. But some expeditions did provide accounts, some pioneers wrote of their experiences in diaries or journals, a few newspapers provided information, and artists often followed after pioneers to record impressions of what they saw. Historians know that we are able to construct a clearer picture of the past when we use multiple sources to see different interpretations of the past and to note points about which sources agree and disagree.

Your Task:
Work in a small group. Select one of the following sources about the West, research using the questions below and others you may want to add, and prepare an illustrated report and an original product that is like the one you chose to research (e.g., if you choose paintings for your research, create a painting of the West of your own or if you chose newspaper accounts create your own newspaper account about the West). Combine all of the illustrated reports and original creations in a booklet to share your findings with others in other classes, the school library, or the community. Use the questions below to guide your research.

- What type of record of the past are you exploring (painting, journal entry, newspaper...)?
- What is your source describing or depicting (What event, what group of people...)?
- What time period being described?
- Was the account (a painting, an article, a journal...) created at the time of the event being described or later?
- What part of the West is your source depicting?
- What is this source intended to do? (E.g., inspire more settlers, tell a different side of westward expansion.)
- Create a timeline for your class. Determine which group researched the earliest topic in history. Make a list of the topics in chronological order so that each group can present topics from earliest to more recent.
- After hearing all of the presentations, and examining the timeline, discuss as a class what have you learned:
  - about the West
  - about various types of sources
  - about multiple accounts of the past.
- Decide how you will organize the booklet of your findings and for whom you will make the booklet (e.g., younger students, the school library, a community organization).
- Extension Activity: Ask each student to write an essay comparing and contrasting the idea of the West represented in the source from his/her group with two other types of sources explored by other groups.
- Here is a list of possible topics and sources for research groups: Paintings of the West by George Caleb Bingham. See The History Channel available at historychannel.com/thcsurvey/thc_resourcedetail.do?encyc_id=202965 and See Washington University Gallery of Art available at archiv.com/archive/B/bingham/daniel_boone.jpg.html – Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap.
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Elementary School

- Paintings of the West by
- Paintings of the West by
- Newspaper accounts
  - For examples of newspaper stories on the Gold Rush, visit the Huntington Library site available at huntington.org/Education/GoldRush/game/anna_1.htm and click on headlines.
- Writings from the Lewis and Clark Expedition
  - Diary or journal accounts from the Lewis and Clark expedition are available at: xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JOURNALS/lewis6.html#chpt20 for the extensive record kept by Lewis and Clark on their expedition.
- Artifacts of the Lewis and Clark Expedition
  - Go to the National Bicentennial Exhibition site commemorating the Lewis and Clark exploration of the Louisiana Purchase available at lewisandclarkexhibit.org/. Click on “Launch the Online Exhibition,” then click on “Go to the Main Menu.” Click on “Gallery” and look through the many pages to find five artifacts that you believe tell much of the story of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. When you click on any of the artifacts you can then click on the “description and credits” for more information.

Extension Activity: We have only explored a few of the topics and types of sources that provide information about the West. Make a list of other topics and types of sources to explore.

Making History Local: Sources Tell a Story

- Go to a local history museum to see the types of sources on display illustrating the settlement history of your local area.
- How do the sources in your local history museum compare with the sources you have explored about the West?
- Which sources in the local museum do you believe provide the best insight into your area’s local history?