



# Westward Migration: Opportunities and Dangers

BY TIM BAILEY

## UNIT OVERVIEW

Over the course of three lessons students will analyze primary source documents that present examples of both the romanticization and the cruel realities of American westward migration during the 1800s. Students will read and analyze different types of documents not only to comprehend the language of the text but also to infer the more subtle meanings. Students will use textual evidence to draw conclusions and present arguments as directed in each lesson. Finally, students will participate in a mock debate drawing on the primary sources.

## UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, analyze, and explain various texts: song lyrics, a personal letter, a poem, and a diary entry
- Identify and summarize key passages
- Answer critical thinking questions using evidence from the texts
- Engage in discussions with other students to explain and defend a position or interpretation
- Role-play in a mock debate

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why were many people drawn to migrate to the West?

To what extent did western migration prove to be a serious challenge?

What were the rewards and dangers associated with migration to the West?

## NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 4

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.2: Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.6: Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.7: Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.4: Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

## LESSON 1

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will carefully read three short primary sources that encouraged Americans to move west and settle the untamed land. They will analyze the documents and identify the arguments being made in favor of westward migration.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On April 30, 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte of France sold to the United States 885,000 square miles of territory in North America for \$15 million. Congress sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find out exactly what the United States had purchased. On November 7, 1805, the Lewis and Clark Expedition reached the Pacific Ocean and the way to the West was opened. Fur trappers, traders, and finally settlers followed.

President James Polk stated that it was America's "Manifest Destiny" to settle North America from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, and Americans demonstrated their agreement by migrating across the Mississippi River and ever westward. In 1841 the first group of sixty-nine pioneers left Missouri and headed west, bound for Oregon. From 1841 until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 more than 350,000 emigrants traveled on foot and by wagon to reach Oregon and California. At the peak of this westward migration more than 55,000 pioneers made the hazardous crossing in a single season.

### MATERIALS

- "The Lovely Ohio" (late eighteenth to early nineteenth century). Available online at the Ballad of America, [www.balladofamerica.com](http://www.balladofamerica.com)
- Arthur Chapman, "Out Where the West Begins," *Out Where the West Begins and Other Western Verses* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 1
- Letter from Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson, November 15, 1871, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00608
- Summary Organizer: Traveling West

## PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students do the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four.
2. Discuss the information in the Historical Background, but avoid providing additional details as you want the students to learn about the topic through the documents themselves. You may have the students take notes on the information.
3. Distribute the song “The Lovely Ohio.”
4. “Share read” the song with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to serve as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
5. You may play the song for the students from the Ballad of America website or a similar source.
6. Distribute to each student three copies of Summary Organizer: Traveling West. Students will determine which words or phrases are the most important. They will copy those words into the activity sheet. They will then summarize the text in their own words.
7. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must complete their own organizers.
8. Repeat this process with the other two documents, the poem “Out Where the West Begins” and the letter by Horace Greeley.
9. Class discussion: What is the central argument being made in all three pieces? Have groups or individual students share and compare their summaries with others in class.

## LESSON 2

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will carefully read an excerpt from the diary of a young girl traveling overland with her family to settle in the Oregon Territory in 1844. They will analyze the document in order to understand some of the difficulties of making that journey. Students will answer critical thinking questions designed to measure their comprehension of the text.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The 2,000-mile journey from Missouri to Oregon was a grueling five- to eight-month ordeal. One in every seventeen travelers died along the way. If graves were evenly spaced along the Oregon Trail's 2,000-mile length there would be a tombstone every eighty yards to mark the resting place of a pioneer who did not survive the journey.

Why did the pioneers risk their own lives and the lives of their families to make this journey? There are many reasons. Among the most common was the promise of something better out West than they could have in the East. Popular publications and guide books of the time extolled the virtues of Oregon and California. One of these books reported that “as far as its producing qualities are concerned Oregon cannot be outdone whether in wheat, oats, rye, barley, buckwheat, peas, beans, potatoes, turnips, cabbages, onions, parsnips, carrots, beets, currants, gooseberries, strawberries, apples, peaches, pears, or fat and healthy babies.”

### MATERIALS

- Catherine Sager Pringle, “On the Plains in 1844” in *Across the Plains in 1844* (ca. 1860), printed in S. A. Clarke, *Pioneer Days of Oregon History*, vol. 2 (Portland OR: J. K. Gill Company, 1905), 503–506.
- Critical Thinking Questions: “On the Plains in 1844”

### PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students do the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four.
2. Discuss the information in the Historical Background, but avoid providing additional detail. You may have the students take notes on the information.
3. Distribute the excerpt from “On the Plains in 1844” by Catherine Sager Pringle.
4. If you choose, you can share read the diary entry as described in Lesson 1 or have the students read it for themselves.
5. Distribute the Critical Thinking Questions activity sheet. Students must cite passages from the text as the basis for their answers. Summaries should be written in complete sentences.
6. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must complete their own activity sheets.
7. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share and compare their answers with others in class.

## LESSON 3 (2 DAYS)

### OVERVIEW

In this two-day lesson the students will demonstrate their comprehension of all the documents read for the previous lessons. They will prepare a mock debate in which they will play the roles of prospective pioneers and argue the wisdom of making the journey out West.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Oregon seemed, from all accounts, to be paradise on Earth. All you had to do was get there and claim your land. It was this prospect that made the journey worth the risks. The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848 created a huge surge in the number of people choosing to emigrate to the West to try their luck.

A number of other factors contributed to the exodus from the East. A series of financial crises, the first in 1837, led to a depression and ruined many farmers. In addition, several epidemics—typhoid, dysentery, tuberculosis, scarlet fever, malaria, and yellow fever—swept many parts of the eastern United States. Perhaps the most devastating of all was cholera, which had arrived from Asia in the 1830s and accounted for more than 50,000 deaths in the United States in 1850 alone.

Settlers emigrated to the West for the same reason that many had come to the Atlantic shores of America over the previous two centuries: religious freedom. The Mormon pioneers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, left Illinois in 1846 to find a place to practice their religion without fear of persecution, and settled in the Salt Lake valley of Utah. Adventurers, missionaries, land speculators, and many others followed the reasoning of Henry David Thoreau who, in his 1862 *Atlantic* essay "Walking," wrote, "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. . . . I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen."

### MATERIALS

- Readings from the previous lessons
  - o "The Lovely Ohio" (late 1700s to early 1800s)
  - o Arthur Chapman, "Out Where the West Begins" (1917)
  - o Letter from Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson (November 15, 1871)
  - o Catherine Sager Pringle, from "On the Plains in 1844" (ca. 1860)
- "The Wisconsin Emigrant" (mid-1800s)
- "The Great Western Migration"
- "Debate Script" Activity Sheet

## PROCEDURE

1. Divide the students into groups of three to five. All of the students should have copies of the texts and activity sheets from the previous two lessons.
2. Discuss the information in the Historical Background, but avoid providing additional detail. You may have the students take notes on the information.
3. Share read the song “The Wisconsin Emigrant” with the class as described in Lesson 1, and then listen to the song online at the Ballad of America website or a similar recording.
4. Lead a class discussion about the song by asking text-based questions: What reasons does the husband give for wanting to move to Wisconsin? What reasons does his wife give for staying? How does he claim that life will be better if they move? What argument does his wife make that finally convinces him to stay?
5. Distribute copies of “The Great Western Migration” for the students to read independently. For the debate activity, they may use this information along with the other documents previously distributed.
6. Tell the students that they are going to have a mock debate on the reasons to migrate to the West or to stay in the East in the 1800s. They need to choose one person in their group to be a debate moderator. They will then divide the rest of the group evenly into supporters and opponents of western migration. You may show the class a video clip of a debate to help them develop their scripts.
7. Distribute the “Debate Script” activity sheet. The students will write the script for a debate based on the issues raised in the documents they have been studying. This will not be an actual debate, but a short reader’s-theater piece. The script is to be written as a team effort, and everyone in the group will have a copy of the final script. The groups will prepare and, if there is time, rehearse the presentations on Day 1 and give their presentations on Day 2.
8. Provide one question that all groups must address during their debate: What is the best argument supporting your view on western migration? (Make sure to base your answer on evidence from the documents.)
9. The students should then write two to four additional relevant questions that can be answered with evidence from the primary sources. They may use the activity sheet to structure their mock debate. Within each group, each side (supporters and opponents) must respond to each question. If there is time, the group may also write a rebuttal for each side for each of the questions.
10. Remind the students that everyone in the group needs to work on the whole script, not just on their side’s answers, and that the responses need to be based on the documents used in the lessons.
11. If there is time, let the groups rehearse their presentations for the next day.
12. On Day 2, all groups present their mock debates. The moderator should begin the debate by introducing both sides and setting out the protocol for the debate.
13. The moderator asks each question and directs the opposing sides to answer. Supporters and opponents answer each question. If they have written rebuttals, they can offer them as well.
14. Class discussion: After the debates have been presented, discuss the best arguments the students made and the best text-based evidence they used.



## **The Lovely Ohio (late 1700s to early 1800s)**

Come all ye brisk young fellows who have a mind to roam  
All in some foreign counteree, a long way from home  
All in some foreign counteree along with me to go  
And we'll settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio  
We'll settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio

Come all you pretty fair maids, spin us some yarn  
To make us some nice clothing to keep ourselves warm  
For you can knit and sew, my loves, while we do reap and mow  
When we settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio  
When we settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio

There are fishes in the river, just fitted for our use  
There's tall and lofty sugar cane that will give to us its juice  
There's every kind of game, my boys, also the buck and doe  
When we settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio  
When we settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio

When we settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio  
When we settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio

Source: *The Ballad of America*, [www.balladofamerica.com](http://www.balladofamerica.com)



## Arthur Chapman, “Out Where the West Begins” (1917)

Out where the handclasp’s a little stronger,  
Out where the smile dwells a little longer,  
That’s where the West begins;  
Out where the sun is a little brighter,  
Where the snows that fall are a trifle whiter,  
Where the bonds of home are a wee bit tighter,  
That’s where the West begins.

Out where the skies are a trifle bluer,  
Out where the friendship’s a little truer,  
That’s where the West begins;  
Out where a fresher breeze is blowing,  
Where there’s laughter in every streamlet flowing,  
Where there’s more of reaping and less of sowing,  
That’s where the West begins.

Out where the world is in the making,  
Where fewer hearts in despair are aching,  
That’s where the West begins;  
Where there’s more of singing and less of sighing,  
Where there’s more of giving and less of buying,  
And a man makes friends without half trying—  
That’s where the West begins.

Source: Arthur Chapman, “Out Where the West Begins,” *Out Where the West Begins and Other Western Verses* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 1.



## Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson (November 15, 1871)

New-York Tribune.

New York, Nov. 15, 1871.

Dear Sir:

So many people ask me what they shall do; so few tell me what they can do. Yet this is the pivot wherein all must turn.

I believe that each of us who has his place to make should go where men are wanted, and where employment is not bestowed as alms. Of course, I say to all who are in want of work, Go West!

But what can you do? and how can your family help you? Your mother, I infer, is to be counted out as an effective worker. But what of the rest? And you – Can you chop? Can you plow? Can you mow? Can you cut up Indian corn? I reckon not. And in the West it is hard to find such work as you have been accustomed to. The conditions of living are very rude there.

On the whole I say, stay where you are; do as well as you can; and devote every spare hour to making yourself familiar with the conditions and dexterity required for the efficient conservation of out-door industry in a new country. Having mastered these, gather up your family, and Go West! Yours,

Horace Greeley.

R.L. Sanderson,  
Duxbury, Mass

Source: Letter from Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson, November 15, 1871,  
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00608

## Summary Organizer: Traveling West

Document Title

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Key Words and Phrases

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Restate in your own words:

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**Catherine Sager Pringle,  
“On the Plains in 1844”  
(ca. 1860)**

My father was one of the restless ones who are not content to remain in one place long at a time. . . . Immigration was the theme all winter, and we decided to start for Oregon. Late in 1843 father sold his property and moved near St. Joseph, and in April, 1844, we started across the plains. The first encampments were a great pleasure to us children. We were five girls and two boys, ranging from the girl baby to be born on the way to the oldest boy, hardly old enough to be any help.

. . . The motion of the wagon made us all sick, and it was weeks before we got used to the seasick motion. Rain came down and required us to tie down the wagon covers, and so increased our sickness by confining the air we breathed.

Our cattle recrossed in the night and went back to their winter quarters. This caused delay in recovering them and a weary, forced march to rejoin the train. . . . Soon after starting Indians raided our camp one night and drove off a number of cattle. They were pursued, but never recovered. . . .

We had one wagon, two steady yoke of old cattle, and several of young and not well-broken ones. Father was no ox driver, and had trouble with these until one day he called on Captain Shaw for assistance. It was furnished by the good captain pelting the refractory steers with stones until they were glad to come to terms.



Reaching the buffalo country, our father would get some one to drive his team and start on the hunt, for he was enthusiastic in his love of such sport. He not only killed the great bison, but often brought home on his shoulder the timid antelope that had fallen at his unerring aim, and that are not often shot by ordinary marksmen. Soon after crossing South Platte the unwieldy oxen ran on a bank and overturned the wagon, greatly injuring our mother. She lay long insensible in the tent put up for the occasion.

August 1st we nooned in a beautiful grove on the north side of the Platte. We had by this time got used to climbing in and out of the wagon when in motion. When performing this feat that afternoon my dress caught on an axle helve and I was thrown under the wagon wheel, which passed over and badly crushed my limb before father could stop the team. He picked me up and saw the extent of the injury when the injured limb hung dangling in the air.

In a broken voice he exclaimed: "My dear child, your leg is broken all to pieces!" The news soon spread along the train and a halt was called. A surgeon was found and the limb set; then we pushed on the same night to Laramie, where we arrived soon after dark. This accident confined me to the wagon the remainder of the long journey.

Source: Catherine Sager Pringle, "On the Plains in 1844" in *Across the Plains in 1844*, Archives of the West, New Perspectives on the West, PBS, [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)



**“On the Plains in 1844”**  
**Critical Thinking Questions**

**What were the greatest difficulties and dangers in making the journey?**

Textual Evidence:

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Summary Sentence:

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**What skills did a pioneer settler need to successfully make the journey?**

Textual Evidence:

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Summary Sentence:

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**How did these pioneers help each other along the way?**

Textual Evidence:

Summary Sentence:

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## The Wisconsin Emigrant

Since times are so hard, I've thought, my true heart  
Of leaving my oxen, my plough, and my cart  
And away to Wisconsin, a journey we'd go  
To double our fortune as other folks do  
While here I must labor each day in the field  
And the winter consumes all the summer doth yield

Oh husband, I've noticed with sorrowful heart  
You've neglected your oxen, your plough, and your cart  
Your sheep are disordered; at random they run  
And your new Sunday suit is now every day on  
Oh, stay on the farm and you'll suffer no loss  
For the stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss

Oh wife, let's go; oh, don't let us wait  
Oh, I long to be there; oh, I long to be great  
While you some rich lady – and who knows but I  
Some governor may be before that I die?  
While here I must labor each day in the field  
And the winter consumes all the summer doth yield

Oh husband, remember that land is to clear  
Which will cost you the labor of many a year  
Where horses, sheep, cattle, and hogs are to buy  
And you'll scarcely get settled before you must die  
Oh, stay on the farm and you'll suffer no loss  
For the stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss  
Oh wife, let's go; oh, don't let us stay



I will buy me a farm that is cleared by the way  
Where horses, sheep, cattle, and hogs are not dear  
And we'll feast on fat buffalo half of the year  
While here I must labor each day in the field  
And the winter consumes all the summer doth yield

Oh husband, remember that land of delight  
Is surrounded by Indians who murder by night  
Your house they will plunder and burn to the ground  
While your wife and your children lie murdered around  
Oh, stay on the farm, and you'll suffer no loss  
For the stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss

Now wife, you've convinced me; I'll argue no more  
I never had thought of your dying before  
I love my dear children, although they are small  
But you, my dear wife, are more precious than all  
We'll stay on the farm, and suffer no loss  
For the stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss

Source: The Ballad of America, [www.balladofamerica.com](http://www.balladofamerica.com)





## The Great Western Migration

On April 30, 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte of France sold to the United States 885,000 square miles of territory in North America for \$15 million. Congress sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find out just exactly what the United States had purchased. On November 7, 1805, the Lewis and Clark Expedition reached the Pacific Ocean and the way to the West was opened. Fur trappers, traders, and finally settlers followed.

President James Polk stated that it was America's "Manifest Destiny" to settle North America from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, and Americans demonstrated their agreement by migrating across the Mississippi River and ever westward. In 1841 the first group of sixty-nine pioneers left Missouri and headed west, bound for Oregon. From 1841 until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 more than 350,000 emigrants traveled on foot and by wagon to reach Oregon and California. At the peak of this westward migration more than 55,000 pioneers made the hazardous crossing in a single season.

The 2,000-mile journey from Missouri to Oregon was a grueling five- to eight-month ordeal. One in every seventeen travelers died along the way. If graves were evenly spaced along the Oregon Trail's 2,000-mile length there would be a tombstone every eighty yards to mark the resting place of a pioneer who did not survive the journey.

Why did the pioneers risk their own lives and the lives of their families to make this journey? There are many reasons. Among the most common was the promise of something better out West than they



could have in the East. Popular publications and guide books of the time extolled the virtues of Oregon and California. One of these books reported that "as far as its producing qualities are concerned Oregon cannot be outdone whether in wheat, oats, rye, barley, buckwheat, peas, beans, potatoes, turnips, cabbages, onions, parsnips, carrots, beets, currants, gooseberries, strawberries, apples, peaches, pears, or fat and healthy babies."

Oregon seemed, from all accounts, to be paradise on Earth. All you had to do was get there and claim your land. It was this prospect that made the journey worth the risks. The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848 created a huge surge in the number of people choosing to emigrate to the West to try their luck.

A number of other factors contributed to the exodus from the East. A series of financial crises, the first in 1837, led to a depression and ruined many farmers. In addition, several epidemics—typhoid, dysentery, tuberculosis, scarlet fever, malaria, and yellow fever—swept many parts of the eastern United States. Perhaps the most devastating of all was cholera, which had arrived from Asia in the 1830s, and accounted for more than 50,000 deaths in the United States in 1850 alone.

Settlers emigrated to the West for the same reason that many had come to the Atlantic shores of America over the previous two centuries: religious freedom. The Mormon pioneers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, left Illinois in 1846 to find a place to practice their religion without fear of persecution and settled in the Salt Lake valley of Utah. Adventurers, missionaries, land speculators, and many others followed the reasoning of Henry David Thoreau who, in his 1862 Atlantic essay "Walking," wrote, "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. . . . I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen."

## Debate Script

### Moderator Question #1:

What is the best argument supporting your view on western migration? (Make sure to base your answer on evidence from the texts.)

Prepared response to Question # 1:

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### Moderator Question #2:

Prepared response to Question #2:

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### Moderator Question #3:

Prepared response to Question #3:

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