

Westward Migration: Opportunities and Dangers



THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY



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

Encounters in the West

by Virginia Scharff, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History, The University of New Mexico

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson signed off on the Louisiana Purchase, buying France's claim to 885,000 square miles of land in North America. But France did not control what it had claimed. Contrary to popular belief, North America was not empty land, there for the taking. Remote and daunting as many western places were, they were not "untamed." Every inch of that territory belonged to Indigenous peoples who sometimes assisted, and often resisted, European and American occupation.

We cannot understand American and European migration to the West without acknowledging that the land already belonged to hundreds of diverse communities of original inhabitants. While the promoters of American expansion touted their intention to "civilize" Indians, noble-sounding rhetoric masked self-interest. Americans' intent to possess and settle the West meant dispossessing and unsettling Native peoples. Even as migrant families looked to better their lives by pulling up stakes, gathering their belongings, rounding up their livestock, outfitting wagons, and embarking on a hard and often deadly journey, their efforts came at a lethal cost for Indigenous inhabitants.

Newcomers found western climes not only unfamiliar, but unforgiving. Accustomed to marking out bounded fields and farming relatively small parcels of land, they had no idea how to deal with high rugged mountain ranges or huge basins where rain seldom fell, let alone scorching deserts. Native communities had long learned how to survive in the extraordinarily varied and sometimes deadly environs of the West, from the prairies of Minnesota to the high plains of Wyoming, from the deserts of Nevada to the lush forests of the Northwest. Spanish and French colonizers had already made forays into the West, trading, raiding, sometimes settling, and changing the ways in which Indigenous people lived. As they encountered invaders, Native nations adopted and adapted European innovations, from horses to metal implements to new plants and animals, to aid in their efforts to retain, and sometimes expand, their home lands. In turn, they taught newcomers about their own crops and crafts, from corn and beans to pottery, ceramics, and architecture. Some, like Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who accompanied Lewis and Clark to the Pacific, worked to aid the newcomers. Others, like the Comanche bands who used horses and guns to build their own empire on the southern plains, fought American expansion tooth and nail. But Native peoples had no power to overcome the deadly diseases that European migrants spread as they made their forays into and across the West.

As European immigrants and Americans traveled the trails, they brought with them microscopic invaders—from typhoid and tuberculosis to measles and cholera—that laid waste to Native communities they encountered. Epidemics spread across the land, affecting even groups who lived far from the trails. The great migration had unintended consequences that reached far beyond the trials and triumphs of the travelers themselves. Hard as it was on those who sought to make a new life in a promised land, the toll was even greater for Native people whose homelands the newcomers meant to take.

Virginia Scharff is an emeritus distinguished professor of history at the University of New Mexico. She has published numerous books including Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West (2003) and, with Carolyn Bruckner, Home Lands: How Women Made the West (2010).

MATERIALS

- “The Lovely Ohio” (late eighteenth to early nineteenth century). Available online at the Ballad of America, 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.