

# Westward Migration, 1783-1900

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist, [dalambert@nehgs.org](mailto:dalambert@nehgs.org)

## Push/Pull of Migration

The decision to migrate depended on factors *pushing* your ancestor out of their current location and *pulling* them to a new location. Push factors included things like overpopulation, urbanization, lack of opportunities, crop failure, and financial disaster. A series of financial panics (occurring approximately every twenty years) over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a role in pushing families to try their luck in the west. Pull factors included land, opportunity, employment, gold or other natural resources, how easy it was to get to the new destination, and the presence of family and friends. Newspaper accounts sung the praises of the new western settlements, making them appealing to easterners seeking a new life.

## Migration Challenges

19<sup>th</sup> century migration was not easy. There were challenges due to topography, geography, and infrastructure. Initial settlements in the U.S. were along the coast and inland rivers and were often laid out in the traditional European village style, with forests cleared away. Migrants would encounter challenges like heavily forested areas and dense undergrowth when leaving to go west. Early on, many roads were narrow and could not accommodate a wagon, and bridges were lacking.

The Appalachian Mountains posed a large barrier to the early phases of westward expansion. Early settlements in the U.S. were all east of the mountain range, as there were few natural gaps in the range allowing for travel through them. Some large roads were built during the colonial period. The Boston Post Road was the first road and also the first postal route. It was followed shortly thereafter by the King's Highway, constructed from 1673-1735. Other important roads included the Fall Line Road, the Great Valley Road, the Upper Road, Braddock's Road and Forbes's Road. These roads mostly followed natural geographic features such as the fall line (where the coastal plain meets the plateau), and major valleys such as the Appalachian Valley. The Wilderness Road, begun in 1775, was a major advance in getting over the Appalachian Mountains. It crossed the chain at Cumberland Gap.

The presence of native tribes also posed a challenge. In 1763, the British government had proclaimed that land east of the Mississippi River and west of the Eastern Continental Divide was to belong to the Native Americans. Some of this land was ceded by Native Americans to the colonies or states in the following years. Nonetheless, the presence of these tribes was a consideration for any settlers heading west.

## Public Land/Public Domain

Public land or the public domain was land governed by the federal government rather than any particular state. The first tracts considered to be in the public domain encompassed the territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. After the Revolutionary War, several of the original states laid claim to these areas, but ultimately relinquished those claims. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the amount of public land available doubled. As the federal government continued to purchase land over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more public land became available. The government offered this land for sale under a series of acts that stated how much land could be sold to a buyer and at what price.

In 1796, the Rectangular Survey System was introduced. This system was a way for new townships to be laid out on a grid pattern. Each township encompassed 36 sections of one square mile each, totaling 36 square miles. The square-miles sections were further divided into half sections (320 acres), quarter sections (160 acres), half-quarter sections (80 acres), and quarter-quarter sections (40 acres). This was first put into practice in what was then called the Northwest Territory, which later became the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the amount of public land available had decreased greatly. At the same time, the conservation movement was growing and the idea of forest reserves came into being. The Public Land Reform Act was passed in 1891.

## Military Bounty Land

Military bounty land was a major draw for early western settlement. Land bounties were available in exchange for military service for veterans of the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and for those who had served at least five years in the military through the year 1858. Both state and federal bounties were available for Revolutionary War service. State bounties were granted within the bounds of those states, while federal bounty land was established within areas of public domain land, in what would become Ohio and Illinois. Later bounty land tracts were located in Arkansas and Missouri.

Beginning in 1788, Revolutionary War veterans could apply to the Treasury Department for a parcel of bounty land. The application process generated a paper trail, typically including at least a warrant, survey, and patent.

## Land Speculation

Land speculation grew dramatically after the Revolutionary War. In particular, land companies played a large role in the settling of western New York and Ohio. Companies like the Holland Land Company, Ohio Land Company, and Connecticut Land Company were considered speculative land companies.

These companies purchased land tracts from the federal government and surveyed the area. They then built roads and canals in order to entice settlers. Some set aside land for religious or educational institutions as well. The large tracts were subdivided and sold to individuals or families.

## Opening the West

A combination of advances in transportation and infrastructure, together with the increased availability of public lands after a series of purchases to increase the territory of the country, made westward migration much easier. Early innovations that developed in the first decades following the end of the Revolutionary War included turnpikes (the first was built in 1792), the National Road (begun at Cumberland, Maryland in 1811), and canals (the Erie Canal, stretching 363 miles, was begun in 1817).

Advances in transportation also aided settlement in the western territories and states. Covered wagons colloquially known as “prairie schooners” were lighter and nimbler than the heavy Conestoga wagons, which aided early travelers. The first public railway, the Baltimore & Ohio, was opened in 1830 and others quickly followed. Over the next decade numerous railroads were built on the East Coast but they could not be used for long-distance travel because the different rail companies did not connect their tracks to one another, and varying track gauges meant this was not possible. Discussions about a transcontinental railroad began in 1830. Congress finally chartered the Central Pacific and Union Pacific companies in 1862 to complete the task, and the railroad was completed on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Point, Utah.

A series of federal land policies encouraged settlement in the western states by offering land at discounted prices. The chart below details some of the most significant policies enacted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Land Act of 1820	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced cost per acre to \$1.25 (from \$2)</li> <li>• Tracts as small as 80 acres, no maximum size</li> <li>• Full payment required at time of purchase (no purchases on credit)</li> <li>• Decreased land speculation but did not eliminate it completely</li> </ul>
Preemption Act of 1841	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Squatters living on federal land could purchase 160 acres for \$1.25 per acre before the land was offered to the general public</li> <li>• Requirements:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Head of household OR</li> <li>– Single man over 21, or a widow</li> <li>– Citizen or an immigrant intending to become a citizen</li> <li>– Living on claimed land for a minimum of 14 months</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Much of Kansas and Nebraska settled on preemption claims</li> </ul>
Oregon Donation Act of 1850	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forerunner to the Homestead Act of 1862</li> <li>• Applied to land in the Oregon Territory             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Wyoming and Montana</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Allowed men to claim land in the territory after working it for four years</li> <li>• Expired in 1855</li> </ul>
Homestead Act of 1862	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receive up to 160 acres of land</li> <li>• Any adult citizen over the age of 21 who had not borne arms against the U.S. could apply             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Included male heads of families, single men, single women, and widows</li> <li>– Included immigrants intending to become citizens</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– File application for \$18</li> <li>– Improve the land for 5 years, build a house</li> <li>– File for deed of title</li> </ul> </li> <li>• After six months residency could purchase land for \$1.25 per acre</li> </ul>
--	---

## Getting There: Major Migration Trails, 1840-1900

1. Oregon Trail: First laid out in 1811 by trappers, it was initially only a footpath. By 1836 there was a wagon trail to Fort Hall, Idaho. The trail became popular beginning in 1843, when a group of 1,000 headed west along the trail to Oregon from Missouri.
2. Mormon Trail: Migration begun in 1846. The trail ran from Nauvoo, Illinois to Salt Lake City, Utah.
3. Santa Fe Trail: First blazed in 1821 by William Becknell to open trade with Mexico. The trail ran from Missouri into what is now New Mexico.
4. California Trail: This route was laid out in 1844 did not take off until after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Many variations of the main trail route developed.

## Suggested Resources

19<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. Canals: An Index of Internet Resources.

<http://19thcentuscanals.net.mocha3030.mochahost.com/>

Billington, Ray and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office. <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>

Dollarhide, William. *Map Guide to American Migration Routes, 1735-1815* (Bountiful, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1997).

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Appalachian Trails to the Ohio River* (Chesapeake, Ohio: Carrie Eldridge, 1998)

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Northern Trails Westward from New England* (Chesapeake, OH : C. Eldridge, 2000).

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Southern Trails to the Mississippi* (Chesapeake, Ohio: C. Eldridge, 1999)

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Trails West of the Mississippi River* (Chesapeake, OH : C. Eldridge, 2001).

Eldridge, Carrie. *Atlas of Settlement Between the Appalachian Mountains the Mississippi-Missouri Valleys* (Chesapeake, Ohio: C. Eldridge, 2006)

Hawkins, Kenneth, comp. *Research in Land Entry Files of the General Land Office*. (NARA: Washington, DC, 2009). Available online at <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/ref-info-papers/rip114.pdf>.



Knepper, George W. *The Official Ohio Lands Book* (Columbus, Ohio: Auditor of State, 2002). Available at [www.auditor.state.oh.us](http://www.auditor.state.oh.us).

Myres, Sandra L. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

Paullin, Charles Oscar. *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*. (Washington, D.C., New York: Pub. jointly by Carnegie institution of Washington and the American geographical society of New York, 1932).

“Prologue: The Public Domain from 1776-1946,” in *Opportunity and Challenge: The Story of the Bureau of Land Management*. Available online at [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/blm/history/chap1.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/blm/history/chap1.htm).

Riley, Glenda. *The Female Frontier*. (Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas Press, 1988).

Santa Fe Trail Research: <https://www.santafetrail.org/publications/new-research/>

“Travel the Trail: Map Timeline 1821, 1880,” Santa Fe National Historic Trail, <https://www.nps.gov/safe/learn/historyculture/map-timeline-intro.htm>

“U.S. Migration Trails and Roads,” Family Search, [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/US\\_Migration\\_Trails\\_and\\_Roads](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/US_Migration_Trails_and_Roads)

White, C. Albert. *A History of the Rectangular Survey System*. (Washington, DC.: Government Printing Office, 1991). Available online at <https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/histrect.pdf>.

## **Websites to find your Oregon Settler**

Pioneer families of the Oregon Territory, 1850 - (\$).

<https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=28583>

Secretary of state - individuals who lived in Oregon prior to statehood through 1860.

<https://secure.sos.state.or.us/prs/personProfileSearch.do?earlyOregonian>

Paper Trail Database - By Oregon California Trails Association; A Guide to Overland Pioneer Document.

<https://www.paper-trail.org/Search>

Over-land Trail Research:

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/national-expansion-and-reform-1815-1880/traveling-on-the-overland-trails-1843-1860/>

Family History Research. A Guide to Overland Pioneer Documents. Oregon-California Trails Association. <https://octa-trails.org/family-history-research/>

The Oregon Territory and Its Pioneers (includes year-by-year lists of pioneers pre-1839 to 1855).

<http://www.oregonpioneers.com/ortrail.htm>

Pioneer & Early Settler Certificates - order a search of Pioneer list of the Oregon Genealogical Society.  
<https://oregongs.org/cpage.php?pt=11>

Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers. <http://oregonsdop.org/ancestors/>

## **Websites to find your Mormon Settler**

Mormon Migration. <https://mormonmigration.lib.byu.edu/>

Mormon Migration Database, 1840-1932. <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2365248>

Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel Records, 1847-1868 - (\$).  
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/62414/>

## **Websites to find your California Trail Settler**

California, Pioneer and Immigrant Files, 1790-1950 - (\$).  
<https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2161>

California, Pioneer Index, 1769-1848 - (\$). <https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1040>

CAGenWeb USGenWeb Project Roster of California Pioneers. <https://www.cagenweb.org/capioneer/>

Native Daughters of the Golden West California Pioneer Project Master Surname Index – CaGenWeb.  
<https://www.cagenweb.org/capioneer/ndgwmaster.htm>

Over-land Trail Research:

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/national-expansion-and-reform-1815-1880/traveling-on-the-overland-trails-1843-1860/>

California Pioneer Index (California), 1906-1935.  
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2137266>

A Guide to Overland Pioneer Document. <https://octa-trails.org/genealogy-paper-trail/>