Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

America, 1840–1895: Expansion and consolidation

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Expansion and the move west

- Many Americans believed in '**Manifest Destiny**', the idea that God meant them to spread across the whole continent.
- From 1843, pioneers travelled the Oregon Trail, about 2,000 miles, facing disease, weather and dangerous river crossings. The Donner Party was trapped by snow in the Sierra Nevada in 1846–47.
- The Mormons, led by Brigham Young, reached the Great Salt Lake in 1847 to escape persecution, and irrigated the desert.
- The California Gold Rush (1849) brought hundreds of thousands of 'forty-niners'.

The Plains Indians

- The Plains Indians, such as the Lakota Sioux, lived in bands. Many were **nomadic**, following the buffalo, which provided food, tipis, clothing and tools. Land wasn't owned by individuals but shared, and it was sacred.
- Government policy changed from the 'Permanent Indian Frontier' (1834) to **reservations**. The Fort Laramie Treaty (1851) set out tribal lands and promised safe passage for travellers.

The Civil War and Reconstruction

- The North and South were divided over slavery and states' rights, especially over whether new western states would allow slavery. After Abraham Lincoln was elected in 1860, eleven Southern states left the Union and formed the **Confederacy**.
- The Union (the North) won the Civil War (1861–65). Lincoln's **Emancipation** Proclamation (1863) declared slaves in the Confederate states free. Lincoln was assassinated in April 1865.

- **Reconstruction**: the 13th Amendment (1865) abolished slavery, the 14th (1868) gave citizenship and equal protection, and the 15th (1870) gave black men the vote. But Southern states passed Black Codes, the Ku Klux Klan terrorised black people, and later Jim Crow laws enforced segregation.

Settling the Plains

- The Homestead Act (1862) gave 160 acres of land to settlers who farmed it for five years. The first **transcontinental railroad** was completed in 1869, bringing more settlers and goods.
- **Homesteaders** faced few trees (so they built sod houses), little water (wind pumps and dry farming helped), harsh weather and cattle trampling crops. Barbed wire (1874) made fencing possible, and new crops such as Turkey Red wheat suited the Plains.
- The cattle industry grew after the Civil War: long drives from Texas to railheads such as Abilene (set up by Joseph McCoy in 1867), then open-range ranching, which collapsed after the terrible winter of 1886–87.

Conflict and the end of the frontier

- As settlers and miners moved onto Indian land, conflict followed: the Sand Creek Massacre (1864); Red Cloud's War (1866–68), which ended with the Fort Laramie Treaty (1868) creating the Great Sioux **Reservation**; and the Battle of the Little Bighorn (June 1876), where Custer's force was wiped out.
- The mass slaughter of the buffalo, from millions to fewer than a thousand by the late 1880s, destroyed the Plains Indians' way of life. The Dawes Act (1887) broke **reservations** up into individual plots. The massacre at Wounded Knee (December 1890) ended armed resistance, and in 1890 the frontier was declared closed.

Key terms

Manifest Destiny	The belief that Americans were meant by God to spread across the continent.
Homesteader	A settler who farmed land on the Great Plains.
Reservation	An area of land set aside for Native Americans.
Nomadic	Moving from place to place rather than living in one spot.
Confederacy	The eleven Southern states that left the Union in 1860–61.
Emancipation	Being set free from slavery.
Reconstruction	The rebuilding of the South after the Civil War.
Transcontinental railroad	The railway linking the east and west coasts of the USA, completed in 1869.

Your notes

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What was Manifest Destiny?
2. Who led the Mormons to the Great Salt Lake in 1847?
3. What started in California in 1849?
4. Why was the buffalo so important to the Plains Indians?
5. What did the Homestead Act (1862) offer?
6. When was the first transcontinental railroad completed?
7. Which invention helped homesteaders to fence their land?
8. What did the 13th Amendment (1865) do?

Answers

1. The belief that Americans were meant to spread across the continent
2. Brigham Young
3. A gold rush
4. It provided food, shelter, clothing and tools
5. 160 acres to settlers who farmed it for five years
6. 1869
7. Barbed wire
8. Abolished slavery

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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