

Investigating History

Grade 4, Unit 4

Impacts of U.S. Expansion



In what ways did the growth of the United States affect different groups of people?

Framing the Unit

This unit is organized into three clusters. The first cluster focuses on how the United States gained territory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and why that growth created conflict. Students compare maps and investigate different methods of expansion—war, purchase, treaty, and annexation—to understand how these affected different groups. They also examine how the question of whether to allow slavery in new states divided the nation.

The second cluster focuses on why so many people moved to the American West. Students analyze primary sources, including John Gast's painting *American Progress*, to explore Manifest Destiny and to evaluate whose perspectives are present or missing in the story of U.S. Expansion. They also learn about the push and pull factors that led to migration to the American West. The formative assessment, asks students to compare *American Progress* with *Reversing Manifest Destiny*, examining how perspectives shape the story of expansion.

The third cluster focuses on who was harmed by U.S. Expansion. Through a lens of *justice*, students analyze primary sources to explain how Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and Hispano communities experienced land loss, violence, and imposed systems of land ownership.

In the Summative Assessment student create a Justice and Action poster in response to the unit's Essential Question: *In what ways did the growth of the United States affect different groups of people?* Students select an example of U.S. Expansion from the unit and create a poster that identifies who was affected and proposes an action to address it. The unit closes with a gallery walk of the finished posters displayed in a public space.

Prepare to teach this unit by exploring the [Background Brief: Impacts of U.S. Expansion](#), which was designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. The brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present this unit with confidence.

Enduring Understandings

1. When nations expand their territory, conflict follows. Some groups gain power while others lose it. Expansion benefits those who make decisions while harming people already living on the land. Governments who have the power to make decisions often undermine the sovereignty of other nations, even when they have made formal agreements to respect it. When expansion raises moral questions, such as whether to allow slavery, it can divide even those who benefit from it.
2. People move to new territories for many reasons, including economic opportunity, religious freedom, and government promises of land. Governments and businesses build infrastructure like trails, railroads, and new laws to make movement easier and faster, benefitting those with economic and political power. However, this movement is often built on the labor and taken land of marginalized groups, especially Indigenous peoples, causing lasting harm to those communities. The stories we tell about migration and settlement, including who is celebrated and who is erased, shape how we understand whose perspectives and sacrifices matter in history.
3. When powerful nations expand, they often treat other nations and groups unjustly by denying them fair treatment and equal access to opportunities. Indigenous nations, African Americans, and Hispano communities experienced violence, displacement, and loss of land and resources during U.S. Expansion. Understanding injustice requires examining who was harmed, how they were harmed, and recognizing that forcing new systems on thriving communities causes lasting damage.

Connections to Current Events and Issues

Connections to today's world and students' lives are built into this unit. Other contemporary connections could be added or developed for various topics of study within this unit, and we encourage you to take advantage of opportunities to connect students' learning to contemporary local, national, and global developments that may arise as you teach this unit. Some ideas for linking this unit to current events and issues include:

- The fight for Indigenous land and water rights continues today. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline is one well-known example of Indigenous peoples defending land and water rights that were repeatedly ignored by the U.S. governments.
- Acequia communities in New Mexico are still fighting to protect community water rights today. As droughts caused by climate change have made water increasingly scarce, these traditional irrigation systems have become even more important. Watch [Keep the Water Flowing](#) to learn about how acequia communities are responding to drought.
- In Massachusetts, Indigenous communities are pushing for change in schools. The [Massachusetts Indigenous Legislative Agenda](#) includes bills to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day, remove Native American mascots from public schools, and ensure that Massachusetts schoolchildren learn about Native American history, culture, and current issues.

Unit Overview

*Vocabulary (in order of appearance)***Tier 3 Vocabulary**

sovereignty
annexation

Manifest Destiny
transcontinental

Priority Tier 2 Vocabulary

expansion
ancestral lands

Indigenous nation
treaty

harm
justice

Lesson Clusters*Cluster 1: Expanding the Nation (Lessons 1-8)***Why did the growth of the United States create conflict?**

Focus Standards: 4.T4.2, 4.T4.4, 4.T4.5, 4.T4a.3, 4.T4d.2, PS 1, PS 3, RI.4.3, RI.4.7, SL.4.1, W.4.2

The expansion of the United States is introduced by asking students to examine two maps: one showing the U.S. population growing from east to west over time, and the other showing Indigenous nations occupying the same land. This contrast invites students to consider how the growth of the United States created conflict and affected different groups of people. Cluster 1 explores how the United States acquired territory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—through war, purchases, treaties, and annexations—with particular attention to how the United States repeatedly failed to honor treaty commitments made to sovereign Indigenous nations. Students also examine how the question of whether to allow slavery in new territories divided the nation. The cluster formative assessment asks students to select one example of U.S. territorial expansion and complete a cause and effect graphic organizer analyzing the government decision: which groups were affected, what happened as a result, and why it created conflict.

*Cluster 2: Moving West (Lessons 9-15)***Why did so many people move to the American West?**

Focus Standards: 4.T4.1, 4.T4.2, 4.T4.3, 4.T4d.5, PS 1, PS 3, PS 5, PS 5, RI.4.3, RI.4.7, SL.4.1, W.4.2

Students launch this cluster by analyzing the painting *American Progress* by John Gast, making observations and asking questions as an entry point into the concept of Manifest Destiny. Throughout the cluster, students analyze primary sources by

Unit Overview

considering who created them, why, and whose perspectives are present or missing. This builds their ability to evaluate a source's credibility and point of view. They investigate the Santa Fe Trail as a key trade route into Mexican territory. Then, they examine how the Mexican–American War opened the door to mass westward migration. Next, they turn to the Transcontinental Railroad, analyzing primary sources across different perspectives to understand its far-reaching impacts. Students synthesize their learning in an Inquiry Circle by returning to the Supporting Question and expanding on it: *Why did so many people move to the American West? Who was affected when so many people moved to the American West?* In the Formative Assessment, students compare *American Progress* with [the painting] *Reversing Manifest Destiny*, examining how perspective shapes the story of U.S. Expansion.

Cluster 3: The Injustices of Expansion (Lessons 16-22)**Who was harmed by U.S. Expansion?**

Focus Standards: 4.T4.1, 4.T4.2, 4.T4.3, 4.T4.5, 4.T4d.2, 4.T4d.5, 4.T4e.2, PS 1, PS 3, PS 5, RI.4.3, RI.4.7, SL.4.1, W.4.2

Cluster 3 focuses on the harm caused by U.S. Expansion into the ancestral homelands of Indigenous peoples and that expansion's impact on other groups, such as Mexicans and formerly enslaved people seeking freedom and equal opportunity. Students will work with a concrete definition of *justice*, and apply that idea to stories of people impacted by U.S. Expansion.

Summative Assessment: Impacts of U.S. Expansion (Lessons 23-24)

Focus Standards: 4.T4.2, PS 3, PS 5, PS 6, SL.4.1, W.4.2

During this unit, students learned that the United States expanded through purchasing land, annexing land, making (and breaking) treaties, and winning wars with other sovereign nations—and that expansion was fueled by the idea of Manifest Destiny. Students also learned about the effects expansion had on Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and Hispano people, and they considered issues of justice related to expansion.

In the Summative Assessment, students return to the painting *Reversing Manifest Destiny* to launch their thinking. They then select an example of U.S. Expansion, identify who was affected by the government's action, evaluate whether the outcome was just, and propose an action to address the harm. They deliver their argument and proposed action in a poster.

Unit Focus Standards

Content Standards

- **4.T4.1:** Describe how the construction of canals, roads, and railways in the 19th century helped the United States to expand westward.
- **4.T4.2:** Give examples of some of the ways the United States acquired new states (beyond the 13 original states) and additional territories between 1791 and 1898, including purchasing land called the Louisiana Territory from France, adding territory in the Southwest as a result of war with Mexico, settling a treaty with Britain to gain land called the Oregon Territory in the Northwest, purchasing Alaska from Russia, annexing Hawaii, and adding territories such as Puerto Rico as a result of a war with Spain.
- **4.T4.3:** Compare different reasons why men and women who lived in the Eastern part of the United States wanted to move West in the 19th century, and describe aspects of pioneer life on the frontier (e.g., wagon train journeys on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, and settlements in the western territories).
- **4.T4.4:** Explain that many different groups of people immigrated to the United States from other places voluntarily and some were brought to the United States against their will (as in the case of people of Africa).
- **4.T4.5:** Show understanding that in the middle of the 19th century, the people of the United States were deeply divided over the question of slavery and its expansion into newly settled parts of the West, which led to the Civil War from 1861 to 1865.
- **4.T4a.3:** Explain the benefits in the 18th century of becoming a state in the United States (as opposed to a British colony) and, as a class, construct a timeline that shows when each of the states in the region was admitted into the United States (Connecticut-1788, Maine, originally part of Massachusetts-1788, as a separate state-1820, Massachusetts-1788, New Hampshire-1788, New Jersey-1787, New York-1788, Pennsylvania-1787, Rhode Island-1790, Vermont-1791).
- **4.T4d.2:** Explain that Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico were territories that formerly belonged to Mexico; that Texas declared independence from Mexico in 1836, and that Arizona and New Mexico were taken by the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War 1846-1848.
- **4.T4d.5:** Using resources such as print and online atlases, historical sources, or state websites, construct a map of a state in the Southwest region that provides information about physical features (e.g., waterways and mountains), climate, settlements and movements of Native Peoples (including current reservation lands), European exploration and pioneer settlements of the 17th-19th centuries and that includes a title, scale, compass, and map key.
- **4.T4e.2:** Explain that California, Colorado, and Utah were territories that belonged to Mexico and were taken by the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War 1846-1848.

Practice Standards

- **PS 1:** Explain how governmental decisions and decision-making processes can affect groups, individuals, and societies.
- **PS 3:** Categorize information from one or more sources based on a topic or inquiry question, taking brief notes on the information gathered.
- **PS 5:** Evaluate a source's credibility using information about the maker's point of view, intended audience, and purpose.

Literacy Standards

- **RI.4.3:** Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, mathematical, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.
- **RI.4.7:** Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, timelines, animations, or interactive elements on webpages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.
- **SL.4.1:** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **W.4.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

Acknowledgements

This Investigating History unit was developed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in partnership with the following organizations and individuals:

Pilot Curriculum Authors: Educurious by NCEE

Lead Author

Elaine Santelmann

Lead Reviewer

Sara Nachtigal

Editor

Gayle Klim

Additional Design Support

N'Dia Parker-McWhorter

2025–26 Curriculum Revisions: Educurious by NCEE

Lead Author

Naomi Tsai

Lead Reviewer

Kasha Browning

Editor

Danielle DeStefano

Digital Media Specialist

Angela Rosenberg

Senior Advisor

Sara Nachtigal

Indigenous Curriculum Review: Native Education Council of Massachusetts

Est. 2019 by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Education Department

Note: The Native Education Council does not rate or endorse curriculum materials. See the Curriculum Guidebook for more information.

English Learner Consultants: English Learners Success Forum

Note: ELSF does not rate or endorse materials. See the Curriculum Guidebook for more information.

Scholar Advisor

Ben Remillard, *Providence College*

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Unit Overview

Kathryn Gabriele
Dylan Geesey-Pearce
Reuben Henriques
Rebekah Judson
Miesha Keita
Julia Lucas
Katherine Tarca

Copyright Notice



All original content in this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) and © 2026 by DESE. Third party content including, but not limited to, images, illustrations, and photographs, are subject to their own license terms.

Reference in this curriculum to any specific commercial products, processes, or services, or the use of any trade, firm, or corporation name is for the information and convenience of the public, and does not constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Our office is not responsible for and does not in any way guarantee the accuracy of information in other sites accessible through links herein. For more information please contact: InvestigatingHistory@mass.gov.