Western Region, 1800-1850

In the early 1800s, when Americans talked about the ‘’West,” they usually meant the area which we now call the Middle West—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa.

Some states later considered part of the American South—Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Missouri—were also thought of as “western” during the early 1800s. As these areas became more heavily settled, they became more like the South.

Like other regions of the growing United States, the West varied from place to place and time to time. Westerners who lived in Cincinnati, for example, didn’t have a great deal in common with hunters, trappers, and settlers on the frontier. Most of the data in Part 3 describes with the more-settled sections of the western region.

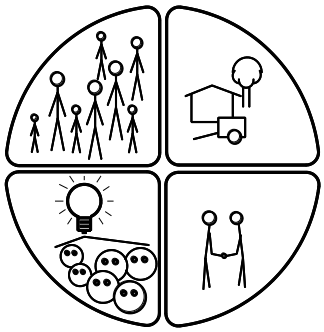
As you study the material, think about this question: **How did the experiences shared by people in the West affect their ideas and ways of acting?**

Investigation: Analyzing the West

The data which follows gives you a general picture of the ideas and ways of acting of the people who moved west in the early 1800s.

Use the same procedure as with the Parts on the Northeast and South:

Use the Model to analyze each piece of data. You’ll find (or be able to infer) information about:



1. Setting, both natural and human-made, including such things as transportation methods.
2. Demography: Population density and distribution (where do people live?)
3. Action patterns: Occupations, child rearing patterns, organizations, social classes, etc.
4. Shared ideas about education, religion, status, the future, etc.

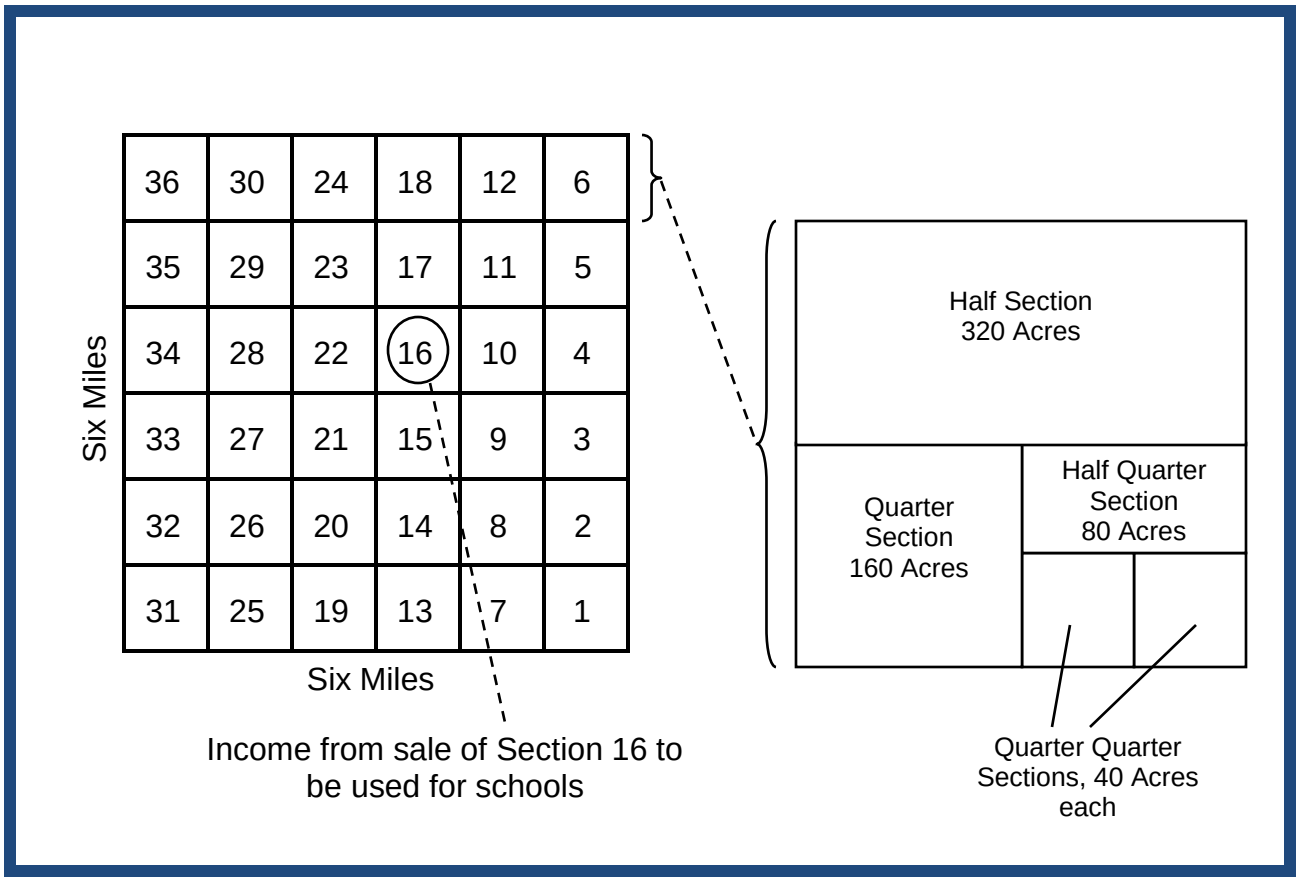
Make notes on the information, which will help you summarize the West when you’ve studied all the material in this activity.

NOTE: Data for the Ohio Frontier, similar to that below, is included in Part 8 of *Investigating American History*. Analyze that data in the same way, and add that information to your conclusions.

Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress passed two laws dealing with the western lands shown on this map. At that time, this area was called the Northwest. Colonists had moved into these lands and colonies claimed them, but they weren't really part of any specific colony. How the area was to be settled and how it was to be governed were important questions.

Congress answered the two questions with two laws. The first was the Land Ordinance of 1785, which made rules about the sale of northwestern land to private owners. The entire Northwest was divided into six-mile squares. Each square became a *township*. Each township was divided into sections. This division is shown in the diagram below.

Most of the income from the sale of these pieces of land was used to give Congress much-needed money to pay national debts. However, the income from the sale of Section 16 in each township was to be used to support township schools.



The sale of Northwest land is described in the following letter written by an Italian priest in 1810. It told Italians about life in America.

> The land is sold by the government in a way that allows almost everyone to own property. The plan is as follows:
>
> Before the land given up by the Indians to the government is put up for sale, it is surveyed, divided into townships, and subdivided into sections.
>
> The smallest quantity the government will sell is 160 acres [a quarter section] at two dollars an acre. A quarter of the total amount is payable at once and the rest over four years. Whoever can purchase for cash can buy at the cost of $1.64 an acre.
>
> This is the plan—now let us see the effects. Every person able to pay the small sum of $80 can become a free owner of land; and even if he has not a dollar more, he always succeeds in paying the rest before the end of four years by selling the timber that he cuts to prepare the land for cultivation. He then becomes a peaceful landowner, with nothing further to pay except a tiny tax on his holdings. He can live on happily.

Paired with the Land Ordinance of 1785 was a second law, the Northwest Ordinance. It described how the territory was to be governed. It also said that whenever any part of the territory had 60,000 free inhabitants, it could become a state "on an equal footing with the original states."

An early resident of Illinois wrote this account:

> My store was the first built in Springfield, or in the county. I was the first one to sell goods in Springfield. For some time my sales were about as much to Indians as to whites. For the first two years I had no competition, and my customers were widely and thinly scattered.
>
> Soon after opening my store, my father sent to me from Kentucky a youth, 16 years old, to act as store boy and clerk. This youth was John Williams, now better known as Col. Williams. He proved to be a very valuable assistant and lived with me as one of the family until 1831. At that time I sold my goods to him and started him in business. He was very successful and soon had a large farm in connection with his store. In later years, he established the First National Bank in Springfield, of which he was president and the principal stockholder. He also built and owned the Northwestern Railroad.
>
> After moving to my farm, I soon found myself much in need of another plowman. A boy came to me and said he wanted to work. He had the chills every other day and could only plow on his well days. His name was Robert North. He was about the most scrawny looking chap I ever saw and could neither read nor write. He soon got well of the chills and made me a most valuable helper. I taught him to read and write. He lived with me ten years, got married, and went to farming on his own hook, in which he was successful. He died two years ago, at the age of 70, after accumulating in land and cash more than $150,000.

GOODS SHIPPED TO BUFFALO FROM THE WEST

1830-1831

267,900 bushels wheat	86,900 barrels flour
4,319 kegs butter	11,800 barrels ashes
3,500 packs furs and pelts	4,800 barrels whiskey
149 tons hemp	6,900 barrels pork
243 bales feathers	1,600 barrels beef
4,206 boxes glass	1,273 barrels lake fish
359,000 single pipe staves	29,000 pounds wool

5,760 pounds western bar iron, lumber, stone, rags, etc.

Frederick Marryat, an English traveler, described a typical Western religious meeting:

Handkerchiefs were raised to bright eyes, and sobs were mingled with prayers and cries. Soon more than 20 men and women were crying out at the highest pitch of their voices and trying to be heard above the others. Every minute the excitement increased. Some wrung their hands and called for mercy; some tore their hair; boys laid down crying bitterly with their heads buried in the straw; there was sobbing almost to suffocation, hysterics, and deep agony.

When it was at its height, one of the preachers came in, and raising his voice high above the noise, asked the Lord to receive into his fold those who now repented and wanted to return to him. Another of the ministers knelt down by some young men, whose faces were covered up and who appeared to be almost in a state of frenzy. Putting his hands on them, the minister poured forth an energetic prayer. Groans, cries, broken sobs, frantic motions, and convulsions followed. Some fell on their backs with their eyes closed, waving their hands with a slow motion and crying out, "Glory, glory, glory!"

When the area was first settled, the people were widely scattered. The truths of the Gospel were seldom heard, because there were only a few preachers. It was because of this problem that they agreed, like the Christians in earlier times, to come together from all quarters and pass many days in meditation and prayer, helping each other. Even now it is not uncommon for the settlers in Indiana and Illinois to travel 100 miles in their wagons to attend one of these meetings.

Frithjof Meidell, a Norwegian immigrant, described Western life to his family in Norway:

Springfield, Illinois

Dear Mother,

I was indeed glad to hear that all of you are getting along so well. The same is true of Christian and me.

How is the railroad getting along? Here in America it is the railroads that build up the whole country. Because of them the farmers get wider markets and higher prices for their products. They seem to put new life into everything. Even the old apple woman sets off at a dogtrot when she hears that whistle to sell her apples to the passengers. Every ten miles along the railways there are stations, which soon grow up into towns. "Soon," did I say? I should have said "immediately," because it is really remarkable how rapidly the stations are transformed into little towns.

Here you can buy houses all ready to be placed on the freight car, and in half a day's time they can be nailed together.

Since I have nothing else to write about this time, I shall attempt to describe how these towns spring up. First, the railroad company builds a depot. Next, a speculator buys the surrounding 100 acres and lays it out in lots, streets, and a marketplace. Then he gives the future town the name of an early President or a famous general—or his own name—holds an auction, and earns many hundred percent on his investment.

A young wagonmaker who has just completed his apprenticeship hears about the station, that it is beautifully located in a rich farming country, is blessed with good water, and, most important of all, that it has no wagonmaker. Making a quick decision, he buys the barest necessities for setting up in his profession, hurries off to the place, rents one of the old log houses, and is soon at work. One absolute necessity he still lacks, however: a sign, of course, which is the most important part of a man's equipment here in America. The next day he hears that there is a tramp painter aboard the train; he gets him off, puts him to work, and the very next day the farmers are surprised to see a monstrous sign straddling the roof of the old log house.

The sign is an immediate success, for the farmers rush to the shop and order wagons, wheels, and the like. The poor man is overwhelmed with more work than he can handle for ever so long. He is about to regret that sign notion of his, but suddenly he has another idea. He accepts every order, and no sooner are the customers away than he seizes his pen and writes to the editors of three different newspapers that three good apprentices can secure steady work with high wages in the "flourishing town of L." Within two days he has help enough and the work goes "like a song."

(Continued)

The train stops again and off steps a blacksmith who went broke in one of the larger towns. He saunters over to the wagonmaker's shop as unconcerned as if he only wished to light his cigar. In a casual way he inquires about the neighborhood and wonders what its prospects are, without indicating that he intends to settle there—by no means! But the wagoner, with his keen Yankee nose, soon smells a rat and starts boosting the place with all his might. This inspires the smith with ecstasy; he starts jumping around and making sledgehammer motions with his arms. Off he goes and rents the other log house and nails a horseshoe over the door as a sign. The horseshoe, to be sure, cannot be seen any great distance, but the smith has a remedy for this, and he starts to hammer and pound away at his anvil so that the farmers for miles around can hear the echoes

Within a short week, a carpenter, a tailor, and a shoemaker also arrive in town. The wagoner orders a house from the carpenter and rents the second story to the tailor and the shoemaker. Soon the blacksmith also builds a house and things progress with giant strides toward the bigger and better.

Again the train stops. This time two young fellows jump off, look around, and go over to have a chat with the blacksmith. One of them is a doctor, the other a lawyer. Both of them rent rooms from the blacksmith and start business.

Once more the locomotive stops. But—what's this getting off? Be patient! just let it come closer. It is nothing more nor less than a mustachioed, velvet-frocked German with an old, overworked hurdy-gurdy strapped to his back. On the hurdy-gurdy perches a measly little monkey dressed in red. The German goes over to the blacksmith shop and begins to crank his music box while the monkey smokes tobacco, dances a polka, and grinds coffee. But the German receives no encouragement for his art, nor does the monkey—except some rusty nails which the smith tosses to him. The artist realizes that his audience is very unappreciative and the poor man's face is overcast with sorrow.

Then he looks about inquiringly as if searching for something and steps up to the doctor to ask if there is a restaurant in town. On receiving a negative reply, his face brightens again; and, after a short conversation with the doctor and the lawyer, he steams off with the next train and jumps off at the first big town, where he sells his hurdy-gurdy and monkey and buys a barrel of whiskey, another barrel of biscuits, two large cheeses, tobacco, cigars, and sausages—miles of them. Thereupon, he engages a painter to make an appropriate sign, and in three days he is back again in the new town. Now he rents the blacksmith's old log house and fixes it up as a shop. Soon the sign swings over the door and fortune smiles upon the German innkeeper.

(Continued)

The German, the blacksmith, and the tailor do a rushing business. The train stops again, and this time it is a printer who makes his appearance. He gets in touch with the doctor and lawyer; an old printing press is for sale in the next town; they buy it, and with this new event we can really say that the town has "arrived." There is some little trouble, to be sure, over the political affiliations of the paper, but a compromise is soon reached and the paper announces itself as "independent." The lawyer volunteers to write the editorials, while the doctor promises a wealth of death announcements, and the German and the blacksmith undertake to fill the rest of the paper with advertisements.

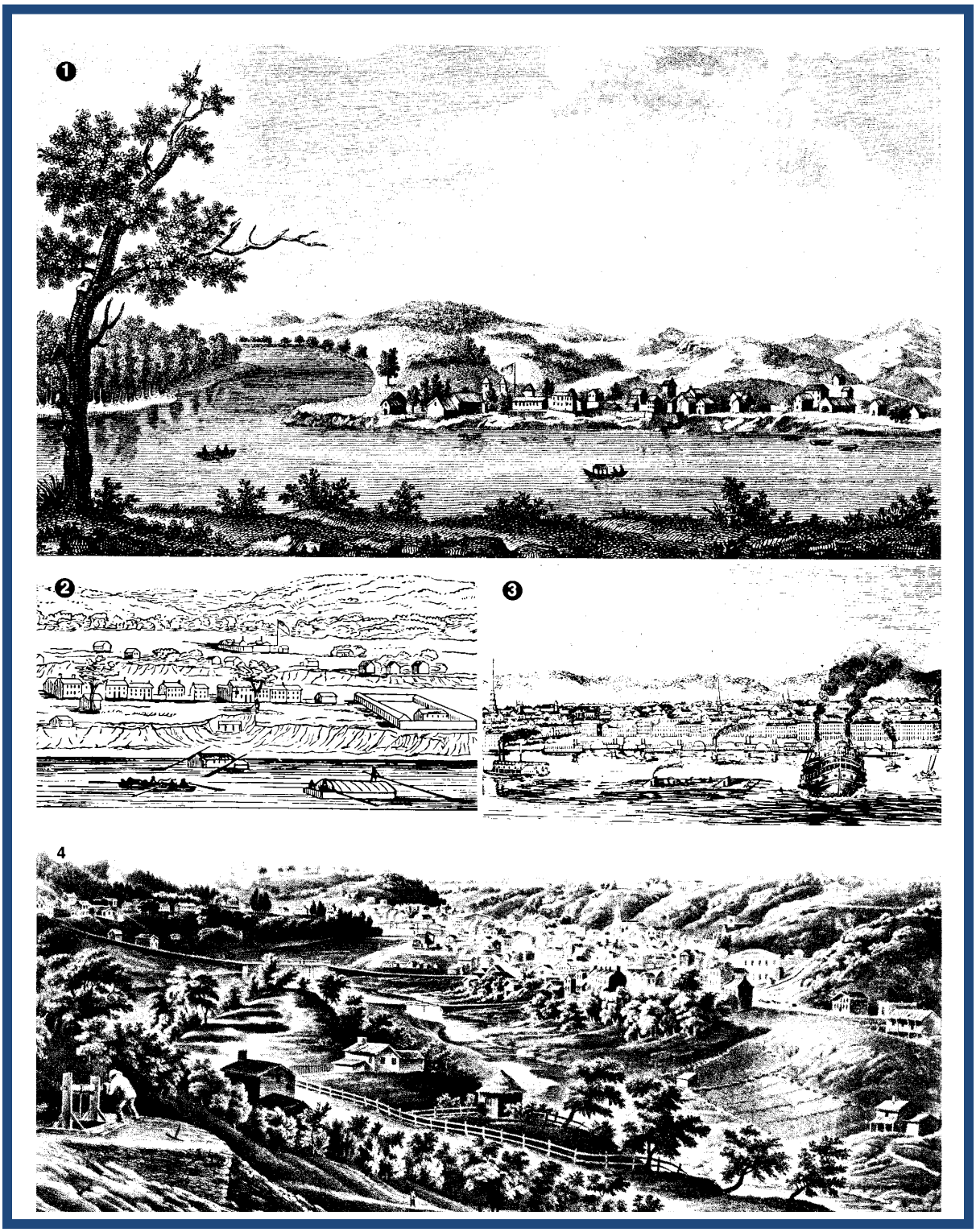
Within a few years the town is very large. The wagonmaker owns practically half of it. The German deals only in wholesale. The lawyer is mayor of the town, and the blacksmith does nothing but smoke cigars, for he is now a wealthy man.

Workers in the West, 1840:

Agriculture	83.9%
Manufacturing	12.0%
Commerce	1.8%
Learned Professions	1.3%

Western towns and cities:

1	Pittsburgh, 1826	3	Cincinnati, Ohio, 1846
2	Cincinnati, Ohio, 1802	4	Galena, Illinois, 1840



Summarizing Western Society

1. ***Summarize life in the West using information for the four Model categories you have investigated.***
2. ***Describe opinions and attitudes you'd expect the average person in the West to have had about:***
   - ***a. Slavery***
   - ***b. Working as a laborer***
   - ***c. Equality of various kinds and classes of people***
   - ***d. The future***
3. ***In what important ways did Western society differ from that of the Northeast and South?***

Investigation: The Western Environment

Throughout the preceding data is information about the natural environment in the West—the land, rivers, climate, etc.

1. ***Trace or draw a simple outline map of the West, showing mountains, navigable rivers, waterpower, farmland, soil quality, harbors, growing season, natural resources, and other information you think affected life in the region. Use the information from data in this Part, along with information from any other sources you wish to use.***
2. ***In your journal, describe relationships between environment in the West, and the ideas and ways of acting of the people who lived there in the period from 1800 to 1850.***

Follow-Up: Today's Middle West

As with the Northeast and South, collect present-day data for the states considered "western" during the early 1800s, in some or all of the following areas:

- Population density
- Employment distribution (service, trade, government, manufacturing)
- Per capita income
- Educational achievement
- Crime Rate

Save your results for comparison with other present-day regions.

Acknowledgements/Sources:

Page 3t: Oscar Handlin, *This Was America,* (New York Harper & Row) pp 138-139. **3b:** Elijah Iles, *Sketches of Early Life and Times,* 1883 **4b:** Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America,* 1839. **5, 6, 7t:** *Norwegian-American Studies and Records,* vol. IX (Northfield, Minn. Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1936) **7b:** *Statistical Abstract.* U.S. Census, 1840.

Notes for teachers and mentors:

This is the third of three units comparing American regions; this unit assumes that learners will have previously performed investigations in the units "Northeastern Region, 1800-1850" and "Southern Region, 1800-1850."

These three units assume that learners are familiar with the entire Model. Both in historical and conceptual sequence these units "fit" after completion of the investigations given in Part 7 of *IAH*.

This unit overlaps and augments material on the Ohio frontier included in Part 8 of *Investigating American History*. The data in that unit may be used to extend analysis of America's western region, before moving to the investigation of systemic relationship given in Part 8.

An additional unit, "Comparing Regions, 1800-1850," may be used to enhance and evaluate learners' understanding of the societal differences between regions, after completion of the investigations in *IAH* Part 8. An understanding of those differences, of course, is necessary background to an understanding of the Civil War.