

# American HORIZONS

**U.S. HISTORY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT  
WITH SOURCES**

**Volume I | To 1877**

**Second Edition**

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# 11

## New Boundaries, New Roles

1820–1856

In early 1836, reports surfaced in the United States that a mixed band of American and Mexican separatists had been killed down to the last man in the defense of an old mission compound in San Antonio, Texas, called the “Alamo.” Led by the Anglo Sam Houston and the Hispanic Lorenzo de Zavala, the Texas independence movement brought together a diverse group united by their opposition to receiving orders from remote Mexico City. Former Mississippi governor John A. Quitman led some of the many Americans who supported the independence movement. Quitman crossed the Sabine River into Mexico with 17 men and the confidence that he fought for freedom. “If I must die early, let me die with these brave fellows and for such a cause,” he proclaimed. Quitman and his band joined Houston’s army and helped Texas declare its independence from Mexico. U.S. president Andrew Jackson, serving out the last of his tumultuous eight years, did not interfere with Quitman or the other Americans who crossed the border to fight against Mexico, even though their actions clearly violated American neutrality laws.

Less than a year after Quitman helped separate Texas from Mexico, a different American invasion generated a much different presidential response. In the wake of “Patriot Uprisings” in Upper and Lower Canada (today’s Ontario and Quebec), Canadian rebels retreated across the U.S. border into Northern cities such as Rochester, Buffalo, and Detroit. During 1837, thousands of Americans joined these Canadian separatists fighting the British, just as Americans had joined

< *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* by Albert Bierstadt, 1867.

### CHAPTER 11 OUTLINE

#### An Expanding Nation

- > Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears
- > Re-Peopling the West
- > Latin American Filibustering and the Texas Independence Movement
- > Pacific Explorations

#### The New Challenge of Labor

- > White Workers, Unions, and Class Consciousness
- > Foreign-Born Workers
- > The New Middle Class
- > The Expansion of Slavery and Slaves as Workers

#### Men and Women in Antebellum America

- > Gender and Economic Change
- > Ladies, Women, and Working Girls
- > Masculinity on the Trail, in the Cities, and on the Farm

#### Freedom for Some

- > The Nature of Democracy in the Atlantic World
- > The Second Party System
- > Democracy in the South
- > Conflicts Over Slavery

Texans fighting the Mexicans. In December 1837, the U.S.-born Rensselaer Van Rensselaer led a small group of men across the Niagara river to establish a beachhead for the return of a well-known Canadian rebel; but Jackson's successor as president, Martin Van Buren, dealt aggressively with this group of American adventurers. Van Buren issued a proclamation denouncing the actions, alerted customs agents and U.S. marshals along the border, and eventually sent General Winfield Scott to manage relations in the region. Despite the heavy military presence, Canadian Patriots and their American supporters coordinated attacks along the border throughout the year. Pressed by armies on both sides, the men went underground in early 1838, but sporadic attacks occurred into 1841.

Neither the Texas nor the Canadian episodes received official government support, but Jackson's hands-off approach offered implicit support for the former. Mexico had only recently freed itself from Spanish control and many Americans viewed it as a weak neighbor, ripe for American conquest. Texas independence angered the Mexicans and America's harboring of Canadian rebels angered the British. In both situations, America negotiated solutions that demonstrated its rising status as a continental power but also one that remained loose at the seams.

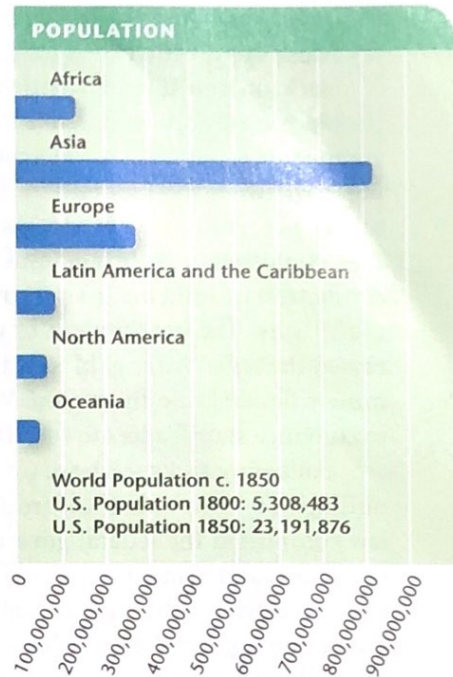
## AN EXPANDING NATION

The three decades of peace following the War of 1812 gave Americans an opportunity to consolidate the territory that had been won permanently from the British. But even as settlers pushed west and traders sailed around the world, American control of the land within the boundaries of the original colonies remained incomplete, underscored by the extensive Cherokee and Creek landholdings in Georgia. Two substantial obstacles blocked American expansion west of the Mississippi River: Mexican control of most of today's Southwest and the presence of substantial numbers of Native Americans. West of the Mississippi, the United States claimed only a few military forts strung out across a vast expanse of plains and mountain territory controlled by a variety of Indian communities. Intermingled with the Western Indians lived tens of thousands of Spanish-speaking residents, most born while Spain still ruled the region. Anglo settlers who headed west into this landscape embodied the dynamism of the era. At the same time many other Americans moved against their will, including enslaved people moved from Eastern states to the emerging cotton belt and Indians removed from the Southeast to Oklahoma. A growing population and a robust economy encouraged the United States to expand, but that expansion created new problems. Military difficulties arose as the settlers and explorers encountered people with existing claims to the land; political problems developed as leaders wrestled with whether the United States should follow the pattern of previous empires; and cultural conflicts grew as the country sought to incorporate people of widely different backgrounds into an already diverse nation.

### **Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears**

Strong native communities stood opposed to the United States in the East as well. In the Southeast alone, the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Creek counted

75,000 members compared to 330,000 white people and 230,000 black people in the region in 1820. Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan likewise included large numbers of native peoples. The state and federal governments worked sometimes in cooperation and other times at odds with each other to push Indians farther to the west. Andrew Jackson came to the presidency strongly opposed to the presence of Indians in territory that could be profitably settled by whites and strongly opposed to the practice of the federal government negotiating with Indians as equals. As early as 1817, Jackson had described “treaties with the Indians as an absurdity.” Born in the Carolina backcountry during the Revolutionary period, when native peoples contested U.S. borders, Jackson matured in Tennessee when that state was still inhabited by them. From his earliest encounters he developed a strong antagonism toward those he regarded as “blood thirsty barbarians.” Jackson sought “to reclaim them [Indians] from their wandering habits and make them a happy, prosperous people,” and



**THE CHEROKEE REMOVAL** The forced removal of Indians by the U.S. government created a demographic and historical catastrophe for Indian communities. Cherokee removal, represented here, began in the winter and imposed physical hardships as it alienated Indian people from their ancestral homelands.

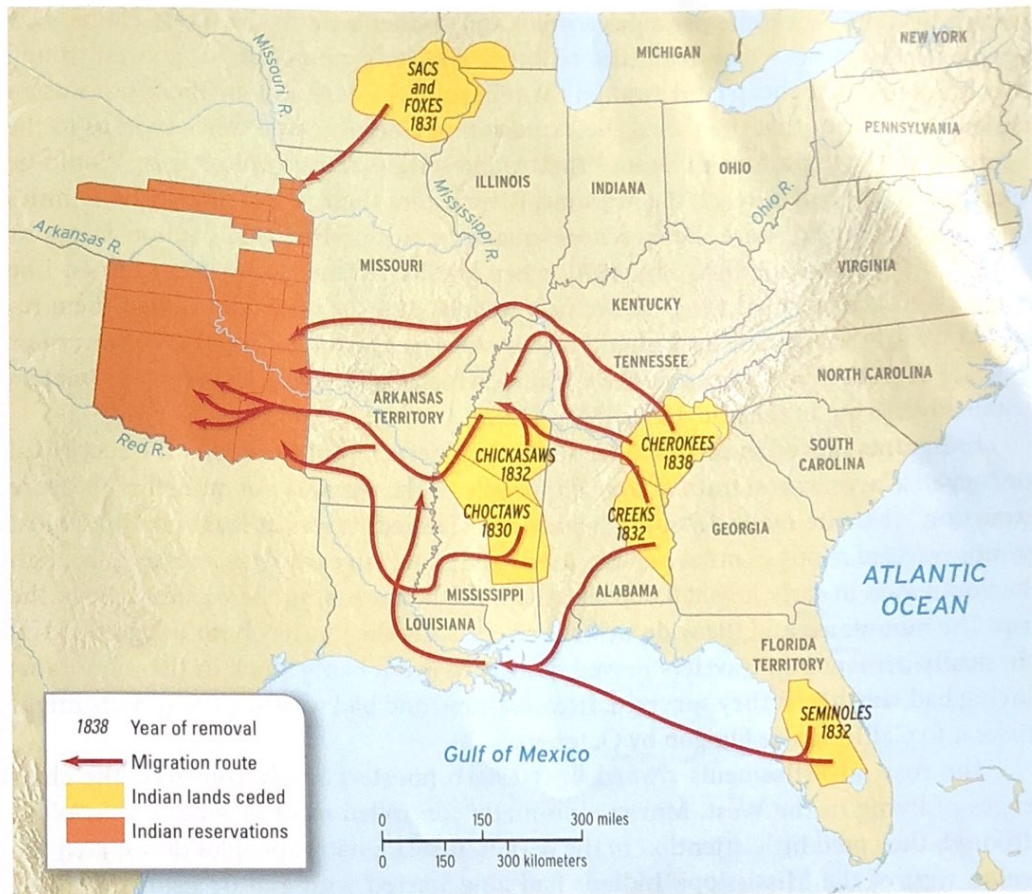
as president he used the executive power to force this policy on Indians across the country. Most Anglo-Americans supported his policies.

Jackson's most public battle with Indians resulted from the expulsion of Cherokee people from Georgia. Cherokees, the largest native community in the Southeast, had adapted to American customs more than neighboring tribes. According to the treaties passed between the tribe and the federal government, the good faith efforts of Cherokees to live peacefully and productively alongside their American neighbors ensured that they could retain their land and their autonomy. But as new Anglo settlers generated conflicts, states and the federal government steadily increased pressure on Indians to sell their lands. The government of Georgia, where most Cherokee landholdings lay, harassed the tribe. After gold was discovered on Cherokee-controlled land in 1829, white miners flooded into the region. With their numbers nearing 10,000, they had the clout to convince state leaders to seek the complete expulsion of the tribe.

Following Jackson's lead, Congress passed the **Indian Removal Act of 1830**, which nullified 50 years' worth of treaties between the United States and many tribes. The law committed the federal government to creating an Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma and to moving Indians by force into this new region. Cherokees, well-educated and protective of their treaty rights, vigorously resisted. Cherokee leaders sought legal protection against Georgia laws that asserted authority over the tribe. In a series of seminal cases, the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice John Marshall, declared the Cherokee, like all recognized Indian tribes, "domestic dependent nations." Marshall intended this description to establish the sovereignty of tribes in relation to state governments, although not in relation to the federal government. In the 1832 *Worcester v. Georgia* decision, the court ruled against Georgia's claim that it held authority over the tribe, but the state and federal government ignored the ruling. Without recourse to the army, which could have protected Indian lands from settler encroachment, Marshall could not enforce the decision.

Under Georgia's protection, white settlers continued to move into Cherokee territory in the early 1830s. In 1835, the federal government negotiated a new treaty with a minority group of Cherokee. This new agreement exchanged all Cherokee claims to land in the East for claims in Indian Territory and a cash settlement. When U.S. forces arrived in early 1838, few Cherokee had prepared for the trip, and soldiers rounded up and confined people over the summer. Contaminated water, inadequate food, and disease killed many of those restricted in stockades; and many more perished on the 800-mile journey west. Estimates of fatalities connected with the "**Trail of Tears**," as Indians referred to the forced march, range from 4,000 to 8,000 (Map 11.1). The blatant violation of property rights backed by clear title to the land worried many white citizens, even those who disliked Indians. Davy Crockett, the legendary frontiersman, lost his congressional seat for opposing Jackson's policy. The violence and trauma of the forced march to the new Western lands created more political enemies for Jackson and a shameful legacy for the American government. Reformers, especially in New England, had protested the Indian Removal Act, and reports of the expulsion and death of so many Cherokees added new urgency to their calls for a more humane Indian policy.

While Jackson and white Georgians were expelling Cherokees from the northern reaches of the state, the Second Seminole War raged in the South. Instead of the Cherokee's legal maneuvering, Seminole fighters used their knowledge of the land and ecology to stymie American forces for years. In 1818, Jackson had led the U.S. Army



**MAP 11.1 ▲ Indian Removals, 1830s** This map shows the routes along which Indians were driven by the U.S. Army during the forced relocations of the 1830s. Jackson's policies moved the last large Indian communities living east of the Mississippi River into the frontier regions of the Oklahoma Territory.

during the First Seminole War, and he eagerly supported efforts to pacify the region at the end his presidency. Most of the fighting in the second conflict occurred within the Okefenokee Swamp and its hinterlands, a shifting maze of wet and dry ground that disoriented all but the most experienced soldiers. Led by Osceola, a skilled commander, Seminole fighters developed a pattern of attacking and retreating that frustrated and debilitated American troops, who also suffered disease and discomfort in the swamps. Despite the high cost to U.S. forces, the Army persevered; and by 1842, a staggering 90 percent of the Seminole community had been killed. The remaining 600 were permanently expelled into the wild region of southern Florida.

## Re-Peopling the West

In the late 18th and early 19th century, settlers moved out of the Northeastern region—with a population density of 31 people per square mile—into the Midwestern territories