

# A Topical History of the United States

Gerald R. Baydo



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# PREFACE

Among students and teachers today there is a desire for a greater sense of relevance and immediacy in American history. At the same time, there is a trend to incorporate the new emphasis on the use of media in teaching. It is the purpose of this textbook to meet these needs. Based on the conviction that the chronological approach can reduce American history to merely a series of names, dates, and facts, this book reviews the subject in a topical manner.

Each chapter covers a different topic, which all together reflect the seventeen major trends or themes in America's development. For example, one chapter concerns itself with the interaction of man and the environment, another with the influence of the city throughout our past. Four chapters are devoted to minority groups—an area that has often received little or no coverage in depth. Three chapters examine cultural matters such as religion, writers and thinkers, and mass amusements. Two chapters show the rise of big business and the response of organized labor. Other chapters deal with more traditional themes such as war, foreign policy, economic growth, and the presidents. And the final chapter shows the influence of the historic past upon the historic future.

In addition to the general narrative, each chapter contains discussion and thought questions and a list of suggested readings and recommended media. This versatile format allows instructors to expand the material, if they wish, by lectures, through discussion, with reading projects, or by the use of media. In addition, the books listed in the suggested readings are frequently paperbacks readily available to the student. The book offers seventeen topics, based on a schedule of one for each week of the semester.

or for flexible use in the quarter system. Instructors who approach topical teaching of American history in more depth can use the book for the second semester of a two semester course.

Beyond these practical advantages, the primary intent of this book is to reflect the changing trends in higher education. Although it covers basically the same material as more conventional texts, items are covered under topics, rather than in sequences. Such an approach allows the student to see more readily the influence of the past on the present and to understand that American history is much more than a list of presidents or a series of names and dates.

Pragmatism was another significant factor in writing this text. In many parts of the country, the days of United States history survey courses as a requirement are nearing their end. Technical and vocational education is on the rise. Students are searching for new values in a constantly changing society. This book views the past in a vertical manner, although some material overlaps from topic to topic due to the interaction of American society. Still, it is valuable to see the evolving struggles of labor against business from their beginnings and the growth of mass amusements from colonial times. This book offers an alternative nontraditional way to study the complexities of the American past.

Writing this textbook has been solely my responsibility, but it has been a product of my past history. I owe a debt of gratitude to my teachers and colleagues at Seattle University, University of Washington, University of New Mexico, and Grossmont College. Special thanks goes to my wife Julie and my two sons, Robbie and Brian, for their patience and cooperation.

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one

# MAN AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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*Man is a product of the earth's surface.*

*We are in a position more and more completely to say  
how far the waste and destruction of natural resources are  
to be allowed to go on and  
where they are to stop.*

*We have islands of wilderness in this country,  
but they cannot survive if the surrounding land  
is raped and devastated.*

---

Modern man has become more concerned about his environment than ever before in the past. "Pollution," "ecology," and "environmental crises" have become part of everyday vocabulary. Exchanges of greetings now include "Did you see the smog today?" or "Is overpopulation the source of all American problems?" Television weathermen in major cities include smog reports in nightly prognostications. Studies of polluted lakes and streams, industrial waste, noise, and garbage are being undertaken. Citizens are called upon to ride bicycles, recycle bottles and paper, and use only certain kinds of soap. The nation has awakened to the relationship between man and his environment. This relationship, however, is not a new one; man has always been a product of the earth and as such has constantly interacted with the environment.

In America the way man has looked on this interaction has been subject to many changes. The early explorers and settlers were primarily concerned with survival in the wilderness. Population growth resulted in greater use of the land and its natural resources. This period can be called one of exploitation or unlimited use. The vastness of the American wilderness and

the apparently endless supply of natural resources seemed to make a logical use of the land unnecessary. This philosophy made man the conqueror of his environment. Forests were cut down, soil was exhausted, cities grew out of the wilderness, and the railroad crisscrossed the land where once no human foot trod. With the official close of the frontier, noted in the census of 1890, exploitation came to be questioned, and with the dawn of the twentieth century came an expanded government policy of conservation.

The environment had to be conserved. But why? Some said for its natural beauty; others argued that natural resources should only be used on a rational basis. As a consequence of the conservation doctrine national parks were established, land laws were changed, and reclamation projects were started. Yet did twentieth-century man really treat his land so differently? Was the environment really being conserved? A negative answer seemed appropriate, for by the late 1960s a new phase of conservation began—the ecology movement. The environment had struck back; ironically it was now exploiting man, and man's survival hung in the balance. An historical survey of American man and his environment will reveal something of the complexity of this relationship.

## **The Topography and Geography of America**

We begin with a brief sketch of the American terrain. The continental United States can be divided into the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plain, Appalachian Highlands, Central Lowlands, Great Plains, Rockies, and Pacific Borderlands. The Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plain or tidewater is the lowland bordering the Atlantic coast of the United States. It extends into the interior as far as the ocean tides, and varies in width. In most of New England and parts of New York it is filled with rocks, and the uneven terrain and short summers make extensive agriculture difficult; but the proximity of the mountains to the coast furnishes adequate water power for industry. In the South the broad coastal plain, the more fertile soil, the longer growing seasons, and abundant rainfall combined to make farming the major occupation, despite such liabilities as thin soil, which wore out quickly, and level terrain, which sometimes caused drainage problems and swamps. This plain also contained many forests of pine. Pine trees were easy to cut and provided the basis of the lumbering and shipbuilding industries. The nearly level land surfaces of the Coastal Plain are used chiefly today for agriculture and forestry.

At the western extremity of the tidewater is the fall line, where streams flowing eastward drop to the back country. Many towns, such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., were established near the water power the falls provided. The falls also impeded movement into the back

country. By 1800 nine out of ten Americans lived on this Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plain. All the important early cities located here were by necessity ports.

The Appalachian Highlands include the Piedmont, or mountain foothills, and two mountain chains—the Appalachians and the Alleghenies. The Piedmont, like the Coastal Plain, is narrow in the northern area and broad in the southern, but it is higher (from several hundred to as high as two thousand feet) and contains more rolling land. Rainfall is more abundant, but the climate several degrees cooler. The soil is more fertile here. The Appalachian and Allegheny mountain chains border the Piedmont on the west. The Appalachians proper extend from Newfoundland to Alabama, while the Alleghenies run from the Catskills in New York to northern Alabama. These mountain chains delayed migration westward and helped to concentrate the colonial settlers on the Atlantic seaboard. Eventually there were three important roads across the Appalachian Highlands. One was the Wilderness Road, which used the Cumberland Gap and led to the gently rolling land of central Kentucky. The second was the Pennsylvania Road, which started at Philadelphia and went to Pittsburgh at the forks of the Ohio. The third, the National Road, led from Cumberland, Maryland, to Wheeling on the Ohio. All three roads were crucial to development of the trans-Appalachian area—the Central Lowlands.

The Central Lowlands, known today as the Middle West, include most of the land between the Appalachian Highlands on the east and the Great Plains on the west. Here is a vast expanse of nearly level land with fertile soils, a long growing season, and a favorable amount and distribution of rainfall. Obviously this is an excellent agricultural region, but the forests, water resources, and mineral wealth helped to make it a leading manufacturing district as well. Most of the streams here join the Mississippi, and since land travel was slow and laborious, the river systems proved paramount. Early settlers found this area to be a veritable paradise, and settlement readily extended to its western edge—the Great Plains.

Between the Central Lowlands and the Rocky Mountains is a monotonous land area known as the Great Plains. This semiarid belt provided a unique problem to the westward movement. Today as in the past the Great Plains are a zone of uncertainty in the production of crops and feed for livestock. The distinguishing climatic characteristic, a deficiency in water, conditions plant life, animal life, and human life and institutions. The Great Plains are also the "dust bowl,"—where terrific dust storms literally blow away the top soil in a single day. Here is the land of the cowboy and romance, but for Americans it has always been a problem area.

The Rocky Mountains form the western border of the Great Plains and stretch from the northernmost part of Alaska to southern Mexico. There is nothing in the eastern part of the United States to rival their height and

ruggedness. Often majestic peaks rise from 6000 to 8000 feet above their surroundings, and the higher peaks are more than 14,000 feet above sea level. In much of this mountain belt there are deep canyons with precipitous rocky walls. These mountains initially were a great barrier to exploration and settlement, and most pioneers looked for the easiest way through. Once transportation problems had been solved, the mountains were centers of mining activity. Today the vacation and recreation potential is being expanded.

West of the Rockies lie the Pacific Borderlands. This region includes a large, mountainous section, the border along the Pacific coast, Alaska and Hawaii, and an inland belt separated from the seaboard by mountains. This is an area of extremes—of high and low elevation, of wet and dry climate, of heat and cold. Mount McKinley in Alaska, for example, is the highest peak on the North American continent; Death Valley in California is 280 feet below sea level. Mountains also dominate the terrain. One almost continuous belt of mountains reaches from southern California to the Canadian line. This belt is made up largely of two great ranges—the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Range. The Sierra and Cascades stretch like a wall that shelters most of the Pacific coast area from the extremes of temperature that are found inland. After the discovery of gold in California in 1848, the region developed rapidly, though today it remains a land of opportunity.

## **The Role of Geography in Exploration**

Within each geographic region there is little unity in climate or terrain. The vastness and diversity of the land has had a profound influence on man's development in America. From the start the environment affected man in North America. When Asian man came across the Bering Strait during the Ice Age, he found that the melting of the inland ice allowed him southward passage in only two regions—one corridor (probably opened about 50,000 years ago) along the eastern foothills of the Rockies and another down the plateau between the northern Rockies and the Coast Range. The great glaciers were the first obstacles to the peopling of North America, but this was not the last time that geography affected historical evolution.

In the pioneer stages of American development geography, real or imagined, molded the experience. After Columbus's voyages Spanish, French, and English explorers searched for the Northwest Passage—a direct water route through North America to India. The search for the Passage lured explorers into numerous inlets and rivers on the Atlantic coast. Europeans were unaccustomed to the American coastline. In the prevailing estuaries

of American rivers they saw channels that might lead to an interior sea. A man might easily mistake the lower Hudson River for an inlet, as Henry Hudson did. The search for the Northwest Passage, therefore, caused pioneer navigators to become familiar with the interior waterways. Eventually the search turned from an oceanic waterway to furs and other natural riches. The Northwest Passage was only imaginary, but the search for it led to the initial explorations of North America.

Some real geographic factors also helped or hindered other exploration and settlement. In 1540 Pedro de Castañeda left with the Francisco de Coronado expedition to search the northern Mexican frontier for the seven cities of gold. Splitting from the main party, Castañeda's group arrived at the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. One member, García de Cárdenas, was so impressed with this stupendous gash in the earth's surface and with the severe cold of the nights that he spent three days trying to find a way to the river below. He instructed three of his men to scale the walls. According to his chronicle they went about one-third of the way and reported that it was a long way to the bottom. In desperate need of water, Cárdenas and his men were forced to leave the canyon. He did not realize the significance of his discovery, but he did feel that the Grand Canyon was a formidable barrier. The Grand Canyon became a real impetus to future Spanish expansion in the Southwest.

Geographic conditions also affected the early career of the first English colony of Virginia. In 1607 settlers of the Virginia Company arrived in Chesapeake Bay and chose the Jamestown Peninsula on the James River as a site for permanent settlement. This location, only thirty-two miles from the sea, was low and swampy, covered with trees, and infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes. During the first six months fever, diseases, and other factors killed approximately half the settlers. It was not until after 1612 that with replanning, supplies, and new leaders the environment was less detrimental.

One of the best methods of alleviating negative environmental effects was to emphasize the positive—whether real or not. The English pictured the new land of America as similar to their homeland in climate and vegetation. The writers of the time not only asserted that the climate was conducive to settlement but suggested general similarities. It was no mere coincidence that Captain John Smith referred to the northern areas as New England—a region not noticeably different from Old England. Optimistic writers frequently mentioned the long summers in New England, the temperate weather of the South, and the mild winters of Virginia. Differences were recognized, of course, but minimized. No barriers to the transfer of familiar English grains and livestock were apparent. Similarities between the colonial area and the British homelands were further pointed out

through reference to vegetation. Such differences as extremes in climate became rather quickly evident to colonists, but most adjusted to the new region and forgot about the old homeland.

Evidence of the lack of geographic knowledge is most visible in the colonial charters. In 1609 the reorganized Virginia Company petitioned for a new charter, because the original charter had been split between two companies. The new charter fixed the limits of the colony at two hundred miles north and south of Port Comfort, and "lying from the Sea Coast . . . up into the land throughout . . . from sea to sea, west and northwest," and included all islands within one hundred miles of the coast. With the settlement of other colonies the "sea-to-sea" concept opened a Pandora's box. In 1632 Virginia came into direct conflict with the colony of Maryland, when King Charles I cut a slice of northern Virginia and granted as a southern boundary "the further bank" of the Potomac River down to Chesapeake Bay. This unusual grant of an entire river has always been resented and disregarded by Virginia crab and oyster fishermen. As recently as 1959 the most long-lasting local dispute in the annals of American history resulted in the killing of fishermen.

In the Pennsylvania charter of 1681 the monarchs tried to rectify their ways with more exact geographic limitations. The boundaries of this province seemed more definite than those spelled out in previous grants, but there were still several vague statements that led to controversies, with New York and Maryland. For example, the charter was not a sea-to-sea grant; in fact, this was the only colony without an Atlantic seaboard. Again ignorance of geography led to many bitter boundary disputes.

Colonial charters still proved troublesome after the American Revolution and the formation of state governments. One of the immediate problems of the first government under the Articles of Confederation was to clear up titles to western lands promised by these charters. During the 1780s, Connecticut, Virginia, Massachusetts, North and South Carolina, and Georgia very reluctantly ceded title to western lands to the federal government. The ignorance of geography had created a monster that lived beyond the colonial period.

In the early stages of American development the environment was sometimes devastating. Overland travel to Oregon and California, a popular pastime during the 1840s, usually involved a three-month struggle with climate and terrain. To the George Donner party it meant more. In 1846 the party followed the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri, along the Platte River, then across South Pass to Fort Bridger. By the time they got there they found they were running a little late, and so they decided to follow the advice of Lansford W. Hastings' guidebook and take a shortcut over the Wasatch Mountains and across the salt desert. Hastings had neglected to mention that he had not attempted the road himself.

They encountered great difficulties in making a road over the mountains and crossing the hot, barren salt desert. By mid-September the party reached the regular road to California, but the delay caused by taking the shortcut proved fatal. The company was caught in an early snow storm in the high Sierra and constructed hasty shelters near what is now Donner Lake. In late December fifteen men and women volunteers tried to cross the mountains on snowshoes. Seven finally reached Fort Sutter after literally living on the flesh of the dead. Relief parties found that forty of the party of eighty-seven had perished in the Sierra snows. Inexact geographic knowledge had taken its toll.

Such faulty knowledge even precipitated an international crisis. In 1846 the Oregon Treaty appeared to end the boundary dispute over the dividing line between the United States and Canada. The treaty extended the boundary line westward along the forty-ninth parallel "to the middle of the channel which separates the continent from Vancouver's Island; and then southerly through the middle of the said channel, and of Fuca's Straits to the Pacific Ocean." This seemed clear enough: The treaty defined the boundary line as the middle of the channel. But it turned out that there were *two* channels, one near the island, one nearer the mainland, and between the two lay the San Juan Islands. To which channel did the treaty refer? While the line was still at issue, the islands were presumed to be in a neutral situation. The Hudson's Bay Company, the British fur company in the Pacific Northwest, had set up a sheep ranch on the largest island, and by 1852 its agents were having trouble with a few Americans who had settled there. When an American killed a company pig, a crisis developed. American troops occupied the southern part of San Juan Island, while British war ships hovered offshore. In 1860 the two powers agreed that the island should be jointly occupied by troops to keep the peace. After twelve long years the Pig War was settled by binding arbitration.

The threat of harsh geographic conditions, whether real or imagined, also was a factor in limiting settlement or development. The area between the Missouri and the Rockies was developed late to a great extent as a consequence of the reflections of Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long. In 1807 Pike and his men, searching for the source of the Red River, were arrested near Santa Fe, taken to Chihuahua, then released after a "cook's tour" of the Southwest. Pike later reported that these vast plains were similar to the sandy deserts of Africa and that in many areas no vegetation existed. Here is the origin of the notion of the Great American Desert that dominated popular thinking and caused settlers to see this area as a barrier to advancement until after the Civil War.

The Stephen H. Long expedition of 1820 perpetuated this idea. Long had been instructed to explore the headwaters of the Red River. He was unable to locate the source, and he reported that the region between the Mis-



souri and the Rockies was wholly unfit for cultivation. On his map he labeled the high plains region the Great American Desert, a designation that was carried over into schoolbook maps of the country and persisted in the minds of people for half a century. Not until after the Civil War did the water pump mill and other technological innovations enable western farmers to push into this area. Today large areas of this Great American Desert are ranches and farms.

## **Environmental Determinants in American History**

A geographic determinist is one who believes that all events are controlled by their geographic setting. Such is too simple and inflexible a view, but environment as a factor in man's growth and development cannot be overlooked. For example, the nature of the social and economic growth of sections—distinct areas with different lifestyles and economic patterns—was greatly determined by geography. We have already mentioned that the barren soil of New England was not conducive to a plantation system, but that the fertile soil of the South was. The society that developed in the North was based on industrial growth and urban life, but the southern system relied on plantation life and slavery. This difference resulted in the difference in outlooks and so played a significant role in the coming of the Civil War.

The North and South even developed two different systems of disposing of land. In New England the practice was to make a survey of the territory before it was settled and sell the resultant blocks. This method usually prevented title conflicts and provided an orderly westward advance. The southern method gave the prospective settler the right to buy a land warrant, choose the acreage he desired, and then have his plot surveyed. This method had the advantage of speeding up settlement, but it produced chaos in titles, as well as irregular holdings. Many southern surveyors used rocks as boundary markers. This was fine, until the rock was moved. One can go too far in emphasizing sectional differences, but environment did indeed help to create a northern and a southern section.

Before transcontinental airlines, transportation was greatly affected by environment. Distance was also a major factor. The Atlantic Ocean separated the colonies from England. The crossing took from four to twelve weeks or more, in crowded and often disease-ridden ships that sailed at irregular intervals, depending on wind and weather. The distance and difficulty of ocean travel put the colonists very much on their own resources once they landed. It helped that the Atlantic coastline is indented with bays, harbors, and rivers that give access for varying distances to the interior. For instance, the Hudson River led to the New York harbor, and the