

Westward Expansion Timeline for Kids

1803 to 1869

At first, the United States was only a strip of land near the Atlantic Ocean. Over about 65 years, it grew all the way to the Pacific Ocean. This timeline shows how people moved west, and what it meant for the people already living there.



1803

The Louisiana Purchase

The United States buys a huge area of land from France. It reaches from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains.

Why it matters: The country became twice as big in one day.



1804

Lewis and Clark

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out to explore the new land. A Shoshone woman named Sacagawea helps them find their way and talk with the people they meet.

Why it matters: They reached the Pacific Ocean and brought back maps and notes about the West.



1825

The Erie Canal

Workers finish the Erie Canal in New York. It is a waterway 363 miles long that boats can use to go from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes.

Why it matters: Moving people and goods west became faster and cheaper.



1838

The Trail of Tears

The government forces the Cherokee people to leave their homes in the Southeast. They must walk hundreds of miles to land in the West. Thousands die on the way.

Why it matters: Many Native nations lost their homelands as settlers moved west.

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1843

The Oregon Trail

About 1,000 people leave Missouri in covered wagons. They travel 2,000 miles to Oregon. The trip takes about five months.

Why it matters: Thousands more families followed the trail in the years after.



1848

Gold in California

A worker finds gold in a river in California. The news spreads. The next year, tens of thousands of people rush there to look for gold.

Why it matters: California grew so fast that it became a state in 1850.



1869

A Railroad Across the Country

Two railroad companies build tracks toward each other, one from the east and one from the west. They meet in Utah. A golden spike is hammered in to join them.

Why it matters: A trip that took months by wagon now took about a week by train.

Words to know

explore: to travel to a place to learn about it

canal: a waterway dug by people for boats

homeland: the place where a people has always lived

settler: a person who moves to a new place to live