

Manifest Destiny and Indian Removal

A convergence of several social, economic, and political factors helped urge the speed of westward expansion in the nineteenth century. Mass immigration from Europe had swelled the East Coast of the United States to record population numbers, pushing settlement westward. Expansion really boomed with the **Louisiana Purchase** in 1803, driving both the population and economy to the west. As the boundaries of America grew, white settlers and proponents of expansion began to voice concerns over what they considered an obstacle to settlement and America's economic and social development – the American Indian



The Speculator, 1852, Francis William Edmonds

tribes living on lands east of the Mississippi River which bordered white settlement. The land was home to many tribal nations including the Cherokee, Creek and Seminole in the south and the Choctaw and Chickasaw in the west. That land held the promise of economic prosperity to raise cattle, wheat, and cotton, and harvest timber and minerals. Eager to take possession of the land, the settlers began to pressure the federal government to acquire the lands from the Indian tribes. To these white settlers, the Indian tribes were standing in the way of progress and of America's **manifest destiny**.

The self-serving concept of manifest destiny, the belief that the expansion of the United States was divinely ordained, justifiable, and inevitable, was used to rationalize the removal of American Indians from their native homelands. In the minds of white Americans, the Indians were not using the land to its full potential as they reserved large tracts of unspoiled land for hunting, leaving the land uncultivated. If it was not being cultivated, then the land was being wasted. Americans declared that it was their duty, their manifest destiny, which compelled them to seize, settle, and cultivate the land. Not surprisingly, the most active supporters of manifest destiny and proponents of Indian removal were those who practiced **land speculation**. Land speculators bought large tracts of land with the expectation that the land would quickly increase in value as more people settled in the west and demand for that western land increased. As the western land was admitted into the Union, it would consequently increase in value.

The Origins of Indian Removal

Though it came to fruition under **Andrew Jackson's** administration in the nineteenth-century, the idea of Indian removal has its origins rooted earlier in the eighteenth-century. A form of Indian removal was first proposed by one of our Founding Fathers, **Thomas Jefferson**. Unlike African Americans, Jefferson believed that Indians were the equals of whites, "in body and mind." Yet Jefferson found them culturally inferior due to their lifestyle and traditions. He believed that their semi-nomadic lifestyle, communal agricultural practices, and hunting traditions did not use the land efficiently. It was assumed that if the Indians adopted a European-style of agriculture and settled in European-style towns and villages only then would they progress from their natural "savage" state to "civilization."



Thomas Jefferson, 1805/1821, Gilbert Stuart, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Jefferson's beliefs on civilization were formed from the **Enlightenment** idea of **environmentalism**, which dictated that a human's environment is shaped by their culture. But Jefferson's intentions were not as socially motivated as they were economic – if Indians abandoned their hunting grounds that then freed up land for white settlement. The **Louisiana Purchase** of 1803 provided a neat solution for Jefferson, one in which Indians would not have to choose between **assimilation** and extermination. The government could relocate Indians further westward, delaying the inevitable **acculturation**, while opening up the vacated lands to white settlement.

Later, President **James Monroe** expanded on Jefferson's ideas and beliefs on Indian removal in an 1825 address to Congress. He abandoned the idea that the Indians could be assimilated into white culture, and he argued that, therefore, it would be to the benefit of the tribes to be removed from their lands for their well-being:

The removal of the tribes from the territory which they now inhabit . . . would not only shield them from impending ruin, but promote their welfare and happiness. Experience has clearly demonstrated that in their present state it is impossible to incorporate them in such masses, in any form whatever, into our system. It has also been demonstrated with equal certainty that without a timely anticipation of an provision against the dangers to which they are exposed, under causes which it will be difficult, if not impossible to control, their degradation and extermination will be inevitable.



[Andrew Jackson](#), 1835, Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl

While Indian removal as a policy was first envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, and structured by James Monroe, it was Andrew Jackson who fully realized removal, pushing the policy into law. Jackson had long been a supporter of removal. Prior to his presidency, he had commanded military forces in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida to quell Indian resistance to white expansion and settlement. He also negotiated several treaties in the 1810s and 1820s which divested southern Indian tribes of their eastern land in exchange for land in the west. Jackson offered his own justification for Indian removal in December 1829, claiming that the removal was necessary for the preservation of American Indians – essentially asserting that removal was a humanitarian act for the good of the Indian tribes.

[The Indians'] present condition with what they once were, makes a most powerful appeal to our sympathies. Our ancestors found them the uncontrolled possessors of these vast regions. By persuasion and force, they have been made to retire from river to river, and from mountain to mountain; until some of the tribes have become extinct, and others have left but remnants, to preserve, for a while, their once terrible names. . . . This fate surely awaits them, if they remain within the limits of the States, does not admit of a doubt. Humanity and national honor demand that every effort should be made to avert so great a calamity.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830

As president, Jackson signed the **Indian Removal Act** into law on May 28, 1830. It authorized him to reserve land west of the Mississippi River and exchange it for Native American land to the east of the Mississippi. Those Indians who did not wish to relocate would become citizens of their home state. After the Indian Removal Act had passed, Jackson continued to publically justify removal. In part of his State of the Union Address of December 6, 1830, Jackson went further, arguing that removal benefited both Indians and whites:

It will separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites; free them from the power of the States; enable them to pursue happiness in their own way and under their own rude institutions; will retard the progress of decay, which is lessening their numbers, and perhaps cause them gradually, under the protection of the

Government and through the influence of good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community.

What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization and religion? . . . How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing to the West on such conditions! If the offers made to the Indian were extended to them, they would be hailed with gratitude and joy.

The conditions and offers, as Jackson proposed them, were as follows: each tribe would receive a territory exceeding the size that they had relinquished to the U.S government. They would be moved to that new territory at the expense of the U.S., and provided supplies such as clothing, arms, and ammunition. They would continue to be provided these supplies for a period of one year after their arrival to their new homeland. Arrangements would be made for the support of schools and for the maintenance of the poor. As Jackson wrote, “Such are the arrangements for the physical comfort and for the moral improvement of the Indians.”

As the years went by and resistance and opposition to removal from certain nations, especially the Seminoles, became increasingly apparent, Jackson’s tone on Indian removal became less hospitable and less conciliatory. In 1835, he wrote “All preceding experiments for the improvement of the Indians have failed. It seems now to be an established fact that they can not live in contact with a civilized community and prosper.”

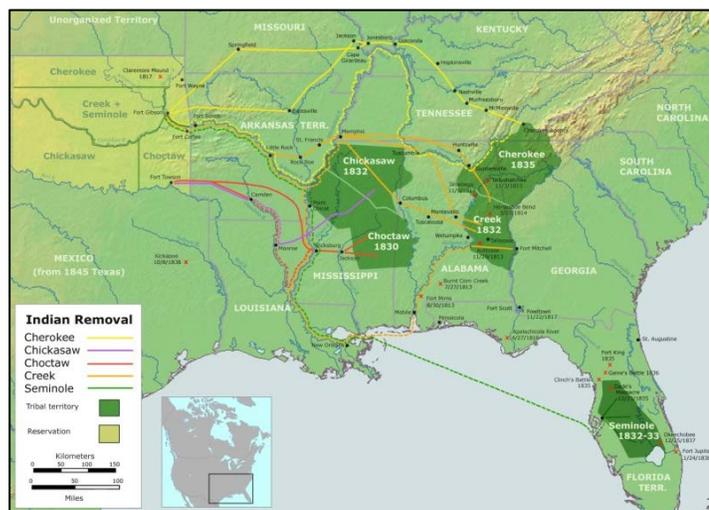
The Trail of Tears

However, removal was not met with gratitude or joy by the majority of American Indians forced to leave their homelands. American Indian participation in removal was meant to be voluntary, and the act required the U.S. government to negotiate fairly with the tribes, but this was not often the result. Many tribes were forcibly removed from their lands, in particular the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole. This series of forced migrations became known as the **Trail of Tears**.

Not all were in favor of removal. The most vocal and prominent among those opposed was Tennessee congressman and American frontiersman of lore **Davy Crockett**. In 1834 Crockett stated his opposition, that if the next president, **Martin Van Buren**, continued Jackson’s Indian policies, Crockett would move to “the wildes of Texas.”

I have almost given up the Ship as lost. I have gone So far as to declare that if he martin vanburen is elected that I will leave the united States for I never will live under his kingdom. before I will Submit to his Government I will go to the wildes of Texas. I will consider that government a Paridice [sic] to what this will be. In fact at this time our Republican Government has dwindled almost into insignificancy our [boasted] land of liberty have almost Bowed to the yoke of Bondage. Our happy days of Republican principles are near at an end when a few is to transfer the many.

In 1831 the Choctaw nation became the first tribe to be forcibly ousted from their lands in Mississippi. After a treaty was signed and agreed upon, approximately 17,000 Choctaw made the move, while 5,000 elected to stay. The Seminoles, located in modern-day Florida, put up a military resistance to removal but after two wars, they were removed in 1832. The Creek removal followed in 1834, the Chickasaw in 1837, and finally the Cherokee in 1838.



Map showing the Cherokee Trail of Tears and other forced relocation marches. Courtesy of the [National Library of Medicine](#), National Institutes of Health.

In almost every case, the Indians were not provided with the adequate supplies they were promised, and as a result many perished on the forced migration due to disease and starvation. Of the 15,000 Creek who marched to their new home in Oklahoma, only 3,500 survived the journey. Similarly, of the 16,000 Cherokee who were forced to move from several south-eastern states to present-day Oklahoma, 4,000 died due to disease, starvation, and adverse weather conditions. In all, tens of thousands of American Indians, some estimates are close to 100,000, lost their lives and their homelands in the series of forced migrations which lasted through the 1840s.

Glossary

acculturation: the cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture.

Andrew Jackson: (1767-1845) 7th President of the United States, military general, governor, and senator. He is most well-known as the founder of the Democratic Party, and for his controversial passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. He epitomized the “Common Man,” or self-made man, of the nineteenth-century, having been the first U.S. president to not have been born into a wealthy, aristocratic family or to have received a formal education.

assimilation: the process of adopting or adapting to a different culture, group, or nation.

Davy Crockett: (1786-1836) American frontiersman, folk hero, politician, and soldier. He represented Tennessee for three terms as a U.S. congressman. As a soldier, he fought in the War of 1812 and died at the Battle of the Alamo during the Texas Revolution. His reputation as a frontiersman elevated him to folk legend status during his political career. He is one of the most celebrated and mythologized figures in American history.

Enlightenment: an eighteenth-century philosophical movement that stressed the belief that science and logic gave people more knowledge and understanding than tradition and religion.

environmentalism: the theory that views environment, not heredity, as the most important factor in the cultural and intellectual development of an individual or group. Part of the Enlightenment teaching, endorsed by lead eighteenth-century philosopher John Locke.

Indian Removal Act: (1830) passed by Congress during President Andrew Jackson’s administration, the law authorized the president to grant unsettled lands west of the Mississippi River to American Indians in exchange for their ancestral homelands, which were within the existing borders of the United States.

James Monroe: (1758-1831) 5th President of the United States. He oversaw major westward expansion of the continental U.S., and strengthened America’s foreign policy with the eponymous Monroe Doctrine (1823), which warned that any attempt by European powers to colonize the Western Hemisphere, or interfere with their politics, would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States.

land speculation: the risky nineteenth-century investment practice or strategy of buying cheaply large quantities of land, guessing when the prices of the land would rise enough to make a profit, and then selling that land. During the peak time of U.S. westward expansion, large amounts of public land was opened for private speculation.

Louisiana Purchase: (1803) purchased from France during President Thomas Jefferson's administration, the region of the United States encompassing land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.

manifest destiny: the nineteenth-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.

Martin Van Buren: (1782-1862) 8th President of the United States. He served as Vice President to Andrew Jackson, who he succeeded in the presidency, and for a time was Secretary of State under Jackson. Van Buren was the first president born a U.S. citizen.

Thomas Jefferson: (1743-1826) 3rd President of the United States, Founding Father, author of the Declaration of Independence, and American lawyer. Jefferson oversaw the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France and arranged for the exploration of that territory by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

Trail of Tears: a series of forced relocations of several Indian nations by the U.S. government in the 1830s and 1840s, following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The tribes forcibly removed during this time were the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole. The phrase "Trail of Tears" originated from an 1838 description of the Choctaw nation removal, in which one Choctaw chief told a newspaper that the forced migration was a "trail of tears and death."