

Evaluating Perspectives on Westward Expansion: Weighing the Evidence

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When Americans from the eastern part of the United States began moving west in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, tensions escalated and conflicts erupted between and among settlers, railroad workers, ranchers, the United States military, and numerous Native American tribes. Incorporating balanced consideration of these diverse and multi-layered encounters in an already brief curricular unit on westward expansion can be tough.

It might be easy to teach about the West one-dimensionally in terms of expansion of the railroads, industries created, or new opportunities for land ownership. But it becomes more difficult when the topic turns to how individuals treated others in the “making of the West.” The topic of westward expansion includes a great diversity of people, all in the West for their own reasons, with different perspectives and aspirations. Native Americans living in the West at the time were not one monolithic group, but of different tribal nations with distinct cultures. We don’t want our students to rely on stereotypes or make assumptions based on the term “Native American.” Likewise, workers and new settlers in the West were not all the same—Chinese and Irish immigrants, African Americans, and native-born Americans from the East had varied experiences and motivations. The issues on which conflicts centered are not simplistically two-sided, with one faction good and the other bad, one right and one wrong. Each group and individual in every conflict was driven by unique priorities and visions. We want our students to grasp and grapple with such complexities.

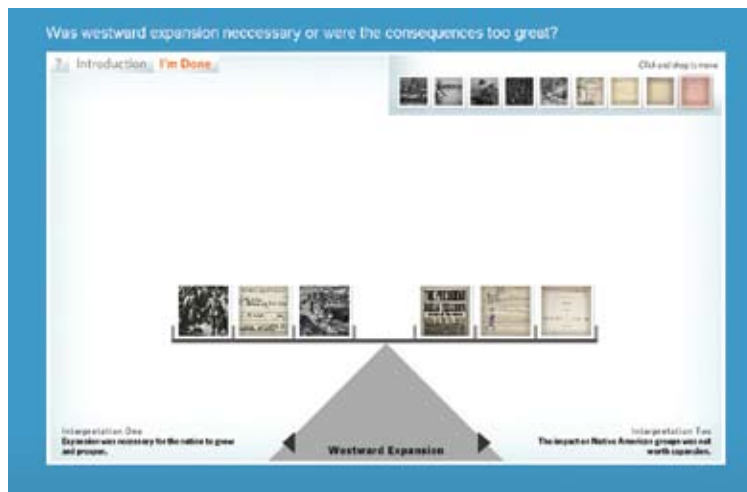
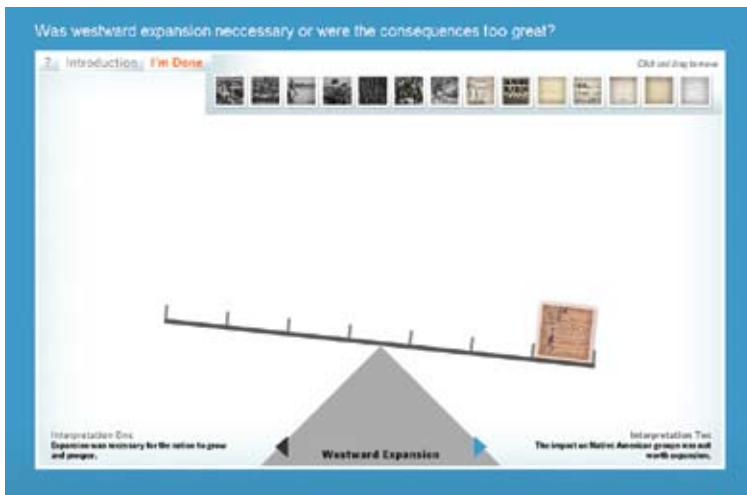
So, including a full variety of perspectives is important when teaching about westward expansion, and helping students evaluate each perspective is even more important. The Weighing the Evidence tool on the National Archives’ DocsTeach.org website can help students do this (see p. 318). The tool encourages students to analyze and evaluate primary sources, and “weigh” the significance of the information in relation to a central question. In short, students use historical evidence to arrive at their own conclusions.

Students can evaluate documents such as a March 1894 petition sent from the Hopi people of the Moqui Villages in the Arizona Territory to “the Washington Chiefs (see p. 319).” Signed by representatives of the tribe, with a symbol for every family, the document asked the federal government to give the Hopi title to their lands instead of individually allotting each tribal member a plot, as had been prescribed by the Dawes Act of 1887. The Moqui worried about losing their matriarchal way of life and cooperative management of resources that helped them adapt to their environment. The document is written in the hand of Thomas Keam, who first came west with the military to move

the Navajo people from Arizona to New Mexico, but later established a trading post and worked with Hopi and Navajo leaders to maintain peace between them, new settlers, and American authorities. Referring to surveyors, the petition said: “During the last two years, strangers have looked over our land with spy-glasses and made marks upon it....None of us were asked that it should be measured into separate lots, and given to individuals for this would cause confusion.”

In comparison, students can examine a photograph taken during the “Golden Spike Ceremony” at Promontory, Utah, following the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869 (see p. 320). The railroad was seen as a triumph for commerce and travel in the United States but was marked by a high mortality rate for workers, and was a threat to the way of life of Native American tribes on the Great Plains. Military conflicts erupted with the Sioux, Arapaho, and Cheyenne peoples, among others.

Including these and other documents in a Weighing the Evidence activity gives students the opportunity to confront the difficult issues involved and consider what each primary source adds to their understanding of the central topic: westward expansion. When they visit <http://docsteach.org/activities/5942/detail>, students encounter a tray of document thumbnail images and an empty scale. Below the ends of the scale are



The Weighing the Evidence tool can help students address a variety of topics. To find an activity that was created using this tool, visit docsteach.org/activities, choose Browse, then Weighing the Evidence under Tool. To use the tool to create your own activity from scratch, register for an account on DocsTeach.org and head to docsteach.org/tools/weighing-the-evidence.

Other possible topics:

African Americans during the Civil War
(Search keywords: "African American civil war" at docsteach.org/documents)

Immigration topics
(Search: "immigration")

The relocation and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II
(Search: "Japanese internment")

Environmental Issues
(Search: "environment")

two opposing historical interpretations. The activity encourages students to examine and evaluate each of the documents, moving them to the scale based upon their interpretation of them. The tool translates the placement to a weight, and tips the scale accordingly. Evidence at the far ends carries full weight, placement closer to the middle carries less, and documents at the fulcrum do not affect the tilt. Students' evaluations are actuated for each piece of evidence.

The activity causes students not only to consider whether the documents support the conclusion "Expansion was necessary for the nation to grow and prosper" or "The impact on Native American groups was not worth expansion," but other factors as well. How relevant are the documents to the topic? Are they from a credible source? Who were the intended audiences? Each of these factors will influence where students place the documents on the scale. In a follow-up

class discussion, students might reference the Hopi petition, noting how every family was represented on it, adding credibility to its perspective. But they will, hopefully, also consider that the intended audience was the United States government, and the petition could present only information that proved the distribution of land under the government's policy would be detrimental. In considering the golden spike photo, students might discuss photography's capacity to document reality—a critical achievement, but also point out the prevalence of staged photos in our society, even back then. They could question the relevance of the photo: Does a photograph excluding ethnic minorities who worked on the railroad show the whole truth? Can a picture taken at the completion of a project encapsulate all of the trials and triumphs encountered during a project?

Students might place a Homestead Proof

Testimony with the sworn statements of Almanzo Wilder that he had built a house and was cultivating the land in the Dakota Territory, in accordance with the Homestead Act, toward the "expansion was necessary side," then place a report created by a government commission finding that the "Indian population was rapidly decreasing because of White aggression, destruction of game, and loss of land" on the "impact...was not worth [it]" side.

They might move an advertisement distributed by a railroad ticket agent claiming "Indian Territory That Garden of the World, Open for Homestead and Pre-Emption" toward "not worth [it]," and then a photograph of a boomtown mining crew drifting for gold somewhere on the side of "necessary."

After students have placed all of the documents, they see a visual representation of where the evidence, as they've evaluated it, lies. Of course you might argue that adding

Moqui Villages
Arizona March 1894

To the Washington Chiefs:

During the last two years strangers have looked over our lands with spy-glasses and made marks upon it, and we know but little of what this means. As we believe that you have no wish to disturb our possessions, we want to tell you something about this Hopi land.

None of us would ask that it should be measured into separate lots, and given to individuals for this would cause confusion.

The family, the dwelling house and the field are inseparable, because the womam is the heart of these, and they rest with her. Among us the family traces its kin from the mother, hence all its possessions are hers. The mam builds the house but the womam is the owner, because she repairs and preserves it; the mam cultivates the field, but he renders its harvest into the womam's keeping, because upon her it rests to prepare the food, and the surplus of stores for barter depends upon her thrift.

A mam plants the fields of his wife, and the fields assigned to the children she bears, and informally he calls them his, although in fact they are not. Even of the field which he inherits from his mother, its harvest he may dispose of at will, but the field itself he may not.

He may permit his son to occupy it and gather its produce, but at the father's death the son may



just one more document from a disaffected perspective would tip the scale. Yes—and that is the point! Ask your students what perspectives are missing or what other kinds of documents should have been included. Remind them that documents can differ by creator, purpose, level of detail, and in a myriad of other ways. Ask students: Why did you place each document where you did? Why do some documents carry greater weight? Remind students to consider their personal backgrounds as well as historical and societal impacts. Follow-up class discussions can lead to a rich dialogue about primary sources as historical evidence and the strengths and weaknesses of using them. This will open students’ eyes to the true breadth of historical evidence and the challenges of coming to more complex and general conclusions—and that history doesn’t neatly fit into this or that conclusion, but is messy!

Complicated topics with a multitude of perspectives demand more careful consideration in the classroom, especially with a dense curriculum. Primary sources from various individuals and groups involved can be included using the Weighing the Evidence tool so that students are required to evaluate them and come to their own evidence-based conclusions, rather than rely on stereotypes or others’ judgments. 🌐

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Note: All documents mentioned in this article are from the holdings of the National Archives. Digitized documents and their complete citations can be found in the DocTeach activity “Was westward expansion necessary or were the consequences too great?” at docsteach.org/activities/5942/detail:

A Hopi (Moqui) petition signed by all the chiefs and headmen of the tribe asking the federal government to give them title to their lands instead of individually allotting each tribal member. docsteach.org/documents/300340/detail

Photograph of Golden Spike Ceremony at Promontory, Utah docsteach.org/documents/594940/detail

Homestead Proof Testimony of Almanzo Wilder docsteach.org/documents/595419/detail

Conditions of the Indian Tribes docsteach.org/documents/593576/detail

Poster Advertising “Indian Territory That Garden of the World, Open for Homestead and Pre-Emption” in Current Day Oklahoma docsteach.org/documents/4662607/detail

Mining crew drifting for gold below discovery point, Deadwood, Dak. Terr. Bystanders pose for photographer S. J. Morrow docsteach.org/documents/533169/detail