

The Formation of the United States: **A Geo-historical Perspective**

From the little settlement of Jamestown on the Atlantic Coast (1607), the United States expanded until it reached the Pacific Ocean in the mid-19th century. A century later, in 1959, its geo-political formation reached its height with the formal integration of the states of Alaska and Hawaii.

This geo-historical unification of the United States occurred at different periods of the United States history under specific circumstances and with landmark events.

1. The Original Thirteen States

Britain founded the first colony, Virginia, in 1607 and the last colony, Georgia, in 1732.

The United States of America emerged as a nation-state during the second half of the 18th century when the (mainly) English settlers of the thirteen colonies rebelled against the British crown and declared their independence in 1776.

2. European Competition over the North American Continent

Various European powers competed and clashed for the colonization of North America, among which Spain, Britain, France and the Netherlands.

Between 1607 and 1763, Britain founded thirteen different colonies covering the eastern part of North America, from the Atlantic coast to the Appalachian Mountains.

Between 1534 and 1763, France too extended its power in North America. Named New France, that vast territory extended from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Appalachians to the Rockies. The French controlled Louisiana (from the Ohio River to the Missouri river), the Ohio valley, the Mississippi and the vital access to the Gulf of Mexico.

3. The French and Indian War (1754-1763)

In the mid-18th century, English settlers crossed the Appalachians and engaged in war with the French and their Indian allies in the Ohio Valley. In 1754, a Virginian aristocrat, George Washington, commanded a militia force and attacked Fort Duquesne, a French fort. The English settlers, commanded by G. Washington, wanted to remove the French from that area but they were soon defeated. Thus, a war erupted between the British and France. In 1756, that war spread in Europe under another name: the “Seven Years War.” In 1763, France was defeated and lost a great part of its North American territories.

Thanks to the Treaty of Paris of 1763, Britain obtained Canada and all the territories east of the Mississippi River.

4. The War of Independence and its Outcome

From 1776 to 1783, the thirteen colonies fought a war of independence against the British monarchy which they came to consider as a colonizing power not as a mother country. At the end of the war, the thirteen colonies became the thirteen original states of the USA. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 gave the United States all the land west of the Appalachians, this at the expense of France’s claims over that territory. Indeed, secret negotiations between the rebelled thirteen colonies and Great Britain took place without the awareness and participation of the French.

By obtaining the land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River, the victorious USA doubled its size. The “Frontier,” which was first limited to eastern fringe of the Appalachians, was moving westward to the Mississippi River.

5. The Northwest Ordinance (1787)

When the Americans started to form their national government under the Articles of Confederation, settlers were already occupying the Ohio Valley. Thus, the Confederation Congress planned the addition of new states to the Union and passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787. The Ordinance organized the land between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. That land was called the Northwest Territory. It was divided into different parts that would be admitted as states. Through that procedure, five new states emerged: Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. The Northwest Ordinance guaranteed many civil liberties among which freedom of religion. It also prohibited the practice of slavery in the territories north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Northwest Ordinance is a landmark in American history in the sense that it launched a policy of land acquisition and westward expansion that would not stop until the boundary of the United States reached the Pacific Ocean.

6. The Louisiana Purchase (1803)

The vast territory of Louisiana was discovered by the Spanish but was explored by the French Monsieur de La Salle in 1682. He sailed down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to reach the Gulf of Mexico. Later French expeditions explored the Missouri River and all the surrounding areas. These explorations established a French claim over all the territory between the Appalachians and the Rockies. After the “Seven Years War,” France kept the part of the land west of the Mississippi River; this was Louisiana.

From 1762 to 1801, Louisiana was ceded by France to Spain, but Napoleon took it back and decided to sell it to the United States.

President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) sent diplomats to Paris. The negotiations lasted two years. France was at war with Britain, needed money and feared an American-British alliance that would take control of Louisiana. So, in **1803**, the French sold the vast Louisiana Territory of 2.3 million km² to the Americans for the sum of \$15 million.

After the Louisiana Purchase, the United States signed boundary treaties, with Spain in 1819, and with Britain in 1818, for the southern and northern borders of Louisiana.

Out of the Louisiana Territory, were created the states of Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Oklahoma. The territory included also parts of nowadays Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Minnesota.

The Louisiana Purchase is another landmark in American History for the following reasons:

- The size of the United States doubled.
- It provided more land for settlement and pushed forward the western frontier of the United States.
- It opened the United States to the Gulf of Mexico with a complete control over the Mississippi River and the acquisition of New Orleans.
- Divergences appeared between Southern (pro-slavery) states and northern (anti-slavery) states over the status of the would-be states that were to be admitted in the Union.

7. The Acquisition of Florida (1819)

From 1513 to 1819, the land of Florida witnessed many conflicts between France, Spain, and Britain over its sovereignty.

Florida was first discovered by the Spanish. Juan Ponce de Leon was the first to land there in 1513. Then, from 1539 to 1542, Hernando De Soto explored the region that extended from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi River. He claimed it for the Spanish Crown.

In 1562, some French settled Florida, but they were exterminated in 1564 by the Spanish army. In 1565, the Spanish founded the settlement of St. Augustine, the first permanent European settlement in North America.

After the Seven Years War, Spain gave Florida to Britain. The British Divided it into two provinces: East Florida and West Florida. However, with the Treaty of Paris of 1763 (and the American Independence) Spain regained it back from Britain.

The American settlement of Spanish Florida occurred gradually till 1812 when American colonists decided to proclaim the independence of the Republic of Florida. Then, an American army commanded by General Andrew Jackson attacked and occupied some parts of Florida under the pretext that Natives and runaway slaves threatened American border settlements. In 1817-1818, American troops invaded Florida under the pretext of pursuing fugitive slaves who found shelter among Seminole Indians. These waves of colonial settlements and military occupations forced Spain to cede Florida to the USA.

According to the terms of the **Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819**, Spain ceded the territory of Florida, east of the Mississippi River, to the USA, and it abandoned all its claims to the Northwest (Oregon Territory). In return, the USA recognized Spanish sovereignty over Texas. Boundary lines were set up to separate American and Spanish territories.

It is important to notice here that the fate of the Natives had no importance in the eyes of the European powers and the USA which were competing and clashing to expand their power on North America.

8. Expansion in the Southwest

The Spanish were the first to explore the vast area north of Mexico (Southwest of North America) in 1540-42. Spain thus expanded its empire north and named the new found area New Spain. Religious missions and military posts started to settle the area. Pedro de Peralta founded Santa Fe in 1610 (it is today the capital of New Mexico). New Spain included the present states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California and parts of Nevada, Colorado and Utah.

Mexico took control of this vast area when it got its independence from Spain in 1822

American fur trappers and traders went in the Southwest in the 1800s. By the 1820s, they founded small settlements. In 1821, The Santa Fe Trail (path from Missouri to Santa Fe) played an important role in early trading between Americans and Spanish-Mexicans. Indeed, the existence of Santa Fe as a trading center attracted Americans in the region.

As for Texas, American adventurers penetrated in Texas as early as 1800s. The successive waves of American settlements in Texas accelerated in the 1820s. By 1845, the number of American settlers exceeded the number Mexican inhabitants.

In 1836, the Texans, led by American Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin proclaimed their independence. The new Republic of Texas was not recognized by Mexico but won support from the United States. The Republic of Texas sought admission to the Union but it was rejected because of two reasons: anti-slaver states did not the admission of a new slave state, and the fear of a war with Mexico.

However, **in 1845, the annexation of Texas occurred.** This led to the Mexican-American War (1845-1848) concerning the southern boundaries of Texas. The American troops defeated the Mexicans and invaded Mexico and its capital. Furthermore, the United States encouraged (plotted) California to declare its independence from Mexico in 1846, and occupied it in 1847.

The **Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848** ended the war. Mexico ceded all its possessions in North America to the USA (for a sum of \$ 15 million). Out of those lands were created the states of New Mexico, California, and Arizona. The area also included parts of nowadays Nevada, Utah, and Colorado.

In **1853**, The USA purchased a piece of land north of the Mexican border. James Gadsden, a railroad entrepreneur, negotiated the purchase of a territory needed to a southern railway passage to California and the Pacific Coast. This was to be called **the Gadsden Purchase**.

9. The Oregon Question

After disputes between the USA, Britain, and Spain over the territory Northwest of the Rockies, an agreement was reached **in 1846, the Oregon Treaty**. The United States Congress created the Oregon Territory in 1848 and the Washington Territory in 1853. These were to be admitted as states in the Union in 1859 (Oregon) and 1889 (Washington).

