

Standard 5-2: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the continued westward expansion of the United States.

5.2.1 Explain how aspects of the natural environment—including the principal mountain ranges and rivers, terrain, vegetation, and climate of the region—affected travel to the West and thus the settlement of that region. (G, H)

Taxonomy Level: B 2 Understand /Conceptual Knowledge

Previous/future knowledge:

In Kindergarten, students recognized the natural features of the environment, including mountains and bodies of water, through pictures, literature, and models (K-5.4).

In 1st grade, students compared the ways that people use land and natural resources in different settings across the world, including the conservation of natural resources and the actions that may harm the environment (1-2.2).

In 3rd grade, students explained the effects of human systems on the physical landscape of South Carolina over time, including the relationship of population distribution and patterns of migration to natural resources, climate, agriculture, and economic development (3-1.4).

In 4th grade, students summarized the major expeditions and explorations that played a role in westward expansion—including those of Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, and Zebulon Pike and compared the geographic features of areas explored (4-5.1). Students also summarized the events that led to key territorial acquisitions—including the Louisiana Purchase, the Florida Purchase, the Northwest Territory treaty, the annexation of Texas, and the Mexican Cession—as well as the motives for these acquisitions and the location and geographic features of the lands acquired (4-5.3).

In United States history, students will explain the impact and challenges of westward movement, including the major land acquisitions, people’s motivations for moving west, railroad construction, the displacement of Native Americans, and the its impact on the developing American character (USHC-3.1).

It is essential for students to know:

Mountain ranges, rivers and deserts formed obstacles to westward migration. Pioneers traveled to embarkation points such as St. Louis, which came to be called the “gateway to the West.” From there they traveled by covered wagon across trails that had originally been used by Native Americans. Explorers and mountain men followed the Native American trails and wrote guidebooks that helped to show the way to those pioneers who came afterwards. The trails became increasingly marked as more and more migrants traveled along these paths. After the Civil War, the transcontinental railroad provided a way for those who had the means to travel to the West (5-2.3).

Migrants first traveled to and settled the west coast, skipping over the Great Plains. Called the “Great American Desert,” the agricultural potential of this dry, flat land was not at first realized. As technology developed, such as the steel plow that was needed to till the hard packed earth, the windmill that would bring scarce water to the surface, seeds that would grow in the challenging climate such as Russian wheat, and mechanical reapers, the potential of the region was unleashed.

Travelers to the West had to traverse not only the plains, but also major rivers and the Rocky Mountains. The major rivers systems of the West that had to be forded were the Mississippi, the Columbia, the Colorado and the Snake Rivers. Trails through the mountains followed passes that were often impassable

during spring rains and winter snows. This made it imperative that travelers leave St. Louis in time to avoid these circumstances. Mishaps along the way that delayed the rate of travel could mean disaster. Students should be able to use a map to interpret travel to the West. Students should be able to locate the Rocky Mountains on a map.

The climate of the West was also a challenge to both travelers and settlers. Hot, dry summers brought drought, dust storms and swarms of insects. Winters brought snow and the resulting spring floods. Storms were often accompanied by tornadoes. Unpredictable weather such as early snows or late-spring hailstorms could ruin crops and imperil livelihoods.

It is not essential for students to know:

It is not essential that students be able to name the trails that crossed the West or to identify the most popular crossing points of the rivers.

Assessment guidelines:

Appropriate assessments require students to **explain** how the natural environment impacted the settlement of the West. Students should also be able to **identify** the major rivers, the mountain ranges and the Great Plains that impeded travel on a map.