United States History

Lecture Narratives: Unit 4

Lecture 01 – Manifest Destiny Mapping

* This lecture is mostly about the mapping process and I don’t typically add much additional material.
* We do discuss the various ways territory is added to the nation. Students will notice that conflict is almost always involved.

Lecture 02 – The Mexican War

* This lecture is in the form of a timeline that students complete as the lecture is given.
* Mexico, having established its independence from Spain in the 1820s, invited Americans to settle in the Texas territory to serve as a buffer against the Indians. Mexico was generous in the terms offered to Americans, such as not charging any taxes for a number of years while settlements get established. Cotton and slavery quickly sprout in Texas, causing the Texas settlers to have much in common with the rest of the South. As most of them are Protestant, they also have little in common with the Catholicism of the Mexicans.
* A series of escalating crises over the powers of Mexico over the Texas residents lead the people of Texas to launch a revolt in the mid-1830s. Imitating the American Revolutionaries, Texas manage to win their independence from Mexico and they establish a separate republic. The United States refuses to annex Texas because Presidents Jackson and Van Buren both fear the political conflict that would arise if another slave state joined the union. For almost 10 years, Texas is an independent nation. Unfortunately, its southern boundary with Mexico is never clearly defined and the Texans think that the boundary is a lot further South than the Mexicans believe.
* By 1844, the annexation of Texas has become an important political issue. Western expansion in general is becoming more important and James K. Polk runs on a platform of the addition of Texas to the union. The issue is so popular that Congress decides in January 1845 to move forward with bringing Texas into the union; Polk’s election as president was taken as a sign of the public’s support.
* In June 1845, President Polk sends an ambassador to Mexico to buy disputed territory in order to smooth over the potential conflict with Mexico. The American ambassador was authorized to offer $25 million for land that would also include California but the Mexican government rejected the offer. President Polk then sent troops to the U.S/Mexican border with the intention of provoking the Mexicans into a conflict.
* In December 1845, Texas finally joins the Union (formally) as a state by a joint-resolution of Congress (which was a dubious measure at the time but approved in a Supreme Court case in 1901).
* In April 1846, the U.S. troops enter land that is disputed between Mexico and Texas and provoke an attack. 16 Americans are killed, giving President Polk the excuse he needs to go to war.
* In May 1846, Polk asks Congress for a declaration of war and the U.S. goes to war against Mexico.
* Sensing that the war was about the expansion of slavery and not about American rights, a northern Congressman offered the Wilmot Proviso in February 1847, stating that any land taken from Mexico would not be allowed to have slavery. This proviso is defeated, further angering the Whigs who believe that the Democrats have manufactured a war simply to further slavery.
* October 1847 – The US defeats Mexico in a war that is a lopsided contest. Mexico did not stand a chance.
* February 1848 – In the treaty that ended the conflict, the United States agreed to pay Mexico $21.5 million for their lost territory. The new lands added to the U.S. basically complete the continental United States (except for a little chunk that will be added in 1853). The new territory is known as the Mexican Cession.
* January 1848 – Gold is discovered in California, part of the Mexican Cession. Hardly anyone knew then, however, that the population boom that would result in California would prove to be an important step towards the Civil War.

Lecture 3 – The Crises of the 1850s

* The Compromise of 1850 grew out of the explosion of California’s population. In trying to settle the issue of whether or not slavery would be allowed in the western lands, Congress hit upon the idea of popular sovereignty. They would allow the people in those areas to vote for or against slavery. California entered the union as a free state in this compromise. The slave trade itself was abolished in the nation’s capital, since many people regarded it as degrading that humans were being bought and sold in the place where the “free and the brave” made laws for the republic. To soothe the fears of southerners, whose slaves were escaping on the Underground Railroad to the North, the Compromise also passed a Fugitive Slave Law. This law is significant in that it could force northerners to be slave catchers and denied “slaves’ caught the right to defend themselves in court. Many northern states responded with personal liberty laws that nullified the Fugitive Slave Act. This provision, more than any other, forced northerners to come face-to-face with the ugly reality of the power of southern slaveowners.
* Uncle Tom’s Cabin – While the Fugitive Slave Act played on northerner’s fears of the slave power, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel helped many to picture the emotional and physical devastation wrought by slavery. Northerners could see—literally, since the book was heavily illustrated—the evils of slavery. A bestseller, the book was turned into stage plays and serialized in the newspapers. One measure of the book’s popularity is the number of girls born after 1851 who are named Eliza after the book’s main character.
* Kansas-Nebraska Act – The calm of the Compromise of 1850 was broken by the greedy machinations of Stephen Douglas, an alcoholic with investments in western railroads who wanted to get support for a transcontinental railroad with a hub at Chicago. However, southerners were not willing to help him unless he offered something, so he turned to popular sovereignty as a tool for increasing slavery’s chances of spreading to the upper west. Under the Missouri Compromise of 1820, no slavery was to be allowed north of the 36˚30’ parallel. Douglas destroyed the Missouri Compomise by offering the possibility of slavery to the Kansas and Nebraska territories – settlers there could vote on allowing slavery. Disgusted by the law, northerners formed a brand new political party in 1854, the Republicans. Meanwhile, Kansas broke out in violence as settlers rushed in to exercise their popular sovereignty. Both pro and anti-slavery forces battled for control of the state, leading to the term “Bleeding Kansas.” On the floor of the Senate, debate over the violence in Kansas reached a fever pitch when a southern Congressman, Preston Brooks, beat Senator Charles Sumner unconscious with a cane. Charles Sumner had made some unsavory insinuations about slavery and Brooks’ relative.
* Dred Scott – The specifics of this case are interesting and students will investigate more in the webquest. In summary, Roger Taney (a Jackson appointee to the court) ruled (under some influence from the President, James Buchanan) in such a way as to try to stop all discussions of slavery. First, Dred Scott’s challenge to the laws of slavery could not stand since African Americans could not be citizens and therefore could not sue. Secondly, the court ruled that living in free territory did not free a person—property was sacred no matter where it was taken. Finally, the court ruled the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional for its violation of property rights. The case outraged northerners who were particularly concerned now that slavery might spread to the entire U.S. under the ruling.
* John Brown – This fanatic holds an interesting place in America’s history. Now regarded as possibly psychotic, Brown held a fanatical devotion to his religious ideas about the sinfulness of slavery. He participated, with his sons, in the massacre of slaveholders in Pottawatomie (Kansas) in 1856. Formulating a plan to arm slaves with weapons secured from Harper’s Ferry, VA, he hoped to inspire a southern slave revolt beginning in Virginia and spreading across the South. The incident showcased his lunacy as it was poorly planned and executed. His trial aroused strong public condemnation from southerners who accused Brown of being funded by a group of northerners. Brown’s death was hailed by many northerners as an example of martyrdom and by southerners as appropriate vengeance against a fanatic.