Major Events during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Economic and strategic interests, supported by popular beliefs, caused the United States to expand its territory to the Pacific Ocean during the first half of the nineteenth century. Before the Civil War the new American republic experienced dramatic territorial expansion, immigration, economic growth, and industrialization. Throughout the first fifty years of the century, thousands of Americans moved west to settle new frontiers.

Following ratification of the Constitution, the American people elected George Washington the first president of the United States. After George Washington’s presidency ended in the late 1790s, the first political parties developed. A political party is a group of people with similar beliefs about how the government should be run. The first two political parties were the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans (also called simply Republicans). Alexander Hamilton and John Adams led the Federalists. They believed in a strong national government and favored the development of an industrial economy based on manufacturing. Bankers and business interests in the Northeast supported the Federalists.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison led the Democratic-Republicans. They believed in a weak national government and favored the development of an agricultural economy based on farming. Farmers, artisans (skilled craftsmen), and frontier settlers in the South supported the Democratic-Republican Party. In 1803 the American people elected Thomas Jefferson president of the United States. As president Jefferson purchased the huge Louisiana Territory from France. This purchase doubled the size of the United States. President Jefferson then sent the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the new territories that lay west of the Mississippi River. Sacajawea, an American Indian woman, served as their guide and translator.

In 1812 the United States declared war on Great Britain. This war, which lasted until 1815, was called the War of 1812. Although the end of this war produced no major changes, American public opinion believed the United States had achieved victory over the British. This belief produced an American claim to the Oregon Territory and increased migration of American settlers into Florida. The United States later acquired Florida from Spain by an 1819 treaty, called the Adams-Onis Treaty.

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the Supreme Court made several key decisions. At this time John Marshall, a Federalist from Virginia, served as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Under Marshall’s leadership, the Supreme Court issued several important rulings, which established the power of the federal courts as a co-equal branch of the United States government. In the case of *Marbury v. Madison* the Supreme Court declared a federal law unconstitutional. This decision set precedent for the federal courts to exercise judicial review, which is the power to declare laws unconstitutional. The right of judicial review provides the Supreme Court with its main check on the power of the legislative branch. In *McCulloch v. Maryland*, a second major decision, the Marshall court prohibited the states from taxing agencies of the federal government by declaring a Maryland state law unconstitutional. In *McCulloch v. Maryland* John Marshall wrote, “the power to tax is the power to destroy.” Marshall believed it was very important for the federal government to be more powerful than the state governments, and this decision further established the power of the federal government over the states. In addition, since *McCulloch v. Maryland* declared a state law unconstitutional, it strengthened the federal court’s power of judicial review.

Relations with foreign nations also became an important matter during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1823 the United States government issued the Monroe Doctrine,
which set forth the basic principles of American foreign policy for the rest of the nineteenth century. The Monroe Doctrine contained four important points. First, the United States said that European nations should not consider establishing future colonies on the American continents (North and South America). Second, nations in the Western Hemisphere (North and South America) were inherently or basically different from European countries. The countries of North and South America were republics by nature, while the European nations were monarchies (ruled by kings or queens). Third, the United States would regard as a threat to its own peace and safety any attempt by European powers to impose their system of government on any independent state in the Western Hemisphere. All American presidents have continued to follow the precedent set forth by this part of the Monroe Doctrine. Fourth, the United States would not interfere in European affairs.

During the first half of the nineteenth century westward movement and economic development were two trends in American life. American settlers poured westward from the coastal states into the midwest, southwest, and Texas. They sought economic opportunity in the form of land, both to own and to farm. The growth of railroads and canals helped the growth of an industrial economy and supported the westward movement of settlers. In addition, in 1793 Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which mechanically separated cottonseeds from cotton fiber. Whitney’s invention led to the spread of the slavery-based “cotton kingdom” in the Deep South. American migration into Texas led to an armed revolt against Mexican rule in the war for Texas independence. At the Battle of the Alamo a band of Texans futilely fought to the last man against a much larger Mexican force. The Texans later defeated the Mexican army, and Texas thereby gained its independence. This development eventually resulted in the annexation (addition; incorporation of territory) of Texas by the United States.

The belief that it was America’s “Manifest Destiny” to stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific provided political support for territorial expansion. Under “Manifest Destiny,” Americans believed it was God’s will that the United States span the entire continent from one ocean to the other. Following “Manifest Destiny” to its logical conclusion, the American victory in the Mexican War (1846-1848) led to the acquisition of an enormous territory in the West. This territory, known as the Mexican Cession, included the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and parts of Colorado and New Mexico.