**SSUSH8: Expansion and Sectionalism**

**Summary**

In the decades before the Civil War, three distinct regions developed in the United States: the North, the South, and the West. Sharp divisions emerged between the economies and culture of the North and South. In the West, settlers from both the North and South merged to create a distinct way of life. The expansion into the West was not without conflict- both political and physical. These cultural and economic clashes ultimately led to the outbreak of Civil War in the United States.

The Louisiana Territory encompassed a wide swath of land in the middle of the North American continent. Thomas Jefferson purchased the land from France in 1803. By mid-century, the population in portions of the territory had increased dramatically and their next step was to apply for statehood through the United States Congress. Missouri was one such territory, primed for acceptance as a full and equal state. At the time of its application, however, there was already a balanced number of free and slave states. The sectional divisions of the nation were demonstrated in the hard-fought negotiations over whether Missouri would enter the Union as a slave or free state.

The admission of Missouri as a new state is an excellent illustration of how Congress sought to maintain a “perfect equilibrium” between the number of free and slave states. In 1819, right before Missouri applied for admission to the United States, there were 11 free states and 11 slave states. The balance was politically important. The North had a larger population, which gave that region an advantage through the proportional representation of the House of Representatives. The Senate, however, was evenly balanced between free and slave states because each state had equal representation in that chamber. For a bill to become a law, it had to be passed by both bodies of the legislature. Therefore, the balanced Senate prevented either region of the country from mandating policy concerning the contentious slavery issue.

Maine would enter as a free state and Missouri would enter as a slave state, thus preserving the balance in the Senate. Second, the rest of the Louisiana Territory would be subject to a geographic division at the 36o, 30” line of latitude (Missouri’s southern border). Slavery would be prohibited north of the line, except in Missouri. Slavery would remain untouched south of the line. The Missouri Compromise passed both bodies of Congress and James Monroe signed it into law in March 1820. The seeds of sectionalism were beginning to sprout.

James K. Polk became the eleventh President of the United States after winning a close election in 1844. Once in office, Polk added to the nation's western lands by annexing Texas and part of Oregon. Many Americans believed that expansion across the continent was the destiny of the United States. Others worried that the bold acquisition of land would lead to war. The actions of James K. Polk during his presidency did both- he added territory to the United States and fought a war with Mexico over expansion.

Americans have always looked westward. As the coastal plains filled, colonists arriving from Europe sought unclaimed land in the backcountry of each colony. After the French and Indian War, settlers crossed the Appalachians and entered the Tennessee and Ohio River Basins. After the American Revolution, settlers began to fill the Ohio Valley and moved out into western Georgia and Alabama. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the size of America's land holdings and brought new opportunities to move westward into the Mississippi River Valley. Florida, the last piece of foreign held territory in the east was acquired in 1819 from Spain. By 1850, Americans had settled California, Oregon, and Washington on the Pacific coast. The process of settlement took 150 years to reach the Appalachians, 50 years to reach the Mississippi River and another 30 years to settle the Pacific states. In 230 years, Americans had come to dominate the continent. Americans believed such rapid expansion must have been a result of divine favor referred to as Manifest Destiny.

The United States, under the leadership of President James K. Polk, took Texas into the Union in 1845. As a result, war broke out between the United States and Mexico over differing frontier claims in Texas. The war proved to be swift and decisive as Mexico lost not only their land claim in Texas, but also all of California and New Mexico to the United States. The victory in the Mexican War soon pitted the North and South against one another as the United States wrestled with the slavery issue in the newly acquired lands. Sectionalism became even more bitter and the United States was quickly headed down a path towards Civil War.