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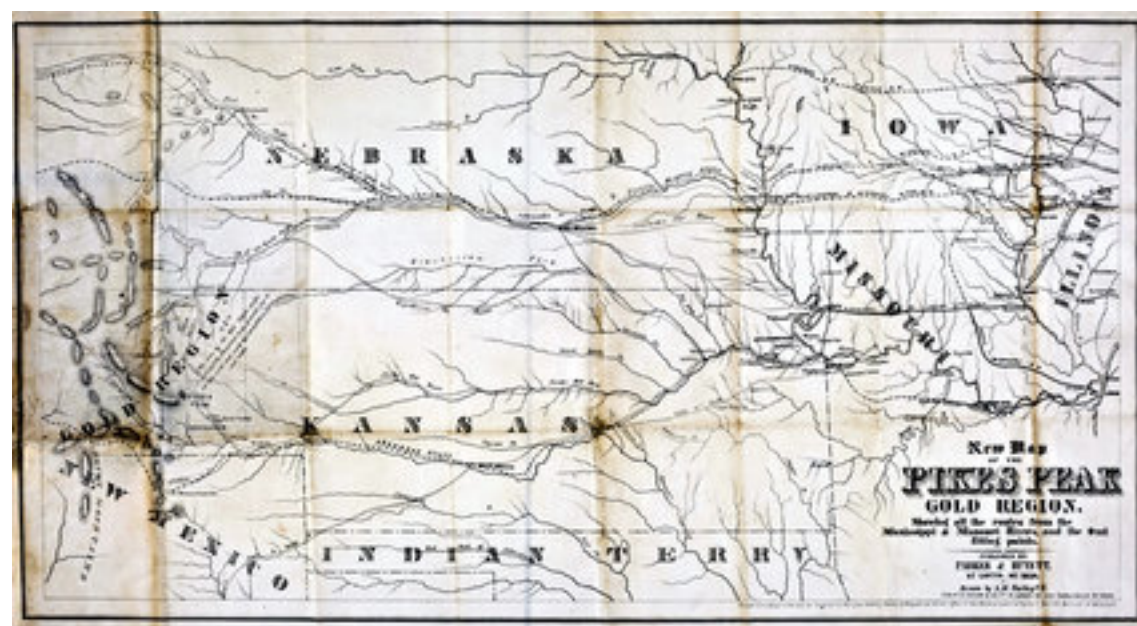
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How the West Was Won

BY SUSAN SCHULTEN FEBRUARY 23, 2011 9:13 PM 32



Newberry Library. Click on the map to follow migrants' quest for gold.

Histories of mid-19th century America tend to separate its two most important threads: a war over slavery engulfs the East, while mineral rushes transform the West. But while these developments are geographically distinct, they could not be more interdependent. At its heart, the political crisis that led to the Civil War was fought over the extension of slavery into the West, and it was the subsequent implosion of the Union that enabled the Northern, Republican-controlled Congress to create these western territories.

Popular culture thinks of America's westward expansion as a post-Civil War event, but it had begun much earlier. In 1859 as many as 100,000 migrants flooded into the western reaches of the Kansas and Nebraska territories, which then extended all the way into the Rocky Mountains. These migrants were lured by the hope of easy gold, and motivated further by the financial panic of 1857.

Though the miners quickly exhausted the mineral wealth along the Front Range (present-day central Colorado), more extensive deposits were soon discovered further west in the Rockies, and the town of Denver developed to serve those interests. Many of these early migrants sought independence from Kansas and Nebraska, and found an ally in Rep. Schuyler Colfax of Indiana. But his efforts to create a territory were met with silence: while Congress had organized seven territories from 1848 to 1854, the decision to open Kansas for settlement under popular sovereignty had been a disaster. Proslavery agitators violently clashed with abolitionists, making it clear how high the stakes were over slavery in the West. Nobody wanted to ignite another "Bleeding Kansas," and the idea of a new territory around Denver languished as Southern and Northern legislators in Washington fought to a stalemate over how to define the West. Efforts to organize the territory around the gold fields failed throughout 1859 and 1860.

Some of these proposals were rejected by Congressmen wary of provoking sectional outrage, and others were defeated by the territorial residents themselves. In February 1860 Kansas drafted a constitution to achieve statehood which outlined Kansas' present borders and detached the western mining regions, including the Front Range, and the city of Denver. Though Kansas would not become a state for another year, by early 1860 it had made clear that the gold fields were beyond its ability to govern. As a result, this region was left unorganized.

Once the Lower South began to secede, however, things changed quickly. While the election of 1860 had given the Republican Party a majority in the House, secession, which removed southern Democrats from Congress, now gave them an effective majority in the Senate. Ironically, the sectional crisis that initially obstructed statehood for Kansas ultimately enabled it to join the Union, which it did on Jan. 29, 1861. Then, on Feb. 1, the same day that Texans voted to leave the Union, Sen. Benjamin Wade introduced a bill to organize a new territory, a square carved out of Kansas and the Utah, Nebraska and New Mexico territories. The new territory at first was called "Jefferson," but it was soon renamed "Colorado."

But even this late in the secession crisis, sectional politics played a key role in defining the new West. The bill was co-sponsored by Missouri Democrat James Green, an ardent defender of slavery and state rights. Green's role indicates that Republicans were actively courting the border states, which also explains why the bill omitted any reference to slavery. Indeed, the bill was introduced just as secession appeared to be losing steam: though seven states had left, four others had defeated secession initiatives. The future of those four states, as well as Kentucky and Maryland, must have preoccupied Congressional Republicans as they debated these new territories.

One wonders what Lincoln must have thought of this strategy, for the bill pitted his primary goals against one another: silence over slavery repudiated the mission of his party, but he also knew that this silence might help to preserve the Union, his paramount objective as president. For all intents and purposes, the territory would be closed to slavery, because although the Dred Scott decision legalized the institution, in practical terms the Republican victory ended the westward spread of slavery. The bill passed at the end of February, and Buchanan signed it as one of his last acts in office. He left Lincoln to appoint officials to govern the new Colorado Territory, as well as the newly organized territories of Nevada and Dakota.

The Republican Party continued to shape the West during the war, most apparent in a series of acts in 1862 that promoted its vision of settlement, railroad development and education. This influence is also evident in the 1864 election, when it seemed that Lincoln might lose his bid for reelection. To maximize their party's chances in the Electoral College, Congressional Republicans invited Colorado, Nevada and Nebraska territories to quickly apply for statehood, since all three were expected to vote Republican. This also explains why no such invitation was given to the much older territories of New Mexico or Utah: the former was considered excessively Democratic, while the Mormon leadership in Utah was still hostile to a party that had characterized polygamy and slavery as the "twin relics of barbarism" in the 1850s.

Colorado's path to statehood in 1864 ended when the territory's voters turned it down, while that same year the brutal Sand Creek Massacre, in which territorial militia killed as many as 163 Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians, raised doubts about its readiness for statehood. In the end, only Nevada became a state under Lincoln's administration. Still, these maneuvers show how Republicans were able to shape the West during the political crisis in the east; they also demonstrate the influence that the secession crisis and the Civil War had on the region's political origins.

This influence is manifest in Denver itself. The streets that line Capitol Hill memorialize Union heroes: Lincoln, Grant, Sherman and Logan. The reverence for the Union is reflected in the architecture of the capitol, which is modeled — like so many others of the era — on the Capitol in Washington, a symbol of power and permanence. From the aptly named Lincoln Park to the west, visitors to Denver were awed by the grandeur of the capitol, and just after the turn of the century a statue memorializing the Union soldier was erected on its western side, a concrete reminder that the massive war in the distant East had helped to win the West.

Editor's note: In an earlier version of this article, the wrong state was given for Rep. Colfax; it is Indiana, and it has been corrected.

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Susan Schulten is a history professor at the University of Denver and the author of "The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950." She is writing a book about the rise of thematic mapping in the United States.

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