

Reasons for Migration

Option A

Adapted from: <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/migration-west>

Lexile: 1040
Word Count: 759

Vocabulary

- | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|------------|------------|
| ▶ emigrated | ▶ idyllic | ▶ cannibalism | ▶ agrarian | ▶ trapping |
| ▶ lumberjack | ▶ Latino | ▶ undeveloped | ▶ westward | ▶ fateful |
| ▶ tower | | | | |

The Donner Party

In 1846, a group of people called the Donner Party emigrated from Illinois west to California. They wanted to begin new lives and build farms in the mild climate there. Delayed in starting, they decided to take a shortcut that would allow them to save time and many miles by leaving the Oregon Trail at a certain point. The route they followed, called Hastings Cutoff, had been described by a writer named Lansford W. Hastings, who had never traveled it himself but wanted to encourage American settlers to move to California, a land he promoted as an idyllic paradise. Although this route was the most direct way to California, it was much harder than anyone expected. The group had to cross steep mountains and long stretches of desert in Utah and Nevada. The Donner Party had made a fateful decision to take this route.

By the time they reached the Truckee River in Nevada, they were running out of food and fighting among themselves. One man killed another in a fight. Some people died from illness or accidents. Native Americans took some of their animals. Small groups began to split off from the main party to try to survive on their own. Even though it was October, George Donner and the others decided to cross the towering Sierra Nevada mountains. As they climbed higher, snow started falling. They had to stop when they found snow drifts that were 10 feet high or more. They built rough cabins and tents for the winter. Despite attempts to get help, only 48 out of 87 people survived the winter. Some became so desperate for food that they resorted to cannibalism, eating the bodies of those who had died. This terrible event showed how dangerous it could be to travel west.

Moving West

Westward migration was not new in the nineteenth century. People had been doing it since the early 1600s when the English started colonies in Virginia and Massachusetts. After the American Revolution, more people moved across the Appalachian Mountains and beyond the Mississippi River.



Kmusser. Donner Route Map. Map. October 21, 2023. Wikimedia Commons.

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A map showing the Hastings Cutoff that the Donner Party traveled to in 1846.

What brought people to the decision to go West? There were many factors, but for most men and women, the West represented opportunity. Many simply sought a better life, tempted by the availability of cheap land. Most Americans lived an agrarian lifestyle that required land for farming or raising livestock. Hunting and trapping presented economic opportunities for some. The massive amount of trees in undeveloped land presented another opportunity for others, because lumber was in demand and logging companies needed lumberjacks. The possibility of mineral wealth also presented an economic motivation, and during the Gold Rush years (1848–1855) many headed westward in search of gold or silver.

Economic uncertainty and the lack of economic opportunities in the East also were motives to seek a better situation in the West. Some went hoping to make a quick profit to pay off debts or to expand their farm or business back home. And many workers—mostly young single men—went West to find jobs as miners, railroad workers, or cowboys on ranches.

Trains made it easier and cheaper to travel west later in the 1800s. Railroad companies offered jobs and encouraged people to buy land along their routes. Some men went west looking for adventure, whether exploring new places, searching for gold, or building homes in the wilderness.

Another inspiration was cultural, such as the desire of migrants who went west to spread their religion. Whether working as missionaries to American Indians or hoping to convert other settlers, Christians from many different churches moved westward. Other religious groups moved west to escape persecution; among these were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons, who moved to Utah and established a new homeland there.

The life of a cowboy became popular after the Civil War, especially in adventure stories. Cattle ranches needed workers, and many young men wanted to be cowboys. However, the real job was much harder than in the stories. Cowboys worked in dan-

gerous, dirty conditions for little money. About one-third of cowboys were Latino, and about that many were African American.

Was It Worth It?

Moving west was dangerous. Travelers faced harsh weather, wild animals, and difficult terrain. They worried about running out of water in dry areas and about outlaws stealing their belongings. Many feared attacks from Native Americans. Women worried about having babies without help from their families and friends. Despite these dangers, many people thought the opportunities were worth the risks.

The idea of moving west became an important part of American identity. Even today, Americans continue to move around the country looking for better lives and new opportunities. They might move in any direction now and travel by different means, but they keep the same spirit of exploration that marked the period of western expansion.



Seanol, Donner Party Memorial, photograph, August 2005, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Donner_Party_Memorial.jpg. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported and GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2 or later.

This memorial honors the members of the Donner Party who endured unimaginable hardship during the winter of 1846–47. The plaque reads: 'Virile to risk and find; Kindly withal and a ready help. Facing the brunt of fate; Indomitable—unafraid.'

Reasons for Migration

Option B

Adapted from: <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/migration-west>

Lexile: 950
Word Count: 380

Vocabulary

- ▶ westward ▶ low-paying ▶ ranching ▶ logging ▶ persecution
- ▶ sickness ▶ settler ▶ missionaries ▶ farming

The Donner Party

In 1846, the Donner Party left Illinois for California, hoping to find new opportunities there. They began late and chose a shorter route called the Hastings Cutoff. The route was named for Lansford W. Hastings, who had promoted the route, though he had never traveled it. It turned out to be much harder than expected, with deserts and high mountains to cross.

By the time they reached the Truckee River, they were low on food and arguing with each other. Some died from sickness, accidents, or violence, and Native Americans took some of their animals. The group began to split up. Despite it being October, they tried to cross the Sierra Nevada mountains. Heavy snow trapped them, and they built shelters that did little to protect them from the weather. Only 48 of 87 survived the winter—some by eating the dead—showing the risks of westward travel.

Moving West

People had been moving west since the early 1600s when the English started colonies in Virginia and Massachusetts. After America became independent, more people moved across the Appalachian Mountains and beyond the Mississippi River.



Kmusser. Donner Route Map. Map. October 21, 2023. Wikimedia Commons.

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A map showing the Hastings Cutoff that the Donner Party traveled to in 1846.

Why did people decide to go west? Most went west seeking better lives—cheap land for farming or ranching, jobs in hunting or logging, or riches from gold and silver, especially during the Gold Rush.

Some went to spread their religion, working as missionaries or escaping persecution. The Mormons, for example, moved to Utah to build a new community.

Immigrants and African Americans also moved west for freedom and opportunity. After the Civil War, many hoped to escape discrimination and improve their lives. Railroads made travel easier and cheaper. Companies offered jobs and land to attract settlers. Others went west for adventure or to build new homes.

Cowboys became famous after the Civil War, though the job was tough and low-paying.

Was It Worth It?

Moving west was dangerous. Travelers faced bad weather, wild animals, and rough land. They worried about running out of water in dry areas and about bad people stealing their things. Many feared attacks from Native Americans. Women worried about having babies without help from their families and friends. Despite these dangers, many people thought the chances for a better life were worth the risks.



Seanol, Donner Party Memorial, photograph, August 2005, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Donner_Party_Memorial.jpg. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported and GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2 or later.

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