

## 3.2 The Growing West

Who benefited from the second wave of westward expansion in the United States?

### Explore

## Looking North

What role did physical geography play in the settlement of Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush?

Although the families living on farms in the West faced difficult living conditions, life in the extreme northwest corner of North America brought challenges that were even more extreme. The large area that now makes up the state of Alaska has a subarctic climate, with summers that are brief and cool and winters that are unbearably harsh at times. A chain of more than 300 volcanic islands stretches to the southwest, nearly 1,200 miles into the Pacific Ocean, while much of the interior region is a snowy and mountainous wilderness. Yet in spite of its extreme physical geography, Alaska became part of the nation's Manifest Destiny after the Civil War.

On March 30, 1867, the United States purchased from Russia the large peninsula and islands of what was then the Alaskan territory. U.S. Secretary of State William Seward negotiated the \$7.2 million land purchase after having spent years convincing Congress and others that Alaska was essential to the nation's development. Seward's conviction was based on the idea that the people of the United States had the Manifest Destiny to expand across North America from shore to shore. Critics, however, denounced the purchase of Alaska as "Seward's Folly" and "Seward's Icebox." They argued that it was foolish for the United States to spend so much money on territory thousands of miles from centers of commerce in the East. On the other hand, supporters of Seward's purchase argued that the land deal ended the possibility of Russian control in North America, created access to the northern Pacific Ocean, and increased the size of the nation by almost 20 percent. When Seward was later asked to recall his greatest professional achievement, he replied, "The purchase of Alaska, but it will take the people a generation to find it out."

### Early Settlement

For several decades after its purchase, Alaska seemed of little importance. Some trappers and traders settled on the territory's Arctic shore. They traveled to the former Russian outpost at Sitka or trading posts such as Wrangell, Kodiak, and Kenai. Military personnel were sent to build and staff army bases, but these proved expensive to maintain in such remote territory. By 1870, all trading outposts except for Sitka had closed. Only around 100 soldiers remained in Alaska.

Early U.S. settlement in Alaska consisted primarily of government employees scattered throughout the frontier posts and a small population of rugged civilians who made a living off of fur, whaling, hunting, and the trade of

other natural resources. At the time of the first U.S. census of Alaska in 1880, only 430 people out of 33,426 were categorized as “white settlers.” The vast majority of Alaskan residents were Alaskan natives, and 1,756 people were categorized as “Creole,” which meant they were native to Alaska but born of Russian descent. The discovery of gold, however, changed everything.

## The Klondike Gold Rush

After small discoveries of gold in and around Sitka, the first Alaskan mining district was established in May 1879. The following year, prospectors found gold nuggets in a creek east of Sitka. The big strike brought people north from San Francisco and Portland. This led to the development of Juneau, Alaska’s current state capital. As more prospectors arrived, settlement patterns began to change. Census figures report that in 1890 Juneau had 1,253 residents, and more than 400 people lived across the channel in the new mining town of Douglas. However, mining was not the only flourishing industry in the Alaska territory. With more than 3,000 rivers and almost 100 lakes, as well as access to the Pacific Ocean, Arctic Ocean, Bering Sea, and Chukchi Sea, the fishing and canning industries also grew to employ approximately 2,000 people.

In August 1896, a group of prospectors found gold just across the border from Alaska, in the remote Yukon region of Canada. The Klondike Gold Rush was on! It took about a year for news of the gold strike to reach the lower United States, and during this time, people claimed all of the gold stakes in the newly named Bonanza Creek. However, the “stampedeers,” or newly arriving prospectors, were unaware. Between 1890 and 1900, the Alaskan population nearly doubled, as an estimated 70,000 or so adventurers migrated to the Klondike.

Many of the fortune seekers attempted the most direct routes to the Klondike across the Chilkoot and White passes. Both trail crossings involved harrowing treks through mountainous terrain. The Chilkoot Pass required a 3,000-foot climb, and the White Pass trail was nicknamed Dead Horse Trail because so many horses were lost on the narrow, rock-strewn path. Travelers on these routes often endured blinding snowstorms, avalanches, fierce winds, and temperatures that fell to  $-50^{\circ}\text{F}$ . Many were forced to walk and use pack animals to carry their belongings.

In addition to heading for the Klondike, the gold rush also saw prospectors fanning out across Alaska in hopes of finding riches. By 1890, for example, the northern boomtown of Nome on the Seward Peninsula had nearly 13,000 residents, and the city of Skagway had nearly 3,200. Then, in 1902, gold was found in Tanana Hills, which led to the founding of the central city of Fairbanks. Although the area was rich in this particular mineral, prospectors needed to dig 200 feet below the hard permafrost to retrieve anything.