

Chapter 3

Setting the Geographic Stage

How has geography influenced the development of the United States?

3.1 Introduction

In late 1606, three small ships crammed with about 105 men and boys set sail from England across the Atlantic. These colonists sought, in the words of a song, “to get the pearl and gold” in “Virginia, Earth’s only paradise.” They were lured by visions of riches—gold, silver, gems—and the promise of adventure.

Four months later, the travel-weary settlers finally sailed into Chesapeake Bay on the eastern coast of North America. Their first impressions of Virginia exceeded expectations. One voyager wrote of “fair meadows and goodly tall trees, with such fresh waters running through the woods as I was almost ravished at [carried away by] the first site thereof.” The settlers chose a site on the James River, which they named for their king, where they established Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in North America.

One of the colony’s leaders, John Smith, declared the site “a very fit place for the erecting of a great city.” Smith could not have been more wrong. The swampy ground swarmed with mosquitoes. It also lacked good drinking water. By the first winter, more than half the settlers had died of sickness and starvation. To top it all off, the “gold” they found turned out to be iron pyrite, a common mineral also known as “fool’s gold.” The hoped-for “land of opportunity” had turned out to be a land of daunting challenges. Yet the infant colony survived, due in large part to Smith’s leadership and the help of local Indians, who brought the settlers food.

The story of Jamestown’s struggle for survival illustrates how geography can affect human events. The North American continent, with its abundant resources, held out the promise of opportunity to all who migrated to its shores. But at the same time, as the Jamestown colonists discovered, this new land also presented those who came with countless obstacles to overcome. In this chapter, you will start to see how geography has helped shape the course of American history, from the arrival of the first Americans to the present day.



This picture shows the wives of settlers arriving at the low, swampy peninsula of Jamestown. Today, the original site of Jamestown sits no longer on a peninsula, but on an island. The site was cut off from the mainland by tidal currents of the James River.



The Mississippi River is a major north-south transportation route. Ships that travel along it carry farm products, raw materials, and factory goods, among other products.



For centuries, the Rocky Mountains, with their tall peaks and rugged passes, blocked east-west movement across the continent.

Although today the Great Plains support agricultural activity, early pioneers would not have believed it possible. They called the grassy, dry region the Great American Desert. Americans did not significantly develop or inhabit the Great Plains until railroads were extended across the country in the late 1800s.

3.2 A Vast, Varied Land: Physical Features of the United States

The United States today measures more than 3 million square miles in area. Within this vast land lie extremely varied **physical features**. The country includes almost all types of **landforms**, from mountains and valleys to plains and plateaus. It also has many bodies of water, from enormous lakes and major rivers to tidewater marshes and swampy bayous. Since humans first arrived, these physical features have influenced patterns of migration and settlement.

Blessings and Barriers The land and its resources have attracted people and helped shape their ways of life. America's earliest people came to the continent tens of thousands of years ago by following animals they hunted. Their descendants spread across the continent and developed ways of life suited to the land's varied environments. Some groups also shaped their environment to meet their needs—for example, by using fire to keep cleared areas of forest open.

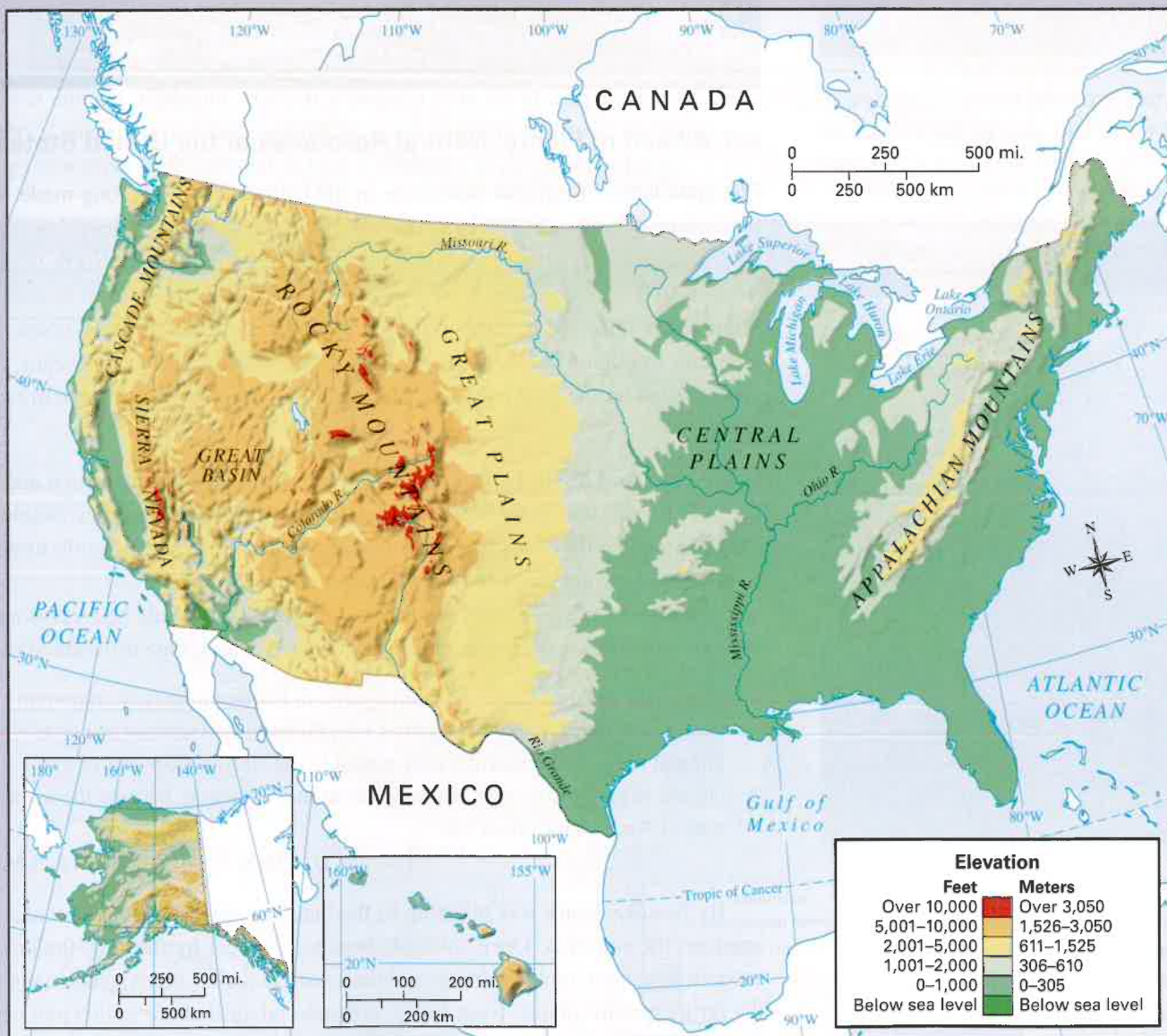
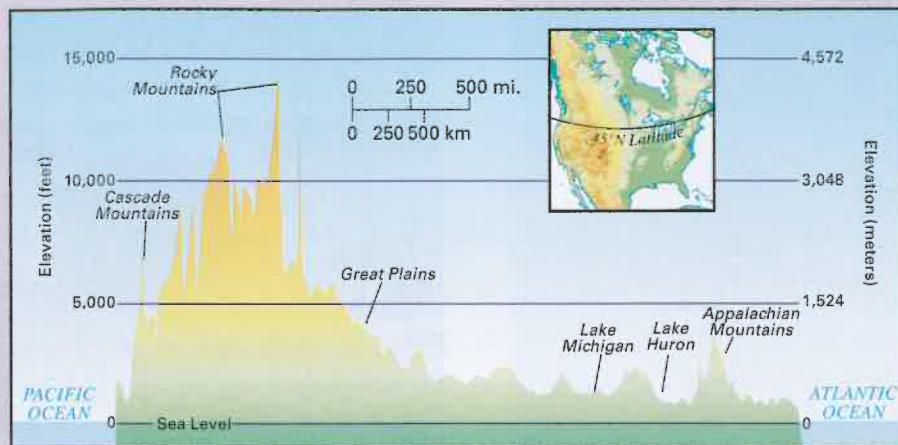
Like these early Indians, settlers from Europe found that the nation's physical features influenced where and how they lived. In the 1500s, the Spanish began settling the Southwest and Southeast in search of gold. Once there, they stayed to run farms and mines. Starting in the 1600s, English colonists adapted to the land and its climate as they began their new lives in North America. For example, the Southeast's broad coastal plain, with its plentiful rainfall and warm temperature, was ideal for farms. By contrast, the Northeast's natural harbors developed into centers of trade and commerce. Because water was the fastest way to transport goods and people in the nation's early days, cities sprang up along internal waterways—such as New Orleans on the Mississippi River and Chicago on Lake Michigan.

Although the land has lured people for thousands of years, it has also posed challenges. For example, the Appalachian Mountains in the East, the Rocky Mountains in the West, and the deserts in the Southwest have been natural barriers to travel and settlement. Harsh climate conditions, poor soil, and lack of water have made living difficult or even impossible in some areas of the country. As you study American history, look for the effect the land has had on the nation's development.



Physical Geography of the United States Today

The elevation profile at right shows a cross-section of the United States. How do you think the physical features of the United States affected settlement patterns?



When colonists arrived in North America, most of England had already been deforested. Colonists set up logging operations to provide wood for shipbuilding, home construction, and furniture making. American forests today still provide lumber for these purposes, as well as for export to other countries.



3.3 A Land of Plenty: Natural Resources of the United States

The abundance of **natural resources** in the United States has long made it a land of opportunity. Soil, forests, wildlife, and minerals have provided the basis for economic activity since the ancient peoples migrated to North America from Asia. Their descendants developed ways of life suited to local resources. Some tribes followed buffalo on the Great Plains. Others developed economies based on woodland game, marine mammals, or fish from rivers or oceans. Still others relied on the land itself, clearing trees and diverting waterways to farm the land.

Using the Land Itself: Farming Dazzled by stories of gold in Mexico and silver in Peru, the Jamestown colonists expected to find these precious metals in Virginia too. To their surprise, they discovered none. They reluctantly turned to farming, growing crops for both subsistence and export.

The first colonists' inability to find these precious minerals had a profound effect on the historical development of the United States. One historian argued,

One of the greatest factors in making land in North America so important was that settlers along the Atlantic Coast failed to find sources of quick mineral riches; consequently they turned to the slower processes of agriculture to gain livelihoods. Farming, from the beginning, became the main way of American frontier life.

—Thomas D. Clark, *Frontier America*, 1969



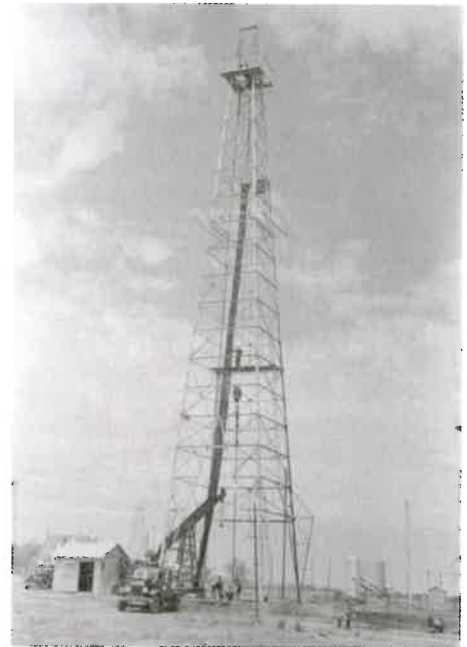
In 1848, the discovery of gold in California set off a worldwide "gold fever." Treasure hunters from as far away as Europe and China, like the ones shown above, raced to the gold fields in hopes of striking it rich.

By *frontier*, Clark was referring to the land still unknown to, and undeveloped by, the colonists. Once colonists began to prosper by farming, the lure of western farmland drew explorers and then settlers across the Appalachians to the fertile interior plains. Even today, commercial agriculture in this part of the United States produces a significant portion of the world's crops.

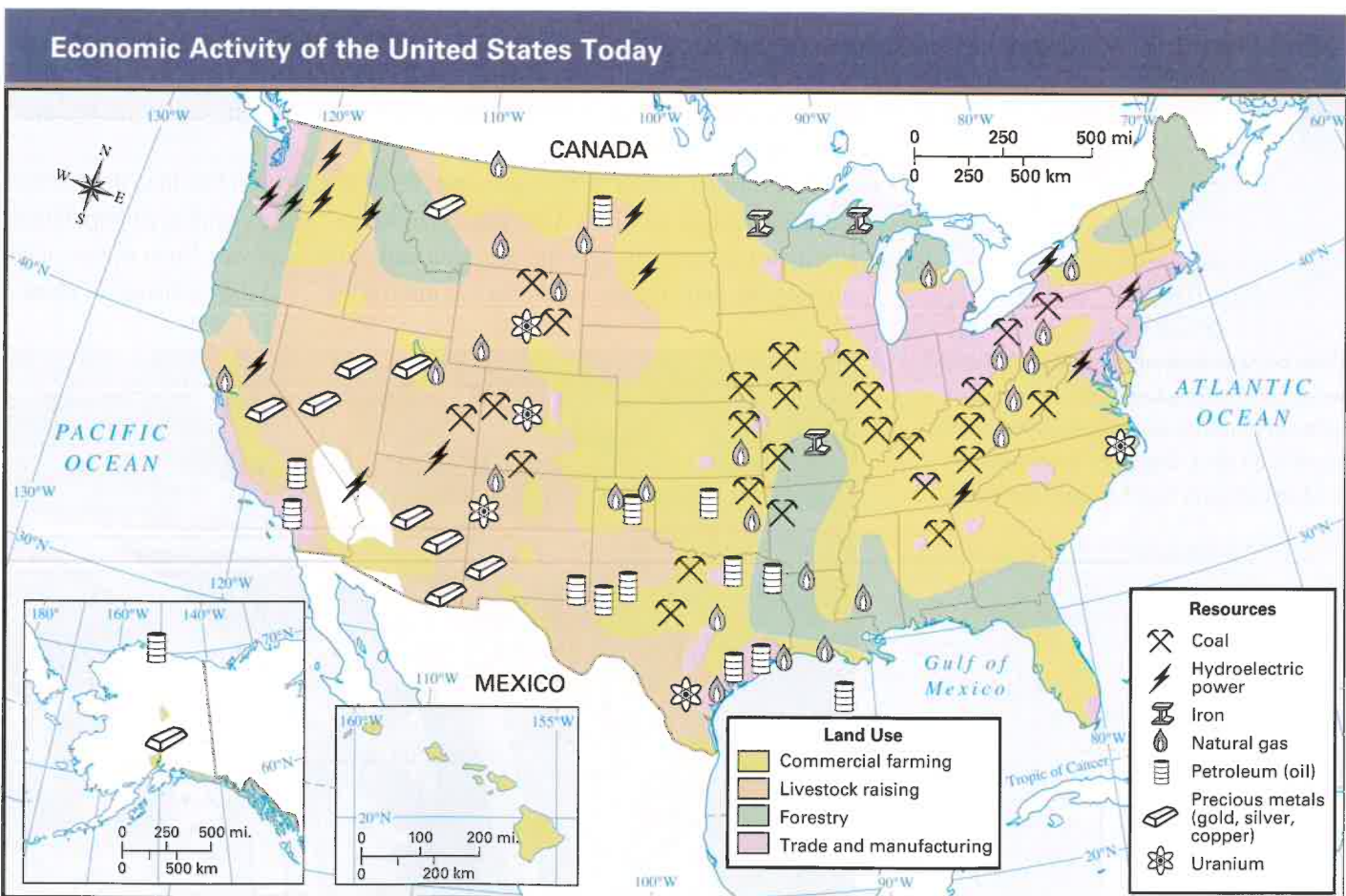
Resources of the Woods, Seas, and Subsoil Parts of our nation that do not have good farmland are rich in other resources. New England's rocky soil and cold winters limited farming to a small scale. Instead, New Englanders built their economy on the resources of the forest and sea. They exported dried fish and whale oil and used their abundant timber to build fishing boats and merchant ships. This successful shipbuilding industry, as well as the area's sheltered harbors, made New England the center of trade with other countries.

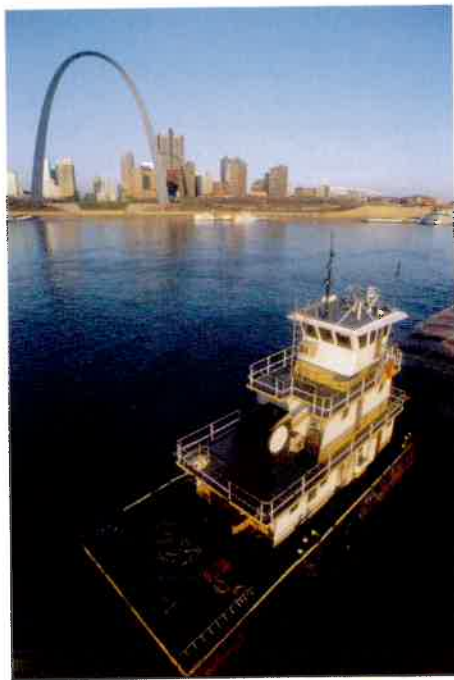
Though Virginia did not have the precious metals the colonists had hoped for, other parts of the country did contain mineral resources. As the United States expanded across the continent in the 1800s, settlers found copper, lead, gold, silver, nickel, and zinc far beneath the soil. These minerals became a source of wealth, as well as the raw materials for American factories to produce an astonishing array of goods. Today, every state has an active mining industry, even tiny Rhode Island and tropical Hawaii.

The energy resources of the United States have played a critical role in the country's economic development. Large reserves of **fossil fuels**, such as coal, oil, and natural gas, helped the United States become an industrial giant in the 1800s. These fuels continue to provide energy for industry and transportation. Water is another important source of energy. Today about 7.5 percent of the country's electric power is generated by waterpower in hydroelectric dams. Energy resources will continue to play a vital part in the nation's future.



Oil prospectors erected derricks to hold the equipment to drill oil wells. Oklahoma's oil reserves are among the largest in the nation.





St. Louis, Missouri, owed its early growth to its location near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. In the early 1800s, St. Louis served as the gateway to the West for explorers, fur traders, and settlers.

Cities respond to population growth in various ways. Los Angeles, California, has sprawled outward in lowrise suburbs. Angelinos, as the locals are called, depend on a complex network of highways to get around their spread-out city.

3.4 A Growing Population: From Farms to Cities

In 1790, the United States held its first **census**, or official count of its population. Census takers counted about 3.9 million people that year. Of that total, only about 5 percent—roughly 195,000—lived in towns or cities that had more than 2,500 people. The rest lived spread out on farms or in small villages. This seemed just right to Thomas Jefferson, whose ideal was a nation of independent farmers.

Growth of Cities Despite Jefferson's high opinion of farmers, the United States would not remain a strictly rural nation. Colonial cities like Boston and Philadelphia began as trading centers at transportation crossroads. As they grew, they became centers of wealth, attracting skilled artisans, professional people, and workers from near and far.

As American settlers moved west, cities developed across the landscape. Physical features influenced where cities sprouted, and ease of access was one key to the birth of cities. St. Louis, Missouri, for example, developed at the juncture of the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers. Its location made it a logical place for the exchange and shipment of farm products, raw materials, and finished products. In the 1800s, improvements to transportation—such as roads, canals, steamships, and railroads—linked cities to the outside world and contributed to their expansion.

In the late 1800s, better transportation encouraged the concentration of industries in cities. These new industries, fueled by abundant natural resources, increased the population of cities. The economic opportunity in cities drew migrants from small towns and farms, as well as large numbers of immigrants from other countries.

As historian Arthur Schlesinger observed, “The city, no less than the frontier, has been a major factor in American civilization.” Urban centers of population and industry led to the growth of wealth and political power. Such centers also support arts and culture, technological innovations, and the exchange of ideas.

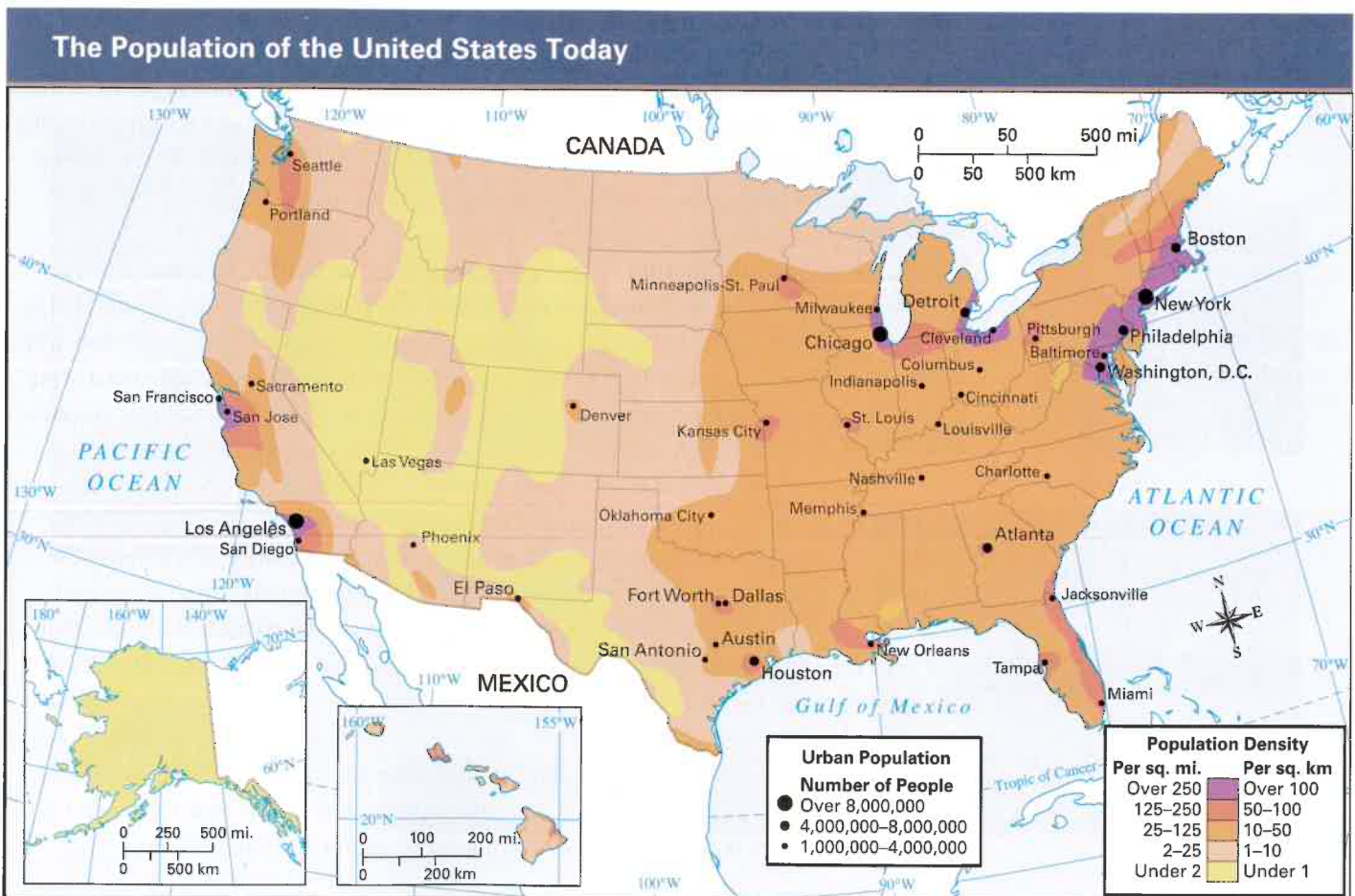




Chicago, Illinois, has responded to population growth by building up as well as out. Downtown Chicago is famous for its soaring skyscrapers. Hundreds of thousands of people stream into this area on weekdays to work and shop. Many arrive on elevated trains, like the one shown here.

U.S. Population Today From 1870 to 1920, the number of people living in U.S. cities increased from 10 million to more than 50 million. Population growth continued over the next 100 years. By 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the nation's population at 308.7 million. About 83 percent of the population lived in metropolitan areas. The commerce and industry that these city populations generate contribute significantly to the status of the United States as one of the world's economic giants.

Population density is a measure of the number of people who live in a given unit of area. In the United States, metropolitan areas, or large cities and their neighboring cities and towns, are areas with a population of 2,500 or more.



3.5 United and Divided: Regions and American History

The United States is made up of 50 separate states, each with its own government. The divisions between states are political boundaries—government-defined borders with exact locations. Yet when Americans think about their country, they also divide it into unofficial **regions**. A region is a geographic area defined by one or more characteristics that set it apart from other areas. A region may be as large as a continent or as small as a city neighborhood characterized by a distinct economic activity, style of home, food or culture, or ethnic group.

Regional Identity A quick glance over the American landscape today reveals remarkable similarities. From coast to coast, you see the same restaurants, stores, highways, movies, and television programs. A closer look, however, reveals that each region of the country has its own identity. Physical features, climate, and natural resources have shaped each region's economy and settlement patterns. Arid and semiarid regions, for instance, tend to be thinly settled, because they lack adequate water for farming and industry.

A region's "personality" also reflects its population. The traditions and culture of the people living in a region give it its own particular flavor. For example, each region has its own characteristic foods, such as spicy burritos in the Southwest and clam chowder in the Northeast. Each region also has its own speech patterns, building styles, and festivals, to name but a few elements of regional identity.

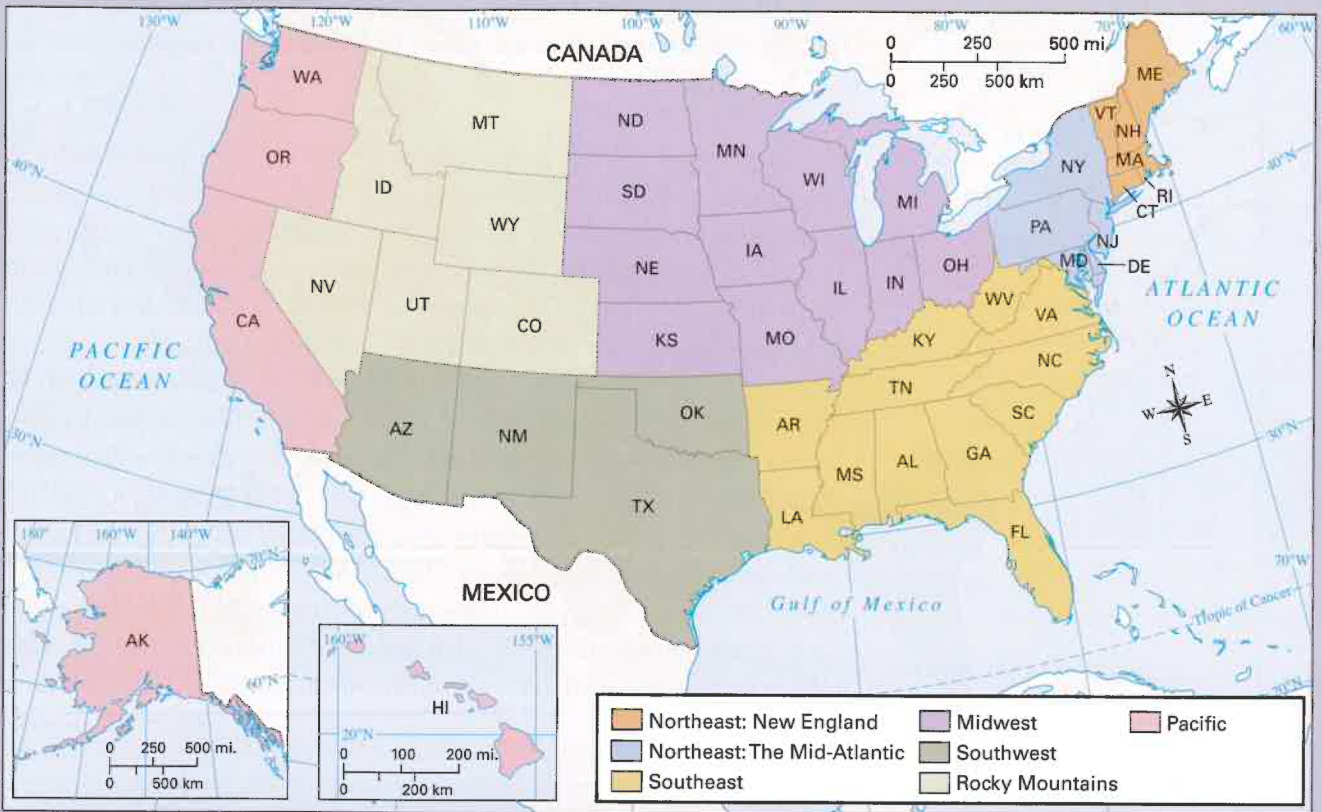
A region's geographic, economic, and cultural factors also shape its needs and wants. As a result, people within a region often share similar points of view and pursue similar political goals. For example, people in an agricultural region often want to protect the interests of farmers, while those in a manufacturing region tend to look out for the interests of their industries.

Regions and History Why is it important to understand regions? For one thing, regional differences have shaped American history and culture in significant ways. People who share regional goals, concerns, and a common way of life can develop strong loyalties. These loyalties can cause division among regions. The most dramatic example of this type of division was the American Civil War, which erupted over regional economic and political differences between North and South. Long after the war was over, regional loyalty remained strong among many Southerners.

Regions also give us a useful way to study the history of a country as large and diverse as the United States. Although regional differences may cause tension, our diversity as a nation is one of our greatest strengths. Our economy relies on the varied physical resources of our vast land. Our democracy has benefited from the diverse backgrounds and concerns of people in different regions.

As you study American history, pay attention to how each region developed. Think about its issues and interests. Look for ways that its interaction with other regions influenced the course of national events.

Regions of the United States Today



Pacific



Midwest



Mid-Atlantic



New England



Southwest



Rocky Mountains



Southeast

Continents of the World Today



3.6 One Continent, Two Oceans: The United States and the World

Geography has played a significant role in how Americans interact with the rest of the world. More than 3,000 miles of Atlantic Ocean separate the United States from Europe. The distance across the Pacific Ocean to Asia is twice as far. In the nation's early years, it took weeks or even months for news to travel across these seas. As a result, to most Americans, what happened beyond their own country's shores was of little interest. They well understood George Washington's farewell advice to "steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world."

Territorial Expansion President Washington wanted no part of political intrigues abroad. However, he foresaw that the new nation would have to interact with the world beyond its borders in other ways. In order to grow, the United States, at various times, negotiated with other countries for more territory. In 1803, the United States purchased enough land from France to double the country's size. Within several decades, it had acquired Florida from Spain and the Oregon Territory from Great Britain. In 1867, the United States agreed to purchase Alaska from Russia. The Hawaiian Islands became U.S. territory three decades later.

Not all territories became part of the United States peacefully. The original 13 states had their birth in the American Revolution against Great Britain. Winning a war with Mexico in the mid-19th century added Texas and the American Southwest to the United States. With the addition of this land, the United States spanned the continent of North America, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific.

Foreign Trade Despite the country's isolated location between these two oceans, Americans have always engaged in international commerce. Even the original colonists traded products across the Atlantic. The first settlers at Jamestown eventually built their economy around shipping tobacco to England for sale. By 1750, the colonies were producing a variety of cash crops for sale overseas. Soon after the American Revolution, Americans began trading with Asia.

As the country industrialized during the 1800s, foreign trade also expanded. Agricultural products still led U.S. exports, but manufactured goods and natural resources, such as iron ore, were shipped abroad for sale too. Americans were also buying a wide array of imported goods, from Chinese tea to English teapots.

During the 1900s, the United States developed trade relationships with countries around the world. By the second half of the 20th century, **globalization**—the process by which cultures, economies, and politics of nations around the world become integrated—had taken hold. Today, the United States is a leader of the global economy and maintains trade relationships with most other countries of the world.

Summary

North America's physical geography has played various roles in the course of U.S. history. The land's size, landforms, natural resources, and location have all influenced the nation's historical, cultural, and economic development.

Physical features Almost every type of landform and body of water exists in the United States. Some have stood as barriers to movement. Others have proved to be suitable locations for settlement, offering a variety of economic opportunities.

Natural resources The lands of the United States offer an abundance of natural resources, which have helped the country establish and sustain itself. Resources such as fertile soil, forests, minerals, and fossil fuels have shaped the economies and cultures of the United States.

Regions Different parts of the United States have developed their own regional identities. At times, regional differences have threatened national unity, but they have also enriched American life and culture.

Population Over more than two centuries, the U.S. population has grown from fewer than 4 million to nearly 300 million. Urbanization has rapidly turned the nation into a country of cities.

World leader The Atlantic and Pacific oceans could have isolated the United States from events elsewhere in the world. However, interactions with other nations, through territorial expansion, immigration, and globalization, have helped make the United States a world leader.