

The United States: A Timeline of Territorial Expansion

1783 – Treaty of Paris (Birth of the United States)

By winning the Revolutionary War, the United States secured recognition of its independence and gained control of land east of the Mississippi River in 1783 ¹. The Treaty of Paris doubled the area of the original 13 colonies, extending the young nation's western frontier to the Mississippi. **Suggested Illustration:** A map of the original United States (13 states along the East Coast) with a highlighted expansion west to the Mississippi, perhaps alongside the scene of American and British delegates signing the 1783 peace treaty. **Notable Quote:** “...that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States.” – *Declaration of Independence, 1776* (a principle fulfilled by the 1783 treaty).

1803 – Louisiana Purchase

The first great expansion came in 1803, when President Thomas Jefferson purchased the vast Louisiana Territory from France for **\$15 million**, nearly doubling the country's size ² ³. This territory stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from New Orleans up to present-day Montana, giving the U.S. control of the vital Mississippi River and port of New Orleans. **Suggested Illustration:** Thomas Jefferson handing a parcel of money or a treaty document to French leader Napoléon Bonaparte, with a large map of the Louisiana Territory in the background (the newly acquired area shaded on a U.S. map). **Notable Quote:** “The sale of Louisiana assures forever the power of the United States, and I have given England a rival who will sooner or later humble her pride.” – *Napoléon Bonaparte, 1803* ⁴ (celebrating the deal's impact on America and Britain).

1818 – Red River Basin (British Cession)

In 1818, the U.S. and Great Britain signed a treaty fixing the U.S.-Canada boundary from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains at the **49th parallel**. As part of this **Convention of 1818**, Britain ceded to the U.S. the Red River Basin south of that line (lands in present-day northern Minnesota and North Dakota) ⁵. The two nations also agreed to **jointly occupy the Oregon Country** (the Pacific Northwest) for the time being. **Suggested Illustration:** American and British diplomats with a map, drawing a line along the 49°N latitude, with a smaller map inset showing the Red River Basin area being added to the U.S. **Notable Quote:** “...the line of 49 degrees shall be the boundary... as far west as the Stony Mountains.” – *Convention of 1818 (establishing the U.S.-Canada border)*.

1819 – Florida Acquisition (Adams-Onís Treaty)

Spain agreed to **cede Florida to the United States** in 1819 via the Adams-Onís Treaty (ratified 1821). Weary of governing Florida and facing American incursions, Spain gave up East and West Florida; in exchange, the U.S. assumed **\$5 million** of claims by American citizens against Spain and relinquished any U.S. claims to

Spanish Texas ⁶ . This treaty also settled a firm western boundary for the Louisiana Purchase and saw Spain give up its tenuous claim to the Pacific Northwest (Oregon), while the U.S. acknowledged Spanish sovereignty in Texas ⁷ ⁸ . **Suggested Illustration:** General Andrew Jackson standing triumphantly at a Spanish fort in Florida (signifying the U.S. military incursions), with Spanish officials lowering the Spanish flag. Alternatively, John Quincy Adams and Spanish envoy Luis de Onís signing the treaty. **Notable Quote:** *"Spain must either control Florida or cede it to the United States."* – Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (ultimatum leading to the treaty) ⁹ .

1845 – Annexation of Texas

The independent **Republic of Texas** was annexed to the United States in 1845, becoming the 28th state ¹⁰ . Texas had won independence from Mexico in 1836, and its annexation was eagerly supported by U.S. expansionists despite Mexico's warnings (Mexico still claimed Texas as its territory). The admission of this huge region (almost 389,000 square miles ¹¹) extended the U.S. to the Rio Grande and set the stage for conflict with Mexico. Indeed, the annexation **led directly to the Mexican-American War** in 1846 ¹² . **Suggested Illustration:** The raising of the U.S. flag in Texas – perhaps an American and a Texan (with the Lone Star flag) shaking hands, as a Mexican officer looks on angrily from afar. **Notable Quote:** *"The Republic of Texas is no more."* – Texas President Anson Jones, 1846 (upon the formal transfer of Texas sovereignty to the U.S., February 1846 ¹³).

1846 – Oregon Treaty

In 1846, the U.S. and Great Britain peacefully settled their competing claims in the Pacific Northwest. The **Oregon Treaty** extended the 49th parallel boundary to the Pacific, dividing the **Oregon Country** between them ¹⁴ . Britain retained what is now British Columbia, while the U.S. obtained the southward portion (present-day Oregon, Washington, Idaho and parts of Montana/Wyoming), finally giving the United States a coveted **window on the Pacific Ocean**. American expansionists had earlier cried **"54°40' or Fight!"** – urging claim to the entire region up to Alaska's southern border – but the compromise at 49° avoided war. **Suggested Illustration:** An American pioneer family overlooking the Pacific (symbolizing "reaching the ocean"), or U.S. and British negotiators slicing a map of the Oregon Territory along the 49th parallel. Possibly include the slogan "54-40 or fight!" on a banner in the scene for historical flavor. **Notable Quote:** *"The [Oregon] Country is ours. The tide of civilization, to say nothing of population, must and will roll over it."* – Senator Thomas Hart Benton, mid-1840s (expressing the era's expansionist zeal).

1848 – Mexican Cession (Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo)

The Mexican-American War (1846–48) ended with a massive land transfer to the United States. In the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** signed in 1848, **Mexico ceded** an enormous territory (over 525,000 square miles) to the U.S. ¹⁵ . This **Mexican Cession** included all of present-day California, Nevada, and Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. In exchange, the U.S. paid **\$15 million** to Mexico and assumed some debts ¹⁶ . This fulfilled America's fervent **"Manifest Destiny"** to span the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific. **Suggested Illustration:** A map of the American Southwest with a huge chunk marked as transferring from Mexico to the U.S., perhaps shown by a Mexican and American official signing a document while an American flag is raised in California. A small battle scene or weary Mexican soldiers could be in the background to signify the war. **Notable Quote:** *"We must conquer Mexico..."*

but not for territorial aggrandizement; no—for peace, and security.” – President James K. Polk, 1846 (justifying the war that led to this cession).

1853 – Gadsden Purchase

In 1853, the United States made a final adjustment to its continental borders by purchasing a strip of land from Mexico for **\$10 million** ¹⁷. Known as the **Gadsden Purchase**, this added about 30,000 square miles in southern Arizona and New Mexico – a region deemed ideal for a southern transcontinental railroad route. The deal, negotiated by U.S. diplomat James Gadsden, fixed the U.S.–Mexico border at its present location along the Gila River and Rio Grande. **Suggested Illustration:** A small map highlighting the Gadsden Purchase area (the southernmost strip of Arizona/New Mexico) being added, perhaps with a steam locomotive to signify the railroad motive. Possibly show an American diplomat exchanging gold with a Mexican official in the desert. **Notable Quote:** *“The territory which we acquire is scarcely habitable, but for the great object of a railroad to the Pacific, its value is inestimable.” – Senator Solomon W. Downs, 1854 (on the importance of the Gadsden Purchase for railroads).*

1867 – Alaska Purchase

In 1867, the U.S. bought **Alaska** from the Russian Empire, further expanding its reach. Secretary of State William **Seward negotiated the purchase** of Alaska – some 586,000 square miles of mostly wilderness – for **\$7.2 million** (about 2 cents an acre) ¹⁸. Critics at the time mockingly called this **“Seward’s Folly”** or **“Seward’s Icebox”**, thinking it a frozen wasteland. However, Alaska would later prove rich in resources like gold and oil. This acquisition extended U.S. territory to the northwest corner of North America, although Alaska would remain a sparsely populated territory until it became a state in 1959. **Suggested Illustration:** William Seward smiling while holding an enormous ice cube or a chunk of gold in one hand and a treaty in the other, with a map of Alaska in the background. Perhaps include skeptical onlookers in 1867 attire, with thought bubbles calling it “Seward’s Folly.” **Notable Quote:** *“...a polar bear garden.” – Representative Andrew Johnson’s jibe (reflecting skeptics’ view of Alaska as barren ice land).*

1898 – Annexation of Hawaii

By the late 19th century, American attention turned overseas. In **1898**, the United States **annexed the Hawaiian Islands**, an independent Polynesian kingdom-turned-republic. American sugar planters and Marines had overthrown Queen Lili’uokalani in 1893; after a brief period as the Republic of Hawaii, the islands were formally annexed by the U.S. in 1898 ¹⁹. Hawaii became a strategic U.S. territory in the mid-Pacific (and eventually the 50th state in 1959). **Suggested Illustration:** Queen Lili’uokalani reluctantly yielding her throne or the Hawaiian flag being lowered as the U.S. flag rises over ‘Iolani Palace in Honolulu. Alternatively, an allegorical image of Uncle Sam welcoming a female figure representing Hawaii. **Notable Quote:** *“I yield my authority... to avoid any collision of armed forces and perhaps the loss of life.” – Queen Lili’uokalani, 1893 (in her statement of abdication under U.S. pressure, expressing hope that justice would be served).*

1898 – Spanish–American War Acquisitions

Also in 1898, the U.S. emerged victorious in the Spanish–American War, a conflict that lasted only a few months but ended Spain’s colonial empire in the Americas and Pacific. In the **Treaty of Paris (1898)**, Spain

ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States, and Spain also relinquished its control over Cuba and sold the Philippines to the U.S. ²⁰ ²¹ . Puerto Rico (in the Caribbean) and Guam (in the western Pacific) remain U.S. territories today. (The Philippines, by contrast, gained independence in 1946.) These acquisitions marked the United States' debut as an **overseas colonial power**. **Suggested Illustration:** An American eagle spreading its wings over islands on a globe: Puerto Rico (Caribbean) and Guam (Pacific) highlighted in U.S. colors. Perhaps depict Admiral George Dewey at Manila Bay or Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, to represent the war that led to these gains. **Notable Quote:** *"It has been a splendid little war."* – *Secretary of State John Hay, 1898* (celebrating the quick victory over Spain that brought new territories under the U.S. flag).

1899–1900 – Partition of Samoa (American Samoa)

In 1899, the United States, Germany, and Britain negotiated a partition of the Samoan Islands. The U.S. acquired the eastern islands of Samoa (notably **Tutuila** and later Manu'a), which in 1900 formally became **American Samoa** – a U.S. territory in the South Pacific ²² . (Germany took the western Samoa islands, now the independent nation of Samoa.) American Samoa gave the U.S. a strategic coaling station at Pago Pago Bay. **Suggested Illustration:** Tropical island setting with a U.S. flag being raised over a Samoan village. Possibly include Samoan chiefs signing the Deed of Cession (1900) with a U.S. Navy officer. **Notable Quote:** *"...yielding all rights of sovereignty...unto the Government of the United States."* – *Deed of Cession of Tutuila, 1900* (words of the agreement by which local chiefs joined American Samoa to the U.S.).

1917 – Purchase of the Virgin Islands

During World War I, the United States purchased the **Danish West Indies** from Denmark in 1917 for **\$25 million** in gold ²³ . These Caribbean islands – now known as the **U.S. Virgin Islands** (St. Thomas, St. John, St. Croix, etc.) – were acquired to prevent their possible seizure by Germany and to expand America's Caribbean presence. They remain a U.S. territory (unincorporated) today. **Suggested Illustration:** An Uncle Sam figure handing a money bag to a Danish official in exchange for a picturesque tropical island scene (palm trees, harbor, Danish flag coming down as U.S. flag goes up). **Notable Quote:** *"It is hereby agreed that Denmark cedes to the United States the islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix..."* – *Treaty of Danish West Indies cession, 1917* (treaty text confirming the sale).

1945–1947 – Post-WWII Pacific Trust Territories

After World War II, the defeated Japanese Empire's Pacific islands were placed under U.S. administration as **UN Trust Territories**. In 1947, the **Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands** gave the United States control over the **Marshall Islands**, **Caroline Islands**, and **Northern Mariana Islands** ²⁴ . Over ensuing decades, most of these islands chose independence (Marshall, Caroline Islands now Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau). **However, the Northern Mariana Islands opted to become a U.S. Commonwealth** – officially joining the U.S. family in a 1976 covenant (effective 1986) ²⁴ . Today the **Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands** (including Saipan, Tinian, and Rota) and other smaller Pacific holdings (such as **Wake Island**, **Midway**, etc.) are part of U.S. territories. **Suggested Illustration:** A map of the Pacific Ocean dotted with island groups; highlight the Northern Marianas with an American flag, while showing flags of newly independent island nations for the ones that chose independence. Perhaps include U.S. Navy sailors raising a flag on a Pacific atoll in 1945 to signify the transfer. **Notable Quote:** *"We draw the line at freedom – we*

relinquish control where peoples choose independence.” – U.S. policy statement, mid-20th century (paraphrasing the American approach to trust territories post-WWII).

(Note: One notable territory the U.S. controlled during the 20th century was the Panama Canal Zone. The Canal Zone was a strip of land critical to operating the Panama Canal; it was under U.S. sovereignty from 1904 until it was returned to Panama under treaties by 1999 ²⁵. This isn't land that remains U.S. territory today, but it features in historical context and re-emerges in contemporary rhetoric, as seen below.)

2025–2026 – Renewed “Manifest Destiny”? (U.S. Expansion Talk in Modern Politics)

In recent years, a new chapter of expansionist talk has emerged in American politics. **President Donald Trump (during his second term, 2025–)** has openly mused about adding foreign territories to the United States – startling echoes of 19th-century Manifest Destiny. In early 2025, Trump vowed in his inaugural address to **“take back the Panama Canal,”** claiming Panama mishandled it and invoking the idea that it was *“built by Americans for Americans”* ²⁶ ²⁷. He declared, *“We didn't give it to China. We gave it to Panama, and we're taking it back,”* asserting that Panama had broken the spirit of the canal treaties ²⁸. He also renewed his **interest in acquiring Greenland**, the vast Arctic island owned by Denmark, calling it vital for U.S. security. *“One way or the other, we're going to get it,”* Trump said of Greenland in a 2025 speech ²⁹, even suggesting he might not rule out military force or trade pressures to secure the island ³⁰ ³¹. Furthermore, Trump **floated the idea of Canada joining the U.S.** – envisioning Canada as the 51st state – which drew sharp public rebukes from Canadian leaders ³². In early 2026, he even shared an edited world map image showing the U.S. flag over **Canada, Greenland, and even Venezuela**, hinting at an American grip on those countries ³³ ³⁴. These unprecedented statements have alarmed U.S. allies and revived debates on imperialism. (Denmark's Prime Minister retorted that “Greenland is not for sale,” and Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau firmly rejected any such notion.) **Suggested Illustration:** A modern political cartoon-style image: Donald Trump holding an American flag planted halfway into a globe, with question mark icons or U.S. flags hovering over Greenland, Panama, Canada (and perhaps a ghosted flag near Venezuela) – indicating his rumored targets. Small caricatures of world leaders (e.g. a shocked Danish PM and Canadian PM) could be reacting. **Notable Quote:** *“The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation... one that expands our territory... We will pursue our Manifest Destiny into the stars....”* – Donald Trump, 2025 ³⁵. (A bold statement blending old expansionist ideology with new ambitions – though **to date these ideas remain speculative**. No actual territorial changes have occurred, and such moves would face enormous legal and international hurdles. This final “slide” in our story serves as a provocative epilogue, highlighting how the notion of American expansion still sparks debate in the modern era.)

Disclaimer: The last section represents contemporary political rhetoric *not* actual expansion. Trump's proposals to acquire territories like Greenland or reassert control over the Panama Canal have not been enacted; they remain controversial statements documented in news reports ²⁶ ²⁹. The inclusion of these 2025–26 ambitions (with question marks on the map) is for context and contrast – underlining how the U.S. grew historically versus how such expansionist ideas are received today.

¹ ² ¹⁰ ¹² ¹⁴ ¹⁵ ²⁰ ²⁴ ²⁵ Territorial evolution of the United States - Wikipedia

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