

The Meaning of Mount Rushmore

The four American Presidents carved into the granite of Mount Rushmore were chosen by sculptor Gutzon Borglum to commemorate the founding, growth, preservation and development of the United States. They symbolize the principles of liberty and freedom on which the nation was founded. George Washington signifies the struggle for independence and the birth of the Republic; Thomas Jefferson the territorial expansion of the country; Abraham Lincoln the permanent union of the states, and equality for all citizens, and Theodore Roosevelt, the 20th century role of the United States in world affairs and the rights of the common man.

The following is a brief history of the United States' first 150 years. This is not meant to be a scholarly version of American history, but to weave the four presidents on Mount Rushmore into the early and important events of America's development.

Between 1700 and 1750 the British colonial population in America increased to more than one million and pressure mounted to occupy the land west of the Appalachians. British expansion was a threat to the Indians, French and Spanish. As a result of the French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years War, France lost all of its land in North America to Britain and Spain.

The French and Indian war demonstrated just how independent the colonists had become. American merchants were trading illegally with French Caribbean sugar islands. The British resolved to reassert control. Customs agents were ordered to crack down on the smugglers and courts were directed to try them. For the first time, Britain posted a large peacetime army in her American colonies.

Dislike of George III dated from an early act authorizing indiscriminate searches of private homes. In 1761 James Otis, an impassioned lawyer, spoke out against such search warrants, saying that man has natural rights that no king can infringe upon. In 1765 a Stamp Act levied taxes to raise funds to support British troops in the colonies. This outraged the colonists who boycotted British goods and forced repeal of the act. In the Virginia House of Burgesses, Patrick Henry in a dramatic speech challenged taxation without representation. Unrest grew when British soldiers fired into angry crowds killing five people in the Boston Massacre. Samuel Adams played a vital role in the rebellion along with John Hancock who helped to organize resistance. In 1773 patriots threw shipments of tea into Boston harbor in protest of these taxes. This incident became known as the Boston Tea Party.

On April 18, 1775, British Major General Thomas Gage sent troops from Boston to Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, to capture colonial leaders and military supplies. Warned by Paul Revere, 70 militiamen met 180 British soldiers at Lexington. Shots were exchanged and the Redcoats marched on to Concord where 450 Americans faced 700 British. By day's end, 50 Americans and 73 British had been killed.

Lexington and Concord transformed a local, political struggle into a full-scale confrontation in which all 13 colonies joined.

American morale had plummeted to its lowest point in 1776 during the terrible retreat that

followed humiliating defeats in New York. On Christmas night, 1776, Washington led his men through the snow and sleet in a surprise attack on Trenton, New Jersey, smashing three regiments. Nearly 900 British troops were either killed or captured. Only four Americans were wounded. After victories at Trenton and Princeton, the army knew that its enemy could be beaten. In the siege at Yorktown, a white cloth appeared on the British ramparts. General George Cornwallis, the British commander, was asking for terms. Surrender followed and an entire British army marched past the quiet ranks of American and French troops to stack its arms. It would be nearly two years before the peace treaty but the war was over.

Alone among the founders of the United States, George Washington earned the title “Father of his Country” in recognition of his leadership in the cause of American independence. Appointed Commander of the Continental Army in 1775, he molded a fighting force that won independence from Great Britain.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia put before the Continental Congress the momentous resolution calling for a Declaration of Independence, foreign alliances and a confederation of American states. Thomas Jefferson, a 33-year-old Virginian known for his eloquent and persuasive arguments, was selected to prepare a draft. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams also played an important role. The declaration was a ringing assertion of the right to revolt, carefully erected upon the principle that government ultimately rests upon the consent of the governed.

After the American victory in its war for independence the treaty of 1783 ceded a region that was larger than much of Western Europe. The delegation to the 1783 Treaty Conference included John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens and their aide, Franklin’s grandson, William. The Americans led by Franklin won a territorial cession stretching from Spanish Florida in the south to British Canada in the north, to Spanish Louisiana beyond the Mississippi River.

Following the Revolutionary War, an issue that threatened to pull the new nation apart was who would control the land beyond the Appalachian mountains? The question pitted large states against small. Many states claimed a slice of the West, based on founding charters that granted “sea to sea” corridors. At the Continental Congress the smaller states led by Maryland argued for the creation of a national domain under congressional control. In 1784, Virginia broke the impasse by ceding to congress its claim to territory from the Ohio River to Canada, paving the way for the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which set an orderly course for national expansion.

The Northwest Ordinance set the number of states northwest of the Ohio River at no more than five and no less than three. It also established a plan for territorial governments and a system for the entry of new states into the union.

In May, 1787, James Madison joined 54 other men in Philadelphia at the Constitutional Convention. The 36-year-old Virginian played a commanding role at the convention and his design for a national government prevailed. George Washington was chosen president of the Constitutional Convention and helped guide the deliberations to form a government that to this date has lasted more than 200 years. As president Washington helped develop the relationships

among the three branches of government. He initiated precedents that successfully launched the new government on its course.

Alexander Hamilton, a former aide to George Washington, became Madison's ally at the Constitutional Convention in support of a strong federal government.

From this convention emerged the United States Constitution. Thomas Jefferson's objection to the Constitution when he read it in France was that it contained no guarantee of personal rights. Jefferson and Madison later pressed for the addition of a bill of rights.

As a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, Jefferson was part of the increasingly anti-British faction. He drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and as a delegate to the Continental Congress, he was chosen to be on the committee to write the Declaration of Independence and became its principal author.

Jefferson was governor of Virginia from 1779-81, and minister to France from 1784-89. He was Secretary of State under George Washington, Vice President under John Adams, and became the third President of the United States (1801-09). He was a man of wide ranging interests including law, horsemanship, music, agriculture, botany, astronomy, invention and architecture, and was the founder of the University of Virginia.

The first census of the United States in 1790 counted 3,929,214 people.

In 1798 the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed by a Federalist Congress to suppress opposition. Several writers and newspaper editors were tried for attacking President Adams, ten were fined and jailed. Virginia and Kentucky resolutions protested the acts as unconstitutional. Kentucky's, which was written by Jefferson, asserted states' rights to nullify such acts of Congress.

In 1801 Jefferson started to plan an expedition across the far west. Jefferson hired Captain Meriwether Lewis, a frontier officer and a family friend, to be his private secretary, and for two years the men went over plans for the expedition. In 1803 the president asked Congress for financing. In asking for permission to cross the Louisiana Territory, he emphasized the scientific purposes of the expedition, leaving unspoken his desire to increase the legitimacy of the United States' claim to the entire continent.

When Lewis and William Clark returned from their two-year, 7000-mile journey, they had crossed the Rockies twice; mapped the Missouri River, the Rocky Mountains, and the Columbia River country; collected linguistic, botanical, zoological, geographical and commercial data, and opened the upper Missouri River to the fur trade.

Although Jefferson's hope for a practicable water route across the continent for the purpose of commerce and the dreams of an ice-free Northwest Passage were not fulfilled, the expedition was a success, giving the U.S. an advantage in its bid to secure the Northwest.

During their trip, Lewis and Clark made an important addition to their party, a young Shoshoni

woman, Sacajawea. Her presence proved that the expedition was not a war party and her ability to speak Shoshoni enhanced the group's trading for horses needed to travel over the mountains to navigable rivers.

Even before Lewis and Clark had set out on their journey, Jefferson engineered the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 from France which doubled the national domain by adding a 909,000-square-mile region to the United States at a bargain price of 15 million dollars. Jefferson sent Secretary of state James Monroe to France to accept the French offer.

"Free Trade and sailor's rights" was the cry that rallied public support for the War of 1812. British attacks on American shipping and imprisonment of American sailors during the Napoleonic War were the official reasons given but the deciding vote for war was from the expansionist-minded congressional "war hawks" who saw their chance to rid the continent of the British and take possession of Canada.

By defeating the British at Lake Erie - the first time an entire British fleet was captured - the Americans under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry took control of Lake Erie and with it most of the old Northwest. The war ended with no clear winner, but for the United States the Northwest was secure, giving the Americans room to expand.

In 1814, the U.S. population exceeded eight million, concentrated along the Atlantic coast.

Andrew Jackson's 1815 victory at the battle of Chalmette fired patriotic fever. Europe realized that the United States was a power. Later, Jackson chased raiding Seminoles into Spanish Florida, pushing Spain into making concessions. Florida was ceded to the United States by Spain along with her claims to the Oregon country for five million dollars.

An 1818 treaty with Britain demilitarized the Canadian border and prescribed joint control of the Oregon country.

These new territories threatened the North-South balance in Congress. New England opposed more slave states. The Missouri Compromise outlawed slavery north of latitude 36 degrees, with the exception of Missouri which entered the Union as a slave state. Maine entered free. Jefferson lamented that the controversy "like a fire bell in the night awakened and filled me with dread."

The U.S. Government's long-standing policy of Indian removal, encouraging or forcing eastern Indians to migrate west, gained momentum after Jackson became president in 1829. Increasing numbers of Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, Seminoles and Cherokees were forced to move west to Oklahoma. Jackson's Secretary of War, Lewis Cass, called the movement "the great experiment" but to the Indians, who not only lost their homes but suffered death and disinheritance, it was thereafter known as "The Trail of Tears."

In 1831, a two-day uprising by Virginia field hands led by Nat Turner claimed the lives of about 60 whites before militiamen crushed it, killing perhaps 100 blacks. The rebellion brought harsher laws in the South and greater awareness of the cost of slavery in the North.

The U.S. population exceeded seventeen million people in 1840.

Texas was admitted to the union of states in 1845.

What began in April, 1846, as a skirmish on the banks of the Rio Grande River between Mexican forces and U.S. troops under General Zachary Taylor became a war in May. The bloody victory over Mexico heaped glory on the army and two of its generals, Zachary Taylor and Franklin Pierce who would become presidents in the next decade. Others involved in the action included Jefferson Davis and West Point graduates Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant and George McClellan. Mexico ended its remaining claim on Texas and the lands of New Mexico and upper California. The United States gained not only an enormous region of North America but also an equally enormous problem. Where within the new land would slavery be permitted?

In 1847 a potato famine struck Ireland and Irish immigration to the U.S. reached 105,000, doubling that of 1846.

In 1849, speaking out against “the horror of trafficking in the souls and bodies of men,” Frederick Douglass became the best-known black abolitionist of his age.

In 1857 Dred Scott, a slave who had been taken temporarily into free territory, had his suit for freedom heard by the Supreme Court. The justices decided, seven to two, that Scott was still a slave and even if freed he could not, as a black, claim United States citizenship and sue in federal court. He was considered property.

In 1858 the Republican Party nominated Abraham Lincoln for U.S. Senator from Illinois. His Democratic opponent was Stephen A. Douglas, nationally known as chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories. Lincoln challenged Douglas to a series of debates with the chief issue being slavery. Douglas won. Lincoln lost his bid for the Senate. In the end, however, Lincoln was the winner because Douglas’ Freeport Doctrine kept the South from nominating him for the presidency in 1860. The debates had brought Lincoln national attention leading to his nomination for president.

Following secession of the southern states, Lincoln, at his presidential inauguration in March, 1861, implored the South to show restraint and tried to dispel its mistrust, but he also pledged to do whatever was necessary to preserve the Union. The South responded by firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, April 12, 1861. The result was four years of bloody conflict.

In January, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to free slaves within those states in rebellion, thus raising the war to a higher moral plane. Later in January, 1865, Lincoln secured congressional approval of the 13th amendment that abolished slavery in the United States.

Audacious on the attack, superb in defense, General Robert E. Lee led the Confederate army of northern Virginia. His men held devout, soft-spoken Lee in awe, even in defeat. “We who live shall never see his like again,” a soldier wrote at Appomattox Court House.

If Lee embodied cavalier Virginia, his Union counterpart represented pragmatic Yankee stock. General Ulysses S. Grant's strategy was: "find out where your enemy is, get at him as soon as you can, and strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on."

Outnumbered by more than two to one, the million volunteers who took up arms for the southern states drew strength from the fact that they were fighting to defend their homes and families. But the North's industrial strength gave the Union vast superiority in ordnance over the Confederates who had to buy military supplies from France and Britain and then run the gauntlet of the Union naval blockade.

While Grant's campaign unfolded, Lee resisted pressure to send troops west to reinforce Vicksburg. He had just won a victory at Chancellorsville, Virginia; another on the Northern soil might end the war. Confederate President Jefferson Davis concurred and Lee invaded Pennsylvania. The climactic battle he sought took place over the first three days of July, 1863, at Gettysburg. When fighting ended, more than 51,000 men were missing, wounded or dead. The Union's victory ended the Confederacy's last attempt to invade the North.

Lincoln's struggle to end the bloody Civil War were never realized by him in office. As he attended the play, "Our American Cousin," at Ford's Theater in 1865 he was assassinated. Lee had surrendered his army at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia a few days earlier. Other confederate forces soon followed.

At war's end debate raged over terms for defeated states' re-entry to the Union. In 1867 Congress required new state constitutions that guaranteed equal rights and the vote for blacks. The southern states refused to carry out the reforms and enacted discriminatory anti-black Jim Crow laws. The states of the South were readmitted. For the most part reconstruction did not produce lasting accomplishments.

The centuries-long conflict between European settlers and native Americans reached its peak in the decade following the Civil War.

In 1868 representatives of the U.S. government signed a treaty at Fort Laramie in Wyoming with the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho nations of the Great Plains. A large area in eastern Wyoming and western Dakota territory was designated unceded Indian country while much of present-day South Dakota was set aside as the great Sioux reservation. But in 1874, gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the heart of the new Indian reservation, and thousands of miners began to swarm into the region. The army tried to control the influx without success and an attempt to buy the Black Hills failed.

The Lakota and Cheyenne left the reservation and resumed raids on settlements and travelers. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered the tribes to return before January 31, 1876, or be treated as hostile. When the Indians did not comply the army was called in to enforce the order. Many battles would be fought before the Native Americans were forced to submit.

Territorial growth on the continent ended in 1867 with the purchase of Alaska from Russia for 7.2

million dollars (less than two cents per acre). Hawaii was annexed in 1898 during an era of overseas expansion and remained the only island group to become a state.

In 1871, the United States population exceeded 40 million.

In 1877, the westward movement continued as congress granted millions of dollars to finance transcontinental rail lines. Settlers purchased railroad lands or homesteaded, populating the region once called “The Great American Desert”. In fulfilling the promise of statehood to settlers, congress broke up what remained of the Indian ancestral lands. With the buffalo herds virtually exterminated, the tribes were eventually starved into submission to the white man’s will. The Army forced American Indians onto scattered reservations. The shrinking of these scattered reservations ended in 1934. Native Americans now number some 1.5 million. They retain their diversity in 500 tribal groups, speaking 250 languages.

With the essential grid of transport and communication networks laid down, America was ready to transform the process of territorial expansion into economic growth. In pursuit of ever higher profits, the nation’s entrepreneurs proved as ruthless, and, ultimately, as successful as the land pioneers they succeeded. As economic power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of large corporations, Congress responded to public pressure by drafting legislation to curb price fixing and other excesses of big business monopolies, known as “trusts.” The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 was passed.

In 1898 acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean provided a base of operations on a vital route between California and the Orient. Closer to home, the nation’s leaders began to realize the strategic and economic importance of the Caribbean, especially when they considered the possibility of a canal across the Isthmus of Panama linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Fresh resources were poured into naval forces and in 1898, following the mysterious explosion of the battleship Maine in Havana, Cuba, which killed 260 Americans, the country entered its first major overseas military adventure against the decaying imperial power of Spain.

As assistant secretary of the navy (1897-98), Theodore Roosevelt helped prepare the navy for the Spanish-American War. When war broke out he resigned the post and, with Leonard Wood, organized the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, “Rough Riders”, and as its lieutenant colonel, led the charge up San Juan Hill in Cuba.

Victory added the Philippine Islands and Guam in the Pacific, Puerto Rico in the Caribbean and considerable influence over the fledgling republic of Cuba.

As president, Theodore Roosevelt was known as a trust buster, a champion of the working man, and a conservationist. For his successful diplomacy in the Russo-Japanese War (1905) he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Aware of the strategic need for a shortcut between the Atlantic and Pacific, Roosevelt secured the right to construct the Panama Canal in 1903. Completion of the Panama Canal was major element in the success of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency.

Gold miners and farmers settled opposite corners of Dakota Territory which became two states in 1889. Ranchers settled Wyoming. Admission of Utah followed its banning of polygamy. Other Northwest territories became states as the railroad pushed westward. By 1912 there were 48 states. Not until 1959, with admission of Hawaii and Alaska, were there 50 states.

In 1886, “Liberty Enlightening the World”- a giant statue given by France is dedicated in New York harbor. The statue greeting immigrants from foreign countries to America is called the “The Statue of Liberty.”

In 1903 a 12-second flight above Kill Devil Hill in North Carolina was the first time, said pilot Orville Wright, that “a machine carrying a man had raised itself by its own power into the air in full flight, had sailed forward without reduction of speed, and had finally landed at a point as high as that from which it had started.”

The Wyoming territory granted women the right to vote in 1869. By 1910, females composed one-fifth of the nation’s work force. They shared the vote with men in 11 states by 1914 but, nationwide, suffrage did not come until 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

In 1914 war broke out in Europe and the United States tried to remain neutral. President Woodrow Wilson was reelected in 1916, helped in large part by the slogan, “he kept us out of war.” This initial neutrality gradually gave way to support for the allies led by Britain and France. Meanwhile, central powers, led by Germany, launched unrestricted submarine warfare on neutral ships. In 1917 United States declared war on the German empire to make the world, “safe for democracy”. This was known as World War I. More than two million American soldiers were sent to Europe in 1917 and 1918. President Wilson, in Paris, France, to negotiate the armistice, pushed for a league of nations to maintain world peace. The United States refused to support Wilson’s plan and the country returned to a mainly isolationist foreign policy.

In 1927, work begins in the Black Hills of South Dakota to commemorate the first 150 years of America’s history by carving a monumental sculpture on Mount Rushmore.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson
Declaration of Independence
July 4, 1776

“The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”

George Washington
First Inaugural Address
April 30, 1789

“We, here in America, hold in our hands the hopes of the world, the fate of the coming years; and shame and disgrace will be ours if in our eyes the light of high resolve is dimmed, if we trail in the dust the golden hopes of men.”

Theodore Roosevelt
Address at Carnegie Hall
March 30, 1912

“It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Abraham Lincoln
Gettysburg Address
November 19, 1863