The Donner family started their trek to the West with many of the comforts of home, including furniture and books. After crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert, however, they were forced to throw out most of their supplies to lighten the load for starving oxen. Some animals finally gave up after trudging on with no food or water.
Passing Through the Great Basin

1845
Fremont’s third expedition enters Utah.

1846
Five pioneer groups, including the Donner party, take Hastings Cutoff through Utah. Miles Goodyear builds a trading post near today’s Ogden.

1847
Mormon pioneers first come into the Great Basin.

1853
Fremont again travels through Utah.

Setting the Stage
During the early 1840s, two kinds of people came through the Utah region. U.S. government explorers were sent to describe plant and animal life and make maps to Oregon and California.

At least five groups of home-seekers heading for California and Oregon, including the now-famous Donner party, passed through today’s Utah. They never planned to stay in the Great Basin, but they blazed a trail through Utah’s mountains. Without them, the Mormon pioneers who came the next year would have had a much harder time getting through the mountains and may not have arrived early enough to plant crops that summer.
Manifest Destiny

From news accounts, letters, and reports by explorers and mountain men, people in the East heard about California and Oregon Country. Oregon Country included today's Washington and Oregon and parts of Montana and Idaho. It was a huge land region heavily populated by many different groups of American Indians.

In the East, editor John O'Sullivan wrote, "It is the manifest destiny of the United States to spread across the continent." He meant that North America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, including Canada and Mexico, should be in the hands of the United States. Americans became excited by this thought, and the growth of the United States eventually spread west to the Pacific Ocean. However, Canada and Mexico never became part of the country.

Trails to Wagon Roads

Through the years, American Indians had made many trails through the place we now call Utah. The mountain men followed these trails and made a few new ones. Eventually, these trails were used by wagon trains.

Bidwell-Bartleson Party, 1841

The first known wagon train to cross northern Utah was the Bidwell-Bartleson party. In the spring, a group of pioneers gathered at Independence, Missouri. They wanted to get to California by wagon. John Bidwell, a teacher, and John Bartleson led the group. They had little knowledge and no maps of the route west. Fortunately, they joined three priests who were being guided by a fur trapper, "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick. He guided them as far as the Great Salt Lake.

The first known white woman to enter northern Utah, nineteen-year-old Nancy Kelsey, was part of the group. She traveled with her husband, Ben, and their two-week-old baby daughter.

"Our ignorance of the route was complete. We knew that California lay west, and that was the extent of our knowledge."

—John Bidwell
A Mythical River

Early Spanish explorers mistakenly believed Utah’s Green and Sevier Rivers were connected, flowing from the Rocky Mountains all the way to California. They called the river Buenaventura. Later groups thought the river could be used as a water route from the Great Salt Lake to the San Francisco Bay.

Because the Buenaventura River was published in maps of the day, the Bidwell-Bartleson party was convinced it existed. They brought carpentry tools to build canoes, hoping to float the rest of the way to California. But as the group made its way west of the Great Salt Lake, they found only a vast desert.

The myth of the Buenaventura persisted, despite the claims of explorers that they had found no such river. It wasn’t until 1844, after an expedition by John C. Fremont, that the matter was laid to rest.

This 1826 map by Albert Finley shows the mythical Buenaventura River flowing west through the Sierra Nevada to the San Francisco Bay.
Fremont, the “Pathfinder”

While still in his teens, Fremont got a job with the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. For two years he worked beside one of the most skilled mapmakers in the United States and learned to take careful readings of instruments, sketch field maps, and make notes of plants and minerals.

Later, Fremont met fifteen-year-old Jessie Benton and eloped with her despite the protests of her father, Senator Benton.

Making the best of the situation, Benton hired his new son-in-law to lead a team to explore and map the Oregon Trail. After his return to Washington, Jessie used Fremont’s notes to write a glowing 207-page report of the trip. Government leaders were so dazzled by the writing that they printed 10,000 copies of the report.

The Second Expedition, 1843–44

Fremont and a group of about thirty mountain men, guided by Fitzpatrick and Kit Carson, worked their way along the Bear River through Cache Valley and camped for a week on the northern shores of the Great Salt Lake. A few men took a leaky rubber boat to a small island in the lake that is now named Fremont Island. They soon joined the Oregon Trail and turned westward to California.

The group later returned to Utah, following the Old Spanish Trail through desolate desert land to today’s Las Vegas and then up through today’s St. George and Santa Clara. At the time, Indians lived in these places.
[By May 1844 we had reached] a halting place of very good grass on the clear waters of the Santa Clara fork of the Rio Virgin. [The land] began to be wooded with cedar and pine, and clusters of trees gave shelter to birds—a new and welcome sight—which could not have lived in the desert we had passed. [The land] gave everyone . . . a more lively spirit.

The Third Expedition, 1845

Mountain men Joseph Walker and Kit Carson guided this expedition, entering Utah through the Uinta Basin. They rode horses to the Provo River, followed it to Utah Lake, and went north along the Jordan River. Arriving in the Great Basin in colorful October, they spent two weeks camped on the future site of Salt Lake City while they explored the region.

One of their goals was to search for a water route from the Great Salt Lake to California. At night, Kit Carson and a group headed across the salt flats. The next afternoon, Fremont led the rest of his company out into the desert. They traveled into the night, and before morning Fremont made fire signals to tell Carson where he was. That afternoon, all were at the base of Pilot Peak, named because it had guided them across the salt flats.

Fremont reported in error that the freshwater Utah Lake and the salty Great Salt Lake were the same body of water. He also said Utah was a garden spot, fertile and well-watered.

The 1853 Expedition

With the goal of finding a suitable route for a transcontinental railroad, Fremont later entered Utah again. By this time, Salt Lake City and many smaller towns dotted the Utah region. Fremont’s group was sheltered from a harsh winter in the small settlement of Parowan.

Fremont’s Contributions

Despite some errors, Fremont took accurate measurements of Utah’s altitude, collected soil samples, wrote about the land, water, and plant life, and made important maps. The information added to the knowledge of the West.

Fremont and his family moved to California, where he was elected a senator and even ran for president of the United States, though he lost the election.
Pioneer Companies Follow Hastings Cutoff

During the 1840s, American interest in California and the Pacific Northwest grew. The question was how to make the long trip in the fastest and safest way. Wagon trains were using the Oregon Trail to Oregon. Some groups were taking a turnoff to California, but the trip was very long.

One of the first people to suggest a more direct route by way of the Great Salt Lake was Lansford W. Hastings. He had written *An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* but had never taken a route near the Great Salt Lake. At Sutter's Fort in California he met Fremont, and they discussed the possible shortcut. Fremont agreed it could be done.

The next spring, Hastings and his men reversed Fremont's route and went east across today's Nevada to Pilot Peak. He and his group crossed the salt flats south of the Great Salt Lake, and then made their way through the Wasatch Mountains to Fort Bridger. Then they rode their horses along the Oregon Trail. Hastings left word asking pioneers to use what he called the Hastings Cutoff. At least five groups did just that.

The Bryant Party

Edwin Bryant, a Kentucky newspaper editor, and eight friends reached Fort Bridger in July. They stayed for four days, talking to Hastings. Bryant and his group decided to take the cutoff and set off on the back of mules. They followed the Weber River through the Wasatch Mountains into today's Ogden Valley. Then they went around the Great Salt Lake and west across the salt flats. Finally, they reached California in good shape.

Entering between the walls of the mountains forming the canyon, . . . we passed through it without any serious accident. The canyon is four or five miles through, and we were compelled to climb along the side of the . . . mountain, frequently passing under, and sometimes scaling, immense overhanging masses and projections of rock.

—Edwin Bryant

The Harlan-Young Group

George Harlan had read Hastings' guide and prepared to take a company to California. He was joined by others, including Samuel Young and his wife and children. The group used the Oregon Trail to Fort Bridger, where they met Hastings. He agreed to guide their forty wagons through the mountains. It would be the first wagon train through Utah's mountains.

They passed quickly into Echo Canyon and down the Weber River. They made the rough passage through the canyon, but the trip was almost impossible.
They lost a wagon and a team of horses. Hastings felt he should warn future travelers to find a different route.

James Mather’s party left Fort Bridger five days behind the Harlan-Young group. They, too, made the hard passage through Weber Canyon and joined the others. Then the two groups traveled together to California.

The Lienhard Party

This party was made up of a few small groups. The “five German boys” included Lienhard and four Swiss and German friends who had just come to the United States. They were caught up in “California fever” and wanted to get free land there. They met Hastings in Morgan Valley, and he warned them to find a different route through the mountains. However, they ignored his warning and made it through the canyon. They pushed on to the south edge of the Great Salt Lake and bathed in salt water. Then they, too, headed on to California.

On the 7th [of August] we reached the flat shore of the magnificent Salt Lake, the waters of which were clear as crystal, but as salty as the strongest salt brine. . . . The clear, sky-blue surface of the lake, the warm sunny air, the nearby high mountains, with the beautiful country at their foot, through which we on a fine road were passing, made on my spirit a charming impression. The whole day long I felt like singing and whistling; had there been a single family of white men to be found living here, I believe that I would have remained.

—Leinhard’s journal

Many groups of pioneers passed through the Great Basin and the rugged Sierra Nevada to start a new home in California.
The Donner-Reed Party

The Donner and Reed families and others followed the Lienhard party and were the last group of the year to use Hastings Cutoff. A large group of men, women, and children divided into two groups before they reached Fort Bridger. The largest group chose the longest way around by way of Fort Hall. The rest, afraid of not crossing the mountains of California before winter, chose Hastings Cutoff. In this smaller group were eighty-seven men, women, and children with twenty-three large wagons loaded with furniture, tools, clothes, food, and other supplies. Reed’s family even had a double-decker “rolling palace” for elegant travel. The group made George Donner the captain of the wagon train.

They reached Fort Bridger in late July and rested to strengthen their cattle for the trek ahead. Then they started out on the cutoff route. At the head of Weber Canyon, they found a letter from Hastings sticking in the top of some sagebrush. He said they should send a messenger after him and he would return and guide them through a route much better than Weber Canyon.

The group camped while Reed and two other men went through the canyon. They finally caught up with Hastings west of the Oquirrh Mountains. Leaving two of the men behind to rest, Hastings took Reed up a new route through Emigration Canyon east of today’s Salt Lake City to the top of Big Mountain. There Hastings
showed Reed the route by which he could pilot his company through.

Reed joined his group, and they started clearing out a dirt road through the canyon. They cut down trees and bushes and moved large rocks. When they finally came out of Emigration Canyon into the Salt Lake Valley, the exhausted group made camp. Building the road through the canyon was the most notable feat of any pioneer group that year. But, it cost the Donner party time, which would prove to be a disaster.

The next day the group set out again and crossed the valley to the Oquirrh Mountains. In the past eighteen days they had gone just forty miles and had lost weeks of good weather.

The people still had to cross the hot, dry salt flats. They started traveling by night to get relief from the scorching heat, but still, without grass or water, tired oxen lay down and refused to move. The children cried for water and their mothers gave them lumps of sugar to cool their mouths. When the moon rose, young Patty Reed said, “How can it be so quiet? We are at the end of nowhere.”

Before long, cattle and oxen were lost. Wagons and supplies had to be left behind. After an agonizing trip across Utah and Nevada deserts, the group came to the high mountains of the Sierra Nevada. It was the end of October, and a long season of stormy weather was upon them.

Attempts to cross the mountains by wagon and on foot failed. The people dug in for the winter and built small cabins in the tops of the mountains. Storms raged and starvation set in. Death followed. To feed her children, Mrs. Reed and others boiled ox hides and bones. Animals were eaten. As the months went on, some of the starving ate the meat of the frozen bodies of those who had died.

Relief attempts from California were made through the winter. Finally, a rescue party from Sutter’s Fort walked into the camp. “Are you from California, or are you from Heaven?” whispered a dazed woman.

The rescuers brought the last of the survivors out of the mountains. Of the eighty-seven people who had started from Fort Bridger, only forty-eight lived to reach California. One was the young girl, Patty Reed.

This doll belonged to Patty Reed. She was eight years old when she and her family were rescued from the snowy pass. They were only one of two families to have every member survive. The doll is now on display at Sutter’s Fort in Sacramento, California.

### Linking the Past to the Present

A small white building in the Utah town of Grantsville serves as the Donner Party Museum. You can see tools, dishes, wagon wheels, and other items thrown out by the party as they made their way across the salt flats.
Miles Goodyear Builds a Trading Post

Before they set out from Fort Bridger, the Donner-Reed party had met mountain man Miles Goodyear and his English partner, Mr. Wills. These two men planned to leave the fort within a few days and "settle at some favorable point on the Salt Lake, which in a short time will be a fine place for emigrants to replenish their teams by exchanging broken-down oxen for good teams."

Miles Goodyear had come to the mountains as a fur trader many years earlier. He had married a beautiful Ute Indian woman, and they had two children. He thought a trading post along Hastings Cutoff would bring him a good living.

Goodyear and his partner traveled to the present site of Ogden and set up a trading post on the Weber River. Mountain men had camped at this site for many years. The men called the post Fort Buenaventura. They built a cabin, fenced a piece of land, and began a garden. They cared for sheep and cattle.

Goodyear did not stay in the cabin that first winter, but his partner did. Instead, Goodyear went to California with a pack of furs. He returned the next spring with horses to sell to travelers.

Linking the Past to the Present

Goodyear's small cabin is now part of an Ogden museum run by the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers. If you can, visit the cabin and think about what it was like to live in it.
Changing Boundaries of the United States

As a few groups were passing through Utah to the rich lands and mild weather of California, thousands of settlers were pushing into Oregon Country and settling there. In 1846, a treaty between the United States and Canada gave Oregon to the United States. The United States had grown.

However, the region of present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and parts of today’s New Mexico, Wyoming, and other land were still claimed by Mexico. No one from Mexico lived in today’s Utah, but it is important to remember that the pioneer wagon trains were traveling over Mexican land.

Today’s Utah was part of a huge region owned by Mexico. California was also part of the region. The name “Utah” was not used at all then. The common term for the place was “the Great Basin,” and it included much of Utah and Nevada.
CHAPTER 5 REVIEW

Memory Master

1. Describe what John O'Sullivan meant when he used the term “manifest destiny.”
2. The first known wagon train to cross northern Utah belonged to the ______ ______ ______.
3. Mrs. ______ (with her baby daughter) was the first white woman to enter Utah.
4. Why was John C. Fremont called “the Pathfinder” or the “Path Maker”?
5. How did Fremont contribute to knowledge about Utah?
6. Hastings’ route was supposed to be a shorter route to ________________.
7. Identify some reasons the Donner-Reed party met with disaster.
8. How did Miles Goodyear contribute to the future settlement of Ogden?
9. During the time period of this chapter, present-day Utah was claimed by which country?

Activity | Chain of Events

Dominguez and Escalante did not find the new route to California they were looking for. They didn’t convert Indians to their Catholic religion. Was their trip of any value? Follow the chain of events:

Dominguez and Escalante traveled through today’s Utah. Miera drew a map of their travels.  

Humboldt, a geographer, later found Escalante’s journal.  

Humboldt published some of the journal, including Miera’s map.  

John C. Fremont, a government explorer, read the journal published by Humbolt and studied Miera’s map.  

Fremont went into today’s Utah and wrote about the region.  

Mormon leaders read the Fremont reports, which helped them plan their route to the West, where they would eventually settle.

1. According to the chart above, who was the first person who benefited from Dominguez and Escalante’s travels through today’s Utah?
2. How did Fremont benefit from the information gathered by Dominguez and Escalante?
3. Summarize one effect of Dominguez and Escalante’s travels on the settlement of Utah.
Go to the Source

Patty Reed Writes a Letter

You read about the trek of the Donner-Reed pioneers on pages 90–91. Several members of the group kept diaries. Some members later recalled the fateful trip and published their writings in newspapers and books. After the rescue of the group in California, some wrote letters to send back home with travelers going the opposite direction. Thirteen-year-old Virginia (Patty) Reed described the crossing of the salt flats west of the Great Salt Lake in a letter to her cousin.

MAY 16, 1847
Speaking of the people at Bridger’s Fort, she wrote:

"...they persuaded us to take Haistings cut off over the salt plain. They said it saved 3 Hundred miles, we went that road & we had to go through a long dry drive of 40 miles. With out water or grass Hastings said it was 40 but I think it was 80 miles. We traveled a day and night & a nother day and at noon pa went on to see if he could find Water, he had not been gone long till some of the oxen give out and we had to lose the Wagons and take the oxen on to water one of the men staid with us and the others went on with the cattel to water."

"Pa was a coming back to us with Water and met the men thay was about 10 miles from water pa said they got to water that night, and the next day to bring the cattel back for the Wagons any bring some Water"

Note: Mr. Reed and others went on ahead to find water. They left their wagons on the desert in order to let the animals travel without the added burden of heavy wagons to pull. Once water was found at some springs at the foot of mountains, Reed started back to meet the cattle and to get his family. Mr. Eddy accompanied him back five miles, with a bucket of water for his oxen that had "become exhausted, in consequence of thirst, and had lain down."

1. Compare the dates Patty Reed traveled across the salt flats of the Great Salt Lake desert with the date of her letter. What conclusions can you draw from the difference in the dates?
2. Why do you think members of the Donner-Reed party wrote about the trip after it was over?
3. The letter says the route of Hastings Cutoff went "over the salt plain," which today we call the salt flats of the Great Salt Lake. What natural resources the group needed does Patty say were not available on that part of the trip?
4. The wagons were packed with goods that would have helped the group survive in the cold mountains of California. Why were the wagons left behind as the group crossed the salt flats?