

U.S. INDIAN POLICY, 1815–1860: REMOVAL TO RESERVATIONS

A Unit of Study for Grades 8–12

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Approach and Rationale	1
II. Content and Organization	1

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview	3
II. Unit Context	3
III. Correlation to National History Standards	4
IV. Unit Objectives	5
V. Historical Background	6

Dramatic Moment	9
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Lessons

Lesson One: The Role of Education	10
Lesson Two: Euro-American Justifications and Indian Responses	24
Lesson Three: Indian Removal Policy	37
Lesson Four: The Case of the Cherokee	56
Lesson Five: The Shift to Reservation Policy	71

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The circumstances in which a nation finds itself are less significant than the context in which those circumstances are perceived, and the ultimate decisions informed by those perceptions define the character of the nation. The cultural interaction between Euro-Americans and the original inhabitants constitute one of the most compelling and defining conundrums in American History. This teaching unit, *U. S. Indian Policy, 1815–1860: Removal to Reservations*, plumbs the depths of nineteenth-century ideology as it manifested itself in prevailing public attitudes, justifications for actions, and the formation of government policy. Opposing viewpoints are presented on the policy of Indian Removal as well as a variety of Native American responses providing substance for discussion and debate. Specific attention is paid to shifting attitudes among the Cherokees as their circumstances changed. The teaching unit concludes with an examination of the transition in U. S. policy from Indian Removal to concentrating the remaining eastern Indians on reservations.

Lessons One and Two present two different cultural perspectives and the circumstances and decisions that defined the nature of the relationship between those cultures. The roots of Euro-American ideology and prejudice are examined as well as the establishment and perpetuation of those biases in the institutions of a young democracy and their influence in directing federal and state policies toward Native Americans during the early nineteenth century.

Lessons Three, Four and Five concentrate on the establishment and implementation of U. S. Indian Policy between 1815 and 1860. These lessons provide primary documents that present multiple perspectives on the policy of Indian Removal and reveals the transition to a policy of confinement on reservations while illustrating throughout the variety of attitudes towards the Indians' adoption of and assimilation into Euro-American culture. Discussion questions and activities are provided to guide students through an analysis of the historical documents and to engage them in the arguments and ideology of these issues in this time period. The current relevance of these issues can be highlighted by a comparison of Indian Removal with ethnic cleansing or an examination of recent disputes over treaty rights in Wisconsin and Minnesota based on the 1837 and 1854 treaties contained in this unit.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

In the typical United States History survey course, this unit would be most appropriate following class topics on the War of 1812 and the diplomatic boundary agreements during the next decade. It could also be the concluding issue in the Jacksonian period while providing a springboard into the topic of western expansion and the overland trails. A discussion of the antebellum Age of Reform could either precede or follow this unit to enable comparisons and contrasts.

This unit is designed for a two to three week time period but is structured to be easily modified for use in a variety of secondary and post-secondary classroom situations and to provide great flexibility in the use of class time. The unit can be used as a whole, independently in separate sections, or by extracting selected documents to enhance other classroom strategies. Should the unit be used in its entirety, class time can be conserved by assigning specific documents to different student groups that would examine them and then report their findings to the rest of the class. Student activities could include analyzing documents, negotiating treaties, engaging in debates, writing mock newspaper articles about specific events, producing posters, staging demonstrations, and role playing. Students will be encouraged to examine issues and events from a variety of Euro-American and Native American perspectives.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

U.S. Indian Policy, 1815–1860: Removal to Reservations presents students with opportunities not only to examine Euro-American—Native American relations during the early nineteenth century from multiple perspectives using primary documents, but the European ideology which pervaded and in turn was perpetuated by the institutions of American Democracy. The unit provides documentary materials and learning activities relating to the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 4, Standard 1B**: *Demonstrate an understanding of federal and state Indian policy and the strategies for survival forged by Native Americans*. Exercises designed to address Euro-American attitudes and ideas that contributed to the myth of Manifest Destiny are incorporated into the unit, satisfying **Standard 1C**. The unit also addresses the five Historical Thinking Standards outlined in Part 1, Chapter 2 of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*. Lessons provide primary source materials which challenge students to distinguish between fact and fiction, compare different stories about historical events, consider multiple perspectives, explain causes in analyzing historical actions, hypothesize influences of the past, identify causes of a problem, and evaluate the consequences of a decision.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze primary documents that reveal attitudes that helped provide a basis for U.S. Indian policy.
2. To compare, contrast and evaluate various arguments concerning the U.S. policy of removing Native Americans west of the Mississippi and to consider differing interpretations of the same historical events.
3. To examine treaties and statements of official policy outlining the shift in U.S. Indian Policy from removal to reservations.
4. To develop an understanding of how the historical documents in this unit and the attitudes revealed by them are relevant to current social-political issues which continue to guide official government policies towards Native Americans
5. To expose students to the viewpoints and political positions of Native Americans whose voices have been largely ignored in standard texts.

V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ideally, relations between two peoples should be an exchange of ideas and a search for mutually beneficial relationships based upon and promoting respect for each other's cultural differences. In an autocratic or aristocratic government, this ideal can be thwarted by narrow concerns of economic interest or social prejudice that control government policy. However, in a democracy, government policy must be supported by commonly held perceptions, and if that policy is prejudicial towards another people, that prejudice must be institutionalized so that no significant group of constituents questions the basic premises from which the policy emanates. Political discourse then focuses on the choice of the various policy options that are dictated by the unquestioned premises.

The perceptions that were later to shape the beliefs of the early Euro-Americans and guide their policies toward Native Americans were clearly articulated during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The feudal system of Medieval Europe planted the seeds for the belief that property ownership brought greater freedom. The decline of feudalism led to an attendant rise in social status of some peasants to that of landowners. This in turn created within the new propertied class a greater degree of independence. The desire for land and all of its promises were passed on and became a compelling motive for future colonizers. The connection between land and freedom had been firmly established by the end of the Renaissance.

As land was seen as liberating the oppressed, reason was perceived as the means to understand the workings of the world, freeing the mind from the rule of passion. Enlightened thought added moral and scientific weight concerning the superiority of reason over emotion by suggesting that humanity was on a continuum with the men of logic (those who created the concept) at the top and