

BLM LE History Part 2

The Bureau of Land Management today administers what remains of the nation's once vast land holdings, the public domain. The public domain once stretched from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific and constituted in Historian Fredrick Jackson Turner's mind, the richest free gift that was ever spread out before civilized man. Of the 1.8 billion acres of public land acquired by the United States, two thirds went to individuals, corporations, and the states. Of that remaining, much was set aside for national forest, wildlife refuges, national parks and monuments, and other public purposes, leaving BLM to manage some 264 million acres of land as well as 570 million acres of subsurface mineral estate. Lands managed by BLM are often scattered and take on checkerboard, jigsaw, and patchwork patterns, but in much of the great basin, desert southwest, and Alaska, solid blocks of public land predominate. These land patterns are inherited. The result of public land policies pursued by the country prior to the agency's founding in 1946. To the young American nation, the public domain represented challenge and opportunity, a wilderness waiting to be transformed into an agricultural Eden. The nation also needed revenue. A policy of disposing public lands through auctions seemed to meet both these needs. As the need for revenue lessened, policies shifted to one of development and lands were generously provided to settlers, corporations, and the states, but as the public domain diminished, the government chose to set aside timber, mineral, and grazing lands and regulate their development as a means of preserving the opportunity of the public domain. The back lands claimed by the British crown, contended Maryland legislators in November 1776, if secured by the blood and

BLM LE History Part 2

treasure of all, ought in reason, justice, and policy be considered as a common stock. With that declaration, Maryland raised the issue of what should become of the territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. The issue proved contentious and threatened the bonds that held the new union of states together. Seven states had claimed to the region. Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, North Carolina, South Carolina, And Georgia had early colonial charters from England granting them title to the lands beyond the Appalachians. New York's claim resulted from concessions by the Iroquois Indians. The remaining states had no claims to the area. For states without land claims like Maryland, the disposition of western lands was of major importance. They needed land to reward the soldiers who served in the regiments against the British. Maryland also feared that if Virginia and the other land claim states to title to the lands of the trans-Appalachian west, they would dominate the nation economically and politically. Maryland demanded that the land claim states relinquish their title to the central government and vowed not to sign the articles of confederation until that was done. The land claim states resisted Maryland's demand at first. Virginia, Maryland's chief antagonist, declared that the central government had no claim to the western lands. The resolve of Virginia and other land claim states however, weakened as they realized the importance of having Maryland in the union and recognized that their conflicting claims to the western lands could threaten their relations with each other. New York in 1780 took the first step towards compromise by offering to cede its claim to the lands beyond the Appalachian Mountains to the central government. Maryland reciprocated by

BLM LE History Part 2

signing the articles of confederation. The United States accepted New York's cession in 1781. By 1802, Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, North and South Carolina, and Georgia had ceded their western land claims to the central government; however, not all western lands were ceded. Virginia had granted much of Kentucky to soldiers and other interests during the revolution and so retained this area. Tennessee, carved from North Carolina, was also withheld from the public domain for much the same reason. The public domain grew rapidly beyond the bounds of the trans-Appalachian west. In 1803, president Thomas Jefferson acquired from France through the Louisiana Purchase the immense region drained by the Mississippi River's western tributaries. The purchase doubled the size of the nation. The Red River Valley of the north came to the United States by the convention of 1818, which set the boundary with British Canada between Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains at the 49th Parallel. By treaty with Spain the following year, Florida was acquired and the western border of the Louisiana Purchase redrawn. American's Manifest Destiny to span the continent was fulfilled in the 1840s. The United States and Britain in 1846 ended their joint occupation of the Oregon Country by dividing the region along the 49th Parallel. That same year also saw the beginning of war with Mexico. American troops seized control of New Mexico and long coveted California, and by the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the United States took title to the southwest from Mexico for 15 million dollars. When Texas joined the union in 1845, it retained title to its vacant and unappropriated public lands as Texas had been recognized as an independent nation for nine years prior to

BLM LE History Part 2

statehood. The federal government however purchased the northwest portion of Texas in 1850 and added it to the public domain. Three years later, James Gadsden negotiated the purchase of 19 million acres along the Mexican border needed for a southern transcontinental railroad route. In 1867, the United States made its last addition to the public domain by purchasing Alaska from Russia for 7.2 million dollars. Hawaii had no unalienated public lands upon admission to the union and therefore was never a public domain state.