



**Assumption  
University**

**Digital Commons @ Assumption University**

---

Honors Theses

Honors Program

---

2023

## **A Push for Historical Thinking in Elementary History Instruction**

Taylor Cirone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/honorstheses>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Elementary Education Commons](#)

---

A Push for Historical Thinking in Elementary History Instruction

Taylor Cirone

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Lisa D'Souza

Education Department

A Thesis Submitted to Fulfill the Requirements of the  
Honors Program at Assumption University

Spring 2023

## **Introduction**

Imagine a classroom where students are tasked with taking on the role of an archaeologist to analyze an artifact from their personal life. They must consider the artifact's significance, what it suggests about culture and society, and who or what it may represent. This is the sort of activity that teachers should encourage in elementary school. It not only sharpens students' analytical skills and higher-order thinking, but it's also engaging. This is not the experience that everybody has, and instead many people label history as that boring class they took in school which didn't teach them anything. Others believe history is irrelevant to the present and has no use in the world we live in today. It is rare that people acknowledge the importance and functionality that history has for all people.

The National Council for Social Studies states that the primary purpose of social studies is, "to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world" (NCSS). In this case, history is an all-encompassing topic with purposes that help us fulfill our duties as students and citizens. History does this by helping people understand diversity and humanity in a way that contributes to our self-awareness and participation as citizens. This suggests that the negative associations with history come from how the topic is taught rather than the topic itself. Specifically in today's everchanging world, there has never been a greater need to teach and learn social studies. It is even more necessary now as our polarized world is experiencing societal problems that require individuals to have problem solving skills and an awareness.

The state standards for social studies explain exactly what elementary students are expected to know and be able to do at each grade level. In grade 4, students are expected to have skills that allow them to do things like, "analyze the purpose and point of view of each source;

distinguish opinion from fact,” and “evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and relevance of each source” (Common Core). Historical thinking supports students’ skill development in analyzing and evaluating a source in these ways. Elementary students must learn the skills of historians in-training, as well as the background knowledge necessary to have a better understanding of themselves and the society we live in. The earlier that students start to learn these skills and ideas the easier it will be for them to be active participants in our democracy.

When elementary students learn to be historians-in-training, they learn to assess and analyze evidence, make claims, and develop interpretations. In this way they practice being an informed citizen who understands the causes and effects of different world events. Researchers like Dr. Keith Barton have conducted studies to assess students’ analytical skills such as use of evidence. He found that students never saw the connection between the sources they examined and how the authors know what happened in history. They didn’t accurately use evidence to reach their conclusions, and when asked how they came to a specific conclusion one student said, “I just kinda know” (Barton, 1997, p. 407). While some argue elementary students lack the ability to conduct historical thinking, Elise Fillpot (2009) found curriculum is the biggest limit on elementary students’ engagement in historical thinking, not age or academic ability. Many believe that some students are too young to think like an historian because they aren’t developed enough.

While there is research in support of historical thinking in the elementary curriculum, the results vary and this raises the question, how capable are elementary students in engaging in historical thinking? I plan to answer this question by looking at examples of historical thinking in elementary students through their experiences with a unit plan I develop with a central focus on historical inquiry. My goal is to develop a 4-day unit plan for 4th graders on Westward

Expansion using the MA Curriculum Frameworks for 4th grade content and NCSS historical thinking skills. I will garner feedback from Worcester area teachers to support the revision of my unit. I will then teach my lessons with elementary students to learn how effective the lessons were in supporting the development of historical thinking in elementary students. There is currently a lack of historical thinking skills being taught in elementary curriculum. This study is important because students may be capable of more critical thinking skills than is typically expected. Due to the necessity of these skills, the earlier students can learn the more successful they will be making claims, recognizing historical perspective, and deeply inquiring into whose story is told in a history and whose is missing.

### **Literature Review**

Historical thinking involves understanding information from the past using multiple sources to show different perspectives. It is higher level thinking that goes beyond the surface and asks students to draw conclusions using evidence. According to the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), social studies content should encourage students to ask questions and think critically. It “gives students the skills needed to be successful in the changing world” (NCSS). The NCSS advocates that students should have social studies experiences beginning in PreK and extending through high school because it fosters skills needed for lifelong learning. They believe history instruction should include connections between the past, present, and future as well as reflect the values of our democracy through reason and debate.

There are certain skills that students should gain from a social studies instruction. These historical thinking skills aren't just beneficial in school but far beyond. Students should be able to use chronological thinking to distinguish how events take place over time and how cause and effect occurs across time. Children should develop skills in reading like a historian so they can

understand sources and be able to develop historical empathy, allowing them to consider life in the past. Analysis and interpretation are key to being historians-in-training so that students can read any source and establish its point of view or perspective, as well as its credibility. Students must be able to form questions and gather data based on historical sources so they can decide which sources are accurate and reliable – this is the most challenging skill for elementary students (Barton 1997).

Scholars continue to struggle with when and how historical thinking skills can and should be taught to elementary students. While some strongly believe that these skills are appropriate for all ages (Fillpot, 2009; Seif, 2003) others think students need lots of support and guidance in using them (Barton, 1997). According to Keith Barton, using historical evidence to support evidence-based conclusions is one of the most important learning objectives of social studies. This is an important objective because using evidence helps students learn how compelling their claims are when they can show the evidence. Without evidence, people may view one's conclusion as an unsupported opinion that uses inaccurate research. In a seminal research study with fourth and fifth graders, Barton (1997) found that students rarely examined sources critically and instead looked at them equally. This is problematic as the key to determining whether a source is credible is determining what it means to be more or less credible and why. In this year-long study, students were first asked broadly about things like how do you know what happened in the past? How do people know what to write about the past? Most students believed that historical information was handed down orally and didn't understand that they were reading accounts that were based on other sources. These students were studying the Battle at Lexington Green and were tasked with analyzing 12 different accounts of the battle. Then they were asked to rank the reliability of each source and form an opinion on which side in the battle fired the

first shot. Students could see disagreement between the sources they read, but they didn't know how to handle this conflict. So, they saw that different accounts told different stories but when they picked a side, they didn't use evidence to form their conclusions and instead said, "I just kind know."

Barton's findings suggest that students should get continuous and explicit instruction with using evidence to make conclusions (Barton). The responsibility for this learning is placed on teachers who should provide opportunities for students to practice historical thinking skills such as analyzing evidence across the academic year. Teachers must explicitly teach how to analyze evidence by scaffolding the process. As students develop and understand historical thinking, the teacher steps back and lets them do more on their own. In this way, the support is taken away in stages, so students aren't overwhelmed (Grand, 2022). With the use of scaffolding students will be able to grow in their historical thinking skills.

While the Barton study shows challenges to historical thinking for children in elementary school, it also demonstrates some success with student use of historical evidence. The students in fourth and fifth grade could examine sources critically and sometimes acknowledged that books about history are written in the present. This means they noticed that authors didn't always live at the time that they wrote about and so they had to get their information from somewhere else. Students also noticed that some sources were more reliable than others. All these things are beginning thoughts that could be further developed into critical and historical thinking. If students are taught what to look for and how to deal with differing perspectives and sources, then they will be more capable of applying historical thinking skills in class and in the real world. Barton demonstrates that there is a basis for historical thinking among elementary students, but they may need more help in applying their skills.

Another study conducted by Elise Fillpot (2009) found that students can perform better than expected and can think at a level higher than what is taught to them at the elementary level. The two third grade students who were tested had been studying history since kindergarten, showing the benefits of an early start to social studies learning. These children analyzed 17 historical sources on a topic they had no prior knowledge of The Dawes Act. The students had to use evidence and their prior knowledge to make judgements about this topic. They did a “think aloud” interview to answer various questions about the topic. Both children successfully used evidence to form sound conclusions and they demonstrated expertise in historical thinking and US history knowledge in their answers. They sourced where the evidence came from and contextualized what was happening at the time of the source’s creation. This study supports the idea that curriculum is the biggest limit on what elementary students can engage in, rather than student age. While the students were only in third grade and had no education on the topic, they proved to have knowledge of other topics and interpretation skills that helped them make sense of The Dawes Act.

Fillpot’s study suggests that history should be taught as evidence-based and interpretative in younger elementary grades. This can scaffold students’ learning as they continue to build their historical thinking skills. Fillpot proposes an issue with the social studies curriculum that is given to students. Since these children could perform better than what was expected of them the curriculum may not challenge all students’ historical thinking skills. Some argue that while the state content frameworks now give history a more prominent role in the elementary curriculum, students continue to struggle with aspects of historical thinking (Chauncey, 2012). This means that the teaching of history needs to be supported and strengthened by teachers so students can improve their historical thinking skills.

There are opportunities for growth in integrating historical thinking in elementary grades. A textbook only approach shuts down inquiry which opposes everything history instruction should be. For one, textbook questions tend to be low level or fact based which leaves little room for interpretation or analysis (TeacherVision). Additionally, textbook teaching only provides students with one perspective on a concept and doesn't account for a student's background knowledge or ability level. Instead of this approach, there should be a balance where children are challenged without getting overwhelmed (Chauncey, 2012). One way to challenge students is through inquiry which involves hands-on learning for the students by having them explore and discover learning from primary sources. Inquiry is the essence of social studies, and it should loop through the curriculum, so students have multiple opportunities to engage in higher order thinking (Swan, 2021). One idea to integrate historical thinking in the elementary classroom is to pose central questions that have many possible answers. Teachers should incorporate many historical sources with different perspectives for students to use to help answer these questions. Discussion is also important in social studies so that students can talk through their ideas and different opinions from their own.

The social studies curriculum today falls short in terms of developing historical thinking in elementary school. There is need for a revised history curriculum because the current social studies programs, standards, and traditional textbooks don't prepare students for productive citizenship (Seif, 2003). History should provide students with life skills like problem solving and debating so they can become active citizens. Elliot Seif suggests the implementation of Understanding by Design (UbD). This is a curricular program he believes will reform how history is taught by engaging students in exploration and discovery. In this program, teachers use

a backwards design where they plan a lesson by starting with the desired end result. Then they work backwards to establish the lesson and curriculum to meet those desired results.

In this way teachers can avoid the “twin sins” of textbook teaching and activity-oriented teaching. When teachers plan lessons solely based on their textbook or based on an activity they want to do in class, students will miss out on having to think historically and reason. This is because teachers will be so focused on the activity or what the textbook says that they won’t spend time on higher-order skills. Understanding by Design allows teachers to plan activities that are more open ended and require teachers to look beyond the textbook for sources and ideas. Many times, history curriculum just seems to be based on reading a textbook and answering questions. However, UbD supports asking students for an analysis of different sources and perspectives.

Looping inquiry can further integrate historical thinking in the elementary classroom (Swan 2021). Many people believe that for social studies, once a fact or word is memorized for the test then it can be forgotten as the class moves on to a new topic. Instead of this, historical thinking requires use of prior knowledge to analyze and interpret sources on a new topic. Kathy Swan argues that using this loop method allows very young children to understand even the most complex ideas or topics. Looping history curriculum encourages the elements of inquiry which are questions, tasks, and sources (Swan, 2021). All of these are crucial in historical thinking so students can fully grasp the content they are learning.

Looping inquiry involves starting with a complex idea in its simplest form and then using it in more challenging ways. The same idea is intertwined through a whole unit and sometimes a whole year to make the concept clear to the student and for them to see how it applies to their life. The goal of this model is to have students practice their historical thinking skills such as

analyzing, interpreting, and debating while they refine their knowledge on one concept in history. Over time using the same theme or idea through different lessons and topics will help students make connections and use their skills more fluently. Many times, this allows students to make connections that they otherwise wouldn't have noticed if they only briefly discussed an idea. This model shows that developing mastery of historical thinking skills takes time but is very necessary to live in the world today (Swan). Even a complex idea such as historical thinking should loop through different classes and years for students to clearly understand it. It is not something learned overnight because it has many different parts to it that require practice.

Many teachers assume that students can't engage in historical thinking. This is shown in the most frequent activities provided for students such as textbook questions and tests. But studies show that children as young as seven can start doing source work (VanSledright, 2004). Source work involves analyzing different documents and authors to try and understand things of the past. For students to engage in source work, they must understand that historians reconstruct the past based on what they are trying to find out from different sources. Assessing sources is an essential part of historical thinking because it can demonstrate different viewpoints and requires students to use their thinking skills to get to the main idea.

In support of this method, VanSledright (2004) identifies four cognitive steps that elementary students should follow when assessing sources. They are identification, attribution, perspective judgement, and reliability assessment. Using these steps results in historical thinking and full understanding of the source at hand. Identification involves knowing what type of source is being assessed whether it is a journal, article, etc. Attribution is recognizing that an author created this source for a specific purpose and that they created it in a historical context. Judging perspectives is the process of reading a source and then assessing what the author's stance is on

certain social, cultural, and political issues. This could involve looking deeper into the text to see the author's perspective. Finally, reliability assessment is when related sources are compared to see how well they can be used as evidence to make claims about what happened in the past.

These cognitive steps can be integrated in the elementary classroom when analyzing sources so that students have a clear process to follow. This will ensure that they analyze sources in the way they are most capable.

As students mature, they will discover that issues are bound to become more complex and will require us to further develop our thinking skills. It is the role of the teacher to make sure students are prepared for these complex issues. Some would say, "The most important challenge facing educators is an intellectual one-developing the minds of our students to promote skilled reasoning and intellectual self-discipline" (Elder and Paul, 2019, P. 388). It is important to teach students how to develop these critical thinking skills because once they are out in the real world, they will be expected to use them on their own to get past problems. If students can be taught to ask the right questions and analyze things properly then they will be able to contribute to society and solve complex issues. It is important for teachers to assess students thinking and reasoning so students can improve on recognizing what they should ask and think in relation to historical sources.

When engaging in historical thinking skills, students should demonstrate clarity of their ideas. It should be obvious what they think, and they should be able to give examples to further explain. Students thinking should also be accurate, so it aligns with different sources and accounts. Students' thoughts should be precise with lots of detailed evidence to back them up. They should also engage in relevant, in-depth thought, so it relates to what they are studying or wondering about but still goes below the surface level. Students should consider if their thoughts

are fair and examine different perspectives without being biased towards one. When students are taught to ask these questions and think in this way then they are prepared for success.

Integrating historical thinking in the classroom may seem like a daunting task. However, it should be thought of as a skill set that develops across the elementary years. Students tend to have a hard time forming opinions on major events because they are used to learning only in the confines of their classroom with no connections to real world events. “On the road to adulthood, students embrace a superficial understanding of the concepts and mechanisms related to democratic life, which hinders their ability to become active citizens” (Araya, 2020, P.1). It is important for teachers to go beyond the surface level and engage students in knowledge that affects their own life.

Students can demonstrate a higher level of critical thinking skills in the narratives they create (Araya, 2020). Students are familiar with stories, shows, and comic strips which makes these beneficial for comprehension and thinking about historical or current events. When students use stories to demonstrate their knowledge, they are more likely to share their own opinion and ideas because they are comfortable with that type of “assessment.” Stories can help show off more skills like perspective, sympathy, and empathy through the characters that students create. Story-based learning is one strategy that can engage students in the process of developing historical thinking skills. This is one way that these skills can be incorporated into the curriculum.

### **The Unit Plan**

The section below is the 4-day unit plan that I have developed consisting of lessons that incorporate various historical thinking strategies. My lesson plans are intended for 4<sup>th</sup> grade during a unit on westward expansion. I taught these lessons to various groups including fellow

teacher candidates, a small group of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, and a group of 21 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from a local elementary school. In these lessons, students take charge and play an active role in their learning. They are tasked with analyzing primary sources, asking and answering questions, and using evidence to form conclusions – all steps in developing historical thinking skills.

**Lesson 1:**

**Topic: Preparing to travel west in a covered wagon on the Oregon Trail**

Grade: 4

Rationale:

Students will understand the difficulty in preparing to travel West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, students will understand the challenge of deciding what to pack and what to leave behind. They will understand the hardships that a person endured on the journey on the Oregon Trail.

MA Common Core Frameworks

**Topic 4. The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today [4.T4]**

3. Describe aspects of pioneer life on the frontier (e.g., **wagon train journeys** on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, and settlements in the western territories).

The Desired End Results:

<b>Understandings/Big Ideas</b>	<b>Essential Questions</b>
Students will understand that ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Packing the covered wagon was challenging for those traveling West</li> <li>• Traveling on the Oregon Trail was a difficult 2,000 mile journey</li> </ul>	Students will keep considering... <p><i>Unit EQ:</i> What was the impact of Westward Expansion?</p> <p><i>Lesson EQ:</i> How did packing the covered wagon and the actual journey west challenge travelers on the Oregon Trail?</p>
<b>Measurable Objectives</b>	<b>Assessment Measures</b>
<p><i>Students will be able to:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe the reasons why packing and traveling in the covered wagon was difficult for those heading West</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In small group and class discussion, students will share their thoughts on why packing the wagon and traveling was difficult on the Oregon Trail.</li> </ol>

<p>2. Analyze problems and predict solutions that people encountered along the Oregon Trail</p>	<p>2. In class discussion, students will share their thoughts and answer questions regarding problems and solutions written on each stop card for the journey.</p>
---	--

**Initiation:**

*Today we are going to talk about Westward Expansion. This is when people called pioneers or settlers left their homes in the East to go West. (Show map). I will show the map that shows population growth and say, this map shows population growth. The year is at the top and so this map shows how the population got bigger over the years going further west.*

I will ask students why people might move from one place to another. Then I will explain why the settlers wanted to leave the East.

*Today we are going to put ourselves in the shoes of pioneers in the 1800s who had to pack a covered wagon for a 6-month journey on the Oregon Trail. I will have a picture of the trail from Missouri to Oregon on the screen (slideshow) and show it to the students.*

*How might the things we would bring today be different from what the pioneers might have brought back in the 1800s?* Students will turn and talk with their table about this question and then they will share with the class.

Students should mention that the pioneers wouldn't have hotels, restaurants, or stores to stop like we would so they would have to pack more. I will explain/rephrase that the pioneers didn't have the resources to buy things along the way, so they would have to pack more with them. They couldn't pull over and eat at a restaurant or sleep at a hotel like we could today. They also didn't have access to medical help or technology.

**Development:**

Next, I will have a picture of the inside of a covered wagon on the screen (slideshow). *The pioneers didn't have space to take all of the things that they needed for the 6 month journey – they needed to make decisions about what to pack. Each wagon was roughly 4 feet wide and 10 feet long. [tape on floor to show size] This is roughly how much space the pioneers had to store their stuff.*

I will show picture of inside of wagon. *We will now read about the packing of the wagon.* I will hand out an excerpt from an article to each student about packing the covered wagon. I will read aloud.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Packing the Wagon to Journey West</b></p> <p>The success or failure of travelers depended most heavily on their choice of equipment and supplies for the journey. Every traveler insisted on taking along some luxuries like mirrors and clocks. They also brought items of sentimental value like family pictures. Chamber pots, lanterns, Bibles, schoolbooks, and furniture were crammed into odd spaces in almost every wagon.</p> <p>Certain tools for emergency wagon repairs were also packed including- rope, brake chains, a wagon jack, extra axles and tongues, wheel parts, axes, saws, hammers, knives, and a</p>
--

sturdy shovel. If they didn't bring these things, there was a higher risk of getting stuck along the trail.

Cooking utensils were also important — few wagons were without a Dutch oven and a good iron skillet — and the trip was simply not possible without a water barrel to get travelers and their animals through dry stretches of the Trail. Weapons and kits for casting bullets were needed for hunting.

Travelers were advised not to overload their wagons, but many underestimated the difficulty of the journey. After beginning the journey, many were forced to leave cargo to lighten the load for their weary oxen. The trail became littered with discarded items.

Most of the space in the wagons was for food. The long days of walking gave travelers huge appetites. Hundreds of pounds of cured meats and dried goods like flour, hardtack, bacon, rice, coffee, sugar, beans, and fruit were packed in wagons for the journey. Coffee probably saved thousands of lives on the trails, as it required that the water be boiled, thus killing any germs (including cholera) that would likely have sicken the travelers.

Adapted from: <https://historicoregoncity.org/2019/04/03/outfitting-for-the-journey/#:~:text=Chamber%20pots%2C%20lanterns%2C%20mirrors%2C,forced%20to%20discard%20nonessential%20carg>

Now I will explain the activity where students pack their own wagon. *Now we are going to split into groups and work to pack a wagon in preparation for the journey on the Oregon Trail.*

Some important things to know before will be put on the board. I will read them to the class:

- *Wagon will be packed for a family of 4 people.*
- *Wagon can carry up to 2,500 pounds*
- *Wagon is pulled by two oxen.*
- *Wagon has a waterproof top which protects the items inside*

The class will be split up into groups of 4 and each student will receive discussion questions and a weight calculation sheet that has all possible items to pack (see link below).

*As a team you will decide what to pack and what to leave at home. As you go you need to track the weight of each item and calculate the total weight of your wagon at the end. Be prepared to share how you decided what to take and what to leave.*

I will model how to fill out the weight calculation sheet. *If I plan to bring 1 tent, I will make one check mark in this column. If I bring 2 ropes, I will make 2 checks.* I will say if they choose to add an item not on the list, they will write it under other on the back. Since weight is tough to estimate, I would help them if they chose to add an item not on the list and are unsure about the weight.

We will briefly discuss how they found the experience of packing the wagon using the following discussion questions:

1. *What would be the most important things you take with you? Why are they important?*
2. *What is the most difficult thing to leave behind? Why did you decide to leave it?*

### **Reflection:**

This lesson was successful for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. They were very engaged and enjoyed the hands-on elements of the lesson. Specifically, they found it fascinating that I taped space on the floor for the wagon size (4ft by 10ft) and they all tried to fit into it at the end of the lesson. They enjoyed working with a partner to pack their own wagon and were shocked at how many items there were to choose from. Many students made great connections and arguments for what they should pack or leave behind. One student explained, “we need a hammer or a saw in case our wagon breaks down”. Another student argued, “we need coffee to stay awake for the long journey”. With prompting the student was able to refer back to the reading and realize that coffee also meant boiled water which prevented cholera.

Overall students were successful with putting themselves into the shoes of the pioneers. I reminded them at the end that the journey is 6 months and so leaving things behind meant you wouldn't have it for a long time. Many students thought items like a diary and ink were useless, while others thought they could be very useful. One student said, ““We could use the diary to make maps [of journey]”. Students were able to use critical thinking by using information from the Packing the Covered Wagon text to inform their decisions about what to pack.

While there was a lot of success in this lesson, I also saw areas for improvement to help with student's background knowledge and understanding. In the future I would include more images to support the items on the packing list and in the read aloud. Students frequently had questions about the items including- chamber pot and Dutch oven. One student was unfamiliar with how to use a calculator and didn't realize that each time you add a number it continues to show the

running total. Overall, it became clear in this lesson that even something that seems obvious may need to be explicitly taught to the students.

**Lesson 2:**  
**Journey on Oregon Trail:**

Grade: 4

Rationale:

Students will understand the difficulty in preparing to travel West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, students will understand the challenge of deciding what to pack and what to leave behind. They will understand the hardships that a person endured on the journey on the Oregon Trail.

MA Common Core Frameworks

**Topic 4. The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today [4.T4]**

3. Describe aspects of pioneer life on the frontier (e.g., **wagon train journeys** on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, and settlements in the western territories).

The Desired End Results:

<b>Understandings/Big Ideas</b>	<b>Essential Questions</b>
Students will understand that ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Packing the covered wagon was challenging for those traveling West</li> <li>• Traveling on the Oregon Trail was a difficult 2,000 mile journey</li> </ul>	Students will keep considering... <p><i>Unit EQ:</i> What was the impact of Westward Expansion?</p> <p><i>Lesson EQ:</i> How did packing the covered wagon and the actual journey west challenge travelers on the Oregon Trail?</p>
<b>Measurable Objectives</b>	<b>Assessment Measures</b>
<p><i>Students will be able to:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Describe the reasons why packing and traveling in the covered wagon was difficult for those heading West</li> <li>4. Analyze problems and predict solutions that people encountered along the Oregon Trail</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. In small group and class discussion, students will share their thoughts on why packing the wagon and traveling was difficult on the Oregon Trail.</li> <li>4. In class discussion, students will share their thoughts and answer questions regarding problems and solutions written on each stop card for the journey.</li> </ol>

**Initiation:**

*Now that our wagons are packed, we are ready to travel on the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri to Portland, Oregon [show slide on map]. There are 8 stops along the trail.*

Throughout the narration there are 8 stops at different points along the trail. The stops are visually shown on the map that is projected on the screen. Each stop explains a problem that needs a solution. Students will engage in this part by answering questions and thinking out loud. Throughout the simulation I will also include some diary entries from Narcissa Whitman who traveled the Oregon Trail to show the students primary sources of voices from the journey. When the diary entries are read, I emphasize how this is the voice of a real woman who traveled on the Oregon Trail. I will ask students, *why is hearing her voice important to understanding the journey?* I will mention that the entry written in 1863 uses Indian, which is a term we don't use anymore because it is confusing depending on if they mean people from India or Native people.

### **Development/Simulation**

#### Part 1:

##### **Teacher:**

[slide wagon] We just woke up in our tents which we set up along a riverbank in Independence Missouri. It was 4 in the morning and still pitch dark outside. Some of the mothers and fathers already started a fire and had breakfast cooking. Everybody is anxious for the journey ahead. All the wagons in our wagon train begin to line up [slide wagon train].

You throw your leg over the edge of the wagon and hoist yourself over. Then you settle into a spot by the edge ready to watch the only world you've ever known disappear [slide dirt path].

We heard the elected leader blow his whistle and the crack of whips and then wagons started to move. We could feel the rocks beneath the wagon wheels, and we bumped up and down in our seats [slide wood bench]. The wooden boards we sit on are not very comfortable and within the first few hours many people decided to walk alongside the wagon to get a break from the bumps and aches of the seat [slide map #1]

##### **Student volunteer reads problem #1:**

A thunderstorm hit as we entered Kansas. The mud was unbearable, and the oxen kept getting stuck. We only traveled one mile today. The wheels got stuck too and our wagons wouldn't move. *How do you think the wheels and oxen got out of the mud?* [slide stuck mud]

##### **Student volunteer reads solution #1:**

We pulled over for 4 days until the rain let up and the mud dried. Everyone helped gather long grass and laid it across the ground in front of the wagon wheels. The oxen pulled from the front and people pushed from the back. The wheels turned onto the grass and finally came out of the mud. Then we were on our way again!

#### Part 2:

**Teacher:**

[slide stop #2] It wasn't long after we got back on the road that we came to another halt. I looked out of the wagon, and we were in front of a large body of water. People ahead of us were using a big flat boat called a scow to take the wagons across the Missouri river [slide scrow]. The oxen had to swim across because they couldn't fit on the scows. This took days for everyone to get across because only a few wagons could go at once, so we camped out while we waited. Everybody was tired, and the long days of traveling were taking a toll on us.

**Student volunteer reads problem #2:**

When we entered Nebraska, we encounter a group of Native People along a riverbank. They ran to us, and everyone prepared their weapons. *What do you think happened?*

**Student volunteer reads solution #2:**

The Native Person told us they have rafts so that we could ferry across the river. They expected food and cloth from our wagons. Travelers often feared the Native People, but typically there was not anything to fear because they wanted to trade.

**Part 3:****Teacher:**

[slide quote] Pioneer woman, Narcissa Whitman wrote about the Native People in her diary. She said "Indians came to our camp every day, begging money and something to eat. Children are getting used to them." She explained how the travelers learned to be less frightened by the Native People.

After crossing the Missouri River, we were on our way. We had a travel guide, but we relied on landmarks most of the time to tell us where we were. We just passed Chimney Rock [slide chimney rock], which was a large column on a bed of rocks that told us we were 550 miles from Independence. It feels like we have been traveling for years but we are getting closer each day.

[slide stop #3] The days seemed to be on repeat and there was no excitement. We ate the same thing every day. We always had biscuits, potatoes, bacon, and beans. Sometimes we crossed territories where there were wild berries and buffalo. But this was not very often. Some Native People we encountered showed us how to dry the buffalo meat to keep it safe to eat for a long time. Even though we were careful, cholera was commonly spread among travelers from contaminated food and water. Cholera cased people to get very sick and many died on the journey.

**Student volunteer reads problem #3:**

[slide sick people] The weather and exhaustion caught up to us when we got to Wyoming. Cholera spread through many on our wagon train. *How could we stop the spread of this disease on the trail?*

**Student volunteer reads solution #3:**

There was no medicine. Cholera killed a young boy in our wagon train. We had to bury him on the trail and leave a grave marker.

Part 4:

**Teacher:**

[slide stop #4] As we continued moving the number of grave markers increased. It seemed like the journey was never going to end. People continued to get sick. [slide dancing] Sometimes when we needed our spirits lifted some of the older travelers would bring out their fiddles and harmonica after we stopped for the night and invite everyone to sing and dance.

As it started to get colder, we used dried buffalo dung called “buffalo chips” [slide chips] to make fire because we never found wood. And they didn’t even smell too bad! We made it to the South Pass. It is a sloping gap that goes through the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming. We are at the halfway point on the Oregon Trail.

**Student volunteer reads problem #4:**

[slide wagon train] We were running out of food, clothes, and wagon parts. We were only 3 months into the journey. We were getting desperate since there were no buffalo chips when we crossed the Rocky Mountains there was only sage roots to burn. *What could the travelers do?*

**Student volunteer reads solution #4:**

[slide Fort stop] Right after the South Pass, we reached Fort Laramie. Here we were able to buy and trade supplies like food, cloth and wagon parts. Our wagon train bought all the remaining supplies at Fort Laramie. This meant the next travelers to stop by would be out of luck.

Part 5:

**Teacher:**

[slide stop #5] We came across a steep mountain which the oxen could not get up [slide pushing wagon up hill] We had to take some boxes and tools out of our wagon and leave them on the side of the road to make it up the mountain.

**Student volunteer reads problem #5:**

One of our oxen collapsed from exhaustion and sickness. It may die without help. *How can we help the oxen?*

**Student volunteer reads solution #5:**

We gave the ox water and food, but it did not get better. After two days we left the ox and that wagon behind so they might eventually find help from people passing by.

Part 6:

**Teacher:**

[slide stop #6] Each day feels longer than the last. Everything feels like a chore even walking, but we continue to fetch water from rivers to wash dishes and cook food even though water was harder and harder to find. [slide diary entry about daily schedule] Here is what Pioneer

woman, Narcissa Whitman wrote in her diary: “Start usually at six, travel till eleven, encamp, rest and feed, start again about two, travel until six or before, then encamp for the night.”

**Student volunteer reads problem #6:**

[slide dust] The ground got very dry as we traveled through Idaho. Dust covered the air. *How might dust interfere with traveling?*

**Student volunteer reads solution #6:**

We had to pull over for 2 days because the dust got into our eyes, and we could no longer see the trail.

Stop 7:

**Teacher:**

[slide stop #7] After days of going up a steep incline, we finally started going downhill. But it wasn't as we anticipated. Here is what pioneer woman – Narcissa Whitman said about the journey downhill: [slide quote]

“before noon we began to descend one of the most terrible mountains for steepness and length I have yet seen. It was like winding stairs in its descent and in some places almost perpendicular. The oxen seemed to dread the hill as much as we did.”

**Student volunteer reads problem #7:**

[slide broken wheel] We went down a steep mountain and a wheel fell off some of our wagons and broke. *What do you think the travelers did?*

**Student volunteer reads solution #7:**

We had to pull over for 5 days before another wagon train came by with supplies we could trade to make new wheels.

Stop 8:

**Teacher:**

[slide stop #8] We knew we were close to the end. Spirits were raised and there was chatter in each wagon on the train.

**Student volunteer reads problem #8:**

[slide fort] Finally, we made it to Fort Vancouver, a large British outpost on the bank of the Columbia River. Here we found much needed food, water, and supplies. *How do you think the travelers felt when they reached their destination?*

**Closure:**

I will ask students to brainstorm the essential question, *How did the wagon train journey make things difficult for those traveling west?* I will write student responses on the board which should include things that were stops on the journey: sickness, Native Peoples, mud, dust, animal exhaustion, broken wagons, etc.

Then I will tie the lesson back to the unit essential question, and ask, *based on the journey on the Oregon Trail, do you think expanding westward was advantageous for all people so far?* Students will explain their answers. *As you can see, traveling the Oregon Trail wasn't easy and there were many challenges along the way!*

**Sources:**

“American West Photographs.” National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/research/american-west>  
Erickson, Paul. *Daily Life in a Covered Wagon*. Puffin Books, 1997.  
Levine, Ellen, and Elroy Freem. *If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon*. Scholastic Inc., 2006.

**Reflection:**

This lesson went well, and students were able to use critical thinking skills to solve the various “problems” along the trail. When I introduced primary sources, I made sure to mention that they use the term ‘Indian’ not “Native People” because of the time period they were written in. This was helpful background knowledge for the students that allowed them to be more successful in the lesson. I made sure to tie parts of the first lesson into this one by asking some groups if they packed any useful items that could help them overcome some of the problems. Some students referenced the text that was read in the first lesson when giving ideas for helping the collapsed oxen. One student suggested boiling water and others suggested giving it coffee.

Although they used information from the previous text, many students didn't realize that once a person or ox had cholera then it couldn't be cured with coffee. They didn't recognize that coffee was only preventative. During the lesson I incorporated the voice of Narcissa Whitman, a real woman who traveled on the Oregon Trail. I asked students, “why is hearing voice of a real women who traveled the Oregon Trail helpful?” Students responded positively, saying that she experienced it, and her voice helps us to picture what actually happened. This was a great example of students using higher order thinking to apply meaning to the lesson.

**Lesson 3 and 4:**

Topic: Considering the Native Peoples’ Perspective on Westward Expansion  
 Grade: 4

**Rationale:**

Students will understand that westward expansion during the 19<sup>th</sup> century created tension and conflict between settlers and Native People. They will recognize that the impact of westward expansion on Native People already living in the West is rarely recorded in history and the Native Peoples’ voices are missing. Students will develop an understanding of the importance of learning about different perspectives.

MA Curriculum Frameworks for History and Social Science – Grade 4

**Topic 4. The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today [4.T4]**

3. Describe aspects of pioneer life on the frontier (e.g., wagon train journeys on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, and settlements in the western territories).

**The Desired End Results:**

<b>Understandings/Big Ideas</b>	<b>Essential Questions</b>
Students will understand that ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Native People and settlers had different perspectives on westward expansion</li> <li>• Westward expansion impacted groups of people in varied ways</li> </ul>	<i>Unit EQ:</i> What was the impact of Westward Expansion?  <i>Lesson EQ:</i> How did expanding westward impact the people choosing to travel and those who already lived there?
<b>Measurable Objectives</b>	<b>Assessment Measures</b>
<i>Students will be able to...</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain reasons why the Native Peoples’ perspective is not considered</li> <li>2. Analyze primary source documents from the time of westward expansion and sort sources on a scale based on their beliefs about the perspective</li> <li>3. Describe the impact of westward expansion on different groups of people</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In small group and class discussion, students will share ideas about why the Native Peoples’ voice isn’t heard in history.</li> <li>2. Students will answer discussion questions about the sources they read to conclude which side of the scale it supports using evidence.</li> <li>3. Full class closing discussion on essential questions</li> </ol>

**Initiation:**

To start the lesson, I will remind students that today we are going to talk more about the Native People during westward expansion which I mentioned during the simulation lesson.

I will explain that many Native People tribes already inhabited areas that settlers moved to during westward expansion [show map slideshow]. I will explain that this map shows the entire United States. I will outline the map using my fingers, so students get a clear picture. I will explain that all the areas highlighted are tribes that lived in that area during the 1800s.

Next, I will tell students that the Native People voice is not found in history. I will pull out 4 books about westward expansion and show them how many times they talk about Native People vs. pioneers [sticky notes in books to show where they talk about the Native People] I will ask:

*If Native Peoples were this widespread in the West, why do you think their story is not easy to find?* [question on slideshow]

I will give students 3 minutes to think, pair, share and then we will come together as a class and brainstorm. I will write ideas on chart paper that we will come back to at the end of class.

- Students should get at the idea that it might be difficult to hear a different side to the story so it will not be remembered that the Native Peoples recorded their history using oral storytelling which means that it is more difficult to learn about if you are not a member of the tribe etc.
- I will prompt as needed - Part of history is to learn about those perspectives that are more challenging to find and not recorded due to oral history traditions

*Today we are going to consider the Native People perspective as well as the perspective of the settlers traveling West that we learned about in the last lesson.*

I will read the essential question on the board:

*Lesson EQ: How did expanding westward impact the people choosing to travel and those who already lived there?*

*Directions: We are going to split up into groups and analyze 5 different primary sources from the 1800s to try and answer the essential question. Does anyone know what a primary source is?*

*It is a first-hand account from someone who was there at the time [show slide of examples] Our job is to review 5 primary sources today and see where we would put them on our large paper scale as each side supports one perspective from history.*

I will add that there isn't one right answer to this question and that we can change our ideas about it as we learn more.

Next, I show them math balance scale. Can I have a volunteer to help me?

*What will happen if put weight on one side?*

*What if I put an equal amount on the other side?*

*What if I put one close to the center/fulcrum on one side but on the other side I put the weight closer to the end?*

*What does placement of the weight on the arm do? Closer to the center vs. closer to the end?*

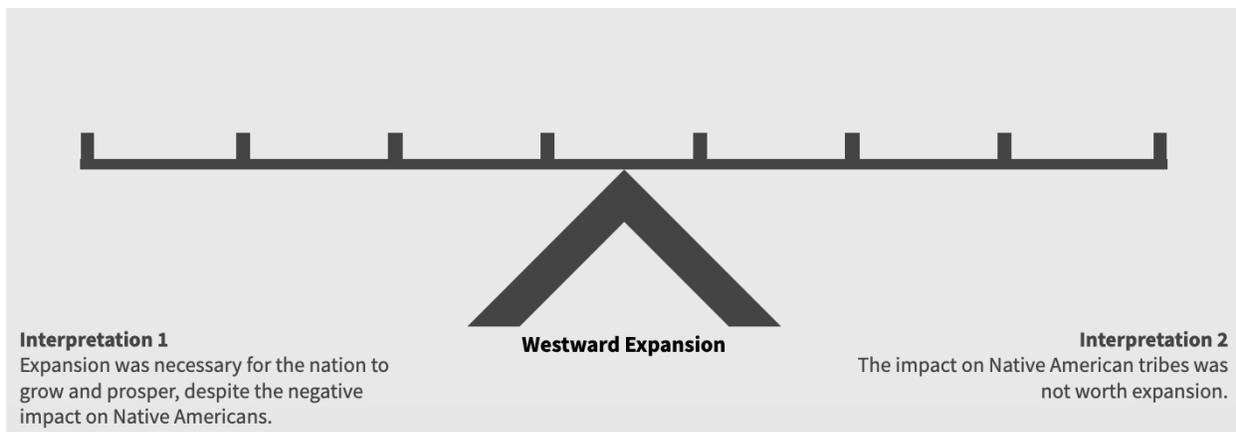
*What if I put one on 3 and one on 9?*

*What if I put two disks on the 4 on one side and one disk on the 8 on the other side? What do you think will happen? So the placement on the scale arm **and** the number of disk you place on an arm both matter.*

My goal is to show how more weight on one side makes the arm tip and depending on where you put the weight on the arm it makes more or less of an impact.

*Notice how weight put on the end, it tips more than weight closer to the middle. This idea is important for our lesson today as we are going to be using this giant paper scale to show our thoughts on primary sources. I will walk the scale over and put it directly under the paper scale so that students see the connection.*

**Development** - Introducing the large paper scale for the lesson -



One side of the scale will say:

- It was important for white settlers to move west.

The other side will say:

- Native People were harmed by settlers moving west.

I remind the students that sources we put towards the ends of the scale “weigh more” and are the sources we think show/represent each side the most. The sources we put towards the middle of the scale show that they influenced our opinion a lot less or didn’t impact our us as much. I will tell students they have to put the sticky notes between two ticks on the scale.

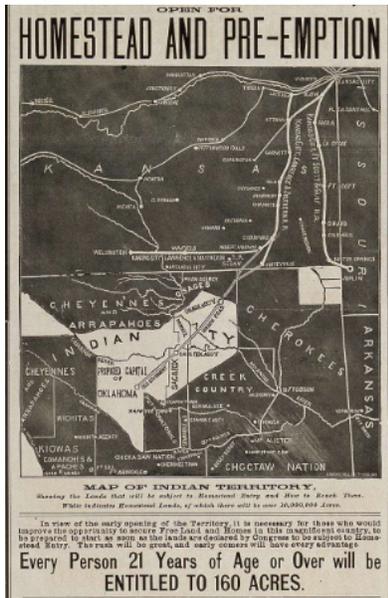
*At the end of the activity, we will consider how the scale would balance based on where we place the sources on our large scale.*

### **Development:**

I will explain that we have visuals of actual primary sources, and we modified them so that we are able to read them. We will go through each source as a class, and I will give an explanation and context and then answer questions. I will pass out a copy for each group as we review each source.

Before we begin, I will explain that some of these sources use the term *Indian* and how today we use Native People because it is less confusing than the term Indian which typically refers to people from the country of India.

### Source #1: Homestead Advertisement



Due to the opening of amazing land in the west, it is necessary to act quickly. Be prepared to start moving as soon as Congress declares the lands part of the Homestead Entry. The rush will be great, and early comers will have every advantage to get the best land. Every person 21 years or older will be given 160 acres of land [this is equivalent to 160 football fields.]

This advertisement was created by the United States government in 1862 when it passed the *Homestead Act* which gave 160 acres of free land in the West to any white settler who agreed to farm the land. This advertisement shows millions of acres of “Indian Territory” that is “entitled” to settlers over the age of 21. What does “entitled mean?” Ask for student ideas. Define – and put on slide your definition “Belief that you have the right to something.” So, this advertisement tells how white settlers believed they had the right to the land in the west.

*Evaluate document #1 with your group. Then decide where your groups wants to position it on the scale according to whether it supports the conclusion “It is important for White settlers to move west” or “Native People were harmed by settlers moving west.” After you decide which side it supports, decide how strongly it supports that side by how far you place toward the end. I will give students a few minutes to discuss with their groups and decide which side it supports on the scale. Then each group will put the source on one side of the scale on the board.*

- I will remind them that where they put it on the arm is also a choice and they can return and move it later if they change their mind.
- We will discuss where each group placed the image and discuss their decision. I will emphasize that students are expected to use evidence to support their conclusions.

## Source #2: Hopi Petition

*Does anyone know what a petition is? It's a request to change something that you believe is unfair or not right.*

*This is a petition to the U.S. government written and signed by the Hopi people in March 1894. The Hopi people are a tribe of Native People. They lived in the Moqui Villages in Arizona [show map] and wrote this petition to the U.S. government. The petition asks the government to give the Hopi people collective ownership to the land instead of individually giving each member of the tribe a plot of the land.*

I will read through the source to the class while they follow along. I will answer any questions and then students will read through the source again in their groups.

### Source 2.

March 1894

To the U.S Government:

During the last two years, strangers called "settlers" have looked at our lands with spy-glasses. None of us ever asked that our Hopi land be divided into separate lots. We request that our land be left untouched. Dividing lots and signing papers are not necessary for us to keep possession of our villages.

Ten years ago, a certain area around our lands was chosen for us to use, but we don't know the area because we have no marked boundaries. We want all the Hopi lands to remain for our people. This will protect us forever against attacks and all our people will be happy.

Signed by 39 members of the Hopi Nation

## Source # 3: Transcontinental Railroad Completion Photo



I will explain: *The transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869 and this is a golden spike ceremony was held at completion where four gold and silver spikes were put into the final wood railroad tie [show images of both]. It took place at Promontory Summit in Utah [show map]. The*

*photo shows the Union Pacific railroad engine on the left and the central pacific railroad engine on the right.*

I will explain that the transcontinental railroad was seen as beneficial for easier travel by settlers across the United States and eased the movement of goods to be traded across the US, but it also had a high mortality rate for workers and disrupted Native Peoples lives in the Great Plains as the tracks crossed through their lands and brought bison hunters. The bison were necessary for the survival of the Native People. The additional settlers also began to farm on the Native People's lands.

Now students will look at the photo in their groups and decide which side it supports on the scale. Then each group will put the source on one side of the scale on the board. We will come together as a class and discuss.

**Source # 4 EXTENSION - Letter from the Governor of New Mexico to President Grover Cleveland.**

In 1886, the Apache tribe lived in Arizona. Governor Ross of New Mexico sought to have the Apache people removed from the area. A governor is the boss of an entire state. The letter emphasizes what the governor called danger of "Indian raids". The "raids" happened when Apache tribe fought to keep settlers off their lands.

I will read this source aloud while students follow along and then they will read the source in their small groups. They will discuss and pick a side of the scale to put the source on. Then we will come together as a class again and discuss why it supports one side over the other.

**Source 4.**

August 14, 1886

Honorable President Grover Cleveland,

We are surprised that people oppose General Miles idea to remove Apache Indians from their reservation in Arizona. Many of us have seen this country the victim of Indian attacks year after year. There is no safety or stop to these attacks if the Apache are allowed to stay. They harm the character of the country as they take over and attack.

General Miles has kept the violent part of these Apache out of New Mexico and finally driven them out of Arizona. They want to return to the reservation. We are convinced that no peace can come to New Mexico or Arizona until these Apache are removed to faraway isolated places.

Very respectfully,

Edmund G. Ross, Governor of New Mexico

### Source # 5 - U.S. Government Report on State of Indian Affairs 1865

*U.S. government asked Dr. Doolittle, a Senator from Wisconsin, to inquire into what was happening in the west with Native Tribal groups. The report described what Dr. Doolittle learned while speaking with John S. Smith who lived in a Cheyenne village. Smith discusses the hardships that Native People tribes had gone through including how the Native People population was rapidly decreasing because of the white settler's violence towards Native People. He explains how the settlers were killing necessary wildlife for Native Peoples' survival and there was much loss of land for the tribes due to westward expansion.*

*This section of the report is a Question and Answer between Dr. Doolittle and John S. Smith*

Once more I will read this source aloud while students follow along and then they will read the source in their small groups. They will discuss and pick a side of the scale to put the source on. Once each group has brought the source up to the board and put it on one side of the scale we will analyze and discuss which side it belongs on and why people may have picked different sides.

#### Source 5

The U.S. Government asked Dr. Doolittle to lead a committee to find out how the Native Peoples were being treated during westward expansion. This is a question-and-answer section where Dr. Doolittle interviewed John S. Smith who lived in a Cheyenne village. He served as an interpreter since he spoke English and the Native language. Smith had witnessed many attacks on Native Peoples by the settlers.

*Question:* How many Indians were killed in the attack?

*Answer:* I think about 70 or 80 including men, women, and children.

*Question:* Was there cruelties on the Indians?

*Answer:* The worst I have ever seen

*Question:* What were the cruelties?

*Answer:* The Indians were scalped. The men used their knives and guns to beat children, men, and women.

*Question:* How long have you spent with the Cheyenne tribe?

*Answer:* I have spent 27 years living with them

*Question:* During those 27 years how have they treated settlers?

*Answer:* They have been peaceful for the most part

*Question:* Do you think the Indians would be peaceful now with the United States?

*Answer:* I say yes. I think so because they never wanted to fight the whites [settlers]. They have lost a lot of confidence they used to have in the white man, but with the right effort and removal of doubts I think it can be brought back.

*Question:* You said the troops pursued the Indians, even while the Indians were fleeing?

*Answer: Yes sir.*

**Closure:**

After all 5 sources from each group have earned a spot on the scale the whole class will reflect on what they think learning about the two perspectives through different interpretations taught them.

I will use an online scale to show how it would look tipped based on where they put the sources.

Each student will receive discussion questions to think and jot down ideas on worksheet (link below).

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Is there a clear conclusion from the scale (see sides below)? Explain your thinking

*Expansion was necessary for the grow of the U.S. regardless of impact on Native People*

*The impact on Native Peoples was not worth expansion westward*

2. Which 2 documents do you think provided the most evidence?
3. Why did you find these 2 documents the most convincing?
4. What would the scale look like without the Native Peoples' perspective?
5. How does the Native People's perspective change the story of westward expansion?  
Use evidence from the sources.

*Extra- if you have time:*

6. What perspectives might still be missing from this story?
7. What other sources could have been included to support more perspectives?

Once the questions are answered we will come together as a class and discuss them. I will prompt students as necessary and remind them to use evidence from the sources to support what they are saying.

*Let's return to our Lesson EQ: How did expanding westward impact the people choosing to travel and those who already lived there? Clearly westward expansion can be a complicated topic with many different viewpoints and sources to consider. After today's lesson we know that multiple perspectives can help us make sense of a complicated topic like this.*

Here I would go back to the list on the chart paper about why students think the Native People voice isn't considered and see if anything changed.

Reflection:

This lesson really challenged students to use historical thinking skills. They were tasked with analyzing five different primary sources from the 1800s. Not only this, but they had to find evidence from these sources to conclude which side of the scale each source supported. I first connected to students' background knowledge from the previous lessons where they were unsure if the interaction would be positive or negative between the settlers and the Native People. I also showed the class a map of where the Native People lived in U.S. at the time of westward expansion. I even showed them children's books about Westward Expansion, where I highlighted with sticky notes how little there was about Native People. This set them up for the most success in this challenging lesson.

When asked, "why can't we find the Native People's story?" students replied with many different ideas that showed some understanding. Some explained it was because settlers were there before, because there were no books at the time, and there were no ways to take a picture. One student said, "there were two stories – one from 'us' and one from Native People". It is interesting to note that this student identified more with the settlers than the Native People which may have impacted their beliefs. Lastly a student noted, "maybe the Native People don't have a story". This shows how important it is to teach about the Native People's experiences and perspective. Overall students had some confusion about the time period and why we can't find information about Native People. Student answers were general and lacked much complexity.

During the introduction, it was clear that students had never heard the term primary source before. When I asked for the meaning student responses included that they were sources "used most often" and "spread around". The math balance scale was vital for students to understand the concept of "weighing the evidence" in this lesson. This is because it gave them a visual of how things can weigh different amounts and how things are heavier or more important

towards the ends of the scale. It allowed them to grasp the idea that evidence can vary in importance and reliability, and not all evidence weighs the same. Throughout the analysis of each source students had to decide if the source belonged on the left side of the scale which said it was important for white settlers to move west or if it belonged on the right side which said that Native People were harmed by settlers moving west. For each source I prompted students by asking them why they put it on one side of the scale and what convinced them to put it there. For the first source, which was an advertisement for the Homestead Act, many students were uncertain of how to answer and said things like, “we are in-between because the Native People may have been harmed but we don’t know”. Others said that the settlers were taking Native Peoples’ lands and that is why they put it on the right. At first students needed much more prompting to use evidence from the sources.

When the class came to the second source, which was the Hopi Petition, the groups all picked to put it on the right side showing “The Native People were harmed”. However, when I asked for evidence and what convinced them to pick that side the responses varied in their understanding and complexity of thought. One student pulled evidence right from the source to explain why the Native People were harmed. She explained, “the part that says, ‘we request our land to be untouched’ shows that they wanted to stay”. This response demonstrates the goal of the lesson which was to support thinking that is more targeted to evidence from the primary source. Other students were much broader and didn’t go beyond surface level answers. For example, one student stated “it seemed like the Native People were harmed” but they didn’t use any evidence and were not able to further explain their thinking.

The fourth source, which was the letter about the Apache tribe, was the most challenging for the students to comprehend and find evidence to draw conclusions. Many of them were only

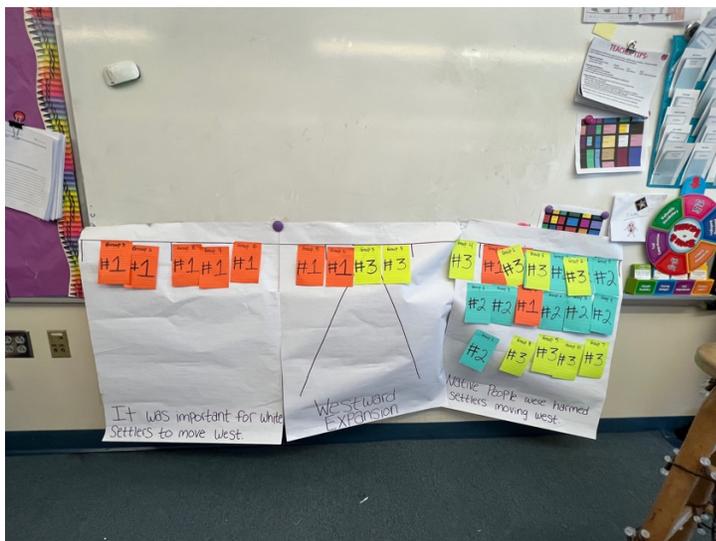
able to say which side they put the source on. When I asked why they put it there they were unable to answer. A handful of students continued to achieve a higher level of thinking and said things like, “they (Governor) wanted to move Apache people to isolated lands”.

The last source was the question and answer between Dr. Doolittle and the interpreter. This source was easier for the students to understand, which brought them success in using evidence to support the sides they chose. Each group put their source on the side supporting that Native People were harmed by expansion, and most provided evidence when they were asked. One student said it harmed the Native People because “[settlers] were killing men, women, and children”, and “men use their knives and guns to kill children”. This source shows that we either need to scaffold the reading and review of the primary sources more or we need to work collaboratively on the sources to engage learners in historical thinking with the teachers support. This might look something like a think aloud done by the teacher to show students how to think about a primary source. For example, source 2 - Hopi Petition - could be read aloud by the teacher, and they would pause frequently sharing their thoughts. The teacher could say, “I wonder what a petition is, I think it’s when someone wants to change something”. They could also show how to use evidence to form a conclusion, “Here it says they request their land be left untouched, so I think that means they don’t want the settlers moving onto their lands and disrupting the way things were before the pioneers”. In this way, the teacher can model how to analyze a source the proper way.

## **Conclusion**

For the end of the lesson the goal was for students to recognize different perspectives and how they can change the narrative of a topic. I first asked students to show with their bodies which way our scale tipped when the sticky notes were on it for all five primary sources. This

incorporated movement and was engaging for students, but also made it clear that our conclusion was that the Native People were harmed by settlers moving West. I then asked which two sources were most convincing for them and the results varied. No one picked the first source because that was the only one placed on the left side of the scale. Three groups picked the second source and used evidence from the source to support their choice such as “it said like settlers looking with spy glasses” and “we request that our lands be left untouched”. Almost every group picked the fifth source as one of the most important. This was the last source so may have been the most memorable for them. They used evidence such as settlers killing 70-80 men, women, children, and “harming tribes”.



Results from Lesson 3, “weighing the evidence.”

### **Adjustments to Lessons**

These lessons went through multiple revisions before their final form. I first taught this lesson to a group of my peers who gave me their feedback and ideas on how to improve. Since this was the first time I taught these lessons, there were a few things that clearly needed to be changed or clarified. I first noticed that students forgot many of the questions I asked them because they weren’t written down. After this lesson, I decided to add the questions to the

slideshow so that it was visually represented. The students didn't understand what I meant by the "voice of the Native People", so I decided to add a visual representation from different books I read showing how many times each one mentioned Native People during westward expansion. This would prove to be a good visual understanding of the problem introduced in this unit.

After this lesson I also made my directions clearer when explaining the balance scale and each source. While teaching this lesson, I realized that there were lots of sources and papers to keep track of and it was overwhelming for the students. Additionally, students needed to keep track of sticky notes to match each source. For future lessons I decided to make students a packet where each source was labeled clearly and in order. I made the sticky notes clearer as well so that each sticky note had the source and group numbers written in marker. I also noticed in this lesson that the big paper scale differed from online scale in terms of number of spaces to place the source which was confusing for the students. For the next lessons I recreated the scale so that the ticks aligned on both scales. In addition, feedback from my peers indicated that the first source was unclear and confusing even for them. So, I went back and revised it to make it clearer. I typed out the words that were blurry underneath the picture so students could better access the content. Teaching to my peers enabled me to adjust the primary source activity for improved student learning.

Next, I taught this lesson to a small group of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders to see how they would respond to the lesson that was targeted towards their age group. After teaching these lessons it was clear that I needed to be more specific and model the weight calculation sheet in the 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson. Students struggled to understand how to fill out the different columns and didn't know what to do if they wanted to bring more than one portion of the same item. In a last-minute decision, we decided to give the students calculators because it would take them too long to do

the math on this sheet. After this lesson I added an extra column on the worksheet that said “total weight” so that students could tally up the totals easier.

After this instruction I decided to change the language on the large primary source weight chart to make it more accessible for students. It was clear that this group struggled to understand what each side of the scale represented when weighing their sources as I used the exact language from the National Archives high school lesson. After seeing how challenging it was for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders, I changed the language to read: Left = It was important for white settlers to move west. Right = Native People were harmed by settlers moving west. This language was more direct for students’ comprehension.

Additionally, I noticed during the instruction that students struggled with the primary source analysis. This makes sense because it was the most challenging part of the unit in an attempt to push students historical thinking skills. I decided to develop the directions more for students before they were sent off to work on the primary source with their group. I made sure to refer to the scale and emphasize that students would decide which side to put it on and how placement on the side demonstrates how strongly it supports the side they pick. I would also physically point to where the sources could go on the scale. After teaching this group I realized the lesson would take way longer than just one class period to get through it all. I decided to extend the lesson across two class periods.

I also realized that the introduction to some of the sources was wordy and confusing. I edited the information to be clearer. I added more details to some of the sources as well. For example, to better explain the transcontinental railroad source I added pictures of a railroad tie and spikes for the students to visualize if they did not know those vocabulary words.

### **Feedback from Experts in the Field**

During the development of these lessons, I had experts provide feedback including Steven Vincent, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Davis Hill Elementary School in Holden, MA. He was eager to provide feedback and have me come in and teach this lesson to his diverse class of 21 students. He admitted that with a lack of resources and time, social studies does not get the attention that it deserves. Additionally, he noted how the lack of a state test to measure student learning like in math, ELA, and science impacts its place in the curriculum.

I first sent my unit to Mr. Vincent who gave me feedback. He enjoyed the immersive experience that the lesson tried to create and thought it would motivate the students to want to learn the material and remain engaged. He suggested ways to further engage students in this unit by adding more visual and audio components to the slideshow. He also suggested creating a journal for the students to document their thinking and reference their learning. This journal can be found in the Appendix. I added the journal as it would hold everyone accountable for participation and assess their learning.

Elizabeth Walsh is a professor of practice in the Education Department at Assumption University. She has a background as an elementary educator and advanced degrees in the field of literacy education. I asked for her recommendations on the reading level of the materials found in the mini-unit. Specifically, I wanted to see if the modified primary sources and simulation parts were too difficult for the students in the class or if they met the expectations of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level. Professor Walsh explained that the reading level seemed pretty accurate for 4<sup>th</sup> grade students.

In addition, she also introduced me to the Fry Readability Formula which can be used by anyone to assess text revisions and determine who might find them most accessible. I put the primary sources into this formula to consider what adjustments might be needed for students

with dyslexia, English Language Learners, etc. While we can't rely solely on formulas like these because we must know our individual students, they are useful to test the overall difficulty of a source. The results that came up on the graph were not valid because the sample sizes were inconsistent, and some sources were longer than others. This demonstrates how difficult it is to write text at grade level. Using other resources, the primary sources came back at about a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, which makes them too challenging for most 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. Specifically, some words were too long for students and were closer to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level. Given the reading level challenge, I read aloud while students followed along in their journal. It is clear, if students had to read these sources on their own, they may have struggled with some of the longer words and sentences.

### **Implications and Implementation**

Incorporating historical thinking in the classroom involves assessing the past using multiple sources and perspectives. Through the use of different primary sources, quotes, and activities students were able to dive deep and ask questions to think more critically (NCSS). The goal was to mold students into historians-in-training where they can read a source, determine point of view or perspectives and its credibility, and draw evidence to make a conclusion. I found that students were able to examine sources critically in this lesson with significant scaffolding and support. So, what does this mean for teachers and students? At the beginning of this lesson students were asked why the Native Peoples' story is not found in history. One student said, "maybe the Native People don't have a story". This answer demonstrates exactly what I wanted to teach the students in this unit. There is always more than one perspective and more evidence to be analyzed and discussed. For a student to suggest there was no story from the Native People

shows their lack of experience with the content of Native People and possibly with using primary sources to learn about multiple perspectives.

As students discussed the first primary source, they weren't sure what to talk about with their groups and didn't know how to explain which side of the scale to put their source on. As they got more practice and I modeled how to use evidence, they began to use more evidence to make their decisions. This supports Keith Barton's findings that students should get continuous and explicit instruction using evidence. As lesson three and four progressed, more and more students pulled direct quotes from the sources to use in their answers as mentioned in the reflections. I supported student learning by modifying the primary sources, including an introduction to each source, and then reading them aloud. Using this process, students were able to successfully engage with the work of historians-in-training. The teacher must explicitly teach these historical thinking skills in order for students to use them properly. Had I not gone into great detail with my instructions showing students what a primary source is, how I modified them to make them readable, and how to find evidence they would have been very lost in this lesson. Without support and scaffolding, most students didn't use any evidence and were not able to further explain their thinking. They just stated their answer with no deeper thoughts behind it.

Scaffolding was vital in this lesson for student understanding. With support students were able to achieve a higher level of thinking. When asked what the most important thing they packed was, one student said "coffee". I then asked why they thought this was important and how they knew. At first, students said they picked coffee to keep them awake on the long journey but with prompting, some students referenced the reading we had done earlier where it said that coffee killed bacteria because of the boiled water. This demonstrates the need for

teachers to clarify connections between students' conclusions and the evidence they read to support their claims.

If I was able to continuously come back to this class and keep teaching them how to use evidence, then eventually they would be able to do it with less support. As students develop and understand a specific skill like analyzing evidence, the teacher can step back and let them do more on their own (Grand, 2022). In Barton's study, he found that there is a basis for historical thinking in elementary students and they might need more help in applying their skills. After teaching this unit it confirmed that students are capable of historical thinking, and they do need help applying their skills. When asked which two sources had the best evidence to support each side of the scale, students referred back to the sources and could explain. Students were able to develop their ideas into critical and historical thinking through questioning and scaffolding.

This unit demonstrated the benefits of looping inquiry because students were able to work with primary sources and analyze evidence throughout each lesson in different ways. Since these skills were included in every lesson, the students became better at historical thinking skills like analyzing and interpreting over time. Looping primary source work throughout this unit helped students make connections between the time period and their background knowledge. It also allowed students to become historians-in-training each day, contributing to their historical thinking skills. This shows the necessity of repeated practice with skills for students to reach a deeper understanding of how and when to use them.

This lesson pushed students to use the four steps that VanSledright (2004) identifies as important when assessing sources. Using these steps allowed students to reach a fuller understanding of what the source was trying to say and why. For each source I gave a preview and then read it aloud to the class. This supported the identification and attribution steps by

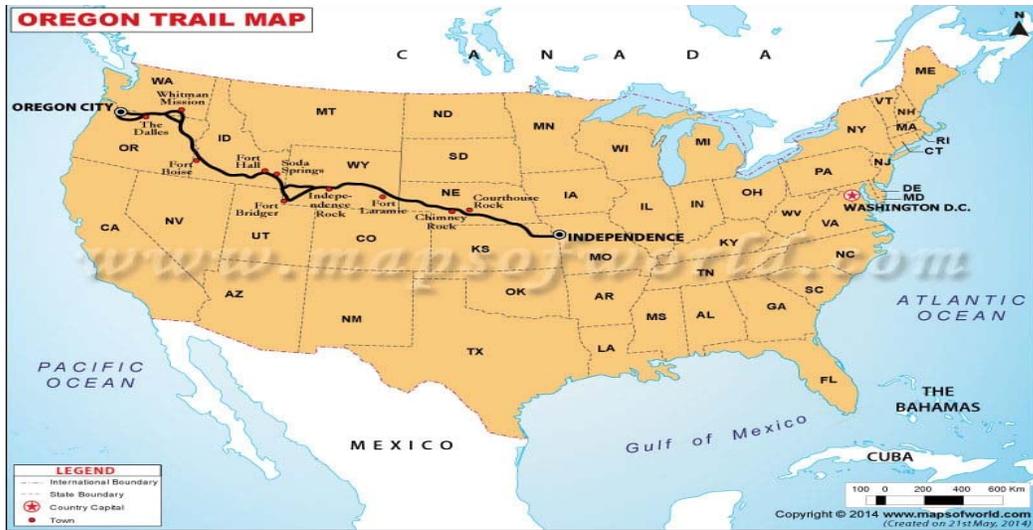
telling students if the source was a photo, letter, journal entry, etc. When I gave them background on the sources, they were able to determine why the author created the source during the time of westward expansion. Once students were split into groups, they were able to complete the last two steps on their own. They judged the perspectives from this time period determining which side of the scale each source would go on and why. Finally, students made a reliability claim on each of the sources based on where they positioned it on the scale. This makes sense since sources “weighed more” or were more reliable towards the ends of the scale. Following these four steps in the lesson gave students a clear direction and end goal. Since they included all of these steps, they successfully and purposefully analyzed each source.

Although some research has been done to understand the role of historical thinking in the elementary classroom, there is still much we don’t know. Some studies have examined what students are capable of and found that they struggle to make claims with evidence, and they need significant support to be successful (Barton 1997). Others have concluded that students can do more than what is expected of them (Fillpot 2009). Many point out that there are flaws in how these skills are taught and how they are presented in the state standards. But there have not been many studies that take all of this into account and try to create a unit using historical thinking skills for elementary students. My research study serves to fill this gap in the research.

Appendix:

# Westward Expansion Journal

Name:



What are 3 essential items you would pack for a 6-month road trip today?

How might the things we would bring today be different from what the pioneers might have brought back in the 1800s?

## **Packing the Wagon to Journey West**

The success or failure of travelers depended most heavily on their choice of equipment and supplies for the journey. Every traveler insisted on taking along some luxuries like mirrors and clocks. They also brought items of sentimental value like family pictures. Chamber pots, lanterns, Bibles, schoolbooks, and furniture were crammed into odd spaces in almost every wagon.

Certain tools for emergency wagon repairs were also packed including- rope, brake chains, a wagon jack, extra axles and tongues, wheel parts, axes, saws, hammers, knives, and a sturdy shovel. If they didn't bring these things, there was a higher risk of getting stuck along the trail.

Cooking utensils were also important — few wagons were without a Dutch oven and a good iron skillet — and the trip was simply not possible without a water barrel to get travelers and their animals through dry stretches of the Trail. Weapons and kits for casting bullets were needed for hunting.

Travelers were advised not to overload their wagons, but many underestimated the difficulty of the journey. After beginning the journey, many were forced to leave cargo to lighten the load for their weary oxen. The trail became littered with discarded items.

Most of the space in the wagons was for food. The long days of walking gave travelers huge appetites. Hundreds of pounds of cured meats and dried goods like flour, hardtack, bacon, rice, coffee, sugar, beans, and fruit were packed in wagons for the journey. Coffee probably saved thousands of lives on the trails, as it required that the water be boiled, thus killing any germs (including cholera) that would likely have sicken the travelers.



Things to know while packing:

- Wagon will be packed for a family of 4 people.
- Wagon can carry up to 2,500 pounds
- Wagon is pulled by two oxen.
- Wagon has a waterproof top which protects the items inside

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Below are items that many people brought with them in their wagon on the Oregon Trail. Fill out the sheet checking off the items you will bring and tally up the total weight of all the items at the end. The weight of food is enough for 4 people and the weight of other items is the weight of just 1 of those items. You will not be able to fit everything, remember the weight of your wagon cannot exceed 2,500 lbs.

### Weight Calculation Chart

Item	Weight (in lbs)	✓ Check the items you will pack ( )	Total Weight for the number you will pack
Tent	40		
Rope	20		
Coffee	70		
Barrel of water	300		
Flour	15		
Yeast	5		
Crackers	20		
Bacon	60		
Eggs	50		
Potatoes	50		
Rice	80		
Cornmeal	10		
Beans	20		
Chocolate	10		
Dried fruit	100		
Dried meat	170		
Roll of cloth	10		
Saw	5		
Hammer	10		
Shovel	40		
Knife	5		
Needle and thread	5		
Doll	5		
Lantern	12		
Soap	10		
Cups	10		
Plates	10		
Pots and pans	200		
Utensils	10		
Bible	5		

Bag of clothes	50		
Bucket	10		
Blanket	20		
Butter Churn	50		
Musical instrument (harmonica or fiddle)	20		
Diary	5		
Ink	10		
Quill	5		
Rolling pin	5		
Cooking stove	500		
Rifle	25		
Tar bucket	100		
Milk	160		
Pillow	10		
Broom	15		
Table	50		
Chairs	100		
Other:			
Other:			

<b>Total weight of wagon</b>	
------------------------------	--

3. What would be the most important things you take with you? Why are they important?

4. What is the most difficult thing to leave behind? Why did you decide to leave it?

## Traveling the Oregon Trail



Stop 1: A thunderstorm hit, and mud sank the wagon wheels and oxen  
How do you think the wheels and oxen got out of the mud?

Stop 2: Encounter with Native Peoples  
Do you think this will be a positive or negative interaction?

Was the meeting violent? Why or why not?

Stop 3: A bacterial disease called cholera spread to travelers on Oregon Trail  
How could we stop the spread of this disease on the trail?

If you caught cholera, what might happen to you?

Stop 4: South Pass  
How do you think it felt to be at the halfway point on the journey?

Stop 5: Oxen Collapsed  
What would you do?

How can you help the oxen?

Stop 6: Dust got in the way of the travelers  
Why does dust interfere with traveling on the Oregon Trail?

Stop 7: Wagon wheel breaks

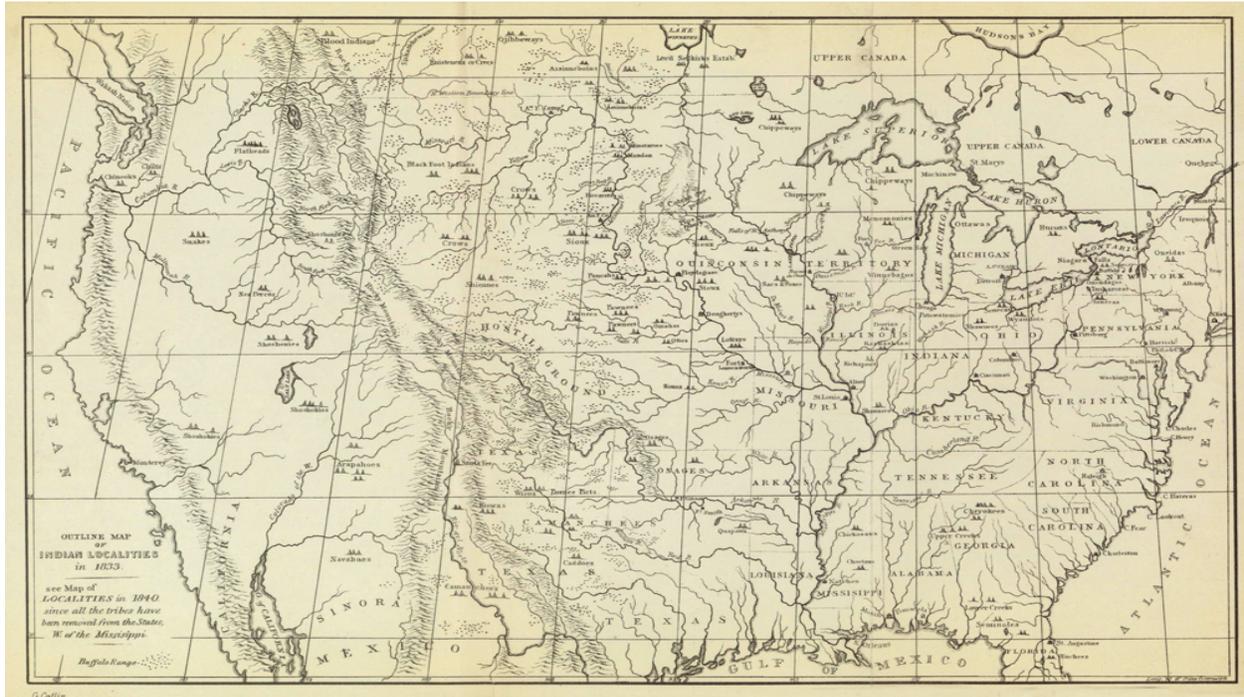
What do you think the travelers did when a wheel broke?

Stop 8: We made it!

How do you think the travelers felt when they reached their destination?

How did the wagon train journey make things difficult for those traveling west?

## Considering the Native People's Perspective



If Native Peoples were this widespread in the West, why do you think their story is not easy to find?

What is a Primary Source?

Scale

It was important for white settlers to move west.	Native People were harmed by settlers moving west.
---	--

1. Is there a clear conclusion from the scale on board? Explain your thinking
2. Which 2 primary sources do you think provided the most evidence?
3. Why do you think these 2 sources were most convincing?
4. What would the scale look like without the Native Peoples' perspective?
5. How does the Native People's perspective change the story of westward expansion? Use evidence from the sources.
8. What perspectives might still be missing from this story?
9. What other sources could have been included to support more perspectives?

Essential Question: How did expanding westward impact the people choosing to travel and those who already lived there?

## References

American Historical Association, “Historical Thinking Skills”. *AHA*.

<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico/for-teachers/setting-up-the-project/historical-thinking-skills>

Araya, Aaron Elí Mena. “Critical Thinking for Civic Life in Elementary Education: Combining Storytelling and Thinking Tools.” *Revista Educación*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2020, pp. 24–45.

<https://doi.org/10.15517/revedu.v44i2.39699>. Accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

Barton, C Keith. “‘I just kinda know’: Elementary Students’ Ideas About Historical Evidence”. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, vol.25, no.4, 1997, pp.407-430.

Elder, Linda and Paul, Richard. “Critical Thinking in a World of Accelerating Change and Complexity.” *Social Education*, vol. 72, no. 7, 2008, pp. 388–391. Maxwell, Mike.

“Historical Thinking Skills: A Second Opinion.” *Social Education*, vol. 83, no. 5, 2019, pp. 290–295.E

Fillpot, Elise. “Historical Thinking in the Third Grade.” *Social Studies*, vol. 103, no. 5, 2012, pp. 206–217.

Grand Canyon University Blogs, “What Is Scaffolding in Education?” *GCU*,

<https://www.gcu.edu/blog/teaching-school-administration/what-scaffolding-education>

Levstik, Linda S., and Keith C. Barton. *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*. Routledge, 2015.

Maxwell, Mike. "Historical Thinking Skills: A Second Opinion." *Social Education*, vol. 83, no. 5, 2019, pp. 290–295.

Monte-Sano, Chauncey. "Build Skills by Doing History." *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 94, no. 3, 2012, pp. 62–65., <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171209400314>.

NCSS Board of Directors, "NCSS Position Statements." *National Council for the Social Studies*, <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements>.

Robelen, Erik W. "Primary Sources Breathe Life into Civil War; Teachers Are Using Firsthand Materials and Technology to Bring Deeper Understanding of the Era." *Education Week*, vol. 30, no. 28, 2011, pp. 1–1.

Sandweiss, E. "Historical Thinking Matters." *Journal of American History -Bloomington-*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2012, pp. 389–390

Seif, Elliot. "Social Studies Revived." *Educational Leadership*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2003, p. 54.

Stearns N. Peter, "Why Study History?," *American Historical Association*, 1998.

[https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998))

Swan, Kathy, et al. "Power, Injustice, Costs and Benefits: Looping Curricular Concepts with the Design Model." *Social Education*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2021, pp. 167–172.

TeacherVision Staff "Textbooks: Advantages and Disadvantages." *TeacherVision*, 25 Jan. 2007, <https://www.teachervision.com/curriculum-planning/textbooks-advantages-disadvantages#:~:text=Textbook%20questions%20tend%20to%20be,students'%20background%20knowledge%20into%20account>.

*The Fry Graph Readability Formula*, <https://readabilityformulas.com/fry-graph-readability-formula.php>.

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration "Was Westward Expansion Necessary or Were the Consequences Too Great?" *DocsTeach*, <https://www.docsteach.org/activities/student/was-westward-expansion-necessary-or-were-the-consequences-too-great#activitytop>.

VanSledright, Bruce A. "What Does It Mean to Think Historically ... and How Do You Teach It?" *Social Education*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2004, pp. 230–230.