

## Portrait of the USA

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## Chapter Two FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

### Geography and regional characteristics

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has written of the "mental click" he feels when arriving in the United States: an adjustment to the enormous landscapes and skylines. The so-called lower 48 states (all but Alaska and Hawaii) sprawl across 4,500 kilometers and four time zones. A car trip from coast to coast typically takes a minimum of five days -- and that's with almost no stops to look around. It is not unusual for the gap between the warmest and coldest *high* temperatures on a given day in the United States to reach 70 degrees Fahrenheit (about 40 degrees Celsius).

The United States owes much of its national character -- and its wealth -- to its good fortune in having such a large and varied landmass to inhabit and cultivate. Yet the country still exhibits marks of regional identity, and one way Americans cope with the size of their country is to think of themselves as linked geographically by certain traits, such as New England self-reliance, southern hospitality, midwestern wholesomeness, western mellowness.

This chapter examines American geography, history, and customs through the filters of six main regions:

- **New England**, made up of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.
- **The Middle Atlantic**, comprising New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland.
- **The South**, which runs from Virginia south to Florida and west as far as central Texas. This region also includes West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and parts of Missouri and Oklahoma.
- **The Midwest**, a broad collection of states sweeping westward from Ohio to Nebraska and including Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, parts of Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, and eastern Colorado.
- **The Southwest**, made up of western Texas, portions of Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and the southern interior part of California.
- **The West**, comprising Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, California, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and Hawaii.

Note that there is nothing official about these regions; many other lineups are possible. These groupings are offered simply as a way to begin the otherwise daunting task of getting acquainted with the United States.

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### REGIONAL VARIETY

How much sense does it make to talk about American regions when practically all Americans can watch the same television shows and go to the same fast-food restaurants for dinner? One way to answer the question is by giving examples of lingering regional differences.

Consider the food Americans eat. Most of it is standard wherever you go. A person can buy packages of frozen peas bearing the same label in Idaho, Missouri, and Virginia. Cereals, candy bars, and many other items also come in identical packages from Alaska to Florida. Generally, the quality of fresh fruits and vegetables does not vary much from one state to the next. On the other hand, it would be unusual to be served hush puppies (a kind of fried dough) or grits (boiled and ground corn prepared in a variety of ways) in Massachusetts or Illinois, but normal to get them in Georgia. Other regions have similar favorites that are hard to find elsewhere.

While American English is generally standard, American *speech* often differs according to what part of the country you are in. Southerners tend to speak slowly, in what is referred to as a "Southern drawl." Midwesterners use "flat" a's (as in "bad" or "cat"), and the New York City patois features a number of Yiddish words ("schlepp," "nosh," "nebbish") contributed by the city's large Jewish population.

Regional differences also make themselves felt in less tangible ways, such as attitudes and outlooks. An example is the attention paid to foreign events in newspapers. In the East, where people look out across the Atlantic Ocean, papers tend to show greatest concern with what is happening in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and western Asia. On the West Coast, news editors give more attention to events in East Asia and Australia.

To understand regional differences more fully, let's take a closer look at the regions themselves.

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## NEW ENGLAND

The smallest region, New England has not been blessed with large expanses of rich farmland or a mild climate. Yet it played a dominant role in American development. From the 17th century until well into the 19th, New England was the country's cultural and economic center.

The earliest European settlers of New England were English Protestants of firm and settled doctrine. Many of them came in search of religious liberty. They gave the region its distinctive political format -- the town meeting (an outgrowth of meetings held by church elders) in which citizens gathered to discuss issues of the day. Only men of property could vote. Nonetheless, town meetings afforded New Englanders an unusually high level of participation in government. Such meetings still function in many New England communities today.

New Englanders found it difficult to farm the land in large lots, as was common in the South. By 1750, many settlers had turned to other pursuits. The mainstays of the region became shipbuilding, fishing, and trade. In their business dealings, New Englanders gained a reputation for hard work, shrewdness, thrift, and ingenuity.

These traits came in handy as the Industrial Revolution reached America in the first half of the 19th century. In Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, new factories sprang up to manufacture such goods as clothing, rifles, and clocks. Most of the money to run these businesses came from Boston, which was the financial heart of the nation.

New England also supported a vibrant cultural life. The critic Van Wyck Brooks called the creation of a distinctive American literature in the first half of the 19th century "the flowering of New England." Education is another of the region's strongest legacies. Its cluster of top-ranking universities and colleges -- including Harvard, Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Wellesley, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Williams, Amherst, and Wesleyan -- is unequaled by any other region.

As some of the original New England settlers migrated westward, immigrants from Canada, Ireland, Italy, and eastern Europe moved into the region. Despite a changing population, much of the original spirit of New England remains. It can be seen in the simple, woodframe houses and white church steeples that are features of many small towns, and in the traditional lighthouses that dot the Atlantic coast.

In the 20th century, most of New England's traditional industries have relocated to states or foreign countries where goods can be made more cheaply. In more than a few factory towns, skilled workers have been left without jobs. The gap has been partly filled by the microelectronics and computer industries.

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## MIDDLE ATLANTIC

If New England provided the brains and dollars for 19th-century American expansion, the Middle Atlantic states provided the muscle. The region's largest states, New York and Pennsylvania, became centers of heavy industry (iron, glass, and steel).

The Middle Atlantic region was settled by a wider range of people than New England. Dutch immigrants moved into the lower Hudson River Valley in what is now New York State. Swedes went to Delaware. English Catholics founded Maryland, and an English Protestant sect, the Friends (Quakers), settled Pennsylvania. In time, all these settlements fell under English control, but the region continued to be a magnet for people of diverse nationalities.

Early settlers were mostly farmers and traders, and the region served as a bridge between North and South. Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, midway between the northern and southern colonies, was home to the Continental Congress, the convention of delegates from the original colonies that organized the American Revolution. The same city was the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

As heavy industry spread throughout the region, rivers such as the Hudson and Delaware were transformed into vital shipping lanes. Cities on waterways -- New York on the Hudson, Philadelphia on the Delaware, Baltimore on Chesapeake Bay -- grew dramatically. New York is still the nation's largest city, its financial hub, and its cultural center.

Like New England, the Middle Atlantic region has seen much of its heavy industry relocate elsewhere. Other industries, such as drug manufacturing and communications, have taken up the slack.

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## THE SOUTH

The South is perhaps the most distinctive and colorful American region. The American Civil War (1861-65) devastated the South socially and economically. Nevertheless, it retained its unmistakable identity.

Like New England, the South was first settled by English Protestants. But whereas New Englanders tended to stress their differences from the old country, Southerners tended to emulate the English. Even so, Southerners were prominent among the leaders of the American Revolution, and four of America's first five presidents were Virginians. After 1800, however, the interests of the manufacturing North and the agrarian South began to diverge.

Especially in coastal areas, southern settlers grew wealthy by raising and selling cotton and tobacco. The most economical way to raise these crops was on large farms, called plantations, which required the work of many laborers. To supply this need, plantation owners relied on slaves brought from Africa, and slavery spread throughout the South.

Slavery was the most contentious issue dividing North and South. To northerners it was immoral; to southerners it was integral to their way of life. In 1860, 11 southern states left the Union intending to form a separate nation, the Confederate States of America. This rupture led to the Civil War, the Confederacy's defeat, and the end of slavery. (For more on the Civil War, see chapter 3.) The scars left by the war took decades to heal. The abolition of slavery failed to provide African Americans with political or economic equality: Southern towns and cities legalized and refined the practice of racial segregation.

It took a long, concerted effort by African Americans and their supporters to end segregation. In the meantime, however, the South could point with pride to a 20th-century regional outpouring of literature by, among others, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine

Anne Porter, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor.

As southerners, black and white, shook off the effects of slavery and racial division, a new regional pride expressed itself under the banner of "the New South" and in such events as the annual Spoleto Music Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, and the 1996 summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia. Today the South has evolved into a manufacturing region, and high-rise buildings crowd the skylines of such cities as Atlanta and Little Rock, Arkansas. Owing to its mild weather, the South has become a mecca for retirees from other U.S. regions and from Canada.

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## THE MIDWEST

The Midwest is a cultural crossroads. Starting in the early 1800s easterners moved there in search of better farmland, and soon Europeans bypassed the East Coast to migrate directly to the interior: Germans to eastern Missouri, Swedes and Norwegians to Wisconsin and Minnesota. The region's fertile soil made it possible for farmers to produce abundant harvests of cereal crops such as wheat, oats, and corn. The region was soon known as the nation's "breadbasket."

Most of the Midwest is flat. The Mississippi River has acted as a regional lifeline, moving settlers to new homes and foodstuffs to market. The river inspired two classic American books, both written by a native Missourian, Samuel Clemens, who took the pseudonym Mark Twain: *Life on the Mississippi* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Midwesterners are praised as being open, friendly, and straightforward. Their politics tend to be cautious, but the caution is sometimes peppered with protest. The Midwest gave birth to one of America's two major political parties, the Republican Party, which was formed in the 1850s to oppose the spread of slavery into new states. At the turn of the century, the region also spawned the Progressive Movement, which largely consisted of farmers and merchants intent on making government less corrupt and more receptive to the will of the people. Perhaps because of their geographic location, many midwesterners have been strong adherents of isolationism, the belief that Americans should not concern themselves with foreign wars and problems.

The region's hub is Chicago, Illinois, the nation's third largest city. This major Great Lakes port is a connecting point for rail lines and air traffic to far-flung parts of the nation and the world. At its heart stands the Sears Tower, at 447 meters, the world's tallest building.

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## THE SOUTHWEST

The Southwest differs from the adjoining Midwest in weather (drier), population (less dense), and ethnicity (strong Spanish-American and Native-American components). Outside the cities, the region is a land of open spaces, much of which is desert. The magnificent Grand Canyon is located in this region, as is Monument Valley, the starkly beautiful backdrop for many western movies. Monument Valley is within the Navajo Reservation, home of the most populous American Indian tribe. To the south and east lie dozens of other Indian reservations, including those of the Hopi, Zuni, and Apache tribes.

Parts of the Southwest once belonged to Mexico. The United States obtained this land following the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. Its Mexican heritage continues to exert a strong influence on the region, which is a convenient place to settle for immigrants (legal or illegal) from farther south. The regional population is growing rapidly, with Arizona in particular rivaling the southern states as a destination for retired Americans in search of a warm climate.

Population growth in the hot, arid Southwest has depended on two human artifacts: the dam and the air conditioner. Dams on the Colorado and other rivers and aqueducts such as those of the Central Arizona Project have brought water to once-small towns such as Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, allowing them to become metropolises. Las Vegas is renowned as one of the world's centers for gambling, while Santa Fe, New Mexico, is famous as a center for the arts, especially painting, sculpture, and opera. Another system of dams and irrigation projects waters the Central Valley of California, which is

noted for producing large harvests of fruits and vegetables.

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## THE WEST

Americans have long regarded the West as the last frontier. Yet California has a history of European settlement older than that of most midwestern states. Spanish priests founded missions along the California coast a few years before the outbreak of the American Revolution. In the 19th century, California and Oregon entered the Union ahead of many states to the east.

The West is a region of scenic beauty on a grand scale. All of its 11 states are partly mountainous, and the ranges are the sources of startling contrasts. To the west of the peaks, winds from the Pacific Ocean carry enough moisture to keep the land well-watered. To the east, however, the land is very dry. Parts of western Washington State, for example, receive 20 times the amount of rain that falls on the eastern side of the state's Cascade Range.

In much of the West the population is sparse, and the federal government owns and manages millions of hectares of undeveloped land. Americans use these areas for recreational and commercial activities, such as fishing, camping, hiking, boating, grazing, lumbering, and mining. In recent years some local residents who earn their livelihoods on federal land have come into conflict with the land's managers, who are required to keep land use within environmentally acceptable limits.

Alaska, the northernmost state in the Union, is a vast land of few, but hardy, people and great stretches of wilderness, protected in national parks and wildlife refuges. Hawaii is the only state in the union in which Asian Americans outnumber residents of European stock. Beginning in the 1980s large numbers of Asians have also settled in California, mainly around Los Angeles.

Los Angeles -- and Southern California as a whole -- bears the stamp of its large Mexican-American population. Now the second largest city in the nation, Los Angeles is best known as the home of the Hollywood film industry. Fueled by the growth of Los Angeles and the "Silicon Valley" area near San Jose, California has become the most populous of all the states.

Western cities are known for their tolerance. Perhaps because so many westerners have moved there from other regions to make a new start, as a rule interpersonal relations are marked by a live-and-let-live attitude. The western economy is varied. California, for example, is both an agricultural state and a high-technology manufacturing state.

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## THE FRONTIER SPIRIT

One final American region deserves mention. It is not a fixed place but a moving zone, as well as a state of mind: the border between settlements and wilderness known as the frontier. Writing in the 1890s, historian Frederick Jackson Turner claimed that the availability of vacant land throughout much of the nation's history has shaped American attitudes and institutions. "This perennial rebirth," he wrote, "this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."

Numerous present-day American values and attitudes can be traced to the frontier past: self-reliance, resourcefulness, comradeship, a strong sense of equality. After the Civil War a large number of black Americans moved west in search of equal opportunities, and many of them gained some fame and fortune as cowboys, miners, and prairie settlers. In 1869 the western territory of Wyoming became the first place that allowed women to vote and to hold elected office.

Because the resources of the West seemed limitless, people developed wasteful attitudes and practices. The great herds of buffalo (American bison) were slaughtered until only fragments remained, and many other species were driven to the brink of extinction. Rivers were dammed and their natural communities disrupted. Forests were destroyed by excess logging, and landscapes were scarred by careless mining.

A counterweight to the abuse of natural resources took form in the American conservation movement, which owes much of its success to Americans' reluctance to see frontier conditions disappear entirely from the landscape. Conservationists were instrumental in establishing the first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872, and the first national forests in the 1890s. More recently, the Endangered Species Act has helped stem the tide of extinctions.

Environmental programs can be controversial; for example, some critics believe that the Endangered Species Act hampers economic progress. But, overall, the movement to preserve America's natural endowment continues to gain strength. Its replication in many other countries around the world is a tribute to the lasting influence of the American frontier.

**[Chapter 3: Toward the City on a Hill >>>>](#)**