

A Student

Document Analysis # 5

Note: this document has been modified.

Westward expansion is a key component to American history. In fact, it shaped the country we live in today. There is a question, however, of whether the American pioneers' characters were shaped by their experiences, or if it was the experience of westward expansion that shaped the pioneers. It seems almost impossible to come to an irrefutable conclusion. The most logical is that westward expansion revealed and shaped the American character simultaneously. First hand accounts of the journey to Oregon found in *Oregon Trail Stories* illustrate this development. The stories demonstrate that westward expansion revealed that Americans were adventurous and brave, optimistic, and independent yet democratic. The stories also show that expansion shaped Americans by causing unity between pioneers and the rest of the nation as they united in suspicions against Indians and battles for land against the Spanish.

Student quickly gets to the point by restating the assigned topic question,

...announcing her thesis,

...and explaining what sources materials inform her opinion.

Now she briefly elaborates on the thesis, providing the reader with a road map of the main points in her essay.

Most of the men and women who traveled to Oregon had a longing for adventure. Lansford W. Hastings's describes his motive to expand as an "anxious desire to visit those wild regions" (Source 1:2). One woman

First point from thesis

When citing long sources, always give both the source number and the page number.

wrote that on hearing about the west her husband “became enthused with the spirit of adventure” (Source 15). David Campbell told his story in a manner that focused most on the adventures he and his fellow travelers came across, such as crossing rivers and fighting Spaniards (Source 7).

Use quotations from the sources, but only in short snippets—keep control over your essay.

Though many pioneers sought adventure in the west, they knew the journey would not be pleasant. Trips to Oregon show the bravery that the Americans possessed as they underwent many hardships. The well known story of the Donner Party is related by Patrick Breen in his diary, showing that everyone during that winter was hungry and cold and lost many loved ones (Source 8). The Donner party’s story became a horror story of westward expansion, but many others faced danger. James Longmire told of being chased by wolves and losing his horses (Source 14). The murder of the Whitmans by Indians is also an example of the dangers of frontier life (Sources 14:107, 3:13, 4:35). Cholera was a fear for all travelers at this time, also. Alvin A. Coffey wrote that he went to great lengths to avoid a wagon train infected by the disease, and Mary Elizabeth Munkers Estes also wrote of the fear of cholera (Source 9:72, 6:39). Despite all dangers, pioneers continued to travel west, displaying their bravery and adventurousness.

Point 2 from thesis

Sources should be explained, not just referred to; your target audience has not seen the documents!

At the end of a long paragraph, restate its relevance to your thesis.

Westward expansion certainly showed that Americans were adventurous and brave, but even more so it showed that they were optimistic. They were willing to leave a lot behind on the premise that their lives would be improved by going west. Martha S. Read's letter shows that her husband believed the family had a better chance to succeed in Oregon than anywhere else (Source 13). Pringle's mother also believes that she and her family would be better off in Oregon because of the "healthful climate" (Source 4: 18). *Ironically she, her husband, and several of her children died on the way to or in Oregon.* In a letter to his wife, William Swain also shows his optimism by believing that the gold he will find on the west coast is worth his journey and leaving his wife and family behind for many months (Source 10). These are just a few examples of how every pioneer had to have a spirit of optimism to risk such danger and loss.

*Point 3
from
thesis*

Show how your examples prove your case. If the family had in fact found wealth and health in Oregon, the decision to go there would have been wise but not necessarily strikingly optimistic.

Pioneers also showed a sense of independence in their westward movement. Hastings called the "American Character" the determination "to govern, but not to be governed" (Source 1:3). Elizabeth Ann McAuley wrote that at her when camping on their journey they were happy because they felt "very independent" (Source 11). Despite a

*Point 4
from
thesis*

desire for independence, parties such as Hastings's did hold elections and selected their leaders, showing their belief in democracy. John McDannald's explanation of the rules of the road also shows that the pioneers understood the need for some sort of government in the west (Source 16).

This is the least well-developed paragraph; it needed either more evidence of an adventurous spirit or an explanation of why a belief in democracy indicates independence.

Though many wagon trains had disagreements, traveling west produced a sense of unity between pioneers.

Hastings wrote that his party felt a oneness of purpose at the beginning of their journey (Source 1:2). Newton G.

Finley's wagon train celebrated birth together (Source 12:86). Others wagon trains supported one another in hard times. Pringle's family was taken care of by their party after her parents died (Source 4). The Donner party also tried to help one another in their suffering (Source 8).

Through common experience the pioneers were unified, but westward expansion also unified the whole nation in their attempt to gain more land for their country. Campbell

writes about attacks by the Spanish and the arrival of the American fleet (Source 7). Besides being united against the Spaniards, Americans became united in their fear and suspicion of Indians. Hastings's advice on how to protect Americans from Indians shows them as ferocious and greedy (Source 17). McClain wrote about her husband

*Point 5
from
thesis*

*Return
to the
main
theme*

dying in a battle between Indians and whites (Source 15). This fear of Indians led to whites to a desire to drive them away. In David Arthur's short account of his journey west, he says that "the...hut of the savage is gone and in its place are stately temples" (Source 2). This statement shows that Americans united in building their society and in wiping out the Indians' society. This is one reaction that marks American history. The other reactions to the journey like bravery, adventurousness, independence, and unity show that the journey west unified a people just as it displayed the characteristics Americans already had.

Note that the American character is not presented as purely positive; the theme of anti-Indian racism is developed as well. The best essays will be nuanced and sophisticated enough to explore both sides of an issue.

Restatement of the thesis.

Excellent essay! The student has used all the documents, but she has not just discussed them one after the other in numerical order—she has woven them into a coherent essay that proves her thesis.