The Age of Exploration

Before your state became the state it is now, it was part of a greater region or territory. Therefore, when you first begin to study your state, you will start by studying the larger region it belongs to.

During the first quarter of this year you studied your home area in terms of its natural environment, and then in terms of the Native Americans who inhabited it. Your state’s history was shaped by these things and also by the people who later explored, claimed, and settled your region.

The main explorers of what is now North America were the British, Spanish, and French. They began exploring during the 1400s when people had a very limited view of what the Earth really looked like. The trips these explorers took helped people gain a more accurate picture of different landforms around the world. The earliest explorers sought to find a sea route to the Far East, especially India and China, in order to trade with the peoples who lived there. (Take a look at a map and see if you can find a sea route from the main ports in Europe to the main ports in Asia.)

The explorers who followed in later years often went for different reasons. Many new inventions made it possible for long sea voyages to take place. Larger and stronger ships and finer instruments of navigation were especially important. The most important discovery, however, was the realization that great continents existed across the ocean from Europe, and that ships could sail there and return instead of falling off the edge of the Earth, as had previously been thought. One of the closest of these unknown continents was North America. As explorers returned to Europe from North America, their stories of the lands they had found inspired many people to want to make the voyage and see the “new world” for themselves.

When European settlers first arrived in this “new world” they found other people living there. As you know from your earlier studies, these people were the Indians or Native Americans who had been living in North America for thousands of years. Over time, the European settlers required more space and as they moved west they fought the Native Americans for the land. These wars lasted many years, and many people died. Eventually, the settlers won and Native Americans who had survived were forced to live in places that were far from their original homelands.

By the time the United States had been established as an independent nation in North America, hundreds of years had passed since the time of the first explorers. Still, most of the North American continent remained unknown, unexplored, and unsettled by the Europeans. In 1750, except for the settlements along the Atlantic coast that became the original thirteen states of the United States, the interior of the continent was still an unexplored wilderness. If your state occupies any territory west of the Mississippi River, it lies in an area that was still an almost unknown “frontier” as recently as 1850.