

INTRODUCTION

A Crossing of Cultures

What we call “The Old West” began around 1850, as **settlers** living in crowded eastern and southern parts of the United States **began to migrate west** of the Mississippi River. At that time, **the United States claimed the land that exists within its borders today**, but much of it was unsettled **territories that had not yet been divided into states.**

Wagon trains included hundreds of people. There was safety in numbers.

From 1860 to the early 1900s, the government encouraged thousands of people to move west with the **promise of cheap land and new opportunity.**

In addition to the chance to own land, there were other reasons why people relocated to the West.

Escaping the racism of the Southern states after the Civil War (1861–1865) drove some former enslaved people. Other **newcomers were lured by stories of gold, silver, and adventure** in a new place.

The western territories may have been new for these incoming settlers, but they weren't new for everybody.

At the time, **land west of the Mississippi was already the home of numerous Native Nations**

who had lived there for thousands of years. **Other**

nations had been moved there in the 1830s when the

U.S. government forced

those in the east

to migrate on foot to western territories,

giving settlers

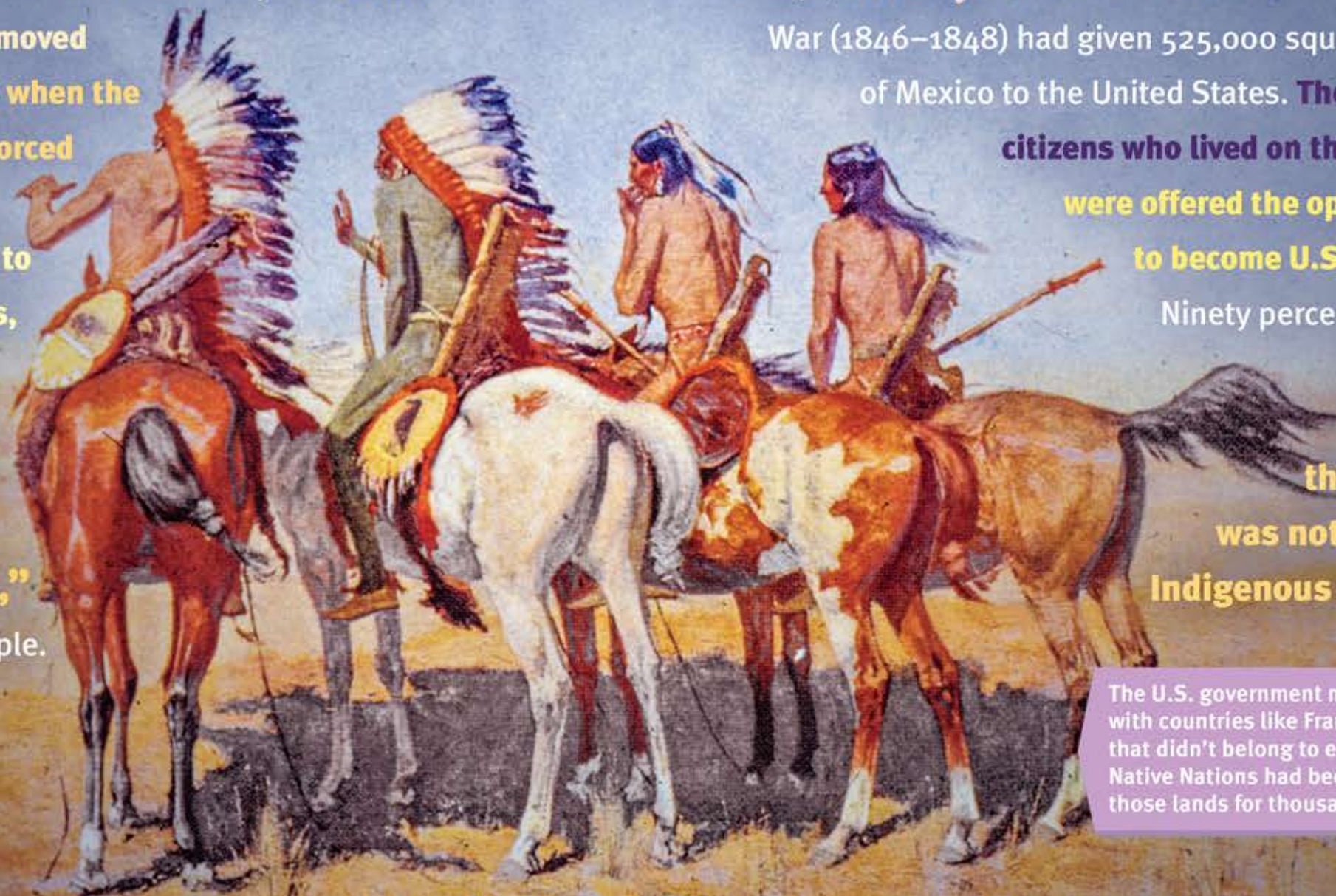
more room. Those

forced migrations

are often called a

“Trail of Tears,”

by Indigenous people.



Indigenous people were not the only people living west of the Mississippi River at the time.

In 1848, a **treaty** at the end of the Mexican-American

War (1846–1848) had given 525,000 squares miles

of Mexico to the United States. **The Mexican**

citizens who lived on these lands

were offered the opportunity

to become U.S. citizens.

Ninety percent of them

accepted.

However,

this choice

was not given to

Indigenous Peoples.

The U.S. government made agreements with countries like France to buy land that didn't belong to either of them. Native Nations had been living on those lands for thousands of years.

From 1865 to 1910, vast numbers of **new settlers** soon arrived **in the West**, leaving Indigenous people with limited authority and protection. **Among the new arrivals were diverse groups of girls and women**, boys and men, of **European, Asian,** and **African** descent. They brought their own cultures and dreams for a new life.

As these newcomers formed communities, they **created laws that were not always kind or fair to everyone**. They did not protect Asian or Indigenous people, and some laws, like the Chinese Exclusion Act, even **discriminated** against them.

Women were also discriminated against and often had fewer rights than men.

But that didn't stop women of all backgrounds from fighting for their freedom or making the Old West their home. In fact, as these **women** made lives for themselves, they **were key in shaping the region west of the Mississippi river.**

As people moved west for new opportunities, they left places their families had lived in for generations, bringing some of their traditions with them.