

Teaching About a Michigan Pioneer Using Geography and Economics

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We keep hearing about the ideal of teaching across disciplines, but how do you combine geography, economics and history, for example? I've been thinking about this in the context of stories about Michigan pioneers in the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*. I've picked one pioneer, William "Yankee Bill" Lewis, who built an inn at Yankee Springs, to create a secondary source account to complement his daughter Mary's primary source account.

William is interesting because he is like many of the people who came to Michigan between 1830 and 1840, when Michigan's population grew from 31,600 to 212,300 people. The largest number of people who moved to Michigan during this time, like William, came from western New York. Many of them were members of families from New England who had settled in New York after the American Revolution. But unlike most of these new settlers, William and his family did not use the Erie Canal and Lake Erie to make their journey. So he reminds us that general statements never apply to everyone.

Most people during this time made their living by farming. You needed land for crops and livestock if you wanted to be a successful farmer. Once a region like New England or western New York was settled, some members of large families had to move to an unsettled area to find enough land to be successful farmers. Although William had been a farmer in western New York, once he got to Michigan, he saw a different economic opportunity. By all accounts, he was quite successful.

Where I see geography and economics in "Yankee Bill Lewis":

Cardinal Directions: The text and the Great Lakes region map showing places mentioned in the text provide practice in cardinal directions and understanding of:

- Where William Lewis traveled in 1835
- The family's route to Yankee Springs
- The route the family's belongings and supplies took to reach Yankee Springs

This may lead to some geography-based questions that we cannot answer because we cannot talk to the Lewis family about them. But speculating about the answers can help us better understand the pioneer era and the geography of Michigan in the 1830s.

- The Lewis family traveled by wagon across Canada. How else could they have come to Detroit from New York? (See the "How They Got Here" article in *The Mitten*.) Why do you think they came across Canada instead of by boat?
- William Lewis shipped his supplies all the way around Michigan on the Great Lakes. Why do you think he did this instead of following the road he and his family took? (See the "Pioneer Life" article in *The Mitten*.)

Push/Pull Factors: The question of why the Lewis family left New York and moved west is also speculative. Did land pressure push them to leave once they sold their farm? Or was it the pull of new opportunities?

Scarcity, opportunity costs and choice: I suspect William Lewis's decision to stay at Yankee Springs instead of going on to Indiana was at least in part an economic one.

- He expected there would be a lot of travelers and a **scarcity** of places for them to stay. There were no other stopping points for almost 20 miles in either direction—a long ways if you are traveling by foot or by horse. As more people settled in the area, scarcity would be less of an advantage and he would rely more on good food and hospitality (see the [resources page](#) for evidence of how well he did this).
- He saw the opportunity of creating an inn where travelers would pay to eat and sleep. The **opportunity cost** for the inn-keeping business was not investing the money from the sale of his New York farm in another farm in Indiana. Maybe he was making a **choice** about what he wanted to do, or maybe a **choice** about what he thought would earn him more money.

Location and natural resources: In the 1830s, Michigan's most important natural resources were its land, used for farming, and its water, used for transportation. Both of these enter into how William Lewis got started. The difficulty of living in a location with poor roads is both an economic benefit for Lewis (people need his inn) and an economic problem (it makes it hard to get the supplies he needs to operate his inn).

Entrepreneurs: Lewis used a lot of resources to build a successful business.

- **Natural resources** such as the land for his garden, the land people were settling as farmers, and fish and wild animals for food for his guests.
- **Human resources** to build his buildings, grow and cook food, make people feel welcomed at the inn.
- **Capital resources** (the money from selling his farm in New York) to buy supplies to get started.

Your Turn: Are you finding good ways to combine the various social studies disciplines in your classroom? Is there anything we can add to this site to help you? What would you like other teachers to share about this topic?

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