

American

Romanticism: Historical Context

KEY IDEAS Historical forces clearly shaped the literature of the American romantic period. Writers responded—positively and negatively—to the country’s astonishing growth and to the booming Industrial Revolution.

The Spirit of Exploration

WESTWARD EXPANSION Writers of the romantic period were witness to a period of great growth and opportunity for the young American nation. With that growth, however, came a price. In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the country’s size. In the years that followed, explorers and settlers pushed farther and farther west. Settlers moved for largely practical reasons: to make money and to gain land. But each bit of land settled by white Americans was taken from Native American populations who had lived there for generations. The Indian Removal Act of 1830, for example, required Native Americans to relocate west. As whites invaded their homelands, many Native Americans saw no choice but to comply. And those who did not were simply—and often brutally—forced to leave.

Toward the middle of the century, Americans embraced the notion of “**manifest destiny**”—the idea that it was the destiny of the United States to expand to the Pacific Ocean and into Mexican territory. Mexicans disagreed, of course. When Texas was annexed from Mexico by the United States in 1845, it set off the Mexican-American War. Many Americans, including writer **Henry David Thoreau**, found the war to be immoral—a war fought mainly to expand slavery. “Can there not be a government,” he wrote, “in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?” In the end, the United States defeated Mexico and, through treaties and subsequent land purchases from the Mexican government, established the current borders of the 48 contiguous United States.

Growth of Industry

The stories and essays of the romantic period reflect an enormous shift in the attitudes and working habits of many Americans. When the War of 1812 interrupted trade with the British, Americans were suddenly forced to produce many of the goods they had previously imported. The **Industrial Revolution** began, changing the country from a largely agrarian economy to an industrial powerhouse.

The factory system changed the way of life for many Americans, but not always for the better. People left their farms for the cities, working long hours for low wages in harsh conditions. In addition, Northeastern textile mills’ demand for cotton played a role in the expansion of slavery in the South. Writers of this period reacted to the negative effects of industrialization—the commercialism, hectic pace, and lack of conscience—by turning to nature and to the self for simplicity, truth, and beauty.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.8 Explain how ideas, values, and themes of a literary work often reflect the historical period in which it was written.

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3 Organize information to show understanding or relationships among facts, ideas, and events....

▶ TAKING NOTES

Outlining As you read this introduction, use an outline to record the main ideas about the characteristics and the literature of the period. You can use article headings, boldfaced terms, and the information in these boxes as starting points. (See page R49 in the **Research Handbook** for more help with outlining.)

I. Historical Context

- A. Spirit of Exploration
 - 1. Westward Expansion
 - 2. Manifest Destiny
- B. Growth of Industry



For more on the American romantic period, visit the **Literature Center** at ClassZone.com.

Cultural Influences

KEY IDEAS Many romantic writers were outspoken in their support for human rights. Their works created awareness of the injustice of slavery and called for reform in many other areas as well.

The Tragedy of Slavery

From 1793 to 1860, cotton production rose greatly, due to the invention of the cotton gin and other farming machinery. So did the number of enslaved workers. Plantation owners were the wealthiest and most powerful people in the South, yet they were relatively few in number. Most Southern farmers held few or no slaves, but they aspired to. They felt that slavery had become necessary for increasing profits.

For slaves, life was brutal. Field workers—men, women, and children—rose before dawn and worked in the fields until bedtime. Many were beaten or otherwise abused. And worst of all, family members were sold away from one another. Often family members attempted to escape to be with one another again. Unfortunately, escapes were rarely successful.

Tension over slavery increased between the North and the South. Many in the North saw slavery as immoral and worked to have it abolished. Others worried as the balance of power between free and slave states shifted with each new state entering the Union. Romantic poets **James Russell Lowell** and **John Greenleaf Whittier** wrote abolitionist journalism and poetry, and even **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** published a volume of antislavery poems. Perhaps the greatest social achievement of the romantics was to create awareness of slavery's cruelty.

Call for Social Reform

By the mid-19th century, many Americans had joined together to fight slavery and the other social ills of the time. Many leading writers of the romantic movement were outspoken in their support for human rights. **William Cullen Bryant** and **James Russell Lowell**, for example, were prominent abolitionists who also supported workers' and women's rights.

The abolition movement began by advocating resettlement of blacks in Africa. But most enslaved African Americans had been born and raised in the United States and resented the idea of being forced to leave. Instead, white and black abolitionists (including women) began to join together to work for emancipation. They formed societies, spoke at conventions, published newspapers, and swamped Congress with petitions to end slavery.



This antislavery medal was created to help grow support for the abolition movement.

A Voice from the Times

*Men! Whose boast it is that ye
Come of fathers brave and free,
If there breathe on earth a slave,
Are ye truly free and brave?
If ye do not feel the chain,
When it works a brother's pain,
Are ye not base slaves indeed,
Slaves unworthy to be freed?*

—James Russell Lowell
from "Stanzas on Freedom"

In the 1830s and 1840s, workers began to agitate as well, protesting low wages and deteriorating working conditions. Many struck, but few were successful—a large pool of immigrants was always ready to take their places. Still, workers began forming unions, and slowly conditions improved.

Women in the early 19th century found much to protest. They could neither vote nor sit on juries. Their education rarely extended beyond elementary school. When they married, their property and money became their husband's. Many even lacked guardianship rights over their children. Throughout this period, women worked for change, gathering in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, to continue their long fight for women's rights.

Ideas of the Age

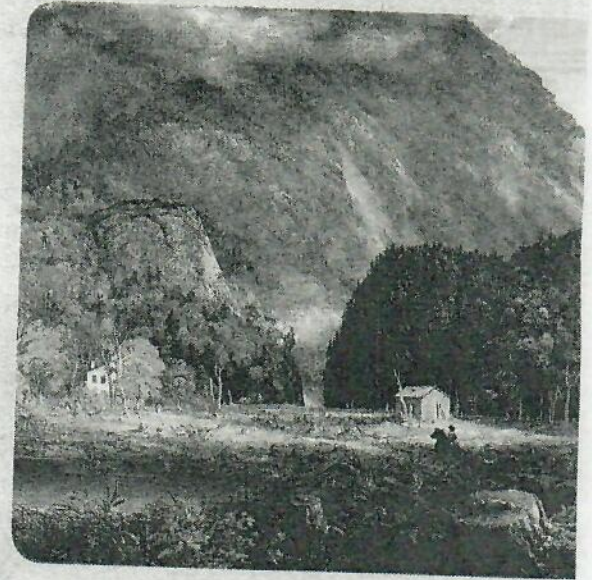
KEY IDEAS Reflecting the optimism of their growing country, American romantic writers forged a national literature for the very first time. Yet sectionalism threatened to tear the nation apart.

Nationalism vs. Sectionalism

In the early 1800s, many Supreme Court decisions strengthened the federal government's power over the states. At the same time, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams established a foreign policy guided by **nationalism**—the belief that national interests should be placed ahead of regional concerns or the interests of other countries. Reflecting the national pride and optimism of the American people, writers of this age forged a literature entirely the nation's own. For the first time, writers were not imitating their European counterparts, but were listening to their own voices and writing with a distinctly American accent.

However, this new spirit of nationalism was challenged by the question of slavery. Up until 1818, the United States had consisted of ten free and ten slave states. As new territories tried to enter the Union, the North and South wrangled over the balance of power between free and slave states. Economic interests also challenged nationalism. Tariffs on manufactured goods from Britain forced Southerners to buy more expensive, Northern-manufactured goods. From the South's point of view, the North was getting rich at the South's expense. Sectionalism, or the placing of the interests of one's own region ahead of the nation as a whole, began to take hold.

THE ARTISTS' GALLERY



The Hudson River School

The paintings on pages 296 and 300 are excellent examples of the works of the Hudson River School artists. This group of landscape painters flourished between 1825 and 1870. The artists knew one another and used similar techniques for portraying nature scenes.

American Style Thomas Cole painted *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains* (1839), shown here and on page 293. He and the other Hudson River artists created passionate wilderness scenes that appealed to the imagination and made earlier American landscapes seem weak and unobserved. Like the American romantic writers of the time, the Hudson River School artists made a conscious effort to create an American style—one based on nature and the emotions.

Real-Life Inspiration The painting shown in detail here has an interesting history. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short story about a real-life landslide at Crawford Notch that took the lives of nine people. The story may have piqued Cole's interest in the scene. In the painting Cole highlights the insignificance and vulnerability of the human figures in the face of the coming storm. One barely notices the settlers' homes or the rider, who seems oblivious to the ominous clouds gathering at the upper left—hinting of disaster to come.

Romantic Literature

KEY IDEAS Themes of individualism and nature unified the writing of the American romantic movement, despite dramatic differences in the writers' focus and style.

The Early Romantics

The early American romantic writers may have been influenced more by the literature of another continent than by that of their own. **Romanticism** had first emerged in Europe in the late 18th century, in reaction to the neoclassicism of the period that had preceded it. Where neoclassical writers admired and imitated classical forms, the romantics looked to nature for inspiration. Where neoclassicists valued reason, the romantics celebrated emotions and the imagination. The first American romantic writers grew

► For Your Outline

THE EARLY ROMANTICS

- were inspired by the beauty of nature
- emphasized emotions and the imagination over reason
- celebrated the individual spirit

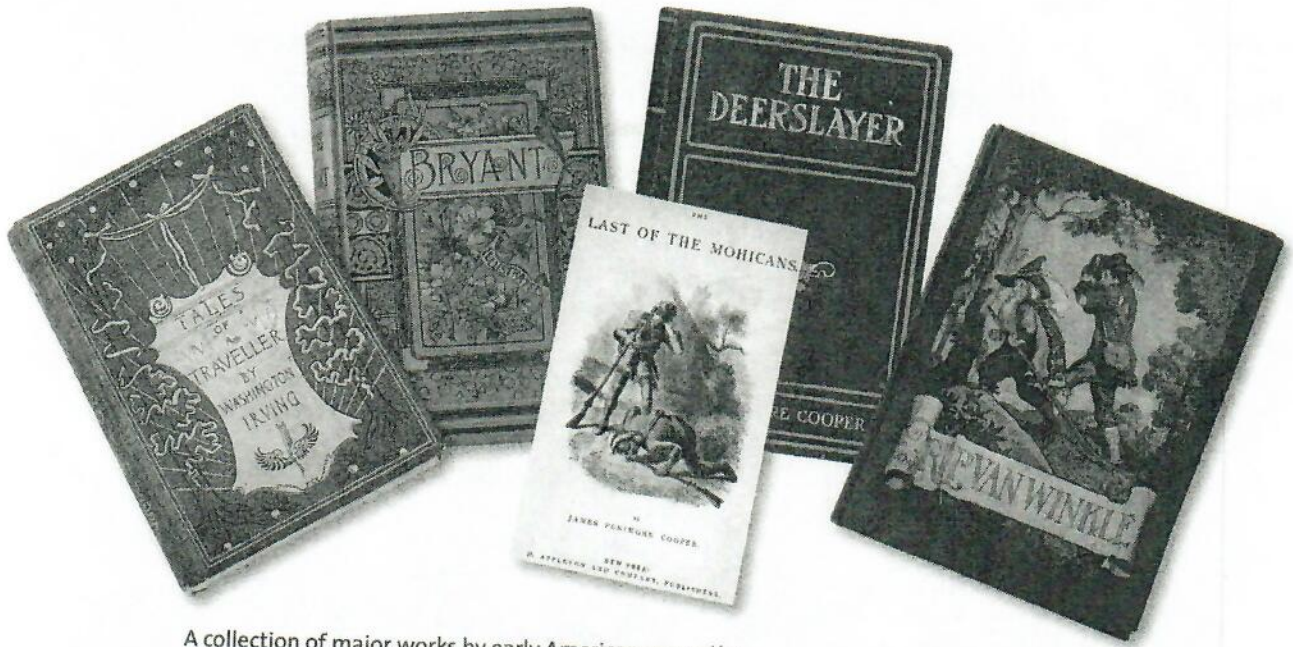
Kindred Spirits (1849), Asher B. Durand. © Francis G. Mayet/Corbis.



ANALYZE VISUALS

This painting is a memorial to painter Asher B. Durand's friend and fellow Hudson River School artist Thomas Cole (here shown with romantic poet William Cullen Bryant).

Although Durand was influenced by Cole, his works express stillness and a realistic imitation of nature, in contrast to Cole's more expressive rendering. Compare this painting with Cole's on the previous page. How are they similar? How are they different?



A collection of major works by early American romantics

out of this European tradition, shaping and molding it to fit their unique American identity. They too were reacting to what had come before—the rationality of the Age of Reason and the strict doctrines of Puritanism.

Indeed, much had changed since the Puritan era in America, and the writers of the early romantic period reflected the more modern sensibilities of their day. As the U.S. population exploded and the country's borders moved westward, American writers aimed to capture the energy and character of their growing country. They saw the limits of reason and instead celebrated the glories of the individual spirit, the emotions, and the imagination as basic elements of human nature. The splendors of nature inspired the romantics more than the fear of God, and some of them felt a fascination with the supernatural.

William Cullen Bryant's 1817 poem "Thanatopsis" went a long way toward establishing romanticism as the major force in the literature of mid-19th century America. Bryant followed the trend of the English romantics by celebrating nature in his work. Romanticism was not only a movement in poetry, however. **Washington Irving**, the first American writer esteemed abroad, pioneered the short story as a literary form. He put America on the literary map and also influenced other writers, particularly Nathaniel Hawthorne. **James Fenimore Cooper** is remembered for writing the first truly original American novel. He celebrated the American spirit in all his frontier novels, known as *The Leatherstocking Tales*. The early romantic writers were the pioneers of America's national literature, setting the course for those who would follow.

A Voice from the Times

*To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. . . .*

—William Cullen Bryant
from "Thanatopsis"



The legendary Hiawatha, memorialized in Longfellow's poem "The Song of Hiawatha"

The Fireside Poets

Other writers influential in forging an American literature were the Fireside Poets, a group of New England poets whose work was morally uplifting and romantically engaging. The group's name came from the family custom of reading poetry aloud beside a fire, a common form of entertainment in the 19th century. With the Fireside Poets, the poetry of American writers was, for the first time, on equal footing with that of their British counterparts.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the best-known member of the group, stressed individualism and an appreciation of nature in his work. His poems took for their subject matter the more colorful aspects of America's past. "Evangeline," for example, tells of lovers who are separated during the French and Indian War, while "The Song of Hiawatha" takes its themes from Native American folklore. Longfellow's fame was so great that after his death, he was honored with a plaque in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey in London—the only American poet ever to receive such an honor.

The other Fireside Poets, **James Russell Lowell**, **Oliver Wendell Holmes**, and **John Greenleaf Whittier**, were strongly committed to using poetry to bring about social reform. They were interested in such issues as abolition, women's rights, improvement of factory conditions, and temperance. They also championed the common person—perhaps as an outgrowth of the form of democracy that had been sweeping the land since President Jackson took office in 1829. Jackson had crusaded against control of the government by the wealthy and promised to look out for the interests of common people. One can see this regard for the common person in the work of Whittier, for example, who wrote of farmers, lumbermen, migrants, and the poor.

► For Your Outline

THE FIRESIDE POETS

- emphasized moral themes in work
- were viewed as equals of British poets of the day
- stressed individualism and an appreciation of nature
- were committed to social reform

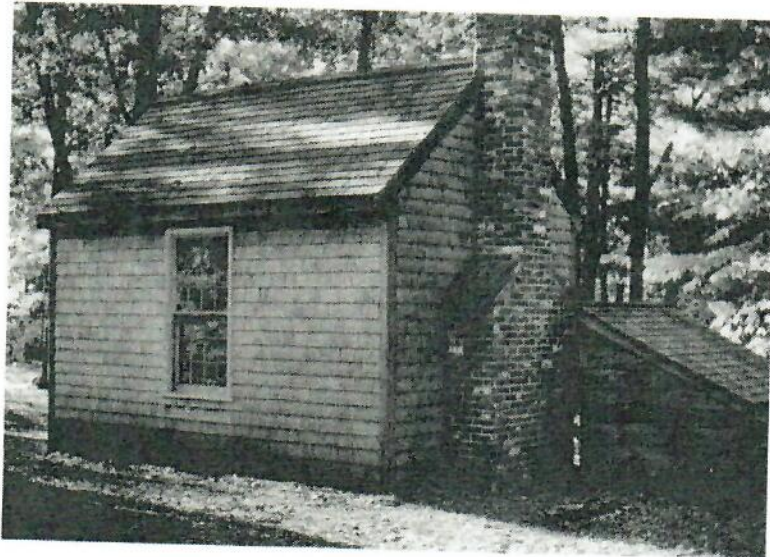
The Transcendentalists

By the mid-1800s, Americans were taking new pride in their emerging culture. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, a New England writer, nurtured this pride. Emerson led a group practicing **transcendentalism**—a philosophical and literary movement that emphasized living a simple life and celebrating the truth found in nature and in personal emotion and imagination. Exalting the dignity of the individual, the transcendentalist stressed American ideas of optimism, freedom, and self-reliance.

The term transcendentalism came from Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who wrote of “transcendent forms” of knowledge that exist beyond reason and experience. Emerson gave this philosophy a peculiarly American spin: he said that every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his or her own, through intuition. The transcendentalists believed that people are inherently good and should follow their own beliefs, however different these beliefs may be from the norm. Both Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” and **Henry David Thoreau’s** “Civil Disobedience” address this faith in the integrity of the individual.

Not surprisingly, a major target for the transcendentalists’ criticism was their Puritan heritage, with its emphasis on material prosperity and rigid obedience to the laws of society. The transcendentalists disliked the commercial, financial side of American life and stressed instead spiritual well-being, achieved through intellectual activity and a close relationship to nature. Thoreau put his beliefs into practice by building a small cabin on Walden Pond and living there for two years, writing and studying nature.

Transcendental ideas lived on in American culture in the works of later poets such as Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens and through the civil rights movement of the 20th century. In the short term, however, transcendentalists’ optimism began to fade when confronted with the persistence of slavery and the difficulty in abolishing it.



A replica of Thoreau’s 10-by-15-foot cabin on the shore of Walden Pond

► For Your Outline

THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS

- emphasized living a simple life
- stressed a close relationship to nature
- celebrated emotions and the imagination
- stressed individualism and self-reliance
- believed intuition can lead to knowledge
- believed in the inherent goodness of people
- encouraged spiritual well-being over financial well-being

A Voice from the Times

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you’ve imagined. As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler.

—Henry David Thoreau

American Gothic: The “Brooding” Romantics

Not all American romantics were optimistic or had faith in the innate goodness of humankind, however. Three other giants from this period, **Edgar Allan Poe**, **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, and **Herman Melville** are what have been called “**brooding**” romantics or “**anti-transcendentalists**.” Theirs is a complex philosophy, filled with dark currents and a deep awareness of the human capacity for evil. While Irving had been satisfied if his work kept “mankind in good humor with one another,” Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe were haunted by a darker vision of human existence. Their stories are characterized by a probing of the inner life of their characters, and examination of the complex and often mysterious forces that motivate human behavior. They are romantic, however, in their emphasis on emotion, nature, the individual, and the unusual.

EXPLORING THE DARKNESS Poe and Hawthorne, and to a lesser extent Melville, used **gothic** elements such as grotesque characters, bizarre situations, and violent events in their fiction. The gothic tradition had begun in Europe, perhaps inspired by the gothic architecture of the Middle Ages. European writers of the 19th century, such as Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*, delighted readers with their deliciously creepy accounts of monsters, vampires, and humans with a large capacity for evil. The romantic movement itself also gave rise to gothic literature. Once the romantics freed the imagination from the restrictions of reason, they could follow it wherever it might go. For the dark romantics, the imagination led to the threshold of the unknown—that shadowy region where the fantastic, the demonic, and the insane reside.

Edgar Allan Poe, of course, was the master of the gothic form in the United States. He explored human psychology from the inside, using first-person narrators who were sometimes criminal or even insane. His plots involved extreme situations—not just murder, but live burials, physical and mental torture, and retribution from beyond the grave.

Nathaniel Hawthorne agreed with the romantic emphasis on emotion and the individual. However, he did not see these as completely positive forces. His works, such as *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Minister’s Black Veil,” examine the darker facets of the human soul—for example, the psychological effects sin and guilt may have on human life.

Herman Melville’s early works were mostly adventure stories set in the South Pacific. *Moby Dick*, however, departed from that pattern. By concentrating on a ship’s captain’s obsessive quest for the whale that took his leg, Melville explores such issues as madness and the conflict of good and evil. Later, in “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Melville

► For Your Outline

AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE “BROODING” ROMANTICS

- did not believe in the innate goodness of people
- explored the human capacity for evil
- probed the inner life of characters
- explored characters’ motivations
- agreed with romantic emphasis on emotion, nature, and the individual
- included elements of fantasy and the supernatural in works

A Voice from the Times

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil.

—Edgar Allan Poe
from “The Fall of the House of Usher”



Like an Open-Doored Marble Tomb, George Klamba. Acrylic on panel, 18" × 14.5". Courtesy Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago. © George Klamba.

reveals the dark side of material prosperity by exploring how the struggle for material gain affects the individual.

Perhaps the dark vision of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe foreshadowed the tumult and tragedy that was soon to erupt in civil war in America. There is no question that these three writers profoundly affected the development of the American literary voice throughout the remainder of the 19th century.

Connecting Literature, History, and Culture

Use this timeline and the questions on the next page to gain insight about how developments during the American romantic period reflected what was happening in the world as a whole.

AMERICAN LITERARY MILESTONES

- 1800**
- 1806** Noah Webster's first dictionary is published. It includes 5,000 words related to American customs that have never before been collected.
- 1809** Washington Irving publishes *A History of New York*, satirizing the young nation.

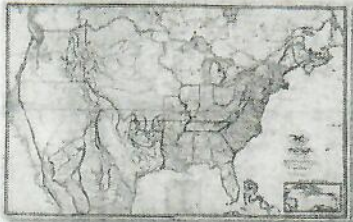
- 1810**
- 1817** "Thanatopsis," composed by William Cullen Bryant at age 18, is published in *The North American Review*. ▼

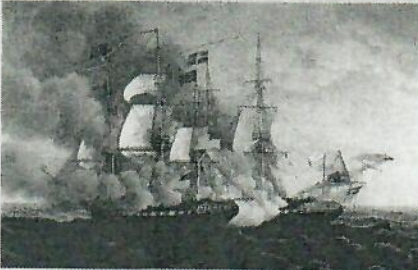


- 1820**
- 1824** Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" is published.
- 1826** James Fenimore Cooper writes *The Last of the Mohicans*.
- 1827** *Freedom's Journal*, the first African-American newspaper, is founded. ▼



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- 1800**
- 
- 1803** Thomas Jefferson doubles ▲ the country's size by buying Louisiana Territory from France.
- 1807** Robert Fulton launches *Clermont*, the first steamboat.
- 1808** United States bans slave trade.


- 1810**
- 
- 1812** United States declares war ▲ on Great Britain. American industry booms.
- 1815** Quaker Levi Coffin establishes the Underground Railroad.

- 1820**
- 1820** Missouri Compromise prohibits slavery in western territories but allows slavery in Arkansas Territory and Louisiana.
- 1823** The Monroe Doctrine bans European colonization in the Americas.
- 1825** The Erie Canal is opened, linking Lake Erie with the Hudson River.
- 1828** Construction begins on the first railroad in the United States.

WORLD CULTURE AND EVENTS

- 1800**
- 1804** Napoleon is crowned emperor of France.
- 1806** The Holy Roman Empire reaches its last days.
- 1807** British slave trade is abolished.

- 1810**
- 1813** Jane Austen publishes *Pride and Prejudice*.
- 1816** Rossini writes the comic opera *The Barber of Seville*.
- 1819** Factory work is outlawed in England for children under nine years old.

- 1820**
- 
- 1821** Venezuela and Mexico declare independence from Spain. ►
- 1823** Beethoven completes his Ninth Symphony.
- 1829** Slavery is abolished in Mexico.