Slavery leapt out of the East and into the interior lands of the Old Southwest in the 1820s and 1830s. Cotton began to soar as the most lucrative product in the global marketplace just as the slaveholding societies of the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic were reaching limits in soil fertility. To land speculators, planters, ambitious settlers and Northern investors, the fertile lands to the west now looked irresistible.

The Native American nations that possessed the bulk of those lands stood in the way of this imagined progress. President Andrew Jackson, an enslaver from Tennessee famous for brutal “Indian” fighting in Georgia and Florida, swooped in on the side of fellow enslavers, championing the Indian Removal Act of 1830. When Congress passed the bill by a breathtakingly slim margin, Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Seminoles in the South as well as Potawatomis, Wyandots, Odawas, Delawares, Shawnees and Senecas in the Midwest were relocated to an uncharted space designated as Indian Territory (including present-day Oklahoma and Kansas). “Removal,” as the historian Claudio Saut argues in a forthcoming book on the topic, was far too quiet a word to capture the violation of this mass “expulsion” of 80,000 people.

As new lands in the Old Southwest were pried open, white enslavers back east realized that their most profitable export was no longer tobacco or rice. A complex interstate slave trade became an industry of its own. This extractive system, together with enslavers moving west with human property, resulted in the relocation of approximately one million enslaved black people to a new region. The entrenched practice of buying, selling, owning, renting and mortgaging humans stretched into the American West along with the white settler-colonial population that now occupied former indigenous lands.

Slaveholding settlers who had pushed into Texas from the American South wanted to extend cotton agriculture and increase the numbers of white arrivals. “It was slavery that seemed to represent the soft underbelly of the Texas unrest,” the historian Steven Hahn asserts in “A Nation Without Borders.” Armed conflict between American-identified enslavers and a Mexican state that outlawed slavery in 1829 was among the causes of the Mexican-American War, which won for the United States much of the Southwest and California.

Texas became the West’s cotton slavery stronghold, with enslaved black people making up 30 percent of the state’s population in 1860. “Indian Territory” also held a large population of enslaved black people. Mormons, too, kept scores of enslaved laborers in Utah. The small number of black people who arrived in California, New Mexico and Oregon before mid-century usually came as property. Even as most Western states banned slavery in their new constitutions, individual enslavers held onto their property-in-people until the Civil War.

Enslaved men who had served in the Union Army were among the first wave of African-Americans to move west of their own free will. They served as soldiers, and together with wives and children they formed pocket communities in Montana, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. It is a painful paradox that the work of black soldiers centered on what the historian Quintard Taylor has called “settler protection” in his classic 1998 study of African-Americans in the West, “In Search of the Racial Frontier.” Even while bearing slavery’s scars, black men found themselves carrying out orders to secure white residents of Western towns, track down “outlaws” (many of whom were people of color), police the federally imposed boundaries of Indian reservations and quell labor strikes. “This small group of black men,” Taylor observes, “paid a dear price in their bid to earn the respect of the nation.”