

# 2023 Theme Narrative: *Frontiers in History: People, Places, Ideas*

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During the 2022–2023 school year, National History Day® (NHD) invites students to research topics related to the theme, *Frontiers in History: People, Places, Ideas*. This theme is broad enough in scope to encourage the investigation of topics ranging from local to global history. To understand the historical importance of their topics, students must ask questions of time and place, cause and effect, change over time, and impact and significance. What factors contributed to the development of a frontier? Why did it emerge, and how did it change? When did it cease to be a frontier? What impact did it have on the people who experienced it, and how did they affect it? Regardless of the topic selected, students must present a description of it and draw conclusions about how their topic affected individuals, communities, nations, or the world, changing the course of human society.

But first, what is a frontier?

## PLACES AS FRONTIERS

A frontier may be geographical—an area thought to be on the edge of a settlement. Various dictionaries refer to a physical frontier as “a wilderness at the edge of a settled area” or “uncharted territory.” The first might be a remote land, beyond the boundaries of an area or country and considered uninhabited. The idea of uncharted territory could be land that is not plotted on a map and therefore “unknown.” This begs the question, uncharted or uninhabited by whom?

Obvious topics that come to mind are those related to the classic frontier of popular culture, the nineteenth-century American West filled with cowboys, outlaws, sheriffs, Native Americans, pioneers, and farmers. Let’s break down this idea.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Americans pushed the geographical boundaries of what they perceived as the frontier farther and farther west. Journalists, poets, novelists, politicians, and even historians described the

frontier as unsettled land there for the taking, urging white settlers to “Go West, young man.” What about the Native or Tribal Nations who inhabited the land? Did they consider the land they called home an uninhabited wilderness?

Students interested in exploring the American frontier and its impact might research the significance of European settlement. What was the effect of their efforts to push the frontier farther westward? Students might consider the impact westward expansion had on other groups of people. What was the experience of women versus that of men? How did this experience affect the settlers or Indigenous Peoples in Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota or Oregon? A performance might explore women’s experiences during the gold rushes in California or Alaska. What role did fur traders or missionaries play in settling the West?



A lithograph of the entrance to Cadotte’s Pass in present-day Montana, c. 1855. Library of Congress (2004666302).

How did technology change the landscape and the lives of those who lived in the West? How was barbed wire a frontier, and how did it alter the western frontier and encourage settlement?

When did the American frontier officially close? How did Americans deal with this intellectually and culturally? Who was Frederick Jackson Turner, and what was his frontier thesis? What impact did it have on intellectual and historical thought?

As we march toward the 250th anniversary of American Independence in 2026, students might focus on topics related to the fight for independence and the ever-moving western frontier. A performance might analyze the French and Indian War (1754–1763), the Proclamation Line of 1763, or the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. How were ideas of freedom and democracy frontiers in political thought? How did these new ideas spark a revolution? How did Native Nations view these ideas? Students interested in this area might develop a website that analyzes European settlements from the perspective of the Pequots, Mohegans, Dutch fur traders, or the English settlers in the Connecticut River Valley during the 1600s.

Another geographic definition of a frontier is the formal border between two countries or societies, particularly when they are hostile. Students might examine the role that borders have played in specific conflicts between countries or how borders have kept people apart, willingly or not.



“Achtung! Sie Verlassen Jetzt West Berlin (Caution! You Are Leaving Now West Berlin),” October 1961. National Archives and Records Administration (6003286).

People and countries often build walls to protect themselves. Students can create an exhibit to focus on the Great Wall of China, which the Qin Dynasty completed in the early 200s BCE. Was it built as a defense? Why and against whom? Did it protect the dynasty? Why or why not? Defensive walls typically surrounded medieval European

cities. Why did ancient Romans build Hadrian’s Wall in second-century England? What were the consequences? The Soviet Union constructed the Berlin Wall in the 1960s. Was it built to keep people in or to keep them out? What effect did this wall have on the world? On politics? On individuals or families?

With or without walls, borders or frontiers have caused many conflicts and have had unintended consequences. Colonization and conquest created many frontiers that often resulted in cross-cultural exchanges. After the Han conquest of Gojoseon (present-day North Korea and Manchuria) in 108 BCE, Koreans adopted many Chinese ideas about government, writing, and farming. Much of Spain became a frontier of the Islamic world in the early eighth century; a paper could evaluate Moorish contributions to Spanish civilization. Often, victors adopted practices and even gods from the vanquished, as the Aztecs did in Mexico in the 1400s.

Disputes over which nation should control Bosnia-Herzegovina contributed to World War I. A documentary might analyze the struggle over that country’s border and control over the country during the twentieth century. Did the war for Bosnian independence in the 1990s resolve this conflict? Why or why not? Disputes on the frontiers between communist and capitalist countries, including the Korean War and the Vietnam War, marked much of the second half of the twentieth century. Poland’s history is characterized by its ever-changing borders. How did these changes affect the Polish people?

## IDEAS AS FRONTIERS

Of course, students are not limited to geographical frontiers. Another definition of frontier is “an undeveloped field of study.” In this case, the term frontier may signify the limits of knowledge or achievement in a particular activity or subject. These frontiers change over time; a frontier for one generation may be commonplace for succeeding generations. Students might explore the work of individuals who have thought of new ways of organizing human life politically, economically, religiously, or socially and assess the impact of these new ideas. Perhaps scientific or technological innovations will capture students’ attention.

Frontiers are crossed by those who challenge conventional thinking. African American entrepreneurs built thriving economic communities in Durham, North Carolina, and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Booker T. Washington organized the National Negro Business League to provide networking and economic opportunities to grow and expand Black-owned businesses. W.E.B. Du Bois argued that economic achievement would not end segregation, and advocated for social change through active forms of protest.

People have striven to push frontier boundaries in science, technology, medicine, transportation, economics, media, law and justice, and art. The realm of human ideas and achievements abounds with potential topics. Scientific and

technological frontiers might be of interest. How did Marie Curie's research on radioactivity in the early 1900s represent a frontier? A student might write a paper that assesses the significance of the mathematician al-Khwarizmi's pioneering work in algebra in the 800s. A group of students might construct an exhibit that examines the development of the steam engine as a frontier in technology. The transformation of industry created by Henry Ford's assembly line could be the subject of a performance. Or, a student could build a website to examine the life and work of physicist Albert Einstein and his pioneering theories and inventions. What were the consequences of these new innovations?

How have frontiers in medical research and discovery affected human society? In the twentieth century, medical teams pioneered the process of transplanting organs. These complex medical procedures helped extend the lives of people suffering from various ailments. How were these frontiers crossed? What innovations were needed to help these patients after their successful transplants? What systems matched patients when donor organs became available? Were these systems fair and equitable to all patients? A student can write a paper to explain this frontier and its impact on science and society.

Space is referred to by many as the final frontier. How has the Space Race influenced politics, culture, or education? Students might produce a website that examines the race to explore this frontier and its impact on the Cold War and vice versa.

While some of humanity's greatest minds have devoted themselves to technological and scientific experimentation, others have devised ways to improve business or national economies. European merchants created banks to make trading easier, while early stock exchanges represented a frontier in capitalism. Students could examine the *zaibatsu*, the huge interrelated corporations that began to dominate Japan's economy in the late 1800s. How might corporations be defined as business frontiers? A student paper could explore the pathbreaking work, *Wealth of Nations* (1776), in which Adam Smith denounced the mercantilism that then prevailed and called for free trade. Or, students might consider how Marxism was a frontier in economic organization and the impact this ideological frontier had on the world.

Politics has also drawn its share of people willing to imagine new ways of doing things. How did the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 BCE pave the way for Athenian democracy? A documentary might focus on the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy when the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca (and soon after the Tuscarora) renounced their traditional hostility to one another and unified. How was this a frontier in political cooperation? Freedom fighters such as Simón Bolívar, who led nineteenth-century independence movements in South America, might be analyzed in an exhibit, while a documentary could assess how the New Deal of the 1930s represented a frontier in American politics.



Simón Bolívar by José Gil de Castro, c. 1823. Lima Art Museum.

Students may find inspiration in the stories of those who have challenged traditional boundaries of race, class, and gender. In what ways could the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement and the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement be considered frontiers in U.S. history? Mohandas Gandhi's efforts to end discrimination in India during the 1930s and 1940s would make a good topic for a performance. How can his efforts be defined as a frontier in political and social thought? What impact did his ideas have on India? On the world?

Many reformers who fought to improve their societies drew strength from religion. The establishment of just about any religion is a frontier, as are many reform movements within religions. A paper might focus on the ancient Persian thinker Zoroaster, whose beliefs in monotheism (belief in one god), judgment day, and the existence of heaven and hell are thought by many to have influenced Christianity and Islam. Methodism's origins as a reform movement in the Church of England in the eighteenth century could be the subject of a website. How were those or other religious movements considered frontiers or departures from established religion or thought?

The Sumerian invention of cuneiform writing around 3000 BCE represented a colossal advance in human culture. How did the ancient Greeks contribute to cultural frontiers in drama and architecture? In the early 1900s, Pablo Picasso and others created a new view of reality with Cubist art, a suitable topic for an exhibit, while a documentary could trace the development of jazz as a frontier in modern music. What were the origins of jazz? What role did New Orleans play in its development?



Cuneiform writing was the most widespread writing system in the Middle East. Merchants used this system to log records, track income, and mark expenses at markets. Metropolitan Museum (66.245.10).

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## CONCLUSION

The 2023 NHD theme is a broad one. Topics should be carefully selected and developed in ways that best use students' talents and abilities. Whether a topic is a well-known event in world history or focuses on a little-known individual from a small community, students should be careful to place their topics into historical perspective, examine the significance of their topics in history, and show development and change over time. Students should investigate available primary and secondary sources, analyze the evidence, and clearly explain the relationship of their topics to the theme, *Frontiers in History: People, Places, Ideas*.

To access more theme resources,  
go to [nhd.org/theme](https://nhd.org/theme).