



The Reservation System

1851 Indian Appropriations Act

In the 1830's, President Andrew Jackson forced Native Americans in the South to leave their homelands and move to the Great Plains. When the Indian peoples were gone, white people were allowed to seize and settle in the former tribal lands. This removal policy was useful to the U.S. government only so long as there remained land undesired by whites, land onto which Native tribes could be moved. In the mid-1800's, when whites began to move into the final remaining strongholds for Native life, the Great Plains, there was no place left for a forced relocation of Native people. The U.S. government responded by devising a new policy for controlling Native Americans, the reservation system.

The 1851 Indian Appropriations Act allotted funds to move western tribes onto reservations. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown explained the rationale behind this policy in 1850. Brown suggested that reservations should be "a country adapted to agriculture, of limited extent and well-defined boundaries; within which all, with occasional exceptions, should be compelled constantly to remain until such time as their general improvement and good conduct may supersede the necessity of such restrictions." (From Wilcomb E. Washburn's *The Indian in America*. Harper and Row, NY. 1975.)

Brown's description of reservations tells us quite a bit about their intended purposes. The following questions will help you think about and develop an understanding of the purposes reservations were intended to serve. What did Brown mean when he said reservations should be:

1. "country adapted to agriculture"?
2. "of limited extent and well-defined boundaries"
3. "within which all (Indians), with occasional exceptions, should be compelled constantly to remain until such time as their general improvement and good conduct may supersede the necessity of such restrictions."