

## Chapter 9

# A Dividing Nation

### *Was the Civil War inevitable?*

#### 9.1 Introduction

On May 22, 1856, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was savagely beaten on the floor of the Senate. The attack followed a speech Sumner had given entitled “The Crime Against Kansas.” Sumner was an ardent abolitionist, and in his speech, he had blasted fellow senators for passing a law that would allow slavery in Kansas Territory.

Sumner heaped particular scorn on one of the law’s authors, Senator Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina. Sumner sneered at Butler for his proslavery beliefs and his tendency to drool when he spoke. Butler was an aged but distinguished member of the Senate. Many senators found Sumner’s speech offensive, and Southerners were outraged.

Two days later, Preston Brooks, Butler’s nephew and a member of the House, approached Sumner, who was seated at his desk. Declaring Sumner’s speech a “libel on South Carolina and Mr. Butler,” Brooks began to beat Sumner over the head with his gold-tipped cane. Brooks eventually broke his cane, but not before he had left Sumner bloody and unconscious on the Senate floor. Sumner survived the attack, but it was three years before he recovered from his injuries and returned to the Senate.

The incident underscored the country’s deep divisions over the issue of slavery. Southerners praised Brooks for defending the South and his family’s honor. Many Southerners sent Brooks new canes to replace the one he had broken on Sumner’s head. The city of Charleston, South Carolina, even sent a cane with the inscription, “Hit him again.”

In contrast, many Northerners were appalled by the incident. They saw it as another example of the same Southern brutality that was responsible for slavery. Many in the North who had previously rejected the antislavery movement as too radical now found themselves more sympathetic to limiting slavery—and more hostile toward the South.



Charles Sumner spent his life working for equal rights for African Americans. Shortly before his death in 1874, the Charles Sumner School opened in Washington, D.C. It was one of the first public schools erected for educating Washington’s black community. Today the school is a museum, with a permanent exhibit on one of Sumner’s friends—fellow abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

## 9.2 Sectional Differences Divide the Union

The Ohio River meanders for nearly 1,000 miles from its origins in western Pennsylvania to the Mississippi River, at Cairo, Illinois. The Ohio has played a significant role in American history. It served as the main route for westward migration into the old Northwest Territory. It also served as a boundary between North and South. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 declared that all lands north of the Ohio would be free of slaves, leaving slavery allowable in lands to the south. This law helped make the creation of new western states easier for a time. But it did not solve the problem of slavery. As the country expanded, sectional differences over slavery increasingly divided the country.

**Slavery Comes to the National Stage: The Missouri Compromise** In the early 1800s, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois applied for statehood. Because they were all north of the Ohio River, they entered the Union as free states. During the same period, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama—all south of the Ohio—entered as slave states.

By 1819, the number of slave states and free states was balanced at 11 each. That meant neither North nor South had a controlling majority in the Senate. But that year, Missouri, which lay to the west of the Ohio River, applied for admission as a slave state. If admitted, Missouri would tip the balance of power in the Senate toward the South.

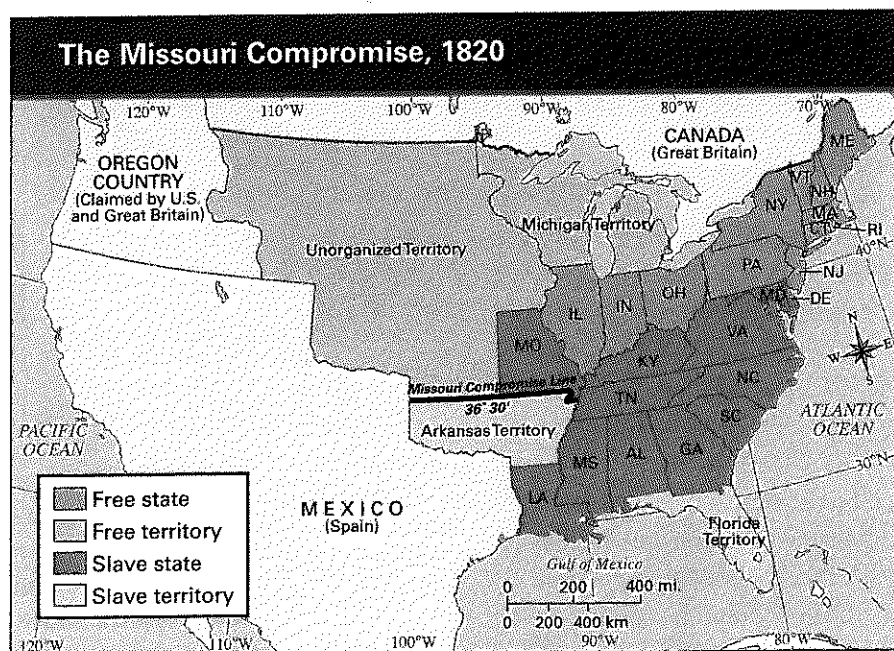
Suddenly, slavery became a national issue. Northerners in Congress protested that most of Missouri lay north of the point where the Ohio River met the Mississippi. By all rights, they said, it should be a free state. They also worried that making Missouri a slave state might turn the rest of Louisiana Territory toward slavery. So they insisted that Missouri could only enter as a free state. Southern senators disagreed. Congress was deadlocked.

When the Senate took up the matter again in 1820, however, things had changed. Maine was asking to join the Union as a free state. This opened the

way for a deal known as the **Missouri Compromise**, which was sponsored by Speaker of the House Henry Clay. Under the terms of the compromise, Missouri would enter the Union as a slave state and Maine as a free state, preserving the balance of power in the Senate. In addition, the law drew a line across the Louisiana Territory at latitude  $36^{\circ} 30'$ . North of that line, slavery would be banned. South of the line, it would be permitted.

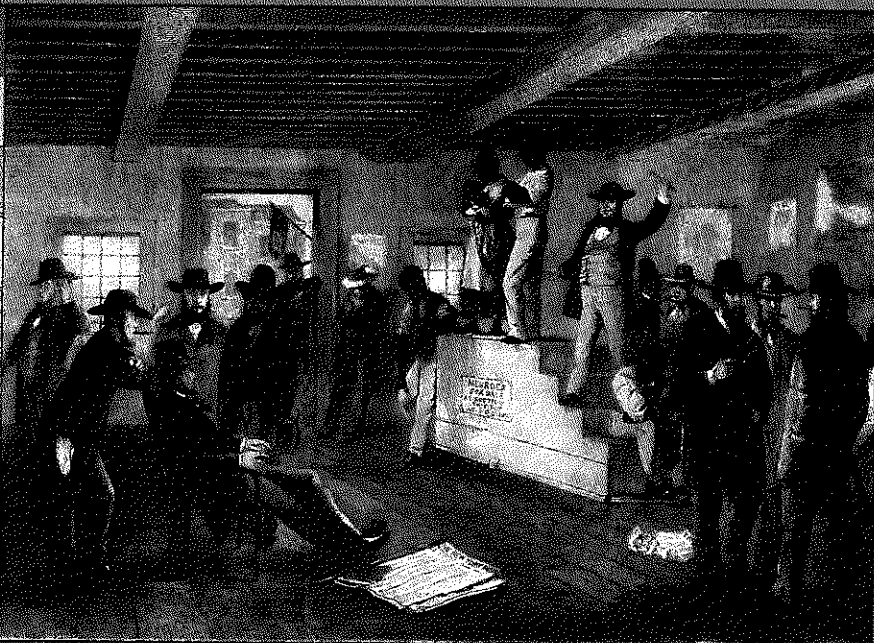
The Missouri Compromise broke the deadlock in the Senate, but it pleased no one. Northerners were angry about the extension of slavery to Missouri. Southerners disliked the ban on slavery in much of the Louisiana Territory. The

The Missouri Compromise kept the balance between slave and free states by admitting Missouri into the Union as a slave state, while Maine entered as a free state. It also set a line at the  $36^{\circ} 30'$  parallel. North of this line, slavery was banned. South of the line, it was permitted.



### Enslaved African Americans, 1790–1860

Year	Slave Population
1790	697,681
1800	893,602
1810	1,191,362
1820	1,538,022
1830	2,009,043
1840	2,487,355
1850	3,204,313
1860	3,953,760



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

compromise eased tensions temporarily, but it was not a permanent solution. Meanwhile, nothing had been settled about the future of slavery. Reflecting on this failure, John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary,

I have favored this Missouri compromise, believing it to be all that could be effected [accomplished] under the present Constitution, and from extreme unwillingness to put the Union at hazard [risk] . . . If the Union must be dissolved, slavery is precisely the question on which it ought to break. For the present however, the contest is laid asleep.

—John Quincy Adams, 1820

**Two Ways of Life: The North and the South** The dispute between North and South over Missouri was more than a battle over slavery. It was a conflict over different ways of life. **Sectionalism**, or a strong attachment to regional interests, had become a major issue in American politics.

By midcentury, the North was becoming increasingly **urban**, as people migrated from farms to cities in search of economic opportunities. In the Northeast, between 1800 and 1860, the percentage of the population living in cities grew from 9 to 35 percent. Some cities grew very fast. The population of New York City, for example, soared during that time from 60,000 to more than 800,000. Waves of immigration, mostly from Ireland and Germany, helped swell populations.

In contrast, the South was still predominantly rural in 1860. Most of the population lived on small farms or large plantations scattered across the countryside. The largest Southern city, New Orleans, had a population of only 169,000 people.

The Missouri Compromise put the slavery issue to rest for a time. But it also allowed the buying and selling of human beings, as shown here, to continue in half of the states. As a result, the number of enslaved African Americans more than doubled after 1820, reaching almost 4 million by 1860.

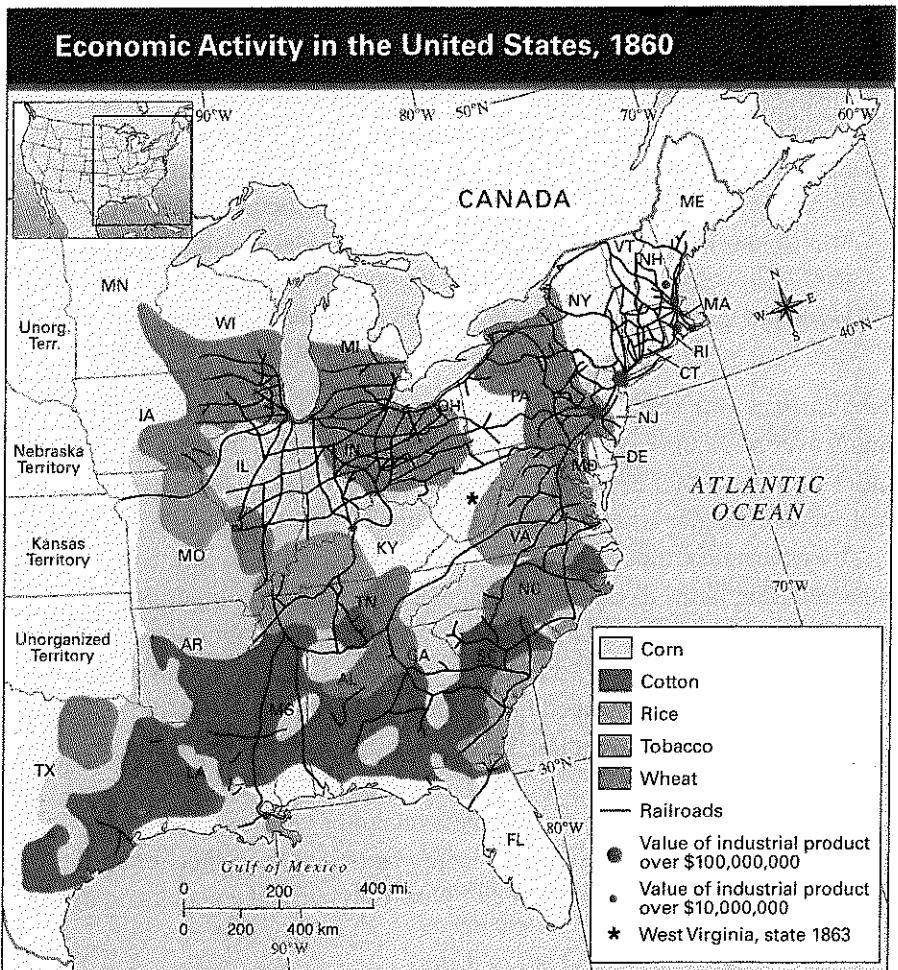
The economies of the two regions were also different. Although agriculture was still a significant part of the North's economy, workshops, factories, and mills also churned out large amounts of manufactured goods. Most of the immigrants entering the country in the 1840s and 1850s settled in the North because that was where the jobs were.

A growing network of canals and railroad lines in the North helped carry the products of mills and factories to customers. By 1860, more than 20,000 miles of rail lines crisscrossed the northern half of the country. These lines connected the cities and factories of the Northeast with the farming regions of the Midwest. In contrast, the South invested much less in transportation and had only half as many rail lines. Instead, it relied on rivers for transportation.

Unlike the North, the South had little industry in 1860. Its economy continued to be based on the export of agricultural products. Rice, corn, and cotton all grew well in the South, with cotton being the most important of the three crops. Some white Southerners owned large plantations worked by large numbers of slaves. But most were small farmers who depended on family members for labor. Only one in four Southern households owned slaves.

Still, plantation agriculture and slave labor formed the basis of the Southern economy. Without slavery, the plantation system would collapse, causing great economic harm to the South. For that reason, most Southerners saw abolitionism as a threat to their economy and way of life.

This map reveals differences in the economies of the North and South in 1860. Although farming was still the main activity in both regions, trade and industry were growing rapidly in the North. In contrast, the economy of the South was dependent on the export of rice, tobacco, and cotton.



### 9.3 The Ongoing Debate over Slavery: 1850–1856

It was 1850, and Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky was once again trying to save the Union. Clay was one of the country's leading statesmen, spending much of his political career trying to mend sectional differences. His efforts to win passage of the Missouri Compromise in 1820 had earned him the title "The Great Compromiser." Now, 30 years later, North and South were once again on the brink of dividing the Union over the issue of slavery. The elderly Clay was tired and ill, but he would make one last effort to hold the country together.

**The Growing Divide over Slavery** In both the North and the South, people had mixed views on slavery. Many moderates in the North accepted slavery where it already existed. They did, however, object to extending slavery into new territories and states, an opinion known as the Free-Soil position.

More radical abolitionists wanted to end slavery everywhere. Until that happened, many stood ready to help slaves liberate themselves. They did so by establishing a network of secret escape routes and safe houses for runaways that became known as the Underground Railroad. An escaped slave-turned-abolitionist named Harriet Tubman was the best-known "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Tubman risked her life many times by returning to the South to guide slaves to freedom in the North.

In the South, moderates saw slavery as a necessary evil that would eventually die out as more and more slaves were freed. Southern radicals, however, held that slaves were property and that limiting the expansion of slavery into new territories deprived Southerners of their property rights.

Territorial expansion became the flash point in the ongoing debate over slavery. Just how divided the country was became clear in 1846, when President James K. Polk asked Congress for money to negotiate with Mexico for the acquisition of California. David Wilmot, a representative from Pennsylvania, attached an amendment to the funding bill known as the Wilmot Proviso. The amendment would have banned slavery from any territory that the United States might acquire. Wilmot's objective, he said, was "to preserve for free white labor a fair country." The Wilmot Proviso passed several times in the House, which had a majority from the North. Its passage was blocked, however, in the Senate, where the South had more senators—and thus, more power.

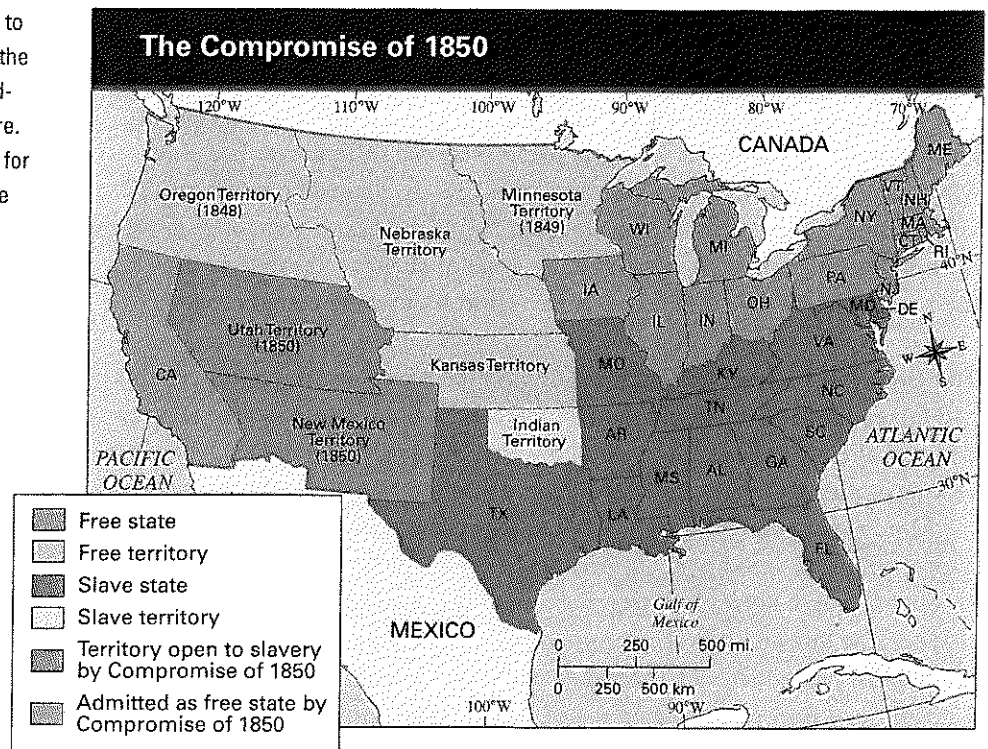
The debate over the expansion of slavery was renewed after the United States acquired vast lands in the Southwest in its war with Mexico. Moderates in both the North and the South proposed settling these new territories on the basis of **popular sovereignty**, or rule by the people. This meant allowing voters in the territories to decide whether to permit slavery. But popular sovereignty did not address the problem of keeping a balance of power in Congress if and when these territories became states.

This problem came front and center when California applied for admission to the Union as a free state in 1849. California's entry as a free state would tip the balance of power toward the North. Of course, Northerners welcomed this idea, while Southerners strongly opposed it. Congress was deadlocked again, and some Southerners spoke of withdrawing from the Union.



Born into slavery, Harriet Tubman escaped to Philadelphia in 1849 via the Underground Railroad. She made her first trip back to the South to help others escape just after the Fugitive Slave Law made it a federal crime to help runaway slaves. She made 19 rescue trips during the 1850s, never losing a fugitive. At one time, rewards for her capture totaled about \$40,000.

The Compromise of 1850 allowed California to enter the Union as a free state. The rest of the Southwest was left open to slavery, depending on a vote of the people who settled there. This compromise held the country together for a time, but it did not satisfy either side in the slavery dispute.

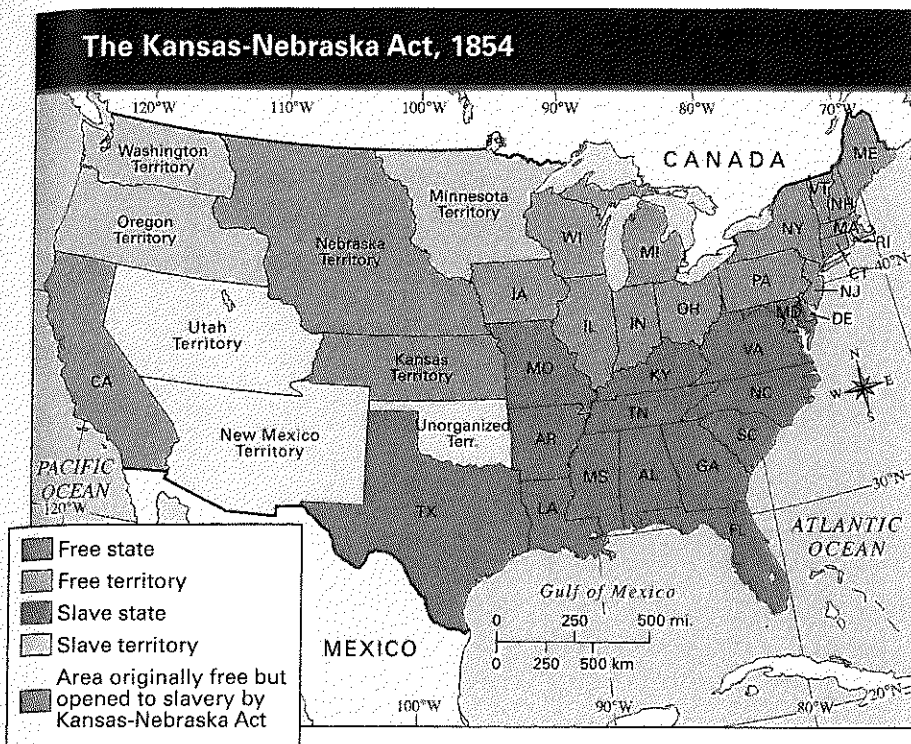


**A Compromise with Something for Everyone** At this point, Henry Clay stepped forward with a plan known as the **Compromise of 1850**. Clay’s plan had something for everyone. It admitted California into the Union as a free state, which pleased the North. It divided the rest of the Southwest into two territories—New Mexico and Utah—and opened both to slavery, which pleased the South. It ended the slave trade in Washington, D.C., but allowed existing slaveholders there to keep their slaves, making both sides happy.

The Compromise of 1850 also included a strong **Fugitive Slave Law**. The new law required the return of escaped slaves to their owners, something slaveholders had been demanding for years. “All good citizens,” it added, “are hereby commanded to aid and assist in the prompt and efficient execution of this law.” Those who did not could be fined or jailed.

To get his plan through Congress, Clay persuaded Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts to lend his support. Webster opposed slavery, but he agreed to support Clay’s compromise in an effort to end the crisis. In a speech before Congress, Webster urged his fellow senators to unite for the good of the nation. “I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American,” he said. “I speak today for the preservation of the Union.” The debate went on for months, but Congress finally approved Clay’s compromise.

**The Compromise Satisfies No One** Clay and Webster hoped the Compromise of 1850 would placate both sides and help ease tensions over slavery. Instead, the compromise pleased almost no one. The Fugitive Slave Law caused particular friction. The law allowed Southern “slave catchers” to come north to retrieve escaped slaves and required Northerners to come to the aid of these slave catchers or face fines, even imprisonment. Many Northerners felt the law was immoral and refused to obey it. Their resistance outraged Southerners.



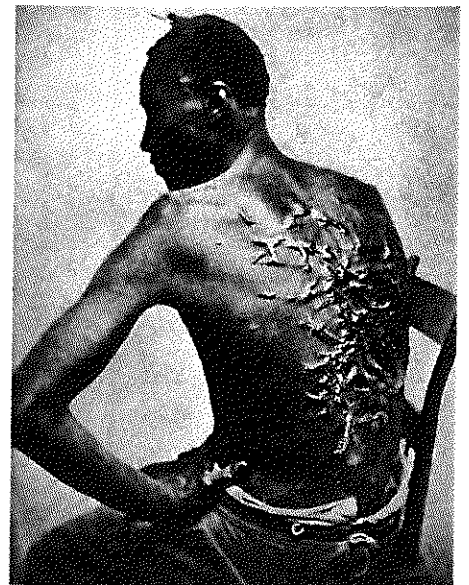
The Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned the Missouri Compromise by organizing Kansas and Nebraska territories on the basis of popular sovereignty. The law angered Free-Soilers in the North, who feared that slavery would soon spread across the Great Plains.

Friction between the sections was further intensified by publication in 1852 of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this best-selling novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe described the cruelties of slavery through the story of a dignified slave named Uncle Tom. The novel describes Tom's experiences with three slaveholders. Two of them treat Tom kindly. The third, Simon Legree, abuses Tom and has Tom beaten to death for refusing to tell where two escaped slaves are hiding.

Stowe hoped her novel would help bring slavery to a quick and peaceful end. Instead, the book increased the hostility of many Northerners toward the South. Southerners, in turn, saw Stowe's description of slavery as both inaccurate and an insult to their way of life.

**Let the People Decide: The Kansas-Nebraska Act** In 1854, another act of Congress set the North and the South on a collision course. That year, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois introduced a bill to organize the Great Plains for settlement. Because this area lay north of the Missouri Compromise line, the bill did not mention slavery. Southerners in Congress agreed to vote for the bill if the two new territories—Kansas and Nebraska—were organized on the basis of popular sovereignty. With Southern support, the **Kansas-Nebraska Act** made it through Congress. "The true intent and meaning of this act," it said, was "not to legislate slavery into any Territory or State, nor to exclude it therefrom."

The Kansas-Nebraska Act dismayed many Northerners. They thought the Missouri Compromise had put most of the Great Plains off-limits to slavery. Now they feared slavery would spread like a plague across the country. To prevent that from happening, antislavery activists and settlers, or Free-Soilers, united to form a new political party in 1854. The new **Republican Party** took a firm stand against the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.



Photographs, like this one of a cruelly treated slave, added fuel to the fire lit by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As Northerners became more aware of the inhumanity of slavery, many refused to cooperate with the Fugitive Slave Law. Some Northern states even passed personal liberty laws, which prohibited state and local officers from cooperating with slave catchers.

This mural, titled "Tragic Prelude," shows John Brown fighting to keep Kansas "free soil." During the settlement of Kansas, supporters and opponents of slavery came into deadly conflict. Newspapers called their violent struggle "Bleeding Kansas." Kansas finally joined the Union as a free state in 1861. The mural, which appears in the Kansas State Capitol, was painted by John Steuart Curry almost a century after these events.



**Kansas Becomes a Battleground over Slavery** By 1855, settlers were pouring into Kansas. Most were peaceful farmers seeking good land to farm. But the territory also attracted **agitators**, or protesters, who wanted to influence the vote on slavery. Abolition societies in the North sent in Free-Soilers, while groups in the South recruited proslavery settlers to occupy Kansas.

It was not long before these two opposing groups came into conflict. From Missouri, armed agitators called "border ruffians" crossed into Kansas and threatened the Free-Soilers. On May 21, 1856, proslavery forces raided the Free-Soil town of Lawrence, Kansas. They burned buildings, looted stores, and destroyed two printing presses. Northern newspapers called the border ruffians' rampage the "Sack of Lawrence."

Antislavery activists led by John Brown met violence with violence. Brown was an antislavery zealot who had dedicated his life to ending slavery by any means necessary. He urged his followers to "fight fire with fire" and "strike terror in the hearts of the proslavery people." Two days after the Lawrence raid, Brown and seven of his supporters attacked the proslavery town of Pottawatomie. They dragged five men out of their homes and killed them with their swords.

Brown's massacre prompted still more bloodshed in Kansas, as proslavery and antislavery forces battled for control of the territory. But the violence was not restricted to Kansas. It was also infecting the nation's capital. The day after the Lawrence raid, Preston Brooks attacked and beat Charles Sumner on the Senate floor. Despite efforts at compromise, the struggle over slavery was getting more violent.



## 9.4 From Compromise to Crisis: 1857–1861

Like many slaves, Dred Scott and his wife, Harriet, wanted their freedom. But rather than run away, they tried to win it legally. In 1846, they sued for their freedom in a St. Louis, Missouri, court. The Scotts had lived with their owner for several years in the free territory of Wisconsin. They based their suit on the argument that living in a free territory had made them free people. What began as a simple lawsuit led to one of the most notorious Supreme Court decisions in the history of the nation.

**The Dred Scott Decision Outrages the North** In 1856, the case of *Scott v. Sandford* reached the Supreme Court. The Court, led by Chief Justice Roger Taney, faced two key questions. First, did slaves have the right to bring a case before a federal court? Second, did the Scott's stay in Wisconsin make them free? Taney, however, saw in this case the opportunity to resolve the slavery issue once and for all. He asked the Court to consider two additional questions. Did Congress have the power to make laws concerning slavery in the territories? If so, was the Missouri Compromise a constitutional use of that power?

The Court issued the **Dred Scott decision** in 1857. It began by reviewing the Declaration of Independence's words that "all men are created equal." Writing for majority, Taney said,

The general words . . . seem to embrace the whole human family . . . But it is too clear for dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included, and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration.

—Chief Justice Roger Taney, *Scott v. Sandford*, 1857

To this Taney added, "Dred Scott was not a citizen of Missouri within the meaning of the Constitution . . . and [is] not entitled as such to sue in its courts."

The Court also rejected the idea that Scott's stay in Wisconsin had made him a free man. Taney reasoned that giving Scott his freedom would be like taking property from his owner. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution protects private property. Thus, the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional by establishing territories "which prohibited a citizen from holding or owning property of this kind."

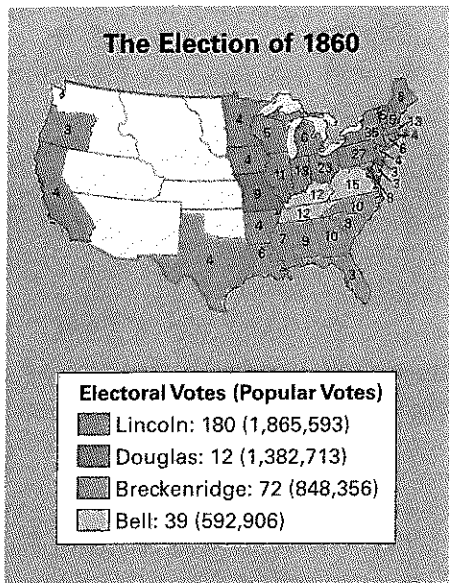
The ruling struck the nation like a bombshell. Southerners were thrilled. They believed the Court had settled the slavery question in their favor. Northerners were stunned. The Court's decision had invalidated the whole idea of "free soil" and opened all territories to slavery. "The decision," wrote a New York newspaper, "is the moral assassination of a race and cannot be obeyed."

**John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry Shocks the South** The Dred Scott decision helped convince radical abolitionists like John Brown that slavery would never be ended by legal means. In 1859, Brown decided to try a different approach—he provoked an armed uprising of slaves to free themselves.

With 21 other men, Brown seized the federal **arsenal** at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. An arsenal is a place where guns and ammunition are stored. Brown intended to distribute the weapons to slaves in the area and spark a slave revolt.

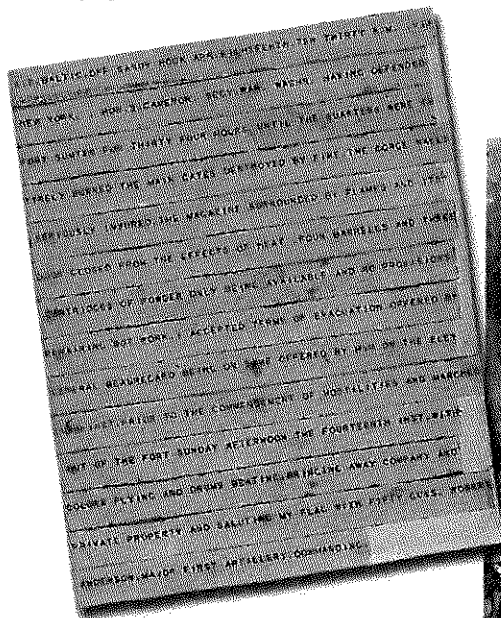


Missouri slave Dred Scott, pictured above beside his wife, Harriet, sued for his freedom by arguing that having lived with his owner in free territory, he should be a free man. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court in 1858. By a majority of 7–2, the Court ruled that Scott could not bring a suit in a federal court because African Americans were not U.S. citizens. Shortly after this decision, Scott was sold. His new owner gave him the freedom the Court had denied.



In the presidential election of 1860, the country was divided along party lines. Lincoln and the Republicans took the Northern states and the far west. The Southern Democrats took most of the South. Lincoln won in the electoral college with less than 40 percent of the popular vote.

The Civil War began on April 12, 1861, when Southern troops opened fire on Fort Sumter. After 34 hours of shelling, Major Robert Anderson sent a telegram to Lincoln's secretary of war, announcing the surrender of the fort. The Union troops left, he reported, "with colors flying and drums beating."



Brown's plan was thwarted when federal troops stormed the arsenal and captured him and his men. Brown was tried for treason, convicted, and executed. Even so, **John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry** shocked the South and prompted widespread fears of a slave rebellion. Most Southerners saw Brown as a lunatic whose extreme views were representative of the antislavery movement.

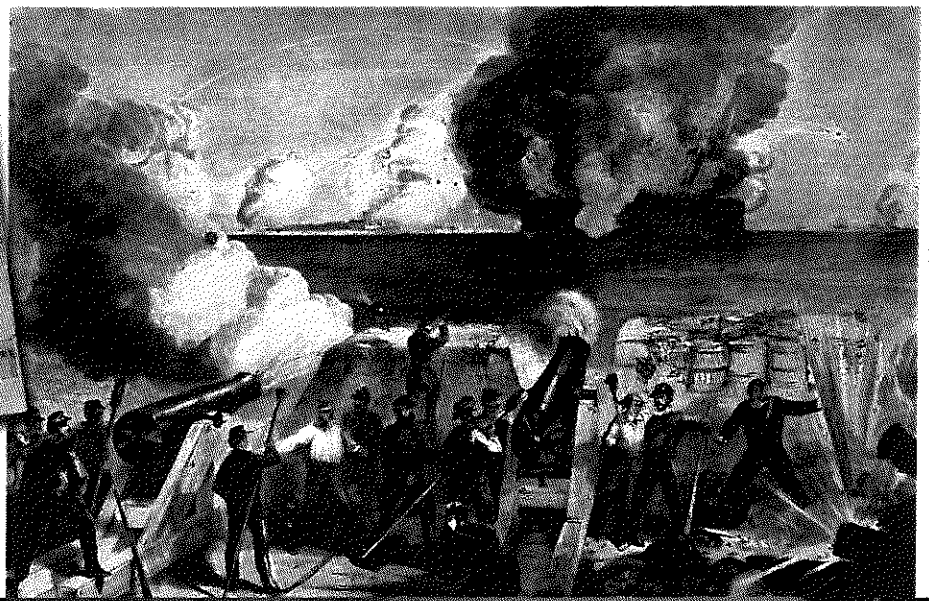
Many Northerners, on the other hand, saw Brown as a hero and martyr to the cause of abolition. Poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that Brown would make the gallows "as glorious as a cross." When the Civil War began a few months later, Union troops marched into battle singing, "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, His soul goes marching on."

**The Election of 1860 Splits the Nation** The presidential election of 1860 drove a final wedge between North and South. Sectional strains had split the Democratic Party into northern and southern **factions**, or competing groups. Northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas of Illinois and backed popular sovereignty in the territories. Southern Democrats picked John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky, who wanted slavery to be allowed in all territories. John Bell of Tennessee, who ran as the candidate of the Constitutional Union Party, tried to avoid the divisive issue of slavery.

It was the fourth candidate, however, who polarized the nation. He was Abraham Lincoln, the Republican Party nominee. Lincoln, an Illinois lawyer, was a moderate but firm opponent of slavery who had first gained national attention during a run for the Senate in 1858. In a famous series of debates against his opponent, Stephen Douglas, Lincoln had condemned slavery as "a moral, social, and political wrong."

Lincoln lost the Senate race to Douglas, but his campaign had won him strong antislavery support in the North. This support, as well as the split in the Democratic Party, helped sweep Lincoln to victory in 1860. Lincoln won the presidency with less than 40 percent of the votes, all of them cast in the North. His name did not even appear on the ballot in many Southern states.

Lincoln's victory raised the cry of **secession**, or withdrawal from the Union, in the South. Southerners feared that with a Republican in the White House, Congress would try to abolish slavery. Lincoln tried to calm Southern fears. He said he would not interfere with slavery in the South. He also said he would support enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. But he refused to support the



The Granger Collection, New York

extension of slavery to the western territories. On that question, he said, there could be no compromise.

**Secession Spreads Across the South** Lincoln tried to hold the nation together, but his efforts had little effect. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. Over the next several weeks, six more Southern states pulled out. Together they formed the Confederate States of America, with Jefferson Davis as president.

In his inaugural address, Lincoln declared that secession was both wrong and unconstitutional. He added that he had no legal right to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed, but he expressed his determination to keep the Union together. He appealed to the rebellious states to return. "In your hands, my fellow dissatisfied countrymen, and not in mine," he said, "is the momentous issue of civil war."

On April 12, 1861, Southern forces opened fire on **Fort Sumter**, a federal fort in Charleston harbor. After a day and a half of bombardment, the troops in the fort surrendered. The attack on Fort Sumter provoked fury in the North. "There is no more thought of bribing or coaxing the traitors who have dared to aim their cannon balls at the flag of the Union," wrote one newspaper. There could be no more compromise. The Civil War had begun.

## Summary

**In the mid-1800s, the United States was deeply divided over slavery. By 1860, a series of events had widened this gulf to the breaking point. The election of Abraham Lincoln as president that year triggered a secession crisis that led to the Civil War.**

**Missouri Compromise** This 1820 compromise banned slavery from much of the Louisiana Territory while maintaining the balance of power between slave and free states in the Senate.

**Compromise of 1850** Henry Clay hoped this compromise on slavery in the West would please everyone. But its inclusion of the Fugitive Slave Law deeply angered many Northerners.

**Uncle Tom's Cabin** This best-selling novel touched the hearts of Northerners with its story of a kind slave who was mistreated by a brutal owner, turning many against slavery.

**Kansas-Nebraska Act** This 1854 act opened Kansas and Nebraska to settlement under the banner of popular sovereignty. Kansas erupted in violence as proslavery and antislavery settlers battled for control of the territory.

**Republican Party** Antislavery activists and Free-Soilers came together in 1854 to form the Republican Party, which was committed to stopping the spread of slavery.

**Dred Scott decision** This 1858 Supreme Court decision denied citizenship to African Americans and opened all western territories to slavery. Northerners were appalled and Southerners pleased.

**Election of 1860** Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln won election in 1860 with a minority of the popular votes. Fearing that Republicans would try to interfere with slavery, several slave states seceded. On April 10, 1861, Southern forces attacked Fort Sumter, beginning the Civil War.