

Discussions of Missouri Compromise

— Brief introduction, effect, and my own point of view

In an effort to preserve the balance of power in Congress between slave and free states, the Missouri Compromise was passed in 1820 admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state.

With the War of 1812 won, Americans could concentrate on solving what was a growing internal problem: what to do about slavery.

The first ships containing African slaves had arrived on American shores in 1619, and the slave trade had picked up in the 18th Century. The expansion of cotton and other types of farming in the South required more and more labor, and more and more plantation owners turned to slaves to fill their workloads.

By the turn of the 19th Century, outrage was growing over slavery, primarily in the Northern states. And as more and more territories were applying to become states, the decision of whether those states could allow slavery was becoming a very important issue.

One by one, states joined the Union. From 1816 to 1819, two Northern and two Southern states joined the Union. The two Northern states, Illinois and Indiana, did not allow slavery; the two Southern states, Alabama and Mississippi, did.

In the years leading up to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the slavery issue was rapidly driving the country into two separate camps, and tensions began to rise between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions within the U.S. Congress and across the country. Congress wasn't doing anything to stop the polarization.

Those tensions reached a boiling point after Missouri's 1819 request for admission to the Union as a slave state. At the time, the United States contained twenty-two states, evenly

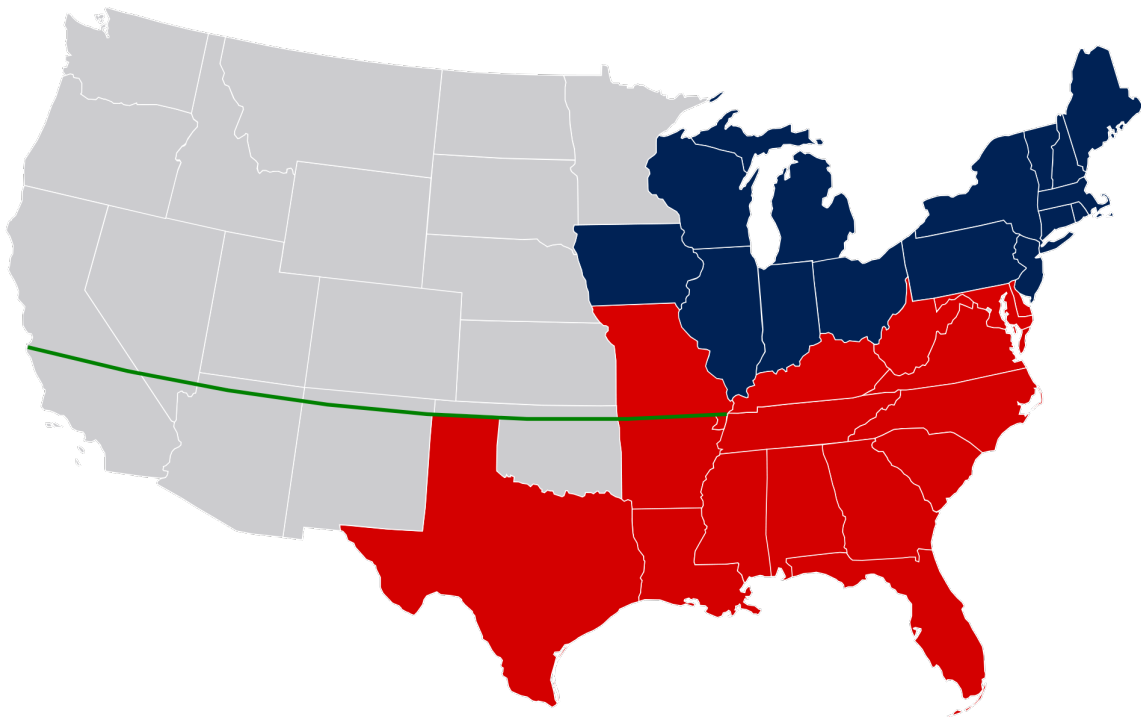


James Monroe (/mənˈroʊ/; April 28, 1758 – July 4, 1831) was the fifth President of the United States (1817–1825).

divided between slave and free. Admission of Missouri as a slave state would upset that balance; it would also set a precedent for congressional acquiescence in the expansion of slavery.

The extraordinarily bitter debate over Missouri's application for admission ran from December 1819 to March 1820. Northerners, led by Senator Rufus King of New York, argued that Congress had the power to prohibit slavery in a new state. Southerners like Senator William Pinkney of Maryland held that new states had the same freedom of action as the original thirteen and were thus free to choose slavery if they wished.

After the Senate and the House passed different bills and deadlock threatened, to keep the peace, Congress *orchestrated* a two-part compromise, granting Missouri's request but also admitting Maine as a free state. It also passed an amendment that drew an imaginary line across the former Louisiana Territory, establishing a boundary between free and slave regions.



Map of the United States c. 1849 (modern state borders), with the parallel 36°30' north – slave states in red, free states in blue

The issue was resolved by a two-part compromise. First, Missouri gained admission to the Union as a slave state, with a provision that portions of the Louisiana Territory lying north of 36' 30' north latitude would be free. Second, Maine was simultaneously admitted to statehood, which enabled the Senate to maintain the balance between slave and free state representation. Slavery was forbidden north of the 36 degree latitude mark, the southern boundary of Missouri. The enabling act of March 6, 1820, made it clear, however, that

fugitive slaves could be apprehended north of the compromise line and returned to their owners. (i.e., people in the North were encouraged to return runaway slaves to their masters).

The Missouri Compromise was criticized by many southerners because it established the principle that Congress could make laws regarding slavery; northerners, on the other hand, condemned it for acquiescing in the expansion of slavery (though only south of the compromise line). Nevertheless, the act helped hold the Union together for more than thirty years until 1854.

During the decades following 1820, Americans hailed the 1820 agreement as an essential compromise almost on the sacred level of the Constitution itself.

In 1854, the Compromise was repealed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the populace of these two new states to locally choose their status of slave or anti-slave. Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional. The slavery issue continued to provoke controversy until it erupted in the American Civil War, fought from 1861 to 1865, during which over 600,000 soldiers were killed.

On the Civil War side, although the Civil War broke out in 1861; historians often say the Compromise helped postpone the war.

These disputes involved the competition between the southern and northern states for power in Congress and for control over future territories. There were also the same factions emerging as the Democratic-Republican party began to lose its coherence.

The Missouri Compromise was significant because it helped to reduce tensions between the North and the South. By doing so, it helped to delay the Civil War. It indeed solved the immediate problem but didn't solve the slavery issue as a whole. As many people on both sides were sure, that would take a war. African Americans knew that they could not rely upon whites to end slavery, but they also recognized that the increasing divide between North and South and their battle over western expansion could open opportunities for blacks to exploit.