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13. The Sectional Crisis | THE AMERICAN YAWP

by All Chapters

56-71 minutes



This mural, created over eighty years after John Brown's death, captures the violence and religious fervor of the man and his era. John Steuart Curry, *Tragic Prelude*, 1938-1940, [Kansas State Capitol](#).

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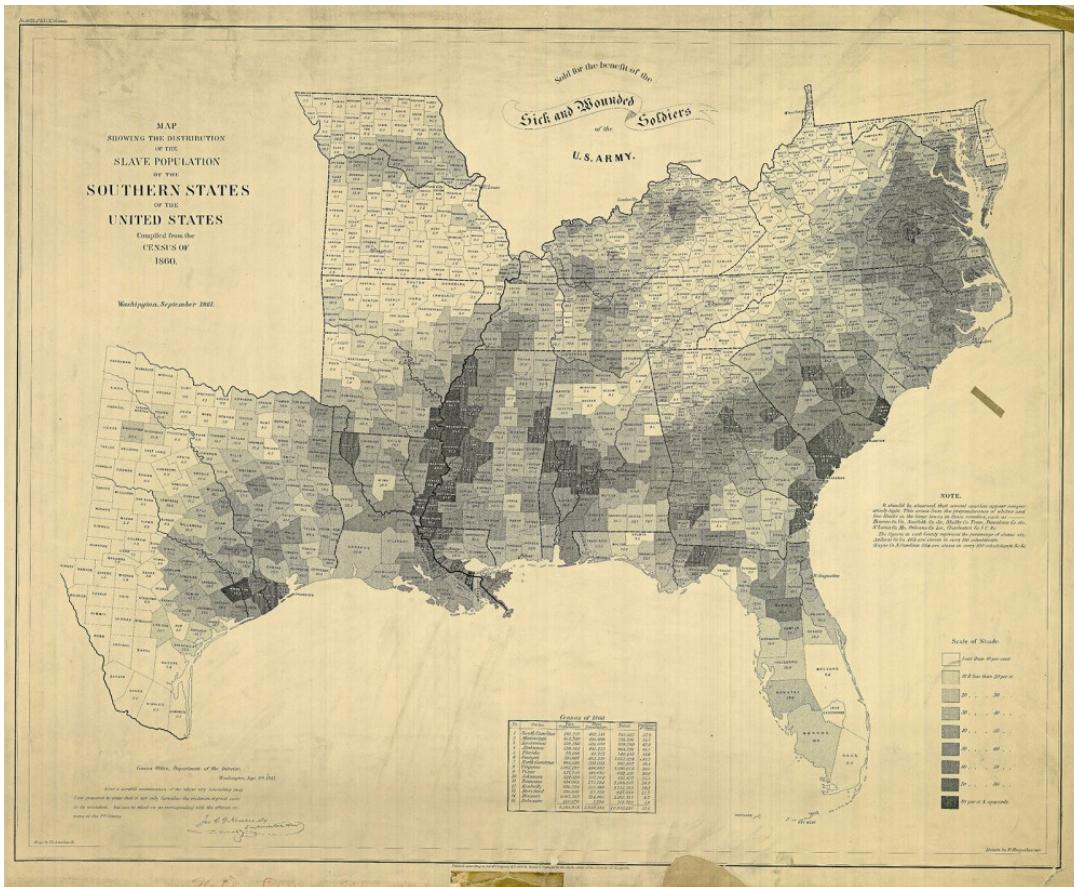
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I. Introduction

Slavery's western expansion created problems for the United States from the very start. Battles emerged over the westward expansion of slavery and over the role of the federal government in protecting the interests of enslavers. Northern workers felt that slavery suppressed wages and stole land that could have been used by poor white Americans to achieve economic independence. Southerners feared that without slavery's expansion, the abolitionist faction would come to dominate national politics and an increasingly dense population of enslaved people would lead to bloody insurrection and race war. Constant resistance from enslaved men and women required a strong pro-slavery government to maintain order. As the North gradually abolished human bondage, enslaved men and women headed north on an underground railroad of hideaways and safe houses. Northerners and southerners came to disagree sharply on the role of the federal government in capturing and returning these freedom seekers. While northerners appealed to their states' rights to refuse to capture people escaping slavery, white southerners demanded a national commitment to slavery. Enslaved laborers meanwhile remained vitally important to the nation's economy, fueling not only the southern plantation economy but also providing raw materials for the industrial North. Differences over the fate of slavery remained at the heart of American politics, especially as the United States expanded. After decades of conflict, Americans north and south began to fear that the opposite section of the country had

seized control of the government. By November 1860, an opponent of slavery's expansion arose from within the Republican Party. During the secession crisis that followed, fears nearly a century in the making at last devolved into bloody war.

II. Sectionalism in the Early Republic



This map, published by the US Coast Guard, shows the percentage of enslaved people in the population in each county of the slave-holding states in 1860. The highest percentages lie along the Mississippi River, in the “Black Belt” of Alabama, and coastal South Carolina, all of which were centers of agricultural production (cotton and rice) in the United States. E. Hergesheimer (cartographer), Th. Leonhardt (engraver), Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States Compiled from the Census of 1860, c. 1861. [Wikimedia](#).

Prior to the American Revolution, nearly everyone in the world

accepted slavery as a natural part of life.¹ English colonies north and south relied on enslaved workers who grew tobacco, harvested indigo and sugar, and worked in ports. They generated tremendous wealth for the British crown. That wealth and luxury fostered seemingly limitless opportunities and inspired seemingly boundless imaginations. Enslaved workers also helped give rise to revolutionary new ideals that in time became the ideological foundations of the sectional crisis. English political theorists, in particular, began to rethink natural-law justifications for slavery. They rejected the long-standing idea that slavery was a condition that naturally suited some people. A new transatlantic antislavery movement began to argue that freedom was the natural condition of humankind.²

Revolutionaries seized onto these ideas to stunning effect in the late eighteenth century. In the United States, France, and Haiti, revolutionaries began the work of splintering the old order. Each revolution seemed to radicalize the next. Bolder and more expansive declarations of equality and freedom followed one after the other. Revolutionaries in the United States declared, “All men are created equal,” in the 1770s. French visionaries issued the “Declaration of Rights and Man and Citizen” by 1789. But the most startling development came in 1803 in Haiti. A revolution led by the island’s rebellious enslaved people turned France’s most valuable sugar colony into an independent country administered by the formerly enslaved.

The Haitian Revolution marked an early origin of the sectional crisis. It helped splinter the Atlantic basin into clear zones of freedom and unfreedom, shattering the long-standing assumption that African-descended enslaved people could not also be rulers. Despite the clear limitations of the American Revolution in attacking slavery, the era marked a powerful break in slavery’s history. Military service on behalf of both the English and the American

army freed thousands of enslaved people. Many others simply used the turmoil of war to make their escape. As a result, free Black communities emerged—communities that would continually reignite the antislavery struggle. For nearly a century, most white Americans were content to compromise over the issue of slavery, but the constant agitation of Black Americans, both enslaved and free, kept the issue alive.³

The national breakdown over slavery occurred over a long timeline and across a broad geography. Debates over slavery in the American West proved especially important. As the United States pressed westward, new questions arose as to whether those lands ought to be slave or free. The framers of the Constitution did a little, but not much, to help resolve these early questions. Article VI of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance banned slavery north and west of the Ohio River.⁴ Many took it to mean that the founders intended for slavery to die out, as why else would they prohibit its spread across such a huge swath of territory?

Debates over the framers' intentions often led to confusion and bitter debate, but the actions of the new government left better clues as to what the new nation intended for slavery. Congress authorized the admission of Vermont (1791) and Kentucky (1792), with Vermont coming into the Union as a free state and Kentucky coming in as a slave state. Though Americans at the time made relatively little of the balancing act suggested by the admission of a slave state and a free state, the pattern became increasingly important, particularly when considering power in the United States Senate. By 1820, preserving the balance of free states and slave states would be seen as an issue of national security.

New pressures challenging the delicate balance again arose in the West. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 more than doubled the size of the United States. Questions immediately arose as to whether

these lands would be made slave or free. Complicating matters further was the rapid expansion of plantation slavery fueled by the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. Yet even with the booming cotton economy, many Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, believed that slavery was a temporary institution and would soon die out. Tensions rose with the Louisiana Purchase, but a truly sectional national debate remained mostly dormant.

That debate, however, came quickly. Sectional differences tied to the expansion of plantation slavery in the West were especially important after 1803. The Ohio River Valley became an early fault line in the coming sectional struggle. Kentucky and Tennessee emerged as slave states, while free states Ohio, Indiana (1816), and Illinois (1818) gained admission along the river's northern banks. Borderland negotiations and accommodations along the Ohio River fostered a distinctive kind of white supremacy, as laws tried to keep Black people out of the West entirely. Ohio's so-called Black Laws of 1803 foreshadowed the exclusionary cultures of Indiana, Illinois, and several subsequent states of the Old Northwest and later, the Far West.⁵ These laws often banned African American voting, denied Black Americans access to public schools, and made it impossible for nonwhites to serve on juries and in local militias, among a host of other restrictions and obstacles.

The Missouri Territory, by far the largest section of the Louisiana Territory, marked a turning point in the sectional crisis. St. Louis, a bustling Mississippi River town filled with powerful enslavers, loomed large as an important trade headquarters for networks in the northern Mississippi Valley and the Greater West. In 1817, eager to put questions of whether this territory would be slave or free to rest, Congress opened its debate over Missouri's admission to the Union. Congressman James Tallmadge of New York proposed laws that would gradually abolish slavery in the new

state. Southern states responded with unanimous outrage, and the nation shuddered at an undeniable sectional controversy.⁶

Congress reached a “compromise” on Missouri’s admission, largely through the work of Kentuckian Henry Clay. Maine would be admitted to the Union as a free state. In exchange, Missouri would come into the Union as a slave state. Legislators sought to prevent future conflicts by making Missouri’s southern border at 36°30’ the new dividing line between slavery and freedom in the Louisiana Purchase lands. South of that line, running east from Missouri to the western edge of the Louisiana Purchase lands (near the present-day Texas panhandle), slavery could expand. North of it, encompassing what in 1820 was still “unorganized territory,” there would be no slavery.⁷

The Missouri Compromise marked a major turning point in America’s sectional crisis because it exposed to the public just how divisive the slavery issue had grown. The debate filled newspapers, speeches, and congressional records. Antislavery and pro-slavery positions from that point forward repeatedly returned to points made during the Missouri debates. Legislators battled for weeks over whether the Constitutional framers intended slavery’s expansion, and these contests left deep scars. Even seemingly simple and straightforward phrases like “all men are created equal” were hotly contested all over again. Questions over the expansion of slavery remained open, but nearly all Americans concluded that the Constitution protected slavery where it already existed.

Southerners were not yet advancing arguments that said slavery was a positive good, but they did insist during the Missouri Debate that the framers supported slavery and wanted to see it expand. In Article I, Section 2, for example, the Constitution enabled representation in the South to be based on rules defining an enslaved person as three-fifths of a voter, meaning southern white

men would be overrepresented in Congress. The Constitution also stipulated that Congress could not interfere with the slave trade before 1808 and enabled Congress to draft fugitive slave laws.

Antislavery participants in the Missouri debate argued that the framers never intended slavery to survive the Revolution and in fact hoped it would disappear through peaceful means. The framers of the Constitution never used the word *slave*. Enslaved people were referred to as “persons held in service,” perhaps referring to English common law precedents that questioned the legitimacy of “property in man.” Antislavery activists also pointed out that while Congress could not pass a law limiting the slave trade before 1808, the framers had also recognized the flip side of the debate and had thus opened the door to legislating the slave trade’s end once the deadline arrived. Language in the Tenth Amendment, they claimed, also said slavery could be banned in the territories. Finally, they pointed to the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment, which said that property could be seized through appropriate legislation.⁸ The bruising Missouri debates ultimately transcended arguments about the Constitution. They became an all-encompassing referendum on the American past, present, and future.

Despite the furor, the Missouri crisis did not yet inspire hardened defenses of either slave or free labor. Those would come in the coming decades. In the meantime, the uneasy consensus forged by the Missouri debate managed to bring a measure of calm.

The Missouri debate had also deeply troubled the nation’s African Americans and Native Americans. By the time of the Missouri Compromise debate, both groups saw that whites never intended them to be citizens of the United States. In fact, the debates over Missouri’s admission had offered the first sustained debate on the question of Black citizenship, as Missouri’s state constitution wanted to impose a hard ban on any future Black migrants. Legislators ultimately agreed that this hard ban violated the U.S.

Constitution but reaffirmed Missouri's ability to deny citizenship to African Americans. Americans by 1820 had endured a broad challenge, not only to their cherished ideals but also more fundamentally to their conceptions of self.

III. The Crisis Joined

Missouri's admission to the Union in 1821 exposed deep fault lines in American society. But the compromise created a new sectional consensus that most white Americans, at least, hoped would ensure a lasting peace. Through sustained debates and arguments, white Americans agreed that the Constitution could do little about slavery where it already existed and that slavery, with the State of Missouri as the key exception, would never expand north of the 36°30' line.

Once again westward expansion challenged this consensus, and this time the results proved even more damaging. Tellingly, enslaved southerners were among the first to signal their discontent. A rebellion led by Denmark Vesey in 1822 threatened lives and property throughout the Carolinas. The nation's religious leaders also expressed a rising discontent with the new status quo.⁹ The Second Great Awakening further sharpened political differences by promoting schisms within the major Protestant churches, schisms that also became increasingly sectional in nature. Between 1820 and 1846, sectionalism drew on new political parties, new religious organizations, and new reform movements.

As politics grew more democratic, leaders attacked old inequalities of wealth and power, but in doing so many pandered to a unity under white supremacy. Slavery briefly receded from the nation's attention in the early 1820s, but that would change quickly. By the last half of the decade, slavery was back, and this time it appeared even more threatening.

Inspired by the social change of Jacksonian democracy, white men, regardless of status, would gain not only land and jobs but also the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, the right to attend public schools, and the right to serve in the militia and armed forces. In this post-Missouri context, leaders arose to push the country's new expansionist desires in aggressive new directions. As they did so, however, the sectional crisis again deepened.

The Democratic Party initially seemed to offer a compelling answer to the problems of sectionalism by promising benefits to white working men of the North, South, and West, while also uniting rural, small-town, and urban residents. Indeed, huge numbers of western, southern, and northern workingmen rallied behind Andrew Jackson during the 1828 presidential election. The Democratic Party tried to avoid the issue of slavery and instead sought to unite Americans around shared commitments to white supremacy and desires to expand the nation.

Democrats were not without their critics. Northerners seen as especially friendly to the South had become known as "Doughfaces" during the Missouri debates, and as the 1830s wore on, more and more Doughfaced Democrats became vulnerable to the charge that they served the southern slaving oligarchs better than they served their own northern communities. Whites discontented with the direction of the country used the slur and other critiques to help chip away at Democratic Party majorities. The accusation that northern Democrats were lapdogs for southern enslavers had real power.¹⁰

The Whigs offered an organized major-party challenge to the Democrats. Whig strongholds often mirrored the patterns of westward migrations out of New England. Whigs drew from an odd coalition of wealthy merchants, middle- and upper-class farmers, planters in the Upland South, and settlers in the Great Lakes. Because of this motley coalition, the party struggled to bring a

cohesive message to voters in the 1830s. Their strongest support came from places like Ohio's Western Reserve, the rural and Protestant-dominated areas of Michigan, and similar parts of Protestant and small-town Illinois, particularly the fast-growing towns and cities of the state's northern half.¹¹

Whig leaders stressed Protestant culture and federal-sponsored internal improvements and courted the support of a variety of reform movements, including temperance, nativism, and even antislavery, though few Whigs believed in racial equality. These positions attracted a wide range of figures, including a young convert to politics named Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln admired Whig leader Henry Clay of Kentucky, and by the early 1830s, Lincoln certainly fit the image of a developing Whig. A veteran of the Black Hawk War, Lincoln had relocated to New Salem, Illinois, where he worked a variety of odd jobs, living a life of thrift, self-discipline, and sobriety as he educated himself in preparation for a professional life in law and politics.

The Whig Party blamed Democrats for defending slavery at the expense of the American people, but antislavery was never a core component of the Whig platform. Several abolitionists grew so disgusted with the Whigs that they formed their own party, a true antislavery party. Activists in Warsaw, New York, organized the antislavery Liberty Party in 1839. Liberty leaders demanded the end of slavery in the District of Columbia, the end of the interstate slave trade, and the prohibition of slavery's expansion into the West. But the Liberty Party also shunned women's participation in the movement and distanced themselves from visions of true racial egalitarianism. Few Americans voted for the party. The Democrats and Whigs continued to dominate American politics.

Democrats and Whigs fostered a moment of relative calm on the slavery debate, partially aided by gag rules prohibiting discussion of antislavery petitions. Arkansas (1836) and Michigan (1837) became

the newest states admitted to the Union, with Arkansas coming in as a slave state, and Michigan coming in as a free state. Michigan gained admission through provisions established in the Northwest Ordinance, while Arkansas came in under the Missouri Compromise. Since its lands were below the line at 36°30', the admission of Arkansas did not threaten the Missouri consensus. The balancing act between slavery and freedom continued.

Events in Texas would shatter the balance. Independent Texas soon gained recognition from a supportive Andrew Jackson administration in 1837. But Jackson's successor, President Martin Van Buren, also a Democrat, soon had reasons to worry about the Republic of Texas. Texas struggled with ongoing conflicts with Mexico and raids from the powerful Comanche. The 1844 democratic presidential candidate James K. Polk sought to bridge the sectional divide by promising new lands to whites north and south. Polk cited the annexation of Texas and the Oregon Territory as campaign cornerstones.¹² Yet as Polk championed the acquisition of these vast new lands, northern Democrats grew annoyed by their southern colleagues, especially when it came to Texas.

For many observers, the debates over Texas statehood illustrated that the federal government was clearly pro-slavery. Texas president Sam Houston managed to secure a deal with Polk and gained admission to the Union for Texas in 1845. Antislavery northerners also worried about the admission of Florida, which entered the Union as a slave state in 1845. The year 1845 became a pivotal year in the memory of antislavery leaders. As Americans embraced calls to pursue their manifest destiny, antislavery voices looked at developments in Florida and Texas as signs that the sectional crisis had taken an ominous and perhaps irredeemable turn.

The 1840s opened with a number of disturbing developments for

antislavery leaders. The 1842 Supreme Court case *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* ruled that the federal government's Fugitive Slave Act trumped Pennsylvania's personal liberty law.¹³ Antislavery activists believed that the federal government only served southern enslavers and were trouncing the states' rights of the North. A number of northern states reacted by passing new personal liberty laws in protest in 1843.

The rising controversy over the status of freedom-seeking people swelled partly through the influence of escaped formerly enslaved people, including Frederick Douglass. Douglass's entrance into northern politics marked an important new development in the nation's coming sectional crisis. Born into slavery in 1818 at Talbot County, Maryland, Douglass grew up, like many enslaved people, barely having known his own mother or date of birth. And yet because of a range of unique privileges afforded him by the circumstances of his upbringing, as well as his own genius and determination, Douglass managed to learn how to read and write. He used these skills to escape from slavery in 1837, when he was just nineteen. By 1845, Douglass put the finishing touches on his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.¹⁴ The book launched his lifelong career as an advocate for the enslaved and helped further raise the visibility of Black politics. Other formerly enslaved people, including Sojourner Truth, joined Douglass in rousing support for antislavery, as did free Black Americans like Maria Stewart, James McCune Smith, Martin Delaney, and numerous others.¹⁵ But Black activists did more than deliver speeches. They also attacked fugitive slave laws by helping thousands to escape. The incredible career of Harriet Tubman is one of the more dramatic examples. But the forces of slavery had powerful allies at every level of government.

The year 1846 signaled new reversals to the antislavery cause and the beginnings of a dark new era in American politics. President

Polk and his Democratic allies were eager to see western lands brought into the Union and were especially anxious to see the borders of the nation extended to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Critics of the administration blasted these efforts as little more than land grabs on behalf of enslavers. Events in early 1846 seemed to justify antislavery complaints. Since Mexico had never recognized independent Texas, it continued to lay claim to its lands, even after the United States admitted it to the Union. In January 1846, Polk ordered troops to Texas to enforce claims stemming from its border dispute along the Rio Grande. Polk asked for war on May 11, 1846, and by September 1847, the United States had invaded Mexico City. Whigs, like Abraham Lincoln, found their protests sidelined, but antislavery voices were becoming more vocal and more powerful.

After 1846, the sectional crisis raged throughout North America. Debates swirled over whether the new lands would be slave or free. The South began defending slavery as a positive good. At the same time, Congressman David Wilmot submitted his Wilmot Proviso late in 1846, banning the expansion of slavery into the territories won from Mexico. The proviso gained widespread northern support and even passed the House with bipartisan support, but it failed in the Senate.

IV. Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men

The conclusion of the Mexican War led to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty infuriated antislavery leaders in the United States. The spoils of war were impressive, but it was clear they would help expand slavery. Antislavery activists, who already judged the Mexican War an enslavers' plot, vowed that no new territories would be opened to slavery. But knowing that the Liberty Party was also not likely to provide a home to many moderate voters, leaders fostered a new and more competitive party, which

they called the Free Soil Party. Antislavery leaders had thought that their vision of a federal government divorced from slavery might be represented by the major parties in that year's presidential election, but both the Whigs and the Democrats nominated candidates hostile to the antislavery cause. Left unrepresented, antislavery Free Soil leaders swung into action.



Questions about the balance of free and slave states in the Union became even more fierce after the US acquired these territories from Mexico by the 1848 in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Map of the Mexican Cession, 2008. [Wikimedia](#).

Demanding an alternative to the pro-slavery status quo, Free Soil leaders assembled so-called Conscience Whigs. The new coalition called for a national convention in August 1848 at Buffalo, New York. A number of ex-Democrats committed to the party right away, including an important group of New Yorkers loyal to Martin Van Buren. The Free Soil Party's platform bridged the eastern and western leadership together and called for an end to slavery in Washington, D.C., and a halt on slavery's expansion in the territories.¹⁶ The Free Soil movement hardly made a dent in the

1848 presidential election, but it drew more than four times the popular vote won by the Liberty Party earlier. It was a promising start. In 1848, Free Soil leaders claimed just 10 percent of the popular vote but won over a dozen House seats and even managed to win one Senate seat in Ohio, which went to Salmon P. Chase.¹⁷ In Congress, Free Soil members had enough votes to swing power to either the Whigs or the Democrats.

The admission of Wisconsin as a free state in May 1848 helped cool tensions after the Texas and Florida admissions. Meanwhile, news from a number of failed European revolutions alarmed American reformers, but as exiled radicals filtered into the United States, a strengthening women's rights movement also flexed its muscle at Seneca Falls, New York. Led by figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, women with deep ties to the abolitionist cause, it represented the first of such meetings ever held in U.S. history.¹⁸ Frederick Douglass also appeared at the convention and took part in the proceedings, where participants debated the Declaration of Sentiments, Grievances, and Resolutions.¹⁹ By August 1848, it seemed plausible that the Free Soil Movement might tap into these reforms and build a broader coalition. In some ways that is precisely what it did. But come November, the spirit of reform failed to yield much at the polls. Whig candidate Zachary Taylor bested Democrat Lewis Cass of Michigan.

The upheavals of 1848 came to a quick end. Taylor remained in office only a brief time until his unexpected death from a stomach ailment in 1850. During Taylor's brief time in office, the fruits of the Mexican War began to spoil. While Taylor was alive, his administration struggled to find a good remedy. Increased clamoring for the admission of California, New Mexico, and Utah pushed the country closer to the edge. Gold had been discovered in California, and as thousands continued to pour onto the West

Coast and through the trans-Mississippi West, the admission of new states loomed. In Utah, Mormons were also making claims to an independent state they called Deseret. By 1850, California wanted admission as a free state. With so many competing dynamics under way, and with the president dead and replaced by Whig Millard Fillmore, the 1850s were off to a troubling start.

Congressional leaders like Henry Clay and newer legislators like Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois were asked to broker a compromise, but this time it was clear no compromise could bridge all the diverging interests at play in the country. Clay eventually left Washington disheartened by affairs. It fell to young Stephen Douglas, then, to shepherd the bills through Congress, which he in fact did. Legislators rallied behind the Compromise of 1850, an assemblage of bills passed late in 1850, which managed to keep the promises of the Missouri Compromise alive.



Henry Clay ("The Great Compromiser") addresses the U.S. Senate during the debates over the Compromise of 1850. The print shows

a number of incendiary personalities, like John C. Calhoun, whose increasingly sectional beliefs were pacified for a time by the Compromise. P. F. Rothermel (artist), c. 1855. [Wikimedia](#).

The Compromise of 1850 tried to offer something to everyone, but in the end it only worsened the sectional crisis. For southerners, the package offered a tough new fugitive slave law that empowered the federal government to deputize regular citizens in arresting runaways. The New Mexico Territory and the Utah Territory would be allowed to determine their own fates as slave or free states based on popular sovereignty. The compromise also allowed territories to submit suits directly to the Supreme Court over the status of freedom-seeking people within their bounds.

The admission of California as the newest free state in the Union cheered many northerners, but even the admission of a vast new state full of resources and rich agricultural lands was not enough. In addition to California, northerners also gained a ban on the slave trade in Washington, D.C., but not the full emancipation abolitionists had long advocated. Texas, which had already come into the Union as a slave state, was asked to give some of its land to New Mexico in return for the federal government absorbing some of the former republic's debt. But the compromise debates soon grew ugly.

After the Compromise of 1850, antislavery critics became increasingly certain that enslavers had co-opted the federal government, and that a southern Slave Power secretly held sway in Washington, where it hoped to make slavery a national institution. These northern complaints pointed back to how the three-fifths compromise of the Constitution gave southerners proportionally more representatives in Congress. In the 1850s, antislavery leaders increasingly argued that Washington worked on behalf of enslavers while ignoring the interests of white working men.

None of the individual measures in the Compromise of 1850 proved

more troubling to antislavery Americans than the Fugitive Slave Act. In a clear bid to extend slavery's influence throughout the country, the act created special federal commissioners to determine the fate of alleged fugitives without benefit of a jury trial or even court testimony. Under its provisions, local authorities in the North could not interfere with the capture of fugitives. Northern citizens, moreover, had to assist in the arrest of fugitives when called upon by federal agents. The Fugitive Slave Act created the foundation for a massive expansion of federal power, including an alarming increase in the nation's policing powers. Many northerners were also troubled by the way the bill undermined local and state laws. The law itself fostered corruption and the enslavement of free Black northerners. The federal commissioners who heard these cases were paid \$10 if they determined that the defendant was enslaved and only \$5 if they determined he or she was free.²⁰ Many Black northerners responded to the new law by heading farther north to Canada.

The 1852 presidential election gave the Whigs their most stunning defeat and effectively ended their existence as a national political party. Whigs captured just 42 of the 254 electoral votes needed to win. With the Compromise of 1850 and plenty of new lands, peaceful consensus seemed to be on the horizon. Antislavery feelings continued to run deep, however, and their depth revealed that with a Democratic Party misstep, a coalition united against the Democrats might yet emerge and bring them to defeat. One measure of the popularity of antislavery ideas came in 1852 when Harriet Beecher Stowe published her best-selling antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sales for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were astronomical, eclipsed only by sales of the Bible.²¹ The book became a sensation and helped move antislavery into everyday conversation for many northerners. Despite the powerful antislavery message, Stowe's book also reinforced many racist stereotypes.

Even abolitionists struggled with the deeply ingrained racism that plagued American society. While the major success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* bolstered the abolitionist cause, the terms outlined by the Compromise of 1850 appeared strong enough to keep the peace.



Uncle Tom's Cabin intensified an already hot debate over slavery throughout the United States. The book revolves around Eliza (the woman holding the young boy) and Tom (standing with his wife Chloe), each of whom takes a very different path: Eliza escapes slavery using her own two feet, but Tom endures his chains only to die by the whip of a brutish enslaver. The horrific violence that both endured melted the hearts of many northerners and pressed some to join in the fight against slavery. Full-page illustration by Hammatt Billings for Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852. [Wikimedia](#).

Democrats by 1853 were badly splintered along sectional lines over slavery, but they also had reasons to act with confidence. Voters had returned them to office in 1852 following the bitter fights over the Compromise of 1850. Emboldened, Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas introduced a set of additional amendments to a bill drafted in late 1853 to help organize the Nebraska Territory, the last of the Louisiana Purchase lands. In 1853, the Nebraska Territory was

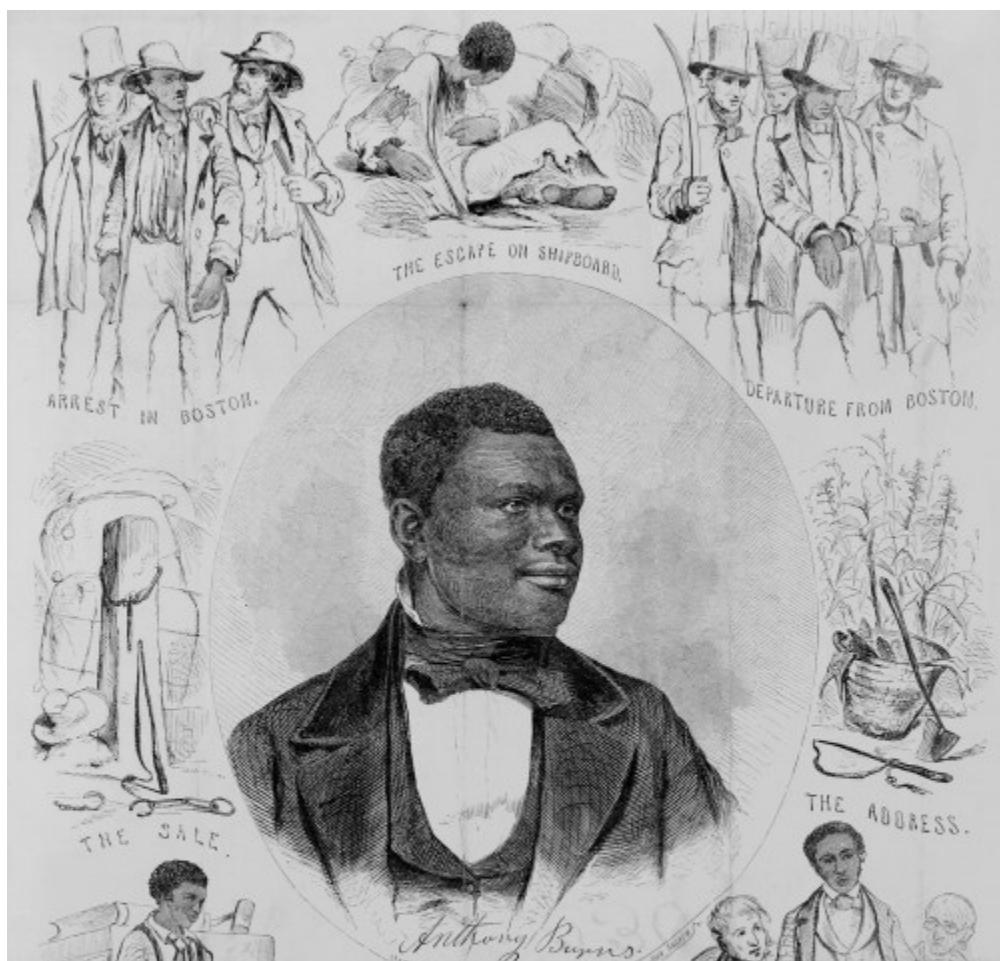
huge, extending from the northern end of Texas to the Canadian border. Altogether, it encompassed present-day Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Colorado, and Montana. Douglas's efforts to amend and introduce the bill in 1854 opened dynamics that would break the Democratic Party in two and, in the process, rip the country apart.

Douglas proposed a bold plan in 1854 to cut off a large southern chunk of Nebraska and create it separately as the Kansas Territory. Douglas had a number of goals in mind. The expansionist Democrat from Illinois wanted to organize the territory to facilitate the completion of a national railroad that would flow through Chicago. But before he had even finished introducing the bill, opposition had already mobilized. Salmon P. Chase drafted a response in northern newspapers that exposed the Kansas-Nebraska Bill as a measure to overturn the Missouri Compromise and open western lands for slavery. Kansas-Nebraska protests emerged in 1854 throughout the North, with key meetings in Wisconsin and Michigan. Kansas would become slave or free depending on the result of local elections, elections that would be greatly influenced by migrants flooding to the state to either protect or stop the spread of slavery.

Ordinary Americans in the North increasingly resisted what they believed to be a pro-slavery federal government on their own terms. The rescues and arrests of enslaved men like Anthony Burns in Boston and Joshua Glover in Milwaukee signaled the rising vehemence of resistance to the nation's 1850 fugitive slave law. The case of Anthony Burns illustrates how the Fugitive Slave Law radicalized many northerners. On May 24, 1854, twenty-year-old Burns, a preacher who worked in a Boston clothing shop, was clubbed and dragged to jail. One year earlier, Burns had escaped slavery in Virginia, and a group of slave catchers had come to return him to Richmond. Word of Burns's capture spread rapidly

through Boston, and a mob gathered outside the courthouse demanding Burns's release. Two days after the arrest, the crowd stormed the courthouse and shot a deputy U.S. Marshal to death. News reached Washington, and the federal government sent soldiers. Boston was placed under martial law. Federal troops lined the streets of Boston as Burns was marched to a ship, where he was sent back to slavery in Virginia. After spending over \$40,000, the U.S. government had successfully reenslaved Anthony

Burns.²² A short time later, Burns was redeemed by abolitionists who paid \$1,300 to return him to freedom, but the outrage among Bostonians only grew. And Anthony Burns was only one of hundreds of highly publicized episodes of the federal government imposing the Fugitive Slave Law on rebellious northern populations. In the words of Amos Adams Lawrence, "We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, compromise Union Whigs & woke up stark mad Abolitionists."²³





Anthony Burns, the fugitive slave, appears in a portrait at the center of this 1855 print. Burns' arrest and trial, possible because of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, became a rallying cry. As a symbol of the injustice of the slave system, Burns' treatment spurred riots and protests by abolitionists and citizens of Boston in the spring of 1854. John Andrews (engraver), "Anthony Burns," c. 1855. [Library of Congress](#).

As northerners radicalized, organizations like the New England Emigrant Aid Company provided guns and other goods for pioneers willing to go to Kansas and establish the territory as antislavery through popular sovereignty. On all sides of the slavery issue, politics became increasingly militarized.

The year 1855 nearly derailed the northern antislavery coalition. A resurgent anti-immigrant movement briefly took advantage of the Whig collapse and nearly stole the energy of the anti-administration forces by channeling its frustrations into fights against the large number of mostly Catholic German and Irish immigrants in American cities. Calling themselves Know-Nothings, on account of their tendency to pretend ignorance when asked about their activities, the Know-Nothing or American Party made impressive gains in 1854 and 1855, particularly in New England and the Middle Atlantic. But the anti-immigrant movement simply could not capture the nation's attention in ways the antislavery movement already had.²⁴

The antislavery political movements that started in 1854 coalesced with the formation of a new political party. Harking back to the

founding fathers, its organizers named it the Republican Party. Republicans moved forward into a highly charged summer.

Following an explosive speech before Congress on May 19–20, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was violently beaten with a cane by Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina on the floor of the Senate chamber. Among other accusations, Sumner accused Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina, Brooks's cousin, of defending slavery so he could have sexual access to Black women.²⁵ Brooks felt that he had to defend his relative's honor and nearly killed Sumner as a result.



The Caning of Charles Sumner, 1856. [Wikimedia](#).

The violence in Washington pales before the many murders occurring in Kansas.²⁶ Pro-slavery raiders attacked Lawrence, Kansas. Radical abolitionist John Brown retaliated, murdering several pro-slavery Kansans in retribution. As all of this played out, the House failed to expel Brooks. Brooks resigned his seat anyway, only to be reelected by his constituents later in the year. He received new canes emblazoned with the words “Hit him again!”²⁷

With sectional tensions at a breaking point, both parties readied for the coming presidential election. In June 1856, the newly named Republican Party held its nominating convention at Philadelphia

and selected Californian John Charles Frémont. Frémont's antislavery credentials may not have pleased many abolitionists, but his dynamic and talented wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, appealed to more radical members of the coalition. The Kansas-Nebraska debate, the organization of the Republican Party, and the 1856 presidential campaign all energized a new generation of political leaders, including Abraham Lincoln. Beginning with his speech at Peoria, Illinois, in 1854, Lincoln carved out a message that encapsulated better than anyone else the main ideas and visions of the Republican Party.²⁸ Lincoln himself was slow to join the coalition, yet by the summer of 1856, Lincoln had fully committed to the Frémont campaign.

Frémont lost, but Republicans celebrated that he won eleven of the sixteen free states. This showing, they urged, was truly impressive for any party making its first run at the presidency. Yet northern Democrats in crucial swing states remained unmoved by the Republican Party's appeals. Ulysses S. Grant of Missouri, for example, worried that Frémont and Republicans signaled trouble for the Union itself. Grant voted for the Democratic candidate, James Buchanan, believing a Republican victory might bring about disunion. In abolitionist and especially Black American circles, Frémont's defeat was more than a disappointment. Believing their fate had been sealed as permanent noncitizens, some African Americans would consider foreign emigration and colonization. Others began to explore the option of more radical and direct action against the Slave Power.

V. From Sectional Crisis to National Crisis

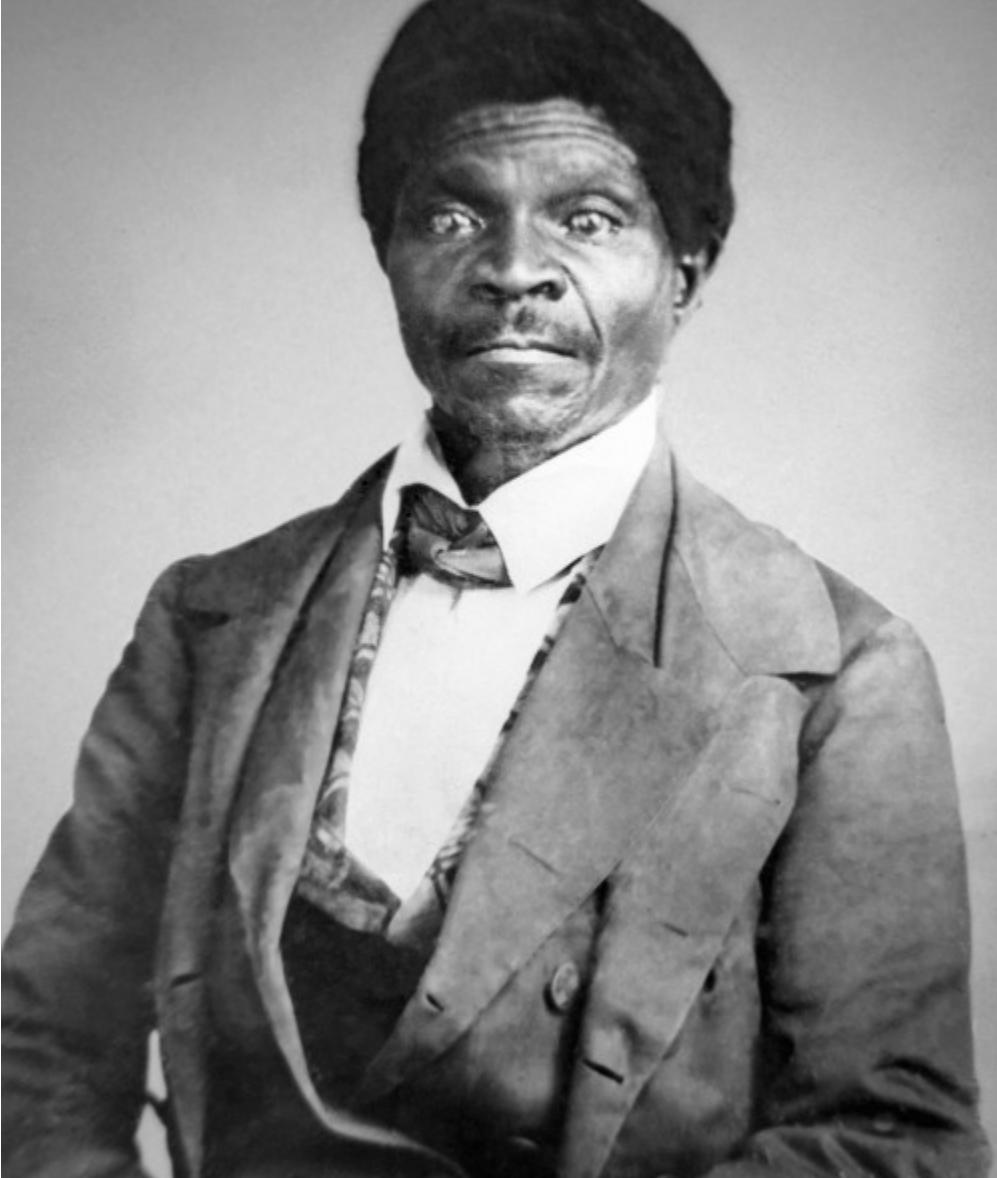
White antislavery leaders hailed Frémont's defeat as a "glorious" one and looked ahead to the party's future successes. For those still in slavery or hoping to see loved ones freed, the news was of course much harder to take. The Republican Party had promised

the rise of an antislavery coalition, but voters rebuked it. The lessons seemed clear enough.

Kansas loomed large over the 1856 election, darkening the national mood. The story of voter fraud in Kansas had begun years before in 1854, when nearby Missourians first started crossing the border to tamper with the Kansas elections. Noting this, critics at the time attacked the Pierce administration for not living up to the ideals of popular sovereignty by ensuring fair elections. From there, the crisis only deepened. Kansas voted to come into the Union as a free state, but the federal government refused to recognize their votes and instead recognized a sham pro-slavery legislature.

The sectional crisis had at last become a national crisis. “Bleeding Kansas” was the first place to demonstrate that the sectional crisis could easily be, and in fact already was, exploding into a full-blown national crisis. As the national mood grew increasingly grim, Kansas attracted militants representing the extreme sides of the slavery debate.

In the days after the 1856 presidential election, Buchanan made his plans for his time in office clear. He talked with Chief Justice Roger Taney on inauguration day about a court decision he hoped to see handled during his time in office. Indeed, not long after the inauguration, the Supreme Court handed down a decision that would come to define Buchanan’s presidency. The Dred Scott decision, *Scott v. Sandford*, ruled that Black Americans could not be citizens of the United States.²⁹ This gave the Buchanan administration and its southern allies a direct repudiation of the Missouri Compromise. The court ruled that Scott, a Missouri slave, had no right to sue in United States courts. The Dred Scott decision signaled that the federal government was now fully committed to extending slavery as far and as wide as it might want.



Dred Scott's Supreme Court case made clear that the federal government was no longer able or willing to ignore the issue of slavery. More than that, all Black Americans, Justice Taney declared, could never be citizens of the United States. Though seemingly a disastrous decision for abolitionists, this controversial ruling actually increased the ranks of the abolitionist movement.

Photograph of Dred Scott, 1857. [Wikimedia](#).

The Dred Scott decision seemed to settle the sectional crisis by making slavery fully national, but in reality it just exacerbated sectional tensions further. In 1857, Buchanan sent U.S. military forces to Utah, hoping to subdue Utah's Mormon communities. This action, however, led to renewed charges, many of them leveled

from within his own party, that the administration was abusing its powers. Far more important than the Utah invasion, however, were the ongoing events in Kansas. It was Kansas that at last proved to many northerners that the sectional crisis would not go away unless slavery also went away.

The Illinois Senate race in 1858 put the scope of the sectional crisis on full display. Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln challenged the greatly influential Democrat Stephen Douglas. Pandering to appeals to white supremacy, Douglas hammered the Republican opposition as a “Black Republican” party bent on racial equality.³⁰ The Republicans, including Lincoln, were thrown on the defensive. Democrats hung on as best they could, but the Republicans won the House of Representatives and picked up seats in the Senate. Lincoln actually lost his contest with Stephen Douglas but in the process firmly established himself as a leading national Republican. After the 1858 elections, all eyes turned to 1860. Given the Republican Party’s successes since 1854, it was expected that the 1860 presidential election might produce the nation’s first antislavery president.

In the troubled decades since the Missouri Compromise, the nation slowly tore itself apart. Congressmen clubbed each other nearly to death on the floor of Congress, and by the middle of the 1850s Americans were already at war on the Kansas and Missouri plains. Across the country, cities and towns were in various stages of revolt against federal authority. Fighting spread even farther against Native Americans in the Far West and against Mormons in Utah. The nation’s militants anticipated a coming breakdown and worked to exploit it. John Brown, fresh from his actions in Kansas, moved east and planned more violence. Assembling a team from across the West, including Black radicals from Oberlin, Ohio, and throughout communities in western Canada, Brown hatched a plan to attack Harper’s Ferry, a federal weapons arsenal in Virginia (now

West Virginia). He would use the weapons to lead a revolt of enslaved people. Brown approached Frederick Douglass, though Douglass refused to join.

Brown's raid embarked on October 16. By October 18, a command under Robert E. Lee had crushed the revolt. Many of Brown's men, including his own sons, were killed, but Brown himself lived and was imprisoned. Brown prophesied while in prison that the nation's crimes would only be purged with blood. He went to the gallows in December 1859. Northerners made a stunning display of sympathy on the day of his execution. Southerners took their reactions to mean that the coming 1860 election would be, in many ways, a referendum on secession and disunion.





The execution of John Brown made him a martyr in abolitionist circles and a confirmed traitor in southern crowds. Both of these images continued to pervade public memory after the Civil War, but in the North especially (where so many soldiers had died to help end slavery) his name was admired. Over two decades after Brown's death, Thomas Hovenden portrayed Brown as a saint. As he is lead to his execution for attempting to destroy slavery, Brown poignantly leans over a rail to kiss a Black baby. Thomas Hovenden, *The Last Moments of John Brown*, c. 1882-1884. [Wikimedia](#).

Republicans wanted little to do with Brown and instead tried to portray themselves as moderates opposed to both abolitionists and pro-slavery expansionists. In this climate, the parties opened their contest for the 1860 presidential election. The Democratic Party fared poorly as its southern delegates bolted its national convention at Charleston and ran their own candidate, Vice President John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky. Hoping to field a candidate who might nonetheless manage to bridge the broken party's factions, the Democrats decided to meet again at Baltimore and nominated Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois.

The Republicans, meanwhile, held their boisterous convention in Chicago. The Republican platform made the party's antislavery commitments clear, also making wide promises to its white constituents, particularly westerners, with the promise of new land, transcontinental railroads, and broad support of public schools.³¹ Abraham Lincoln, a candidate few outside Illinois truly expected to win, nonetheless proved far less polarizing than the other names on the ballot. Lincoln won the nomination, and with the Democrats in disarray, Republicans knew their candidate Lincoln had a good

chance of winning.



This political cartoon depicts the four candidates in the 1860 presidential election. Dividing the National Map. Available from the [Library of Congress](#).

Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 contest on November 6, gaining just 40 percent of the popular vote and not a single southern vote in the Electoral College. Within days, southern states were organizing secession conventions. John J. Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a series of compromises, but a clear pro-southern bias meant they had little chance of gaining Republican acceptance. Crittenden's plan promised renewed enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law and offered a plan to keep slavery in the nation's capital.³² Republicans by late 1860 knew that the voters who had just placed them in power did not want them to cave on these points, and southern states proceeded with their plans to leave the Union. On December 20, South Carolina voted to secede and issued its Declaration of the Immediate Causes."³³ The declaration highlighted failure of the federal government to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act over competing personal liberty laws in northern states. After the war

many southerners claimed that secession was primarily motivated by a concern to preserve states' rights, but the primary complaint of the very first ordinance of secession listed the federal government's failure to exert its authority over the northern states.

The year 1861, then, saw the culmination of the secession crisis. Before he left for Washington, Lincoln told those who had gathered in Springfield to wish him well and that he faced a "task greater than Washington's" in the years to come. Southerners were also learning the challenges of forming a new nation. The seceded states grappled with internal divisions right away, as states with enslavers sometimes did not support the newly seceded states. In January, for example, Delaware rejected secession. But states in the Lower South adopted a different course. The state of Mississippi seceded. Later in the month, the states of Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana also all left the Union. By early February, Texas had also joined the newly seceded states. In February, southerners drafted a constitution protecting slavery and named Jefferson Davis of Mississippi their president. Weeks after Abraham Lincoln's inauguration, rebels in the newly formed Confederate States of America opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Within days, Abraham Lincoln would demand seventy-five thousand volunteers from the North to crush the rebellion. The American Civil War had begun.

VI. Conclusion

Slavery had long divided the politics of the United States. In time, these divisions became both sectional and irreconcilable. The first and most ominous sign of a coming sectional storm occurred over debates surrounding the admission of the state of Missouri in 1821. As westward expansion continued, these fault lines grew even more ominous, particularly as the United States managed to seize even more lands from its war with Mexico. The country seemed to

teeter ever closer to a full-throated endorsement of slavery. But an antislavery coalition arose in the middle 1850s calling itself the Republican Party. Eager to cordon off slavery and confine it to where it already existed, the Republicans won the presidential election of 1860 and threw the nation on the path to war.

Throughout this period, the mainstream of the antislavery movement remained committed to a peaceful resolution of the slavery issue through efforts understood to foster the “ultimate extinction” of slavery in due time. But as the secession crisis revealed, the South could not tolerate a federal government working against the interests of slavery’s expansion and decided to take a gamble on war with the United States. Secession, in the end, raised the possibility of emancipation through war, a possibility most Republicans knew, of course, had always been an option, but one they nonetheless hoped would never be necessary. By 1861 all bets were off, and the fate of slavery, and of the nation, depended on war.

VII. Primary Sources

1. Prigg v. Pennsylvania, 1842

Conflicts between the power of the federal government and states’ rights strained American politics throughout the antebellum era. During the 1840s and 1850s, the most consistent source of tension on the issue stemmed from northerners refusing to comply with fugitive slave laws. As early as the 1780s, Pennsylvania passed laws that made it illegal to take a Black person from the state for the purpose of enslaving them. In the majority opinion, excerpted here, Supreme Court justice Joseph Story decided that the national fugitive slave act overruled Pennsylvania’s law.

2. Stories from the Underground Railroad, 1855-56

William Still was an African-American abolitionist who frequently

risked his life to help freedom-seekers escape slavery. In these excerpts, Still offers the readers some of the letters sent to him from abolitionists and formerly enslaved persons. The passages shed light on family separation, the financial costs of the journey to freedom, and the logistics of the Underground Railroad.

3. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852

In 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe published her bestselling antislavery novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. Sales for Uncle Tom's Cabin were astronomical, eclipsed only by sales of the Bible. The book became a sensation and helped move antislavery into everyday conversation for many northerners. In this passage, a senator and his wife debate the Fugitive Slave Law.

4. Charlotte Forten complains of racism in the North, 1855

Writer, activist, and teacher Charlotte Forten was born in Philadelphia in 1837 to a well-to-do African American family. Forten's diary entries from 1854 illuminate sectional tensions, especially in her discussion of the trial of Anthony Burns, a fugitive from slavery. She also expressed frequent frustration over the racism she encountered in Boston.

5. Margaraetta Mason and Lydia Maria Child discuss John Brown, 1860

After John Brown was arrested for his raid on Harpers Ferry, Lydia Maria Child wrote to the governor of Virginia requesting to visit Brown. Margarettta Mason of Virginia wrote a searing letter to Child attacking her for supporting a murder. Child responded, and the exchange of letters was published by the American Antislavery Society.

6. 1860 Republican Party platform

The 1860 Republican Party convention in Chicago created a platform that clearly opposed the expansion of slavery in the West

and the reopening of the slave trade. However, nothing in the document claimed that the government had the power to eliminate slavery where it already existed. Controversies over slavery suffuse the platform, but maybe even more noticeable is the importance of the West to the Republican Party.

7. South Carolina declaration of secession, 1860

Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 contest on November 6 with just 40% of the popular vote and not a single southern vote in the Electoral College. Within days, southern states were organizing secession conventions. On December 20, South Carolina voted to secede, and issued its “Declaration of the Immediate Causes.”

8. Effects of the Fugitive Slave Law lithograph, 1850

This lithograph imagines the consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act, part of the Compromise of 1850. Four well-dressed Black men are being hunted by a party of white men, seen in the background. There are a number of ambiguities in the image – are the Black men enslaved or free? Are they trying to escape or not? Where exactly are they? These ambiguities speak to the concerns many abolitionists had about the law, which required free citizens to return freedom-seeking people to their enslavers.

9. Sectional crisis map, 1856

This piece of Republican propaganda from the 1856 election makes clear distinctions between free states, slave states, and territories. Featured at the top of the page are engravings of John C. Fremont and his running mate, William C. Dayton. A vibrant red sets off the free states. The chart, “Freedom vs. Slavery,” demonstrates the North’s economic and cultural superiority over slave states in terms of everything from population per square mile, capital in manufactures, miles of railroad, the number of newspapers and public libraries, and value of churches.

VIII. Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Jesse Gant, with content contributions by Jeffrey Bain-Conkin, Matthew A. Byron, Christopher Childers, Jesse Gant, Christopher Null, Ryan Poe, Michael Robinson, Nicholas Wood, Michael Woods, and Ben Wright.

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Notes