Transcendentalism

In his 1794 book The Age of Reason, Thomas Paine advanced a religious philosophy called Deism that struck at the tenets of organized religions, particularly Calvinism as it was practiced by the Puritans. Paine claimed that churches were “set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” These thoughts were shocking to Americans who were imbued with a strong religious tradition. At the same time, Paine’s ideas appealed to many Americans who were likewise steeped in the rationality of the Enlightenment period and who had difficulty aligning Calvinist doctrine with reason.

Calvinism held that the essential nature of infants was evil. This belief was called “infant damnation.” Calvinism also subscribed to a belief that there were only a certain few who were “elect” by God from the beginning to be saved. All others were doomed after death regardless of their beliefs or actions in life. Many people objected to the ideas of infant damnation and the powerlessness of the individual to achieve salvation.

Paine’s Deism, by contrast, claimed that human nature was essentially good and that salvation was within reach of every person through faith and good works. Deists believed in a “clockwork” universe. They felt that God had created the world and all the laws that governed it, and then He allowed events to play themselves out as they would without further divine intervention. Deists believed that the laws of the world are knowable to humanity by the application of logic and reason. This contrasted with the Calvinist idea that true knowledge is only obtained by divine revelation as expressed in the Bible. A number of the Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, became Deists.

A new Protestant sect, the Unitarians, formally expressed the philosophy of Deism. Unitarians believed in a single divine deity, the Supreme Being, as opposed to the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit worshipped by most Christians. They also believed in free will, salvation through good works, and the intrinsically moral nature of human beings, including infants and children. The Unitarian creed was rational, optimistic, and non-dogmatic. Unitarianism appealed to many intellectuals and free thinkers of the day.

Others who were unhappy with the Puritan religion chose to return to the Episcopal faith, which was associated with the Anglican Church of England. The Irish and Scots in the United States were already largely Presbyterian. A similar religious group, the Congregationalists, often merged with the Presbyterians in small communities since they differed little in creed. In these ways the religious landscape was changing in the early 1800s, especially among the established, educated people of New England. But the pace of change across the country was soon to quicken.

The Romantic Movement at the turn of the nineteenth century gave expression to a growing conviction throughout Europe and America that there was more to experiencing the world than could be inferred by logic and more to living than could be satisfied by the acquisition of material things. People felt a need to balance reason and calculation with emotion and spirit. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant first framed doubts over rationality as a cure-all for human problems and needs in his Critique of Pure Reason, published in 1781. Sympathetic poets and authors transmuted his ideas into literary works that were meant to be as much apprehended by the soul as understood by the intellect. In England, writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson, to name a few, breathed life into Romanticism through their poetry. The Romantics revered nature and felt that contemplation of natural scenes would lead to realization of fundamental truths.

In America, Emerson and Thoreau helped formalize the Romantic Movement into Transcendentalism, a philosophy that reads almost like a faith. The Transcendentalists infused the Romantic impulse with mysticism, a belief in the possibility of direct communion with God and knowledge of ultimate reality through spiritual insight. In part, this was fueled by newly translated Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic texts, which contained elements of mysticism. A thread of the mystic also ran through American Puritanism and in the Quaker faith even more so. Quaker doctrine subscribed to a belief in an Inner Light, which was a gift of God’s grace. The Inner Light expressed itself as divine intuition or knowledge unaccountable by ordinary derivations of thought.

For Transcendentalists, truth is beyond, or transcends, what can be discovered using evidence acquired by the senses. Like the Quakers, Transcendentalists believed that every person possesses an Inner Light that can illuminate the highest truth and put a person in touch with God, whom they called the Oversoul. Since this sort of knowledge of truth is a personal matter, Transcendentalism was committed to development of the self and had little regard for dogma or authority.

Ralph Waldo Emerson took up the Transcendentalist banner after studying at Harvard to be a Unitarian minister. He left what he called the “cold and cheerless” Unitarian pulpit to travel in Europe and talk to Romantic writers and philosophers, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle. Returning to America, he lived in Concord, Massachusetts, near Boston, where he composed poetry and wrote essays. He supported himself through annual lecture tours and was a very popular speaker.

In 1837 at Harvard, Emerson delivered his influential “American Scholar” lecture that exhorted Americans in the arts to stop turning to Europe for inspiration and instruction and begin developing an American literary and artistic tradition. Emerson preached the philosophy of the Oversoul and the organic, ever-changing nature of the universe, stressing self-reliance, individualism, optimism, and freedom. Though not inclined toward political activism, by the eve of the Civil War, Emerson became an ardent abolitionist.

Another Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, wrote essays that have had a profound effect on modern thought. His philosophy of individualism and conscious nonconformism is expressed in his book Walden: Or Life in the Woods (1854) where he describes living a full emotional and intellectual life for two years while residing in a tiny cabin he made himself and existing in every other way at a barely subsistence level. His other work of note is the essay On the Duty of Civil Disobedience. Thoreau was against Texas joining the Union because it would be a slave state. He felt that the United States had involved itself in the Mexican War on behalf of Texas and, therefore, he refused to pay a tax that he felt would support the war effort. For this he was briefly jailed. Thoreau’s tactic of passive resistance was later emulated by Mahatma Gandhi in India in his resistance to British rule and by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his non-violent approach to gaining civil rights.

Romanticism encouraged writing literature of remarkable emotional effects. In the early nineteenth century, Washington Irving (Legend of Sleepy Hollow), James Fenimore Cooper (Last of the Mohicans), and Edgar Allen Poe (The Pit and the Pendulum) made their marks as gifted authors. In the early 1850s, however, in addition to Thoreau’s Walden, American writers produced a dazzling set of classic works inaugurating a golden age in American literature. In this time frame, Nathaniel Hawthorne published The Scarlet Letter and the House of the Seven Gables, Herman Melville produced Moby-Dick, and Walt Whitman composed Leaves of Grass. These were a new breed of distinctly American authors, writing on American subjects and from a uniquely American perspective steeped in native Transcendentalism. Until this time American literature was considered second rate if it was considered at all. In the wake of these contributions, Europe began to look to America for thought and inspiration of true quality.

The Second Great Awakening

At the turn of the nineteenth century, America was still a devotedly church-going nation. Most Americans felt a traditional religious faith to be the foundation of moral character, and many worried that over time the religious imperative would wane into token gestures and empty social structures. These concerns increased with news of the cruelties and excesses of the French Revolution done in the name of reason.

In 1795, Timothy Dwight became president of Yale College, described as a “hotbed of infidelity.” Determined to counter the secular trend in American thinking, Dwight sponsored a series of religious revivals that fired the collective soul of the Yale student body and spread across New England, igniting a religious movement called the Second Great Awakening. The sermons preached from the pulpits of this great revival did not attempt like the old-time Puritans to pressure a captive congregation with dire predictions of a vengeful God’s omniscient power and arbitrary judgments. Rather, they spoke of a benevolent Father whose most passionate desire was the salvation of every one of His children down to the most lost sinner.

At a religious assembly, a person could be saved by faith alone during a conversion experience. Unusual behaviors such as “speaking in tongues” or convulsive fits of religious ecstasy sometimes accompanied these experiences. The only absolute requisite to salvation, however, was an acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice as atonement for one’s sins. All people were free to accept this gift or not. But the fires of everlasting hell, described in lush and vivid imagery, awaited those who turned their backs.

The Second Great Awakening soon spread to the frontier. Beginning in the South and moving northward along the frontier to the Old Northwest, a new institution, the camp meeting, ignited a spiritual fervor that converted thousands and altered the religious landscape of America forever. Many traditional churches were swept away in this new awakening. Others reformed to counter the firestorm of the evangelical preacher.

Camp meetings were generally held in the fall after harvest but before the rigors of winter. For the participants who often traveled considerable distances, religious revivals probably combined the attractions of a retreat, a camp-out, and a much-earned vacation. As many as 25,000 people gathered at revival meetings to hear the gospel preached by charismatic orators who “rode the circuit” from camp to camp.

Besides the spiritual message, revival meetings offered entertainment in an age when other diversions for the average person were either of the homegrown variety or of a quiet, literary nature. A free-wheeling, fire-and-brimstone revival provided an acceptable emotional and social outlet for people of the frontier who were mostly engaged in farming and other rural, labor-intensive agricultural pursuits. Of particular importance, women could attend and participate in religious revivals at a time when many social outlets available to men, such as taverns and fraternal organizations, were neither considered appropriate nor allowed for women. This offered revival preachers a natural female constituency that contributed immeasurably to their success.

In the south, black slaves and freed men and women could also attend segregated, companion revivals. The emotional, spiritual, and social opportunity of such a gathering can scarcely be appreciated in the modern age for its intensity. These meetings gave rise to a rich and remarkable tradition of black preachers who provided not merely social and spiritual but political cohesion to much-beleaguered black communities in the difficult times to come.

Western New York hosted so many revival meetings patronized by the hellfire-and-brimstone variety of preacher that it came to be known as the “burned-over district.” With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, commerce and industry boomed, particularly around Utica in Oneida County. This attracted great numbers of people seeking a fresh start in life. Such seekers were prime subjects for conversion by revivalists because of the social nature of a revival. At a camp meeting, a person joined hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others on an essentially egalitarian basis. Though many were drawn to the meetings for the social aspect, they were easily caught up in the event and followed through with conversion.

The women of Utica were particularly concerned with the spiritual health of their community, and since women did not generally work outside the home they had the time to organize community activities. The Oneida County Female Missionary Society raised sufficient money to support the revival movement in the area for a number of years. The role of women in the Second Great Awakening can scarcely be over-emphasized. Women were converted in equal numbers with men, but once converted tended to be even more solid adherents to their church than their male counterparts. Viewed as the moral center of the family, a woman was responsible for her husband’s and children’s spiritual well being. Women took this responsibility seriously and sought to fulfill it through church participation and, later in the century, through organizing charitable and benevolent associations aimed at social reform.

Evangelists were aware that their power to make converts rested substantially in their influence with women. The new gospels emphasized the importance of the role of women in bringing their families to Christian life. They placed an equal value on the spiritual worth of men and women, in contrast to earlier religions that tended to minimize women’s importance in the spiritual as well as secular spheres. This gender egalitarianism in religious matters marked a break with the past and offered women the opportunity to acquire standing in the community without treading on the secular prerogatives of their husbands. Once this door was opened to them, women continued to play a crucial role in religious life and went on to become pioneers and crusaders in nineteenth century social reform.

Many prominent preachers frequented the pulpits of the burned-over-district. Among them, William Miller gained a following of around 100,000 with a Biblical interpretation of the Second Coming of Christ on October 22, 1844. Failure of the prophecy to materialize did not wholly quench the Millerite movement, which became known as Seventh Day Adventist.

Perhaps the greatest evangelist was the former lawyer Charles Grandison Finney, who conducted an intense, sustained revival in the burned-over-district from 1826 to 1831. Beginning in Utica, he made his way in stages to Rochester and New York City. Church membership grew by tens of thousands wherever he held revivals. A spellbinding orator, Finney preached a theology in pointed contrast to Puritan Calvinism. Salvation could be had by anyone through faith and good works, which he felt flowed from one another. People were the captains of their own fate, and since Judgment Day could come at any time, his hearers should take immediate action to ensure the redemption of themselves and their loved ones.

Finney was a master of showmanship and participatory psychology. His revival agenda included hymn singing and solicitation of personal testimonials from the congregation. He placed an “anxious bench” in the front of the assembly for those teetering on the brink of commitment to Christ. The moment of holy redemption for a bench-sitter became a dramatic event. Finney encouraged women to pray aloud and denounced alcohol and slavery from the pulpit. He felt that mass, public conversions were more effective than the old-style, solitary communion because they emphasized the fraternal nature of church membership. Finney later became president of Oberlin College in Ohio, the first U.S. college to admit women and blacks and a hotbed of abolitionism and evangelical zeal.

The crusading spirit of religious evangelism carried over into secular life and expressed itself in a number of reform movements. Temperance, suffrage, prison reform, and abolition all received an infusion of energy from evangelical vigor. In addition, the traveling preacher expanded the horizons of imagination beyond the local sphere and even beyond the borders of the nation. Supporting a mission in a foreign country or among Native Americans in the West became a binding cause for many churches. Reports from missionaries in such exotic places as Africa, India, or Hawaii were awaited with breathless expectation. As an enticement to listen to their religious message, missionaries often provided medical, technical, and educational benefits to the people in the locale of their mission. In these ways, the Second Great Awakening contributed to changing not just the nation, but the world.

Revivalism did not affect the wealthier, better-educated parts of society that gravitated to Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Unitarian churches as much as it did rural and frontier communities that tended to be Baptist or Methodist. The Baptist faith proved ideal for conditions on the frontier. Baptists believed in a literal reading of the Bible that required no authoritarian interpretation. They also subscribed to the concept of the possibility of any person obtaining salvation through his or her own free will. Above all, however, they believed that a church was its own highest authority and thus avoided the difficulties and delays of petitions to and approvals from a distant hierarchical organization.

A group of Baptists could form their own church on the spot and choose a preacher from among themselves. The Baptists were egalitarian in their creed, believing that all people were equal before God regardless of their economic, social, or educational standing. The simplest farmer in Kentucky was on par in native dignity with every other person in the Republic. These beliefs and the Baptists’ uncomplicated organization were highly appealing to small communities of self-sufficient, independent-minded people.

The Methodists, however, were most successful at reaping the benefits of religious revivalism of the early 1800s by establishing a system of itinerant preachers on horseback, or circuit riders. Francis Asbury began the practice when the frontier was scarcely west of the Appalachian Mountains. Hardy and fearless, Asbury rode the rugged backwoods trails and preached thousands of sermons to farmers, pioneers, and backwoodsmen and their families.

Peter Cartwright, the most famous of the Methodist frontier preachers, delivered his highly charged sermons for 50 years in the frontier region bordering the Ohio River. Uneducated himself, he along with other Methodist evangelists considered education a hindrance to converting souls since conversion is not a matter of the mind but of the spirit. Energy, sincerity, and a powerful message of faith and redemption were the necessary requisites for a Methodist circuit rider. Their approach seems justified since by 1850 the Methodist Church had more members than any other Protestant sect in the country.

Churches came to reflect deep divisions that paralleled sectional interests in the country far beyond issues of religious doctrine or socio-economic stratification. By 1845, both the Baptist and Methodist Churches split over slavery. Presbyterians suffered a similar schism in 1857. The Northern churches of these denominations believed in abolishing slavery while Southern congregations felt their economic well-being was bound to a slaveholding system. The conflict over human bondage thus broke first in the communities of religion, which served as heralds to the South’s secession from the Union and, ultimately, to the American Civil War.

Utopian Movements

A number of cooperative communities were launched in the 1800s as experiments in alternative social organizations and Christian living according to scriptural interpretations. This was not a new phenomenon in the New World. The Jamestown colonists, the Puritans, the Quakers, and others had all made the difficult and dangerous voyage across the sea in order to live by their own beliefs.

Reformers in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening sought to get away from authoritarian power structures but still provide for all members of the group. Brook Farm, New Harmony, the Shaker and Amana communities, and Oneida Colony were typical trials of utopian communes. Generally socialistic, these communities failed to thrive in America’s capitalistic culture once the vision and dedication of the original founders was gone. Their histories as alternative patterns of living are valuable, however, for their insight into human relationships and social structures.

New Harmony, founded in 1825 in Indiana by wealthy Scottish textile manufacturer Robert Owen, ironically perished early from lack of harmony among its participants. The Amana communities in New York and Iowa were also short-lived, fading away by the end of the 1850s.

Brook Farm in Massachusetts, noted as a transcendental literary and intellectual haven, suffered from indebtedness, in part from a disastrous fire and in part from lack of incentive for the members to be productive, since the fruits of the labor of all were shared equally by all, regardless of contribution. Lasting only five years, the experiment in “plain living and high thinking” was forever memorialized as the basis for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The Blithedale Romance.

The Shaker communities, founded by an Englishwoman, Ann Lee, who came to America in 1774, practiced strict sexual abstinence since they believed the Christian millennium was imminent and therefore saw no reason to perpetuate the human race. Ann Lee died in 1784, but the sect continued to prosper on the strength of its fervent and joyful religious life. The Shakers admired simplicity and made an art of designing buildings and furniture of distinctive, harmonious beauty. By the 1830s, there were 20 Shaker communities, and by 1840 the Shakers had a membership of some six thousand. Shaker communities existed for another 100 years, though dwindling slowly. Their rule of celibacy and communal holding of property discouraged new converts. Because of their high ideals and lack of controversial practices, the Shaker communities lived in harmony with their neighbors.

By contrast, the Oneida colony practiced free love, birth control, and eugenic selection of parents. These life-style anomalies proved unpalatable to most Americans and caused ongoing problems with the surrounding community. Founded in 1847 in Vermont by John Humphrey Noyes, the colony soon had to relocate to more-tolerant New York. Noyes’s doctrine of “Bible Communism” insisted selfishness was the root of unhappiness. Owning property and maintaining exclusive relationships encouraged selfishness and destructive covetousness of what others have. Therefore, the keys to happiness were communal ownership of property and what Noyes termed “complex marriage” where every woman was married to every man in the group.

The Oneidans shared work equally and supported their enterprise by manufacturing such things as steel traps, silk thread, and silverplate tableware. Yielding to external pressure, the Oneida colony gave up complex marriage in 1879, and communal ownership of property soon followed. The group eventually transformed itself into a joint-stock company manufacturing stainless steel knives and tableware. Thus Noyes’s communistic utopia ended as a capitalist corporation.

In New York in the 1820s, Joseph Smith was visited with a vision and claimed to have received golden plates that detailed a new religion he called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormonism. In 1831 Smith founded a small community in Ohio. The Mormon faith was cooperative in nature, which rankled the individualistic temper of the times. But the colony was efficient and successful, which attracted converts. Strife with the local inhabitants caused the colony to relocate to Missouri and then to Illinois, where in 1839 they founded the town of Nauvoo. Five years later Nauvoo was the largest town in the state. Rumors of polygamy and other social irregularities incensed the moral rectitude of neighboring non-Mormons. Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested, and while in jail they were attacked by a mob and killed.

Leadership of the Mormons was taken up by Brigham Young who led the sect to the site of what is now Salt Lake City. The Mormons were highly successful in Utah, but so staunchly independent that they raised the ire of the United States government, which sent troops against them in 1857. The issue of polygamy delayed statehood for Utah until 1896. Though no longer communal in nature, Mormonism remains a dynamic influence in the state of Utah, and the Mormon faith is recognized as a major religion in the United States.

Subordination of the individual to the group seems to be the one common thread among the utopian experimental communities. Beyond that, their doctrines, practices, and fates make each group uniquely individual. They reflected the idealistic, reform-minded spirit of their age, and remain as monuments to human courage to live differently on the basis of principle and religious conviction.

Reform might be labeled the touchstone of the nineteenth century. The movements begun then often did not bear fruit until the twentieth century, and some are still in the process of becoming fully realized. Reforms such as prison reform, corporate reform, sanitation, and child labor were mostly accomplished through court cases. Women’s rights, the universal right to vote, and temperance from alcohol relied on grass-roots movements, consciousness raising in the form of parades, petitions, and lectures, and ultimately, legislation. But the test of the nation came over reform from the practice of slavery, which sparked a terrible war. The first reforms of the era were of religion and philosophy. When the hearts and minds of the people changed, social and political reform became an unstoppable force.

Humanitarian Reform

The Age of Reform--the decades prior to the Civil War--was a period of tremendous economic and political change. Many Americans believed that traditional values were undercut by the emerging industrial and market economy and they supported humanitarian and social reforms in an effort to create a new moral order. Some reformers, including those who embraced transcendentalism, promoted the divinity of the individual and sought to perfect human society. A number of experimental communal "utopias" were formed to further this effort.

Other reformers were driven by more traditional religious impulses, such as the Protestant revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening. Charles Grandison Finney, the greatest of the revival preachers, denounced both alcohol and slavery. The Shaker, Amana, and Mormon communities were among those that blended religion and secular institutions to further human perfectibility. Many middle-class women took the opportunity to broaden their experiences beyond the domestic sphere by participating in various reform movements. A defining characteristic of this era was that women played public, leading roles in many of the crusades to reform American society.

The emphasis on human perfectibility led some reformers to provide care for the physically and mentally afflicted. Thomas H. Gallaudet, a graduate of Yale who studied the education of deaf-mutes in Paris, opened the first American school for the deaf at Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. His son, Edward, founded the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, which is now known as Gallaudet University. Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe did similar work with the sightless in Boston. He founded in 1832 the Perkins Institution and the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind. Howe received international acclaim by teaching a blind, deaf, and mute, twelve-year-old girl to communicate through sign language.

As part of the humanitarian reforms sweeping America, asylums were also funded for social deviants and the mentally ill. Criminals of all kinds—including debtors—and the indigent insane were confined together indiscriminately in crowded, filthy prisons during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In Pennsylvania and New York, the idea that criminals should be reformed led to experiments in solitary confinement. Strict rules of silence were imposed, in an attempt to provide prisoners with the opportunity to contemplate their mistakes and become penitent. Therefore, prisons literally became "penitentiaries," or "reformatories." In 1821, Kentucky became the first state to abolish imprisonment for debt. As working-class men won the right to vote, debtors' prisons eventually disappeared from the American scene.

Dorothea Dix, a remarkably selfless woman, abandoned a successful teaching career in 1841 to begin a life-long crusade to improve conditions for the mentally impaired. After touring asylums and poorhouses in Massachusetts, she reported to the legislature that the indigent insane were treated as violent criminals: "Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." Dix traveled extensively and ultimately persuaded 20 state legislatures and the federal government to establish mental health asylums, including St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. At her urging, Congress passed a bill granting public lands to the states to fund hospitals for the mentally and physically impaired. President Franklin Pierce, however, did not want the federal government involved in charity work and vetoed it. Despite that singular setback, Dorothea Dix clearly influenced governmental policy during the Age of Reform.

Educational reform was another effort Americans pursued to perfect society during this period. In the early nineteenth century, Americans had the highest literacy rate in the western world, and yet there was no statewide system of free elementary schools anywhere in the United States. Reformers were influenced by Thomas Jefferson's vision of an educated electorate, and the desire to inculcate students—including increasing numbers of non-English and non-Protestant immigrants—with traditional American values. Public education, they argued, would foster equal opportunity and social stability.

The leading figure in the public school movement was Horace Mann. He served as the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from its creation in 1837 until 1848, when he was elected to the Congress. Mann was the driving force behind better school buildings, expanded curricula, and improved teacher training and higher salaries. Boston set the pace with free public high schools in the 1820s, for both boys and girls. By the Civil War, most northern states had tax-supported public schools at the elementary and high school levels. Public education lagged, however, in the western frontier regions and throughout most of the South.

Women played an increasing role in public education during the reform era. Catharine Beecher, a sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, encouraged women to enter the teaching profession because their "natural" role suited them to the care and nurturing of children. Thus, Beecher combined the "cult of domesticity" with educational reform. By 1850, most elementary school teachers were women, although some were hired because they could be paid considerably less than men. At the secondary level, Emma Willard in 1821 established the Troy Female Seminary in New York. Oberlin College in Ohio became the first institution of higher learning to admit African Americans and female students—four women enrolled in 1837. That same year, Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke Seminary, which later became the first women's college. During the Age of Reform, educational opportunities for women expanded, although most were not encouraged to pursue higher education.

The temperance movement, the greatest of the evangelically inspired reforms, also attracted those who believed in human perfectibility. During the early 1800s, Americans consumed two to three times the amount of alcohol per capita than today. Alcohol abuse was rampant among men and women from every walk of life. Drunkenness, the reformers claimed, lay at the root of nearly every social problem—including crime, poverty, labor absenteeism, and domestic violence. Advocates of temperance had been active since the publication of Dr. Benjamin Rush's An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors upon the Human Mind and Body in 1784, but the campaign against alcohol during the reform era was imbued with an unprecedented moralistic fervor. This was, in large measure, because women dominated the rank-and-file membership roles of many local temperance societies. The temperance movement attracted the largest numbers of female reformers, and served to introduce them to other crusades—especially women's rights and abolitionism.

In 1826, the assault upon "demon rum" became a national movement with a confederation of local societies called the American Temperance Union. Within a decade, the A.T.U. boasted a membership of 1.5 million, and an additional five hundred thousand Americans had taken the "cold water pledge" and vowed to forsake all alcohol. In 1840, a group of reformed alcoholics led by John B. Gough, known as the "poet of the d.t.'s," organized the Washington Temperance Society and began touring the country, giving impassioned speeches to audiences of "drowned drunkards." Temperance songs, such as "Dear Father, Drink No More," and melodramatic fiction also were employed in the fight against liquor. The Glass, for instance, told the story of a young boy who was locked in a closet by his drunken mother and forced to gnaw off one of his arms to prevent starvation. The most popular temperance novel was Timothy Shay Arthur's Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, and What I Saw There, a tragic tale of a family destroyed by drink. Only copies of Uncle Tom's Cabin sold in greater numbers during the 1850s.

Maine became the first state to prohibit the sale of alcohol, in 1851. The leader of the prohibition campaign was Neal Dow, a Quaker businessman who served as the mayor of Portland. A dozen other states passed similar "Maine laws," although in most cases they were not rigorously enforced or were soon repealed. This shift in objectives from temperance to prohibition was generally led by well-to-do reformers and industrialists. Employers were particularly interested in imposing discipline among their laborers, many of them Irish or German immigrants who resented legislative attempts to curb their social drinking. The phenomenal success of the temperance movement in reducing alcohol consumption during this period was due not to legal coercion, but moral suasion and self-improvement.

Women’s Rights

The spirit of reform was prevalent in the field of women's rights. Many women played a central role in a wide range of antebellum moral crusades—especially in support of temperance and the abolition of slavery—and their experiences in a male-dominated culture led to the first American feminist movement. This era witnessed the beginning of the quest for equality between the sexes, but the chief strides were made decades later.

Following the Revolutionary War, women were encouraged to become models of "Republican Motherhood," in an effort to nurture and shape succeeding generations of American citizens. The emerging market economy during the early nineteenth century widened the gulf between the workplace and the home, and had a tremendous impact on the social roles of middle-class men and women. The result was an increasing emphasis on the "separate spheres" concept. That is, men were the "bread-winners" and political leaders; women were expected to be the guardians of morality and benevolence. The family home was now a refuge from the harsh realities of the office or factory, and the special province of the wife and mother.

Some women enthusiastically embraced the "cult of domesticity," reveling in their increased influence and leadership within the home. Catharine Beecher, for example, in 1841 wrote Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies, a best-selling guidebook for wives and mothers in which she instructed them on their myriad household duties. Sarah J. Hale, editor of the popular Godey's Lady's Book, explained that her magazine scrupulously avoided political topics because "other subjects are more important for our sex and more proper for our sphere." Working-class women did not have the opportunity to stay home and cultivate the "domestic virtues," but for many middle-class women their growing independence within the family justified a life revolving around their husband and children.

Some women naturally found the domestic sphere to be confining. Americans were also marrying later and bearing fewer children. This meant that many women had the inclination and the time to participate in the women's rights movement. During the Age of Reform, women faced legal discrimination in virtually every aspect of their lives. They were prohibited from voting or holding public office, and forfeited their property rights when they married. A wife could not sign a contact, draft a will, or sue in court, without her husband's permission. Most professions were closed to women, with the notable exceptions of teaching and writing, and females had less access to higher education. The legal status of women was essentially that of a white child or black slave. Margaret Fuller, a prominent transcendentalist and the editor of The Dial, wrote in Woman in the Nineteenth Century: "Many women are considering within themselves what they need and what they have not."

Some female abolitionists turned their attention also to the women's crusade. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, daughters of a southern slaveholder, railed against "domestic slavery" as well as black bondage, and defiantly declared, "Whatever is right for man to do is right for woman." Angelina married the western abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld, in 1838, but chose to retain her maiden name. Sojourner Truth, a former slave, divided her time between addressing abolitionist audiences and women's rights groups.

Most famously, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were two female delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention held at London in 1840. When they were denied full participation because of their gender, they returned to America determined to campaign for equal rights. They organized the first women's rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. The three hundred delegates adopted a "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," drafted primarily by Stanton, that was patterned on the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." The document listed the "repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman," and called for a redress of grievances.

Among the resolutions adopted by the convention, only one was not ratified unanimously--the demand that women be granted the right to vote. One hundred delegates, including thirty-four men (among them Frederick Douglass) signed the declaration, although some later requested the removal of their names due to the public outcry and scorn heaped upon the "amazons" of Seneca Falls. Thus was launched the modern women's rights movement in America.

The first truly national women's rights convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850. Susan B. Anthony, an unmarried Quaker who had been active in the temperance movement, shortly thereafter assumed the leadership role in the drive for legal equality and the right to vote. Progress was limited in these years, however. More than a dozen states, led by Mississippi in 1839, granted some property rights to married women. Additionally, some extraordinary women hurdled the barriers to career advancement.

Elizabeth Blackwell, in 1849, became the first female to graduate from a medical college. Her sister-in-law, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, was the first ordained female minister in the United States. Progress was also made in the field of higher education for women. Lucy Stone, yet another of Elizabeth Blackwell's sisters-in-law and a graduate of Oberlin College, married Henry Blackwell in 1855. She popularized the feminist practice of retaining her maiden name after marriage; those who did so were called "Lucy Stoners." A final feminist symbol, named for Amelia Bloomer, was a style of dress that combined a short skirt over full-length pantalets. "Bloomers," introduced by the well-known actress Frances Kemble, were a practical outfit that afforded women freedom of movement without a loss of modesty. Typically, however, bloomers were ridiculed as too radical and unfeminine. Although some progress was made during these years, the entire women's rights crusade took a back seat to other reform movements--most especially to abolitionism.

Abolitionism

Slavery may appear to have been dying out in the United States, but the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made it economically viable in the southern states. Furthermore, slavery was more than just a labor system—it was an institution to control the black race in America. Racism alone prevented the abolition of slavery during the Age of Reform. Southerners defended slavery as a "necessary evil," and argued that they could not free millions of slaves without destroying their economy and their society. Many Northerners had economic ties to the "peculiar institution," and still others worried about their own futures if they were suddenly competing in the marketplace with millions of free African Americans. Most northern states restricted the political rights and civil liberties of their black citizens. Lydia Maria Child, an active reformer in many fields, captured this Northern spirit when she wrote, "Our prejudice against colored people is even more inveterate than it is at the South."

The abolition movement grew slowly during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In late December 1816, a prominent group of men, dominated by Southerners, gathered in Washington and founded the American Colonization Society. Judge Bushrod Washington, nephew of the first president, presided. Henry Clay, a Kentucky slaveholder and national political figure, praised the aim of the society to "rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous, portion of its population"—free blacks.

Several years later, the first African Americans arrived in what became the Republic of Liberia. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for the slaveholding president who supported the goals of the American Colonization Society. Colonization, however, had no real chance of success. Only a tiny fraction of the African American population removed to Liberia, due to the costs involved and the opposition of free blacks who rightly viewed America as their homeland. Most white abolitionists, too, soon turned to other methods to combat slavery. Nonetheless, during the 1850s Martin Delany, a free black doctor and journalist, preached economic self-sufficiency and the creation of separate African American communities in Africa, Canada, or Latin America. As late as the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln seriously considered establishing black colonies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A new intensity and enthusiasm galvanized the abolition movement during the reform era. African Americans were active in the crusade from the start. The first African American newspaper, Freedom's Journal, was founded in New York in 1827, and within a few years there were more than 50 antislavery societies in black communities. David Walker, a free black who moved from North Carolina to Boston, was one of the Journal's agents. He published in 1829 a radical pamphlet, Walker's Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World, that scornfully rejected colonization, and warned whites of the destruction they faced, "If we have to obtain our freedom by fighting."

Although Walker died the following year, his call for slave rebellion led southern states to outlaw black education and crack down on "incendiary" publications from the North. In an unfortunate coincidence of timing, Nat Turner, a literate slave, led two-dozen followers on a bloody rampage in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. About 60 whites were killed before the insurrection was brutally crushed and Turner executed. Nat Turner's rebellion was blamed by terrified southern whites on northern abolitionists. Any lingering hopes for gradual and voluntary emancipation by state legislatures died with Nat Turner. Southerners soon were defending slavery not as a necessary evil, but as "a positive good."

Most white abolitionists rejected the violent approach advocated by David Walker. William Ellery Channing, Lyman Beecher, and Charles Grandison Finney, to name a few, were motivated by evangelical revivalism. Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker, published in Baltimore the most influential antislavery newspaper of the 1820s, The Genius of Universal Emancipation. Among his staff was William Lloyd Garrison, who moved to Boston and started his own abolitionist weekly. Garrison embodied a more radical approach to abolitionism than his mentor. The first issue of The Liberator, dated January 1, 1831, carried a message that Garrison forcefully continued to deliver: "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD."

Garrison demanded immediate, uncompensated emancipation, and equal rights for black Americans. He lambasted the Constitution for permitting slavery to exist, refused to engage in political action to attain his goals, and called upon northern states to secede from the Union if slavery was not abolished by the "wicked" Southerners. Garrison led the way in founding the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, and served as the first president of the American Anti-Slavery Society the following year. The chief financial backing for the national society came from two wealthy New York merchants, Arthur and Lewis Tappan. Within a decade, there were about 2,000 affiliates of the American Anti-Slavery Society, enrolling 200,000 members.

Women played a major role in the abolitionist movement. Lucretia Mott founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was a network of local organizations. African Americans, including Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart, addressed "promiscuous" audiences of men and women in New England. Abby Kelley, a Quaker, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké, who converted to Quakerism before leaving their southern home, were among the more celebrated female platform speakers. Angelina and Sarah contributed much of the primary research from southern newspapers and firsthand testimonials to Theodore Dwight Weld's graphic exposé of the peculiar institution, American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses. Weld, who was married to Angelina, was a revivalist preacher trained by Charles Grandison Finney and a leading western abolitionist.

Many escaped slaves made particularly effective speakers. Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown, both escapees from Kentucky, were prominent African American abolitionist orators. Frederick Douglass was the greatest African American abolitionist and a mesmerizing speaker. His autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, traced the remarkable life of a young slave who taught himself to read and write before escaping from Maryland in 1838. Douglass founded the North Star, an abolitionist newspaper, in Rochester, New York, and continued the crusade for racial equality.

Despite their growing numbers, antislavery crusaders were never more than a small minority of Northerners. They were also the subjects of physical threats. Garrison, for example, was paraded around Boston in 1835, with a rope hanging from his neck, by what was described as a "well-dressed" mob. Two years later, the movement had its first martyr. In Alton, Illinois, across the Mississippi River from slave-holding Missouri, Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered while defending his abolitionist newspaper office. Cassius Marcellus Clay faced the same threat in Lexington, Kentucky, and mounted two small brass cannons to guard the doors of the True American. Violence was averted, however, when Clay's press was dismantled and shipped out of the state.

To further the cause of freedom for the slaves and freedom of the press, thousands of petitions were sent to Congress urging the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1836, however, the House passed a "gag rule," that automatically tabled antislavery petitions without debate. Many Northerners, who previously gave little thought to abolition, now viewed their own civil liberties as being in jeopardy. John Quincy Adams, then a representative from Massachusetts, led the fight against the gag rule until its repeal in 1844.

The petition drive was one form of political action employed by abolitionists. Some leaders of the movement, most notably William Lloyd Garrison, continued to rely solely on moral suasion. Increasingly frustrated by their lack of progress, however, Douglass, Weld, and the Tappan brothers were among those abolitionists calling for a political war against slavery. In 1840, they organized the Liberty Party, and nominated for president James G. Birney, a former Kentucky slaveholder. Birney received only 7,000 popular votes in the ensuing election. Four years later, again with Birney heading the ticket, the Liberty Party increased its vote count to 62,000. The abolitionists probably cost the Whigs the electoral vote of New York, thereby ensuring the election of Democrat James Knox Polk. In 1848, the Free Soil Party played a significant role in the election, and foreshadowed the founding of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Ultimately, the abolitionist crusade proved to be the most powerful of all the reform era movements, forever changing the history of the United States.

**Territorial Expansion and Sectional Issues, 1820 – 1860**

**Oregon Country**

**The spirit of "Manifest Destiny" pervaded the United States during the Age of Reform—the decades prior to the Civil War. John L. O'Sullivan, editor of the influential United States Magazine and Democratic Review, gave the expansionist movement its name in 1845, when he wrote that it is "the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." Manifest Destiny was stimulated by nationalism and an idealistic vision of human perfectibility. It was America's duty to extend liberty and democratic institutions across the continent. Underlying this divine American mission was a feeling of cultural—even racial—superiority. Anglo-Saxon Americans believed that they had a natural right to move west, bringing with them the blessings of self-government and Protestantism. Americans gradually had been moving westward for two centuries, but in the 1830s and 1840s they pushed across the continent.**

**By the early nineteenth century, Spain, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States claimed sovereignty to the Oregon country. Oregon was a sprawling region of half a million square miles west of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific, between what is now the northern boundary of California and the southern tip of Alaska. Spain ceded its claims with the Transcontinental Treaty, negotiated in 1819 by John Quincy Adams, by which the United States acquired Florida and relinquished any nebulous claims to Texas under the Louisiana Purchase. In the mid-1820s, Russia acknowledged that Alaska extended only to the present-day southern boundary of 54o 40' north latitude, and ultimately sold its holdings north of San Francisco at Fort Ross to settlers.**

**The withdrawal of Spain and Russia left Oregon to the United States and Great Britain. Both had strong claims to the region based on discovery and occupation. George Vancouver, a British naval officer following up on the voyages of Captain James Cook, explored the coastline in 1792, and the Hudson Bay Company subsequently established fur-trading posts. Also in 1792, Robert Gray, an American fur merchant sailing out of Boston aboard the Columbia, discovered the majestic river named for his ship. Lewis and Clark wintered on the Oregon coast during their famous expedition, and John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company built Astoria in 1811.**

**The United States and Britain agreed to the "joint occupation" of Oregon in 1818, when Spain and Russia still had claims to the region, allowing the citizens of each nation equal access to the territory. Merchant mariners and "mountain men" who worked for the various fur companies shared Oregon with the Indians, but there were few white settlers. Then, in 1829, Hall J. Kelley renewed interest in the region with the American Society for Encouraging the Settlement of the Oregon Country.**

The Reverend Jason Lee, and several other Protestant missionaries sent to convert the Flathead Indians, settled in the Willamette River valley, south of the Columbia, by the 1830s. Dr. Marcus Whitman and his wife Narcissa, who was among the first group of white women to cross the Rockies, built their mission east of the Cascade Mountains among the Cayuse Indians. The Whitmans, who never learned to appreciate the natives’ culture or social customs, were killed by the Cayuses after a measles epidemic decimated the tribe. Other missionaries also faced resistance from the Indians who wished to maintain their traditional ways, and began encouraging white emigration to extend "civilization" to the territory. There were about 500 Americans living in the region by the end of the decade, sending back reports on the temperate climate, abundant forests, and fertile soil.

Motivated by the spirit of Manifest Destiny, "Oregon Fever" seized thousands of western Americans hard hit by the economic depression—known as the Panic of 1837—triggered largely by an over-speculation in federal lands. Independence, Missouri, was the starting point of the 2,000 mile Overland Trail, blazed by Jedediah Smith, Jim Bridger, and other mountain men. Commonly referred to as the "Oregon Trail," the route ran along the Missouri and Platte Rivers, across the Great Plains, and through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains. West of the continental divide, in present-day Idaho, wagon trains either moved into Oregon down the Snake and Columbia Rivers or turned southward along the California Trail.

In the years prior to the Civil War, more than 300,000 Americans traveled west, typically with all their belongings in "prairie schooners," canvas-covered wagons typically pulled by oxen. Most of the Oregon pioneers were young farm families from the middle west, who completed the difficult journey in five or six months. A high percentage of the California gold-seekers were young, unmarried men, who expected to return to their families as wealthy men. Many overland pioneers died on the trail—17 per mile, according to one estimate—but fewer than 400 were killed by hostile Indians. The various Indian tribes frequently developed a flourishing trade with the whites passing through their lands, and occasionally served as scouts for the wagon trains.

It was clear that the joint occupation of Oregon could not continue indefinitely. About 5,000 Americans had made the trek to Oregon by the mid-1840s, most of them settling south of the Columbia River. There were perhaps 700 British citizens living near Fort Vancouver on the north bank of the Columbia. Daniel Webster and Lord Ashburton discussed the Oregon issue during their negotiations in 1842, but did not reach an agreement. President John Tyler suggested that the boundary line be extended from the Rocky Mountains along the forty-ninth parallel, but the British refused to relinquish their claims to the Columbia. The spirit of Manifest Destiny could not be held in check for long, however, and the presidential election of 1844 ultimately determined the extent of American territorial expansion.

The Annexation of Texas

When Mexico gained its independence from Spain, Texas was a sparsely settled frontier province bordering the United States. Texas, explored by the Spanish as early as the 1500s, was largely neglected in the centuries that followed. Only a few thousand Mexicans—known as Tejanos—lived in the province by the early 1820s, most of them clustered around the mission at San Antonio. The Mexican government encouraged Americans to emigrate to Texas in an effort to create a military buffer between marauding Indians and the more southern provinces. The Americans were required to give up their citizenship, convert to Roman Catholicism, and become Mexican citizens. In return, they were granted huge tracts of land in the region bordering Louisiana, along the Sabine, Colorado, and Brazos Rivers.

The first American empresario was Moses Austin, a former New Englander who had traded with the Spanish for decades. Austin was granted 18,000 square miles, with the understanding that he would settle 300 American families on his lands. His son, Stephen F. Austin, had the grant confirmed by Mexican authorities after his father’s death, and by the mid-1830s there were about 30,000 Americans ranching and growing cotton with the aid of several thousand black slaves. Despite the fact that the Mexican government had abolished slavery, Americans continued to emigrate with their “lifetime indentured servants.” The Americans in Texas greatly outnumbered the native Mexicans, and they sought full statehood for the province in order to gain home rule.

The American-born Texans supported Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna for the presidency of Mexico in 1833, because they believed he would support statehood. But after his election, Santa Anna proclaimed a unified central government that eliminated states’ rights. The Texans, with some Tejano allies, revolted against Santa Anna’s dictatorship. The revolutionaries declared their independence on March 2, 1836, and adopted a constitution legalizing slavery. David G. Burnet, a native of New Jersey who had lived with the Comanches for two years, was chosen president of the new republic. Sam Houston, a former Tennessee congressman and governor who fought under Andrew Jackson during the War of 1812, was selected as Commander-in-Chief of the army.

The Mexican government responded swiftly to put down the Texas rebellion. Santa Anna raised a force of about 6,000 troops, and marched north to besiege the nearly 200 rebels under the command of Colonel William B. Travis at the Alamo, the abandoned mission at San Antonio. The final assault was made on March 6, and the entire garrison was annihilated, including the wounded. Among the dead were frontier legends Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie. A few weeks later at Goliad, Santa Anna ordered the slaughter of 300 Texas rebels after they surrendered.

The Texas Revolution struck a sympathetic chord in America. Hundreds of southwestern adventurers responded to the romanticized heroism of the Alamo and promises of bounty lands. Ignoring American neutrality laws, they rushed to join the Texas army. With fewer than 900 men—about half the size of Santa Anna’s force—General Houston surprised the Mexicans at the San Jacinto River, near the site of the city that bears his name. “Remember the Alamo!” and “Goliad!” were the rallying cries of the Texans as they overwhelmed the veteran Mexican army

Santa Anna was captured after the Battle of San Jacinto and forced to sign a treaty recognizing Texas as an independent republic, with the Rio Grande River as its southwestern boundary. Upon his return to Mexico City, Santa Anna repudiated the peace treaty. The Mexican Congress likewise refused to acknowledge the independence of Texas, and continued to claim the Nueces River as the boundary of its “rebellious province.” Mexico warned of war should the United States attempt to annex Texas.

Following the revolution, Sam Houston was elected president of Texas, and diplomatic envoys were sent to Washington seeking admission to the Union. President Andrew Jackson, concerned that the annexation of Texas might mean war with Mexico and knowing it would upset the sectional balance between free and slave states, merely extended diplomatic recognition to the new republic on March 3, 1837. His immediate successor in the White House, Martin Van Buren, also managed to sidestep the question of annexation.

President Van Buren was defeated for re-election by William Henry Harrison in the famous “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too” campaign of 1840. Tyler was a former Democratic senator from Virginia who resigned his seat rather than vote to expunge a resolution of censure directed against Jackson. This made him an attractive running-mate for Harrison, but it did not make him a Whig in principle. Harrison became the first president to die in office (only a month after his inauguration) and President Tyler soon broke with the Whigs over two key issues—the constitutionality of a national bank and the annexation of Texas.

Tyler selected South Carolinian John C. Calhoun as secretary of state, and instructed him to negotiate a treaty of annexation with the Texas envoys in Washington. Expansionists feared that an independent Texas would blunt America’s march into the southwest. Calhoun subsequently submitted a treaty to the Senate, but also made public his correspondence with the British minister, Richard Pakenham. In his letter, Calhoun chastised British officials for pressuring the Texans to abolish slavery in return for Mexican recognition of their independence. The Republic of Texas had established close diplomatic ties with several European nations, including Britain and France, in an effort to protect itself from Mexico. After defending slavery as a benign institution, Calhoun claimed that the preservation of the Union required the annexation of Texas. By linking the expansion of slavery with the admission of Texas, Calhoun doomed the annexation treaty.

The annexation of Texas and the Oregon boundary dispute were major issues during the election of 1844. While President Tyler was plotting to annex Texas, the leading contenders for the presidential nominations of the Democratic and Whig Parties did their best to defuse the explosive controversy. Former president Martin Van Buren and Henry Clay published letters expressing their opposition to the immediate annexation of Texas. Their anti-expansionist views cost Van Buren the Democratic nomination, and Clay the presidency.

Manifest Destiny was so strong among northwestern and southern Democrats, that the party’s national convention nominated James Knox Polk of Tennessee for president. “Young Hickory” ran on a platform calling for the “re-annexation of Texas” and the “re-occupation of Oregon.” Clay received the Whig nomination by acclamation, but westerners remembered his Texas letter and some northeasterners refused to support a slaveholder. James G. Birney, the candidate of the Liberty Party, polled enough Whig support in New York to swing that state’s electoral vote to Polk, who was elected president.

President Tyler viewed the Democratic victory as a mandate to annex Texas. Recognizing the difficulty of securing the two-thirds Senate vote necessary to ratify a treaty, Tyler hit upon an ingenious ploy. He sought a joint resolution of annexation from Congress that required a simple majority in each house. This was accomplished shortly before Tyler left office. After a state convention agreed to annexation on the Fourth of July, Texas was formally admitted to the Union in December 1845. President Polk, meanwhile, ordered General Zachary Taylor and about half of the United States army—some 3,500 men—to take up a defensive position on the Nueces River.

The Mexican American War

The process of admitting Texas as a slave state was well under way by the time Polk became president on March 4, 1845. One plank of the Democratic platform was thus resolved. In his first annual message to Congress, Polk asserted that the American claim to the entire Oregon country was “clear and unquestionable.” The British, who had refused on several occasions to relinquish any territory north of the Columbia River, now had a change of heart. Their chief fur-trading post had been moved to Vancouver Island, and British Minister Pakenham suggested extending the boundary line from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific along the forty-ninth parallel. Polk, focusing on settling the Texas controversy and acquiring California, agreed to submit the British proposal to the Senate. On June 18, 1846, over the protests of expansionist Democratic senators demanding all of Oregon to the southern border of Alaska—“Fifty-four forty or fight”—the Oregon boundary settlement was ratified. Polk was especially pleased with the timing of the compromise, because the United States was already at war with Mexico.

Mexico broke diplomatic relations with Washington following the annexation of Texas, and continued to claim the Nueces River as the southwestern border of its rebellious province. Exacerbating the situation were millions of dollars in inflated claims that Americans had lodged against the Mexican government, and the driving desire of President Polk to acquire the valuable Pacific ports of California. Polk appointed John Slidell of Louisiana as minister to Mexico, and instructed him to offer up to 30 million dollars to settle the disputed claims and purchase California and New Mexico—the territory between Texas and California. Secretary of War William Marcy suggested to Thomas Larkin, the American consul in Monterey, that the Californios might follow the Texas example and declare their independence from Mexico. John Charles Frémont led an ostensible “exploring expedition” to support such a revolt.

The Polk administration failed in its initial efforts to acquire California and settle the Texas controversy. Californians did not rise in revolt, and Mexico rejected Slidell as an American minister. Polk then ordered General Taylor to move his troops across the Nueces to the Rio Grande, but the stalemate continued. On Saturday, May 9, 1846, the president informed his cabinet that the U.S. “had ample cause of war,” based upon the rejection of Slidell as minister and the claims issue. Only Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft, the preeminent historian of the age, opposed seeking an immediate declaration of war from Congress. That very evening, however, word was received that fighting had commenced along the Rio Grande. The following Monday, Polk declared that Mexico “invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil.” Congress responded with a war resolution and an authorization for 50,000 volunteers.

The war with Mexico was popular in the Mississippi Valley, but was derided as “Mr. Polk’s War” in the northeast. Whigs generally opposed the war, but party members in Congress voted to support the American soldiers and marines during the fighting. Abraham Lincoln, a Whig congressman from Illinois, believed Polk rushed the country into war over the disputed territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. He demanded to know the exact “spot” the war started, but his views were not popular back home and he chose not to run for reelection.

Antislavery men naturally viewed the conflict as a brazen conspiracy to extend the boundaries of the "peculiar institution." James Russell Lowell, an abolitionist poet, castigated the Mexican War in the Biglow Papers:

They jest want this Californy

So’s to lug new slave-states in,

To abuse ye, an’ to scorn ye,

An’ to plunder ye like sin.

Henry Davis Thoreau symbolically protested the war by refusing to pay his Massachusetts poll tax. He spent one night in the Concord jail, before his aunt paid his fine and he returned to Walden Pond to write a classic essay, “Civil Disobedience.” Thoreau rhetorically inquired: “How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.”

Despite the opposition of Whigs and antislavery men, the war with Mexico was an unparalleled military success. After the first clash in late April, General Taylor crossed the Rio Grande and defeated numerically superior Mexican forces at the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. Advancing on Monterrey, a town in northern Mexico, "Old Rough and Ready" and his men faced fierce house-to-house fighting against a valiant Mexican army led by General Pedro de Ampudia. Taylor agreed to a negotiated surrender, allowing the Mexican troops to retreat with their arms. President Polk countermanded the armistice, and ordered Taylor to take a defensive position and detach most of his veteran troops to bolster a planned attack against Mexico City. General Santa Anna tried to exploit Taylor’s weakened position, but the Battle of Buena Vista in February 1847 was a stunning American victory. It was also Taylor’s last fight—he returned home a military hero destined for the White House.

Polk’s main objective—California—was not the scene of major military action. Americans living near Sonoma raised the “Bear Flag Revolt” in June 1846, aided by Frémont’s small force. After his sailors and marines seized Monterey, Commodore John D. Sloat proclaimed the annexation of California and instituted a military government. Some Mexican loyalists resisted the American occupation, and sporadic fighting continued. Meanwhile, Colonel Stephen Kearney's small army garrisoned Santa Fe, New Mexico, before resuming their march. En route, Kearney encountered Kit Carson, who incorrectly reported that California had been pacified. Sending all but one hundred men back east, Kearney joined forces at San Diego with Commodore Robert Stockton and helped put down the loyalist revolt. The American forces entered Los Angeles in January 1847, ending the fighting in California.

The decisive campaign of the war was the expedition against Mexico City. Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the United States Army, landed his men on the beaches near Vera Cruz, and commenced a march that traced the route taken 300 years before by Cortés. Scott brushed aside Santa Anna’s army at Cerro Gordo, a battle in which Captains Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan distinguished themselves. Santa Anna hastily recruited a Mexican army of about 20,000 troops, but many of them were ill-trained and equipped. In a series of sharp battles near the capital city, General Scott's army of nearly 14,000 men overwhelmed the Mexican forces. The fortified hill of Chapultepec was stormed despite the desperate resistance of the defenders, who included young military cadets known as “los niños." Mexico City fell on September 14, as American soldiers and marines entered the “halls of the Montezuma.”

Nicholas P. Trist, the chief clerk of the State Department, was sent by Polk to negotiate a peace treaty with the Mexican government. It was signed on February 2, 1848, at Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Mexico acknowledged the annexation of Texas (with the Rio Grande as its border), and ceded New Mexico and California to the United States. In return, the United States paid $15,000,000 for the Mexican Cession, and assumed up to $3,250,000 of the disputed claims. The war’s human toll included about 13,000 American dead—the vast majority due to diseases. In terms of the percentage of combatants, this remains the nation's costliest military conflict. It also reopened the slavery expansion controversy settled by the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Ralph Waldo Emerson prophetically warned, “The United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man swallows the arsenic, which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us.” Indeed, the Mexican Cession became a political battleground between the North and the South. The issue was raised early in the war by David Wilmot, a Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania. Employing the language of the Northwest Ordinance, Wilmot proposed that slavery be prohibited in any territory acquired from Mexico. The “Wilmot Proviso” passed the House frequently in the next several years, but it was always defeated in the Senate. It never became law, but represented the extreme Northern position regarding the extension of slavery.

Senator John C. Calhoun presented the extreme Southern position on slavery expansion in February 1847. Calhoun argued that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in any American territory, and Southerners subsequently demanded that federal slave codes protect slavery in the Mexican Cession. Two compromise proposals were also advanced prior to the election of 1848. James Buchanan urged that the Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30’ be extended to the Pacific. President Polk agreed; but it was becoming more difficult for politicians to concede any territory in the fight over slavery. The other compromise proposal, known as “popular sovereignty,” was introduced in December 1847 by Lewis Cass, a moderate Democratic senator from Michigan. Cass adroitly proposed that the explosive slavery question be removed from the halls of Congress by letting the people of the territories decide the matter. As it turned out, a decision would have to be reached soon because of the California gold rush.

California Gold

In January 1848, gold was discovered on property belonging to John Sutter in the Sierra Nevada foothills of northern California. Sutter tried to keep the discovery secret, but word leaked out shortly after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was ratified. An estimated 100,000 “Forty-niners” from around the globe flocked to the gold fields the following year alone. Seemingly overnight, San Francisco grew from fewer than 1,000 residents to a major port city of 20,000. The vast majority of the new immigrants were men, including some of the first Chinese migrants to California. Most of the gold seekers who survived ultimately returned home poorer than when they left. Some women joined their husbands, and found that they could make their own fortunes feeding the miners and doing their laundry. Single women, including prostitutes, set up shop for themselves, enjoying more economic freedom but experiencing less personal security in the lawless mining camps.

As the population of California exploded, a convention met at Monterey in the fall of 1849 and drafted a state constitution prohibiting slavery. Zachary Taylor, who defeated Lewis Cass for the presidency in the previous election, urged Congress to admit California as a free state. Taylor owned plantations in Louisiana and Mississippi and was the former father-in-law of Jefferson Davis, who had fought under him at Buena Vista, but he was no apologist for slavery. Old Rough and Ready had spent his entire adult life prior to becoming president in the United States Army, and was a staunch nationalist. He saw no reason why California should not be admitted as a free state, as its residents wished. Up to this time, even the champions of slavery had conceded the right of state governments to decide the issue. Nonetheless, if California were admitted as a “Wilmot Proviso” state it would upset the sectional balance, and deprive slaveholders of the most valuable portion of the Mexican Cession. Ironically, the national expansion that sprang from Manifest Destiny now placed the Union itself in jeopardy.

Slave Resistance

During the 1850s, Americans witnessed a decade of sectional crises that threatened the very existence of the Union. Ralph Waldo Emerson was right in predicting that the Mexican Cession would reignite the explosive issue of slavery expansion. The newly acquired territory lay beyond the Louisiana Purchase and therefore was not part of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Californians were clamoring for statehood, the residents of Utah and New Mexico deserved territorial governments, abolitionists wanted to prohibit slavery in Washington, and Southerners demanded a more effective fugitive slave law. The sectional battle lines were forming. Southerners took an increasingly aggressive stance in defending their “peculiar institution,” while criticism of slavery intensified in the north. The debate was sharpened by the refusal of African-Americans to passively accept their bondage.

Most slaves led harsh and brutal lives. They were frequently whipped and sometimes branded or mutilated. On the larger plantations the majority of slaves worked in the fields, generally from daybreak until sundown, under the supervision of an overseer and his drivers. Domestic slaves might wear fine clothes and be trusted with the raising of their master’s children, but they were under constant white supervision and subject to the whims of their owners. Slave families could be heartlessly separated, and free blacks—in the north and south—were in danger of being kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Black resistance to enslavement took many forms, and played an important role in fashioning a compromise to the sectional controversy in 1850. Armed rebellion by the slaves was extremely rare, but a few potentially violent plots were uncovered during the early nineteenth century. The first was organized in 1800 by Gabriel Prosser, and involved about 50 slaves living near Richmond, Virginia. Hundreds of slaves learned about the planned uprising, and two of them informed the white authorities. Governor James Monroe called out the militia and Prosser and 25 of his followers were executed, although their owners received compensation. Denmark Vesey, a literate carpenter who purchased his freedom from lottery winnings, spent five years devising an elaborate scheme to seize control of Charleston, South Carolina. Vesey also was betrayed by slaves and hanged along with 35 fellow conspirators, in the summer of 1822.

The only significant slave insurrection during the antebellum period was Nat Turner’s Rebellion. A literate slave, Turner believed that it was his divine mission to “slay my enemies with their own weapons.” In 1831, he led about 30 slaves on a murderous rampage through tidewater Virginia, killing close to 60 men, women, and children. A wholesale slaughter of blacks took place before the uprising was put down. Turner eluded his pursuers for two months before being captured, tried, and executed. In response to the revolt, southern states strictly enforced laws prohibiting the education of slaves, and increased surveillance of free African-Americans. Northern black sailors were sometimes incarcerated while their ships were anchored in southern ports, and throughout the countryside mounted “slave patrols” were increased to prevent blacks from meeting without whites present and to catch runaway slaves.

African-Americans usually took less desperate measures than armed rebellion in their struggle against the “peculiar institution.” White Southerners frequently complained of slaves refusing to work hard, breaking their tools, stealing food, and committing petty acts of sabotage or arson. Many slaves ran away, sometimes in an effort to avoid punishment or to visit nearby family members. Most were soon caught or returned voluntarily after a few days. On average, about 1,000 slaves succeeded in fleeing to free states each year, using their skills and cunning to outwit their owners and pursuers. Henry “Box” Brown managed to be shipped in a crate from Richmond to Philadelphia. Ellen Craft disguised herself as a sickly male slaveholder and escaped to the North with her husband, who posed as her slave.

Some fugitive slaves were aided by the Underground Railroad once they reached the free states. Although its effectiveness and scope were exaggerated after the Civil War, the “railroad” was a loosely organized group of abolitionist “conductors” who operated safe-house “stations” in northern states and transported their “passengers” to freedom in Canada, beyond the reach of slave catchers. Harriett Tubman, dubbed “the Moses of her people,” was the most famous Underground Railroad conductor. She escaped from Maryland in 1849, and risked her freedom by returning from Canada 19 times to rescue some 300 slaves—including her parents. During the Civil War, she served as a Union spy.

It is likely that more slaves were emancipated by their owners or purchased their freedom than ever escaped, but fugitive slaves increased sectional tensions. In 1842, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Prigg v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that Congress had the sole power to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. This led to the passage of “personal liberty laws” in several northern states, designed to protect the rights of alleged fugitive slaves by prohibiting state officials from assisting in their capture. Southerners complained that these laws made it impossible to return their escaped property, and demanded a more stringent fugitive slave act. Adding further fuel to an already explosive issue, some Northerners called upon Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia and ban it from the Mexican Cession. Clearly, a political compromise was needed to settle the sectional controversy.

The Compromise of 1850

When California residents applied for statehood after the Gold Rush swelled the population, Congress faced a dilemma. Northerners were a solid majority in the House of Representatives, but the Senate was equally divided between 15 free and 15 slave states. Southerners dominated the Supreme Court and Zachary Taylor, who owned plantations and slaves in Louisiana and Mississippi, was in the White House. California sought admission as a free state, and this threatened to upset the delicate sectional balance. Northerners also expected Utah and New Mexico, in need of territorial governments, to eventually join the Union as free states.

It was Senator Henry Clay, the “Great Pacificator,” who attempted to settle the sectional crisis in a sweeping political compromise. In January 1850, the 72 year-old Kentucky Whig introduced a series of resolutions that called for the admission of California as a free state; the organization of territorial governments for Utah and New Mexico, without “any restriction or condition on the subject of slavery”; the abolition of the slave trade (but not slavery) in the District of Columbia; a more stringent fugitive slave act, to circumvent the various personal liberty laws; and the scaling back of the Texas boundary claims in return for the federal assumption of the state’s debts. Clay implicitly supported the popular sovereignty principle regarding the Mexican Cession, rejecting both the Wilmot Proviso and a federal slave code for the western territory.

Clay defended his proposals in a lengthy two-day speech delivered to the Senate in February, but not everyone in the audience was prepared to compromise. John C. Calhoun was too feeble to speak as scheduled on March 4, so his defiant final thoughts on the sectional crisis were read to the Senate by James M. Mason of Virginia. Calhoun argued that Southerners had “no compromise to offer,” because the North had been chipping away at the political equality of slaveholders since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Northerners must concede to the South the right to carry slaves into the Mexican Cession, return all fugitive slaves, and “cease the agitation of the slave question.” Calhoun died before the month ended, but his unyielding opposition to compromise was espoused by Jefferson Davis and a younger generation of southern “fire-eaters”—the most aggressive supporters of slavery and, ultimately, secession.

Daniel Webster, along with Clay and Calhoun part of the “Great Triumvirate,” rose in the Senate for his last significant address on March 7. “I speak to-day for the preservation of the Union,” he began, “Hear me for my cause.” The Massachusetts Whig eloquently upheld Clay’s resolutions, claiming that the Wilmot Proviso was unnecessary because the “laws of nature” prevented slavery from flourishing in the inhospitable western climate and soil. He failed to convince New England abolitionists, however, who denounced Webster for also supporting a stronger fugitive slave law. John Greenleaf Whittier dismissed the once “God-like Daniel” in a vitriolic poem, “Ichabod”:

All else is gone, from those great eyes

The soul has fled

When faith is lost, when honor dies,

The man is dead!

William Henry Seward, a 48 year-old New York Whig and an implacable foe of compromise, spoke on March 11. He demanded the immediate admission of California as a free state, without any concessions to the South. Seward argued, “There is a higher law than the Constitution, which regulates our authority over the domain.” This extra-Constitutional “higher law” idea was frightening to Unionists, and came back to haunt Seward when he sought the Republican presidential nomination in 1860. Lewis Cass, “The Father of Popular Sovereignty,” joined the Senate debate and echoed Webster’s support for Clay’s proposals in an effort “to calm this agitation.”

On April 18, the Senate chose Henry Clay to chair a Committee of Thirteen, formed to draft compromise legislation. The other 12 members, including Webster and Cass, were equally divided between Northerners and Southerners, and Whigs and Democrats. In May, the committee reported three bills to the Senate. The first, dubbed the “Omnibus bill,” called for the admission of a free California, settled the Texas boundary, and established territorial governments for Utah and New Mexico. The other bills strengthened the fugitive slave law and abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia.

As the debate continued through the hot summer months, it became clear that Clay’s strategy was failing because senators who opposed any section of the Omnibus bill were prepared to vote against it. President Taylor, for his part, saw no reason why California’s admission to the Union should be linked to a larger compromise. On the Fourth of July, the president endured hours of oratory under a broiling sun. Upon returning to the White House, he attempted to cool off by consuming excessive amounts of cucumbers, cherries, and iced milk. He died five days later of a violent stomach disorder. Millard Fillmore, who was sworn in as the thirteenth president, was pledged to support a legislative compromise. Nevertheless, a majority of the Senate still opposed the Omnibus bill in its entirety and, on August 1, only the provision establishing the Utah territorial government was passed.

Bitterly disappointed, Clay gave up the struggle and left Washington for the more healthful climate of the Rhode Island seashore. But the victory of those opposed to a comprehensive accord was short-lived. Stephen A. Douglas, a young Democratic senator from Illinois, assumed the task of dividing Clay’s remaining proposals into individual bills and steering them through Congress. By late September, the legislation collectively known as the Compromise of 1850 was signed into law by President Fillmore. California was admitted as a free state, Utah and New Mexico were created as territories, Texas was compensated with ten million dollars for accepting its present-day borders, the slave trade was abolished in the District of Columbia, and a more stringent fugitive slave law was enacted. Stephen Douglas, nicknamed the “Little Giant,” proudly declared that “the whole country” accepted the Compromise as the “final settlement” to the sectional controversy.

Americans generally supported the Compromise of 1850, with the exception of political extremists in both the north and the south. The Fugitive Slave Act was particularly galling to many Northerners. Alleged runaways were not permitted a jury trial or allowed to testify at their hearing, and the commissioners who decided the cases were paid ten dollars if they returned accused fugitives to slavery but only five dollars if they released them. In addition, “all good citizens” were “commanded to aid and assist in the prompt execution of this law.” Anyone obstructing the return of a fugitive slave or participating in a rescue was liable to a maximum fine of 1,000 dollars and a six-month term of imprisonment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson reflected the feelings of many Northerners when he wrote, “This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century, by people who could read and write.” He asserted that no one could obey the Fugitive Slave Act without the “loss of self-respect.” A fellow New Englander put it even more bluntly—the law he reckoned placed the value of an escaped slave at 1,000 dollars, and the price of a Yankee soul at five.

Northern opposition to the law flared when slave catchers attempted to return fugitives to their owners. One of the first arrests took place in October 1850 at Detroit. Giles Rose, employed as a laborer by a former governor of Michigan, was accused of escaping from Tennessee and placed in the custody of the federal marshal. Armed blacks, including several hundred that crossed over from Canada, surrounded the jail and threatened to free Rose. Before blood was shed in a rescue attempt, a town meeting was held and 500 dollars was swiftly raised to purchase his freedom.

More spectacular rescues took place in the year following passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Ellen and William Craft were rushed to safety by Boston abolitionists before a Georgia slave catcher could claim them. Frederick “Shadrach” Minkins (variously known as Wilkins or Jenkins), working as a waiter in a Boston coffeehouse, was arrested as a fugitive but freed by a band of African-American citizens. In Syracuse, New York, the Liberty Party was holding its state convention when William “Jerry” Henry, a known fugitive from Missouri, was arrested. An angry crowd marched on the building where he was held. Led by Gerrit Smith, one of the wealthiest men in the state, and Jermain Loguen, a conductor on the Underground Railroad and himself a fugitive, the rescuers broke down the door with a battering ram. Henry was taken in a wagon to Oswego, where he crossed Lake Ontario to freedom in Canada.

Despite some successes by antislavery Northerners, more than 200 runaways were returned to the south under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. When an abolitionist newspaper editor in Wisconsin, Sherman Booth, was jailed in 1854 for assisting in the rescue of an escaped slave, the state legislature declared the federal law to be “void, and of no force.” The slavery issue transcended Constitutional theory—even northern states were willing to embrace Calhoun’s doctrine of nullification in the sectional struggle. Several other northern states also passed new “personal liberty laws,” making it difficult for federal authorities to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act. In 1859 the Supreme Court ruled in Abelman v. Booth that the law was constitutional, and Booth returned to jail. Nonetheless, the Fugitive Slave Act was essentially unenforceable in many parts of the North by the mid-1850s.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin

The most significant response to the Fugitive Slave Act came from the pen of novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe. Uncle Tom’s Cabin ran serially for nearly a year in an abolitionist newspaper, before it was published as a book in early 1852. It was an immediate and phenomenal success—selling 10,000 copies its first week in print, and 300,000 within a year. By the time of the Civil War, several million copies were in circulation, and many Union soldiers received their first lessons in the “peculiar institution” from the pages of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. More than anything else, Stowe’s novel released pent-up feelings of guilt and revulsion toward slavery among Northerners who previously had not given much thought to the sectional controversy. What was once primarily a political or constitutional issue, took on the trappings of a moral crusade.

The visceral impact of Uncle Tom’s Cabin was due largely to the enchanting characters that seemingly leaped to life from its pages. Tom was vividly described as a long-suffering saintly slave; Eva, an angelic daughter of white slave owners; and Simon Legree, a native of Vermont, was the brutal slave driver who whipped Tom to death. A melodramatic plot captured the imaginations of readers and moved many to tears. In one memorable scene a mulatto slave, Eliza Harris, heroically fled across the ice floes of the Ohio River with her son clutched in her arms and the slave catchers’ bloodhounds baying at her heels. Stowe championed domestic and family values, and graphically depicted how the institution of slavery corrupted the Christian virtues of both whites and blacks. She later remarked that God wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and certainly she was profoundly influenced by the Second Great Awakening. Her father, brother, and husband were all evangelical ministers who embraced abolitionism. Stowe was denounced in the south as that “vile wretch in petticoats,” but her novel was a propaganda victory for the antislavery cause.

Southern writers attempted futilely in the ensuing “cabin wars” to portray slavery as a benign institution. Aunt Phyllis’s Cabin, for example, described Christian masters who neither whipped their slaves nor broke up families. Literary defenders of the “peculiar institution” contended that the slaves themselves were more satisfied with their lot than the desperate “wage slaves” of the northern factories. Such efforts did little, however, to change Northern sentiments toward slavery. Instead, Uncle Tom’s Cabin inflamed public opinion in both the north and the south during the 1850s. For millions of Americans, Stowe imbued the slavery issue with an emotional fervor that hastened the Civil War.

The Ostend Manifesto

Manifest Destiny remained a driving force in the years following the war with Mexico. Throughout the nation Democrats, especially, flocked to the “Young America” movement, which championed the European revolutionaries of 1848 and the spread of democratic ideals around the globe. Expansionists also sought new markets and further territorial acquisitions. Southerners particularly coveted Cuba, the final remnant of Spain’s once grand empire in the Western Hemisphere, and they had an ally in the White House. Franklin Pierce, a Democrat from New Hampshire, defeated General Winfield Scott for the presidency in 1852, despite being derided by abolitionists as “a northern man with southern principles.” The Pierce administration actively sought to annex Cuba, lying 90 miles off the Florida Keys, even though President James K. Polk’s previous offer of 100 million dollars for the island had been scornfully rejected by the Spanish government.

On February 28, 1854, an incident took place in Havana, Cuba, that heightened the tensions between the United States and Spain. An American merchant ship, the Black Warrior, was seized by Spanish authorities and its owners subsequently fined six thousand dollars for violating customs regulations. Southerners were willing to use this affront to national honor as a pretext for war with Spain, expecting to gain Cuba in the process. Spanish officials, however, realized the gravity of the situation and soon released the Black Warrior. This temporarily defused the diplomatic crisis, but the Pierce administration responded with a secret plan to acquire Cuba.

Secretary of State William L. Marcy, a New Yorker, instructed several American diplomats in Europe to devise a solution to the Cuba question. Two of the ministers were aggressively in favor of extending slavery—Pierre Soulé of Louisiana, who represented the U.S. in Madrid; and James M. Mason of Virginia, ambassador to France. The third was James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, minister to Great Britain, who joined many northern Democrats who supported territorial expansion, be it slave or free. The American ministers first met in Ostend, Belgium, before concluding their talks at Aix-la-Chapelle in Prussia. They drafted a truly remarkable document, known as the Ostend Manifesto, on October 18, 1854.

Soulé, Mason, and Buchanan claimed that Cuba was “an unceasing danger, and a permanent cause of anxiety and alarm” to the United States. They urged the Pierce administration to “purchase Cuba from Spain at any price for which it can be obtained.” If the Spanish refused to sell the island, however, Americans, “By every law, human and divine, . . . shall be justified in wresting it from Spain if we possess the power.” The Ostend Manifesto was leaked to the New York Herald, and it created a furor in the north. The Pierce administration appeared ready to go to war with Spain to acquire more slave territory. Secretary of State Marcy publicly disavowed the “buccaneering document,” and Soulé resigned in protest. The Ostend Manifesto, coupled with Uncle Tom’s Cabin, drove a wedge between the North and the South and undermined the effectiveness of the Compromise of 1850 as the final solution to the sectional controversy.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

Many Americans believed that a transcontinental railroad would unify the United States by linking eastern and western points of the rapidly expanding nation. Not everyone, however, agreed where the railroad should be built. U.S. minister to Mexico James Gadsden, a Southerner, wanted the route to go through Texas and the New Mexico Territory to the Pacific Ocean. Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, meanwhile, supported a plan to wind the railroad through Chicago and the Nebraska Territory, where he owned a sizable amount of land. Douglas’s proposal, though, faced substantial obstacles—the U.S. government had designated the region as Indian Territory and banned white settlers.

Douglas refused to let anything block his plan. He supported the decision by the federal government to revoke earlier land grant promises and force the Indians to move. The senator then developed a political scheme to win the support of Southerners, the primary backers of Gadsden’s plan. In 1854, Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which split the territory into two sections, slave state Kansas and free state Nebraska. He believed in popular sovereignty and pushed to let the residents of each territory decide whether their state would permit slavery. Douglas called for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that prohibited slavery north of the 36° 30’ line because both Nebraska and Kansas were located north of the line.

The senator realized that the opportunity to create another slave state would entice Southerners to support his plan, which they did with enthusiasm. He drove the bill through Congress and, in the process, angered a majority of his fellow Northerners. Douglas knew that Southerners would whole-heartedly support his plan; however, he seriously miscalculated reaction from Northerners. Outraged protesters declared the compromise repeal “a gross violation of a sacred pledge.” The decision to reopen the slavery issue to allow more slave states re-ignited decades-old conflict between Northerners and Southerners and set the foundation for the coming Civil War.

Kansas’ fertile farm land and its location next to Missouri, a slave state, made it the most likely of the new territories to support slavery. However, since popular sovereignty gave the citizens of the territory the right to decide the issue, both abolitionists and “proslavery-ites” recruited settlers to establish a majority there. One organization, the New England Emigrant Aid Company, sent thousands of people to Kansas. The company armed the pioneers with rifles nicknamed “Beecher’s Bibles,” after the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher who raised money to purchase the weapons. The group traveled to the new territory singing a marching song penned by Quaker poet Whittier.

“We cross the prairie as of old

The Pilgrims crossed the sea,

To make the West, as they the East,

The homestead of the free!”

Southerners who supported Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act became irate when abolitionists attempted to make both Nebraska and Kansas free states. Leading Southerners refused to lose both territories to the “Negro-loving free-soilers,” and encouraged many settlers, including several slave-owners, to claim Kansas land. The proslavery-ites, who like their Northern counterparts were also well-armed, shouted their own rallying cry.

“You Yankees tremble, and abolitionists fall

Our motto is, “Give Southern Rights to all!”

As the two groups convinced more and more followers to move to Kansas, their anger and hostility toward each other swelled. Skirmishes took place throughout the territory and conflicts over land claims often grew violent. In 1855, residents went to the polls to elect members of the territory’s first legislature. However, armed slavery supporters from Missouri, angry that “foreigners” from New England were trying to “steal” Kansas, poured across the border to vote repeatedly. Although a census recorded almost 3,000 eligible voters, more than 6,000 votes were cast. The Missourian’s strong-arm tactics vaulted slavery supporters to victory and established Kansas as a slave state. Abolitionists considered the government fraudulent and arranged their own regime based in the town of Topeka. Both groups claimed authority over the territory but neither had secured the right legally.

President Pierce fanned the flames of controversy by denouncing the free state government. In 1856, the crisis reached its boiling point when a mob of proslavery-ites raided the free-soil town of Lawrence. They looted stores, burned buildings, and destroyed the town’s printing press. The violent attack was just the first of many to come and prompted journalists to call the escalating conflict “Bleeding Kansas.”

The controversy in Kansas reflected a growing crisis that was consuming the entire nation. Tension between American-born citizens and immigrants, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews altered the political landscape. New political parties emerged to support the various religious and ethnic causes. The Know-Nothings maintained an anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic platform, but bigotry was not an effective base for a national party and they soon disbanded. Many northern Know-Nothings, Whigs, and Democrats angry at President Pierce for his Kansas policy joined forces in the summer of 1854 to form the Republican Party.

The new party, comprised of mostly Northerners, clashed with Southerners over many federally funded programs, including harbor and river improvements and the trans-continental railroad. Although many abolitionists voted Republican, not all Republicans were strictly antislavery. Many of the party members simply did not want blacks—free or slave—in the territory. The Republican Party grew quickly throughout the northern states and soon became a prominent player in American politics.

The Dred Scott Decision

The controversy surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act affected the 1856 Democratic presidential nomination. Party members vetoed the selection of two prominent figures involved with the act—Stephen Douglas and Franklin Pierce. Rather, delegates elected James Buchanan, a Pennsylvania lawyer not connected with the Kansas-Nebraska affair. Therefore, Democratic leaders believed he was safe from Republican scrutiny.

Buchanan sailed to an easy victory over Republican candidate John Frémont and ex-president Millard Fillmore, who represented the Know-Nothings. At the core of the Buchanan victory was a group of southern ruffians who violently threatened war and secession should the “slave-loving” Frémont take office. The threats worried Northerners, who made up the majority of the Republican Party. Since the Republicans were primarily businessmen, and the possibility of losing their profitable business connections with the South would be a financial disaster. Therefore, many Republicans begrudgingly voted for Buchanan.

Two days after Buchanan took the oath of office, the Supreme Court handed down a decision that would push the nation one step closer to Civil War. The case involved Dred Scott, a Missouri slave who frequently traveled with his owner through Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory. In 1846, Scott sued his owner’s widow for his freedom. He claimed that his residence in free state Illinois, and in the Wisconsin Territory, where the Missouri Compromise outlawed slavery, made him a free man

After several years in litigation, the case made it to the United States Supreme Court. On March 6, 1857, Chief Justice Roger Taney announced the dismissal of Scott’s case. The Supreme Court—with five of its nine members from slave states—ruled that black people were not citizens of the United States. Since Scott was not a U.S. citizen, he could not sue for his liberty. Taney also announced that even if Scott had been considered a citizen, his residence in the Wisconsin Territory did not qualify him to be free. Taney argued that, in his opinion, the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional because it deprived citizens of their property—slaves in this case—without the due process of the law outlined in the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Taney’s ruling declared that since slave owners could take their “property” anywhere, Congress could not ban slavery from the territories.

The Supreme Court’s decision shocked and angered blacks, abolitionists, and popular sovereignty supporters who had fought to end—or at least limit—the expansion of slavery. Republicans responded by declaring that the Court’s ruling was an opinion and, therefore, was not enforceable. Southerners were outraged at the Northerners’ blatant defiance of the Supreme Court’s verdict and promptly revisited their secession discussions. With these actions, the nation crept closer to war.

Lincoln-Douglas Debate of 1858

The Dred Scott case played a pivotal role in the 1858 Illinois senate race and in the 1860 presidential election. Eyeing Stephen Douglas’s seat in the Senate, Abraham Lincoln challenged the incumbent to a series of debates. The two politicians differed in almost every respect. Lincoln, a tall and lanky Republican with a high-pitched voice, relied on his wit and integrity to provide a comforting sense of sincerity. Douglas, meanwhile, was a short, barrel-chested Democrat whose sweeping gestures and booming voice consistently captured the attention of his audiences. Many historians call Douglas the best speaker of his time, which emphasizes the boldness of Lincoln’s challenge.

The seven debates took place in cities throughout Illinois but garnered national attention. The topics discussed on the plains of the Midwest mirrored the issues that concerned all Americans. The viewpoints and ideas presented by both Lincoln and Douglas set the tone for political discussions for years to come.

Perhaps the most famous Lincoln-Douglas debate took place in Freeport, Illinois. Referring to the Dred Scott case, Lincoln asked his opponent if the residents of a territory could exclude slavery before the territory became a state. The Republican, who, like the majority of his party, believed slavery to be a moral issue, hoped to back Douglas into a corner by forcing him to comment on popular sovereignty and slavery. If Douglas continued to support popular sovereignty, his views would contradict the Supreme Court’s ruling that seemed to prohibit a territorial legislature from excluding slavery before statehood. Douglas replied that in order for slavery to exist, laws were necessary to protect it. If no such laws were established, slave-owners would not reside there and the territory would be free. He concluded that if the residents did nothing, slavery would essentially be excluded from the territory. Douglas effectively answered the question without offending pro or antislavery supporters. His famous response became known as the Freeport Doctrine.

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Although Lincoln proved to be a formidable challenger, Douglas employed his superior debating skills to maintain his position in the Senate. Lincoln, however, was by no means a loser. He showed his strengths as a leader not just to the citizens of Illinois, but to the people of America. The modest, Kentucky-born lawyer placed Republican ideals before a national audience and influenced the fledgling party’s strong showing in the 1858 congressional elections.

During the next several months leading up to the 1860 presidential election, Douglas’s Freeport Doctrine would resurface and cost him the Democratic nomination. Many Southerners, primarily boisterous Democrats who influenced many party members, focused on the senator’s statement that the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision could be circumvented. They refused to support a candidate who did not completely back their views on slavery.

Lincoln, on the other hand, catapulted to the top of the Republican Party and received its nomination for president. The emergence of the Republican Party in the north put southern Democrats on the defensive. Although neither party actually campaigned for or against slavery, antislavery supporters began to associate themselves with Republicans while proslavery backers tended to support Democrats. A wall of hostility and bitterness soon separated Northerners from Southerners. As the election of 1860 approached, and Abraham Lincoln’s popularity soared, southern radicals openly discussed secession should the Republican win the White House.

Jim Brown’s Raid

Tension between the North and South over the slavery issue grew more intense as the election of 1860 drew near. Violent reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act spread rapidly throughout the nation. The Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision deepened the divide between Northerners and Southerners—antislavery supporters and proslavery-ites. In 1859, fifty-nine-year-old John Brown devised a plan to provoke a slave revolt to answer the “sacking” of Lawrence, Kansas by radical slavery backers three years earlier.

The Bible-toting abolitionist believed that he was appointed by God to rid the nation of slavery. He turned his home in Ohio into a station on the Underground Railroad, and for a brief period lived in North Elba, a free black community in New York. While Brown planned his retaliatory strike in Virginia, he was a wanted man for several violent raids in Kansas and Missouri. In 1856, two days after Missouri marauders attacked Lawrence, Brown gathered a group of volunteers and raided Pottawatomie Creek. The group savagely murdered five proslavery supporters, mutilating the bodies beyond recognition. Brown and his band moved from town to town, raising havoc in the name of God and antislavery supporters.

The fight over slavery in Kansas pressed President Buchanan to establish a legitimate government there. He appointed Robert Walker as territorial governor to oversee the election of a constitutional convention in 1857. However, those wanting a free state feared that proslavery forces would use intimidation and violence to garner fraudulent votes and boycotted the election, which was held in Lecompton. Consequently, slavery supporters dominated the convention and eventually drafted a proslavery constitution called the Lecompton Constitution. As Buchanan pushed Congress to approve the constitution, Northerners and antislavery supporters, including Brown, became irate.

During the next year, Brown formulated a plan to start a slave rebellion and form a free state for blacks. The heart of the plan involved attacking the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He rented a farmhouse a few miles from the armory and studied the site’s layout. With each passing month, more volunteers, including Brown’s sons, arrived at the farmhouse to join the operation. Brown also secured financial backing for his plan from several wealthy Northerners, commonly referred to as The Secret Six. He shared his strategy with approximately 20 volunteers, but he left most of the plan’s details to divine guidance. Brown believed that that God would intervene to provide exactly what the group needed to succeed

On a crisp fall night in 1859, Brown and his gang advanced toward Harpers Ferry and cut the telegraph lines. The men overpowered the few night watchmen assigned to guard the armory and took several townspeople hostage. Brown then sent his men to look for more hostages. They particularly wanted to find Lewis Washington, a local slaveholder and the great-grandnephew of George Washington. Brown believed that a hostage of his stature would attract additional attention to his cause. The group returned with a handful of hostages, including Washington. Brown explained his mission to the hostages and anyone else within earshot.

“I came here from Kansas, and this is a slave State. I want to free all the negroes in this State; I have possession now of the United States armory, and if the citizens interfere with me I must only burn the town and have blood."

Word of Brown’s scheme quickly spread throughout the town. The abolitionist figured it was only a matter of time before droves of runaway slaves and sympathetic whites arrived at the armory to pick up their weapons and fight for freedom for all slaves. He and his men shuffled the hostages into the compound’s engine house and waited for the next phase of the plan. However, the slaves never showed up. Ironically, the area Brown selected for his slave uprising had very few slaves, and the ones living there were well off and in no hurry to cause trouble.

Early the next morning, Brown’s men shot a railroad employee. The townspeople heard the shots and sent for help. Before long, Brown and his gang were surrounded by local militiamen and a company of United States Marines, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee. President Buchanan, who had been told that the uprising involved more than 700 blacks and whites, ordered three artillery companies and Lee’s unit to respond. Since the Marines were based nearby, they were the first soldiers to arrive.

Brown repeatedly tried to negotiate freedom for his surviving followers, but a cease fire never happened. Lee and his Marines eventually rushed the building and captured Brown and four of his men. The fight left Brown beaten, bleeding, and unconscious. Inside the engine house and the home that Brown and his group rented, federal forces found crates filled with weapons intended to arm the defiant slaves.

Brown and the surviving members of his gang were charged with murder, conspiracy, and treason against the state of Virginia. Brown’s lawyer planned to enter an insanity plea, but the accused refused to go along because he wanted to become a martyr in death. The trial lasted four days, and the jury deliberated for less than one hour before finding Brown guilty and sentencing him to death. The devout abolitionist, lying on a cot in the court room because he was still weak from the wounds he suffered during his capture, was granted an opportunity to address the people. Brown spoke slowly so reporters could capture every word for the following day’s newspapers.

“I believe that to have interfered as I have done in behalf of His despised poor, is not wrong, but right. Now, it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done.”

Although Brown’s actions were backed by a small group of wealthy New Yorkers, Southerners linked the violence to all Northerners. Additionally, since Northerners comprised a majority of the Republican Party, Democrats used the incident to claim that “the raid was the result of the teachings of the Republican Party.” To many Southerners, Civil War now seemed inevitable.