Mr. Carpenter

Notes: AP History

Pre-Civil War

A common assumption to explain the cause of the [American Civil War](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/american-civil-war.htm) was that the North was no longer willing to tolerate slavery as being part of the fabric of US society and that the political power brokers in Washington were planning to abolish slavery throughout the Union. Therefore for many people slavery is the key issue to explain the causes of the American Civil War. However, it is not as simple as this and slavery, while a major issue, was not the only issue that pushed American into the ‘Great American Tragedy’. By [April 1861](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/april-1861-civil-war.htm), slavery had become inextricably entwined with state rights, the power of the federal government over the states, the South’s ‘way of life’ etc. – all of which made a major contribution to the causes of the American Civil War.

By 1860 America could not be seen as being a homogenous society. Clearly defined areas could be identified that had different outlooks and different values. This was later to be seen in the North versus South divide that created the two sides in the war.

The South was an agricultural region where cotton and tobacco were the main backbone to the region’s economic strength. The area relied on exports to markets in Western Europe and the class structure that could be found in the UK, for example, was mimicked in the southern states. The local plantation owner was a ‘king’ within his own area and locals would be deferential towards such men. The whole structure was portrayed in ‘Gone With The Wind’; a strictly Christian society that had men at the top while those underneath were expected and required to accept their social status. Social advancement was possible but invariably it was done within the senior families of a state, who were the economic, political and legal brokers of their state on behalf of the people in that state. Within this structure was the wealth that these families had accrued. It cannot be denied that a huge part of this wealth came from the fact that the plantation owners oriented the work on their plantations around slave labour. As abhorrent as it may be to those in the C21st, slavery was simply seen as part of the southern way of life. Without slavery, the economic clout of these premier families would have been seriously dented and those they employed and paid – local people who would have recognised how important the local plantation owner was to their own well-being – simply accepted this as ‘how it is’. When the dark clouds of war gathered in 1860-61, many in the South saw their very way of life being threatened. Part of that was slavery but it was not the only part.

The North was almost in complete contrast to the South. In the lead up to April 1861, the North was industrialising at a very fast rate. Entrepreneurs were accepted and, in fact, were seen as being vital to the further industrial development of America. You did not have to stay in your social place and social mobility was common. For example, Samuel Colt was born in Connecticut into a relatively poor background. He had an inauspicious start to his life but ended up a very rich man who left his wife $15 million in his will. Whether he could have done this in the South is a moot topic. It was always possible but most of America’s premier entrepreneurs based themselves in the North where the straitjacket of social class was weaker. Cornelius Vanderbilt is another example. Whether a man who came from the Netherlands could have forced his way into the social hierarchy of the South is again a question open to debate. The North was also a cosmopolitan mixture of nationalities and religions – far more so than the South. There can be little doubt that there were important groups in the North that were anti-slavery and wanted its abolition throughout the Union. However, there were also groups that were ambivalent and those who knew that the North’s economic development was based not only on entrepreneurial skills but also on the input of poorly paid workers who were not slaves but lived lives not totally removed from those in the South. While they had their freedom and were paid, their lifestyle was at best very harsh.

While the two sides that made up the American Civil War were apart in many areas, it became worse when the perception in the South was that the North would try to impose its values on the South.

In 1832, South Carolina passed an act that declared that Federal tariff legislation of 1828 and 1832 could not be enforced onto states and that after February 1st 1833 the tariffs would not be recognised in the state. This brought South Carolina into direct conflict with the Federal government in Washington DC. Congress pushed through the Force Bill that enabled the President to use military force to bring any state into line with regards to implementing Federal law. On this occasion the threat of military force worked. People in South Carolina vowed, however, it would be the last time.

It was now that slavery became mixed up with state rights – just how much power a state had compared to federal authority. State rights became intermingled with slavery. The key issue was whether slavery would be allowed in the newly created states that were joining the Union. This dispute further developed with the ‘Louisiana Purchase’ of 1803 whereby Kansas, among others, was purchased by the federal government. Kansas was officially opened to settlement in 1854 and there was a rush to settle in the state between those who supported slavery and those who opposed it. The state became a place of violence between the two groups and Kansas got the nickname ‘Bleeding Kansas’ in recognition of what was going on there. However on January 29th 1861, Kansas was admitted to the Union as a slave-free state. Many in the traditional slave states saw this as the first step towards abolishing slavery throughout the Union and thus the destruction of the southern way of life.

When South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20th 1860, the first state to do so, it was a sign that the state no longer felt part of the United States of America and that America as an entity was being dominated by a federal government ensconced in the views of the North. Whether this was true or not, is not relevant as it was felt to be true by many South Carolinians. The secession of South Carolina pushed other southern states into doing the same. With such a background of distrust between most southern states and the government in Washington, it only needed one incident to set off a civil war and that occurred at [Fort Sumter](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/fort-sumter.htm) in April 1861.

Lincoln/Douglass

What is often overlooked is that the debates were part of a larger campaign, that they were designed to achieve certain immediate political objectives, and that they reflected the characteristics of mid-nineteenth-century political rhetoric. Douglas, a member of Congress since 1843 and a nationally prominent spokesman for the Democratic party, was seeking reelection to a third term in the U.S. Senate, and Lincoln was running for Douglas's Senate seat as a Republican. Because of Douglas's political stature, the campaign attracted national attention. Its outcome, it was thought, would determine the ability of the Democratic party to maintain unity in the face of the divisive sectional and slavery issues, and some were convinced it would determine the viability of the Union itself. "The battle of the Union is to be fought in [Illinois](http://www.history.com/topics/illinois)," a Washington paper declared.

Although senators were elected by the state legislatures until 1913, Douglas and Lincoln took their arguments directly to the people. The timing of the campaign, the context of sectional animosity within which it was fought, the volatility of the slavery issue, and the instability of the party system combined to give the debates a special importance. Not long before, Douglas had defied President [James Buchanan](http://www.history.com/topics/james-buchanan) and the southern Democratic leadership when he opposed the admission of [Kansas](http://www.history.com/topics/kansas) as a slave state under the controversial Lecompton constitution, a stand for which he received support from Republicans in Congress as well as their interest in his reelection. At the same time, Buchanan and the southern slave interests gave tacit (and in some instances explicit) support to Lincoln's candidacy because of their hostility to Douglas. As a result of this strange alignment, Lincoln's principal task was to keep Illinois Republicans from supporting Douglas by exposing the moral gulf that separated them from the senator and to win the support of radical abolitionists and former conservative Whigs. A relative newcomer to the antislavery cause (before 1854, he said, slavery had been a "minor question" with him), Lincoln used the debates to develop and strengthen the moral quality of his position.

The groundwork for the campaign was laid in Lincoln's famous House Divided speech in Springfield on June 16, 1858. Douglas opened his campaign on July 9 in [Chicago](http://www.history.com/topics/chicago). By mid-August, the two candidates had agreed to a series of debates in seven of the state's nine congressional districts.

Lincoln opened the campaign on an ominous note, warning that the agitation over slavery would not cease until a crisis had been passed that resulted either in the extension of slavery to all the territories and states or in its ultimate extinction. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," he declared. Lincoln's forecast was a statement of what would be known as the irrepressible conflict doctrine. The threat of slavery expansion, he believed, came not from the slaveholding South but from Douglas's popular sovereignty position--allowing the territories to decide for themselves whether they wished to have slavery. Furthermore, Lincoln charged Douglas with conspiring to extend slavery to the free states as well as the territories, a false accusation that Douglas tried vainly to ignore. Fundamental to Lincoln's argument was his conviction that slavery must be dealt with as a moral wrong. It violated the statement in the [Declaration of Independence](http://www.history.com/topics/declaration-of-independence) that all men are created equal, and it ran counter to the intentions of the Founding Fathers. The "real issue" in his contest with Douglas, Lincoln insisted, was the issue of right and wrong, and he charged that his opponent was trying to uphold a wrong. Only the power of the federal government, as exercised by Congress, could ultimately extinguish slavery. At the same time, Lincoln assured southerners that he had no intention of interfering with slavery in the states where it existed and assured northerners that he was opposed to the political and social equality of the races, points on which he and Douglas agreed.

Douglas rejected Lincoln's notion of an irrepressible conflict and disagreed with his analysis of the intentions of the Founding Fathers, pointing out that many of them were slaveholders who believed that each community should decide the question for itself. A devoted Jacksonian, he insisted that power should reside at the local level and should reflect the wishes of the people. He was convinced, however, that slavery would be effectively restricted for economic, geographic, and demographic reasons and that the territories, if allowed to decide, would choose to be free. In an important statement at Freeport, he held that the people could keep slavery out of their territories, in spite of the *Dred Scott* decision, simply by withholding the protection of the local law. Douglas was disturbed by Lincoln's effort to resolve a controversial moral question by political means, warning that it could lead to [civil war](http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war). Finally, Douglas placed his disagreement with Lincoln on the level of republican ideology, arguing that the contest was between consolidation and confederation, or as he put it, "one consolidated empire" as proposed by Lincoln versus a "confederacy of sovereign and equal states" as he proposed.

On election day, the voters of Illinois chose members of the state legislature who in turn reelected Douglas to the Senate in January 1859. Although Lincoln lost, the Republicans received more popular votes than the Democrats, signaling an important shift in the political character of the state. Moreover, Lincoln had gained a reputation throughout the North. He was invited to campaign for Republican candidates in other states and was now mentioned as a candidate for the presidency. In winning, Douglas further alienated the Buchanan administration and the South, was soon to be stripped of his power in the Senate, and contributed to the division of the Democratic party.

**Jackson and the Whigs: 1830–1844**

**Events**

1830 Congress passes Indian Removal Act

1832 Black Hawk War

1834 Whig Party forms

1835 Start of Second Seminole War

1836 Bank of the United States’ charter expires Jackson issues Specie Circular Martin Van Buren is elected president

1837 Panic of 1837

1838 U.S. army forcibly removes Cherokee on “Trail of Tears”

1840 Van Buren establishes independent U.S. treasury William Henry Harrison is elected president

**Key People**

**Nicholas Biddle** - President of the Bank of the United States; exerted significant influence on U.S. economy

**Henry Clay** - Kentucky statesman; co-founder of Whig Party

**Daniel Webster** - Massachusetts senator; co-founder of Whig Party

**Martin Van Buren** - Eighth U.S. president; inherited depression from Panic of 1837

**William Henry Harrison** - Ninth U.S. president; died after only a month in office

**John Tyler** - Tenth U.S. president; angered fellow Whigs by opposing most of their agenda

**The Age of Jackson**

The **Age of Jackson** and the **“Jacksonian Democracy”** that it brought with it were markedly different from anything the nation had yet experienced. Unlike the early republic, which had been dominated by wealthy politicians, the Age of Jackson was a new age of the common man, a period of American cultural history that shunned wealth and aristocracy in favor of humble origins, log cabins, and frontier ruggedness.

During this period, more and more American men were granted the right to vote, as property ownership and literacy restrictions for voting were abolished in more and more places. As universal manhood suffrage became the norm, the lower and middle classes gained an outlet to express their political opinions.

**The Indian Removal Act**

Prior to his political career, Jackson had spent much of his life in the military, clearing the West of Native Americans. During the War of 1812, he had routed the Creek Nation (allied with Britain), and had spent subsequent years pursuing the Seminoles in Florida. As president, he continued to push native peoples off their lands to make room for white American farmers. In 1830, Jackson and congressional Democrats passed the **Indian Removal Act** to remove, by force, all Indians east of the Mississippi to “permanent” **reservations** in present-day Oklahoma and Nebraska.

The Indian Removal Act reversed many earlier policies that recognized Native American lands as foreign soil. Some tribes, such as the Cherokees, had expended great effort in attempt to integrate themselves with the new American society. They had created a tribal government based on separation of powers and checks and balances and had embraced agriculture and the market economy. In the 1831 case ***Cherokee Nation v. State of Georgia***, the Supreme Court had ruled that the Cherokee had legal rights to their lands. Nonetheless, Jackson pursued his removal agenda mercilessly. Many of the relocated tribes were lumped together on one huge reservation, which made it difficult for them to preserve culture and tribal identity over the years.

**The Trail of Tears**

Throughout the 1830s, the U.S. Army supervised the relocation of more than 100,000 members of the Chickasaw, Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole, Sauk, and Fox tribes. Most of these Native Americans had to travel the roughly 1,000 miles on foot, sometimes in chains. Tens of thousands died on the journey, which was labeled the **Trail of Tears**.

Some tribes, however, resisted resettlement. Consequently, U.S. Army troops crushed the Sauks and Foxes in the **Black Hawk War** of 1832 and the Seminoles in the Second **Seminole War** of 1835–1842.

**The Bank of the United States**

Jackson also battled the **Bank of the United States**, one of the cornerstones of the American economy, during his term. Chartered in 1816 and headed by **Nicholas Biddle**, the Bank held all federal gold and silver deposits and thus had significant control over credit and monetary policy.

Many politicians, such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, believed that the Bank provided the needed stability in the transition to a market economy. Jackson, however, hated it because it was a private institution and thus outside government control. To him and to many debt-ridden western farmers, the Bank represented the corrupt moneyed interests of wealthy fat-cat investors who cared only about their own money.

**The Bank War**

Clay, in a bid to gain political support for the upcoming election of 1832, pushed a bill through Congress to renew the Bank’s charter for another twenty years. He hoped that this move would put Jackson in a bind: if the president signed the bill, he would loose western votes, but if he vetoed it, he would lose the support of wealthier eastern voters.

Jackson initiated a **Bank War**, vetoing the bill and claiming that the Bank of the United States was unconstitutional. Overjoyed, Clay had Jackson’s veto message printed and distributed throughout the country. The move backfired, however, because westerners hailed the president as a savior of the common American.

**The Election of 1832**

The Bank became a central issue in the election of 1832. Democrats nominated Jackson for a second term, while Clay ran on the National Republican ticket. In addition, the Anti-Masonic Party, the first **third party** in a U.S. presidential election, ran a candidate. Jackson received a greater number of popular votes and trounced Clay with 219 to 49 votes in the Electoral College.

**The Bank’s Dissolution**

Endowed with what he believed to be a mandate, Jackson immediately dismantled the Bank of the United States by withholding all federal gold and silver deposits and redepositing them in smaller **“wildcat banks,”** many of which were unsound. The Bank withered away until its charter finally expired in 1836. Afraid that the Bank’s death would encourage investors to overspeculate in western lands, Jackson also issued the **Specie Circular** in 1836, which required all land to be purchased with hard currency.

**The Whig Party**

Jackson’s destruction of the Bank sparked a heated debate within the leadership of the Democratic Party. Some, such as Clay and Webster, believed that Jackson had violated the Constitution in killing the Bank and introduced a motion to censure the president. Other politicians followed suit, and Clay and Webster quickly became the leaders of a new political faction. Calling themselves the **Whigs** (in reference to an British political party opposed to royal prerogatives), they stood against Jackson and in favor of progressive social reforms, better education, internal improvements, and limits on westward expansion. The Whigs embraced the transition to a market economy and thus won support from the wealthy manufacturers in the North as well as the cotton-growing plantation owners in the South.

**The Election of 1836**

By 1836, the Whigs had gained enough support to nominate several presidential candidates, hoping that one of them would be able to oust the Democrats. Because Jackson was too old to run for reelection in 1836, he threw his support behind his secretary of state, **Martin Van Buren**. Van Buren wasn’t the most popular choice, but Democrats chose him anyway because of his ties to Jackson. Van Buren easily defeated the scattered and divided Whig candidates.

**Jackson’s Legacy**

Jackson **increased the power of the executive office** more than any previous president. He repeatedly ignored the Supreme Court, challenged the Constitution when he dismantled the Bank of the United States, and changed the nature of the presidential veto. Jackson wielded executive power so forcefully that his National Republican and Whig enemies dubbed him “King Andrew I.”

Jackson’s **veto** of the Bank charter was especially revolutionary. Whereas previous presidents had vetoed bills that they believed to be unconstitutional, Jackson’s veto marked the first time that a president vetoed a bill because he personally disliked it. Jackson’s action reminded Americans that even though the Supreme Court had the power of judicial review, it had to rely on the compliance of the president to carry out its decisions.

**The Panic of 1837**

Unfortunately, Jackson’s action imperiled the nation’s economy by causing the devastating **Panic of 1837** and subsequent depression. His removal of federal funds from the Bank of the United States undermined the country’s credit and financial stability and prompted the wildcat banks to print their own paper money, which flooded the economy and spurred inflation. Because few poor farmers had any hard currency, they had no way to purchase land.

**Van Buren and the Treasury**

Van Buren’s presidency was blighted by the Panic of 1837 and the depression that followed. Prices fell, hundreds of banks shut down, and millions found themselves out of work or too poor to farm. Van Buren, believing that government dollars had collapsed many of the wildcat banks, had Congressional Democrats pass the **Independent Treasury Bill** to redeposit these dollars in a new, independent **U.S. Treasury**.

**The Election of 1840**

The Whigs rebounded with General **William Henry Harrison** in 1840. A former governor of Indiana Territory, Harrison had become a national star after his success against Native Americans at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 and against the British in the War of 1812. Although he came from a prominent Eastern family, Whigs played him as a log cabin–born, hard cider–drinking frontiersman.

Democrats rallied behind Van Buren half-heartedly, but his name had become so associated with the economic depression that he had little chance to win. Though Harrison won the popular vote by a slim margin, he received almost four times as many electoral votes as Van Buren.

**The Rise of the Whigs**

The election of 1840 marked the beginning of the era when political loyalties in the United States were divided between the Democrats and the Whigs. The Whigs, however, were short-lived, and the country soon moved into a period in which the major opposing political forces were the Democrats and Republicans.

**Harrison and Tyler**

Whig leaders rejoiced when **William Henry Harrison** became president in 1840 because they expected to push forward the domestic programs that Henry Clay had begun under his American System years earlier. The celebration ended abruptly, however, when Harrison died of pneumonia after only a month in office. Relatively unknown Vice President **John Tyler** became the next president.

A former Democrat from Virginia, Tyler had become a Whig several years earlier only because he couldn’t stand Andrew Jackson’s autocratic leadership. However, Tyler was a political misfit and a Whig in name only; party leaders had selected him as Harrison’s running mate only because he could attract Southern votes.

**Tyler’s Troubled Presidency**

No longer really a Democrat, but certainly not a true Whig, Tyler found himself between a rock and a hard place during his presidency. Like a Whig, he approved of an 1841 congressional bill that would dismantle Martin Van Buren’s independent treasury. After much negotiation, Tyler also approved of the higher **Tariff of 1842**. Like a Democrat, though, he repeatedly and stubbornly refused to revive the Bank of the United States or to fund internal improvements. Whig leaders grew so irate with Tyler that they eventually expelled him from the party.

**Changing Society and Culture: 1820–1860**

**Events**

1830 s Transcendentalist movement begins

1837 Oberlin College opens as a coeducational institution Mary Lyon establishes Mount Holyoke Seminary

1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne publishes *The Scarlet Letter*

1851 Herman Melville publishes *Moby-Dick*

1854 Henry David Thoreau writes *Walden*

1855 Walt Whitman publishes *Leaves of Grass*

**Key People**

**Martin Van Buren** - Eighth U.S. president; set ten-hour workday for federal employees

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** - Essayist and philosopher; one of the foremost Transcendentalists

**Henry David Thoreau** - Essayist and philosopher; another major Transcendenalist

**Walt Whitman** - Poet who espoused individualism; most famous for *Leaves of Grass*

**Herman Melville** - Novelist; wrote whaling epic *Moby-Dick*

**Urbanization in the North**

The Market Revolution caused major changes in northern society, as more and more Americans moved to **large cities**. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and other major cities tripled or even quadrupled in size from 1820 to 1860 as people left their farms to find work in the cities.

**Wage Labor**

One byproduct of the increase in manufacturing and mass migration to the cities was the development of **wage labor**. As more factories sprang up in the North, more workers were needed to tend to the machines. Rather than learn a trade skill, these day laborers worked alongside scores of others for as many as sixteen hours a day, six or seven days a week, for a meager hourly wage.

Though many early wage laborers were children, often under the age of thirteen, most were men. Some factories, such as the Lowell Mills in Massachusetts, employed only girls and young women. These factories provided room and board and attempted to “moralize” the women with heavy doses of religious preaching and strict discipline.

**Labor Strikes**

Although wealthy business owners loved cheap wage labor, workers suffered, and few had any recourse to redress their grievances. Collective bargaining was illegal, and factory owners could always hire replacement workers, or “scabs,” if employees refused to work. Some workers, particularly women, risked prosecution and initiated a series of **strikes** in the 1820s and 1830s to improve working conditions.

**Labor Unions and Reforms**

These labor strikes became more prominent in the national news around the same time that the **National Trades Union**—one of the nation’s first unions—formed in 1834. Eventually, the government began to take action: in 1840, President Martin Van Buren succeeded in establishing a **ten-hour working day** for all federal employees engaged in public works projects; in 1842, the Massachusetts Supreme Court legalized trade unions in ***Commonwealth v. Hunt***. Nevertheless, it would be decades before unions gained any real power to bargain effectively.

**German and Irish Immigration**

In the 1840s and 1850s, urbanization in the North accelerated as millions of immigrants from Europe settled in northern cities. Facing starvation from the Potato Famine of the mid-1840s, over 100,000 **Irish immigrants** came to the United States *every year* in the late 1840s and 1850s to find new opportunities. Though most settled in New York, Boston, and later in Chicago, Irish quarters sprang up in every major northern city.

**German immigrants** also arrived en masse during the same period. Many came to escape persecution after a democratic revolution in Germany in 1848 had failed. The German immigrants were generally wealthier than the Irish and therefore rarely settled in the cities.

A significant number of native-born Americans resented immigrant groups. These **“nativists”** denigrated the Irish and Germans as ignorant and inferior and also discriminated against them because of their Catholic background.

**The Know-Nothings**

In the 1850s, many nativists joined the anti-immigration American Party, or **Know-Nothing Party**. Most Know-Nothings were Protestant middle-class Americans whose jobs could be threatened by unskilled Irish and German workers. The party’s base was primarily northern: manufacturing and wage jobs were located almost exclusively in the North, so the “immigrant problem” was not a factor in the South. The Know-Nothing Party was popular enough to take control of a few northern state legislatures in the 1850s and to field a major presidential candidate, Millard Fillmore, in the 1856 election. The Know-Nothings, though a minority, were thus highly influential in politics at the time.

**A New National Culture**

American intellectuals began to address these startling social and political changes in new novels, poems, and essays. In New England, for example, the **Transcendentalists** argued that there is knowledge beyond what the senses can perceive and that ultimate truth “transcends” the physical world. Between 1830 and 1850, Transcendentalists such as essayists **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau** and poet **Walt Whitman** championed self-reliance, independence, and a fierce individuality that matched the character of the developing nation.

Poets **John Greenleaf Whittier** and **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** and novelist **Louisa May Alcott** also wrote about the new America. Other commentators, including the so-called **Dark Romantics**, who included poet **Edgar Allan Poe** and novelists **Herman Melville** and **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, had a more critical view of American society in the years before the Civil War.

**The “Cult of Domesticity”**

Generally, women were shut out from the economic opportunities of the Market Revolution. Through the antebellum years, many Americans continued to believe that men and women worked in separate spheres—men outside the home, and women inside. Often labeled the **“Cult of Domesticity,”** this social norm encouraged “good” women to be responsible not only for day-to-day housekeeping but also for making the home a happy and nurturing environment for their wage laborer husbands. Women were also expected to educate their children and provide moral guidance. Higher education did not become an option for women until the late 1830s (see *The Spirit of Reform, p. 52*).

**Status Quo in the South**

While the North and West experienced dramatic social and economic change, the South remained relatively unchanged between 1820 and 1860 because of the region’s reliance on **cotton production**. After the invention of the cotton gin, cotton production proved so profitable that by 1860, the South was producing 75 percent of the cotton supply used in British textile factories.

**Southern Social Hierarchy**

As the North became increasingly democratic, the South continued to adhere to the old, almost feudal social order. At the top were a select few, extremely wealthy, white **plantation owners** who controlled the southern legislatures and represented the South in Congress. Then came the **farmers** who owned one or two slaves, followed by the poor and sometimes **landless whites**. Black slaves were confined to the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Though slaves did the bulk of the manual labor on the largest cotton plantations, not all whites owned slaves. In fact, only about one in four southern males owned slaves in the 1850s, and those men usually owned only one or two slaves. Most southern whites were poor subsistence farmers who grew food only for their own use.

**Attempts to Justify Slavery**

Despite the rampant poverty and social inequity, the vast majority of southern whites believed firmly in the superiority of their social system. Ironically, the poorest whites often were the most ardent supporters of slavery, because they dreamed of becoming rich planters with slaves of their own.

Slaveholders attempted to justify slavery in many ways. Some championed the “paternal” nature of slavery by arguing that they took care of the “inferior race” as fathers would small children. Others told themselves that blacks were better off as slaves in America than as “savages” in Africa. More often, however, defensive slave owners pointed accusing fingers at the North, claiming that the impersonal industrial system in the North was based on“wage slavery.”

**The Deepening North-South Divide**

As time passed and the rapidly changing society in the North outpaced the sluggish South, Americans in the North and South began to see themselves as two very different peoples. While the North underwent major social and economic changes during the antebellum period, the South generally clung to King Cotton and slavery and thus remained essentially the same. These differences drove the regions further and further apart in the years leading up to the Civil War.

**Religious Revivalism: 1800–1850**

**Events**

1800 Second Great Awakening begins

1821 Charles G. Finney begins conducting Christian revivals

1825 New Harmony commune is founded

1826 American Temperance Society is founded

1830 Joseph Smith establishes Mormon Church

1841 Brook Farm commune is founded

1844 Millerites prepare for end of the world

1846 Mormons begin migration to Utah

1847 Oneida Community is founded

**Key People**

**Charles G. Finney** - Evangelical preacher who held fiery, popular camp-style meetings

**Joseph Smith** - Founder of the Mormon church, which attracted a large following

**William Miller** - Leader of the Millerite movement; projected 1844 as the end of the world

**The Second Great Awakening and Revivalism**

In addition to social and economic changes, the antebellum period was also marked by a flurry of **religious revivalism** that spread throughout every region of the United States. Beginning with the **Second Great Awakening** (a sudden evangelical movement that started around the turn of the nineteenth century), this renewed interest in religion arose primarily as a backlash against the Enlightenment and so-called “age of reason” that had inspired thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine.

Hundreds of roving preachers began to spread a variety of gospels on circuit routes, setting up **revivalist camps** in rural areas that attracted thousands of new converts. Reverend **Charles G. Finney**, one of the most popular revivalists of the time, spread his version of the Good Word to thousands of Americans over the course of fifty years. His converted were often so overcome with religion that they would roll, jerk, shake, shout, and even bark in a frenzy of salvation.

**The Burned-Over District**

The epicenter of revivalism was the so-called **Burned-Over District** in western New York. Named for its overabundance of hellfire-and-damnation preaching, the region produced dozens of new denominations, communal societies, and reform movements. The abolitionist and temperance movements (see *The Spirit of Reform* , p. 57) also had some of their strongest roots in this region.

**Methodists, Baptists, and Unitarians**

Although southern and western **Baptists** and **Methodists** were known for their hellfire-and-damnation zeal, other sects and denominations were regarded for their appeal to reason. **Unitarians** in New England, for example, attracted a huge following because of their belief in a loving God, free will, and denial of original sin. The Unitarian movement attracted many of the nation’s foremost intellectuals, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists.

**Millerites**

Conservative revival preaching sometimes spawned radical new denominations such as the **Millerites**. William Miller’s movement, which flourished in the 1830s and early 1840s, attracted several hundred thousand Christians who believed that Jesus would return to Earth on October 22, 1844. Though many Millerites lost faith when Jesus failed to show up, the movement prevailed for several decades. Followers eventually reorganized themselves into the modern-day **Seventh-Day Adventists**.

**Mormons**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or **Mormons**, also emerged from western New York. Founded by **Joseph Smith** in 1830, the Mormons believed that God had entrusted them with a new set of scriptures called the Book of Mormon. Because some Mormons practiced **polygamy**, they were forced to follow Smith westward across the continent to find safe haven from persecution.

When Smith was killed by a mob in Illinois in 1844, his disciple, **Brigham Young**,took charge of the church and led a mass migration to the desert around the Great Salt Lake (then still part of Mexico). Utah eventually became a U.S. territory after the Mexican War but was not admitted to the Union until 1896, when Mormons agreed to abandon the practice of polygamy.

**Utopian Communities**

Inspired by lofty ideals to improve mankind and end social discord, some people during this period attempted to create new **utopian communities** based on cooperation and communism. Roughly a thousand people, led by Robert Owen, founded the **New Harmony** community, one of the first utopian communities in the antebellum era. Although New Harmony failed in just a few short years, it spurred the creation of others.

**Brook Farm** was established in 1841 and came to be one of the most famous attempts at communal living. Closely affiliated with the Transcendentalist movement, these farmer-intellectuals tried to hew a modest living out of the wilderness. Like New Harmony, this community also collapsed within a few years.

John Noyes’ **Oneida Community** had some lasting success. The community believed in radical ideas such as communal marriage, birth control, and eugenics. The **Shakers**, too, had a sizeable following in the 1840s, but eventually died out because believers were forbidden to marry or have sex.

**Class and Sectional Differences**

The new sects and denominations that sprung up during the revivalist movement attracted different social groups. Most of the new evangelical denominations attracted poor, uneducated followers in the West and South. Less frenzied denominations, such as the Unitarians, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, flourished in wealthier cities in the North. The rise of these different denominations thus widened already-growing sectional rifts in the United States.

**Revivalism, Women, and Reform**

However, despite the differences among their followers, all of the revivalist movements had the same goal: to refine humanity and make sense of the rapidly changing American social and economic fabric. Virtually all of the new denominations denounced alcohol, prostitution, gambling, and lotteries. Thus, the movements also had a huge impact on the **reform movement**.

Revivalism had a great impact on **women** as well. Shut out from politics and most facets of the new economy, women poured their energies into religion and reform. Many believed they could have a positive impact on society by converting their family, friends, and neighbors.

**The Spirit of Reform: 1820–1850**

**Events**

1822 Demark Vesey leads slave revolt in South Carolina Republic of Liberia is founded in Africa

1826 American Temperance Society is founded

1831 Nat Turner leads slave rebellion in Virginia William Lloyd Garrison begins publishing *The Liberator*

1833 Garrison and Theodore Weld found American Anti-Slavery Society

1834 Female Moral Reform Society forms in New York

1836 House of Representatives passes “Gag Resolution”

1837 Abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy is killed Oberlin College opens as a coeducational institution Mary Lyon founds Mount Holyoke Seminary for women

1840 Liberty Party is formed

1843 Dorothea Dix crusades for prison and insane asylum reform

1845 Frederick Douglass publishes *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention is held

1854 T. S. Arthur publishes *Ten Nights in a Barroom and What I Saw There*

**Key People**

**Susan B. Anthony** - Ardent women’s rights advocate and suffragette

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton** - Feminist and women’s rights advocate; organized Seneca Falls Convention along with Susan B. Anthony

**Frederick Douglass** - Freed slave who was a leader in the abolitionist movement

**William Lloyd Garrison** - Radical abolitionist; published magazine *The Liberator*

**Horace Mann** - Public education advocate; pushed for education reforms in Massachusetts

**Dorothea Dix** - Massachusetts schoolteacher who campaigned for publicly funded asylums to help the mentally ill

**The Rise of Social Reform**

The revivalism that spread across the country during the antebellum era also gave rise to numerous social **reform movements**, which challenged Americans to improve themselves and their communities. Because revivalism and reform went hand in hand, many prominent reformers were **women**. Denied roles in politics or in the new market economy, women found that they could make a difference through championing social change. These women reformers often fought for a variety of causes at the same time: for instance, the women’s suffrage movement was closely tied to the abolitionist movement.

**Abolitionism**

The **abolitionist movement** sought to eradicate slavery in the United States. Prominent leaders in the movement included **Theodore Weld**, **Sojourner Truth**, **Frederick Douglass**, **Elijah P. Lovejoy**, and **William Lloyd Garrison**, among others. Garrison, a radical abolitionist who called for immediate emancipation, became infamous when he started an antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, in 1831. His articles were so vitriolic that warrants for his arrest were issued in the South. Garrison and Weld also founded the **American Anti-slavery Society** in 1833.

**Anti-Abolitionism in the North**

Although the North was the hotbed of the abolitionist movement, not all northerners were abolitionists: many felt ambivalent toward emancipation or were downright against it. Trade unions and wage workers, for example, feared that if slavery were abolished, they would have to compete with free blacks for jobs (an argument also used by pro-slavery southerners). Most public figures and politicians shunned abolitionists for their radicalism and unwillingness to compromise. Even the “Great Emancipator” Abraham Lincoln, though more open to abolitionism, was wary of radical abolitionists.

**Slave Uprisings**

The antebellum period was marked by several major slave uprisings. In 1822, a former slave named **Denmark Vesey** planned to lead eighty slaves in a revolt in Charleston, South Carolina. Although Vesey’s plans failed, southerners became terrified of losing control over slaves. In 1831, another slave, **Nat Turner**, led a bloody slave uprising in Virginia.

**Abolitionist Propaganda and Politics**

Because **William Lloyd Garrison** published the first edition of *The Liberator* the same year as Turner’s uprising, many southerners jumped to the conclusion that Garrison had incited the rebellions with his antislavery rhetoric. Furthermore, former slave **Frederick Douglass** became a celebrity in the North when he published his experiences in *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845.

As the abolitionist movement grew, it became more of an organized political force. The movement grew to be so noisome that the House of Representatives actually passed a **gag resolution** in 1836 to squelch all further discussion of slavery. Several years later, in 1840, the abolitionists organized into a party, the **Liberty Party**.

**The Temperance Movement**

Another strong reform movement during this period was the **temperance movement**, which aimed to ban alcohol production and consumption. The movement was led primarily by women, who charged that drinking ruined family life and led to spousal and child abuse. Factory owners in the cities also lamented that alcoholism reduced worker output and caused on-the-job accidents.

The first chapter of the **American Temperance Society** formed in 1826 and grew into thousands of chapters nationwide over the following ten years. The society distributed propaganda and paraded abuse victims and reformed alcoholics through towns to preach against consumption. **T. S. Arthur**’s 1854 novel *Ten Nights in a Barroom and What I Saw There*, which portrayed the horrible effects of hard liquor on a previously quaint village, gained the movement even more attention.

Several cities and states went to far as to pass laws prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. Maine was the first to do so, in 1851. The **“Maine Law,”** as it came to be called, encouraged many other northern states to follow suit.

**Prohibiting Prostitution**

Antebellum reformers also struck out against **prostitution**, which burgeoned as American cities grew larger due to the manufacturing, economic expansion, and immigration. Spearheaded almost entirely by upper- and middle-class women, antiprostitution societies fought not only to reduce the number of working girls on the streets but also to reform them. The **Female Moral Reform Society**, founded in New York in 1834, expanded to hundreds of other cities and towns by 1840. These societies also strove to end prostitution by decreasing demand: many newspapers began to publish customers’ names, while many states enacted laws to punish clients as well as the prostitutes themselves.

**Prison Reform**

Reformers during this era also launched campaigns against the prison system, where conditions were horrible. **Debtors’prisons** were still common and housed the majority of American“criminals”—mostly the poor, who sometimes owed creditors only a few dollars. Over time, reformers were able to change the system. Debtors’ prisons gradually began to disappear, and activists succeeded in convincing many that the government should use prisons to help reform criminals, not just lock them away.

**Reform for the Mentally Ill**

Often working hand-in-hand with prison reform was the movement to help the **mentally ill**. The common belief during this era was that the mentally ill were willfully crazy or that they were no better than animals. As a result, thousands were treated as criminals and thrown into prisons. The leader of the reform cause was **Dorothea Dix**, who compiled a comprehensive report on the state of the mentally ill in Massachusetts. The report claimed that hundreds of insane women were chained like beasts in stalls and cages. Dix’s findings convinced state legislators to establish one of the first asylums devoted entirely to caring for the mentally ill. By the outbreak of the Civil War, nearly thirty states had built similar institutions.

**Education Reform**

Reformers also sought to expand **public education** during the antebellum era, because many at the time considered public schooling to be only for the poor. Wealthier Americans could pay for their children to attend private schools and academies but disdained the idea of paying higher taxes to educate the poor. Over the course of the antebellum period, however, more and more cities and states began to realize that education was essential to maintain a democracy.

**Horace Mann** was one of the greatest champions of public schools. As secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Mann fought for higher teacher qualifications, better pay, newer school buildings, and better curriculum. **Catherine Beecher**, sister of novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, also crusaded for education but believed that teachers should be women.

**Women in Higher Education**

American women gained their first opportunities for **higher education** during this period. In 1837, feminist Mary Lyon established Mount Holyoke Seminary, the first college for women. That same year, Oberlin College became the first institution of higher learning to open on a coeducational basis.

**Women’s Suffrage**

In addition to educational opportunities, many women began to demand political rights, especially the right to vote, or **women’s suffrage**. Under leaders **Lucretia Mott**, **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, and **Susan B. Anthony**, the movement gained substantial momentum during the antebellum era. Stanton and Mott astounded Americans and Europeans alike when they organized the **Seneca Falls Convention** in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. There, women leaders heard Stanton’s *Declaration of Sentiments*, in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, declaring that women were equal to men in every way. Of the many sentiments declared, the most shocking was the call for full suffrage for all women.

**Legacy of the Reform Movements**

Although there were a wide variety of reform movements in the antebellum period, they shared common characteristics. Most were rooted in the religious revivalism and new moralist beliefs of the age. Second, women dominated most reform movements. Finally, reformists were generally centered in the North, while the conservative South once again generally lagged behind. This disparity between North and South contributed further to the social and political tensions of the pre–Civil War years.

**Manifest Destiny: 1835–1850**

**Events**

1836 Texas declares independence from Mexico Battle of the Alamo Congress refuses to annex Texas

1841 John Tyler becomes president upon Harrison’s death

1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty ends Aroostook War Congress passes Tariff of 1842

1844 James K. Polk is elected president

1845 United States annexes Texas Congress is presented with Wilmot Proviso

1846 Congress passes Walker Tariff United States and Britain resolve dispute over Oregon Mexican War erupts

1847 General Winfield Scott captures Mexico City

1848 United States and Mexico sign Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

1849 Peak of California Gold Rush

**Key People**

**Daniel Webster** - Secretary of state under Tyler; negotiated Webster-Ashburton Treaty

**Frederick Jackson Turner** - Historian of the late 1800s who explored the importance of the frontier in U.S. history

**Manifest Destiny**

During the 1830s and 1840s, American nationalism and westward expansion had merged into the widespread belief in **manifest destiny**. Proud of their democratic roots and traditions, faced with a seemingly boundless continent, many Americans thought of themselves as the forbearers of freedom.

Nationalistic revivalist preachers added fuel to the fire by proclaiming that Americans were God’s chosen people and that it was their right and duty to spread democracy and Protestantism from sea to shining sea. Many also looked to nearby Canada and Mexico, and even as far away as South America. Whereas the Old World had been dominated by monarchy and aristocracy, Americans were determined that the whole of the New World would be free.

**Western Trails**

Settlers moving west took any of several major routes, most of which started in Missouri. Of these, the **Oregon Trail** is most famous. Hundreds of thousands of Americans moved to Oregon Territory (now Washington, Oregon, and Idaho) during the years before the Civil War, most of them settling in the fertile Willamette Valley.

The **Mormon Trail** to Utah and Nevada was also popular, as was the **Santa Fe Trail** to New Mexico, and the **California Trail** to Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay area. Because there were no railroads in the West, the transcontinental journey had to be made in wagons or on horseback. Thousands even made most of the journey on foot.

**Life in the West**

People left their homes in the East for new opportunities, for adventure, or for religious reasons—or to strike it rich, after **gold** was discovered in California in 1848. Life on the trails and on the frontier was difficult because of weather, disease, and bandits, and thousands of travelers never made it to their destinations. Many of the first settlers were criminals who had fled the states to escape sentences or execution. There was little law enforcement except for the occasional band of vigilantes. There were also few or no women in many areas.

**Territorial Disputes with Britain**

The manifest-destiny fervor exacerbated territorial tensions with Britain—tensions that had been mounting since the War of 1812. Although some disputes had been temporarily settled during Monroe’s and Adams’s presidencies, several major issues remained unresolved.

The two sides almost came to blows when frontiersmen in Maine and Canada started a small war for control of land in northern Maine in 1842. This **Aroostook War** (after the Aroostook River in Maine) convinced both Britain and the United States that a settlement needed to be negotiated before the fighting in the wilderness became a full-scale war. Fortunately, Daniel Webster (who served as Tyler’s secretary of state) and Lord Ashburton of Britain agreed on a permanent border between Maine and Canada in the **Webster-Ashburton Treaty** of 1842.

**Oregon and 54° 40'**

Britain and the United States also clashed over the **Oregon Territory**, and the dispute proved harder to solve. The two countries had occupied the territory jointly until 1828, at which time Britain had offered the United States everything south of the 49th parallel—the present-day border between Washington State and Canada. Most Americans, however, wanted nothing less than the entire territory, everything up to the 54° 40' parallel (up to the southern tip of Alaska). Although Britain had better claims to the land, the number of Americans in the territory far outnumbered the British, who numbered only several hundred. This unresolved issue, a hot topic in the election of 1840, was not resolved until several years later.

**The Lone Star Republic**

The other major land issue in the 1840s was **Texas**, which had declared its independence from Mexico in 1836 and had immediately requested U.S. statehood. Northern Whigs and opponents of slavery, however, protested the creation of another state in the South and blocked the move to annex the fledgling country in Congress. The U.S. neutrality pledge also prevented it from interfering. So for the time being, the United States could offer nothing more than formal recognition. Mexico tried several times over the next decade to reconquer their rebellious Texas province without success.

**Britain’s Plans for Texas**

Forced to protect itself, Texas negotiated trade and security treaties with several European powers. Britain in particular became very interested in Texas: it hoped to use Texas as a buffer to curb U.S. expansion. With the United States unable to expand beyond Texas, Britain hoped to weaken the Monroe Doctrine and perhaps gain new territories in North America again. In addition, Britain hoped that Texas cotton could end England’s dependence on American cotton. American policymakers were furious when they learned of Britain’s plans, so Texas thus became the hottest topic in the election of 1844.

**The Significance of the West**

Historian **Frederick Jackson Turner** argued in his 1893 paper“The Significance of the Frontier in American History” that the West and expansionism during the nineteenth century had an extraordinary impact on American government and society. He argued that a seemingly endless frontier made Americans different from Europeans and helped them develop democracy, individualism, and egalitarianism. Though mostly overlooked when it was first published (and still debated among historians today), Turner’s argument has become a landmark work in American historical scholarship

**The Mexican War: 1844–1848**

**Events**

1844 James K. Polk is elected president

1845 The U.S. annexes Texas

1846 Congress passes the Walker Tariff Independent Treasury is reestablished U.S. resolves dispute over Oregon with Britain Mexican War erupts John Frémont seizes California

1847 General Winfield Scott captures Mexico City

1848 United States and Mexico sign Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

**Key People**

**James K. Polk** - Eleventh U.S. president; expansionist Democrat from Kentucky; acquired Oregon and California; fought the Mexican war

**Henry Clay** - Unsuccessful Whig candidate against Polk in 1844 election

**Zachary Taylor** - Twelfth U.S. president; Mexican War hero; tried to dodge controversy over westward expansion of slavery

**The Election of 1844**

For the election of 1844, the Democrats nominated Speaker of the House **James K. Polk** on a platform supporting the annexation of Texas and demanding all of the Oregon Territory to the 54° 40' line. The Whigs, having formally kicked President John Tyler out of their party, Whigs selected **Henry Clay** (his third presidential bid). The new antislavery **Liberty Party** also nominated a weak candidate, mainly for show. In the end, though, Polk won 170 electoral votes to Clay’s 105; surprisingly, the Liberty Party stole just enough votes from Clay to tip the election toward the Democrats.

**Annexing Texas**

Tyler, concluding that Polk’s victory was a mandate from the American people to **annex Texas**, put the issue to a vote in both houses of Congress. Thus, in 1845, Congress officially annexed the Lone Star Republic. Mexico was outraged: they had refused to recognize Texas independence in 1836 and believed that the rebellious state would one day be reconquered. After the annexation announcement, Mexico withdrew its ambassador from Washington, D.C.

Then, a border dispute exacerbated the situation: whereas the United States claimed that Texas extended all the way south to the **Río Grande**, Mexico claimed that Texas was smaller, ending further north at the Nueces River. Both sides sent troops to the region, the Americans camping north of the Nueces and the Mexicans to the south of the Río Grande.

**Polk’s Presidency**

Polk went to the White House with a specific“to-do” list and accomplished all of his goals by the time he left. First, with the **Walker Tariff** of 1846, he reduced the tariff that had crept higher and higher since 1842. The new tariff set taxes on foreign goods at around 35 percent. Second, Polk reestablished the **independent treasury** that Martin Van Buren had created and that Tyler had decommissioned.

In addition, Polk wanted westward expansion, especially into Oregon and California. California had recently become a hot topic and prize in the West for its San Francisco Bay. However, acquisition of California would be difficult: it belonged to Mexico, which was not on good terms with the United States.

**Acquiring Oregon**

Acquiring **Oregon** was not difficult but did spark controversy. Recognizing that it could never win the population war in Oregon, Britain proposed giving the United States all of Oregon south of the 49th parallel rather than quarreling for the entire territory up to 54° 40'. The Senate agreed to the compromise, despite protests from many Americans who wanted the entire territory.

**Polk Asks for War**

**California** was more difficult. In 1845, Polk sent an envoy to Mexico City to offer Mexico as much as $30 million for present-day California, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico. The envoy, however, was never even allowed to make the offer and instead was ordered out of the country. Polk then ordered General **Zachary Taylor** and 1,500 troops to prepare to march to the Río Grande. Provoked, Mexican troops crossed the Río Grande and attacked Taylor in April 1846.

Immediately after he received the news, Polk “reluctantly” requested Congress to declare war. Congress granted Polk’s request after much debate. Whigs were particularly skeptical about who had actually started the war. **Abraham Lincoln**—then a congressman from Illinois—continually badgered Polk to identify the exact spot where the Mexicans had engaged Taylor. These **“spot resolutions”** gave the president a black eye and led many to believe that Polk had wanted and provoked the war himself.

**The Mexican War**

The United States did not lose a single battle during the two-year war. Several months after the war had begun, **John Frémont**—an explorer and Polk’s agent in California—seized Los Angeles and accepted California’s surrender. With California secure, Polk then concentrated on campaigns in Santa Fe, Buena Vista, and Monterrey, and eventually captured Mexico City.

**The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**

In 1848, the two sides signed the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**, in which Mexico gave up nearly half of its territory to the United States (present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas). The United States agreed to pay Mexico $15 million in exchange.

**Public Opinion of the War**

The Mexican War was a fairly popular war with the American people, for land-hungry settlers had been itching for more territory to farm and settle in the West. As a result, tens of thousands of American men enlisted in the army within the span of just two years. The spoils of war were demonstrable, as the size of the United States increased by a third.

For politicians, however, the war opened a huge can of worms. Accusations flew over who had actually started the war and why the war was being fought. Many Whigs (and historians) questioned Polk’s motives, believing that the war was more about California and manifest destiny than it was about Texas or U.S. security.

**A Renewed Debate Over Slavery**

The war also renewed old debates on the westward expansion of slavery; some historians have claimed that in many ways the Mexican War was the first round between the North and South in the Civil War. On one side were the Whigs and a growing number of abolitionists in the North, who were adamantly against letting slavery spread. Against them stood the entire South and a majority of Democrats, who believed that expanding slavery was essential to the survival of their economy and society. This debate became the major issue—really the only issue—during the next decade until the outbreak of the Civil War.

**Expansion and Slavery: 1846–1855**

**Events**

1846 Wilmot Proviso attempts to ban slavery in the West

1848 Mexican War ends Zachary Taylor elected president Free-Soil Party forms

1849 California and Utah request admittance to the Union

1850 Compromise of 1850 Congress passes Fugitive Slave Act Taylor dies; Millard Fillmore becomes president

1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Franklin Pierce elected president

1853 Gadsden Purchase negotiated

1854 Ostend Manifesto exposed

1855 William Walker invades Nicaragua

**Key People**

**Zachary Taylor** - 12th U.S. president; avoided slavery issue; died sixteen months into term

**Millard Fillmore** - 13th U.S. president; stepped in for deceased Taylor

**Franklin Pierce** - 14th U.S. president; proslavery Democrat from New England; pursued expansionist policy in Latin America and the West

**Lewis Cass** - Democratic presidential candidate in 1848; proposed popular sovereignty as means of determining free/slave status of western states

**Henry Clay** - Kentucky statesman who engineered Compromise of 1850

**Stephen Douglas** - Senator from Illinois; aided passage of the Compromise of 1850

**Harriet Tubman** - Runaway slave from Maryland and active abolitionist; key figure in the Underground Railroad

**The Wilmot Proviso**

At the end of the **Mexican War**, many new lands west of Texas were yielded to the United States, and the debate over the westward expansion of slavery was rekindled. Southern politicians and slave owners demanded that slavery be allowed in the West because they feared that a closed door would spell doom for their economy and way of life. Whig Northerners, however, believed that slavery should be banned from the new territories. Pennsylvanian congressman David Wilmot proposed such a ban in 1846, even before the conclusion of the war. Southerners were outraged over this **Wilmot Proviso** and blocked it before it could reach the Senate.

**Sectional Loyalty Over Party Loyalty**

The Wilmot Proviso justified Southerners’ fears that the North had designs against slavery. They worried that if politicians in the North prevented slavery from expanding westward, then it was only a matter of time before they began attacking it in the South as well. As a result, Southerners in both parties flatly rejected the proviso. Such bipartisan support was unprecedented and demonstrated just how serious the South really felt about the issue.

The large land concessions made to the U.S. in the 1848 **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** only exacerbated tensions. Debates in Congress grew so heated that fistfights even broke out between Northerners and Southerners on the floor of the House of Representatives. In fact, sectional division became so pronounced that many historians label the Mexican War and the Wilmot Proviso the first battles of the Civil War.

**The Election of 1848**

Even though the Wilmot Proviso failed, the expansion of slavery remained the most pressing issue in the election of 1848. The Whigs nominated Mexican War hero General **Zachary Taylor**, a popular but politically inexperienced candidate who said nothing about the issue in hopes of avoiding controversy.

The Democrats, meanwhile, nominated **Lewis Cass**. Also hoping to sidestep the issue of slavery, Cass proposed allowing the citizens of each western territory to decide for themselves whether or not to be free or slave. Cass hoped that a platform based on such **popular sovereignty** would win him votes in both the North and South.

The election of 1848 also marked the birth of the **Free-Soil Party**, a hodgepodge collection of Northern abolitionists, former Liberty Party voters, and disgruntled Democrats and Whigs. The Free-Soilers nominated former president **Martin Van Buren**, who hoped to split the Democrats. He succeeded and diverted enough votes from Cass to throw the election in Taylor’s favor. (Taylor, however, died after only sixteen months in office and was replaced by **Millard Fillmore**.)

**The Slavery Debate**

Although Taylor’s silence on the issue quieted the debate for about a year, the issue was revived when **California** and **Utah** applied for statehood. California’s population had boomed after the 1849 **gold rush** had attracted thousands of prospectors, while barren Utah had blossomed due to the ingenuity of several thousand Mormons. The question arose whether these states should be admitted as free states or slave states. The future of slavery in Washington, D.C., was likewise in question.

A great debate ensued in Congress over the future of these three regions as Southerners attempted to defend their economic system while Northerners decried the evils of slavery. In Congress, the dying **John C. Calhoun** argued that the South still had every right to nullify unconstitutional laws and, if necessary, to secede from the Union it created. **Daniel Webster** and **Henry Clay**, on the other hand, championed the Union and compromise. Webster in particular pointed out that discussion over the expansion of slavery in the West was moot because western lands were unsuitable for growing cotton.

**The Compromise of 1850**

In the end, the North and South agreed to compromise. Although Clay was instrumental in getting both sides to agree, he and Calhoun were too elderly and infirm to negotiate concessions and draft the necessary legislation. This task fell to a younger generation of politicians, especially the “Little Giant” **Stephen Douglas**, so named for his short stature and big mouth. A Democratic senator from Illinois, Douglas was responsible for pushing the finished piece of legislature through Congress.

The **Compromise of 1850**, as it was called, was a bundle of legislation that everyone could agree on. First, congressmen agreed that **California** would be admitted to the Union as a free state (Utah was not admitted because the Mormons refused to give up the practice of polygamy). The fate of slavery in the other territories, though, would be determined by **popular sovereignty**. Next, the slave trade (though not slavery itself) was banned in **Washington, D.C.** Additionally, **Texas** had to give up some of its land to form the New Mexican territory in exchange for a cancellation of debts owed to the federal government. Finally, Congress agreed to pass a newer and tougher **Fugitive Slave Act** to enforce the return of escaped slaves to the South.

**A Northern Victory in 1850**

Though both sides agreed to it, the Compromise of 1850 clearly favored the North over the South. California’s admission as a free state not only set a precedent in the West against the expansion of slavery, but also ended the sectional balance in the Senate, with sixteen free states to fifteen slave states. Ever since the Missouri Compromise, this balance had always been considered essential to prevent the North from banning slavery. The South also conceded to end the slave trade in Washington, D.C., in exchange for debt relief for Texans and a tougher Fugitive Slave Law. Southerners were willing to make so many concessions because, like Northerners, they truly believed the Compromise of 1850 would end the debate over slavery. As it turned out, of course, they were wrong.

**The Fugitive Slave Law**

Ironically, the 1850 **Fugitive Slave Act** only fanned the abolitionist flame rather than put it out. Even though many white Americans in the North felt little love for blacks, they detested the idea of sending escaped slaves back to the South. In fact, armed mobs in the North freed captured slaves on several occasions, especially in New England, and violence against slave catchers increased despite the federal government’s protests. On one occasion, it took several hundred troops and a naval ship to escort a single captured slave through the streets of Boston and back to the South. The Fugitive Slave Act thus allowed the abolitionists to transform their movement from a radical one to one that most Americans supported.

**The Underground Railroad**

Even though few slaves actually managed to escape to the North, the fact that Northern abolitionists encouraged slaves to run away infuriated Southern plantation owners. One network, the **Underground Railroad**, did successfully ferry as many as several thousand fugitive slaves into the North and Canada between 1840 and 1860. “Conductor” **Harriet Tubman**, an escaped slave from Maryland, personally delivered several hundred slaves to freedom.

**Uncle Tom’s Cabin**

Another major boost for the abolitionist cause came via **Harriet Beecher Stowe**’s 1852 novel ***Uncle Tom’s Cabin***, a story about slavery in the South. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold, awakening Northerners to the plight of enslaved blacks. The book affected the North so much that when Abraham Lincoln met Stowe in 1863, he commented, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!”

**Franklin Pierce and Expansion**

Despite the concessions of the Compromise of 1850 and the growing abolitionist movement, Southerners believed the future of slavery to be secure, so they looked for new territories to expand the cotton kingdom. The election of **Franklin Pierce** in 1852 helped the Southern cause. A pro-South Democrat from New England, Pierce hoped to add more territory to the United States, in true Jacksonian fashion.

**Latin America and the Ostend Manifesto**

Pierce was particularly interested in acquiring new territories in Latin America and went as far as to quietly support **William Walker**’s takeover of Nicaragua. A proslavery Southerner, Walker hoped that Pierce would annex Nicaragua as Polk had annexed Texas in 1844. The plan failed, however, when several other Latin American countries sent troops to depose the adventurer. Pierce’s reputation was also muddied over his threat to steal Cuba from Spain, which was revealed in a secret document called the **Ostend Manifesto**, which was leaked to the public in 1854.

**The Gadsden Purchase**

Despite his failures in Nicaragua and Cuba, Pierce did have several major successes during his term. In 1853, he completed negotiations to make the **Gadsden Purchase** from Mexico—30,000 square miles of territory in the southern portions of present-day Arizona and New Mexico. In addition, Pierce successfully opened Japan to American trade that same year.

**Bleeding Kansas: 1854–1856**

**Events**

1854 Congress passes Kansas-Nebraska Act Republican Party forms

1856 Border ruffians burn the town of Lawrence, Kansas Pottawatomie Massacre Charles Sumner attacked in the Senate James Buchanan elected president

**Key People**

**John Brown** - Violent radical abolitionist involved in the Pottawatomie Massacre and Harpers Ferry Raid

**James Buchanan** - 15th U.S. president; pro-Southern Democrat

**Stephen Douglas** - Democratic senator from Illinois; pushed the Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress

**John Frémont** - Mexican War hero; first presidential candidate for the new Republican Party

**The Kansas-Nebraska Act**

Senator **Stephen Douglas** of Illinois, hoping to lure transcontinental railroad developers away from lands acquired via the **Gadsden Purchase**, proposed instead to build the line farther north, so that the railway would end in Chicago and give his home region a huge economic boost. But federal law required that the vast unorganized areas in the middle of the country first be carved into official territories before any track could be laid.

To do so, Douglas rammed the **Kansas-Nebraska Act** through Congress in 1854 to create two new territories—Kansas in the South and Nebraska in the North. According to the **Missouri Compromise** of 1820, both territories would have to be free because they were north of the 36˚ 30' line. But Douglas, aware that Southern legislatures would never approve two new free territories, declared instead that **popular sovereignty** would determine whether Kansas and Nebraska would be free or slave. In doing so, he hoped to strengthen his bid for the presidency in 1856 by winning support from Southern Democrats.

**Backlash Against the Kansas-Nebraska Act**

Because popular sovereignty had worked in the Compromise of 1850, Douglas assumed that the doctrine would work in the unorganized territories as well. Privately, he believed that slavery would never take hold in Kansas and Nebraska because the terrain was unsuitable for producing cotton. Popular sovereignty, then, was merely a carrot to appease the South. Douglas thus figured the act would please both the abolitionists in the North and slave owners in the South, bring development to Chicago, and increase his chances for the party’s nomination in 1856 without really changing anything.

But Douglas’s plan backfired. Southerners—Democrats and Whigs alike—jumped at the opportunity to open Northern territories to slavery, but Northerners recoiled, outraged that the Missouri Compromise had been violated. Riots and protests against the Kansas-Nebraska Act erupted in Northern cities.

**Growing Antislavery Sentiments in the North**

What Douglas had failed to realize was that most Northerners regarded the Missouri Compromise to be almost sacred. The publication of ***Uncle Tom’s Cabin*** and the brutal enforcement of the **Fugitive Slave Act** had by this time awakened hundreds of thousands in the North to the horrors of slavery. Even those who benefited from Southern slavery, such as textile manufacturers, did not wish to see slavery expand further west or north. The Kansas-Nebraska Act succeeded only in shifting Northern public opinion even further away from reconciliation with the South.

**The End of the Whig Party**

The Kansas-Nebraska Act also caused the collapse of both the Whig and Democratic parties. The parties split according to section: to pass the act through Congress, Southern Whigs voted with Southern Democrats against their Northern counterparts for the first time in history. The Whigs were never able to reunite after this catastrophic divide. The Democrats survived, but Northern Democrats lost over half their seats in Congress that year.

**Border Ruffians vs. Free-Soilers**

After the Kansas-Nebraska Act, thousands of people moved into the territory. Most of them were simply westward-moving farmers in search of better land, but others swarmed there in an attempt to tip the balance in the impending decision about Kansas’s free/slave status. Thousands of proslavery Missourians crossed the state line into Kansas when they learned that popular sovereignty would determine the fate of slavery. They grabbed as much land as they could and established dozens of small towns. These **“border ruffians”** also rigged unfair elections, sometimes recruiting friends and family in Missouri to cross over into Kansas and cast illegal ballots. Others voted multiple times or threatened honest locals to vote for slavery. Afraid that Kansas would become the next slave state, Northern abolitionists flocked there too and established their own **Free-Soil towns**. Both factions even went so far as to establish their own territorial capitals.

**“Bleeding Kansas”**

Inevitably, the two groups clashed. In one incident, a hotheaded band of proslavery settlers burned the Free-Soil town of Lawrence, Kansas. In retaliation, the deranged **John Brown** and his own antislavery band killed five border ruffians in the **Pottawatomie Massacre**. Neither Brown nor any of his followers were ever tried for their crimes. Within a few months, Kansas was plagued by marauding violent factions. This rampant lawlessness and bloodshed earned the territory the nickname “**Bleeding Kansas**.”

**Charles Sumner**

Blood was also spilled over Kansas on the Senate floor when Congressman **Preston Brooks** of South Carolina beat Massachusetts Senator **Charles Sumner** brutally with his cane. Brooks had grown so incensed over the antislavery speech Sumner had delivered the previous week that he decided to take vengeance on his own. The beating nearly killed Sumner, who was forced to leave the Senate for several years to receive medical treatment. Brooks was hailed as a hero in the South but vilified in the North.

**The Election of 1856**

Americans were still divided over the Kansas issue as the **election of 1856** approached, so parties nominated Kansas-neutral candidates in the hopes of overcoming the growing sectionalism. The Whig Party had by this time dissolved into Northern and Southern factions and was unable to agree on a candidate. Northern Whigs instead united with **Free-Soil Party** members and Unionist Democrats to form the new **Republican Party** and nominate adventurer **John C. Frémont**. Democrats, on the other hand, rallied behind the relatively unknown **James Buchanan**. Whereas Frémont ran on a platform expressly opposed to the westward expansion of slavery, Buchanan campaigned for popular sovereignty. The nativist **Know-Nothing Party** also entered ex-president **Millard Fillmore** in the race, campaigning on a platform to stem the influx of Irish and German immigrants. In the end, Buchanan defeated his rivals soundly.

**The Buchanan Years: 1857–1858**

**Events**

1857 Buchanan accepts Lecompton Constitution Supreme Court issues *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision Panic of 1857

1858 Congress rejects Lecompton Constitution Lincoln and Douglas debate slavery in Illinois

**Key People**

**James Buchanan** - 15th U.S. president; supported the Lecompton Constitution to admit Kansas as a slave state

**Dred Scott** - Slave who sued his master for his and his family’s freedom in a landmark 1857 Supreme Court case

**Roger Taney** - Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional in the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision

**Stephen Douglas** - Illinois senator who rejected Kansas’s Lecompton Constitution; announced Freeport Doctrine of popular sovereignty during the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858

**Abraham Lincoln** - Former lawyer from Illinois who rose to national prominence during the Lincoln-Douglas debates

**Dred Scott v. Sanford**

Just two days after **James Buchanan** became president in 1857, controversy over the slavery issue struck again when the Supreme Court declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional in the ***Dred Scott v. Sanford*** case. In the infamous decision, the enslaved **Dred Scott** sued his master for his freedom and that of his wife and daughter. Scott had married a free black woman while traveling with his master in the free state of Illinois in the 1830s. The two had a child but then moved back to the South. Scott believed that he had been freed once he had crossed the 36˚ 30' parallel and that his wife and daughter had been enslaved illegally when they returned to the South.

However, Chief Justice **Roger Taney**, along with a majority of the other justices—all but one from the South—ruled that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional because the federal government had no right to restrict the movement of property (i.e., slaves). Taney also contended that Scott had no business suing his master in a U.S. court, because that right was reserved only for citizens. Taney hoped his ruling would finalize blacks’ status as property, uphold slavery, and end the divisive sectional debates.

**Northern Backlash**

The *Dred Scott* ruling only exacerbated sectional tensions, however. Whereas Southerners hailed it as a landmark decision that would finally bring peace, Northerners were appalled. Thousands in the North took to the streets to protest the decision, and many questioned the impartiality of the Southern-dominated Supreme Court. Several state legislatures essentially nullified the decision and declared that they would never permit slavery within their borders, no matter who ordered them to do so. Buchanan himself was implicated when it was discovered that he had pressured the Northern justice into voting with the Southerners. Arguably, the *Dred Scott* decision had almost as great an effect on Northern public opinion as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

**The Lecompton Constitution**

Meanwhile, the bleeding had not stopped in Kansas, where **abolitionist settlers** and **border ruffians**, unable to agree on a territorial government, established two separate ones—a Free-Soil legislature in Topeka and a proslavery legislature in Lecompton. After the Free-Soilers boycotted a rigged election to draft a state constitution in 1857, proslavery settlers were given a free hand to write the document as they sought fit. When they finished this **Lecompton Constitution**, they then applied for statehood as a slave state.

President Buchanan accepted the constitution immediately and welcomed Kansas into the Union. In 1858, however, the Republican-dominated Congress refused to admit Kansas on the grounds that border ruffians had rigged the election. **Stephen Douglas** declared that Kansas would be admitted only after honest elections were held to determine whether the state would be free or slave. The Lecompton Constitution was put to a special vote in the territory the following year and was soundly defeated. Kansas eventually entered the Union as a free state in 1861.

**The Panic of 1857**

Buchanan’s other major challenge was the brief economic depression that swept the nation in 1857 and 1858. The depression was sparked by the **Panic of 1857**, which occurred when newspapers reported the failure of a prominent bank in the Midwest. Reduced exports of food and manufactured goods made the depression worse in the West and North but left the South’s cotton economy relatively untouched. Southerners relished Britain’s dependence on cotton and hailed the soaring unemployment rate in the North as proof that the **wage-labor system** had failed.

**The Lincoln-Douglas Debates**

In this atmosphere of national confusion, relatively unknown former congressman **Abraham Lincoln** challenged **Stephen Douglas** to a series of public debates in their home state of Illinois. Lincoln, hoping to steal Douglas’s seat in the Senate in the 1858 elections, wanted to be the first to put the question of slavery to the voters. The “Little Giant” accepted and engaged Lincoln in a total of seven debates, each in front of several thousand people.

During the debates, Lincoln denounced slavery as a moral wrong and argued that the “peculiar institution” should be banned from the West permanently. At the same time, though, he also called for the preservation of the Union. Douglas accused Lincoln of being a radical abolitionist and articulated a new policy—the **Freeport Doctrine**—stating that popular sovereignty in the territories was the only democratic solution to resolving the slavery problem. Even though Lincoln lost the Senate race, the **Lincoln-Douglas debates** brought him to national prominence.

**The Election of 1860 and Secession: 1859–1861**

**Events**

1859 John Brown raids Harpers Ferry, Virginia

1860 Abraham Lincoln elected president South Carolina secedes from the Union

1861 Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas secede Jefferson Davis becomes president of the Confederate States of America Lincoln delivers first inaugural address South Carolina seizes Fort Sumter Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia secede

**Key People**

**Abraham Lincoln** - 16th U.S. president; his Republican roots and association with abolitionism prompted South Carolina to secede in 1861

**John Bell** - Constitutional Union candidate for president in 1860; campaigned for compromise, Union, and slavery

**John C. Breckinridge** - Vice president under Buchanan and Democratic candidate for president in 1860; supported by Southern Democrats

**Stephen Douglas** - Democratic presidential candidate in 1860; supported primarily by Northern Democrats

**Jefferson Davis** - Former senator from Mississippi selected as president of the Confederate States of America in 1861

**William Seward** - Radical abolitionist who led Whig Party and, later, Republican Party

**John Brown** - Radical abolitionist who incited a slave uprising in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859; was convicted of treason and hanged

**John Brown and Harpers Ferry**

Although the economic depression of 1857–1858 put a temporary damper on the slavery debate, the radical abolitionist **John Brown** quickly revived it with another violent incident. On October 16, 1859, Brown—the infamous Free-Soiler who had killed five proslavery men at the **Pottawatomie Massacre** in Kansas in 1856—stormed an arsenal at **Harpers Ferry**, Virginia (present-day West Virginia), with twenty other men. He hoped the raid would prompt slaves throughout Virginia and the South to rise up against their masters.

Strangely, though, the fanatical Brown had never informed the slaves of his plan, so no uprising took place, and Brown and his men found themselves cornered inside the arsenal. A long standoff ended with half the raiders dead and the rest, including Brown, captured. After a speedy trial, Brown was convicted of treason and hanged. Before his death, he announced that he would gladly die if his death brought the nation closer to justice.

Brown’s execution was met with cheers in the South and wails in the North. His raid had touched on Southerners’ deepest fear that their slaves would one day rise up against them, and many in the South viewed him as a criminal and a traitor of the worst kind. Most Northerners, however, saw Brown as a martyr, especially after he so boldly denounced slavery with his final words.

**Democratic Candidates in 1860**

Amid this tense atmosphere, the nation’s political parties convened to select their respective candidates for the presidential election of 1860. Democrats gathered in Charleston, South Carolina, but were bitterly deadlocked on whom to nominate. Though **Stephen Douglas** was the party favorite, no Southern Democrat would vote for him after he had rejected the **Lecompton Constitution** in 1858. Unable to compromise, the party split: Northern Democrats returned home and nominated Douglas, while Southern Democrats chose proslavery Vice President **John C. Breckinridge** from Kentucky.

**Republican Candidates in 1860**

The Republicans also had trouble choosing a candidate. Senator **William Seward** from New York was the most popular choice but also the riskiest because of his hard-line antislavery stance. Moreover, the Republicans knew they needed a candidate who could win both the Northeast and the contested Northwest (now called the Midwest), where the Democrats had a strong foothold.

As a result, the Republicans settled on the lanky **Abraham Lincoln** from Illinois, who had a reputation in the North for being a moderate and a Unionist. Nonetheless, a small faction of Republicans saw Lincoln as too much of an abolitionist and instead nominated Tennessean **John Bell** under the banner of the proslavery **Constitutional Union Party**.

**The Election of 1860**

With the parties split and compromise no longer a solution, the **election of 1860** was less a national election that two sectional elections. Most Southern states refused to put Lincoln’s name on the ballot or acknowledge his candidacy, and several even vowed to leave the Union if Lincoln were elected. Few people took this secession talk seriously, however, for the South had been making similar threats for decades.

The run-up to the election was intense as the four major candidates crisscrossed the country discussing the issues. On top of their traditional platform of higher tariffs and internal improvements, Lincoln and the Republicans added the promise of maintaining the Union. The Constitutional Union candidate, Bell, likewise promised to preserve the Union. Northern Democrat Douglas delivered antisecession speeches, and Southern Democrat Breckinridge defended slavery.

In the end, Lincoln won a resounding victory, with 40 percent of the popular vote. He won a total of 180 electoral votes, while the other candidates combined won 123.

**Secession**

A month after Lincoln’s election, legislators in **South Carolina** voted unanimously to secede; within several weeks, **Alabama**, **Florida**, **Georgia**, **Louisiana**, **Mississippi**, and **Texas** followed suit. Despite “Honest Abe’s” reputation in the North as a moderate, he was vilified as a radical abolitionist“Black Republican” in the South. Much to the dismay of anxious Northerners, lame-duck president **James Buchanan** did nothing to address the secession crisis. Lincoln also waited to take action until he had officially become president.

**The Confederate States of America**

Meanwhile, delegates from the seven secessionist states met in Montgomery, Alabama, in February 1861 to form the government of the new **Confederate States of America**. They drafted a new constitution; chose **Richmond**, Virginia, to be the new capital; and selected former Mississippi senator **Jefferson Davis** as the Confederacy’s first president. (*For more information about the Confederate government, see* The Confederate Side)

**The Crittenden Compromise**

Hoping to prevent war from breaking out after the secession, Senator **John Crittenden** from Kentucky proposed another compromise. He suggested adding an **amendment** to the Constitution to protect slavery in all territories south of 36˚ 30', and then allowing **popular sovereignty** to determine whether these Southern territories became free or slave when they applied for statehood. All territories north of 36˚ 30', meanwhile, would be free. Many Southerners contemplated the **Crittenden Compromise**, but Lincoln rejected it on the grounds that he had been elected to block the westward expansion of slavery.

**Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address**

As both Northerners and Southerners waited to see how Lincoln would respond, he calmly announced in his **first inaugural address** that he would do nothing. Rather, he reaffirmed the North’s friendship with the South, stressed national unity, and asked Southerners to abandon secession. Moreover, he declared that the secession was illegal and that he would maintain the Union at all costs—but that he would make no move against the South unless provoked.

In announcing that he himself would take no action, Lincoln placed the responsibility for any future violence squarely on the South’s shoulders. He knew that Americans in the North would support a war only in which the Southerners were the aggressors. Lincoln could thus continue to claim honestly that he was fighting to defend and save the Union from those who wished to tear it apart.

**Fort Sumter**

**Jefferson Davis**, on the other hand, announced in his inaugural speech that the South might be required to use force to secure its aims, and that spring, the South made good on its word. On April 12, 1861, General **P. T. Beauregard** ordered his South Carolinian militia unit to attack **Fort Sumter**, a Union stronghold on an island in Charleston Harbor. After a day of intense bombardment, Major Robert Anderson surrendered the fort to Beauregard. South Carolina’s easy victory prompted four more states—**Arkansas**, **North Carolina**, **Tennessee**, and **Virginia**—to secede. The Civil War had begun.

**Complacency in the South**

The fall of Fort Sumter was not a major battle, militarily speaking: the Union troops surrendered only because they ran out of supplies, and neither side suffered any serious casualties. However, the easy seizure of Fort Sumter inspired complacency in the South: Southerners misinterpreted Anderson’s surrender as a sign that the Union was weak and unwilling to fight.

Lincoln’s lack of immediate response was likewise misleading. The North appeared to do nothing for months afterward—the next battle wasn’t fought until July—and the South interpreted this inaction as further weakness. In reality, Lincoln used the interim weeks to ready the military and put the gears of the North’s war machine into motion. The brutal war that followed turned out to be far different from the smooth sailing the South initially expected.