

**The Civil War****Lesson 1**

# The Issue of Slavery

**Key Terms and People**

**secession** Decision by a state to leave the Union

**Compromise of 1850** Series of measures that were intended to settle the disagreements between free states and slave states

**popular sovereignty** Idea that people living in a territory should make their own decisions, especially the decision to admit slavery

**Stephen A. Douglas** Senator from Illinois who worked to pass the Compromise of 1850

**Millard Fillmore** 13th president

**Fugitive Slave Act** Law that provided for harsh treatment for escaped slaves and for those who helped them

**Underground Railroad** Secret network of people who hid fugitive slaves who went north to freedom

**Harriet Tubman** Famous “conductor” on the Underground Railroad

**Harriet Beecher Stowe** Author of the antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

**Kansas-Nebraska Act** Law that split Nebraska into the territories of Nebraska and Kansas and allowed for popular sovereignty there

**John Brown** Fierce opponent of slavery who led a raid that killed five proslavery people

**Bleeding Kansas** Nickname given to the Kansas Territory because of the bloody violence there

**Before You Read**

In the last lesson you read about changes in work and in working conditions during the 1800s. In this lesson you will see how the issue of slavery in the western territories caused conflict in the nation.

**As You Read**

Use a chart to take notes on the Compromise of 1850, the people involved in it, and the issue of slavery.

Lesson 1, *continued*

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**SLAVERY IN THE TERRITORIES****Why was slavery a major issue?**

By the mid-1800s the North and South had grown further apart, particularly on the issue of slavery.

In 1846 Congress debated the Wilmot Proviso. This was a bill that would ban slavery in the new territories acquired from Mexico. Northerners favored the bill. They felt that more slave states would give the South too much power in Congress. Southerners opposed the Proviso. They argued that slaves were property, and the Constitution protected property, so the Wilmot Proviso was unconstitutional. Southerners also feared that if the Wilmot Proviso became law, there would be more free states and the North would have more power. It never became law.

In 1849 California held a convention to start the process of becoming a state. Southerners thought it should be a slave state since most of it lay south of the Missouri Compromise line. (This imaginary line running through the western territories was created in 1820. South of the line, slavery was legal; north, it was outlawed.)

President Zachary Taylor supported California's admission as a free state. Taylor believed that the slavery issue should be left up to individual territories rather than Congress.

However, Taylor soon found that feelings in the South were more passionate than he expected. Southerners saw the move to block slavery in the territories as an attack on the southern way of life. They began to question whether the South should remain in the Union.

1. Why was the issue of slavery in the territories so important to the North and South?

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**THE SENATE DEBATES****What was the Compromise of 1850?**

The 31st Congress opened in December 1849 having to deal with the question of California's statehood and a border dispute between slave state Texas and part of New Mexico Territory. Also, northerners wanted slavery abolished in the District of Columbia. Southerners accused the North of failing to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. Things became so tense that some southern states threatened **secession**, or formal withdrawal from the Union.

Henry Clay of Kentucky presented the **Compromise of 1850**. To please the North, the compromise called for California to be admitted as a free state. To satisfy the South, the compromise called for a stricter fugitive slave law.

Other provisions of the compromise had elements that appealed to the North and South. For example, both regions were happy with a provision that gave **popular sovereignty** to the territories of New Mexico and Utah. This allowed the territories to decide for themselves whether to be a slave or free state.

Also, as part of the compromise, the federal government would pay Texas \$10 million to surrender its claim on New Mexico. Northerners approved of this provision because, in effect, it limited slavery in Texas to its current borders. For southerners, the money would help to offset Texas's expenses and debts from the war with Mexico.

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Congress debated the Compromise of 1850 for months. The North, represented by Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, supported the plan. Webster appealed for unity and urged northerners to try to compromise with the South by passing a stricter fugitive slave law. He asked the South to be cautious about secession. The South, represented by John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, opposed the compromise. Calhoun was against any plan that limited states' rights to decide the slavery issue themselves.

The compromise failed to pass. Senator **Stephen A. Douglas** of Illinois then took action. He got the compromise passed by submitting each part as a separate bill. The unexpected death of President Taylor aided Douglas's efforts. On July 9, 1850, Taylor fell ill and died. **Millard Fillmore** became president. Unlike Taylor, he supported the compromise. Finally, the Compromise of 1850 became law. However, it did not settle the issue of slavery for long.

2. What were the features of the Compromise of 1850?

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### FUGITIVE SLAVES AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

#### **How did the North react to the Fugitive Slave Act?**

The Compromise of 1850 made the **Fugitive Slave Act** much stricter, which caused outrage in the North. Runaway slaves could be arrested and sent back to the South and into slavery again. They were not entitled to a jury trial and could not testify on their own behalf. A statement by a slave owner was all it

took for a slave to be returned. People found guilty of helping a fugitive could be fined, imprisoned, or both. Northerners resisted the law and organized committees to send fugitive African Americans to safety in Canada. Nine northern states passed personal liberty laws, which banned the imprisonment of runaway slaves and guaranteed that they would have jury trials.

In addition, free African Americans and white abolitionists organized a secret network of people who would help fugitive slaves in their escape. It was called the **Underground Railroad**. **Harriet Tubman**, a runaway slave who had reached safety in Philadelphia, was a famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. She made 19 trips back to the South and helped about 300 slaves gain their freedom.

In 1852 abolitionist **Harriet Beecher Stowe** published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This novel showed the horrors of slavery and helped many in the North see the fight to ban slavery as a moral struggle. The book prompted northern abolitionists to increase their protests against the Fugitive Slave Act. Southerners criticized the book as an attack on their way of life.

3. What was the Underground Railroad?

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### TENSION IN KANSAS AND NEBRASKA

#### **What conflict arose over the Nebraska Territory?**

In 1854 the issue of slavery in the territories again erupted. That year, Stephen Douglas proposed splitting the

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Nebraska Territory into two territories—Nebraska and Kansas.

He had several motives. Douglas was eager to organize these territories because he believed that most people wanted the western lands to be part of the Union. Douglas also believed that continued expansion would help unify the nation. He assumed that one state would enter as a free state, the other a slave state. This would keep a balance between the North and South.

However, Douglas did not realize how strongly the North had opposed slavery. The entire Nebraska territory was north of the Missouri Compromise line. Because of this, the North argued that both Nebraska and Kansas should be free states. Northerners opposed Douglas's proposal. They saw it as an attempt to increase slavery.

Douglas's bill caused bitter debates in Congress. The **Kansas-Nebraska Act** became law in 1854. It split Nebraska into the territories of Nebraska and Kansas. Each state would decide whether or not to allow slavery.

4. What did the Kansas-Nebraska Act do?

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### **VIOLENCE ERUPTS IN "BLEEDING KANSAS"**

#### **Why did violence erupt in Kansas?**

Settlers from both the North and South rushed into the Kansas Territory. By March 1855 there were enough settlers in Kansas to hold an election for a territorial legislature. Thousands of "border ruffians" from Missouri went into Kansas to vote illegally, winning a

majority for the proslavery candidate. He set up a government and began issuing proslavery acts. Angry about the fraudulent election, abolitionists set up their own government.

Violence soon erupted in Kansas. Some antislavery settlers lived in a town called Lawrence. A fight there resulted in the killing of an antislavery settler. Violence continued when a proslavery grand jury said Lawrence's settlers were traitors and had them arrested. The posse burned their headquarters and printing presses and looted houses and stores. Abolitionists said the event was "the sack of Lawrence."

When **John Brown**, an abolitionist, heard about what happened in Lawrence, he sought revenge. He and his men killed five proslavery people in a raid. This killing triggered dozens of violent actions throughout Kansas. About 200 people were killed. Because of the violence on both sides, the territory was nicknamed **Bleeding Kansas**.

The violence over the issue of slavery also spread to the Senate. As senators debated the situation in Kansas, a relative of an antislavery senator attacked a proslavery senator on the Senate floor.

The fierce differences between North and South affected the nation's political parties. The compromises that had been reached were not able to satisfy radicals in either the North or South. The debate over slavery caused new political alliances and violence.

5. Why was Kansas referred to as Bleeding Kansas?

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