

THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY in ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Slavery was a social institution that submitted a slave to forced labour and denied him all human rights. The slave was the property of his master; therefore as an object, he could be bought, sold, given, or mortgaged according to his master's will. Until 1865, slavery was a legal institution in the USA and slave laws and institutions regularized it.

1. Slave Trade in the Colonial Period

During the 16th century, John Hawkins and Francis Drake, two English pirates, made their reputation by smuggling African blacks to Spanish colonies in the New World. In the English colonies, labour was initially provided by **indentured servants**, poor whites, or convicts. Enslavement of blacks started on a small scale in 1619, the year in which a shipment of slaves was brought and sold in Jamestown, Virginia. The first slave status was similar to that of the white indentured servants – i.e. limited period of servitude after which they were freed. England legally engaged in slave trade in 1663. In 1698, even colonials could practice slave trade.

2. Institutionalization of Slavery

As plantation developed and became more and more profitable, the need for slave labour increased too. The white labourers and indentured servants improved their economic and social status; the slaves replaced them gradually and became an important element of the colonial economic system. Consequently, in the 1660s, laws defining the legal, political and social status of slaves were introduced in all the thirteen colonies; they were developed and ultimately toughened:

- Forced labour was legalized.
- Slave disobedience was severely punished.
- Racial intermarriage and manumission (release from slavery) were forbidden.
- Slavery was perpetuated: from slaves to their descendants.
- Slave marriages were not recognized.

Socially, the slave system of the United States' South was the most dehumanizing systems in human history.

3. Development of Slavery

The Development of plantations, the need of labour force and the profitability of slave trade resulted in a flood of slaves on the American markets. By the time slave trade was stopped in 1807, Africa had lost 15 million captives to enslavement.

Northerners were very active in the field of slave trade. They developed the **triangular trade** which linked the colonies, West Africa and the West Indies. In the triangular trade, rum made in New England from West Indian sugar was traded for African captives on the shores of West Africa, who in turn were sold in the West Indies and Southern plantations. By 1804, the northern states had emancipated (freed) their slaves and slavery disappeared from the North.

Most of the slaves lived in the South. After 1810, the South was the greatest cotton-growing region in the world. Therefore, slavery was a vital element to Southern economy.

4. Slavery in the Antebellum South

From the birth of the republic to 1830, Southerners argued that the emergence of cotton as the most important cash crop in the country made slaves necessary. The indispensable reliance on slavery was their justification. They defended slavery as a **necessary evil**, something awful but vital for the survival of the South.

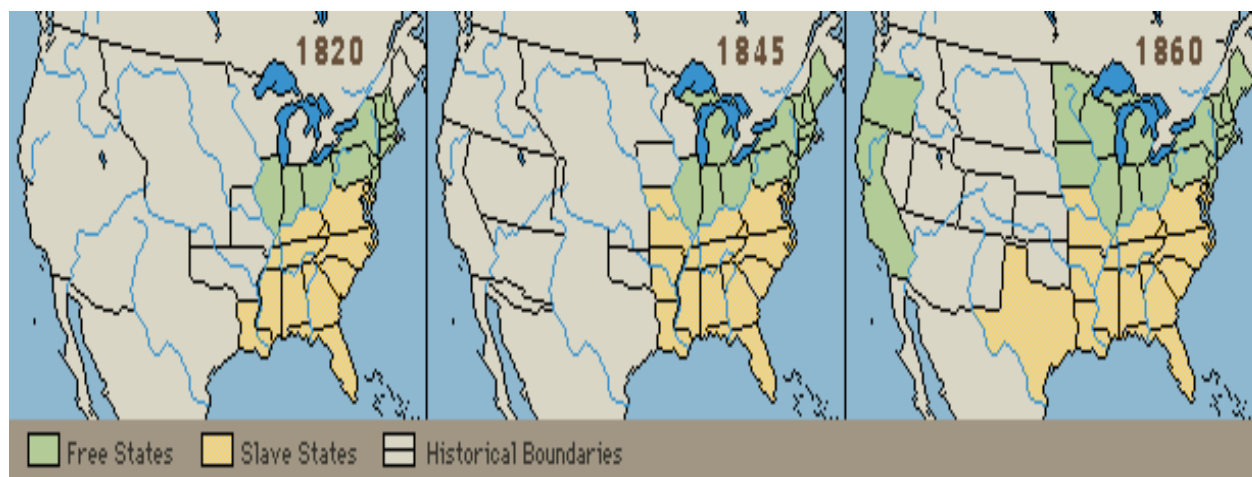
After 1830, a number of factors forced southerners to change their defence. Instead of defending slavery as a necessary evil, they began to defend slavery as a "**positive good**." They argued that the slaves were in actuality happy, content and well cared for. They even went as far as

saying that being a slave was better than being a worker in a northern factory, a condition referred to as "wage slavery."

The south felt compelled to defend slavery for many reasons.

1. In the North, there was a growing abolitionist sentiment.
2. In the South there was an increased reliance on cotton as an export crop. By 1860 cotton was 65% of all of US exports. This led cotton to be referred to as "King Cotton." While only 25% of southerners actually owned slaves (some historians give the lesser estimates, only 8%), these select few were the ones with great political power. If one considered that a slave in 1850 was worth \$2000 then losing 200 slaves would mean a loss of \$400,000. This was an astronomical sum at the time, equal to millions. Southern plantation owners were not about to lose that kind of money.
3. Almost all southerners, regardless of whether or not they owned slave, were basically racist. View of blacks ranged from them being inferior, to being animals, to them being likened to pets. In all cases slaves were viewed as property, not people.

In the US Congress, Southern representatives worked hard to protect slavery. They took any position that defended slavery and their general economic condition. They advocated nullification, opposed tariffs and worked to get strict fugitive slave laws passed.



5. Attempts to solve the question of slavery with regard to westward expansion.

Throughout the early 19th century, slavery's role in national politics increased. Politicians became concerned with how the status of slavery in territories and new states would be determined. They drafted various acts including the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

A-The Missouri Compromise (1820)

One by one, new states joined the Union. From 1816 to 1819, two Northern and two Southern states joined the Union. The two Northern states, Illinois and Indiana, did not allow slavery; the two Southern states, Alabama and Mississippi, did. The slavery issue was rapidly driving the country into two separate camps, and Congress wasn't doing anything to stop the polarization. Both sides made threats over continued settlement of the Louisiana Territory, and neither side was willing to give the other even a temporary advantage.

When Missouri applied to become a state, in 1819, the Union had 22 states, 11 allowing slavery and 11 outlawing it. Missouri wanted to become a slave state. Anti-slavery leaders were afraid that allowing another slave state would upset what was then a delicate balance between slave states and free states.

Abolitionists wanted slavery outlawed everywhere, and they were willing to resort to violence to get what they wanted. Many slave owners and even non-slave-owning Southerners were willing to fight to keep what they thought was their right to own slaves if they chose.

So how did Congress solve this growing problem? By **compromising**. Because both sides were on opposite sides of the issue, both sides couldn't be satisfied by the same outcome. So Congress gave both sides something: Each side got a new state.

Maine applied for statehood about the same time, and both were eventually admitted to the Union, **Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state**.

With The **Missouri Compromise** of 1820:

- Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine was admitted as a free state
- Slavery was forbidden north of the 36 degree latitude mark, the southern boundary of Missouri.
- People in the North were encouraged to return runaway slaves to their masters.
- Slavery was not prohibited anywhere, not even in the free territories.



B-The Great Compromise of 1850

The Missouri Compromise solved an immediate problem but didn't solve the issue of slavery as a whole. In 1845, the Missouri Compromise enabled the admission of Texas as a slave state

However, the Missouri Compromise was unable to provide a solution for the problems caused by the admission of California into the Union. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had dictated that all territories north of the 36'30" parallel would be free and those below it would be slave, but California was divided in 1/2 by that line. Southern and Northern representatives had to find another solution.

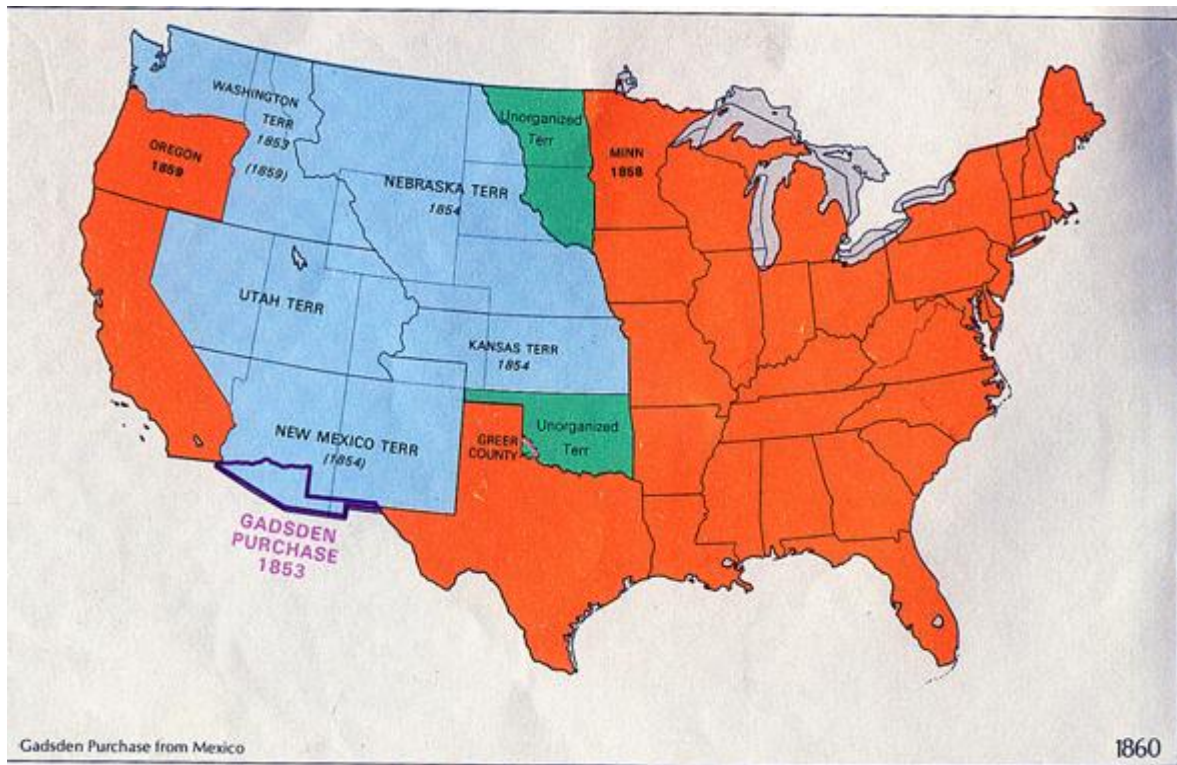
The Compromise of 1850:

- a) California admitted as a free state.
- b) Utah and New Mexico would be able to choose for themselves (popular sovereignty)
- c) Slave trade was abolished in Washington DC but not slavery itself.
- d) Congress passed a stricter Fugitive Slave Law to be enforced in the North.

C-The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)

In 1854, the Congress passed the **Kansas-Nebraska Act**. Settlement in the territory of Nebraska was organized under that legislation. It allowed settlers in the newly formed states to vote on the slavery question. This had harmful consequences: **Kansas and Nebraska became the sites of violent clashes between antislavery and proslavery groups.**

When settlers received popular sovereignty, Southern settlers flooded the newly organized territories as the Kansas Territory passed laws in favour of slavery. Anti slavery supporters set up a separate, competing government and Kansas was divided into an armed camp. That resulted in the **Border War or Bleeding Kansas.**



Another outcome of this legislation and its effects was the creation of a new political party: the **Republican Party** was formed to protest the expansion of slavery into the territories.