



# The Slavery Issue in the West



## Explore These Questions

- What were the various views on slavery in the West?
- What was the goal of the Free Soil party?
- What were the results of the Compromise of 1850?

## Define

- sectionalism
- popular sovereignty
- secede
- fugitive
- civil war

## Identify

- Missouri Compromise
- Wilmot Proviso
- Free Soil party
- Zachary Taylor
- Stephen Douglas
- Compromise of 1850
- Fugitive Slave Law of 1850

## SETTING the Scene

In 1820, Thomas Jefferson was in his seventies. The former President had vowed “never to write, talk, or even think of politics.” Still, he voiced alarm when he heard about a fierce debate going on in Congress:

“In the gloomiest moment of the revolutionary war, I never had any [fears] equal to what I feel from this source. . . . We have a wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go.”

Jefferson feared that the “wolf,” or the issue of slavery, would tear the North and South apart. He was correct. As settlers continued to move west, tension over slavery worsened. Again and again, Congress faced an agonizing decision. Should it prohibit slavery in the territories and later admit them to the Union as free states? Or should it permit slavery in the territories and later admit them as slave states?

## The Missouri Compromise

When Missouri asked to join the Union as a slave state, a crisis erupted. The admission of Missouri would upset the balance of power in the Senate. In 1819, there were 11 free states and 11 slave states. (See the graph on page 427.) Missouri’s admission would give the South a majority in the Senate. Determined not to lose power, northerners opposed letting Missouri enter as a slave state.

The argument over Missouri lasted many months. Finally, Senator Henry Clay proposed a compromise. During the long debate, Maine had also applied for statehood. Clay suggested admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. His plan, called the **Missouri Compromise**, kept the number of slave and free states equal.

As part of the Missouri Compromise, Congress drew an imaginary line across the southern border of Missouri at latitude 36° 30′ N. Slavery was permitted in the part of the Louisiana Purchase south of that line. It was banned north of the line. The only exception to this was Missouri. (See the map on page 431.)

## New Western Lands

The Missouri Compromise applied only to the Louisiana Purchase. In 1848, the Mexican War added a vast stretch of western land to the United States. (See the map on page 363.) Once again, the question of slavery in the territories arose.

## The Wilmot Proviso

Many northerners feared that the South would extend slavery into the West. David Wilmot, a Congressman from Pennsylvania, called for a law to ban slavery in any lands won from Mexico. Southern leaders angrily opposed the **Wilmot Proviso**. They said that Congress had no right to ban slavery in the western territories.

## Linking United States and the World

### United States



### Russia



### Forced Labor

In the painting at left, enslaved African Americans await the results of a slave auction. At the same time in Russia, millions of workers were serfs. Serfs were bound to the land and had to work for wealthy nobles. One Russian observer sadly reported “of men and women torn from their families and their villages, and sold . . . of children taken from their parents and sold to cruel masters.” ★ **How was slavery in the United States similar to serfdom in Russia?**

In 1846, the House passed the Wilmot Proviso, but the Senate defeated it. As a result, Americans continued to argue about slavery in the West even while their army fought in Mexico.

### Opposing views

The Mexican War strengthened feelings of **sectionalism** in the North and South. Sectionalism is loyalty to a state or section, rather than to the country as a whole. Many southerners were united by their support for slavery. They saw the North as a growing

threat to their way of life. Many northerners saw the South as a foreign country, where American rights and liberties did not exist.

As the debate over slavery heated up, people found it hard not to take sides. Northern abolitionists demanded that slavery be banned throughout the country. They insisted that slavery was morally wrong. By the late 1840s, many northerners agreed.

Southern slaveholders thought that slavery should be allowed in any territory. They also demanded that slaves who escaped to the North be returned to them. Even white southerners who did not own slaves generally agreed with these ideas.

Between these two extreme views were more moderate positions. Some moderates argued that the Missouri Compromise line should be extended across the Mexican Cession to the Pacific Ocean. Any new state north of the line would be a free state. Any new state south of the line could allow slavery.

### \$ Connections With Economics

In response to the Wilmot Proviso, some southern states proposed cutting off all trade with the North. Another economic threat was that southerners would stop payments on debts owed to northern banks and businesses.

Other moderates supported the idea of **popular sovereignty**, or control by the people. In other words, voters in a new territory would decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery in the territory. Slaves, of course, could not vote.

## The Free Soil Party

The debate over slavery led to the birth of a new political party. By 1848, many northerners in both the Democratic party and the Whig party opposed the spread of slavery. However, the leaders of both parties refused to take a stand on the question. They did not want to give up their chance of winning votes in the South. Some also feared that the slavery issue would split the nation.

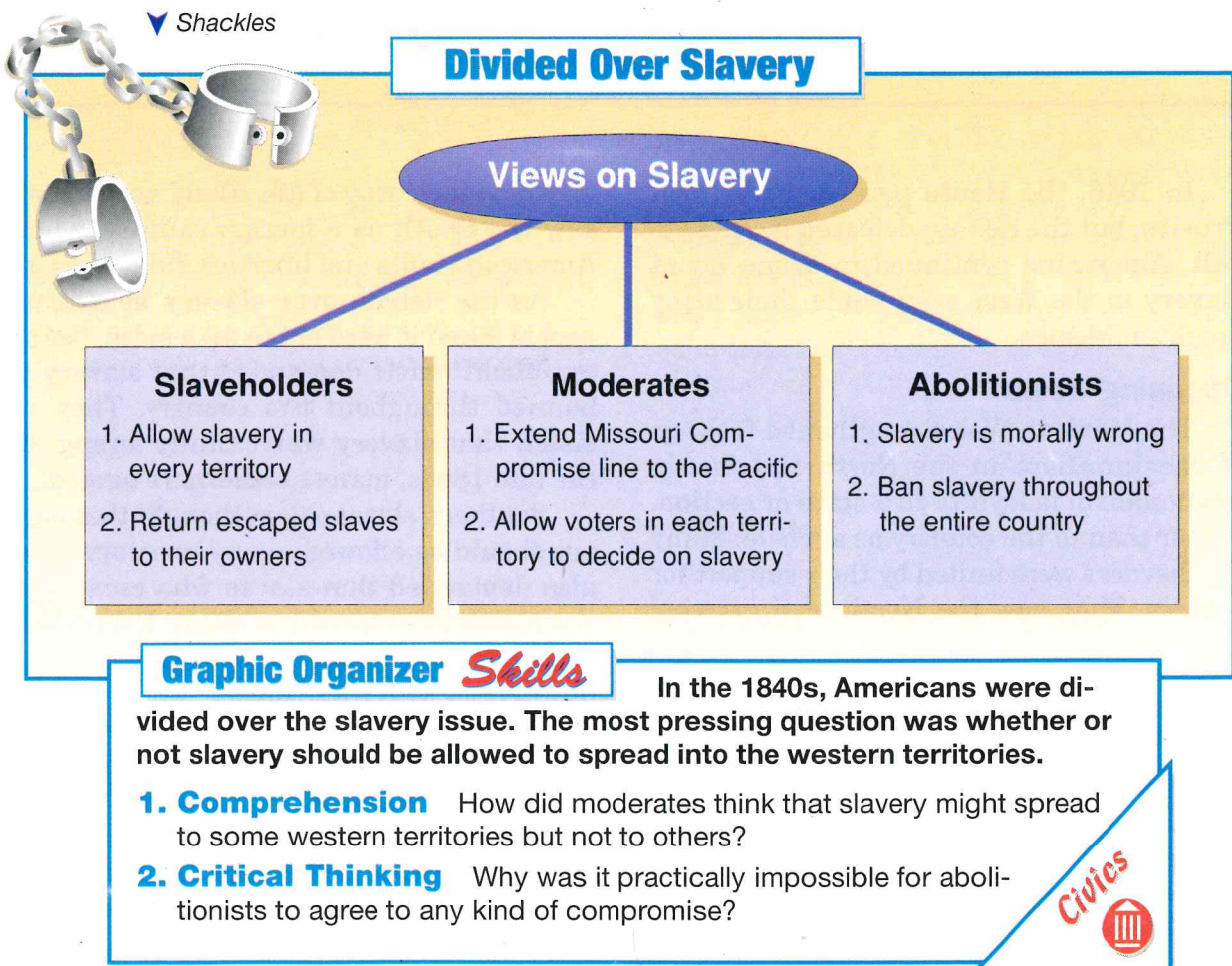
In 1848, antislavery members of both parties met in Buffalo, New York. There, they founded the **Free Soil party**. Their slogan was “Free soil, free speech, free labor,

and free men.” The main goal of the Free Soil party was to keep slavery out of the western territories. Only a few Free Soilers were abolitionists who wanted to end slavery in the South.

In the 1848 presidential campaign, Free Soilers named former President Martin Van Buren as their candidate. Democrats chose Lewis Cass of Michigan. The Whigs selected **Zachary Taylor**, a hero of the Mexican War.

For the first time, slavery was an important election issue. Van Buren called for a ban on slavery in the Mexican Cession. Cass supported popular sovereignty. Because Taylor was a slave owner from Louisiana, many southern voters assumed that he supported slavery.

Zachary Taylor won the election, but Van Buren took 10 percent of the popular vote. Thirteen other Free Soil candidates won seats in Congress. The success of the new Free Soil party showed that slavery had become a national issue.



## Need for a New Compromise

For a time after the Missouri Compromise, both slave and free states entered the Union peacefully. However, when California requested admission to the Union as a free state in 1850, the balance of power in the Senate was once again threatened. (See the graph to the right.)

### California's impact

In 1849, there were 15 slave states and 15 free states in the nation. If California entered the union as a free state, the balance of power would be broken. Furthermore, it seemed quite possible that Oregon, Utah, and New Mexico might also join the Union as free states.

Many Southerners feared that the South would be hopelessly outvoted in the Senate. Some even suggested that southern states might want to **secede**, or remove themselves, from the United States. Northern congressmen, meanwhile, argued that California should enter the Union as a free state because most of the territory lay north of the Missouri Compromise line.

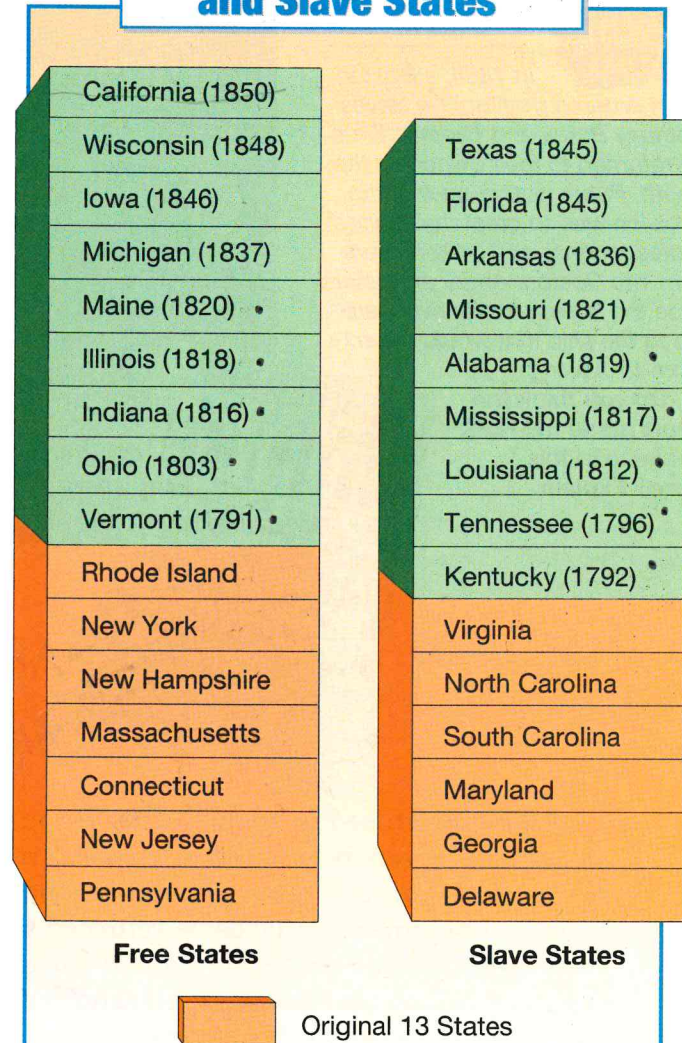
As Congress tried to reach a new compromise, tempers raged. One frightening incident involved Senators Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri and Henry Foote of Mississippi. Benton supported California's entry as a free state even though he himself was a slave owner. He denounced Foote for opposing California's admission. In response, Foote rose angrily from his seat and aimed a pistol at Benton. As other senators watched in horror, Benton roared, "Let him fire. Stand out of the way and let the assassin fire!"

No blood was shed in the Senate that day. However, it was clear that the nation faced a crisis. Many in Congress looked to Senator Henry Clay for a solution.

### Clay vs. Calhoun

Clay had won the nickname "the Great Compromiser" for working out the Missouri Compromise. Now, nearly 30 years later, the 73-year-old Clay was frail and ill. Still, he pleaded for the North and South to reach an agreement. If they failed to do so, Clay warned, the nation could break apart.

## Balance of Free and Slave States



### Chart Skills

Both the North and the South were determined to maintain the delicate balance in the Senate between slave and free states.

- 1. Comprehension** (a) How many of the original 13 states were free states? (b) How many of them were slave states?
- 2. Critical Thinking** How did the balance of power in the Senate change in 1850?



Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina prepared the South's reply to Clay. Calhoun was dying of tuberculosis and could not speak loudly enough to address the Senate. He stared defiantly at his northern foes while Senator James Mason of Virginia read his speech.

**Protest!**

In 1854, a Boston court ordered that fugitive slaves Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims be returned to their owners in the South. Public outcry against the decision was so great that United States marines and artillery were sent into Boston. Angry protesters lined the streets as the two were led to the ship that would return them to slavery.

★ Do you think the court made the right decision in this case? Explain.



Calhoun refused to compromise. He insisted that slavery be allowed in the western territories. Calhoun also demanded that **fugitive**, or runaway, slaves be returned to their owners in the South. He wanted northerners to admit that southern slaveholders had the right to reclaim their “property.”

If the North would not agree to the South’s demands, Calhoun told the Senate, “let the states . . . agree to part in peace. If you are unwilling that we should part in peace, tell us so, and we shall know what to do.” Everyone knew what Calhoun meant. If an agreement could not be reached, the South would secede from the Union.

**Webster calls for unity**

Daniel Webster of Massachusetts spoke next. He supported Clay’s plea to save the Union. Webster stated his position clearly:

“ I speak today not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a northern man, but as an American. . . . I speak today for the preservation of the Union. . . . There can be no such thing as a peaceable secession. Peaceable secession is an utter impossibility. ”

Webster feared that the states could not separate without a **civil war**. A civil war is a war between people of the same country.

Like many northerners, Webster viewed slavery as evil. Disunion, however, he believed was worse. To save the Union, Webster was willing to compromise with the South. He would support its demand that northerners be required to return fugitive slaves.

**Compromise of 1850**

In 1850, as the debate raged, Calhoun died. His last words reportedly were “The South! The South! God knows what will become of her!” President Taylor also died in 1850. The new President was Millard Fillmore. Unlike Taylor, he supported Clay’s compromise plan. An agreement finally seemed possible.

Henry Clay gave more than 70 speeches in favor of a compromise. At last, however, he became too sick to continue. **Stephen Douglas**, an energetic senator from Illinois, took up the fight for him. Douglas tirelessly guided each part of Clay’s plan, called the **Compromise of 1850**, through Congress.

The Compromise of 1850 had five parts. First, it allowed California to enter the Union as a free state. Second, it divided the rest of the Mexican Cession into the territo-

ries of New Mexico and Utah. Voters in each would decide the slavery question according to popular sovereignty. Third, it ended the slave trade in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital. Congress, however, declared that it had no power to ban slave trade between slave states. Fourth, it included a strict fugitive slave law. Fifth, it settled a border dispute between Texas and New Mexico.

## Fugitive Slave Law of 1850

Most northerners had ignored the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793. As a result, fugitive slaves often lived as free citizens in northern cities. The **Fugitive Slave Law of 1850** was harder to ignore. It required all citizens to help catch runaway slaves. People who let fugitives escape could be fined \$1,000 and jailed for six months.

The new law also set up special courts to handle the cases of runaways. Judges received \$10 for sending an accused runaway to the South. They received only \$5 for setting someone free. Lured by the extra money, some judges sent African Americans to the South whether or not they were runaways.

The Fugitive Slave Law enraged anti-slavery northerners. By forcing them to catch runaways, the law made northerners feel they were part of the slave system. In several northern cities, crowds tried to rescue fugitive slaves from their captors.

Martin R. Delany, an African American newspaper editor, spoke for many northerners, black and white:

“ My house is my castle. . . . If any man approaches that house in search of a slave—I care not who he may be, whether constable or sheriff, magistrate or even judge of the Supreme Court . . . if he crosses the threshold of my door, and I do not lay him a lifeless corpse at my feet, I hope the grave may refuse my body a resting place. ”

The North and South had reached a compromise. Still, tensions remained because neither side got everything that it wanted. The new Fugitive Slave Law was especially hard for northerners to accept. Each time the law was enforced, it convinced more northerners that slavery was evil.

## ★ Section 1 Review ★

### Recall

1. **Locate** (a) Missouri, (b) Maine, (c) Missouri Compromise Line, (d) California, (e) New Mexico Territory, (f) Utah Territory.
2. **Identify** (a) Missouri Compromise, (b) Wilmot Proviso, (c) Free Soil party, (d) Zachary Taylor, (e) Stephen Douglas, (f) Compromise of 1850, (g) Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.
3. **Define** (a) sectionalism, (b) popular sovereignty, (c) secede, (d) fugitive, (e) civil war.

### Comprehension

4. Describe three different views on the issue of slavery in the West.

5. Why did some people leave the Whig and Democratic parties and create the Free Soil party?
6. Explain the five parts of the Compromise of 1850.

### Critical Thinking and Writing

7. **Analyzing Ideas** Why might the goals of the Free Soil party have pleased some northerners but not others?
8. **Analyzing Visual Evidence** Based on your understanding of the painting on page 428, how did the Compromise of 1850 create new conflict over the slavery issue?



**Activity Making a Decision** You are a northerner of the 1850s. There is a knock at your door. It's a fugitive slave! Will you help the runaway or will you turn the person in to the authorities? Write a brief statement explaining the reasons for your decision.