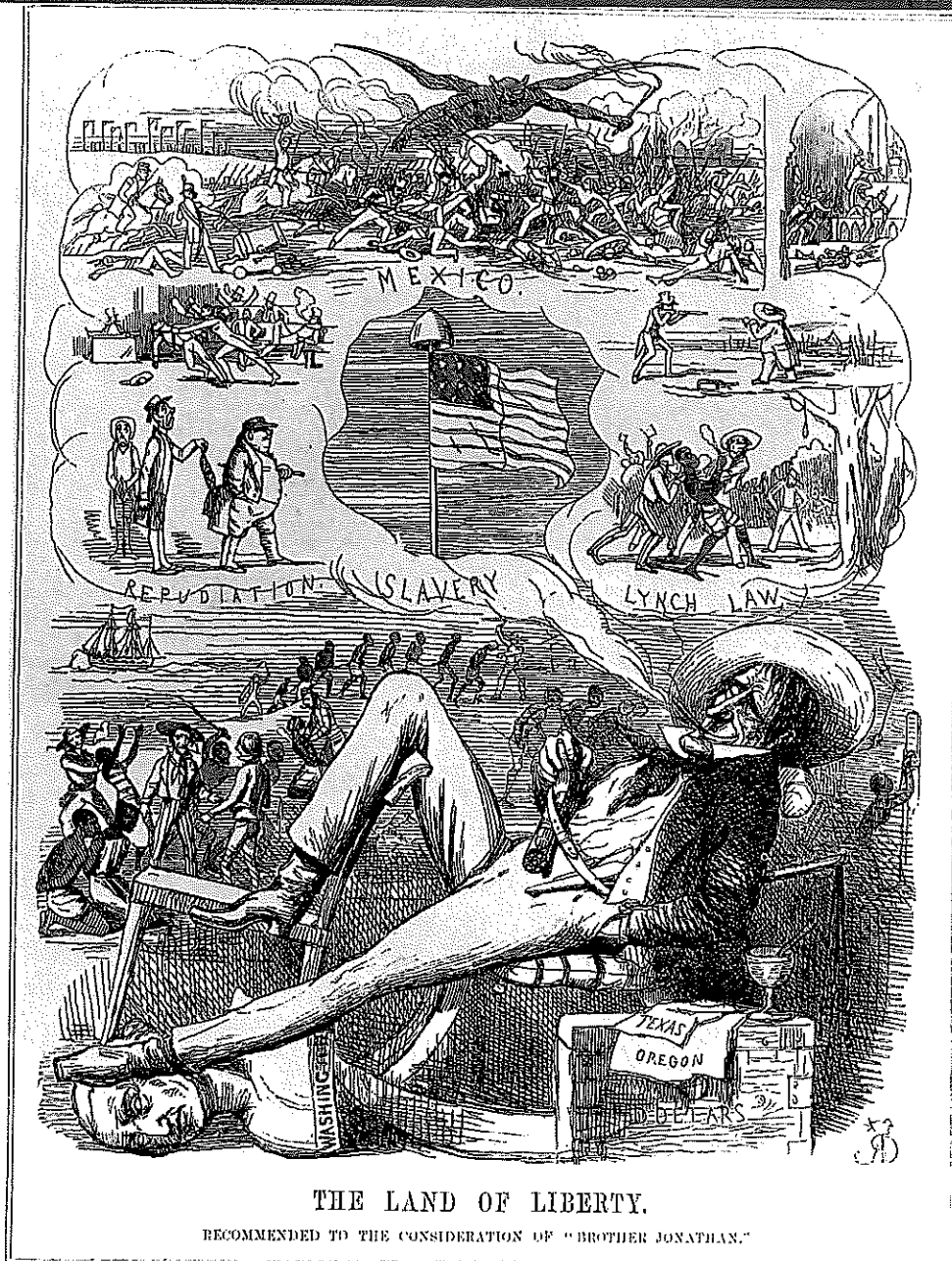


9

The Spread of Slavery and the Crisis of Southern Society

1836-1848



Extending the Empire for Slavery

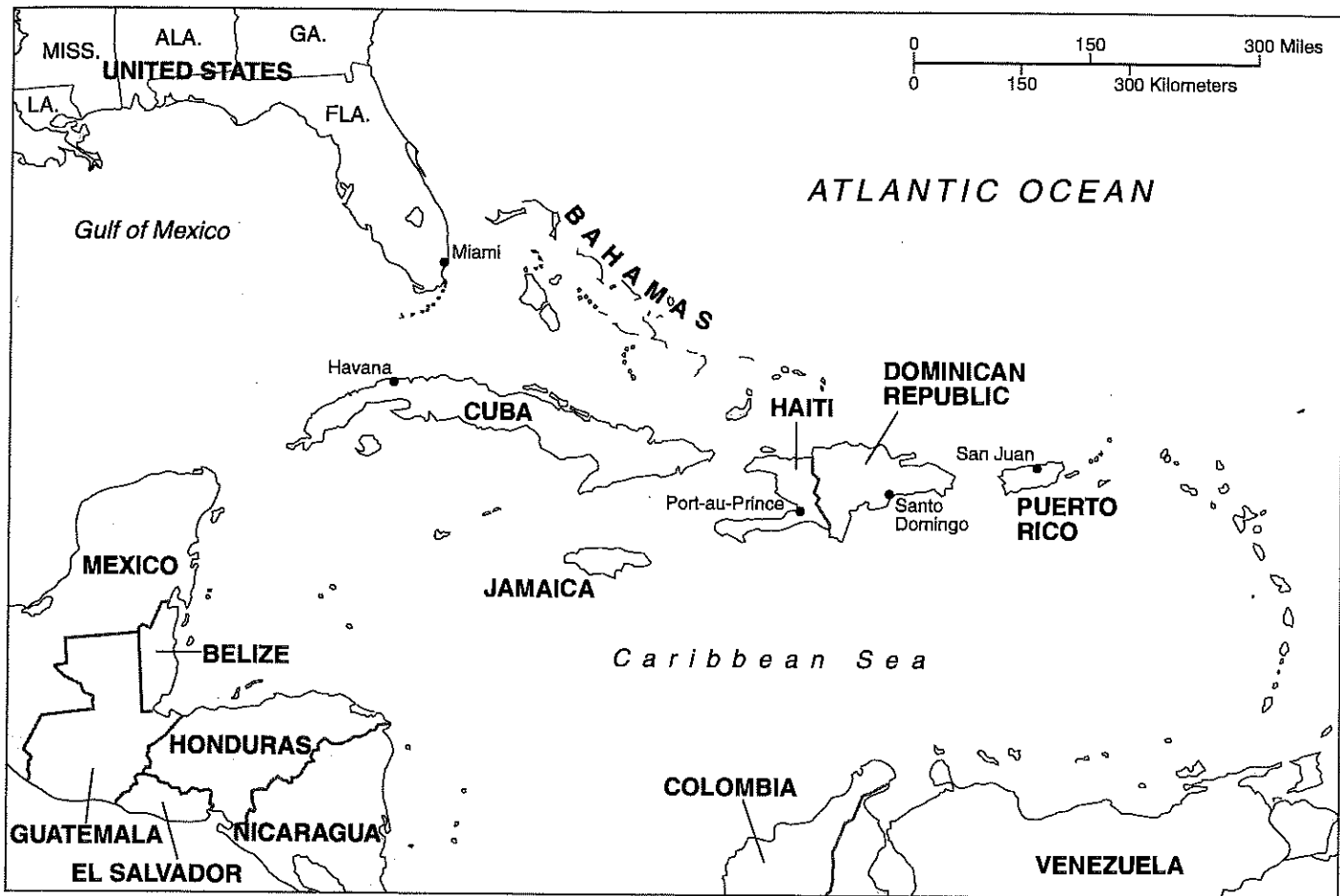
Southern whites had long dreamed of extending their dominion into tropical climates. Congressmen and presidents cast greedy glances at Cuba and Central America throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century. In New Orleans, the large number of French, free blacks, and slaves who arrived from Sainte-Domingue (present-day Haiti) after the revolution there in the 1790s gave the city a Caribbean flair that made planters in the area think of the possibilities of exploiting the West Indies. Proslavery adventurers actually mounted invasions of Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua in this period. And the successful settlement and “emancipation” of Texas in the 1830s revitalized dreams of a slave empire that stretched into Mexico and the Caribbean (Map 9.3).

Yet opening new lands to slavery created perils as well as opportunities. Territories acquired by the United States in the 1830s and 1840s inspired increasingly heated debates over the boundaries of slave society. When war erupted with Mexico in 1846, the criticisms from abolitionists intensified. In its aftermath, Whigs and Democrats were faced with difficult choices as some Americans who were adamantly opposed to the extension of slavery began to take a stand in the partisan political arena.

The Lure of New Territories to the South and West After Texas, Cuba was perhaps the most appealing prospect for annexation. In 1823, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams claimed, “There are laws of political as well as physical gravitation, and if an apple, severed by a tempest from its native tree, cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union.” In 1848, President James K. Polk tried unsuccessfully to help this “natural” gravitation along by offering Spain \$100 million for the island. Similar offers, supported by circles of Cubans who were dissatisfied with Spanish rule, were made several more times over the next decade, although without success.

Southern planters also investigated economic possibilities in California during the 1840s. To encourage larger numbers of U.S. residents to settle the region, Anglo-American immigrants to the West Coast described the rich lands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys and the docile population of Indian workers. Initially, these pioneers cared little about the origins of the new settlers, as long as the United States gained control of the region from Mexico. But planters, such as Richard Fulton of Missouri, wanted to know, “Is California a slave state and could our citizens bring their slaves with them?”

Those who were already established in the area tried to reassure potential southern émigrés. Rancher John Marsh, who had gained significant



MAP 9.3 The Lure of Caribbean Territories

After the United States acquired the Louisiana Territory and Florida, wealthy white Southerners began looking for new areas in which to expand their plantation economy. Some set their sights on the Caribbean. Easily accessible from Florida and with a long history of slave-produced sugar, rum, tobacco, and coffee, Cuba seemed particularly attractive. Even Saint-Domingue (Haiti), the site of a successful slave rebellion led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1791, was considered a possibility for future development of the plantation system. Although plans to add Caribbean islands to the United States did not progress much in the mid-nineteenth century, Cuba and Puerto Rico were the first areas to come under U.S. control when the United States engaged in its first imperial adventures in the 1890s. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba and the U.S.: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (1994).

experience in Indian affairs, admitted that Mexico did have laws against slavery, but he assured prospective migrants that the native peoples were willing workers. He even claimed that they submitted to “flagellation with more humility than negroes.” Pierson B. Reading, a former New Orleans cotton broker who resettled in California, wrote to a friend back home in 1844, “The Indians of California make as obedient and humble slaves as the negroes in the south,” and “for a mere trifle, you can secure their services for life.” Although the indigenous peoples proved more resistant than these descriptions suggest, southern whites, encouraged by increased demand

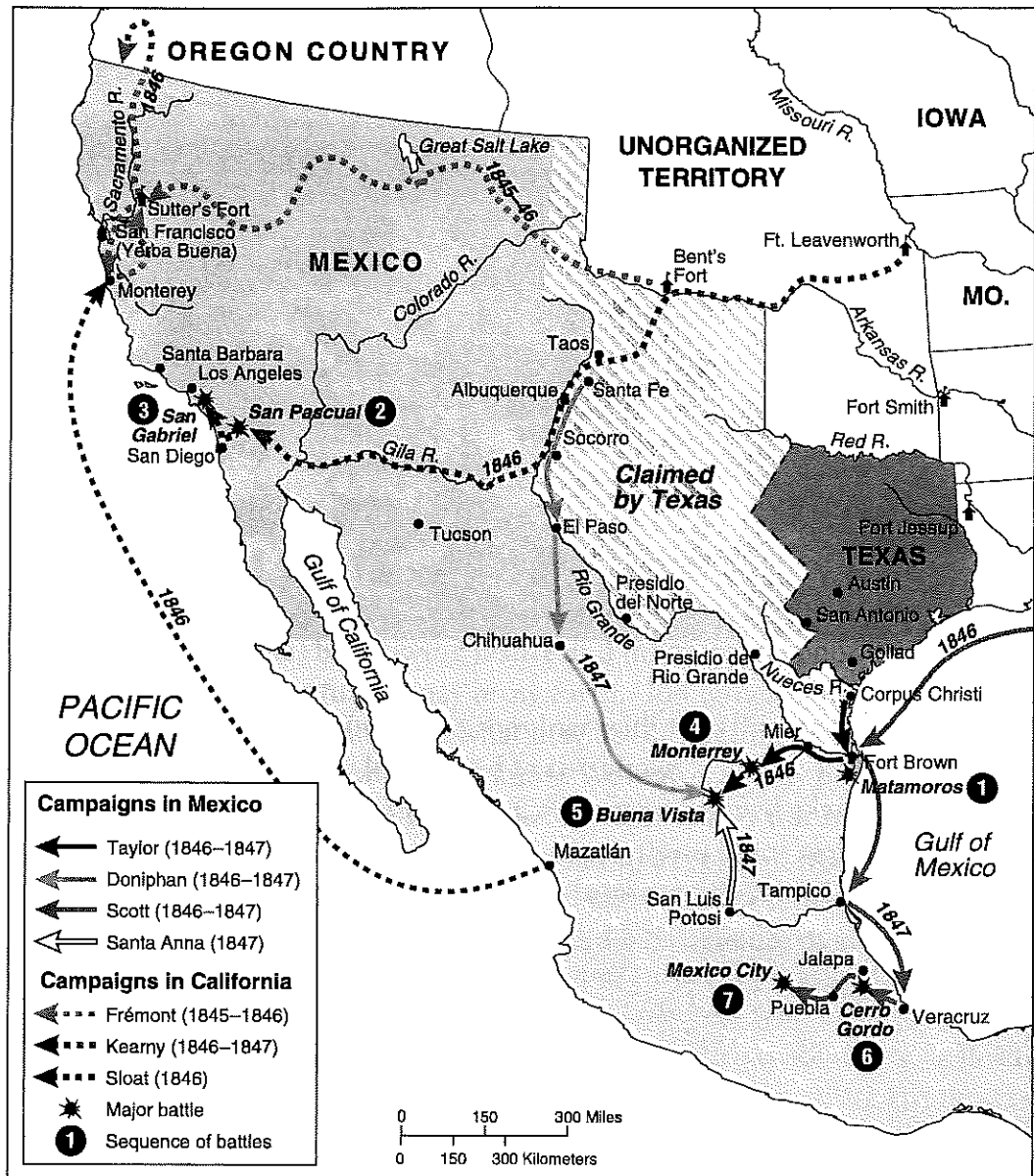
for agricultural products, eagerly envisioned plantations stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, worked by dark-skinned slaves.

The dreams of westward expansion had fueled political conflicts within and between the North and the South since the 1810s (see Chapter 8). The Lone Star Republic of Texas generated intensive debates in the 1830s and 1840s. It had sought U.S. statehood from the moment it achieved independence in 1836, but northern hostility to admitting this immense slaveholding territory into the Union had postponed action for several years. In 1844, however, the Democratic Party platform tied support for Texas statehood to the demand—popular among northern farmers—for the annexation of all of Oregon (a region that was claimed by both England and the United States). Farmers from the Old Northwest had been eyeing Oregon's Willamette Valley for years. By 1843, thousands of wagons were already following the Oregon Trail west from Missouri. Southern planters and politicians began to believe that the North's appetite for new lands might at last provide the basis for Texas statehood. The election the following year turned on the issue of admitting Texas and annexing Oregon.

As was noted earlier, the Democrats chose James K. Polk as their party standard-bearer, overlooking both President Tyler, who was considered ineffective, and Martin Van Buren, who was less enthusiastic about the admission of Texas. Andrew Jackson was a great fan of Polk who, like Jackson, was a Tennessee Democrat with a vision of America as an expansive nation. The Whigs nominated Henry Clay, but the party was divided over the wisdom of westward growth. Southern Whigs were particularly angered at Clay's failure to support the admission of Texas, whereas northern Whigs were annoyed that Clay even considered taking such a stand.

Polk's election was viewed as a mandate for expansion. The new administration did not annex all of Oregon, however. Instead, it agreed with Britain to define the forty-ninth parallel as the northern boundary of the United States, simply extending the eastern border with Canada westward. But even before this boundary dispute was settled, the U.S. Congress approved the annexation of Texas in December 1845.

The War with Mexico President Polk had even grander plans for expansion. During his one term in office, he oversaw the acquisition of more territory by the United States than any other president. His predecessor, President John Tyler, completed the annexation of Texas, but Polk presided over the settlement of the disputed Oregon Territory and then turned his attention to wresting more land from Mexico. Knowing that this plan would necessitate war, Polk sent U.S. troops across the Nueces River in Texas in January 1846 and into territory claimed by Mexico (Map 9.4). News that Mexican troops had crossed the Rio Grande River in April and attacked American soldiers then led Polk to demand war with Mexico. Whigs, however, thought that Polk had provoked the conflict, and a majority voted

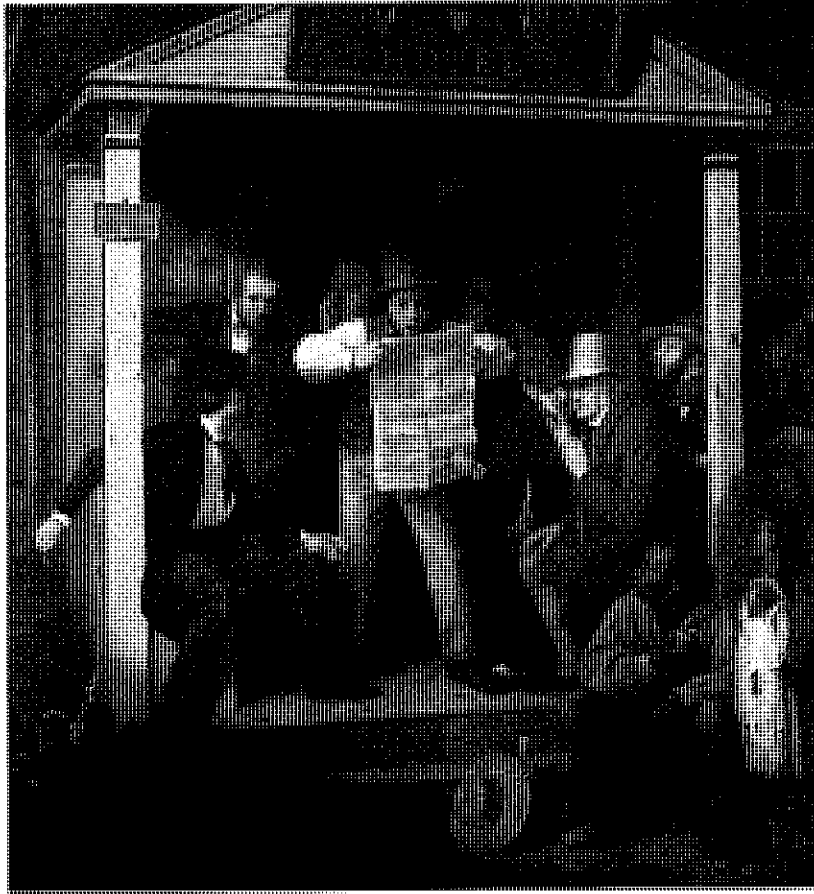


MAP 9.4 The U.S. War Against Mexico, 1846–1848

During the war with Mexico, U.S. troops seized the northern sections of Mexico, and John C. Frémont led an uprising of U.S. settlers in present-day California. At the same time, under the leadership of generals Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor, the U.S. Army repulsed Mexican troops led by General Santa Anna. Defeated on all fronts, Mexico surrendered vast territories to the United States, comprising all or parts of present-day Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and Wyoming. California became an independent republic but was soon annexed by the United States as well.

against the declaration of war. The newly elected Whig representative from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, even demanded evidence about the precise spot where Mexicans had supposedly shed American blood.

Still, the Democratic majority carried the day. “As war exists,” the president then told Congress, “we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the



War News from Mexico

In Richard Caton Woodville's 1848 painting, guests at the "American Hotel" (who represented a cross-section of the nation's white citizenry) demonstratively reacted to news about the Mexican War. Their almost comical behavior was in marked contrast to the subdued response of the black man and child in the picture's foreground. 1848, oil on canvas, 27 × 24 3/4 inches — National Academy of Design.

interests of our country." Many, probably most, Americans, North and South, agreed. Another Illinois representative, for instance, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, was a fervent champion of westward expansion. He helped to boost the war spirit in Congress and branded critics such as Lincoln "traitors."

Despite the arid lands that made up most of northern Mexico, many slaveholders eagerly looked forward to creating new slave states from these hoped-for territories. "Every battle fought in Mexico," cheered the Charleston, South Carolina, *Courier*, "and every dollar spent there, but insures the acquisition of territory which must widen the field of Southern enterprise and power in the future. And the final result will be to readjust the power of the [Southern] confederacy, so as to give us control over the operation of government in all time to come."

For proslavery forces, the chance to acquire additional lands in the Southwest offered numerous benefits. The spread of slavery would aid planters in the Upper South by creating an even greater demand and higher price for their excess slaves. Small farmers who owned no slaves (a group that would constitute three-fourths of southern white families by 1860)

“We Are Engaged in a War of Conquest”: Opposition to the War Against Mexico

These excerpts from a lecture by Charles C. Shackford, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Lynn, Massachusetts, criticize the premises and results of the U.S. war against Mexico and the lack of vocal opposition to it by northern citizens and politicians.

We are engaged in a war of conquest. All the resources of our nation for to-day and many days to come, are applied to inflict the horrors of war upon a neighboring people. We are recorded in the book of history, as the murderers of thousands whose only crime was living upon their native soil. . . . Truly is this matter the question of to-day; and the question not of politicians merely, but of every individual who has heart, or thought, or conscience. . . .

With the cancer of slavery feeding upon our system, this war was inevitable. . . . The North, with a fatal spirit of acquiescence, has submitted to one encroachment after another upon the spirit of freedom; and now, floated upon the surface, it is borne along to share the retribution. There remains but one way of escape. Slavery, that hydra, which but gains in strength from every act of feeble opposition and tame submission, must be slain. . . . At every new victory of the accursed system, some feeble cry is raised, ‘that this encroaching evil must be opposed henceforth,’ and then all is still. . . . A war in [our country’s] defence, however iniquitous, a measure however wrong, has but to be entered upon, and then they pronounce it right to aid in its completion. . . .

Glorious government! which can spend millions . . . to subdue a weak, divided, miserable country, while a deaf ear is turned to a whole people of noble-hearted workmen dying for bread. . . . No money for charity, none for justice, none for the payment of claims long due our citizens, none for internal commerce, for science, for the promotion of the means of human comfort; all must be taken to pay the hirelings in this war of slavery! Such is the glory that encircles our nation’s brow!

Charles C. Shackford, *Citizen’s Appeal in Regard to the War with Mexico. A Lecture* (Andrews & Prentiss, 1848).

could hope for a better chance on the new western lands, thereby alleviating the pressures on the planter class to respond to their needs by redistributing existing wealth. Finally, the rapid growth of a nonslaveholding and increasingly antislavery North endangered the political autonomy of the slaveholding South. Geographical expansion would help to ensure that planters had increased representation in the Senate through the admission of new slave states. This would prevent the North from using the federal government to block the interests of slaveholders.

In some parts of the country, however, the enthusiasm of slaveholders for war and their vision of a slave confederacy inspired vigorous opposition. Despite the passage of a resolution supporting the president's declaration of war, a majority in the House of Representatives also voted in favor of a Whig proposal that declared that the war had been "unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States." And while a prowar demonstration on May 20, 1846, occupied one part of New York's City Hall Park, George Henry Evans and John Commerford addressed an antiwar rally in another. Having "great reason to believe" that the Mexican War was the work of Texans and their business allies, the rally organizers urged "the Commander in Chief of the army to withdraw his forces, now on the Rio Grande, to some undisputed land belonging to the United States." And if war proved finally unavoidable, then the American sponsors of prowar meetings and messages "ought to be the first to volunteer, and the first to leave for the seat of war."

Opposition to the war was strong among northern farmers as well as some businessmen. The Massachusetts state legislature denounced the war and its "triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the 'Slave Power,' and of obtaining control of the Free States" by gaining a slave-state majority in the Senate. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* carried a speech by an Ohio



Dimly Viewed

Popular fervor for the Mexican War was fanned by visual reporting that promoted patriotic and nationalistic sentiments. Printmakers strove to satisfy the public's desire for news from the front. In the field, daguerreotypists struggled with a cumbersome and fragile new technology, trying to capture the world's first photographs of war. In this rare outdoor scene, Brigadier General John E. Wool and his mounted troops paused for a photographer in Saltillo's Calle Real, halting in the middle of the road to accommodate the long time required to expose a photographic plate. Daguerreotype, c. 1847 — Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Uncle Sam's Taylorifics

A beardless Uncle Sam sliced and booted Mexico across the Rio Grande in this bellicose 1846 lithograph cartoon. Henry R. Robinson (after a drawing by Edward W. Clay), 1846, lithograph — New-York Historical Society.



Democrat who argued that the administration's willingness to compromise with Britain on the Oregon boundary while going to war with Mexico over the Texas boundary demonstrated that "the administration is Southern! Southern! Southern! . . . Since the South have [sic] fixed boundaries for free territory, let the North fix boundaries for slave territories." And Connecticut Congressman Gideon Welles probably spoke for a majority of his constituents when he declared, we must "satisfy the northern people . . . that we are not to extend the institution of slavery as a result of this war."

Abolitionists helped to foment and then reinforce northern fears that the war was a planter conspiracy to ensure southern control over the nation. During the 1830s, nearly every acquisition of territory in the South inspired abolitionist outcries against the extension of slavery. Announcement of the outbreak of war with Mexico was received at the 1846 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society by means of the new magnetic telegraph. Abby Kelley, an abolitionist who had not planned to speak at the New York gathering, impulsively rose in indignation to express her opposition to the war. "Our fathers were successful in the Revolution, because they were engaged in a holy cause, and had right on their side. But in this case we have not. This nation is doomed," she proclaimed. She prayed for defeat but envisioned instead a U.S. victory followed by the day of reckoning, when southern slaves would join forces with western Indians, "who are only waiting to plant their tomahawks in the white man's skull."

As abolitionists engaged in acts of civil disobedience to protest the war, pacifists sometimes joined them. A young Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his taxes in protest against the war and was jailed in July 1846. The brief imprisonment inspired his classic essay “Resistance to Civil Government” (republished in 1866 under the title “Civil Disobedience”). Other antislavery advocates, however, followed Abby Kelley in taking a more belligerent pro-Mexico stance. Abolitionists across the country signed antiwar pledges and advocated military victory for Mexico. William Lloyd Garrison spoke for many abolitionists when he declared,

I desire to see human life at all times held sacred; but in a struggle like this, so horribly unjust and offensive on our part, so purely of self-defence against lawless invaders on the part of the Mexicans, I feel as a matter of justice, to desire the overwhelming defeat of the American troops, and the success of the injured Mexicans.

The abolitionist campaign bolstered opposition to the war among some Americans, but popular enthusiasm was inspired by the rapid advancement of U.S. troops into Mexico.

Although the war lasted eighteen months, U.S. troops dominated the fighting. General Zachary Taylor captured northeastern Mexico, including Monterrey, in September 1846. Colonel Stephen Kearney captured Santa Fe that same fall and then joined the ongoing battle in California, where Mexican forces were quickly defeated. When Mexico refused to surrender, Polk sent General Winfield Scott to march troops north from Veracruz, on Mexico’s Gulf Coast. Scott’s army seized Mexico City in September 1847, forcing the Mexican government to negotiate the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo soon thereafter.

The success of the U.S. Army ensured the dismemberment of Mexico. In March 1848, the Senate approved the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, granting the United States control over the provinces of California and New Mexico and moving the Texas-Mexican border southward from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande. The United States thus acquired vast new lands that offered seemingly limitless opportunities for economic advancement. But who would benefit most from these opportunities: southern planters, small farmers, or northern laborers? This question moved center stage in the nation’s political debates.

Manifest Destiny and the Conflict over Slavery in the New Territories

Most white Americans, and certainly most Whigs, were not opposed to expansion. They might oppose expansion by force of arms or in the interest of slave owners, but even antiwar northerners generally agreed that the conquest of western lands benefited the nation. Journalist John L. O’Sullivan rallied support for westward expansion; in 1845, he claimed that

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ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD

Wages, \$1.25 per Day.

Fare, from New-York, only - \$4.50

By Railroad and Steamboat, to the work in the
State of Illinois.

Constant employment for two years or more
given. Good board can be obtained at two
dollars per week.

This is a rare chance for persons to go
West, being sure of permanent employment
in a healthy climate, where land can be
bought cheap, and for fertility is not surpassed
in any part of the Union.

Men with families preferred.

For further information in regard to it, call
at the Central Railroad Office,

173 BROADWAY,

CORNER OF COURTLANDT ST.

NEW-YORK.

R. B. MASON, Chief Engineer.

H. PHELPS, AGENT,

July, 1853.

Go West, Young Man!

This Illinois Central Railroad advertisement, probably directed to immigrants, was posted in New York City in 1853. American Museum of Immigration, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

it was Americans' "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." Although O'Sullivan's New York colleague Horace Greeley cautioned that a "nation cannot simultaneously devote its energies to the absorption of others' territories and the improvement of its own," settlers in the disputed western territories were enthusiastic about expansion and relatively unconcerned about contradictions between American principles and practice.

In California, John C. Frémont, who worked with the U.S. Army's topographical corps there, was happy to oblige when Polk indicated that the U.S. naval fleet in the Pacific would support a settler uprising along the West Coast. In 1846, Frémont helped to organize a rebellion among U.S. citizens living in California, and the "Bear Republic" soon declared its independence from Mexico. Frémont was certain that annexation would soon follow, counting on his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, to carry the banner of California statehood in Congress.

With war underway and further expansion seeming inevitable, politicians turned their attention to the fate of slavery in the territories that were now sure to be acquired. Congressman David Wilmot, a Pennsylvania Democrat,

opened the debate almost immediately. In 1846, at Wilmot's initiative, the House of Representatives voted to prohibit slavery in any territory that was acquired through the war with Mexico. Although defeated in the Senate, the Wilmot Proviso had received the endorsement of all but one northern state legislature by 1849.

Wilmot never considered his proposal a move "designed especially for the benefit of the black race." Nevertheless, it won fervent support among people in the free states who opposed slavery. This sentiment was strongest in New England, where clergymen, followers of Garrison, Liberty Party adherents, and free blacks were among the numerous contingents of anti-slavery advocates by the late 1840s. In 1846, a convention of working people protested the fact that "there are at the present time three millions of our brethren and sisters groaning in chains on the Southern plantations." Delegates to the convention declared their refusal to do anything "to keep three millions of our brethren and sisters in bondage" and called on other labor groups "to speak out in thunder tones" to secure for "all others those rights and privileges for which we are contending for ourselves."

But the majority of working people in the North were more cautious about abolishing slavery throughout the nation. Some no doubt recognized

“I Plead the Cause of White Freemen”: Representative Wilmot’s Proviso

In 1847, Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania proposed a legislative amendment (which came to be known as the Wilmot Proviso) that would ban slavery from any territory acquired as a result of the war with Mexico. In this speech to his fellow members of the House, Wilmot makes clear that he cares only for the prospects of free white workers and not at all for enslaved African Americans.

I make no war upon the South nor upon slavery in the South. I have no squeamish sensitiveness upon the subject of slavery, nor morbid sympathy for the slave. I plead the cause of the rights of white freemen. I would preserve for free white labor a fair country, a rich inheritance, where the sons of toil, of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor. I stand for the inviolability of free territory. It shall remain free, so far as my voice or vote can aid in the preservation of its character.

. . . O, for the honor of the North—for the fair fame of our green hills and valleys, be firm in this crisis—be true to your country and your race. The white laborer of the North claims your service; he demands that you stand firm to his interests and his rights; that you preserve the future homes of his children, on the distant shores of the Pacific, from the degradation and dishonor of negro servitude. Where the negro slave labors, the free white man cannot labor by his side without sharing in his degradation and disgrace.

Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 2d sess., 1847, Appendix, 317. Reprinted in William E. Gienapp, ed., *The Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Collection* (W. W. Norton, 2001), 17–18.

the economic contradictions highlighted in the Richmond, Virginia, *Enquirer’s* attack on working-class abolitionists. Referring to shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts, an editorial noted that they are “a people working all day on brogan shoes for the negroes at the South” but “who go to Abolition prayer meetings at night.” Others feared that concerns over abolition were taking attention away from the needs of free white workers. George Henry Evans, once an outspoken enemy of slavery, became convinced that the fight for the emancipation of blacks must be postponed until the war against the exploitation of wage labor was won.

Still, if most northerners were wary about the effects of abolishing slavery, they also hotly opposed its extension beyond what then constituted the borders of the South. Northern farmers wanted western lands held free for settlement as homesteads, not as slave plantations. Many urban workers and small producers also hoped eventually to populate the West’s towns and cities or have them kept free for their children and grandchildren. Immigrants, too, saw the West as a land of opportunity, and many eastern residents hoped that immigrants would settle there and thus alleviate competition for industrial and commercial employment in the East. Finally,

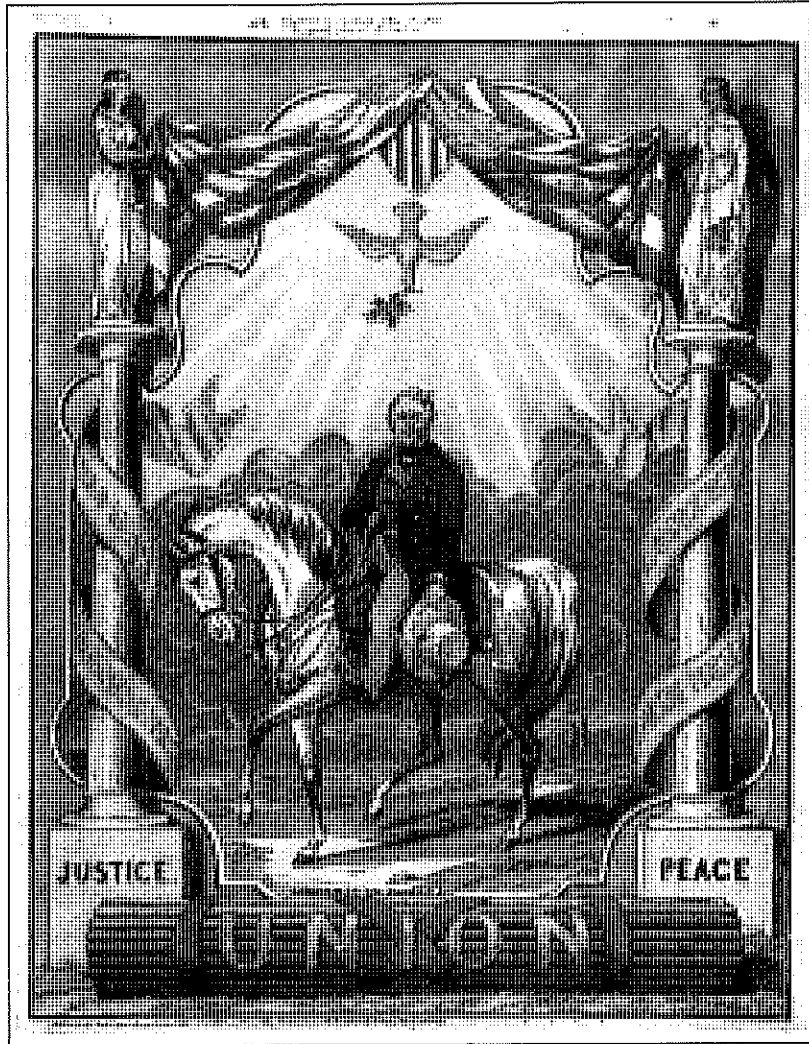
free blacks in the North were appalled at the thought that slavery would spread beyond its present borders. They rightly feared that their own liberties would be jeopardized by such an expansion.

None of these groups wanted to live among slaves and slave owners or to compete with slave labor. They believed that slavery had imposed multiple indignities, political restrictions, depressed wages, and harsh conditions on free workers in the South, and at the same time, it had encouraged industrial stagnation. To all these people, slavery signified the death of everything they cherished or aspired to: personal independence, mutual respect, political equality, the right to enjoy the fruits of their own labor. In attacks on their employers, Lynn shoemakers, Lowell mill operatives, and many other workers compared factory owners with slave owners and proclaimed the degrading conditions of their own labor by calling themselves “wage slaves.” By accusing their employers of treating them like blacks, they hoped to horrify other white Americans and thereby gain their support.

With so negative a view of slavery, northern workers, farmers, merchants, and manufacturers could hardly relish having the institution gain new vigor by spreading farther west. Only a minority of them were abolitionists; most simply wanted slavery to remain restricted to the South. The vast majority of northern whites, including a number of abolitionists, believed that blacks were innately inferior and therefore supported state laws that limited the economic, social, and political rights of free African Americans. They envisioned the western territories as a place where free white men could gain access to cheap and abundant land. Even though far more free whites were now wage laborers than independent farmers or artisans, they were proud that they could sell their labor as free persons. Although in the midst of strikes and protests, they might wield the rhetoric of wage slavery, most would have agreed with the abolitionist who distinguished between slaves and free workers by saying, “Does he not own himself?” Moreover, whatever their circumstances at that point, many northern workers still hoped one day to own their own home, land, or business, a hope that the image of wide-open spaces and new opportunities in the West kept alive.

This antipathy to slavery, and in many cases to African Americans, explains why the Wilmot Proviso was so appealing to northern whites. In addition, free-soil clubs, which opposed the spread of slavery, sprang up quickly in cities and towns throughout the Northeast and upper Midwest at the start of the war with Mexico. By joining these clubs, workers, farmers, and shopkeepers—native-born and immigrant alike—announced that they would not tolerate chattel slavery in the territories acquired from Mexico.

Territorial Expansion and Political Turmoil The dispute over the spread of slavery became more and more important in American politics as the war



Union on the Battle Field

Mexican War hero Zachary Taylor rode popular enthusiasm for American conquest to victory in the presidential election of 1848. In this earliest-known presidential campaign poster, the names of Taylor's victorious battles wind down columns entitled Justice and Peace, while a sunlit dove of peace descends toward the unlabeled candidate (Taylor's fame making the mention of his name superfluous). Borrowing the style of large, colorful circus posters, this campaign poster promoted the election as another grand-scale public spectacle of the time.

Thomas W. Strong. *Union*, woodcut printed in colors on paper, 1848 — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

with Mexico ended. This issue would remain central for the next decade and a half, splintering the two main political parties, the Whigs and Democrats. Even before 1848, abolitionists had run for political office under the auspices of the Liberty Party. But when former president Martin Van Buren bolted from Democratic ranks to become the candidate of the new Free-Soil Party in 1848, the tension mounted. Although not an abolitionist, Van Buren ran on a platform that coupled opposition to the westward spread of slavery with support for “the free grant [of land] to actual settlers.”

In 1848, the Free-Soil Party was not strong enough to oust the Whigs or Democrats from national power, in part because it inspired fierce opposition in the North and the South. William Lloyd Garrison and many other radical abolitionists dismissed the Free-Soilers for supporting “whiteman-ism” (that is, keeping the West open to white men only). Most of the northern economic elite also denounced the Free-Soil Party. Although in most cases, they morally opposed slavery, they opposed even more strongly the

organized antislavery movement. Their reasons were many: A mass campaign against slavery would dangerously polarize the nation. It would infuriate slave owners, whom the northern elite counted on as business and political partners. It would undermine the two major political parties and threaten the federal union itself. For instance, Whig leader and financier Philip Hone denounced Free-Soilers as “firebrands” who were ready to tear down the edifice of government to erect “altars for the worship of their own idols.” And southern slaveholders were adamant in their opposition. As a result, Free-Soil candidate Van Buren lost his bid for a second chance as president, and Zachary Taylor, the Whig candidate, was elected.

Conclusion: Western Expansion and the Path to War

Despite this defeat, the issues that the Free-Soil Party had raised did not die. Instead, debates over land and labor grew more heated after 1848. Between 1845 and 1848, the United States had acquired 1.2 million square miles of territory. The victory over Mexico transferred California and the vast New Mexico territory to the United States and ensured that the Rio Grande would be recognized as the Texas border. Nearly 80,000 Spanish-speaking people, mostly of mixed Mexican-Indian descent, lived in the annexed areas. These people would perform much of the low-paid labor that was needed to make agriculture, ranching, mining, and industry profitable in the region. In addition, there were other racial and ethnic groups already settled in the western territories: Indians who had long inhabited the West, slaves taken there by their owners, immigrants and free blacks migrating westward to gain land and a better chance for an independent livelihood, and Chinese arriving in increasing numbers to work on railroads and in mining camps. These various groups increased the labor force, the competition for land, and the difficulties of resolving questions about the nation’s social, racial, economic, and political order.

In 1848, however, Anglo-Americans focused more on their victory over Mexico than on the problems it spawned. Such vast territorial expansion in such a short time exhilarated many Americans. Didn’t the war demonstrate the country’s growing military prowess and finally seal its “manifest destiny” to dominate the continent from sea to sea? Certainly, southern planters felt confident that expansion had given new life to the system of plantation slavery.

During the 1830s and 1840s, southern planters had expanded their reach westward, removed most American Indians to Oklahoma Territory, developed an elaborate proslavery ideology, and consolidated their political and economic power in the region. Yet they could not rest easy. The acquisition of new territory and the expansion of a brutal internal slave trade inspired

resistance among enslaved women and men, outcries from free blacks and fugitive slaves, and growing criticisms of slavery from nonslaveholding southern whites and northern abolitionists. Tensions emerged even within the two major political parties over the best means for handling the increasingly volatile issues raised by slavery's spread westward. Indeed, winning the war against Mexico greatly sharpened the internal conflict in the United States. The debate over what to do with the new land—specifically, whether to permit slavery there—aroused emotions that ultimately exploded in the Civil War.

The Years in Review

1812

- The First Seminole War occurs, in which U.S. Marines invade Florida to recapture runaway slaves and meet resistance from black fugitives and Seminole Indians.

1832

- The majority of Seminole Indians leave Florida.
- College of William and Mary professor Thomas Dew crafts an influential proslavery document, which claims that slavery is best both for the South and for the slaves.

1833

- The British government abolishes the slave trade in the West Indies.

1835

- The Second Seminole War occurs, in which fugitive slaves (known as maroons) join Seminole Indians in their fight against the United States. The peace agreement in 1842 forces the Seminoles to leave Florida but allows maroons to accompany them to Oklahoma rather than returning to their masters.

1836

- The Republic of Texas declares its independence from Mexico; outnumbered Texans lose at the Battle of the Alamo and are all killed, but Texans defeat Mexicans six weeks later at the Battle of San Jacinto, crying “Remember the Alamo!”

1837

- The Panic of 1837 lasts five years and devastates the nation.
- The Virginia General Assembly reaffirms the 1806 statute that allows individual counties to determine whether free blacks could remain in residence.
- The First Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women meets in Philadelphia.

1840

- The Liberty Party is founded by abolitionists.

1841

- The Supreme Court rules that Joseph Cinqué and other slave mutineers on the Spanish ship *Amistad* should be free because international slave trading is illegal.

1844

- Democrat James K. Polk defeats Whig Henry Clay in the presidential election on a strongly expansionist platform.
- The Methodist Episcopal Church splits into northern and southern branches over slavery; the Baptists split the following year.

1845

- Congress approves the annexation of the Lone Star Republic (Texas).
- Newspaper editor John L. O'Sullivan proclaims Americans' "manifest destiny to overspread the continent."

1846

- A compromise with Britain establishes the northwestern border of the United States at the forty-ninth parallel despite expansionists' cries of "54°40' or Fight!"
- The United States declares war against Mexico; many northern farmers, businessmen, and abolitionists oppose it as a scheme to expand slavery into the West.
- Henry David Thoreau is jailed for refusing to pay taxes in protest of the Mexican war; his subsequent essay, "Resistance to Civil Government" (later published under the title "Civil Disobedience"), will later influence Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The Wilmot Proviso prohibiting slavery in any territory acquired through the Mexican War is passed by the House of Representatives but defeated in the Senate.
- Colonel John C. Frémont organizes U.S. citizens living in California in a rebellion against the Mexican government, declares the "Bear Republic" independent from Mexican rule, and anticipates annexation by the United States.

1847

- The U.S. Army under General Winfield Scott seizes Mexico City.

1848

- President Polk tries unsuccessfully to buy Cuba from Spain for \$100 million.

- The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ends the Mexican War, gives California and New Mexico to the United States, and moves the Texas-Mexico border south to the Rio Grande.
- The Free-Soil Party, formed to oppose slavery in the West, runs ex-Democrat Martin Van Buren for president; however, Whig Zachary Taylor wins the presidency.
- The Seneca Indians write their own constitution.
- The minié ball (a bullet with a conical head and hollow base that expands when fired) is perfected; it will prove extremely deadly in the Civil War.
- France abolishes slavery in its West Indies colonies.

Additional Readings

For more on slave-owning whites and the nature of plantation communities, see: Carol Bleser, ed., *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder* (1988); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (1982); William J. Cooper, Jr., and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (1990); Drew Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840–1860* (1977); Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South* (1992); James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (1982); William Kauffman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (2003); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (1996); and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982).

For more on non-slave-owning whites, see: Charles Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure, eds., *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South* (1998); and Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (1983).

For more on free African Americans in a slave society, see: Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (1974); John Hope Franklin and Alfred J. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 7th ed. (1994); Virginia Meacham Gould, *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To Be Free, Black and Female in the Old South* (1998); Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); and Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1984).

For more on the internal slave trade, see: Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (2003); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999); and Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia's Ex-Slaves* (1976).

For more on western expansion and political tensions over slavery, see: Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (1970); Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War* (2002); Lawrence Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830–1870* (1982); and Archie P. McDonald, ed., *The Mexican War: Crisis for Democracy* (1969).