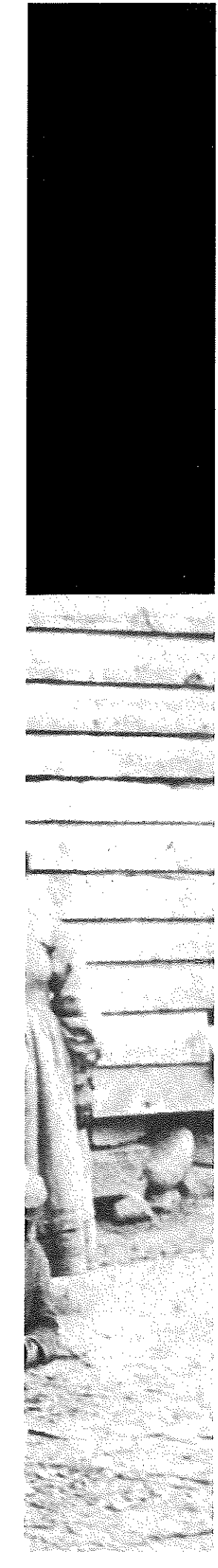


Part Three

War, Reconstruction, and Labor

1848-1877





BETWEEN 1848 AND 1860, societal changes created by immigration, industrialization, western expansion, and the growth of slavery led to repeated confrontations between political leaders as well as among ordinary Americans. Political compromises, such as the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, resolved the most bitter issues for a time. But it was not until the North defeated the South in the Civil War that the most volatile issue—slavery—was finally settled and the future development of the United States under industrial capitalism was assured. The dramatic and bloody events surrounding the Civil War constituted a second American revolution, which formed the centerpiece of this era.

This second revolution resulted not only in emancipation, but also in a fundamental expansion of legal guarantees of citizenship and political equality. In this way, it paralleled the first American Revolution, when colonists gained both independence from Great Britain and the liberties that are guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Still, like the first revolution, the Civil War and its aftermath demonstrated that differences of class, race, and sex still limited the practical implementation of constitutional claims for equality.

From the end of the Mexican War in 1848 through the 1870s, women and men—including African Americans, Mexican Americans, Indians, Chinese and European immigrants, and native-born whites—continued to build the expanded territory that was America. They constructed towns and railroads, managed farms, and extracted minerals in the West; furthered industrial and commercial growth in the North; and contributed mightily to agricultural production in the South and Midwest. Members of the laboring classes also engaged in the era's increasingly heated debates over immigration, westward expansion, and women's rights, even as they banded together to advance social and political causes. They joined both antislavery and antiabolitionist groups; formed unions and staged strikes; and participated in political rallies, electoral campaigns, and the founding of the Republican Party. Large numbers of working-class men eventually took up arms to further one cause or another: the defeat of Mexico, battles in Indian territory, and Confederate independence or the salvation of the Union.

Although few Americans believed, even in the 1850s, that the struggle over slavery would erupt in a civil war, when war finally broke out in April

1861, nearly all Americans' lives were affected in profound ways. The South seceded from the Union to maintain the system of racial slavery on which the region's very identity was based. Northern whites went to war, for the most part, not to free the slaves, but to limit slavery's expansion westward and to maintain the Union. Still, during the South's departure from the federal Congress, legislators from the free states reshaped western development by funding the transcontinental railroad and passing the Homestead Act. This legislation would gradually transform western society, further limiting the ability of American Indians to maintain traditional lifeways. The war also transformed women's lives. As men were drawn into the military, their wives, sisters, and daughters took over jobs in fields and factories, managed businesses and plantations, entered new occupations as clerks and nurses, and formed organizations to aid soldiers and newly freed slaves.

Over time, the purpose of the war changed, especially for the Union. As the North faced unexpected military defeats and the unanticipated actions of slaves, more and more northerners embraced emancipation as a critical goal of the war. African Americans escaped from slavery in huge numbers. Many of them, along with northern free blacks, demanded the right to fight for the Union; ultimately, nearly 200,000 African Americans served in the Union Army. They helped to turn the tide in the war's final two years and convinced northerners to fight for the end of slavery as well as the preservation of the Union.

Neither side in this conflict was completely united. Clashes erupted within the South and the North over the war's personal, economic, and political costs. In the North, however, a broad coalition—farmers, workers (including recent immigrants), businessmen, and politicians—emerged to support the Republican Party's policy of massive military action against the South. This wartime coalition then formed the core of support for Republican policies toward the South after the war.

The Confederacy's defeat raised as many questions as it answered. Slavery was now destroyed, but what kind of labor system would replace it? African Americans were now free, but what would they do with their new freedom? How would their former masters react? Who would lead the new South now? The policies of the period called Reconstruction attempted to answer these questions.

The freedpeople knew exactly how they wanted those questions answered. To them, emancipation meant the right to speak and act as free people, to reunite their families, and to end their automatic deference toward whites. And freed men and women acted decisively to guarantee these freedoms. Their claims of individual rights quickly grew into collective demands for education, the ownership of land, and full political participation.

Southern whites had a very different notion of what Reconstruction should mean. Former slave owners wanted a rapid return to stability and a

continuation of their rule in spite of emancipation. Few of them could abide the freedpeople's demands for political and social equality. White farmers and workers did not want to face economic or political competition from millions of former slaves.

Most of the North's white workers, though they did not want to compete with African Americans for jobs or consider them as equals, were unwilling to accept the continued domination of slave owners over the freedpeople. Most industrialists were committed to rebuilding the ravaged South as quickly as possible on free-labor principles, transforming slaves into wage laborers. And Republican Party leaders, intent on blunting the political power of the Democrats and former slaveholders, needed the votes of newly enfranchised African Americans to build their party in the South.

The diverse objectives of blacks and whites, North and South, resulted in sharp conflict and a growing sense of crisis. No group won all of its demands—least of all the freedpeople. For most, their quest for land of their own remained unfulfilled, although they did win important victories, especially citizenship and black male suffrage. Even these gains engendered intense opposition among southern whites. So, too, did the increasingly radical policies of the Republican Party and the efforts of some in the party to impeach President Andrew Johnson, the Tennessee politician who rose to power when President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in April 1865.

Some whites came to believe that only terror could ensure white supremacy in the South. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan after 1867 and the use of violence to subvert constitutional guarantees soon halted the freedpeople's progress. Within a decade, the southern elite had reestablished its control, thanks in part to tacit support from moderate Republicans, who came to dominate the northern party after 1870. Reconstruction ended tragically for the freedpeople, who saw their former masters returned to power through the combined force of vigilante violence and political compromise.

Meanwhile, the North and West were being transformed by technological change and the massive influx of migrants from the eastern United States and immigrants from abroad. Developments that began in the midst of the war accelerated after 1865. A transcontinental railroad system soon linked northern cities to western towns, mines, and farms. Industrial manufacturing multiplied as access to raw materials increased. Unprecedented numbers of immigrants filled the growing ranks of America's postwar industrial working class. Economic growth and immigration further fueled westward expansion, creating new problems as well as increased conflict between settlers and Indians, Mexican Americans, and native-born whites and among various native societies.

The wartime coalition that had joined farmers, workers, and businessmen in the North broke apart in the face of these changes. Even as transportation and communication networks drew Americans across the

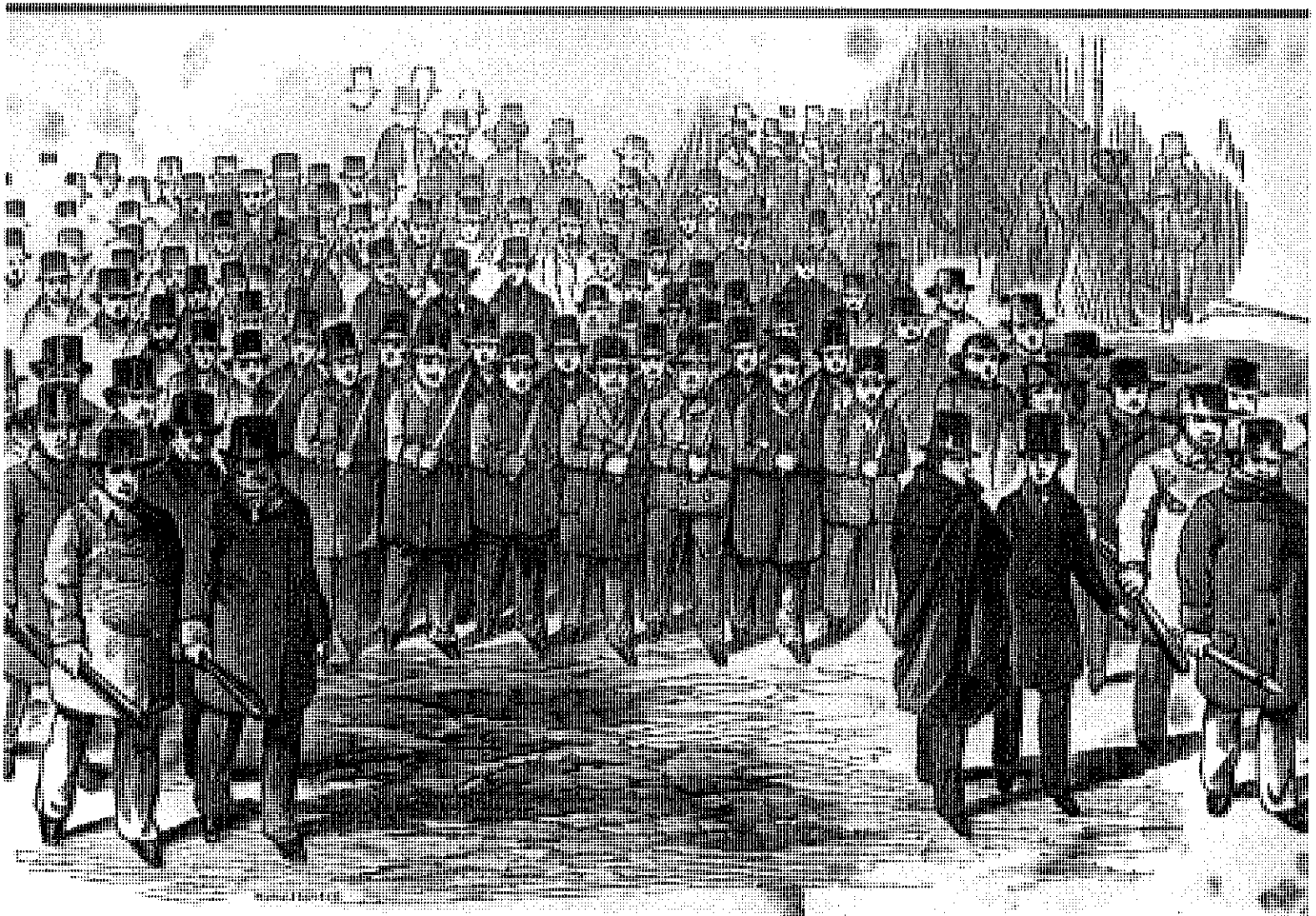
continent closer together, differences of race and economic opportunity sharpened political divisions. The severe industrial depression that began in 1873 forced Americans to realize that their nation, too, was suffering the wrenching dislocations and class divisions that were already evident in Europe; increasingly, great wealth and opulence coexisted with grinding poverty and human misery. This widening gulf helped to revive the labor movement.

Many Americans sought to ignore this gulf during the celebration of the nation's centennial in 1876, yet in the following year, America experienced its first nationwide industrial rebellion when hundreds of thousands of railroad strikers and their supporters brought the nation to a standstill. The end of Reconstruction and the nationwide railroad strike in 1877 closed out an era. Decades of conflict over slavery had ended, but the drama that pitted capital against labor continued, as did the struggles over the place of women and men, whites, blacks, and Indians, and native-born Americans and immigrants in the society, economy, and polity.

10

The Settlement of the West and the Conflict over Slave Labor

1848-1860



The Transformation of the West

American Indians Face New Obstacles

The Gold Rush

Work and Race

Pioneer Women's Work and Rights

Slavery Expands West

Uneasy Compromises over Slavery

The Compromise of 1850

The Fugitive Slave Law

Broken Covenant: The Kansas-Nebraska Act
of 1854

Bleeding Kansas

Birth of the Republican Party

The Labor Question in a Time of Rising Tension

Defending the Rights of Labor

White Southerners Respond to Free Labor's
Claims: The *Dred Scott* Decision

Toward a Sectional Showdown

The Raid on Harpers Ferry

A House Divided

Conclusion: The Deepening Rift Becomes a Chasm

Police Conveying Sims to the Vessel

Thomas Sims escaped slavery in Georgia, but in April 1851, he was arrested in Boston and, under the Fugitive Slave Law, returned to his owner. The city's abolitionist movement agitated for his release, and large crowds surrounded the courthouse in which Sims was incarcerated. But these efforts, which included plans to forcibly free the prisoner, did not succeed. This picture from a Boston illustrated weekly shows how Sims was conducted by 300 armed police and marshals to a Navy ship that carried him back to slavery. On his return south, Sims was sold to a new master in Mississippi. He escaped again in 1863.

Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-room Companion, May 10, 1851 — American Social History Project.

IN FALL 1850, HENRY BUSH, a forty-five-year-old stove maker from Rochester, New York, headed to California. He left behind his pregnant wife Abigail, aged forty, their three young children, and two older children from his first marriage. Friends and fellow abolitionists in the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society bid him good-bye, doubting that they would ever see him again. Although Henry had been among those who opposed the Mexican War in 1846 because of its threat to expand slave territories, he now hoped that new lands in the West would offer him economic opportunity. Having lost his business in the Panic of 1837 and having struggled since then to support his growing family, Bush was lured to California by the promise of gold.

Many Americans hoped that the gold and other resources to be found in the 1.2 million square miles that had been added to the United States through President James Polk's expansionist policies would provide them with a new start. Shopkeepers and craftsmen such as Henry Bush valued the greater economic independence and security that the West promised. Speculators, merchants, and manufacturers also enthused over business prospects there. Yeoman farmers from both the North and the South hoped to expand their holdings and their profits by moving to the more fertile lands of the Great Plains and the Far West. And slaveholders envisioned the region as the salvation of plantation agriculture by opening up fresh land for cotton and sugar cultivation. The discovery of gold in California added to the jubilation among Americans, gave a boost to the U.S. economy, and swelled the already high tide of westward migration.

Whether they imagined the West as a refuge for slavery or a haven for free labor, most Americans back East considered it a vast and largely empty space. In reality, the region was filled with diverse inhabitants with whom newcomers had to compete for resources. After 1848, American Indians, Mexicans, and Spaniards with deep roots in the region were joined by massive numbers of immigrants from Latin America, Europe, and the eastern United States; slaves taken west by their owners; free blacks seeking greater independence; and Chinese immigrants, who arrived in growing numbers to work in mining camps and on railroads. Although individuals from many backgrounds thrived in this setting, differences of race, nationality, and class created greater opportunities for some than for others.

The convergence of these diverse groups in a single region increased not only the competition for wealth and land, but also the difficulties of resolving questions about the nation's racial, economic, and political order. Men like Henry Bush did not leave their abolitionist principles back East, nor did slaveholders intend to give up their human chattel when resettling in the West. To southern planters, western expansion was slavery's salvation. As one Georgia politician told Congress in the 1850s, "There is not a slaveholder in this House or out of it, but who knows perfectly well that whenever slavery is confined within certain specified limits, its future existence is doomed." For northern businessmen and politicians, the West offered a different kind of safety valve, one that would alleviate the economic pressures caused by the growing number of propertyless workers and the massive wave of immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and other European countries. Many workers and immigrants also viewed the West as a beacon of opportunity. Although industrial laborers and skilled artisans reinvigorated efforts to organize unions in the North, most workers remained unorganized at midcentury. To these men and women, the West offered a second chance. Some envisioned rich farmlands; others hoped for steady employment on railroads, in construction, or as shopkeepers; and still others dreamed of quick riches panning for gold.

Debates over free versus slave labor shaped the dreams and the experiences of western settlers. These debates had first arisen at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and led to a political crisis in 1819–1820 that was finally resolved by the Missouri Compromise. After the U.S. victory in the Mexican War, however, much more serious conflicts over the spread of slavery erupted. These included battles over the admission of California to statehood in 1850, the status of Kansas and Nebraska territories in 1854, the Supreme Court ruling on Dred Scott's freedom in 1857, and the armed attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859. Although the best-known leaders of the proslavery and antislavery forces lived in the East, these conflicts deeply affected residents of the West, who held their own opinions about what was best for their territory or state.

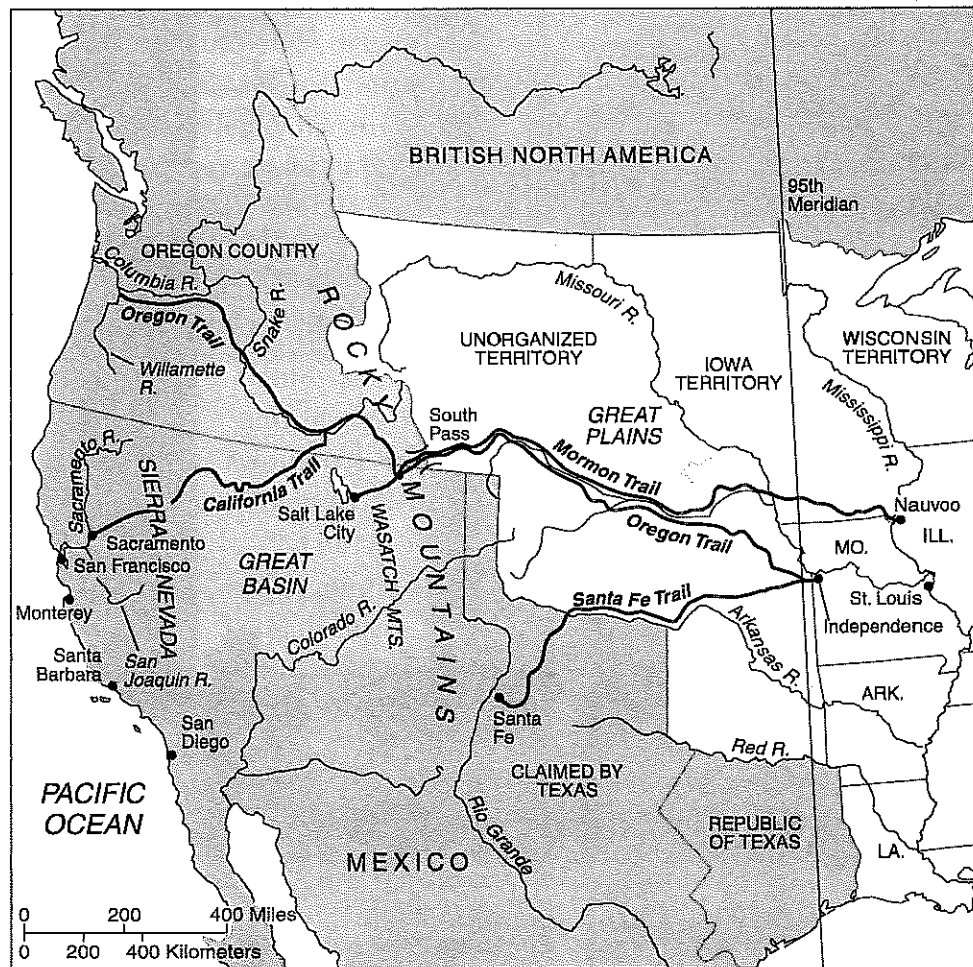
The Transformation of the West

People who were native to the western territories had suffered significant changes well before the United States defeated Mexico. The pace of change quickened, however, after the United States acquired the vast lands won from Mexico and especially after gold was discovered in California in 1848. Then, the influx of people, rapid growth of towns and cities, expansion of roads and railroads, increased demand for land and labor, and battles over economic and political control transformed nearly every aspect of western life (Map 10.1). For Indian societies, mining, urbanization, and railroad construction devastated local habitats and intensified conflicts among tribes and with U.S. citizens and soldiers. As U.S. citizens gained political control of the region, they passed laws to limit the rights of longtime Indian, Mexican, and Spanish residents. Even U.S. residents who moved West found themselves competing for rights and resources.

Despite increased opportunities for some, inequalities of class, race, and gender were largely reproduced in the western territories of the United States. The status of African Americans was uncertain in many parts of the

MAP 10.1 Settlement of the Trans-Missouri West, 1840s

The Oregon and Santa Fe trails opened up the western plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Pacific Coast to thousands of pioneers and settlers from the eastern and midwestern United States. In 1842, the first party of over 100 people left Independence, Missouri, and headed across the Oregon Trail. Over the next eighteen years, some 350,000 men, women, and children traveled this overland route to the Pacific Coast. Nearly one-tenth died along the way. One of the largest groups of migrants were the Mormons. Driven out of western New York in the 1830s and out of Illinois in the early 1840s by mobs who protested the Mormon practice of polygamy, the Mormons built an agrarian empire in the Great Salt Lake basin in present-day Utah.



Contrasting Views of Oregon Territory

In 1847, the Illinois Journal, a newspaper based in Springfield, Illinois, decided to publish letters from former Illinoisans who had been tempted by the promise of Oregon and had emigrated there. Readers who were curious about what life was like in the wild, northern territory got a mixed bag of reviews. Two of the letter excerpts follow.

Mr. Isaac Statts, in a letter to a friend, dated "Polk County, Oregon, April 8, 1847," says—

"I am highly pleased with this country, and so far as I can now say, shall spend the remainder of my days in it. It has assuredly the most healthy climate in the world. . . . Grass has been very fine and abundant for the last six weeks. When wheat is well put in, you can safely count on 30 bushels an acre. Hemp, tobacco and flax do well here. It is a good country for sheep. There is sufficient water power to carry on manufacturing to any extent. I have built my house in a commanding situation, and have a fine view of the country for ten miles around, and it is quite refreshing on a warm summer's day to feel the invigorating breeze from the Cascade mountains. . . . I am convinced that this is as fine a country as can be found. Any man disposed to be industrious and who would be satisfied any where, would be satisfied in this country."

Mr. Hezekiah Packingham, formerly of Putnam County, in this State, thus writes to his brother under date of "Willamette Valley, March 1, 1847:"

"I arrived in the Wallamette [Willamette] Valley on the 30th of September, and my calculations are all defeated about Oregon. I found it a mean, dried up, and drowned country. . . . I can give Oregon credit for only one or two things, and these are, good health and plenty of salmon, and Indians; as for the farming country there is none here—wheat grows about the same as in Illinois; corn, potatoes, and garden vegetables cannot grow here without watering. The nights are too cold here in summer. The soil is not as good as in Illinois—the face of the country is hilly, and high mountains covered with snow all summer, and small valleys. . . . Oregon is rapidly filling up with young men, (but no girls,) of whom two-thirds are dissatisfied, and many would return to the States if they were able, but the road is long and tedious, and it is hard for families to get back . . . We were uninjured by the Indians, though they were very saucy—they have no manners; they worship idols, and I saw one of their gods at the mouth of the river. There is no society here . . . I shall return to the States next spring. Don't believe all that is said about Oregon, as many falsehoods are uttered respecting the country."

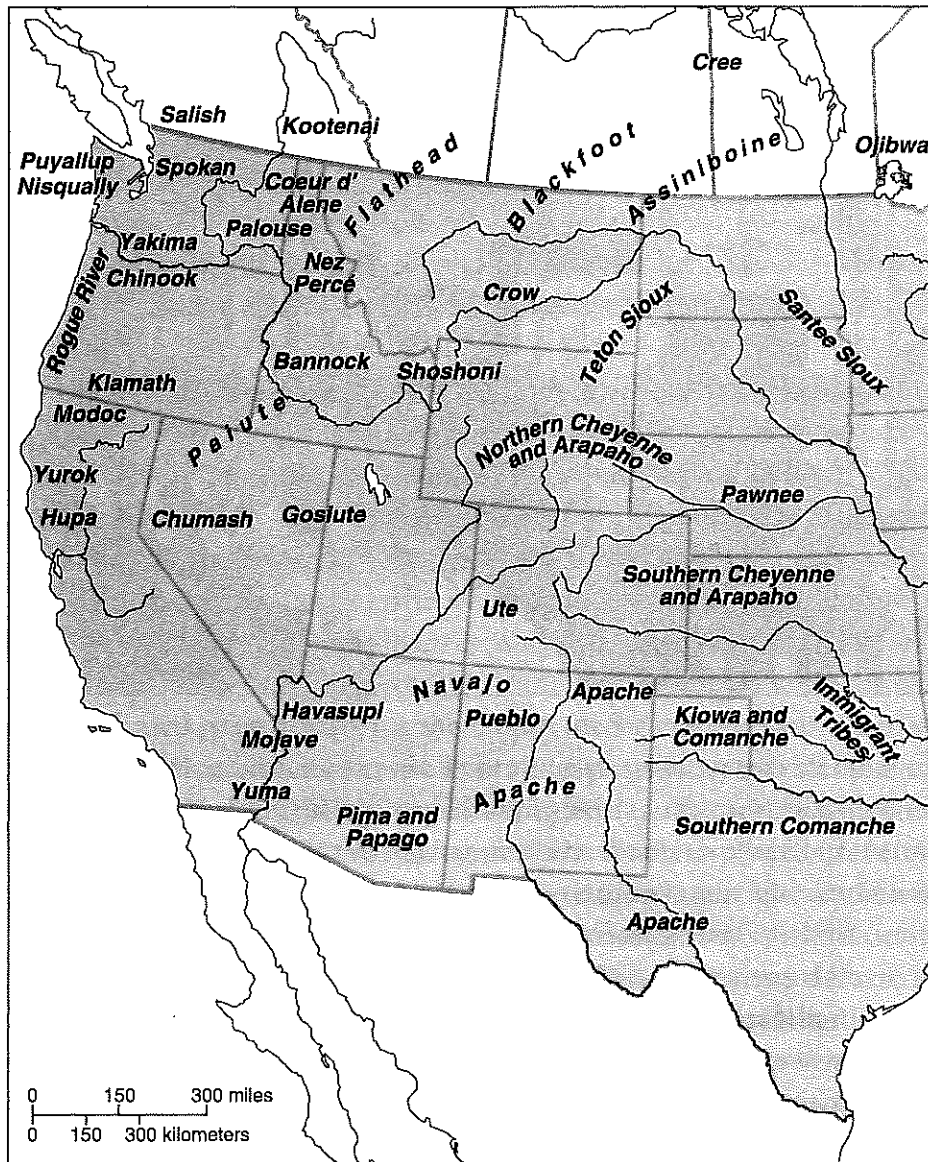
Illinois Journal (Springfield, Illinois), November 11, 1847.

West. Southern whites transported slaves into newly acquired lands, and free blacks suffered discrimination in the new territories much as they had back east. Many white men found their opportunities limited when gold mines failed to produce the riches for which they had hoped and they were forced to return to wage labor to survive. Women's status also differed by nationality and race. Some women benefited from the scarcity of women in the West at midcentury, but these temporary opportunities rarely offset the economic, political, and legal disadvantages of their sex.

American Indians Face New Obstacles Between the time of the first Spanish settlements in California in 1769 and the Gold Rush of 1849, disease, death, and labor exploitation devastated the native population. The availability of horses and guns, which spread across the West in this same period, made nomadic tribes more mobile, settled villages more vulnerable, big game hunting more wasteful, and conflicts among neighboring groups more deadly. Intertribal conflict on the Plains increased as well under the pressure of forced tribal movement. The Chippewas, for example, pushed the Sioux out of the Minnesota territory in the 1830s, and by midcentury, the Sioux had themselves seized land from the Poncas, Pawnees, Hidatsas, Assiniboines, Crows, Mandans, Arikaras, and Iowas. In the 1840s and 1850s, once they possessed guns, the Navajos, who were skilled horsemen, staged more destructive attacks not only against U.S. soldiers and settlers, but also against their traditional enemies, the Utes and Pueblos.

In the late 1840s, when the United States took possession of the western Plains, California, and Oregon, some 360,000 Indians occupied the West (Map 10.2). There were probably some 75,000 native peoples on the Great Plains, including the Cheyennes, Blackfeet, and Sioux. These buffalo-hunting and warring tribes fed European and American stereotypes of teepees, painted warriors, and chiefs in headdresses. Close to 85,000 Creeks, Cherokees, and other Southeastern Indians also inhabited western lands. Another 25,000, mostly Comanches and Apaches, resided in Texas. The Mexican Cession brought another 150,000 Indians into the United States, swelling the Navajo and Apache populations and placing a number of small California tribes under Anglo-American laws and customs. Finally, some 25,000 Nez Perce, Yakimas, Walla Wallas, and Coeur d'Alenes occupied the Oregon territory, which came under U.S. control in 1846.

Some Indians quickly recognized the significance of the arrival of large numbers of Americans. In 1846, as thousands of U.S. soldiers swarmed into the West on their way to wage war with Mexico, Cheyenne leader Yellow Wolf noted the "diminishing numbers of his people, and the decrease of the once abundant buffalo" and asserted that Indians would "have to adopt the habits of the white people." Although many Indians would have agreed with their aging Cheyenne brother, others, especially the younger ones, were



MAP 10.2 Major Indian Tribes in the American West in 1850

Before the arrival of vast numbers of Europeans and white Americans in the West, hundreds of Indian tribes coexisted on the land. The abundance of land, game, and edible plants compared to the relatively small size of the population ensured that these diverse tribes could survive despite differences in political and economic systems, military capabilities, and religious beliefs. Though conflicts among some native peoples had always existed, the conflicts increased substantially when the native groups were forced by the pressure of white settlement to share ever-smaller territories. By 1850, these intertribal conflicts were exacerbated by growing tensions between the various Indian tribes and the large numbers of white Americans arriving from the eastern United States. Robert Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846–1890* (1984).

not yet ready to make further concessions. Resistance by Plains Indians ended only after decades of bloody warfare, which greatly decimated their numbers. Yellow Wolf himself was killed in a massacre by U.S. soldiers in 1864 at Sand Creek in the Colorado territory.

In California, the small size of existing Indian societies and the outbreak of deadly epidemics limited native resistance (Table 10.1). In the early 1840s, men such as U.S. Army Captain John Sutter, stationed in California, confiscated tribal lands in the central part of the state, a process that was made easier by a smallpox epidemic that claimed thousands of native lives in the 1830s. Sutter recruited and coerced the Nisenan people who lived in the area to work his land, alternating material incentives with corporal punishment to control them. When California declared independence from Mexico in 1846, the U.S. government began playing a more important role

TABLE 10.1 California's Indian Population, 1852

Though California Indians had confronted Spanish and American soldiers and settlers for nearly eighty years before the discovery of gold, the rapid influx of non-Indians to the area after 1848 disrupted their ways of life in new and profound ways. By 1852, in the northern and central districts of California where mining was most important, the percentage of Indians in the total population had dropped precipitously. Only on the southern edge of the main mining districts, in Mariposa and Tulare counties, did Indians still constitute a significant portion of the population. Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (1988).

Domesticated Indians in California by Mining District and County in 1852			
County	Non-Indians	Indians	Indians as Percentage of Total Population
Northern District			
Klamath	523	0	0
Shasta	3,855	73	1.8
Siskiyou	2,214	26	1.2
Trinity	<u>1,933</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>0.2</u>
Subtotal	8,525	103	1.2
Central District			
Butte	8,542	30	0.3
Calaveras	28,936	1,982	6.4
El Dorado*	40,000	---	---
Nevada	18,139	3,226	15.1
Placer	10,867	730	6.3
Sierra	4,808	0	0
Tuolumne	25,730	590	2.2
Yuba	<u>20,593</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>0.6</u>
Subtotal	157,615	6,678	4.1
Subtotal w/o El Dorado	117,615	6,678	5.4
Southern District			
Mariposa	4,231	4,533	51.7
Tulare	175	8,407	98.0
Subtotal	<u>4,406</u>	<u>12,940</u>	<u>74.6</u>
TOTAL	170,546	19,721	10.4
TOTAL w/o El Dorado	130,546	19,721	13.1

* El Dorado County returned a population estimate of 40,000 that was not broken down by age, race, or sex.
Source: 1852 California Special Census, California State Archives.

in the region, and Sutter became the local Indian agent, in charge of land grants, labor contracts, and the distribution of supplies. At the same time, more and more Americans began moving into California, most coming south from Oregon or across the Plains from the east. Soon, the discovery of gold near Sutter's Mill unleashed a floodtide of migration, creating even more difficult conditions for Indians in the region.

The Gold Rush On January 24, 1848, James Marshall discovered gold in a millrace along the American River. Word of the event quickly circulated through the local area. In May, the San Francisco *Californian* reported that "the whole country from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevadas, resounds with the sordid cry of

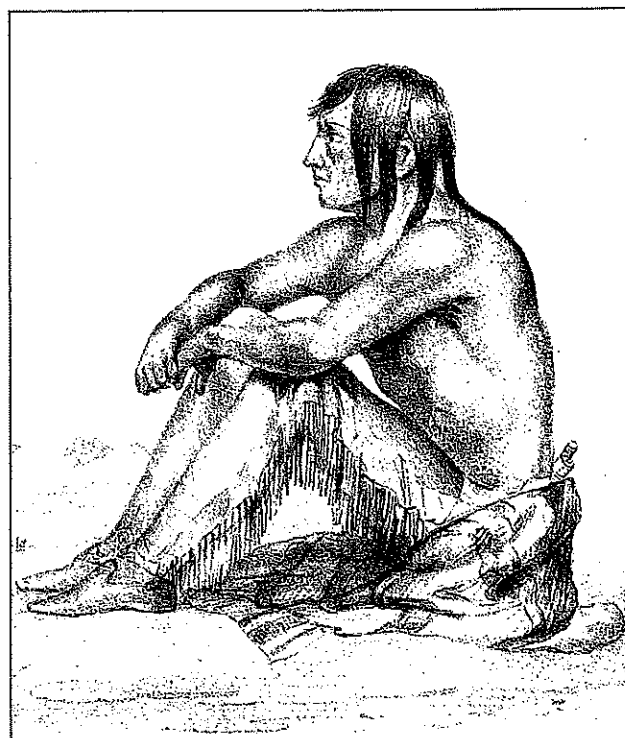
‘gold, GOLD, GOLD!’ while the field is left half planted, the house half built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes.” By year’s end, the news had spread across the nation.

The 700 or so new settlers who had arrived in California in 1848 were joined by thousands and then tens of thousands of others in 1849 and 1850. These later pioneers, known as Forty-Niners, cared little about farming, trading, or building settlements. They came to stake a claim. Gold fever drew Irish, Scottish, French, and German miners to California along with Chileans, Mexicans, Peruvians, and Americans. In 1849 alone, some 80,000 gold-hungry adventurers—most of them men—poured into the area (Map 10.3). In the rush to control the most promising sites, armed Americans assaulted foreign-born competitors, especially Chinese, Chilean, Peruvian, Mexican, and French miners, often driving them off their claims. In one case, U.S. miners drove out a group of 60 Chinese immigrants who had been hired by a British mining company. Whites knew that amid the general violence and lawlessness that characterized life along the mother lode, assaults on Asians or Hispanics—even deadly assaults—were unlikely to lead to arrest, much less conviction.

Despite the violence, mining camps turned into boomtowns literally overnight. A typical mining camp, Nevada City emerged at the intersection of two creeks in the Sierra foothills in the fall of 1849. A few cabins, a general store, and hundreds of tents appeared along the creek beds during the winter. In the spring, thousands of men streamed into the area seeking their fortunes. A few decided to pursue wealth not by panning for gold, but by providing the necessities of life for those who did. Stores and saloons sprang up on the small flat along Deer Creek. New roads, carved out to ensure a steady supply of goods, brought more merchants and miners into the town. In spring 1850, miner William Swain described the area’s astonishing growth:

The speculators, traders, gamblers, women and thieves keep their eyes on the mines and when miners move, they all move. This spring there was but one house in Nevada City, now there is said to be 17,000 men in and about it. . . . Everything is in a state of fermentation, rolling and tumbling about.

The fermentation that Swain observed created new problems for the region’s American Indians, such as the Nisenan. The miners and others rushing in razed the forests to make way for camps, towns, and roads. They used timber for sluices, dams, houses, shops, and fuel. The miners imported food from afar, since they considered nutritionally inadequate the seeds and

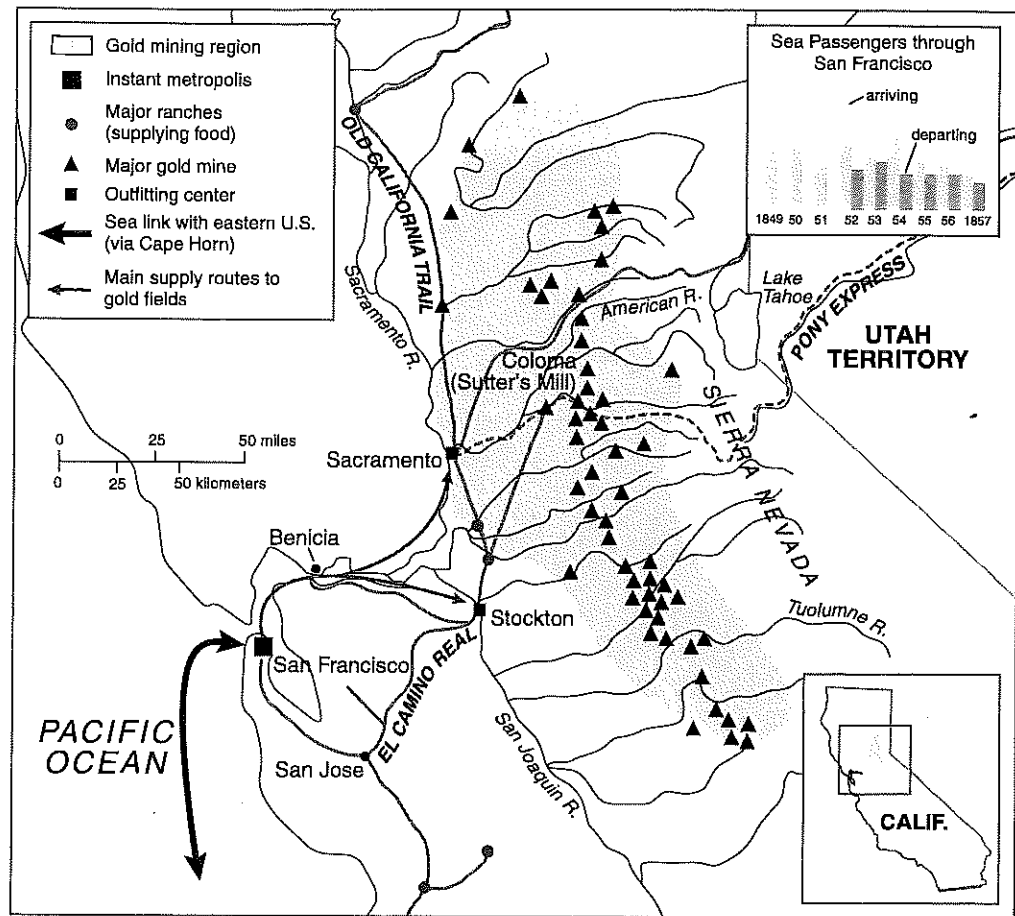


Yellow Wolf

This 1846 sketch of the Cheyenne chief by Lt. J. W. Abert was included in the officer’s official report. “Report of Lieutenant J. W. Abert, of His Examination of New Mexico, in the Years 1846–’47,” Senate Executive Documents, 30th Congress, 1st session, no. 23 (1848) — Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library.

MAP 10.3 The California Gold Rush

Beginning in 1849, hundreds of thousands of people from the eastern United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, and other parts of the world converged on California. Because of the rapid rise in population and because so many of the newcomers were young men seeking gold rather than farmers, merchants, or manufacturers, an enormous demand for food, clothing, equipment, and housing was created. San Francisco, the main port of entry for those who arrived by sea, became a booming metropolis, and smaller trading outposts such as Sacramento and Stockton were transformed into important commercial centers. Agricultural production increased in the rich interior river valleys, and new jobs were created by miners' demands for clean clothes, home-cooked meals, and adequate housing.



acorns that the Nisenan harvested. The new settlers killed off deer and other animals and destroyed fish habitats, while devastating fires swept the Sierra mining towns and water remained in short supply. The Nisenan nearly disappeared along with their homes and food supplies.

Over the next decade, the mining camps spread. New methods, such as hydraulic mining, made the process of mining more profitable for a few, but most Forty-Niners eventually worked for wages, just as they had back east. These changes were even more detrimental to the land and to native communities. The experience of the Nisenan was echoed in every area where miners settled, shattering the fragile ecosystems that had supported many California Indian communities. Meanwhile, Spaniards and Mexicans found themselves exploited in the same ways in which they had once mistreated the Indians: the newcomers expropriated their land, imposed new forms of labor, and sexually abused local women. In California during the 1850s, the Indian population plummeted to between 30,000 and 35,000. Even native peoples who had served the American cause—fighting with U.S. troops against Mexico in 1846 or aiding American forces in putting down a rebellion led by the Cupeno tribe in 1851—were denied the rights to citizenship, suffrage, and property that were guaranteed to whites.

“I Often Have a Hearty Cry”: A Boardinghouse Keeper in the California Gold Rush

Mary Ballou and her husband ran a boardinghouse in a California gold mining town. Ballou's letter to her son, written in 1852, evokes the rough housing, violence, and high prices (from which the Ballous profited) in California during the gold rush. She also describes how the few women there provided each other with companionship and consolation. Ballou's references to “the States” suggest how far from home California must have felt, since California had been a state for two years when she wrote this letter.

well I will try to tell you what my work is here in this muddy Place. . . . sometimes I am washing and Ironing sometimes I am making mince pie and Apple pie and squash pies. . . . Sometimes I am making gruel for the sick now and then cooking oysters sometimes making coffee for the French people strong enough for any man to walk on that has Faith as Peter had. three times a day I set my Table which is about thirty feet in length and do all the little fixings about it such as filling pepper boxes and vinegar cruets and mustard pots and Butter cups. sometimes I am feeding my chickens and then again I am scaring the Hogs out of my kitchen and Driving the mules out of my Dining room. . . . Sometimes I am making soups and cranberry tarts and Baking chicken that cost four Dollars a head and cooking Eggs at three Dollars a Dozen. . . . sometimes I am taking care of Babies and nursing at the rate of Fifty Dollars a week but I would not advise any Lady to come out here and suffer the toil and fatigue that I have suffered for the sake of a little gold neither do I advise any one to come. Clarks Simmon wife says if she was safe in the States she would not care if she had not one cent. . . .

[O]ccasionally I run in and have a chat with Jane and Mrs Durphy and I often have a hearty cry. no one but my maker knows my feelings. and then I run into my little cellar which is about four feet square as I have no other place to run that is cool. . . . [today] I have been to church to hear a methodist sermon. his Text was let us lay aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset us. I was the only Lady that was present and about forty gentleman. So you see that I go to church when I can.

Mary B. Ballou, “I Hear the Hogs in My Kitchen”: A Woman's View of the Gold Rush, ed. Archibald Hanna (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), reprinted in Christiane Fischer, ed., *Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849–1900* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), 42–46.

Work and Race Life on the western mining frontier was difficult even for white workers, who had the privileges accorded their race. Most did not strike it rich, and after using up their original stake searching for gold, they had nothing with which to purchase land, tools, or supplies. Many were thus forced to become wage laborers in mines or railroads or to find jobs as seasonal workers or tenants on large farms owned by wealthy whites. Others moved to the region's widely scattered cities, seeking jobs on the docks in San Francisco or in Sacramento's food-processing plants. Many found

Washing Away the Landscape

In 1853, hydraulic mining was introduced in the California gold fields, harnessing the power of water forced through a system of hoses to cut away tons of rock and dirt to extract the gold hidden beneath. "Thus," rejoiced one local newspaper, "banks of earth that would have kept a hundred men employed for months in their removal will now be removed by three or four men in two weeks." But as this cartoon from the *Sacramento Bee* indicated, the new process worsened erosion that had already been caused by excessive timber cutting, clogging rivers with the runoff that flooded and devastated rural settlements.

"What Hydraulic Mining Is Doing for the Country," Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center, The Eleanor McClatchy Collection/82.04(MC8:14)/G.F. Keller/n.d./dl.



themselves working shoulder to shoulder with the Chinese, Mexicans, and African Americans they had hoped to rise above.

Still, to most white Americans, California remained a land of promise, and a few achieved the success they sought, though not necessarily in the way they had imagined. Henry Bush, for instance, who failed to strike it rich in the mines, bought a plot of land north of San Francisco, started a vineyard there, and made his fortune in grapes rather than gold. Continuing dreams of economic opportunity led many workers who faced miserable conditions and low wages to ignore the benefits of class solidarity. Instead, in an effort to keep California's wealth for whites only, white employees often cooperated with employers to exclude those they defined as "intruders": Indians, African Americans, Mexicans, Spaniards, and Asians.

The obstacles that white workers and employers created were reinforced by the passage of laws that taxed "foreigners" working in mining areas, including Mexicans who had lived in the region longer than many of the lawmakers. Another series of California regulations restricted the rights of residents who were considered to be nonwhite. African Americans, although free, were denied the right to vote, claim a homestead, hold public office, serve on a jury, or attend school with white children. In San Francisco in the 1850s, it was even illegal for blacks to ride streetcars. In addition, "no black or mulatto person or Indian" was "permitted to give evidence in favor of or against a white person" in court. In 1854, the state Supreme Court affirmed, in the case of *People v. George Hall*, that Indians could not testify against whites in court and—incredibly—that Asians were Indians. Therefore, Chinese also were prohibited from giving testimony in court.

In 1855, the court clarified its stance, arguing that the Chinese were “a race of people whom nature has marked as inferior . . . incapable of progress or intellectual development beyond a certain point.” Still, the Chinese population in California increased—numbering some 25,000 by the mid-1850s—and spread into other western states, such as Nevada and Idaho. Though these immigrants performed critical services for mine owners and other miners—cooking, cleaning, and doing the most arduous manual labor—they were never accepted as part of the new western working class.

Pioneer Women’s Work and Rights When native-born white women began moving west in large numbers in the 1850s, they harbored popular but distorted images of Indians, Mexicans, and other “foreigners.” White women’s initial scarcity in the West and their growing numbers after 1850 created challenges and opportunities for all women in the region.

Susan Magoffin, the wife of a trader, was one of the first U.S.-born women to travel in the “New” Mexico territory, in 1846. In her diary, she noted with shock that Mexican women wore loose blouses, flowing skirts, and no corsets, which to her suggested that they had loose sexual morals. Yet she also appreciated their personal warmth and hospitality. Magoffin was surprised to discover that Mexican law granted married women property rights that were denied women under U.S. law. When the region was annexed by the United States in 1848, Mexican women lost not only the right to control their own property after marriage, but also the right to custody of their children and the right to sue in court without the consent of fathers or husbands. Still, Spanish and Mexican legal traditions did mitigate some of the worst features of Anglo-American law in the West. For instance, married women in the West held greater rights over family property than did their counterparts back East.

Despite some legal benefits accorded to western women, pioneer wives generally had to accede to their husbands’ wishes, including the man’s desire to uproot his household and head to the frontier. Of course, some women eagerly embraced the opportunity and adventure that the frontier offered, but those who did not had little choice but to acquiesce. In spring of 1853, for example, Abigail Bush, whose husband Henry had left for California three years earlier, finally followed him west. With her “wee daughter” and three sons, she traveled to New York City and then set sail for the long voyage around South America to California. Despite the desire to reunite her family, Abigail lamented those forced to “leav[e] Home, its Comforts and Endearments” only to be “Doomed to Disappointment, Sorrow, & a Grave” far from family and friends. Although Abigail Bush had been the first



Sam Pit

Pit was one of the many Californian Indians who labored in the gold fields. California State Library, Sacramento.

“We Are Not the Degraded Race You Would Make Us”: Protesting Anti-Chinese Sentiment in California

In 1852, Norman Asing, a restaurant owner and leader in San Francisco's Chinese community, wrote this open letter to California Governor John Bigler, who had called for a restriction on Chinese immigration. California had experienced a dramatic upsurge in Chinese immigration, from a few thousand Chinese immigrants in 1850 to 20,000 in 1852, when they constituted almost one-quarter of California's workforce. Bigler cited the inability of the Chinese to assimilate as European immigrants had before them; Asing assails the governor for his anti-Chinese stance while making his own distinctions about the superiority of some racial groups over others.

Sir: I am a Chinaman, a republican, and a lover of free institutions; am much attached to the principles of the government of the United States, and therefore take the liberty of addressing you as the chief of the government of this State. . . .

[S]o far as the history of our race in California goes, it stamps with the test of truth the fact that we are not the degraded race you would make us. We came amongst you as mechanics or traders, and following every honorable business of life. You do not find us pursuing occupations of degrading character, except you consider labor degrading, which I am sure you do not; and if our countrymen save the proceeds of their industry from the tavern and the gambling house to spend it on farms or town lots or on their families, surely you will admit that even these are virtues. . . .

Your Excellency will discover, however, that we are as much allied to the African race and the red man as you are yourself, and that as far as the aristocracy of skin is concerned, ours might compare with many of the European races; nor do we consider that your Excellency, as a Democrat, will make us believe that the framers of your declaration of rights ever suggested the propriety of establishing an aristocracy of skin. I am a naturalized citizen, your Excellency, of Charleston, South Carolina, and a Christian, too; and so hope you will stand corrected in your assertion “that none of the Asiatic class” as you are pleased to term them, have applied for benefits under our naturalization act. I could point out to you numbers of citizens, all over the whole continent, who have taken advantage of your hospitality and citizenship, and I defy you to say that our race have ever abused that hospitality. . . . You find us peculiarly peaceable and orderly. It does not cost your state much for our criminal prosecution. We apply less to your courts for redress, and so far as I know, there are none who are a charge upon the state, as paupers.

“To His Excellency Gov. Bigler,” *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco, California), May 5, 1852.

American woman to preside over a woman's rights convention (see Chapter 8), she could not refuse her husband's decision to move to California.

Many women shared Abigail Bush's dilemma, but few traveled by sea to California. In the years after the Gold Rush, most migrants journeyed in family groups on the overland trails by wagon train. These trains included many recently married couples with young children, infants, or babies on the way. During the long and difficult journey, families were often forced to abandon some of their possessions to lighten the wagons, family heirlooms and other items of "merely sentimental" value being the first to go. Women and children typically gathered fuel and hauled water, tasks that could be incredibly burdensome on the Plains, where both water and trees were scarce. Frontier families often cooked over "buffalo chips," that is, dried dung, gathered along the edges of the trail. In addition, whether pregnant, ill, or exhausted, women still performed the necessary domestic chores of washing clothes, preparing meals, and caring for children amid the chaos of constant movement.

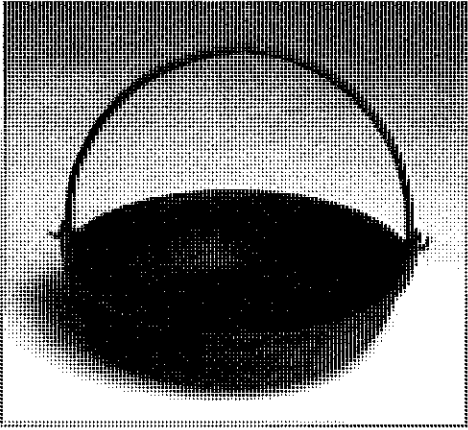
During the crises that all too frequently confronted these pioneers, women might also take on men's roles, such as driving the wagons, caring for the horses, or burying the dead. Catherine Haun and her husband traveled west from Iowa in spring 1849. She later recalled that one man "was bitten on the ankle by a venomous snake," and "his limb had to be amputated with the aid of a common handsaw. Fortunately, for him, he had a good, brave wife who helped and cheered him into health and usefulness." Still, "the woman had to do a man's work as they were alone," that is, they had no other family with them on the trail.

Elizabeth Smith, who traveled the Oregon Trail two years earlier, might have offered sympathy and advice. Her husband fell ill in November 1847, after nearly six months on the trail. Elizabeth had to take charge of the wagons and seven children, including her baby daughter. After reaching Portland, Oregon, Mrs. Smith found shelter; cared for her husband and children through the cold, wet winter; and sold what goods they had to buy food. On February 2, 1848, the final tragedy hit. "Today we buried my earthly companion," she wrote in her diary. "Now I know what none but widows know; that is, how comfortless is that of a widow's life, especially when left in a strange land, without money or friends, and the care of seven children."



Forty-Niner

With the aid of a shoulder pole, which derived from his homeland, a Chinese immigrant carried one of the prospector's essential tools: a rocker box, also known as a cradle. While a sluice box was used in streams to retrieve gold, the rocker box was designed for dry places. Miners poured a small amount of water into the box and then rocked it from side to side until dirt and other materials sifted through its perforated bottom, leaving the heavier gold behind. Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.



Lightening the Load on the Overland Trail

Traveling on the overland trail meant giving up cherished family possessions and familiar domestic conveniences. A woman might be able to bring along only an iron cooking pot, a kettle, and a coffee pot to prepare meals for her family on the journey west — and things might not get much better for a while after arrival at their new frontier home. Iron cooking pot, mid-1800s, 88.227.2 — Autry National Center.

As the Smiths' experience suggests, when families settled in mining camps or farm villages, life could be even more difficult than it was along the trail. Houses were sometimes widely separated, leaving women with little social contact or domestic help beyond their immediate family. Men's employment was often erratic, and work for women, though plentiful, rarely paid well. Moreover, many of the opportunities for female employment—in the dance halls and brothels that sprouted in mining towns, for instance—were not considered appropriate for respectable married women. Mrs. Smith sent her two oldest sons to work in the mines while they were still quite young, and she did laundry and

cooking for others to make ends meet. A year and a half after her husband's death, she married a widower who had ten children of his own and finally found the economic security that had driven her husband to move west in the first place.

Even those whose families survived the westward journey intact, staked a homestead, and started a farm faced hardship. Enormous labor was required to build a house, construct basic furnishings, break the ground, plant the first crops, keep a cow and chickens, do the milking, collect the eggs, churn the butter, make the clothes and bedding, complete the harvest, haul the water, chop the wood, and keep the household clean and the family fed. Although men, women, and children all did their share, women's work was particularly taxing. For young wives, childbearing and caring for infants added to the physical burdens of frontier life. Women had far fewer opportunities than their husbands and sons to travel to nearby farms, trading posts, or towns; as a result many suffered from isolation and depression. Churches were few and far between, and doctors and midwives were often too far away to attend births or provide assistance in emergencies. This placed the major burden of caring for the family's physical and spiritual needs on women.

Despite these burdens, some white women benefited from moving west. Because of the scarcity of white women on the frontier, those who made the trip were often highly prized as wives and mothers. Single women could marry into established families, and widows such as Elizabeth Smith usually found new husbands quickly. Those who chose to remain single and had the skills to farm could gain access to homesteads. Other women used their skills at sewing, cooking, laundry, shopkeeping, or writing to launch successful business ventures. By the late nineteenth century, pioneer women would build on the importance of their labor to achieve political rights and professional status that were not available to women back east.

Pioneers on the western frontier led lives that were filled with work and family. Even after the invention of the telegraph and the construction of railroads, many households remained isolated and did not receive regular

mail deliveries or newspaper reports. Western political leaders, however, were often eager to gain access to federal support, and most hoped one day to apply for statehood for their territories. When statehood was at stake, western residents quickly became swept up in the political dramas that were unfolding back East. The most important issue in many cases was whether a territory would gain admission as a free state or a slave state. The outcome of these debates was significant for all westerners, but particularly for the African Americans who had moved or been forced to travel west.

Slavery Expands West Slavery existed in many of the western territories, though of the newly settled lands, it flourished only in Texas and Oklahoma. Still, however circumscribed, the expansion of the plantation system exacerbated the brutality of slavery. On the frontier, slaves were increasingly subject to abuses as a consequence of absentee ownership. Black women, denied the minimal protections that were offered by extended families, suffered increased sexual abuse in frontier regions, where men once again dominated the population. There, too, it was difficult to supply slaves with sufficient food, clothing, and housing because the expansion of settlement outstripped the extension of railroads, banks, and other agents of commercial development.

Slavery was legal only in the Utah territory, Texas, and Oklahoma in the mid-nineteenth-century West, and the number of slaves in the Far West remained small throughout the period. The vast majority of African Americans living west of the Mississippi River worked as slaves in Texas, where they made up 30 percent of the population in 1860, and Oklahoma, where they made up nearly 15 percent and were held in bondage by Cherokee, Creek, and other Indians. Yet officials in other territories generally ignored the existence of slaves within their borders rather than challenge their white owners, who were seen as valuable settlers. Black laborers thus suffered oppressive conditions whether legally enslaved or technically free.

Brutal work conditions, harsh discipline, and scorching temperatures affected growing numbers of enslaved African Americans as the planter frontier pushed west. There was little division of labor by sex or age; every body was needed to pull stumps; dig ditches; cut cane; plant cotton; and build houses, slave quarters, barns, and roads. One Texas slave recalled years later that the workday lasted from “can see to can’t see.” Throughout the Southwest, moreover, enslaved African Americans were captured and killed in raids by Comanches and other Indian groups that were trying to stop the influx of white settlers. Slaves who escaped still faced capture by Indians as well as vast stretches of arid land.

Life on the frontier could be particularly harsh for isolated slave women, whether on the Oklahoma and Texas frontier or in older settlements such as Missouri. Celia, a thirteen-year-old African American,

learned the horrors of isolation as soon as her new master, Robert Newsom, picked her up in his wagon. On the trip to his Missouri farm, Newsom, a widower, raped the girl. Once she was settled on the farm, he repeated his sexual assaults whenever he chose. When Celia sought protection by taking up with one of the two male slaves on Newsom's farm, her owner ignored her pleas to be left alone. Celia refused to accept her fate and set a trap for her master. She killed Newsom with a hatchet on the night of June 23, 1855, after he had assaulted her. She then cut up and burned his body in her fireplace. Celia was eventually charged with murder and found some sympathy among whites who were appalled by her tale of abuse. Unfortunately for Celia, her case came to trial in the midst of renewed conflicts over slavery, most notably in the neighboring Kansas territory. In this context, acts of open defiance by a slave could not go unpunished. An all-white jury found Celia guilty, and she was hanged.

Uneasy Compromises over Slavery

The expansion of slavery as the nation pushed west inspired growing opposition in the free states. Although the majority of whites, North and South, accepted slavery where it already existed, more and more opposed its extension into new territories. Of course, many people were more concerned with saving western lands for whites than with limiting the abuse of blacks. Nonetheless, these converts to free-soil principles began to swell the anti-slavery ranks. Between 1849 and 1854, those who opposed slavery and/or its expansion clashed head to head with southern planters and their supporters. The most severe conflicts erupted over the admission to statehood first of California and then of Kansas. Although a resolution was reached in each case, the battles heightened suspicions on both sides, and the compromises themselves laid the foundation for future conflicts.

For instance, the Compromise of 1850, by which California was admitted to the union, included a new and expanded Fugitive Slave Law that ignited outrage in the free states and attracted new recruits to the antislavery cause.

The Compromise of 1850 In California, the number of U.S. residents had grown so rapidly that in 1849, political leaders sought statehood without having ever applied for territorial status. This made California the focal point of debates over slave labor and free labor that continued to dominate eastern political life. Just before California applied for statehood, northerners who wanted the West left open for settlement by free men founded the Free-Soil Party (see Chapter 8). Seeking to alleviate the pressures that were created by immigration and provide a fresh start for families who were unable to find prosperity in increasingly crowded eastern cities, Free-Soilers

advocated a nonslave West but did not advocate abolition. They were willing to leave slavery alone where it already existed, thereby hoping to assuage the concerns of southerners.

The events unfolding around California tested the strengths and limits of free-soil sentiment. Zachary Taylor, a Whig slave owner, had been elected president in 1848 (see Chapter 8). He encouraged California's application for statehood as a means of strengthening the Whig Party nationally. Here, thought Taylor, was an opportunity to defuse Free-Soil Party support by demonstrating that a southern Whig could oversee the entrance of free states to the Union. Taylor's success in this endeavor depended on his ability to convince other southern Whigs that slavery could be protected in the South without expanding the institution into every western territory.

Taylor's plan ran into several obstacles. Congressional Democrats, Whigs, and Free-Soilers all wanted reassurances that the interests of their constituents would be protected. And no one seemed convinced that the simple admission of California as a free state could ensure those interests. After lengthy and contentious arguments, Congress rejected the idea of either allowing or forbidding slavery in the West by federal law and instead stitched together a compromise.

The construction and passage of this compromise involved some of the most charismatic figures and some of the most dramatic oratory in the history of the U.S. Senate. Henry Clay, architect of the Missouri Compromise thirty years earlier, spearheaded this effort at national reconciliation even though he was old and ill. His bill called for passage of five measures: (1) California would be admitted as a free state; (2) territorial governments would be formed without restrictions on slavery in the rest of the land acquired from Mexico; (3) the federal government would assume Texas's public debt in exchange for Texas yielding in its border dispute with New Mexico; (4) the slave trade, but not slavery itself, would be abolished in Washington, D.C.; and (5) a new and more effective fugitive slave law would go into effect. But despite his appeals to shared national principles, Clay could not get the bill passed.

Among his most forceful opponents was John C. Calhoun, sixty-six years old and in worse health than Clay. Because Calhoun was unable to rise from his seat, a colleague read his speech. Calhoun demanded that the South be granted equal rights in the territories, that the North obey all fugitive slave laws, and that the North cease its attacks on the institution of slavery. He even suggested that the country be ruled by two presidents, one representing the North and one the South, each with veto power. Though he claimed that he, like Clay, wanted to save the Union, his blueprint for sectional reconciliation required the North to acquiesce to the South.

Massachusetts' elder statesman, Senator Daniel Webster, reassured the North that this would not happen. Older than Calhoun by two years but still

healthy, and hopeful of gaining the White House one day, Webster rallied support to Clay's cause. In a brilliant speech, he urged calm, advocated idealism, and praised patriotism. But even Webster could not convince a majority of his colleagues to vote for Clay's compromise bill. He was perhaps glad when his appointment as secretary of state removed him from the Senate and the acrimonious debate. Death removed Calhoun, in July 1850. And although Clay remained in the Senate until his death two years later, he retreated from its leadership.

After six months of debate, then, the California issue remained unsettled. At this point, a younger and more pragmatic group of Senators took over the negotiations. These men—including William H. Seward of New York, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, and Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois—initially seemed even less willing to compromise. Seward adamantly opposed Clay's bill; Davis just as adamantly favored slavery and its expansion; and Douglas staunchly favored western growth and development. Yet the three managed to move the legislation forward. Douglas provided the critical breakthrough when he broke Clay's bill apart, allowing senators to vote for the sections they favored without accepting the sections they opposed.

Ultimately, the Compromise of 1850 consisted of a series of separate bills passed by different, and sometimes competing, coalitions. Northeasterners and midwesterners, for instance, nearly all supported the admission of California as a free state and the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia. Southerners, on the other hand, voted overwhelmingly for the new Fugitive Slave Law, which denied jury trials to accused runaway slaves and empowered any marshal pursuing them to force local citizens to join the hunt. On each issue, just enough party loyalists crossed sectional lines to ensure passage. In addition, the sudden death of President Taylor in July 1850, who, despite his support for California's admission, had threatened to veto the larger compromise of which it was a part, paved the way for the bill's passage. The new president, Millard Fillmore, not only supported the compromise, but used his powers as president to convince northern Whigs to support it as well.

Leaders of both major parties congratulated themselves on the 1850 compromise. "Much . . . may be effected by a conciliatory temper and discreet measures," declared Whig Philip Hone. "All praise to the defenders of the Union!" Former Democratic presidential candidate Lewis Cass declared confidently, "I do not believe any party could now be built in relation to this question of slavery. I think the question is settled in the public mind." Political and business leaders organized rallies in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati, in support of the compromise.

Many workers and farmers also approved the new agreement in hopes that it would prevent disruption of the Union and improve their chances for

upward mobility. Large numbers of working people saw slavery as synonymous with degradation, and cries of “wage slavery” condemned capitalists who oppressed their employees. But equating wage labor with slavery did not lead to sympathy for slaves themselves. Native-born and immigrant white workers were equally likely to define their own status as free men by distinguishing themselves from slaves. In addition, many white workers harbored racist attitudes not only toward slaves, but toward free blacks as well. They often viewed with suspicion fugitive slaves who had escaped to the North, seeing them as competition for scarce jobs and as diminishing, by their race alone, the wages and status of free white workers. This led once again to a desire to keep slavery and African Americans out of the western territories, where white workers assumed that African Americans would necessarily undermine the value of free labor.

Still, although Douglas, Seward, and Davis could take credit for completing the work Clay had begun, they failed to embrace the elder statesman’s concern about national reconciliation. Achieving compromise only through the appeasement of separate and antagonistic interests did not solve the nation’s racial crisis. Instead it soon revitalized sectional hostilities. The most controversial section of the 1850 Compromise—the Fugitive Slave Law—served as the next lightning rod.

The Fugitive Slave Law One of the Fugitive Slave Law’s major targets was the “underground railroad,” a network of thousands of free blacks and white sympathizers who concealed, sheltered, clothed, and guided runaway slaves in the course of their northward flight. The best known of the “conductors” who served this railroad was Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1849. Over the next decade, Tubman returned to the South nineteen times, repeatedly risking capture and death to liberate more than 300 others. In the North, local vigilance committees—composed largely of free blacks and white Quakers—kept the railroad going. Free blacks provided most of the labor and funds required by the cause, despite their long hours of work and limited economic opportunities. African American members of the New York support committee were able to pledge only fifty

CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE

OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the Watchmen and Police Officers of Boston,

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

KIDNAPPERS

AND

Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, Shun them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

The Fugitive Slave Law

A notice posted by Boston abolitionist Theodore Parker in 1851. Boston Public Library.

Freedom or Death

Soon after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Margaret Garner fled from her Kentucky master with her four children. Slave patrollers followed her to Ohio. Faced with capture, Garner killed two of her children rather than see them be returned to slavery. The surviving children were taken from her, and on the return trip to Kentucky Garner drowned herself in the Ohio River. Her story inspired an acclaimed nineteenth-century painting by Thomas S. Noble (on which this engraving was based) and Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*. *Harper's Weekly*, May 18, 1867 — American Social History Project.



cents a month; those in Philadelphia contributed even less. Fortunately, a few wealthy families, such as the Fortens (free blacks) and the Motts (white Quakers), were also deeply committed to keeping the railroad running.

During the 1840s, slave owners grew more anxious about the underground railroad, even though the number of successful slave escapes may not have increased. Escapes affected far more than the few thousand slaves who actually fled. News traveled through the slaves' "grapevine telegraph," emboldening many who were still in bondage. At the same time, successful fugitives such as Frederick Douglass and William and Ellen Craft, who had escaped from Georgia in December 1848, became powerful and effective antislavery speakers in the United States and Britain. The proponents of the Fugitive Slave Law hoped that it would not only reduce the number of escapes, but also drive earlier runaways such as Tubman, Douglass, and the Crafts back into hiding.

Instead, the new law had the opposite effect, reinvigorating protests against slavery and against slave owners, who were viewed as abusing federal power. A law that forced them to assist slave owners in returning fugitives to bondage enraged long-time abolitionists and their new allies. They held mass meetings throughout the North and Midwest. At one gathering in Allegheny City, near Pittsburgh, land reformer John Ferral, a veteran of the workingmen's movement of the 1820s and 1830s, attacked the Fugitive Slave Law and proposed a state constitutional amendment that gave black males the right to vote. The meeting approved his proposal at a time when only five northern states enfranchised African Americans on an equal basis with whites. A number of antislavery Whigs captured seats in northern

“What a Disgrace to a City Calling Itself Free”: Harriet Jacobs on the Fugitive Slave Law

Harriet A. Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, published in 1861, was one of the few narratives of slavery written by a woman. Having escaped from her master in 1845, Jacobs—along with other fugitive slaves—found herself once more imperiled when Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law. Here, she describes the impact of the 1850 law on the African American community of New York City.

About the time that I reentered the Bruce family, an event occurred of disastrous import to the colored people. The slave Hamlin [James Hamlet], the first fugitive that came under the new law, was given up by the bloodhounds of the north to the bloodhounds of the south. It was the beginning of a reign of terror to the colored population. The great city rushed on in its whirl of excitement, taking no note of the “short and simple annals of the poor.” But while fashionables were listening to the thrilling voice of Jenny Lind in Metropolitan Hall, the thrilling voices of poor hunted colored people went up, in an agony of supplication, to the Lord, from Zion’s church. Many families, who had lived in the city for twenty years, fled from it now. Many a poor washerwoman, who, by hard labor, had made herself a comfortable home, was obliged to sacrifice her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to friends, and seek her fortune among strangers in Canada. Many a wife discovered a secret she had never known before—that her husband was a fugitive, and must leave her to insure his own safety. Worse still, many a husband discovered that his wife had fled from slavery years ago, and as “the child follows the condition of its mother,” the children of his love were liable to be seized and carried to slavery. Everywhere, in those humble homes, there was consternation and anguish. But what cared the legislators of the “dominant race” for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts?

... I was subject to it; and so were hundreds of intelligent and industrious people all around us. I seldom ventured into the streets; and when it was necessary to do an errand for Mrs. Bruce, or any of the family, I went as much as possible through back streets and by-ways. What a disgrace to a city calling itself free, that inhabitants, guiltless of offence, and seeking to perform their duties conscientiously, should be condemned to live in such incessant fear, and have nowhere to turn for protection! This state of things, of course, gave rise to many impromptu vigilance committees. Every colored person, and every friend of their persecuted race, kept their eyes wide open.

Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).



A Bold Stroke for Freedom

On Christmas Eve, 1855, patrolers finally caught up with a group of teenaged slaves who had escaped by wagon from Loudon County, Virginia. But the posse was driven off when Ann Wood, leader of the group, brandished weapons and dared the pursuers to fire. The fugitives continued on to Philadelphia. William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (1872) — American Social History Project.

congressional elections in fall 1850 as a result of this popular reaction to the Fugitive Slave Law.

Other dissenters took direct action. In Boston, Philadelphia, Syracuse, Chicago, and elsewhere, black and white opponents of slavery used force to protect fugitives from their hunters, sometimes attacking and even killing the pursuers. In October 1850, Boston abolitionists helped two slaves to escape to freedom and drove from town the Georgia slave catcher who was pursuing them. A year later, in Syracuse, New

York, a crowd of 2,000 broke into the courthouse to free a fugitive slave. That same fall, a group of free blacks and fugitive slaves in the Quaker community of Christiana, Pennsylvania, armed themselves with guns against a group of slave catchers, killed a Maryland slave owner, and severely wounded his son. In this case, despite the willingness of federal officials to intervene on the slave owners' behalf, public outrage forced the government to drop charges against those who had defied the Fugitive Slave Act by force of arms.

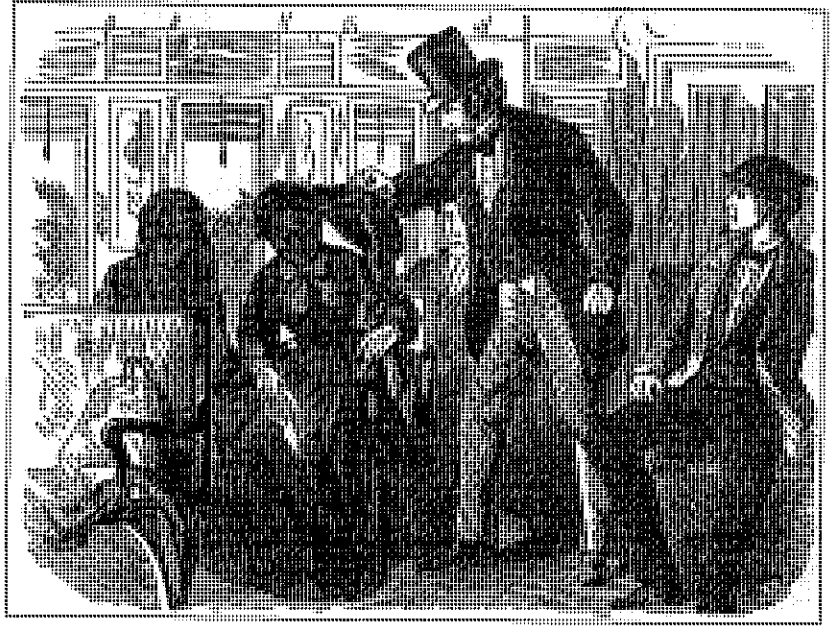
The 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a tragic tale of slavery and slave hunters, enhanced popular opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law. Harriet Beecher Stowe first published the story in serial form in the *National Era*, an abolitionist newspaper. When published in book form, it sold three hundred thousand copies in one year, electrified northern readers, and infused opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law with a powerful emotional appeal.

Against this background, the Free-Soil Party expanded its ranks. Contradicting some politicians' claims that the Compromise of 1850 would forestall the growth of parties focused on slavery, the legislation created stronger bonds between established antislavery forces and free-soil advocates. In addition, the Free-Soil Party gained support from some immigrant groups, including German émigrés who had been politicized by their experience in European revolutions in 1848–1849. These immigrants focused first on issues of class inequality. “The rich and distinguished here stand higher above the law than in any country,” exclaimed one German-born Pittsburgher. In America, he went on, “in the land that boasts of its humanity, that claims to be at the very top of civilization . . . the laboring classes are treated in as shameful a manner as in Europe, with all its ancient prejudices.” The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act reinforced the sense among

many immigrants that the fight for free soil and against slavery must be won if the move to America was truly going to improve their lives.

Contrary to the hopes of its sponsors, then, the Compromise of 1850 inflamed antislavery feeling in the North. As long as slavery seemed geographically contained and remote, free-state residents could try to ignore it, considering it someone else's worry and someone else's sin. But by refusing to outlaw slavery in the West and then welcoming slave hunters into the free states and requiring all citizens to aid them, the new law put an end to those illusions.

Like the Mexican War, the Fugitive Slave Law seemed to bear out the abolitionist claim that chattel slavery endangered freedom everywhere, not merely in the South.



Unveiled

After passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, escaped slave women living in the North sometimes wore veils when they appeared in public to avoid identification by slave catchers. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1872) — American Social History Project.

Broken Covenant: The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 Before the battles over the Fugitive Slave Law could ebb, struggles over slavery erupted in the Great Plains. The focal point of this battle was the Kansas-Nebraska bill, submitted to Congress in January 1854 by Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. Douglas had speculated heavily in western lands and hoped that by attracting settlers to the region he could persuade Congress to route a planned transcontinental railroad through the area. Because many southern senators preferred a more southern route, Douglas offered them an incentive to vote for his bill: he included a clause that allowed residents of the territory to decide by popular vote whether or not they would permit slavery. Because the Nebraska territory lay north of the 30° 30' line set by the Missouri Compromise, allowing residents there to vote on whether to become a slave state or a free state would effectively remove all federal barriers to the spread of slavery throughout the West.

In its final version, Douglas's bill not only explicitly annulled the terms of the Missouri Compromise, which in the more than three decades since its passage had become nearly sacrosanct as the final statement on the boundary between free and slave territory. It also divided the Great Plains into two territories—Kansas and Nebraska—to assuage the concerns of free-state Iowans and slave-state Missourians (Map 10.4). New antislavery and proslavery forces could each hope to win control over one of the new territories. Then, to replace the Missouri Compromise line, Douglas proposed a doctrine that he called “popular sovereignty.” This doctrine left the future of