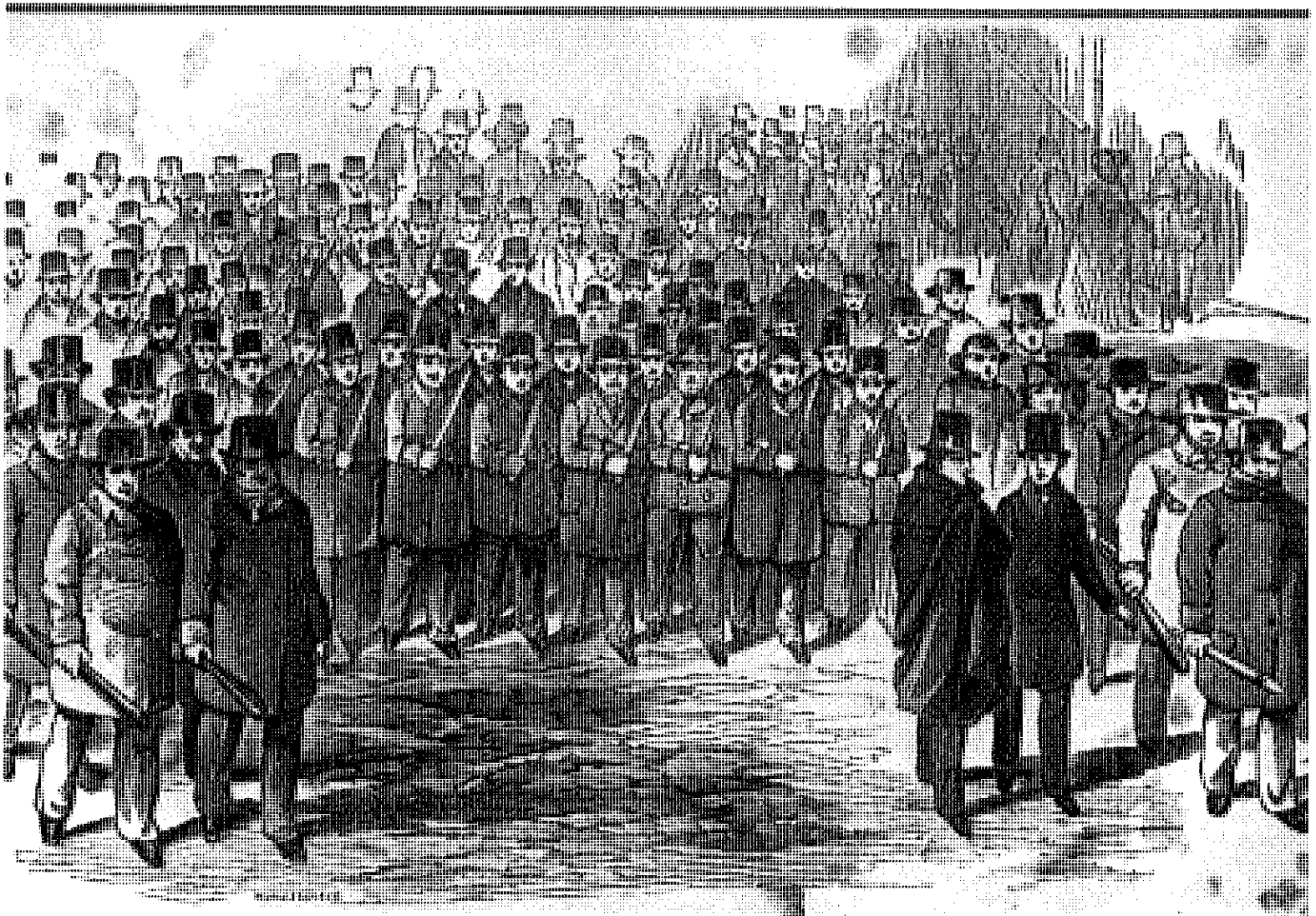


10

The Settlement of the West and the Conflict over Slave Labor

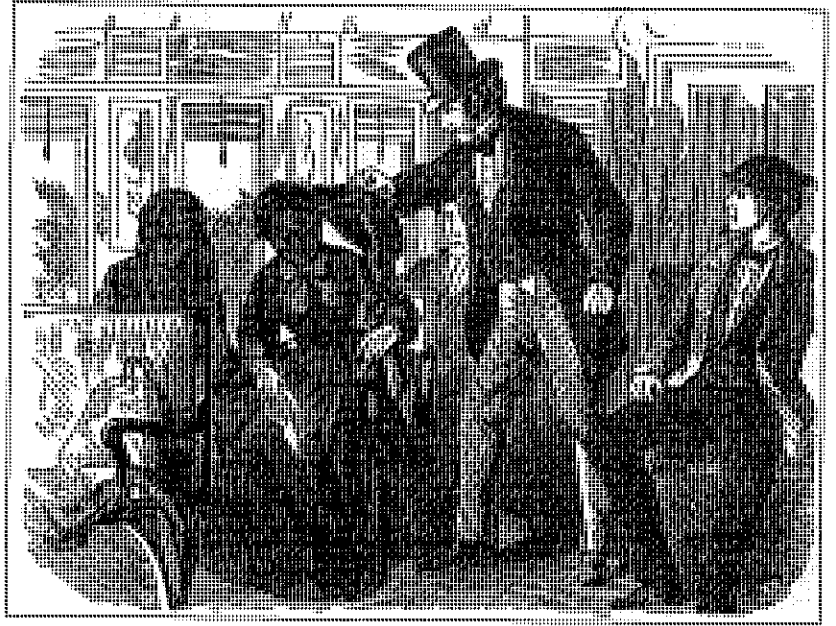
1848-1860



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.

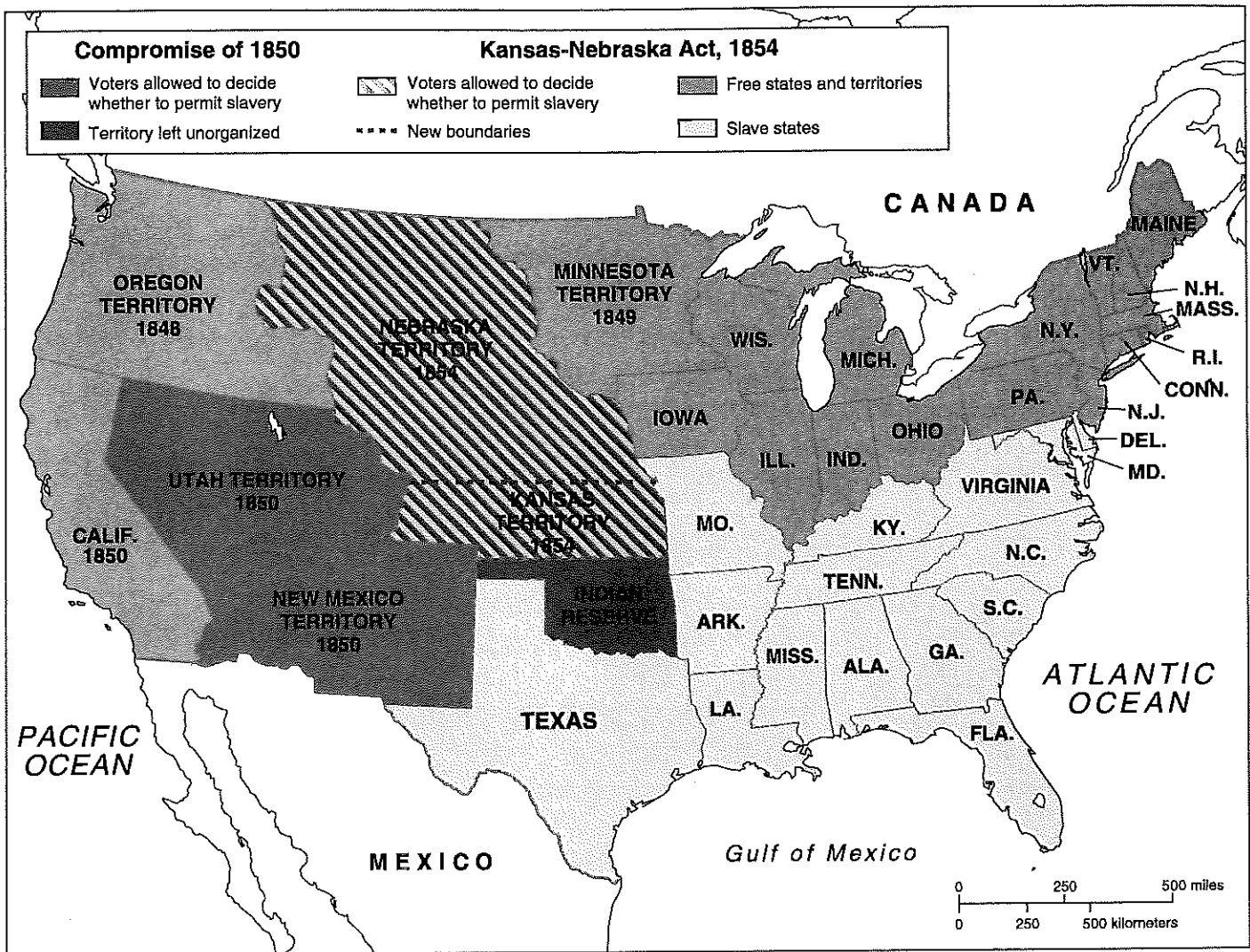


Unveiled

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



MAP 10.4 The Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, 1854

By the early 1850s, vast new lands in the West had come under U.S. control. The desire of both northerners and southerners to settle those lands renewed the conflict between the advocates of free- and slave-labor systems. In the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, politicians attempted to settle these disputes through legislative action. However, leaving the final decision on slavery in large parts of the West to popular sovereignty ensured that the battle over slave and free labor would only intensify in coming years.

slavery to be decided by registered voters in each territory that sought admission as a state.

Reaction was almost instantaneous. A group of antislavery congressmen issued an impassioned and widely circulated manifesto calling the new law “a criminal betrayal of precious rights.” In the West, they said, “it has been expected, freedom-loving emigrants from Europe, and energetic and intelligent laborers from our own land, will find homes of comfort and fields of useful enterprise.” But Douglas’s law would turn this great expanse “into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves.”

Widely reprinted and translated, this appeal aroused a firestorm of protest that dwarfed opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law. More than three hundred free-soil rallies in the North and West mobilized tens of thousands of people of all social backgrounds. Some were leading merchants and bankers in major northern cities, longtime advocates of compromise and friendly relations with slave owners. They now pleaded with the South to withdraw the bill to avoid inflaming the already dangerous antislavery sentiment in the North. Whig leader Amos Lawrence, a Boston merchant, begged southerners to “pause before they proceed further to disturb the peace which we hoped the Compromise of 1850 would have made perpetual.” Others who opposed Douglas’s bill were staunchly against slavery on principle. They denounced the bill not for causing bad sectional feelings, but because (as one group declared) it “authorizes the further extension of slavery.”

Despite these strong objections, the Senate passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act on March 3, 1854. The majority that favored the legislation included many southern senators, who viewed “popular sovereignty” as the best hope for expanding slavery into the West. To achieve victory, these southerners combined with northern Democrats who hoped that this bill would provide the basis for expanding their party’s support. On May 22, the House added its assent by a narrow margin.

Advocates in both houses of Congress had gained the support of President Franklin Pierce. Pierce, an obscure New Hampshire Democrat, was elected in 1852 when the Whig Party suffered deep divisions over the issue of slavery. Pierce attempted to avoid the issue of slavery as a candidate and as president. But his election just a year after the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect made such a stance impossible. Instead, Pierce chose to send federal troops into northern cities, such as Boston, when abolitionists stormed courthouses and attempted to free recaptured slaves. In 1854, Pierce came out in support of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, helping to win over enough northern Democratic congressmen to assure its passage. He signed it into law in May 1854.

In elections that fall, candidates of the so-called Know-Nothing Party (see Chapter 8), who claimed that they, too, wanted to protect the white race, gained ground in local and state contests. They temporarily controlled the governments of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Yet voters in these very same states elected Free-Soilers to office in significant numbers. Clearly, this latest attempt at resolving the slavery controversy had only inflamed the conflict.

Bleeding Kansas During the next two years, political passions burned fiercely in Kansas. Proslavery Missourians poured across the border, hoping to claim the Kansas territory for themselves. But even more settlers

“Come by the Thousands”: The Struggle for Kansas

*Concluding that Missouri “has done her duty” to populate the Kansas territory with slavery supporters, this “appeal” appeared in DeBow’s Review, a journal on agricultural and political subjects for southern plantation owners. It calls on other slavery supporters from throughout the South to do the same by contributing their bodies and their funds to support the struggle over the future of slavery—in-
deed over the future of the Union itself.*

To the People of the South: On the undersigned, managers of the “Lafayette Emigration Society,” has devolved the important duty of calling the attention of the people of the slaveholding States, to the absolute necessity of immediate action on their part, in relation to the settlement of Kansas Territory. The crisis is at hand. Prompt and decisive measures must be adopted, or farewell to southern rights and independence. . . .

The great struggle will come off at the next election, in October, 1856, and unless the south can at that time maintain her ground, all will be lost. We repeat it, the crisis has arrived. The time has come for action—bold, determined action; words will no longer do any good; we must have men in Kansas; and that too by tens of thousands. A few will not answer. If we should need ten thousand, and lack one of that number, all will count nothing. Let all then, who can come, do so at once. Those who cannot come, must give their money to help others to come. There are hundreds of thousands of broad acres of rich land, worth from \$5 to \$20 per acre, open to settlement and pre-emption, at \$1.25 per acre. Let, then, the farmer come and bring his slaves with him. There are now one thousand slaves in Kansas, whose presence there strengthens our cause. Shall we allow these rich lands and this beautiful country to be overrun by our abolition enemies? We know of a surety that they have emissaries and spies in almost every town, village and city in the south, watching our movements, and tampering with our slaves. Let us, then, be vigilant and active in the cause; we must maintain our ground. The loss of Kansas to the south will be the death knell of our dear Union.

Missouri has done nobly, thus far, in overcoming the thousands who have been sent out by Abolition Aid Societies; we cannot hold out much longer unless the whole South will come to the rescue. We need men; we need money; send us both, and that quickly. Do not delay; come as individuals, come in companies, come by the thousands.

“Kansas Matters—Appeals to the South,” *DeBow’s Review*, May 1856.

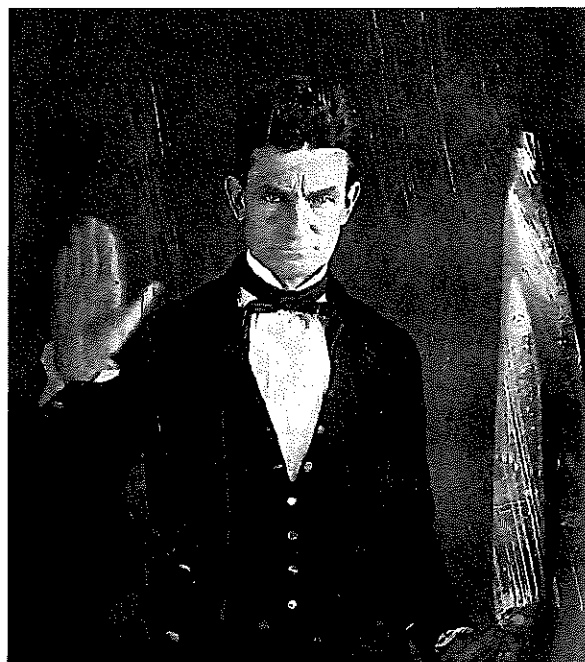
arrived from the free states. Thousands were aided by abolitionists back east who formed the Kansas Emigrant Aid Society to ensure the territory would remain a haven for free labor. Confronted by a free-soil majority, the proslavery forces quickly resorted to armed intimidation and violence. When antislavery forces responded, undeclared guerrilla war followed.

One especially passionate antagonist in this battle was John Brown. Born in 1800 into a white family of New England stock, Brown was deeply attached to the country's revolutionary traditions and stirred by the great religious awakenings of the age. Over the years, he tried his hand at various occupations to support himself and his growing family. He sometimes achieved modest prosperity, but Brown prized other things above commercial success. "To get a little property together," he once wrote his son, "is really a low mark to be firing at through life." Personal independence, democracy, equal rights, self-discipline, and self-respect—the traditional republican values of the North's small producers—meant more to him. The quickening commercialization of American life disturbed Brown, for he perceived it as a threat both to his world and to his moral code. And the Panic of 1837, which ruined him along with so many others, confirmed his worst fears.

As the years went by, Brown's views about society and its ills grew clearer. Of all society's wrongs, none repelled him as thoroughly as human bondage. Here was truly the "sum of all villainies," the starkest challenge to all the social and religious beliefs that shaped his outlook. From the 1830s on, Brown aided fugitive slaves from his home in northern New York State, and after 1850, he worked with free blacks to resist the Fugitive Slave Law.

In the mid-1850s, five of John Brown's sons joined the antislavery advocates who were moving to Kansas. Encountering armed groups of southerners who were determined to force slavery on the territory, they called on their father for aid, and he soon joined them. In the often brutal fighting that followed in "Bleeding Kansas," Brown earned a reputation for ferocity and an uncompromising hostility to slavery and racism generally. He proclaimed "the manhood of the Negro race" and expressed his antislavery convictions with a vehemence that was alien even to many Free-Soilers.

Confrontations in the West soon found their echo back east. Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, an eloquent spokesman for African American rights, denounced the efforts of Democrats in the White House and Congress to force slavery into a free Kansas. He was particularly vehement in a speech he gave in May 1856, in which he attacked his Senate colleague, Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina, for having taken "the harlot slavery" as his mistress. He called the efforts of proslavery forces to establish their own government in the territory the "Crime Against Kansas." In retaliation for Sumner's inflammatory remarks, a distant cousin of Butler, the young congressman Preston Brooks, attacked Sumner with his walking cane. Brooks beat Sumner unconscious, landing some thirty blows while the senator sat trapped by his heavy desk, unable to defend himself.

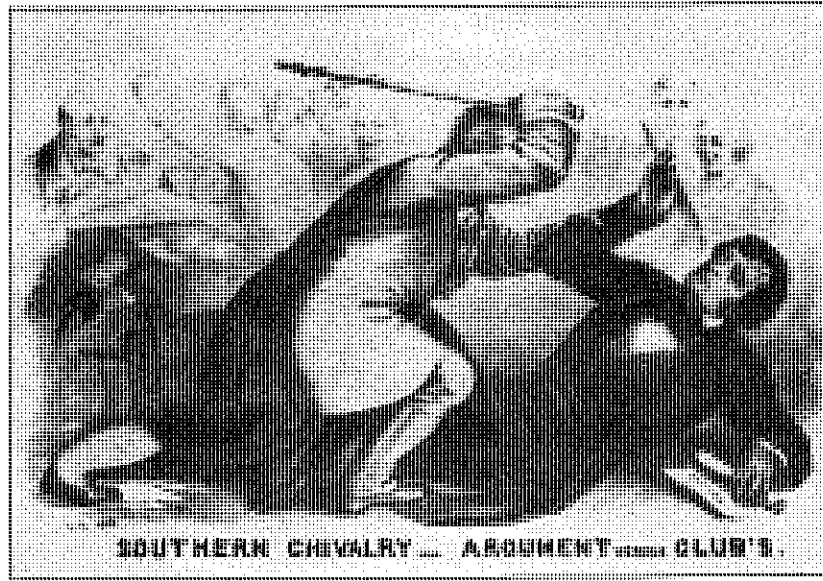


John Brown

This recently discovered daguerreotype portrait of the abolitionist — before he grew his famous beard — was taken in 1847 by African American photographer Augustus Washington. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Southern Chivalry

A contemporary print denounced South Carolina congressman Preston S. Brooks's assault on Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner on May 12, 1856. In Southern media, however, Brooks was celebrated as a hero for resisting Northern insults. John L. Magee, *Southern Chivalry — Argument Versus Club's*, lithograph, 1856 — American Social History Project.



In Kansas, such brutality had become commonplace. Hannah Anderson Ropes, a young mother of two, had moved to Lawrence, Kansas, in the fall of 1855 to join her husband. She wrote heart-wrenching letters to her mother back in Brookline, Massachusetts, including one on November 21, in which she described the dangers that surrounded her family:

How strange it will seem to you to hear that I have loaded pistols and a bowie knife upon my table at night, three of Sharp's rifles, loaded, standing in the room. . . . All the week every preparation has been made for our defense; and everybody is worn with want of sleep.

Her fear, and that of her neighbors, was that proslavery Missourians would cross the border and launch an all-out attack on the abolitionist stronghold of Lawrence.

In the summer of 1856, proslavery forces did attack Lawrence, destroying two newspaper offices, burning buildings, looting stores, and beating residents. Hearing the news, John Brown, accompanied by four sons and two antislavery supporters, sought revenge against a small settlement of proslavery families along Pottawatomie Creek. Using broadswords, Brown and his followers roused five families out of their beds in the middle of the night, murdered and mutilated five of the men, and left their wives and children to spread the tale of terror. The attack on Lawrence and the so-called Pottawatomie Massacre provoked a guerrilla war that raged in Kansas for months and cost some 200 lives.

Despite the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its support by proslavery Democrats, residents of Kansas finally established a free state government in mid-1858. That victory, however, ended neither the broader dispute over slavery nor John Brown's role in it. The battle in Kansas, in fact,



Rescued

In 1859, the Kansas abolitionist Dr. John Doy, called a slave-stealer by his enemies for his forays into Missouri to free slaves, was kidnapped by proslavery partisans and imprisoned in Missouri. This photograph showed Doy surrounded by the friends who subsequently rescued him. Kansas State Historical Society.

only stoked the flames of national conflict and convinced Brown that a final reckoning was near. If it was only violence that had kept Kansas free, he asked, how could peaceful methods alone secure the same ends throughout the country? When his brother Jeremiah urged moderation, John replied “that he knew that he was in the line of his duty, and he must pursue it, though it should destroy him and his family. He . . . was satisfied that he was the chosen instrument in the hands of God to war against slavery.”

Birth of the Republican Party Many Americans now agreed with Brown that a peaceful end to slavery no longer seemed likely. For decades, the concerted efforts of politicians North and South had staved off a direct confrontation between the slave-labor and wage-labor systems. But in “Bleeding Kansas,” the systems met head to head. As Congressman Abraham Lincoln wrote to a Kentucky friend a year before the bloody conflicts in Kansas:

You spoke [in 1819] of “the peaceful extinction of slavery” and used other expressions to indicate your belief that the thing was, at some time, to have an end. Since then we have had thirty-six years of experience, and this experience has demonstrated, I think, that there is no peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us.

The Missouri Compromise line, which had promised so much in 1819, was now gone. With its demise, controversies over slavery multiplied, and the country’s two major political parties finally broke apart. The Whigs’ disintegration began with the Compromise of 1850. By opposing the Compromise, President Zachary Taylor alienated ardently proslavery voters,

***If I Don't Kill Something Else
Soon, I'll Spile!***

An 1856 drawing commented on Know-Nothing violence in Baltimore. The scene was popularized by members of nativist gangs with names such as "Blood-Tubs," "Cut-Throats," and "Plug-Uglies." Maryland Historical Society.



dooming the Whig Party's future prospects in the South. The remaining Whigs were deeply divided; some attempted to overshadow the antislavery movement altogether by combining forces with the nativist American (or Know-Nothing) Party. Anti-immigrant riots in Baltimore and other east coast cities suggested that this strategy might be successful, but after making quick gains, the movement soon collapsed. The slavery question had simply become unavoidable. In mid-1855, the Know-Nothing Party itself split into proslavery and antislavery factions.

Democrats, meanwhile, suffered a series of splits and defections, beginning with the founding of the Free-Soil Party in 1848. By 1854 and 1855, massive numbers of midwestern free-soil Democrats had left the party, alienated by Democratic support for popular sovereignty in Kansas and Nebraska. The formation of a national Republican Party in 1856 cut deeply into northern Democratic support and highlighted the increasingly sectional character of partisan political alignments.

The Republican Party coalesced out of the large but amorphous opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska bill of 1854. In their first party platform, drafted in 1856, Republicans denounced slavery as immoral and insisted on halting its further westward expansion. The new party attracted support

from many formerly competing interests, including antislavery Whigs, Democrats, former Free-Soilers, and Know-Nothings. One of its earliest organizers, Alvan Bovay, was a veteran land reformer and former Whig. Labor leader and land reformer John Commerford became a Republican spokesman in New York. But party leaders also included some prosperous northern businessmen, many of them rising manufacturers, often from relatively humble backgrounds, who had been competing against the established mercantile elite for years. Meanwhile, many of the North's largest merchants and manufacturers with important southern ties threw their political support to the Know-Nothings or to northern Democrats. Leading Republicans were more commonly middle-class men (especially lawyers, professional politicians, editors, and journalists) who accepted the values of the North's free-labor industrial system and were ready to fight for it—more so than were many of the elite.

Yet the great majority of those who rallied to the Republican Party's banner during the 1850s were small farmers, small shopkeepers, and skilled urban working people, most of them native-born. Significant numbers of ordinary laborers also voted Republican. And the Republicans gained the support of many reform-minded northerners, including many who were denied the right to vote. Large numbers of free blacks, for instance, who were disfranchised in northern states by literacy, residency, or monetary requirements, supported the Republicans, as they had the Free-Soilers. And many women, white and black, who had earlier formed societies to aid abolition and free-soil efforts, now threw their resources behind the Republican Party.

The election of James Buchanan, the Democratic presidential candidate in 1856, did little to allay fears of sectional conflict. Buchanan had sought the presidential nomination before. He succeeded this time because his party could not afford to renominate the sitting president, Franklin Pierce, who was too closely linked to the bloody events in Kansas. In addition, the Democrats hoped to gain favor among northern voters by nominating a candidate from their region. Buchanan was perfect: a dignified elder statesman from Pennsylvania who had been minister to Great Britain in the years that the Kansas-Nebraska conflict flared. He may have been uninspiring and unimaginative, but Buchanan was also uncontroversial and uncommitted on popular sovereignty and the extension of slavery.

The Republicans chose John C. Frémont, who had gained his reputation as a celebrated army explorer and leader in the conquest of California. He embodied the free-soil vision of America's manifest destiny. Compared with the mere 10 percent of the vote that the Free-Soil candidate, Martin Van Buren, had won just eight years earlier, Frémont's 33 percent of the total votes reflected a major transformation in public thinking. Debates over western territories had inspired this change. Frémont carried eleven of the

sixteen free states and 45 percent of all ballots cast in the North. The Republican campaign slogan — “Free soil, free labor, free men” — summarized the goals and ideals that drove millions into its ranks, almost overnight.

Though the Democrats won the 1856 election, the Republican Party’s dramatic gains accelerated the drive toward national conflict. Observing the deepening isolation of their political allies in the North, southern planters began to see the majority in the free states as entirely hostile to slavery. To them, it was only a matter of time before Republicans gained control of the national government and used its power to undermine slavery everywhere—first in the West, then in the old South. These specific fears grew out of other, more general worries about southern society and its internal frictions and conflicts. Most immediately, what impact would a Republican national government have on the slave population?

Throughout the South, blacks were paying close attention to national politics, pondering the significance of this new division of the white population, and hoping for liberation through a Republican victory. The 1856 election brought with it stories of plans for slave insurrections in at least six southern states. Though no such uprising occurred in the 1850s, slaves’ everyday resistance and attempts to escape to freedom kept planters anxious. The rise of the Republicans only made matters worse. “The recent Presidential canvass has had a deleterious effect on the slave population,” reported a Nashville, Tennessee, editor in alarm. “The negroes manifested an unusual interest in the result and attended the political meetings of the whites in large numbers. This is dangerous.” A Memphis colleague agreed: “If this eternal agitation of the slavery question does not cease we may expect servile insurrections in dead earnest.”

In the meantime, some Republican leaders as well as some writers who supported the new party began courting the nonslaveholding whites of the

South. The election of Francis P. Blair, Jr., of St. Louis to Congress in 1856 suggested that Republicans could gain popular support in slave states—at least those on the border. The *National Era*, an antislavery newspaper since the 1840s, responded to Blair’s election by declaring, “We no longer stand upon the defensive. We have crossed the line, and are upon slaveholding ground.” North Carolinian Hinton Helper’s book *The Impending Crisis of the South*, published in 1857, aided Republicans among southern-born residents of the Midwest. Helper argued that slavery was a political and economic curse on the South, driving

“Negro Dogs”

Whether attempting to escape or simply traveling at night to visit friends or family in neighboring plantations, African American slaves were threatened by the slave patrols. These squads, often including nonslaveholders who were required to serve under state law, were notorious for their brutality. Most feared were the dogs that the “pattyrollers” used to track down fugitive slaves. This 1856 advertisement promoted the sale of dogs trained expressly to hunt human beings. Abraham Chapman, comp., *Steal Away: Stories of the Runaway Slaves* (1971).

How do you like this - You d—d

LOOK OUT.

Negro Stealers



The undersigned would announce to the public generally, that he has a splendid lot of well broke

NEGRO DOGS,

And will attend at any reasonable distance, to the catching of runaways, at the lowest possible rates. All those having slaves in the woods will do well to address

W. D. GILBERT,
Franklin, Simpson co. Ky.

Jan. 29, 1856.
[N. B. Please post this up in a conspicuous place.]

nonslaveholding whites into poverty, forcing their wives and daughters to labor in the fields, and encouraging many to abandon the South altogether. Although others had made these claims before, here was a “son of the South,” as Horace Greeley noted, “who speaks with an authority and a weight which no outsider can have.” So impressed were Republicans with Helper’s appeal to nonslaveholders in the South that they printed an abridged version of the book in 1859 and circulated it widely in the North.

The immediate impact of Hinton Helper’s book in the South was minor. No abolitionist, Helper abhorred the necessity for poor whites to mingle with southern blacks under the plantation system. Nonetheless, planters feared the long-term effects of his work and severely punished those who were caught circulating it. For them, it was another sign of the dangers that the Republican Party posed to slave owners. So it was with growing seriousness that southern politicians threatened to pull their states out of the federal union and beyond the reach of the Republicans to preserve their social power and human property.

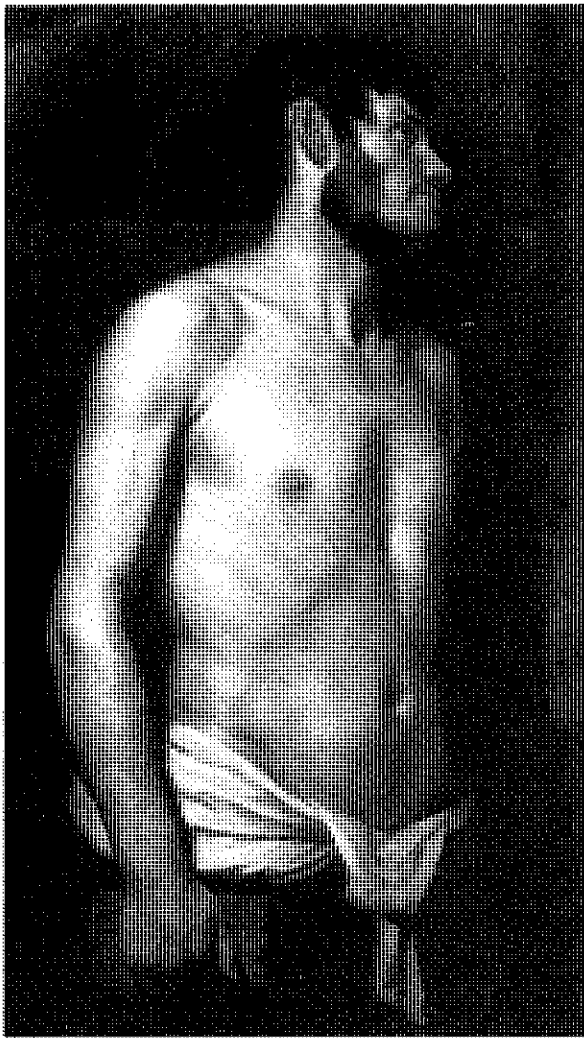
The Labor Question in a Time of Rising Tension

Although slavery had emerged as a critical political issue, the enslavement of blacks remained first and foremost a system of labor. Indeed, it was the threatened loss of enslaved workers’ labor power and the profits thus generated that led slave owners to fight so vehemently for their “peculiar institution.” In this battle, northerners repeatedly touted the superiority of free labor, portraying northern workers as independent and responsible citizens who contributed mightily to both economic prosperity and western expansion. Yet northern workers, especially those who were employed in the burgeoning cities and factory towns along the Atlantic coast and in railroad, maritime, and mining trades throughout the free states, often expressed biting criticisms of the capitalist system. Indeed, those workers who identified themselves as “wage slaves” suggested that their employers were the equivalent of slave drivers. Thus, even as the growing sectional crisis overshadowed the grievances of free workers in national political debates, affluent and working-class northerners clashed with each other in numerous cities and towns. At the same time, conflicts among workers continued to undermine class solidarity as immigrants and the native-born, free blacks and whites, and women and men vied with each other in defining a working-class agenda.

Both Democratic and Republican politicians sought the support of their poor and working-class neighbors. Especially in the North and West, where white workingmen had gained the right to vote in large numbers, elections might turn on who appealed most effectively to their needs. Republicans’ use of the slogan “Free soil, free labor, free men” attracted many northern work-

A Dead Rabbit

Also entitled *Study of an Irishman*, George Henry Hall's 1858 painting was rendered shortly after the July 1857 Dead Rabbit–Bowery Boy Riot, a conflict in New York's Five Points between rival Irish working-class street gangs. The painting subtly conveyed a sense of the fear and fascination that poor Irish immigrants provoked in many native-born, middle-class Americans — including, unusually straightforward for the era, a note of homoeroticism. George Henry Hall, 1858, oil on canvas, 32 x 40 1/2 inches — National Academy of Design.



ers to the party. During the 1850s, as elections to national office became crucial in determining the outcome of sectional debates over slavery, some groups of workers renewed their efforts to build powerful labor organizations. Although most were focused on improving wages and working conditions rather than political clout, organized labor had a greater chance of influencing political campaigns than did individual workers.

Workers could not, however, influence the courts. Judges who were sympathetic to slavery had their own responses to questions of citizenship, rights, and race. This was demonstrated most powerfully by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1857 ruling on a case brought by a slave named Dred Scott.

Defending the Rights of Labor Throughout the 1840s, efforts to establish unions and other working-class organizations were limited. The prolonged effects of the Panic of 1837, the influx of massive numbers of Irish and German immigrants, the promise of economic opportunity in the West, and highly charged debates over the rights of African Americans and women repeatedly disrupted class-based alliances. Even immigrant workers were divided by language, religious affiliation, and political beliefs. Moreover, some immigrants sought relief from oppressive conditions not through class solidarity, but in neighborhood gangs that pitted one group of young men against another.

By midcentury, however, workers renewed their organizing efforts. As employers repeatedly pitted one group against another, workers gradually learned a hard lesson. Although most white workers still refused to include blacks in their associations and most male organizations continued to exclude women, coalitions among white working-class men developed regionally and nationally. By 1860, some men even supported strikes by women, especially in the shoe and textile industries, in which women formed a large portion of the labor force.

The 1850s thus saw significant advances for the labor movement, including the beginnings of nationwide organization. Such efforts even gained support among free laborers in southern cities such as Baltimore, Richmond, St. Louis, and New Orleans, raising new fears among planters about the rise of Republicanism on their own soil. After 1850, national unions sprang up among hat finishers, cigarmakers, typesetters, plumbers, painters, stonecutters, shoemakers, and iron molders. Some of these unions disappeared almost as fast as they arose, and in most cases, the “national” organizations existed only in the free states.

Moreover, the national organizations rarely showed leadership on controversial issues, such as the admission of African American, Mexican, Asian, or women workers to member unions. Nonetheless, in laying the groundwork for later, more successful efforts at labor organizing, these early national unions suggested the power of free workers to develop their own agenda and the need for both northern Republicans and southern slave owners to respond to workers' concerns.

The case of the national union of iron molders—founded largely at the instigation of William H. Sylvis—illustrates the development of national labor organizations. Born in 1828, Sylvis sought training and work as an iron molder in the 1840s, as the iron industry was mushrooming to meet demands for industrial tools and machinery. At first, the few skilled ironworkers earned good wages, but as the number of molders increased, foundry owners reduced wages and imposed harsh working conditions. Simultaneously, a small number of large companies that were able to afford newer and more expensive equipment centralized control over iron production. When Sylvis tried to open his own foundry, the costs drove him out of business, and he was soon trudging Pennsylvania's roads in search of wage work.

Settling in Philadelphia in 1853, he attempted to support his new wife and a growing family on a journeyman molder's meager wages. During the 1830s and 1840s, journeymen molders had formed several local unions around the country, most of which organized to negotiate a single agreement or to call a single strike. The Philadelphia molders were among the first workers to move toward a larger and more permanent organization. Their 1855 constitution declared, "In the present organization of society, laborers single-handed are powerless . . . but combined there is no power of wrong they may not openly defy." Two years later, when some of Sylvis's coworkers struck over a 12 percent wage cut, Sylvis joined the strike as well as the picket committee.

The Philadelphia molders' action failed when an economic depression developed in 1857, but the defeat did not destroy the union. Sylvis, the union secretary, threw himself into the job of strengthening the organization and its ties to other molders' associations. The rise of a national market convinced Sylvis that molders had to organize nationally as well, and he played a central role in founding the National Molders' Union in 1859.

The Great Meeting of Foreigners in the Park

An illustration from an 1855 nativist tract depicted a labor demonstration in New York's City Hall Park demanding relief for the unemployed during the 1854–1855 depression. This wood engraving was one of the few images of organized working-class action published before the Civil War. (Cunnington) J. Wayne Laurens, *The Crisis, or the Enemies of America Unmasked* (Philadelphia, 1855) — American Social History Project.



"An Empty Pocket's the Worst of Crimes!": Supporting the Lynn Shoeworkers

The Hutchinson family was one of the country's most popular singing groups in the nineteenth century. Their successful stage performances combined entertainment with a social reform message; Hutchinson songs often took up the causes of abolitionism and woman suffrage. As natives of Lynn, Massachusetts, the Hutchinsons were particularly aware of the plight of the city's shoeworkers. "The Popular Creed," first sung at shoeworkers' meetings, later became a standard song of the labor movement.

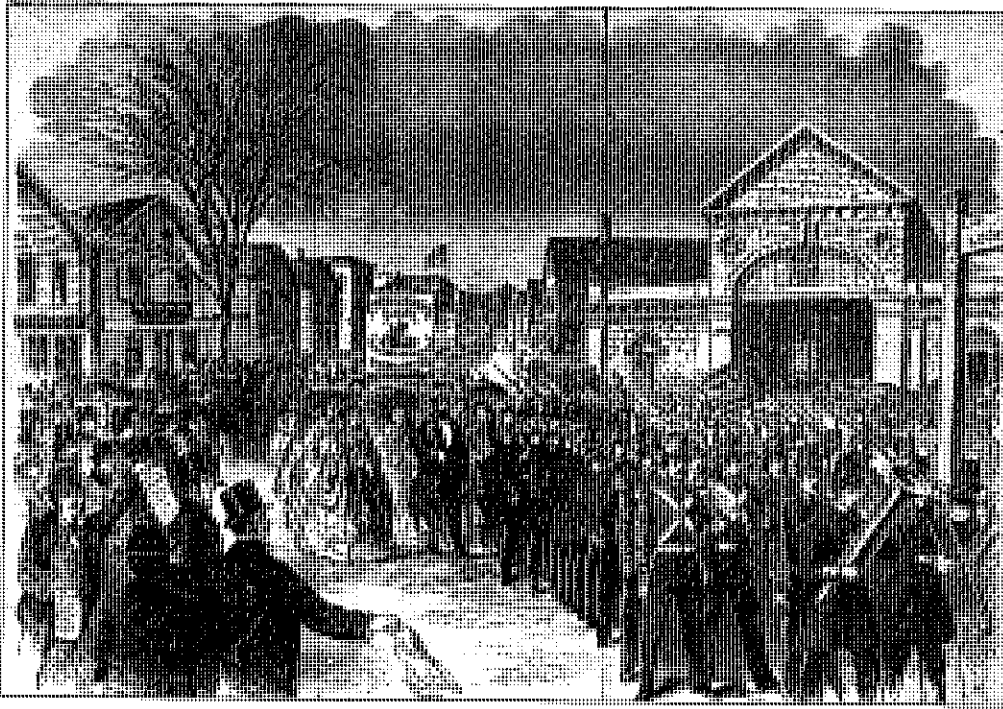
Dimes and dollars! Dollars and dimes!
An empty pocket's the worst of crimes!
If a man's down, give him a thrust!
Trample the beggar into the dust!
Presumptuous poverty, quite appalling!
Knock him over! Kick him for falling!
If a man's up, oh, lift him higher!
Your soul's for sale, and he's the buyer!
Dimes and dollars! Dollars and dimes!
An empty pocket's the worst of crimes!

I know a poor but worthy youth,
Whose hopes are built on a maiden's truth;
But the maiden will break her vow with ease,
For a wooer whose charms are these:
A hollow heart and an empty head,
A face well tinged with the brandy's red,
A soul well trained in villainy's school,
And cash, sweet cash! — he knoweth the rule.
Dimes and dollars! Dollars and dimes!
An empty pocket's the worst of crimes!

I know a bold and honest man,
Who strives to live on the Christian plan.
He struggles against fearful odds—
Who will not bow to the people's gods?
Dimes and dollars! Dollars and dimes!
An empty pocket's the worst of crimes!

So get ye wealth, no matter how!
No question's asked of the rich, I trow!
Steal by night, and steal by day
(Doing it all in a legal way!)
Dimes and dollars! Dollars and dimes!
An empty pocket's the worst of crimes!

The Awl, 1844.



“American Ladies Will Not Be Slaves”

Preceded by the local militia, women shoemakers demonstrated in the streets of Lynn, Massachusetts, on March 7, 1860. In contrast to their failure to cover previous labor actions, illustrated newspapers published a number of images of the 1860 strike. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, March 17, 1860 — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

At the same time, shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts, also stepped up their protest activity. Declining wages, repeated layoffs, and disruptions caused by the introduction of the sewing machine finally exploded in 1860 in the largest strike the nation had ever seen. Over 20,000 men and women—more than one-third of all shoe workers in Massachusetts—laid down their tools.

The Lynn strikers said that they were defending individual dignity and freedom. To emphasize that point, they linked their struggle to symbols of national independence, launching the strike on George Washington's birthday, and they defended their rights with the rallying cry “Sink not to the state of a slave.” On March 7, 800 women, including strikers and their supporters, marched through the wintry streets of Lynn behind a banner that proclaimed, “American ladies will not be slaves: Give us a fair compensation and we labor cheerfully.” The Lynn strikers turned out in huge street demonstrations, fought the use of scab labor, and battled the town marshal when he and his deputies intervened on the side of the bosses. Bolstered by additional police, the employers won the day. Nevertheless, the determined Lynn strikers became a symbol for other laborers who sought better treatment. And their repeated invocation of the slavery theme carried great significance in the context of heightened sectional tensions.

White Southerners Respond to Free Labor's Claims: The *Dred Scott* Decision Southern planters challenged northern workers' claims that their condition was similar to that of slaves. Many agreed with Virginia planter George Fitzhugh that so-called free labor was more exploitative than

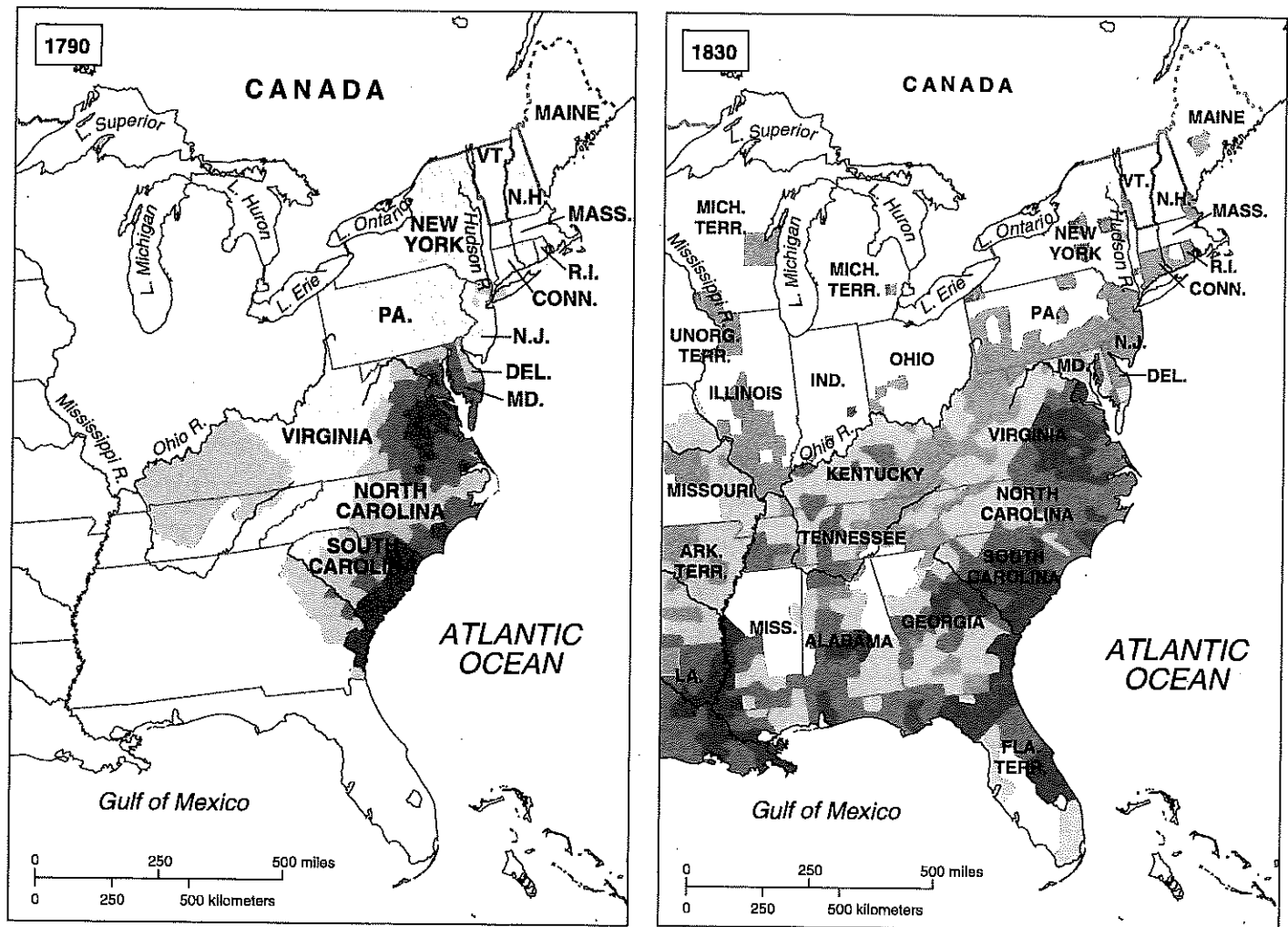
slavery (see Chapter 9). Arguing that “the subjection of man to man” occurs in every country and every region of the country, proslavery advocates contrasted the “hunger and cold” and the daily suffering of impoverished “free” laborers with what they considered the humanitarian Christian arrangements of slavery. Using such reasoning in conjunction with older biblical justifications for bondage, more and more southern planters argued that the South must stand firm behind its “peculiar institution.”

Indeed, some did more than stand firm. William Walker, a Tennessee-born slaveholder, and 58 mercenaries “invaded” Nicaragua in May 1855. Within six months, Walker succeeded in exploiting civil unrest in the country to declare himself president. His government, which opened Nicaragua to slavery, was recognized by the United States in 1856. But he was overthrown a year later by forces that were financed by his former sponsor, the railroad entrepreneur Cornelius Vanderbilt.

In that same year, 1857, the Supreme Court bolstered planters’ commitment to slave labor within the United States when it rejected the claim of a Missouri slave named Dred Scott that he had become free when his master took him out of the South and into a free state (Illinois) and a free territory (Wisconsin). The Court, filled with southerners and Democrats and led by aging Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, a former slaveholder, pronounced unconstitutional all laws restricting the free movement of property, including human property. Indeed, Taney asserted further, Scott had no right to bring suit at all because since the founding of the American republic, no black person in the United States had enjoyed any “rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Although Taney had already freed his own slaves, he was committed to defending his beloved South against Republican threats to its time-honored institutions.

Northerners were horrified. They argued that the *Dred Scott* decision, followed to its logical conclusion, could lead to legalizing slave ownership not only in the territories but in the free states as well (Map 10.5). The *New York Tribune* declared the decision was the work of “five slaveholders and two doughfaces,” the latter referring to the two northern justices, both Democrats, who supported the majority decision. The “dictum,” it claimed, was “entitled to just as much moral weight as would be the judgment of a majority of those congregated in any Washington bar-room.” The remedy, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, was “the ballot box” and the election of a Republican president in 1860.

For proslavery firebrands, the *Dred Scott* decision was just the kind of guarantee for slave labor that they sought. Some went so far as to demand the resumption of the Atlantic slave trade. Others called for an automatic veto over all federal legislation affecting southern interests. Southern politicians also tried to limit the rights of the foreign-born in their midst, and southern congressmen blocked homestead legislation that would have made

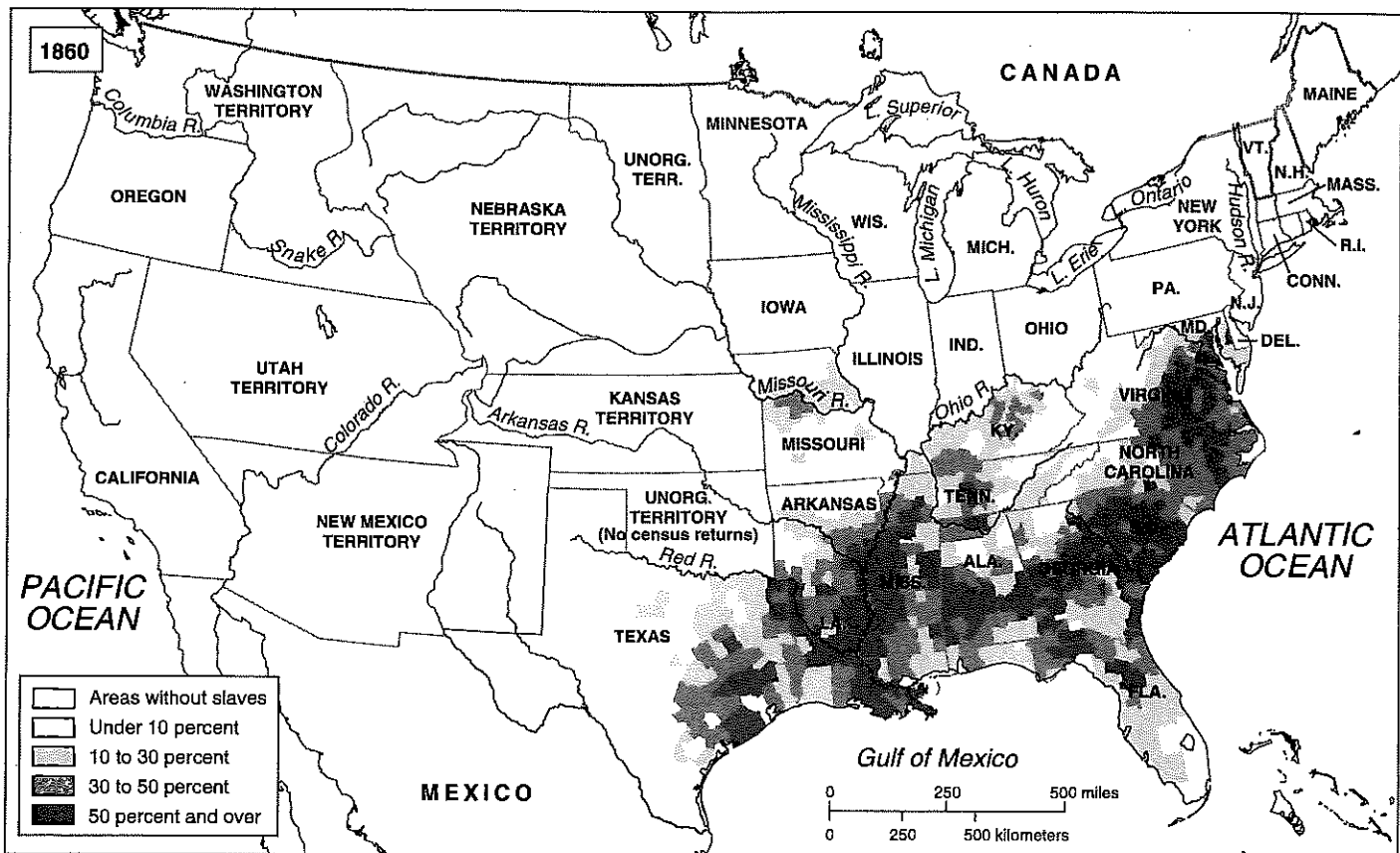


MAP 10.5 The Distribution of Slave Population, 1790–1860

The spread of slavery into the sugar and cotton lands of the lower Mississippi Valley and along the fertile “black belt” that stretched from Georgia through Mississippi increased the profitability of the “peculiar institution” in the first half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the percentage of the southern population who could afford to own slaves declined, creating the large plantations and wealthy slave owners that have come to dominate our images of southern life in the decades before the Civil War. Life on the western frontier of slavery was anything but bucolic, however, with harsh work discipline, an active slave trade, and the constant threat of disease, debt, and rebellion.

western land more available to small farmers. A law turning western land over to independent farmers rather than reserving it for planters, exclaimed the *Charleston Mercury*, would be “the most dangerous abolition bill which has ever been directly passed by Congress.”

In the context of heightened proslavery rhetoric and the *Dred Scott* decision, northern laborers faced new dangers. A Supreme Court that refused *Dred Scott*’s petition for freedom and denied Congress any power to restrict the expansion of slavery was not likely to support the rights of workers. At the same time, they had new opportunities, as the expansion of suf-



frage to white working-class men in most free states ensured that they would have a critical role to play in political contests for federal power.

Toward a Sectional Showdown

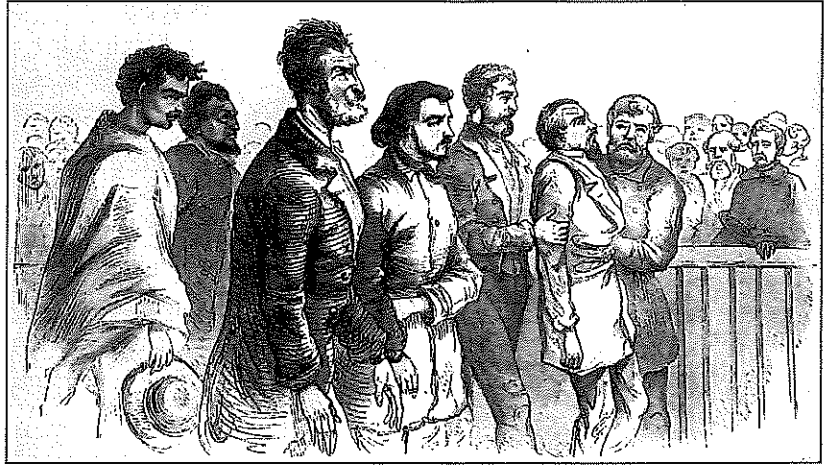
While working-class men and women in the North and West built organizations to defend their rights in the 1850s, most southern slaves had to rely on family and community networks to lessen the brutalities of bondage. Individual acts of resistance continued, but these could only disrupt, not end, the system of slavery. Slaves needed allies, though it is likely that few imagined finding them among white men. Then, in 1859, as the nation lurched toward a final showdown, John Brown reappeared on the national stage and made clear that at least some white men would risk their lives to end the brutal institution. A year later, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. Although Lincoln was no abolitionist firebrand like Brown, southern planters considered him sufficiently radical that his election heightened fears over the future of slavery.

The Raid on Harpers Ferry On October 16, 1859, John Brown, three of his sons, and nineteen associates—black and white—launched a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Trained in Kansas, the men

planned to seize the arms that were stored at the arsenal, liberate slaves from Virginia plantations, and then retreat into the Allegheny Mountains. There, they hoped to fortify a base from which to encourage, assist, and defend additional insurrections and escapes. The constitution that Brown drafted for this projected haven envisioned a utopian society in which “All captured or confiscated property, and all property [that is] the product of the labor of those belonging to this organization and their families, shall be held as the property of the whole, equally, without distinction.”

Brown had gained substantial financial support from a group of six respected abolitionists, all white, but he could not convince Frederick Douglass or other prominent black abolitionists to join his ranks. Though impressed by Brown’s commitment, Douglass was convinced that the project was suicidal. He was right. The plan pitted a handful of poorly armed men against virtually the entire white population of Virginia — and the South — plus the armed forces of the U.S. government. Although Brown and his men did capture the arsenal in the middle of the night, they never managed to free any slaves, and they failed to escape. A detachment of U.S. Marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart quickly surrounded the insurgents, subjected them to withering fire, and finally captured most of the survivors. By the afternoon, eight of Brown’s men, among them two of his sons, were dead. Three townsmen had also died, and two more raiders were killed in the final battle. Brown was captured; promptly indicted; and tried for treason, murder, and fomenting insurrection. On November 2, he was convicted, and one month later, he was hanged. In one of his last letters, he wrote, “Men cannot imprison, or chain, or hang the soul. I go joyfully in behalf of millions that ‘have no rights’ that this great and glorious, this Christian republic, ‘is bound to respect.’”

Though unsuccessful, the Harpers Ferry raid reverberated through the country. Southern leaders pointed to it as the final proof of the North’s violent intentions. Republican moderates such as Abraham Lincoln hastily condemned Brown’s deed. Others rejected Brown’s tactics but saluted his values and goals. White abolitionists, southern slaves, and free blacks nationwide grieved at Brown’s execution and proclaimed him a martyr in the American revolutionary pantheon. Church bells throughout the North pealed in mourning. In December 1859, Baltimore police, concerned about the activities of local African Americans, broke into an annual ball held by



The Arraignment

Harper's Weekly artist David Hunter Strother sketched John Brown and his coconspirators as they were charged with treason and murder in a Charlestown, Virginia, courtroom. Reporters' access to Brown and the trial was severely restricted because of fears about rescue attempts and local suspicion toward any sympathetic outsiders; indeed, another pictorial reporter was forced to flee Virginia after word spread that he had sold a drawing of John Brown to the antislavery *New York Tribune*. Meanwhile, the Virginia-born Strother was able to cover the trial with little competition, assisted by the presiding judge and the prosecutor who were his close friend and uncle, respectively. David Hunter Strother (Porte Crayon), *Harper's Weekly*, November 12, 1859 — American Social History Project.

“You Have Been Brave Enough to Reach Out Your Hands”: A Letter to John Brown

In the days before his execution, a black woman in Kendalville, Indiana, wrote to John Brown offering her thanks and speculating on the steps America would have to take to erase the “national sin” of slavery. While in prison, Brown received many letters of support from free blacks throughout the North.

Kendalville, Indiana, Nov. 25

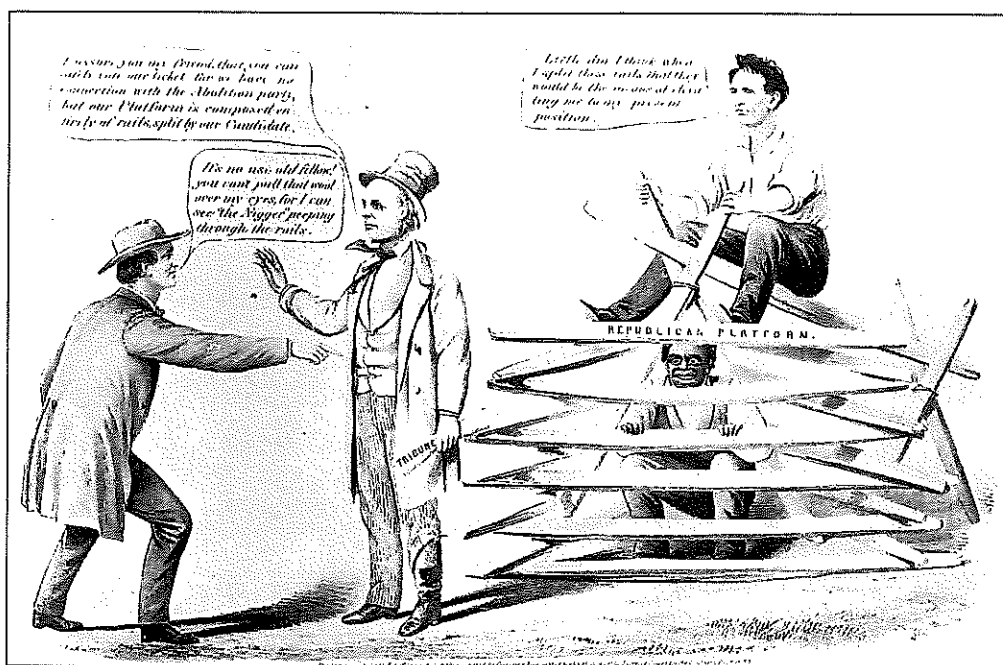
Dear Friend:

Although the hands of Slavery throw a barrier between you and me, and it may not be my privilege to see you in your prison-house, Virginia has no bolts or bars [that can stop me from sending you] my sympathy. In the name of the young girl sold from the warm clasp of a mother’s arms to the clutches of a libertine or a profligate, in the name of the slave mother, her heart rocked to and fro by the agony of her mournful separations, I thank you, that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race. You have rocked the bloody Bastille; and I hope that from your sad fate great good may arise to the cause of freedom. . . . I would prefer to see Slavery go down peaceably by men breaking off their sins by righteousness and their inequities by showing justice and mercy to the poor; but we cannot tell what the future may bring forth. God writes national judgments upon national sins; and what may be slumbering in the storehouse of divine justice we do not know. We may earnestly hope that your fate will not be a vain lesson, that it will intensify our hatred of Slavery and love of freedom, and that your martyr grave will be a sacred altar upon which men will record their vows of undying hatred to that system which tramples on man and bids defiance to God.

Carter G. Woodson, ed., *The Mind of The Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800–1860* (1926).

free blacks in the city. What they saw no doubt heightened their fears: the hall was draped in banners bearing John Brown’s likeness, and a bust of Brown was inscribed “The martyr—God bless him.” The struggles that had so long been waged over western territory had finally come home to the South.

A House Divided In 1860, matters came to a head. The Democratic Party—the last major national bastion of the compromise forces—could not agree on a single platform or candidate. The slavery issue had simply become too explosive. Democrats divided their party and their electoral strength in half as northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas while their southern counterparts, desperate to gain federal protection for slavery, chose Buchanan’s vice president, John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky. A weak



Undercover

An 1860 anti-Lincoln cartoon portrayed the presidential candidate trying to conceal the antislavery essence of the Republican platform. Currier and Ives, 1860, lithograph, 12 x 11 7/8 inches — Museum of the City of New York.

echo of the old Whig and Know-Nothing forces dubbed itself the Constitutional Union Party and made a futile attempt to delay action on the slavery issue a while longer. Their ticket was composed of John Bell of Tennessee and Edward Everett of Massachusetts.

The Republicans, however, stood united, determined to win and then to resolve the nation's sectional crisis once and for all. Looking past better-known party leaders—such as Senator William Seward of New York and Governor Salmon P. Chase of Ohio—the Republican delegates selected Abraham Lincoln as their presidential candidate. Lincoln had several advantages. He was more moderate on slavery than Seward or Chase; he had demonstrated his skills as a debater during the 1858 Illinois congressional campaign; he had represented small farmers and workers throughout his career; and he lived in an area of the Midwest where voter support was critical to winning the presidency.

Both the North and the West went heavily Republican in the election, with Douglas, supported by northern Democrats, picking up most of the rest of the vote. On national questions, workers had no doubt that their interests lay with the party of Lincoln. The workers of Lynn gave stunning majorities to Republicans at the state level and to Lincoln for president.

In the North, only New Jersey resisted Lincoln's triumphal sweep of the free states. In the South, the small urban vote generally went to the Constitutional Union Party, while the rural majority went heavily to Breckinridge and his proslavery southern Democrats. Lincoln's majority in the North and West proved sufficient to ensure his election as president.

Though he received only 40 percent of the popular vote nationwide, he earned the necessary majority of electoral votes by winning in the most populous states.

Yet this was the first time in American history that a president had been elected without a single southern electoral vote. Clearly, the South was now in a dependent relationship within the national government, and the free states could pass legislation against the interests of the South with the full support of the U.S. president. Lincoln's election opened one of the most important and dramatic chapters in the nation's history. It signaled, as one observer noted, "the beginning of the Second American Revolution."

Conclusion: The Deepening Rift Becomes a Chasm

The Republican victory in 1860 grew out of the social, economic, cultural, and political changes that had taken place in the United States during the preceding half-century. By preserving slave labor, the first American Revolution stopped far short of the Declaration of Independence's stated goal: a society based on the principle that "all men are created equal." For a number of decades, national leaders worked long, hard, and successfully to hold together a nation that was increasingly divided by two distinct labor systems.

But as the slave-labor South and the free-labor North matured, they developed needs, interests, and values that each region found to be ultimately unacceptable in the other. Slave owners and their supporters became more and more committed to chattel slavery, viewing it as the essential prop to their own independence, while to them, the North's vaunted "free society" became an object of fear and loathing. And although northerners hotly disagreed among themselves about the meaning of "free labor," most came to view the expansion of slavery as a direct threat to northerners' own rights, freedoms, and aspirations. The ongoing resistance to slavery and the response that it evoked from slaveholders kept the issue alive and the stakes high.

Disputes over the future of the West manifested and exacerbated the growing sectional clash, destroyed the old two-party system, and gave life to Republicanism. "Bleeding Kansas" and Harpers Ferry revealed how sharp the conflict had become and foreshadowed the way in which it would at last be resolved. John Brown continued to symbolize the powerful currents that drove North and South toward war. In late 1859, Brown died a traitor's death, brought to the gallows by U.S. troops led by Colonel Robert E. Lee. Two short years later, U.S. troops marched into battle against Lee. On their lips was a fighting song that began "John Brown's Body lies a-moldering in the grave," but "his soul goes marching on."

The Years in Review

1846

- California declares its independence from Mexico.

1848

- Gold is discovered in California; about 80,000 people arrive in California the next year.
- Mormon farmers, plowing the shores of the Great Salt Lake, introduce irrigation to U.S. agriculture.
- The nation's first Chinese immigrants arrive in San Francisco; by 1852, an estimated 18,000 Chinese are in the United States.
- The Free-Soil Party is organized; it favors prohibition of slavery in the new territories that were added as result of the Mexican War.

1849

- Harriet Tubman escapes from slavery in Maryland and becomes a “conductor” on the Underground Railway, which got its start about a decade earlier.

1850

- The Compromise of 1850—a series of bills passed by Congress to appease proslavery and antislavery groups—admits California to the Union as a free state, allows the New Mexico and Utah territories to choose their status, abolishes the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and passes a tough new fugitive slave law.
- German American craftsmen establish General Worker's League, a reflection of the influence of European democratic revolutions of 1848 on American labor activism.

1851

- “Go west, young man,” declares John L. B. Soule in an editorial in the *Terre Haute Express* (though Horace Greeley is mistakenly credited with the line); between 1845 and 1869, 1.4 million people follow this advice.

1852

- Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which sells 300,000 copies in a year.

1854

- The California Supreme Court rules in *People v. George Hall* that American Indians are prohibited from testifying against whites in court and then defines Asians as “Indians.”
- The Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which nullifies the Missouri Compromise and allows each individual territory or state to decide its slave status, becomes law.

- The war along the Kansas and Nebraska border between proslavery and antislavery landowners becomes known as “Bleeding Kansas.”

1855

- The Know-Nothing Party splits into proslavery and antislavery factions.

1856

- Antislavery senator Charles Sumner is caned and severely injured by proslavery congressman Preston Brooks on the Senate floor.
- Democrat James Buchanan is elected president over Know-Nothing Millard Fillmore and Republican John C. Frémont; the newly formed Republican Party makes an impressive showing in its first election.

1857

- The U.S. Supreme Court’s proslavery decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* horrifies northerners.
- The first elevator is installed in New York City.
- North Carolinian Hinton Helper publishes *The Impending Crisis of the South*, which argues that slavery was a political and economic curse on the South.
- Iron molders in Philadelphia strike over a 12 percent wage cut; the strike is unsuccessful but paves the way for later organization of a national molders’ union.

1858

- Debates between Republican Abraham Lincoln and Democrat Stephen Douglas during the Illinois Senate race draw national attention to Lincoln.
- Kansas residents vote to establish a free-state government after several years of violent skirmishes between proslavery and antislavery settlers.

1859

- The National Molders’ Union is founded; in this decade, national unions also spring up among hat finishers, cigarmakers, and others.
- John Brown leads two dozen people on a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, to seize arms and liberate slaves in the area; he is caught after a bloody battle, tried, and hanged.
- Ohio native and blackface minstrel performer Dan Emmett writes “Dixie’s Land,” which made the word *Dixie* a synonym for the South and later became a battle hymn for the Confederacy; the song is first performed in New York City and first becomes popular in the North.

1860

- Twenty thousand men and women shoe workers go on strike in Massachusetts to protest declining wages and repeated layoffs.

- The Democratic Party divides over the issue of slavery; northerners nominate Stephen Douglas as their presidential candidate; southerners run John C. Breckenridge; Republican Abraham Lincoln defeats both of them and Constitutional Unionist John Bell.

1864

- Cheyenne leader Yellow Wolf dies at the massacre at Sand Creek; decades of bloody warfare have decimated the Plains Indians.

Additional Readings

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For more on compromises over slavery, see: Stanley Campbell, *The Slave Catchers* (1970); Merrill Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay and Calhoun* (1987); David Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848–1861* (1976); and Kenneth Stampp, *The Imperiled Union* (1980).

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