



Growing Tensions Over Slavery

Objectives

1. Explain why conflict arose over the issue of slavery in the territories after the Mexican-American War.
2. Identify the goal of the Free-Soil Party.
3. Describe the compromise Henry Clay proposed to settle the issues that divided the North and the South.

Prepare to Read

Reading Skill

Analyze Causes Causes are the reasons that events happen. As the United States struggled over the issue of slavery, events such as new laws or important speeches had dramatic effects on the struggle. Understanding how these events made such an impact will help you make sense of this turbulent time in American history.

Vocabulary Builder

High-Use Words

vital, p. 482

crisis, p. 484

Key Terms and People

popular sovereignty, p. 483

secede, p. 484

fugitive, p. 484

Henry Clay, p. 484

John C. Calhoun, p. 485


Daniel Webster, p. 485

Main Idea

The vast territory acquired as a result of the Mexican-American War reignited the controversy over slavery.

Vocabulary Builder

vital (vī tahl) *adj.* necessary for life; of great importance

 **Background Knowledge** The Missouri Compromise of 1820 seemed to have quieted the differences between North and South. Then, the American victory in the Mexican-American War added new territory to the United States. In this section, you will learn how this development recharged the slavery issue.

Slavery and the Mexican-American War

Between 1820 and 1848, four new slaveholding states and four new free states were admitted to the Union. This maintained the balance between free and slaveholding states, with 15 of each. However, territory gained by the Mexican-American War threatened to destroy the balance.

The Wilmot Proviso The Missouri Compromise did not apply to the huge territory gained from Mexico in 1848. Would this territory be organized as states that allowed slavery? The issue was vital to northerners who wanted to stop slavery from spreading.

Fearing that the South would gain too much power, in 1846 Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania proposed that Congress ban slavery in all territory that might become part of the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War.

This proposal was called the Wilmot Proviso. The provision was passed in the House of Representatives, but it failed in the Senate.

Although the Wilmot Proviso never became law, it aroused great concern in the South. Many supporters of slavery viewed it as an attack on slavery by the North.

Antislavery Party The controversy over the Wilmot Proviso also led to the rise of a new political party. Neither the Democrats nor the Whigs took a firm stand on slavery. Each hoped to win support in both North and South in the election of 1848.

The Democratic candidate for President in 1848, Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, proposed a solution that he hoped would appeal to everyone. Cass suggested letting the people in each new territory or state decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. This process, called **popular sovereignty**, meant that people in the territory or state would vote directly on issues, rather than having their elected representatives decide.

Many Whigs and Democrats wanted to take a stronger stand against the spread of slavery. In August 1848, antislavery Whigs and Democrats joined forces to form a new party, which they called the Free-Soil Party. It called for the territory gained in the Mexican-American War to be "free soil," a place where slavery was banned.

The party chose former Democratic President Martin Van Buren as its candidate. Van Buren did poorly in the election. However, he won enough votes from the Democrats to keep Cass from winning. General Zachary Taylor, a Whig and a hero of the Mexican-American War, was elected instead.

Checkpoint Why was the Free-Soil Party founded?

The Election of 1848



Reading Political Cartoons

Skills Activity

This 1848 cartoon reflects a view that members of the Free-Soil Party were "barnburners," ready to burn down the barn (the Democratic Party) to get rid of proslavery "rats."

- Identify Main Ideas** How does the cartoon relate to the Election of 1848?
- Apply Information** In the cartoon bubble (top right), what are the meanings of "FREE SOIL" and "Davy Wilmot"?

Calhoun Versus Webster

“[If] something is not done to arrest it, the South will be forced to choose between abolition and secession. . . . If you are unwilling we should part in peace, tell us so; and we shall know what to do when you reduce the question to submission or resistance.”

—John C. Calhoun, March 4, 1850



John C. Calhoun

“I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American. . . . I speak today for the preservation of the Union. . . . I speak today . . . for the restoration to the country of that quiet and that harmony which make the blessings of this Union so rich, and so dear to us all.”

—Daniel Webster, March 7, 1850



Daniel Webster

Reading Primary Sources

Skills Activity

During the Senate debate on Clay's Compromise of 1850, John C. Calhoun and Daniel Webster wrote dramatic speeches evaluating the compromise.

- Detect Points of View** For what region does Daniel Webster claim to be speaking?
- Apply Information** Calhoun says “[If] something is not done to arrest it, the South will be forced to choose between abolition and secession.” To what does “it” refer?

Main Idea

The compromise proposed by Henry Clay produced one of the greatest debates in American history.



Analyze Causes

What event did both southerners and northerners worry would destroy the balance of power between them?

Vocabulary Builder

crisis (KRĪ sihs) *n.* turning point or deciding event in history

A Bitter Debate

After the discovery of gold in California, thousands of people rushed west. California soon had enough people to become a state. Both sides realized that California's admission to the Union as a free state would upset the balance between free and slave states in the Senate.

Northerners argued that California should be a free state because most of the territory lay north of the Missouri Compromise line. But southerners feared that if free states gained a majority in the Senate, the South would not be able to block antislavery attacks like the Wilmot Proviso. Southern leaders began to threaten to *secede*; or *withdraw*, from the nation if California was admitted to the Union as a free state.

There were other issues dividing the North and South. Northerners wanted the slave trade abolished in Washington, D.C. Southerners wanted northerners to catch people who had escaped from slavery. Southerners called for a law that would force the return of *fugitives*, or runaway enslaved people.

For months it looked as if there was no solution. Then, in January 1850, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky stepped forward with a plan to calm the *crisis*. Clay had won the nickname the Great Compromiser for working out the Missouri Compromise. Now, Clay made another series of proposals that he hoped would forever resolve the issues that bitterly divided northerners and southerners.

The Senate's discussion of Clay's proposals produced one of the greatest debates in American political history. South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun was against compromise. Calhoun was gravely ill and just four weeks from death. He was too weak to give his speech, but he struggled to sit upright while his final speech was read to the Senate.

The admission of California as a free state, Calhoun wrote, would expose the South to continued attacks on slavery. There were only two ways to preserve the South's way of life. One was a constitutional amendment to protect states' rights. The other was secession.

Three days later, Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster rose to support Clay's proposals and called for an end to the bitter sectionalism that was dividing the nation. Webster argued for Clay's compromise in order to preserve the Union.

Which view would prevail? The very existence of the United States depended on the answer.

✓ Checkpoint How did California's proposed admission to the Union affect the debate between the North and the South over slavery?

★ Looking Back and Ahead With the territories acquired by the Mexican-American War, the nation could no longer overlook the slavery issue. Statehood for each of these territories would upset the balance between free states and slaveholding states. For a short while, it seemed to many that Henry Clay's proposed compromise gave concessions to both sides. But, as you will read in the next section, the compromise soon fell apart. When it did, the nation once again plunged down the road to all-out war between the regions.

Section 1

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Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) **Recall** What was the Wilmot Proviso?

(b) **Analyze Cause and Effect** Did the Wilmot Proviso successfully address the nation's divisions over slavery? What effect *did* it have on the nation?
- (a) **List** What were the main issues that led to Henry Clay's proposed compromise?

(b) **Detect Points of View** Write a sentence describing how you would feel about the need to compromise if you were a member of Congress from the North.

Reading Skill

- Analyze Causes** What did southerners want Congress to do about enslaved people who had fled to the North?

Vocabulary Builder

Complete these sentences so they clearly show your understanding of the key terms.

- The status of new western territories would be decided by **popular sovereignty**, which is _____.
- If southern states **seceded** from the Union, then _____.

- Many northerners would not report **fugitives**, who were _____.

Writing

- Consider the broad topic "Conflicts Between Slave States and Free States Before the Civil War." Divide it into four or five narrower topics. Each of these narrower topics should be covered in a research paper of a few pages.