**Chapter Four: Slavery and the Road to Secession**

**The slave economy**

The South relied on slavery heavily for economic prosperity and used wealth as a way to justify enslavement practices.

**Cotton is king**

By the mid-19th century, southern commercial centers like New Orleans had become home to the greatest concentration of wealth in the United States. Slavery shaped the culture and society of the South, which rested on a racial ideology of white supremacy. And importantly, many whites believed slavery itself sustained the newly prosperous Southern economy.

However, cotton was a labor-intensive crop, and many plantation owners were reducing the number of people they enslaved due to high costs and low output. In 1793, **Eli Whitney** revolutionized cotton production when he invented the **cotton gin**, a device that separated the seeds from raw cotton. Suddenly, a process that was extraordinarily labor-intensive could be completed quickly and easily. By the early 1800s, cotton emerged as the South’s major **cash crop**—a good produced for commercial value instead of for use by the owner. Cotton quickly eclipsed tobacco, rice, and sugar in economic importance.

American plantation owners began to turn to the world market to sell their newfound surplus. Cotton had the advantage of being easily stored and transported. A demand for it already existed in the industrial textile mills in Great Britain, and in time, a steady stream of slave-grown American cotton would also supply northern textile mills. Southern cotton, picked and processed by newly-profitable slaves, helped fuel the 19th-century **Industrial Revolution** in both the United States and Great Britain.

This lucrative international trade brought new wealth and new residents to New Orleans as products and people travelled down the new water highway of the US, the **Mississippi River**. The invention of the **steamship** dramatically increased the use of the river as a quick and easy way of transporting goods. By 1840, New Orleans alone had 12 percent of the nation’s total banking capital. Enslaved people, cotton, and the steamship transformed the city from a relatively isolated corner of North America to a thriving metropolis that rivaled New York in importance.

By 1850, of the 3.2 million enslaved people in the country’s fifteen slave states, 1.8 million were producing cotton. By 1860, slave labor was producing over two billion pounds of cotton per year. Indeed, American cotton soon made up two-thirds of the global supply, and production continued to soar. By the time of the Civil War, South Carolina politician James Henry Hammond confidently proclaimed that the North could never threaten the South because “**cotton is king**.”

The production of cotton brought the South more firmly into the larger American and Atlantic markets. About 75% of the cotton produced in the United States was eventually exported abroad. Exporting at such high volumes made the United States the undisputed world leader in cotton production. Although the larger American and Atlantic markets relied on southern cotton in this era, the South also depended on these markets for obtaining food, manufactured goods, and loans. Thus, the market revolution transformed the South just as it had other regions.

**The domestic slave trade**

With the cotton boom in the Deep South came a spike in demand for enslaved laborers to work the fields. Although Congress abolished the foreign slave trade in 1808, Americans continued to smuggle Africans across the Atlantic Ocean. However, the **domestic slave trade** primarily supplied the necessary labor force. As the tobacco crop dwindled, former tobacco farmers in the older states of Virginia and Maryland found themselves with “surplus” enslaved laborers whom they were obligated to feed, clothe, and shelter. Some slaveholders responded to this situation by freeing enslaved laborers; far more decided to sell them.

The **domestic slave trade** offered many economic opportunities for white men. Between 1790 and 1859, slaveholders in Virginia sold more than half a million enslaved laborers. the movement of slaves from the Upper South to the Deep South made up one of the largest forced internal migrations in the United States.

**The**[**Missouri Compromise of 1820**](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/civil-war-era/slavery-and-the-civil-war/v/slavery-and-missouri-compromise-in-early-1800s) :

When the Missouri Territory first applied for statehood in 1818, it was clear that many in the territory wanted to allow slavery in the new state. Part of the more than 800,000 square miles bought from France in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, it was known as the Louisiana Territory until 1812, when it was renamed to avoid confusion with the newly admitted state of Louisiana.

Missouri’s bid to become the first state west of the Mississippi River, and to allow slavery within its borders, set off a bitter debate in a Congress that was—like the nation itself—already divided into pro- and anti-slavery factions. In the North, where abolitionist sentiment was growing, many people opposed the extension of the institution of slavery into new territory, and worried that adding Missouri as a slave state would upset the balance that currently existed between slave and free states in the Union. Pro-slavery Southerners, meanwhile, argued that new states, like the original 13, should be given the freedom to choose whether to permit slavery or not.

During the debate, Rep. James Tallmadge of New York proposed an amendment to the statehood bill that would have eventually ended slavery in Missouri and set the existing enslaved workers there free. The amended bill passed narrowly in the House of Representatives, where Northerners held a slight edge. But in the Senate, where free and slave states had exactly the same number of senators, the pro-slavery faction managed to strike out Tallmadge’s amendment, and the House refused to pass the bill without it.

After this stalemate, Missouri renewed its application for statehood in late 1819. This time, Speaker of the House Henry Clay proposed that Congress admit Missouri to the Union as a slave state, but at the same time admit Maine (which at the time was part of Massachusetts) as a free state. In February 1820, the Senate added a second part to the joint statehood bill: With the exception of Missouri, slavery would be banned in all of the former Louisiana Purchase lands north of an imaginary line drawn at 36º 30’ latitude, which ran along Missouri’s southern border.

**Manifest Destiny:**

Because Americans believed that their national security was threatened by British activity in Texas, California, and Oregon, westward expansion reached a new peak on intensity in the 1840’s. However, this expansion was most importantly due to the beliefs of the ‘manifest destiny’ published a New York edition in 1845. Manifest destiny reflected the belief that Providence had intended the U.S. to control the entire North American continent. This justified the conquest of ‘lesser breeds’ like the Indians andMexicans by land-hungry pioneers. But running through Manifest Destiny, there was an idea of idealism: the conviction that the enlargement of the American territory was the best means of promoting the spread of democratic ideals and institutions. Such ideas became the driving force of public policy, which resulted in the annexation of Texas, the acquisition of California, New Mexico, and Utah, all which resulted from American victory in its war against Mexico (1846-48).

**The Mexican-American War**

On May 13, 1846, the United States Congress declared war on Mexico after a request from President James K. Polk. Then, on May 26, 1848, both sides ratified the peace treaty that ended the conflict.

The conflict centered on the independent Republic of Texas, which opted to join the United States after establishing its independence from Mexico a decade earlier.

The new U.S. president, James K. Polk, also wanted Texas as part of the United States, and his predecessor, John Tyler, had a late change of heart and started the admission process before he left office. Polk and others saw the acquisition of Texas, California, Oregon, and other territories as part of the nation’s Manifest Destiny to spread democracy over the continent.

The U.S. also tried to buy Texas and what was called “Mexican California” from Mexico, which was seen as an insult by Mexico, before war broke out. Mexico considered the annexation of Texas as an act of war. After a series of border skirmishes, President Polk asked Congress for the war declaration because, under [Article I, Section 8](https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/article/article-i#article-section-8) of the Constitution, only Congress could declare war.

In the fighting that followed, the mostly-volunteer United States military secured control of Mexico after a series of battles, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848.It was the first large-scale success of a United States military force on foreign soil. Mexico received a little more than $18 million in compensation from the United States as part of the treaty.

The pact set a border between Texas and Mexico and ceded California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming to the United States. Their transfer to the United States’ control also cut the territorial size of Mexico in half. On the surface, the war’s outcome seemed like a goldmine for the United States. But the acquisition of so much territory with the issue of slavery unresolved lit the fuse that eventually set off the Civil War in 1861. But the underlying issue was how adding new states and territories would alter the balance between free and slave states was critical.

**The Compromise of 1850**

At the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States gained a large piece of western land known as the **Mexican Cession**.

The issue of whether to permit slavery in the territories organized in this new land consumed Congress at the end of the 1840s. During the war, Congressman David Wilmot introduced the **Wilmot Proviso**, a proposal to ban slavery in any new territory acquired from Mexico. The measure passed in the House of Representatives but failed in the Senate.

Congress was also seeking resolutions for several other controversial matters. Antislavery advocates wanted to end the slave trade in the District of Columbia, while proslavery advocates aimed to strengthen **fugitive slave laws**. But the most pressing problem was California: the many emigrants who had flocked to the territory upon the discovery of gold in the late 1840s had forced the question of its statehood and status as a slave or free state.

The presidential election of 1848 determined which of these issues would be tackled first. Southern Mexican-American war military hero Zachary Taylor was elected president in 1848, much to the satisfaction of southern slaveholders. Although Taylor himself owned more than one hundred slaves, he prioritized national unity over sectional interests. He called on Congress to admit California as a free state.

The debate in Congress heated up quickly. Kentucky senator **Henry Clay**, also known as the “**Great Compromiser**,” offered a series of resolutions, most of which aimed to limit slavery’s expansion. Clay answered Taylor’s request, calling for California to enter the Union as a free state, but he coupled this antislavery provision with a more robust federal fugitive slave law in hopes of sectional compromise.

Clay's resolution angered the deathly ill **John C. Calhoun**. Calhoun, too sick to speak, had his friend deliver a speech condemning Clay's proposal as endangering Southern rights and prosperity. Calhoun reinforced the need for a stronger fugitive slave law and condemned what he saw as northern aggression, warning that the South would leave the Union sooner than submit to limitations on slavery.

President Taylor and Henry Clay’s inability to cooperate stalled the government’s resolutions on slavery. Taylor then became suddenly ill and died within five days. Vice President Millard Fillmore succeeded him as president and worked with Congress to flesh out the “final” terms of the compromise.

**Provisions of the Compromise of 1850**

The package of bills included four major provisions:

* **A new, stricter Fugitive Slave Law**: Congress passed a strict fugitive slave law, which required officials in all states and territories to assist with the return of enslaved people who had escaped to freedom or pay a substantial fine. Ordinary citizens were also required to assist in recapturing escapees or face fines or imprisonment. There were no safeguards to prevent opportunists from claiming that any person of African descent, including free black citizens of the North, was an escapee.
* **Admission of California as a free state:** To balance the Fugitive Slave Act's concession to the South, Congress admitted California as a free state.
* **Popular sovereignty in New Mexico and Utah territories:** Congress avoided a direct decision on the question of slavery in the new Territory of New Mexico and the Territory of Utah, employing the principle of **popular sovereignty**. This allowed white residents of the territories to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery.
* **A ban on slave trading in Washington, DC:** Antislavery advocates welcomed Congress’s ban on the slave trade in Washington, DC, although slavery itself continued to be legal in the capital.

Most Americans breathed a sigh of relief over the deal brokered in 1850, choosing to believe it had saved the Union. However, the compromise stood as a temporary truce in an otherwise white-hot sectional conflict. Popular sovereignty paved the way for unprecedented violence in the West over the question of slavery.

**The Kansas-Nebraska Act**

The revival of the sectional conflict over slavery was also caused by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Act, introduced by Senator Douglas, created two territories: Kansas, directly west of Missouri; and Nebraska, west of Iowa. The act applied the principle of **popular sovereignty**. Since both territories fell above the 36° 30' line, the proposed bill would repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

When Kansas was finally opened to settlement in 1854, movements were organized in the North and the South to send big numbers of settlers with the object of winning control of the territory. Soon the number of Kansas population reached the level required to justify statehood. Elections were organized to form a state legislature and draw a constitution and were won by the pro-slavery settlers. However, the freesettlers denounced the results because of fraud and organized their own elections.  
Political division in Kansas soon led to violence and bloodshed. In May 1856, a force of pro-slavery militia marched on the free-soil town of Lawrence and terrorised the inhabitants. The revenge came a few days later when a fanatical abolitionist, John Brown, led a band of followers to attack pro-slave settlers. This was the signal for further turmoil. Armed bands from both sides searched the territory, shooting and burning without discrimination (Bleeding Kansas). When federal troops managed to restore temporarily order late in 1856, some 200 people had been killed.

**Dred Scott v. Sandford**

In 1857, the Supreme Court decided the case of ***Dred Scott v. Sandford***. Dred Scott, born in slavery in Virginia in 1795, had been one of the thousands forced to relocate as a result of the massive internal slave trade.

His first enslaver, Peter Blow, sold him to John Emerson, who took Scott and his wife to Missouri, where slavery had been adopted as part of the **Missouri Compromise**. But in 1820, John Emerson left Scott with his brother John Sanford (misspelled Sandford in court papers), who took Scott to Illinois and then to the Wisconsin territory. Critically, both of those regions were part of the **Northwest Territory**, where the **1787 Northwest Ordinance** had *outlawed* slavery. When Scott returned to Missouri, he sued in the state courts for his freedom. He claimed that his residence in a free territory made him a free man. His case made it all the way to the Supreme Court.

In 1857, the Supreme Court—led by Chief Justice Roger Taney, a former slaveholder—handed down its decision. On the question of whether Scott was free, the Supreme Court decided he remained enslaved. The court then went beyond the specific issue of Scott’s freedom to make a sweeping and momentous judgment about the status of Black people, both free and enslaved, arguing that Black people could never be citizens of the United States.

Further, the court ruled that Congress had no authority to stop or limit the spread of slavery into American territories. This proslavery ruling explicitly made the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional.

The *Dred Scott* decision opened up huge sectional divisions among Democrats, leaving an opening for a different party’s candidate to win the presidency. The **Democratic Party** became so divided that they ran two candidates in the election of 1860: Northern Democrats nominated **Stephen Douglas**, while southern Democrats nominated **John Breckinridge**. This split the Democratic ticket in half, giving the Republicans, who nominated Abraham Lincoln, a huge advantage.

Also hoping to prevent a Republican victory, pro-Unionists from the border states organized the **Constitutional Union Party** and put up a fourth candidate, **John Bell**, for president, who pledged to end slavery agitation and preserve the Union but never fully explained how he would accomplish this objective. Although Lincoln only won 40 percent of the popular vote, he gained a majority in the Electoral College, winning the election of 1860.

During the presidential campaign, Southern leaders warned that they would not remain in the Union under a sectional Northern president. Immediately after the result of the election as announced the secession movement began. By the time Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1860, seven states had seceded from the Union. Their delegates met at Montgomery, Alabama, drew a constitution for the Confederate States of America, and elected Jefferson Davis as President.

**The Crittenden Compromise**

Lincoln’s election prompted Southern states to begin leaving the Union.

In December 1860, Kentucky Senator John Crittenden proposed a final attempt to keep the southern states from seceding before the Civil War broke out. The **Crittenden Compromise** aimed to end debates over slavery and its expansion forever by enshrining slavery in the Constitution and stipulating that it could not be abolished. The Crittenden Compromise would have reestablished slavery in all states south of the **36°30′ line**, and made slavery illegal in all states north of the boundary, effectively reinstating the Missouri Compromise. But it failed to pass Congress, and Lincoln rejected it.

The Crittenden Compromise was the last attempt to mitigate sectional divisions over slavery before the Civil War erupted.