**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. 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.

Eventually, 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 and Mexicans 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. 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 acquisition of new lands brought along the struggle over slavery. Although Congressman David Wilmot Proviso proposed a bill to prohibit slavery in any lands acquired from Mexico, the Wilmot Proviso was defeated in the Senate because of Southern opposition. As a countermeasure, Congressman John C. Calhoun of South Carolina introduce a resolution known as the Platform of the South, asserting that Congress had no constitutional authority to prevent the citizens of any state from migrating there with their property, including their slave property. As it was expected, Northerners rejected the Calhoun’s resolution.  
When the thirty-first congress met in 1849, the Union was in danger. The returning Senator Henry Clay introduced in the Senate a set of resolutions that inaugurated a seven-month debate in Congress. In the ensuing Compromise of 1850, Congress agreed that California be admitted as a free state, that a new Fugitive Slave Act be passed, and that slavery in the rest of the territories acquired from Mexico to be decided by their respective settlers on the time of admission to the Union (according to the doctrine of ‘Popular Sovereignty’ advocated by Stephen A. Douglas

**3. The Revival of Conflict:** When Franklin Pierce was elected President in 1852, the slavery agitation was reviving. Because the Fugitive Slave Law (which obliged states to arrest runaway slaves and send them back to their owners) was the most important acquisition made by Southerners from the Compromise of 1850, they were determined to resist any attempt to modify or repeal it. On the other hand, Northerners found its provisions unacceptable and tried to obstruct or even nullify it. On some occasions, the law was openly defied when northern whites defied the local authorities by freeing fugitive slaves under arrest.  
 The revival of the sectional conflict over slavery was also caused by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Act was introduced by Senator Douglas and consisted in organizing the Nebraska country into two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, towards their future settlement. Although these two territories were situated north of Missouri, and thus supposedly prohibited to slavery according to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, Douglas suggested that slavery there should be decided on the basis of his doctrine.  
 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.

The *Dred Scott* decision opened up huge sectional divisions among Democrats, leaving an opening for a different party’s candidate to win the presidency. As the election of 1860 approached, the tension was mounting between North and South about the issue of slavery. Political divisions led to the collapse of the one remaining nation party, the Democratic Party. This opened the way for the newly established northern Republican Party to reach power. It was clear then that the perspective of a northern politician coming to power would simply mean the total division of the country.  
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.