

1) The North, the South, and Slavery in America

Grade Level



When Texas joined the United States in 1845, one major challenge facing the nation was the growing debates over slavery.

Southern states had excellent soil and long growing seasons. This made their economies perfect for plantation agriculture. This required a lot of workers doing difficult work. In contrast, the climate and geography of northern states were less suitable for big farms like plantations.

Because of these differences, the North and the South had developed very differently. The South's economy focused on plantation agriculture using enslaved labor. Meanwhile, the economy of the North had smaller farms, focusing more on trade and manufacturing. By the early 1800s, slavery had been abolished, or prohibited, in the North.

The economic differences between the North and the South caused each region to have very different views on what was best for the nation. Politicians from the North and the South each worked to gain a majority in the U.S. Congress, or the group elected to make laws. Both regions wanted the political power to do what was best for their own region.

As the United States expanded west, arguments between the North and the South over slavery intensified. If new western territories joined the U.S. as free states, the North would gain more power in the government. If they joined as slave states, the South would gain more power. As new western states like Texas joined the Union, arguments between the North and the South over the expansion of slavery grew significantly. This caused more regional conflicts and even violence.

2) The U.S. – Mexico War 1846 – 1848

Grade Level



The United States annexed Texas in 1845. In the terms of annexation, the U.S. government accepted Texas' claims that its southern border with Mexico was the Rio Grande and promised to protect this border. The Mexican government disputed this claim, however, stating that the border was actually about 150 miles north at the Nueces River. In 1846, American President James K. Polk sent the U.S. army under General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande. This was territory that both Texas and Mexico claimed.

Then on April 25, 1846, Mexican troops launched an attack on Taylor's army across the Rio Grande. President Polk asked Congress for a declaration of war against Mexico for "spilling American blood on American soil." Congress passed a

declaration of war, and the U.S.-Mexico War began. When the U.S. army entered Mexico City more than a year later in September 1847, the Mexican government was forced to surrender.

The U.S.-Mexico War ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. This document required Mexico to cede to the United States all Mexican territory west of Texas to the Pacific Ocean. The Mexican Cession included the modern-day states of California, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. The acquisition of the territories of the Mexican Cession caused intense debates between Northern and Southern politicians in Congress over whether this new land should enter the Union as slave states or free states.

3) The Gold Rush & the Compromise of 1850

Grade Level



New territories like the ones in the Mexican Cession could apply for statehood once they gained a population of 60,000 free people. In the 1840s, that would have normally taken a very long time, but in 1848 gold was discovered in California. During the next few years, 300,000 people flooded into the California territory, hoping to get rich. California's population grew quickly, and the territory soon became eligible for statehood.

Once again, debates flared up in the United States Congress over whether California would enter the Union as a slave state or free state. A Kentucky senator named Henry Clay passed the Compromise of 1850. This compromise attempted to satisfy the North by allowing California to enter the Union as a free state, while attempting to satisfy the South

by passing the Fugitive Slave Act. The act required runaway slaves to be returned to their enslavers, even if they had escaped to a free state.

Additionally, the Compromise of 1850 allowed the territories of Utah and New Mexico to decide whether they would allow slavery by voting on the issue when they became states. The Compromise of 1850 also adjusted the border between New Mexico and Texas. This significantly reduced the size of Texas to its present borders.

While the Compromise of 1850 attempted to fix the growing arguments between the North and the South over slavery, it did not solve the problem. The issue of the expansion of slavery continued to pose a serious challenge to the United States.

4) The Kansas-Nebraska Act 1854

Grade Level



In 1820, the U.S. Congress passed a law called the Missouri Compromise. This law allowed Missouri to join the Union as a slave state, but it prohibited slavery in the rest of northern part of the Louisiana Territory. This satisfied many Northerners because it limited the expansion of slavery. Many Southerners were angry, however, because they believed the federal government did not have the right to limit the expansion of slavery.

Then in 1854, almost ten years after Texas' annexation, the United States Congress passed a law called the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This act stated that the issue of slavery in the territories would be decided by popular sovereignty. In other words, the people could vote on whether they wanted to allow slavery in their states or not. The

Kansas-Nebraska Act basically undid the law established by the Missouri Compromise.

Many Southerners were satisfied with this law because it meant that slavery could spread into more new states. Many Northerners were deeply dissatisfied with this law, however, because it did not follow that was already established by the Missouri Compromise.

In 1854, Kansas was holding a vote on whether to allow slavery or not. Northerners and Southerners flooded into the territory to try to vote on the issue, and violence broke out between the two groups. An abolitionist named John Brown and his sons even killed five pro-slavery supporters. This violence showed the growing division between the North and South over slavery in the United States.

5) Conflicts Over Slavery Continued to Grow

Grade Level



While Texas' population and economy grew and developed as a new state in the Union, arguments continued to increase throughout the country over slavery. In 1854, Northerners formed the Republican Party to oppose the expansion of slavery in the United States. It only received support from the northern states, however.

Then, in 1857, the United States Supreme Court heard a case about an enslaved man named Dred Scott. Scott argued that he should be considered a free man, because his master had brought him into a free territory. The Supreme Court, however, ruled that Scott was not a free man because enslaved people were not legally citizens of the U.S. The court argued that enslaved people had no rights under the constitution. Additionally, the Supreme Court declared that the federal government had no legal right to prohibit the expansion of slavery into

American territories. This ruling angered Northerners and abolitionists.

A few years later in 1859, John Brown, the abolitionist who had killed five pro-slavery supporters in Kansas in 1854, attempted to raid the federal arsenal called Harper's Ferry in Virginia. A federal arsenal is a place where weapons are stored for the government. Brown's goal was to steal the weapons in order to arm enslaved people so they could rebel against their masters.

Brown's attempt failed. He was captured and executed, though his actions highlighted the growing tension between pro-slavery and anti-slavery parts of the country. Additionally, his actions scared Southern slave holders, who were afraid that the enslaved people might violently rebel against them.

6) The Election of 1860

Grade Level



The United States had become so divided over slavery that it became the most important issue of the presidential election of 1860. Most Southerners would only vote for a candidate who supported slavery, while most Northerners wanted an anti-slavery candidate.

The Republican Party, which had been founded only six years earlier, nominated a man named Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln opposed the spread of slavery into the western territories. For this reason, nearly all Southerners did not want him to be president. South Carolina even declared it would secede, or officially end its connection to the United States, if Lincoln was elected. Most Texans

also opposed Lincoln. Instead, they mostly supported a pro-slavery candidate named John C. Breckenridge.

Tensions were high and the country was on edge throughout 1860 leading to the election. Pro-slavery vigilantes in north Texas killed dozens of people. They claimed the people they killed were abolitionists trying to start a slave rebellion. When the election results showed that Abraham Lincoln had won the presidency by a very small margin, South Carolina seceded from the Union. People throughout the country waited to see what the rest of the South, including Texas, would do next.