

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Missouri Compromise

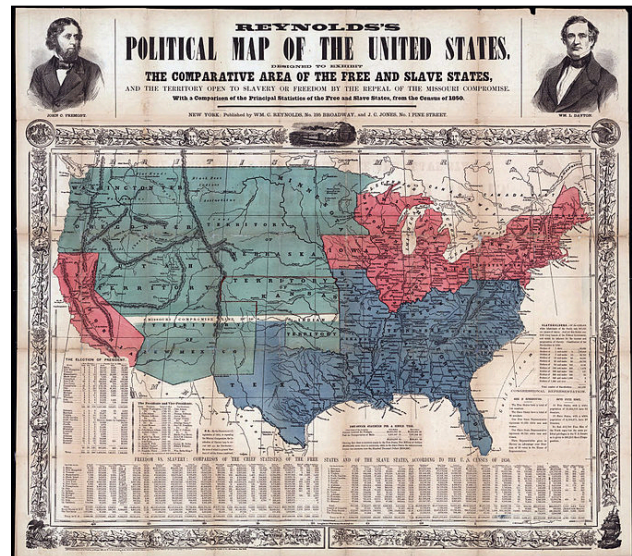
By USHistory.org
2016

This text discusses how the addition of new states to the United States raised questions about the future of slavery. In 1818, when Missouri asked to join the Union as a slave state, the U.S. had an equal number of slave and free states, which balanced disputes between them in Congress. The Missouri Compromise would be the first of many disagreements that led to the Civil War, where the South tried to leave the U.S. in order to continue to practice slavery. As you read, identify what the Missouri Compromise was and how different people and groups involved with the compromise reacted to it.

The Slavery Question

- [1] During the early 1800s, the United States was a rapidly growing nation. During that time, many Americans were moving west in search of new opportunities. While most white Americans agreed that this expansion was crucial to the health of the nation, they couldn't agree about what should be done about slavery in the West.

Westward expansion had a very negative impact on the rights of Native American communities, but that rarely became a controversial public issue. This was not the case for slavery, however, as northern and southern whites differed sharply about slavery's proper role in the west.



"Map of Free and Slave States" by William C Reynolds is in the public domain.

As western territories became accepted into the United States as states, it made slavery an explicit¹ concern of national politics. Balancing the interests of slave and free states had played a role from the very start of designing the federal government at the Constitutional Convention in 1787.² The crucial compromise³ there that sacrificed the rights of African Americans in favor of a stronger union among the states exploded once more in 1819 when Missouri petitioned to join the United States as a slave state.

In 1819, the nation contained eleven free and eleven slave states, creating a balance in the U.S. Senate. Missouri's entrance threatened to ruin this balance in favor of slave interests. The debate in Congress over the admission of Missouri became extraordinarily bitter after Congressman James Tallmadge from New York proposed that slavery be prohibited in the new state.

1. **Explicit (adjective):** outright; very clear
2. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 developed the policies of the Constitution of the United States. In it, the Founding Fathers agreed to put off the question of outlawing slavery for over 20 years.
3. The Convention also decided that slaves were worth three fifths of a person for counting the population and determining how many representatives each state got.

- [5] The debate was especially ironic because defenders of slavery relied on a central principle of fairness. How could the Congress deny a new state the right to decide for itself whether or not to allow slavery? If Congress controlled the decision, then the new states would have fewer rights than the original ones.

Henry Clay, a leading congressman, known as “The Great Compromiser,” played a crucial role in brokering a two-part solution known as the Missouri Compromise. First, Missouri would be admitted to the union as a slave state, but would be balanced by the admission of Maine, a free state, that had long wanted to be separated from Massachusetts. Second, slavery was to be excluded from all new states in the Louisiana Purchase⁴ north of the southern boundary of Missouri. People on both sides of the controversy saw the compromise as deeply flawed. Nevertheless, it lasted for over thirty years until the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 determined that new states north of the boundary deserved to be able to exercise their sovereignty⁵ in favor of slavery if they so choose.

Even though the Missouri crisis ended peacefully for white Americans, it further highlighted the divide between northern and southern states. As Thomas Jefferson observed about the Missouri crisis, “This momentous question, like a fire-bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror.”

African-American Revolts

African Americans obviously opposed slavery and news of some congressional opposition to its expansion circulated widely within slave communities. Denmark Vesey, a free black man living in Charleston, South Carolina, made the most dramatic use of the white disagreement about the future of slavery in the west. Vesey quoted the Bible as well as congressional debates over the Missouri issue to denounce⁶ slavery from the pulpit⁷ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church where he was a lay minister. Along with a key ally named Gullah Jack, Vesey organized a slave rebellion in 1822 that planned to capture the Charleston arsenal⁸ and seize the city long enough for its black population to escape to the free black republic of Haiti.⁹

The rebellion was betrayed just days before its planned starting date and resulted in the execution of thirty-five organizers as well as the destruction of the black church where Vesey preached. Slaveholders were clearly on the defensive with antislavery sentiment building in the north and undeniable opposition among African Americans in the south. As one white Charlestonian complained, “By the Missouri question, our slaves thought, there was a charter of liberties granted them by Congress.”

- [10] African Americans knew that they could not rely upon whites to end slavery, but they also recognized that the increasing divide between north and south and their battle over western expansion could open opportunities for blacks to exploit. The most explosive of these future black actions would be Nat Turner’s Virginia Slave Revolt in 1831.¹⁰

4. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, in which President Thomas Jefferson bought a large territory from France that covered much of the Great Plains to the west of the Mississippi River, doubled the size of America.

5. **Sovereignty (noun):** the independent authority and right to govern over oneself

6. **Denounce (verb):** to state that something is evil or wrong

7. **Pulpit (noun):** a raised platform where a preacher stands

8. **Arsenal (noun):** a collection of weapons

9. Haiti was the first country in the modern world to establish itself as a country of freed slaves. In 1804, Haitian slaves revolted and overthrew their colonial masters in the Haitian Revolution, establishing Haiti as a country.

10. Nat Turner was a slave who led a revolt in 1831 in Virginia that resulted in the deaths of 55 to 65 white people. IN retaliation, white mobs killed more than 200 black people.

"The Missouri Compromise" by USHistory.org is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: How does the Missouri Compromise and slave revolution interact within the text?
 - A. The Missouri Compromise encouraged slaves sold to Missouri families to revolt and run away before they could arrive in the controversial state.
 - B. The Missouri Compromise encouraged slaves to resist revolution in the hopes that those against slavery would soon abolish it in the United States.
 - C. Slaves who heard of Congressional support of the Missouri Compromise were encouraged to revolt.
 - D. Slaves who heard of Congressional opposition to the Missouri Compromise were encouraged to revolt.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Vesey quoted the Bible as well as congressional debates over the Missouri issue to denounce slavery from the pulpit of the African Methodist Episcopal Church where he was a lay minister." (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "Slaveholders were clearly on the defensive with antislavery sentiment building in the north and undeniable opposition among African Americans in the south." (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "African Americans knew that they could not rely upon whites to end slavery, but they also recognized that the increasing divide between north and south and their battle over western expansion could open opportunities for blacks to exploit." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "The most explosive of these future black actions would be Nat Turner's Virginia Slave Revolt in 1831." (Paragraph 10)

3. How does this sentence from paragraph 5 contribute to the central ideas of the text: "The debate was especially ironic because defenders of slavery relied on a central principle of fairness."
 - A. It hints at the contradiction between what is fair for the states and what is fair for African Americans.
 - B. It undermines the notion that the Missouri Compromise was unfair.
 - C. It reveals how difficult the debate over Missouri statehood was due to the subjective nature of fairness.
 - D. It reinforces the logical reasoning of defenders of slavery.

4. Which statement best describes a central idea of the text?
- A. A country cannot be founded on equality and enslave its people.
 - B. Western expansion revealed deep divides regarding equality in the U.S. that the Missouri Compromise could not completely fix.
 - C. Without the Missouri Compromise, slave revolts would not have happened.
 - D. The Missouri Compromise was a solution to a temporary problem. Passage of the bill was a major turning point in American history.
5. According to the author, how did the Missouri Compromise lay the groundwork for the Civil War. Provide evidence from the text in your answer.
