

Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction: Slavery in the Territories

by ReadWorks



political map of the United States, 1856

Before the Civil War, the nation was already divided. The country was divided over the issue of slavery. In the North, there were fewer slaves than in the South. There were mostly shops and industries that did not need slave labor in the North. In the South, large plantation owners kept many slaves to work the fields and even serve in the houses. So why couldn't the North and the South just agree to be different?

Slavery became a moral issue. More and more Northerners were against the idea of owning people as if they were property. At first they let slavery continue in the South. But in 1860 America was growing. People were moving west to new territories. As the territories gained more and more people, they could ask to be an official state of the United States of America. Would these new states allow slavery? In answer to this question, Northerners yelled "NO!" But Southerners yelled, "YES!"

There were many fights in Congress about slavery in the territories. At first, Congress made a compromise (the Missouri Compromise of 1820). They decided to keep a balance. All territories below the line of latitude 36°30' would be slave states, like the southern states that were their neighbors. All states above 36°30' would be free. No slavery would be allowed in these states.

But the compromise did not work for long. Senators needed another idea to keep the balance of slave states and free states. They decided to let people in the territories vote to decide for themselves whether or not they would be free. The voting idea was a disaster. On the night before the vote that would determine whether Kansas would be a free state or a slave state, thousands of men from Missouri spent the night in Kansas. These men wanted Kansas to have slavery, so they sneaked in to vote. Northerners called these men "border ruffians." The next day, they voted. They did not really live there, so their votes should not have counted. When the results came back, Kansas was voted a slave state.

The United States government did nothing to stop the madness, but there was a new fight over slavery in the United States Senate. One day a Senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, stood on the Senate floor and gave a long, heated speech about the morality of the North and the evil injustice of the South. He said that Southerners were all horrible and devilish. He was especially mad at southern Senators, including Andrew Butler from South Carolina. Two days later Senator Butler's cousin showed up in the Senate. His name was Preston Brooks. Brooks took his cane and started beating Charles Sumner over the head! A fight had broken out on the Senate floor! Sumner was badly hurt. Northerners called him a hero. But Southerners were proud of the way Brooks defended their ideas. The division had already begun. It was only a matter of time before the southern Senators would leave Washington, D.C., and make their own country in the South.