

The Debate over Slavery

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. The addition of new land in the West renewed disputes over the expansion of slavery.
2. The Compromise of 1850 tried to solve the disputes over slavery.
3. The Fugitive Slave Act caused more controversy.
4. Abolitionists used antislavery literature to promote opposition.

The Big Idea

Antislavery literature and the annexation of new lands intensified the debate over slavery.

Key Terms and People

popular sovereignty, p. 476
 Wilmot Proviso, p. 476
 sectionalism, p. 477
 Free-Soil Party, p. 477
 secede, p. 478
 Compromise of 1850, p. 479
 Fugitive Slave Act, p. 479
 Anthony Burns, p. 480
Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 481
 Harriet Beecher Stowe, p. 481

TAKING NOTES

Copy the graphic organizer below. As you read, take notes on the sequence of events in the debate over slavery. Be sure to describe the effects of each event.

Significant Events in the Slavery Debate

Event	Effect
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	

If YOU were there...

You live in a crowded neighborhood in New York City in 1854. Your apartment building is home to a variety of people—long-time residents, Irish immigrants, free African Americans. One day federal marshals knock on your door. They claim that one of your neighbors is a fugitive slave. The marshals say you must help them find her. If you don't, you will be fined or even sent to jail.

What would you tell the federal marshals?

BUILDING BACKGROUND Some reform movements of the 1800s drew stubborn and often violent opposition. This was especially true of the abolitionist movement. Pro-slavery supporters fought for laws to protect slavery and extend the slave system. These laws were a threat to African Americans in the North.

New Land Renews Slavery Disputes

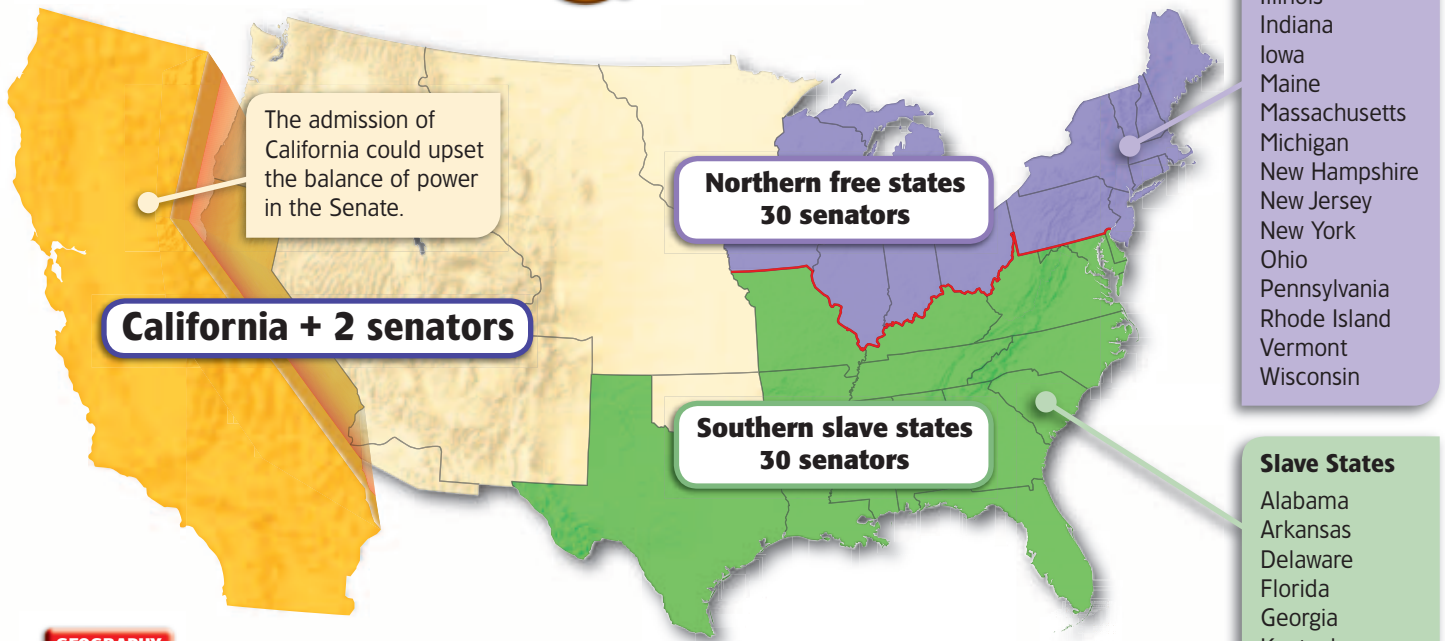
The United States added more than 500,000 square miles of land as a result of winning the Mexican-American War in 1848. The additional land caused bitter debate about slavery. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had divided the Louisiana Purchase into either free or slave regions. It prohibited slavery north of latitude 36°30' but let Missouri become a slave state. In the 1840s President James K. Polk wanted to extend the 36°30' line to the West coast, dividing the Mexican Cession into two parts—one free and one enslaved. Some leaders, including Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, encouraged **popular sovereignty**, the idea that political power belongs to the people, who should decide on banning or allowing slavery.

Regional Differences about Slavery

Some northerners wanted to outlaw slavery in all parts of the Mexican Cession. During the war, Representative David Wilmot offered the **Wilmot Proviso**, a document stating that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of [the] territory."

Upsetting the Balance

QUICK
FACTS



GEOGRAPHY
SKILLS

INTERPRETING MAPS

Region How could the admission of California as a slave state or a free state upset the balance between North and South?

The northern-controlled House passed the document, but in the Senate, the South had more power. The Wilmot Proviso did not pass. Before this time, politicians had usually supported the ideas of their political parties. However, the Wilmot Proviso spurred a debate that showed growing **sectionalism**, or favoring the interests of one section or region over the interests of the entire country.

To attract voters, the Democrats and the Whigs did not take a clear position on slavery in the presidential campaign of 1848. In response, **antislavery northerners formed a new party, the Free-Soil Party, which supported the Wilmot Proviso.** They worried that slave labor would mean fewer jobs for white workers. Party members chose former president Martin Van Buren as their candidate. The new party won 10 percent of the popular vote, drawing away votes from Democrat Lewis Cass. Whig candidate Zachary Taylor won a narrow victory.

The California Question

The California gold rush caused such rapid population growth that California applied to join the Union as a state instead of as a territory. But would California enter the Union as a free state or a slave state?

Most Californians opposed slavery, which had been illegal when the state was part of Mexico. Also, many forty-niners had come from free states. But if California became a free state, the balance between free and slave states would change, favoring the free states.

In the South, an imbalance was unacceptable. "We are about permanently to destroy the balance of power between the sections," said Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi. He and many other southerners did not want California to enter the Union as a free state.

READING CHECK Drawing Inferences

Why did sectionalism in the United States increase in the late 1840s?

THE IMPACT
TODAY

Small parties still affect presidential elections in a similar way today.

Compromise of 1850

Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky had helped to settle the Missouri crisis of 1819–20 and the nullification crisis of 1832–33 by proposing compromises. He now had another plan to help the nation maintain peace. His ideas were designed to give both sides things that they wanted:

1. California would enter the Union as a free state.
2. The rest of the Mexican Cession would be federal land. In this territory, popular sovereignty would decide on slavery.
3. Texas would give up land east of the upper Rio Grande. In return, the government would pay Texas's debts from when it was an independent republic.
4. The slave trade—but not slavery—would end in the nation's capital.
5. A more effective fugitive slave law would be passed.

Primary Source

SPEECH

The Seventh of March Speech

On March 7, 1850, Daniel Webster spoke on the floor of the Senate in favor of the Compromise of 1850.

I hear with distress and anguish the word "secession." Secession! Peaceable secession! Sir, your eyes and mine are never destined to see the miracle. The dismemberment [taking apart] of this vast country without convulsion! The breaking up of the fountains of the great deep without ruffing the surface! Who is so foolish, I beg every body's pardon, as to expect to see any such thing? . . . There can be no such thing as peaceable secession.

—quoted in *Daniel Webster: The Completest Man*, edited by Kenneth Shewmaker

Webster is upset by talk of secession.

Webster is saying that just as it is impossible to move water in the ocean without making waves, it is impossible for states to peacefully secede.

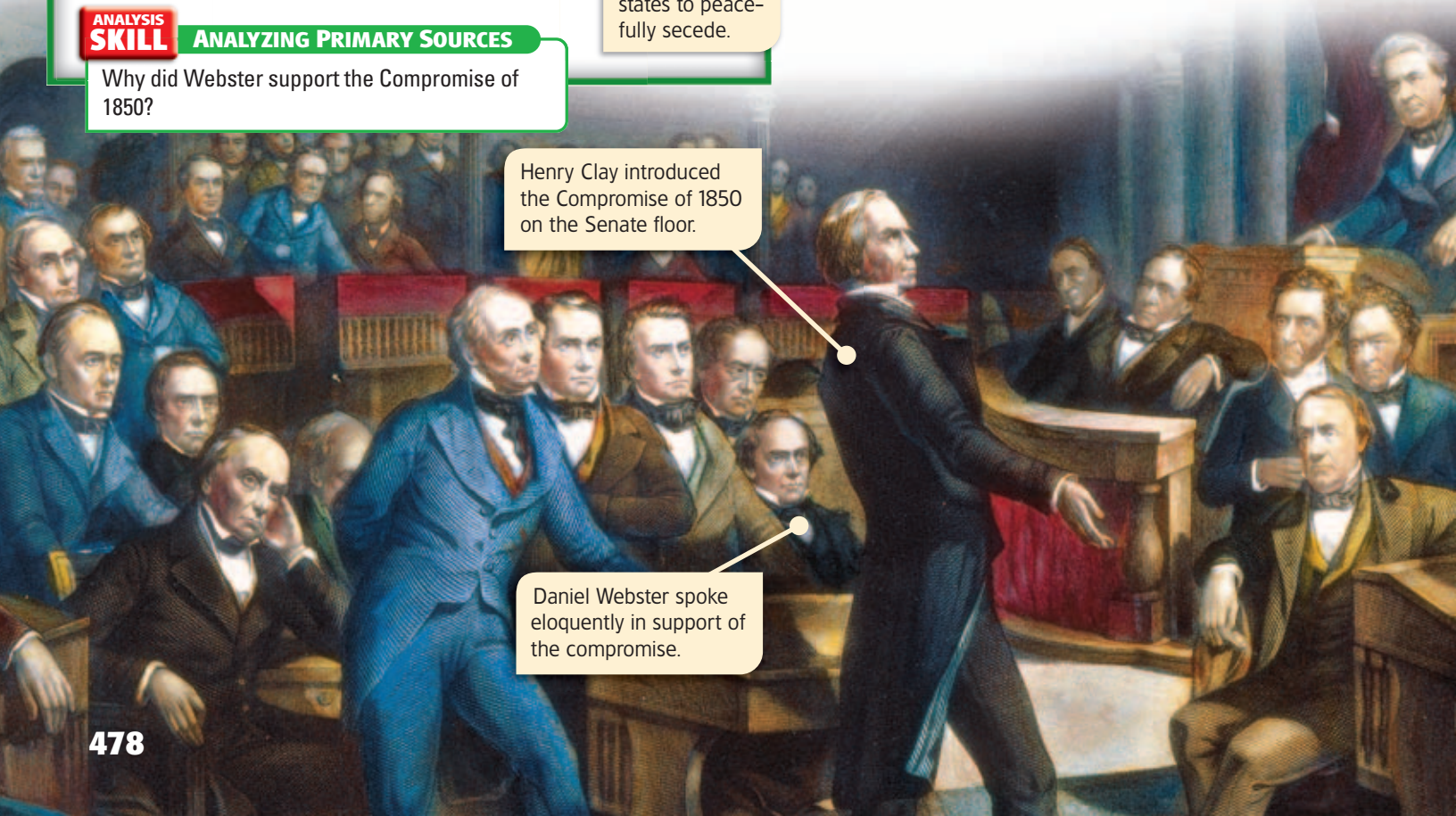
ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Why did Webster support the Compromise of 1850?

Henry Clay introduced the Compromise of 1850 on the Senate floor.

Daniel Webster spoke eloquently in support of the compromise.

Clay's plan drew attack, especially regarding California. Senator William Seward of New York defended antislavery views and wanted California admitted "directly, without conditions, without qualifications, and without compromise." However, Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina argued that letting California enter as a free state would destroy the nation's balance. He warned people of issues that would later start the Civil War. Calhoun asked that the slave states be allowed to **secede**—formally withdraw—from the Union.



In contrast, Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts favored Clay's plan:

“I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American ... I speak today for the preservation of the Union. Hear me for my cause.”

—Daniel Webster, quoted in *Battle Cry of Freedom*
by James M. McPherson

Webster criticized northern abolitionists and southerners who talked of secession.

A compromise was enacted that year and seemed to settle most disputes between free and slave states. It achieved the majority of Clay's proposals. With the **Compromise of 1850**, California was able to enter the Union as a free state. The rest of the Mexican Cession was divided into two territories—Utah and New Mexico—where the question of whether to allow slavery would be decided by popular sovereignty.

Texas agreed to give up its land claims in New Mexico in exchange for financial aid from the federal government. The compromise outlawed the slave trade in the District of Columbia and established a new fugitive slave law.

READING CHECK Analyzing How was Texas affected by the Compromise of 1850?

Fugitive Slave Act

The newly passed **Fugitive Slave Act** made it a crime to help runaway slaves and allowed officials to arrest those slaves in free areas. Slaveholders were permitted to take suspected fugitives to U.S. commissioners, who decided their fate.

Details of the Fugitive Slave Act

Slaveholders could use testimony from white witnesses, but enslaved African Americans accused of being fugitives could not testify. Nor could people who hid or helped a runaway slave—they faced six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine. Commissioners who rejected a slaveholder's claim earned \$5 while those who returned suspected fugitives to slaveholders earned \$10. Clearly, the commissioners benefited from helping slaveholders.

Reactions to the Fugitive Slave Act

Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act began immediately. In September 1850—the same month the law was passed—federal marshals arrested African American James Hamlet. They returned him to a slaveholder in

Primary Source

SPEECH

Southern View of the Compromise of 1850

John C. Calhoun from South Carolina wrote a speech saying that the proposed compromise did not go far enough to satisfy the South.

“I have, senators, believed from the first that the agitation of the subject of slavery would, if not prevented by some timely and effective measure, end in disunion ... The South asks for justice, simple justice, and less she ought not to take. She has no compromise to offer but the Constitution, and no concession or surrender to make.”

Agitation means “unrest.”

Calhoun believes the South's position was supported by the Constitution.

John C. Calhoun was weak and near death. He had his speech in support of slavery read to the Senate for him.

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Why did Calhoun urge southern senators to vote against the compromise?

Primary Source

PHOTOGRAPH

A Fugitive Slave Convention

The Fugitive Slave Act enraged abolitionists. To protest the new law, they held many meetings to publicly denounce it. One such meeting was held in 1850 in the small town of Cazenovia in central New York, a center for abolitionist activity. About 2,000 people—including many former slaves—attended the convention. They listened to speeches, made plans, and raised their voices for freedom. This photo was a point of pride for the delegates, but it also was used by opponents of the movement as a symbol of the poor morals of abolitionists: Not only were whites allowed to mix with African Americans, women and men were allowed to mix as well. This angered many people.

The Edmonson sisters, Mary (left) and Emily, tried to escape from slavery but were captured. Abolitionists later purchased their freedom.



Gerrit Smith organized the convention.

Frederick Douglass spoke to the crowd.

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Why would the abolitionists want a photograph of their convention?

Maryland, although he had lived in New York City for three years.

Thousands of northern African Americans fled to Canada in fear. In the 10 years after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, some 343 fugitive slave cases were reviewed. The accused fugitives were declared free in only 11 cases.

The Fugitive Slave Act upset northerners, who were uncomfortable with the commissioners' power. Northerners disliked the idea of a trial without a jury. They also disapproved of commissioners' higher fees for returning slaves. Most were horrified that some free African Americans had been captured and sent to the South.

Most northerners opposed to the Act peacefully resisted, but violence did erupt. In 1854 **Anthony Burns**, a fugitive slave from Virginia, was arrested in Boston. Abolitionists used force while trying to rescue him from jail, killing a deputy marshal. A federal ship was ordered to return Burns to Virginia after his trial. Many people in the North, particularly in Massachusetts, were outraged. The event persuaded many to join the abolitionist cause.

READING CHECK Drawing Conclusions

What concerns did northerners have about the Fugitive Slave Act?

Antislavery Literature

Abolitionists in the North used the stories of fugitive slaves like James Hamlet and Anthony Burns to gain sympathy for their cause. Slave narratives also educated people about their hardships.

Fiction also informed people about the evils of slavery. **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, the anti-slavery novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, spoke out powerfully against slavery. Stowe, the daughter of Connecticut minister Lyman Beecher, moved to Ohio when she was 21. There she met fugitive slaves and learned about the cruelties of slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act greatly angered Stowe. She decided to write a book that would educate northerners about the realities of slavery.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was published in 1852. The main character, a kindly enslaved African American named Tom, is taken from his wife and sold “down the river” in Louisiana. Tom becomes the slave of cruel Simon Legree. In a rage, Legree has Tom beaten to death.

The novel electrified the nation and sparked outrage in the South. Louisa McCord, a famous southern writer, questioned the “foul imagination which could invent such scenes.”

Within a decade, more than 2 million copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been sold in the United States. The book's popularity caused one northerner to remark that Stowe and her book had created “two millions of abolitionists.” Stowe later wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* to answer those who had criticized her book.

The impact of Stowe's book is suggested by her reported meeting with Abraham Lincoln in 1862, a year after the start of the Civil War. Lincoln supposedly said to Stowe that she was “the little lady who made this big war.” Her book is still widely read today as a source of information about the harsh realities of slavery.

READING CHECK Identifying Cause and Effect

Why did abolitionists use antislavery literature to promote their cause, and what effect did it have on the slavery debate?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW The United States experienced increasing disagreement over the issue of slavery. The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act tried to address these disagreements with legislation. In the next section you will read about another disputed law concerning slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the violence it sparked.

Section 1 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Describe** What ideas did the **Free-Soil Party** promote?

b. Predict What are some possible results of the growing sectional debate over slavery?
- a. Describe** What were the major points of the **Compromise of 1850**?

b. Contrast What differing opinions emerged toward Henry Clay's proposed compromise?
- a. Identify** What were the effects of the **Fugitive Slave Act**?

b. Draw Conclusions Why did some Americans believe the Fugitive Slave Act was unfair?
- a. Identify** What are three examples of antislavery literature?

b. Elaborate Do you think literature was an effective tool against slavery? Why or why not?