

INTRODUCTION

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A large country with vast territories yet untamed, a nation with sections that differed in climate, economy and attitudes about government, and a nation of fiercely independent people: that was the United States in the 19th century. Clash was inevitable - predestined - as this young country in the international arena emerged from a New World wilderness to a new world power. In the North, there was rapid industrialization. In the South, an agricultural economy based largely on cotton, with a plantation system and slave labor, remained dominant.

There were divisions even within the chief geographical areas of North and South.

In the Northeast, principally New York, Pennsylvania and in the New England states, were the intellectual and moralist leaders - the very civilized as it were, the philosophers of the day. And there too were the cultural and chief financial centers of the young country. Money talked. West of the Allegheny Mountains and the Ohio River were the northern tier of states carved from the wilderness: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, part of Minnesota. They were not among the original 13 colonies, and because these states were the offspring of the great American experiment in democracy, people of this region were particularly prideful of and loyal to the Union of states.

Below the Mason-Dixon Line - the generally accepted boundary between North and South - the heavy cotton-producing states of the Deep South differed in attitude and outlook from states of the Upper South, where slavery was not as predominant. The population of the Upper South was less than 30 percent slaves, while in the Deep South slaves accounted for almost half the population (47 percent), and over half in the States of Mississippi (55 percent) and South Carolina (57 percent). Diverse interests, diverse attitudes. The situation was volatile as the mid-19th century approached.

As new states entered the Union the question was: slave or free? From this controversy came Fugitive Slave Laws, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which gave rise to the violent era known as Bleeding Kansas), the Dred Scott Decision, and a host of other legislative and judicial measures designed to quell growing sectional unrest over slavery, but that generally led to more bitterness. Tossed into the mix of debate was the question of state rights versus a strong central government, and even whether the western railroad expansion should be from Northern or Southern cities.

Two events of the late 1850s helped force matters from the political arena to the battlefield. In October 1859, the fanatical abolitionist, John Brown, came east from Kansas and attempted to foment a slave uprising in northern Virginia by seizing the Federal armory at Harpers Ferry. He failed miserably, for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that slavery was a soft issue in the region. United States troops under Colonel Robert E. Lee took Brown into custody. He was tried and sentenced to hang by a Virginia court. Among the crowd that gathered to watch the execution, which gave the abolitionist movement a martyr, was a young actor named Booth, who this day wore a borrowed uniform of the Virginia militia, but who would one day don the cloak of an assassin.

The second development that brought the nation closer to war was the rise of the Republican party, which emerged from the split within the Democratic party over slavery and the right of states to govern themselves. The election of Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate, in November 1860, was considered by the Deep South to be a victory for abolition, a strong central government, and Northern financial interests. As a result, on December 20, the State of South Carolina declared its ties with the Union dissolved. Compromise had failed. A nation moved toward war.