

1850's Pre-Civil War

Major Themes:

Abolition
Sectional Tension

Presidencies:

James Buchanan – 1857 – 1861 (only one you need from this decade)

Overview:

So the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (waving hand) sure worked out well for the US, except that we never decided what to do with the new territory where slavery was concerned – would it be free or slave? So with Congress deadlocked on the question, in steps Henry Clay again to negotiate a tricky compromise.

The Compromise of 1850 admitted Texas as a slave state and California as a free state, maintaining the balance of representatives in Congress for the moment. As for all future states, they would have the right of popular sovereignty – meaning they would get to vote in each state over whether slavery would be legal or not. Seems democratic enough, right? In addition, the Fugitive Slave Act was strengthened, with harsher penalties for those northerners who did not aid in the recovery of runaways. The stage was set for something to go horribly wrong.

To make southerners more anxious about abolition, The Underground Railroad – a series of abolitionist safe houses throughout the south that aided slaves attempting to escape to free territory – was in full swing, with “conductors” like Harriet Tubman making repeated trips into slave territory to help others escape. Thousands did just that in the 1850's, raising tensions and angering southern slaveowners at the loss of their “property”.

In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a fictional story about the horrors of slavery. It flew off of bookshelves, selling a million copies the first year, with two effects: 1) it helped to spread the abolitionist idea to others in the North, growing the movement, and even perhaps influencing Queen Victoria of England, and 2) it hardened southern attitudes towards northerners, believing Stowe a fraud (she had never been to the South), and that she represented the misguided feelings of those who wanted to change the southern way of life.

Kansas was the first state to try out the new popular sovereignty idea, as Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act to provide the structure for the voting to take place. Kansas exploded into violence as pro-slavery gunmen and radical abolitionists invaded the state, intent on killing as many opponents as possible and winning the election. “Bleeding Kansas” would not stop for ten years, with more than 10,000 dead.

John Brown makes a few appearances in this time, at Potawatomie Creek in Kansas where he murders five pro-slavery men, and also in Missouri soon after, where he raided a plantation and took over 20 slaves all the way to Canada, so as to be finally and truly free (Britain had already

abolished slavery). He was a disciple of radical abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher, who sent Brown and others to Kansas with “Beecher’s Bibles” – guns – to use as abolitionist tools in the name of God.

Violence spread to the floor of the S Congress, as in 1856, when Senator Preston Brooks of South Carolina almost beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts to death with a cane in front of the entire US Senate because of a vocal dispute over slavery. Congressman started to carry pistols and knives with them to work each day. Southern supporters sent Brooks new canes, with the orders to “go to work”.

The Supreme Court stepped into the fray in 1857, declaring in the case of *Dred Scott vs. Sanford* that “A black man had no rights a white man was bound to respect” essentially declaring them chattel, or property that could be taken anywhere an owner wished, including into free territory. From here, things quickly got out of hand.

In 1859, John Brown threw a Hail Mary pass and bet all of his chips on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, where he hoped to lead a slave uprising that would spread throughout the South. It was a hare-brained scheme that had no chance of success, but then Brown wasn’t exactly playing with a full deck all the time either. He seized the federal armory (weapons storage warehouse) and waited for slaves to run from the plantations to him so he could arm them and march them around the South. The slaves never even heard about it until it was over. The townspeople ran home and got their weapons and surrounded the place, killing one man, a free black, and holding Brown under siege until the US Army arrived a couple of days later under a career soldier named Robert E. Lee. They charged the armory, killing two of Brown’s sons and wounding Brown himself.

He was put on trial for treason by the state of Virginia, where he was convicted and sentenced to hang. His importance is not what he did, but how people reacted to him. Northern abolitionists hailed Brown as a hero and martyr, and used him to both recruit new members for the cause, and as a source of personal inspiration to up the sacrifices they were willing to make. Southerners mistakenly believed that Brown represented what all northerners believed, and that many more would follow him, armed, and into the South, to take away what they felt were their dearest rights. Southern state militias were soon formed, which would later evolve into the Confederate Army. Sides were being chosen.

Herman Melville called John Brown “The Meteor of the War” – a signal announcing that it was about to begin, and there was no stopping it now. The election of Lincoln was all that stood between a shaky Union and southern secession. 31 million people – 22 million Northerners and 5 million white southerners, with 4 million slaves, in 1860 sat at the brink of catastrophic war.