

Kansas-Nebraska Act

In 1854, Stephen Douglas introduced a bill to help solve the problem of slavery in the new Nebraska territory. He proposed that Nebraska be divided into two territories — Kansas and Nebraska. The settlers of the new territories would decide whether they would be slave or free. This proposal set off a storm of controversy because it effectively undid the Missouri Compromise. Southerners supported the act, while Northerners felt it was a betrayal. The Act set off bitter violence in the Kansas territory. More than 200 people died over the issue of slavery. The area became known as Bleeding Kansas. Anti- and pro-slavery forces set up rival governments. The town of Lawrence was destroyed by pro-slavery forces. In revenge, John Brown and a small group killed five pro-slavery supporters in the middle of the night.

Dred Scott Decision

In 1857, the United States Supreme Court made a landmark ruling in the Dred Scott case. Dred Scott was a slave who applied for freedom. He claimed that because his master had taken him to the free territories of Illinois and Wisconsin, he should be free. The court ruled that because Dred Scott was not considered a citizen, but property, he could not file a lawsuit. The Court also ruled that Congress had no power to decide the issue of slavery in the territories. This meant that slavery was legal in all the territories and the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional.

Harpers Ferry Raid

In 1859, John Brown and a group of followers organized a raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, a federal arsenal. Brown hoped that slaves would come to the arsenal and he would then lead a massive slave uprising. It was Brown's belief that slavery could be ended only through the use of violence. Brown was unsuccessful, and troops led by Robert E. Lee killed 10 raiders and captured John Brown. He was found guilty of murder and treason and sentenced to death. Brown conducted himself with great composure during his trial. While many northerners thought his plan to lead a slave revolt was misguided, they also saw Brown as a hero. Southerners felt that the North wanted to destroy slavery and the South along with it.

Election of 1860

In the mid-1850s, people who opposed slavery were looking for a new voice. Free Soilers, Northern Democrats, and anti-slavery Whigs formed the Republican Party. Their main goal was to keep slavery out of the western territories, not to end slavery in the South. The party grew and was ready in 1856 to challenge the older parties in power. They were not successful in 1856. In 1860, the Republicans ran Abraham Lincoln from Illinois. Lincoln was known to oppose slavery on the basis of its being morally wrong. However, Lincoln was not willing to end slavery at the risk of tearing the Union apart.

Secession of the South

The Southerners' reaction to the election of President Lincoln was strong. They felt that the country had put an abolitionist in the White House. The South felt that secession was the only option. In 1860, South Carolina seceded from (left) the Union. By February of 1861, Alabama, Florida, Texas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi had seceded. In