

Status of Slavery in the Territories, 1850–1854

Student Handout

Historical Context

In the years before the Civil War as the nation continued to expand westward, Congress repeatedly addressed the slavery issue, hoping to preserve **the Union**. As new states were added, it became increasingly necessary to create laws that would reduce the tension between slave and free states. Slave states feared Congress would pass laws banning slavery and free states feared that a law might pass that would deny **abolition**. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 tried to avoid sending the country into conflict by keeping the balance between slave and free states, but as the country continued to expand westward, new compromises were needed to address different concerns. The **Compromise of 1850** and the **Kansas-Nebraska Act** both allowed citizens to decide the slavery question by **popular sovereignty** (popular vote). As the territory of Kansas prepared for statehood, it had to decide whether it would permit slavery. This led to the conflict known as “**Bleeding Kansas**” as supporters and opponents of slavery entered the territory and clashed.

Vocabulary

The Union

Abolition

Compromise of 1850

Popular sovereignty

Kansas-Nebraska Act

Bleeding Kansas

Map Activity

To do this activity, you will need a blank outline map and access to the “Status of Slavery in the Territories, 1850–1854” digital map. Turn on the layers of the digital map as indicated on the following instructions and answer the question in the space provided.

1. What opinions did people have on slavery ten years before the Civil War? What did the government do during this time to avoid war? How did new states and territories decide whether they would be slave or free?
2. Look at the map with all the layers except the “State” layer turned off.
3. On your outline map, identify the states that allowed slavery in the years before the Civil War. Color or draw a line around these states.
4. Turn on the “Slave states” layer to see which states had slavery. Make any necessary corrections to your outline map.

5. Now, identify the states that banned slavery before the Civil War on your outline map. Use a second color or draw a line around these states.
6. Turn on the “Free states” layer to see which states banned slavery. Make any necessary corrections to your outline map.
7. Why do you think there were an equal number of slave and free states?

8. Identify the territories in the upper map whose slave status would be left to their inhabitants. Turn on the “Left to territories” layer to see if you identified them correctly.
9. Locate the territories created by the Compromise of 1850 on your outline map and color them with a third color.
10. Turn on the “Compromise of 1850” layer and check to see if you identified these correctly. Make any necessary corrections to your outline map.
11. Now, locate the territories created by the Kansas-Nebraska Act on your outline map and color them with a fourth color. Locate and draw in the line established by the Missouri Compromise of 1820.
12. Turn on the “Missouri Compromise line” and “Kans-Neb Act” layers and check to see if you identified these items correctly. Make any necessary corrections to your outline map.
13. Answer these questions in the space provided:
 - a. How do you think these laws helped reduce the tensions between slave and free states?

 - b. Which territories were allowed to decide whether they would have slavery? Why do you think this policy of choosing slavery by popular vote was acceptable to some, but not to others?

 - c. What differences do you see between the two maps? What similarities exist?

- d. Now turn on the inset map (“Violence erupting” layer), which shows the conflict in the Kansas-Nebraska territory. Read the captions on this map and answer the following questions:
 - i. What happened in Lawrence?
 - ii. What happened in Potawatomie Creek?
 - iii. Why do you think these events occurred so close to the Missouri border?

Assessment

Look at the lower map of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and locate the line of the Missouri Compromise. This line was established in 1820 as the dividing line between slave and free states. Missouri was allowed to be a slave state as a compromise for allowing Maine into the Union as a free state. The goal was to keep a balance between the number of slave and free states. Write a paragraph answering the following question:

Why did Congress have the Kansas-Nebraska Act invalidate the dividing line between slave and free states?