

The Compromise of 1850

The Missouri Compromise maintained an uneasy peace between the North and the South for several decades. Then, in 1850, the issue of slavery and its expansion surfaced once more.

The discovery of gold at a sawmill in California in 1848 led to the Gold Rush of 1849, which resulted in California's population increasing more than tenfold in a few years. This led to Californians applying for admission to the Union as a free state in 1849 and a resumption of the slavery-expansion controversy.

The issue was even more complicated because of the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican War in 1848. By its terms, Mexico relinquished claims to Texas above the Rio Grande River and ceded New Mexico and Upper California to the United States. This vast territory was organized into Utah Territory in the North and New Mexico Territory in the South. (In time, the states of Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico would be formed from the region, as well as parts of Colorado and Wyoming.) The burning question was: Would these new territories be free or slave? Would another compromise be worked out that would once again avert war? The North hammered away at the evils of slavery, while the South, if it did not have its way, threatened to secede from the Union. With storm clouds on the horizon, the future looked bleak.

Once again, the Great Compromiser, Henry Clay, came to the rescue. In 1850, he was over 70 years old and in failing health. But this did not stop him from vigorously participating in another heated debate on the slavery question. He and several other stalwarts of the Senate (Daniel Webster of Massachusetts and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina chief among them) argued the issue for eight long months. With people from neighboring cities crowding into an overheated Senate chamber that left all in attendance perspiring, Clay rose on January 29 and presented a set of resolutions he hoped would once again ease the conflict. They were as follows:

- (1) California was to be admitted to the Union as a free state.
- (2) Texas would relinquish to New Mexico some land that both claimed, with the federal government reimbursing Texas \$10 million for its loss.
- (3) The new territories gained as a result of the Mexican War could, once they applied for statehood, decide for themselves whether to be free or slave.
- (4) The slave trade, although not slavery, would be abolished in the District of Columbia. (Washington, D.C. had been the home of the largest slave market in North America.)
- (5) A much stronger fugitive slave law would make it a crime for anyone to give assistance to a runaway slave.

The Compromise of 1850 succeeded in maintaining the peace for another ten years, but it did little to settle the slavery controversy. The North, to be sure, was satisfied that California would join the union as a free state, and the South was pleased that the new territories acquired from Mexico could decide the slavery issue for themselves. But the real stickler was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This law made the Compromise of 1850 ineffective and further flamed the fires of hatred that burned between the North and the South.

The Fugitive Slave Act was a clear victory for the South. It was aimed at combating the Underground Railroad, which had been guiding runaway slaves to freedom in the North (and, in some cases, on to Canada). But if its enactment was hoped to permanently avert war; it backfired. The law gave added impetus to the ever-growing antislavery movement, as southern slave-catchers started going north determined to bring back "their rightful property." Sometimes in the zealotry they kidnapped free blacks and transported them south to be sold back into slavery. Instead of kowtowing to the new act, many northerners openly flouted it. They nailed placards on trees and doors warning blacks to stay out of sight, and did everything they could to assist slaves in their flight to freedom.

Review and Write

1. Which state's application for statehood brought on the Compromise of 1850?
2. Who created the Compromise of 1850 and how long did it take to craft this compromise?
3. From the set of five resolutions drafted, which was the most contentious and why?
4. Define popular sovereignty using your textbook and then state how it applied within the Compromise of 1850.
5. For your interaction, you are to write an "I Am" poem using the directions from our class handout. Your poem will be placed in your Interactive Notebook on page 20L.