

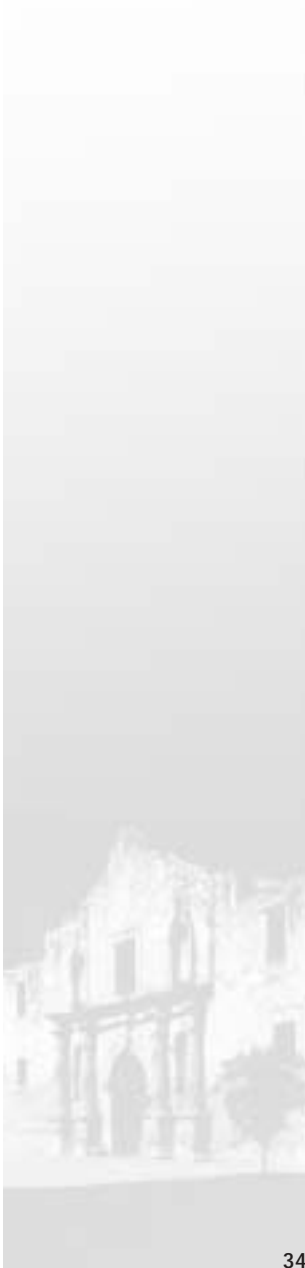


Two Nations on the Brink of War

At the Battle of San Jacinto, a very young Texan army under the leadership of feisty frontiersman Sam Houston (1793–1863; see biographical entry) had defeated a section of the much more experienced Mexican army. They had captured the famous Mexican general, Antonio de López Santa Anna (1794–1876; see biographical entry), and made him sign a treaty that recognized Texas as an independent nation. Texans and other U.S. citizens were proud and elated, but that mood was short-lived. When the dust settled, most Texans realized that they faced an uncertain and risky future.

Calls for the annexation of Texas

Although the population of U.S.-born settlers in Texas was higher than the Mexican population in the region, the Texans were far outnumbered when Mexico's total population—more than eight million—was considered. Mexico could raise a much bigger army than could Texas. Most U.S. citizens admitted that the victory at San Jacinto had been a



lucky break. It was not likely that the Texan army could win a real, full-scale war if Mexico chose to wage one.

Thus, more and more voices began to call for annexation, meaning that Texas would become part of the United States. The benefits of statehood had to do not just with defense (not only against Mexico but against the various Native American nations in the area, who also considered the Texans invaders) but with culture. In their hearts and in their habits, the vast majority of U.S. settlers in Texas were still Americans. They still spoke only English and practiced the Protestant religions of the U.S. majority. And they wanted all of the rights and privileges that belonged to U.S citizens.

The Lone Star Republic makes its way

For the time being, however, the Lone Star Republic made its way on its own. In October 1836, the revolutionary hero Sam Houston became the little nation's first elected president. Five months later, the United States set up diplomatic relations with Texas (a formal way of recognizing that another country has a right to exist), followed by similar steps taken by France, Great Britain, and other European nations. During the next decade, the government of the Lone Star Republic would be troubled by problems of defense and debt, but Texas itself would continue to grow in population.

There were two main reasons why Texas was attractive to certain people in the United States. Those who supported expansionism (the movement to expand the United States beyond its already established borders) welcomed this new territory as a likely place for more and more U.S. citizens to settle. And if Mexico wanted a war, so be it, for then perhaps the United States could gain even more land than just Texas. The other reason had to do with an issue that was already complex and troublesome, and that would continue to divide the people of the United States during the next few decades. That issue was slavery.

The issue of slavery divides the nation

By the mid-nineteenth century, slavery had been practiced in the United States for almost two hundred years.

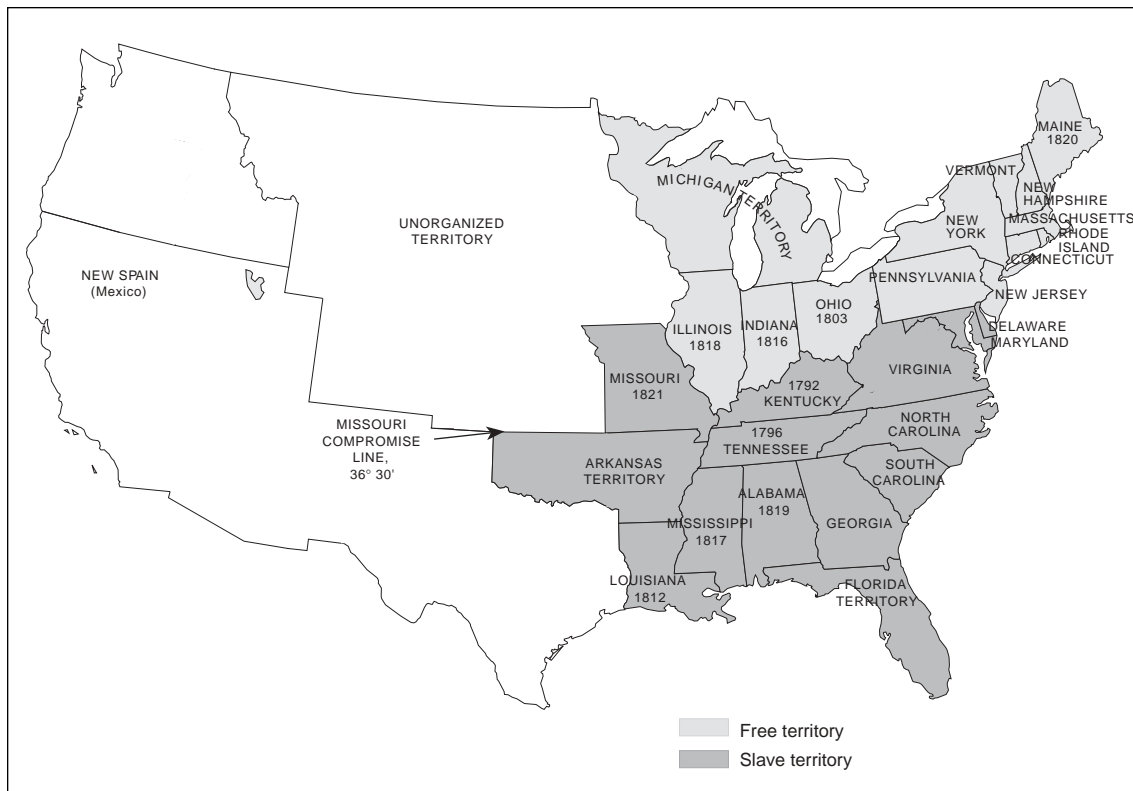
During those centuries, Africans had been taken from their homes and transported under inhumane conditions across the ocean to North America (as well as to parts of South America, Central America, and the Caribbean islands). There they were made to work in the fields and in the homes of farms and plantations without wages and under harsh living conditions as well as the constant threat of punishment or death if they tried to escape. Supporters of slavery justified it as the only way to provide the vast numbers of agricultural workers needed to keep the U.S. economy going. Since Africans and other people of non-European heritage were viewed as racially inferior, it was not necessary to treat them equally, and it would be foolish and wrong to offer them the same rights as white people.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the United States began to change, however. A division between the northern and southern states began to develop, and this division would grow wider with the passing years. The North had become less dependent on agriculture and more dependent on trade and industry. These practices called for fewer workers, and as a consequence, there was no need to use slave labor. There had always been U.S. citizens in all parts of the country who disapproved of slavery, but now more northerners began to view the practice as being morally wrong. Eventually an abolitionist movement (whose members worked to end slavery) developed and grew in numbers and influence.

Meanwhile, the economy of the South was still based on agriculture. Southern farmers and plantation owners still depended on slaves to work their fields and harvest their cotton, rice, and other crops. Many southerners also were quite comfortable with and proud of their lifestyles and culture, and they did not want things to change. They felt that northerners understood neither the southern way of life nor the true nature of slaves and slavery. There were a few southern abolitionists, but most southerners viewed them with scorn and suspicion.

A delicate balance

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the number of states in which slavery was legal kept pace,



more or less, with the number of states in which it was illegal. This balance was important, because neither side wanted the other to have too much power in Congress. To northerners, that might mean that laws would be passed that would keep slavery strong and benefit the South too much, and to southerners, it might mean that slavery would be outlawed altogether, or that their region might otherwise be hurt. As the nineteenth century progressed, the distrust between North and South seemed to grow by leaps and bounds.

The issue reached a crisis point in 1820, when Missouri applied to be admitted to the union as a slave state. If this happened, the delicate balance between slave and free (nonslave) states would be upset. As a result, northerners strongly protested Missouri's admission. The issue was resolved with an agreement called the Missouri Compromise, through which Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine (which had previously formed the northern part of the

A map showing the line that made up the Missouri Compromise. The Compromise was put in place to keep the balance between free and slave states. *Photograph courtesy of the Gale Group.*

state of Massachusetts) was admitted as a free state, thus maintaining the balance. This agreement also prohibited slavery in any of the lands of the Louisiana Purchase (which included the present-day states of Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, part of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, most of Kansas, parts of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Louisiana) that were north of the Missouri border.

Texas becomes a slavery battleground

After the admission of Missouri as a state, Texas was to become the next great slavery battleground. Those who wanted not only to uphold, but to extend the practice of slavery, and thus increase the power of the slaveholding states, saw Texas as the natural place to do it. In fact, many Texans already owned slaves and were as determined to keep owning them as they were to carry unregistered guns. It was thought that since Texas covered such a huge area of land (several hundred thousand square miles), it might eventually be divided into two or even three separate states, all of them allowing slavery. That would give slaveholders more influence in the Senate, where each state would have two votes.

These, of course, were the very reasons northerners opposed the annexation of Texas. They feared that southerners would take control of Congress and thus dominate national life and politics. In addition, many northerners believed that slavery was evil and must be stamped out, not extended. Abolitionists were sure that all this talk of annexation was generated by a proslavery conspiracy. Abolitionists foresaw dire consequences if Texas was allowed into the United States, including the possible breakup of the union. A few proponents of Texas annexation also objected to the way that Texans had gone back on their promise to obey Mexico's laws and had, in fact, simply taken land that really belonged to Mexico.

By the 1830s, the U.S. Congress was divided between those in favor of annexing Texas and those against it, with each group continually vying for power. Meanwhile, the man at the helm of the nation between 1828 and 1836, President Andrew Jackson (1767–1845), was in favor of Texas statehood but did not want to take a firm stand on the issue. He was afraid that annexing Texas at this time would look too much