

Slavery: Cause and Catalyst of the Civil War

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Southeast Region



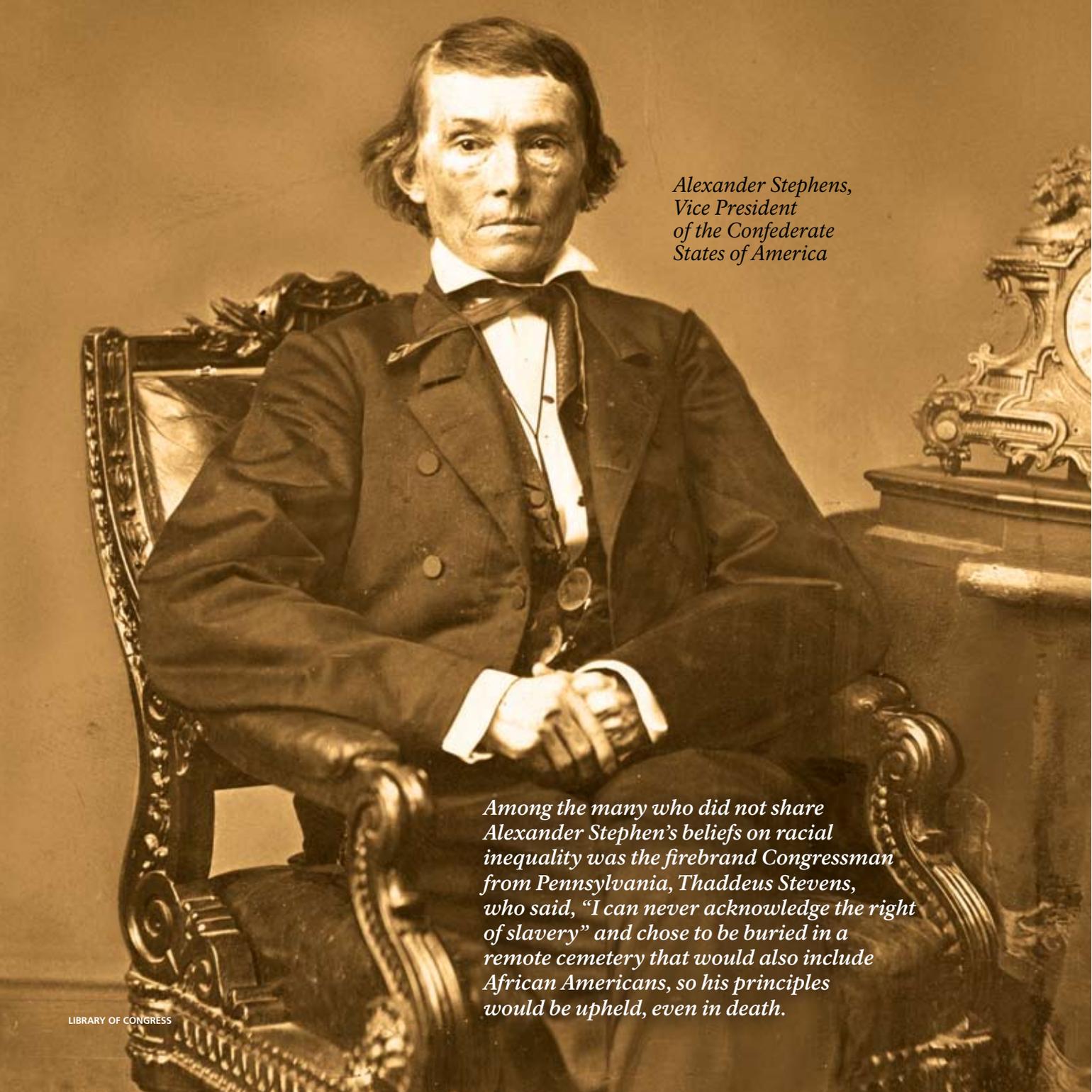
What caused the Civil War?

A number of issues ignited the Civil War: states' rights, the role of the federal government, the preservation of the Union, the economy; but all were inextricably bound to the institution of slavery.



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Alexander Stephens,
Vice President
of the Confederate
States of America

Among the many who did not share Alexander Stephen's beliefs on racial inequality was the firebrand Congressman from Pennsylvania, Thaddeus Stevens, who said, "I can never acknowledge the right of slavery" and chose to be buried in a remote cemetery that would also include African Americans, so his principles would be upheld, even in death.

The Context for Conflict

The role of slavery in bringing on the Civil War has been hotly debated for decades. One important way of approaching the issue is to look at what contemporary observers had to say. In March 1861, Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America, was quoted in the Savannah Republican:

"The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution African slavery as it exists amongst us, the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the 'rock upon which the old Union would split.' He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact.

"[Our] foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition."

Savannah Republican, March 21, 1861

Today, most professional historians agree with Stephens that slavery and the status of African Americans were at the heart of the crisis that plunged the U.S. into a civil war from 1861 to 1865. That is not to say the average Confederate soldier fought to preserve slavery or the average Union soldier went to war to end slavery. Some fought on moral grounds. Some fought because they felt their way of life and prosperity were threatened. Others fought to preserve the Union. Soldiers fight for many reasons—notably to stay alive and support their comrades in arms. The North's goal in the beginning was the preservation of the Union, not emancipation. For the 180,000 African Americans who ultimately served the U.S. in the war, however, emancipation was the primary aim.

The roots of the crisis over slavery that gripped the nation in 1860-1861 go back well before the nation's founding. In 1619, slavery was introduced to Virginia, when a Dutch ship traded African slaves for food. Unable to find cheap labor from other sources, white settlers increasingly turned to slaves imported from Africa. By the early 1700s, in British North America, slavery generally meant African slavery. Southern plantations using slave labor produced the great export crops—tobacco, rice, forest products, and indigo—that made the American colonies prosperous. Many Northern merchants made their fortunes either in the slave trade or by exporting the products of slave labor. African slavery was central to the development of British North America.

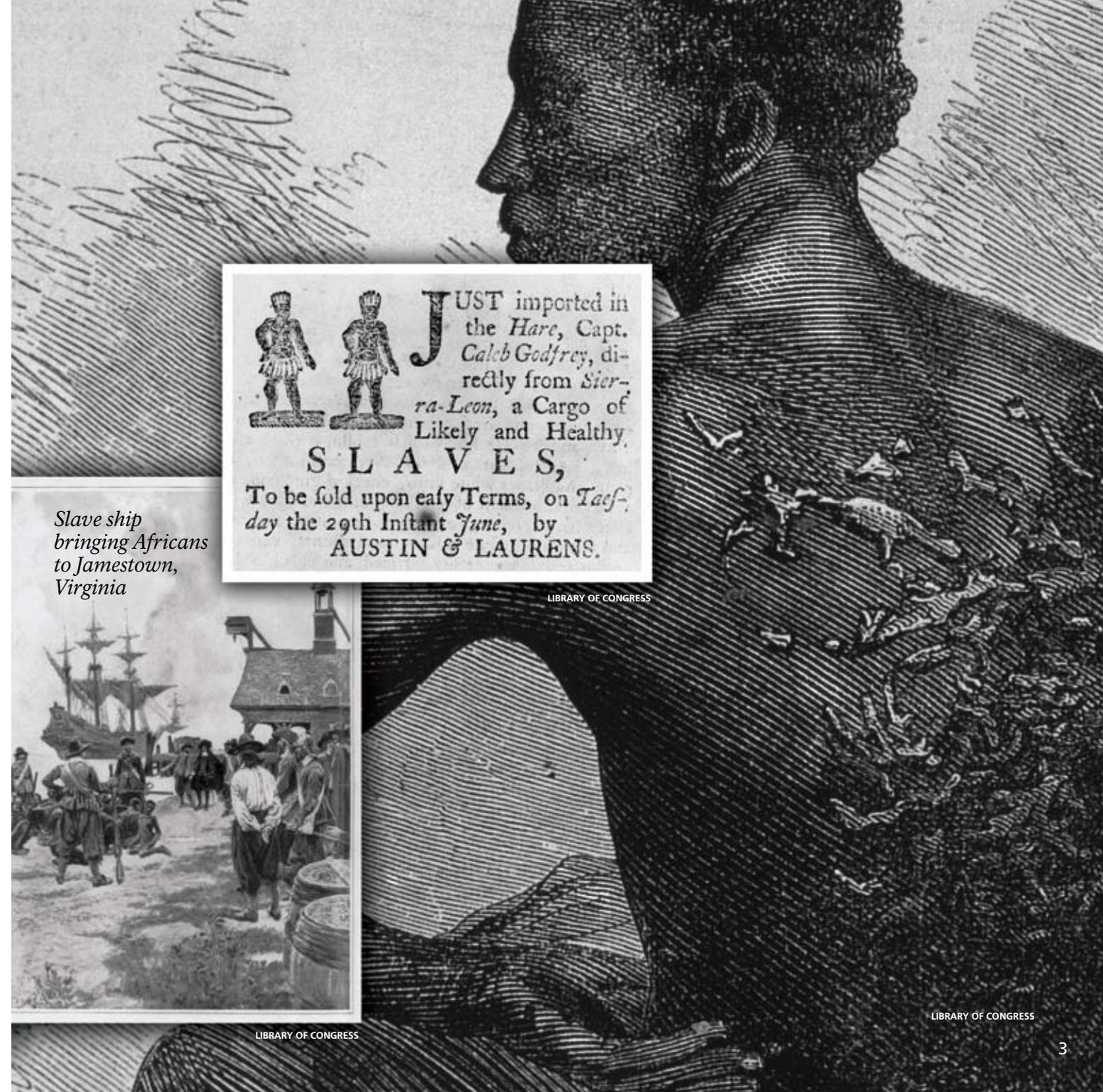


NPS/RICHARD SCHLECHT

Although slavery existed in all 13 colonies at the start of the American Revolution in 1775, a number of Americans (especially those of African descent) sensed the contradiction between the Declaration of Independence's ringing claim of human equality and the existence of slavery. Reacting to that contradiction, Northern states decided to phase out slavery following the Revolution. The future of slavery in the South was debated, and some held out the hope it would eventually disappear there as well.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

United States Declaration of Independence



 JUST imported in the *Hare*, Capt. Caleb Godfrey, directly from *Siera-Leon*, a Cargo of Likely and Healthy
SLAVES,
To be sold upon easy Terms, on *Tues-* day the 29th Instant *June*, by
AUSTIN & LAURENS.

Slave ship bringing Africans to Jamestown, Virginia



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The cotton gin greatly increased the amount of cotton that could be processed and therefore the demand for more slave labor.

Slavery and the Economy

All realistic hope slavery might eventually die out in the South ended when Massachusetts native Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin—a simple machine that enabled textile mills to use the type of cotton grown in most of the South. At the same time, the world demand for cotton exploded. By 1840, cotton produced in the American South earned more money than all other U.S. exports combined. Many white Southerners came to believe cotton could be grown only with slave labor. Over time, most took for granted that their prosperity, even their way of life, was inseparable from African slavery.

Slavery was not the only source of dispute. The North and South were very different in nature, and wanted different things from their government. In the North, society was fast becoming industrial. Immigrants in search of work were arriving by the thousands. In addition, women began to leave the farms seeking opportunity in the cities. Immigrants and women provided an abundant source of inexpensive labor to fuel the factories. Industrialization increased the amount of textiles produced and therefore, the demand for more slave labor. Entrepreneurs looking to develop these new industries demanded protection from the cheap European imports.



Women and immigrants at New England mills (Homer Lithograph)

The South, on the other hand, remained a region of small towns and large plantations. The great cotton empire depended on slave labor and cheap European imports. Southerners began to fear that if the North ever gained control in Congress, it would create taxes on imports, known as tariffs, which would ruin the South.

John C. Calhoun, Vice President under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, was among the first to voice this concern. Though he opposed secession, Calhoun argued that a state could protect its interests by simply nullifying any act by the Federal government it considered unconstitutional and unfair. Southerners began to rely on the concept of states' sovereignty as a means of self-protection.



Slave quarters at Melrose Estate.



NPS/NATCHEZ NHP

Formerly enslaved woman, Jane Johnson at Melrose Estate, Natchez, Mississippi, circa 1905



NPS/NATCHEZ NHP

Slavery and States' Rights

The question of who had the power to allow or disallow slavery in the territories and the newly formed states—the federal government or the states—provoked a heated national debate that would last for decades, resulting in a number of compromises.

The proposed admission of Missouri as a slave state in 1820, led to the Missouri Compromise. Under its terms, Maine was admitted as a free state at the same time Missouri came in as a slave state, maintaining the balance between slave and free. Additionally, Congress prohibited slavery in all western territories lying above Missouri's southern boundary.

The Missouri Compromise quieted the agitation over slavery. But, Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to a friend, said that the compromise was “like a firebell in the night.” He also foretold that the institution of slavery was like holding a “wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.” True to his prediction, the anti-slavery movement, which had been around since before the Revolutionary War, gained strength, and became more vocal and more radical by the 1830s, calling for the immediate end to slavery. One of these radical abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, declared:

Enslave the liberty of but one human being and the liberties of the world are put in peril... I will be as harsh as truth, and uncompromising as justice... I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard.

The firebell in the night that Jefferson predicted went off when Nat Turner, an enslaved man in Southampton County, Virginia, believed that he was called by God in a vision to initiate a slave revolt. He hoped it would spread into a massive uprising. Starting with a few trusted fellow slaves, Turner began his rebellion on April 21, 1831. Other enslaved and free blacks joined, eventually numbering about 70 rebels. During the revolt, some 60 whites were killed. The retaliation was swift and harsh. Local militias and detachments from the American naval fleet docked in Norfolk, numbering about 3000 men, captured and executed 56 blacks. Another 100-200 blacks

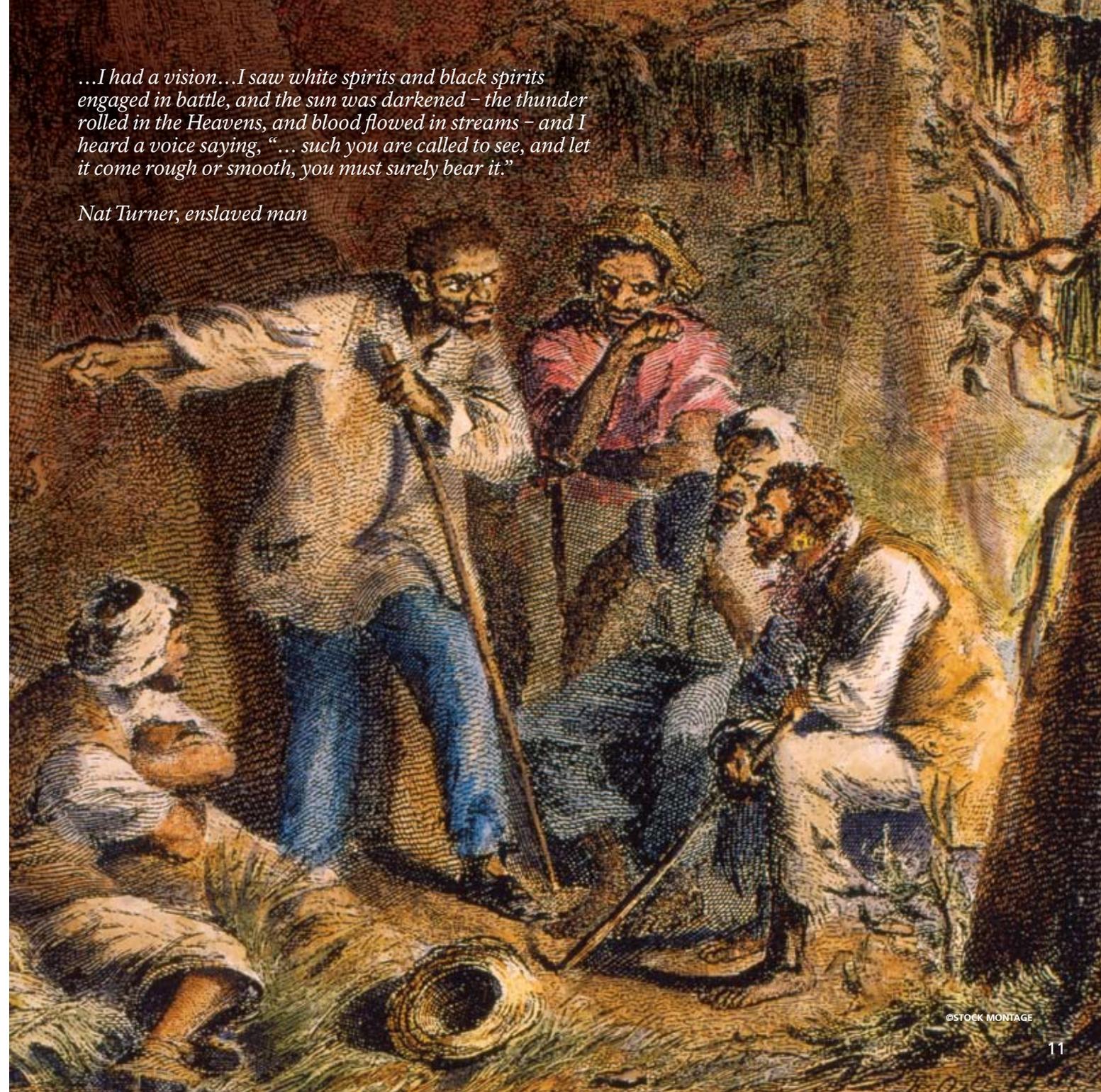
The capture of Nat Turner



©STOCK MONTAGE

...I had a vision...I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened – the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams – and I heard a voice saying, “... such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it.”

Nat Turner, enslaved man



©STOCK MONTAGE

were killed during the retaliation. Nat Turner's Revolt planted fear throughout the South. The Virginia General Assembly passed laws that made it unlawful to teach slaves or free blacks to read or write or to hold religious services, in which a white minister was not present. Other states followed Virginia's lead.

Later, the U.S. victory in the Mexican War of 1846-1848 brought the nation vast new acreage in the West. Once again, the status of slavery in the territories became a hot issue. Congressman David Wilmot of Pennsylvania introduced legislation strictly prohibiting slavery in any of the new lands. The bill failed to pass and the issue was argued furiously for the next fifteen years.

A new agreement, the Compromise of 1850, became necessary when California sought to join the Union. The compromise admitted California as a free state, included a stronger fugitive slave law, assured Congress would not interfere with the interstate traffic in slaves in the South, and prohibited the slave trade in the District of Columbia. As is usually the case with compromises, neither side was pleased, but both accepted it, hoping the law would finally settle the slavery issue. It didn't. Also in 1850, the area of present-day Arizona and New Mexico was established by Congress as the New Mexico Territory. While the territory was below the line established with the Missouri Compromise, Congress remained silent on whether or not slavery would be allowed in the territory.

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 incited great outrage. Commissioners received twice as much money for returning a slave to the South than for freeing them. This heightened Northern sympathy toward the runaway slave and caused great expansions in the existing vigilance and resistance movements. Organizations like the Anti-Slavery Society, spearheaded by both men and women, staged lectures and provided shelter, money, transportation, and services for slaves, to escape along the Underground Railroad.



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The Underground Railroad was a vast network of people who helped fugitive slaves escape to the North and to Canada. It was not run by any single organization or person. Rather, it consisted of many individuals, such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth—some whites but predominantly blacks—who knew only of the local efforts to aid fugitives and not of the overall operation. Still, it effectively moved hundreds of thousands of slaves northward each year.

In 1853, a free black man, upon entering the state of Maryland, was sold into slavery and died trying to escape. In a letter to the leader of the Underground Railroad movement in Philadelphia, African American woman and Anti-Slavery Society organizer, Frances Harper wrote: Upon that grave I pledge myself to the Anti-Slavery cause.

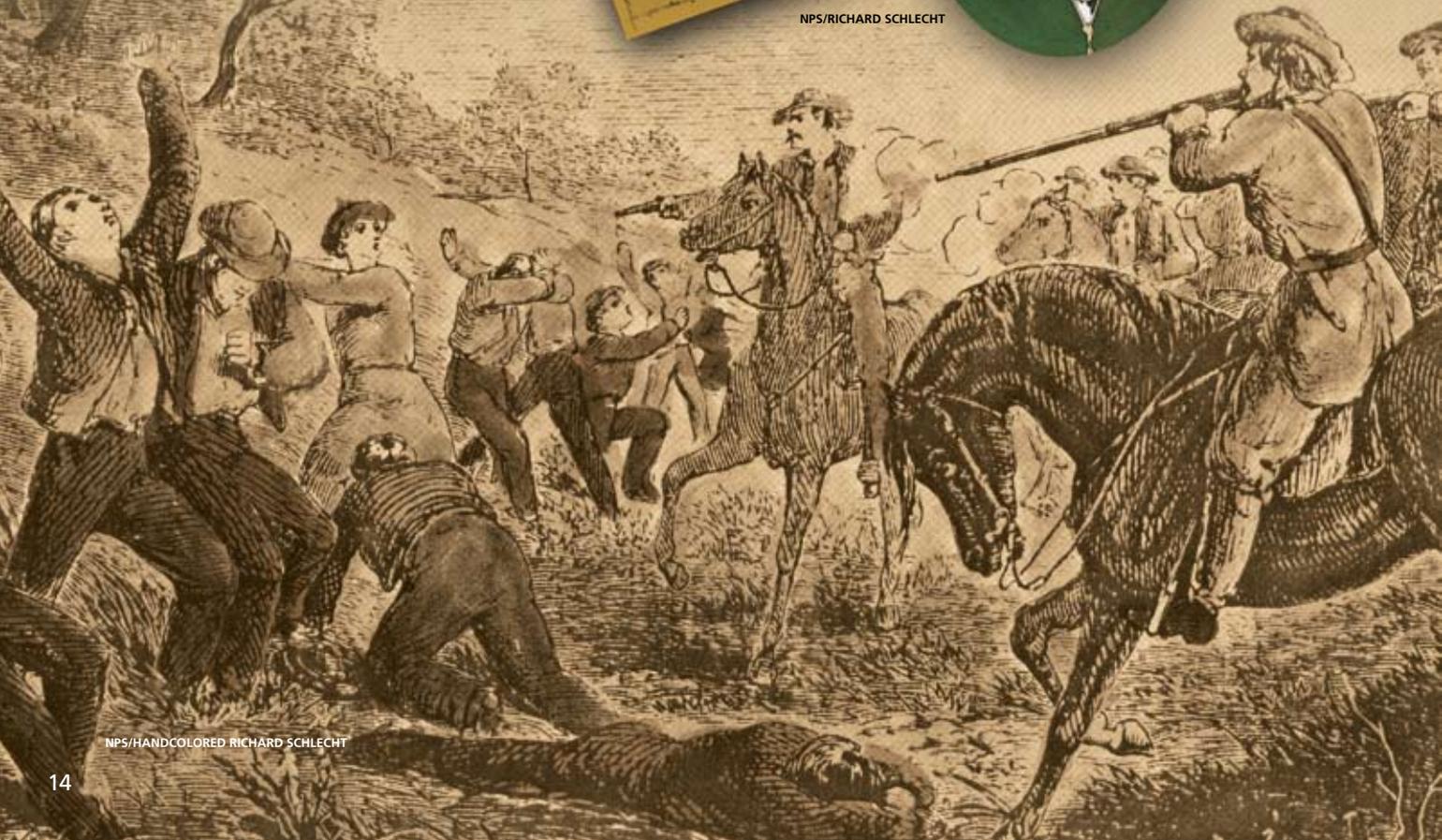
Pro-Slavery proponents killed five people and wounded six others in the Marais Des Cygnes Massacre in Kansas as a result of the tensions caused by the Kansas-Nebraska Act.



Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, incited anger in the South.



NPS/RICHARD SCHLECHT



NPS/HANDCOLORED RICHARD SCHLECHT

With tensions at a fevered pitch, Harriet Beecher Stowe published her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, describing the atrocities of slave life. The book sold 300,000 copies in its first year and became the second best-selling book of the 19th century, following the Bible. The novel's popularity roused intense new resentment in the South.

Then, in 1854, passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act invoked the concept of "popular sovereignty" which gave the people of each territory choosing to pursue statehood, the right to decide whether or not to allow slavery. Pro- and anti-slavery factions turned the Kansas Territory into a bloody battleground.

Settlers from the North were determined to make Kansas a free state. Southern settlers were equally determined to make it a slave state. Missouri's Border Ruffians came across the border to intimidate free-soilers and raid abolitionist towns. Some Northerners shipped in boxes of rifles, known as "Beecher's Bibles." (Filled with antislavery fervor, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher had once said there might be situations where a gun was more useful than a Bible.) John Brown and his followers started their bloody fight against slavery, killing pro-slavery sympathizers in Kansas.

Back in Washington, D.C., tempers flared. After addressing "the crime against Kansas," Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts was attacked with a cane and beaten unconscious on the Senate floor. Senator Toombs from Georgia announced he would one day auction slaves on Boston Common itself. In Alabama, Secessionist William Lowndes Yancey argued angrily that the South would never find happiness until it left the Union and became an independent nation.



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Preston Brooks canes Senator Sumner unconscious on the Senate Floor in the heated dispute over the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Politics of Unrest

Enslaved man, Dred Scott sues unsuccessfully for his freedom.



NPS/RICHARD SCHLECHT

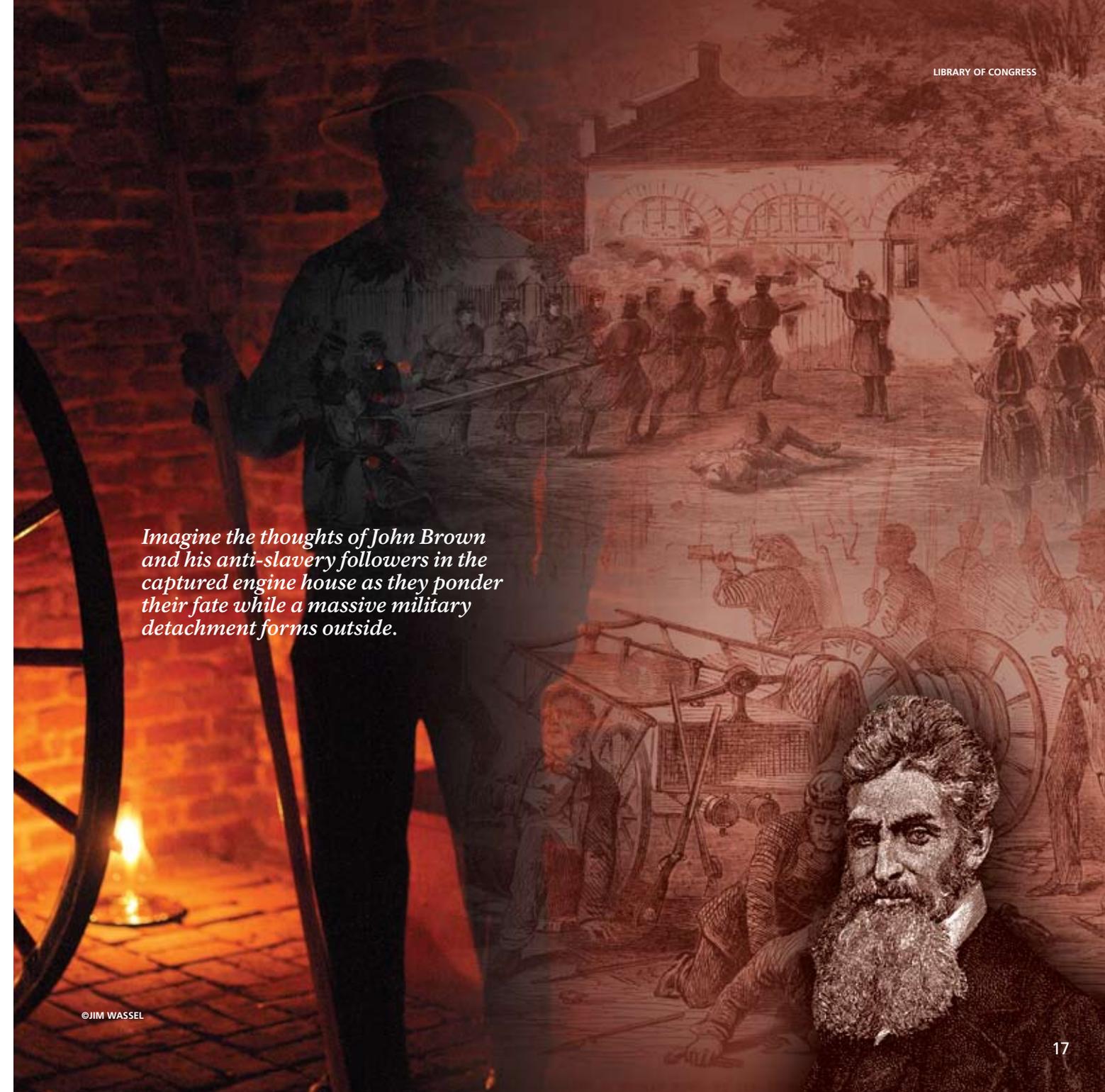
The Republican Party was organized as a direct response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Republicans made opposition to the extension of slavery in the territories their chief issue. Inevitably, the party aroused deep anger in the South. Attitudes in the two sections of the nation continued to harden into the late 1850s.

Then, in 1857, Dred Scott, an enslaved man who was taken by his owner, an Army surgeon, into Illinois and Wisconsin Territory (later Minnesota) which were part of the Northwest Territory in which slavery was prohibited, sued for his freedom. The U. S. Supreme Court decided that Americans of African descent—whether enslaved or free—were not U.S. citizens and did not have the right to sue. The Court also found the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, ruling that the federal government did not have the authority to prohibit slavery in the territories.

Two years later, the powder keg ignited. John Brown, with a handful of followers, attempted to seize the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, hoping to use the weapons stored there to incite a slave insurrection in the South. He managed to capture an engine house which he held overnight. However, the next morning, a detachment of U.S. Marines, led by army Colonel Robert E. Lee overran the building. Brown was quickly tried, convicted of treason, and hanged. After this raid, the hope of a peaceful solution to the problem of slavery seemed more and more remote.

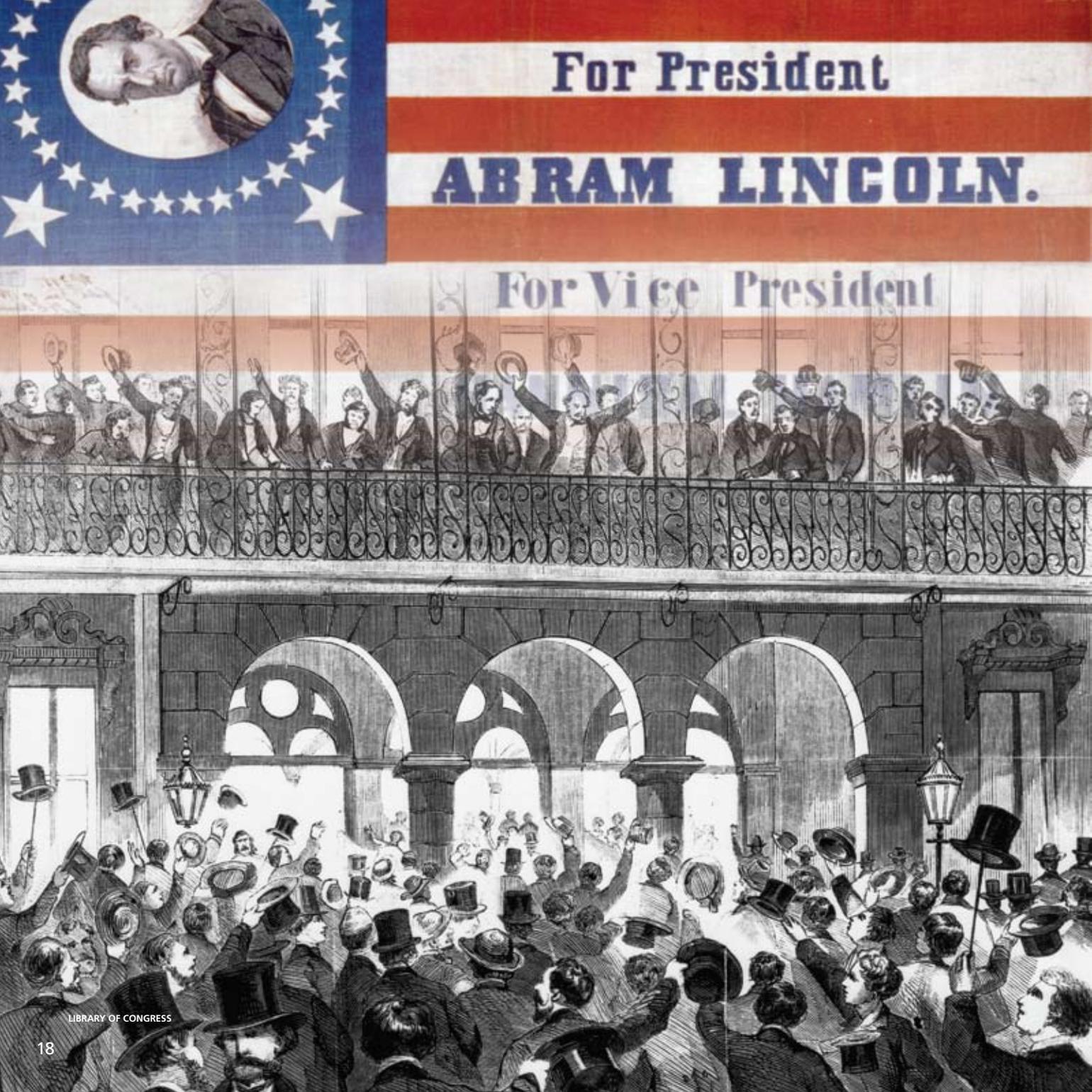
If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further... with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments—I submit; so let it be done.

John Brown, Abolitionist, at his court hearing



Imagine the thoughts of John Brown and his anti-slavery followers in the captured engine house as they ponder their fate while a massive military detachment forms outside.

©JIM WASSEL



The question of slavery, and particularly slavery in the territories, dominated the presidential election of 1860. The recently formed Republican Party emerged as the advocate for abolishing slavery in the territories. Abraham Lincoln was the party candidate. The Democratic Party, which had dominated politics in the 1850s, split along sectional lines, with Northern Democrats nominating Stephen A. Douglas, and adopting a platform of extending popular sovereignty to the territories. The Southern Democrats nominated John C. Breckenridge, and their platform advocated the protection of slavery where it existed and in the territories. Not happy with any of the above options, another party, the Constitutional Union Party, made up of remnants of the Whig and other earlier parties, nominated John Bell as its candidate. Its platform advocated compromise on the issue to slavery to save the Union and the Constitution.

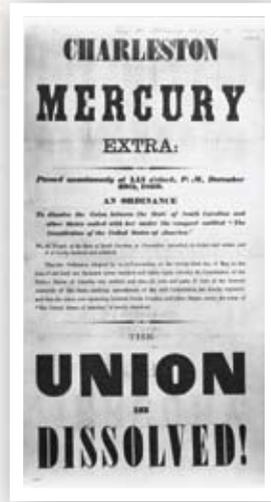
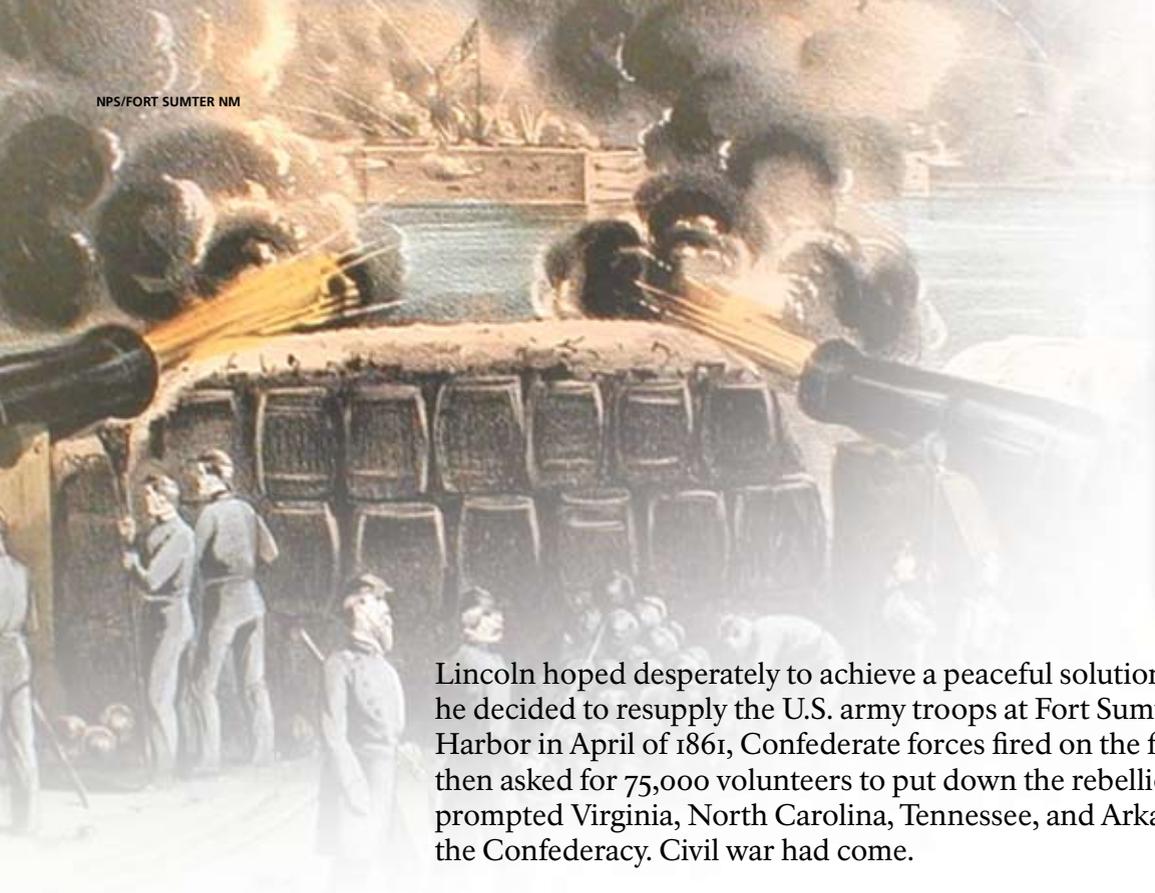
Though he didn't receive a majority of the popular vote, Lincoln gained a solid majority in the Electoral College. He won the election by carrying most Northern states and the western states of California and Oregon, while failing to receive a single electoral vote in the Deep South, where in ten states he was not on the ballot.

Spurred by South Carolina, the states of the Deep South concluded a limitation on slavery in the territories was the first step toward a total abolition of its "peculiar institution." Expecting the worst, the South Carolina legislature remained in session waiting for the election to be held. Immediately upon seeing the results, representatives called for a special state convention in December, which voted unanimously for the state to secede from the Union. One by one, six other states—Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas—also left the Union, calling their new country the Confederate States of America and electing Jefferson Davis as its president.

Following Lincoln's election, the State of South Carolina votes to secede from the Union.

*Jefferson Davis,
President of
the Confederate
States of America*





NPS/FORT SUMTER NM

Lincoln hoped desperately to achieve a peaceful solution, but when he decided to resupply the U.S. army troops at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April of 1861, Confederate forces fired on the fort. Lincoln then asked for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion. This prompted Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas to join the Confederacy. Civil war had come.

There were many differences of opinion between the North and the South in 19th-century America. Differences over slavery were the only ones that could not be settled by peaceful means. Evidence from that time shows the secession of seven Deep South states was caused primarily by concerns over the future of slavery. When Mississippi seceded, she asserted that:

Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery . . . Utter subjugation awaits us in the Union, if we should consent longer to remain in it. It is not a matter of choice, but of necessity. We must either submit to degradation, and to the loss of property worth four billions of money [the estimated total market value of slaves], or we must secede from the Union framed by our fathers, to secure this as well as every other species of property.

The Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina



The bullets that ripped through the US flag at Fort Sumter tore the fabric of the nation in half and shredded any hope for peaceful resolution.

African American men rushed to enlist. Contraband and Colored Troops served in all-black units commanded by white officers. Though they faced segregation and discrimination, they fought with valor, their contributions helping turn the tide of battles. By the end of the war, roughly 180,000 troops were men of color, some earning the highest military honors.

*U.S. Colored Troops,
54th Massachusetts,
Reenactors*



NPS/KENNESAW MOUNTAIN NBP

NPS/FORT SUMTER NM

*At the Battle of
Chaffin's Farm, with
most of the officers dead
or wounded, the sergeants
of the 4th United States
Colored Troops (USCT)
assumed leadership.*



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*When the charge
was started, our
Color guard was full;
two sergeants and
ten corporals. Only
one of the twelve
came off that field on
his own feet. Most of
them are there still
...It was a deadly
hailstorm of bullets
sweeping men down
as hail-stones sweep
the leaves from trees...*

*Sgt. Major Christian
Fleetwood, USCT,
Medal of Honor
Recipient*



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*To what end did 620,000
soldiers sacrifice their lives?*

*In the end, the Civil War
determined what type of a country
we would be—united;
and what type of a people
we would be—free.*

Unfinished Business

Historians have said the Civil War was the unfinished business of the Revolution and the Constitution, and yet today that business is still incomplete. There are still obstacles to overcome before Americans of every creed, color, and gender are truly equal. If the Civil War was the defining moment in the history of the nation 150 years ago, this then, is the defining task of the current generation.