


Trigger Events of the Civil War

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The Civil War was the culmination of a series of confrontations concerning the institution of slavery.

1820 | The Missouri Compromise

This 1856 map shows the line (outlined in red) established by the Missouri Compromise. (Library of Congress)



In the growth years following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, Congress was compelled to establish a policy to guide the expansion of slavery into the new western territory. Missouri's application for statehood as a slave state sparked a bitter national debate. In addition to the deeper moral issue posed by the growth of slavery, the addition of pro-slavery Missouri legislators would give the pro-slavery faction a Congressional majority.

Ultimately, Congress reached a series of agreements that became known as the Missouri Compromise. Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine was admitted as a free state, preserving the Congressional balance. A line was also drawn through the unincorporated western territories along the 36°30' parallel, dividing north and south as free and slave.

Thomas Jefferson, upon hearing of this deal, *“considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper.”*

1831 | Nat Turner's Rebellion

Nat Turner interpreted two solar eclipses as instructions from God to begin his rebellion. (Library of Congress)

In August of 1831, a slave named Nat Turner incited an uprising that spread through several plantations in southern Virginia. Turner and approximately seventy cohorts killed around sixty white people. The deployment of militia infantry and artillery suppressed the rebellion after two days of terror.



Fifty-five slaves, including Turner, were tried and executed for their role in the insurrection. Nearly two hundred more were lynched by frenzied mobs. Although small-scale slave uprisings were fairly common in the American South, Nat Turner's rebellion was the bloodiest.

Virginia lawmakers reacted to the crisis by rolling back what few civil rights slaves and free black people possessed at the time. Education was prohibited and the right to assemble was severely limited.

1846 - 1850 | The Wilmot Proviso

The Wilmot Proviso was a piece of legislation proposed by David Wilmot (D-FS-R PA) at the close of the Mexican-American War. If passed, the Proviso would have outlawed slavery in territory acquired by the United States as a result of the war, which included most of the Southwest and extended all the way to California.

Wilmot spent two years fighting for his plan. He offered it as a rider on existing bills, introduced it to Congress on its own, and even tried to attach it to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. All attempts failed. Nevertheless, the intensity of the debate surrounding the Proviso prompted the first serious discussions of secession.

1850 | The Compromise of 1850

With national relations soured by the debate over the Wilmot Proviso, senators Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas managed to broker a shaky accord with the Compromise of 1850. The compromise prevented further territorial expansion of slavery while strengthening the Fugitive Slave Act, a law which compelled Northerners to seize and return escaped slaves to the South.

While the agreement succeeded in postponing outright hostilities between the North and South, it did little to address, and in some ways even reinforced, the structural disparity that divided the United States. The new Fugitive Slave Act, by forcing non-slaveholders to participate in the institution, also led to increased polarization among centrist citizens.

1852 | *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional exploration of slave life was a cultural sensation. Northerners felt as if their eyes had been opened to the horrors of slavery, while Southerners protested that Stowe's work was slanderous.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was the second-best-selling book in America in the 19th century, second only to the Bible. Its popularity brought the issue of slavery to life for those few who remained unmoved after decades of legislative conflict and widened the division between North and South.

1854 - 1861 | Bleeding Kansas

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, narrowly passed while Congressmen brandished weapons and uttered death threats in the House chambers, overturned parts of the Missouri Compromise by allowing the settlers in the two territories to determine whether or not to permit slavery by a popular vote.

Pro- and anti-slavery agitators flocked to Kansas, hoping to shift the decision by sheer weight of numbers. The two factions struggled for five years with sporadic outbreaks of bloodshed that claimed fifty-six lives. Although both territories eventually ratified anti-slavery constitutions, the violence shocked and troubled the nation.

1857 | *Dred Scott v. Sanford*

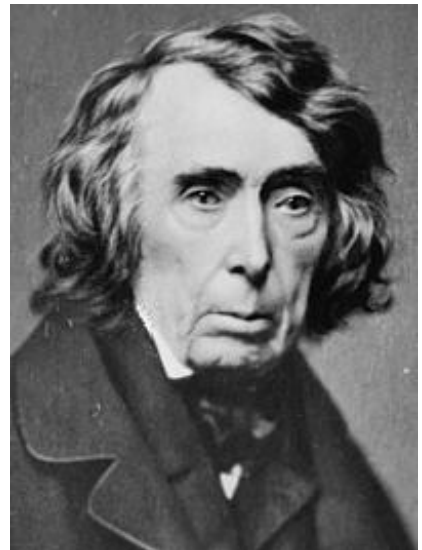
Chief Justice Roger Taney proclaimed blacks "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." (Library of Congress)

Dred Scott was a Virginia slave who tried to sue for his freedom in court. The case eventually rose to the level of the Supreme Court, where the justices found that, as a slave, Dred Scott was a piece of property that had none of the legal rights or recognitions afforded to a human being.

The Dred Scott Decision threatened to entirely recast the political landscape that had thus far managed to prevent civil war. The classification of slaves as mere property made the federal government's authority to regulate the institution much more ambiguous.

Southerners renewed their challenges to the agreed-upon territorial limitations on slavery and polarization intensified.

1859 | John Brown's Raid



John Brown's stature grew in the months and years following his death. (Kansas Historical Society)

John Brown cut his teeth as a killer as an anti-slavery “Jayhawker” during Bleeding Kansas. In mid-October of 1859, the crusading abolitionist organized a small band of white allies and free blacks and raided a government arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He hoped to seize weapons and distribute them to Southern slaves in order to spark a wracking series of slave uprisings.



Although Brown captured the arsenal, he was quickly surrounded and forced to surrender by soldiers under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee. He was tried for treason and, upon his execution, became a martyr for the abolitionist cause. Southerners, on the other hand, began to militarize in preparation for future raids.

1860 | Abraham Lincoln’s Election

Abraham Lincoln was elected by a considerable margin in 1860 despite not being included on many Southern ballots. As a Republican, his party’s anti-slavery outlook struck fear into many Southerners.

On December 20, 1860, a little over a month after the polls closed, South Carolina seceded from the Union. Six more states followed by the spring of 1861.

1861 | The Battle of Fort Sumter

Abraham Lincoln's skillful strategy forced the South to fire the first shot of the Civil War at the Battle of Fort Sumter. (Library of Congress)

With secession, several federal forts, including Fort Sumter in South Carolina, suddenly became outposts in a foreign land. Abraham Lincoln made the decision to send fresh supplies to the beleaguered garrisons.

On April 12, 1861, Confederate warships turned back the supply convoy to Fort Sumter and opened a 34-hour bombardment on the stronghold. The garrison surrendered on April 14.



The Civil War was now underway. On April 15, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to join the Northern army. Unwilling to contribute troops, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee dissolved their ties to the federal government.

