

Timeline of the Civil War

This timeline features key turning points leading up to and during the Civil War. Following each is a link to a student-friendly resource to learn more.

1787: United States Constitutional Convention

Delegates at the Constitutional Convention created a Constitution that protected slavery and granted slaveholding states disproportionate power in the national government.

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1793: Invention of the Cotton Gin

Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin revived Southern agriculture and made cotton and slavery more profitable than ever. By 1860, cotton, grown mainly by slave labor, was the most profitable product in the U.S.

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January 1, 1804: Haiti, The First Black Republic

A coalition of slaves and their allies won independence from France after thirteen years of fighting in the Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue, becoming Haiti, the first country to abolish slavery. Exhausted by war, France sold to the U.S. the Louisiana territory that stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. This new territory increased sectional conflict over the expansion of slavery that culminated with the Civil War.

White slaveholders in the Southern states attempted to keep news of Haiti's success from their enslaved people and pressured the U.S. government not to recognize the new republic of Haiti. Nevertheless, enslaved people learned about Haiti and were inspired. Subsequent leaders of slave revolts [Gabriel Prosser (1800), Charles Deslondes (1811), and Denmark Vesey (1822)] looked to the Haitian example.

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1808 to 1865: Second Middle Passage

Facing pressure from Britain that banned the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, Congress ended the U.S. slave trade in 1808, the earliest the Constitution permitted it to do so. Other countries like France and the Netherlands soon followed the example set by Britain and the U.S. Still, the trade within the U.S. grew as owners in states too far north to profit from the cotton boom sold their slaves to states further south. Historians call this second forced migration that affected over a million enslaved people the "Second Middle Passage."

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1820: Missouri Compromise

The U.S. Congress was divided on the issue of allowing slavery in newly acquired territories. Northerners wanted the West to be closed to slavery and set aside for white farmers. Southerners hoped to expand their slave empire across the West. This congressional compromise accepted Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state, thus preserving the balance of power in Congress between free and slave states. To avoid conflict in the future, the compromise also divided the territory from the Louisiana Purchase along the 36°30' latitude line and only allowed slavery in states that were formed south of it.

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1831: Trans-Atlantic Slave Revolts

Within four months two large-scale slave revolts instilled fear in slave holders. In Virginia, Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in which he and 40 other enslaved individuals raided plantations and killed nearly 60 whites. Just months later, in the British colony of Jamaica, Sam Sharpe launched the ten-day “Christmas Rising” that involved around 50,000 enslaved individuals. Initially, white citizens in Jamaica and Virginia reacted similarly, killing leaders and brutally suppressing enslaved and freed Black people. Governments, however, responded very differently. Facing economic pressure and fearing further uprisings, Britain ended slavery in its Empire in 1833 financially compensating slaveholders for economic loss. Although the Virginia legislature briefly considered ending slavery in response to such violence, it instead tightened control on all Black Virginians both free and enslaved. Other Southern state governments responded similarly. Moreover, at the federal level, Southern slaveholders became more insistent that the national government should allow the unbounded expansion of slavery and protect slaveholders’ “property.”

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1830s: Indian Removal

The U.S. government forced nearly all of the remaining Indigenous people out of the South with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This opened up more land for cotton production and thus fueled the growth of slavery and the domestic slave trade. Furthermore, because some Indigenous people enslaved African Americans, this act led to the expansion of slavery into the territory the U.S. had set aside for Indigenous Americans, the region that would become the state of Oklahoma.

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1836 to 1848: Battling Over Manifest Destiny

Because Northerners and Southerners saw land as a key part of the American Dream, many believed in the concept of “manifest destiny.” This ideology claimed that God had intended the United States to occupy

the entirety of the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. Because Northerners and Southerners disagreed on whether or not slavery should expand with the nation, as the U.S. grew, both sides became more dissatisfied with the status quo that the Missouri Compromise laid out.

The renewed debate over slavery in the West set off a political chain reaction. It started in 1836 when American slave-holders split off from Mexico and created the Republic of Texas to protect their right to own people. The U.S. Congress, fearing Mexico's reaction and facing popular opposition, waited until 1845 to accept Texas as a state. A few months later, the U.S. entered a war with Mexico over the contested borderlands of Texas that ended with an 1848 treaty that granted the U.S. more than half of Mexico's land.

In what became known as the Wilmot Proviso, Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot made a proposal to prohibit slavery in these newly acquired territories. Although it failed, the Wilmot Proviso set off an intense national debate that would not end until the Civil War. Furthermore, it led to the creation of the Republican Party, a political party committed to end the expansion of slavery in the West.

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1850: Compromise of 1850

The Compromise of 1850 refers to five laws Northern and Southern congressmen negotiated to temporarily silence the debate over the expansion of slavery. In 1849, California, a territory taken from Mexico during the Mexican-American War, applied to enter the United States as a free state, which would have upset the balance between free and slave states.

To gain the support of Southern congressmen for the admission of California, Northern congressmen agreed to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. This law reinforced the Fugitive Slave Clause in the U.S. Constitution by mandating that all citizens aid in the capture of escaped enslaved people, denying fugitives or anyone accused of being a fugitive the right to a jury trial, and tasking the Federal Government with recovering enslaved people who had escaped. Moreover, these laws dictated that territorial legislatures in the former Mexican lands – not the U.S. Congress – would decide by popular vote if they would allow slavery when they applied for statehood. Lastly, one law abolished the slave trade in Washington D.C. but allowed slavery to continue in the nation's capital. While the compromise kept the country united, it was only a temporary solution. Some historians have called it “The Truce of 1850.”

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1854 to 1856: Kansas-Nebraska Act and “Bleeding Kansas”

In 1854, Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas authored the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It was intended to empower the residents of the Kansas and Nebraska territories, both north of the Missouri Compromise line, to vote on whether or not to allow slavery, a policy known as “popular sovereignty.” Instead the Act inadvertently set off a series of fraudulent elections that resulted in a pro-

slavery government that shut down free speech. This led to a guerilla war between armed pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces, both of which had their own government and tried to apply for statehood. Only after the secession of the Southern states did Kansas finally enter the U.S. as a free state in 1861.

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1855: High Point of the Filibusters

From 1830–1860, small groups of pro-slavery Americans tried to take over Latin American countries in order to add more slave states to the U.S. These men were known as “filibusters” and unsuccessfully attempted to conquer Cuba, Honduras, Costa Rica, and parts of Mexico. They had no formal legal or military support from the U.S. Government. The only successful filibuster was William Walker. He took over Nicaragua and reimposed slavery. Still, he only ruled from 1855–1857 and like most filibusters, his life ended in front of a firing squad.

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1857: Dred Scott Decision

The United States Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that African Americans were not citizens and “had no rights the white man was bound to respect.” Furthermore, the Supreme Court concluded that Congress could not constitutionally prohibit slavery in any territory because that would violate the Constitution’s protection of private property. Southerners felt like the decision validated their views; Northerners became increasingly fearful that their country was ruled by a small group of slaveholding elite, which they termed “the Slave Power.”

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1859: John Brown’s Raid on Harpers Ferry

Abolitionist John Brown, who had led anti-slavery guerilla fighters in Kansas, unsuccessfully tried to incite a slave revolution. He and his followers briefly took control of the U.S. Armory at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia (today part of West Virginia), hoping to redistribute the weapons made and stored there to enslaved people in the area. Brown and his men were quickly captured. At his trial, Brown spoke out against the horrors of slavery. For Southerners, Brown’s raid triggered their ever-present fear of slave rebellion and made them think that abolitionists would go to any lengths to end slavery.

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1860: Election of Abraham Lincoln

Americans understood that the election of 1860 was critical; 85% of eligible voters cast a ballot. (Keep in mind that at this time only 17% of the U.S. population had the right to vote.) Because four candidates ran, Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate, won the electoral college with just under 40% of the popular vote. The Democrats nominated two candidates, Stephen Douglas, who opposed a pro-slavery party platform (instead favoring

popular sovereignty) and the other, John Breckinridge who openly supported slavery. Additionally, a third party, the Constitutional Union Party, promised to enforce the law and took no stand on slavery. With the pro-slavery vote split, Lincoln was able to win, even though Southern states had refused to include him on the ballot.

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1860 to 1861: Waves of Secession and War

South Carolina was the first state to secede from the United States. Its Declaration of Secession on December 20, 1860 stated that “increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery” led the state to declare its independence. Before Lincoln’s inauguration in March (the Twentieth Amendment in 1933 moved inauguration to January), six other states seceded, created the Confederate States of America, drafted a Constitution, and elected Jefferson Davis as President and Alexander Stephens as Vice President.

Within these states, support for secession was not universal. Moreover eight slaveholding states remained in the U.S. and tried to negotiate a compromise that would reunite the states. One of those failed compromises was a proposed thirteenth constitutional amendment that would have guaranteed slavery in the South but not in the western territories. On April 12, 1861, Confederate forces opened fire and forced the surrender of the U.S. Army forces defending Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. Two days later President Lincoln issued a call for troops. This led Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee to secede and join the Confederate States.

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1861: Border States in Conflict

In the fall of 1861, pro-Confederate factions in Kentucky and Missouri drafted secession declarations and created their own state governments. The Confederacy recognized these governments. However, both states, as well as Delaware and Maryland, the other slaveholding border states, officially stayed in the Union. Citizens of all four states fought both for the Union and the Confederacy.

Once the first large battle of the war, the Battle of Bull Run or Manassas, destroyed illusions of a quick outcome, federal and state governments adopted extreme measures to keep Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri in the Union, including the suspension of habeas corpus, disenfranchisement of citizens in the Confederate army, and the declaration of martial law. Lastly, residents in western Virginia who opposed secession and supported the Union gained recognition from the U.S. Government for the new state of West Virginia in 1863.

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1862: Battle of Antietam & Emancipation Proclamation

In 1862, Great Britain and France, the world's superpowers, came close to formally recognizing the Confederate States Government and giving it military support. Then, U.S. forces successfully stopped the first Confederate invasion into Union territory at the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862. After this Union victory—the bloodiest single day of the war—Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. As of January 1, 1863, enslaved people in the Confederacy were to be considered free if they could reach U.S. lines. Black men now had the right to enlist in the Union Army.

After the Battle of Antietam and the Emancipation Proclamation, European governments reconsidered their tentative plans to help the Confederacy and maintained neutrality throughout the war. The Union Army's performance suggested to them that the United States could reestablish its control over the Southern states. Moreover, both Great Britain and France had already ended slavery. They did not want to support the Confederacy once the Union had declared it was also fighting to end slavery.

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July 1 to 4, 1863: The Battle of Gettysburg & Confederate Surrender of Vicksburg

Two Union victories, the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania (July 1–3), and the Confederate surrender in Vicksburg, Mississippi (July 4), paved the way for U.S. victory. The capture of Vicksburg gave the Union full control of the Mississippi River, cutting off the western half of the Confederacy [Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas] from the eastern half.

The Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania, intended to dampen Northern morale and push Lincoln to negotiate for peace, also failed. The three day Battle resulted in over 50,000 Union and Confederate soldiers wounded, captured, or killed. Both victories bolstered Northern support for the war and demoralized many in the South. On November 19, 1863, Lincoln spoke briefly at the dedication of a U.S. cemetery at Gettysburg. He defined the Union cause as the nation's "new birth of freedom" in what would become famous as the Gettysburg Address.

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July 13-18, 1863 New York Draft Riots and Massacre

The Emancipation Proclamation and a new national draft law outraged poor white New Yorkers. Working class immigrants already faced considerable economic hardship and feared that Black Southerners freed by the Emancipation Proclamation would migrate North and take their jobs. The draft seemed unfair to the poor because rich men could pay a substitute to fight in their places. On July 13, thousands of white men and women stormed the U.S. Army recruitment office, attacked wealthy homes, and murdered hundreds of Black citizens. Finally, Union troops stopped the white mob. Government officials announced that they would postpone the draft for New

York City. It was one of the largest riots in American history, with at least 100 killed and 2,000 injured, most of whom were African American. Policemen, aid organizations, and business professionals, both black and white, worked together to rebuild the community.

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1864: Fall of Atlanta and Election of Lincoln

In the summer of 1864, former U.S. general George McClellan ran as the Democratic candidate against Lincoln. The Democratic platform of ending the war with a negotiated peace proved popular in the North, especially after Union forces suffered massive casualties in failed attempts to take Richmond, Virginia (the capital of the Confederacy). In September 1864, U.S. General William Sherman captured Atlanta, Georgia, the central transportation hub of the Confederacy. This victory proved to doubting Northerners that the war for union and emancipation could be won. The surge of Northern morale ensured Lincoln won a second term. Lincoln was determined to gain total military victory.

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April 1865: Surrender of Confederate Forces & Assassination of Lincoln

Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia surrendered to U.S. forces at Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. The surrender of the most successful of the Confederate armies triggered the surrender of all other Confederate armies between April and June. On April 14, John Wilkes Booth, a famous Southern actor committed to the Confederate cause, assassinated Lincoln. Lincoln's death left the complex but vital issue of reconstructing the union of states to the next president, Andrew Johnson, a Southern Democrat. Johnson would not prove to be capable of the task.

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December 1865: Ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment

The Thirteenth Amendment granted enslaved people legal freedom. Even though many men and women had already secured their own freedom as a practical matter during the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment granted them constitutional protection to live with family, marry, and move freely. To regain readmission into the U.S. Congress, former Confederate states had to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment.

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