

THE

SKIRMISHER



CIVIL WAR TRUST

1776-1860: THE GATHERING STORM

VOLUME 4

SETTING THE STAGE

The United States Constitution was adopted in 1789 in order to establish a government among the thirteen American colonies. The Constitution was the subject of spirited debate.

In the end, states reserved a great deal of independence—there was no national currency, no national income tax, and only a small national army. States could also decide whether or not to allow slavery within their borders.

Even the framers of the Constitution were unsure of the strength of their vows to one another. Could the bonds between the United States be dissolved in the future? Would the people survive such disunion?

Industrialization strengthened the American economy but divided its society. The invention of the cotton gin turned the slave plantations of the Deep South into some of the world's most lucrative businesses. However, the North generally controlled the factories and the merchant ships necessary to maximize profit from Southern crops. Southerners frequently accused Northerners of making unfair deals that cut into their earnings.



After the Revolution, many national issues were left unresolved. (US Army)



By 1860, there were 4 million slaves in the United States; 1 million in the north and 3 million in the south. (Library of Congress)

The industrial revolution also sparked a renewed focus on social development, particularly in the North. Banners were raised for causes such as temperance, suffrage, health care, workers' rights, and abolition. Southerners were less enthusiastic than Northerners about the reform movements. The matter of abolition was exceptionally fraught, as Southerners were gravely afraid of a slave uprising.

Secessionist rhetoric quickly entered national policymaking. As early as the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798, secretly written by then-Vice President Thomas Jefferson himself, states began to threaten departure from the Union in response to minor growths of federal power.

The nation continued to grow, most notably with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the Mexican-American War of 1848. Introducing new states into the Union raised questions about the nation's stance on slavery, as each new addition required a new conversation about the legality of slavery in the new state. Congress passed a series of compromises to forestall intense conflict on the issue.

LIGHTING THE FUSE

As the nineteenth century passed, Northern and Southern citizens came to view each other with increasing hostility. In 1832, a slave named Nat Turner led a bloody uprising in Virginia that intensified racial fears in the South. The Nullification Crisis of the same year increased economic tension. Many Northerners saw the 1848 Mexican-American War as a Southern extravagance, or even a violent lurch towards a Central American slave empire.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 brought slavery fully into the Northern consciousness—each citizen became legally compelled to assist in the apprehension of fugitive slaves. The dragnet was corrupt, intimidating, and it often deported legitimately free men. Gaining first-hand experience with the agents and the process, many began to wonder at the true horrors hidden in the cotton country.

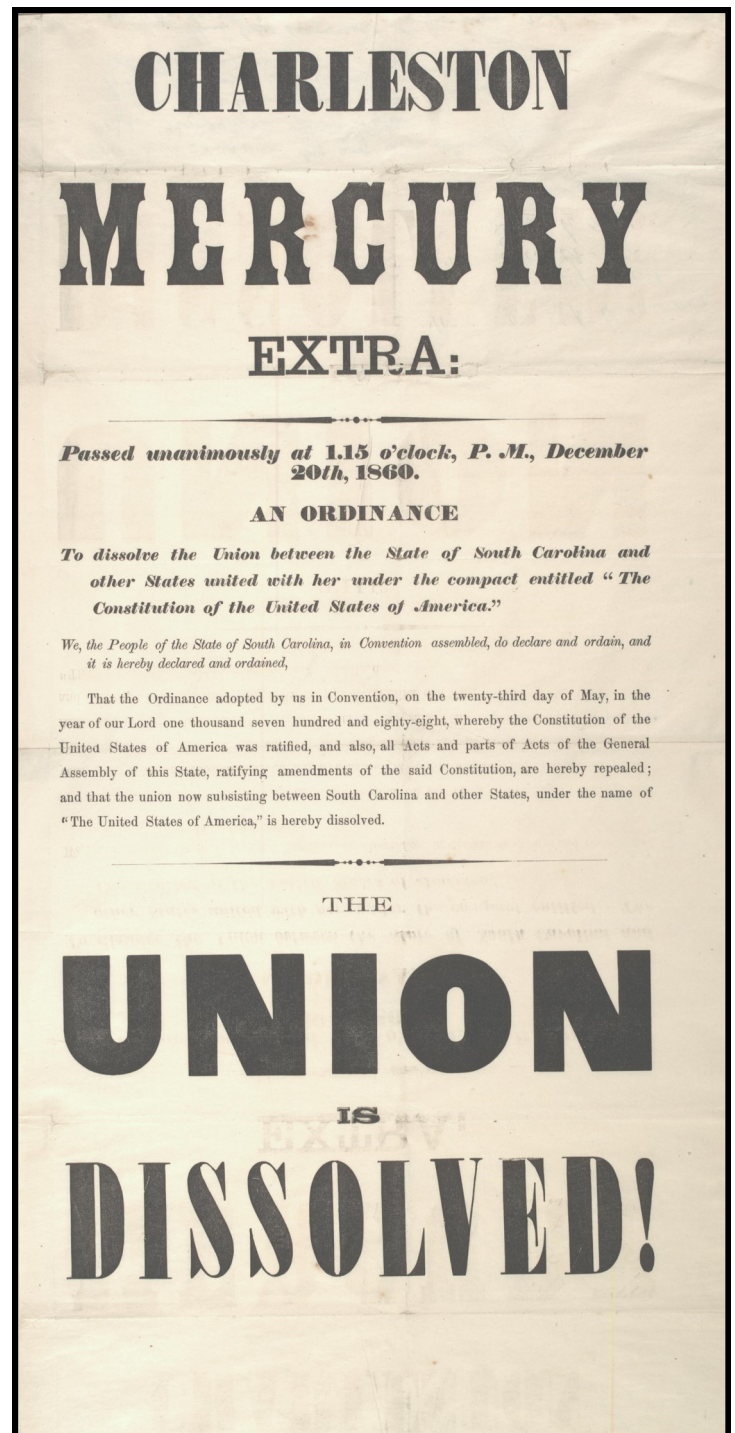
Harriet Beecher Stowe composed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. The tragic novel of slave life ignited the passion of millions in the North. It was second only to the Bible in number of copies sold in 19th century America. Southerners accused Stowe of libel and treachery, but the cries for abolition grew stronger.

Kansas and Missouri were the next states due to be admitted to the Union. Upon entry in 1854, each was governed by "popular sovereignty," in which a general yes-or-no vote of citizens throughout the state established its stance on slavery. This procedure provoked a period of violence known as "Bleeding Kansas."

Abolitionists and slavers flooded the new state. Each faction attempted to influence the referendum by way of coercion and murder. A man named John Brown gained notoriety for his butchery of a family of slavers along Pottawatomie Creek.

In 1859, John Brown attempted to launch a national slave uprising. He seized the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with a force of sixty men, but he was quickly captured and hanged for his crimes. Nevertheless, he became something of a martyr to the abolitionist-leaning Northern public. Southerners were enraged by such treatment of a man who threatened their lives and livelihoods.

Abraham Lincoln won a dysfunctional presidential election in 1860, taking the highest percentage (39%) of four contenders despite not even being on the ballot in many Southern states. He had previously made a remark about how the "government cannot endure, permanently, half-slave and half-free." The statement was taken very literally in the South, and many thought some kind of forced abolition was imminent. South Carolina withdrew from the Union on December 20, 1860, with great fanfare.



ACTIVITY:

Create a timeline running from 1787-1860 and chart on that timeline the events described in this issue of *The Skirmisher*. Then rank those events as the top reasons for disunion. Next, do an internet search or use your text book and assign a related primary source to each event.