

Sectionalism due to western expansion essay



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The Antebellum period from 1800 to 1850 marked a time of sectionalism in American history. Furthermore, new territories gained during western expansion added to this conflict between different sections of America. Southern states wanted new slave territories, while the North wanted to contain the spread of slavery. While Western expansion contributed to growing sectional tensions between the North and South from 1800-1820, sectionalism intensified significantly from 1820-1850. Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Western territorial expansion started to increase a sense of sectionalism throughout America.

President Jefferson obtained the Louisiana purchase from Napoleon in 1803, gaining unfamiliar territory West of the Mississippi River. As Lewis and Clark explored the area, others began to populate it, slowly leading to increased tensions between the North and the South. Soon an act was passed stating that territories with a certain number of inhabitants would be added to the union as newly developed states. Furthermore, During the Adams-Onis treaty with Spain, Florida was peacefully acquired as a state in America, which also increased tension.

Eli Whitney's cotton gin, and King Cotton increased the South's dependence on slaves to sustain the supply and demand of cotton, while the North favored the containment of slavery; This difference between the territories regarding slavery directly contributed to the sense of sectionalism shared throughout the nation. However the issue of slavery would be postponed due to the War of 1812, and for a while afterwards, America's shared sense of nationalism overpowered their shared sense of sectionalism.

Around the time of 1820, America's pride in their victory in the war of 1812 was wearing off, and the balance of nationalism and sectionalism among the nation shifted primarily due to Westward expansion. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, introduced by Henry Clay, allowed for both Maine and Missouri to be admitted into the union on condition that Missouri became a slave state, as well as banning slavery above the thirty-sixth parallel. Any state admitted into the Union below this line would decide the legality of slavery for their new state, by popular sovereignty.

This temporarily maintained the balance of slave states and free states in the Union, while increasing sectionalism throughout America. Neither the North or South wanted the other section to have more states favoring their own slavery ideals, in fear of biased representation in the Senate.

Furthermore, sectionalism was demonstrated by the fact that congress felt the need to implement "The Gag rule"; This disallowed congress from discussing the issue of slavery for the next thirty years (while only lasting a decade).

Though members of the house tried to pass the Wilmot proviso, which would ban slavery in newly acquired Mexican territories, Southerners naturally opposed this. Disagreements over how to decide the newly acquired land's position on slavery, further intensified sectionalism between the North and South. At one point the South even tried to pass the Ostend Manifesto in an attempt to purchase Cuba from Spain, and admit it into the Union as a slave state.

Although this effort failed, it strongly represents the intense sectionalism during the time: As an entire portion of the country acted autonomously to secure an additional state to gain power over their Northern neighbors.

Finally, the compromise of 1850 was passed, declaring popular sovereignty as the determining factor of the position of slavery among the land gained from Mexico. Moreover, this compromise enforced a fugitive slave law, allowing the South to collect runaway slaves, abolished the slave trade in Washington D. C. , and admitted California as a free state.

Although Congress implemented countless compromises to secure the unionization of America, their efforts proved futile, as sectionalism prevailed and the United States grew closer to an inevitable Civil War. Western expansion during the first half of the nineteenth century, along with increased tensions between the North and South due to slavery, directly increased the sense of sectionalism between the two regions. The controversy over controlled land transformed the nation's intense sense of nationalism into an even more intense sense of sectionalism, leading to a Civil War only fifty years later.