

# Missouri compromise of 1820 – kansas- nebraska act



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In the forty years leading up to the Civil War, the United States Congress did its best to enact a number of different pieces of legislation that were all designed to regulate the budding issue of slavery in so called "border" states. In places like Kansas and Missouri, there was no clear cut answer to the slavery question. In fact, the discussion went on for decades in these two states. Starting with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, Congress made it clear that they would take all necessary measures to bring an accord between pro-slavery states and those who opposed it.

The aptly named compromise mandated that slavery couldn't take place anywhere north of the Louisiana Territory, except for the area of Missouri, where slavery would be allowed. The congressional legislation continued in 1850, when a series of laws was put into place in order to keep balance between the slave and free states. Called the Compromise of 1850, the primary objective of this legislation was to bring California into the union as a free state, in order to shift the balance between the two sides.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 continued this long line of legislation and put more control of the issue in the hands of the people. It established the two states and let the people their make their own choice on the matter of slavery. These three laws were extremely important in helping to establish the distinct party lines on the issue of slavery and set the stage for the conflict that eventually led to the Civil War. These acts had varying levels of significance and success, depending upon who one might be asking. This essay will address the impact of each act on the development of the United States as a whole during a time when tempers were flaring and spirits were high.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was one of the most important pieces of legislation to come about during the time leading up to the Civil War in the United States. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate struggled immensely with this compromise because they could not come to a working accord on the matter. The fact that the various factions that had control over congress held vastly different opinions on slavery did not help matters in the least bit.

In short, people from the South had a vested financial interest in keeping slavery alive, while those people in the North had a similar financial interest in getting rid of slavery. In a way, it was all a song and dance done in order to keep the idea of control in place for both sides. Specifically, the Missouri Compromise of 1820 did a couple of things which had a huge impact on the country and made necessary the legislation that would soon follow. During that time, the Missouri Territory was close to becoming a state, but a great debate raged on about what kind of state it would ultimately become.

Since the proposed Missouri state was a gateway to the west and was an important addition to the growing country, each side wanted to get their hands on the state. Though the immediate result of the compromise was that it brought another large slave state into the union, the more important and overlying impact was that it split the country into two halves. Above the state of Missouri, there could not be any more slavery. That meant that Missouri would become something of a battleground state and it also meant that the lines were now clearly drawn.

It was the North against the South and there was that anyone could do to change that after the fact. Even great American thinker Thomas Jefferson knew that the creation of a slave state in Missouri would go a long way to ripping the Union in pieces. He wrote to John Holmes and said, " 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" (Jefferson).

That rhetoric was ultimately an omen for what was to come for the United States. Though it would be another four decades before the country would go to war, the creation of Missouri as a slave state opened the door for even more unreasonable discourse and further legislation.

While the Missouri Compromise was one single piece of nation changing legislation, the Compromise of 1850 was a series of laws that had a similarly large effect on the country. It was clear with these laws that Congress was trying to do everything in their power to make sure that the country did not go to war. Though it would eventually be imminent, there was some thought in 1850 that the Union could be saved without the nation having to go through a debilitating Civil War.

The Compromise of 1850 did a lot to help bring the nation together, although it could be said that the effort was too little and too late. California was ready for statehood at this point and it brought that state into the Union as a free one. Like all compromises, this one was two sided, though. It also did much to help improve the prospects of the slave holding southern states.

Though the series of laws did away with the slave trade in the U. S., it did establish a law that would help slave owners to bring their slaves back. The Fugitive Slave Act was a strong measure that required all people to help in this effort. If the nation's history was a sentence, this compromise could certainly be used as a semi colon. It put aside some of the tensions that both sides had and it also had some people convinced that a solution was on the horizon.

Though it might have looked like a step in the right direction, it appears in hindsight that this bunch of laws was nothing more than a pause between the tenuous situation leading up to 1850 and the Civil War, which came a mere eleven years later. Still, this was a positive measure for the country in that it did attempt to do something to rectify the situation. It was not the last series of laws aimed at doing this, though, as the Kansas-Nebraska Act a few years later was also important.

Whatever good will was built during the Compromise of 1850 was certainly smashed to pieces with the events that led up to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. This act started out as a good thing, but quickly deviated from that plan. Initially, it was passed in order to help open up the Western area of the United States for exploration by white settlers. It helped to establish Kansas and Nebraska in that area. Still, the more important point is that this act gave the people of those territories the right to choose whether or not they would have slaves or not. This was a step in the right direction for those people who felt strongly for states' rights, but it failed to serve as a solution for a nation that genuinely needed answers to their questions.

The people of the United States, at that time, had no way of making such a decision by themselves. In fact, the political positioning and jockeying that went along with this act was a negative byproduct that the writers of such an act could have never imagined in the beginning. The Kansas-Nebraska Act also did away with the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and with that, did away with any progress that the act had established during that time. From this important act came the American ideal of “ Popular Sovereignty”, which was truly a people based system that put all of the power in the hands of the states’ residents.

Most historians feel that this law did not achieve its desired impact and it really had a negative effect on the Union. This law pleased those from the South, while it angered Northerners, who felt that such a law was in favor of slavery. This event marked one of the last straws leading up to secession and eventually, the Civil War. Because of it, the North felt that they could no longer trust the Southerners in power and because of that, there was no turning back.

These three acts happened over the course of many years, but they were all intertwined and all had a profound impact on the changing dynamic of the United States prior to the Civil War. Congress was clearly grasping at straws, and although their motives may have been pure in regards to writing the laws, the intended meaning did not hit the mark. The Missouri Compromise drew lines between the two sides for the first time and gave each section of the country its own identity.

That was a pre-cursor to war, but it certainly was not the thing that caused the nation to battle itself. The Compromise of 1850 sought to dissolve the tension that existed and was put into place by the Missouri Compromise, but it really did not do enough to cause any real, noticeable change in the Union. It did create a little bit of good will and promote some camaraderie between the two sides, however, which was a positive thing at the time.

Unfortunately, all of that positive momentum was destroyed in the few years that followed the writing of the 1850 Compromise.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act was sloppy and did not take into account what people from the North might think about the dissolution of the previous laws. In short, it became a dividing force that pushed a country apart as it was just about to come together. All of these events were representative of the struggle faced by the Union during the time that they were written. Even the most influential and smartest people of American society were not able to write laws that could bring a country together when the fundamental problems were ripping at its core.

## **Works Cited**

Jefferson, Thomas. 22 April 1820. Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes.