The Election of 1860 and Secession

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

The crises of the 1850s did nothing to quell the country's sectional unrest. One more crisis, the attack on Harpers Ferry by John Brown and a group of radical abolitionists in October of 1859, made compromise on the issue of slavery all but impossible. The subsequent election of Republican Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860 solidified the divisions between North and South. Throughout the 1850s, a handful of Southerners threatened to secede from the United States in defense of slavery. After 1860, they made good on their threat as eleven southern states left the Union to form the Confederate States of America, a nation dedicated to maintaining and expanding racial slavery.

This tutorial examines secession and the beginning of the Civil War in five parts:

1. John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

On October 16, 1859, the radical abolitionist John Brown and a small group of armed men attacked the federal arsenal in **Harpers Ferry**, Virginia.

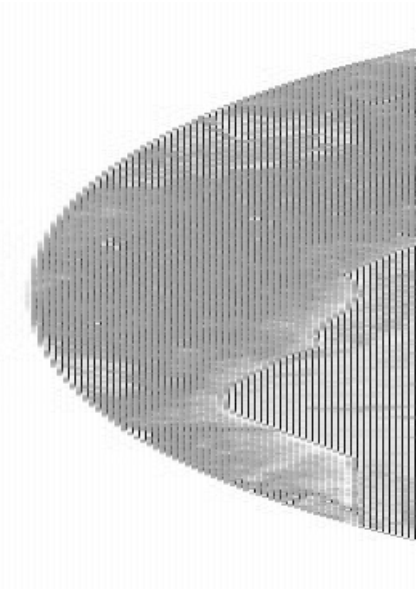
TERM TO KNOW

Harpers Ferry

The site of a federal arsenal where, in 1859, John Brown attempted to instigate a revolt of enslaved persons.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

Brown wanted to capture the weapons in the armory. He planned to distribute them among enslaved people to instigate a revolt that would accomplish one of two outcomes: hasten the onset of civil war between North and South, or encourage a widespread uprising that would end slavery in the South.

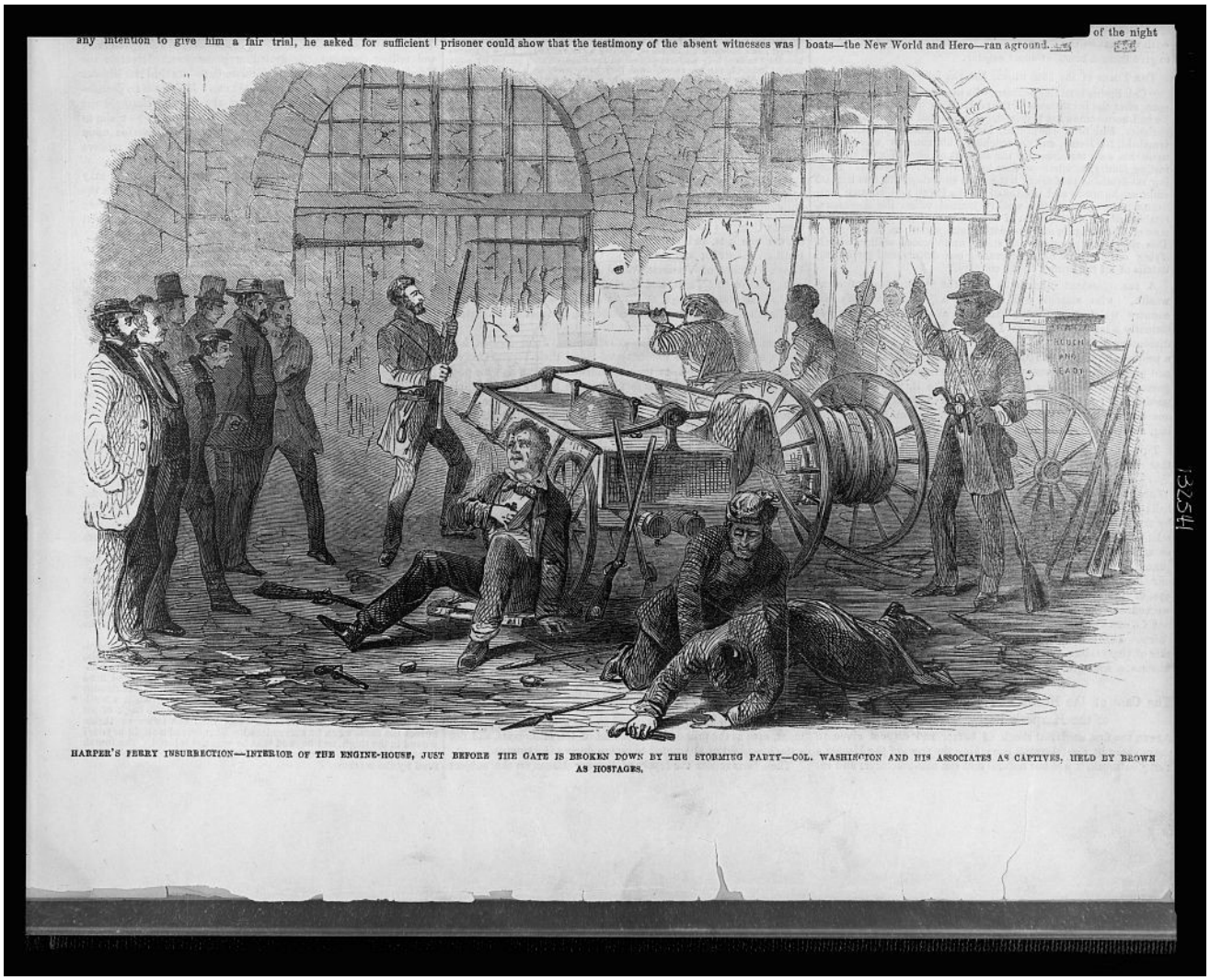


Brown's force easily took control of the armory, which was lightly guarded. After that, however, the raid fell apart for several reasons:

- Brown had not made contact with enslaved people in the area before the raid. Local enslaved people were not prepared to join his revolt.
- Brown did not plan an escape route. His group soon found itself trapped in the armory's engine house and under fire from local residents.
- After holding the passengers of a train stationed in Harpers Ferry hostage for a few hours, Brown allowed the train to depart for Baltimore. As a result, word of the raid spread quickly.

Federal marines commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart captured Brown and his followers only a day and a half after the raid began.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.



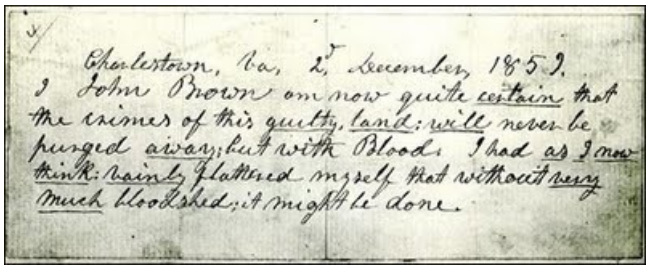
This 1859 illustration, captioned "Harpers Ferry insurrection—Interior of the Engine-House, just before the gate is broken down by the storming party—Col. Washington and his associates as captives, held by Brown as hostages," is from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine.

THINK ABOUT IT

Do you think this illustration was intended for a Northern or a Southern audience? What evidence from the image can you use to support your opinion?

If the raid was not enough to inflame sectional tensions, Brown's conduct during his trial and execution ignited them further. On the morning before his execution, he wrote a short note defending his actions.

"I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had as I now think vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done."


Charlestown, Va, 2d December, 1859.
I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done.

After his execution, northern public opinion viewed Brown as a martyr. Church bells throughout the North tolled during the hour of Brown's execution. Leaders of northern African-American communities celebrated Brown by noting that he was one of the few White men who willingly sacrificed his life for the cause of racial equality.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

Southerners worried about the possibility of similar plots and were alarmed by northern public opinion. After Brown's execution, one Maryland resident asked whether it was possible to "live under a government, a majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and Christian hero?"

Although northern political leaders quickly distanced themselves from Brown, southerners were outraged that a majority of northerners condoned his actions.

---

2. The Election of 1860

John Brown's raid and subsequent execution was the final controversy related to slavery during the 1850s that contributed to the disintegration of the nation. This disintegration continued during the 1860 presidential election, won by **Abraham Lincoln**, and inspired southern secessionists to withdraw their states from the Union.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Abraham Lincoln

Prominent antislavery politician in the 1850s and Republican presidential candidate in the election of 1860; his victory led to the secession of the Confederate States of America from the Union and the eventual outbreak of the Civil War; author of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Lincoln's victory owed much to disarray in the Democratic Party. Before the Party's nominating convention began, several southern Democratic state organizations vowed to walk out if the party did not support the expansion of slavery into the western territories. When the Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas on a platform that promoted popular sovereignty in the West, southern delegates walked out.

Pro-slavery Democrats held their own convention, nominating John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky (the current Vice President) on a platform that included protection of slavery in western territories. The result was a Democratic Party split along sectional lines: Northern Democrats supported Douglas, and southern Democrats backed Breckinridge.

In the aftermath of John Brown's raid, leaders of the Republican Party searched for a moderate presidential candidate who could appeal to the minority of northern voters who were abolitionists, as well as the majority who opposed slavery due to their belief in free labor. They nominated Abraham Lincoln for several reasons:

- Lincoln opposed the expansion of slavery in the western territories, a position shared by moderates in the party.
- Although he was not an abolitionist, Lincoln's moral view on slavery made him acceptable to abolitionists in the party.
- Lincoln was from Illinois. Republicans hoped that by nominating a candidate who was moderate on slavery, and from the Midwest, they could expand their influence in the Midwest, including slaveholding states like Missouri and Kentucky.

The Republican platform encompassed Lincoln's free labor views and addressed the party's northern interests by including the following:

- Rejection of the *Dred Scott* decision
- Opposition to the expansion of slavery into the West
- Federal aid for the construction of a transcontinental railroad

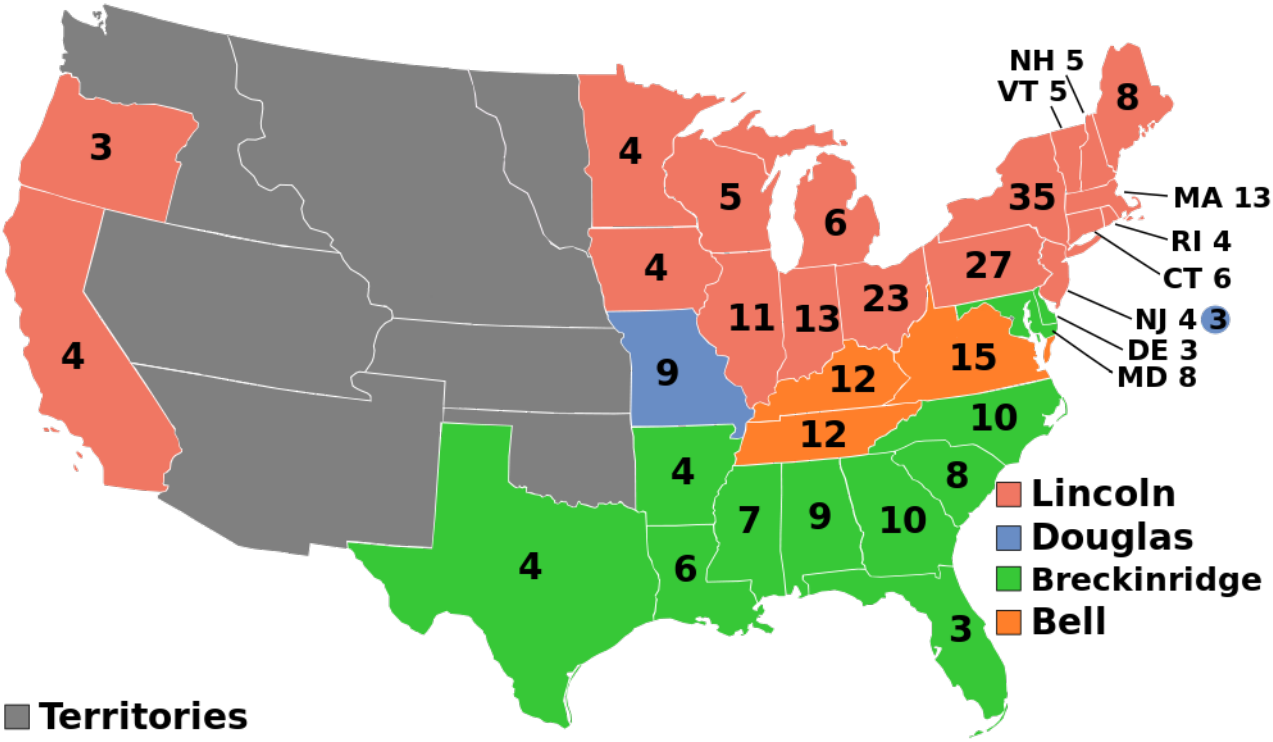
© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

- Free homesteads for western settlers

DID YOU KNOW

A fourth political party—the Constitutional Union Party, which was comprised primarily of former Whigs who did not support Lincoln or the Republicans—also participated in the Election of 1860. Its presidential candidate was John Bell of Tennessee, who ran on a pro-Union platform to preserve "the Constitution as it is and the Union as it was." Bell never fully explained how he would accomplish this objective.

Given the partisan and sectional divisions, two presidential elections essentially took place in 1860: one in the North, between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas; and one in the South, between John Breckinridge and John Bell.



The electoral map reflects these sectional and partisan divides:

- Abraham Lincoln carried all of the North (with the exception of New Jersey, which gave some of its electoral votes to Douglas) with 1.8 million popular votes and 180 electoral votes.
- Stephen Douglas gained 1.3 million popular votes, but only won in Missouri.
- The southern vote split between Breckinridge and Bell (who received 72 and 39 electoral votes, respectively).

Lincoln won the presidency without receiving a vote in ten southern states, where he was not even included on the ballot. Democratic disunity also enabled the Republicans to make significant gains in Congress. From the Republican perspective, the Election of 1860 was a repudiation of the southern "Slave Power."

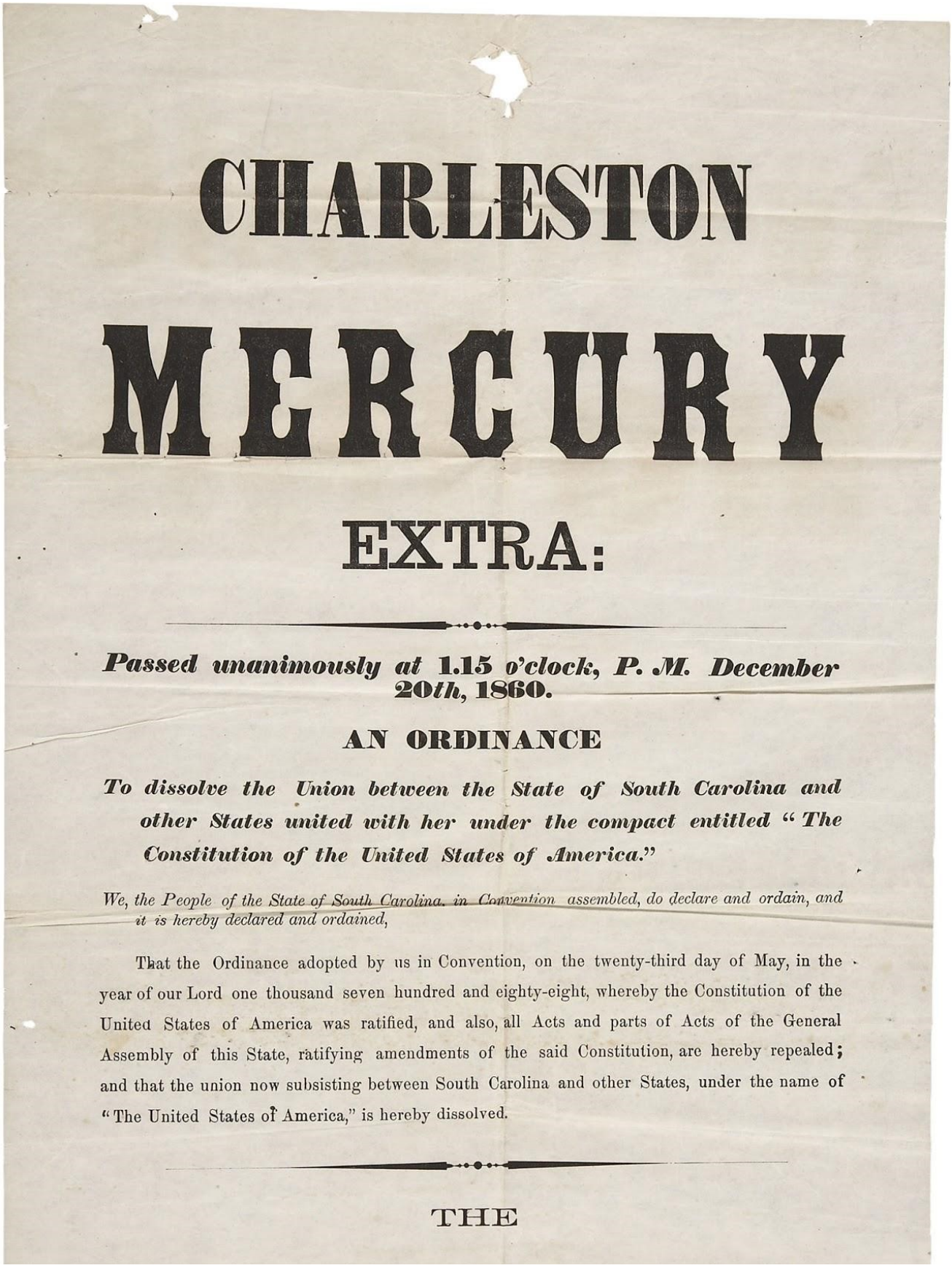
DID YOU KNOW

Lincoln would have won the Electoral College even if the votes for his three opponents had been combined for a single candidate.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

3. Secession

Southern states acted quickly in the wake of Lincoln's election. Rather than accept minority status in a nation in which the majority was hostile to its way of life, and facing a government controlled by a political party (the Republicans) that threatened their economic system, southern leaders moved toward independence.



CHARLESTON

MERCURY

EXTRA:

Passed unanimously at 1.15 o'clock, P. M. December 20th, 1860.

AN ORDINANCE

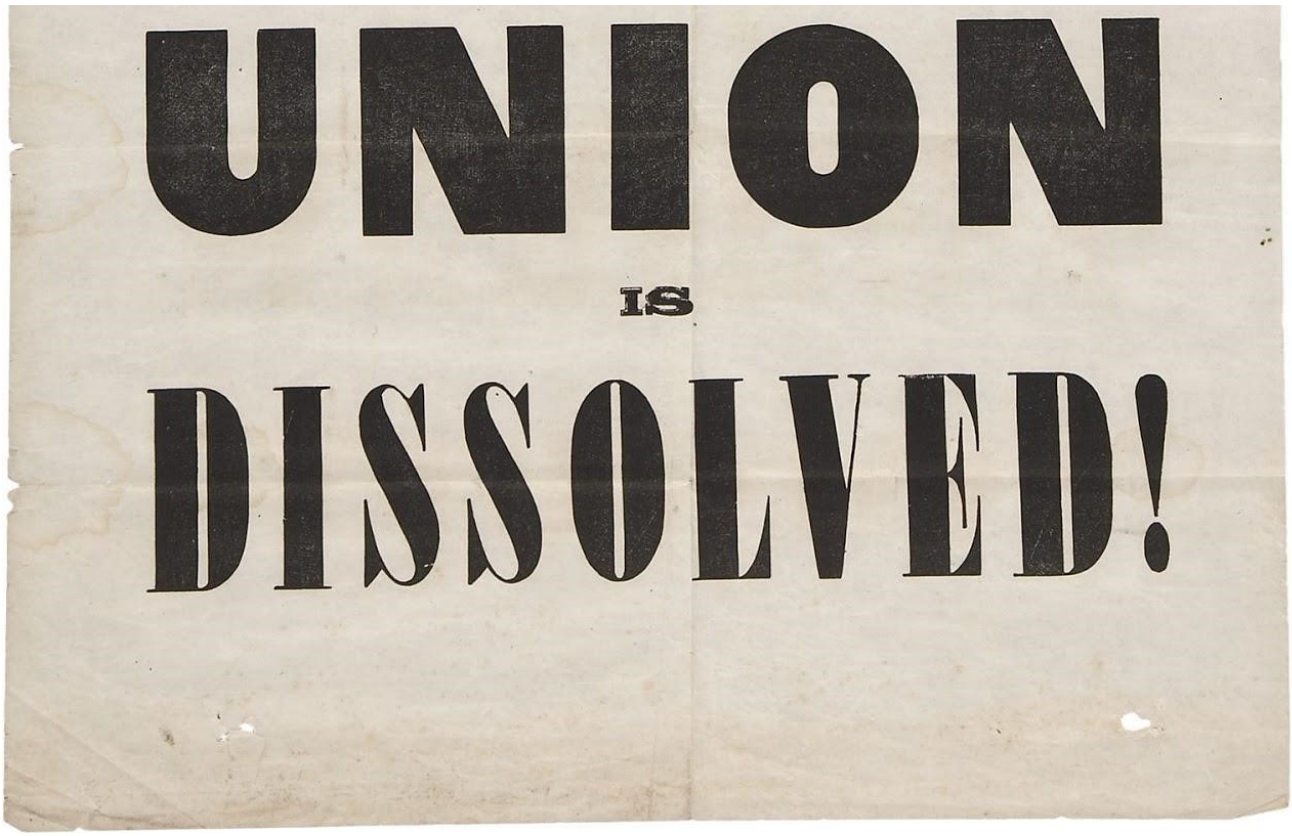
To dissolve the Union between the State of South Carolina and other States united with her under the compact entitled "The Constitution of the United States of America."

We, the People of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled, do declare and ordain, and it is hereby declared and ordained,

That the Ordinance adopted by us in Convention, on the twenty-third day of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified, and also, all Acts and parts of Acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying amendments of the said Constitution, are hereby repealed; and that the union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of "The United States of America," is hereby dissolved.

THE

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.



The Charleston Mercury announces South Carolina's secession from the Union, December 20, 1860.

South Carolina, the state with the highest percentage of enslaved people in its population, was the first southern state to secede. It held a convention to examine the issue and, on December 20, 1860, the delegates voted unanimously to leave the Union before Lincoln's inauguration. By February of 1861, six other states from the Deep South—Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—held conventions and seceded from the Union.

The delegates to these conventions justified secession and generated support for their efforts in the following ways:

Social Contract Theory	Property Rights	White Supremacy
Delegates insisted that state sovereignty preceded the sovereignty of the federal government that was created by the Constitution. They interpreted the Constitution as a contract: the individual states had agreed to be bound by it, and could break the agreement at any time.	Slaveholders argued that Lincoln's insistence that slavery could not expand to western territories infringed on their right to acquire and transport property (i.e., purchase enslaved people and move them across state lines or into western territories).	Secessionists argued that the Republican Party sought racial equality, which would destroy the racial hierarchy that slavery had created in the South. Poor White people and wealthy slaveholders agreed that equality was for White men only, enabling them to join together in support of secession.

4. The Confederate States of America

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

The Constitution of the Confederate States of America, or the **Confederacy**, drafted by the southern states in February of 1861, stated the reasons for secession.

TERM TO KNOW

Confederacy

The new nation formed by seceding southern states in 1861; also known as the Confederate States of America (CSA).

The Confederacy was not a federal union, but a confederation.

DID YOU KNOW

In a confederation, individual states agree to unite under a central government for some purposes, such as defense, while retaining autonomy in most other areas of government.

The Constitution of the Confederacy strengthened state sovereignty at the expense of national government.

EXAMPLE State legislatures could impeach Confederate officials who worked within their boundaries. It also forbids the national government to assist in the construction of internal improvements.

The Confederate Constitution stated that the government must defend and perpetuate racial slavery. It protected the interstate slave trade, guaranteed that slavery would exist in new territory gained by the Confederacy and, perhaps most importantly, Article One, Section Nine of the Constitution stated that "No.... law impairing or denying the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed."

DID YOU KNOW

The Confederate Constitution resembled the U.S. Constitution in certain respects. For example, it created a Congress composed of lower and upper houses, a judicial branch, and an executive branch with a president who served a six-year term.

Delegates to the Confederacy's constitutional convention chose **Jefferson Davis** of Mississippi and Alexander Stephens of Georgia as President and Vice President of the new country.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

Inauguration of Jefferson Davis as the president of the Confederate States of America in Montgomery, Alabama, February 18, 1861.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Jefferson Davis

President of the Confederate States of America from 1861-1865.

5. Fort Sumter

By the time of Abraham Lincoln's inauguration on March 4, 1861, the Confederacy had already been established. In his inaugural address, Lincoln courted Virginia and the other slaveholding states that remained in the Union, saying, ""I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." In contrast, Jefferson Davis openly encouraged those same states to join the Confederacy.

In his inaugural address, Lincoln rejected secession, arguing that the Union could not be dissolved by the actions of a handful of states. While he did not mention re-taking federal property that the Confederacy had seized, he insisted that the United States would retain control of forts and other federal buildings situated in the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis, meanwhile, encouraged Confederate forces to seize federal property in the South.

Both presidents—Lincoln and Davis—walked a tightrope towards conflict, which erupted at**Fort Sumter** in April of 1861.

TERM TO KNOW

Fort Sumter

A federal fort in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, where the Union garrison came under siege by Confederate forces in an attack on April 12, 1861, beginning the Civil War.

Located in Charleston harbor, Fort Sumter was defended by a federal garrison of fewer than one hundred soldiers and officers. Their situation grew dire when local merchants refused to sell them food and supplies ran low. Lincoln notified South Carolina's governor that he would resupply the garrison. His strategy was clear: If the Confederates opened fire on resupply ships, the decision to go to war would have been made by the South.

On April 12, 1861, Confederate forces in Charleston began a bombardment of Fort Sumter. Two days later, the Union soldiers surrendered.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

Bombardment of Fort Sumter, Charleston Harbor, April 12 and 13, 1861, published by Currier & Ives shortly after the fort surrendered to the Confederacy.

News of Fort Sumter's surrender galvanized both sides. On April 15th, Lincoln proclaimed that a state of insurrection existed in the South and issued a call for 75,000 volunteers to subdue it. The response from northern states was overwhelming. Several northern governors notified Lincoln and the War Department that they would quickly fulfill their quotas and offered additional troops.

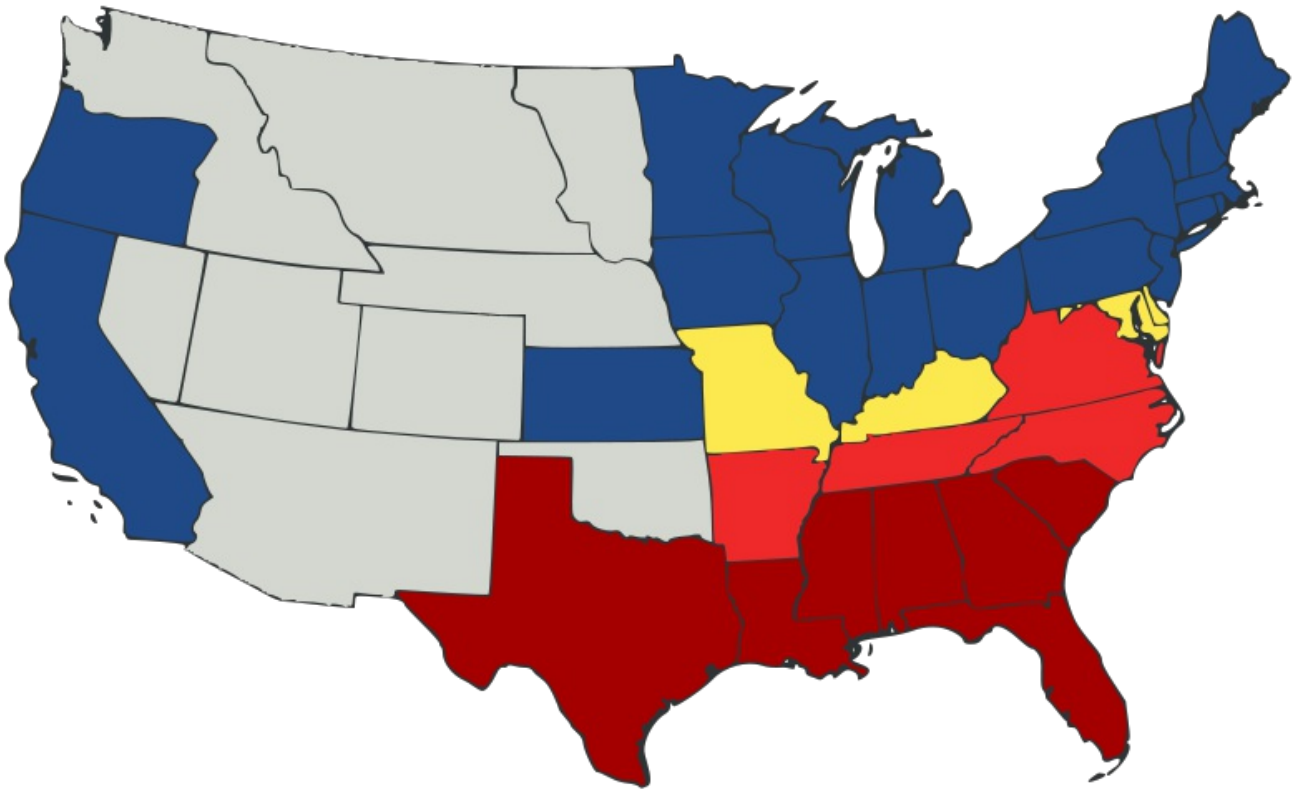
Virginia, North Carolina, and Arkansas voted to join the Confederacy. The capital of the Confederate States moved to Richmond, Virginia, only ninety miles south of Washington, D.C. Thousands of young men rallied to the Confederate cause by enlisting in the army.

Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri chose to remain in the Union and became known as "border states": slaveholding states that maintained allegiance to the Union.

DID YOU KNOW

Thirty-five counties in western Virginia, which contained approximately one-quarter of Virginia's White population and identified more closely with the northern economy and culture, seceded from Virginia and ultimately formed the state of West Virginia.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.



The Union and the Confederacy, 1861. States in dark red are the original seven states of the Confederacy. States in light red (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas) seceded from the Union and joined the Confederacy after the attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861. The northern and western states shown in blue banned slavery and remained in the Union. The four states in yellow were known as the "border states", states in which slavery remained legal, but which chose to remain in the Union. The western territories are shown in gray.

John Brown's premonition that the nation's crimes—the injustices and cruelty of slavery—would "never be purged away but with blood" had come true. The attack on Fort Sumter began the Civil War that had been feared for so long.

SUMMARY

A new level of animosity and distrust between North and South was reached in the aftermath of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. These divisions led to the final breakdown of the second party system during the Election of 1860, as the Democratic Party split into sectional factions and Lincoln was elected President. His election prompted the secession of the southern states and the creation of a new nation, the Confederate States of America, dedicated to the protection and expansion of racial slavery. The attack on Fort Sumter in April of 1861 began the Civil War. The future of the American republic was in doubt.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax "U.S. History". access for free at openstax.org/details/books/us-history LICENSE: CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL

ATTRIBUTIONS

- Map of the Union and Confederate States | **License:** Creative Commons
- Bombardment of Fort Sumter (1861) | **License:** Public Domain
- Inauguration of Jefferson Davis (1861) | **License:** Public Domain
- Charleston Mercury Announcement of Secession (1860) | **License:** Public Domain
- Electoral Map (1860) | **License:** Public Domain
- Image of John Brown's final words (1859) | **License:** Public Domain
- Image of the Interior of the Engine House during John Brown's Raid (1859) | **License:** Public Domain

TERMS TO KNOW

Confederacy

The new nation formed by seceding southern states in 1861; also known as the Confederate States of America (CSA).

Fort Sumter

A federal fort in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, where the Union garrison came under siege by Confederate forces in an attack on April 12, 1861, beginning the Civil War.

Harper's Ferry

The site of a federal arsenal where, in 1859, John Brown attacked in an attempt to instigate a revolt of enslaved persons.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Abraham Lincoln

Prominent antislavery politician in the 1850s and Republican presidential candidate in the election of 1860; his victory led to the secession of the Confederate States of America from the Union and the eventual outbreak of the Civil War; author of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Jefferson Davis

President of the Confederate States of America from 1861-1865.

DATES TO KNOW

1859

John Brown raids arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

1860

Republican Abraham Lincoln wins the Election of 1860; South Carolina secedes.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

1861

The Confederate States of America (CSA) is formed; Confederate forces fire on Fort Sumter; Abraham Lincoln issues call for military volunteers.

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.