

Bleeding Kansas

1853–1861



The term “Bleeding Kansas” describes the violent events in the Kansas Territory sparked by the controversy of allowing slavery in Kansas. The events that led to the violence began on December 14, 1853. Iowa Senator Augustus Dodge proposed a bill for the organization of the Nebraska Territory. One of the states created by this proposal was Kansas. The Senate listened to Dodge’s proposal. They later sent it to the Stephen Douglas-chaired Committee of Territories. Douglas was a strong supporter of Manifest Destiny. He believed it was the God-given right of the United States to expand its territory as much as possible. One of the main components of Manifest Destiny was the construction of a transcontinental railroad. This would connect the United States from east to west via a rail line. Douglas knew in order for this railroad to become a reality, the Nebraska Territory must be organized. This meant the United States must forcibly remove the Indians from the land.

Douglas wanted the bill to become a law. He would have to obtain the votes from Southern states. Slavery was a main factor in the South. Douglas came up with a solution agreeable to the South. He proposed that popular sovereignty resolve the question of slavery in the Nebraska Territory. The voters in the Nebraska Territory would decide. This proposal angered the North. They said it would render the Missouri Compromise of 1820 useless. The compromise stated, except in Missouri, there would be no slavery above the line at latitude 36°30’. President Franklin Pierce approved the bill, and both houses of Congress passed the bill. It became law on May 20, 1854. A pro-slavery legislature was elected. It passed severe penalties to those who spoke out or wrote against slaveholding policies. Anyone who assisted runaway slaves also would be penalized. The

penalty was either a death sentence or serving ten years of hard labor. People opposed to slavery established their own legislature, but President Pierce did not recognize it.

The capital of the Nebraska Territory, which strongly supported slavery, was relocated to Leecompton, near a free-state area. Because of widespread suspicion of the outcome of the legislative election, a team of investigators was brought in to review the ballots. They discovered most of the people who had voted were not even from the region. They demanded that the government recognize and enact free-state legislation. These requests were denied several times. Riots ensued, and many people were killed, beaten, and even tarred and feathered. Rioters who supported slavery burned the Free State Hotel. John Brown, a noted abolitionist, led a counterattack. He killed five pro-slavery people. Fifty-five people were killed during the Bleeding Kansas violence.

Violence even occurred in the United States Congress. Congressman Preston Brooks (nephew of Senator Andrew Butler, whom Senator Charles Sumner had attacked in a speech) attacked Sumner, an abolitionist, with a cane on the floor of the Senate. Sumner went into a coma after the attack.

John W. Geary, the new governor of the Nebraska Territory, came into power in the latter part of 1856. He demanded an end to the violence. He led a group to draft a constitution for the territory, although many of the delegates at the convention could not decide whether they wanted a free state or slave state government. After four constitutional conventions, the last one taking place in Wyandotte, a free-state constitution was adopted in July 1859. When Kansas tried to enter the Union, pro-slavery forces continued to deny its application. Most of these pro-slavery forces came from the South. Kansas finally was admitted to the Union as a free state.

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. For what did Senator Augustus Dodge's bill call?
2. Senator Stephen Douglas was a strong supporter of Manifest Destiny. What does Manifest Destiny mean?
3. Why was the organization of the Nebraska Territory necessary?
4. What was the compromise Douglas organized with the South? Why did this agreement anger Northerners?

