

Missouri Compromise

In 1820 representatives of the Missouri Territory applied to the United States Congress to be admitted into the Union as a state. Statehood required a written state constitution. The proposed constitution of Missouri included slavery. This became controversial, because Alabama's admission as a slave state in 1819 had achieved a balance of an equal number of free and slave states. This meant senators from neither free nor slave states could pass new laws without reaching some compromise. Missouri's entry into the Union as a slave state would destroy this balance.

Congress also faced the question of managing slavery in the vast western lands acquired through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Settlers already had begun moving west in search of free land and economic opportunity. Eventually territories such as Arkansas, Kansas, and Nebraska would apply for statehood. Should Southerners be allowed to transport their slaves into the new territories, or should those areas be restricted to free settlers as the Northwest Ordinance had required in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois?

Never before had Congress considered slavery a national issue. The Abolitionist Movement was not organized, though Quakers and religious leaders had raised moral issues about slavery. Most of the arguments at this point concerned economics and political representation, rather than whether slavery was good or evil. Former President Thomas Jefferson saw the potential for America's destruction in the Missouri controversy: "This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union."

Kentucky Congressman Henry Clay constructed a compromise to keep the Union intact. In two acts of Congress known jointly as the Missouri Compromise, Clay engineered a solution that pleased nobody; but it was a solution that he hoped would displease everyone equally. Missouri would be admitted as a slave state at the same time as Maine entered as a free state. This would preserve the balance of power in the Senate. Thereafter, states would be admitted in pairs. Congress drew a line west from the southern border of Missouri, along the parallel 36°30' north latitude; territory south would become slave states, while territory north of this line would become free states.

For thirty years the Missouri Compromise provided a framework that allowed Congress to maintain an uneasy peace over the issue of slavery. In the end, however, the slavery question would drive the country into a civil war.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. What were the two main components of the Missouri Compromise?
2. Who thought the Missouri controversy might lead to the destruction of the United States?
3. Congress had to determine how to manage the question of slavery in what large land area?
4. Which congressman constructed the Missouri Compromise?