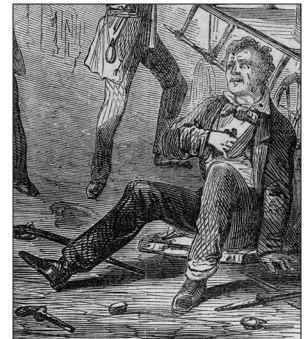


# THE CIVIL WAR: THE NATION MOVES TOWARD WAR, 1850-61

In the 1850s, the conflict over slavery brought the United States to the brink of destruction.

In the course of that decade, the debate over slavery raged in the nation's political institutions and its public places. Congress enacted new policies related to slavery. The courts ruled on cases related to slavery. Abolitionists continued their efforts to end the institution. Political parties, also affected by issues related to slavery, realigned and reformed. Newspapers, novelists, activists, and reformers joined the debate, all responding to the crisis—or even trying to inflame it—in their own way. All of these events were important in the decade preceding Abraham Lincoln's election and the outbreak of Civil War.



Harper's Ferry Insurrection  
- Interior of the Engine  
House  
[http://www.loc.gov/pictures/  
item/2002735881/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002735881/)

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The timeline below highlights some of the most important events of the tumultuous decade:

### 1850

In an attempt to prevent a civil war, Congress enacted a series of laws that became known as the Compromise of 1850. These included an enhanced Fugitive Slave Law. This law required law enforcement officials throughout the country to aid in the arrest of alleged runaway slaves. It provoked a national controversy and many Northerners refused to enforce the law's provisions.

### 1852

Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. It sold 300,000 copies in the United States in the first year of its publication, spurring on the work of abolitionists and enraging those who defended slavery. It also spawned several other plays and musicals, some carrying on the theme of the book, others taking a pro-slavery approach. While Stowe's book was strongly anti-slavery, it also created and reinforced stereotypes about African Americans.

## **1854**

Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed settlers in the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska to decide whether they would allow slavery. The Republican Party was formed in response to opening the Northern territories to slavery.

## **1855**

Anti-slavery Free-Staters and pro-slavery Border Ruffians clashed in Kansas. The violence, which lasted for several years, became known as the Border War, or Bleeding Kansas.

## **1857**

The U.S. Supreme Court handed down the Dred Scott decision (*Scott v. Sandford*). The ruling stated that no one of African descent could qualify for U.S. citizenship. This decision further outraged abolitionists.

## **1859**

John Brown led a band of about 20 radical abolitionists in a raid on the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Brown hoped to set off a slave revolt, but then plan failed. Brown and several other men were caught and executed.

## **1860**

Abraham Lincoln won the Republican nomination for president, running against the Democratic candidate Stephen A. Douglas. Even before Lincoln won the election, Southern states began threatening to secede if the Republican candidate won. Following Lincoln's victory, South Carolina seceded from the United States on December 20.

## **1861**

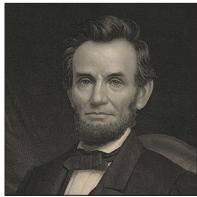
- January-February: Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas seceded. The six states that had seceded formed a government called the Confederate States of America, or Confederacy. Jefferson Davis was elected its president.
- March: Lincoln was inaugurated. Congress authorized raising an army of volunteers.
- April 12: Confederates fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. U.S. Major General Richard Anderson surrendered the fort.
- April 15: Lincoln issued a proclamation declaring that the Southern states were engaged in an insurrection. He called for 75,000 troops from the state militias to join the federal army.
- April-June: Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee seceded and joined the Confederacy.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The documents in this set are arranged in chronological order and, taken together, give an idea of some of the critical events in the decade before the outbreak of the Civil War.

- Working as a class or in small groups, use the documents to create a timeline of important events in the 1850s. What evidence can they find in the documents of how Northerners and Southerners responded to each event? What additional documents might help fill gaps in their understanding of how the events affected the regional conflict?
- Have students search for additional primary sources related to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the Library of Congress online collections or elsewhere. What can students tell about the impact of the book from the documents related to it? How did people with different views on slavery respond to the novel? Ask students to develop an analogy to a contemporary literary work.
- Have students examine the examples of music included in the primary source set. What events did people sing about? Why might these songs have been popular? What songs can students list that comment on current events?
- Ask students to examine the newspaper articles included in the primary source set. To what extent are the articles objective--that is, to what extent do they present both sides of the story without showing favoritism? Challenge students to use the *Chronicling America Historic American Newspapers* to find newspapers that take different views of the events covered in these articles. What might be the effect on people of partisan newspaper coverage? What similar concerns can students discuss about news coverage of events today?
- Ask students to read the newspaper account of the bombardment and surrender of Fort Sumter to the map "Sketch of Charleston Harbor." How does comparing the two primary sources deepen their understanding of the events? What questions do they still have about events?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



### **The Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/stern-lincoln/>



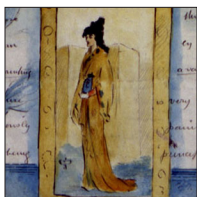
### **Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers**

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>



### **An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadside and Other Printed Ephemera**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rbpehtml/>



### **Words and Deeds in American History: Selected Documents Celebrating the Manuscript Division's First 100 Years**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mchtml/corhome.html>



### **Slaves and the Courts: 1740-1860**

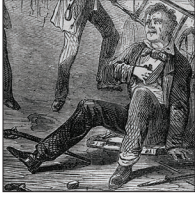
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sthtml/sthome.html>



### **America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets**

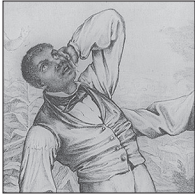
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html>

## PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS



"Harper's Ferry Insurrection – Interior of the Engine House." Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1859. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002735881/>



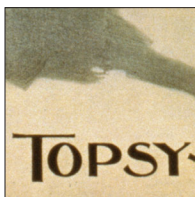
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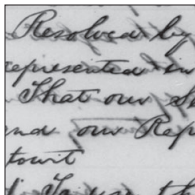
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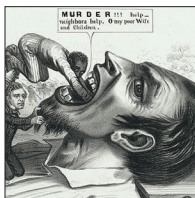
"Uncle Tom's Cabin Co." Lithograph. Buffalo: Courier Litho. Co., c. 1889. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/var1994001231/PP/>



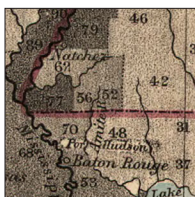
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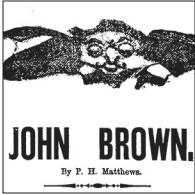


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<http://www.loc.gov/item/96685918>



"The Political Quadrille. Music by Dred Scott." Lithograph. Cincinnati [?], 1860. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661605/>



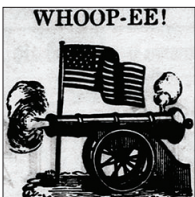
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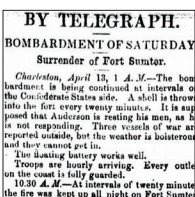
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"Whoop-ee! President, Abraham Lincoln..." *White Cloud Kansas Chief* (White Cloud, KS), November 8, 1860, image 2. From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015486/1860-11-08/ed-1/seq-2/>



Asher & Co. "The Historical War Map." Map. Buffalo: E. R. Jewett & Co., c. 1862. From Library of Congress: Geography and Map Division.  
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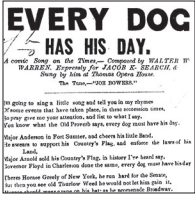


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<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lprbscsm.scsm0239>