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The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was an agreement that temporarily resolved growing sectional tensions between the North and the South, which lingered since the Constitutional Convention of 1787.Following prolonged debates at the Constitutional Convention, a series of compromises emerged, enabling the formation of a “more perfect Union.” While these compromises expedited the establishment of the new republic, they also laid the groundwork for future conflicts over the issue of slavery, particularly as the nation expanded westward.The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 played a pivotal role by prohibiting slavery in territories north of the Ohio River, temporarily quelling sectional disputes. However, the 1803 Louisiana Purchase introduced fresh challenges, compelling Congress to grapple with slavery’s expansion into this vast territory.Thomas Jefferson was an advocate for the abolition of slavery in the Northwest Territory. As President, he authorized the Louisiana Purchase. Image Source: Wikipedia.In 1812, the Missouri Territory was carved out of the Louisiana Purchase, attracting settlers, including slaveholders from the South. When Missouri sought statehood in 1818, it had a substantial slave population. The introduction of the Tallmadge Amendment in 1819 aimed to restrict slavery in Missouri, triggering intense debates in Congress. The House approved a bill recommending Missouri’s statehood with the amendment, but the Senate did not vote on it.In 1820, Congress revisited the issue and reached a compromise. This compromise combined legislation for Maine’s admission as a free state with an amendment enabling Missouri’s entry as a slave state, preserving equal Senate representation. Importantly, it established a line at 36°30′ north latitude, prohibiting slavery north of Missouri’s southern border within the Louisiana Territory.The Missouri Compromise, signed into law by President James Monroe in March 1820, temporarily quelled the slavery debate, though it did not resolve underlying tensions. It also set a precedent for congressional regulation of slavery in territories, foreshadowing future conflicts and ultimately contributing to the nation’s devastating Civil War.Subsequent events, including the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, would further fuel these sectional tensions, leading to the war that determined the fate of the Union and slavery in the United States.When delegates to the Constitutional Convention assembled in Philadelphia in 1787, one of the more daunting tasks that they faced was resolving sectional differences between the North and South centered on the issue of slavery.After weeks of debate proved futile, the delegates negotiated a series of compromises that enabled them to proceed with their primary assignment of forming “a more perfect Union” between the separate states.In the short term, the compromises regarding the status of slavery established in the Constitution facilitated the creation of the new republic — at the expense of blacks held in bondage — but they also sowed the seeds of turmoil that began coming to fruition as the nation expanded west in the coming decades.As the delegates to the Constitutional Convention set about creating a new government, representatives to the Congress of the existing government established under the Articles of Confederation, known as the Confederation Congress, were meeting in New York.On July 13, 1787, the Confederation Congress enacted the Northwest Ordinance, which stipulated “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory… ”The Northwest Ordinance established the Ohio River as the border separating free and slave states between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. For the next three decades, that boundary forestalled major sectional disputes over slavery.This painting by Charles Willson Peale depicts Nathaniel Gorham, who was President of Congress when the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was enacted. Image Source: Wikipedia.Circumstances changed in 1803 when Napoleon Bonaparte sold President Thomas Jefferson 828,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi River. The Louisiana Purchase created new challenges for the federal government. Besides land ownership issues regarding the native inhabitants, Congress eventually had to address the question of the expansion of slavery in the new territory.In 1812, Congress carved the Missouri Territory out of the Louisiana Purchase. Soon after, settlers began pouring into the new territory, and many of them were slaveholders from the South. In 1818, when the residents of Missouri petitioned Congress for statehood, roughly 8,000 to 10,000 slaves lived in the territory. In January, residents of the territory petitioned the U.S. House of Representatives for statehood, but the House did not consider the measure during that session. In December 1818, Missouri residents petitioned Congress for statehood a second time.The House took up the request during the next session. Southerners expected Congress to admit Missouri as a slave state, but on February 13, 1819, New York Congressman James Tallmadge introduced an amendment to the Missouri statehood measure that would gradually end slavery in the new state. The Tallmadge Amendment also mandated the emancipation of all children of slaves born in the State of Missouri upon reaching the age of twenty-five. The Tallmadge Amendment started a year of bitter debate in both houses of Congress. On February 17, 1819, the House passed a bill recommending Missouri statehood, including the Tallmadge Amendment, by a vote of 82 to 78, and forwarded it to the Senate. The upper chamber never voted on the proposed legislation.During the following session of Congress, on January 3, 1820, the House passed legislation to admit Maine to the Union as a free state.Later that month, the lower chamber revisited the proposal for Missouri statehood. On January 26, 1820, John W. Taylor of New York introduced an amendment allowing Missouri to enter the union as a slave state, which the House adopted.The Senate tied the two bills together, passing a single bill admitting Maine to the Union and an amendment enabling the people of Missouri to draft a state constitution. The proposed legislation hinged upon an important second amendment introduced by Senator Jesse B. Thomas of Illinois.The original bill provided for a trade-off — admitting Maine as a free state in return for admitting Missouri as a slave state, thus maintaining the balance of power in the Senate — 12 free states and 12 slave states.As amended by Thomas, however, the bill also prohibited slavery in the rest of the Louisiana Territory, north of the southern border of the new state (36°30′ north latitude). The Senate passed the amended legislation and returned it to the House.The amended Senate bill evoked considerable sectional rancor in the lower chamber.House Speaker Henry Clay had to use his considerable skills to forge a consensus. Eventually, he got his colleagues to enact two bills — one admitting Maine to the Union and another, which included the Thomas Amendment, enabling the citizens of Missouri to draft a state constitution with no restrictions upon slavery.Together, the two pieces of legislation became known as the Missouri Compromise.Congress passed the compromise legislation on March 5, 1820, and President James Monroe signed it into law the next day.Missouri’s statehood request required a second compromise after Missouri submitted its state constitution to Congress in 1821.The proposed constitution contained a provision that excluded “free negroes and mulattoes” from the state.Once again, Clay demonstrated his abilities as the “Great Compromiser” by getting Congress to allow the admission of Missouri to the Union provided that the exclusionary clause in the proposed constitution “shall never be construed to authorize the passage of any law . . . by which any citizen of either of the States in this Union shall be excluded from the enjoyment of any of the privileges and immunities to which such citizen is entitled under the Constitution of the United States.”Thus, by agreeing to never deny citizens of other states coming into Missouri, the rights afforded them by the U.S. Constitution, Missouri became the 24th state on August 10, 1821.Besides settling the issues at hand, namely the admission of the states of Missouri and Maine to the Union, the Missouri Compromise had other important consequences.It temporarily muffled the debate over slavery (or at least the extension of slavery) in the United States, although the abolitionist movement continued to grow in the North.It also established the precedent that Congress could regulate slavery in the territories even though the Constitution did not address the issue.Three decades later, that precedent became the focal point of constitutional and states’ rights arguments that contributed to the attempted dissolution of the Union in 1860.Missouri Compromise AftermathThe slavery issue reached crisis proportions once again in 1850 when Congress struggled over the disposition of new territories acquired during the Mexican-American War.The Compromise of 1850, authored by Clay and shepherded through Congress by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, formally codified the concept of popular sovereignty, which Douglas and Michigan Senator Lewis Cass championed.Stephen Douglas. Image Source: Wikipedia.In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act — which also invoked popular sovereignty — gutted the key provision of the Missouri Compromise regarding slavery in the Missouri Territory.Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the case of Dred Scott v. Sandford, nurtured the growth of the Republican Party, alienating Southerners even more.The election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860, proved to be the death knell of the spirit of compromise.Ultimately, only the tragedy of four years of civil war would determine the future of the Union, and slavery in the United States.Missouri Compromise SignificanceThe Missouri Compromise of 1820 was important to the history of the United States for various reasons:It temporarily eased the growing sectional tensions between the North and the South over the issue of slavery. By balancing the admission of Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state, it maintained equal representation in the Senate, preventing an immediate crisis.The compromise set a boundary, marking 36°30′ north latitude, where slavery was prohibited within the Louisiana Territory north of Missouri’s southern border. This marked the first time Congress actively regulated slavery in newly acquired territories, setting a precedent for future legislative actions.The Missouri Compromise provided a brief pause in the slavery debate, allowing the nation to focus on other issues. However, it did not address the fundamental question of slavery’s expansion, which would resurface in subsequent years and ultimately lead to the American Civil War.The Missouri Compromise marked a critical moment in the nation’s history, foreshadowing the turbulent events that would follow in the decades leading up to the Civil War.Use the following links and videos to study the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Secession Crisis, and the Civil War for the AP US History Exam. Also, be sure to look at our Guide to the AP US History Exam.The Missouri Compromise was an agreement reached in 1820 between Northern and Southern states in the United States that admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. It established the 36°30′ parallel as the dividing line between slave states and free states in the Louisiana Purchase Territory. The compromise was seen as a temporary solution to the issue of slavery expansion, but it ultimately contributed to the growing tensions between North and South that led to the Civil War.This video from Daily Bellringer discusses the Missouri Compromise. In 1803, with the ratification of the treaty between France and the United States, several territories became part of the union. In 1804, the colonization of Upper Louisiana began. From an agricultural point of view, the land on the lower Missouri River, from which the new state was to be formed, had no prospects as a major cotton producer. The only crop that was considered suitable for diversified agriculture and for slave labor was hemp. During the 1810s, especially after the end of the War of 1812 against the British, many southern planters migrated to the future Missouri Territory, bringing with them their goods and especially the slaves already working on the large southern plantations. In 1819, the Missouri Territory applied for admission to the Union. The territory had been settled mainly by whites from the southern states and in 1820 had six thousand black slaves (out of a population of about 66,000). The proposed constitution for the new state therefore protected slavery.In February 1819, the proposal for annexation went before Congress. James Tallmadge, a congressman from New York, proposed that Missouri be admitted on the condition that it gradually abolish slavery. The Democratic-Republican congressman’s proposal caused a rift within the party, with many southern members opposed to the abolition of slavery. The southern states, with the exception of Georgia and South Carolina, had regarded slavery as a declining institution after the American Revolutionary War. This was evident in the shift to diversified agriculture in the Upper South; the gradual emancipation of slaves in New England and, more importantly, in the Middle Atlantic states. From 1790, with the introduction of the cotton gin, to 1815, with the huge increase in international demand for cotton, slave-based agriculture experienced an immense revival, spreading the institution westwards to the Mississippi River. Anti-slavery elements in the South faltered, as did their hopes for the imminent end of human slavery.Despite heated debate, the proposal was passed by the House of Representatives but stalled in the Senate. The dispute had a significant political underpinning. The problem for the slave-holding states was to prevent Congress from falling entirely under the control of the free states. The latter, which had overtaken the South in population, had already secured a majority in the House of Representatives, where each state sends several representatives in proportion to its population. Unlike the Senate, the distribution of seats was fixed, with each state having two seats. By 1819, Alabama had been annexed, allowing slavery and bringing the number of slaveholding states to eleven. With the same number of free states, the situation in the Senate was one of parity. Missouri would therefore tip the balance for or against slavery.The debate lasted for over a year and showed the strong division between the northern and southern states. In 1820, Henry Clay, congressman and representative of the West, proposed to resolve the issue with what would go down in history as the ‘Missouri Compromise’. This compromise admitted Missouri to the Union as a state where slavery was permitted, and stipulated that slavery would not be permitted above the 36th parallel and 30′, the southern boundary of Missouri, in future annexations, making Missouri itself the exception to the newly created rule. To prevent the new state with slavery from upsetting the balance of power in the Senate, a new free state, Maine, was also admitted, separate from Massachusetts, of which it had previously been a part. The debate was so heated that many politicians of the time realized how explosive the issue of slavery could become for the Union. Under the Missouri Compromise of 1820 Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine as a free state. Subscribe to topic Subscribe to author Print Article PDF Map of the United States on the Eve of Civil War, 1861 The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was an effort by the US Congress to resolve a sectional dispute between the 'free states' of the North and the 'slave states' of the South. Hoping to hinder the westward expansion of slavery – and thereby limit the undue political influence of the slave-holding South – Northern representatives had sought to deny Missouri admittance into the Union unless it limited slavery within its borders. This was hotly opposed by Southern representatives, leading to the compromise: Missouri would enter the Union as a 'slave state' in exchange for the admittance of Maine as a 'free state', as well as the prohibition of slavery in all western lands north of the 36°30′ parallel, excluding Missouri itself. While this provided a temporary solution, the question of slavery would only become more contested, eventually leading to the American Civil War (1861-1865). Background: An Empire of Slavery By 1815, 1.4 million men, women, and children languished in a state of perpetual and hereditary bondage in the United States, the legal property of their masters. The institution of slavery was an undoubtedly hideous blight on what President Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) had once called the 'empire of liberty'; indeed, in the years that followed the American Revolution (1765-1789) many White Americans recognized that slavery was incompatible with the Enlightenment ideals upon which their country was founded, summed up by the famous phrase 'all men are created equal'. Some slaveholders, like Jefferson himself, agreed that slavery was a moral evil but were worried that a general emancipation would have grave consequences – not only would the immediate release of all slaves threaten the White supremacy from which the slave-holding class derived its power, but it could also provoke insurrection, as some of the former slaves might seek retaliatory vengeance on their erstwhile masters. Poorer White Americans were also unwilling to be taxed so that the slaveholders could be compensated for freeing their slaves. Slaveholders claimed that they were paternalistic caretakers who treated their slaves better than Northern industrialists treated their wage workers. And so, the Founders reluctantly sanctioned slavery, but with the implicit understanding that it would be gradually eradicated over time. Their commitment to this goal was manifest in several pieces of legislation – in 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, which prohibited the expansion of slavery into the vast Northwest Territory, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished in 1807. The regulation of slavery in areas where it already existed was left to the states, but even here, there were great strides toward emancipation. Pennsylvania and the states of New England had already abolished slavery during the Revolution, while New York and New Jersey each began processes of gradual emancipation around the turn of the century. Diversified methods of farming in the Upper South left that region less dependent on slavery, causing an increased rate of individual slaveholders freeing their slaves in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. By the end of the 18th century, the institution of slavery was on decline everywhere in the United States except South Carolina and Georgia. Racism, of course, was still prevalent, and free Blacks were rarely regarded as equal. But there was still reason to hope that within only a few generations, slavery would have died a natural death, a bleak chapter in the otherwise glowing history of Jefferson's 'empire of liberty'. But it was not long before this wave of emancipation came to an abrupt and screeching halt. The destruction wrought by the Napoleonic Wars (1804-1815) in Europe had disrupted international commerce for nearly a generation and had prevented the mass marketing of products like cotton. In the American South, where the climate was ideal for cotton growth, planters seized the opportunity to pick up the slack. By 1820, the United States had replaced India as the largest cotton producer in the world and would provide 68% of the world's cotton by 1850. But cotton cultivation was a labor-intensive process, even after the invention of the cotton gin; consequently, the interstate slave trade roared to life again, as planters rushed to buy slaves to toil on their cotton plantations. To justify this reversal, slaveholders no longer claimed that slavery was a moral evil. Instead, they claimed that they were paternalistic caretakers who treated their slaves better than Northern industrialists treated their wage workers. The Cotton Pickers by Winslow Homer More and more White settlers travelled west with their slaves, headed for the cotton-friendly regions of the southwestern Louisiana Purchase. In 1812, the state of Louisiana joined the Union as a 'slave state,' and just like that, the westward spread of slavery increased its momentum. Though there was not yet a clear distinction between the 'free states' of the North and the 'slave states' of the South – many Northern states were still in the process of weaning off slavery – the cultural differences between the two regions were already beginning to take shape. The industrializing North and the agrarian South had been feuding over the soul of the nation since the days of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson's arguments in President George Washington's cabinet meetings. But now, the institution of slavery festered beneath the nation's surface like a tumor, poised to spread throughout the body of the nation – the only question was whether the nation would ignore it until it was too late. Missouri Controversy & Tallmadge Amendment At the end of the War of 1812 (1812-1815), the United States entered a period of peace and political stability known as the 'Era of Good Feelings'. Victory over a superior British army at the Battle of New Orleans (8 January 1815) had given Americans a new self-confidence as a nation, while the continued flood of White settlers into the uncharted West added new territories and states to the ever-growing 'empire of liberty'. By early 1819, enough people had settled in the Missouri Territory to qualify it for statehood. As was procedure, an 'enabling act' was introduced to Congress, which, if passed, would allow Missouri voters to elect delegates to begin drafting a state constitution. But on 13 February 1819, as the House of Representatives considered the act, a congressman from Poughkeepsie, New York, stood up and "tossed a bombshell into the Era of Good Feelings" (Howe, 147). James Tallmadge, Jr. (1778-1853) was a political outsider with a history of opposing slavery. In 1817, he had played an important role in speeding up the gradual emancipation of slaves in his home state, and the following year, he had objected to the admission of Illinois into the Union since its constitution had not provided enough evidence that it would adhere to the prohibition of slavery as laid out in the Northwest Ordinance. Now, Tallmadge introduced an amendment to the 'enabling act' that he believed should be conditional for Missouri's statehood: future importation of slaves into Missouri must be banned, and all slaves born in Missouri after its admission into the Union must be freed once they reach the age of 25. Currently, there were an estimated 10,000 enslaved people in Missouri, and Tallmadge's plan would lead to a peaceful abolition of slavery in the territory within a few generations. From a taxpayer's point of view, the amendment had the added benefit of not requiring financial compensation for slaveholders, since it would not free anyone who was currently enslaved. Tallmadge found a deal of support from his fellow Northerners, many of whom were already growing apprehensive about the admittance of more 'slave states' into the Union – the 'three-fifths' clause in the Constitution, which counted three-fifths of a state's enslaved population for representational purposes, granted the South undue influence that was disproportionate to its voting population. As a result, the South obtained several significant legislative and electoral victories in recent years that it otherwise would not have. Northern representatives rallied around Tallmadge's amendment in the hopes of ending the political supremacy of the slave-holding Southern states – to garner support, they made moral, religious, and economic appeals against the institution of slavery, and even quoted the Declaration of Independence. The Founders had always intended to eradicate slavery eventually, Tallmadge and his supporters argued. Now was the time to hurry that process along. But the Southern representatives were unmoved. Indeed, even the aged Jefferson, living in retirement on his plantation of Monticello, added his voice to the Southern chorus denouncing the amendment. Congress could not force a state to emancipate its slaves, they argued; such an act would surely violate the Constitution. And so, the lines had been drawn for the fiery conflict that would divide the nation for decades to come and culminate in civil war. This outcome was foreseen by Rep. Thomas W. Cobb of Georgia, who told Tallmadge, "You have kindled a fire which all the waters of the ocean cannot put out, which seas of blood can only extinguish." Tallmadge, convinced of the righteousness of his cause, cooly replied, "If a dissolution of the Union must take place, let it be so! If civil war, which gentlemen so much threaten, must come, I can only say, let it come!" (quoted in Howe, 148). The Compromise The Tallmadge Amendment was approved in the House of Representatives, where the Northerners had an advantage, by a margin of 87-76. But thanks to the three-fifths clause, the South had greater strength in the Senate; three of the four senators from Illinois and Indiana joined with their Southern colleagues to defeat the bill. So, with the two houses deadlocked, the Missouri statehood bill lapsed as Congress adjourned for the summer. In the following months, both sides tried to whip up support from their constituents. Senator Rufus King (1755-1827) of New York, the last icon of the dying Federalist Party, gave speeches denouncing the three-fifths clause and supporting the Tallmadge Amendment, for which he was accused of fanning the flames of sectionalism. Jeffersonian Republicans, both in the South and in Washington, D.C., claimed that the anti-Missouri proponents were merely disgruntled political outsiders who wanted to split the party. The Compromise showed that the South was much more unified behind the institution of slavery than was previously believed. The administration of President James Monroe (served 1817-1825) was not idle during this time. Hoping to resolve the Missouri issue, Monroe met with the Speaker of the House, Henry Clay (1777-1852) of Kentucky, and several Senate leaders to devise a plan. In June, the Massachusetts legislature had voted to separate from the District of Maine, which was now eligible for statehood – might Maine be admitted as a 'free state' in exchange for the admission of Missouri without the Talmadge Amendment? When the next Congress convened in December 1819, this proposal was presented to the Senate, which found it to be agreeable. In early 1820, it voted to pass a bill that would admit Maine into the Union as a 'free state', with an amendment that the people of Missouri could form a state constitution without restrictions on slavery. But before this bill could be sent back to the House, Senator Jesse B. Thomas of Illinois rose to introduce a second amendment. Though Thomas himself had previously voted with the pro-slavery bloc, he knew that many Northerners would not be satisfied with the bill in its current state. So, he added the proviso that slavery would be banned in the territories of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36°30' north latitude – the southern boundary of Missouri – with the sole exception of Missouri itself. The so-called 'Thomas Proviso' was approved by the Senate, and Speaker Clay skillfully guided the whole package through the House, engineering separate votes on each of the issues. On 5 March 1820, Congress passed the Missouri Compromise, which included: the admission of Maine as a 'free state', the admission of Missouri as a 'slave state,' and the abolition of slavery in all western territories north of Missouri's southern border, save for the land within Missouri itself. President Monroe – who said he would have vetoed the Tallmadge Amendment – was satisfied with the Thomas Proviso and signed the bill on 6 March. Aftermath As historian Daniel Walker Howe points out, the Missouri Compromise had multiple outcomes. First, it ensured the breakup of the Democratic-Republican Party along sectional lines, leading to the end of the relative political unity that had characterized the 'Era of Good Feelings'. Second, it confirmed the growing power of the US Senate, which had traditionally been less influential than the House of Representatives but had in this instance been the more instrumental chamber. Third, it enhanced the national reputation of Henry Clay, who reaped the lion's share of the credit for the compromise and would go on to dominate national politics over the next several decades. But by far the most significant outcome of the compromise was that it showed that the South was much more unified behind the institution of slavery than was previously believed. Gone was the idyllic notion that the 'peculiar institution' would die out on its own – even Jefferson, who had once professed to believe in the gradual abolition of slavery, now sided with the men who supported its expansion. From here, the issue of slavery would only become more divisive as it dominated the political conversation in the United States. Jefferson, who was in the twilight years of his life and would not live to see the nation torn apart by civil war, nevertheless predicted that the question of slavery would only be resolved by violence: This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once the knell of the union. It is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence…I regret that I am now to die in the belief, that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be, that I may not live to weep over it. (quoted in Howe, 157). Indeed, it did not take long for the volatility of the Missouri Compromise to become apparent. When the Missourians gathered to draft their state constitution, they not only legalized slavery in perpetuity, but also forbade free Blacks and Mulattoes from "coming to and settling in this state" (ibid). This directly contradicted the US Constitution, since some free Blacks were citizens of other states and were therefore guaranteed the same 'privileges and immunities' in every state. When the Missouri state constitution was sent to Congress for approval, many Northern congressmen threatened to oppose it, which would undo all the progress of the Missouri Compromise. It was once again left to Clay to diffuse the situation by offering what became known as the 'Second Missouri Compromise': Congress would approve the Missouri state constitution, provided the Missouri legislature not pass any law violating the rights of free Black citizens. This was agreed to, and Missouri officially entered the Union as the 24th state in August 1821; Maine had already been admitted. The trend set by the Missouri Compromise – the admittance of one 'free state' for every 'slave state,' and vice versa – would continue until it was challenged by the Compromise of 1850 and ultimately repealed four years later in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Far from providing a permanent solution, the Missouri Compromise only delayed the conflict that would eventually boil over into the American Civil War. Did you like this definition? This human-authored article has been reviewed by our editorial team before publication to ensure accuracy, reliability and adherence to academic standards in accordance with our editorial policy. Howe, Daniel Walker. What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848. Oxford University Press, 2007. McPherson, James M. Battle Cry of Freedom. Oxford University Press, 2003. Meacham, Jon. Thomas Jefferson. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013. Missouri Compromise: Date, Definition & 1820 - HISTORY, accessed 4 Jun 2025. Wood, Gordon S. Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic 1789-1815. Oxford University Press, 2011. World History Encyclopedia is an Amazon Associate and earns a commission on qualifying book purchases. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was an attempt by the US Congress to settle a sectional dispute between the 'free states' of the North and the 'slave states' of the South, concerning the spread of slavery into the state of Missouri. In the Missouri Compromise, it was decided that Missouri would join the Union as a 'slave state' in exchange for the admission of Maine as a 'free state.' It was also decided that slavery would be prohibited in all western territories north of the 36°30′ parallel, excluding Missouri itself. The Missouri Compromise was important for turning the question of slavery into the most important national issue, and for setting the divide between the 'free states' of the North and the 'slave states' of the South at the 36°30′ parallel. World History Encyclopedia is a non-profit organization. Please support free history education for millions of learners worldwide for only $5 per month by becoming a member. Thank you! Become a Member Donate Submitted by Harrison W. Mark, published on 05 June 2025. The copyright holder has published this content under the following license: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike. This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon this content non-commercially, as long as they credit the author and license their new creations under the identical terms. When republishing on the web a hyperlink back to the original content source URL must be included. Please note that content linked from this page may have different licensing terms. Add Event Visual Timeline Rep. James Tallmadge, Jr. introduces the 'Tallmadge Amendment', which would prohibit Missouri from joining the Union unless it limited slavery. Congress approves the Missouri Compromise, setting the boundary between 'free' and 'slave' states at the 36°30′ parallel (except Missouri). When Americans debate federal power, regional identity, or the unfinished business of racial justice, they are—knowingly or not—echoing the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Crafted to quiet a crisis over slavery’s expansion, the deal bought the young republic breathing room but also drew a literal line across the map that previewed the Civil War. Understanding how and why Congress struck that bargain helps us see the roots of later conflicts and the limits of political compromise. By 1819 the United States had doubled in size, thanks to the Louisiana Purchase and a post-War-of-1812 land rush. Cotton profits enriched the Deep South, while northern merchants and factory owners watched slavery’s growth with alarm. Politically, the Senate was delicately balanced at 11 free and 11 slave states, so every new state application felt existential. When Missouri Territory petitioned for admission with slavery protected, it triggered the first national showdown over whether the institution could spread west. In February 1819, Representative James Tallmadge Jr. of New York proposed that Missouri ban further importation of enslaved people and gradually free children born into slavery. Southerners called it unconstitutional interference in state affairs; northerners hailed it as moral progress. The House passed the amendment, but the Senate, dominated by southern interests, rejected it—exposing deep sectional rifts and setting the stage for months of deadlock. Speaker of the House Henry Clay believed that saving the Union required creative give-and-take. Working behind closed doors, Clay and Senate allies bundled Missouri’s request with Maine’s bid for statehood (then part of Massachusetts). The idea: admit Maine as free, Missouri as slave, and draw a geographic boundary—latitude 36° 30′—across the rest of the Louisiana Purchase. Slavery would be barred north of the line (except in Missouri) and permitted south of it. Clay’s knack for counting votes and soothing egos pushed the package through both chambers in March 1820. President James Monroe signed it on March 6. Maine admitted as the 23rd state (free). Missouri admitted as the 24th state (slave) once it drafted a constitution “not repugnant to the U.S. Constitution.” Section 8 of the act banned slavery “in all territory north of 36° 30′ latitude, except within the boundaries of Missouri.” That single sentence tried to settle the status of more than 800,000 square miles—an area larger than France and Germany combined. Many citizens sighed with relief; the stock market even ticked upward. Yet others sensed the pause was temporary. Former president Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, wrote that the compromise was “like a fire bell in the night” warning of disunion. His alarm captured a truth: the legislation treated symptoms, not causes, of sectional tension. Southern planters preserved the option to extend slavery below 36° 30′, safeguarding political power. Northern politicians could tell constituents they had contained slavery’s spread. Enslaved people gained nothing; bondage simply moved west with their owners. Native nations such as the Osage and Cherokee faced accelerated dispossession as white settlers, slave and free, poured into newly defined territories. By freezing the conversation at a geographic line, Congress avoided grappling with slavery’s human cost and the rights of Indigenous peoples whose lands became bargaining chips. The compromise coincided with the Panic of 1819, America’s first major financial crisis. Southern creditors blamed tight-fisted northern bankers; northern newspapers blamed speculative cotton growers. Missouri’s admission gave planters new acreage to restore profits, while free-soil advocates feared an ever-expanding “Cotton Kingdom” would stifle wage labor and industrialization. These contrasting economic models hardened sectional identities for decades. Although the “Era of Good Feelings” featured nominal one-party rule under the Democratic-Republicans, the Missouri debate shattered that illusion. Factions coalesced into new alignments: pro-restriction “Barnburners” in New York, pro-slavery “Old Guard” Democrats in the South, and the National Republicans who would evolve into Whigs. By the 1850s those currents fed directly into the birth of the Republican Party on an explicit free-soil platform. Congress effectively repealed the geographic ban in 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which let settlers decide slavery by popular sovereignty. Violence in “Bleeding Kansas” showed how fragile the 1820 line had become. In 1857 the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision declared that Congress never had power to ban slavery in the territories, branding the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional and erasing its political authority. Most scholars agree the compromise marked the first national attempt to limit slavery’s spread, foreshadowing later flashpoints such as the Compromise of 1850. Some, like historian William Freehling, argue it postponed civil war long enough for the North to industrialize and eventually prevail. Others contend it deepened divisions by cementing the notion that the Union’s survival depended on an equal number of slave and free states—a mathematical impossibility as population boomed in the North. The debate itself underscores the compromise’s significance: it remains a benchmark for measuring American sectionalism. Primary-source analysis: Jefferson’s “fire bell” letter lets students hear contemporary fears in vivid prose. Mapping activity: Plotting states and territories before and after 1820 helps visualize the stakes. Role-play debate: Assigning Tallmadge, Clay, and Monroe roles illuminates legislative strategy. Civic parallels: Compare 19th-century sectional media to modern polarized news feeds to discuss how geography and ideology intersect. These strategies align with C3 Inquiry Arc standards and build historical thinking skills. The Missouri Compromise reminds us that compromise is a tool, not a cure. Leaders bridged differences only by postponing a moral reckoning. When underlying injustices remain untouched, even brilliant political engineering can merely delay conflict. Modern policymakers wrestling with issues such as immigration, voting rights, or climate change can learn from 1820: durable solutions demand confronting root causes, not just drawing lines on a map. The 36° 30′ line etched into the national consciousness in 1820 could not hold back the tides of expansion, ideology, and human aspiration. Yet studying how Congress tried—and ultimately failed—to balance liberty and bondage gives us a clearer lens on the forces that shaped the United States. By blending geographic, economic, and moral dimensions, the Missouri Compromise stands as a pivotal chapter in the story of an “indivisible” Union still striving to live up to its founding promises. Frequently Asked Questions 1. What was the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and why was it significant? The Missouri Compromise was a legislative agreement that aimed to maintain the balance of power between free and slave states in the United States Congress. In 1820, Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, and Maine was admitted as a free state, preserving the numerical balance between the North and South. Additionally, the compromise established an invisible line across the Louisiana Territory at 36°30′ latitude, north of which slavery was prohibited (except for Missouri). This compromise was significant because it managed to quell tension temporarily over the issue of slavery’s expansion, serving as a precedent for legislature addressing sectional conflict. It was a pivotal moment that highlighted the deeply ingrained divisions over slavery, foreshadowing the American Civil War. This compromise matters today as it showcases how compromises influenced both the preservation and escalation of tensions leading to future conflicts, offering insight into America’s ongoing dialogue on federal power and racial justice. 2. How did the Missouri Compromise impact the debate over federal power and states’ rights? The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was pivotal in influencing the long-standing debate over federal power versus states’ rights. By enabling Congress to dictate where slavery was permissible in new states and territories, this compromise underscored the federal government’s significant role in shaping domestic policies. However, the South viewed these regulations as overreach by the federal government into state jurisdictions, sowing seeds of discontent that would later fuel the states’ rights argument in the lead-up to the Civil War. The continued debate over federal authority and states’ rights, as seen through actions such as nullification crises and secession arguments, owes much to the precedents set during moments like the Missouri Compromise. Therefore, uncovering this historical agreement offers deeper insight into these perennial tensions and how they shaped the nation’s legislative and political landscape. 3. Why was the Missouri Compromise needed, and what crisis did it seek to resolve? The Missouri Compromise was necessitated by the intense sectional crisis that emerged over the question of admitting Missouri as a state. When Missouri applied for statehood in 1819, the balance between slave and free states was equal in Congress, with 11 each. Missouri’s proposed entrance as a slave state threatened this balance, potentially granting the South more influence in the Senate. This sparked fierce debates over whether new territories should permit slavery, revealing the broader conflict between Northern and Southern interests. The compromise resolved the immediate crisis by maintaining the balance through Maine’s admission as a free state and agreeing on a geographical boundary for slavery in future territories. It was intended to be a temporary solution to buy time for negotiation and calm growing sectional tensions, which it did successfully—at least for a few decades. Understanding this compromise helps us appreciate how the struggle to balance regional and political interests was handled and the compromises that were struck to temporarily unify a deeply divided nation. 4. What were the long-term effects of the Missouri Compromise on American history? The predominant long-term effect of the Missouri Compromise was its role in shaping the legislative and political framework regarding slavery in the U.S., contributing to the conditions that eventually led to the Civil War. By drawing a demarcation line where slavery could extend, it heightened regional divisions and framed slavery as a dominant issue in American politics. This division replayed in later events, including the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision, both designed to address limitations established by the Compromise. As American territories expanded westward, each decision concerning their status exacerbated sectional differences, culminating in secession and civil war. Moreover, the compromise underscored how legislative actions at the federal level could momentarily delay conflicts yet ultimately fuel the tensions they sought to suppress. This historical narrative remains relevant in contemporary discussions about state versus federal authority, as the balance struck by the Compromise continues to echo in debates about regional identity and racial justice. 5. How does the Missouri Compromise continue to influence modern discussions about racial justice and regional identity? The Missouri Compromise continues to influence modern dialogues on racial justice and regional identity by providing a historical backdrop to debates about federal legislative power and civil rights. The way the Compromise addressed slavery speaks volumes about the nation’s ongoing challenges regarding racial equity and the legislative measures undertaken to address them. The compromise attempted to create a temporary seal over the growing fissure of racial injustice represented by slavery, and these efforts to “balance tensions” resonate in today’s struggle to reconcile federal authority with state rights about racial policies. Moreover, the geographic line it created imposed a distinct regional identity that influences how parts of the U.S. are perceived today in social and political spheres. It highlights the enduring challenge of achieving unity within diversity while maintaining justice, showcasing lessons that inform current debates over civil rights, equality, and how they should be enshrined or expanded upon in law. Understanding this context helps unpack the complexity of past and present racial issues, contributing meaningfully to the broader understanding and pursuits of equality and justice in the nation today. As with most compromises, the purpose of the Missouri Compromise was to maintain peace, and it has managed to do exactly that for 30 years before the conflict about slavery in North America finally escalated. All About Numbers In 1819, just 5 years after the country managed to become Independent, a bitter debate ensued when Missouri filed an application to be joined to the Union as a slave state. At that time, the Union consisted of 22 states, of which 11 allowed slavery and in the other 11 it was considered illegal. The Northern states did not want the Southern, slaveholding states to gain too much power in Congress, especially as they would be in the majority once Missouri joins as a slave state. Missouri was obtained through the Louisiana Purchase, just outside of the old Northwest Territory and they were afraid that allowing slavery in Missouri may influence other states carved from this territory to also become slave states. Bitter debate ensued and continued for months until the Missouri Compromise was made. Resolution As Maine also applied to become a state at around the same time as Missouri, it was in the end decided that the two would be admitted together, to maintain the balance between the senators: Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a slave state. It was also decided that slavery would be outlawed in the rest of Louisiana, above the 36th parallel (around Missouri’s southern border.) For the next 30 years after the Missouri Compromise, states were always added to the Union in this way to maintain balance: one slave state and one free state at the same time. This article is part of our extensive collection of articles on the Antebellum Period. Click here to see our comprehensive article on the Antebellum Period. Would you like to learn the complete history of the Civil War? Click here for our podcast series Key Battles of the Civil War "What was the Purpose of the Missouri Compromise?" History on the Net© 2000-2025, Salem Media.June 19, 2025 < More Citation Information. In an effort to preserve the balance of power in Congress between slave and free states, the Missouri Compromise was passed in 1820 admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. Furthermore, with the exception of Missouri, this law prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Territory north of the 36° 30′ latitude line. In 1854, the Missouri Compromise was repealed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Three years later the Missouri Compromise was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision, which ruled that Congress did not have the authority to prohibit slavery in the territories.