



# STEPHEN DOUGLAS

## and the Politics of Slavery

Map Joplin Globe

By Jason Navarro, Educator, Wheaton High School, Wheaton, Mo.



Photo National Archives

The terrible conflict of the Civil War did not begin overnight, but was instead the result of complicated political and social issues that bitterly divided the country in the 1850s. At the center of many of those issues was Stephen A. Douglas.

Douglas, or the "Little Giant," as he was often called, was a Democratic Party politician for Illinois. He moved to Illinois at the age of 20, leaving behind his home in Vermont and becoming a teacher while showing interest in politics. By his 30th birthday, Douglas had been elected to Congress twice. His 1847 election as a U.S. Senator made him a force in national politics.

Douglas first gained attention when California applied for statehood in 1850. California wanted to enter

the Union as a free state, abolishing slavery within its borders. Slave states protested this action because they believed it would upset the balance of free and slave states. With more free states than slave states in the Union, the free states would hold more power in Congress and could work against slavery.

The result of this clash was the Compromise of 1850. The compromise was authored by Kentucky Senator Henry Clay but largely pushed through Congress by Douglas. The compromise allowed California to become a free state in exchange for concessions to the southern slave states. Among the most controversial of those concessions was the Fugitive Slave Law. This law stated that anyone who found a runaway slave was legally obligated to return that slave to his master. The Fugitive Slave Law angered many Northerners, but the Compromise of 1850 stalled the slavery crisis for a short time.

### Kansas-Nebraska Act

Perhaps Douglas's most fateful decision was his creation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. As part of an effort to organize those territories as a northern route for the railroads, Douglas made great concessions to Southerners in order to receive their support. The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed those new territories to vote on whether they would be free or slave states, an idea known as popular sov-

ereignty.

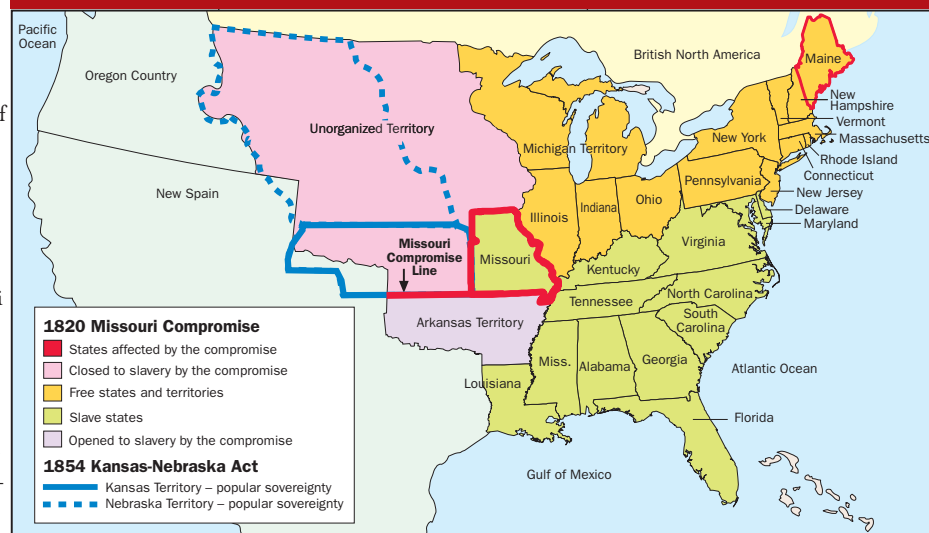
However, there was one big problem. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 said that slavery could not spread above the southern border of Missouri anywhere in the Louisiana Purchase other than Missouri itself. By pushing the Kansas-Nebraska

Act through Congress, Douglas destroyed the Missouri Compromise, set off a bloody border war between Kansans and Missourians, and led those who opposed the spread of slavery to form the Republican Party. The unstable issue of slavery in the United States reached its most tense point yet.

### Lincoln arrives on the scene

The Republicans soon gave Douglas his greatest rival, fellow Illinois politician Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln ran against Douglas for the U.S. Senate in 1858. Douglas won the election, but the famous series of debates between the candidates made Lincoln a household name and pushed him towards a run for the presidency two years later.

## THE UNITED STATES IN 1820



Lincoln again faced Douglas in one of the most important elections in American history.

By that time, Southerners had given up on Douglas because of his weak support of slavery. He truly believed in popular sovereignty and did not want to see slavery forced upon Kansas. These issues destroyed the Democratic Party and led to its split.

Douglas was nominated for president by the Northern Democrats, and Vice President John Breckinridge was nominated by the Southern Democrats. With John Bell stealing votes for another party and the Democrats split, Douglas realized that Lincoln and the Republicans were sure to win. Douglas spent the end

of his campaign traveling the South and trying to calm southern fears, but Southerners did not listen.

Lincoln was elected, and several southern states seceded from the United States. Stephen Douglas died of typhoid fever in 1861, just as his beloved nation was torn apart by Civil War.

### LEARN MORE!

Companion activities for this series can be found at [www.mo-nie.com](http://www.mo-nie.com) using code: cwteach

### 1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act leads to the "Bleeding Kansas" border war and the formation of the Republican Party.

### 1859

John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry increases tensions between the North and the South.

### 1860

Abraham Lincoln is elected President. South Carolina secedes from the Union.

### 1861

The Confederate States of America is formed. Fort Sumter is captured and the Civil War begins.

### 1862

Missouri is successfully defended by the Union at Pea

Ridge, Ark. Union victory at Antietam leads Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

### 1863

Victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg turn the war in favor of the Union.

### 1865

Lee surrenders at Appomattox. Lincoln is assassinated at Ford's Theater.

### 1867

Radical Reconstruction begins in the South.

### 1877

The Compromise of 1877 ends Reconstruction. Without military support, Reconstruction governments collapse in the South.

This Newspaper In Education series was created by The Joplin Globe in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education Teaching American History Project, the East Newton R-6 School District, the Southwest Center for Educational Excellence and the Missouri Southern State University Social Sciences Department.

The Missouri Press Foundation thanks The Joplin Globe and its partners for sharing the series with community newspapers.

