

1. Causes of the Civil War

NCSS Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance | NCSS Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

The Powder Keg: Unraveling the Causes of the American Civil War

Picture a nation torn apart, brother fighting against brother, and a conflict that would reshape the future of a country. This was the reality of the American Civil War, a devastating struggle that erupted in 1861. But what led to this monumental clash? The causes of the Civil War were complex and multifaceted, rooted in decades of growing tensions between the North and South. We'll explore the key factors that ignited this powder keg, forever changing the course of American history.

The Root of Discord: Slavery and Its Expansion

At the heart of the Civil War lay the institution of slavery. While the North had gradually abolished slavery, the South's economy and social structure remained deeply entrenched in this inhumane practice. As the United States expanded westward, a crucial question arose: would new states be free or slave? This debate over the expansion of slavery into new territories became a flashpoint for conflict.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 attempted to maintain a balance between free and slave states by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, while also establishing the 36°30' parallel as the dividing line for future states. However, it was only a temporary solution. The acquisition of new territories from the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) reignited the debate.

The Compromise of 1850, brokered by Senator Henry Clay, tried to address the status of territories gained from Mexico. It admitted California as a free state, allowed popular sovereignty in Utah and New Mexico territories, and introduced a stricter Fugitive Slave Law. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854

further strained relations, as it repealed the Missouri Compromise and allowed new states to decide the slavery question through "popular sovereignty." This led to violent confrontations, such as "Bleeding Kansas," where pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers clashed, foreshadowing the larger conflict to come.



The Civil War was caused by slavery, states' rights, economic differences, and political conflicts between the North and South.

Economic Divide: Two Different Worlds

While slavery was the central issue, economic differences between the North and South also fueled tensions. The North had become increasingly industrialized, with a diverse economy based on manufacturing, commerce, and wage labor. In contrast, the South remained primarily agricultural, relying heavily on slave labor to cultivate cash crops like cotton, tobacco, and sugar.

These economic disparities led to conflicting interests in national policies. The North favored high tariffs to protect its industries, while the South opposed them as they raised the cost of imported goods. The Tariff of 1828, nicknamed the "Tariff of Abominations" by its

Southern critics, highlighted this divide. The North pushed for internal improvements like railroads and canals, which the South often saw as benefiting Northern interests at their expense.

The economic differences also shaped immigration patterns, with most new immigrants settling in the North, further increasing its population and political power. This demographic shift would have significant implications for representation in Congress and the Electoral College.

Political Turmoil: A Nation Divided

The growing sectional divide manifested in the political arena. The rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s, with its anti-slavery expansion platform, threatened Southern interests. The party's formation was partly a response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the perceived aggressions of the "slave power."

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, despite not winning a single Southern state, was seen by many Southerners as a threat to their way of life. Although Lincoln had pledged not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, his opposition to its expansion was enough to alarm Southern states.

The concept of states' rights also played a crucial role. Many Southerners believed that states had the right to nullify federal laws they disagreed with and even secede from the Union if they felt their rights were being infringed upon. This ideology, championed by politicians like John C. Calhoun, clashed with the North's vision of a strong federal government.

The Dred Scott Decision and Its Impact

The Supreme Court's 1857 decision in the Dred Scott case further inflamed tensions. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's ruling declared

that African Americans, whether free or slave, were not American citizens and had no standing in federal court. It also invalidated the Missouri Compromise, stating that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in the territories. This decision outraged many Northerners and strengthened the resolve of abolitionists.

The Spark: Secession and Fort Sumter

Following Lincoln's election, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union in December 1860. Six more states - Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas - followed suit by February 1861. The Confederate States of America was formed, with Jefferson Davis as its president.

The final spark came on April 12, 1861, when Confederate forces fired upon Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. This attack on a federal installation left President Lincoln with no choice but to call for troops to suppress the rebellion, leading to four years of brutal conflict.

The American Civil War was the result of a perfect storm of factors: the fundamental issue of slavery and its expansion, economic differences, political divisions, and differing interpretations of states' rights. These long-simmering tensions finally boiled over, plunging the nation into its bloodiest conflict.

Understanding the complex causes of the Civil War is crucial not only for comprehending this pivotal moment in American history but also for recognizing how unresolved societal divisions can lead to devastating consequences. As we reflect on this turbulent period, we are reminded of the importance of addressing systemic injustices and finding common ground in the face of deep-seated differences.

1. Causes of the Civil War

GUIDED NOTES

I. Key Terms

1. Missouri Compromise: _____
2. Popular Sovereignty: _____
3. Fugitive Slave Law: _____
4. Secession: _____

II. Main Concept Overview

Word Bank: *Tensions, Economic, Slavery*

The American Civil War was caused by a complex set of factors, primarily centered around _____ and its expansion. The conflict arose from long-standing _____ between the North and South, which had different _____ systems and political ideologies.

III. Matching Section

Match each term with its correct description:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| _____ Compromise of 1850 | A. Allowed new states to decide the slavery question |
| _____ Kansas-Nebraska Act | B. Established 36°30' parallel as dividing line for future states |
| _____ Missouri Compromise | C. Admitted California as a free state |
| _____ Dred Scott Decision | D. Declared African Americans were not citizens |
| _____ Fort Sumter | E. Site of the attack that began the Civil War |

IV. Fill in the Table

Complete the table comparing the North and South:

Aspect	North	South
Economy		
Labor System		
View on Tariffs		

V. True or False

- _____ The South opposed high tariffs as they raised the cost of imported goods.
- _____ The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state.
- _____ The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was not seen as a threat by many Southerners.
- _____ The concept of states' rights was primarily championed by Southern politicians.
- _____ The attack on Fort Sumter marked the beginning of the Civil War.

VI. Application Question

Describe how the issue of slavery's expansion into new territories contributed to the growing tensions between the North and South. How did various compromises attempt to address this issue, and why did they ultimately fail?

VII. Reflection/Summary

In your own words, summarize the main causes of the American Civil War. How do you think these historical divisions still impact American society today?

1. Causes of the Civil War - Reflection Questions

1

How did economic differences between North and South contribute to the path to war?

How do you think these economic factors interacted with the issue of slavery? How did the industrial economy of the North differ from the agricultural economy of the South? What role did tariffs play in creating economic tension? How did the Southern economy's reliance on slavery affect its political positions?

2

In what ways did westward expansion exacerbate the conflict over slavery?

How did the acquisition of new territories reignite debates about slavery? What was the significance of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in this context? How did events like "Bleeding Kansas" foreshadow the larger conflict to come?

3

How did the Dred Scott decision escalate tensions between North and South?

What were the key points of the Dred Scott decision? How did this ruling affect the status of African Americans in both free and slave states? What impact did this decision have on the political climate of the time?

1. Causes of the Civil War - Hypotheticals

Scenario: A New Party Rises

Imagine that a new political party forms around a single, polarizing issue and quickly gains enough support to win several key states in a presidential election.

- a) How might established political parties respond to this new competition?
- b) What impact could this have on the political unity of the country?
- c) In what ways does this scenario reflect the political shifts that occurred before the Civil War?

Scenario: The Profitable Divide

Suppose that due to technological advancements, several states develop a new, highly profitable industry that relies on practices that are considered unethical by many but are not explicitly illegal under federal law.

- a) How might economic interests influence political positions on this issue?
- b) What kind of compromises might be proposed to address the conflict?
- c) How could this situation create divisions similar to those seen before the Civil War?

1. Causes of the Civil War - Historical Activity

Instructions: Read the article below and analyze the author's perspective.

Breaking News! THE UNION IS DISSOLVED!

Charleston, South Carolina — December 20, 1860

In an extraordinary session, South Carolina delegates have voted 169-0 to leave the United States. Church bells rang throughout Charleston as news spread.

“We have severed the bonds with a government that no longer represents our interests,” declared Convention President D.F. Jamison.

Why We Leave

Delegates cited Lincoln's election as the final straw. His Republican Party opposes slavery's expansion into western territories. Our grievances include: protective tariffs benefiting Northern manufacturers, California's admission as a free state, and Northern states refusing to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law.

Governor Gist addressed the crowd: “Our forefathers created a voluntary compact of states. When that compact is broken, we reserve the right to withdraw. South Carolina entered the Union freely, and we leave it freely.”

What Happens Next?

Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas have scheduled secession conventions. Many believe a new Southern Confederacy will soon emerge.

Major Anderson commands federal troops at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Governor Gist demands all federal property be surrendered.

Lincoln remains silent.

Will separation occur peacefully? Will Lincoln surrender federal forts, or hold them by force? Will the North allow us to leave, or send armies? One thing is certain: the United States as we knew it has ceased to exist.

Primary Source Practice

Analysis Questions

Source Analysis: According to this newspaper, what reasons did South Carolina give for seceding from the United States?

Connection Question: This article presents secession as a peaceful exercise of “states’ rights.” How does this Southern perspective help explain why many Southerners believed they were fighting for independence rather than defending slavery?

1. Causes of the Civil War - Vocabulary

TERM	DEFINITION
Abolitionist	
Compromise	
Confederate	
Dred Scott	
Expansion	
Fort Sumter	
Kansas-Nebraska	
Missouri	
Popular Sovereignty	
Republican	
Secession	
Slavery	
States' Rights	
Tariff	

1: WORD SEARCH

Causes of the American Civil War

J B C A B I R A K J H U M T D O J Z X F Z K B R
K D S X B B G X J X Y L I J A M W W L I I N H M
V V B Y L O U X T M R H S R B T M I Q C P H N S
R B Z R M V L Q Y F B P S X R E P U B L I C A N
C U Y B Q A P I T O K M O X M H K M R A S M C Y
I G R C P E J Z T K S Y U U K Z M O T E F B S M
K O U H Z T J S D I F S R I T P N S J A U D X A
Z A G O G R N R K C O B I F H O C O S K R D M O
C O N F E D E R A T E N Q M X P X D T X Q I H W
K L M S W J N C R D V R I F J U K R A H Q I F Z
Q E K U A A I J D O M M P S F L M Z T T W J Y F
K H A J W S Y E P W J G Q Z T A M M E L K K B M
L D F A H U N U U I F L F T N R R U S C M R J R
R T H D N Z U E Z E T C B P V S W P R X F U C N
V Z J I Q M V R B E Q A I Z B O N E I L W G O E
Q W G S W D N Q V R W D F H S V L K G C F Z M X
U J S A B P T K W S A Z R Z V E U I H X B A P P
D U L E N G B Y M D E S O A N R C Z T F M R R A
X J A S E O R X L K S E K S E E R E S V V K O N
X T V N Y J D G D Z J V X A M I K S S O K B M S
D G E L Y B R U I E Y F D R L G Y I I S U Z I I
O H R O C Q Z N Q D G N K Z V N C C H D I C S O
W R Y W O F O R T S U M T E R T B I Y W A O E N
S D Y T J V D R E D S C O T T Y A P R A R Q N L

Popular sovereignty

Confederate

Kansas-Nebraska

Tariff

Compromise

States' rights

Abolitionist

Missouri

Secession

Slavery

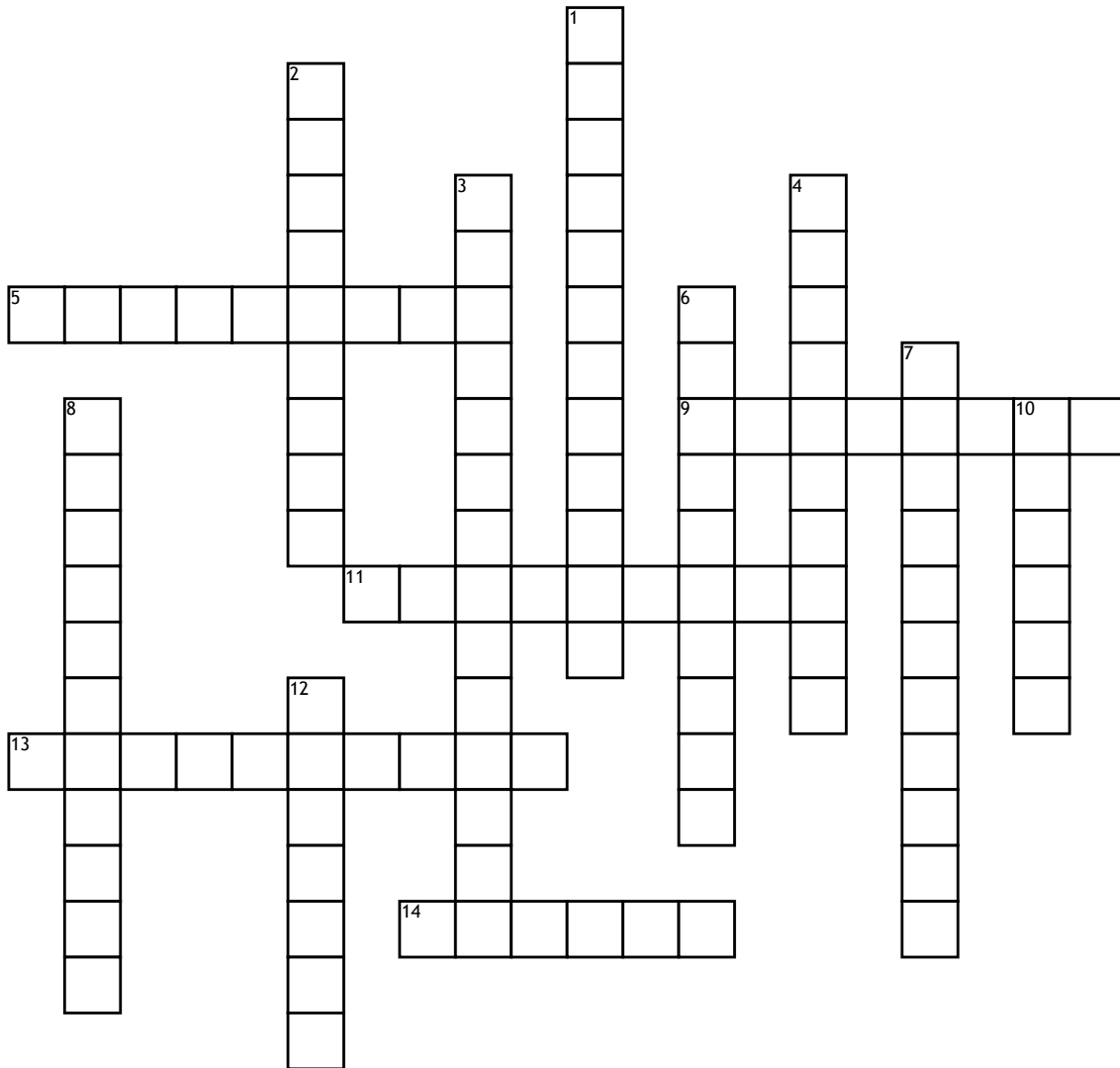
Fort Sumter

Dred Scott

Republican

Expansion

Causes of the American Civil War



Across

5. Westward growth that fueled debates over new states' status.

9. State whose admission sparked a crucial 1820 agreement.

11. Supreme Court case that intensified sectional tensions. (2 words)

13. New party formed with an anti-slavery expansion platform.

14. Tax on imports, a source of economic tension between North and South.

Down

1. Advocate for ending the peculiar institution.

2. Southern states' act of leaving the Union following Lincoln's election.

3. Act that allowed popular sovereignty in new territories. (2-words)

4. Site of the attack that sparked the Civil War. (2 words)

6. Political agreement, often named after years like 1820 and 1850.

7. Concept allowing territories to decide the slavery question, Popular _____

8. Member of the Southern alliance formed in 1861.

10. Concept championed by Southerners to oppose federal laws. States' _____

12. Central institution at the heart of the Civil War debate.