

Causes of the Civil War (Part 1)

(¶1) There were many causes of the Civil War. While numerous causes occurred in the years immediately preceding the Civil War, some causes involved longstanding issues in the nation that had never truly been resolved.

(¶2) A major underlying cause was the result of geography. The differing geographies of the North and South led to very different economies. The South had a warmer climate and long, deep rivers. The warmer climate allowed for longer growing seasons. All of these climatic and geographic factors make the south ideal for agriculture. Therefore, southern farmers invested in commercial farming growing cash crops on large plantations. To do the work on these plantations, the South relied on slave labor. On the other hand, the North had cold winters and rocky soil, which limited the region to having small farms. This led to the development of a diverse commercial economy based on activities other than agriculture, such as fishing, lumber, and manufacturing. None of these activities needed a lot of workers so slavery died out in the north. Rivers in the North were shallow, so trade developed using port cities along the coast. And even though northern rivers were not very good for transportation and trade, they were good for turning waterwheels. As a result, the North developed an industrial economy and relied on wage labor more (see information on immigration below). To help protect Northern industries from competition from British goods, the federal government passed a tariff. This tariff made products from the North cheaper than British goods, so everyone (including Southerners) was basically forced to buy Northern manufactured goods. As a result of the tariff, the South was upset because they had to buy Northern goods. The South was also upset because the Northerners refused to cooperate in returning fugitive (escaped) slaves. This led to stronger fugitive slave laws, which in turn angered the North, and increased tension.

(¶3) Another underlying problem had to do with federalism (power divided between national and state governments). When the Constitution was written, delegates debated the issue of who would have the final say on laws (state governments or federal governments). In the early 1800's, when some southern states were unhappy about the tariff that protected northern industries, some politicians proposed the principle of nullification. This was the idea that if a state considered a federal law unconstitutional, the state could nullify the law. This led to tension between Southern state governments and the federal government, and was one problem that led to the Civil War.

(¶4) Another problem was that the growth of the country started to unbalance the balance of power between northern and southern states. As the country expanded and new states were being added, tensions between the north and south were inflamed as the two sides debated over whether or not slavery would be allowed in the new states. These intense debates were controlled as long as new states could be added equally to both sides preserving the balance in the Senate. Until 1818, the United States consisted of 10 free and 10 slave states. When a territory's population reached about 60,000, the people of the territory could petition the Union for admission and become part of the United States, once Congress approved. When Illinois was admitted as a free state, Alabama was admitted as a slave state soon after in order to preserve the balance between free and slave states. When Missouri applied for statehood, this led to the Missouri Compromise. The compromise included Missouri being admitted as a slave state, Maine admitted as a free state, and the Louisiana Territory was split at the line of 36'30" latitude (north of the line, slavery was illegal; south of the line, slavery was legal).

(¶5) Despite these efforts, the balance of power was becoming unbalanced. In the 1830s and 1840s, lots of immigrants were coming into the country but they were mostly coming into northern states because the immigrants were interested in factory jobs. This led to the population of the north growing faster than the population of the south. As a result, there were many more representatives in the House of Representatives from northern states than southern states. For a while, these differences were kept in check because the power of northern states and southern states was balanced in the Senate. But this didn't last forever.

(¶6) When California applied to become a state, it had already banned slavery. This caused the South to be concerned that another free state would join the Union. To address this concern, Congress passed the Compromise of 1850. In theory, the Compromise of 1850 included provisions (parts) to appeal to Northerners and Southerners. The terms of the Compromise were that California was admitted as a free state. Utah and New Mexico territories would vote on whether or not to allow slavery. The slave trade was banned in the District of Columbia, but slavery was allowed to continue, and the Fugitive Slave Act required people in the free states to help capture and return escaped slaves. Also, alleged fugitive slaves were not entitled to a trial by jury and were not allowed to testify on their own behalf. However, the Compromise of 1850 failed to diffuse tensions