

Missouri Compromise

Sara Ann McGill

In the early 1800's, as the United States experienced a rapid westward expansion, the issue of slavery divided the nation. The legality of slavery in a given territory was of major concern when the territory applied for statehood. Legislators tried to solve this problem with the new state of **Missouri** by instituting the **Missouri Compromise**. The **Compromise** maintained the balance of power in Congress and instituted a concession that would solve disputes when other territories became states. However, the **Missouri Compromise** was called into question and eventually nullified.

Toward Statehood

Since the formation of the United States, regional differences threatened the unity of the country. As early as 1787, when the Constitution was signed, the North and South argued over the issue of slavery. Before westward expansion began in the 19th century, it was understood that states south of the Ohio River and the Mason-Dixon Line, which ran the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland, would allow slaves, while those north of this border would forbid it.

The balance of political power in the federal government was very important to both the North and South. When Alabama joined the Union as a slave state in 1819, it made the balance of power in the legislature equal. The Senate had 22 members from slave states and 22 from free states. As new settlers swelled the population of the **Missouri** Territory, it petitioned for statehood in 1818. Since most of these settlers had come to **Missouri** from southern states, slavery was widely practiced in the territory with over 10,000 slaves working for **Missouri** owners. It was assumed that **Missouri** would join the union as a slave state. The North feared that the South would now have more power in national politics with the addition of **Missouri** as a slave state to the legislature. . .

Missouri Compromise Becomes a Bill

In February 1820, Illinois Republican Senator Jesse B. Thomas presented to Congress a suggestion that became the basis of the **Missouri Compromise**. He suggested that **Missouri** enter the Union as a slave state, and the territory of Maine be allowed to join as a free state. This would allow both states to enter the

Copyright of Missouri Compromise is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

union without upsetting the balance of power in the legislature. Henry Clay, the speaker of the House from 1815-21, encouraged legislators to vote for Thomas' bill. The House rejected the first draft of the bill. The Maine statehood bill was reintroduced as a separate piece of legislation.

The **Missouri Compromise** included a stipulation designed to prevent future conflict concerning the status of new states. A line would be drawn extending from the northern borders of Tennessee and North Carolina at 36 degrees 30 minutes. All of the new states that were north of this border, except for **Missouri**, would become free states. All new states south of the border would be slave states.

The House of Representatives approved the bill, but the Senate had a more difficult time with Thomas's proposition. The debates were so heated that the president of the senate, Daniel D. Tompkins, could barely keep order in chambers. After heated arguments, committee conferences and minor alterations, the Senate passed the **Missouri Compromise** on January 13, 1820. In March 1820, the Senate passed the bill that gave statehood to Maine. It appeared that the controversy over the balance of legislative power was settled.

Many people remained unhappy with the **Missouri Compromise**. Citizens in the South still resented the federal government for interfering with the issue of slavery, an issue that was traditionally a state's right to decide. The discontent over the **compromise** led to more legislation on slavery.

Copyright of Missouri Compromise is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.