

Running for Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Law and the Coming of the Civil War

This activity compares a runaway slave ad and an abolitionist poster to explore the causes and effects of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. The law changed how many northerners viewed slavery and intensified conflicts that brought the nation closer to Civil War.

Essential Questions

- How did slaves, through their actions, challenge the authority of slave owners and the legitimacy of slavery.
- What were the Constitutional conflicts over individual liberty versus property rights, including the Fugitive Slave Law?
- How did the Fugitive Slave Law serve to strengthen the abolitionist movement?

Instructions

1. **Step 1:** We will review the **timeline of compromises over slavery** and discuss the following points:
 - There had been conflict between slavery and freedom since the beginning of the republic
 - The meaning of the phrase "*secure the Blessings of Liberty*" to Americans in the 1790s
2. **Step 2:** Please locate the documents "**Runaway Slave Advertisement from Antebellum Virginia**" and "**Caution!**" poster warning runaway slaves of slave catchers, and their accompanying **analysis worksheets (three)**. If this is being done in class, you will work with a partner to read and analyze the one document at a time (including the description), and Part I of the General Analysis Worksheet for that document. We will review as a class, and then complete the analysis of the other document and Part II of the General Analysis Sheet. If this is HW, just work through it individually.
3. **Step 3:** GTS: You are to individually write a response to the question "How did people in the North and South resist slavery?"

Historical Context

With the Compromise of 1850, the North and South avoided--or more accurately, delayed--a struggle that threatened to rip the Union apart. The Compromise included a Fugitive Slave Law, which empowered the federal government to prosecute northern whites who shielded runaways. Bounty hunters sometimes wrongfully seized free blacks born in the North as escaped slaves. In response black Americans and their white allies used force to protect fugitive slaves, sometimes attacking or even killing their pursuers. Conflicts sparked by the Fugitive Slave Law also infuriated southern slaveholders, who believed that the federal government was failing to keep northern abolitionists in check.

Timeline of Compromises over Slavery

From the nation's very inception, the existence of slavery stood in glaring contrast to the ideals of liberty and justice expressed in the preamble to the Constitution. The Constitution itself protected the institution of slavery (while never actually using the word slave) through a number of compromises worked out between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions. These constitutional compromises did not resolve the conflict, however, and Congress passed other compromises in an effort to prevent the young nation from breaking apart.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

—**Preamble to the United States Constitution**

The Constitution

The “Three-Fifths Compromise” provided a formula for calculating a state’s population, in which three-fifths of “all other persons” (i.e., slaves) would be counted for purposes of representation and taxation. The Constitution also included a provision to ban the importation of slaves starting in 1808, and a fugitive slave clause requiring escaped slaves to be returned to their owners.

Fugitive Slave Act (1793)

Required that escaped slaves found in free states be caught and returned to their masters. The Act also denied freed slaves the right to a jury trial and other constitutional rights.

Missouri Compromise (1820)

Banned slavery in the Louisiana Territory north of the 36° 30’ parallel, except within the borders of the state of Missouri, which would be admitted as a slave state; Maine to be admitted as a free state.

Second Missouri Compromise (1821)

Missouri was admitted as a state despite a provision in its constitution excluding “free negroes and mulattoes” from the state.

“Gag rule” in Congress (1831-1844)

When abolitionists began submitting petitions about ending slavery to Congress, proslavery representatives passed a "gag rule" that prevented those petitions from being discussed.

Compromise of 1850

Necessary to determine whether slavery would be allowed in states created by the territory acquired from Mexico in the Mexican-American War. California was admitted as a free state, while the Territory of New Mexico (including present-day Arizona and part of Nevada) allowed slavery. The Compromise also included a measure banning the slave trade (but not slavery itself) within the District of Columbia, as well as a new and more forceful Fugitive Slave Law.

Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)

Created the territories of Kansas and Nebraska and provided that residents of those territories would vote to determine whether the two territories would allow slavery. This resulted in violence between pro-slavery and anti-slavery advocates who moved to the territories.

Crittenden Compromise (1860)


An unsuccessful attempt by Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky to resolve the secession crisis by making concessions to slave states. Crittenden proposed a constitutional amendment to guarantee the permanent existence of slavery in the slave states along the boundaries established by the Missouri Compromise line.

Focus Questions

1. What was the first political compromise over slavery?
2. What keeps happening that requires the subsequent compromises?
3. What is the last attempted compromise over slavery?

Runaway Slave Advertisement from Antebellum Virginia

In this handbill from 1854, a Virginia slave-owner advertises a large reward for the return of a 33 year-old enslaved man. Historians have noted the use of woodprint images, such as the one seen here, as evidence of the frequency of runaway slaves—so many that southern printers invested in specialized type. The number of advertisements for runaways in Virginia rose dramatically in the 1840s and 1850s, and average rewards nearly doubled. Runaways were costly to slaveholders, in terms of lost labor and the expense of ads, rewards, and patrols. More fundamentally, runaways challenged the authority of slaveholders and the legitimacy of the system. Amid the growing sectional conflict over slavery, southern lawmakers pushed through the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850.



6c, 1911

\$100
REWARD!

Ranaway on the 27th of September last, from the Farm of the Hon. Jeremiah Morton, [to whom he was hired,] in the county of Orange, near Raccoon Ford, my negro man

OSBORNE!

He is 33 years of age, very stout and very black, with African features, about 5 feet 9 inches high, with very bad teeth, ruptured with hernia on the right side, and had on when he left a new truss. He sometimes calls himself John. I will give for the apprehension of said negro so that I get him again, \$25, if taken in Culpeper, Orange or Stafford, \$50 if taken in any other county, and \$100 if taken out of this State. He was raised in Stafford, on a farm known as Salvington, on Potomac Creek. His mother is owned by Mrs. Rawlings, in that neighborhood. His wife is owned by Mr. C. C. Beckham, of Culpeper.

Stevensburg, Culpeper Co., Va., Oct. 14, 1854. **ROBERT O. GRAYSON.**
[ALABAMA PRESS, PRINT.]

SOURCE | "\$100 reward! Ranaway on the 27th of September last," Stevensburg, 1854; from Library of Congress American Memory, *An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/rbc/rbpe.18604300>.

CREATOR | Robert O. Grayson

ITEM TYPE | Advertisement

Boston Abolitionists Warn of Slave Catchers

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which required police officers everywhere in the country to capture escaped slaves and return them to their owners. Northern whites who were caught helping escaped slaves could also be arrested and face heavy fines. As a result of the law, many free African Americans who were not escaped slaves were still captured and sent into slavery in the South. The Fugitive Slave Law made northerners whose states had long ago abolished slavery responsible for helping to maintain slavery. This drew many new supporters to the abolitionist cause. After the law was passed, abolitionists held mass meetings throughout the North and Midwest, and in many places used force to protect fugitives from their hunters. This poster was created by Boston abolitionist Theodore Parker.

External Link: hdl.loc.gov

CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE
OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the
Watchmen and Police Officers
of Boston,

For since the recent **ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN,** they are empowered to act as
KIDNAPPERS
AND
Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in **KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES.** Therefore, if you value your **LIBERTY,** and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS** on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for
KIDNAPPERS, and have
TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

SOURCE | Theodore Parker, "Caution!! Colored people of Boston," poster, 1851, Boston; from the Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.06002200>.

CREATOR | Theodore Parker

ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print

Runaway Slave Advertisement worksheet

1. There are six (6) people mentioned in the ad, besides Osborne. Create a chart that shows the relationship of these 6 people to OSBORNE.

Vocabulary

Apprehension: arrest

Truss: a brace **Stout:** heavy

Ruptured: torn **Hernia:** an injury to the stomach area caused by heavy lifting

2. Complete the following from the information you get from the advertisement. If choices are given for the answer, **circle** the correct choice.
- a) The advertisement was published in October. [1853 / 1854].
- b) The advertisement says that Osborne, also known as _____, ran away on _____. [1853 / 1854].
- c) There is an image of an escaped slave on the advertisement called a woodprint. Does this image look like it was [drawn freehand / printed from a form].
- d) There are three rewards offered. What amounts are they and why are they different?

e) There are locations mentioned; the farm where John was raised is _____ and the town is _____.

f) The farm where he was raised is closer to where his [mother / wife] lives.

g) His mother and wife are owned by [the same person / two different people].

h) The reason the advertisement mentions John's mother and wife is:

Analysis Worksheet: Boston Abolitionists Warn of Slave Catchers

Complete the following from information you get from the description at the top of the page and the poster. If choices are given for the answer, **circle** the correct choice.

2. The poster is dated [1841 / 1851]
3. Who is meant to see the poster?
 - escaped slaves
 - free African Americans
 - all of the above

Vocabulary for Poster

- conversing:** talking, having a conversation
- aldermen:** elected city council
- empowered:** given authority or permission to do something
- welfare:** health and happiness
- fugitive:** someone who has escaped
- shun:** avoid something or someone on purpose

3. Use your vocabulary to answer the following:

The poster says they should avoid [talking with / touching / fighting with] the city's watchmen and police officers.

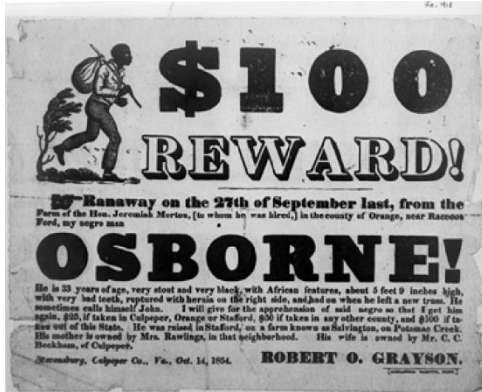
4. The mayor and aldermen of Boston gave permission to the city's watchmen and police officers to:
 - a. Go to the South and kidnap slaves
 - b. Capture any escaped slaves in the city of Boston
 - c. Keep their own slaves
5. Use the description at the top of the document to answer the following:
Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1780. Why would a poster in 1851 be telling people to look out for slave catchers?

6. How is this poster an example of the conflict between what is the right thing to do and what is the legal thing to do?

General Focus Questions for Running for Freedom Activity

PART 1

Runaway Slave Advertisement (Virginia 1854)



Vocabulary:

- Apprehension: arrest
- Truss: brace

Based on the information found in this document, please respond to questions shown below.

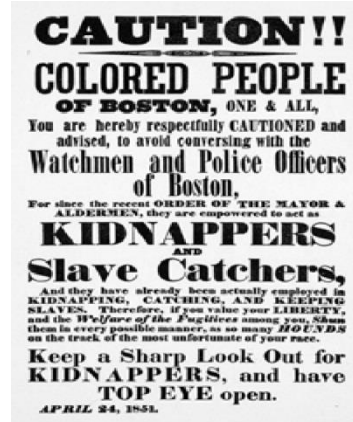
3. There are three outstanding features of the advertisement. Explain each.
 - a) Woodprint image
 - b) \$100 Reward
 - c) Osborne
4. What insight into slavery as a labor system and its effect on slaves do you get from this advertisement?

PART 2

Questions to pose of both documents:

How are these two documents similar? Different? Explain.

Caution! Colored People of Boston



Vocabulary:

- Alderman: elected member of a town or city council
- Shun: to deliberately avoid someone or something
- Empowered: Having control over one's life or situation

Based on the information found in this document, please respond to questions shown below.

- 1) To whom is this poster addressed?
- 2) Who
 - a) was empowered to capture slaves?
 - b) empowered them to?
- 3) Massachusetts had abolished slavery in 1780. How did the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 create a conflict for states that had previously abolished slavery?

