

# Chapter 10

# Witnessing History . . .



The Fugitive Slave Bill (exhibited in its hideous deformity at our previous meeting) has already in hot haste commenced its bloody crusade o'er the land, and the liability of ourselves and our families becoming its victims at the caprice of Southern men-stealers, imperatively demands an expression, whether we will tamely submit to chains and slavery, or whether we will, at all and every hazard, Live and Die freemen.

—Robert C. Nell, “Declaration of Sentiments of the Colored Citizens of Boston on the Fugitive Slave Bill!!!” 1850



What action might Nell be suggesting of black people in light of the Fugitive Slave Bill?

An abolitionist poster from Massachusetts condemns the Fugitive Slave Law and the politicians who voted for it.

## Chapter Preview

### ▶ Witnessing History

As Martin Delany suggested in his quote in Chapter 9, Nell urges black people to decide their own fate and not submit to enslavement and to fight to the death to be free.

### ▶ Retracing the Odyssey

#### **Boston, Massachusetts: Black Heritage Trail.**

This is a 1.6-mile walking tour of fourteen sites. It begins at the Africa Meeting House (built in 1806) and includes the four-story home of black leader Lewis Hayden and his wife Harriet, as well as Augustus Saint-Gaudens's powerful 1897 Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.

By the end of the 1840s in the United States, no issue was as controversial as slavery. Slavery, or more accurately its expansion, deeply divided the American people and led to the bloodiest war in American history. Try as they might from 1845 to 1860, political leaders could not solve, evade, or escape slavery and whether to allow it to expand into the nation's western territories.

Whether slavery should be permitted in the western territories was not a new issue. As early as 1787, Congress had prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory, the area north of the Ohio River that became the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Then in 1819 a major political controversy erupted when Missouri applied for admission to the Union as a slave state. The Missouri Compromise—which admitted Maine as a free state, Missouri as a slave state, and outlawed slavery north of the 36° 30' line of latitude—settled that controversy, but only postponed for twenty-five years further conflict over the expansion of slavery.

The country's desire to acquire western lands intensified in the 1830s and 1840s. Most white Americans and many free black Americans assumed the American people should occupy the North American continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. In 1846 U.S. troops fought an eighteen-month conflict that resulted in the acquisition of more than half of Mexico and a major step toward the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny.

## Section

# 1


## The Lure of the West

### Free Labor Versus Slave Labor

Westward expansion revived the issue of slavery's future in the territories. Should slavery be legal in western lands, or should it be outlawed? Most white Americans held thoroughly ingrained racist beliefs that people of African descent were not and could never be their intellectual, political, or social equals. Yet those same white Americans disagreed vehemently on where those unfree African Americans should be permitted to labor and reside.

Most northern white people adamantly opposed allowing southern slaveholders to take their slaves into the former Mexican territories. They detested the prospect of slavery spreading westward and limiting their opportunities to settle and farm those lands. Except for the increasing number of militant abolitionists, white Northerners detested both slavery as a labor system and the black people who were enslaved.

By the mid-nineteenth century, northern black and white people embraced the system of **free labor**, that is, free men and women working to earn a living and improve their lives. If southern slave owners managed to gain a foothold for their unfree labor on the western plains, in the Rocky Mountains, or on the Pacific coast, then the future for free white laborers would be severely restricted, if not destroyed.

 **Reading Check** What did “free labor” mean to nineteenth-century Americans?

### The Wilmot Proviso

In 1846, during the Mexican War, a Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, David Wilmot, introduced a measure in Congress to prohibit slavery in any lands acquired from Mexico. Wilmot later explained that he wanted neither slavery nor black people to taint territory that should be reserved exclusively for whites: “The negro race already occupy enough of this fair continent. . . . I would preserve for free white labor a fair country . . . where the sons of toil, of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor.”

**Wilmot's Proviso** failed to become law, but white Southerners, who saw the measure as a blatant attempt to prevent them from moving west

### GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What did “free labor” mean to nineteenth-century Americans?
- ▶ Why was the expansion of slavery such a divisive issue?
- ▶ Why were white southerners opposed to the Wilmot Proviso?
- ▶ What were the sources of opposition to Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850?

### KEY TERMS

- ▶ free labor, p. 313
- ▶ Wilmot's Proviso, p. 313
- ▶ positive good, p. 314
- ▶ Free-Soil Party, p. 314
- ▶ Forty-Niners, p. 314
- ▶ Compromise of 1850, p. 314

### ▶ Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher's Resource Manual*.

### ▶ Reading Check

Free labor meant free men and women working to earn a living and improve their lives. Many people in the North saw westward expansion as an opportunity to expand the scope of free labor, something they believed was consistent with the country's core values.

### ▶ Recommended Reading

Eric Foner. *Free Soil, Free Labor and Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. An excellent overview of attitudes on free soil, slavery, and race.



Although white miners resented their presence, black men too sought riches in California in the great gold rush of 1849.

#### ► Reading Check, p. 315

Northerners believed that the expansion of slavery would limit the scope of free labor, cutting off opportunities for free men and women to make a living. It should be noted that many who opposed the expansion of slavery were equally opposed to racial integration.

#### ► Document

##### 10-1 *The Compromise of 1850*

The Missouri Compromise permitted Missouri to become a slave state, maintained political balance by admitting Maine as a free state, and banned slavery north of the 36°30' line of latitude in the old Louisiana Territory. This set of documents reproduces Henry Clay's compromise and opponent John C. Calhoun's reply.

#### ► Recommended Readings

Vincent Harding. *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981. A tribute to and a masterful narrative about the black people who challenged the white majority in nineteenth-century America.

and enjoying the prosperity and way of life that an expanding slave-labor system would create, were enraged. They considered any attempt to limit the growth of slavery to be the first step toward eliminating it. And the possibility that slavery might be abolished, as remote as that may have seemed in the 1840s, was too awful for them to contemplate.

White Southerners had convinced themselves that black people were a childlike and irresponsible race incapable of surviving as a free people. Southern white people considered slavery “a positive good”—in the words of Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina—that benefited both races and resulted in a society vastly superior to that of the North.

To prevent slavery's expansion, the **Free-Soil Party** was formed in 1848. It was composed mainly of white people who vigorously opposed slavery's expansion and the supposed desecration that the presence of black men and women might bring to the new western lands. But some black and white abolitionists also supported the Free-Soilers as a way to oppose slavery. They reasoned that even though many Free-Soil supporters were hostile to black people, the party still represented a serious challenge to slavery and its expansion. Frederick Douglass felt comfortable enough with the Free-Soil Party to attend its convention in 1848. The Free-Soil candidate for president that year was the former Democratic president Martin Van Buren. He came in a distant third behind the Whig victor and hero of the Mexican War, Zachary Taylor, who won, and the Democrat Lewis Cass. Nevertheless, ten Free-Soil congressmen were elected, and the party provided a growing forum to oppose slavery's advance.

## California and the Compromise of 1850

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 sent thousands of Americans hurrying west in search of wealth in 1849. The **Forty-Niners** were almost exclusively male and mostly white Americans. But the desire to get rich had universal appeal, and the gold rush attracted Europeans, Asians (mostly from China), and African Americans. Nearly 900 black men (and fewer than 100 black women) were living in California by 1850. Included among them were people of African descent from Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Jamaica. As California's population quickly soared to more than 100,000, its new residents applied for admission to the Union as a free state. Southern whites were aghast at the prospect of California prohibiting slavery. They refused to consider its admission unless slavery was lawful there. Most Northerners would not accept this.

Into the dispute stepped Whig senator Henry Clay, who had assisted with the Missouri Compromise thirty years earlier. Clay put together an elaborate compromise designed not only to settle the controversy over California, but also to resolve the issue of slavery's expansion once and for all. The **Compromise of 1850** attempted to satisfy both sides. To pla-



ate Northerners, he proposed admitting California as a free state and eliminating the slave trade (but not slavery) in the District of Columbia. To satisfy white Southerners, he offered a stronger fugitive slave law to make it easier for slave owners to apprehend runaway slaves and return them to slavery. New Mexico and Utah would also be organized as territories with no mention of slavery (see Map 10-1).

Clay's bill did not pass. Southern opponents like John C. Calhoun could not tolerate the admission of California without slavery. Northern opponents like Senator William Seward of New York could not tolerate a tougher fugitive slave law. President Zachary Taylor shocked his fellow Southerners and insisted California should be admitted as a free state and promised to veto the compromise if the House and Senate passed it.

In the summer of 1850, Taylor died unexpectedly and was succeeded by Millard Fillmore, who was willing to accept the compromise. Senator Stephen Douglas, an ambitious Democrat from Illinois, guided Clay's compromise through Congress by breaking it into separate bills. California entered the Union as a free state, and a stronger fugitive slave law entered the federal legal code.

**Reading Check** Why was the expansion of slavery such a divisive issue?

**MAP 10-1 The Compromise of 1850**

As a result of the war against Mexico, the United States acquired the regions shown on this map as California, Utah Territory, New Mexico Territory, and the portions of Texas not included in the Province of Texas.

**?** With the Compromise of 1850, California entered the union as a free state. In which remaining western lands would slavery be accepted or rejected?



Explore this map online at [www.prenhall.com/aah/map10.1](http://www.prenhall.com/aah/map10.1)

**Map 10-1**

The future slave status of the New Mexico and Utah territories remained unresolved.