

The American Civil War

by ReadWorks



Source: United States Marines

The American Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865 and was the result of a period of many tense years between the Northern states and the Southern states. The major issue between the North and the South was slavery. Starting in the 1850s, Northerners became more and more hostile to the idea of slavery on moral grounds, while slavery continued to be an accepted fact of life in the South.

In the early- to mid-1800s, large farms called plantations were the backbone of the Southern economy. Cotton, a cheap material used often in everyday life all over the world, was one of the most important crops grown on the plantations. As a result, cotton plantations multiplied throughout the region. Soon the South had become the main grower and exporter of cotton for Europe and a powerful economic force. Many people were required to work on plantations, and Southern plantation owners relied on slaves as the cheapest form of labor to work the fields. Slaves who worked in the fields typically lived in shacks in the slave quarters at a distance from the main house where the owners' families lived. They were given very little free time and were required to be answerable to the plantation owner. Some slaves even worked inside the homes of plantation owners, cleaning the house, or as a nanny to the children.

Slaves were considered property—they worked on plantations, in shops, in towns and cities, and in the construction of railroads. In the South, slaves were just another part of the landscape.

A different understanding of slavery, however, was beginning to take shape in the North. Taking the most progressive stand of the day, the Vermont Constitution of 1777 insisted that "all men are born equally free and independent," and added a clause prohibiting slavery based on this belief. The Declaration of Independence, in stating that all men are created equal, inspired Vermont to prohibit slavery in its constitution in 1777. By 1804, all states north of Maryland had voted to abolish slavery, many through a process of gradual emancipation, which set deadlines by which a slave must be freed, depending on the work done or the age reached. Also, during the antebellum period (1815 - 1860), the North began a process of modernization and industrialization. Industrial advances allowed for the development and expansion of new industries, like transportation (roads, canals, and railroads), communications (magazines and newspapers), and finance (banking and insurance). These industries fueled a demand for wage labor, which was partially met by the influx of immigrants from Europe. Refugees from European political and economic conditions sought the freedoms of American life, and many settled in the northern states.

By the 1850s, the majority of people in the North were opposed to the expansion of slavery and against allowing new states to join the United States as slave states. Some people were opposed to slavery for moral reasons, and they formed a movement in the North called "abolitionism," which called for the legal end to slavery in all of the United States. The wealthy Southern states saw abolitionism as a threat to their way of life and fought against the Northern states politically whenever there was a chance. When Abraham Lincoln, a Republican from Illinois who believed firmly in the Union, as opposed to states' rights to choose their own practices (regarding slavery, taxes, and other issues), was elected President in 1860, it was just too much for the Southern states. And so, soon after Lincoln took office, seven Southern states—South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—seceded from the United States of America and formed the Confederate States of America so that they could rule themselves as they saw fit.

President Lincoln knew that the Confederacy was a rebellion that would have to be brought back into the federal government. On April 12, 1861, the first shots of the American Civil War were fired upon Union (Northern) soldiers at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. The Northern troops were defeated quickly, and they retreated. Soon afterward, four more states—Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina—joined the Confederacy and entered the fight.

The American Civil War lasted four years and claimed the lives of approximately 620,000 soldiers. Fierce battles were fought throughout the country, and many lost their lives due to the wounds suffered and diseases spread from poor sanitary conditions. The war was bitter, with most young men leaving home to join the fight, sometimes clashing with family members from the other side on the battlefields. The North was at an advantage. With access to more soldiers, as well as factories that could quickly churn out wartime materials, they were often able to fight harder and longer.

Some of the most famous battles of the Civil War took place in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; Bull Run, Virginia; and Antietam, Maryland. Although one side or the other was technically victorious after these battles, each battle (and the war in general) could be considered a pyrrhic victory: there were such devastating costs on both sides of the war that the victory felt like a defeat.

After many long years and battles, the Confederates surrendered. On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee of the Confederacy surrendered to General (and future president) Ulysses S. Grant of the Union at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What was the major issue between the North and the South starting in the 1850s?

- A. industry
- B. cotton
- C. slavery
- D. women's rights

2. The passage explains the sequence of events that led to the Civil War. What happened after seven Southern states seceded from the Union?

- A. The American Civil War began.
- B. Abraham Lincoln was elected president.
- C. Vermont abolished slavery in its constitution.
- D. The North began a process of industrialization.

3. Slave labor was important for the economy of the Southern states. What evidence from the passage best supports this statement?

- A. In the early- to mid-1800s, large farms called plantations were the backbone of the Southern economy.
- B. Soon the South had become the main grower and exporter of cotton for Europe and a powerful economic force.
- C. Cotton, a cheap material used often in everyday life all over the world, was one of the most important crops grown on the plantations.
- D. Southern plantation owners relied on slaves as the cheapest form of labor to work the fields.

4. The passage states, "Slaves were considered property." Based on this information, what conclusion can you make about how slaves were treated?

- A. Slaves were treated well by some people.
- B. Slaves were treated as less than people.
- C. Slaves were mostly ignored by most people.
- D. Slaves were cared for like a prized possession.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A. the role of slavery in the start of the Civil War
- B. the use of slaves on Southern cotton plantations
- C. why Northern states voted to abolish slavery by 1804
- D. cultural differences between the northern and southern states

6. Read the following sentences: "In the early- to mid-1800s, large farms called plantations were the **backbone** of the Southern economy. Cotton, a cheap material used often in everyday life all over the world, was one of the most important crops grown on the plantations. As a result, cotton plantations multiplied throughout the region."

What does the author mean by calling plantations the "**backbone**" of the Southern economy?

- A. Plantations were a metaphorical pain in the back to the Southern states.
- B. Plantations were the weakest link in the strong Southern economy.
- C. Plantations were built on the bones of the slaves who worked on them.
- D. Plantations were the most important part of the Southern economy.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

In the Southern states, slavery was supported because it fueled the economy. _____, the Northern states viewed slavery as morally wrong.

- A. Therefore
- B. Ultimately
- C. In contrast
- D. Primarily

8. What was abolitionism?

9. Explain why the Southern states saw abolitionism as a threat to their way of life.

10. Explain how the issue of slavery and the abolitionism movement helped to start the American Civil War. Support your answer using information from the passage.