

Reading Through History

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The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

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The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was one of the most controversial laws ever passed. What was the Fugitive Slave Act? Why was it enacted?

In 1793, Congress passed a law which stated that all fugitive slaves (runaways) had to be returned to their masters. While it was enforced after it was passed, as time went by, many people in the Northern states (where slavery was illegal) began ignoring the law.

In fact, many Northerners did everything they could to circumvent the old Fugitive Slave Act, helping slaves run away and escape into Canada. It was this refusal to enforce the old law that prompted Southern slave owners to desire a new law. This led to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.



The act was part of a larger package of five bills known as the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise of 1850 was an agreement made between Northern legislators and Southern congressmen in which they each gave up something they desired in order to avoid conflict. This agreement, which had been orchestrated by the legendary Senator Henry Clay, helped to avoid civil war for several years.

The Fugitive Slave Act was one of the principle parts of the compromise. It stated that all fugitive slaves must be returned to their masters. It also stated that any law enforcement official who did not assist with the return of a runaway would be fined \$1,000 (that would be over \$25,000 today!)

According to the law, even an African American who was suspected of being a fugitive slave could be apprehended. Once arrested, the suspected runaway had no right to a trial (because slaves and most free blacks were not considered full citizens). Police officers, and other law enforcement officials, who arrested runaways would be given a pay bonus for their work (this gave them a reason to arrest anyone who looked like they might be an escaping slave).

Additionally, any person who was caught giving shelter, food, or protection to a runaway slave could be subject to up to six months in prison.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 infuriated Northerners. They felt that obligating Northern law enforcement agents to enforce this law was an underhanded method of expanding the power and reach of slavery. Congress had made it illegal to even assist a fugitive slave, and offering bonuses to law enforcement officials who caught suspected runaways made it dangerous for free blacks everywhere—not just in the South.

While the Fugitive Slave Act, as well as the other provisions in the Compromise of 1850, was supposed to diffuse tensions, it only succeeded in making things worse. As the 1850s progressed, and resentment towards the new law grew, it drove the two sides closer and closer to civil war.

Multiple Choice: *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. _____ Why was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 passed?
 - a. Because Northern states had stopped enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act from 1793.
 - b. It was a major effort to try and catch Harriet Tubman.
 - c. There was a sudden epidemic of slaves running away, which they had never done before.
 - d. It was one of the settlements which brought the Civil War to an end.

2. _____ What was the Compromise of 1850?
 - a. It was the peace treaty which ended the Civil War.
 - b. It was an agreement that allowed Abraham Lincoln to become President.
 - c. It was an important Supreme Court decision which prevented the Civil War for many years.
 - d. An agreement between Northern and Southern congressmen which helped avoid the Civil War for several years.

3. _____ The main provision of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 stated what?
 - a. That Harriet Tubman was to be shot on sight.
 - b. That all fugitive slaves must be returned to their masters.
 - c. That fugitive slaves, if caught, were to be hanged without trial.
 - d. That all fugitive slaves were regarded as free citizens and would no longer be pursued.

4. _____ Which of the following best describes the punishment if someone was caught providing shelter to a fugitive slave?
 - a. The person could be given up to six months in jail.
 - b. The person would be executed for attempting to help the fugitive.
 - c. The person would be sold into slavery.
 - d. The person could be given a prison sentence of no less than five years.

5. _____ Why did most Northerners dislike the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850?
 - a. They felt that it was expanding the power and reach of slavery.
 - b. They felt that it only benefited Southern slave owners and did not help Northern slave owners.
 - c. They felt that it would only delay the Civil War, which they really wanted to happen.
 - d. They felt a better solution to the problem would be for Southern slave owners to prevent their slaves from running away.

Student Response: *Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of at least five complete sentences.*

6. Why did many influential Southerners push for a new Fugitive Slave Act in 1850? Do you feel that the reaction to the new law that many Northerners displayed was justified? Why or why not?

Guided Reading: *Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.*

1. As time passed, many _____ began ignoring the original Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.

2. The goal of many Northern abolitionists was to help fugitive slaves escape to _____.

3. The Fugitive Slave Act was part of a five bill package known as the _____.

4. Most of the ideas written into the Compromise of 1850 came from Senator _____.

5. Any law enforcement official who did not attempt to apprehend a runaway slave would be _____ \$1,000.

6. Free African Americans arrested under the Fugitive Slave Act had no legal rights in most courts because they were not considered full _____.

7. Police officers who arrested runaways would be given a _____ for their work.

8. The Fugitive Slave Act outraged many people living in the _____.

9. Many felt that the underhanded method of the new law was a method for expanding the power and reach of _____.

10. The Fugitive Slave Act, along with other happenings during the 1850s, pushed the North and South closer to _____.

Vocabulary Check: *Select the option that best identifies the use of the underlined word.*

1. _____ In the opening sentence, the word controversial means
 - a. Of, producing, or marked by causing public agreement.
 - b. Being neither right nor wrong.
 - c. Of, producing, or marked by causing public dispute.
 - d. Having no particular interest or concern; apathetic.

2. _____ “Northerners did everything they could to circumvent the old Fugitive Slave Act.” In this passage, the word circumvent implies that
 - a. Northerners strongly supported the law.
 - b. Northerners were indifferent about the law.
 - c. Northerners wanted a much stronger, tougher law passed to replace the original act.
 - d. Northerners hated the law and tried to find ways around it.

3. _____ The word orchestrated in the fourth paragraph means
 - a. To compose or arrange music for performance by an orchestra.
 - b. To arrange or control the elements of, as to achieve a desired overall effect.
 - c. To hold financially liable; demand payment from.
 - d. That Henry Clay had nothing to do with the bill.

4. _____ “The Fugitive Slave Act was one of the principle parts of the compromise.” The word principle in the previous sentence implies
 - a. That the Fugitive Slave Act was not important.
 - b. That the Fugitive Slave Act did not make it into the law.
 - c. That the Fugitive Slave Act had widespread support throughout the country.
 - d. That the Fugitive Slave Act was a very important part of the compromise law.

5. _____ The word infuriated in the eight paragraph means
 - a. To strongly support an issue or situation.
 - b. To cause shock or worry.
 - c. To make light of, or fun of a situation.
 - d. To make angry; enrage.

TRUE/FALSE: *Indicate whether the statement is true or false. If the statement is false, write the correct word in the space provided to make the statement true.*

6. _____ The Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850. _____

7. _____ It was mainly Northerners who supported the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Act.

8. _____ Even free African Americans could be arrested if someone suspected them of being a fugitive slave. _____

9. _____ Under the conditions of the Fugitive Slave Act, suspected runaways would be given a trial to determine if they were actually a fugitive slave. _____

10. _____ Under the Fugitive Slave Act, aiding a runaway slave was punishable by up to six years in jail. _____

Answer Key:

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 Multiple Choice:

- 1) A
- 2) D
- 3) B
- 4) A
- 5) A

Student Response for The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850:

- 6) Part 1: Northerners no longer enforced the old law.
Part 2 & 3: Student answers will vary.

Guided Reading for The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850:

- 1) Northerners
- 2) Canada
- 3) Compromise of 1850
- 4) Henry Clay
- 5) Fined
- 6) Citizens
- 7) Bonus
- 8) North
- 9) Slavery
- 10) Civil War

Vocabulary Check:

- | | |
|------|--------------------|
| 1) C | 6) T |
| 2) D | 7) F - southerners |
| 3) B | 8) T |
| 4) D | 9) F – would not |
| 5) D | 10) F – six months |