

# The Uneasy Balance: Stepping Stones to War

by Jared A. Morris

**Subject(s):** U.S. History I

**Key Words:** slavery, cotton, cotton gin, antebellum America

**Time Allotted:** 60 minutes

<b>Lesson Overview</b>	The American Civil War was a terrible, yet transformative event in the history of the United States. The following is an interactive, chronological look at some of the important factors and events that plunged the country into terrible conflict.
<b>Compelling Question</b>	Using the institution of slavery as the lens through which to examine, what are some key points, themes, and events leading up to the American Civil War?
<b>Supporting Questions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Why was slavery not legitimately dealt with during the founding period of the nation?</li><li>2) How did the cotton gin help change the economy, culture, and demographics of the country?</li><li>3) What correlations can be made between slavery and cotton?</li><li>4) What issues arose between the northern and southern states as new territories were acquired in the west?</li><li>5) What role did John Brown play in the lead-up to civil war?</li></ol>
<b>Learning Objectives</b>	Student will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• -Identify key cultural, political, and economic tensions leading up to the American Civil War?</li><li>• -Examine and discuss how the institution of slavery was a key factor in causing the American Civil War</li><li>• -Locate line of demarcation between “slave” and “free” states prior to civil war.</li><li>• -Discuss the role of cotton and the cotton gin in the spread of slavery</li><li>• -Analyze primary sources, maps, and other resources to create discourse and develop an understanding of key aspects of Antebellum United States.</li></ul>
<b>C3 Standards &amp; Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• D2.Geo.12.9-12 Evaluate the consequences of human-made and natural catastrophes on global trade, politics, and human interaction.</li><li>• D2.His.1.9-12 Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.</li><li>• D2.His.15.9-12 Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.</li><li>• D2.His.16.9-12 Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.</li></ul>
<b>Materials/ Resources</b>	Story Map: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Link to story map: <a href="https://arcg.is/PyKHS">https://arcg.is/PyKHS</a></li><li>• Story Map graphic organizer</li><li>• Instructional Process page</li><li>• Story Map Graphic Organizer</li></ul>
<b>Modifications/ Extensions</b>	There are numerous ways these resources may be used. There are multiple resources included in this that can allow for modifications are extensions to fit the students, teacher, class, etc.

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## Contextual Essay

The American Civil War was a terrible, yet transformative, event in the history of the United States. Recently (Oct. 2017), Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker and creator of the nine-part series “The Civil War,” tweeted: “Many Factors contributed to the Civil War. One caused it: slavery.” Although many will argue that there were multiple causes to the war including tariffs and states’ rights, it is hard to deny the assertion that the roots of the war can be traced back to the institution of slavery. Over centuries, it had woven its way into the fabric of the economy, culture, and, rightly so, the moral and political discourse of the country. Regardless of to what extent a person views the role of slavery in the Civil War, it is undeniable that its existence from the country’s founding, to 1860, created major points of prosperity for some and misery for others all while contributing to tensions between various groups within the country culminating in civil war. Although there are numerous factors and events that could be pinpointed as crucial in the lead up to the conflict, the following is an overview of a select few involving the “slavery” factor.

During the hot summer months of 1787 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the United States Constitution was created, debated, and approved by the members of the Convention. The cherished document is the framework that has been instrumental in successfully navigating numerous hardships throughout the history of the country. For all that the U.S. Constitution was and is today, there is one issue in particular that failed to be resolved at the time of its approval: legal slavery.

Although many Founding Fathers had mixed views on the issue, the “peculiar” institution of slavery was not forcefully dealt with in the founding period of the United States. It could be argued that had this been a major objective of the founding period, the tensions that arose from slavery could have been avoided, thus preventing the war we know.

As the 18th century was coming to a close, the economic “practicality” of slaveholding was coming to a close as well. Maintaining a forced-labor work force was becoming less and less profitable and, as predicted and even hoped for by some of our Founding Fathers, slavery was slowly abolishing out of mere economic necessity. That was until one man and one invention flipped that possibility to starry fiction. Before the development of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, seeds had to be removed (cleaned) from the cotton bulb by hand, which was both tedious and time-consuming. The cotton gin allowed cotton to be cleaned at a much higher rate. As cotton spread across the warm, fertile south, as well as, into western territories, slavery went with it. The two became increasingly linked. Since cotton could be cleaned at a quicker rate, planters wanted more cotton picked. In order to pick more cotton, planters relied more and more on the backs of an enslaved labor force. Slavery spread with cotton. In just 20 years following the invention of the cotton gin, slavery saw an increase of 70%, deepening its claws into the fabric of the United States.

As the United States expanded westward, the uneasy balance between slave states and free states was continuously tested. Neither side wanted to lose power in congress, so compromises were reached to try to maintain a balance. But as newly acquired territories organized and developed, the all-

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consuming question was constantly “will these new states join as “SLAVE STATES” or “FREE STATES?” In 1854, The United States Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which nullified the Missouri Compromise. The act essentially opened the door to the spread of slavery into the western territories stating that newly formed states could allow the settlers or citizens of these areas to decide for themselves on the slavery issue. The first attempt at this was Kansas Territory. Pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers flooded into Kansas in hopes of swaying the decision one-way or the other. The result of this contentious decision led to a time known as “Bleeding Kansas.” By allowing the territory to decide on its own about “slavery,” congress sent wheels in motion that resulted in mini-civil war on the Kansas plains. Pro-slavery men and anti-slavery men killed each other over the same issue that our Founding Fathers struggled with and failed to resolve just 70 years prior...the issue of legal human trafficking in the United States.

One of the settlers involved in the Kansas conflict was a northern man named John Brown. A staunch abolitionist, Brown concluded that only by blood and violence would the sin slavery be removed from the nation. In Kansas he, along with his sons, hacked to death five pro-slavery settlers, but it was his actions at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers for which he is best known. In hopes of starting an anti-slavery revolution, Brown and his “soldiers” attacked a federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). He aimed to capture guns and munitions then rally runaway slaves and whites sympathetic to his cause. Brown would then wage war on southern plantations using the Appalachian Mountains as cover similar to Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest. The plan, however, was an utter failure. Brown and his men bungled the raid at Harper’s Ferry, no runaways or local whites came to his aid, and Brown was subsequently executed for treason by the state of Virginia. Although his actual plan did not succeed, the effects of the raid and his hanging are imperative and cannot be understated. He became a martyr to many abolitionists, as well as, a nudge to act for armchair abolitionists. On the flipside, he was a warning to southern slaveholders. The raid at Harper’s Ferry was viewed as an attack on the south.

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**INSTRUCTIONAL PREPARATION:** This activity requires either individual student computers, students in groups with one computer per group, or done as a class with one computer and one projector. The “Uneasy Balance, Student Interactive Guide” is the main piece for each student or each group. This handout corresponds with the story map and allows the students to enter their observations and feedback there for discussion.

**INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS:** See “Uneasy Balance, Instructional Guide”