PART I

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CAUSES

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The Antebellum War over Slavery

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For decades historians of the Civil War Era have agreed that the causes of the war lay in issues related to slavery rather than sectional disagreements over economics and state rights. Northern criticism of the slave labor system, Southern proslavery defensiveness, Southern efforts to expand slavery into US territories, Northern fear of proslavery domination of the federal government, and a Northern free-labor ideology all had roles. While recognizing the importance of these slavery-related factors, this chapter emphasizes the role of physical conflict over slavery itself in pushing the two sections toward war. Slave escapes, Southern attempts to recapture escapees and kidnap free African Americans into slavery, Northern aid to the escapees and kidnap victims, and aggressive physical abolitionist interference with slavery in the South shaped this long conflict.

Antebellum intersectional violence occurred chiefly in the free-labor states of the Lower North and the slave-labor states of the Border South. From east to west the boundaries dividing these groups of states consisted of the Mason–Dixon line, the Ohio River, and the northern portion of the Mississippi River. The Mason–Dixon line marked the line between the Northern free-labor state of Pennsylvania and the Southern slave-labor states of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. The Ohio River flowed between the Northern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois and the Southern states of Virginia and Kentucky. The upper Mississippi River marked the line between the slave-labor state of Missouri and Illinois. In 1837 the *Baltimore Patriot* referred to the entire border region as "the Middle Ground."[1] Very significantly for the antebellum war's political repercussions, Washington, DC, the slaveholding national capital, lay in the Middle Ground.

Border regions are defined as places where contrasting economies, societies, and cultures overlap. In such regions attitudes tend to be more moderate

1 *Baltimore Patriot*, quoted in *The Philanthropist* (Cincinnati), January 16, 1838.

than in regions farther apart geographically. In antebellum America this meant that in the North–South borderlands more similarity of views existed regarding slavery than in regions located farther north and south. Historians have described Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and *parts of* Virginia as outposts of slavery. In portions of these states slave labor had never been extensive, had not expanded, or had declined. By the 1810s a tendency of masters to migrate south with their slaves or sell slaves to Lower South cotton producers led some to believe Border South slavery would soon end.[2] Meanwhile proslavery economic, demographic, and political influences permeated the Lower North.

Commerce spanned the Mason–Dixon line and the great rivers to its west drawing the Lower North and Border South together. A network of steamboats, turnpikes, canals, and (by the 1830s) railroads linked the two regions. The Ohio River served as a route of travel and commerce intertwining the interests of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois with those of Virginia and Kentucky. The Border South city of Baltimore had an economic hinterland that overlapped Philadelphia's. Pittsburgh and Cincinnati respectively channeled western Pennsylvania and Old Northwest agricultural and mineral products down the Ohio River toward New Orleans. The Border South cities of Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis participated in this commerce.[3]

Demographics also spanned the sectional boundary. During the eighteenth century, white people from Pennsylvania settled large portions of Maryland and Virginia. White Virginians settled in southwestern Pennsylvania. White people from Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee predominated among settlers in southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Many of them sympathized with slaveholders and shared their racial views. In 1841 Gamaliel Bailey, an abolitionist who published and edited the *Philanthropist* newspaper in Cincinnati, declared his city

2 Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America 1859–1863* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), pp. xviii–xix; Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), pp. 26–7; Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 4–5; Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), pp. 6–8.

3 Robert J. Brugger, *Maryland: A Middle Temperament 1634–1988* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 152–5; Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 42; Kim W. Gruenwald, *River of Enterprise: The Commercial Origins of Regional Identity in the Ohio Valley 1790–1850* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 104–5; John A. Williams, *West Virginia: A Bicentennial History*, 2nd edition (Morgantown, VA: University of West Virginia Press, 2001), p. 50.

to be more "beset by pro-slavery influences than any other spot in the free states."[4]

Throughout the antebellum years pro-Southern Democrats dominated politics in the southern portions of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Democratic politicians in these states usually supported laws designed to discourage black settlement and aid masters in recovering fugitive slaves. They opposed antislavery efforts. Whig politicians in these Lower North states, although less proslavery than their Democratic counterparts, emphasized economic ties to the Border South. Whig leaders in the Border South also favored measures to promote commerce. While they denounced abolitionists as fanatics, they also, at least rhetorically, endorsed eventual abolition of slavery.

The definition of borderlands and these characteristics have led to emphasis on Lower North and Border South moderation. Historians usually describe residents of the North–South borderlands as caught between extreme regions to their north and south. Edward L. Ayers, asserts, "The people of the border did not start the fight that became the Civil War. Indeed, they prided themselves on their restraint in the face of what they saw as extremists above and below them."[5] Farther north, abolitionists, centered in New England and New York, demanded immediate emancipation of the slaves. Farther south, proslavery politicians and journalists demanded national measures to protect slavery. In the borderlands, journalists and politicians often advocated sectional compromise.

Yet, despite sectional interconnectedness on the Middle Ground, fundamental differences divided Border South from Lower North. Along with geography, these differences predisposed some residents of the two regions to violent conflict. And the North–South border became the front line of an antebellum physical struggle over slavery. People on each side were *not* moderate when they fought and sometimes killed each other over slavery. The differences were social, economic, and political. First, much more than in those areas of the Lower North settled by Southerners, the Border South

4 Wilbur Zelinsky, "Cultural Geography," in E. Willard Miller (ed.), *A Geography of Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 136–7; Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest 1787–1861*(Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 2–4, 94–8; Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1967), pp. 8, 18–26; Gruenwald, *River of Enterprise*, pp. 141–3; *The Philanthropist*, September 22, 1841.

5 Ayers, *Presence of Mine Enemies*, pp. xviii–xix.

maintained a structured society and conservative culture. Second, compared to the Lower North, commercial development and population growth lagged in the Border South. Third, in contrast to leaders in the Lower North, tobacco planters in northern Virginia, Kentucky's Bluegrass aristocracy, and Missouri's powerful master class all had cultural, economic, and political ties to the Cotton South.[6]

Most important, race-based slavery divided the Lower North from the Border South. In order to understand this division, it is important to recognize that slavery's decline in the Border South during the decades prior to the Civil War has been exaggerated. Delaware's tiny slave population and Maryland's much larger one diminished between 1830 and 1860 – Delaware's drastically and Maryland's significantly. Still, almost 90,000 slaves lived in Maryland in 1860. Virginia's, Kentucky's, and Missouri's slave numbers *increased* throughout the antebellum period. Although Virginia's northwestern counties never had many slaves, between 1830 and 1860 the total number of slaves within Virginia's bounds rose from 470,000 to 491,000. Kentucky's slave population went from 165,000 to 225,000. Missouri's from 25,000 to 115,000. These states retained a major economic stake in slavery. Equally as important, nearly all white residents of the Border South feared that near-term emancipation of the region's slaves would create a large and uncontrollable free black class. This fear provided an additional proslavery factor.[7]

In contrast to the Border South's large black population, few African Americans lived in the Lower North. For example, in 1850 black people constituted 1.3 percent of Ohio's population. As a result, white Lower Northerners had less fear of free African Americans than did white Border Southerners. Pennsylvania in 1780 and New Jersey in 1804 had initiated gradual abolition. The result was that by 1850 there were no slaves legally residing in Pennsylvania and 236 in New Jersey. Similar conditions existed in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, where the Northwest Ordinance had banned slavery in 1787. The majority of people in these Lower North states regarded slavery to be an economic, political, and moral evil. Even those white Lower

6 Williams, *West Virginia*, pp. 42–3; Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 124–9; Christopher Phillips, "'The Crime against Missouri': Slavery, Kansas, and the Cant of Southernness in the Border Wests," *Civil War History*, vol. 48, no. 1 (March 2002): 63–6.

7 University of Virginia Historical Census Browser, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*.

Northerners who had a Southern background believed slavery marginalized white laborers.[8]

Tiny black populations in the Lower North did not prevent racial prejudice. Many white Border Northerners regarded free African Americans to be shiftless, lazy, unintelligent, and dangerous. Laws in the Lower North states restricted black rights, and violence against black people broke out frequently. But because white people in the Lower North had less reason to fear black people, most Lower North residents regarded African Americans as human beings rather than aberrant forms of property.[9] Many white residents of the Lower North, who were not abolitionists, sympathized with fugitive slaves. And fugitive slaves (the illegal immigrants of their time) catalyzed the Lower North's differences with the Border South into armed conflict. From the 1780s through the 1850s people living on the Middle Ground fought over slavery. For the most part, those on each side relied on small arms and improvised weapons. They used clubs, knives, muskets, pistols, shotguns, bricks, and stones. But by the 1840s one or another of the opposing forces sometimes used cannon.

In 1842 the *Lynchburg Virginian* asserted that, in order to protect slavery, the Border South states "must take their defense into their own hands" and, if necessary, "carry the war into Africa" – the Lower North. Moderate and powerful proslavery leader Henry Clay of Kentucky contemplated "desolated fields, conflagrated cities, murdered inhabitants, and the overthrow of the fairest fabric of human government that ever rose to animate the hopes of civilized man."[10] As mentioned at the start of this chapter, other slavery-related factors helped cause the Civil War. But, to fully understand how the war came about and proceeded, the impact (over several generations) of intersectional violence caused by slave escape and related issues must be taken into account. Ongoing escape, aid to the escapees in the Lower North,

8 Berwanger, *Frontier against Slavery*, pp. 8–17, 22–51; James Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Emil Pocock, "Slavery and Freedom in the Early Republic: Robert Patterson's Slaves in Kentucky and Ohio 1804–1819," *Ohio Valley History*, vol. 6 (Spring 2006): 3–6; Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 17–20, 174; Stephen Middleton, *Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

9 *The Philanthropist*, November 14, 1837; Albert Bushnell Hart, *Slavery and Abolition, 1831–1841* (1906; reprinted New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), pp. 277–8.

10 *Lynchburg Virginian*, quoted in *Louisville Daily Journal*, December 3, 1842; Daniel Mallory (ed.), *Life and Speeches of Henry Clay*, 2 vols. (New York: Robert P. Bixby, 1844), vol. II, p. 374.

and physically aggressive abolitionist action in the Border South distressed white Southerners and divided them regarding the importance of remaining in the Union.

The antebellum war over slavery began during the 1780s when Pennsylvania adopted its gradual emancipation policy. This policy led to armed clashes between Marylanders and Virginians, on the one side, and Pennsylvanians, on the other. Of these clashes the one involving a black man named John Davis, who had become free under Pennsylvania law in 1783, had the greatest impact on sectional tensions and the future of the antebellum war. In early 1788 Davis's former master took him to Virginia to reenslave him. Then Pennsylvania abolitionists associated with the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, who had been engaged in helping slaves escape, went to Virginia, located Davis, and brought him back to Pennsylvania. That May three Virginians came to Pennsylvania, where they "with force and arms . . . assaulted, seized, imprisoned, bound, and carried Davis" back to Virginia and slavery.[11]

As a result of abolitionist prodding, Pennsylvania governor Thomas Mifflin in May 1791 attempted to extradite the Virginians to face kidnapping charges. When Virginia governor Beverly Randolph refused, Mifflin sought congressional legislation regarding fugitives from justice. At the same time, some Virginia politicians accused abolitionists of committing "robberies . . . on the innocent citizens of Virginia" by "forcibly" helping slaves escape. In response to this interstate, North–South impasse, Congress between 1791 and 1793 produced what became known as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which initially had two objectives. First, as Pennsylvania desired, it sought to clarify the criminal extradition process. Second, as Virginia desired and more importantly for the developing sectional conflict, it aimed to formalize the right of masters or their agents to cross state boundaries, capture fugitive slaves, take them before federal or state magistrates, and (upon presenting evidence of ownership) return the captive to slavery. This latter portion of the law encouraged violent encounters between slave catchers and kidnappers, on one side,

11 Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relationship to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 209; Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 85. John McCree and William Rogers to Thos. Mifflin, June 4, 1791, *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts*, William P. Palmer and Sherman McRae (eds.), 11 vols. (1875; reprinted New York: Kraus Reprints, 1968), vol. v, quotation p. 320.

and African Americans, white abolitionists, and nonabolitionist white Northerners, on the other.[12] Ironically, Congress passed this law in an attempt to stop the spread of intersectional violence. But as slaves continued to escape, people in the Lower North helped them, and masters attempted to reclaim human property, cross-border fighting increased. The fighting over many years encouraged intersectional animosity.

In 1821 the Maryland assembly declared, "Whenever a runaway slave is pursued and found in Pennsylvania, every possible difficulty is thrown in the way... If ... legal proceedings fail [to help the fugitive], force is not unfrequently resorted to." In 1822 a member of the same assembly complained that when he attempted to rely on the 1793 law, residents of southeastern Pennsylvania threatened him with "personal violence." In 1836 a Pennsylvania judge recalled that, during the nineteenth century's first three decades, efforts to recover escaped slaves "often" involved "hazard ... disputes, violence, bloodshed."[13]

In contrast to areas directly north and south of the Mason–Dixon line, frontier conditions prior to 1800 limited slave escapes across the Ohio River into the Old Northwest *and* physical conflict. But, when in 1803 the newly created state of Ohio passed "Black Laws" limiting black citizenship rights, it aimed in part to discourage violence related to attempts to recapture slaves. That this was an elusive goal is clear in the case of Ned and Lucy Page. Their Kentucky master had brought them to Ohio, where they became legally free and escaped from him. In January 1806 two armed Kentuckians attempted to recapture the couple in a Dayton tavern. When Ned Page drew a pistol in self-defense, two dozen local white men joined him against the Kentuckians.[14]

In 1846 Ohio Whig congressman Joshua R. Giddings recalled that in 1810 a Kentucky master and several associates had arrived in his hometown of Jefferson, Ohio, located in the northeastern section of the state. Armed with knives and pistols, the Kentuckians recaptured a family of escaped slaves.

12 Palmer and McRae (eds.), *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, vol. v, pp. 343–4, 402 (quotations); William R. Leslie, "A Study in the Origins of Interstate Rendition: the Big Beaver Creek Murders," *American Historical Review*, vol. 57, no. 1 (October 1951): 67–70; Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders*, pp. 85, 98–9; Fehrenbacher, *Slaveholding Republic*, pp. 212–15.

13 "Resolutions, Passed February 23, 1821," in Maryland, Session Laws, 1821, Archives of Maryland Online, 625: 175, http://aomol.msa.maryland.gov/html/legislative.html (1st quotation); "Resolutions Passed February 23, 1822," in Maryland, Session Laws, Archives of Maryland Online, 626: 179–80 (2nd quotation); *Niles' Register* 50, August 20, 1836, 424 (3rd and 4th quotations).

14 Middleton, *Black Laws*, p. 47 (quotation); Pocock, "Slavery and Freedom": 4–8.

Then, according to Giddings, as the master and his associates headed south with the family, "some fifteen or twenty colored men," armed "with guns, pistols, and other weapons," overtook the Kentuckians, forcing them to make their claim to a local magistrate, who denied it.[15]

Such Northern actions did not always succeed. In 1818 three white men from Kentucky "knocked down" a black woman at Corydon, Indiana. As Corydon residents attempted to intervene, the Kentuckians threatened to kill them and "carried her off." At other times antislavery Northerners went on the offensive. In 1824 four white men from Point Pleasant, Virginia, crossed the Ohio River, abducted a young white man they accused of guiding eight slaves north, and jailed him. Within six weeks half a dozen Ohioans, "armed with hunting rifles and pistols," went to Point Pleasant. They threatened to shoot the men who guarded the jail, broke into the man's cell, and rescued him. As the Ohioans departed, the guards fired at them, wounding one.[16]

Three years earlier a larger confrontation had occurred at New Albany, Indiana, located across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. A slave catcher had brought forty-three armed men with him to a judicial hearing called in New Albany to determine the status of a black man the slave catcher had captured in the town. When the judge declared the black man to be free, the Kentuckians seized the man. When the judge called for order, a Kentuckian knocked him down. Then twenty local militiamen, whom the county sheriff had assembled, fixed bayonets and charged. They "badly" wounded several of the Kentuckians, who released the black man and retreated south.[17]

Border conflict became more common and intense during the 1830s and 1840s. In 1836 forty black men, armed with muskets, clubs, and stones, gathered at Swedesboro, New Jersey, after a slave catcher imprisoned a black family in a tavern. In a failed attempt to free the family, the men "riddled" the building with bullets. On the night of September 12, 1841, six Kentuckians crossed the Ohio River to Ripley, Ohio, where white abolitionist and underground railroad leader John Rankin and his family lived. As the Kentuckians approached the Rankin home intending to burn it, one of

15 *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Salem, Ohio), February 27, 1846.
16 Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Indiana and the Century of Statehood* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1919), vol 1, pp. 341–4 (1st quotation); H. H. Hardesty, *Historical and Geographical Encyclopedia . . . of Meigs County, Ohio* (Toledo, OH: Hardesty, 1883), pp. 273–5 (2nd quotation).
17 Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, vol 1, p. 347.