

Violence in Congress

Preston Brooks beats Sumner with a cane

The battle over slavery seemed to cool off during the 1830s and 1840s – but that came to an end in Kansas. In truth, the heated opinions on the issue had never disappeared, but the Missouri Compromise and other attempts at a truce succeeded in pushing it aside for a few years. Unfortunately, what happened in Kansas was far too much to ignore.

Like many other territories at the time, Kansas was preparing to join the Union, so it had to be decided whether it was going to be a free state or a slave state. The northern states (*whose industrial economy did not rely on slavery*) favored turning the territory into a free state, and they decided to tip the scales in their favor. People living up north quickly moved to Kansas until the majority of the population was anti-slavery.

These newcomers, however, did not truly represent the sentiment in that area of the country. One state over, in Missouri, the bulk of the population was pro-slavery – and they weren't about to be pushed aside. In 1854, a group of Missourians traveled to Lawrence, Kansas, and demanded that the northerners leave town. The settlers refused to move, marking the beginning of warlike tensions between the two areas.

In 1855, slaveholders from Missouri and Arkansas interfered with elections in Kansas. They destroyed polls,

A Little Extra

The slave-holders in Missouri did a great job interfering with the elections in Kansas in 1854. Although there were only 3,000 settlers in the area, over 6,000 votes were collected!

Not surprisingly, the votes were overwhelmingly pro-slavery.

intimidated local citizens, and even cast false votes. These men knew that their own right to own slaves would quickly be encroached upon if neighboring Kansas outlawed it.

By this time, the rest of the country was closely watching the events unfolding in “Bloody Kansas.” Southern states, such as South Carolina, were sympathetic to Missouri. These states had also experienced pressure from the north to end slavery (*despite the fact that most*



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people in the north had no idea how to run a plantation). In the north, people sided with Kansas and wanted to put an end to the practice.

In 1856, Massachusetts Congressman Charles Sumner delivered a powerful speech condemning the events in Kansas, and he specifically denounced the southern states for being sympathetic to Missouri. If Sumner had been hoping to end the violence associated with “Bloody Kansas,” then he failed miserably. After his speech, Preston Brooks, the congressman from South Carolina, attacked Sumner and started beating him ruthlessly with a cane.



To say the least, this wasn’t just another day in congress. Brooks beat Sumner so fiercely that Sumner had to leave office for the next three years. The northern states saw Brooks as a monster, and demanded his quick removal. The southern states regarded Brooks as a hero, and a man willing to fight for southern pride.

In order to expel Brooks, the congress needed to gather a two-thirds vote. It didn’t get it. Brooks did, however, agree to resign in the midst of all of the controversy. Within a few months, he was re-elected to the seat in congress that was available from his own resignation!

Charles Sumner recovered from his wounds and returned to congress in 1859. Preston Brooks died two years earlier, preventing any future showdowns between he and Brooks.

The events of “Bloody Kansas” did not settle the slavery issue. It took a Civil War to finally end it, during which Charles Sumner remained outspoken against the practice.

Fast Fact

The attack of Preston Brooks on Charles Sumner was somewhat personal. In his speech, Sumner had directly criticized South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler—a friend and relative of Brooks.

